

Poland

Barbara Hollender

Thanks to the fully-functioning Cinematography Act, the economic crisis has yet to have a significant impact on the Polish film industry. The Polish Film Institute has its own budget, which is supported by television stations (43 per cent), operators of digital television (34 per cent) and cable television (14 per cent), as well as a percentage of the revenue accrued from cinema tickets (8 per cent) and distributors (one per cent). In total, the budget amounts to approximately €28million. This amount is then invested in film production. The Polish Film Institute receives over 500 applications for support of feature and documentary films annually, and about 80 per cent of Polish film productions are made with the assistance of the Institute. Of the remaining 20 per cent, the films are either very commercial or alternative/experimental. On average, around 50 to 60 feature films are made each year.



Antoni Krauze's **Black Thursday**

Experienced Polish directors often revisit some of the country's more problematic periods. Antoni Krauze made the modest, yet deeply moving, quasi-documentary **Black Thursday** (*Czarny czwartek*). The film focuses on the so-called December events, when almost fifty

people were killed and over 1,000 were injured during workers' rebellions in 1970. Krauze follows the talks held by the state authorities and party officials behind closed doors, where the decision was made to fire on workers. He shows the streets of Gdańsk and Gdynia, where people died on their way to work, were arrested and where the night-time funerals of victims took place.



Agnieszka Holland's **In Darkness**

Agnieszka Holland returned to World War II with **In Darkness** (*W ciemności*). In Lvov, during the Nazi occupation, a simple worker and small-time thief, Leopold Socha, gave shelter to a group of Jews in the sewers. They remained there for 14 months. Initially, he did it for money, but when the Jews ran out of funds he continued to protect them. Though dealing with the nightmare of the Holocaust, Holland has produced a moving and universal testament to the humanity of people, but never forgets our capacity for cruelty.

The major cinematic event in Poland during 2011 was the release of **Rose** (*Róża*) by Wojciech Smarzowski – one of the country's most important filmmakers. It unfolds shortly after World War II has ended, in the region



Wojciech Smarzowski's *Rose*

of Masuria. German inhabitants are being resettled, Russian marauders are brutally raping women, Polish repatriates from Russia are unable to find a place to live in this new place and are treated as usurpers by the local population. All the while, the Security Service is introducing the new communist order. But amongst the smoldering ruins there is love, between Róża and Tadeusz. A Masuria woman, she has been deprived of her identity and raped. Tadeusz is a former fighter from Warsaw's uprising. This love – tragic, distrustful and against all circumstances – allows the two to retain the last remnants of their dignity.



Jerzy Hoffman's 1920. *The Battle of Warsaw*

The first Polish 3D feature film **1920. The Battle of Warsaw** (1920. *Bitwa Warszawska*) was expected to be a great event. A national epic that detailed Jerzy Hoffman's Polish victory over Russian forces attempting to invade Warsaw, the film was decimated by critics. Aside of Sławomir Idziak's cinematography, it is difficult to praise anything: an inconsistent screenplay, bland and paper-like characters, an

unconvincing love affair and jingoistic pathos not corresponding to the modern look at history.

Alongside the more traditional period dramas, these filmmakers are also engaging in a series of films that attempt to grapple with the modern condition in Poland. In **Man, Chicks Are Just Different** (*Baby są jakieś inne*), Marek Koterski attempted yet another film about the state of Polish intellectual life. In it, two men travel in a car and discuss their thoughts on women. However, beneath these conversations is a brilliant portrayal of men, detailing their insecurities, complexes and fears.



Marek Koterski's *Man, Chicks Are Just Different*

Polish cinema also has more recent generation of directors – 30 to 40-year-olds. Their focus is on the transformative Poland, the way the country has changed in their own lifetime. In **The Mole** (*Kret*) Rafał Lewandowski looks at how evil committed in the past impacts subsequent generations. The father, in the past a leader of miners' strikes, is accused of having collaborated with the Secret Service. The son, a grown man, is affected directly. He is forced to deal with his own feelings for his father and face the disgrace suffered by his family.



Rafał Lewandowski's *The Mole*

Greg Zgliński's **Courage**

Younger filmmakers look more to the moral dilemmas of faced by people today. The main character of Greg Zgliński's **Courage** (*Wymyk*) has to cope with his guilt over failing to help his brother when he is beaten up by hooligans in front of him. The film's contemporaneity is reinforced by the use of YouTube in the film. Footage of the beating is uploaded, so that everyone can see the young man's 'cowardice'.

Bartosz Konopka's **Fear of Falling**

Bartosz Konopka, whose documentary *Rabbit à la Berlin* was nominated for an Oscar, made his feature debut with **Fear of Falling** (*Lęk wysokości*). It tells the story of a young television journalist whose personal life is in a mess. His father, whom he has not seen for years, suffers a mental breakdown and the son starts to feel pangs of responsibility for him.

Leszek Dawid's **Ki** looks at the world of a young, confused woman. The mother of a two-year-old boy, Ki is barely an adult herself. Crazy, irresponsible and full of dreams,

she is also very lonely. Dawid and actress Roma Gąsiorowska developed the role of Ki together, creating a character whose fear of responsibility is both a credible character and a metaphor for a generation.

Leszek Dawid's **Ki**

Lewandowski, Dawid and Konopka, who all started out in documentary, are part of a promising generation. Alongside them are a collection of gifted actors, including Robert Więckiewicz (*In Darkness, Courage*), Marcin Dorociński (*Rose, Fear of Falling*) and Agata Kulesza (*Rose, Suicide Room*). Together, they are the current crop of Poland's most sought-after talent.

Form and language is also being played with in a number of new releases. Lech Majewski's **The Mill and the Cross** (*Młyn i krzyż*) is an impressionist take on Breughel's painting *Stations of the Cross*, whilst Łukasz Barczyk's **Italians** offers a near-wordless variation on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In **Daas**, Adrian Panek's directorial debut, the costume drama is reconfigured as the director tells the story of the self-proclaimed Messiah from the 18th century, Jakub Franek, who became of the founder of the Seventh Day Adventists. And in **Suicide**

Adrian Panek's **Daas**

Room (*Sala samobójców*) Jan Komasa offers an unsettling portrait of the internet age, with characters occupying a space between the real and virtual worlds. A fascinating work, it blends strong performances with excellent animation.

Of the more commercial productions, the comedies **Letters to M.** (*Listy do M.*) by Mitja Okorn and **O, Charles** (*Och, Karol*) by Piotr Wereśniak dominated the domestic releases at the box office.



Mitja Okorn's *Letters to M.*

Next year is an important one for Polish cinema. A new system of grant allocation will come into force at the Polish Film Institute, which will be based on the decisions of six experts. There are also questions being asked about private funding – in the current economic climate, can many people invest in such a risky industry?

As for forthcoming productions, Andrzej Wajda, who is now 85-years-old, will have completed his film about Lech Wałęsa. The screenplay was written by writer and playwright Janusz Głowacki, with Robert Więckiewicz playing the lead. No less anticipated is the new film about the Warsaw uprising of 1944, directed by 30-year-old Jan Komasa.

BARBARA HOLLENDER is a Warsaw-based journalist and film critic for the daily *Rzeczpospolita*. She covers many major film festivals, and has written, among other works, a study of *Studio Tor* (2000).

The year's best films

Rose (Wojciech Smarzowski)

Courage (Greg Zgliński)

In Darkness (Agnieszka Holland)

The Mole (Rafael Lewandowski)

The Mill and the Cross (Lech Majewski)

Directory

All Tel/Fax numbers begin (+48)

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Lech Majewski's *The Mill and the Cross*