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An Interview with Agnieszka Holland: 
The Politics of Ambiguity

JOHN C. TIBBETTS

“I am used to being criticized because my films seem too ambiguous, too full of contradictions. Well, I don’t see things as black and white. Life is too complicated. If you ask me what the main subject of my movies is, I’d say that’s it.”—Agnieszka Holland

Writing as recently as 2003, Dina Iordanova in *Cinema of the Other Europe* notes that the study of European cinema “is still more or less synonymous with West European film-making,” which “barely covers East Central European traditions” (10). Yet, there is evidence that serious academic examinations of the cinemas of Soviet satellite states of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia during the period of state socialism (1945–1989) are underway. A major figure in these considerations, albeit a relatively neglected one in contemporary scholarship, is Agnieszka Holland.

Holland emerges during the late years of state socialism in Poland, 1981–1985, a time when stagnant political conditions aroused a growing social discontent over improved working conditions that were promised but never delivered. Trade union Solidarity-sanctioned strikes, government reprisals, stifling bureaucratic machinery, and dysfunctional familial structures were all reflected in her early work as screenwriter and director. “Film-making became an oppositional activity,” at this time, writes Iordanova, “as it exposed the crisis of the regime by showing the stagnating lives of small people” (108).

Holland was born in Stalinist Warsaw on November 28, 1948, to a divided family. “I’m half Polish, half Jewish,” the petite, dark-haired director says. “My father was a communist, a Jew; but he was more anarchist than communist. His family—my grandmother and

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grandfather—died in the Warsaw Ghetto. My mother was Polish, and she worked in the Polish underground for the Jews. So you see,” she pauses with characteristic irony, “for the real Jew, I’m not Jewish, but for the Polish anti-Semite, I am.” Indeed, this confusion of identity, of occupying an ambivalent space amidst conflicting ideologies and circumstances, has made her resistant to political and religious dogma. A sickly child, she spent much of her time drawing, writing, and directing short plays with her childhood friends.

She was only thirteen when her father died under mysterious circumstances. “I knew real fear then,” she recalls. “My father was killed probably by political police during an interrogation. They said it was a suicide, that he fell out of a window. A year before that a gypsy woman told me when I would be thirteen I would lose both my parents. And so when my father died, I waited and waited, filled with fears. But, you know, beyond everything, I never stopped being curious about things. It’s curiosity that keeps me away from despair. If you lose your curiosity, you are losing your talent as well. You have to keep that alive. I realized that learning in the school wasn’t the most important thing. Since the age of fifteen I decided I wanted to be a film director, which was unusual for a woman. I think I was very smart. I knew was smart and that I could do some things better than other people. I was fearless. It gave me the strength to go through. Even my time in prison I see as necessary to my maturation, even though it was painful. Of course, ever since the birth of my daughter, I have not been so fearless…” (Not for nothing was her name, “Agnieszka,” taken from the defiant heroine of the celebrated Polish novel, Nights and Days.)

Because Polish anti-Semitism barred her from the Łódźfilm school, the seventeen-year old Agnieszka was accepted into the Czech film school FAMU, whose faculty included Milos Forman and where she met her future husband, Laco Adamik (who to this day lives in Poland, directing movies). This was at the time of the famous “Prague Spring” of 1968, under the reform government of Alexander Dubcek, when the Czech cinema enjoyed an unprecedented freedom that suggested that de-Stalinization was underway. That promise was premature. After the subsequent invasion on August 20 by Warsaw Pact and Soviet tanks, and as a result of her own involvement in the student underground, Agnieszka served time in solitary confinement in a Czech prison. “It was the most exhilarating and then the most depressing moment of my life,” she recalls with typical ambivalence. Back in Warsaw in the early 1970s, at the height of the Polish “New Wave” (referred to sometimes as the “Cinema of Moral Concern”), she came of age as a screenwriter under the mentorship of Krzysztof Zanussi and Andrzej Wajda, for whom she served as First Assistant Director on his Man of Marble (1977). Films like this provided her examples of how to explore issues of political and moral dissent within the limitations imposed by the communist regime.

“It was called a Polish ‘New Wave’ because of the incredible work directors like Wajda, Munk, Kawalerowicz and later Skolimowski were doing,” Holland explains. “Creative energy had been frozen during the Stalinist times, and now it exploded after Stalin’s death and appearance of Khrushchev. Not only in the political way, but also in the creative way. It was very much like what had happened in Czechoslovakia starting in the middle ’60s, which is why I had gone to Prague Film School, because I felt something very powerful was going on in Czech cinema. So, back in Poland, I and Zanussi and Wajda and Kiezlowski all shared the feeling we could make a difference and do positive things with our films. I never had an authority problem as a woman, either. All the workers were very respectful and devoted. The only inconvenience was not enough money and old-fashioned equipment.

2Unless otherwise noted, all remarks by Holland are taken from the author’s interview, 21 November 2004, Kansas City, MO.
We were all of different ages, but we shared scripts and ideas as friends and artists. Many of us still do to this day.”

Encouraged by Wajda in her ambition to direct, she made Provincial Actors (1980), and Fever (1981), in Poland, two early directorial efforts that reveal what was and continues to be Holland’s darkly ironic view of the ambiguities and intersections of political critique, spiritual crisis, and individual failure. Provincial Actors, which won the International Critics Prize at Cannes in 1980 (co-winner with Resnais’ Mon Oncle d’Amérique), examines the misadventures of a theatre troupe preparing a classic Polish patriot play, Stanislaw Wyspianksi’s Liberation. The action centers on Chris (Stefan Burczyk), the troupe’s leading man, who is tired of the backwashes of the provinces. He has set his sites on Łódź, where he hopes to break into film and television (likewise frustrated in her career is his wife, Anna, a member of a puppet play company).

Chris and the troupe are trying to modernize the play, but the director insists on cutting the play’s key speeches dealing with Polish liberty against oppression (“Great causes, the Motherland, the human lot, freedom, art, are just as essential to us as bread and shoes”). “What’s Liberation about without the Polish cause?” Chris wonders. While the company wrestles with political and artistic censorship, the play, as a result, stalls in the face of personal and artistic accommodation. Ultimately, high-minded attitudes, heroic acts, and noble postures are impossible in this muddied world and in this watered-down production. “No ideals,” laments Chris at the end. “They all break down.”

“Provincial Actors is very important to me,” says Holland. “It was my first film, so you try to prove yourself. Making a film at that time was very adventurous—and I don’t just mean politically. In Poland we had only two sound cameras. One was only for the people working for the Communist Party and the other was for the rest of us. The second one was huge and made such a terrible sound that you had to put a lot of covers on it. We had no dolly, so we put it on a wheelchair or on top of a rug so we could pull it across the slippery floor. We had so little film it was impossible to shoot two takes of the same thing, or master shots. You needed to have your point of view well in mind before you started shooting and the editing already done in your head. And the actors and cinematographers had to be very skilled and professional. Everything was in such short supply and very precious. I remember at one point the camera assistant ruined an entire magazine of film. That night committed suicide.”

“Just before I did this movie I was directing the play in a provincial theatre, so a lot of it was taken from my experiences and observations. And I co-wrote it with a friend of mine who was a fantastic theatre director, so he gave me a lot of insight as well. I wanted it to be realistic, to be seen in communist Poland as a metaphor of the country itself and not just a provincial theatre. That can be dangerous, however, because you become too self-conscious about everything. It was typical to have experience both in stage and film. Wajda had done two or three plays that became very famous. We have in Poland the Theatre for Television, which is a little like your own television movies—classical and contemporary plays shot with three cameras.”

“It’s based on a play that is a kind of Polish institution by a very well known Polish writer, a real romantic, named Stanislaw Wyspianksi. He wrote it in the nineteenth century, before Poland achieved independence. He was also a painter, and you can see his work and his stained-glass windows in the Cracow churches. The play is very complicated. It was forbidden in the Stalinist times and not performed. Even later, the censors watched over any production very carefully. In my film you see the director making cuts during the production, but he persuades himself he’s doing it for artistic rather than politically opportunistic reasons. You have to wonder, does he even realize what his real motives are?”
Fever likewise details the failures of group and individual political commitment. Set in 1905 it deconstructs with fierce irony the comically inept efforts of a cell of Polish Socialist revolutionaries to overthrow the Tsarist regime in Cracow. It begins with the revolutionaries’ construction of a bomb that is intended to destroy the Russian overlords; and it concludes with the harmless detonation of that bomb in a lake by Russian officials. The deadpan tone that hovers over everything subverts any possibility of heroism and revolutionary idealism. The rebels abjure their cause and settle for the tasks of day-to-living. The bomb may have been impotent for the Cause, but it proved to be effective in dispersing the band of revolutionaries. The unsuccessful dissidents succumb to madness, confusion, and political accommodation (this sort of debunking attitude surfaces seven years later in To Kill a Priest’s [1988] story of the clumsy attempts by the Polish secret police to assassinate a Warsaw priest—based on the doomed Jerzy Popieluszko—in the early 1980s).

“You see characters here who are so naïve as to think you have only to be against something to get what you want, a play or a revolution. It’s not enough. I think if you look closely at most of my films you’ll see people like them. They’re dreamers, but they don’t have life experiences or the tools to back them up. They can only simplify things, and that’s dangerous. It’s like what is happening with President Bush. He seems to believe that the world is something simple. And people are paying with their lives for this.”

But isn’t it the duty of an artist, to clarify and simplify?

“Yes, it’s a temptation. But there’s a difference between clarification and illumination. I don’t think the task of the artist is to make things clear and understandable, necessarily. Rather, you hope to throw light on things, to help an understanding, but not to simplify it. The Greeks talk about ‘catharsis,’ which is nothing less than a kind of spiritual awakening. But you can’t break that down into simple answers.”

By contrast, A Lonely Woman (1981) and Angry Harvest (1985) tell the stories of individual women whose lives are blunted by, respectively, bureaucratic mediocrity and anti-Semitic bigotry. The remarkable A Lonely Woman is an unrelieved, grim portrait of social and personal misery as Irena Misiak (Maria Chwalibog), a single mother, labors at her job as postal clerk while living in a dilapidated shack and raising her young son. She takes on a lover, Jacek (Boguslaw Linda), a pathetic, crippled character who turns abusive as the relationship wears on. After she has abandoned her child, stolen money, and fled the city, she is smothered to death by Jacek, in an act of murder, which may also be seen as a violent sort of compassion.

But at the very end of the film, in a typically enigmatic image, she reappears as an angel flying over the schoolyard to deliver one last letter to her son. “We will be together soon,” reads the letter, “and live happily in our little house.” I ask Agnieszka about this curious scene, so unexpectedly naïve and moving after the starkly sad events depicted. “Do you believe that scene?” she demands, suddenly turning full upon me. “You see, it’s no longer a fantasy if you accept it, isn’t it?” She pauses a moment, considering. “People ask me how I was able to bring off such an angry picture of Polish life; but those were the high days of Solidarity and even the censors were on strike! But by the time I finished it in December 1981 things had changed and it was forbidden in Poland for the next eight years.”

Angry Harvest, which first brought Holland to international notice (and an Academy Award nomination), was the story of a young, upper-class Austrian Jewish woman (Elisabethy Trissenaur) who escapes a Nazi death camp train and seeks refuge in the home of a lonely Catholic farmer (Armin Mueller-Stahl). Uneasy shifts in religious fervor, racist bigotry, and erotic passion between these two disparate characters ultimately lead to her suicide. “It’s based on fact,” recounts Holland. “I met a man named Herman Field,
who had written a book about it. He had heard the story from a Polish underground officer, when they were imprisoned together in a Stalinist prison. The time I made Angry Harvest was very complicated. I emigrated from Poland in December 1981 when I went to Sweden to promote A Lonely Woman. I was outside of Poland when the political situation changed in a dramatic way.

With the martial law, General Jaruzelski shot down and arrested many of my friends, and I knew if I went back to the country I would be arrested as well. So I decided to stay outside. I was really desolate. I didn’t know what would happen to my little daughter and my husband. I knew what had happened to my Czech friends, like Ivan Passer, who could not see his child for fifteen years! You think at a time like that that you’ll be isolated forever [It would be nine months before she would see her daughter again]. I didn’t speak any language, except Polish, Czech and Russian. I knew I had something important to say to the world, but I didn’t know if the world wanted to know it.

So it took several years before I was able to make my first movie outside of Poland. And it was a German-Jewish producer named Artur Brauner who gave me the chance. But the budget was extremely small and we shot under very difficult conditions and in only eighteen days or so. We shot interiors in a Berlin studio that had been converted from a gas factory. After eight or ten hours of shooting, everybody collapsed. We didn’t really know what we had, until suddenly other countries began to notice it and there were all kinds of prizes and publicity. So it was a big success.”

Her films now banned in Poland, she was forced to remake herself abroad, and she turned to writing scripts for Poles also working in exile—including Wajda’s Danton (1982), A Love in Germany (1983), The Possessed (1988), and Korczak (1990)—and by developing her own projects with Western European production companies, most notably Angry Harvest (1985), To Kill a Priest (1988), Europa, Europa (1991), and Olivier, Olivier (1992).

Made in the years of Holland’s exile, these films continued to reflect her political and personal thematic preoccupations. To Kill a Priest is a meditation on a crisis in political and religious faith—not, ironically enough, suffered by the martyred Solidarity priest, Father Popielszko (Christopher Lambert), but by the Polish policeman, Stefan (Ed Harris), whose obsession to assassinate him is contradicted by his thinly disguised attraction to the Catholic faith and ritual. “I have dedicated my life to the strengthening of Socialist Poland,” Stefan declares to the judge who has sentenced him to prison for murder. “I’m responsible for the pain and the anguish of a mother who will never see her son again; but despite everything, I’m a normal man with normal reactions to evil.” We listen to the words of this monster who earlier had bludgeoned the priest to death, and, against our will, perhaps, believe his sincerity, misguided though it may be.3

Olivier, Olivier is one of Holland’s favorite films. “It’s a mysterious story, but it’s based on fact. But there are things in it that must remain unresolved, unanswered. For me, it’s personal, and I have to admit that making it took a lot out of me. Like the mother in the film, I know what it’s like to be forcibly separated from a child, my daughter, when I was in Paris during the martial law back in Poland. And I know that my daughter must have felt that I had vanished from the world. When I finally got her out of Poland, she didn’t speak to me for a while. She told me she had thought I had died.”

The film asks a question about identity—is the 15-year delinquent arrested for male prostitution really the boy Olivier who had disappeared mysteriously six years before in the fields of Provence? His mother believes it. His sister, Nadine (Marina Golovine), is

3For an account of the incident, see Kevin Ruane, To Kill a Priest (London: Gibson Square Books, 2005).
unconvinced, and she sleeps with him (Gregoire Colin). A neighbor, Marcel, claims he had raped the real Olivier years before and had buried the body (we get a fleeting glimpse at the alleged grave, one of those intense but inconclusive visions that Holland allows us that seem to reveal nothing, or everything).

Or is the 15-year old stranger really Olivier after all, but suffering from a trauma that has left him confused. We will never know for sure. Meanwhile, other secondary characters themselves hover between fits of fantasy and reality (notably, sister Nadine, who lapses into hallucinations, practices odd rituals in the attic, and seems to possess telekinetic powers). In the end, we are haunted by another of those Hollandesque glimpses, a view through a doorway of a little boy on a swing—(this is after the older Olivier has returned to the family).

“For the mother, Olivier will be the Olivier, even if it is shown he is not. The sister thinks he is not, so for her he is not. Marcel has his reality. And so on. I try to construct this movie like a room with four doors, each door representing the ‘reality’ as perceived by one of the characters. You can enter in through any one of the doors, according to how you see things yourself.”

Most famously, Europa, Europa, based on a true story, chronicles the serio-comic adventures of a Jewish boy, Solly Perel, who survives the war due to his chameleon-like adjustments to the shifting political allegiances of the war—as a loyal young communist while in Soviet-occupied Poland, newly incarnated as an equally loyal Hitler-Jugend at the time of the Nazis’ invasion, and a Jew again named Solly Perel when at war’s end he reunites with his lost brother. Moments of kindness and charity commingle with acts of brutality and sadism, constantly bewildering the hapless Solly.

“That was when I first realized that I was confused,” he comments wryly, after one particularly unexpected demonstration of compassion from a Nazi soldier. Bitter ironies and hallucinatory scenes fitfully illuminate the action like flashes of heat lightning: There is the lecture to the Hitler Youth about Semitic physiognomy (ape-like postures, fawning manners, a flattened back of the head, etc.), while it is Solly’s head that is selected for measurement by calipers as a demonstration of a proper Aryan specimen; the dawning realization that Solly’s beautiful German girl friend is a vicious anti-Semite; a dream sequence in which Stalin and Hitler dance to “Deutschland über alles” in waltz time; Solly in his new Nazi uniform transforming his Nazi strut into a travesty of the Charleston dance; etc. Most poignant of all is one of those moments that seems so special to Holland, a brief and tiny flicker of recognition that bespeaks a universe of meaning: Solly’s chance glimpse through a streetcar window of the woman who might be his mother hustled by Nazis soldiers to an uncertain fate. In all, Europa, Europa is a rare blend of entertainment and social commentary. In the words of Solomon Perel himself, “Agnieszka Holland viewed me as the Candide of the twentieth century” (xii).

“To make a movie about somebody who is still alive and who is there to see it is very difficult to me,” says Holland. “I tried not to invent things too much. Ninety percent of what you see is what Solly said happened. An example of something I added was the reunion scene. It wasn’t his brother that Solly met, but his cousin. His brother survived the war, but it was the cousin that he met. I just thought it was better to show brothers.”

“My producer on Angry Harvest brought the story of Solomon Perel to me. In some ways it was a sweet simple story of a family, but there were epic aspects to it—big crowds, war, locations in Germany and Russia that made me afraid it couldn’t be done. So I said no,

4Solomon Perel’s memoir was translated into English with the publication of Europa, Europa: A Memoir of World War II (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997).
I didn’t think I wanted it. But after the Oscar nomination for *Angry Harvest*, Artur Brauner came to Hollywood to see me. Believe it or not, it was his first trip to Hollywood, even though he had produced more than 200 films before. So there I was, in the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Santa Monica, having already seen Disneyland and having met important directors like Billy Wilder and Fred Zinnemann, and Mr. Brauner pulls out a contract to do *Europa, Europa*, which I signed on the spot!"

I was happy to be reunited with my close friend, Jacek Petrycki, the cinematographer I had worked with on *Provincial Actors* and *A Woman Alone*. I had not seen him for several years, because he remained in Poland with the Underground. He came to France in 1987 when I was shooting *To Kill a Priest* and was astonished at all the equipment we had. He started to cry. We worked on *Europa, Europa* in Poland during the last moments of communism. At first I wanted to call it *European Education*, but Romain Gary had already used the title in a novel.

Actually, I think *Europa, Europa* works because it hints at a duality in Europe, of the old Europe of rich culture and tradition and the newer Europe responsible for two of the most terrible totalitarian regimes in history. It also describes the identity confusion of the boy Solly. The real Solomon Perel emigrated to Palestine after it became Israel after the war. He married a woman with a Polish-Jewish heritage and never told her his story. His two brothers survived, so they knew it, but it remained a secret among themselves. He had two children and created a factory, which makes zippers (which I thought was funny, since in the story he is hiding all the time!).

“But sometime in the early 1950s he had a heart attack and thought he was dying. He decided to return to his hometown in Germany. It was the time of the celebration of the anniversary of the Kristallnacht, the first big pogrom against Jews in Germany. He told his story to one of the local journalists, and it became more widely known. He came back to Germany several times. I think it still had good memories for him, along with the bad ones. He even admitted to me that when he heard some of the old Wehrmacht songs that tears came to his eyes. That’s when he realized that *who we are* is so complicated and that identity has so many layers. I told him that if his penis had not been circumcised, he might have become a genuine Nazi Youth; it kept his Jewishness intact, if you know what I mean.

He agreed. The questions he started asking himself are not the kinds of questions that very many Germans of his generation have been asking themselves: Who are we, really; and how much of what we think we are is only the product of circumstances, or a role we’re playing, or merely what other people expect of us? Too many of them put on the mask and avoided these questions. They don’t like to face the complexity of it all. Solly is so honest about it. I am happy to tell you that he loved the film, totally loved it. And when a scene would come on that I had invented, he would say, ‘Oh, yeah! It was like that!’ What I had added became a part of his memories.

“The funny thing was, when I met him, I found it hard to believe that anybody could ever have thought he was *not* Jewish! He was short with a big nose! So I figured that after the war and he was able to be ‘Jewish,’ again his nose decided to grow, like Zelig (the fictitious chameleon-like character in Woody Allen’s 1983 film of the same name). The international success of the film made him famous. And his wife didn’t like all the attention he started to get from the women! Anyway, he has become a kind of Holocaust teacher and speaks to many groups.”

Beginning in 1993, Holland began working within the international studio system, with mixed results. Her films remain complex explorations of the personal, often with interesting political and erotic overtones. However, she says she was ready in *The Secret Garden* (1993) to attempt something lighter, more immediately accessible than her earlier work. Indeed, it
remains to date her happiest film. She brought psychological and class subtexts to Frances Hodgson Burnett’s popular tale of Mary Lennox (Kate Maberly), a spoiled, orphaned girl who comes to live with her uncle in a chilly old Yorkshire mansion and who awakens to a new life in the long-abandoned garden that blooms wildly outside.

“I grew up with that book,” she explains. “I was reading all the time and that was one of my favorite stories. And when I had the chance to make it into a movie, I knew that for a change I could tell a simple story and concentrate on the depth of Mary’s change from petty, spoiled child to a loving, life-inspiring creature. However, you can find places in it where I was forced to add some details to brighten things up—more shots of flowers and animals running around and that sort of thing. I hated that.” Yet, for all the sprinkles of flowers, cute bunnies, and twittering birds, there are images of undeniable power—Mary’s terrifying view of the earthquake’s damage from underneath her bed, the bleak, twisted house interiors counterpointed by the wildly blooming garden, the children’s ritual ceremony as they brandish torches and speak in tongues, hints of passion and jealousy in the children’s innocent hugs and kisses, and, most memorable, the girl’s inviting gesture to follow her as she loosens the ivied latch that permits her—and us—our first entry into the mysterious garden. Underneath the starchy aprons of Victorian childhood does indeed lurk the terrible heart of the pagan.

In *Total Eclipse* (1995), Holland dramatizes the bleak, obsessional homosexual alliance between French poets Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, a struggle by turns poetic, erotic, and sado-masochistic between their mundane public lives and their private fantasies. The definitions of both characters are blurred by their contradictions and their confusions. “I want to be a revolution,” Rimbaud says. “When I found out I was not content to be just one man, I decided to be all men.” Holland shrugs off the negative response that greeted the film. “People were expecting a romantic version of the lives of these two poets,” she says. “But I liked the Hampton play and screenplay because I felt they worked against these myths. You’re never able to capture the full complexity of human beings, and all you can do is express your own questions about them and do so in an ironic way that’s fresh and different. I’m always struggling with too many issues and too much information about a subject. But I have only a little suitcase to hold all this stuff!”

*Washington Square* (1997) was Holland’s contribution to the brief 1990s boom of Hollywood adaptations of Henry James. It presents another in her succession of complex female portraits, both more sinister and more ironic than competing adaptations of the novel. The story of Catherine Sloper (Jennifer Jason Leigh) has been attended by tragedy from the very beginning, when her mother died in childbirth (“How could it be that your mother has to die so you could inhabit a space in this world,” snarls her father), and by the time she is of age, she is a vulnerable plain, terminally shy and self-conscious target for the wickedly opportunistic and fortune-hunting Morris Townsend (Ben Chaplin). Like Mary Essex discovering her secret garden, Catherine blooms under Morris’ unexpected attentions.

But ambiguity is everywhere—how much of Catherine’s love for Morris is really a dangerous self-absorption (what do we make of the scene where she passionately kisses her own reflection in a mirror?); how much of her father’s refusal to consent to the marriage is really fear of losing his lap-dog of a daughter trained to serve him; how much of Townsend’s gold-digging is really a well-intentioned search for a wanting masculinity; and how much of Catherine’s aunt’s scheming to bring the lovers together is really driven by her own infatuation with Morris? At the film’s conclusion, the enigmatic expression on Catherine’s face as she refuses the pleas of the now scorned, but repentant Morris tells us, as usual, nothing, but everything. “I liked the ending the most,” she says. “But at first the studio
thought it was too subtle and wanted something different, more like the kind of revenge drama you saw in the earlier film version [William Wyler’s *The Heiress*, 1949]. I really hated that idea. But after some test screenings, I was able to keep my ending.”

*The Third Miracle* (1999), like her earlier *To Kill a Priest*, explores issues of skepticism and faith measured against human frailties. A priest, Frank Shore (Ed Harris) is dispatched by Rome to investigate allegations of miracles and the proposed sainthood of an American woman, Helen Oregan. Just as Helen was a plain, ordinary woman and thus hardly a glamour candidate for sainthood, so is her defender, Shore, a skeptical priest, an unlikely candidate to pursue her cause. What transpires turns out to be a character study of Shore’s failing faith in God, counterpointed by his growing faith in Helen Oregan.

“There are lots of priests and lots of issues of faith in my movies,” comments Holland. “People ask me what the ‘third miracle’ is in that movie. Who knows? You tell me. For some, it’s the bleeding Madonna, or the cured child, or the priest who pursues his mission regardless of his own doubts. Maybe there are many miracles. I had some interesting discussions while making the film with Catholic priests in Poland. I found that it’s very difficult for modern, educated priests to believe in miracles, even though the Christian church is based on them. They see them instead as metaphorical tools. People today are caught between their need for the purity of faith and their awareness of the second-handed, ironic, postmodernist transcriptions of faith all around us. We are struggling between these poles, between something that is rationalistic and something that is very strange and unknowable.

*Shot in the Heart* (2001) reunited Holland with her favorite cinematographer, Jacek Petrycki, and is one of several occasional pieces she has done for television. “My approach to television is that it’s not such a big difference from making movies. Sometimes you have more freedom because you don’t have to worry about ticket sales. Today you can find material on television more courageous and edgy than on the big screen.” It was shot mostly in Baltimore and executive-produced by Barry Levinson. It is a grim story of murder, family dysfunction, and eerie superstition. Based on a book by Mikal Gilmore, it details the last days on Death Row of his brother, Gary Gilmore, imprisoned and sentenced to death by firing squad for the murder of a gas station attendant and a hotel clerk. “When I read Mikal’s book, I thought it was very honest,” says Holland. “Here are lives that are all mixed up and complicated and mysterious. You can’t really undo this complex fabric. The best and the worst are mixed together, all the violence and some of the hint of redemption. With these two brothers there’s even a Biblical implication of Cain and Abel. I worked with Mikal a lot on the film. He wrote the first version of the script.”

The back-story of Gilmore’s family reveals through a series of flashbacks in two time periods, the boys’ upbringings near Provo, Utah and their mother’s childhood in 1929, a household haunted by an abusive father (Sam Shepard) and implications of an alleged ritual “Blood Atonement” proclaimed by the Mormon-raised mother (Amy Madigan), who fears a malevolent spirit threatens the family. Is this the reason Gary Gilmore (Elias Koteas) demands a firing squad, so his blood will be spilled (Holland intercuts the execution with images of a Mormon ritual knife slaying)? Gary himself demonstrates the kind of erratic, unpredictable and inexplicably brutal behavior we saw in the character of the Soviet secret policeman in *To Kill a Priest*. By now we know no easy explanations of Gilmore’s actions and his subsequent death wish will be forthcoming. Gary’s brother, Mikal (Giovanni Ribisi), is himself confronted with a dilemma, either to allow his brother to die according to his wishes, or stay the execution and in so doing condemn Gary to the horrors of a lifelong incarceration. As to the mysteries attending the spirits that apparently haunt the Gilmore home, they remain unsolved.
Julie Walking Home (2002), also shot by Jacek Petrycki, blends Holland’s preoccupations with miracles, priests and crises in faith with the melodramatic story of a woman facing her own problems in marriage and motherhood. When her son Nicholas is diagnosed with a cancerous tumor, Julie (Miranda Otto) leaves her errant husband and travels to Poland in search of a legendary faith healer named Alexy (Lothaire Bluteau). The gaunt and ascetic Alexy singles her and Nicholas out of a crowd of thousands come to see him. He lays ministering hands upon the child and almost immediately there are signs of healing. Meanwhile, a friendship develops between Alexy and Julie and the boy.

Returning to her Canadian home, Julie is amazed to find that Nicholas is now in remission, all signs of the tumor gone. Alexy, in the meantime, is haunted by the stirrings of love for Julie, and he follows her to Canada. Despite the protestations of her husband, Julie embarks on a passionate affair with Alexy. “I never had anything before you,” he confesses to her, tears streaming down his face. At the same, he admits, he’s unsure if she loves him only because he saved her son. A little later Julie learns the bad news that Nicholas’ tumor has returned. Alexy rushes to the hospital but his healing powers have vanished. At that same moment, Julie reveals that she is carrying his child. The story ends with Alexy’s disappearance and the pregnant Julie and Nicholas back home. Agnieszka’s only comment when I asked him about Alexy’s loss of his miraculous powers at the hands of Julie was the sly comment, “That’s what we do.”

Holland’s latest project, Copying Beethoven (2005), is a new departure for the director. “I’ve always wanted to make a film about a great composer,” she says (at the time of the interview she was preparing the shoot in the Spring of 2005). “And this is the first time I’ve had the chance to work with a lot of music. So far, I’ve been lucky with the composers who’ve worked on my movies, like Zbigniew Preisner. But here I have Beethoven himself!” The composition and performance of his Ninth Symphony will be the centerpiece of the story. The story is about a young woman named Anna Holtz, a fictional character, who wants to be a composer and who is hired to be Beethoven’s copyist. So the title is Copying Beethoven. Ed Harris will play the role of Beethoven. The script is by Stephen Rivele and Chris Wilkinson. Another project, Magnificat, concerning the life and music of Johann Sebastian Bach, is still waiting for financing. Back in the late ’70s I wanted to do a television mini-series on the life of Poland’s national composer, Frederic Chopin. I have seen five or six movies about his life and none of them have the subtlety and complexity a genius like him demands. People like him and like Beethoven are “Rashomon”-like characters, too complicated for just one interpretation.”

Screenwriters Stephen Rivele and Chris Wilkinson wrote the script on spec and, after viewing all of Agnieszka Holland’s films, including the ones with Ed Harris, sent the project to her. Composer Piotr Kaminsky came on board to manage the soundtrack arrangements and original music. Mr. Rivele describes the relationship between Beethoven and the fictional Anna, the copyist, in the film: “It is the fact that Anna instinctively understands what Beethoven intended in the first passage she copies from the Ninth Symphony that makes him think she has been sent to him by God to help with his last and most sublime work, the late string quartets. Norman Mailer once said that every artist starts out imitating someone whose work he or she admires, then finds his or her own voice. This is what happens with Anna. She not only finds the voice, she finds the courage to compose in her own right through her association with Beethoven” (Author’s correspondence with Stephen Rivele, 15 August 2005).

Magnificat is scripted by Ernest Kinoy and Johnny Ferguson. It is based on the novel Bach and the Heavenly Choir by Johannes Ruber. The attempts of a newly-installed Pope to canonize the Lutheran composer, Johann Sebastian Bach contend with the objections of conservative Cardinals who argue that the Church has never canonized a Protestant. The search for miracles in the canonization of a saint echoes a similar quest for spiritual truth in Holland’s The Third Miracle. (Information from the unpublished script Magnificat used here by permission of Noel Pearson of Ferndale Films.)
It’s not difficult to see why Holland is attracted to these stories of Bach and Beethoven. Perusal of their scripts reveals paradoxes and ambiguities aplenty—in the first, a new Pope’s ambition to canonize the Lutheran composer Johann Sebastian Bach; and in the second, a young woman’s struggles in “copying” Beethoven’s manuscripts in order to find her own creative “voice.”

“People think all my recent movies should be as political as some of my earlier films,” she says. “But I was never interested in politics, only what is going on between and within people, not so much what is happening outside of them. In that sense, I guess you could say that all my movies are political, or they are not. Reality is not found in the workings of ideologies and public institutions but in the people living and working within them. In a society where there are these sharp divisions between personal and public life, people start to think they don’t count anymore. Their curiosity is shrinking. And that’s dangerous. We become less and less interested in other points of view. The rest of the world seems to disappear for us.”

Holland has been vocal on several occasions regarding her concerns about today’s generation of filmmakers. She complains of the “numbness” and “conventionalization” of American commercial cinema, its “lack of personal, unique and original forms of expression... the dominion of dialogue over image, [and] sloppiness in poetics.” Even in Europe, she has been quoted as charging, the film product has become nothing more than a second-rate American copy. She recalls a time in 1981 when she and Kiezlowski taught at the ŁódźFilm School. It was not a happy experience. Their attempts to teach the basics of dramaturgy and editing and camera technique were rejected by the students. “They didn’t want a professional school,” she says. “They wanted to make experimental films and study meditation and such things.”

She had a similar experience in the late 1980s in Germany. “It’s one of the problems in cinema today that most of the directors are from a wealthy middle class, and they don’t the complex life experiences that they need. Only a genius like a Marcel Proust or a Franz Kafka can live a relatively uneventful life, but most filmmakers are not like that and need life experiences. Look at the generation of filmmakers that lived through the Second World War and you find Wajda, Bergman, Antonioni, Bergman, Bresson, Kurosawa, Fellini, Tarkovsky who felt that the world is a place where you have to fight to find your truth. By contrast, I remember when I was teaching in Germany in the late 1980s, even then there were nice people who were technically adept, but they didn’t have their own story.

You would think to grow up in a complicated place like Germany that would be plenty of experiences to draw on; but they were not using it in their work. So, I gave them simple exercises about experiencing separation, fear, or hunger, but they couldn’t understand. I asked them, have you ever felt these things? And they would say, ‘Yes, I am afraid of going to the dentist’; or say, ‘I was once locked in an elevator.’ How can this cope with the complexities of our world? Instead, we hide away, like the child looking for safety beneath his bed. We refuse to ask difficult questions and to challenge ourselves with complicated characters and situations. We are doing nothing more than playing a waltz on a modern-day Titanic.”

Finally, it seems to me that the characters in Holland’s films are like spies operating behind enemy lines. Silently, surreptitiously, they keep their worlds under watchful

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7 For a complete text of a speech on this topic delivered at the 2004 Netherlands Film Festival, see “Agnieszka Holland: The Future of Cinema,” Variety 26 September 2004.
8 For Kiezlowski’s account of this episode, see Danusia Stock, ed., Kiezlowski on Kiezlowski (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 37–38.
surveillance. For example, *Angry Harvest* opens with a framed square of light, Rosa’s fleeting view of the passing countryside from the train carrying her and her family to a concentration camp. *To Kill a Priest* begins when a child scratches through the frost on a car window to witness a Solidarity demonstration. In *Europa, Europa* Solly Perel catches a fleeting glimpse through a rainstreaked streetcar window of his mother being hustled off to a Nazi concentration camp. Paul Verlaine’s chance glimpse through a train window of his lover, Arthur Rimbaud, results in the desertion of his wife and a life ahead full of violence and recriminations. The father of Gary Gilmore stumbles up a staircase to confront a ghastly, but unseen, apparition that tumbles him backward and creates shockwaves throughout the rest of *Shot in the Heart*.

Catherine Sloper in *Washington Square* catches a momentary view of herself in a mirror—and kisses it passionately. In *Julie Walking Home*, the faith healer Alexy, in a glimpse of but a few seconds, singles out of a teeming crowd of thousands Julie and her ailing child. And *The Secret Garden* is fraught with these narrow views: Crouching under her bed, Mary Lennox has only a cramped, limited perspective on the terrible earthquake that is killing her parents. Her wanderings about the chilly old mansion afford her furtive glimpses of the mysterious child, Colin. Later, she trips the hidden latch in the garden wall that discloses narrow patch of light that will soon bloom into a garden of wonders. “It’s not just a garden,” says Mary’s uncle, “but a universe.”

I ask Agnieszka Holland about these moments. Intended or not, these tiny revelations of terror, promise, wonder, and insight remain in the mind long after the larger dimensions of the films fade from memory. “I don’t know that I always plan for these things,” she confesses with a rueful smile. “But they are there, aren’t they?” She pauses thoughtfully. “But when I think back, I grew up a child always in bed, always sick. The world outside came to me in bits and pieces, I guess you would say. And that’s the way it is for all of us, isn’t it? Just tiny moments. And maybe it was particularly like that for my generation, growing up in a country like Poland, at a time when so much was hidden from us.”

**Works Cited**
