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Discussion with the President of the European Film Academy, Agnieszka Holland

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ABSTRACT

This article transcribes an interview with the President of the European Film Academy, film director and scriptwriter Agnieszka Holland. It traces the filmmaker's journey from her early filmmaking career and the potential influence of acting as a global citizen. Agnieszka Holland studied directing at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague. She began her career as an assistant director to Krzysztof Zanussi and Andrzej Wajda as her mentor. In 1977, Agnieszka Holland made her co-directing debut with 'Screen Tests.' In 1978, Holland wrote her first screenplay for Wajda, 'Without Anaesthesia.' Her solo feature directing debut started with 'Provincial Actors,' which won the International Critics Prize at Cannes Film Festival (1980). Since then, she has directed over 30 films, won numerous awards, including the Golden Globe and Silver Bear Berlinale. Agnieszka Holland was nominated for a BAFTA and Emmy, while her films 'Angry Harvest' (1985), 'Europa Europa' (1990), and 'In Darkness' (2011) were nominated for an Academy Award. The emotional impact and foresight of these films have earned her international fame. Throughout her career, Holland's vision of cinematography and the way reality is depicted influenced the further history of cinema.

KEYWORDS

Contemporary;
cinematography; filmmaker;
culture; art; Europe

A.W. In your film 'Europa Europa' (1990), Solomon Perel is a fascinating character. How do you see Solomon Perel in 2020?

A.H. Solomon Perel deserves nothing short of admiration, both as a fictional character and as a real human being, whose story has inspired this film about courage and identity. It was notable how throughout vocalizing his experiences, he never attempted to erase or excuse the actions of his past as a product of unfortunate circumstances. Instead, Perel accepted and exposed his gradual descent into Hitler's regime and the struggle of hiding his Jewish identity expressed through otherwise small and trivial things such as circumcision. Nowadays, it is rare to see someone openly admitting to having sympathized with Nazi ideology and only being averted thanks to close friends, especially with a background such as his (Markowitz 2018).

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Currently, at the age of 95, Solomon Perel is still alive and in good shape. I had the pleasure of conversing with him during the Haifa Film Festival, in 2019. Unsurprisingly, his life's unique and complex events have shaped him as a person and given him a perspective that many either cannot or refuse to acknowledge. His generation, which is also my parents' generation, has lived through very intense historical periods, many of which were shrouded in totalitarianism and autocracy. People tend to forget their past political beliefs and actions, or simply render them as a dismissible misstep, while failing to hold themselves accountable for whatever vileness their minds might have slipped into. This is why Solomon's honesty stands out as an example of integrity and personal growth through a difficult and morally challenging life story, despite not being responsible for the triggers that veered his life in that direction in the first place.

A.W. Discussing your collaboration with HBO in the framework of the 1983 series, how would you define connections between dystopia and politics, and utopia and politics?

A.H. Nowadays, we live in a world where the concept of dystopia is becoming increasingly relevant. As young people in communist Poland, my peers and I would read George Orwell's prominent dystopian novels 'Animal Farm' and '1984' as reflections of our own time and reality. Despite being a work of fiction, these stories appeared to have a personal connection and an eerie sense of familiarity for the people of my generation. In 1989, with the fall of communism, when the Iron Curtain fell, and later Francis Fukuyama published the book 'The End of History and the Last Man' such literature became less prominent among the youth and eventually portrayed a world that was disconnected from the contemporary reality. Re-reading '1984' at the beginning of the 21st century felt nostalgic, but the novel appeared to carry a more historical value rather than stand as a relevant social commentary. Then, there was a notable rise in new authoritarian systems under the guise of populist regimes, especially around Eastern European countries such as Poland and Hungary. Eventually, it spread towards the West; and after the election of Donald Trump, many book-selling charts began to be dominated by Orwell's books again. '1984' regained popularity almost overnight, with topical novels such as Philip Roth's 'The Plot against America' and Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale,' following closely after. It was rather thought-provoking to observe the latter work of literature being plunged into critical success after Hulu's 2017 production of a series, especially after failing to attract public interest with its 1900 film adaptation by Volker Schlöndorff (Karajica 2019).

It seems natural to assume that dystopia or at least dystopian ideas are re-entering social consciousness as a concept relevant to modern reality. As a filmmaker, I feel obliged to share that this shift in mindset has influenced my work. I was working on the third season of Netflix series 'House of Cards,' which has a heavy emphasis on American politics, when I realized that such work might be unintentionally dangerous. Showcasing the possibility of total corruption within such influential political systems, and humanizing the officials behind them, can send a wrong message to the audience and warp their perception of real-life events occurring in Washington. While working on the fifth season, the 2016 presidential elections were ongoing, which made the experience completely surreal.

For over ten years, the cruel, corrupted, cynical characters have become more attractive to the general audience. This is quite an evident phenomenon, but as an insider, I became a first-hand witness to the change. The feedback to the morally complicated characters that I submitted to studios gradually shifted from ‘unsympathetic’ to ‘overly sympathetic,’ which is a big leap for such a short time. Jerks such as Frank Underwood from ‘House of Cards,’ or Walter White from ‘Breaking Bad’ quickly climbed the fan-favorite ladder, proving to be the most financially beneficial investments for production companies. The formula called for an attractive person with misguided beliefs (ranging from manipulative and cynical underdogs to gangsters and serial killers), usually deemed the misunderstood hero of the story.

This trope seems to have merged with reality, with existing political figures such as Boris Johnson in the UK, Donald Trump in the USA, or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil occupying positions of high authority not only in their own country but also globally, given the influence of the region under their constitutional influence. It almost seems as though they have stepped out of a popular Netflix or HBO series and walked right into the governments of different countries. Given these circumstances, it is about time for a cultural shift towards utopia. People need more visions of a world that is not so bleak, cynical, and distrustful. The problem with this is that it is very challenging to create a believable utopia; in fact, it probably has not been done well since Karl Marx. Still, attempting to steer the atmosphere towards a more idyllic path looks like a step towards a better direction.

A.W.

Can you discuss the idea of human desire in cinematography? Do you think that in the future, humanity will go back to the age of romanticism?

A.H.

It looks like people are slowly getting fed up from desiring the cynical ‘bad guy’ characters. I would not call it an age of new romanticism, but rather something founded in basic, sensual connection. *Connection* is the key word; it must be brought back to the interhuman spectrum from the winning virtual one. Romanticism can be dark as well, which is somewhat frightening. Admittedly, today’s society is living in a strange era of romanticism, which glorifies opposing science, refuses vaccinations, and accepts power-hungry charlatans who attempt to take over the world. It speaks of emotional decision-making rather than result-oriented actions. It is the new shape of romanticism from the 19th century. It is inspiring, but it is also very dangerous. It is possible that violence will disappear from the film industry as a direct consequence of the increase in real-life violence. Perhaps people will get tired of seeing it on the streets and want something different from their screens.

A.W. Can we empower ourselves being engaged in a chosen mission or a job such as a filmmaker? Can it instill within us the vision to look for the right words to reflect our vision as a global citizen and be the advocate and the voice of the suppressed and the voiceless?

A.H. My professional platform has been an important means for self-expression and a significant contributor to my personal growth as a free-thinker and an individual. Some of my movies are more popular than the others; they are certainly not all recognized to

the same extent, but I still think that all of them hold a grain of truth and pose questions that are important. This is a legacy I intend on upkeeping in all of my projects, especially now, when humanity is facing a global crisis. The novelty and uncertainty create a deep-rooted fear within people, which in turn leads to aggression and desperation. Finding answers to the unknown becomes crucial for countless people's peace of mind, which makes them more susceptible to falling for lies and manipulations. Through films, I try to tell stories about the present that I find important and that will help people to understand where humans stand as a species. Yet, at the same time, I am not a preacher. I have no intention of giving my audience moral guidance and pointing them toward a direction that is subjectively right or wrong. Human beings are incredibly complex by nature, so I try not to reduce them to black-and-white categories. In my opinion, the biggest enemy of truth is not a lie – it is simplification. Deceptions can be caught, checked, or at the very least felt through intuition. Simplifying the complicated, compound structure of human nature, on the other hand, is a deficit which poisons the truth.

A.W. In one of your conversations, you have mentioned that there are three significant reasons for a new revolution: 'globalization and immigration; the internet revolution; the gender revolution.' Can you please elaborate?

A.H. The new wave of globalization implies an inevitable corruption of capitalism. An organized system aimed at unification falls into dangerous territory once people start feeling that they do not belong and that their choices do not influence the major decisions within their countries. The modern age has reached a level of globalization, where local governments fail to contain the power as its ideology spreads internationally; instead, it is the global corporations that take up the head of the table. These organizations have the real power to manipulate human lives in a way that benefits their revenue flows. Contrary to popular belief, the general population is not stupid and realizes how the influence that they hold over their own autonomy diminishes day by day and how the governors that they elected cannot interfere with this unfolding of events. This is the beginning of a deep crisis in democracy. This regime makes sense only if people believe that they have an influence on the decision-making process concerning their lives and the lives of their children. Such strong distrust is creating an open field for opportunistic populists and liars to seize public attention. The simple answers that they give to incredibly complicated questions appeal to the confused population, which strives for a feeling of security and being a part of an organized system. However, such band-aid solutions, represented with empty slogans in the spirit of 'Make America Great Again!' stand completely exposed over an unexpected hurdle such as a global pandemic. The aforementioned leaders fail to address the situation adequately in order to minimize casualties. Interestingly, the countries which are the most successful in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic are led by women. Soft power proves to be more efficient than arbitrary, arrogant, and shamelessly authoritarian systems. Crises start with the lack of equality due to the disconnect between the ultra-rich and the middle class or those below the poverty line. Generally, globalization is a very multifaceted concept, with many branches that influence different walks of life. It is difficult to predict the precise ways that it will affect the world; however, it is undeniable that it has already started leaving its trail.

Internet revolution is a concept, which is much bigger than its initial impression renders. It influences not only the circulation of information and knowledge, the spread of manipulative propaganda and fake news but also how people communicate among themselves. A vivid example of this is the lockdown enforced by most governments due to the global health crisis. Most elderly people, along with the 'middle generation,' have reported feelings of isolation and an overwhelming lack of human contact. The younger generations (children, teenagers, young adults), on the other hand, seem to be feeling quite happy. Stereotypical as it may sound, there is a sliver of truth to the fact that many representatives of the youth enjoy spending alone time in their room, using their internet access for any desired entertainment, including virtual social interaction. In fact, they are so used to such a way of communication that many did not feel the difference that quarantine regulations had enforced upon their lifestyles. Such a precedent is dangerous, since it undermines the way that humans view one another. Undoubtedly, the internet has many advantages, but it is also important to acknowledge how paradoxically, by connecting us, it disconnects us sometimes.

Because of such wide accessibility, people are divided into separate bubbles and hold the beliefs of their chosen group nearly as absolute truth. They do not feel the need to confront those from a different bubble, with a completely different ideology, since what exists outside of their created narrative has to be false. Due to such extreme division, people start having less and less in common, until eventually, situations such as the extreme political polarization of nowadays become a norm. Politics and economies have always been controversial topics, with a wide range of opinions constantly surrounding them, yet the ability for civil discourse and compromise seems to have been lost in the loud chatter of arguing over one's own side. The platforms designed for such active discussions have been dismantled, so individuals remain within their bubbles of hand-picked narratives alongside peers who agree with their stances unequivocally. Naturally, one bubble believes that the other does not have the right to exist. It is an all-around dangerous situation (Tibbetts 2008).

Lastly, the emancipation of women is one of the most critical social and political issues of the past centuries. If there could be an allegory drawn between human rights and a big unsliced pie, the upper-class religious white heterosexual men would be the owner of the entire pan. However, with social progress rapidly gaining more velocity, the pie gets divided between more groups. Women, children, racial minorities, representatives of different sexual orientations, disabled people, etc. are finally getting the fundamental human rights that they should have never been denied in the first place (Mazierska and Ostrowska 2006). Unfortunately, the slices are still uneven between the groups, but the conversation arising from that inequality must certainly be credited to a vast improvement from an incredibly unaccepting and bigoted past. Even animals get a little piece, with more activists advocating for their right to life as living, breathing creatures. As the portion separated for the white men starts shrinking while culturally, their responsibilities remain as big as always, they begin to feel offended, endangered, and somehow decimated.

There are, naturally, reasons for active resistance to a drastic change towards inclusion. For example, in societies where women have more rights and thus can afford to have independent expectations from their role in the social hierarchy, the population is shrinking. Women who want to be successful professionally and feel empowered enough

to attempt pursuing such an undertaking do not typically want to procreate as much as the stereotypical housewife. Because of this, the number of white men is shrinking, which becomes a quite serious genetic/racial fear for many men, who benefit from the old constructs, which put them in charge of the whole pie. This is most noticeable in developed countries such as the US and some regions within Europe. Nonetheless, it is most important to acknowledge that the threats of the deconstruction of widespread societal norms pale in comparison to a more urgent emergency, which is the ecological crisis. If representatives of all social, racial, sexual, and other minorities do not work together towards the common goal of preserving the Earth as it has been over its habitable years, human rights issues will become sadly irrelevant.

A.W. During one of your interviews, you have mentioned: ‘There are things in Catholicism and Polish nationalism that is deeply anti-Semitic.’ Why do you think so?

A.H. I must premise this answer by stating that the question of Polish-Jewish relationship is extremely complicated and delicate, so I would not heavily rely on a short snippet of an answer that I may provide as a personal insight, to understand the issue in its entirety (Crnkovic 1998). Unfortunately, antisemitism is a deeply entrenched sentiment in Poland, and while I do not condone it, I may attempt to explain where it stems from historically. The rise of antisemitism in Poland is connected with the rise of the Catholic Church, which also marked the beginning of the loss of Polish independence. Throughout this historical period, Poland remained divided between Russia, Germany, and Austria for 120 years. The Jewish population in Poland was not very big; it was nowhere near the numbers known in Western Europe. Perhaps due to a desire for identity preservation, the minority actively rejected cultural assimilation, contributing to the growth of the divide between the cultures over time. For Polish people, Jews remained strangers in their country, rather than people who shared the land with them. In such moments of crisis, it was easy for any kind of powers, such as the Germans or the Catholic Church, to manipulate the tension for their advantage by presenting Jews as scapegoats for everything wrong in Poland and Polish society. The poor peasants living in the villages of Poland without a penny in their pockets, some of whom have been enslaved and badly mistreated, began seeing Jews as people who stole opportunities for a better life in Poland that were meant for them. Even the Jews that were poor and struggling were seen as foreigners, who were stealing someone’s chance at a good fortune. Polish villagers lived in such conditions until the second part of the 19th century, which further stemmed hate and bigotry towards the minorities present in the country.

Interestingly, most Jews who attempted to assimilate with the Polish culture, learn the language, and integrate into the society around the 20th century were the representatives of the artistic movement, like painters, novelists, actors, musicians, etc. In this case, the Polish middle-class viewed them as competition, and the antisemitism intensified further. These people were so lost that they believed any antisemitic propaganda spoon-fed to them because everyone was looking for an easy target to direct the blame. Needless to say, the Jews who had managed to take up entrepreneurship and open businesses were heavily judged by the local community; their disappearance could potentially leave the promise of wealth redistribution, which excited Poles and filled

them with more rage. Met with such hostility and an impoverished lifestyle, the Jewish population was not very eager to be friendly, either. They would rather learn Russian or German because they were better languages, and the countries provided better citizenship conditions than Poland. The disdain and miscommunication came from both sides and hindered a healthy cultural coexistence, which could have ultimately improved the lifestyle for both struggling parties, in possible cases of profitable corporations. When the war and the Holocaust came, it became disgustingly easy to hate Jews and succumb to witless cruelty by not considering them human beings. These events poisoned Polish behavior for a very long time (Thomas, 2018).

A.W. What shaped and sculptured your identity?

A.H. If I may make a slight detour in the direction of *how* my identity was shaped, I would gladly speak about the lessons that life has taught me about myself. I am reasonably confident that I now know my strengths and limitations, which is an essential lesson for an artist. My vivacity and my need to communicate stories and thoughts manifest themselves in my profession, which allows me to exercise something very significant to my personality – the expression of creative liberty. I also learned that people are quite the same in all places, even if there are many cultural differences between the regions they come from. My best personal example of this is working with actors, who appear to be so similar to each other, despite their insanely diverse backgrounds. They may be rich, famous, and living in a big mansion right in the middle of Hollywood, or a small provincial actor from a little town in the Czech Republic or Poland; they are still precisely the same. It is a lesson that teaches the complexity of the world and how it is full of very exotic, different cultural expressions, yet at the same time, how human nature is not so different and the needs of humanity are very similar.

A.W. You say that the needs of humanity are very similar. Would you say that those basic needs are those in Maslow's theory?

A.H. Yes, some of the very basic needs that every human has, such as generosity, trust, human connection, love, fear of death, fear of failure, and so many more. They are vast emotions with so much volume that they are difficult to control and can only be released through creativity. Actors usually share their emotions through their bodies, but sometimes, they crave an outburst of emotion from someone else, someone that is around them. For example, I have noticed that they all need to be loved, especially in the simplest ways, like hugging or smiling.

A.W. Aging is not all about growing old. How do you manage to age gracefully and still have a boundless desire to make new films?

A.H. I live partly in Los Angeles, partly in Poland, partly in France, and mostly in the hotels where I happen to be shooting or promoting my films. It is tough to pinpoint, but perhaps they contain some kind of vitality, which makes me feel young. I do not feel old yet. I know what is coming my way from observing my mother in the last twenty years, but at the same time, I cannot ever be certain about the future, so I try not to worry about it. Perhaps the curiosity of what will happen is one of the things that keeps people alive. Every film and every work that I commence is completely new and fresh; it is simulating to never fall into a monotonous routine; it is a challenge. Besides, I have some experience

under my sleeve, so I know how to effectively deal with certain problems. The main challenge is to recognize when it is time to stop. At some point, I believe there probably comes a time when one is just not as good, as efficient, or as relevant anymore. One has to be careful not to become sclerotic in one's work. To avoid disappointment, I have promised myself that if I feel the importance of my work and the passion behind it slipping, and if I am making too many compromises with myself, it means I am losing patience and losing curiosity. I have to stop.

A.W. What is a happy ending for you as a filmmaker? Is there a happy ending?

A.H. I am quite pessimistic existentially, which means I think that every life ends the same way. The only difference is in the way one dies, and of course, there are some better and some worse deaths. However, by the end, one disappears and is simply not here anymore. Since I consider myself to be my work, and I perceive the world only from a subjective perspective through my senses and brain, I think that if I were to disappear, all my work would disappear, also. Perhaps this would be a good ending for my enemies, but certainly not for me.

I do not believe much in happy endings, but I do believe in some kind of catharsis. I think that bad emotions will be somehow clarified and purified by this catharsis before there is an end. That is the kind of happy ending that I am sensitive to; perhaps it ends badly, but it feels that something important happened.

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