

CULTURE / INTERVIEW

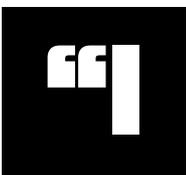
Dariusz Kuźma

There Is No One Truth

An Interview with Andreas Hoessli

A still from "The Naked King: 18 Fragments on Revolution". Photo: Courtesy of Andreas Hoessli

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don't believe in objective historical truth. You have to discover history each and every year, search for new ways to understand its different aspects, and try to integrate everything you find into what you had already known, or at least you thought you knew." Dariusz Kuźma talks with Swiss journalist and filmmaker Andreas Hoessli about his documentary *The Naked King: 18 Fragments on Revolution*, in which he explores the various social and political contexts of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, as well as the 1980s Solidarity movement in Poland.



Dariusz Kuźma: You witnessed the birth of the Solidarity movement first-hand. How did you find yourself in Poland at the end of 1970s?

Andreas Hoessli: I was young and curious, I wanted to experience this other, mysterious world outside of the Western side of the Iron Curtain. As it happened, I had a dissertation project and I could apply for a postgraduate scholarship granted as a part of the exchange programme between Switzerland and Poland. I was successful and could travel to your country, first for one year only, but then I prolonged it for a second year. Ultimately, I was in Poland from 1978 to 1980.

Was it such a different world from what you had experienced back home?

Oh, yes, it was quite a different world for me. You know, in those times in Switzerland nobody knew what was happening on the other side of the Cold War borders. Very few people travelled there. It was another world for me, both culturally and in terms of the real socialist system.

In your film, you find common elements between what happened during the times of Solidarity and the revolution in Iran, despite the thousands of kilometres that separated them.

I merely continue to explore the observations that Ryszard Kapuściński made in his book *Shah of Shahs*, but, yes, there were quite a few elements common to both revolutions, although the Iranian preceded the Polish one. In fact, both are part of a much bigger discussion among historians that 1979 and 1980 were key years in modern history. During a relatively short time, there was this social and political shift in different parts of the world that changed many things. The world kind of took a different direction. And the Iranian and Polish revolutions were important in that shift.



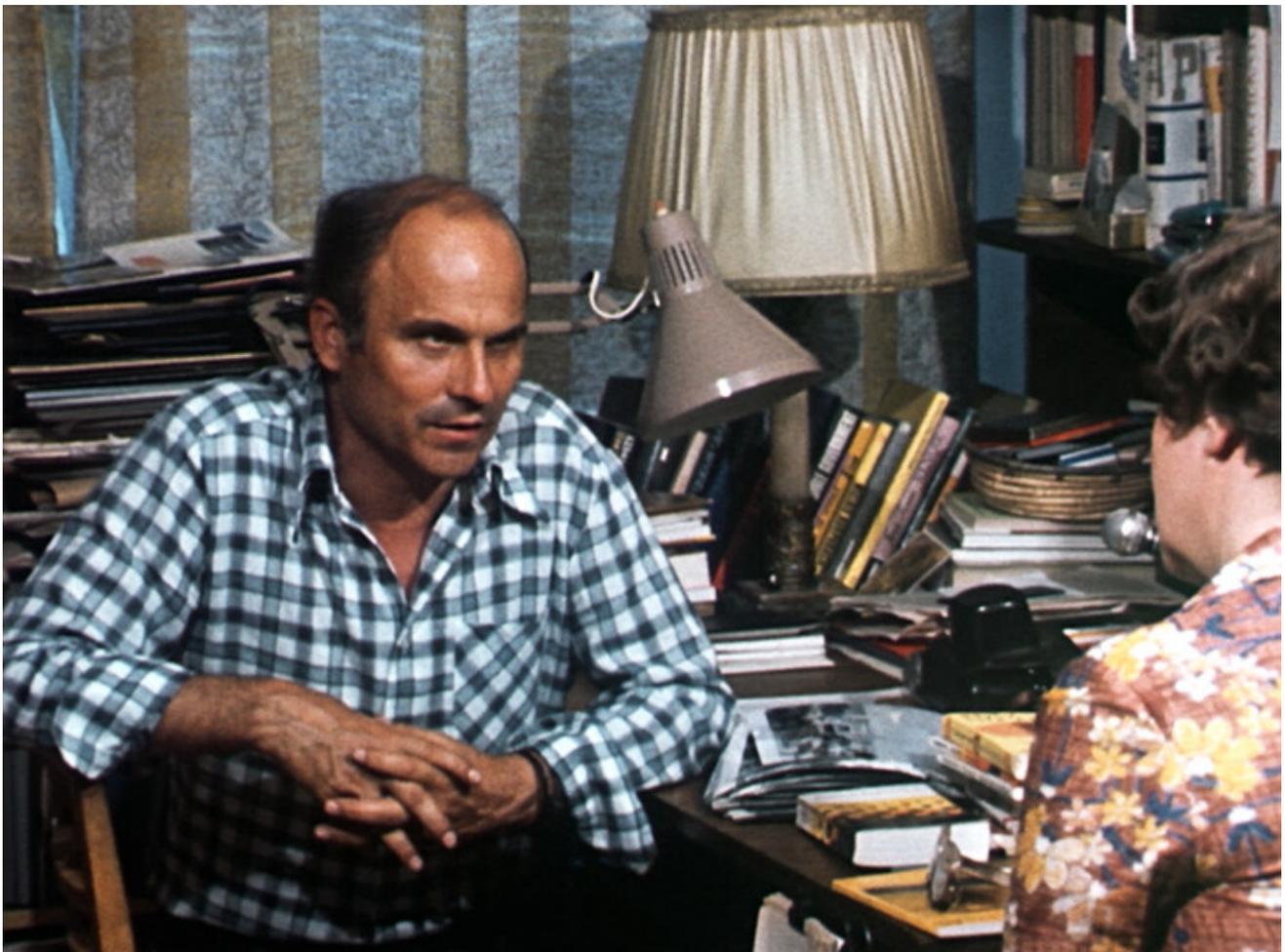
A still from “The Naked King: 18 Fragments on Revolution”. Photo: Courtesy of Andreas Hoessli

Let me rephrase. You suggest in *The Naked King* that the Iranian revolution somehow influenced the Polish one. How was that possible?

I believe it did influence the Polish revolution, although it wasn't an obvious influence, rather a hidden one. What was happening in Iran was more than just a revolution, it was an earthquake of social and political changes. Many people in Poland took interest in it; me and my friends were reading articles by Kapuściński and others. What is important to understand, and what is often forgotten, is that Poland and Iran were in good relations in the 70s. The Shah even visited Poland in 1977, he and his wife received *honoris causa* from the University of Warsaw. I have footage from this visit that wasn't shown to the public at the time. There are more interconnections between Poland and Iran than you would think. The Polish *szlachta* [the nobility of the First Polish Republic – ed. note] identified itself with the ancient Iranian warrior tribe called the Sarmatians. In our times, in 1942, more than 200,000 men, women and children, deported from Poland to Siberia in 1939, joined Anders' Army in its journey to the Middle East and North Africa, among them many Jews. They crossed the Caspian Sea and entered Iran. Many stayed there, including the famous Jewish orphans from Esfahan. There are Iranian films about those times, and you still can find many traces of it in today's Iran. What's more, after the revolution in Iran, some of the students who took part in the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979 created a new political party called Solidarity. They took the Polish *Solidarność* as a model, and some of them were imprisoned for it.

Interestingly, one of the main themes of your film is exactly about that: how the passage of time erodes the truth about revolutionary movements. That nowadays it is quite impossible to grasp what happened 40 years ago.

I'll tell you something, it was quite impossible to grasp it even then. I mean, objectively, or at least as objectively as one could. The idea of memory is a funny thing in itself, but historical memory is an entirely different thing. I made *The Naked King* because I wasn't quite sure about what exactly happened in Poland when I was living there. I wanted to reinvestigate it. And I did, personally, but after the film had been released in cinemas in Germany and Switzerland, I had discussions about what exactly Solidarity was about. You see, many people outside of Poland saw it then, and still do now, as a Catholic movement. In my opinion, when you follow the events and true motivations of the people who took part in it, you find that it was not at all a Catholic movement, but a deeply social one.



A still from "The Naked King: 18 Fragments on Revolution". Photo: Courtesy of Andreas Hoessli

So, how can young people who didn't live then learn about what it was when they have so many partial answers that don't really form an overall picture? Not to mention the effective ideological propaganda of your current government, which uses Solidarity for its own purposes by falsifying history.

This begs the question: do you think the truth, or a truth, still matters? Or maybe what does matter are myths and symbols based on partial, subjective versions of what happened?

I don't believe in objective historical truth. You have to discover history each and every year, search for new ways to understand its different aspects, and try to integrate everything you find into what you had already known, or at least you thought you knew. That said, I strongly believe that truth still matters, meaning a kind of truth that is an interpretation of facts and at the same time a subjective take on it. *The Naked King* was such an attempt, I wasn't interested in having an ideological view of history, but rather in reflecting on what happened through my own experiences.

One of the undisputable facts is that while you were staying in Poland, the Polish Secret Service wanted to use some nasty methods to make you an informer – and you found out about the details of this during making of *The Naked King*.

You are correct, but it was not a surprise for me that the Secret Service planned to recruit me. I mean, I wasn't naïve, I was a Western journalist with different contacts staying in a country ruled by a regime during a social upheaval. It was obvious they might want to use me in one way or another. What I didn't expect was that they had taken it as seriously as I discovered when reading the Secret Service files years later. I had the chance to verify their authenticity during a meeting with General Kiszczak when he was alive. I wanted to have a better understanding of what had happened. And he told me that, yes, they were authentic, but it was not that big of a deal because they had planned to make informers out of many Westerners. When I asked why, he replied that they had simply been doing the same things that every Secret Service in the world would have been doing in their place.

What I found quite puzzling was that one of your interviewees says that all of it – the methods, the surveillance, the provocations – did not matter in the grand scheme of things. That we should forget about what happened in the past and focus on the present.

You are referring to one of the former intelligence agents who says in the film that since they succeeded in destroying most of the documents about the links between the Secret Service and the Church, the same should be done with everything else, because it doesn't have any historical importance. He used to be in the Secret Service, but, funnily enough, I think he is against the current Polish government, which to some extent is doing exactly as he says – trying to monopolize the perspective on the country's turbulent history so that it can use some events from the past for its political purposes.

Isn't it connected in a way to which side you are on during revolutionary times? Masoumeh Ebtekar, who fought against the government in 1979, now is a Vice-President of Iran, and she says in *The Naked King* that even if she still holds the values of the revolution dear, she doesn't agree with what the revolution became.

The important thing for me, the most interesting thing, was the way Ms Ebtekar was speaking about the history of the revolution. She basically said that we should learn and understand the history, but at the same time be able to criticize what we did and said in the past. She is one of 12 Vice-Presidents in Iran, but the fact that she holds a position of power doesn't give her the right to say what she wants. Not in modern Iran. In my opinion, what she meant was that some of the foundations of the Iranian revolution were wrong and we should accept it. Like, the occupation of the US embassy and the way the hostages were treated. But she could not say that openly. In a way, Poland has it better. You can glorify or criticize the Solidarity movement, even if the government would like to force its own narrative.



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It is obvious to me that we should not forget about the past, but learn from it as much as we can, if only not to make the same mistakes. The problem is, it seems there isn't one past to learn from.

Hannah Arendt carefully studied the French and American revolutions and wrote in her book *On Revolution* that when the revolution starts even its leaders have no idea how it is going to end. I think that, first, we should treat revolution as a social phenomenon resulting from the decomposition of the regime and many other aspects, not necessarily a decision of a group of people to fight and die. And, second, we should distinguish between a revolution and a result of this revolution. Establishing the new results directly from a revolution, but they are not the same. Revolutions will happen, whether you want it or not, but we should be able to understand their contexts and not treat history from a fixed perspective. We should investigate it, discuss it, over and over. I believe saying that we learn or don't learn from history is simplifying a very important and difficult process. The investigation of history and its representation in the public sphere has to be based on honest research, and this concerns historians, journalists, documentary filmmakers, and others. In history, it is even more important than in the exact sciences, because we must be aware that history can become part of political propaganda. If we take the example of Poland today, it is clear for me that the party in power tries to monopolize its own version of the history of *Solidarność* as a kind of 'official history', and that is dangerous.



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Parts of this interview have been edited and condensed for clarity and brevity.

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Dariusz Kuźma

is a film journalist, translator, regular contributor to the Camerimage film festival and one of its selectors. He has a degree in English Studies and American Studies. He is passionate about world cinema and unconventional television series. His articles have been published by numerous Polish magazines and online media.





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