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Poland and Me: The Treasures of Polish Film

Polish film has been a doorway for me into the complexities and beauty of Poland and its culture. While my Polish wife has been my primary guide into Poland, Polish film has been a great help as well. As a Chicago native - second in the world in Polish population - I was already familiar with some Polish history and culture. I knew of Pulaski, Kosciuszko, Copernicus, Chopin, and John Paul II, of course. I was already familiar with the three necessary portraits in every Polish home: The Divine Mercy, Our Lady of Czestochowa, and John Paul II – given their presence in so many of the homes of my friends with Polish heritage. Growing up near Polish grocery stores and bakeries, I was already familiar with the basic Polish diet: pierogis, kielbasa, and paczki - although ‘paczki’ looked different than it sounded (my first introduction to the Polish language). So, Chicago gave me one leg up with my wife, but I took this for granted. I met my wife in Washington, D.C. at the beginning of 2012. Trying to impress her, I went to a D.C. bakery on Fat Tuesday to buy her a paczki, and the baker gave me a strange look when I asked if they had paczki. “What’s that?”, he said. That is when I realized how unique Chicago is in its Polish identity. Yet, I had a very superficial and stereotypical understanding of Poland – the picture you paint based on a visit to a Polish gift shop. Polish film has helped me paint a more robust portrait of Poland. These films have sparked my interest and appreciation for this wonderful country. They have also encouraged me to learn Polish to better understand the Polish soul and its vision of the world.

While my wife and I were dating, I rented a movie by Krzysztof Kieslowski (again trying to impress my wife), though I could barely pronounce his name - a great indication that he was most likely Polish. The movie was *White*, part of the *Three Colors Trilogy*. It had an intriguing, strange, and surprising plot, to say the least, and it was different than most American films – funny in a deep way. The movie made me think, and its themes were simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary. Naturally, I did my research, which unveiled for me the richness of Polish film but also the richness of Polish art in general. Film is an art encompassing many art forms: namely, music, the visual arts, literature, and drama. Ashamedly, I have to admit that I thought Polish culture and its art were second rate to the culture and art of Germany, France, and England. However, Polish film, and then finally going to Poland for the first time to get married to my *very* Polish wife, which gave me a chance to explore historically significant cities like Warsaw and Krakow, changed my mind. I became a Pole-phile – if such a term exists. I realized a poetic vision lies deep within the Polish soul. In the following, I would like to suggest that Americans, most of whom see the world technically and superficially, have much to learn from Polish film greats, such as Oscar winner Pawel Pawlikowski. These artists have been able to elevate an art form, which is often discredited as nothing but delightful shadows on the wall, to something bordering on the religious.

Pawel Pawlikowski has intrigued me these past couple of years. I like his summary of the difference between the typical American film and Polish film in his rather funny Oscar address in 2015. He said, “We made a film in black and white about the need for silence, withdrawal from the world, and contemplation, and here we are: this epicenter [Hollywood] of noise and world-attention. Fantastic!” Pawlikowski’s recognition of the irony of receiving an award from a rather superficial American film academy is a lesson to American filmmakers that the films they make shouldn’t be sensational but reflective. Many of the thoughtful American directors of the “New Hollywood”- Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Stanley Kubrick, Terrence Malick - recognize the value of Polish films. Scorsese has presented the Masterpieces of Polish Cinema; Francis Ford Coppola had the famous Polish composer, Wojciech Kilar, write the score for his operatic film *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*; Stanley Kubrick wrote the foreword to Kieslowski’s Dekalog screenplay; and, Terrene Malick used both Kilar and Priesner’s music in his recent films *Tree of Life* and *Knight of Cups*. Many movie buffs idolize these directors, and it would be good for them to learn from the Polish films these directors so admire. I thank these directors for popularizing Polish film in the States. I would like to do the same. Hence, my need to learn Polish.

Polish Director Krzysztof Kieslowski’s films are notoriously sparse in dialogue – good for me. Yet, he expects much from his audience. To pass Communist censorship he had to limit his expression, implicitly saying much that only the insightful would get. This made great art. Through oppression Poland has learned that dramatic art is one of the only ways people can speak the truth. In the preface to the *Dekalog* screenplay, Stanley Kubrick observed the same. He said that Kieslowski and his cowriter “…have the very rare ability to *dramatize* their ideas rather than just talking about them. By making their point through the dramatic action of the story they gain the added power of allowing the audience to discover what’s really going on rather than being told. They do this with such dazzling skill, you never see the ideas coming and don’t realize until much later how profoundly they have reached your heart.” Pawlikowski said something similar in advice he gave to young film makers. He said, “I don’t try to seduce the audience too much, so you know you’re going to lose a lot of them. But those who stay might benefit, or like it more.” American film critic, Glenn Kenny, stayed. For RogerEbert.com on Masterpieces of Polish Cinema, Kenny wrote, “they [Polish film masterpieces] tug at your sleeve, nag at your consciousness, asked to be watched again.” Directors such as Wajda would have liked to read such a comment for he said, “My task as a director is not just to provide a nice evening’s entertainment…The most important thing is to make people think.” This is exactly what most Polish films do. While most of the films can seem cryptic, they allure you, knowing that there something more there. By learning Polish, I hope to see more in these films.

I have watched Kieslowski’s Dekalog 1 nearly fifteen times, and every viewing deepens my appreciation of the film. One viewing is not enough. It is worth noting that Pulitzer Prize winning film critic, Roger Ebert, taught a course at the University of Chicago solely devoted to Kieslowski’s Dekalog. One would think only great works of literature should merit such attention, but Polish films are on the same level as Polish literature, often bringing great literature to life on the screen.

On my last trip back to America from Poland, I watched *Potop,* a film based on Sienkiewicz’s classic. I liked it so much, but I felt disconnected in that I didn’t know Polish. If you don’t know the language you are cut off from its lebenswelt – something many Polish phenomenologists, such as Wojtyla and Ingarden, confirm. Language is very important in Poland. Literature kept the country alive during the Occupation (Zabory) and the Communist era. Most countries and cultures would be absorbed into their conquerors, but the Poles, like the Jews, kept their distinctive identity and freedom through great literature and poetry. Their national heroes were the poets, such as Mickiewicz, Slowacki, Norwid, and Wojtyla. The fact that a statute of Mickiewicz dominates the center of Krakow and Poland’s only Pope was a poet speaks volumes about Polish culture. Americans honor their politicians, generals, businessmen, and engineers, not its poets. I think America can greatly benefit from Poland’s appreciation for poetry. Not only do I want to understand Poland and its art, especially its rich films and literature, but I want to better know my wife.

The French word for “translate” is close to the word “betray” for every translation is a betrayal of the deepest meaning. Translations never get you as close to the real as what is communicated in the native tongue. While my wife and I have our own language, I have realized that sometimes we are lost in translation. I need to learn Polish. I believe that part of the beauty of my wife is her Polishness, and that is why I would like to speak Polish so as to better understand her and her culture. Polish film has helped me better understand Polish people. Also, it has allowed me to have great conversations with Polish people; they are proud of their art. By learning Polish, I would like to introduce others to the beauty of Poland and its great film. But not only that: I want to finally understand and enjoy the poetry of Disco Polo greats like Zenek and Boys whose words may be beyond Norwid’s best!