
Heroism, *Raison d'état*, and
National Communism: Red
Nationalism in the Cinema
of People's Poland

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*'History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]'.
Walter Benjamin, XIV Thesis on the Philosophy of History.*

Abstract

Using archival sources, film reviews, interviews, secondary sources and movies, this article examines a Polish nationalist-communist school of directors who supported the Communist Party regime in constructing a new ethos, which consisted of ethnocentric nationalism and authoritarian nation state ideology. It demonstrates how the party state tried to legitimise itself by endorsing popular culture, specifically mainstream cinema. It also argues that National Communism inevitably led to the nationalist-authoritarian fusion, which set up the conditions for a pluralist and polyphonic realm, outside, but also within the ruling camp.

The cinema of People's Poland is known almost exclusively for the Polish Film School's painful attempts to grapple with the traumas of the Second World War and the later, socially critical work of the Cinema of Moral Angst, neither of which received unqualified approval from the communist regime. Largely ignored, however, is another, quite different current in Polish film-making of the time: a nationalist-communist school of directors who supported the regime and sought to articulate a patriotic founding myth of People's Poland, based on the glorification of military history and, in particular, triumphalist images of national unity in the struggle against the Nazis and in the early twentieth-century struggle for Polish independence. The films they produced offer valuable insights into the history of

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both People's Poland and Polish cinema, project the mnemonic operations of the official memory discourse, and syncretise past and present, memory and myth, reinterpreting national history in the light of public debates and political paradigm shifts that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.

In its struggle for nationalist legitimisation, the ruling party always paid close attention to the politics of historical memory. Let us bear in mind that the Second World War was central to communist takeovers. Accordingly, the communists crafted the image of the Polish nation united in the victorious struggle against the Nazis. In a manner similar to Titoist partisan mythology, the promotion of the resisters' and veterans' ethos reinterpreted history, magnifying the role of the 'home communists' against that of the Soviet-controlled Polish Army in the liberation of Poland. This 'indigenous' reinterpretation of the past was consistent with Władysław Gomułka's construct of the 'Polish road to communism' that blended Marxism and nationalism, a Soviet-style system and national specificities and traditions. Thus post-Stalinist People's Poland was a socialist state, but – above all – it was the end result of historical processes that promoted the Polish nation state. For the Communist Party, the end result of the growing reliance on ethnocentric nationalism was a transformation into a populist-nationalist regime, which unintentionally turned the cultural sphere into a pluralist and polyphonic realm.

Similar legitimising patterns can be found in other socialist countries. In the Soviet Union it was National Communism in the 1920s and Russian nationalism endorsed by the Stalinist state during the Great Patriotic War. Elsewhere, 'national' roads to communism saw the appropriation of historical events and figures that espoused the marriage of national liberation and social revolution. Anti-Ottoman and anti-Habsburg rebellions in the Balkans and central Europe, the Chinese Boxer Uprising and the Hussite movement in medieval Bohemia together served as native, indispensable roots for the communist nation states. In fact, the Second World War partisans were contemporary versions of various 'freedom fighters' from the past, whereas numerous individuals from nationalist pantheons were protosocialist in their simultaneous rejection of domestic reaction and foreign oppression. Gradually, the ranks of canonised or partly rehabilitated historical leaders expanded to include feudal warlords, autocratic rulers and even individuals of anti-communist pedigree.

With its mass appeal, distribution politics and popularisation by TV after the mid-1950s, film proved to be a powerful medium in the nationalist legitimisation of party rule. There were some notable flagships of National Communism in socialist cinema: Yugoslav Partisan films that promoted the slogan of 'Brotherhood and Unity' and the myth of the War of National Liberation before evolving into Hollywood-style, action- and star-packed big-budget productions; Romanian historical epics on Michael the Brave and Vlad Țepeș (better known in the West as Dracula) that presented these medieval and early modern rulers as national unifiers if not the forerunners of Ceaușescu's regime; and GDR films that mythologised German anti-fascism, often projecting the year 1945 as the cathartic yet redeeming birth of the new socialist Germany. A fascinating yet less researched example of the nationalist legitimisation of communist rule can be found in the cinema of the People's Republic of China. While Mao's China mixed the aesthetics of national opera with Socialist

Realism, the 1980s saw war films hailing the heroism of the Nationalist army in the struggle against the Japanese without mentioning the figure of Chiang Kai-shek. In recent years, following the metamorphosis of the Chinese communist state into a modern, authoritarian, global economic power, we can see the legitimising use of martial arts films and historical dramas that glorify the ancient and centralising imperial rule and the Confucian concept of a just, autocratic sovereign.¹ Most of these cinematic visions of national history were produced as giant, popular spectacles and used as a counterweight to more independent, nuanced and therefore potentially subversive film movements.²

Although state-owned and controlled, cinema in the Soviet bloc was not a mere extension of party ideology, propaganda and official historiography. With the exception of the brief reign of Socialist Realism, the relationship of the party state and film-makers stemmed from the regimes' policies towards the intelligentsia and oscillated between rigid dictate, mutual accommodation and greater artistic freedom. De-Stalinisation facilitated and encouraged the autonomous stance of numerous individuals as well as production teams, but did not set a unitary trend.³ For example, let us remember that relatively liberal Titoist Yugoslavia applied comparatively harsh censorship of its cinema, because in the absence of centralised education policies and a coherent ideological line, film remained the only cultural medium that still projected the founding myth of 'Brotherhood and Unity'. Inasmuch as political shifts and global aesthetic trends determined the fate of film-makers under communism, so did the gradual erosion of institutional censorship and its replacement by what Miklós Haraszti defined as 'the velvet prison', in which the state displayed a substantial permissiveness and even co-opted dissent.⁴

This article aims to trace the development of one specific current in socialist film-making that was supportive of the Communist Party while also expressing ethnocentric nationalism and authoritarian nation state ideology, partly stemming from National Communism, partly reminiscent of the *endek* (National Democratic) rhetoric. Arguably, the films of Jerzy Passendorfer, Ryszard Filipiński and, above all,

¹ On Yugoslav Partisan films, see Andrew Horton, 'The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film: Cinematic Perceptions of a National Identity', *Film Criticism*, 12, 2 (1987), 18–27; the Romanian movies mentioned are Sergiu Nicolaescu's *Mihai Viteazul* (1970) and Doru Nastase's *Vlad Ţepeş* (1979); on the cinema of the GDR, see Anke Pinkert, *Film and Memory in East Germany* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008); for the partial rehabilitation of the Kuomintang and the promotion of etatism, watch Yang Guangyuan's *The Battle of Taierzhuang* (1987) and Yimou Zhang's *Hero* (2002).

² The second wave of Yugoslav Partisan films of the 1960s and 1970s followed the official condemnation of the new Yugoslav cinema, labelled by the government as the Black Wave. Historical dramas produced in Czechoslovakia during the post-1968 normalisation, such as Otakar Vavra's Second World War trilogy – *Days of Betrayal* (1972), *Sokolovo* (1975) and *The Liberation of Prague* (1977) – provide examples of films with nationalist-communist salutation and popular appeal that 'replaced' the rebellious movies of the Czechoslovak New Wave.

³ On the one hand, the Polish October of 1956 and the belated liberalisation of the system in Czechoslovakia contributed to the phenomena of the Polish School and the Czechoslovak New Wave. On the other hand, the immediate period after the construction of the Berlin Wall saw an outburst of artistic creativity among East German film-makers.

⁴ Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism*, trans. Katalin and Stephen Landesman (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

Bohdan Poręba are the best representations of this trend. These directors did not gain the critical acclaim and international reputation that accompanied the reception of the Polish School or the Cinema of Moral Angst. Artistically, their talents never matched those of Andrzej Wajda, Andrzej Munk or Krzysztof Kieślowski. Still, some of their films did well with domestic audiences and were further popularised by Polish television. While their thematic focus on twentieth-century Polish history, especially the Second World War, had much in common with the Polish School, their specific take reflected two interwoven themes central to the regime's myth of the all-embracing anti-Nazi struggle: the glorification of the Polish military, and Germanophobia.⁵ The directors presented in this article were determined to construct a new national ethos and world-view, which consisted of three chief ingredients: socialism (later replaced by etatism), nationalism and heroism.

In contrast to the Polish School oeuvres, the films of Passendorfer and to some extent of Poręba acted not only as an ideological appendage of the party state but also as mainstream cinema, more conventional and influenced by commercial films than the early works of Wajda, Munk or Kazimierz Kutz. To put it bluntly, while Polish *auteurs* looked to the aesthetics of Italian neo-realism, French avant-garde or Japanese masters, Passendorfer and Poręba preferred such popular genres as the Western, heist movies, American Second World War combat films, Hollywood grand spectacles and Soviet war epics. Rather than investing in a serious artistic and intellectual dialogue with their viewers, they combined entertainment with didacticism. This choice cannot be simply explained by the absence of American popular cinema on Polish screens in the 1950s and 1960s. The claim of this article is that mainstream films sat well with the party regime. Aleksander Ford's *Teutonic Knights* (1960), an adaptation of Henryk Sienkiewicz's historical epic, attracted millions of viewers but also conveyed anti-German propaganda. Numerous transcripts of meetings of the Script Assessment Commissions and the Commissions of Film Approval, the part-governmental, part-industry committees scrutinising films, attest to high-ranking officials' attraction to popular cinema. In 1964, Stefan Olszowski, a hard-line member of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, participated in the assessment of Passendorfer's *Colours of Struggle*. He applauded the script and emphasised the value of popular genres: 'I think that we really need a partisan-action movie; I do not quite understand what constitutes a "historical fresco", but I am afraid that this term describes a film, which follows a format of history lecture . . . I would caution against this tendency to lecture.'⁶

Gomułka's cinematographer: Jerzy Passendorfer

The end of Stalinism in Poland and Władysław Gomułka's return to power in 1956 marked not only a crucial paradigm shift in the history of Polish communism

⁵ Joanna Wawrzyniak, *ZBOWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej, 1949–1969* (Warsaw: Trio, 2009), 13, 225.

⁶ Filmoteka Narodowa, Komisja Ocen Scenariuszy, A-214 poz. 300 (5 May 1964), *Barwy walki*.

but also the advent of the Polish Film School, a generation of film-makers who raised Polish cinema to international prominence. Gone was the doctrine of Socialist Realism, which had excelled in producing factory production dramas, ideologically rigid biographical epics of communist leaders, and vigilante thrillers unmasking class enemies, imperialist spies and saboteurs. Focusing their lens on the wartime experience, Wajda, Munk and Kazimierz Kutz questioned the Polish patriotic canon and its glorification of romantic heroism and martyrdom.⁷

But this historical and cultural revisionism coupled with new aesthetic approaches tended to contradict the regime's vision, which projected People's Poland as the end result of the struggles for independence and the culmination of national history. Wajda's *Kanal* (1957) and *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*, 1958) captured the tragedy of soldiers of the resistance Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, or AK) trapped in the sewers during the Warsaw uprising of 1944 and caught in the web of history after the liberation and communist takeover. Munk's takes on the Rising, Polish POWs and Nazi occupation were sarcastic, chilling and pessimistic. Above all, the leading members of the Polish School were more interested in offering some kind of therapy to the historically brutalised and politically confused war generation than in legitimising the party state. Their international success might have granted them some artistic independence, but it did not shield them from the criticism of Gomułka's watchdogs. The 1960 resolution of the Central Committee Secretariat of the party condemned some Polish films for their pessimism, Western influences and disagreement with the party programme.⁸

The most aggressive advocates of a blend of Communist nationalism, General Mieczysław Moczar's faction of 'Partisans', were even more explicit in their rejection of the Polish School.⁹ Colonel Zbigniew Żałoski, a historian and essayist close to Moczar, attacked Wajda and Munk for mocking the Polish insurrectionary tradition and neglecting the role of history. By promoting the ethic of 'the gutter', according to Żałoski, these so-called educators were contributing to the moral disarmament of the nation and the alienation of young people.¹⁰ Jan Srebrzyński described works by Munk and Wajda as nihilistic, anti-heroic and detached from historical truth.¹¹ The Partisans' position dramatically improved after Moczar's promotion to the positions of minister of internal affairs and chairman of the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację, ZBOWiD) veterans' union in 1964.

⁷ On the phenomenon of the Polish School see Paul Cotes, *The Red and the White: The Cinema of People's Poland* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005).

⁸ Marek Haltof, *Polish National Cinema* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 103.

⁹ The Partisans were high-ranking security and military officers who served in the People's Army (AL), a communist resistance group, during the war, and afterwards languished in second-rate government positions. Their ideological platform consisted of anti-Semitism, authoritarianism, militarism and opposition to liberalism of all kinds. They contrasted themselves, the 'home communists', to 'Muscovites' and 'Jews'. See Krzysztof Lesiakowski, *Mieczysław Moczar 'Mietek': Biografia polityczna* (Warsaw: Rytm, 1998), 222–3.

¹⁰ Zbigniew Żałoski, *Siedem polskich grzechów głównych* (Warsaw: Iskry, 1973), 222–9.

¹¹ Jan Srebrzyński, 'Tego rachunku nie podpiszemy', *Za Wolność i Lud*, 16–30 April 1968, 5.

By the late 1960s Moczar's union had gained almost 300,000 members, including 60,000 AK veterans.¹² The influx of former non-communist resisters reflected the partial rehabilitation of the AK after 1956, the Partisans' attempt to gain popularity among non-communists, and the alleged unity of the nation in the struggle against the Nazi occupiers.¹³ Moczar's own contribution to this myth was the publication of his war memoirs *Colours of Struggle (Barwy Walki)* in 1961. Praised by the party and lavished with numerous state prizes, the book glorified the communist partisans and acknowledged the limited co-operation between the People's Army (*Armia Ludowa*, or AL) and the AK on the battlefield, projecting the image of patriotic 'boys from the forest'.¹⁴

Three years after its publication, the book was adapted for the screen by Jerzy Passendorfer (1923–2003). Passendorfer's films of the late 1950s and 1960s made him an exemplary film-maker of Gomułka's period. In fact, it would be impossible to identify another director who so fully conveyed the historical and cultural aspirations of the regime, particularly its obsession with the Second World War and the sacrosanct myth of armed struggle.

Passendorfer's biography has much in common with the life stories of other Polish film-makers of his generation. Born in the eastern city of Wilno to the family of a career army officer, he was active in the underground theatre scene under Nazi occupation. A graduate of the Łódź film school and the Prague Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU), he switched from directing documentaries to making feature films after 1956. Passendorfer's second independent movie, *Answer to Violence (Zamach, 1958)* covered the 1944 assassination of Frantz Kutschera, the commander of SS and police in Warsaw, by the AK. The theme stemmed from the Polish School, but Passendorfer's execution set him apart from works by Wajda or Munk. It was a reconstruction of the military action, shot in the manner of heist movies, rather than a psychological portrayal of war-torn society and resisters. Furthermore, unlike Wajda's and Munk's pessimistic or ambiguous endings, the epilogue of the movie projected optimism: the surviving members of the AK commando unit went on fighting for a good cause. Thus Passendorfer steered away from the controversial subject of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, ignoring the tragic struggle of the AK soldiers as well as the survivors' persecution after the war. This optimism complied with the regime's message – the struggle against the Nazis was victorious; a nation could not survive without its heroes' courage and sacrifice.

Passendorfer's subsequent projects did even more to emphasise glorious victory, at the expense of tragedy. The 1963 adaptation of Wojciech Żukrowski's novel *Fire Bath (Skąpani w ogniu)* marked the beginning of the director's long collaboration with the writer. Passendorfer adored Żukrowski's prose, which he deemed ready-made for

¹² Wawrzyniak, *ZBOWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej*, 275–76.

¹³ In his 1964 address delivered at the commemoration ceremony of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, Zenon Kliszko, Gomułka's closest collaborator, went so far as to deny that there were any divisions among former resisters. See Zenon Kliszko, 'Nas już nic nie dzieli', *Za Wolność i Lud*, 16, 3 (1964).

¹⁴ Mieczysław Moczar, *Barwy walki* (Warsaw: WMON, 1961).

filming.¹⁵ *Fire Bath* tells the story of a young Polish army officer stationed in the Western Territories annexed from Germany after the war. Captain Sowiński's soldiers protect new settlers as well as the 'indigenous' population from gangs of looters and the Nazi underground. Passendorfer shot his movie in the manner of westerns. He would use the same technique and scriptwriter for the adaptation of Moczar's memoirs.

To his credit, Passendorfer skipped Moczar's dull rhetoric, choosing instead the action-oriented story of the partisans' struggle against the Nazis in the autumn of 1944. The film was a combat-packed drama with strong-willed commanders, goofy foot soldiers who often brought comic relief, and hundreds of extras. Lieutenant Kołacz's AL detachment rescues a delegate of the Central Committee of the party from the hands of Gestapo. But the partisans must also battle the German offensive and defend the civilian population against savage retribution. Overcoming mutual suspicions and political differences, Kołacz allies his men with a local AK unit. Together and with the help of the Red Army, they successfully repel the anti-partisan expedition. 'These boys from AK are really swell', says Kołacz's deputy when the two units go their separate ways after the battle, 'too bad they are not going with us'. But there are also villains in this story, the nationalist guerrillas from the National Armed Forces (NSZ) who nearly murder several of Kołacz's men and who deliver the communist delegate to the Nazis.

The discussion at the meeting of the Film Approval Commission in December 1964 is fascinating in its demonstration of enthusiastic support for Passendorfer's film, though there were also some disagreements. Nearly all discussants complimented the director's professionalism and ability to make an engaging combat movie. Jan Gerhard, writer and veteran of the Second World War, praised the filming of the derailment of a Nazi military train, comparing it to a similar act in *The Longest Day* (1962), produced by Darryl F. Zanuck, and proclaiming Passendorfer to be among the first film-makers worldwide to shoot such difficult scene.¹⁶ But the majority of comments focused on the film's historical and political content. Wincenty Kraśko, the head of the Culture Department of the Central Committee, highly complimented the film for showing a significant chapter of 'the nation's drama and tragedy, including the issue of AK'. Tadeusz Zaorski, chairman of the commission and Culture Minister, emphasised that until then Polish cinematography had lacked a film about the partisan struggle of the communist resistance.¹⁷

One bone of contention, however, was the exact wording of the final scene. In the film's original version, Kołacz watches the departing AK unit and declares: '[I hope] our paths cross again'. Zaorski and Stanisław Trepczyński, another government official, and film critic Tadeusz Karpowski objected to the line: seen from the

¹⁵ *Życie*, 'Widzenie świata', 27 August 2000.

¹⁶ Gerhard, former member of the French resistance, conspicuously ignored René Clément's *La Bataille du Rail* (1945); instead, he emphasised Passendorfer's credentials through the comparison with a Hollywood super production.

¹⁷ Zaorski conveniently ignored more complex and less politically explicit films such as Andrzej Wajda's *A Generation* (1955) and Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Shadow* (1956).

contemporary angle, the statement was correct, but in the context of 1944, it trivialised political differences between AK and AL and offered too far-reaching and didactic a prognosis. ‘It distorts the logic of history’, declared Trepczyński, ‘which should prompt AK-men to stay’. The director and the scriptwriter defended their version. ‘We should put it in pedagogical perspective’, observed Passendorfer. ‘I think that this scene constitutes the film’s main conclusion. . . . These people shared the experience of common struggle . . . and realised that [above all] they are [patriotic] Poles’. Zaorski sustained his objection. The final wording featured in the approved version followed director Czesław Petelski’s suggestion.¹⁸

Pro-party film critics described *Colours of Struggle* as ‘the resistance picture’, rehabilitating both the previously persecuted AK soldiers and the Polish left, patriotic and profoundly national.¹⁹ The film began a line-up of ever more optimistic war films: *Heading for Berlin* (*Kierunek Berlin*, 1968) and *The Last Days* (*Ostatnie dni*, 1969), depicting the Polish army units in the Berlin offensive, and *The Day of Purification* (*Dzień oczyszczenia*, 1969), the story of an encounter between AK and Soviet partisans, a testimony to the Polish–Soviet brotherhood in arms.

Passendorfer’s films dominated the cinema and television screens of Gomułka’s Poland ad nauseam. The circle was complete – with the exception of the far Right, all members of the resistance movement contributed to the victory over fascism in the spirit of national reunion. Although they part ways in 1944, the narrative has them subsequently coming together in contemporary Poland, joining the ranks of Moczar’s veterans’ union and servicing People’s Poland.

The optimistic and historicist doctrine of Gomułka’s regime ran up against the wall at the end of the decade. In 1968 the party government launched an anti-Semitic campaign, in which Moczar played a vital role, and took part in the Warsaw Treaty Organisation invasion of Dubcek’s Czechoslovakia. Two years later the Polish leader deployed army units against the striking workers on the Baltic Sea coast, killing dozens and wounding hundreds. The Polish army, that cherished bulwark of national pride, massacred Poles and brought enslavement to Czechs and Slovaks. Gomułka’s fall in December 1970 testified not only to his own failure but also to the ideological and moral bankruptcy of communism in Poland. Under the new, pragmatic-minded regime of Edward Gierek, communism in Poland entered its *belle époque* and underwent ideological demobilisation. But red nationalism did not vanish from Polish cinema and would manifest itself again in a different dress.

Party rebels: Bohdan Poręba and Ryszard Filipiński

Unlike Gomułka, Gierek was not an ideology-driven zealot but a pragmatic social engineer, more prone to manipulation than to outright authoritarianism, coercion and political crusades. Downplaying the gospel of Marxism, opening the country

¹⁸ FilMOTEKA Narodowa, Komisja Kolaudacyjna, A-216 poz.39 (3 Dec. 1964), *Barwy walki*.

¹⁹ Zbigniew Klaczyński, ‘Trudny optymizm’, *Kino*, 5 (1969), 4–7.

to the West, and focusing on the economy, the Gierek leadership led society in a profoundly un-ideological direction, away from austerity and ideological discourse and towards consumerism. Ultimately, Gierek's ambitious modernisation exposed the weakness of the Polish economy, the corruption of the ruling elite, and the inadequacy of the socio-political system. But before this happened, the complex legacies of the Second World War, communist takeover and Stalinism – all historical factors that determined the course of Gomułka's period – had faded.

Gierek brushed aside war films, ideological offensives and austerity, and brought in jeans, Coca-Cola, modern popular entertainment, cars and vacations on the Black Sea. Intellectual malcontents could be bought with material concessions and new venues for the expression of their concerns, TV programmes, new theatres or publishing. These were 'safety vents', affordable and easy to control if necessary.

Initially the paradigm shift in the state's cultural policies was quite convincing. In comparison with the Gomułka era, the use of official nationalism and history dramatically decreased. Patriotism, according to Gierek, was essentially the 'patriotism of labour', consisting of the support for state interests and daily fulfilment of citizen duties.²⁰ A war veteran was no longer the embodiment of supreme virtues, the symbol of the system; now the hero of the hour was a socialist manager, an engineer building a new factory or a competent technocrat, as exemplified in one of the most hailed TV serials of the period, *Managers (Dyrektorzy)*.

Gierek's strategy left a strong imprint on cinematic life. Film-makers in Poland always considered themselves public intellectuals whose duty was to respond to and critique social, political, economic and cultural processes. And Gierek's Poland offered plentiful themes. In the long term the self-described technocratic and competent regime proved to be corrupt and inept, but at least it remained relatively lenient and tolerant of criticism. Both sets of attitudes eventually backfired, bringing to life the flagship of Polish cinema in the 1970s, the Cinema of Moral Angst.²¹

In 1955, in one of its attempts to make film-makers comply with the party line, the regime reorganised the film industry into a system of film units (*zespoły filmowe*). Each unit was managed by a prominent director, scriptwriter or cinematographer, who was responsible to government officials. But under Gierek's self-proclaimed meritocracy, by the mid-1970s the film units had evolved into production teams that often reflected their managers' diverse artistic tastes and political persuasions. For example, Wajda, the head of the film company Unit X, actively promoted a young generation of film-makers, among them Agnieszka Holland, Krzysztof Kieślowski and Marcełi Łoziński, whose biting critique of a society in crisis and corruption led to the birth of the Cinema of Moral Angst. On the other side of the divide stood Passendorfer's Panorama unit, which grouped pro-party veteran directors and like-minded younger film-makers who did not share Wajda's or Holland's zeal in

²⁰ Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm* (Warsaw: Trio, 2001), 372.

²¹ For the most up-to-date discussion of the Cinema of Moral Angst, also known as the Cinema of Moral Concern, consult Dobrochna Dabert, *Kino moralnego niepokoju* (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2003).

unmasking the discrepancy between the government's propaganda of success and everyday life realities. One of these recruits was Bohdan Poręba (1934–).

Born in Wilno in the family of an army officer, Poręba graduated from the Łódź Film School in 1955. His first project, the documentary *Island of Great Hopes* (*Wyspa wielkiej nadziei*, 1957), on the children's sanatorium in Otwock, was a touching film about pain and hope. The distorted faces and bodies of children suffering from osteoarticular tuberculosis put the movie into the tradition of the 'black series', short documentaries made around the turn of October 1956 that contradicted and exposed the lies of the Socialist Realist cinema, and portrayed a world of alcoholism, hooliganism, prostitution and city ruins not previously seen in Polish documentary films.²² But unlike a majority of these films, Poręba's documentary had a happy ending: successful surgeries, treatment, and replacement of the wooden barracks with a modern sanatorium building.

Optimism prevailing over human destructiveness was also present in the director's first two features, *Sleepwalkers* (*Lunatycy*, 1959) and *Road to the West* (*Droga na zachód*, 1961). The first film chronicled the redemption of a young hooligan, and the second told the story of Polish train carrying ammunition to the front in 1945. As the train crosses through former German lands, its military guards battle the remnants of the German army and Nazi saboteurs. Eventually all the soldiers are killed, but the old machinist delivers the train to its destination. The film was the blueprint for Poręba's subsequent themes. It focused on a history of Polish–German relations, always portrayed as a constant and mortal conflict. Its message praised Polish resilience, heroism and ultimate victory. The film also marked the first instance of disputes between the director and the authors of the script, who in protest against Poręba's arbitrary and substantial changes withdrew their names from the opening credits.²³

Poręba's films of the 1960s followed this trajectory. In *Long Is the Journey* (*Daleka jest droga*, 1963) a veteran of the Polish army in the West overcomes his lack of trust towards a new communist Poland, sacrifices his relationship with an English girl, and returns to the fatherland to execute the last wish of his fallen comrade, the construction of a school building. In *On the Oder* (*Nad Odrą*, 1965),²⁴ a family of Polish settlers in the Western Territories refuses the offer of assistance from the former German owner of their house.

Uninspiring and highly didactic, these films failed to establish Poręba as a leading film-maker. Furthermore, *Long Is the Journey* met with a chilly reception in the government, leading to what the director later described as the period of 'film unemployment', which lasted until 1969 (Poręba's work on *Last Day – First Day* partly contradicts this claim). Fortune smiled on Poręba with the 1968 March crisis,

²² Mikołaj Jazdon, 'Czarna Seria, 1955–1958', in *Polska Szkoła Dokumentu: Czarna Seria* (Warsaw: Polskie Wydawnictwo Audiowizualne, 2008).

²³ Information obtained from the Polish Film database, available at <http://www.filmpolski.pl> (last accessed 21 Dec. 2011).

²⁴ *Nad Odrą* is a film novella, part of *Last Day— First Day* (*Dzień ostatni – Dzień pierwszy*), a collective project devoted to the portrayal of Poland shortly after the liberation. The film was blocked by censorship until 1981.

the anti-Semitic campaign, and the purge of several veteran film-makers, Aleksander Ford, Wanda Jakubowska and Jerzy Zarzycki, whom he considered guilty of his misfortunes. He also perceived the March crisis as a 'chance for restoring Polishness'. In 1969 he joined the Communist Party and returned to directing films.²⁵

Poręba's breakthrough occurred in 1973 with *Hubal*, a controversial epic about legendary Major Henryk Dobrzański 'Hubal' (1897–1940), the first partisan commander in the Second World War, portrayed by Ryszard Filipiński (1934–) in an outstanding performance. Far from being an accurate historical reconstruction, Poręba's film was the director's subjective immortalisation of Hubal, his political and artistic creed, Poręba's contribution to 'the making of national cinematography'. The director's changes to the script of Jan Józef Szczepański caused the writer to withdraw his name from the credits. It seems that Poręba decided to cut the scene of Hubal's sexual encounter with a peasant girl.²⁶ Censorship brought another set of modifications. Anyone familiar with the story of Hubal knew that the legendary cavalryman had spent most of the September 1939 campaign fighting and eluding the Red Army, not the Nazis. Needless to say, this part of Hubal's biography, and the references to his participation in Piłsudski's Legions and the 1920 Polish–Bolshevik war, were absent.

But it is the portrayal of Dobrzański that makes the film an example of historical manipulation serving the communist regime. The movie begins with 1939 Polish, German, English and French newsreels, contrasting the destruction of Poland and the heroic struggle of its defenders with the 'Phoney War' of London and Paris, and shown against a sarcastic soundtrack counterpoising Parisian waltzes and Polish military songs. The meaning is clear: the Western Allies betrayed Poland, while the pre-war government, which had aggrandised the country as a military superpower, collapsed like a deck of cards. In one of the dialogues, Dobrzański, a career cavalry officer and Olympic equestrian, and Piłsudski's follower, demands the trial of pre-war leaders and a profound change in the country's socio-political order.

The major's insubordination to the underground authorities that called for the disbandment of the unit is portrayed as a conflict between a patriotic soldier and calculating politicians who delay the starting moment of open struggle against the Nazi occupier, a frequent accusation made against the AK by the regime's propaganda. Poręba's Hubal is the leader of a plebeian and all-embracing national guerrilla force. Following the tradition of romantic insurrections, he draws upon peasants and various odd bedfellows – a patriotic clerk, a local priest, and idealistic landlords. Frequent references to village-style Catholicism, envisioned as the natural order of things, distinguish Poręba's film from other period pieces. On one occasion Hubal leads his soldiers to a local church for a traditional Christmas Eve mass and joins the astonished peasants in singing a nineteenth-century version of 'God Save Poland'. Notably, while soldiers stand erect, the villagers are on their knees facing the major. The desecration of Hubal's body by the Nazis in the film's ending – his corpse was carried on a

²⁵ *Prawda, dobro i piękno. Film o Bohdanie Porębie*. 2009. Directed by Ksawery Szczepanik.

²⁶ Grzegorz Sroczyński, 'Poręba chce zmartwychwstać', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 3 April 2008.

manure-covered horse cart among cheering German soldiers – offers another display of quasi-religious patriotic symbols. Throughout the movie the director often relies on Wojciech Kossak's militaristic and kitschy paintings.

In somewhat prophetic fashion, anticipating General Wojciech Jaruzelski's rhetoric of martial law, Poręba presents Hubal as a soldier hero who stands for continuing statehood, an administrator and a lawmaker. In one memorable scene, a bandit sentenced to death by the major cries out that in the absence of any authority and political power the verdict is unlawful. 'I am the power,' Hubal shouts back, 'and anybody who violates the sacred laws of this land will meet the same end'.

Poręba's film met with an enthusiastic reception by the authorities. At the meeting of the Film Approval Commission in May 1973, much praise was lavished on him. Only directors Jerzy Kawalerowicz and Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski seemed to be perturbed by the movie's length and its sluggish parts, its didactic and primitive symbolism, and the shallow portrayal of the Germans. But these few objections carried little weight against the commendation of the film's political content. Colonel Załuski admired the film and pronounced it to be profoundly Polish and yet universal in its romanticism, comparing Hubal's ultimate sacrifice to that of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. This was not only the story of an individual's death, but also of the exit of a Poland of nobility and heroic horsemen. The film had enormous potential for educating and shaping the political conscience of the young generation. Poręba himself added that he had tried to record a legend, a patriotic myth, necessary for sustaining the wellbeing of society. Nation needed heroes such as Hubal, the defender of the past, and yet the herald of the future. Poręba easily won the commission's approval.²⁷

Hubal won Poręba numerous honours and the opportunity to establish his own production unit, Profile. The film met with a warm response from audiences, but film critics and political pundits were divided. To be sure, pro-regime commentators were close to ecstatic. Załuski anticipated a great international success. 'It is not an accident', he wrote, that 'the legend of Hubal won the heart of Fidel Castro'. Referring to the anti-heroic approaches of the Polish School, he stated: 'Five years ago, this would have been an unfashionable icon, but now we have entered a phase of new political thinking . . . In this respect, *Hubal* is the first Polish non-provincial film, addressing dominant trends in contemporary cinema, particularly the revolutionary romanticism of recent years'.²⁸ Stanisław Zieliński, a veteran of the 1939 campaign, also close to the Partisans in the 1960s, was initially more sceptical.

The Poland of September and October (1939) seemed too colourful to me, the village folk too calm and dignified, the army devoid of the stigma of defeat. But one line made me believe in Poręba's vision: 'Why is it so quiet?' I will never forget what a blow the silence from Warsaw was [after its capitulation].²⁹

²⁷ FN, KK, A-344 poz. 42 (29 May 1973), *Hubal*.

²⁸ Interview quoted in 'Wokół Hubala', *Kino*, 11 (1973), 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Klaczyński, an admirer of Passendorfer's 'difficult optimism', declared in *Trybuna Ludu* that the story of Hubal's partisans is part of a broad historical process, the build-up of a new political system, which stemmed from the struggle against fascism.³⁰

On the other hand, Rafał Marszałek questioned the triumphalism and fetishisation of military uniform as well as the projected division between active soldiers and passive peasant masses.³¹ Aleksander Ledóchowski went even further, accusing Poręba of imposing his own arbitrary vision of Hubal, ignoring the antagonisms of pre-war society, failing on the artistic front, and cultivating primitive didacticism.³²

Such criticisms notwithstanding, at the time, it looked as if the film had raised Poręba and Filipiński to prominence and fame. But they were both swimming against the tide. Załuski's announcement of a romantic revival stood in clear contrast with the moral and socio-political climate in Gierek's Poland and elsewhere. Moreover, the appearance of the democratic opposition and the underground press in the second half of the 1970s was undermining the monopoly of state-sanctioned media and culture on the representation of national history. Meanwhile, the Polish cinematic community was more interested in unmasking the moral condition of Polish society than in immortalising yet another icon from the pantheon of nationalist heroes. It was the Cinema of Moral Angst, not *Hubal*, that strengthened the reputation of Polish cinema worldwide. Poręba tried to tap into this mood in *Where Grass Is Green and Water Clean* (*Gdzie woda czysta i trawa zielona*, 1977), his own take on a story of an individual's failed confrontation with local corruption in Gierek's Poland. But unlike the characters in films by Kieślowski or Holland, Poręba's protagonist is not an alienated intellectual, idealistic film-maker or former convict but a party secretary, a detail that robbed the film of credibility.

It was not until the fall of Gierek and the birth of Solidarity that both Poręba and Filipiński fully expressed their nationalist-communist views on the screen. The two film-makers benefited from the ferment of open discussion, but they produced films that went unappreciated by both society and the embattled regime. Still Filipiński's *Coup d'état* (*Zamach stanu*) and Poręba's *Polonia Restituta*, made in 1980 and released in 1981, a few months before Jaruzelski's declaration of martial law, are symptomatic of Moczar's later followers' reading of the Solidarity crisis and national history.

Coup d'état was actor Filipiński's first and last attempt at directing a film. The production began in 1979 and concluded in 1980, just weeks before the summer 1980 strikes that led to the creation of Solidarity and the most profound crisis of communist rule in Poland. The massive, long epic (160 minutes) depicted the launching of the successful coup d'état by Marshal Józef Piłsudski (portrayed by Filipiński himself) in May 1926, the crushing of the anti-*Sanacja* opposition in 1930, and the subsequent establishment of an authoritarian dictatorship. The film did not attempt to reconstruct the history of the Second Polish Republic, something Jerzy Kawalerowicz sought to do in *Death of a President* (*Śmierć prezydenta*, 1977), about the

³⁰ Ibid., 24.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Aleksander Ledóchowski, 'Żołnierz Rzeczypospolitej', *Kino*, 9 (1973), 2–9.

1922 assassination of the first Polish president Gabriel Narutowicz by a nationalist fanatic; rather, like Poręba's *Major Hubal*, it conveyed the director's personal view of 'what should have happened'. It is worth mentioning that the author of the script, journalist Ryszard Gontarz, excelled himself in the 1968 anti-Semitic campaign. Both he and Filipki belonged to the circle of Moczar's sympathisers.

Historically, the conflicts that triggered the 1926 coup d'état stemmed from the profoundly different backgrounds and political visions of the three dominant figures of independent Poland: Roman Dmowski, the leader of the National Democratic Party; Piłsudski, formerly the head of the Polish Socialist Party; and Wincenty Witos, the peasant leader. Instead of paying attention to nuances or offering historical analysis, Filipki begins his movie in 1925, with the pro-Piłsudski officers' demonstration. He presents the coup as a desperate action of power-hungry men against parliamentary democracy and almost immediately moves to the Great Depression and the crushing of democratic opposition. While showing Piłsudski's charisma, Filipki condemned his policy without paying any attention to the origins of his dramatic evolution. The film carries no coverage of the period prior to the coup d'état, nor does it offer any treatment of the programmes of the main political forces. Watching this film would never inform viewers about what differentiated Piłsudski from Witos or why Piłsudski's action sat so well with large segments of society. Filipki's Piłsudski is an opportunistic, two-faced and egomaniacal petty dictator without an identifiable world-view. Dmowski's National Democrats, who were the dominant force on the Right and Piłsudski's principal adversaries, are missing from the plot. The only people who come out well in this portrayal are Witos's peasants and several socialist activists.

Filipki's craft is also in doubt: the screen is populated by dozens if not hundreds of characters who make their appearance on the screen, deliver lines, and then depart without any contextualisation. The film's best part, the reconstruction of the Brest trial of opposition leaders, owns its strength not to Filipki's directing skills but to fascinating court transcripts. Symbolism balances on the edge of kitsch: a barefoot Witos ploughing his land, triumphant land aristocrats celebrating their alliance with the new regime in a huge ballroom, scenes of civil war in 1926 reappear in the movie's epilogue against the soundtrack of Piłsudskiite 'First Brigade' song. One can even detect anti-Semitic undertones such as the close-up of uninterested Jewish merchants devouring sandwiches while lonely Witos struggles to walk among unsympathetic passers-by.

While shooting *Coup d'état* in 1979, Filipki could not have foreseen the Solidarity revolution, but his film was released in 1981, amidst the confrontation between the party and the trade union. Analogies between the crisis of parliamentary rule in 1926 and the contemporary events of 1980 proved decisive for the reception of this otherwise mediocre drama. The controversial decision of the jury of the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia to award it the major prize in the autumn of 1980, after the August accords that paved the way for the creation of Solidarity, only added fuel to the heated debate. Was the film a warning against the conditions of political anarchy that necessitated the intervention of a strong man? *Coup d'état* constitutes one of the examples in the history of cinema when the timing of a premiere moves a film into a context far different from that originally planned.

The film was shunned by audiences, panned by film critics, and lambasted by professional historians, even those close to the regime. The latter reaction illustrates an interesting and important phenomenon that occurred during the Solidarity crisis: the return of historians to public discourse due to the relaxation of censorship, and the fervour of open debates that swept Poland during the sixteen months of legal Solidarity.

Neither the scholars nor the journalist invited by Barbara Mruklik of the monthly *Kino* to the panel devoted to Filipiński's film were Solidarity members or sympathisers. Professors Marek Drozdowski, Piotr Łossowski, Henryk Jankowski and Józef Szaffik, one of the purge masters of Polish academia in 1968, and Kazimierz Koźniewski of the *Polityka* weekly were deeply implicated in the politics of the history of the communist regime. Nevertheless, in their verdict on *Coup d'état* they acted as decisive executioners. They accused the director of shallow analysis of the 1926 events, historical errors and total lack of comprehension of the complexities of the Second Polish Republic.³³

One significant fact on which the critics failed to remark, however, was Filipiński's reintroduction of Marshal Piłsudski to the cinema of People's Poland after decades of conspicuous absence. Of course, Filipiński's portrayal of Piłsudski was utterly negative. Still, considering the fact that this exploit took place before the birth of Solidarity and the subsequent revolution in depicting Poland's recent past, evidenced, for example, in the 'reopening' of the Katyn case and the official, even if partial rehabilitation of General Władysław Sikorski, Prime Minister of the Government-in-Exile, *Coup d'état* deserves sustained attention.

Was Gierek's regime already so ideologically decadent that it relaxed its grip on the treatment of the past or at least proved inconsistent in the politics of history? This seems to be only part of an answer. Arguably, the same de-ideologisation provided outlets for those elements within the party state and its cultural institutions that contested political atrophy, paid close attention to the use of history, and even tried to excavate and recycle non-communist, nationalist icons and tropes. The usual suspects are Moczar's followers. But we cannot only think of the Partisans who by the beginning of the 1980s were often reaching retirement. We can identify the 'post-Partisan' cohort of nationalist-communist pundits, men such as journalist Ryszard Frelek and party historian Włodzimierz Kowalski who, working in tandem, produced a number of historical plays on the Second World War for Polish TV. Still in their thirties at the time of the Partisans' offensive, they swallowed 'Moczar's bite' but also proved quite successful in adapting to and benefiting from the climate of Gierek's *belle époque*. They opposed both the ideological atrophy of the 1970s and the advent of the democratic opposition, preparing the ground for General Wojciech Jaruzelski's ostensibly nationalist and post-Marxist authoritarianism of the 1980s. In *Polonia Restituta*, shot in 1980, but fortuitously released in the same year as Filipiński's movie, Połęba the director, Kowalski the scriptwriter and Frelek the consultant

³³ 'Zamach na epokę', *Kino*, 5 (1981), 24–8.

went even further than *Coup d'état*, partially rehabilitating the roles of Piłsudski and Dmowski in the history of twentieth-century Poland.

Polonia Restituta presented a chronicle of the events that led to Poland's independence in 1918. It was shot in numerous locations, including Paris, London, Washington, Rome and Saint Petersburg, and required the participation of hundreds of actors and extras, so the budget exceeded the astronomical amount of 100 million zloty. Poreba's reconstruction is crowded with historical and fictitious figures, but the two characters who stand above the others are Roman Dmowski and Piłsudski. It is clear that the film presents both politicians as the fathers of independent Poland. Next in the hierarchy of the contributors to the rebirth of Poland is, perhaps rather surprisingly, Lenin, or rather the Bolshevik revolution. The Western leaders, Georges Clemenceau, Woodrow Wilson and Lloyd George, occupy different positions in this narrative. Moderately pro-Polish (Clemenceau and Wilson) or anti-Polish (Lloyd George), they display a contemptible ignorance and lack of understanding of Polish reality. *Polonia Restituta* deems the end result, the restitution of sovereignty, a largely indigenous affair, while promoting the myth of national unity in the struggles for independence.

The problem was that in 1981 optimistic historicism and the cinematic resurrection of Dmowski and Piłsudski no longer sufficed for success. The film was dreadfully long (219 minutes), the characters flat and underdeveloped; they resemble figures from a wax museum or puppets, thrown onto and then removed from stage. The film relies on tomes of verbatim transcripts of negotiations, speeches and nationalist diatribes that are often presented in their original version but are not contextualised or qualified. A Roman Catholic priest from the former German partition thunders against freemasonry, which sabotages the incorporation of Danzig and Pomerania into Poland. Dmowski curses 'masons and Jews – all servants of the King of Prussia'. While negotiating minority rights treaties, which all new successor states were compelled to sign, Dmowski, a virulent anti-Semite, asks Lloyd George: 'And how will you guarantee the protection of Jews in Germany?' Here the viewer is manipulated into recalling the Holocaust, which took place twenty years after the Versailles Treaty: Dmowski leaves audiences with a sense of foreboding.

The script by Włodzimierz Kowalski was full of deliberate omissions and distortions. The life-long antagonism between Dmowski and Piłsudski and their profoundly different visions of Poland were swept under the carpet. Viewers might well walk away from the film convinced that the leader of the National Democrats acted as Piłsudski's ally if not emissary. The Polish-Bolshevik war, ethnic conflicts (with the exception of Polish-German clashes in Silesia and Poznan), and ethnic minorities are entirely missing.

In contrast to previous film approval meetings discussed in this article, the meeting in which the committee assessed Poreba's work in December 1980 was a stormy debate, which reflected the twin phenomena of free discussion and pluralist discourse brought by the advent of Solidarity, but also Poreba's unpopularity in the Polish film-making community. Half of the committee's twenty members, including the doyen of Polish film criticism, Aleksander Jackiewicz, walked out of the room after the first

part of the meeting. The acclaimed director Krzysztof Zanussi – one of the towering figures of the Cinema of Moral Angst – Wajda, and Jerzy Hoffman – the director of acclaimed historical epics – voiced strong objections to the cinematic quality of *Polonia Restituta*, above all, to the script, character development, bad acting and even makeup effects. Neither a fully-fledged feature film, nor a historical docudrama, Poręba's production was perhaps suitable for TV rather than cinema screens, argued Zanussi, who also pointed to its enormous budget. Wajda seconded: the screenplay read like a collection of historical records, not a movie script, which should bring life into protagonists. The casting of actor Janusz Zakrzewski in the role of Piłsudski was a huge mistake. 'I think that the leadership of [our] film industry cannot make such decisions without consulting the film-makers' community', complained Wajda.³⁴

The reaction of invited historians and journalists was less critical yet not unanimous, oscillating between muted criticism, limited approval and enthusiastic support. 'I must admit that I am perturbed by the fact that all the characters in this film are right, Piłsudski, Dmowski and Lenin', historian Feliks Tych commented. 'I have the feeling that we are reading an attractive history textbook, printed on good paper, but not necessarily well composed.' Writer Witold Zalewski shared the film-makers' objections: 'These historical characters are turned into puppets; their actions are not very convincing'. On the other hand, Wojciech Żukrowski criticised Hoffman and Zanussi for condemning trivialities, such as the clumsy wig of an actor portraying Ignacy Paderewski, and neglecting the essential message of the film: the birth of national unity in former partitions. Two military consultants, Colonels Eugeniusz Kozłowski and Waclaw Ryzewski, echoed this opinion. 'What we have learned from this film is that Poland owed its independence to the effort of all patriots, representatives of different political options [for example], members of General Haller's army and communists.'³⁵

Kowalski and Poręba defended their project vehemently and emotionally, attacking their adversaries. 'Today's discussion has confirmed my belief that cinema is too important to leave it to [film-makers], people like Wajda, Hoffman and Zanussi', said Kowalski. 'I am scared by the mentality of the representatives of Polish culture and cinema . . . What matters is not the budget of a film but its resonance and impact on historical education'. He praised *Polonia Restituta* for breaking taboos and dogmas in the official coverage of Polish history. Hamletising Poręba described himself as a victim of the hate campaign launched by his enemies from the film community. He claimed that the film even met with a good reception from Solidarity members. 'I am not going to retreat from the convention I proposed', he concluded. Chairman Michał Misiorny, head of the Cinematography Committee, approved the release of Poręba's film, though not unconditionally; he recommended cutting down lengthy scenes and bringing more life to the characters.³⁶

³⁴ FN, KK, A-344 poz. 249 (23 Dec. 1980), *Polonia Restituta*.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ Ibidem.

The film played to half-empty cinemas. Audiences often consisted of military recruits and schoolchildren herded by their head teachers (this was the author's experience in 1982). Before the imposition of martial law and the crackdown on Solidarity the majority of film critics trashed the film in the manner of Wajda and Zanussi.³⁷ Poręba and Kowalski offered an ideal of Polish patriotism that simply excluded any dichotomies and rivalries, but what the authors of *Polonia Restituta* did not understand or chose to ignore was the fact that the highly politicised and divided Polish society of 1981 was no longer interested in buying this nationalist-communist product.

The immediate afterlife of *Coup d'état* and *Polonia Restituta* is highly revealing of Jaruzelski's Poland. During the period of martial law both films were turned into television series. It seemed that Jaruzelski's endorsement of strong nationalist rhetoric and authoritarian etatism would greatly benefit the two film-makers, but following the fiasco of his directorial debut Filipki quit the film industry for nearly twenty years. Poręba went on to direct mediocre films, including another collective project with Kowalski, *Catastrophe in Gibraltar (Katastrofa w Gibraltarze, 1983)*, a dishonest take on the life of General Władysław Sikorski that even exceeded earlier projects' manipulative use of history. The director was again swimming against the tide. First, the era marked the general demise of Polish cinema. With the emigration or deliberate silence of leading directors, and the actors' boycott of TV and pro-regime films, Polish film-making plunged into darkness. What was left of it was not enough to offer escapism for a society worn out by ongoing political conflict and deepening economic crisis. Second, Poręba's political ties with the party hardliners, and especially their nationalist faction, cut him off from Jaruzelski. In 1981 Poręba became the chairman of the Patriotic Union 'Grunwald', a nationalist-communist and anti-Semitic association with close links to the security police. Always posing as a reformer, Jaruzelski distanced himself from the most hated and compromised faction of his party. As a result of his political choices and artistic incompetence, Poręba sank into oblivion, and to this day he lives by the self-ascribed glories of past achievements, *Major Hubal* especially. He has not made any films since 1991, and in all likelihood he never will.

Conclusions: historical films after 1989

The story of the cinematic vision propagating a nationalist-communist fusion offers valuable insights into the evolving nature of communist rule in Poland and the responses that this evolution drew from the film community. The cinema of People's Poland was not just populated by talents who also happened to harbour oppositional views. The films discussed here not only transmitted the regime's intentions and aspirations but also reflected socio-cultural attitudes and mores that did not form part of Wajda's or Zanussi's vision: instances of genuine support for the party state, aggressive nationalism and militarism. In the end, when utilising cinematic sources in

³⁷ Barbara Mruklik, 'Historia z fotoplastikonu', *Kino*, 8 (1981), 12–15.

historical research, we need both sides of the coin, Wajda and Passendorfer, Zanussi and Poręba.

But what happened to the genre of historical epic films in post-communist Poland? After the decades of state censorship, one could expect a historically revisionist cinema that could address such previously repressed traumas as the 1944 Warsaw Uprising or offer affirmative takes on the Solidarity revolution and the collapse of communism. These dramas could be the flagships of the cinematic legitimisation of a new democratic nation state. They could also close various chapters of 'national mourning' and foster a new optimistic national identity.³⁸ Yet such films did not materialise. The cinema of independent Poland never acquired a bard of didactic historicism and national consensus comparable to Steven Spielberg – and a very good thing too. But it also failed to produce such therapeutic dramas as the American *Forrest Gump*, the Czech *Kolya*, and the German *The Lives of Others*.

There is a multitude of explanations. First of all, it is the cost of the country's socio-economic transformation. Economics rather than history preoccupied audiences. But film-makers are often capable of producing films that make history attractive to viewers in spite of economic hardships and concerns. The British War School of the 1950s provides a good example of popular historical films that boosted the morale of society perturbed by the economy of shortage, the collapse of colonial empire, and the loss of their position of great power. Far more important was the privatisation of film industry and the loss of state subsidies. No longer under the protective umbrella of the state, Polish film-makers had to compete with mainstream Hollywood movies and cater to those producers who cared mostly about profit. A number of older acclaimed directors did not adapt to this transition, or they simply ran out of steam. Others concentrated on entertainment. Both approaches proved futile, breeding artistic impotence in the portrayal of the recent past. Wajda's anachronistic and shunned *The Crown-Eagled Ring* (*Pierścionek z włosa z orłem w koronie*, 1993) about the unsuccessful adaptation of an AK officer to the new communist order and Władysław Pasikowski's *Dogs* (*Psy*, 1992), the action-packed redemption of a former security policeman, illustrate this phenomenon quite well. The belated farewell to the Polish School lost out to a violent Hollywood-style gangster movie. Wajda's tale of martyrdom did not end national mourning. Pasikowski's vision presented a contemporary Polish hero as a tough, violent macho-man.³⁹

The only director who came close to delivering therapeutic and affirmative historical dramas in the 1990s was veteran Kazimierz Kutz. His *Death as a Slice of Bread* (*Śmierć jak kromka chleba*, 1994) is about the sit-in Solidarity strike and the subsequent massacre of workers by communist police and armed forces at the Wujek coal mine in December 1981. The partly farcical, partly tragic *The Turned Back* (*Zawrócony*, 1994) chronicles the transformation of a simple man and party member

³⁸ Kuba Mikurda, 'Przypadek Pękońskiego Grzegorza Królikiewicza czyli ćwiczenia z historii', in Agnieszka Wiśniewska and Piotr Marecki, eds, *Kino Polskie 1989–2009: historia krytyczna* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2010), 47.

³⁹ On Pasikowski's cinema, see Bożena Keff, 'Psy Władysława Pasikowskiego, czyli Polska jest twardzielem', in Wiśniewska and Marecki, *Kino Polskie*, 25–34.

into the communist regime's opponent. *Colonel Kwiatkowski* (*Pulkownik Kwiatkowski*, 1995) is a comedy about a military surgeon-turned-con-artist who, while posing as a high security official, helps victims of communist henchmen. Out of the three, *Death as a Slice of Bread* is the only large-scale Polish feature film on the Solidarity revolution. Although laden with pathos and the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy, it is not exactly a 'patriotic epic'. A long-time bard of his native Silesia region and explorer of the 'plebeian' current in Polish cinema, Kutz celebrates ordinary men and heroes, focusing his camera lens on a collective rather than on single protagonists.⁴⁰ In doing so, he borrows from the classic of urban guerrilla movies, Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*. Despite Kutz's self-proclaimed agnosticism, the movie also conveys the Christian ideas of selfless sacrifice and redemption. Kutz avoids demonising people who stood on the other side of barricade, party members, soldiers and policemen. There are no calls for retribution or references to contemporary politics.⁴¹ Kutz complements the myth of Solidarity by removing the black-and-white Manichean perspective on the communist past.

Kutz's movie went against two contemporary trends in Polish society and politics of the 1990s: the de-mythologising of Solidarity following the breakup of the union into rival parties and the return of the ex-communist Left to power. Furthermore its limited popularity also reflects the last factor responsible for the relative absence of recent history on film screens – the lack of consensus among the country's political and cultural elites on a history of Solidarity, anti-communist opposition and the collapse of communism in 1989. Competing visions of the past have prevented the making of epics that could instil a new collective identity based on confidence. As a result, Polish historical films retreated into a shell, either comic book or cult of martyrdom, which promotes what Bożena Keff describes as the dominant component in contemporary national identity, the 'capitalist-nationalist-Catholic world-view (*światopogląd kapitalistyczno-narodowo-katolicki*, or k-n-k)'. The k-n-k vision is based on several constructs: the Polish nation is always innocent; all national calamities have external origins; the Poles share no responsibility for the tragedies of others.⁴² Keff's definition seems highly relevant to the portrayal of history in post-1989 cinema. In a way, the capitalist-nationalist-Catholic trinity logically replaces the socialist-nationalist-militarist fusion of red nationalist film-makers, promoting uncritical historicism and reducing the past to what Raphael Samuel defines in Benjamin's fashion as a 'plaything of the present'.⁴³

It is a paradox that Andrzej Wajda's *Katyn* (2007), the most acclaimed historical drama of recent years, comes surprisingly close to the vision of national history and identity described by Keff but also to Poreba's narrow patriotic didacticism. Of course, cinematically, beautifully crafted *Katyn* and sloppy *Polonia Restituta* are as different as day and night. Given the movie's subject, particularly the afterlife of

⁴⁰ Haltof, *Polish National Cinema*, 186–7.

⁴¹ Aleksandra Klich, *Cały ten Kutz: biografia niepokorna* (Kraków: Znak, 2009), 262.

⁴² Keff, 'Rewers Borysa Lankosza, czyli chłop, diabeł, wice-żyd', in Wiśniewska and Marecki, *Kino Polskie*, 243–4.

⁴³ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 429.

the Katyn massacre in communist Poland, it is tempting to see Wajda's movie as revisionist cinema, which delivers a blow to the founding 'murder' of the party state. While reviewing *Katyn* on the pages of *The New York Review of Books*, Anne Applebaum wrote that Wajda's movie provides a valid example of 'patriotic cinema'. She also claimed that in this movie, just as in his earlier works, Wajda conducts 'cinematic dialogue with Polish audiences'.⁴⁴ I must disagree with the second statement. Dialogue is an exchange of ideas; in films it also means ambiguity – a film-maker does not claim to have the last word but invites viewers to reflect and articulate their own interpretations. Wajda's *Katyn* lacks this flexibility and constitutes a monologue.

Artur Żmijewski, one of the most innovative visual artists in contemporary Poland, and a contributor to the left-leaning *Krytyka Polityczna* cultural review, defines Wajda's historiosophy: since the Katyn crime constitutes the founding fallacy of the communist regime, 'the world under [the communists'] lead leaves no other choice but death'.⁴⁵ Major Jerzy, who survived the massacre and compromised himself by joining the communist army, commits suicide. Tadeusz, the son of a victim and a former AK partisan, dies after tearing down a pro-communist poster.⁴⁶ Agnieszka, the sister of a murdered officer, crusades for the accurate description of her brother's death on his symbolic grave. She confronts cowardice, apathy and the menace of communist authorities, but also her own sister, a high school principal who has adjusted to the new reality. Arrested by the security police, she descends into the dungeon and torture chambers.

The much-anticipated and prolonged reconstruction of the killing, coming *after* the film's post-war segments, breaks the linear narrative of the movie, 'corrects' the lie, and compels audiences to mourn the victims. Wajda leaves nothing to the imagination of the viewer: everything is communicated and explained. He recycles symbols and iconography he has used before, this time, however, often on the verge of kitsch. Wajda constructs a monument to the fallen. But does he conclude national mourning? 'In People's Poland, film-makers made movies about victory or at least, about the continuing struggle and resistance', writes Żmijewski. 'Today, in the free world, we make films about disasters, victims and those who lost.'⁴⁷

Żmijewski's take may be too selective, and his judgment too abrasive, but little suggests that Polish cinema, after the decades of cultivating ideology-driven historicism and pedagogy, is capable of producing dramas that advance not only the knowledge of history, but also its honest analysis and understanding. Despite vastly different socio-political and cinematic environments, the difference between the bards of nationalist-communist Poland and their current successors in the treatment

⁴⁴ Anne Applebaum, 'A Movie That Matters', *The New York Review of Books*, 18 Feb. 2008.

⁴⁵ Artur Żmijewski, 'Katyn, Katole, Świadectwo, czyli praca ideologii', in Wiśniewska and Marecki, *Kino Polskie*, 212.

⁴⁶ The protagonist of Wajda's memorable *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), Maciek Chelmicki, had a choice between joining normal life and staying in the anti-communist underground. Tadeusz of *Katyn* embraces death without hesitation.

⁴⁷ Żmijewski, 'Katyn, Karole, Świadectwo', 216.

of history may be quite trivial. At the end of the day, it is Poręba and company who may have the last laugh. The conditions of film-making under state socialism are not so different from the realities of corporate culture – the last two decades tend to confirm this argument advanced by the dissident Haraszti nearly thirty years ago.