

“Polish Cinema Before and After 1990”

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The history of late 20th century and early 21st century Polish Cinema can perhaps best be understood by considering two radically different political periods:

- 1) 1945-1989: The Communist era
- 2) 1990-to today: Poland's return to Western style democracy and a market economy

Part One: The Communist Era

Under the influence of the Soviet Union, the Polish Communist government kept an attentive eye on cultural matters. All films were subject to censorship by various bureaucrats and apparatchiks. This was not exceptional to Poland: one could make an interesting comparison of the structures of film approval in Poland and Japan after the Second World War. Akira Kurosawa had to have his early films approved by committees on which Americans sat. Japanese nationalism had to be monitored

much in the same way as certain ideas of individual freedom had to be checked in Poland.

Interviewed in the 1980s by an Australian journalist, Andrzej Wadja responded cautiously to a direct censorship question:

“Now I will have to be more general. First of all I must say—because ideology comes in words—censors control words more than actions. You may have different scenes and say more *through* them, and it’s very difficult to censor them. But words come first with censors so they are most particular about dialogues. Furthermore, the only way to fight the censors is to make something which is *generally* not censorablewhat you have to do is to try to make every scene so fit with the ideology of the film that there is very little individually for the censor to cut.” (Quoted in Frank Bren, *World Cinema: Poland* (London: Flicks Books, 1986), p.171.

Little wonder that the films in Poland were denoted as a “cinema of moral anxiety.” The two famous Wadja films *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* intersected unintentionally on the struggles of Solidarity against the Communist

government. But more than that, they spoke to the Polish people's yearning for a removal of a double life, constantly saying one thing but thinking another.

The films of Kieslowski, Zanussi, Holland and Skolimowski all carry this probing, contemplative, intellectual one could say, atmosphere. Even Skolimowski's 1982 *Moonlighting*—a film starring Jeremy Irons who is a foreman for a group of imported Polish construction workers to do a job in London on the cheap, carries with it a sense of foreboding as back in Poland martial law is declared. The workers feel exploited politically back in Poland and economically in England. Their hatred for their foreman—his role rather than him as a person—is paralleled to their distaste for the Polish regime.

Thirty years on from this film, some estimate at least a million Poles now live and work in the UK, making Polish the second most popular language spoken there after English.

Part Two: 1990 Onwards

One might see the period of the last twenty-five years in Polish cinema as a bifurcated one. There continued to be what critics have now reframed as a “cinema

of moral concern” alongside a mainstream escapist commercial entertainment industry. The basic difference is that the focus has turned from political freedoms to matters of economics--the power of material goods—and the key question seems to be: how does the acquisition of money elevate, constrain or corrupt the individual?

Hence we have witnessed a slew of gangster and crime pictures, and low comedies that have been successful at the box-office. In its efforts to become a viable entertainment industry, we should not be surprised at the shift to genre filmmaking. In that sense, young people in Poland today are no different from their counterparts in other European countries—they seek opportunity and prosperity with personal freedoms attached, and yet Poland remains the most devout Catholic country in Europe, and its conservatism runs deep. Thus it is no surprise that we see biopics celebrating a more traditional heritage—films on Chopin and Pope Jean Paul II.

Having said that, the changing times have allowed famous directors, such as Polanski, to interrogate the war-time relationships among Polish Jews, Polish Catholics and Germans in his film *The Pianist* (2002), and Wajda’s 2007 film *Katyn* approached one of the darkest subjects of Polish history—the massacre of Polish army officers in Katyn forest, carried out by Russian forces in 1940.

It has to be said that Polish cinema has not been known for being at the forefront of women's issues or issues of minorities. However, I think it fair to say that Polish cinema punches above its weight overall, with famous auteur directors, esteemed film schools, and a growing international profile, which festivals like this, do much to promote. Whether escapist, political, or a hybrid of the two, I'm sure you'll enjoy the films over the next few days.