

Introduction

I am pleased to have this opportunity to update and expand my 2002 book, *Polish National Cinema*. Its new title, *Polish Cinema: A History* emphasizes that this is a revised and enlarged chronological account of the development of Polish cinema from 1896 to 2017.¹ Since 2002, more than five hundred new films have been released alongside dozens of old films, once considered lost, that have reemerged from archives. In addition, several significant studies have been published (in Polish as well as in English) on various aspects of the Polish film industry.

The present book deals not only with films themselves but also with their characteristic features and elements, recognized locally and internationally as distinctively Polish—what one might call a recognizable “national accent.” The focus is on full-length narrative films, although the book occasionally offers commentary on major Polish television films, documentaries, and animated films.

Polish cinema has made considerable progress in recent years and, arguably, has become better known outside of Poland. This publication follows the largest presentation of Polish films outside of Poland: the touring twenty-one-film retrospective “Martin Scorsese Presents: Masterpieces of Polish Cinema,” which premiered at the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York on 5 February 2014. It also follows Polish cinema’s first Oscar in 2015, the Best Foreign Language Film category for *Ida* (Poland-Denmark) directed by Paweł Pawlikowski.

Throughout its history, the Polish film industry has been able to produce a diverse corpus of work. Several representatives of Polish cinema have enjoyed international fame; some are even generally regarded as masters of cinema. Almost every film history textbook contains a chapter discussing the emergence and importance of the Polish School phenomenon. The names of Poland’s best-known directors, such as Andrzej Wajda, Roman Polański, and Krzysztof Kieślowski, are mentioned among the world’s most important filmmakers. In many books, the Łódź Film School serves as a model for successful film education.

¹“Polish Cinema: A History” by Marek Haltof. <http://berghahnbooks.com/title/HaltofCinema>

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Any writer dealing with the development of Polish cinema must take into account the complexity of Poland's history. Changing political situations typically defined the development of local cinema. Polish films thus reflect the history of a land in which national insurrections resulted in military defeat, a presence of occupying forces, and the suppression of Polish culture. It is feasible to distinguish films made in the Polish territories during the absence of the Polish state (before 1918), the cinema of interwar Poland (1918–1939), the cinema of communist Poland (1945–1989), and the films made after the return of democracy in 1989.

It is also necessary to take into account Poland's borders, which have changed throughout history. After the three partitions (in 1772, 1793, and 1795), Poland was wiped off the map in 1795 and divided among its three powerful neighbors—Russia, Austria, and Prussia—until the end of World War I. The partitions of Poland, including the one in 1939 between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, defined the character of Polish nationalism: its pro-Catholic stance and antiauthoritarianism, and its largely romantic vision of history.

Because of this “burden of history,” Polish cinema and other arts often had to perform specific political, cultural, and social duties. Without a state, without an official language, the partitioned Polish territories were unified by the Roman Catholic religion, a common heritage and culture, as well as a spoken language. Before 1918, Polish territories were on the peripheries of the three European superpowers. Their economy remained poor and underdeveloped; its population had a high illiteracy rate, especially in the biggest Russian-controlled sector.² Consequently, it was not the press but the cinema that performed an educational role for a number of people because this art form spoke to the literate and the illiterate.

Polish history provided an abundance of themes for the screen, and local audiences always seemed to prefer films narrating local history and referring to local culture. As a result, a large number of Polish filmmakers were preoccupied with local issues that were, sometimes, difficult for outsiders to comprehend. In addition, during the communist period, Polish films were often seen in the West as works depicting the “political other.” Politically minded Western critics, as well as Polish critics, often overlooked their value as works of art.

Given this uneasy background, before the return of democracy in 1989, Polish filmmakers were often expected to perform various educational and nation-

building duties. While they also produced entertainment films, the filmmakers saw themselves primarily as guardians of national culture and propagators of the national literary canon. During Poland's communist period, local filmmakers were perfectly aware of their role within the nationalized film industry as educators, entertainers, social activists, and political leaders. Filmmakers were at the foreground of Polish life, accustomed to a situation in which their voices and their works were carefully watched by both authorities and general Polish audiences.

The transition to democracy altered the relationship between filmmakers and their audiences. In the late 1990s, Polish filmmakers began winning back their audiences with popular adaptations of the national literary canon. The foundation of the Polish Film Institute (PISF) in 2005 continued this work by stimulating the film production and increasing popularity of Polish cinema in Poland, as well as abroad.

To write about Polish cinema before 1939, in particular, is a difficult task because little is known about Polish films produced in the early twentieth century. In fact, most early Polish films have been lost. A number of films and documents related to film production before World War II in Poland were destroyed, especially during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. Because of the absence of several primary sources (films), a researcher must reconstruct the picture of Polish cinema before 1939 through miraculously preserved artifacts—fragments of films, articles, reviews, still photographs, film posters—most of which are archived at the Polish Filmoteka Narodowa (National Film Archives) in Warsaw. An expert on early Polish cinema, Małgorzata Hendrykowska, stressed this arduous investigative task by titling her book on the origins of cinema in Poland *Śladami tamtych cieni* (*Following Those Shadows*).³

Before the fall of communism in 1989, little had been written about early Polish cinema. The communist authorities preferred to promote the picture of prewar “bourgeois Poland” as a land of commercial cinema and disrespect for art films. They also did not want to mention several prewar films that were anti-Russian and anti-Soviet; these films were neither released nor discussed in the People's Republic of Poland. One faces similar difficulties when dealing with the communist period. Polish sources published before 1989 often suffer from restrictions that had been imposed by the oppressive communist ideology. Frequently, they testify more about the nature of “cultural politics” in Poland than about the aesthetic or political impact of these films or their true popularity.

Polish cinema familiarized local and international audiences with its unique political context. This context and the relationship between film and politics in

Poland had been so self-evident that they frequently served as a preconceived methodological approach. In film criticism, Polish cinema often existed mostly as an expression of Polish history and of political and social tensions, and rarely as a discipline in its own right. The distinguished Polish filmmaker Kazimierz Kutz wrote bitterly in 1996: “Polish cinema in years past, propelled by anticommunism of the West, benefited from the permanent discrediting, because the theme had been always more important than the style. It never had to compete intellectually; we were allowed to enter salons in dirty boots to describe communism, which the public wished a quick death.”⁴

For Western viewers, Polish film frequently served as an introduction to communist politics, to the nature of the totalitarian state, to censorship and its repercussions—an Aesopian reading. Nowadays, more and more critics and audiences, not tainted by perspective of the previous system, see films as films, not as political statements playing some role in the demolition of the communist system. By perceiving films merely as political tools, willingly or not, some critics, including me, often situated them among other remnants of the past. Milan Kundera’s comment is appropriate in this respect: “If you cannot view the art that comes to you from Prague, Budapest, or Warsaw in any other way than by means of this wretched political code, you murder it, no less brutally than the worst of the Stalinist dogmatists. And you are quite unable to hear its true voice.”⁵

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Randall Halle in his book *The Europeanization of Cinema* stresses several of the problems film historians face while debating the early stages of cinema, chiefly the difficulty of distinguishing the difference of the national and the international (film as an international medium and a national product).⁶ Halle is right that film historians, including me in *Polish National Cinema*, often tend “to nationalize this prenatal cinema.”⁷ Because of the lack of a Polish state, the Polish territories becoming peripheries of the partitioning superpowers, and the extraterritorial and international nature of early cinema, several Polish filmmakers moved to neighboring state capitals (Moscow, Berlin, and Vienna) where they contributed greatly to cinemas of Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian empires. Their ethnicity was often overlooked. For example, in his pioneering study about films made on Polish territories during World War I, Mariusz Guzek lists thirty-one films directed by the Polish director Edward Puchalski in Russia from 1915 to 1917,

several of them comedies starring the Polish actor Antoni Fertner as Antosza (Antoś). He also lists fourteen films made in Russia with the significant participation of Polish artists from 1915 to 1918, and he provides a list of thirty-two documentaries shot by the Russian military film units on Polish territories.⁸ To complicate this issue, one should also take into account filmmakers and film inventors born in foreign capitals to Polish parents who became pioneering figures within other national cinemas. For example, the first Polish animator Władysław Starewicz (Ladislav Starewitch, 1882–1965), the world-known pioneer of puppet films, was born in Moscow, made his first films in Kaunas (today Lithuania) and Moscow, and after 1918 continued his career in France.

For practical reasons, in this book I consider only those Polish filmmakers who either started their careers in Poland (or the Polish territories) or significantly contributed to the development of the Polish film industry. In addition to creating its own national industry, however, Poland has been greatly contributing to world cinema through its émigrés. Most of them are representatives of what in Poland is called “Polonia” (a term referring to Polish émigrés). Most of them are not discussed here, since their artistic biographies are now a part of other national cinemas. For example, I do not discuss extensively Polish diasporic filmmakers, that is, directors, cinematographers, and actors working outside of Poland. For example, not present in this book is a discussion of films directed outside of Poland by Paweł Pawlikowski. He was born in 1957 in Warsaw, but was educated and made most of his films in England, with the exception of the aforementioned Academy Award-winning *Ida*. Also absent in this text are the achievements of a group of prominent Polish cinematographers working in the United States, such as Andrzej Bartkowiak (1950–), Adam Holender (1937–), Janusz Kamiński (1959–), Andrzej Sekuła (1954–), and Dariusz Wolski (1956–). This book also does not include Polish actors whose careers developed abroad, such as Joanna Pacuła and Gosia Dobrowolska. Several film directors, for example, Roman Polański and Jerzy Skolimowski, are considered as essentially Polish artists despite the fact that they left Poland during the early stages of their careers. Their films made in Poland are discussed in this book in more detail, whereas their international careers are covered only briefly.⁹

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Since the mid-1980s, the concept of national cinema has been much debated in film and cultural studies. Many writers have theorized the idea of a nation, nationalism, and national identity, most often returning to the much-quoted book by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.¹⁰ National cinema as a multidimensional theoretical construct appears in Thomas Elsaesser's book on German, Susan Hayward's on French, Andrew Higson's on English, and Tom O'Regan's on Australian national cinemas, to name just a few classic examples.¹¹ More recently, several studies have addressed the issue of transnational cinema concerning Polish film.¹² Apart from the understandable transnational aspect of Polish cinema before 1918 (films made during the last years of the partition period and during World War I), Poland produced films in both Polish and Yiddish during the interwar, so language alone cannot be used as the defining feature of Polish cinema. In recent years, the Polish Film Institute has funded several international productions, including minority projects. Frequently, these borderline films disappear from cinema history books, since they are claimed by different historiographies.

While I am cognizant of the theoretical complexities of the issues involving writing a history of a national film industry, for the purpose of this book I have adopted a simple and functional definition of Polish cinema. I examine films that fulfill at least two of the following criteria: works that were made in Poland (or on the Polish territories before 1918), in the Polish language, and by Polish filmmakers (filmmakers living in Poland, regardless of their nationality). Furthermore, I consider the transnational aspect of Polish films: I examine international coproductions with significant Polish contribution (director and part of the crew), as was the case of Kieślowski's *Three Colours* trilogy (1993–1994). Rather than provide close textual analysis of select films that have already been seen outside of Poland at international film festivals and discussed by scholars, I prefer to present an extensive factual survey of Polish film in general. Less familiar films and names are included to show the richness of Polish cinema and to build a more complete, balanced picture.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. Unlike *Polish National Cinema*, which included three topical chapters covering the representation of the Stalinist years, the representation of Jewish-Polish relations and the Holocaust, and the new action cinema, this revised edition employs a chronological framework—this periodization largely mirrors the political changes that occurred in Poland. The data provided for

the films include the year of theatrical release instead of the year of production. During the communist period, the authorities shelved and delayed several films; in such cases, I provide both dates. The Polish title is listed first, followed by the English title in parentheses. All subsequent references employ the English title.

Notes

1. *Polish National Cinema* was the first comprehensive study of Polish cinema in English. It was translated into Polish in 2004 (it was the first single-volume monograph on the history of Polish cinema) and into Japanese in 2006.
2. In 1897, 69.9 percent of the population was illiterate. Małgorzata Hendrykowska, "Was the Cinema Fairground Entertainment? The Birth and Role of Popular Cinema in the Polish Territories up to 1908," in *Popular European Cinema*, ed. Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), 118.
3. Małgorzata Hendrykowska, *Śladami tamtych cieni: Film w kulturze polskiej przelomu stuleci 1895–1914* (Poznań: Oficyna Wydawnicza Book Service, 1993). All translations of non-English works and quotations in this book are my own unless otherwise indicated.
4. Kazimierz Kutz, "Swojski pejzaż," *Kino* 9 (1996): 54.
5. Peter Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 142.
6. Randall Halle, *The Europeanization of Cinema: Interzones and Imaginative Communities* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014).
7. *Ibid.*, 61.
8. Mariusz Guzek, *Co wspólnego z wojną ma kinematograf? Kultura filmowa na ziemiach polskich w latach 1914–1918* (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2014), 570–73 and 560–62.
9. For more, see Marek Haltof, *Historical Dictionary of Polish Cinema* 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 8–9.
10. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
11. Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (London: British Film Institute, 1989); Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993); Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996).
12. Sebastian Jagielski and Magdalena Podsiadło, eds., *Kino polskie jako kino transnarodowe* (Kraków: Universitas, 2017); Ewa Mazierska and Michael Goddard, eds., *Polish Cinema in a Transnational Context* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014).