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Canons of Polish Cinema and the Place of Polish Films in Global Film Canons

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine the canons of Polish cinema as created for local consumption and for the promotion of Polish cinema internationally, as well as the place of Polish cinema in supra-national canons. It also presents briefly the history of Polish cinema and its main authors as well as the criteria of canonisation used in this essay. It argues that Polish experts tend to single out films with distinct visual style, while ordinary Polish viewers favour comedies. It also discusses the cases of Andrzej Wajda and Roman Polanski, because the former is a director most canonised by the Polish viewers, the second is the most canonised director globally to originate from the Polish soil, although he is not always treated as a Polish director. It also looks at the case of Wojciech Has, whose film *The Saragossa Manuscript* tops many polls for the best Polish films, despite his career being largely neglected by Polish film historians.

KEYWORDS

Polish cinema; canon of Polish films; canonisation; andrzej wajda; wojciech has; roman polanski

The aim of this essay is to look at the canons of Polish cinema as created for local use and for the promotion of Polish cinema internationally, as well as the place of Polish cinema in supra-national canons. Before I move on to these issues, I will present briefly the history of Polish cinema and its main canonisers¹, as it has affected to a large extent the way its canons have been conceptualised. I will also reveal the criteria through which I pick canons for my examination.

The History of Polish Cinema and Its Chief Canonisers

The history of Polish cinema, in common with many other Eastern European cinemas, can be divided into three large periods, reflecting the history of this country. The first covers the period beginning with Poland regaining independence after the First World War and finishes with the beginning of the Second World War. During this period, faced with the difficult economic and political situation, the Polish government was reluctant to invest in domestic film production. This led to the production of mostly commercial, genre films on moderate budgets, many of them comedies, musicals and melodramas, which were typically disparaged by local critics, as unambitious, repetitive, and poorly made

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(Gierszewska 2012). There was a consensus that such films would never become classics. After the Second World War, with a few exceptions, they remained seen as disposable products, not worthy of any afterlife on the grounds of their low production values and being made under a capitalist system. They were pilloried or pitied as pure commercialism without artistic standards, as conveyed by the term 'branza' (professionals or tradesmen) used to describe their makers (Starski, quoted in Lubelski 2009, 79). There is no history of Polish cinema, written before the Second World War, only individual reviews, on the basis of which we might reconstruct critical standing of specific films.

After the Second World War Poland joined the Soviet bloc and its economy became nationalised. This was also the case in the cinema industry. By the same token, cinema was expected to adhere to the ideological position and interests of its main sponsor – the socialist state. The pressure to conform to the ideology and politics of the socialist authorities were at its strongest during the rule of the Stalinist Bolesław Bierut, which lasted till his death in 1956. Hence, the first distinct cinematic school which emerged in Polish cinema after the Second World War was socialist realism. Its principal tenet was that art should be subordinated to the political project and express the position of the community it serves, rather than filmmakers. The critical standing of socialist realism was relatively low once this school was over (which is important, given that canons are created mostly retrospectively) and even, to some extent, even when it lasted. Critics argued that putting the requirement to make socially useful and positive films resulted in the production of mediocre films, which followed the same formula and lacked in personal touch, not unlike prewar genre films.²

Socialist realist cinema was followed by the Polish School, which lasted from the mid-1950s till the early 1960s. Filmmakers, belonging to this movement, took advantage of the more liberal atmosphere, following the death of Stalin and Bierut, and the ascent to power of Władysław Gomułka, and embarked on the production of more personal films, although dealing largely with the experience of the Second World War, often as seen by the members of the Home Army, which was condemned by the Stalinist authorities. Their main representatives of this school were Andrzej Wajda (1926–2016), who directed *Popiół i diament/Ashes and Diamonds* (1957), Andrzej Munk (1921–1961), director of *Eroica* (1958), Jerzy Kawalerowicz (1922–2007), who directed *Pociąg/Night Train* (1959) and Wojciech Has (1925–2000), director of *Jak być kochaną/How To Be Loved* (1963). This period was followed by a cluster of films, set in the present time, most importantly *Nóż w wodzie/Knife in the Water* (1962) by Roman Polanski (b. 1933) and films made by Jerzy Skolimowski (b. 1936), such as *Rysopis/Identification Marks: None* (1964), *Walkower/Walkover* (1965) and *Bariera/Barrier* (1966), which can be regarded as the Polish answer to the French New Wave.

The change in the style of films was accompanied by the emergence of critics, who were strongly influenced by authors publishing in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Aleksander Jackiewicz (1915–1988) and Bolesław Michałek (1925–1997). The role of Michałek as a canoniser of Polish cinema was especially important, as he played many prominent roles in film criticism, including as an editor in chief of the popular film journal *Film*, deputy editor in chief of the more highbrow *Kino*, wrote numerous articles about Polish cinema, and several books, including the first book on Polish cinema addressed to the English-speaking audience, in 1988 (Michałek 1988).

The French critics from the *Cahiers* circle, whom Michałek emulated, favoured auteurism. They regarded the director as the ultimate author of films and privileged films on which such authorial stamp was most noticeable, at the expense of films following genre formulas.³

They also edified a certain generation of directors and critics as best positioned to create canon. Serge Daney, who was an editor-in-chief of this magazine in the late 1980s, in conversation with Jean-Luc Godard (included in Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1998) claims that 'Godard's generation' (roughly those born between the mid-1920s and mid-1930) was best placed to create cinema's history (hence canon) because they were the first to experience cinema as an art with a linear history. They were aware that Rossellini was after Griffith and Visconti after Renoir, as much in a chronological as a logical sense. Prior to 'Godard's generation' such a phenomenon was impossible because of factors such as a lack of access to films, exacerbated by the Second World War, and a low quality of film criticism. It could be argued that the filmmakers belonging to the Polish School and, even to a larger extent, the Polish New Wave, were cinephiles, who made their films with acute awareness of film history, especially such schools and trends as Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave. In the Polish and Eastern European Context an important factor was also the perceived oppositional stance of the director, which demonstrated that he was guided by his personal opinion rather than the political agenda of the authorities.

After the Polish School, the next distinctive paradigm in Polish cinema was the Cinema of Moral Concern in the second half of the 1970s, whose main representatives were Krzysztof Kieslowski (1941–1996), Krzysztof Zanussi (b. 1939) and Agnieszka Holland (b. 1948). This cinema was no longer interested in the Second World War and brushed aside the polished, often ornamental style characteristic of the films by Wajda, Kawalerowicz and Has. It took inspiration from television and was bolder in criticising the authorities. These directors were also cinephiles and in a fashion anticipating postmodernism, showed interest in the process of filmmaking and cultural institutions, as conveyed by titles of such films as *Amator/Camera Buff* (1979), directed by Kieslowski or *Aktorzy prowincjonalni/Provincial Actors* (1979) by Agnieszka Holland.

The next generation of Polish film historians, specialising in Polish cinema, born in the 1930s and the 1940s, continued the line of inquiry and showed similar interests to those of Jackiewicz and Michałek. Symptomatic from this perspective are the cases of Tadeusz Lubelski (b. 1949) and Maria Kornatowska (1935–2011). All of them were critics, historians and pedagogues working respectively at the Jagiellonian University and the Lodz Film School. Lubelski, who is probably the best-known historian of Polish cinema working in Poland, follows in the footsteps of Michałek most closely, examining Polish cinema as cinema of auteurs. Among his numerous books one finds *Strategie autorskie w polskim filmie fabularnym lat 1945–1961 (Authorial Strategies in the Polish Fiction Films in the Years 1945–1961*, first edition 1992, second edition Lubelski (2000)), whose very title underlines the importance of auteurism in Polish cinema, as well as several monographs, devoted to specific Polish filmmakers, such as Tadeusz Konwicki (1984), Krzysztof Kieślowski (1997) and Andrzej Wajda (2006), again pointing to the importance of auteurs in the history of Polish cinema and the two paradigms previously mentioned, the Polish School and the Cinema of Moral Concern. Kornatowska published a volume of interviews with Agnieszka Holland and co-scripted a film about Wojciech Has, again demonstrating the dominance of the director-centric approach in Polish film history.

Of course, films belonging to these waves constituted only a small proportion of films produced in Poland every year. Along auteurist films numerous genre films were made, such as comedies, melodramas, along with a smaller number of horrors and science fiction films, and documentary and animation films. Many of them turned out to be very popular,

but they barely attracted attention of the aforementioned critics and scholars. It appears that there was a tacit assumption that they lay outside the canon, mostly due to allegedly being of low artistic value and politically conformist.

The fall of the Iron Curtain changed the film industry in Poland, weakening its protection by the state, abolishing overt political censorship and bringing an entrepreneurial spirit to the film industry. This period can be regarded as a synthesis of the two previous periods. On one hand, it has been recognised after 1989 that cinema is a commercial institution and the previous prejudices against commercial cinema disappeared among filmmakers and critics. Hence, it led to the filmmakers engaging more openly with genre cinema and other means to attract audiences, such as using enticing trailers, media promotions etc. On the other hand, however, the Polish state remained the main sponsor of the Polish cinema. This is especially the case since setting up Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej (the Polish Institute of Film Art; known as PISF) in 2005, a state institution, which supports the bulk of full-length feature films every year.

Although over 30 years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Curtain, no distinctive waves have been identified by the historians of Polish cinema. This is important because, as Godard remarks in his *Histoire(s) du cinema*, the waves affect canon formation in a major way. This is because we tend to pay more attention and remember better films which emerge as a part of a group, united by a similar style and ideology, and often similar generational experience of their makers. Such films also come across as better aligned with the current politics, engaging with it approvingly or critically. The importance of waves lies also in the fact that, according to Daney, at some point (most likely in the 1980s) it became difficult to create a canon because, suddenly, there were too many films to choose from and cinema lost its power as an institution. The lack of waves thus potentially works against identifying canonical films in Polish postcommunist cinema. What acts against finding new classics of Polish cinema are also changes in film studies, reflecting transformations in this discipline elsewhere. Although aesthetic preoccupations, which were of paramount importance to historians and critics such as Michałek, Lubelski and Kornatowska, did not disappear entirely from interests of Polish scholars of Polish cinema, are largely supplanted by other approaches, concerning issues around production, economy or queerness, among others. Consequently, there are fewer historians in the vein of Michałek and Lubelski, willing to argue about the perceived greatness of specific Polish films, filmmakers and cinematic schools.

Hard and Soft Canonisation

Film canons are used for different purposes, such as information, education, internal and external promotion of certain works and, broadly understood, engaging with historical and aesthetic discourse. Depending on the purpose, the users of canons would turn to different criteria. Some might lean towards researching existing history books; others would look at the results of polls for best films, programmes of national and international festivals and awards given there. Still others might look at box office results. Those interested in the Polish take on the canon of Polish films, would prioritise Polish sources and media; those interested in the standing of Polish films on the international arena would research the presence of Polish films in international publications, festivals and on streaming platforms,

and in polls for best films in the history of world cinema. We might also get different results, depending on whether we are interested in the canon made by film specialists or ‘lay audience’.

It is impossible in a standard sized journal article to consider all these markers of canonisation, therefore I will privilege here the presence of Polish films in national and international polls for best films, published histories of Polish cinema, both in Polish and in English, as well as their position in Oscar competition and, to a lesser extent, their presence in the histories of Eastern European, European and global cinema. Published polls are of the greatest importance here. This is because they are the most explicit ways of canonising films: those who partake in polls explicitly vote for best films. By contrast, choosing a film for an analysis in an article or in a classroom discussion does not necessarily mean that it is an excellent film; it might just suggest that it is a good representative of a certain type of production. A good position in the box office does not guarantee that it will retain its elevated position in the years to come; it might just be a fashionable film. Even winning a prestigious festival does not warrant staying in the viewers’ memory. From this perspective I suggest making a division between strong and weak canonisation. Winning a prestigious poll is a sign of a strong canonisation. Winning a festival and being just mentioned in publications is a marker of a weak canonisation. Becoming the topic of an academic monograph; receiving an Oscar nomination I place somewhere in between these categories. In my examination I will look at films and directors, given that Polish cinema history, as I already indicated, was largely influenced by the concept of the director-author. I am also interested in the relationship between canons of films and canons of directors, as well as the relationship between canons, movements, genres, generations and gender.

It shall also be mentioned that we are likely to receive different results, depending on the definition of a ‘Polish film’ and a ‘Polish filmmaker’ (principally director). Polish canonisers typically use such definitions implicitly, on some occasions even saying that ‘everybody knows or feels what is a Polish film’. However, in practice different people have different views on the Polishness of Polish films. We can identify two contrasting approaches to this issue. On one end of the spectrum a Polish film is defined as a film which is funded by Polish bodies, directed by a Polish director, includes mostly Polish cast and crew, is shot and set in Poland, spoken in Polish and concerns Polish issues. On the opposite side of the spectrum a Polish film is any film which has something Polish about it, be it a director, topic or funding. Similarly, in the first, restricted sense, a Polish director is somebody who is ethnically Polish and dedicated him/herself to make Polish films in the first sense. In the second sense, this group includes anybody who came from the Polish soil or even simply has Polish ancestors, irrespective of where they make their films and what is their topic.

In most cases, problems arise in relation to films and directors placed in the middle of this spectrum, such as *Trois couleurs* (*Three Colours* trilogy, 1993–1994), which Krzysztof Kieslowski made in France, and *The Pianist* (2002) by Roman Polanski, which is an international coproduction, set in Poland, but shot largely in Germany and spoken in English. Of all film directors, the case of Polanski is the most borderline and most important, because – as I will demonstrate in due course – including or excluding Polanski has a major impact on the very top of the hierarchy of Polish films and filmmakers, as well as the standing of Polish cinema internationally.

Polish Canons for Polish Viewers

In this part I like to focus on several polls for the best Polish films. The most authoritative of them appears to be the poll organised in 2015 by the Film Museum in Lodz together with the Film Department of Lodz University, the Lodz Film School and the Polish Society of Filmmakers. The poll was titled ‘12 Films for 120 years of cinema’ and consisted of two parts. In first part participants voted for best films in the history of cinema, irrespective of their nationality; in the second for the best Polish films (Muzeum Kinematografii w Łodzi’s Best Polish Films 2015). I will focus on the second part, drawing largely on its analysis by Konrad Klejsa, who was involved in organising the poll and was tasked with summarising its results (Klejsa 2015). The poll was largely modelled on the *Sight and Sound* poll, in which specialists from different fields are invited, to cast their ballot for the best films of all time. On this occasion, specialists included principally filmmakers, academics and those involved in the promotion of Polish film culture. Participants could vote for their personal favourites, rather than the ‘objectively’ best films. They were also allowed to consider Polish films according to the broad definition which considers films like *The Pianist* and Kieslowski’s *Three Colours* trilogy, as Polish films. In total, 132 filmmakers and 150 film culture specialists, voted, which renders it representative of the Polish film specialists, given the size of the country. The first twelve places are as follows:

1. *Ziemia obiecana/The Promised Land* (1975), dir. Andrzej Wajda
2. *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie/The Saragossa Manuscript* (1965), dir. Wojciech Jerzy Has
3. *Popiół i diament/Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), dir. Andrzej Wajda
4. *Nóż w wodzie/Knife in the Water* (1962), dir. Roman Polański
5. *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą/The Hourglass Sanatorium* (1973), dir. Wojciech Jerzy Has
6. *Pociąg/The Night Train* (1959), dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz
7. *Przypadek/Blind Chance* (1981), dir. Krzysztof Kielowski
8. *Dzień świra/Day of the Wacko* (2002), dir. Marek Koterski
9. *Matka Joanna od Aniołów/Mother Joan of Angels* (1961), dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz
10. *Ida* (2013), dir. Paweł Pawlikowski
11. *Zezowate szczęście/Bad Luck* (1960), dir. Andrzej Munk
12. *Rejs/Cruise* (1970), dir. Marek Piwowski

Klejsa notes that what connects two films at the very top of the list is their epic dimension and spectacularism, albeit fulfilled for different purposes. ‘*The Promised Land* portrays spaces and characters populating them in a naturalistic way; *The Saragossa Manuscript* gravitates towards reverie’ (Klejsa 2015). Indeed, the care for visuals in these two films is unprecedented in the Polish history. Both are superproductions. In particular, *The Saragossa Manuscript*, which is set in Spain during the Napoleonic wars, is a feat of production design, with the Spanish cities, castles, mountains and deserts recreated in Poland (Figures 1–3).

Klejsa notes that the same spectacularism cannot be found in the other films from the ‘golden twelve’, which are more in the style of ‘chamber pieces’ and ‘introspective works’, as exemplified by *Knife in the Water*, *The Night Train*, *Day of the Wacko* and *Ida* (ibid.). While I agree with this opinion, I would suggest that all these films, with the exception of *The Day of the Wacko*, are renowned for the care afforded to their visual dimension.



Figure 1. *The Promised Land* (1975), dir. Andrzej Wajda.



Figure 2. *The Saragossa Manuscript* (1965), dir. Wojciech Has.

What is also notable about this poll is that it is dominated by the first generation of postwar director-auteurs: Wajda, Has, Kawalerowicz and Polanski. Of the twelve films, eight were made by these four directors, and of those, famous films made in the late 1950s and the early 1960s; what can be described as the films of Polish modernism. What is also striking is the dominance of the films made during the PRL and the lack of films made in the years 1918–1938 among the twelve best or even in the entire list of 100 best films. Why is this the case? Apart from the low reputation of Polish interwar cinema, we can list time as a factor in such a negative assessment – they do not coincide with the ‘lived experience’



Figure 3. *Day of the Wacko* (2002), dir. Marek Koterski.

of people voting in this poll, unlike the films of the 1960s, with which many of them grew up. The films from this period were not shown in Polish cinema theatre, except in the specialist Iluzjon cinema, belonging to the film archive and if they were shown on television, they were 'ghettoised' in a special programme *W starym kinie/In the Old Cinema*, whose very title suggested their outmodedness, unlike films from the late 1950s and the 1960s, which are regularly broadcast on the Polish television, as well as released on DVD.

Another surprise is the modest representation of films made after the fall of the Iron Curtain: only two of the twelve films on the list were made after 1989. Such results can be explained, again, in part by the factor of time: it requires time to recognise a work of art as a masterpiece. That said, some of them, such as *Ida* and *Róża/Rose* (2011), directed by Wojciech Smarzowski, were pronounced masterpieces only several years after their release. Another factor, which Klejsa mentions in his analysis, is the age of experts, who responded to the poll: older judges, who dominated the poll, tended to choose older films, although not those made before they were born. If the poll was made only by voters below 40, the results would be quite different. While the voters older than 60 mentioned only one film made after 1989, *Ida* by Pawlikowski, those younger than 40 mentioned also *Day of the Wacko*, *Psy/Dogs*, *Dług/Debt* (1999), directed by Krzysztof Krauze and two films by Wojciech Smarzowski: *Dom zły/The Dark House* (2009) and *Rose*. The younger voters also tended to mention more often films by Krzysztof Kieslowski, at the expense of those by Wajda, Kawalerowicz and Munk. The choice of the postcommunist films on the long list, which also includes *Wesele/The Wedding* (2004) by Smarzowski on 29th place and *Plac Zbawiciela/Saviour Square* (2006) by Krzysztof Krauze and Joanna Kos-Krauze on 50th place, confirms Klejsa's observation that younger viewers are less interested in the Polish history and more in the present day. I would also add that visual exuberance appears to be of less importance to these voters. Foreign films of Polish directors feature on this poll, but lower than one might expect, with Polanski's *The Pianist* on 24th place and Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Blue* (1993) on 52th place. The list of masterpieces is dominated by full-length fiction films; there are fewer than five films which do not belong to this category (documentary and animation films). This is, however, a feature of polls for best films made elsewhere, including the S&S poll.

One aspect of the result of the poll, particularly striking in the context of the changes which over the decades took place on the S&S polls, is the lack of female directors in the top twelve and their poor performance overall, despite the wide acclaim of at least two Polish female directors, Wanda Jakubowska, the director of *Ostatni etap/The Last Stage* (1948) and Agnieszka Holland, who made, among other films, *Kobieta samotna/A Woman of Her Own* (1987) and a large number of female directors who made their debuts after 1989, such as Małgorzata Szumowska and Agnieszka Smoczyńska, who have a significant presence on the festival circuit. Holland's films have the highest place on this list of all the films made by female directors, reaching 49th place. Jakubowska's film reached only 86th place; Szumowska's *Body/Ciało* (2015) found itself at the 69th spot. Their relatively low position on this list can be linked to specific factors. Jakubowska is a chief representative of socialist realism, which has not been in vogue among critics, except the most politically conformist, on the account of it being the antithesis of auteurism. The fact that her *The Last Stage* reached the golden hundred at all is most likely due to the fact that this is the first fiction film about Auschwitz and is largely based on Jakubowska's own experiences as a prisoner. The Cinema of Moral Concern, with which Holland is most identified, generally lost its appeal due to its reliance on dialogue and a 'timid didacticism', which only Krzysztof Kieslowski managed to avoid. The relatively poor performance of Szumowska and other female directors of her generation and a younger one can be seen in the context of the under-representation of films made after 1989. Viewed less sympathetically, however, Polish film experts, perhaps less driven by the 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity' agenda, which dominates Western academia and cultural institutions⁴, value films made by female directors less highly than films made by their male counterparts and are therefore less likely to include female directors on their list simply to fill quotas.

To establish how representative the Museum of Cinematography poll is, I looked at other polls from the last decade available online. Some of them are made by just one critic, while others purport to be based on ballots by many film specialists; while others still admittedly represent 'vox populi', allowing ordinary viewers to cast their vote. Of those made by specialists, I have consulted, among others, one published by the cultural portal *Esensja* ('50 najlepszych polskich filmów wszech czasów' (2011), from 2011 and *Pelna sala* ('Top 100 Najlepszych polskich filmów w historii' 2017), from 2017. Although precise results differ, for example on whether the winner is *The Promised Land*, or *The Saragossa Manuscript*, the patterns which emerged in the Museum of Cinematography poll apply also to those two polls, namely their domination by the Polish School films, together with those by Krzysztof Kieslowski and *Knife in the Water* by Polanski. This is combined with a poor representation of films from the postcommunist period and a near absence of films made in the interbellum.

Of those representing 'vox populi', the most representative appears to be one compiled by *FILMFEST PL* in 2012. On this occasion the poll has been dominated by comedies by directors such as Tadeusz Chmielewski, Marek Piwowski, Stanisław Bareja and Juliusz Machulski. One could find six comedies in the 'golden ten' or even seven comedies, if we treat *The Saragossa Manuscript* as a comedy, which reached Nr 5, above Polanski's *Knife in the Water* at Nr 6 and *The Promised Land* at Nr 7 ('Najlepsze polskie filmy wszech czasów - NOWY RANKING' 2013). This poll points to the disparity between the tastes of experts and ordinary people, with the former favouring arthouse, modernist films, while the latter favouring popular films. This disparity may be in part explained by the assumption that

popular cinema in Eastern Europe during the period of state socialism was low-brow and politically conformist, as Adrian Pelc argued in relation to Yugoslavia (Pelc 2024). However, this assumption does not stand in the light of the fact that makers of comedies, such as Stanisław Bareja, were often braver than their arthouse-minded counterparts in criticising the state socialist system. Moreover, some of them were stylistically very sophisticated, as exemplified by films by Marek Piwowski and Wojciech Has. More likely, the experts shun popular cinema on the grounds that it simply cannot be as good as arthouse cinema. What ordinary viewers have in common with specialists is assigning a relatively low value to films directed by women.

To assess the hierarchy of the interbellum and the postcommunist films, I also looked separately at polls, which either specifically included interwar polls or favoured them in some way. Of prewar films, the absolute favourite is *Mocny człowiek/Strong Man* (1929), directed by Henryk Szaro, which was also the only prewar film which got any ballots in the other polls, followed by comedies, *Zapomniana melodia/Forgotten Melody* (1938), directed by Konrad Tom and Jan Fethke and *Piętro wyżej/Upstairs, Downstairs* (1937), directed by Leon Trystan. It is not difficult to explain the relative success of Szaro's film, as it has many markers of arthouse cinema made at the time when most Polish films were not arthouse. Based on the script of some of the most ambitious writers of this period, such as Stanisław Przybyszewski and Andrzej Strug, and with a visual inventiveness which can be compared to that of *Metropolis* (1928) by Fritz Lang and an interesting story about an ambitious journalist, who steals his friend's manuscript, it certainly deserves attention. Moreover, after being a hidden gem of the Polish Film Archive, the film was released on DVD with Polish intertitles and English subtitles.

The high place of *The Day of the Wacko* on the first, seminal list, is confirmed by various polls for the best Polish film made after 1989 or after 2000, for example one made up by hundred 110 experts of Polish cinema, published by AntyRadio in 2020 ('Poznaliśmy 10 najlepszych polskich filmów po 1989 roku. Są zaskakujące pozycje' 2020). On this occasion the commentators noted a gap between the number of votes received by Koterski's film and those which followed. How to explain the special status of this film about an impoverished teacher of Polish literature, whom the fall of the state socialist system brought only frustration and disillusionment, given that this transformation finished around the time the film was made? Why does it still appeal to the younger audience? First, it is a comedy – the favourite genre of Polish viewers at large. Second, Koterski shows great care for the language spoken by the characters: it is the language of the street, condensed and intensified. From this perspective, Koterski's film, with an exception of films by Stanisław Bareja, is unusual, as Polish cinema is not renowned for the way it presents spoken language. Even in the most naturalistic of films, language comes across as artificial. Another characteristic of Koterski's film is that it deals with Polish myths, not unlike the films by Wajda and Munk. Finally, Koterski's diagnosis of the status of the state-employed Polish intelligentsia, is still valid – this strata continues to be overlooked by the Polish governments, with teachers belonging to the worst paid section of Polish society.

The results of the polls assessing Polish postcommunist films point to the breaking of Polish cinematic generations. Although after 1989 the 'giants' of the Polish cinema of the PRL period, such as Andrzej Wajda and Jerzy Kawalerowicz and the directors associated with the Cinema of Moral Concern, such as Krzysztof Zanussi and Agnieszka Holland, were still active, their productions did not reach the first ten. The lists are made of films of

directors born in the 1950s and 1960s, with Koterski (b. 1942) being the oldest of the lot. They are predominantly chamber pieces, rather than epic productions, and they are concerned with an individual or the family rather than the nation, as conveyed by their titles such as *Róża* (2011), directed by Wojciech Smarzowski, *Ida* (2013), directed by Paweł Pawlikowski or *Ostatnia rodzina/The Last Family* (2016), directed by Jan Matuszyński. On the list by AntyRadio, unlike on the list made of the best Polish films of all times, we find one film made by a female director, although on the last place: *Tower. Bright Day* by Jagoda Szalc. Significantly, it is a debut film by one of the less known female directors who started their career after 1989, suggesting that those who cast their ballots were more concerned with the quality of individual films than the name of the filmmaker. The hype surrounding some of the female directors, most importantly Małgorzata Szumowska and Agnieszka Holland, both being very active off-screen, does not affect the choices of the viewers or even experts in a major way.

What also interested me in the polls was whether the high rankings of specific films translates into the high ranking of their directors. To find out, I consulted two polls for best Polish directors: one published by the portal film.org.pl, in 2018 ('NAJLEPSI POLSCY REŻYSERZY. Poznaj wyniki plebiscytu!' 2018); the other by Antyradio, also in 2018 ('Wojciech Smarzowski wybrany jednym z najważniejszych twórców filmowych 100-lecia' 2018). On both polls the first three positions are occupied by the same three directors: Wajda, Kieslowski and Polanski, although in different order. Polanski topped the first poll, while Wajda the second. The high position of Polanski suggests that, although the bulk of his films are regarded as non-Polish, Polish viewers are still happy to claim Polanski as a Polish director. Wojciech Smarzowski found himself at 4th place in the first poll; Stanisław Bareja at 5th place. Has, whose *The Saragossa Manuscripts* is the most highly voted Polish film, along with Wajda's *The Promised Land*, did not manage to reach the first five on either of the list. This might suggest that – in contrast to Wajda – he is associated merely with one great film. However, in reality we have several of his other films on the lists, such as *The Hourglass Sanatorium* and *Pętla/The Noose* (1957). Hence, the more likely explanation is that Has was less visible in his life than Wajda and Kieslowski, who acted as public intellectuals, which is confirmed by people who met him (Wołoszczuk 2020; Kędziński quoted in Serdiukow 2024). The two most voted postcommunist directors turned out to be Wojciech Smarzowski and Marek Koterski.

These results encourage opposite conclusions. On one hand, it seems as if Polish viewers like Polish films, namely films focused on Polish history and national character. This is confirmed by the high rankings of Wajda, Bareja, Koterski and Smarzowski. However, on the other hand, they show an inclination towards films which are more universal, as exemplified by Has' *The Saragossa Manuscript* and Polanski's *Knife in the Water*. Krzysztof Kieslowski's middle place between Wajda and Polanski and the choice of his *Blind Chance* as his best film somewhat reconciles these two tendencies, given that he is less universal than Polanski, yet less Polish than Wajda. Looking at the lists, one is, again, struck by the relatively poor performance of female directors. We find Wanda Jakubowska, Agnieszka Holland and Małgorzata Szumowska all on the second halves of the lists.

If we look at the other criterion of canonisation of directors, namely their presence in substantial publications in terms of length, both academic and popular, we notice that, as far as the very top of the most respected filmmakers are concerned, publications reflect their high standing. The unprecedented first position belongs to Andrzej Wajda. Most likely

I was not able to trace all books, devoted to this director, but according to my estimates, it exceeds forty positions.

A large proportion of them are publications which are biographical and concern different aspects of his work, such as his drawings, his views on politics and art, as well as his relationships with his collaborators and artists who inspired him, such as writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and painter Andrzej Wróblewski. It seems like no other Polish filmmaker was researched with such care and thoroughness and treated with such interest as a public intellectual. Next is Kiesłowski. The number of books dedicated to this director approaches thirty. On this occasion we can notice a large proportion of interviews and biographies (many of which authored by the same author, Stanisław Zawisliński) and published scripts, along books that demonstrate scholarly engagement with his works. This suggests that while Kiesłowski is of great interest to the general audience, his works pose some challenge to Polish scholars, perhaps due to the previously mentioned difficulty of situating his films along the Polishness- universalism spectrum. The third Polish director canonised in this way is Krzysztof Zanussi, with twelve books about his films as well as several volumes about his scripts, approaching about twenty books in total. On this occasion the scholarly interest is significantly higher than his place in hard canons. The reason for this discrepancy might be the particularly media-friendly persona of Zanussi, who is happy to grant interviews to journalists and academics. Moreover, unlike his peer Krzysztof Kiesłowski, he is still alive and active as a filmmaker.

The other widely represented director on the shelves of bookshops, real and virtual, is Roman Polanski. On this occasion, the gap between interest in his films and him as a person is even more poignant than in the case of Kiesłowski, as I counted almost twenty books in Polish, most of them being translations, concerning his life. This is understandable, given that his life has been so unusual. On the other hand, the interest in his work appears to be rather limited and is represented largely by works of Grażyna Stachówna, published quite a long time ago, with the recent publication devoted to *Knife in the Water* being an exception to this rule (Pawłowska-Jądrzyk and Tomczyk-Jarzyna 2022). Such dearth of interest in Polanski's films can be explained by two factors. One of them is the fact that – as some of the results of the polls suggest – he is not perceived as creator of Polish films. Hence, scholars specialising in Polish cinema might lack access to some of his films and foreign archives, as well as language proficiency, to engage with them. The other factor might be anxiety that his bad personal reputation might reflect badly on authors examining his works.

The scholarly and journalistic interest in Wojciech Has, despite the high standing of his films in hard canons, is much smaller than in Wajda, approaching about ten books. This disparity can be explained by his cinema not easily lending itself to be considered in a context of Polish history and politics, which still dominate in Polish film scholarship. Moreover, as I previously mentioned, Has was an introverted man, who did not shine on television as Wajda or Zanussi. That said, the interest in Has' films is growing, hence he is slowly gaining the place he deserves at the 'academic pantheon of canonised directors'. Jerzy Kawalerowicz had six books to his credit, Andrzej Munk three, which appears to be commensurate with their standing in the polls.

Although comedy is the favourite genre of Poles, film directors specialising in this genre are neglected by Polish scholars. There are no monographs about Marek Piwowski or Marek Koterski. Juliusz Machulski and Stanisław Bareja fares only slightly better, with four books devoted to Bareja, but only one being of an academic standard. Similarly, there is only one

academic book devoted to Machulski, reflecting the conservative, auteur-oriented character of Polish film scholarship. On the other hand, there is already one book on Małgorzata Szumowska, despite her relatively poor performance in the aforementioned polls.

Given the lack of book-length studies about some of the most appreciated Polish directors, such as Marek Koterski, it might come as a surprise that there is a large volume of books, devoted to film composers. The most canonised of them is Krzysztof Komeda, the long-term collaborator of Roman Polanski and Wojciech Kilar, who scored all films by Krzysztof Zanussi, as well as several by Wajda and Polanski. Between them, they have about a dozen books to their credit.

Polish Cinema Canons for Foreign Consumption

As I previously mentioned, the first academic book in English about Polish cinema was authored by Bolesław Michałek with the assistance of Frank Turaj, published in 1988 (Michałek and Turaj 1988). This book traces development of Polish cinema since the Second World War, thus tacitly assuming that the postwar period mattered much more than the interbellum. Its main point is that, despite being state-owned and working under the communist censorship, some Polish filmmakers, who made their debut after the end of Stalinism, managed to achieve a high level of artistic autonomy. This was to a large extent a result of a semi-autonomous studio system, which supported their creativity and the approach taken by the Lodz Film School, which produced such talented graduates as Roman Polanski and Jerzy Skolimowski. Michałek focuses on the careers and films of several directors, such as Andrzej Wajda, Andrzej Munk, Jerzy Kawalerowicz and Krzysztof Zanussi, arguing that they are true authors of their films, conveying in films their personal vision, rather than being vehicles of state propaganda.

Since Michałek wrote his history of Polish cinema, there have been many more books in English on this topic. Some of them concern Polish cinema at large or various aspects of it (Coates 2005; Haltof 2002 and 2018; Mazierska 2007; 2017; Mazierska and Ostrowska 2006). A large proportion of books on Polish cinema concerns Polish directors, such as Polanski, Wajda, Kieslowski, Skolimowski, Borowczyk, Holland and Has. Their protagonists directed some films abroad and achieved successes outside of Poland, in countries such as France, the UK and USA. It shall be added, that from this perspective Polanski is in a league of his own, not only as Polish, but Eastern European cinema is concerned, both in terms of numbers of books devoted to him and the fact that many of them are written by 'regular' foreigners, as opposed to Polish scholars living in a diaspora.

The focus of publications on Polish directors who are recognisable abroad is understandable, given that the market for publications on Polish cinema is narrower than in Poland, and to tap into it, their authors have to rely on the potential readers' familiarity with certain films or at least names. In short, they need to be more conservative, sometimes hoping that getting the readers to immerse themselves in the work of a relatively well-known director would lead to developing interest in a more niche phenomena. By and large, one can see the alignment between the privileged status of these directors in both types of canons, internal and external, although there are certain peculiarities. The canon for international consumption, like the one for internal consumption, is represented by, essentially, two generations and two cinematic waves: those born between 1927 (Wajda) and 1948 (Holland), who contributed to the Polish School and the Polish New Wave of the early 1960s (Wajda,

Polanski and Skolimowski) and the Cinema of Moral Concern (Kieslowski and Holland). In particular, the high place of Wojciech Has, who can be placed on the pantheon of Polish cinema, along with Wajda, Polanski and Kieslowski, has only one book dedicated to him and this book was written by a foreigner, Annette Insdorf (Insdorf 2017) and several decades after Wajda, Polanski and Kieslowski got the first book-length studies dedicated to them.⁵

There are no books about younger directors, particularly those who started their career after the fall of state socialism. One factor explaining this absence is that it is easier to write in a foreign language about a filmmaker, when one can draw on the extensive literature in Polish. Second, the passage of time allows one to distinguish between directors of once fashionable films and creators of classics, according to the rule that canons are created retrospectively. The third possible reason is that contemporary Polish cinema does not contribute to the world cinema films of the same stature as that produced by the likes of Wajda, Polanski, Has, Kieslowski, Munk or Skolimowski or at least there is a chasm between what Polish viewers and critics favour and what is admittedly of interest to foreign audiences. This hypothesis can be supported by textual analysis of most popular films made after the fall of the Iron Curtain. In particular, the films of the three most canonised Polish post-communist directors, Marek Koterski, Wojciech Smarzowski and Władysław Pasikowski, as I already argued in relation to Koterski, are more preoccupied with Polish than international issues. They all also have a relatively low-key, functional cinematography, in contrast to the visual excess and experimentation, admired in films by Has, Wajda and Skolimowski. At the same time, these directors embrace genre cinema. Koterski's *Day of the Wacko* is one of the most appreciated comedies in Polish history; Pasikowski's *Psy (Dogs, 1992)* is a gangster film. Genre cinema, as I already indicated, tends to be shunned by the Polish canonisers.

It is also worth looking at Oscar submissions as a means of soft canonisation of Polish films for the foreign viewers. I will leave out here the question how successful were these attempts, trying to answer it in the next part of my investigation. What interests me is merely the politics of putting forward specific Polish films to the Oscar Committee. Poland has been making submissions for Oscars since 1957, the first time the category of the 'best foreign film' was introduced by the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The first film submitted to this competition was Wajda's *Kanal*, which was a film announcing the arrival of the Polish School. By and large, looking at the list, we see the domination of films made by filmmakers from the waves which I discussed before. Wajda is, by a large margin, the most promoted director, with ten films submitted to the Oscars committee, followed by Krzysztof Zanussi with four films, and Krzysztof Kieslowski and Jerzy Kawalerowicz, both with three submissions. Again, we observe here some disparity between the strong push to promote Zanussi internally and externally and his relatively low status in 'hard canons'. There is also a glaring absence of *The Saragossa Manuscript* and other films by Has, despite his high status in hard canons of Polish films, which feels almost like a conspiracy against this director by the Polish film establishment. Another observation is the prevalence of historical films and especially films about the Second World War. Polish specialists in comedies, such as Bareja, Chmielewski and Koterski, were not included in the pool of submitted films either. While in the twentieth century the committee submitted almost exclusively films made by male directors, with the exception of Maria Kaniowska in 1959 for *Szatan z siódmej klasy (The Devil from the Seventh Grade)* and Ewa Petelska, the wife of Czesław Petelski, in 1973, for the film *Kopernik (Copernicus)*, from the 1990s, six films submitted were directed by women: Dorota Kędzierzawska, Magdalena Piekorz,

Agnieszka Holland, separately and jointly with her daughter, Kasia Adamik, Małgorzata Szumowska and Dorota Kobiela.

Given the large number of books in Polish about Polish film composers, it does not come as a surprise that we find two books in English devoted to Polish film composers, Krzysztof Komeda (Grzebalkowska 2020), best known for his collaboration with Roman Polanski and Zbigniew Preisner, who worked closely with Krzysztof Kieslowski (Reyland 2012).

Polish Films in Transnational Film Canons

It is impossible to list all the ways through which Polish films entered into international or global canons, but here I will consider the place of Polish films in *Sight and Sound* (later S&S) polls for the best films of all times, the IMDb Top 250 Movies list, in publications about classics addressed to the 'lay audience' made up of cinephiles, books concerning European and Eastern European cinema and nominations for Oscars.

The place of Polish films in S&S polls is of special importance due to the fact that polls offer us hard canons of global films, and immense respect, with which these polls are treated in the circle of film specialists. Moreover, its longevity and regularity allow for a longitudinal study of the way films from different countries and regions fared over the years, according to the opinions of broadly understood specialists: film critics and filmmakers. The S&S poll has been conducted since 1952 every decade, with each decade bringing more judges. This number grew immensely, from about 60 in 1952 to over 1600 in 2022. Hence, this poll can be regarded as an important barometer of changes in the cinematic tastes of film specialists.

By and large, in the early S&S polls one could observe the strong presence of films from the Soviet Union, but this presence, up to 2012, was not accompanied by a rise of films from other countries, belonging to the socialist bloc, including Poland.⁶ This situation confirms the world-system theory of sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, which argues that the world is divided into centre, periphery and semi-periphery, with the periphery struggling to move into the centre (Wallerstein 2000). According to this schematisation, after the Second World War, the Soviet Union's cinema was fighting for the position of the global hegemon with the USA and Western Europe, while Eastern Europe was lagging behind.

In the 2012 poll western films dominated and overshadowed films from the Soviet Union to a greater extent than in the previous polls. However, one could also see in it *Chinatown* (1974), directed by Roman Polanski and *Dekalog/The Decalogue* (1989), directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski, suggesting that they started to make inroads into the world's cinematic 'super-classics'. Of course, this poll demonstrates the dependence of the position of Polish cinema on a definition of the Polish film and Polish director. Treating Polanski as a Polish director leads to the doubling of the number of Polish productions and renders Polish cinema best represented on S&S poll from all Eastern European countries, even though this representation is still small, overall.

Jumping to 2022, we can note that the moderate advancement of Polish films was reversed during this decade. *The Decalogue* and *Chinatown* disappeared altogether from the 'golden hundred' and *Chinatown* only retained its position on the directors' poll ('Revealed: the results of the 2022 Sight and Sound Greatest Films of All Time poll' 2022). Such a reversal of fortune for Polish films was in line with other Eastern European (and Russian) films slipping on this ladder, with the only exception being *Sedmikrásky/Daisies* (1966), directed

by Věra Chytilová, which moved up, reaching 28th place. This should not be interpreted as a sign of the poll taking a more western-centric turn, but rather that Eastern European films had to compete in this arena with other films coming from the global periphery, most importantly the Global South or films marginalised in a different way, which are promoted in the name of 'social justice'. We can speculate that Eastern Europeans no longer hold the position of a marginalised or persecuted minority, being largely incorporated into western economic and political structures, such as the EU and NATO; which to some extent explains the previous successes of Kieslowski and his disappearance from the list. In the case of Polanski, who disappeared from the main list, but retained its place of the list of directors, the main factor might be the current bad reputation of the director, denigrated by the #MeToo movement for having sex with an underage girl in the 1970s, which, however, affected Polanski's standing in the filmmakers' community less, as it is generally more sympathetic to his position.

The S&S poll, despite its wide geographical representation, still captures a specialist and elitist taste, even though the critics no longer ignore the social realities of which they're also a part. By contrast, various books of the 'best films' or 'films worth watching' represent a more popular taste, even though this taste is also aspirational in the sense that 'what is worth watching' does not include only what people are actually watching in great numbers, namely what triumphs in the box office, but also lesser known and more difficult films which the authors suggest their readers watch despite or because of their arguably challenging character. For this study, I explored in detail one such publication, *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die*, edited by Steven Jay Schneider (Schneider 2018), because it is one of the most popular and respected books of this type. By this point, it has been through many editions, with the first being published in 2003, and the most recent one 2021, drawing contributions from many well-known journalists, such as Jonathan Rosenbaum, Richard Peña, David Stratton, and Margaret Pomeranz. Moreover, this book was translated into Polish and published in 2018, suggesting that Polish publishers trusted their editor's and authors' choices, regarding it as representative not only of American or Anglosphere tastes, but an international cultural palate as well. Indeed, while American films dominate (569 against 155 from France in second place), the geographical spread of the films chosen for consideration is impressive, with many European films receiving due interest. In this publication Poland is better represented than on S&S poll, with 12 films, more than any other Eastern European country. Moreover, on this occasion the distance between Poland and Russia (which tended to be immense on the S&S polls), got smaller, as there are only 17 Russian films listed in this book.

Given that, it is of interest to address how Polish films or films made by Polish directors are treated there. The above distinction is worth making on this occasion because what is striking is the large number of films whose directors came from Poland, but which were made outside the borders of their country. This is especially the case of Polanski, who entered this poll, impressively, with four films. However, except from *The Pianist* (2002), which is partly a Polish production, all of his other films, included in this survey, were made in the English-speaking countries, USA (*Chinatown* and *Rosemary's Baby*, 1968) or the UK (*Repulsion*, 1965). Krzysztof Kieslowski's situation was not dissimilar, as he also entered with four films, including three made partly or entirely abroad: *Podwójne życie Weroniki/The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), *Three Colours: Blue* (1994) and *Three Colours: Red* (1994); Agnieszka Holland with one film, *Europa, Europa* (1990). Such a choice suggests that in order to move from a periphery to the centre in the global hierarchy of taste, the best strategy

for the Polish director is to move to the centre physically – as was the case of Polanski and Holland at some stage of their careers. Andrzej Wajda, to some extent, bucks the trend, as he has three films on this list, all made in Poland. Has is also here, with *The Saragossa Manuscript*.

The IMDb Top 250 Movies list includes only two films made by one Polish director – *The Pianist* by Polanski, at 33 and *Chinatown*, at 161. This result shows that – as far as recognition of Polish cinema is concerned – Polanski is in a league of his own, being respected both by film specialists and even to a larger degree, ordinary viewers.

Polanski's films are typically the only films mentioned in non-Polish and non-Eastern European context, for example in publications about genre cinema, film music and film theory, pointing to its soft canonisation. There are, obviously, more Polish films, included in publications concerning European and Eastern European cinema. One example is a book by András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950–1980* (2008). The title of this publication speaks for itself: it is concerned only with highbrow, arthouse cinema, so one would not expect the mentioning of films by Chmielewski and Bareja. Instead, we find the mentioning of films by Wajda, Polanski and *The Saragossa Manuscript*, which receives more attention than other Polish films, even though Bálint Kovács misspells the author's name. It is described as a

peculiar case of the mental journey... Both in terms of mise-en-scène and visual composition the film does not reveal any influence of modernism, whereas it is quite unique in its narrative composition, containing a series of narratives embedded in one another. The only antecedent to this structure can be found in *The Immortal* and suggests serial construction initiated by Resnais's *Muriel* (1963). (Bálint Kovács 2008, 336–37)

Overall, however, one cannot help but notice that Polish films are overshadowed here not only by films of western modernists, such as Godard and Antonioni, but also Russian and Eastern European directors, such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Milos Forman and Miklós Jancsó, whose films are analysed in depth. Another seminal example is the collection *The Cinema of Central Europe*, edited by Peter Hames (2004), which provides a close analysis of 24 films from the whole region, excluding the Soviet Union. Among them there are seven Polish films, mostly of the 'the usual suspects', namely Polish modernists, among which is *The Saragossa Manuscript*. To that the editor added one film from the interbellum, *Der Dibuk/The Dybbuk* (1937), directed by Michał Waszyński. This inclusion, however, more likely reflects more on the editor's desire to acknowledge the importance of the Jewish tradition in the Eastern European cinema than to honour Polish interwar cinema. Polish films from the postcommunist period are omitted. It is also worth adding that although *The Saragossa Manuscript* received little interest from film historians, it enjoyed some 'soft canonisation' from fellow artists. It belongs to the favourite films of directors such as Luis Buñuel, David Lynch, Lars von Trier, Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, and Jerry Garcia, the leader of the band Grateful Dead, who played an important role in bringing it to the attention of American arthouse film directors. As a result, Scorsese and Coppola financed the digital reconstruction of the film (Wołoszczuk 2020).

If we now look at the Oscar nominations for the best foreign film, then Poland received 13 nominations in its history. The first nominated film was Polanski's *Knife in the Water*, in 1962; the last one was in 2022, when Jerzy Skolimowski's *EO* was nominated. The period 1974–1981 can be regarded as the luckiest for Poland in this respect, as Poland received five

nominations, including for three films by Andrzej Wajda. Following that, there were no nominations till 2007, when Wajda again got a nomination for his *Katyń*. Looking back at the films submitted in the years 1982–2006, one can conclude that it was either a dark period in the Polish history, marked by the production of depressing films with no visual flair and now mainly forgotten. The other conclusion is the possible incompetence of the Oscar submission committee, which had little understanding about what the Academy was looking for. When *Katyń* broke this spell, better times followed, and in 2014 Poland received an Oscar for *Ida*, a film tackling antisemitism in Poland. If we include in the consideration foreign films by Polanski, Polish Oscar successes will be significantly enhanced, as his films received many nominations and Polanski himself received Best Director award for *The Pianist*.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Polish specialists favour films produced during the period of the PRL, perhaps because at this time Polish cinema clustered into several distinct movements and was more aligned with international arthouse cinema, especially European New Waves. Despite serious attempts by Polish film historians to promote films made by female directors (including by the author of this essay), Polish film canons for Polish film consumption, are very masculine. One surprise is also that despite the widespread belief that the Second World War is Poland's most interesting period, Polish viewers, including experts, prefer films which are not about the war. The most canonised films, such as *The Promised Land*, *The Saragossa Manuscript*, *The Night Train* and *Knife in the Water*, do not concern the Second World War. We can also notice that ordinary Polish viewers have a particular penchant for comedy, while experts single out films with visual flair and a certain surplus of meaning. In theory, these two requirements are not mutually exclusive, but rarely they are realised in one film, with *The Saragossa Manuscript* being an exception.

Efforts to create a canon of Polish films for consumption by foreigners are focused on a cluster of filmmakers and on historical dramas. There is an assumption that Polish cinematic humour would not translate into foreign languages, therefore it is not even worth trying to show it to foreigners. In the recent years, one could also see a push to promote films made by women, but, so far, without much pay-off.

Polish films play a minor role in supra-national canons, both those created by experts and the lay audience. The only Polish director who managed to enter the canons created by and for ordinary viewers, is Roman Polanski, and he still attracts the attention of experts. On one hand, this elevated status of Polanski should be a source of joy, as it demonstrates that Poland has one filmmaker, who truly broke into the cinematic mainstream. On the other hand, given that his fiction debut took place over sixty years ago, it can be seen as a sign of Polish cinema losing relevance on the international stage.

Notes

1. I am doing it with an awareness that presenting such history by itself an act of canonisation. However, it is impossible to critique canons without presenting them first.

2. This criticism was largely justified due to the fact that the most successful socialist realist films were made by directors, who started their career before the Second World War, belonging to the previously mentioned *branza* (professionals or tradesmen) (Lubelski 2009, 79).
3. There were, however, exceptions, such as films by Hitchcock, who was viewed as an *auteur*.
4. Harold Bloom, in his seminal book on the Western literary canon, describes such approach as the ‘School of Resentment’, namely the schools of literary criticism that have gained prominence in academia, consisting of mainly feminists and Marxists, who are preoccupied with political and social activism at the expense of aesthetic values (Bloom 1994).
5. *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* tried to correct this situation to some extent, by publishing a special issue on Has in 2014, but the response to CfP was, relatively speaking, modest. The issue begins with an editorial, fittingly titled ‘The unjustly neglected career of Wojciech Jerzy Has’ (Mazierska and Goddard 2014). Another attempt to recognise the importance of Has is a chapter dedicated to him in the book *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918*, which can be regarded as an authoritative publication about Polish culture for foreigners (Taras 2008). Other directors discussed in this publication are Wajda, Skolimowski, Kiesłowski and one female director: Dorota Kędzierzawska.
6. This could be in part due to the fact that till 2012, *Sight and Sound* published only a short list of winners. It is thus possible that some Eastern European films featured in a long list, but the shortness of these lists obscured their prestige.

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Notes on contributor

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