



# Ida

**Director:** Pawel Pawlikowski

**Country:** Poland

**Date:** 2013

*A review by A O Scott of **The New York Times**:*

Though it takes place in Poland in 1962 — a weary, disenchanted country grinding along under gray, post-Stalinist skies — Pawel Pawlikowski’s “Ida” has some of the structure and feeling of an ancient folk tale. It concerns an orphan who must make her way through a haunted, threatening landscape, protected only by her own good sense and a powerful, not entirely trustworthy companion. Ida (Agata Trzebuchowska) is a young novice a few days from taking her vows in the convent that has been her only home since infancy when she learns of the existence of a previously unknown aunt named Wanda (Agata Kulesza). If this were actually a fairy tale, Wanda might be both fairy godmother and wicked witch. A former state prosecutor, she boasts grimly of her role in the political show trials of the early 1950s, when Poland’s Communist government used judicial terror (among other methods) to consolidate its power and eliminate its enemies.

A decade later, she is still part of the political elite, though whatever zealotry she might once have had has long since been replaced by cynicism. Chain-smoking and drinking heavily, pursuing one-night stands more out of habit than desire, she is in every way the opposite of her unworldly, pious niece. But Wanda does see a family resemblance and also has a startling piece of news, delivered with a wry, bitter smile as Ida, with her coif and crucifix, sits at the kitchen table: “You’re Jewish.”



This is not a joke — and there is nothing funny about the wartime fate of Poland’s Jews, including Ida’s parents — but “Ida” and its characters are alert to the absurdities of Polish history, as well as its abundant horrors. Mr. Pawlikowski, a Polish-born writer and director who has spent most of his career in England, has reached into his country’s past and grabbed hold of a handful of nettles. “Ida” is a breathtakingly concise film — just 80 minutes long — with a clear, simple narrative line. But within its relatively brief duration and its narrow black-and-white frames, the movie somehow contains a cosmos of guilt, violence and pain. Its intimate drama unfolds at the crossroads where the Catholic, Jewish and Communist strains of Poland’s endlessly and bitterly contested national identity intersect.

Ida and Wanda set out to discover what happened to Ida’s parents, a quest that turns “Ida” into both a road movie and a detective story. They encounter priests and peasants, provincial officials and a saxophonist (Dawid Ogrodnik) whose advanced musical taste (as well as his attraction to Ida, in spite of her habit) provides a hint of youthful ’60s spirit amid the gloom and bad memories. Mr. Pawlikowski, who started out making documentaries and whose previous fictional features include “Last Resort,” “My Summer of Love” and “The Woman in the Fifth,” can be a wonderfully lucid storyteller. “Ida” is as compact and precise as a novella, a sequence of short, emphatic scenes that reveal the essence of the characters without simplifying them. Having set up an obvious contrast between Wanda and Ida — atheist and believer; woman of the world and sheltered child; sensualist and saint — the film proceeds to complicate each woman’s idea of herself and the other. Their black-and-white conceptions of the world turn grayer by the hour.

What you are watching could virtually have been made in 1962. (The Polish countryside seems to have cooperated by not changing too much in the decades since.) Until the very end, the audience never hears music unless the people on screen hear it, too, and many of the scenes — at once austere and charged with an intensity that verges on the metaphysical — owe an evident debt to ’60s cinema heroes like Ingmar Bergman and Robert Bresson. But “Ida” is hardly an exercise in antiquarian pastiche. It is rather an

excavation of truths that remain, 70 years after the Holocaust and a quarter-century after the collapse of Communism, only partially disinterred. And it is, above all, about the spiritual and moral condition of the women, who, between them, occupy nearly every second of this film.

Mr. Pawlikowski's style of shooting might be described as sympathetically objective. His camera maintains its distance, and he never presumes access to the inner lives of his characters. He keeps them low in the frame, with unusually ample space above their heads, creating a kind of cathedral effect. Ida and Wanda can seem small and alone, lost in a vast and empty universe. But their surroundings often achieve a quiet grandeur, an intimation of divine presence. There is an implicit argument here between faith and materialism, one that is resolved with wit, conviction and generosity of spirit. Mr. Pawlikowski has made one of the finest European films (and one of most insightful films about Europe, past and present) in recent memory.

But the accomplishment is hardly his alone: "Ida" belongs equally — and on the screen, pre-eminently — to the two Agatas. Ms. Kulesza is a poised and disciplined professional, able to show us both Wanda's ruthless self-control and its limits. Ms. Trzebuchowska, a student with little previous acting experience, is a natural screen presence and also an enigmatic one. Ida starts out, for the audience and perhaps herself, as an empty vessel, with little knowledge or experience of the world. To watch her respond to it is to perceive the activation of intelligence and the awakening of wisdom. I can't imagine anything more thrilling.

From: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/02/movies/ida-about-an-excavation-of-truth-in-postwar-oland.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/02/movies/ida-about-an-excavation-of-truth-in-postwar-oland.html?_r=0)

## The death of Stalinism in Bohemia (9 mins)

**Director:** Jan Svankmajer

**Country:** Czech Republic/UK

**Date:** 1990

**A review from [letterboxdvd.com](http://letterboxdvd.com):**

In order to get all of the references in this short film you'd probably need an encyclopaedic knowledge of Czech history, something which I don't possess, but the imagery is so powerful and startling that you'll get a decent idea of what's happening anyway.



The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia chronicles exactly what it says on the tin. This metaphorical masterpiece covers the whole of Czech history from 1948 to the Velvet Revolution in 1989 via a combination of stock footage, stop-motion and clay animation. It is a film rich in visuals that depict events, beliefs and moods, and in the space of fewer than ten minutes the film dissects countless aspects of what life was like in Soviet Czechoslovakia.

The themes of the film are worthy of a dissertation, and there's no point in me dissecting each image because I'll be here all week. What I will say though is that this is a strange but brilliant take on a fascinating and all too easily forgotten chapter of World history, and one that you can watch over and over again but still find something new at which you can marvel.

The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia is, to put it simply, a masterpiece of short, surrealist cinema.

From: <http://letterboxd.com/thengliestfraud/film/the-death-of-stalinism-in-bohemia/>