

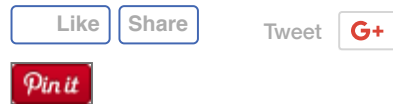


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Film Review: Cold War

In a visually stunning, formally immaculate and darkly romantic film, Pawel Pawlikowski ('Ida') sets a story of star-crossed lovers against the turmoil of post-war Europe.

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Searing, elegant and swift, Pawel Pawlikowski's *Cold War* marked a high point in this season's stellar New York Film Festival. The Polish *auteur's* *Ida*, a crossover film that took the foreign-language Oscar, raised the bar high; his new film, fresh off its Best Director win in Cannes, handily matches it in power. Shot, as was *Ida*, in exquisite black-and-white in tight Academy 1:33 aspect ratio, *Cold War* follows a pair of fatefully mismatched lovers over 15 years from 1949 to 1964 against the backdrop of that eponymous period in Poland, Berlin, Yugoslavia and Paris.

What lends the film a special resonance far beyond what you might expect from the tale of a troubled romance is the way Pawlikowski imbeds the love story in history (think *Doctor Zhivago*); the fractured continent of post-war Europe is a featured player, in effect, at once pulling the couple together and driving them apart. The lovers are caught in a riptide of power games that leave them with no good choices. Lest this sound miserabilist and grim, *Cold War* has a smokin' hot vibe thanks to the principals' chemistry. The soundtrack is music lovers' heaven, ranging from Bach and Chopin, to mesmerizing folk songs, to torchy blues standards and rock. Adding an auto-fictional twist, the lovers are reportedly based on Pawlikowski's own parents.

The story opens in 1949 as Wiktor (Tomasz Kot), a pianist and composer, and Irena (Agata Kulesza), his producing partner, record the voices of raggedy, impoverished locals singing Polish folk music—plaintive songs of love that belie the physical deprivations of the singers. Among many indelible images, a small boy in a too-large coat with a too-wise face looks on. We're immediately plunged into familiar Pawlikowski terrain, the icy heart of winter, a season that rhymes with the filmmaker's romantic melancholy. Wiktor and Irena (his sometime lover) have been dispatched by the government to the countryside to assemble a troupe of singers and dancers to perform "authentic" Polish folk music throughout Europe—and showcase the new dawn of a Soviet-ized Poland. In their wanderings, the pair happen on a ruined church, where the eyes of a saint still gaze raptly—or accusingly—from a fresco. The viewer would do well to remember those eyes.

During auditions in a dilapidated, improvised "academy," Wiktor falls hard for young singer Zula (Joanna Kulig, in a turn deserving of international acclaim). She's the "ideal" blonde, Aryan type that the boss, a Soviet apparatchik (an excellent Borys Szybczyk), wants to foreground. Wiktor is taken not only with her vibrant voice, but her seductively feral vibe. That she reputedly killed her father—"He mistook me for my mother, so I showed him the difference with a knife," she explains matter-of-factly—only whets Wiktor's appetite. They waste no time connecting. Though markedly incompatible in temperament—Zula appears apolitical, even informing on Wiktor, and remains tethered to her childhood religion; he's irreligious and politically engaged—their bond is beyond resisting.

Their first frantic love scene—grabbing maybe five seconds of screen time—is emblematic of Pawlikowski's style in this film. He skips any earlier glimpses of the couple's romance, eliding moments most filmmakers would spell out. In fact, the whole film, with its scenes quickly fading to black—which mark jumps in time and place—hurtles forward with elisions that the viewer is asked to fill in. The abruptness is elegant, thrilling, and captures the fleeting moment like few films in recent memory.

By the '50s, with Zula its vital center, the troupe finds success throughout Europe. Wiktor, though, balks at the way the troupe's concerts have been co-opted as propaganda for Stalin. Once in East Berlin, Wiktor asks her to defect with him—"You're unique, I don't want to live without you." Zula fails to show for their planned rendezvous, begins a boozy downward spiral, and, it's suggested, engages in an affair with the Party hack.

Jump to Paris 1957, where Wiktor has been cobbling together a career as a jazzman in clubs, hanging with various Bohemian types, including a poet mistress (Jeanne Balibar in a cameo). During his impassioned reunion with Zula, you could swear the sound system has shut down, mimicking the super-silence audiences bring to watching sex scenes. In Paris, the couple performs together in jazz clubs, where Kulig's torchy renderings heat up the film's cold heart. Briefly, the couple finds equilibrium, until Zula, rootless and ever volatile, dismisses Wiktor as "a Polish artist in exile" and heads back to the old country. Eventually the lovers reunite in Poland, where Wiktor languishes in jail, his fingers maimed.

Thanks in large part to DP Lukasz Zal, *Cold War* is a visual stunner. Images attain the level of great graphic design: A shadowy figure crosses the snow at dusk diagonally across the screen. After a squabble with Wiktor, Zula drifts on her back down a river like John Everett Millais' painting of Ophelia. Additional below-the-line credit should go to Jaroslaw Kaminski for his ruthless editing. The musical ensemble performances, masterfully choreographed by Pawlikowski, explode with excitement, the singers mesmeric and unnaturally rapt, perhaps sensing their lives are at stake. The big news here is the performance of Kulig as gorgeous, doomed Zula. For sheer magnetism it ranks with that of Jeanne Moreau in *Jules and Jim* and should make her an international star.

Like *Ida*, *Cold War* offers layers of subtext. In a very un-touristy scene in Paris, Zula and Wiktor take a boat down the Seine at night, gliding by the great rose of Notre Dame, darkened like sinister black lace. Given the rest of the film's tenor, I doubt it's over-interpreting to note that the image suggests the extinction of religion in their lives. Throughout, the default state of exile in *Cold War* is more than just geographical—it's the longing for some absolute, which love, for a time, tantalizingly offers. In fact, Pawlikowski's films are daringly personal and off-trend in their religious dimension. *Ida*, if you remember, chooses the consolation and order of the cloister over the deceptions, uncertainties and tumult of the world. It's not too much of a spoiler to say that *Cold War* rings a devastating variation on a similar choice.

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