

Summary



Krzysztof Zanussi. Between the Imaginarium of Cinema and the Magnetism of Theatre. Germany, Switzerland, Austria

“Krzysztof Zanussi is sometimes intriguing, but also sometimes irritating”,¹ which, in his profession, makes him all the more interesting. He is reserved, stubborn, uncompromising, a non-conformist and an introvert, also during interviews. He likes taking on the role of the interviewer: “Why do the Germans think so idealistically? There are no recipes, no solutions. I provide the impulse so that people start thinking. My attitude is not that of a pessimist. I have trust in the individual’s strength and ability to understand the existing facts and avoid the danger of assimilation”.² He represents *auteur* cinema, is faithful to his ideals but is fully aware as to what this may bring. He created his own individual trend described as “Zanussi’s *universum*”,³ characteristic of films that pose open questions and do not have any ready answers. As Mariola Marczak points out: “Krzysztof Zanussi’s films represent existential drama, the anxious and nostalgic search for what is reflected in aiming towards something [...]. Zanussi is a rationalist and sceptic, and that is why his films show a trace of being dramatically torn apart, which results from being aware that we shall never reach our goals but, at the same time, never cease in our attempts to do so”.⁴ His characters are often like him: “He reminds us of one of his heroes, the thoughtful and secretive Jan from *The Structure of Crystals*. He presents his arguments shyly and is anything but eager to talk about his work, perceiving it as incomplete. Many things annoy him in ‘modern’ films and is irritated by the absolutisms and exaggerated perfectness of story-telling represented by other film-makers. He prefers intimacy because a film is not a screaming poster”.⁵ In revealing cynicism and opportunism, as well as (in)humane attitudes, he shows the helplessness of those who cry out: “go with your head held high among those who are on their knees and are in the midst of those who

¹ Zanussi. *Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, back cover, Warszawa 2014.

² Zanussi: Ich bin aber kein Pessimist, *Kölnische Rundschau*, 3 December, 1977.

³ *Cierpienie i nadzieja w twórczości filmowej Krzysztofa Zanussiego*, eds. Father Andrzej Baczyński, Father Michał Drożdż, and Michał Legan OSPPE (Kraków, 2015), p. 13.

⁴ Mariola Marczak, *Niepokój i tęsknota. Kino wobec wartości. O filmach Krzysztofa Zanussiego*, Olsztyn 2011, p. 483.

⁵ Vor den Entscheidungen, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 18 February 1972.

have been smashed into smithereens”.⁶ He presents a lack of acceptance over and above the spiritual awareness of people as a whole, although he himself stresses: “I keep hoping that my next film will be better, that it will be more important and wiser”.⁷ The frames of his images “where he is mainly interested in a good, weak person who nearly dies in the face of evil”,⁸ are like slides gradually filling up with content, creating unique compositions of important moral dilemmas. Sensitive, touchy, inquisitive and loyal, he chooses his co-workers very carefully, with the accuracy of a jeweler: Edward Żebrowski described him as “a cross between a rationalist and a moralist”, whereas Bolesław Michalak added that “he is exceptionally intelligent and insightful”. “He has his own world. And this shows how different he is. He is not subject to influence”, noted Sławomir Idziak, while Maja Komorowska observed that “although sometimes my perception of the world and my way of expressing it and how I see it are probably trying for him, his loyalty is of great importance to me”.⁹ Filip Bajon sums these comments up by saying: “he is the only producer that measures up to our times”.¹⁰ About films, Zanussi says that “they are my main concern in life”, while about himself, he states: “I am one of the few who has the privilege of doing what is my greatest passion in life”.¹¹

How can we then sum up the fifty-year presence of Krzysztof Zanussi’s output in German-speaking countries, a film director from ‘behind the iron curtain’, who already in the 1970s started fulfilling his dreams about work in the West? Probably the only way is to describe, sum up, analyze and synthesize his achievements during this period, as has been done by the authors of this publication. Although they are fully aware that despite their involvement in the topic and collecting as many sources as possible, only to a small degree were they able to present the whole spectrum of his activities in those countries. These researchers knew only too well that they were undertaking a task that was practically impossible. as in following their hero, they had to go from small theatre halls to meet the great of this world. From joining the audience in Bremen’s Opera Theatre, they would have to move on to interpret and analyze such metaphysical films as *Imperative* or *Power of Evil*. They also had to take into consideration such films as *Nachtdienst* with two actresses appearing in one room, only a moment later to look into films that seemed – in contrast – to be like epics, such as *Ways in the Night* or *A Year of the Quiet Sun*, and then move on to discuss the theatrical productions of such diverse playwrights as Pinter, Ionesco, Miller or Hare, whose works Zanussi produced on German stages, including travelling theatres.

The aim of this publication is thus to present Krzysztof Zanussi’s artistic work in German-speaking countries in the form of a monographic sketch and not as a chronicle. The book touches upon the very essence of his extremely vast output. Of importance was not only to show Zanussi as a film director but also as somebody very much involved in

⁶ *Przesłanie Pana Cogito*, <https://fundacjaherberta.com>, 22.07.2022.

⁷ Krzysztof Zanussi – Polens Meisterregisseur wird 80, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 17 June, 2019.

⁸ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Kämpfe eines Klosterbruders. Nur wer zweifelt, wird erleuchtet: Dem Filmregisseur Krzysztof Zanussi zum Siebzigsten, 17.06.1999.

⁹ *Tor Zespół*, Barbara Hollender, Zofia Turowska, Warszawa, 2000, pp. 143–146.

¹⁰ Filip Bajon, Lekcje stylu, (in): *Artysta wobec współczesności. O Zanussim inni*, Neriton, Warszawa, 1996, p. 28.

¹¹ Iga Czarnawska, *Krzysztof Zanussi – sylwetka artysty*, Warszawa, 2008, p. 19.

the theatre. In reference to the above-mentioned publication by Mariola Marczak, this work is, on the one hand – and in the context of Zanussi's film output – a reminder of what has already been written, but on the other, emphasis has been placed on the films that were the result of his cooperation with German-speaking film companies, cooperation concerning films directed by him as well as those he produced or co-produced. This also applied to those films where he acted as consultant. The authors of this monograph were also, to a large extent, concerned with how Zanussi's film output was perceived in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and – what is extremely important – in the former German Democratic Republic, where Krzysztof Zanussi had a well-grounded position. However, an essential addition that is completely new in research conducted on his artistic output is the extensive chapter devoted to his theatrical and operatic works, in parallel with his career in film, in countries representing German culture.

Hence, we would like to invite you to make a journey along the well-known road through Krzysztof Zanussi's land of films, a road – as was mentioned above – that leads to his involvement in the theatre. It was in the latter that he developed his artistic career in parallel with his passion for films. From the collected information it appears that Zanussi, generally perceived as a man of the cinema, has directed as many as fifty theatrical productions, although the majority of the first-night performances took place outside Poland. Although this has led to him being perceived in his home country as a film director, in the wider European perspective he is seen as both a film and theatre director.

He has worked for the stage for over forty years. His foreign debut took place in 1980 in Schaubühne München and this premier was the beginning of his difficult, yet successful, career in German theatres. This continued for the following thirty years. Another path that he took, which still awaits research, is his work as an opera director, reshaping the classics, but also reaching out for works that had their origins in that part of Europe.

Zanussi's involvement in the theatre/opera has revealed new opportunities for research. As the majority of publications devoted to him have been concerned with his work for the cinema, in order to fill in this so very significant gap we decided to place this well-grounded portrait of 'Zanussi, the film-maker' in somewhat different perceptive frames.

Motivation for the following monograph was awakened by the belief that our duty was to fill this gap by presenting his whole artistic output in German-speaking countries, and to show how diverse it was. This also had to include lectures delivered in art colleges throughout Germany, Austria and Switzerland. This was the norm among such artists as Krzysztof Zanussi. He would also go out to talk with his theatrical audiences and work towards improving Polish-German relations on different levels.

The authors of this publication wish to show how Krzysztof Zanussi's film and theatre productions were received in Germany and that is why there are so many reviews, often translated into Polish for the first time. Besides, attempts have been made to create interpretive frameworks which would include such diverse works as documentaries, films inspired by literature and those based on Zanussi's own scripts, all being linked to his theatrical achievements that include quite a number of plays and operas. And because his achievements in German-speaking countries are only a part of his vast artistic output, the authors had to, in an obviously simplified manner and also sometimes barely touching upon the subject, refer to both his earlier and later oeuvre, i.e. to 'Zanussi's *universum*'. The hope is that despite the limitations resulting from time, space as well as life, this publication will at least to a certain extent increase our readers' knowledge

about Krzysztof Zanussi's work in German-speaking countries and supplement the portrait of this total artist, as we may describe him when we look at his achievements within audiovisual and theatrical culture. That is why we would like to invite you to take part in an intellectual journey into past and present times, into the different forms of film and television, and to meet people from the German and Polish cultural world dealing in the fields of literature, philosophy and the media.

In academic publications, it has always been the norm and custom to say to whom the given work is addressed. Here we have decided not to define our potential target readers as we are convinced that art and science are to serve everybody and not only the chosen few. That is why, if we were to give it a label, we would rather place it within popular science and describe it as being interdisciplinary. This, of course, is only a suggestion and not a key to the book itself. You have to decide for yourselves. We, however, firmly believe in the value of such a publication and in making it available to a wider readership.

Translated by Aniela Korzeniowska