

Article

# Dis/Possessing the Polish Past in Marcin Wrona's *Demon*

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**Abstract:** The article examines how Marcin Wrona's *Demon* (2015) reworks the Jewish myth of a *dybbuk* in order to discuss how and to what extent a spectral haunting may disrupt acts of collective forgetting, which are in turn fueled by repression, repudiation, and ritualized violence. A part of a revisionist trend in Polish cinema, *Demon* upsets the contours of national affiliations, and in doing so comments on the problematic nature of memory work concerning pre- and postwar Polish–Jewish relations. Because the body possessed by a female *dybbuk* is foreign and male, the film also underlines gendered aspects of possession, silencing, and story-telling. The article draws on Gothic Studies and horror cinema studies as well as Polish–Jewish studies in order to show how by deploying typical possession horror tropes Wrona is able to reveal the true horror—an effective erasure of the Jewish community, an act that needs to be repeated in order for the state of historical oblivion to be maintained.

**Keywords:** possession; gender roles; national identity; Polish–Jewish relations; the Holocaust; Polish cinema; *dybbuk*; memory

## 1. Introduction

Marcin Wrona's *Demon* (2015) utilizes the Jewish myth of a *dybbuk* in order to discuss how and to what extent a spectral haunting may disrupt acts of collective forgetting, which are in turn fueled by repression, repudiation, and ritualized violence. In simplest terms, *dybbuk*—a dead person's ghost clinging to a live host—represents the deeply disconcerting violent past clinging uncomfortably to the present-day Polish imaginary. Originally, a malevolent spirit in need of ritual banishing, with time *dybbuk* came to feature more prominently in “stories of (temporarily) threatened but almost invariably restored social order,” as a figure capturing the mounting tension between the traditional and the modern, often focused on gender dynamics (Dziuban 2019b, p. 138). In recent years, the *dybbuk* has been appropriated by Polish critical and artistic discourses as a favored figure of memory about Jews, thus inadvertently turning into a metaphor for Polish fascination with (perhaps possession by?) all things Jewish.<sup>1</sup> In Wrona's film, an English-speaking groom accidentally unearths a skeleton during a traditional Polish wedding and is possessed by a Jewish girl's spirit, herself a terrified stranger speaking a foreign tongue. The possession by a *dybbuk*, while superficially conforming to conventional Western possession narrative, actually marks an opportunity to both communicate with the prewar past and articulate present-day anxieties, an opportunity violently denied by the Polish wedding party.

The Gothic doubling in *Demon* troubles gender binarism, as a female spirit (doubly Othered as Jewish and female) invades a male body (also marked as Other because of his ambiguous roots)

<sup>1</sup> Zuzanna Dziuban, in her insightful essay on the instrumentalization of the *dybbuk* trope in Polish narratives about the Holocaust and its aftermath, highlights the often unreflective use of Jewish ghosts to assuage Polish guilt, discuss Polish (rather than Jewish) trauma, and accentuate Polish sensibility and sense of righteousness, which effectively evacuates *dybbuk* of its cultural and historical specificity, its Jewishness. See (Dziuban 2019b).

in order to be finally given a voice. Yet, her story remains untold, not only because the only other Yiddish-speaking person at the wedding is a confused elderly Jewish teacher, but, more importantly, because the wedding guests refuse to listen to her. The Gothic doubling also troubles the very contours of national identities, Polish and Jewish, which are allowed to intermingle only in death. Rather bleakly, the film ends with the groom's disappearance and yet another collective act of disremembering. The groom thus joins other ghosts, other skeletons in the Polish history closet, other blank spaces that are carefully pruned and kept clean by mainstream media and official narratives of postwar nation-building. As *Demon* vividly suggests, these blank spaces are not empty, but are, in fact, inhabited by the Polish Jews killed in death camps and in pogroms, who left behind their property, wealth, and land, all of which was utilized (but never acknowledged) in the postwar rebuilding efforts.

In the first part of this essay, I will situate *Demon* on the map of contemporary Central European cinema, more specifically in reference to Holocaust cinema and Polish horror cinema. Because the historiographic and cultural reception of the Holocaust in postwar Poland has been highly contentious and prone to misrepresentation, contemporary Polish filmmakers attempt to reckon both with the past and the present and to trigger a larger national debate on Polish–Jewish relations and Polish anti-Semitism, with varying success. A few of these film projects, with *Demon* being the latest example, intervene in national myth-making processes by calling attention to their masculinist, homogenizing, and exclusionary character.

I will then discuss the way the Gothic and horror tropes clarify both gender politics and national politics of *Demon*, with a special emphasis placed on the transgressive nature of the dybbuk possession. While mainstream Western possession horror is often preoccupied with gender roles and the threat that femininity and female-coded corporeality posit to the patriarchal order, the groom's possession threatens the status quo of hegemonic memory politics in Poland through the destabilization of both gender and national norms. Cementing the link between possession and ownership, the groom's possession draws attention to Jewish *dis*-possession during and after the war as well as to modern-day *re*-possession efforts undertaken by the original owners' inheritors.

The last analytical section is devoted to the hauntological politics of hospitality and the ways in which the dybbuk possession interrupts collective and individual memory work. Paradoxically, while a line of communication is opened between the living and the dead, the hosts and the wedding guests are uninterested in hearing the ghost out, especially since the act of listening and accepting the ghost's tale would require on their part an absolute hospitality (a potentially upsetting and perilous one, for that matter). Instead, they react with shame, disgust, and, ultimately, violence, thus replicating events from the past (both pre- and postwar) that led to the current-day possession. The haunting, for all its potential of bridging the two communities (the Jews and the Poles, the dead and the quick), is violently interrupted by a collective ritual of forgetting and the decision to go back to a customary dreamlike oblivion.

## 2. The Holocaust Cinema and Horror Cinema in Poland

Ostensibly, Marcin Wrona's *Demon* has nothing in common with Holocaust cinema—it is set in contemporary times and the script contains no direct references to the Second World War and the Shoah. At the same time, *Demon* cannot refrain from circling back to the Holocaust, touching upon it in passing, talking about it by not actually speaking its name. The narrative doggedly returns to the Polish–Jewish prewar intimacies that were effectively repressed and denied by post-1945 Polish historiography, which underscored, first and foremost, a narrative of unquestionable Polish heroism and noble martyrdom. The memory of the Holocaust, understood here as a reservoir of cultural images, tropes, and narratives, acts thus as a marker of repression, the prefix “un-” in the Freudian uncanny, which points to the necessarily incomplete process of forgetting and escaping Poland's collective past. By unearthing (quite literally) the proof of Polish–Jewish relations, commonplace, mundane even, before the War, *Demon* shows how the dominant discourses of the Jewish genocide and its immediate aftermath turned these relationships into an uncanny, shameful, even abject secret. While the dybbuk herself might be

construed as an uncanny visitor who triggers the violent return of the repressed, such readings risk reifying the figure of the dybbuk and, more importantly, instrumentalizing Jewish folklore for the sake of Polish memory work. Importantly, Wrona deploys the dybbuk neither as a cheap sentimental trick symbolizing bygone folk-ish Jewishness nor as a vehicle establishing Polish victimhood in the face of anti-Semitism. Instead, *Demon's* dybbuk, by clinging to a “swój” foreigner underscores the uncanniness of national categories and their perilous volatility. “Swój,” a general possessive adjective that can be attached to any grammatical person, is used in colloquial expressions emphasizing group identity, a sense of belonging, and unwavering loyalty, but also a sense of being owned by others. In *Demon*, the “swój” groom is at first welcomed into the Polish community, his foreignness overlooked or perhaps suspended, only to be brutally rejected the moment the dybbuk marks him with a new sense of foreignness, one that cannot be molded into a conventionally Polish shape.

*Demon's* script is based on a 2008 play *Przylgnięcie* (*Clinging*) by Piotr Rowicki, which in turn draws inspiration both from a series of theatrical workshops Rowicki participated in 2007 and *The Dybbuk* by S. An-Ski, a 1914 Yiddish play, popularized by its 1937 film adaptation, the first Polish film shot completely in Yiddish.<sup>2</sup> While An-Ski's play and its adaptation form important intertexts for Wrona's *Demon*, the latter is expressly not a film that delves into the actual Jewish folklore or culture. Its very title—*Demon*—suggests a Christian cosmology rather than a Jewish one. Thus the ill-fitting title embodies a lost heritage, a knowledge, and a past that are no longer accessible to *Demon's* protagonists.<sup>3</sup> Paweł Maślona and Marcin Wrona's screenplay introduces a number of significant changes to Rowicki's *Przylgnięcie*, most notably transforming a Polish criminal, Piotr “Pyton” Pytlakowski, into a foreigner Peter/Piotr (“Python”). Whereas in the play Piotr is cast as a righteous victim of Polish anti-Semitism whose noble efforts at recovering the past lead to his death, Wrona's *Demon* offers a much more nuanced reading, one in which the dybbuk plays a much more troubling part.<sup>4</sup> Poland lost 22% of its population during the Second World War; three of these six million victims were Polish Jews, almost 90% of the Jewish diaspora in Poland. Yet, postwar authorities enforced a homogenizing narrative of the wartime past, and the memory of Polish Jews murdered in Nazi extermination camps was, for all intents and purposes, incorporated into “the Polish national martyrdom” (Haltorf 2012, p. 1). As Marek Haltorf observes in his book on Polish Holocaust cinema, two competing versions of the Holocaust exist in the popular imaginary, each one depending on the ethnicity of the witness and their national identification (1–2). Communist myth-making centered on the image of brave (male) Poles struggling heroically against impossible odds, and in that particular version of Polish history, there was absolutely no place for Jewish victims, their specificity, and their unmistakably different place in the Nazi politics of extermination (Haltorf 2012, p. 2). Dorota Glowacka and Joanna Zylinska suggest that, in fact, “this unmentioned, traumatic loss of the Jewish neighborly presence, combined with a sense of horror and guilt that remain unaccounted for, has contributed to the strengthening of the idea of the monocultural Polish community in the postwar period” (Glowacka and Zylinska 2007, p. 2).

Today, three decades after the political transformation of 1989 and the break with the communist regime, Polish history, and literature textbooks still offer an incomplete version of the prewar past in which Jews emerge only occasionally as stereotypical innkeepers or money lenders, then, all of a sudden, appear en masse in 1939 just so that they could be almost entirely decimated by 1945. This curious absence flows directly from Polish myth-making phantasms, in whichever since the late eighteenth century (that is, the beginning of the Partitions of Poland) there has always been room for just one narrative of national suffering—the Polish one. As a result, the true extent of Polish anti-Semitism or Polish colonialist efforts in Eastern Europe (both of which can be dated to the Middle Ages) remain

<sup>2</sup> See also a review blog post by Wiesława (2015) “‘Demon’ czyli dybbuk na ‘Weselu’” at <https://www.salon24.pl/u/nanofiber/674565,demon-czyli-dybbuk-na-weselu>.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the word “dybbuk” appears in the film just once and it is immediately rejected by Żaneta's father as unscientific nonsense, impossible in “a civilized country”.

<sup>4</sup> See also (Dziuban 2019b).

unacknowledged or, at best, are relegated to harmless touristy stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> The false belief in Polish homogeneity, past and present, was strengthened after the transition to neoliberal capitalism in the 1990s, when “nationalism, Catholicism employed as a political ideology, and Romantic political messianism that placed special emphasis on territorial ‘home’ as the nation’s seat, as well as on collective suffering perceived as an act of community-making” became foundational for post-Soviet identity work in Poland (Matyjaszek 2019, p. 191).

While a number of Polish films made between 1945 and 1989 explore the collective and individual trauma associated with the Second World War and, to a lesser extent, the Holocaust, their creators do not discuss prewar and wartime Polish–Jewish relations, which were conveniently ignored by the official historical and cultural discourses by both the communist regime and the post-1989 democratic government.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the early twenty-first century that Polish filmmakers began narrating stories of the entangled nature of Polish and Jewish lives before (or just after) 1945. Films such as *Far from the Window* (*Daleko od okna*, 2000), *In Darkness* (*W ciemności*, 2011), *Joanna* (2009), *Ida* (2013), *Aftermath* (*Pokłosie*, 2012), and *Demon* form the backbone of this revisionist trend, though arguably most of them did not manage to escape cheap sentimentalism and faux universality that characterize a great many Polish productions focused on national history and, specifically, the Second World War and its social and political repercussions. Another genre film, *Aftermath*, a mystery thriller, discusses the economic and social reverberations of Jewish pogroms committed by Poles during and immediately after the Second World War. While notably more successful than *Demon*, it was not a huge commercial success and was met with strong repudiation in conservative circles and anti-Semitic responses in the popular press and online communities.<sup>7</sup> Still, the psychoanalytic framework of *Aftermath* metonymically reduces Jewish presence to tombstones (found in a forest road by a Polish farmer, which prompts his investigation into his hometown’s past). As such is not interested in the actual trauma of the Holocaust victims but rather in working through an underdefined Polish trauma and an eventual recovery of a Polish sense of righteousness.<sup>8</sup> The film clearly shows how in Polish official discourses “[t]he Holocaust mutated into an empty signifier of ‘trauma’” (Dziuban 2019a, p. 28); “the unspeakable” slowly disengaged from the Jews suffering the violence and attached to the Poles witnessing and/or committing this violence.

*Demon* differs from the above-mentioned revisionist films also because, though set in contemporary times, it tackles prewar Polish–Jewish relations and indirectly comments on the economic and social aftermath of the disappearance of Polish Jews. A number of clues point to another love story and another wedding taking place in prewar Poland as the old photograph, the ghost’s old-fashioned wedding dress, and the timeline of Żaneta’s grandfather, Staszek, mysteriously coming into possession of Jewish property suggest strongly. This story—Hana’s story—as evidenced by these few scattered memorial pieces, did happen but ultimately it is not recovered and is reburied with Piotr’s body instead. Moreover, even though *Demon* is not expressly concerned with the Holocaust, it falls back on the Holocaust thematic framework—the unacknowledged truth about the Holocaust and its aftermath casts a long shadow back and, in a way, mystifies prewar, wartime and postwar Polish–Jewish relations.<sup>9</sup> In popular understanding, the immensity and incommensurability of the rupture in the symbolic order caused by the Holocaust leaves little to no space for discussing Polish anti-Semitism, which becomes

<sup>5</sup> See also (Janion 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Since this paper does not analyse films concerned with the Holocaust per se, I will not be discussing the problematics of representation of the “unrepresentable”. For more on this subject, see, for instance (LaCapra 1994; Avisar 1988; Baron 2005). For the discussion of the use of the fantastic in the Holocaust literature and cinema, see (Kerman and Browning 2015).

<sup>7</sup> See also, “Dlaczego ‘Pokłosie’ Władysława Pasikowskiego wywołało prawdziwą medialną burzę? [Waszym zdaniem]” in the online portal *naTemat* (Editorial office of *naTemat* 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Significantly, in *Aftermath*, the farmer who unearths the tombstones (and the truth about the pogrom) is nailed to his barn and crucified by his neighbours, thus becoming a Christ-like figure redeeming the Polish sins of the past.

<sup>9</sup> For more on Polish anti-Jewish violence and anti-Semitism, see, for instance (Gross 2001; Gross 2006; Grabowski 2013; Żukowski 2018).

an irrelevant footnote to the Nazi atrocities. This willful refusal to face the past is a recurring theme in Polish public discourse and official politics.<sup>10</sup>

In his study, Haltof underlines “the uniqueness of the Polish experience of the Holocaust” (6): in a little over four years the Polish–Jewish diaspora disappeared almost entirely from Polish territory. For this reason, films dealing with the Holocaust “depict [it] through the prism of Polish–Jewish relationships” (Haltof 2012, p. 6). Jewish neighbors, relatives, lovers, friends, colleagues, workers, employers, whose presence in Poland extended back to the 10th century, left a long-unacknowledged psychological chasm, a social and cultural void, which only recently re-emerged in public discourse. Andrzej Leder’s influential book on the national imaginary, *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (*Dreamed Revolution. Historical Logic Training*, 2014) (Leder 2015) charts the social revolution of 1939–1956, a dreamlike nightmarish upheaval triggered by external forces, during which the Polish symbolic field and social reality were irrevocably transformed. Leder lists three main factors behind this traumatic transformation: German occupation, Jewish genocide, and, finally, communist authorities’ radical reshaping of ownership structures in the first decade after the war. As a consequence, today’s middle class remains unaware of how their grandparents’ and parents’ social advancement was predicated upon these very factors, and how the disappearance of an emergent Jewish middle class as well as Polish landed gentry and intelligentsia made room for the working class’ and peasants’ conversion into today’s bourgeoisie.<sup>11</sup> This ignorance of the past, simultaneously blissful and restless, unintentional and yet obstinate, forms the backbone of *Demon*, and the attendant metaphors of dreaming, waking up, and falling back to sleep organize the film’s striking conclusion.

Still, reading *Demon* exclusively in terms of its closeness or distance to Holocaust cinema does not fully account for Wrona’s decision to place the plot in a decidedly Gothic frame. The Gothic is not understood here as a separate genre, but rather as an artistic mode and aesthetic sensibility preoccupied with the repetition and revival of the past (Spooner 2007), upheavals triggered by past familial secrets (Williams 1995), property, im/propriety, and inheritance (Anolik 2016), and exploration of the fantastic via the uncanny, and the abject (Punter 2007; Hurley 2007). As such the Gothic can easily “cling” to other genres such as thrillers, supernatural melodramas, horror subgenres or dramas, especially if the Gothic is understood as “negative aesthetics”—a set of disturbing, unpleasant and irrational “conventions, settings, characters, devices and effects” (Botting 1996, p.3). Of course, one could just as well read *Demon* in terms of European magic realism, which “provides a unique arena for the East Central European (post)colonial subject to claim the remembrance of things and ways of life that were, and still are, carefully censored out by the dominant discourses of the numerous ‘great powers’” (Skrodzka 2012, p.14). Nevertheless, magic realism cannot fully account for *Demon*’s hauntological framework and its insistence on Gothicized tropes of memory, inheritance, and familial secrets. Additionally, because the film visually and thematically references the subgenre of girl-centered possession horror, horror cinema seems a more suitable critical lens for this particular analysis.

In the context of post-transition Polish film production, horror remains a vastly underrepresented genre, and the evident lack of a representative sample is only further compounded by critical difficulty in theorizing Polish (or even Eastern European) horror as such. Volha Isakava proposes a two-thronged frame for horror analysis in Eastern Europe: a global perspective that takes into account the impact of Hollywood filmmaking on post-Soviet genre cinema and a local perspective that focuses on “how the

<sup>10</sup> In 2018, the Polish Parliament passed a controversial bill on the National Remembrance Institute, under which any mentions of the Polish state’s complicity in Nazi crimes (for instance, as suggested by the use of the phrase “Polish concentration camps”) would be punishable by prison. Ultimately, the ensuing international diplomatic crisis coupled with a strong public outcry led to a rushed amendment that repealed the articles concerning prison sentencing. See also, Christian Davis, “Poland makes partial U-turn on Holocaust law after Israel row” in the online edition of *The Guardian* (27 June 2019). (Davis 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Leder’s thesis has been sharply criticized, perhaps rightly so, for misrepresenting peasants as passive, cruel bystanders and for simplifying much more complex sociopolitical and cultural formation processes, which elude a clear-cut linear progress proposed by Leder. See, for instance, Michał Pospiszyl’s insightful review of *Prześlona Rewolucja* in *Praktyka Teoretyczna* (Pospiszyl 2014).

films reflect their own cultural condition” (Isakava 2014, p. 119). The history of Polish horror is a short one, mainly because of the communist regime’s mistrust of the so-called low genres, synonymous with the decadent, perverse, death-, and sex-obsessed West. The few horror films that were made between 1945 and 1989 do not form a cohesive local reference grid, which is further reflected in the few post-1989 horror films, which fall into two categories: clumsy and ultra-cheap copies of Hollywood slashers or torture porn (*Time of Darkness* [*Pora Mroku*, 2008], *The Legend* [*Legenda*, 2005]), and a diverse assortment of art-house films, magical realism, and campy experiments (*Tower. A Bright Day* [*Wieża. Jasny dzień*, 2018], *The Lure* [*Córki dansingu*, 2015]), *The Werewolf* [*Wilkołak*, 2018]). Still, *Demon* does not so much maneuver between the two poles—global (Hollywoodized) and local (Polish) cinematic traditions—but rather employs well-known Western horror tropes (such as supernatural possession) to unlock local historical and cinematic contexts.

### 3. The Horror of Possession

*Insidious* [2010], *The Prodigy* [2019], *Incarnate* [2016], *The Haunting in Connecticut* [2009] and adult men (less commonly women) being possessed by spirits and alien consciousness (*The Lazarus Effect* [2015], *Get Out* [2017], *The Conjuring* [2013], *The Amityville Horror* [1979], *The Taking of Deborah Logan* [2014], *The Devil’s Candy* [2015], *The Shining* [1980], *Session 9* [2001]), the vast majority of possession narratives center around the figure of a young girl, in either her teens or her twenties—*The Possession* (2012), *The Last Exorcism* (2010), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Unborn* (2009), *Quija* (2014), *The Vatican Tapes* (2015), *The Haunting of Molly Hartley* (2008), *The Conjuring 2* (2016), *The Possession of Hannah Grace* (2018), *Jessabelle* (2014), *Grace: The Possession* (2014). What is perhaps most striking is the persistent uniformity of girl-centered possession narratives, especially when compared to other forms of possession that construct both the possession and the possessed in various ways (white patriarchy overcome by repressed anger and guilt, mothers dealing with maternal ambivalence, double consciousness literalized as possession horror etc.). In contrast, the possessed girl is invariably white, conventionally beautiful, and middle class, and her possession is propped by two narrative pillars: her behavior challenges gender norms, and the possession is dealt with (successfully or not) by professionals symbolizing the Law of the Father—priests and exorcists, rabbis and pastors, fathers and husbands/boyfriends, and occult specialists. The girl-centered possession narrative, first theorized by Barbara Creed (1993), posits that it is actually a young woman’s budding sexuality and unruly femininity (rather than the external supernatural force) that are the true sources of the threat to the patriarchal order (usually represented by men of the church and other paternal figures). The possession doubles as adolescence—abject liquids are discharged; the body begins to change rapidly and to look strange and sickly; the girl becomes violent, improper, unruly, often sexually aggressive. The iconic image of possessed Regan in *The Exorcist* sums up this schema perfectly: a dirty, disheveled girl, with pasty mutilated skin, is seen violently masturbating with a cross.<sup>12</sup> While Wrona’s *Demon* does not follow a possession plot neatly, it does refer stylistically and topically to typical possession tropes possessed, the main character is marked by intense gender noncompliance, and the possession is (unsuccessfully) handled by patriarchal figures of authority.<sup>13</sup> However, in contrast to typical girl-centered narratives, it is a foreign groom—Piotr (nicknamed Python)—who becomes possessed by a dead Jewish girl’s spirit at his own wedding to a Polish girl, Żaneta. He knows some Polish, including a raucous Polish folk song, which, just as his given name (Piotr) strongly suggests some Polish roots, but since he communicates mostly in English, he is perceived by Żaneta’s family as an

<sup>12</sup> Still, a lot of examples of possession cinema actually interpret the possessing figure as male, which, according to some critics, challenges Creed’s analysis. In such readings, it is not so much unruly femininity that threatens the patriarchal order but rather another agent of the patriarchy that possesses and manipulates a young woman in a grotesque parody of womanhood and female sexuality, desire, corporeality. For more, see (Krzywinska 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Writing about An-sky’s play and its theatrical adaptations, Friedman compellingly argues that “the dybbuk itself is a transgressive image of gender ambiguity,” one able “to deconstruct the masculine/feminine dichotomy” (Friedman 2012, p. 135). For more on contemporary reconstructions of the dybbuk, see Anolik (2001).

outsider from the West. Interestingly, his English, while perfectly fluent, is devoid of any discernible accent, which only serves to muddle his Western origins further and makes his ethnic and national affiliation even less clear. Piotr's ambiguous origin is further corroborated by a pronounced lack of friends and family members coming to his wedding. While he could be a second- or third-generation Polish immigrant to the West, Piotr might also be construed as Jewish, since he follows a Jewish wedding custom of stomping on a vodka glass after the first toast. In contrast, Żaneta throws her glass behind her, as the Polish custom dictates. This reading is reinforced by an extra-textual clue—Piotr is played by an Israeli actor, Itay Tiran.<sup>14</sup> Just as a young female body is read as unstable and thus open to intrusions in girl-centered possession narratives, Piotr's liminal status—as a potential insider and an ambiguous outsider—makes him even more susceptible to the “clinging.”<sup>15</sup> While clearing the grounds for a traditional barn wedding on Żaneta's grandfather's property, Piotr accidentally unearths an old grave, but decides to keep the information to himself rather than risk spoiling his bride's happiness. Piotr's decision not to reveal the burial ground results in the release of a dybbuk, a ghost who clings to Piotr and ultimately takes over his body and soul. Typical signs of girl-centered possession follow suit: Piotr is visited by a ghost that only he can see; he bleeds from his nose while having a first dance and later first marital sex with Żaneta; he loses consciousness and suffers from an epilepsy-like attack; he also begins to speak Yiddish and, finally, adopts the personality of Hana, a Jewish girl, most likely murdered by Staszek, Żaneta's grandfather. All of this happens during a frenetic vodka-filled Polish wedding. When the grave is finally acknowledged and the possession becomes apparent, the patriarchal figures (Zygmunt—Żaneta's business-like father, the ultra-rational Priest, the drunken Doctor, the senile Professor) either refuse to act or are unable to take any meaningful steps.<sup>16</sup> No exorcism takes place, no help ever comes. The groom disappears; however, it is unclear whether Piotr disappeared of his own volition or “was disappeared” by one of Żaneta's ex-suitors, a disgruntled employee of her father.<sup>17</sup>

The dybbuk is Hana, a Jewish girl, likely murdered before or during the Second World War, as she and her family's clothes in an old photograph would suggest. She clings to Piotr for two reasons: because he is the one to unearth her grave, and because she believes him to be her groom. Her white lacy gown and headdress suggest a 1930s bridal attire, and one cannot but wonder if she was perhaps killed on her wedding night by her Polish groom? The abandoned house next to the wedding barn still carries signs of Hana's family life (such as marks on the door frame to measure her and her siblings' height), which means that the property used to belong to a rich Jewish family in prewar times. However, today the property is in the hands of Żaneta's family, and Żaneta is to take possession of it after her wedding, just like her deceased grandfather would have wanted. While no-one connects the dots in *Demon*, the implication that Żaneta's grandfather was Hana's lover and her murderer is strongly suggested by visual and textual clues. With Hana's family killed during the Second World War, Żaneta's grandfather was able to claim her family's land for himself, thus paving the way for his family's financial and social climbing in the postwar decades. Over time, the knowledge of the true origins of Żaneta and her family's wealth slowly dissipates; nevertheless, judging from their urgent

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<sup>14</sup> In this reading, Piotr's latent Jewishness that erupts at his wedding appears as unruly as a young girl's budding sexuality and femininity in possession horror. Still, however tempting this line of interpretation might be, focusing on Piotr's potential Jewishness as the true source of possession risks not only erasing (again) Hana's story but also abstracting the very concept of Jewishness and robbing it of its historical and cultural specificity.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of female grotesque and female “openness” to intrusion, see also (Russo 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Żaneta, after learning about the grave, is the only person demanding a proper burial for Hana as a means of ending the possession. Her father flatly refuses explaining that, after all, the whole country was built on corpses and, besides, no-one would come to Hana's funeral, the implication being that all her relatives perished in the Holocaust or left Poland after the war. He adds that only TV crews would come to this funeral in search of a controversy, thus indirectly admitting that he is fully aware of how Jewish remains unearthed on his father's property would be framed in the national discourse.

<sup>17</sup> The latter reading is reinforced by a scene in which the young employee pushes Piotr's car over the ledge in a water-filled quarry (a quarry belonging to Żaneta's father). While Piotr's body is nowhere to be seen, it seems a new and even deeper grave for family secrets has been found.

desire to dismiss Piotr's possession and forget about Hana's corpse, Żaneta's family must have been aware of their grandfather's deeds, at least to some extent. Even Zygmunt himself admits he never liked this place and he would gladly organize a second and improved (that is corpse-free) wedding somewhere else. Jasny, his son and Żaneta's brother, asks Zygmunt what he knows about the corpse, suggesting that Żaneta's father must have been privy to his own father's secrets. The inheritance that Żaneta is due belongs to Hana, for whom the property is still very much hers and her family's.<sup>18</sup> Piotr, as Hana's spectral groom, becomes a symbolic substitute of this stolen inheritance—since Hana cannot repossess her land (which now belongs to Żaneta), she takes possession of Żaneta's husband.

While in most possession narratives the two entities coexist, albeit with some difficulty, a scene close to the end suggests Piotr's spirit has taken Hana's place in her grave, while she lives on in his body. In a poignant vignette, the viewers see Hana standing helplessly next to her grave while Piotr, seemingly dead, is being buried in her place by Żaneta's brother and his friends. It is also a rare scene in which the viewers are asked to adopt Hana's perspective rather than Piotr's. Here, the two tropes are enacted simultaneously: that of a wedding union between a living man and a dead woman (Hana becoming the spectral bride, Piotr becoming her long-lost groom) and that of the dead and the living switching places. The spectral wedding reading is reinforced by an old photograph found during the demolition of the old house at the end of the film—Piotr, the groom, is now seen next to Hana, the bride, and her family. History has repeated but also reversed itself—first, Hana disappeared during her own wedding, and now Piotr disappears without a trace.

While the Gothic repetition of the past points to the imperfectly repressed and unacknowledged national traumas, the uncanny doubling (two brides, two weddings, two unexplained disappearances, two missing bodies) signals death and destruction as the only possible escape routes. Piotr and Hana are reunited in death and in their now shared spectral past, while Żaneta symbolically retraces Piotr's original journey. Dressed in dark jeans and Piotr's leather jacket (thus mirroring his clothing from the very beginning), she crosses a river on a ferry, figuratively leaving her hometown and her family's secrets behind. Rather than face the difficult prewar past and her family's complicity in the very rewards they were able to reap by taking over abandoned Jewish property and land, she chooses effective erasure and escapes to the West. Similarly to Leder's contemporary Polish middle class, Żaneta constructs her identity by severing ties with her family's (and nation's) not-so-glorious past and instead looks to Western Europe for safe middle-class identity markers. By taking over Piotr's place, Żaneta enacts a secondary possession of sorts, which only serves to further underscore Piotr's ambiguous, liminal place in the European imaginary, and the concomitant potential for his instrumentalization.

#### 4. Transgressing Gendered and National Identities

Piotr's ambiguous status as an insider-outsider evokes Poland's uneasy relationship with its own geopolitical standing and cultural in-betweenness, and when Hana takes over Piotr's body, she further undermines the dynamics of Polish postwar imaginary. Hana as Piotr commits two acts of cultural transgressions—the dybbuk possession disturbs both traditional gender roles and traditional national identities, which in the Polish imaginary remain permanently intertwined. As Maria Janion suggests, the Polish nationalist discourse is a deeply masculine one, in which homosocial visions of total brotherhood, male camaraderie and friendship block women from entering the social and historical imagery, the exception being larger-than-life figures of sacred/sacrificial mothers and maidens (Janion 2007, p. 267). Hence, male patriots are constantly wary of slowly slipping onto the other end of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's continuum of male desire (Sedgwick 1985), which is why they are on the lookout for any signs of weakness, emasculation, perversion, and, of course, femininity. This in

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<sup>18</sup> Dziuban translates Hana's angry words (which remain untranslated in the Polish and subtitled versions of the film) as "Go away from my house!" (Dziuban 2019b, p. 173).



turn means they tend to project images of villainy on cultural Others such as Jews, homosexuals, or feminine men.

In the final act of *Demon*, Piotr embodies all of these markers of Otherness: he is, after all, possessed by both Jewishness *and* femininity, which, taken together, make him a perfect recipient of anti-Semitic hatred. After all, “[t]he Jew is the hysteric; the Jew is the feminized Other; the Jew is seen as different, as diseased,” writes Sander Gilman in his germinal study of the Jew’s body (Gilman 1991, p. 76).<sup>19</sup> The deeply misogynist and homophobic strands of European anti-Semitism are no longer imposed on the Jewish male body from the outside by his attackers but are rather enfolded through the dybbuk possession: Piotr, or more precisely Piotr’s body, comes to represent all the traits constituting Jewish weakness in popular anti-Semitic discourses.

Over the course of the wedding, Piotr suffers two epilepsy-like attacks; a short one during “oczepiny” (a capping ceremony) and a longer one when he enters a throng of dancing people, removes his shirt and thrashes around half-naked, moaning and screaming. Piotr’s contortions during the second attack, while evidently uncanny and disturbing, are interspersed with surprisingly gentle almost dance-like gestures. The sharp contrast between a male torso, glistening with sweat, and delicate hand movements through which Hana is learning her new body point to how the dybbuk possession disturbs conventional markers of masculinity and femininity.

Hana inhabits Piotr’s body completely, down to her mannerisms, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. Piotr, lying peacefully in Hana’s grave, seems to be content with giving his body over to Hana. However, such a transgressive embodiment is a source of deep shame for Żaneta’s family, who meet Piotr’s noncompliance with violence—they drag Hana (in Piotr’s body) into the cellar, tie her up, beat her up, gag her, and leave her there away from the wedding guests’ prying eyes. With the cellar representing a prototypical hiding place for Jews during the Second World War, the history is repeated once again, as an abject Jewish body cannot be seen or acknowledged and, consequently, has to disappear or be disappeared.

*Demon* allows for an embodied transmission of memory and trauma, and Hana’s memories, her affective states, feelings, and corporeality are allowed to surface. The viewers do not get to hear her story, but not because Hana does not have a story but rather because the people surrounding her are not interested in hearing her out. If anything, they want to forget that “it” has ever happened—“it” meaning the murder, the burial, the clinging, the possession, even Piotr and Żaneta’s wedding, and, on a larger scale, also the centuries-long history of Polish–Jewish life. The gentle and wondrous intimacy that can be palpably felt in Itay Tiran’s (Piotr’s) performance is a far cry from the revulsion and fear of supernatural possession found in mainstream horror cinema. This spectral intimacy in *Demon* seems, if not natural *per se*, then at the very least a natural consequence of the prewar intimacy of the two communities: Jewish and Polish, living side by side in a small nameless town.

The dybbuk, by troubling both traditional gender norms and national identities, elicits different, but equally inadequate, responses from the four men enjoying the highest standing in their community: Zygmunt, the town’s potentate, the Priest, the Doctor, and the Professor. Those (non)reactions are symptomatic of official Polish memory work politics and of the place accorded to women and feminized subjects in the Polish cultural imagery.<sup>20</sup> Żaneta’s father, Zygmunt, as the richest and most powerful man in the region, makes all the decisions; he tells the Priest to annul the wedding, he orders the Doctor to keep Piotr sedated; he decides when the Professor speaks and when he stays silent. His overall strategy could be thus summed up as damage control and avoidance. At one point he explains to Piotr that even though Piotr might have seen something (a skeleton, that is), he, Zygmunt, has not

<sup>19</sup> See also Yosef (2004).

<sup>20</sup> Żaneta’s attempt to have a proper burial for Hana is quickly and effectively foiled by the men controlling her life (her father, brother, their friends). Her one moment of disobedience—when she slaps her father for suggesting that the wedding should be annulled and re-done after things quiet down—is met with immediate retaliation by her brother, Jasny, who slaps her in turn.

seen anything, which, to his mind, protects him from the imperative of acting and taking responsibility for his father's wrongdoing. Zygmunt's canny evasion of *looking* (at Hana's corpse and into his own father's past) coupled with a belief that he is protected by his faux-ignorance speaks to a wider refusal to engage with the past on the part of Polish cultural and political institutions.

Avoidance is also practiced by the local clergyman—the Catholic Priest, an ultra-rationalist, reluctantly agrees to say grace in front of distressed Piotr/Hana, but while the Doctor, a town's drunkard and a self-professed atheist, argues the case for an otherworldly phenomenon, the Priest insists on psychosis, DID or food poisoning and constantly asks to be driven home, away from the community in crisis. Ill at ease and emotionally distant, the Priest does not want to get involved in whatever drama is unfolding, mirroring the Catholic Church's tendency to intervene in the Polish affairs only when it suits their own goals.

It is the Doctor who wants to be involved but his drunkenness prevents him from responding in any meaningful manner. Interestingly, it seems that the Doctor knows more than he lets on and when Piotr asks him about Żaneta's grandfather his first instinct is to volunteer information on Staszek's moral integrity. The Doctor reassures Piotr that Żaneta's grandfather was "a very decent man" and then attempts to strengthen this message by adding a Polish idiom "czysty jak łąza" ("clean as a teardrop," which can be translated as "clean as a whistle" or "pure as snow"); unfortunately, after imbibing numerous vodka shots, he cannot pronounce "najczystszy" (the superlative form of "czysty" and a reasonably daunting consonant cluster), and it is only on the third attempt that he manages to enunciate the cumbersome phrase. Clearly, the hyperbolic claim that Staszek was the most decent, the "cleanest" and "purest" person in town turns out to be much harder to say out loud than the Doctor anticipated. As an afterthought, the Doctor adds that "even the cleanest drop may fall into a dirty puddle," suggesting perhaps a more collective understanding of wrongdoing but also a deeper knowledge of the town's history. The Doctor's uncanny knowledge of the past is also indicated by a phrase from the Talmud (and one that is often used in exorcism) that he poetically utters upon seeing Żaneta digging up Hana's grave, which begs the question where exactly did he learn it?<sup>21</sup> Does he study Judaism as a hobby of sorts? Or is he perhaps a descendant of Polish Jews who decided to keep his family roots hidden? Either way, the Doctor fails as a keeper of Jewish heritage and the town's history, and chooses the safety of alcoholic oblivion over the risks signaled by actual involvement in memory work and negotiations of inheritance. Paradoxically, it is his alcoholism that both enables him to talk more openly about the past and allows him a certain level of immunity from potential repercussions for hinting at taboo knowledge.

Finally, the town's teacher, known affectionately as the Professor, is the only person who speaks Yiddish (or admits to it) and who used to know Hana before the war. As already mentioned, his status as an amiable old fool prevents him from taking any direct actions; he can only implore the wedding guests to cherish the memory of the past and he can only beg Zygmunt to organize an exorcism for Piotr/Hana, failing miserably at both requests.

Interestingly, both the Professor and the Doctor admit to being infatuated with Hana, or perhaps more accurately, an idea of her. The Professor recalls Hana's beauty, a bet he and other Jewish boys had about kissing her, and a sting on his cheek from where she slapped him, presumably because he tried to kiss her. The Doctor, still quite inebriated in the early morning, walks around a misty farm field, ostensibly in conversation with Hana's ghost (even though the camera shows only him.) He asks her half-jokingly why she did not choose him, a bachelor with a good job and a teetotaler, for her new lover. Clearly, both men relate to Hana first and foremost through their own desires and thus perceive her as a phantasmatic promise of their long-lost past (the Professor) and never-to-arrive future (the Doctor). On the one hand, neither of them is interested in hearing Hana's story as both think of themselves as

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<sup>21</sup> See also Bloom (2007, p. 56). The Doctor is also the first one to understand that Piotr/Hana is speaking Yiddish, and not German, as other wedding guests assume.

potential suitors rather than witnesses; on the other, only they actually acknowledge Hana's presence in Piotr's body. Still, even in their acknowledgment they reduce her to the stereotypical "beautiful Jewish girl," an ahistorical carrier of male desire, and gloss over not only Hana's actual life and death but also her potentially destabilizing presence as a dybbuk coming to reclaim her inheritance.

AA Jewish girl inhabiting a liminal male body can be also contrasted with the figure of Polonia, a Romantic and post-Romantic allegory of Poland, often presented in Polish arts and literature as "a proud woman, tragic, persecuted, chained," close to death or already dead (Janion 2007, pp. 186, 267). Polonia the Redeemer is also a sacrificial victim: innocent and persecuted, betrayed, and mistreated; a victim whose blood will revitalize the Polish national spirit (always construed as male) and who will sanctify Poland's eventual recovery and resurrection from political subjugation (Janion 2007, p. 281). Polonia as a spectral maiden shares a number of commonalities with Hana—beautiful and young, violated and abandoned—they both want to be heard and they both offer a potential for national redemption. Yet, a Jewish girl, with her foreign language, her alien faith and customs, and, finally, with her olive skin and dark curly hair, can never be accepted as Polonia, which is why no-one wants to hear Hana's story and accept responsibility for the possession—understood both as Piotr's spectral possession and the material possession of Hana's property by Żaneta's grandfather. The fantastic union between the living and the dead, first imagined by the Polish Romantics as an answer to Poland's political and cultural disintegration during the Partition of Poland (1795–1918), clearly does not extend to the Polish Others—the Polish Jews. They are excluded from this supranatural community, which explains why, in Wrona's film, even though the line of communication between the living and the dead has been successfully opened, the living refuse to listen.

## 5. Haunting, Interrupted

As already mentioned, I do not approach the dybbuk possession of Piotr through the return of the repressed paradigm as I fear this gesture would reduce Hana's story to a repressed memory belonging to someone else, to a different historical agent who has some measure of agency and self-awareness where Hana has none. Additionally, with Piotr's foreign status it is not entirely clear why he should be the one haunted by repressed memories. As Dziuban rightly points out, "[t]he foreignness/otherness of Python effectively prevents him from being framed as a carrier of the Polish transformative encounter with the Jewish past" (Dziuban 2019b, p. 173). Seen in this light, Maślona and Wrona's decision to make Piotr a foreigner rather than a Pole can be read as a conscious effort on their part not to (ab)use Jewish folklore, Jewish artifacts, or Jewish memories as tools or materials used by Poles to investigate their own guilt, reconcile themselves with the past, or atone for their sins and omissions.<sup>22</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, *Demon* shows how forcing Hana's story into the framework of collective repression by the wedding guests constitutes a violent gesture that keeps her story from being told or heard.

*Demon* suggests that Polish postwar generations need to make a periodic, orchestrated effort to keep on ignoring the burden they are carrying in their collective memory and repress it even further.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This is the case of *Aftermath* in which a Polish farmer accidentally unearths Jewish tombstones that were used to pave a forest road in the post-war years, which in turn leads him and his brother to uncover the story of a pogrom. Apparently, the actual Jewish voices were not necessary to tell this story; Jewish artifacts were more than enough to carry the burden of Polish guilt and Polish memory. The last scene of the film shows a group of Jews visiting a newly re-constituted cemetery located outside the village. The camera shows them isolated and speaking in a foreign language, symbolically confirming the gulf between Jews and Poles and, in a rather naive and empty gesture, suggesting a positive (and final) result of memory work. Their prayer is not translated, and the camera quickly moves to one of the Polish brothers, who, standing between the tombstones, lights the candle for his long-lost neighbors in a symbolic gesture of remembering one's dead. Therefore the film confirms that the Jews, the tombstones, the pogrom were just a backdrop for a story of brave Poles uncovering their ancestors' sins in order to finally exorcise them from collective memory.

<sup>23</sup> Dziuban actually suggests that "the violence is a response to unsettling questions about the status of the current reality, the status quo, about fragile ownership, and about a present predicated upon the exclusion, murder and dispossession of the Jewish other" rather than a way to simply erase the discomfiting past (Dziuban 2019b, p. 174). Thus, the dybbuk in *Demon* might be construed not as a figure of memory but rather as a figure of dispossession—a sign that the rightful heirs might be coming back to reclaim their ancestors' property and land.

Thus, *Demon* ends with yet another collective act of forgetting: crucially, it is not Hana's ghost who is being exorcized but the memory of a ghost. Żaneta's father addresses the wedding guests in the early morning: "We must forget what we didn't see here . . . Because we were witnesses to a collective hallucination. I am dreaming you. And you're dreaming me. It's quite simply just a collective dream. A dream within a dream. In fact there was never a wedding. You weren't here. I was not here. God isn't here. And he wasn't here."<sup>24</sup> For all intents and purposes, Zygmunt hypnotizes the drunk guests, which is why he ends his speech counting in Russian—this seemingly random act is actually a reference to a widely popular Russian hypnotizer, Anatoly Kashpirovsky, and his healing sessions that were broadcast on Polish public television in the early 1990s. After this invocation, the guests disperse in a drunken stupor. Some of them crash into a funeral procession, but death no longer fazes or surprises them; they have grown immune to the specters of the past. The inevitability of this resolution is already foreshadowed by the opening titles, during which a digger truck is seen meandering through the town's little alleys and empty streets. The digger, which will first unearth Hana's body, will later cover her bones, and, finally, it will be used to demolish Hana's family house, thus eradicating any physical signs of the Jewish community in that nameless sleepy town. The fact that the town remains oblivious to the digger's noisy drive in the morning hours suggests a willful act of ignoring the digger's technological potential for both uncovering and destroying the past. Tellingly, the digger belongs to Zygmunt, and he jokes at some point that he values it even more than his daughter.

Arguably, the memory of Hana will live on in the Professor's mind, but as the last living member of the prewar Jewish community, he has no-one to whom to pass on his knowledge. In a poignant scene, just after Piotr (or rather Hana in Piotr's body) disappears, Żaneta and the Professor drive around the sleepy town searching for her groom. After a violent storm, the town is enveloped in an eerie fog and car windows grow opaque from humidity, thus effectively masking the town's modernity, which, in turn, activates the Professor's memory work. He unearths the town's spectral past from his own memory by pointing out that, for instance, the present-day butcher's used to be a synagogue and their tsaddik would walk 12 km every morning to study the Torah. During the Second World War and in its aftermath, he lost his whole world, whose reflection now exists only in his memory. Earlier, during a prerequisite toast, the Professor actually implored the wedding guests to keep the memory alive, but he never got to specify a memory of *what* precisely he wanted them to preserve, as he was interrupted and led off the stage. The memory work thus remains unfinished. Even Żaneta, a witness to his testimony during their shared car ride, refuses to remember and prefers relocating to the symbolic postmemory West rather than facing the collective past in the little town.

The refusal to communicate with the dead situates *Demon* firmly within hauntological processes of remembering, reimagining, reliving, and, most crucially, forgetting, censoring, and refusing to look. A pun on haunting and ontology, hauntology points to the interplay of spectral presences and absences, and the lasting effects of the past inf(lect)ing the present; it "replac[es] the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (Davis 2005, p. 373). The ghost as a figure of absolute Otherness requires a careful ethical response of acceptance and openness rather than epistemic violence underpinning acts of interrogation and exorcism. Even though Derrida's specter is not supernatural, I am consciously deploying his conceptual metaphor in a narrative of a supernatural possession in order to investigate how the dybbuk's appearance at Piotr and Żaneta's wedding does not trigger an epistemological crisis (How can we be sure it really is a ghost? What is the spirit saying? What is the knowledge it wants to impart? How do we end the "clinging"?) but rather an ontological crisis (Did it really happen—"it" being the wedding, the possession, possibly Hana's murder? Is Piotr still Piotr or Hana, or both? Is Hana dead

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<sup>24</sup> There is a certain untranslatable ambiguity to Zygmunt's last words: "Was nie było. Mnie nie było. I Pana Boga nie ma. I nie było." Which, on the one hand, may mean that the guests, himself and God were never here in this barn on this day. On the other hand, it can also mean that they never existed in the first place, which adds to the oneiric, purgatory-like ambiance of the scene.

or alive?). Neither Piotr nor Hana is a complete stranger for Żaneta's family, but they are not kin either. Both are initially welcomed into a Polish community, but the moment they dare to disturb gender and national boundaries of propriety (and property), they are both silenced and turned away. As such, Hana in Piotr's body conjures a Derridean specter, both a *revenant* from the unacknowledged past and an *arrivant* from the as-of-yet unarticulated future (1994). This reading is further corroborated by the fact that Hana arrives both too late and too early to be welcomed. She is too late, because the only person who can still understand her language (Yiddish) and her familial context (prewar Poland) is an old Jewish professor, a person both respected (he is, after all, addressed as the Professor) and treated as a harmless old fool by the town's community. Hana also comes too early as her hosts are not yet ready to listen. Instead, they demand answers, but since she is not providing answers they want to hear, they grow impatient and increasingly uninterested in her story. Hana herself is not yet ready to talk about what happened to her. Hana's resistance to the logic of disclosure only further strengthens her spectral status. Both she and her story are in a sense unspeakable and thus cannot be restored to the order of knowledge, which, after all, is a prerequisite step in every exorcism.

In the end, the panic and fear she experiences locked in a dirty basement in an alien body among mostly hostile strangers, becomes her new story, a story that will, too, be erased from everyone's memory. One could argue that she is met with *hostipitality* (a pun on hostility and hospitality), a concept theorized by Derrida in *Of Hospitality* (Derrida 2000), which highlights the ambiguity inherent to hospitality, which can never wholly extricate itself from the potential for violence (Marzec 2015, p. 143). Derrida describes two subtypes of hospitality: conditional and unconditional (2000). Whereas the former remains bound by language and normative rules of communication and social exchange (such as issuing an invitation, accepting an invitation, the stranger revealing his/her name to the host), which are supposed to ease the essential unknowability of the Other, unconditional hospitality is not limited by language. Żaneta and Piotr's wedding, as a typical rite of passage, is structured around clear linguistic signifiers (vows, speeches, toasts, songs, introductions, congratulations) and as such is based on conditional hospitality, which is why Hana's refusal to behave as an obedient wedding guest is met with such violence. She is an uninvited stranger, a spectral wedding crasher, who refuses to explain herself, beg forgiveness, and lay bare her intentions. More importantly, however, she refuses to speak in a language acceptable to her hosts—not just a Polish language but also a language of historical obedience and of uncontaminated past.

## 6. Conclusions

While the film consciously deploys a number of possession tropes, it does so in order to undermine their utility and to prove how truly absurd they are in the face of true horror—an effective erasure of the Jewish community, an act that needs to be ritually repeated in order for the state of historical oblivion to be maintained. While savvy horror fans recognize the subsequent stages of the possession and await a conventional resolution either in the form of a successful exorcism or a symbolic repayment of what the living owe the dead, *Demon* frustrates these expectations by showing how, for the town's community, erasing the troubling past is preferable to working through its wrongdoings.

Piotr's possession marks the physical, economic, and cultural dispossession of the Jewish communities during the Second World War and their symbolic dispossession in the subsequent decades. It falls to the patriarchal figures to protect the community's wealth and to keep the soft cordon of silence around their little town intact. Even though the ending suggests that the act of forgetting has been successful and the little Polish community can go back to its dreamlike stasis, the film itself functions as an effective intervention into a dominant historical discourse. Wrona achieves this by showcasing the ripple effects of a spectral haunting, a Gothic shattering of social order, and a hauntological process of remembering, reliving, and recasting the past as part of the present, a hypervisible absence that demands the viewers'—*our*—attention.

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