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Film in Illiberal Times: Poland's Public Memory and the European Union

Frances Tanzer 

Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies/Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA
Email: ftanzer@clarku.edu

Abstract

This article is about the recent transformation of two powerful, paradoxical, and inseparable narratives of progress that developed in the postwar period: aesthetic autonomy and Holocaust remembrance. As far-right and illiberal parties have gained power across Europe, they adapted these foundational narratives of the liberal-democratic West to assert their own legitimacy and to reimagine the cultural inclinations of the European Union. This article examines how this process has taken place in the reception of Jonathan Glazer's *Zone of Interest* (2023) and Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border* (2023)—both international co-productions produced during the repressive eight-year reign of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland. A close reading of these films and their reception in different contexts, exposes a world more complicated than one-dimensional dichotomies between the liberal and the illiberal. Likewise, the reception of the two films makes apparent the entanglement of the national and transnational, as well as a process of translation and mistranslation that takes place as cultural materials move across geographical and ideological boundaries. Understanding such dynamics helps us to comprehend the options for criticism available to artists working within repressive contexts.

Keywords: Poland; Holocaust memory; film; Holocaust film; illiberalism; liberalism; cultural diplomacy

Introduction

This article is about the recent transformation of two powerful, paradoxical, and inseparable narratives of progress that developed in the postwar period: aesthetic autonomy and Holocaust remembrance.¹ As far-right and illiberal parties have gained power across Europe, they have adapted these foundational narratives of the postwar liberal-democratic West to assert their own legitimacy and to reimagine the cultural inclinations of the European Union. The discussion below examines how this dynamic unfolded in the reception of Jonathan Glazer's *Zone of Interest* (2023) and Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border* (2023)—both international co-productions produced during the repressive eight-year reign of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland (2015–2023).² Glazer's film about the Holocaust

¹ Amos Goldberg and Bashir Bashir framed the Holocaust as part of a narrative of progress in their introduction to *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 3.

² Jonathan Glazer, *Zone of Interest*, 2023, United Kingdom, United States, Poland: Film4, JW Films, Extreme Emotions); Agnieszka Holland, *Green Border (Zielona granica)*, 2023, Poland, France, Czechia, France and Belgium, Metro Films, Asute Films, Blick Productions, Marlene Film Productions, Beluga Tree, 2023.

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received Polish state funding and support but eventually sparked controversy internationally. Meanwhile, Holland's feature about the refugee crisis on the border between Poland and Belarus received no state funding and became a source of derision for PiS hardliners in the lead-up to the fall 2023 elections. Their differences in reception within Poland notwithstanding, the two films are linked by—and lay bare—the centrality and political flexibility of Holocaust remembrance and aesthetic autonomy within contemporary cultural discourses.

A close reading of these films and their reception in different contexts, exposes a world more complicated than one-dimensional dichotomies between the liberal and the illiberal. Likewise, the reception of the two films makes apparent the entanglement of the national and transnational, as well as a process of translation and mistranslation that takes place as cultural materials move across geographical and ideological boundaries. Understanding such dynamics helps us to grasp the options for criticism available to artists working within repressive contexts.

Aesthetic Autonomy and Holocaust Memory

Aesthetic autonomy and Holocaust remembrance have formed the basis of enduring efforts to guard the boundaries of liberal-democratic postwar Europe. Traditionally, aesthetic autonomy represented the idea that art should exist independently from the external influences of politics, capital, morality, and religion.³ The concept grew from Enlightenment discussions of autonomy, which had focused on the individual's capacity to create meaning and norms that were separate from the forms of authority generated by the state and church.⁴ While this is not the place to consider the sprawling history of this concept, contemporary cultural discourses hinge on its Nazi-era transformation. The Nazi attacks on Enlightenment values, including individual artistic and intellectual expression, gave aesthetic autonomy a new ideological significance from the 1930s on.⁵ This significance persisted during the Cold War. During the Nazi and Cold War periods, politicians and culture bureaucrats in the West enlisted a discourse of aesthetic autonomy in a vigorous defense of liberalism and eventually the capitalist West.⁶ Liberals prided themselves on allowing individual creativity to thrive in contrast to the synchronization of art and politics that characterized the Third Reich and Communist Eastern Europe.

After 1945, aesthetic autonomy became a potent political tool for former Nazi states. West German and Austrian politicians, for instance, were quick to learn the lesson: they deployed a discourse of aesthetic autonomy, made visible through exhibitions of modernism, to signal their radical opposition to Nazi culture and to rebrand themselves as democratic and European.⁷ In other words, postwar aesthetic autonomy is best understood

³ See Grant Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Avant-Garde to Socially Engaged Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024); Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3–6.

⁴ Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 15; associated with a Kantian theory of disinterestedness, *Critique of Judgement* (London, 1914 [1790]).

⁵ Theodor Adorno, for instance, framed his aesthetic theory in opposition to “the totalitarian pressures of fascist mass spectacle, socialist realism, and the ever more degraded mass culture of the West.” Cited in Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: ACLS Humanities, 1986), vii.

⁶ See Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Frances Tanzer, “The Emigration of Egon Schiele: Jewish Refugees and Austrian Modernism in New York,” in *Erasures and Eradications in Modern Viennese Art, Architecture and Design*, ed. Laura Morowitz and Megan Brandow-Faller (New York, 2023), 74–86. These revelations about the transformation of liberal cultural principles during the Cold War contribute to Samuel Moyn's criticism of Cold War liberalism: *Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

⁷ Frances Tanzer, “European Fantasies: Modernism and Jewish Absence at the Venice Biennale of Art, 1948–1956,” *Contemporary European History* (2022): 243–58.

as a discursive tool used to bolster legitimacy, perform political reeducation, and exclude enemies—here Nazis and Communists—from cultural production.

To be sure, many scholars observe that the state of separation aesthetic autonomy proposes between art and politics does not match reality.⁸ Social, economic, and political circumstances shape artists, their work, and institutions in a variety of ways, regardless of the political system in power. Even the opposition between liberalism and illiberalism that the Cold War variant of aesthetic autonomy proposed faltered in practice: During the McCarthy era, this core liberal cultural value supported the illiberal goals of repression and denunciation. The supposed failure to properly separate aesthetics or thought from politics became a justification for the suppression of communist cultural figures and ideas.⁹ This moment, then, provides an illustration of what Agnieszka Pasieka calls the “illiberalism operating within liberalism.”¹⁰ The Cold War context facilitated the intersection of liberalism and illiberalism but also obfuscated their proximity through the language of ideological opposition. The power of aesthetic autonomy ultimately rests in its claim to be apolitical—a feature that conceals the political work underway, as well as the shifting politics of its proponents.

The second core principle of liberal-democratic Europe, Holocaust remembrance, only emerged as one of the continent’s founding myths during the post-communist period. Unlike the discourse of aesthetic autonomy, the important status of Holocaust memory as a founding myth of unified Europe constituted a subject of intensive scholarly debate over the past two decades. According to Charles Maier, by the twentieth century’s end the Holocaust functioned as the central event in a master narrative of the century.¹¹ From the perspective of this narrative, the Holocaust represented a return to barbarism (after a century of post-Enlightenment progress). This lapse was only overcome by the reestablishment of a liberal-democratic order after World War II—a development viewed as inseparable from yet another victory of humanism, Enlightenment values, and rationalism. The Stockholm Declaration (2000) institutionalized this master narrative. The declaration positioned the Holocaust as the foundation for the EU’s collective memory and committed member states to the recognition of the murder of Jews within their own nations.¹²

The two narratives work together: if aesthetic autonomy represents the supposedly productive, healthy cultural system created by liberal democracies, then the memory of the Holocaust reminds us of the severe consequences and high stakes of any lapse.¹³ A pedagogical mission stands at the core of both the discourse of aesthetic autonomy and Holocaust remembrance. Aesthetic and moral education was to precede political transformation, first after National Socialism and then after communism. If aesthetic autonomy

⁸ Aesthetic autonomy also found its way into key theories of modernism. See for example, Pierre Bourdieu, “Flaubert’s Point of View,” trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Critical Inquiry* (1988), 553 and 551; Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Random House 1981); *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3. Gluck makes these observations (and challenges this framework with a discussion of popular culture), *Popular Bohemia*, 3–6; see also Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002).

⁹ On McCarthyism, see John Sbardellati, *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood’s Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Agnieszka Pasieka, *Living Right: Far Right Youth Activists in Contemporary Europe* (Princeton, 2024), 8.

¹¹ Charles Maier proposed this for the Holocaust in “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era,” *American Historical Review* (2000): 807–31; see also Tony Judt, *Postwar* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 803–31.

¹² See Aline Sierp, “Europeanising Memory: The European Union’s Politics of Memory,” in *Handbook on the Politics of Memory*, ed. M. Mälksoo (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2023), 81–94; Jelena Subotić, “Holocaust Memory and Political Legitimacy in Contemporary Europe,” *Holocaust Studies* (2023): 502–19.

¹³ Maier, “Consigning,” 807–31.

and Holocaust memory have represented important pre-conditions for belonging to the liberal-democratic West, then in the hands of the right they have helped to legitimate the presence of illiberal parties in Europe and assisted efforts to redefine the cultural landscape of the European Union.¹⁴

Since 1989, aesthetic autonomy and Holocaust remembrance have become metrics for determining post-communist Europe's suitability for belonging to the EU.¹⁵ But this belonging is fragile and contingent: any real or perceived lapses raise anxieties about Eastern Europe's presence within the EU. Though the slide to illiberalism is a global problem, Western onlookers frequently point to the rise of illiberal parties in post-communist states as evidence of an Eastern European aberration from the West's normative path.¹⁶

The consequences of this derogatory attitude are threefold. First, Western Europeans often fail to acknowledge the global sources of illiberalism and its presence across Europe, East and West.¹⁷ Second, in the Polish context (though the logic could be applied elsewhere), the identification of PiS-led Poland as deviant due to their suppression of Holocaust history obfuscates their simultaneous "appropriation" of the Holocaust.¹⁸ As Jelena Subotić observes, the EU requirement of a self-critical Holocaust memory ignores the memory of Stalinism and communism at the core of national identity and historical memory in Eastern Europe. In turn, post-communist states adapt Holocaust memory to suit their own pre-existing frameworks, often equating Nazi crimes with communist brutality or using Holocaust symbolism to think about communism.¹⁹ Finally, a tale of aberration treats Poland as a monolith and conceals fissures within Polish society—fissures that are also reproduced across Europe and the Anglo-American sphere.

Within this multilayered cultural matrix, Jonathan Glazer and Agnieszka Holland's recent films expose two faces of the instrumentalization of Holocaust remembrance and aesthetic autonomy, as well as their rightward migration. *Zone of Interest*, by virtue of its focus on the Holocaust and its notable aesthetic ambitions, may have assisted in creating positive images of Poland internationally at a time when various EU member states frequently raised concerns about illiberal backsliding. By contrast, PiS officials denounced Agnieszka Holland's film and ludicrously referred to the director as a "Nazi collaborator"—as we will see, a testament to their participation in a discourse of aesthetic autonomy that identifies unwanted cultural materials as "political" and links that presence of "politics" to National Socialism and Communism.

Certainly it would be misleading to suggest that films, state funded or otherwise, could be contained or characterized exclusively by the efforts to instrumentalize or repress them. Instead, many of the films produced during the period of PiS leadership betrayed evidence of a deeply divided, ambivalent Polish society. The multiple stakeholders involved in film production bring this matter to the fore. Even state financed films rarely express a single cultural aspiration. Likewise, international co-productions include the potential for

¹⁴ See Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca, 2019); Jonathan Zisook, "The Politics of Holocaust Memory in Central and Eastern Europe: Contemporary Poland as a Comparative Case Study," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* (2023): 24–46. Relatedly, Jan Grabowski has distinguished Holocaust negationism from denial in Poland: *Whitewash: Poland and the Jews* (London: Jewish Quarterly, 2024).

¹⁵ See Marek Kucia, "The Europeanization of Holocaust Memory and Eastern Europe," *East European Politics and Societies* (2016): 97–119.

¹⁶ Anthropologist Ivan Kalmar calls this phenomenon "Eastern Europeanism," a form of discrimination that explains populism in Eastern Europe as a result of the experience of communism, which allegedly did not allow Eastern Europe to engage with the anti-racist and liberal democratic pedagogies of the West. Ivan Kalmar, *White But Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), 5.

¹⁷ See Douglas R. Holmes, *Integral Europe: Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofascism* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star*, 25–27.

¹⁹ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star*, 9.

the misunderstanding of cultural values and narratives across borders—sometimes these misunderstandings can even be helpful for differently located artists, producers, and audiences. As for Holland and Glazer, they ultimately propose alternatives to a restrictive or repressive cultural logic and help us to think beyond the normative cultural categories and frameworks implied by the versions of aesthetic autonomy and Holocaust remembrance that have been hegemonic in the liberal-democratic West.

An Illiberal Cultural Policy at Home and Abroad

It is significant that *Zone of Interest* received state funding from the Polish Film Institute (*Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej*) and *Green Border* did not. Established in 2005, under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture, the institute identified the promotion of Polish culture and film abroad as one of their central goals.²⁰ From 2015 to 2023, this mission interacted with the PiS “policy on history,” which aimed to present a positive image of the Polish past (and present). Films that troubled this agenda were simply not funded: Holland did not dare apply for funding for *Green Border*, which criticizes Polish border guards and immigration policy more generally. She explained: “We didn’t ask for a grant from the Polish Film Institute, knowing what the attitude of the governmental institution was to that subject: it was totally forbidden.”²¹ When it came time to nominate a Polish film for the category of best foreign language film at the Academy Awards, Glazer won the nomination without issue in 2024. Meanwhile, Holland heard rumors that the selection committee, organized by the Polish Film Institute, did not select *Green Border* in 2023 because they feared reprisals from the government in the form of withheld funding.²²

By contrast, the Polish Film Institute co-financed *Zone of Interest*; and subsequently, they endorsed the international co-production between the United Kingdom, the United States, and Poland as the Polish selection for the best foreign language film at the Academy Awards.²³ Another state institution, the Auschwitz Memorial Museum offered scholarly guidance.²⁴ When *Zone of Interest* appeared in theaters, it received mostly positive reviews in Poland, including in far-right and radical nationalist publications like *Gazeta Polska* (discussed below).²⁵ One must assume that the state institutions that supported *Zone of Interest* in a variety of ways believed the approach the director had taken regarding Poland’s twentieth century could assist—or at least not hinder—the promotion of a positive image of the past demanded by the “policy on history.”

What does the policy on history aim to achieve? It has endeavored to reshape collective memory. While the policy is not limited to the Holocaust (it also engages the history of communism), negating the process of coming to terms with this “painful past” formed one of its major objectives. Specifically, PiS sought to forestall debates about Polish complicity

²⁰ Kancelaria Sejmu, Ustawa z dnia 30 czerwca 2005 r. o kinematografii, Dz. U. 2005 Nr. 132 poz. 1111, p.3, June 30, 2005. (<https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20051321111/U/D20051111Lj.pdf>).

²¹ Claire Armitstead, “Interview with Agnieszka Holland” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2024. (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/article/2024/jun/17/making-this-film-was-forbidden-how-agnieszka-hollands-migrant-thriller-inflamed-the-polish-right>).

²² Scott Roxborough, “Oscars 2024: Poland Picks ‘The Peasants’ Over ‘Green Border’ After Government Attacks,” *Hollywood Reporter*, September 25, 2023 (<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/poland-picks-the-peasants-over-green-border-2024-oscars-1235598160/>).

²³ “Film ‘Strefa interesów’ z datą kinowej premiery,” *Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej*, August 16, 2023 (<https://pisf.pl/aktualnosci/film-strefa-interesow-z-data-kinowej-premiery/>).

²⁴ On the collaboration see “Zone of Interest,” May 29, 2023 (<https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/the-zone-of-interest-jonathan-glazers-film-about-the-auschwitz-commandant-awarded-the-grand-prix-at-cannes-film-festival,1617.html>).

²⁵ See Sylwia Krasnodębska, “Strefa Interesów w polskim interesie,” *Gazeta Polska*, February 2, 2024.

that unfurled after the publication of Jan Gross' *Neighbors*.²⁶ It goes without saying that the "policy on history" is not only about the past. It is about how to define the boundaries of the Polish nation in the present. Representations of the Holocaust long served as a crucial forum for two competing visions of Polish identity—one Catholic, illiberal and exclusive of Jews and other non-Christians; the other civic, secular, and liberal democratic.²⁷

PiS sought to empower the Catholic and exclusive version of Polishness after winning majority rule. Seeking legal legitimacy for their historical policy, minister of Justice Zbigniew Ziobro introduced what became known abroad as the "Holocaust Speech Law" in 2016, signed into law in 2018. The law amended the Institute of the National Remembrance Act, originally ratified in 1999 to allow the investigation of war crimes committed against the Polish people during World War II and the communist period. The new amendment threatened a three-year prison sentence, later walked back, for "anyone claiming publicly and against the facts" that "the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich."²⁸

PiS used the amendment to chill self-critical discussions—scholarly or otherwise—about the Nazi period.²⁹ Even before the adoption of the amendment, the historical policy served as the justification for removing supporters of the self-critical view from official posts: in 2016, Karol Nawrocki, a PiS-aligned historian and the current president of Poland, replaced the director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Paweł Machcewicz. Meanwhile, PiS adherents denounced Machcewicz's internationally acclaimed exhibition as "pseudo-universal[ist]" and failing to reflect "the Polish point of view."³⁰ After its implementation, the "Holocaust Speech Law" served as justification for further personnel changes—a lesser-known, PiS affiliated director replaced the POLIN director Dariusz Stola. Likewise, scholars examining Polish complicity swiftly came under attack. When a victim testimony accused a perpetrator by name in Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking's *A Night without End*, a niece of the accused sued the scholars with financial assistance from the Polish League Against Defamation.³¹ The plaintiff reprimanded the scholars for tarnishing not only the name of her uncle but also "other Poles" and "Poland."³²

Meanwhile, indicative of the deep civic divide outlined above, Polish scholars, politicians, and religious leaders have criticized each act of suppression. An open letter in opposition to the "Holocaust Speech Law," asked: "Why should the victims and witnesses of the Holocaust have to watch what they say for fear of being arrested?" They wondered:

²⁶ Jan Gross, *Neighbors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000).

²⁷ Geneviève Zubrzycki, *Resurrecting the Jew: Nationalism, Philosemitism, and Poland's Jewish Revival* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 5–7; Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory: The Landscape of the (Non)memory of the Holocaust in Polish Education from 1989 to 2015* (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Wydawnictwo, 2020); the implications the civic interpretation were on display at the sixtieth anniversary commemoration of the Jedwabne pogrom on July 10, 2001, when the President of Poland Aleksander Kwasniewski framed the events of 1941 as a case of "fratricide." "President of the Republic of Poland participated in the mourning ceremony in Jedwabne," July 11, 2001 (<https://www.president.pl/archive/news-archive-2000-2010/news-2001/president-of-the-republic-of-poland-participated-in-the-mourning-ceremony-in-jedwabne,38125>).

²⁸ Quoted in Zubrzycki, *Resurrecting the Jew*, 2–3.

²⁹ See Zisook, "The Politics of Holocaust Memory in Central and Eastern Europe," 24.

³⁰ Claudia Ciobanu, "Poland's WWII Museum under Political Bombardment," *Politico*, May 15, 2017; also cited in Subotić, *Red Star, Yellow Star*, 7.

³¹ Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking eds., *Night without End: the Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

³² Polish Anti-Defamation League, "Malinowski Case" (<https://www.anti-defamation.pl/english/edward-malinowski-case/>); see also Grabowski, *Whitewash* Jo Glanville, "A gift for holocaust deniers': how Polish libel ruling will hit historians" *The Guardian*, February 12, 2021 (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/12/a-gift-for-holocaust-deniers-how-polish-libel-ruling-will-hit-historians>).

“Why must this be argued based on paragraphs from the criminal code and not through the merits of debate?”³³

These scandals did not stop at Polish borders. When Masha Gessen wrote an article in *The New Yorker* in defense of Grabowski and Engelking, the subheading of the article garnered controversy in Poland. In its original formulation, the subheading declared: “To exonerate the nation of the murders of three million Jews, the Polish government will go as far as to prosecute scholars for defamation.”³⁴ Piotr Cywiński, the director of the Auschwitz Memorial Museum, who, as we will see, rushed to Glaser’s defense in a 2024 controversy regarding *Zone of Interest*, balked at the suggestion that Poles were responsible for the Holocaust. The article, he lamented, contained “so many lies and distortions that I find it a bit hard to believe that it is a coincidence.” Cywiński presented Gessen as responsible for distortion and even potential denial. He explained: “Furthermore, when it concerns the Holocaust, any distortion of the historical truth is very dangerous. This applies to all forms of denial, revisionism and the deformation of historical truth.”³⁵ Though Gessen’s article focuses primarily on the contemporary court case and controversy, Cywiński claims that they “den[y] the existence of the perpetrators” (meaning the Germans).³⁶ Ultimately, the matter of the case against Grabowski and Engelking, he concludes, is a “private lawsuit under civil law, to which everyone is entitled” and, therefore, is not an issue worthy of public attention and debate.³⁷

Though *The New Yorker* changed the subtitle (the new title read: “Scholars face defamation suits, and potential criminal charges, in the Polish government’s effort to exonerate the nation of any role in the murders of three million Jews during the Nazi occupation”), Cywiński suggested that “painful damage had been done” and asked for an apology. The Polish Center for Holocaust Research, led by Barbara Engelking, chimed in, too. Though the Center found that Gessen had accurately characterized the current “efforts of the Polish authorities regarding the politics of Holocaust memory,” they rejected the suggestion of shared Polish guilt for the Holocaust—perhaps lamenting its potential to undermine the otherwise detailed discussion of the contemporary political landscape.³⁸

Writing from afar, it seems that Gessen did not anticipate how their words could be interpreted within Poland. Nevertheless, Gessen found the episode revealing. In an open letter in the liberal daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, they suggested that the virulent opposition rested on a “linguistic and logical” misunderstanding. Why should a statement that a government overreacts to a particular idea or argument necessarily mean that that the idea or argument is true? The fact that such a misunderstanding could unfurl indicated “the very opposite of a climate in which intellectual inquiry and nuanced story telling are possible.”³⁹ Gessen’s remarks suggested that Poland had lapsed under the PiS-led government regarding those two, interconnected aesthetic and moral prerequisites for inclusion and participation in the liberal-democratic European/Western project: first, in its support for

³³ Letters, “Polish Law Denies Reality of Holocaust,” *The Guardian*, February 5, 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/05/polish-law-denies-reality-of-holocaust>).

³⁴ Masha Gessen, “Historians Under Attack for Exploring Poland’s Role in the Holocaust,” *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2021.

³⁵ Piotr Cywiński, “Reckless Fiddling with the Fates of Three Million Victims Can Only Arouse Opposition,” *Polish History* (<https://polishhistory.pl/piotr-cywinski-reckless-fiddling-with-the-fates-of-three-million-victims-can-only-arouse-opposition/>).

³⁶ Piotr Cywiński, “Reckless Fiddling.”

³⁷ Piotr Cywiński, “Reckless Fiddling.”

³⁸ Sebastian Rejak posted a screenshot of the original Facebook post from the Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów / Polish Center for Holocaust Research, March 28, 2021 (<https://x.com/SebastianRejak/status/1376097586629779456/photo/1>).

³⁹ Masha Gessen, “The Following Is a Statement I Have Sent to *Gazeta Wyborcza* ...,” March 28, 2021 (https://www.facebook.com/gessen/posts/10158485093519398?ref=embed_post).

intellectual and artistic freedom, or aesthetic autonomy; and second, in its cultivation of a robust, Holocaust memory culture. Such demands clearly jostled with the radical nationalism of the Polish right. For PiS officials Gessen's accusations amounted to a diplomatic mater: Szymon Szykowski vel Sek, the foreign minister, exclaimed that Gessen's article would elicit a "strong reaction from Polish diplomacy."⁴⁰

The film industry, and the Polish Film Institute, were not immune to these political transformations: In 2013, the Polish Film Institute funded Pawel Pawlikowski's *Ida*, which contributed to the effort to come to terms with the Nazi past.⁴¹ *Ida* chronicles the story of a woman about to take her vows as a Catholic nun. She discovers that her parents were Jewish and were murdered by the neighbor with whom they had sought refuge. Already in 2013, two years prior to PiS's second major electoral victory, the Polish League Against Defamation issued a letter of complaint to the Polish Film Institute, criticizing their financial support of the film. A petition followed, signed by 40,000 Poles. The petition called for the addition of title cards that would explain that Poles were also executed by Germans and therefore cannot be held responsible for German atrocities. At this time, the film institute stood its ground. But in 2016, a year after PiS won the decisive 2015 election, the efforts to reframe the film bore fruit: a warning about the film's "historical inaccuracies" preceded a state television broadcast.⁴² Such warnings had a pedagogical function: they encouraged audiences to view the film with skepticism and a derogatory gaze.

Acts of repression, particularly threats of withholding funding, encouraged some artists and institutions to adapt cultural work to suit the boundaries established by the policy on history. This did not mean that their works were devoid of a critical edge. One example that betrays the ambivalences of making art with state funding under the PiS regime also comes from Pawlikowski—his magisterial love story, *Cold War* (2018).⁴³ Another international co-production between producers in the United Kingdom, France, and Poland, the film made a splash internationally with three nominations at the Academy Awards (Best Director, Best Foreign Language Film, Best Cinematography).

Based on the story of the director's parents, *Cold War* follows Wiktor (Tomasz Kot) and Zula (Joanna Kulig) as they make music, fall in love, and torture each other all the while participating in—and sometimes resisting—the establishment of a Polish national culture to suit the postwar communist regime. It is a film that can be read in at least three ways: First, this is a beautiful and tragic love story. Second, *Cold War* is a tragedy about the simplification and oppression of art and local cultures in authoritarian regimes. To this end, it shows the consequences of defying the principles of aesthetic autonomy: art and love suffer under communism's repressive policies. We might expand this criticism to the contemporary period, even perhaps to the situation of the creation of this film. At the same time, *Cold War* floated beautifully alongside the ideological imperatives of the PiS regime with its emphasis on Catholicism, the hardships of communism, abstract references to the Holocaust, and a soft criticism of the West.

To be sure, the potential for several meanings is characteristic of works of art in general, not only to those created in repressive contexts. Yet in Poland, films like *Cold War*

⁴⁰ Quoted in Daniel Tilles, "Author responds to criticism and death threats over New Yorker article on Polish Holocaust complicity," *Notes from Poland*, March 29, 2021 (<https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/03/29/author-responds-to-criticism-and-death-threats-over-new-yorker-article-on-polish-holocaust-complicity/>).

⁴¹ Pawel Pawlikowski, *Ida*, 2013, Poland, Denmark, France, United Kingdom: Polish Film Institute, Canal + Polska, Danish Film Institute, Eurimages, Andrea Occhipinti.

⁴² Andrew Pulver, "Polish TV Broadcaster Criticized for its Treatment of *Ida* Screening," *The Guardian*, March 4, 2016.

⁴³ Pawlikowski, *Cold War*, 2018, Poland, France, United Kingdom: Opus Film, Polish Film Institute, mk2 Films, Film4, BFI et. Al.

exposed the cultural dynamics of a divided society, where political opponents might consume the same cultural materials and share aspirations to secure international audiences. Meanwhile, international audiences might perceive a very different film than the audiences at home. In fact, the potential to reach international audiences affords film the opportunity to rebrand Polish culture abroad. After the 2018 Holocaust Law garnered much negative attention, PiS officials might have viewed a film about the Holocaust as an opportunity to balance national and international imperatives.

Zone of Interest (2023)

Zone of Interest does not seem ripe for any standard propaganda project—a view that this article will sustain. Based on Martin Amis’ novel of the same name (2014), the film documents the idyllic lives of the Auschwitz camp commandant Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel), his wife Hedwig (Sandra Hüller), and their children in occupied Poland.⁴⁴ The film also features a non-human protagonist—the cement wall that divides the world of the Höss family and that of the camp. Having viewed a Höss family album, Glazer noted that though many photographs documented scenes of family life in the garden, none of the photographs featured the wall that surrounded the garden.⁴⁵ He turned this absence into a presence: for him, the wall is the symbol of their complicity. On one side, Hedwig meticulously manages her home. But this lavish life-style rests atop the family’s willful ignorance of the dehumanization and brutality taking place on the other side of the wall.

The wall does speak—in the form of the twelve minutes of ambient music that Mica Levi composed for the film. The eerie sonic landscape exposes the brutality behind the pleasant everyday existence of the Höss family. It helps to reveal, as Glazer explained in an interview, the way that “genocide becomes ambient to their lives.”⁴⁶ Meanwhile, horrors unfurling beyond the concrete wall appear as tortured screams, blood washed from boots, and a thick layer of soot from the crematorium that coats the vicinity each evening.

Glazer did not want his film to be purely, or even mostly, historical. Rather, he wished to make his viewers feel as if they were really there. He built this principle into the method of filming: separate cameras followed the actors and filmed their actions simultaneously. The effect breaks the wall between the viewer and the complicity they witness on screen, as if to say: we are all potentially complicit.⁴⁷

In the Polish context, Glazer’s desire to implicate the viewer jostled with features that fit the film into the “policy on history”: this is a film about Germans and a film that depicts Polish suffering, rescue, and resistance rather than Polish complicity. In other words, in an ironic twist, Glazer’s film about complicity became complicit in affirming the PiS-approved narrative of the Holocaust. And yet, each of these elements is drawn askew so that it contains both the trappings of the preferred narrative and tools to undermine that narrative.

While individuals who appear to be Polish victims of slave labor populate the film (though we actually do not know if they are ethnic Poles or Jews), we do not meet any explicitly Jewish protagonists. From this fact one could arrive at the conclusion that Poles were

⁴⁴ Martin Amis, *The Zone of Interest* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

⁴⁵ Mateusz Demski, “Polska koprodukcja z dwoma Oscarami. Reżyser ‘Strefy interesów’: ‘W Polsce spotkałem anioła,’” *Gazeta wyborcza*, March 11, 2023 (<https://wyborcza.pl/7,101707,30720994,w-polsce-spotkalem-aniola-rezyser-wybitnej-strefy-interesow.html>).

⁴⁶ Interview with Jonathan Glazer, “The Zone of Interest”—Scene at the Academy,” February 16, 2024 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxVLq4EqFzQ>).

⁴⁷ “The Zone of Interest”—discussion with the filmmaker,” *On Auschwitz* [podcast], March 28, 2024 (<https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/auschwitz-memorial/episodes/The-Zone-of-Interest—discussion-with-the-filmmakers-e2hmi5v>).

the main victims of the Nazi period. This is a narrative that would please PiS officials but also, of course, has a history that precedes the Law and Justice Party. By not distinguishing Jews and Poles, Glazer avoids reproducing the logic of the Nazi racial system of classification and division. At the same time, he participates in a tendency to conflate Polish Jews and ethnic Poles. During the communist period, educational materials and sites of commemoration typically did not distinguish Jewish and ethnic Polish victims but labelled all victims as Polish. The effect was incorrectly portraying the number of ethnic Polish victims and therefore emphasizing a narrative of Polish martyrdom above all.⁴⁸

And yet, representations of Jewish absence punctuate the film. Clothing and goods looted from Jewish victims arrive at the Höss home. Hedwig distributes these goods to her servants but keeps the finest item for herself: a fur coat that she models in the mirror in her bedroom. In the pocket, she finds lipstick belonging to its previous owner. She tries it on in the mirror, before swiftly wiping it off and storing it in her vanity purse. The looted goods enrich the Höss family and contribute to their view, rooted in antisemitic stereotype, that Jews are an endless source of wealth. But the scene also points to the intimacy involved in interacting with stolen Jewish property. In this case, it is an intimacy of bodies, a perverse kiss, as Hedwig's lips graze a rouge that had already been shaped to the mouth of a nameless, absent, and silenced victim.

A second scene allows the viewer to ruminate on the mixture of intimacy and distance that characterizes the perspective of the perpetrators and their beneficiaries: Hedwig's mother comes for a visit. As she marvels "speechless" at her daughter's social rise, the mother wonders if the woman whose home she used to clean, Ester Silberman, is behind the wall. It is a rare moment where a Jew is mentioned by name. As Nitzan Lebovic pointed out, the scene exposes a difference between the mother's pre-Nazi antisemitism, which developed alongside intimacy and everyday interactions with Jews, and Hedwig's Nazi antisemitism, which operated in a context of Jewish absence and a systemic effort to erode any intimacy between Jews and non-Jews.⁴⁹

The theme of Jewish absence also appears in the context of resistance. The Höss family's domestic bliss is interlaced with a tale of a "glowing girl." The glowing girl is based on the real-life Aleksandra Bystroń-Kołodziejczyk, who Glazer met while filming in Oświęcim. Like her fictional counterpart, Bystroń-Kołodziejczyk distributed food to prisoners; later, she served as a message courier within the resistance group the Union of Armed Struggle (ZWZ-AK).⁵⁰ Told in night vision, we first meet her as she leaves pieces of fruit under shovels at a worksite around Auschwitz.

While she engages in her act of resistance and rescue, we hear Höss reading Hansel and Gretel to his children. The idyllic fairy-tale existence of the Höss family meets the reality of the camps and a very different existence. The juxtaposition of Höss' reading off-screen with the image of a Polish girl distributing aid turns the fable against its speaker. With their sweeping pedagogical mission and recourse to a mythological past, fables are fickle and ripe for subversion. *Hansel and Gretel* serves above all as a tale of liberation: in the end, Gretel pushes the evil witch into an oven—the perpetrator gets theirs, destroyed by their own tools of destruction. Meanwhile, Gretel frees Hansel from his imprisonment.

Liberation from what? Again, Glazer reminds us of the proximity of two very different realities. Höss likely viewed the German fable along the lines of Nazi propaganda: as a story of the protection of German purity and of liberation from the oppression of the evil (Jewish)

⁴⁸ Geneviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 114–15.

⁴⁹ Nitzan Lebovic, "The Zone of Complicity," *Journal of Genocide Research* (2024): 1–5.

⁵⁰ Aleksandra Kołodziejczyk, "Oral History Interview" (1998). A.0300.251, RG-50.488.0251, November 10, 2005, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection.

witch. By contrast, on screen, the “glowing girl” resists National Socialism and the genocide. To be sure, our heroine achieves more modest goals than Gretel. No one is freed from Auschwitz’ ovens. Under one of the workers shovels, she uncovers a tin with a scroll inside. The scroll, she learns, is a musical score with lyrics by Joseph Wulf. Also, a real-life figure, Wulf was a Jewish historian. He who survived Auschwitz and went on to co-found the Central Jewish Historical Commission.⁵¹ While in Auschwitz, he wrote and recorded songs in Yiddish; the film features one of those songs, called “Sunbeams.”

The glowing girl returns home with the song; we hear Wulf’s own voice introducing it. Night turns to day and we find the “glowing girl,” who no longer glows, playing “Sunbeams” on her piano. Notes sound hesitantly and the lyrics show on screen in slowly evaporating text. As in the prior scene, a “voice” appears without its speaker, but here it is an act of solidarity: the “glowing girl” brings the music of the absent Jew to life. Unlike in the scenes depicting perpetrators, the perverse intimacy of theft and erasure does not characterize the relationship with the missing Jew. Rather, this is an intimacy produced by the rescue and preservation of Jewish culture. In the scene, the glowing girl takes on a new role as a steward of a vanishing Jewish culture and presence. Her act of resistance is inseparable from her sustained solidarity and preservation.

For Glazer, stepping outside of the Höss house was crucial. He explained the inclusion of Bystrzeń-Kołodziejczyk by noting that a film about complicity with no resistance was too bleak. In an interview with *Gazeta Wyborcza*, he said that Bystrzeń-Kołodziejczyk: “seemed almost like a saint ... but for her, what she was doing was nothing unusual. She helped because she didn’t know any other way.”⁵² Glazer presents the resister as an individual of conscience. From this angle, just as anyone might be guilty of lesser or greater degrees of complicity and perpetration, individuals also share the potential for resistance. But the real-life Bystrzeń-Kołodziejczyk was not a lone wolf. She operated within the context of an organized anti-fascist resistance. To this end, Glazer, perhaps unwittingly, fits his tale into a post-communist reluctance to discuss the history of anti-fascist resistance—a reflection of a context where communism and fascism are frequently equated. The result, as Subotić notes, impoverishes the vocabulary of resistance to fascism and helps facilitate its resurgence.⁵³

In Poland, the presence of a Polish martyr and an individual resister in the film formed the focus of most of the reviews. From the perspective of the reviewer in the far-right *Gazeta Polska*, the “glowing girl” saved the film. On the one hand, the reviewer lamented that the film was intended for “global audiences” and might leave viewers with the impression that Poles were only “servants” of the Germans. Perplexingly, since Jews were not presented dying or otherwise in the film, they add that *Zone of Interest* might give the impression that “only Jews die in war.” On the other hand, this reviewer praised the inclusion of the “glowing girl” and her acts of heroism as she offered aid to victims of Nazi persecution. Everyone, this reviewer concluded, should view the film.⁵⁴

From this angle, *Zone of Interest* assists in a balancing act: smoothing over longstanding divisions between the symbolic power of “Oświęcim,” the town in which Auschwitz is situated and a shorthand for Polish suffering, and “Auschwitz,” an international symbol of Jewish martyrdom.⁵⁵ The two images—Oświęcim and Auschwitz—have jostled in the postwar and post-communist periods. The source of the tension is a contest over who

⁵¹ See Nicolas Berg, “Joseph Wulf. A Forgotten Outsider Among Holocaust Scholars,” in *Holocaust Historiography in Context. Emergence, Challenges, Polemics and Achievements*, ed. David Bankier and Dan Michman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2009), 167–206; Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 91, 103, 196.

⁵² Demski, “Polska koprodukcja z dwoma Oscarami. Reżyser, Strefy interesów.”

⁵³ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star*, 6.

⁵⁴ Krasnodębska, “Stefa Interesów w polskim interesie.”

⁵⁵ Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 14–17, 98–140.

should be viewed as the main victim of the Nazi period, Poles or Jews. Likewise, the two images raise a dispute about how to balance the national versus international versions of this history. For these reasons, changes in the Auschwitz Memorial Museum's exhibition in the post-communist period, which emphasized the specific fate of Jewish victims, yielded accusations of the "de-Polonization" of the site.⁵⁶

Zone of Interest joins Oświęcim and Auschwitz, the Polish and the international, but retains an ambiguity about the place of Jews in the story. This ambiguity has a different connotation in the West than in Poland. In the West, the centrality of Jews to the story of the Holocaust and Auschwitz is so well established that it hardly needs to be stated. In fact, some American, Israeli, and Western European viewers might even assume that those engaged in slave labor in the film were Jewish—another type of erasure and misguided memory that obfuscates the experiences of Poles. Meanwhile, in Poland, the lack of specificity about Jewish victims and a focus on Polish martyrdom enables the perception of a re-Polonization of the Holocaust in the international spaces of both Auschwitz and the film world. To be sure, not everyone in Poland shared the perspective of *Gazeta Polska* and other right-wing news outlets. In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, one reviewer questioned if the scenes of hope and resilience that featured the "glowing girl" were necessary but did not say more on the topic—I suspect an allusion to their politicization in Poland.⁵⁷

The final scenes of the film return to the notion of Poles as stewards of the history of the Holocaust. For the first time, the viewer goes to the other side of the wall—not only the wall of the camp, but also the temporal wall that separates the epoch of the Holocaust from our contemporary reality.⁵⁸ The viewer finds herself in the present-day Auschwitz, now a museum and memorial. The doors to the gas chamber open and a cleaning crew arrives. The crew of Polish women sweep the crematorium, dust the ovens, and clean glass vitrines. The labor that makes the memorial site function is exposed. It is an astonishing revelation: first as a site of murder and now as a site of memory, Polish labor, now paid, once again forms a hidden but crucial component of the camp's daily operations.

The cleaning process is interlaced with another scene featuring Rudolf Höss: we find him leaving a party, just having learned of his "exciting" new project as the lead organizer of the deportation and gassing of Hungary's Jews. As Höss descends the stairs, he wretches. The film flips back to the cleaning crew and the present day. The long-term consequences of the Holocaust are on display: the sequence suggests that Poles bear the responsibility for cleaning up the horrific mess produced by the Germans. These scenes, too, can be read several ways: as an insistence on solidarity between Jews and Poles and a suggestion that this solidarity represents a long-term commitment to Holocaust remembrance. Or the scenes can function as an affirmation of the narrative of Polish victimization currently touted by the right. The reason why this is possible is because, at least a superficial reading of the film, confirms the presence of the key trappings of the policy on history: Polish martyrs (presented in Christological terms as "saint-like"), German perpetrators, and absent Jews. At the same time, other audiences might not understand who these women are or where

⁵⁶ On the encounter with the reality and scale of Jewish persecution, Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 105–08; on the revision of the museum's narrative, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 114–18; those accusations were repeated in 2019 and the director of the Auschwitz museum, Piotr Cywiński, became the target of criticism: Monika Sieradzka, "Poland's Forgotten Victims of Nazism," DW, January 26, 2019 (<https://www.dw.com/en/polands-forgotten-victims-of-nazism/a-47247374>).

⁵⁷ Piotr Guskowski, "Jak u Pana Boga za piecami Auschwitz-Birkenau. Takiego filmu jeszcze nie było," *Gazeta wyborcza*, March 7, 2024; see also, Wojciech Engelking, "Rozum i drobnomieszczenie. Wokół filmu 'Strefa interesów' w reżyserii Jonathana Glazera," *Kultura Liberalna*, April 2, 2024 (<https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2024/04/02/rozum-i-drobnomieszczenie-recenzja-strefa-interesow-jonathan-glazer-wojciech-engelking/>).

⁵⁸ Nitzan Lebovic proposes complicity as a temporal concept: "Homo Complexus: The 'Historical' Future of Complicity" *History and Theory* (2021): 409–24.

the museum is located. Invested in its revisionist memory project, the PiS regime likely understood that it could benefit from a film that spoke in different registers at home and abroad. Perhaps Glazer understood this, too: what the Polish government wanted people to perceive would not always be perceptible abroad. In this sense, international cultural productions offer a framework for the collaboration of individuals and institutions with very different political and cultural goals as they endeavor to make works that appeal to divergent or seemingly unrelated audiences.

Green Border (2023)

Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border* did not suffer these ambiguities in Poland. Holland's film did provoke audiences at home and found no support among state officials. Holland is well-known for her films about the Holocaust and Polish Jewish identities, which draw on her own background—*Angry Harvest* (1985), *Europa, Europa* (1990), and *In Darkness* (2011). Nevertheless, *Green Border* is not about the Holocaust. Rather, it examines the ongoing refugee crisis at Poland's border with Belarus and the treatment of refugees more generally. The film has a family resemblance to *Zone of Interest*. Holland's film also features a wall as a symbol of complicity and dehumanization: it is not the wall of Auschwitz, but the so-called "green border" where refugees from the Middle East and Africa try to reach the European Union but are trapped by a geopolitical conflict.⁵⁹ Contrasted with the response to *Zone of Interest*, the Polish reception of *Green Border* suggests that the horrors of the Holocaust are somehow easier to discuss, however fraught such discussions can become, than the matter of refugees in contemporary Europe.

The conflict at the center of Holland's tale began in the summer of 2021 when authorities in Belarus falsely promoted the country as a place of easy transit to the EU. Alexander Lukashenko threatened to "flood" the EU with "drugs and migrants."⁶⁰ Holland's film captures the tensions produced by this crisis: if debates about the Holocaust raised existential questions about the nature of Polish identity (was it civic and secular—and therefore inclusive of Jews—or was it Catholic, ethnically homogenous and exclusive), then the presence of refugees from the global south formed a new chapter in these debates. Questions of Polish identity were now linked to racialized notions of European civilization, pervasive Islamophobia, and anti-migrant sentiment. It goes without saying that such prejudices have hardly been limited to Poland or the far right.⁶¹

As with *Zone of Interest*, the screenplay for *Green Border* demanded copious research: Holland made use of testimonies from refugees, borderland residents, as well as anonymous testimonies from Polish border guards.⁶² Shot in black and white, the film has the air of a historical feature or documentary. It is the inversion of Glazer's strategy: rather than dragging the past into the present, Holland's monochromatic film presents a contemporary topic as a part of our shared history. The stories of refugees, she proposes, should earn our respect. Moreover, these tales, like the Holocaust, form part of the shared past and present of Poland and Europe. It is a pedagogical film; and like *Zone of Interest*, *Green Border* also comprises a fable with lessons about resistance.

⁵⁹ Katarzyna Przyborski explains that the two walls were connected: when Martin Amis published his book in 2014, many were worried about the arrival of populations from Syria and, for many, walls became "a very good solution." Przyborski, "Strefa Interesów A Po Kore Stronie Muru Ty Chess Mieszkać?" Krytyka Political, March 15, 2024.

⁶⁰ See Agnieszka Kubal, "Why is There a Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border?" *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (2021) (<https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2021/11/17/why-is-there-a-humanitarian-crisis-at-the-polish-belarusian-border/>).

⁶¹ On Western Europe see: Holmes, *Integral Europe*.

⁶² Magdalena Polska, "Zielona granica," *Kultura Gazeta*, September 13, 2023.

Told in four, interwoven chapters, *Green Border* focuses on four different perspectives on the humanitarian crisis. Chapter 1, “the family,” begins with an encounter on the flight to Belarus. Leila (Behi Djanati Atai), from Afghanistan, meets Amina (Dalia Naous), a mother with an infant. Amina travels together with her family: husband, son, daughter, infant, and father—all fleeing Syria. Upon landing, Leila joins Amina and her clan in the van that drives them to the border. They form a makeshift family in transit: the context of transit, entrapment, and dehumanization demands an expansion of the traditional family unit. *Green Border* repeats this lesson learned through the arduous journey of the refugee, again and again: our present catastrophe requires us to form new social arrangements and alliances, Holland suggests.

Chapter 2 focuses on Jan (Tomasz Włosok), a Polish border guard, a doting husband, and soon-to-be father. We first find him in a meeting of fellow guards, where a superior explains that this is “classic hybrid warfare.” “Remember,” he continues, “these [the refugees] aren’t people they are weapons of Putin and Lukashenko ...These aren’t people they are live bullets.” The remark links two existential threats: a belligerent Russia to the East and refugees from the global south. At the edge of the Europe Union, the border patrol imagines itself as the guardian of Europe’s borders and as the protector of Christian Europe. This existential borderland battle raises a sense of insecurity regarding Poland’s status within the EU, as well as a radical nationalism that mobilizes Islamophobia and anti-migrant sentiment in an effort to reimagine the EU along the lines proposed by illiberal parties.

Jan does not only “manage” the crisis at work; he lives in the region affected by it. Like the border he guards, the boundaries of his home are, in practice, porous. Scenes of the gruesome deeds he completes while in uniform are punctuated by his realization that refugees are using the shelter of his home—in the film a construction site—and some of its resources. This fact he treats with ambivalence: he throws their things outside, angrily cleans excrement out of the toilet, and nails the door shut; but he also leaves the refugees bottles of water.

In the third chapter, we meet a group of activists. They provide food, water, medical assistance, and dry clothes. The viewer and the refugees are relieved to see them—a reprieve from the dehumanizing gaze of the border patrol guards. But they are limited in their ability to help the refugees. They operate within the Polish legal system. This means that they are unable to transport refugees beyond the exclusion zone because doing so would be grounds for human trafficking charges. They offer to either give the refugees supplies and leave them in the forest or help them apply for asylum. The application for asylum carries a risk: it necessitates a call to the border guard. While the boundaries of law limit the actions of the activists, the border patrol does not abide by these laws. Though they are legally obligated, they ignore the appeals for asylum and push the refugees back to Belarus.

The scenario leads to one of the most violent scenes of the film and exposes the ambivalence of the aid supplied by activists. They do not succeed in getting the refugees out of their predicament because they adhere—for their own protection—to the legal system that the border patrol is empowered to ignore. The astonishing brutality of the push-back that takes place in the presence of the activists suggests that their involvement might even intensify the violence. Holland adds a complicating layer to Glazer’s discussion of resistance: the act of resistance is not necessarily the opposite of complicity with violence. We find activists complicit in upholding the dehumanizing policies of the government and the border patrol officers even as they offer meaningful aid.

Julia (Maja Ostaszewska) forms the subject of the final chapter. A widowed therapist who recently moved to the rural border, Julia meets two refugees drowning in a marsh. This devastating encounter shocks her into action. She offers the activists her home as a base for their activities but ultimately experiences frustration with the limitations of what they can achieve within the confines of the law.

Taking matters into her own hands, she decides to transport a refugee family out of the forest and to the home of one of her patients. The act defies Polish law, the strict rules of her

activist group, and the norms of her profession as a psychotherapist. The first time we meet Julia's patient-turned-co-conspirator, we find him enraged by the actions of the PiS regime. In standard therapeutic language, Julia explains that "we shouldn't address issues beyond our control." But her encounter with refugees in the forest and her frustration with the activists, creates the possibility for an alternative to the therapeutic relationship—perhaps an alternative form of therapy.

The moral of this story is as follows: Julia's act of solidarity with refugees serves as a foundation for a new type of solidarity among ethnic Poles. Even Jan, the border guard, gets involved: while inspecting a truck, he sees the eye of the refugee and father we met in the opening scenes of the film. Instead of investigating further, he lets the truck pass, knowing the vehicle is carrying refugees into Poland. This vision of society and resistance does not fit neatly into any ideological framework. Holland does not reproduce the tainted image of anti-fascism in eastern Europe. Rather, she offers an alternative to both an ideologically committed resistance movement and to the image of a lone wolf engaged in an isolated act of resistance. What Holland proposes is a new society re-organized around the principles of defiance and human solidarity.

The film concludes with an addendum: the immediate aftermath of the expansion of Russia's war in Ukraine in February 2022. Refugees from the war cross the Polish border in large numbers. But now the border patrol helps to relocate Ukrainian refugees, who do not get trapped in the forest but are welcomed into Poland as representatives from the outermost edge of Christian Europe. This moment brings together Jan and the activists of Chapter 3. Now, they stand on the same side as colleagues and collaborators. A scene of intimacy unfolds as they recognize each other from the other refugee crisis and, in turn, mistrust each other. Here we see a paradox of the border and those tasked with guarding it: its violence is contextual, hierarchical, and racially motivated. The border becomes rigid or porous depending on who encounters it. Meanwhile, new interpretations of Poland's borders continuously redefine Polish society.

An international co-production between Poland, France, Czechia, and Belgium, *Green Border* attracted critical praise and won the Special Jury Prize at the 80th Venice International Film Festival. The film did not necessarily implicate other European nations in the fate of refugees, and some might have viewed it as a sign of a particularly brutal policy, limited to Poland. Certainly, this was not Holland's intention. But it also goes without saying that Holland had not participated in an effort to produce a positive image of Poland.

In stark contrast to the international praise, the Polish government immediately condemned *Green Border* and used the film to rally support for the upcoming fall 2023 election. A government order required cinemas that received state funding to show a video that presented the official perspective on the border before each screening. Screenings frequently became sites of protest and counter protest.⁶³ Mariusz Kamiński, the minister of the interior, called the film a "brutal attack on Polish uniformed officers who were defending not only Poland but also Europe."⁶⁴ The reaction of PiS officials often backfired and had the effect of increasing the popularity of the film. In Holland's words, many Poles saw the government reaction as overwrought—as "trying to kill a mouse with a canon."⁶⁵

⁶³ Anna Wyrwik, "Protest prized krakowskim kinem przeciw filmi 'Zielona granica,' *Onet*, September 21, 2023 (<https://kultura.onet.pl/film/wiadomosci/protest-przed-kinem-przeciw-filmowi-zielona-granica/cenwlcs>).

⁶⁴ Daniel Tilles, "Director to Sue Polish Justice Minister for Likening Film Critical of Migrant Treatment to Nazi Propaganda," *Notes from Poland*, September 7, 2023, (<https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/09/07/director-to-sue-polish-justice-minister-for-likening-film-critical-of-migrant-treatment-to-nazi-propaganda/>).

⁶⁵ David Mouriquand, "Polish Director Agnieszka Holland on Her New Film 'Green Border': 'We Need Courageous Films,'" *Euronews*, February 2, 2024 (<https://www.euronews.com/culture/2024/02/02/polish-director-agnieszka-holland-on-her-new-film-green-border-we-need-courageous-films>).

The negative responses, meanwhile, drew on PiS's revisionist Holocaust memory to dismiss the director. Though it was not true, many of the accusations against Holland centered on the assertion that she had compared border guards to Nazis and that she herself had produced a piece of "Nazi propaganda." The architect of the "Holocaust Law" and Minister of Justice Zbigniew Ziobro chimed in along these lines. Although he had not seen the film, Ziobro wrote on X: "In the Third Reich, the Germans produced propaganda films showing Poles as bandits and murderers. Today they have Agnieszka Holland for that."⁶⁶ In a radio interview on the right wing, Radio Maryja, Ziobro condemned Holland for having made herself a vehicle of "Russian propaganda" and creating a film: "that shows Poland from the worst angle."⁶⁷ In this way, he links Holland to Poland's two enemies Nazi Germany and Russia—the latter being at once a present-day threat and a stand in for communism.

The attack against Holland might appear contradictory: on the one hand, antagonists read her film's focus on contemporary complicity in human rights violations at the border as invoking Polish complicity during the Nazi period. Interestingly, this conclusion reverse engineers the Holocaust remembrance projects that do, in fact, use the symbolism of the Holocaust to condemn more recent genocides and breaches of human rights.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the fact that she raises the specter of complicity at all leads opponents to discursively link Holland to Nazi Germany and Putin's Russia. This discourse, intended to quell and suppress a culture of criticism, uses the same principle as the Holocaust Law but also reverses it: if the Holocaust Law punishes discussions of Polish complicity, then this response recasts Holland as a collaborator to delegitimize her politically problematic cultural work through its alleged—but fabricated—tight association with National Socialism and Russia. Consistent with the policy on history, if Holland can be compared to National Socialists, then Poles must be the victims of her work. In turn, Holland must stand outside of the Polish national community.

When Holland threatened to sue Ziobro for defamation for his comparison of her film to Nazi propaganda (ironically a threat that could make use of the Holocaust Law), he explained that the "Last Judgment" would take precedence over any court judgment and reaffirmed his accusation that she had unfairly and hypocritically compared border guards to Nazis. Later, when a court ruling was issued to prevent him from comparing Holland's film to Nazi propaganda, he called it "an assault on freedom of speech." He drove home his perspective once again, explaining that the judgment allowed Holland to make the comparison of border guards to "German Nazis."⁶⁹ The statement is only more absurd when we consider that the most important border guard represented in the film eventually demonstrates concern for the plight of refugees.

The office of border patrol reaffirmed the association of *Green Border* with Nazi propaganda in a press release on the film, titled: "Green Border—Only Pigs go to the Cinema" ("Zielona Granica"—tylko świnie siedzą w kinie").⁷⁰ The slogan—"only pigs go to the cinema"—came from the Polish resistance and had been used in opposition to Nazi propaganda films after the occupation of Poland at the start of World War II. The use of the slogan in relation to Holland's film implied that her film antagonized the Polish nation and could be

⁶⁶ Quoted in Vanessa Gera, "Polish Official Harshly Criticizes Film that Explores Migration Crisis at the Belarus Border," AP, September 5, 2023 (<https://apnews.com/article/poland-migration-belarus-venice-film-festival-fcfc8261f22ef9f290532a609a580060>).

⁶⁷ Quoted in Tilles, "Director to Sue."

⁶⁸ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star*, 22.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Tilles, "Director to Sue."

⁷⁰ See Maciej Chołodowski, "Zielona granica". Prezydent Duda pozwany za widowed o świnia chodz catch w kinie, *Białystok wyborcza*, October 26, 2023, (<https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,30343190,zielona-granica-prezydent-duda-pozwany-za-wypowiedz-o-swiniach.html>).

delegitimized as Nazi (or communist, or Russian) propaganda and subordinated to political interests. As this example and others make clear, the condemnation of Holland's work linked the weaponization of Holocaust remembrance to a particular understanding of the relationship between culture and politics in terms of aesthetic autonomy. We see both discourses in negative relief as tools of repression. Holland's detractors accused her of creating artwork that was mere propaganda. Ziobro and the office of the Border Patrol delegitimized her work as political and ideological. They viewed its alleged politicization as yet another sign that the film was tethered to the repudiated politics of National Socialism, a regime apparently only capable of art that served an ideological purpose.

An Oscar Controversy

Zone of Interest experienced a similar fate outside of Poland. Though the Polish right mostly championed *Zone of Interest*, a denunciation of the film as political and ideological became a staple of the right in the West. For Glazer, the controversy began not with the screening of his film but with a speech he delivered at the 96th Academy Awards. Accepting his award for best international film, Glazer made it clear that his film's message about complicity was not only about the Holocaust: "Our film shows where dehumanization leads at its worst. It has shaped all of our past and present. Right now, we stand here as men who refute their Jewishness and the Holocaust being hijacked by an occupation which has led to conflict for so many innocent people. Whether the victims of October—whether the victims of October 7th in Israel or the ongoing attack on Gaza, all the victims of this dehumanization, how do we resist?"⁷¹ Glazer issued a warning about the instrumentalization of the Holocaust and those who use their historic victimization as a weapon—a statement that interestingly could be applied to Poles, as well as Jews in some instances.

Once Glazer himself made the connection between his film's condemnation of complicity during the Holocaust and contemporary discussions of Gaza, viewers could not help but agree. Supporters appreciated his multidirectional vision and celebrated *Zone of Interest*'s depiction of the Holocaust for its enduring and transferable relevance in our own times.⁷² Anthropologist Ghassan Hage contended that: "this is all of us now in the shadow of the mass murders committed in Gaza, living in cultures that have banalized evil."⁷³ From this view, the political meaning of the film secures its significance rather than its delegitimization—an inversion of the interpretation of aesthetic autonomy commonly featured in the discourse of the right and among liberals.

Detractors also took note. Right-wing pro-Israel pundit Ben Shapiro inverted Glazer's warning against the instrumentalization of Jewishness and the Holocaust. In an outlandish interpretation, he accused Glazer of "using Jewishness and the Holocaust as a weapon—in favor of Hamas" (a curious remark since Glazer's speech did not mention Hamas). Shapiro continued by challenging Glazer's Jewishness and drawing the boundaries of Jewish identity to exclude the director and other Jews who Shapiro might identify with "left-wing causes."⁷⁴ Some figures in Israel and the United States simply misconstrued Glazer's remarks and claimed that he had "renounced his Jewishness" rather than its instrumentalization. Proponents of this view transform Glazer discursively into a non-Jew. Ideological exclusion, in this instance, informs an imaginative redrawing of ethnic and religious boundaries.

⁷¹ The full text of Glazer's speech: Zoe Guy, "Joaquin Phoenix, Chloe Fineman, and More Support Jonathan Glazer's Oscars Speech in Open Letter," *Vulture*, April 5, 2024 (<https://www.vulture.com/article/oscars-2024-jonathan-glazer-speech-full-transcript.html>).

⁷² See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁷³ Ghassan Hage, "Zone of Interest as an Ethnography of Indifference," *Journal of Genocide Research* (2024): 1–7.

⁷⁴ Ben Shapiro, "Jonathan Glazer's Evil Oscar's Display" *Grand Forks Herald*, March 17, 2024, (<https://www.grandforksherald.com/opinion/columns/ben-shapiro-jonathan-glazers-evil-oscars-display>).

This structure of thought echoed the negative reception of Holland's *Green Border*, which likewise defined the film's director as outside of the boundary of, and even an enemy of, the Polish community. In both cases, then, the delegitimization of the work of art as political deepened into a delegitimization of the artist's belonging to Polishness or Jewishness. Even if differently located illiberal commentators diverged in their assessment of *Zone of Interest*, this method for denouncing unwanted cultural products clearly functioned in Poland, Western Europe, Israel, and the United States—a fact that illuminates a transnational discourse of cultural criticism among right wing groups and proponents, as well as national discrepancies.

In Poland, right-wing news outlets were mostly silent or ambivalent regarding Glazer's Oscar's speech. Meanwhile, some liberal and centrist news outlets attempted to sever the film from Glazer's statements. One reviewer concluded in an addendum that: "Films are smarter than their directors, just as novels are smarter than their authors, so we will not mention Glazer's Oscar speech."⁷⁵ Other supporters of the film countered accusations of politicization by explaining that the film did not really deliver a political message: another manifestation of the weaponization of aesthetic autonomy, which attempts to preserve culture as apolitical to guard its legitimacy.

On March 14, the director of the Auschwitz Memorial Museum, Piotr M. A. Cywiński, explained on X: "In his Oscar acceptance speech, Jonathan Glazer issued a universal moral warning against dehumanization. His aim was not to descend to the level of political discourse. Critics who expected a clear political stance or a film solely about genocide did not grasp the depth of his message. 'The Zone of Interest' is not a film about the Shoah. It is primarily a profound warning about humanity and its nature."⁷⁶ For Glazer's supporters the statement from the Auschwitz Memorial Museum acted as a legitimizing force: Who better to understand the significance of the Holocaust than the director of such an institution? Meanwhile, opponents were apparently so incensed by the remarks that the X account lost 4,800 followers in the month of March. The way that controversy unfolded, mostly on social media, however, concealed yet another discrepancy of interpretation—this time between Cywiński's perspective and Glazer's own sense of his film.

The political message in Glazer's speech was straightforward. But Cywiński sought to support Glazer and the legitimacy of *Zone of Interest* by pointing to its political incoherence. The method shared a foundational assumption with Glazer's (and Holland's) detractors: an adherence to the principle of aesthetic autonomy. For Cywiński, emphasizing the political ambiguity of the film aimed to deflect any interpretation that would connect the Auschwitz Museum, which had assisted in the research for the film, to the controversies and debates that surround the application of the genocide concept to Gaza. But it also reflects tendencies of the post-communist period that certainly preceded—but were also taken to the extreme by—the rise of the PiS party.

Glazer and Cywiński seem to agree that the Holocaust offers the potential for a universal message but they diverge on the nature of this message. For Glazer, the film is about a persistent ability to ignore and benefit from atrocities. This ability, he suggests, is not incidental to our world but rests at its very foundation. In other words, this is hardly a historical film about the specificities of the Holocaust. The Holocaust in Glazer's hands is neither unique nor merely comparable to other instances of genocide and atrocity. Rather, Glazer imagines the Holocaust as an unending event: he does not exclaim "never again" but asks "why always again?"

⁷⁵ Engelking, "Rozum," April 2, 2024.

⁷⁶ Piotr Cywiński, Auschwitz Memorial, March 14, 2024 (<https://x.com/AuschwitzMuseum/status/1768342279415058865>).

Cywiński's remarks point in a different direction. He defended the film's ability to condemn dehumanization and evil—concepts which he removes from historical understanding and treats as quasi-religious. Cywiński references the Roman Catholic interpretation of Auschwitz, which became prominent from the 1980s on. In this moment, a Catholic universalism that focused on Auschwitz as a carrier of “universal lessons” replaced the socialist universalism of an international anti-fascist struggle. The Catholic interpretation formed yet another way of engaging with the international significance of the site of Auschwitz: its proponents translated Auschwitz' international significance to core questions of Polish identity—Catholicism and martyrdom.

Like the communist anti-fascist narrative, Catholic universalism collapsed Jewish victims into a tale of Polish martyrdom and heroism.⁷⁷ At the same time, it goes without saying that Catholic universalism, married to ethnic nationalism, parted ways with the socialist narrative by replacing the evils of capitalism and fascism with an ahistorical and metaphysical notion of universal evil.⁷⁸ Resistance and martyrdom formed central fixtures of this narrative but also appeared in a depoliticized form, severed from any anti-fascist struggle—a narrative echoed in *Zone of Interest* itself (even if Glazer's speech diverged from this interpretation). This variety of Catholic universalism found echoes within postwar Europe—a history that increased its utility for the process of post-communist reorientation.⁷⁹ In recent years, radical nationalism redirected such narratives toward anti-democratic and illiberal ends, while also protesting the ways that the Catholic universalism of the 1980s has often involved a deepening engagement with Jewish experiences and the memorialization of Jewish victims.

Conclusion

The Oscar controversy took place after the October 2023 parliamentary elections, which saw the defeat of the Law and Justice Party and the appointment of the leader of the opposition party, Donald Tusk, as prime minister. While the political transformation brought a sigh of relief from many segments of Polish society and within the EU, Holland questioned if the political shift would radically transform Poland's cultural apparatus. Reflecting on the October elections, she lamented that: “So far our cinema authorities have not changed. It remains to be seen whether they will change their approach to funding more topical or controversial projects.”⁸⁰ Regarding the refugee crisis Holland made a similar observation: “The language is different but, frankly, I think the new government doesn't have any more idea how to deal with migration than the rest of Europe.”⁸¹ In part this situation emerges as the result of intense divisions that mark Polish society, not to mention other European societies.

The June 2025 election, which brought PiS hardliner and historian Karol Nawrocki, mentioned above, into the presidential seat on a very narrow margin, served as another reminder of that division and the challenges ahead for pro-democracy Poles. In response to the devastating election result, Donald Tusk proposed a rightward shift that included

⁷⁷ Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 110.

⁷⁸ Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 104.

⁷⁹ See Brandon Bloch, *Reinventing Protestant Germany: Religious Nationalists and the Contest for Post-Nazi Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025); James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Tanzer, “European Fantasies,” 243–58; Tanzer, *Vanishing Vienna*, 112–42.

⁸⁰ Marta Balaga, “Polish Filmmakers Gear Up for New Political Reality: ‘Recent Years Have Been Very Difficult,’” *Variety*, February 16, 2024 (<https://variety.com/2024/film/global/poland-berlin-agnieszka-holland-ewa-puszczyńska-1235914577/>).

⁸¹ Armitstead, Interview, June 17, 2024.

tighter controls on borders and immigration. With these subsequent developments in mind, Holland's remarks illuminate the proximity of liberal and illiberal cultural and political regimes. Likewise, these recent events point us to the causes of this proximity: their interwoven history and shared intellectual universe, as well as the societal divisions that seem to demand their collaboration.

Such revelations provide a cultural dimension to the now frequent assertion that liberalism and illiberalism are not opposites but rather ready co-conspirators. Especially when illiberal parties are democratically elected, as in Poland, we can expect this interplay and fusion between illiberal and liberal cultural projects and discourses. But regardless of our awareness of this proximity, it is commonplace to celebrate a liberal cultural system as the cultural norm that ought to be resurrected after a lapse into authoritarian rule or fascism. In this framework, aesthetic autonomy becomes an antidote to the political and moral lapse. It is a type of solution that rests on the belief in a stark opposition between authoritarian and liberal rule. This article has suggested that such images of aesthetic discontinuity frequently mask deeper alliances between supposed political opposites. Indeed, the reception of the two films and the controversies that have surrounded them expose shared assumptions about the relationship between art and politics found across the political spectrum and across borders: in a range of contexts, the perception of the collapse of boundaries between art and politics either delegitimizes a work of art or proves its relevance. In each instance, art garners its meaning through the presence or absence of the correct politics.

Despite the shared world outlined above, it goes without saying that there are crucial differences between Tusk's Civic Platform and the Law and Justice Party. The two parties represent distinct visions of Poland, its relationship to the past, to democracy, human rights, and to Poland's place in Europe. The liberal government is willing, for instance, to accept and to encourage a self-critical discussion of Polish complicity in the Holocaust and the antisemitism of the 1930s and 1940s. The problem, however, with the standard oppositions and normative interpretations of liberal cultural values (the need to "return" to them after a period of illiberal rule) is thus: not only do such oppositions conceal the cocreation of the liberal and the illiberal, but, even more pressingly, the effort to reassert a normative liberal cultural system that prioritizes aesthetic autonomy does little to protect the democratic system that it claims to represent. As I have argued above, this is the case for two reasons: first because the right has appropriated that discourse; and second, because the right has gained popularity at least in part as the result of a rejection of liberal rule.

Holland and Glazer offer an alternative cultural framework that does not fixate on the liberal/illiberal opposition or the presence and absence of "politics." Rather, this framework emphasizes the potential to observe and imagine new alliances. Theirs is the perspective of the fable or the allegory. At the most foundational level, allegories and fables make a truth or a lesson visible and therefore memorable. They use formulaic images, stereotypes, and narrative structures to uncover hidden social possibilities. The two films use allegory—for Glazer the Holocaust becomes a fable; and for Holland the refugee crisis does this work—to expose solidarities that defy norms. This framework offers a more expansive role to the artist: through their engagement and close observation, the artist becomes an important public voice, rather than merely an outsider or antagonist, responsible for upholding art's separation from the political sphere (as implied in the ideology of aesthetic autonomy).⁸² Our times, as the controversies that have surrounded Glazer and Holland make clear, demand a reorganization of standard ideological oppositions and frameworks to make such voices visible and graspable.

⁸² Gluck makes this observation in her discussion of modernism, *Popular Bohemia*, 8.

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Frances Tanzer is the Rose Professor of Holocaust Studies and Jewish Culture at Clark University. She is the author of *Vanishing Vienna: Modernism, Philosemitism, and Jews in a Postwar City* (2024). She is currently completing a book titled "Klezmer Dynasty: Musical and Linguistic Inheritance in the Galician Borderlands."

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