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# Between History and Fiction: Visualizing Contemporary Polish Cultural Identity

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Nikki Castle

## Visualizing Polish Cultural Identity: Reading History through Film

The idea of a coherent Polish cultural identity has been complicated for generations by the segmenting of the Polish nation through its turbulent history. This history, marked by few short periods of independence, has created a “quilted identity” in Polish culture. Indicators of German and Soviet influence are patched together with those from imperial powers of the past as well as other inherently Polish elements. The result is an identity deeply divided in various perspectives on Polish cultural memory. This remains important even today, as these events are not easily forgotten pieces of the past, but rather are parts of a continuous historical narrative which persists through the present. Especially complicated was the post -WWII period since Poland experienced even greater disconnect with its own cultural values during the Communist reign. In this project, I will investigate how contemporary films serve as illustration of Polish internal struggle with its own history and its cultural memory during the post-WWII period. Three films, each from a distinct time period, will be examined. The chosen time periods will outline the following time-frame: “Post World War II”(after 1945), “Soviet Occupation” (1939-1991), and “Independence” (1991-present). The films are: Andrzej Wajda’s *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), representing the “Post World War II” period; Agnieszka Holland’s *To Kill a Priest* (1988), representing the “Soviet Occupation” period; and Andrzej Wajda’s *Katyn* (2007), representing the “Independence” period. These films present decisive turns in the formation of collective cultural identity in Poland and they illustrate the impact of war trauma on the Polish “quilted identity,” the role of religion, and the continuous impact of immediate as well as distant history on present day Poland.

**Between History and Fiction: Visualizing Contemporary  
Polish Cultural Identity**

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International Studies

Research Honors Proposal

## **Abstract**

In this study, Polish cultural identity as derived from shared cultural memories is explored. The persistence of a strong Polish cultural identity even throughout a turbulent history is examined during the Soviet era through the analysis of three films, Andrzej Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds*, Agnieszka Holland's *To Kill a Priest*, and Andrzej Wajda's *Katyń*. Because viewing films can result in the adoption of prosthetic memory which contribute to support of cultural memory, and because the creation of film itself can be considered scriptotherapy, each film is a lens to better understand how reaction to traumas of World War II and adherence to belief in Catholicism have influenced cultural memory and, by extension, Polish cultural identity throughout the period of study.

## **Key Words**

Poland, Cultural Memory, Cultural Identity, Film, Soviet Union, Prosthetic Memory, World War II, Catholicism, Scriptotherapy

## Table of Contents

Introduction

Polish Cultural Memory

History and Film

*Ashes and Diamonds*

Historical Background

History vis-à-vis Fiction

Film Overview

*To Kill a Priest*

Historical Background

History vis-à-vis Fiction

Film Overview

*Katyn'*

Historical Background

History vis-à-vis Fiction

Film Overview

Conclusion

Bibliography

## Introduction

The idea of a coherent Polish cultural identity<sup>1</sup> has been complicated for generations by the segmenting of the nation throughout its turbulent history. Following a long history of rule under partition between Prussia, Russia, and Austria from 1772 to 1791 and 1793 until implementation of a Napoleonic state in 1807, and rule under Russia beginning in 1815, the Poles experienced a brief period of independence from 1919 until 1937 (Pounds 48-60, 78, 82). By 1939, however, autonomy was lost to Nazi invasion and eventually to Soviet occupation of the nation in 1945, at the end of WWII. Poland remained occupied by the Soviet Union until the dissolution of the communist regime in 1991. However, in the words of Norman Pounds, “few countries have been able to establish so powerful an image of themselves that it could survive partition, defeat, and persecution as the Polish image of Poland has done” (Pounds 3). Although Poles have successfully maintained a national image throughout the persistent splintering of the Polish nation, this image was never universally understood.

The historical disorder has created a “quilted identity” of the nation in Polish culture. Originally used by Marina Balina with regard to an author illustrating memories of life as a Jew in Soviet Russia, this term speaks to the attempt to piece together separate and sometimes conflicting elements which compose Polish cultural identity (Balina 2008, 21). Indicators of recent Nazi and Soviet influences are patched with those from imperial powers of the past and other inherently Polish elements. The result is a cultural identity deeply divided in various perspectives on Polish cultural memory. This remains important even today, as these events are not a series of isolated cases of the past, but rather are parts of a continuous historical narrative

1. In this paper, Fong and Chuang’s definition of *cultural identity* developed in the book “Communicating Ethnic and Cultural Identity” is used. These scholars claim that cultural identity is a social construct defined as, “the identification of communications of a shared system of symbolic verbal and nonverbal behavior that are meaningful to group members who have a sense of belonging and who share traditions, heritage, language, and similar norms of appropriate behavior” (Chuang and Fong, 6).

which persists through the present. Furthermore, this continuum is not linear, but rather continuously interrupted by different recollections of past events. These returns are most often prompted by discoveries of further evidence which demystifies complicated international relations between Poland and former allies or enemies in wartime, or by present-day relations which mirror contentious international situations of the past.

Although Polish history has been fragmented for centuries, the post -WWII period was especially complicated. This is because Poland experienced even greater disconnect from its own cultural values during the Communist reign. The goal of this study is to investigate how 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Polish films serve as therapeutic narratives of the internal struggle toward creation of cultural identity pertaining to Polish history and cultural memory during the post-WWII period. Three films, each portraying a different central element of Polish cultural identity, will be examined. The origins trace back to responses to the traumas of WWII: recollection of wartime relations within Polish inner circles and with allies.

Cultural memory of war trauma is inextricably linked to Polish cultural identity because it presented Poles with the question of whether they were victims or perpetrators of conflict. This idea is posited in Andrzej Wajda's film *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958). Catholicism is important because of its longevity as it has persisted even through the communist regime, and remained a distinguishing part of cultural history. Agnieszka Holland's *To Kill a Priest* (1988) depicts the role of Catholicism in maintaining a sense of cultural identity throughout the Cold War. The relationship between Polish cultural identity and historical conflict is deepened in the examination of both past and present relations with Russia. Andrzej Wajda's film *Katyń* (2007)

explores the impact of the Katyń massacre on Polish people and military alliances alike. All three films illustrate cultural divisions which contribute to the idea of a Polish “quilted identity.”

### **Polish Cultural Memory**

Although there exist conflicting perspectives on historical events in all regions and countries, this is particularly important in the Polish case. This is because Polish cultural identity is largely based on cultural memory, which is defined as “transformative historical experience that define[s] a culture, even as time passes and it adapts to new influences” (Rodriguez, 2007). In his article, “Building the Past, Forgetting the Future: Is Poland a Historical Knowledge Based Society?” Radoslaw Poczykowski discusses the implications of his claim that “Polish society is deeply rooted in the past” (23). He explains that the tendency to form an identity based on cultural memories has steadily increased in recent years, owing both to the past-oriented focus of politicians and to greater availability of literary materials offering increasingly complete pictures of Polish history. Poczykowski highlights the distinction between national and civil models of historical narratives, which represent the two major paradigms through which competing versions of history can be studied.

The national paradigm corresponds to the ‘official’ version of history sanctioned by a governing national body. This type of understanding involves state control over historical information where the primary function of a historian is to further a political agenda by providing judgments on the past rather than unbiased accounts of events (Poczykowski 27). Dissent from an approved version of history is perceived as a threat under the national historical paradigm. Conversely, the civil model of historical narratives welcomes plurality; it allows for different “versions” of history to emerge based on the unique perspectives grounded in the



influence of an individual or group's background. A civil model of the study of the past expects that "historians act as scientists" both to uncover and relay accurate retellings and to provide insight about why more than one historical narrative may be relevant to different groups experiencing the same history (Poczykowski 29). All three films in this study portray events which occurred during a time in which only a national historical paradigm was supported, yet the narrative of each film exposes the inconsistencies between the nationally accepted narrative and historical data.

During the communist regime, the national paradigm of history was utilized to silence resistance to the authority of the Communist Party. The state compiled and taught the only permissible rendition of Polish history, which presented both the Soviet Union and its version of Marxist-Leninist communist ideology in a positive light. To publicly oppose this historical narrative would result in punishment such as incarceration or threats from the Polish secret police. Still, to demonstrate loyalty to the Polish nation or to historical truth, many Poles insisted privately or publicly on the integrity of their own recollections of the recent past. This resulted in further divides in perceptions of Polish cultural identity as some were more willing than others to trade relative safety for nationalist integrity.

The films examined in this study portray a perspective which opposed the national paradigm of history permitted under the communist regime, creating an opportunity to discuss discrepancies between the official account of life in Poland during Soviet occupation and the account held by those who resisted it. Film is used in this case as narrative text because its audiences can act as witnesses to the past in a manner which is more direct than either visual art or literary accounts allow. Today, the civil paradigm of exploration of the Polish Cold War

historical narrative is permitted, and stories of the past can be more carefully read to extract Aesopian messages which contradicted the state sanctioned version of Soviet history. The opportunity to share multiple historical narratives has also given way to new stories which can, in more explicit terms, develop an understanding of the competing nature of a national paradigm of history which does not reflect historical truth.

Other nations have also struggled to formulate a cohesive historically based cultural identity when faced with the plural nature of cultural memory. French scholar Pierre Nora writes of the difficulties in reconciling emerging memories, rooted in diverse perspectives, of historical figures who he claims have been rendered one-dimensional by historical study. He uses the term *historiography* to describe the “history of history,” or the study of the way national history has been written as opposed to the way in which a memory would encompass a greater sense of the environment and context in which historical events took place and historical figures lived and created memories (Nora, 9). He argues that history intentionally aims to destroy memory, or, at the very least, disassociate it from history (Nora, 10). I would like to argue that films based on historical events aim instead to reconcile history and memory as Nora understands them. In this way, films provide a fuller understanding both of the past and of the ways in which people are collectively impacted by the dominant historical narrative.

### **History and Film**

The purpose of keeping relatively objective records of history is to ensure that collectively accessible memories of the past are remembered truthfully, reporting events exactly as they occurred. However, this approach is inherently imperfect; ignoring the perspectives of the people who experienced the events in question necessarily means a piece of the experience is

lost. In these cases, to gain a true understanding of the past, it is important to consult both history books and fictional sources of information. As originally stated by writer E. M. Forster in his book *Aspects of the Novel*, “fiction is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence.” (Forster, 98) In the case of Communist Poland, unbiased recordkeeping was impossible because accounts which contradicted the national historical paradigm could be considered treasonous and removed from the archives. Without many accurate unbiased representations of the period, it becomes even more important to turn to fiction to understand the Polish experience before and during the Cold War.

Forster’s often repeated idea holds true in cinema as well as literary fiction. In addition to gaining an understanding of the hidden lives of characters representing real experiences of the past, cinema provides the audience with an opportunity to understand the environment in which historical events took place. A film director has even more tools than the author of literary fiction to make his or her historical visions come alive. Set design, lighting, and a variety of other factors come together to set the tone of the story. Because this is accomplished without active reading of a description, this environment can be unconsciously absorbed by the audience rather than consciously witnessed. This creates a deeper connection between the viewer and the historical situation represented in the film<sup>2</sup>.

In addition to providing an alternative illustration of nonconforming positions on the realities of life during the Communist regime, films can be analyzed as therapeutic narratives for

2. In particular, my views on the three films in this study were shaped by scholarly work of Marek Haltof: *Polish National Cinema* New York: Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2002.

their creators. The concept of narrative therapy is developed by Michael White and David Epston in their book entitled *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1990). Although it was intended as a form of psychotherapy involving a partnership between patient and therapist, I argue that the literary or visual narrative can stand alone as a therapeutic tool for all participants of film creation and viewing.

Viewed in this way, a film is much more meaningful than a mere illustration of a perspective on history; it is a creative outlet for understanding the adversity faced by the Polish collective people which ultimately manifests as the cultural memory upon which Polish cultural identity is based. Film, then, can be viewed as a form of *scriptotherapy*, which is defined by trauma scholar Suzette Henke as “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (Henke, xii). Henke connects her concept of scriptotherapy to previous work on psychoanalysis, claiming that they share the objective to “reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context out of fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation” (Henke, xviii). The idea of scriptotherapy is consistent with Epston and White’s argument that a therapeutic narrative “provides a frame that enables us to consider the broader sociopolitical context of persons’ lives and relationships” (27). Interpreted as scriptotherapeutic visual narratives, Polish films that reflect the traumatic experiences of WWII not only portray the climate of historical events as the film director wishes to convey his or her ideas, but also provide insight about the actual context in which these events were experienced firsthand. In this way, one can argue that historical films do not merely provide a diluted secondhand account of history, but rather allow viewers to witness the “firsthand” experience.

The idea of a faux-firsthand experience is especially important in a society where cultural identity is so deeply rooted in cultural memory. Even by Rodriguez's definition of the cultural memory, events do not need to be experienced firsthand for a generation to strongly identify with their implications. Providing younger generations with a stronger connection to traumatic or religiously-rooted events of the past through film only enhances cultural identification with these memories. According to Alison Landsberg, "the technologies of mass culture and the capitalist economy of which they are a part open up a world of images outside a person's lived experience, creating a portable, fluid, and nonessentialist form of memory" (18). This forms the basis of the concept of the *prosthetic memory*, which Landsberg argues becomes as much a part of an individual's perceived memories as their actual lived experiences do. The films in this study attempt to create a historical narrative exposing a layer of truth that had once been concealed in an effort to preserve events that form the basis of key elements of cultural identity. However, because the nature of film is intergenerational, this preservation functions as a prosthetic memory that younger Poles adopt and remain connected to the historical Polish cultural environment. With this methodological apparatus in mind, I analyze three films which represent three important traumatic narratives of the collective Polish experience.

***Ashes and Diamonds – Andrzej Wajda, 1958, Poland***

The film *Ashes and Diamonds* was directed by Andrzej Wajda, famous for his films portraying Poland in times of war. Wajda was born in Poland in 1926 and began directing films in 1954. He continued to direct until his final film in 2009, *Tatarak*. During the Cold War, he was involved in the Solidarity movement, and even served as a member of Lech Walesa's Solidarity Advisory Council from 1981 to 1989. He dedicated much of his career as a film

director to exposing “the atrocities of Nazism and the tragedies brought by communism” (wajda.pl). Four of his films have been nominated for Academy Awards for best foreign language film, and in 2000 Wajda received an honorary Oscar from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

### **Historical Background**

Following WWI, Woodrow Wilson included the demand for the formation of an independent Polish state in his Fourteen Points (Points 83). The territory in which this state was to be created lay between the three Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire) which had been defeated in the war. While the Polish government worked to recreate itself and its borders in the poorly defined territory over which it had been given authority, the Soviet and Nazi powers strengthened. As a result, on September 1, 1939 German armies invaded Poland, whose British and French allies were powerless to protect the boundaries of the newly independent state. They did, however, officially enter war with Germany, and WWII began over the invasion into Polish territory. Polish resistance was broken into small pockets and easily quelled by the forces of German and Russian troops and tanks. This war meant another six years of partition as Russian forces invaded the new state from the East, annexing conquered territories along the way (Points 84-5).

In Poland, World War II officially ended with Soviet liberation from Nazi control in January 1945. Although this term suggests benefit to the Poles, in reality liberation referred to imposition of a new regime. The presence of this new regime was solidified in April 1945 when the provisional government of Poland signed a treaty and pact of cooperation with the Soviet Union. However, as Soviet forces liberated village by village, innumerable Polish lives were

“written off as war casualties” upon resistance to this takeover (Davies 1982, 471). This pattern continued, amassing a total of victims estimated to number in the tens of thousands, culminating in the Warsaw Uprising beginning in late July of 1944. In this tragic event, after receiving encouragement from Moscow Radio, the Nazis remaining in the city met resistance from Warsaw residents. In spite of this announcement of support and the presence of Soviet armed forces essentially directly outside the gates of Warsaw, the Poles were left to fight German tanks alone. Their resistance was led by the National Army, which was a passionate although poorly funded and organized force of nationalist Poles fighting in the hope to return to a Polish sovereign state. Their numbers were already depleted by the beginning of the Warsaw Uprising, and when Soviet support did not arise, most of the National Army which remained to the end was composed of young boys wielding home-made explosives against the fully-commanded and well-funded Nazi troops. When the Soviet troops remained just outside the city of Warsaw during the Uprising, Winston Churchill spoke out. He denounced Soviet leaders for observing from a distance as the remnants of the Polish nationalist resistance were destroyed, allowing the Nazis to obliterate any future opposition to Soviet occupation and, metaphorically speaking, to keep Polish blood off Soviet hands. The Soviet Union instead presented itself as a liberator, and the remaining Polish citizens accepted this story after the failure of the National Army to present a feasible alternative. Ultimately, according to an October broadcast from Warsaw, the remnants of Polish National Army emerged from these brutal sixty-three days uplifting Polish heroism in the face of “the terrible injustice suffered by the Polish nation” (Davies 1982, 474-479). Still, the goal of Polish independence was not realized, and when Soviet liberators finally arrived, the communist regime was successfully imposed over the bleeding and weakened resistance.

The Warsaw Uprising and the preceding injustices resulted in the first major rift in Polish cultural identity in the wake of World War II. In response to over two months of watching children fighting tanks with bottles filled with petrol, many Poles were uncertain if they should feel like victims of the bloody situation or heroes who fought valiantly until the end. The radio broadcast delivered in Warsaw in October highlights the juxtaposition of these two conflicting perceptions of the Uprising. The broadcast begins by lamenting being “treated worse than Hitler’s satellites.” However, praising the perseverance of the Polish people, the broadcast ends with the following: “immortal is the nation that can muster such universal heroism. For those who have died have conquered, and those who live on will fight on, will conquer and again bear witness that Poland lives when the Poles live” (Davies 1982, 479). Another layer of complexity was imposed on Polish cultural identity as Poles struggled to understand whether they were victims of Soviet negligence or heroes who triumphed in the calamity of the Warsaw Uprising. Soviet liberation imposed communism on the nation, and another patch was sewn into the quilted Polish cultural identity as Polish citizens divided in the safety of supporting the new regime or in the risk of fighting it.

The most obvious risk of fighting the regime was the Secret Police, or Secret Service. This group was called *Informacja* (Information) and its leaders were appointed by Soviet rather than Polish military leaders. *Informacja* monitored the behavior of Polish citizens, and contributed to the atmosphere of widespread mistrust and reporting neighbors that was shared throughout the Soviet Union and its satellites. Whether Poles were reporting one another or being observed by the *Informacja* directly, many believed it was too great of a risk to oppose the Communist Party or its ideals in any way. Punishments for behaviors that could be labeled as



treason included incarceration or physical harm to the offenders themselves or to their loved ones. In spite of the climate of fear that resulted from the omnipresence of the Secret Police and their sympathizers, nationalists in favor of Polish independence went underground and continued National Army operations whenever possible, strategically organizing assassinations or other ways to hinder the efforts of the Communist Party (Checinski, 50-4).

### **History vis-à-vis Fiction**

*Ashes and Diamonds* was released in 1958 and stars Zbigniew Cybulski, whose role in this film made him the famous “Polish James Dean” as he is commonly called even today. The film was based on a novel by the same title written by Jerzy Andrejeski , and the title itself is a reference to a widely celebrated 19th century poem by Cyprian Norwid. In this poem, the juxtaposition between ashes and diamonds is what remains after the chaos of a destructive fire. Ashes represent the unsalvageable remains of the destruction; diamonds, unaffected by the flames, represent the hope of a new beginning. This imagery can be linked to the legendary phoenix which is reborn of ashes and provides hope for positive change and healing. In addition to the title, Norwid’s poem is featured in the film during a scene in which the protagonist Maciek takes his romantic interest Krystyna into a ruined church. Krystyna reads a passage from this poem off of a tombstone located in the church. The reading off the tombstone suggests that this destructive fire has already burned, and her presence among the ruins is a metaphor for the rare treasure of a normal life amidst the ashes of recovery from the chaos of WWII.

*Ashes and Diamonds*, a film which takes place over the span of approximately one day, opens on a road in a small Polish town in May of 1945, just after World War II has ended in Poland. The audience sees Maciek, his colleague from the National Army, Andrzej, and

Drewnowski, a double agent, for the first time. They are waiting for a local official of the Communist Party to drive past; they have been assigned the task of killing him from their leader in the National Army. This new party leader, Szczuka, has been isolated as a target because he was a traitor during WWII working for Nazis, but he was granted a position of power anyway because of the rampant corruption in the single-party regime. They shoot and kill two civilians on the road, mistaking them for Szczuka and a colleague, and continue to Warsaw where they have a second chance of assassinating the correct target.

They enter the hotel “Monopol,” where Maciek secures a room next to Szczuka’s by reminiscing with the clerk about the beauty of the capital city before it was destroyed by Nazis during the Warsaw Uprising. In the “Monopol,” Drewnowski has organized an event in honor of the appointment of his boss to be a new minister in the communist government. In the hours leading up to the event, Maciek develops a romantic interest in the bartender Krystyna, Andrzej stresses that he must focus on awaiting the opportunity to assassinate Szczuka, and Drewnowski becomes intoxicated while celebrating what his boss’s promotion may imply for his own career. The audience watches Drewnowski compromise his career by drunkenly imposing his (and an obnoxious reporter’s) presence on the sophisticated guests of the banquet while Maciek risks the opportunity to successfully execute his mission in order to spend more time with Krystyna before he inevitably must leave the city and move on to the next National Army mission.



Maciek and Krystyna in the ruined church. *Charles Silver, Ashes and Diamonds.*

Tensions are already high as Maciek and Krystyna enter a bombed church and stumble upon the crypt where the bodies of the men he killed in the first scene of the film lie. The audience knows that he cannot remain in Warsaw with Krystyna, because this will mean hiding his crime from her until the likely event that he is found guilty for the two murders. Maciek seeks the advice of Andrzej anyway, pleading that his commander allow him to live a normal life instead of moving from city to city, constantly killing for the cause and subsequently running away. Andrzej reminds him that orders must be carried out, and that his desertion will represent surrender to the Communist Party and its values. With the importance of his mission reaffirmed, Maciek follows Szczuka out of the hotel and shoots him. In this famous scene, Szczuka falls into Maciek's arms as fireworks explode overhead in celebration of the end of the war. This ironic embrace forces the audience to confront the reality that, although the war itself had ended, two

very different and inharmonious ideologies have already divided the Polish population, even before celebrations of peace have come to a close.



Maciek and Szczuka's ironic embrace. *John Cribbs, "100 Cinematic Deaths"*

In the early morning, after fulfilling his mission and killing Szczuka, Maciek runs into a group of Polish patrols who shoot him upon noticing that he is armed. He stumbles along without an obvious plan to save himself from the situation, and eventually collapses on a trash heap where he finally dies. His death is difficult to watch, as he lies unceremoniously curled into the fetal position and writhing in pain among the garbage. There is no glory or martyrdom in his death, which seems inevitable in a story featuring perpetual conflict for a nation which is supposedly celebrating the end of a war and the beginning of a peaceful era.

## Film Overview

In this film, symbolism is very important as Wajda was unable to communicate many of his viewpoints explicitly for fear of censorship or persecution by the Polish communist government. Significantly, Szczuka is targeted upon his promotion as a party leader because of his history as a war traitor. This posits the National Army against rewarding duplicitous behavior and the corruption of *Informacja*. Andrzej and Maciek of the National Army represent the rejection of a duality which complicates Polish cultural identity in addition to the rejection of the Communist regime itself, which is posited against Polish nationalism.

In one especially powerful scene of *Ashes and Diamonds*, Andrzej laments to Maciek that their fight in the National Army was in vain, since the outcome of the Warsaw Uprising was not the national freedom that they had been fighting for, but simply a new oppressive power. The celebrations of the end of World War II seem ironic as the audience watches Maciek and Andrzej continuing to take missions of what is steadily becoming a subtle and strategic civil war. The National Army's targets are no longer Nazi soldiers openly destroying the streets of Warsaw, but Poles with aspirations to achieve success as officials in the Communist Party. The two groups, communists and nationalists, have opposing cultural memories of the same event, which can hardly be called historical as it is still continuing to be celebrated throughout the film. This divergence in interpretations of cultural memory forms two distinctly separate pieces of the Polish quilted identity. The conflict between these two opposing positions recalls the metaphorical chaotic blaze from Norwid's poem, only as Maciek writhes in pain on a trash heap in the closing of the film, it is clear that no diamonds remain among the ashes as long as the

isolated strikes of the National Army are the only resistance to the oppressive force of the Communist Party.

***To Kill a Priest* - Agnieszka Holland, 1988, U.S.**

The director of this film is a Polish immigrant in the United States, Agnieszka Holland. She was born in Warsaw in November 1948, and is known for her tales “founded in the human story of life and joy in the midst of tragedy and disaster, of the world of man under the hand of God and all the unexpected pains and pleasures of existence” (Nawoj 2003). Before beginning to direct her own films, she collaborated with director Andrzej Wajda on several scripts. Protagonists of Holland’s films are rarely portrayed having achieved fulfillment or happiness in their lives. This is arguably the product of living as a believer in Solidarity throughout the Communist Polish regime, where Holland’s own visions of happiness or fulfillment were unlawful in the single-party system of Soviet occupation.

**Historical Background**

Resistance to the single-party communist government continued to grow and was quite popularly supported under the name *Solidarność*, or *Solidarity*. *Solidarity* began somewhat unexpectedly within the socialist framework as a movement of trade-unions demanding better working conditions in physically laborious jobs. In the 1950s, it developed into an effort to fight off Soviet aggressors. The success of *Solidarność*, which was cemented as a revolutionary movement in 1980 in response to worsening economic conditions, is largely credited to Lech Wałęsa. According to political scientist Ray Taras, “it embodied the hopes of much of Polish society for a more liberal, responsive, and pluralist political system” (1986, 64). This movement operated underground and was supported by the Catholic Church, which often housed

clandestine meetings. Although Wałęsa served as the chairman, there was another individual who stood out among the many involved who was responsible, albeit indirectly, for the popularization of Solidarity. The Polish Archbishop Karol Wojtyła was appointed to the papacy as John Paul II in October 1978, making him the first pope in over four centuries to hail from a country other than Italy. This was a source of great pride for the Poles, who became even more dedicated to Catholicism in celebration of this recognition. In spite of communist opposition to religion, the Pope visited his home country in 1979. In this time, he delivered speeches in which he addressed the Poles as members of a unified nation instead of a mere piece of the greater Soviet Union (Kraszewski, 27). It was these speeches which fostered the atmosphere that ultimately allowed for the cooperation of the working class people to organize in opposition to the monopoly of power that was the Communist regime (Davies 1982).

Even before the Catholic Church became the primary supporter of the Solidarity movement, the Communist Party recognized its potential to complicate totalitarian rule of Poland. One of the primary ideologists of the Party is quoted to have said,

“The Church is a great obstacle to us because in it are concentrated the philosophical bases of ideological reaction, which it ceaselessly relays to the masses. In the popular consciousness, it is the bulwark of Polish tradition and culture, the most complete expression of ‘Polishness’. This traditional understanding of patriotism is the greatest strength of the Church, even stronger and more powerful than the magic of ritual. The Church is the natural source of opposition, both ideological and philosophical”  
(Kemp-Welch, 1263).

This ideologist's message was heeded by military leaders of the Party, who moved to make as many threats and arrests as needed to quell the power of the Catholic Church. In this endeavor, though, the Party ultimately failed. The church and its ideology were far too integrated into the identity of the Polish people to be successfully subdued. Catholicism for the Poles was much more than religion - it was the last remaining piece of their cultural identity.

### **History vis-à-vis Fiction**

*To Kill a Priest* was directed in 1988, and was based on historical events rather than a fictional novel. More specifically, the basis of the film is the story of a priest named Jerzy Popieluszko, who lived from September of 1947 until October 19, 1984. He was anti-communist, and was known in his congregation as the 'Messenger of Truth' for his pro-Solidarity sermons which united parishioners against the injustices of the communist regime. Today, Father Popieluszko is an officially recognized martyr of the Catholic Church. In 1984, he was assassinated by three members of the Security Service of Internal Affairs of Poland for his role in advancing the Solidarity movement. Remarkably, his killers were all found guilty for their crimes in court after news of the murder enraged the Polish people. Even during the communist regime, the Party could not publicly support the murder of Popieluszko in fear of supplying the Solidarity movement with enough emotional ammunition to incite a revolution. This decision illustrates the fragile balance of fear that enforcers of the Communist Party utilized to maintain control during a time when resistance to the regime was growing rapidly in Polish cities. Comparing this situation to the nearly hopeless case of the National Army portrayed in *Ashes and Diamonds* illustrates the immense growth of resistance to the Communist Party after the crystallization of the Solidarity movement.



## Film Overview

In *To Kill a Priest*, the audience closely follows the stories of both the protagonist Father Popieluszko and the antagonist Stefan of the Polish *Informacja*. It is evident that both are incredibly passionate about their fundamentally opposing ideologies. In his sermons, the priest explicitly supports the Solidarity movement and very quickly amasses a following of fellow dissidents against the Polish Communist Party. Even as parishioners are arrested for various infringements of Communist-sanctioned public conduct, he continues to inspire his followers to remain loyal to the cause. He supports their struggles by stating that God is on their side. This angers Stefan, who tries by every means available to him to have Popieluszko arrested, and therefore silenced. In one such endeavor, he enlists the support of a low-ranking officer who had previously attempted to gather support for a Solidarity coalition within his police force. He sends the officer to Popieluszko's house to act as a refugee, creating the opportunity to arrest the priest for harboring a fugitive. In this, Stefan almost succeeds; however, his supervisors release Popieluszko in anticipation of an upcoming wide-scale pardon in which the priest would be released anyway.



Father Popieluszko openly supporting Solidarity during a sermon. *Brian Orndorf*.

Unable to cope with this perceived injustice, Stefan resigns from his position and formulates a plan to take matters into his own hands and murder the priest instead. Understanding this, his supervisor arranges a clandestine meeting with a man who gives him direction to carry out the task. Although he has received unofficial support from his former superiors and therefore from the Party to carry on with the assassination, this is not enough to save Stefan from the backlash when he is discovered by the public. In his incoherent rage, Stefan and his two assistants (including the same officer who had pretended to take refuge in Popieluszko's apartment) leave a trail of clues of their guilt as they track down and carry off Father Popieluszko. Ultimately, although they are successful in extinguishing the voice of this powerful orator, Popieluszko's assassination leads to an outrage among his followers and sympathizers, and the Solidarity movement amasses greater support in response to the people's perceived cruelty and harshness of the Party's police forces.

Stefan and his assistants are tried and found guilty for their crimes as the Party attempt to distance itself from the event, hoping to defuse the reactionary increase in support for Solidarity. Ultimately, the film ends tragically for both protagonist and antagonist. By the end of the film, the two men have, in a sense, killed each other. This is true in a literal sense for Popieluszko, but Stefan, too, has lost his life at the hands of his obsession with terminating the threat of Solidarity embodied by the priest. He is abandoned by his party after sacrificing both his inner and familial stability for the sake of eradicating resistance to the Communist regime.

Similar to the juxtaposition between National Army and Communist Party in *Ashes and Diamonds*, the film *To Kill a Priest* illustrates the conflict between the Solidarity movement and

the Communist Party's secret service. The approximately 30-year gap between the settings of the two films is incredibly important in understanding the difference in support that Maciek and Father Popieluszko experienced in resisting the Party. Directly after WWII, the public enjoyed the relief of the end of the war and many hoped that Soviet liberation could result in the return to Polish independence. It was not until 1946 that the public began to realize that their struggle was not over. Alternatively, many who did not identify as nationalists hoped to capitalize on the new order and ascend the ranks of the single-party system. However, by the early 1980s, dissatisfaction with the Communist regime was great enough to overcome much of the climate of mistrust, and the Solidarity movement had already gained wide support. The two Polish identities - communist and revolutionary nationalist - were by this point more deeply ingrained in the culture of the time. Each of these components of the Polish quilted identity was cemented by a community whether through the state or the church.

***Katyni* – Andrzej Wajda, 2007, Poland**

**Historical Background**

In Poland, World War II resulted in the swift division of Polish territory between occupation by the Nazi Reich, the Soviet Union, and the *Generalgouvernement*. The *Generalgouvernement* was the term used to describe the territory which was under Nazi control, but was not annexed into the Nazi Reich. The division of territory can be seen in the map below. The capital in Warsaw was part of the territory annexed by Nazi Germany, and the city of Kraków in the *Generalgouvernement* became the new center for relocated Polish cultural life as a result. As the country was divided, many Polish citizens attempted to flee to the

*Generalgouvernement*, though most were unsuccessful because special permits were required to allow emigration from Reich territory once it was occupied.

NAZI-SOVIET PACT Partition of Poland September 28, 1939



*(Chronicles of the Vilna Ghetto website)*

Especially challenged in the pursuit of permits for emigration to the Generalgouvernement were people who were connected to the military. In the years prior to 1939, the focus of the Polish nation had been placed on military reform. This was ultimately unsuccessful; the nation lacked both the necessary technological development and the monetary resources to build up an effective military. However, the nationwide attempt to improve the Polish military was not without consequence. Because the belief of the time was in the military as the path to a successful independent nation, the bulk of the nation's most talented and

ambitious individuals held ranks in the military forces. These were the people who had the necessary education and support to rebuild a free and independent Polish state. For this reason, the most effective way for Nazi and Soviet authorities to cripple Polish nation-building was to exercise greater control over military personnel and their families once they had invaded Polish territory in autumn of 1939.

Directly after acquiring territory in Eastern Poland following the Nazi-Soviet Pact of Non-Aggression of 1939, Soviet authorities took thousands of the highest-ranking military officials as well as engineers, scientists, and lawyers captive as prisoners of war to a prison camp in Soviet territory near Smolensk. Although undecorated soldiers were allowed to leave, officers and young professionals were kept in this prison camp until early 1940, when the Soviet secret police (NKVD) began transporting them truck by truck to the Katyń forest to be executed *en masse*. This massacre remained undiscovered for the proceeding months until the summer of 1941, when Adolf Hitler commanded the invasion of the Soviet Union. The Polish government-in-exile in London responded to Hitler's violation of the Pact of Non-Aggression by deciding to realign with their former allies against the Nazis. They requested the release of the Polish prisoners of war in order to form a military once again in order to fight alongside the Soviets, but in December 1941 the Soviet government claimed that the prisoners of war had escaped and could not be located (Britannica, 2-4).

In the next two years, the Nazi military enjoyed slow but steady success on the Eastern front while the status of the prisoners of war in Katyń remained a mystery. The Nazis ultimately occupied the Katyń forest, where the mass graves of Polish officials were finally uncovered nearly two years after the massacre had taken place. The propaganda arm of the Reich fully

exploited the discovery, publishing a list of the identified dead and blaming the cruel Soviets while painting themselves as heroes for breaking the news to the Polish people. An investigation followed, in which 4,443 corpses were uncovered and Soviet authorities were accused of being responsible for these executions in 1940. The Soviet government attempted to shift the blame with an alternative story in which the Poles had been working on construction projects in the area in 1941 when Nazi occupying forces entered and executed them. This story was maintained until March 1989, when responsibility was officially placed on the NKVD by Mikhail Gorbachev (Britannica, 3-5).

In the many years leading up to 1989, however, a Polish citizen's willingness to swallow this cover-up story became an important cultural symbol. Most were aware that the massacre had taken place in 1940, therefore assigning responsibility to the NKVD, and, by extension, the Soviet Union. Third party investigators including the Red Cross had correctly identified and published the possible dates of death for the Polish officials based on forensic evidence from the corpses, and some Polish citizens had access to further evidence supporting this belief. However, the USSR had installed a new communist government in Poland and the officially acceptable position placed responsibility on the Nazis for the Katyń massacre. It was illegal to voice an alternative opinion, but the Katyń massacre became a test of a "purist" Polish identity for those who were willing to risk their livelihoods to speak the truth as they understood it. In this way, brave support for Polish nation-building was equated with the support of a Polish identity. By and large, the Polish people understood just as the Soviets had that the extermination of the nation's military officials, scientists, and academics would result in a loss of hope for a free Polish nation, and they became culturally divided. Nationalists were unwilling to accept the

fabricated yet safe story about the Katyń forest massacre, but many others who had lost hope for a free Polish state preferred to maintain the status quo and accept the capacity in which the Soviet regime allowed them to culturally identify as a Polish people.

2010 brought the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Katyń massacre. To mark this momentous occasion, a memorial had been planned at the site of the war crime near Smolensk. The plane carrying ninety-six Poles from Warsaw to Smolensk, including President Lech Kaczyński and his wife, all senior commanders of the Polish national forces, and families of the victims of the massacre seventy years prior, crashed. The cause of the crash was attributed to poor weather and failure to properly prepare for landing the flight in worsened conditions. Vladimir Putin was assigned the responsibility of leading the investigation. As reports began to imply that the Russian side of investigations were less cooperative than originally promised, the crash became a cause for heavily strained relations between Poland and Russia.

Although this study focuses on Poland following World War II, the previous extended history of maintaining a strong sense of the endurance of Polish cultural identity remains significant. Any efforts made on the part of the Communist Party to subdue Polish nationalism were automatically hindered by the fact that Poles had experienced similar challenges to the autonomy of their identity before. The impact of the Soviet era on Polish cultural identity was substantial, but the Polish voice ultimately survived cultural oppression and successfully illustrated the experience through films, among other media as well.

The 2007 film *Katyń* is one of the most recent films directed by award-winning Polish director Andrzej Wajda. It is also one of his most personal, as his father was one of many victims of the historical Katyń massacre. The film provides a carefully constructed perspective of the

Katyń massacre and the confusion surrounding this atrocity. Although it tells the story of the male military officers and members of the intelligentsia who perished under Stalin's command in 1940, *Katyń* is presented largely from a female perspective. The main characters are the wives and mothers of the Polish prisoners of war attempting to understand the fate of the men they love. As a result, the film is stitched together in a way that allows the audience to experience the confusion of the unfolding of the Katyń massacre and the shifting of the blame between Soviets and Nazis.

### **History vis-à-vis Fiction**

The film opens on a bridge on September 17, 1939. On the west side, Polish citizens flee newly Nazi-occupied territories but are met with those escaping from the opposite side as the Soviet military makes gains in the East. It is among this chaos that the protagonist Anna is first presented searching for her husband with her daughter Weronika and their bicycle. In the midst of the confusion on the bridge, the wife of a military general calls out to her from a car to offer her a ride to Kraków where her own husband has told her that she will be safe. Anna refuses in order to continue searching for her husband Andrzej. She is instructed to look in a church courtyard where some Polish soldiers are receiving medical treatment, but Andrzej is not there. A priest tells her about the Soviet capturing of the Polish officers and lends her a bicycle so that she may help her husband to escape.

At last, Anna finds Andrzej gathered with the other military officials who are to be taken as prisoners of war to the USSR. He is shown writing in a journal with the explicit purpose of ensuring that a record will exist of the way he has been treated and what he has seen in the likely event that he will soon die. He is talking with Jerzy, a man in his unit who has also been taken as



a prisoner of war. Anna begs him to join her and their daughter, but Andrzej refuses to betray his oath to the military for his own personal safety. In this way, both Andrzej and Anna demonstrate their loyalty to oaths taken before God (his to the military and hers to Andrzej), prioritizing such obligations before their own wellbeing. Andrzej does not take advantage of the opportunity to escape, deciding instead to remain with his fellow men in uniform while Anna continues on to try to find safety in the *Generalgouvernement*. He stresses that she is in particular danger because of her status as a Polish military wife.

The perspective of the film shifts to introduce the audience to Andrzej's parents in Kraków. Although they are optimistic that their son is safe in captivity, they are not unaffected by the war. Andrzej's father Jan, a university professor in Kraków, is summoned to the University Jagiellonski to attend a lecture delivered by a Nazi SS general. It seems that the Nazis share the Soviet goal of decapitating the Polish intelligent resistance, because the lecture is a ruse; the SS take advantage of the assembly of Polish academics to corral them into trucks for transportation to the camp at Sachsenhausen. It is at Sachsenhausen that Jan eventually dies, reportedly as a result of a 'long untreated heart condition.'

Heeding the advice of both her husband and the General's wife, Anna tries to emigrate to the *Generalgouvernement*, but is denied three times in spite of having been born in Kraków and having family who still reside there. She returns to stay with a friend, whose husband is also a Polish officer, and who shares a residence with a communist Russian officer sympathetic to her situation. Feeling guilty because he had failed to save his family in a previous war, and certain that he will be sent to the Finnish war front where he will die, the officer offers Anna protection through marriage. He echoes Anna's loved ones when he implies that he knows about plans to

act against Polish military wives. He argues that marriage to him will improve her political position and allow her to live safely. She refuses his proposal, prioritizing her oath before God to her husband even in spite of increasingly hopeless news about the likelihood of his survival. However, the officer still hides Anna and her daughter Nika when police come searching for her at her residence. He encourages her to flee, and she ultimately makes it to Andrzej's mother's residence in Kraków.

Back in the prisoner of war camp, Andrzej builds his friendship with Jerzy as life continues in the prison camp in as normal a fashion as possible. He falls ill, and Jerzy lends him a sweater which happens to have his name written in it. They attempt to inspire positivity in an airplane engineer who is angry and disheartened by what he perceives was treason on the part of the Soviet forces who imprisoned them. This is a demonstration of the link between the engineer's education and his potential to reconstruct an independent Poland - he is both a scientist and a voice against the injustice of Soviet forces. Furthermore, the commander of the unit delivers a speech in the prison camp which reinforces this link. He refers directly to those in the camp who are not trained soldiers, but rather lawyers, scientists, engineers, and artists, and makes the powerful statement that without them, there is no hope for a free Poland.



Prisoners of war gather to hear their commander speak in the camp. (*freerepublic.com*)

Andrzej himself has maintained his habit of record-keeping, and writes detailed records of the names of those who are sent each day in transports. Ironically, he and his companion Jerzy share the popular opinion that these transports are something to look forward to - they believe, since they have been vaccinated for typhus, that they will be going on a long journey to a neutral country. Eventually, there comes a day when Andrzej's name is called, but Jerzy remains behind. Andrzej promises him the prospect of a happy life wherever the transport takes them. Both he and the audience are still unaware of what his fate will be.

At this point, there is a break in the chronology of the film. The audience sees Anna once again after she has arrived in Kraków and has begun to recreate her life there in 1943. The list of

Polish officers discovered in Katyn is published by the Nazis. Anna is overjoyed to see that Andrzej's name is missing from the list, even though the names of his commander and many others in his unit are there. Her life with Nika consists of working in a photo shop and waiting for Andrzej to return to her. A break in this monotonous life arrive in the form of her nephew Tazio. Having been orphaned by the war and the Katyn forest massacre, Tazio is remarkable for his youthful optimism and undying loyalty to Poland. He represents new hope both for the Polish nation and for Anna, for whom the past years have been dark. Tazio meets the Madam General's daughter Ewa as they run together from the police after he is seen tearing down a propaganda poster. In this scene, Wajda uplifts the power of innocent young love even in times of adversity. The audience, however, is not allowed to believe in the fallacy of hope for very long. Immediately after making plans to take Ewa on a date the following day, the Soviet police catch up to him and he is killed in the chase.



Anna reads the list of identified victims of the massacre published by Nazis in occupied Kraków.

*(freerepublic.com)*

Anna's situation worsens when she receives a visit from Jerzy. Having survived the war, he enlisted in the People's Army of Poland to continue serving in the interests of his country. However, the command of the People's Army is sympathetic to the Soviet Union, and he must accept the cover-up story about what happened in the prison camp, though he knows from personal experience that it is untrue. His visit is a shock both to Anna and to Andrzej's mother, who had seen Jerzy's name on the list of Polish officers found in the Katyn mass graves. He breaks the news to Anna that Andrzej will not be returning home, and that he was misidentified as Jerzy because he had been wearing Jerzy's sweater at the time he was killed. She is too distraught to provide any consolation to Jerzy, who bears the guilt of surviving in the place of Andrzej. Many of the Polish citizens living in the Generalgouvernement react to Jerzy as if he

were a traitor to his own identity. Unable to withstand survivor's guilt and the reactions of his former friends, Jerzy commits suicide.

Before committing suicide, Jerzy had visited a former teacher of his who was working secretly with a small team to collect and hide true evidence of the Katyń forest massacre safely away from Soviet officials who would attempt to destroy it. He provided them with Anna's address with the hope that they might return any of his effects to her. After receiving news of his death, the teachers do return Andrzej's diary to Anna. The audience is shown the date in 1940 - clearly during the time in which Soviets would bear responsibility for the crime - on which Andrzej was transported from the prison camp and ceased to write. The nearly two hour film closes on a heart wrenching recreation of the methodical cruelty of the massacre itself. The audience must wait until this point, experiencing the chaos of war and propaganda, to be confronted with the truth.

### **Film Overview**

In effect, *Katyń* is the quintessential example of cultural and prosthetic memory furthered by film. Wajda's film was released as part of a *civil paradigm* of history to portray life during a time in which a *national paradigm* of history existed. The blame for the Katyń massacre had already been placed on Stalin and the Soviet Union; Wajda could relay truthful accounts of the massacre and the confusion that followed freely. While the gap between the events which compose the subject of the film and the film's creation and release allows for a higher degree of honesty in his depictions of the massacre and its context, this same gap also removes the director from the subject of his art by several decades. As Pierre Nora has suggested, it is memory which overcomes history as a basis for cultivating a sense of cultural identity (Nora, 9). Andrzej

Wajda's memory of the post-war period and of the traumatic experience of losing his father in the Katyń massacre that enriches his film and allowed it to become such an important film for Poles of all ages to reconnect to the Polish identity (wajda.pl, 2).

The film itself effectively employs breaks in chronology and perspective to evoke a sense of the confusion that resulted from a lack of unbiased information about the Katyn massacre. Families were torn, unsure if they could remain hopeful, where to place the blame as information began to surface, who to turn to in order to rebuild the nation, or how to remain loyal to their Polish national identity without risking their livelihoods. Wajda allows the audience enough opportunity to feel attached to and hopeful for the characters to bring meaning to numbers of soldiers killed in the massacre and the impact that this had.

## **Conclusions**

The Polish state has undergone immense physical changes throughout its history, transforming from the largest territory on the European map in one century to having its land completely eradicated in the next. These physical and subsequent political changes have given rise to complicated cultural memory of the Polish historical narrative, which results in a quilted Polish cultural identity. The recent traumas of WWII, the Cold War, and the Katyń massacre have further divided Poles by ideology, whether this pertains to support of the Communist regime, clandestine involvement in the Solidarity movement, or merely continued practice of the Catholic faith. Shared memory is an important foundation of the Polish cultural identity which adequately captures the fragmented nature of identification from experiencing the same historical narrative on opposing sides of a conflict.

The complications of possessing diverging identities during an era when only a single national paradigm of historical understanding was allowed is captured through art. More specifically, film provides an outlet for the emergence of multiple historical narratives in a way that is accessible to the public. Audiences gain a greater understanding of the historical climate associated with events or figures portrayed in films and can identify more closely with a shared cultural past. In this study, the presentation of cultural memory captured in the films *Ashes and Diamonds*, *To Kill a Priest* and *Katyń* was explored.

These films are valuable presentations of the “unofficial” version of the Polish historical narrative of the Cold War. Since the culmination of WWII, the two primary narratives forming independent pieces of the Polish quilted identity belonged either to the Communist Party, or against it. The national paradigm of history was inescapable at the time - it was taught in schools and disseminated through propaganda in a variety of media in daily life. A civil paradigm encouraging plurality of historical narratives was silenced. This suggests that the Communist Party, although fearsome, was self-aware of the instability of a regime which neither appropriately represented the people it governed nor allowed them a voice. Had it enjoyed popular support, there would not have been a need to outlaw dissenting opinions or the spread of information regarding the true role of the Soviet military in the culmination of the Polish sovereign state during the Second World War.

The visual narratives presented by these films outline perspectives from Poles living during the Soviet era which contradict the national paradigm. These perspectives represent the cultural memories upon which transformations to Polish cultural identity were based during the Cold War. Even the most recent generation has access to this cultural memory, which develops



their understanding of Polish history and nation-building. The films are widely viewed even today, and resonate with audiences who adopt them as parts of their prosthetic memory, which influences their perceptions of Polish role in history and in Europe today.

The study of these Polish films uncovers that stories, especially visual narratives, can overpower traditional study of the past as the primary way in which Poles connect with their national history. Fiction is an important supplement to the study of historical records because it provides a deeper understanding of the context in which people of the past lived. Audiences of visual fiction based on history are provided with the opportunity to connect with Polish national memories as if they were their own. It is this phenomenon that allows Poles to then conflate Polish and their own cultural memory, and finally, cultural identity.

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