

***Ida*: A Movie Review**

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(From CPLT/FREN 359: Advocating for Other Countries)

Paweł Pawlikowski's 2013 film *Ida* does not give watchers much in the way of viewing instructions. The opening scenes offer no clues about the story, none of the familiar road signs at the beginning of historical films to frame the temporal setting. ("Poland. 1962. A convent.") There is no music to set the tone, no shots panning over postwar Poland, nothing overtly telling viewers how to feel about the convent, the characters, the Communist government. This lack of information is the film's greatest strength.

The story takes place well after the establishment of Communist rule in Poland, with the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust silently, oppressively extant throughout everyday life. *Ida*, the title character, is a young, novice nun. The Mother Superior of the convent sends *Ida* to meet her estranged aunt and only living relative, *Wanda*. When they first meet, *Wanda* informs *Ida* that she is really Jewish and her family was killed during the war. *Wanda* takes *Ida* with her to find the graves of *Ida*'s parents and cousin, *Wanda*'s son.

The film offers no judgments about its main characters, who are polar opposites: *Wanda* opinionated, outspoken, and unafraid to take what she wants, and *Ida* reserved, quiet, and chaste. Pawlikowski does not push viewers to favor either woman, and both have less-than-upstanding moments. In one scene, *Wanda* returns to *Ida*'s and her hotel room drunk. She cannot help but taunt *Ida* for her discomfort with *Wanda*'s inebriation and reluctance to join the party downstairs: "Of course. I'm a slut and you're a little saint. This Jesus of yours adored people like me..." But despite her mocking words, throughout the film *Wanda*'s excesses—drinking, one-night stands, breaking and entering—are framed in the context of her suffering. A judge for the Communist government, at one point in the film she refers to herself as "Red *Wanda*," proudly telling *Ida* about her days as a state prosecutor, having earned her nickname for the many people she had had executed. *Agata Kulesza* beautifully portrays *Wanda*'s rage and hopelessness about her family's violent deaths: she is a woman on a mission to literally unearth the past. Nothing will stop her. If she is sometimes out-of-control, her anger and disillusionment help viewers understand why.

As for *Ida*, her reticence may primarily be a product of *Agata Trzebuchowska*'s inexperience (*Ida* was her acting debut), but the film still succeeds in portraying her discomfort with *Wanda* and her newfound family history. In the hotel room, when inebriated *Wanda* picks up *Ida*'s Bible to "have a read," *Ida* grabs the book out of *Wanda*'s hands, packs it away, and leaves the room, slamming the door behind her. *Wanda*'s response: "What a beast came out." The "beast" is *Ida*'s knee-jerk defense of her identity as a nun. *Wanda*'s challenge reveals the shaky ground on which *Ida*'s faith is built. Although *Ida* is committed to finding her parents' grave, in a way *Wanda* threatens her sense of self. It is only after *Wanda*'s suicide that *Ida* opens up to her aunt's way of life. She briefly imitates *Wanda*, putting on an evening dress and heels, getting drunk, and sleeping with a man.

The viewer's experience is to be torn between the two women: *Ida*, whose sheltered, Catholic upbringing makes the revelations about her family history particularly hard to process, and *Wanda*, who has both delivered harsh punishment and suffered horrific loss. Both deserve better.

Even minor characters are presented without clear judgment. Not even Feliks, the man who murdered Ida's parents and cousin and the one character who probably most deserves our judgment, is presented as a clear-cut villain. Toward the end of the film, having been continually harassed by Wanda, Feliks cuts a deal with Ida: he will show Wanda and Ida their family's burial site, if afterward they agree to leave him alone. Feliks brings them to the woods, and digs up the bones of their family from an unmarked grave. He admits to the murders with great regret. He is shown sitting in the empty grave, with his knees tucked to his chest—almost in the fetal position—as if by digging the grave of his former neighbors, he has dug his own. He is pitiable: a Pole who killed his fellow Poles, who must live with his troubled history, just as Poland as a country must live with the memory of the Holocaust. As with Ida and Wanda, viewers are left to make of Feliks what they will.

Pawlikowski's sound and visual techniques also allow viewers to make their own judgments about the characters in *Ida*. The film's sound is almost exclusively diegetic: footsteps, clucking chickens, scraping spoons. The only music we hear is either produced by the characters or Wanda's car radio. Without external musical cues, viewers are free to decide for themselves what is really going on in each scene, and in the characters' minds. The fact that nearly all the action is framed in the bottom third of the screen makes every scene seem as if it is being perceived at eye-level. This gives viewers a sense of being silent observers, drawing out their sympathy. When Wanda crouches at her family's grave, viewers feel as if they are physically beside her, watching her cradle her son's skull in the crook of her arm, sharing in her grief. This compression of the action in each shot also gives viewers a sense of incredible pressure on the characters: a visual suggestion that at the time, Poland was being crushed by its silence about the Holocaust and the war.

Ultimately, the film's lack of judgment is effective. *Ida* achieves something many historical narratives do not: it presents a story about horrific, suppressed trauma, and yet does not push viewers to accept a politicized message. It is easy, especially in films about the Holocaust and the Second World War, to make monsters of those who committed atrocities. It is difficult to confront their humanity. *Ida* has no monsters. It only has people trying to reconcile their mistakes and live with their choices.