

[Review] Marek Haltof (2012) Polish film and the Holocaust: politics and memory

Article (Published Version)

Mroz, Matilda (2015) [Review] Marek Haltof (2012) Polish film and the Holocaust: politics and memory. *Film-Philosophy*, 19. ISSN 1466-4615

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/61722/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Review: Marek Haltof (2012), *Polish Film and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 288 pp.

Matilda Mroz

University of Greenwich

Before the Holocaust, Poles and Jews had for centuries lived side-by-side as neighbours. As Joanna Żylinska has pointed out, however, the Polish-Jewish relationship highlighted the ‘structural ambivalence’ around the term ‘neighbour’: ‘Even though it involved physical side-by-side coexistence, neighbourliness in fact seems to have preserved the distance between the Poles and the Jews’ (Żylinska 2007: 283). The division between ‘self’ and ‘other’ was fundamental to the formation of Polish identity and memory, with Jews frequently being perceived as the ‘perfect out-group’, a marker of difference to non-Jewish Poles *par excellence* (Gitelman 2003: 273). The inherent antagonism in neighbourly proximity is epitomized by the violence that took place in the Polish village of Jedwabne in 1941, when, as historian Jan Gross claimed in *Neighbours* (first published in Poland in 2000), Polish villagers herded their Jewish neighbours into a barn and burned them alive. We cannot underestimate the impact that *Neighbours* had in Poland. Revelations of Polish violence towards Jews interrogated the foundations of Polish Holocaust memory, which has centered largely on the heroic actions of Poles who risked their lives to rescue Jews. Such a version of history was promoted heavily under Communism, and also forms the backbone for most cinematic treatments of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust, as I have noted elsewhere (Mroz 2013), and as Marek Haltof’s *Polish Film and the Holocaust* attests to.

Following, at least in part, the controversies inspired by Gross’s work, the past decade has seen a surge of interest in Polish-Jewish memory, in academia as well as in the wider political and cultural sphere. Haltof’s work is thus both timely and valuable. In *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, Haltof provides a detailed survey of Polish Holocaust films, the circumstances of their production, and the work of Polish-Jewish directors and cinematographers, from the immediate post-war era to (roughly) 2010. The fact that the book is structured chronologically does not prevent Haltof from making significant connections between films from different eras, though these are more occasional than sustained. The most impressive aspect of this book is Haltof’s thorough and engaging use of a variety of archival documents that shed light on the production and reception contexts of the films, including the transcripts from script evaluation committees (which provide some fascinating insights into the functioning of Communist

ensorship and propaganda), viewing figures and autobiographical material. Although, as Paul Coates (2013: 102) has noted, Haltof's categorisation of 'Polish Holocaust films' excludes some valuable works, such as Agnieszka Holland's *Bittere Ernt/Angry Harvest* (West Germany, 1985) and *Europa, Europa* (Germany/France/Poland, 1990), his book does an excellent job of providing at least some context for and analysis of a very large number of films, some entirely unknown outside of (and in some cases, even within) Poland.

Naturally, Haltof's survey method has its shortcomings: some films are granted only a few lines of discussion, while others, notably *Ostatni etap/The Last Stage* (Wanda Jakubowska, Poland, 1948), *Ulica Graniczna/Border Street* (Aleksander Ford, Poland, 1948), *Korczak* (Andrzej Wajda, Poland/Germany/UK, 1990) and *Wielki tydzień/Holy Week* (Andrzej Wajda, Poland/Germany/France, 1995) are accorded greater attention. Given that these four films are overrepresented in critical writing on Polish Holocaust cinema, and, in the case of Wajda at least, in critical writing on Polish cinema in general, it is a shame not to see a longer discussion of some of the lesser-known works. Throughout the analyses, there is not much engagement with philosophical, ethical and/or aesthetic concerns, including, for example, the issues of taking responsibility, of witnessing and giving testimony, and of the aestheticisation of the Holocaust. That said, to engage with such topics is not the book's stated intention, and Haltof himself expresses the hope that further, more theoretically minded, studies will follow (5). Such studies are sorely needed; as Haltof points out, although occupied Poland was the site of most German concentration and extermination camps, not a single book, in either Polish or English, has been devoted to the representation of the Holocaust in Polish cinema (5). To this I would add that philosophical, critical and artistic material originating in Poland has frequently been sidelined in Holocaust studies in favour of French and German writing, film and artworks – and this despite Poland's geographical centrality to the Holocaust, despite the significance of the fact that Poles witnessed much of the destruction of their Jewish former neighbors, and despite the conflicts of memory around the Holocaust between those within and outside Poland (including, frequently, Polish-Jewish survivors residing abroad). Studies such as Haltof's constitute an important step towards balancing this focus.

Given that the debates around Jedwabne have generated the 'most prolonged and far-reaching of any discussion of the Jewish issue in Poland since the Second World War' (Polonsky and Michlic 2004: xiii), it is somewhat surprising that Haltof himself plays down the recent shifts in Polish memory around the Holocaust. Jedwabne is only mentioned a handful of times, and little attention is paid to the documentary films centering on the Jedwabne events (Haltof's book was, it should be noted, published before the release of the first fiction film that takes up many

issues present in Gross's *Neighbours*, namely Władysław Pasikowski's *Pokłosie/Aftermath*, Poland/Russia/Netherlands, 2012). Nevertheless, *Polish Film and the Holocaust* has much to contribute to our awareness and understanding of Polish, and Polish-Jewish, filmmakers' and writers' responses to the Holocaust, and the formation and subversion of collective memory at various stages of Poland's history.

Bibliography

Coates, Paul (2013) 'Into that Darkness', *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, 4:1, pp. 101-104.

Gitelman, Zvi (2003) 'Collective Memory and Contemporary Polish-Jewish Relations', in Joshua D. Zimmerman (ed.), *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, London: Rutgers University Press, pp. 271-290.

Gross, Jan T. (2003), *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland, 1941*. London: Arrow Books.

Mroz, Matilda (2013), 'Re-Imagining the Neighbour: Polish-Jewish Relations in Contemporary Polish Visual Culture', in Axel Bangert, Robert Gordon and Libby Saxton (eds.), *Holocaust Intersections: Genocide and Visual Culture at the New Millennium*, London: Legenda, pp. 132-147.

Polonsky, Antony and Joanna B. Michlic (2004), 'Preface', in Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (eds.), *The Neighbours Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. xiii-xiv.

Żylinska, Joanna (2007) 'Who Is My Neighbour? Ethics Under Duress', in Dorota Głowacka and Joanna Żylinska (eds.), *Imaginary Neighbours: Mediating Polish-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 275-300.