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Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
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SYLVIA PLACHT

Agnieszka Holland: straining against the confines of the frame

# A Love in Poland

BY J. HOBERMAN

**ANGRY HARVEST.** Directed by Agnieszka Holland. Written by Holland and Paul Hengge, from the novel by Hermann Field and Stanislaw Mierzewski. Produced by Artur Brauner. Released by European Classics. At the Lincoln Plaza, opening March 16.

**CROSSROADS.** Directed by Walter Hill. Written by John Fusco. Produced by Mark Carliner. Released by Columbia Pictures. Opening March 14.

**SIBYLLA'S KISS.** Produced, directed, and photographed by Clemens Klopfenstein. Written by Klopfenstein, Serena Kiefer, Max Rüdinger, and Franz Rickenbach. At the Museum of Modern Art, March 16.

Brutal, claustrophobic, gripping, Agnieszka Holland's *Angry Harvest* uses melodrama to induce a heightened sense of reality. Holland, perhaps the most gift-

ed Polish director to emerge on the eve of Solidarity, has fashioned what might be termed a psychological action film. Although shot in West Germany with a largely German cast, *Angry Harvest* evokes wartime Poland with unnerving vividness—its moral conflicts mapped out in sexual terms as visceral as they are disturbing.

*Angry Harvest*, which had its local premiere last October at the New York Film Festival, is a Holocaust *Kammerspiel* focusing on the relationship between Leon (Armin Mueller-Stahl), a sexually repressed Catholic farmer, and the Jewish woman he shelters. In the novel from which the film is adapted, Rosa is a

young medical student who escapes from a nearby ghetto. Holland's version ups the ante. In the film, Leon and Rosa have virtually nothing in common; they represent two utterly disparate worlds. Here, Rosa (Elisabeth Trissenaar) is a chic Viennese matron who jumps an Auschwitz-bound transport with her husband and child, loses them in the forest, and collapses, sick and starving, at Leon's feet.

Although uniformly well-acted, the film belongs to Mueller-Stahl: Leon is at once coarse and complicated, prissy and sadistic, simpleminded and sly, otherworldly and indomitable. This woman-shy peasant originally wanted to be a priest and although he initially protects Rosa out of simple human kindness, her big-city glamour is as irresistible to him as her utter helplessness. It's one of the film's understated ironies that the war keeps dropping delicacies into Leon's lap. (When he goes to town he sees a dream-like flurry of household goods falling from the windows of Jewish homes.) And Rosa is the greatest gift of all.

Rosa's feelings for Leon, on the other hand, are left purposefully unclear. If sex is her means of survival, how could it be otherwise? (At strategic intervals, Holland offers a shot of the sun inexplicably blazing down on Poland like some fiery, mindless life force.) For all Rosa knows, her husband is searching for her in the forest; the crudely ardent Leon is not simply her protector but her jailer as well.

One can legitimately read Rosa's compliant dependence, alternately wily and hysterical, and Leon's absolute, if capriciously exercised, power over her as a feminist metaphor for male-female relationships in general. Still, *Angry Harvest* is highly specific to its time and place; the annihilation of the Jews haunts virtually every scene. "They'll get them all, that's for certain," remarks one black marketeer (the superb Wojtech Pszon- iak—Robespierre in Wajda's *Danton*), "Not one will survive." Leon crosses himself when he hears this; he has no stomach for active anti-Semitism or even for trafficking in confiscated Jewish goods. But since he believes that nothing happens without God willing it, he takes for granted that the Jews are being punished for their sins. "Why do you compare Jesus Christ to your Jewish rabble?" he screams at Rosa when she points out that his God was a Jew. Rosa must convert if Leon is to marry her, as he proposes to do, after the war.

*Angry Harvest* is particularly acute in evoking the perception of Jews as power-

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ful yet thrillingly vulnerable. At times, Leon's ambivalent treatment of Rosa suggests the sexual correlative to the sequence in *Shoah* where, with unmistakable *schadenfreude*, several Polish peasants describe the "rich foreign Jews" they saw eating and playing cards as they unwittingly rode to their deaths in first-class train compartments. "I'd never have dared with Eugenia," Leon remarks, referring to the untouchable neighborhood aristo, after drunkenly raping Rosa across the kitchen table.

*Angry Harvest* is Holland's fourth feature (as well as the first she's made outside of Poland) and it's directed with tremendous force. The energy she unleashes strains against the confines of the frame. Like her mentor Andrzej Wajda, Holland keeps close to the action. This is a very physical film, but its bluntness should not conceal its subtleties. *Angry Harvest* in no way simplifies the tangled emotions of its extreme situation. In the end, Leon receives an ambiguous blessing from a pair of Jews he has inadvertently saved.



*Angry Harvest: Holocaust Kammerspiel*

If God moves in enigmatic ways, so does the human heart.