



The Birch Street Ulica Brzozowa
Directors: Wojciech Jerzy Has, Stanisław Różewicz
Poland 1947
9 mins
Digital (restoration)

The Moose Pętla
Director: Wojciech Jerzy Has
Production Company: Polish State Film
Screenplay (based on his short story):
Marek Hłasko
Director of Photography: Mieczysław Jahoda
Editor: Zofia Dwornik
Art Director: Roman Wolyniec
Costumes: Andrzej Cybulski
Make-up Artist: Zbigniew Dobracki
Music: Tadeusz Baird
Sound: Bohdan Bienkowski
Cast:
Gustaw Holoubek (*Kuba Kowalski*)
Tadeusz Fijewski (*Władek*)
Aleksandra Śląska (*Krystyna*)
Teresa Szmigielówna (*Kuba's old flame*)
Helena Makowska-Fijewska (*barmaid*)
Zygmunt Zintel (*Poldek*)
Roman Kłosowski (*Janek*)
Stanisław Miński (*Rybicki*)
Poland 1957
102 mins
Digital (restoration)

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The Long Strange Trips of Wojciech Jerzy Has

The Moose

The screening on Wednesday 2 April will include a pre-screening discussion between season curator Michael Brooke and Tomasz Kolankiewicz, Polish National Film Archive

Although less known internationally than it deserves to be, Wojciech Has's *The Moose* (1957) was arguably the strongest feature debut made in Poland between the rebirth of the country's national cinema at the end of WWII and Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (1961). Its big advantage was that, unlike the debuts of Has's peers (Jerzy Kawalerowicz, Andrzej Munk, Andrzej Wajda), *The Moose* was made late enough so as not to be hamstrung by the dictates of compulsory Socialist Realism, which governed all creative output in Poland from 1949 to 1956. Indeed, it's unlikely that such a project would have been sanctioned in the Socialist Realist era, since the film's dissolute protagonist Jakub 'Kuba' Kowalski (Gustaw Holoubek) could hardly be further removed from the notion of an idealised Socialist hero.

For starters, he's an alcoholic. In fact, Kuba Kowalski is one of the cinema's great alcoholics, fully up there with Ray Milland's Don Birnam in *The Lost Weekend* (1945) or Nicolas Cage's Ben Sanderson in *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995). And while he might have secured official approval if he'd seen the error of his ways and turned to the path of ideological righteousness... well, it's scarcely a major plot spoiler to reveal that this doesn't happen. Indeed, the screenplay, adapted by Marek Hłasko from his own short story, was initially rejected by the official assessment committee, only being passed (and still with some hesitation) on a second submission.

Kuba was allegedly based on Hłasko's friend Władysław Broniewski (1897-1962), a poet and revolutionary who also struggled with alcoholism, although the much younger Kuba can't match Broniewski's high-profile political activism. Although he is also an artist, the only detail that Has added to Hłasko's script, which he otherwise filmed virtually as written. Or at least in terms of its plot and dialogue; the heavily symbolic visual treatment, which Has characterised as somewhere between Expressionist and Surrealist, is the director's own.

Kuba lives on his own in a flat that could easily do double duty as a Samuel Beckett set or, two decades later, play host to the protagonist of David Lynch's *Eraserhead*. During a downpour – and it's almost permanently raining in this film – the rivulets trickling down the window are projected onto the roughly finished walls, creating the impression that they're melting. On those walls are mounted numerous empty frames, as if to suggest works that Kuba has sold in order to fund his drinking habit. (Jean Renoir would similarly retain the frames after selling his distinguished father's paintings, albeit with the higher aspiration of funding his early film career). Broken glass can sometimes be heard crunching underfoot, a legacy of an accident with a picture frame.

Inside the flat, a metal sculpture features a hand reaching out; impossible to say whether it's offering assistance or desperately clutching at the air. Outside, a large mural on the side of an opposite building features a woman who appears to be staring voyeuristically through the window at him; her neutral expression either pitying or mocking according to Kuba's mood at the time. And above all there's the phone, frequently framed as the dominant part of the image (including the entire opening credits sequence), and even when off camera its ring is just as disruptively insistent. Equally penetrating is the sound of a man collecting empty bottles, the uneven pavement causing them to clink relentlessly. It is not, to put it mildly, the optimal dwelling for an alcoholic, but one assumes that he couldn't afford anything better.

The Long Strange Trips of Wojciech Jerzy Has

The Saragossa Manuscript + intro

Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie

Tue 1 Apr 18:40

The Noose Pętla

Wed 2 Apr 20:00 (+ pre-screening discussion);

Wed 16 Apr 18:15

Farewells (aka Lydia Ate the Apple) Pożegnania

Fri 4 Apr 18:10; Fri 18 Apr 20:40

One Room Tenants Wspólny pokój

Mon 7 Apr 20:45; Fri 18 Apr 18:15

Goodbye to the Past Rozstanie

Fri 11 Apr 20:50 (+ intro); Mon 21 Apr 16:10

The Doll Lalka

Sat 12 Apr 19:50; Sat 19 Apr 12:00

Gold Dreams Złoto

Mon 14 Apr 20:50; Wed 23 Apr 18:00

The Hourglass Sanatorium

Sanatorium pod klepsydrą

Thu 17 Apr 18:00

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This retrospective is presented in partnership with the ICA, which will also be hosting exclusive screenings of Has' works.



The 23rd Kinoteka Polish Film Festival is part of the UK/Poland Season 2025.



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Kuba does at least have a girlfriend, Krystyna (Aleksandra Ślaska), a blonde ice maiden whose brisk efficiency he probably needs more than something more ostentatiously 'romantic', although he visibly bristles at some of her life-improving suggestions. Because he knows, and will affirm repeatedly as the film progresses, that for all his frequently voiced aspirations to get on the wagon, replace booze with Antabus tablets and dry out properly, this is unlikely to come to pass for as long as he still has access to a nearby bar. His deadline is 6pm, the time of his appointment at the clinic, and in the run-up Has regularly cuts to images of clocks, often disproportionately huge, to remind him and us of how long he has to cling to sobriety.

The fact that much of the film's mid-point takes place in the Under the Eagle bar (decorated with a large stuffed eagle dangling above the punters, its walls lined with pictures of bodybuilders implicitly rebuking their lifestyle) tells its own story, and we learn much of Kuba's back-story from the people he meets, whether it's an old flame (Teresa Szmigielówna), a fellow drunkard named Władek (Tadeusz Fijewski) or the no-nonsense barmaid (Helena Makowska-Fijewska), whose response to the dare 'If you say "eight", I will take my own life today' is to say 'Eight' and laugh mockingly. There's also live musical commentary, from a piano-and-violin duo whose love song includes the repeated line 'Take the scissors, cut the line, we'll say we're not at home', and Poldek the accordionist (Zygmunt Zintel). (The film's official score, by Tadeusz Baird, is doom-shrouded from the start, its low-register piano chords making repeated appearances to signal something about to turn for the worse.)

One of the most telling scenes comes after Kuba and a telephone engineer named Janek (Roman Kłosowski) come to blows in the street. Hauled up in front of the local police sergeant (a world-weary Stanisław Miński), they're let off with a caution not because they couldn't have faced more serious charges (indeed, Kuba seems to be provoking him into overreacting by repeatedly saying 'Pijak' – 'Drunkard' – when asked his name and profession), but because he honestly can't be bothered. And in any case he has one of his regulars to attend to, an elderly alcoholic who can predict precisely which cell he's going to end up in – and the sergeant can in turn predict when he's going to stop singing and start fitting.

Has and cinematographer Mieczysław Jahoda (who had already filmed a couple of his documentary shorts) repeatedly treat Kuba to close-ups that would be decidedly unflattering in a different kind of film, but which are all too revealing here; we're talking visible pores and oozing sweat, lit so as to emphasise every droplet. And Kuba knows perfectly well what he looks like at any given moment but simply doesn't care; once the drink takes hold, he's happy for it to lead wherever it's minded to take him, even at the risk of destroying relationships, reputations and possibly even his life.

This wasn't quite Gustaw Holoubek's film debut: he'd played the fearsome Feliks Dzierżyński, Polish-born founder of the Soviet secret police, in Wanda Jakubowska's *Soldier of Victory* (1953) and a supporting role in Wadim Berestowski's adventure film *The Mineshaft Mystery* (1956). But this was his first big screen leading role, following a decade of outstanding stage work that had already established him as one of the finest Polish actors of his generation. His Kuba Kowalski ranks alongside Zbigniew Cybulski's as yet unfilmed Maciek Chelmicki in Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) as one of the most charismatic characters in all 1950s Polish cinema; even when he's at his most self-humiliating, you can't take your eyes off him.

Michael Brooke, season curator