

Łukasz Żal

Interview Finn Blythe
Personal on-set photography by Łukasz Żal

After the cinematographer fell ill prior to shooting Paweł Pawlikowski’s Oscar-winning *Ida* in 2013, his camera operator Łukasz Żal was presented with the kind of preordained opportunity to replace him that befalls those destined for greatness. Stepping into the vacated position, it was this serendipitous moment that not only alerted Pawlikowski to Żal’s cinematic eye, but helped Żal cultivate his deft visual intelligence and understated style into one of the industry’s finest cinematographers.

Last year saw Żal reunited with Pawlikowski for *Cold War*, a film which, in appearance and acclaim, picked up where the pair left off. With the same crisp monochrome 4:3 aspect ratio, and three Academy Award nominations, both are astonishing feats of storytelling which, from first to last frame, move with a tempo and visual economy that never wavers or overcompensates.

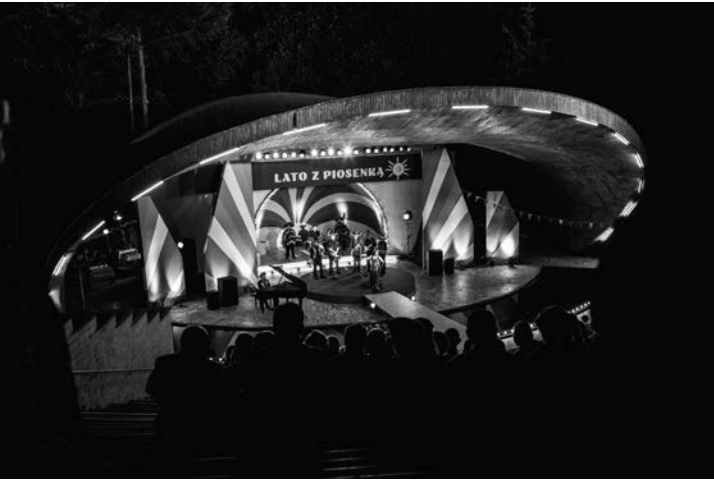
In his tendency to frame shots that make equal use of backdrop as they do character, Żal situates narrative within a reality which, like our own, is contingent and unpredictable. Combined with his meticulous and ritualised preparation, it is this readiness to channel moments of spontaneous truth and unpredictable flashes of authentic human interaction that leave his films etched into memory. Extending far beyond merely visualising dialogue, his focus, lighting, depth of field and camera movement enrich our understanding of each character and the worlds they inhabit.



Finn Blythe: Hello Łukasz, what are you working on at the moment?
Łukasz Żal: Just talking about a few new films, reading scripts, organising myself. I’m in a moment where I really don’t know what I’m going to do even in the next few days because there are so many different approaches and issues that I’m trying to put together.
Finn: And has that all developed off the back of *Cold War*?
Łukasz: It’s snowballed. Scripts are coming almost every few days and there’s very little time to decide which is the best and which direction to take.
Finn: So when you have to make a quick decision regarding a script, what goes into that process?
Łukasz: That’s an interesting question. I’m trying to look for a project in which I somehow find a part of myself and learn something, about myself, about people, about the world. That was exactly the case with *Cold War*. It is of course Paweł’s film, but it was also very personal for me in terms of thinking about love: what love is, what it isn’t, how relationships work, what we are looking for in deciding who to be with. I don’t think of films as work, I try to think of them as personal journeys, you don’t know where it’s leading, you’re just taking the story and trying to discover something new. After every film you’re a different person. It’s a chapter in your life.
Finn: You’ve referred to the experience of working on a film as ‘creative meditation’. Are you consumed to a point where you find it difficult to switch off?
Łukasz: Well in general I have a problem that my mind is always thinking. So at least when I’m working, life is easier because I can use it for something creative, not just thinking about unnecessary things. But it’s also a creative meditation in terms of being on set. When I am on set I don’t talk a lot, I try not to lose energy on small talk because I believe that every ounce of energy you have should go into the movie. When I’m shooting, time slows to a standstill. You are so involved, all you’re aware of is that moment of creation. Before a film I try to prepare in the best way possible – before *Cold War*, I thought that somehow A causes B: the more I prepare, the better the film will be, but since I’ve realised this isn’t the case. Very often things happen on set, things you can’t predict or control, you just need to be aware and open to seeing things and I think that’s the most exciting part of shooting.
Finn: And where does that focus and energy on set come from? Is it the director, the script or something collective?
Łukasz: Everything comes from the director, you are kind of a partner. With Paweł, he somehow invites you to dance, and together with your camera operator and your gaffer, you dance with him. Very often you balance on the border of mistake and catastrophe because when you want to make something new you need to be bold, be brave.
Finn: Not afraid of mistakes.
Łukasz: Exactly. During *Cold War* there were plenty of days we filmed in the middle of the day and it didn’t work. You feel that it’s OK but it’s not what you’re looking for. Then in certain moments you see that something breaks. I think it’s the same with directors: they don’t always know, sometimes they are just waiting for something amazing to

happen. One of my favourite directors, he was also my teacher, Jerzy Wójcik, Polish DOP, wrote once in his book something like, “Coming to the set I’m very well prepared, but I’m not coming with a solution, I’m just trying to make sure that everything goes in the proper direction. I know my tools, I know the script, I somehow know what I want, but I’m coming and waiting for the moment when whatever we need to happen, happens.”
Finn: So when you see a script for the first time, can you visualise the shots?
Łukasz: Yes, but when I first read the script, I’m more concerned with an emotional connection. I can’t shoot something which I don’t understand or believe in. When the story is really strong I see pictures. But I like to read a lot because each time I read, I find new things and new images.
Finn: So how many times would you read a script normally?
Łukasz: I don’t know – a lot. Ten or twenty times. It’s a very short period between being sent a script and beginning to prep. It’s a time with a lot of doubts, you doubt your intelligence, your talent, you think maybe this time it won’t happen. Sometimes you’re trying to find an idea for something and you can’t find it, so I very often get pissed off and walk a lot in the city, I go to see my parents or to the forest. I rent a little cottage close to Warsaw and I go there to just sit, think, read the script, listen to music and watch films. Sometimes you just do nothing, you try to get bored, you try to sleep, you go somewhere, you are alone, you are with people, you talk with friends. For *Cold War*, Paweł and I talked through the script a lot, discussing the music scenes or going on reccies together.
Finn: But isn’t that the most amazing thing? You can spend hours hitting your head against the wall but once you talk to someone about it, explain it to them, more often than not it dislodges the block in your mind, usually when you wake up the next day.
Łukasz: Yeah, I believe it’s a kind of wisdom, it’s not like we are geniuses but something goes *through* us. With *Cold War* we had so many situations where something saved our ass, where a solution came from thin air. Like we had one idea of how to shoot Tomasz Kot [Wiktor, protagonist in *Cold War*] when he plays piano, we used motion control for that.
Finn: In the Berlin bar?
Łukasz: No the first time.
Finn: Oh in the house, with that beautiful cut to the girls who are all listening?
Łukasz: Exactly. So the technical idea came from our DIT [digital imaging technician], my friend, unfortunately he died in a motorcycle accident, but the actual idea came from him. We were just doing tests, and he said, “Łukasz, what do you think if we cut at this moment? And there was a production supervisor, there was me, everybody just thinking how to do this shot...”
Finn: But then to your credit, you were the one who was receptive to that idea,

HOT WIRED



so you’re rewarded for having an open attitude.
Łukasz: I think so, but that’s the most important attitude for directors as well, that they are open but ultimately take responsibility for their decisions. They work with all these people, production designers, DOP’s, costume designers, but in the end, they have to take final decisions while remaining open to all those talented people. If you create an environment of hard work and creativity, not just through your attitude but the example you set, everybody will follow. There is such a concentration of creativity on a film set and an atmosphere that means everybody wants to add something. Everybody is throwing suggestions at you so you need to know what you’re doing. It’s like with the director, they need to accommodate those talents and see how they work together to make the final decision. That’s the point, where you take responsibility for something, that the film will work, the actors will work, the story will work, the image will work. I remember shooting in Paris [for *Cold War*] and the depth of field was very shallow there. At a certain point the production guys and designers were laughing at me, saying, “We almost can’t see anything because it’s so blurred,” and at times I was afraid they might be right, maybe it is too much. In the end I said, “OK, it works.” But they were so involved, so into finding the best solution, that’s really a constant situation you have to live with. The film



becomes a part of you, when you finish it, it's hard because you feel empty, like something left you.

Finn: I can totally imagine that sense of loss. I wanted to talk to you about your earlier work, because after graduating from Łódź in 2007 you made a number of documentaries and I wondered what knowledge you transferred from that experience into your later film work?

Eukasz: That's a good question, because Paweł also comes from documentary. It's very important for everybody to know their strengths and weaknesses, so when I was shooting documentary I realised I'm quite good at observing reality and finding empathy in people. That was the most important thing I learned shooting documentary, that you are capturing a piece of life, something real. So when I moved to feature films and met Paweł, I transferred that ability to capture life, not just translating the script into images but trying to find a piece of life in this carefully pre-prepared on-set environment. I remember shooting this documentary – I was shooting in a kitchen, crouched between a table and the wall with this little pipe digging into my back. I sat there for two hours, but in certain moments they began to talk about something important, and you think, "Wow. I captured that," and it was real, it wasn't prepared, it was just a piece of truth, a piece of life, and I try to work the same way in a movie.

Finn: That's what I love so much about the way you shoot, your depth of field and aspect ratio means that the characters are always situated in the real world.

Eukasz: Thank you, you're right. If you're just shooting two people talking in a room with a blurred background, I mean it's not a movie, it's a way of showing things and transferring the script into images. I think a film – like *Citizen Kane* or directors like Tarkovsky or Bergman – must have all those elements included, the image, actors, emotions, everything works for one shot and everything is in there. Paweł said, "It's like a table with four legs, the image is just one leg," the image is not supposed to be nice or beautiful, it should be a part of the story, it should convey mood among many other things. Finn: And when it comes to prep and surrounding yourself with books, music and films, do they all depend on the project or are there a few you continually revisit?

Eukasz: I mean it changes all the time, but there are films I like to watch constantly, so Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*, which was one of my favourite films during *Ida*, but also Fellini's *8½* and *Amarcord*. From Tarkovsky: *Mirror* and *Stalker*, and Bergman also, *Cries and Whispers*, Antonioni's *Blow-Up* is one of my favourite films. I also really like the Aleksei German films, *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* or *Khrustalyov, My Car!*

Finn: So it does change project to project?

Eukasz: It changes all the time. Sometimes I don't watch the whole movie, just excerpts, because I believe the brain only needs a small impulse from something. Sometimes I see a new film at the cinema and find a solution from a completely different movie, you direct your attention to a different place and that's how you get the idea. There's a moment when I get the film that I start to go to the gym, start running, going swimming, not partying so much, trying to live cleaner.

HOT WIRED

Finn: Like an athlete, you're training. Eukasz: Yeah. Because you know it's just a matter of how you look after your mind, so you need to live in a very different structure. Watch films, read a lot, listen to music. It's helpful but I think everyone does stuff like that.

Finn: So do you have any concrete idea as to what you're going to be working on this year?

Eukasz: Not completely no. I'm waiting for something which would be very significant, but at the same time it might not happen. I have a few projects which I'm working on, a few scripts I'm reading but I don't know what will happen this year. Because of this film and other events happening now, everything is a little bit crazy so I'm preparing myself for an intense time.

