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Moving Ahead into the Past: Historical Contexts in Recent Polish Cinema

At this point, the task is to remember, but to remember strenuously, to explore, decode and deepen the terrain of memory. Moreover, what is at stake is not only the past, but the present.

Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl*

In calling on us to “strenuously” remember the past, Eva Hoffman draws attention to the limits within which memory operates, the manner in which it easily allows for nostalgia, trauma, and, most importantly, the present, to colour our view of the past. The way in which we remember the historical past, she says, has consequences, above all, for ourselves: “In memories, too, begin responsibilities.” [1] In Polish, the word ‘historia’ carries the meaning of both the English words ‘history’ and ‘story’, fusing these two etymological close cousins, which together conceptually delineate the route(s) via which the historical past reaches our memory. History comes into being not as the result of past events occurring, but through the telling or recording of stories about them, and thus, storytelling is the underlying foundation of all historical discourse, with the study of the means of narrating these event comprising the domain of historiography. Hayden White’s notion of “historical emplotment”, that is, of written historical accounts being structured by literary narrative conventions, underscores this relationship, allowing for a closer, more precise examination of how historical narratives – the way history is told – are constructed, and how their form influences the content. [2]

In terms of cinema, the relationship between ‘history’ and ‘story’ is complicated by the veracity with which the visual image conveys information and the metaphoric operations by which cinematic language condenses meaning. Annette Insdorf begins her book *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* by recounting her attempt to write a screenplay based on her father’s escape from a Nazi work camp. She explains how she struggled to anticipate the audience’s expectations and predict their reactions to various cinematic conventions in

[1] E. Hoffman, *Shtetl. The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews*, Boston 1997.

[2] “I distinguish here between the emplotment of the events of a history considered as elements of a story and the characterization of those events as elements in a matrix of causal relationships presumed to have existed in specific provinces of time and space.

In short, I am for the moment taking at face value the historian’s claim to be doing *both* art and science and the distinction usually drawn between the historian’s *investigative operations* on the one hand and his *narrative operation* on the other.” H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore 1975, p. 14.

the depiction of real events embedded in the wider historical context of the Holocaust:

How would you show people being butchered? How much emotion is too much? How will viewers respond to light-hearted moments in the midst of suffering? I was caught between the conflicting demands of historical accuracy and artistic quality.[3]

These same questions can be asked about cinematic depictions of other traumatic historical events and periods that left their marks on national and other communities in the form of lost lives, suffering, and deprivation, which in the case of Poland includes not only the Second World War, but also the communist era. On the other hand, the modes of film production and consumption in Poland, including state funding, but, more significantly, a mass market dominated by Hollywood films, Multiplex cinemas, and the aesthetics they embody, present a second set of forces guiding today's cinematic uses of the historical past. Thomas Dougherty addressed this issue in terms of American cinema nearly two decades ago in his review of *Schindler's List* (1993), complaining that "Hollywood has come to seem the prism through which all history, genocidal or otherwise, is witnessed and felt." [4] It is thus clear that formulations of history in film are guided by two seemingly incongruous demands, both of which are mediated by changing cinematic genre conventions: fidelity to truth and fulfilment of audience expectations.

This situation, however, is nothing new. A similar dilemma existed in relation to fiction in the 18th and 19th centuries, when critics and writers were anxious about mixing "truth and fiction." In the 19th century, depictions of the past in historical novels and realist novels would come to be distinguished from "the mere costumery" found in romances through what Georg Lukács labelled "historically representative" depictions of characters and settings, whose "spatio-temporal (i.e. historical) character" reflected "the concrete (i.e. historical) significance of place and time." [5] A key element in much of the historical fiction that has since followed, ranging from the novels of Walter Scott and Sienkiewicz, to non-Western works, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) and Yukio Mishima's *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy (1969–1971), has been an effort to express and define national character through narratives depicting individual characters. [6]

Since the publication of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in 1991, national communities have increasingly come to be seen as constructions of literary, cinematic, and other discourses. This focus on the construction of national identity as a form of discursive self-fashioning is particularly useful in the case of Poland, whose bor-

[3] A. Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, Cambridge 1989, p. xiii.

[4] T. Doherty, *Schindler's List*, "Cineaste", April 1994, vol. 20, no. 3, p. 50.

[5] G. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. H. and S. Mitchell, London Press, 1962 (1937), p. 21.

[6] J. de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, Oxen 2010, p. 49.

ders, population, and political and economic orders have repeatedly undergone radical change over the centuries, profoundly affecting – physically and conceptually – who and what comprised the Polish national community.[7]

In the Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, or PRL), the use of the past in film became an important means for constructing a 'national community' that would fit well into the physical and ideological borders of the new socialist state, and for legitimizing it as the legitimate historical successor to previous Polish states. The Second World War, the scars from which were still fresh and visible, was thus a common cinematic theme in the first years of the new regime, with early films such as *Forbidden Songs* (*Zakazane piosenki*, 1947), *Last Stop* (*Ostatni etap*, 1948), and *Border Street* (*Ulica Graniczna*, 1949) highlighting the horrors of and resistance to German occupation. Later, both the auteur cinema of the Polish Film School in the 1950s (Wajda, Munk, Kutz, etc.) and popular films of the 1960s, like the 'Red Westerns' *The Law and the Fist* (*Prawo i pięść*, 1964) and *The Echo of Wolves* (*Wilcze echa*, 1968), continued to use the war and early postwar rebuilding as settings for fictionalized depictions that, in the first case, represented early attempts to recast the recent past in a more (artistically) honest, less ideological light, and, in the second, to mythologize it within the conventions of Western popular forms.

In the 1970s, mega-production historical costume dramas, such as Jerzy Hoffman's *The Deluge* (*Potop*, 1974), Andrzej Wajda's *The Promised Land* (*Ziemia obiecana*, 1975), and Jerzy Antczak's *Nights and Days* (*Noce i dnie*, 1975) readily made use of conventions borrowed from or inspired by the officially decadent American film industry; in doing so, however, the films helped Poland's communist leadership achieve certain programmatic goals. Among these was social control: such films and other seemingly non-ideological forms of popular culture functioned as a so-called 'safety valve' to relieve social pressure. Like the circuses of ancient Rome, such entertainment, especially when featuring spectacular, heroic action (this would also include sport), acted as a means of *compensation* that allayed through vicarious experience viewers' need for authentic action.[8] These films were also sources of national pride, earning praise for the

[7] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1991. Anderson uses the example of multiple shifts in the state language used in England over the course of a millennium, including Latin and French, but the same argument could be used for linguistic shifts in the pre-partition Commonwealth, especially in Lithuania, which used Latin, Chancery Slavonic, and Polish as court languages, with Lithuanian not functioning as a written language until the 16th century,

and for the period of the partitions for both the Lithuanian and Polish national communities. See: T. Snyder, *The Reconstruction Of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*, New Haven 2004, pp. 17–26.

[8] See the discussion of Charles Y. Glock's division of the means of social control, aimed at preventing collective (political) action, into *sanctions, compensations, and ideology* in D.C. Legee, et al. *The Politics of Cultural Differences*, Princeton 2002, pp. 45–46.

PRL domestically and abroad for its cultural achievements, including Academy Award nominations for all three aforementioned films.[9] Censorship and self-censorship were taken as givens in the state-funded film industry, where filmmakers generally had to limit their deviation from officially-sanctioned versions of history to various forms of conspiratorial solidarity with viewers, who looked for coded messages and smuggled visual content as surreptitious pleasures provided by the directors, ostensibly (but rarely in truth) behind the censor's back.

Film and Memory of the PRL

The legacy of historical films from the communist period continued to exert an influence in the post-1989 era, with pundits often questioning whether visions of the past produced under the former system are not harmful for today's viewers, especially younger ones. While such concerns have been most loudly voiced in relation to the popular television series *Four Tankman and a Dog* (*Czterej pancerni i pies*, 1966–1970), set during the Second World War, the premise that the improper reception of historical visual narratives created under the former system could still be dangerous today has been repeatedly put forward in the media, primarily by conservative commentators. Broader questions about the role of history in popular films from the past were raised in an exhibition held in the Zachęta Gallery in 2000 by Piotr Uklański, a Polish-born artist living in New York since 1991. The exhibition, which had been originally exhibited in London in 1998, was entitled *Nazis* and consisted of 164 colour and black and white photographs of actors posing as the Nazis they play in various films from around the world. Uklański's message in the work was that mass culture presents a false image of Nazis, with portrayals generally featuring well-known and charismatic actors, and that for those born long after the Second World War, these images are often the only ones they have.[10] At the Warsaw exhibition, actor Daniel Olbrychski struck down from the wall his own image and those of several others with a prop sabre he had used in the film *Deluge*. Olbrychski's attack on the images and the media sensation it created underscored the seriousness with which cinematic historical iconography continued to be treated in post-1989 Poland. Perhaps even more than the exhibition itself, the actor's choice to literally 'attack' the photographic reproductions on display in a 'Sarmatian defence of honour' attested to the

[9] Of the six films nominated for Best Foreign Language Film through 1979, four were historical mega-productions. In addition to the three mentioned above, also nominated was Kawalerowicz's historical-themed *Pharoah* (*Faraon*, 1966). The other two were Polański's *Knife in the Water* (*Nóż w wodzie*, 1963) and Wajda's *The Maids of Wilko* (*Panny z Wilka*, 1979).

[10] In the words of the artist himself: "The portrait of a Nazi in mass culture is the most prominent example of how the truth about history, about people is distorted. This is all the more important to me in that this is the main source of information about those times, and for many people – the only one." http://www.culture.pl/web/english/resources-visual-arts-full-page/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/piotr-uklanski [accessed: 28.12.2012].

perceived power of these photographs – and by extension the films behind them – to act as potential sources of false knowledge both about real-life Nazis and, as Olbrychski seems to indicate, about real-life actors, as well.

In *Polish Cinema Now!*, volume editor Mateusz Werner notes that Kazimierz Kutz's *Death as a Slice of Bread* (*Śmierć jak kromka chleba*, 1994) and Filip Bajon's *Poznań '56* (1996) were among the few films of the 1990s to specifically address life under the PRL. Both do so by focusing on iconic moments of mass political resistance, the massacre at the Wujek Coal Mine during martial law and the Poznań Uprising of 1956. Werner says it was not until the opening in 2004 of the Warsaw Rising Museum, with its innovative participatory narrative structure, that "it became apparent that interest in the tragic Polish history was not limited to a handful of sentimental old-timers and a marginal group of politicians fossilized in their outdated pretensions," but also evoked emotions among young people and "regular folk." [11] Krzysztof Krauze's *Street Games* (*Gry uliczne*, 1996) confronts precisely this lack of interest in Poland's recent past and in life under PRL among young people in the mid-1990s by portraying the search for answers about events from the early Solidarity era as not merely an 'archeological' activity, but an adventure into issues shrouded in mystery and leading to political intrigue in the present day. The film, set in contemporary times, deals with the discovery by two young journalists of information about the death nearly two decades earlier of student activist Stanisław Pyjas, apparently at the hands of the communist secret services (SB). Krauze's film takes a meta-documentary approach, setting the true story of a mysterious informant code-named 'Ketman' within the fictional frame of the journalists' work on a documentary about Pyjas' death. Although the film deals with the PRL period, it is essentially a political thriller in which the journalists are led to highly placed figures whose actions – both in the past and present – the men are eager to hide. Krauze adds fictional layers and details to a real-life story in order to adapt it to the political climate of the mid-1990s, which in this case involves not so much finding Pyjas' killers, as exposing the seedy past of hidden behind (but also indicative of) the political and financial ambitions of a member of Poland's post-communist elite. The young journalists initially treat the decades-old cover-up behind Pyjas' death as something distant and abstract, but are drawn into the story when they realize it leads to those in the upper echelons of power. Moreover, they begin to increasingly identify with the victim – as Krauze no doubt hopes the viewer will, as well – whom they come to see as being, in many ways, much like themselves.

[11] M. Werner, "Whatever happened to Polish Cinema after 1989", in: *Polish Cinema Now!*, ed. M. Werner, Warsaw 2010, pp. 12–13.

'New Wave' of Historical Film

Poland's entry into NATO (1999) and the EU (2004) brought an era of self-searching to Polish society, as many on the right began to argue that greater integration into Europe threatened the autonomy and cultural heritage of Poland. The country was seen by them as an easy target for exploitation by its richer and more powerful Western neighbours, especially Germany. Likewise, the values of a secular and consumerist West were portrayed by conservatives as a threat to the Catholic values said to define Poles. The raising of questions about Poland's place inside Europe resulted in a debate within Poland about what it meant to be a Pole and how the country and its people had arrived to where they were today. Key aspects of Polish identity, including Catholicism and Poland's historical past, began to be scrutinised and questioned. The twentieth century became a battleground in a fight to shape Poles' collective memory. Relations with Lithuania, Ukraine and Germany came to be more frequently viewed (from all sides) through competing collective memories of painful historical experiences, such as the postwar expulsion of Germans from Poland or the Volhynia Massacres. Inside Poland, the publication in 2000 of Jan Gross' *Neighbors (Sąsiedzi)*, about the killing of Jews by Polish villagers in 1941, unleashed a wave of debate in the media about what really happened, who was responsible, and what role the Germans, the war, and the Jews themselves played in this event and others like it. From both within and without the country, forces were coming to bear that were shaking Polish culture from a 'post-traumatic' fixation with history as a realm reserved for martyrdom and mythological heroism, in which competing narratives were seen as violating sacred territory.[12] In the wake of this 'return to history', late in the first decade of the 21st century, Polish cinema witnessed a flourishing of dramas with historical settings, themes and backdrops rooted in the previous century.

These films are set in various periods of the 20th century, from the Polish-Bolshevik War (1919–1920) in the first years of the Second Polish Republic (1919–1939), through the Second World War, to the era of the Polish People's Republic. They included big-budget 'blockbusters' produced as commercial products for purposes of mass entertainment, like Jerzy Hoffman's *Battle of Warsaw 1920 (1920 Bitwa Warszawska, 2011)*, Poland's first feature-length 3-D production, and Patryk Vega's *Hans Kloss. More Than Death At Stake (Hans Kloss. Stawka większa niż śmierć, 2012)*, based on a popular 1960s television series about the wartime adventures of a Polish secret agent. There were also powerful dramas rooted in Poland's wartime experiences,

[12] In addition, the debate about Jedwabne brought to an end what Joanna Tokarska-Bakir calls a "heroic culture of silence", in which the spectres of the dead – and looming large among them, Poland's Jews – 'haunted' the collective consciousness in the form of a suppressed memory. See: J. Tokarska-Bakir, "Poland

as the sick man of Europe? Jedwabne, 'post-memory' and historians", <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2003-05-30-tokarska-en.html> [accessed: 28.12.2012]. Originally published in Polish: *Historia jako fetysz*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 15.02.2003, p. 20.

including Andrzej Wajda's *Katyń* (2007), Jan Jakub Kolski's *Venice* (*Wenecja*, 2010) and Agnieszka Holland's *In Darkness* (*W ciemności*, 2011). The majority of films, however, were predominantly set in various decades of the PRL era, including the postwar 1940s – Ryszard Bugajski's *General Nil* (*General Nil*, 2009), Janusz Majewski's *The Rite of Passage 1947* (*Mała matura 1947*, 2010), and Wojciech Smarzowski's *Rose* (*Róża*, 2011); the Stalinist early 1950s – Borys Lankosz's *Reverse* (*Rewers*, 2009); the tumultuous late 1960s and early 1970s – Jan Kidawa-Błoński's *Little Rose* (*Różyczka*, 2010) and Antoni Krauze's *Black Thursday. Janek Wiśniewski Fell* (*Czarny czwartek. Janek Wiśniewski padł*, 2011); and, finally, the late 1970s and 1980s – Rafal Wieczynski's *Popiełuszko. Freedom Is Within Us* (*Popiełuszko. Wolność jest w nas*, 2009); Wojciech Smarzowski's *The Dark House* (*Dom zły*, 2009); Jacek Borcuch's *All That I Love* (*Wszystko, co kocham*, 2009) and Waldemar Krzystek's *80 Million* (*80 milionów*, 2012). Lastly, a few films, including Rafael Lewandowski's *The Mole* (*Kret*, 2010) and Władysław Pasikowski's *Consequences* (*Pokłosie*, 2012), were set roughly in the present day, but featured plots driven by historically rooted conflicts.

These historically-themed films appear to have captured the imagination of both Polish and foreign viewers. Since 2008, historically-themed films have won all but one of the Golden Lion Awards for best picture at the Gdynia Film Festival, and the two most recent Oscar nominees – Wajda's *Katyń* (2007) and Holland's *In Darkness* (2011) – both concerned historical themes. They were also the first Polish films nominated for Best Foreign Language Film since 1981, demonstrating that Polish auteur cinema has found a language to communicate a Polish perspective on history to foreign audiences. Although the films in this 'new wave' differ greatly in terms of genre, scale and mood, many of them approach historical storytelling in ways that differ from those used earlier. In part, this reflects a shift away from heavy-handed, univocal didactics, especially among the younger generation of directors, such as Smarzowski, Lewandowski, Vega, and Lankosz. Yet, the treatment of historical themes by established directors of popular films, like Majewski and Pasikowski, better known for crime stories and action cinema, indicates that the move toward new approaches to viewers reaches beyond new voices.^[13]

These shifts are made all the more apparent when contrasted with films that portray iconic tragedies in Polish history in more traditional, sweeping and mythic terms, such as Antoni Krauze's depiction of the brutal suppression of strikes in cities along the Baltic coast in 1970, in *Black Thursday. Janek Wiśniewski Fell*. The film uses a number of conventions typical of historical dramas about the PRL

[13] In order to maintain a focus on new approaches to history in recent films, I will leave aside Wajda's *Katyń* and Holland's *In Darkness*. This is not to say their work does not reflect change, but merely that

their recent cinematic style is best addressed within the scope of their body of work, which is beyond the scope of this essay.

period: black-and-white archival newsreel footage, mass gatherings of striking workers, communist officials seated around tables, and ruthless beatings by *milicja* officers. The film's pre-credit opening depicts the Drywa family sharing *opłatki* on Christmas Eve 1969, which is followed by a text panel informing about the pre-holiday food price hikes announced by the regime a year later, which triggered the strikes that led to 'Black Thursday'. Newsreel footage of workers gathered before the regional party headquarters sets an initial, ominous tone, as the film interweaves warm, domestic scenes within the Drywa household with the narrative of the spreading strike and the decision by the Party to suppress it. When Brunon Drywa leaves the safety of his home, shown here as an idyllic sphere, to return to work, as the authorities have requested, he is among those gunned down by the army on the train platform at the Gdynia Shipyards station. The wife's role in the film, initially limited to domestic chores, now shifts to searching futilely for her wounded husband, and later, mourning him in a funeral hastily arranged by the authorities. As a form of docudrama, Krauze's film manages to provide context through scenes typical of the tragic events, including several featuring an effective Gomułka figure in Wojciech Pszoniak. Yet, the film requires no actions from the characters, especially the female ones, beyond those stereotypically assigned to them by their social and economic roles. In the second half of the film, besides following Stefania Drywa in her search for Brunon, the viewer primarily sees a long series of beatings and the famed procession of marching workers through the streets of Gdynia, including their carrying a bloodied flag and the body of Zbigniew Godlewski, the inspiration for the iconic protest song of the film's title, sung by punk rock legend Kazik Staszewski at the film's end. The monumental importance of the worker's resistance and the (even ultimate) price they paid is cemented for the viewer in the film's final scenes, which depict a monument later erected to commemorate the strike and those who died in it. Importantly, Krauze maintains a coherent and factually sound historical timeline in the film, while embodying the collective body of 'actors' in this social drama in believable, if poorly individuated, characters. The commercial success of the film, which drew 675,000 viewers,[14] demonstrates that a viewing public exists for docudramas able to clearly relate history in a heroic, unambiguous, and visually engaging manner.

New Returns to the PRL

While Krzysztof Krauze's *Street Games* focused on a search for undercover agents in the mid-1990s, Jan Kidawa-Błoński's *Little Rose* returns to the so-called 'March Events' of 1968 to show the probable intrigues, including erotic ones, potentially hidden behind the ster-

[14] *Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej*, <http://www.pisf.pl/pl/kinematografia/box-office/filmy-polskie?cat=5465> [accessed 17.11.2012].

ile language of the SB files housed in the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – IPN). Inspired in part by revelations from the IPN archives in 2002, *Little Rose* focuses on the story of a woman who finds herself caught between two men, each representing one side of the ‘oppression/resistance’ dichotomy. In the film, Kamila is convinced by her boyfriend, Roman, a member of the SB, to spy on the writer Adam Warczewski. Although she initially agrees to become an undercover informant to please her boyfriend, Kamila – an orphan raised by the state, finds herself inspired by Warczewski and his literary world, and eventually reverses her betrayal, leaving Roman and marrying Warczewski. Ultimately, both men are destroyed by the system that divides them, leaving Kamila without either. Though Kidawa-Błoński said the film drew inspiration from the story of Paweł Jasienica’s wife spying on him, he emphasized that Bertold Brecht’s relationship with a Stasi agent and other stories also provided the starting point for the film’s action.^[15] As a historical drama, *Little Rose* is thus inspired by real lived lives, but its plot is constructed on the basis of a conventional cinematic master plot, a three-way romance that inevitably leads to conflict. Setting the film during the events of 1968 allows for the fates of the film’s characters to be embedded in broader historical circumstances that were pivotal in the lives of entire groups of people (students, those of Jewish heritage). The details of the characters involved have been changed in order for them both to function as elements of a love triangle, as well as typifying aspects of the social milieu in which this conflict occurs. Finally, the story challenges the quality of the ‘stories’ derived from SB files, since they primarily include facts and instruments used to intimidate and compromise. Thus, the question of motivation, a key factor in the successful development and playing of a fictional character, is largely unavailable from the information provided from such reports. By providing Kamila with such a (seemingly) unusually motivated and tragic story of collaboration, Kidawa-Błoński suggests that strong judgments based on IPN records are dangerous, and that despite its name, the institution’s holdings themselves are not a literal repository of ‘national memory’, but merely a source or tool for building it.

Whereas *Little Rose* questions our access to the past through the narratives contained in SB files, Smarzowski’s *Dark House* dismantles the uniform image of the *milicja* as a collective force for repression through a complicated multi-layered narrative involving an investigative team and two crimes, one of which is a legitimate focus of inquiry, while the other is a political crime in they themselves are implicated. The film’s action begins in 1978 with Edward Środoń narrating highlights of his life story up to the sudden tragic death of his wife, which leads him first into alcoholism, and then to set out towards

[15] “Jan Kidawa-Błoński o swoim filmie”, Press materials for the film *Little Rose*, <http://www.stopklatka.pl/film/film.asp?fi=35578&sekcja=1> [accessed: 28.12.2012].

a new start in life on a state farm in the Beskids. By chance, he ends up at the home of the Dziabas, where tragic events occur. Four years later, in 1982, he is brought by the *milicja* to recount these events at the scene of the crime. During the split narration that follows, the events of that fateful night four years ago are shown in flashback form as they are recalled by Środoń; simultaneously, a second drama is being played out among the *milicja* and prosecutors collecting and recording the testimony. Throughout the investigation, the camera repeatedly assumes the perspective of a small B&W handheld unit being used by the officers to record the events, underscoring the more general role of the camera in creating a coherent and compelling narrative, in this case one that will be used to judge and convict Środoń, a fact that becomes crucial in the film's final scenes.

In both the film's present and in the flashbacks, events are essentially driven by vodka, with heavy alcohol consumption being both a cause and product of tragic events. The behaviour of Środoń after his wife's death, and of the characters in the Dziabas home, both in the flashback and during the course of the crime scene investigation, is largely determined by their drinking. However, in later scenes, set during martial law, alcohol seems to represent a more utter hopelessness, with the *milicja* officers drinking as they work, with the exception of the most positive character among them, Colonel Mróz, who remains sober until he removes an anti-alcohol implant buried beneath his skin. The social relations in the film are antagonistic, with characters using one another for their own benefit, though this is initially not apparent when Środoń first enters the Dziabas home, and initial suspicion yields to hospitality, which after heavy drinking leads to a scheme to cooperate in setting up a bootlegging operation. This drunken talk, however, actually ends in a murderous plot that turns even more gruesome as the result of inebriation. Later, at the crime scene, when the investigation threatens to reveal a politically motivated cover-up and Mróz proves incorruptible, threatening his higher-ups, it turns out that his fellow officers have all agreed to help frame him, and eventually, to turn a blind eye to his staged murder, with either a bribe or threat securing their cooperation and vodka numbing their senses, moral and otherwise.

The events that unfold in the 'dark' (*zły* means 'bad' or 'evil' in Polish) house can be seen as a microcosm of the realities of martial law-era Poland, the 'dark home' of all the characters, with emigration and death as the only means of escape. The cinematic techniques used in the film draw parallels between the two stories; for example, the scenes in both temporal planes pick up in pace, becoming shorter and more chaotically filmed as the plot(s) reach a crescendo. The viewer and Środoń both take in the full extent of the past tragedy (and realize he will survive it) at nearly the same moment that both also become aware of another tragedy unfolding, in which Środoń will likely die. An ironic contrast to these two events are shots, full of blood and

screaming, of a female *milicja* officer giving birth to a child of uncertain paternity, whose mother knows it may have just been orphaned, making this seemingly optimistic event seem dark, ironic, and even tragic.

The role of memory in Środoń's recounting of past events, and the hostility of his 'audience' to his version of events, which differs from what the *milicja* prosecutor has decided is the proper chronology, suggest a loose analogy between the dual narratives being constructed in *Dark House* and the telling of history during the socialist period. Although both Środoń and Mróz are judged to have improperly constructed a sequence of past events, ironically, it is Mróz who receives the harshest 'sentence'; Środoń, after having been framed for Mróz's murder, appears to escape in the film's final moments. This fact, however, is difficult to discern due to the complicated *mise-en-scène* of the final scene. An extremely long crane shot splits the action into a centred image of the house with a collection of individuals involved in the investigation grouped before it, and a distant image of Środoń being chased, that seems to show him getting away in the film's final seconds. However, it is almost impossible for the viewer to focus on both fields of action, and an attempt to keep one's eye focused on the distant figure in flight is disturbed by a vodka bottle flung directly at the camera by a drunken *milicja* officer.

The demands created on the viewer's eye by the multiple fields of action Smarzowski creates on screen highlight the need to make choices – and beware of the danger of being tricked or disturbed – in following stories where the narrative path is not clearly spelled out. Significantly, Środoń is warned to flee by two *milicja* officers, while a third actively abets his escape by tackling his pursuer. Thus, in *Dark House*, not all the *milicja* are truly negative characters, yet the division between them is not between honest and corrupt – everyone is corrupt. Instead, a distinction is made between ruthless and blind obedience to authority and a willingness to express defiance towards party higher ups. For this reason, prosecutor Tomala and party official Zięba are the film's true villains, and how the film creates a more subtly constructed portrait of the power structures of the PRL during the dark times of the early 1980s.

The tragicomic moments that occur during drunken camaraderie between men and which provide the backdrop for murder in *Dark House* find a lighter analogy in the interactions of women in Borys Lankosz's *Reverse*. Here, the setting is the Stalinist period, and the home contains three generations of women. The film revolves around Sabina, who shares a flat with her mother and grandmother in which a prewar cultural atmosphere prevails. She works, however, in a publishing house, where her paternal boss, with Marx, not Stalin over his desk, represents the hopeful, idealistic side of the new order and its culture. The matchmaking efforts of Sabina's mother bring men into the home representing different professional and personal rela-

tionships to Poland's postwar milieu: a cultureless and number-obsessed bureaucrat, a poet who refuses to compromise his art, and finally, a well-dressed, handsome suitor named Bronisław, who proves to be an agent of the security services. His trench coat and good looks give him the look of a film-noir detective in an ironic play on cinematic conventions. The comedic elements of the story, however, turn both tragic and macabre, as the action's focus moves from the hapless courters to Bronisław. He wins the bookish Sabina's heart, but when he turns brutal and rapes her, she poisons and kills him. When the girl and her mother decide to move the body to the attic studio where Sabina's brother paints socialist-realist paintings, the close encounters they have in the studio and on their way up the stairs to it, create a mixture of dramatic tension and dark humour that create an atmosphere of the grotesque.

Shot in a richly textured black and white that provides the film with a period feel, *Reverse* operates through the incongruence of the parts that comprise it. The old-fashioned attitudes of the mother and grandmother, who seek to prevent Sabina from becoming a spinster at any cost (it turns out, literally) are contrasted against various individuals representing different faces of the new system. Sabina herself is squeezed by all of these forces, and, as a result, is forced into committing a desperate act. A second layer of the film is that of Sabina meeting her visiting son, who was conceived during the sexual assault against her and born on the day of Stalin's death. He is the spitting image of his father, who he believes was a hero of the underground murdered by the communist regime. Through the figure of the son, Lankosz emphasises the difference between communicated and collective memories of the past. Sabina's purposeful denial to her son of his own 'story' is motivated by her desire to relieve him of its burden, which is also a product of past times – an aspect of the Stalinist security state. *Reverse* succeeds in achieving a sense of historicity without relying on true events or real characters, and does so by pushing the boundaries of what some might consider acceptable "historical emplotment" for a film about Stalinist terror. Like Holland's *Europa, Europa* (1990), about a Jewish boy who is forced, at times comically, to constantly shift identities during the war, *Reverse* shows the potential for embedding compelling narratives in historical moments, even when the tropes used, in this case, grotesque and ironic humour, seem to risk trivializing the reality of that period.

In adopting more personal, individualistic approaches to history, recent films have begun shifting from memory to 'postmemory' – the mediated experience of the past through the memories of our family and the community around us – as the site of contact with the past. A prime example of a film focused on the post-memory of the communist past is the Polish-French director Rafael Lewandowski's film *The Mole*, in which a son, Paweł, discovers rumours about his father, a Solidarity hero, being an informer for the SB to be true. Paweł ulti-

mately confronts and finally kills the former SB officer who is blackmailing his father. With clear analogies to real-life claims of collaboration by Lech Wałęsa, which grew stronger after Law and Justice came to power in 2005, the film nevertheless remains firmly embedded in the father-son relationship, which drives the action. A counter-point to the son's mediated memory of the father's Solidarity past is the collective memory of the Polish émigrés in France, who greet the father as a hero when he visits, ostensibly to buy used clothing for resale back home, but he in fact chooses to remain with them, rather than return to face the allegations against him back home. Their conviction that the communists who they believe still run Poland are behind the charges, and their exaggerated patriotism infuriates the son. When he is told that he is "too young to understand", he snaps back, saying: "your Poland no longer exists. We have to look ahead, and not keep looking backwards." The father decides to stay in France in a wilful denial of memory, while after returning to Poland, Paweł destroys what represents a potentially dangerous source of memory of his father's past. In killing the agent, Paweł does not change the past, but he eliminates him as a connection to it, and thus believes he is removing a threat to his father.

A blurring of the division between popular and 'ambitious' cinematic treatments of historical themes is best evidenced in the recent projects of Władysław Pasikowski. In the early 1990s, Pasikowski's action films entranced audiences with their slick Hollywood-inspired aesthetics and plots laden with violence and macho bravado. Pasikowski's *Pigs* (*Psy*, 1992) and *Pigs II: Last Blood* (*Psy II: Ostatnia krew*, 1994) depicted a brutal, dark side to Poland's new free-market reality. In the films, Boguś Linda plays former SB officer Franz Mauer, a cynical tough-guy, driven by a search for both love and a place for himself in a corrupt and violent world, where 'business' involves drugs and weapons, betrayal and revenge. The role made Linda the first box-office superstar in the Polish Third Republic, and established Pasikowski as the leading representative of a slicker, more commercial filmmaking style, which he continued through 2004 in a number of thrillers and crime dramas.

However, when Pasikowski returned to filmmaking in 2007, it was not to shoot another tough-guy film, but to assist Andrzej Wajda by writing dialogue for the screenplay to *Katyni*. The film marked the 86-year-old director's return to serious filmmaking about modern history, this time about a story involving his own family – Wajda's father was a victim of the Katyni massacre. Although Pasikowski's role in writing the script remained in the background, it nevertheless contrasts with Wajda's past preference for adapting serious works of literature, or, as in the case of *Korczak* (1990), turning to an established 'serious' film artist like Agnieszka Holland. Wajda's turning to Pasikowski would appear both to indicate his seeking help in reaching

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popular audiences – including youth, a target of several of the director's most recent films^[16] – and signal a shift in the younger director's focus towards more serious aims.

In 2012, Pasikowski worked on two feature-length film projects that embraced history from within disparate narrative conventions. The first, *Hans Kloss. More Than Death at Stake*, for which he wrote the screenplay, was a long-awaited film adaptation of a 1960s television war/spy series featuring one of the most iconic figures in PRL pop-culture (and current retro nostalgia), Hans Kloss, a German intelligence officer who in actuality is Stanisław Kolicki, a Polish spy working for Moscow. This film also features a split time frame, with Stanisław Mikulski, who starred in the original series, portraying both the real, German Kloss and Kolicki as elderly men in 1975; meanwhile, Tomasz Kot plays the figure from the aging Kloss' memories and recounted wartime adventures. Although the film's masterplot is focused, like the Indiana Jones movies, on the search for a mysterious treasure (the lost Amber Room), with flashbacks to 1945 filmed in the style of classic Hollywood war movies, *Hans Kloss* also takes viewers to communist-era Poland, where the SB force Stanisław Kolicki once again to impersonate the real Kloss, who has clues to the whereabouts of the Amber Room. The multiples layers of identity and the return to PRL in the film both reflect aspects of retro nostalgia that Pasikowski seeks to engage in his approach to viewers. The film plays on Mikulski's recreating aspects of his original role, and ironically contrasts the cult status of the series and its hero in the PRL with the film's revelation that Kolicki was imprisoned after the war due to Stalinist paranoid fears about his loyalty. Although this represents an attempt to restore some of historical truth the original series denied in the PRL, *Kloss* nevertheless remains firmly rooted in the tradition of American adventure-oriented war stories, where the historical background is indeed intended merely as 'window dressing', aimed at increasing the film's dramatic effect; its 'truth' value is, thus, a function of its verisimilitude within the structure of plot conventions rather than in relation to any past reality.

Pasikowski's second film, set in 2001, was *Consequences (Pokłosie)*, the story of two brothers who confront a dark secret from the past, and as a result, bring upon themselves the wrath of their neighbours, triggering a series of events that both deepens the secret and places their lives in jeopardy. The story itself borrows heavily on revelations from Jan Gross's *Neighbors* and, later, *Golden Harvest* (2011, co-authored with Irena Grudzińska-Gross), the first of which chronicled the murder of Jews by Polish locals in the town of Jedwabne, and the second, the illegal acquisition of Jewish property after the war

[16] A focus in Wajda's cinema on the needs of younger audiences can be seen in *Pan Tadeusz* (1999) and *The Revenge (Zemsta)*, 2002), both adaptations of classic

works of 19th-century literature that are required reading in Polish schools.

throughout Poland. The books were criticised as being an ‘anti-Polish’ attack by outsiders, embittered exiles with Jewish roots (both authors were expelled from Poland in 1968). In the film, Pasikowski successfully both maintains and dismantles this line of division through the character of Franciszek, who returns to Poland after living in Chicago for 20 years, to help his brother, Józef, whose wife has left him and travelled to America. It is her murky tales about Józef’s problems and his conflict with the inhabitants of his village that lead Franciszek to travel to his brother after being estranged from him for two decades.

When this ‘prodigal son’ returns to his native village, he is greeted by a Star of David spray-painted on the local bus stop, as well as by a mysterious figure, who steals his belongings, foreshadowing the story he will uncover. He learns his brother has constructed a make-shift cemetery in a field out of *matzevahs* used years ago to reinforce a road. The initial hostility of the local community to Józef is now aimed at both brothers, who together try to uncover why the digging up of the *matzevahs* evokes such strong emotions. The film moves more decisively towards the ‘buddy’ movie or thriller genre one might expect from Pasikowski, as the brothers uncover the village’s secret, the appropriation of Jewish land in the aftermath of the Second World War, which also implicates their own family. The brothers’ discovery of the ruins of their own family home in what is now a marshy wasteland shifts the narrative from and ‘us/them’ to a collective guilt shared by the estranged brothers and their neighbours, but when they dig up the remains of bodies long buried there, the full extent of the past crime becomes evident.

Pasikowski’s film demonstrates the power of embedding historical narratives within existing popular genres, what film critic Bartosz Staszczyszyn called Pasikowski’s “finding the golden mean between an attractive cinematic form and loyalty to historic facts” which gives the film “the ability to reach a broad audience and change the way they look at history.” [17] The film, originally proposed to the Polish Film Institute under the title *Kaddish* in 2006, intentionally borrows scenes from Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) and Paweł Łoziński’s documentary *Place of Birth (Miejsce urodzenia)*, [18] about author and Holocaust survivor Henryk Grynberg’s return to his birthplace after 50 years. Yet the effect of these scenes – transposed from real situations before the war to fictional characters living in 2001 – is to add dramatic tension, rather than realism, to the film. The director himself noted his preference for the former: “I love American films. The love directors who make fast, powerful, gritty films. Scorsese is the most important director for me.” [19]

[17] B. Staszczyszyn, “Prawda, która boli”, *Culture.pl*. http://www.culture.pl/kalendarz-pelna-tresc/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/L6vx/content/poklosie-prawda-ktora-boli, 09.11.2012 [accessed: 28.12.2012].

[18] R. Grzela, *Pasikowski: Coś takiego zdarzyło się w moim kraju*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 26.10.2012, p. 10.

[19] Ibidem.

Andrzej Wajda called *Consequences* “the last film of the Polish Film School” for its sharing of that movement’s ambition to open a social dialogue about Polish identity, to ask questions “about who we are”. Commenting on the issues raised by the film, including the organized murder of Jews by Poles, past anti-Semitism in Poland, and its persistence today, Wajda added, “some say it’s best to forget about this, but artists, Polish cinema, we’re here to remind people.”^[20] Yet, provoking such a reckoning is what historian and consultant to the film Barbara Engelking says was the project’s aim: “This is a film about us, a film about what we do with our memory.”^[21] In the film, Józef tries to explain his motivation to his brother, stating simply, “These people once lived. I had to do it.” Although his actions are hard for him to verbalize, they are not shown to be unmotivated. The local parish priest provides an explanation that is imprecise, but which can be clearly read by audiences: “He’s doing what God tells him to do.” Thus, although Pasikowski leaves the issue of motivation unresolved, he suggests it lays at the very heart of one’s humanity.

When Eva Hoffman calls on us in *Shtetl* to “remember strenuously, to explore, decode and deepen the terrain of memory”, she is referring to a man who in part inspired the book, the (then) young Polish historian Zbigniew Romaniuk, who was responsible for unearthing and preserving the memory and history of the former Jewish inhabitants of the small town of Brańsk. In creating a tense drama based on this same impulse to remember and explore the past, and by raising the stakes in this ‘strenuous’ effort to those of life and death, Pasikowski demonstrates the potential of popular cinematic forms for exploring the past. In doing so, he is following a path previously explored by one of his idols, Oliver Stone, although he avoids the American director’s tendency to embellish history. Moreover, by rooting the film’s plot in the story of two conflicted brothers, the director refocuses the discussion about the darkest pages in the history of Polish-Jewish relations from an ‘us/them’ dynamic, to one of ‘a conflict within’. Józef’s murder towards the film’s end is implied to be not merely a consequence of his conflict with his neighbours, but also of Franciszek’s abandonment of him, for which the surviving sibling atones by carrying on his brother’s work to bring justice to the memory of the dead. In this way, Pasikowski’s film demonstrates on multiple levels the consequences and responsibilities that memory brings.

Conclusion

What might be called ‘new Polish historical cinema’ represents, as a whole, a move from one kind of ‘historia’ to another: from telling history to telling stories. This shift echoes a general trend (often clum-

[20] Interview with Andrzej Wajda by Monika Oleniczak, “Kropka nad i”, TVN24, 08.11.2012.

[21] Prof. Engelking o ‘Pokłosiu’: Ten film w pewnym sensie ma niewiele wspólnego z Żydami, “Gazeta

Wyborcza” 22.12.2012. http://m.wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/1,117915,12909536,Prof_Engelking_o_Poklosiu_Ten_film_w_pewnym_sensie.html [accessed: 28.12.2012].

sily) enshrined in the concept of a post-modern approach to the past, in which over-arching meta-narratives are treated as constructs in the service of the dominant socio-political and economic paradigm of power. Such an approach suggests the need in cinema for depicting a kaleidoscope of lived experiences, rather than focusing on iconic figures and touchstone moments of collective experience and trying to etch them into the mass consciousness. In the films discussed here, filmmakers seem intent on doing more than merely depicting events set in the past. Rather, they address the way in which the collective consciousness about history is structured, about how the past is understood. Genre and cinematic technique are used not to achieve a reality effect, but to provide innovative formulae by which to explore a world that can only be accessed through stories, and the understanding of which is a direct result of the modes of depiction employed.

In contrast, while effective as a docudrama, *Black Thursday*. *Janusz Wiśniewski Fell* remains rooted in a nostalgia for history as an overarching meta-narrative, a force for constructing a shared national identity. For this reason, the film features no compelling individual story, but rather depicts the characters as part of a 'collective body' that is repeatedly beaten and fired upon by the communist regime's security forces, which also remain faceless. A key role is given to the doctors and families in the film, who imbue the main story – the raw and brutal exercising of power – with appropriate doses of helpless indignation and heartfelt solidarity. History told in this manner is expressed through a chronology of events linked by a chain of cause and effect, a textbook version of history, rather than through the lived experience of a given time expressed through the lives of individual characters, a literary approach to history.

In films such as *Reverse*, *Dark House*, and *Consequences*, history is explored not as passive 'content', but rather as a constructed reality. Narrative techniques construct an experience of the past by means of fictive elements, with the characters and plots signifying wider, authentic historical issues. In *Reverse*, Sabina's domestic cultural sphere is out of step with that of Stalinist PRL, requiring her to maintain a line of division between the prewar world inside and the socialist(-realist) milieu beyond her home. But preventing the outside world from entering this private realm is as impossible as keeping the 'freedom' inside her of the coin she swallows. Socially defined gender expectations common to both worlds paradoxically drive the film and her character towards the ill-fated romantic entanglement with Bronisław. Similarly, the murders at the centre of the investigation in *Dark House* are not the film's true centre, but rather a vehicle for a study of the investigation itself. The viewer is faced with a much more interesting and more puzzling riddle set within the complex social milieu of the investigative team, guided by rules that typify the 'dark' days of martial law. The individuals on the *milicja* team and their

investigation provide an anatomy of the period, while the dual narrative threads providing synergetic energy to one another.

The focus of these films and other on the influence of specific historical moments and periods on average people is a reversal of the ancient goal of history: to tell us something about ourselves through our past collective actions. In introducing new narrative conventions and genres into cinematic historical discourse, the directors of the films described here avoid worn-out conventions that have become cliché or kitsch through repeated, mechanical use. This is especially significant in portrayals of traumatic experiences, like the Second World War, the Holocaust, or communist repression, as the act of raising of historical awareness here entails responsibilities that derive from the very act of remembering itself – responsibilities both to the victims and to ourselves.