**Secret agents, informers, and traitors: Agnieszka Holland’s *Fever* (*Gorączka,* 1980)**

**Abstract**

The article examines Agnieszka Holland’s film *Fever* (*Gorączka,* 1980) depicting the 1905 revolution in Russian Poland. While situating it in various socio-political and cultural contexts, the author examines the significance of the historical event and its parallels to the Solidarity movement. A special attention is given to the fact that both movements were heavily infiltrated and surveilled by the state security apparatuses. Close analysis of the figures of secret agents featured in *Fever* focuses on their political significance and meanings to reveal how these expressed scepticism and distrust in the possibility of political change. As the author demonstrates, *Fever* questions the possibility of genuine revolutionary change, yet most importantly it presents the failure as a ‘national defeat’ rather than a crash of political aspirations of working class and peasantry. The numerous figures of the *Okhrana* spies and agents in Holland’s film paradoxically solidify this ‘national’ dimension of the revolution as they are presented as collaborating with the oppressor of the Polish nation in the first place. Likewise, the Solidarity movement was also appropriated by the national discourse, while class-related political aspirations were marginalized and eventually corrupted. The article concludes with the claim that the figure of a secret agent proves paradoxically crucial in mobilizing and stabilizing national discourse as represented subtly, yet persistently in *Fever.*

**Keywords:**

Polish cinema, security apparatus, revolution, Agnieszka Holland, Solidarity movement,

On February 14, 1979, an informer of the security militia (SB) acting under the codename ‘Bogdan’ wrote a report on the film unit ‘X’ supervised by Andrzej Wajda. It read: ‘The Big Trinity of the film unit “X” consists of the director Andrzej Wajda, who is responsible for artistic matters, Bolesław Michałek, a literary director, and Barbara Pec-Ślesicka, who is responsible for film production and human resources. The three stick together. Close to them are among others Agnieszka Holland and Edward Kłosiński’ (Gańczak 201, 281). In October 1982, Holland is mentioned in another report including a list of ‘filmmakers who have negative political attitude’ (ibidem). These reports are by any means unique or rare documents. Informers infiltrated people working within film industry as much as any other sector of Polish society. As Filip Gańczak informs in his book on Polish filmmakers’ relationships with security apparatus, the archives of the National Institute of Memory (IPN) are abundant. The records concern both collaboration and invigilation of the members of film community. Holland was invigilated not only because of her close relationship with Andrzej Wajda but also because of her family history, specifically her father’s death in 1961 during a search of his apartment by the secret policemen.

Although everyone knew about secret agents of security apparatus penetrating everyday life in real socialist Poland, their presence remained ‘secretive’ in Polish cinema in that they were not represented.[[1]](#footnote-1) The first ‘traces’ of these characters appeared in the 1980s, which was a time of turbulent political transition from the triumphant emergence of the Solidarity movement in 1980, through the introduction of marshal law in 1981, to the first partially free election in 1989. Holland made her film *Fever* in 1980, in the time preceding the workers’ strikes that finally led to the triumph of the Solidarity movement. The film depicts the revolution of 1905-1907 in Russian Poland focusing on its final stage when numerous conflicts between various political factions emerged. Polish society responded to the revolution and its gradual demise with a whole range of attitudes: idealism, anarchism, terrorism, fear, passivity, and treachery. Importantly, in Holland’s film these ambivalent political and moral attitudes characterize both the revolutionaries and the collaborators of the Russian secret police *Okhrana*;[[2]](#footnote-2) as the main character Leon, a cold-blooded revolutionist, says: ‘I am an executioner of the revolution and its spy,’ alluding to his own political and moral ambivalence. *Fever* was frequently interpreted as a political allegory, or even a prophetic vision of the Solidarity movement as it expired in a way similar to the decline of the 1905 revolution depicted in the film. Once triumphant and revelling in utopian hope of re-uniting Polish society and implementing the principles of democracy, eventually the legendary trade union successively crumpled into various groups that soon started to fight one another. Holland’s portrayal of the aftermath of the 1905 revolution on Polish territories paralleled – or perhaps indeed foretold as many claimed – the political turmoil and disappointment caused by the Solidarity movement.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the article, I locate *Fever*,especially its representation of secret agents of the Russian political police *Okhrana*, within several contexts to discuss its political and cultural significance. First, I discuss the significance of the 1905 revolution in Russian Poland and its position in the vernacular historical and cultural discourse. I will examine how the event can be related to the Solidarity revolution, while also noting of how both movements were infiltrated by respectively Tsarist secret police and communist security apparatus which significantly compromised their unity. Second, I briefly discuss Holland’s own and her family entanglement with communist security apparatus and her experience of the Prague Spring to argue that she incorporated these occurrences in her ‘biographical legend’ and the image of her public persona. The subsequent analysis of the figures of secret agents featured in *Fever* focuses on their political significance and meanings to reveal how these expressed scepticism and distrust in the possibility of political change. I also comment on the standard censorship procedures employed for the film and its critical reception to argue that the 1905 revolution was embedded within the nationalist narration, while its socio-economic significance was downplayed. As I will demonstrate, *Fever* questions the possibility of revolutionary change, yet it presents its failure as a ‘national defeat’ rather than the crash of political aspirations of working class and peasantry. The numerous figures of the *Okhrana* spies and agents in Holland’s film paradoxically solidify this ‘national’ dimension of the revolution as the ‘enemy’ they collaborate with the oppressor of the Poles not working class. Likewise, the Solidarity movement was also appropriated by the national discourse, while class-related political aspirations were marginalized and eventually corrupted. Implementation of Marshall Law in 1981 strengthened this ‘national narration’ and the Solidarity stood for ‘Polish people’ rather than a trade union. When years later the legendary leader of Solidarity Lech Wałęsa was accused of being an informer of the communist security apparatus, it was presented as betrayal of the nation not the workers’ cause. To summarize, the figure of an agent proves paradoxically crucial in mobilizing and stabilizing national discourse as represented subtly, yet persistently in *Fever.*

**Forgotten Revolution and its contested legacy**

The 1905 Revolution took place in the Russian Poland (Congress Kingdom of Poland). Although it was a part of the Russian Revolution, it had its own specific aims and political agendas. Initially it was caused by the worsening of economic situation of workers and peasants as well as Russia’s military defeat in the war with Japan in which many Poles were conscripted and perished. Later it was also fuelled by the nationalistic aspirations of re-constructing of the Polish state. As the issues concerning its future political system were disputable to say the least, they ultimately caused a conflict between various political parties: Polish Socialist Party (PPS, led by Józef Piłsudski), PPS – Left faction, and the National Democratic Party (“Endecja” led by Roman Dmowski). PPS advocated for using the revolutionary movement to regain independence for Poland, PPS Left faction was mostly concerned with the proletarian aims, whereas Dmowski’s party opted for increasing Polish representation in the State Duma, the Russian legislative assembly, which meant acceptance of the existing social and political status quo. This fracture within the revolutionary movement was crucial in further developments of Polish left-wing politics.

The revolution started with general strike that gave an impulse to rebellious acts undertaken by other social groups such as craftmen and peasantry. The workers requested: an 8-hour working day, participation of workers in negotiations with the factory owners, social and health care services, and educational facilities for their children. Importantly, they also brought up an issue of sexual molesting of female workers by the factory owners and management personnel. Dmowski’s party was eager to fight the revolution from within with its own forces to gain gratitude of the Tsar and *Duma*. Understandably, this attitude met with resistance of PPS members and their supporters. The internal conflicts between various parties and ideologies were emerging with great intensity. As Adam Tyszka noted: ‘Atomization of Polish society has never been so massive’ (2005, 22).

In November 1906, the Russian authorities introduced marshal law and the military forces were entitled to use violence whenever they deemed it necessary. The strikes were slowly expiring, whereas the *Okhrana* agents infiltrated the PPS units leading to their destruction and gradual demise.[[4]](#footnote-4) The revolution entered its decline period: the erstwhile enthusiasm vanished and the number of its participants and members radically decreased. Ignacy Daszyński, a member of PPS and a pre-war prime minister of Poland, bitterly commented that the worst thing occurring during the revolution was ‘hostility of the whole Polish society, decline of its spirit, and meanness of Polish patriots’ (quoted in Cybulski 1981, 12). The initial hope instigated by the revolution was eventually replaced with bitter disappointment.

Although the number of people who were involved in the revolutionary movements between 1905-07 was much higher than the number of the participants of the national uprisings, the event has never been recognized as an important part of the national history and collective memory. While seeking for the reasons of this symbolic ‘erasure’ of it from the national history, its ambivalent political aims seem to be of special importance. *Fourth Uprising or First Revolution?,* ask Stanisław Kalabiński and Feliks Tych in the title of their book on the 1905 Revolution (Kalabiński,Tych 1976). Admittedly, the event has been a contested object throughout Polish history and was frequently appropriated for specific political and ideological reasons. Post-1945 historical discourse downplayed the ‘nationalistic’ faction of the 1905 revolutionary movements (especially its leader, Józef Piłsudski as well as the extreme-right-wing politician Roman Dmowski)), whereas emphasizing its international and proletarian aspect represented by the PPS ‘Left’ faction. There were also attempts to establish a link between the 1905 revolution and the post-war state socialism. This ideological adjustment has been vehemently reversed after the collapse of communism with a historical narration emphasizing the importance of its ‘nationalistic’ component. Admittedly, both historical discourses appropriated the event and blurred, or perhaps even annihilated the actual significance of the event that is now regarded as a crucial turn in the 20th century politics and basis of modern Polish society in terms of merging the national and socio-economic emancipatory aspirations (Blobaum 1995).

In his analysis of the 1905 revolution in Russian Poland, Robert Blobaum comments that the initial ‘mass mobilizations and demonstrations of political enthusiasm of 1905’ were followed with ‘the popular apathy of 1907,’ but he also indicates its formative aspect:

On many future occasions, during the interwar period, the postwar communist era, and in the most recent postcommunist years, a majority of Poles would act in similar fashion. Similar, too, is the subsequent history of polarization and fragmentation, those other phenomena that marked the birth of modem Polish mass politics in the first years of the twentieth century. (Blobaum 1995, 233)

In a similar vein, Polish researchers note:

The 1905 Revolution in the Russian-controlled Kingdom of Poland was one of the few bottoms-up political modernizations and general democratizations in Polish history, paralleled probably only by the ‘first’ Solidarity movement in the early 1980s. Both upsurges were similar in that they led to the defeat of popular class uprisings aimed at political recognition and economic alleviation. (Śmiechowski, Marzec 2016, 437)[[5]](#footnote-5)

There is one more parallel between these two revolutionary movements as both were infiltrated by the state security apparatuses: secret agents of the *Okhrana* in the 1905-1907 revolution and SB in the 1980s. As Antoni Dudek and Andrzej Paczkowski inform: ‘a massive development of the agent network in the wake of the establishment of “Solidarity,” which the SB tried to penetrate, and of the role of TWs [Tajny Współpracownik/ Secret Collaborator - EO] in the investigating of underground opposition structures’ (Dudek, Paczkowski 2005, 259). As Paczkowski claims elsewhere, the main aim of these activities was not to collect information but rather to disseminate fake materials to cause the union’s disintegration (Paczkowski 2015, 140). The agents also targeted people who were not directly connected to the SB, yet they left Solidarity because of the radical politicization of the union that they disagreed with (141). After introduction of marshal law, the security apparatus remained very active and would take every measure to discredit the leaders of Solidarity.[[6]](#footnote-6)

To summarize, there are many parallels between the 1905-7 revolution and the Solidarity movement that was also called a ‘peaceful’ revolution in that both emerged as massive rise, yet expired as disintegrated and torn between various political factions. Most importantly, they both merged the socio-economic and the national emancipatory aspirations. Agnieszka Holland’s *Fever* that was made before the culmination of the Solidarity movement evoked these parallels that was duly noted by many reviewers. As it often happens, cultural production anticipates political phenomena much earlier than these are noted and examined by politicians, historians, and sociologists. One may ponder on Holland’s historical and political insightfulness that some critics called ‘prophetic’ (see: Kłopotowski 1981). Withstanding from establishing an unproblematic link between filmmaker’s biography and her work, I argue for ‘fictional-biographical overlap’ (Erhart 2019, 68) in Holland’s film in that her personal life experience and participation in the Prague Spring have affected her vision of history and revolution.

**Agnieszka Holland – a ‘usual suspect’?**

Agnieszka Holland was born to a Polish mother, Irena Rybczyńska, and Jewish father, Henryk Holland, a pre-war communist. After WWII he was a journalist who vehemently supported the idea of communism and harshly criticized its opponents. However, after the October Thaw of 1956, he joined the revisionist circles in the party that demanded its reforms. In November 1961, he passed the Khrushchev's ‘Secret Speech’ to the French journalist of *Le Monde,* Jean Wetz who published it on the issue of November 17. Their earlier conversation was eavesdropped by the Polish secret service and Holland was identified as Wetz’s source. Holland was arrested. During the search of his apartment, he committed suicide with jumping out of the window. For years, his death was an object of various speculations and some believed that the functionaries murdered him.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Although Henryk Holland divorced Agnieszka’s mother, Irena Rybczyńska, in 1959, his mysterious death has shadowed the director’s life for years. First and foremost, after graduating from high school in 1966, Holland decided to study film directing in the Prague film school FAMU. As she explains, one of the reasons for that was that her father’s mysterious death made her a political ‘usual suspect’ that had no chance to get accepted to the Łódź Film School. In Prague, she spent five years from 1966-1971 and, thus, she did not participate in the events of March 1968 in Poland[[8]](#footnote-8) that are perceived as a bitter testimony of the fragility or perhaps even impossibility of national unity as it easily cracks under the political manipulation of authority. In April 1968, Poland as a member of the Warsaw Pact participated in military suppression of the Prague Spring. Instead of taking part in the students revolt in Poland as did most of her contemporaries Holland witnessed the crashing of the events of the Prague Spring by the military forces of the Warsaw Pact. As she said, after that and the subsequent period of ‘normalization’ she lost her faith in the possibility of genuine revolution.

During the period of ‘normalization’ Holland was involved in illegal political activity of Polish couriers (so-called ‘Tatra-men’ [*taternicy*]) smuggling samizdat publications from Paris to Warsaw via Prague. With her then husband, Laco Adamik, she helped the Polish conspirators to print some forbidden materials. Unfortunately, the ‘Tatra-men’ were arrested when crossing the Czechoslovak-German border and put on trial in Poland. During interrogation, they reported on their illegal activities in Czechoslovakia and the help they received from Holland and her Czechoslovak fellows. Consequently, the Czechoslovak secret police started to invigilate her and eventually she was arrested for six weeks, which was, as she confessed, ‘brutal,’ yet ‘one of the most important of her life experience’ (Holland 2012: 44-45).[[9]](#footnote-9) In her interview with Stanisław Zawiśliński, she said that after her arrest and time spent in the prison she felt as if she was eventually relieved from the stigma of her father’s story. Instead, she started living her own (invigilated? - EO) life (Zawiśliński 1995, 19).

After returning to Poland in 1971, Holland first collaborated briefly with Krzysztof Zanussi and then she joined the film unit ‘X’ with Andrzej Wajda as its artistic head. As already mentioned, the secret informers infiltrated the group on regular basis. When Wajda planned to have Holland as his assistant for making the film *Man of Marble* (*Człowiek z marmuru*), he was unofficially informed that the project would not be accepted for production with her participation. Finally, a bargain was made between the authorities and the film unit ‘X’: Wajda agreed not to employ Holland as his assistant, whereas she was eventually given a permission to make her feature-length debut which had been blocked for some time (see Gańczak 2011, 288). While working on her own film *Provincial Actors* (*Aktorzy prowincjonalni*), she also authored the script forWajda’s new film *Without Anesthesia* (*Bez znieczulenia*, 1978). An informer working under the codename ‘Jerzy’ reportedthat it presented the story of Agnieszka Holland’s father which was a pretext to criticize political mechanisms of contemporary life in Poland (Gańczak 2011, 292-293). Holland’s surveillance by the secret services lasted practically until 1989; in 1980, the secret reports mentioned her call for collecting money for the ‘Solidarity’ unions but also her political radicalization demonstrated in her critique of Wajda as being not progressive enough (Gańczak 2011, 295). While living on exile in the 1980s, she wrote a script for Wajda’s planned film *Korczak* that was accused by secret services as being anti-Polish and tendentious in presentation of Polish-Jewish relationship during the Holocaust. As Gańczak reports, the Polish authorities requested significant changes in the script, yet Holland did not agree to these, while managing to get an interest of the German producer, Artur Brauner in the project. There were plans to make the film in Hungary, yet these were protested by the Polish secret services in the letter sent to their Hungarian ‘comrades.’ Eventually, the ‘Hungarian’ plan was aborted and the project returned to Wajda, yet he would be not allowed to make the film until the collapse of communism (Gańczak 2011, 304). According to the archival sources, while staying on emigration, Holland remained an object of moderate yet persistent invigilation until 1989.

In her numerous interviews, Holland shares her father’s story and her own experiences with security apparatus and censorship as important elements of her artistic biography. She does not hide her real-life persona behind the abstract image of a film *auteur*, but occasionally comments on how her life experience affects her work. For example, she often says that her scepticism as for political struggles for radical change goes back to her time at the FAMU film school, when she observed the demise of the Prague Spring. Hence the pessimistic portrayal of revolution in her film *Fever*. The case of this filmis one of many examples of Holland ‘authorizing’ her own work, implying a ‘fictional-biographical overlap’ in the narratives and imagery of her films. Secret agents populate densely the fictional world of *Fever* and they appear briefly in *A Woman Alone*, while being at the forefront of *To Kill a Priest.* After years, they return as omnipresent and malevolent figures in the Soviet Russia portrayed in *Mr. Jones* or in the Netxlix dystopian series *1983* for which Holland directed two episodes. The case of *Fever* remains especially interesting as this is her first film that relates to both Holland’s individual biography and collective historical experience.

**Clumsy agents, naïve fighters, and cruel leaders**

While reflecting on her disillusionment with the Prague Spring, Holland said: ‘It was an experience revealing human nature and its weakness. Defeat of the revolution is one thing, yet how one behaves facing this defeat is another thing. This painful and bitter experience was reflected in *Fever*’ which was made at the peak of hopes raised by the Solidarity movement’(Holland 2012, 172).[[10]](#footnote-10) Unlike most of the Poles who euphorically participated in ‘the Solidarity carnival’ believing that the wound of the March 1968 would eventually heal and all erstwhile class conflicts between intelligentsia and workers would be solved in the name of the national unity, Holland’s film presented the revolution as a dire matter. In *Fever* it is led by cold-blooded manipulative (male) leaders who ruthlessly exploit enthusiasm of their subordinate (women and lower class men) for their own political aims, while criminal underclass is trying to gain financial profits from acting as double agents of the *Okhrana* and Polish revolutionary organizations. *Fever* confirms Stanisław Brzozowski’s, a famous Polish philosopher and critic who himself was accused of being the *Okhrana’s* agent, statement: ‘Revolutions are the moments when societies learn about their genuine structures’ (Brzozowski 1984, 402). As if to oppose the euphoric mood of 1980, Holland’s film excavated the bitter historical lesson of the 1905 revolution.

*Fever* is based on Andrzej Strug’s novel *History of One Bullet* (*Dzieje jednego pocisku*)published in 1910, which was three years after the 1905 revolution expired. The author presents the historical events from a multitude of perspectives attached to various characters. Various lines of the narrative connect to one another by means of the titular bullet, in fact a bomb, that moves from one character to another symbolizing the destructive power of the revolution. Ultimately, and somehow ironically, the bomb explodes in hands of a mentally ill secondary character, while not triggering off any substantial political change. The disjointed narrative and lack of protagonist reflect on fragmentation of Polish society during the revolution and its aftermath. The novel’s represents political reality of 1905 as chaotic and in the state of permanent decay, whereas the bomb serves as a fetish that connects the characters through the structures of desire for political change that will never occur. Thus, it reveals the utopian aspect of the revolutionary project.

Regardless of the frequent alternations of the literary original, Holland’s film follows the novel’s representational logic.[[11]](#footnote-11) The opening shots of *Fever* evoke the fetishistic aspect of the titular bomb. As a background for the opening credits, there are several close ups of hands assembling an explosive mechanism; the touch is as precise as it is tender. One of the shots shows a sticking out element of the bomb as it hurts a finger; a big drop of blood fills up the screen. Then, the camera shows a medium-close up of a man who sucks his hurt finger, while his face seems to express almost erotic pleasure. At this point the sequence cuts to the long shot od a gate and then of a poor neighbourhood with a couple of young men apparently waiting for something or somebody. As there is no dialogue, the narrative does not provide sufficient information to comprehend the presented situation. When eventually a police car drives in the street, the men stop it and rescue the prisoner from the wagon. This dynamic brief scene cuts back to the bomb’s constructor. A young woman visits him to collect the bomb. Soon, the woman whose name is Kama and the rescued prisoner, Leon, are acting together on a terrorist mission designed to assassinate the Russian Governor. Alas, the plan fails. In response, bitterly disappointed Kama succumbs to mental illness and practically vanishes from the narrative. In contrast, Leon, the revolutionary leader, remains in the story, yet his significance diminishes and other characters are getting gradually more narrative attention. Consequently, the film lacks in the protagonist and there is no specific goal to be achieved. Instead, the narrative establishes a fetish-object, a bomb that is mobilizing, as suggested in the opening, libidinal energy that needs to be released in explosion. Although it moves from hands to hands of many people it occurs in a rather random way and none of its ‘owners’ is able to release its energy as if suggesting their political impotence and disconnectedness. The explosion of the bomb finally happens at the ending of the film, yet in the most unexpected and disappointing way as it is performed by the Russian soldiers as a safe explosion in the river.

Among the various characters represented in *Fever* the figure of a secret agent manifests disintegration of the Polish society in a conspicuous way. Admittedly, the film suggests that everyone is a potential secret agent as demonstrated in the scene taking place in a public bath where Leon, the revolutionary leader after being rescued from the police, is relaxing after a harsh confrontation with his aristocratic father who is giving a party for the oppressive Russian establishment. When two workers discover him in a bath tube (his pose is reminiscent of Marat from the famous painting by David) and they see the marks left by shackles on his wrists, they instantly decide to call for the police. These two ordinary men are as ready to collaborate with the Russian oppressor as is Leon’s father; for the former it is an act of obedience, whereas for the latter it is an act of political pragmatism.

When Leon travels to the countryside to touch base with the group of peasants- socialists who are desperate to join the revolution, there are two episodes featuring secret agents. The first one takes place at the political meeting to which a captured local bandit is brought. One of the peasants recognizes in him the police informer who tried to infiltrate their political organization. The young man initially denies it, yet later on he confesses that indeed he collaborated with the police while also terrorizing the local community. As he admits, he would associate with any group or forces if there would be a chance for material profit. To his shock, the impromptu execution squad is assembled with a young man, Wojtek Kiełza, being selected for completing the act of retribution. Alas, he proves inept in using the weapon and chaotically shoots the bullets at the man’s legs and arms to eventually bursting in hysterical sob and throwing the pistol away. Leon expertly completes the execution like a professional gunman (Figure 1). The figure of the young bandit who ‘occasionally’ serves as a police secret agent embodies the moral decline of Polish society during the revolutionary times. He represents ideological indifference and moral apathy of common people; tellingly, even the word of ‘traitor,’ as he is called in the dialogue, is inappropriate as to ‘betray’ somebody or something one needs to believe in the values these represent. The character of the casual collaborator echoes Holland’s bitter remarks on the moral apathy of the Czechs after the suppression of the Prague Spring.

Moral malady of the Polish society is also conspicuously present in the following scene taking place at the rail station. At some point, Leon who is sitting in a waiting room notices several men in dark coats and hats that make them to stand out among other travellers. They suspiciously look at him and the briefcase he is carefully holding on his lap. No doubts, they are the *Okhrana* agents who are ‘hunting’ for revolutionaries (Figure 2). Once the travellers notice that Leon is an object of their round-up, they also start looking at him with a persistent curiosity (Figure 3). Thus, Leon becomes an object of a double scrutinizing look: of the *Okhrana* agents and the crowd. This shared look establishes a subtle yet persistent connection between these two groups as if suggesting that the civilians are potential informers if the situation demands it. Their passive behaviour testifies to their alienation from larger ideological structures and eventually the national community. Admittedly, they stand for social disintegration and alienation.

Moral decay of Polish society and its disintegration are corroborated by the figures of double agents working for both the *Okhrana*[[12]](#footnote-12) and the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). The *Okhrana’s* agents and informants as represented in *Fever* are far from Machiavellian figure that are able to manipulate adversaries for achieving their aims. Instead, they are greedy men who are ready to ally with anybody if it may bring about material profit. One of these shady double agents follows Kiełza, who comes to the town to reconnect with the party. When he comes to the factory, the workers, unlike in the days of the general strike, respond with hostility to any mentioning of political protests. The *Okhrana’s* informer pretends he is a party contact and takes the naïve peasant to his ‘comrade.’ The mise-en-scène used in the following scene significantly contributes to the agents’ characterization; the Russian informer lives in a rather luxurious apartment and his clothes are elegant and most likely expensive (Figure 4). There is certain, typical of nouveau riches, ostentatiousness in demonstrating all these signs of wealth, which is in sharp contrast to the bare and unadorned party meeting rooms presented earlier in the film. For Kiełza, who is ‘new to the town’ it does not seem suspicious and he easily agrees to visit the Committee which, to his horror, turns out to be the *Okhrana* headquarters. He is arrested, whereas his ‘comrade’ casually chats with another agent who a while ago arrested Leon.

One of the double agents is a former comrade of another main character, the anarchist Gryziak, who left the party as he was disappointed in its unwillingness or inability to introduce a radical social change. When Gryziak visits his fellow to get back his money, the latter tries to recruit him for the *Okhrana* with the prospects of material benefits and joy of playing double game with the party members (Figure 5). He behaves like a trickster who takes as much advantage as possible from the chaotic and ever changing times of the revolution at its decline. Gryziak rejects his offer and kills him. This can be seen as an act of poetic justice and an effort to restore a moral order, yet his motives remain unclear. In addition, his later inability to explode the bomb in the *Okhrana* headquarters diminishes the anarchistic potential of the character. When he enters the meeting room, he triumphantly demonstrates the bomb, whereas the officials frantically hide under the table. After a brief moment, he throws the bomb, yet to his astonishment and their relief it does not explode.[[13]](#footnote-13) Soon, the officials violently attack Gryziak. He responds to the violence with obstinate laughter which alienates the viewers and prevents them from feeling compassion.

Arguably, all of the characters featured in *Fever* are inconsistent in their motivation and as such they epitomize moral chaos emerging from the revolution and its aftermath. In the case of the *Okhrana’s* secret agents, their political cynicism and opportunism prevent them from acting as counter-revolutionaries. They cannot play a role of the traditional antagonist either. Instead of well-defined political revolutionary struggle, Holland’s film presents its decline and entropy. Importantly, none of the main characters represents positive values that the viewer may identify with. Leon embodies the figure of a cold-blooded immoral revolutionary who is able to sacrifice everyone at the altar of the political struggle. Kama approaches the revolution with a hysterical excitement and ends up with a mental illness. Kamil who is secretly in love with Kama soon abandons his revolutionary activity to take care of her and as it is subtly suggested he decides to inform on Leon to protect his beloved. Kiełza is unable to develop his own class-determined political subjectivity while mechanically repeating revolutionary slogans. His death is not depicted as a symbol of political resistance but rather a clumsy parody of it. Finally, Gryziak is killed in an uncontrolled revenge performed by a mob-like horde of the policemen. Importantly, there is no single character to survive and take over the revolutionary task. The Russians are ultimate victors who are able to disarm the bomb symbolizing the revolutionary spirit. Its ‘safe’ explosion in the river stands for the ‘disarmament’ and consequently ‘death’ of the political struggle of Polish people.

*Fever* does not reflect on the emancipatory impulses originating from masses as claimed by the historians (cf. Blobaum 1995), instead the film shows revolutionaries representing middle-class or intelligentsia who are visibly alienated from the lower class participants of the protest. The latter are only emotionally engaged with the political protest, while not being able to come up with their own political agenda. Finally, there is a large group of traitors and secret agents who often work for both Polish political parties and the Russian secret police. In *Fever,* the revolution is presented as a massive yet not consistent movement.

***Fever –* a revolutionary film, or a film about (lost) revolution?**

*Fever* – as any film made in Poland during the period of real socialism – had to be approved by the Commission for Film Approval (Komisja Kolaudacyjna) for official distribution. The meeting took place on November 10th, 1980, which was two months after the agreement signed by Lech Wałęsa, the leader of the Solidarity trade union, and Polish government. The time following the end of strikes was marked by political relaxation and, in consequence, censorship also loosened its erstwhile grip. As Holland recollects, at the time of the Commission meeting to approve *Fever* the censors declared strike and they did not request any changes to the presented film. As she said, ‘It was very funny as he [the censor] gasped at all these moments that he would normally request cuts’ (Holland 2012, 175). In result, there were no censorship interventions to the film. Likewise, the Commission members were unexpectedly appreciative and tolerant, although the film depicting the Polish revolutionaries fighting the Russian regime was easily to be taken as sending an anti-Soviet message. Michał Misiorny who was at that time the director of the Main Office of Cinematography (Naczelny Zarząd Kinematografii) praised the film for its content and artistic quality. The historian Feliks Tych who extensively published on the topic of the 1905 revolution, admired Holland for making a film about the obscured part of Polish history. Finally, Andrzej Wajda, the film’s producer expressed his contentment with Holland’s film as it demonstrated her directorial skills and unquestionable talent (A-344 poz. 240). The positive evaluation of *Fever* was followed with the Golden Lions Award at the Polish Film Festival in Gdańsk. At the 1981 Berlin Film Festival, Barbara Grabowska who played Kama was distinguished with the Silver Bear Prize for the best Actor.

After its release, Polish film critics praised the film for its formal qualities, yet they often complained about its ‘coldness’ and pessimism.[[14]](#footnote-14) For example, in his review of the film published in *Dziennik Ludowy* (Folks Daily), Andrzej Dzięgielewski wrote that the film is ‘as irritating as it is depressing. Perhaps this is the reason why people do not want to see the film. The movie theatres are empty’ (Dzięgielewski 1981).[[15]](#footnote-15) Likewise, Władysław Cybulski noted that: ‘when everyone wants the victory, she gives us a film about defeat’ (Cybulski 1981, 12). Many reviewers noted parallels between the 1905 revolution and the Solidarity movement; especially, they pointed out similarity of the scene in *Fever* that features people gathering at the factory gate to express their support for striking workers to the actual Gdańsk shipyard’s gate that became an icon of Solidarity protest (cf. Hellen 1981, 1; Kijowski 1981, 7; Prasek 1981; Lewandowski 1981, 34) (Figure 6). Krzysztof Demidowicz even claimed that the 1905 revolution was a camouflage to talk about the contemporary political situation and the Solidarity movement (Demidowicz 1981, 20). As already noted, the film was made well before Solidarity strikes and, thus, these comparisons demonstrate a frequent critical strategy employed at that time in Poland of searching for ‘hidden’ subversive meanings regardless of the authorial intentions.[[16]](#footnote-16) One of the reviewers, Krzysztof Kłopotowski, suggested in his review published in a *Solidarity Weekly* that Holland’s film was an act of prophecy (1981, 14), which can be seen as a symbolic inclusion to the Romantic tradition of Polish art. Importantly, this opinion proves still valid to some critics. For example, Robert Birkholc states:

*Fever* is Agnieszka Holland's film from 1980, whose prophetic quality we can now see. It was created while Solidarity triumphed, and shows the fall of another revolution – the one that took place in 1905 on the lands of the Russian partition. This bitter portrait of the defeat of a national and social uprising had its premiere when a big part of the Polish society was euphoric after the events in Gdańsk Shipyard. ***Fever***is seen as a display of the artist's great intuition, a Cassandric portent of martial law, which was approaching Poland when the film premiered. Yet another experience was the direct impulse for making the film: in 1968 the director witnessed the sad ending of the Prague Spring, after which society entered a long period of impasse. The historical context is not most important though, because ***Fever***is an extremely universal film which can be referenced to any revolution. (Birkholc 2015)

The critics also compared *Fever* to another Polish film made in 1980 by Edward Żebrowski *W biały dzień* (*In Broad Daylight*)that was loosely inspired by the case of Stanisław Brzozowski, one of the most important Polish literary critics and philosophers, who was accused of being an Okhrana’s informer. The film focuses on a young member of PPS who is ordered to execute ‘the traitor,’ yet eventually he aborts his mission due to – as he explains – his doubts about his guilt (See Hellen 1980, and Śrutkowski 1980; Janion 1980; Boni 1980). In both Żebrowski and Holland’s films, Polish society is presented as being disintegrated, antagonised, and prone to all kind of provocation. Most importantly, all decisions made by the characters are politically or morally questionable. Importantly, the two films were not only compared at the time of their release; in his book on history of Polish cinema, Marek Haltof also notices: ‘Both films offer a number of references to the political situation in Poland during the Solidarity period’ (Haltof 2002, 158).

The suggested by film critics similarities between the 1905 revolution and the Solidarity movement were also made by Polish historians and sociologists. While pondering on the heritage of the 1905 revolution in post-WWII Poland, Andrzej Leder, the philosopher and sociologist, claims that genuine leftist impulses initiated in 1905 materialized only twice after WW2: in 1956 and 1980. The Solidarity movement, he argues, manifested ‘an authentic leftist political subjectivity,’ yet ‘paradoxically, the largest in Europe workers’ movement was doomed to failure’ (Leder 2014, 189). The failure was inevitable because Solidarity fought to join post-industrial Western Europe where there was no space for workers’ political subjectivity. Moreover, Solidarity was – as he claims – a ‘mask’ hiding various political and ideological options and the representation of the leftists was rather low. In the 1980s, the movement’s victory was possible due to its leader, Lech Wałęsa, who was indeed ‘a genuine child of the 1945-1956 revolution’ (Leder 2014, 190). Initially, his collaboration with intellectual circles represented by Adam Michnik, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Jacek Kuroń, and others was a symbol of long desired alliance of the workers and intelligentsia, however during Wałęsa’s presidency his plebeian genealogy prevented him from entering the Polish symbolic universe and acting as a coalescing force for the formation of postcommunist collective identity. Soon after taking on the position of presidency, he initiated the ‘war at the top’ conflicting all political parties and circles. In the near future, the same intellectuals who previously loudly announced their alliance with the workers, rejected and discredited him. His descent from the position of power was finalized when he was accused of being an informer of communist security apparatus that was registered under the codename ‘Bolek.’ Although his collaboration remains a contested matter among the historians until present day, denigration of Wałęsa’s legend took place and it was a symbolic sign of the failure of the Solidarity revolution. As Leder claims, the workers lost their cause, whereas neoliberalism of the 1990s eventually deprived them of their previous ‘symbolic capital’ they gained during the period of real socialism and the Solidarity movement (Leder 2014, 195). The utopian dream of national unity has reached its bitter end.

*Fever* presents the 1905 revolution as also reaching its bitter and somehow paradoxical end. However, the bitterness does not relate to the annihilation of the ‘genuine leftist impulses’ that were identified by Andrzej Leder and other historians. In contrast, the film presents the decline of the revolution as a ‘national defeat’ as all of the ‘owners’ of the bomb who represent various social strata are connected by means of the fetishistic object of the bomb that would destroy the Russian power. They all are enchanted with the idea of the revolution, yet its aim is never clearly explained and accepted by everyone.[[17]](#footnote-17) This ‘imaginary’ alliance of disconnected people represents the illusion of national unity as well as impossibility or unwillingness to address differences in terms of social class and economic capital.

The secret agents and informers of the *Okhrana* significantly contribute to the effect of the ‘national’ embedding of the revolution. They represent various social classes from peasantry to aristocracy and they do not ‘betray’ the proletarian revolution but rather the ‘national cause.’ Therefore, the Russian collaborators and informers featured in *Fever* paradoxically solidify the national dimension of the 1905 revolution while simultaneously downplaying its social aspect. I argue that *Fever* presents ‘the lost revolution’ as the ‘fourth uprising’ rather than failed social revolt. The film does not recognize the 1905 revolution’s genuine political emancipatory impulses and as such it parallels the Solidarity movement. The latter also began as a working protest, yet soon was transformed into the political struggle of Polish nation against the government dependent of the Soviet power. In her film, Holland spoke as a sceptic about the revolution, yet she spoke from within the national community that minimizes its social and economic differences. In her interview published in 1981, she says that the Russian ‘occupier’ is an enemy not only for the group of terrorists but for the whole Polish society (Holland 1981, 14). Interestingly, in her film *A Lonely Woman*,made for the Polish television also in the 1980, whose action takes place during the Solidarity period, Holland acknowledges the illusion of the concept of the national unity. It features a female character that is excluded from the local community whether it is consolidated around the local Party committee, the Solidarity units, or Roman-Catholic parish. Her alienation from the national discourse is especially manifest in the scene when she delivers a registered letter to an apartment that is searched by secret policemen. When the agent opens the doors, she is first slightly disconcerted, yet in a while she regains her composure and collects from the interrogated man his signature. A second later, she joins her acquaintance and does not even mention the occurrence to him. She knows that the dissidents struggle against the system of state socialism and the Soviet oppression, whereas the members of the secret services try to maintain the status quo, yet both ideological agenda will keep the patriarchal system intact. Admittedly, she is not scared of secret policemen, yet she is afraid of her neighbour who is tormenting her every day. In the euphoric times of the Solidarity protests, she is a lonely woman as any other woman living in Poland at the decline of the period of state socialism.

**Conclusion**

Agnieszka Holland’s *Fever* engageswith the 1905 revolution that expressed both social and national emancipatory impulses and for that reason was frequently compared with the Solidarity movement that was also challenging economic oppression of the workers as well as dependency on the Soviet power. Eventually, both protests were embedded within the national discourse. Although *Fever* questions the possibility of genuine revolutionary change, it does not challenge the supremacy of the national community. Paradoxically, the numerous figures of secret agents contribute to the hegemony of the national discourse as they are presented as collaborators of the Russians, which make them ‘traitors’ of Poland rather than of the proletarian revolution. This national grand-narration has also been employed in conceptualizing the Solidarity movement and its political significance. Its infiltration by socialist security apparatus was also conceived as an act aimed against Polish nation. Although Holland’s film engages with the historical event mobilizing leftist social forces and aspirations, eventually it minimizes socio-economic conflicts within Polish society emphasizing instead national bonds (as presented through the fetishistic bomb). Arguably, in *Fever* the revolution is ‘lost’ not because it eventually fails, but because the proletarian revolution is inevitably subordinated or appropriated by the national discourse.

*Fever* is also implicated in the activities of Polish secret services on the extra-textual level. First, Agnieszka Holland due to her family history and her own involvement in illegal political activity while studying at FAMU has become an object of surveillance of both Polish and Czechoslovak secret services. Her later collaboration with Andrzej Wajda and the film unit ‘X’ was constantly ‘closely observed’ by informers and functionaries of SB. Omnipresence of secret agents in *Fever* juxtaposed with Holland’s numerous interviews in which she mentions her experiences with the security apparatus establishes the ‘biographical-fictional overlap’ in her work. Paradoxically, the figure of a secret agent acts as a keystone of this interrelation. Being an object of scrutiny of the socialist security apparatus that is dependent and obedient to the Soviet oppressors has solidified Agnieszka Holland’s position of the dissident artist of Polish national cinema.

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1. Only the films whose action took place during the period of Stalinism presented the characters of agents of security apparatus. These images were allowed, as they were a part of the officially discredited period of ‘mistakes’ as admitted in the famous speech by N. Khrushchev; Andrzej Wajda’s *Man of Marble* (*Człowiek z marmuru,* 1977) is one of the first films that features the character of the member of security apparatus. In the films made in 1960s and 1970s depicting then contemporary reality these characters are virtually absent. Among very few films featuring these figures is *Index* (*Indeks)* by Janusz Kijowski that was made in 1977, yet its premiere was postponed until 1981 after the legalization of the Solidarity movement.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fredric S. Zuckerman comments on the Okhrana’s significance in the institution of Tsarist police: ‘A crucial link in the development of the tsarist police network was the creation of the *Okhrannye Otdeleniia* or Security Divisions’ (2003, 79). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interestingly, the theme of the 1905 revolution proved relatively popular in Polish cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, which may seem symptomatic compared to the virtual absence of the topic in the previous decades. The following films were made: *In Broad Light* (*W biały dzień*, dir. Edward Żebrowski, 1980), *Knave* (*Kanalia*, dir. Wojciech Wiszniewski, 1990), and *Provocateur* (*Prowokator*, dir. Krzysztof Lang, 1995) and all of them feature an ambivalent figure of a double agent or spy. Similarly to Holland’s *Fever*, these films problematize the question of political collaboration and treason, which by many was interpreted as indirectly related to the issue of cooperation with communist regime that was especially sensitive in the case of the Solidarity members and activists. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In her elucidating essay on the political treasons during the 1905 revolution, Magdalena Micińska mentions a couple of cases of the political activists who decided to collaborate with the Okhrana. She also notes that that collaboration with the Tsarist secret police was a thematic motif of several literary work whose action took place during the 1905 revolution such as Marian Gawalewicz’s *Wir* or Andrzej Strug’s *Z ręki przyjaciela* (see Micińska 2005). In contrast, Bohdan Cywiński in his famous book *Rodowody niepokornych* that traced out the origins of Polish postwar democratic impulses in the socio-political discourse created at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, claimed that ‘Surprisingly low number of people engaged in the revolutionary activities in Poland, decided to collaborate with *Okhrana*.’ As he further claims, ‘Genuine activists were able to develop such a moral discipline that any promise of freedom presented to them during interrogation were in vein’ (Cywiński 2010, 142). Arguably, the number of Polish collaborators is adjusted to fit a specific ideological agenda and the vision of the Polish nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In his book *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*, Timothy Garton Ash mentions his meeting with Bohdan Cywiński ‘who developed a striking comparison with the 1905 revolution in Russian Poland (…) But when the time came, in 1905, the intellectuals were amazed by the scale of the workers’ demands, and swept away by their actions’ (2002, 56). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As Andrzej Paczkowski reports: ‘When SB Research Office specialists were preparing activities designed to discredit Wałęsa, they secretly recorded a conversation between Wałęsa and his brother Stanisław, who visited him on September 30. In that conversation, during which the brothers indulged in alcoholic beverages, their topics of conversation included family financial matters’ (Paczkowski 2015, 213). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The mystery of death of Henryk Holland 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 it was a suicide (Persak 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The student revolt was set off by a censor’s decision to ban the performances of Adam Mickiewicz’s romantic drama *Dziady* (Forefathers’ Eve, 1968, Teatr Polski, Warsaw, directed by Kazimierz Dejmek) on the grounds of its anti-Russian, and therefore also anti-Soviet, message. Anti-Soviet resentment was manipulated by a political fraction led by General Mieczysław Moczar who vehemently promoted the nationalist variant of socialism that aimed at ‘cleansing’ Poland of ‘alien’ elements. Members of the Polish intelligentsia and students vehemently protested against this eruption of xenophobia and populist nationalism, whereas the workers remained indifferent. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In her interview with Stanisław Zawiśliński conducted in 1995, Holland diminishes her involvement in the activity (see: Zawiśliński 1995, 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In his review of *Fever*, Jan F. Lewandowski suggested that the film was to be linked with Holland’s experience of the Prague Spring (1981, 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In her insightful essay on *Fever*, Maria Janion identifies the bomb as a fetish (Janion 1981, 9) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The infamous *Okhrana* department exceled in provocations aimed against revolutionary movements. Instead of repressions, they invested in disinformation and provocation as the most efficient methods of political struggle. Thus, they would infiltrate various revolutionary groups to divide their members by means of false accusations and information. These methods were later transplanted to the post-revolutionary Soviet Russia and used by the communist secret police (Siemiątkowski 2017, 16-17). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The scene of the unsuccessful terrorist attack is also important because it mobilizes contradictory emotional structures. As Tadeusz Sobolewski claims, the viewers may feel relief that the attack failed (1981, 13). Yet, after ‘re-processing’ of the event, they may reconsider their initial response. After all, the survivors are the oppressors and ruthless persecutors of the revolutionaries and Polish people. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For example, Maria Malatyńska called the film ‘cold’ and claimed that it is impossible for the viewer to emotionally respond to it (Malatyńska 1981, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In fact, 245 000 viewers watched the film in 1981, which was an average number for the box-office. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. One of the reviewers writes that in her speech at the Gdańsk Film Festival, Holland said that it was not her intention to make a film about the Polish Solidarity revolution but more about the Prague Spring (I.S. 1981) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. When before his execution Kiełza clumsily shouts ‘Away with the Tsar,’ it sounds as a slogan he repeats without really understanding it and it is unclear whether this is a call to end up with economic exploitation of tsarist autocracy, or Russian oppression of Polish nation, or both. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)