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דיבוק בספרות וקולנוע עכשוויים בפולין

The Dybbuks of Contemporary Polish Literature and Cinema

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Introduction

Recent political events demonstrate that Poland's conflicted relationship to Jewish history is not consigned to the past. As Poland struggles to reconcile with the Jewish past as part of its own, attitudes about the role of Jews in Polish collective memory range from outright anti-Semitism to nostalgia toward Jewish culture. Particularly in Polish literature and film, a nostalgic stance toward Jewish culture developed in post-communist Poland that expresses interest in the former symbiosis between Poles and Jews and occasionally goes so far as to whitewash the taint of anti-Semitism. But whether met with hostility or affection, a venerable legacy of Jewish culture in Poland continues to haunt Polish society. This thesis will explore the entangled histories of Polish and Jewish culture by investigating the dark Jewish spirits of the past that come back, in various forms, in the pages of Polish modernist and contemporary literature, including as Dybbuks, Jewish ghosts, that haunt Polish texts.

Taking the influential Polish national drama *Wesele (Wedding)* by Stanisław Wyspiański as my starting point and moving forward to contemporary Polish literature and film, I trace the relationship between Polish cultural memory and Jewish aesthetic influence. In his 2015 film *Demon* Marcin Wrona casts a wedding haunted by demons, a trope strengthened in the Polish imagination by Wyspiański's play, as a retelling of the classic Yiddish folktale of a bride possessed by a troubled spirit and of An-sky's Yiddish stage version of the story, *The Dybbuk*. The intertwined stories of possession raise new questions about contemporary Poland's own possession by the haunting memory of the Yiddish culture that once flourished in its territory. In some cases, this possession is made manifest as nostalgic fascination and in other cases as horrified revulsion.

However, the Jewish ghosts reappearing in contemporary Polish works of literature and film not only reflect preoccupation with the Jewish past but also represent a struggle between what was repressed and remembered under communism. Wrona's fusion of Yiddish and Polish folk and literary traditions offers a case study to analyze sources of nostalgic influence in modern Poland.

It is crucial to note that Wrona's interest in Jewish demons is part of a larger pattern at work in Poland of cultural phenomena treading the line between historical possession and aesthetic syncretism. The last few years have seen premieres of numerous Polish adaptations of An-sky's play as well as the staging of many original productions and publication of new books that focus on the Jewish ghosts inhabiting the Polish landscape. For instance, Sylwia Chutnik's play *Muranooo* tells a story of Muranów, a neighborhood in Warsaw built on the remains of the Warsaw Ghetto. In Chutnik's play the neighborhood is now haunted by Jewish ghosts. Similarly, *Night of the Living Jews (Noc Żywych Żydów)* by Igor Ostachowicz is set in the same Warsaw neighborhood built on ghetto ruins, but in this work it is visited by the zombie-like ghosts of Jews who once lived there. Populated by a spectral cast of ghosts and demons, these works have an especially potent effect, as they disturb the audience by directly confronting them with overt embodiments of their latent fears. This fear has its roots in decades of realized and unrealized guilt and denial. Performance arts, specifically theatre and film, appear to be the perfect medium for depicting such stories of possession, which is theatrical in its nature, because they oppose the Polish stagnation caused by political repression.

Aims and General Description

The proposed thesis will offer analysis of contemporary Polish works of fiction, film, and drama demonstrating the continued interest in Poland's Jewish past, which reveals itself in the spectral appearance of Jewish ghosts in cinema, theatre, and literature. The research draws on classic Polish and Yiddish texts by Wyspiański and An-sky to explore the textual background of the Dybbuk motif and to compare the classic referent with contemporary works. The thesis will focus on Marcin Wrona's *Demon* in order to ask, first, why the Polish interest in the Jewish past focuses on the twisted form of a Dybbuk, and second, what implications this theme holds for representing Polish-Jewish relations and heritage. My goal is to understand the causes as well as the effects of the phenomenon, as it bears significance for the current political and social landscape in Poland, a country in which historical narratives stand at the center of spirited national debates about the future.

Methodology

This thesis adopts a comparative method mediated in English, the language of international research, to study a literary motif that migrates from Yiddish to Polish across a span of more than a century and through various media. I will locate the folkloric genesis of the Dybbuk literary theme, describe its development in An-sky's and Wyspianski's plays of the early twentieth century, and explicate its use in contemporary Polish cinema and fiction as a form of acting out a repressed historical possession. This work will entail visual analysis of Marcin Wrona's 2015 film *Demon* as well as the films

that influenced it: the classic 1937 Yiddish film adaptation of An-sky's *Dybbuk* and the 1973 Polish adaptation of Wyspianski's *Wesele*. In addition, I will closely read the original texts of *Wesele* (1901) and *Der Dybbuk* (1920). In the last chapter of my thesis, my research strategy will involve close readings of the contemporary Polish texts *Noc Żywych Żydów* by Igor Ostachowicz and *Murano* by Sylwia Chutnik. I will base my initial research on existing scholarship on An-sky's *Dybbuk* and Wyspianski's *Wesele* accounting for importance of these texts in the Yiddish and Polish literary traditions, respectively. I will then advance my analysis of contemporary film and drama through tools borrowed from the study of adaptation for film and theatre. I will integrate into my research relevant reviews and media reports on Wrona's film and recent Polish texts.

Scholarly and Critical Background

Few scholars thus far have studied the phenomenon of Jewish ghosts haunting Polish works of narrative, and none comments directly on *Demon*. As there are no scholarly articles yet on Wrona's *Demon*, which is the main interest of my thesis, I will base my paper on scholarly texts which are strongly connected to the film's topic and themes, building on them in order to present my own research.

The proposed thesis will begin with close readings and analysis of An-sky's *Dybbuk* and Wyspianski's *Wesele*. The critical background on which I will rely in the first part of my thesis will include scholarship which directly addresses these two dramas, such as Harold Bloom's afterward to *A Dybbuk and Other Tales of the Supernatural*, David Roskies's introduction to *The Dybbuk*, and Eva Plach's paper on the Jewish theme in Wyspianski's *Wesele*. Safran, Schorsch, and Hoberman provide critical

context on how An-sky and Wyspianski cultivated the ghost motif in their literary parables of modern fate in the contested historical arena of eastern Europe.

Scholarship on film and visual analysis will be drawn from critical work on the specific films as well as from James Naremore's *Film Adaptation* on the adaptation of stage drama in cinema. Rosenberg and Plach offer a model of how postwar European film delicately portrays Jews in the shadow of the Holocaust. With regard to Wrona's film, which, I argue, merges Polish and Jewish tales into one contemporary narrative, I will look at scholarly research pertaining to Jewish ghosts in film as well as studies of Jews in Polish popular culture, especially articles by Michael Steinlauf and the contributors to volume 16 of *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, which is devoted to Jewish popular culture. Most salient to my discussion of Wrona's film is Agi Legutko's 2012 doctoral dissertation (written at Columbia University) *Possessed by the Other: Dybbuk Possession and Modern Jewish Identity in Twentieth Century Jewish Literature and Beyond*. Secondly, I will rely on contemporary media reports and critical reviews of the film to provide an account of its reception in Poland and elsewhere. I will include in this critical reviews including Ofer Aderet's review in *Haaretz* and J. Hoberman's in *Tablet*. I will also seek to present background for Wrona's film by surveying research on significant Polish stage adaptations of An-sky's play (Steinlauf), Jewish motifs in Polish film (Gold), and the gender aspects of the original tale of dybbuk (Anolik Bienstock).

Perhaps the most important article for the final chapter of my thesis, in which I connect Wrona's film to Chutnik's *Muranoo* and Ostachowicz's *Noc Żywych Żydów*, will be Magdalena Waligórska's "Healing by Haunting: Jewish Ghosts in Contemporary Polish Literature," which, published in 2014, does not include Wrona's *Demon*, but

focuses on the main interest of my thesis: the phenomena of Jewish ghosts appearing in the pages of Polish contemporary literature. In completing my theoretical argument about how these cultural productions reflect historical processes at work in Poland today, I will rely on Freud's notion of the return of the repressed from his 1915 essay "Repression" and his 1899 theory of screen memories in an article by that name to account for the cultural forces that appear to be informing the ambivalent treatment of Jewish figures in contemporary Polish culture.

Chapter Outline

My thesis will be comprised of an introduction, three central chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter will provide background for the analysis of contemporary works that will form the bulk of the following two chapters.

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter will be to introduce the reader to the general landscape of contemporary Poland, and, in particular, the country's complicated attitude toward Polish-Jewish history. In the introduction I will present the argument of my thesis and justify the relevance of the literary and cinematic works selected for analysis.

Chapter 1. Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele* and Shimon An-sky's *Der Dybbuk*

This chapter will survey the historical referent for my argument. Drawing on Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele* and Shimon An-sky's *Der Dybbuk*, the chapter will

present an analysis of two canonical dramatic texts that strongly influence the Jewish and Polish literary imagination. The chapter will also describe the film adaptations of these works, which further strengthened their roles in their respective cultural traditions. Through exposition of the history behind these classic instances of Jewish ghosts haunting national narrative, the chapter will provide the necessary background for understanding the contemporary phenomena described in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2. Marcin Wrona's *Demon*

In chapter 2 I will focus solely on the 2015 Polish film *Demon*, in which I find tropes rooted in *Wesele* and *Dybbuk* reworked in contemporary cinematic treatment. By analyzing the film with relevant tools of film studies and adaptation studies, and comparing it with its historical antecedents, I will show how Marcin Wrona, the director of the film, connects two disparate national dramatic traditions to create a composite picture of a troubled contemporary Polish culture haunted by repressed memories of the past. The film offers commentary on the resolved and unresolved trauma connected to the Shoah of the Polish Jews, the Polish involvement in the massacres, as well as the relations between Polish and Jewish neighbors. In this chapter, in addition to using tools of literature and film analysis, I will invoke Freud's psychoanalytic theory to frame discussion of the return of the repressed as one model for grasping why trauma of the past century continues to reveal itself in twenty-first-century Poland in the shape of ghosts and horror.

Chapter 3. Sylwia Chutnik's *Muranoo* and Igor Ostachowicz's *Noc Żywych Żydów*

In chapter 3 I will continue to analyze the phenomena defined in chapter 2 by introducing two of the most important contemporary examples of the appearance of Jewish ghosts in the pages of Polish texts. These two texts strengthen my thesis that the appearance of Jewish ghosts in Polish non-Jewish texts is a larger phenomenon which might point to the unresolved traumas and guilt associated with the Polish-Jewish past, revealing itself through the appearance of phantoms and ghosts, and the experience of unexplained fear. These two works have not been translated into English, and I will rely on my own reading of the original text in Polish and provide, where necessary, translation of passages into English.

Conclusion

The final chapter will connect all the ideas presented in the paper and summarize them, in order to draw larger conclusions on the importance of understanding the described phenomena and the implications of it for contemporary Poland, as well as its neighboring countries, which share its tragic history.

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