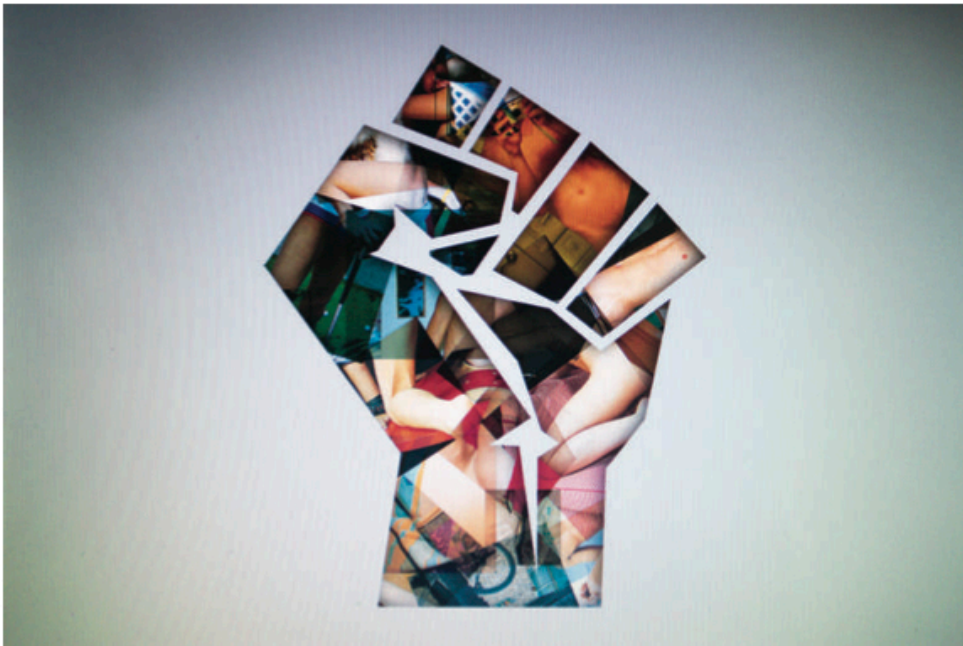


SAMUEL NOWAK

SEKSUALNY KAPITAŁ

WYOBRAŻONE WSPÓLNOTY SMAKU
I MEDIALNE TOŻSAMOŚCI POLSKICH GEJÓW



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Na okładce
MD, We're here, we're queer, and we riot!

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Summary

How do we perceive the relationships between media, popular culture and (homo)sexuality? What is the impact of media digitalisation and convergence processes on sexual identity? How do we, as media users, confront various identity politics? The majority of authors who deal with such questions tend to give similar answers: sex always sells, the media mediatise and reproduce heteronormative discourse of identity and rarely is the independent and quality media given a chance to combat the dominating heterosexual ideology. In his book, “Sexual capital. On the Imagined communities of taste and media identities of Polish gay men”, Samuel Nowak draws on the example of gay men to suggest reversing this perspective, which should in turn enable us to look at the media and pop culture as at the never-ending battle for the right to articulate one’s sexual “self”. Dating portals, social media campaigns, TV programmes and tabloid news prove to be politically valid areas of resistance against domination accompanied by various deceit tactics and acts of constant insubordination on behalf of the media recipients.

The three-part thesis by Samuel Nowak is the first publication in Poland dedicated to the relationship between the media and sexual identity. Even though the author creates his theory referring to the identity strategies of gay men, his ideas may help to understand the relationship between media and sexuality in a broader plane. The author focuses his concerns on popular culture. He critically discusses the works in this area and offers his own methodology of research based on the combination of selected concepts of Pierre Bourdieu and John Fiske.

The basis for the “Sexual capital” is also the will to take part in the Polish discussion on media and sexuality dominated by queer theorists. In this preferred perspective, identity is the effect of the process

of subjectification and sexuality is treated as another regime of truth. Nowak argues that this approach results from two erroneous reasonings: non-reflective concept of identity/sexuality and understanding of media as machinery of normative mechanisms. In this book the questions about the impact are reversed and the author discusses the media as a tool for the articulation of one's sexual identity as illustrated with the example of Polish gay men. Thus, the confining and limited diagnoses made by the majority of domestic researchers are rejected and the author's own theoretical frame suggested.

Part one of the book consists of two chapters. In Chapter 1 Nowak describes the theoretical bases of his work which are British cultural studies. He commences with the explanation as to why this perspective was assumed and based on what motivation. Then he points to the typical Birmingham school interest in what constitutes the popular as well as the power of social practices. Furthermore, the categories of identity in cultural studies are interrogated from (1) the synchronic and (2) the diachronic perspectives. This aims to emphasise three aspects: (1) the central role of the notion of identity in cultural studies, with the emphasis on the interdisciplinary nature and devoid of a nonchalant approach to mass culture. Then Nowak connects the subject issue with (2) cultural media theory and (3) relates it to gay and lesbian studies, also called LGBT studies, in both cases in order to clarify the perspective. At the same time he tries to prove that gay and lesbian studies, even though they are under crushing criticism and their significance is usually undermined, are still a lively and attractive research discipline. The popular narration juxtaposes the conclusions of LGBT studies and modern queer theory, accusing the former of transhistoricity, essentialism and anachronism. In his book, Nowak tries to prove that this is a mistaken perspective and offers four arguments for the critical return to gay and lesbian studies. These four arguments include: ties with cultural studies, an interest in links between economy and sexuality, an appreciation of popular culture and creative dimension of the tension between LGBT studies and queer theory.

Thus, the first chapter aims to not only explain and validate the motivation and choices made by the author, but also constitute a reconnaissance of the field and preparation for the creation of the author's own theoretical proposal.

Chapter 2 focuses on selected concepts of relations between the media and identity of gay men in four research fields: (1) cultural media theory (Arthurs, Gauntlett), (2) LGBT studies (Dyer, Cohen, Weeks, Pullen), (3) performance studies and queer theory (Campbell, Fox) and (4) domestic variation of queer theory (Kochanowski). Nowak diagnoses the weak and strong sides of the discussed theories and identifies

which of them could be useful in his work. He selects specific elements from the cultural studies tradition (works of Dyer and Arthurs) and from gay and lesbian studies. Other approaches (especially the theory of simulation performance by Kochanowski) are completely rejected as erroneous and impossible to maintain. Thus, Nowak – by way of elimination – prepares the field for his own theoretical structure.

Part two consists of one chapter (3). Based on previous deliberations the author tries to create his own theory which will explain and give the floor to various examples of articulation of gay male identity in the media – both to fictional characters, uses of social media and gay celebrities. This project, as it has already been mentioned, is based on the works of two theoreticians: (1) Pierre Bourdieu and (2) John Fiske. In three sequences Nowak combines their work and proposes his own perspective.

(1) The author commences with (a) a presentation of arguments for the return to Fiske and refutes accusations which are often raised against his concepts. He proves that this, as Simon Firth calls him the villain of cultural studies may again prove useful in the era of convergence and digitalisation of the media. Then (b) he presents the motivation behind his choice of certain concepts of Pierre Bourdieu. His significance is not as often questioned but associating him with the paradigm of cultural studies may raise certain doubts. Hence the author points to Bourdieu's unique success in Anglo-Saxon cultural studies. To close this section the author (c) exposes similarities in the works of both researchers and explains why in his opinion they may be merged within his own project.

(2) In another sequence Samuel Nowak takes from Bourdieu certain assumptions presented in "Distinction" and suggests treating the sexuality of the gay man as a form of capital which could be described as the most similar to the cultural capital – it seems the most natural. He suggests understanding the resulting mediatised practices as the politics of sexual taste. This way it becomes possible to follow the correlation between different sexual capitals and sexual tastes. The author tries, however, to avoid the mechanistic thinking about sexual tastes whose politics would be aimed at reproduction of the existing order of things.

(3) Since the area of Nowak's deliberations is media pop culture, after Fiske he treats meaning (in this case sexuality) as an ongoing negotiation. Sexual tastes continuously get into skirmishes and these communities which better capitalise their sexuality are placed higher in the hierarchy of sexual tastes. Thus accompanying them cultural and communication practices, as well as aesthetical codes will have different recognition. What is more, when capitalising their sexuality, communities and individuals enter into various alliances. Since the author takes

the created by Stuart Hall and reworked by John Fiske distinction into people and power-bloc, he is able to show how the same communities may demonstrate progressiveness and conservatism at the same time, how they can differentiate each other and win these contradictions for themselves. The sense of sexual distinction is almost always negative. This approach allows the author to follow the dynamics of this particular disposition; however, it never determines the final destination.

In the analytical Part three of the “Sexual capital” Nowak tests his theory. For the use of Chapters 4, 5 and 6 he distinguishes three sexual capitals and politics of taste accompanying them. These are: (Chapter 4) political sexual capital, (Chapter 5) practical sexual capital and (Chapter 6) popular sexual capital.

(4) Political sexual capital may be associated with forms of treating one’s sexuality in the media with a focus on political involvement. The chapter starts with the analysis of the social campaign “Let them see us” (organised in 2003 by the Campaign Against Homophobia), which is used to create definitions and explain how precisely the process of investing in one’s sexual identity in a political way may be understood. This was the first such action in Poland hence serves as a good starting point for analyses in the book. Samuel Nowak emphasises that the fact of occurrence of non-heteronormative sexuality in the media circuits created certain general preliminary conditions for the new type of representation and articulation of the LGBT identity in the media: thanks to its legitimisation function it encouraged other users and creators of media to articulate/create gay identities. However, in opposition to what the critics of this perspective say Nowak tries to prove that such strategies should be understood not as creation of new frames but as elbowing in the discourse (as Pullen would say), intercepting (Dyer) or wrestling with the existing power relations (Fiske). Further on the author analyses two different strategies of approach to civil partnerships in the LGBT media.

(5) Practical sexual capital refers to media platforms which make it possible to call communities to life and offer tools for expression of one’s own identity. Nowak starts with looking at social dating portals and then describes politics of taste accompanying them. As in the previous chapter, sexual capital and taste are understood in the categories of adaptation and resistance strategy, not reproduction of heterosexual matrix. Nowak analyses two portals – Fellow and Kumpello and points to their different character. Then he focuses on identity capital connected with sexual pleasure – he explores the phenomenon of sexdating and sex chats. To conclude the author shortly describes the specific function of mobile media which make it possible to fill actual spaces with sexual meaning and undermine the category of identity as such.

(6) In the last chapter the author deals with the phenomenon of popular sexual tastes. They are a consequence of treating gay sexuality as capital which can be transformed in popular and mediatised phenomenon: this may be a character in TV series, a celebrity or gossip. Samuel Nowak commences with looking at the phenomenon of gay celebrities, somewhat relatively new in our domestic media. Their careers may be understood precisely as a result of treating one's own sexual identity as capital which is literally invested (sic!) in the media circuits. Communities of sexual taste created around them are governed by specific rules resulting from the status of a famous person, from the fact that he/she is a famous gay person. Then Nowak looks at strategies of creating gay characters in fiction genres. In this case this institutional medium treats gay sexuality as capital which may be exchanged for economic capital. Creating gay characters as illustrated with the example of the "Magda M." series is, however, subject to certain rules of popular taste, hence unique accompanying power relations. In the last part of the chapter the author focuses on a specific popular sexual taste – internet gay tabloids. They are partly related to the celebrity discourse (as a part of the gutter press circuit) but they also have other functions characteristic for their genre. They are also an intriguing space which may be understood as the sphere where social norms are bent through strategies of escaping the disciplining norms of identity regimes. They also have a political dimension which has to be appreciated. Homo-tabloids are populist practices in which political conflict is expressed in the clearest, i.e. full of life-or-death passion, way.

Out of the carefully selected analyses presented in the "Sexual capital" emerges a picture of the world in which various communities of sexual taste fight for their value so that their sexual capital is located higher in the hierarchy of social recognition. Heteronormativity proves a fragile and unstable discourse in confrontation in which every trick is allowed.

translated by *Amalia Woźna*