

## Chapter 5

### **Agnieszka Holland's Starburst Career: From Persona non Grata to International Celebrity on Multiple Fronts**

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Rita Kempley: “She’s a celebrity now and can chide the Polish people as she pleases.”

Holland: “If I live [sic] there they will [sic] eat me, you know. But because I am coming as a beloved visitor, it goes well.”  
(Kempley 1997: G7).

In early October 2022, I attended the Alina Margolis-Edelman Award ceremony at the Marek Edelman Dialogue Centre in Łódź. The award is given to the people and institutions that help children, and Agnieszka Holland is the chairwoman of the jury. I saw her moving swiftly across the hall while greeting, hugging, and chatting with the people in attendance. At one point, two women approached her and said something to her with a sheepish smile. Responding with a nod, she stood next to one of them, while the other photographed them with her cell phone. Then the women changed places for another shot. Holland left them instantly after the impromptu session, to join other guests, whom she welcomed with a smile and a brief exchange. Meanwhile the women, happy and proud, gazed at the screens of their cell phones.

The selfies with the two women leave no doubt whatsoever that Agnieszka Holland is a celebrity. However, the event she participated in provides a special context for her celebrity status. The main recipients of the 2022 award were people engaged in helping children who are victims of the migratory crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Holland has long criticized the Polish government’s migratory politics, taking part in protests and giving supportive speeches. Using every opportunity to publicly protest any form of discrimination, she is an activist celebrity (Figure 5.1). Yet, first and foremost, she is the most internationally recognizable Polish filmmaker.

In this chapter, I discuss how Holland’s public persona has evolved from celebrity director to activist celebrity advocating for human rights.<sup>1</sup> Holland became a celebrity director when she started working abroad in France and Germany during the eighties and Hollywood in the nineties. When martial law was introduced in Poland in 1981, she decided to remain abroad, and soon became an exilic artist struggling to work in the film industry. Yet, with time and especially an Oscar nomination for *Angry Harvest* (1985), she gained recognition in the transnational mediascape. In approximately the last two decades her public persona has transformed from celebrity director into activist celebrity, enabled by the “convertibility of celebrity into other resources, such as economic or political capital” (Driessen 2013: 544). She uses her capital acquired as a celebrity director for her political activity. Among many ideological agendas, she passionately

<sup>1</sup> P. David Marshall acknowledges this shift occurring in contemporary culture and discusses how “establishing reputation and significance [changed], to its celebrity iconicity and the development of the visible presentation of different boundaries of public and private” (Marshall 2016b: 497).

supports women's causes, especially their right to abortion. Although she cannot be identified with celebrity feminism, she uses her celebrity status to support a feminist agenda. Most likely she understands that

[f]eminism—especially in a context routinely celebrated as postfeminist, with its work thought to have been done—continues to need its celebrities; those women who receive the type of cultural legitimation that enables feminism to continue its vital work. And, of course, indicative of their symbiosis, the mainstream media continues [sic] to need feminism, including the high profile women it has authorised to publicly speak on its behalf. (Taylor 2014: 771)

In examining Holland's evolution from celebrity director to celebrity activist, I examine her interviews, appearances in various media, journalistic portrayals of her persona, and the awards and honorary recognitions she has received during the last three decades to buttress my argument that she is "a discursive figure who continually mediates and is mediated by her film, her publicity, and her own public articulations" (Lane 2000: 47). From these mediations emerges the filmmaker/celebrity nexus, which Holland attempts to regulate in each timeframe according to evolving situations. The transformations of her public persona need to be seen as seeping into one another and emerging with various degrees of intensity in different contexts and circumstances.

### **Celebrity Director: Between Art and Commerce**

When in 1988, after seven years abroad, Holland finally was allowed re-entry into Poland, her friends and colleagues waited for her at the airport and welcomed her as if she were a star or celebrity. She came to promote her film *To Kill a Priest* (1988), which was presented outside of the official system of distribution. The facilitators of these screenings organized them as highly important "film events," reported even overseas. As John Tagliabue wrote in *The New York Times*: "Several hundred invited guests gathered for the first Polish screening of a film that describes the slaying of a pro-Solidarity priest by policemen" (Tagliabue 1988). Political celebrities, such as Jacek Kuroń, a legendary figure of the anti-communist opposition, celebrated the film and its director. Soon, Polish distributors and critics were working to establish Holland as a celebrity director. After her seven-year-long absence from the Polish mediascape, she had become visible again (see Tasker 2010).

Deborah M. Sims notes that celebrity directors usually are *auteurs* who establish "an elite community of auteur filmmaking that is coded as masculine and upholds admission standards predicated on maleness." She also claims that "fame itself is gendered," and that "[t]he masculinization of fame . . . [is] particularly apt in the case of filmmaking" (Sims 2014: 193). A photo of Polish filmmakers participating in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Cannes Film Festival testifies to Sims's observations. It shows five renowned Polish male directors (Andrzej Żuławski, Andrzej Wajda, Roman Polański, Ryszard Bugajski, and Krzysztof Kieślowski), with Holland as the only woman. All stand in a row holding a huge Polish flag that serves as the backdrop for the picture (Figure 5.2). The photo has acquired iconic status in the history of Polish cinema, as evidenced by its use as a cover photo for the magisterial volume on the history of Polish cinema by the renowned scholar and film critic Tadeusz Lubelski (2009). Taken at the most prestigious European film

festival, the photo symbolically confirmed Holland's membership in this "elitist masculine club."<sup>2</sup> In 2022, she returned to Cannes as a juror, which was a sign that her symbolic capital had grown. Yet she used it (as I explain in due course) as an arena for political activism. In the intervening years she enjoyed the status of celebrity director mostly in her native Poland despite—or perhaps because of—not making films there until 2007.

To a significant extent, Holland owes her status of celebrity director to the promotional campaigns of her foreign films organized in Poland. The Solopan company, the Polish distributor of *The Secret Garden* (1993), her first and successful Hollywood production, organized a so-called "continental premiere" of the film, which became a spectacular cultural event. It took place in Warsaw on January 25, 1994 in the Kultura movie theater (Karbowiak 1994).<sup>3</sup> Among the invited guests were Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first prime minister of post-communist Poland, and Maja Komorowska, a famous actress and supporter of the anti-communist dissident movement. Both came with their granddaughters. There were also many figures known in Polish bohemian circles. In 1995, Warner Home Video released the film on VHS, sold together with the book *Directed by: Agnieszka Holland (Reżyseria: Agnieszka Holland)*, edited by Stanisław Zawisliński (1995); it included interviews with Holland and her collaborators as well as excerpts from reviews of her films. Attention to Holland, in short, was not lacking.

Just seven years after the first volume on Holland was published, a book-length collection of interviews with her by Maria Kornatowska (1935-2011) appeared, titled *Magic and Money*.<sup>4</sup> It contains Holland's commentaries about her colleagues, friends, family, films, and her personal struggles with various obstacles she had encountered as a (woman) filmmaker (Holland 2002). A renowned film critic and professor at the Łódź Film School, Kornatowska not only posed questions but fully participated in the conversations and shared her thoughts or opinions on the issues they discussed. This was the exchange of two cultivated and successful women who shared a passion for cinema.

Kornatowska's interviews foregrounded the factor of gender in Holland's persona as a celebrity director, as demonstrated by the selection of visuals for the book: these include sixteen photos from her films, twelve of her on the filmset or with actors, and fourteen of her with her family and friends (some of them doubling as her collaborators). The persona which emerges from these photos engages equally in professional and private life. Most importantly, she looks pretty much the same in all of the photos (except for the age difference between her childhood and adult life), which testifies to her authenticity and, possibly, integrity. Deborah Jermyn usefully notes that the way a woman director looks informs "the meaning/s she contains" (Jermyn 2021: 369). Holland's look suggests individualism and strength, for she visibly distances herself from fashion trends. This does not mean that she neglects her attire; most often she opts for a boho style that sends a subtle counter-cultural message. Equally eloquent, her professional photos testify to her director status, as she is frequently shown behind the

<sup>2</sup> In her essay on the extra-textual contexts of Kathryn Bigelow's authorship, Rona Murray notes that she established "representation of herself as strong in masculine terms" (Murray 2011: 5), which Holland did in the 1970s in the Polish film industry. While admitting the gender essentialism informing such a claim, Deborah Jermyn agrees with Murray's observation (Jermyn 2021: 371).

<sup>3</sup> This is one of the most famous arthouse movie theatres that is located at the very centre of Warsaw.

<sup>4</sup> In 2012, the second and expanded edition of the book was published, which testifies to its popularity and Holland's status of celebrity director.

camera or on a filmset in rather commanding postures, whereas the private photos reveal her intimate self. The professional photos are complemented with pictures taken at cinematic events such as the Cannes film festival. Overall, the photos contribute to her celebrity persona, which always merges the public with the private. Two scholarly monographs that were published around the same time as Kornatowska's interview, by Mariola Jankun-Dopartowa (2000) and Sławomir Bobowski (2001), include some biographical information, yet they are mostly concerned with Holland's films, examined as addressing universal human issues. Arguably, the three books sanctioned her work as internationally recognized *auteur* cinema, thereby establishing her as a celebrity director.

Although Holland's recognizability outside of Poland was significantly lesser, her persona in the 1990s and early 2000s attracted considerable attention. Her films were reviewed by the most prominent newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *The Washington Post*, and many others. She was also interviewed by the journalists of these newspapers, which increased her visibility and reputation. And her persona was as interesting as her films. In an interview for *The Washington Post*, Rita Kempley asked her provocative questions, and Holland answered them just as provocatively. The article was published as "Agnieszka Holland: A War on Stupidity; Polish-Born Director of 'Washington Square' Faces Off Against the Mindless Moviemaking Machine," and the journalist introduced Holland through both her films and her biography: "Her critically acclaimed films have been banned in her homeland, snubbed by Germany's Oscar nominating committee and ignored in her adopted France. Additionally, she's been exiled from Poland, jailed by the Czechs and condemned as an antisemite even though she is half Jewish and faced virulent racism herself" (Kempley 1997: G7). Kempley briefly describes *Washington Square* (1997) as a "hardly typical Hollywood" film, which implies that it sooner belongs to European art cinema. While commenting on the story and the characters, Holland recollects her father, who was similar to Dr. Sloper in that he also was incapable of unconditional love for his daughter. When Kempley mentions Todd McCarthy's review, claiming that the film is "imbued with something of a feminist twist," Holland spontaneously responds, "This guy is completely stupid [. . .]. He reviewed a couple of my movies and those were the most stupid reviews I have ever had. I don't think it's feminist. I think it's told from a more female point of view than other adaptations." Yet after a while, she admits that from a certain viewpoint "it is a feminist story" (Kempley 1997: G7). While describing Holland's relationship with her native Poland, Kempley states: "She's a celebrity now and can chide the Polish people as she pleases." Holland caustically replies (in imperfect English): "If I live there they will eat me, you know. But because I am coming as a beloved visitor, it goes well." Holland reserves her most provocative statement for living in Los Angeles: "I kind of like living in L.A., which surprises myself. There are only three things to do: go to movies, drive and shop. That's why I am not wearing black, you see. Suddenly in my forties I am the beeg [sic] shopper." Kempley comments ironically on this confession: "Next thing you know she'll be popping Prozac" (Kempley 1997: G7).

Holland's subsequent collaboration with television streaming platforms reduced her visibility, and consequently her celebrity director status subsided significantly in her native Poland and elsewhere. She regained it with the Oscar nomination for her 2011 film *In Darkness*, an international coproduction made in Poland. Simultaneously, in the second decade of the twenty-first century she systematically increased her public activity

in political and social life, which ultimately added a celebrity-activist component to her persona.

### Cinema, Politics, and Celebrity Culture

The promotional campaign organized around *In Darkness* and its Oscar nomination boosted Holland's visibility significantly. She currently enjoys prominence in contemporary (mostly European) film culture, Polish political life, and in the popular media, and her celebrity capital has accumulated in three areas: cinema, politics, and celebrity culture. Today Holland is one of the most recognizable public figures in Poland. Her name in a Google search yields 3,380,000 results, while Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the governing party Law-and-Order (PiS) gets 7,970,000 results. Moreover, her search results are also much higher compared to the stars and celebrities of Polish cinema such as Andrzej Wajda (2,590,000 results), Krystyna Janda (about 1,150,000 results) and Daniel Olbrychski (421,000 results). Compared to Anglophone directors in world cinema, Holland's score is much lower than Quentin Tarantino's (37,500,000 results), moderately lower than that of Jane Campion, who apparently is the most recognizable female filmmaker in contemporary cinema (6,040,000 results), but almost on a par with Kathryn Bigelow's (3,640,000 results).<sup>5</sup> Holland's recognition originates mostly in her prolific participation in film cultures and as such will be discussed first.

### Cinema

Holland is a recipient of many awards and distinctions. At the local level, one of the most spectacular ceremonies honoring her was the occasion of implanting a star with her name on the main street of Łódź—the town where the Polish film industry was located during the period of state socialism, hence called Hollyódź, with a series of stars' names paralleling the famous Walk of Fame in Los Angeles (Figure 5.3). All her films made in the twenty-first century have been distinguished with various film festival prizes. For instance, *In Darkness*, aside from being nominated for the Oscar, received among many other awards the Grand Prix at the 7th Batumi International Art-house Film Festival. Although the festival is not the most prestigious, the award is important inasmuch as it symbolically signifies Holland's comeback to art cinema after working within the Hollywood system of film production and global streaming platforms. Her 2017 *Spoor* (*Pokot*) won the Alfred Bauer Prize (Silver Bear) at the 67<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival (Figure 5.4). Finally, *Mr. Jones* (2019) won the Grand Prix Golden Lions at the 44<sup>th</sup> Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia. Two years later, in 2021, at the same festival she was awarded with the Platinum Lions for lifetime achievement in filmmaking. Holland is also active in European film culture; in 2014 she was elected to be the chair of the European Film Academy board and in 2021 to be its President.

Like other celebrities, Holland has received recognition from universities, and these are of special importance. They include honorary degrees from FAMU (Figure 5.5) and Brandeis University (Figure 5.6) as well as the Viadrina University Award (in Frankfurt at Oder; Figure 5.7).<sup>6</sup> Although these distinctions granted by higher educational institutions are commonly seen as symbolic acknowledging the recipients' contribution to

<sup>5</sup> Accessed on September 24, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Among other recipients of the award are Krzysztof Penderecki, Karol Dedecius, Volker Schlöndorff, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Günter Grass, and Adam Michnik.

culture and science, they also serve to boost the prestige of these institutions (see the Introduction). In other words, the higher educational institutions use the cultural capital of the people they honor. As P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond explain:

On a basic level, universities have always been in an industry obsessed with impact: they want their individual location to be noticed, their impact and prestige to be recognized and their ‘work’ valued, and thus they have consistently wanted to be attached to those who were most visible in many domains of public activity. Thus, for centuries they have been the place for the provocative lecture and the site of invitation to the most famous literary or performing arts star. [. . .] In a much more systematic way, the relationship between celebrities and universities was built through the system of honorary degrees and doctorates where the individual university reached out beyond its borders to connect to some prominent individual. (Marshall and Redmond 2016: 3)

In other words, universities and artists-intellectuals-celebrities are “friends with benefits” who participate in a mutual exchange of cultural capital that enhances the visibility of both parties. The ceremonies are always organized as spectacular events, with traditional academic gowns, hats, and imponderabilia, and as such they appeal enough to media to be widely promoted and disseminated. Ultimately, enhanced visibility increases cultural capital of the academic institution, which can be transposed into economic capital through attracting more affluent patrons. In turn, the artists/intellectuals increase their chances to get their projects funded, while also enjoying increased demand for their cultural products.

### ***Politics***

Holland’s native Poland also recognized her with many honorary awards and distinctions for her public activity and advocacy for democratic and inclusive societies. To name just a few, in 2013 she received the Saint George medal from *Tygodnik Powszechny*, a progressive Catholic weekly—a prestigious award that honors those who campaign against any form of oppression or inequality (among its recipients are Adam Michnik, Václav Havel, and Marek Edelman). In 2015, the Kościuszko Foundation granted her the Pioneer Award; in the same year she received the award Creator of Culture from the popular weekly *Polityka* for engaging with difficult historical and political issues in the accessible form of popular cinema. Among the distinctions she garnered abroad, two deserve special mention: in 2014 she received the Gratias Agit Award from the Czech Ministry of Foreign Matters as well as the Order of Princess Olga that the president of Ukraine gives to women for their achievements in various realms of public and private life. Such international recognition increases Holland’s symbolic capital, which she uses in sociopolitical life.

Holland’s participation in political debates within Poland has intensified since the right-wing conservative party of Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) came to power, first in 2005 until 2007, and then in 2015 until now. Monika Bartoszewicz describes PiS as “a highly centralised and micro-managed *Führerpartei* with its unquestionable supreme leader, Jarosław Kaczyński” (Bartoszewicz 2019: 481). Since 2015, Polish society has been deeply divided between supporters of the ruling party and

its opponents. PiS demonizes women's right for abortion, same-sex marriage, and sex education; it led restrictive migration politics during the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe and the 2021 crisis on the Polish-Belorussian border.<sup>7</sup> Large sectors of Polish society have frequently manifested their discontent with such governmental politics, which the media either applauded or deplored. Their coverage significantly buttressed political dissent. Public television (TVP) channels governmental propaganda, while the commercial station (TVN), a subsidiary of Warner Bros, vehemently criticizes the government. Whereas TVN frequently invites Holland to comment on various political and social issues (Figure 5.8), TVP presents her persona as an example of social and political irresponsibility. Whether positive or negative, the prolific images of her in the media increase her visibility and her symbolic capital. A few years ago Kaczyński made his contribution to her image when in the Polish Parliament he commented critically on her political attitude by falsely claiming that she was calling for a return to communism ("Fałszywy cytat" 2019). Aside from the appropriateness or legitimacy of the comment, when the political leader of the country during his parliamentary speech expresses an opinion about a filmmaker, his doing so may be seen to revitalize Lenin's reported statement, "Cinema is the most important of arts." Paradoxically, instead of depreciating her, Kaczyński's criticism made her more recognizable than ever.

Utterly devoid of any nostalgia for communism, Holland openly disapproves of PiS's blatant nationalistic historical narration, which has resulted, inter alia, in a revival of "żydokomuna" (Judeo communism), the antisemitic concept that linked Polish Jews with Stalinist oppression. Her rejection of it is motivated ideologically as well as personally, for it is linked to the tragic story of her father, who was a pre-war communist-turned-revisionist in the mid-1950s; arrested in 1962, he fatally jumped out of a window during an official search of his apartment.<sup>8</sup> For decades it was unclear whether his death was a suicide or political murder. In a symbolic gesture of dissent from PiS's nationalistic historical narration, Holland accepted Krystyna Naszkowska's invitation to participate in the book *We're the Children of Communists* (*My dzieci komunistów*). Published in 2019, the collection includes interviews with children of Polish communists who were involved in implementing Stalinism in Poland and explores the communist heritage in contemporary life. As the interviewees are relatively recognizable public personas who are active in contemporary social, political, or artistic life, it indirectly yet persistently calls for a nuanced approach to the communist heritage. In her interview, Holland emphasizes her father's sincere and idealistic engagement with communism before WWII, followed by his bitter disillusionment with its implementation after 1945. She also admits that over the years she has developed sympathy and tenderness for him (Naszkowska 2019: 381). Like all the other entries in the volume, her story goes beyond the binary opposition of communism and anticommunism exploited by PiS.<sup>9</sup> It is worth

<sup>7</sup> This radically changed in the case of Ukrainian refugees escaping to Poland after Russia's aggression. In 2022 Poland opened its borders to the Ukrainians without any restrictions and provided them with basic health care and work permission, in addition to education of children.

<sup>8</sup> The mystery of Henryk Holland's death was finally solved by Krzysztof Persak, who found the archival records of surveillance installed by secret services in his apartment; the recordings of the day of his death prove that it was a suicide (Persak 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Zygmunt Bauman's biography is the most conspicuous example of the complex relationship between an intellectual and communist doctrine to which he vehemently adhered during WWII and the period of Stalinism. An exhaustive and succinct examination of the issue is presented in a recently published

mentioning that Naszkowska's invitation to participate in the project was rejected by many people who are either unwilling or afraid to talk about their communist and often Jewish heritage. Holland did not hesitate to accept it, and the symbolic capital she has accumulated as a celebrity director has solidified her position within the public discourse on memory.

### ***Popular Culture***

Although Holland has been interviewed in many books, periodicals, and magazines, her celebrity status is mostly boosted by her frequent appearances on television, radio, and the internet. Her participation in diverse actions protesting the restrictive abortion law (Women's Strike, 2020-2022), the refugee crisis in 2021, and Russia's attack on Ukraine is always documented on TVN news and on the internet platforms belonging to the consortium (Figure 5.9). Since the TVN media group supports the Civic Platform party (Platforma Obywatelska), the main opponent of PiS, Holland's presence in its programs indirectly legitimizes its agenda. In the complex nexus of politics, celebrity culture, and infotainment, "celebrity is a mechanism of power through which certain speakers are granted not only the ability to speak but to have such speech legitimated" (Taylor 2008: 105).

Holland traverses the realms of politics and entertainment swiftly and efficiently. During the 2021 Polish Film Festival in Gdynia, when she received the honorary award of the Platinum Lions for lifetime achievements, she delivered a speech that was devoted as much to politics as to cinema. She commented on the immigrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border that was occurring at that time, while comparing the immigrants to the Holocaust victims depicted in her films. As she said, refugees also need to hide and they also suffer from cold and hunger. Helping these people, she claimed, would be the only chance for Poles to save their humanity. In her speech, she performed the role of a politically engaged artist who dares to criticize the political power if the situation demands it. Like many Polish "national artists" in the past, Holland acted as the nation's conscience (see the Introduction). She seemed to repeat Stefan Żeromski's often quoted call: "Polish wounds must be torn open so that they do not heal with a membrane of meanness" (Żeromski 1956: 114). In her speech, the suffering immigrants are "a wound" on the Polish body, thus, they must not be subjected to political reasoning but, instead, treated with compassion and respect. Only then will the wound be "healed."

Holland has tended to engage transnational identities in her work and public appearances, but rather unexpectedly in her Gdynia speech she performed the role of the national artist as a guardian of moral order and national spirit. Enthusiastic applause greeted her speech, to which other prizewinners often referred during the ceremony. Arguably, the event elevated Holland to the position of the master (or, better, mistress) of Polish national cinema. It could be claimed that she has returned from her "transnational adventure" to perform the role of the "national artist" previously played by Andrzej Wajda. And one may ponder whether the assumption of that part may evidence her acceptance, once again, of the masculinized role of the national film *auteur* or whether that role has evolved into a female form that privileges affect and emotion as central to cultural production.

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biography of Bauman by Domosławski 2021. References in the footnotes should also adhere to the author-date format used in the main text



At the same time, Holland does not limit her public celebrity performance solely to the role of “national artist.” If needed, she enacts the role of the “European” artist deeply concerned with the larger community of the “old continent.” For example, on the completion of Brexit, she reprimanded the UK for leaving the EU:

Aren’t you ashamed to be the first to back away from hope? Can you see an alternative? Do you really think that once we’ve broken our voluntary ties things will be just as they were before? No, they will not. So I cannot wish you all the best. I won’t say ‘Good bye and good luck.’ Because I’m furious with you. [. . .] I’m sure you’re making a mistake for which we’ll all pay—you’re sure to, but so are we. I’m afraid everyone’s going to pay equally for the lies, cowardice, and arrogance of the few. (Holland 2020a)

Her voice was the harshest among the twenty-seven farewells expressed by renowned figures from the European Union countries.<sup>10</sup> Likewise harsh was her comment delivered at the 77<sup>th</sup> Cannes Film Festival in 2022, where she was invited to serve as the President of the L’Œil d’or - Le Prix du documentaire Jury. She reprimanded the organizers for screening the film of a Russian director in the main competition: “If it were up to me, I would not include Russian films in the official program of the festival—even if Kirill Serebrennikov is such a talented artist.” She added: “Unfortunately, my bad feelings were confirmed by his words. He used [the film’s festival press conference] to praise a Russian oligarch [the film’s funder, sanctioned billionaire Roman Abramovich] and to compare the tragedy of Russian soldiers to Ukrainian defenders. I would not give him such a chance at this very moment” (Holdsworth 2022). Admittedly, on this occasion, as on many others, Holland demonstrated that “celebrities [. . .] sometimes [. . .] operate as what could be described as contemporary moral compasses” (Marshall 2016a: 156). Arguably, Holland’s pedagogical attitude cannot be explained solely by her personality, for it more generally relates to some aspects of European culture.

In her analysis of European literary celebrities, Rebecca Braun succinctly explains that nineteenth- and twentieth-century American writers strove to fit within national narratives privileging “the common man,” while “their European counterparts have [. . .] found themselves bound into a tradition that expects and correspondingly rewards intellectual and moral instruction.” Consequently, the former are manufacturing their personas (and their works, for that matter) for mass consumption, while the latter are “liable to be received by a public that overplays the social and intellectual capacities of fallible individuals” and ultimately become “intellectually fetishised” (Braun 2011: 323). Although Holland works in cinema and television, which might be seen as representing respectively high and popular culture, she speaks from the position Braun ascribed to European writers and hence she feels entitled and obliged to provide moral instruction whenever she thinks (or feels) it is needed (see the Introduction).

First and foremost, Holland calls for an inclusive society that will provide every citizen with equal rights. In interviews she supports the LGBTQ+ movement and

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, while reporting on Holland’s “farewell” to Brexit, Polish journalists skipped the fact that she was one of twenty-seven people invited by *The Guardian* to share their reflections on Brexit. As a result, some readers might have misperceived Holland’s criticism as an individual voice coming from Eastern Europe.

participates in related community events. Her engagement with the issue also has a personal dimension, for her daughter and regular collaborator, Kasia Adamik, came out as gay in 2012. In 2014, Holland consented to have her photo be used for a cover of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *Replica* (*Replika*), the only Polish LGBTQIA magazine (Figure 5.10). Presumably, the editorial board believed that her face is recognizable enough to leverage the issue of non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities in the public debate. In her interview published in the same issue of *Replica*, she speaks as a celebrity director/activist and at the same time as the mother of a gay daughter. In the title of the interview, she addresses the parents of gay children with the words “Parents, be cool!” As much as she affirms the LGBTQIA community, she is ruthless in her criticism of the government’s conservative gender politics. For instance, in a 2020 interview for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, she compared the government-run hate campaign directed at the LGBTQ+ community to the Jews’ persecution in the twentieth century, while expressing admiration for Polish youth’s resistance to these attacks and support of their goals (Holland 2020b). In 2021, the *Replica* interview was reprinted in a book format along with other conversations published in the magazine. The volume was titled *People, not Ideology* (*Ludzie nie ideologia*; Żurawiecki 2021), which boldly denounced a statement made by President Andrzej Duda during his election campaign in 2020 in the city of Brzeg: “Attempts have been made to persuade us that they [LGBT] are people, but this is merely ideology” (“Andrzej Duda znów o LGBT”). In this context, Holland’s presence in the volume is an act of political dissent even stronger than the earlier loan of her image for the cover of *Replica*.

Holland’s manifestations of political dissent develop what Liza Tsaliki calls “the celebrity-in-the-public-service narrative” through which “celebrities render the consumption of politics and activism—not just that of an extravagant lifestyle—an attractive imperative. They can be seen to instigate activist engagement and motivate public endorsement of their cause, while reinforcing their image as ‘doers of good deeds’” (Tsaliki 2016: 235). A celebrity “lends credibility to political agendas” (Tsaliki 2016: 240) and may be called a “celebvocate,” the term Tsaliki uses for the merger of celebrity and advocate. Since Holland’s media presence is prolific and extends across various platforms, she also acts “as an agent of dispersal, a driver of the extension of the TV medium as it reaches feelers out across ever more screens” (Kavka 2016: 297). Accordingly, the authorship of celebrity directors becomes dispersed, for it emerges not only from the texts of their work but also from the aesthetic and ideological frameworks constituted by the various screens on which they appear. In contemporary Poland, Holland’s numerous images in the media as well as her films unquestionably have familiarized the country’s audience with her and her cultural status.

Within contemporary screen cultures Holland’s political activism is by any means unusual. As Sims notes, “The influence of famous directors reaches well beyond the parameters of their own fields, into the scope of philanthropy and politics, or a synthesis between the two,” while “star power enables celebrity directors to bring national attention to the projects they choose, support the philanthropies dearest to them, and promote the political ideology that they value” (Sims 2014: 202, 203). This evolution is indebted to the development of celebrity culture. As Lilie Chouliaraki observed, in the two last decades or so celebrity has changed from a “‘powerless’ to ‘powerful’ elite.” While occupying this elevated position, a celebrity functions as “a communicative figure that

articulates aspirational performances of solidarity” (Chouliaraki 2013: 229). Holland eagerly engages in various non-governmental humanitarian actions while also providing material support for institutions of social and health aid. The most famous is the annual action of The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity, an NGO that raises money for pediatric and elderly health care and entails one of the seasonal events most publicized by the independent media, especially TVN. In 2020, Holland participated in the event and put on a silent auction during a visit on the set of her next film project,<sup>11</sup> while in 2017 she offered a dinner with her in one of Warsaw’s restaurants.<sup>12</sup> Tellingly, her cultural capital is significant enough to be monetized.

Although in her public performances Holland behaves as a rational and no-nonsense person, she balances these characteristics with emotional warmth. For example, she gave a couple of interviews for women’s magazines together with her daughter, Kasia, in which she performed both the role of a professional filmmaker in possession of agency and power as well as that of a caring mother who supports her daughter (Holland 2019). Importantly, the photos that supplemented one of these interviews present both women in a private space rather than on a set or during film production (Figure 5.11). The visuals foreground the familial rather than professional narration, and the emphasis on the personal may be attributed to Holland’s preferences, but equally may be seen within the context of an “emotive turn” occurring in contemporary, especially celebrity culture. As Sean Redmond contends, “celebrity is an emotive apparatus that engages with common modes of feelings and delirious forms of affect. Celebrities situate themselves within broad economies of intimacy, creating para-social relationships” (Redmond 2016: 351). It is safe to say that recently Holland has invested extensively in these structures of affective exchange.

### (Auto)biography?

Karolina Pasternak’s 2022 biography of Holland, *Holland: Biography Anew* (Holland. *Biografia od nowa*), instantiates the director’s participation in the emotive turn. As the third collection of interviews of the filmmaker, along with three scholarly monographs devoted to her work, it testifies to her reputation of celebrity director. However, compared to the two previous books of interviews (Zawiśliński 1995; Holland 2002), the volume pays more attention to Holland’s personal life. Pasternak begins her book with a description of the garage in Holland’s house in Brittany, France, which indicates that she had access to the director’s private space. She also explains that they met when a friend recommended that she run the Q and A sessions during Holland’s retrospective in Berkeley, California. The sessions extended well beyond cinema theaters and continued at the shared breakfasts, dinners, and walks. Arguably, Pasternak introduces herself as a close acquaintance, a friend who is allowed to see what is closeted in the house and garage, and, by the same token, what is hidden behind Holland’s public persona. When she enters the garage where Holland keeps numerous boxes and folders containing

<sup>11</sup> In the same year, Olga Tokarczuk put on the auction the replica of her Nobel medal. See: Dziecko i Figura 2020. <https://dzieckoifigura.pl/to-przekazaly-na-wosp-gwiazdy-niektore-byly-naprawde-hojne/>. Author-date

<sup>12</sup> The internet portal “wpolityce.pl” announced it under the heading: “It is a super attraction, dinner with Agnieszka Holland”; see: wPolityce.pl 2017 <https://wpolityce.pl/kultura/321946-to-ma-byc-super-atrakcja-kolacja-z-agnieszka-holland-wsrod-filmowych-aukcji-na-rzecz-wosp>. Accessed January 5, 2023. Author-date

various documents and memorabilia, Pasternak randomly selects a box and opens it, to find a poem by the director written during the first years of her exile. When later the journalist asks Holland whether anybody knew about her poetic creations, she gets a negative answer. Yet in a letter to Wajda written on January 23, 1984, Holland mentioned that she had started writing poetry to distance herself from reality (Andrzej Wajda Archive).<sup>13</sup>

The introductory chapter of the biography establishes Holland as a person who hides her gentle side even from her family and friends—with the poems locked in the box serving as proof of that fact—which instantly softens her familiar persona of a strong and authoritative woman. Accordingly, Pasternak emerges as a person who is close to Holland and enjoys her trust. After all, the filmmaker lets her rummage through her personal belongings and, as it later transpires, shares with her the most intimate experiences of her life. Since the soft part of Holland's persona seemingly has remained hidden from the public for a long time, her story, Pasternak claims, needs to be retold, and she proceeds to retell it via Holland's own comments.

The first chapter, "Prague," concerns Holland's studies at FAMU. It presents mostly the material already publicized by Holland in her previous interviews (see Zawisliński 1995 and Holland 2012), yet it also includes her ex-husband's, Laco's, and her friend Andrzej Koszyk's recollections of their time spent together in the capital. Unlike in the earlier publications, Holland comments on her own and her fellow students' sex life,<sup>14</sup> mentioning her then-illegal cohabitation with Laco. Later in the book, she tells Pasternak that her husband cheated on her with her best friend, which ruined their marriage. Tellingly, what Holland reveals to Pasternak is her vulnerable side.

The whole book expands on Holland's private life, her family, and her friends from the perspective of the director herself. For example, Chapter Two, titled "Mother" (Mama), depicts the history of Holland's family from the maternal side. Pasternak's decision to include this material fits Holland's narrative about the importance of her mother—a motif iterated for decades in her public statements about her family. Another chapter treats her father's family, most of which perished in the Holocaust, leaving him and his sister as the only survivors. A special place within the family constellation is allotted Holland's daughter, Kasia, whom Holland had incorporated relatively early into her public persona. In interviews during the 1970s, she would frequently mention Kasia, confessing that she lacked adequate time to take proper care of her—an acknowledgement also articulated by Ludmila Gurchenko (see Chapter 10). In a 1989 interview, she hinted that her daughter's enrollment in a school in Paris limited her professional mobility (Holland 1989), while in another press conversation she mentioned that Kasia loved her school in Paris, which would not have been possible in Poland (Holland 1989: 8).<sup>15</sup> At a certain point, Holland expanded her "family circle" to include

<sup>13</sup> The Andrzej Wajda Archive in Kraków is located in the Centre for Japanese Culture Manga; the collection is not yet catalogued.

<sup>14</sup> She also talks about this topic in the 2013 documentary *Return of Agnieszka H.*, directed by Krystyna Krauze and Jacek Petrycki, which presents Holland's departure for Prague and her recollections of her stay there.

<sup>15</sup> Holland's intense relationship with her mother and her daughter, generously shared with the media, to an extent echoes the relationship between Alla Pugacheva and her daughter, Kristina Orbakaite, which, according to Olga Partan, may be seen as "a certain 'feminism à la Russe'": "both mother and daughter

her sister, the film director Magdalena Łazarkiewicz, and other relatives. Currently, Holland's celebrity persona is firmly rooted in the "family circle," within which, as Pasternak neatly convinces readers, she acts as a matriarch-like protective figure of a predominantly female group.<sup>16</sup>

However, behind Holland's strong figure—whether performing the role of a matriarch, an authoritative director, or an angry activist—Pasternak's book reveals a hidden memory of trauma. Holland divulged to the journalist that she had been sexually molested as a teenager, and Pasternak describes the whole process of the director's decision to allow her to include the incident in the book. As the journalist explains, "Then in Prague we had a long conversation. She told me that she was sexually molested. The nightmare began when she was twelve and lasted up to the time when she left for Prague." Pasternak recollects how Holland interrogated her on her intended use of the material. Initially, "[Holland] categorically forbade me to write about the story in the book. And I understood that. In my opinion, her censorship was not a constraint on the journalist's freedom of speech, but the sacred right of a victim" (Pasternak 2022: 153). Eventually, Holland gave her consent under one condition: that the name of the perpetrator not be revealed. Presumably, she did not want it to be "marketed" as a scandalous item but, rather, to offer a glimpse into her traumatic past.

Importantly, in a different section of the volume, Holland admits her own implication in male molestation of women. She acknowledges that she acted as a passive observer of her male colleagues'/friends' "seduction" of young women from the provincial towns in which they made films: "I did not display a solidarity of sisterhood because this notion did not exist then" (Pasternak 2022: 161). One may also add that at that time, the director was performing a male masquerade that precluded acting as a "sister" to other women. Pasternak assumes that the #MeToo movement and the director's participation in the 2020 Women's Strike affected Holland's attitude to various forms of patriarchal oppression and prompted her confession of being sexually abused. On the one hand, sharing intimate and often traumatizing details from her life can be attributed to the celebrity culture that fuses the personal with the public; on the other, it also testifies to Holland's changing attitude to feminism and eventual embrace of its agenda.

Pasternak explains Holland's initial rejection of feminism—shared by Krystyna Janda (see Chapter 6)—by her lack of familiarity with the movement: "Feminism was an abstract slogan for her for a long time, as it was practically absent from the public debate in PRL" (Pasternak 2022: 123). Holland herself explains that she had distanced herself from feminism in the 1970s because communism was the main enemy for both men and women, whereas patriarchy was so firmly ingrained in social life that nobody thought about changing it. While referring to her gradual embrace of feminism, she mentions the American feminist Shana Penn, whose book documented how many active female members of the Solidarity movement were erased from its history after 1989.<sup>17</sup> Pasternak

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pursue individual achievement and control over their personal and professional lives, find male partners disillusioning, and rely heavily on each other's support. Agency is their forte" (Partan 2010: 175).

<sup>16</sup> She mentions relatively often her nephew, Antoni Komasa-Łazarkiewicz, who has composed music for several of her films.

<sup>17</sup> See Penn2003.

records the director's eventual declaration of commitment to feminism in the 1998 interview published in the women's magazine *Mirror* (*Zwierciadło*), in which she said to the journalist, "I'm a feminist" if it means equality of women and men in professional, social, and family life (Pasternak 2022: 125). Pasternak presents this evolution as a self-explanatory process, a volitional act, while not recognizing the importance of public gender discourse to which Holland was exposed while living and working abroad.

At no stage does Pasternak provide the reader with her own interpretation and analysis of Holland's biography and persona. Rather, she assumes the position of an understanding and empathetic friend, listening attentively to Holland and then sharing the latter's words with readers. The objectivity traditionally expected of a journalist rarely surfaces in her approach, which favors Holland's own self-presentation. Such a stance is all the more remarkable because at one point Pasternak acknowledges her potential control of the book's content:

I know that in her work she is a perfectionist and that she has to control the process of filmmaking and sometimes this tendency to control things transfers to her private life [. . .] But this book is mine. Not Agnieszka's. She gave her life into someone else's hands and took the position of an observer that is there, participates, yet cannot influence the flow of events but only look at it. (Pasternak 2022: 151)

Granted, Pasternak selected the material to be included in the book and structured it around the nodal points of Holland's life instead of simply following her lifeline. However, she rarely distances herself from the director's opinions or confronts them with the voices of those who might be unfavorable to her. For example, it is symptomatic that she selected Feliks Falk from the members of the film unit "X" to talk about Holland's position in the collective, while not approaching Jerzy Domaradzki, who elsewhere expressed his criticism of the director's usurped leadership in "X," which reportedly antagonized the collective (Wertenstein 1991: 62). Pasternak's overreliance on Holland as a source of information also affects the sections of the book reporting on the director's invigilation by secret service agents. The author's exclusive use of the materials in the director's private archive makes one wonder whether she conducted any independent research in the archive of MSW (Ministry of Internal Affairs) or the Institute of National Memory (IPN). That Pasternak developed Holland's life narrative within the space allocated to her by Holland herself may be deduced from the volume's blurb: "In this book, Agnieszka Holland reveals the truth about her life for the first time"—a claim for veracity that establishes Holland as the ultimate agency standing behind the portrayal, not only the subject but also the covert author or co-author. And as a celebrity writer, she constructs herself "as literary material that has been moulded into fruitful biographical and semi-biographical narratives by the ongoing questions of personal proximity and social distance that characterise our experience of the modern media-led world" (Braun 2011: 321). Indeed, the book efficiently balances this blend of proximity and distance to Holland in that it softens her image, yet is careful not to abandon her carefully created persona of a reputable director who is engaged in the current political and social debates advocating for a democratic and inclusive society.

The unusual cover photo chosen for Pasternak's book deserves special attention.

It shows a black-and-white frontal close-up of Holland's face, marked by many deep wrinkles (Figure 5.12). Given its raw aesthetic, the photo is almost a manifesto against beautification in the contemporary mediascape and a sign of courage in an old woman who does not care how she looks or perhaps is even proud of her age. The unadorned image of Holland resists the pressure of contemporary media to look young, beautiful, and attractive. Above all, she looks authentic, as if testifying to the blurb's statement that "in this book, Agnieszka Holland reveals the truth about her life for the first time." Yet upon closer scrutiny the photo reveals traces of intervention—a standard practice nowadays, when radical procedures attempt to beautify those portrayed. From under heavy eyelids she looks directly, even confrontationally, at us, the readers. In this photo, Holland is anything but the "object-to-look-at" as conceived by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay. Rather, the opposite occurs here; it is Holland's interrogating and challenging gaze that is directed at us, the readers and consumers of her public image.

### Performing Herself

All representations of Holland that appear in contemporary media demonstrate her careful control of her public image and awareness of the semiotics of clothes, makeup (or the lack thereof), hairstyle, body posture, and so on. While self-fashioning for the public, she carefully designs the *mise-en-scène* aspects of her persona, even if it is to make it look random. She does not offer a consistent style in that she often wears gender-neutral casual clothes, but also boho-style garments or evening attire if called for by the given occasion. For example, in the photos accompanying her and Kasia's interview for *Mirror* magazine, the *mise-en-scène* connotes ordinariness, which was appropriate for a woman's magazine published since 1957 by the Polish Women's League. Although in the twenty-first century it had to be refashioned to meet the expectations of modern women functioning in consumerist society, *Mirror* still differs from other glossies. It tries to balance traditional journalism concerned with important social issues and promotional materials required by the press market. In the interview, titled "Agnieszka Holland and Kasia Adamik—close but separate," Holland talks about how she brought up her daughter as a single mother whose profession required constant travel (Holland 2019). She also admits that she knew about Kasia's gayness long before her daughter came out. As she adds, "Fortunately, we lived in the States then, where things were changing in terms of tolerance for homosexual people." In the photos that accompany the material they both wear casual outfits, and the background is neutral. In one shot, they stand in a doorway that marks the private space of home; the colours are darkish and unsaturated, their clothes are plain, and there are no special visual effects to enhance the image. The orchestration epitomizes ordinariness and authenticity, and as such it serves as a potential point of identification for many ordinary parents of (non-normative) children. Likewise, Holland's outfits at the various protests are deliberately casual, even nondescript, and they de-celebrate and deglamorize her, in accordance with the discourse of her authenticity. As Chouliaraki claims, for celebrities, humanization strategies are necessary "to domesticate their extraordinariness," while "[a]uthenticity emerges in the performance of the celebrity persona as a moral self" (Chouliaraki 2013: 196). Not unlike in her films belonging to the cinema of Moral Concern that offered a harsh judgement of late-socialist Polish reality, now as a celebrity activist Holland berates authorities for their immoral political decisions concerning the vulnerable and marginalized.

## Conclusion

Although Holland has a tenuous connection to social media (her Twitter and SB accounts are not active), she frequently appears on the internet and on television—specifically, TVN, owned by Discovery and Warner Bros. Thus, her presence in contemporary screen cultures is ample, while the boldness of her public statements makes her one of the most recognizable as well as controversial public personas in contemporary Polish and, to a lesser extent, European media. She has accumulated a substantial symbolic capital performing the roles of both celebrity director and celebrity activist, which testifies to Marshall's claim that "the condition of celebrity status is convertible to a wide variety of domains and conditions within contemporary culture. Thus, the power of celebrity status appears in business, politics, and artistic communities and operates as a way of providing distinctions and definitions of success within those domains" (Marshall 2014: xlviii). While moving swiftly between the roles of celebrity director and celebrity activist, Holland is invariably concerned with the realm of politics. She speaks against the powerful center and for the powerless margins. Thus, I would argue, she performs the role of an intellectual who, as Michel Foucault noted, "spoke the truth to those who had yet to see it, in the name of those who were forbidden to speak the truth; he [sic!] was conscience, consciousness, and eloquence" (Foucault and Deleuze 1977: 207). However, as the French philosopher contends, with time the intellectual became somehow obsolete as the masses began to possess knowledge and could express themselves. Yet, he continues, there is still a system of power that "invalidates this discourse and this knowledge [. . .]. Intellectuals are themselves agents of this system of power—the idea of their responsibility for 'consciousness' and discourse forms part of the system" (Foucault and Deleuze 1977: 207). Today's masses are still longing for moral instruction and hope, and activist celebrities fulfill this need with passion and persuasive "authenticity." And Holland perfectly performs this role, for she knows how to direct these spectacles of her celebrity persona.

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