

Ewa Mazierska

University of Central Lancashire

ORCID 0000-0002-4385-8264

Book Review: Henri de Corinth, *Andrzej Żuławski: Abject Cinema*, Amsterdam University Press, 2024

Henri de Corinth's monograph of Andrzej Żuławski, titled *Andrzej Żuławski: Abject Cinema* and published by Amsterdam University Press in 2024, adds to the significant body of literature about this director. Żuławski, after Roman Polanski and Andrzej Wajda, is the most discussed Polish director in foreign languages, including by authors, who, like de Corinth, who is American (or at least based in the United States), are not ethnically Polish. This interest, to a large extent, reflects the fact that Żuławski, like Polanski, and to a smaller extent other Polish émigré directors, such as Jerzy Skolimowski and Walerian Borowczyk, is not regarded as truly Polish. De Corinth tackles this issue head on, emphasising the fact that a large part of Żuławski's life was spent in France and mentioning his deep dislike of Eastern Europe and ambivalent attitude towards the West. One can add that this is in contrast to Polanski, who – at least till his escape from Hollywood in 1977 – had a much more positive attitude towards it. De Corinth, for example, mentions that

It seems inevitable that the sociopolitical environment in which Żuławski was reared would for him extrapolate various sociopolitical components of cinema, particularly of Western cinema. The director once described his experience at age fifteen, when young Communists in his school were being ousted for duplicity, being anti-social, anti-regime,

and so on, wondering: "...by what miracle had I not been contaminated, bah, submissive, by the falsehood and lie of communist propaganda," and thus seeing more plausible reality in "...the technicolor cows and cowboys of *The Tall Men* than in the banners, slogans, and red newspapers talking about the working class..." These comments are a reflection of a long-standing ambivalent relationship between Żuławski and the culture of Western Europe. For instance, when Andrei Tarkovsky visited the United States in 1983 to promote *Nostalghia* (1983) at the Telluride International Film Festival, he described the "tastelessness" of Las Vegas in his diary, yet the first thing he allegedly said he wanted to do was to see *Octopussy* (John Glen, 1983), and Żuławski mocked the director for doing this. Yet when Żuławski arrived in Paris during his first exile after *The Devil*, among the first things he did was purchase a Porsche.

This ambivalent (for more critical readers, verging on hypocritical) attitude to the West and, more widely, borderline character of Żuławski's cinema appears to be the main topic of this book. De Corinth researches it, using as the main lens the ideas formulated by Kristeva, most importantly her concept of abject. He maintains that:

The cinema of Andrzej Żuławski constitutes an experience of the abject, both in its depiction of its subjects and in the embodiment of its own form. Żuławski depicted subjects that on the surface appear to exist in states of abjection, be they estranged from some kind of norm or stasis – social, political, spiritual, geographic, or otherwise – or a state of regression or extreme emotional duress – often manifesting itself in corporeal gesture, collapse of language, or other complication of performative behavior. At the same time, his cinema, received either as a single film or collectively as a corpus of works, registers as a cinema that in itself exists in a state of abjection, given the sociopolitical and intellectual circumstances under which Żuławski worked – specifically the national film industries that existed under an ideologically divided Europe in the middle twentieth century – and the dynamic that existed between the director's personal life and his cinema.

At first sight, such a 'one focus' approach appears to be risky, as the author is in danger of overlooking many other dimensions of Żuławski's works. However, in fact, most of these other dimensions are covered, such as, for example, his interest in the built environment. This is in part because 'abject' is indeed at the

centre of Żuławski's films; the director almost wallows in those aspects of human life, which most people want to hide, such as excruciating pain, ugliness and horror. Moreover, on occasions, De Corinth stretches his method a bit to tackle what might have otherwise slipped away from his investigation. This does not mean that he does not privilege some of Żuławski's films, at the expense of others. He scrutinises most thoroughly and returns most often to films which can be categorised as horrors: *Possession*, *Shaman* and *Third Part of the Night*. This is only natural, as in these films the borders dissolve, most importantly between the main character and somebody else, which is often conveyed by the same actor playing two characters. While *mise-en-scene* is treated by De Corinth with the greatest of interest, music, although noted by him, receives relatively little attention. This is a pity, as it would complicate the question of authorship of Żuławski's films, given his long and close collaboration with Andrzej Korzyński, who affected these films more than any other of his collaborators. However, this is understandable: it is easier to discover or locate the 'abject' in a material environment than immaterial music.

Although the author is (most likely) American, he draws on a range of sources not only in English, but also French and Polish. There are occasional inaccuracies, but such mistakes are expected in works of this scope and length. By and large, de Corinth's book is informative, engaging and easy to read, despite its heavy topic and the complexity of its methodology. This is because de Corinth explains his key concepts clearly and illustrates them using examples from Żuławski's films. By the same token, this book should attract not only academics, but also students and cinephiles. This lightness of writing probably reflects the fact that de Corinth is a journalist, rather than a professional academic. However, it might also cause objections, especially from readers who are sceptical about using a biographical lens to explain the work of an artist. De Corinth not only does so, but intermingles discussion of Żuławski's films, novels, memoirs, interviews and life, as if it was one coherent whole. Most likely, in the case of Żuławski, such an approach is more justified than, let's say, in the case of Andrzej Wajda. Nevertheless, some readers would prefer de-coupling of the artist from his life. This requirement makes even more sense in the current moral climate, when works of many artists, like Polanski and Gaugin, are being censored or cancelled, because of the supposedly immoral behaviour of the artists. Given that Żuławski's behaviour could also be seen on many occasions as questionable, it is probably better to stick to his films, as arguing for their entanglement with their author's life, brings a risk that he would be cancelled too.