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Monika Borys
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Given the lineup across much of our current television landscape, we could be forgiven for thinking that the medium is utterly obsessed with class struggle. One of the most popular TV genres to exploit class difference for dramatic purpose is the reality show. This essay examines Polish adaptations of three foreign reality show formats that rely on “clash of two worlds”-type tropes to drive their narratives. The shows in question are: Projekt Lady (prod. TVN, first aired in 2016), Damy i wieśniaczki (prod. TTV, first aired in 2016), and Rolnik szuka żony (prod. TVP, first aired in 2014). Drawing on sociological concepts of class as the embodiment of a specific collection of attributes and habits (Pierre Bourdieu), the author treats the shows in question as a particular sub-type of image designed to impart lessons in class. Calling on scholarship interpreting reality show programming as a neoliberal formula that gives weight to the middle-class habitus (Beverley Skeggs, Helen Wood), this analysis considers the specific nature of the Polish social structure, and interprets the relationship between class and gender in the analyzed programs. The inquiry elucidates what could be called the Polish strain of upward mobility, which compels reality show contestants to blend attributes associated with both the lower (“peasants”) and middle classes (“ladies”).

Monika Borys - Cultural studies scholar, journalist. A graduate of the University of Białystok and the Jagiellonian University. She is working on a Ph.D. dissertation devoted to the visual construction of Polish countryside in the public sphere after 1989 (Doctoral School of Humanities at the University of Warsaw). The author of "Polski Bajer. Disco polo and the 90s" ["Polski bajer. Disco polo i lata 90."] (2019), co-curator of the exhibition "Disco Relaks" at the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw. She published, among others in "Praktyka Teoretyczna", "View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture", "Dwutygodnik", "Gazeta Wyborcza" and "Popmoderna".

Becoming a Lady: Learning to be "Classy" in Polish Adaptations of Reality Shows



Lekcja stylu [*Lessons in Style*]. Film still

First, you need to take off the top and set it aside, then use a small fork to cut the pastry into smaller pieces and carefully scoop out the filling. While a spoon may assist in the elegant partitioning of the dessert, neither a fork nor knife ought to be put into a cream-filled pastry before its top has been removed. Doing so risks the filling inelegantly running out of the pastry, making the ensuing formless dessert difficult to consume, a calamity former First Lady Jolanta Kwaśniewska warned against in the 2006 television show *Lekcja stylu* [*Lessons in Style*]. Although the on-screen instruction pertained to the disassembly of cream puffs, it has seared itself into the collective memory of the nation as a lesson in eating meringue. The shift was prompted by Democratic Left Alliance politician Józef Oleksy, who, in a private conversation with Andrzej Gudzowaty (clandestinely captured on the so-called "Oleksy Tapes"),[1] vented that it did not behoove a First Lady to impart upon the nation how to correctly consume a meringue. The controversy stemmed not from the televised lessons themselves, but rather the fact that Kwaśniewska recast herself as a café etiquette tutor so shortly after leaving the Presidential Palace.

Lekcja stylu was a fitting addition to the lineup of TVN Style [rather than use the English pronunciation, the channel opted for the Polish one, which renders the name as the Polish plural for "style" – transl. note], a cable channel aimed at women aspiring to be middle class, which was launched shortly after Poland's accession to the European Union. Like its parent channel TVN, Style was positioned from its inception as an

aspirational brand, while its programming focused on life-advice content geared toward raising standards in personal and professional lives. Much of its roster was based on Anglo-American makeover show formats devoted to revamping looks and personal habits.[2] Unlike foreign programming, in which small groups of experts told viewers what to wear, what to eat, and how to clean their homes, *Lekcja stylu* was distinguished by a dose of familiarity. Although Jolanta Kwaśniewska dealt with matters more sophisticated than ordinary styling and grooming tips, she was "our former First Lady" rather than some unknown public-image pundit from abroad.

Assuming that social class entails not only an economically determined position relative to the relations of production, but also an aggregation of embodied principles and competencies acquired in the course of education and the accumulation of capital, Jolanta Kwaśniewska's lessons ought to be considered a televised representation of class, or, more precisely, a particular sub-type thereof – one designed to be instructive.[3] This representation was supposed to familiarize viewers with the manners and rituals of high society and animate dreams of their better selves, ennobled by perfect command of etiquette. The antagonizing force of distinction was not particularly strong in this case. The expert-teacher directed her lessons to a very broad group of apprentices – the whole nation (or at least its female portion) was to learn the principles of elegance, while the First Lady's tastes were considered universal. Shortcomings in decorum carried no penalty for the trainees, and it was widely believed that everyone could do with a refresher course in *savoir-vivre* and the key principles of diplomatic protocol. This rigidly class-bound instruction sought to conceal itself beneath a veneer of classlessness, as the customs of the upper classes were taught to the commoners aspiring to the middle class.

Six years later, another bout of public fervor was prompted by a televised representation of class, this time related to cookery. In an episode of *Pamiętniki z wakacji* [*Vacation Diaries*], a pseudo-documentary series about the many misadventures of Polish tourists in foreign resorts, a female character unveiled what came to be known as the "meat hedgehog" – a bizarre composition of cold cuts and sausages, arranged on a platter and garnished with olives and a slice of peach to resemble the spiky animal. Served as an appetizer with beer, the strange dish left the woman's guests dismayed and complaining that it was too heavy and greasy. The scene quickly made its way online, where it was edited into a clip featuring one of the characters repeating the rhyme "Mięsny jeż, ty go zjesz!" ["Hedgehog out of meat, go ahead and eat!"] in an odd, sing-song manner. And so the meat platter became a meme – a viral, self-replicating symbol of the failed makeover of the masses and their poor imitation of middle-class standards. It was endlessly reworked online, even ending up in a picture of former Prime Minister Donald Tusk with the caption "Raise taxes on sausages so the plebs stop making hedgehogs out of meat,"[4] and a video remix that intercut it with celebrity chef Magda Gessler's trademark excoriations. Unlike Jolanta Kwaśniewska's cream puffs, the meat hedgehog, conceived as a representation of class, carried no instructive payload and was instead used to identify the uncouth. It is the obverse of the same coin: a handbook on etiquette must necessarily include examples of what *not* to do. The "class" of the pseudo-documentary genre itself played a key part here. The constructed distinction was amplified by the "spam" genre's typically unsophisticated production values, which seek to derive authenticity from the untrained performances of amateur actors.



Meme with Donald Tusk - "Raise taxes on sausages so the plebs stop making hedgehogs out of meat"

These stories of cream puffs and meat hedgehogs well illustrate the character of televised representations of class and allow us to further define the principles that govern them. In both cases, the class perspective is further reinforced by the mechanism of identifying taste. The cream puff is edifying – it teaches etiquette and decorum, and propels the dream of social advancement by connecting it to the conscientious observance of certain rules, habits, and gestures. The meat hedgehog, in turn, eliciting either disgust or laughter at the misguided distinction (today, that sort of ridicule is commonly called "beka," which loosely translates into "razzing"), allows dissociation from what is deemed too familiar, too gauche, and in this case, too close to behaviors associated with the lower classes. Simultaneously, the pseudo-documentary and the TVN Style program differ on account of their relationship to reality: while the pastry-eating lesson aims to inspire upward social mobility, the meat hedgehog draws on the allure and comfort of ordinariness, seeking to stay ostentatiously close to reality.

The public myths explaining particular social norms change along with the tides of capitalism. Magda Szcześniak has shown that after 1989 Poles were tutored on what to wear or drive to become a member of the middle class,[5] the instructions flowing readily from a variety of new media: illustrated magazines, television commercials, and movies and TV series imported from the West. As lifestyles transformed and prosperity soared (and with it growing inequality), the construction and

performance of patterns penetrated into ever-new areas of public life. Unlike conspicuous status markers such as expensive watches and bespoke suits, food and the patterns of its consumption underpin a much subtler form of cultivating hierarchy and projecting social elevation.

The question of taste is the fundamental principle organizing pop-cultural representations of class conflict, currently one of the most popular themes in TV programming. Given the schedules across much of our current television landscape, we could be forgiven for thinking that the medium is utterly obsessed with class struggle, the fixation manifesting itself in a variety of narratives and stories. One of the most popular TV genres to exploit class differences for dramatic purposes is the reality show. Today, most scripted reality series are based on formats invented abroad. What sort of lessons in class do these modified copies offer their audiences?

To answer that question, this essay will examine three television shows based on formats licensed from abroad and which have garnered considerable popularity in recent years. In each, status differences were reframed as a "war of the worlds" and used to propel the storylines. In *Projekt Lady* (*Project Lady*, orig. *Ladette to Lady*, prod. TVN, first aired in 2016), "difficult" girls hailing from the bottom of the social ladder compete to refashion themselves into genteel ladies; in *Damy i wieśniaczki* (*Ladies and Peasants*, orig. *Lady and Peasant*, prod. TTV, first aired in 2016), a well-off city dweller trades places with a disadvantaged countrywoman in order to get a taste of the life led by someone from the opposite end of the social spectrum; *Rolnik szuka żony* (*Farmer is Looking for a Wife*, orig. *Farmer Wants a Wife*, prod. TVP, first aired in 2014), meanwhile, showed lonely farmers seeking partners for life.

I treat images of class in reality shows as representations that not only portray but also regulate reality, as they command the power of constructing social distinctions,[6] extending beyond merely realizing the symbolic violence that may be triggered by the stereotypes, distortions, and simplifications of reality deployed by the media.[7] Investigating these representations is fundamental to the understanding of the modern visibility of class – the ways in which it is naturalized, the patterns that recast it as an "attribute" of the individual, and the impact of these processes on social communication. Hence, rather than interrogate the actual position of the participants in TV shows, this essay analyzes how television, in an age when class as a category used to describe social structure is atrophying, goes about giving lessons in class. What tools does it use to identify it?

Reality television and class

Academic analyses of Anglo-American reality TV formats have often pointed out how the genre is ideologically subordinate to the logic of neoliberalism, which organizes the entirety of the world around the middle class, universalizing it, and positions the working class as the object of disciplining.[8] Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood observed that, despite a variety of internal rules and guidelines, the basic script for much of reality programming is based on what the scholars termed "self-management as a form of pedagogy."[9] Viewed through such a lens, reality shows become instruments of "governmentality" as conceived by Michel Foucault[10]; they generate subjectivity that is self-regulating, competitive, and which defines itself through commodifiable values. For the shows' participants, self-improvement, usually understood as a makeover of either their physical appearance or habits, is considered a gateway to the middle class. Thus, as pointed out by Skeggs and Wood, the position of the individual is

subjected to the process of individualization – social issues (such as healthcare or education) are interpreted as deriving from personality, modifiable through appropriate training or education. The neoliberal individualization in reality shows is part of a broader trend in public debate, entailing a shift away from perceiving individuals in structural, localized categories and toward seeing them as wholly autonomous and self-governing. Characters in narratives like these are recast as Robinson Crusoes on a desert island – with everything seemingly dependent solely on their own merits, only they are capable of shaping their fates. From such an angle, growing social inequality may indeed seem rooted in the "quality" of human beings alone, with no weight given to economic or political circumstances. This does not imply that such a view abolishes class structure in order to usher in a classless society where economy no longer has any bearing on the lives of individuals. In her analysis of modern social taxonomies, Skeggs claims that nowadays class is displayed through cultural values, while social distinction is described using moral categories inscribed into the body.[11] In her interpretation, reality shows have become the neoliberal visual formula for portraying social relations thus established.[12]

One way of constructing the moral worth of an individual involves identifying their class relative to the question of taste. Samantha A. Lyle argues that modern reality show formats lend weight to the bourgeois habitus by constructing a middle-class gaze that dissociates itself from the working class, treating its taste as a token of its inferiority and simultaneously concealing the relational nature of the judgements of taste.[13] Such an

interpretation seems insufficient if we take into account the specific model of capitalism in East–Central Europe, where the middle class has an entirely different history than in Western liberal democracies.[14] How do television templates of class form in countries where the middle class has an uncertain, ephemeral status?[15]

What must be taken into consideration here is, first and foremost, the remaking of the social structure and its attendant class narratives, as well as the reconfiguration of the media landscape in post-socialist states. The transition to a capitalist economy and rapid technological developments prompted shifts in the public sphere: the privatization of the media, their exemption from central planning, and the weakening of the intelligentsia's cachet and decline of its role in shaping the social hierarchy of values. In Polish academic and journalistic discourse, the commercialization of the media is often perceived as one of the causes of the axiological crisis in culture.[16] As it turned out, the problem lay not just in the marketization-driven disintegration of the community, but also the changes in the symbolic power landscape. These issues are exemplified by Teresa Bogucka's book *Triumfujące profanum. Telewizja po przełomie 1989* [*The Triumphant Profane: Television after the 1989 Transition*], in which she framed the capitalist transformation of the media realm as a qualitative change that laid bare the failure of the cultural model of the Polish People's Republic.[17] The author argued that the projected emancipation of the working class ultimately failed to transpire because, in the wake of the transformation, the audience rejected past ideals in favor of facile entertainment and consumerist behavior:

> as soon as it was given Western-style programming, the Polish audience swiftly dismissed the Television Theater, high-grade filmmaking, and cultural broadcasts, leaving them

> with a vestigial viewership. The public embraced the simple, the uncomplicated. Comedies, action nonsense, romances. Feeding their need to laugh, to fear, to feel. That's what people like.[18]

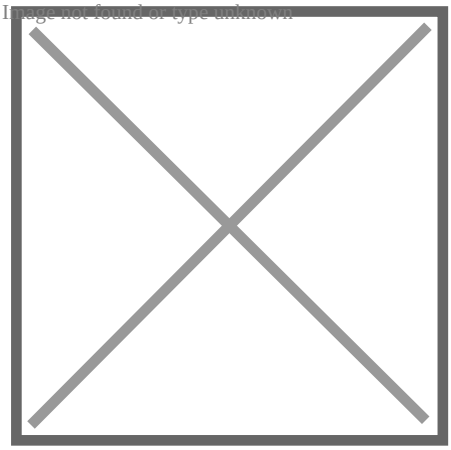
Bogucka sees the reasons for the squandering of the Polish People's Republic's vision of a classless society not in the contrived character of the ideology which sought to exalt the peasant and the worker as much as in the reorganizing of the social ladder (or at least the changes in access to the media) that she believes paved the way for the rise of populism. The people, up until 1989 the main target of the censors' efforts, regained representation in liberalized, market-driven television. In programs such as *Interwencje* [*Interventions*], *Sprawa dla reportera* [*Reporter Needed*], or *Na każdy temat* [*Whatever the Subject*], Bogucka sees the "triumphant profane" – a people critical of the shock economic reforms and given ample space to vent their frustration on-air.[19] Here, "profane" denotes excess, the affective surfeit prompted by the refusal to accept the rule of unbridled privatization.

This memory of the 1990s well illustrates the tangle of problems defining contemporary class aesthetics enduring in popular symbolic circulation. As it commercialized, television offered a platform for underprivileged communities and groups, who could reclaim their voices after years of censorship, yet this encountered considerable resistance from the public, who were already playing according to new, capitalist rules. If, as Bev Skeggs argues,[20] neoliberalism describes class in moral and cultural categories that can be priced in market terms, then Polish images of class rely on the shift that the 1989 transition prompted in language. Class was relegated to a socialist taboo, and those who revealed themselves to be incompatible with the new reality – the people in Teresa Bogucka's book chief among them – were collectively designated as relics of the past.

An example of such a narrative can be found in the ahistorical figure of *Homo sovieticus*, the antithesis of the middle class, used to denote the social group that was hit hardest by the transformation and whose refusal to abide by its rules earned it allegations of obscurantism and harboring a "Soviet mentality."[21] Neoliberal individualization also affected categories used to describe the working class, which, as Roch Sulima pointed out, was left behind by the transition to capitalism and stripped of its material context.[22] How does the transformation-driven shift of class representation from the collective toward identity-bound categories affect contemporary media messaging? How does the reality show frame class relations today?

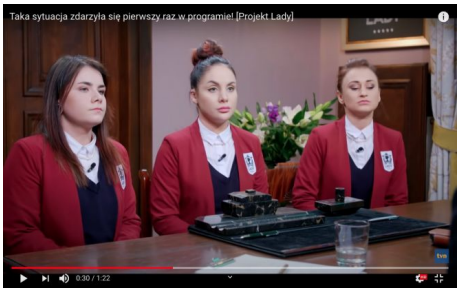
A school for ladies

Like its original British template, *Ladette to Lady*, TVN's *Projekt Lady* draws richly on the culture and customs of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy. The program, which follows a reality competition formula, features a group of young women from working-class backgrounds. After being selected through auditions following a casting call, the contestants are sent to a palace, where, under the watchful eyes of the cameras, their two imposing, upper-crust mentors (Tatiana Mindewicz-Puacz and Irena Kamińska-Radomska), and the host (Małgorzata Rozenek-Majdan), they undergo a makeover which takes them from rebellious ladettes to proud, confident ladies. This social elevation is predicated upon comprehensive tutelage and the repudiation of prior "improper" behavior; it's a finishing school, by any other name. Contestants are expected to improve their command of etiquette



Projekt Lady [*Project Lady*] - mentors meet one of the participants

by way of training sessions and are repeatedly tested on their uptake, self-development, and relevant job skills (in the course of the show, they are offered internships with an architectural design studio, a modeling agency, and an art gallery). Each episode ends with the elimination of the contestant the mentors believed fared the worst in either performance or giving up bad habits. The last ladette standing wins the title of "Leading Dame" and a three-month English course at a language school in Oxford.

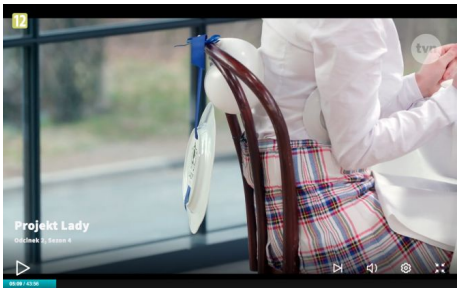


Projekt Lady [*Project Lady*] - participants judged by mentors. Film still

The class taught to the reality show contestants entails a specific sense of aesthetics and cultural cachet instilled in the course of training. The girls' prior appearance symbolizes the "past" they are supposed to shed. They are berated for having dyed hair (jet black or platinum blond), long, painted nails, garish makeup, skimpy blouses, and short skirts. Some carry themselves in a deliberately titillating manner; others prefer the tomboy style. Some are reprimanded for being loud and vulgar; others for being timid and withdrawn. The show's creators summarized it as a "showcase for poor manners, partying, antisocial behavior, and a very specific definition of femininity."[23] "Poor conduct" and womanhood conceived as dysfunctional are the site for this framing of class, which itself is inscribed on the body. The competitive makeover is expected to extend into the contestants' entire lives; at the same time, those dedicating too much attention to their appearance are scolded as self-obsessed. Success in *Projekt Lady* depends on striking a balance between careful grooming and restraint, an attitude exemplified by the uniform that the contestants put on after taking up residence in the palace. In keeping with its inevitable schoolyard connotations, it denotes order and elitism, but also implies a predilection toward discipline and conservative morals. The

contestants also receive instruction in walking in high heels, entertaining guests, business etiquette, and table manners. During one such training session, the girls were supposed to practice correct posture at the dinner table by holding small plates under their armpits, between their knees, and behind their backs. "I get really stressed; when someone's watching my every move, I can't pull myself together," one of the girls said. Even the slightest move risked breaking the tableware, putting the mistake front and center for everyone to see and hear.

Projekt Lady was lambasted for its coercive approach, which disregarded the contestants' agency in favor of shaping them according to a template, treating them as little more than objects to be remade in a certain image. The show also drew comparisons with Margaret Atwood's dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale*[24] or the notorious finishing schools depicted in Victorian novels.[25] Its class training unfolds on well-trodden ground – it exploits the "bodily timidity"[26] of women socialized by patriarchal societies to subject themselves to strict beauty regimens, as "to look was to be."[27] In *Projekt Lady*, class and gender are inextricably linked and mutually dependent. The small community of women is propped up by a rigid hierarchy: serving as teachers of good manners and proper living, the upper-crust experts educate the girls about gendered rules. They build class from the stereotypical, clichéd attributes of the good wife and mother. To prove their responsibility and patience, the contestants are entrusted with twenty-four-hour care of an egg as if it were a baby. To gauge their meticulousness and conscientiousness, the girls are tasked with recreating pastries conjured up by professional *pâtissiers*, while their gracefulness is measured using a combination of obstacle course and table setting. No mistake or



Projekt Lady [*Project Lady*] - learning to sit at the table. Film still

blunder escapes the mentors, who usually acknowledge them with a patronizing *bon mot* (such as "a stain on the linen is a stain on a lady's honor" or "a lady makes haste slowly"). The lessons aim to impart the unwritten rule that normative femininity is inextricably linked to specific tastes that underpin female identity.



Projekt Lady [*Project Lady*] – internship at the BWA Warszawa Gallery. Film still

What is and isn't appropriate is a matter of taste that the show believes it can teach. On the one hand, it remains ostensibly open, while on the other it uses antiquated aesthetic doctrines as a perspective through which young women are judged and their worth evaluated. In one episode, contestants are offered brief internships intended to help them verify ideas about future work. Two of them end up at the BWA Warszawa contemporary art gallery, where they assist with packing paintings, janitorial duties, and showing visitors around. The girls are portrayed as token commoners, ill-equipped to understand abstract art. "You don't touch anything in art, any piece could easily be worth a million dollars!" says the gallery owner to the girl who grasps a piece of Witek Orski's sculpture sticking out from a wall. "I'd prefer working in production, at least something's going on there," says the other. This clear juxtaposition of the contestants' practical, experience-oriented tastes and refined predilections is more reminiscent of nineteenth-century divisions between "pure" art and folk aesthetics than modern omnivorousness and inter-class flows.[28] Here, art plays a hegemonic role and taste reveals its dual nature. As Jon Cook wrote, taste can be both aspirational and mimetic: it can be an instrument of advancement and compel us to imitate the desired taste of the class we aspire to be part of.[29]

This space of awkwardness is the essence of the show. The class lessons are imparted by exploiting the shame, gaffes,

FUBARs, blunders, and clumsiness of the contestants as they strive to carry out their mentors' instructions – as when the girls sneak out of their rooms at night and head for the basement (surveilled by a night-vision camera all the while) to "work off" the stress of their schooling, only to be reprimanded and punished later. The goal, therefore, is not to acquire a complete set of skills that will become an invisible part of their new identity, but rather to continuously perform the effort and failure in pursuit of the ideal.

Projekt Lady subverts social determinism and the classic interpretation of class as a set of circumstances shaping the fate of the individual. At the faux finishing school, the girls actual background is a burden they have to shed, thus prompting them to meet head-on the fatalism that has so far governed their lives. In the of the episodes, the show's narrator says in voiceover:

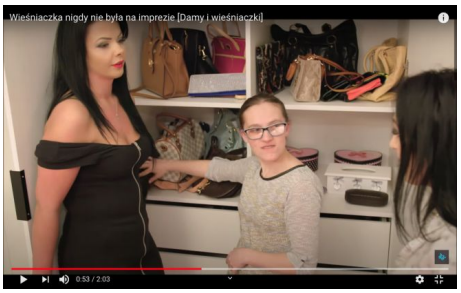
> Here at *Projekt Lady*, we believe that everyone is entitled to decide their own future. That is why we invited thirteen girls to take part in our program, girls whose lives were, until now, dictated mostly by blind fate. Our charges will have three months to learn from our experts how to function in a world that has so far been way outside their reach.

The extract exposes the show's inherent contradiction and the paradox of neoliberal self-management: in order to regain control over their lives, the contestants must submit themselves to the mentors' control and judgment. Until they give in to the experts' requirements, they are not considered capable of self-management or autonomy. They are expected to be proactive, yet obedient.

The original British template of *Projekt Lady* is based around the figure of the ladette, which appeared in Anglo-Saxon media at the turn of the twenty-first century and was primarily associated with the "negative" connotations of women's emancipation.[30] The term denotes crass gendered expression

and is generally used to describe a young woman whose behavior grants her access to spaces hitherto reserved for men. She's loud, vulgar, and provocatively dressed; she drinks to excess and parties a lot. Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson argue that the moral panic surrounding the rise of the ladette was mostly a reaction to the "girl power" discourse.[31] The attempt to adapt the British format already presumes a considerable degree of social polarization. But in the absence of the symbolic capital that the middle class commands in the United Kingdom, the patterns of emancipation develop differently, while the contexts of the aristocracy and "lad culture" further expand the gap the contestants have to close in order to advance upward. The class hyperbole proves too "strong" to convincingly capture the particular structure of Polish society. In effect, the class training that *Projekt Lady* contestants undergo ultimately parodies the upward social mobility it ostensibly offers. In her column in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Anna Golus concluded: "If this is what manners are supposed to look like nowadays, I'd much rather sit on a train with a ladette, wolfing down sandwiches, wearing combat boots or a mini dress, but one who would smilingly help me put my suitcase up, even if she utters a curse or two in the process, than with some wannabe lady who'll turn me down with a dismissive 'You'll manage'."[32] Thus, the class hyperbole lends a hand to the contestants, who invite viewer sympathy by failing to conform to archaic norms. The producers, on the other hand, struggle to conceal the show's arbitrary nature and mask the incompatibility of the format's class perspective with local reality. The hierarchy crumbles every so often, as the girls choose to help each other rather than compete, and refuse to see the instructors as dignified mentors, preferring to view them as friends they can both laugh and cry with (this role is particularly true of TV celebrity Małgorzata Rozenek-Majdan).

Like *Projekt Lady*, the reality show *Damy i wieśniaczki* [*Ladies and Peasants*], based on a Ukrainian format, exploits differences between the rich and the poor for dramatic purposes. Each of its episodes, aired by private broadcaster TTV, tells the story of an affluent townswoman and a poor woman from the countryside who swap places for three days in order to learn more about the other's everyday life.



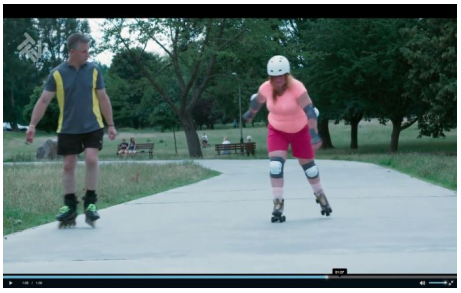
Damy i wieśniaczki [*Ladies and Peasants*] - "peasant" and "ladies" are looking at expensive handbags. Film still

The appeal of the format is rooted in the stark contrast between the two worlds. The role of the "ladies" is usually played by celebrities, models, DJs, and fitness trainers. In the opening vignettes, they are presented solely in the context of their physical appearance: we see them go through beauty treatments, medical procedures, and workouts. The city they live in is a realm of entertainment rather than effort: "Here is a Polish Barbie. She loves luxury and has no idea of what real work is like," says the narrator by way of introduction. To cast the "peasants," meanwhile, the producers chose underprivileged women, often single mothers, usually portrayed through the lens of their living conditions, illnesses, and general neglect. Their home villages are remote realms of scarcity and hard work that rarely pays a living wage.

The class differences in *Damy i wieśniaczki* draw on a key dichotomy entrenched in the history of culture. The antipathy between city and countryside is a trope that triggers dynamics of domination and subordination. The economic framing of these spaces prompts a number of associations typical of both Polish and Ukrainian culture. The city is a beacon of modernity, wealth, progress, health, beauty, and loneliness, whereas the countryside represents tradition, poverty, backwardness, illness, ugliness, and community. In the seasons produced in collaboration

with Ukrainian broadcasters (*Damy i wieśniaczki. Za granicą* [*Ladies and Peasants: Abroad*]), the manufactured distinction is further exacerbated by ethnic context. In *Za granicą*, the "peasants" always come from Ukraine and swap places with Polish "ladies." Although the basic framework of the show remains the same, the differences are further aggravated by association of the countryside with the "savage East" and "the Russkies."[33] The Orientalizing metaphor recasts Ukraine as a periphery dependent on the metropole, ready to be exploited and colonized. It can be argued, therefore, that the *Damy i wieśniaczki* format is localized through both the cultural proximity of Poland and Ukraine and through the stereotype of Poland's superiority to its eastern neighbors.

Distinction is experienced in the body. A stay in the city for a "peasant woman" usually involves a makeover and activities she has never had the opportunity to try. We see them undergo aesthetic medicine procedures, take dance lessons, and work out with personal trainers they could not otherwise afford, which often leaves them feeling frustrated and downcast. In one episode, the producers had the countrywoman take roller-skating lessons in order to "learn to move more gracefully." When the woman, fed up with repeated falls, announced she wanted to leave, the narrator chided her condescendingly: "At the first sign of difficulty, she gives up. She will have to grow more confident if she wants to change her life." For the countrywoman, upward mobility is contingent upon beauty treatments and makeovers changing her physical appearance, expected to strip her of her "hayseed" features. The "ladies," meanwhile, must prove themselves capable of doing real work by performing a variety of farming chores. They milk cows, feed pigs, renovate their



Damy i wieśniaczki [*Ladies and Peasants*] – learn to move more gracefully. Film still

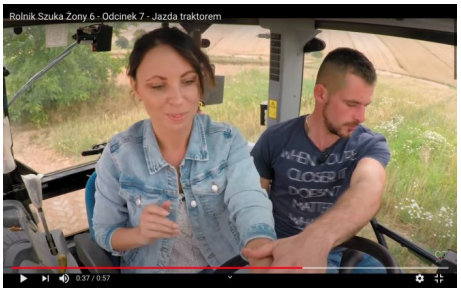
counterparts' ramshackle homes. The division of labor in the show clearly implies that work is only real when it involves physical effort.

To the women in the show, the changing of places and experience of a different life becomes akin to a survival camp, while to the audience, the program is a showcase of modern precarity. In confessional segments, the women praise the necessity of taking risks and stepping out of one's comfort zone. Helen Wood and Bev Skeggs argued that this particular dramaturgical device, typical of reality shows, imbues the story with the aesthetics of depth below the surface,[34] a variant of realism intended to emotionally engage the audience. In the show, the fates of the characters are subject to forces beyond their control, but struggle they must, because their worth is dictated by their ability to recapture some semblance of control over their lives. This drama of depth below the surface allows the producers to ratchet up tension and uncertainty, but these are also played for laughs, pushing the narrative toward slapstick comedy – in both versions of the show, the women demonstrate the resourcefulness of Robinson Crusoe and the clumsy ditziness of Charlie Chaplin. While they refuse to accept their fates and steadfastly decide to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," they are still mercilessly judged for all aesthetic blunders and missteps stemming from their incompatibility with the class ideal they are supposed to emulate.

Who will love the "redneck"?

Considering how deeply our culture draws on peasant-mania and peasant-phobia, and how city-versus-countryside animosity has resurfaced in a variety of contexts, an interrogation of the popular reality show *Rolnik szuka żony*, which seeks to reshape preconceptions of farmers and the countryside, produces interesting conclusions. First aired in 2014 by TVP1, the show is based on the British format *Farmer Wants a Wife*, which also

spawned a variety of adaptations across Europe, in South Africa, the US, and Australia.[35] In Poland, the show has a viewership of around three million per episode.[36] The basic format includes five bachelor farmers of different ages (usually male, although some seasons include one woman farmer), presented with a pool of prospective romantic interests from which they pick their future partner. Over a couple of days, by way of elimination, the farmer is supposed to choose the woman he believes is most suited to being his wife.



Rolnik szuka żony [*Farmer is Looking for a Wife*] - flirts and tractors. Film still

The British format allows for modification of certain local myths portraying the countryside as a land of stagnation and malaise or a bucolic "resource." The imported pop-cultural narrative facilitates a miraculous transformation, which recasts the Polish farmer as a European smallholder, whose professional ambitions are fulfilled by farm work. Proof of this shift can ostensibly be found in the farmers' commitment to their agricultural labor and its mechanization – "Farming is a way of life and a conscious choice," as host Marta Manowska declares in one episode. In the vignettes opening the show's seasons, the star farmers are shown working their modern, usually sizable homesteads. They raise animals, but also tend their gardens, orchards, or even run their own agritourism facilities. Farm machinery is frequently used as convenient scenery for the characters' pre-marital misadventures. Combine harvesters and tractors are more than just farm vehicles – they provide the backdrop for everyday rendezvous, as when the prospective couples meet up for dates in tractor cabs. Wide shots and drone footage highlight the monumentality of the mechanized farmyards. The bucolic atmosphere is always accompanied by technological representations, making the shots starring large

tractors look more like "agricommercials" than scenes from a reality dating show. In contrast to images of farmhands from former state agricultural collectives trapped in permanent limbo (the so-called "brakemen of the economy" or entitled farmers – a trope frequently applied to Andrzej Lepper and his Samoobrona party), which were designed to shame the rural populace,[37] these reality show farmers are "transformers"[38] – agents of modernization, masters of nature, and efficient businessmen. Thanks to technology, the farmer has finally undergone the metamorphosis that capitalists expected of him three decades ago.

While successful in farm work and business, the farmer has had no such luck with romantic endeavors. In one episode, host Marta Manowska asks: "How does it feel to have it all on the one hand and nothing on the other?" Although progressive in their farming, the men still abide by conservative values. They are positioned as victors: they make decisions, dictate rules, and evaluate the performance of the contestants vying for their attention as they go about tasks designed to test their patience, resourcefulness, and endurance: milking cows, helping with insemination, driving tractors, and cooking meals. Competing against each other, the women are also judged by the farmer's family and friends.

Critics have drawn attention to the deeply misogynistic framing of male-female relationships in the show, accusing its producers of entrenching patriarchal patterns of female agency and relegating women to prospective brides, subordinate to male partners dictating the terms of the relationship.[39] As such, *Rolnik szuka żony* enables the resurgence of the lost fantasy of traditional gender roles, which reserve agency primarily for men. Simultaneously, the show is a response to genuine demographic concerns, exemplified by the number of single rural men,[40] commonly called "old bachelors," with little chance of finding

a romantic partner, as well as the growing ideological rift between conservative young men and their female peers, overwhelmingly liberal and mobile.[41] In the show, that situation is inverted – here, the machine of popular culture spotlights those defeated by the "free market" of romantic love. Contrary to prevalent, Orientalizing portrayals of the countryside, the reality show aired on public television might be considered an effort to restore dignity and grant visibility and recognition to certain groups of excluded individuals. The farmer, after all, is haunted by the neoliberalism-inflected specter of being a "redneck," deprived of control over his own aesthetic representation. Thus, *Rolnik szuka żony* strives to restore dignity to single men in the field of love, which seems to be the most difficult area in which to demand justice and equality.[42] In doing so, however, it reanimates archaic fantasies about men picking and choosing from a rich pool of available romantic interests.

Conclusion

As Przemysław Czapliński wrote, "the people, in seeking a more just distribution of goods, also expect a redistribution of images."[43]

Reality shows are an important part of the process of shaping representation, because they include amateur talent and offer visibility to groups underrepresented in mass communication. Although they rank lowest in overall media circulation, they are capable of affectively engaging large groups by skillfully addressing the fears, aspirations, and complexes of the public. As the above analysis of *Projekt Lady*, *Damy i wieśniaczki*, and *Rolnik szuka żony* clearly demonstrates, the programs paint a picture of a highly polarized world, in which poverty and wealth complement each other, while injustice and inequality are normalized.

What lessons do these Polish reality shows impart? Here, class intersects with gender and sexuality to produce gendered class identity, itself used to thematize issues such as the

commodification of marriage or social mobility contingent on the accumulation of erotic capital. Reality shows tell their female audience that gender is ultimately a class issue, and that working on improving one's "femininity" paves the way toward social advancement. The female reality show contestant, somewhat disgusted by her prior behaviors or habits, which betray her working-class background, decides to undergo strict training. To become a "lady," she must first master high-society manners. Her new habitus, however, cannot simply be the contradiction of her prior position. The way up is full of twists and turns, and requires her to deftly switch between old and new habits. In the specifically Polish strain of class advancement emerging from reality programming, the "new woman" is a blend of the "lady" and the "peasant," bringing together an array of attributes hailing from different classes – she is equally skilled at eating meringue (or a cream puff), milking cows, and roller-skating. Climbing the social ladder, she is expected to "put herself first," and eventually grow enough to find love and start a family in the countryside, the latter given a veneer of modernity by technology, concealing its backwardness and provincialism.

1 "Zapis rozmowy Oleksego z Gudzowatym," *Dziennik.pl*, October 12, 2007, https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/205396,zapis-rozmowy-oleksego-z-gudzowatym.html (accessed August 22, 2020).

2 On the "culture of transformation" in makeover shows, see: Małgorzata Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Feniksy, łabędzie, motyle. Media i kultura transformacji* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2012).

3 The concept of class as habitus, a coupling between the body and society, was developed by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2015).

4 As cited in: Mirosław Pęczak, "Z czego śmieją się Polacy na Youtube," *Polityka*, April 10, 2012, www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/1525673,1,z-czego-smieja-sie-polacy-na-youtube.read (accessed August 22, 2020).

5 Magda Szcześniak, *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana–Instytut Kultury Polskiej, 2016).

6 On the politics of representation in the context of excluded classes, see: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271–313.

7 For a media studies perspective on the symbolic abuses against underprivileged classes in Polish television, see: Michał Rydlewski, *Scenariusze kultury upokarzania. Studium z antropologii mediów* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2019).

8 See: Irmi Karl, "Class Observations: 'Intimate' Technologies and the Poetics of Reality TV," *Fast Capitalism* no. 2 (2007), 107–115, www.uta.edu/huma/agger /fastcapitalism/2_2/karl.html (accessed August 22, 2020); Samantha A. Lyle, "(Mis)recognition and the middle-class bourgeois gaze: A case study of *Wife Swap*," *Critical Discourse Studies* no. 4 (2008), 319–330; *Reality Television and Class*, eds. Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood (London–New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011),

9 Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood, "Spectacular Morality. 'Reality' Television, Individualisation and the Remaking of the Working Class," in: *The Media and Social Theory*, eds. David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee (London: Routledge, 2008), 177–193.

10 See: Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michel Senellart (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

11 Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 26.

12 Skeggs and Wood, "Spectacular Morality," 180.

13 Lyle, "(Mis)recognition and the middle-class bourgeois gaze," 320.

14 On the uncertain status of the middle class in East–Central Europe, see: Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi, and Eleanor R. Townsley, *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists: The New Ruling Elites in Eastern Europe* (London: Verso, 2001).

15 On the transformation of television and the reality show genre in East–Central Europe, see: Irena Reifova, "Shaming the working class in post-socialist Reality Television," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (March 2020), 1–18; Aniko Imre and Annabel Tremlett, "Reality TV Without Class: The Postsocialist Anti-Celebrity Docusoap," in: *Reality Television and Class*, op. cit., 88–103.

16 See: Maria Janion, *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś* (Warsaw: Sic!, 1996); Teresa Walas, *Zrozumieć swój czas. Kultura polska po komunizmie. Rekonesans* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003).

17 Teresa Bogucka, *Triumfujące profanum. Telewizja po przełomie 1989* (Warsaw: Sic!, 2002).

18 Ibid., 20.

19 Ibid., 41.

20 Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, 99.

21 See: Józef Tischner, *Etyka solidarności oraz Homo sovieticus* (Kraków: Znak, 1992); Piotr Sztompka, *Trauma wielkiej zmiany. Społeczne koszta transformacji* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2000).

22 Roch Sulima, *Słowo i etos* (Kraków: FA ZMW "Galicja," 1992), 5.

23 *Projekt Lady*, www.goldenmedia.tv/produkcje/projekt-lady (accessed August 22, 2020).

24 Sylwia Chutnik, "Czyż kolejna edycja 'Projektu Lady' nie jest tak naprawdę 'Opowieścią podręcznej'?," *Wysokieobcasy.pl*, July 7, 2017, www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,100865,22065510,czyz-kolejna-edycja-projektu-lady-nie-jest-tak-naprawde-opowiescia.html (accessed August 22, 2020).

25 Natalia Waloch, "Ciężko patrzeć na to, jak uczestniczkom „Projektu Lady" łamie się kręgosłupy, żądając całkowitego poddaństwa," *Wysokieobcasy.pl*, July 18, 2020, www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,100865,23689035,ciezko-patrzec-na-to-jak-uczestniczkom-projekt-lady-lamie.html (accessed August 22, 2020).

26 The phrase is used by Iris Marion Young in her discussion of the social determinations of how men and women use their bodies. Idem, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," in: *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27–46.

27 Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, 100.

28 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 22.

29 Jon Cook, "Culture, Class and Taste," in: *Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change*, ed. Sally R. Munt (London–New York: Continuum, 2000), 100.

30 Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson, "'Ladettes' and 'Modern Girls': 'Troublesome' Young Femininities," *The Sociological Review* no. 2 (2007), 251–272.

31 Ibid., 266.

32 Anna Golus, "Projekt snobka," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, August 22, 2017, www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/projekt-snobka-149432 (accessed August 22, 2020).

33 On the Polish metaphor of "ruskość" [an untranslatable term – the closest approximation in English would be something along the lines of "Ruskieness," although that phrase doesn't communicate the full semantic payload of the Polish original – transl. note] as a synonym for inferiority in the context of the work of Dorota Masłowska, see: Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez, "Od odrzucenia ironii ku jej afirmacji. Dorota Masłowska w poszukiwaniu 'my'," *Studia Litteraria et Historica* no. 5 (2016), 1–50.

34 Skeggs and Wood, "Spectacular Morality," 183.

35 On the differences and similarities between local adaptations of *Farmer Wants a Wife*, see: Jolien van Keulen and Tonny Krijnen, "The Limitations of Localization: A Cross-cultural Comparative Study of 'Farmer Wants a Wife'," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 17, no. 3 (2014), 277–292.

36 Michał Kurdupski, "'Rolnik szuka żony' zyskuje widzów z odcinka na odcinek. TVP1 nokautuje konkurencję," *Wirtualnemedia.pl*, September 24, 2019, www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/rolnik-szuka-zony-6-sezon-ogladalnosc-tvp1-liderem (accessed August 22, 2020).

37 On the shame of the transformation, see: Przemysław Czapliński, "Wojna wstydów," *Teksty Drugie* no. 4 (2016), 17–45.

38 This is a reference to the term "non-transformers," which Przemysław Czapliński first used in his interpretation of Dorota Masłowska's essay on the characters in pseudo-documentaries. See: Przemysław Czapliński, "Uciekaj albo płyń," *Dwutygodnik.com*, www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/7524-uciekaj-albo-plyn.html (accessed August 22, 2020).

39 Karolina Brzezińska, "'Rolnik szuka żony' – banalny program, w którym mężczyzna jest sędzią, a kobieta się przed nim puszy," *Wyborcza.pl*, September 26, 2014, https://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,16712416,_Rolnik_szuka_zony____banalny_program__w_ktorym_mezczyzna.html (accessed August 22, 2020); Helena Łygas, "Targ z kobietami, czyli ile jeszcze sezonów kitu o miłości na wsi wciśnie nam TVP," *Kobieta.onet.pl*, September 24, 2019, https://kobieta.onet.pl/rolnik-szuka-zony-coraz-bardziej-przypomina-targ-z-kobietami/dgm862l (accessed August 22, 2020).

40 According to the 2018 *Monitoring rozwoju obszarów wiejskich* [*Rural Area Development Monitor*], there were 91 women for every 100 men living in rural areas in Poland. See: Monika Stanny, Andrzej Rosner, and Łukasz Komorowski, *Monitoring rozwoju obszarów wiejskich. Etap III: Struktury społeczno-gospodarcze, ich przestrzenne zróżnicowanie i dynamika* (Warsaw: Fundacja Europejski Fundusz Rozwoju Wsi Polskiej, Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa PAN, 2018), www.efrwp.pl/dir_upload/photo/dd2944ba62e5d93441ab784e0f94.pdf (accessed August 22, 2020).

41 Krzysztof Pacewicz, "Młodzi mężczyźni są prawicowi i samotni, a młode kobiety liberalne i w związkach [SONDAŻ]," *Wyborcza.pl*, April 27, 2019, https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,24700696,mlodzi-wypisali-sie-z-politycznej-wojny-starszych-maja.html (accessed August 22, 2020).

42 On neoliberalism's inherent politicization of desire and love in the context of "incels," a portmanteau denoting a subculture of men who are involuntarily celibate, see, among others: Amia Srinivasan, "Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?," *London Review of Books* vol. 40, no 6 (2018), www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n06/amia-srinivasan/does-anyone-have-the-right-to-sex (accessed August 22, 2020).

43 Czapliński, "Uciekaj albo płyń."

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