

Naked horror in the semi-periphery

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1. The issue

Since 2016, a television dating game show called *Naked Attraction* has been broadcast on Britain's Channel 4. In the programme, a clothed person is faced with six naked people who are initially hidden in coloured booths. The persons' faces and bodies are gradually revealed from the feet up. During each round, the chooser eliminates one naked person until only two are left. Then the chooser also takes off their clothes to make the final choice of a person to go out with for a fully clothed date. The programme then presents their feedback after the date, usually a few weeks later (*Naked Attraction*, n.d.).

Versions of the show now air in other countries: it has been broadcast in Germany since 2017, in Denmark since 2019, in Finland since 2020, and in Italy and Norway since 2021 (*Naked Attraction*, n.d.). As of this year, reruns of individual national versions have been broadcast on the Polish channel Zoom TV. The programme is also broadcast in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, India, Ireland, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey and the United States (*Netherlands...*, n.d.). Poland ranks fourth in the audience ratings for this programme – behind the United States, United Kingdom and Sweden, and before the Netherlands (*ibidem*). On 15 May 2021, the broadcast of the Polish version of *Naked Attraction* was to begin, however, as is detailed below, it was suspended.

This programme is part of the culture of exhibitionism and consumerism (Bachowski 2021), which is by no means new to television, especially if this exhibi-

tionism is not about physical exposure, but – perhaps more intimately – mental exposure. The programme alludes to disappointment with dating sites and is based on the assumption that people get to know each other in their clothes, and when it comes to undressing, they are sometimes disappointed with each other. Hence the intellectually bold conclusion that changing this order can be effective.

The procedure of selecting partners includes eight stages: (1) exposing people in booths from the waist down, (2) revealing the middle parts of their bodies, (3) revealing the entire figure with the face, (4) listening to the voices of the selected persons, (5) undressing the chooser, (6) choosing one partner, (7) a fully clothed date, and (8) a possible second date after a few weeks. At each of the first six steps, the chooser eliminates one naked person. In Denmark, Finland and Poland five people are selected; therefore, the third stage is combined with the fourth.

Importantly, the programme is focused on exposing the biological and mental diversity of participants, presenting their different gender identities (binary and non-binary), different sexual orientations (hetero-, homo-, bisexual, pansexual and polyamorous), biodiversity (including transgender persons, different distance of individual persons from the canons of beauty, undisguised biological defects, different skin colours and different ages of the participants) and cultural diversity, including the different scope of hair removal from different parts of the body, different forms of surgical and cosmetic interventions, as well as earrings and tattoos in different places of the body. This programme does not exclude anyone (*Magia...*, 2021), so it can open the viewer to otherness (Gawot 2021), although there is a possibility of exclusion at the stage of selecting programme participants.

Choosers usually declare that they are motivated to participate in the programme by their desire for a permanent partner, implying their loneliness among a large group that is looking for true love (Gawot 2021). It cannot be ruled out, however, that some participants want to manifest their self-acceptance or the need for “exhibitionist existence” (Bachowski 2021), although the host of the Polish version of this programme excludes the latter motivation (Głowińska 2021). In the process of choosing partners, the choosers comment on the appearance of individual parts of the body of the naked persons, but they usually do not criticise the appearance of

those persons and they often have positive or kind words for the eliminated contestants.

In all national versions of the programme, a clothed woman is the presenter. She asks the choosers about their preferences regarding sexual behaviours. In this layer of the programme, implied misandry can be seen. Men are sometimes asked by both the presenter and, possibly, the chooser, for a detailed revealing of the genitals, which extremely rarely happen in the case of women; moreover, in case of undressing female choosers various forms of camouflage are used to protect intimate places, and the camera exposes these places without intrusiveness.

The criteria for selecting a candidate is subjective, and the size of the primary and secondary sexual characteristics is not – contrary to the fears or expectations of the audience – essential.

Individual national versions of the programme have their own specificity. For example, in the Finnish version, the entire silhouette and face of the candidate rejected in the first stage are not shown, and the presenter does not ask the chooser why the candidate was rejected. In the British version, the tone of the candidate's voice is less important than his ethno-regional accent, while in the German and Danish versions the latter element is less important and is absent in the Finnish and Polish versions.

During the interludes of the programme, interesting and useful cartoons are presented, illustrating individual psycho-biological issues of human sexuality.

2. Critique

Viewed optimistically, *Naked Attraction* is “a television experiment that tries to answer the question of whether the choice of a partner” (*Magia...*, 2021) rests solely on the basis of physical characteristics, and whether this “determines [...] the success of a relationship” (*ibidem*). However, the analysis of the broadcast programmes shows that the original assumption, implying that human nudity reveals the truth about the person and that the choice of a partner based on his or her external appearance is accurate, is clearly false. This assumption results in the objectification of the human body (Bachowski 2021).

Based on the analysis of the programmes watched, it can be estimated that 90% of couples matched in this programme part before sexual contact or soon after. This is perhaps reflected in the fact, known from naturist beaches, that dressed people are more attractive, and especially intriguing, than undressed. Focusing on the appearance of a potential partner disregards his or her personality and social position, which – implying the existence of a classless society – leads to disappointment. The last observation is intensified by the fact that the chooser cannot choose none of the naked people, and the latter have no choice, so they can only manifest their disapproval or disappointment on a date. As a result, the entire procedure is a selection rather than a choice.

Substantive criticism can also be given to the sexological vocabulary used in the programme. For instance, in the Polish, British and German programmes, as well as the Polish-language version of the two latter, the term *vagina* is being misused to describe the vulva, which is incidentally common for today's media; the choosers are therefore offered to “watch the vaginas”, which would be difficult without the use of a gynaecological chair. The host of the Polish version of the programme maintains that “the most difficult thing when working on the set [is] to name parts of the body, mainly genitals” (Głowińska 2021), because the Polish language is allegedly “poor in this respect, [and] many words are profane or mocking” (ibidem). The host claims therefore that she wanted to “introduce some kind of class” (ibidem), whatever that means, which – as the example of “vagina” shows – has not worked very well.

Criticism of the British version of this programme was presented shortly after the first episode was broadcast. This was argued to be “the most utterly stupid show on TV” (Scott 2016), leaving critics wondering “how low can this [...] dating show go” (O'Donovan 2016), especially since “aren't we told all the time that personality is just as, if not more important than looks when it comes to dating?” (Scott 2016). As Joanna Flis states, it is difficult to “believe that acceptance has anything to do with [...] the demonstration of the anatomical features of the body, which are implicitly intended to represent the participants. By creating such a shortcut at the bodily level, the meaning of human needs, values, spirituality, etc. is amputated” (Bachowski 2021).

Apart from the content-related criticism, there was also moral criticism. “Numerous complaints about the programme were made by viewers to the broadcasting watchdog Ofcom [the Office of Communications] due to the full-frontal nudity that is featured. Ofcom chose not to investigate as there was nothing that breached their rules: the show was purely a dating show and did not contain any sexual activity and was shown after the watershed” (*Naked Attraction*, n.d.).

On the contrary, there was hardly any content-related criticism in Poland, as opposed to moral and formal criticism. Opposition was raised against the plans to launch the Polish version of the programme on the basis of indirect information about the content of the British and German versions – which are broadcast on Polish television. Based on the sensational information from a gossip magazine (*Program...*, 2021), which stated that the selection of partners on the programme is based on the appearance of genitals, the applicants complained about the “negative impact on the psyche of viewers” (*ibidem*). In the discussion on the internet forum, the opponents of the programme claimed (*ibidem*) that (1) they had not seen it, but they would comment, (2) and because they dislike the programme, it must be banned, (3) children will be offended by the programme (after 11 p.m.!) as well as the old people (forced to watch?), (4) and the whole programme resembles a slave market, probably because of the objectification of the programme participants, who, however, are not forced to participate in this programme.

On the other hand, supporters of the programme pointed out (*Program...*, 2021) that: (1) in the programme one can see an un-retouched image of human bodies, (2) which is useful in terms of information about human biodiversity and (3) awakens respect for otherness, (4) there is no obligation to watch programmes that one does not like, (5) and the scandal caused to children by a programme broadcast after 11 p.m. is the burden of their parents. Supporters of the television show also highlighted the hypocrisy of those advocating for bans (*ibidem*), who they identified as Catholic-Taliban, since they (1) do not mind TV programmes promoting hatred or (2) travelling billboards with a view of aborted foetuses, (3) they are inclined to accept only foreign nudity, even though Poles are represented in considerable numbers in the

British version of the programme, and foreign versions of the programme are available on Polish television.

Contrary to the British Ofcom, the Polish National Broadcasting Council was guided not by substantive considerations, but by the moral obsessions of hyper-conservative hypocrites. Therefore, the Council blocked the planned broadcast of the Polish version of the programme (*Telewizja...*, 2021). Moreover, the Council imposed a financial penalty on the television station for showing the British version of the programme (*20 tys. zł...*, 2021). The punishment was based on the law prohibiting discrimination (*Spór...*, 2021), although the programme, especially in the British version, is dominated by anti-discrimination attitudes. Curiously, however, in its censorship decision, the Council referred to the provision that “broadcasts or other messages may not propagate actions contrary to law, the Polish *raison d'état*, as well as attitudes and views contrary to morality and social welfare, in particular they may not contain inciting hatred or discriminating on the basis of race, disability, sex, religion or nationality” (*Spór...*, 2021). In its opinion, the Council found a violation of the standards regarding the content of the programmes, i.e. the prohibition of “promoting attitudes and views contrary to morality and social welfare, in particular due to the presentation of scenes and content that objectifies women and men and depicting them as sexual objects, and thus violating the human dignity of both sexes” (*20 tys. zł...*, 2021), although the Council does not mind broadcasting “other commercial programmes in which nudity is blurred, but one can see sexual activities [and] hear vulgar language” (Głowińska 2021).

The station appealed against this decision, evidently effectively, because on 3 September 2021 the Polish version of the programme was broadcast. However, the programme was preceded by a disclaimer which explains that the show is aimed at adult viewers and features close-ups of the participants' naked private parts. The disclaimer also adds that human bodies are attractive regardless of size, shape and age, and clarifies that nudity is shown in the programme with due respect (Sawicka 2021).

Due to initial difficulties with launching the Polish version of the programme, the latter starts by displaying the following entries: NAKED ATTRACTION PO-

LAND; EVERYONE IS UNIQUE; HONESTY AND DIGNITY; RESPECT; FOR ADULTS ONLY; NAKED ATTRACTION. It is also based on carefully developed programme assumptions presented by Beata Olga Kowalska, who hosts this programme.

It is “high time for a revolution and it really could be a breakthrough. We have been going backwards in many areas for several years. It’s time for a change. [...] We had to convince the unconvinced that *Naked Attraction* is nothing wrong, nothing immoral” (Głowińska 2021). The distrustful attitude towards the *Naked Attraction* results from “Polish tradition, prudery, superficial attachment to traditional values, from being brought up in the Catholic faith. From the Polish mentality. There is a certain closure in us. We have an unhealthy view of human nudity and sexuality. [...] We are too serious. We have too little sense of humor. We lack distance to ourselves and the world. [...] We have a certain indolence within us. [We] prefer to complain, while doing nothing [...]. Instead of getting into ourselves or loving our body, we fall into complexes and prefer to criticise others. We blame everyone around. One can see this frustration in the comments on the internet. [...] It would seem that the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s changed something. However, I have the impression that we have retreated again, locked ourselves in a shell. [...] But [...] the drop hollows the rock. We have to break this shell. [...] We live in a world of Instagram ideals where everyone is beautiful, young and rich. In the media, we see beautiful women who are made up from head to toe. [...] These are later followed by audience complexes, various psychological problems. There is no such thing in *Naked Attraction*, we show people as they are. I think that the reception of this programme in Poland would be completely different if there were normal sex education. [...] We learn to respect our own body. That sex is not gymnastics, but a kind of intimate bond” (Głowińska 2021).

When asked if the above arguments do not add “ideology to a stripped date” (Głowińska 2021), B. O. Kowalska replies that “this programme, contrary to appearances, is not as controversial as some people think. [...] *Naked Attraction* shows how we really look. It shows that there are no perfect people. [...] It is true that through aesthetic procedures, plastic surgeries we often look like each other, 90[%] of us are

bodily individuals. [...] And this programme shows it" (ibidem). This programme "will help to break the idealised view of the human body, break some taboo, make people understand they are one of a kind and that it is normal and [...] beautiful. [...] This programme gives us a chance to look at other people as exceptional. [...] We are unique, one of a kind and this is beautiful about us" (Głowińska 2021).

Naked Attraction "reverses the order of dating. The couple first see each other naked, and only later go on a date, already in their clothes. It is then that the participants find out if there is chemistry between them, if they can communicate. This proves that the body itself does not really count. No matter how beautiful it is and how much it will fit our imaginations[;] if there will not be something else between people, they will never fall in love with one other. [...] Because 'the something' decides, that is, personality, character, intellect" (Głowińska 2021).

The specificity of the Polish version is that – contrary to the assumptions of the original British version – choosers often criticise the appearance of the selected persons. "But [...] that's who we are. This is our mentality [...]. We like to criticise, evaluate" (Głowińska 2021).

It is also difficult not to notice that the host of the Polish version of the programme is tense, which gives the impression of a lack of professionalism.

3. Conclusion

The observation that nudity – as opposed to hatred – is terrifying in the semi-periphery is not new. If something is disliked by an extremely conservative minority, then at best it should be forbidden, and supporters of freedom of choice should be pacified. This does not mean, however, that the present author is an enthusiast of intellectually unambitious television entertainment programmes, of which *Naked Attraction* should nevertheless be assessed higher than the performances of cabarets, whose jokes focus on excretory activities. On the other hand, the promotion of pseudo-Christian principles of hatred of one's neighbour does not raise the objections of the National Council as to its contradiction "to law, the Polish *raison d'état* and [...] morality and social welfare, in particular [...] inciting hatred or discriminating on the grounds of race, disability, gender, religion or nationality" (*Spór...*, 2021).

Sylwia Chutnik is prone to associate the above-mentioned principles of hatred of one's neighbour with the strong controllability of society. People who do not know others "dig into their positions, hav[ing] a sense of morality that does not allow for other life scenarios" (Dudko 2021), while in fact "they are terribly fascinated with it" (ibidem), which is confirmed by the popularity of gossip sites and tabloids. What is interesting is getting excited about the scandals, combined with the holy indignation that follows. This results in the "exoticisation of the 'other'" (ibidem), leading to discrimination. Hope is in diversity, because thanks to its awareness one can "look at other people differently" (ibidem).

So far, dating programmes in Poland have mainly shown young and "attractive" people. Therefore, it is worth hoping that *Naked Attraction* will not be suspended, as it offers "an effective antidote to the false enchantment of pop culture through the reality of human sexuality and the appearance of the human body" (Sawicka 2021), since it is not only revealing the body, but also revealing oneself (Głowińska 2021). It is admittedly "eccentric and [...] controversial entertainment, but [...] in a country that negates sexual education [...] it is needed" (Sawicka 2021). This view is not undermined even by the observation that sexual education – even if unlike the programme discussed here – is about empowerment rather than the objectification of human sexuality (Bachowski 2021).

The usefulness of programmes such as *Naked Attraction*, despite all its shallowness and erroneous initial assumptions, consists in undermining the tradition of "the Polish family – patriarchal, violent, toxic, disgusting, in which monstrous things occur, because someone wants them to take place behind closed doors" (Dudko 2021). Perhaps it is high time, "to ventilate Poland, the family, open the windows wide so that this draft will remove the whole toxin" (ibidem) of hypocrisy. And the whole hope is that "it will end one day, [...] because we can no longer be stuck in this outlandish spot" (ibidem) of the peripherising semi-periphery.

To conclude, it is worth noting that the subject of this editorial is parochial hypocrisy, semi-peripheral intolerance and the pseudo-Catholic imperative of hatred of one's neighbour – resulting from complexes – presented in the context of exhibi-

tionist culture. If one would like to see the exaltation of people with limited horizons here, it could be found merely in the context of sociological analysis.

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Wpłynęło/received 06.09.2021; poprawiono/revised 15.09.2021