

## Article

# Not knowing has intimately Intimations: The Cinema of Wojciech Has, by Annette Insdorf [Book Reivew]

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**Not Knowing Has Intimately**

## **Intimations: The Cinema of Wojciech Has**

**Annette Insdorf**

**Northwestern University Press, 2017**

**£ 23.50 (paperback), 160 pages ISBN 978-0-8101-3504-8**

In 2013 'Studies in Eastern European Cinema' devoted a special issue to Wojciech Has (in the recent literature, especially in Poland, presented as Wojciech Jerzy Has), as a way to make up for the fact that his career was neglected by both Polish and foreign film historians. The articles we published were also meant to encourage more research about Has, also given that with the passage of time he comes across as more contemporary (or timeless) than his better-known compatriots, such as Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Kieślowski, in part on the account that he is the least realist and Poland-centred of the great directors of Polish cinema.

As if to respond to our call, in 2017 Northwestern University Press published a book about Has' cinema, authored by Annette Insdorf. This fact should be celebrated, given both the unwillingness of academic publishers to invest in work about less-known cinemas and the wider trend of moving away from the auteurist paradigm towards discussion about other aspects of cinema, such as production and reception of films. Insdorf belongs to a small circle of authors who, despite not being Polish, throughout her career showed interest in Polish cinema, as demonstrated by her previous book, devoted to Krzysztof Kieślowski.

How did she approach Has' cinema? In a nutshell, by dividing it into fourteen chapters, each devoted to one full-length film of Has, beginning with *The Moose* (1957) and finishing with *The Fabulous Journey of Balthazar Kober* (1988) plus one chapter about his work in the Łódź Film School and an appendix, presenting his short films. Such an approach has some advantages; the main being that somebody interested in a specific film by the director finds the relevant information easily. The disadvantage is a sense of fragmenting Has' oeuvre and neglecting periods between the analysed films. Such periods should be of interest to the author of every monograph on a film director and on Has' especially, given that his career was far from being smooth. For example, in 1973 the director made, arguably, one of his most ambitious films, *The Hourglass Sanatorium*. His next film, *An Uneventful Story*, was made only in 1983. This raises a question what happened in Has' career and life in the ten years dividing these two films. Was he suffering from burn-out? Was he forbidden from making films? Was this gap caused by political censorship, by the director's personal circumstances, or the micro-politics pertaining to the organisation of the Polish film industry? Such questions are, unfortunately, of little interest to Insdorf, although sporadically she touches upon them, suggesting on some occasions that Has' interest in Jewish history and his (however veiled) criticism of the ideology of state socialism and the reality of living under this system might not have been taken too well by the political authorities. Instead of these suggestions, however, it would have been better to provide details, either by sifting through archival documents or talking to the director's friends and collaborators. In fact, Insdorf talked to some of them, but her goal seems to have been the collection of testimonies about Has' individualism and genius, rather than getting an insight into the complicated relations between the director-auteur and the circumstances in which he operated.

The book, in a classical style, offers mostly textual analysis of Has' films. This means, to a large extent, connecting his films to literary texts. Such approach is justified by the fact that the majority of them are literary adaptations, often of difficult texts, especially from the cinematic perspective, of authors such as Jan Potocki, Bruno Schulz and Władysław Terlecki, who eschew linear narrative and move between different ontological orders. Insdorf also tries to uncover other literary, as well as cinematic references and intertexts in his films. For example, when writing about *The Doll*, she mentions Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shot* and when examining *How to Be Loved*, in which Zbigniew Cybulski played the main role, she mentions Cybulski most iconic performance in Andrzej Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds*. These connections indeed exist but they have been examined by many authors before Insdorf. This would not be a problem if not for the fact that she limits herself to stating that they exist and summarising them in one-two sentences, rather than probing them and using them as a means to uncover what was unique in Has' style. When we get a bit more about these literary connections, this is because she draws on work of other scholars, who published about Has in English, adding little to existing analyses. The same concerns Has visual style, for which he is particularly appreciated. Insdorf mentions his affinity for frames, the rich mise-en-scene in many of his films, his interest in voyeurism, his surrealist imagination. Again, however, these are characteristics which were mentioned over and over again and examined in a greater depth, including in English-language scholarship on Has. The reader who hopes that Insdorf will build on these texts, will be disappointed.

The part about Has' work in the Łódź School is practically made up of quotations of his students and collaborators, which predictably underscore his opposition to state socialism, rather than an attempt to reconstruct Has' approach to his work as a pedagogue. This is a lost opportunity, given that one can frequently encounter in Poland an opinion that, for good or for bad, Has strongly influenced the style of many of his pupils, such as Małgorzata Szumowska.

In conclusion, *Intimations: The Cinema of Wojciech Has* provides a decent introduction to the cinema of Wojciech Has but, contrary to its title, cannot be described as an intimate portrait of this remarkable director.

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