

Social Attitudes Towards Historical Films in Contemporary Poland

ABSTRACT. Białous Maciej, *Social Attitudes Towards Historical Films in Contemporary Poland*. "Images" vol. XXXVIII, no. 47. Poznań 2025. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. Pp. 65–78. ISSN 1731-450X. <https://doi.org/10.14746/i.2025.38.47.4>.

Social research indicates that feature films are invariably among the most common sources for acquiring knowledge about the past. Therefore, films are a crucial element of public history and collective memory. However, quantitative social research usually does not focus on how audiences perceive films about history. This article attempts to fill this gap, using the results of a qualitative study involving eight focus group interviews conducted among Polish viewers of historical films. The article answers the questions of how audiences define the historical film genre (paying particular attention to temporal, historical truth and subject criteria), what functions they ascribe to it (educational, emotionalizing, entertaining, political) and what relevance contemporary viewing practices (such as fragmentation of viewing practices, popular interest in series) have for public history and collective memory.

KEYWORDS: public history, historical film, collective memory, memory politics, contemporary Polish cinema

Feature films are often considered to be one of the most important sources of knowledge about the past, and thus an important part of public history, which can be defined broadly as a "phrase that can cover any historical activity that is not regarded as academic history."^[1] The popularity of films about history is confirmed by social research conducted in various countries. For example, a survey carried out in 2021 among the American public revealed that the two most popular sources of historical knowledge are related to moving pictures.^[2] As many as 69% of respondents indicated the "documentary film/TV" category, while a slightly smaller percentage (66%) indicated "fictional film/TV" as the sources they use. Based on this research, it can also be noted that films are a more common source of knowledge about the past, not only compared to traditional book references ("nonfiction history book" – 32%, "historical fiction book" – 26%), but also to newer sources such as "social media" (26%) or "history-related video games" (11%). Similar conclusions can be drawn both from earlier American studies,^[3] and survey research conducted in Poland.^[4] According to

Introduction

[1] Faye Sayer, *Public History: A Practical Guide*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2019, p. 3.

[2] Peter Burkholder, Dana Schaffer, *History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey*, American Historical Association, Washington DC 2021.

[3] Jannelle Warren-Findley, *History in New Worlds: Surveys and Results in the United States and Australia*,

lia, "American Studies International" 2004, vol. 42, no. 2/3, pp. 75–85; Roy Rosenzweig, David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, Columbia University Press, New York 1998.

[4] Andrzej Szpociński, *II wojna światowa w komunikacji społecznej*, [in:] Piotr T. Kwiatkowski, Lech M. Nijakowski, Barbara Szacka et al., *Miedzy codziennością a wielką historią: Druga wojna światowa*

the latter, films are among the primary sources of knowledge about the history of World War II and the Warsaw Uprising, right next to mass media and knowledge conveyed in schools.

In other words, quantitative social research suggests the commonness of feature film watching as a public history practice. However, simply acknowledging the universality of such practices does not fully explain their significance. The article aims to use qualitative empirical research to establish what the social attitudes towards historical films in contemporary Poland are.

If we consider feature films as part of public history, this means that moving images of the past are relevant not only from the individual perspective, but also for social groups. As Barbara Franco writes, public history functions “*for* the public, *of* the public, *by* the public, and *with* the public.”^[5] Therefore, it is vital to determine how films about history are perceived in public discourse, not only from the industry or film critic points of view, but also from that of the audience. Feature films can be considered to be elements of collective memory, or more precisely, cultural memory. Jan Assmann defines the latter as: “a body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose «cultivation» serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.”^[6] Furthermore, because of their vital importance for collective identity processes, cultural memory artifacts, including film productions, are subject to memory politics, which can be defined as “public actions leading to the consolidation and reinforcement of collective memory or its alteration.”^[7] Such a perspective on feature films can be particularly relevant under conditions of political polarization, when specific cinematic visions of the past could often be treated as narratives typical of competing political camps (e.g., conservative, liberal, leftist), and produced mainly for current political use. This is certainly a condition characteristic of contemporary Poland^[8] and another important reason to determine how viewers perceive the films produced.

The prevalence of acquiring knowledge about the past from feature films and the potential significance of these productions for collective (cultural) memory and the politics of memory justifies questions about the attitudes of audiences towards films about history. It is

w pamięci zbiorowej społeczeństwa polskiego, Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Gdańsk and Warszawa 2010; CBOS, *Powstanie Warszawskie w ocenie społecznej*, Fundacja Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, Warszawa 2014, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_110_14.PDF (accessed: 20.09.2024).

[5] Barbara Franco, *Public History and Memory: A Museum Perspective*, “The Public Historian” 1997, no. 19(2), p. 65.

[6] Jan Assmann, John Czaplicka, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, “New German Critique” 1995, no. 65, pp. 125–133.

[7] Lech M. Nijakowski, *Polska polityka pamięci: Esej socjologiczny*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2008, p. 43.

[8] Magdalena Urbańska, *Filmowe zarządzanie pamięcią: Kino polskie 2005–2020 o historii najnowszej*, Universitas, Kraków 2022, pp. 41–50.

important to determine such issues as how audiences define historical films genre, what they expect from such productions, and what the most important criteria are for evaluating them. Such questions usually go beyond the scope of quantitative social research of film audiences. Hence, this article is a report on a qualitative study consisting of two series of focus group interviews (FGIs) conducted with Polish audiences. The article will present the main conclusions of the interviews and the prospects for conducting further research.

The article is based on data collected during two series of focus group interviews on historical films, conducted several years apart, in 2015 and 2022 (eight interviews in total). As a qualitative research technique, FGIs can be characterized as a moderated discussion on research topics. Encouraging participants to discuss often results in added value, especially when compared to individual interviews and in the case of topics such as research into social attitudes.^[9]

In both series, interview participants were recruited based on several criteria. Firstly, the research was conducted with residents of different localities and regions of Poland. Geographical diversity was primarily related to different experiences of the regions' history in the 19th and 20th centuries (e.g., belonging to other countries during the partition of Poland, the experience of Soviet occupation from 1939–1941, the diverse ethnic composition of the regions before World War II, etc.), and therefore potential differences in regional collective memories. The size of the locality also mattered, as this could differentiate access to cinemas or other film viewing practices (such as the popularity of streaming services). Secondly, care was taken to ensure equal proportions of gender and age among interviewees. In the latter case, it was decided to divide the research participants into younger and older ones, i.e. those who consciously remember the communist period (roughly those born before 1980). Such a division was intended to separate those people that have no (or little) personal memories of the communist era, meaning that their knowledge of the 1944–1989 period is based rather on cultural than individual memory. Moreover, for older interviewees, the connection between films about history and state propaganda should be more transparent, while for younger viewers it is not necessarily as obvious. Finally, all participants declared a general interest in Polish historical feature films, watching them at least “from time to time”.

All interviews were conducted in groups of 8–10 people in either a face-to-face or online form (2022 series). A total of 67 persons participated in all interviews. In the article, the interviewees' statements will be mostly paraphrased, while in isolated cases of the use of quotations, they will be marked appropriately to prevent identification of the participants.

Research Method

[9] Peter Lunt, Sonia Livingstone, *Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communications Research*, “Journal of Communication” 1993, no. 46(2), pp. 79–98.

An important introductory question during the interviews was how respondents understand the historical film genre. Defining historical films can be cumbersome or imprecise, which is why researchers or critics writing about such films often employ other terms instead. With this in mind, it should be noted that historical film is both a term in common use among film audiences and a category appearing on popular film websites (e.g. IMDB or Polish Filmweb), even if other, closely related terms (e.g. period drama, costume drama) function in parallel. At the same time, it should be noted that although the research tool referred to specific concepts such as feature film, the ultimate goal was to understand the attitudes and perspectives of the audience. Therefore, in practice, when talking about their viewing practices, the respondents often moved freely between films for the cinema and series watched on television or streaming platforms. This reveals how the respondents paid greater attention to the content than to the formal and genre-related framework of representations of the past.

The interviews yielded many spontaneous definitions. Based on these, it can be concluded that most people would agree that the historical film genre concerns films about the past based on actual events (Pol. *filmy o przeszłości oparte na rzeczywistych wydarzeniach*). However, such a synthetic definition raises at least three groups of questions to which interviewees were not in agreement. Firstly, what is the past? Is it possible to establish a rigid chronological framework for a historical film? When do historical films end and contemporary films begin? Secondly, to what extent must these films be based on actual events? What is the acceptable margin of creative freedom for filmmakers? How to measure it? Thirdly, whose past is at stake? Must or should historical films focus on national history? Are stories of ordinary people from the past, without any political context, also historical films? These three groups of questions can be linked to the three criteria of historical films mentioned by respondents. These can be described as (1) temporal, (2) historical truth and (3) subject criteria. The main stances of the interviewees on these questions will be outlined below.

Regarding the temporal criterion, the respondents' opinions on the boundary separating historical from contemporary films are interesting. Some respondents tried to set it rigidly on a timeline, usually linking it to momentous events such as the end of World War II or the beginning of the systemic transformation in Poland in 1989. From this perspective, the past is a time differing significantly from the present in political, economic or cultural terms. Just as often, however, there were comments expressed during the interviews that pointed to the fluidity or subjectivity of such a caesura. A good example of such statements is the quote: "I myself have the impression that World War II is such a boundary. Maybe in a few years this border will move, but the point is that a lot of people are still alive, so this is a border for me"

(6YF).[10] This statement actually reproduces the distinction between communicative and cultural memory proposed by Jan Assmann.[11] Communicative memory is embedded in direct social interactions and the individual memories of participants and witnesses of past events. Thus, communicative memory remains alive as long as there are individuals who can testify about these events in everyday, unmediated communication. Consequently, after a lapse of about eighty to a hundred years, communicative memory is supplanted entirely by cultural memory. At present, the memory of World War II is precisely at this stage, therefore, as the interviewee rightly points out, the boundary of "historicity" will shift as the last witnesses of World War II pass away. Such a stance could be supported by another respondent: "For me, that boundary is the time when I wasn't there. Since I remember everything, I perceive it as the present, and the time when I wasn't there, that I know from other people's stories or from school, that is history for me. So, since I wasn't there" (6YM). From this point of view, the boundary between the past and the present is not only fluid, but also subjective, coupled with one's own individual memory. Such a perspective was mostly adopted by younger interviewees, especially those who do not remember the communist period.

I have highlighted these two statements to show how the temporal framework of historical films is not clear-cut and from the perspective of at least some audiences, historical films begin when cultural memory displaces communicative memory. This somehow leads to questions about the reliability of historical films, the balance between filmmakers' artistic visions, facts, collective memory and the politics of memory. If, like some of the interviewees, we assume that historical films begin where communicative memory ends, we cannot confront their meaningfulness with the memory of the witnesses (e.g., our relatives[12]), but only with other cultural artifacts (public history or academic history). This raises the question of whether (or to what extent) audiences trust the reliability of the historical films they watch.

The interviewees' opinions regarding the criterion of historical truth did not provide unequivocal answers. Certainly, most respondents assumed that they can identify films that are merely fantasies about the past and exclude them from the historical film genre. On the other hand, almost every interview produced statements proving that an individual viewer is often not competent enough to assess the historical accuracy of a film. The interviewees suggested that the belief in the reliability of historical films seems to flow from three primary

[10] Citation references signify the ordinal number of the interview, the subject's age group (Y – young, O – old) and their gender (F – female, M – male).

[11] Jan Assmann, *Communicative and Cultural Memory*, [in:] *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*, eds. Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, Edgar Wunder, Springer, Heidelberg 2011, pp. 15–28.

[12] A study by Peter Burkholder and Dana Schaffer shows that respondents trust messages from relatives more than books or films. Peter Burkholder, Dana Schaffer, op. cit., p. 27.

sources: firstly, the quality of the film itself, primarily how coherently and convincingly past events are presented. This is a combined effect of the script, acting, film sets, costumes, soundtrack and other aspects^[13]; secondly, the consistency of the film with other known elements of public history (films, books, works of art, museum exhibitions and so on); thirdly, from the public discourse on specific film productions, including awards they have received, the content of film reviews, expert commentaries available in the media, the opinions of history teachers (or their actions, as the screening of a film to students is ostensibly a guarantee of its reliability), etc. In other words, other public history activities are also crucial to the reception of films on history.

Regarding the latter two sources, some interviewees suggested that films presenting a vision of the past which is alternative or contrary to the institutionalized collective memory (for example, school knowledge) may enjoy less trust from audiences, who will be less inclined to include heterodox images of the past in the historical film genre. At the same time, such alternative narratives do happen under conditions of strong political polarization, when cinematic interpretations of the past are used as instruments of memory politics. The political aspect of historical films will be developed later in this article, but at this juncture it should be noted that the interviewees were generally more convinced by films that match their previous knowledge and other productions they have already seen. The interviewees also indicated that there are situations in which a film triggers further interest in a particular historical figure, event or period, which is followed by searching for information on the Internet, looking for books on the subject, visiting museums, trips to memorial sites, etc. It is not clear, however, whether respondents selected these activities in such a way as to maintain the maximum consistency with the film narrative that aroused their initial interest. This issue requires further research.

Most of the participants' opinions on the subject criterion revealed that feature films obviously focus on the fate of individual characters, while historical films should depict it on the canvas of events important from a social perspective. Interviewees most often referred to events relevant to the history of the state or nation (the history of Poland or the history of Poles). There were virtually no spontaneous statements about other possible perspectives on the representation of the past (e.g., regional history, minority ethnic groups history). When questioned, respondents were also rarely able to recall the titles of Polish films that focus on regional history^[14] or to suggest topics from

[13] It is worth noting that the expectation of presenting the past in a coherent and closed formula is one of the typical conventions of films on history according to Robert Rosenstone. At the same time, he notes that such a convention limits the space for digressions, doubts, contingencies, which are the essence of historical discourse. Robert A. Rosenstone,

The Historical Film as Real History, "Film-History" 1995, no. 5(1), pp. 5–23.

[14] The most common exception were films about Silesian history directed by Kazimierz Kutz, such as *Sól ziemi czarnej* (*Salt of the Black Earth*) (1969), *Perła w koronie* (*Pearl in the Crown*) (1971).

regional history that would be significant or interesting as a basis for historical films. From the interviewees' points of view, historical films are public history elements that usually work at the national or state level of collective memory.

Another important theme in the interviews was determining the meanings that viewers ascribe to historical films. Are these really an important source of knowledge about the past? Do respondents also associate them with other functions, such as developing patriotic attitudes, pursuing memory politics or simply entertaining? Based on the interviews, it can be seen that viewers recognize the four important functions of historical films. These will be discussed below.

Firstly, the educational function of historical films was mentioned most often. It is equivalent to the common treatment of films as a source of knowledge about the past, discussed in the introduction. It can therefore be concluded that the qualitative interviews confirm the findings of the surveys. At the same time, the value of films as a source of knowledge is recognized by the respondents primarily in their visual layer. Films, unlike books, visualize the past, doing so in a more holistic way than museum exhibitions, for example. In this respect, video games can compete with feature films, but among interviewees there were no people particularly interested in historical-themed games. Due to changes in the demographics of gamers, however, it can be assumed that in the future video games will be more frequently compared with films in terms of visualizing historical events.^[15] Some respondents stressed that the cinematic visualization of the past is important because it greatly facilitates and speeds up the process of imagining past realities. That is the reason why they try to watch historical films with their school-age children, treating it as an important teaching aid. On the other hand, one respondent noted that when watching a film about history with a child, the responsibility of the parent is also to verify what is presented on the screen. This, in turn, refers back to the issue of audience competence and the genre criterion of historical truth, discussed earlier. In many cases, parents have to look to other sources for confirmation of the film's value.

The second function mentioned during the interviews can be described as emotionalizing the past. Respondents emphasized that the construction of feature films, which is often based on the emotional fate of the protagonists, not only allows viewers to gain knowledge about the past, but also to create a kind of bond with the past era and the characters inhabiting it.^[16] The importance of this function for collective memory practices is worth emphasizing. As is well known, human attitudes toward various aspects of reality can consist of three components – cognitive, emotional and behavioural.^[17] Feature films,

Importance of Historical Films

[15] Peter Burkholder, Dana Schaffer, op. cit., p. 20.

[16] Robert Rosenstone also wrote about this function: Robert A. Rosenstone, op. cit.

[17] *Teorie postaw*, ed. Stefan Nowak, PWN, Warszawa 1973.

unlike some other sources of knowledge about the past, are characterized by a relatively strong emotional charge, which has a potential impact on attitudes. The emotional stake associated with a film, for example, can promote a deeper interest of a topic or, in some cases, even a change of attitude towards the past. Both effects were confirmed by some interviewees based on their experience.

The third function can be described as entertainment. Respondents regularly highlighted how, in addition to the whole range of diverse emotions that can accompany watching films on history (e.g. anger, grief, pity, pride, relief), it is very often also a form of entertainment, an activity that is meant to be an enjoyable pastime for viewers. At the same time, this is a major function, since some participants admitted that they would not watch history films of their own volition if it did not give them pleasure. In many cases, entertainment is thus a precondition for viewing. For some respondents it is also a source of preference for foreign, primarily Hollywood, historical cinema over Polish films. In the opinion of these viewers, Polish productions tend to be technically inferior or too depressing in their atmosphere, and therefore are watched less frequently, at least of their own free will.

The previous three functions were primarily concerned with the importance of historical films to individual viewers. The fourth function identified by the respondents is significant at the societal level. Respondents stressed the importance of films for the sphere of politics, both at the national and international level (even though they hardly use terms such as historical politics or politics of memory). The interviewees unequivocally pointed out that political authorities can encourage to produce particular visions of the past through films, and the target audience can be both domestic and foreign.

The theme of the memory politics in historical films was an important part of the interviews. The interviewees were asked to consider whether it is better for historical films to be produced with explicit state participation (such as financial contributions from state agencies or production by state-related institutions) or whether this should be left to the free-market interplay of private producers competing to satisfy public tastes. Generally speaking, respondents found it difficult to give clear answers to these questions, and they did not demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the structure of the film industry in contemporary Poland (which, of course, was not required at all). At the same time, the interviewees tended to use similar arguments for and against both models, which leads us to believe that these are relatively common opinions on what historical films are or should be.

According to the respondents, the primary advantage of a model with active state participation is taking care of the public's historical education, addressing topics central to collective identity, promoting patriotism, commemorating important figures and events, or, finally, interpreting international history (such as World War II) from a Polish

perspective.[18] In other words, interviewees see films as an important element of public history and a tool of national or international memory politics.

During the first wave of interviews, the risk of the past being misinterpreted by Polish or foreign viewers was raised. This was seen as a possible consequence of viewing content that is not critically framed (in reviews, comments by historians, teachers, etc.). The main examples cited at the time were the then-popular German TV series *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter* (2013),[19] which caused a stir in Poland due to alleged anti-Polish messages, primarily the portrayal of Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) soldiers as anti-Semites, and films such as *Enigma* (2001), directed by Michael Apted, which downplayed the role of Poles in history (in this case, breaking the code of the German encryption machine during World War II).

In other words, in those conversations, the emphasis was rather on the international level, while in the 2022 interviews, more attention was paid to the domestic situation, which can be linked to the prolonged and deepening political polarization in Polish society.

During the second wave of interviews, some of the respondents – of different genders and ages, but with a rather negative attitude towards the Polish government at the time of the research (which represented a conservative-nationalist discourse) – added that the advantages of state-funded films can become disadvantages or even a serious threat if politicians intend to manipulate historical facts and treat films as a propaganda tool. However, it was rather difficult for them to give specific examples, as they pointed out that they try not to watch such productions. They were referring, for example, to the general category of films about the so-called 'Cursed Soldiers' (*Żołnierze Wyklęci*), or to the film *Smoleńsk* (2016), directed by Antoni Krauze. Still, according to the interviewees themselves, the latter does not really meet the criteria of historical cinema, being rather a political fiction film.

It seems that despite the time gap between the two waves of interviews, the respondents regarded the importance of films for memory politics similarly. According to them, those productions are significant both at the international and national levels. The first one prompts the question of how the history of Poland and Poles is presented in foreign films or in Polish films distributed internationally. The second level focuses on which political factions in Poland can benefit from the production of specific films. While in 2015 the respondents were more willing to talk about the international level, in 2022 they focused more on national politics.

Meanwhile, according to the interviewees, the production of history films by private producers results in more attractive films and offers a chance for good entertainment. Here, interviewees usually referred

[18] One interviewee pointed out that the main idea is "to fight misconceptions about history" (3YM).

[19] Polish title *Nasze matki, nasi ojcowie*, international title *Generation War*.

to examples from Hollywood cinematography, which interests people not only in the United States, but all over the world. On the other hand, respondents also referred to American examples in order to point out the risks of downgrading films as reliable sources of knowledge about the past, of conventionalizing film narratives, and the prevalence of spectacular form over valuable content, or – the falsification of images of the past in the name of so-called “political correctness” (or politics of media representation). The latter was mainly evident in the interviews conducted in 2022. All of this is seen by participants as side effects of the private producers’ desire to maximize their profits.

Thus, during the interviews, the respondents formed a sort of continuum of films on history with two clearly outlined poles. We could describe the first of these as missionary, since it focuses on disseminating historical knowledge, strengthening collective memory, building patriotic or civic attitudes, etc. Spectacular historical cinema belongs to the second pole, which serves primarily for entertainment, treating facts pretextually. At the same time, it is difficult to state unequivocally whether either of these poles is clearly preferred by the respondents in terms of viewing practices. A good example of such ambiguity is the following quotation:

The Crown, a series about the English Royal Family shows their filth [...]. I like it, because I saw a lot of surprising things there. Orgies, things unheard of... You open your eyes and look really surprised that there's a royal family and such things are happening. On the other hand, I think there are some limits, you shouldn't insult Wałęsa or the Pope. I think such things should be hidden, because they should be role models, and there are fewer and fewer of these role models nowadays. Young people have no one to follow and problems arise. Historical films should show role models, which should also help in the normal life of an ordinary individual. I like *The Crown* because it's fun to watch, but I know there shouldn't be such films (5OM).

As one can see, it is possible to agree with the missionary benefits of historical films, while at the same time enjoying productions that somehow deny them.

Audience Practices

To understand the actual relevance of feature films as a common source of knowledge about the past, audience practices are also significant. After all, from the perspective of public history and collective memory, it is important not only whether films on history are watched, but also how this happens and whether viewers watch the same films. During the communist period, among the ten Polish films with the largest cinema audiences, eight were set in a historical context.^[20] In an analogous list of Polish films produced after 1989, there are only four such productions in the top ten. In 2021–2023 period, only one production (loosely) referring to history gathered more than half a million

[20] *Lista filmów z największą liczbą widzów w Polsce*, Wikipedia, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_filmów_z_największą_lodzią_widzów_w_Polsce

liczb%C4%85_widz%C3%B3w_w_Polsce (accessed: 23.09.2024).

viewers in cinemas, namely, *The Peasants (Chłopi)* (2023), directed by DK Welchman and Hugh Welchman. Such data suggest that the contemporary importance of films as cultural texts universalizing collective memories about the past is declining in Polish society.

As a result of Poland's systemic transformation since the 1990s, a number of cinemas, especially in smaller centres, have declined or closed, significantly reducing the possibilities of watching the latest productions on the big screen.^[21] At the same time, the development of the television market has allowed viewers to choose from an increasingly wide range of programmes. The processes of personalizing viewed content have significantly deepened in recent years due to the proliferation of streaming platforms, a process further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the growing number and competitiveness of platforms, the availability of film productions from all over the world, algorithms recommending productions for individual users, and the surge in the popularity of series, it is increasingly difficult to find Polish films about history that are universally recognizable.

During the first wave of interviews (2015), respondents eagerly referred to well-known Polish TV series from the pre-1989 era, such as *Czterej pancerni i pies* (*Four Tank-men and a Dog*) (1966–1970) and *Stawka większa niż życie* (*More Than Life at Stake*) (1967–1968), which had been broadcast multiple times on television, while the contemporary production that served as the basic point of reference for viewers was *Czas honoru* (*Days of Honour*) (2008–2013). At the time, it was mainly younger interviewees who declared that they watched the latter, with the overall reviews being favourable. Still, it should be noted that, in comparison with foreign productions, *Czas honoru* did not fare particularly well. This ambivalence is reflected in the following quote: “I watch it because I really don't like it. The script, the acting and the set design are very bad, which is exactly why I watch it. This is the essence of Polish films: kitsch and artificiality” (3YM). Individual responses also pointed to foreign series broadcasted on Polish-language television stations, such as *The Tudors* (2007–2010) or *Rome* (2005–2007), which, from the perspective of the respondents, could serve as a model for showing Poland's past, e.g. the period of the Jagiellonian dynasty.

Meanwhile, in the second wave of interviews (2022), streaming platforms proved to be the most important, and often the only medium through which people watch films or series. This was particularly true among residents of smaller towns, although traditional television remains important for some older respondents. Those in large cities are more likely to attend cinema screenings, while using streaming platforms as their first-choice medium on a daily basis. The comments of some respondents further justify such practices with the belief that

[21] Marcin Adamczak, *Globalne Hollywood, filmowa Europa i polskie kino po 1989 roku*, słово/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2010, pp. 240–249.

the emotional layer of historical films (e.g., horror, suffering, grief induced by watching war productions) makes them prefer to watch such images at home, in comfortable conditions, rather than in public places such as movie theatres. Thus, despite the fact that respondents declared a general interest in films about history, it was very difficult to find such Polish productions that all or at least most of the respondents were familiar with. A notable exception during the second series of interviews was *Wołyń (Hatred)* (2016), directed by Wojciech Smarzowski (1.4 million viewers in movie theatres), and to a lesser extent, Władysław Pasikowski's *Pokłosie (Aftermath)* (2012) (325,000 viewers in cinemas, with simultaneous high level of media and political publicity). Interestingly, other films on history that arouse media controversy were less known and recognized among the respondents, such as Paweł Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2013), *Historia Roja* (2016) directed by Jerzy Zalewski, or Konrad Łęcki's *Wyklęty (Cursed)* (2017). These are films that from the points of view of critics and academicians appear as important elements of contemporary memory politics^[22] but are far less important for audiences. The situation was similar in the case of TV series. In interviews conducted in 2022, there was no mention of shared experience of watching classic pre-1989 series such as *Czterej pancerni i pies* and *Stawka większa niż życie*. There were only occasional references to *Czas honoru* and TVP productions: *Korona królów* (2018–2020) and *Korona królów. Jagiellonowie* (2022–2024). The viewing experience shared by a larger number of respondents was only associated with the series *Wielka woda (High Water)* (2022), produced for Netflix, referring to the 'Flood of the Millennium' that hit Poland in 1997.^[23] In this case, however, it was not clear to the interviewees whether and to what extent this production could be considered historical.

Of course, it should be noted that the sample group was not representative, thus conclusions about familiarity with particular productions cannot be extrapolated to the entire population. Nevertheless, the fragmented, personalised viewing practices of individuals, as revealed during the interviews, are consistent with the macro-scale processes described above. It can be assumed that while films on history are still a common source of knowledge about the past, they are losing their power to build common collective memory, therefore influencing society's self-image.

With the changes in audience practices, another aspect is worth noting. The dominance of streaming platforms is also significantly affecting the forms of production, most notably the rise of series as a viewing practice. This was reflected in interviews in connection with questions about whether there are topics from history (of Poland or the region in which interviewees live) that they think should be filmed. It is worth noting that these questions usually caused some difficulty for the respondents, and spontaneous answers rarely appeared. Among the

[22] Magdalena Urbańska, op. cit.

[23] The interviews were conducted shortly after the series premiered on Netflix on 5 October 2022.

interviewees' expectations, however, were suggestions for productions reflecting popular forms known from streaming services. Suggestions included stories of well-known magnate families (the Branicki family in the Podlasie region, Czartoryski family in Puławy) in a convention fraught with both romance and political intrigue (such as in *The Crown*, *The Tudors*) or series about the Jagiellonian dynasty as a grand political saga (these suggestions appeared both before and after Polish Television produced the series *Korona Królów. Jagiellonowie*, however, it should be noted that respondents expected a different, premium kind of production).

This qualitative study confirms the prevalence of watching feature films as a source of knowledge about the past. At the same time, it sheds more light on the actual role of films for contemporary public history and their relevance for collective memory. The most important conclusions can be boiled down to a few points, presented below.

Firstly, the interviewees most often define the genre of historical film on the basis of three main criteria – temporal, historical truth and subject – but there is no consensus among them on the necessary conditions for fulfilling these criteria. Respondents' statements suggest that opinions may be influenced by their age or general interest in the past, but testing these hypotheses requires further research.

Secondly, respondents often do not consider films on history in isolation from other sources of knowledge. Thus, the reliability of a particular film is evidenced, for example, by the general consistency of the film's message with other productions on a similar topic and the opinions of authorities (reviewers, teachers, film award jurors, etc.). The relevance of a film as a source of knowledge about the past may thus depend on the degree to which it is embedded in the network of social actors and the previous cultural practices of individuals.

Thirdly, respondents perceive the great importance of historical films in the fact that knowledge about the past (the cognitive component of attitudes toward historical events) is wrapped in an emotional, entertaining layer (the emotional component of attitudes). Without this layer, films become unattractive, artificial, boring. This is an accusation repeated regularly during the interviews with regard to some Polish film productions, especially in comparison with Hollywood period dramas.

Fourthly, interviewees deem films about history to be important elements of collective memory and memory politics, primarily at the national and transnational levels. It was more difficult for respondents to talk about films as cultural texts presenting minority memories (e.g., regional, ethnic, religious minorities, women's history, etc.).

Fifthly, as a result of changes in viewing practices, primarily the proliferation of streaming platforms, it is becoming progressively difficult to speak of a canon of films about the past that can serve as bonding elements in the collective memory of Polish society. The practice of watching films is increasingly becoming an individual ex-

Summary

perience (alone, at home) rather than a social one (at the cinema, in a group), which further limits social communication about films and the historical events they talk about. Audiences also expect new historical productions to adapt to popular forms brought by streaming platforms (e.g., a series instead of a feature films).

The results also indicate the need for further social research into the actual importance of films for public history. This should be not only of a qualitative nature (e.g., in-depth individual and group interviews, research workshops) but also involve quantitative research, carried out on representative samples, which would go beyond noting the prevalence of films as a source of knowledge about the past.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Adamczak Marcin, *Globalne Hollywood, filmowa Europa i polskie kino po 1989 roku, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2010.

Assmann Jan, *Communicative and Cultural Memory*, [in:] *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*, eds. Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, Edgar Wunder, Springer, Heidelberg 2011, pp. 15–28.

Assmann Jan, Czaplicka John, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, “New German Critique” 1995, no. 65, pp. 125–33.

Burkholder Peter, Schaffer Dana, *History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey*, American Historical Association, Washington DC 2021.

CBOS, *Powstanie Warszawskie w ocenie społecznej*, Fundacja Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, Warszawa 2014, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_110_14.PDF (accessed: 20.09.2024).

Franco Barbara, *Public History and Memory: A Museum Perspective*, “The Public Historian” 1997, no. 19(2), pp. 65–67.

Lista filmów z największą liczbą widzów w Polsce, Wikipedia, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_film%C3%B3w_z_najwi%C4%99ks%C4%85_liczb%C4%85_widz%C3%B3w_w_Polsce (accessed: 23.09.2024).

Lunt Peter, Livingstone Sonia, *Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communications Research*, “Journal of Communication” 1993, no. 46(2) pp. 79–98.

Nijakowski Lech M., *Polska polityka pamięci: Esej socjologiczny*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2008.

Rosenstone Robert A., *The Historical Film as Real History*, “Film-Historia” 1995, no. 5(1), pp. 5–23.

Rosenzweig Roy, Thelen David, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, Columbia University Press, New York 1998.

Sayer Faye, *Public History: A Practical Guide*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2019.

Szpoćiński Andrzej, *II wojna światowa w komunikacji społecznej*, [in:] Piotr T. Kwiatkowski, Lech M. Nijakowski, Barbara Szacka et al., *Między codziennością a wielką historią: Druga wojna światowa w pamięci zbiorowej społeczeństwa polskiego*, Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Gdańsk and Warszawa 2010.

Teorie postaw, ed. Stefan Nowak, PWN, Warszawa 1973.

Urbańska Magdalena, *Filmowe zarządzanie pamięcią: Kino polskie 2005–2020 o historii najnowszej*, Universitas, Kraków 2022.

Warren-Findley Jannelle, *History in New Worlds: Surveys and Results in the United States and Australia*, “American Studies International” 2004, vol. 42, no. 2/3, pp. 75–85.