



WOMAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA: PREVIEW

Silent Land (Cicha ziemia)

+ Q&A with director Aga Woszczyńska

Aga Woszczyńska on 'Silent Land'

In Silent Land, your feature debut set during summer holidays, you deal with dark subjects in broad daylight.

What you call darkness, for me is this inability to feel emotions or to be in touch with them. When you don't have empathy, you are blind to whatever is happening around you. You opt for passivity and conformity, just like the main couple.

They seem so perfect: tall, blond. Why did you choose these actors?

They look like an Ikea commercial! Dobromir Dymecki and Agnieszka Zulewska are such good performers and friends of mine. I have already worked with both of them on my diploma film *Fragments*, which premiered at Cannes in Directors Fortnight. With Dobromir, we made three shorts together. He is 'my' actor – that's what I call him. With Agnieszka, I just couldn't imagine any other person as Anna. They just fit so well together.

I wanted to show 'the perfect couple', even though nothing in their life is perfect. Their image stands in contrast to what's inside. I made *Fragments* with the same actors and the same characters. But I still had the impression that this short film was not enough to tell the story about emotional bankruptcy... as I like to call the state of my characters.

Why did you want to set the film in Italy?

It's usually portrayed as this ultimate holiday destination but in the film, everything is falling apart – starting with the pool. We tend to see it like that, especially Polish people. We all remember coming to Italy when we were children. My own relationship with the country changed 15 years ago. I spent some time in Calabria, there were almost no tourists and I wrote this story with it in mind – I felt like I really got to know this region. I fell in love! Later, we got funding from Sardinia so the location has changed, but it was still a very interesting place to explore. I have never been there before.

Italy is a cradle of beautiful culture, where suddenly beautiful values are starting to collapse. I choose this country also because when I was writing the script the biggest amount of immigrants was desperately trying to come to Italy. But I don't want to blame just Italy, but whole Europe, whole world exactly.

You refer to the refugee crisis in Silent Land. When tragedy strikes, someone says about the immigrant: 'He wasn't even legal.'

As if dismissing his entire existence. It's a very cruel sentence. When the catastrophe on Lampedusa happened, I wanted to make a commentary, but not in a literal way, on how Europe – through the viewpoint of my characters – can be so incredibly passive and blind to the plight of immigrants. I think it is a very timely story. Especially now, when a country like Afghanistan desperately

needs help, we are closing our eyes and borders. But *Silent Land* is not a political statement – it's a humanistic statement.

Did you want to talk about masculinity here as well? Adam tends to 'act like a man' but the one time he doesn't...

When the accident happens, they both don't react. I don't think Adam is supposed to do something just because he is a man – they both have two hands, two legs and a brain. Anna is trying to put the blame on him, that's true, but she doesn't have the right to do so. They were both there – they both saw it happen.

When I speak to men who have seen the film, they agree that it should be him. But to me, it's not like Adam doesn't feel 'like a man' anymore. I constructed these characters thinking about specific psychological types and he is a narcissist. I had boyfriends like him [laughter]. Still, I like him the most – I don't actually like Anna that much. Mostly because he has the strength to change and to assume the guilt. He might seem weak at the beginning, but eventually he becomes strong. As I said before, it's the only character that changes, because Anna is afraid of change. She just wants to come back to Poland, to their normal routine. My cinematographer, Bartosz Świniarski, told me I would be accused of not liking men after this film. But I love them and I love Adam, because he evolves. Anna just seems strong. Whenever there is a problem, she is hiding.

How did you start collaborating with Jean-Marc Barr? He is playing a diver here; a bit like in his breakthrough The Big Blue.

I knew I wanted him in the film, but I was afraid he wouldn't agree – precisely because of that reason! He played that all the way back in 1988, when he was the most beautiful man in the world. Well, he still is! [laughs]. But he turned out to be an amazing collaborator, very professional and kind. Even though he is already a famous actor he was always reading a book on set, by the camera, ready to start working. I don't know if it's because of the casting or because of the energy on set, or both, but I ended up working with an amazing group of people.

When I think of his character, Arnaud, I am going back to that dark place we have discussed at the beginning. He needs to take care of his clients and he seems so peaceful, but then we get to know his other side too. I like that we have these two completely different couples here: Anna and Adam, Claire and Arnaud. They are different yet what they are dealing with is ultimately the same. Anna and Adam didn't help the man who was dying in front of them and Arnaud would do anything for money

You seem interested in different forms of selfishness – the moment when 'putting yourself first' stops being an empowering slogan and starts to cause serious issues.

We need to distinguish between the decision to not be too influenced by other people's problems and not helping out when we should. I could say that I am 'taking care of myself' because I don't feel like seeing my grandmother, who was never really that nice to me for example. But what if she is really unwell, in need of help? These are two different things. I don't agree with this new life philosophy – focusing only on yourself is a bad thing. My film shows what happens when passivity takes over our life: the passivity of today's thirtysomethings or of Europe, not willing to take care of the immigrants.

Three days ago, I had to dial the emergency number for the first time in my life. There was a woman lying on the pavement, not moving. Right in front of other people's home and balconies – nobody reacted. People were just passing her by. She was drunk and you could tell, but only after the ambulance came people started to pay some attention. Later that day I met my producer and said: 'We need to bring this film to cinemas a bit sooner.'

I noticed you don't have any dramatic soundtrack or music in the film, there is a lot of silence. Why?

To me, music emphasises emotions. You are trying to feel whatever the music wants you to feel: be sad, be happy. In my film, you don't have to do anything – it's just you and the screen. I prefer to ask questions rather than give any answers, so here, the sound is the music.

To me, cinema starts when the words end and the images start carrying emotions. Which is why I value my collaboration with Bartosz Świniarski so much. We worked together before too and sometimes I am afraid he is able to read my mind – he knows everything! He knew I wanted to achieve something similar to slow cinema, where form is as important as content. I didn't want to be close to these characters right from the start, we are approaching them only later. I didn't need any close-ups. I like it when the whole frame communicates something, not just the face.

Interview by Marta Bałaga, production notes

SILENT LAND (CICHA ZIEMIA)

Directed by: Aga Woszczyńska

©: Lava Films SP. Z.o.o., Kino Produzioni S.R.L.,

I/O Post S.R.O., EC1 Łódź, Canal+

Production Company: Lava Films

In co-production with: Kino Produzioni, I/O Post,

EC1 Łódź - Miasto Kultury w Łódź, Canal+

Production Companies: Polskiego Instytutu Sztuki Filmowej,

Eurimages Conseil de l'Europe, MiBACT, Státní fond kinematografi

Screenplay: Aga Woszczyńska, Piotr 'Jaksa' Litwin

Director of Photography: Bartosz Świniarski

Editor: Jaroslaw Kaminski

Production Designer: Ilaria Sadun

Costume Designer: Anna Sikorska

Music: Piotr Kurek

Cast

Dobromir Dymecki (*Adam*)

Agnieszka Zulewska (*Anna*)

Jean-Marc Barr (*Arnaud*)

Alma Jodorowsky (*Claire*)

Claudio Bigagli (*Giuseppe*)

Poland-Italy-Czech Republic 2021©

113 mins

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