

HOLODOMOR ESSAY PRIZE 2021: HIGHLY COMMENDED

How has the Holodomor been represented, addressed and studied in modern western cinema?

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In the modern day, the lessons of history are being adapted in order to be passed down through new media. Now, no child will complete their GCSE history without the aid of a film or two and should any person wish to explore a historical topic their first instinct may be to search for it one's streaming platform of choice. With the Holodomor this is no exception.

Mr Jones (2019) is the most prominent of three western films which have portrayed the Holodomor. It focuses on Gareth Jones' attempts to uncover the famine and uses journalism to explore how propaganda and corruption allowed for the famine to go unchecked. The romantic-drama *Bitter Harvest* (2017) centres around the plight of Cossack kulaks during the famine period, but was not well received by audiences or critics upon its release. And in the cinematic adaptation of Tom Rob Smith's thriller, *Child 44* (2015), the Holodomor is briefly portrayed and used as the backstory for two of the characters.

Mr Jones is perhaps most successful in presenting the Holodomor as it explores the famine through the eyes of an outsider. As is often the case with Western audiences, they may fail to properly connect with the tragedy or reality of something when it is foreign and distant, when the characters speak in a different language or dress differently. In *Mr Jones*, the central figure of Jones allows an excellent access point for the audience, as we in the west can better relate and empathise with the horrors of the famine when seeing it through his eyes. Furthermore, Chalupa expressed in a 2021 interview that she had intentionally written the Gareth Jones of the film to be more naïve than his historical counterpart in order to allow the audience to discover the truth of the Holodomor with him and make the film an educative experience.¹

Interestingly, one of *Mr Jones* most prominent academic critics has been Phillip Colley, the great nephew of Gareth Jones, who panned the film for its apparent inaccuracies. Writing on his family website² he rebuked the scenes shown in the film which he asserts never happened to Jones. Colley makes an interesting point, for when considering the tagline of the film, "The most important true story you will ever watch", it would seem that this in itself is untrue if it is believed that prominent scenes in the film are fictional. Colley asserts that "When a film creates a fake public perception of history, surely this cannot be a good thing", however, I would contest him on that matter as what he perceives as fictional are the scenes in which Jones is present before instances of grain requisition, body carts and cannibalism. Whilst Jones may never have witnessed such scenes, these are all well documented atrocities which occurred during the famine period and therefore I believe they have a place in the film as it is important that audience see as much of the full extent of the genocide as possible, so that their understanding of it is broadened. Colley stated that in doing this Chalupa "invented multiple fictions", however, we see here his own ignorance as Chalupa revealed that a scene in which a crying baby is pulled from the arms of its dead

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/500152653347642/videos/450583709452535> [Retrieved 22.7.2021]

² https://www.garethjones.org/mr_jones/true_story.htm [Retrieved 22.7.2021]

mother and then dumped on a body cart with her comes directly from the memoirs of her grandfather and survivor of the Holodomor, Olexji Keis.³ By allowing the film to be based not just on Jones' diaries but on the memoirs of a survivor means that a better perspective of the famine is gained. Whilst an outsider, western view is beneficial for an outsider, western audience to help them comprehend and learn about the famine, it would be irresponsible of the writer not to consider the experience and accounts of the actual victims. Colley overlooks this as he spuriously claims that Jones' diaries "are considered the only reliable eye-witness accounts of a famine that killed millions".

Another part to which Colley objects most strenuously is the links which *Mr Jones* makes between the Holodomor and George Orwell's novella *Animal Farm* (1945). The film opens with Orwell writing the preface to his book and then the opening line "Mr Jones of Manor Farm had locked the hen-houses for the night".⁴ With this link established, the film returns to Orwell and excerpts from his novella a number of times, each of which serve to contextualise the situation of the Soviet Union through Orwell's satire, this means that Stalin and the Soviet government can be alluded to whilst remaining almost entirely unseen. Following this Orwell then appears in the narrative, meeting Jones in person and advises him "To speak the truth, regardless of consequence, is your duty, and it our right to hear you". Whilst this meeting never occurred, and is therefore much to Colley's chagrin, it aids the narrative and allows for a number of references which firmly set film in an Orwellian landscape, such as the character Ada Brook's reference to the man who follows her around as her "big brother". With these ideas in place, the restricted situation of the journalists in Moscow and the authoritarian control of the government can be far better appreciated and the audience can understand how the famine, which also has an allegory in *Animal Farm*, was able to take place unchallenged.

The film's director, Agnieszka Holland, has been praised for the way in which she explored the famine and placed emphasis on it cinematically. A review from Sonny Bunch points to how Holland "drains the land of colour" in order to accentuate the bleak and harsh atmosphere during the famine, but then goes on to contrast such when, on a train, Jones produces an orange, the colour of which stands out against everything else.⁵ Such filmography emphasises and encapsulates the starvation of the Ukrainian people and is a perfect way to re-enact Jones' famous anecdote:

*"In the train a Communist denied to me that there was a famine... I threw an orange peel into the spittoon and the peasant again grabbed it and devoured it. The Communist subsided."*⁶

I would also praise Chapula for her use of Walter Duranty as the film's antagonist. Whilst the obvious villain in the narrative of the Holodomor is Josef Stalin it is exceptionally hard to create an engaging narrative about the personal suffering when its instigator was so immensely distant from it. The use of Duranty as an engaging and nuanced antagonist

³ <https://www.facebook.com/500152653347642/videos/450583709452535> [Retrieved 22.7.2021]

⁴ Orwell 1945:1

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/31/mr-jones-deadly-consequences-shoddy-journalism/> [Retrieved 22.7.2021]

⁶ https://www.garethjones.org/margaret_siriol_colley/Famine_gripsrussiahtm.htm [Retrieved 22.7.2021]

recontextualises the danger of the genocide by placing emphasis on the neglect of the west in addressing the famine and on the use of misinformation and propaganda. Duranty is shown very much in the role of a 'useful idiot' as he reports to the west the officially authorised and socialistically idealised version of the Soviet Union and is rewarded with his hedonistic lifestyle. While not discussed in the film, we know that the real Duranty reported the famine and the possibility that 10 million had perished to the British Embassy in Moscow,⁷ which is an even worse indictment of the duplicity and self-serving nature of both Duranty and the western governments, both of whom wished to ingratiate themselves with Russia and were willing to turn a blind eye to genocide to facilitate such.

Whilst I would say that *Bitter Harvest* is not unjustly criticised for its poor filmmaking, I do believe it holds merit in the way in which it portrays life during the Holodomor. Unlike *Mr Jones*, the protagonists of *Bitter Harvest* are Cossack kulaks and therefore the film far better explores the local and personal effects of the famine, showing the forced collectivisation and the violence enacted on those who resisted. It also focuses on the attacks on Eastern Orthodoxy and Ukrainian identity by the state during the period. All of these aspects offer a far more poignant look into the culture which the Holodomor targeted than the other films. Where the film falls short is the narrative which interconnects these themes. Badly written, it plays out like an action film with occasional romance and Stalin-cameos interspersed. The precedence the narrative diminishes the importance of the famine, making it more akin to background imagery. Furthermore, the film favours the violence of the Holodomor as opposed to the starvation, meaning that at times it feels more like a film just about oppressive regime as opposed to one about a famine and for that reason it sometimes comes across like the film aims to commemorate the victims but instead uses the Holodomor as a setting for a Tarantino homage.

Child 44 is particularly interesting in its use of the Holodomor. The film opens by showing the suffering of an orphaned child during the famine and how it leads him to run away and join the Red Army, becoming a decorated war hero. This protagonist now finds himself pursuing a prolific child-murderer and the second Holodomor-related plot point comes when he finally confronts the murderer who explains how the horrors of the famine drove him to become a killer. I began feeling that this element was somewhat sensationalist, however, the inspiration for the novel on which the film is based was the Soviet murderer, Andrei Chikatilo who had grown up during the famine and was told by his mother that his brother had been murdered and cannibalised by neighbours.⁸ It has been suggested that the trauma of his youth lead to his warped actions in later life, legitimising this portrayal. Whilst the film is certainly not devoted whole cloth to the Holodomor, its importance in narrative normalises knowledge of the famine. Additionally, the way in which the films opens with an explanation of the forced collectivisation and subsequent starvation and directly names it as 'Holodomor' is especially beneficial as an instance of mainstream Holodomor education.

⁷ <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/05/fellow-travellers-and-useful-idiots> [Retrieved 22.7.2021]

⁸ <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1309&dat=19920420&id=JMFUAAAAIABAJ&pg=4499,3916322> [Retrieved 22.7.2021]

In the Washington Post, Michael O'Sullivan writes that the Holodomor "could have made for a tale of great, stirring tragedy on the silver screen. *Bitter Harvest* is alas, not that movie".⁹ Following that criticism and many more like it, Ukrainians expressed upset and leapt to the defence of the film as, at the time, it was the only western film to base its narrative entirely around the Holodomor. Now, we may assume that *Mr Jones* will take its place as a far more watchable film about the famine. However, I would still argue there is long to go and concur with Godfrey Cheshire who writes that "Holodomor deserves examination, interrogation and commemoration. But it strikes me that the best place to start, cinema-wise, might be with a documentary that has the scope and power of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*."¹⁰

Angela Chalupa stated that she was inspired by *Schindler's List* (1993) in creating *Mr Jones*,¹¹ and I do think it is beneficial to look to Holocaust films when thinking about the same for the Holodomor. Whilst there are as many issues with denial regarding the Holocaust as with the Holodomor, I would argue that films like *The Pianist* (2002) or *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008) have encouraged a far more widespread understanding of the events of that genocide. The Holocaust has been recognised for a very long time whereas the Holodomor has only really come to public recognition since the 1980s, therefore I would argue that the medium of film may similarly be the way forward to solidifying the Holodomor in the international conscience.

A step in the right direction would be to make more Ukrainian language films such as *Famine-33* (1991) or *The Guide* (2014) easily available for international audiences. It cannot be understated that only three films are not nearly enough representation for one of the largest genocides in history, but for now, the three films which we do have each offer a slightly different view of the Holodomor. Irrespective of the quality of their filmmaking, on the whole they each respect the tragedy and loss of life, are not misguided or sensationalist and offer an excellent educative insight into this most important part of history.

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⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/bitter-harvest-ukrainian-famine-is-rendered-as-heavy-handed-melodrama/2017/02/23/a0251588-f53c-11e6-8d72-263470bf0401_story.html [Retrieved 22.7.2021]

¹⁰ <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bitter-harvest-2017> [Retrieved 22.7.2021]

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