

## Don't Look to the East: National Sentiments in Andrzej Wajda's Contemporary Film Epics

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PATRIOTISM HAS ALWAYS BEEN HIGH ON Andrzej Wajda's agenda. Already in the 1950s, in *Kanał* (1957) and *Popiół i Diament* [Ashes and Diamonds] (1958), he chronicled stories of heroism and national loyalty set against the war-scarred Polish landscape. Because of heavy government censorship, back then Wajda's criticism of the Soviet-instigated political system in Poland could only be symbolically inserted into his film plots. Later, with *Człowiek z marmuru* [Man of Marble] (1977) and *Człowiek z żelaza* [Man of Iron] (1981), the director was able to reveal his political opinions with much more confidence. For obvious reasons, even those films never contained any candid anticommunist or anti-Soviet views. Only since the 1990s have Wajda's political convictions become more conspicuous, as he looks at Polish history through the lens of his half-romanticizing, half-revisionist camera, most evidently in his two national epics, *Pan Tadeusz* [The Last Foray in Lithuania] (1999) and *Katyń* (2007). With no censors keeping him at bay, the director now freely expresses his nonconformist national sentiments, where resistance to political influence from Russia sits at the center of Polish national characteristics.

On the ideological level, both of Wajda's contemporary epics set out an imaginary meridian borderline that helps define the identity of

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his nation. Whatever lies to the west is marked as positive, whereas the eastern side is certainly associated with negative Russian abuse. The line does not literally match geographical borders of the country; it is a symbolic division between the good *us* and the evil *them*. This imaginary boundary is in no way the director's invention but rather is an integral part of Polish political and cultural discourse, deeply rooted in the national tradition. Wajda's attachment to similar binary national divisions appears rather dated to Western cinema viewers in the globalized world. Likewise, younger Polish film critics tend to dismiss them as simple stereotypes. These critics also often negatively comment on the elevated tones of Wajda's recent epics. However, such voices of disapproval, even if undoubtedly present in Poland, do not have the power to halt the production of film epics, which—usually made by older-generation directors, including Jerzy Hoffman, Jerzy Kawalerowicz, and Andrzej Wajda—have now promoted lofty national ideals for more than a decade.

Since the 1989 systemic transformation from communism to capitalism, Polish viewers have witnessed a renaissance of historical and heritage epics. These monumental productions saturate cinema screens with myths of national loyalty and frequently propagate Catholic values, which for many Poles are at the core of their new European identity. Starting the epic trend at the end of the 1990s, along with Jerzy Hoffman's *Ogniem i mieczem* [With Fire and Sword] (1999), Andrzej Wajda's *Pan Tadeusz* proved immensely popular among domestic audiences. This highly fictionalized

heritage film was adapted from an obligatory school reading under the same title. The original, which had been written in verse back in the nineteenth century by Polish national bard and émigré poet Adam Mickiewicz, presented a nostalgic vision of an independent national gentry culture that at the time had already been disappearing.

Wajda's film adaptation closely replicates the idyllic world from Mickiewicz's book. It offers almost the same stylized look at the Polish-Lithuanian gentry allying with Napoleon to fight their Russian oppressors. By adapting the text, with which almost every Pole is familiar, the director managed to draw a huge number of viewers. *Pan Tadeusz*, which opened in October 1999, overall attracted more than six million domestic cinemagoers in the following year ("Przeboje kasowe 2000 w polskich kinach"). This immense popularity of Wajda's first epic resulted from the fact that he translated the well-known but now slightly dated *Pan Tadeusz* for the needs of the more visually oriented turn-of-the-century audience yet never really moved far from the original.

Wajda's script is developed around two storylines, the romantic and the patriotic. At first, the viewers follow the eponymous Tadeusz in his innocent and many times comically erratic search for a perfect spouse, accompanying his friends and family in their rows and petty local conflicts. These pursuits are swiftly abandoned, however, when a patriotic cause of defending Lithuania (in the nineteenth century an integral part of Poland) calls them to stand up against the Russian czar's soldiers.

Returning to the times when Polish patriotism developed as a moral stance of active opposition to the eastern enemy of the country, Wajda's 1999 epic manifests nostalgia for the heroic national past, as its spectacular plot stems from a long-term Polish feud with the neighboring nation. Along with Hoffman's epic, which in the same year recounted fictional tales of the eighteenth-century Polish-Ukrainian wars, *Pan Tadeusz* marks the beginning of a tendency present to this day in Polish film epics, whereby with only a few exceptions char-

acters representing the cultures east of Poland tend to be either ridiculed or vilified.

Despite the voices of such critics as Mary P. Wood, who foresaw the end of popularity of film epics in Poland after 2001 due to "the difficulty of using the epic template in a political situation of mass emigration in search of work and encouragement of a more European identity" (145), epics have not disappeared from Polish cinema venues. *Katyń*—along with *Bitwa Warszawska 1920* [Battle of Warsaw 1920] (2011), the latest 3D picture directed by Jerzy Hoffman—emanates an air of melancholic longing for the morally superior Pole, whose presence on the screen helps revive the patriotic spirit of the nation, now a member of the united Europe.

*Katyń*, as its title indicates, is based on historical events from the twentieth century. The film follows characters whose families and friends were affected by the massacre of 22,000 Polish officers and intellectuals committed by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (*Narodny komissariat wnutrennikh del*, or NKVD) in *Katyń* in April 1940. Its story parallels some of the events in the director's family; Wajda apparently lost his father Jakub in *Katyń*. For Wajda, the film closes the now almost-lifelong chapter of his World War II output and serves as his final artistic expression of sorrow, intended to leave "the pain behind" (Sobolewski). It depicts the war and the postwar Soviet-instigated communist regime as victimizing vehicles that trapped Polish citizens and required unusual strength from those who survived. Notably, Wajda's film forms the first-ever cinematic reference to the massacre, and it rightly ascribes the responsibility for it to the Soviets.

The plot follows three women, Anna, Róża, and Agnieszka, whose male relatives were murdered by Soviets in the *Katyń* Forest Massacre. We are offered a highly episodic account of their lives in Cracow during World War II and shortly after. As a rule, the director reveals only the most dramatic moments, when the women either have to fight for survival or receive bad news about the fate of their spouses and siblings. Thus, it is fairly difficult to form an

emotional bond with the protagonists, especially given that their lines and acts may strike the viewer as rather theatrical. For most of the film, the Cracow stories are only punctuated by gloomy peeks at the officers in the POW camp, destined to be eventually killed in the final massacre sequence. Due to the brevity of such scenes, it is even harder for the audience to relate or identify with the fears and suffering of these prisoners.

*Katyn*'s episodic plot may prove unclear to some Western audiences because it highly relies on the viewer's familiarity with Polish-Russian history relating to World War II. Yet the now over seventy-year-old events and the national animosities that ensued from them are still very much alive in the contemporary political and cultural discourse in Poland, having returned to the public eye in the 1990s after fifty years of communist suppression. Their presence in national media and education persists to such a degree that any potential lack of such knowledge among Western audiences never occurred to highly optimistic officials at the Polish Film Institute when they selected *Katyn* to be Poland's Oscar candidate. Later, when Wajda's much-celebrated 2008 Oscar nomination did not lead to the win for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, some critics in the country expressed their deep disappointment. To them, however based in the national history, the film appeared very much unique and relevant to the present time. Not only did it portray a massacre that had never been examined in the cinema, but also its negative representation of Russian communists seemed to be universally appealing and almost contemporary, especially given the relatively recent fiasco of the Soviet regime.

*Katyn*'s political message is clear, if not literal. Even though, unlike *Pan Tadeusz*, Wajda's World War II epic leaves the bygone idealized national heritage behind, the director still adheres to the same national sentiments. Despite his otherwise revisionist historical intentions, just like in *Pan Tadeusz*, here Wajda again indirectly promotes the new European identity of his nation, which is defined in opposition to

the now-gone communists, represented as offensive Soviets, to whom the noble Polish stand up. The most patriotic Poles on the screen are always the most resistant to the Soviet influence. In *Katyn* Wajda strips the national struggle of all the glory of *Pan Tadeusz* to convey a grim vision of indomitable Poles and their martyrdom under the Soviet rule, which in turn awards them a distinctive position in Europe.

In her discussion of Eastern European heritage films, Dina Jordanova notes, "[T]he people of Central Europe look at history from a specific angle: they come from small countries which are usually powerless to make developmental decisions, yet need to react to whatever political shifts and advances occur (usually at the instigation of a neighboring great European power)" (43). Even though their political weakness may appear to be a solid fact from an outside European perspective, Poles do not share similar views on their national identity and their position in the continent. In both *Pan Tadeusz* and *Katyn*, Wajda clearly affirms that it is not political strength that, for many people in the country, makes Poles equal or even superior to their neighboring nations. It is the moral power, the heroism, and the nonconformity—the fact that one cannot crash the spirit of a Pole—that form the basis of the identity of the nation. Wajda both subscribes and contributes to this collective pride. The director's advocacy of such unsurpassed traditional national identity is certainly determined by his own position on the history.

After political and cultural changes in the 1990s, seeking a remedy for confusion of values and their doubts about the future, Poles often unwittingly looked to their past with nostalgic eyes (Sztompka 178–81). Many revisited their national history, hoping to find justification for their contemporary preference for the new democratic system. In his films, Wajda implies that Polish patriotism, as historical experience has dictated, should principally align with Western Europe and its democratic and capitalistic ideals. His often disparaging representations of Russian nationals and their attempts to subjugate Poles—from the nineteenth-century

attacks by the czar's troops to the twentieth-century murderous deeds of the Soviets—help the director allusively expound his view on the new European identity of his country. Wajda's portrayal of the Russian is a creative tactic that results from his attempts to boost the morale of the Polish. Conservative, straightforward anti-Russian readings of his epics, however, are quite frequent in the country, especially in light of recent political developments.

*Pan Tadeusz* and *Katyń* gained new relevance after the 2010 plane crash in the Russian city of Smoleńsk that killed 96 people, including right-wing Polish president Lech Kaczyński, who was on his way to Katyń to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the same massacre that is central to Wajda's World War II epic. Determination of the responsibility for the accident and for the death of the president provoked many political and diplomatic exchanges between the Polish and Russian governments, which were followed by a full-fledged onsite investigation. The endless press and political arguments surrounding the 2010 catastrophe have not concluded on either side. In the meantime, alleged Russian conspiracy theories started resonating in numerous political debates in Poland. As similar views sweep across the nation, Wajda's nostalgic gaze at the national history attracts new critical attention, whether he conveys his message through his unique screen reexamination of World War II history, which has recently returned to the political discourse because of to the crash of the presidential plane, or through cinematic redrafting of the conventional literary masterpiece.

### ***Pan Tadeusz*: Sweet Polish Victory over a Weak Russian Enemy**

Whereas *Katyń* is based on a fairly original screenplay loosely adapted from Andrzej Mularczyk's novel, *Pan Tadeusz* lingers over the traditional beauty of heroic Polish literature, which promotes hegemonic visions of Polishness, typically taught at schools in the country. The fairly uniform teaching curriculum in Poland has always foremost emphasized the emi-

nence of patriotic works by Adam Mickiewicz, Henryk Sienkiewicz, and other national, if not nationalistic, writers. Patriotism, as advocated by these authors, tends to be synonymous with defending the Polish soil against attacks by either Germans or the eastern "other"—namely, Russians or Ukrainians. In line with the expectations of devoted patriotic Polish readers, who mostly populate his audience, Wajda follows Mickiewicz's perspective and never aspires to originality.

Although the original *Pan Tadeusz*, the literary epic, primarily received critical appreciation for its representation of the idyllic Polish-Lithuanian setting, author Mickiewicz—who lived at the time when Poland was under the Russian rule—was also known as an avid promoter of collective political efforts to first regain and then defend sovereignty of his country. Focusing on national problems, not only does the nineteenth-century author present his fellow countrymen as admirable in their traditional patriotism and Catholic faith, but he also intends to highlight national faults that need to be overcome before the Russian garrison can be defeated. This particular aspect of Mickiewicz's work captivated Wajda when he initially announced the plans for his first-ever heritage film. In the director's own words, "[i]t is certainly a great story . . . These Poles are foolish, just like us, in the country where you cannot form any stable political coalition. Telling this story again may result in an interesting contemporary film!"<sup>1</sup> (Wajda 10). Just like Mickiewicz, Wajda intended to appeal to the collective consciousness to revive some sense of national responsibility for the future of his country at the end of the 1990s, when Polish politics were polarized.

However, the highly stylized film, whose characters speak in verse and use nineteenth-century language, was critically acclaimed more for its spectacular depiction of the traditional patriotic culture and the director's narrative strategy than for the director's intended message. Many commented on its potential as a strong domestic box office contender; others saw it as the first sign of a reemergence of high

production values in the national cinema. Upon its release, Polish film critic Andrzej Werner argued, “Wajda chooses universalism of his own culture against false universality of mass culture” (171).

The all-embracing nature of *Pan Tadeusz* mainly results from its uplifting value. With its positive portrayal of the Pole, *Pan Tadeusz* deviates from “tragic narratives” (Sztompka 77) that in the 1990s proliferated in popular Polish films (e.g., *Dług* [The Debt] (1998), which incidentally also dwells on Russian villains). These productions mostly chronicled the negative effects of the political and social transformation. When social problems dominated Polish screens, Wajda offered hope. Tradition was again alive, and his viewers could rest reassured in their national self-confidence, as they followed the love adventures of young Tadeusz set against a backdrop of national efforts to win independence from the czar.

In his own nostalgic manner, Wajda reaffirmed the traditional take on national friends and enemies that had already resurfaced in the political debates at the time. When in 1999 Poland joined NATO, numerous skeptics openly voiced their concerns regarding anticipated threats to Polish national identity; these concerns were reinforced by the country’s plans to join the European Union. The international situation of the country changed, and on the domestic scene the post-1989 systemic changes provoked collective symptoms of cultural trauma (Sztompka), which left many in doubt regarding the future of their country. With the national identity seeming unstable, Wajda’s glorious national characters inspired the Polish and motivated them in their political choices. Metaphorically, *Pan Tadeusz* served as a cinematic approval of the then-approaching Polish alliance with Western Europe that was finally concluded in 2004, when the country indeed became a member of the European Union.

The film’s highly romanticized outlook on the past potentially displays the impotence of the nation’s eastern enemies, who are finally defeated by the united French and Polish. The dominance of the Polish over the Russians

stands out in the film’s happy-ended narrative, even if according to historical accounts Napoleon’s triumph over the czar’s army was unusually short-lived. The victory moves the narrative toward the climax in the concluding party. The scene of celebration that follows the return of Polish soldiers who fought under Napoleon is so visually elaborate that the brief final epilogue sequence from Paris, where we find some already much older characters in exile, can hardly reverse the inspirational effect of the heartwarming triumph over Russians.

The battle with the Russians in *Pan Tadeusz* provides the main twist to the narrative, which features two conflicted Polish-Lithuanian families—the Horeszkos and Soplicas. As their argument over a local castle escalates, Count Horeszko makes a foray against Soplica’s house. His sudden invasion, however, proves unsuccessful and comes to an abrupt ending caused by an unexpected appearance of the czar’s troops. Without a second thought, the two Polish-Lithuanian families reconcile to fight against their common Russian enemy. The battle sequence offers the viewer many long and middle shots of the Russian soldiers displaying their incompetence and cowardice. Standing in rows against their more relaxed and dispersed enemies, they mechanically shoot only when loudly ordered by their drunk and quick-tempered major. This ineffective and truly comical fighting style eventually leads them to surrender. In contrast, the presentation of the Poles in the battle relies on well-timed, rapidly cut series of close-ups and middle shots, full of forceful energy. While cleverly directing their efforts to win against the more numerous regular Russian army, they surpass their enemy in skill and passion. The viewers are positioned to cheer the Polish-Lithuanian efforts, as Wajda’s camera allows them detailed and dynamic observations of that side’s actions. At the same time the Russians appear to be in the distance, visually achieved through distinct space between the camera lens and the actors. This separation further reinforces the feelings of Wajda’s audience and marks the partiality of his camera.

Not only do the Russian soldiers lack skill, courage, and wisdom, but they are also presented as a corrupted crowd. Their leader, Major Plut, turns out to be a sly national traitor. To no viewer's surprise, he ends up being killed by Warden, one of Horeszko's servants, in an offscreen act of nationalistic revenge and punishment for his deceitful nature. Earlier in the story, the only positively portrayed Russian in the field, Rykow, promises his soldiers money to encourage—or rather bribe—them to fight. When the battle is finally over, the Russians break the agreed cease-fire to further highlight that they have no honor. Except for the two commanders of the regiment, the Russian troops stay anonymous to the audience, whereas by the time the battle starts, the spectator knows most of its Polish participants. This simple familiarity-versus-anonymity scheme highlights the director's national preferences. It also directs the viewer's sympathy. Such narrative tactics that revolve around clear-cut contrasts allow Wajda to potently convey his national sentiments through negative visual representation of the czar's troops, even if the victory in the film's only battle with the Russians may strike the viewer as unrealistic because of its overtly chaotic character.

As Cartmell and Hunter note, “commercially successful historical films tend to stick to a pattern clearly at odds with what academia knows as ‘history’”(5). In line with this general trend, which is widely accepted by his viewers, Wajda intentionally trades historical truth for his conservative patriotic vision. In more general terms, his strategy is also symptomatic of the modifications history undergoes when it is turned into fiction and then further adapted for the screen. According to Pierre Sorlin, “[t]he contingent aspect of the historical tradition, with which historians are deeply concerned, is completely ignored by the producers of historical films. It must be said that this type of film is not a historical work: even if it appears to show the truth, it in no way claims to reproduce the past accurately” (37). Wajda's 1999 heritage epic, albeit rather concerned with historical accuracy when it comes to props and costumes,

follows Mickiewicz's fictional story to comment on the contemporary political and ideological moods in the country rather than to produce a truly historical account. The actual past events are often overshadowed by myths centered on individual protagonists. Yet even though modifications often exaggerate the glories of his nation, the director obeys his culture's tradition. *Pan Tadeusz* never transgresses the dominant Polish conception of heroic national history, and thus Wajda's perspective complies with the core mainstream Polish values.

Even though they are at first sight quite temperamental, the Polish-Lithuanian male characters in *Pan Tadeusz* are firm in their respect for the national tradition. On multiple occasions their behavior indicates that they observe their culture, with Catholicism as its integral part. Their faith clearly distinguishes them from the Russians. The local community in the story is often accompanied by priests and monks, who preach honor and respect. Thanks to their devotion and their charitable deeds, many characters are able to redeem their sins, as does Jacek Soplica, a murderer, who appears in the story and film dressed as a humble monk. In several scenes, religion offers strength and confidence to the Poles, who pray for love, courage, and national independence. All their prayers are answered toward the end of the film. The mechanical Russian soldiers are never portrayed engaging in any religious activity. Just as they have no faith, they also lack manners. In one of the pre-battle scenes, Major Plut is shown as obnoxious when he makes unwelcome sexual advances to Zosia and Telimena, who appear shocked, for noble Polish women are used to being treated with courtesy. Throughout the film, good manners in the presence of women clearly differentiate the modest and virtuous Poles from the Russians, who—as exemplified by Major Plut—are so weak that they cannot control their animal-like sexual desires.

The moral and political weakness of the Russian crowd in the film is further confirmed in the conclusion to the story, when we learn that they fled in fear of the approaching Napoleonic army. The final engagement party crowns two

parallel stories, the romantic and the patriotic. When the previously exiled Polish soldiers come back home with the French as their allies, they are clearly presented as victors. As the voice-over praises Polish achievements on the war front, the Russians virtually disappear from the story. To the viewer they are presented as so powerless that they are not even worth a mention. At the same time the engagement of young Tadeusz and virgin Zosia reunites the two conflicted families in a picturesque celebration. While watching the Polish-Lithuanian characters perform the last traditional dance in the film (the Polonez), the spectator remains fully convinced that they were correct in supporting the French in their struggle for independence. By means of implication, Wajda comforts his audience: Western Europe is the right political direction for their country.

Corresponding to the needs of its audience, at the time of its release, *Pan Tadeusz* proved magnetic, as evidenced by its box office success, but later Wajda did not avoid bitter words of criticism. While discussing heritage epics in the context of the national cinema, film journalist Sebastian Jagielski writes in tones of disapproval, “Polish film industry reversed towards the past . . . [I]n peace and self-contentment our directors chewed up on the old works. . . . Polish cinema—always haunted by the past—[is] flooded by the wave of costly adaptations of school readings” (55). Despite such critical voices, the Polish Film Institute (financed by the government), along with public television (Telewizja Polska) and some private investors, keeps injecting huge sums into monumental heritage/historical super-productions similar to *Pan Tadeusz*. In the eyes of some Polish film producers, such traditional, often binary affirmations of national identity still have the potential to appeal to the viewer—hence their efforts to maintain the life of film epics that have been quite popular in the country for the past forty years.

As Iordanova notes, “East European cinemas were often involved in producing massive scale heritage epics usually chronicling episodes of the glorious past of the country and fulfilling

the needs of romanticized representations of national history” (96). In the 1960s and 70s, with the use of the heritage/historical epic, the communist government in Poland promoted national pride and patriotism to accommodate the Polish people’s need for an exceptional and unique identity in the communist bloc. The epic operated as a tool in communist hands to convince Poles of good intentions of their ruling party. The fact that under communism Andrzej Wajda distanced himself from working within the constraints of the genre clearly speaks of his political opposition to the now-gone system. Paradoxically, when the old political stimuli for producing epics evaporated, Wajda turned to this very film template to promote his anticommunist convictions.

### ***Katyń*: Polish Martyrs and the Murderous Soviet Machine**

Whereas in *Pan Tadeusz* the eastern other was disguised as the nineteenth-century Russian czar’s soldier, in *Katyń* Wajda’s representations of eastern villains on the screen become much more literal in their red incarnations. *Katyń* clearly gravitates toward cinematic rediscovery of the atrocities and later misdeeds committed against the Polish by communist-minded Russians. Even though the film is often interpreted as one that “poses questions regarding [Polish] heroism and honor” (Sobolewski), the selection of events within the narrative is itself suggestive of the director’s national sentiments. *Katyń*’s cinematic journey to the times of World War II is on one hand reminiscent of previous works by Wajda such as *Kanał* and *Ashes and Diamonds*. Yet on the other, following historical suit, it shifts its focus on the enemy from the Germans to the Russians, who throughout the film materialize as overtly heartless Soviets, whereas the Germans brutalize the Poles only at the very beginning of the story.

To emphasize the obscure nature of its subject matter, *Katyń* starts with tracking credits of bluish smoke and clouds over its credit sequence. However, from the next cut on, the story leaves the fogginess behind to move on to

a rather black and white portrayal of the massacre and its circumstances (even though the film is in color), where moral judgments are easy to make. No doubt, the viewer is positioned to sympathize with the victims of the Soviet regime, and the negative portrayal of the communists spirals upward as the film progresses. Played to evocative music, the culminating last sequence of the film gives a prolonged and repetitive account of the mechanical killings performed by the Soviets, who appear unscrupulous, bureaucratic, and inhumane. The metaphor of a murderous assembly-line structure populated with immoral and ethically numb Russians climaxes in the few final shots, when a bulldozer runs over the dead to cover up their mass grave. The brutally violent Soviet machinelike regime shows no respect for the human body, not to mention the soul.

About one-third into the story, through visual and dialogic means, Wajda establishes a clear contrast between the Polish and the Soviets. Whereas the former come across as fully human, the latter are portrayed as parts in the perfunctory engine of totalitarian destruction. Except for one decent Russian character, Captain Popov, who saves Anna in the initial part of the film, the overall portrayal of the Soviets is overtly unfavorable and clearly in contrast to the qualities of Wajda's own nation. Although the Polish characters often act overly dramatic, the Russians show no signs of emotion. The Polish pray; the Soviets kill. The Polish talk; the Soviets yell. The Polish think; the Soviets count. The Polish are nonconformists; the Russians comply with the Stalinist regime. Such binary oppositions detach the whole narrative from authenticity, and for the viewer even the documentary footage edited into the story fails to create a more realistic touch. This lack of verisimilitude paired with the frigid calm of the character buildup prompted criticism from international reviewers and brought restrictions to the popularity of the film outside its immediate cultural context. Authors in *Sight and Sound* write that the film is "good rather than great" (Brooke and Kuc 34), and a *Variety* critic points that "[s]ome will admire the general

absence of sentimentality, but for others, pic might seem too cold and lacking an emotional punch" (Felperin 26). Despite its Oscar nomination, the film did not succeed at the box office outside Poland. Too focused on the older generation's Polish response to the event and politically controversial, *Katyń* was shown on only two screens every weekend in the United States ("Box Office/Business for *Katyń*").

Understandably, in Russia, where Wajda touched the chord of old national guilt, the reaction to the film was even more negative. In Russian media and politics, the responsibility for the Katyń Forest Massacre was still debated, and in 2007 the problem remained unresolved. The sensitive nature of the subject prevented the film from being shown in cinemas, and it took another three years for *Katyń* to be aired on Russian television. Under Putin the film's one-dimensional portrayal of the Soviets sparked major controversies. Previously, the anti-Russian sentiments across Poland had been often discussed by politicians and nationwide Russian newspapers. Notably, in 2005 an adviser to President Vladimir Putin, Gleb Pawlowski, said, "Poles talk about Russians the way anti-Semites talk about Jews" (Bernstein). However extreme, similar official statements indicated tensions in Polish-Russian relations. In this environment, the massacre presented on the screen as a mechanical act of murder proved to be too much for media gatekeepers in Russia.

Yet for his own patriotic purposes, Wajda does not limit his portrayal of the totalitarian Soviet machine to the main act of distasteful violence, and he does not vilify communists in vain. All his contrast-based discursive strategies serve to convey a message of admiration for his own nation's moral strength, when confronted with victimization and relentless coercion by communist propagandists, who in an attempt to hide the truth about the massacre abuse the Polish characters in the film. It is worth noting that any support for communism on behalf of Polish citizens is pushed to the margins of the story. Most of the main characters withstand the Soviet rule after the war



with dauntless bravery, even if they are to pay the highest possible price of losing their life for their resistance. Jerzy, the only Polish character who overtly sways toward communism, quickly realizes his mistake and commits a spectacular suicide, caught on camera, to symbolically punish himself for his weakness.

It does not take long for the viewer to realize that the individual stories centered on Anna, Róża, and Agnieszka serve as pretexts to comment on the collective. Fearless and morally superior to their oppressors, all three main female characters resist postwar propaganda and manage to live by their prewar values. While being interviewed by communist police, Agnieszka, a former participant in the Warsaw Uprising, refuses to stay silent about Soviet involvement in *Katyń*, even though such insubordination will get her arrested. One of the close-ups in the interview scene clearly reveals her pride, when she lifts her chin and her face radiates defiance. Similar resistance is characteristic of not only the youngest characters. When on the main city square Soviets screen a war chronicle about *Katyń* that blames Germans for the massacre, middle-aged Róża, a widow whose officer husband was murdered in *Katyń*, also publicly demonstrates her refusal to accept communist brainwashing. In the snow, surrounded by meaningful silence, Róża appears in a middle shot yelling and banging on the window of the projectionist's car. The energy of her anger clearly contrasts with the frozen emotions and ethics of those who screen the newsreels. The scene highlights her courage and solitude in her personal battle for honesty. Finally, Anna pursues the truth with no intention of giving up, until she comes across her husband's *Katyń* diary, which only leads her to more suffering.

In their own ways, the women in the story are as honorable as their men, who—loyal to the country—refuse to evade their tragic fate at the beginning of the film. The majority of Polish characters embody high moral values. Still, in their Catholic culture they are destined to suffer in martyr-like fashion to defend their own beliefs and their loyalty to the country. Wajda's recounting of the massacre and of the episodes

surrounding it is infused with Catholic symbols of crosses, rosaries, churches, and words of prayers. The viewer observes the patriotic victimized Poles, the martyrs of Soviet oppression.

Just after its release in Poland in 2007, *Katyń* was heavily promoted by some critics. A writer for the popular *Film* magazine proclaimed, "You need to go and see *Katyń*. The subject matter deserves it, Wajda deserves it, and, Poland deserves it . . . [y]ou should go, just like you should vote in elections, even if you do not like any of the political parties" (Rakowiecki 74). Despite such dramatic pleas for viewers' sense of patriotism, at the domestic box office the film was still surpassed by *Shrek the Third* ("Przeboje kasowe 2007 w polskich kinach"). Because it came in second, on the outside it may still be regarded as quite a successful production. However, those who appreciated it were the director's fans, older-generation viewers, or conservative critics with patriotic inclinations.

In 2007 *Katyń* failed to unite the nation and to bridge the generational gap among its domestic audience. To many younger viewers, the film functioned as just one more historical film. Despite Wajda's cinematic efforts to bring national strengths into the spotlight, some declared the production to be a disappointment. A review written by one of the readers of *Film* magazine articulated the convictions of *Katyń*'s detractors: "The film came too late. Today, in the era of democracy and freedom of speech, one can scream about the difficult past of our nation, but it won't be—as it used to be—an act of courage" (Putko 118). The author went on to say that the film featured highly stereotypical characters, its cinematography was rather mediocre, and it failed to be innovative or original. If nothing else, the words of the magazine reader reflected the views of the younger audience, to whom the notions of Soviet guilt and national pride seemed worth only historical, not contemporary, debate. Representative of many younger voices, Jakub Boratyński (born in 1971) of the Batory Foundation noticed that since Poland entered the European Union, anti-Russian sentiments had been on the decrease (Mite). Overall, to the audiences who

had had no direct involvement in the portrayed events, *Katyń* looked rather conservative and outmoded. Perhaps its overtly theatrical acting style coupled with the general pathos of the story added to its lack of appeal.

However, in 2010 when Polish-Russian political tensions escalated, the film suddenly attracted new media attention. Strong anti-Russian sentiments reemerged in Polish society following the plane crash in Smoleńsk. The accident on 2 April 2010 killed the country's president, Lech Kaczyński (who had been a devoted propagator of Wajda's film), and ninety-five others, including government and army officials. Ironically, all the passengers on board the crashed TU-154 had been on their way to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the Katyń Forest Massacre. Conservative Polish media soon labeled the catastrophe as "the second Katyń massacre." Widespread national mourning culminated in April and May events in Warsaw, where a colossal wooden cross was planted by scouts in front of the Presidential Palace. For several weeks, regardless of the weather, a significant number of people prayed in front of it for the victims of the catastrophe. The nation was symbolically traumatized, and such public lamentations gave an outlet for the despair of the hurt national spirit.

Soon after the catastrophe, extreme right-wing media in the country, led by the ultra-Catholic radio station Radio Maryja and television station TRWAM—both founded and managed by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, who was notorious for his chauvinist convictions—forged nationalistically driven campaigns to investigate the circumstances of the crash. Their numerous programs broadcast throughout 2010 and 2011 clearly displayed anti-Russian sentiments, now visibly present in extremely conservative sections of Polish society. Similar views proliferated across right-wing press in the country, where theories of alleged Russian responsibility for the accident often suggestively recalled the diplomatic role of the dead president Lech Kaczynski in the Georgian conflict—whereby he had strongly opposed Putin's government—as a potential reason for

his death (Falkowski). The cult of the dead president often relied on condemning the actions of the central liberal government. Radio Maryja's Web site featured full versions of numerous press releases criticizing Polish prime minister Donald Tusk for his reconciliatory politics toward Russia. Accusing him of yielding to the superior Russian power in one of the interviews republished on the Web site, Ewa Thompson from Rice University nurtured anti-Russian sentiments: "If Poland becomes an economic and political vassal of Russia, cultural vassalage will follow . . . Now Poland (its government) has been pacified, just like during anti-Russian uprisings" (cited in Bober). Although Andrzej Wajda clearly distanced himself from such extreme nationalist voices, similar debates created bad press for his latest epic. Despite the fact that dissatisfied right-wing film critics heralded the film as "touching" yet one where "real [POW] heroes" were "overshadowed" (Rutkowska), now because of its subject matter *Katyń* seemed, to many younger viewers, to lean toward conservative political views.

The endless prayers and media debates, along with the conspiracy theories, which blamed the Russians for the tragedy, brought back the old rivalry between the two nations, divided not only by their social and political ambitions but also by their religious beliefs. Just like the religious symbols in Wajda's story of *Katyń*, the giant crucifix spontaneously erected on the main street of the capital city stood for patriotism and superiority of the nation, now again symbolically victimized. After a major national debate, which divided the Polish into supporters and opponents of the "Smoleńsk cross," it was finally moved to one of the Warsaw churches in November 2010. The cross became a religious relic commemorating the national tragedy, and the cult of the dead president in the right-wing media evoked additional parallels to national martyrology. As Wajda's films establish, the symbolic definition of Polish national identity in the new Europe closely embraces Catholicism, which in turn distinguishes Poles from Orthodox or atheist Russians. With this in mind, the ostentatious

turn toward Catholic religion in the mourning country served as a symbolic gesture, an expression of national identity. According to Julian Borger and Helen Pidd reporting from Warsaw for the *Guardian* in the spring and summer of 2010, “the crash just opened a new wound on top of an old scar.”

Under the pressure of the growing tension and in a gesture of reconciliation, Russian television aired Wajda’s film for the second time. Following the broadcast, the press in Moscow appraised *Katyń*’s portrayal of the 1940 massacre. This time the film was acclaimed as a purifying, almost cathartic picture. The turnaround in Russia was met with mixed reactions in Poland. Although some recognized the goodwill among their eastern neighbors, for others the development only bolstered convictions of the alleged Russian conspiracy. The latter opinions clearly sprang from anti-Russian sentiments, which persisted in Polish society regardless of any reconciliatory Russian gestures.

Paradoxically, when Wajda’s film benefited from the political tension as it was used to reach out to the Russian viewer, in Poland the intensified right-wing voices conjured up stereotypical binary differences between the two nations, which Wajda’s films seemed to have earlier propagated. Similarly constructed notions of national identity—however separate from the right-wing chauvinism—soon also resurfaced in production plans for new film epics, again initiated by older-generation filmmakers. Given that *Battle of Warsaw 1920*, which tells the story of Polish victory over the Bolsheviks, was released in the fall of 2011, the historical anti-eastern revisionist sentiments injected into cinematic reproductions of the national past seem to be still in fashion.

## Conclusion

When the grand national ideology was crippled after the systemic transformation, Wajda offered a cinematic revival of the upright Polish, who might not have always been the winners, but whose spirits stayed undefeated. As far as their strong morality, his filmic Poles could

win any contest. In a nostalgic fashion, the director’s epics cinematically reaffirmed this particular aspect of Polish national identity. At the same time, *Pan Tadeusz* met the need for a confirmation of the national ability to overcome the post-transformation hurdles. As the Polish first adopted capitalist and democratic values in the 1990s, Wajda’s pejorative portrayal of the Russians helped advocate his pro-Western convictions. His Russian troops appeared spineless and thus inferior to Poles, to the satisfaction of the pro-European mentality of the director’s audience. With its victorious alliance of the Polish and the French, Wajda’s first-ever heritage epic fulfilled viewers’ expectations and certainly assisted its audience in their political choices. By bringing to the screen the mechanical Soviet murderers, eight years later *Katyń* again vilified the Russians. This time they allegorically emerged as responsible for the hardships of the nation, which had to struggle against the ghosts of its communist past. Not only were the Russian villains in both Wajda’s epics justified by events in the narratives, but they also served as a foundation on which the director constructed the identity of his Polish characters. Shortly after both films were released, Wajda’s rendition of national conflicts with the eastern neighbor automatically translated into the immediate political and social circumstances of his Polish viewers.

However, as times have changed, Wajda’s selective nostalgic view of the national past has faced increasing criticism. Across different generations and in the context of recent Polish-Russian tensions, opinions regarding his film epics are ever more divided. Commenting on the contemporary Eastern European film epic, Roumania Deltcheva argues, “In the new conditions, the introspection into the . . . past transcends the expected function of going back to common traditional foundations to reaffirm permanence and interconnectedness. More importantly, delving into the past engages collective identities and individual psychologies in a complex interplay” (207). Now with their differing national preconceptions as well as their diverging approaches to the communist exper-

rience, the Polish, whose collective national identity is much more stable, are far from being unified in their response to Wajda's epic works. The processes related to globalization obviously have an additional impact on the national feelings, as they prompt many Poles to depart from simplistic notions of their own national identity. Even though the political right wing, often closely related to the Catholic Church in the country, still nurtures traditional prejudice against supposed Russian enemies, best exemplified by the conspiracy theories following the crash in Smoleńsk, elsewhere in the media anti-Russian sentiments tend to be labeled as conservative. To the majority of young Poles, Wajda's onscreen stereotyped Russian seems less and less appealing. From their perspective his contemporary epic is often seen as already dated, even if "Wajda regards the film as a symbolic burial of the [Katyń] victims" (Sobolewski).

Bitter criticism articulated by many journalists and viewers and the younger generation's lack of interest in Wajda's second epic are quite symptomatic of the changing times. The domestic critical reception of *Katyń*, when compared to that of *Pan Tadeusz*, clearly discloses that the historic national themes, even if dealing with fairly recent events, do not find the same acclaim as they used to. Although nostalgic views of national heroism set against the Russians (e.g., *Battle of Warsaw 1920*) persist among the older generation of Polish filmmakers, none of the younger directors choose similar themes. The epic has lost its soothing value for the young in the nation. To many, Wajda's positive image of the strong Pole in *Pan Tadeusz* and *Katyń* is overshadowed by the epics' now high-risk anti-Russian sentiments, which when removed from their filmic contexts may have the power to ignite conflicts with the eastern neighbor of the country. Because Poles are now firmly established in their alliance with Europe, there seems to be only limited cultural space for onscreen vilification of Russians, however revisionist. The changes on the political scene call for the Polish film epic to depart from national sentiments and revisit its take on cinematic nostalgia for the past.

Nostalgia film first came under critical scrutiny in 1991 thanks to Fredric Jameson's seminal article on the subject. In Jameson's view, historical references to the past in film form an uncreative practice and are somehow unproductive when it comes to understanding both the history and the future. However, he restricted his definition of nostalgia film to generic and intertextual references within the postmodern American cinema. Far from any postmodern ambitions, Wajda's nostalgia clearly differs from the Jamesonian notion. At first, the use of the national past in *Pan Tadeusz* appeared ideologically beneficial for his audience, who almost immediately engaged in contextual/allegorical readings. The director steered clear of pure commodification of the past and entered the realm of national identity. His first epic production linked the national tradition of film epic to the new symptoms of cultural trauma in a society that was undergoing serious political and social changes in the 1990s. Wajda's creative practice of revitalizing the national identity did not only reach back to the history as such, but selectively modified it to convey the then socially valid contemporary messages.

Either praising the glories of his ancient ancestors or showing them caught up as victims in history, in a quintessentially modernist manner, Wajda continues the long Polish tradition of accommodating romanticized visions of the national past for the needs of his contemporaries. In both *Pan Tadeusz* and *Katyń* the history on the screen is marked by heroism (either literal or defined in moral terms) that has been planted in Polish public imagery since the nineteenth century. However, with his tenacious use of national identity set against the Soviet World War II enemy in the 2007 film, Wajda is now seen to have failed to adapt to the changing times, and this is why his nostalgic camera is criticized regardless of his patriotism. Paradoxically, the director who objects to false visions of history falls into the trap of unintentionally advocating black and white national stereotypes among his viewers, which for them falsify the present. Cartmell and Hunter comment on

the power that filmic modifications of history may have over viewers: “[T]he understanding of the past by non-historians—‘ordinary people’ if you like—is by its representation in film and fiction. . . . Oscar Wilde remarked that there was no fog in London till the Impressionists painted it. In the same spirit we might say that history is the invention of creative artists as much as an objective record of true events” (1). Wajda creatively reproduces history from his own subjective perspective. His epics tell stories that, in the new context of the second decade of the new millennium, revive animosities between the Polish and the Russians rather than heal the shaken national spirit, as they initially might have done. With his arbitrary conservative recounting of historical facts, just like Oscar Wilde’s impressionists, Wajda adds fog to the already obscured situation on the Polish-Russian political scene. Symbolically, the mist from the opening shots of *Katyń* does not rise as a falsification of history that needs to be cleared by the film, but rather it floats as a haze over presently delicate Polish-Russian relations. The conservative patriotic sentiments shining through *Katyń* may have an obfuscating effect on the film’s audience, which certainly weakens the pioneering historically revisionist stance of the production.

The conservative character of Wajda’s film epics does not conclude with his national sentiments. He also limits the representation of his own people to either the gentry, whose idyllic life is being recreated on the screen, or alternatively to the twentieth-century intelligentsia fighting against the Soviet oppression. By restricting the nation to just two historically very small classes, his epics follow the dominant Polish vision of the national history. In addition, his recycled themes from Polish wars (no matter if they are ancient or based in the twentieth century) fall hand in hand with the current school teaching curriculum, which is not contested on cinematic grounds. With no intention to transgress the tradition, Wajda’s modernist adherence to the Polish hegemonic view of history, with its integral national sentiments, makes his films somehow redundant to

the new, even domestic audience, who grew up in a different cultural environment from the one of the director’s generation.

#### NOTE

1. All quotes from Polish sources are translated by the author of this article.

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