Cold War (*Zimna wojna*, 2018)

Mirja Lecke

dir. Paweł Pawlikowski; screenplay Paweł Pawlikowski, Janusz Głowacki; photography Łukasz Żal; music Marcin Masecki. 35mm, black/white, 89 mins. Opus Film et al., distrib. Kino Świat.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Zimna wojna tells the tragic love story of two Polish musicians between the early postwar years and the 1960s. It is a music film and a melodrama that shows the inseparable entanglement of individual feelings with a politicized public sphere marked by the establishment of state socialism. In the arts, the tightening grip of ideology is shown to bring about the trivialization of musical expression as well as the blatant moral corruption of the cultural elites. *Zimna wojna* thus presents a post-communist analysis of the characteristics of the era's sentimentality (Howard 76). While the plot follows an established narrative about East Central European society's deception and disenchantment with socialism, *Zimna wojna* is innovative in casting the love story between the East and the West, transgressing the Iron Curtain. The film questions the idea that Europe was divided fatally, yet safely, into separate worlds and that stories ended for those who crossed that border.

The lovers, Zula (played by Joanna Kulig) and Wiktor (played by Tomasz Kot), are an uneven couple. He is older than her, an established pianist, composer, and conductor with a bourgeois background, a natural-born fellow traveler, who pursues his professional ambitions in the wake of the Communist party's rule. He is involved in a campaign to build up a socialist folk music culture as it is promoted by the state and which would be presented by the choir and dance ensemble called Mazurek. Wiktor, the party commissioner Kaczmarek (played by Borys Szyc), and other experts for music and dance travel provincial Poland and record peasants' songs, most of them in unsophisticated tunes, some with »exotic« glottal sounds but, importantly, all about

either love and marriage or drinking, occasionally religion. This is not the folk music needed for hard-working communists who have overthrown their lords and exploiters and that is capable of emotionally uniting the nation. The female protagonist Zula enters the stage in a casting at the former noble estate that the Mazurek organizers use for accommodation, auditions, and dancing exercise. Zula erotically appeals to Wiktor and when asked to sing for him, she provocatively performs a cheerful popular Soviet love song from a war comedy: Russian popular culture instead of Polish folklore. Zula's ambition is to make a living and have fun, but she also has the air of a femme fatale. Previously, she had attacked her abusive father with a knife, which introduces her impulsive nature early in the film. Wiktor and Zula fall in love, but soon party schemes interfere: Zula reports to the secret police about Wiktor. As the grip of Stalinism grows firmer, Mazurek turns away from popular arrangements of authentic folk music to openly political texts and praise of Stalin, »the father of the peoples.« Wiktor plans to flee to West Berlin during a guest performance at the 1952 socialist youth convention. Zula has doubts, she fears to lose her status and income in the West. Having waited in vain for Zula at the check point, Wiktor leaves on his own.

The next scene is set in Paris, where Wiktor plays in a jazz club and socializes with existentialist avant-garde circles. Zula and Wiktor see each other again during Mazurek's international tours in France and Yugoslavia; both have new partners but are unhappy. They realize that theirs is the love of their lives. In 1957, Zula suddenly shows up in Paris. After a happy reunion, they start working as musicians again. Zula sings jazz and chansons, first in Polish then in French. But in the elitist milieu of Paris their relationship suffers again, this time from the Parisian vanity fair. Zula now finds Wiktor unmanly and inhibited. To promote their success, she sleeps with a Parisian music producer. Frustrated and disillusioned, she, ultimately, flees back to Poland. Wiktor, although stateless and considered a traitor by the Polish state, follows her and ends up in a penal camp with a 15-year sentence for illegal border crossing. Zula employs her sex appeal once more for their reunion: She marries the opportunistic cynic Kaczmarek, now Mazurek's head, and has a son with him. When Wiktor is finally released from prison, Zula has become an alcoholic and is desperate in her unhappy marriage. The couple escapes to the province where their love began. They commit suicide.

The dynamic and fragmentary picture is shot in black and white with sharp contrasts. It plays with the film styles of socialist realism and the nouvelle vague as well as with post-Stalinist documentary cinema that all flourished in Communist Poland. The traditional melodramatic love triangle is transformed into a constellation of the couple and two obstacles, embodied by two male figures. Each of them symbolizes a morally illegitimate authority, one in the West, one in the East: the market and the Communist party. The emotional encounter between Zula and Wiktor is impressively conveyed with musical means. As a leitmotif the folk song »Two little hearts, four eyes« recurs, a song about a girl whose mother forbade her to love a young man but she »grabbed him by the neck« and now is doomed. The mother's interference with her daughter's erotic life symbolizes illegitimate intrusion into the protagonists' personal life. Importantly, they cannot break free even in the West. The song is first presented by a little girl, later sung in two voices, consecutively turned into a choir arrangement for Mazurek. In the crucial scenes set in Paris, however, it is sung by Zula in Polish and French, causing a fight between the lovers over authentic musical expression and adequate translation. Can folk songs be adapted into popular mass culture without distortions? And what is

more, do individualist jazz music and the French language at all allow for the expression of »Polish« unconditional romantic love? Zula's answer seems to be »no.« After her return to Poland, she is forced to give up the illusion of personal fulfilment through music altogether, touring with trite mambo songs through tourist resorts. Wiktor's ability for musical expression is also doomed, he has lost a finger while in prison.

Pawlikowski, son of Polish émigrés, who is no less a British than a Polish director (White 44), drew on his family history when writing the script. *Zimna wojna* is a significant contribution to the historical reevaluation of Europe's division, a piece of geopolitical analysis (White 48) that uses melodrama's transcultural potential to forge an affective community across Europe. To Western viewers, Poland is presented as a poor but aesthetically very appealing country. Polish spectators may appreciate the film's claim to a firm place in European high culture. For debates over the responsibility for oppression under Communism, however, the film is a provocation, not unlike its Oscar-winning predecessor *Ida* (2013) that dealt with Poland's troubled Jewish history. In *Zimna wojna*, too, guilt permeates society: Wiktor, Zula, Kaczmarek, no one is without fault, not even the woes of Stalinism can be blamed on the Soviet Union exclusively. It is, however, also worthwhile to acknowledge the numerous ways in which the film establishes a connection to traditional patterns of Polish cultural self-perception: There is a fatalistic belief in the power and endurance of heterosexual romantic love, in which the female part is strong, active, and uncompromising, even though she bears the harsher consequences and sacrifices. Christian faith is another case in point. Zula and Wiktor perform a wedding in a church ruin, Bach music playing from the off. Paradoxically, the last scenes show the couple in a situation they could have easily achieved from the outset, had they only refrained from their mundane ambitions—Pawlikowski's plea for a modest life in the homeland.

References

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