Textual Analysis — Ida (2013)

Directed by Pawel Pawlikowski

Duration: 1h 22m

Sequence: 58m (58:29 - 1:02:29)

*Ida* is a drama film directed by Polish-British director Pawel Pawlikowski (All Movie). The film is set in Poland during the 1960s. It depicts the life of an orphan named Ida living in a catholic convent, who discovers about Wanda Gruz, her aunt — the only surviving relative she knows about. By contacting Wanda, Ida seeks to know more about her parents and what happened to them. Throughout the journey between the two, they overcome ups and downs. As they unveil small pieces of their family history together, they struggle with who they are as a person. The consequences that come after having the knowledge about Wanda’s beloved sister is fatal. With Pawlikowski’s delivery from script to film and Lukasz Zal and Ryszard Lenczewsk’s great direction over cinematography, it scored an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2015 (IMDB).

This text will specifically analyze the scene in which Ida goes back to the convent and discovers herself - introducing the theme of life obstacles and self identity. This makes her go out and explore herself as an individual. This textual analysis will thoroughly discuss the cinematic elements including misé en scene, cinematography and the filmmakers intentions - provided with historical, social and technological context of the film.

Pawlikowski stated that he wanted *Ida* to heavily emphasize and clearly articulate the emotional and psychological aspect of Polish citizens who were affected by World War II (Sims, David). By displaying the narrative set of the 60’s in 2015 - the emotional aspect would be a rare element to capture, which is exactly what he wanted to bring into today’s culture with *Ida* (Roberts, Sheila). Showing this will create a whole new image that isn’t as talked about and made aware of - this is the meaning of the film. Many critiques have justified this; Pawlikowski’s visual and intentions for the film helps support that meaning. In the extract, Pawlikowski displays different sets of scenes, each resembling her daily activities in the convent, however he directed it in a way that made her stand (Figure 1, *Ida* 2013).
out. In the first scene, as they are crafting some sort of artifact, Agata Trzebuchowska (actress who plays Ida), delivers hesitant facial expressions. This can suggest that she feels out of place and is uncertain about her life decisions. Her distant sitting position may imply isolation (see figure 3). She appears deep in thought and contemplates whether she still wants to stay in the convent and go on with her vows (see figure 1). The next scene shows the routinely shower with the other nuns, Ida explores her sexual values as she stares curiously at other women bathing themselves. This shot is well thought out because of Pawlikowski’s intention to emphasize on carnal desire - the dress shown is white and sheer, making it clear to the audience about what Ida is truly wondering about (refer to figure 2). Overall, he was able to deliver strong emotion shown physically through the characters options and the way the scene was set up.

Movies specifying World War II are already quite popular in European cinemas, so focusing on a different element would break the typical mainstream trend (Hill, J and Church Gibson, p. 1981). However, despite Pawlikowski’s main intention to show sentiment and stray from conventional ideas like mentioned before — historical context is still an important aspect of this film (Sims, David). This is because it provides the audience an essential understanding. As implied earlier the film manifested Poland at the time of World War II, which was a time where Germany dominated the country and took over their system (Poland profile - Timeline, BBC News). Several civilians were killed and stripped of their personal identity - Pawlikowski wanted to deliver that feeling with *Ida* (News agencies). With knowing the historical context, the audience would be able to pinpoint certain events that makeup the story and form at least a basic sense of it. Being aware of the consequences Poland received from Germany at the time of the Holocaust will heavily affect how the audience views the film. He definitely kept that in mind while filming as isolation is a clear and visible conflict.

*Misé en scene* is quite an important part in terms of composing the factors in the scene itself. Setting up the common props that make up a realistic convent is very important. It makes it clear that Ida is going along with her everyday tasks; everyone is wearing the same uniform and doing the same actions, showing
familiarity (Barsam and Dave Monahan, 164). The entire film is in black and white and has a balanced cool contrast - this is in tune with Pawlikowski’s intention to talk about life and faith (Gibbs, 8). To remove other distracting factors that can possibly stray the audience away from the meaning, he takes away the color to keep the film minimalistic and peaceful (Roberts, Sheila). This decision along with adding grain to the film makes sense historically because it links to the time period, since films in the 1960s are commonly monochromic (Roberts, Sheila). The whole visual of the scene has a very subtle contrast and enhances the aesthetics of natural lighting well in order to distinguish shadows and highlights - this creates the minimalistic, simple meaning of a life Pawlikowski wanted to deliver. Apart from that, it was also able to smoothly display social context. This is something that is heavily incorporated into the making of this film. Pawlikowski undoubtedly succeeded in showing the realistic differences between the lives of Ida and Wanda. As Ida lives in a Catholic convent, she heavily believes in restraining from any ‘sinful’ behaviors such as drinking or sexual thoughts; Wanda is the complete opposite as her character is an alcoholic, a heavy smoker and gets with men in local pubs — apart from their opposing external actions, their personalities clash as well. Ida appears more conservative and kept to herself, while Wanda is outspoken, frank and is a firm believer in her opinions. Mise en Scene is appropriately used to convey that. The effect this has is that there is a visible contrast between the two, creating contradiction, conflict and clear distinction. This will make the characters easily identifiable and bold, each representing their own individual characteristics. Apart from that, the film also provides social context when Ida learns that her relatives are actually Jewish, for people that are aware about the opposing beliefs between Jews and Catholics, they would be as surprised as the character (Shipley, Gary J). With this knowledge, Ida becomes in denial of her attendance to the convent; audiences who have knowledge on this social situation will understand the character’s thoughts and emotions. With all of this presented, Pawlikowski received heavy criticism from Polish citizens, as they say some historical facts were perceived wrongly - claiming that the movie displayed Poland as more responsible for the Holocaust rather than the victim of it. Pawlikowski dismissed the comments by stating that Germany being responsible for the event is a ‘world known fact’. (Lyman, Rick)
The last element to be discussed is cinematography. This one of the outstanding elements incorporated in the film. Like discussed previously, minimalism is an effect they wanted to assimilate; Łukasz Zal conveyed this by having very still cuts and little camera movements. Open frames are commonly used to sync with the tranquil tone Pawlikowski is going for (Barsam, 190). For example, the scene that Ida and other nuns in the convent handcrafting are composed of still shots, no panning at all. The shots included a close shot of Ida’s face working on her craft, a close up of Ida’s hand crafting and a wide shot of all three characters doing the task together. Some of these decisions were used to represent symbolistic meanings, in the close up of Ida, she pauses to smell a leaf, which may imply her curiosity and desire for experience. The framing is also very thought out, as it leaves out a lot of space on the left and at the top of the subject (her), this is to communicate the idea of isolation (see figure 4). Łukasz Zal mentioned that he moved several lighting equipments in order to get the balanced lighting that he wanted (Sheila, Roberts). By doing so, he is able to make it seem as if the scene is only illuminated by one natural source - the window (Sheila, Roberts). This creates an illusion that will convey the intended tone - peace and calmness. Other shots that convey meaning is the shower scene, where it is composed of Ida shot from different angles - this is used to show her contradicting thoughts. Several lighting sources were used to highlight and shadow specific parts of the scene and the outcome appeared to be a dimly lit room, again, representing Ida’s feelings.

The technological context of this is quite interesting, the use of equipments to give out different contrast levels, achieving the most realistic and effortless effect (Desowitz, Bill). They wanted to go for minimalism so little correction to the color palettes were done. Łukasz Zal always had the concept in mind and never strayed from Pawlikowski’s initial vision. In the shower scene, the lighting was actually a mistake. The light used to illuminate was too bright, so he had to use paint to tone it down, not realizing that it was actually more darker than he expected. However, it was still used as Pawlikowski liked the dull, murky vibe it radiated. He has a clear visual of what he wants and finds ways to deliver it onscreen without the use of complex technological methods (Grobar, Matt).

In conclusion, a large number of audience will be able to agree that *Ida* performed well cinematically due to Pawlikowski’s firm vision of the concept. He never put away the idea and tried to keep the misé en scene and cinematography in tune with his intentions. By supporting that with the incorporation of
technological, historical and social context - all of these components played a role in earning the well-deserved Academy Award that will make the world remember *Ida* as an emotionally captivating motion picture.

Word Count: 1697
Works Cited


Grobar, Matt. “‘Ida’ Cinematographer Lukasz Zal Stepped In At The 11th Hour And Got An Oscar Nom For His First Feature.” *Deadline*, 2 June 2015, deadline.com/2015/02/ida-lukasz-zal-cinematography-oscars-foreign-language-1201374820/.


