

# POLISH CINEMA ART

The Search for Content



Piotr Uklański, *Summer Love* (2006), frame enlargement.



## ANDRZEJ JACHIMCZYK

At the 2006 Venice Film Festival, film critics gave a cold reception to *Summer Love*, a film by internationally known Polish-American artist Piotr Uklański. Later that year, the film was shown at the Gdynia Film Festival, the premier showcase for Polish narrative cinema, where it was similarly criticized for lack of formal and dramatic consistency, and described as a work of video art rather than a narrative film. It was shown again a year later at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and reviewed by New York Times' film critic, Manohla Dargis, who wrote "there's something ominous about this kitsch ballad."<sup>1</sup> Uklański's film passed through galleries and museums and was eventually released on DVD under a new title, *Dead Man's Bounty* (2008), but, nearly unnoticed by the filmgoing public and critics, it never gained a regular movie theater distribution.

However, a few art and film historians interested in avant-garde film saw *Summer Love* as opening a trend in Polish cinema, perhaps not entirely new but indicating something Polish artists had reached for all along – a medium combining plastic and performance arts, enriching the formal and conceptual narratives of each. *Summer Love* is now considered a pivotal film within the development of Polish filmmaking, defining an artistic movement called "Cinema Art."<sup>2</sup>

After World War II, Polish cinema went through a few decisive transformations. The first post-war attempts at filmmaking were burdened by the strict political rules of the communist regime under the controlling influence of the Soviet propaganda machine. Nevertheless they were popular. For example, the first Polish color film *Przygoda na Mariensztacie* (*An Adventure at Marienstadt*, 1954) by Leonard Buczkowski,

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Andrzej Munk, *Człowiek na Torze* (*Man on the Tracks*) (1956), frame enlargement.

Andrzej Wajda, *Popiół i Diament* (*Ashes and Diamonds*) (1958), frame enlargement.

Jerzy Skolimowski, *Walkower* (*Walkover*) (1965), screengrab.

Franciszka and Stefan Themerson, *The Eye and the Ear* (1944), frame enlargement.



a romantic comedy about a young woman who comes to Warsaw from her backward village to become a bricklayer and joins the effort to rebuild the ruined city, gained larger audiences than Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977).

The political thaw of October 1956 opened access to the cinemas of the West, especially Italian Neorealism, providing a fertile opportunity to transform the imposed social realism into a new cinematic current. The Polish Film School period of 1955-1961, beginning ten years after World War II, included filmmakers attempting to comprehend the horrific events of the war generating such masterpieces as Andrzej Wajda's *Kanał* (*Canal*, 1957), the first film about the last days and failure of the Warsaw Uprising, which received the Special Jury Award in the 1957 Cannes Film Festival. Other examples are the classic of the Polish Film School, Wajda's *Popiół i Diament* (*Ashes and*

*Diamonds*, 1958), and Andrzej Munk's *Człowiek na Torze* (*Man on the Tracks*, 1956), which influenced a generation of filmmakers. One of the most important films of that period was *Ostatni Dzień Lata* (*The Last Day of the Summer*, 1957) by Tadeusz Konwicki. This film, in form and narrative, was "so far ahead of its time that there was no response to it"<sup>3</sup> and unfortunately, its minimalistic style was not taken up again until almost sixty years later by Wilhelm and Anka Sasnal in *Z Daleka Widok jest Piękny* (*It Looks Pretty from a Distance*, 2011).

After the period of films dealing with war atrocities and their aftermaths, the influence of the French New Wave became apparent. Directors Jerzy Skolimowski with *Walkower* (*Walkover*, 1965) and *Rysopis* (*Identification Marks: None*, 1964) and Tadeusz Konwicki with *Salto* (1965) abandoned war reckonings for new stylistic narratives. The film critic Zygmunt Kałużyński describes



Piotr Uklański, *Summer Love* (2006), frame enlargement.

these films as expressing the flow of streams of consciousness, undecidability and attempts at the recreation of feelings.<sup>4</sup> The trend did not last, but firmly established a significant feature of Polish cinema – the continuous and relentless search for new forms and themes.

The next significant trend in Polish filmmaking was the Cinema of Moral Anxiety (1976–1981), expressing a new stance on socialist reality, beginning with *Personel* (*Personnel*, 1975), the first feature-length film by Krzysztof Kieślowski, and followed by *Człowiek z Marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, 1976) by Andrzej Wajda, *Aktorzy Prowincjonalni* (*Provincial Actors*, 1978) by Agnieszka Holland, *Iluminacja* (*The Illuminations*, 1973) by Krzysztof Zanussi and *Przypadek* (*Blind Chance*, 1987) by Krzysztof Kieślowski. These films were a reflection of the socio-political turmoil of the final years of socialist Poland. We did not know it then, but we felt that all the irrefutable models proposed by the systems of politics, faith, art, economics, and morality were crumbling, leaving us with impossible dilemmas. For the first time cinema mirrored the reality and consciousness of Polish society, a prelude to the dramatic changes instigated by the Solidarity movement.

In 1989, Poland's socialist system imploded under forces from within, giving birth to a democratic, free-market state. With this came a new mind-set, the craving for everything the West could offer. In that rapturous climate of acceptance of western commercialism, the drive for another artistic innovation in film form or content evaporated. The Polish film industry

turned to the ready-made models of Hollywood and started to produce gangster movies, romantic comedies, thrillers and other potential moneymakers. But without the American film industry's expertise in its own entertainment culture, along with a lack of appropriate funds, the results were pathetic.

In this climate, the film by Piotr Uklański introduced at the beginning of this article appeared as if from nowhere. It was the consequence of the new Polish freedom as well as the indirect result of the long history of artistic exploration and experimentation in Polish cinema. The avant-garde films of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson, the experiments combining film, theater and art installations of the early fifties, and the Łódź Film School's Film Workshop had engraved in the minds of Polish filmmakers the necessity of a continuous search for new forms to express the great questions of human existence. Even when it tried to be purely formal or entertaining, Polish art was always in some way entangled with the profound issues of history and the existence or meaning of life.

Piotr Uklański is a successful Polish-American artist. He studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, and in 1991 moved to New York to study photography at the Cooper Union and work in video, photography and performance arts. His first major work, *Unnamed* (*Dance Floor*, 1996), is a disco floor that combined the features of minimalism, popular culture and kitsch. His next work, which increased his fame and notoriety, *Unnamed* (*The Nazis*, 2000), is a gallery of 164 stills of actors who played Nazis in films. One of the portrayed actors destroyed some

of the photographs in protest, prompting the exhibition to close. The scandal surrounding the show (not initiated or intended by the artist) became a comment on how we participate in and understand history.

Ukłański's *Summer Love* was a reflection on the condition of the Polish cinema as an art form. It follows crudely the memes of the Western Genre, with all the characters played by famous Polish actors in an ironical, almost comical manner. It is a parody of a Western with its classical forms of narrative and infatuation with the star system, a warning to filmmakers that they are abandoning their exceptional search for new modes of artistic expression, and a condemnation of appropriating Hollywood models. So, with its critique of the Polish film industry, *Summer Love* cemented its fate as the critics' punching bag and, in consequence, received poor audience numbers.

In 2008 Ukłański was taken up by the prestigious Gagosian Gallery with the show "White-Red." Roberta Smith, premier art critic of The New York Times, summarized Ukłański's artistic career as a "wily combination of seriousness and black humor, sincerity and cynicism, as well as the often-nationalistic hollowness of festival art." *Summer Love* is so far the only feature film by Piotr Ukłański. We hope that it is not merely a step in his artistic career but a commitment to cinema, soon to be followed up.

Around the same time, Wilhelm Sasnal with his wife Anka Sasnal produced, wrote and directed their first feature film. Graduating in 1999 from the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow with a diploma in painting, Wilhelm was described by Roberta Smith as a "reserved yet soulful Polish painter" who works "from photographs with a combination of blunt and tender brushwork."<sup>5</sup> With his transformation of photographs into paintings, it seemed almost inevitable that the artist would try to go in an opposite direction – from stills to moving images. His first super eight films consisted of realistic images of the artist's immediate surroundings: photographs from newspapers, images on TV and in movie theaters, pictures of his family. Anka is responsible mainly for the scripting and editing phase of each project, while Wilhelm prefers the production stage.

Świniopas (*Swineherd*), their first feature project, is a black and white film inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's story of the same name. The film depicts a bleak, miserable and ugly social reality in a Polish village in an unspecified place and time. The film was shown exclusively in galleries, where it is still exhibited with other short films. *Świniopas* (*Swineherd*) was shot in Super 16mm and blown up to 35mm.

Considered by the filmmakers as their first feature film, *Z daleka widok jest piękny* (*It Looks Pretty From a Distance*, 2011), was also shot in Super16 and blown up. The film is a story of a young man who left his village, whereupon his neighbors kill his dog, plunder his house and eventually burn it to the ground. The simple-minded primitive greed and savagery of the villagers awakens the memory of events of violent and homicidal attitudes by the Poles towards the Jews during the German occupation of Poland. The film is inspired by the book of Jan Gross, a Polish-American historian, titled "Neighbors" about the episode during the World War II, when Polish residents of the village Jedwabne burnt alive all of their Jewish neighbors – about twelve hundred people – then took over their houses and property.<sup>6</sup> The stunning beauty of the film's images, juxtaposed with the ruthless, primitive force and foulness of the villagers' existences, exposes the savagery



TOP Wilhelm Sasnal, *Świniopas* (*Swineherd*), frame enlargement. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

BOTTOM Anka Sasnal, Wilhelm Sasnal, *Z daleka widok jest piękny* (*It Looks Pretty From a Distance* (2011), frame enlargement. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery



## OPPOSITE, FROM TOP

Anka Sasnal, Wilhelm Sasnal, *Huba (Parasite)* (2013), frame enlargement. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ.

Anka Sasnal, Wilhelm Sasnal, *Słońce, to słońce mnie oślepiło (The Sun, The Sun Blinded Me)* (2016), frame enlargement. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth, Foksal Gallery Foundation.

Anna Molska, *Mutantki (Mutants)* (2017), installation view. Sculptural representation of the film. Courtesy the artist.

of human nature. The film was awarded the Best New Polish Film at the 2011 New Horizons Film Festival, but received poorly by the movie-going public.

The next project Wilhelm and Anka Sasnal undertook was *Huba (Parasite)*, 2013), a meditation on a modern family comprised of the incompatible trio of a young woman, her infant child and a sick old man. In their continuous struggle, there is visible an almost tangible force of life's indifference. *Huba* opened in Berlinale 64, then it was shown at 14th T-Mobile New Horizons in Wrocław and won the Focus Canada Prize at the 43 Festival di Nouveau Cinema in Montreal.

The most recent feature of Anka and Wilhelm Sasnal is *Słońce, to słońce mnie oślepiło (The Sun, The Sun Blinded Me)*, 2016). It is a story inspired by Albert Camus' short novel "The Stranger," about an alienated man who meets a dark skin stranger on the beach and kills him. Though written in 1942, Camus' story is relevant today as Europe experiences waves of refugees and migrants landing on its beaches from Africa and the Middle East. The organized hostility declared by the Polish government and resonated by the majority of Polish society is almost incomprehensible given the experience of World War II and its aftermath, when millions of Poles were themselves displaced. As the film is stunningly shot in color tones reminiscent of Wilhelm Sasnal's paintings, its minimalistic images underscore the tragic banality of hate.

While Anka and Wilhelm Sasnal were working on their second feature, Agnieszka Odorowicz of the Polish Film Institute, Wojciech Marczewski of Wajda Film School and Łukasz Ronduda of Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw established a film initiative called Nagroda Filmowa (the Film Prize) of 500 000 PZŁ (around \$125,000). The Prize is awarded once a year to an artist who will make a feature film of "high esthetical and content value, and releasable in movie theaters."<sup>7</sup> The goal of this initiative is to promote innovative and experimental films by new filmmakers. Unlike the spontaneous trends in Polish cinema already discussed, the Nagroda Filmowa initiative was introduced institutionally and deliberately, to reinvigorate the already apparent overlapping collaboration between the arts and the cinema in Poland.

There are 15-20 projects submitted each year. The winner gets access to the teaching staff and equipment of Wajda School and assistance from Wajda Studio, a production company associated with the school. Each laureate is expected to prepare a pilot project that includes two scenes with professional actors,

for use as a pitch for additional funds and collaboration with coproduction companies.

In 2011, the first prize was awarded to Zbigniew Libera, for the project *Popołudnie w barze Ozon (An Afternoon at the Ozone Bar)*. Libera works in video, photography, video installation, and performance art. His most controversial work is *Lego Concentration Camp* (1994), a set of boxes and illustrations compiled from real Lego sets, suggesting a kit for the construction of a toy concentration camp. The work prompted removal of the artist's participation from the 1997 Venice Biennale and the Lego Corporation's suits against Libera. Libera's extensive video works have prepared him to move into feature film. But the artist sees a radical difference between making art and making movies – "making art is like riding a bike but making films is like driving a tank" – as he put it at the Miłosz Festival in Kraków this summer.

While in production, the working title was changed to *Walser* (2015). The film is the story of Andrzej Walser, a lost railway clerk who wanders into the territories of a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by a primitive tribe of young naked and beautiful people. Gorgeously photographed by Adam Sikora, with specially invented music and language, *Walser* (78 min) opened at the 2015 Gdynia Film Festival.

The next laureate of the Prize was the young artist Anna Molska, for the project *Mutantki (Mutants)*. Molska graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, where she studied sculpture in Studio of Audio-Visual Space of Grzegorz Kowalski. The artist was introduced to the world art stage in 2009 in *The Generational Triennial: Younger Than Jesus* at the New Museum in New York, with the video work titled *Tanagram*. *Mutantki* is scheduled for completion in 2017. She turned to film to be able to explore the profound and complex problems that are not so easily addressed through the conventional means of plastic arts, Molska told me when we met last spring in Warsaw.

The 2013 Prize was awarded to Agnieszka Polska, video artist and photographer, for the project about the last hours of the life of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Hura, wciąż żyjemy! (Hurrah, We are Still Alive!)*. Polska graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow in 2010. Her film is still in production.

The 2014 Prize went to Katarzyna Kozyra, one of the representatives of the critical art movement after the fall of communism in 1989. Kozyra graduated from the studio of Grzegorz Kowalski of the Sculpture Faculty at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and won the Prize for the project X. It is an





Łukasz Ronduda, *Performer (The Performer)* (2015), installation view. Courtesy the artist.

experimental feature concerning Kozyra's battle with cancer. The film is still in production as well.

The most recent award went in 2015 to Jaśmina Wójcik, video, installation and action artist. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw where she studied in the Studio of Audiovisual Space under Grzegorz Kowalski and received a doctorate from the same school in 2011. Wójcik's project, *Symfonia Fabryki Ursus (The Ursus Factory Symphony)* is the conclusion of a five year research program with the ex-workers of the Ursus, a closed tractor factory. The film is still in production.

In this environment of artists producing feature-length films another event unexpectedly emerged. Possibly inspired by the examples of film critics of the Cahiers du Cinéma, the curator Łukasz Ronduda ventured into the film territory with astonishing results. A curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Ronduda began his directorial debut by collaborating with Maciej Sobieszński, in directing and writing *Performer (The Performer)*, 2015, 63 min.). The film is a story about the life and works of one of the most important contemporary Polish artists, Oskar Dawicki, who plays himself in the leading role. It is a film installation of works by the artist: a story that combines life and works inseparably, culminating in the fictional death of the artist. The film opened at the 44th International Film Festival

Rotterdam and received the Think: Film Award at the 65th Berlin Film Festival.

Almost immediately after *Performer*, Ronduda turned to a new project, this time as the sole director of a love story between two artists Zuzanna Bartoszek and Wojtek Bąkowski, who create their perfect world as a work of art. Again, Ronduda attempts to combine art with film, which results in a new form of non-commercial, creative cinema, Cine Art, as he calls it. *Serce Miłości (A Heart of Love)* 79 min., Color, 35 mm was originally released at the 46th International Film Festival in Rotterdam and then, in a new version, Director's Cut at the 67th International Film Festival in Berlin.

Unlike Julian Schnabel or Steve McQueen, Polish artists do not produce commercial movies dealing with recognizable, universalized themes, utilizing standardized film forms so as to attract the biggest possible audience. The Polish artists' films by and large circulate around the arts. However, the focus is not a reflection on Art itself, which often occurs within the Art World. Rather the films remain within the standards of the commercial film industry, proposing a new artistic resolution in form and content, while, in line with the traditional aspirations of art, aiming for higher levels of perception of reality.



Łukasz Ronduda, *Serce Miłości* (*A Heart of Love*) (2017), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

Jaśmina Wójcik, *Symfonia Fabryki Ursus* (*The Ursus Factory Symphony*) (2015-present), frame enlargements. Photo credit Jakub Wróblewski. Courtesy the artist.



**JOEY HUERTAS** is an experimental film and video artist residing in NYC. Beginning as a self-taught musician, he was a member of the east coast punk rock music scene. Joey integrates social and protest matters into his creative works and is a firm believer in the DIY ethic of creativity. He has recently started a monthly underground open reading and screening series that he calls HIJACK!

**ANDRZEJ JACHIMCZYK** is a New York based writer and filmmaker interested in approaching philosophy through the nontraditional, representational perspective of film. He is the author of a book, *Reading Hegel after Nietzsche* (Atropos Press, 2013) and the writer-director of a short, *Artworkers* (2015). Andrzej teaches sociology at University of North Carolina Pembroke.

**LAURA U. MARKS** is a scholar and programmer who works on media art and philosophy. Her most recent book is *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (MIT, 2015). She is Grant Strate Professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

**JUSTIN REMES** is assistant professor of film studies at Iowa State University. He is the author of *Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis* (Columbia University Press, 2015), and he has written articles for *Cinema Journal*, *Screen*, the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, and *Film-Philosophy*. He is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *Absence in Cinema*, which investigates erasures of sound and imagery in experimental film.

**ALEXANDRA SYMONS SUTCLIFFE** is a curator and writer whose work focuses on dance, performance and techniques of faithful reproduction. Recent projects include “Falling, Realism, Aspiration” at ESSEX STREET and “That I am reading backwards and into for a purpose, to go on” at The Kitchen, both in New York. She is a recent Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellow on the Whitney Independent Study Program and participant in the Centre for Research Architecture.

**RICHARD TUOHY** is an Australian experimental film-maker and a visible figure in the artist-run film-lab movement. An advocate for the possibilities of hand made cinema, Tuohy has devoted much time and effort in sharing his knowledge through workshops and classes both in Australia and internationally.

**RACHEL VALINSKY** is a doctoral student in Art History at the CUNY The Graduate Center. Her writing has also appeared in *East of Borneo*, *BOMB*, *C Magazine*, and *The Third Rail*, and she is the editor of *Warm Equations* (Édition Patrick Frey, 2016).

**DARA WALDRON** teaches at the School of Art and Design, Limerick Institute of Technology, Rep. of Ireland. He is the author of *New Nonfiction Film: Art, Poetics and Documentary Theory* (Bloomsbury, 2018). Contact Waldron at [dara.waldron@lit.ie](mailto:dara.waldron@lit.ie).

**CHRISTIAN WHITWORTH** is a PhD candidate in art history at Stanford University. His current research considers parody and humor as methods of edification within film and video.

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