

Tomasz Basiuk
American Studies Center
University of Warsaw, Poland

Coming Out and Beyond: Polish and American Representations of Sexual Minorities

This article looks at the “coming out” category in a broad political sense as the work of making the particular subject positions of LGBT minorities legible to those subjects themselves and to the public at large. Coming out thus understood includes, but is not limited to, the rhetorical act of announcing one’s sexual identity; it likewise includes aesthetic representations such as memoirs and films. This broad definition of coming out, based on Jacques Rancière’s political philosophy, enables a comparison between the political-cum-aesthetic work of sexual minorities in the US, especially after the Stonewall Inn riots and up to the AIDS epidemic and its aftermath, and some developments in post-1989 Poland.

The following discussion of popular portrayals of sexual minorities focuses on aesthetic and political rather than on artistic or sociological questions. This emphasis suits the representational practices which I examine here. My point is that these practices, which make the homo/hetero difference visible, are at least partly indebted to similar practices in American culture. I have in mind the declarative coming out and the genre of the coming out story, both of which are related to a politics of identity that may be likened to such politics that are pursued by ethnic minorities. The so-called ethnic model emphasizes cultural distinctiveness, as well as the past and present oppression experienced by the group. My argument will link coming out and the coming out story to this project, and also suggest some ways in which these strategies are overcome or displaced.

A way to talk about these points is to say that they are related to two different meanings of the word myth. On the one hand, is equivalent to the *grand récit* popularized by Lyotard as a mode of legitimizing some human endeavor (27-41). An analogy obtains at this level between the political aspirations of Polish and American LGBT activism insofar as these can be linked to the American Dream and to the Polish Romantic tradition of fighting for freedom, so long at least as a dream of freedom includes participation in the public sphere, i.e., political subjectivity. This sense of freedom is articulated in Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*, wherein grassroots

political involvement that creates the civil society is put forth as a prerequisite for effective revolutionary change, exemplified in the American Revolution:

[...] in America the armed uprising of the colonies and the Declaration of Independence had been followed by a spontaneous outbreak of constitution-making in all thirteen colonies... so that there existed no gap, no hiatus, hardly a breathing spell between the war of liberation, the fight for independence which was the condition for freedom, and the constitution of the new states (141).

On the other hand, and less sweepingly, myth can be synonymous with stereotype: a well established, if not always well founded, opinion. Such opinions, and such mental images as they may articulate, can be manufactured, or at least manipulated, though perhaps not freely. This is what Roland Barthes proposed in his *Mythologies*, wherein myths are described as poetic solutions to particular problems in public relations and marketing. Applied to political activism, myth in this narrow sense describes a particular strategy of representation. Representing a sexual minority as a group of people who share an identity is political mythopoeia.

Those two meanings of myth – the will to freedom as political participation and an aesthetic used to make a particular point – are in a relation of troubled continuity that can at some juncture become an antinomy. I will call on Jacques Rancière's political theory to suggest the sense in which an antinomy between them can arise, and how it may be overcome.

First, however, I examine some similarities between the Polish and the American popular myths about homosexuality. Similarities arise because homosexuality has been a topic in intercultural communication for more than a century. Moreover, opinions about homosexuality are transferred from American into Polish culture in the process of cultural globalization, in which American cultural texts and, consequently, the stereotypes they reflect, are especially influential. For example, the Polish philosopher Teresa Hołówka's memoir *Delicje ciotki Dee*, published in 1990, became a somewhat notorious focus for the Polish readers' widespread fascination with American culture. Hołówka writes about her then recent experience at Indiana University at Bloomington in the late 1980s, just before the time when Poland entered into a period of political, economic and cultural transformation that was eventually to encompass a level of LGBT visibility. The particular trope of representing homosexuality which Hołówka deploys is the late-nineteenth century concept of sexual deviation as a symptom of degeneracy affecting a decadent society.

The pertinent scene takes place at a party, at which the first of her interlocutors, another Central European, as his name indicates, discusses homosexuality as a form of cultural degeneracy which he thinks characteristic of Americans:

"They have had their heads turned around from all the wellbeing and the easy life," Dragomir was fuming. "Imagine that at my office, out of six hundred, every other guy is a queer. They are not at all embarrassed by it. They will introduce themselves by saying, hi, I am David and I am gay. But this is not a come-on. They do the same thing with women. Any day now their entire civilization will just collapse. So the ancients fell because they became degenerate.

"Easy living is not the reason," an autochton intervenes. "On the contrary. Do you have any idea of the expense involved in starting a family? It's loans and loans and loans:

a home, a car, a fridge, furniture, curtains, all the things without which your lady just could not live. You are putting a noose around your neck which you won't escape for the rest of your living days. You're better off getting it on with a guy. He will move in but make no such demands. And if he doesn't like it anymore, he will just move out. No lawyers, no alimony" (Hołówka 120, my translation).

These words spoken by the anonymous "autochton" hardly contradict Dragomir's larger point about Americans' degeneracy because the staple housewife's supposedly exuberant expectations are also given as decadent. More to the point, the comically one-sided explanation of male homosexuality is notable because of the unspoken message that the writer has only encountered the phenomenon of gay men by coming to the U.S. Indeed, the next paragraph introduces the lesbian as another New World wonder, one which, as a Russian saying popular among Poles goes, cannot be grasped when sober. In short, homosexuality becomes thinkable as an American phenomenon, which can then be brought to the Polish reader for her or his education and enjoyment. This logic of cultural importation is hardly exceptional, nor has it become a thing of the past. It is traceable, among others, in activism undertaken on behalf of sexual minorities in Poland.

The American political arena is often presented as consisting of competing claims. This perspective is adopted by Michael Novick in *The Holocaust in American Life*. Novick posits that the secularized American Jewry has appropriated the European Holocaust as its core historical experience and put it forth as analogous to such forms of oppression as slavery, Jim Crow, and racial segregation had been for African Americans. This mechanism illustrates that to define a minority it is necessary to point to its distinctive features, and since any group is likely to be internally diverse, it may be useful to call on a well-known event or events in a relatively recent past as that group's formative experience. Thus, despite similarities to the ethnic model, identity politics departs somewhat from the usual sense of *ethnos*.

Constructing a politics of identity around shared past oppression, which is well-known or easy to publicize, suits the project of sexual minorities' formation. There can be little question that the designation LGBT, standing for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, the transgendered – an acronym that is sometimes extended to include Q for questioning and/or queer, I for intersexual, and so on – refers to a group that is hardly uniform. People covered by this designation are various with respect to their psychosexual identity, not to mention other qualities, such as gender, "race," class, and ethnicity. What binds them together is a narrative of the common experience of stigmatizing and discriminatory practices at the hands of a heteronormative mainstream, which often regards sexual difference as deviant, degenerate, sick, embarrassing, sinful, etc., leading to ostracism, unequal treatment, and violence perpetrated by thugs, as well as by the state and by professionals. Some argue that a politicized gay identity has emerged as a response to persistent stigmatizing and discriminatory practice. "I discover that I am a person about whom something can be said, to whom something can be said, someone who can be looked at or talked about in a certain way and who is stigmatized by that gaze and those words" (Eribon 16). Psychosexual determinants by themselves could not have resulted in an identity politics.

A minority politics seeks recognition for a distinctive criterion that can be an argument for a redistribution of access to rights. Even though modern legal norms

usually posit equality before the law, equal access to rights is often frustrated by differences between individuals and groups. The desire to ameliorate this state of affairs is what accounts for the range of policies known as affirmative action. The recognition of unequal access to rights is also a major tenet of feminist theory. For example, Seyna Benhabib offers a critique of the universalist assumptions in Jürgen Habermas's political theory. Historically, Jim Crow provides many examples of laws that were superficially fair but which had the effect of discriminating against African Americans, for example, by introducing a poll tax or by requiring that voters should be literate. Like in the case of affirmative action, the logic used to eliminate such unfair laws pointed to the limitations of access arising from a past of slavery. In general terms, an identity politics attempts to articulate the manner in which a group's equal access is limited. The demand for a recognition of such limitation is meant to be a step toward the group's factual inclusion.

Achieving inclusion may not be easy. To the great disappointment of LGBT activists, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) that constitutional protection of privacy, a penumbra of the Fourteenth Amendment affirmed by the Court for married couples in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) and later extended to unmarried couples, did not apply to consensual sexual acts between adults of the same gender, even if such acts took place in private. The 1986 ruling thus upheld anti-sodomy statutes in Georgia and, by implication, elsewhere in the land.

The Court's decision was only reversed in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), which decriminalized same-sex activity by extending the privacy clause to include homosexuals.¹ Although this reversal did not depend on recognizing homosexuals as a class of people requiring constitutional protection (much as other courts' decisions in respect of same-sex marriage and civil unions typically invoke other principles, such as those pertaining to licenses and to contractual law), it is undeniable that the public image of homosexual women and men has changed in the intervening years, making specific claims easier to articulate and easier to accept. In *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the Court held that extending constitutional protection to same-sex activity would be inappropriate in light of the widespread disapproval of these practices. A reversal of this position in *Lawrence v. Texas* was clearly a reflection of the change of mind Americans had about gay people.

Visibility is a key point here, and it is something that the ethnic model tacitly assumes. Many minorities can be distinguished by their skin color or an assemblage of easily observable cultural traits, such as their language or dress. By contrast, the homosexual minority has no comparable traits that would allow their members to be easily spotted. There does not seem to be a specifically homosexual body, much less one definable through distinctive characteristics (Edelman 3-23). This means that in order to access the political arena formed by competing identity positions, the sexual minority must make itself visible. Visibility is the governing ideal of the vast majority of activism undertaken on behalf of the LGBT community.

The point corresponds to a theoretical insight put forth by Rancière. The concept of a *partition du sensible*: a partition of the sensible, or, of the perceptible (or

¹ In *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the Supreme Court arguably recognized homosexuals as a class but did so only so as to deny that class the right to protection of privacy. See Halley, "The Construction of Heterosexuality."

else, distribution of the visible), is at the core of his writings on politics and aesthetics. The foremost function of an aesthetic is to render some things visible while obscuring others. An aesthetic is what divides the world into that which can be made public versus that which will remain obscene. The image of the aesthetic as a particular sorting machine corresponds to Rancière's concept of the political: in order to become a subject of politics, one must speak so as to be heard as speaking rationally. The reason one might not so be heard is that the public sphere is never constructed in an unequivocally rational manner; rather, its rationality reflects the particular order that has been set up by its participants, that is, those who hear one another out. Those whom no one hears – or those whose speech is apprehended as mere expression of pain rather than as rational discourse – are simply excluded from political participation. In order to join politics, one may not simply adopt the current standard of rationality and hope for the best. If one has not hitherto been a political subject, such simple accession is unlikely to succeed because the public sphere has not been constructed in a way that would prepare other participants to recognize one's claims as rational. The first step is therefore not even to critique this state of affairs but to figure out a way for one's critique to be heard. It is at this juncture that Rancière differs most sharply from Habermas. Unlike Habermas, Rancière posits the political as a performative moment of articulated dissent. This articulation can then result in a new consensus to replace the one that had been found wanting.

In *Disagreement*, Rancière contends that in order to successfully claim one's rights, one must simultaneously render legible the situation of the subject making this claim, and that one does this with the use of metaphor (56). The metaphor is necessary to make the claim comprehensible to others; it is therefore a question of rhetorical effectiveness. By describing the subject's self-presentation as metaphor, Rancière points to the linkage of politics and aesthetics. It is with the use of an aesthetic that the subject's speech can cross the threshold of perceptibility (*partition du sensible*). Politics is thus the art of being heard, wherein "art" literally means artistic or quasi-artistic activity. By the same token, art – because it coincides with the domain of the aesthetic – is inescapably entangled with politics.

In moving from this general concept of politics to the particular politics of LGBT activism let us note that to the criticism of the public sphere apprehended as a uniform space capable of granting equal access – a criticism heard in such formulations as Michael Warner's term *counterpublics* – corresponds a certain ambiguity of the expression *to come out*, which designates the act of labeling oneself as a member of a sexual minority. *To come out* is now typically understood as signifying emergence from a place of hiding: *to come out of the closet*, although historically the expression (modeled on coming out balls at which debutantes came out into the society) was *to come out into the life*. This pertained to joining the gay life and its many institutions, which Edmund White once described as "sexual culture" (157-167). The more current meaning of *coming out* as a public announcement of one's homosexuality dates to the post-Stonewall years and its politics of gay pride (Delany 1-26). In this contemporary sense, *coming out* may be grasped as performative speech whose goal it is to reform the public's intellectual habits so as to raise consciousness about the very existence of gay people, as much as about their needs and expectations. The purpose of coming out is thus a momentary disruption of the public sphere – whose limited coherence is an obstacle to one's self-presentation – with a view to its reconstruction.

Paradoxically, while *coming out* seeks to impact the public sphere in its entirety, it always addresses it only partially. A complete coming out is quite impossible. One comes out to a particular audience at a particular moment in time. The public sphere is not so uniform as to make even the most public coming out known to everyone: even if one came out on the evening news, one would eventually encounter people who have not witnessed the event and never heard about it. The efficiency of a coming out is further limited by the tacit heteronormative assumption that anyone newly met is straight unless we are otherwise informed (and even then acknowledgement of queerness can be withheld). In order to come out more completely one would have to see this assumption changed, and yet that change seems possible only by the partial increments of individual acts of coming out, whether actual or represented.

My focus on coming out is as a political project rather than as self-expression, or as discovery of one's psychosexual identity. As a political project, coming out aims at an aesthetic reconfiguration of the public sphere, with a view to what Rancière describes *partition du sensible*. Of course, the usual sense of the expression *to come out* is precisely self-discovery and self-expression. Paul Robinson contends that contemporary gay American autobiographers rely extensively on the coming out story. There is an analogy there to the Puritan conversion narrative, insofar as both refer to intimate personal experience which they express in a formulaic way. For the Puritans, in keeping with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, one's confession of faith, which took the form of the conversion narrative, was supposed to testify to the circumstance that the particular aspiring member of the congregation had been elected by God to be one of his saints. Consequently, a narrative about one's conversion was expected to describe individual spiritual experience. At the same time, however, as a public confession of faith, it had to be sufficiently conventional to be comprehensible to the congregation, which was empowered to accept the candidate into its ranks. The gay coming out, which is frequently couched in terms of a narrative about coming out – a demand for recognition couched in terms of an account of self-recognition – also brings together two seemingly disparate functions. On the one hand, it is a narrative which touches on an individual's deeply felt sense of herself or himself, in keeping with the Foucauldian thesis that sexuality has become the language of truth about the psyche. On the other, it is the conventionally accepted way of acceding to a sexual minority.

An advantage of Rancière's theory is that it allows us to move beyond a discussion of coming out as modeled on the conversion narrative and its attendant ambivalent status as a statement both public and private. Instead, this narrative of self-discovery can be grasped as a metaphoric presentation of the situation from which the subject is speaking, making a claim for recognition comprehensible. That recognition can be symbolic, as when the claim emphasizes the demand for recognition of one's identity, or it can be quite specific, as when the claim is a pragmatic demand pertaining to specific rights, to a change in the law, to administrative procedures, etc. Grasped in Rancière's terms, the coming out story has the role of establishing a level of visibility requisite for such political goals, and it relies on aesthetic means to play this role.

This description suits rather well Robert Gliński's documentary *homo.pl* (2007; distributed on HBO in 2008). In the film, a lesbian couple, a single woman working

with that couple, and three same-sex couples all tell their coming out stories. They talk about how they have determined their homosexuality, how they fell in love for the first time, how they met their current partner, whether they have introduced that person to their parents, and so on. They also talk about their workplaces. One gay male couple describes their wedding in the U.K. The lesbians and gay men in the film speak about whether they would like to have children, either biological or adoptive, whom they could raise together. Their personal statements carry the viewer across the threshold of the perceptible: they build the visibility of homosexuals by prompting the viewer to see these particular homosexuals as individuals. Their speech also suggests some quite specific demands, however inexplicit, for systemic and legal changes pertaining to discrimination in the workplace, the right to marry, the right to enter into a civil union, the couple's right to adopt a child, and the right to adopt one's partner's child. The tacit political message is indirectly affirmed by the fact that at least some of the individuals portrayed in the film are themselves activists. This goes unremarked, however. Only Krzysztof Kliszczyński mentions the street address of a non-governmental organization where he met his partner, making it apparent to viewers familiar with Warsaw NGO's that he means a major LGBT organization (Stowarzyszenie Lambda Warszawa). Despite this de-emphasis of the political, it is clear that the film's presentation of private lives is intended to have political significance, perhaps in keeping with the feminist dictum that the personal is political. The film's work is political also in terms of Rancière's definition, which holds that the first task of politics is to make the subject heard: that one must be persuasive in putting forth the situation in which one is making one's claim. One's metaphor – as per that word's etymology – needs to be a vehicle capable of ferrying one's audience across the threshold of the perceptible.

Piotr Matwiejczyk's amateur fiction film *Homo Father* (2005), which won an award at the Gdynia Film Festival, adopts an analogous strategy by telling the story of a young gay couple.² The filmmakers critique the heteronormative prejudice which prevents some characters in the film from noticing that the two men who live together are a couple. They also portrays openly homophobic behavior, including physical violence. But they move beyond these crucial, if already somewhat familiar problems, to look at other issues, which are less often portrayed in Polish filmic representations of homosexuality. One of the two gay men learns with surprise that some years ago he has fathered a daughter, whom he is now rather suddenly expected to take in for several months. With this plot development the filmmakers show a gay male couple's childrearing abilities and thereby comment on current controversies about same-sex couples and adoption.

The filmmakers and the actors playing in *Homo Father* are straight, as they make clear in the extras included on their dvd, where they present their work as a gesture of solidarity with sexual minorities. Their rhetorical strategy can hardly be described as a coming out, since it is not that. However, it does seem analogous in some respects to the coming out strategy exemplified by the documentary film *homo.pl*, discussed above. The fictional presentation of two gay men's life together

² The same Film Festival which recognized *Homo Father* also censored it by editing out 16 minutes. See the Filmweb.pl service: <http://www.filmweb.pl/film/Homo+Father-2005-235756#>.

in *Homo Father* makes them a part of a generalized collection of images of humanity. Such universalizing induction of the gay self into the aesthetic public sphere is a precondition for further steps, including those more explicitly politicized. *Homo Father* implies that coming out is best described as strategy rather than as self-expression. That the director and the cast declare themselves to be heterosexual articulates straight people's support of LGBT rights, adding to their legitimacy.

Rancière's theory allows us to move beyond the limiting tendency, pointed out by Foucault, of equating sexuality with truth about the human psyche. This tendency is a significant temptation vis-à-vis the coming out story, which is structured around the revelation of a secret truth. However, the coming out story is not the only game in town. Arguing in *Gay Lives* that contemporary gay American men rely very extensively on the coming out format for describing their lives – and so subscribe to psychoanalysis by virtue of emphasizing their sexual self-discovery – Robinson seems to forget that in some cases at least the classic coming out story emerges only after the writer has described his homosexuality in another way. For example, Robinson analyzes Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (1992), which won the National Book Award. Some years previously, however, Monette published another memoir, *Borrowed Time* (1988), which describes his partner's illness and death from AIDS. (Robinson discusses this earlier memoir without conceding that *Becoming a Man* is not, literally, Monette's coming out.) There are other such examples. Mark Doty published *Heaven's Coast* (1996), an elegiac memoir celebrating his late partner, before publishing *Firebird* (1999), which describes his growing up. For Monette and for Doty both, their public coming out occurred in the form of a personal account linked to AIDS. The more conventional coming out story, analogous to the Bildungsroman, only came later, in the function of a supplement.

Indeed, it is impossible to leave out the AIDS epidemic from a discussion of ways in which gay visibility has emerged. This is especially true in the U.S., where AIDS has been a major medical and cultural fact. But it is also true of at least parts of the Western world, for example, France. There are some quite specific reasons for this link between AIDS and gay visibility. AIDS spread like wildfire in the gay urban centers of San Francisco and New York, to the extent that survivors talk about dozens, and sometimes about hundreds of friends and acquaintances lost to the epidemic. The gay community's awareness of the extent of the devastation was itself made possible by intense gay organizing which began in the 1970s, in the wake of the Stonewall Inn riots. Moreover, the shocking negligence of federal and metropolitan authorities, especially in New York, spurred more grass-root organizing with a view to spreading information, including about safer sex, providing assistance to some of those in need, and exerting political pressure by alarming the public opinion. One of the most well known political organizations formed in response to the epidemic was ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), whose public work is a model example of Rancière's recipe for making a successful rights claim. The activities of ACT UP were instances of political performance which dramatized the situation of PWLAs (Persons Living with AIDS), helping to make specific demands comprehensible. (They are aptly documented, e.g. by Crimp and Rolston, as well as by Lestrade.) The AIDS epidemic also gave rise to a change in gay men's portrayal in popular culture. It may be that Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993) stills ends with the death of Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks), in keeping with Vito Russo's critical

observation, presented in "Necrology," an appendix to his *The Celluloid Closet*, that a gay protagonist of a film must die (347-349). Nonetheless, gay men were no longer dangerous deviants but were portrayed instead as victims of the epidemic, as well as of homophobic prejudice. (Although, arguably, gay men continued to be seen as threatening as potential HIV carriers.)

The AIDS epidemic in Poland has never had a comparable cultural significance, nor has it claimed so many lives in such a public way as in the U.S. Consequently perhaps, there has been little public debate in Poland about AIDS and, when such debate does take place, it often puts forth a fantastic portrayal of AIDS. Nonetheless some notable analogies obtain. There is, for example, the tendency to exoticize the virus itself and its source by locating them at a distance, perhaps in Africa. Such xenophobic defensiveness presumably helps to maintain the sense that one is safe, at least so long as one remains in a monogamous relationship, steering clear of strangers who might pose a threat. The most prominent discussion of AIDS in the Polish media took place when an immigrant from Cameroon named Simon Mol, who has since died, was accused, in 2007, of infecting numerous female sexual partners with HIV. Sensationalist news about the alleged perpetrator and "his HIV" continued up until Mol's untimely death, as exemplified by Jakub Pietrzak's 2008 front page article for the tabloid *Fakt* (1). One of the premises of the discussion of this case in the media was that the particular strain of HIV could allegedly be traced back to the man's country of origin. It seems curious, in any case, that the exotic provenance of the accused man and even of the viral strain itself seems to have been required for what remains the most sustained public discussion about AIDS ever to take place in Poland. Mol was "othered" – racialized, cast out, presented as an aberration, and so on – in the course of this discussion. He was, indeed, described much like a fairytale monster whose nature it is to attack and destroy defenseless women. In saying so, I certainly do not mean to suggest that one should not take responsibility for the consequences of one's sexual actions, including with respect to sexually transmitted diseases. My point is that that was not at all the discussion which took place in the Polish media.

Moreover, it seems to me very unlikely that there would be comparable coverage – or even any coverage – of a case in which a man were accused of having infected other men. AIDS and (male) homosexuality remain relatively marginal so long as they seem unthreatening to the heterosexual majority. A similarity between Poland and the U.S. in this respect is clear. American media have also portrayed HIV as coming from Africa (or from Canada, in the infamous Patient Zero hypothesis), and have misleadingly suggested that it did not concern the "healthy" core populace.³

I have suggested there is a xenophobic impulse behind the false belief that one remains safe by isolating oneself from others. An early portrayal of homosexuality in a mainstream television show in Poland illustrates this logic. In a 2004 episode of the popular soap opera *M jak Miłość* (*L Is For Love*), Marek Probosz, a Polish actor who at the time has just migrated back from the U.S., plays a homosexual friend of one of the protagonists, a man who is now married to a woman. This gay visitor attempts

³ The misinformed Patient Zero hypothesis was popularized by Randy Shilts (128, *passim*). The opposition between "family values," supposedly American, and the supposed African provenance of HIV has been critically addressed by Cindy Patton (127-138).

to seduce the husband, whom he apparently reminds of a romance which had taken place between the two men in the past. It seems notable that both diegetically and extradiegetically – with reference to the character played by Probosz and with reference to the actor himself – the figure of a gay male is seen as intruding from a considerable spatial and temporal distance: a lover from the past, arriving from another continent; an actor returning to Poland after some years spent in the U.S. (Of course, one could try to read this double figure otherwise, as signifying a return of the repressed.)

In summary, popular representations of the LGBT minority in Poland reproduce some of the phantasms found in texts of American popular culture and media. This is especially clear in the distancing techniques that locate homosexuality, as well as AIDS, which remains symbolically linked to homosexuality, on the margins of “our” world, and that present them as alien and dangerous. These representations suggest that safety is achievable by defending against an external aggressor, and that maintaining rigid boundaries to protect one’s space and the status quo is desirable. This overtly xenophobic mechanism is especially pertinent in representations that link homosexuality and AIDS.

LGBT activism in Poland is also influenced by the American experience. Grass-root organizations adopt strategies of building visibility that have been tried out in the U.S., coming out by far the most prominent among them. In this context, the announcement of one’s homosexuality and giving an account of one’s sexual self-discovery is not to be described only as self-expression or as a way of acceding to a sexual minority. It has also a specifically political function, which is metaphoric, insofar as it breaks through the threshold of the perceptible – reconfiguring the visible with aesthetic work – and thus helping legitimize the rights claims made by and on behalf of the LGBT community. Legal and systemic changes can only take place once queers are included in the broad range of humanity’s representations of itself.

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