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Polish Cinema: From History to Modernity

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Abstract

Today, Russian-Polish relations cannot be called warm or friendly, although there have been periods of constructive and mutually beneficial cooperation between Moscow and Warsaw in history. Under these conditions, it is important not to slide down to the level of denying or “cancelling” the culture of other countries and peoples... An excellent example of such a thoughtful, deep, professional analysis is the book by film critic Alexander Fedorov “Polish Album: Movies Notes”, which reveals the theme of Polish cinematography and its reflection in the mirror of Soviet and Russian film criticism. This book continues the series of film studies publications by Professor Alexander Fedorov on Soviet and foreign cinematography. Some of these books have already been talked about in the film and media press, and some of them have won awards from the Guild of Film Critics and Film Critics.

The material of this book might be of interest for higher-school teachers, students, graduate students, researchers, film critics, cinema scholars, journalists, as well as for the wide range of readers who are interested in the history of cinema art, problems of cinema, film criticism and film sociology. In connection with the publication of the monograph Alexander Fedorov gave an interview to Professor Marina Tselykh.

Keywords: Polish films, Polish cinema, Fedorov, book, film studies, Soviet film criticism, readers, audience.

1. Introduction

Today, Russian-Polish relations cannot be called warm or friendly, although there have been periods of constructive and mutually beneficial cooperation between Moscow and Warsaw in history. Under these conditions, it is important not to slide down to the level of denying or “cancelling” the culture of other countries and peoples... An excellent example of such a thoughtful, deep, professional analysis is the book by film critic Alexander Fedorov “Polish Album: Movies Notes” (Fedorov, 2023), which reveals the theme of Polish cinematography and its reflection in the mirror of Soviet and Russian film criticism. This book continues the series of film studies publications by Professor Alexander Fedorov on Soviet and foreign cinematography (Fedorov at al., 2017; Fedorov at al., 2018; Fedorov et al., 2019a, Fedorov at al., 2019b; Fedorov, 2002; Fedorov, 2014; Fedorov, 2015a, Fedorov, 2015b; Fedorov, 2016a, Fedorov, 2016b; Fedorov, 2017a, Fedorov, 2017b; Fedorov, 2019; Fedorov, 2021a, Fedorov, 2021b; Fedorov, 2022a, Fedorov, 2022b, Fedorov, 2022c; Fedorov, 2023; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2022a, Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2022b, Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2022c). Some of these books have already been talked about in the film and media press, and some of them have won awards from the Guild of Film Critics and Film Critics.

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After reading your book, I got the impression that you are a deep connoisseur and fan of Polish cinematography. You talk about Polish cinema with great knowledge, and in rather soft and, as it seems to me, extremely positive tones. Why do you love Polish cinema so much? What is the reason for your particular interest in it?

My acquaintance with Polish cinema began back in the 1960s, when such famous films as *Ashes and Diamond (Popiół i diament)*, *Ashes (Popiół)*, *Pharaoh (Faraon)*, *Manuscript Found in Zaragoza (Rekopiś znaleziony w Saragossie)*, etc. were released in Soviet cinemas. Both these films and the actors who played the main roles in them (Zgibniew Cybulski, Daniel Olbrychski, Pola Raksa, Barbara Brylska, Beata Tyszkiewicz, etc.) became my film favorites. Perhaps because I have been interested in Polish history and culture since childhood. It is no secret that for many Soviet viewers, Polish cinematography, against the backdrop of many censorship restrictions in the field of art, was a kind of window into another life.

What are the main stages in the development of Polish cinema? What trends in its development do you consider the main ones? Can Polish cinema be considered a separate direction of world cinematography? Is there any special Polish film school? If it is, what is its secret, and what is it famous for?

Before the Second World War, Polish cinema, in my opinion, was inscribed in the "Central European" genre cinema and, of course, remained in the shadow of French and British cinema. But in the second half of the 1950s, on the wave of the "thaw", the famous "Polish school" was formed, which was distinguished by both acute social topics at that time and a new film language, it gave the world such film masterpieces as *Ashes and Diamond (Popiół i diament)*, *Eroica*, *Train (Pociąg)*, *Passenger (Pasażerka)*, *Last Day of Summer (Ostatni dzień lata)*, etc. The influence of the "Polish school" was felt in some Soviet films of the 1960s (*Eastern Corridor*, etc.). The peak of interest in Polish cinema in the USSR was in the 1960s.

And this is quite understandable: firstly, unlike the situation in the 1920s and 1930s, friendship and cooperation with Poland at that time was actively supported at the state level; secondly, these years (from the second half of the 1950s to the mid-1960s) saw the rise of the "Polish film school"; thirdly, it was Polish films that then formed a significant part of foreign distribution in Soviet cinemas. This explains why it was in the 1960s that not only dozens of articles, but also a series of books about Polish cinema were published in our country.

In the 1960s, Polish cinematography lost some of its leading artists, both pioneers of the "Polish school" and young masters. In 1961, director Andrzej Munk (*Eroica*, *Passenger*, etc.) became a victim of a car accident. In 1967, Poland's No. 1 actor Zgibniew Cybulski died under the wheels of a train... In 1963, the "prodigy of the Polish screen" Roman Polanski (*Knife in the Water / Nóż w wodzie*, 1961) left for the West. In 1968 another director and actor Jerzy Skolimowski (*Walkover, Barrier/Bariera*, 1969) followed his example. A little later, one of the best Polish cameramen, Jerzy Lipman (who was a cameraman in *Channel / Kanal*, *Ashes / Popiół*, and other classic films), and Alexander Ford, director of the famous *Crusaders / Krzyżacy*, emigrated. Talented animators Jan Lenica and Walerian Borowczyk preferred to work in the West.

In the entire decade of the 1970s, only one film by Wojciech Has was released (*The Hourglass Sanatorium/Sanatorium pod klepsydrą*, 1974). After spending several years abroad, Jerzy Kawalerowicz, the author of *Train (Pociąg)*, *Mother Joanna of the Angels (Matka Joanna od Aniołów)*, staged the retrodrama *The Death of a President / Śmierć prezydenta* (1978) about the assassination of Polish President Gabriel Narutowicz in 1923 only at the very end of the 1970s. Only one film in the 1970s was staged by Tadeusz Konwicki, who once conquered the Venice festival with the poetic film *Last Day of Summer* (1959)... Discussions around new films by Ewa and Czesław Petelski, Witold Lesiewicz, Stanisław Lenartowicz, Jan Rybkowski, Stanisław Różewicz and other directors of the older generation have subsided significantly.

Of all the Masters, only Andrzej Wajda continued to work fruitfully, creating in the 1970s such significant films as *Landscape after the Battle / Krajobraz po bitwie*, *The Promised Land/Ziemia obiecana*, *Man of Marble / Człowiek z marmuru*, etc.

New masters came to the fore: the "third Polish cinema". Many of them were born after the war. In the 1970s, a "cinema of moral anxiety" (kino moralnego niepokoju) arose in Poland, which was addressed to modernity and in many cases was critical of socialism, in connection with which

polish films in the Soviet box office became less and less, respectively, the number of publications decreased. For example, the books of Irina Rubanova about the documentary cinema of Poland, about the work of Zgibnew Cybulski (1927–1967) and Andrzej Wajda (1926–2016) due to censorship obstacles did not reach readers (see about this: [Rubanova, 2015](#)).

The situation worsened even more in connection with the attempt of the Polish Solidarity movement to oppose the communist regime: many Polish filmmakers (including A. Wajda, who supported Solidarity) could not be mentioned in the Soviet press until perestroika times...

A short wave of revival of polish film studies in USSR came in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was at this time that soviet authors were able to write without fear of censorship bans and edits. But ... the collapse of the USSR almost immediately led to the liquidation of the system of monthly distribution of films from Eastern Europe that had developed over many decades: a stream of American production poured on to Russian cinema/video screens, which practically washed away not only Polish, but also Russian films in the 1990s. As a result, not so many fans of Polish cinematography could see such films at Polish Film Weeks, on satellite TV or on the Internet.

What do you see as the main features in the development of Polish and Soviet cinema in the post-war period? What role did the censorship system in these countries play in this? Were there special prohibitions and ideological guidelines in the interpretation of Polish cinema and film criticism by the Soviet censorship? Is it possible to say that the censorship framework and ideological prohibitions artificially created by state pressure contributed to the “noble complication of forms and images” in Polish cinema? Is this pressure enough to give rise to artistic overtones that are inherent in real art?

In the first post-war decade, the development of cinema in Poland (as well as in the USSR) was under strong ideological pressure, censorship was very strict, and only the thaw allowed the appearance of such innovative films, significant for art, as *The Cranes Are Flying* by M. Kalatozov and S. Urusevsky and *Ashes and Diamond* by Andrzej Wajda.

Irina Rubanova, one of the best connoisseurs of Polish cinema, knowingly noted that in Poland after 1956 “the territory of allowed freedom was more spacious than ours. The content and individual themes (for example, relations with the great eastern neighbor, both current and historical) were very strictly regulated, but poetics and stylistic decisions were given to the discretion of the artist. ... in Poland, censorship was easier, censors were not interested, for example, in style, form, language, which for a long time was normative in our country. ... Everything that concerned the form, style, the Polish censor did not touch, and did not hunt for it” ([Rubanova, 2000](#)).

The features of Soviet film censorship were different: both in cinema and in film criticism it was impossible:

- have an alternative official interpretation of many stages of Polish-Russian-Soviet relations (for example, the Soviet-Polish war of 1920, World War II 1939–1945, the entire post-war period, including, of course, the assessment of the Solidarity movement);
- have a positive attitude towards formal experiments in the field of form and film language;
- positively consider erotic, religious and mystical themes;
- benevolently evaluate the work of Polish filmmakers who emigrated to the West (or later: the work of filmmakers who supported Solidarity).

Such bans in the USSR existed until the beginning of “perestroika”, although at times they could be slightly circumvented (well, for example, write something positive about Janusz Majewski’s mystical film *Lokis*). But, of course, both in Poland and in the USSR, many artists sought to circumvent censorship by using the complex language of philosophical parables, historical allusions, subtexts, and so on.

What concepts and views influenced of the Polish cinema of different years? Is it possible, in this connection, to identify certain dominants in the depiction of reality in Polish cinema in different years? What philosophical, artistic, stylistic finds were embodied in the Polish cinema of these periods? Is this stylistics in demand in modern cinematography, or, having once received its creative “film incarnation”, the aesthetics of existentialism has exhausted itself and is today perceived not as an innovation, but as something secondary? What do you see as the main difference between modern Polish cinema and the one that was created in the conditions of the Soviet period?

The main objects of criticism of Polish films of the second half of the 1950s in the USSR were "pessimism", "hopelessness", "gloominess", "non-class approach", "slander", "defamation",

"revisionism", "susceptibility to Western influence" and other factors, perceived from the standpoint of socialist realism as extremely negative. And it must be said that it was precisely in such sins that the official Soviet film criticism later accused some films created in the USSR or with the participation of the USSR (*Eastern Corridor* by Valetin Vinogradov, *Stars and Soldiers* by Miklós Jancsó, etc.).

Of course, Polish cinema, starting from the second half of the 1950s, largely relied on Western philosophical concepts of existentialism, sometimes using a surrealist form that was not allowed in the USSR. In modern Polish cinema, experiments in the field of film language have become rarer, it has become more of a genre, corresponding to the trends of the European mainstream.

What authors and films can represent a brief history of Polish cinema? What is the main phenomenon and uniqueness of Polish cinema? Which Polish directors do you consider to be the main figures of world cinematography and why? In your opinion, what films by Polish directors can be called "cult" films? What is the significance of Andrzej Wajda's work for the development of world and domestic cinema? How can you characterize the "branded style" of A. Wajda? With the works of which Polish directors is it necessary to get acquainted for a modern audience today? Can it help to understand the history of the development of world cinema?

Actually, I gave the answer to this question in my book: the main figures of Polish cinema are the directors Andrzej Wajda, Andrzej Munk, Wojciech Has, Tadeusz Konwicki, Jerzy Kawalerowicz, Alexander Ford, Krzysztof Zanussi, Krzysztof Kieślowski... It was they, in my opinion, who have made the greatest contribution to Polish cinematography, both in terms of content and form. In my book, I talk in details about the work of each of these Masters, including the reflection of this problem in the mirror of Soviet and Russian film criticism...

However, with all my love for Polish cinema, I have written about it inexcusably little: after all, almost every Polish director of the second half of the 1950s – 1980s probably deserved a separate detailed conversation... Polish cinema of this period is a unique phenomenon of world culture, about which, I am sure, profound volumes will be written...

What image of Russia and Russians was predominantly created on the Polish movie screen? Have these images changed depending on political vectors? Have the historical grievances of the Poles towards the Russians been expressed in the cinema?

In the Polish cinema of the 1960s, there were many positive images of Russians, for example, in films about the Second World War (*Where is the General / Gdzie jest generał*, 1964 by Tadeusz Chmielewski, *Four Tankmen and a Dog/Czterej pancerni i pies*, 1966 by Konrad Nałęczki and others).

On the eve and after the collapse of the USSR, the attitude towards Russians and Russia in Polish cinema, of course, changed. For example, from the film *Young Ladies and Widows / Panny i wdowy* (1991) by Janusz Zaorski, it follows that "Russians are dirty, eternally drunk, brutal and overwhelmed with one single desire – to possess Polish women. ... Again, as in the 1920s, we see violence against Mother Poland. It is no coincidence that the invaders are presented exclusively in the male version, as more or less wild scoundrels" (Rakhayeva, 2012: 230).

The main prohibition of socialist times, concerning the reflection on the screen of the Soviet-Polish war of 1920, also collapsed, although in fairness I note that in the key Polish film on this topic – *The Battle of Warsaw 1920 / 1920 Bitwa warszawska* (2011) by Jerzy Hoffman – the scheme of negative presentation of Russians on the screen is not so straightforward.

Of course, in its interpretation of Polish-Russian relations, the modern cinema of Poland could not bypass the tragic events of 1939 and the next 10-15 years: *Zinga (Cynga)*, 1991 by Leszek Wosiewicz, *Young Ladies and Widows (Panny i wdowy)*, 1991 by Janusz Zaorski, *All the Most Important (Wszystko co najważniejsze)*, 1992 by Robert Gliński, *Colonel Kwiatkowski (Pułkownik Kwiatowski)*, 1995 by Kazimierz Kutz...

The theme of Russian men of arms is also present in the Polish-Czech *Operation Danube (Operacja Dunaj)*, 2009 by Jacek Glomb, where Soviet soldiers are displayed as wild and cruel ones. In Polish contemporary films of the last three decades, Russians are often portrayed as criminals, bandits, prostitutes, pimps, mafiosi (*Debt / Dług*, 1999 by Krzysztof Krause and other similar films), although sometimes immigrants from Russia look more humanized and positive (*To the End of the World/Na koniec świata*, 1999 by Magdalena Lazarkiewicz, *Master/Mistrz*, 2005 by Piotr Trzaskalski and others).

To sum up the conversation about the phenomenon of Polish cinema, what, in your opinion, is the reputation of Polish cinema today among film critics and ordinary viewers? Is it true that now only insiders and film experts know about the phenomenon of Polish cinema? What is the place of Polish cinema in the global film industry today?

In contrast to Soviet times, Polish films are practically not included in the mass Russian film distribution, that's why ordinary viewers can watch them mainly on the Internet. The interest of Russian film experts and critics in the cinematography of Poland has also fallen markedly. It is not surprising: the Polish cinema of the present years again (as once in the 1920s – 1930s) fit into the "average picture" of European cinema...

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