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**FILM
BLOG**

A short history of Polish cinema

Polish film was an early frontrunner, before occupation forced wave after wave of talent abroad. Its fortitude is embodied by Andrzej Wajda – still going strong 50 years after his first feature



Slice of life ... Leon Niemczyk, left, and Zygmunt Malanowicz in Roman Polanski's first feature, *Knife in the Water* (1961). Photograph: AP

There aren't many traces on the internet of the early Polish pioneers: people such as [Kazimierz Prószyński](#) and [Bolesław Matuszewski](#) who were operating at the turn of the century, turning out silent short docs called things like *Ślizgawka w Łazienkach* (Skating-ink in the Royal Baths). (Prószyński was also a pioneering camera inventor, developing a model called a [pleograph](#) in 1894, and a handheld effort called an [aeroscope](#) in 1909.) Nor is there any link for Anton in Warsaw for the First Time, [Poland's](#) legendary first feature film, directed by and starring Antoni Fertner in 1908.

Fertner, though, went on to a respectable career as an actor in the interwar period – you can see him as an old man in *Książątka* (1937, above) and [Gehenna](#) (1938).

The first Polish film-maker to leave a significant dent in cinema history was [Władysław Starewicz](#) – whose complicated ethnic background highlights Poland's own political travails at the time. Born in Moscow to émigrés from the part of the old Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth that had been absorbed into the Russian empire after partition in 1795, Starewicz had grown up in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas and went back to Moscow to work on his pioneering insect stop-motion films. Notable titles include *The Cameraman's Revenge* (1912) ...

... and *The Insects' Christmas*.

The Russian revolution forced him to flee to France, where he set up his own studio and completed his masterpiece, [The Tale of the Fox](#), in 1930 (though it wasn't released until 1938).

Polish silent cinema also unearthed another major star, who could take advantage of the internationalism afforded by the absence of dialogue. Born Barbara Apolonia Chalupiec, it was as [Pola Negri](#) that she shone in first Polish, then German, silents.

In 1922, she made the big switch to the US and ended up becoming one of silent Hollywood's biggest stars, courting scandal with a string of affairs (including with Chaplin and Valentino) and being tagged as the "Queen of Tragedy".

The interwar period, in which Poland achieved nationhood for the first time in centuries, led to an outpouring of nationalist epics, often adapted from literary sources. One of the leading figures of the period was director Henryk Szaro, a one-time student of theatre innovator Vsevolod Meyerhold, and who went on to direct significant films such as [Mocny Człowiek \(The Strong Man\) \(1929\)](#) – [due to screen at the Polish film festival in London next week](#).

Szaro also flourished in the sound era; he made the [Faustian drama Pan Twardowski](#) in 1936 (below) and followed it with a Yiddish film, [The Vow](#), on the eve of the war. Szaro, a Polish Jew, was shot dead in 1942 after the Nazis invaded Warsaw.

Ironically, probably the best-known film to survive Poland's sound period was the Yiddish musical [Yidl with a Fiddle](#) (1936), shot in Krakow's [Kazimierz](#) district with an imported American star, [Molly Picon](#).

Prolific Polish film-maker Michał Waszyński also found time to direct a Yiddish classic, [The Dybbuk](#), adapted from [the Russian-Jewish play by S Ansky](#).

The chaos and destruction wrought by the second world war meant that Poland had to reinvent its film industry from the ground up. The subsequent Soviet occupation meant that cinema became a state concern; the director of Film Polski, the government production company, was [Aleksander Ford, a well-organised Stalinist](#) who had joined the Red Army during the war. Here's a bit of footage of Ford in 1959, shooting [Knights of the Teutonic Order](#) (1950), Poland's anti-German answer to Eisenstein's [Alexander Nevsky](#).

One plus point: the [Łódź film school](#) was founded in 1948, with virtually every Polish film-maker of substance in the postwar years passing through its doors. One of its graduates, [Andrzej Wajda](#), was apprenticed to Ford and then given a chance to direct his own film. The result was the revelatory [A Generation](#) (1955), in which Wajda emerged as an independent and fresh voice and the leader of a new spirit in Polish cinema.

[A Generation](#) was the story of a callow youth sucked into the anti-Nazi resistance; Wajda would go on to produce two more in his "war trilogy", [Kanal](#) (1956, below) and [Ashes and Diamonds](#) (1958)

Meanwhile a contemporary of Wajda's, who even had a small role in [A Generation](#), was plotting his escape from postwar Poland. [Roman Polanski](#) made one extraordinary Polish production, [Knife in the Water](#) (1962): a three-hander filmed with such impeccable stylishness that it earned an Oscar nomination for best foreign film and allowed Polanski to head off to the west and shoot [Repulsion](#) in London.

Another émigré from postwar Poland was animator Walerian Borowczyk, who made the surrealist stop-motion film [Dom](#) (House) (1958), in collaboration with Jan Lenica, shortly before leaving for France in 1959.

Borowczyk became notorious for the erotica he produced in the 1970s – but returned to his Polish roots in the mid-70s to make an [adaptation of The Story of Sin](#), the literary classic by Stefan Żeromski already filmed by Szaro in 1933. Incredibly it's on Megavideo (below), though without subtitles.

Jerzy Skolimowski was another director who found life difficult in 1960s Poland; he worked as a scriptwriter on *Knife in the Water* and began a series of semi-autobiographical films in 1965. The fourth of these, [Hands Up!](#) (1965), triggered the authorities' wrath and like Polanski he headed west. Among the films he made in exile is the extraordinary [Deep End](#) (1971), due for reissue on 6 May 2011.

Wajda, meanwhile, had been plugging away in Poland throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with [Man of Marble](#) (1976), his critique of the [Stakhanovite movement](#), his most successful film of the period.

That is, until its follow-up. Part of *Man of Marble* was set in the Gdańsk shipyards – the cradle of [Solidarity](#), the Polish trade union federation – and gave Wajda unparalleled access to the labour movement. In 1981, he made [Man of Iron](#), containing the same central character, which offers an amazing record of a turning point in Polish history.

The subsequent clampdown meant Wajda, like Polanski before him, was off; but he spent his time abroad profitably. [Danton](#) (1983, below), starring Gérard Depardieu, was arguably the best of the work he produced before he could return home.

The high-achievers of the next generation of Polish cinema were led by Krzysztof Kieślowski, the key figure of a movement known as the "cinema of moral anxiety". Kieślowski had been making films since the 1960s, but only made an international impact with 1979's [Camera Buff](#). His epic project based on the 10 commandments, [Dekalog](#) – composed of 10 one-hour films – catapulted him to international renown on the back of its two feature film spin-offs, [A Short Film About Killing](#) and [A Short Film About Love](#).

But it was his [Three Colours trilogy](#), beginning with *Blue* in 1993, that sealed Kieślowski's reputation: it remains almost the perfect film-in-exile, shot in France with Juliette Binoche and themed around the French flag.

One of Kieślowski's writers on [Blue](#), [Agnieszka Holland](#), carved out her own career as a director: she started in Poland with the allegorical backstage drama *Provincial Actors* (1978), before heading west like many before her and making an impact internationally with *Europa Europa* (1990) and [The Secret Garden](#) (1993).

Amazingly, through it all, Wajda has kept going. After returning to Poland to make [Korczak](#) in 1990 (with an Agnieszka Holland script), he has enjoyed an improbable Indian summer. His 1999 film [Pan Tadeusz](#) caught the post-communist mood with its nationalist sentiments and was a huge domestic success. And his 2007 feature [Katyn](#), about the gruesome second world war massacre covered up the Soviets, is arguably his towering achievement.

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