



Laying the ghosts of history to rest – Andrej Wajda's *Katyn*

Polish Film Club – Bringing Polish film culture to Irish Poles

Ireland is home to some 250,000 Polish residents, most of them young people in their twenties who crossed the Irish Sea to take opportunity of the country's sustained economic boom of the past decade.

These young Poles are the primary target of the Polish Film Club. The Club brings a recently released Polish language film into Ireland once a month and takes it on a road show of the major towns, generally starting with Dublin, Sligo and Cork.

“The Polish residents have a great hunger for their own films,” remarks Polish Film Club manager Richard Carolan, of Red Star Film Distributors. A native of Monaghan County in Northern Ireland, Richard has gained a good overview of the range of East European cinema whilst working as Festival Manager for the Dublin International Film Festival.

Programming for the Polish Film Club espouses a whole range of genres. In April, Richard put up the gritty drama *Komornik (The Collector)*, about a hard-man debt collector working for the Polish State. In May, the choice was of a lighter ‘dramady’ *Jeszcze Raz (Once Again)*, a mother-and-daughter story with a romantic focus. “The audience is quite cinephile back in Poland. Somehow, the taste of the Polish diaspora goes more towards the popular entertainment and we have to take this into account when choosing the movies.” In Spring 2008, Richard was hopeful that he may soon lay his hands on a print of legendary Polish film maker Andrzej Wajda's new hit film *Katyn*. The historical film tells a World War II story which to this day continues to haunt the collective consciousness of Poland; that of a real-life massacre of Polish troops by the Red Army, which was subsequently passed off as a Nazi war crime until forensic evidence unearthed in the 1970s, revealed the grim truth. “We're waiting for the film to

go to the Cannes Film Festival and then to the Oscars, before we can secure rights for the Club,” adds Richard. “However, this is an exceptional case. What we’re trying to do with the other films is to narrow the gap between their cinema release in Poland and their programming in our Film Club. The longer the gap, the lesser the value of the film for us, because pirated copies soon find their way into Ireland,” he adds.

Acquisition prices for the limited market reached by Polish Film Club never exceed £3,000 per film. The amounts may be small, but for many Polish films, they could be the only route into the fast increasing expatriate community in Ireland and the cultural dividend far exceeds the modest financial reward. “Access is often an issue,” says Richard. “The distributors are reluctant to split Irish rights from UK rights because they get a better deal if they bundle them together.”

The Polish Film Clubs is aimed firmly at the 18 to 30 year old age range, with a strong male bias. “We repeat the screening twice each film club night and get approximately 100 admissions between the two,” says Richard. “This is still a small number but we’re slowly building up the brand. There is still a large untapped audience out there.”

Whilst showing Polish films to Ireland’s Poles may help keep them in close contact with their home culture, is there not a danger that it may encourage them to isolate from Irish society rather than feeling integrated? “This is a dimension we’re addressing all the time,” Richard reflects; “We want the Club to lead to an exchange in both directions. For instance, we always programme the main feature with an Irish short film, presented with Polish sub-titles.” In the summer of 2008, Red Star Distribution was organising a programme of Irish shorts to be screened at film festivals in Poland.

Polish Film Club is also responsible for plans to launch an annual Polish Film Festival in Dublin. Richard is confident the film festival will help build cultural bridges. “The concept is to take those films out of the closed Polish *diaspora* circles and introduce an Irish audience to them. There are a lot of interesting Polish films that simply cannot access mainstream cinema distribution in Ireland, so this is about helping our own people discover the films.”

Polish Film Club relies mainly on its website to gradually attract and develop a community interested in tracking the films. Information and promotion is also channelled through the Polish Film Institute, with whom Richard and his team have a strong working relationship. “This is a fertile cooperation and it is facilitated on a day-to-day basis by the presence of two Polish-speakers on our staff.”

The unprecedented influx of young Poles and other youth from those European countries who recently joined the EU, has brought social and cultural challenges with it. Richard sees Polish Film Club as a model for helping this generation of immigrant to soften the cultural shock. “I believe initiatives such as this one should be offered to other immigrants into Ireland. They enrich film culture on both sides and provide those new arrivals with a softer transition from their home culture into our own. Their integration here will be all the more successful if they can retain a strong sense of their own cultural roots.”