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The Framework of Reception: Public Responses to Historical Fiction Films¹

Ramy recepcji: publiczne reakcje na fabularne filmy historyczne

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the methodology of studying the reception of historical fiction films by means of press coverage. Although a common practice, it is usually taken for granted without additional methodological reflection. Using the example of three films and their reviews in the Polish press, the article highlights the need to specify the reception's discursive frameworks on a case-by-case-basis. The political, geographic, or time-related contexts of the historical fiction films significantly modify their modes of interpretation.

Key words: historical films, reception studies, discourse analysis

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In their 2015 election campaign, the currently-governing Law and Justice party [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość] proposed a plan for a historical fiction film to educate international audiences about the history of Poland. Shortly after the inauguration of the new government, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage Piotr Gliński announced a competition for the script. However, the project was never finished. This might be treated as a political anecdote were it not for the fact that it illustrates the popular belief in the cinema's power of influence.

Fictional feature films depicting various episodes of the history of Poland reach, in our country, a significantly higher audience than other genres do². Many of these titles have provoked intense discussions in recent years, especially when the themes relate to the Second World War. Still, their reception has rarely been discussed³. Films that have triggered the greatest controversies include: *Katyń* (2007) by Andrzej Wajda, *Ida* (2014) by Paweł Pawlikowski, and the German television mini-series *Our Generation* (orig. *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, 2013) directed by Philipp Kadelbach. The first section of this article provides a brief overview of press response to these films⁴; in the second section, I present methodological considerations that follow from this research. Although films popularize historical topics, research on their impact on collective memory is difficult because the audience consists of different people who use different media and react differently to the same messages. Can public reactions be thus equated to reception? How can we challenge the prevailing research model in which the relations between cinema and history are usually discussed on the basis of the films' content rather than their reception? Last but not least, how can we include the analysis of reception in the field of memory studies?

Katyń, *Ida* and *Our Generation* have many features in common: war motifs, international publicity, and press reactions outnumbering the

² Cf. M. Białous, *Spoleczna konstrukcja filmów historycznych. Pamięć zbiorowa i polityka pamięci w kinematografii polskiej*, Gdańsk 2016.

³ This may be a consequence of the Polish tradition of film sociology, which has focused on the attitude towards film as expressed by various social groups', mainly children, youth, and workers. Cf. K. Klejsa, *Badania widowni filmowej. Historia i współczesność (rekonesans bibliograficzny)*, 'Kwartalnik Filmowy' 2014, 85; K. Klejsa, M. Saryusz-Wolska, *Badanie widowni filmowej: historia i metody*, in: *Badanie widowni filmowej. Antologia*, eds. K. Klejsa, M. Saryusz-Wolska, Warszawa 2014, pp. 25–28.

⁴ Detailed analyses for each of them are presented in the following articles: M. Saryusz-Wolska, *Prasa o 'Katyńniu' Andrzeja Wajdy*, in: *Polskie piśmiennictwo filmowe*, eds. P. Zwierzchowski, B. Giza, Warszawa 2013; M. Saryusz-Wolska, *Geschichtspolitik in Polen. Die Debatten um den preisgekrönten Film 'Ida' von Paweł Pawlikowski*, <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/film/geschichtspolitik-polen> [accessed on: 21 XI 2019]; M. Saryusz-Wolska, C. Piorun, *Verpasste Debatte. 'Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter' in Deutschland und in Polen*, 'Osteuropa' 2013, 11–12.

average. At the same time, there are many differences among them. *Katyń* is a long-announced film, telling a story of over 20,000 Polish officers and intellectuals murdered by the Soviets in 1940. *Ida* surprised the critics with a story of a nun who is confronted with her Jewish origins. *Our Generation* is, in turn, a German television production about five friends who are separated by the war, broadcast, among others, on Polish Television in the atmosphere of a scandal. The circumstances of the films' release are also important: the reception of *Katyń* was influenced by the election campaign in 2007 and the sudden death of the then President Lech Kaczyński, killed in a plane crash on his way to the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the Katyń massacre, in April 2010; *Ida* gained publicity thanks to the award of the American Film Academy; while the mini-series *Our Generation* was discussed in two public spheres: German and Polish.

The terms 'historical fiction film' and 'reception', used in the title of this article, require some comment. I am using the former in the colloquial sense: the adjective 'fiction' means that these are not documentary films; the term 'historical' refers to their content which includes events from the past. The concept of 'reception' is slightly more complex as researchers have used it in different ways. Firstly, from the 1960s, film studies influenced by neo-Marxism and psychoanalysis treated films as the result of ideological practices. According to this approach, social discourses are projected onto the film and reflected in it. In this model, the spectator is a subject integrated into the film's structure⁵. Secondly, an increasing amount of research is based on observations and interviews, hence focuses on viewers as a self-reflective social group able to articulate their opinions. Thirdly, the use of extra-cinematic discourse, i.e. reviews and other statements available in the public sphere, is a common practice in reception studies. In this model, it is important to outline the audience's 'horizon of expectations'. When entering the cinema, turning on their television set or other device, the viewers already have certain predictions about the material they are about to watch. These are shaped by marketing materials or reviews, among other sources. Therefore, Janet Staiger underlines that 'texts and textual analysis still matter'⁶ in reception studies.

⁵ D. Biltereyst, Ph. Meers, *Film, cinema and reception studies. Revisiting research on audience's filmic and cinematic experiences*, in: *Reception Studies and Audiovisual Translation*, eds. E. Di Giovanni, Y. Gambier, Amsterdam 2018, p. 22; Cf. K. Klejsa, M. Saryusz-Wolska, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–16. This model is used, by the way, not only in film studies. Michael Baxandall proposed, for instance an analogous method for art history as a solution to the problem of the scarcity of sources concerning the reception of early art. Cf. M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Oxford 1974.

⁶ J. Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, New York–London 2005, p. 9; D. Biltereys, Ph. Meers, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

In this article, I address the press coverage, both the printed and electronic editions of the newspapers and magazines, of the three films mentioned above. However, I do not take into consideration any opinions posted on social media or online chat platforms, as this would cause further methodological difficulties. This decision may seem anachronistic as much of today's discussion about films takes place via digital media. While the press maintains its position as a gatekeeper to the public sphere, individuals may articulate their opinions immediately on the internet. However, a thorough analysis of social media or online discussion requires separate digital tools that would encompass mechanisms of algorithmicizing, anonymity of statements, not so seldom generated by bots, as well as dealing with the issue that the texts are both ever-growing and removable. The analysis of discussions led in digital media should therefore be separated from the analysis of press discourse. The mere fact that both texts may be available on the internet is not a sufficient premise for studying them together.

KATYŃ

In her analysis of the earliest press responses to *Katyń*, the film scholar Monika Nahlik wrote: 'It is surprising [...] how many people who write about *Katyń* address the circumstances of its creation, anecdotes from the life of Wajda himself, comparisons between the events shown in the film and those known from scientific studies and, finally, with the very socio-historical importance of the *Katyń* crime, and how little space is dedicated to the film itself'⁷. This accurate diagnosis is worth expanding upon. One of the most important factors that shaped the reaction to *Katyń* was the postponement of the premiere from the beginning of April (the anniversary of the *Katyń* massacre) to 17 September 2007, i.e. the anniversary of the Red Army's invasion of Poland in 1939. As a result, in September 2007, the media paid more attention to the *Katyń* massacre than to the Soviet-German occupation usually commemorated at this time of the year. An additional factor that influenced the reception of the film were the preterm parliamentary elections in autumn 2007: a circumstance unpredictable at

⁷ 'Zaskakujące jest [...], jak wiele osób piszących o *Katyniu* zajmuje się okolicznościami jego powstania, anegdotami z życia samego Wajdy, porównaniami między wydarzeniami pokazanymi w filmie a znanymi z naukowych opracowań, wreszcie samą społeczno-historyczną wagą zbrodni katyńskiej, a jak niewiele miejsca zostaje poświęcone samemu filmowi'. M. Nahlik, '*Katyń* w czasach popkultury', in: *Kino polskie jako kino narodowe*, eds. T. Lubelski, M. Stroiński, Kraków 2009, p. 330.

the time of the decision to postpone the premiere. *Katyń* quickly became an element of the election campaign. In the course of a few weeks, it was mentioned about 200 times in the Polish press, although – as Nahlik rightly points out – Wajda’s film was only a pretext for most of the comments.

The public reception of *Katyń* proceeded in three stages: the first one was opened by the film’s premiere and ended by the celebrations of the national independence day on 11 November 2007; the second one concerned the reception abroad, including the screening of the film at the Berlinale festival in February 2008 and the nomination for the American Film Academy Award for the best foreign language film (eventually, the award went to *The Counterfeiters* by the Austrian director, Stefan Ruzowitzky); the third one was related to the broadcast on Polish and Russian television on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Katyń massacre, as well as the special screening after the transmission of the funeral of the Polish President Lech Kaczyński.

The nationalistic politics of history, which the Law and Justice government had initiated two years earlier, became an important element of the 2007 election campaign. The then-president Kaczyński took patronage over Wajda’s film. The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage organized a parallel campaign, ‘I remember. Katyń 1940’. The Minister of National Defense, Andrzej Szczykło, ordered all soldiers to see the film. However, not only politicians recognized the need to include *Katyń* in extensive educational activities. Many teachers took their students to the cinema. On the occasion of the premiere, the liberal ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’ daily and the Catholic ‘Tygodnik Powszechny’ weekly published special supplements devoted to the Katyń massacre illustrated with film stills, but discussing the historical events of 1940 and the subsequent commemoration of the crime. In the first phase of reception, *Katyń* was therefore a pretext for substitute anniversary celebrations.

Opinions about *Katyń* were formed across the usual ideological divisions. The usually critical Tadeusz Sobolewski from ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’ expressed his enthusiasm for the film that actually affirms the myth of romantic heroes bestially murdered by the Soviets⁸. Quite surprisingly, Krzysztof Kłopotowski from the conservative daily ‘Rzeczpospolita’ expected a more modern narrative and accused the film of ‘literal patriotism’⁹. In the same newspaper, Barbara Hollender wrote in an

⁸ T. Sobolewski, *Gest Antygony*, ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’ 18 September 2007, p. 13.

⁹ K. Kłopotowski, ‘*Katyń dla pań*’, ‘Rzeczpospolita’ (‘Plus Minus’ supplement) 15–16 September 2007, p. A12.

ambivalent tone, and Krzysztof Masłoń declared *Katyni* a masterpiece¹⁰. Disputes about the new politics of history and the upcoming elections lingered in the background of many opinions, especially those formulated by journalists not usually associated with film critique.

In January 2008, *Katyni* returned to press pages as a result of its nomination for the Film Academy Award and an out-of-competition screening at the Berlinale, attended by the German chancellor Angela Merkel. As the film was not then regularly distributed abroad, only correspondents and historians specializing in the history of Poland wrote about it in the international press. Wajda's film was reduced to its informational value and potential to popularize Polish history. In general, however, *Katyni* met with a lack of understanding in the United States (where it was not distributed at all), France (distribution from 2008) and Germany (distribution from 2009). In Russia, besides the television broadcasts in 2010, there were single special screenings, but their press reception was scant. However, much attention was paid to *Katyni* in the German press whose representatives spoke tepidly about the film itself, but with respect for the victims portrayed in it¹¹.

Once the hopes for an international success were shattered, *Katyni* disappeared from the Polish and foreign press for two years. It was only the television broadcasts in Russia and Poland at the turn of March and April 2010 that provoked a new response. Interestingly, the first television broadcast took place not in Poland, but on the Russian channel 'Kultura' on 2 April 2010. The second broadcast took place on the TVP (Polish Television, i.e. the public television network) and simultaneously, as a special screening, on the largest Russian television channel, 'Rossiya', on 11 April 2010 – the day after the plane crash that killed the Polish president, his wife, and another 94 prominent passengers. The film was probably the only unchanged item on the public television program during these days in Poland. Another Polish broadcast took place a week later after the funeral of the presidential couple. Because the passengers of the plane were killed on their way to the celebrations of the anniversary of the *Katyni* massacre, foreign media (incl. CNN, BBC, EuroNews) presented fragments or stills of the film to illustrate information about the crash.

Over the course of three years after its premiere, the discourse on *Katyni* was dominated by political threads. Simultaneously, *Katyni* appeared as

¹⁰ B. Hollender, *Spóźniony fresk Andrzeja Wajdy*, 'Rzeczpospolita' 17 September 2007, p. A12; K. Masłoń, *Po 'Katyniu' można tylko milczeć*, 'Rzeczpospolita' 13 September 2007, p. A12.

¹¹ A. Kilb, *Die wahre Geschichte einer blutigen Lüge*, 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' 18 September 2008; T. Kniebe, *Royal Flunsch*, 'Süddeutsche Zeitung' 16–17 February 2008; *Opfer spielten keine Rolle* (interview with Andrzej Wajda), 'Der Spiegel' 2009, 38.

a historical source: first through the use of stills in press articles about the massacre itself, then through the broadcast of the fragments of the film in international media informing about the plane crash. Finally, in 2016, a few sequences made their way to the Katyń gallery in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. Placing fragments of a fictional feature film next to archival materials, interviews with witnesses (including Wajda, speaking about his father who was among the victims of the massacre), surrounded by authentic objects (for example buttons found during the exhumation) suggests that *Katyń* is a museum piece of the same weight. In a way, it is, with the difference that Wajda's film does not testify about the events of 1940, but about Polish cultural memory seventy years later.

IDA

Unlike *Katyń*, Pawlikowski's film appeared unobserved. As in the case of Wajda's film, the reception of *Ida* had several stages: the first one after the Gdynia Film Festival (the most prestigious Polish film festival) and the subsequent cinema premiere in autumn 2013, the second one on the occasion of the Film Academy Award in early 2014, and the third one in relation to the presidential campaign of 2015.

The first comments appeared after the screening at the Gdynia Film Festival, where *Ida* received the main prize. The reviewers at the time were accredited critics, the only people granted a pre-release screening. They mainly emphasized the artistic value of the images¹². The film was released in cinemas two months later in November 2013 and only then did serious criticism appear. The debate was initiated by the sociologist Anna Zawadzka who accused the filmmakers of anti-Semitism¹³. She noted that the aunt and only relative of *Ida* (the nun who realizes her Jewish origins) is a Stalinist judge. In the opinion of Zawadzka, the figure of the communist Jewish woman deserves condemnation because she reproduces the negative stereotype of Judeo-Communism. Other leftist intellectuals, such as Agnieszka Graff, Elżbieta Janicka, Helena Datner and Piotr Forecki, all subscribed to Zawadzka's opinion. In 'Gazeta Wyborcza' and the magazine 'Krytyka Polityczna', they published articles in which they accused the filmmakers of presenting a Jewish woman as a communist criminal, while

¹² T. Sobolewski, *Złote lwy dla 'Idy'*, 'Gazeta Wyborcza' 16 September 2013; J. Majmurek, 'Ida', 'Kino' 2013, 10; A. Piotrowska, *Żydowska zakonnica*, 'Tygodnik Powszechny' 2013, 43.

¹³ A. Zawadzka, 'Ida', <http://lewica.pl/blog/zawadzka/28791/> [accessed on: 12 XI 2018].

the positive figure is a nun who rejects her Jewish roots and embraces Catholicism. They argued that this 'Christianized' the Holocaust¹⁴. In discussion with these critics, Tadeusz Sobolewski and Krzysztof Varga, both from 'Gazeta Wyborcza', emphasized the aesthetic qualities of *Ida*. Thus, the newspaper served as a platform for both the accusations of anti-Semitism and the film's defense. Interestingly enough, the authors of the positive opinions were professional reviewers (i.e. those who deal with cinema on a daily basis), while critique came from intellectuals who were specialists for Jewish culture and Holocaust memory. Conservative journalists did not participate in this part of the discussion at all.

Representatives of right-wing magazines, primarily 'Do Rzeczy' and 'W Sieci' (currently 'Sieci') aired their opinions a year later when *Ida* was nominated for an Oscar. At the turn of the years 2014 and 2015, Bronisław Wildstein, Piotr Zaremba, Rafał A. Ziemkiewicz, Krzysztof Masłoń and others accused the film of being anti-Polish. Their arguments referred to a discourse that stemmed from the heated debate that came up in Poland after the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross' book *Neighbors* (2001) in which he described how Polish Christians murdered their Jewish neighbors in the town Jedwabne, in July 1941. As a result, Gross was accused of being inaccurate and looking for cheap anti-Polish sensation. Conservative intellectuals repeated these arguments in regard to *Ida*, because the main character's relatives were similarly murdered by their Polish neighbors. The critics of the film argued that presenting Polish anti-Semitism was detrimental to Poland's international image¹⁵. Moreover, they emphasized that the film did not show the role of the Germans in the Holocaust, suggesting instead that the perpetrators were exclusively Poles. The discussion became part of Andrzej Duda's (the then presidential candidate of the Law and Justice party) election campaign: he used the example of *Ida* to criticize the politics of history, as well as cultural and foreign policies

¹⁴ A. Graff, *Subtelność i polityka*, 'Krytyka Polityczna' 1 November 2013, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/film/graff-ida-subtelnosc-i-polityka/> [accessed on: 12 XI 2018]; E. Janicka, *Ogon, który macha psem*, 'Krytyka Polityczna' 25 November 2013, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/film/janicka-ogon-ktory-macha-psem/> [accessed on: 12 XI 2018]; A. Graff, H. Datner, *My komisarki od kultury*, 'Gazeta Wyborcza' 13 November 2013; P. Forecki, *Legenda o Wandzie, co zastąpiła Niemca*, <http://lewica.pl/?id=28839&tytul=Piotr-Forecki:-Legenda-o-Wandzie,-co-zast%B1pi%B3a-Niemca> [accessed on: 12 XI 2018].

¹⁵ Cf. B. Wildstein, *Dlaczego podpisuje petycję w sprawie 'Idy'*, 'Do Rzeczy' 2015, 5; K. Masłoń, *We mgłę zginęło Portofino*, 'Do Rzeczy' 2015, 6; R.A. Ziemkiewicz, *'Ida', czyli artysta na wojnie*, 'Do Rzeczy' 2015, 10; A. Malaskowski, *Idzie po nas 'Ida'*, 'W Sieci' 2014, 34; P. Zaremba, *'Ida' – opowieść ułomna*, 'W Sieci' 2014, 50; M. Pawlicki, *Nienawiść zamiast strachu*, 'W Sieci' 2015, 9; P. Zaremba, *Moralitet ze skazą*, 'W Sieci' 2015, 9.

during a television debate with President Bronisław Komorowski from the liberal Civic Platform [Platforma Obywatelska] party.

Disputes over the alleged anti-Semitism and anti-Polonism of *Ida* returned after Law and Justice's victory in the parliamentary elections in 2015. The newly nominated CEO of the public television network (TVP), Jacek Kurski, decided to broadcast *Ida* supplemented with subtitles explaining that the Holocaust was perpetrated by the Germans, while Poles had saved Jews despite the threat of death penalty¹⁶. Kurski did therefore what conservative journalists demanded in their critiques. Adding subtitles with such information caused protests, articulated by filmmakers represented by the Polish Directors Guild [Gildia Reżyserów Polskich]. They considered that procedure an unacceptable interference in the film and a form of censorship.

As in the case of *Katyni*, the election campaign turned out to be a key circumstance influencing the public reception of *Ida*. While the dispute over the alleged anti-Semitism of the film was an internal discussion of liberal and leftist circles, the allegations of anti-Polonism became part of a broader political debate. Despite prestigious awards, barely 243,000 viewers saw the film in Polish cinemas¹⁷. The intensive press coverage and the enthusiastic reception abroad did not translate into national film attendance.

OUR GENERATION

The three-part TV mini-series, broadcast originally by the German public channel ZDF, depicts the story of five young Germans whom we meet in 1941. One of them is Victor, a German Jew who escapes from transportation to Auschwitz and finds refuge in a company of the Polish Home Army, the largest underground military organization in German-occupied Poland during the Second World War. When his Jewish identity is revealed, Victor is forced to flee as the partisans turn out to be anti-Semites. That twenty-minute scene brought attention and criticism upon the film within Poland.

The Polish Embassy in Berlin issued an official protest letter¹⁸, and Polish commentators were surprisingly unanimous. The liberal 'Gazeta

¹⁶ Full content can be found on the website: <https://archiwum.stopklatka.pl/news/ida-w-tvp2-wyjasniajace-napisy-przed-emisja-filmu> [accessed on: 12 XI 2018].

¹⁷ http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film_info/?id=44820 [accessed on: 12 XI 2018].

¹⁸ https://www.msz.gov.pl/pl/c/MOBILE/aktualnosci/dla_mediow/sprostowania/informacja_msz_w_zwiazku_z_publicacja_portalu_wpolityce_pl_nt_filmu_nasze_matki_nasi_ojcowie_ [accessed on: 23 XI 2018].

Wyborcza' called the film 'trash', and Leszek Pietrzak from the conservative biweekly 'Uważam Rze' considered it akin to Goebbels-style propaganda and suggested that it was intended to wipe out the German responsibility for the Second World War¹⁹. The reactions of the authors writing for the conservative 'Tygodnik Powszechny' and the liberal 'Newsweek' did not diverge either. The Catholic 'Gość Niedzielny' published an interview with a left-wing historian, Robert Traba, who reminded the producers of the fact that the German television usually presents the Nazis as 'the others' who are not part of the mainstream society²⁰. All these concordant if negative opinions appeared after the German broadcast of the mini-series but before it was available in Poland. That conflict did not begin until a few weeks later, when the then CEO of TVP, Juliusz Braun, announced that public television would buy the rights to show *Our Generation*. Law and Justice (then an opposition party) protested the decision, while representatives of TVP along with the representatives of the liberal media claimed that Polish viewers had the right to see the film and form their own opinions²¹.

However, German public opinion reacted quite differently, emphasizing topics such as the technical advancement of the mini-series, the realism of the battle scenes, and the way German crimes were presented. German commentators unanimously described the film as an excellent, authentic work which truly presented the atrocities of war and Nazi crimes²². Against that background, the commentary of the historian Ulrich Herbert, in the left-wing 'Tageszeitung' daily, stood out as the only one to concede the point to Polish critics: 'At the end, the five heroes turn out to be victims or opponents of the Nazi regime. Officer Wilhelm deserts and kills his superior. Friedhelm, a cynical Wehrmacht soldier, shoots an SS-man. Even Charlotte, who betrays a Jewess, feels remorse. Greta, after being imprisoned for a long time, is finally sentenced to death. That's what Germans would like to be'²³. Aside

¹⁹ B. Wieliński, *Kto wytłumaczy Niemcom, że AK to nie SS*, 'Gazeta Wyborcza' 25 March 2013; L. Pietrzak, *Falszowanie historii*, 'Uważam Rze' 2013, 13.

²⁰ R. Traba, *Nazistami byli inni*, 'Gość Niedzielny' 2013, 13.

²¹ P. Wroński, *'Nasze matki, nasi ojcowie' – skandal czy serial poruszający*, 'Gazeta Wyborcza' 21 June 2013.

²² See opinions about the series in 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' (Wolfgang Michal, 22 March 2013), 'Der Spiegel' (Roman Leick, 25 March 2013), 'Die Welt' (Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 22 March 2013), 'Die Zeit' (Götz Aly, 14 March 2014). Analysis of German press reactions: C. Classen, *Opa und Oma im Krieg. Zur Dramatisierung des Zweiten Weltkrieges im Fernsehreiheiter 'Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter'*, 'Mittelweg 36' 2014, 1.

²³ 'Die fünf Protagonisten sind am Ende alle Opfer oder sie stellen sich gegen den Nazi-Staat: Wilhelm, der Offizier, desertiert und bringt seinen Vorgesetzten um. Friedhelm, ein zynisch gewordener Wehrmachtssoldat, erschießt am Ende einen SS-Offizier. Selbst als Charlotte eine Jüdin denunziert, tut sie es mit schlechtem Gewissen. Greta wird nach langer Haft wegen Wehrkraftzersetzung schließlich hingerichtet.

from the exception of Herbert, Polish and German reviewers held extremely different opinions and did not even attempt to enter into dialogue with each other. For Aleida Assmann, these parallel discourses contributed to her notion of monological memory: self-centered and rejecting the memory of harm done to others by one's own group²⁴.

The public reception of all the three films was dominated by questions about the attitudes towards the 'truth' and historical facts. The Polish film scholar Monika Woźniak rightly claims that this type of argument is often characteristic of discussions about historical films. It is '[...] perhaps the only film genre that is assessed in two dimensions, the aesthetic one and the educational one, as this is the subtext of the discussion over the truth or distortions of history as proposed by cinema and television'²⁵. In this respect, however, the reception of historical films seems to be similar to the reception of literary adaptations because, in both cases, fidelity to the original has never ceased to be a measure of judgment²⁶.

It is therefore the mechanisms of creating 'authenticity' that is important for the three storylines discussed here. In the case of *Our Generation*, this includes additional materials: information on the historical background was posted on the broadcaster's website along with a two-part documentary in which scenes from *Our Generation* were intertwined with eyewitnesses' accounts and archival footage²⁷. As a response to the critique from Poland, the ZDF television channel produced an additional documentary about the German atrocities in occupied Poland²⁸. The documentary and supplementary information were, however, unavailable to most Polish reviewers and thus not commented on, even though they constituted an important element of the entire media event. The producers of the mini-series managed to convince the German public that they were showing the 'truth'. Even Frank Schirrmacher, the then editor-in-chief of the 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' newspaper, encouraged the viewers

So wären die Deutschen gern gewesen'. U. Herbert, *Nazis sind immer die anderen*, 'Tageszeitung' 21 March 2013.

²⁴ A. Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen der Erinnerungskultur*, München 2013.

²⁵ '[...] to bodaj jedyny gatunek filmowy, który oceniany jest w dwóch wymiarach, estetycznym oraz edukacyjnym, bo taki jest podtekst dyskusji o prawdziwości czy też przekłamaniach wizji przeszłości proponowanej przez kino i telewizję'. M. Woźniak, *Gatunek filmowy w przekładzie: historia na ekranie*, in: A. Hołobut, M. Woźniak, *Historia na ekranie. Gatunek filmowy a przekład audiowizualny*, Kraków 2017, p. 75.

²⁶ Cf. A.M. Scholz, *From Fidelity to History. Film Adaptations as Cultural Events in the Twentieth Century*, New York–Oxford 2013, p. 5.

²⁷ 'Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter'. *Eine andere Zeit – Die Dokumentation* (ZDF, dir. P. Hartl, prod. G. Knopp, 2013).

²⁸ *Kampf ums Überleben. Die deutsche Besatzung in Polen* (ZDF, dir. A. Klamt, A. Bartel, 2013).

to watch *Our Generation* with their whole families and thus learn about the fate of older generations²⁹.

Another factor important for the placement of a fictional plot within the frame of authenticity is the *dispositif*: the moment the film appears on television, i.e. in a *sui generis* informational medium, it becomes a source. This was the case not only for *Our Generation*, but also for *Katyń*, broadcast on television to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the massacre, as well as for *Ida*, supplemented with educational subtitles. Films shown on television, especially on public channels, are expected to be 'authentic', which was an important framework for the reception of those three films. As the disputes rarely concerned aesthetic or entertainment values and focused on the variously defined 'historical truth' instead, it was the director of *Katyń* who met with the mildest criticism. As a son of an officer murdered by the Soviets in the massacre, he legitimized his film with his own family story. He therefore also appeared in this role at the exhibition at the Museum of the Second World War.

THE FRAMEWORKS OF RECEPTION

The above analysis relies on the press coverage of the three films. Is this a justified method? In their review of reception research methods, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers do not refer to the analysis of press discourse. The authors distinguish between the reception studies based on the analysis of the spectator as a 'textually-inscribed construction' (which they largely reject) and the analysis of the 'flesh-and-blood' audiences³⁰. It seems, however, that the gap between the 'spectator in the text' and the 'viewer in front of the text' can be filled by the 'audience in the public sphere', as argued by Staiger, among others³¹.

While Biltereyst and Meers agree with Staiger that the public discourse is important for the assessment of film reception, they do not mention any narrower research based on the analysis of film reviews. Neither do the editors of the volumes *Watching Films. New Perspectives on Movie-Going, Exhibition and Reception* and *Making Sense of Cinema. Empirical Studies into*

²⁹ F. Schirmacher, *Die Geschichte deutscher Albträume*, 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' 15 March 2013.

³⁰ D. Biltereyst, Ph. Meers, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³¹ Cf. inter alia: J. Staiger, *op. cit.*

*Film Spectators and Spectatorship*³². This is not a mere omission. In practice, this method is popular but usually applied intuitively³³. The first methodological reflections on this approach have appeared only recently and were most convincingly presented by the German historian Ulrike Weckel³⁴. The frequent use of reviews by film scholars, especially in Poland, demonstrates that they remain an important source. Representatives of other disciplines, such as literary studies or art history, also refer to the media coverage when answering questions about reception. This is usually justified by the difficulties in accessing other sources – especially when the discussed works are distant in time, we have few other ways of assessing reception.

The press debates – regardless of whether we are talking about printed or digital editions – have their own rules. Each title constitutes a specific ‘label’, which helps organize the discourse. In Poland, for example, texts published in ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’ or ‘Newsweek’ are customarily treated as an expression of the opinions of liberal or left-wing-liberal circles, while ‘Rzeczpospolita’, ‘Tygodnik Powszechny’ or ‘Sieci’ are considered a testimony of conservative or right-wing views. This is, obviously, a conventional division. In practice, there are many messages formulated contrary to this framing, e.g. the criticism of *Katyni* in the conservative ‘Rzeczpospolita’ or the interview with the liberal historian Robert Traba about *Our Generation* in the Catholic ‘Gość Niedzielny’.

Apart from film critics, social and political journalists also express their views on historical films, in particular those devoted to the Second World War. For example, neither the liberal intellectuals Elżbieta Janicka or Helena Datner on the one hand, nor conservative authors: Bronisław Wildstein or Piotr Zaremba on the other, deal with cinema on a daily basis. They usually write about other topics; however, they did take part in the discussions about *Ida*. In view of such rich sources, it is possible to formulate more general conclusions. In her book devoted to public debates on Holocaust films in Poland and Germany, Małgorzata Pakier writes that the press coverage, although not statistically ‘representative’, gives ‘sig-

³² *Watching Films. New Perspectives on Movie-Going, Exhibition and Reception*, eds. K. Aveyard, A. Moran, Bristol–Chicago 2013; *Making Sense of Cinema. Empirical Studies into Film Spectators and Spectatorship*, eds. C.D. Reinhard, C.J. Olson, New York 2016.

³³ This observation is confirmed by the Polish film scholar Piotr Zwierzchowski who conducted systematic research on the Polish film press. P. Zwierzchowski, *Czasopisma filmowe jako źródła w badaniach nad kinem PRL-u – aspekt wizualny*, in: *Źródła wizualne w badaniach nad historią kina polskiego*, ed. idem, Bydgoszcz 2018, p. 49.

³⁴ Cf. U. Weckel, *Plädoyer für Rekonstruktionen der Stimmenvielfalt. Rezeptionsforschung als Kulturgeschichte*, ‘Geschichte und Gesellschaft’ 2019, 45.

nificant insight' into the audience's reactions³⁵. Weckel emphasizes further that the analysis of press discourse is a qualitative method, therefore bound by a different notion of representativeness than quantitative methods. She claims that critiques written by various authors reflect various modes of argument that concerned particular films. With a sufficiently large number of texts, addressed to different audiences, one may generalize and try to infer the reception among 'ordinary' viewers: firstly, because many (especially local) critics originate from the 'ordinary' audience; secondly, because the press shapes the opinions of its readers³⁶.

What further conclusions can be drawn from the sketchy comparison of the reception of *Katyni*, *Ida*, and *Our Generation*? If the issues of political divisions in the Polish media are left out, two results come to the fore: firstly, that historical fiction films are expected to show historical 'truth', secondly, that their reception changes over time. The marketing campaigns of *Katyni* and *Our Generation* stressed that the films would show 'the truth'. Unsurprisingly then, commentators rated them by their faithfulness to historical facts. The reviewers' opinions varied depending on who was writing, when, and where. The same film, viewed under different circumstances and by different audiences, can be interpreted in different ways.

The differences in the opinions on the three films are therefore worth paying closer attention to: German critics generally spoke warmly about *Our Generation*, while most Polish reviewers hammered the mini-series; *Ida*, criticized in Poland from all political sides, albeit with the use of different arguments, garnered enthusiastic opinions of the foreign press; *Katyni*, having evoked a rather positive (if politicized) response in Poland, met with a complete lack of understanding in other countries. The reception was also influenced by the time the films were viewed, which can best be seen in the case of *Ida*: right-wing commentators became interested in the film only on the occasion of the Oscar nomination which coincided with the presidential campaign in Poland. Circumstances such as the audience's nationality or the election calendar are therefore crucial to the understanding of a film's reception.

Therefore, a mere analysis of the reviews and discussions is insufficient. Due to the role of the circumstances in which reception happens, it is its context that makes the main difference. In other words, it is about where (in what national or regional culture) and when (in what time

³⁵ M. Pakier, *The Construction of European Holocaust Memory: German and Polish Cinema after 1989*, Frankfurt am Main 2013, p. 22.

³⁶ U. Weckel, *The Mitlaufer in two German postwar films: representation and critical reception*, 'History and Memory' 2003, 2, p. 67.

period) the reception takes place³⁷. The notion of context is often used in discourse analysis³⁸. However, the main disadvantage of this concept is its capacity: anything can be a context. Staiger, therefore, prefers the notion of ‘circumstances’, arguing that they are central to the analysis of reception as the meaning of one message is shaped in relation to other ones³⁹. However, Staiger’s proposal, which refers to cinema as an element of popular culture, does not provide any additional benefits for the study of historical films. Hence, in this field, I propose – without abandoning the idea of ‘context’ or ‘circumstances’ altogether – the term ‘framework’.

The idea of a framework appears most often in the analysis of discourse and communication⁴⁰. In sociology, it is also the central concept for, among others, Maurice Halbwachs (*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*), Antonina Kłoskowska (*Společne ramy kultury*) and Erving Goffman (*Framework analysis*). All these authors were inspired by the sociology of Émile Durkheim who was among the first sociologists to proclaim that the social world is regulated by rules and structures, and the researcher’s role is to reveal them. For the study of historical films, the concept of the framework enables, by recalling Halbwachs, to build a bridge to collective memory. For Halbwachs, the ‘framework’ is a form of the social localization of individual memories and a mechanism of communicating the past⁴¹. Although his book *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* will soon celebrate its hundredth anniversary, Halbwachs’ thesis that collective memory depends on its social environment stays in force.

Reflection on the relation between historical films and memory appears in various academic disciplines. For example, the art historian Horst Bredekamp argues that films play a special role in creating historical myths⁴²; the memory scholar Wulf Kansteiner writes that images collected in film and television archives influence the way people perceive history⁴³;

³⁷ Cf. U. Hasebrink, *Kultur*, in: *Handbuch Medienrezeption*, eds. C. Wunsch et al., Baden-Baden 2014; S. Auerbeck-Lietz, *Epoche*, in: *ibidem*.

³⁸ Cf. T. van Dijk, *Text and Context. Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse*, London 1977.

³⁹ J. Staiger, *op. cit.*, p. 2 et seq.

⁴⁰ B. Scheufele, *Frames–Framing–Framing-Effekte. Theoretische und methodische Grundlegung des Framing-Ansatzes sowie empirische Befunde zur Nachrichtenproduktion*, Wiesbaden 2003.

⁴¹ M. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris 1925.

⁴² H. Bredekamp, *Image Acts. A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, transl. E. Clegg, Berlin–New York 2018.

⁴³ W. Kansteiner, *Populäres Geschichtsfernsehen vor ‘Holocaust’: Die Darstellung des Nationalsozialismus und des Zweiten Weltkrieges in drei Erfolgssendungen des ZDF, ‘Historical Social Research’/‘Historische Sozialforschung’ 2005, 4, p. 54.*

the historian Norman Davies, during a discussion about *Katyń*, stated that the picture could 'change the way in which the West perceives not only the Katyń massacre, but also the Second World War itself'⁴⁴. These and other statements about the alleged impact of film on collective memory are based on everyday observations and expectations: we still barely know the actual mechanisms of this process. Among the above-mentioned authors, it is only Kansteiner who deals with this subject in a systematic way. He focuses on the relationship between the broadcasting of television films about the Holocaust and the development of the discourse on this subject in the public sphere. He repeatedly claims the importance of empirical projects: 'It is very problematic to study collective memories on the basis of the representations of the past without trying to determine who has actually used and identified with such representations'⁴⁵.

Filling the gap indicated by Kansteiner, Sabine Moller has conducted observations and interviews with viewers representing various professional, social, and national groups⁴⁶. As expected, it turned out that viewers who saw the two blockbuster movies *Forrest Gump* (1994, dir. R. Zemeckis) and *Good Bye, Lenin* (2003, dir. W. Becker) in Germany and the United States interpreted their messages differently and referred to different associations. Depending on their historical knowledge and so-called film literacy, they paid attention to different issues. She cites, for example, interviews with American students of cultural studies who paid particular attention to the (non-)representation of the history of African American women in *Forrest Gump* because they had taken part in classes on gender and race categories prior to watching the film⁴⁷. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the study by Stefanie Rauch who, in turn, emphasizes the role of preconception, i.e. expectations formed by viewers before seeing the film⁴⁸. The results of both studies can be safely explained by reference to the idea of the social framework of memory. Collective memories, Halbwachs argues, are common to people belonging to the same group⁴⁹. In his concept, memory,

⁴⁴ 'wpłynąć na zmianę sposobu, w jaki Zachód widzi nie tylko sprawę katyńską, ale także samą II wojnę światową'. *'Katyń' to szansa dla prawdy. Rozmowa z Normanem Daviesem*, 'Dziennik Polska. Europa. Świat' 24 January 2008, p. 6.

⁴⁵ W. Kansteiner, *Nazis, Viewers and Statistics: Television History, Television Audience Research and Collective Memory in West Germany*, 'Journal of Contemporary History' 2004, 4, p. 576.

⁴⁶ S. Moller, *Zeitgeschichte sehen: Die Aneignung von Geschichte durch Filme und ihre Zuschauer*, Berlin 2018.

⁴⁷ S. Moller, *Zeitgeschichte sehen. Filmrezeption als interaktiver Aneignungsvorgang*, 'Werkstatt Geschichte' 2015, 69, p. 75.

⁴⁸ S. Rauch, *Understanding the Holocaust through film. Audience Reception between Preconceptions and Media Effects*, 'History and Memory' 2018, 1.

⁴⁹ M. Halbwachs, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

i.e. what we remember and what we forget, relies on the preferences imposed by our social environment. By the standards of contemporary sociology, this is obviously a very general but nonetheless true statement.

Although both Moller and Rauch conducted their research on the basis of interviews with individual viewers, a similar mechanism can be identified in public reactions to historical films. From the point of view of memory studies, however, a significant difference should be noted, expressed in the notions of *collected memory* and *collective memory*. Jeffrey K. Olick, who proposed this distinction, defines the former as the sum of individual memories, and the latter as an abstract category referring to the cultural discourse⁵⁰. In this model, Moller's and Rauch's research would be focused on collected memory, while the public discourse on historical films would be an expression of collective memory. However, the mechanism of 'framing' is similar in both cases. Just as the surveyed students had an idea of what the 'right' film about the history of the United States should look like, Polish journalists were convinced of how to 'properly' present a Jewish heroine, for instance. These threads were indicated within the social framework, shaped by specific press titles or intellectual circles. It is especially visible in the case of the reaction to *Our Generation*, because the twenty-minute-long scene which was discussed in Poland for several weeks caused no controversy in Germany. There, it was completely 'invisible' as no specific 'framework' could mark its place in the collective memory and thus define its significance.

While both Moller and Rauch pay attention to different places and social groups where reception takes place (in the case of the films analyzed here, such places are different intellectual and media environments), historians consistently emphasize that historical fiction films do not tell us much about the stories they present; conversely, they provide much more information about the times in which they were created: about the 'use' of history for political, entertainment or commercial purposes. Following this path, the German historian Hans Henning Hahn proposes three levels of analysis in historical films: the plot, and the film in two historical moments: (a) its creation and (b) its reception⁵¹. Of course, the latter two moments may be the same when analyzing contemporary films. Nevertheless, even a several years' shift – as in the case of the television broadcast of *Katyń* – builds up a separate framework of reception. Especially in the history

⁵⁰ J. Olick, *Collective Memory: The Two Cultures*, 'Sociological Theory' 1999, 3.

⁵¹ H.H. Hahn, *Le passé peut-il être vécu comme réalité visuelle? Réflexions d'un historien sur la représentabilité de l'histoire au cinéma*, in: *Représentations de l'histoire*, eds. G. Laudin, E. Mass, Cologne 1993, pp. 85–100.

of Polish cinema, there have been many examples of films screened after a long delay. In such cases, the temporal difference between production (and therefore the time of anticipated reception) and distribution (the time of actual reception) may be particularly significant.

CONCLUSION

Many studies on the relationship between cinema and collective memory deal with the way historical events are presented in films. Thus, they focus on the films rather than on the public discourse around them⁵². This is because they treat the movie as an *articulation* or a *carrier* of memory, hence a mirror-like phenomenon that would reflect historical topics important for a given group. Yet, in my opinion, the questions of if and how historical films affect collective memories reach beyond the films themselves. The answers require entering the world of the audiences. This can be done directly by focusing on flesh-and-blood viewers, as Sabine Moller and Stefanie Rauch have done. However, public reactions to historical films are also informative. In order to grasp the complexity of the phenomena discussed in this article, we need a category to organize the publicly articulated statements. The notion of a 'framework', taken from both discourse analysis and early memory studies, allows us to distinguish between media, groups, and moments of reception. Furthermore, we need critical tools to discuss the consequences of treating historical films as means of producing and authenticating collective memories. At best, historical fiction films, along with the public reactions to them, can be a testimony of contemporary mnemonic discourses.

(translated by LINGUA LAB)

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STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł koncentruje się na metodologii badania recepcji filmów historycznych z zastosowaniem recenzji i artykułów prasowych. Mimo że jest to powszechna praktyka, to stosowana jest zazwyczaj jako oczywistość, bez dodatkowej refleksji metodologicznej. Na przykładzie trzech filmów oraz komentarzy, które ukazały się na ich temat w prasie, artykuł zwraca uwagę na konieczność każdorazowego określania ram dyskursu, w którym odbywa się odbiór. Polityczny, geograficzny czy czasowy kontekst funkcjonowania filmów historycznych istotnie zmienia bowiem sposoby jego odczytania.

Słowa kluczowe: filmy historyczne, badania recepcji, analiza dyskursu

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