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“I like it close” – Jolanta Dylewska’s art of cinematography

Jolanta Dylewska is the first Polish female cinematographer successfully “fulfilling herself” in the realm of feature films. I use the word “cinematographers” instead of “female and male cinematographers” because the cinematography department is the least feminized one. Dylewska was the first Łódź Film School female graduate of the Direction of Photography Department that succeeded in shooting feature-length movies. In Łódź Film School women were studying from the very beginning at the turn of 40s and 50s, however, they were a minority and the female graduates worked as still photographers or cinematographers behind documentary or educational films. In 1949–1989 27 women were enrolled to study at the Direction of Photography Department, among 647 students enrolled at the time they constituted only 4%. Some of them decided to direct films, e.g. Ewa Kruk, other chose documentary cinematography, like Elżbieta Zawistowska, individuals made photo career as photographers of celebrities, like Zofia Nasierowska oraz still photographer, like Renata Pajchel.

Dylewska was the first to break through the barrier in nineties, when she started her cooperation with Mariusz Grzegorzek, that resulted in cinematography of two long features *Rozmowa z człowiekiem z szafy* (*Talk with a Man from the Wardrobe*, 1993) and *Królowa aniołów* (*Queen of Angels*, 1999). She also cooperated with other authors from the younger generation, like Przemysław Wojcieszek and Adam Guziński. Later on she crossed the border of Polish national cinema to the East and made impressive cinematography of *Tulpan*

(2008) and *Ayka* (2018) by Sergey Dvortsevov. In women's cinema she continued partnership with Agnieszka Holland on *W ciemności* (*In Darkness*, 2011) and *Pokot* (*Spoor*, 2018). The awards she has been given by fellow professionals are the best proof of her position in the world of male cinematographers (!)¹. In 2002, at the Slamdance Film Festival, she was presented with Kodak Vision Award for Cinematography for *Louder than Bombs* (dir. P. Wojcieszek, 2000). In 2008, she received Silver Camera 300 at the International Cinematographers Film Festival "Manaki Brothers"² in Bitola for her cinematography for Sergey Dvortsevov's *Tulpan*. Then in 2011, at Camerimage Festival, the acknowledgment of her work in Agnieszka Holland's *In Darkness* took the form of the Golden Frog – it made Jolanta Dylewska the first female winner³ of the main award of the most important competition of this most prestigious event dedicated to the art of cinematography.

My heroine is also a director of documentary films devoted to Holocaust, the cultural heritage of Polish Jews, or Marek Edelman. I will come back to this issue in another text, because I think that this subject is worth to be analysed particularly. In my opinion this "trace" on Dylewska's art is very important, because when she was making *The Chronicle of Warsaw Ghetto Uprising According to Marek Edelman* (1993), she discovered the meaning of the human face. She was using old Crass camera to make close ups of people shot by Nazis, so she could come closer and closer to their faces and eyes. I think that the contact with Holocaust's issue and with the cultural heritage of Polish Jews, was the first and the most important turning point in her career. The second turning point was cooperating with Przemysław Wojcieszek. Working with Wojcieszek was the test that she could make a contemporary "punk" movie.

In this essay I would like to find out what in the art of cinematography is important for her and try to indicate the signs of her style. I define the style of a male/female cinematographer, his/her handwriting after David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson as "an organized way of using film techniques. It is based on particular technical solutions the creator chooses within the limits of historical conditions. In broader terms the notion of *style* can also be used [what is particularly important for the deliberations on the art of cinema-

¹ Fortunately, this situation has been changing recently. The quantitative change in features can be recognized since 2011-2015 when 6 long features were shot by women. Besides Dylewska's *In darkness*, there were: Karina Kleszczewska (*Italiani, Hiszpanka*), Monika Lenczewska (*Obce niebo*), Magdalena Górka (*Jack Strong*), and Weronika Bliska (*Jak całkowicie zniknąć*).

² It is the oldest festival dedicated to the art of cinematography in the world.

³ Before Dylewska's success only men had been presented with these awards.

tography – note by K.T.] for describing the characteristic way of using film techniques by a single creator or a group of creators.”(Bordwell, Thompson, 2018, p. 345). I have chosen few, not all, movies with her cinematography, to search that characteristic way of using the film technics and to highlight her cooperation in the field of women’s cinema (with Agnieszka Holland) and Central and Eastern European Cinema (with Sergey Dvortsevoy), including Holocaust themes.

It is difficult to reconstruct her style, first of all because of what she confessed in our text messages exchange concerning *Ayka* (dir. S Dvortsevoy, 2018) – “The final effect of my work on *Ayka* was covering up the tracks of my presence as a cinematographer. It was fascinating, although painful at times.” Besides, earlier, in an interview conducted by J. P. Pelech, she said – “As a cinematographer I try not to have my distinct style. Instead, I am trying to find an appropriate style for this particular, unique film I am shooting. (...) I’m trying to create images which are rather clever than beautiful, and which fit with their visual dramaturgy into the pattern of the main dramaturgy in the film.”(Pelech, 2012, p. 8). Second, how to compare *Louder than Bombs*, an example of guerrilla filmmaking which – as reported by Jolanta Dylewska – “We were making this film terribly hastily. (...) Money was tight and shooting took only 17 days. The main objective was to meet the deadline. (...) Time restrictions influenced the shape of the concept. I knew we couldn’t lay dolly tracks, that mise-en-scène can’t be complex, that we can’t afford rehearsals and re-takes, that I have to do without expensive lights. (...) I regretted not having two cameras to shoot simultaneously...” (Sendekca, Gruca, 2002, p.4), with *Tulpan* and *Ayka*, which were being refined for several years, or with Oscar-nominated *In Darkness*.

However, there is something that characterizes Jolanta Dylewska’s projects and is becoming more and more noticeable. Firstly, Jolanta Dylewska “tells stories using landscapes”, whether it is the Kazakh Steppe, forests on the Polish and Czech frontier, or snowy Moscow⁴. Secondly, similarly to other great cinematographers⁵, she is interested in a face, not only human, though. In *Tulpan* she shows us the face of a yearning sheep, or a camel mother following her baby “kidnapped” by nomads, or rats besetting the characters of *In*

⁴ The situation, when „the location makes a movie”, is very comfortable for filmmakers, but not for filmologist, or film critic, because in such occasion we have nothing to analyse, we can only adore great frame. Such situation we have in *Tulpan* and in *Spoor*.

⁵ A human face is interesting for the vast majority of remarkable cinematographers – starting with Sven Nykvist, described as “an expert in shooting two faces and a cup of tea” (see Szczepański, 1994, p. 160); and ending with Dick Pope, who is referred to as “a master of drawing the map of a human face” (own archives).

Darkness – the creatures are given “faces” after they stopped being reduced to annoying creatures and became the companions of Jews hiding in the sewers of Lviv. In *Spoor* (dir. A. Holland, 2017) the anthropomorphized faces of animals are being contrasted with moustached hunters’ beastly mugs. Thirdly, more and more often Dylewska succeeds in “immersing” a viewer into an image, best exemplified by *In Darkness*, but also by *Ayka* or *Marek Edelman... And There Was Love in the Ghetto* (2019).

It does not come as a surprise that Dylewska tells a story using landscape when we realize whom she considers her masters. Among these we can find: Jerzy Wójcik, who inspired her on how to give a final touch to the scene of birthing in *In Darkness*: “death is expressed by means of composition while birth – by means of light”(Pelech, 2012, p. 14) – he suggested. The second master is Shakespeare – “his way of thinking about the elements – either water, wind, fire or air (for him in a theatre, for me – in a film) is close to my heart, since they reflect the condition of the soul, or less effusively, the feelings and emotions of characters. I count animals among elements”(Pelech, 2012, p. 14). The third master is Rebbe Nachman of Breslov – “a zaddik, an 18th-century mystic. Listen to him: ‘God has a never-ending conversation with a man through trees, grass, stones and flowers, dreams and people met by accident’”(Pelech, 2012, p. 14).

The Kazakh Steppe does not bring calm or hope for Asa, who came back to the steppe after his service in the navy. It is rather terrifying in its total dominance over a man; undeniably stately, the steppe can certainly leave a person awe-struck, yet more likely – frightened. There is disquietude in this grandeur, perfectly enhanced with a hand-held camera, which turns into a fly-on-the-wall instead of following the characters; it accompanies them in their everyday life on the steppe, the reality which is not easy, not only because of emotional aspects, but rather of those most practical ones. Asa is being constantly reminded that he will die here if he remains alone – nobody will wash his clothes, prepare his meals, and as a loner he will not be trusted with a herd, a guarantee of survival. Yet Asa does not want to get married, for practical reasons, he just wants Tulpan whom he fell in love with after seeing her briefly from behind a curtain where she had been watching her match-makers. We will never get a chance to see Tulpan’s face, instead, we will learn every detail of the steppe Asa will eventually choose after realizing this is his place and destiny. The steppe is not something visually attractive, there is not much going on, just sand, wind, a herd and some puny shrubs here and there.

Nonetheless, Jolanta Dylewska managed to prove that this space also has its soul. Demanding, yet faithful.

She presented the forests in *Spoor* in equally monumental way. This location, however, is more recognizable and more friendly. But maybe we perceive it this way as all persecuted creatures – both human beings and animals – can find their shelter there? Or possibly it is just a result of juxtaposing long shots, showing the beauty and power of nature, with close-ups of animal faces and detailed images of human faces? We can see the animals' eyes with light leaks on the pupils⁶, and the negative characters' faces zoomed in – voraciously licked lips covered with a moustache (brining to mind animal hair while animals' eyes seem so human). “Actually, I could make films using these two shots only: close-ups and full shots. These are similar to each other. The former serves to describe the world a human belongs to, while the latter is a human pulled out of this world. It is too tight for the world to fit in but we can still see a crucial, tender and sensitive part of the world, a human with his or her emotion” (Gruca, Sendekca, 2002, p. 7). Sven Nykvist used to perceive the importance of these shots identically, while Bogdan Dziworski⁷ still sees it that way.

Monumental and unfriendly again, devoid of a soul – this is Moscow that Ayka roams. Dylewska explains that it was Shakespeare who influenced the change of the season in Dvortsevov's film. The action of the film was supposed to take place in the summer, “but I felt, or even knew, that snowy winter will make a viewer empathize⁸ with Ayka more deeply. Later on, I often felt guilty. Snow wasn't falling, we were waiting endlessly”⁹.

The title of Jolanta Dylewska's dissertation supervised by Jerzy Wójcik was: *Like in a mirror, a short essay on a face* (Gruca, Sendekca, 2002, p. 5), thus she must have been interested in faces as early as during her studies in the Direction of Photography Department in Łódź Film School. However, judged by the visual value of productions co-created by Jolanta Dylewska, she gained the practical knowledge of the power of a face while making (also

⁶ In *In Darkness* there is also a shot in which we can look deeply in a rat's intelligent eyes (with a light leak, of course).

⁷ Bogdan Dziworski is Polish cinematographer, known for his collaboration with Grzegorz Królikiewicz especially. Their main work is *Through and Through* (1973). But for me the most important is that Dziworski is great documentalist, talented photographer and charismatic teacher of the art of cinematography. Well known Polish cinematographers (Wit Dąbal, Ryszard Lenczewski Krzysztof Ptak, Piotr Sobociński) started in Dziworski's group, sometimes called „the second filmschool”.

⁸ I will get back to the issue of empathy in the part about “immersing a viewer into an image.”

⁹ A snippet of my e-mail correspondence with Jolanta Dylewska.

as a director) films composed mostly of archival materials¹⁰ - *The Chronicle of Warsaw Ghetto Uprising According to Marek Edelman* (1993) and *Po-lin. Slivers of Memory* (2008, cin. J. Romasz) – “(...) I chose for shooting [*The Chronicle* – note by K.T.] an old Crass camera for trick photography¹¹. To be more precise, it is a table with a camera hanging above and a background projector down below. A mirror set at a certain angle sends an image from the background projector to the camera, and the images are taken in a stop-motion technique. I watched the material on that table, frame by frame, and I had a chance to get to the one-sixteenth part of the image. (...) I was i m m e r s e d i n f a c e s [emphasized by K.T.], in gestures. I also had to slow the process down, as often something important was happening in 8 frames, thus beyond viewer’s perception. I was getting as close as possible because I wanted to give a viewer a chance to look these people in the face, to see them holding hands, look them straight in the eye at times. I like it close” (Gruca, Sendeccka, 2002, pp. 6–7). I have already tackled the issue of animal faces. In *Tulpan* the camera does not focus on faces, though, but on the vastness of the steppe, it accompanies the characters instead of portraying them, in *Ayka*, however, it is as close as possible, but it still does not penetrate the Kazakh girl’s face, it would be an act of violence, which is absent in the frame but fills Ayka’s¹² world. We are either finding out about its consequences, or waiting for it. Most often we can watch a part of the girl’s neck or cheek, sometimes we can see her eyes. Long shots are there so that a viewer knows what time and place the film action is set in, and also to show Ayka’s fragility, loneliness, and the hopelessness of her situation. She is hounded and terrified, fleeing her oppressors because of whom she had to leave her son in hospital. The girl is trying to occupy as little space in the world (that is in a frame) as possible, in order not to catch anybody’s attention. It was necessary to portray her with close-ups so that we could notice her at all. But mostly so that we could physiologically feel her fear of everything. Solely by watching a piece of the Kazakh girl’s face we can find out, or rather assume, that she is bleeding – as she has just given birth – and her blood is freezing on her clothes while she is unable to move freely. The naturalistic redness is absent from the image. The work of the camera is extremely discreet in this film. The camera not so much follows as it accompanies Ayka, in order to give the testimony of truth. It shakes as if it started

¹⁰ Under Jolanta Dylewska’s watchful yet tender eye, the past comes back to life like Golem, who got the slip with the spell back in his mouth.

¹¹ While working on *Marek Edelman... And There Was Love in the Ghetto* Jolanta Dylewska had already been using the digital possibilities of image editing.

¹² Samal Esljamova, awarded at Cannes IFF in 2018 for her role of Ayka, is supposedly the only professional actress in the film, while the remaining cast are amateurs.

to feel the girl's anxiety. The visit at a female gynaecologist, who helps girls in need and takes care of heavily bleeding Ayka, is shot from a distance – such situation requires intimacy, it is not about the excitement over physiology.

Equally discreet as the work of the camera is the light. While it is true that several times we are guided towards the blinding brightness of snowy Moscow, far more often we can see darkness. Especially in a flat where Ayka rents a part of a room. She feels a bit safer in that place – she can at least lie down and take a painkiller, but even there she is beset: by her family who demands support over the phone, by people she runs away from, by nosy flatmates, and finally by militia and the landlord. And we can't see much yet again, but in this film nobody wanted to go the easy way and shock with visually attractive privation or the details of postpartum period. What is bright, though, is the finale, set on a staircase, the tightness of which did not disrupt the dynamism of the frame perfectly reflecting Ayka's emotions when she has to make an impossible choice. It is the asceticism of means selected by Jolanta Dylewska that enabled her to create the atmosphere of a Greek tragedy within seemingly banal space.

For Jolanta Dylewska it was important that a viewer empathized with Ayka, a similar conclusion can be drawn after analysing the visual means applied to *In Darkness*, where the cinematographer “placed” the viewers in a situation identical to that of the characters’, “immersed” them into an image, what I understand as an absolute control over the receivers’ perception. It is often dark in this film, but one can still see enough to understand the characters’ situation, but at the same time not too much to be able to identify with them¹³.

A large part of the film is set in the sewers of Lviv which beg for high contrast accentuating all of their architectural nuances¹⁴, but “Agnieszka banned any contrast lighting” – recalls Jolanta Dylewska (Pelech, 2012, p. 8), and for that reason there is no such light in the film. The first moment the cinematographer realized that she finally knew how to tell the story, was when she was wandering around the sewers of Lviv – “I was scared, even though I had my colleagues at hand. What I felt in there helped me with my work on the

¹³ Jolanta Dylewska confessed that for her the most difficult part was creating in the sewers such darkness so that the viewers could feel touched by it, yet would still be able to discern the actors’ looks and gestures (see Pelech, 2012, p. 13).

¹⁴ Before shooting *In Darkness* the cinematographer had seen i.a. Wajda’s *Kanal* with Jerzy Lipman’s cinematography (and Jerzy Wójcik as camera operator, 1956), *Odd Man Out* (dir. C. Reed, cin. R. Krasker, 1947) and *The Third Man* (dir. C. Reed, cin. R. Krasker, 1947), as well as Samuel Maoz’s *Lebanon* (2009) with Giora Bejach’s cinematography awarded with the Golden Frog. (see Pelech, 2012, p. 8).

first scene of the widespread panic and being lost in the sewers, and the sisters' fight" (Pelech, 2012, p.10). The second one – while reading the memories of Ignacy Chiger, Krysia's father, who noticed that "with all those lit candles and lamps, his companions, children and wife look as if they were painted by 17th-century Dutch painters. It was an epiphany for me! He noticed beauty in this nightmare. Those tiny helpless lamps softened by the humidity of the sewers were illuminating people with Rembrandt's light! I am quite sure he had Rembrandt in mind. (...) His words turned out to be my primary inspiration for the way I started to think about light. They also helped me to choose the lenses. What I mean is imitation, resolution, look. My choice was Cooke S4, because I wanted to create between the camera and the characters a kind of an intimate, although undesired, even a bit forced bond. If I didn't know Ignacy Chiger's descriptions, I would go for Zeiss Master Prime and be closer to the characters' physiology. (...) I found it crucial to make the viewers feel the helplessness of the Light. (...) The light I built in the sewers for a particular scene was based on small effect lamps, such as torches, carbide lamps, candles" (Pelech, 2012, pp. 10–12). Working with light in that film – the first one in Jolanta Dylewska's career that she shot with RED One digital camera¹⁵ – consisted mostly in lengthening and reflecting the light present in the frame. The strongest lamp in the film cast belonged to Robert Więckiewicz who played Leopold Socha, a sewer worker who needed to use a torch a lot in his job. A 100 W lamp kept running out of juice quickly, so Więckiewicz had to carry a battery under his belt. The duties of both an actor and a lighting technician were also successfully combined by Krzysztof Skonieczny who played Szczepiek, however, contrary to Robert Więckiewicz, he mainly lighted himself – "We pulled forward the little light bulb in his torch, a bit beyond the socket. Thanks to that trick Szczepiek's face has been lit slightly from the bottom upwards; this adds naivety and innocence to it. I wanted the viewers to like that boy (as he was still one) in that light even more, and then mourn him more intensely after he has been hanged" (Pelech, 2012, p. 10).

"Immersing a viewer into an image" is also a result of fiddling with focus and colour, not only working with light. What I have in mind is the finale sequence of coming out of the sewers. A blurred yellow spot turns out to be a balloon on a string. Green spots are leaves. We see all of it out of focus at first, just like the characters hiding in the sewers utterly deprived of natural light and having little artificial one, had to accustom their sight to what they

¹⁵ A digital camera was used to shoot 90% of the material, while the remaining 10% was shot with a film camera on a 35 mm negative (Pelech, 2012, p. 10).

had lost a dozen or so months earlier.¹⁶ The issue of colour cannot be left out, either – the Nazi stigmatized Jews with the yellow Star of David. The choice of colours enabled the film to be integrated into both historical and modern iconography of Israel: in this film, often getting close to monochromaticity, the presence of blue colour, so characteristic of the flag of Israel, is simply striking – Korsarz is wearing a blue shirt in one of the first shots, Mrs Chiger heading for a hideaway has a blue coat on.

In conclusion, I would like to recall the Dylewska's standpoint, denying her own individual style in order to find a style that will communicate the director's vision. That is for sure the competence that a cinematographer should be able to activate as the closest co-operator of the film author. However, I have managed to find out some characteristic features in her images, such as telling stories through landscapes and faces (full shots and close-ups), including animals, and immersing the viewer in images – by using light and sharpness and bringing all the cinematographer's technical expertise into play. Having male masters, like Jerzy Wójcik, William Schakespeare and Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, she has worked out her female mastery, that crossed the border uncrossable for women cinematographers until 90s in Polish cinema and develops her own way in combining cinematography and direction with benefits for Central European cinema.

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¹⁶ "I wasn't sure if they were supposed to come out into light or into colour only. It was fate that decided for us. Although we had tried to approach that scene twice, the sun did not appear, and because there had not been any lamp that could replace the sun in that scene – they come out into colour" (Pelech, 2012, p. 11).

Abstract

The author presents the cinematographer and director Jolanta Dylewska, striving to define her cinematographic style. Although Dylewska began working independently as a cinematographer only after the turn of 1989, her position in the history of Polish and European cinema can be determined through awareness of her female pioneership in this profession, set against the background of generations of graduates of the Cinematography Department at the Lodz Film School. The researcher focuses on films that are the result of Dylewska's collaboration with transnational directors, Agnieszka Holland (*In the Darkness, Spoor*) and Sergey Dvortsevov (*Tulpan, Ayka*). The cinematographer denies that she has developed her own individual style, her goal is to find a style that will communicate the director's vision. The researcher, however, finds characteristic features in her images, such as telling stories through landscapes and faces, including animals, and immersing the viewer in images – by using light and sharpness and bringing all the cinematographer's technical expertise into play.

Key words: women's cinema; women's cinematography; Polish Film; Łódź Film School; style in cinematography