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“ABSURDITY” AS HISTORICAL REALITY? STANISŁAW BAREJA’S ALTERNATYWY 4 AS A POPULAR FORM OF AN INTELLECTUAL CRITIQUE OF THE SOCIALIST SYSTEM IN THE POLISH PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC (PRL)

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the ideological role of comedic television programming in the former Eastern Bloc states through a case study of Stanisław Bareja’s Alternatywy 4 [Alternative Street #4] television series. Whereas media studies have uncovered the socialist state’s use of television as a device for ideological indoctrination, this paper seeks to contribute to the theory of the medium as a form of popular resistance. The research methods involve the use of primary and secondary sources that help construct the contextual and theoretical components for understanding the social and historical context in which the series was produced and broadcasted, as well as the in-depth analysis of the series’ content. The analysis demonstrates how three themes of popular critique of the state socialism discussed in various issues of the Polish-émigré literary-political magazine Kultura, i.e. the critiques of neostalinism, Sovietizm, and the lack of pluralism/individuality, was framed within the popular apartment block genre that was far more accessible and relatable to Polish society. The results suggest that Alternatywy 4 recontextualizes intellectual critiques of the Polish People’s Republic’s “success of socialism” propaganda and disseminates subversive meanings to inform society of more glaring issues behind the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in Poland.

Keywords: Stanisław Bareja ▪ Alternatywy 4 ▪ Kultura ▪ Poland ▪ socialist television

1. INTRODUCTION

On 12 December 1981, director Stanisław Bareja and his crew began filming the star-studded nine-part television series *Alternatywy 4* (Alternative Street #4), a satire

about individuals from all strata of society living in a stereotypical apartment block in the Polish People's Republic (PRL). The next day, the ruling Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) declared martial law and effectively militarized television stations and major cities, as well as arrested thousands of Solidarity trade union activists. Yet Bareja continued his production uninterrupted until its completion, only for state authorities to shelve the series and prevent its airing on television until 1986. Upon closer examination, *Alternatywy 4* is a product of Bareja's own satirical style and directorial work combined, offering the television viewer a visual transmission of the most salient arguments critically assessing the Polish socialist system. In doing so, it confronted the latter's prescribed "propaganda of success" which had promoted an atmosphere of normalcy to cover up the increasingly deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in Poland. The series engages the extent to which Polish society would settle for conformity and stability in an individual's daily life at the price of communism's longevity. This article investigates the curious history behind one of Bareja's most notable works by exploring the historical and ideological aspects behind its content, in an effort to uncover the rearticulation of Polish intellectual debates at the time that challenged the Edward Gierek regime's "success of socialism" in the late 1970s, all through satirical content led by "absurd" approaches to everyday life.

Bareja's legacy is quite unknown to Western audiences and scholars, unlike household Polish directors such as Andrzej Wajda or Krzysztof Kieślowski. Monographs on Polish television and cinema are still largely only available in Polish (Kończak, 2007; Skotarczak, 2004), with some English exceptions (Mazierska, 2017). As scholarship on other Eastern Bloc states, however, they have greatly contributed to an area-wide investigation and understanding of the freedom and limits of visual programming in communist states, especially when compared to the voluminous Western media studies. Overviews have focused on both the producer and consumer aspects of television, with the medium utilized as a tool for promoting and transmitting ideological agendas, a means of transnational communication and expression, or acting as a shared space for both sides to harness the technology for their own benefits (Imre, 2016; Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018). Case studies have also yielded similar findings while concentrating on specific elements, such as the Soviet Union's mission to invent a culture based on mass media (Roth-Ey, 2011), or Czechoslovakia's promotion of normalcy via programming after the Prague Spring (Bren, 2011). From a historical perspective, Cold War studies seeking to explain the collapse of communism by 1991 have shifted away from power narratives involving centralized political-ideological structures, now paying more attention towards grass-root or cultural movements as sources of destabilization.

This article approaches Eastern Bloc television through a micro case study of *Alternatywy 4*. The basis for this research is to examine: (1) how the series acted as a mediator between inaccessible dissident thought and Polish society experiencing the socioeconomic strains of state socialism, and (2) how popular ideological critiques were recontextualized by Bareja for mass consumption through the medium

of television. For clarity, the article's arguments are tested in four sections. My case study begins with the examination of Bareja's career, his genre of filmmaking, and his direct ties to anti-communist activities and intellectual émigré publications as influencing the series' composition. Aside from consulting the limited literature on Bareja and works examining the time period at hand, I apply a selection of socialist television studies containing similar themes. Then, I briefly review the socioeconomic conditions during the 1970s that triggered an increase in critical responses from intellectuals and society alike. Not only does this provide a contextual foundation for my analysis, but it also serves as a prime source of Bareja's absurd material while dually headlining a multitude of articles found in the Parisian publication *Kultura* [Culture]. Works from a variety of Polish contributors to *Kultura* at the time are reflected in order to reconstruct intellectuals' critiques of state socialism in that period, e.g. from Marxian economists such as Edward Lipinski, who would soon join the ranks of Jan Drewnowski and Leszek Kołakowski in their growing disillusionment with the socialist system's failure to reform according to humanistic values. Other essays come from social observers such as Andrzej Micewski ("Leo Breit" and "Zygmunt Ossowski") and Bronisław Kotowicz, who sought to uncover the root of the growing disconnection between the state and society. The second section reviews the series' origins to further provide a valuable context for the paper's analytical section. It reveals the motivations for using the popular apartment block genre as its setting and source of conflict, and the choice of characters from all strata of society. It then traces the series' production from the imposition of martial law, its shelving, and the pressure for its delayed release. The remaining two sections hone in on my examination of the series' nine episodes, with each one consisting primarily of theoretical and analytical components. Analytically, I examine the choice and presentation of scenery settings, music/sounds, the main plot and subplots, as well as the characters and their responses to conflicts which they come across through dialogue interpretation. All these components are where Bareja and his writers would carefully hide their allusions to criticizing both the socialist state and society. Theoretically, I then scrutinize *Alternatywy 4* through the scope of *Kultura's* articles, where I uncover three popular tenets that connect the majority of these writings to Bareja's content, namely: the critique of neostalinism, *Sovietizm*, and the lack of plurality/individualism. Such a framework allows me to demonstrate the presence of these themes in a selection of scenes by breaking down character dialogues possessing hidden allusions within them. The ultimate goal of this study is to further the understanding of communist use of television as both a tool of stability and inadvertently as a Frankenstein's monster which contributed to its downfall.

2. THE RISE OF "BAREIZM"

Stanisław Bareja's rise in Polish film and television began shortly after he had completed his film studies in 1954. His initial films were considered of artistic value and

did not contain any questionable material which could raise suspicion from the state authorities. But by the mid 1970s, he began to reorient his films towards a more critical approach to the sudden changes occurring in Poland's socialist system (Replewicz, 2015, pp. 120–121). They came as a result of the declining socioeconomic conditions experienced by the state's citizens under the gross mismanagement of the Edward Gierek-led ruling apparatus, fraught with cronyism and excessive layers of bureaucracy. Since 1971, it tried to fast track Poland's technological and structural modernization while raising the standard of living through the borrowing of exorbitant Western European loans and credits. Failing to pay them back, consumer products availability dwindled as sudden price increases were introduced to key foodstuffs without the consultation of Gierek's darling working class, all leading to societal tensions mounting in manifestations such as long lines outside of stores or rare but renewed physical demonstrations in cities such as Radom in June 1976 (Breit, 1976, pp. 47–48; Ossowski, 1975, p. 66; Paczkowski, 2003, pp. 356–359).

Despite the economic depression, the Gierek regime sought to control the reality of life in the PRL. By touting the "success of socialism" through an illusionary campaign dubbed the "propaganda of success," the PZPR utilized media such as television to strategically promote an atmosphere of normalcy through the selectivity of broadcast content. Reports of completed state projects were plentiful, while the daily plight of the citizen was purposely ignored. Poland had gone from a reformist state in the 1960s, where attention was orientated towards redefining television's infrastructure, to a hard-line state determined to control "the message" being transmitted (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018, p. 87). The Gierek regime had embraced the power of television and declared that the medium would build "a dialogue between the party and society" (Kończak, 2007, p. 112). Since the generation of the 1970s was the one that grew up after the Second World War and had relatively few memories of Stalinism, it allowed the party to shift from fighting to defend its ruling legitimacy to now wholly focusing on aligning society with the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Similarly to the majority of Eastern Bloc states, television could promote programmes that conditioned viewers with socialist values through a "shared sociality" associating the ruling party with the citizen. By the 1970s, 75 per cent of Poles considered the medium to be their favorite form of leisure activity. It is no surprise that Gierek invested much in such an indoctrinating tool, as television became symbolic for both the producer and consumer: the state's ability to master modernity and the individual's exposure to modern lifestyles (Kończak, 2007, p. 120). According to Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable (2018), television could serve as the anchor of normalcy and contribute to the stability and longevity of communist rule only if it provided the consumer with a multitude of freedom and access (pp. 4, 9; Roth-Ey, 2011, p. 4). Since ruling legitimacy was no longer a concern while the illusion of success promoted normalcy, the party was no longer concerned with criticisms of it or the system. This opened the door for the growth of satirical cabarets and television/film productions, which were the result of what Dorota Skotarczak (2004) described as the Gierek regime's

over-confidence. This practiced freedom by the regime not only reflected its “maturity” but also what she dually claims as providing symptoms of a system that was beginning to unravel, because it and its criticisms seemingly went unchecked (pp. 189–190; Mazierska, 2017, p. 186).

This pseudo-liberal atmosphere fostered the rise of “*Bareizm*”, a distinct satirical style founded upon the notion of absurdity as the main format of presentation in Bareja’s works. His films observed the daily life of society with an irony that became integral to his films in the late 1970s. As Poland’s socioeconomic conditions progressively worsened, they forced people to commit desperate or degrading acts with little to no objections. Bareja took such examples and amplified them to a point where rationally they were deemed too absurd to be realistic, but their underlying logic was not far from the truth. Once the daily occurrences that inspired Bareja’s “absurdities” became part of the established atmosphere of normalcy, film and television criticisms of the socialist system were not interpreted as being a direct threat to the system as a whole, which unabated their funding and effectively bypassed the state censorship.

It was only a matter of time before Bareja’s work caught the attention of audiences, film critics, and the state authorities, whose blunders during the Gierek years were not spared from being mockingly criticized. While his films brought endless laughter within cinemas, they also drew denunciations and harsh accusations from his detractors and even colleagues. They were labeled as possessing low artistic value and being profit-seekers, while going against the accepted norm of the time where serious works were produced under the “Cinema of Moral Anxiety/Concern”. Considered to possess the finest films in the PRL, the genre raised questions over people’s identity and existence in the socialist state, but in a more classical and darker tone. (Skotarczak, 2004, p. 213; Mazierska, 2017, p. 194; Sobańda, 2016). Originally, “*Bareizm*” was coined by Bareja’s former colleague Kazimierz Kutz to denote something “in a bad style,” with other directors accusing Bareja of “flattering petty-bourgeois tastes” or even being against the working class (*WP Film*, 2015; Sobańda, 2017). But it was not his intent to conform to what the industry demanded or to seek out personal success. He battled against what he perceived as a façade of lies, built by communism (but directed by the Kremlin) and “forced into the mouths of Poles” (Łuczak, 2001, p. 73). Bareja committed his films to touch upon society’s most pressing problems and to ridicule them, in an effort to force the individual to reflect upon what they were seeing and experiencing. He once remarked, “Poles have a very specific humor. We laugh at others but immediately become offended when others laugh at us. How many people become offended after watching a film or listening to a satire? In the whole world, we don’t have anyone equal to us,” (Replewicz, 2015, pp. 162, 166, 234). His absurd approach to society’s ills was not meant to dismiss achievements that alleviated social problems such as the post-war housing crisis; it was meant to draw people’s attention to the true products of communism: the division of society and the degradation of the individual. What Bareja observed and ultimately

re-enacted was how communism had, “influenced the individual’s psyche, behavior, and thought” (Replewicz, 2015, p. 193; Skotarczak, 2004, p. 199). Stripped of its pomp and frills, or, “artistic value,” *Bareizm* in its absolutely raw form was its own genre to which Bareja had pledged his allegiance to, avoiding association with other film circles that would only inhibit his pursuit of non-conformal ideas.

Of all the films produced by Bareja in the 1970s, the final two that closed out the decade drew the wrath from the state. Both, 1978’s *Co mi zrobisz jak mnie złapiesz* [What You’ll Do To Me When You Catch Me] and 1980’s *Miś* [Teddy Bear] were considered to be the “sharpest” of Bareja’s films directed against the socialist system (Płociński, 2015). Although their plots focused on protagonists who usurp their powerful positions and connections to the party in order to settle personal matters, they also portrayed the role of everyday PRL citizens who are manipulated and exploited for individualistic gain. Not only was Bareja exposing behavior which was contrary to the promotion of collective interests in a socialist system, he was also illuminating the existence of two different worlds and their functions. For those who dabbled in the bureaucratic system came the reward of unlimited access to a world full of consumer goods and services unattainable for the common Pole. And for those who played by the rules, the reward was an alternate universe where one was punished for honesty and forced to wait for basic commodities. It is worth noting here that the relationship that television had fostered between the state and the consumer in Eastern Europe was anything but static, and fitted the role of two acquaintances rather than a marriage. Using the Soviet Union’s aggressive pursuit in promoting a “mass culture” through viewership, Kristine Roth-Ey (2011) underlines the state obsession to promote a culture that paradoxically re-orientated the individual away from work and towards the former’s consumption. Not only did the Soviet masses harbor a disinterest in original programming and preferred more feature films, these trends (similar in Poland) were an example of the Soviet citizen’s interaction with television on “their own terms” (pp. 4, 14–15; Kończak, 2007, pp. 124, 126). Sensing and maintaining such a delicate balance may have been the censor’s chief concern. Symbolic of how *Bareizm* touched those very nerves was the cutting of one scene from *Miś* that served as a metaphor for the socialist system: a passer-by sneezes and a nearby car falls completely apart (*Interia.pl*, 2017; *WP Film*, 2015; Sobańda, 2016).

Aside from his professional non-conformity in film, Bareja also possessed a personal devotion to opposing the enforced perception of normalcy. The 1976 protests that rocked the PRL brought about a watershed moment in the communist era with the formation of the Committee for the Defense of Workers (later Social Self-Defense – KSS KOR), as well as the realization that the Gierek regime would not fix the socio-economic crisis. Not legally sanctioned, this group of dedicated intellectuals and students came to the political, legal, and economic aid of workers who had been repressed by the protests. Impacted by the events, Bareja was determined to take a greater position in fighting the degradation of Polish society. Through his close colleague Stanisław Tym, he established connections with the KOR and Solidarity activists, participating

in conspiratorial work where he provided his home as a space for meetings, illegal literature printing, or a hideout to evade arrest for illegal activity (Łuczak, 2001, p. 128. Replewicz, 2015, pp. 353–354, 357). His position as a director also came in handy, as it allowed him easier travel access outside of the Eastern Bloc. When returning from places such as France or Greece, Bareja never returned empty handed and often brought back copies of banned literature like the Polish émigré journal *Kultura*, or in one notable incident a printing press for Solidarity activists (Łuczak, 2001, p. 129). With mutual work on and off the production set, *Bareizm* became a two-fold commitment towards achieving one goal: the promotion of non-conformity.

Bareja was an anti-communist, a dedication that grew stronger with every new movie that he released aimed at critiquing the system (Replewicz, 2015, p. 121). His work never clearly suggested an alternative system to replace it much like KOR and Solidarity, whose sole dedication lay in the improvement of the individual's welfare (Ost, 1990, pp. 4, 15). This may not have been a priority or even a task for him to preoccupy himself with. Despite possessing a complete library of *Kultura* in his home, it is difficult to ascertain whether Bareja had begun reading such subversive material long before, or even what content may have had the greatest impact on his anti-communist stance (Łuczak, 2001, p. 129). Public debate took off through a variety of opposition activity in the early 1970s, arguably due to Koławkowski's 1971 article, "Theses on Hope and Hopelessness", which set off discussions that "crystalize[d] opinions among contributors and readers [in publications like *Kultura* or *Aneks*], and it allowed participants to decide what forms of activity were possible" (Paczkowski, 2003, p. 377). Based on the many themes present in his work, a conclusion can be drawn that it was émigré writings in publications like *Kultura* that may have influenced Bareja's own critiques of the socialist system, which he then transmitted into visual representations for mass consumption. While the Parisian monthly contained a variety of contributors, many addressed Polish society and its place in the socialist system. They tended to promote similar general theories and potential solutions to improving society's conditions. These articles increased in frequency after the Gierek regime made attempts to push back on the Helsinki Accords through changes to the Polish constitution. Intellectuals now began to consider how Polish society could protect itself and whether some of its daily functions were perhaps inadvertently contributing to Poland's plight. Bareja's films had spared no state inefficiencies or individual cynical behavior from judgment. *Alternatywy 4* would be his opportunity to confront society as a whole and document the true relationship between the common individual and communism.

3. THE ORIGINS OF ALTERNATYWY 4

Alternatywy 4 was not Bareja's first television series, but it was his first satirical approach to the apartment block genre. The genre itself had actually long been popular in Polish film and television, and in the rest of the Eastern Bloc. One of the

most notable Polish productions was the series *Czterdziestolatek* [The 40 Year Old], which followed the middle-aged man's relationship with his family and career. Its popularity made it the first sensational serial hit to challenge the cinema industry while lightly touching upon political issues and primarily focusing on personal dilemmas such as a mid-life crisis (Kończak, 2007, p. 154; Imre, 2016, p. 205). It celebrated the giant concrete apartment structures as Poland's and the rest of the Eastern Bloc's solution to post-war housing crisis, if not also an example of the push towards modernity. This meeting point for various people was "where a cross section of society could be displayed and a desirable balance between critique and conformity could be demonstrated" as cited by Anikó Imre (2016, p. 204). She further points out to how characters carrying didactic messages in a "more or less successfully fictionalized form," were central to socialist soaps/serials. They were popular because they portrayed ordinary people finding themselves in situations recognizable to viewers through a "bottom-up" design, as well as balancing political conformity through socialist ideas and *gently* mocking the realities of these ideas (Imre, 2016, p. 204). The content was negotiable to where it appealed both audiences and state authorities without being an overt tool of propaganda like for instance, news channels. Similar to the experiences of East German television, fictional programmes increasingly became popular at the expense of news programmes whose viewership declined as the truth grew distant from daily occurrences. As a result, the state was inclined to invest in such programmes as a way to propagate ideological messages that were not as easily detected, since truth was never a preoccupation within scripted television (Kochanowski et. al, 2012, p. 1-2).

Alternatywy 4 was to fit within the framework that Imre presents, but in the more subversive manner. Inspired by newspaper articles and the experiences of friends and relatives, Bareja and his co-writers, Janusz Płoński and Maciej Rybiński, used the daily problems that Poles experienced as forums where the success of socialism and the illusions created by the propaganda of success could be exposed and critiqued. In its essence, the driving point was to show everything that was wrong with this controlled atmosphere of normalcy (Szafran, 2014). When Bareja's ties to intellectual currents are taken into consideration, another scope of examining the series becomes available: the common individual and their part in the promotion of normalcy. The series uncovers the various extents to which communism willingly forces a person to conform to its demands in order to survive as a ruling system.

Initial filming was scheduled to take place on 14 December 1981, but owing to a last-minute appeal by Bareja, it was moved and began a day before martial law was imposed. Whether Bareja knew about the crackdown is unknown, but fate was clearly on the production's side (Sobańda, 2017). Because the state was too busy militarizing major industrial hubs as well as the television medium itself (with all attention and control applied to informational/news programmes) during its crackdown on Solidarity, no one showed any interest in monitoring the series' production. The only shortfall was the lack of props, which often times the actors would supply

themselves (Sobańda, 2017). But similarly to Bareja's previous films, *Alternatywy 4* was sure to draw the ire of the censors and the *kolaudacja* [Final Approval Committee]. While the censors did not have much to say about the series, the *kolaudacja*'s chairman demanded to know who had authorized this project's production. The series was shelved as it failed to possess artistic value, a "correct" or positive ideological interaction with its audience, and whether it was even acceptable to show to a wider audience (Płoński, 2017, p. 13; Interia.pl, 2017; Imre, 2016, pp. 204, 220). Consequently, the series would sit on the storage shelves at Telewizja Polska S.A.'s (TVP) headquarters for three years. During those years, however, an extraordinary phenomenon began to develop. Copies of the series were made and passed on to others in the "*drugi obieg* (i.e. samizdat)" manner. Despite the quality of taped-over copies decreasing, the demand for it only increased. After the state's embarrassment of finding these copies being sold on the black market near Warsaw's 10th Anniversary Stadium, the series was reconsidered. TVP's administration itself was open to the idea as it sought to save a project that, such as the large majority of other television programmes in the PRL, received state funding for production (Sobańda, 2017; Interia.pl, 2017). *Alternatywy 4* finally premiered on September 30, 1986, with an uncut version appearing almost thirty years later in 2014.

4. A MICROCOSM OF THE PRL: THE APARTMENT BLOCK AS A NEOSTALINIST COMMODITY

If *Alternatywy 4* was to show the PRL's epoch in a microcosm, Bareja and his writers focused on representing the dysfunctional state in a variety of ways. The cinematic effects employed are particularly noteworthy, as his selection in scenery, camera angles, and paired music or sounds provided context to the tenants' awkward situations within the socialist system during the Gierek years. Still-frame shots often conveyed a puzzling or disastrous scene, to which the camera then focused in on the character's perplexed or even defeated facial expressions. Moving shots followed a character to signify a triumphant or dramatic moment, but mainly functioned in a reality show format as if the audience member was in the scene with the character(s). Bareja's choice of music and sounds also provoked laughter in a scene that contained limited or no dialogue at all. The series' theme song was similar to a clumsy, Vaudeville-like composition, representing joyful or frustrating, but above all else, absurd moments. Absurdities often ended dramatic scenes as well, beginning with eerie sounds produced by a Theremin, and ending with ironic tones when the character's suspenseful moments turned out to be for naught.

The series was centered on an ensemble of characters from various professions and backgrounds whose differences first pit them against each other, only to be sidelined once they all face similar challenges that serve as sources of solidarity. Its didactic messages were fictionalized to some extent, but to such a degree where critique could be protected by the characters' acceptance of absurd situations. Dorota

Ostrowska's (2013) study traces the series' origins through cultural influences like cabarets, satirical theater, and student street protest culture, all of which resembled surrealist socialism in their acts (p. 63). The series took on this form of satirical critique, taking contradictory conditions whether fantasy or reality, and presenting them in the form of an absolute reality. She also pinpoints the main vein of the series' absurdity in the stark reality that the apartment block was falling apart "before it was completed and lived in." Its other revolutionary, yet controversial marks were that topics such as habitual housing shortages finally made it onto television (Ostrowska, 2013, p. 76).

One of the key critiques brought forth by political, economic, and social critics was that the PRL was governed by neostalinism or "post-totalitarianism," in which the authorities no longer preferred violence as a means to control society. Instead, the state would deprive the citizen of access to material goods, which would force the latter to sacrifice some freedoms in order to attain basic commodities. By creating a high demand and a priceless reliance on the state, society would be forced to conform to the given socioeconomic conditions and submit to the authority of the party, no matter how humiliating or immoral the process may be. The attainment of an apartment best represents this phenomenon and should the process take too long, citizens would commit desperate acts such as bribery to their own advantage. In simple terms, if the system lied to achieve its own ends, citizens would adopt the same methods against the very system which they were struggling against. This however turned into a vicious circle based on perpetuating the lie, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once underlined, "participating in lying means taking part in the most destructive, anti national work at the behest from the reigns of the Kremlin." Critics such as Leszek Kołakowski applied this theory to Polish society and argued that so long as the common man manipulates the system like his abusers, he aides in its longevity (Anonymous, 1974, p. 15; Urban, 1981, pp. 13-14).

In the opening scene of the first episode, viewers are introduced to all the characters in an all too familiar setting: awaiting the list of apartment awardees at the cooperative housing administration. PRL citizens had to sign up and to some extent, invest money towards receiving brand new apartments in a process similar for other limited rare commodities. Yet the supply of new apartment blocks could not keep up with the demand due to various issues such as where the priorities of economic planning and investment were being allocated (Jarmuż & Jarosz, 2013, p. 58). This caused the attainment of a living space to be something equivalent to winning the lottery. When the main office's doors finally open in episode one, Bareja's camera technique captures a room full of highly anticipating individuals seeking to view the coveted awardee list. It is complimented by a church-like tune with a choir of angels singing, celebrating the majestic moment of the secretary making her way to the bulletin board. But no list is provided, and ensuing frustrations boil over. A television reporter arrives and bribes his way towards selecting apartment awardees to satisfy his exclusive story (Interia.pl, 2017). The middle-aged Dionizy Cichocki

(Bronisław Pawlik) symbolizes this instance of absurdity as he not only has been waiting eleven years, but his name is also the first to be crossed off due to the unappealing composition. Ironically, he is chosen by the journalist to be interviewed and states that he is happy after being assured that going along with “the script” would not trouble him in any way. The propaganda of success is uncovered through the common partnership between the party and the media to script success stories and fulfill the impression of normalcy (Curry, 1984, p. 262; Łuczak, 2001, p. 77).

The tragedy behind scorned individuals like Cichocki and his mission to right his wronging is comically exploited. His misfortune sees him congratulated by his co-workers, only to become alienated after he reveals to them that it was a ploy. His boss offers to award him his second brand new apartment, only to give it away after seeing Cichocki’s televised glory (Jarmuż & Jarosz, 2013, p. 64). After numerous petitions to the co-operatives’s director (Gustaw Lutkiewicz), he is finally granted one after facing the director with a fake television crew. Yet his unorthodox breakthrough is crushed when a well-known government *apparatchik*, Jan Winnicki (Janusz Gajos), bribes the director with automobile purchase cards in return for an apartment to get away from his lavish villa and adulterous wife. Cichocki is informed that he never filed the appropriate paperwork, which required his dead parents’ signatures. His poor luck is a case in point: a powerful *apparatchik* getting his way and a blue-collar worker facing endless red tape to attain a commodity (Jarmuż & Jarosz, 2013, p. 64). The critics pointed to the impossibility of correcting such imbalances, as the surpluses would never be available to the privileged had workers not been kept at a low standard of living (Drewnowski, 1970, pp. 33–34). Furthermore, Cichocki’s plight serves as a metaphor for the neostalinist system where industrial production was not geared towards meeting market demands, but rather ideological, alliance-based ones. One of the sharpest critiques of Poland’s economic downturn was that a “cardinal sin” had been committed where the PRL’s investments were planned to assist its Eastern Bloc leader (Winnicki) and not the world market (Cichocki) or even its own society (Breit, 1976, p. 50; Ossowski, 1975, p. 66).

Neostalinism was also present in the shortcomings of the socialist system and the actual construction of apartment blocks. The opening frame in *Alternatywy 4*’s introduction provides a panoramic view of Ursynów, a suburb south of Warsaw where the series is set. Under a triumphal drum roll as if something grand was being presented by an orchestra, the camera slowly zooms in while moving from left to right, capturing a landscape dotted large concrete apartment structures famously associated with Eastern Bloc states. Initial reactions assume that socialism has successfully turned Ursynów into a workers’ utopia, comparable to that of Nowa Huta in the 1950s, a suburb of Kraków, whose socialist realism landscape was constructed to reflect the working class and technological grandeur. This soft opening is quite appropriate and upholds a certain degree of truth here in that these structures did provide a solution to the prevailing housing crisis. Another angle to this presentation found throughout the series is the lack of urbanization in these neighborhoods. In

various scenes in front of the block, one notices that the landscape is hilly and rough, completely unsmoothed by the construction crews. Trees are positioned randomly, leftover building materials litter public squares, and very few patches or areas of manicured grass can be found. A major obstacle that the characters face outside of their apartments is that the neighborhood is far removed from any marketplace, school, or even one's place of employment. Just through these visuals, Bareja masterfully projected the frustrations of Polish society as described by intellectuals, in that these neighborhoods were isolated from city centers where cultural life flourished due to the available material and social amenities (Kwiatkowska, 1979, pp. 76–77). The aesthetics employed in the public scenes not only underscore the exaggeration of the PRL's propagated modernity, they also tell the story of the individual's deprivation from expanding their worldly view and standard of living (Skotarczak, 2004, p. 226).

The subplot of episode five also provides the viewer with an example of neostalinism's material deprivation at the behest of a higher authority. The regional state power plant makes the decision to shut off all energy to the block and the suburb of Ursynów. From a lack of coal due to its need for foreign export, to the new block neighborhoods being too distant and poorly insulated, the plant director orders all power to be cut off. Temperatures eventually reach a frigid point and many tenants complain, while Winnicki, who approved the energy cutbacks and prepares to sneak away to his villa, declares that everyone must stick together throughout the ordeal in a sign of "solidarity", perhaps a reference to all Eastern Bloc states weathering the Soviet Union's economic woes. With assistance to a higher authority deemed futile, the tenants devise a plan to take an old locomotive from a nearby scrapyard and use it to heat the building. The building supervisor Stanisław Anioł (Roman Wilhelmi) disapproves of this entire scheme but capitalizes on its innovation by informing the local newspapers of "his" solution to his building's energy crisis. Although the tenants may have broken laws to construct the project, they did so as a result of their own rights being impeded on without warning. After the problem is solved, normalcy returns to both the residents who return to their private lives, and the power plant which applauds Anioł's leadership and flips a coin to determine the next neighborhood to receive cutbacks. This ignorance also reflects the criticisms pointed at the socialist system's failure to acknowledge citizen creativity and initiative, which defined true socialism and its practical progression (Lipinski, 1976, p. 9). These subplots and visual presentations ultimately reveal that the system's intent to subdue its people through deprivation not only came in restricting their access to materials, but also in limiting their freedom to think or act independently.

5. A "SECOND POLAND": *GOSPODARZ ANIOŁ* AND SOVIETIZM

A second component to intellectual currents displayed in the series was the idea that Poland lacked sovereignty. Kołakowski (1975) had argued that a true Polish state did not exist, as just like Nazi occupation created a break in the state's natural

progression through time, so had Soviet domination since 1945. Polish citizens may have recognized an occupying political system, but they lived life normally as if they were living in a state as real as the one before 1939 (p. 30). In 1975, the Gierek regime signed the Helsinki Accords that bound the PRL to respect human rights. But months later the Polish constitution was amended to make the PZPR the sole authority over the state, seemingly wresting the majority if not all power away from the working class. It also renewed its “friendship” with the Soviet Union. Maintaining human rights was never realized, as symbolized with the suppression of demonstrations in 1976, the tightening of criticism, a crackdown on independent organizations, and the acceleration of propaganda. Coupled together, this was “the worst Sovietization” of Polish interests in thirty years worth of socialist existence (Breit, 1976, p. 52). In an open letter to Gierek, Marxian economist Edward Lipinski (1976) had stated that the renewed alliance with the Soviet Union was intended to align Poland’s political and social life with its neighbor’s agenda through pressure. He warned that the only things to come out of such an imposed government were the solidifying of party power and the destruction of society’s welfare (pp. 5–6, 9). Poland was plagued by Sovietism in that it not only lacked sovereignty, but its effort to coordinate every single facet of an individual’s life was straight out of the Soviet Union’s playbook. Kołakowski saw this neurosis as everyone who contributes to the campaign of falsification makes themselves accomplices / accessories to the crime (Urban, 1981, p. 16; Drewnowski, 1970, pp. 27–28; Anonymous, 1974, pp. 4, 6). If the PRL lacked sovereignty, so did its citizens. The experiences of the series’ tenants under the oppressive building landlord are a testament to this challenging issue.

As the *gospodarz* [supervisor], Anioł in actuality has the duties of a janitor but treats his reassignment from the state as a promotion from his former post as cultural manager of Pułtusk, something he equates to the functions of an *apparatchik*. At Alternative Street, his quest for power is fueled by a plan: if he successfully manages the block, he could quickly climb the hierarchy of state power. Individuals advancing through managerial skills but without expertise were labeled *karierowcy* [career-builder], opportunists who only sought career advancement and came to make up the Gierek regime’s ruling clique (Drewnowski, 1970, p. 35; Kotowicz, 1976, pp. 80–81). Anioł inherits the social divisions visible amongst the tenants and maintains them through the use of coercion and pseudo democratic practices, which materializes in their performing the block’s cleaning duties. He is a tall, slim, and shadowy figure that embodies the term “big brother,” lurking in the stairways and suddenly appearing in a tenant’s doorway all while recording the activities of his neighbors. Anioł is keen to remind the tenants what they are and are not permitted to do, and firmly underlines that he is the landlord of this property. One practice of his authority is through his entrance into apartments unannounced, where in one instance he subtly states, “Above all else, I am, in my own home,” a vocal reminder that his control over the premises permeates any personal boundaries or concrete walls. He also demands uniformity amongst the tenants, as in the case of Miss Ewa (Hanna Bieniuszewicz)

who tries to hang curtains in her apartment that he disapproves of because they are of a different color than his own. Declaring that he is responsible for the block, he demands a *societal* approach from her (Bareja, 1986).

Anioł perfectly represents the issue of “Sovietizm” in Poland, or as he states in one episode, “a *second* Poland,” which the block’s occupants will build together. If intellectuals argued that the PRL was not the real Poland but one ideologically occupied by the Soviet Union, then Anioł’s vision for his block embodies these alien attributes (Kořakowski, 2013, p. 123). During move-in day, he begins his exercising of power by not permitting the eager residents to start entering the block earlier than scheduled. When the time finally comes, he acknowledges the frustrations over the process of attaining an apartment but reassures the residents that their loss of nerves was not in vain. “There is a beautiful Russian custom, ‘to exit, first you must sit a little bit.’ But we will create our own custom, our Polish one. ‘To enter, you must wait awhile’” (Bareja, 1986). The idea of waiting is practically the same in both the Russian and Polish context in that they are both resolutions for perceived punishments. Whereas the former refers to punishment in the form of serving a sentence in a penal colony or Gulag, the latter one alludes to punishing an individual by making them wait for years before they attain basic commodities like a roof over one’s head. This very concept of having to wait for everything in Poland was a sharp criticism found in intellectual circles and proof of human degradation, exacerbated by the harsh reality of having to ask permission for just about everything (Drewnowski, 1970, pp. 28–29).

The creation of a police state and the infiltration of the individual’s privacy is intensified after episode six, where Anioł meets the neighborhood’s militia officer, Paruś (Stanisław Bareja). If Anioł represents the ruling PZPR with the block serving as the PRL, then like Winnicki, Paruś symbolizes the Soviet Union. Unlike the apparatchik, the officer shows interest in learning about the tenants. He informs his subordinate that, “if all is in order, everything will be fine. But if there is unease, then things won’t be well.” He constantly asks Anioł whether they “have an understanding”, to which the latter emphatically replies in the affirmative (Bareja, 1986). Since this exchange, Anioł develops his web of informants by creating lies and blackmailing his neighbors in order to get them to spy on each other. He is then able to use the collected information to successfully force the tenants into complying with his cleaning demands. This new relationship is a reaffirmation of Poland’s Sovietizm, where tight cooperation with the Soviet Union is a forced necessity. Although the adaptation of Soviet models had been the norm since the Eastern Bloc’s formation, one can see this scene as emblematic of the Gierek era after 1975 and its constitutional changes and alliance reinvigoration. The very creation of information networks underlines the centralization process through compartmentalization, similar to Gierek’s elimination of *powiaty* [counties] and creation of more, smaller *województwa* [provinces] to create closer monitoring and responses to citizen activities (Ossowski, 1975, p. 67).

6. THE LACK OF PLURALISM AND SUPPRESSED INDIVIDUALITY

The final third component in intellectual currents involved questions pertaining to whether the PRL actually exhibited *true* socialism. Andrzej Koraszewski (1976) had argued that the system had two interpretations: while the state saw socialism as a key ruling and disciplinary device, those who opposed the former were in favor of it as being defined by humanistic and democratic values. He further argued that an actual socialist party had not existed in Poland since the Moscow-backed communist Polish Workers Party (PPR) eliminated all of its rival parties in 1945, including socialist ones. “Socialism” became a mask for “communism” to hide behind (pp. 95–96). Other intellectuals took aim at diving deeper into what socialism meant, such as Lipinski in his letter to Gierek. Similarly to others, the economist (1976) cited the importance of respecting fundamental freedoms and citizen rights, which were a prerequisite for a healthy society and in the building of socialism. He further saw the system as being based on a partnership and open dialogue between state and society, where a person’s creativity not only humanized the process of production but also helped in planning society’s consumption (pp. 4, 8–10). True socialism was defined as a mutual relationship between state and society, but for this to materialize, it would not only require the state to regain its sovereignty from the Soviet Union, but to also begin recognizing basic individual rights in order to allow society to function and contribute to the building of a socialist Poland.

Just as Gierek had accelerated his normalcy propaganda and banned independent organizations after 1975, Anioł’s actions are found in the same vein. He originally forms a cabaret for the tenants to perform their unique talents in, but with the ulterior motive of coordinating their daily routines after they come home from work to assist his spying methods. But in episode seven Winnicki shoots down the idea as being too individualistic, an allusion to the crack down on these critique forums that had been tolerated before 1975. Instead, the apparatchik suggests something with a strong, collective voice to which Anioł proposes a choir. Winnicki applauds the idea, citing it as an activity that the government sponsors at festivals, as well as something to take people’s minds off of the current “conditions” (Bareja, 1986). The mandatory choir practice is synonymous with the state-sponsored celebrations such as May Day that the PRL would organize and require its citizens to attend. Its use as a distraction was strategic, since such cultural entertainment was amongst the most popularly transmitted programmes in the 1970s (Kończak, 2007, pp. 160, 162). Non state-sanctioned events or gatherings were forbidden, which Anioł underlines in a variety of ways. In episode eight, the peasant Józef Balcerek must bribe him with bottles of vodka to allow his niece’s wedding reception to take place in his apartment. Growing tired of the festivities, Anioł refuses to allow the tenants to take a break from them and watch a broadcast of the Polish national soccer team’s match. He demands a choir practice instead, as “any forms of social gatherings in this block by its tenants cannot be continued without the attendance of everyone”.

After the tenants spur his request, he proceeds to shut off the building's electricity (Bareja, 1986).

The tenants of *Alternatywy 4* increasingly saw their individual rights and freedoms curtailed as the series progressed. Hoping to retreat to the privacy of their home, the borders between public and private life became permeable due to the actions of Anioł and other representatives of the system. Apart from Anioł dictating the color of curtains or seizing furniture to serve the block's cultural club, construction workers would barge into apartments and demand that modifications be made (despite not being in the original blueprints) for a personal cost despite these basic commodities that should have been in the original blueprints. The violation of an individual's human right not to be mistreated was evident from Anioł's blackmailing methods or his slandering of Miss Ewa's burlesque profession in an effort to convince the tenants of his moral authority. Constitutional articles, such as the right to rest and leisure, were vividly violated, as tenants were forced to partake in Anioł's cabaret/choir or seek permission for activities such as Balcerek's wedding reception in his home. The basic human right to expression was limited as well, with Anioł dictating the material for his cultural club or correcting a resident's speech if it sounded too individualistic and not collective. Of course little resistance was given to such incursions, as citizens were content with this price to pay for peace or even the convenience of finally not having pipes run across the kitchen. Perhaps the foundation for this conformity had been established from the very beginning of the series – the individual was ready to do whatever it took to enjoy the victory of attaining an apartment after many years of waiting for one.

Kořakowski (1975) surmised that Poles settled for conformity by believing that there were always some things better than others, to which the apartment can be seen as a retreat for the individual to appreciate and remind them to swallow any pursuit to redress an injustice (p. 30). However, this isolates them from society and when scores of people live similar lives, society is reduced to a dull mass contributing to the banality of communism. Intellectuals saw that similar attacks on human dignity could only come from a system that produces a collectivity through uniformity. If a person is their own source of worth and moral norm, then to surrender moral responsibility was to allow humanity to lose its individuality and become reduced to being another piece of the state's property (Skolimowski, 1969, p. 24; Kořakowski, 2013, p. 95). Paulina Bren's (2011) study of Czech television after the Prague Spring has also touched upon this idea of capitulation to unconscious fear through Václav Havel's model of the greengrocer who places a pro-socialism sign in his store window. The individual performs this ritual not because of any outright support for the socialist system, but to avoid punishment for not going along with its demands. Havel argued that compliance was an act of fear without ever fully realizing it, with the individual becoming a player in the game for the purpose of maintaining their existence. But Bren rejects this paradigm, arguing that the lines of normalcy were blurred and that decisions were far more complex, with ethical ambiguity proving

to be a burden for both sides the common citizen and dissidents, as well as party apparatchiks (pp. 7, 98, 206). When applied to Bareja's characters, indeed, it is not fear that rules their choices but rather the desire for normalcy that is defined by being left alone. However, as Bren clarifies, it is more about the uncertainties that lay ahead for an individual that create a fear of being ruled by fear during normalization (pp. 204–205). The stress from anticipating Anioł's next moves as well as what surprises await from the seemingly unfinished apartment, is the root cause of the tenants' sacrifice of freedom for comfort and privacy.

After a series of futile attempts, by episode six the neighbors begin to forge stronger bonds with each other that culminate in a show of physical force to finally oust Anioł. But could such a united front have found genuine cooperation with representatives of state power like Anioł or even Winnicki? If intellectuals found that a free and independent society could promote true socialism, then Bareja showed the problems in its crystallization. In order to centralize and protect itself, the state would infiltrate organizations in order to ideologically consolidate them. When Anioł hastens his oppression, he replaces the Professor with his key informant, Docent Furman (Wojciech Pokora), as head of the tenants committee in an effort to stave off a growing rebellion against the initial waves of cleaning duties assigned to the tenants. He not only restores their trust and deflects future grievances but he also creates another layer of bureaucracy that distances the central authority from responsibility and the admittance of mistakes (Kotowicz, 1976, p. 82). Freedom from the state control was only one half of the issue, as socioeconomic critics urged an end to the PZPR's campaign of falsification and the promotion of truth and honesty with society. A key factor to the outbreak of demonstrations in 1976 was Prime Minister Piotr Jarosiewicz's blatant public lie to Poles that the party had consulted the working class prior to the price hikes that summer (Breit, 1976, pp. 48, 51; Kotowicz, 1976, p. 81). Bareja and his writers reproduced this failure to consult society through the character of Winnicki. After Anioł cuts off the electricity, Winnicki comes to the rescue by inviting all his neighbors to come watch the match on his battery-powered television. Before the broadcast, the neighbors lament about their struggles with the current economic climate. He shares his sympathies and informs his neighbors about a moratorium on meat exports, yet the warmth of this scene soon cools with the airing of a news report featuring Winnicki, where the apparatchik announces the government's introduction to a three-year freeze on the production of meat in order to encourage frugality and see a realistic percentage growth in the economy.

Citing the 1976 constitutional changes and summer demonstrations, Bronisław Kotowicz (1976) observed that "without large reforms to lead life in the direction of authentic democracy and the freedom of the citizen, the masses in Poland will simply stop working, period," further clarifying that it is no longer about food or a home but about freedom and dignity (p. 84). By episode nine, the tenants' frustrations of life under Anioł have become unbearable that they design a plan to embarrass him in front of an international delegation which he has invited to showcase his success

of managing an apartment block. The series' final scene shows the apartment block beautified with the tragic hero Cichocki now managing the property and fulfilling cleaning requests from the residents. He is then greeted by the co-operative director who informs him that a committee of international mayors have chosen to undertake the block's functions and invest in the neighborhood with the help of the area's new coordinator – Anioł. Although Anioł was simply reshuffled in the party cadre, a common practice under the Gierek regime, his downfall could ultimately be interpreted as the decade's culmination in the rise of Solidarity in 1980–81 (Mazierska, 2008, pp. 236–237).

7. CONCLUSION: BAREIZM AS A POPULAR FORM OF INTELLECTUAL CRITICISM

After analyzing a selection of primary and secondary sources, placed in the historical context of the Polish People's Republic in the 1970s, this study reveals direct links between Stanisław Bareja's *Alternatywy 4* and popular debates discussed in the émigré publication *Kultura*. The deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in Poland and the Gierek regime's insistence on promoting a sense of normalcy through a campaign of lies were arguably the primary motivation for Bareja to take up a proactive anti-communist stance against what he perceived was the continuous degradation of Polish society. As section two reveals through sources like his biography and interviews with stars and producers from the show, the director increasingly took part in subversive acts such as smuggling and possessing *Kultura* issues, which strongly suggest that Bareja utilized them. Upon examination of various articles from the publication's issues throughout the decade, along with that of the series itself, the proceeding sections demonstrate that the series' dialogues, character interactions, and scenery conveyed three popular tenets (neostalinism, Sovietism, and lack of pluralism / individuality) raised in various *Kultura* articles (as well as by other socialist critics that Bareja admired like Leszek Kołakowski) which further substantiate my claim that intellectual debates influenced Bareja and were ultimately explored and recast in various but relatable forms within *Alternatywy 4* for viewer consumption.

Dorota Ostrowska (2013) fittingly cites in the historical context that “this kind of character [Anioł] and the rebellion of the inhabitants would not have been allowed to be shown on Polish TV before 1980, when Solidarity was founded in an act of defiance against the Polish government” (p. 77). With the martial law designed for the party to retake control, it comes to no surprise that the series was shelved for three years. From past experiences, Bareja knew the risk of trying to pass such content by state censors but he continued nonetheless, likely seeing the power and autonomy of the television set. *Bareizm* was always about nonconformity and challenging the state's official version of normalcy through visual representations and dialogues filled with double entendres. If Polish films at the time were produced with ambiguity in order to make them more interesting to a wider array of viewers without

“following a specific political agenda,” then Bareja supplemented that method by adding absurdity to divert censors away from the hidden messages (Mazierska, 2017, p. 18). With the format of a television series, he dually embraced the power and autonomy of the television set in the privacy of a viewer’s home, where they could interpret the subversive messages without interference. This was his contribution to the growing opposition movement while thousands of Solidarity activists were interred in prison.

Only referenced a few times, the meaning of “Alternative” was ambiguous if taken at face value: the city commission accepting this name for the apartment block because they could not agree on others, or Balcerek telling his son he is “too young to know what it is” (Bareja, 1986). However, Gierek declared that there were no alternatives to Poland’s situation in the late 1970s, to which intellectuals vehemently objected (Koraszewski, 1976, p. 100). There was always an alternative choice to make than to accept whatever difficult situations the tenants found themselves in, even if it did not involve the choice between good and evil as Kołakowski (1971) argued (pp. 45–46). If the party was to abandon the clutches of neostalinism and treat society as an equal partner in producing true socialism, then the citizen had to do their duty. Unlike his previous films, Bareja’s series was a critique of Polish society and how it also played a role in prolonging the longevity of communism by accepting the degrading conditions it produced for the sake of normalcy and stability. It was not until the tenants displayed a strong sense of solidarity with a plan to undermine Anioł’s rule that genuine change was attainable.

Just as in the last thirty years that media studies have uncovered the role of television in the Eastern Bloc in both the state’s political indoctrination of the masses as well as the masses’ own escape from it, series like *Alternatywy 4* also possess a valuable contribution to historical studies on that era. They not only reveal much about the lives of people, but also about the writers behind them who may not have always towed the party line. Although censorship was exceptionally ruthless towards his works, Bareja and its use of absurdities found a covert way in leading Bareja’s fight against the PZPR’s façade of lies. Through comedy and everyday portrayals, *Alternatywy 4* repurposed the use of television from a purely popular form of entertainment to one that disseminated largely inaccessible subversive material from its authoring intellectual sphere right down to the consuming masses. The medium of television was instrumental in turning this series into a valuable source of social history through its reproduction of the day-to-day realities of PRL life while illuminating the social divisions preventing society from effectively organizing or individuals from living as human beings. History books rightfully credit Solidarity’s role in uniting people to bring an end to the Eastern Bloc, but Polish intellectuals reminded us that the agency of change lies in the individual and what they can accomplish just by fighting for basic human rights and dignity. *Alternatywy 4* provided Polish society with something comparable to a circus mirror – to laugh at oneself, but to provoke further consideration as to whether there is some truth to what is being seen.

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