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**MASTER'S THESIS**

**DUALITY AS A CREATIVE PRINCIPLE IN THE FILMS  
OF A. ŻUŁAWSKI**

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I declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

**DUALITY AS A CREATIVE PRINCIPLE IN THE FILMS  
OF A. ŻUŁAWSKI**

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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# Duality as a creative principle in the films of A. Żuławski

## Abstract

The cinema of the controversial Polish director Andrzej Żuławski changed and morphed in synchronicity with his personal transformations over the years; however, the use of duality remained a consistent principle in his artistic approach, which also contributed to the polarized reactions that his films usually provoked from their audience. The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, also examined opposites and identified two basic instincts underlying every human action: the life instinct and the death instinct. I find a correlation between Freud's theory of opposing instincts and the core themes in Żuławski films, which I identify as the theme of Love and the theme of Death. In my thesis I will endeavor to approach an analysis of two of Żuławski's films through the prism of dualism contained in the pair of his most exploited themes. Although the thematic duo of Love and Death prevails in most of Żuławski's films, I have deliberately chosen *The Third Part of the Night* and *Possession* as the basis of my analysis, since I find it fascinating how the duality concept is evident not only in the content of each film separately but also in the way these two films correlate.

# Dualita jako tvůrčí princip ve filmech A. Zulawského

## Abstrakt

Filmy kontroverzního polského režiséra Andrzeje Żuławského se v duchu synchronicity měnily rovněž v závislosti na trajektorii jeho osobního života. Užití duality ovšem i přesto zůstalo konzistentním principem jeho uměleckého přístupu, což zároveň přispělo k protichůdným reakcím diváků, jenž byli s jeho filmovou produkcí konfrontováni.

Protiklady se ve své práci zabýval také zakladatel psychoanalýzy Sigmund Freud, jenž identifikoval dva základní pudy, které můžeme spatřit za každým lidským jednáním: pud k životu (Eros) a pud k smrti (Thanatos). Freudova teorie protichůdných pudů dle mého názoru koreluje s ústředními tématy filmů Andrzeje Żuławského, jež jsem identifikovala coby téma lásky a smrti.

Ve své magisterské práci se pokouším analyzovat dva Żuławského filmy skrze prizma duality přítomné v dvojici jeho nejčastěji využívaných témat. Ačkoli tematická dualita lásky a smrti převládá ve většině Żuławského filmech, pro analýzu jsem si záměrně vybrala filmy *Třetí část noci* (*The Third Part of the Night*) a *Posedlost* (*Possession*). Pokládám totiž za fascinující, že koncept duality je evidentní nejen v rámci obsahu každého jeho filmu zvlášť, ale také ve způsobu, jakým korelují tyto dva vybrané filmy navzájem.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 The Duality in the cinema of Żuławski

The cinema of the controversial Polish director Andrzej Żuławski is prone to being labelled as 'excessive', 'psychotic', 'anarchic', 'hysterical', 'extreme', 'scandalous', 'dark', etc. All those labels may appear to be valid in certain respects, but none of them articulates what lies beneath the obvious, as usually there is an on-going principle of duality in Żuławski's work.

Żuławski exploits this duality in many different aspects of his films, including in the storyline structure, the mise en scène, the editing and the construction of the characters. The concept of dualism is also evident in Żuławski's intertwining of the intimate with the political in the narrative of his films, often entangling powerful political messages beneath a seemingly neutral surface. In his film *Szamanaka*, for instance, a woman is eating the brain of her lover, but most audiences can easily overlook the fact that Żuławski was actually portraying the confrontation between capitalist Catholic Poland with the new progressive thinking of the young generation. In *The Devil*, we may assume that we are watching 18<sup>th</sup> century fiction about a schizophrenic youngster becoming a serial killer, whereas in fact Żuławski was showing us how the Communist Party politically manipulated and exploited idealistic Polish youth in order to obtain power.

Over the years, the cinema of Żuławski changed and morphed in synchronicity with his personal transformations, but the use of duality remained his consistent artistic principle, which also contributed to the polarized reactions from the audience that his films provoked.

The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, also examined opposites and identified two basic instincts underlying every human action: the life instinct and the death instinct. In a correspondence with the physicist Albert Einstein, he explained:

“We assume that human instincts are of two kinds: those that conserve and unify which we call erotic (in the meaning Plato gives to Eros in his Symposium), or else sexual (explicitly extending the popular connotation of “sex”) and secondly the instincts to destroy and kill which we assimilate as the aggressive or destructive instincts.”<sup>1</sup>

I find a correlation between Freud’s theory of opposing instincts and the core themes in Żuławski films, which I identify as the theme of Love and the theme of Death. According to Freud, the crucial aspect of the two instincts is their mutual entanglement, which is not always obvious at first sight:

“Each of these instincts is every whit as indispensable as its opposite and all the phenomena of life derive from their activity whether they work in concert or in opposition. It seems that an instinct of either category can operate but rarely in isolation, it is always blended (“alloyed” as we say) with a certain dosage of its opposite, which modifies its aim, or even, in certain circumstances, is a prime condition of its attainment. Thus the

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, “Why War?,” International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, 1933, p.40.



instinct of self-preservation is certainly of erotic nature, but to gain its ends this very instinct necessitates aggressive action. In the same way the love-instinct when directed to a specific object, calls for admixture of the acquisitive instinct of it is to enter into effective possession of that object. It is the difficulty of isolating the two kinds of instincts that has long prevented us from recognizing them.”<sup>2</sup>

The same impossibility of isolation of the separate opposing principles I find to be fundamental in Żuławski’s creative approach, manifesting itself even in the tiniest details of his film’s structure.

In this thesis I will endeavour to approach an analysis of two of Żuławski’s films through the prism of dualism contained in the pair of his most exploited themes. Although the thematic duo of Love and Death prevails in most films of Żuławski, I have deliberately chosen *The Third Part of the Night* and *Possession* as the basis of my analysis since I find it fascinating how the duality concept is evident not only in the content of each film separately but also in the way these two films correlate.

*The Third Part of the Night* is a film set during wartime; *Possession* is a film about an intimate war, and yet ends with the sound of bombing. Both films use double characters; birth and death are constantly mirroring one another; both reflect the phenomena of love versus marriage; both have their own monster;

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p.42.

and there is a pervasive evocation of God, even though His presence is often there in the form of His absence.

Before approaching the comparative analysis of the two abovementioned films, which will be the core of my thesis, in my introduction I will present a brief summary of Żuławski's cinematographic opus and I will examine the two aspects that I find crucial for Żuławski's creative outcome: his work with actors and the autobiographical discourse in his work.

## **1.2. A lifetime and fifteen films**

Andrzej Żuławski was born in 1940 in Lwów, Poland (now Lviv, Ukraine). After completing his studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne and in film at L'Institut des hautes études cinématographiques in 1960, he worked as second director and assistant to Andrzej Wajda on his films *Samson*, *Love at Twenty* and *The Ashes*.

Already at the beginning of his directorial career, with his two short films *Pavoncello* (1967) and *The Song of Triumphant Love* (1969), Żuławski introduced a theme that would prevail in his career as a filmmaker: the love triangle. His distinctive filmmaking style only emerged later, however, with his first feature film *The Third Part of the Night* (1971), a captivating portrayal of the Holocaust based on the personal experiences of his own father. With multi-layered apocalyptic imagery and symbolism the film portrays the nightmarish

reality of people who, in order to gain exemption for themselves and their families from Nazi extermination, voluntarily put themselves at risk of a typhus infection by working as lice-feeders at the Weigl Institute in Lwow. Leszek Telezinsky and Malgorzata Braunek starred in the film, appearing in double roles. Braunek would soon become Żuławski's first wife, and the artist-muse relationship would become a pattern in Żuławski's life as a filmmaker while his films would take a turn towards an artistic transcription of his ongoing intimate ebbs and flows.

The controversial film *The Third Part of the Night* was followed by an even more daring film, *The Devil* (1972), depicting Poland's problematic past. The latter led to Żuławski being persecuted out of the country by the communist regime and to the film being banned. The film is set during the Prussian army's invasion of Poland in 1793. A young Polish nobleman, Jakub (Leszek Teleszynski), is freed from prison by a mysterious figure (Wiktor Sadecki) who guides him on a tour across the country. As they travel they witness scenes of chaos and moral corruption, including Jakub's father's death and his girlfriend's betrayal. Distressed by what he has seen, Jakub commits a number of seemingly motiveless murders.

In 1976, Żuławski made his first film in exile in France, *The Most Important Thing: Love*, loosely based on Christopher Frank's *La Nuit Américaine*. This love-triangle film is set in a stylishly decadent setting of the pornography industry, drugs, abuse, and the downhill road to fame. A young photographer (Fabio Testi)

falls for Nadine, a married second-rate actress (Romy Schneider). With a knight-like attitude, the photographer borrows money from loan sharks to help Nadine regain her dignity as an actress by financing a theatre production in which she will get a role. The film brilliantly depicts the two sides of the same coin, love as a trap and love as a way out, while portraying the death of one relationship simultaneously with the birth of another.

In the same year, Żuławski was invited back to Poland to shoot *On the Silver Globe*, a sci-fi epic based on a book by Żuławski's great uncle, Jerzy Żuławski. Strikingly conceptual and experimental in form, the film follows a newly emerging society on an alien planet, the descendants of astronauts who once crash-landed. In the absence of relevant memories, the tribe creates their own mythology based on superstitions. They are enslaved by telepathic bird-like creatures called the Sherns and are desperately in need of salvation. The newcomer from Earth (Andrzej Seweryn) is instantly considered a Messiah and ultimately crucified. Filming was suspended when the shooting was banned by the authorities who interpreted the film as allegory of the Polish people's struggle with totalitarianism. Żuławski did not resume it until 1986 when he edited the forty-eight surviving parts of the film, adding a commentary to fill in the narrative gaps. *On the Silver Globe* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1988.

After losing his right to work in Poland at the end of the 1970s, Żuławski shot *Possession*, a marital drama in the guise of a horror film. *Possession* portrays

Żuławski's own failing marriage, with Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as a source of additional inspiration, and with Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* as a point of contrast. The main storyline develops around a married couple, Mark (Sam Neill) and Anna (Isabelle Adjani), whose relationship comes apart. The duplication of the main protagonists (already used in *Third Part of the Night*), becomes an allegory for the misrepresentation of oneself in relationships, while the monster in construction is waiting to be revealed simultaneously with the death of the old "masked" selves. Over the years, *Possession* has proved to be Żuławski's most emblematic film, earning him cult status.

In 1984 Żuławski released *The Public Woman*, another love triangle with a political subplot, portraying an aspiring actress (Valerie Kaprisky) who has become lost by satisfying other's people's ideas about herself. Her maturation as an actress happens in parallel with her real-life maturation, provoked by the events leading to the death of both her lovers, the manipulative film director (Francis Huster), and the Czech dissident (Christopher Lambert). This is another work in the line of Żuławski's autobiographical films, in which he offers a sneak peek into the life of film creators and where the line between the personal and the professional is hard to recognize, as in the case of his own relationships with his lead actresses.

In 1985 Żuławski premiered *L'Amour Braque*, a film inspired by Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. The film introduced Żuławski's new muse, Sophie Marceau, who would

become his life partner, the mother of his son, and with whom he would make another three movies. The film is about a bank robber, Mickey (Tcheky Karyo), who meets Leon, a man recently released from a mental asylum (Francis Huster). They become companions, but Leon soon falls in love with Mickey's girlfriend. A mad love triangle ensues, with a brutal end.

In 1987 Żuławski premiered his filmed opera *Boris Godunov* by Mussorgsky, with lyrics by Pushkin, an astonishing cinematic experience shamelessly flirting with theatricality.

Two years later he released *My Nights Are More Beautiful Than Your Days*, a captivating love story lived from the perspective of forthcoming death. Lucas, a computer scientist (Jacques Dutronc), meets Blanche (Sophie Marceau), a young clairvoyant, after finding out he is terminally ill. Both become instantly connected, despite her being married and despite their childhood memories being burdened by the infidelities of their parents. The number of words Lucas can remember decreases with the progress of his illness, just as the number of his remaining days grows smaller while the intensity of the feelings between him and Blanche grow deeper.

Żuławski's 1990 film *Blue Note* portrays the final stage of the ten-year relationship between George Sand (Marie-France Pisier) and Frederic Chopin (Janusz Olejniczak) as their affection is challenged by the charms of Sand's

maturing daughter Solange (Sophie Marceau). The film is an ode from one Polish artist in exile to another (like Żuławski, Chopin lived in France). The film highlights the genius of Chopin with extensive use of his music throughout.

In 1996 Żuławski made another film in Poland, *The Shaman*, disguising another political message within an extremely erotic story focusing on a professor of anthropology (Boguslaw Linda) who is trying to solve the mystery of a recently discovered mummified shaman, while in the throes of a sexually passionate relationship with a young and uninhibited woman (Iwona Petry).

In 2000, Żuławski premiered *Fidelity*, a not very successful attempt at setting Madame de La Fayette's 17th-century novel *The Princess of Cleves* in modern France. The film portrays a passionate photographer, Clélia (Sophie Marceau), who marries the patrician publisher of age Clève (Pascal Greggory) but is tempted by the advances of a young photographer called Nemo (Guillaume Canet). Throughout the film she resists this temptation for the sake of marital fidelity, which may seem absurd given that it was made by Żuławski who had always portrayed unrestrained women breaking moral norms. It is probably one of the weakest of Żuławski's films. This was perhaps in part the result of the autobiographic reflection of his own failing relationship with his much younger wife Sophie Marceau.

After *Fidelity*, Żuławski took a 15-year break from filmmaking, during which time he wrote 20 novels before releasing his unusual swan song, *Cosmos*, in 2015.

Loosely based on the novel of the same name by Witold Gombrowitz, the film portrays Witold (Jonathan Genet), a failed law student with a furious passion to become a writer, while he is having a few days of retreat in a family-run guest house by the sea. A series of strange events become point of interest for Witold and a source of inspiration for his new book. His plot becomes mostly taken over, however, by his new muse, Lena (Victoria Guerra), the married daughter of the guesthouse owners. The film is a not very successful mashup of elements employed in other films by Żuławski. Its biggest failure lies in attributing the typical Żuławski-style lead character madness to a male protagonist.

Żuławski died on 17 February 2016.

### **1.3. The Autobiographical Discourse**

I would never make a film about myself," Żuławski claimed, "for several reasons, including ethical ones. I believe that this shouldn't be done. And yet on the other hand, I'm also very reluctant, actually more so in literature than in film, towards things you know nothing about, that you are not familiar. <sup>3</sup>

This statement of the director justifies the highly present autobiographical element in his work, as apparently his own life was the subject he knew best, and he steadily used it in his films, for his on-going journey of self-reflection. *The Third Part of the Night* is a case of a collaborative autobiography, as the script is based not only on the childhood memories of the director but mainly on the book

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<sup>3</sup> Żuławski. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej, ed. P. Kletowski, P. Marecki, Warszawa 2008, p. 14.



*Minute of Silence*, written by the director's father, Miroslaw Żuławski, in which he describes the events at Weigl's institute, based on memory as well as on entries from his diary which he had regularly kept at that time.

“I wanted to make this film as a parable about that stratum of intellectuals that my parents represented. But also in order to tell about that historical, political and human paradox: bringing children into the world in the year 1940. My father was in the Home Army. He was in charge of the underground press in Lviv. My mother was also a resistance soldier. They met and they conceived two children. I was luckier, because I was stronger. My sister lived only several months. She died of hunger and cold. My father found a job at an institute where an anti-typhus vaccine was produced. I asked him to write out the theme of feeding lice (with oneself) and dissecting them. The vaccine was made out of lice guts from lice feeding on human body, human blood. I reworked father's text, weaving in the drama of the double characters.”<sup>4</sup>

Żuławski was born in 1940. At the time of the events described he was a very young child. Possibly he witnessed most of them before he was able to identify it with the speech. Moreover, the lice-feeding caused an everlasting state of fever in its feeders. Żuławski's father never had a chance for a clearheaded perception.

“Lice-feeders were infected with lice toxin. They always had body temperature fluctuations. Some got ill with typhus [...] With such daily conditions, they were like heavily drunk people, drunken like after rectified

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<sup>4</sup> Opętanie. Ekstremalne kino i pisanstwo A. Żuławskiego, ed. S. Naitza, Warszawa 2004, pp. 16-17

spirit, like after vodka. They would never sober up. My father told me a lot about that.”<sup>5</sup>

So although the accuracy of their memories is not in doubt, it must be considered that a child of such a young age perceives reality on a visually-symbolic level, and additionally the perception of Żuławski's father was fever-intensified. So the combination of those two distorted and emotionally compressed points of view have resulted in a film with an intensely fragmented, labyrinth-like structure almost incomprehensible from a logical point of view, and yet emotionally penetrating the viewer like a flood that is impossible to bypass.

The film theoretician Monika MAszewska-Łupiniak has also discussed the impossibility of tracing the actual past through the fragmented narrative of the film:

“Andrzej and Mirosław Żuławski clearly suggest that returning to the apocalyptic past is an almost futile activity, for it is difficult to find any sense in the remembered experiences. There is a certain aporia in their autobiographical message: governed by the aesthetics of fragment, it does not constitute a coherent whole, but rather an intimate mental patchwork, in which individual fragments shed light on each other over and over again. In lieu of a complete structure, we get a living form filled with meaningful images, which only rarely turn into a coherent narrative.”<sup>6</sup>

By the process of weaving personal material as the basis of an artistic work, the author foregoes the possibility of forgetting and voluntarily condemns himself to

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Monika MAszewska-Łupiniak, *Kwartalnik Filmowy-Special Issue*, Instytut Sztuki, 2013.

re-living them over and over again. He also loses the rights to the private possession of his own memories, since they become the collective possession of all viewers who experience an emotional reaction while watching the film. In the case of painful experiences, this act of “freezing” pain into the film frame becomes the ultimate sacrifice of the personal in favour of the artistic. *Possession* was another example of the same masochistic tendency of Żuławski to build his movies on the basis on his troubled intimate life.

“Possession was born of a totally private experience. After making *The Most Important Thing: Love in France*, I went back to Poland to get my family (who at the time were my wife and my kid) and bring them to France. I had two or three interesting proposals to make really big European films. But when I returned to Poland I saw exactly what the guy in *Possession* sees when he opens the door to his flat, which is an abandoned child in an empty flat and a woman who is doing something somewhere else. It’s so basically private. Now I can go back to it many years later, but even the dialogue in certain kitchen scenes and certain private scenes is like I just wrote it down after some harrowing day. So it’s amazing how such a private thing became a kind of icon. You know Adjani got the prize at Cannes for this film? She got the Cesar, which is the French Oscar, and 14 other prizes in many festivals. Please believe me when I say it’s mentally very disturbing to see that your very private little film became something in which so many people recognize something of themselves. Thirty years later I’m still thinking about it.”<sup>7</sup>

The birth scenes in both films are also an interesting point of comparison in regards to the autobiographical.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview of Andrzej Żuławski by Margaret Barton-Fumo on March 6, 2012, Available at: [www.filmcomment.com](http://www.filmcomment.com).

The basic realities of the film are accurate the director claimed, “the fact that my father was a lice feeder, that the commander of the partisan division was blind, that I was born in similar circumstances as the child of the film protagonist. Also my characters’ way of life is real. All that the film is based on is real.”<sup>8</sup>

In *The Third Part of the Night*, Żuławski portrayed his own birth, giving the chance to Malgorzata Braunek who at that moment was his wife, to play the role based on his mother’s character, and in that way experience bringing him into the world. Ten years later, in *Possession* Isabelle Adjani played the character based on Malgorzata Braunek, (at that moment already the ex-wife of Żuławski), and the birth is a miscarriage of what she calls “sister faith”.

The Oedipal pattern, which becomes obvious when those two scenes are compared in the context of the director’s life could be seen as a presumption in a possible attempt at psychological analysis of the director on a basis of his films. Yet in another of Żuławski’s films, *The Devil*, he directly incorporates the oedipal pattern in the storyline of the film, where the protagonist intentionally has sex with his own mother (who at that moment does not recognize her son), in revenge for her leaving him as a child. And there is a very powerful oedipal pattern in *Possession* as well: the mother of Heinrich, who supports her son unconditionally and without ability of judgment, loses her only reason to live when her son dies and so chooses to die as well.

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<sup>8</sup> Pojedynek w Riwierze, *Kino* 1971, n.12 p. 17

An interesting autobiographical reference highly present in his films is Żuławski's relationship towards his actors, or more precisely his actresses. He is famous for eliciting lunatic powers from his actresses, and with an eye never tepid, juggling between his directorial and personal passion for them. His relationship with Sophie Marceau is more or less evidently portrayed in each of the films they made together, with interesting amplitude of the inordinate ardour of the protagonist in *My Nights are More Beautiful Than Your Days*, towards the almost bizarre call for loyalty to be favoured over lust in *Fidelity* just as he and Marceau were on the verge of divorce. Żuławski often reincarnated himself through the characters in his films, but he never did it in a more exposed way than through the role of the director on the verge of madness ((Kessling) in his film *The Public Woman*. An exaggerated version of Żuławski, Kessling is a director in exile who shoots only in Germany (France in the case of Żuławski), making films about "those who longer fear God"<sup>9</sup> and about "those who try to change the world through violence".<sup>10</sup> The sad and lonely Pygmalion who reinvents random beautiful girls into actresses of monstrous capabilities, and suffers over the fact that after he turns them into stars they will no longer belong to him. Żuławski was never loquacious about his method of working with actors, but it is exactly in this film, through the monologue of Kessling, that he has generously slipped through an extraordinary acting lesson—a topic I will discuss in the following chapter.

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<sup>9</sup> Text fragment from Żuławski's film *The Public Woman*

<sup>10</sup> Text fragment from Żuławski's film *The Public Woman*

#### 1.4. An Acting Lesson from Żuławski

“Playing each scene separately isn't enough. The weeping girl, the hysterical girl, the girl in love, the girl losing her charms... I don't want you to play each scene, I want you to act your part! I've seen plenty of actors playing each scene amazingly, like the branches of a tree. ‘The tree-actors.’ At the end of the movie, all you could hear was the rustling of the leaves. It's crap! What matters is what's happening between the scenes, the truthfulness of the character, and the heart of the role. The perceptiveness of the role! All that you carry within yourself during the movie, the destiny of the character. Destiny - period. I want you to know everything, I want you to show me everything like X-rays would. To find the truth, the truth of what's right here!”<sup>11</sup>

This text comes from a memorable scene in Żuławski's *The Public Woman*, in which a determined director is trying to pull to the surface the acting potential he believes is hidden in the inexperienced actress he has chosen for his film. It is one of the rare windows throwing a little light on the mystery of Andrew Żuławski's methods for coaxing performances out of his actors—more often actresses—that frequently transcend the territories of acting into landscapes of primal, archetypal expression of the human spirit.

The way Żuławski worked with his actors has often been associated with the work of Jerzy Grotowski, a visionary Polish theatre director who attempted to “strip down” theatre of everything inessential to its existence in the hope of developing an act of truthful and intimate communion between the spectator and the actor. Żuławski neither confirmed nor denied the connection between his

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<sup>11</sup> Text fragment from Żuławski's film *The Public Woman*

working methods with those of Grotowski, so the parallel I try to bring here might be considered as merely my own frivolous interpretation. In the absence of written records about the methods Źuławski used, I discovered that Grotowski's statements are highly applicable when attempting to theorize the miracles we witness when watching some of the acting performances in Źuławski's films.

“One must give oneself totally, in one's deepest intimacy, with confidence, as when one gives oneself in love. Here lies the key. Self-penetration, trance, excess, the formal discipline itself - all this can be realized, provided one has given oneself fully, humbly and without defence. This act culminates in a climax. It brings relief.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus here explains his view of acting in an interview with Eugenio Barba, it seems as if he is describing the primal screams of Isabelle Adjani in *Possession*; the frantic existence of Malgorzata Braunek and Leszek Teleszyński in *The Third Part of the Night* and *The Devil*, the trembling love scenes between Valerie Kaprisky and Christopher Lambert in *The Public Woman*, the palpable sadness of the doomed affection between Sophie Marceau and Jacques Dutronc in *My Nights Are More Beautiful Than Your Days*, the wrenching power of Iwona Petry's orgasms in *Szamanka*...

“Don't get me wrong. I speak about "holiness" as an unbeliever. I mean a 'secular holiness.' If the actor, by setting himself a challenge publicly challenges others, and through excess, profanation and outrageous sacrilege reveals himself by casting off his everyday mask, he makes it possible for the spectator to undertake a similar process of self-penetration. If he does not exhibit his body, but annihilates it, burns it,

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<sup>12</sup> Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 1968,p.38.

frees it from every resistance to any psychic impulse, then he does not sell his body but sacrifices it. He repeats the atonement; he is close to holiness.”<sup>13</sup>

Grotowski’s words are strikingly similar to the words used by Żuławski on one of the rare occasions he discussed his attitude towards an actor’s processes:

“I guess in my work I am asking the actor to go deep down and understand why the hell he is an actor. Does he want to parade? Does he want to exist in a very superficial world or is he really, truthfully being an actor—which is almost a religious feeling. Please understand I am not a religious person in any sense of religion, okay? But I went to Siberia, I went to Africa, I went to the Caribbean, and I saw the voodoo and I saw the shamans and they are the best actors ever. Which means that if it is related to something so profound in our being, then why the hell are we playing with it? Why are our kids playing, and not just waiting for their piece of meat or whatever? This is basic. This is very interesting. This is fantastic. And if you are keen to go into it, if you are interested by it, I think it just helps today’s actors to forget that they are in the present and to remember that they are actors.”<sup>14</sup>

And again another version of the same statement pronounced by Żuławski’s alter ego, Kessler, in the film *The Public Woman*:

“An actress can keep nothing for herself! She  
Can’t have her secret garden, she can play anything!  
The sheep, the wolf, and the grandmother!”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 1968,p.34.

<sup>14</sup> Interview of Andrzej Żuławski by Margaret Barton-Fumo on March 6, 2012, Available at: [www.filmcomment.com](http://www.filmcomment.com).

<sup>15</sup> Text fragment from the film *The Public Woman*.



The fascination Żuławski nurtured with the phenomena of acting is evident not only in the outstanding creations he provoked in the actors he works with, but also in the frequent presence of “the actor” as a character in his films: there is a troupe of actors in *The Devil*; the main storylines of two of his films are closely connected with the acting ambitions of its protagonists (*The Most Important Thing: Love, and the Public Woman*); the *Blue Note* ends with a puppet performance; and he even manages to include speeches on the topic of acting in his obviously sci-fi film *On the Silver Globe*.

In this regard I would also like to discuss two aspects of the uneasy tasks which every actor playing in Żuławski’s movies had to undertake: acting the words Żuławski would write and acting the “wordless”.

The dialogues in Żuławski’s films are not naturalistic. Sometimes they sound like poetry, sometimes like inner monologues, excerpts from personal dairies, deep philosophical questions and religious lamentations, but almost never like random everyday dialogues. So how does an actor deliver a believable performance when s/he is supposed to interpret lines bordering on artificiality? And how is this kind of approach in constructing film dialogues justified?

Grotowski also discussed the question of the use of artificiality of form, arguing that it does not contradict the possibility of reaching the truthfulness of the content but on the contrary supports the emergence of truth, especially in cases of extreme emotions.

“There is no contradiction between inner technique and artifice (articulation of a role by signs). We believe that a personal process, which is not, supported and expressed by a formal articulation and disciplined structuring of the role is not a release and will collapse in shapelessness. We find that artificial composition not only does not limit the spiritual but actually leads to it. (The tension between the inner process and the form strengthens both. The form is like a baited trap, to which the spiritual process responds spontaneously and against which it struggles.) The forms of common "natural" behaviour obscure the truth; we compose a role as a system of signs which demonstrate what is behind the mask of common vision: the dialectics of human behaviour. At a moment of psychic shock, a moment of terror, of mortal danger or tremendous joy, a man does not behave "naturally." A man in an elevated spiritual state uses rhythmically articulated signs begins to dance, to sing. A **sign**, not a common gesture, is the elementary integer of expression for us.”<sup>16</sup>

Indeed Źuławski’s attention is never caught by the ordinary slow-paced life. His stories always trespass the tiny line between life and death, looking bravely over the verge of madness, and the electrified form of speech which Źuławski uses to transmit them is probably the most rhythmically correct choice in order to endure their close to explosive content. Faced with the challenge of pronouncing this type of text, the actor needs to overlook the immediate appearance and search for the symbol of the archetype contained in its structure. The actor’s understandings of the text should not come in the form of intellectual vivisection but rather by allowing the symmetry between the essential in the text and the actor’s own emotional source to provoke the emergence of the expression out of

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<sup>16</sup> Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 1968,p.17.

their bodily memory, expression which equalizes his own with the experiences of his forefathers.

In the case of the *Third Part of the Night*, the prevailing emotion that emerges behind the poetical dialogue is fear—a magnified fear of death, an Intensified struggle for survival, for preserving life, even in the form of bringing new babies to the world despite the world itself falling apart.

Fear is also one of the prevailing emotions in *Possession*, but it is a fear of death in a figurative sense—in this case the death of love. It is again notable how these two films reflect one another, as the first one presents an intensified search for construction (love) in times of threatened existence, as well as the opposite, an intensified need for destruction (especially self-destruction) when meaning (love) is under threat.

The “grounding” of the utterly poetic dialogue of Żuławski, is greatly supported by the proficient partnering between the main artistic couples, Leszek Teleszyński and Malgorzata Braunek in *Third Part of the Night*, as well as Isabelle Adjani and Sam Neil in *Possession*. The role the fine partnering implies on the overall quality of the performance is also evident in the decrease of the quality of the acting of Sam Neil in the scenes in which he is alone (e.g. the phone conversation scene). Regarding Isabelle Adjani, she is marvellous with or without a partner, and it is noted that for her most famous scene in *Possession*, when she has a miscarriage in the subway, for which she won Best Actress award at both the

1981 Cannes Film festival and the Cesar Awards, Żuławski directed her to “fuck the air”.

That scene is a good example of how Żuławski used the power of non-language sequences, and also of the great level of co-creation which required from actors to perform non-verbal scenes. The way Żuławski used non-verbal scenes in his films is also proof of his unconventional and brilliant cinematic thinking, and although in some of those scenes the accent is on the imagery and the effect is achieved through editing, there are others whose power relies solely on the actors.

There is a scene in *Possession* where Adjani (Anna) enters an empty church and, as she attempts to pray standing under the giant statue of Jesus, discovers that she has lost the words of her prayer. This scene stands as a wordless version of Anna’s frantic monologue about losing “Sister Faith”, and seen in parallel both scenes are wonderful examples of the variety of expressions Żuławski could create to achieve the same goal. In the wordless version, however, there is a quality which appears precisely because of the absence of words, as in this case the chosen form also becomes a metaphor of how faith has decreased so much that the words of the prayer have lost their meaning and all that is left of the prayer is a mute and tearless crying.

Adjani’s performance recalls Elaine Scarry’s observation in *The Body in Pain*:

“*The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) that ‘whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.’ Adjani’s remarkable

achievement – one as impressive now as it was thirty five years ago – is that for a brief moment, her body evoked an insight into the experience of suffering that words have so rarely achieved.”<sup>17</sup>

Żuławski was a generous director in terms of his focus on his actors and his providing them with the conditions for delivering performances that pushed the boundaries of cinema. Nevertheless, acting is not always successful in Żuławski's films. His persistent insistence on the use of exaggerated gesturing and rather theatrical *mise en scène* was not always well understood and executed by his actors. In some of his films in which the plot does not support the excessive behaviour of the characters, moreover, the style of acting becomes unjustified and resembles a caricature of what was once an achievement in Żuławski's films. A good example for this is Żuławski's final film, *Cosmos*, where the actors seem lost in acting weirdness without finding any relevant reason for it either in the psychology of their characters or in the storyline.

However, the successful examples of acting in Żuławski's films surpass the conventional expectations of an actor's accomplishment. The process of delivering those performances seemed as painful and harsh as the miscarriage in the famous subway scene in *Possession*. In a video interview Adjani described the process of working with Żuławski:

“He manipulated us a lot, but it is for the best, as he would never get this result if he wasn't as terrible and strong with us as he was on set. I was

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<sup>17</sup> Alexandra Heller Nicholas, The powerlessness in the language, available at: <https://overland.org.au/2016/02/andrzej-zulawski-and-the-powerlessness-of-language/>.

arriving every day on set, telling myself, 'you will not cry today' and of course I was crying."<sup>18</sup>

It is no wonder that Żuławski could not put into words the methods he used to achieve that outstanding quality in the performances of his actors. It seems that, similar to the characters in his films, he was directing in a state of trance, a trance which could not be described, but could only be lived and shared.

"Action! Open up!", screams Kessler\* to his actress, and it seems that this is the sentence which summarizes it all: to open up. The level to which the actors were able to open up into sharing the trance experience with Żuławski was the level which determined the quality of their performance.

When asked in a video interview how he worked with his actors, Żuławski answered: "I will never tell you that. It is my trick of the trade," before adding, in a more serious tone, "That is what makes you a filmmaker, or not." And judging by the results he achieved with his actors, Żuławski was a filmmaker—and one of a kind.

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<sup>18</sup> Video interview with Isabelle Adjani at the Cannes Film Festival in 1981, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjkZ7J5LqWo>.

## **2. The Dualistic Principle in the films *The Third Part of the Night* and *Possession***

In the following chapter I will explore the dualistic principle in Żuławski's creative approach through his films *The Third Part of the Night* and *Possession*, with an emphasis on the two prevailing thematic lines: the theme of Love and the theme of Death. I will also apply this dualistic method in my analysis, by deriving the antidotes from the mentioned themes, but in the context I assume that they exist in the films of Żuławski. In this way I will explore the theme of Love through the contrast between unlegislated love and love in the context of marriage. I will explore the theme of Death through its contrast, Life, which in Żuławski's films manifests itself through the Sexuality. As an introduction to this chapter I will also zero in on the narrative plot in both films.

### **2.1. *The Third Part of the Night*: a summary**

*The Third Part of the Night* has a complex non-linear structure in which reality is interwoven with flashbacks and hallucinations. However, what can be identified as its storyline is as follows:

After witnessing the slaughter of his son Lukas, his wife Helena and his mother by German soldiers, Michal leaves the house in the countryside and moves to the city, where he joins the underground resistance. During an assignment, another man is mistaken for him and wounded, while Michal finds himself in the

apartment of the man's at the moment labouring wife, Martha. Martha inexplicably reminds Michal of his dead wife, Helena, and he instantly start considering her and her new-born baby as his own family whom he needs to protect. For their sake he again takes up the job he had quit before because it made him ill: lice feeding. He even starts living with Martha in the same attic room in the convent where he once lived with Helena. And although it seems as if he has been given a second chance, his new life so much resembles his previous life that it pulls out to the surface his demons from the past.

Michal's first wife Helena had persuaded her previous husband to take the lice-feeding job, which caused his illness, a turning point in their relationship from which Helena became bound to him by her guilt. The appearance of Michal provided Helena with escape from her guilt-burdened marriage, but the guilt does not cease to plague her and even redoubles in the wartime circumstances when the only work Michal can get is the lice-feeding job and he takes it on her insistence. Michal witnesses the ex-husband of Helena tearing up the document that gave him arrest immunity (the confirmation that he works a lice-feeder), and voluntarily accept deportation to a concentration camp. Witnessing the despair of the man whose place he has taken, Michal withdraws emotionally from Helena, doubting her ability to love since she was capable of leaving his predecessor in such a manner. His emotional numbness continues even after their son Lukas is born, and all this begins to haunt him with a tremendous feeling of guilt after they have both died. He tries to redeem his sins to his dead wife and son by properly loving Martha and her baby, whom he begins to consider as the common



possession of himself, Martha and her husband. He tries to redeem his guilt for repeatedly taking over a life that previously belonged to another man by his continuous efforts to find the husband of Martha and bring him back to live with her.

In the elliptical ending of the film, Michal runs through a very long hospital hallway. The associations range from the tunnel we pass through from the mother's womb to life and the tunnel we cross to the 'other world' when we die. At the end of this tunnel Michal meets his own dead body. Moments later he also meets his own death, which obviously occurred on the stairway where at the beginning of the film he thought he was mistaken for Martha's husband. Nothing is certain in this film, and the interpretation of the narrative is dependent on the viewer's perspective, but the way I understand it is that the entire film is a pre-mortal hallucination of Michal occurring just moments before he dies. In those moments he envisions his life lived in a better way and also a better version of his death-it would be perfect if he was among the three corpses on the floor and Helena's reading was never interrupted.

## **2.2. *Possession*: a summary**

Anna and Mark are a married couple on the verge of estrangement for unidentified reasons. Returning home from a trip, the cold and confused welcome Mark receives from his wife makes him feel he had better spend the night in a hotel. Anna refuses the suggestion, since their son Bob is expecting his father. The usual suspect in such cases, a third person in the relationship, is initially

denied; but soon the revelation comes in the form of a phone confession. They meet in a café soon afterwards, and while they quickly agree on the material details of their divorce, Mark's decision that he will not be seeing their son anymore sounds like pure vengeance. She hits back by telling him that she would never have had Bob with him if she had known that other man existed in this world. What follows is his explosive anger, at first directed at every object that comes in his way, and later morphing into self-destructive isolation in a hotel room for three weeks. On his return home he finds his son all alone in an empty flat. When Anna comes back he takes the opportunity to make her stay. At first he violently blackmails her on the basis of her neglecting their son, and then he resorts to begging her to stay. He lulls her to sleep in their common bed and it seems that a truce has been achieved until, in the middle of the night, Mark realizes that Anna has escaped while he was sleeping when he is awoken by a phone call from a man claiming that Anna is with him. The next morning, Mark takes his son to the kindergarten for the first time and is surprised to discover that the teacher looks exactly like his wife, except that her eyes are green. The next surprise comes when, after tracking down Heinrich, Anna's supposed lover, he discovers that Ana is not with him and that the phone call he received in the night must have come from someone else. Anna appears and disappears, and every meeting with Mark brings another level of despair and mutual infliction of pain. In an emotionally wrenched kitchen scene, Ana attempts suicide by cutting her neck with an electric knife. Minutes later, Mark is randomly making cuts in his arm with the same knife. "It doesn't hurt!" Ana claims. "No.", Mark agrees, for

despite all their efforts their heartache cannot be surpassed by physical pain. Mark hires a detective to follow Anna. The kindergarten teacher, Helena, visits Marc to share her worries about his son, Bob. She cleans the bloody mess Anna has made in the kitchen, and she cleans Mark's wounds—by becoming his lover. The detective is the first to discover the Monster—the new lover of Anna, and by doing so he earns his death. The second victim of Anna is the lover of the detective. Mark senses that Anna is killing anyone who comes near her flat, so he passes on her new address to Heinrich. Mark receives disturbing video footage of Anna, made by Heinrich. Anna is having a miscarriage of something she calls "Sister Faith". Heinrich is almost murdered by Anna, but the final act of killing is completed by Mark. By becoming accomplices, the intimacy between Anna and Mark is restored. In the meantime, Anna has also killed Margie, and Mark promises to help with dealing with the corpse. Mark visits Heinrich's mother and keeps her company in her peaceful suicide. The police are after Anna, and Mark has his own persecutors. Eventually both end up being murdered. But just before they die, Anna introduces her lover, the Monster she has created by making love to him. The monster has progressed into another version of Mark, except that his eyes are green, like the eyes of kindergarten teacher. As the 'bad versions' of Ana and Mark are dead, the 'good' versions are about to meet, and the film ends right before that happen.

### 2. 3. Death versus Life

There is almost no film of Żuławski in which death does not play a central role. In some of his films, death is present in the form of anticipation (*The Blue Note*, *My Nights Are More Beautiful Than Your Days*). In others death takes so high a toll as if were working to meet a quota (*The Devil*, *The Third Part of the Night*, *On the Silver Globe*, *A Public Woman*). Sometimes death comes in very unexpected guise (*Szamanka*, *Possession*). In any case, death is always there and hardly anything can steal its spotlight, except sometimes death's opposite, life—and the ultimate manifestation of life in the films of Żuławski is the sexual.

Sexual scenes are amongst the highlights of Żuławski's films and are never there as an end in themselves. Żuławski mastered to perfection the talent of incorporating an abundance of information about the characters, their interrelationships and the storyline in the way the sexual scenes are executed.

There are two possible readings of the film *The Third Part of the Night*. The first reading accepts that everything is happening for real except the physical analogy between Helena and Martha, and respectively Michal and Martha's husband. The second possibility, to which I am more inclined, is that all the events occurring after the staircase chase are only a hallucination of Michal's. The same is the case with *Possession*: we can either read it fully as a metaphor (the unfaithfulness, the murders, and the return to the husband after the monster phase), or we can embrace the possibility that all the events actually happened regardless of the fact that some of them are surpassing objective reality.

However, in the following chapter I would like to examine the sexual scenes in both films, from the perspective of the first reading that assumes everything is actually happening.

There are two erotic scenes in *The Third Part of the Night* without an actual sexual act, but they nevertheless contain the primary accumulation of the sensual charge between the characters: the birth scene of Martha, and the bandaging scene in the bathroom. What is common between those two scenes is that the erotic is represented by a symbol: a nurse. When Martha is giving birth, Michal takes the role of the nurse; when Michal faints, Martha is the nurse, bandaging his wounds in the bathroom.



***The Third Part of the Night –Martha is bandaging Michal***

The etymology of the word 'nurse' contains both the meaning of taking care of an injured person as well as of breastfeeding a baby. Both meanings contain the act of care, and by the use of the nursing motif Żuławski establishes the prepositions for love relationship between the characters. The nurse as a symbol contains the pair of opposites: life and death. The life principle is not only expressed by the care for preserving life, which is normally part of the work of nurses, but also by the connection with the erotic rooted in the collective memory of the war survivors (as well as their descendants through the myth transmission), a phenomenon also discussed by the famous sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld:

“During the war years public opinion treated the nurses nearly always from the erotic point of view but in a thoroughly ambivalent fashion. On the one hand the transfigured form of the nurse was put in the center of every idealistic cult which was nevertheless thoroughly libidinous; and on the other side it seemed that a special pleasure was taken in besmirching this ideal figure, of attributing all her activities to thoroughly erotic motives in a much more comprehensive way than anything we have here attempted.”<sup>19</sup>

The first erotic scene between Marc and Anna in *Possession* counterpoises the nursing scenes in *The Third Part of the Night*. Again there is no actual sexual act, but nursing is replaced with wounding. The sensuous white flash of Anna's neck is approached by an electric kitchen knife, by Ana herself, just in the middle of Mark's cries “Anna, help me!”. Anna is as unable to help him, as she is unable to resist the cravings of her body towards her new lover, so the only way out is by abandoning the body—by dying. An actual nursing scene in which Marc is

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<sup>19</sup> Hirschfeld, M, *The Sexual History of the World War*. New York, NY: Panurge Press, 1930, p.66.

bandaging her neck follows the unsuccessful suicide attempt and the tightening gauze resembles the suffocation she feels in relation to him and at the same time associates with a possible murder. The guilt circulates between the spouses in a reversed love dance of action and reaction so the next on move is on Mark, and his aggression is now directed towards himself as he sporadically cuts his own hand with the same electric knife. This scene is a wonderful example of the continuous use of polarities in Żuławski's cinema: the electric knife, the tool resembling death, becomes the connection between the bodies of Anna and Marc, and the cutting becomes sex performed through an intermediary and also a substitute for the absence of actual sexual activity in their marriage.



***Possession-*** Mark bandages the neck of Anna



**Possession-Mark is cutting his arm with electric knife**

The use of polarities is very evident in the next pair of erotic scenes, which I will analyse. In the *Third Part of the Night*, sexual union between Martha and Michal becomes possible only after their eventual separation appears on the horizon (with the news of Martha's husband soon returning). The scene of the first sexual act of Martha and Michal is filmed as inconclusive wrestling match between life and death in which the bonding of their bodies is paced down by Michal's emerging memories of his deceased son and wife. The scene culminates with a dazzling shot in which Michal discovers that under their love bed there is a window hole offering a direct view on his friend's deceased mother.

The prelude to the only scene in *Possession* in which Anna and Mark actually have intercourse is again a death—this time the death of Marge, Ana's best friend. The blood-soaked shirt of Michal becomes a sign of voluntarily shared



guilt over Ana's murder of Marge and a starting point for rebuilding the communion between the two estranged lovers.

Żuławski's almost obsessive fusing of the erotic with death is also obvious in another love scene in the *Third Part of the Night*. Jan, the former husband of Helena, wakes up in the bed of the waitress he has just met. The view of a woman sleeping by his side provokes his emotions and he bursts into silent crying. The girl wakes up and the mutual sadness connects them in a passionate kiss; but just moments after, a gunshot from the window kills her.

The birth scenes occurring in both films also serve as antidotes to one another. While in the *Third Part of the Night* the birth of a beautiful healthy baby occurs in the middle of the destructive power of the war, as a pure personification of life power, in *Possession* the birth is a miscarriage occurring with disastrous force and serving as a symbol of destruction.

The monster with which Anna makes love, after all, visually resembles both a decaying corpse and an embryo in development. Thus even the monster becomes a personification of the polarity between construction and destruction, procreation and vanishing, or simply life and death.

#### **2.4. Love versus marriage**

The next duality I would like to examine, as it is highly present in the films of Żuławski, is the one between Love (in the context of a love relationship

unburdened by legislation) in contrast with Marriage. Żuławski's attitude towards marriage as burdensome, limiting the freedom and opposing the creative expression of love is notable in most of his films. He presents infidelity as the common escape towards freedom, and a jump from the static power of marriage into the dynamics of new temptations. In most of his films, this paradigm is used in the common sense of the love triangle drama.

It is only in the *The Third Part of the Night* and *Possession* that Żuławski manages to observe the duality of love versus marriage, using the full potential of the metaphor and blurring the line between consciousness and sub-consciousness, as well as between reality and hallucination.

Both films use doubles of the main protagonists played by the same actors. In *The Third Part of the Night* the purpose of the doubles is in the context of re-living life in a better way. In *Possession*, the context is slightly different and lies in constructing a better (idealized) version of the actual marital partner.

The dreamlike opportunity for reliving a life already lived brings the danger of repeating the same mistakes. Freud had also examined the phenomena of repetition:

“This ‘perpetual recurrence of the same thing’ causes us no astonishment when it relates to active behaviour on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences.

We are much more impressed by cases where the subject appears to have a passive experience, over which he has no influence, but in, which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality.”<sup>20</sup>

The repetitions occurring in the life of Michal, in the life he lives with Martha, the new version of his deceased wife Helena, are directed by the course of fatal circumstances rather than by his active behaviour. One of the main fatal circumstances is the war setting in which everything occurs. If the film is observed from a perspective based on the presumption that the events following the staircase chase are only Michal’s hallucination, it is interesting to note that despite Michal’s ability to visualize his becoming a better partner and better father, he is still not able to visualize a reality without war.

The moment when a third person, an outsider, enters and threatens a marital union between two people is captured very precisely in the scene of Helena and Michal’s first meeting. The polarity between the old and the new is skilfully emphasized with visual details and behavioural hints.

While Jan, the husband of Helena is wearing pyjamas (the dress code of someone who is constantly ill), the outfits of Helena and Michal are in matching colours—an inventive visual suggestion that they “fit together”. Jan mentions that “the only fire that could have broken out in this house died out a long time ago”, alluding to the deceased passion between him and Helena. “You should not sit

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<sup>20</sup> Freud, S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. London, International Psycho-Analytical, 1922, p.16.

here in darkness,” says Helena to Jan, a sentence with double meaning that illustrates not only the obvious, but also her feeling that he is no more illuminated by her love, and there is a new person in the light of her attention. The room is heavy with the guilt-burdened relationship between Jan and Helena, and Michal tries to leave it as soon possible, but Helena follows him. While the two are alone talking to each other in the hallway they already look like a couple, while Jan is out of frame and only his repetitive calling on Helena reminds us of his fading presence in her life. The moment at which the husband suddenly becomes the intruder between two emerging lovers finds a brilliant visual expression in a shot where Michal and Helena are positioned at the doorframe looking at each other, divided by the naked death-evoking body of Jan positioned in the doorway.



***The Third Part of the Night***-Jan between the emerging lovers Michal and Helena

When Helena finally decides to escape Jan, the scene of meeting with her new lover, Michal, takes place at a graveyard—another of Żuławski's favoured contrasts. She faints in the arms of Michal, overwhelmed by her strong love feelings. The new surfacing relationship seems promising not only because it is a way out of dreary marriage but also because it is pulsating with fresh life force.

The lover quickly becomes a husband, however, and what was once a free choice turns into a duty. Michal soon becomes the emotionally unresponsive and guilt-imposing husband that Jan was, especially after he starts working as a lice-feeder—at Helena's insistence—(just as Jan did) and falls ill as a result.

The alienation between lovers as a result of marriage is also reviewed in *Possession*, but from the opposite angle: the characters are given the chance to walk the path regressively, and from spouses to become lovers.

The first information we receive in *Possession* is that the husband has been absent for a long time. He returns from a trip and is greeted with a cold marital bed from which his wife feels the urge to run away while he is asleep. If we assume that almost everything in this film is a metaphor, the absence of Mark can also be understood in a wider context than the one related to his travels. It is common for spouses get so much used to each other's presence that they become 'invisible' for one another, especially in the erotic sense. If we assume that Anna has suffered from being 'invisible' to Mark for a long time, the film can

also be understood as a radical effort by a woman to regain her erotic visibility in the eyes of her husband. The French writer and philosopher Georges Bataille examined the correlation between habit and passion:

“The most serious thing is that habit dulls intensity and marriage implies habit. There is a remarkable connection between the innocence and the absence of danger offered by repeated intercourse (the first act being the only one to fear) and the absence of value on the level of pleasure generally associated with this repetition. This is no negligible connection: it has to do with the very essence of eroticism.”<sup>21</sup>

In this Żuławskian fantasy, the return of the passion between the spouses is possible. The film becomes a more violent and doubled version of Pinter’s *The Lover*<sup>22</sup> when we realize that the wife has been unfaithful to her husband with a monster who is actually just a version of the husband himself, while the husband has been unfaithful to his wife with the kindergarten teacher who is also a version of his wife.

It is an interesting point of comparison how Żuławski envisioned those two duplicated, idealized versions of the spouses. Thus the dreamlike wife is wearing white, as white as her saint-like behaviour, and she is always at the disposal of her needy husband or child. Her kitchen is perfectly clean, and her humour is intelligent and precise. While the dreamlike husband, according to Żuławski, is a monster whose main characteristic is his sexual endurance. However, if the wife

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<sup>21</sup> Bataille, G, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986 p.111.

<sup>22</sup> *The Lover* is a 1962 one act play by Harold Pinter, in which the husband plays the role of the lover, which enables the wife to take the role of a whore.

is diligently and regularly making love to the monster-husband he eventually turns into an exemplary handsome man.

Żuławski has been accused of being a misogynist more than once, but I will abstain from such judgments, partly because of my deep admiration of Żuławski's films, and especially this one, and partly because I am still defending duality as the ultimate principle of his works. In other words, he may seem to be a misogynist, but that may also prove that he is a lover of women.

Mark and Anna eventually come to a revival of their passion, preceded by the brutal murder of every man who comes near Ana and her treasure, the monster-lover, and also the murder of Anna's best friend Margie, which can also be understood as intuitive revenge because Margie slept with Mark. The love act occurs on the kitchen floor, as the marital bed could have evoked bad memories; and before succumbing to the ardour of her husband, Anna informs him that God is in her.

At this point I would like to return to the observation of the opposites, but from a Tantric point of view. In Tantra the opposites should overcome the battle and work in cooperation. The body and the spirit, the erotic and the transcendental, emotion and intellect, good and evil, etc., all become equalized, first within oneself and subsequently in the partner. Only with such pacifying of the polarities can the distinction between self and other vanish and the partners approach a mutual state of bliss:

“There is neither affirmation nor denial, neither existence nor non-existence, neither non-remembering nor remembering, neither affection nor non-affection, neither the cause nor the effect, neither the production nor the produced, neither purity nor impurity, neither anything with form, nor anything without form; it is but the synthesis of all dualities.”<sup>23</sup>



***Possession*-Ana is making love with the monster**

Viewed from this perspective, the monster can also be considered as the suppressed part of the personality of Mark, which makes him emotionally distant. He is “away”, because he is away from himself, because part of him is unloved and hidden. Anna discovers that ‘monstrous’ side of Mark, and decides to love it. By the act of loving that secret part of Mark, she is creating Mark. “Almost,

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<sup>23</sup> Dasgupta, S. B. *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1974 p. 114.



almost!” cries Anna when Mark sees her making love to the monster. Indeed the monster is almost finished, but in order to be fully finished there is a need for acceptance, or in tantric terms, for an equalization of polarities. The marriage becomes effective at the moment when Mark accepts Anna’s monstrous side. Anna’s infidelity and the murders at one point become something completely natural for Mark, simply because they belong to her. At the moment he is able to accept Anna’s monstrous side he reconciles himself with his own monster as well. He becomes “finished”, as Anna puts it. Now it becomes clear that the choice of depicting Anna’s idealized version as white and caring did not come from misogynist motives but from opposition to the original Anna who, unlike Mark, was emotionally transparent, sexually awakened and in touch with her wild side, but lacking contact with her more peaceful and modest part.

After the old and fragmented Anna and Mark are dead, the newly built ones can continue to live. The new Anna, already in touch with her caring side, is naturally at home with the child. The new Mark is returning home again, just like at the beginning of the film. It seems that a new and promising beginning is ahead of them. The only one who doubts it is their son. “Don’t open!” screams the little child who has already witnessed the devastating effect his parents have on each other. The whole film receives a new meaning when viewed from the perspective of a little boy traumatized by his parents’ dramas. The return of the father for the little child can mean only one thing: the war between his parents is about to begin. The sound of the bombing at the end of the film is not a historical

reference but rather a manifestation of the fear of a little child scared of the ruinous power of love.

The whole film seems like a meditation of the director on the possibility of reunion with his wife and a desperate cry for optimism regarding their marriage. And although the film probably contributed to his inner reconciliation with the infidelity of his wife, the ending of the film suggests that he cannot trust again a woman who was capable of leaving a child alone at home so she could be with a lover.

### **3. Conclusion: The atypical quest for God**

Many film critics and scholars have attempted to analyse the complex and fascinating film opus of Żuławski. However, his films have still never been fully grasped, his metaphors never fully revealed, his secret messages never fully unveiled. With this thesis I make my own modest contribution to shedding some light on the universe of a filmmaker I deeply respect.

I have explored the use of duality as a creative principle in Żuławski's films *Possession* and *The Third Part of the Night*, using a dualistic method myself. Out of the content of these films I have identified and examined two pairs of thematic opposites, *Love versus Marriage*, and *Death versus Life*. This has led me to a conclusion similar to that reached by Sigmund Freud in observing that life manifests itself through opposites which are inevitably and permanently interrelated.

Each discovery leads to a new question, however, and the basic question that arises from focussing in on the monstrous in humanity as offered by the films of Żuławski, is whether God still exists. Although Żuławski never claimed to be religious, it seems that his films are nothing less than an on-going dialogue with God.

“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” says the Bible (John 4:8), and the question arises as to whether Żuławski is replying to this statement when Helena in *The Third Part of the Night* explains that love is “the absence of cruelty, a total contempt for everything that is not love”<sup>24</sup>. Is this an expression of the director’s rage towards God who, defined as love, should represent “the absence of cruelty”, but instead is mercilessly cruel? It is a rage that finds its proper voice in the blasphemous prayer of Michal’s father after he has witnessed the murder of his wife, his daughter-in-law and his grandson:

“Oh God, who does not lead us... Oh, God, who allows the fragile to be killed and who elevates blind hatred... Oh, God, who allows cruelty to be propagated and people to torment each other... Oh, God, who elevates the most evil ones and puts the whip into their hands... Oh merciless God, have no mercy upon us.”<sup>25</sup>

And when in *Possession* Mark slaps Anna, saying that his violence is punishment for her lies, and Anna replies “Than you have to add some more”, isn’t that just the same rebellious dialogue of Żuławski with God continuing?

There is no sin from the Ten Commandments that is not committed in Żuławski’s films. But again it is the principle of duality that illuminates this tormenting need of Żuławski to expose the filthiest manifestations of humanity. That need does not come from denial of God’s existence but from a longing for God. The parade of sins and “sinners” in the films of Żuławski is just another attempt to test the limits of God’s love.

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<sup>24</sup> A text excerpt from the film *The third Part of the night*

<sup>25</sup> A text excerpt from the film *The third Part of the night*

Right about the time of Żuławski's birth, the world was a slaughterhouse far scarier than the world represented in *The Third Part of the Night*. In the last year of his life Żuławski witnessed the next major crisis of human values, popularly called the "refugee crisis". He has left us fifteen films, to continue on our own his atypical quest for God's return. In *The Third Part of the Night* he even slipped in a tiny users' guide, which his passionate nature never allowed him to follow:

"You want to talk to God on equal terms.  
It's impossible.  
You should only ask him silent questions."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> A text excerpt from the film *The third Part of the night*

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## **5. Filmography**

### **1. The Story of Triumphant Love (TV Short) 1969**

**Piesn triumfujacej milosci (original title)**

Country: Poland

Language: Polish

Runtime: 27 min

### **2. Pavoncello (TV Short) 1969**

Country: Poland

Language: Polish

Runtime: 27 min

### **3. The Third Part of the Night 1971**

**Trzecia czesc nocy (original title)**

Country: Poland

Language: Polish

Runtime: 105 min

### **4. The Devil 1972**

**Diabel (original title)**

Country: Poland

Language: Polish

Runtime: 119 min



**5. That Most Important Thing: Love 1975**

**L'important c'est d'aimer (original title)**

Country: France | Italy | West Germany

Language: French

Runtime: 109 min

**6. Possession 1981**

Country: France | West Germany

Language: English | French | German

Runtime: 124 min

**7. The public woman 1984**

**La femme publique (original title)**

Country: France

Language: French

Runtime: 113 min

**8. Mad love 1985**

**L'amour braque (original title)**

Country: France

Language: French

Runtime: 101 min

**9. On the Silver Globe 1988**

**Na srebrnym globie (original title)**

Country: Poland

Language: Polish

Runtime: 166 min

**10. My Nights Are More Beautiful Than Your Days 1989**

**Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours (original title)**

Country: France

Language: French

Runtime: 110 min

**11. Boris Godounov 1989**

Country: France | Spain | Yugoslavia

Language: Russian

Runtime: 115 min

**12. The blue note 1991**

**La note bleue (original title)**

Country: France | Germany

Language: French

Runtime: 135 min

### **13. Szamanka 1996**

Country: Poland | France | Switzerland

Language: Polish

Runtime: 110 min

### **14. Fidelity 2000**

**La fidélité (original title)**

Country: France | Portugal

Language: French

Release Date: 2000

Runtime: 105 min | 166 min (general release)

### **15. Cosmos 2015**

Country: France | Portugal

Language: French

Runtime: 103 min