

# CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

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## Ida

**Country:** UK, Poland (2013) (82 mins)  
**Director:** Pawel Pawlikowski  
**Co-Writer:** Rebecca Lenkiewicz  
**Cinematography :** Ryszard Lenczewski, Lukasz Zal

**Main Cast:** Agata Trzebuchowska (Anna), Halina Skoczynska (Mother Superior), Agata Kulesza (Wanda), Dawid Ogrodnik (Lis), Jerzy Trela (Szymon), Adam Szyszkowski (Feliks), Dorota Kuduk (Kaska), Natalia Lagiewczyk (Bronia)

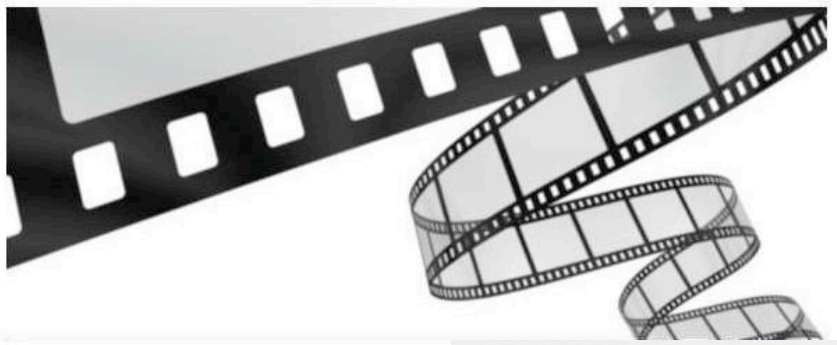
Agata Trzebuchowska, the young Polish star of *Ida*, has giant, dark orbs for eyes, each a pool of midnight-black water on the pallid landscape of her skin...what some would call "doe-eyed," but is there more than innocence in those ocular circles? Do her pupils, rendered inky by the film's monochromatic color scheme, also reflect the darkness of the world they detect? Anna is a novitiate nun in 1960s Poland. One week before taking her vows, the 18-year-old is instructed by the abbess of her convent to speak with her only living relative. Aunt Wanda (Agata Kulesza), a jaded judge of the Communist Party, drops a bombshell on her niece...her charcoal peepers widening with the news... Cue the least frivolous road trip of all time.

*Ida* is the first movie Polish-born filmmaker Pawel Pawlikowski (*My Summer of Love*) has made in his homeland. That feels significant: In many respects, this austere, carefully composed drama is a trek into the past—an excavation of personal and national histories, many of them unpleasant. Pawlikowski, who's evoking the grim Communist Poland he left as a teenager, shoots the film in pristine black and white and the boxy academy ratio, both of which lend it a classical, almost *Bergmanesque* allure. It's a breathtakingly gorgeous movie, full of painterly backdrops and stark juxtapositions of light and dark, the latter exemplified by Anna's white habits—a symbol of her purity—against various shades of oppressive grey. Going home has brought out a new confidence in Pawlikowski; he believes in his images, and in the truths they can convey. Over an efficient 80 minutes, no shot feels wasted, and no one says much that couldn't be better communicated through their placement in the artfully arranged frame.

Bleakness creeps into *Ida* fast; the heroine's journey is essentially the retracing of a funeral march, leading inexorably into the woods, to the dirty soil and the badly kept secrets it conceals. But this is no miserabilist slog. Nestled within its sins-of-the-elders narrative is a faintly charming cross-generational bonding picture, pairing a worldly cynic with a young girl taking her last gasp of secular air before giving her life to the Lord. The two soften each other in different ways—Wanda coaxing curiosity out of her teenage charge, Anna inching her way into the



affections of a woman who thought herself beyond affection. (A whole different movie could have been built around the damaged aunt, to whom Kulesza brings a seen-it-all weariness that's affecting and almost seductive.) When the two bunk at a hotel,



where a jazz band conjures a smoky romantic atmosphere, the film briefly flirts with a *Lost In Translation* quality—an impression amplified by a scene of Anna chatting with a suave suitor, their conversation framed against a series of windows and the warmly lit room on the other side. The future, *Ida* seems to be proclaiming, could very well be brighter. The key is to not to get too lost in the fog of a traumatic past.

A.A. Dowd, AVClub

Many shots in the strikingly-photographed film *Ida* feature people arranged along the bottom of the frame, with ample empty space left above their heads. That space could hold many things—thought bubbles, slogans—but in this case, it seems to hold whatever weighs on the character's mind, controlling their thoughts and actions: some kind of invisible authority, a heavy, unseen power....

Each frame in *Ida* is like a Dutch painting, or even a Renaissance painting, Agata Trzebuchowska's face as serene as a Madonna. Trzebuchowska is certainly the film's other great asset: all the performances are great, but she is not even an actress, having been spotted by a producer in a cafe and hired almost on the spot. You'd never believe it. Her eyes are like deep, dark midnight pools, imbuing what could have been a rather flatly written character with the sense that much lays beneath the still surface (which helps keep the third act convincing).

*Ida* calls to mind quite a range of films. It has kin in *Alexander Payne's Nebraska*, also a black-and-white film about a trip to find family origins. Serene images of nuns and novitiates singing in the chapel and eating quietly together recall *Philip Gröning's Into Great Silence*. Some of the long driving shots punctuated by conversation made me think of various films by the *Dardennes*.

At the end of the day, though, I can't help but think about *Krzysztof Kieslowski*, another Polish filmmaker who, like Pawlikowski, started out in documentary and moved toward narrative film, spending some of his career making films outside his native country. Kieslowski's connection to the era in *Ida* would have been even more direct—he was born in 1941, while Pawlikowski was born in 1957. Kieslowski found himself often working as an outsider, trying to make work under the strictures of an oppressive regime while remaining Polish; Pawlikowski said in an interview that "I come from a family full of mysteries and contradictions and have lived in one sort of exile or another for most of my life. Questions of identity, family, blood, faith, belonging, and history have always been present."

Kieslowski had a penchant for characters that are "doubled"—a sort of mysterious doppelgänger, most clearly (though not solely) demonstrated in 1991's *The Double Life of Veronique*, in which a Polish girl and her French counterpart seem to be living lives along a dual track. Some read that film as representing the dual identities present in Europe at the time, setting up Communist Poland against the free West—one able to choose her future, and one still bound.

A similar doubling is happening in *Ida*, though Pawlikowski's isn't as

blatant as Kieslowski's. Anna is Ida, Ida is Anna—they are the same person, quite literally, but also represent two possibilities for the same person. One reading of the ending of *Ida* might be that Anna has to try "Ida" on for size before knowing what choice she should make about her future. That's a reasonable conclusion, indicated early in the film.

But I think there's a second way to think about it: in the end, Ida realizes that she doesn't understand her aunt at all. She can't fathom why she made the life choices she did, and has to consider becoming her aunt's double, inhabiting her aunt's reality—wearing her clothes, engaging in her activities—in order to see what it was to be her, and to understand how she could have done what she did. And, perhaps, Ida's wondering if it's the best way that she can pray for her soul.

In a very imperfect way, this reminds me of the incarnation—the idea that God could inhabit a human body so that finite people could trust him to know what it is to be human, and to understand how Christ could intercede for them. To become another is in some way an act of love for that other person. Jesus knew what it was to be a person, and not one in an ivory tower.

On a night of unhappy drinking, Wanda tells Ida, "Your Jesus didn't hide out in a cave with books but went out into the world . . . This Jesus of yours adored people like me. Take Mary Magdalene." Truthfully, though *Ida*'s small, flawed attempt at incarnation was all I could think about while watching the film, I doubt that doctrine is what Pawlikowski had in mind. But it puts me in mind of another Kieslowski film—*Blue*, in which Julie ([Juliette Binoche](#)) comes to realize that she can only love others and experience true liberty by coming alongside them and dwelling in their pain. She takes compassion on those who have hurt her, choosing to stop living life apart from them and start living with them.

The beauty of movies is that the good ones allow us to practice a little bit of flawed and limited incarnation, too. In films, as in good fiction, we get to live a little bit of someone else's reality. That requires being open to the experience, and it requires attention, something that's hard to come by in our world. But a film like *Ida* gives us a chance to walk alongside the characters for a while, trying to understand their world and their struggles, and it's a pleasure to do it when it's so beautiful.

[Alissa Wilkinson, Christianity Today](#)

## Background

*Pawlikowski, the UK-based director of My Summer in Love and The Woman in the Fifth left communist Poland as a teenager in the '70s. This is his first film set in his home country and in the language. It's a curious homecoming for Pawlikowski, who meditates not only on the memories of his own past, but of Poland's, without a didactic agenda. Instead, he offers an account of the country's conflicted post-war period through a character who has minimal understanding of the secular world and whose faith is so strong, she experiences each event, and learns each fact, in a measured state of grace.*

**COLLEEN KELSEY:** Let's talk about *Ida*. I was curious, especially after seeing your last film, *The Woman in the Fifth*, how you moved onto this project. It's a bit of a departure.

**PAWEŁ PAWLIKOWSKI:** *The Woman in the Fifth* was a very strange film. It started out as a thriller, and it became a really personal, solipsistic film. I had this urge to make a film that was more grounded in history, in a particular time and place that I'm very familiar with and interested in. I also wanted to touch base with something that I've been postponing for a long time with my country, because I have too many hang-ups about Poland. I can't talk straight in Poland. It's sort of a contorted identity thing, but I also felt ready to make that film. I usually make films about what's on my mind at any given time.

**KELSEY:** Was it an emotional homecoming?

**PAWLIKOWSKI:** You know, film is a long, technical process. I wasn't emotional most of the time. [laughs] It was just, "How the hell do we get this location or how do we get the money together and how do we find the actors?" But it was good. It was interesting location scouting and just driving around bits and pieces of Poland,



which I hadn't seen for decades. In terms of story, recreating the early '60s, which I can remember from being a kid, definitely there's a lot of emotion in the images. They have a lot of resonance. The landscape, the objects in the shot, and this lost world is in my family album somewhere. It was very personal, that stuff.

**KELSEY:** The film is not a traditional road movie but it plays into that genre a bit. Was that something that you felt was integral in driving the narrative? A certain kind of wandering?

**PAWLIKOWSKI:** It suddenly became a road movie when I put the two characters together. I started out with seven different sources and seven different ideas. I played with the character of the young novice nun who discovers something about her past that she wasn't aware of. And then, a different story about this Wanda character, who's this Stalinist judge with blood on her

hands who suddenly loses the ground under her feet and loses faith. I met a character like that some time ago.

**KELSEY:** The film is stylistically very striking. I think the choice of black and white was appropriate for creating a certain authenticity to the era, as well as the aspect ratio. Were you looking at any other films? Any Polish films from the period?

**PAWLIKOWSKI:** Not specifically. I grew up cinematically in the '70s. I was watching a lot of Godard, Bresson, Dreyer, and all sorts of old films and the Czech New Wave. I wasn't specifically looking at them, but they were in the back of my head, of course. It was a lot of images of my family album and the way I remember that period broadly through films of that period, but also through photographs. I just felt like it was the best way to bring it to life. In black and white, you really look at things. The shape of things matters much more. You're limited to certain things, suggesting a lot by not showing very much. That was the strategy of the whole thing. Also, the dialogue and everything was trying to make things resonant without spelling too much out or showing too much. It affects your imagination. You have to fill in the rest.

**KELSEY:** And it allows us to focus on Agata [Trzebuchowska]'s beautiful face, which is so open. That gave me a way into the film. She's an unknown actor. What was the process of finding her?

**PAWLIKOWSKI:** I was looking high and low for real actors that could do it, or students of drama. I couldn't find anyone. Then, a friend of mine saw her in a café in Warsaw. She was a cool hipster. This friend knew I was looking for a young actress and I was desperate. I told all my friends, "Wherever you see someone who is vaguely in the right ballpark, take a secret photograph and send it to me." [Kelsey laughs] That's what this friend did. Externally, Agata didn't look like the part at all, but there was something striking about her. When I invited her for an audition, she came in because she knew my films—she wasn't interested in acting at all.

**KELSEY:** What does she do?

**PAWLIKOWSKI:** She's a student of philosophy and history. She took time off at the university, with a guilty conscience. She was great. She could take pressure. The beautiful thing about her was that she was not actress-y at all. She didn't have a histrionic bone in her body. She doesn't grimace at all, which kind of fits into this idea that this girl in the convent has nobody to grimace at. She thinks before she speaks. She has these mechanics that I imagined *Ida* should have. She's very calm, observes things and processes them, and then speaks when she really needs to speak. All these things coincided with what I needed *Ida* to do, which are not easy to act. Mind you, she did act it. It was acting when she did it. She wasn't just playing herself. She knew exactly why she was doing something at a certain time. She occasionally challenged my reasons for doing things.

**KELSEY:** In putting those two together, *Ida* and Wanda... I found them really interesting not as two polar opposites, but perhaps as two extreme sides of a person. I was curious about how you wanted to create the dynamic between the two of them and what they received from the other? *Ida* is discovering so much, and those past discoveries have haunted Wanda.

**PAWLIKOWSKI:** She's hidden a lot, and *Ida*'s presence brings it all out. They impact each other interestingly. In the end, *Ida* seems to be the stronger character because she's less conflicted. She has a different sort of temperament. What they do have in common is that they both have faith, or had faith, and they need faith. Wanda's faith evaporated with the moral



collapse of Stalinism. This heroic period of communism, where you're building a new society, was no longer possible, and Wanda loses her position of power in a sense of narrative. Whereas Ida has a different sort of faith, which she almost loses, but doesn't really. It's easier to lose faith in something like Marxism, which is kind of a concrete thing, which is supposed to shape society. Whereas faith that's not measureable is possibly less easy to damage, to destroy it. But they are both strong women. They are made of the same material in some way. But they have a different imagination. They have different ideas in their heads.

KELSEY: Especially in the one sequence where Ida dresses in Wanda's clothes and attempts to live her life for a little bit.

PAWLIKOWSKI: Yeah, but without any great conviction. [laughs] More like, "I have to try it out."

KELSEY: But she ends up rejecting the secular world. Do you see Ida as an idealist?

PAWLIKOWSKI: There's a kind of psychology that's not typical. She's not usual. She's one of these genuinely spiritual creatures. She doesn't need life and what it has to offer, especially the life of Poland in 1961. So, she's an unusual character. I asked the audience at a film festival, and they identified more with Wanda and her contradictions. But Ida is a particular character. I don't know. She's not like you and me. [laughs] Well, I don't know about you, but...

KELSEY: I think that most of us can relate to the complexities of Wanda a bit more. What about the post-war era in Poland did you specifically want to explore?

PAWLIKOWSKI: Yeah, this kind of moment where life seems possible again after the ravages of the war and after Stalinism, which was kind of a period of utter terror, but also a period of idealism. Then, suddenly there's a kind of normality—like, music:

you're dancing and a bunch of life's vitality comes back. That clash of the two things is kind of interesting. It's always most interesting for culture, for music, when it's measured against its opposite. You really see it in focus. That period was a really creative time in Poland with music, theater, and cinema. A degree of freedom came after a period of total unfreedom. It was an interesting time. But also in terms of all these frozen things, Wanda is keeping what she knows frozen for a long time, then suddenly things are opened up and she has to air them because of her niece. Suddenly, she's exposed to her hidden tragedy. There are a lot of hidden things when a degree of freedom arrives and suddenly you come out into the open.

The same thing happened after '89. Communism collapsed and all sorts of things could be discussed. There wasn't any kind of free debate or free access to information at all. So, suddenly, all sorts of traumas come out in these periods. The early '60s was already something in that direction. But also, I wanted to show Poland as a cool country, strangely. I quite like the style, and the shape of the cars, and the attitude and the people. I think it was a kind of original place with an original youth culture.

KELSEY: Was most of the music in the film from Polish artists of the period?

PAWLIKOWSKI: It was. It was a real explosion—there were a lot of singers and bands. With Stalinism, pop music was banned. So suddenly there was this kind of light pop inspired by Italian music and French music and rock-'n'-roll from the States. They were sweet, positive, optimistic songs, which were a real reaction to the grimness that preceded in the '50s and '40s. The jazz is another thing. Poland was a serious jazz country from the late '50s onward. Jazz had also been banned by the communists and it was still banned in other countries. I don't think there wasn't any jazz in Russia. But Poland was the most open society to the West at the time. So jazz was a huge thing and there were some really great musicians at the time. Ida connects especially with that one tune, "Naima," by John Coltrane. The pop songs just wash over her, but when she hears that, she kind of falls in love. That opens her up.

Interview Magazine

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## Our previous presentation:

Based on the feedback slips returned on the night, you rated **Lilting**, screened on Thursday, April 24<sup>th</sup>, **4.4** stars out of 5.

Please visit the current season page at <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk> to read all the feedback [comments](#).

You can still provide [feedback](#) on this, or any other film, by visiting the Discussions page:

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Upcoming **Cramphorn Films**:

Friday 6<sup>th</sup> March: **National Gallery** (12A), UK, 2014, dir. Frederick Wiseman

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> and Monday 9<sup>th</sup> March: **The Imitation Game** (12A), France, 2012, dir. Morten Tyldum

Friday 13<sup>th</sup> March: **Winter Sleep** (15), Turkey/France/Germany, 2014, dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan

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## Our next presentation:

**Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> March: Bastards** ("**Les Salauds**" France, 2014, dir. **Claire Denis**) at 8pm.