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Agnieszka Holland: Challenging Holocaust Memory and Representation in Film

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by

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Abstract

Agnieszka Holland: Challenging Holocaust Memory and Representation in Film

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The following investigation into the Holocaust films of Polish-Jewish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland aims to identify the ways in which Holland both pushes the genre forward and challenges the traditional memory of the war in Poland. Rather than adhering to formalist conventions in portraying the Holocaust in cinema, Holland breaks the genre's representational taboos, avoiding a binary narrative and instead engaging in a morally challenging confrontation with the past. Moreover, by focusing on the shared suffering of Poles and Jews during the war and occupation, Holland's Holocaust films recast the memory of the war to better reflect its complex and at times ambiguous nature. This critical perspective offers a reconciliatory discourse in the competing national memories of both Catholic Poles and Jewish Poles. Specifically, this investigation examines *Angry Harvest*, *Europa Europa*, and *In Darkness* to conclude that the Holocaust films of Agnieszka Holland present a more complete and nuanced portrait of wartime conditions during World War II in Eastern Europe, and Poland in particular.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In January of 2018, the President of Poland Andrzej Duda approved an anti-defamation bill which made it illegal to assign or imply responsibility for the Holocaust to the Polish nation. Entitled the "Amended Act on the Institute of National Remembrance" (1998/2018), it is intended to punish those who attribute Holocaust crimes to Poland or the Polish nation with fines and up to three years in prison. The bill also states that "If the perpetrator…acts unintentionally, they shall be liable to a fine or restriction of liberty" and "An offence is not committed if the perpetrator…acted within the framework of artistic or scientific activity."[1] Yet, the details regarding how artistic and scientific content will be evaluated, and by whom, have remained vague and non-committal. The law reflects not only how significant the interpretation of Holocaust history is for its political elites, but also the important role artists and scholars play in shaping the memory of the Holocaust in Poland. Indeed, through their art and scholarship, they have continually grappled with issues stemming from the war. At times, they have challenged the uniformly heroic memory of the events perpetuated by political elites at home and abroad.

Even as the image of Poles as heroes and victims continues to dominate public memory of the war in Poland, as it has for more than six decades, artists and scholars have added more uncomfortable yet humanizing narratives about the past. At times, their work has been highly controversial. Polish filmmakers have contributed to this discussion in valuable ways by illuminating the hardships endured by both Poles and Jews during the war. However, faced with the complicated and sensitive nature of the war in Poland, they have often had to compromise or generalize in the portrayals of either side. From the outset of her career, Polish filmmaker

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[1] Ministerstwo Sprawiedliwości. „Nowelizacja ustawy o IPN." https://www.ms.gov.pl/pl/informacje/news,10368,nowelizacja-ustawy-o-ipn--wersja-w-jezyku.html. Accessed May 30, 2018.

Agnieszka Holland recognized how these compromises led to distortions of facts or perpetuation of stereotypes. When creating her films about the Holocaust, Holland's aim has been to present an unvarnished look at individuals' actions during the war. By challenging the accepted form and function of Holocaust film, Holland has taken an unflinching look at people's motivations and responses in these morally challenging years and by doing so highlighted the human story in the Holocaust. Her films thus help recast the narratives about Poles and Jews during the war by focusing on a shared humanity and thus suggesting a path of reconciliation.

For the purpose of this study, I will analyze the following Holocaust films produced by Agnieszka Holland: *Angry Harvest* (1985), *Europa Europa* (1990), and *In Darkness* (2011).[2] These films represent attempts to investigate the Holocaust from a Polish perspective and they have all gained international attention and acclaim. The three films share certain attributes that make them particularly useful for an investigation of the representation and memory of the Holocaust in Poland. For example, all are films produced since the 1980s. Since the creation of artifacts related to the Holocaust invariably reflect the temporal context within which they are produced, I chose films that represent a viable link to the current cultural memory. More importantly, as observed by Laurie Vickroy, "narratives about trauma flourished particularly in the 1980s and 1990s with increased public awareness of trauma and trauma theory."[3]

The films also focus on the relations between Jews and non-Jews during the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Unlike the Western experience of the Holocaust, the war in Eastern Europe, and Poland specifically, involved the local populations in complex ways that defy simple classification. The upheaval of social and class norms on the basis of racial hierarchies led to a

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[2] *Angry Harvest*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1985; Germany: Central Cinema Company Film (CCC)); *Europa Europa*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1990; Germany: Central Cinema Company Film (CCC)); *In Darkness*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (2011; Poland: Production Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej).
[3] Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p. 2.

redistribution of power that blurred the lines of friend and foe. The direct-line sequence often depicted in films wherein Germans occupy, isolate Jews, then deport them to camps and the gas chambers – all without significant involvement of the local population – cannot adequately describe events in the East. Here, local non-Jewish populations were at times deeply implicated in the dispossession and murder of Jews while also suffering under German occupation, blurring the categories of bystander, victim, and perpetrator. While the involvement and collaboration of non-Jewish locals did occur outside of Eastern Europe, and has been addressed in films such as the *The Sorrow and The Pity* (1969) and *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974), the representations of the Holocaust in the East and West differ in important ways.[4]

Lastly, the films were selected based on their success and popularity. Regardless of critical acclaim, films with international visibility and circulation due to box office success inevitably find a home within the cultural and shared memories of audiences. It often becomes a building block in memory construction. The three films considered were all nominated for Academy Awards in the United States, a significant milestone for a foreign language film in the international community.

Cinematic depictions of trauma are vehicles through which scholars can analyze and comment on society's reaction to historical moments of atrocity. Whether a community's national reckoning or a global phenomenon, the cultural artifacts produced and consumed say much about the place of atrocity in historical memory. The brutal German and Soviet occupations of Poland during the Second World War resulted in over 6 million Polish deaths. Roughly 3 million of those victims were Jewish Poles and more than 90% of Polish Jewry. [5] The

[4] *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Directed by Marcel Orphüls (1969; West Germany: Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR)); *Lacombe, Lucien*, Directed by Louis Malle (1974; France: Nouvelles Éditions de Films (NEF)).
[5] Joshua Zimmerman, *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 239.

terrible legacy created by this wartime genocide, which affected Jews and Catholics in different ways, continue to shape Polish-Jewish relations to this day. While Jews have been an integral part of Polish society stretching back a thousand years, their lives and cultures closely intertwined with the non-Jewish majorities, Poles and Jews' wartime interactions reveal dark secrets that many shy away from investigating. As the new anti-defamation law makes clear, the subject is simply too much of a minefield and has, for the most part, remained taboo.

The dominant narrative that has shaped Polish collective memory regarding the plight of Jews, constructed during and after the war by non-Jewish Poles, was one that lauded Catholic Poles for showing solidarity towards their Jewish neighbors within the confines of Nazi oppression. According to this narrative, Poles helped Jews where they could, under threat of death, and saved many thousands, especially Jewish children. Officially, there were no Polish collaborators. An important part of Polish collective memory is that it was Jews, in fact, who were the collaborators, they were all too eager to work with the Soviet Communists. Even so, the story goes, Poles did not retaliate against them. In the collective memory of Poles, it was only the *szmalcowniks*, delinquents and criminal exploiters, who profited off Jews and collaborated with the Germans. Certainly, few dispute the reality that indeed Poles saved Jews at extreme risk to themselves and their families, while also suffering under fierce Nazi cruelty. And there is some logic to the fact that Jews would prefer Soviet rule over the Nazis. These themes were powerfully reinforced in the postwar period and through film especially, as the Communist government invested heavily in the "cinefication" (kinofikacja) of the country.[6] Yet, in recent years the cinematic interpretations surrounding the portrayal of victims, bystanders, and perpetrators has become considerably more complicated.

[6] Marek Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), p. 14.

Once the Communist silence and censorship was lifted, bitter memories and troublesome pasts bubbled to the surface. The simplified canonical legacy of the Poles' wartime suffering and heroics was replaced with a polemical debate on Polish culpability in the Holocaust. Spearheaded by Jan Gross's widely-read book *Neighbors* (2001) and echoed more recently with Jan Grabowski's *Hunt for the Jews* (2013), the discussion has sparked a debate that has both engaged and advanced this narrative of Polish collaboration and helped to bring it to the attention of wider English-speaking audiences.[7] While the currently rigid political trend in Poland may be troubling, the level of inquiry that these works demonstrate is encouraging. Yet if *Wołyń* (*Hatred*), the latest Polish film about Polish culpability in atrocities against Jews is any indication, then the dual narrative of Polish and Jewish suffering that persists in the officially sanctioned national memory of the war has not been laid to rest.[8]

Since the end of the Second World War, artists and scholars have used Holocaust film as a way to negotiate the troubled past and complicated nature of Polish-Jewish relations. In some ways Polish film scholarship and artistic treatment of the Holocaust stands apart from its West European and American counterparts. Much of the focus of Western literature has been on the ethical and artistic dilemmas of portraying atrocity and its images as entertainment, stemming from the original formalist view originally put forth by Claude Lanzmann.[9] Additionally, a great deal of attention has been given to the genre as a function of collective memory creation and societal reflection, which has been addressed by authors such as Lawrence Baron, Xeuling

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[7] Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German Occupied Poland* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013).
[8] *Wołyń*, Directed by Wojciech Smarzowski, (2016; Poland: Andrzej Ludzinski Productions).
[9] Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of his Evil* (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 16-31.

Huang, Paul Coates and others.[10] When considering Poland, the discussions are often confined to the political polemics regarding Polish-Jewish relations and their portrayals onscreen.

Holocaust as a "genre"

There has been plenty of debate surrounding the use and usefulness of the Holocaust as a category set apart from other historical dramas. Some have argued that to classify a film as such is to betray the subject itself. The meaningful action and drama required for narrative dramatizations to be successful (i.e., profitable) and internalized by the audience betrays the truth of the horror. And as Jewish historian Yaffa Eliach has famously asserted, "there's no business like the Shoah business."[11] Yet, others have maintained that Holocaust representation is set apart from other historical drama and fiction, and should be investigated as a unique genre. Not only for what it can tell us about a society's interpretation of the past, but also because these interpretations will inform future generations. As a template for unimaginable horror and human cruelty, the Holocaust film has undoubtedly given us images familiar to most everyone – stacked bodies, train cars, barbed wire fences. From a relative dearth of filmic material following the war, there is now a massive collection of historical and artistic representations, recreations, and interpretations of the Holocaust both for entertainment and education. At the same time, as distance from the event widens, new generations of viewers rely increasingly on cinematic retellings to visualize and understand the Holocaust.

The debate over Holocaust as a genre has been ongoing, yet many seem to agree on its distinct nature. In *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, Anette Insdorf breaks apart the

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[10] Lawrence Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present: The Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Xeuling Huang, *Constructing Cultural Memories of Trauma in Popular Holocaust Films* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2010); Paul Coates, "Walls and Frontiers: Polish Cinema's Portrayal of Polish-Jewish Relations," in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 10 (1997): 221–246.
[11] Tim Cole, *Images of the Holocaust* (University of Michigan: Duckworth, 1999), p. 6.

genre into what she defines as its constituent "subgenres."[12] Beginning with early films that deal with interfaith solidarity, the focus quickly shifts to Jewish victims and Nazi perpetrators in the 1950s to 1970s, leading to the stories of the saved. As Insdorf puts it, "Once the cinema acknowledged that the vast majority of European Jewry was murdered, new movies could ask how the few were saved."[13] She also delineates the trend of dark comedy as a problematic subgenre, as it can lead to depictions of survivors as mentally unhinged. What is most compelling is her discussion of the genre as a tool for creating and shaping the past and future through the lens of one's present. While addressing the danger of co-optation and commercialization, Insdorf reaffirms the importance of preserving its memory for the sake of its cultural significance.

In his work *Screening the Holocaust,* Ilan Avisar is more inclined to err on the side of caution when considering the Holocaust as a "genre" within which to tell a drama.[14] Focusing on narrative choices, Avisar makes clear his distaste for films that attempt to portray character agency and martyrdom when in reality total genocide prevented meaningful action by most everyone. He notes, "The incomparable horrors of the concentration camp universe cannot serve as a context for dramatic action…Successful narrative stories on the Holocaust are possible only when they focus on the peripheral dimensions of the concentration camp universe, on the plight of the victims before they entered the gates of Auschwitz."[15] Once there is no agency for the victims, they are no longer appropriate for a narrative drama.

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[12] Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 245-300.
[13] Ibid, p.246.
[14] Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinemas Images of the Unimaginable* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998).
[15] Ibid, p. 51.

While this is a valid critique, Avisar refrains from entering into a more nuanced theoretical discussion of the genre, such as the one presented by Xueling Huang in her book *Constructing Cultural Memories of Trauma in Popular Holocaust Films*.[16] Based on her theories of film semiotics – "the language-like character of cinema" – Huang lays out the categories that are important to consider in any analysis of Holocaust film. These include "semiotic categories like image and music [that] explain the basic mode of cinematic signification, narrative categories like narration and focalization draw on the particular procedure of significance in the film."[17] From this, Huang theorizes that these categories construct traumatic and cultural memory and are worthy of serious investigation. Through cinematic visualization and sound, the past configures in a multi-sensory mode that allows the viewer to experience the past "second-hand." And since the viewer forms their "memories" of the Holocaust by recalling the various images they have seen on screen (probably the only imagery they have seen), the representation of such events becomes extremely important to their understanding of them.

Imagery and Image Making

The importance of imagery in linking the past and the present, not to mention in the creation of memory and identity, cannot be overstated. Barbie Zelizer's excellent book *Remembering to Forget* tackles the complexity of traumatic imagery and image making and complicates our assumptions about their power to inform and prevent future atrocities.[18] In her discussion, she covers the history of these images and their use, noting the revolutionary nature

[16] Huang, *Constructing Cultural Memories of Trauma in Popular Holocaust Films*.
[17] Ibid, p. 63.
[18] Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

of photographic technology in being able to record in vast detail. In contrast to words, which much of the world had come to discount as questionable propaganda, the endless images streaming in from the West (especially the United States) and Russia had a profound effect on the population as a whole. People no longer relied solely on writers and journalists to be the arbiters of meaning, they could see for themselves. As Zelizer states, "In representing atrocity in this fashion, photographs challenged traditional journalistic modes of representation and enhanced an alternative aim – that of bearing witness."[19] It is from the power of witnessing that the imagery of the Holocaust has been so widely internalized and recycled. We can see this from the dozens of films that employ the same image. Whether it be the famous depiction of the wandering wailing woman in the ghetto holding her dead child – which was an event recalled by numerous eyewitnesses and reinforced by widely circulated German propaganda imagery – or the piles of personal belongings strewn about a train platform after a selection of prisoners, Zelizer posits that the recycling and internalizing of this imagery is something to be examined and investigated for its effect on memory creation.[20]

In a similar vein of research, Libby Saxton is interested in the way in which ethical perspectives are articulated in film and with cinema's past and present role as witness to the Holocaust. In her *Haunted Images* she sheds light on the responsibility of viewers themselves to investigate the moral perspectives inherent in the film, not to mention the need for an awareness of strategies through which films sidestep difficult questions of ethics and violence.[21] This last point is particularly striking considering the gratuitous nature of violence in popular media that is taken for granted and often at face value for the sake of the narrative or entertainment. Rather

[19] Ibid, p. 139.
[20] *A Film Unfinished*, Directed by Yael Hersonski, (2010; Germany/Israel: Oscilloscope Pictures).
[21] Libby Saxton, *Haunted Images: Film, Ethics, Testimony and the Holocaust* (London: Wallflower, 2008).

than allow creatively stale representations to dull our senses, Saxton relates, "The most challenging representations…interrogate the limits of vision and knowledge in the face of the Holocaust – and encourage us to look beyond them. Rather than an "integral image" of genocide… [some films] offer us a fleeting glimpse of its horror and engage us in difficult, painful and open-ended processes of ethical reflection."[22] Lawrence Baron adds to this conversation in his discussion of post-war moving image depictions of the Holocaust, with a focus on the miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) as a catalyst for future works.[23] In his book *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*, Baron draws attention to the narrative structure of the most popular Holocaust films, identifying the evolution of the genre up to the 2000s.[24] Interestingly, he disagrees with Insdorf's assertion that Holocaust movies constitute a genre at all. Rather, he sees it as a small fraction of a film, which itself is composed of many hybrids of genres. In his chapter "Picturing the Holocaust in the Past: 1945-1979," Baron links the TV production of Holocaust films to an earlier tradition of dramatic showcases and religious series broadcast during the 1950s and 1960s, pointing out that the subject itself was a convenient and cost-effective stand-in for the traditional movie-of-the-week, which typically featured historical docudramas. Much like the success of *Roots* (1977), *Holocaust* was booked as a *Big Event* special on NBC, with educational guides being distributed to teachers and organizations throughout the nation.[25] Clearly, Baron sees the potential of serious feature films about the Holocaust to enlighten people and projects that come after, even *if* it simultaneously entertains.

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[22] Ibid, p. 91.
[23] *Holocaust*, Directed by Marvin J. Chomsky (1978; USA: Titus Productions).
[24] Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*, p. 50-53.
[25] *Roots*, Directed by Marvin J. Chomsky (1977; California: Warner Bros. Television).

Identity and Memory

The power of Holocaust film and imagery to inform, create, and distort is particularly important within Polish cinema because the historical memory of the war remains so central to politics and culture in that country. The Second World War temporarily wiped Poland from the map and crippled its population. The monuments, memorials, and cemeteries dotting the country and peppered throughout its cities attest to its lasting memory not to mention its continued role in political discourse. Poles were direct victims and witnesses to the Holocaust. German-occupied Poland was the main killing ground of the Holocaust. Catholic Poles its main witness. As very few Polish Jews survived the war and even fewer remained in post-war Poland, Jews' stories were left to be told by others. From this a dual and competing narrative has persisted in the telling of the story, recounting the past, and interpreting the future. Though few have examined this phenomenon as expressed through Polish film, those that have reveal its complexity and its controversy.

Marek Haltof's excellent *Polish National Cinema* not only helpfully reconstructs the history of Polish cinema in both the pre-war era and post-war, but insightfully examines the dual identity struggle mentioned above.[26] As he charts the representation of Polish-Jewish relations in motion picture renditions in the years following the war, he notes the increased tendency of some Polish artists' attempts to confront the long-suppressed aspect of their culture. Regardless of the political explanation or the truthfulness of the rendition, Haltof argues that for these filmmakers, the sense of loss appears genuine. At times, the artist's decision to tackle the subject is more about excavating a missing part of Polish identity that cannot be reconciled. He notes, "Poland,

[26] Marek Haltof, *Polish National Cinema* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002).

a traditional haven for Jews, has no significant Jewish presence now…The Poles cannot morally tolerate empty pages in their history as a nation. Hence the ongoing postcommunist archaeology of the Jewish past in Poland."[27] The constant struggle with the legacy of the Holocaust and the memory of the war involves a confrontation with an unknown past and the subsequent process of redefining Polishness.

Another landmark work by Haltof is *Polish Film and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory*. This exhaustive work charts the path of Polish filmmakers making Holocaust films up to 2012, with particular attention paid to the politics and personnel involved in the various selected works. The book relates the geopolitical contexts of all of the relevant periods of Polish film following the war and during communism. Of particular interest due to its focus on the politics of Holocaust memory is the chapter "Wanda Jakubowska's Return to Auschwitz: The Last Stage (1948)."[28] In this chapter, Haltof deconstructs not only the content of the film and the circumstances surrounding its creation and its effect on later Holocaust narratives, but also the film's changing reception over time. Haltof concludes that while Jakubowska's work was hailed in its time by critics and survivors alike – after all, she was writing from her own camp experience - this image has weakened alongside increasing distance from Soviet influence over Poland. Her unwavering devotion to communism has been viewed by many as the reason for her occasionally inaccurate narrative choices. As a film that is more a testament to Cold War politics than reflecting an accurate portrayal of the camps, Haltof's argument regarding *The Last Stage* (1948) considers the context of its creation and its legacy.[29] It engages with previous

[27] Ibid, p. 240.
[28] Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, p. 28-52.
[29] *The Last Stage*, Directed by Wanda Jakubowska (1948; Poland: Film Polski).

research and discussion surrounding the onset of socialist realism in Polish film, and its wider effect on the political and ideological construction of memory surrounding Auschwitz.

In keeping with contextual assessments, Paul Coates' *The Red and the White* seeks to evaluate the contributions of Communist-era Polish filmmakers depicting the war and the Holocaust based on a careful evaluation of facts and circumstances.[30] Coates' chapter "Ashes and Diamonds: Between Politics and Aesthetics" is particularly noteworthy considering *Ashes and Diamonds* has long been considered the most important of all Polish war films, and Wajda Poland's most renowned auteur.[31] Coates looks deeply into every aspect of the film including its genesis, development, reception, and legacy up to the near-present day. Moving from the novel the movie is based upon to scripts choices, rewrites, and interviews with those involved in the filmmaking process (including Wajda), Coates is able to move beyond polarizing critiques. By digging deeply into the role of the main protagonist (played by the famed Zbigniew Cybułski, the most popular Polish actor in the post-war period), including interviews with the actor, Coates uncovers a redeeming truth that transcends the political moment.[32] As Coates puts it, "the film strikes notes of falsity and truth," yet the falsity is easily peeled away as we are distanced from the moment. "What remains is the honesty of Cybułski's character, who is the embodiment of the doomed Home Army and the touchstone of the reality of its commitments."[33] Given the charged polemics regarding evaluation of early Polish cinema about the war, this piece convincingly bridges the divide by offering a nuanced look at both the film and Wajda, while also taking the discussion up to the near-present day. Coates' careful analysis highlights the

[30] Paul Coates, *The Red & The White: The Cinema of People's Poland*, (New York: Wallflower Press, 2005).
[31] *Ashes and Diamonds*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda (1958; Poland: Zespól Filmowy "Kadr").
[32] Cybulski was known affectionately as the "Polish James Dean," as he was handsome, played rebellious characters, and tragically died young. Haltof, *Polish National Cinema*, 89.
[33] Coates, *The Red & The White*, p. 45.

limitations of Polish cinema's confrontation with the war and Holocaust during the Communist era, while informing the reader of its power to subvert as well.

Ewa Mazierska's "Non-Jewish Jews, Good Poles and Historical Truth in the Films of Andrzej Wajda" is more of a visual and skeptical reaction to Wajda's work and is considerably less laudatory.[34] Mazierska maintains that there is a significant discrepancy between Wajda's representations of Jews and Polish-Jewish relationships and that offered to us by historians. Citing the work of Polish-Jewish historian and Holocaust victim Emmanuel Ringelblum, Mazierska rejects the traditional read on Wajda and challenges the dominant narrative from a Jewish perspective. Mazierska's argument asserts that Wajda's narratives contain anti-Semitic tropes and are biased in favor of assimilated Jews and heroic Poles, even to the point of obscuring or contradicting historical fact in order to strengthen his idea of Polish identity. The contrast between Coates' and Mazierska's interpretation of Wajda's cinematic contribution to Poland speaks to the dual narrative perpetually at play regarding perceptions of the war.

What is clear from a brief review of the relevant literature is that the subject of the Holocaust as a cultural and even artistic phenomenon within film has received extensive attention and study in the United States and Western Europe in the years following the war, with new research and cultural artifacts continuing to appear every day. Because of the difficulties associated with the production of art, education, and political and civic institutions during the Communist era in the Soviet Union, Western attention to depictions of the Holocaust in film in any one country inside the Iron Curtain was largely relegated to a "Soviet" context that did not take particular national contexts into account. Given Poland's unique experience and proximity to the Holocaust as well as the war's continued reverberation through politics and art, an

[34] Ewa Mazierska, "Non-Jewish Jews, Good Poles and Historical Truth in the Films of Andrzej Wajda," in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20, no. 2 (2000): 213-26.

investigation of Holocaust films offers an important lens through which contemporary debates can be understood/illuminated. Since much of the literature on Polish film focuses on politics and identity vis-à-vis the Polish-Jewish competing memory and narrative, a more theoretical approach regarding the representation and construction of trauma, already widely employed by Western treatments of Holocaust imagery and its effect on Western audiences, seems particularly useful. By examining the effect of seeing the present through the past, we may be able to combine Poland's deep connection with the Holocaust with the West's more distanced and theoretically minded approach in order to provide a more productive set of reflections on Holocaust memory and its significance in Poland.

The first chapter of this thesis will address Agnieszka Holland's first Holocaust film *Angry Harvest* (1985), which depicts the complicated dynamics involving a Polish farmer (played by a German actor) harboring a Jewish woman during the Nazi occupation. Chapter 2 will focus on *Europa Europa* (1990), which recounts the story of a young Jewish boy who survived the Holocaust by attempting to pass as an Aryan and a member of the Hitler Youth. The third chapter will focus on the 2011 film *In Darkness*, set in the sewers of Lwów. This story recounts the experience of a sewer worker conflicted in his attempt to save Jews, while also depicting the Jews' dilemma of whether or not to trust their protector.

Though I will be studying cultural artifacts that deal with an event nearly three generations past, the implications of such investigation and potential research finds still have the power to evoke strong emotions and great controversy in places such as Poland and Israel, where discussions, research, art, and politics still resonate with the effects of that great trauma. The staggering loss of life combined with a racial and ethnic program instigated by the Nazis to exploit fragments of Polish nationalism and Catholic anti-Semitism created a burning animosity

and search for justice that still exists within the scholarly work on both sides. It is my hope that through this research, and more specifically Agnieszka Holland's bold filmic works, a path can be seen that allows the problematic history of Poles and Jews to move forward towards a reconciliation of their competing memories. While her films pull no punches in depicting all sides of the conflict, they arguably suggest a middle path that is both humanizing and healing.

Chapter 2: Agnieszka Holland (film/television director/auteur, screenwriter)

"I am used to being criticized because my films seem too ambiguous, too full of contradictions. Well, I don't see things as black and white. Life is too complicated. If you ask me what the main subject of my movies is, I'd say that's it."[35] —Agnieszka Holland

As someone who is schooled in the traditions and aesthetics of Polish film but set apart from them by her international acclaim, influence, and cinematic sensibilities, Agnieszka Holland is a Polish filmmaker who successfully bridges the gap between the wider world of Holocaust investigation and the specific Polish dimension it possesses. Her entire oeuvre has been a delicate balancing act between the general and specific, between cultural uniqueness and the universal. Through a study of her Holocaust films, which I define here as her films that deal directly with the destruction of European Jews during World War II, I argue that not only can a valuable connection be made with the wider world of Holocaust studies, but a more nuanced and complete conversation regarding Poland's own traumatic past can be revealed. A dialogue that avoids the narrow polemics offered by traditional representations of Polish-Jewish relations. Rather than a competing narrative that is insular and accusatory in nature, Holland's films attempt to move the narrative forward by making a shared past, opening the way to a path of reconciliation.

This thesis will be a case study of Agnieszka Holland's Holocaust genre films. As this research is seeking to analyze culturally significant Holocaust films through a Polish context there are a number of filmmakers who fit the bill, with Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieślowski, and Roman Polański being among the biggest names within Polish cinema with international acclaim. All three are Polish filmmakers who have made widely circulated Holocaust films with

[35] John Tibbets, "An Interview with Agnieszka Holland: The Politics of Ambiguity," in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 25, no. 2 (2008), p. 132.

a particular focus on both the Polish and Jewish perspectives. Wajda's films *Samson* (1961), *Krajobraz po bitwie* (*Landscape After Battle,* 1970), *Korczak* (1990), and *Wielki tydzień* (*Holy Week*, 1995) share the theme of Jews attempting to survive while seeking help from a frightened, apprehensive, and at times antagonistic Polish populace.[36] Kieślowski's *Dekalog, osiem* (*Dekalog, Eight*, 1988) investigates the dark effects of wartime's legacy on the present, and Polański's *The Pianist* (2002) portrays the impossible luck and outside help required for a Jewish person to survive on the "Aryan" side of Warsaw.[37] These works have received international praise and honors, while also doing their part to convey the racial dynamics at play under Nazi occupation in Poland. Each of these films in their own way has helped bring attention to the complicated relationship between Jews and Poles during the war for viewers unfamiliar with the region and its history.

Yet, among her many peers Holland's work provides a unique vantage point on Polish-Jewish relations for a number of reasons. For a start, Holland was one of the few filmmakers with more than an academic experience of Polish-Jewish relations. Born after the war to a Catholic mother and Jewish father who had both suffered through the Holocaust, each with their own harrowing survival story, Agnieszka Holland has a direct connection to events that shape her own questions of identity. Her father was an anarchist with communist leanings during the war, whose parents died in the Warsaw Ghetto. Her mother worked for the Polish underground. "So you see…for the real Jew, I'm not Jewish, but for the Polish anti-Semite, I am," Holland explains.[38] It is this dual and confused identity that allows Holland to occupy an ambivalent

[36] *Samson*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda (1961; Poland: Film Unit "Droga"); *Landscape After Battle*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda (1970; Poland: Film Unit "Wektor"); *Korczak*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda (1990; Germany: Regina Ziegler Filmproduktion); *Holy Week*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda (1995; Warsaw: Canal+).
[37] *Dekalog*, Directed by Krzysztof Kieślowski (1988; Poland: Telewizja Polska (TVP)); *The Pianist*, Directed by Roman Polański (2002; Germany: TVA Films).
[38] Tibbets, "Interview," p.133.

stance in the face of conflicting ideologies. Not one to be taken in by religious or political rhetoric, her circumstances nurtured a skeptical mind.

Foreshadowing the theme of entrapment and alienation she so often revisits in her films, her family background was a liability early in her career. In the aftermath of the war, Poland's film industry flourished under the Communist government's auspices through the Film School in Łódź. Studying in Łódź was essentially the only path into the ranks of the Polish film industry at the time. The directors mentioned above, as well as the famed Krzysztof Zanussi, were alumni of the school and would eventually become her artistic peers. However, Holland was unable to attend the Film School due to political complications. Although her father, the journalist Henryk Holland, had been a staunch Communist immediately following the war, he soon became disillusioned with the regime. His controversial dissent marked him a political enemy and he died soon after. It was likely a staged suicide following his interrogation by police. The truth of his death is still a mystery, but Holland herself is certain that the Polish secret police (Służba Bezpieczeństwa) assassinated him by defenestration. Following his death, the Holland name carried connotations of opposition to the regime. With a lack of opportunities at home and an urge to leave Poland, Holland decided to study abroad in Czechoslovakia.[39]

It was during her time studying at FAMU, the film school in Prague, that she was caught up in the events of the Prague Spring in 1968 and imprisoned for six weeks, an experience she recalled as "a useful lesson of life." While she admits her part was minute—merely passing illegal publications along to Poland—the changing political climate following the Prague Spring

[39] Ewa Mazierska and Elżbieta Ostrowska, *Women in Polish Cinema* (Berghahn Books, New York, Oxford, 2006). p. 185; Robert Markowitz, "Visual History with Agnieszka Holland (interview)," *Directors Guild of America*. https://www.dga.org/Craft/VisualHistory/Interviews/Agnieszka-Holland.aspx. Accessed June 10, 2018.

led to her decision to return to Poland after finishing her studies in 1971 along with her Slovak husband Ladislav Adamik.[40]

Even so, her time in Czechoslovakia had a profound impact on Holland's artistic expression, something that has shaped her films ever since. At the time, artists in the Polish film industry were guided by socialist realist conventions and the need to build a strong, useful Polish wartime narrative in the romantic tradition. Holland was able to cultivate her ideas and sensibilities outside of that framework, albeit at a cost. Her Czech influence is an additional nuance that sets her apart from her peers in the Polish film industry. Summarized by Ewa Nawój, Czech New Wave cinema is marked by its "ironic, yet warm treatment of the protagonist, its special realism reminiscent of documentaries, its respect for detail comparable to cinéma-vérité, and its unhurried plot."[41] Added to this was her time spent with Milan Kundera in Prague from which she gained a fascination with "mundane metaphysics," or a belief that the greater truths of life can be seen through ordinary everyday experiences.

Upon her return to Poland, Holland was quickly taken in by the Polish film community. Andrzej Wajda became her mentor and took an active interest in her work. Her first opportunity came as an assistant to Krzysztof Zanussi on his now legendary film *Illuminacja* (*Illumination*, 1973).[42] Considered one of the founders of the "kino moralnego niepokoju" ("Cinema of Moral Anxiety") or "kino nieufności" ("Cinema of Distrust") movement that swept the region during the early 70s to mid-80s, Zanussi's film about a young aspiring scientist destined for decline remains one of its flagship works. Following the disappointment of 1968, young filmmakers were beginning to explore and criticize the ideals and norms they were brought up with. Their

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[40] Stanisław Zawiśliński, *Reżyseria: Agnieszka Holland* (Warszawa: Wydawn. Skorpion, 1995), p.19.
[41] Ewa Nawój, "Agnieszka Holland," in *Adam Mieckiewicz Institute: Culture.pl*. https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/agnieszka-holland. Accessed June 10, 2018.
[42] *Iluminacja*, Directed by Krzysztof Zanussi (1973; Poland: P.P. Film Polski).

films tended to focus on contemporary locations that were symbolically imbued public spaces such as the home or schools, while linking them to themes relating to a loss of ideals and moral values. Holland recalls her time with Zanussi as valuable, even if she admits to no small amount of youthful hubris: "I was very ungrateful to Zanussi. I worried him to death. I was young then, pretentious, and conceited. I thought I knew everything…I performed all my duties properly…but as a human being I was unbearable."[43]

After requesting to join Andrzej Wajda's illustrious film unit "X" and being accepted, Holland was still unable to get any of her scripts approved through the Ministry of Culture's central scenario committee – an obvious side-effect of her tainted name and heritage, especially after the anti-Jewish campaign of 1968. This led to Wajda's offer of creative collaboration on *Człowiek z marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, 1976), a project that was political in nature.[44] Up to that time, political genre films hadn't really existed in Poland, and Holland jumped at the chance of such a creative partnership with the successful and influential filmmaker. That such a film could be released under the Communist authorities was an indication of the impending artistic and political thaw that arrived with the onset of Solidarność, and also that the film's long censorship review process was complete. After nearly fourteen years in development, Wajda's script was approved in 1976. Though it was critical of the excesses and corruption of the Stalinist era in Poland, its attacks were ones the regime could weather. Frank Turaj sums up Polish films critical of the Stalinist era in this way: "Stalinism is a good target. It is a way of criticizing the

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[43] Zawiśliński, *Reżyseria*, p. 24.
[44] *Man of Marble*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda (1976; Poland: Zespól Filmowy "X"); Mazierska, *Women in Polish Cinema*, p. 186.

system without being blamed for criticizing the system. It is permissible to denigrate Stalinism, as long as it is Polish Stalinism."[45] Wajda's film did just that.

However, as soon as she began casting, Holland was barred from being a part of the project in any way by the central scenario committee. The committee ordered the film unit to fire her immediately. In an act of solidarity with their colleague, Wajda and the crew, as well as other prominent figures in the Polish film industry, initiated a strike. This led to a surprising and welcome concession on the part of the authorities. In exchange for keeping Holland off the project entirely, they would greenlight two of her scripts, one for television and one for cinema. This kickstarted her career and allowed it to begin in earnest, she produced no less than five films in the next four years.[46] *Zdjencia probne* (*Screen Tests*, 1976), *Niedzielna dzieci* (*Sunday Children,* 1977), *Cos za cos* (*Something for Something*, 1977), *Aktorzy prowincjonalni* (*Provincial Actors*, 1978), *Gorączka* (*Fever*, 1980), and *Kobieta samotna* (*A Woman Alone*, 1981 – this film was shelved until 1987).[47]

While the onset of the Solidarity movement in Poland brought on a sense of euphoria among artists seeking to imbue their work with the spirit of the times, Holland maintained a measured distance from simple, laudatory works about Poland. Her past had taught her that not everyone is included in the march to progress. Working closely with Wajda, Zanussi and other Polish artistic icons, Holland was duly influenced by the political and cultural aesthetics that the particular Polish school of film embodies, which is best exemplified by those students who

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[45] Frank Turaj, "Poland: The Cinema of Moral Concern," in Goulding, *Post New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 160.
[46] Markowitz, interview with Holland.
[47] *Zdjencia probne*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1976; Poland: Zespól Filmowy "X"); *Niedzielna dzieci*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1977; Poland: Zespól Filmowy "X"); *Cos za cos*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1977; Poland: Zespól Filmowy "X"); *Aktorzy prowincjonalni*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1978; Poland: Zespól Filmowy "X"); *Gorączka*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1980; Poland: Zespól Filmowy "X"); *Kobieta samotna*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1981; Poland: Zespól Filmowy "X").

graduated from the prestigious Łódź School of Film and created art throughout the Communist period between 1945-1989. Polish Romanticism, with a smattering of references to Polish history, literature, and symbols are to be found in Holland's work alongside her peers. Yet, her films seek to add a complexity that is often missing from the work of her colleagues. For example, her first breakout feature film, and another flagship in the Cinema of Moral Anxiety, *Aktorzy prowincjonalni* (*Provincial Actors*, 1976) delves into the psychological complexity between characters, while presenting both the male and female perspective of the story. This was highly unusual for the genre.[48]

Like her peers, Holland was interested in examining the role of art in a Communist society. Yet, she was determined to escape the conventional contrast of *us* versus *them*. Rather, she preferred to weave more complicated narratives which focused on real people affected by powers beyond their control. Following an acting troupe attempting to put on a theatre performance of Stanisław Wyspiański's play *Wyzwolenia* (*Liberation*) in the countryside, *Provincial Actors* is a darkly comedic drama that served as a commentary on Polish politics and society. Holland stated her opinion on the Cinema of Moral Anxiety in a 1993 interview, "We were delighted that we could code the message in a film that 'evil is linked with communism,' [however] it seems that this is the basic weakness of these films."[49] Rather than follow the established scheme of Moral Anxiety films, which Maria Kornatowska has described as a simplified socialist realist viewpoint that avoids complicated or ambivalent conceptions of reality, Holland preferred to obscure the narrative of "us" versus "them."[50] Instead, Holland sought to portray the sick reality of an outside world that inevitably destroys lives, a world of the

[48] Mazierska, *Women in Polish Cinema,* p. 195.
[49] Tedeusz Sobolewski, "Wyzwoliłam się: mówi Agnieszka Holland," in *Kino* 12 (1992), p. 8.
[50] Maria Kornatowska, *Wodzireje i amatorzy* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1990), p.184.

entrapped. In the film, neither the male nor female protagonist ends up fulfilled within the opposite systems they inhabit, and although they experience a reconciliation in the end, it is a bitter and depressed one, offering little hope for the future. As Holland recalls: "In *Provincial Actors* I was less concerned with showing the mechanism of manipulation, and more with presenting human fate, in all its embroilment and entanglement."[51]

This sobering picture of an entrapped existence with a focus on the complexities of human interaction can also be seen in her films *Gorączka* (*Fever*, 1980) and *Kobieta samotna* (*A Woman Alone*, 1981). In *Fever*, Holland depicts the Polish Revolution of 1905. Her trademark skepticism is on full display as she represents the various attitudes of the revolutionaries, ranging from the romantic traditional Polish hero figure, willing to maintain religious faith and zeal in the face of a lost cause, to the ruthless pragmatist/terrorist, to the clueless and naïve anarchists and idealists. As they pass a bomb from one agent to the next, Holland's narrative structure ensures that there is no one hero or heroine. The plot follows the bomb itself, the object of importance for all involved. This is a technique Holland often employs to distance the viewer from the fiction and focus on the human foibles that complicate simple hero/villain assessments. In fact, as the end of the film sees the bomb safely dismantled by their Russian targets, the sense of closure and satisfaction is the Russians' alone, again complicating the accepted idea of pride in a concerted national struggle against an evil foe. As Holland later remembered: "I decided to make this film because, after my experience of Czechoslovakia, I was sensitive to the bitter experience of a revolution that was 'sold out.'"[52] While her peers and the majority of the Polish artistic and literary community were understandably flushed with excitement about the onset of

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[51] Nawój, *culture.pl*.

[52] Sławomir Bobowski, *W poszukiwaniu siebie: Twórczość filmowa Agnieszki Holland* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2001), p. 125.

the Solidarity movement, Holland was again concerned with those left out of the narrative, those whose narratives and memories were not as useful and so were discarded. As Sławomir Bobowski wrote:

> at a time of great enthusiasm, of hope for a change for the better, and of the complacency of Polish society proud of the transformations going on in Poland, the remarkable…artist [Holland] gave a mirror to them in which they did not recognize themselves…Holland made a bitter film in a time of faith and euphoria; she showed the people-puppets, who only think that they have a say, who believe that they are free and can shape reality according to their own will. She presented the world as a playground of irrational forces of destruction and libido.[53]

Kobieta samotna (*A Woman Alone*) was the next film made by Holland, a work that has been described by some as one of the darkest and most brutally honest films ever made in Poland. While it was finished in 1981, it was immediately banned by the authorities and would not see the light of day (besides illegal distribution) until 1987. The film depicts a female postal worker attempting to raise her son alone, working for a slave wage and living in abysmal conditions while her neighbors and acquaintances are little more than opportunists and adversaries. Again, Holland attempts to depict someone who is not a part of either the Solidarity movement or its government opposition but is merely swept along by the force of inertia, stuck in the middle. Film critic Ewa Nawój has observed that "Holland does not aim to criticize her character, but demonstrate the situation of excluded people who are completely bypassed by any big breakthroughs."[54] *Kobieta samotna* eschews the traditional good versus evil when depicting both sides. The film's focus on the everyday experiences of living in the Polish People's Republic complicates the more heroic idealism displayed in Wajda's *Człowiek z żelaza* (*Man of Iron*, 1981).[55] Not only that, Holland's depiction of the Polish mother runs counter to the

[53] Bobowski, *W poszukiwaniu siebie*, p. 125.
[54] Nawój, *culture.pl*
[55] *Człowiek z żelaza*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda, 1981; Poland: United Artists Classics.

martyrological myth traditionally affixed to it. Ever one to avoid canonical tropes in favor of stark reality, Holland attempts to rewrite the myth with a focus on those left out. *Kobieta samotna's* lead woman violates the cultural norms traditionally associated with the selfless and noble Polish mother, and in the end, she suffers for it. Film historian Ewa Mazierska has commented on this controversial aspect of a rarely broached topic in Poland: "This replacement powerfully undermines the myth of the Polish mother…Thus, Holland discloses the destructive aspects of the myth. Those who do not follow its precepts are met with disdain and repugnance. The bonds of solidarity do not link everybody."[56]

Of course, it is important to point out that Agnieszka Holland does not consider herself as a true representative of feminist ideology, but as something more universal and heterogeneous. As she herself has stated in an interview, "I've never identified myself with women's cinema, not to mention feminist cinema."[57] While she frequently returns to issues of gender, sexuality, and the body that certainly reflect experiences of contemporary women, it is more often than not in service of a more universal point.

By December of 1981, Martial Law had been implemented in Poland in response to the political instability caused by pro-democracy movements like Solidarity. Traveling abroad in Sweden promoting *A Woman Alone* when it was announced, Agnieszka Holland decided to emigrate to France rather than return home, as she risked arrest upon returning.[58] This was a difficult time for her. Many of her friends who remained in Poland were shot or imprisoned, and her husband and daughter were still trapped in the country. She was told that she was not allowed to return to the country and was forbidden from contacting her family. She would not

[56] Mazierska, *Women in Polish film,* 203.
[57] Zawiśliński, *Reżyseria*, p. 43.
[58] Tibbets, "Interview," p. 132-143.

hear from them for the next nine months.[59] Holland spent the next few years acclimating to life outside of Poland. Her languages consisted of Polish, Czech, and Russian, so it would be a few years before she was able to make movies again. In the meantime, she was content to provide scripts for her Polish colleagues who were also working in exile. Among them are Wajda's *Danton* (1982), *A Love in Germany* (1983), *The Possessed* (1988), and *Korczak* (1990).[60] Eventually after a few years, German-Jewish producer Artur Brauner gave Holland her first chance at making a film outside of Poland.[61] While this new chapter in Holland's career allowed her more artistic freedom and growth, evolving her style in a way that will be discussed in the following chapters, her films continued to reflect her personal and political preoccupations. It was during this period that she created the first of her Holocaust genre films, *Zły zbiorów* (*Angry Harvest*, 1985).

Holland's early life and career have helped her to offer a perspective different from that of her peers. While deeply connected to the history and culture of Poland, her family heritage is shaped by two competing narratives. She learned early on that her family name could be perceived as heroic or suspect, depending on the times and the current regime. Being both an insider and outsider as a Pole and a Jew imbued her with a sense of purpose in her filmmaking. Her time spent abroad in Czechoslovakia during her formative years had a profound impact on her view of Poland that has allowed her to see the country from an outside perspective, a quality that both past and contemporary Polish filmmakers have struggled with. Avoiding the insular nature of Polish film has only led to her increased success outside of the country. At the same time, her personal and working relationships with the elite of the Polish film industry have

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[59] Ibid.

[60] *Danton*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda (1983; France: TF1 Films Production); *A Love in Germany*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda (1983; France: TF1 Films Production); *The Possessed*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda (1988; France: Gaumont Production).

[61] Tibbets, "Interview," p.136.

ensured her acclaim within Poland on par with other legendary auteurs. Given her ability to reach such wide audiences while still retaining a personal connection to her Polish viewers, Holland is uniquely positioned to tell Poland's story to the larger world with a fair degree of credibility. More importantly, Holland's stubborn insistence on avoiding simple polemics in favor of complex and inclusive narratives offers a middle-path through controversial issues of belief and identity. Nowhere do these qualities carry more weight than in her cinematic treatments of the Holocaust. As three of her most monumental and celebrated works, Holland's Holocaust genre films are a testament to her goal of forging a new postwar chronicle that avoids favoring harmony over dissonance. Her wartime stories, as in her previous work, seek to humanize all participants and draw attention to the little known and forgotten pieces of history that are often discarded in favor of a glossy, constructed epic.

Chapter 3: Angry Harvest

"I really wanted to make a film that related to the Holocaust; I had been thinking for a long time how I could make a new kind of statement about it"[62] – Agnieszka Holland

Introduction

After making several films in Poland and then emigrating to France, Holland finally came to international attention with the release of *Angry Harvest* in 1985. The first of her films about the Holocaust challenged the traditional memory espoused by the Polish communist regime since the end of the war. It did so by focusing on the complex nature of Polish-Jewish relations during the occupation, digging into a troubled past that saw Poles not only as victims, bystanders or saviors, but as beneficiaries, accomplices, or perpetrators as well. By portraying Jews with agency, a desire to survive, and a reluctance to accept outside help, the story also runs against the narrative of Jewish fatalistic acquiescence. Further, the film attempted to experiment with the well-established and formalist character of Holocaust film by confronting its taboos of representation. Rather than portray a direct-line sequence narrative wherein Germans occupy, Jews are isolated and deported to camps, and the local population does not play a significant role, *Angry Harvest* complicates the story by turning its gaze towards Eastern Europe and Poland in particular. The setting is an ordinary village, and non-Jews are not passive, but actively wield power. Direct German aggression does not play a role, and the result unavoidably implicates the locals in the violence. We do not see ghettos and brutal roundups, concentration camps, SS men, or gas chambers, but rather a more nuanced representation of a personal and specific dimension of the Holocaust that is seldom investigated – the relationship and power dynamics between

[62] Anonymous, "Dialogue on Film: Agnieszka Holland," in *American Film* (September, 1986), p. 13-15, here 15.

Poles and their Jewish neighbors under German occupation. There are no "heroes" in the film, and traditional categories of victim, bystander, and perpetrator do not work, as the would-be protagonist embodies all three of these.

Angry Harvest is a psychological drama that explores the complex power relationships resulting from the extreme circumstances of war and occupation. By focusing on the competing narratives of Poles and Jews and complicating our understanding of their actions and motives, Holland blurs the lines between good and evil, while also changing the conception of what a Holocaust film should be. In doing so, Holland is able to tap into the tension between the universal Western preoccupation with the Holocaust and the specific experience of the war in Poland. Holland's film was indeed able to make a new statement about the Holocaust for international audiences as well as native Poles. *Angry Harvest* reshaped past assumptions about the role of film as witness to the Holocaust, and at the same time worked to dismantle the comfortable and simplistic memory of the war in Poland. Through an unorthodox depiction of the Holocaust devoid of traditional imagery, and her self-conscious and unapologetic portrayal of both Poles and Jews, Holland's film upsets the accepted paradigm of Holocaust film and of Polish-Jewish relations during the war.

The Film

The film's story begins in the winter of 1942-43, as a Jewish couple and their young daughter are about to leap from a deportation cattle car traveling through the countryside of Silesia. When the family becomes separated in the woods after their escape from the train, a Polish farmer, Leon Wolny, discovers the Jewish woman Rosa (Elisabeth Trissenaar) wandering alone in the forest near his home. Wolny (Armin-Mueller Stahl) is living in Silesia under Nazi

occupation. Having signed the *Volksliste*, Leon enjoys the privilege of being an ethnic German and is comfortable with his newfound wealth and status. His germanization and Silesian origin offers him some safety and anonymity. He does not seem to be troubled by his conscience at his newfound fortune. He feels rather lucky that his privileged position in the countryside has afforded him a chance to offer food aid to the wealthy Polish Kamińska family, for whom he was once a lowly stable boy. Leon offers Rosa shelter in his cellar and promises to help reunite her with her husband and daughter.

However, after a time, Leon's baser instincts take hold of him. His latent feelings of social inferiority combined with his sexual repression get the better of him. He begins to manipulate Rosa by withholding information about her husband's survival, and increasingly tries to force himself on her. Rosa continually rejects his advances. Yet, eventually she chooses to barter with her body in the hopes that Leon will pay to help the local Jew Rubin (Klaus Abramowsky) acquire a hideout elsewhere, which he does. Rosa's calculated, if desperate, submission to Leon shifts the relation of power between the two in her favor. Rather than a passive victim, Rosa proves herself to be actively involved in her fate, making choices and seeking survival.

As Leon and Rosa settle into a relatively quiet, if uneasy routine, a certain affection and love develop between them. Borne out of their mutual dependence upon one another and their shared isolation, for a time the two entertain thoughts of a life together, even after the war. These thoughts are short lived however, as Leon's continued sexual and moral degradation lead him to objectify and exploit Rosa more and more. Before long, he is locked in a cycle of abuse and atonement towards Rosa that is only made worse by Leon's progressively excessive drinking. He is tormented by his inability to resist the temptation to abuse his power. Though he

does have a moral compass, he continually lacks the strength to follow it. He begins to resent Rosa for his own transgressions. Despite this, Rosa fears for her life if she were to be discovered and so prefers to remain with him in hiding.

In a turn of events that speaks to the social disruption brought on by the German occupation, Leon finds himself on top of a social order that once looked down on him as his status as an ethnic German sets him apart from his former superiors. When the matriarch of the wealthy Kamińska family passes away, Leon is informed that she had set aside money in her will for him and a house in Kraków if he agrees to marry and watch over her daughter, Eugenia. Eugenia is about the same age as Rosa, but with noticeably less vitality. More importantly, she represents the social strata that Leon could only kneel to before the war. Sweeping aside all concerns, Leon agrees. Though noticeably deferent to his former employer, he clearly revels in his power over two women who before the war would have been his social superiors. Rosa is immediately beside herself with worry and fear at the prospect of losing her sanctuary. Leon intends to keep Eugenia at a separate location and continue to hide Rosa, but when the Polish Underground leave a murdered informant on his property, he quickly decides to move Rosa instead. Though Leon insists the old Polish couple he is entrusting her to are honest (even though he had to bribe them with an unreasonable sum), Rosa knows that moving is certain death and begs and pleads with him to reconsider, to no avail. Leon convinces himself that this is his only option to ensure her safety. In the end, Rosa chooses suicide over relocation. Leon secretly buries the body, and when Rosa's husband and the daughter of Rubin show up at his door looking for Rosa, he must lie and say she left weeks ago. Though he did not kill her, his lie reveals an awareness of his role in her death. Remorseful, Leon offers them the $1000 he owed Rubin, who was captured and murdered after being betrayed by the informant. Sometime later,

in the final scene, Leon reads a letter from Rubin's daughter relating their successful escape to the United States and subsequent marriage due to his financial assistance. Leon has survived the war unscathed and wealthy, feeling he has repented for the misery he has wrought.

Analysis

Angry Harvest avoided the traditional formalist approach commonly employed in Holocaust films up to that time. It was not biographical, nor did it employ the techniques of a documentary and use real or stock footage. Both strategies were a common methodology employed by many filmmakers attempting to reconcile the ethical dilemma inherent in creating a cinematic work based on something that many argued was beyond representation. Films such as Orson Welles' *The Stranger* (1946), Wanda Jakubowska's *Ostatni etap* (*The Last Stage*, 1948), Andrzej Munk's *Pasażerka* (*Passenger*, 1963), and Andrzej Wajda's *Krajobraz po bitwie* (*Landscape after Battle*, 1970) attempted to tell narratives involving life in the concentration camps based loosely on true accounts, using archived footage in the style of a documentary.[63] Additionally, some filmmakers sought to relate the horrors of the ghetto and mass extermination by utilizing witness testimonies, often along with authentic footage and on-site recreations. Marc Donskoi's *The Unvanquished* (1946), George Stevens' *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremburg* (1961), and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) followed an established prohibition and taboo against trivializing the Holocaust for the sake of mass consumption and entertainment.[64] Put another way, even though it may be possible to relate

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[63] *The Stranger*, Directed by Orson Welles (1946; California: United Artists Studios); *Pasażerka*, Directed by Andrzej Munk (1963; Oświęcim: Zespoł Filmowy "Kamera").
[64] *The Unvanquished*, Directed by Marc Donskoi (1946; Ukraine: Kiev Film Studio); *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Directed by George Stevens (1959; Amsterdam: George Stevens Productions); *Judgement at Nuremburg*, Directed

aspects of what the Holocaust was like on screen and in books, such portrayals must mirror as closely as possible the reality as recorded by those who bore witness.

Further, cinematic stories of the Holocaust must mirror a specific Jewish reality that focuses on their material and physical destruction, the gas chambers, and both passive bystanders and collaborators. Omer Bartov, in his study on Jews and the Holocaust in cinema, described this tendency to simplify Jewish characters and experience for the sake of reverence:

> This preoccupation…must be at the center of any cinematic endeavor about the Holocaust. It is also part and parcel of representations of the "Jew" in film. Precisely because of its enormity, the Holocaust should arguably be represented in a straightforward, empirical, no-nonsense manner…Similarly, precisely because of the catastrophe of the Jewish genocide, there is an urge to represent the "Jew" as having just one aspect, one identity, and one goal.[65]

Yet, Holland's depiction of Rosa defies the stereotype of a passive, one-dimensional victim. Rosa displays agency, however limited, and although she is devastated by the loss of her family, she continues to have a fierce desire to survive. Rather than seeking out Leon's help, she reluctantly accepts it, and uses what little she has to manipulate him. Similarly, Holland's depiction of non-Jews avoids a simple label of rescuer or collaborator. Poles and ethnic Germans display an array of behaviors that make it difficult to anticipate their actions.

Holland sought to eschew the common tropes of Holocaust film up to that time and deal rather with "more universal questions of human beings in extreme situations of danger and dependence – especially between a man and a woman."[66] In the film, release from an entrapped existence is sought as much by peasant and would-be priest Leon Wolny as it is by the upper-class Rosa, a woman he hides and torments, but whose presence also torments him. Holland's

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by Stanley Kramer (1961; California: Roxlom Films Inc.); *Shoah*, Directed by Claude Lanzmann (1985; Germany: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)).

[65] Omer Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema: From* The Golem *to* Don't Touch My Holocaust (Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 165.

[66] Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, p. 103.

focus on Leon and Rosa as an allegory of Polish-Jewish relations during the war allows her to explore more difficult questions. As she stated in a 1985 interview, she agreed to the script because "It didn't have the clichés of SS men with rifles, deportations and concentration camps."[67] Past films had established the imagery of the Holocaust that was so central to their messages, but those films did little to convey the particular complexity of Polish-Jewish relations that informed people's actions during the war. Moreover, they reinforced the idea of Nazis as the sole perpetrators, with everyone else cast as victims. And while both Polish and international attempts at respectfully depicting the war and genocide were laudable, it was also arguably used as a strategy for evading a properly ethical confrontation with the events.

In *Angry Harvest*, the straightforward, empirical presentation of the Holocaust is nowhere to be seen. Holland's film is not concerned with the normal linear and binary narrative of idealized Jews forced into the ghettos, deported, and then murdered by evil Nazis. In fact, there are no camps or Nazis in the film, but rather local non-Jews, Poles, and ethnic Germans reacting within the paradigm of occupation. Instead of a traditional binary narrative, the viewer observes the brutal ambiguity of reality. In this small village, the Holocaust is played out without the direct participation of the Nazis. And if the Nazis were not present to commit the violence, it begs the question of who the perpetrators were. Although he starts out with a humane impulse, power corrupts Leon. He attempts to save Rosa and probably loves her in his own way, yet he is inspired by lust and exploits her, treating her as a pet. Though his actions ultimately lead to her death, he does end up saving Rubin's daughter and Rosa's husband. Holland casts Leon as an allegorical wartime composite Pole. He is equal parts victim, bystander, rescuer, beneficiary, and perpetrator. For her part, Rosa is at first not at all grateful for Leon's help, angry at her

[67] Ibid.

forced dependence. And although she is at the mercy of her benefactor and decides to submit to him sexually, she maintains her stubborn hold over the last bit of autonomy she has, as well as over Leon himself, and her social superiority gives her power over him at first. No single character in the film is shown to be completely heroic or villainous. It is this skepticism about simple truths that allowed Holland's film to challenge and attempt to rewrite the traditional cultural and collective memory of Polish-Jewish relations established in the immediate aftermath of the war and nurtured during the communist period.

Holland's own multicultural origin is probably behind her self-conscious approach to both Polish and Jewish competing narratives of the war. As a Pole whose mother fought with the Polish Underground and a Jew whose grandparents died in the Warsaw Ghetto, Holland has always been an insider stuck on the outside. It is from this vantage point that she attempts to rewrite the history of the war in Poland to reflect a more inclusive and comprehensive reality. As stated in the introduction, the cultural and psychological upheaval resulting from the murder of 6 million Poles and the extermination of Poland's Jewish population had a profound effect on those who survived the war and subsequently affected the adopted narrative. Jewish suffering was seen through the lens of Polish occupation and the memory of the 3 million Polish-Jewish victims was coopted into a larger narrative of Polish national martyrdom. Yet, as Andrew Charlesworth explains, "every act of capturing memory can by its exclusivity push aside the claims of others or their own collective rights and identities."[68] Mention of non-Jewish collaboration became taboo, and the memory of the war was seen as a heroic and united struggle against the fascist Nazi threat. Poles were victims along with their Jewish neighbors. From this practice emerged the canonical legacy of Poland as the martyr of Europe and the "Christ among

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[68] Andrew Charlesworth, "Contesting Places of Memory: The Case of Auschwitz," in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12 (1994): p. 579

Nations."[69] But Holland prefers to present the wartime struggle as one of myriad ugly truths and contradictions. Much as Jan Gross' *Neighbors* would eventually bring to the surface a more complete and troubling picture of the war in which neighbor turned against neighbor, *Angry Harvest* presents Leon and Rosa as an allegory of the tortured and troubled past of Polish-Jewish relations.

Holland's portrayal of Poles and Jews is multivalent. Ever skeptical of dogma and ideology, Holland prefers to approach the clash of religion and class without self-righteousness or ulterior motives. Her unique experience in Poland and abroad combined with her mixed family heritage lends to her sensitivity when attempting to portray a two-sided narrative in *Angry Harvest*. Additionally, since the film is a German production that takes place in a German-speaking border setting in Poland, Holland is arguably able to explore controversial and sensitive issues with more freedom than if it were an exclusively Polish production. Leon and Rosa, along with the supporting characters reflect a spectrum of behavior that defies simple assessments of good or evil. Some Poles, like the character Maslanko (Kurt Raab), attempt to help Jews.[70] Maslanko does help some Jews to escape, yet he ultimately robs and denounces Rubin to the Gestapo. Also, the priest and his sister Pauline (Anita Höfer) exhibit sympathy and solidarity for their Jewish neighbors, with the priest even helping to move Rosa for Leon. Pauline is eager to take any action against the injustice she sees yet finds no outlet for it. The priest is unwilling to instruct his congregation to aid Jews in their resistance, advising them to remain silent, and other decent Poles like Pauline follow suit. The ever-ubiquitous presence of the opportunistic and greedy *szmalcownik* found in nearly every Polish film about the Holocaust is turned on its head

[69] The "Christ among nations" moniker has a long tradition from the period of partition (1795-1918), when Poland was erased from the map of Europe by its neighbors. Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
[70] Maslanko's name is likely a reference to his role as a *szmalcownik*, as his name translates roughly to "buttermilk."

as well. While Maslanko fits the bill accurately enough, the profit-driven character of Cybulkowski (Wojciech Pszoniak) is more complicated. He eagerly collects the property and possessions left behind by the Jews and is crass in his demeanor, yet does show a bit of empathy for their fate. Added to that is his reluctance to denounce Rosa and Leon to the Gestapo once he realizes Leon is hiding her and an informant has been killed on Leon's property. Cybulkowski understands the value of the information, yet chooses to remain silent, making clear that he is not interested in that kind of profit. Leon misreads Cybulkowski's intentions and accuses him of blackmail and threatens him. This is probably Holland's commentary on the traditional portrayal of *szmalcowniks* as contemptable criminals not representative of Polish society. Their collaboration has an accepted presence within Polish collective memory. Furthermore, it reveals a tendency to view denunciation only—and not the robbing of Jews—as collaboration with the Germans. When Cybulkowski tells Leon what he knows, Leon becomes enraged, "You trying to blackmail me, huh!?" Cybulkowski's shocked reply of "Now why would I do that?" reinforces his final refrain: "I don't understand why everyone thinks I'm a scoundrel!?" The reasons for Cybulkowski's silence probably come from pure self-interest, but the result saves Leon from scrutiny.

The character of Leon can be seen as something of a composite Pole, containing contradictory possibilities that defy easy classification. Leon is a failed priest torn between his patriotism, strict Catholicism, peasant upbringing and his inner moral failings and insecurities. He is a good man but succumbs to the temptations offered by his newfound power and status. He admonishes Cybulkowski for his opportunism yet cannot help but accept a desk from him while remarking excitedly that "it is even better than the one owned by the priest!" He initially refuses to help a desperate Rubin pay for a hiding place by buying his vast orchard for next to

nothing yet offers Rosa his life savings when she scolds him for it. When approached by the Polish Underground requesting his services as a courier due to his anonymity, he eagerly accepts, relating that he had just been waiting to do his part for Poland. However, his fear overtakes him upon hearing of the danger in traveling to Borzechowo. He then uses Pauline's enthusiasm and affection for him to convince her that he is actually a member of the Underground and the secret mission is for her. After she accepts and travels to Borzechowo with the package, Leon is later informed by her brother that she was shot and killed after fleeing the rendezvous in panic. Leon's behavior towards Rosa is also inconsistent. At times he kneels before her, offering his subservience in return for her love and affection, pleading "Please Rosa, I love you, I love you, I will do anything you want…We can be like husband and wife." Yet in his drunken stupors he reveals a baser side that merely objectifies and exoticizes her Jewishness. In one violent episode, he forces her to drink with him, tears her clothes from her and forces her on her stomach, only to pass out before he can rape her. During the incident, he laughs when telling her "I'll tell you the difference between you two, I wouldn't dare do this with Eugenia!" The power dynamic shifts in his favor as he gains total dominance, Rosa is no longer able to negotiate.

In the end, Leon does all he can to save Rosa even when it means they can't be together, firmly believing that moving her out of his cellar is the safest course for her, and probably afraid of the consequences awaiting them both if she is discovered by Eugenia. However, his selfish actions destroy any chance of her reuniting with her husband and lead to her suicide. And finally, while his noble act to save Rosa was probably inspired by his darker instincts and led to tragedy for her, the course of events also resulted in the survival of her husband and Rubin's daughter. Through Leon's character, Holland sought to portray the fluidity and complexity of events on the ground during the war and occupation. As private testimony and archival research

have often proven, the actions and rationale exhibited by Poles faced with occupation were not at all predictable or consistent over time. There is certainly truth in broad assessments regarding Polish-Jewish interaction during the war, especially when considering that Jewish survival almost always depended directly on some form of Polish assistance. However, adhering to a strict narrative of Polish solidarity with Jews and the heroic effort on the part of Poles to save as many as they could under the threat of death is unreasonable. The idea that collaborators and criminals were somehow a world apart from the virtuous Poles is put to the test in Holland's characters, and is exemplified in Leon.

In addition to exploring the in-between spaces and teasing out the nuance of Polish responses in her characters, Holland also tried to present the absurdity at the heart of Polish-Jewish animosity. An absurdity that lay at the heart of the conflict itself – race and religion. In a scene that is characteristic of the anti-intellectualism that lay at the heart of anti-Semitic sentiments and Catholic resentment of Jews, Leon and Rosa debate religion. What is interesting in this scene is not only Holland's depiction of Leon's argument as absurd, but also the tenderness that is displayed between the two before the argument erupts. In the scene, Rosa is cooking him a sumptuous dinner of roast goose. They have relaxed around one another and developed a friendly rapport that borders on playful. It is the only moment in the film when the two exhibit some semblance of a normal romantic and friendly relationship.

However, as Leon becomes frustrated with her blasé attutide towards learning the "true faith" in order for them to be married, their unity collapses. As he quizzes her on the apostles she responds in jest, "Simon was called Peter…Saul became Paul…oh I don't remember the rest, I'm tired." "You should be happy to get to know the light of the true faith," Leon argues. "It's a disgrace not to know the gospel." Rosa is quick to reply, "And you don't know the Old

Testament. That's the origin of the faith. You speak with contempt about the Jewish faith even though it's the basis of your religion. The Jews are the older brothers of you pagans." Leon then leaps from his chair in anger, "Are you crazy? What pagans?" Rosa laughs in astonishment "What, you were pagans. All gentiles were pagans." As Leon hears this he shouts the age-old accusation so often levelled at Jews, "The Jews crucified our Jesus Christ!" Rosa shouts back "Your Jesus Christ was a Jew! The apostles were Jews. Your Holy Virgin Mary was also a Jew. The only difference is that you believe this messiah has already come and redeemed you." As she looks to the floor, her voice drops as her emotion wells up, "Jesus' suffering…We Jews today have hundreds of thousands of innocent martyrs." At this Leon can stand no more, "Shut your mouth!" Rosa is unfazed, "What right do you have to demand that I renounce my faith?" Leon responds angrily, "What right do you have to compare Jesus Christ to your Jewish riffraff?" With that, she angrily shoves the roast goose off the stove and it falls to the floor, shattering the pot, and Leon rushes in and slaps her face. In the face of their religious impasse, they both turn to anger. This powerful scene suggests that the path to reconciliation between Poles and Jews must evolve past this dogmatic absurdity. In some ways, Leon and Rosa had already reconciled their uneasy coexistence before their argument. But their unity as humans was quickly undone by their religious differences, "the very differences that create wars in the first place," Holland acknowledged.[71]

Just as the brutal and iconic imagery of the Holocaust is conspicuously absent from the film, missing also is the traditional heroic image of Polish resistance fighters found so often in films about occupied Poland. The secret activism of the Polish Underground State (Polskie państwo podziemne), featured so prominently in some of the most celebrated and influential

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[71] Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, p. 103.

Polish films, is purposely clouded by Holland's presentation. Unlike the overt force of justice found in Leonard Buczkowski's *Zakazane piosenki* (*Forbidden Songs*, 1948), or the honorable survivors depicted in Wajda's *Kanał* (1957), in *Angry Harvest* the hidden activities of the resistance bring fear and mystery.[72] When the well-dressed and confident resistance member approaches Leon Wolny, he plays to his weakness. "Do you know who sends his regards? The mayor. He is always saying that after the war, we will need men like Leon Wolny." As the man explains the risky courier assignment, he senses Leon's apprehension, "Do the fatherland a service, or don't you feel obliged anymore?" As Leon lowers his head and accepts, grateful for the attention, there is a distinct sense of falsehood and arrogance from the man's satisfied reaction, "We knew we could count on you." It is clear from their exchange that Leon is simply a disposable tool to the resistance network. He later finds out from Cybulkowski that the trip would mean certain death. When he uses the same tactics of honor and flattery on the naïve Pauline a few scenes later in order to spare himself the danger of the assignment, the uncomfortable actions of the resistance are magnified.

Holland's treatment of the Polish Underground's activities is not simplistic, however. While the members themselves always appear cold and calculating (though we only see two of them in the course of the film), there is a scene which offers a nod to their more virtuous missions. When Leon discovers a murdered man inside a house on his property, the sign attached to his neck reads that he was killed by the Polish Underground for informing on Rubin and three other Jews in the area. The ambivalent interpretation of the resistance's actions speaks to a larger critique of their activities to save Jews and the legacy of the Underground government

[72] *Zakazane piosenki*, Directed by Leonard Buczkowski (1947; Poland: Film Polski); *Zakazane piosenki* remains one of the most popular Polish films ever made. The scenography and music are among the most memorable in Polish cinema, and did much to inform other postwar films about the war. Marek Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), p. 22.

and Home Army (Armia Krajova, AK) in Poland. The Polish leadership during the war has often received strong criticism for its inaction towards helping to save Jews. Underground publications like *Biuletyn Informacyjny* did much to inform and shape public action, and some have pointed out that it did not do enough to disseminate what the government knew about the plight of Jews or instruct Poles to give aid.[73] And some in the right-wing Polish resistance viewed assistance to Jews as a form of collaboration, as it could lead to reprisals against non-Jewish Poles. Yet, it is true that the Underground government did establish *Żegota*, the Council to Aid the Jews, in 1942. Their goal was to provide financial assistance to Jews in hiding, especially children.[74] Holland's portrayal of the Underground State as pragmatic, if indifferent, nationalists, certainly rings true. In the film they do not actively save Jews, but merely avenge them. To deprive them of all heroic value would be a stretch too far for Holland though, as in truth some were saved by their actions. As with the other characters in the film, those of the resistance seem neither completely good or evil.

Conclusion

Holland's *Angry Harvest* is a film that deviates from the largely formalist approach that preceded it, most notably in Poland. While there were films in Poland that attempted self-consciously to deal with portraying the Holocaust and the relationship between Poles and Jews, Holland's picture avoids some of the compromises Polish filmmakers made after the war. Films like Wanda Jakubowska's *Ostatni etap* (1948), Aleksander Ford's *Ulica graniczna* (1949), and Wajda's *Pokolenie* (1950) and *Samson* (1961) did not shy away from depicting Poles and Jews

[73] Israel Gutman, *Unequal Victims: Poles and Jews During World War II*, (New York: Holocaust Library, 1986), 69, 144, 147.
[74] Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*, (Holt Paperbacks, 2004), 120.

fighting side by side during the war, and on some levels, they do attempt to focus on the unique horror of the Jewish experience. Yet, the depictions are often clouded by the films' ideological message, such as for communism in *Ostatni etap*, or nationalism, such as in *Pokolenie*. Because of the communist censorship, the scripts dealing with the struggle of Jews and Poles alike were watered down to fit a comfortable nationalism decided from the top. This is not to say that films coming out of Poland about the Holocaust after the war weren't ground breaking in their own right, or that they didn't attempt thoughtfully to come to terms with the cultural trauma of Jewish extermination. However, Holland's emigration to Europe and personal connection to Polish cinema made her uniquely positioned to tell more nuanced and difficult stories. She did not have to contend with censors, the Polish government, or ostracization. This freedom allowed her to tell a different kind of story about the Holocaust, one that shunned the traditional imagery and narrative in favor of more complex depiction. *Angry Harvest* pushes the Holocaust film genre forward, while also serving as an allegorical enactment of the complex and difficult nature of Polish-Jewish relations during the war.

Chapter 4: Europa Europa

Being half Polish and half Jewish makes you very confused and schizophrenic, also emigration opens up questions about who you really are…The main question interesting to me is how much we are created by expectations of people, how people want to see us or to push us. In our decisions, opinions, are we ourselves and how much we are influenced by circumstances?[75] – Agnieszka Holland

Introduction

Following the success of *Angry Harvest*, Holland's next film, *Europa Europa* (1990) continued to challenge the traditional representations of the Holocaust in film. Distance from Poland, artistic freedom, and her particular experience as a Polish-Jewish émigré would inspire Holland to reshape and experiment with the Holocaust narrative in a new way. While *Angry Harvest* probes the complexities of the war in Eastern Europe and avoids clichéd imagery in portraying the Holocaust, *Europa Europa* puts the spotlight on the imagery itself, using it to cast a critical light on the taboo of the Holocaust as "un-representable." In *Europa Europa*, Holland employs alternative strategies of humor, sexuality, and identity trauma to help deconstruct the shock of the Holocaust and move the narrative beyond its stale tropes. As with Holland's other films, *Europa Europa* creates new categories for characters that collide with official histories, and in doing so provides a more complex reading of events. The film unfolds similarly to a picaresque novel, employing comedy and satire around the main character, which Holland has described as the *Candide* of the twentieth century.[76] Based on the autobiography of Solomon

[75] Gordana P. Crnković. "Interview with Agnieszka Holland," in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Winter 1998-1999): full range, then p. 9.
[76] Solomon Perel, *Europa Europa: A Memoir of World War II* (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1997);
Holland is referring to Voltaire's main character in *Candide* (1759). The story is unpredictable, fast-moving, and dreamlike. As a coming of age story, it parodies romance clichés yet grounds the narrative in a serious history and uses the humorous and fantastical nature of the story to tackle serious issues of religion, philosophy, and

Perel, a German-Jew who survived the Holocaust thanks to his ability to assume different identities, most notably that of a young Nazi, Holland's film does not shy away from making the viewer uncomfortable. The film's postmodern irreverence towards classic representations of the Holocaust chips away at the traditional narrative stereotypes that focus on Jewish passivity in the face of destruction or a totality of good versus evil.

The Film

The opening of the film slowly fades in to focus on a young Solomon Perel (Marco Hofschneider) drowning, half-dressed in the uniform of a *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth), foreshadowing the identity crisis at the heart of the film. The scene then shifts to the infant Perel's circumcision, overlaid with his mother's humming of the Hebrew song, "Hine Mah Tov." Afterwards, we see the young Solomon (nicknamed "Solek" or "Solly") on the eve of his bar mitzvah about to celebrate with his family when *Kristallnacht* occurs. In the chaos, Solly escapes and hides – although he is naked from being surprised in the bathtub – but the family's home and shop are ransacked, and his sister is killed. Realizing the danger of remaining in Germany, Solomon's father (Klaus Abramowsky) decides to move his family east to be with relatives in Łódź. Tragically, the Germans then attack Poland. Solly's older brother David (Piotr Kozlowski) decides to join the Polish army, while Solly and his brother Isaak (Rene Hofschneider) remain with their parents. As the German army nears, Solly's father decides to send him and Isaak further east in the hope they may avoid the Nazi dragnet.

In a scene that symbolizes the messiness and confusion surrounding the dual-invasion of Poland as a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement's secret protocol, Solly and Isaak

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government. Essentially, a thinly veiled assault on the dominant worldview with Candide as its vehicle. Voltaire, *Candide, or, Optimism*, trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Modern Library, 2005).

become separated on the Bug River. As other escaping Poles row back into German-occupied Poland shouting that the Soviets have invaded, Solly is ushered into a boat with other Jews. The Poles, preferring Hitler over Stalin, go one way, while the Jews, preferring the Soviets, go the other, as Perel's background narration confirms. Solomon is then rescued by a Soviet soldier and sent to an orphanage in Grodno. During his two years in the Soviet orphanage, he joins the Komsomol (All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) and is subjected to their political indoctrination program along with other Polish, Russian, and Jewish orphans. Though his bourgeois origins are suspect, his Jewishness is irrelevant to the school's headmasters. The orphanage is eventually attacked by German forces, signaling the dissolution of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the onset of Operation Barbarossa. In the ensuing commotion, Solly is again separated from his companions, and subsequently captured by German soldiers.

In an ironic twist of fate, Solly is able to avoid the lot of the other Jews that the Germans have captured and whom they quickly execute. His Nordic features and fluent German give the soldiers pause. When Solly explains that his name is Josef Peters and his family was killed by the Bolsheviks, they quickly take pity on who they think is a distraught young ethnic German boy who lost his family to the enemy, nicknaming him "Jupp." He then demonstrates his fluency in Russian and proves he is willing to help, assisting the soldiers to identify Stalin's son Yakov Dzhugashvili among the prisoners. His actions cross the line from surviving to actively collaborating. Having gained their confidence, Jupp is given a position as translator by the unit commander and accompanies the men for several weeks, witnessing the war first hand. During his time with the unit, Solly must refrain from openly bathing or going to the bathroom, as his circumcised penis will certainly give him away. Yet, when the secretly homosexual German soldier Robert (Andre Wilms) surprises Jupp in the bathtub, his secret is betrayed. But in feeling

a kinship with Solly due to their shared hidden identity, Robert promises to never reveal his secret to anyone. They soon forge a strong bond. Later, a genial scene of the men chatting in a trench erupts into a heated battle against the Soviets, in which Robert and the other two soldiers present are killed. Solly is devastated by the loss of Robert. Left alone and confused, Solly then radios a surrender to the Soviets, claiming he is a Komsomol. However, he inadvertently approaches their position at the moment they are overrun, leaving Solly as the apparent sole vanguard of an advancing German force. Hailed as a daring young hero, he is adopted by the unit commander and sent back to Germany to enroll in a prestigious Hitler Youth academy in Berlin.

In the film's most bizarre episode, Solly then joins an elite unit within the Hitler Youth organization, while also becoming best friends with its most ardent student Schulz (Klaus Kowatsch) and romantically involved with the academy's fiercest anti-Semite Leni (Julie Delpy). As they become closer, his inability to perform sexually for fear of revealing his identity drives Leni away from him. During his time as a Hitler Youth Solly is also, paradoxically, held up as an example of typical Aryan features during a racial seminar involving the academy's racial "expert." As it becomes more and more difficult to hide the truth of his body, however, Solly devises numerous tactics to avoid detection. In one instance he fakes a toothache, going so far as having a healthy tooth painfully removed, and in another he pulls the skin up around his penis and ties it off in an attempt at mimicry. Both strategies fail. When later he is unable to produce his Certificate of Racial Purity to the police station commander, he is miraculously saved by an airstrike that levels the building. The final act of the film sees Solly reluctantly trying to hold a doomed Berlin with his fellow soldiers. In a moment of exhaustion and hopelessness, Solly

deserts his unit and charges the Soviet line, hoping to surrender. Under a hail of gunfire at his back from his former allies, Solly is successfully captured by the Soviets unscathed.

Solly expresses to the Soviet commander that he is Jewish and has been hiding his identity. The commander replies that if he was, he would be dead or in a concentration camp. He then shows Solly pictures of the Jews the Soviets had come across. As Solly gazes at the procession of horrific images put in front of him, he cannot believe it. The commander then puts Solly's fate in the hands of a nearby concentration camp prisoner, offering the man a pistol and Solomon himself. Before the man can decide, however, Solly is recognized by his long-lost brother Isaak, who had also recently been rescued by the Soviets. They embrace and weep happily, and Solly is spared execution. Afterwards, Solly finds out that the rest of his family was murdered two weeks after the brothers escaped Łódź. He and his brother then decide to move to Palestine, which later becomes Israel. In the final scene, the real Solomon Perel stands by a river while singing "Hine Mah Tov."

Analysis

Europa Europa is a film that can be seen as the beginning of a heightened concern with the artistic dilemma of representing the unrepresentable. Holland was determined to challenge the taboo of Holocaust representation, and she found humor and irony a useful avenue for a number of reasons. The film's humor offers advantages and vantage points for tackling issues that would otherwise be difficult to address and allows for a clever subversion of norms. The film's humor and irony work to encourage a dismantling of traditional identity categories of race, class, gender, and nationality. Andrew Horton's theory of film comedy in the deconstructive

spirit offers useful insight into this strategy's effectiveness.[77] Horton explains that "deconstruction has a subversive thrust similar to comedy's subversion of norms…an attitude of *play* that exposes how a text undermines the philosophy it asserts."[78] This "attitude of play" can produce complex critiques and an increased appreciation of the random and arbitrary, a clear goal for Holland. Horton further states that in comedy, audiences are often placed as insiders, with the film somehow acknowledging their presence.[79] This technique allows the audience the distance necessary to view the events as playful or comedic. The periodic narration throughout the film, combined with the appearance of the real Solomon at the end helps this distance, as does the fact that only the audience is aware of Solomon's secret throughout the film. Finally, Horton explains that whereas tragedy seeks to reduce the number of possibilities and imply a sense of fate or inevitability, comedy revels in improvisation, potentiality, and openness.[80]

Indeed, the film's narrative flow depends on a sequence of jokes and ironies that challenge, expose, or parody the absurd binaries of power and authority. When the family flees the violence and racism of *Kristallnacht* to the safety of Poland, those hatreds are nonetheless brought directly to them with the German invasion. And even if David is willing to fight in the defense of Poland, he must return home unarmed and dejected. To begin with, he could not even find his unit in the chaos, and what's more the Polish army would not spare any rifles for Jews. Although Solly is sent to an orphanage that is safe for Jews, he is nonetheless suspect due to his bourgeois class origins and must promise to work hard and overcome it. Furthermore, when a classmate decries Solly as "a dirty Jew who crucified Jesus," an enraged headmaster jumps to his feet and shouts to the student "obscurantism and racism! Polish fascist! Lord's aristocrats, do

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[77] Andrew S. Horton, *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c1991).
[78] Ibid, p. 7-8.
[79] Ibid, p.9.
[80] Ibid, p.9-10.

you know what Lenin said about anti-Semitism? That it is a crime as bad as counterrevolution!" Holland's irony here is striking considering future Soviet anti-Semitism.

Solly's evaluation by the various German or Nazi characters is also steeped in humor and irony, again exposing the absurd binaries of race, gender, and nationality. To begin with, the reason for Solly's immediate acceptance into the German fold following his capture is due to his upper-class German accent, a proof of his German "purity." What's even more amusing is that this racial confirmation follows immediately after the platoon leader warns that he "can smell Jews." In another bizarre scene, Holland again plays with racial stereotypes when Solly travels to Berlin with a clichéd, middle-aged Nazi woman as his handler. Overweight, smoking, and using a gold-plated, bullet-shaped lighter, the woman is enrapt with his dark hair and youthful exuberance, seeing in him an exemplary *Volksdeutscher.* When she realizes Solly shares the Führer's birthday, she then pounces on him once they are alone. Reaching her hand into his pants, she whispers into his ear that his dark hair is just like the Führer's. As they have sex, the woman screams out "Mein Führer!" The scene then blends into the next as Solly shouts in joy from the back of the train, elated that his disguise has been reconfirmed. The fact that the woman is most convinced of Solly's similarity to Hitler when she grabs his penis – the one link to Solomon's true identity - is telling. Holland's scene points to the absurdity at the heart of the Nazis' racial ideology. To further drive home this important observation, Holland includes another hilarious, if deeply disturbing classroom scene involving the Hitler Youth academy's racial "expert," Goethke (Erich Schwarz). The class lesson is "How do you recognize a Jew?" Goethke proceeds to explain that "science is incorruptible…if you understand racial differences, no Jew will be able to deceive you." He continues "[Jewish] blood composition is different from ours…they have a hooked nose…ape-like walk…shifty eyes…[but] the Nordic man is the gem

of the earth and most talented…their body is perfect." The professor then calls Solly to the front of the class in order to give a phrenological reading of his head and evaluate his eyes and hair. Afterwards, he instructs the class, "look at his skull, his profile…distinct Aryan traits…he is an authentic Aryan." This scene epitomizes the absurdity inherent in German racial ideology.

Other than using humor and irony to escape the classic direct-sequence lines of structuring Holocaust narratives, Holland also transgresses the norm by displaying trauma and identity through the body. As in her previous film, this film is almost devoid of direct references to the atrocities of the Holocaust. Instead, it visualizes Solomon's naked and dressed body and focuses on his constant border crossing to suggest that trauma. These "semiotic categories," as put forth by literary critic Xueling Huang and discussed briefly in the introduction, are important when considering any analysis of Holocaust films. This is especially important when these visual or narrative categories serve to construct traumatic memories.[81] While Solly's naked body represents his Jewishness, his dressed body indicates his other identities. Whether wearing the outfit of a Komsomol, or his uniform as a Hitler Youth, the tension between his naked and dressed body speaks to the larger trauma of navigating his multiple "selves" while still retaining his Jewish identity. Early in the film, when Solly is forced to don a Nazi leather jacket to cover his naked body, this tension is striking. It was only by coincidence that he received the jacket, a "temporary identity," yet the visualization of the remaining naked part of his body anticipates his trauma of perpetual forgetting and remembering that recurs throughout the film. Solly constantly tries to assimilate into a new identity, only to constantly be brought back to his origins. He convinces every person he encounters throughout the film that he is who he says he is, except when his body gets in the way. Every time he urinates, bathes, or attempts intimacy he is

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[81] Huang, *Constructing Cultural Memories*, p. 64-70.

reminded of not only the danger of discovery, but the pain of his loss. This increasing anxiety culminates with a nightmare in which Solomon cannot get his family to recognize him. When he takes refuge in the nearby closet, he finds Hitler hiding there as well, covering his crotch. Solly's dead sister appears, saying "He's a Jew too, that's why he has to cover it." Afterwards, Hitler becomes the image of Robert. Robert is then shot (as he was in a previous scene) and Solly awakens from his nightmare screaming, having wet the bed. Ever the outsider on the inside, Holland chose to use a different perspective of trauma to represent the crimes of the Holocaust, the trauma of repressing and forgetting the self. While the act of Solly changing his body plays out his trauma of remembering and forgetting, the film's visualization of his body is Holland's strategy for conveying it to the audience.[82]

Although not as central a theme as in *Angry Harvest*, Holland's *Europa Europa* is not without an exploration and commentary on wartime Polish-Jewish relations. During a scene in the Komsomol orphanage, we see Solomon well-acclimated to his new communist opinions as he reads his report on the evils of capitalism, receiving praise and applause. Regardless of his beliefs, his newfound identity has afforded him a place in which he does not have to hide. This scene speaks to the anti-Semitic stereotype of the *Żydokomuna*, or "Judeo-commune" that suggests Jews collaborated with the Soviets in their domination of Poland and held a privileged place over the Poles while under Soviet rule. A contentious issue between Poles and Jews that was responsible for an intense outburst of anti-Semitic violence once the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, it survived the war and became a little questioned part of the collective memory. However, the stereotype has little basis in fact. As Jan Gross' research has maintained, the

[82] Ibid, p.69.

dominant experience of Jews during the war was that of fear.[83] Further, Polish-Jewish relations during the war were mediated by the outside forces of the Nazis and the Soviets, who encouraged beliefs of Polish-Jewish fractiousness. In the scene, the young Pole Zanek (Andrzej Mastalerz) jumps to his feet and declares that "God is real! All of this is a lie!" When the female instructor asks if anyone agrees with Zanek, the other Polish boys stand in solidarity with him. The instructor then scoffs at the Poles' Catholicism, asking Zanek to pray to God for candies to fall from the ceiling. When his prayer fails, she gives a prayer of her own to Stalin, which works instantly (in the children's excitement, they do not notice the hands dropping the candies form the overhead vents). Solly tries to interject that "science proves…" but is cut off by Zanek's anti-Semitic outburst. When Zanek is then called a Polish fascist by a headmaster, he is incredulous: "My father was killed by the Germans! When I return home…" The headmaster then interrupts, "hell will freeze over first. Poland will never be Poland again!" As Zanek shouts tearfully "That's a lie!" one can see the powerful animosities at play which were utilized by both sides. In an interesting role reversal, it is the Poles whose victimization is the focus, with Solomon playing the role of the oppressor. Holland is probably pointing out that Solomon's own oppression does not necessarily completely ennoble him. In this place, Solly is the insider, and Zanek the outsider. Moreover, the "Judeo-commune" stereotype is addressed as a misunderstood response to the Polish indignities suffered under the Soviet occupation. The enemy in this scene is the Soviet apparatus, not Solly. Yet, what Zanek sees is a Jew betraying a Pole.

When a "miracle" in the form of an airstrike shatters Solly's orphanage refuge just as the instructor utters "Communism is beautiful," it indeed seems that God has chosen to side with the righteous. Yet, a few scenes later when Solly meets Zanek again, things go differently.

[83] Jan Gross, Tony Judt and István Deák. *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 107.

Traveling with his newfound German allies, Solly is denounced as a Jew by an angry Zanek standing nearby. Just as Holland seemed to state with the orphanage scene, the concepts of martyr and perpetrator are often shrouded in ambiguity. While this genuinely courageous Polish defender of faith *is* oppressed, that does not mean that he cannot be an oppressor as well. The enemies in this scene are the Nazi soldiers, yet what Solly sees is a Pole betraying a Jew. Holland further points to their absurd circumstantial roles through their exchange: Solly: “Why do that?” Zanek: “Aren’t you a German Jew, and I a Polish fascist?” Afraid that Zanek will succeed in denouncing him, Solly attacks him and they wrestle to the ground. As the Germans approach them, Zanek takes off running, only to be accidentally hit by a truck and killed. Another “miracle,” yet this time in Solly’s favor. Holland’s insistence on the fluidity of their roles and the arbitrary nature of ascribed miracles says much about the nature of Polish and Jewish competing narratives of the war. Rather than assigning one side as good and the other as evil, Holland portrays Poles and Jews as people locked in a struggle between two totalitarian regimes that have more in common than not. The jarring dream sequence featuring Stalin and Hitler waltzing together drives this point home. As the two dance, Solly’s father scrambles for candies on the floor while Zanek stands nearby as a crucified Christ. Just as Solly’s survival is based on luck and whim, so too are the various actions of all parties, which are unavoidably contingent upon the times.

Conclusion

Europa Europa became an incredibly successful film internationally yet had a troubled start in Germany, failing at the box office. Lawrence Baron observes, “*Europa Europa*’s multicultural message, multinational origins, and discomforting synthesis of comic, sensual, and

violent elements hurt its reception at the box office."[84] Controversy around the film grew after the selection jury in charge of nominating Germany's best foreign language film to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences overlooked the film, claiming it was not a German production. Holland had already been assured that *Europa Europa* was a strong contender to win by others in the industry. She argued that *Angry Harvest* had the same number of German crew and actors, and it was nominated. Holland herself believes that her experimentation offended old-guard hardliners in the German government and film industry. "It was jealousy and fury, though they did submit *Angry Harvest*, which was done by the same producer and myself. They hate [the] producer who did that and Europa, Europa...Some of them were nationalistic too, though they have it very deeply and hide it from themselves-not all of them are like that, but some part of these people have very strong feelings like that."[85] Indeed, the German Film Commission justified its decision by claiming the film was "trashy," "voyeuristic," and "unbelievable"[86] Yet Holland's suspicions ring true when considering that members of Germany's film elite, including Armin Mueller-Stahl, Volker Schlöndorff, Michael Verhoeven, Wolfgang Petersen, and Anna Schygulla, took out personal ads praising the film and asking the Academy to nominate it in other categories.[87]

Europa Europa bends the conceptions of what a Holocaust film should be. For Holland, this experimentation is paramount to understanding and representing the impossible.[88] While Claude Lanzmann has fiercely criticized Holland's mandate to stray from the accepted and sacred tropes of Holocaust representation, her narrative construction is not all that different from

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[84] Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust*, p. 87-88.
[85] Crnković, "Interview," p.7.
[86] Robert C. Reimer and Carol J. Reimer, *Nazi-Retro Film: How German Narrative Cinema Remembers the Past* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), p. 146-147.
[87] Robert C. Reimer and Carol J. Reimer, *Historical Dictionary of Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham, MD.: Scarecrow Press, 2012), p.64.
[88] Tibbets, "Interview," p. 138.

his at its core. Holland recognizes this. Having previously stated that she greatly respects his work, she also recognizes that his staged interviews are themselves a product of cultural construction and experimentation. The closing of the film, which sees the elderly Solomon Perel singing by the quiet river, alludes to a similar and memorable scene in Lanzmann's *Shoah* in which survivor Simon Srebnik returns to his Polish town in order to sing in the same spot where he had previously performed for SS officers during the war. Holland is likely asserting that her strategies of relating the Holocaust can serve just as well as Lanzmann's strictly formalist approach. Holland's cinematic goals run counter to traditional forms of Holocaust representation, as she seeks directly to challenge the status quo. As Milan Kundera has remarked, "Europa, Europa is guilty of destabilizing the hallowed edifice of present-day Holocaust representational realities…Holland's intrepid obsession with capturing the 'impossible morality' of the Holocaust 'goes against the spirit of our time', which instead tends to be a 'simplistic moralism devoid of the least curiosity to understand the psychological mechanisms which set the horror alight'.[89]

[89] Milan Kundera, "L'infernale immoralité Agnieszka Holland cinéaste de l'impossible," in *Le nouvel Observateur* No. 1358, (15-21 November, 1991), p 68.

Chapter 5: In Darkness

When you see the history of humanity, killing each other, hating each other, it's so easy to understand…You just take off the costume of civilization and it grows in one minute. And that in those circumstances somebody can act good is something which is really mysterious.[90] – Agnieszka Holland

Introduction

Even after the success of *Europa Europa*, it took Agnieszka Holland over a decade to return to the subject again. During those years, she created several films in Europe and the United States, while also contributing to American television. Notable films include *Olivier, Oliver* (1992), *The Secret Garden* (1993), *Total Eclipse* (1995), *Washington Square* (1997), *Julie Walking Home* (2002), and *Copying Beethoven* (2005).[91] Holland also directed select episodes for HBO's *The Wire* and *Treme*, and for AMC's *The Killing*.[92] Finally, in 2011, Holland returned to the subject of Poles and the Holocaust with her film *W ciemności* (*In Darkness*, 2011). The film tells the true story of Leopold Socha, a Polish sewer worker and petty thief from Lwów who saved a dozen Jews from certain death by hiding them in the sewers - though not without exploiting them first. Notably, the film presents two perspectives on the subject, one Polish-Catholic and one Jewish.

Adapted from Robert Marshall's book *In the Sewers of Lwów* (1991), Holland repeatedly rejected the rough English-language script offered to her by Toronto-based screenwriter David

[90] Johnson Reed, "Movies; World Cinema; Poland; Shedding light on the gray areas; Agnieszka Holland says the story's complex portrait of the Holocaust drew her to 'In Darkness,'" *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), December 11, 2011.
[91] *Olivier, Olivier*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1993; France: Oliane Productions); *The Secret Garden*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1993; USA: Warner Bros.); *Total Eclipse*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1995; UK: FIT Productions); *Washington Square*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (1997; USA: Alchemy Filmworks); *Julie Walking Home*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (2002; Germany: Art Oko Film); *Copying Beethoven*, Directed by Agnieszka Holland (2005; USA: Sidney Kimmel Entertainment).
[92] *The Wire*, Created by David Simon, HBO, 2002-2008; *Treme*, Created by Eric Ellis Overmyer and David Simon, HBO, 2010-2013; *The Killing*, AMC, Created by Veena Sud, 2011-2014.

Shamoon.[93] Apprehensive about the emotional and psychological toll inherent in making such a film, Holland hesitated about revisiting the subject.[94] Even though she admired the blockbuster *Schindler's List* (1993), she felt that similar kinds of films with famous actors and American stars were becoming cliché and ineffective.[95] Yet, Holland was unable to shake the story from her thoughts, often dreaming about it.[96] When she finally decided to take on the project, she did so with three specific demands. First of all, it would not be shot in English, but rather in the authentic languages of Polish, German, Yiddish, Hebrew, and Ukrainian, the "true languages of the story." Second, she insisted no lighting effects be used and the movie be shot as much as possible in the real sewers, preferring instead the authenticity of the poorly lit and claustrophobic spaces. Finally, Holland insisted the narrative grapple with moral and psychological ambiguity, rather than good versus evil. She wanted "not a black and white, sentimental vision of the angelic, innocent victims and the bad guys, but a complex portrait of people in extreme circumstances who are sometimes generous, sometimes selfish, sometimes bad, sometimes loving."[97] To her surprise, the producers agreed.[98]

As with her previous Holocaust films, *In Darkness* challenges the traditional Manichean representation of the Holocaust. Sharing themes with *Angry Harvest*, the film also placed a particular emphasis on the competing victim narratives of Poles and Jews and the moral transformation of Leopold Socha, while also offering a de-centered perspective that avoids an overriding narrative. Her goal was to resolve the tension of the competing memories of the war.

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[93] Robert Marshall, *In the Sewers of Lwów: A Heroic Story of Survival from the Holocaust* (Scribner Book Company, 1991).
[94] Pat Dowell, "Poland's Holland, Exploring Holocaust History Again (Interview)," *NPR*. February 19, 2012
[95] *Schindler's List*, Directed by Steven Spielberg (1993; USA: Universal Pictures).
[96] Billy Gil, "Director Agnieszka Holland Enlightens Viewers on 'In Darkness (Interview),'" in *Home Media Magazine*, Vol. 34 Issue 19, p12.
[97] Reed, *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 2011.
[98] Gil, "Interview," p.12.

By employing artistic strategies such as language use, lighting and positioning, as well as character representation, Holland successfully produced parallel narratives that avoided privileging either side. The end result was a more complex portrayal in which the audience is unable to discern the protagonists or assign clear moral judgments. The Polish and Jewish characters defy simple classification, and their interactions keep the audience from developing a strong allegiance to either. In what is arguably her most powerful statement on the subject, *In Darkness* insists on providing a reconciliatory discourse for Polish-Jewish relations during World War II.

The Film

As the film opens, the sound of a train rings out from the darkness. While it might seem what should follow is a shot of cattle cars filled with victims, the image instead resolves into a swastika-emblazoned toy train surrounded by toy figurines dancing in a shop store window. As a young Polish man stares at the miniature carnival through the glass, the juxtaposition foreshadows the Jewish and Polish situations.[99] The setting is Lwów, German-occupied Poland, 1943. In the next scene we are introduced to Leopold Socha (Robert Więckiewicz) and Szczepek Wróblewski (Krzysztof Skonieczny) as they ransack a confiscated Jewish home now occupied by Germans for valuables. After an altercation with a Hitler Youth member and a young Polish girl who stumble upon them – one that sees Socha scold the Polish girl by telling

[99] This scene brings to mind Czesław Miłosz's famous poem "Campo di Fiori," which contrasts the suffering of the Warsaw ghetto victims with the freedom and leisure of the "Aryan" side. In his poem, Miłosz observed Easter Sunday from the other side of the ghetto wall, where people enjoyed a carnival and rode a carousel at Krasiński Square. As the ghetto revolt was raging and Jews were being slaughtered on one side of the wall, people lived and laughed on the other. This image has become a symbol of Jewish isolation within their own city and the passivity of much of the populace. From Czesław Miłosz, "Campo di Fiori," in *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001* (New York: Ecco, 2001), p. 33; Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books: New York, 2010), p. 290.

her to "find a Polish man to fuck" – the two thieves leave with their spoils. As they make their way home, they hear the screams of women in the forest. They then catch a glimpse of a long procession of naked women being terrorized and driven forward by German soldiers. What follows is a scene that brings to mind the horrific imagery associated with the Holocaust and sets the context for the moral drama that is soon to be played out in the sewers. Though Socha and Szczepek do not see, the audience is shown fleeting images of executions and mass graves. When Socha arrives at home in the next scene, it becomes clear that he is a man of meager means. As a sewer worker and small-time thief, he struggles to provide for his wife and sick daughter.

In the next scene, we are introduced to the main Jewish characters. In an attempt to escape the upcoming liquidation of the ghetto, the Chiger family, along with other Jews, are digging a tunnel from inside their home to the sewers. Cut in with this shot are scenes involving the abuse and ridicule of Jews in the streets. We see them being made to wash the streets, dance, and we witness their beards being torn painfully from their faces by laughing German soldiers. At a bartering spot on the ghetto wall, the main Jewish character Mundek Margulies (Benno Fürmann) is called to the fence by Szczepek, Leopold Socha's colleague, only to be punched in the face when Szczepek accuses him of ripping him off. Before long, Socha (Leopold's last name and moniker) and Szczepek encounter Mundek and a group of Jews as they break through to the sewer. The head of the family Ignacy Chiger (Herbert Knaup) offers Socha a watch worth 500 złotych to hide him and his family. Though initially wary, knowing it could mean death, Socha cannot resist the easy money and agrees – though not without first saying he could get more by turning them in and thus upping the price to the watch *and* 500 złotych. Ignacy agrees, and they proceed together to his home inside the ghetto to negotiate. Ignacy's wife and children

are surprised by their visitors, and the tension rises as both Socha and Szczepek and the group of Jews consider their arrangement privately. Mundek suggests simply killing the untrustworthy Poles right then and there, while Socha considers bleeding them dry and then turning them in after to claim the bounty. They then agree to an uneasy alliance, Socha will hide them in the sewers for 500 złotych a day. After this scene, Socha meets an old prison acquaintance and Ukrainian policeman Bortnik (Michał Żurawski) in a pub. Bortnik comments that the Germans are the best thing to happen to the Ukrainians and Poles, clearly enjoying his new power and status as a German auxiliary (Socha does not tell him of his arrangement with the Jews).

When the roundups and murders begin, the Chiger family, Mundek, and other Jews in their group, flee to the sewers. In the chaos, they are surprised to find Socha waiting as promised. When Socha and the group come upon another large group of Jews also hiding in the sewers, it becomes clear that his agreement has become more complicated. He then makes a deal with Ignacy and Mundek to hide only 12 Jews, as more than that he deems too great a risk. Among the 12 are Ignacy and his wife, their two children, as well as Klara Keller (Agnieszka Grochowska), a young woman looking after her sister. Also with the group are the young couple Janek Grossman (Marcin Bosak) and Chaja (Julia Kijowska), and the Hasid Jakob Berestycki (Jerzy Walczak). The few others with the group play minimal roles in the drama. After the negotiation, Socha exits the sewer and has another run-in with Bortnik, who is personally executing Jews against a wall in the ghetto. Bortnik levels a veiled threat at Socha to keep an eye out for Jews in the sewer and report any to him immediately, claiming "It's our duty." Socha agrees. When Socha returns home to his wife Wanda (Kinga Preis), she laments for the Jews and comments that God will punish the greedy who exploit them. As they talk, Socha is surprised to learn that Jesus was a Jew.

What follows is a series of tests met by both Socha and the 12 Jews in hiding. Socha must stay one step ahead of the increasingly suspicious Bortnik, as well as other Poles, while also maintaining his own moral compass. For their part, the Chiger family, Mundek, and the others are being tested as well, struggling to maintain their composure and survive with barely enough food and water in reeking, horridly filthy conditions. Socha brings them food periodically, but other than that, they are completely cut off from the world and live in near complete darkness, perpetually damp and dirty. As Socha's charges begin to give way under the strain of darkness and isolation, they become increasingly suspicious of Socha. At one point, Mundek almost kills him. In the face of this, Socha decides to abandon them to their fate. Yet, a few days later, Socha sees Mundek being detained by a German soldier above ground. He intervenes and tries to act as though he is Mundek's overseer. The young German soldier is suspicious, and in the confusion of attempting to arrest them both, Socha and Mundek murder him. When Socha later comes upon the Chiger's lost children in the sewers, he saves them and takes them back to their parents. At this point the Chiger's money has run out. Socha decides to pay for their food out of his own pocket and risk his family to hide them. He has had a change of heart and now feels committed to the safety of "his Jews."

In the final dramatic episode of the film, a devastating flash flood hits the city and the sewers are nearly inundated. Socha abandons his daughter's communion and heads desperately to the sewers to help the Jews who will surely drown. He comes upon Bortnik, who is assisting a German soldier in rigging the sewers with explosives as a surprise for the incoming Soviet troops. Socha claims that he is in the area to retrieve his tools, and warns that the explosives will set off the gas pipes in the sewer. However, Bortnik and the German are suspicious and demand he prove it (after all, Socha is wearing a suit in a downpour). When Bortnik sees Jewish

belongings floating in the sewer, he realizes Socha's betrayal and they proceed to fight in the darkened sewer. They become separated, and a sudden rush of water overtakes them both. Socha barely survives, but Bortnik is killed. Miraculously, the overflow also caused the manholes to burst and drain the sewers, inadvertently saving the Jews who had nearly drowned. The final scene sees Socha and his wife happily pulling the Jews out of the sewers after the Soviets have taken the city. They had been in captivity for 14 months, and there were 10 remaining.

Analysis

Throughout *In Darkness*, Holland uses various cinematic techniques to avoid endowing the film with a dominant narrative, insisting instead on presenting the parallel narratives of Poles and Jews and the complexities within each side. One primary strategy employed to that end is Holland's use of language. The film is multilingual, and this contributes not only to Holland's greater goal of challenging traditional Holocaust portrayal, but also lends dynamism to the characters' interactions and the spaces they inhabit. Film critic and author Elżbieta Ostrowska has described this technique as a "de-centered perspective" that avoids a "hegemonic gaze."[100] Indeed, from the outset Holland was adamant about avoiding a conventional or theatrical representation of the Holocaust, and avoiding a dominant language was one way to accomplish this. As Holland later recalled:

> I needed in some way this authenticity in order to believe that what I'm showing is true…That it is the reality…I realized that if I wanted to express this reality I have to shoot it with the real languages of this place. And Lwów was this multicultural,

[100] Elżbieta Ostrowska, "I Will Wash it Out: Agnieszka Holland's 2011 Film *In Darkness*," in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* vol. 29, Issue 1 (1 April 2015): full range then p. 71.

> multilinguistic, and multinational city. So I decided that all of the actors involved will be learning the languages they don't know.[101]

The film utilizes six different languages, which include German, Yiddish, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Russian, and two dialects of Polish, standard literary Polish and the minority Lwówian dialect Balak of the *Kresy* region of eastern Poland, which is spoken by Socha and his family.[102] The effect of this is apparent even in the opening scene. As Socha and Szczepek encounter the Hitler Youth and young Polish girl, the German is using German, Socha is speaking in the lower class Lwówian dialect and the Polish girl uses standard Polish. Already in this first scene we see the complexity of the war played out through language. With the collaborator using the mother tongue and the thief the minority dialect, this scene certainly complicates the dominant Polish narrative of the war. Highlighting discord between those who collaborated and those who did not, from the first scene Holland confuses the audience's perception of both roles.

In another early scene, language serves as a vehicle for the dual narrative at play which underscores the theme of mutual distrust between Jews and Poles. Historically seeing one another as the "other," Jews and Poles are estranged regardless of their shared past, and Holland brings this out through the negotiation scene. After Socha negotiates with Ignacy in the ghetto apartment, they each retreat to either side of the room and the audience is privy to their respective conversations in their own tongues. Szczepek is adamantly against helping Jews, but Socha explains that they can make money helping them now and "we can always just turn them in later." In the Jewish group, Mundek argues they should just kill the Poles and be done with it: "Never trust a Polack…It's four of us against two. We can easily finish them off…Why not?

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[101] Erin Gleeson, "Agnieszka Holland Returns with a Holocaust Story Set in the Sewers of Poland," in *City Paper* (Baltimore), March 21, 2012.

[102] Sony Picture Classics, "An Agnieszka Holland film IN DARKNESS," *Presskit: Official Selection 2011 Telluride Film Festival 2011 Toronto International Film Festival, Special Presentation,* www.sonyclassics.com/indarkness/In_Darkness_presskit.pdf. Accessed July 25, 2018. p. 5.

This is war." In this scene we see the tension between sameness and difference that Holland strives for. They are separated by language, yet strangely unified in their cold pragmatism. Neither side is idealized, and the audience is left disappointed by the actions of all.

Holland also uses language to draw attention to the complications within both the Polish and Jewish experience. When Socha is shopping at a market in the city in a later scene, the relatively well-to-do Polish shopkeeper demands an outrageous price for Socha's goods, pocketing the extra cash herself. She tells Socha she noticed Wanda buying enough food for an army and that he can afford it. She is cashing in on the war and also possibly ready to denounce them if Socha or his wife buy too much food. Just as in the opening scene with the young Polish girl who speaks standard Polish, the animosity between the two is striking, and we are left wondering who the criminals really are, not to mention who is allied with who.

For their part, the Jews are also depicted as linguistically fractured and complex. Speaking Polish, German, Yiddish, and Hebrew, they seem to represent the spectrum of Jewish assimilation in Poland. In one scene, Ignacy is admonished by Janek for speaking German: "Quiet Mr. Chiger, we all know you speak their fucking language." Ignacy replies, "The language of Heinrich Heine. You should learn it. But I suppose to you, ignorance is bliss, right Mr. Grossman?" When the Jews are deciding amongst themselves who is to be saved, they begin to argue. Janek claims he should be saved because his house was used as their dwelling in the ghetto and he took all the risk. Ignacy is enraged since it is he who is actually paying, "We would never have even been in the same room before the war!" Chaja then shouts back, "Listen to the professor who refuses to speak Yiddish! All that education didn't buy you any sense!" Mr. Chiger's role as an assimilated Jew is contrasted sharply with the others, highlighting the disparate nature of the Jewish struggle not often focused on in portrayals of the Holocaust. Later

in another tense scene, Janek threatens to shoot Jakob, who won't stop chanting in Hebrew: "Shut up! Stop this damned praying! God isn't here!" This scene suggests that Jews, like other people, are also divided by class and culture. Holland's use of language to relate the complex relationships between Poles and Jews and amongst themselves serves to reinforce the "de-centered" perspective the film embodies.

In addition to language as a tool in service of a double narrative, Holland also uses light and character positioning in *In Darkness* to de-center the viewer's allegiance. To begin with, the sole reliance on lighting from flashlights for the duration of the film disables the audience's ability to orient themselves within the narrative. The light that is available is often fleeting and erratic, and only parts of the sewer are lit up at any given time. Holland wanted to imbue the film with an element of incomprehensible chaos in which the audience cannot create a spatial order or create a firm vision of the events. As per Holland's instructions, director of photography Jolanta Dylewska eschewed traditional lighting conventions used in previous films depicting the sewers such as in Wajda's *Kanał.*[103] The deliberate avoidance of the chiaroscuro effect to formally delineate light from dark aids in the avoidance of a binary narrative. Good and evil are not mirrored by light and dark. Added to this is Dylewska's camera work that seeks to avoid endowing either side with a particular agency when both Jews and Poles occupy the same space. This is clear early on in the negotiation scene between Socha and Szczepek and Ignacy and Mundek. The camera's focus is de-centered and preoccupied with long shots that don't favor either side. First, the shot films Socha and Szczepek from behind in the bottom-left foreground before switching to the opposite perspective behind the Jews. There are no close-up shots, and the middle-space is left purposely uninhabited. This type of framing continues

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[103] Sony Picture Classics, *Presskit*, p. 6.

throughout the film whenever Jews and Poles interact. Also, in scenes involving agreements between the two sides when they are shaking hands, the focus is exclusively on the hands themselves, there is no dominant face to attribute altruism to. This is telling, since whenever the hands of Poles and Jews are joined – for example when Socha assists Mundek in sneaking into a camp, when finding the missing children, and during the final rescue from the sewer – the camera is conspicuously focused on the hands and nothing else. They serve a symbolic function of being open to the "other." We do not see Socha's face, or any savior's face for that matter, depriving Socha or any other character of a singular heroic agency. Again, the viewer is deprived of a narrative or artistic cue that would help to gain perspective on the situation or create an allegiance to either side.

Perhaps Holland's most effective strategy when presenting the double narrative of Poles and Jews in the film is through her complex and even-handed characterization of them. Both sides resist easy classification throughout the entire film, and both are treated with an appropriate measure of reverence and disdain. To being with, Socha and the other Polish characters cannot be simply labeled or morally judged. Socha possesses anti-Semitic views, and cashes in on the Jews' misfortune, yet is morally transformed in his response to the occupation. Initially, Socha helps the Jews out of personal gain alone. In his dealings with them, Socha does not even attempt to hide his casual anti-Semitism. When encountering a large group of Jews in the sewer, he is clearly agitated, labelling them "Fucking lice," a particularly potent stereotype pushed by Nazi propaganda. And when negotiating how many Jews he is willing to save with Ignacy, he is cold and unsympathetic, attributing the Jews' desperation for survival as stereotypical Jewish scheming. As they plead with him to save more, Socha replies "14, 15, 16!? Give a Jew a finger and he'll take your arm!" When the mother continues to beg, he coldly replies "No! You can

always leave your children behind if you want." When Ignacy tries to protest that the price is too high considering how many are being saved, Socha responds "you're bargaining with your life, you're just like any other Yid." And yet, when the Jews eventually run out of money, Socha does not turn them in, using his own money instead to buy them food. In another scene he even excitedly brings them matzo, a menorah, and gifts for everyone when Passover is near. It is never directly stated why he saves them, whether out of religious conviction or a personal duty or a through a personal transformation. Moreover, it seems that Socha himself is not thinking too much about why he is acting, instead reacting in the moment. Yet, a moral transformation does occur in Socha, suggesting that even for the sinful, there is a path to redemption and a possibility of reconciliation. Holland's portrayal of Socha does not shy away from uncomfortable and difficult truths, yet offers a way forward in the face of those truths. If Socha can have a moral re-birth, then perhaps Poland can as well. Contemporary Poles can reconcile themselves to a past in which some failed but others triumphed. Redemption is possible, and Poles can identify with that without denying the historical record.

While Polish anti-Semitism is on display through the actions of Socha and Szczepek, it is cleverly complicated not only by Socha's moral transformation, but by Socha's wife Wanda as well. Early on when she laments the fate of the Jews while bathing Socha, he responds that "the Jews crucified Jesus. Its written in the Bible." "That's just church politics," she replies, "Just think about it, the Jews are the same as us. Our lady and the apostles, they're all Jews, even Jesus." Socha is stunned, "Jesus?" In a similar scene in which Szczepek is dining with Socha and Wanda, the topic again comes up. Wanda is furious that Socha has been hiding his aid to the Jews. When he protests that "you said that Jesus was a Jew," Wanda states, "This is different!" Amusingly, Szczepek sits by astonished, "Jesus was a Jew?" As Socha and Wanda continue to

argue, the camera focuses on Szczepek as he mutters to himself, “Is that true? Jesus was a Jew?” Even the character that opens the film by striking a Jew in the face goes through a kind of redemption by seeing the humanity in them and perhaps feeling solidarity. Notably, when Szczepek later gives up on helping Socha aid the Jews out of fear, he still does not turn them in and is eventually executed as German retribution for Socha and Mundek’s actions. Holland’s portrayal of Poles neither absolves them nor condemns them. Socha exploits the Jews but ultimately risks his family to save them. Szczepek and Socha both carry the stigma of anti-Semitism within them but are receptive to facing the absurdity of its premise. And while Wanda counters their bigotry with wisdom and compassion, she still cannot bring herself to sanction risking their family for Jews until near the end of the film when she is basically forced to.

For their part, the Jewish characters are also portrayed as complicated characters who do not at all adhere to the traditional label of passive victims or saintly martyrs, and as stated before, their unity is more often an exception rather than the rule. Mundek is tough and active in his survival. He is not the stereotypical apathetic, suffering Jew from the ghetto, and when we first meet him he is digging a tunnel to escape and refusing help from the Poles. At one point he even chooses to sneak into the Janowska concentration camp to search for Klara’s missing sister. And while Socha repeatedly comes through for them, the Jews show little gratitude and are rather annoyed at their dependence on him. They often accuse him of betrayal or collaboration, at one point blaming him when Chaja smothers her newborn baby out of fear the child will give them away. It is clear that Chaja killed her child due to severe emotional distress, and what’s more, Socha was present for the birth and expressed great joy. Yet, when Socha comes around to ask about the child and offers to take care of it, they explain his death with “It’s for the best.” “Better for who,” he asks? “For Socha,” Klara responds angrily in the darkness. Also, when Socha

returns the jewels Ignacy gives him out of guilt, Mundek does not trust this and attempts to kill him. When Socha later saves Mundek from being captured by a German (even though there is nothing to gain from it), Mundek merely responds, "Why do you care, traitor?" and walks away. Holland's commentary here is clear, the response to anti-Semitism can often be anti-Polonism, regardless of events on the ground, leading to divided communities. The film also does not shy away from presenting a rather unflattering picture of Jews as real people in survival mode. As Holland stated:

> I would not sugar-coat any of the Jewish characters – they were all deeply flawed, some of them former con men or black marketeers. There were class divisions among them which collided, especially between the upper-class Ignacy Chiger and the rough-hewn Janek Grossman who abandoned his wife and daughter.[104]

Indeed, during the ghetto roundup, Janek's wife gives him the ultimatum, his wife and child or his mistress; he chooses his mistress. Both the wife and child later die in Janowska camp. Moreover, Janek then impregnates Chaja, only to abandon her and the group in the middle of the night. He and two others escape with the group's food and water reserves, as well as the only pistol. Added to this is the animosity between Klara and Chaja which often leads to them arguing intensely and exchanging insults. Rather than a monolith of victims huddled together waiting for death, the Jews in Holland's film are displayed as complex human beings in an extreme situation.

Holland not only carefully considers both Poles and Jews in the film, but affords them equal representation as well. *In Darkness* could really be seen as two separate, but mirrored stories. To begin with, screen time is divided almost equally between the two. Each side is given roughly forty minutes, while the remaining sixty minutes is time they spend occupying the

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[104] Ibid, p. 4.

same scene. Each group is also engaged in a struggle to survive, committing illegal actions just to acquire enough food. Even the costuming of Socha and Mundek, who we could call the "hero" archetypes for each group, are fashioned in a similar manner, with flat-top hats and dashing, leather smuggling jackets. They are equally masculine and empowered. Also interesting is Holland's use of sex as a marker of sameness. We see erotic scenes with both the Poles and the Jews, and each time the sex occurs in front of a child who is nearby. This strategy links both groups in a primal and effective way, while also revealing a little-discussed fact of Jewish life in captivity. Holland has often received criticism for displaying sex in her films about the Holocaust, accused of being unrealistic. Her response speaks to her wider goal of changing Holocaust representation:

> We have to change the cliché…Of course they had sex and not only that, I was talking with Marek Edelman, [who] wrote a book about life in the ghetto and [he] talked about how much love and sex there was in the ghetto. He said he had never seen so much sex and it was incredible.[105]

These parallel scenes and equal treatment of both Poles and Jews help to avoid privileging either narrative. While the difference between the two is clearly evident in the very setting they occupy (after all, the Poles do not have to hide or face being murdered outright), Holland supplements this by keeping the narrative focused on highlighting their sameness.

Conclusion

In Darkness is Holland's bold plea for the reconciliation of Polish-Jewish memory and competing narratives of the war and the Holocaust. Her argument calls for a truthful and

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[105] Melissa Silverstein, "Interview with Agnieszka Holland – Director of In Darkness." *Indie Wire*. https://www.indiewire.com/2011/09/interview-with-agnieszka-holland-director-of-in-darkness-212058/. Accessed July 27, 2018.

measured assessment of the war, with flawed beings at the mercy of the larger world at its center. Her depiction of Poles and Jews during the occupation opens up interesting parallels that speak to their larger and deeper connection. Through her use of language, lighting and positioning, and her portrayal of the characters, Holland draws out the complex and multicultural aspect of the Holocaust. After all, as Krystyna Chiger, niece of Ignacy Chiger and real-life survivor of the events later attests in her memoir *The Girl in the Green Sweater*:

> My memories come to me in Polish. I think in Polish, dream in Polish, remember in Polish. Then it passes through Hebrew and somehow comes out in English. I do not know how this works, but this is how it is. Sometimes it has to go through German and Yiddish before I am able to tell it or understand it.[106]

This comment speaks to the multivalent aspect of Jewish identity, and the war in Poland more generally. The war in Eastern Europe was not one side versus another, but a complex conflict involving many nationalities, ethnicities, religions, and allegiances. Within that mix, individuals' actions and decisions were by no means simple or static over time, oftentimes defying simple explanation. As Primo Levi famously wrote of the "Grey Zone" within the Holocaust experience:

> The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also inside, the 'we' lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us.[107]

In Darkness attempts to bring that indecipherable ambiguity into the light, while casting off old assumptions and stereotypes in favor of a more balanced and truthful, if difficult, reckoning with the past.

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[106] Krystyna Chiger with Daniel Paisner, *The Girl in the Green Sweater: A Life in Holocaust's Shadow* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), p. 2. Krystyna's book was written too late to affect the making of the film. However, Chiger states that she always thought Holland should do it if it became a movie. Additionally, after viewing the film, Chiger excitedly commented that "it was just like that!"

[107] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 38.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Polish films about the Holocaust constitute an important site of national memory and societal reflection. As stated previously, six million Poles – one fifth of the country's prewar population – perished in World War II. Of those victims, three million were Jewish Poles. Indeed, before the war, Jews were the largest minority in Poland. Jews were a part of Poland since at least the Middle Ages, and Polish culture was, in part, Jewish. Jews and Poles interacted in markets and on the streets, and at times lived in mixed communities and spoke each other's languages.

After the war, Poland's prewar diversity was just a memory. For the most part, no Polish Jews survived. This empty page in Poland's history was left to be filled by the mostly non-Jewish Poles who survived. And for non-Jewish Poles, the death of Polish Jews was seen as an extension of Polish suffering, their deaths incorporated into the memory of Polish citizens killed during the war. Polish Jews became a part of Polish national martyrdom, and Jewish victimization was constructed through the lens of Polish victimization. Yet, this practice led to the suppression of uncomfortable narratives that ran counter to the idea of Polish-Jewish solidarity as common victims of Nazi and Soviet aggression. Through the creation and reinforcement of an official and comfortable wartime narrative espousing the hardship and sacrifice of Catholic Poles alongside their Jewish neighbors, the past became distorted and simplified. The Communist leadership's attempt to legitimize itself by focusing on the national struggle against the fascist occupiers left little room for Jewish martyrdom.[108] Thus emerged two competing versions of memory, with two groups claiming to be the victims of history. Backed by a vibrant post-war film industry and well-funded by the government, Polish filmmakers

[108] Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, p. 2.

produced dozens of films after the war that dealt with the war and the Holocaust. Yet, they were unable or reluctant to meaningfully address the issue of Polish-Jewish conflicting memory, or relate the complicated nature of the Holocaust. To do so would have opened up difficult questions about non-Jewish culpability or collaboration. Not only that, the horrifying and tragic nature of the Holocaust caused many filmmakers (not just in Poland) to rely on reverential and prescribed forms of representation to depict Jewish extermination, inadvertently simplifying the picture. The result was the presentation of the Holocaust as a struggle of good against evil, a monolithic enemy against a monolith of victims, with Nazis cast as stereotypical villains and Jews as idealized victims. After the return of democracy in 1989, Polish filmmakers were free to explore and confront their past, yet the difficult and ugly reality of some aspects have led to the subject remaining, for the most part, taboo.

Agnieszka Holland is a Polish filmmaker who sits apart from her Polish contemporaries and other directors who create films about the Holocaust. As someone who is both Jewish and Polish, she has recognized that portrayals of the Holocaust often compromise and distort facts, perpetuating stereotypes. Her formal training abroad in Czechoslovakia, combined with her apprenticeship under renowned Łódź School of Film graduates like Wajda enhance her position as an outsider on the inside, and give her a firm foot in both camps. By exploring the complex decisions and actions of all actors during the war, her films are meaningful for Catholic and Jewish Poles alike, not to mention audiences outside of Poland that are unaware of the region's complexity.

With *Angry Harvest*, Holland sought to eschew the commonly understood cinematic image of the Holocaust and its representation of Poles and Jews. It offers a probing and biting analysis of Poles and Jews, while exploring the Holocaust outside of the framework of Nazis and

the camps. Instead, Holland's presentation of Leon and Rosa serve as an allegory for the troubled history of Polish-Jewish relations during the war. In the film, past assumptions about the behavior of Poles and Jews are complicated. Leon embodies the characteristics of victim, bystander, rescuer, beneficiary, and perpetrator, and is neither completely heroic or villainous. Rosa also does not conform to common stereotypes about Jews during the Holocaust. She proves to have agency and a desire to live, and manipulates her captor. By focusing on the interpersonal relationship between a Catholic Pole and a Jew in a village setting away from the camps and SS men, Holland successfully challenged the dominant narrative regarding Polish-Jewish relations during the war, as well as challenging the prevailing conception of what a Holocaust film could be.

With *Europa Europa*, Holland continued the trend of challenging Holocaust representation in film, while defying the stereotype of Jewish passivity. Focusing on humor, identity politics, and sexuality and the body, the film offers an unconventional – and up to that point largely taboo – representation of the Holocaust. Presented through Solomon Perel's identity trauma and trans-border activities, the film offers a complex reading of events that better positions the viewer in understanding the racial and ideological battleground in which the war was set. Moreover, by displaying the tension between Poles and Jews within the context of two competing and brutal dictatorships, Holland presents their actions self-consciously with an eye towards highlighting each side's virtues and limitations under wartime conditions and within the confines of occupation. What results is a more truthful, if difficult, moral assessment that upends common stereotypes about the war.

Perhaps her most salient statement about Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust came with *In Darkness*. Holland's latest foray into the subject was an unadulterated excavation

of Polish-Jewish wartime memory. In presenting both Poles and Jews in a de-centered narrative that refuses to privilege either side, the film offers a way forward in their competing histories, while also presenting a more accurate picture of events. Leopold Socha defies easy classification, at first carrying the hallmarks of a collaborator. The war is an opportunity to rob and exploit Jews, and he takes it. Surprisingly, the war causes a moral transformation in him, and by the end he risks everything for the Jews. Holland's striking portrayal suggests that flawed humans are not beyond the possibility of redemption. Similarly, in her unflattering and mold-breaking portrayal of Jewish characters, Holland reminds us that Jews were not angelic, holy martyrs but real people, human and deeply flawed. Not only that, Jewish agency in the face of destruction runs counter to the false charge that they went to their deaths "like sheep to the slaughter." By focusing on their shared suffering, Holland suggests a path towards reconciling the dual memory that has existed since the war. Through blurring our understanding of heroes and villains, the film gets us closer to the ambiguity and fluidity of events in Poland during the war, challenging the dominant narrative that has been reinforced for decades.

Since the public and scholarly debate spurred by Jan Gross' research on Polish crimes during the Holocaust began, the continuation of this type of dialogue has since been challenged by political change and has remained highly controversial. Political pressure has stifled energetic investigation into the past, yet Holland believes the trend is buckling, albeit slowly. Many young people are receptive to an honest confrontation with the past. As Holland herself has observed:

> there is a lot of tawdry thinking and one-sidedness. But there is also openness to discussion. The last two historical films I shot - Burning Bush and In Darkness - were well received even by that fraction of right wing parties who I don't have anything in common with…I reassured myself that people are ready for historical stories in which black and white extremes are replaced by truth, even if it's much more ambiguous. The

> fantastic ratings of Burning Bush and In Darkness are a sign that something is changing in our approach to the past.[109]

By adhering to prescribed forms of representation, which present a linear narrative for the Holocaust and avoid a morally challenging confrontation, Holocaust films often do not properly relate the complex events in the East, and Poland in particular. The line between friend and foe was blurred as a result of a brutal occupation by two regimes intent on exploiting Polish-Jewish animosity for their own gain. Yet, rather than present a binary struggle or attempt to compare the suffering of Jews and Poles, Holland's aim has been to present the stark reality of the war and the complicated effects of occupation. In doing so, her focus on the human aspect of the story offers the competing histories of Poles and Jews a foundation upon which to co-exist and move forward. Agnieszka Holland's Holocaust cinema focuses on the shared humanity of its subjects, rather than on a juxtaposition of their pain, suggesting a path toward reconciliation in the competing histories of Poles and Jews.

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[109] Ewa Nawój, "Agnieszka Holland: "Mam w sobie gen wolności," in *Adam Mieckiewicz Institute: Culture.pl*. https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/agnieszka-holland-mam-w-sobie-gen-wolnosci-rozmowa. Accessed June 10, 2018.

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