



Amsterdam Polish Film Festival

18-20.10.24 de BALIE

AGNIESZKA HOLLAND | FOCUS ON HUMANITY

DAY 1 | FRIDAY OCTOBER 18

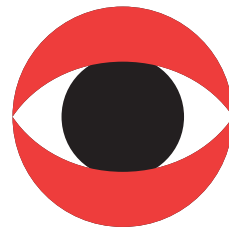
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|---------------|--|
| 17.30 - 19.00 | A Lonely Woman (1981, 90 min.) |
| 20.00 - 20.30 | Conversation: Through the Lens of Time -The fever of the 1980's in Poland
Moderator: Stefan Malešević
Guest: Barbara Malak - Minkiewicz |
| 20.30 - 22.30 | Fever (1981, 116 min.) |
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DAY 2 | SATURDAY OCTOBER 19

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| 16.00 - 18.30 | Green Border (2023, 147 min.) |
| 20.00 - 20.40 | Live interview: The many faces of Agnieszka Holland
Moderator: lanthe Mosselman |
| 20.40 - 21.20 | Conversation: How migration really works?
Guests: Hein de Haas & Joely Mbundu |
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DAY 3 | SUNDAY OCTOBER 20

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 15.00 - 17.30 | In Darkness (2011, 145 min.) |
| 19.30 - 20.00 | Conversation: Humanity within us - Facing tough choices. Moderator: Dore van Duivenbode. Guest: Bibi Dumon Tak |
| 20.00 - 22.10 | Spoor (2017, 128 min.) |
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Welcome to Amsterdam Polish Film Festival 2024

We are delighted to welcome you to the third edition of the Amsterdam Polish Film Festival. This year, we are honoured to shine a special spotlight on the remarkable work of Agnieszka Holland, one of the world's best-known Polish filmmakers.

A true icon of Polish cinema, Holland is known not only for her powerful storytelling but also for her role as a social activist and provocateur, fearlessly breaking cultural taboos. For nearly 50 years, she has created films, theatre performances, and television series that have influenced Polish and world culture. Holland is a rare director whose films are relentlessly political while refusing to flatten her characters or tolerate black and white dogmatism. She has become an ambassador of Polish cinema to the world and an inspiration to future generations of filmmakers.

This year, the festival will last three days and will present five of her films. The films highlight Holland's unique cinematic style and reflect some of

the major themes she has explored throughout her career. Each day, the films are accompanied by discussions that explore the complex issues and situations addressed in the films. The first day will focus on Holland's early works: *A Lonely Woman* (1981) portrays repressive reality of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) and tells the story of people pushed to the edges of society. The film depicts an almost forgotten chapter of Polish history that is all the more relevant at the time of socialist nostalgia. In the conversation with Barbara Malak - Minkiewicz, we will look into life in Poland during the 1980s - a turbulent decade marked by political unrest and economic challenges. In *Fever* (1980), she explores the dangers of ideology and the power of manipulation

through an account of 1905 Revolution in The Kingdom of Poland.

Day two of the festival is entirely dedicated to Agnieszka Holland's latest production *Green Border* (2023). This powerful and thought-provoking movie tells the story of refugees trying to cross the border between Belarus and Poland. Following the film, there will be a live interview with Agnieszka Holland, followed by a discussion on migration. Migration expert Hein de Haas and *Green Border* actress Joely Mbundu will delve into the facts, myths, challenges, and impacts of migration.

On the third day, we present two films that explore humanity's respect for others and the natural world. While *In Darkness* is about human relationships, *Spoor* examines how we treat other living beings and whether we show them the respect and kindness we would want

for ourselves. In a conversation with writer Bibi Dumon Tak, we will explore questions about compassion and our relationship with nature.

We invite you to immerse yourselves in the screenings and discussions designed to honour Holland's remarkable contributions to the world of cinema. Thank you for joining us in this journey of reflection and discovery, where art meets the essence of humanity.

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Art direction & design: Basia Knobloch

The Amsterdam Polish Film Festival is organised by Polish Culture NL
in cooperation with De Balie, and co-sponsored by AFK.



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A Lonely Woman

Agnieszka Holland's 1981 film *A Lonely Woman* is one of the most depressing portraits of the late Polish People's Republic: kilometre-long queues for shops, poverty, a terrifying lack of perspectives, and mutual adversity.

Such a critical film could only have been realised at the time of the "Solidarność Carnival", during a brief political thaw in 1980-1981. Sadly, the institution of the martial law buried the chances to distribute the film: *Kobieta samotna* (A

Lonely Woman) spent six years on the shelf and did not premiere until 1987. Even though Holland's drama is embedded in a specific historical moment, it significantly stands out among other works of the cinema of

moral anxiety and in many respects is still up to date.

The main character, Irena Misiak (Maria Chwalibóg), is a postwoman, raising her son Boguś (Paweł Witczak) by herself. The woman works like a slave in order to support her child, but she still hardly manages to get by. Irena received accommodation from the government, and she lives in a small, cramped room near railway tracks. The living conditions are abysmal, as the large family from the next-door apartment dreamt about taking over this space and now takes revenge on the neighbour, stealing fuses, hiding the water pump, and so on. Irena has no money nor connections, so she is kicked around at work and not treated

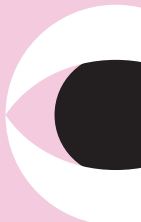
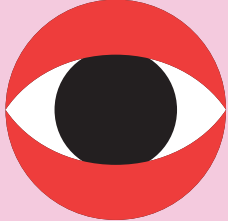
seriously by her family. This situation also affects Boguś, who, being the poorest pupil, becomes the class scapegoat and is accused of all sorts of rowdy mischief. A ray of hope about the fate of Misiaks comes with the appearance of Jacek (Bogusław Linda), a young and – as it would seem – sensitive pensioner, who declares his love for Irena. However, it is clear from the very start that this story about a lonely woman will not end happily...

One of the film's scenes is particularly poignant: a distraught Irena, who has brought herself to stealing money, crosses the street with her soon, indifferently passing a demonstration calling for a release of political prisoners. In 1981, when the artistic crowd united in its eulogies to the magnificent Solidarność, Holland did not get carried away by the overly enthusiastic atmosphere and presented a story of an impoverished, forsaken woman, who remains practically untouched by the social changes. Irena has not a drop of political awareness, and she doesn't know whether to seek justice from the authorities or Solidarność, all she wants is to earn a living and get an apartment. To some extent, it is her own fault: she is unable to think realistically

Life in the
Polish
People's
Republic is
a complex
world beyond
politics

about changing her position, she follows dubious advice and utterly naive illusions. Nonetheless, Holland does not aim to criticise her character but demonstrate the situation of excluded people who are completely bypassed by any big breakthroughs. In *Kobieta samotna*, the image of society in the Polish People's Republic escapes the stereotypical dichotomy of government and the opposition, and is much more complex than in its contemporary *Człowiek z żelaza* (Man of Iron).

Holland's film does not focus on demonstrations and protests, but on the life of a helpless, abandoned woman. Jacek Petrycki's camerawork eloquently illustrates the heavy and stuffy atmosphere of Irena's world, penetrates the claustrophobic interiors and unfriendly public spaces, full of nosy and hostile people. At the same time, as the director pointed out, Petrycki's cinematography carries a certain pathos and sensuality, which shields the protagonists from the role of scrutinised specimen. Interestingly, Holland breaks the naturalistic convention of the film twice, diverging towards a pure... surrealism. In one of the scenes, we see the bothersome neighbours collapsing after they were



Holland shows the struggles of excluded people without criticizing their character

“shot” by Boguś. In another one, we see a flying Irena drop a letter for her son from the sky. This shows that Holland distanced herself not only from the mental, but also stylistic patterns that ended up dominating the cinema of moral anxiety. *Kobieta samotna* could be accused of excessive pessimism, emerging not only in its description of reality, but also in the plot, abounding in misfortune and tragic coincidences. However, Holland's perspective, devoid of cheap sentimentalism, and excellent performances by Maria Chwalibóg and Bogusław Linda make *Kobieta samotna* one of the most moving examples of social cinema in the history of Polish film. ●

Written by Robert Birkholc, December 2015

Source: Culture.pl reprinted with permission



Conversation: Through the Lens of Time

The fever of the 1980's in Poland

The 1980s, often described as a lost decade, were a tumultuous time in Poland, marked by political unrest, economic struggles and social upheaval.

In August 1980 an anti-communist Solidarity trade union was founded, only to be dissolved by the end of 1981, when the government imposed martial law and imprisoned Solidarity leaders and opposition activists. This abrupt and brutal end to Poland's dreams of freedom combined with economic hardship caused the decade to be remembered as gloomy, grey and depressive, with hardly any hopes for a

better future.

It was only towards the end of 1980s that the communist rule in Poland turned out to be a complete bankrupt, both economically and morally. Taking an advantage of a favourable international situation, Poland reached for its independence once more in 1989, this time successfully, giving an impulse to the fall of the whole Soviet bloc.

Moderator Stefan Malešević is a Cinema Programmer at De Balie. He is a film director from Belgrade and has been living in the Netherlands since 2019. Stefan studied film directing under the mentorship of Béla Tarr at the Sarajevo Film Academy. After directing several short films, commercials, and music videos, he made two award-winning feature films: Gora and Mamonga.



Guest Dr Barbara Malak - Minkiewicz is a social sciences and philosophy scholar with a PhD from the University of Warsaw. Involved in an anti-communist opposition in 1980s and imprisoned after the introduction of martial law. After the collapse of communism, she focused on the transformation of education in Central European countries. After brief service as the spokesperson of "Solidarność" trade union in Gdansk (1990-1991), she engaged in several projects in post-soviet bloc countries. In 1998-2014 worked at as the manager of membership relations at the IEA Secretariat in Amsterdam. In 2013 Polish President awarded her with the Officer's Cross of Polonia Restituta for her contribution to Poland regaining independence. ●



Poland's 1980s:
turmoil to
triumph, igniting
the Soviet bloc's
collapse in 1989

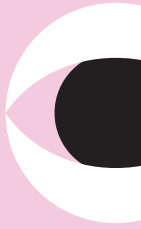
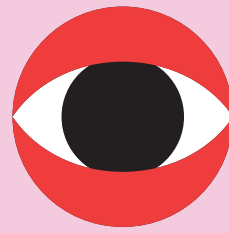


Fever

Fever is Agnieszka Holland's film from 1980, whose prophetic quality we can now see. It was created while Solidarity triumphed and shows the fall of another revolution – the one that took place in 1905 on the lands of the Russian partition.

This bitter portrait of the defeat of a national and social uprising had its premiere when a big part of the Polish society was euphoric after the events in Gdańsk Shipyard. *Fever* is seen as a display of the artist's great intuition, a

Cassandric portent of martial law, which was approaching Poland when the film premiered. Yet another experience was the direct impulse for making the film: in 1968 the director witnessed the sad ending of the Prague Spring, after



which society entered a long period of impasse. The historical context is not most important though, because *Fever* is an extremely universal film which can be referenced to any revolution.

Holland's film was based on a very interesting, yet difficult to adapt, novel by Andrzej Strug entitled *Dzieje jednego pocisku* / History of one bullet, published in 1910. Its narrative is complicated, there are no main characters, but many threads and episodes. The plot binder is the bullet from the title, constructed for a revolutionary organisation and passed from one conspirator to another. Holland's film is similar in this aspect, but the screenwriter, Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, simplified the original's structure and lessened the number of characters appearing on screen. It was definitely a good idea: *Fever's* protagonists are both credible and full-blooded, and can be treated as incarnations of some general traits.

In the movie's first part the key role is played by a fighter from the Polish Socialist Party, Leon (Olgierd Łukaszewicz). He's a "modern" leader" – not a romantic, 19th-century desperado, but a cold strategist who ruthlessly

Fever tells how history traps and pulls in unaware fighters

manages the lives of his subordinates. Can one surrender one's personal responsibility and justify it as historical necessity? When does the goal justify the means? The ethical problems referenced in *Fever* can trespass the historical context and can be referenced both to the functioning of 20th-century totalitarian regimes and to modern forms of terrorism.

Holland doesn't idealize the revolutionists' actions: violence is shown in a drastic, revolting way. It's enough to mention the naturalistic scene wherein the kind-hearted villager Wojtek (Adam Ferency) kills a supposed spy. The executioner is not able to kill his victim quickly, so the execution becomes a slow torture. The utopian project of the revolution contrasts with the awful method of realizing political goals. Those who suffer the most in *Fever* are the naive believers in great ideas, easily manipulated by people like Leon. For

DAY 1 FILM

example, Kama (Barbara Grabowska), disposed of to burn in the revolutionary fire by the charismatic leader. The martyred girl is in love with Leon, who treats her as an instrument (as a sexual object or as a tool in his terrorist attacks) and will have to pay for her commitment with her mental health. Her sacrifice will turn out to be futile, just as Wojtek's, who will fall into the secret police's hands. *Fever* is most of all a story about the trap of history, which imperceptibly draws the unconscious fighters in.

Two years after the revolution chaos reigns, the party is divided, bandits shoot innocent citizen and idealists

become an easy target for insidious informers, collaborating with the tsar's Okhrana. The only ones who can feel safe are anarchists such as Gryziak (Bogusław Linda), a radical, free as a bird, who despises death and any form of hierarchy. It's no longer clear who's on which side, and the revolutionists' energy is wasted because of the manipulators and secret agents. Holland seems to say that this is an inherent stage of any social fight, and what happened in Poland after 1981 confirmed this thesis. As Maria Janion wrote, *Fever* is a 'brutal, cruel, wild film. And at the same time, in this wildness – extremely precise, even cold' (Maria Janion, *Filozofia bomby*, 'Kino' 1981, vol. 7). The stuffy, 'feverish' atmosphere of the dying revolution was amazingly created through cinematic form. The grim world shown in the adaptation of Strug's novel, is dark and shown through the dynamic camera of Jacek Petrycki, which expressed the protagonists' emotional turmoil. Agnieszka Holland's brutally honest and ironic perspective finds a great equivalent in *Fever's* audiovisual style. ●



Author: Robert Birkholc, translated by:

N. Mętrak-Ruda, December 2015.

Source: Culture.pl reprinted with permission



Green Border

Agnieszka Holland's brutal and timely drama shines a dark spotlight on the horrors faced by refugees in the exclusion zone between Poland and Belarus.

At 74, Polish film-maker Agnieszka Holland has lost none of her passion – or compassion – and this brutal, angry, gruelling drama, in sombre black and white, is recognisably the work of that director who made *Europa Europa* in 1990. It is about the “green border” exclusion

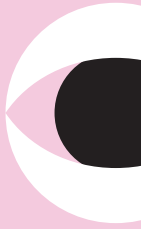
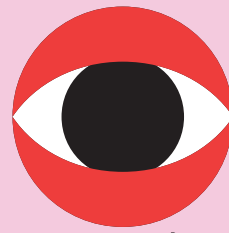
zone between Poland and Belarus, now the location for an apparently unending ordeal for refugees.

With sly malice, Belarus president Alexander Lukashenko has in recent years permitted the admission of refugees, cynically encouraging their hope



Holland shows
how petty
insults and
real violence
slowly destroy
their sense of
humanity

of getting easily from there on foot across the border into Poland and the EU via the Białowieża Forest – but only as a way of punishing and undermining the European Union for its anti-Belarus sanctions. He has effectively weaponised these desperate souls and the increasingly resentful and aggressive Polish border force avoid the bureaucratic necessity of feeding and housing these incomers in camps and just throw them back over the barbed wire fence, where they live and die in the forest wasteland. Belarus's "green border" destabilisation strategy helps push Poland into paranoid xenophobia,



precisely the geopolitical mood which Lukashenko (and Putin) find congenial. Holland's drama covers a mosaic of people caught up in this nexus of desperation, hunger, fear and political bad faith: there are refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Africa, a Polish border guard with a pregnant wife who is having qualms about the brutality he is expected (illegally) to dish out and a Polish psychotherapist horrified and radicalised by witnessing the death of a refugee child, who then joins what amounts to a guerrilla band of young Polish activists who make sorties into the forest to give what medical help and legal assistance they can.

The result is a sombre, yet gripping movie in what feels like two separate genres: a movie about the eastern front in the second world war, or the first world war, or perhaps an entirely different, futurist film: a post-apocalyptic drama in which the forest is the site of some frantic survival-struggle experienced by people whose humanity has been almost entirely stripped from them, as if by some nuclear blast or germ warfare strike.

When the refugees first stumble euphorically into Poland, believing that their worries are now over, they still feel

Green Border hits hard, but it's a must-see film exposing Europe's urgent reality today

like human beings. But this is eroded by the pure absurdist horror of being brutally evicted back to Belarus and then thrown back into Poland by two sets of soldiers, neither of whom want the responsibility of dealing with them, back and forth – and all under cover of that forest, whose darkness makes it that bit easier to get away with uniformed brutality.

When Afghan English teacher Leila (Behi Djanati Atai) stumbles across a ploughed field and pitifully asks a Polish farmer for water, he obliges and even gives her some apples and points towards a farmhouse where more help is to be had. But when she turns and sees him call someone on his mobile, she panics and runs back to the cover of woodland

DAY 2 FILM

while he calls after her: "Wait!" Was he really trying to help? Or going to denounce her to the authorities? Farmers in occupied Poland or occupied France must have looked similarly ambiguous.

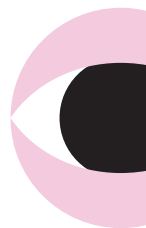
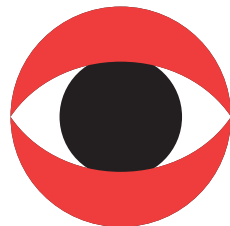
Later, a hatchet-faced Belarusian border guard demands €50 from Leila for a bottle of water; first refusing to give her change for a larger bill and then petulantly grabbing the water back and contemptuously returning her money with a slap. Holland shows that these degrading petty assaults, along with the very real physical violence, chip

away at their sense of themselves as human beings. And the Belarusian and Polish guards are themselves scared of each other. And then there is the war in Ukraine, and Holland's film shows that this very same border force is mobilised to welcome thousands of Ukrainian refugees: somehow all the realistic arguments against refugees appear to have melted away. *Green Border* is a tough watch: a punch to the solar plexus. But a vital bearing of cinematic witness to what is happening in Europe right now. ●

Author: Peter Bradshaw, September 2023

Source: The Guardian, reprinted with permission





Interview

The many faces of Agnieszka Holland

Agnieszka Holland's life and career reflect the journey of a woman whose passion, strength, and creativity have influenced how we see moral and political issues in movies.

A talented ambitious woman who is proud to be Polish, but forced to live in exile by political events beyond her control. A European at heart who has experienced first-hand the dilemmas created by national borders that are in conflict with religious and cultural boundaries.

Born in communist Poland, Holland grew up in a world defined by political repression and personal limitations. She was not permitted to further her studies at the National Film School in Łódź, Poland. Undeterred, she left Poland and moved to Prague, where she graduated from FAMU, the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts, in 1971.

After her return to Poland, Holland began her filmmaking career as an

assistant to Krzysztof Zanussi, aligning herself with the “cinema of moral anxiety,” a group of young directors committed to addressing the social and political struggles of the time. She found a mentor in the great Polish director Andrzej Wajda and soon began directing her own films. Her first TV film, *An Evening at Abdon* (1975), paved the way for her debut feature film, *Provincial Actors* (1978), which was celebrated internationally, earning her the International Critics' Prize at the 1980 Cannes Film Festival.

Curious
Honest
Never
judgmental

DAY 2 INTERVIEW

The late 1970s and early 1980s were a time of great tension in Poland. The country was facing severe economic hardship, with food shortages, inflation and widespread discontent among the people. The Communist government, under Soviet influence, struggled to maintain control as protests and strikes, particularly in shipyards and factories, became more frequent. Life was difficult due to the repressive political climate, censorship, and lack of basic freedoms, leading to growing unrest and the eventual formation of the Solidarity movement, which demanded political and social reforms. Holland's subsequent films, *Fever* (1980) and *A Lonely Woman* (1981), tackled these issues directly, portraying characters caught up in the turmoil of a repressive state. However, when martial law was declared in December 1981, the Polish government banned her films, and Holland, who was promoting her work abroad at the time, made the difficult decision not to return. Forced into exile, she settled in France and continued her filmmaking career.

In 1985, Holland gained international recognition with her film *Angry Harvest*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. This marked the beginning of her global

career, which saw her explore themes of identity, morality, and faith in increasingly diverse settings. Her 1990 film *Europa Europa*, the story of a Jewish boy who survives the Holocaust by posing as a Nazi, won a Golden Globe and earned her a second Academy Award nomination, this time for Best Screenplay.

Over the next decades, Holland's work continued to break boundaries. She directed films like *Olivier, Olivier* (1992), *The Secret Garden* (1993), *Total Eclipse* (1995), and *Washington Square* (1997), showcasing her versatility across genres. In 2011, her film *In Darkness* brought her a third Oscar nomination, while *Spoor* (2016), based on Olga Tokarczuk's novel, won the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival.

Her collaboration with close friends and fellow filmmakers, such as Krzysztof

Holland never
wavered in her
commitment to
telling stories
that matter



Her films make you think and feel, confronting tough truths about the world and yourself

Kieślowski, with whom she co-wrote the *Three Colors* trilogy, and Andrzej Wajda, further deepened her connection to Poland's cinematic legacy. At the same time, she expanded her career into television, directing episodes for some of the most acclaimed series of the 21st

century, including *The Wire* and *Treme*, as well as *The Killing* and *Cold Case*. Her work on the mini-series *Burning Bush*, which explored the Prague Spring, was particularly personal, reflecting her deep ties to the Czech Republic and its history.

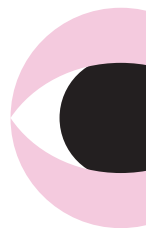
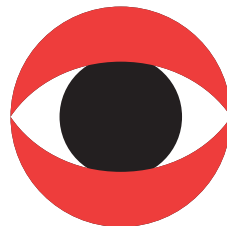
Her latest film, *The Green Border*, premiered at the 80th Venice International Film Festival, where it won the Special Jury Prize. It serves as a testament to her unwavering dedication to exploring moral complexity in the face of political conflict.

Despite the many challenges she faced — from political censorship to exile — Holland never wavered in her commitment to telling stories that matter. Her films not only make audiences think but also touch their hearts, forcing them to confront difficult truths about the world and themselves. Whether exploring the horrors of war, the pain of exile, or the moral dilemmas of everyday life, Holland's work consistently reflects her belief in the power of cinema to inspire empathy and awaken the conscience. ●

Author: Bożena Kopczyńska, September 2024



Martin Kraft (photo.martinkraft.com)
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Conversation

How migration really works?

What are the main concerns regarding migration? Why is the discussion about it so difficult? Should it be restricted or promoted? And what is it like to be a migrant?



Moderator Ianthe Mosselman is the senior editor and Program Maker Art, Literature, at De Balie. She studied Comparative Dutch Studies in Amsterdam and Berlin. She creates programs about art, literature, and culture, and over the past few years, she has interviewed various national and international writers on the stage of De Balie. She has also worked for the European Press Prize.

Guest Prof Hein de Haas is a sociologist and a geographer who has lived and worked in the Netherlands, Morocco and the United Kingdom. He is currently Professor of Sociology at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, part of the University of Amsterdam. Between 2006 and 2015, he was a founding member and co-director of the International Migration Institute at the University of Oxford. He continues directing IMI from its current home at UvA. He is also Professor of Migration and Development at the University of Maastricht.

In his work, De Haas has advanced a new, long-term view of migration as an intrinsic part of global change and development. He is lead author of *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern*



World, a seminal text book in the field of migration studies.

His new book *How Migration Really Works: A Factful Guide to the Most Divisive Issue in Politics* was published by in 2023, as well as in German, Dutch, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Greek and Korean translations. He maintains a blog on migration-related topics.

Guest Joely Mbundu was Born in Villeneuve-St-Georges, France and attended school in Flanders, Belgium. Her first role, at the age of 16, was the critically acclaimed lead “Lokita” in the 2022 film by the Dardenne Brothers, “Tori and Lokita.” The film premiered in Competition at the Cannes Film Festival and went on to win a special prize in honour of



Cannes’ 75th Anniversary. It also garnered awards at the Jerusalem and The San Sebastián Festival and was honoured with the Grand Audience Award at The Seville European Film Festival. Most recently, Joely was featured in Agnieszka Holland’s 2023 film, *Green Border*, which won a Special Jury Award at The Venice Film Festival where it received a 14-minute standing ovation and also screened at the Toronto and New York Film Festivals while garnering rave reviews from Variety, The Hollywood Reporter, Deadline, The New York Times, The Washington Post and other publications. Joely speaks French, English, and Flemish fluently. She sings and has been involved in various forms of dance for many years - including classic, hip hop and jazz. ●



In Darkness

2011 Oscar nominated film based on a true story recounts the story of Leopold Socha, a sewer worker and petty thief in Lviv (then Poland, today Ukraine) during the Nazi occupation. Written by Robert Marshall, an existential tale of the volatility of the human spirit.

One day Socha encounters a group of Jews trying to escape the liquidation of the ghetto. He hides them for money in the labyrinthine sewers beneath the bustling activity of the city above.

What starts out as a straightforward

and cynical business arrangement, turns into something very unexpected, the unlikely alliance between Socha and the Jews as the enterprise seeps deeper into Socha's conscience. The film is also an extraordinary story of survival as these

men, women and children all try to outwit certain death during 14 months of ever increasing and intense danger.

Although the subject of the Holocaust has been tackled by several different directors in numerous genres, the award-winning director has strived to devise an original take on the Holocaust. Holland has said of her efforts:

2009 brought a number of new Holocaust stories in books and films. One might ask if everything has now been said on this subject. But in my opinion the main mystery hasn't yet been resolved, or even fully explored. How was this crime (echoes of which continue in different places in the world from Rwanda to Bosnia) possible? Where was Man during this crisis? Where was God? Are these events and actions the exception in human history or do they reveal an inner, dark truth about our nature?

Exploring the many stories from this period uncovers the incredible variety of human destinies and adventures, revealed in the richest texture of plots and dramas, with characters that face difficult moral and human choices, exercising both the best and the worst in human nature. One of those stories is about Leopold Socha and the group of Jews from Lviv's Ghetto,

whom he hides in the city's sewers. The main character is ambiguous: seemingly a good family man, yet a petty thief and a crook, religious and immoral at the same time, perhaps an ordinary man, living in terrible times. During the story Socha grows in many ways as a human being. There is nothing easy or sentimental in his journey.

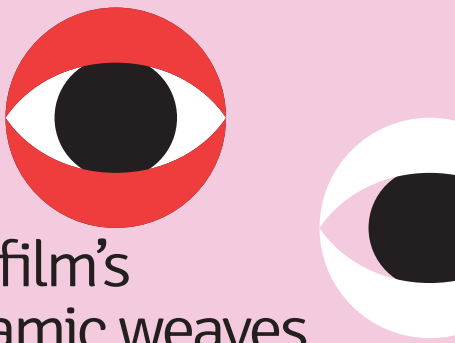
The group of Jews he saves is not entirely angelic. Fear, terrible conditions and their own selfishness make them complex and difficult individuals, sometimes unbearable human beings. But they are real and alive, and their imperfections give them a stronger claim to their right to life than any idealised version of victims could.

Agnieszka Holland explains: I immediately liked the story, liked the potential of it, the

How could this crime happen?
Where was humanity and where was God in this crisis?

characters, and the script. The biggest and the most exciting challenge for me as a filmmaker was the darkness. They live in the dark, stink, wet and isolation for over a year. We knew we had to express it, to explore this underground world in a very special, realistic, human and intimate way. We wanted the audience to have the sensory feeling of being there. And to maintain tension as the viewer slowly becomes attached to the story. The dynamic of the film is built on inter-cutting the worlds of the two leads, Socha and Mundek. These two worlds come together to be one, in which they must work together to survive.

Most of the main cast and crew are Poles, speaking in a mix of Polish, Ukrainian, Yiddish and German. Asked why the film was not in English, Agnieszka Holland told Melissa Silverstein writing for *Women and Hollywood*: The script was written in English by a Toronto screenwriter, and it is much easier to finance when it is in English. I don't believe it reaches an audience really well except really big movies made by very famous filmmakers and very famous stars and having wide American distribution. But small middle budget films in English some way slip between the TV movie



The film's dynamic weaves together the worlds of Socha and Mundek

and the movie for no one, so I know it will not help the film to reach an audience by the fact that it would be in English, but it would be certainly easier to finance. International English-speaking films are easier to finance than Polish films with Yiddish and Ukrainian and German thrown in. The producers have been very brave that they followed my concept, and I think the film wouldn't have the power that it does if it were in English. I deeply believe that.

Even before its release, *In Darkness* received laudatory critical reviews. Wall Street Journal's Joe Morgenstern reported from the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado: Any mention of movies and sewers brings to mind 'The Third Man', but Ms. Holland's brave epic could not be farther

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from conventional entertainment; the suspense here, derived from a true story, is excruciating and inspiring in equal measure. The hero, Soha (a perfect performance by Robert Więckiewicz) brings Oskar Schindler to mind because he's a Gentile who decides to save Jewish lives. Otherwise, Soha's story is singular and superbly dramatic, the evolution of an obtuse anti-Semite into a guardian angel.

Todd McCarthy writing for the Hollywood Reporter also saw the film

at the Colorado festival and called it a "robust and arduous drama, Agneska [sic.] Holland's Holocaust tale should be well received by the considerable art house audience partial to the subject matter". The film was a 2012 Oscar contender in the Best Foreign Film Category. It also garnered a nomination for the 2012 Critics' Choice Awards in the same category. ●

Author: Konrad J. Zarębski, December 2011

Source: Culture.pl reprinted with permission



Conversation

Humanity within us - Facing tough choices

Is compassion an integral part of human nature or is it experienced only by some of us? Is it a gift or can it be learnt? And why some humans think that we are entitled to rule the realm of nature?

Moderator Dore van Duivenbode is a Polish-Dutch writer and journalist who studied History at Utrecht University. Her debut book, *My Polish House*, reflects on her youth in Oswiecim (Auschwitz), and won the 2019 *Bob den Uyl Prize* for best travel book. Her second book, *Oerbos*, was recently published. She has also appeared in the VPRO documentary series *Moja Polska!* and other projects.

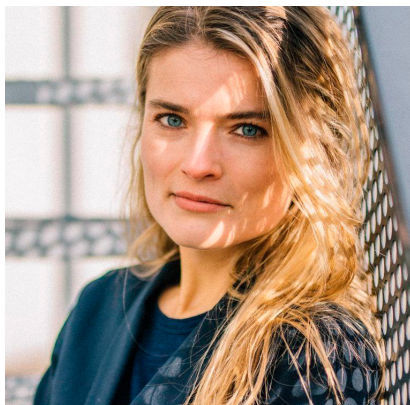


Photo: Marc Haers

Guest Bibi Dumon Tak, a celebrated Dutch author, blends fiction and non-fiction in children's literature. She began her career writing about animals and nature, with acclaimed works like *Laika in de ruimte*. Known for her engaging storytelling, she makes complex topics accessible for young readers. Dumon Tak has won several awards, including the Gouden Griffel, for her warmth and humor. ●

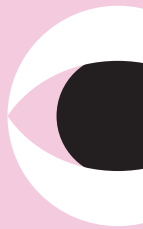
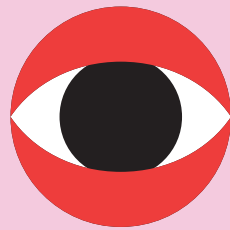


Spoor

The acclaimed Polish director questions the sacrosanct dominion of human over animal in a vigorous dark comedy fairytale.

Near the end of *Spoor* (2017), Agnieszka Holland's Silver Bear-winning feature, a jittery woman recalls the parable of the Night Hunter, a local legend that used to frighten her as a child. The story of a spirit in pursuit of evil people frames the events of the film, in which members of a hunting party disappear under mysterious circumstances, as folkloric acts of justice.

Melding its whodunit narrative with uncanny suspects, *Spoor* questions presupposed hierarchical structures, whether man over woman, or human over animal. Drawn up from various genre forms—murder mystery, eco-thriller, dark comedy—the film nevertheless concocts a world very much like our own, if we took animals seriously.



Janina Duszejko (Agnieszka Mandat) is a retired engineer, part-time English teacher, and full-time animal activist in a Kłodzko Valley Mountain village, where hunting is equally a means and an end, safeguarded by local authorities and revered as a rite of passage into manhood. Like many phallogocentric traditions, it excludes women while testifying to the dominion of man over beast, a hegemony that *Spoor* puts to the test. Duszejko teams up with other oddballs—a local woman she nicknames “Good News” (Patrycja Volny), an epileptic IT engineer (Jakub Gierszał), and a Czech entomologist (Miroslav Krobot)—to take on the violent town order.

Casting an elderly woman as the film’s protagonist is a feminist gesture, shining a light on a character type usually bound to supporting roles. The figure of the old maid is conventionally typified as a female lacking sexualized attributes, existing on the fringe of society. Constantly reinforcing this perception, the men with power in the town take turns mispronouncing Duszejko’s name, swapping it for “Duszenko” (the former derives from the Polish word for soul,” the latter from the verb “to strangle,” making this error a telling Freudian slip). In bureaucratic negligence, they dismiss

her official letters and pleas, regarding her as the town freak. When a society denies the authority of a strong, educated woman due to her being in its periphery, it loses the benefits of her perspective. This is one symptom of the calcified structures *Spoor* puts in its sights, raging equally against the tyrannies of sexism, ageism, and speciesism.

While debates about the anthropocentric nature of cinema as a medium cut across the academic disciplines of film and animal studies, *Spoor* lends a compassionate look through its lenses. The joint camerawork of Jolanta Dylewska and Rafał Paradowski proves equally attentive to humans, plants, and animals—although not in the same frame—composing a multilevel microcosm of the small, desolate town between the Polish, Czech, and German borders. As a result, the forest belts and mountain

By giving animals more screen time, the film entrusts them with greater agency

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peaks of Lower Silesia, observed in the course of four seasons, are nothing short of a fairytale backdrop for the film. Long shots cover acres of land enveloped in mist, the human presence marked by tiny figures or cars toiling on the mountain trails. The camera glides over frosty hills and glistening sunrises, delivering a paean to nature and its virginal beauty, separate from man's intrusions. Stitching together depopulated landscape sequences with manifestations of man's cruelty to

animals, the film rattles the cage of its spectators.

When it approaches animals, the camera lowers itself to the ground, empathetically shrinking to the height of a fox, or even to that of a beetle. By bridging the vertical distance between camera and its subject in an impromptu documentarian mode, Holland achieves a touching intimacy that renders the animal an active participant, rather than the passive object of our gaze. By



allowing more screen time to animals, the film entrusts them with agency. The world can seem uncompromisingly cruel under macro lenses, which remains steadfast whether facing a massacre, a decaying body, or a slaughtered animal arranged as a spectacle for passersby. Lingering on repulsive imagery may suggest a dispassionate viewpoint, but here—by refusing to look away—the cinematography affirms that life and death are intertwined.

Spoor's opening sequence compares tree branches with deer antlers, and when the camera blurs its usually sharp picture of reality, flora transforms into fauna as if under a spell. *Spoor* serves in part as a wildlife catalogue, showing horses, roe deer, foxes, wild boars, hares, and more in their natural habitat, without any precise narrative function. Such plot stoppages complement the film's overwhelmingly empathetic concern, showing that animals are always there.

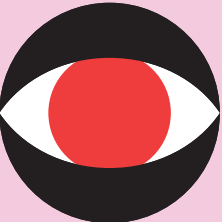
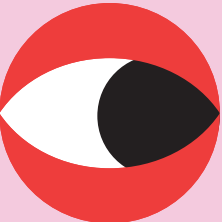
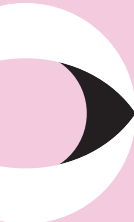
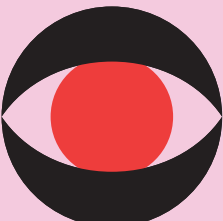
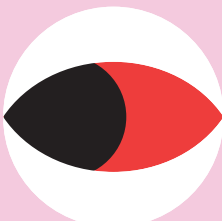
In relation to humans, animals persist as prey, as accomplices, as paganistic sacrifices during a church mass. We see what becomes of animals when they are no more in close-ups of fine leather boots, the feathers from a torn-up down jacket, taxidermied trophies hanging on

Spoor questions hierarchical structures, like man over woman or human over animal

the wall. A wolf costume and Playboy bunny ears operate toward the same ends at further remove. A mirror version of the wildlife catalogue is assembled of the animal after-life. While Duszejko interrogates her fellow citizens' morals, animal scholars are asking related questions: can animals be murdered, and are animals themselves capable of murder, or is that distinction reserved for homo sapiens? In a way, *Spoor* is not unlike a wild animal itself: if you chase it with moral didacticism, it will certainly outrun you. If, instead, you slow your pace and return its empathetic look, that human-animal taxonomy will seem at once to be irrelevant. ●

Author: Savina Petkova, September 2019

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