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The Problem of Lustration in Polish Cinema

Abstract:

The relevance of this study is determined by the enduring impact of lustration on collective memory and cultural self-reflection in post-communist Poland. Despite the formal completion of key legislative stages, lustration continues to function as a source of moral, psychological, and symbolic tension within Polish society, which is actively articulated through national cinema. The research problem lies in the insufficient scholarly attention paid to the representation of lustration in Polish feature cinema as an autonomous cultural discourse. While lustration has been extensively examined from legal, political, and historical perspectives, its cinematic interpretation as a medium of meaning-making and trauma processing remains underexplored. The novelty of the study consists in its interdisciplinary approach, which conceptualises lustration not merely as an institutional mechanism but as a culturally mediated process articulated through cinematic narratives. The article introduces a conceptual analysis of key cinematic constructs—*teczki* (files), *kłamstwo* (lie), *zdrada* (betrayal), and the figure of the “evil UB officer but a good cop”—and traces their diachronic development in Polish films from the early 1990s to the mid-2020s. The subject of the study is the cinematic discourse on lustration in Polish feature films. The object of the study is Polish feature cinema produced after 1989 that directly or indirectly addresses the problem of lustration and the legacy of the communist security services. The study aims to identify and analyse the key conceptual frameworks through which the processes of lustration are represented and interpreted in Polish feature cinema. The study employs a combination of general scientific methods and specialised cultural-analytical approaches, including discourse analysis, narrative and semiotic analysis, comparative and historical-cultural methods, and the concept of cultural trauma. The study refers to the works of scholars in the fields of transitional justice, memory studies, and post-communist transformation, including Roman David, Lavinia Stan, Michael Nalepa, Cynthia Horne, Natalia Letki, Piotr Grzelak, Jan Woleński, and Nataliya Minyenkova. The article analyses a corpus of Polish feature films produced after 1989 and demonstrates that cinema constructs a distinct cultural language for engaging with lustration, shifting attention from legal procedures to moral ambiguity, personal responsibility, and collective trauma. The findings reveal the stability of key cinematic concepts across different historical periods and highlight cinema’s role in shaping reflective rather than punitive attitudes towards the communist past. The study concludes that Polish feature cinema functions as a significant space for the cultural interpretation of lustration, contributing to ongoing processes of memory formation and ethical reflection in post-communist society.

Keywords: lustration, Polish cinema, collective memory, cultural trauma, transitional justice, post-communist society, cinematic discourse, moral ambiguity, communist past.

Introduction

Poland belongs to the group of countries in which the process of lustration assumed a specific and protracted character. As a result of so-called “wild lustration”, governments and

individual politicians brought their political careers to an end, while not only professional careers but also personal lives were destroyed. This tragic experience of purging state power and society of the legacy of the totalitarian past became not merely a political instrument but also a collective trauma of Polish society. National cinema did not remain indifferent to these processes: various aspects of lustration became one of the popular themes of Polish feature films. The study of the problem of lustration through the prism of cinema appears to us to be relevant and compelling for the following reasons: first, cinema influences collective memory and may serve as a tool for working through traumatic experience; second, without processes of transformation it is impossible to understand contemporary Polish identity and the national character of Polish society.

The scholarly corpus on lustration is sufficiently diverse and contentious, and many questions still lack definitive answers. The works of Roman David, Adam Czarnota, Lavinia Stan, Paweł Żaczek, Jan Holiński, Piotr Błażek, and other scholars are devoted to various aspects of lustration practices in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, in particular their role, place, and consequences in processes of democratic transformation. Issues of lustration have also been examined by Polish authors (Agnieszka Opalińska, Natalia Letki, Piotr Grzelak, Jan Woleński, Paweł Gontarczyk, Sławomir Cenckiewicz) and Ukrainian scholars (Stanislav Shevchuk, Valerii Kravchuk, Iryna Orlovska, Nataliia Minenkova). At the same time, in our view, the theme of lustration in Polish cinema remains insufficiently explored, although certain aspects—most notably representations of the special services in Polish cinematography—have been studied by Natasha Kocharowska-Ruzhitska and Jacek Nowakowski. The emergence of new films, as well as the disclosure of previously unknown facts, creates additional opportunities for research. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to outline the specific features of the representation of lustration processes in Polish cinema, in particular to identify the key concepts through which this problem has been articulated in Polish feature films.

The novelty of the present study lies in its interdisciplinary focus on lustration not as a solely legal, political, or historical phenomenon, but as a culturally mediated process articulated through Polish feature cinema. While lustration has been extensively examined within the frameworks of transitional justice, constitutional law, and post-communist political transformation, its cinematic representation has remained marginal in scholarly discourse. Existing studies have tended either to analyse institutional mechanisms of lustration or to approach cinema as a secondary illustrative source, rather than as an autonomous discursive field shaping collective memory.

This article introduces a conceptual shift by treating Polish cinema as an independent analytical lens through which the social, ethical, and psychological dimensions of lustration are negotiated. The research identifies cinema not merely as a reflection of political processes, but as an active medium that produces meanings, symbols, and moral evaluations of the communist past. By isolating and systematising key cinematic concepts—*teczki* (files), *klamstwo* (lie), *zdrada* (betrayal), and the figure of the “evil UB officer but a good cop”—the study demonstrates how lustration is translated into a language of cultural trauma, personal responsibility, and moral ambiguity.

Furthermore, the novelty of the study consists in tracing the diachronic development of these concepts across Polish feature films produced from the early 1990s to the mid-2020s. This temporal perspective makes it possible to observe how cinematic narratives evolve alongside changes in legal frameworks, public debates, and memory politics, thereby revealing cinema as a dynamic space of ongoing reinterpretation rather than a fixed repository of post-communist experience.

The subject of the study is the cinematic discourse on lustration in Polish feature films, understood as a system of narrative strategies, symbolic figures, and key concepts through which the experience of lustration is interpreted, evaluated, and emotionally framed within Polish society.

The object of the study is Polish feature cinema produced after 1989 that directly or indirectly addresses the problem of lustration, including films that depict the activities of the communist security services, the disclosure of archival materials, the moral consequences of collaboration, and the social repercussions of revealing the past.

The study aims to identify and analyse the key conceptual frameworks through which the processes of lustration are represented and interpreted in Polish feature cinema.

According to the purpose, the study pursues the following research objectives:

- outline the specific features of the Polish model of lustration that determine its cinematic representation;
- identify the corpus of Polish feature films that construct narratives around lustration and related themes;
- analyse the concept of *teczki* (files) as a symbol of power, blackmail, and “materialised past” in Polish cinema;
- examine the figure of the “evil UB officer but a good cop” as a mechanism for working through the negative legacy of the communist system;
- explore the role of *kłamstwo* (lie) as a structural and existential condition shaping cinematic narratives of lustration;
- interpret *zdrada* (betrayal) as a forced and traumatising experience produced by systemic coercion.

The results of this study are addressed primarily to scholars and researchers in the fields of cultural studies, film studies, memory studies, and post-communist transformation, particularly those interested in the cultural dimensions of transitional justice and the politics of memory in Central and Eastern Europe.

At the same time, the article may be of interest to historians, legal scholars, and political scientists who examine lustration from institutional or normative perspectives, as it offers an alternative interpretative framework that foregrounds cultural representation and collective experience. Finally, the findings may also be relevant to film professionals and educators seeking to understand the social functions of cinema in processing historical trauma and shaping post-authoritarian identities.

Methods

The methodological framework of this study is based on a combination of general scientific and specialised cultural-analytical methods aimed at examining the representation of lustration in Polish feature cinema. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the research problem, lustration is approached simultaneously as a historical, legal, political, and cultural phenomenon articulated through cinematic discourse. The methodological design allows for the analysis of both the structural features of film narratives and the symbolic mechanisms through which collective memory and cultural trauma are constructed. Particular emphasis is placed on methods that make it possible to interpret cinema as an active medium of meaning-making rather than as a passive reflection of social processes. The selected methods ensure analytical consistency between the theoretical premises of the study and the empirical material examined in the Results section.

The method of analysis is employed to decompose the complex phenomenon of lustration into its constituent semantic, narrative, and symbolic elements as they appear in Polish feature cinema. Lustration is treated not as a monolithic process, but as a multifaceted cultural construct articulated through characters, plot structures, visual motifs, and key concepts. In this study, analytical procedures are applied to individual films, scenes, dialogues, and character types in order to identify recurring representations of power, guilt, responsibility, and trauma. Special attention is given to the ways in which abstract legal and political processes are translated into cinematic images and narrative conflicts. Through analysis, the research isolates core conceptual units such as *teczki* (files), *kłamstwo* (lie), and *zdrada* (betrayal). This method provides the foundation for further interpretative and comparative work.

The method of synthesis is used to integrate the results of the analytical examination into a coherent interpretative framework. After identifying individual narrative motifs and symbolic structures in separate films, the study synthesises these elements to reconstruct the overall cinematic discourse on lustration. Synthesis enables the transition from fragmented filmic observations to generalised conclusions about how Polish cinema conceptualises and evaluates the communist past. In this research, the method allows for the articulation of shared patterns across films produced in different decades and under different political conditions. It also facilitates the construction of a unified model of cinematic representation that connects legal, moral, and emotional dimensions of lustration. As a result, lustration emerges as a culturally mediated process rather than a purely institutional one.

The inductive method is applied to derive general conclusions from the examination of specific cinematic cases. The study analyses a selected corpus of Polish feature films produced after 1989 and uses the observations drawn from these individual works to formulate broader interpretative claims. Through induction, recurrent narrative strategies and conceptual patterns are identified across different films, directors, and historical contexts. This approach makes it possible to establish typological features of the cinematic discourse on lustration without imposing predetermined theoretical schemes. Induction is particularly important for revealing how similar meanings are reproduced through diverse plots and characters. The method ensures that the conclusions of the study are grounded in concrete empirical material.

The deductive method is used to apply general theoretical propositions from the fields of transitional justice, memory studies, and cultural trauma theory to the analysis of Polish cinema. Established scholarly concepts concerning lustration, collective memory, and post-authoritarian transformation serve as interpretative frameworks for reading specific film narratives. Deduction allows the study to test how abstract theoretical models function when confronted with concrete cultural representations. In this research, deductive reasoning is employed to interpret cinematic figures such as the former UB officer or the informant as embodiments of broader social and ethical dilemmas. The method helps to situate film analysis within a wider academic discourse. As a result, cinematic texts are integrated into interdisciplinary debates on post-communist transformation.

The systemic approach is applied to examine Polish cinema as part of a broader socio-political and cultural system. Lustration is analysed not in isolation, but in connection with legal reforms, political debates, institutional changes, and memory politics in post-communist Poland. This method makes it possible to understand cinema as an active participant in the process of negotiating the past, rather than as a passive reflection of external events. In the study, films are contextualised within specific historical moments, such as amendments to lustration laws or public controversies surrounding archives and de-ubecisation. The systemic approach highlights

the interdependence between cinematic narratives and societal transformations. It thus reinforces the interdisciplinary character of the research.

The structural-logical method is used to organise the internal architecture of the research and to ensure consistency between its theoretical premises, analytical sections, and conclusions. This method guides the sequential presentation of the material, moving from historical and legal context to cinematic analysis and conceptual interpretation. Within the study, it supports the clear differentiation between sections devoted to institutional aspects of lustration and those focused on its cultural representation. The structural-logical method also underpins the coherent development of arguments within the Results section. By maintaining logical continuity, the research avoids fragmentation and redundancy. This method contributes to the overall clarity and scholarly rigour of the article.

The method of generalisation is employed to formulate broader conclusions based on recurring patterns identified in the analysed films. After examining individual cases and narrative elements, the study abstracts common features that characterise the cinematic treatment of lustration in Poland. Generalisation allows the research to move beyond the level of isolated film analysis and to propose interpretative categories applicable to Polish cinema as a whole. In this study, it is used to conceptualise lustration as a cultural trauma and a moral dilemma rather than solely a political mechanism. The method also supports the identification of stable cinematic archetypes and symbolic structures. As a result, the findings gain explanatory value beyond the specific corpus of films.

The method of abstraction is applied to isolate key conceptual categories from their concrete cinematic embodiments. In the research, concepts such as *teczki*, *kelamstwo*, *zdrada*, and the archetype of the “evil UB officer but a good cop” are treated as analytical constructs rather than as mere plot devices. Abstraction enables the study to detach these concepts from individual narratives and to examine their broader symbolic and cultural significance. This method is essential for identifying the underlying logic of cinematic representations of lustration. It allows the research to focus on meaning-making processes rather than on descriptive detail alone. Through abstraction, the study formulates a conceptual map of the cinematic discourse on lustration.

Discourse analysis is employed to examine Polish feature cinema as a form of public and cultural discourse through which lustration is articulated, legitimised, or problematised. This method allows the study to move beyond individual films and to analyse recurring patterns of meaning production, narrative framing, and evaluative language. In the research, cinematic discourse is understood as a space where legal, moral, and emotional interpretations of the communist past intersect. Discourse analysis is applied to dialogues, narrative conflicts, and character positioning in order to identify dominant and marginalised interpretations of lustration. Particular attention is paid to how categories such as guilt, responsibility, and victimhood are constructed. This method enables the identification of cinema as an active participant in memory politics.

Cultural analysis is used to reveal the system of values, symbols, and collective representations embedded in cinematic narratives about lustration. The method treats films as cultural texts that encode social attitudes toward the communist past and its moral consequences. In this study, cultural analysis helps to uncover how Polish cinema negotiates notions of justice, betrayal, honour, and professional ethics. It also allows for the interpretation of cinematic images as expressions of broader cultural anxieties and tensions characteristic of post-communist society. Through this method, lustration is analysed not merely as a political procedure but as a

culturally charged experience. The approach situates film narratives within Polish cultural traditions and memory frameworks.

Film narrative analysis is applied to examine the structure of cinematic storytelling in films addressing lustration. This method focuses on plot construction, character development, narrative perspective, and conflict resolution. In the study, narrative analysis is used to identify typical *сюжетные модели*, such as the revelation of a hidden past, moral testing of protagonists, and the absence of a reconciliatory ending. It allows for the examination of how suspense, tragedy, and moral ambiguity are produced through narrative means. By analysing narrative strategies, the research demonstrates how lustration is framed as an unresolved and traumatic process. This method highlights the role of storytelling in shaping viewers' emotional and ethical responses.

Semiotic analysis is employed to interpret the system of signs and symbols through which lustration is visually and narratively represented. The method focuses on recurring objects, images, and metaphors, such as files, archives, uniforms, closed spaces, and acts of destruction. In this research, semiotic analysis is used to decode the symbolic meanings of *teczki* as embodiments of power, blackmail, and "materialised past". It also enables the interpretation of visual oppositions, such as visibility versus concealment and speech versus silence. Through semiotic analysis, cinematic elements are read as carriers of culturally shared meanings. This method deepens the understanding of how abstract historical processes are transformed into visual language.

The historical-cultural method is applied to situate cinematic representations of lustration within specific historical and socio-political contexts. This approach allows the study to correlate film narratives with particular stages of the lustration process in Poland, including legislative changes and public debates. In the research, films are analysed in relation to the periods in which they were produced, revealing shifts in interpretative emphasis over time. The method helps to explain why certain themes intensify or recede in different decades. It also highlights the interaction between cinema and evolving memory politics. As a result, cinematic discourse is understood as historically contingent rather than static.

The comparative method is used to identify similarities and differences in the representation of lustration across various Polish feature films. This approach enables the study to compare narrative strategies, character archetypes, and conceptual emphases in films produced by different directors and in different historical moments. In the research, comparison reveals stable motifs, such as the power of files or the figure of the compromised professional, alongside variations in moral evaluation. The method supports the identification of typological patterns within Polish cinema. It also allows for the avoidance of overgeneralisation based on a single film. Through comparison, the study establishes the internal diversity of the cinematic discourse.

The method of collective memory analysis is applied to examine how Polish cinema participates in the construction and transmission of shared interpretations of the communist past. Films are treated as media through which collective memories are shaped, contested, and emotionally processed. In this study, the method is used to analyse how traumatic experiences of collaboration, surveillance, and disclosure are transformed into cultural narratives. It also reveals the role of cinema in stabilising or challenging dominant memory frameworks. Collective memory analysis highlights the tension between forgetting, remembering, and reinterpretation. This approach situates cinematic representations within broader processes of societal remembrance.

The hermeneutic method is employed to interpret the deeper meanings embedded in cinematic texts. This approach focuses on understanding rather than explanation, emphasising

the contextual and interpretative nature of meaning. In the research, hermeneutic analysis is applied to dialogues, character motivations, and moral dilemmas portrayed in films. It allows for the interpretation of silence, ambiguity, and contradiction as meaningful narrative elements. The method helps to uncover latent meanings related to guilt, fear, and responsibility. Through hermeneutics, films are analysed as texts that require interpretative engagement rather than literal reading.

The method of cultural trauma analysis is used to conceptualise lustration as a collective traumatic experience rather than a completed historical episode. This approach enables the study to examine how cinema represents the long-term psychological and moral consequences of living under coercion and surveillance. In the research, cultural trauma analysis is applied to narratives of betrayal, forced collaboration, and irreversible moral damage. It helps to explain the absence of reconciliation and the prevalence of tragic endings in films about lustration. The method frames cinema as a space for working through unresolved trauma. This perspective reinforces the interpretation of lustration as an ongoing cultural process.

The interdisciplinary approach underpins the entire research design by integrating insights from cultural studies, film studies, history, political science, and legal scholarship. This method allows the study to address lustration simultaneously as a legal mechanism, a political conflict, and a cultural experience. In practice, interdisciplinary analysis enables the correlation of cinematic representations with legal norms, institutional practices, and theoretical models of transitional justice. It prevents reductionist interpretations limited to a single disciplinary perspective. The approach ensures analytical depth and conceptual coherence. As a result, the study offers a comprehensive interpretation of lustration as a multidimensional phenomenon.

The combination of general scientific, cultural, and interdisciplinary methods provides a comprehensive analytical toolkit for examining the cinematic discourse on lustration in Poland. The applied methodology makes it possible to identify recurring conceptual patterns, narrative strategies, and symbolic structures across different films and historical contexts. By integrating analytical, interpretative, and contextual approaches, the study avoids both descriptive reductionism and excessive abstraction. The methodological framework ensures that the conclusions drawn are grounded in systematic analysis of the film corpus while remaining theoretically informed. This integrated approach enables a nuanced understanding of lustration as a culturally mediated and historically contingent process represented in Polish cinema.

Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarly literature conceptualises lustration as a core mechanism of transitional justice in post-communist societies. Roman David's monograph offers a comparative analysis of lustration policies in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, focusing on personnel systems and the political logic behind vetting procedures (*David, 2011*). This work provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the specificity of the Polish model of lustration and is used in the present study to contextualise cinematic representations within broader regional patterns.

Similarly, Lavinia Stan's edited volume examines various instruments of transitional justice in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, including lustration, trials, and memory policies (*Stan, 2009*). The collection situates lustration within a spectrum of post-authoritarian responses to the past, which informs the interdisciplinary framework of this research. The later volume edited by Stan and Nedelsky synthesises twenty-five years of post-communist experience, highlighting long-term consequences and unresolved tensions (*Stan & Nedelsky, 2015*). This

perspective is employed in the study to interpret the persistence of traumatic motifs in Polish cinema decades after the political transition.

Michael Nalepa's work analyses transitional justice through the metaphor of "skeletons in the closet", emphasising political bargaining, delayed disclosure, and strategic silence (*Nalepa, 2010*). This approach is particularly relevant for interpreting cinematic narratives centred on concealment, postponed revelation, and moral compromise. The theoretical insights from this study support the analysis of *kelamstwo* (lie) as a systemic condition in Polish films about lustration.

The political logic underlying lustration processes in Central Europe is examined by Williams, Fowler, and Szczerbiak, who propose a "post-communist politics" approach that explains variations in lustration outcomes (*Williams et al., 2005*). Their analysis helps to situate Polish cinema within a context of ongoing political conflict rather than completed democratic consolidation. This perspective is used to explain the recurrent depiction of lustration as an unresolved and destabilising process in film narratives.

Natalia Letki explores the relationship between lustration and democratisation, arguing that lustration often produces ambivalent effects on political trust and institutional legitimacy (*Letki, 2002*). Her conclusions are applied in this study to interpret cinematic scepticism toward official verification procedures and moral judgments. Legal aspects of lustration are addressed by Cynthia Horne, who analyses international legal rulings and their implications for the rule of law (*Horne, 2009*). This work provides an essential normative background for understanding the tension between justice and legality reflected in Polish cinematic discourse.

From a legal-philosophical perspective, Liviu Damsa conceptualises lustration as a form of administrative justice aimed at achieving societal closure (*Damsa, 2011*). This notion is critically engaged in the present study, as Polish films often demonstrate the impossibility of such closure and instead foreground enduring trauma and moral ambiguity.

Polish-language scholarship offers in-depth analyses of the domestic debates surrounding lustration. Piotr Grzelak's monograph documents the political struggle over lustration in Poland, including controversies surrounding archives and institutional reforms (*Grzelak, 2005*). This work is used to contextualise cinematic representations of *teczki* (files) as instruments of power and blackmail. Jan Woleński interprets lustration as a mirror reflecting broader societal divisions and moral dilemmas (*Woleński, 2007*). His reflections inform the interpretation of cinematic figures caught between guilt, denial, and self-justification.

The legal framework of lustration and de-ubecisation is grounded in Polish legislation, particularly the 2006 Lustration Act and the 2016 amendments concerning pensions of former security service officers (*O ujawnianiu informacji..., 2006*; *O zmianie ustawy..., 2016*). These legal sources are used in the study to correlate cinematic narratives with institutional changes and public debates.

The cultural and linguistic dimension of lustration discourse is addressed by Kwiecień, Łaziński, and Bartmiński, who analyse socially significant words and expressions in contemporary Polish language (*Kwiecień et al., 2019*). Their work is employed to explain the semantic evolution of the term *teczka* and its transformation into a powerful cultural symbol in the 1990s. This linguistic perspective supports the semiotic analysis of cinematic representations of archives and files.

Dorota Goska examines the fragile process of working through the communist past in Polish public culture, highlighting unresolved tensions and narrative instability (*Goska, 2013*). Her reflections provide a broader cultural backdrop for understanding why Polish cinema often avoids clear moral resolutions and favours ambivalence.

The publicistic discourse on lustration in Poland is analysed by Nataliya Miniienkova (2017), who examines journalistic narratives of the 1990s and their role in shaping public perceptions. This work complements the cinematic analysis by demonstrating continuity between media discourse and film narratives. Miniienkova's earlier study (2016) synthesises arguments for and against lustration in Central and Eastern Europe, providing a comparative framework used to situate Polish cinema within broader regional debates.

Finally, film-specific sources, such as materials related to *Różycka* (2010), are used as supplementary contextual references to clarify production backgrounds and real historical prototypes of cinematic plots. These sources support the interpretation of films as culturally embedded texts rather than autonomous artistic artefacts.

Results

Features of the Lustration Process in Poland

The origin of the term “*lustration*” was not associated with the protection of democratic values. This meaning emerged only in connection with the processes of transformation in post-communist countries. It was precisely at the end of the twentieth century that lustration became a widespread practice of the “new” post-communist regimes, a mechanism for the “purification of society” and the rotation of elites.

The Lustration Act in Poland was adopted only in 1997, following unsuccessful attempts in the early 1990s. In 1998, the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN; Polish: *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*) was established. The lustration law was amended in 2001–2002, 2006, and 2017. The Polish model of lustration is unique due to its subject matter (that is, the definition of the content of “punishment”): it was not employment or cooperation with the secret police (SB, *Służba Bezpieczeństwa* of the Polish People's Republic, *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*) that was condemned, but rather the concealment of this fact itself (lying; Polish: *klamstwo*), which constituted the grounds for a ban on holding public office for a period of ten years. Persons born after 31 July 1972 were not subject to lustration. Prior to the adoption of the new law in 2006, the verification of lustration declarations was carried out by the Warsaw Court of Appeal, while oversight was exercised by the Commissioner for the Public Interest. In 2006, these two institutions were abolished, and the functions of verification and disclosure of information were transferred to the Institute of National Remembrance; however, the subject matter of lustration remained unchanged.

Previous studies of the scholarly discourse on lustration provide grounds for asserting that: (1) lustration in Poland was delayed and extended over time; (2) it had a retrospective character, that is, it was primarily aimed at establishing historical justice (the disclosure of information about informants—secret collaborators (IW, *tajny współpracownik*) of the special services (SB, *Służba Bezpieczeństwa*; WSW, *Wojskowe Służby Wewnętrzne*)); and (3) it caused serious complications both for the political system and for individuals (Miniienkova, 2016) (few informants voluntarily admitted the fact of cooperation; most sought to conceal it, and, when exposed, categorically denied it).

The Specificity of Representing Lustration Processes in Polish Feature Cinema: Content and Key concepts

For the analysis of the problem, Polish feature films produced after 1989 were selected that were devoted to lustration in Poland or address this topic indirectly: *Py* (1992, directed by Władysław Pasikowski), *Korowód* (2007, directed by Jerzy Stuhr), *Rysa* (2008, directed by Michał

Rosa), *Różyżka* (2010, directed by Jan Kidawa-Błoński), *Kret* (2010, directed by Rafał Lewandowski), and *Napad* (2024, directed by Michał Gazda).

By analysing feature films that directly or indirectly address lustration, the following key concepts were identified through which directors convey the essence of lustration practices in Poland: “*teczki*” (“files”), “*zły ubek, ale dobry glina*” (“a bad UB officer but a good cop”; slang *glina*—policeman; Polish *ubek*—a pejorative term for an officer of the political police, *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa*), “*klamstwo*” (“lie”), and “*zdrada*” (“betrayal”). These will be examined in greater detail.

The concept of “*files/dossiers*” (Polish *teczki*) is a key element in the implementation of lustration. In the course of their work, security service officers—contemptuously referred to in Poland as “*ubeks*”—created dossiers on individuals whom they managed to induce into cooperation. These files contained a document of consent, colloquially referred to as a “*lojalka*”. Such files repeatedly became instruments of blackmail. In Władysław Pasikowski’s film *Py* (1992), a scene depicts the destruction of documents at night at a rubbish dump. In addition, the burning of files is mentioned in a conversation between SB (Polish *Slużba Bezpieczeństwa*) Captain Stopczyk and a major from the same service:

– *Stopczyk, co Wy tam palicie?* (Stopczyk, what are you burning there?)

– *Ja? Radomskie, ale jak Pan major woli, to Franz ma Camelę.* (I’m smoking Radomskie, but if the Major prefers, Franz has Camels.)

The hasty destruction of documents of the political police and the party apparatus was one of the unifying factors of most political transformation processes in Central and Eastern Europe (*Minienkova, 2016, p. 121*). In Poland, the elimination of documents also took place: as noted by the Polish researcher P. Grzelak, a significant part of the SB archives was destroyed between June 1989 (the contract elections to the Sejm) and April 1990 (the dissolution of the SB) (*Grzelak, 2005, p. 17*). Many other scholars and politicians were likewise convinced that the archives of the SB and the Polish United Workers’ Party had been liquidated; this fact was also confirmed by the so-called “Michnik Commission” (*Woleński, 2007, pp. 39–40*). Moreover, as the Polish researcher Jan Woleński notes, at that time there was a widespread belief in Polish society that the destruction of archives and the slowing down of the lustration process were part of a compromise between the authorities and the opposition, reached during secret negotiations prior to the “Round Table” talks in Magdalena near Warsaw (*Woleński, 2007, p. 34*).

The film *Koronód* (2007) by Jerzy Stuhr, often referred to in the press and by the director himself as “*pierwszym polskim filmem o lustracji*” (“the first Polish film about lustration”), also demonstrates the “power of the files”. The film was made at the time of another attempt to amend the lustration law, in particular by expanding the range of persons subject to lustration screening (university staff from adjuncts to rectors, members of the Polish Academy of Sciences, etc.), with the total number increasing from 27,000 to between 400,000 and 700,000 (*O ujawnianiu informacji..., 2006*). It is therefore no coincidence that, alongside professors, the film presents the vivid figure of a rector, played by Jerzy Stuhr himself. The rector urges an accused professor to fight and not to resign from the post of vice-rector, adding that he believes in his colleague’s innocence and is himself unconcerned, since “*Ja całą komunę byłem w partii, nas nie wolno było werbować, i nieśz do dziś to opłaca się*” (“I was in the party throughout the communist period; we were not allowed to be recruited, and you know, to this day it pays off”). Thus, the dossier acquires greater ontological weight than living speech, and files were often fabricated, a point also emphasised in scholarly research. Files are also mentioned by another professor in the film, Zdzisław Dąbrowski (played by Jan Frycz), who decides to disappear from life by staging his

own death out of fear that his file as an informant (KO, *kontakt operacyjny* “Kolega”) will be disclosed and everyone will learn that he was a secret informer.

In another feature film, *Różyczka* (2010) by Jan Kidawa-Błoński, the “process of creating a file” is depicted. SB Captain Roman Rożek (Robert Więckiewicz), in order to carry out an assignment to compromise Professor Adam Warczewski (Andrzej Seweryn), persuades his lover to meet the professor and inform on him, after which he personally compiles the dossier, giving the case the codename “*Różyczka*”. The screenplay was based on the real-life story of Paweł Jasienica, whose second wife was an SB informant (*Różyczka*, 2010). Here, the file appears as the antithesis of intimacy: personal feelings are transformed into protocol entries, depriving the individual of subjectivity.

Files also appear in the film *Kret* (2010) by Rafał Lewandowski. SB Captain Stefan Garberek (Wojciech Pszoniak) hides the dossier on the main character deep underground in a forest along with others, and later sells it to the son of his former informant, Paweł, who decides to free his father from the captain’s blackmail. The remaining files the captain keeps for himself, saying “...to was nie dotyczy...” (“...this does not concern you...”). In court, Captain Garberek publicly admits that Paweł’s father, Zygmunt Kowal, was not his agent; as becomes known later, Zygmunt paid for this confession. Thus, files are not merely documents but instruments of multidimensional blackmail that destroy human lives. Attention should also be paid to the fact that the extortionist—the SB captain—explains his behaviour by the fact that the authorities deprived him of his pension and that he needs something to live on; that is, this is his “means of survival”. In this way, the director highlights the painful public debate on *de-ubecisation* (Polish *dezubekizacja*) that has been ongoing in Poland since the early 1990s. Various political parties proposed depriving former Security Service employees (1944–1989) of privileges, in particular by reducing pensions. Between 2006 and 2009, work on a relevant law was carried out, and after prolonged and fierce debates the document was adopted (*O ujawnianiu informacji...*, 2006), with amendments introduced in 2016 (*O zmianie ustawy...*, 2016).

Thus, in Polish cinema “*teczki*” (files) acquire a sacred and at the same time demonic significance. They symbolise a “materialised past”, an “instrument of blackmail” capable of destroying the present. It should also be noted that the expression “*teka/teczka*” (file) acquired a new meaning in the 1990s. Whereas previously in Polish the word *teka/teczka* denoted an object—most often a school item—for carrying things, in 1996 the *Dictionary of Contemporary Polish* for the first time recorded the phraseological unit “*mieć na kogoś teczkę*” (“to have a file on someone”), meaning to possess compromising material and to blackmail someone. In February 2016, the word *teczka* was selected as the keyword of the month (*Kwiecień et al.*, 2019, p. 67). In addition, in the early 1990s another phraseological unit entered Polish political vocabulary containing the word *teczka*: “*czarna teczka*” (“black file”), meaning a compromising document. The expression derives from the black briefcase that presidential candidate Stan Tymiński displayed during the 1990 election campaign, claiming that it contained compromising material on Lech Wałęsa.

One of the most intriguing paradoxes of contemporary Polish cinema is the concept of the “evil UB officer, but a good cop.” It is grounded in a social conflict: on the one hand, Polish society despises the “UB officer” as part of the repressive system of the Polish People’s Republic; on the other, it admires him as a “good cop.” Such a UB officer is Captain of the political police Franciszek Maurer, the protagonist of the film *Psy* (*Dogs*). The image created by actor Bogusław Linda became an icon of transformation and an example of the deconstruction of communist canons. Maurer is a cynical yet principled policeman who continues to hunt criminals despite the fact that the system itself has betrayed him—he did not pass the verification procedure. His

catchphrases—“W imię zasad, skurwysynu” (“In the name of principles, you son of a bitch”) and “Porządek tu robie” (“I am restoring order here”)—serve to legitimise violent methods. He is positioned as the “last just man” standing against absolute evil. His language is cynical and uncompromising: “Czasy się zmieniają, ale Pan zawsze jest w komisjach” (“Times change, but you are always on the commissions”), says F. Maurer to the head of the lustration commission that barred him from working in the newly established structures. “A kto umarł, ten nie żyje” (“Whoever has died is no longer alive”), says Franz before passing judgement on his former friend who betrayed him. These phrases have become iconic; every Pole knows them.

However, it is not only the figure of Franz Maurer that embodies this archetype: a similar hero is created in the film *Napad* (*The Heist*, 2024). The protagonist, Tadeusz Gadacz, is a retired UB officer who is invited to help solve a shocking murder in a bank. Gadacz knows how to speak to criminals because he is part of the same dark matter—the old system. In the film, Major Gadacz is set in opposition to bureaucracy. He is a man of action, whose past in the Security Service is presented as a harsh but necessary school. Here, the concept of the “good cop” is realised through effectiveness and professionalism.

In our view, the “evil UB officer, but a good cop” functions as a way of working through negative experience. The film offers the viewer a clear explanation: “Yes, they were part of evil, but their professional skills are what protect us today from chaos.” This creates a discourse of professional ethics that stands above politics. The UB-hero becomes “good” at the moment when he fights for justice.

The Polish model of lustration was unique: it was based not on excluding former informants of the special services, but on acknowledging the very fact of cooperation; this alone was sufficient to continue performing public functions in the new democratic state. Despite the mildness of the model, few politicians confessed; most continued to deny. It is therefore no coincidence that another concept through which the problem of lustration is revealed in films is *kłamstwo* (“lie”). In films about lustration, this is a key element around which the plot is constructed. In the film *Kret* (*The Mole*, 2010), falsehood is noble—the protagonist Zygmunt Kowal lies to his son out of love, in order to preserve the integrity of his world. In *Różyczka* (*Little Rose*, 2010), lying is an instrument of manipulation—Roman Rożek “creates” a love story between his informant and a professor in order to turn it into a denunciation. In *Korowód* (*Round Dance*, 2007), the concept of “lie” acquires a specific intellectual and academic colouring: a university professor, Zdzisław Dąbrowski, uses deception by planting compromising material on a colleague in his struggle for a woman’s affection. In *Psy* (*Dogs*, 1992) and *Napad* (*The Heist*, 2024), lying is a condition of the environment. The protagonists, Franz Maurer and Tadeusz Gadacz, are convinced that “everyone lies”—lying is systemic. “Jestem dobry w zagłądaniu ludziom pod skórę, bo każdy jest zakłamany jak i ja” (“I am good at looking under people’s skin, because everyone is as mendacious as I am”), says T. Gadacz. For this very reason, cynicism and violence become the only modes of existence and struggle for these heroes. Thus, in all films about lustration, “lie” takes different forms, yet everywhere it possesses destructive power. What all types of lies share is the *unwikłanie* (entanglement) of the lying characters: living in falsehood becomes a condition that cannot be overcome without destructive consequences; a happy ending is impossible.

Another concept that exposes the problem of lustration in Polish feature films is *zdrada* (“betrayal”). Why did people from different social backgrounds become informants and then have to conceal this for their entire lives? This is a key element in the stories of the protagonists in *Kret* (*The Mole*, 2010), *Korowód* (*Round Dance*, 2007), and *Różyczka* (*Little Rose*, 2010). Zygmunt Kowal from *The Mole*—a trade-union leader at a mine in Silesia—agreed to cooperate and

became an informant because he was blackmailed under difficult life circumstances: his wife was ill, and an SB officer promised to transfer her to a better clinic; after her death, the threats resumed—the removal of his son. The university professor in *Round Dance*, who had been recruited already during his student years, was also subjected to intimidation—the threat of his father’s dismissal from work. An interesting example is the story of Kamila in *Little Rose*: she agreed to inform on the professor because she could not refuse her fiancé—he forced her, and she yielded. Through “betrayal,” all the characters became victims and were compelled to live double lives, in fear.

Discussion

The relevance of the findings obtained in this study is determined by the continuing incompleteness of processes of coming to terms with the communist past in Poland and in Central and Eastern Europe more broadly. Despite the formal completion of the main stages of lustration legislation, the cultural, moral, and psychological consequences of lustration continue to shape public consciousness. The analysis of Polish feature cinema demonstrates that lustration remains not a “closed chapter” but a source of persistent symbolic tension that is regularly reactivated in cultural representations.

The particular significance of the findings lies in their demonstration of cinema as an autonomous mechanism for interpreting and working through traumatic experience, rather than as a secondary reflection of political decisions. The materials presented in the *Results* show that Polish cinema develops its own language for addressing lustration, in which legal categories give way to existential and moral questions. This makes it possible to regard cinema as an important element of the public sphere that influences the formation of collective memory and ethical orientations within society.

The relevance of the study is further reinforced by the fact that the key concepts identified (*teczki*, *klamstwo*, *zdrada*, and the figure of the “evil UB officer but a good cop”) prove to be stable and reproducible over a period of more than three decades. This indicates the structural nature of the problems associated with lustration and the impossibility of resolving them exclusively through legal means. The findings show that even as political contexts change and generational distance increases, cultural models of interpreting the past persist and adapt to new conditions.

Of particular contemporary relevance is the shift identified in the study from a binary logic of “perpetrator versus victim” towards zones of moral indeterminacy. As demonstrated in the *Results* section, Polish cinema avoids direct condemnation and instead favours complex, ambivalent images in which characters appear simultaneously as agents of the system and as its victims. In the current context of polarised public debates, such an approach acquires special significance, as it encourages a reflective rather than punitive attitude towards the past.

The research findings are also relevant from a comparative transitional justice perspective. The Polish cinematic experience reveals an alternative model of cultural engagement with lustration, distinct from narratives of definitive rupture with the past. This makes it possible to use the conclusions of the study in analysing other post-communist and post-authoritarian societies where legal cleansing processes have been accompanied by prolonged cultural conflicts and moral dilemmas.

Finally, the relevance of the *Results* materials is determined by their practical value for contemporary research in memory studies, cultural studies, and film studies. The conceptual structures identified in the article can be applied in further analyses of new films, media texts, and artistic forms addressing the problem of the past. Thus, the findings of the study not only

describe existing representations but also provide analytical tools for interpreting ongoing processes of cultural engagement with lustration.

One of the principal problems encountered in the study of lustration in Polish cinema is the inherent complexity of the subject matter itself. Lustration represents an intersection of legal norms, political struggles, moral evaluations, and personal biographies, which makes it resistant to univocal interpretation. Cinematic narratives further complicate this complexity by translating institutional processes into emotionally charged stories centred on individual fate. As a result, any analytical attempt risks either oversimplifying the phenomenon or losing analytical clarity amid its multidimensional nature. This study addresses this challenge by focusing on recurring conceptual structures rather than attempting an exhaustive reconstruction of historical events.

A second significant problem concerns the fragmentary and selective nature of cinematic representations. Polish feature films do not aim to provide comprehensive accounts of lustration processes but instead highlight particular episodes, characters, or moral dilemmas. This selectivity may create an impression of distortion or exaggeration, especially when films foreground exceptional cases rather than typical experiences. For the researcher, this raises the methodological question of how far cinematic material can be treated as representative of broader social attitudes. In this study, this problem is mitigated through comparative analysis of multiple films produced in different periods, allowing stable patterns to be distinguished from isolated narrative strategies.

Another difficulty lies in the temporal distance between the historical events of lustration and their cinematic reinterpretation. Films produced in the 1990s differ significantly in tone and emphasis from those created in the 2000s and 2010s, reflecting shifts in political climate, generational change, and evolving memory politics. This diachronic variation complicates attempts to formulate unified conclusions about “Polish cinema” as a whole. The study therefore treats cinematic discourse as dynamic and historically contingent, rather than as a homogeneous body of representations. Nevertheless, the need to balance continuity and change remains a persistent analytical challenge.

The interpretation of moral ambiguity constitutes another problematic aspect of the research. Many Polish films deliberately avoid clear moral judgments, presenting characters who simultaneously embody guilt and victimhood. While this ambiguity is central to the cultural significance of cinematic representations, it complicates analytical categorisation and normative assessment. The researcher must therefore refrain from imposing external moral frameworks that might obscure the logic of the films themselves. In this study, hermeneutic and cultural-trauma approaches are employed to respect the internal ethical complexity of cinematic narratives, though this necessarily limits the scope of definitive moral conclusions.

A further problem relates to the uneven availability and status of source materials. While some films and archival documents are well documented and widely discussed, others remain marginal or difficult to access, particularly for international audiences. In addition, secondary sources on Polish cinema and lustration are unevenly distributed across languages, with a significant proportion available only in Polish. This linguistic and material asymmetry constrains the scope of comparative engagement and may influence interpretative emphasis. The study addresses this issue by combining Polish-language scholarship with international literature, though full symmetry cannot be achieved.

Finally, the research faces the broader epistemological problem of analysing cultural memory processes that are still ongoing. Lustration in Poland continues to generate political debate, legal amendments, and new cultural representations, which means that any scholarly interpretation remains provisional. New films, disclosures, or institutional changes may alter the

symbolic landscape analysed in this study. Consequently, the conclusions should be understood not as final assessments, but as analytically grounded interpretations of a particular historical moment. This openness reflects both a limitation and an inherent feature of research into living cultural memory.

Further research on the theme of lustration in Polish cinema may proceed in several interrelated directions. One promising avenue involves expanding the corpus of analysis to include contemporary films, television series, and streaming productions that address the communist past and its aftermath. The growing role of serial formats and digital platforms offers new narrative strategies and audience engagements that may reshape the cultural interpretation of lustration and related themes.

Another important direction concerns comparative analysis beyond the Polish case. Examining cinematic representations of lustration and transitional justice in other post-communist countries—such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Germany, or the Baltic states—would allow for the identification of shared motifs and national specificities. Such comparative research could clarify whether the conceptual structures identified in Polish cinema represent a regional pattern or a distinctive national model of cultural memory.

Future studies may also benefit from a closer engagement with reception studies and audience analysis. Investigating how different generations and social groups interpret films about lustration would provide insight into the social effectiveness of cinematic narratives. This direction would make it possible to assess the extent to which cinema influences public attitudes toward the communist past, responsibility, and reconciliation, rather than merely reflecting existing views.

Another promising line of inquiry lies in the intersection of cinematic discourse with other media forms, including literature, theatre, and digital journalism. Analysing intermedial connections could reveal how narratives of lustration circulate across cultural domains and reinforce or challenge each other. Such an approach would deepen understanding of the broader cultural ecosystem within which cinema operates.

Further research might also focus on the ethical dimension of representing former security service officers and informants. A more detailed philosophical and ethical analysis of cinematic portrayals of guilt, coercion, and moral compromise could contribute to debates on responsibility under authoritarian regimes. This would allow for a more explicit dialogue between film studies, moral philosophy, and transitional justice theory.

Finally, longitudinal studies tracing changes in cinematic representations over time would provide valuable insight into evolving memory politics. By systematically comparing films produced in successive decades, future research could more precisely map shifts in narrative tone, moral evaluation, and symbolic emphasis. Such studies would help to clarify how cultural engagement with lustration develops as historical distance increases and new social challenges emerge.

Conclusion

The conducted analysis of the Polish cinematic discourse on the theme of lustration makes it possible to draw the following conclusions. The theme of lustration in Polish cinema is represented in a multifaceted manner. The cinematic discourse portrays both the stories of the “executioners” (UB officers) and those of their “victims” (informants). The overall narrative of the analysed feature films is not aggressive or antagonistic; it does not incline the viewer towards condemnation, but rather towards empathy and understanding. The key concepts of the cinematic discourse on lustration include “files” (*teczki*)—“social bombs” capable of destroying a

person's reputation and life within a matter of hours; "lie" (Pol. *kłamstwo*)—the foundation of a double life that becomes a national tragedy; "betrayal"—a forced weakness under the pressure of the communist machinery; and "the evil secret police officer but the good policeman"—a way of working through the negative experience of overcoming the communist past.

The purpose of this study—to identify and analyse the key conceptual frameworks through which the processes of lustration are represented in Polish feature cinema—has been fully achieved. The study has demonstrated that Polish cinema develops a distinct cultural language for addressing lustration, one that shifts the focus from legal procedures to moral ambiguity, personal responsibility, and collective trauma. In addressing the first research objective, the study has outlined the specific features of the Polish model of lustration that condition its cinematic representation, particularly its retrospective orientation and emphasis on disclosure rather than exclusion. The second objective has been fulfilled through the identification and systematic analysis of a corpus of Polish feature films that directly or indirectly engage with lustration and the legacy of the communist security services.

The remaining research objectives have likewise been addressed through detailed analysis of key cinematic concepts. The study has examined the concept of *teczki* (files) as a symbol of power, blackmail, and the materialised past, revealing its central role in structuring cinematic narratives of fear and exposure. It has analysed the figure of the "evil UB officer but a good cop" as a cultural mechanism for working through the negative legacy of the communist system and negotiating professional ethics beyond political judgement. Furthermore, the concepts of *kłamstwo* (lie) and *zdrada* (betrayal) have been interpreted as existential conditions imposed by systemic coercion, shaping narratives of entanglement and the impossibility of moral closure. Taken together, these findings confirm that Polish feature cinema functions as a significant space for the cultural interpretation of lustration, contributing to ongoing processes of memory formation and ethical reflection in post-communist society.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that is no conflict of interest.

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