

Dina Iordanova, 'A Breakthrough: Divided Loyalties in Kieslowski's *Camera Buff*,'  
Essay in the booklet to Arrow Films' Edition of  
*Cinema of Conflict: Four Films by Krzysztof Kieslowski*, 2020, 21-28.

## **A BREAKTHROUGH: DIVIDED LOYALTIES IN KIESLOWSKI'S CAMERA BUFF**

by Dina Iordanova



Kieslowski's *Camera Buff* (*Amator*, 1979) is the story of a humble provincial factory buyer, Filip Mosz (Jerzy Stuhr), who acquires an 8 mm camera to film his new-born baby daughter. But then he gradually gets involved in amateur filmmaking at his place of work and beyond, in film clubs and even television, attends events, learns how to use new equipment and starts obsessing about point of view, choice of subjects, editing and such like. Filmmaking brings him excitement and simultaneously leads to disaffection from his familiar surroundings; he gradually grows farther and farther apart from his small family paradise and grows interested in the outside world. His rapid education in representation – hand-held camera, long shots, montage – is counter-balanced by an equally rapid estrangement from former family and friends. The narrative of his evolution ends at a moment when, alone in the apartment – after his wife and child have left him – he turns the camera towards himself. He will be a filmmaker.

\*\*\*

Within Poland, *Camera Buff* was released in an intense cinematic context, at the juncture when the established generation of Polish directors (Wajda, Jakubowska, Kutz, and Zanussi to some extent) welcomed younger creators that mainly came out of the film school in Łódź. These included people like Feliks Falk (*Top Dog* [*Wozdziej*, 1978], also starring Jerzy Stuhr) and Agnieszka Holland (*Provincial Actors* [*Aktorzy Prowincjonalni*, 1979], also shot by Jacek Petrycki) whose works gravitated around contemporary themes of work, relationships, and personal integrity, and often relied on the same crew members. Just a few years later the growing number of these contemporary-themed films (which also include Wajda's *Man of Marble* [*Człowiek z Marmuru*, 1977] and *Rough Treatment* [*Bez Znezczenia*, 1978] and Zanussi's *Camouflage* [*Barwy Ochronne*, 1977], among others) would come to be known as 'cinema of moral concern', in a context where the demise of state socialism had already

started – with the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II (1978), the strikes of 1980, and the introduction of martial law of 1981.

Krzysztof Kieslowski, the director of *Camera Buff*, graduated from the film school in Łódź a decade earlier, in 1968. He then made documentary shorts about ordinary working people (e.g. *Bricklayer* [*Murarz*, 1973]). He also worked in television and his works were shown in many festivals. Thus, whilst not autobiographical, many of Filip's formative experiences may have been Kieslowski's own, or observed by him. He had been filming the world of work and many personal stories had emerged through his television reportages. Kieslowski's filmic intentions are similar to Filip's. They both seek to present non-traditional complex protagonists evolving in worlds where things are not black and white: a control freak night porter for Kieslowski (*From a Night Porter's Point of View* [*Z Punktu Widzenia Nocnego Portiera*, 1979]) and a deeply ordinary and dedicated dwarf-worker in Filip's first short feature for television.

Kieslowski gradually came to working on hybrid types of feature re-enactments with a strong documentary feel that were mainly produced by the 'Tor' film unit (managed by Stanisław Rozewicz) and often used a mixture of reportage with artistic license and even professional actors, all in the name of realism.<sup>1</sup> He has also shot quite a bit for television, an institution which not only was of particular importance during the period in question but which is also depicted as force for change in *Camera Buff*. In his book of dialogues with Danusia Stok, Kieslowski speaks at length about this: if it was not for the pro-active stance of the commissioning editors, the simpler approval process and the lesser financial pressures, he

---

<sup>1</sup> His feature debut is the film *Blizna/The Scar*, 1976. One of his early television shorts, the 30-min long *Przejście Podziemne/Pedestrian Subway* (1974), starring Andrzej Seweryn, is available on Amazon Prime.

may not have been able to make some of his most important films, including the *Dekalog* (1989-1990), which was originally made for TV.<sup>2</sup>

\*\*\*

Immersed into small-town amateur film societies, of 8mm and 16 mm films and life in late socialism, *Camera Buff* brings two worlds together – work and filmmaking. At one point in the film Filip looks through a film magazine; the camera glimpses some of the pages, and we see, fleetingly, images from films by Czech master Jiri Menzel and Hungarian veteran Karoly Makk, a photo of Polish megastar Zbigniew Cybulski, and a still from Ken Loach's *Kes* (1969) – thus setting the cinematic and aesthetic context of the time. It is a hint to the direction the protagonist might take, as he intensely immerses himself in studying cinema – but it is also an introduction to the world of Kieslowski's own cinematic peers.

And indeed, *Camera Buff* provides a comprehensive snippet into the structure of film culture in socialist Poland. On the one hand there is the world of officially sanctioned filmmaking, represented here through Filip's meeting with director Krzysztof Zanussi, a screening and discussion of whose *Camouflage* he attends. The encounter with a man like Zanussi, who walks the walk and talks the talk, opens Filip's eyes to a world that would normally be out of sight for an ordinary worker: one where filmmaking can be a reputable profession for a clean-cut suit-wearing person and where issues that one is bothered about can be shown on screen and then discussed. Filip brings Zanussi for a visit to his factory in Wielice, a place that the

---

<sup>2</sup> In Danusia Stok, *Kieslowski on Kieslowski* (1994). His *Short Film About Killing* (1988) and *Short Film About Love* (1988) were made as spin-offs of the respective TV episodes with minor additional funding for added scenes and blowing up to 35 mm format. The position of television in the late 1970s was similarly progressive in other countries of state socialism, for example in former Yugoslavia in providing creative outlet for those filmmakers who had gone in emigration earlier in the decade as fall out of censorship of Makavejev's bold *WR: Mysteries of Organism* (1971).

director had not even heard about. But then, going to such meetings with the members of the working class is what is expected from the intelligentsia under socialism.

Then, even if not officially part of the film industry structures, there is the institution of television: The film features a real character, Andrzej Jurga, who is still currently a Professor at the Łódź film school who in the film is a commissioning editor who is instrumental in Filip's transformation. They first meet at the amateur cinema festival where Jurga sits on the jury, i.e. here is a television gatekeeper who considers workers' filmmaking not only legitimate, but a source of fresh material. He is one of those savvy socialist intellectuals who knows how to capitalise on what was permitted and finds ingenious ways to speak up in a context where speaking rights are monopolised by the communist party and state.

Filmmaking by a worker is particularly important; it only takes little assistance from the editor for the workers to start seeing and saying what the intelligentsia would be seeing and saying: it is all in line with the Leninist view that the proletariat needs to have ideology imported from the more educated classes. The relationship between the intelligentsia and workers is a key topic of pre-martial law Poland, with a huge build-up of tensions that would erupt later on (as shown in *Workers '80* [*Robotnicy '80*, 1982], a documentary shot by Jacek Petricki, *Camera Buff's DoP*).

Jurga and his colleagues pro-actively commission amateur work that shows the situation around the country; their role as gatekeepers is best shown in the scene where they hand over film stock to allow the next project to be filmed – up until this point the stock had been coming from the director of the factory. Now there are new masters on the block and Filip's loyalties start splitting.

At the lowest, entry level – yet the only one immediately accessible to Filip and whose existence he did not even suspect – is the circle of amateur workers' cinema clubs. Working for one of them is Anna (Ewa Pokas); her job is to pro-actively canvass various enterprises and solicit material for the competitive event which she organises in Łódź. She is also the one who speaks up for Filip's film, becoming his effective promoter. Anna belongs to two worlds. On the one hand she is near the workers and thus, is the only connection between Filip's current world of an outsider and his dream world of cinema, that she belongs to and he does not. At some point Filip even dares to reach out and kiss her; yet it never goes any further than that. The kiss does not mean much to her; it is unlikely that there will be an affair here; and his script doesn't seem like it was written by a sexually permissive person. The kiss is more of an act of longing, an act of putting a foot in the door for a future he wants for himself. On the other hand, Anna also knows the real cineastes, and there are hints she is sleeping with someone high up in the hierarchy. She is young and good looking and will probably climb up the ladder and leave this job – for the time being, though, she is dedicated to the workers. Her character, indirectly, hints at the limitations faced by women in the film industry, back then as well as today.

At the festival, Filip also meets others like him – but more seasoned ones, who introduce him to gossip, competitiveness, the limiting context of this new society. He keeps his distance, but nonetheless, this becomes his initiation into the new life that will set him apart from other members of the working class. Initially, the camera was acquired with the intention to film the baby, Irenka. It is a Soviet product and not an easy item to get: this type of object (means of allowing for 'mechanical reproduction' as per Walter Benjamin) were not widely accessible during communism. Filming stock was particularly limited, and whilst the factory director isn't the one who gives Filip his new camera, he acquires stock for him to enable his reportages – but also to control them. Gradually, with Filip's expanding social network, the

sources of stock diversify, and the matters of agenda-setting and censorship become more complex, taking his shooting to a higher level of self-reflexivity.

Filip's evolution is from a mere recordist to a reporter, and from there on to narrative filmmaker, and the film reveals the key moments of this development: a film club popping up, a sidekick appearing, some experimentation with PoV shots which Filip puts to the side in view to be integrated into a later project... All these transitions take place quite rapidly and subtly, as for the whole duration of the film, Filip remains employed at his factory job and his daughter is less than a year old. The radical changes that are already underway fall outside the narrative space of *Camera Buff*. He learns to be a reporter the moment he recognises the value of filming some party official going to the toilet – a reportage that brings about both recognition and censorship. He makes steps into narrative filmmaking the moment he crosses into the courtyard behind a facade to film what is not presentable/showable. With every further filming decision, he gets farther and farther away from his fellow workers with whom he seemed close earlier in the film.

Then, there is censorship – and it is Kieslowski's great achievement in this film to show the subtle and complex considerations that informed the mechanisms of control in the era of dying communism. The factory director is charged with this task. On the one hand, he is shown as a typical controlling bigot – he wants to have a say on what is being shot and shown, he scolds Filip for shooting a reportage about a disabled worker (rather than about a 'man of marble' type of hero), and other things of this sort – all easily predictable behaviour. But it also transpires he is a decent man, who tries to keep things in balance within the limited range of means he has at his disposal. He does not try to misrepresent or deny the wrongs behind the facade – he was simply overburdened by his responsibility, and there are

limiting management aspects that Filip does not know about. Media and film are only a part of the story, and a superficial one at that.

\*\*\*

Starting with the birth of his daughter, Irenka, *Camera Buff* tackles a series of changes that occur in Filip Mosz's life. Some are of particular importance.

His first 'auteur' film, for example. The subject that Filip picks for his first exercise in creating a narrative documentary is his colleague who is a dwarf. An ordinary married man, he has worked at the factory for a quarter of a century. It was difficult and he was bullied at first, but now he has asserted his position at the factory, and all is well in his home and marriage. Filip follows Wawrzyniec (Tadeusz Rzepka) around, gathering material for a short feature. The factory director, however, is unhappy and tries to pressure him against this choice of a 'cripple', as he puts it. Besides giving insights into the working dynamics at the factory, it is interesting to think that Filip may have chosen the dwarf worker as protagonist for a very similar reason – he is visibly different, even if the director and Filip approach his difference with opposed sets of values. Filip is searching to glorify the ordinary man, a protagonist who may be at a disadvantage yet stands out in a simple yet dignified manner. For the director it is not about the individual, the worker must blend into the socialist enterprise and is nothing more than an extension of it, a 'man of marble'. Filip triumphs at the end – he has made other compromises, but his documentary about the dwarf worker is on television; it earns him recognition amidst colleagues and sets him on the path to becoming a filmmaker.

And then, there is the loss of the family. Filip's wife, Irka (Malgorzata Wlodarszyk) is quick to realise that she does not like the way her man is changing; she turns away from him,



somehow too easily. It is true that he bought the camera to film the baby but has barely done that; he has been absent from his domestic life and his mind is occupied with something else, and it is not too difficult for her to figure out that if she does not leave now she may find herself left by him. Still, her desertion comes as a shock; he did not see it coming even though he will soon be back on his feet. He is still part of the community; he is upset when he watches the footage of his friends' mother who has since passed away. But he can no longer prioritise the 'peace and quiet' that he and Irka have promised to one another and that is, uncompromisingly, still entrenched in her values. He still does not know in what direction the tide is taking him, but he is already on the move... The Catholic family transactions, with a wife who militantly defends the right to being ordinary, are not of his fancy any longer.

The last scene of the film shows Filip Mosz in his empty apartment. It is Sunday, no work today. His family is no longer there. He has changed; the change has also been noticed and recognised by others. The road ahead is clear. But what does he know about the world? Which story does he know well enough to tell? In a symbolic, Proustian gesture, he turns the camera on himself. Indeed, all we can talk about is ourselves...

\*\*\*

Jerzy Stuhr (b. 1947) is one of Poland's great actors, having been cast in more than thirty films of consequence and is best remembered, perhaps, for his role in Feliks Falk's *Bohater Roku* (1987). In *Camera Buff* he is in his prime and going from strength to strength, having just emerged from another, drastically different but equally rewarding role in Feliks Falk's film *Top Dog*, where he is the calculating and pragmatic emcee. Stuhr worked with Kieslowski on other films, most notably for *Three Colors: White* (*Trois couleurs: Blanc*, 1994). Around the time of Kieslowski's passing he turned to directing and, for a short while,

was considered something of a Kieslowski heir, mainly for films like *Love Stories (Historie Milosne, 1997)* and *Big Animal (Duze Zwierze, 2000)*, in which he also starred.

Being made before those later films for which Kieslowski had assembled his ultimate ‘team’ (comprising of composer Zbigniew Preisner and cameraman Slawomir Idziak) the other key collaborator here is Jacek Petrycki, a major Polish cinematographer with more than 100 credits to his name.<sup>3</sup> For *Camera Buff*, Petricky supplies an unforgettable camouflage feel, overwhelmingly found in the greyscale overtones of the film – of the buildings, the factory environment, the clothes – the colour of late socialism, an afterimage that remains.

The film was met with the approval of those in charge as it was sent to the Moscow Film Festival where it got an award. Other awards followed, at Gdynia, and, most notably, at the Berlinale. By the summer of 1980, *Camera Buff* had played at key festivals all over the West – New York, Locarno, Porretta Terme. This started an awards spree for Kieslowski as each one of his later films would bring in multiple awards from the circuit. Initially, the reaction of international critics was mixed, but gradually they started seeing and understanding the subtlety of Kieslowski’s cinema, and today, *Camera Buff* counts as one of his early masterpieces.

---

<sup>3</sup> Most notably, Petrycki shot most of Kieslowski’s documentaries, his *Bez Konca/No End*, Ryszard Bugajski’s seminal *Przesluchanie/The Interrogation* (1989) and the documentary film *Krzysztof Kieslowski: I am So-so* (Krzysztof Wierzbicki, 1995).

# CINEMA OF CONFLICT

FOUR FILMS BY KRZYSZTOF KIEŚLOWSKI



ARROW  
ACADEMY

15