

Counterinterpretation in film criticism

The case of *Ida* by Paweł Pawlikowski

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The objective of this text is to discuss a lack of interest in the religious context of the award-winning film *Ida* by Paweł Pawlikowski. Moral choices within the film prove to be of greater concern to the director than political questions. Nonetheless, the film continues to generate reactions in right wing nationalist circles – and not only in Poland. From the point of view of thematic story and plot, the film is a historical drama with the possibility of a wide spectrum of interpretation. From the point of view of a conflict between Anna's Christian beliefs (as a novice in a convent who is in the process of preparing to take her final religious vows) and her Jewish heritage she has to choose between *The Old* and *The New Testaments*. Her family was killed by Poles and *Ida/Anna* has a dilemma: to follow the *Old Testament* law: "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", or to obey *The New Testament* principle: "That ye resist not evil. But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mat. 5: 39)¹. *Ida* chooses to follow principles of the *New Testament* and returns to the convent.

In his past-unearthing film *Ida* Pawlikowski sublimely juxtaposes *New Testament* Christian values with the *Old Testament* injunctions of *tarjag micwot*². The objective of this text is to discuss several of these oppositions which have yet to be taken into consideration. Lack of interest in the religious context of the award winning film



¹ All quotes from *The Bible* come from the Millennial edition: Poznań-Warszawa 1980.

² *Tarjag micwot* is a collection of 613 recommendations which form the ethical foundation of Judaism, whereas *Aseret Hadibrot* is the 10 statements or decrees of God (not commandments as St. Jerome erroneously translated).

undoubtedly stems from the polemics regarding the Polish-Jewish past and its inherent prejudices. Upon deeper reflection one perceives that Pawlikowski wishes to examine a series of events from a religious perspective. Moral choices within the film prove to be of greater concern to the director than political questions; he puts off the problems of prejudice to a later agenda. A phenomena which could be viewed as a hate storm spread over the net after the award granting ceremonies of the Oscars. While the nature of the internet guarantees anonymity, the media pieces and interviews no longer exist. Open attacks on the director and his film abound. The film is accused of an unmistakable anti-Polish sentiment and of presenting to the world a warped image of Polish society and history. This is the mildest description that one can find in the right-wing media. Tadeusz Płuzański, for example, goes so far as to ascertain that *Ida* is an anti-Polish film, while purporting to be just the opposite. Płuzański states that Pawlikowski decidedly portrays history in a warped looking glass depicting Poles as anti-Semites. For him this is a fallacious portrayal: „It was the Germans who were anti-Semites; the Germans who mass murdered the Jews”³. These contentions might be called mythical and are based on a trivialization of facts and events. They are flushed with fear before a reckoning with the past. This sort of thinking is characteristic of a comfortable society, one which considers itself as blame free. In *Ida* Pawlikowski formulates a query: how is Poland, as a society to pull itself out of the illusion of innocence?

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Pawlikowski originally wrote his first draft of *Ida* in English⁴. Later he reworked it into Polish. In *Filmmaker Magazine* he revealed that Polish continues to be for him his first language. A few years earlier he wrote *Sister of Mercy* with Cezary Harasimowicz. There too the main protagonist is a nun. This was nonetheless clearly a narrative text, with thriller elements⁵. For him the greatest challenge in writing the script was to incorporate biblical themes into it. The identification of apocryphal elements in *Ida* is not an easy task – it is a question of rendering Biblical injunctions into iconic form. For example, the Hebrew prohibition “*lo tircach*” (“Do not murder”) or “*sinat chinam*” (“Renounce hatred”) or Christ’s command from *The Gospel of Saint Matthew*, “If any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also” (Mat 5: 40). All these notions appear only in the visual aspect of the film.

Ida is an artistically refined film which alludes to classical European cinema – especially to the work of Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini and Vittorio De Sica, but also to the Polish Film School. It utilizes black and white images characteristic of the 1950s and uses the already long abandoned 1,37 : 1 gauge known also in English as 4 : 3



³ See S. Żaryn, Płuzański: „*Ida*” to film antypolski, który przynosi więcej szkody niż pożytku. Nie cieszę się z tego Oscara. NASZ WYWIAD, interview with T. Płuzański, <http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/234878-pluzanski-ida-to-film-antypolski-ktory-przynosi-wiecej-szkody-niz-pozytku-nie-cieszę-się-z-tego-oscara-nasz-wywiad> (access date: 17.11.2020). The title of the text can be translated: “*Ida* is an anti-Polish film which does more harm than good. This Oscar does not gladden me”.

⁴ To B. Zatońska’s query “What is a script to you, Sir?” P. Pawlikowski answers: “This is a document which must be constructed in order to obtain funding. In it I jot down general ideas, scenes, structure, plot, and, as well, as many good dialogues as possible, some of which will survive the entire editing process” (*eadem*, W „*Idzie*” *zderzyłem wiarę z niewiarą*, interview with P. Pawlikowski, <http://tygodnik.tvp.pl/12401144/w-idzie-zderzyłem-wiarę-z-niewiara> [access date: 17.11.2020]).

⁵ See *Interview with Director Paweł Pawlikowski*, http://www.musicboxfilms.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/IDA_AWARD_PRESS_NOTES_2014.pdf (access date: 17.11.2020): “I’d been playing for years with the story of a Catholic nun who discovers she’s Jewish. I originally set it in ‘68, the year of student protests and the Communist Party sponsored anti-Semitic purges in Poland. The story involved a nun a bit older than *Ida*, as well as an embattled bishop and a state security officer, and the whole thing was more steeped in the politics of the day. The script was turning out a little too schematic, thriller-ish and plotty for my liking, so I put *Ida* aside [...]”.



⁶ See **L. Bloom Ingram**, *Courage of Conviction: A Conversation with "Ida" Director Pawel Pawlikowski*, <http://filmmakermagazine.com/85840-ida/#.X7QgeWhKibi> (access date: 17.11.2020).

⁷ **B. Zatońska**, interview with P. Pawlikowski for TVP Info, 14 September 2003, <http://www.tvp.info> (access date: 23.04.2017). See also *ibidem*: "Incidentally, the late 1950s and early 1960s were great for jazz in Poland. There was a real explosion: Komeda, Namysłowski, Stańko, Wróblewski. Apart from telling Ida's story, I wanted to conjure up a certain image of Poland, an image that I hold dear. My country may have been grey, oppressive and enslaved in the early '60s, but in some ways it was 'cooler' and more original than the Poland of today, and somehow more universally resonant".

⁸ Here it is possible to recall the similar case of the priest, R. J. Weksler-Waszkiniel who discovered his Jewish roots only in 1978 during a conversation with his mother.

aspect ratio; that is, it is comprised of symmetrical frames composed of long and slow takes of the Polish People's Republic world. It operates a still camera, which creates the effect of the disappearing figure when the focalization does not quite match the action – all this renders Pawlikowski's work an aspect of universality and steps beyond contemporary film aesthetic as it is practiced today in Hollywood⁶.

The music that Pawlikowski has chosen is also an interesting area of commentary. He has incorporated Polish as well as foreign hits of those years, as well as jazz (John Coltrane), and then there is *The International* played during Wanda Gruz's funeral. The music wafting from the radio, from records and from the club stage form a sound commentary to the iconic narration of the film. This is not film music specifically composed in response to the requirements of the film, rather, this music coexists along with the silences found within the film and underscores the states linked with the emotions of the film characters. Pawlikowski has this to say about the musical accompaniment:

Music was an integral part of the script from the beginning – exactly these songs and pieces that one hears on the soundtrack. Music is always very important in my films, at times more important than the narrated story. I chose already well known works. Music that is especially composed for a film is something that I rarely utilize. The songs in *Ida* specify that era more exactly and illustrate the dissolution of that moribund world of social realism. I have also incorporated a few kitschy works of Adriano Celentano and Marino Marini. Finally there is jazz which bursted on the scene in Poland and enlivened the grey landscape of the early 1960s⁷.

From the point of view of theme, the film is a historical drama with the possibility of a wide spectrum of interpretation. In the Poland of the 1960s the memory of the war, the Holocaust and the Stalinist era was very much alive. This is shown through the prism of two key figures: Anna/Ida and her aunt Wanda. Anna is a wartime orphan raised in a convent who is in the process of preparing to take her final religious vows. Her Mother Superior suggests to Anna that she make contact with the only remaining member of her family; referring to Wanda, Anna's aunt. It will be Wanda who will inform Anna of her family's history. From her Anna learns she is a Jewess and that her real name is Ida Lebenstein⁸. This bit of information comes as a shock to the novice. She decides to discover what happened to her parents and the rest of her family. Ida travels with Wanda to a locality where her family had lived, and step by step she unravels the riddle of their family's fate. She uncovers the fact that during the war her family was hidden, but finally they disappeared. It was assumed that they were dead, that is, killed, and that nobody knows (does not wish to know), what had actually happened to them. During the course of several conversations it comes out that it was, in fact, a neighbor

who committed the murders, a neighbor whose son, Feliks, took over ownership of the Lebenstein's family home. Feliks does not, however, wish to disclose the whereabouts of his father, nor does he wish to speak about what actually happened to Ida's family during the war. Finally Wanda and Ida uncover the truth, and negotiate an agreement with Feliks, who gains the legal rights to the Lebenstein family property by revealing the whereabouts of the bodies.

In tandem with the historical theme we get a glimpse into Wanda's daily life. It turns out that during the Stalinist era Wanda worked as a prosecutor in the legal system and condemned to death the so called enemies of the people⁹. Alongside this there is also the story of Ida's romance with a young saxophonist, Lis (Fox), who participates in a jazz concert as part of the near-by town's festivities. The film ends with Anna/Ida's return toward the convent, although we do not finally know whether or not Ida actually makes it there. The road along she is hastening could ultimately lead to nowhere.

The conception of the road-quest movie is not new. It is possible to name numerous literary works as well as films, such as John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), Fellini's *La Strada* (1954), Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and, of newer productions, Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991). It is noteworthy that most films of this genre arose on the cusp of the 1950s and 1960s, and their characteristic is a lack of a dynamic plot. Pawlikowski alludes to this time in *Ida* by having the characters travel over the Polish countryside in a Wartburg – an East German car. However, travelling has an additional dimension – besides the physical aspect there is the metaphysical one. The trip also alludes to that which is not accessible to the senses (nor to experience) and this is the most interesting aspect of the world depicted in *Ida*; it presents a world that was seen through the eyes of the director as a child¹⁰. Life is, after all, a voyage; making films is a way of delineating a place that one inhabited at a given time in the past. Thus we are presented with a historical film of a strong moral tone, but without having to do homework in history¹¹. Consequently, the universality which characterizes *Ida* is linked with the biblical context of the film – a context which Polish critics failed to analyze in numerous discussions. The Jewish roots of the director, but also his Roman Catholic upbringing, gives Pawlikowski the possibility of making comparisons between the moral frameworks of the two monotheisms: Judaism and Christianity¹².

The eponymous heroine is unconditionally linked to Christianity and she scrupulously fulfils her convent's commands. She completely adheres to *New Testament* injunctions, that is, to Christ's teachings. This rupture between the old and the new has a repercussion on the whole spectrum of the novice's behavior. As the director states:

Despite discovering her Jewish roots and learning about the circumstances of her family's deaths, Ida remains a good Christian. She flounders some-



⁹ See Pawlikowski's assessment of the figure of Wanda (B. Zatońska, interview...): "Wanda's belief in the communist system is decidedly on the wane, if it at all continues to exist. This worldly system has not proven itself valid. I have juxtaposed Wanda with a character who is a godly woman, one imbued with a profound faith that is unshakeable. I was interested in a confrontation of two figures, one of whom holds a well-established belief, whereas the second figure already believes in nothing at all. It is apparent that Wanda continues to be active, has needs, but she is driven by a hatred for people, as well as for herself. She loses herself in play, in sex. Wanda is a knot of various emotions, while Ida is calm and harmonious. When I was doing my post-graduate degree at Oxford in the early '80s I befriended Professor Brus, a genial economist and reformist Marxist who left Poland in 1968. I was particularly fond of his wife Helena, who smoked, drank, joked and told great stories. She didn't suffer fools gladly, but she struck me as a warm and generous woman. I lost touch with the Bruses when I left Oxford, but some 10 years later I heard on BBC News that the Polish government was requesting the extradition of one Helena Brus-Wolińska, resident in Oxford, on the grounds of crimes against humanity. It turned out that the charming old lady had been a Stalinist prosecutor in her late twenties. Among other things, she engineered the death in a show trial of a completely innocent man and a real hero of the Resistance, General 'Nil' Fieldorf. It was a bit of a shock. I couldn't square the warm, ironic woman I knew with the ruthless fanatic and Stalinist hangman. This paradox has haunted me for years".

¹⁰ See *ibidem*: "In the 1960s, when I was a kid and first saw the world this was how I depicted it in this film [...] seeing the world for the first time. [...] life is a journey and filmmaking marks where you (the audience) are in life and it marks where I am in life. Each film is different as a result".

¹¹ See S. Levine, *Interview: Dir. Paweł Pawlikowski on His Oscar-Shortlisted Film "Ida"*, <http://blogs.sydneybuzz.com/interview-dir-pawel-pawlikowski-on-his-oscar-shortlisted-film-ida-62c25ad5b3d1> (access date: 17.11.2020): "There were two ways to look at this film: as a conceit, as in, 'what a great story – a girl about to take her vows in the convent which raised her discovers she is Jewish and returns to the society which destroyed her family' – or as a journey of a fresh soul into the heart of humanity [...] [who] finds that she is blessed by being able to decide upon her own destiny within it".

¹² See B. Zatońska, interview...: "My father's roots were Jewish, but he was an atheist, a humanist and a freethinker. He loved Poland like no one else, and our departure from our home country was a severe blow" – relates Paweł Pawlikowski. "My



mother came from a traditional Catholic family, but she was a black sheep, as at the age of 17 she ran away from Katowice to Warsaw to join the ballet. Something was always driving her [...]. At times I attended church in Warsaw, but then rather mechanically without conviction. Later in England I lived in a boarding school for children of Polish refugees, actually for Brits of Polish extraction, where one was cold and hungry, and where the day began with a frigid shower followed by a mass. I quickly escaped from there, but nonetheless the person of Jesus himself has always remained close to my heart".

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ In the *Vulgate* the Greek term "οὐ φονεύσεις" (from the verb "φονεύω") is found, which signifies killing, but specifically killing with cruelty, in other words, murder. In the Latin transliteration of St. Jerome, we have the phrase "*non occides*", where the verb "*occido*" has only one meaning, and that is 'killing'.

¹⁵ Genesis 4, 2–16.

¹⁶ It is sufficient to consider for a moment the stained-glass window in the stable rendered by Ida's mother. It is a copy of M. Chagall's stained glass wherein Cain murders Abel. As Chagall's work was constructed in 1960, it was not possible for it to be an inspiration for Ida's mother who made her version before the war. Thus, it is an agreed upon symbol brought into the narration of the iconic film, underscoring the fact of the murder within a Biblical delineation.

¹⁷ "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a leg for a leg" (Exodus, 21: 24).

what along the way, but she is intensely imbued with her belief in God. This is very untypical. And I wished to make a film about just such a person¹³.

As a Jewess and a Christian she has to deal with the fact of her family's murder. As a Jewess she ought to follow the commentaries of the *Torah*, which makes a distinction between killing and murdering, since the Judaic commandment *lo tircach* does not mean 'do not kill', but rather 'do not murder'. Murder is an illegal relinquishing of life, a commandment given to man by God, whereas killing may be justified, if it accords with the law, or with traditional customs (for example, the death sentence, or self-defense, etc.)¹⁴.

In the film the theme of the deaths in Ida's family ought to be viewed in the context of the first biblical murder.

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the Lord God said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?". And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"¹⁵

Cain murders Abel, neighbors murder neighbors, human beings murder their fellow human beings¹⁶. Ida, in accordance with the *Torah* fulfills the ethical differentiation between taking the life of an innocent person and punishment for murder. To punish the murderer of her family would be simple: it would be sufficient to turn to Wanda for help. After all Wanda threatens Feliks: "I can annihilate you, and you have small children". Whereas Ida, in adherence with the teachings of Christ, divests herself of the desire of punishing Feliks. Moreover, she undersigns a document which relinquishes her right to her family's former home – leaving the house to the murderers, following the commandment found in *The Gospel of Saint Matthew* in the *New Testament*:

You have heard it said: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth! But I say unto you: That ye resist not evil. But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man shall sue thee at Law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain (Mat. 5: 38–41)

If we acknowledge that the term "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" is an *Old Testament* metaphor for a code of justice dealing with ethnic hatred¹⁷, then according to the *Torah* this is an indication of equality before the law, or in the case of the murder of Ida's family – a death for a death. In accordance with the *Torah* hatred towards another human being who cruelly hurts another must be punished and this other, this foreign other must find support in a "righteous person". Put another way, the *Torah* sanctions positive hatred, when this hatred would purportedly avert a further escala-

tion of evil. Hatred is only unethical when it is without cause (*sinat chinam*) when the instinct of hatred is directed against a blameless person. Nonetheless, Christ teaches that one ought not to fight evil with force, as force also constitutes an evil – and *Ida* faithfully holds to this principle. She relinquishes her family home to Feliks and by this gains access to the place of burial of her family's remains.

The dilemma which manifests itself at this moment concerns the transport of the remains to the Jewish cemetery. The exhumation of human remains is forbidden in Judaism with the exception of exceptional circumstances, such as, for example, danger of defilement of a burial site. This is the principle *met micwa*, or the obligation to bury an abandoned body or one not buried in accordance with Judaic law. If a Jew is buried in a place where non-Jews live, then each Jew is obligated to transport those remains to a *kirkut* (Jewish cemetery). Wanda and *Ida* submit themselves to this law and transport their loved ones' bones to the city, in order to lay them in their family grave. This important scene of locating the family plot has a purely religious character, not a political one. There is not one sentence found herein of a historically ideological coloration. This comprises the only opening for a further discussion about the Shoah. This is also an important question raised about tolerating evil: allowing evil, and so participating in it. Pawlikowski comments on it in this fashion:

I wished to make a very Christian film; revenge does not at all enter the picture. It is about getting at the truth, as well as a painstaking examination of one's own faults. The most important thing is forgiveness. With matters such as the Holocaust we ought to weigh the matter ourselves, and not leave it to others¹⁸.

Symbolism also plays a significant role in the film as manifested in the names chosen for the main protagonists. As Pawlikowski asserts everything in this film has a meaning – every frame, every sound, and every silence; names, too, are significant. According to the director, *Ida* carries its old meaning of an innocent woman, a virgin, or one blessed. Her Christian name, Anna, also has Hebrew roots (in the *Book of Kings* the common term “*hannah*” means ‘mercy’), whereas the surname *Lebenstein* means ‘stone of life’. The name Wanda is associated with the Vandals, while her last name *Gruz* (‘rubble’) describes her life situation (her world lay in rubble). Feliks proves to be a lucky devil who bypasses justice, whereas the saxophonist Lis (cunning as a fox) displays this quality when he seduces *Ida*¹⁹. She allows herself to be seduced, as she wishes to have a taste of the “sinful life”. To achieve this end she steps into Wanda's shoes literally and figuratively. She dons her aunt's stiletto shoes and goes dancing at the club in order to meet with Lis. She drinks vodka and in the end goes to bed with him. In this manner she replicates the paradigm



¹⁸ B. Zatońska, interview...

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.



²⁰ In Latin: "Either I will find the road, or I shall carve one out for myself".

of Wanda's life and gets to examine "what is on the other side of the looking glass".

This type of dynamic is dependent on role reversal. Wanda tries to enter into Ida's skin in order to be able to understand her behavior, while Ida wishes to have a taste of Wanda's life. It is possible to describe it as *hakarot hatow*, that is, an attempt to discern the difference between good and evil by means of altering one's point of view. In Judaism it is one of the most important roads leading to the attainment of happiness, one dependent on the unceasing probing and evaluation of values which God proposes to us in life. If in as much as the attainment of happiness is a moral obligation in regards to God, then it is also a moral obligation in regards to the human being. And this principle illuminates Ida in her search for happiness – she has a choice: either to align herself with Lis (after all, he proposes marriage to her), or to return to the convent and dedicate her life to Christ. The final scene does not give an answer to the question posed, what is it that Ida finally chooses to do. We see her walking alone down the road, and while the camera up until this point has remained static, now backs up before the striding heroine and shows her search for Hannibal's principle "*Aut viam inveniam aut faciam*"²⁰.

Słowa kluczowe

antysemityzm, *Stary Testament*, *Nowy Testament*, stalinizm, Polska w latach 60. XX w., *Ida*, Paweł Pawlikowski

Keywords

antisemitism, *Old Testament*, *New Testament*, Stalinism, Poland during the 1960s, *Ida*, Paweł Pawlikowski

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Summary

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The objective of this text is to discuss a lack of interest in the religious context of the award-winning film *Ida* by Paweł Pawlikowski. Moral choices within the film prove to be of greater concern to the director than political questions. Nonetheless, the film continues to generate reactions in right wing nationalist circles – and not only in Poland. From the point of view of thematic story and plot, the film is a historical drama with the possibility of a wide spectrum of interpretation. From the point of view of a conflict between Anna's Christian beliefs (as a novice in a convent who is in the process of preparing to take her final religious vows) and her Jewish heritage she has to choose between *The Old* and *The New Testament*. Her family was killed by Poles and *Ida/Anna* has a dilemma: to follow the *Old Testament* law: “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”, or to obey *The New Testament* principle: “That ye resist not evil. But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also”. *Ida* chooses to follow principles of the *New Testament* and returns to the convent?