# Polish National Cinema

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# Landscape after Battle

## The Return of Democracy

Toward the end of the 1980s, the communist system in Poland started to show signs of decline. Round table discussions were arranged between the communists and the representatives of the opposition at the beginning of 1989 to find solutions to Poland's political problems and poor economy. The negotiations led to a compromise that, consequently, enabled the change of the political formation. The summer of 1989 is usually cited as a turning point in Polish history, marking the peaceful transition from the totalitarian system to democracy. Tadeusz Mazowiecki formed the first noncommunist government in Polish postwar history after the stunning election victory of Solidarity's Civic Committee in June 1989. Although Wojciech Jaruzelski still remained the president, the communists' monopoly had been brought to a decisive end. Lech Wałęsa's presidential victory in December 1991 definitively ended one-party rule and started a new era in Polish history.

### Cinema Industry: From the State Monopoly to Free Market

The year 1989 was also a turning point for the Polish film industry. Once again, it was not a cinematic movement but rather a political transformation—this time a bloodless one—that defined the new period. The nationalized and centralized film industry, entirely dependent on government funding, was transformed into a free market economy subsidized by the state. In post-totalitarian Poland, filmmakers and other artists are relieved from their traditional duties to the nation, liberated from political pressures and commitments. The political role commonly reserved for artists



has returned to politicians, political commentators, and historians. Filmmaking has once again become a strictly professional endeavor and exists somewhere on the margin of mainstream Polish life.

The year 1987 brought new legislation that abolished the state monopoly in the sphere of film production, distribution, and the purchase of foreign films. This act, more fully introduced after 1989, transformed the state-owned and controlled film industry, based on film units—the core of the local film business since 1955—into independent studios. The new legislation and the abolition of censorship in 1990 made film producers and directors responsible for both the content and the financial success, or failure, of their products. On the one hand, this decision gave considerable freedom to the companies mainly in the sphere of coproductions and distribution in the West. On the other hand, in spite of limited government subsidies via the Cinema Committee of the Ministry of Culture and Arts (also established in 1987), this independence forced the companies to concentrate on the commercial aspect of their productions. At the beginning of 1992, the following film studios functioned: Filip Bajon's Dom, Jerzy Kawalerowicz's Kadr, Tadeusz Chmielewski's Oko, Janusz Morgenstern's Perspektywa, Bohdan Poręba's Profil, Krzysztof Zanussi's Tor, Juliusz Machulski's Zebra, Jerzy Hoffman's Zodiak, and the Karol Irzykowski Film Studio managed by Jacek Skalski and Jerzy Bugajski.[1]

The process of democratization began with the releasing of a number of films shelved by the previous regime, among others Ryszard Bugajski's *Interrogation*, Jerzy Domaradzki's *Wielki bieg* (*The Big Run*, 1981), Agnieszka Holland's *A Woman Alone*, Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Blind Chance*, and Janusz Zaorski's *The Mother of Kings*. These films deal with the psychosocial pressures of Stalinism—the period euphemistically called by Communist Party authorities in Poland "the age of mistakes and blunders." Films concerned with Polish-Russian history, like Tadeusz Chmielewski's adaptation of *Wierna rzeka* (*Faithful River*, 1983), the classic novel by Stefan Żeromski about an anti-Russian uprising in 1863, had also been suppressed.

The move toward a market economy in Poland coincided with the universalization of coproductions in Europe and the incorporation of American popular cinema into that market. The end of a fully subsidized and centralized Polish film industry controlled through state censorship and the emergence of a new audience, for whom not only communism but Solidarity are history, have brought some inevitable changes to film production and distribution, as well as to film thematics and stylistics. Coproductions, multinational enterprises, competition with Hollywood, a plurality of styles and genres are all changing the film landscape in Poland.

The transition to a market economy in Poland has not been an easy process. At the beginning of the 1990s there were symptoms of a deep economic crisis in the film industry. Figures show that the number of cinema theaters decreased rapidly, from 1,830 toward the end of the 1980s to 1,195

in 1991 and 755 in 1993 (compared with 1,200 in the Czech Republic, 3,709 in Germany, and 4,397 in France in 1993). Another alarming figure was the extremely low average for the number of cinema visits per inhabitant: 0.35 in 1993 compared with 1.26 in Hungary, 2.06 in the Czech Republic, and 2.15 in Germany.[2]

Some Polish critics and filmmakers believed that free market reforms had created a situation in which Polish films could not compete with American products. With the gradual Americanization of the local market, it was also difficult to see Western European films, and almost impossible to see Central European and Russian works. For instance, between 1991 and 1995 only six Italian, nineteen German, forty-one English, and forty-five French films were released in Poland. Interestingly, there was not a single Russian film among 122 new titles exhibited in Poland in 1992.[3]

In accordance with expectations, American films clearly dominated the market: more than 60 percent of the Polish repertoire consisted of American films (as much as 73 percent in 1992). They were heavily promoted and well distributed. The average number of prints used for the release of an American film ranged from twenty to fifty. Only five to fifteen copies of films from Poland and other parts of Europe were distributed at release. Polish films accounted for only 18 percent in 1991, 14 percent in 1992, 20 percent in 1993, 12 percent in 1994, and 10 percent in 1995 of the total number of films released in Poland. The number of local films distributed in Poland does not, however, match their market share. Due to lower inflation rates and increasing cinema ticket prices (between US $2 and $3 in 1995), the total box office has been steadily growing and reached US $40 million in 1995. The percentage earned by Polish films has been low, ranging from 9.4 in 1991 to 5.2 in 1995.[4]

At the beginning of the 1980s, the film industry in Poland was a workplace for almost ten thousand people, half of whom were employed by state institutions. Throughout the 1990s, this number decreased rapidly. For example, the Film Production Company in Łódź, whose personnel numbered 1,100 in the 1980s, employed only 350 in 1992.[5] While the transfer of Poland's economy from the public to the private sector has been conducted in quite an efficient manner, the privatization of the film industry has proved difficult.

To stimulate and protect the indigenous film industry, the following three government funding bodies were created in 1991: the Script, Production, and Distribution Agencies.[6] The goal of the Script Agency (Agencja Scenariuszowa) is to create a market for film scripts in Poland by supporting script development and pre-production work. Currently, more than 50 percent of Polish scripts originate with the agency's financial support.

The Film Production Agency (Agencja Produkcji Filmowej) is involved financially in the production of feature, documentary, animated, and educational films. Its main goal is to cofinance projects that are "of cultural value." The selection process is carried out by a panel of experts appointed by the chairman of the Cinema Committee. Each feature project is evaluated by a commission of nine experts picked randomly from a group of fifty-seven. The commission is always composed of two critics or scriptwriters, two production managers, two distributors, and three cinema managers. The agency coproduced seventeen features in 1992, eighteen in 1993, and fifteen in 1994.



The main task of the Film Distribution Agency (Agencja Dystrybucji Filmowej) is to stimulate the distribution of films that are considered to be important from the point of view of the state's cultural policy. This is done through the financial participation of the agency in the distribution mostly of Polish films, but also of artistically significant foreign films. With the help of this agency, Polish cinemas have screened films by directors such as Jim Jarmusch, Derek Jarman, and Peter Greenaway, as well as the majority of Polish features.

Given the difficulties of the transitional period, it is worth noting that the Polish film industry has consistently been able to produce more than twenty feature films yearly. Every year during the 1990s, at least two or three films were made independently, without the state's involvement. Since the crisis at the beginning of the 1990s, the number of cinema theaters has been increasing slowly but steadily. In 1992 Poland joined the Eurimages Foundation (established in 1989), which sponsors European films. Krzysztof Kieślowski's last films were made with its help.

The future of Polish cinema, however, is more and more dependent on television. In 1995, state-run television participated in the production of almost all feature films in Poland, and acted as a sole producer of four. Three films were coproduced by the private television network Canal+. Certain acclaimed filmmakers, for example Andrzej Barański and Jan Jakub Kolski, made all of their films with the help of state television.

These changes have been introduced to create a new system in which state patronage coexists with private initiatives. The main task is to defend the national film industry; in a country with a population of almost thirty-nine million, it is understandable that virtually no local film can recoup its cost without foreign sales. Statistics show that one hundred thousand viewers in cinema theaters are considered high by Polish standards of the 1990s. For example, if we look at Polish films released in 1996, only five of them have achieved these results: Władysław Pasikowski's *Słodko-gorzki* (*Bitter-Sweet*) leads with 340,000 viewers, then Juliusz Machulski's *Girl Guide*, Andrzej Żuławski's *She-Shaman*, Krystyna Janda's *Pestka* (*Pip*), and Marek Koterski's *Nic śmiesznego* (*Nothing Funny*). Many films, often made by internationally renowned directors, have only a limited audience; for instance, Andrzej Wajda's *Wielki Tydzień* (*Holy Week*) had eight thousand viewers, Krzysztof Zanussi's *Cwał* (*In Full Gallop*) five thousand, and Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Za co?* (*For What?*) only one thousand.[7] During the mid-1990s in Poland it was still easier to produce a film than to exhibit it in movie theaters.

## Filmmakers after the Wall Came Down

In Robert Gliński's 1989 film, *Łabędzi śpiew* (*The Swan's Song*) a successful Polish scriptwriter returns from abroad only to learn that his ideas for future films have nothing to do with the changed reality around him. He tries to survive this difficult time by producing some desperate "post-modern" versions of Polish history and by cannibalizing American models. The effect is unintentionally comic, absurd, and out of place.

For many filmmakers in Poland, as was the case for Gliński's protagonist, the new reality has come as somewhat of a shock; the relationships between the state and the artist as well as between the artist and its audience have changed dramatically. The traditional antagonist (the totalitarian state) has disappeared and with it a polarized world in which the only meaningful distinction was between the pro-communist side ("them") and the "right side" ("us"). The artistic criteria in Poland were repeatedly subordinated to political criteria. To be a dissident meant to be a true artist; some artists were canonized simply because their work was incompatible with the communist system. For some, being on the right (dissident) side was enough reason to be hailed as a great artist. In a sense, it was an anachronistic, romantic Polish extension of the artist-as-torch-bearer myth. In this context, the quality of artistic output was often of minor importance. In Wajda's classic *Ashes and Diamonds*, the two Home Army survivors engage in a conversation that could easily be a commentary on the situation of a filmmaker in post-1989 Poland. "Those were the days!" says Maciek recalling his dead friends. "We knew what we wanted, and what was expected of us," responds Andrzej.[8]

Given the complexity of Polish history, cinema—and, for that matter, all Polish art—has generally been regarded as more than just entertainment. The artist's "mission" was that of a prophet and teacher bringing a message to society. Film and other art forms acted as safety valves in the controlled, corrupt political system. Filmmaking was a platform on which political debates were sometimes argued openly, and sometimes in an Aesopian language. Politically active filmmakers were always at the foreground of Polish life. The artists felt an immense responsibility. Conversely, they were also accustomed to a situation in which their voices were heard and analyzed by the people and by the authorities.

At present, film ideology is of minor significance and will remain so until a new antagonist is found. Economics supersedes politics. New audiences demand new films. The marginalization of traditional filmic themes like Polish martyrology and history (only two of the films at the 1996 Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia dealt with such themes) proves that the time has come for the Polish cinema to be free from political and social obligations. But what does this freedom mean—queries Andrzej Wajda in his 1991 diagnosis of the state of Polish cinema—in these changed political, economic, and social situations? He ironically suggests that such freedom is a freedom from the audience, criticism, authority, ideology, and artistic criteria.[9]



Filmmakers now have to defend themselves exclusively with their films. They have to fight for audiences that they depend on to exist. State-run political censorship has been replaced by the economic censorship of the producer, which, in many aspects, is even harsher. Polish film critic Tadeusz Sobolewski states that many filmmakers and critics started out believing in the victory of freedom but immediately felt disappointed with it.[10] One of the leading Polish Catholic intellectuals, Józef Tischner, states this concern bluntly in the title of his book: *Nieszczęsny dar wolności* (*The Unhappy Gift of Freedom*).[11]

A new market came into being. Nevertheless, Kazimierz Kutz maintained at the beginning of the 1990s that the quality of Polish cinema had reached rock bottom. For him, Poland was allowing itself to be flooded with anonymous international coproductions, rather than supporting national films.[12] In his view, the production of films was becoming exclusively an opportunity for grabbing money; the producers were behaving in the manner of the capitalists from early Soviet cinema.[13] Others, like the influential *Kino* critic Jerzy Płażewski, claimed that coproductions would guarantee survival for the local film industry.[14] The figures, which show the increasing number of coproductions, support the critic's claim: between 30 and 40 percent of Polish films are international coproductions.

After the 1989 freedom shock, there were claims—supported by leading Polish filmmakers such as Wajda and Zanussi—that Polish cinema was in danger of becoming commercialized, especially after Western distributors entered the Polish market. Some believed that free market reforms would create a situation in which Polish films could not compete with Western "B" products, such as "the collected works" of Chuck Norris. Another concern was the feigned reorientation of Polish filmmakers toward commercialism. For many critics and filmmakers, the specter of commercialism haunted Polish cinema. Disappointed with the first flood of commercially minded products, some filmmakers went so far as to emphasize the positive role of state censorship in the totalitarian period.[15] For instance, Kutz asserted that political censorship was one of the main factors behind the origins of artistic cinema in Poland. He maintained that there were some positive aspects to political censorship, which motivated the best artists to work harder and to speak in purely visual terms. For him, this laid the foundation of the Polish School in the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to Wajda, the figurativeness of Polish cinema was one of the crucial elements in its fight against political censorship. In contrast to dialogue, symbolic pictures are very difficult to censor, claims Wajda, giving examples from his *Ashes and Diamonds*.[16] Commenting on censorship, Kieślowski once remarked that filmmakers in Poland "were in a luxurious and unique situation. We were truly important … precisely because of censorship. We're allowed to say everything now but people have stopped caring what we're allowed to say."[17]

The whole discussion about the current state and the future of the Polish film industry vacillates between voices emphasizing the importance of the national character of Polish films and those advocating the universal, cosmopolitan nature of art. Taking the first perspective, Polish film critic and writer Anita Skwara states that, "Polish cinema stands a chance of survival and development only when it is national in character, when it arises directly from the traditions, culture and myths forming Polish awareness."[18] Some directors, however, go beyond the limits of narrowly understood "national themes" or the "Polish perspective" and focus on what can be called "a European consciousness."[19] The popular slogan in Poland, "catching up with Europe," expresses a desire to create new post-totalitarian art that, while addressing some universal issues, will reflect national uniqueness. The problem facing new cinema, not only in Poland but in all of Central Europe, is to find a new voice to adequately express the "national" while incorporating other cinematic discourses.

Some established filmmakers are unable to find a new voice in this changed situation. For instance, Feliks Falk's *Koniec gry* (*End of the Game*, 1991) and *Daleko od siebie* (*Far from Each Other*, 1996), are full of clichés from the poetics of the Cinema of Distrust. *End of the Game* portrays a young, sensitive mathematician (who resembles the early protagonists of Zanussi) and tells the story of his uneasy love affair with the female leader of a political party. The world vision presented in the film is journalistic and sketchy, in line with the bland psychological characterization of the protagonists. An old master, Jerzy Kawalerowicz, experienced similar problems with two films released after the Wall came down. *Jeniec Europy* (*The Prisoner of Europe*, 1989) and *For What?* (1996) were poorly received by critics and ignored by audiences. This is also a factor that contributed to the indifference met by some of Wajda's more recent films: *The Ring with a Crowned Eagle*,[20] *Holy Week*, and *Panna Nikt* (*Miss Nobody*, 1996).

For self-declared cosmopolitan filmmaker Krzysztof Zanussi, recent years have been very productive. He has made a series of television films, several documentaries, and a number of feature films: *Stan posiadania* (*Inventory*, 1989), *Życie za życie* (*Life for Life*, 1990), *Dotknięcie ręki* (*The Silent Touch*, 1992), and *In Full Gallop*. In 2000, Zanussi's *Życie jako śmiertelna choroba przenoszona drogą płciową* (*Life as a Fatal Disease Sexually Transmitted*), a continuation of his earlier meditations on death (for example, *The Death of a Provincial* and *Spiral*), was announced the winner of the Moscow Film Festival and the Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia.

Films made by Zanussi in the late 1980s and the 1990s do not provoke the same disputes and controversies as his earlier works. In *Inventory*, for example, Zanussi centers on three characters: two women, representing two different world-views as well as two different groups of the Polish society ("us" versus "them"), and a sensitive young man acting as a mediator. Improvised elements play a major role in this ascetic film characterized by the minimal use of cinematic techniques and an emphasis on moralizing dialogues. In *Inventory*, Zanussi pushes his style to the extreme. The film seems too verbal at the expense of imagery and too artificial in its construction of the conflict.



After *Life for Life*, almost a hagiography of the saint Maksymilian Kolbe, Zanussi directed a multinational (Polish, British, Danish) production, *The Silent Touch*, arguably his best film in recent years. The film tells a familiar story: a young musicologist from Cracow (Lothaire Bluteau) has a dream about an unknown musical masterpiece. He writes down its basic tones and travels abroad to an old eccentric composer (Max von Sydow), once famous and worldly, now living in seclusion, to convince him to write the piece. The composer has been silent for almost forty years, withdrawn from the musical life. The young messenger from Poland has to awaken him from artistic inertia, to awaken his sexuality to enable him to compose the work of his life. (The film includes Wojciech Kilar's magnificent score.)

## Reclaiming the Recent Past

The post-totalitarian period is characterized by an effort to overcome the previous modes of thinking. Filip Bajon's *Bal na dworcu w Koluszkach* (*Ball at the Koluszki Station*, 1990), Feliks Falk's *End of the Game*, Janusz Kijowski's *Stan strachu* (*State of Terror*, 1990), Waldemar Krzystek's *Ostatni prom* (*The Last Ferry*, 1989) and *Zwolnieni z życia* (*Dismissed from Life*, 1991), and particularly Tadeusz Trzos-Rastawiecki's *Po upadku* (*After the Fall*, 1990) were made too late. Viewed after 1989, they had lost their relevance and, as a result, their audience.

The success of Wojciech Marczewski's *Ucieczka z kina "Wolność"* (*Escape from "Freedom" Cinema*, 1990) is merely an exception to the rule that political films are now difficult to market in Poland.[21] On the surface, Marczewski's film looks like a tribute paid to Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). The story is set in a movie theater called "Freedom" in which a fictitious Polish film titled *Jutrzenka* (*Morning Star*) is shown. The characters in the film rebel against the roles they have to perform; they do not follow the script and, in an act of defiance, utter their own words. They cannot be subjected to any external pressures. The mutiny on the screen spreads rapidly; real people from the street, regardless of their political standing, sing Mozart's *Requiem* as a way of showing their resistance. A government censor (Janusz Gajos, in an impressive performance) is unable to do anything and eventually falls under the spell of the film. Finally, afraid that the copy of the film will be burnt, the screen characters escape to the roof of the cinema theater building.

On the simplest level, *Escape from "Freedom" Cinema* can be taken as a story about a disillusioned censor, rejected by his family, who comes to fathom the misery of his present life. On another level, however, this multilayered film clearly serves as an allegory of the situation in the 1980s, a reminder of the supremacy of politics over people's lives, or, perhaps, as

an allegorical story about rebellion. Marczewski's film is not as visually refined as his earlier *Nightmares* or *Shivers*. The emphasis is on direct political references, and on an examination of the near past from the perspective of a newly regained freedom. With its clear divisions between what is right and wrong, between the rulers and the ruled, *Escape from "Freedom" Cinema* accurately reflects the spirit of the former period. But intellectually, for these same reasons, it also belongs to that era.

One might well have expected a flood of artistic works reclaiming the past after the political events of 1989. Indeed, at the beginning of the 1990s, the distribution of major awards at festivals of Polish films demonstrated a consistent preference for honoring films that dealt with various aspects of Polish history. Awards were presented to Robert Gliński's *Wszystko, co najważniejsze* (*All That Really Matters*, 1992), an examination of the fate of Polish citizens deported by Stalin to Kazakstan after the outbreak of World War II, and to Grzegorz Królikiewicz for his study of Polish history as seen through the eyes of a handicapped person in an unsuccessful search for his unknown mother in *Przypadek Pekosińskiego* (*The Case of Pekosiński*, 1993). Other well-received films dealing with recent history include, among others: *300 mil do nieba* (*300 Miles to Heaven*, 1989), by Maciej Dejczer; *Kornblumenblau* (1989), by Leszek Wosiewicz; *Pokuszenie* (*Temptation*, 1995), by Barbara Sass; *Pułkownik Kwiatkowski* (*Colonel Kwiatkowski*, 1996), by Kazimierz Kutz; and *Gry uliczne* (*Street Games*, 1996), by Krzysztof Krauze.

The film *300 Miles to Heaven* won the European Film Award (the "Felix") in 1989 as the Young European Film of the Year. This well-made and moving film, scripted by Dejczer and Cezary Harasimowicz and based on real events, tells the story of two young brothers who, during martial law, escape to Sweden hidden on the underside of a huge truck. In spite of the tendencies inherent in such topics, Dejczer (b. 1953) avoids sentimentality and never resorts to stereotypes or filmic clichés. The first part of the film portrays a hopeless picture of Polish "socialist" reality—the ugliness of the environment, the corruption, the futile struggles with authorities—and serves as justification for the boys' desperate departure from the country. The second part shows the two alienated teenage protagonists in prosperous, though cold, "capitalist" landscapes. The final scene, a telephone conversation between the two boys and their parents in Poland, is among the most powerful sequences in Polish cinema. "Don't ever return here," their father states. This cruel sentence might serve as one of the strongest criticism of the communist regime.

In *Kornblumenblau*, Leszek Wosiewicz (b. 1947) offers a completely different treatment of Polish martyrology—a different look at World War II and wartime suffering. *Kornblumenblau* also works against the romantic tradition that permeates Polish literature and film. Moreover, since the film is set in a concentration camp and its protagonist's name is Tadeusz, it is inviting to treat it as another reading of the laconic postwar prose of Tadeusz Borowski. In Borowski's world, all characters are infected by the



devastating degeneration of human values. Everyday existence is marked by compromises and resignation, and is viewed through a personal philosophy adopted in order to survive. Likewise, in Wosiewicz's film, the focus is not on the psychology but on the physiology of the dehumanized hero. Tadeusz (Adam Kamień) survives by instinct: he tries to be loyal to the guards and to stay on good terms with the other inmates. For them, he remains an enigma. "Is he a sly dog or an imbecile?" wonders one of his fellow prisoners.

The film starts with a skillfully edited pre-credit, slapstick-like sequence that summarizes the early stages of Tadeusz's life. Wosiewicz employs old documentary footage and fragments of a Polish prewar film, intercut with original footage (also in sepia tones) showing the protagonist's parents, his birth, and the beginnings of his career as a musician. This silent part of the film (only a few captions are employed) ends with the outbreak of the war and the protagonist's being sent to a concentration camp for his supposed political activities.

It is tempting to read *Kornblumenblau* in broader terms, as a parable on the situation of an artist in a totalitarian state, but the film's protagonist is quite pragmatic, a chameleon-like person able to fit into different situations, an amiable conformist. Tadeusz fulfills his parents' dream by becoming an artist, but to secure his future, he also becomes an engineer. As if to emphasize this aspect of his personality, in the last symbolic scene, after the liberation of the camp, he voluntarily joins a group of Soviet soldiers and starts entertaining them.

*Street Games*, by Krzysztof Krauze (b. 1953), centers on an event in recent Polish history—the death of Stanisław Pyjas, a student and also a member of the opposition, who was murdered in 1977. According to the film, the mystery surrounding Pyjas's death does not belong to a faded past. In *Street Games*, the past affects the present. The ghosts from the past emerge as important players in contemporary political life. These include not only members of the disgraced Security Force (SB) but also a former dissident with an obscure past as a collaborator and informer, who is possibly involved in the murder. The young television reporter Janek (Redbad Klijnstra) investigates the past, although the subject initially seems to be too removed for him. Gradually, he develops a spiritual bond with the murdered student, becomes almost obsessed with the case, and, finally, has to die.

The look of Krauze's film is American, but its content is unmistakably Polish; it is a classic political thriller set in contemporary Poland. Łukasz Kośmicki's stylish cinematography creates a cinematic trip into the complexities of the past. *Street Games* is clearly a modern political film, successful in its attempts to capture the change of political systems and the spirit of the communist past. Similar to Agnieszka in Wajda's *Man of Marble*, Janek from *Street Games* also goes back almost twenty years and investigates the 1970s. In both cases, the past emerges in its dangerous intricacy and overshadows the present. The mosaic stylistics of Krauze's film (e.g.,

the insertion of animated clips into the realistic story), references to American cinema, and the use of modern Polish rock music clearly target young viewers.

Krauze's recent film, *Dług* (*Debt*, 1999), awarded the Grand Prix at the 1999 Festival of Polish Films, also refers to a well-publicized event. A group of young businessmen, who are being blackmailed by a gangster trying to collect a nonexistent debt, kill the blackmailer and his bodyguard out of desperation. The protagonists, who took the law into their own hands, receive long-term sentences. Although the psychological relations between the victims and the victimizer are at the center of Krauze's film, it takes part in a national discussion in Poland concerning the weakness of the law, the helplessness of ordinary citizens facing a corrupt underworld, and the links between organized crime and the political elite. A number of other films portray the Polish reality in a similar manner, among them *Poniedziałek* (*Monday*, 1998), which was directed by the accomplished cinematographer Witold Adamek.

A prominent member of the Polish School generation, Kazimierz Kutz continues to be one of the key figures in Polish cinema. Despite his harsh criticism of the new reality, he seems to have had no problems adjusting to it. Active in theater and television, and in the mid-1990s a regular contributor to a much-discussed column in the journal *Kino*, Kutz has directed, among others, *Zawrócony* (*The Turned Back*), the winner of the 1994 Festival of Polish Films; *Death as a Slice of Bread*, Special Award of the Jury at the same festival; and *Colonel Kwiatkowski*, one of the best Polish films released in 1996.

*The Turned Back* and *Death as a Slice of Bread*, films scripted by Kutz, are set in Silesia shortly before and after the introduction of martial law. The director, independent as usual and unconcerned with current political and aesthetic fashions, deals with the myth of Solidarity and the political atmosphere of 1981. Both films differ distinctly in their treatment of the subject. The tragedy and pathos of *Death as a Slice of Bread* is replaced by the almost farcical events of *The Turned Back*. For Kutz, these two films also mark a return to his favorite Silesian themes, which are present in his earlier best-known works.

The sit-in strike at the coal mine Wujek is the subject of *Death as a Slice of Bread*. The film is a faithful reconstruction of those events: it starts with the introduction of martial law and the arrest of the mine's Solidarity leader, and ends with the brutal pacification of the mine, during which nine people were killed. Working on the project for almost ten years, Kutz was faced with the challenge of making a film that would neither trivialize the events nor fall into the now obsolete category of "patriotic picture." The result is an almost documentary record of those events, a tragedy without individual heroes. The film lacks a typical narrative yet is laden with pathos in its celebration of everyday situations. Its characters are simple yet dignified, as if taken from a Solidarity poster. Kutz's film alienates the viewer with its refusal to introduce distinguishable



characters. In the current period, characterized by the depreciation of the myth of Solidarity, Kutz's film goes against the trend by attempting to animate a myth that is already dead. *Death as a Slice of Bread* is, arguably, a powerful farewell to the epoch of Solidarity.

*The Turned Back* tells a tragicomic story about an ordinary man, the simple worker and party member Tomasz Siwek (Zbigniew Zamachowski), who, sent as a communist informer to a Solidarity demonstration, returns as a changed man (the title of the film is a play on words: in Polish *zawrócony*=turned back is close to *nawrócony*=converted). At the gathering, Tomasz is overwhelmed by the exhilarating atmosphere and starts to sing religious and patriotic songs. Barely escaping the pursuit of militia special forces, he is later mistakenly identified as an active agitator and brutally interrogated by the secret police. Finally, the disillusioned Tomasz finds his own direction and protection in the Catholic Church.

The above account may be understood in symbolic terms as a story about political initiation. The protagonist is not an opportunist but a simple man lost in the complex reality of 1981. He is an ordinary man who comes from a village and feels alienated in a new industrial environment. Manipulated by representatives of the communist system and, accidentally, involved in Solidarity's actions, he starts the rapid process of self-education. Tomasz is not a converted sinner, but a person who is "turned back" from being an object of manipulation. Kutz stresses the grotesque, tragicomic aspect of his protagonist's adventures, particularly in the famous slapstick-like sequence in which Tomasz is chased by a group of riot militia.

## Comedies

At the beginning of the 1990s, a few attempts to make deliberately commercial films resulted in some miserable releases. Intended as commercial endeavors, some films by formerly respected, artistically inclined directors proved to be both artistic and commercial failures, for example, Janusz Zaorski's *Panny i wdowy* (*Maidens and Widows*, 1991) and Barbara Sass's *Pajęczarki* (*Spider Women*, 1992). Fortunately, there were some exceptions. Apart from Radosław Piwowarski and Juliusz Machulski, who succeeded in making intelligent and apt popular films, other directors made single films that enjoyed commercial and critical success. These include Jerzy Domaradzki's *Łuk Erosa* (*Cupid's Bow*, 1988), Jan Łomnicki's *Wielka wsypa* (*The Big Giveaway*, 1993), and Filip Bajon's *Lepiej być piękną i bogatą* (*It's Better to Be Beautiful and Rich*, 1993).

Since his first feature film, *Aria for an Athlete*, Bajon has made a number of highly original, artistically sound films. Bajon's *It's Better to Be Beautiful and Rich*, a modern version of the Cinderella story with a distinct Polish flavor, is his successful first venture into mainstream commercial cinema. His young female protagonist, a weaver played by Adrianna Biedrzyńska, works in a declining factory that is permanently on strike. One day, she

learns that she has inherited the factory. The implausible becomes possible in the film, which meanders toward an unavoidable happy ending that implicitly mocks popular films on success stories. The film has two layers: a melodramatic success story and an ironic commentary on the new Polish dream of becoming rich overnight. Bajon also plays with stereotypical Polish images of the West and of the "Wild East" (Ukraine; Bajon's film is a Polish, French, and Ukrainian coproduction). The film features a number of excellent Polish actors—among others, Daniel Olbrychski, Anna Prucnal, Bronisław Pawlik, and Marek Kondrat—who act (perhaps overact) in the manner of American prime-time television productions. The music and flamboyant photography emphasize the fairy-tale-like aspect of the film.

The award-winning *Kolejność uczuć* (*The Sequence of Feelings*, 1993), by Radosław Piwowarski (b. 1948), tells the story of a famous aging actor (Daniel Olbrychski) who comes to a provincial theater in Silesia to direct *Romeo and Juliet* and subsequently has a romance with a teenager, Julia (Juliet). The love story is set, atypically, against the background of industrial Silesia. This lyrical but unsentimental film, at times reminiscent of American romantic screwball comedies of the 1940s and 1950s, plays with Olbrychski's own star persona, which he earned in the late 1960s and the 1970s. His performance (a near mockery of "Olbrychski," a figure he created during his long career) also comes as a refreshing turn in his career.

Polish cinema is not internationally known for its comedies. The atmosphere of Polish films is usually serious, in keeping with the topics presented in these films: politics, social issues, and Polish history. Sylwester Chęciński's film about the introduction of martial law, *Rozmowy kontrolowane* (*Controlled Conversations*, 1992) brings some hope that in Poland it may finally be possible to laugh at matters normally reserved for serious treatment. Chęciński's fine comedy, scripted by a former contributor to Stanisław Bareja's comedies, Stanisław Tym (who also acts the main role), is set shortly before and after the implementation of martial law in Poland. Significantly, its innovation lies in its mockery of both sides. The protagonist (Tym), entangled in events that overwhelm him, unwillingly becomes a hero of the underground Solidarity. His undeserved fame spreads. Chęciński's mockery of Polish-style heroism and worn-out romantic gestures belongs to the tradition started by Andrzej Munk's antiheroic *Eroica*. The likeable hero of *Controlled Conversations* is involved in farcical adventures in the gloomy reality of the early 1980s in Poland. There is no ambiguity about him; he is a simple-minded, career-seeking individual, a product and a victim of the system.

Two later films, though lacking the strength of Chęciński's work, deal with similar issues told in a similar fashion. Marek Piwowski, the maker of the Polish cult film *The Cruise*, directed in 1993 the irreverent and uneven *Uprowadzenie Agaty* (*The Kidnapping of Agata*), based on a true story, about a politician who abuses his power to get rid of his daughter's lover. The new political situation, with its hastily created political elites, and the Catholic Church are the object of laughter and mockery. Piwowski's film, in spite of its satirical and comic potential, loses its initial impetus and turns out to be a collection of humorous yet disconnected and visually dry cabaret sketches. Konrad Szołajski's *Człowiek z ...* (*Man of ...*, 1993) goes so far as to mock Wajda's *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* and ridicule the "men of styrofoam," the descendants of brave dissidents turned new-style apparatchiks. Apart from direct references to Wajda's films, this sadly ineffective film tries to laugh at the current state of affairs, which is portrayed as corrupt, manipulated, and hopeless. In this world there are no ideas, and there is no protagonist to identify with.



Although the majority of contemporary comedies deal with the current political situation, there are also films focused more on characters than on politics. The exhibitionist film *Nothing Funny*, by Marek Koterski (b. 1942), is such an example. The film starts with an image of the deceased filmmaker, who tells the sad story of his life. One misfortune follows another from the time he is in diapers. Cezary Pazura plays the unfortunate loser, who goes through a midlife crisis and suffers from permanent artist's block. *Nothing Funny* can also be taken as a parody of the filmmaking community in Poland: several (sometimes crude) gags ridicule its alleged lack of professionalism and stupidity. Koterski blends fine humor and well-observed situations with lavatory jokes and unsophisticated imagery. Laughing at the state of the film industry, yet exhibiting a lack of filmic refinement himself, the director falls victim to his own mockery.

*Dzieci i ryby* (*Seen but Not Heard*, 1996) and *U pana Boga za piecem* (*Snug as a Bug in a Rug*, 1998), by Jacek Bromski (b. 1946), belong to the most interesting comedies made in recent years. *Seen but Not Heard* is the story of a forty-something generation trying to find itself in the new Polish reality. It narrates the story of a romance between a well-to-do woman (Anna Romantowska), running her own advertising business and raising a daughter, and her old romantic interest (Krzysztof Stroiński), once an aspiring scientist, now a provincial teacher.

## Personal Films

Contemporary Polish cinema also originates with auteurs making low-budget, personal, easily recognizable films. Andrzej Barański and Jan Jakub Kolski deal with "provincial" Poland and the small, "insignificant" characters populating this landscape. Between 1989 and 1995, Kolski and Barański were the most prolific of Polish filmmakers, with six feature films, produced mostly by state television. Exceptional in the context of Polish cinema is the case of Andrzej Kondratiuk's *Wrzeciono czasu* (*The Spinning Wheel of Time*, 1995) and *Słoneczny zegar* (*The Sundial*, 1997), both low-budget, personal films produced by the director's family and friends.

Kondratiuk (b. 1936) started his career in 1965 with the television film *Monolog trębacza* (*The Trumpeter's Monologue*), and made several films in

the 1970s, including *Dziura w ziemi* (*The Hole in the Ground*, 1970), *The Ascended*, and *Pełnia* (*Full Moon*, 1979). Kondratiuk and his wife actress Iga Cembrzyńska (b. 1939) made, in the 1990s, *The Spinning Wheel of Time* and *The Sundial*, both semiautobiographical stories about an aging filmmaker obsessed with the passage of time, cinema, and a young woman. These films are a continuation of Kondratiuk's earlier *Cztery pory roku* (*Four Seasons*, 1984), a work resembling a family album that portrays the Kondratiuks vacationing in their secluded family cabin. These films, however, are not "family movies," nor are they narcissistic pictures of the Polish intelligentsia. The discourse on aging, temporality, family bonds, and art is enhanced by the films' exhibitionist style, the creation of characters who border on being pretentious, and the inclusion of clever dialogues about existential problems. *The Spinning Wheel of Time*, in particular, succeeds in capturing the grotesque aspect of life as well as its poetry.[22] Critics in Poland labeled this type of cinema "private/separate cinema." The film's slow-paced scenes, unmistakable self-mockery, sarcastic humor, and visual beauty and Kondratiuk's perseverance in pursuing his vision were honored with the Special Award of the Jury at the 1995 Festival of Polish Films.

Since his impressive *A Provincial Woman*, Andrzej Barański (b. 1941) has made several notable films, including at the beginning of the 1990s *Kramarz* (*The Peddler*, 1990), *Kawalerskie życie na obczyźnie* (*A Bachelor's Life Abroad*, 1992), and *Dwa księżyce* (*Two Moons*, 1993). He is not a storyteller but rather a philosopher interested in the banality of everyday life. His films, although frequently set in the 1950s and the 1960s, ignore politics and are devoid of Polish romantic clichés. They resemble intimate miniatures, naive pictures that put everyday banality on the pedestal of art. Barański shows his protagonists' lives as heroic, tough but charming. His pragmatic protagonists are preoccupied with work and life; they do not shape history, ask "important questions," or fight/build the communist system. Instead, they approach life as a task to accomplish. They retain their composure when confronting everyday reality and survive day by day.

Barański's subtle version of realism has no predecessors in Polish cinema; it also differs from a version of realism developed in the early films of Jiři Menzel and Miloš Forman. The uniqueness of Barański's poetics is seen at its best in *The Peddler*. The protagonist Chruścik (Roman Kłosowski) is another de-romanticized, hard working individual who is not preoccupied with politics or history but with the everyday struggle for survival. Barański tells the story of his life in an extended flashback. Before the court, Chruścik narrates the futility of his past exertions, his failed attempts to fulfill the dream of his life (to own a small house), as well as his struggles with provincial authorities and unfair competition. The protagonist endures all of the hardships of life, yet, surprisingly, his account of Polish postwar history is devoid of politics. Politics plays a role in his life not unlike that of the elements, and is treated accordingly. A perpetual optimist with no luck on his side, Chruścik never complains.



**Figure 8.1** Roman Kłosowski in Andrzej Barański's *The Peddler* (1990)

*The Peddler* is permeated with images of provincial Poland and the slow-paced lives of the province-dwellers. Due to the nature of his work (as an itinerant salesman), Chruścik moves from one small place to another. The camera follows him in these colorful places avoided by mainstream Polish cinema: country fairs and sleepy provincial towns. The importance of Barański's work lies in his painstaking re-creation of the material aspect of the Polish communist past. In this film, the paraphernalia of the Catholic Church and the communist system blend together into an idiosyncratic mélange characteristic of postwar Polish reality. Answering a question about the alleged banality of his films, Barański remarks: "It is not that I love banal aspects of life. I am, however, charmed by a certain order. Such an order with which one can live and die."[23]

Trained as a cinematographer, Jan Jakub Kolski (b. 1956) is probably the most important newly emerging figure in contemporary Polish cinema. He has made a number of highly original films since his well-received 1991 debut, *Pogrzeb kartofla* (*The Burial of Potato*). This success was followed by *Pograbek* (1992); *Jańcio Wodnik* (*Johnnie the Aquarius*, 1993); *Cudowne miejsce* (*Miraculous Place*, 1994); *Szabla od komendanta* (*The Sabre from the Commander*) and *Grający z talerza* (*The Plate Player*), both films

released in 1995; the winner of the 1998 Festival of Polish Films, *Historia kina w Popielawach* (*The History of Cinema Theater in Popielawy*); and a recent film, a story about the Holocaust, *Daleko od okna* (*Away from a Window*, 2000). His slow-paced films are characterized by their fine cinematography (by Piotr Lenar) and stylized acting, particularly from Franciszek Pieczka (b. 1928), Mariusz Saniternik, and Grażyna Błęcka-Kolska (the director's wife). Kolski's films resemble in atmosphere Witold Leszczyński's classic *The Life of Matthew*, also starring Pieczka, and his later film *Konopielka*. Kolski's films share with *The Life of Matthew* the same obsession with mythologized rural communities and down-to-earth yet multidimensional protagonists who feel a sense of mystery when close to nature. In some of his films, however, the protagonists have more in common with characters depicted in *Konopielka*—characters who are backward, ignorant, and xenophobic. Kolski creates a private world, a mythical village, and protagonists who are outside of history. However, he does not make "rural films," as he frequently declares, but rather films that are set in a rural milieu; the problems they touch upon have universal appeal.

Kolski's prolific nature and his obsession with the private world lead inevitably to a certain mannerism, apparent in his *The Sabre from the Commander* and *The Plate Player*. To be sure, from a "personal director" we expect an "authorial style," and this frequently involves the repetition of themes, structures, and cinematic devices. Writer-director Kolski (all scripts are his own) is haunted by the same picturesque landscapes and characters, and by the presence of the religious/supernatural element in the lives of his down-to-earth yet unique characters.

The direct political references present in Kolski's first film, *The Burial of Potato*, gradually disappear from his later works, replaced by metaphysical meditation and folk wisdom combined with a unique version of lyricism and humor. Kolski is interested in oversensitive, weird, and marginalized characters whose worlds end with the horizon. His protagonists live as if outside of history; they are not political animals but simple people whose often banal and uneventful lives are limited to their village or small town and a marginal profession. Their aspirations follow suit. In Kolski's world, supernatural events are everyday phenomena, and Christianity coexists with remnants of Slavic pagan beliefs.

*Johnnie the Aquarius* is the essence of Kolski's stylized poetic, perhaps magic, realism. The film portrays a village thinker, Jańcio (Johnnie), who discovers his unusual ability to "control" water, which, under his power, is no longer constrained by the laws of gravity. Blessed with miraculous abilities and driven by a sense of mission, Jańcio leaves his secluded village and his pregnant, faithful wife Weronka for the outside world. Prosperity and fame change his life forever, endangering his marriage and, finally, bringing unhappiness to him and to those whom he loves. His son, born in a barn, has a devilish tail, the result of a spell thrown by a beggar for somebody else's wrongdoing. Desperate, Jańcio tries to reverse time and to repair the damage he has done to Weronka. He loses the battle with time, but, by accepting things as they are, he finds peace of mind while surrounded by his family.



With its multilayered construction and many references to religion, politics, and literature, *Johnnie the Aquarius* could be taken as a philosophical, political, or poetical parable, depending on a critic's predilection. Kolski's unusual story has no equivalent in Polish cinema; it has the appeal of a chromolithograph, of "primitive poetry," and of a philosophical folktale. Stylized dialogues and songs commenting on the action are combined with tableaux-like compositions of a world ruled by mysticism. The frequent use of slow motion stresses the importance of the moment and of the characters inscribed in a rural landscape.

Kolski's poetics and his portrayal of the farmers' class, as well as Barański's vision of provincial life, are not challenged in Poland. An important stream of so-called "Polish rural literature" has no filmic counterparts. For instance, Ryszard Ber's adaptation of Wiesław Myśliwski's prose, *Kamień na kamieniu* (*Not One Stone upon Another*, 1995), resulted in a disconnected picture devoid of the epic scope of the novel (interestingly, Myśliwski is credited as a scriptwriter of the film). Practically, the only

**Figure 8.2** Franciszek Pieczka in Jan Jakub Kolski's *Johnnie the Aquarius* (1993)

picture that has to be mentioned here is *Śmierć dzieciobroba* (*Death of the Kidsmaker*, 1991), by Wojciech Nowak (b. 1957). This film belongs to a different kind of realism. Like Kolski's *The Burial of Potato*, it is a cruel, merciless picture of the province. The reality Nowak presents is loathsome, peopled by grotesque, vulgar characters. The film's protagonist, a provincial Don Juan, refuses to marry a pregnant security officer's daughter. His refusal is not a nonconformist act, not a Don Juan's revolt, nor a political gesture. Instead, he is at pains to emphasize his separation from a world he despises, but of which he is paradoxically a part. The film's mise en scène stresses the ugliness and trashy characteristics of a degraded world.

## Female Filmmakers

In recent years, several films made by female Polish filmmakers have enjoyed critical and/or commercial success, including works by Dorota Kędzierzawska, Teresa Kotlarczyk, Magdalena Łazarkiewicz (Agnieszka Holland's younger sister), and, in particular, Barbara Sass.

Dorota Kędzierzawska (b. 1957) started her career with *Koniec świata* (*The End of the World*, 1988, television film) and *Diabły, diabły* (*Devils, Devils*, 1991). Her subsequent films, *Wrony* (*Crows*, 1994) and *Nic* (*Nothing*, 1998), have been very popular on the international film festival circuit. *Crows* tells the story of a lonely twelve-year-old girl, who kidnaps a two-year-old toddler, plays at being her mother, and then returns her many hours later. The slow narration centers entirely on the two girls and their journey; other characters appear and then quickly fade away in this film about the need for love. The film's simple, poetic narrative is beautifully visualized by Artur Reinhart; his splendid cinematography captures sophisticated images of an old town, of beaches, and of the sea—the scenery of the journey. In these beautiful yet cold landscapes, the older girl's desperate search for love becomes almost a cry in the dark.

Another promising female director who started her career in the 1990s is Teresa Kotlarczyk (b. 1955). She is the author of *Zakład* (*The Reformatory*, 1990), an intriguing film dealing with the problem of manipulation and, on a different level, with moral questions involved in filmmaking. Kotlarczyk's *Odwiedź mnie we śnie* (*Visit Me in My Dream*, 1996) is the Polish equivalent of *Ghost* (1990). Ala, a beautiful and successful writer, dies in a car accident, leaving her three children and husband unable to come to terms with their loss. The parallel action portrays Ala in a kind of heavenly waiting room reconsidering her past life and watching her family on earth learning to live anew. In an emotional finale, she returns to earth disguised as a different woman and is recognized by her family. Kotlarczyk's most recent film, *Prymas. Trzy lata z tysiąclecia* (*The Primate: Three Years Out of the Millennium*, 2000), tells the story of the internment of the Polish Catholic primate Stefan Wyszyński by the communist authorities during the Stalinist period.



Magdalena Łazarkiewicz (b. 1954) is chiefly known for the youth-oriented *Ostatni dzwonek* (*The Last Bell*, 1989), the politically oriented *Odjazd* (*Departure*, 1992, directed with her husband, Piotr Łazarkiewicz), and *Białe małżeństwo* (*White Marriage*, 1993). The last film deals openly with young female sexuality as well as female psychology. Set against the backdrop of the idyllic scenery of prewar Poland—a picturesque country landscape with a pleasant manor, marching cavalry men, and burgeoning girls in virginal white dresses—the film mixes subjective and objective reality, dreams and waking reality, and also various genres. The young female protagonist rebels against her own gender and the traditional role prescribed for her. She despises and is afraid of matrimonial sex without love, with all of its biological connotations, and does not want to follow the example of other women in her family. *White Marriage* can be taken as an intelligent discussion of female sexuality with strong Freudian overtones, something of a rarity in Polish cinema.

In the shadow of Poland's internationally known filmmakers, Barbara Sass (b. 1936) has developed her own personal style. After working as an assistant director on films by Wajda, Has, and Skolimowski, she started her independent career in 1980 with the film *Without Love*. Following the success of this film, she developed a body of work characterized by thematic unity (she is also a scriptwriter) and by a simple documentary-like visual style (her husband, Wiesław Zdort, always participates as a cinematographer). Like Márta Mészáros of Hungary, Sass presents a feminist perspective and confronts issues largely ignored in overtly political Central Europe: the plight of women and gender relations. Like Mészáros and the majority of Central European female filmmakers, Sass also objects to narrow feminist interpretations of her films. Nevertheless, given Sass's manifest interest in feminist issues, her works almost force critics to take a feminist perspective. For instance, her early works—starting with *Without Love* through *The Debutante*, *The Shout*, and *The Girls from Nowolipki* and its sequel *Crab Apple Tree*—portray young women struggling to achieve their goals in spite of political and psychosociological pressures. These films center more on characters than on action or psychosociological backgrounds. Sass appropriately calls her early films "psychological portraits narrated in a rhythm corresponding to that of the contemporary world: dynamic, sharp, and fast."[24]

In the 1990s Sass completed four films: *Historia niemoralna* (*An Immoral Story*, 1990), *Tylko strach* (*Only Fear*, 1993), *Temptation*, and *Jak narkotyk* (*Like a Drug*, 1999). *An Immoral Story* comments on the creative process of filmmaking. Featuring the star of Sass's early films, Dorota Stalińska, the film tells a fictional story about an actress and reflects on being an artist (actress/filmmaker) at the same time. Throughout the film, a female director (perhaps Sass herself) comments off-screen to her editor on several scenes from her film in the making. *An Immoral Story* is full of intertextual references to Sass's early films, to Polish cinema, and to Stalińska's career as an actress. In spite of its significance, this intricate work did not receive

the critical acclaim it deserves in Poland. After *Only Fear*, the story of a successful television journalist, Katarzyna (Anna Dymna's winning performance), struggling to overcome alcoholism, Barbara Sass directed one of the finest Polish films produced in 1995, *Temptation* (discussed in chapter 9).

## Krzysztof Kieślowski

Krzysztof Kieślowski, born in 1941 and arguably the best-known contemporary Polish filmmaker, died in March 1996. His *Dekalog* (*Decalogue*, 1988), a ten-part series of contemporary television films loosely based on the Bible's Ten Commandments, was hailed as a great achievement and incontestably placed its director in the realm of renowned filmic authors. *Krótki film o zabijaniu* (*A Short Film about Killing*) and *Krótki film o miłości* (*A Short Film about Love*), the extended feature versions of two parts of *Decalogue*, were exceptionally well received in Europe. Kieślowski's last films, *Podwójne życie Weroniki* (*The Double Life of Véronique*, 1991) and his trilogy *Three Colors: Blue, Red, White* (1993–1994), consolidated his position as a distinguished European auteur.

A closer look at Kieślowski's oeuvre and his artistic persona reveals that he does not fit the traditional image of a "great Central European auteur" obsessed with politics and history. His films are also unique in the context of Polish cinema, which is usually preoccupied with the local romantic tradition. For a number of critics who are used to Polish film functioning, for the most part, as an expression of Polish history and political tensions, Kieślowski's films (especially his 1990s international coproductions) can be puzzling. I argue that Kieślowski's last films embrace many stylistic and thematic obsessions characteristic of European art cinema and, therefore, should be examined in a larger than national context.

As opposed to other internationally known Polish filmmakers, such as Andrzej Wajda or Krzysztof Zanussi, Kieślowski was never directly involved in politics nor was he ever explicitly political in his films or in public appearances. Although persistently subjected to an Aesopian reading by Polish critics and filmgoers alike, his early, still underappreciated films, such as *Camera Buff* or *Blind Chance*, do not demonize the communist system. Rather, they show the system as an obstacle to achieving happiness and, to use the title of his 1976 film, *Calm*. Discussing Kieślowski's career, Tadeusz Sobolewski points out the problem that Kieślowski's "apolitical" stand generated in Poland: "None of the critics in Poland had the foresight to perceive the uniqueness and specificity of Kieślowski's films, except in terms of their being a function of social, political or religious aspirations. The Polish critic persistently forces the artist to answer the questions concerning social issues."[25]

Perpetually independent, Kieślowski operated outside of mainstream Central European aesthetics. Within this highly politicized culture, in which political choices were of greater importance than aesthetic priorities,



Kieślowski was clearly an outsider, not afraid of expressing unpopular views concerning, for example, religion and political commitment. Kieślowski frequently stressed his disillusionment with politics. In 1994, explaining his surprising decision to retire from filmmaking at the age of 53, he claimed that "one of the reasons of my departure from the cinema is my dislike for fulfilling public roles, and a longing for privacy."[26]

Kieślowski's move to international coproductions and his subsequent critical recognition were considered by some Polish critics as suspicious.[27] Unlike other Polish artists, Kieślowski achieved his international auteur status without relying on the Polish romantic tradition, which, as Bolesław Michałek says, is characterized by its "battle for social justice, and its preoccupation with gaining independence, the tradition in which dilemmas are solved by a single gesture. Kieślowski indicates that a dilemma is something you live with."[28] Michałek's statement closely resembles Paul Schrader's distinction between American movies, which are "based on the assumption that life presents you with problems," and European films "based on the conviction that life confronts you with dilemmas—and while problems are something you solve, dilemmas cannot be solved, they're merely probed or investigated."[29] Kieślowski's films certainly deal with dilemmas.

In spite of its religious connotations, *Decalogue* is not an exploration of supernatural phenomena but an acute analysis of pre-1989 Poland. The ten-part film, written by Kieślowski with Krzysztof Piesiewicz (his regular co-scriptwriter since 1984), portrays a pessimistic picture of a harsh world in which moral choices have to be made against the pressure of politics and economics. Kieślowski's "entomological observations" of Polish society give *Decalogue* the sense of a semidocumentary film. The ugliness and grayness of the dehumanized urban landscape dominate the filmic landscape, together with close-ups of people surviving these harsh conditions. The Bergmanesque dilemmas depicted here are appropriate for Kieślowski, who is known for his admiration of some of Bergman's films, *The Silence* (1963) in particular. (Interestingly, in his 1995 interview, trumpeted as "the last one," Bergman listed *Decalogue* as one of the five contemporary films that he "most benefited from.")[30]

The semidocumentary aspect of *Decalogue* is particularly evident in *A Short Film about Killing*, which alludes to the Fifth Commandment. The film tells the story of a young drifter, Jacek (Mirosław Baka), who commits the brutal murder of a taxi driver, is sentenced to death for his crime, and is hanged. Kieślowski plays with three distinct viewpoints: that of the murderer, that of his victim, and that of the young lawyer who prepares for the lawyer's bar examination and later gets his first case—defending the killer. Kieślowski, as usual, brings into focus small details and stresses the dreadful aspect of both the murder of the taxi driver and the execution authorized by the state.

Kieślowski's Polish-French coproductions, starting with *The Double Life of Véronique*, are often read allegorically by Western critics as commentaries

**Figure 8.3** Mirosław Baka (left) and Jan Tesarz in Krzysztof Kieślowski's *A Short Film about Killing* (1988)

on the relationship between Poland and Western Europe. *The Double Life of Véronique*, Kieślowski's breakthrough film, is a rare "art film" dealing with the subject of doubleness. This is presented in the story of two young women, Weronika in Poland and Véronique in France, both memorably played by Irène Jacob (winner of the Best Actress award at Cannes), who do not know each other but whose lives have many mysterious parallels. The element of chance is a driving force in the film. The protagonists' "double life" is intensified by Sławomir Idziak's remarkable cinematography and Zbigniew Preisner's poignant score.

This slow-paced enigma, beautifully crafted and governed by a sense of mystery, appears to be almost the essence of "European art cinema," due to its personal character, sensuality, and self-referentiality and to the fact that it is saturated with art film clichés. Kieślowski's episodic film, full of unexplained occurrences, relies heavily on magnification, enigmatic doubling, and symbolism. Its elliptical narrative construction, which is mysterious to the point of teasing the spectator, resists any explicit interpretation. The story about duality is told with the extensive use of mirrors that not only multiply space but also make the whole film a spectacle of ambiguity. The film's energy and breadth does not allow it,



**Figure 8.4** Irène Jacob in *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991, Krzysztof Kieślowski)

however, to be another "fairly conventional box of ontological tricks, recycling traditional metafictional paradoxes."[31]

Kieślowski's formalist exercise probably did to art films in the 1990s what Sergio Leone's "spaghetti Westerns" did to the Western in the 1960s—the accumulation and intensification of features characteristic of the "genre." The accumulation of symbolic associations and other art cinema qualities in *The Double Life of Véronique* prompted Gaylyn Studlar to remark that it looks almost like "a virtual parody of all the established stereotypes of Continental filmmaking associated with an earlier generation of filmmakers, such as Ingmar Bergman and Alain Resnais."[32]

For Kieślowski, this film also marks a radical departure from his early filmic essays to polished international and "nonpolitical" coproductions. This is a turn toward privacy and "calmness," a retreat from the pressure of politics that is openly manifested in the Polish part of the film. For instance, Weronika does not notice a huge statue of Lenin being towed away on a truck, signaling, perhaps, the fall of communism. In another scene, when Weronika stares at her double among the tourists, she seems totally unaware of the political demonstration and the riot police surrounding her at Cracow's Main Square. Weronika is as free from politics as is the film, to the astonishment of many critics.

Kieślowski's *Three Colors*, a major cinematic achievement of the 1990s, is a trilogy inspired by the French tricolor, in which blue stands for liberty, white for equality, and red for fraternity. In spite of these connotations, Kieślowski does not seem to be particularly interested in politics or social issues; instead, once again, he deals with protagonists facing moral dilemmas, with their individual quests for the three values embodied in the French flag.

The first part of the trilogy, *Blue*, tells the story of Julie (Juliette Binoche) who endures the death of her husband and child in a car accident. The camera captures Julie's grief, her attempts to detach herself from her friends, to free herself from the past. When Julie accidentally learns about her husband's infidelity, she gradually embraces the life she has attempted to suppress. As in *The Double Life of Véronique*, the striking musical score by Zbigniew Preisner, Kieślowski's composer since *No End*, dominates the trilogy, especially the *Blue* part. It replaces dialogue and strengthens the narrative. *Blue*, in fact, is also about music. Julie's late husband was a famous composer who left an unfinished piece devoted to the idea of Europe's unification. At the end of the film, Preisner's music explodes with the "European Concerto," which employs St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians.

*White*, the "Polish" part of *Three Colors*, portrays Karol (Zbigniew Zamachowski), a Polish hairdresser living in Paris and going through a bitter divorce with his French wife Dominique (Julie Delpy). After Karol is (improbably) smuggled into Poland in a suitcase, he quickly amasses a fortune by speculating on land. In order to get even with his French wife, he fakes his own death. When Julie appears in Poland to claim his legacy, she is arrested and accused of murdering Karol. The second part of the trilogy is frequently seen by Western critics as commenting on the ties between Poland and the West. For Paul Coates, for instance, *White* "dramatizes Polish fears of exclusion from Europe," and "Karol's impotence may be that of a Pole confronting locked European doors...."[33] Such political interpretations of the film seem to be valid—the film includes some penetrating, humorous references to Polish "capitalist reality"—yet this is not the tone of the majority of reviews published in Poland. *White* is discussed there as merely a "comic interlude" within the trilogy, a film devoid of serious examination of Polish reality and filled with suspicious art house clichés.[34]



Kieślowski's *Red*, probably the most sophisticated part of the triptych, tells the story of a young fashion model, Valentine (Irène Jacob), and her chance encounter with a retired judge (Jean-Louis Trintignant) who is obsessed with illegal electronic surveillance. The complex relationship that develops between them is at the center of the film. Another character is also introduced, Valentine's neighbor, Auguste, a young law student whose life mirrors that of the old judge. At the end of the film, Valentine and Auguste are among the seven survivors rescued from a ferry accident. In an attempt to sum up the trilogy, the film also lists additional survivors whose names include other protagonists of the trilogy.

Kieślowski's *Three Colors*, which premiered at major European festivals (an important aspect, because it shows Kieślowski's aspirations) is ostensibly self-reflective and self-referential. As in *Decalogue*, characters appear and reappear in the trilogy; "Van den Budenmayer's" music (actually composed by Preisner) is quoted extensively. Kieślowski remarks that these interconnections are "for the pleasure of some cinephiles who like to find points of reference from one film to another."[35] The director employs chance scenes with no apparent link to the story, rejects causal narrative, and peoples his films with familiar supporting characters (for example, elderly ladies slowly crossing the street, perhaps reminding the protagonist of the fragility of life). The same tendency toward mannerism is evident in the cinematography and mise en scène, including the extensive use of the films' key colors to stress the films' themes, and the reliance on mirror images, filters, and views through windows and doors. Kieślowski made films for cine buffs; there are more questions than answers in his cinema, and everything here is geared toward mystery.

Tadeusz Szczepański comments that "Kieślowski ingeniously multiplies subtle refrains, parallelism, counterpoints, correspondences, symmetries, echoes, and mirror effects not only on the level of narrative threads, situations, characters, or props in the roles of *res dramatica*, but also in the mise en scène and in the use of color, sound, and, of course, music."[36] Another Polish scholar, Grażyna Stachówna, lists recurrent motifs in the trilogy that also refer to Kieślowski's earlier films: "colors, slogans of the French Revolution, blind chance, Van den Budenmayer, voyeurism and eavesdropping, an old woman with a bottle, the final cry

of the protagonists, windows, beads made of glass, two frank coin, loneliness, jealousy, humiliation, contempt, sex, suicide."[37]

The semantic richness of Kieślowski's trilogy is not, however, taken by all Polish film scholars and critics as a sign of art. For instance, Mariola Jankun-Dopartowa claims that *Three Colors* cannot be described within the existing boundaries of art cinema. According to her, the trilogy is somewhere between the domain of Bergman's cinema and videoclip or "pretentious" European production. She accuses Kieślowski of bordering on kitsch sensibility, telling stories familiar from numerous soap operas and "magazines for thinking women," and abandoning his earlier film poetics.[38]

For a number of Polish critics, Kieślowski seems to be the true hero in his films. Tadeusz Sobolewski writes that in spite of Kieślowski's often declared agnosticism, his films are imbued with strong religious overtones. For instance, the judge in *Red* "becomes simultaneously the figure of Kieślowski and the Lord God, as imagined by common folk." The same critic notes that Kieślowski abandoned "tales of fictitious characters, much in the same way he had once abandoned the documentary for fiction, for something in a way of an 'inner documentary' attempting to render inexpressible, agnostic states."[39]

* * * *

Although Kieślowski's films are unique in the Polish context, one may see a continuation of his cinema in the recent films made by Jerzy Stuhr: *Spis cudzołożnic* (*The List of Adulteresses*, 1994), *Historie miłosne* (*Love Stories*, 1997), *Tydzień z życia mężczyzny* (*A Week in the Life of a Man*, 1999), and *Duże zwierzę* (*The Big Animal*, 2000).[40] *The List of Adulteresses*, with Stuhr in the leading role, tells the story of a middle-aged academic who thinks back on his old girlfriends and women from his past during the official visit of a Swedish academic. Stuhr's film offers not only a nostalgic journey into one man's past but also a loving introduction to the unique character of Cracow.

One of Kieślowski's favorite actors, Stuhr also wrote and directed the 1997 winner of the Festival of Polish Films, *Love Stories*. In this film, dedicated to Kieślowski, Stuhr presents four parallel stories with four different protagonists: a university teacher, a priest, an army officer, and a convicted thief (all played by Stuhr). They have to choose between love and career, between the complications that love might introduce into their lives and the boredom of illusory stability. Stuhr employs an "art film atmosphere," down-to-earth characters facing moral choices, and mysterious, otherworldly figures like the "Master-Pollster," who questions the four protagonists about the true nature of their choices. *Love Stories* resembles a morality play permeated with the very metaphysical ingredients that are so characteristic of Kieślowski's last films.

In *A Week in the Life of a Man*, Jerzy Stuhr casts himself as public prosecutor Adam Borowski, who is eager to prosecute others, yet in his private



**Figure 8.5** Jerzy Stuhr and Irina Alfiorova in *Love Stories* (1997, Jerzy Stuhr)

life is equally guilty. He has an extramarital affair, attempts to avoid paying taxes, and does not understand his wife's (Gosia Dobrowolska) urge to adopt a child. The contrast between the public and private sphere of life and the subtle criticism of the emerging post-communist middle class in Poland are stressed by the ironic use of a line from *Hämlet*, sung in a song by Wojciech Kilar. The choir, to which the prosecutor belongs, rehearses several times "What a piece of work is a man," an ironic comment on the duality of the main protagonist. Stuhr's most recent film, *The Big Animal* is based on a script written by Kieślowski in 1973. It tells the story about a simple office worker who, despite problems with his neighbors and the authorities, takes care of a camel that had been abandoned by a wandering circus. The camel clearly serves as a poetic metaphor of tolerance and personal freedom in Stuhr's realistic observations of small-town mentality.

* * * *

Political and economic transformations profoundly affected the Polish film industry in the 1990s. The transition to a market economy changed the relationship between the filmmakers and the state, and also between

the filmmakers and their audiences. After a period of noticeable crises at the beginning of the 1990s, recent years have brought some moderate optimism: Polish films have started to compete successfully with Hollywood's products on Polish screens. Some of the established filmmakers have regained their popularity. And emerging innovative auteurs like Kolski, Krauze, and Stuhr have found loyal audiences and critical recognition. A new cinema and new names have surfaced in Poland since 1989. If debuts testify to the rank and health of any national cinema, then the current state of Polish cinema is not as dark as sometimes portrayed.

The current situation in the Polish film industry indicates that the future belongs to those filmmakers who are too young to be "tainted" by the past and to those whose experiences liberated them from the clichés and preoccupations of the pre-1989 cinema. The future also belongs to films that are always popular among Polish audiences—adaptations of the national literary canon. Jerzy Hoffman's *Ogniem i mieczem* (*With Fire and Sword*), based on Henryk Sienkiewicz's historical epic novel, and Andrzej Wajda's *Pan Tadeusz*, an adaptation of Adam Mickiewicz's book-length poem, both released in 1999, proved to be the most successful films to have premiered in Poland after 1992.[41]

## Notes

1. See Edward Zajiček, "Kinematografia," in *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku: Film, kinematografia*, ed. Edward Zajiček (Warsaw: Instytut Kultury and Komitet Kinematografii, 1994), 93.
2. Monique van Dusseldorp and Raphaël Loucheux, eds., *Towards the Digital Revolution: European Television and Film between Market and Revolution* (Liege: The European Institute for the Media, 1994), 50 and 53.
3. Figures from the *Polish Film Guide 1996/97* (Warsaw: Film Polski, 1997), 9; and Barbara Hollender, "Kronika. Bilans roku 1992 w kinach," *Kino* 1 (1993): 2.
4. Ibid.
5. Zajiček, "Kinematografia," 92 and 97.
6. *The Catalogue of the XX Festival of Polish Feature Films in Gdynia* (Gdynia, 1995), 111–115. Also, "Jak powstaje film" *Kino* 11 (1994): 14–16.
7. "Popularność filmów polskich 29.12.95 – 29.08.96," *Film Pro* 10, no. 18 (1996): 11.
8. This fragment of *Ashes and Diamonds* was also mentioned by Wajda in his address at the Congress of Polish Film. Andrzej Wajda, "Co się stało z polskim kinem?" *Kino* 2 (1997): 5.
9. Andrzej Wajda, "Wolni od czego?" *Kino* 1 (1992): 3–5.
10. Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Filmy polskie mówią: w tym kraju nic się nie zmieni" [a statement of the Polish critic at the Forum of the Polish Filmmakers Association in Gdynia, 1991], *Kino* 1 (1992): 2.
11. Józef Tischner, *Nieszczęsny dar wolności* (Cracow: Znak, 1996).
12. Kazimierz Kutz, "Przestaliśmy istnieć" [fragment of a discussion: "Co z polskim kinem?"], *Kino* 11 (1992): 21.
13. Kazimierz Kutz's column "Z mojego młyna," *Kino* 7–8 (1995): 70.



14. Wanda Wertenstein and Jerzy Płażewski, "Współprodukcje: hydra czy szansa," *Kino* 6 (1993): 6–9.
15. For instance, opinions expressed in the special edition of *Reżyser* [Film Director], "Tren na śmierć cenzora," 11 (1992): 1–8. Published with *Kino* 11 (1992). Also, an interview with writer and filmmaker Tadeusz Konwicki: "Wróżby z dnia dzisiejszego," *Kino* 1 (1991): 5–6.
16. "Tren na śmierć cenzora," 2.
17. Danusia Stok, ed., *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993), 151–152.
18. Anita Skwara, "Film Stars Do Not Shine in the Sky Over Poland: The Absence of Popular Cinema in Poland," in *Popular European Cinema*, ed. Richard Dyer and Ginnette Vincendeau (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), 230.
19. See Krzysztof Zanussi's comment, "Obrona kosmopolityzmu," *Kino* 2 (1992): 16–18.
20. *The Ring with a Crowned Eagle* is, in a sense, an appendix to Wajda's famous *Ashes and Diamonds*.
21. Marczewski's film was the winner of the 1990 Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia. After the introduction of martial law in Poland, as a sign of protest, the director had remained silent for almost ten years ("internal exile" was the Polish term to describe such acts).
22. *The Spinning Wheel of Time* is virtually a family enterprise. Andrzej Kondratiuk is the writer-director-star and co-cinematographer of this film. His wife Iga Cembrzyńska, a well-known actress-singer, acts as producer-star. Among the few actors in this intimate film is Janusz Kondratiuk (b. 1943), Andrzej's brother, a director known mostly for his distinguished television films made in the spirit of an early Miloš Forman, for example, his cult film in Poland, *Dziewczyny do wzięcia* (*Marriageable Girls*, 1972). He also made full-length films in the 1990s, including *Głos* (*The Voice*, 1992) and *Złote runo* (*The Golden Fleece*, 1997).
23. Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Realizm Andrzeja Barańskiego" [an interview with Barański], *Kino* 11 (1992): 12.
24. Maciej Maniewski, "Między miłością a dojrzałością" [an interview with Barbara Sass], *Kino* 6 (1996): 6.
25. Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Peace and Rebellion: Some Remarks on the Creative Output of Krzysztof Kieślowski," *Polish Cinema in Ten Takes*, ed. Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska and Zbigniew Batko (Łódź: Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 1995), 124.
26. Ibid., 125.
27. Mirosław Przylipiak writes about the reception of Kieślowski's films in Poland, "Filmy fabularne Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego w zwierciadle polskiej krytyki filmowej," *Kino Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, ed. Tadeusz Lubelski (Cracow: Universitas, 1997), 213–247; idem, "Monter i studentka," *Kino* 3 (1997): 6–9 and 50.
28. Sobolewski, "Peace and Rebellion," 126.
29. Paul Schrader, quoted in Thomas Elsaesser, "Putting on a Show: The European Art Movie," *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 4 (1994): 24.
30. Kieślowski's fascination with Bergman is discussed extensively in Tadeusz Szczepański's essay, "Kieślowski wobec Bergmana, czyli Tam, gdzie spotykają się równoległe," in Lubelski, *Kino Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, 163–171. [Szczepański quotes Jannike Åhlund's interview with Bergman, "Sista intervjun med Bergman," *Expressen* (23 November 1995).]
31. Jonathan Romney, "The Double Life of Véronique," *Sight and Sound* 1, no. 11 (1992): 43.
32. Gaylyn Studlar, "The Double Life of Véronique," *Magill's Cinema Annual 1992: A Survey of the Films of 1991*, ed. Frank N. Magill (Pasadena and Englewood Cliffs: Salem Press, 1992), 120.
33. Paul Coates, "The Sense of Ending: Reflections on Kieślowski's Trilogy," *Film Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1996–1997): 23–24.
34. See, for instance, Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Równanie w dół: *Trzy kolory: Biały*," *Kino* 2 (1994): 10–11; and Mariola Jankun-Dopartowa, "Trójkolorowy transparent: Vive le chaos!" *Kino* 6 (1995): 4–7.

35. Serge Mensonge, "Three Colours: *Blue*, *White* and *Red*. Krzysztof Kieślowski and Friends" [interview], *Cinema Papers* 99 (1994): 30.
36. Szczepański, "Kieślowski wobec Bergmana," 165.
37. Grażyna Stachówna, "*Trzy kolory*: wariacje na jeden temat," in Lubelski, *Kino Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, 102.
38. Jankun-Dopartowa, "Trójkolorowy transparent," 4–7.
39. Sobolewski, "Peace and Rebellion," 136 and 123.
40. Jerzy Stuhr is a well-known theatrical and film actor associated with the famous Teatr Stary in Cracow. He has appeared in several celebrated films made by, among others, Andrzej Wajda, Feliks Falk, Krzysztof Kieślowski, and Juliusz Machulski. Apart from Stuhr, directorial careers started such established actors as Bogusław Linda with *Seszele* (*Seychelles*, 1989), Krystyna Janda with *Pestka* (*Pip*, 1996), Olaf Lubaszenko with *Sztos* (*Making the Sting*, 1997), and Marek Kondrat with *Prawo ojca* (*Father's Law*, 1999).
41. According to the Polish weekly *Polityka*, *With Fire and Sword* (released in February 1999) remains the most popular film premiered in Poland between 1992 and June 1999 with 6,747,000 viewers. *Titanic* (1998) remains second with 3,516,000 viewers; *Jurassic Park* (1993), third with 2,742,096; *The Lion King* (1994), fourth with 2,722,000; and another Polish film, *Kiler* (1997), is ranked fifth with 2,201,502 viewers. *Polityka's* report does not include *Pan Tadeusz*, which premiered in October 1999 and was quickly seen by six million viewers. [The editorial board of *Polityka*], "Raport *Polityki*: 10 lat na wolności," *Polityka*, 5 June 1999, 24. In 1999, Polish films shared an unprecedented 60 percent of the local market. The successes of Polish films prompted the *Rzeczpospolita* film critic, Barbara Hollender, to title her review article "Hoffman and Wajda Won over Hollywood." Barbara Hollender, "Hoffman i Wajda wygrali z Hollywood," *Rzeczpospolita*, 26 January 2000, 8.

Stalinism remained virtually untouched until the mid-1970s.[1] The process of unveiling the Stalinist years started in Polish as well as in Hungarian