

# AAmeryka with an even more capital A. Białoszewski's two accounts on America

## Abstract

The article compares two versions of Miron Białoszewski's American journal. The first one is censored, literarily elaborated and published officially in communist times, albeit posthumously. The other is a crude piece from Białoszewski's *Secret Diary*. Both versions are analysed as attempts to come out in literature. In his American journal written in 1982, Białoszewski searched for a "third way" between communism and the Solidarity movement – namely, in the (homo)sexual liberation which he found in porn cinemas, darkrooms, and sex shops.

## Keywords

Queer Diary, Queer Modernism, Polish Modernism, Travelling Narrative, America



## 1. Queer modernism's belated coming out

Although modernism was being queer in its prime, it nonetheless still has its afterlife “coming outs”. Despite allowing more openness than many other cultural epochs in the past, modernism restricted the codes of speaking “openly”, of being “out” to wider audiences, of writing in a way that queer subjects might have desired and wished for. It is in our time, in postmodern times, that some of the modernism's skeletons start falling out of the closet with the publication of newer and newer “uncensored editions”, “full editions”, private letters, new biographies, and, last not least, “secret diaries”<sup>1</sup>. There was a “hidden modernism”, a closeted utopian space where modernist writers could have expressed openly the topics that they felt obliged not to mention, at least thus openly, in their works designed for official publication; on the other hand, these diaries were not completely “private”, as they were written with the intention to be published “one day”, possibly posthumously, in “better times”, envisaged in a utopian gesture. This “hidden modernism” seems to have many facets of what we used to consider “postmodern”, and that allows us to offer a back-of-the-envelope hypothesis that postmodernism was a potentiality of modernism which the latter repressed, or, that there is continuity between these two phenomena, and the passage was made as the kind of “return of the repressed” or, in this context, a coming out. If, to simplify a bit, sexuality and “obscenity” are considered low, then the “high modernism” always had the low, yet it is postmodernism that (re?)integrated the body. At least this applies to “queer modernism”. Whether the queer struggle with the modernism's casing was one of the decisive factors of the afoot (general) postmodernism, it could be debated.

## 2. Between the “official” and “unabridged” versions, between writing and editing

In this paper I will offer a detailed study of a text that was known in Polish literature and its specific version was commented by scholars. Recently we got access to the “full unabridged” version of the *Secret Diary* by Miron Białoszewski, a major Polish modernist. The text in question is called *AAmerica* and was published in 1988 in a collection of posthumous writings which also included an account of a journey around Europe on a ferry written in prose and his “last poems”. I will be calling this version “official”, while the full unabridged I will be calling “original”. The edition of the American journey account, as the editor's note tells us, was prepared to be set in 1986, however the blurb on the back-cover comments:

<sup>1</sup> I have treated the topic of queering the modernism's closet and the traces of visible queerness in modernism elsewhere, especially in my full-length book *Polish Queer Modernism*, with chapters also on Białoszewski (Sobolczyk 2015b), therefore in this study the remarks on modernism serve merely as an introduction to a study of one particular example.

it is a collection of texts prepared for publication by Miron Białoszewski in 1983. The work on this collection was stopped by the sudden death of the writer on June 17th, 1983 after a 4-month earlier stroke. This book in its final form would have for sure been different, richer, more perfect. In this work-in-progress form it is a dramatic documentary of the last months of Miron Białoszewski's life (Białoszewski 1988).

Some things in this blurb need, however, to be set straight. Only a couple of poems come from the very "last days" and the core of the book, the European and American prose, and American poems, are earlier and they do not document the "dramatic end", rather "joyful peregrinations" (or even, to use a pun, "joyful cruising"). The researchers read these texts as "finished", "definite", e.g. the category "final poems" was suggested (Brzozowski 1993; Sobolczyk 2002), that is, poems intentionally designed as "settling accounts", closing both life experiences and the artistic path (which in the case of Białoszewski, a "life writing" author, were usually the same). Likewise, the narratives of travelling were described not as "drafts" but as elaborated artefacts (Czermińska 1993; Fiut 1996; Korwin-Piotrowska 2004; none of these essays take into account gay topics). As I see it, this blurb documents the hesitation of the editor whether to publish this book at all and how it might be received in mid 80s in (still communist) Poland.

It is only with the publication of Białoszewski's *Secret Diary* in 2012 that we understood what the "work on this book" meant. *Secret Diary* contains the whole diaristic account of Białoszewski's travel to the US in 1982. We don't know (yet?) of any other version of his European travel accounts called *Mapping up Europe*. There are also a few "American" poems, two of them assigned to the cycle *Kitty Kitten's Cabaret* where not published officially neither in the collection from 1988, nor in the posthumous book of poems *OHO* from 1985 (completed by Białoszewski before death); they were published in the volume of inedita in 2017 (Białoszewski 2017). In *Secret Diary* Białoszewski mentions his writings dating from that period when asked by his readers: "They ask me if I write something about America. I don't know what to answer. Finally, I tell the truth. That I am taking journal notes, not for print, and there are also a few KKK numbers" (Białoszewski 2012: 831)<sup>2</sup>. Previously Białoszewski used several times fragments of the *Secret Diary* in his official books, usually after editing them (which is the case of some fragments of *Dustbrush*, 1980), however *AAAmerica* is the largest block taken out from the diary. The editing consisted in cutting out pieces, rearranging them, adding a (more "literary elaborated") "frame", coding names, and occasionally "hotting up" some sentences or paragraphs. These procedures are traditionally recognised by the editing criticism. Later on, I shall analyse in great detail the cutting-rearranging process

<sup>2</sup> "Pytają mnie, czy co napiszę o Ameryce. Nie wiem, co na to odpowiadać. W końcu mówię prawdę. Że robię zapiski dziennikowe, nie do druku, a kilka numerów amerykańskich *Kici Koci* już jest". *Secret Diary*, as most of Białoszewski's texts, has not been translated into English. The translations used in this text are mine. "KKK" refers to "Kitty Kitten's Cabaret" cycle.

which mostly omitted sexuality, i.e. homosexuality, and politics – and this is the gist of this essay. But before, let me show what “adding a frame” meant. In *AAAmerica* Białoszewski gives a clue wherefrom he took his title. This was supposed to come, I guess, as a surprise to his readers: most thought that the “AAA” refers to a kind of hypervocalised hype, the fascination of the Polish citizens under communism with America, or the desire to emigrate; or some might have recognised the advertising structure used to position the ad better (“AAAAll my loving will I give to a bearded guy”, etc.); lastly perhaps some readers could have thought that Białoszewski ironises the alleged primacy that the US might have seemed to partake in a self-congratulatory gesture. However, the title was inspired by the fact that the New York subway fast trains were marked with one A and the regular ones with AA. In the original version of *Secret Diary* he didn’t mention this fact at all, so it seems added later from memory. As for what I call “hotting up” – in *AAAmerica* the writer repeats on two pages a *double entendre* phrase: “Still the sun tends to the West” (Białoszewski 1988: 58, 75). Though it is an observation from the airplane window, it acquires a political meaning that the Sun smiles more to the West, i.e. that in the cold war between East and West, West is on a better position. Note that his flight took place in the middle of the martial law in Poland. In the original version this phrase appeared only once and in a slightly different shape: “The sun for 5 hours has been on the home straight [tends to the sunset]” (Białoszewski 2012: 802).<sup>3</sup>

### 3. A “coming out text” in the communism?

Before the publication of Białoszewski’s inedita, especially *Secret Diary*, it was *AAAmerica* that seemed to be the most “gay” text by this writer and therefore it was called his “almost coming out”. The analysis of this American narrative closed my essay on the writer’s “hermetic pornographies”:

In his late works, in *AAAmerica*, he decides to talk openly about “pornography”, at the same time introducing the word in the easiest form to define – as a genre of film or a magazine. [...] In his obsessive talk about porn, there is no more perverse lightness of the subject, there is no more nodding at the reader, or playing little games with him – or simply the game has changed. There are no [...] confessions, like “I watch porn and I get excited” (Sobolczyk 2013: 116-117)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> In Polish “sunset” and “West” share the same noun, “zachód”, and the difference is marked by the use of capital letter. However phonetically there is no difference at all. The original Polish versions of this phrase are: “Wciąż słońce ma się ku zachodowi” and „Słońce ma się od 5 godzin ku zachodowi”.

<sup>4</sup> Here I quote the translation of my text from 2006 made in 2013, i.e. already after the publication of *Secret Diary*.

Yet when we collate the official and the "secret" versions, we see that what had seemed "telling much", "being open", was actually carefully censored and elaborated, not that "excessive" anymore, not that "open". In this context the question that the blurb asks can be recontextualised in a surely different direction than the editors imagined back in the day: how would have AAAmerica finally looked had Białoszewski completed the elaboration of the text? Would he keep stronger fragments? Or would the editor force him to cut them? Note that the very same year when Białoszewski wrote and edited his American diary, his publisher, PIW [State Publishing Institute], issued a censored edition of Jerzy Andrzejewski's *Pulp*, which had appeared before in a different edition in the independent dissident circulation, and where not only homosexuality is talked about, but there are even pornographic moments about an intellectual and political dissident being fucked by a guy with a huge dick. Moreover, *Pulp* was published after the secret service attempted to bring shame on Andrzejewski, an active political dissident, by spreading a fake letter in which he allegedly demanded gay marriage rights (in 1976). In April 1978 Białoszewski noted in his diary, probably after hearing some gossip in the publishing house: "They are supposed to publish some books that they had previously not wanted to, among others Andrzejewski's *Pulp*" (Białoszewski 2012: 527)<sup>5</sup>. The "unmentionability", "uncensoredness" of *Pulp* and the full version of AAAmerica are similar, especially on the sexuality level. Andrzejewski is perhaps more acrimonious on the political level, however both works offer a similar blending of the queer with the political. Moreover, adding to the publishing atmosphere, Grzegorz Musiał's debut queer and campy novel *Fluid state* was published in 1982, and it was inspired among others by Białoszewski's works. In 1984 the communist publisher reedited Marian Pankowski's queer novel showing gay sex between a Nazi German and a Polish boy, entitled *Rudolph*; the book had appeared four years earlier in the exile publishing house in London. Even if this apparent "liberalisation" could be called in our today terms "pinkwashing", i.e. the Polish authorities in the time of the martial law tried to prove that they were in fact liberal,<sup>6</sup> still we understand that it was possible for Białoszewski to prepare a more open book.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that both these writers were major Polish modernists (albeit Andrzejewski's position then seemed higher, now it seems to be reversed), and both gay, however neither their works, nor their biographies were ever close. Andrzejewski never mentioned Białoszewski in his columns, letters, or diaries (at least the ones we now by far). Apart from this mentioning of *Pulp* in *Secret Diary*, Białoszewski mentions his friend's Ludwik's comment that he read a boring column by Andrzejewski. The original Polish passage sounds thus: "Mają teraz wydawać różne książki, których przedtem nie chcieli, między innymi *Miazgę* Andrzejewskiego".

<sup>6</sup> Gay people during all that time, famous and ordinary alike, were shadowed by the secret service. E.g. Jerzy Andrzejewski's signature under the letter opting for gay marriage was obtained by an agent who had sex with the writer and then "medicined" him with a blackout pill. The secret service used boys – agents to keep Andrzejewski drinking (he was an alcoholic) in spite of his attempts to rehab. Białoszewski himself noted in his diary that after years he found out that some of his friends from the past were secret service agents. A few times Białoszewski was either arrested or interrogated by the secret service or the militia came to his apartment. In 1985, two years after martial law was suspended, the militia run an organised detention of gay men called *Hyacinth* action, repeated three years later on a smaller scale.

## 4. "Secret Diary" and its "coming out structure"

In the structure of *Secret Diary*, the American segment is located after the "coming out" section. The majority of the diary speaks about homosexuality in more or less the same style used in the official texts. The full outness appears as late as in the third part called *Aggravation*. In the previous one, titled *Transmitting*, after describing the death of his parents and the wave of strikes in 1980, he stopped writing/recording (some segments were recorded and then rewritten) for a year (see also my review essay written just after the diary was published: Sobolczyk 2012). The new part, *Aggravation*, was not recorded (it was usually other people who rewrote the recordings into text), it was written in notebooks and not rewritten on a typewriter (which was also done for him by third parties). There were seven notebooks, but there remain only four, as three most probably were destroyed. The text starts in 1982 and the first of the notebooks, numbered 4, contains the annotation: "to be published in 2020" (later he changed his mind and set the date to 2010). All this shows how problematic and postponed was this "coming out" even in a private diary. It is an internal struggle, although it seems that he wanted to settle it before his death, and it seems also that it brought him psychological relief. And therefore, it means as well that the decision to take out something from this "secret" text, and to make it public, albeit censoring it but not completely, makes *AAmerica* a "coming out text". There is such a subgenre of queer literature known as "coming out text", somewhat similar to a "manifesto" which can take different stylistic forms nonetheless.

After two pages, on the second day of this new part of the diary that starts on May 18th, 1982, i.e. in the night of May 19/20th, the coming out story takes place. It starts actually with a pretext story that I had described in detail in my book *Polish Queer Modernism*<sup>7</sup>. Białoszewski uses a pastiche of a Proustian trope, he starts talking about standing in a queue to buy fruit drops and suddenly jumps to his childhood when he liked eating fruit drops and also having sex adventures. Then a long monologue on his sex and love life starts, and from this time on Białoszewski is open in his diary about homosexuality, with the American part being the most replete with details.

## 5. Differences between the original and the official versions

Time to delve into these details. We knew from the published version that Białoszewski bought "porn" (porn magazines) in New York and that he thought it was reasonably cheap, even though it cost more than other expenses: "Porn magazines eight, ten dollars. It seems to me that it's not that much for this kind

<sup>7</sup> Although years pass and I still haven't figured out if this was actually a planned subterfuge, a deliberate "pretext" with a Proustian touch, or a psychological effect of the need to say it finally, to burst out, and the night, the mood drove the writer this way.

of things" (Białoszewski 1988: 62)<sup>8</sup>. It has to be explained that although homosexuality in Poland has been legal from 1932 with the age of consent being equally set for hetero- and homosexuals at 15 years, porn was illegal and therefore much desired. Białoszewski himself mentioned that when his former partner and later co-habitant, Leszek, went to Italy for painting purposes, he came back with playing cards with nudes. The first Polish gay bulletins or magazines (published from 1983, it is little probable that Białoszewski had them in his hands) reprinted Tom of Finland's erotic pictures, or the porn ban was omitted by "promoting bodybuilding"<sup>9</sup>. In the original version of this passage there was a provocative political context to the porn buying topic. In *AAAmerica* buying porn follows a short excerpt on shops depicted according to the formula of fetishisation of Western abundance and with a note on race diversity. It creates a logical bridge from seeing many shops to entering one of them which happens to be a press shop. With elaborated naturalness, the writer says; "I buy porn". This is supposed to show that porn was available not only in shops "for perverts", although later on in *AAAmerica* he will talk about sex-shops as well. What was omitted in this account is the visit Białoszewski had to pay to the Polish consulate in New York. And in front of this consulate there was a manifestation of Polish diaspora against communist regime and supporting the Solidarity movement. The writer felt awkward, because he was invited by the exile organisation Alfred Jurzykowski Foundation and his journey to the US needed to be approved by the communist authorities, so he was obliged to visit the consulate: "I listen to both sides. What else befits? I am not hiding my distance nor lassitude with the politics, economy, social life, the Polish coercion. I want difference, be it only for six weeks" (Białoszewski 2012: 803)<sup>10</sup>. The next day his "care-takers" who approve the pro-Solidarity manifestation take the writer with them, but in front of the consulate he stands at a distance and eventually decides to go to sex-shops which, as he had already learned, were near.

I stopped at a certain distance. I said in my case it doesn't befit because yesterday I went there to arrange my things and I will need their clemency and help with the return ticket. What good would I have from shouts and whistles of a small Polish group anyway. One

<sup>8</sup> "Pisma porno po osiem, dziesięć dolarów. Wydaje mi się, że to nie tak drogo jak na takie rzeczy".

<sup>9</sup> As Lukasz Szulc notes in his valuable book on homosexuality under communism, "Filo" magazine tried actively to fight the ban on pornography: "[it] included not only many erotic / pornographic stories or images and humorous slogans such as 'We want porn, not ORMO [a volunteer police reserve]', but also some serious discussions about the ban on the distribution of pornography in Poland under communism. In one issue, "Filo" dedicated two full pages to the topic. First, authors reacted to some complaints from the readers about reproducing explicit images and using vulgar words by explaining that the images were artistic in nature and the words were ironic in intention. Next, they argued that homosexual pornography was prosecuted in Poland more vigorously than heterosexual pornography and made the case for legalizing the former, maintaining that pornography would work as a substitute for sex and, thus, would help to fight against the spreading of HIV" (Szulc 2018: 172).

<sup>10</sup> "Ja wystuchuję tych i tamtych. Bo niby co innego wypada? Nie ukrywam swojego dystansu do polityki ani zmęczenia polityką, gospodarką, życiem społecznym, musem polskim. Chcę inności, choćby na 6 tygodni".

lady was the loudest. Just as that black lady yesterday shouting about Jesus. Instead of contemplating this, I fled to the porn shops nearby and there I spent an interesting evening on browsing porn in New York. In each porn shop on one side there is female-male love, and on the other, there is male-male, very abundant. Many guys here and there. Anybody can browse whatever they want. I was here yesterday too, I bought many very beautiful nudes. [...] Today I bought a very sought-after goodie, 6 dollars only. A great Black guy with a huge dick is performing a blowjob / gamaruche on himself. Such a huge dick like this one I had twice (Białoszewski 2012: 804)<sup>11</sup>.

This paragraph shows that *AAmerica* was “literary elaborated” but *not* as opposed to the “crude” diary account: the diary is likewise elaborated. This is a deliberate provocation, but also more than that. Provocation to the communist authorities, because writing about Solidarity as such was banned (no wonder then that he cut this passage for the official edition). Provocation to Solidarity because of the distance in space and also metaphorical. But “going his (own) way” (to the sex-shops) means that some people needed a *third* way. Communism, as he perfectly knew, was essentially homophobic. But what was by many, perhaps even by the majority of Polish people, believed to bring “freedom”, for a specific minority seemed to be a “restricted liberation”. Białoszewski’s prediction was correct: although Solidarity extensively referred to human rights, it denied in the 80s, in the 90s, and throughout the 21st century that gay rights be part of human rights (see also Ritz 2002). He thus redefines in a queer way the myth of “AAmerica as the land of liberty”<sup>12</sup>. For the majority of pro-Solidarity, it meant “democratic liberty”. Białoszewski points to the freedom of sexual expression. He even goes further in his political provocation when he accounts how he kept his new bought porn magazines

<sup>11</sup> “Zatrzymałem się w pewnej odległości. Powiedziałem, że mi nie wypada, skoro tam wczoraj byłem jako załatwiacz i od konsulatu dalej potrzebuję łaski, pomocy w powrotnym bilocie. Zresztą co mi przyjdzie ze słuchania pokrzykiwań i gwizdów małej grupki Polaków. Najgłośniej krzyczała jakaś kobieta. Niczym wczorajsza Murzynka o Jezusie. Zamiast to kontemplować, poleciałem do niedalekich sklepów porno i tam na oglądaniu pism spędziłem ciekawe popołudnie w Nowym Jorku. W każdym porno-sklepie jest z jednej strony miłość damsko-męska, a z drugiej – męsko-męska, obfita niezwykle. Tam tyle mężczyzn, co i tu. Każdy sobie ogląda, co chce. Jak długo chce. Wczoraj też tu byłem, kupiłem dużo przepięknych aktów. [...] Dokupiłem sobie dziś bardzo przez siebie poszukiwany cymes, tylko za 6 dolarów. Świetny Murzyn z olbrzymim ‘interesem’ sam sobie robi minetę. Olbrzymi ‘interes’ podobny do owego miałem dwa razy”.

<sup>12</sup> Białoszewski always paid much attention to dreams, and he described many of them in his poems and prose. In the official version he included just two sentences, not very meaningful without a context – I want to suggest that “sexual liberty” as the third way is a possible context: “Before flying to New York I had recurring dreams of a clique/rushes [sitwa] surrounding me. But here in New York these dreams suddenly stopped” (“Przed wyjazdem do Nowego Jorku powtarzały mi się sny z otaczającą mnie sitwą. Tu w Nowym Jorku nagle te sny ustały”, Białoszewski 1988: 77-78). He uses an untranslatable word, “sitwa” means literally “clique”, but it comes from either “net”, “web”, either from “rushes” (or “scirpus”), in both cases of something dense that you can be caught up in and even die (or drown; note that Białoszewski’s lover drowned in a lake in the writer’s presence).



at nuns'. Quite accidentally his accommodation in New York, very cheap, happened to be at catholic nuns'. Białoszewski outplays this fact as a political allegory when he says in the original version: "I live with this porn at nuns'. And it's all good. It's like going to the consulate and at the same time having nice chats with the dissidents" (Białoszewski 2012: 805)<sup>13</sup>. Solidarity was closely tied to catholic church and therefore it was a strictly moralistic movement on erotic grounds. Białoszewski's "third way" shows that for a queer person there can be no conflict between religion and sexuality. He himself was not religious, and in Poland he was friends with a nun (Maria Franciszka), a teacher of Polish language at school, who knew Białoszewski's partners, received them as a couple and even organised some readings for the writer; he also had a gay colleague who became a priest; he wrote short stories about a young monk that he and his ex-boyfriend knew, and who was telling them stories about gay sex life of monks inside and outside the convent. Białoszewski was also interested in the theatrical side of religion(s), although his own spiritual practice tended rather to East. In a nutshell, his perception was that homosexuality and Catholicism don't have to be preclusive. In the official account the paragraph on nuns and porn omits the political context and, again, it situates porn in the context of "commodity fetishism", i.e. among goodies unavailable in Poland that "everyone" dreams of:

I come back to the room at nuns' on the seventh floor, I unfold my porn, Chinese cookies, bananas, oranges and I tell myself: "real treats, real treats". When I leave the place, I hide the porn under the shelf with an extra blanket, who would give a look there, what cleaning lady? (Białoszewski 1988: 63)<sup>14</sup>.

If we read it allegorically, Białoszewski is trying to say: we should want free market not only for food, but also for sexuality<sup>15</sup>. Curiously enough, since we know that Białoszewski was writing these words about a "third way" and sexual freedom short before his death (but did he know it? did he plan it as a "last words" genre?), his words sound like a kind of prophecy and testament. A few years later the vision of changes to come was presented in a similar fashion

<sup>13</sup> "Z tym porno mieszkam sobie u zakonnic. I wszystko dobrze. To tak jak chodzenie do konsulatku i miłe rozmowy z wygwizdywaczami".

<sup>14</sup> "Wracam do pokoju zakonnic na siódme piętro, rozkładam porno, chińskie ciastka, banany, pomarańcze i mówię do siebie. – Co za prezenty, co za prezenty. Wychodząc chowam porno pod półkę z zapasowym kocem, komu by się tam chciało zaglądać, której sprzątacze?". Bananas and oranges were hardly available in communist times. Once a year, near Christmas, ships from a fellow communist country, Cuba, arrived with green and sour oranges.

<sup>15</sup> Porn is a part of something that he called in one American poem "this dumpster of the world / sometimes beautiful is" ("ten śmietnik świata / czasem piękny jest", Białoszewski 1988: 127), i.e. mixture and diversity. In the official version he says: "I get off in the umbilicus of the city. There noise, turmoil, only shadow, because the sun doesn't arrive, heights, shops, cinemas, porn, sellers, convertors, saxophonists, white, black and yellow" ("Wysiadam w pępku miasta. Tam hałas, rwetes, sam cień, bo słońce nie dochodzi, wielkie wysokości, sklepy, kina, porno, handlarze, nawracacze, saksofoniści, biali, czarni i żółci", Białoszewski 1988: 65). This fragment was added later, it doesn't appear in the original version.

in the gay magazine "Filo": "Sooner or later, the wave of porn business will reach us just as jeans, video, Coca-Cola and colourful socks did" (quoted after: Szulc 2018: 172). Note that many former Solidarity dissidents, in the 90s in the new system, assumed an approving stance toward jeans and video, but negative toward porn, women's rights, not to mention homosexuality which they believed was nonexistent. Nonetheless, porn was legalised.

There is also a difference between the two versions of the description of porn cinema. In the original version the writer accounts numerous visits, in the published version they are synthesised and censored:

I come to see male-female porn. Movies. [...] There are cinemas only for men as well. "Male" is written on the top. You go in, you seat. [...] From time to time someone gets up and goes backstage. It turns out this is a relief lounge. [...] I homed in on a "Male" cinema with a follies show. You clap after every performance. And this is how wonderfully I have past my evening. At some point I felt as if someone was trying to reach my pocket. But I moved (Białoszewski 1988: 76)<sup>16</sup>.

He seems to dim protectively his "coming out" in this official version by "bisexualising" it. I skipped a description of male-female striptease and dances which has no equivalent in the fragment on gay cinema, he just mentions that there are "performances" and the audience "claps"<sup>17</sup>. But what is funny is the difference of "touch" that he describes. In the official version he suggests that he was

<sup>16</sup> "Wstępuję na porno męsko-damskie. Filmy. [...] Co pewien czas film się przerywa, wychodzi na scenę żywa z tapczaniem baba, tańczy, rozbiera się, wypina, wlatuje chłop, ściąga spodnie i majtki, i zaczynają miłość na tapczanie, po kolei to i owo w krążku światła. Udają na końcu orgazm. [...] Są i kina dla samych panów. Z napisami na wierzchu "Male". Tam też się wchodzi, siada. [...] Co pewien czas ktoś wstaje i idzie za kulisy. Okazuje się, że to salon ulgi. [...] Trafiałem również do kina "Male" z rewią męską. Po każdym występie klaszcze się. I tak świetnie zszedł mi wieczór. W którymś momencie czułem, że ktoś mi chyba dobiera się do tylnej kieszeni. Ale się odsunąłem".

<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, also the fragment on the straight cinema was cut a bit – Białoszewski offers a metaerotic commentary: "If you zoom off from awe, you have different ways of reception. Listening too long to moans and cries of pleasure start to make one laugh" ("Jeśli się wypadnie z podziwu, to ma się odbiór na różne sposoby. Dłużej słuchane stęki i jęki rozkoszy zaczynają być śmieszne", Białoszewski 2012: 811). "Zooming off from awe" is a nice euphemistic metaphor of coming (ejaculating). This sentence could have been censored because it seemed too picturesque, but also because it implied that Białoszewski was not being indifferent in porn cinemas (before, needless to say, arriving at stoical indifference). However, I suspect as well that it could be particularly irritating and provocative in Poland also because pornography was so fetishised (as banned things often are), while here we read a moment of disenchantment. In the construction of homosexuality in *Secret Diary*, however, it has its function, that is, it is not accidental that he as a gay subject delivers such a remark seeing a straight porn movie. He never says anything similar about gay porn movies, he adds a remark on "porn" as such (yet after describing "homoporn with black, yellow and white" and then some avenues and food): "Of course in the long run pornography bores, or rather fatigues. But after a break it prepossesses you again" ("Oczywiście pornografia na dłuższą metę nudzi, czy raczej nuży. Ale po przerwie znów zajmuje", Białoszewski 2012: 828).

touched by someone who wanted to rob him<sup>18</sup>. In the original version he says simply that he was grabbed by someone for a moment as part of a "cruising trajectory" of changing seats, grabbing guys until finding mutual satisfaction:

At the audience there is someone sitting here and there, changes seats, something at times is going on. An inebriate behind me smoked cigarettes, commented loud what was going on the screen, finally grabbed me a bit, then talked, changed seats (Białoszewski 2012: 806).<sup>19</sup>

"Something is going on" is a euphemism for sexual activities. Two days later, on another visit in a porn cinema (we don't know if it's the same or a different one), he amplifies the topic, giving a topography of the cinema's audience which also constitutes a difference of "touches". There is a region of "erotic grabbing" and of "thievish grabbing":

I went by subway to the cinema of my rite/observance. Standing and sitting there were many men of different age, different beauty, all the races. Some were standing in an observational box by the wall. It seems that there they grab wallets on the asses. In the rows on the chairs mostly engaging in ardencies, but singular (Białoszewski 2012: 808)<sup>20</sup>.

On this occasion I will offer a short note on the vocabulary. In the official version Białoszewski used the phrase "male cinema" (as if it were "gents", i.e. toilet, this is the association in Polish language). In the original version he introduced his first visit to a porn cinema with a short story of being in a teahouse (I am not referring to gay slang meaning, but a place where tea is served) with a Polish immigrant lady: "she showed me on our way a few peculiarities. Among others, next to her house, a cinema for homosexuals. Just after bidding adieu to her

<sup>18</sup> In the official version he says that one Sunday he was supposed to meet his readers in Manhattan, but when he bends down his caretakers notice that there is a hole in his trousers. The writer thinks that either he did it involuntarily, or someone cut it in the cinema (Białoszewski 1988: 79). In the original version he says only that he noticed on Saturday (not on Sunday) that his trousers are "snagged on the ass" (Białoszewski 2012: 810). For some reason then the writer, thinking of publication, added this suspicion that it happened in "some cinema" (*cognoscenti* readers would guess which of the cinemas, he described also regular cinemas where he watched horrors, not only gay porn cinemas); he avoided the word "ass", but added the word "hole". This is all quite ambiguous: what would he have to do in the cinema for someone to cut a hole (with a knife or scissors rather?) in the place visible only when you bend down? It is just a loose hypothesis, but perhaps it is a coded allegory: namely, how the American experience helped him become out in his writing (i.e., show a hole on his ass), pointing to non-normative male passivity.

<sup>19</sup> "Na widowni tu i ówdzie ktoś siedzi, przesiada się, coś czasem się dzieje. Pijak za mną palił papierosy, komentował na głos to, co szło na ekranie, w końcu podmacał mnie, potem gadał, przesiadał się".

<sup>20</sup> "Pojechałem metrem, czyli subwayem, do kina mojego obrządku. Sporo stało i siedziało mężczyzn w różnym wieku, różnej urody, wszystkich ras. Niektórzy stali w łoży obserwacyjnej pod ścianą. Zdaje się, że tam macają portfele na dupie. W rzędach krzesel przeważnie zaangażowani w namiętności, ale pojedyncze".

and her uncle, I quickly embroiled myself in this cinema" (Białoszewski 2012: 806)<sup>21</sup>. He used the medical but open word then, although nonetheless he later added a metaphor, instead of saying "I went to/entered this cinema", etc., he uses "I got involved/I got engaged/I embroiled myself in", possibly alluding to the collocation "embroil myself in karman"<sup>22</sup>, which he also uses in the diary (in a moment I will quote another use of this phrase). It comes as a bit of surprise that on his second visit to the cinema he also uses a metaphor which has a modernist-euphemistic touch: "cinema of my rite/observance". This metaphor juxtaposes sexuality and its diverse forms with different religions. Perhaps both metaphors are related on the basis of religion: if Białoszewski was raised in a catholic culture, but analyses his actions in hinduistic or buddhist terms, he alludes to a minoritarian and little-known religion in his own culture. The second metaphor might also be related to the cross-section of races, ages, beauties, and by default religions in a conventional meaning, but which all gather under the umbrella of one thing (religion, i.e. sexuality). In the official version Białoszewski, with the use of a somewhat elusive and elliptic syntax, also mentions that he went to the "relief saloon" in a gay cinema: "I went to a porn cinema this and that, with the backstage, and to the relief" (Białoszewski 1988: 113)<sup>23</sup>. This is a euphemistic way of mentioning a sex adventure. His reader must be attentive to remember which of the cinemas had the relief saloon (i.e. the "male" one, not the straight one). In the original version we have a detailed account of this adventure, however, and it is one of the most licentious fragments in the whole diary:

I go behind the screen to a dark smoochy room and I see shadows of guys. They tend to each other, approach. One – I can see from a distance – gorgeous, almost naked – doesn't stint nobody looking at him. [...] You can hear moans of pleasure from the screen and live. The naked one after not such a short show came with a hiss, elegantly, because slowly put his shirt on, underwear, pants, went away. His place took a young, quite tall Asian guy, he allowed the others to touch him strongly. And sticky of pleasure he yielded to it and came against the background of moans and swigging from the screen. A small shadow of a small Chinese guy appeared, this

<sup>21</sup> "Pokazywała mi po drodze kilka osobliwości. M. in. – obok jej domu – kino dla homoseksualistów. Po pożegnaniu się z nią i wujem pod jej bramą szybko wdałem się w to kino".

<sup>22</sup> He uses it in the very beginning of the original account: "Strange. I came here to receive an award. I could receive it through the bank. But I was tempted. Then frightened. But it was embarrassing to cancel the trip. I embroil myself in karman, in deeds" ("Dziwne. Przyjechałem tu po nagrodę. Mogłem ją odebrać przez bank. Ale mnie kusilo. Potem straszyló. Ale wstyd było cofać jazdę. Wdaję się w karmana, w uczynkowość", Białoszewski 2012: 802). It seems that this word is almost a "key word" in this text, possibly highlighting "movement", "agility", "diversity" as opposed to (unvoiced) "stagnancy" in Poland. Białoszewski shows this "embroiling" as a process that goes from "general" to "particular": first, embroiling in karman or deeds; then in a porn cinema; finally, in a guy in the cinema. In this context "embroiling" seems synonymous with "excitement", as if he was saying "in my late days this is the very thing that can excite me".

<sup>23</sup> "Byłem w kinie porno takim i siakim, i z kulisami, i do ulgi".

one was sitting and watching, because there are also chairs there. I embroiled myself in one German, who last of all was repeating "danke danke danke". At some moment my shoes began to slide from you know what. There is so much of it. You could fall down. [...] A human leaves the place sated, calended, satisfied, and not recognized" (Białoszewski 2012: 808-809)<sup>24</sup>.

In this quotation we have another use of "wdać się" (embroil oneself). This one is somewhat ambiguous in Polish, because there is a saying "wdać się w kogoś" which means "take after somebody", e.g. "take after father" (look or act like him). No doubt Białoszewski, highly conscious linguistically, means both: become ardently engaged in an action with a German guy and, most probably, "do the same thing as he is doing". Perhaps even the writer tries to introduce an idea of "sexual empathy" (mutuality). Compared to this detailed and keen account, the official version, *AAAmerica*, seems cold and distanced. It seems an outsider's reportage or a traveler's account of "diversities of the world". Daniel Harris offered a great analysis of the changes of pornographic films and literature which throws some light on Białoszewski's descriptions:

the wake of the home video revolution of the mid 1980s [...] liberated viewers from decrepit burlesque palaces with sticky floors and dilapidated seats plastered with wads of gum. Until the last decade, the viewing of pornography was a communal event, taking place in darkened cinemas where restless audiences migrated from seat to seat in a game of musical chairs, knocking knees, playing footsie, and gathering together for sex in abandoned balconies or the cramped stalls of bathrooms. Because the vast majority of the people viewed pornography in a public setting, early gay films really served more as an enhancement for cruising, a form of visual Muzak for sex, than they did as an end in themselves (Harris 1997: 119).

Another "licentious" add-on to the official version is the goodies he bought in a sex shop, goodies that he kept in the nuns' place. In the official account he mentioned "indecent objects hanging on the walls" ("na ścianach wiszą różne nieprzyzwoitości", Białoszewski 1988: 62) among the magazines that "many clients browse" (the writer notes with a touch of amazement that you

<sup>24</sup> "Wchodzę za ekran, do ciemnego nastrojowego pomieszczenia, a tam cienie chłopów. Maja się ku sobie, podchodzą. Jeden-widzę z daleka-wspaniały, prawie nagi-nie żałuje nikomu patrzenia na siebie. [...] Słychać jęki rozkoszy zza ekranu i jednocześnie te na żywo. Nagi pokazujący siebie po nie za krótkim seansie wyładował z sykiem, elegancko, bo powoli naciągał na siebie koszulę, majtki, spodnie, poszedł. Na jego miejscu zakrólował młody, dosyć wysoki Azjata, ten pozwolił dotykać siebie jak najmocniej. I też-oblepiony pożądliwością-sam jej ulegając, dojechał na tle jęków i żłopań z ekranu do swojej stacji. Zjawił się cień małego Chińczyka, ten siedział i patrzył, bo są tam i krzesła. Ja wdałem się z kolei w rozgogolonego Niemca, który mi na koniec powtarzał-danke-danke -danke. W pewnej chwili zaczęły mi się buty ślizgać, wiadomo, po czym. To aż tyle tego. Można się przewrócić. [...] Człowiek wychodzi stamtąd nasycony, wymagłowany, usatysfakcjonowany i nierozpoznany".

can browse everything). In the original version we learned that he actually also bought one "indecent object": "I bought more male porn and a gum imitation of the male jewel for 5 dollars" ("Dokupiłem sobie jeszcze męskie porno i imitację gumową męskiego wdzięku za 5 dolarów", Białoszewski 2012: 809). The word "dildo" was unknown in Polish language back then<sup>25</sup>. Unfortunately, the topic of dildo never comes back in the narrative, so we are unable to learn what were its vicissitudes, e.g. whether he transported it to Poland (nor do we know if he was able to transport porn magazines).

One last difference between the two versions has to be mentioned to make the account of queerness in the text(s) full. It deals with an ambiguous linguistic misunderstanding, possibly deliberate: the misunderstanding of the English idiom "to come out of the closet". The two versions are a bit different. Here is the official one:

I am meeting an acquaintance who emigrated from Poland in 1968. He was a boy then, now he says they want to make him a professor, but he holds out. He asks:

– How did this happen that you came out of the closet? maybe I don't speak Polish very well, because I'm not using it, but I think you understand me.

– Yes, yes, perfectly – and I start explaining as I can, that first it took me out of the bed to the hospital, then to the sanatorium. Then I moved. Thanks to that it was easier to travel to Budapest. And after the pleasures of Budapest it was easier to travel elsewhere (Białoszewski 1988: 82)<sup>26</sup>.

Now the original version:

With an old acquaintance from Poland, Ludwiczek, who emigrated in 1968 – and he is still young – on a walk-in beatnik artists neighborhood. [...] Ludwiczek shows me homosexual men street.

– Only at this hour there's nothing going on, too early and otherwise too cold.

Ludwiczek unlearned speaking Polish, but in my presence, he got rolling. He asked me in the beginning:

– What happened that you came out of the closet?

<sup>25</sup> In this official fragment where he describes magazines that one can browse, he also mentions that outside of the shop there are "prostitutes, whackos, and dressed up people" – the latter probably meaning drag queens, but Polish language didn't have a word for that.

<sup>26</sup> "Spotykam się ze znajomym, który wyemigrował z Polski w sześćdziesiątym ósmym roku. Był wtedy chłopcem, teraz mówi, że chcą z niego zrobić profesora, ale on się broni. Pyta się – Jak to się stało, że pan wyszedł z szafy? Ja może niedobrze mówię po polsku, bo nie używam tu polskiego, ale chyba pan mnie rozumie. – Tak, tak, doskonale – i tłumaczę mu, jak mogę, że najpierw wyrwało mnie z łóżka do szpitala, potem do sanatorium. Potem się przeprowadziłem. Dzięki temu już było łatwiej jechać do Budapesztu. A po przyjemnościach w Budapeszcie łatwiej było jechać gdzie indziej".

I that heart stroke moved me. And so I learned to travel. When he could see me in 1967-1968 on Plac Dąbrowskiego, always lying in bed, he couldn't imagine me walking the streets (Białoszewski 2012: 826-827)<sup>27</sup>.

Ludwiczek is Ludwik Weiss from a family of Polish Jews who emigrated in 1968 after the anti-Semitic political hate campaign run by the communist party. What we can reconstruct is that Ludwiczek, though a young boy, must have already known he was gay, and he got to know older gay men since he was visiting the apartment of Białoszewski and his ex-partner Leszek. In 1967 Białoszewski was depressed by his boyfriend's suicide. I suppose the street that they walk down is Christopher Street (though it is curious that Ludwiczek says: "there is nothing going on... because it's too cold"; would he mean sex in public? Or at least half-naked men in leather suspenders?) or some street at Greenwich Village as the "gayborhood". It is clear that Ludwiczek means "to come out as gay" when he uses the idiom "to come out of the closet". This idiom was introduced in Polish language in its literal translation in, if I am not wrong, 21st century. But did Białoszewski understand it? Both his replies seem to contradict that. However, the explanation he gives is different in the original version and in the official one: actually the "heart stroke" came later than the "hospital" and "sanatorium" mentioned in the official version, because they refer to tuberculosis periods. Secondly, he added a metalinguistic remark on not speaking very well Polish and understanding it perfectly. It seems to build the idea of winking at the *cognoscenti* readers (who "perfectly" understand that the closet is gay-related) and talking at the same time to the *ignoranti* about getting out of the bed at home (home and bed being this "closet"); also the "pleasures in Budapest" might have a double meaning for *cognoscenti* in this context<sup>28</sup>. Re-reading now the original version and trying to stick to Ludwiczek's point of view: what did he mean when he asked that question, knowing that it referred to being "publicly gay"? He must have known that in Poland back then almost no one was "publicly gay" even though literary circles knew about Białoszewski before 1967 (as some

<sup>27</sup> "Ze starym znajomym z Polski Ludwiczkiem, który wyemigrował w 1968 – a jest wciąż młody – na spacerze po dzielnicy artystów beatników. [...] Ludwiczek pokazywał mi ulicę homoseksualistów. – Tylko o tej godzinie nic się nie dzieje, z wcześniej i zresztą za zimno. Ludwiczek odczytał się mówienia po polsku, ale przy mnie się rozkręcił. Spytał mnie na początku – Co się stało, że pan wyszedł z szafy? Ja, że ruszył mnie zawał. I tak nauczyłem się jeździć. Kiedy mnie obserwował w 1967-1968 r. na pl. Dąbrowskiego, leżącego zawsze w łóżku, nie wyobrażał sobie mnie chodzącego po ulicy".

<sup>28</sup> Someone (maybe Ludwiczek himself) could have told Białoszewski the meaning of this idiom. Another example of a passage that we might wonder "how much Białoszewski knew" is his short story about the mayor and his city hall in Manhattan (Białoszewski 1988: 68; exactly the same passage in the original version Białoszewski 2012: 812). Is mentioning the mayor an allusion? At that time, the mayor of New York was Ed Koch (1978-1989) who was rumoured to be gay; these rumours started at least in 1977, and Koch was "outed" by the writer Larry Kramer in the 80s as a punishment for not doing enough to help the gay community fight the AIDS crisis (cf. also Eisenbach, 2006: 295). Anyone that Białoszewski talked to in New York could have told him the "gossip", so he could know it. But did he?

other writers as well). I think he means roughly... cruising. As a young boy he must have thought that Białoszewski just stayed at home, occasionally receiving some visits, and not actively seeking partners in cruising places such as parks, public toilets, and specific streets<sup>29</sup>. And now in New York he heard him talking (I guess) of gay porn cinemas and they walked gay area. This is what I think he meant as being "out".

## 6. AAmerica – vs. AAAids?

The last thing I want to touch upon could seem "provocative" or even "scandalous" to the Polish readers of Białoszewski (perhaps not so much to international readers). Today any reader going through such descriptions of gay cinemas, sex in public places, promiscuity etc. in late 1982 could also think that it was the time of spreading of the AIDS plague and the beginning of the shutting down porn theatres and baths<sup>30</sup>. People knew little back then, yet there was some information available about it. My question is, could Białoszewski know anything about that new disease which was discussed in the US media. Did any of his friends, straight or gay, mention it? Or could he watch some discussion of it in the news? There are no references to it. Only in September 1982 did the name change from GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) to AIDS, nonetheless it was still discussed as a "gay plague",

<sup>29</sup> This understanding of the closet is popular and with no doubt Ludwiczek refers to this meaning. However, urban sociologists offer an interesting definition of the closet applied to the city where gay men and women "appropriated not identified as gay [...] in order to construct a gay city in the midst of (and often invisible to) normative city" (Chauncey 1994: 23). This is the case of Warsaw under communism and even in the first years after 1989 (compare Kostrzewa *et al.* 2010). New York in the 70s and 80s is described by urban (queer) sociologists as a different phenomenon: "the great gay migration and gayborhoods were mutually reinforcing: gays and lesbians selected specific areas to which they relocated, and their emergent clusters affirmed a "sexual imaginary" – or a perception that they comprised a people and a tribe, culturally distinct from heterosexuals" (Ghaziani 2015: 309).

<sup>30</sup> Compare what *Newsweek* wrote in December 1981: "The epidemic does not affect homosexual women; it seems closely linked to the life-style of gay men with many sexual contacts. It coincides with the burgeoning of bathhouses, gay bars and bookstores in major cities where homosexual men meet" (Newsweek 1981). It seems like a moral critique of gay culture, gay bookstores possibly had nothing to do with the HIV spreading, although bathhouses did. Either way, this article refers to the lifestyle that Białoszewski so voraciously embraced in New York, claiming it as the liberation from communism and Solidarity. See also: "In 1981 two new cases of AIDS were diagnosed in New York each week, and one new case was discovered in the United States each day" (Eisenbach 2006: 293). And also: "No municipal government was more negligent about the AIDS crisis than the New York City authorities. Even though New Yorkers accounted for one-half on the nation's AIDS caseload in the early 1980s, there were no city programs to deal with the disease" (Eisenbach 2006: 294). These "authorities" mean above all the closeted gay mayor Ed Koch. "Long suspected of being a homosexual, Koch was skittish about all gay issues" (Eisenbach 2006: 295).



or “druggie disease” as well. Because most of the people who took care of Białoszewski in the US knew he was gay and even showed him gay places, they could have mentioned the new disease among gay men. As for TV, when he went to Buffalo, he stayed at his friends' house and watched TV with them. Białoszewski's level of English is hard to tell (in early 50s he co-translated a song of Chinese communists from English), in the original version he noted passingly: “Here in New York I don't use the language. I arrange things miming. In any case in NYork they apparently speak English badly. The (key) element of the language – the endings” (Białoszewski 2012: 805)<sup>31</sup>. This implies he had some knowledge of the language, “passive knowledge” I suppose, which also helped him when he watched movies in (non-porn) cinemas. With TV, his hosts could have added necessary explanations as well. There is a recurrent topic in these TV seances and newspapers as well: as Halloween was approaching, there were increasing warnings for kids to be careful with cookies and candies, because some people intentionally put pieces of glass or razor blades there; another warning concerned medicines where cyanide was intentionally put (Białoszewski 2012: 816). Later on, talking about the night of October 31st, he adds that also some children were raped, and that a woman died after eating an apple poisoned with a syringe (Białoszewski 2012: 818). Repeatedly he also mentions horror movies, as if there was a connection between making and watching horror or gothic movies and poisoning Halloween cookies or apples or medicine. The poisonings were very covered back then and Michael Bronski in his *A Queer History of the United States* actually used this example to discuss AIDS:

In October 1982 the country was in a panic because an unknown person in the Chicago area had placed cyanide in Tylenol capsules, causing seven fatalities. The *New York Times* printed thirty-one stories about Tylenol poisonings during October and another twenty-nine throughout November and December. By October 5, 1982, 634 people in the United States had been diagnosed with AIDS, and over a third of them had died. The *New York Times* ran three stories about AIDS in 1981 and three more in 1982 (Bronski 2011: 225).

Certainly, it is accidental that Bronski relates these two topics; or were they related in the media accounts back then as well? In addition, it should be said that “The Advocate”, a gay magazine, published articles about AIDS from February 1982, which was a necessary source of information for gay people as the mainstream media were reluctant to inform (Alwood 1996: 221). Was “The Advocate” one of the magazines Białoszewski bought and defined as “porn” (which “The Advocate” actually wasn't)? Finally: did he have contact with the virus? Is this question scandalous? Even if nothing in the circumstances of his death indicates HIV-related complications. Even if this question doesn't contribute anything knowledge-changing. Is it scandalous to ask?

<sup>31</sup> “Języka tu w Nowym Jorku nie używam. Załatwiam na migi. Zresztą podobno w N. Jorku na ogół mówią źle po angielsku. Żywioł języka – końcówki”.

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