Adapting the National Literary Canon: Polish Heritage Cinema

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After overcoming the rough transitional period at the beginning of the 1990s, a group of well-established Polish filmmakers, whose names are often synonymous with Polish national cinema, succeeded in winning back their audiences toward the end of the decade. Their commercial success came with films that were always popular in Poland—lavish adaptations of the Polish national literary canon. Thanks to Jerzy Hoffman's *With Fire and Sword (Ogniem i mieczem)* and Andrzej Wajda's *Pan Tadeusz*, which together had more than thirteen million viewers in 1999, Polish cinema shared an unprecedented sixty percent of the local market. The success of Polish films prompted the influential *Rzeczpospolita* film critic, Barbara Hollender, to title her review article: "Hoffman and Wajda won over Hollywood" (Hollender 2000, 8). Another prominent critic, Zbigniew Pietrasik from the weekly *Polityka*, proclaimed in his 1999 article the long-awaited "true victory" of Polish cinema (Pietrasik 52). This essay looks at the recent Polish adaptations of the national literary canon and their successful competition with Hollywood cinema, which is partly achieved by nostalgic ventures into the distant past and the reliance on stereotypical attributes of Polishness.

History

To understand the privileged status of adaptations in Polish cinema, one has to be aware of the local cinema's close bonds with national literature. At the beginning of the twentieth century, literature (which was then the respected guardian of national values) provided an abundance of patriotic and social themes not only for the state-

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less Polish nation, but also for the emerging national cinema. It also gave Polish cinema some respectability among audiences and helped to grant cinema the stature of art. Literary works by, among others, Stefan Żeromski, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, Adam Mickiewicz, and the two recipients of the Nobel Prize for literature—Henryk Sienkiewicz (1905) and Władysław Reymont (1924)—had been scripted by prominent contemporary writers and adapted for the screen.[1]

Filmmakers were eager to popularize the national literary canon, and looked for stage-tested scripts that, apart from signs of high art, contained melodramatic and sensational plots. Unlike *film d'art* in France, in Polish productions "costume was not an indication of theatre, a peculiar reference to 'genuine art,' but the sign of the presence of Polish culture" (Hendrykowska 206). Both locally produced films and foreign films that were based on Polish literary classic works, proved to be box-office successes in the Polish territories. The preference of Polish audiences for films narrating their history or referring to Polish culture had been often exploited by film distributors, who did not hesitate to alter titles or subtitles to find an audience (Hendrykowska 137, 164-66; Banaszkiewicz 91-92).

The most prestigious productions after 1918 included *The Promised Land* (*Ziemia obiecana*, 1927) co-directed by Aleksander Hertz and Zbigniew Gniazdowski, and *Pan Tadeusz* (1928) by Ryszard Ordyński. The latter, adapted from Mickiewicz's national book-length poem, became the focal point of the celebrations of the tenth anniversary of Polish independence. Although very popular among the audiences for their faithfulness to the esteemed literary sources, these films had rarely been praised by contemporary critics, who frequently faulted the trivialization of the original, the literariness of the film, the lack of originality, and, usually, the lack of professionalism.

The most popular Polish films made after 1945 were also based on respected literary sources. For example, the year 1960 marks the production of the first postwar historical epic (and the most popular Polish film), another adaptation of Henryk Sienkiewicz, *The Teutonic Knights (Krzyżacy)*, directed by Aleksander Ford. This widescreen film in Eastmancolor, the first of its kind in Poland, had fourteen million viewers in the first four years of its release, and was exported to forty-six countries (Janicki 81). According to figures from 2000, *The Teutonic Knights* remains the most popular film screened in Poland, with 33.3 million viewers, ahead of two other Sienkiewicz's adaptations—the children's film *In Desert and Wilderness* (*W pustyni i w puszczy,* 1973, Władysław Ślesicki), with 30.9 million viewers, and another historical epic, *The Deluge* (Potop, 1974, Jerzy Hoffman), with 27.6 million viewers. Among 20 most popular films shown in Poland from 1945 to 1990, there are thirteen Polish films, including eight adaptations, among them four adaptations of Sienkiewicz's novels (Kucharski 388).

Films based on Sienkiewicz's historical epics, originally written to "console the hearts" of stateless Poles, reinforced the images of the heroic Polish past and functioned as "the national remedy in all colors."[2] Vast panoramas, epic scopes, historical

adventure stories utilizing Polish history, and, above all, Sienkiewicz's name proved to be enough to attract millions to their adaptations. They were eagerly awaited by Polish audiences for whom Sienkiewicz and the characters populating his historical novels were (and are) household names. Some of the films, such as *Pan Michael* (*Pan Wołodyjowski,* 1969, Jerzy Hoffman) and *The Deluge* were generic adventure films, almost "cloak and dagger" works, with elements of romance, set in an environment that was a stereotype of Polish history.

Film adaptations of the national literary canon had the most successful ticket sales in Polish cinema also during the mid-1960s. In addition, they were very-well received by Polish critics. The majority of adaptations stirred heated national debates, typically dealing with historical and political issues surrounding the films, rather than the films themselves. Andrzej Wajda's *Ashes* (*Popioły*, 1965), an adaptation of Stefan Żeromski's novel, and Jerzy Kawalerowicz's epic production, *The Pharaoh* (*Faraon*, 1966), based on Bolesław Prus's novel, serve as good examples here. Several films from the 1960s were also received as historically distant parables on contemporary Poland. This way of reading films was an established tradition in Poland; it became even more prominent in the late 1970s and after the introduction of martial law in December 1981.

Also in the mid-1960s, some Polish filmmakers became known for their innovative treatment of literary classics. For example, *The Saragossa Manuscript* (*Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie,* 1965, Wojciech J. Has), adapted from the novel published in French in 1813 by a writer of the European Enlightenment, Count Jan Potocki, offers a complex, labyrinth-like narrative structure that is open to interpretation. The viewer follows Captain Alfons von Worden (Zbigniew Cybulski) and his improbable voyages across eighteenth-century Spain. His surreal journey is governed by the logic of dreams. The oneiric dimension of this travel, the motif of a journey into one's past, and the appearances of characters who emerge from the realm of dreams or memories also characterized some of Has' later films, including *Hospital under the Hourglass* (1973, *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą*), an adaptation of Bruno Schulz's prose which deals with the theme of childhood recollections in the spirit of Franz Kafka.

It has to be also mentioned that several established Polish directors, for example Andrzej Wajda, heavily relied on adaptations of the Polish national literary canon. At the beginning of the 1970s, Wajda produced a number of important adaptations revolving around the characters' psychology rather than the historical and political contexts. They include: *Landscape after Battle* (*Krajobraz po bitwie,* 1970), based on Tadeusz Borowski's short stories; *Birchwood* (*Brzezina,* 1970), an adaptation of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's short story; *The Wedding* (*Wesele,* 1973), an adaptation of the canonical Polish drama by Stanisław Wyspiański; *The Promised Land* (1975), based on Władysław Reymont's novel about the birth of Polish capitalism in Łódź; and *The Shadow Line* (*Smuga cienia,* 1976), a lesser known adaptation of Joseph Conrad.[3]

In the oppressive 1980s, adaptations of national literature also belonged to the most popular films. For example, the year 1986 brought several notable films: *Foreigner*

(*Cudzoziemka*) by Ryszard Ber, based on Maria Kuncewiczowa's novel; *Chronicle of Amorous Accidents (Kronika wypadków miłosnych)* by Andrzej Wajda, based on Tadeusz Konwicki's novel; *Bodensee (Jezioro Bodeńskie)* by Janusz Zaorski, based on Stanisław Dygat's novel; *Axiliad (Siekierezada),* Witold Leszczyński's film based on Edward Stachura's novel; and *The Girls from Nowolipki (Dziewczęta z Nowolipek)* and its continuation *Crabb Apple Tree (Rajska jabłoń)*, both adaptations of Pola Gojawiczyńska's novel by director Barbara Sass. The most popular film screened in 1987 in Poland, with almost six million viewers, was another adaptation, *On the Niemen River (Nad Niemnem),* directed by Zbigniew Kuźmiński and based on Eliza Orzeszkowa's acclaimed novel.

Modern Adaptations

Towards the end of the 1990s, several filmmakers and producers saw adaptations of classic Polish literature as the only way to fill the movie theaters. This belief was widespread after the enormous success of Hoffman's *With Fire and Sword* and Wajda's *Pan Tadeusz* in 1999. Poor financial results in the year 2000, in spite of a small group of remarkable films, were blamed on the lack of big-budget literary adaptations. This situation prompted some filmmakers to choose the much-traveled path and rely on well-known literary sources. Thus, the beginning of this century brought new adaptations of Henryk Sienkiewicz—*Quo Vadis* (2001) by Jerzy Kawalerowicz, clearly the most expensive Polish film ever made with its budget of 18 million dollars, and *In Desert and Wilderness* (2001) by Gavin Hood. Other adaptations, labeled in Poland as belonging to the "cinema of school canon," followed quickly: Stefan Żeromski's novel, *Early Spring* (*Przedwiośnie,* 2001), directed by Filip Bajon; Aleksander Fredro's classic play, *Revenge* (*Zemsta,* 2002), adapted by Wajda; and Józef Ignacy Kraszewski's popular pseudo-historical novel, *The Old Tale* (*Stara baśń,* 2003), adapted by Hoffman. Like earlier adaptations, these films also successfully competed with Hollywood products. For example, Wajda's *Revenge* had 1.84 million viewers and Hoffman's *The Old Tale* achieved 908 thousand viewers (Hollender 2002).

The popularity of local historical adaptations is reflected by the statistical data published in 2005 in the popular Polish online film journal *Stopklatka*. The list of the ten most popular films released in Poland after 1989 includes three Polish films topping the list: *With Fire and Sword*, *Pan Tadeusz* and *Quo Vadis*. On the list of nine Polish films which had more than one million viewers since 1989, there are seven adaptations, including six adaptations of canonical literary works. Perhaps these impressive figures prompted Dina Iordanova to comment: "If one looks at the wider European context, Poland's record in producing heritage cinema may yield only to France and Britain" (49). However, contrary to frequently voiced opinions about the dominant role of contemporary adaptations of the Polish literary canon after 1989, these films form merely 25 percent of the total local film production. Their enormous

popular appeal also does not match their critical acclaim. For example, among fourteen Grand Prix awarded at the annual Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia from 1989 to 2005, only three went to film adaptations (the main award was not given in 1989, 1991 and 1996).[4]

"Nostalgia business"

Although adaptations do not constitute the majority of films produced in Poland, do not receive important festival awards, and are virtually unknown outside Poland, they are however the most prominent part of the Polish film industry in terms of their popularity and prestige. How shall we then look at the recent successes of Polish adaptations? How to explain the nostalgia for Sienkiewicz (that "peddler of pleasant dreams"—as Witold Gombrowicz referred to him) in post-communist Poland? How can we explain the popularity of works written in a different epoch in order to promote "national self-assertion and pride, which compensated for the collective low esteem and feeling, stemming from continuous defeats on the battlefield" (Hauser 306)?

In a seminal article on recent Polish adaptations, symptomatically titled "In the Land of Noble Knights and Mute Princesses: Polish Heritage Cinema," Ewa Mazierska applies the term "heritage cinema" (although this is not the term used by Polish film critics and scholars) to a group of historical films based on masterpieces of Polish literature, and focuses her attention on *With Fire and Sword* and *Pan Tadeusz*. Mazierska examines these films almost as commentaries on problems permeating contemporary Poland, as a reflection of the dominant Polish ideology and of the state of Polish cinema. She also analyzes these films as part of a "nostalgia business" (167) that attempts to achieve the impossible—to create an imaginary "land of noble knights and mute princesses." Mazierska accurately stresses that "the production of a significant number of heritage films in Poland of the last decade can be largely explained by the anxieties and uncertainties Poland experienced after the collapse of communism and introduction of the market economy" (168). Furthermore, she notices that heritage films, which are partly subsidized and fiercely promoted by the state as "national events," support the dominant "conservative ideology," and help to affirm Polish national identity experiencing profound crisis. Mazierska concludes her highly critical analysis of Polish adaptations:

> Polish heritage films typically create an image of Poland in days gone by as a feudal and patriarchal country, where loyalty to one's motherland and the Catholic faith was regarded as of the highest value. This Poland is idealized by the films' authors and thus (albeit indirectly) they elevate the political forces that facilitate and strengthen nationalism, Catholicism, patriarchy, sexism and elitism. On the whole, Polish heritage cinema, in common with the majority of artefacts and institutions which are born out of nostalgia, promotes a conservative, reactionary ideology. (180)

It is difficult not to agree with Mazierska's perceptive comments. To a certain degree, the popularity of Polish heritage films reveals frequently voiced fears of exclusion from Europe, the difficulty of finding themselves in a new political situation, and skepticism concerning contemporary politics and politicians. Furthermore, if we look at Merchant/Ivory historical films and follow Andrew Higson's much-quoted description of British heritage cinema of the 1980s, the similarities between the two are striking.[5] Heritage films are, by and large, lavish "quality" productions relying on reputable literary works, which offer slow-paced pastoral images, revealing the same fascination with the romanticized past, and deal with the upper-class milieu.[6] Like their British counterparts, Polish adapters of the national literary canon favor safe literary works set in an equally safe history. Their films do not deconstruct the past or stir up vitriol. Instead, they offer romantic-nostalgic images of the past, and rely on the popularity of their literary sources for success.

Aspiring to make big budget "quality pictures," Polish filmmakers, however, produce films inferior to Hollywood products, despite their growing budgets, epic scopes, local stars and thousands of extras. These films' spectacular sets, colorful costumes, and household literary names in the credits provide only "signs of art." Audiences are reassured rather than challenged. Despite the cinema industry's large-scale publicity machine that stresses the contemporary relevance of a given literary work (see numerous interviews with Wajda concerning his adaptation of *Pan Tadeusz* and *The Revenge*), audiences are taken to places that bear little significance to the present, but that for many Poles represent the stereotypical, nostalgic images of "Polishness." According to the *Polityka* film critic, the mass audience watching *With Fire and Sword* proves that contemporary Poles are "modern but without a modern ideology" (Pietrasik 53).

In the past, Polish intellectuals frequently objected to Sienkiewicz's vision of history and tried to eradicate the national image he promoted. Although such reservations have been frequently voiced in recent years, they have been marginalized in the state of almost "national euphoria" that surrounds the release of Polish heritage films. Their box-office success also has to do with aggressive media campaigns, unprecedented by Polish standards. This aspect, the sociological and cultural phenomena of mass pilgrimages to see *Pan Tadeusz* and *With Fire and Sword,* has been analyzed by several scholars. These films' promotional campaigns constitute a marketing achievement in themselves, with the involvement of the Polish press, critics, and cultural organizations inside and outside of Poland, emphasizing that it would be almost an "unpatriotic" act not to see films such as *Pan Tadeusz* and *With Fire and Sword* (Kałużyński 18; Mazierska 181). Interestingly, the promotional campaign has not only been reserved, traditionally, to film journals and tabloid press. For example, *Gazeta Wyborcza*—one of the leading Polish daily papers, published more than 500 articles about *With Fire and Sword* (Hauser 309).

National Films?

As stated earlier, according to the makers of Polish heritage films, their films perform a very important nation-building task. For example, in 2002 Jerzy Hoffman commented: "In a year, twenty films are produced and five percent of them are historical films. And we are happy that this five per cent of these films are based on Polish history. In two or three years time we will join the European Union. There are huge opportunities for unification and communication. But what will differ us will be our culture, our history and our traditions" (Horton). Hoffman also revealed in an interview after the premiere of his *With Fire and Sword* that he intended to produce a "Polish-Ukrainian version of *Gone with the Wind*… a story of great passions, of human fates thrown into the tragic whirlpool of civil war" (Hauser 310). Unlike Sienkiewicz's novel, Hoffman's film however promotes reconciliation between Poland and Ukraine via, among other things, the elimination of several scenes which would be offensive to contemporary Ukrainians. Ewa Hauser argues persuasively that "this film's popularity reflects the desire on the part of the Polish audience to revise the eastern mission myth, and redefine the borders of Polishness" (Hauser 306).

Likewise, Andrzej Wajda comments on the vital role heritage cinema plays in contemporary Poland. He stresses that *Pan Tadeusz* reminds the nation about its serene past, about a well-ordered world that contrasts sharply with its inconsequential present-day reality (Lubelski 28). Elżbieta Ostrowska fittingly summarizes Wajda's attempts in *Pan Tadeusz* by saying that his "effort aims to save the landscapes of collective memory from oblivion and to create in the contemporary collective consciousness of Poles a little space for the shadows of ancestors not to be forgotten" (Ostrowska).

The *Central Europe Review* critic noticed that Hoffman's film "with its depiction of a territorially powerful Polish state, use of well-loved Polish novel as a source and its sheer epic scale and box-office prowess, might make it a candidate for a 'nationalist' film" (Horton). In several interviews, however, the director rejects strongly this notion and, interestingly, the word "national" *(narodowy)* is carefully avoided by liberally-minded film critics in recent Polish debates surrounding the release of Hoffman's film, because it has been appropriated by the Polish political right. Wajda, however, does not seem to be afraid of the term "national" when he explicitly states that "*Pan Tadeusz* this is us, with our national character, portrayed against the backdrop of our national landscape, and with our national language" (Lubelski 30). The director emphasizes that his film celebrates Polishness, and is the result of a nostalgic yearning for a lost home (Lubelski 28). The image of a stork that appears in the last shots of *Pan Tadeusz,* that clichéd emblem of tranquil rural Poland, serves as a visual exclamation mark (perhaps redundant?) for this very Polish film.

Conclusion

The commercial success of Polish adaptations of the national literary canon seems almost guaranteed. Regardless of their artistic merit, these films will serve many generations of Poles as handy, albeit sometimes naïve, illustrations of the national literature and the national past. Schools (schoolchildren on cinema trips in particular) and public libraries will make extensive use of them. Their artistic merit as films, however, is questionable. *Pan Tadeusz, With Fire and Sword* and several other adaptations fare poorly among those who lack familiarity with their literary sources and the elaborate knowledge that surrounds their literary and political contexts. Unlike the majority of English heritage films, popular on the international art-house circuit and shown in mainstream theaters, the films by Wajda and Hoffman are specifically Polish products, incomprehensible to outsiders. The growing production costs, bigger budgets, and the competition between Polish blockbusters, may prove difficult for some of the Polish film producers to recoup the costs of their films through domestic sales alone.

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Endnotes

1 The historical part of this paper incorporates fragments from my *Polish National Cinema* (New York: Berghahn, 2002). Recent Polish adaptations are also discussed in my Polish text, "Narodowe nostalgie. Uwagi o współczesnych polskich adaptacjach filmowych" [National Nostalgias: Contemporary Polish Film Adaptations], in *Najnowsze kino polskie,* edited by by Piotr Zwierzchowski and Daria Mazur (Bydgoszcz: University of Bydgoszcz Press, 2007): 79-87.

2 The expression comes from the title of Zygmunt Kałużyński's review, "Lekarstwo narodowe we wszystkich kolorach" [National remedy in all colors]. Quoted from Stanisław Ozimek, "Od wojny w dzień powszedni," in *Historia filmu polskiego 1957-1961*, edited by Jerzy Toeplitz (Warsaw: WAiF, 1984), 187.

3 Wajda's adaptations are discussed extensively in Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska's Polish book, *Polska klasyka literacka według Andrzeja Wajdy* (Katowice: Śląsk, 1998). Nurczyńska-Fidelska focuses on *Ashes, The Land of Promise, Birchwood, The Wedding,* and *Danton*.

4 For comparison: most critics agree that almost thirty percent of American films are adaptations. In the years 2003-2005, among fifteen films nominated for Academy Awards, as many as twelve were adaptations.

5 For example, the following works by Andrew Higson: "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film," in *Fires Were Started. British Cinema and Thatcherism,* edited by Lester Friedman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), *Waving the Flag. Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), and *English Heritage, English Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

6 Interestingly, as observed by Dina Iordanova, these films "were made in a supposedly class-conscious socio-cultural context." See Iordanova, 50.