

Women in Polish Cinema

By Jonathan Owen

Fall 2006 Issue of KINEMA

The title of Ewa Mazierska and Elżbieta Ostrowska's *Women in Polish Cinema* designates an area of film studies doubly neglected. In the field of Polish cinema studies, itself marginal territory, there has been scant attention paid to gender issues. The authors lay much of the blame for this at the feet of Polish film scholars themselves, resistant to gender studies out of an all too symptomatic hostility towards feminism as an alien, "corrupting Western influence". Attempting significantly to redress this situation, the authors establish a twofold purpose: to assess the representations of women onscreen and to reassess the place within Polish cinema of women behind the camera. Their analysis mediated by a strong sense of national specificity, Mazierska and Ostrowska reveal the range of historical, political and religious factors that have determined (indeed sometimes over-determined) constructions of femininity in Polish culture and film.

By far the most important and far-reaching of these constructions is the myth of the "Polish Mother," an austere feminine role model that emphasises fervent patriotism, stoic suffering and the willing sacrifice of self and family to the nationalist cause. This ideal of martyr-like, politicised femininity, argues Joanna Szewcowska in the first of the book's three parts, arose in the occupied, partitioned Poland of the nineteenth century: once the public sphere was appropriated by the occupiers, the defence of Poland's language, culture and values was entrusted to the private, domestic sphere. The myth was also nurtured by cultural and religious tradition (Romanticism and the Catholic "Marian" cult).

The book's second part examines the portrayal of women throughout Polish cinema history, from the silent era to the post-Communist period. There are shifts and continuities, occasionally progressive representations but more often traditional or reactionary ones: the seemingly liberatory images of female workers or "Superwomen" in Socialist Realist cinema are compromised by subtle paternalism and the perpetuation of traditional ideals of beauty; the long-suffering Polish Mother is transposed to the struggles of the Solidarity era; and, most dispiritingly of all, the end of Communist oppression ushers in a resurgent sexual conservatism and a "masculine" genre cinema that both marginalise and demonises women. Counterbalancing this account of women "according to men" is the book's final part, which explores the *Źuvres* of several female directors, including the "women's films" of Barbara Sass and the contemporary work of Dorota Kędzierzawska.

Women in Polish Cinema reconciles cultural case study and theoretical perspectives on gender in an admirably, perhaps surprisingly, lucid manner. The films themselves are analysed in detail and depth, and the comprehensive summaries provided will certainly benefit the native English speakers for whom most of these films will be difficult to see. As well as helping fill a significant gap in film scholarship, the book's focus prompts some fascinating revaluations of Polish cinema history.

The Polish School, often acclaimed as Eastern bloc cinema's modernist breakthrough, is shown as reinscribing those images of suffering, self-sacrificing heroines central to national mythology. The career of Andrzej Wajda, Poland's most celebrated filmmaker, comes in for some particularly sharp revision: reducing *Man of Marble's* independent heroine to a passive Polish Mother in *Man of Iron*, Wajda is criticised as an "opportunist" who tailors his films to political trends, in this case the conservative, Catholic Solidarity movement. The book's third part is of necessity slightly less focused than the other two, with the thematic coherence of the preceding parts balanced by the need to do justice to the totality of each director's work. Yet this section displays the same critical insight and independence. A chapter on the almost forgotten Wanda Jakubowska reveals both artistic merit and moments of (possibly inadvertent) political critique: just as the authors are unafraid to criticise an August figure such as Wajda, they are even-handed with a director easily dismissed as a Stalinist propagandist. Combining freshness of focus with close, penetrating analysis, *Women in Polish Cinema* is a contribution to East European film studies at once innovative and exemplary.

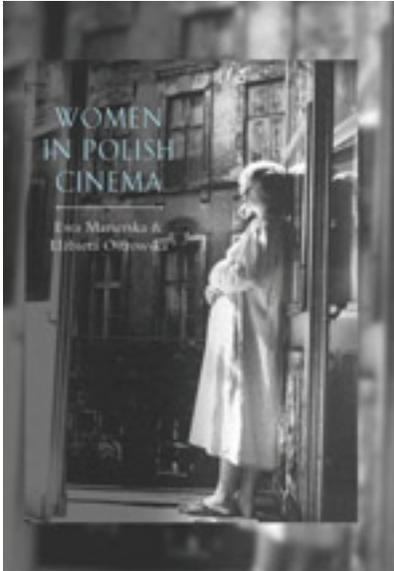


Figure 1: *WOMEN IN POLISH CINEMA*. Ewa Mazierska and Elżbieta Ostrowska. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006. ¶ 256 pp. 36 ill. ¶ ISBN: 1571819479 (hdbk), \$75/£45; ¶ ISBN: 1571819487 (paper), \$25/£15.

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