

7-8 Oct 23 | deBalie
Amsterdam
Polish
Film Festival



**looking
east** understanding
central-europe



PROGRAMME

DAY 1, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2023

15.00 – 18.30

Mr Jones (Agnieszka Holland, 119 min) + **talk**

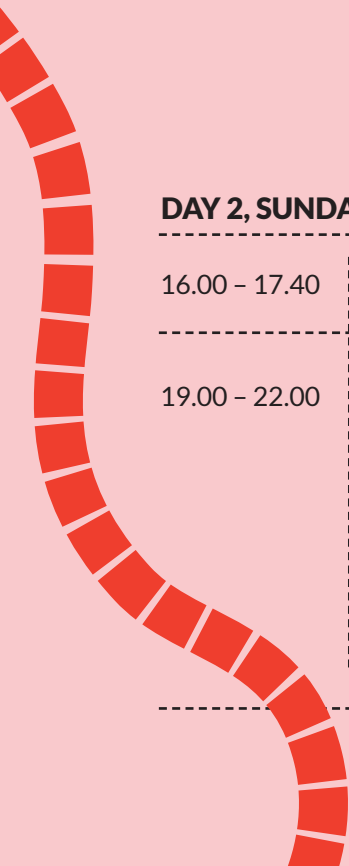
Conversation: Russian dominance in the Central Europe

Moderator: Fadoua Alaoui

Guests: Barbara Malak-Minkiewicz, Matt Steinglass, Anne-Lise Bobeldijk, Kateryna Kobchenko

19.30 – 21.40

Jack Strong (Władysław Pasikowski, 130 min)



DAY 2, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2023

16.00 – 17.40

Klondike (Maryna Er Gorbach, 100 min)

19.00 – 22.00

The Hamlet Syndrome (Elwira Niewiera & Piotr Rosołowski, 86 min) + **talk**

Conversation: The impact of war in Ukraine on people and their personal lives

Moderator: Fadoua Alaoui

Guests: Elwira Niewiera, Maryna Er Gorbach, Anna Greszta

Looking East – Understanding Central Europe

We are thrilled to have you join us for the second edition of the Amsterdam Polish Film Festival. This year's lineup features Polish and Ukrainian films and international panel discussions focusing on the history and current developments in Central Europe. Our carefully curated selection of films promises to captivate your imagination, stir your emotions, and ignite thought-provoking conversations. This will give you a unique opportunity to form a comprehensive understanding of the developments in Central Europe.

During the first day of the festival, we are going to zoom into the situations in Ukraine and Poland during the communist era. The film, *Mr Jones* (2019), directed by renowned Polish director Agnieszka Holland, tells the story of Holodomor, the Soviet Union's forced famine in Ukraine in the early 1930s which killed millions of ethnic Ukrainians. The second film, Polish political thriller *Jack Strong* (2014) directed by Władysław Pasikowski,

is based on the true story of Ryszard Kukliński, a colonel of the Polish army, who takes up the fight alone against the Soviets, collaborating with the CIA during the Cold War. The conversation between the films will explore the historical context, contemporary dynamics, and the implications of Russia's influence on the countries in Central Europe.

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been ongoing since 2014, leaves an indelible mark on both Ukrainian individuals and the society. This is the theme of the second festival day. The film *Klondike* (2022) directed by Ukrainian director Maryna Er Gorbach, a winner at the famous Sundance festival, depicts the war in the Donbas region. The lives of Irka and Tolik become disrupted when flight MH17 is shot down nearby, increasing the terrifying tension in their village. A film about loyalty to friends, family, nation and location.

The documentary *The Hamlet Syndrome*

(2022) directed by Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosołowski portrays a group of young people preparing a play, revealing their personal experiences with the war and resulting traumas, which they slowly embody on stage.

After the film we will have a thought-provoking conversation about the films and how the war in Ukraine influences people and their personal lives. Directors Maryna Er Gorbach and Elwira Niewiera, talented young filmmakers, will take part in the conversation. It will be a chance to dive deeper into the stories that move us and the artistry that brings them to life.

Thank you for being a part of the Amsterdam Polish Film Festival. We hope you enjoy every moment of this extraordinary cinematic adventure. Lights down, curtain up, and let the festival begin!

Board Polish Culture NL

Bożena Kopczyńska

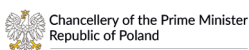
Ewa Kędzierska

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The Amsterdam Polish Film Festival is organised by Polish Culture NL
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Mr Jones

Director: Agnieszka Holland, 2019

Agnieszka Holland brings to the screen the extraordinary and powerful story of the real-life Welsh journalist who uncovered Stalin's genocidal famine in Ukraine, which killed almost 7 million during The Holodomor of 1932 and 1933. Gareth Jones (James Norton) is an ambitious Welsh journalist who gained fame after his report on being the first foreign journalist to fly with Hitler. On leaving a government role, Jones decides to travel to Moscow in an attempt to get an interview with Stalin himself. Hearing

murmurs of government-induced famine, Jones travels clandestinely to Ukraine, where he witnesses the atrocities of man-made starvation. Deported back to London, Jones publishes an article revealing the horrors he witnessed but is accused of being a liar by those who have an interest in silencing him. As the death count mounts, Jones has to fight for the truth.

Agnieszka Holland

Agnieszka Holland (1948) is a renowned Polish film director and screenwriter

known for her contributions to world cinema. Holland's journey in filmmaking began with studies at the prestigious FAMU in Prague, where she honed her craft and was exposed to the New Wave cinema movement. Over the years, she worked her way up in the film industry, initially as an assistant director and screenwriter in Poland, before achieving international acclaim. Her films, often delve into complex historical and political themes, offering profound insights into the human condition. She has successfully combined European and Hollywood filmmaking, as well as television. Holland's work has garnered numerous awards, including Oscar nominations, showcasing her ability to create emotionally resonant and socially relevant cinema.



Martin Kraft (photo.martinkraft.com)
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Death in Ukraine: Was 'Mr. Jones' a Film or a Prophecy?

Mr. Jones', a 2019 period film directed by Agnieszka Holland about a journalist reporting on Holodomor – the Stalin-made famine in 1930s Ukraine – is proving to be more relevant than ever as it regains popularity too.

Turning a blind eye

In 1933, 'Death in Ukraine' was a headline one could read in newspapers that decided to run articles written by the Welsh journalist Gareth Jones. His reporting was a result of his risqué and ultimately lethal investigation conducted in the Soviet Union. He was also the first to report on the existence of Holodomor, Stalin's famine genocide, to the West. Publishing these revelations was a bold move from the papers' owners – most notably William Randolph Hearst – since the most popular narrative at that time was to praise Stalin and his 'economic miracle'. Pulitzer Prize winner Walter Duranty was the loudest voice of the cheering crowd, and neither hunger nor starvation were mentioned in his articles, just a 'food shortage', which Duranty deemed a consequential element of



building a new country.

The distribution of the dailies is shown in one of the last scenes of Agnieszka Holland's *Mr. Jones*. The film – written by a debutante, Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and a scholar of Ukrainian descent – was co-produced by Poland, Ukraine as well as the United Kingdom and was released in 2019.

As Holland points out in her film, the Western world chose to ignore the fact that building a communist utopia cost more than a food shortage – the price was being paid with the lives of millions of Ukrainians. Also, British politicians refused to acknowledge Stalin's crime for many reasons, mainly as to avoid another great war in Europe. In addition, they held a firm belief that the

only threat to world peace was Adolf Hitler. On the other hand, American politicians had their own reasons for turning a blind eye to Stalin's atrocities: in 1933, the USSR was yet to be officially recognized by the United States and deals between the two economies were already underway. This too is depicted in Holland's film.

What Mr. Jones doesn't mention, and what should be added, is the deeply rooted hatred for Ukraine that Stalin cultivated for years. Along with taking away grains, livestock and crops, he wanted to eradicate Ukrainian culture, customs and language. As Serhii Plokhii, professor of Ukrainian History and the director of the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University, points out in his article about Mr. Jones, Stalin was closing Ukrainian schools, newspapers and cultural institutions as early as in 1932. The parallel between this and the recent, disgraceful February 2022 speech by Putin about how Ukraine is, and has always been, an integral part of Russia – is nauseating.

A warning

Reading the 'Death in Ukraine' headlines and seeing Mr. Jones today, weeks after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, feels ominous, to say the least. Holland's film

proves to be prophetic in retrospect. Yet, at the time of its original release, which was the Berlin Film Festival 2019, the reception of Mr. Jones was lukewarm at best. The critics were impressed with some parts of the film – mainly with the dreamlike sequence of Gareth Jones' journey through the famished Ukrainian countryside – while they found the other scenes longish and considered them a slightly stiff lesson in history. There is a Polish expression that says 'it's difficult to be a prophet in your own country', and for being an international helmer, which Agnieszka Holland is, it has been proven to be true on more than just a local level. Her film is not an unsubstantiated claim: Holland knows very well what she is talking about when she examines 20th century regimes. She grew up under the communist regime in Poland and was persecuted by another – communist Czechoslovakia. She dedicated a big part of her professional career to portray, analyse and warn of authoritarian powers, to name a few: *Europa, Europa*, *In Darkness* or *Charlatan*.

While promoting Mr Jones in Berlin three years ago, Holland already warned that historical events left untold will come back to haunt Europe. As she told Cineuropa in an interview:

I'd never been asked to direct a film about Holodomor. For a long time, I'd been thinking and telling people that many of the crimes condoned by the communist regime are still not talked about. There is no global awareness surrounding them, whereas the Holocaust, for example, is a known part of human history. [...] I think the fact that these atrocities are shrouded in silence is one of the reasons for the moral chaos we can feel in Europe today.

She also noted that despite being responsible for killing over 20 million of his own people, Stalin is still considered by Russians as being one of the greatest leaders in history. 'To understand how monstrous that is, and the influence it must have on the politics in Russia, we have to imagine what would happen if the Germans picked Hitler!' Holland added. But Mr. Jones is not solely a warning, or a history lesson, as some of the early reviews suggested. It is first and foremost a thriller told from the perspective of an idealist who is faced with the choice to either ignore the evils he witnesses with his own eyes or risk everything, including his own life, to report it. In today's world, the price one must pay for speaking up is hardly that high, but everything ultimately comes down to the choice that Jones made – one either calls out the evil or ignores it.

“the fact that these atrocities are shrouded in silence is one of the reasons for the moral chaos we can feel in Europe today”

Inconvenient news

The film introduces Gareth Jones while he is in his late 20s, serving as foreign advisor to David Lloyd George, British Prime Minister. The young Welshmen made a name for himself interviewing Adolf Hitler, and in the film's opening sequence, Jones is warning British high-level politicians of Hitler's ravenous appetite for conquering Europe. The room doesn't take Jones seriously, however, shaking their heads in disbelief while smoking cigars. The news that this young man is bringing is equally as inconvenient as is his zealous attitude – and his hunger for getting to the bottom



of things.

Jones announces that he wants to go to the USSR, to examine and possibly interview another world leader – Stalin. Initially, he too believed the Soviet propaganda, but when the facts stopped seeming plausible, he decided to dig deeper, and so he does – even after he is let go by Lloyd George. Gareth Jones travels to Moscow as a stringer and meets his fellow journalists there. He sees how they support the official narrative about the USSR, and how Walter Duranty is compromising his journalistic ethos to gain favours with Moscow and uphold his status as the most important Western correspondent in the Soviet Union. Wanting to see something other than what the officials are willing to show him, Gareth Jones jumps off a train from Moscow and takes another one going to the countryside. He travels around frozen villages, to the Ukrainian heart of darkness, where he witnesses the biggest atrocities he has ever seen, cannibalism included. After he miraculously survives and manages to escape the USSR, he tries to tell the world what he had just seen. The problem is that the world is not that willing to listen...

Today, when all eyes are on Putin's

invasion of Ukraine, and both traditional and social media provide live coverage from surrounding cities, there is no need to convince anyone about the gravity of the situation. And instead of 'Death in Ukraine', most social media posts say 'Glory to Ukraine'. Still, a lot of fake news is being spread by the Kremlin's loyal journalists, this also includes propaganda – the Walter Durantys of this world are alive and well. Nevertheless, this journalist cannot help but think for how long European leaders held a similar attitude towards Putin that their predecessors had towards Stalin.

Falling on deaf ears

Few paid attention to what Gareth Jones was saying, and not many wanted to listen to Agnieszka Holland's 'reporting' too. Mr. Jones was sold to many international markets and earned 2.8 million dollars worldwide, which was below expectations. In Poland, it landed in the 20th spot at the box office in November 2019, grossing 1.2 million złoty (approx. \$300,000). One of Agnieszka Holland's previous films – the Oscar nominated WWII film *In Darkness* – was over 3 times more successful, both on the local and international market. Karolina Pasternak, who just published a brilliant biography of Agnieszka Holland, notes that the film

was significantly more popular in France, where it had a very telling title – Ombre de Stalin (The Shadow of Stalin).

Pasternak tells Culture.pl:

At that time in Poland there was not a lot of interest in historical parables and cautionary tales from the past. Mr. Jones is not a typical 'festival film', it is a genre story; it has action and a strong protagonist. And despite all of that, it didn't appeal to a wider audience. [...] I think that powerful posters, allusions to Stalin and Orwell's Animal Farm, as well as to the contemporary world, made people want to push that aside, turn a blind eye on it. They preferred to believe that it's the past and that's where it belongs. And now they say in disbelief, that history repeats itself and that Putler [Putin + Hitler] is back.

She adds that as of March 2022, additional screenings of Mr. Jones are being organised in the UK and in the Czech Republic.

Look at bookstores: the bestselling books are about Putin, WWII and potential WWIII. Also, many people re-read George Orwell's Animal Farm that bookends, so to speak, Agnieszka Holland's film. The novel is a poignant metaphor of the USSR, with animal characters inspired by Stalin and his

inner circle and contains the famous line: 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others'.

Animal Farm was written during WWII and got published – not without difficulty – in 1945. Worth mentioning is that the first language the book was translated into was Ukrainian. It was done by Ihor Shevchenko, who grew up in interwar Warsaw and wrote for Polish papers published abroad. Orwell's book was distributed among Ukrainians stationed in displaced persons (DP) camps around Europe. The circulation was as high as 5000, and Orwell wrote a letter to Ukrainian refugees that served as an introduction to his book – it was the only introduction he had ever written. Incidentally, DP camps are where parents of Mr. Jones screenwriter, Andrea Chalupa, were born. She added her grandparents' account of the Holodomor, the death in Ukraine, to the story about the man who uncovered it to the world.

Written by Ola Salwa, March 2022

Source: Culture.pl reprinted with permission.

Conversation: Russian dominance in the Central Europe

Central Europe, with its rich history and diverse cultures, has often found itself at the crossroads of major geopolitical shifts. Today, one of the key topics of discussion revolves around Russian dominance in the region. As we delve into this conversation, we'll explore the historical context, contemporary dynamics, and the implications of Russia's influence on the countries in Central Europe. It's a complex and evolving topic that has far-reaching consequences, and our dialogue aims to shed light on its various facets."

Moderator: Fadoua Alaoui

After being anchor of the daily morning show on the Dutch Caribbean channel "Nos Pais Television", she now presents a great variety of events in the Netherlands.

It comes as no surprise that because of her traveling, living in different countries and knowledge of languages, her biggest passion is 'Human Interest'. She likes to use her own experiences and knowledge on various topics and at the same time gather more knowledge and insights together with her guests and audience.

She will look for similarities and recognition in order to create understanding for the 'other'. Fadoua presented already several events for Polish Culture NL, amongst others about multilingualism.

GUESTS

Dr Barbara Malak-Minkiewicz, social scientist and philosopher, was involved in an anti-communist movement in Poland, among others managing operations of the Committee for Independent Science. After



the collapse of communism, her professional interests turned to the transformation processes in Central-Eastern European countries, especially in education. After brief service as the spokesperson of “Solidarność” trade union in Gdansk, Poland (1990-1991) she engaged in several projects in Poland and other post-communist countries. For her work for freedom in Poland she was awarded by Polish President in 2013 Officer’s Cross of Polonia Restituta.



Matt Steinglass is the Europe correspondent for The Economist. After growing up in Washington, DC, he studied Russian history and literature at Harvard and interactive telecommunications at New York University. He has lived in and reported from Togo, Vietnam, Britain and the Netherlands. Before joining the Economist in 2014 he was Netherland’s correspondent for the Financial Times. His current beat includes Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and pan-European issues. His paternal family hails from Warsaw, where the name Steinglass can be traced back to the late 1700s.

Anne -Lise Bobeldijk is a post-doctoral researcher at Wageningen University, where she takes part in the NWA Heritages of Hunger-project. Her current research project considers the (political) use and





misuse of history and famine legacies in the Soviet Union, Ukraine and Russia. In her doctoral research at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies and the University of Amsterdam, she analysed the history and memory of violence prior, during and after the Holocaust and the Second World War in Belarus.

Dr Kateryna Kobchenko, historian, born 1975 in Kyiv (Kiev), Ukraine. She studied history at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, where she also defended her dissertation and worked for several years. In 2020-2021 she was a member of the Project of Digital Interview-Collection “Forced Labour 1939-1945. Memory and History” at the Freie Universität Berlin. In the academic year 2022-2023 K. Kobchenko worked as a Research Assistant at the University of Münster. Since October 2023 she has receives a Habitation scholarship of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Germany, her research subject is the History of Ideas of Ukrainian political emigrants after the WW II.





Jack Strong

Director: Władysław Pasikowski, 2014

“Jack Strong” is both a thriller and one of the world’s most fascinating spy stories. The film tells the true story of Colonel Ryszard Kukliński (Marcin Dorociński) – a man who single-handedly waged a battle against the Soviet Union from deep within its ranks. Ready to risk his life in order to keep the world from destroying itself, he started to cooperate with the CIA for many dangerous and emotionally draining years where one wrong move could mean a tragic fate for him and his family. “Jack Strong” was well-received

in Poland and internationally, drawing attention to the remarkable story of Kukliński and his contributions to the downfall of communism. The film not only serves as a thrilling espionage drama but also sheds light on the moral dilemmas faced by individuals who choose to engage in espionage for the greater good.

Władysław Pasikowski

Władysław Pasikowski is a Polish film director and screenwriter. He began his career in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a pivotal time for Polish cinema following

Cold War Spy Jack Strong

the fall of communism. Pasikowski produced his first films thanks to his cooperation with Juliusz Machulski – the films were *Kroll* from 1991 and *Psy* (Pigs) from 1992. Both productions, although causing numerous controversies, gained great popularity. They were even awarded during the Polish Feature Film Festival.

Władysław Pasikowski's filmography includes a range of genres and themes, but he is often associated with crime dramas and films that tackle social and historical issues. Throughout his career, he has demonstrated a commitment to exploring the intricacies of human nature and society through the lens of cinema.



Photographer: Justus Nussbaum License: CCBY-SA 3.0

Interview with the Director

It was solely his conscience that prompted his actions - Pasikowski says about Jack Strong, the protagonist of his film.

Joanna Poros, PAP: Why did you decide to make a film about Ryszard Kukliński? Why did you decide to go with this particular story?

Władysław Pasikowski: It was the story which chose me. Personified by the producer, Sylwia Wilkos, the story made me a proposition for me to be the one to clarify the misunderstandings about the Colonel. I knew nothing more about Kukliński than the average person. That he lived, he served with the General Staff, he assisted General Jaruzelski, he betrayed, he spied for the CIA, that when he was exposed, he fled abroad, where he died. But, given the fact that I wanted to make a film, I had to take an interest in the Colonel and reach for some documents. And that's when it turned out, as history sometimes goes, that there's more to the story.

Enduring years of misunderstandings or slander, the Colonel was being accused

of things he didn't do, so I thought that it was worth clarifying and sharing the knowledge I gained with others. Apart from that, his life made for fascinating material for a terribly interesting spy-sensation story with high stakes at play.

What is your personal opinion about Ryszard Kukliński?

– The Colonel's heroic act came at a time when no one expected it of him. Like I have often said, the situation cannot be compared to a man drowning in front of a bridge full of people. In that situation, although I am not denying the element of bravery, there is the pressure of ordinary people weighing on the potential hero. The same goes for occupation, where you had to become part of the opposition because your friends expected you to. But the Colonel's war was "cold", the stabilisation was grey and the family had enough to get by, even more than enough. It was his solely his conscience, nothing else, that prompted his actions. But the Colonel was aware of the fact that all of us, all of Poland, could evaporate within an hour and disappear from the face of the earth as a result of the transformation of the cold war into a hot one. He couldn't allow that to happen. I think that it would have been easier for him to give his life than "military honour" and to be a dead

man than a traitor, but he decided to do it anyway. He paid for it with his whole life, not losing it, but putting up with it.

After "Pokłosie" ("Aftermath"), referring to a very difficult episode of Polish history, you made a film about Ryszard Kukliński, whose figure brings up strong emotions in Poland, whose actions some consider controversial. Do you chose difficult topics for your films on purpose? And why have you been looking into historical content recently?

– Once again I'll use the producers as an excuse. I would like it if I were the one deciding about the choice of topics. Then, I would make a hilarious film, a so-called buddy-movie, about buddies who commit crimes and a very sad film about Polish teenage girls who sell their youth in exchange for a fashion career in Milan or Paris. Or then a pretty tragic film about Nangar Khel. But the producers aren't thrilled about my ideas, so my "compromise" is to go with their propositions. Consequently, that's where the ideas for films like "303" about Polish aviators in England, or "Stankiewicz" about Polish officers in the Army of the Tsar, or "GROM" about heroic, Polish soldiers, this time in Afghanistan, came from.

Answering the question indirectly,

I think that it wasn't me, but the producers who butchered romantic comedies and adapted all compulsory school readings, discovered a fondness for history [...]

In your opinion, is the discord surrounding Kukliński in Poland settled yet?

– No. Just like after the release of Gross's book, the dispute surrounding antisemitism wasn't settled, and my film which came twelve years later ignited it anew, the affair surrounding the Colonel, faintly covered by dust now, will make the headlines again and overshadow the film. But that's the price for making films about weighty topics. When you make a film about actors running around hotel hallways with naked arses, then you can count on the fact that the viewers, but most of all the critics will care about the film itself.

In the making of "Jack Strong" did you side with those according to whom Colonel Kukliński is a Polish hero?

– Yes.
[...]

Historians still know very little about Ryszard Kukliński's biography. What did your work on the script to the film about the Colonel look like, what sources of

information did you use, did you contact people who knew Kukliński personally?

– The producers worked on the script for many years. I joined them at a later stage and could make use of their yearlong research. At my disposal I had copies of documents and interviews with people like former CIA officer David Forden, who directly "led" the Colonel as the most valuable contact in the Soviet sphere. My research reached Forden's superiors, Ambadora Jerzy Koźmiński, and even Professor Zbigniew Brzeziński himself, who during Kukliński's days was President Carter's National Security Adviser. Work on the first record lasted for a couple of years, and under the watchful eye of producer Sylwia Wilkos, I wrote my version for some nine months, just like it is with kids... I was being cheered by the Colonel's wife, who unfortunately died before the first screening.

My last question concerns plans, new cinematic projects. Are you preparing to shoot a new film? If so, what will you tell us about this time?

– There is no such project on the way. And the ones that do exist have such long beards that they will probably die soon.

Ryszard Kukliński (CIA secret-agent pseudonym Jack Strong) was deputy



director of the board of operating directors for the Polish Armed Forces general staff. At the beginning of the 70s he started cooperating with American intelligence. He passed strategic plans of the Warsaw Pact to the U.S. He warned them about the imposition of martial law in Poland. Kukliński were “evacuated” from Warsaw by the CIA and flown to safety in the U.S. in 1981. He lived in the U.S. under a fake name. His actions severely divided public opinion in Poland. In 1984, a court of the People’s

Republic of Poland sentenced him to death. His sentence was lifted in 1995. Kukliński died on the 11th of February 2004 in Tampa, Florida. His older son, Waldemar, was killed in 1994, the killers were never identified. According to the official version, his other son, Bogdan, disappeared without a trace during a sea expedition in 1993.

Source: PAP, edited by MG,
translated by Mai Jones

Source: Culture.pl reprinted with permission



Klondike

Director: Maryna Er Gorbach, 2022

July 2014. Expectant parents Irka and Tolik live in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine near the Russian border, disputed territory in the early days of the Donbas war. Their nervous anticipation of their first child's birth is violently disrupted as the vicinal crash of flight MH17 elevates the forbidding tension enveloping their village. The looming wreckage of the downed airliner and an incoming parade of mourners emphasize the surreal trauma of the moment.

As Tolik's separatist friends expect him to join their efforts, Irka's brother is enraged by suspicions that the couple has betrayed Ukraine. Irka refuses to be evacuated even as the village gets captured by armed forces, and she tries to make peace between her husband and brother by asking them to repair their bombed house.

Klondike premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 21, 2022, where it won the World Cinema Dramatic Competition for directing. The film was also awarded at the Berlin International Film Festival 2022 and International

Istanbul Film Festival 2022. The film was selected as the Ukrainian entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 95th Academy Awards.

Maryna Er Gornbach

Maryna Er Gornbach is a Ukrainian filmmaker who writes, directs, produces, and edits films. After studying in Kyiv National I. K. Karpenko-Kary Theatre, Cinema & Television University (Ukraine), she graduated from Andrzej Wajda Master School of Film Directing (Poland). Since 2017 Maryna ER Gornbach has been a member of the European Film Academy. She made the films *Black Dogs Barking* (2009), *Love Me* (2013) and *Omar and Us* (2019) together with her husband Mehmet Bahadır Er. *Klondike* is the first film she has written and directed alone.



Klondike Director Maryna Er Gornbach on the state of the Russia-Ukraine war and being inspired by Maya Deren

If nothing else, Ukrainian director Maryna Er Gornbach's first solo-helmed feature *Klondike* can be credited with uncanny timing. A vivid look at an ordinary farming family in the occupied Donbas region of Ukraine, who just happen to have a full wall of their home destroyed by an errant missile, its European premiere at the 2022 Berlinale was followed only days later by Russia's full-scale invasion of the country, which of course continues unabated. It would be one of the last Ukrainian features to conclude production before the war broke out (and indeed, many of its key artists and filmmakers have gone to fight on the front lines), a prophetic missive from a country that has stunned the world with its resilience in the face of crisis.

Er Gornbach, who's based in Istanbul and previously co-directed several features with her spouse Mehmet Bahadır Er, reveals herself as a filmmaker able to conjure an imposing sense of scale, and creditably evoke with massive props (and some post-production trickery) the wreckage of the downed Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, which



is interweaved through the predicament of the fictional characters, Irka (Oksana Cherkashyna) and Tolik (the late Sergey Shadrin), who are weighing up departing their small farm as the separatist conflict rages. Irka's late stage pregnancy provides another ticking-clock element for their safety, and various familial and social connections, and their attendant loyalties to the war's two sides, precipitate a spiral towards tragedy.

With a U.S. release this week following its well-received Sundance 2022 world premiere, I caught up with Er Gorbach via a video call, where our chat spanned the film and the pressing geopolitical issues it's intimately caught up with.

The Film Stage: Where did the initial inspiration to tell this particular story, set amidst the Donbas conflict, come from?

Maryna Er Gorbach: Regarding the war – which started in 2014, in Ukraine – it's a movie which is basically asking a question: what's happening there? What's happening in this house? What's happening with these people? What's happening on the border? Who are those mercenaries? It proceeds from one question to another. On 17th July 2014, when the Malaysian airline actually crashed over Donbas, it provoked these same questions. Like all of us in Ukraine – or at least my friends and I – we were just shocked. There are rockets in the middle of Donbas which can shoot down a civil aeroplane. So that was the very beginning – my shock, let's say, because I believe that, somehow, Klondike is a mirror of my emotions of those days.

I feel a link with the main protagonist, Irka, though she's a somewhat passive figure, despite containing agency. She's on the slight periphery of this conflict that's unfurling on both a micro and macro scale.

For me, it was natural to use a woman in the middle of the story. Because I am a woman director and I know, you know,

women “muscles” and women instincts. From my soul, from my body. They were super-important because finally, when you watch Klondike, it’s not really about any military or family conflict. It’s about a conflict between creation and destroying. And Irka, she represents creation.

The actress, Oksana Cherkashyna, comes from Ukrainian theatre – I also saw her in Bad Roads at the 2020 Venice Film Festival.

She was in the opening segment, where a woman with white hair and red lipstick is driving a car towards the checkpoint. But I know that for some countries, the sales agency decided to cut this scene.

Could you say a few words about Sergey Shadrin, who plays Tolik? Did he have a similar acting background?

You know, we have a very interesting story with Tolik, because our casting director, Tetyana Symon, showed me his pictures and said, “Look at this man.” And the pictures were, you know, fantastic because he has this very, very interesting face and so on. But his profession was a stuntman, so basically he’s fighting, jumping. He was doing all those kinds of action movies. And he never had any professional acting education. And I didn’t want to have a typical “macho man” in my

movie. You know, I really wanted to have somebody who doesn’t understand what he has to do and totally doesn’t understand what’s happening. He belongs to Irka, she’s his goddess, and he wants to save her and he doesn’t know how he will manage all this, all this stuff.

When I saw his pictures I was thinking, “He has too much menace, he’s much too macho.” But we decided to try. Let’s cast him. And when he came to us, I have this particular way of casting actors: I never ask them to play the scene from the film. I want to understand, you know, how they are. They are in their mission. I want to know, as an actor, what they can do, where they are, how far they can go. I asked him to act as a small boy, a six-year-old.

So you asked him, as this well-built 40-year-old man, to be a six-year-old. Wow.

Yeah, I really imagined Tolik as boy who just woke up in the middle of Donbas and doesn’t understand what’s happening. So he was acting as a small boy who came to school, and he is an outsider. No one wants to be friends with him. And just made a perfect scene, you know. For the actor Sergey Shadrin, this was his first leading role and, unfortunately, his last leading role. [He died soon after the film’s principal photography, on June 3rd, 2021.]

Your mise-en-scène is very striking. You can almost estimate the number of shots in the film, yet you use them to convey as much as you can. It's the combination of wide lenses and those enormous horizons, and occasional, surprising camera movements.

It was a directorial "statement" because I knew that for my final scene, my final message, it's only possible to accomplish it in one shot because we are talking about the miracle of life. And you cannot cut it. It's always about the "period," and there is always kind of stress or shock before I cut, you know. Yeah. So now in Ukraine, we also say "before" war and "after," and this sense of a "period" or full stop is repeated.

One of your key inspirations is Larisa Shepitko, most famous for *The Ascent*, a key Eastern Front World War II film. Can you talk about your connection to her, and what you've learned from her work?

You know, she's from Donbas; she was born there. I'm inspired by her but also by Maya Deren.

Now that you say that, I can see a connection to *At Land*--the mobility of the lead female character, crawling on the arid plains...

With Shepitko's cinema, she speaks about war. But at the same time, she's so much

about people and she's standing with the human. And Maya, for me, is just a master of cinema language in communication with viewers' feelings. My conditions were that I cannot say, "Who are the soldiers?" Because, you know, they didn't have any flag on their uniforms. In 2014, the world wasn't as aware of the war in Ukraine. My conditions were to ask questions but in a cinematographic way. Like these female film directors, who are just masters.

You premiered the film at an uncanny moment: immediately afterwards, we had the full outbreak of the war. I'm wondering what it's been like, you know, to tour with the film and show it, around the world, to many different audiences and to hear about the reactions you've had.

It's a very good question, actually. It was the initial day after the full-scale war started, in Switzerland. There was this audience question about the final scene, whether we have any hope as human beings? I said that right now, there is no bomb which can destroy the sun. So we still have sunrise and sunset. And this means that we have a hope. And to travel with this movie, it was not only to speak about my own fears--because it's not only about my fears anymore. I think that we are potentially living at the end of "ages," which

we name “civilization”, but we don’t really know. We face ages of creation. I hope creation will win. Yes, but I don’t know the future.

What’s your impression of the conflict at this current time? And do you have any hopes for its potential cessation?

Excuse me, it’s war. It’s very important to understand that this is war because, yeah, one can say they have conflict. But Russia and Ukraine, they’re at war, okay. And this is a very important distinction to make.

Indeed, let me correct my previous comment!

I am not ready to be Cassandra anymore. I just really want to say that this war – this full-scale war – it’s going on too long already. And it’s not only war between Russia and Ukraine; it is also war in the imagination of both, on the question of, “Who is the hero?” Who is the contemporary hero? When it started last year, the contemporary hero from the very beginning, it was any Ukrainian man or woman who just took any gun which they could find, and they join the Territorial Defence Forces. Then we had professional soldiers. Then we had President Zelensky.

Yes.

And many, many other people who

were making, you know, miracles. As a Ukrainian. I want to continue this. I want to tell about other heroes who are fighting for their houses, lands, and protecting Ukraine. But as a director I want to say that – regarding history, life, drama, and screenwriting – it’s never too simple to describe the future.

You’re not Cassandra, as you say.

I mean, as long as Ukraine doesn’t have the weapons to make a counter-attack, Russia has more time to prepare new guns. It is still a very big country. And our bravery, Ukrainian bravery, needs more military stuff to win. It’s not possible only with human heroism.

Written by David Katz, The Film Stage, August 2023

Source: The Film Stage, thefilmstage.com.

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The Hamlet Syndrome

Directors: Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosołowski, 2021

A few months prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, five young women and men participate in a unique stage production that attempts to relate their war experiences to Shakespeare's Hamlet. For each of them, the stage is a platform to express their grief and trauma through the famous question, "to be or not to be," a dilemma that applies to their own lives. The protagonists fight against disappointment, powerlessness,

and anger, trying to put their lives back in order while processing their painful past: SLAVIK, who went through a hell of war and captivity as a soldier, KATYA, who longs for her mother's forgiveness for joining the army, RODION, who escaped from Donbas and is now facing growing homophobia, ROMAN, who is still struggling with the traumatic memories of his war experience as a paramedic on the battlefield, and Oxana who struggles on an artistic frontline as an actress.



Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosołowski

Elwira Niewiera is a Polish/German director and screenwriter, winner of many international awards. In her artistic work, she focuses primarily on political, social and cultural transformations in Eastern Europe. Elwira is a member of the European Film Academy.

Piotr Rosołowski is a Polish director, screenwriter, and cinematographer based in Berlin. He graduated from the Katowice Film School and was awarded an Academy of Media Arts scholarship in Cologne. Piotr also works as a director of photography, he shot many awarded



feature and short films.

Piotr co-directed together with Elwira already three successful feature documentaries: “Domino Effect” prized at the Krakow Film Festival and DOK Leipzig, “The Prince and the Dybbuk” awarded with the Lion for Best Documentary on Cinema at the 74th Venice Film Festival, and “The Hamlet Syndrome” honored with Grand Prix Semaine de la critique at the 75th Locarno Film Festival.

Source: Polish Docs, polishdocs.pl

The Hamlet Syndrome

Directed by Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosołowski

Winning awards at film festivals in Locarno and Kraków, the documentary directed by Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosołowski is a tale about Ukraine at war and her heroes. It is not an easy story but moving in its resemblance to reality and it breaks away from simple conclusions. They were brought together by Hamlet and the war. When the first Russian shots were fired in Donbas in 2014, their lives changed forever. Sławik went to fight for his country and was taken prisoner along with the whole of his division only a few weeks later. Katia dropped her university studies in 2014 and, despite her mother's pleas, picked up a weapon to join the front line. Roman did not wish to shoot people so, instead, he became a doctor for the army and spent long months rescuing his companions who were fighting on the front line. Oksana (Czerkaszyzna, currently employed at Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw) actively participated in the protests on Kiev's Maidan Square, while Rodion, a Donetsk LGBT community member, took to sewing military uniforms and helping to organize humanitarian aid.

Eight years after the outbreak of the war all these people came together on the theatre stage. Directed by Roza Sarkisian, they are preparing a performance inspired by Hamlet. But this Hamlet is far from conventional adaptations. It is a tale laced with personal memories and traumas, with processed tragedies and latent pain. Every one of them must confront the demons of war. Roman can hardly talk about the terror he experienced on the front line. Sławik struggles with suicidal thoughts while Katia fears being raped and experiencing sexism in her own army ranks.

The accounts Hamlet Syndrome is assembled of are not merely traumatic memories of evil invaders and the cruelties of war but also bitter contemplation on national elation and the solitude of heroes. The protagonists openly talk about homophobic and sexist attitudes commonly found in Ukrainian society, about the lack of psychological support for those who saw and experience far too much, about how being considered a hero deprives one of the rights to admit to fear. Lastly, about how war-exhausted society often sees veterans as pests in the way of making peace with the invader.



The Hamlet Syndrome is not a feel-good story but one that provokes reflections on the idea of nationhood, unity, common ideals, and patriotism. The play is an opportunity to speak honestly about all the hardships, even if they do not fit the widely accepted picture. This way, the individual therapy of several actors transforms into a collective psychotherapy session carried out in the spirit of sincerity and mutual respect. In one of the scenes Sławik's father recalls the time of his son's captivity

saying: "I would not like to go through it again". Sadly, reality has added a tragic continuation to Hamlet Syndrome. When the Russian invasion started in February 2022, the protagonists once more had to ask themselves "to be or not to be?". Today, some of them fight with weapons in hand again, others are involved in helping the Ukrainian Army and refugees. The grim epilogue that the war added to Niewiera and Rosolowski's film makes it even more important and relevant. It is an invitation to discuss the

idea of a community and the duties of its members. The duo of Polish documentary film makers managed to capture an exceptionally dramatic moment in history and created intimate character portraits that mirror not only the Ukrainian nation but also ourselves, watching the Russian-Ukrainian war from entirely different perspective.

The film by Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosołowski won the Grand Prix in the Semaine de la Critique competition at the Locarno Festival, as well as the Golden Hobby Horse for the best Polish documentary at the Kraków Film Festival.

Autor: Bartosz Staszczyszyn

Translated by: Monika Gimblett

Source: Culture.pl reprinted and translated with permission.

DAY 2 CONVERSATION

Conversation: The impact of war in Ukraine on people and their personal lives

Moderator: Fadoua Alaoui

The impact of the ongoing war in Ukraine is far-reaching and complex, affecting many aspects of life in Ukraine but also outside of the country. This conflict, which began in 2014, has created a humanitarian crisis, with millions of Ukrainians being internally displaced or seeking refuge abroad. Families have been torn apart, and many have lost their homes and livelihoods. The constant threat of conflict, along with the trauma of witnessing violence and loss, has taken a heavy psychological toll on Ukrainians. On a positive note, the conflict has spurred civil society and activism in Ukraine.

It has fostered a sense of unity and patriotism among many Ukrainians, as they rally around the cause of defending their sovereignty. During the conversation we will explore the human stories and discuss the implications of this conflict on people and their personal lives.

GUESTS

Maryna Er Gorbach – Director of the film *Klondike*

Eliwira Niewiera – Director of the film *The Hamlet Syndrome*

Anna Greszta is a cultural anthropologist and a PhD researcher at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), University of Amsterdam. She currently works in ERC-funded Conspiratorial Memory project, focusing on cultural representations of the Russian war in Ukraine. Inspired by and immersed in cultural analysis and anthropological traditions, the project examines the intersections of memory and conspiracy cultures in the landscape of objects representing the war. Her previous research experience varies from examining Polish-Jewish relations and the memory of the Holocaust (BA in Ethnography, University of Warsaw, 2013-2016) to visual ethnography of discourses and practices of beauty in Ukraine (MSc in Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, 2017-2020). Anna is a co-founder of Amsterdam-based volunteer group Collect4Ukraine.





FOUNDATION POLISH CULTURE NL

The Netherlands is a multicultural country with many different nationalities. Among all those different cultures and nationalities, there are many people with a Polish background. There has been a warm bond between Poland and the Netherlands for centuries. Think of trade in the seventeenth century or the contribution of the Poles to the liberation of the Netherlands in 1944. In the 1980s the Netherlands supported the Polish people in their fight for freedom. Since the fall of communism, economic ties have blossomed.

The main goal of our Foundation is to promote Polish culture in the Netherlands, raising cultural bridges between the two countries as well as promoting the Polish language and supporting art and cultural activities related to Poland.

To be informed about our activities and future events please join our newsletter. Sign up via www.polishculture.nl.

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The Foundation operates on a voluntary basis and does not receive any structural subsidies for our activities. Your donation, no matter the amount, will greatly help us achieve our goals. You can transfer your contribution to our bank account indicated below.

We are looking for Volunteers

Together we can do much more and we need your help. If you are interested in Polish art and culture or would like to help us build cultural bridges, please contact us via info@polish.culture.nl.

Stichting Polish Culture NL

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