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Film shelf 2019

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Abstract: The paper presents the most important and the most interesting Polish films of 2019. The text covers titles such as: Corpus Christi, Icarus The Legend of Mietek Kosz, (Nie)znajomi, Mr Jones, Politics, Their Lucky Stars, Spoor, and Playing Hard. The author presents particular films from a point of view interesting for foreigners – people learning Polish as a foreign language and interested in Polish culture.

Key words: film, Polish films, 2019, cinema

The year 2019 was another successful period for Polish cinema, at least in terms of attendance figures. Once again, a Polish film was among the five Academy Award nominees for Best Foreign Language Film (currently: Best International Feature Film). The start of 2020 looks even better in this respect (although not necessarily when it comes to the quality of the films). Unfortunately for the quality of Polish cinema, according to producers, most cinema chains decided to drastically reduce ticket prices at the start of 2020.

If such a radical ticket price reduction continues to be applied (...) it should force Polish producers to cut their film budgets by 35% on average It also means a sharp drop in remuneration, by the same percentage. I'm sure people are already lining up to work for less than two-thirds of their previous pay... The fact is, however, that in this situation even producing the most commercial movies will become unprofitable. Will Poles be happy about it? American cinema will definitely be doing great.¹

¹ https://sporwkinie.blogspot.com/2020/03/kina-obnizaja-ceny-biletow-produkcja.html ?fbclid=IwAR2UxlHAY5Y8xYL8DxL4cSjBFimp4tp-8kl7scgfUmxee-cxZ1GB5WTqnTM [dostep: 12.03.2020].

To make the meaning of this reduction clearer to cinemagoers: if a ticket costs half as much now, twice as many people would have to attend screenings to make everything stay at the current level. In the case of the biggest blockbusters, this would mean that their audience would have to increase from 2 million to 4 million... We all realise that this threshold is virtually unattainable, as in recent years, only *Kler (Clergy)* has managed to draw an audience of 5 million. The math, therefore, looks nice from the perspective of the audience, but the effects for the future (probably not very distant future, in fact) do not look terribly promising for the producers and distributors.

Corpus Christi

The most talked-about (and best) film of the year was by far the Polish Academy Award candidate, i.e. Jan Komasa's Boże Ciało (Corpus Christi). Unfortunately, the film lost the battle for this prestigious award to South Korean Parasite2, but this does not in any way diminish its value. The story of a boy from a young offenders' institution who dreams of becoming a priest and, as a result of a "misunderstanding", starts to minister as one, may seem quite controversial at first glance. This - more or less critical - way of presenting "religious" topics is often not received very positively in many countries. Poles have a particular attitude towards religion - this is one of the most frequently discussed topics (apart from politics) at meetings among family and friends. However, Komasa's film quickly dispels the doubts. Corpus Christi actually delivers a message about youth, courage, the ability to forgive, and love. It is not difficult to imagine that the tragic events serving as the background for the main protagonist's story could have been true. The community the protagonist starts his work in is divided, its members are full of both concealed and open hatred and mutual resentment. The young man pretending to be a priest does everything he can to make the town's inhabitants come to terms with the past and with themselves. At the same time, he reveals to the audience a sad truth about small-town mentality, according to which keeping up appearances at all costs is more important than a neighbour in need of help.

² Bong Joon-ho's film won 4 Oscars, including for Best International Feature Film and Best Picture.

This film is not about the church or about a false or real priest, it's about us. In *Corpus Christi*, the worst vices of the Polish society come to the fore – being overly judgmental, social ostracism and tacit consent to pathologies. The film also tells us how many aspects in our lives depend on our own decisions and why giving someone a "second chance" should not be regarded as an obsolete notion.⁸

One of the strongest assets of the film is definitely the cast. Bartosz Bielenia allows the audience to discover completely new worlds – his character could not have been played better, worse or in a different way. Bielenia doesn't play. He is simply there. If only the Motion Picture Academy were a less fossilized body, to put it mildly, Bielenia could have been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor. Aleksandra Konieczna, in turn, is the actress who definitely stands out in Komasa's film.

The priest's housekeeper combines the traits of all silent housekeepers and mothers of priests, but also housekeepers and mothers in general. They clench their teeth and purse their lips, but they see a lot, they see too much. They exist very strongly, but only few are capable of noticing them.⁹

Icarus. The Legend of Mietek Kosz

The latest film by Maciej Pieprzyca, *Ikar. Legenda Mietka Kosza (Icarus. The Legend of Mietek Kosz*) tells the extremely interesting story of Mieczysław Kosz – a legend of what is referred to as the Polish school of jazz. This musical current dating back to the mid-1950s became known mainly thanks to such artists as: Krzysztof Komeda, Michal Urbaniak, Tomasz Stańko and Jan "Ptaszyn" Wróblewski.

Today, it is difficult to understand the phenomenon of Mieczysław Kosz. He remains an almost mythical figure in the memory of older jazz lovers and people professionally connected with this music. The disabled artist, who came from an area far from major urban centres¹⁰, was nevertheless capable

³ https://www.granice.pl/publicystyka/boze-cialo-recenzja-filmu/1372/1 [accessed on: 11 February 2020].

⁴ https://kultura.onet.pl/film/recenzje/oscary-2020-boze-cialo-z-jedna-nominacja-recenz ja-filmu-jana-komasy/xlvkqb9 [accessed on: 11 February 2020].

⁵ Mieczysław Kosz lost his sight at the age of 12.

of developing an original musical language at a time when contact with international mainstream jazz was very limited in Poland. His performances were much talked about elsewhere in Europe too. He was invited to play concerts during prestigious events such as the Montreux Jazz Festival (...). And yet, only one original LP of his music was released during his lifetime! His piano playing can be heard on the New Faces in Polish Jazz compilation, and also as accompaniment on the album recorded by singer Marianna Wróblewska. And that's all! Nowadays, when recordings are the basis for an artist wishing to make media and listeners aware of them, this would be unthinkable. However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Kosz was starting his career, things were different.⁶

Forgotten by a wider audience, Kosz was an absolute revelation of the Polish jazz scene. Maciej Pieprzyca recalls his legend in his film, and does it in a perfect way. The film is a visual experience, but above all a musical one, and not only for jazz lovers, which is worth emphasising. The pieces written by the musician are characterised by classical as well as folk music influences. Unfortunately, the lives of great artists are often marked by the stigma of misery, and this is also the case here. Kosz became an alcoholic, and the growing sense of loneliness and overwhelming sadness eventually made him fall out (or jump out) of a window in May 1973. It is not entirely clear whether this was a conscious step, or whether he had had too much alcohol. His death at the age of 29 and the already mentioned modest musical output led to Kosz becoming quickly forgotten. However, there is still hope that Pieprzyca's film and the extraordinary performance of the sensational David Ogrodnik will give this figure a new, wonderful life.

(Nie)znajomi

A few couples of friends meet one warm evening for dinner. Everyone is troubled by different problems, and everyone has different ideas as to

⁶ https://hi-fi.com.pl/sylwetki-muzyczne-lista/1090-mieczys%C5%82aw-kosz-%C5%BCy cie-jest-dramatyczn%C4%85-przygod%C4%85.html [accessed on: 15 February 2020].

⁷ Kosz loved the music of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt.

⁸ He used to say that "only sorrow is beautiful".

⁹ Ogrodnik has come to specialise in "difficult" performances in Polish cinema. It is sufficient to recall here the characters he played in *Chee się się żyć (Life Feels Good)* (see "Postscriptum Polonistyczne" 2014, no. 1) and *Ostatnia rodzina (The Last Family)* (see "Postscriptum Polonistyczne" 2017, no. 1).

how to solve them. Nice company, delicious food and the approaching lunar eclipse are supposed to help one unwind and forget about everyday worries. In reality, however, this is only the start of a test of strength, a test of honesty, fidelity, devotion and patience. Someone suggests they play a game: until the evening ends, all text messages, e-mails and calls will become public, and there will be no secrets around the table. Can playing with privacy in this way end well?¹⁰

The words quoted here are not about the film (Nie)znajomi – this is actually a synopsis of the Italian film Perfetti sconosciuti (Perfect Strangers), which the Polish production is based on. The Polish remake repeats the original nearly fully – hence the possibility of using synopses and even fragments of reviews of the two films interchangeably. Interestingly, the Italian idea for the script played out so well that remakes were made in several other countries too, including France, Spain, and Turkey. The question one should ask is therefore: did the great Italian film lose any of its quality in the Polish version?

Fortunately, this is not the case – and the credit for this definitely goes to the Polish cast. Tomasz Kot, Maja Ostaszewska, Łukasz Simlat, Michał Żurawski, Wojciech Żołądkiewicz, Kasia Smutniak¹¹ and Aleksandra Domańska give a great display of their acting skills. The script, just like for instance that of Roman Polanski's *Carnage*, places the whole emphasis on the cast's performances. One room, no special effects and a screenplay based exclusively on dialogue leaves no room for any mistakes. The Polish actors did a great job – each has their own five minutes in the film, during which they show off their acting skills like a guitarist playing a solo during the most important concert of their life. These are the moments that give the film its distinctly Polish charm and make it slightly different from the Italian original¹².

All things considered, (Nie)znajomi is the same story, deprived of undesirable moralising, but providing a solid foundation for questions to be asked, full of penetrating insights about regular everyday normal guys, egoists and hypocrites, justifying their cheating with the desire to achieve peace of mind and happiness for themselves. It's a theatrical stage where fun and laughs turn into accusations and crying¹³.

¹⁰ https://www.filmowa.net/content/1659.html?view=event [accessed on: 15 February 2020].

¹¹ The Polish model living in Italy for many years appears in both versions.

¹² There are also a few script changes in the film, which I am not going to describe to avoid spoilers. They will also matter only to those who either have watched or intend to watch both films.

¹³ https://naekranie.pl/recenzje/nie-znajomi-recenzja-filmu [accessed on: 15 February 2020].

Regardless of the version chosen (possibly both), the film is not a waste of time. On the contrary, it is bound to make everyone reflect on certain things and take a quick look at the things stored in their mobile phone's memory. The question that everyone should give an honest answer to after the screening is: Would you play this game?

Mr Jones

At the time I am writing about Agnieszka Holland's new film, it's actually no longer that new. In fact, the director's latest film Charlatan premiered during the Berlin International Film Festival in 2020. However, before the story of Czech healer Jan Mikolášek14 is released in cinemas, it is worth taking a look at Mr Jones. The film tells the story of a journalist who gained his five minutes of fame as a result of an interview with Adolf Hitler and who decides to write an article about the modernisation of the Soviet Union. He consequently goes to Moscow, where he wants to interview Joseph Stalin. However, things go pear-shaped and he ends up in Ukraine, where the Holodomor (the great famine¹⁵) is raging. Thus, Gareth Jones, i.e. the eponymous Mr Jones, becomes one of the few foreigners who have actually seen the terrible crime with their own eyes and who have decided to tell the world about it. His articles reporting on the events in Ukraine, inconvenient for many people, did not meet with a friendly reception at all. One of his most fierce critics was Walter Duranty - New York Times correspondent in Moscow. Fortunately, there were also many who believed – among others, George Orwell, who, inspired by Mr Jones' stories, wrote one of the most important books of the 20th century: Animal Farm.

Mr Jones certainly isn't Agnieszka Holland's best film. The idea was very interesting and it could have been a hit,

¹⁴ "The film is set in the second half of the 20th century. At that time, Mikolášek's name was known almost all over Europe. His patients included King George VI of England and Antonín Zápotocký – Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia in the years 1948–53, and from 1953 the country's president. Mikolášek saved his limb from amputation, thus obtaining incredible political protection. Unfortunately, this ended when Zápotocký died – he was sued and deprived of his property and civic rights" (https://www.onet.pl/film/onetfilm/szarlatan-zwiastun-nowego-fil mu-agnieszki-holland/l30z2cd,681c1dfa [accessed on: 17 February 2020]).

¹⁵ Many works have been written about this "forgotten" 20th century crime, including the shocking book by Anne Applebaum, Red Famine.

but in order to achieve this, more focus should have been placed on the characters. The Polish director portrays Mr Jones as a typical naive British man who sacrifices everything to reveal the truth to others after he discovers it. The character is played in a flat and monotonous way. There is not much of a flesh-and-blood character here, not much emotion, and nothing that a large audience could find compelling. Compared to him, Ada and Duranty are even more two-dimensional and artificial. The problem is not that Gareth Jones is an ordinary man rather than a superhero. Agnieszka Holland simply does not say anything interesting about him. 16

The shocking pictures of Ukrainian villages dying of hunger are therefore, unfortunately, somewhat overshadowed by this naïveté and one-dimensionality of the main protagonist. What is most certainly lacking is also the fact that little information is smuggled about the causes of the Holodomor (for instance in the scenes of the argument with Duranty or those showing the process of writing the articles), as actually, contrary to what might seem, not many people know much about it. One can be afraid that the film, watched from the point of view of such a person, might turn out to be less than compelling.

Their Lucky Stars

In the case of Polish rom-coms, it would be difficult to talk about any candidates for best picture. What they could usually hope for at most would be an award for the least embarrassing script and the least dull performance. How does the "latest film from the creators of *Listy do M. (Letters to Santa)* and *Podatek od milości (Taxing Love)*" do on this list? Compared to this year's rivals – it's not bad. Having said that, competing against films such as *Miszmasz, czyli kogel-mogel 3* and *Jak poślubić milionera* means that the bar was not raised terribly high.

Cale szczęście (Their Lucky Stars) is the story of a symphony orchestra musician who meets a celebrity, and as a result his life changes dramatically. The main protagonist and his son instantly become "all hers", and one can easily guess what happens next. Well, not so easy after all, because the "unexpected" twist of the plot will definitely come as a surprise to everyone watching the film. The initial scenes bring to mind the blockbuster Notting Hill with Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant — Piotr Adamczyk does quite a good rendition of the clumsy bookseller, but unfortunately the positive inspirations end here.

¹⁶ https://www.spidersweb.pl/rozrywka/2019/10/25/obywatel-jones-recenzja-agnieszka-holland-film/ [accessed on: 15 February 2020].

It's hard to find a positive review of the film anywhere. The authors of reviews and descriptions criticise every aspect of the picture. However, not all the accusations seem to be entirely deserved. For instance, faulting Tomasz Konecki's latest production for lack of originality. It seems to verge on the impossible to find an original romantic comedy – a characteristic feature of this genre (even more so than of other genres, it seems), is its persistent nature. It is difficult to say whether this is due to the laziness of the creators or to the very formula of the genre, which apparently leaves less room for creativity than drama, or even horror. Audiences have been less critical, expressing positive opinions about the performance of twelve-year-old Maksymilian Balcerowski, for instance. Consequently, if one were to find the best rom-com that premiered in 2019 on the basis of an average rating bearing in mind the above, it could well be *Their Lucky Stars*.

Politics

Patryk Vega and Wojciech Smarzowski specialise in showing Poland from a satirist's point of view. Each of them does it quite ruthlessly, but they differ slightly in terms of the level of their vision (for instance the artistic quality). *Polityka (Politics)*, released in cinemas in 2019, was advertised as a film that would expose the Polish political scene, etc. As it usually happens in the case of such productions, high-sounding promises tend to remain unfulfilled. The same goes for *Politics*. It is more a collection of gags (strongly immersed in current political events, by the way, so no one will be able to decipher them two or three years from now) than a film that would demand a logically structured script. "Although life is said to write the best stories, the weakest point of *Politics* is precisely the story, i.e. the screenplay"¹⁷. The individual parts of the film are rather unimaginative skits without any original contribution on the part of the authors. As a result, audiences could watch a trailer showing all the "funny" scenes, and a film that is neither funny nor controversial.

The director combined several outdated memes shared on pro-Polish groups' pages with jokes of the kind found on final pages of housekeeping advice magazines. The film includes every outdated meme you've

¹⁷ https://plus.gloswielkopolski.pl/polityka-recenzja-filmu-patryka-vegi-ktory-mial-wywrocic-scene-polityczna-ale-nie-ma-czym/ar/c13-14398621 [accessed on: 15 February 2020].

ever seen pop up on your wall, when a close or distant family member shared it $^{18}\,$

Anyone wishing to watch a slightly funnier political satire should definitely devote more attention to the series *Ucho prezesa* (*The Chairman's Ear*), created by Robert Górski from the sketch comedy group Kabaret Moralnego Niepokoju. The series, although ephemeral just like *Politics* in terms of the stories told, is definitely more witty, and the acting is much better too. Vega's films are shot quickly, without much attention to detail – the point is mainly to make ad hoc fun of certain problems and pathologies, point a finger at them and stigmatise them. If Patryk Vega wanted to go down gloriously in the history of Polish cinema, this was certainly not the right direction to follow. However, assuming that his aim is rather to make big money quickly, it makes little sense to judge the artistic level of his productions.

Playing Hard

Kinga Debska is a Polish director whose two films – *Moje córki krony (These Daughters of Mine*) and *Zabawa, zabawa (Playing Hard)* – prove that she is good at making social dramas. Her latest film tells the story of several women who have alcohol problems.

The way Debska looks at her protagonists (...) makes her one of the most sensitive Polish auteurs. There's no spectacular irony here, or reprimands coming from the moral stratosphere. The director does not overdo it in the opposite direction either, and does not make the alcoholics victims of a centuries-old tradition. She is satisfied with empathy, for which she found an equivalent in film language.¹⁹

Playing Hard is quite a shocking picture of where alcohol abuse may lead. The cast's performances are definitely an advantage of the film (especially when it comes to the actresses playing the main protagonists). Dorota Kolak, Agata Kulesza and Maria Debska did a particularly good job with their

¹⁸ https://www.filmawka.pl/polityka-recenzja/ [accessed on: 16 February 2020].

¹⁹ https://www.filmweb.pl/reviews/recenzja-filmu-Zabawa+zabawa-22083 [accessed on: 16 February 2020].

extraordinary portrayal of educated and successful women²⁰ carrying the burden of a huge problem which they hid from the whole world and from themselves.

None of them realises their problem and they react aggressively to any attempt to draw attention to it or to save them. This is where *Playing Hard* becomes true, because not a bit of falsehood can be felt in the way in which it addresses the issue. The way in which each of the characters copes or fails to cope with addiction, and how they develop during the film, are really credible. Does one have to fall to the very bottom to save oneself? The film also shows the co-dependency of one's nearest and dearest, who can do nothing to help. The trio of actresses shine, giving every theme addressed its own identity, uniqueness and emotions. It all seems taken directly from real life. The camera watches the situation calmly and never resorts to cheap tricks in terms of depicting alcoholism or leaping from story to story in an exaggerated way.²¹

Spoor²²

Agnieszka Holland's *Pokot (Spoor)* is definitely worth including in the review of the year. Although the film was made in 2017, the Nobel Prize for Literature for Olga Tokarczuk brought it back onto the screens of many TVs and computers, not only in Poland. Agnieszka Holland is definitely an Academy Award regular²³. In 2017, the director had a chance to be nominated again, but this time her latest film, *Spoor*, lost the rivalry against pictures from Sweden, Denmark, Iran, Australia and Germany.

The submission of *Spoor* as a candidate became much amplified (...) as a result of the petition sent to the Minister of Culture and National Heritage Piotr Gliński by members of the Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk Association

 $^{^{20}}$ One of them is a highly successful doctor, another one a public prosecutor, and the third one an ambitious student.

²¹ https://naekranie.pl/recenzje/zabawa-zabawa-recenzja-filmu-3517538 [accessed on: 16 February 2020].

²² The description presented here is a slightly modified version of an excerpt from the article 2017 season film shelf published in issue no. 1 of "Postcriptum Polonistyczne" in 2018.

²³ Three nominations for this prestigious award for the films *Angry Harvest* (1986), *Europa*, *Europa* (1992) and *In Darkness* (2012).

and the Magna Polonia Klodzko Land Club. They demanded that Agnieszka Holland's film be withdrawn from the rivalry for the nomination because they believed it to be anti-Catholic and anti-Polish.²⁴

Perhaps, therefore, Poles went away empty-handed this time precisely due to the controversies triggered by the film in Poland. Most people, of course, rejected the accusations put forward in the petition, considering them absurd, but this does not change the fact that they echoed quite widely in Poland and certainly did not go unnoticed abroad. What is *Spoor* about then, since it managed to outrage some Polish audiences so strongly? It is an adaptation of the novel *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk. The film and the book tell the story of a woman living outside major urban areas. The main protagonist, Janina Duszejko, starts her own investigation after a series of murders of poachers and hunters discovered in the village.

I wanted this hunting theme to be strong here, but it's a story of an elderly woman fighting against the patriarchal world. Hunting is a metaphor for power, it has always been like this. It's the key to understanding the mechanisms that we still deal with today,²⁵

– this how the author, Olga Tokarczuk, describes the story.

It is very hard to describe *Spoor* and it is quite difficult to express an unambiguous opinion about it. The cast: Agnieszka Mandat, Jakub Gierszal, Andrzej Grabowski and others are definitely a great asset of the film, and this is already a perfectly legitimate reason to devote time to Agnieszka Holland's work.

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Boże Ciało (Corpus Christi), director: Jan Komasa, writer: Mateusz Pacewicz, cinematography: Piotr Sobociński jr., starring: Bartosz Bielenia, Aleksandra Konieczna, Eliza Rycembel, Tomasz Ziętek, Łukasz Simlat.

Icarus. Legenda Mietka Kosza (Icarus. The Legend of Mietek Kosz), director: Maciej Pieprzyca, writer: Maciej Pieprzyca, cinematography: Witold Płóciennik, music: Leszek Możdżer, starring: Dawid Ogrodnik, Jowita Budnik, Wiktoria Gorodeckaja, Maja Komorowska, Justyna Wasilewska, Piotr Adamczyk.

²⁴ http://film.onet.pl/wiadomosci/oscary-2018-najlepszy-film-nieanglojezyczny-walka-o-nominacje/kr3hnh [accessed on: 18 January 2018].

²⁵ https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pokot_(film) [accessed on: 18 January 2018].

- (Nie) znajomi, director: Tadeusz Śliwa, writer: Katarzyna Sarnowska, Tadeusz Śliwa, cinematography: Michal Dąbal, starring: Tomasz Kot, Maja Ostaszewska, Łukasz Simlat, Michal Żurawski, Wojciech Żołądkiewicz, Kasia Smutniak, Aleksandra Domańska.
- Obywatel Jones (Mr Jones), director: Agnieszka Holland, writer: Andrea Chalupa, cinematography: Tomasz Naumiuk, starring: James Norton, Vanessa Kirby, Peter Sarsgaard, Joseph Mawle, Krzysztof Pieczyński.
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- Zabawa, zabawa (Playing Hard), director: Kinga Dębska, writers: Kinga Dębska, Mika Dunin, cinematography: Andrzej Wojciechowski, starring: Dorota Kolak, Agata Kulesza, Maria Dębska, Marcin Dorociński, Barbara Kurzaj, Mirosław Baka.

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https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeXpIj05NyRVcWKg85wOiTw, https://www.facebook.com/Polska-Półka-Filmowa-100108104897142

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