

INTERVIEW

Damian Kocur on *Bread and Salt*

VOL. 134 (APRIL 2023) BY ANTONIS LAGARIAS

We met with Polish filmmaker Damian Kocur at the 22nd Transilvania International Film Festival (14-23 June), where his film “Bread and Salt” screened in the SMART7 section. The film tells the story of a young pianist who goes back to his hometown in provincial Poland for the summer break. Reunited with his brother and childhood friends, he witnesses the aggressive reaction of the town’s youth to the opening of a kebab shop by two immigrants. We spoke about the director’s personal ties to the story, the different visual means he used in the film and the toxic mentality that fosters racism in Poland.

Your film depicts a small Polish town and focuses on young people that spend their summer holidays there. The film shows how racism and aggressiveness contaminate their daily lives, ultimately resulting in violence. Could you provide more details about your personal connection to the town and this mentality?

I was born in a similar place, a small town in southern Poland populated mostly by workers. Almost 20 years have passed since then, but I can remember that growing up in that town, there was nothing better to do than just hang around doing nothing really, smoking joints, drinking beer, etc. There weren’t any cultural activities for us, we didn’t have a theater or a cinema. Many of the people there had no real perspective. And I would say that I was one of the first ones who managed to escape. I went to Krakow to study German language and literature. I can remember that the first time I went back to my town in order to visit my family I started noticing differences between Krakow, a major student city, and my provincial hometown. A difference in mentality. Maybe I already knew it, but having this Krakow perspective helped me see things more clearly. Growing up, I knew that I had a different approach to art and science compared to my childhood friends. This does not mean that they didn’t understand me, yet at the same time we could feel this difference.

When I started working on the script, I used elements from this experience. The idea

came from a tragic even that happened in Poland a couple of years ago, when a young boy was accidentally killed by a person working at a Kebab shop. I was also inspired by different books that treated similar subjects. I read Didier Eribon's novel, *Returning To Reims*, where he describes his childhood as a gay person in a small homophobic town in France. Similarly, one of our friends left the town and later we learned that he was gay. He was hiding it because he was afraid of the town's reactions. I contacted him 15 years later, he lives in Mallorca today and has a husband. He told me that he was just afraid of telling anyone because he didn't know how we would react.

So, in my film I combined elements from my personal story, the stories of my friends, and also the stories of my protagonists. Tymek and Jacek, the two main characters, are brothers and pianists in real life as well. I know them very well, so I wanted to work with them even if they are not professional actors. Their relationship as depicted in the film is kind of real, because they act based on their own experiences. For instance, we see in the film that after Jacek fails to enter the music academy, he becomes kind of depressed and that Tymek tries to convince him to leave the town. This also happened in their real life. I try to combine documentary elements with a fictional story, a method I had previously used in my short films. I do not cast actors. I search for the right people that can tell the story in the way I want the story to be told.

Did you want your film to be representative of provincial Poland?

I think that, yes, Poland is like this. I used memories from my teenage years and many things have changed since then, for sure. But, at the same time, many things remain the same. Aggression and violence among young people are still very present today, in bigger cities as well. You can see it in the way people talk to each other and in the words they are using. This kind of violent, vulgar language is everywhere. It is not limited to small towns. I just wanted to place this story in a small town because it is a place I can remember from my childhood. Thus, many dialogues in the film are inspired by my childhood friends. I would say though that the difference between big cities and provincial towns is getting smaller and smaller. People have access to the internet, they can connect through different platforms and social media and they can more easily meet people with similar interests.

How was the film received in Poland? Did you ever receive feedback from the audience saying that they cannot recognize their country or that this is not what Poland looks like, today at least?

There were some comments suggesting that maybe something has changed, but at the same time, violent events take place very often, perhaps on a weekly basis. As I mentioned in the Q&A last night, a month ago a young boy was beaten to death in the middle of the street in the daytime. And no one reacted, so my film is mostly about people not reacting when faced with violence. In this, Tymek and Jacek are a bit like

Cain and Abel, since, in a way, Tymek ends up killing his brother by not acting in the face of what is happening. He sees things going in a wrong direction but does not react because he is afraid. Maybe, if he had said “stop”, things could have turned out different.

As viewers, we closely identify with Tymek’s perspective as we watch the events through his eyes. For the most part, we know only what he knows. For instance, Tymek doesn’t know a lot of details about the two foreigners who run the Kebab shop. They remain strangers. We never learn their names - except for Youssef - or their origin and, in that way, the film reinforces their anonymity. Did you ever consider presenting their point of view?

Never. I didn’t want to change the point of view since this would mean resorting to a different film language associated with different genres. So, I did not want to go there. One scene where I give more space to them is when Youssef and his friend are talking to each other and their dialogue is not subtitled in English. In that way, I wanted to show the viewers what it feels like not being able to understand, a kind of awkward feeling shared by many characters in the film. Also, I wanted to avoid making a straightforward film about immigrants that would clearly define the good and the bad. I mean, they are humans as well, so they have the right to react in an aggressive way too, especially if they are mistreated to this extent.

Just before the Venice premiere, a festival programmer came up to me and asked me if I thought there was a problem with showing Arab-speaking characters acting aggressive since they end up killing a Polish guy. My reply to him was that I intended to show where and why events like that may take place. He was from a film festival in Sweden. I know that in Sweden they have problems with the Arabic minority and they often try to present themselves as tolerant and politically correct, so they avoid talking about these issues as if they did not exist. In my case, I did not want to make a film that turned against anyone. The film screened in the Cairo Film Festival in Egypt, one of the biggest Arab film festivals. And no one was upset. It was important for me to avoid a black-and-white approach. After watching the film, you need to think and ask, “Who is the victim?”. I think that the Kebab employees are victims here since, being a minority, the shop was a piece of their home and they had to protect it and defend themselves. That is exactly what happened in the real event the film is based on. A guy was killed by accident, but the immigrants who were responsible were only trying to defend themselves after having been harassed for so long. Tensions were gradually building over time.

Tensions are also constantly building throughout your film. As viewers, we feel that violence is permanent and unavoidable. However, it is associated with a kind of male aggressiveness. The film focuses on those young boys and the rest of the characters are either secondary or absent. Did you ever consider

including a different opinion? For instance, a female character or an older person who could present a different perspective?

It is true that male characters are very present in the film, while female characters remain on the sidelines. And that is because there is little space for them within this culture of toxic masculinity. It becomes a kind of force that pushes everything else aside. It was a conscious decision to do this. With the absence of older people, I wanted to suggest that parents are another reason that things like this keep happening. In the case of three of the main characters, their fathers are absent and while the mother is still there, she is not really available for them. Young people like them may end up having no connection with their parents and this is often because, in Poland, people spend most of their time working. Wanting to sacrifice everything in order to keep their jobs and earn more money, they end up having little to no connection with their children.

Your film showed some clear aesthetic choices. At times it feels like a documentary, and, at the same time, it is very theatrical. How did you work with your director of photography and the actors to shoot the scenes where most of the action takes place in the background of the shot?

I wanted to avoid a type of cinema where the camera moves constantly and follows around the non-professional actors, like the Dardenne brothers do for instance. We had to use some close-ups for Tymek because he is the main character but, most of the time, we tried to keep the camera at a distance. In a way that you can sit, like in theater, and observe as the whole scene unfolds. You can choose where to focus. For instance, in the scene at the bus stop you observe the situation while being stuck at a specific place, as it would probably happen in real life. It is perhaps possible to turn the head but at the same time you are kind of forced to be an observer. I knew from the beginning that I wanted my film to look like this.

Is it an approach you will continue using in future projects?

For my new feature I am not sure yet. It will be a story about a family of four and the main character will be a teenage girl. The two parents will be professionals, and the kids are non-professionals. It will be a Ukrainian-speaking film shot in Spain, but I don't have a lot of Ukrainian friends I could work with. In my previous films, I mostly worked with friends since I don't need specific acting skills but a specific kind of presence in front of the camera. I'm looking for real conversations, real reactions and a real relationship between people that is developed both before and during shooting. It is important to know that it will work between them, and then all you have to do is press the button. A lot came from just being there with the actors and observing what was happening.

For instance, during the shooting I was living with the two brothers in the flat we see in the film, so I could observe their real-life relationship. I was listening to their conversations, and I would sometimes ask them to repeat what they were saying in front of the camera. For me, a film is made during the shooting, and not during the writing period. You can agree about many things on paper, but it doesn't mean it's going to work as intended. In this, I agree with Werner Herzog when he said that storyboards are for cowards, and if you spend more than two weeks writing a script, it will probably be a bad one. I spent around two weeks writing this script because most of the story was already in my mind and I just needed to write it down. And I wrote the treatment for my next feature in a week or two. Now we need to be more precise, so we are writing the dialogues, but dialogues are not that necessary to me. I just need to know what the scene is about and then I prefer to let the actors, professionals or non-professionals, use their own language and their own expressions.

Many shots are followed by black, soundless images. For the audience, there are different ways to interpret this. It was a strong visual effect that created a rupture in the film's continuity, reflecting a threat of violence that was everywhere and that even affected the filmic structure itself. At the same time, it introduced a distance for the viewers who were constantly reminded that they are watching a film. Was it important for you to introduce some additional distance between the film and the viewers through formal means?

Yes, I wanted to provide some space for the viewers. Every new scene puts them in a new situation, and they risk forgetting what they just saw and felt. So, my aim was to give them some space. It was kind of intuitive, I must say. For the same reason, I wanted to avoid establishing shots which would allow the viewer to locate the time and place of the action, like saying "the next day" or "in this block of apartments". I think such establishing shots are overused. So, instead, I searched for a different visual language and ended up using these black fragments. I also think that it is important to use everything you can to disturb the viewers. Some people think that there is something wrong with the screening when the first black image appears. Then, they get used to it and I believe that these black fragments activate a desire to interpret the unknown. If you are asking what it meant, perhaps the film already stands out a bit.

Another notable choice was to end the film on a kind of ambiguous note, as the violent event is depicted only through the security cameras of the kebab shop. By default, these cameras only show a specific angle, so we never get to see what happened exactly. It is clear that it was an accident, but why was it important for you to finish with this ambiguity and conceal the complete picture of the event?

Because you can get a complete picture of violence on the internet. It's very easy, you can click twice and you can get access to all kinds of violence. So I think that cinema

doesn't have an obligation to show violence in an obvious way. I don't have to show that somebody is physically stabbed to death to understand and feel what is happening. This is not cinema's task anymore. The internet grants you access to all kinds of pornography and violence.

Even though that may leave the audience with questions, like for instance who exactly did it and how?

I think you know who did it because you saw this guy running with a knife, trying to defend himself. So, you know what happened, only not in a very obvious way. Most importantly, I chose this visual way to show this moment because it looks like videos of violence one can find online. Many of those videos have the image quality of CCTV cameras. We had this idea to give the audience a short glimpse of the shop's CCTV cameras in different moments throughout the film, as a kind of repetition. I discussed this with my producer, but he was against it, because we were already using a lot of different artistic tools and he thought that it was too much. But now I regret that we didn't do it. We repeated a weird sound that young can hear at different moments throughout the film. I have to say though that my producer was very open to all the ideas, perhaps because he is from a public institution since the film was produced by the Polish Filmmakers Association that finances debut films. Because it is really hard to find funding in Poland for art house cinema.

Another scene that seems to reference other films were the shots of the familiar places we see inhabited by the protagonists throughout the film, but at the end, they appear empty. It looks a bit like the ending of Antonioni's *Eclipse*, where the camera drifts through empty spaces. Antonioni suggests with these shots that the story in the film is only one among thousand possible ones, but in your film, these images have a more sinister look. They seem to suggest that violence will only repeat itself if no one acts against it. It feels like a warning, and I would like to ask what kind of audience did you have in mind when you shot this? Did you want to mainly address a domestic audience in Poland?

That's a good interpretation. To be honest, I didn't envision it in this way. My decisions were more intuitive, I just wanted for things to look like this, to show the same spaces we see throughout the film but this time being empty, to symbolize that someone has disappeared, someone is not there anymore. Maybe I was inspired by other films, their images often stay with you and you use them unconsciously. But I also wanted to avoid a kind of social drama, where everything is told in an obvious manner. By showing you these images, I leave some room for interpretation. I wanted to just maintain this feeling of loneliness for a while. Some people asked me why I didn't show how Tymek or the rest of society reacted. I just thought it would be too much. It would make it about sadness, when the film is not about that.

Thank you for the interview.