

Książki o filmie

„Kwartalnik Filmowy” no. 130 (2025)

ISSN: 0452-9502 (Print) ISSN: 2719-2725 (Online)

<https://doi.org/10.36744/kf.4336>

© Author; Creative Commons BY 4.0 License

Marek Haltof

Northern Michigan University

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9978-2404>

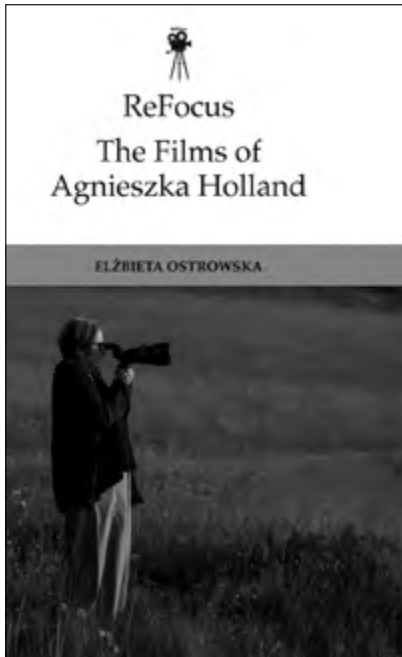
The Endurance of Authorship Theory

Keywords:

Agnieszka Holland;
authorship;
European art cinema;
transnational cinema

Abstract

The article is a review of Elżbieta Ostrowska's 2024 book *ReFocus: The Films of Agnieszka Holland*. It highlights the pioneering nature of this English-language publication and the methodological challenges of describing the rich and diverse output of a director who has been equally successful in European arthouse cinema, Hollywood, and global streaming platforms. The book explores the multifaceted, chameleon-like nature of Holland's authorship, paying particular attention to the context of transnational women's cinema, Holland's artistic biography, and her political activism.



The prestigious Edinburgh University Press has finally published the long-awaited first English-language book about Agnieszka Holland, the prolific and influential master director whose films made in Poland and abroad have won her numerous festival awards. The book's author, Elżbieta Ostrowska, holds unique qualifications to discuss Holland's international career and the question of authorship: she is a native of Poland, received her education there, taught at universities in the United States and Canada, and now continues her career in Poland at her alma mater, the University of Lodz. Her previous essays on Holland's films, published in prestigious journals like *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* and *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, set the stage for an engaging and well-researched monograph.¹ Importantly, Ostrowska co-edited two anthologies on the issue of authorship in ci-

nema with John Orr, focusing on Andrzej Wajda and Roman Polański. These works have proved popular in the English-speaking world; I was one of those who used them as textbooks in my classes at Northern Michigan University.²

Ostrowska's *ReFocus: The Films of Agnieszka Holland* begins with the strong statement that Holland is *the most internationally recognized Polish filmmaker* (p. X) – a claim that one may find debatable. While we might all agree that Holland arguably ranks as the most versatile Polish filmmaker – working in multiple languages and across different film industries – the number of English-language books on her work unfortunately does not evidence her 'most internationally recognized' status, supported by prestigious festival awards, Oscar nominations, and other accolades. Other Polish filmmakers have enjoyed greater international visibility in academic discourse. These include, for example, Krzysztof Kieślowski, with at least sixteen books in English devoted to various aspects of his career, or Andrzej Wajda, with six publications, not counting translations of his screenplays and books into English. And, of course, there is Roman Polański, with at least twenty books covering his career, biography, and award-winning films. Why is this important? I would argue that the number of English-language books could serve as an indicator of the number of academic courses offered in English on a given subject – in this case, the cinema of Polański and Kieślowski in particular. I am no exception, regularly offering courses on both directors.

On the same page of the preface, Ostrowska rightly emphasises that despite Holland's *artistic achievements and popularity with world-wide audiences, her work and her persona remain under-researched* and that her *volume compensates for that neglect* (p. X). Ostrowska expertly addresses this gap in the first English-language monograph on Holland. However, it must be said that Polish scholars have paid

attention to Holland's cinema and produced some important books. Of course, one must start with a pioneering work by Mariola Jankun-Dopartowa, *Gorzkie kino Agnieszki Holland* [*The Bitter Cinema of Agnieszka Holland*], published in 2000 by słowo/obraz terytoria. The next year, Sławomir Bobowski published another monograph, *W poszukiwaniu siebie. Twórczość filmowa Agnieszki Holland* [*In Search of Oneself: The Cinema of Agnieszka Holland*]. The following years brought further studies, including Maria Kornatowska's fascinating book-length 2002 interview with Holland, *Agnieszka Holland: Magia i pieniądze* [*Agnieszka Holland: Magic and Money*], and works by Katarzyna Mąka-Malatyńska, such as the 2009 monograph, simply titled *Agnieszka Holland*, and an English-language study of Holland's arguably most internationally known film, *Europa, Europa* (1991), published in Poznań in 2007. Holland's films, biographical legend, influence on younger filmmakers, and, obviously, her political activism are of great interest to contemporary Polish researchers, as demonstrated by Karolina Pasternak's recently published book, *Holland. Biografia od nowa* [Holland: Biography Once Again].³

Elżbieta Ostrowska's work consists of an introduction and seven chapters that discuss Holland's career in chronological order. The Introduction, subtitled "Authorship, women's cinema and transnational screen cultures," sets the tone for the entire book by addressing these important and hotly debated issues. Ostrowska recognizes that Holland's oeuvre does not fit into traditional approaches to authorship, but rather encourages studies of specific films, such as *Europa, Europa*. This makes it extremely difficult to trace Holland's trademark signatures, authorial obsessions, and continuity of style – something expected in well-established approaches to authorship, which I also practice. Instead, Ostrowska explores the multifaceted nature of Holland's authorship, emphasising the context of transnational women's cinema. In the opening pages of her Introduction, Ostrowska lists Holland's works, ranging from European art cinema, through European and Hollywood productions, to global streaming platforms, not to mention her political activism, translations, and appearances in films by other directors. After critically evaluating various new theoretical approaches that fall under the umbrella of authorship, Ostrowska rightly notes that Holland has established a *chameleon-like authorship* (p. 1), skilfully adapting to different modes of production in communist Poland and later in Western Europe and North America.

The first chapter, "Early years: pains and joys," discusses complex biographical issues and the beginning of Holland's career in the former Czechoslovakia. For Ostrowska, Holland's education at Prague's FAMU (Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts) and her student diploma film, *Sin of God* (*Hřích boha*, 1969), foreshadow some of her future work. Ostrowska examines Holland's biography – an artistic biography coupled with a biographical legend – and convincingly argues that *the generic and aesthetic versatility of her work – that has sometimes been viewed as inconsistency and has been used to prevent her from being admitted to the traditional elitist „auteurist” club – can better be viewed as resulting from her life journey which has followed anything but a linear and progressive line* (p. 26).

In the second chapter, "Art, politics and gender: Holland's participation in socialist Poland's screen cultures," Ostrowska looks at Holland's films made in Poland from 1972 to 1981. Holland began her career as an assistant to Krzysztof Za-

nussi on his *Illumination* (*Iluminacja*, 1973). Between 1972 and 1981, she was a member of Andrzej Wajda's Zespół Filmowy "X" (Film Unit "X") and the leading representative of the cinema of moral concern, also known as the cinema of distrust. During this period, she directed several important films, often read as metaphors for Polish politics, such as *Provincial Actors* (*Aktorzy prowincjonalni*, 1979), *Fever* (*Gorączka*, 1981), and, above all, one of the darkest and most brutally honest films ever made in Poland: *A Woman Alone* (*Kobieta samotna*, 1981, released in 1988), starring Maria Chwalibóg. In this chapter, Ostrowska analyses Holland's growing significance in the Polish film industry. While other Polish biographers of Holland's cinema may have focused too narrowly on the political dimensions, Ostrowska moves in a different, feminist direction, frequently with the help of what I would call "heavy terminology." Looking at Holland's female characters, particularly in *A Woman Alone*, she states: *As mentioned, most of the women in Holland's films were provided with significant subjectivity, yet they eventually retreated from the emancipatory path and submitted to the core values of the national (patriarchal) culture* (p. 73).

The third chapter, "European exilic cinema," centres around Holland's films made outside Poland between 1981 and 1992. Ostrowska is interested in Holland's *transition from socialist to Western modes of film production [which] resulted in a thematic and stylistic versatility in her exilic work compared to her Polish oeuvre from the 1970s, which treated contemporary subject matters in realistic form* (p. 17). After martial law declaration in December 1981, Holland lived in France. She then directed several internationally acclaimed films in Germany and France, including the Holocaust war drama *Angry Harvest* (*Bittere Ernte*, 1985), which earned her an Oscar nomination in the Best Foreign Language Film category. Her next Holocaust film, *Europa, Europa*, tells the story of a young Jewish man who survives the war by hiding his identity. The film proved even more successful, winning several awards, including a Golden Globe in 1992.

The fourth chapter, "Transatlantic journey/adventure, or the re-phase," concerns the films Holland made in North America. Ostrowska examines Holland's Hollywood films, including two adaptations of classic literary works: *The Secret Garden* (1993) and *Washington Square* (1997). Her list also includes two atypical biopics, *Total Eclipse* (1995) and *Copying Beethoven* (2006), as well as two films discussed under the heading "Post-secular journeys to (Eastern) Europe": *The Third Miracle* (1999) and *Julie Walking Home* (2002). As Ostrowska observes, the general tone of reviews published in America suggested that a successful European filmmaker-for-hire had lived up to expectations and delivered some accomplished works, but in Poland, her films were mostly seen as the work of an *auteur* who had smoothly adapted to different production models and audience expectations without sacrificing her authorial signature.

The fifth chapter, "From cinematic *metteur en scène* to television *auteur*?" covers Holland's television films – an important part of her oeuvre that naturally presents challenges for authorship analysis. Ostrowska looks at television films like *Shot in the Heart* (2001) and *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story* (2006), as well as several popular and innovative television series in which Holland participated, for instance, *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *Treme* (HBO, 2010-2013), and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018).

The sixth chapter, “‘Back home’ or ‘There’s no such place as home’: post-communist political cinema revisited,” discusses a group of Holland’s recent films, including some of her most accomplished works, such as *In Darkness* (*W ciemności*, 2011), *Mr. Jones* (2019), and *Charlatan* (*Šarlatán*, 2020), all of which are European co-productions that focus on the history of East-Central Europe.

The final chapter of this fascinating book, “Performing authorship: from celebrity director to celebrity activist,” traces the evolution of Agnieszka Holland’s public persona: from politically engaged filmmaker, *through celebrity director embedded within the system of neoliberal democracy, to activist celebrity director advocating for human rights* (p. 19). In this context, Ostrowska also critically evaluates the development of *auteur* methodology and offers her own complex reading of the concept and theory of authorship in cinema.

ReFocus: The Films of Agnieszka Holland constitutes a comprehensive work that methodically interweaves discussions relevant to the Polish cinematic, cultural, and socio-political milieux with innovative perspectives on authorship. Ostrowska’s monograph presents a compelling case study. It demonstrates that, despite its many shortcomings and years of marginalisation, this interpretive strategy – which in practice often determines how films are received and analysed – can effectively reveal new meanings. The book draws on details from Holland’s life, blending them with Ostrowska’s insightful close readings of the director’s major films. The inclusion of references to Polish debates on feminism and gender issues, along with the reception of Holland’s films in her native country, should pique the interest of English-speaking readers. Meticulously researched and lucidly written, the monograph offers a fresh perspective on Holland’s cinema and underscores the endurance of authorship in the film industry and academia.

Elżbieta Ostrowska, *ReFocus: The Films of Agnieszka Holland*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2024.

¹ E. Ostrowska, “‘I will wash it out’: Holocaust Reconciliation in Agnieszka Holland’s 2011 Film *In Darkness*”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 2015, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 57-75; “Secret Agents, Informers, and Traitors: Agnieszka Holland’s *Fever* (*Gorączka*, 1980)”, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 2022, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 152-167.

² *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda: The Art of Irony and Defiance*, eds. J. Orr, E. Ostrowska, Wallflower Press – Columbia University Press, London 2003; *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World*, eds. J. Orr, E. Ostrowska, Wallflower Press – Columbia University Press, London 2006.

³ M. Jankun-Dopartowa, *Gorzkie kino Agnieszki Holland, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2000; S. Bobowski, *W poszukiwaniu siebie. Twórczość filmowa Agnieszki Holland*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2001; M. Kornatowska, *Agnieszka Holland: Magia i pieniądze*, Znak, Kraków 2002; K. Mąka-Malatyńska, *Agnieszka Holland*, Wydawnictwo Więź, Warszawa 2009; *Europa, Europa*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 2007; K. Pasternak, *Holland. Biografia od nowa*, Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, Kraków 2022.

Marek Haltof

Professor at Northern Michigan University. His books include *Polish Cinema: A History* (2019), *Screening Auschwitz: Wanda Jakubowska's "The Last Stage" and the Politics of Commemoration* (2018), *Historical Dictionary of Polish Cinema* (2015, first edition in 2007), *Polish Film and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory* (2012), *The Cinema of Krzysztof Kiesłowski: Variations on Destiny and Chance* (2004), and *Polish National Cinema* (2002). His books in Polish include *Kino Australii: o ekranowej konstrukcji Australii* [Australian Cinema: On the Screen Construction of Australia] (2005) and *Autor i kino artystyczne. Przypadek Paula Coxa* [Authorship and Art Cinema: The Case of Paul Cox] (2001). His work in English has been translated into several languages, including Chinese, Japanese, and Polish.

Bibliography

Ostrowska, E. (2024). *ReFocus: The Films of Agnieszka Holland*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Słowa kluczowe:

Agnieszka Holland;
autorstwo;
artystyczne kino
europejskie;
kino transnarodowe

Abstrakt

Marek Haltof

Trwałość teorii autorskiej

Artykuł jest recenzją książki Elżbiety Ostrowskiej z 2024 r. *ReFocus: The Films of Agnieszka Holland*. Autor podkreśla pionierski charakter pracy i wyzwania metodologiczne związane z opisaniem bogatego i różnorodnego dorobku reżyserki, która odnosi sukcesy zarówno w europejskim kinie artystycznym, Hollywood, jak i w obrębie dystrybucji na globalnych platformach streamingowych. Ostrowska bada wieloaspektową, kameleonową naturę autorstwa Holland, zwracając szczególną uwagę na kontekst transnarodowego kina kobiecego, biografię artystyczną reżyserki i jej polityczny aktywizm.