

REVIEW

# Illusion, Disillusionment

Krzysztof Zanussi's *Persona non grata* (2005)

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Nothing is the way it seems: this is the hidden motto of Krzysztof Zanussi's *Persona non grata*, in which the truth takes a tiring amount of deceptive forms before finally being presented to the viewer. Where *Illumination* and *Camouflage*, two of Zanussi's classic films from the 1970s, taught us that the path to many answers we are seeking is obstructed by both politics and the nature of the sciences through which we hope to unveil them, *Persona non grata* argues that excessive idealism itself can throw us off the course of truth. Wiktor, Polish ambassador to Uruguay, is faced with a conspiracy surrounding major deals with external contractors and the death of his wife (another major lesson to be learned is that all bad things happening in politics are somehow interconnected), but lags behind the answer because of his obsession with principled behavior; as one character from the film puts it, the protagonist applies rules where they don't exist. Thus, Wiktor fails, until the end, to recognize that deception and lies may be instrumentalised by people with good intentions (especially in politics, it is implied). The film's narrative vehicle are confidential conversations, often between Wiktor (Zbigniew Zapasiewicz) and a mistrusted character who ends up having pretty good reasons for his position, briefly removing the conceited frown from Zapasiewicz's face which viewers may already be familiar with from Zanussi's earlier *Life is a Sexually Transmitted Disease*. While openly gerontic films are rare, *Persona non grata* seemingly attempts to "catch up" with the troubles of older viewers, for most of which an easy explanation is readily provided (even for the fact that some troubles lack such an explanation, or resolution). If young cinema protests the ageing of cinema, why indeed shouldn't there be a counter-movement to this trend? The problem, with the one and the other, is that the focus on differentiation makes such films neurotically obsessed with an idealisation of their respective perspective. Zanussi's film doesn't only accommodate the grief and alienation of his main character, but likewise an image of the past (if only retrospectively) that is difficult to buy into. Indeed, one may wonder how Wiktor could have held on to his idealism throughout his political career – was there really a time when there were rules in politics or life? Even if he himself has somehow managed to elude the cynical comportment of his peers, shouldn't he at least have learned to acknowledge its existence? An answer of sorts is the fact that Wiktor lives in a world that is not only anachronistic, but likewise surreal. In spite of his diplomatic routine, he is allowed to self-indulge throughout much of the day, mourning

his wife's death over the piano and persistently staring at objects in his residence (a runner-up in terms of comic potential is a late scene in which he travels to oversee the transport of the remains of a Polish citizen but decides, upon arrival, to change his plans). Of course, Zanussi shouldn't be credited with (or blamed for) coming up with a way of romanticizing the fate of heroes of a lost time. In fact, Wiktor shares many of his characteristics with fellow characters from other Polish films, perhaps most prominently his refusal to accept a sexual offer from a beautiful female employee when in possession of information against her (cf. *Hans Kloss. Stawka większa niż śmierć*). Still, what makes *Persona non grata* stand out is its explicit ambition to set things right: is it worth making a film designed to disabuse the viewer of his black-and-white world views if it presupposes first ascribing those beliefs to him?