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Krzysztof Zanussi

A photograph from his private collection

Krzysztof Zanussi Revisited¹

A Conversation—Dorota Filipczak

(University of Łódź)

DOROTA FILIPCZAK: Professor Zanussi, let me first thank you for your kind agreement to share your thoughts with *Text Matters*. I would also like to congratulate you on joining the board of the European Film Academy.

KRZYSZTOF ZANUSSI: If I may interrupt you, it's not a terribly great honour, because I am one of the founders of this Academy. Then I withdrew from it for many years because I was very disappointed by the way it developed. However, I have lost my battle, and I'm again ready to serve this academy. But it is not what it was meant to be. The Academy was practically formed and founded by Ingmar Bergman, and he wanted to create a very exclusive club of people whose work is known beyond the limits of their own language, and of their own culture. And he had the idea to have a *numerus clausus* of one hundred like, say, in the Vatican conclave, and have it like the French Academy. Unfortunately, this idea came to Ingmar Bergman too late. I was one of the first forty members whom he convoked. But an Academy of that sort did not attract enough attention and enough sponsors, so after a couple of years we had to change the profile, and now we are over a thousand people, and the members' fees are making life for the Academy possible, but it is definitely not the same Academy. So there is nothing to congratulate me on. It's rather a surrender.

DF: Thank you for setting that straight. Could you comment on the challenges facing the European Film Academy then and now?

KZ: Well, the Academy was born already too late, because Europe was so divided that practically no artist knew any counterpart in a neighbouring country. We didn't know each other. Bergman, for most of his career, did not know Fellini. He did not know Pasolini. He did not know Truffaut. Very few directors were multilingual. Fortunately, Bergman was, but not that many, not Fellini. Three fourths spoke some English, but that was the time when English was not so commonly spoken in this professional circle. So originally it was meant as a club to meet and talk, and try to compare markets,

¹ I was able to talk to Professor Krzysztof Zanussi after his lecture on life choices of the protagonists in *The Structure of Crystal* and *Wege in der Nacht* given to history students during his visit at the University of Łódź on 14 December 2011.

views, cultural traditions and roots. Today it's all different, and it is again the club where we may exchange some views and some ideas. And the European Film Academy is holding quite a few seminars and MA classes. I think this is the most important part of it. It's also awarding a European film prize, which is of very limited importance; we couldn't make it more prestigious, because not that many European films travel. They do not travel. French films are shown in France, Italian films are shown in Italy, and German films are shown in Germany. And it's only American cinema that is uniting us. It is again a great defeat, because at the time of my youth all was different. My father was sending our maid and our driver to see American films, because they were seedy. And it was a natural expectation that American films would be very popular but very simple-minded. And at the same time educated people were choosing French, sometimes Italian, sometimes Spanish, and sometimes British films. Not German, because after the war German films were almost non-existent, and it took us a long time before we recognized that Germany had an existing culture. But if we drop this limitation, then we understand that what was true forty or fifty years ago is not true any more. And now international European films are very few. There was a time in the sixties when we were trying to make co-productions that were meant to be intercultural. And the British, in this very aloof way, were calling it *Europudding*, because these films were shot unnecessarily in English, using English as a vehicle to bring various actors together. And a native-English-speaking audience was never ready to accept it. There is one example that is interesting for European readers; an example of Rainer Fassbinder, a German director, who made a film based on Genet (translated by Trout), and he shot this film in English with Jeanne Moreau, who is bilingual, and other actors who were quite fluent in English. But for the American market he had to show the dubbed German version with subtitles, because the thinking of the film and the narration was definitely not Anglo-Saxon. So the language was an obstacle. People felt more alienated when they heard English dialogue; they felt better when they heard German dialogue with subtitles. And then in art cinemas this film was working, so it was a great memento for *Europudding*, but of course the whole concept of *Europudding* was this aloof British approach telling us: "Drop making films in our language; buy our films, that will be enough." And one of our colleagues defending the continental view said: "Translate the name into French, and immediately it sounds better, *eurogâteau*." This sounds very attractive, because pudding is appalling, as is most British cuisine. This is not the cuisine of our dreams.

DF: Let me move on to your films now. In *Wege in der Nacht* (*Night Paths*, *Drogi pośród nocy*, 1979) a crucial role is played by the library which connects a Polish countess, a Wehrmacht officer and a Jewish refugee. You said

that your cinema came primarily from literature. The scene with Friedrich and his cousin discussing Japanese aesthetics brings to mind Ezra Pound with his orientalism on the one hand and his involvement with fascism on the other. There are references to Plato and Nietzsche. What were the textual inspirations behind this film?

KZ: Well, it's very hard for me to dig into these inspirations because I'm not very well read. And sadly, at my advanced age, when I should have read more, I have major problems with my sight and I don't read as much as I'd like to. But without a doubt what you made reference to is the time of lectures I had as a student, and they remained in my memories, and they are always there. I regret I do not read as much as I would like to, but when it comes to the classics I have the basic knowledge.

DF: Your critics often mention film directors who have influenced you. Bergman is a case in point. What about literary inspirations, the texts that mattered to you, or the texts you would treat as milestones?

KZ: Well, I had this opportunity a few years ago, when I started my term as a *consultor* at Pontifical Council for Culture. One of the bishops approached me in a most humble way, a really exemplary Christian. He told me: "I am incompetent. I find myself in this world of arts and I know nothing. Could you give me the first ten milestones, the books to read, because you talk about some works I've never heard about"; a very simple-minded bishop from a small, not very important, country, but with the right approach. So I was challenged by this list. It's like going to an uninhabited island with such a list. And I started with Stendhal, believing that this is the beginning of modern narration, and then I had Camus and Dostoyevski. I had Thomas Mann and Joseph Conrad as these very important writers. I put (because of my deep personal conviction) Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa with his *Il Gattopardo*, because I think it's a masterpiece of the 20th century, but not many people share my view. I put Graham Greene, believing that these are stories that will reward the reader. And I took Bernanos, because he is a bishop. And this was more or less my list of ten. And I was very moved because this bishop called me a couple of months later and he confessed that out of ten he'd read seven, and he liked practically all of them. So it means that he was sensitive to the values which I was trying to promote.

DF: Now that you've mentioned Conrad and Greene, I would like to ask you about other English-speaking writers, especially playwrights, because you directed plays by Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter. You directed *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller.

KZ: Oh yes, I did a couple of times, recently in Russia. I directed Pinter a couple of times as well. Tom Stoppard too. I think that all Anglo-Saxon drama is often very much down to earth; it's realistic. It's often psychological, sometimes very close to film or television, but it's also close to the public. I'm afraid that continental Europe, especially Germany, went too far with this kind of experimental theatre and language which is now very formal and conveys very few ideas. So when I touch Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller I know what my task is as the director, what I'm supposed to do. And I have the material for actors to act and for the public to be moved by. In many other plays written today I lack this material and then I am very disappointed. German theatre is especially alien to me. So I feel I'm always in opposition. I directed a lot in Germany, and I know I will take the plays that no German director wants to touch, like Pinter, like Stoppard, like Tennessee Williams.

DF: Correct me if I am wrong: your films seem incredibly intertextual, not only *Wege in der Nacht*, but also, for example, *Persona Non Grata* (*Persona non grata*, 2004). Perhaps it is a case of affinity rather than inspiration. The book I have in mind is *Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lowry.

KZ: I didn't think about any similarity, but it's subconscious; the book is in me. And you know I am a non-drinking person, so it is very particular. I'm not such an admirer of *Under the Volcano*. I am somehow irritated by this book, because it's about the sickness without the remedy.

DF: Well, it is and it isn't. There is a huge mystical dimension.

KZ: There is a mystical dimension but there is no practical suggestion that this destiny is a little bit in our hands. It is very fatalistic to me. And that's what I disagree with.

DF: I see. I think *Under the Volcano* should be seen as a part of a continuum, because Lowry planned a twentieth-century equivalent of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

KZ: : Oh yes, he did.

DF: But he failed.

KZ: Exactly, because even for Dante *Paradise* is the most difficult and the most disputable part of the Trilogy.

DF: The Ambassador from your film *Persona Non Grata* resembles the Consul from *Under the Volcano* in his idealism and obsessive jealousy—and his partiality for drink, which is only hinted at in the film. The setting is Spanish-speaking and postcolonial, like Lowry’s Mexico. Why did you choose Uruguay of all places?

KZ: Well, I chose Uruguay just because I wanted a God-forgotten place with no particular aura of local problems. Argentina would have been impossible. Mexico has too strong an identity for the Ambassador to be confronted with. Uruguay is almost a piece of Europe on another continent, but there are other similarities; they do exist; there is no doubt about it. And I even kept some Spanish dialogue in the film. As I’m ignorant of this colour of various languages, it’s a big problem for me, because I shoot many films abroad. And, of course, my command of all other languages is never as good as my command of my mother tongue, Polish. However, I have to deal with the problem, because sometimes my assistant tells me this actor mispronounced the word (when an actor, a local native-speaker pronounces the word, I take it for granted that this is the right pronunciation), and that sometimes he changed the word, and this particular word is poorly chosen, or it is in bad taste, or it is ahistorical, or socially wrong, or a person of this class would never use this word. So there is a feeling of incompetence, a feeling that everything is really on shifting sands. I’m never sure what actors are saying. This is a big pain and a very big challenge.

DF: Are you aware of the reception your film had in Uruguay?

KZ: Yes, I was in Uruguay when the film was shown, and of course there was a strong reaction in the capital, in Montevideo. And they rather liked the film’s image of their country. This is a very peaceful and unproblematic image, but on an everyday level there was a funny incident. The man who lent us his house for shooting was scandalized by the fact that the interior does not match his house, because we shot the interior in Moscow. And he said it was cheating; he felt defamed, because, as he said: “I have totally different paintings and different interiors.” He was so unaware of what the film is about.

DF: You cross many borders to make your films, and I wonder how your films cross the borders and find their audience in countries whose historical experience seems so remote, especially in postcolonial countries. I know from an Indian professor that your films got a lot of response there.

KZ: India is a very particular country. And, of course, it's only the upper class. Only 10 per cent of Indian population speak English, because 90 per cent do not. But then you have the film societies, and this is the real audience. By the way, I have lectured in India quite a lot, and I've been there over thirty times. So yes, I feel this following in India. And Indians definitely have their choices of film. It's the same in the States, where there are film societies and art cinemas in big cities and on campuses, and they show my films. And some TV channels were showing my films. Then I see the choice is totally different; the evaluation of my work is different. They go for those films which I thought were far less important, but it's up to them. So whenever I'm asked what films of my own I like best, I answer, "It is up to you." I've been travelling to China quite a lot, both Communist China and Taiwan China. Taiwan is much more articulate. And in these countries, like in Thailand and other Buddhist-mentality countries, totally different choices are made. They are mostly interested in the films that have clear-cut ethical problems, but they are totally insensitive to the whole metaphysical perspective. They reject it. The notion of mystery is not something they buy.

DF: I would like to ask you about the reception of those films that seem to me quintessentially Polish, such as *The Contract* (*Kontrakt*, 1980), *Constant Factor* (*Constans*, 1980) or *A Woman's Decision* (*Bilans kwartalny*, 1974), where I can recognize items familiar from my childhood. I can see that the dress code is there and the wall unit, and tea in glasses, an emblem of communist Poland.

KZ: The Poland of our youth.

DF: Yes, how did all this get across?

KZ: Well, sometimes people were pointing out particular details that were exotic to them, like, for example, in *Camouflage* (*Barwy ochronne*, 1976), where the *rektor* is visiting the students' camp and some items from the kitchen are taken to his car. This was a surprise in the States, and even today in Poland people are surprised; they say: "Why does he do it? Does he need to steal apples and tomatoes from the students' kitchen?" At that time it was obvious, and of course the audience laughed when they saw it. But these are usually minor things. There is no bigger issue than the issue of cellphones. One of my scripts (*The Unapproachable*, 1982) is based on the fact that somebody must make an urgent telephone call. It wouldn't make sense today, because everyone has a cellphone, and you can ask anyone to do you a favour. And here you had to enter somebody's house to make a call. So such things change. And, of course, the social code was

always confusing. Western audiences saw my protagonist, who was a medical doctor, and they were surprised that his living standards were lower than those of any nurse they knew. But this was the reality in a socialist country, where doctors were very poorly paid.

DF: I have been trying to examine the issue of death in your films, a theme that seems so fundamental, and yet so difficult because there is always a risk of reductiveness. In your commentary on the DVD for *Persona Non Grata* there is your statement that death is one of the few topics worth talking about, apart from love. Now, this struck me as a very biblical juxtaposition.

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KZ: Yes, it was meant to be biblical. I wanted it to be biblical.

DF: “[F]or love is strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6). Isn’t this embedded in the film?

KZ: I hope so.

DF: The Ambassador from *Persona Non Grata* keeps looking for his wife the way the beloved keeps looking for the bridegroom in the Song of Songs. It’s a pity that this very important intertext went unnoticed in Polish criticism.

KZ: Well, criticism, especially in Poland, was not very profound. A new generation of critics is emerging and the old one has vanished, so it’s a time of vacuum. But when I showed this film in Italy I could see that it had been noticed.

DF: Are they more biblical than we are?

KZ: Oh, they definitely are.

DF: I have devoted much time to studying fiction about women, so I would like you to talk about your female characters for a while.

KZ: I must invite you to my next film. It will be a film in defence of women against feminists. Let me add—and this is my own rhetorical invention—feminism is like cholesterol; there is good feminism and bad feminism. I am not against all feminism. That would be stupid. Every fight for equal rights is good feminism. But this attempt to make women identical to men but even worse is a bad thing.

DF: Your female characters strike me as very independent, for example, Elżbieta in *Wege in der Nacht* has a very independent mind. The same could be said about the protagonist's aunt in *In Full Gallop* (*Cwał*, 1995). With her double identity she ensures the survival and cohesiveness of the whole family. And I felt that Marta in *A Woman's Decision* is the one who really makes her own choice. Lilka in *The Contract* defies the hypocrisy of her social milieu. Bella in *Family Life* (*Życie rodzinne*, 1971) is also defiant. They seem quite powerful and very liberated for their contexts.

KZ: I would agree about that, but I had that example in my family. My mother and my wife are independent and very strong women, and not submissive, by any means. And I think in previous generations there was always the legend of a strong, independent woman in the family, and I was fascinated by it. For many years in my private life I was trying to find a submissive partner. And I didn't find one. And I married a woman who is very strong, and we fight, but my wife wins in many fields, sometimes to my embarrassment, because she drives a car better and much faster, so pays bigger fines. She is very good with technology too. And although we are both over seventy, she climbs big trees and prunes them when necessary, while I'm dying of fear that one day she will fall. And, of course, she directs all the construction work at home. This is her field, and this is, I think, one of the archetypes of Polish women in the 19th century. My mother took over the factory after my grandfather was executed (during the Second World War). She learnt the job in one day, and she was very good at it.

DF: Actually, I would like to ask about the female perspective in your films, because it seems so inevitable and so necessary. I mean we wouldn't get the message of *Wege in der Nacht* without Elżbieta. And the same goes for Emilia in *The Year of Quiet Sun* (*Rok spokojnego słońca*, 1984). Could you say more about this?

KZ: Well, that's hard for me to do, because I take it as natural. It's just a portrait of women I met in my life, or whom I imagined, but based on some experience and some knowledge.

DF: What about the question of choice in your films, especially with regard to women?

KZ: I was largely in conflict with the fashion and approach when I made *A Woman's Decision*, because for me a really liberated and free woman is getting back to her marriage and her husband; it's not that she surrenders,

but that she chooses. And once this is her free choice, then she knows that this is true to her real nature. And I think this was quite problematic at the time, because some feminists said that breaking the relationship is always better than keeping it, because it was the fashion of the times.

DF: This is incredibly reductive.

KZ: Yes, this is reductive. But I hold to the idea. And I think it's no coincidence that this film did fairly well in America.

DF: I am not surprised at all. But let's move on to *Revisited* (*Rewizyta*, 2009). What I like about this film is the open-endedness. At the end of the film, the protagonist, with his background of suicide attempts, confesses that he has climbed the crane to watch the sunrise, frustrating our expectations that this time he will successfully kill himself. I would like to ask about the idea of your connecting with your own work intertextually. Why did you revisit these particular films: *Family Life*, *Camouflage*, *Constant Factor* and *With a Warm Heart* (*Serce na dłoni*, 2008)?

KZ: Well, for many reasons, and maybe the technical reasons. These actors were alive and these stories were left open to some extent. I could have done it with other films, but sometimes the protagonist dies at the end so there is no chance to do it. In some cases, as in *Illumination* (*Iluminacja*, 1973), for example, the actor, Stanisław Latało, died, so I had no chance to revisit him. I would be curious to see what happened to his character later, but somehow he was bound to die. So that was the main reason for the choice, and besides I thought these were the four films that had something in common, too. So that was my intuition.

DF: Your oeuvre is intertextual not only with motifs but also with actors who keep returning in your films. So they bring into a film their own achievement, like Zbigniew Zapasiewicz—who, incidentally, played the Consul in a theatrical adaptation of *Under the Volcano*. Is this an attempt to see how a particular kind of actor will develop, faced with a new challenge?

KZ: Well, I'd say that whoever develops and does not become stagnant in his career is my ally. I've dropped some actors because they didn't show any sign of growth. And the others with whom I remain friends are people who have grown. So I think this is the key to the answer.

DF: So the actors grow in the films.

KZ: And they grow through the other films; they grow in their stage work. So I watch them, and I see that in the new decade of their life there is something new to discover.

DF: I'd like to ask you about the role of memory in your films. After all, the crucial motif in *Revisited* is remembering.

KZ: You know, that's hard to be theoretical about, but the fight for memory is the only resistance we can show to the passage of time and death. If we are able to preserve a relationship, friendship, love, or marriage, it is a victory, because time is dividing us all permanently. It is a natural process, like decomposition is a natural process. And we need entropy to decline if we want things to be organized, to be put together. So I feel this passage of time very strongly. I try to show my opposition, and I know that time is going to win anyway. But my opposition, my resistance, is this little sign of dignity that I have tried. I knew I was bound to lose, but I tried.

DF: How would you describe your contact with the audience nowadays and in the seventies, in any case, behind the Iron Curtain?

KZ: Let me give you a very biblical example. I steal it from somebody who had enormous merit. It was a tiny Chinese priest, the Cardinal of Manila. His name was Sin (Jaime Lachica Sin). And he was the leader of the victorious church of the Philippines against the dictatorship of Marcos, whom I happened to know personally too. And Cardinal Sin was at the front-line of a demonstration, and the soldiers got the order to shoot, to fire, and they didn't. And that's how the dictatorship finished. So when Cardinal Sin visited Rome just after it happened, there was a press conference and everybody was so exultant, and he was asked how he felt in the role of leader of the victorious church. He gave a very sincere answer: "I feel like the donkey that Christ used on Palm Sunday entering Jerusalem. This donkey thought that all this honour was for him." We were having a marvellous reception at that time, but it was not for us. It was because of the resistance, because we were showing opposition to the evil power. So we were also focussing the feelings of an audience that wanted a change, and that's why we were rewarded beyond our merit. And we now think that this was a beautiful time from the donkey's perspective. That we had won all the applause. It wasn't only for us. It was mostly for the message that we were bringing and the hope and sense of solidarity. People were happy in the cinema when they could applaud together, or laugh together against something that they thought was evil.

DF: That's very interesting as well. I am intrigued by the presence of music in your films. It's like another self that you have. It's significant that when you tell an artist's story in *The Silent Touch* (*Dotknięcie ręki*, 1992), you choose a composer, not a film director, not a painter or a writer. Was there a reason behind this particular choice?

KZ: In the case of *The Silent Touch*, it was my composer Wojciech Kilar, with whom I had worked all my life, and it was a homage to his composition. I was reconstructing the fictitious birth of this composition. But otherwise, yes, I am a music goer and music lover. So this was probably most natural for me, most spontaneous to go for a musical background, and to look for music more than painting, more than architecture, although my ancestry is all architects and constructors. So that's probably the reason I've made many documentaries about music. And I directed a couple of operas (even this year). So that's where I feel comfortable and often excited.

DF: You focussed on Penderecki, Lutosławski and Baird in your documentaries and films.

KZ: Now I've made another television documentary about Kilar. I've recently made films about music for Germany, and I made a film about the music in the Warsaw ghetto (1993). So as you see, there are many references to music.

DF: Quite. You seem to be in a quarrel with postmodernism.

KZ: Absolutely outspoken.

DF: And the whole of deconstruction.

KZ: Oh yes, deconstruction is a part of it. When I was teaching at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee in Switzerland, I was having classes next to Jacques Derrida. So it was a joy when students came from his classes to mine and I could tell them: "He's a great philosopher. I'm nobody, but don't trust him. Don't believe him. What he says is all wrong." And some students followed me.

DF: And yet I am aware of a very interesting use of deconstruction by theologians or people working in religious studies.

KZ: I wouldn't be scandalized at all. I know what it is like in Poland. My daughter-in-law is promoting Derrida from a metaphysical perspective,

and his development absolutely justifies this. He has great value in the deconstruction of certainty, which is absolutely illuminating. He is a father killer because he is an ex-Marxist. He killed Marxism quite successfully. But in my opinion he went a bit too far.

DF: Perhaps different people use Derrida differently.

KZ: Yes, but there is this facet of Derrida which I defend. But I think that on a popular level postmodernism is perceived as relativism or nihilism. And this is a real danger of our time.

DF: You seem to have so many personas: film-maker, scientist, philosopher, story-teller, intellectual, quester who unhides the hidden. Which would be the right identification? All of them or none of them?

KZ: All of them or none of them, which is almost the same. I have this great grace in life to have so many vests, and it is always exciting to see life from a different perspective, and discover that there are more surprising perspectives.

DF: My last question is to do with your revisiting the students of history at the University of Łódź. What's the difference between your discussion with the audience here and, for example, at American universities, where you have also had lectures?

KZ: Well, we have far less in common when we cross the Atlantic because the life experience is different. But if we overcome this element of alienation, we find that the basic human feelings are the same. And students are always very perceptive, if you really have the readiness to give them something. And that's the basis. So when you come with good will and want to share, they are with you. When you come only to impress or teach and educate, then you may be rejected. I've had this experience in different places, including China, where I've recently lectured quite often, and it is again extremely far away in terms of mentality. But at the end there is something human that we can dig into, and then I have the feeling of very good contact.

DF: Thank you very much for this inspiring and insightful conversation.

KZ: Thank you. Dziękuję.