

ACTION IS A MOST DANGEROUS THING: INTERVIEW WITH AGNIESZKA HOLLAND

Megan Ratner

On January 19, 1969, anguished by what he termed the “demoralization” of his fellow Czechoslovaks following the Soviet invasion of August 1968, university student Jan Palach fatally set himself on fire in Prague’s Wenceslaus Square. Though his desperate act opens Agnieszka Holland’s *Burning Bush*, it is the aftermath that the mini-series chronicles, when Czech officials, under the guise of preventing more self-immolations, vilified Palach. The case was used to set the tone for President Gustav Husák’s “normalization,” which straitened Czech society from the openness of predecessor Alexander Dubcek’s “socialism with a human face” to a carefully controlled state of mistrust and stagnation.

This material has more than cinematic relevance for Holland. Barred from study in her native Poland, Holland attended Prague’s FAMU (Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts) in the late 1960s. Holland did not know Palach, but they moved in the same circles. Exhilarated by the student movement, Holland shed her apoliticism, participating in demonstrations and eventually serving several weeks of jail time for “attempting to forcibly destroy the international system of socialist countries.” As she told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2012, the 1968 invasion was a “great anti-Communist lesson” after which “I had no more illusions.”¹

Burning Bush follows Dagmar Burešová (Tatiana Pauhofová), the Palach family’s attorney who defends Jan posthumously against party-instigated defamation. Holland deftly uses procedural conventions to reveal a devastating system, one that lasted twenty years. Burešová’s obstructed attempts to build the case provide an unusually accurate glimpse into the divisive, petty bullying that sowed confusion, doubt, and anxiety at every level of Czech society. (A teenager in the early 1970s, I lived in Prague with my

family, where I attended the local public school. Holland perfectly captures the country’s isolation from the rest of the world and the vague yet genuine dread, inescapable as the soot-specked air.) In *Burning Bush*, the new normal stifles information, access, and expression, illustrating the pressure to which all but the most dedicated dissenters eventually succumbed. The series was a hit in the Czech Republic, breaking the society’s general silence about the decades preceding the Velvet Revolution.

In the 1980s Holland was a leader in the Polish Cinema of Moral Anxiety, where her colleagues included Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Kieślowski. Her many films include *Washington Square* (1997), *Olivier, Olivier* (1992) along with three Academy Award nominees: *Angry Harvest* (1985) and *In Darkness* (2011), both for best foreign film; and *Europa, Europa* (1990), for best adapted screenplay. Holland’s work directing episodes of *Treme*, *The Killing*, and *The Wire* is evident in *Burning Bush*’s excellent pacing, the episodic format ideally suited to this complex history.

Though its faded black-and-white title sequence (which contrasts lithe young people dancing the Twist with the colossal, invading Soviet tanks) visually evokes the Czech New Wave, *Burning Bush* resembles those films more in spirit than in images. A melancholy absurdity informs the trial scenes and, especially, an extended sequence in a sleepy out-of-town tavern where Burešová reconstructs the crucial Communist party meeting at which Palach was denounced. Over the course of the story, Holland’s muted colors echo the society’s diminishing vitality, sharpening the effect of occasional intermixed black-and-white archival footage, particularly of a rally shortly after Palach’s death. The subdued palette emphasizes the insidiousness of the changes: normalization was less about being interrogated in the middle of the night than turning colleague against colleague, friend on friend. In his 1984 essay *Politics and Conscience*, Václav Havel described totalitarian systems as “a convex mirror of all modern civilization and a harsh, perhaps final call for a global recasting of how that civilization understands

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The Palachs (Petr Stach and Jaroslava Pokorná) engage attorney Burešová (Tatiana Pauhofová).

Photo courtesy of Studio Hamburg

itself.”² Given the current revelations about the use of mass data in government and, arguably more chillingly, under marketers’ control, nothing about *Burning Bush* should feel unfamiliar—only necessary and cautionary.

Holland was in the United States for the *Burning Bush* screening at the New York Film Festival, where this interview was conducted.

Megan Ratner: *Burning Bush* is set at the same time seminal films of the Czech New Wave were made. Did a particular filmmaker especially influence you?

Agnieszka Holland: Yes and no. While at FAMU, I watched many movies from the great Czech New Wave. I especially admired *Return of the Prodigal Son* (1967) and *Courage for Every Day* (1964) by Evald Schorm, who is a little forgotten these days. But I didn’t want to mimic them. I didn’t want the stylization of those ’60s movies. *Burning Bush* is shot and cut differently from those films, without the handheld camera and with a different kind of editing that accelerates the rhythm after slowing down. We are more disruptive and elliptic now. *Burning Bush*

is inspired by these Czech spaces and by this somewhat different way of observing reality.

Ratner: The police procedural overtones in *Burning Bush* make it feel a bit less political than a way of looking at criminals. Was that what you were thinking about?

Holland: No, that is pretty natural to my storytelling. These days it would be difficult for me to match the pace of, say, Theodoros Angelopoulos movies. I’m thinking a different way. Faster. My aim was to keep a steady tension for an all-at-once, four-hour screening. We wanted to grab the audience and to keep to the story.

Ratner: First-time scriptwriter Štěpán Hulík knew the material but was too young to have lived it. Did you mix in any of your own experience?

Holland: A bit. But it didn’t substantially change the structure or meaning of the script. I added some details and we worked with the characters to make them more complex, or ambiguous. Štěpán and I were very much in synch. He has incredible intuition, actually. Reading his



Lies in black and white: “The Truth About Jan Palach’s Death.” Photo courtesy of Studio Hamburg

script, before I knew how old he was, I thought he was one of my contemporaries who perhaps I’d forgotten, or never known. I was shocked that at twenty-six he had such deep feeling for what went on then.

Ratner: Hulík’s fascination with Jan Palach in some ways parallels Palach’s own fascination with fifteenth-century reformer Jan Hus. Both Hulík and Palach seem to have a direct connection to history.

Holland: I think Štěpán is a reincarnation from the 1960s. Not only because he wrote this script but also because his university studies centered on Czech and Slovak cinema during normalization. Štěpán’s published thesis, *Kinematografie zapomnění*, is the best book on the subject. He wrote the *Burning Bush* script in the screenwriting course in school. It was a hit in the Czech Republic, so the guy is incredibly lucky, also. He’s working on new material and is in something of a depression because he doesn’t know if, as a writer, the best has already happened. I hope not. He’s really good.

Ratner: The women are particularly prominent, not only Burešová, but also Palach’s mother and

Vladimir’s university student daughter. It’s an indication of how it played out differently for the generations.

Holland: Women were very prominent in the Czech and Polish opposition movements, in Solidarity. Women in this society are quite often the driving force, especially on moral issues, but at the same time they are servants to the men and family. When the government ended, when the victory came, the men took all the places. The women went into the shadows again. Burešová became the Minister of Justice (under Václav Havel), but the men pretty quickly put her to the side.

Ratner: Did you have to do a lot of work to re-create the feeling of the city at the time?

Holland: Prague is easy to shoot in. It is very filmmaking friendly and it’s still possible to find spots that haven’t changed too much, some not at all. There are incredible interiors, with plenty of fantastic locations. Usually, when you’re making a film you look for something that is similar to what you want and you have to settle. But in Prague we had a very wide range of choices. Everybody was extremely motivated, which was a big help.



Burešová's intimate refuge with husband Radim (Jan Budař). Photo courtesy of Studio Hamburg

Ratner: Has post-Communist television improved over what was offered by the state?

Holland: It's lower than it was under Communism, actually. Television became a mix of bad American television and bad South American television, a mix of *telenovela* and stupid entertainment. The entire crew wanted to make *Burning Bush*, to work on this story and to work with me. Everybody was so devoted, so they gave their best. I think most of them had never done anything this good, actors included.

Ratner: Did you choreograph the actors' movements?

Holland: I let them do what they felt. I don't choreograph, other than a particular shot or scene. I believe at some moment the actor becomes the character and they know better.

Ratner: Burešová's sex scene with her husband is a crucial release from the struggle and fear as she builds her case. It's also a form of reassurance. He's one of the few people she can trust.

Holland: Erotic life under "normalization" must have been pretty intense, I think. But in *Burning Bush* I was just showing a husband and wife. I wanted to show the despair and the need for closeness, how this explodes in some kind of urgent sex.

Ratner: Sex was one of the few means of personal expression.

Holland: You could make a completely separate movie about sex life under Communism. I came to Prague in 1966, before normalization. I came months before school started to learn a bit of Czech and to acclimate to Prague. I wasn't yet eighteen in this time. I was living in the mixed

student dormitory. Anywhere I opened a door, people were fucking. It was the first time in my life that I saw people making love like that, in the showers and so on. And after that I don't know how many lovers I had the first year. Maybe ten? It was the time of "make love not war," right? And under Communism that was even more powerful because there were very few possibilities for expressing personal freedom. Sex was one way.

Ratner: For audiences who may be unaware of how lively Prague was in those days, the title sequence, which juxtaposes the *Twist* with the crush of Russian troops in the city streets, is a pithy history lesson.

Holland: It was the idea of a young filmmaker whom we asked to do the title sequence. We loved it. He put things in a historical context and at the same time expressed the contrast between the politics and life as it was lived.

Ratner: You use snatches of archival film seamlessly throughout the series. Do you think of yourself as a historian?

Holland: Not really. My philosophical relation to the past is that it doesn't exist. It's part of our present. The past happens now, even if it's reconstructed. Something that was, historically speaking, a hundred or fifty or sixty years ago, is still present to me.

Ratner: Whether or not people are alive who were part of it?

Holland: Right.

Ratner: Does that feeling play any part in how you pick projects?

Holland: What I mean is that in some way it doesn't matter to me. When I was doing my Holocaust movies, I sometimes thought that I lived at that time, that I am some kind of reincarnation.³ I do a historical movie as a contemporary movie. I look for language that is not very stylized or dated.

Ratner: *Burning Bush* seemed very much of its time but, because of the updated look and pace, fresh, too.

Holland: We wanted it to be evocative. Watching it, we wanted you to feel you were there. I think we did that. People reacted in a very emotional way. Suddenly they had the impression that they were reliving their life.

Ratner: Even now, Czechs are only slowly talking about this period.

Holland: They put it to the side or hid it and didn't want to talk about it. For most people it's pretty logical. It was



Protesting normalization: “Better to die standing than to live on your knees.” Photo courtesy of Studio Hamburg

an important chunk of their life and it wasn't pleasant. And they are not very proud of what they did during normalization. Even if they didn't do very bad things, they had to compromise all the time. They accepted the situation but they don't like to talk about it. Poles are very quick to mythologize the past. They make themselves into heroes. Suddenly there are 10 million heroes, which is of course totally fake. But Czechs don't have this talent or fault. They'd rather forget, or keep silent, or turn it into a joke. All three approaches are understandable but they are negative: they don't allow you to grow up, to learn a lesson or take advantage of the richness of the experience.

Ratner: The script's focus on the petty ways life was made miserable allowed viewers to see how pervasive normalization's effects were.

Holland: This fairly soft oppression was specific to the last period of Communism. It targeted people's everyday lives. The corruption was pretty mild. After a few years it just contaminated the entire system.

Ratner: As you know, it's not limited to that time or that system.

Holland: I experienced this in Iran. A few years ago I was on the jury of an Iranian film festival. I wanted to see Tehran for myself, to visit with several good colleagues, Iranian filmmakers, who are fantastic, very intelligent and talented people. During the festival, a few young Iranian filmmakers confided a bit in me about the situation but they pointed out someone they said was an informer for the regime. And when I met another filmmaker, he said: the guy you just talked to can't be trusted. That's how this poison starts and it's very, very difficult to avoid this contamination. A side effect is that those who stand apart become outcasts, with other people in some ways hating that they are so noble. You run the risk of other people feeling you're better than they are.

Ratner: *Burning Bush* shows that such contamination can't help affecting friendships.

Holland: Under Communism people were very close, which is why the betrayal became so terrible. When



Collective trauma. Photo courtesy of Studio Hamburg

Vladimir accuses Dagmar’s young assistant she knows for sure that he’s lying. And he knows that she knows. The look between them is so heartbreaking to me. When Dagmar comes back home, she cries and then she makes love to her husband. It’s a kind of desperation.

Ratner: Desperation runs through the miniseries: things seem placid on the surface but are chaotic in reality. Andrei Ujică describes cinema as having a “therapeutic function over the collective trauma.”⁴ Does that seem accurate?

Holland: Yes, but the main function of cinema is just to make movies for entertainment, to dream and to evoke experiences. But if cinema helps in some way to digest the trauma, it’s good.

Ratner: At the least cinema presents events in a different perspective.

Holland: That is very important in those (former Eastern Bloc) countries. In all post-totalitarian countries it’s easy for people to become narcissistic. They think that their suffering is the most important; that only they are just;

that they are victims; and that no one understands them. All this bullshit makes it impossible to see the opposite point of view. It’s why they can very easily hate strangers. They cannot accept that the stranger has the same rights to live in this world that they do.

Ratner: That kind of thinking is not limited to the former Eastern Bloc.

Holland: The problem is that we are all living in a system like that—it’s not only the people who lived under totalitarian systems. When you see the modern society in the American or Western style of life, you see people who spend their lives in the shopping malls, who are sold to the corporations through credit and fear, and who are all the time *here* [looks down at cell phone] and cannot communicate. It allows for terrible things to happen on your doorstep, like Lampedusa [at the time of the interview, the immigrant boat had just capsized] and nobody reacts.⁵

Ratner: Conformity promises a false security.

Holland: The conformism is universal. Communism wasn’t an exception, just an extreme. Like Nazism, it was



Filmmaker Agnieszka Holland (right) with her daughter Kasia Adamik (left) in a candid moment at the 40th Telluride Film Festival. Photo courtesy of B. Ruby Rich

an extreme showcase of the danger of human nature. But it is not over and done with. It's not that it will never come back. It is present in some diluted way in our life.

Ratner: If I understand you, this is not something imposed on people but an outgrowth of other tendencies.

Holland: Right. People are not made for freedom. You have to learn it and preserve it on an everyday basis—not just political freedom, but freedom in the wider sense.

Ratner: Do you see similarities between today's surveillance state and that of the Eastern Bloc? Does the fear-mongering strike the same note?

Holland: Contemporary democratic governments present terrorists very much as anti-Communist persons were presented under Communist rule. It's the language of propaganda. I think that what is most dangerous in the world

of today is that we don't have new ideas. The old ideas, which have already been poisoned, are recycled over and over again. We know that things are not working but we really don't know what to do to make them work. The outbursts of anger become mass murder or terrorism. This desperation becomes universal.

Ratner: People are reluctant to admit the system doesn't work. Everyone knew the problems under normalization but few wanted to put themselves on the line.

Holland: Yes, they have one life and they don't want to spend it on fighting.

Ratner: Did you see similarities between certain things in America and Poland early on?

Holland: When I came here to work for the first time, about twenty years ago, I did some American movies and worked with an American crew. I had a very strange

experience because I realized that on the movie set the crew had a very hierarchical relationship. During the shoot, I was the god. So I am a boss. And when I asked my collaborators, such as my first AD, who was a very intelligent man, what he thought about some of my ideas or solutions the answer was, "It is certainly as you think, Madam." And I said: what do you mean? I asked your opinion. And he said: but you are certainly right. After a while I realized he was afraid to express his opinion. If it was different from mine, I might be angry and maybe fire him. Conforming yourself to the boss's expectations and the fear of being fired are so general in American moviemaking.

In some ways people in America were more conformist than under Communism in Poland. People there were much more rebellious and had their own opinion, though I realized that in Poland they didn't have as much to lose. In America a job means you have credit and credit means a house, your children's education, your entire life. People become slaves to this chain and cannot really express themselves freely. Most people live like that. So it's not so very different. In some ways the financial crisis showed that all that will not make you safe. So now what? But it's the people who express the anger, not the leaders. They express the desperation or disdain, but not new ideas. And they don't take responsibility. Trade union leaders or the student movement seem to be recycling the speeches of fifty years ago, but they are inadequate to the present situation.

Ratner: Part of it seems to be trying to work within the system, a resistance to razing the whole thing.

Holland: That's a really big topic. It's the disillusion with Communism: the failure of a big idea. Suddenly people feel there is only one possible reality: liberalism and the idea of the free market economy. That system became some kind of a god but at the same time it's not working.

Ratner: On a brighter note, what works well is your ongoing collaboration with your daughter, Kasia Adamik, on this project and several others.

Holland: Kasia is very talented and she's very generous. A giver. She has a very happy character, very generous and very joyful—good presence on the set for sure. Now her live-in girlfriend has also started making films. My sister and her husband are also directors, as was my husband. At first Kasia didn't want to be a filmmaker. She was an artist and she made comic books. She was a very successful Hollywood storyboard artist, but she wanted to work on her own ideas. She made a small, independent film in America, then she did two movies, theater and television in Poland. Kasia does her own projects, but when I'm doing mine and she is available, I ask her to come and to shoot something. I know she will renew my spirits. She has shot about ten or fifteen percent of my movies. And we collaborated on two projects, we co-directed. She sometimes asks my advice, but I don't shoot her movies so I'm not giving her exactly back what she's giving me. I think she is ready to do something important. I hope so.

Author's Note

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Notes

1. Marta Kijowska, "Was hat Sie der Kommunismus gelehrt, Frau Holland?," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 20, 2012.
2. Václav Havel, *Open Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 259.
3. *Angry Harvest; Europa, Europa; In Darkness*.
4. Rob White, "Interview with Andrei Ujică," *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2011): 71.
5. Jim Yardley and Elisabetta Povoledo, "Migrants Die as Burning Boat Capsizes Off Italy," *New York Times*, October 3, 2013.