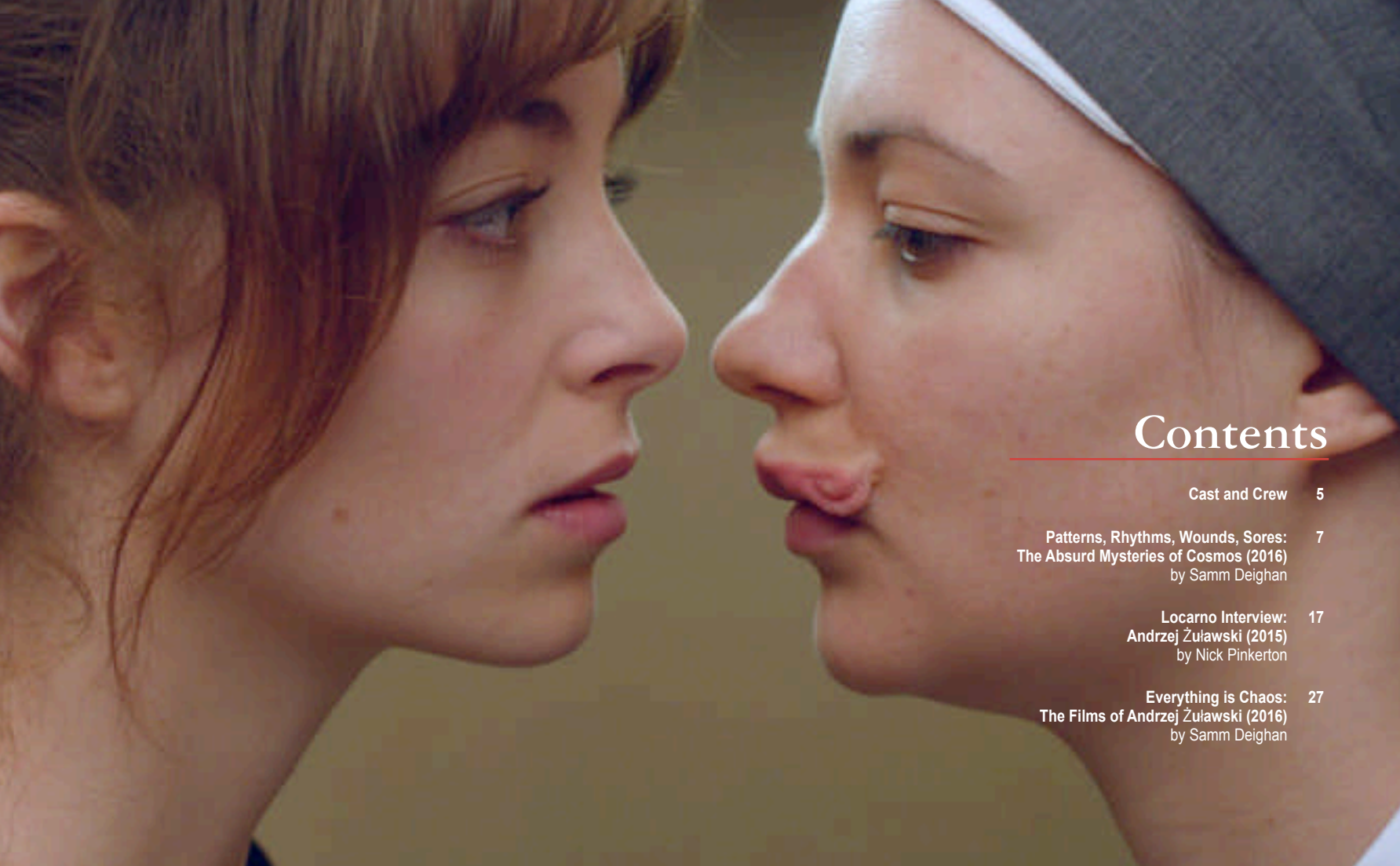
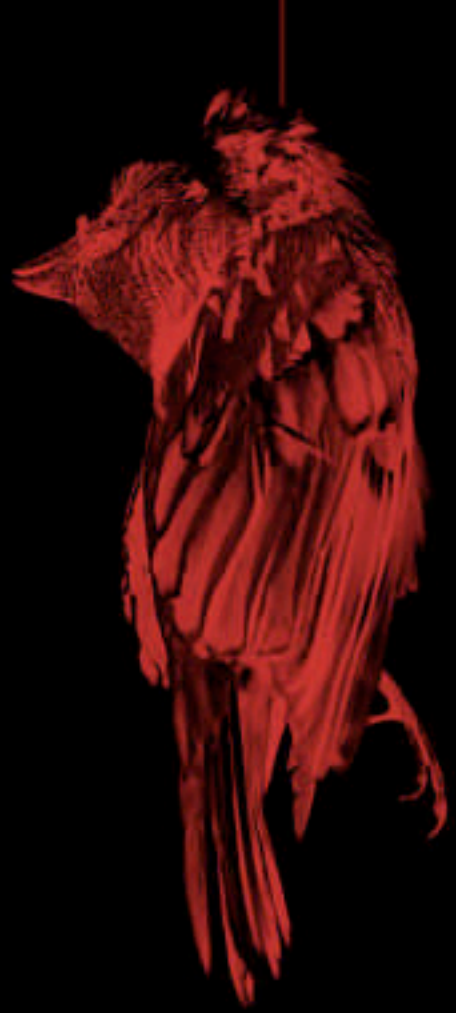


Contents



Cosmos

A film by
Andrzej Żuławski

Based on the novel by
Witold Gombrowicz

Sabine Azéma
Jean-François Balmer
Jonathan Genet
Johan Libéreau
Victória Guerra
Clémentine Pons
Andy Gillet
Ricardo Pereira
António Simão

Director of Photography
André Szankowski AIP-AFC

Music by
Andrzej Korzynski

Edited by
Julia Gregory

Produced by
Paolo Branco

PATTERNS, RHYTHMS, WOUNDS, SORES
The Absurd Mysteries Of Cosmos

by Samm Deighan

It would not be difficult to make the case that Andrzej Żuławski was one of the most consummate, thrilling adapters of literary material to the screen. In a career that spanned more than 40 years and resulted in 13 astounding films, the majority of his scripts had literary sources indicating a seemingly boundless appetite for literature and culture. From Ivan Turgenev and Stefan Żeromski to his own great-uncle's turn-of-the-century science fiction epic, obscure contemporary novels and memoirs, *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), and some of the finest Dostoyevsky adaptations ever made – and even Russian opera – these direct sources don't even take into account references to everything from Shakespeare and Polish poetry to French pop culture and philosophy that is packed into his films.

He obviously never shied away from a challenge – and expected his audience to be able to keep up with him – so it should come as no surprise that his final film, *Cosmos* (2015), made just before his passing earlier this year, is an adaptation of the absurdist, stream-of-conscious 1965 novel of the same name from Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz. Born in Poland in 1904, Gombrowicz primarily grew up in Warsaw, but, like Żuławski, spent much of his adult life abroad, largely due to political circumstances. He took a chance trip to Argentina on the eve of World War II and effectively wound up stranded there, which is at least partially responsible for his survival during the war years. His novels, and especially his extensive diaries, buck tradition, express an abiding sense of outrage at the state of Poland in the 20th century, and are often deeply psychological investigations into the absurd nature of the world. Writing about him for *The New Yorker*, Ruth Franklin described him as "wildly surrealist" and said, "Gombrowicz used the nonsensical and the absurd as weapons against convention."

He is, perhaps understandably, difficult to adapt. Only a few other directors have attempted it over the years, including Żuławski's countryman, Jerzy Skolimowski, who turned to the 1937 novel *Ferdydurke* for *30 Door Key* (1991); he was notoriously so scarred from the experience that he didn't return to the director's chair for nearly 20 years. Regardless, the vein of absurdity he represents, along with a handful of other key authors like Bruno Schulz and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, is an important trend in Polish literary tradition, one that deeply influenced many of the country's filmmakers. In a recent interview,

Żuławski said of Gombrowicz, "We were feeding on his plays and books because he was like air, like light, in those terribly sad, grey, and lying times. Whatever he did looked like a savage provocation in front of the Communist concrete and total boredom and total incapacity to do anything right. My entire generation was a Gombrowicz generation."

And Żuławski is uniquely suited to Gombrowicz's stream-of-consciousness approach, a style that hovers in the no man's land between linear structure and surreal chaos. While the director embraced absurd elements as far back as his first feature film, *The Third Part of the Night* (*Trzecia część nocy*, 1971), he developed a new approach to language mid-career with films like *L'Amour braque* (1985) – thanks to script contributions from French musician and writer Etienne Roda-Gil – and *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours* (1989), where dialogue soars to dizzying heights. *Cosmos*, however, goes even one step beyond and becomes, to quote a line from the film's protagonist, a poetic, often comedic way to describe "the irrational organization of the world".

Described as a "metaphysical noir thriller", *Cosmos* is essentially an absurdist comedy about two young men, Witold (newcomer Jonathan Genet, in a fantastic performance) – intentionally named after Gombrowicz himself – and Fuchs (Johan Libéreau), who are on holiday in the Portuguese countryside. They rent rooms in a guesthouse owned by Madame Woytis (Sabine Azéma) and her scatological husband Léon (Jean-François Balmer, who nearly steals the film with all his 'bleurgh'-ing); fellow lodgers include Woytis's adult daughter Lena (Victória Guerra), her straight-laced architect husband, Lucien (Andy Gillet), and the family's sweet-tempered maid, Catherette (Clémentine Pons).

Witold comes across a dead sparrow hanged in the woods and becomes convinced there is some inscrutable mystery that surrounds a series of odd coincidences and unsettling signs: a stain on the ceiling of his room, a scar on the maid's lip, a dangling piece of wood, a ladder left in the garden. This also corresponds with a novel he's writing (about the horror that comes from a towel hanging in a locked room), and his growing feelings for Lena, which inspires such hysteria that he strangles her pet cat and leaves it hanging in the garden. To escape "this house and its aberrations", Witold and Fuchs accompany the family on a trip to the seaside, because, as Léon says, who can guarantee it will stop with the cat?

The majority of Żuławski's male protagonists, particularly those found in his early films like *The Third Part of the Night*, *The Devil* (*Diabeł*, 1972), *L'Important c'est d'aimer* (1975), *Possession* (1981), and even *On the Silver Globe* (*Na srebrnym globie*, 1988), are frequently made to look absurd, oddly passive, even ridiculous; they are rarely masters of their own fates. But, paired with Gombrowicz's nonsensical prose and Żuławski's

excellent use of an ensemble cast (who share incredible chemistry), this quality is not only Witold's defining trait, but also makes him immensely likeable. There is a lightness and an innocence to him. His misinterpretation of signs is presented as both the gateway to madness, and to a kind of magical realism. The existential mystery suggested by *Cosmos*'s loose plot is not really about who hanged a bird, but is the riddle of life's fundamental absurdity, which is itself a source of wonder, even joy.

Witold's determination to craft a narrative out of seemingly insignificant signs and unrelated events – both as a writer of fiction and as someone existing in an absurd world – becomes a consuming obsession as his desire for Lena grows, and the film essentially focuses on the irrational mysteries of love, attraction, and erotic obsession. His fascination with her begins the first time he sees her, when Madame Woytis shows he and Fuchs one of the spare rooms. In his novel, Gombrowicz wrote, "And yet there was a surprise, because one of the beds was occupied and someone lay on it, a woman, lying, it seemed, not quite as she should have been, though I don't know what gave me the sense of this being, let's say, so out of place – whether it was that the bed was without sheets, with only a mattress – or that her leg lay partially on the metal mesh of the bed (because the mattress had moved a little), or was it the combination of the leg and the metal that surprised me on this hot, buzzing, exhausting day."

These contrasting images of metal mesh and Lena's flesh subtly recur throughout the film; Witold says, "The hand, the leg, the mesh, what disorder." His dialogue about the disorder of things – clearly aggravated by his growing obsession with Lena – echoes Mark's words to Anna in *Possession*, "You must restore order," which reflects a similar sense of chaos and distress, though, in that case, it is about the ending, rather than the beginning, of a relationship. Witold agonizes, "I'll never know anything about her," and there is the sense (both in the novel and the film) that his need to fictionalise and invent is the only way he knows how to fill these gaps, though it drives him increasingly mad. Out of a sense of displaced desire, related to his obsession with the hanging sparrow, he strangles Lena's cat after spying on her in her bedroom with her husband, then hangs the animal in the garden, an act that essentially drags the other inhabitants of the house into his frustrated psychodrama.

Shakespeare, whose plays Żuławski referenced frequently throughout his films without ever directly adapting (outside of a few moments of *Hamlet* in *The Devil* and a scene from *Richard III* in *L'Important c'est d'aimer*), wrote in *As You Like It*, "Love is merely a madness; and, I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do; and the reason why they are not so punish'd and cured is that the lunacy is so ordinary that the whippers are in love too." These entwining themes of love and madness are one of

the sole defining features of the director's films; the majority of them focus on the romantic frenzy that springs from the friction caused by a love triangle, which is referred to in *Possession* as a "vulgar structure". In addition, a shock of recognition, a fundamentally irrational, almost random 'love at first sight' moment begins many of his films; though he suggests that a central couple will be drawn inexorably together despite numerous difficulties facing them, he also implies hysteria and even violence will follow.

Death is frequently the outcome of these relationships and his work is full of acts of murder and suicide inspired by romantic strife: in *L'Important c'est d'aimer*, a husband commits suicide to allow his wife to be with the man who loves her; *Possession* is concerned with a husband's attempts to win back his wife, who has taken a lover (or lovers), and things rapidly turn violent; in *La Femme publique* (1984), one of the men in a love triangle commits suicide; in *L'Amour braque*, a couple is killed and only their third is left alive; a couple commits suicide in *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours*; and so on. It is not unusual, then, that *Cosmos* features the suicide of a husband – after it becomes clear that Lena now prefers Witold – but it is remarkable how briefly Żuławski lingers on this event. Lucien's swinging corpse is given little dramatic weight and is little more than a literal backdrop to the moment that Witold and Lena's love is revealed: Witold speculates on why Lucien hanged himself ("Was it a mania for hanging that drove him to hang himself?") and suggests it is a natural conclusion to the series of strange events. He tells Lena that they're in love with each other and she gives another silent scream; he holds a folded paper mouth up to his lips and she bites it away. It seems like they're going to kiss, but he pretends to strangle her.

In general, hands are of central importance to their relationship and take on an usually erotic context within the film; it is the absence of touching that makes it so profoundly noticeable. As in *La Fidélité* (2000), where hands are a symbol of intimacy and vulnerability, here they are a frequent visual symbol, and Żuławski particularly focuses on Lena's fingers as she smokes or nervously touches things. When Witold and Lena first shake hands, it's violent, and their heads shake, as if they are briefly pantomiming an orgasm. Knowingly, later, Léon speaks of the "mad excitement of a tiny touch," and whenever Witold and Lena accidentally brush, at least for the first half of the film, they are both alarmed and break away.

There is a sense of childlike innocence to their relationship, which is largely defined by play and performance. They barely speak to each other for much of the film, though the defining moment in their relationship – outside of Witold hanging Lena's cat – involves play and performance. And like *La Fidélité*, it involves the recitation of poetry, yet another example of Żuławski blending literary influences; while that film is an adaptation of *La*

Princesse du Clèves and frequently relies on W.H. Auden's poetry, here they recite Fernando Pessoa's 'Magnificat' (1933) to each other, lines like "When will this inner night – the universe – end / And I – my soul – have my day? / When will I wake up from being awake?"

Żuławski's depictions of his lovers often evokes two children at play, or a parent caring for a child, but *Cosmos* is relatively unique in that it defines Witold and Lena's uncertain relationship as a shared sense of wonder at the world, a childlike glee that sometimes manifests as madness, and a hopeful dream for the future. He tells her "there is an imperfection in each perfection" and it is clear that his unusual, creative spark – so unlike her milquetoast husband (who Fuchs describes disdainfully as having a "surgeon's hands") – is one of the things that attracts her to Witold.

And while the majority of Żuławski's films focus on couples and love triangles, it is his later work that explores the family dynamic in a more communal sense and it is here that Witold's fascination with Lena develops and the majority of their relationship plays out. Food, eating, and domestic ritual play a significant role in Żuławski's films in general and particularly in *Cosmos*, where much of the action is set up around the Woytis family, their home, and their evening meals. This theme began as early as Żuławski's short films, *Pavoncello* (1969) and *The Story of Triumphant Love* (*Pieśń triumfującej miłości*, 1969), where characters smash glassware to express inner turmoil and endure uncomfortable dinner sequences featuring love triangles. Both of these elements reappear in *L'Important c'est d'aimer*, while *Possession* and *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours* involve parallel sequences of the male protagonist having a violent confrontation with seemingly the entire kitchen staff of a restaurant after an argument with his female partner. In *Szamanka* (1996), the male lead attempts to control and civilize the titular protagonist by forcing her to eat with a knife and fork (among other food-related scenes including food smearing at a bourgeois dinner party and even cannibalism).

This theme often becomes quite surreal: a meat grinder becomes a tool of spontaneous self-mutilation in *Possession*, while *Boris Godounov* (1989), Żuławski's adaptation of Modest Mussorgsky's sole opera, features surreal touches like large cabbages and headdresses made of produce. Both this film and *La Note bleue* (1991), based on the life of Chopin and writer George Sand, include scenes of people smashing cabbage with their feet (presumably to make sauerkraut) and rubbing mashed potatoes on their faces (as wonderfully absurd acts of defiance). *La Note bleue* was originally inspired by Sand's renowned cookbook and, like *Cosmos*, much of the film's action takes place in the kitchen and at group meals. In *La Note bleue* and *Cosmos* perhaps more than any of his other

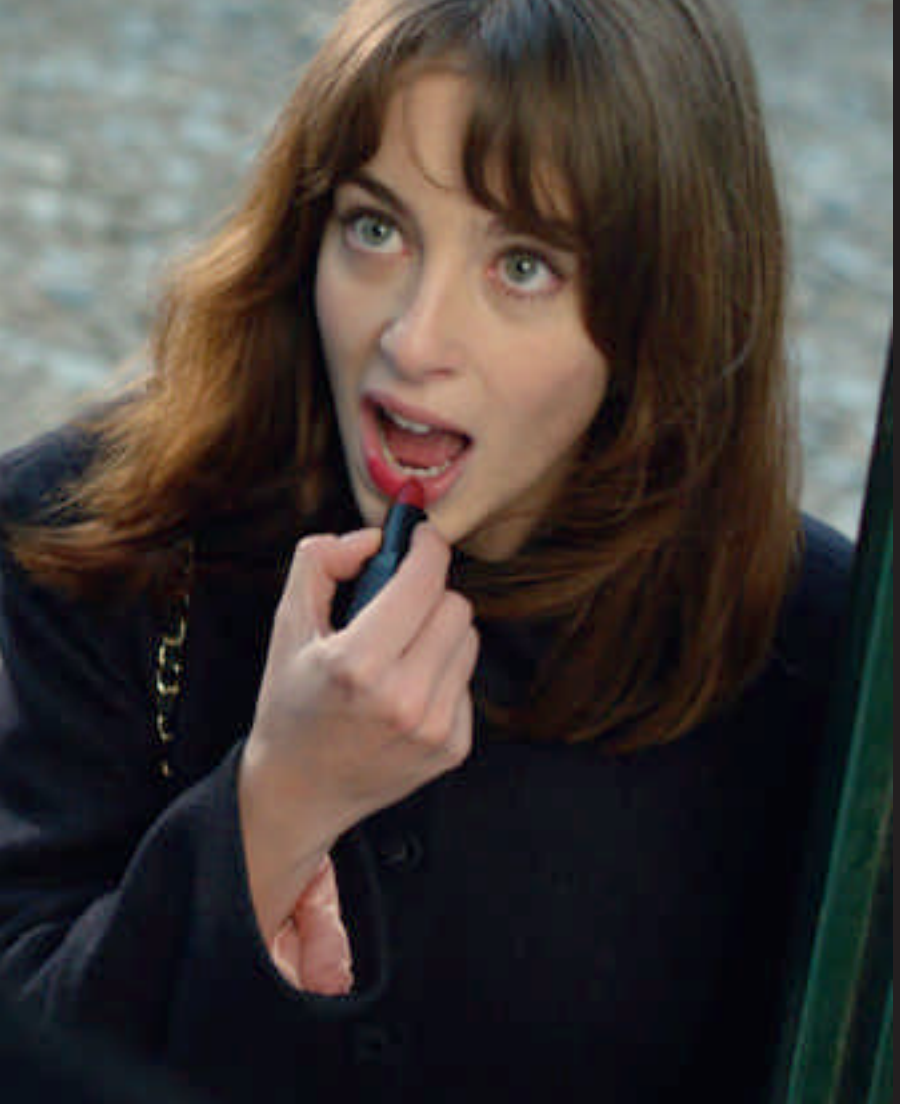
films, food is connected to a sense of not only personal, but social intimacy, with a strongly implied sense of sensuality.

Witold's fascination with Lena essentially unfolds at the dinner table, at first the only place he has consistent access to her. He watches her, especially her hands and her mouth, as she smokes cigarettes, eats, and moves her hands across the tablecloth, over utensils. Later, after Leon spills a dish of peas in the kitchen and Lena dashes to help clean it up, shots of her legs across the floor, slightly spread, are contrasted with bright green peas and Witold says, "stop this madness". Even their first scenes of mutual romantic anxiety occur when they are sitting across from each other at the end of the table in the house by the beach. He has picked up one of her fallen cigarettes, slender objects that come to represent her, and puts it insistently on her plate.

And in the last lines of the novel – which is much less vague than the conclusion of Żuławski's admittedly more hopeful film, and implies that the protagonist has returned to his life Poland without any romantic union at all – Witold says, "I returned to Warsaw, my parents, war with my father again, various other things, problems, complications, difficulties." Żuławski's final shot, before the credits begin to roll, is a nod to this: over top of an image of trees blowing in the wind is Gombrowicz's concluding line: "Today we had chicken fricassee with béchamel sauce for dinner." The layered, repeating final images of the film imply that Witold and Lena are going off together, with their suitcases, into a seemingly abandoned moss-covered building. Before breaking the fourth wall, during the closing credits sequence, as he did to varying degrees in *La Femme publique* and *Boris Godounov*, he also implies that this could all be Witold's fantasy, or perhaps Lena's.

There is a certain indelible magic in the fact that a director's final film – particularly one made 15 years after his penultimate effort – can be full of so much whimsy and wonder, and is a work in which the bitter is always mixed, in equal parts, with the sweet; in which experience never dampens a sense of seemingly inexhaustible wonder at the profound strangeness of the world. Ultimately, *Cosmos* is a celebration of life's mysteries – and its fundamental absurdity – and is an affecting sensory experience, one in which the musical sounds of language and light-hearted wordplay (translated into English by Żuławski scholar and collaborator Daniel Bird in an act of sheer linguistic gymnastics) are contrasted with repeating visual tropes: fluttering hands, the mist-drenched forest, a dead bird hanging inexplicably in space, and the impression of, as Fuchs says, "a crooked mouth and a dark cavity".

Samm Deighan is the Associate Editor of* Diabolique Magazine*, editor of* Satanic Pandemonium*, and co-hosts the* Daughters of Darkness *podcast. She's currently writing a book on WWII and cult cinema.



LOCARNO INTERVIEW
Andrzej Żuławski

by Nick Pinkerton

This interview was originally published on the Film Comment *blog on August 14th, 2015. Reprinted with kind permission.*

The experience of watching Andrzej Żuławski's breakneck, hectoring, emphatic *Cosmos* may be compared to being yanked around hither and thither by the lapels until dizzy, or to trying to hop a runaway train – for a second you think you have a handle on it, after that you're just hanging on for dear life and trying not to be sucked under the wheels.

Cosmos, currently in competition for the Golden Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival, is Żuławski's first film in 15 years. It's an adaptation of the 1965 novel of the same name by Witold Gombrowicz (1904-69), in which two young students (played in the film by Jonathan Genet and Johan Libéreau) living at a secluded country house find themselves assailed by what they believe to be sinister auguries.

Born in Eastern Poland (part of present-day Ukraine), after attending film school in France and serving as an assistant to Andrzej Wajda, Żuławski began his own directorial career with *The Third Part of the Night* (1971). Meddling from Communist authorities convinced Żuławski that he wouldn't be able to live and work in his native country as a liberated artist, so he relocated to Paris shortly thereafter. His first film made in France, *The Most Important Thing: Love* (1975), cemented his international reputation, and he would gain a measure of infamy for films displaying a feverish, St. Vitus Dance – like energy, brazen eroticism, and elements of horror and fantasy, as in *Possession* (1981), or his too-little-seen Polish homecoming, the extraordinary *Szamanka* (1996). In recent years, he has become a prolific novelist, though a recent touring retrospective brought his filmography before a new audience, making this an auspicious moment for his reappearance.

At the Locarno Film Festival, *Film Comment* met with Żuławski on the covered patio of his hotel in Ascona, where, at the moment we sat down, a downpour began outside.

Nick Pinkerton: *I saw you in Montreal around this time two years ago, at the Fantasia Fest. At the time you had some very harsh words for the contemporary cinema, and seemed to be in a fighting spirit.*

Andrzej Żuławski: I still am, because the only thing that I cannot sustain in cinema is boredom, this terrible boredom which assails European cinemas now, and these terrible festivals. Go to Cannes, you'll die. You went there?

NP: *I did not.*

AŻ: Good for you. I have a son who's 20, and he was at the Cannes film festival this year, because his mother [Sophie Marceau] was on the jury. He phoned me in a panic, because he's young and he still has so many illusions and so many hopes—I'm happy for that. He said: "Father, I'm dying of boredom! Is it always like that?" I said: "No, not always, but mainly nowadays." It's either sheer boredom; or you have to see the film taking things for a serious matter, and you have to take cinema for a serious matter, which maybe it's not. Or you have the light stupidities, and the only progress in film nowadays is in technology. Technology leads the industry, or the industries. You have three solutions, and in between, once every five or six years, you can see a film which is a film, which is something to see, to hear, to get moved by in a way or another. I'm still very much against [contemporary cinema]. What can we do?

NP: *What struck me when watching* Cosmos *in this festival's context is that it's very much a maximalist movie in a place where minimalism is, I would say, the rule.*

AŻ: Look, I'm not yet dead. I'm alive. Speaking profoundly, I love cinema, so I love to see it when I can, and I still love to do it when I can. But the energies are exactly the same as always. An English journalist told me that my film is an extremely radical film. I was listening with suspicion. I wondered, what does he mean by "radical"? It's chop, chop, chop, straightforward, punching the lines, etc. Maybe it is radical, I don't know. I enjoyed doing it, and I especially enjoyed working with the actors. I think they are all quite, quite fabulous. I also enjoyed fighting with the book by Gombrowicz. He was such a brilliant and highly intelligent and perverse guy. I was making a film that didn't attempt to be in a fight with the book – not destroying the book or pretending to destroy the book – but rather be faithful to the spirit of the book while not just flatly filming the book. Making a real film out of it was my goal.

NP: *Gombrowicz is very invested in that adolescent spirit, in taking the piss out of things.*

AŻ: It was his attitude. When he was young, when he was old, he had the same attitude. He adored what he called "the green": that which is not ripe yet. The unripe, the unfinished, the not yet said. He adored that. It was almost a cult or a religion with him. The longer he lived, the more the aesthetic became an ethic. He was living with a ton of young guys. He found this unfinished quality of the human body, of young things, so much more aesthetically appealing than rotten old things. We never tried to discuss that in the movie. That's him and it's all right, but it's not me. You have writers and filmmakers who are constructors, and then you have those who are destructors. Depending on the time, I think, one is more interesting than the other. For all of Gombrowicz's life, he was a destructor. He was always somehow on the margin of the main road. That made him young up until his old age. It's extremely interesting, and I would say vicious.

NP: *Is that destructive, wrecking-ball quality part of what made adapting Gombrowicz seem important or necessary at this juncture?*

AŻ: I don't know. Please, what's important or necessary in cinema? Nothing. "Important," "necessary" – I can't understand these words. I do it because the book is lovely and brilliant. I've liked the book for ages. I was very surprised to be offered the opportunity to film it. I would never think of it. And that's it. Now, is it important? No, I don't think so. What's important? Locarno's important? That car over there? No. Or Hollywood? No.

NP: *But it seems with the frustration that you were just now expressing with contemporary cinema…*

AŻ: No, I'm not expressing frustration. Please don't misunderstand me. I was very happy not doing films for 15 years. Maybe it was the happiest period of my life. I was busy with really interesting things, like living. And so there is absolutely no frustration. On the contrary, I bless these times, and now I look forward with a bit of apprehension because the men with the money are thinking that they should make films now, again. And I won't. No.

NP: *Well, you can always disappear into the woodwork again.*

AŻ: No, but I'm 75, so that would be final, and this is the only thing that makes me wince.

NP: *Why do you think the opportunity came about now? Do you think your traveling retrospective had something to do with it?*

AŻ: I don't know. No, really, I don't absolutely know. I was really amazed after all these years of not being there and not doing this thing, when I went on stage and 2,000 people were applauding me, like these years of solitude didn't exist. I was really moved. Really. Stupidly moved.

NP: *Could you talk a little bit about how the cast of* Cosmos *came together?*

AŻ: Like all casts in the world – except Hollywood, where very often people are pre-cast. The young guy who is the lead, Jonathan Genet, I found in a theater in France. Not in Paris, but in the provinces. He does a lot of theater, but he's practically unknown. I discovered him in the provinces, where I went because there are a lot of fantastically gifted and strange and unknown actors there, because the known ones are in Paris and they do resemble each other, maybe not physically but in the way they perform. He's a wild guy. He's fantastically interesting for me in a part that we cannot define really. It's ambiguous. I think that's very difficult too for him, to endorse this un-clarity, which is Gombrowicz.

NP: *The part is really the epitome of the Romantic figure of the pale, longhaired poet pushed to the point of absurdity, yet not quite parodic. These exaggerated Romantic tropes seem to give the film its defining tone: a Romanticism that is pushed beyond Romanticism until it verges on the absurd.*

AŻ: It's called Surrealism. It's an interesting interpretation, Romanticism pushed to the point of absurdity, which is called Surrealism.

NP: *And he does an extraordinary Daffy Duck impression.*

AŻ: [*Laughs*] But he can do whatever. The girl, Victória Guerra, was discovered by the producer. She's Portuguese, and I saw her in two not very convincing films, huge historical frescos, *Lines of Wellington* and *Mysteries of Lisbon*. In the first one, she acted with John Malkovich. John told me: "Don't hesitate. Take her. Take her. She is a talent." And one listens to John Malkovich, who's the ham of hams, but very intelligent, totally bright, and so I listened. I did a test. The first shot of the movie was a shot in the mountains when she breaks down, to see if she can do it, and she could. So, she was in the film.

NP: *This is the rubber-faced close-up, when it looks like she's pulling faces in the mirror?*

AŻ: Yeah. The two French actors from the old school, I knew them for years and years, and I admire them, especially Jean-François Balmer, the guy who does the older man. I think it's an incredibly brilliant performance with the language, with the French. He's amazing and I always saw him in the theater, and I always wanted one day to have the pleasure of working with him. He's a great actor. [Sabine] Azéma, who was the wife of Alain Resnais for 30 years, who I respected a lot, though strangely I never thought she was any good in his films.

NP: *I would agree with you wholeheartedly. I've never liked her more than in this.*

AŻ: Though in some light things where you have to be very quick and witty, she's very good. And she's very popular. For a producer, it's important. And she's a sweet person. We also had two Portuguese actors, which was easier, as we were shooting in Portugal. It was a small cast, a cast of nine.

NP: *How did you go about adapting from a text which is so interior to give it an exterior life, making it something other than an internal monologue? How do you open that up into a film?*

AŻ: You saw the film, so you have the answer. I don't know if it's a good film or not, but one way was to try not to fight with the book – though it was still a fight with Gombrowicz's intelligence, and his traps, which are numerous. It was important not to give it the original setting, which is Poland in 1939, with a bourgeois family pension, and this suffocating, claustrophobic thing, but to open it. This means that it becomes modern, today, somewhere in Europe, doesn't matter, and this opens all the interior structures of the film. If you do this, if you transpose it, it's almost like filming Stendhal or Balzac in modern dress. Almost. So the adaptation was something very, very difficult for me. I think I wrote the script three times in order to be absolutely faithful to this mad spirit of Gombrowicz. On the other hand, I didn't want to just film the book, but to make an independent and free film. That was the fight during this production: accelerating things all the time.

NP: *Is Gombrowicz someone you grew up reading? Someone you've been with to one degree or another for your entire life?*

AŻ: Yes. For my generation, which was born during the war and raised during Communist times, Gombrowicz was censored, totally unknown in Poland. No books in print, no nothing. He was living, as you know, in exile in Argentina, in Buenos Aires. But we were feeding on his plays and books because he was like air, like light, in those terribly sad, grey, and lying times. Whatever he did looked like a savage provocation in front of the Communist concrete and total boredom and total incapacity to do anything right. My entire generation was a Gombrowicz generation.

NP: *I know Skolimowski's film* Ferdydurke *from some years back. I don't know how many other attempts have been made…*

AŻ: I never saw it. "I had everything wrong," Skolimowski said. Maybe one day I will see it. And there was another one, which is *Pornografia*, made by a Polish director who changed

the text, the circumstances, the whatever, to a point you cannot say it's Gombrowicz anymore. It's something… I don't know. I'm sorry, the guy's around, but it's rather – I shouldn't say this – it's very bad.

NP: *You talk about changing the text to the point where it's not Gombrowicz anymore. How much was that a concern for you – this idea of how faithful to be, or how much license to take so that it can become its own thing?*

AŻ: I don't know. I know that everything people say, the long monologues, the things Witold writes on his computer, this is in fact pure Gombrowicz, this is the text. But whether they go here or there or do this or that… this is an adaptation and a script has to be a script. Gombrowicz didn't give a fuck for any kind of logic. For instance, he allows himself to write that, okay, two people go to the garden, there are two, and suddenly one of them disappears. The one who stays never wonders what happened to the other. You cannot write a script this way. People will say: "What did they do with the other guy? Did they cut it? He got erased?" So there are certain simple rules we cannot avoid in writing scripts. Even Mel Brooks respects…

NP: *The Aristotelian unities?*

AŻ: The grammar of cinema.

NP: *I like the phrase that you used with regard to Gombrowicz, which is a "savage provocation," and I wonder if that to a certain extent could be applied to what you hoped to do with this movie, a sort of gauntlet-throwing?*

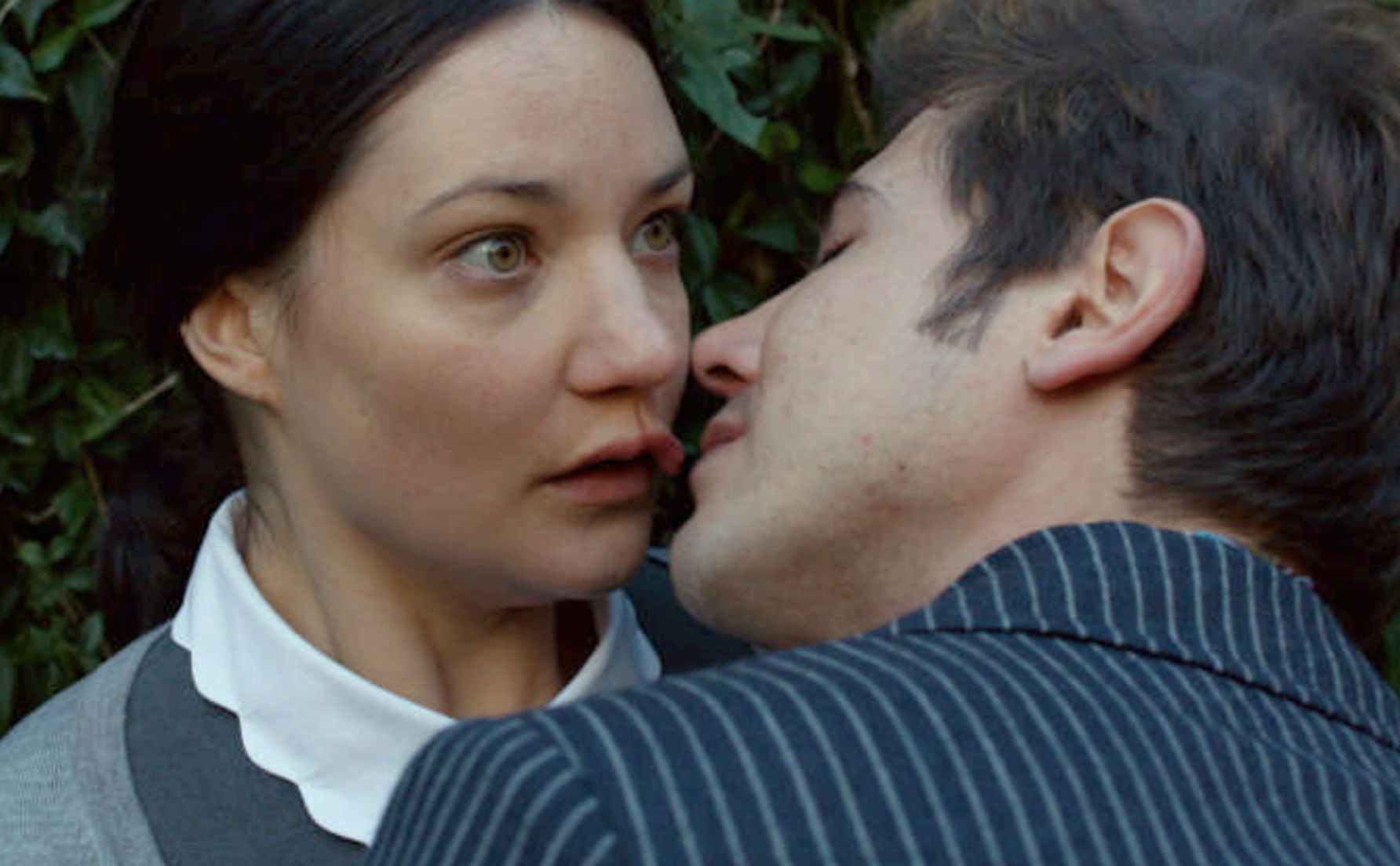
AŻ: In Gombrowicz's case, it was an act of anger, defiance, and an attack on a very claustrophobic bourgeois society, first in Poland then in France, in his plays. Therefore, one can say it was political for him. In my case, not at all. This film could be shot in any country of Europe at any time, so it's not an attack against something very precise. It's an attack against stupidity and a lack of imagination, how a cosmos can be built with the smallest things, with the most unrelated human interactions. It's a cosmos. It can be on the contrary, like a precise mechanism, but then I wouldn't believe it because a cosmos who finally says… Yeah, this is a cosmos: here, this bottle, this thing, your reflection in the mirror, the mosquito that just bit me. I never saw him, he was so little, so small. It's a cosmos. This was strongly appealing to me, by the end of my life, to see that it's absurd but not in an absurd way.

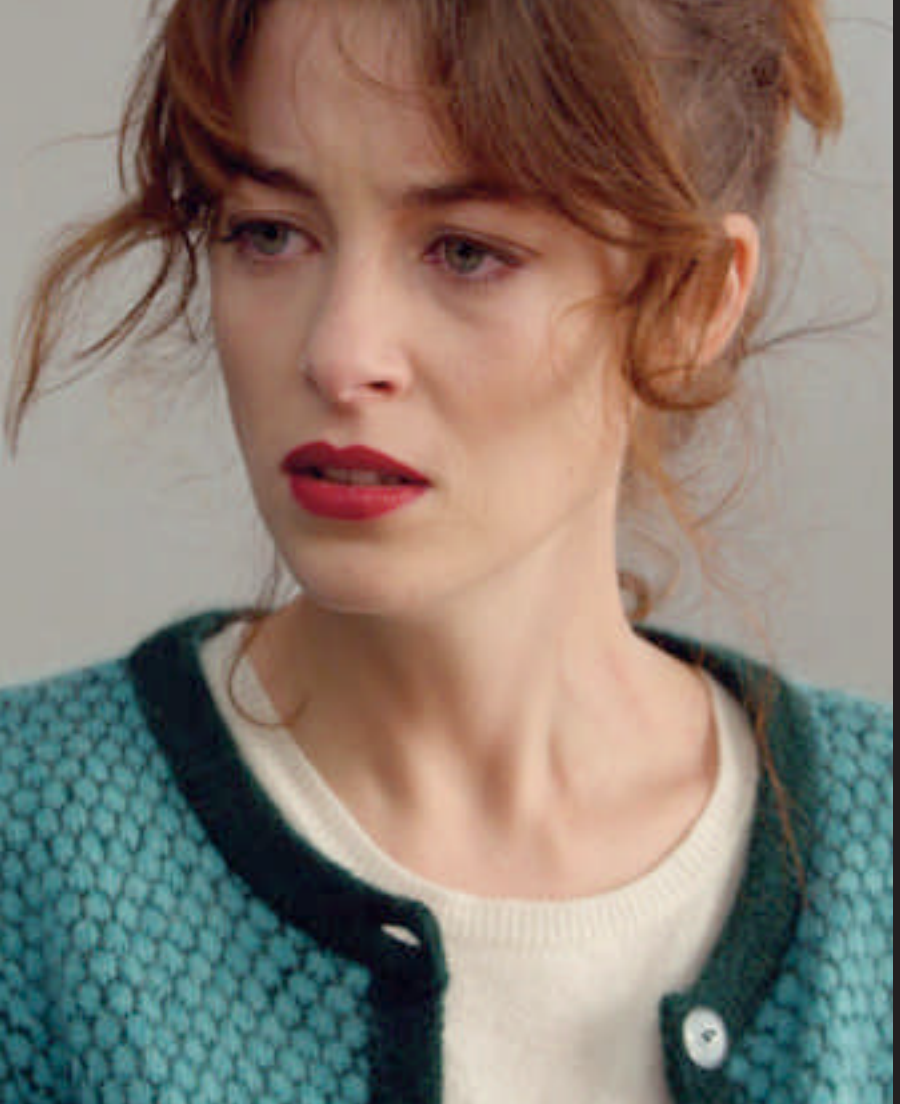
NP: *That seems to be where a lot of the humor of the film comes from: trying to make, as you say, an order, trying to create some logic out of wholly unrelated and random objects.*

AŻ: It is a story of the human mind.

NP: *And you have a very, very funny postscript.*

AŻ: It's the last sentence of the book. He says: "At dinner we had chicken with béchamel sauce."





EVERYTHING IS CHAOS
The Films of Andrzej Żuławski

by Samm Deighan

One of the most singular cinematic voices of his generation (or any other), Polish director Andrzej Żuławski (1940-2016) left behind an astounding catalogue of thirteen feature films, a few short films and many novels. Most people familiar with his name know him from *Possession* (1981), made in the transitional period when he left Poland for political reasons and settled in France, where he made the majority of his films. Widely regarded a horror film, thanks to its outré themes and use of explicit violence, as well as its unfortunate inclusion in the British 'Video Nasties' list of banned films, *Possession* highlights some of the key themes of Żuławski's career: characters defined by emotional excess or outright hysteria, a nebulous plot that focuses on failed or frustrated love and a distinctive, even restless sense of visual style.

Like some of his fellow countrymen and expatriates, Roman Polanski, Walerian Borowczyk and Jerzy Skolimowski, Żuławski seems like more of an international talent than strictly a Polish one. He always used genre to his own ends, incorporating everything from elements of the absurd to sex, violence and hysteria, as well as a wealth of historical and literary references. An active, brilliant mind and one that was never content to be complacent, the films he created are necessarily challenging and cannot neatly be defined by genre, basic plot premises, or the sort of clear-cut moral dilemmas favoured by mainstream cinema.

Żuławski got his start in Warsaw in the 1960s, working throughout much of that decade as an assistant director for Andrzej Wajda on films like *Samson* (1961), *Love at Twenty* (*L'Amour à vingt ans*, 1962; Wajda directed the 'Warsaw' segment) and *The Ashes* (*Popioły*, 1965). He made his own short films at the end of the decade, *The Story of Triumphant Love* (*Pieśń triumfującej miłości*, 1969) and *Pavoncello* (1969), both of which were commissioned for Polish television. Based on works of classical literature – an 1881 novella by Ivan Turgenev in the case of the former and a 1920 short story by Polish writer Stefan Żeromski for the latter – they may seem more conventional and restrained than his later films, but are fixated on the same themes that would follow the director throughout his career: hysterical men and women, love triangles and a profound, even haunting depth of feeling; in the case of *The Story of Triumphant Love*, this is highlighted by an eerie piece of music from composer Andrzej Korzyński, one of Żuławski's lifelong collaborators.

Like *Possession*, his first feature film, *The Third Part of the Night* (*Trzecia część nocy*, 1971), uses some tropes of the horror genre – though it relies even more on the Polish absurdist literary tradition – as well as biographical elements: it was co-written by his father, Mirosław, and is based on the elder Żuławski's experiences in Nazi-occupied Lwów (now Lviv, Ukraine), which was also his son's birthplace. While WWII was a common setting for films made in the Eastern bloc, as it allowed filmmakers to depict communist-approved, moralist dramas of good Soviets battling evil Nazis, *The Third Part of the Night* presents a man's descent into madness amidst a backdrop of plague, lice feeding, Gestapo intrigue and apocalypse.

In this non-linear tale, Michał (Leszek Teleszyński) watches German soldiers murder his family, but later meets a woman (Małgorzata Braunek) who looks exactly like his dead wife. Her husband is confused for Michał and is taken away to a Gestapo prison, while she gives birth with only Michał to assist her. Though she initially rejects him, she depends on him for her survival – he works in a laboratory feeding lice with his own blood and has access to food and vaccines – and they begin to fall in love…

The themes of war as a backdrop for personal and political chaos, apocalypse and the use of graphic violence would also appear in Żuławski's follow up film, *The Devil* (*Diabeł*, 1972), about a young man (Teleszyński again) attempting to return home across war-torn Poland in the eighteenth century, during the invasion of the Prussian army. His chaotic journey is far more frenzied, violent and sexually explicit than the events of Żuławski's debut feature – captured by dizzying yet spellbinding cinematography, with assistance from Andrzej Jaroszewicz, another of Żuławski's lifelong collaborators – and this film was considered to be even more subversive by the Polish government, who promptly banned it. The Polish People's Republic, contending with the aftermath of violent protests across the country, went through a period of censoring any art deemed to have themes of political dissent. Many artists, intellectuals and academics – and especially Jews – were forced to emigrate, Żuławski among them.

Like many of his suddenly homeless countrymen, the director relocated to France, where he had already spent a significant amount of time, thanks to his father's position as a diplomat and his earlier studies at the Sorbonne. He apparently found work in Paris as a writer and returned to filmmaking in a few short years with *L'Important c'est d'aimer* (1975), which marks quite a departure from *The Third Part of the Night* and *The Devil*; in general, the mid-'70s through the early '80s was a period of experimentation for Żuławski and resulted in *L'Important c'est d'aimer*, his sci-fi epic *On the Silver Globe* (*Na srebrnym globie*, 1988) and *Possession*. On the surface, *L'Important c'est d'aimer* is a seemingly conventional melodrama about the relationship between an actress and a photographer,

though with a backdrop of the worlds of soft- and hardcore pornography. This film was Żuławski's first major success and boasted an international cast that included Austrian starlet Romy Schneider, Italian action mainstay Fabio Testi and even German arthouse sensation Klaus Kinski.

In addition to being his first French effort, *L'Important c'est d'aimer* marks a number of firsts in Żuławski's feature films. It is actually an adaptation of Christopher Frank's 1972 novel *La Nuit américaine*, but also makes use of classical theatre, namely Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1592). Though this began with his use of *Hamlet* (1603) in *The Devil*, he would continue it throughout the '80s. And despite the compelling supporting performances of his then-wife Małgorzata Braunek in his first two Polish films, Żuławski's work with Schneider would set a pattern that continued throughout most of his career: hysterical, often physically demanding performances from lead actresses who would generally come to serve as the protagonists for his films. These roles often controversially challenged conventional notions of beauty, sexuality and femininity. Schneider, who won many awards for *L'Important c'est d'aimer*, would soon come to be joined by Isabelle Adjani, Valérie Kaprisky, Sophie Marceau (who would also become Żuławski's longtime romantic partner) and Iwona Petry.

The success of *L'Important c'est d'aimer* actually allowed Żuławski to return to Poland in the late '70s, when he was invited to make a new film. He chose to adapt the first two books of his great-uncle's influential – yet never translated into English – sci-fi series, *The Lunar Trilogy* (*Trylogia Księżycowa*, 1903-1911), as *On the Silver Globe*, which is arguably the director's most challenging, visionary project. It follows a small group of scientists abandoned on the moon, who begin a new civilisation that gradually succumbs to superstition, primitive religious fixations, arcane rituals and, eventually, a megalomaniacal cult. Quite epic, even operatic, in scope – with everywhere from the Baltic Coast to the Gobi Desert used for locations – the film was halted by the Polish government when it was nearly complete and all related materials, including props, costumes and film reels, were ordered destroyed.

Thanks to the dedication of the cast and crew, much of it was spared and preserved, though Żuławski was forced to return to France and was unable to complete the film until the late '80s. In 1988, it was finally screened at the Cannes Film Festival, with the director on hand to narrate the missing sequences and present a relatively complete version of the film. Undeniably provocative, controversial and deeply critical of absolute authority, *On the Silver Globe* is a work of science fiction and fantasy seemingly without parallel – at most it can be compared to some of the films of Alejandro Jodorowsky – and the film's restoration and unveiling in early 2016 has certainly been one of the cinematic events of the year.

But Żuławski's follow up film, *Possession*, is also his most infamous, and reflects much of the anger and heartbreak experienced during the years of *On the Silver Globe*, which also coincided with a bitter divorce from Braunek. *Possession*, intentionally set in Berlin, which Żuławski later described as a city of divided hearts, is a story about the failure of a marriage against a backdrop of existential violence, body horror, espionage... and an erotic octopus monster. Like *The Third Part of the Night*, this is a deeply personal film full of biographical elements, doubles and horror genre tropes, all leading towards a sense of impending apocalypse, when a husband (Sam Neill) tries to win back his wife (Isabelle Adjani), who is having an affair, though things turn out to be far more complicated.

Żuławski abandoned these genre themes when he returned to France and his films for the rest of the '80s are quite a departure from his earlier work. The three films made after *Possession* – *La Femme publique* (1984), *L'Amour braque* (1985) and *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours* (1989) – all represent a blend of genres (with an emphasis on crime and romance), exemplify Żuławski's skill of adapting complex literary works, and are defined by compelling, if complex female protagonists. Both *La Femme publique* and *L'Amour braque* are Dostoyevsky adaptations; writer Dominique Garnier co-scripted the former film, which is based on her memoirs about her early years in Paris as a model, but is also a loose interpretation of the novel *Demons* (*Bésy*, 1872), about political rebellion and personal hysteria in small town Russia. Adapting the spirit of the tale more than the literal plot, Żuławski moved the novel's events to a contemporary film shoot in Paris, where an egotistical, emigre director (Francis Huster) takes over the life of an actress (Valérie Kaprisky) he has cast in an adaptation of *Demons*.

While *La Femme publique* combines a chaotic film shoot with a murder mystery, political intrigue and an assassination plot, *L'Amour braque* is essentially a crime film – focusing on the complicated love triangle that emerges when an innocent young man (Huster again) befriends the leader of a gang (Tchéky Karyo) and then falls in love with the man's girlfriend (a young Sophie Marceau, in her first film with Żuławski) – though it is also an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's 1868 novel *The Idiot* (*Idiot*). The script contributions from songwriter Étienne Roda-Gil resulted in rapid, often dizzying dialogue packed with cultural references, a trend that would come to define the second half of Żuławski's career. And, perhaps surprisingly, this film is a somewhat faithful adaptation, despite the presence of gangsters, gunfights, flamethrowers, car chases and some of the most erotic sex scenes in any of the director's films.

The emphasis on nudity, sex and frenzied dialogue continued in the melancholic *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours*, a tragic love story that also marked the return of French pop singer Jacques Dutronc from *L'Important c'est d'aimer*. Dutronc plays a terminally ill

computer programmer who falls in love with a troubled young woman (Marceau). When she leaves Paris because of her traveling act as a psychic, he follows her to a seaside resort and is determined to proclaim his love despite his failing health. In this film, wordplay is connected to everything from romantic wooing and self-expression to confession. Even though it ends in suicide, a relatively common theme throughout Żuławski's films, it is one of his most tender and romantic. Along with the later *La Note bleue* (1991) and *La Fidélité*, both also starring Marceau, this is part of a loose, very personal trilogy that revolves around intense, but complicated relationships between older men and younger women.

During this period, *Boris Godounov* (1989) – an adaptation of Modest Mussorgsky's opera of the same name from 1873 – serves as a brief departure from these romantic themes. One of Żuławski's more neglected titles, the director managed to transform one of the most staged operas in Russian history into a work that is utterly his own. Complete with nudity (well before it became somewhat *de rigueur* in contemporary opera productions), plenty of surreal elements, and one of his boldest colour palettes, this political tale about the rise and fall of a regent turned tyrant borrows as much from Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky as it does from Mussorgsky; it deserves to be regarded as a spectacle of excess every bit as much as *On the Silver Globe*.

Though he did follow this by directing an opera for the stage, cinematically Żuławski returned to romantic themes – and comedy – with *La Note bleue*. As with *L'Important c'est d'aimer*, this is one of his most conventional films, at least on the surface level, and is essentially a historical melodrama; it follows the final months of the relationship between French nineteenth century novelist George Sand (Marie-France Pisier) and Polish composer Frédéric Chopin (pianist Janusz Olejniczak). Like Żuławski, who at that time had been exiled from Poland on and off for nearly two decades and was then living with a woman whose fame and fortune had eclipsed his own, Chopin had spent much of his life outside of his home country. *La Note bleue* focuses on the end of his nearly ten-year relationship with Sand, when Chopin allegedly developed feelings for her daughter, Solange (Marceau).

Despite its themes of heartbreak and loneliness – and mortality, as Chopin was terminally ill, much like the protagonist of *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours*, and passed away less than two years after the events depicted here – *La Note bleue* is one of Żuławski's warmest and funniest films, with many moments of laugh-out-loud physical comedy that is far more overt than the often subtle, ironic humor of his earlier films. Its concerns with family and domestic ritual wouldn't re-emerge until *Cosmos* (2015), though this is also one of Żuławski's richest explorations of art and music, both of which are integral to the film's plot and its lush, dramatic sense of style. In this looser thematic sense, the film represents

an integration of French and Polish culture, one that was an important component not only of Chopin's life, but also Żuławski's.

His next film, *Szamanka* (1996), actually coincides with his return to Poland after the fall of communism. This highly controversial film is unabashedly critical of Polish society and was panned by critics upon its release – primarily thanks to its violent and sexual content – and was derisively referred to as 'Last Tango in Warsaw'. It continues his exploration of unusual female protagonists, as it follows a young woman known only as the Italian (Iwona Petry), who leaves her poverty-stricken village to study engineering in Warsaw and strikes up an increasingly extreme relationship with an older anthropologist (Bogusław Linda), just as he discovers the mummy of an ancient shaman. His life disintegrates as he becomes obsessed with both the Italian and the mummy, and his attempts to control her result in violence.

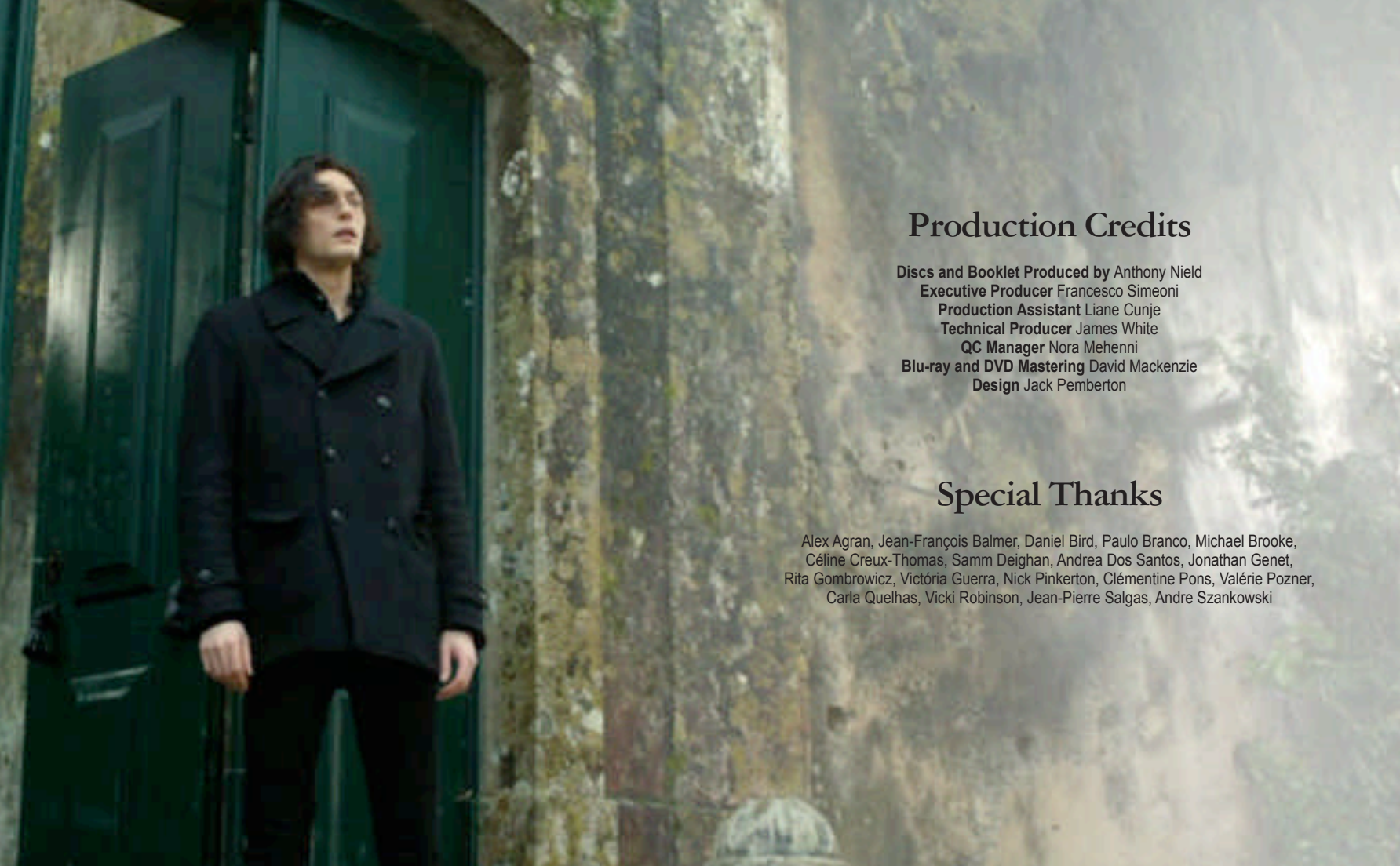
Penned by Polish novelist (and later politician) Manuela Gretkowska, *Szamanka* not only attacks Poland's cultural and social conservatism, but also the country's Catholic roots. It's one of the director's few films that could be said to have religious themes, though these are presented in an uneasy juxtaposition with both science and industry. Often attacked for its allegedly sexist tone, this film is Żuławski's most sexually transgressive and through these sequences, challenges gender stereotypes at every turn.

Though his penultimate film, *La Fidélité*, would return to the romance and melodramatic through another exploration of a failing relationship, it also follows an unconventional heroine. Marceau, in her final role for Żuławski, plays a successful photographer who is hired by a media mogul at the same time that she has a chance meeting with a publisher (Pascal Greggory), whose family company is being sold to the same mogul. They fall in love and, despite her reservations about relationships and commitment, marry. But she meets another young photographer (Guillaume Canet) for whom she feels an intense attraction, which poses a threat to her marriage.

Based on the seventeenth century novel, *La Princesse du Clèves*, this also coincides with the end of Żuławski and Marceau's relationship. Like *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours* and *La Note bleue*, it is concerned with themes of grief, loss and abandonment, though it's also a film about asking for forgiveness. It is perhaps Żuławski's ultimate thesis on love as a chaotic, potentially destructive force, which is also the overriding theme of his entire career as a filmmaker. The film examines the contrast between passion and responsibility and questions the nature of real commitment. It's also his grandest use of

poetry – an element that appears in most of his later films, including *La Note bleue* and *Cosmos* – and he weaves lines from English W.H. Auden into the loose narrative of *La Princess du Clèves*.

It seemed likely that *La Fidélité* was going to be the director's last film, though he tried to get several projects off the ground in the ensuing decade and continued to write novels. Fortunately, nearly 15 years later, in 2015, he was finally able to adapt Witold Gombrowicz's absurdist 1965 novel *Cosmos*, about an existential mystery uncovered by two young men while vacationing in Portugal. Despite the gap in years, this film embodies some of Żuławski's most enduring themes, such as the nature of performance and masks, the relationship between love and madness, and the exploration of what it means to be human in a hostile, irrational world. It is also perhaps fitting that his last film is one of his funniest, brightest and most hopeful, and it stands as a staunch celebration of life, even in the face of absurdity, frustration and even death.

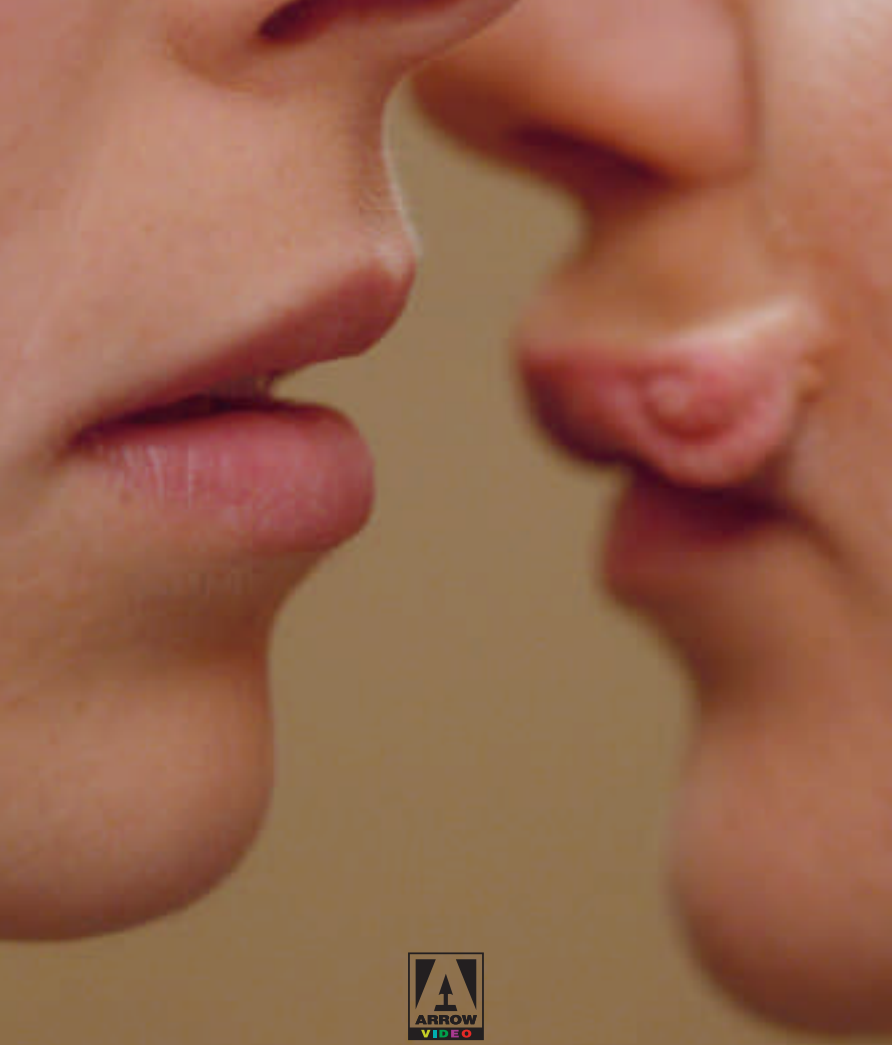


Production Credits

Discs and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield
Executive Producer Francesco Simeoni
Production Assistant Liane Cunje
Technical Producer James White
QC Manager Nora Mehenni
Blu-ray and DVD Mastering David Mackenzie
Design Jack Pemberton

Special Thanks

Alex Agran, Jean-François Balmer, Daniel Bird, Paulo Branco, Michael Brooke, Céline Creux-Thomas, Samm Deighan, Andrea Dos Santos, Jonathan Genet, Rita Gombrowicz, Victória Guerra, Nick Pinkerton, Clémentine Pons, Valérie Pozner, Carla Quelhas, Vicki Robinson, Jean-Pierre Salgas, Andre Szankowski



ARROW VIDEO

FCD1368