

GROTESQUE, ABSURDITY, CUTENESS: ON THE INTERTWINING OF
ARGUMENTATIVE FRAMES, AESTHETICS, AND EMOTIONS IN THE POLISH
'WAR ON ABORTION'

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Grotesque, Absurdity, Cuteness: On the Intertwining of Argumentative Frames, Aesthetics, and Emotions in the Polish ‘War on Abortion’

_Abstract

This *_Article* explores the centrality of argumentative frames in shaping the abortion debate in Poland, focusing on their intersection with aesthetics and emotions. Drawing on framing theory, it examines how visual and rhetorical strategies are used to construct narratives, mobilize emotions, and influence public discourse. The analysis centers on three aesthetic framing techniques—grotesque, absurdity, and cuteness—as employed by anti-abortion and pro-abortion movements.

Grotesque frames, characterized by graphic depictions of fetal remains and dystopian imagery, amplify moral shock to evoke fear and reinforce binary narratives of ‘good versus evil.’ In contrast, absurdity disrupts such frames through humor and incongruity, as seen in feminist parody campaigns which critique the artificiality of anti-abortion propaganda. Cuteness leverages the disarming and subversive qualities of pastel hues, glitter, and playful motifs to destigmatize abortion and promote resilience and solidarity.

By exploring their cognitive, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions, this study highlights the transformative potential of frames in reproductive politics. It reveals how movements construct powerful narratives to challenge entrenched ideologies while navigating the risks of polarization and trivialization. This analysis thereby contributes to an understanding of the dynamic interplay between visual culture, emotional resonance, and political activism in shaping cultural and political contestations.

“Where inequality is a right, resistance is a duty.”—Feministyczna Brygada Rewolucyjna¹

1_Introduction: (Counter-)Framing the Abortion Debate²

Framing is central to ongoing political debates in Poland surrounding conception, contraception, and pregnancy termination.³ Over recent decades, right-wing parties and populist movements in Poland and other European countries have effectively framed their agendas around the Catholic Church, presenting themselves as defenders of ‘traditional’ values and a ‘natural’ social order. This strategy has produced a populist blend of anti-feminist, anti-progressive, and anti-abortion rhetoric and symbolism.⁴ These narratives have shaped national debates and policymaking, exemplified by the mid-2000s report by the leading Polish women’s organization FEDERA titled *Contemporary Women’s Hell*, which highlighted the absence of safe abortion services in Poland.⁵

Since the 2015 parliamentary elections, the Catholic Church and ‘pro-life’ activists have escalated their framing efforts to construct abortion as a moral and constitutional

issue, advocating for its total ban. In spite of large-scale protests, including the Black Protests and the Women's Strikes of 2016 and subsequent years, a new law severely restricting abortion took effect in early 2021. This legislation justified its ban on abortion in cases of severe and irreversible fetal defects based on an extreme interpretation of Article 38 of the Polish Constitution, which protects the "right to life of every human being."⁶ Consequently, Poland now has one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, second only to Malta, which enforced a total ban until 2023, when the country amended its legislation to allow abortion solely in cases where the pregnant woman's life is at immediate risk. While women in Poland who take abortion pills at home or travel abroad for abortion remain outside the scope of prosecution, those assisting them—medical professionals, family members, or activists—are criminally liable.

The framing of abortion as a constitutional and moral issue has generated chilling effects. Women are increasingly hesitant to conceive due to fears of legal and medical barriers in emergencies, while healthcare providers hesitate to carry out necessary medical interventions out of fear of prosecution.⁷ The tragic outcomes of the 2021 abortion law are illustrated by the deaths of six women who were since reportedly denied abortions under life-threatening circumstances. The death of a 30-year-old woman named Izabela in 2021, from septic shock after doctors delayed intervention while waiting for the fetus' heart to stop beating, became a pivotal event. Her death, widely discussed within the #AniJednejWięcej [#NotASingleOneMore] campaign, sparked renewed protests and debates about abortion access, cementing Poland's status as one of Europe's most restrictive countries on this issue.

The framing of Poland's 'war on abortion'—understood as a sustained political and symbolic conflict in which both anti-abortion and pro-abortion movements employ competing strategies to shape public discourse on abortion rights—offers a critical context for examining intersections between visual culture, and political activism. This *Article* investigates how abortion is aesthetically and emotionally framed in the Polish context, analyzing the cultural meanings, emotional strategies, and social impact of abortion imagery. This imagery oscillates between frames of clinical detachment, emotionally charged fetal personification, and surreal or provocatively cheerful narratives. The analysis unpacks the aesthetics, language, uses, and framing techniques of abortion images within the broader context of reproductive

politics, as well as their influence on public consciousness and emotional experiences in abortion debates. Drawing on theoretical approaches to populism, movement framing, grotesque, absurdity, and cuteness as aesthetic and rhetorical tools, the study scrutinizes how emotional and aesthetic frames contribute to (anti)feminist and (anti)populist practices.

This study also critically engages with the power of visual framing to instigate transformative social change in the face of rising populism, anti-genderism, and religious fundamentalism across Europe. Methodologically, the paper draws on a combination of participant observation, discourse analysis, and qualitative interviews conducted during field visits in Warsaw in 2019–20. Additional empirical material was collected through digital ethnographic observations of social media platforms maintained by key actors. These include the fundamentalist organization *Pro-Prawo do Życia* [Pro-Right to Life] as well as feminist initiatives like *Aborcyjny Dream Team* [Abortion Dream Team] and *Feministyczna Brygada Rewolucyjna FeBRa* [Feminist Revolutionary Brigade FeBRa].⁸

The developments, actors, and actions explored serve as the backdrop for analyzing how visual frames negotiate boundaries between political aesthetics and protest activism. The study reveals a fascinating ambivalence among Polish pro- and anti-abortion activists in constructing collective identities and shaping public discourses. This ambivalence is further amplified by militaristic framing, whereby the public debate on reproductive rights is described on both sides as a “fight,” a “battlefield,” or a “war.”⁹ As Julia Seweryn has illustrated with reference to the highly publicized case of the abortion activist Justyna Wydrzyńska,¹⁰ these metaphors reinforce oppositional vocabularies pitching “good” against “evil” or “terminating” against “killing” in the public debate on reproductive rights.¹¹ Within this frame, (anti-)abortion images are portrayed as “war pictures,” while the emphasis on visualization within the political struggle over abortion is interpreted as a form of surveillance and attack.¹²

2_30 Years of Abortion Struggle in Poland: No End in Sight?

Poland provides a prime example of how political challenges to abortion rights can resurface repeatedly, even after years of relatively liberal and socially accepted legislation. During the communist period, abortion was widely practiced in public

hospitals and private clinics. However, after the end of communist rule in 1989, access to abortion became more difficult. Since then, abortion in Poland has served as a barometer of political shifts, ethical and religious discourse, and the country's prevailing "traditional" character, as evidenced by its stigmatization, criminalization, and progressive exclusion from public healthcare since the late 1980s.¹³ Poland's abortion laws exemplify what Marcin Kościelniak characterizes as the deep entrenchment of anti-abortion Catholic ideology within the country's legal, political, and social order.¹⁴ The post-communist transition was marked not only by democratization but also by the systematic exclusion of women's rights and the growing influence of the Catholic Church over state policy. In 1990, religion was introduced as a subject in school education, after which Church officials became more visible and influential in public life. The Church proceeded to play a major role in the criminalization of abortion, with guidance and support from the "Polish Pope" John Paul II.¹⁵ Following the election of a non-communist government, women seeking an abortion faced increasingly stringent requirements, including medical and psychological certificates as well as fees.

In 1993, a significant change occurred with the passing of the so-called Act on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection, and Conditions of Permissibility of Abortion. The new bill eliminated "difficult living conditions" as an acceptable reason for terminating a pregnancy and effectively made abortions based on social considerations illegal.¹⁶ Furthermore, the "abortion compromise," a popular shorthand for the legislation, made previously legal therapeutic abortions and abortions in cases involving criminal acts almost inaccessible. These changes led to the establishment of expensive and unregulated "underground" facilities,¹⁷ and planted the seed for ongoing divisions within Polish society over reproductive rights. In 1996, a left-leaning government reintroduced socioeconomic considerations as the legal basis for abortion, stipulating a gestational duration of less than 12 weeks and mandatory counseling before the procedure. However, in 1997, these measures were reversed, and stricter abortion regulations were reinstated.

Since the 2010s, there have been further attempts to limit or ban legal abortion in Poland, marking a new and more radical chapter in the country's 'war on abortion.' From 2011 to 2018, several bills were introduced to the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament, with the aim of imposing such changes. These efforts have fueled

anti-abortion rhetoric in public debate. The proposed bills were drafted by anti-abortion agents, primarily by the Catholic organization *Ordo Iuris* [Legal Order],¹⁸ and supported by the Catholic Church and right-wing politicians in the Sejm, particularly by the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* [Law and Justice, PiS] party. In 2016, the “Stop Abortion” initiative, led by the Pro-Right to Life foundation, began collecting signatures to support a bill proposing a complete ban on legal abortions. At the same time, two bills were introduced to the Sejm regarding the liberalization of abortion laws in Poland. One of the bills, proposed by the *Ratujmy Kobiety* [Save the Women] initiative, was accompanied by a campaign to gather support for the proposal in the parliament.¹⁹ The outcome of the vote sparked the 2016 Black Monday mass demonstrations across the country with an estimated 100,000 participants in almost 150 cities, towns, and villages.²⁰ This marked the beginning of the social movement for reproductive and women’s rights known as *Czarne Protesty* [Black Protests]. Confronted with the threat of harsher legal restrictions, punitive measures, and a broader assault on reproductive rights, thousands mobilized in mass demonstrations that combined digital activism with street protests. The protests took the form of what Elżbieta Korolczuk describes as “connective action”²¹—a kind of resistance enabled by digital networks, grassroots organizing, and collective activism. Framing their struggle as a broader fight for women’s autonomy and democratic freedoms, protesters transformed the Black Protests into a landmark moment of feminist and civic mobilization in Poland. These events echoed the public debates surrounding the 1993 “abortion compromise,” which not only produced deep societal divisions and highly emotional public discourse, but, as Małgorzata Fuszara suggests, also represented a critical moment that helped to “give birth to feminism in Poland.”²²

In 2020, the constitutional tribunal, which lacked legal validity and independence due to the influence of the PiS party, ruled that the existing legislation allowing abortion on the grounds of fetal abnormalities was unconstitutional. This decision sparked a new wave of mass demonstrations. Nevertheless, the controversial law went into effect in 2021, ushering in some of the most severe restrictions on reproductive rights in Europe. The ruling received criticism from human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. Polish opposition MPs staged a protest in the parliament, wielding placards with the hashtag #ToJestWojna [#ThisIsWar].²³

The new law recognizes abortion as legal only in cases of rape, incest, or if the pregnant woman's health is at risk; conditions which apply to only two percent of all abortions in Poland. The number of legal pregnancy terminations was already low across the country at around 1,000 per year, 98 percent of which were due to serious fetal impairment.²⁴ In practice, it is now almost impossible even for those legally eligible for an abortion to obtain one, leading to a boom in so-called "abortion tourism." Every year, thousands of Polish women and pregnant people seek abortion care in other European countries or import abortion pills. Estimates suggest that between 100,000 and 150,000 such cases occur each year.²⁵ Beginning in 2016, the feminist collective Abortion Dream Team has opposed the ban by organizing demonstrations and workshops to teach women how to obtain and self-manage a medical abortion. Since the constitutional tribunal ruling, the collective has helped over 125,000 people in Poland access safe abortions with more than EUR 830,000 in funding.²⁶ The collective is a founding member of Abortion Without Borders, an initiative of several organizations across multiple European countries working together to help people access abortions either at home with pills or in clinics.

During the 2023 electoral campaign, Donald Tusk, leader of the political alliance *Koalicja Obywatelska* [Civic Coalition] and newly elected prime minister of Poland, expressed his support for the legalization of abortion up to 12 weeks. Currently, the Tusk-led government is facing great pressure to relax the draconian abortion restrictions implemented in 2021. Since entering government, the coalition member *Nowa Lewica* [New Left] has submitted a bill to parliament that would legalize abortion on demand up to the 12th week of pregnancy. While the measure had majority support within the government, it was defeated due to the most conservative element of the ruling coalition, which joined with the opposition to vote against it. Even if passed, the bill might well have been vetoed by PiS-aligned president Andrzej Duda or rejected by the PiS-dominated constitutional court. The bill was the first of four draft bills with the intention to soften abortion laws, which were given preliminary approval by the Sejm in 2024. However, the future of the other three bills remains doubtful in view of the split within the ruling coalition.

3_ Theoretical Background: Argumentative Frames, Aesthetic Techniques, and Emotive Practices

Frames, as conceptualized by David Snow and Robert Benford, function as “interpretive schemata that simplify and condense the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of events.”²⁷ These schemata are dynamic constructs, shaped to reflect evolving contexts, goals, and audiences. In social movements, frames serve as essential tools for structuring understanding, mobilizing support, and articulating collective identities. Snow and Benford differentiate between three key framing processes: diagnostic framing, which identifies problems and assigns blame; prognostic framing, which outlines solutions or strategies; and motivational framing, which inspires and sustains participation.²⁸ Similarly, William Gamson breaks collective frames into three subframes: injustice, which centers on moral outrage; agency, which fosters belief in the possibility of change; and identity, which defines shared boundaries and affiliations.²⁹

Building on these foundations, the concept of *argumentative frames* emerges as a specific modality of framing within the context of contentious political and cultural debates.³⁰ Argumentative frames extend the foundational framing processes by emphasizing the structured interplay of claims, evidence, and rhetorical strategies used to advance or counter a position. They are inherently dialogical, functioning not only to persuade adherents but also to refute opposing views and engage with public discourse. Unlike frames that primarily seek to align with existing beliefs, argumentative frames foreground active contestation, presenting claims designed to provoke reflection, challenge assumptions, or solidify collective narratives. In this way, they integrate diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements into a coherent argumentative structure, underpinned by both cognitive and affective appeals.

In the Polish debate surrounding abortion, argumentative frames are particularly salient as tools for shaping public discourse and contesting deeply entrenched ideological divisions. These frames operate across multiple dimensions, with diagnostic components portraying abortion either as a moral violation that endangers societal values or as a fundamental right tied to bodily autonomy and gender equality. Prognostic elements offer competing visions: anti-abortion frames advocate for stricter legal restrictions and prenatal rights, while pro-abortion frames call for

expanded reproductive healthcare and legal protections for women's choices. Motivational components, in turn, draw on emotional appeals to outrage, solidarity, or fear, seeking to galvanize action and loyalty within polarized communities.

What distinguishes argumentative frames in this context is their ability to bridge cognitive, aesthetic, and emotive dimensions. They are not merely instruments for defining problems or proposing solutions but are also deeply embedded in the sensory and affective landscapes of protest culture. For instance, anti-abortion campaigns frequently deploy graphic visualizations of fetuses to construct emotionally charged narratives of victimhood and moral urgency, while pro-abortion activists counter with imagery and slogans emphasizing resilience, autonomy, and solidarity.³¹ These visual strategies reinforce the argumentative frames, adding layers of sensory immediacy and emotional resonance that heighten their persuasive power. At this point it is important to emphasize that James Jasper is right to criticize the predominantly cognitive focus of framing theory, arguing that it overlooks the emotive dimensions inherent in framing processes.³² Injustice frames, for instance, are deeply entwined with emotions like anger, fear, or outrage, which often fuel the momentum of social movements and protest actions. These emotions are not merely reactions but integral components of framing that amplify the resonance and impact of a given narrative. By incorporating emotional elements into diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, movements can evoke visceral responses that drive engagement and commitment.

Aesthetic techniques are central to the process of “arguing with pictures”³³ and further enhance the emotional and cognitive dimensions by leveraging the visual and sensory aspects of communication. As Jacques Rancière notes, aesthetics involves the redistribution of the sensible, shaping how individuals perceive and interpret the world.³⁴ Techniques such as the grotesque, absurdity, or cuteness disrupt conventional frames, creating a sense of ambivalence and destabilization. Drawing on Erving Goffman's concept of frame-breaking,³⁵ the grotesque, for instance, operates by blending contradictory elements—repulsion and attraction, fear and fascination—to challenge entrenched social categories. Graphic depictions of fetal bodies or distorted imagery may provoke visceral reactions that destabilize familiar schemas and prompt viewers to reconsider their assumptions about personhood, humanity, and morality.

Emotive practices are central to the efficacy of both frames and aesthetic techniques. Drawing from Jasper's work on the role of emotions in social movements³⁶ and Monique Scheer's understanding of emotions as cultural practices,³⁷ emotions can be conceptualized not merely as irrational impulses but as culturally embedded practices that shape and sustain collective action. Outrage, anger, and empathy, for example, emerge as pivotal emotions in abortion debates, motivating individuals to participate in protests or engage in online advocacy. Barbara Rosenwein's concept of emotional communities³⁸ highlights how shared norms and values regarding emotional expression create bonds among activists. In the Polish context, both anti-abortion and pro-abortion movements utilize emotive practices to construct and reinforce polarized emotional communities. Anti-abortion campaigns frequently deploy grotesque imagery to evoke disgust and moral outrage, while pro-abortion advocates use symbols of solidarity and resilience to inspire empathy and hope. These practices are not only discursive but deeply embodied, reflecting the material and sensory dimensions of protest culture. As Scheer argues, "feelings [...] can be experienced sensually through material anchors and therefore strengthened and consolidated."³⁹ Posters, memes, banners, or other protest objects take on this function of material anchors and create enduring affective bonds that drive collective action.

In this way, the interplay of argumentative frames, aesthetic techniques, and emotive practices in the Polish 'war on abortion' underscores the multifaceted nature of cultural and political contestation. By integrating cognitive, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions, movements construct powerful narratives that challenge existing social orders and mobilize diverse audiences. How this dynamic unfolds in the Polish context will now be illustrated through the examples of grotesque, absurdity, and cuteness.

4_Grotesque: Resurgence of Good Versus Evil or How Powerful Is Moral Shock?

As a visual and rhetorical device, grotesque destabilizes the boundaries of the familiar and projects dystopian realities that serve specific ideological purposes. The contrasting depictions of the Abortion Dream Team (ADT) on the 2018 cover of *Wysokie Obcasy* [High Heels]—a women's magazine published since 1999 and one of the most influential opinion-forming publications in Poland—highlight the

polarized visual strategies in the abortion debate. Jakub Kijuc, a young right-wing artist and comic author, produced a grotesque reinterpretation of the cover, exemplifying how aesthetic techniques align with emotive practices and populist argumentative frames to shape public discourse. These images, rich in symbolic and emotional resonance, reveal a broader struggle over the framing of abortion rights as either a moral ‘good’ or a societal ‘evil.’

Drawing on Michael J. Lee’s concept of the populist argumentative frame,⁴⁰ the grotesque as visual and rhetorical technique by Polish anti-abortion campaigns amplifies the four foundational elements of populist argumentation: the virtuous people (‘pro-life’ activists), the constructed enemy (the feminist pro-choice movement), the defiled system (a political and medical system allowing abortions), and the apocalyptic call (the anti-abortion debate as resurgence of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’). In the anti-abortion context, these frames intertwine with Rosalind Petchesky’s concept of the “militarization” of fetal imagery,⁴¹ where visuals function as tools of surveillance and attack. The grotesque becomes a strategy to define the pro-choice movement as an existential threat, portraying its advocates as morally corrupt agents of societal decay.

The original *Wysokie Obcasy* cover presents a counter-frame rooted in empowerment and normalization. It features the ADT founders—Karolina Więckiewicz, Natalia Broniarczyk, and Justyna Wydrzyńska—smiling in matching *Aborcja jest OK* [Abortion is OK] t-shirts against a vibrant pink backdrop (figure 1). The image employs aesthetic strategies of brightness, cohesion, and relatability to project abortion as a healthcare decision embedded within progressive feminist and humane values. By situating the activists within a frame of empowerment and agency, the cover counters stigmatization and appeals to audiences open to viewing abortion as a legitimate choice.

However, Kijuc’s grotesque reinterpretation aggressively reframes the activists within a dystopian, Manichean worldview. The cover, retitled *Złobcasy* [Evil Heels], portrays the Abortion Dream Team founders as soulless, zombie-like figures and replaces the slogan with *Zabiłam moje dziecko* [I killed my child], supplemented by the statement *Gniję od środka. Uśmiecham się żebyście myśleli, że jest OK* [I’m rotting from the inside. I am smiling to make you think it is OK] (figure 2). This reinterpretation invokes grotesque aesthetics, which, as Wolfgang Kayser argues,

employ distortion and horror to subvert familiar norms and impose a “demonic” narrative.⁴² The grotesque caricatures by Kijuc, which was often displayed on the sides of campaign vans dubbed “fetus trucks,”⁴³ disorient viewers by challenging their moral assumptions and compelling them to confront the perceived consequences of abortion activism.



Fig. 1: Karolina Więckiewicz, Natalia Broniarczyk, and Justyna Wydrzyńska, founders of Abortion Dream Team, depicted with “Abortion is OK” t-shirts on the 2018 cover of the feminist magazine *Wysokie Obcasy*, © Kasia Strek/Wysokie Obcasy

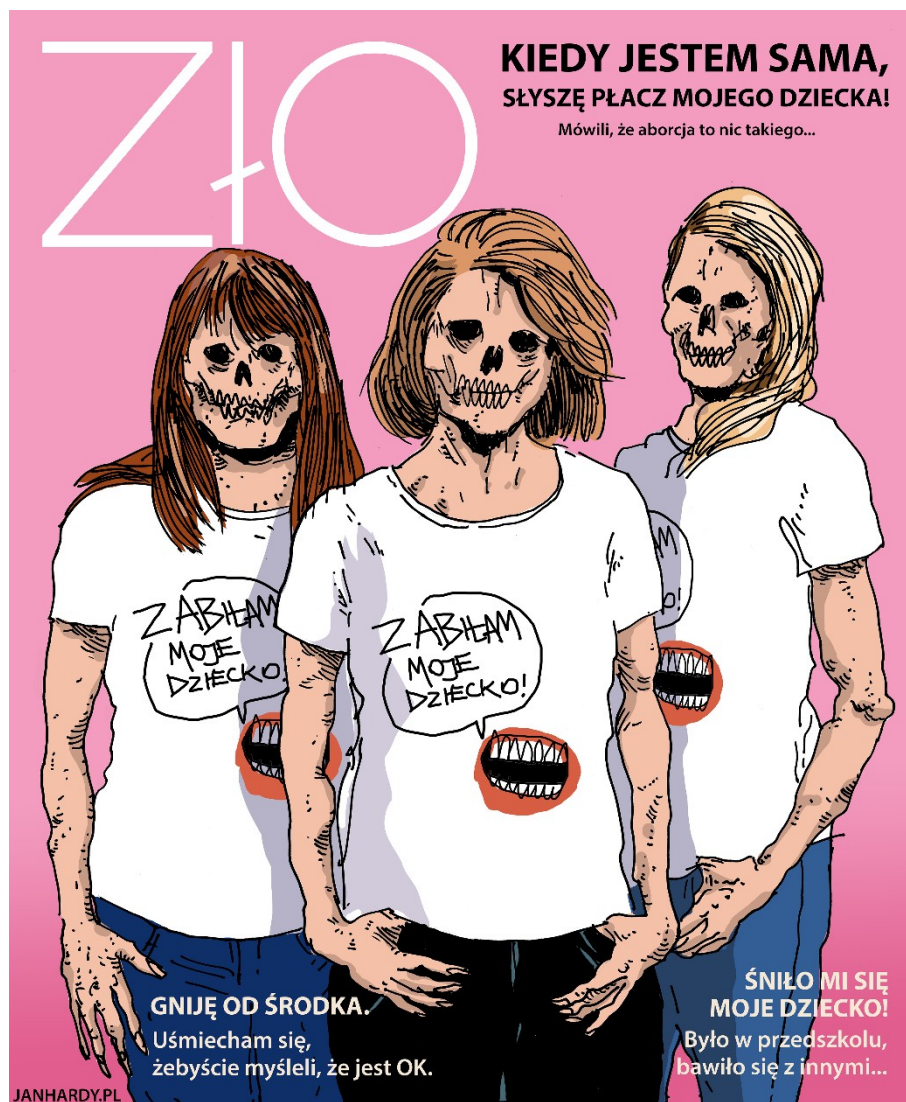


Fig. 2: The magazine's cover *Złobcasy* as revised by the comic artist Jakub Kijuc and distributed on "fetus trucks" by activists of the Pro-Right to Life foundation, © Jakub Kijuc

Kijuc's reinterpretation exemplifies the grotesque as a rhetorical weapon, drawing from Philip Thomson's notion of the grotesque as an aggressive tool used to destabilize conventional categories.⁴⁴ The ADT founders, framed by their supporters as relatable healthcare advocates, are recast as monstrous figures embodying societal decay and a threat to the preservation of the Polish family and nation. This transformation is consistent with anti-abortion keywords such as "death trade" and "death pills," which dominate the anti-choice lexicon in Poland. This framing can be found both on the website of the Pro-Right to Life foundation⁴⁵ and in right-wing ultra-conservative press outlets. In 2020, for instance, the conservative daily *Gazeta Polska* [Polish Newspaper] and an associated monthly magazine reported on the

“Abortion Killing Team” as “merchants of death [...] killing the unborn.”⁴⁶ These frames align with the apocalyptic discourse pervasive in right-wing populist rhetoric, invoking survivalist themes and dichotomizing society into forces of ‘good’ versus ‘evil.’ In an analysis of right-wing press narratives surrounding the abortion debate, Inga Koralewska and Katarzyna Zielińska highlight how the construction of abortion as a threat to Polish culture and national identity is central to right-wing discourse, with phrases such as “defending the unborn,” “protecting women,” and “preserving culture and nation” framing abortion not only as a moral transgression but as an existential danger to the Polish nation.⁴⁷ The grotesque frame serves multiple purposes here: first, to elicit “moral shock”⁴⁸; second, to construct a moral hierarchy that delegitimizes pro-choice advocates; and third, to mobilize anti-abortion supporters by reinforcing their worldview and casting reproductive rights activists as an existential threat.

The power of the grotesque lies in its ability to provoke contradictory emotions. As Thomson suggests, grotesque imagery generates confusion and ambivalence, destabilizing established social orders and opening space for radical reinterpretations.⁴⁹ Kijuc’s depiction of the ADT founders, for instance, simultaneously evokes repulsion and fascination, framing the activists as both threatening and pitiable. This tension resonates with the populist argumentative frame, which thrives on the emotional intensification of moral conflict. The grotesque’s role in evoking visceral reactions aligns with the observation that populist narratives often rely on affective strategies to deepen frame resonance.

At the same time, the grotesque’s ability to evoke emotional ambivalence raises questions about its efficacy. Ultimately, the grotesque’s effectiveness as a framing device depends on its ability to resonate with its intended audience. Susan Sontag warns that repeated exposure to shocking images risks desensitizing audiences or alienating moderates, fostering a detached, aestheticized, and passive response to macabre scenes akin to a touristic perspective.⁵⁰ Kijuc’s adaptation, while effective in polarizing public opinion, may fail to engage those outside the anti-abortion movement’s ideological base. Moreover, the grotesque can backfire, tainting its users with accusations of incivility, manipulation, or voyeurism. Its reliance on shock and distortion also makes it vulnerable to misinterpretation, illustrating the double-edged nature of this aesthetic technique.

The contrasting covers illustrate the centrality of framing in the Polish abortion debate. While *Wysokie Obcasy* employs aesthetic strategies of normalcy and empowerment to construct a pro-choice frame, Kijuc's grotesque reinterpretation weaponizes distortion and horror to undermine it. The satire appears subversive but ultimately reinforces conservative and retrogressive narratives by opposing the genuinely radical ADT strategy. These aesthetic choices are not neutral; they extend beyond reproductive rights, intersecting with deeper conflicts over national identity, cultural heritage, and the political appropriation of narratives. The contested portrait of ADT can thereby be viewed as another chapter of what Agnieszka Graff terms "Polish feminism's ongoing dialogue and confrontation with national symbolism."⁵¹ Historically, this has consisted in ongoing contestation of dominant understandings of woman- and nationhood, and the retaliatory appropriation of feminist imaginaries by right-wing, masculinized political forces and the Catholic Church. These narratives, rooted in emotional intensity and visual symbolism, shape public discourse and influence mobilization while highlighting the grotesque's dual potential for disruption and polarization.

5_Absurdity: Jam, Nonsense, and Counter-Framing Through Sudden Incongruity

In the visually charged 'war on abortion' in Poland, the use of absurdity emerges as a strategic aesthetic counter-frame that disrupts entrenched narratives and challenges the emotional hegemony of grotesque anti-abortion imagery. Unlike the grotesque, which evokes visceral horror, absurdity undermines through humor, incongruity, and deliberate illogic. This section explores how the Feminist Revolutionary Brigade (FeBRa) utilizes absurdity to challenge anti-abortion propaganda, reconfigure public discourse on reproductive rights, and disrupt the framing of fetal personhood—a radical legal doctrine that seeks to endow fetuses with full rights and legal protections by creating a direct conflict between pregnant people's rights and those of so-called "unborn children."⁵²

The FeBRa poster, a parody of the anti-abortion *Szpital bez aborterów* [Hospitals without abortion providers] campaign by Pro-Right to Life foundation, demonstrates how absurdity can recontextualize deeply emotional imagery. The anti-abortion poster depicts fetal remains next to a photo of the public Witold Orłowski Hospital in Warsaw, describing the institution as "abortion slaughterhouse no. 1 in Poland."⁵³

Framed within Lee's populist argumentative structure,⁵⁴ the original image again constructs an apocalyptic narrative: virtuous 'pro-life' citizens stand against the murderous 'abortion mafia' operating in defiled state institutions. The juxtaposition of graphic imagery with a public institution reinforces the claim that abortion is a grave 'societal evil' requiring urgent action.

FeBRa's reimagined poster, featuring strawberry jam and the slogan "Don't buy strawberry jam from the store! Make it yourself at home!" reframes this imagery through absurdist humor: "Are you fed up with unpunished zygotarians? With our complaints that the police ignore? Help us fight them through absurdity, and then enjoy their faces when we stand in front of their displays with our jam—only homemade!"⁵⁵ (figure 3). In the 2017 campaign *Stop dżemu ze sklepu* [Say no to store-bought jam], the activists combat the grotesque fetal depiction with a banal metaphor, creating an incongruity that disarms the emotional shock of the original and supports self-managed abortions at home. Following Albert Camus, the absurd emerges when reason encounters its limits, exposing the irrationality of human constructs.⁵⁶ FeBRa exploits this principle, transforming grotesque anti-abortion imagery into a critique of its own artificiality and excess.

This rhetoric and aesthetic frame reflect broader theories of absurdity as a tool for critique. For example, John Morreall argues that humor, particularly absurd humor, has a unique capacity to challenge established power dynamics by exposing contradictions and fostering critical distance.⁵⁷ By equating fetal imagery with jam, FeBRa subverts the anti-abortion narrative's moral gravitas, instead drawing attention to its fake and manipulative framing. As Katarzyna Szwed, one of FeBRa's activists, stated: "What does jam have to do with abortion? Exactly as much as their posters have to do with reality. [...] We've run out of methods for a serious response, apparently it's time for an absurd one."⁵⁸



Fig. 3: FeBRa's provocative pro-abortion poster with strawberry jam jars and the absurd inscription "Don't buy strawberry jam from the store! Make it yourself at home!," © Witek Orski/FeBRa

The poster also critiques the anti-abortion movement's emphasis on fetal personhood, a central theme and radical doctrine in their visual and rhetorical arsenal. FeBRa's campaign counters this framing by highlighting its absurdity. The visual pun of jam jars filled with a gelatinous red substance mocks the pseudo-scientific portrayal of fetal remains, undermining the claim that these images represent medical or moral truth. In other words, humor and absurd exaggeration are deployed to destabilize hierarchical systems of meaning and authority.

Furthermore, FeBRa's use of absurdity is not merely a defensive tactic; it actively reclaims visual and rhetorical space in the abortion debate. Historically, anti-abortion campaigns have dominated public spaces with graphic imagery, leveraging grotesque imagery to provoke emotional shock and take control of the narrative. FeBRa's jam posters reclaim these spaces, replacing horror with ridicule. This shift aligns with Schopenhauer's idea of humor as a "sudden perception of incongruity"⁵⁹ and its potential to disrupt manipulation and restore agency to audiences. By making the grotesque ridiculous, FeBRa neutralizes its power to intimidate and alienate.

However, framing strategies that rely on humor carry risks. Absurdity can alienate audiences who perceive it as trivializing serious issues, and it may fail to resonate with those unfamiliar with its subversive intent. Critics of FeBRa's campaign have argued that it trivializes the complexity of abortion by reducing it to a joke. Yet, as Scheer emphasizes, emotions elicited by humor—surprise, amusement, or even

discomfort—are culturally embedded practices that can foster solidarity and provoke critical reflection.⁶⁰ FeBRa's strategy succeeds not by dismissing the gravity of abortion but by exposing the absurdity of its opponents' methods. The FeBRa campaign also intersects with broader feminist critiques of visual culture. Anti-abortion imagery often relies on voyeuristic depictions of fetal remains to evoke moral shock. As Robert Hariman and John Lucaites argue, such images draw on established conventions of public spectacle to naturalize political ideologies.⁶¹ FeBRa's strawberry jam banners disrupt this spectacle by reframing it as manipulative. The deliberate absurdity invites viewers to question not only the authenticity of the original images but also the ideological motives behind their dissemination.

In the context of Poland's polarized abortion debate, absurdity serves as a powerful tool for destabilizing dominant frames. By confronting grotesque anti-abortion imagery with humor and incongruity, FeBRa shifts the emotional terrain of the debate and creates space for alternative narratives. The absurd appears not as an escape from reality but as a confrontation with its contradictions. FeBRa's campaign exemplifies this confrontation, using absurdity to expose the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of anti-abortion rhetoric while reasserting the agency of those who seek reproductive justice.

6_Cuteness: When Pink, Glitter, and Paws Develop Soft Power and Subversive Potential

While turning to the aesthetic technique of cuteness, this final section will explore how this seemingly opposite approach—gentle, light-hearted, and empathetic—similarly disrupts the emotional dynamics and argumentative frames of the Polish abortion debate. Cuteness, as both an aesthetic and rhetorical strategy, holds a paradoxical position in feminist and political discourse. Often associated with docility, naivety, and commodification, it has historically functioned as an aestheticizing mechanism for disempowerment. Yet, as Sianne Ngai argues, cuteness can also serve as a powerful tool of resistance, unsettling dominant power structures through its subversive and disarming qualities.⁶² The Abortion Dream Team exemplifies this duality by harnessing cuteness in their visual and rhetorical campaigns to destigmatize abortion and reframe the public debate on reproductive rights.



Fig. 4: A sparkling meme with glitter, hearts, and the pink slogan “It’s ok to celebrate abortion work” distributed on Abortion Dream Team’s social media channels, © Abortion Dream Team



Fig. 5: Abortion Dream Team’s cute meme using the motif of a pink kitten paw accompanied by the unapologetic slogan “Abortion is OK,” © Abortion Dream Team

Two ADT memes—one adorned with glitter and hearts celebrating abortion work, and another featuring a pink kitten paw alongside an unapologetic pro-abortion slogan—illustrate the group’s strategic use of cuteness. Both memes, saturated with

pastel pink tones and playful imagery, operate as counter-aesthetics to the grotesque and absurd visual narratives used or provoked by anti-abortion campaigns. By invoking cuteness, the Abortion Dream Team not only counters grim portrayals of abortion but also reframes it as an act deserving of empathy, solidarity, and even joy.

The first meme, with its glittering text and heart motifs, draws attention to the emotional and symbolic potential of pink as a color of resistance (figure 4). As Karolina Więckiewicz, a former founding member of ADT notes, pink is reclaimed from its patriarchal associations of fragility and infantilization to become a banner of feminist defiance:

We must reclaim the color pink—just as we must reclaim the right to abortion. We reject the symbolism of pink rooted in patriarchy, reserved only for little girls [...]. We don't want pink to be associated with supposed feminine delicacy or naivety. Until now, abortion has been portrayed in dark tones. In texts about abortion, we've seen empty faces staring into the distance, raindrops trailing down windows, blood, and shadowy underworlds. We've had enough of this narrative.⁶³

In this context, glitter and hearts serve a dual framing function: they aestheticize the mundane labor of abortion activism while provoking an emotional response of warmth and acceptance. Ngai's conception of cuteness as an aesthetic of vulnerability finds new meaning here; rather than disempowering, the aesthetic frame invites a reconsideration of the moral and affective dimensions of abortion. Furthermore, ADT's use of glitter as a metaphorical and literal embellishment evokes a sense of celebration, as Erica Millar's "happy abortion"⁶⁴ framework suggests. By portraying abortion as an act that can be celebrated rather than lamented, the activists unsettle traditional narratives of shame and sorrow, foregrounding the agency and resilience of those who seek abortions.

The second meme, featuring a pink kitten paw alongside the slogan "Abortion is OK," further intensifies the dialectic between trivialization and empowerment (figure 5). The kitten, a quintessentially cute figure, evokes a sense of playfulness and affection, which contrasts sharply with the somber tone of anti-abortion rhetoric. The visual language of this meme leverages the disarming power of cuteness, creating a momentary cognitive dissonance that compels the viewer to reconsider their emotional response to the subject matter.

The choice of a kitten paw also aligns with "subversive affirmation" as theorized by Sylvia Sasse,⁶⁵ where an ostensibly affirmative stance destabilizes existing power

structures within the Polish ‘war on abortion.’ This interplay of vulnerability and defiance underscores the potential of cuteness as a tool for feminist agency, highlighting its capacity to disarm and disrupt. In this sense, ADT’s strategic use of cuteness disrupts the visual and emotional hegemony of anti-abortion propaganda, replacing images of violence and despair with motifs of care, solidarity, and humor.

Yet, this strategy is not without its tensions. The juxtaposition of cute aesthetics with the serious issue of abortion raises questions about the ethical implications of trivialization. Does the use of glitter and kitten paws risk undermining the gravity of reproductive rights? Or does it, as Więckiewicz contends, effectively dismantle the shame and silence surrounding abortion, making space for new narratives of resilience and autonomy? ADT’s deployment of cuteness as an aesthetic and rhetorical strategy exemplifies its potential as a tool of feminist resistance. By harnessing the disarming and subversive qualities of glitter, pink hues, and kitten motifs, these memes destabilize the grotesque frames that dominate the abortion debate. The power of cuteness lies in its ability to provoke, disarm, and transform—a power that ADT wields with both playful irreverence and profound political insight.

7_Summary: Framing the Visual Politics in Poland’s Abortion Debate

This *Article* examined how visual and rhetorical framing strategies define and influence the contentious abortion debate in Poland. The analysis put forward the central importance of argumentative frames: dynamic structures that combine diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements to shape public discourse, mobilize emotions, and sustain collective action. These frames, employed by both anti- and pro-abortion movements, rely heavily on aesthetic and emotional appeals to convey their ideologies and mobilize support. Through the lenses of the grotesque, absurdity, and cuteness, the above analysis illustrates the transformative potential of framing practices and their role in Poland’s polarized reproductive politics.

The grotesque emerges as a powerful yet polarizing aesthetic tool in anti-abortion campaigns. Graphic images of fetal remains and dystopian caricatures of pro-choice activists, such as Jakub Kijuc’s grotesque portrait of the Abortion Dream Team founders, evoke moral shock and reinforce narratives of societal decay. These frames, deeply embedded in right-wing populist rhetoric, rely on visceral reactions to establish a stark binary between ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ The grotesque aesthetic,

prominently featured in anti-abortion ‘fetus truck’ campaigns, capitalizes on fear and revulsion to galvanize support. However, this strategy risks alienating more moderate audiences and desensitizing the public, highlighting the double-edged nature of grotesque framing.

In contrast, absurdity functions as a counter-frame that disrupts the emotional dominance of grotesque imagery. The Feminist Revolutionary Brigade employs humor and incongruity to challenge the credibility of anti-abortion propaganda. FeBRA’s strawberry jam campaign, which parodies grotesque anti-abortion posters by equating fetal imagery with jars of jam, reframes the emotional narrative to expose the manipulative and exaggerated tactics of their opponents. This absurdist approach invites critical reflection and dismantles the authority of anti-abortion frames by rendering them ridiculous. The deliberate use of incongruity underscores the potential of absurdity to reconfigure public discourse and reclaim visual and rhetorical space in the abortion debate. However, this study acknowledges that absurdity’s subversive nature may struggle to resonate with audiences unfamiliar with its critique, raising questions about its accessibility and effectiveness.

Cuteness, as exemplified by the visual campaigns of the Abortion Dream Team, offers another avenue for reframing the abortion debate. Through pastel colors, glitter, and kitten motifs, ADT leverages traditionally feminized aesthetics to destigmatize abortion and promote a narrative of agency and joy. Memes such as the sparkling “It’s ok to celebrate abortion work” or the playful “Abortion is OK” with a kitten paw juxtapose light-hearted imagery with unapologetic pro-choice slogans, creating an aesthetic and emotional counterpoint to the somber tones of anti-abortion rhetoric. Drawing on theories of cuteness as both disarming and subversive, this *Article* has highlighted how these visuals reframe abortion as an act of empowerment rather than shame. The reclaiming of pink, often associated with patriarchal notions of fragility, as a symbol of feminist resistance underscores the strategic depth of ADT’s framing efforts. This *Article* also critically examined the ethical complexities of using playful imagery to address such a contentious issue, questioning whether the aesthetic risks trivializing the seriousness of reproductive rights.

By focusing on these aesthetic techniques, this analysis reveals how frames operate beyond cognitive persuasion, embedding themselves within the affective and

sensory dimensions of cultural and political discourse. The interplay of the grotesque, absurdity, and cuteness demonstrates how visual and rhetorical strategies shape public consciousness, construct collective identities, and contest dominant ideologies. In the Polish context, these frames not only reflect the polarized nature of the abortion debate but also illuminate broader struggles over narrative control and social transformation. This study has thereby underscored the importance of framing as a multifaceted process that integrates cognitive, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions to mobilize action and reimagine the terms of political contention.

Endnotes

- ¹ See FeBRa's Facebook profile, "Tam, gdzie nierówność jest prawem, opór jest obowiązkiem," *Feministyczna Brygada Rewolucyjna*, January 25, 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=560840162754562&set=a.560840139421231>>.
- ² Some contextual information presented in this introductory section and the following overview on abortion in Poland draws on the author's previously published article: Agnieszka Balcerzak, "Angry Posters: Decoding the Political Aesthetics of Visual Pro-Choice Protest in Poland," *Berliner Blätter* 88 (2023): 23–41. Doi: [10.18452/28001](https://doi.org/10.18452/28001). The remaining content is original and unpublished.
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- ⁴ For further discussion, see Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, eds., *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (London/New York: Routledge, 2022).
- ⁵ FEDERA, *Contemporary Women's Hell: Polish Women's Stories* (Warszawa: Federation for Women and Family Planning, 2005).
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- ⁸ Fundacja Pro-Prawo do Życia, <<https://stronazycia.pl>>, Feministyczna Brygada Rewolucyjna FeBRa, <<https://www.facebook.com/FeministycznaBrygadaRewolucyjna>>, Aborcyjny Dream Team, <<https://adt.pl>>, accessed September 10, 2024.

- ⁹ See Suchanow, *To jest wojna*, 2020.
- ¹⁰ Justyna Wydrzyńska is an abortion activist and founding member of Abortion Dream Team who was prosecuted for providing abortion pills to a woman in an abusive relationship, a case that became emblematic of Poland's restrictive abortion laws and the broader criminalization of reproductive autonomy.
- ¹¹ Julia Seweryn, "'Killing' or 'Terminating'?": Pro-Life vs Pro-Choice Abortion Discourse Surrounding Wydrzyńska's Court Case," *Socjolingwistyka* 37, no. 1 (2023): 299–313.
- ¹² See Drew Halfmann and Michael Young, "War Pictures: The Grotesque as a Mobilizing Tactic," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2010): 1–24.
- ¹³ For further discussion, see Joanna Mishtal, *The Politics of Morality: The Church, the State, and Reproductive Rights in Postsocialist Poland* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015).
- ¹⁴ Marcin Kościelniak, *Aborcja i demokracja. Przeciw-historia Polski 1956–1993* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2024).
- ¹⁵ For further discussion, see Katarzyna Zielińska, Irena Borowik, Inga Koralewska and Marcin Zwierzdzyński, "Religion-Related Legitimations in Abortion Policy Making in Poland: What Do They Tell Us About the Public Role of Religion?," *Sociology of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2023): 176–196.
- ¹⁶ See Wanda Nowicka, "The Struggle for Abortion Rights in Poland," in *Sex Politics: Reports from the Front Lines*, eds. Richard Parker, Rosalind Petchesky and Robert Sember (Rio de Janeiro: Sexuality Policy Watch, 2007), 167–196, here: 170–171.
- ¹⁷ Following criminalization, abortion practices have entered a grey zone of private arrangements. It is estimated that around 150,000 abortions are performed annually, generating approximately USD 95 million for doctors who earn both unregistered and tax-free income. See Agata Chelstowska, "Stigmatisation and Commercialisation of Abortion Services in Poland: Turning Sin into Gold," *Reproductive Health Matters* 19, no. 37 (2011): 98–106, here: 98.
- ¹⁸ The organization is part of a global ultraconservative network that was founded in Brazil in the 1960s. It was *Ordo Iuris* that drafted the 2016 anti-abortion bill in Poland. Ordo Iuris, "Stop aborcji," *Ordoiuris, pl*, accessed September 12, 2024, <<https://www.ordoiuris.pl/stop-aborcji>>.
- ¹⁹ The draft bill "Save the Women" collected almost 500,000 signatures, "Ratujmy kobiety," *Archiwum Osiatyńskiego: Alfabet Buntu*, accessed September 12, 2024, <<https://archiwumosiatynskiego.pl/alfabet-buntu/ratujmy-kobiety>>. In 2018, the Sejm rejected the bill, which aimed to liberalize abortion regulations, provide reliable sexual education in schools, and ensure free access to contraception.
- ²⁰ Elżbieta Korolczuk, "Explaining Mass Protests Against Abortion Ban in Poland: The Power of Connective Action," *Zoon Politikon* 7 (2016): 91–113, here: 98.
- ²¹ Korolczuk, "Explaining Mass Protests Against Abortion Ban in Poland," 94.
- ²² Małgorzata Fuszara, "Will Abortion Issues Give Birth to Feminism in Poland?" in *Women's Issues in Social Policy*, eds. Mavis Maclean and Dulcie Groves (New York/London: Routledge, 1991), 205–228, here: 205.
- ²³ See the statements of Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović, "Removing the Basis for Almost All Legal Abortions in Poland Amounts to a Ban and Violates Human Rights," *X*, October 26, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Dunja_Mijatovic/status/1320781834112933888>, and of Amnesty International, "Poland's Constitutional Tribunal Rolls Back Reproductive Rights," *Amnesty.org*, October 22, 2020, <<https://amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/polands-constitutional-tribunal->

rolls-back-reproductive-rights>.

- 24 In 2020, for instance, 1,074 legal abortions—26 less than in 2019—were performed in Polish hospitals according to data obtained by FEDERA from the Ministry of Health in July 2021, FEDERA, “Liczba aborcji ustawowych w 2020 – Mamy dane z Ministerstwa Zdrowia,” *Federa.org.pl*, July 23, 2021, <<https://federa.org.pl/danemz-aborcje-2020>>. In 2023, the number of legal abortions in Polish hospitals was 425, cf. PAP, “W 2023 r. 425 legalnych aborcji w szpitalach. Szacunki FEDERA: do 200 tys. wszystkich,” *Polska Agencja Prasowa*, July 25, 2024, <<https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/w-2023-r-425-legalnych-aborcji-w-szpitalach-szacunki-federa-do-200-tys-wszystkich-nowe>>.
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- 29 William Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press: 1992), 7–8.
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- 37 Monique Scheer, “Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012): 193–220.
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- 39 Monique Scheer, “Emotionspraktiken: Wie man über das Tun an die Gefühle herankommt,” in *Emotional Turn?! Zugänge zu Gefühlen und Gefühlswelten*, eds. Matthias Beitzl and Ingo Schneider (Wien: Selbstverlag des Vereins für Volkskunde, 2016), 15–36, here: 28.
- 40 Lee, “The Populist Chameleon,” 355–378.
- 41 Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, “Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction,” *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 263–292, here: 276–278.
- 42 Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957).
- 43 The term ‘płodobus’ (fetus truck) refers to a vehicle used by anti-abortion activists to display graphic and often disturbing images of aborted fetuses. Such trucks are driven through major Polish cities or parked in front of strategic institutions such as schools, churches, or hospitals. ‘Fetus trucks’ have repeatedly become the subject of protest actions and legal disputes, with attempts being made, not always successfully, to ban them from public spaces. Cf. Paweł Rutkiewicz, “Wyrok WSA w sprawie płodobusów: Łódź przegrała z wojewodą, ale nie składa broni,” *Wyborcza.pl Łódź*, February 4, 2022, <<https://lodz.wyborcza.pl/lodz/7,35136,28074901,plobusy-miasto-lodz-przegralo-z-wojewoda-przed-wsa-w-lodzi.html>>.
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- 52 Cf. Pregnancy Justice, *Unpacking Fetal Personhood: The Radical Tool that Undermines Reproductive Justice* (New York: Pregnancy Justice, 2024), 3.

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- ⁵⁸ Cf. Waluś, "Na antyaborcyjne plakaty feministki odpowiadają plakatami z dżemem," 2017.
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