

In the clutches of melancholy. Interpretive analysis of Gilles Renard's student film "Late Afternoon"

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The aim of the analysis is to present the film (*Late Afternoon*) by Gilles Renard as a study of melancholy. Both the plot and the cinematographic means used to shape the form of this short film correspond with the theoretical texts by Julia Kristeva and Melanie Klein on depression in women. The author of the text considers *Late Afternoon* as a feminist and affirmative film, strongly inspired by the aesthetics of Krzysztof Kieślowski's cinematic output.

Keywords: Gilles Renard, *Late Afternoon*, melancholy, feminism

Gilles Renard directed his student film *Late Afternoon* (*Późne popołudnie*), created in 1996 at the National Higher School of Film, Television and Theatre in Łódź, under the auspices of Krzysztof Kieślowski and Witold Sobociński. Although the prospect of considering his film as a completely individual work would be tempting, it is hard not to resist the impression that the young creator was "influenced" by the authorities and did not become the "his own father" [1], which is visible both in the subject and methods he used to build an atmosphere with his use of filmic devices.

The main character of the film is Ewa, a young woman in love with Marek, who is older and married. The action of *Late Afternoon* takes place around the visit of a long-lost childhood friend, in front of whom Ewa is trying to pretend that she has married Marek and is carrying his child. However, it soon comes to light that the woman is only pretending to be happy. In fact, she is the "other one": a lover whose current situation is beginning to bother her. Ewa decides to leave her lover just as he is trying to tell her about both his departure from his wife and his decision to start a new life with Ewa in Canada.

Although the truth about Ewa's fictitious pregnancy (revealed by showing that under her clothing there is not a pregnant belly but a pillow) may be an element of surprise, for an attentive viewer the mystification created by the heroine becomes obvious from the very beginning: when seen for the first time the woman is looking out of

[1] H. Bloom, *Lęk przed wpływem*, trans. A. Bielek-Robson, Kraków 2002, p. 107.

the window, and her slender figure does not suggest at all that she is an expectant mother. Only in the following scenes, when the visit of the friend is approaching, does the belly become noticeable. The cigarettes smoked by Ewa in anticipation of the arrival of guests are a similar clue given by the director to the viewers. Her behaviour seems unusual for a happy woman expecting the birth of a long-awaited child.

Cigarettes are one of those elements of the world presented which Renard uses from the outset to depict the psychic state of the main character. She is shown without a cigarette only in the take that exposes her pregnancy, while in other moments the woman smokes constantly in every space in which she happens to be. The camera fetishises this act through aestheticization, for example, in close-ups, not devoid of eroticism, in which only a fragment of the woman's face is visible together with the smoke she deeply inhales and exhales. The cigarette as a part of the film set design has a long and ideologically marked history[2], and presented in a seductive manner cannot be left without proper commentary. The transgressiveness of the figure of a smoking pregnant woman is overshadowed by the psychoanalytical dimension of the figure of a woman with a cigarette in general. Attention must be paid to the far-reaching tradition of attributing the characteristics of typically men's artefacts to cigarettes.[3] In *Late Afternoon*, Ewa's smoking not only emphasises her loneliness and alienation, but also heralds her decision to stop her toxic relationship and leave Marek, and thus to free herself from male power and to gain independence.

Renard subordinates also other means of filmic expression to the illustration of Ewa's internal state. The fact that the narrative is developed from her perspective is confirmed by the initial sequence of the film when the protagonist is nostalgically looking out the window, watching some children playing on the playground. At this moment the soundtrack is dominated by a single sound: her loud breath. The action of *Late Afternoon* is therefore a strongly subjectivised account, given from the point of view of an emotionally trembling woman.

Her psychological condition justifies the presence of one of the easiest tools to influence the sphere of emotions – music: in the case of this film, one can hear the second part of the Italian concert[4] by Johann Sebastian Bach, which is the only musical leitmotif of the film, and which, through its calm pace (contrasting with the other parts of Bach's work) and consistent repetition of tones, introduces a melancholic mood. The play of lights and colours turns out to be important in modelling the right atmosphere. Renard consistently maintains *Late Afternoon* in dark shades of colours, adequate to the time of the day from

[2] L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, London 1989, p. 8.

[3] The story of incorporating women consumers into the group of smokers is described in an interesting way by Wendy Christensen; see: eadem, *Torches of Freedom: Women and Smoking Propaganda*, [https://](https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2012/02/27/torches-of-freedom-women-and-smoking-propaganda)

thesocietypages.org/socimages/2012/02/27/torches-of-freedom-women-and-smoking-propaganda (accessed: September 10, 2018).

[4] J.S. Bach, *Concerto nach Italienischem Gusto* (part 2: Andante).

the title. The colours vary between cold and warm, emphasising the internal tension that accompanies the heroine. Most of all, however, the spaces are darkened: there is a lack of light in them, which sometimes allows us to see only slightly illuminated faces or silhouettes of women.

Light is also used to build film metaphors. For example, the painting of a woman in a classicistic style appears twice in the film. The affiliation of the painting with the ancient tradition triggers contexts related to the category of harmony, which is so important for art enslaved by the rigid principles of the Great Theory of Beauty.^[5] In the first minutes of the film, the painting is, like the space surrounding Ewa, barely visible and the camera slides off into complete darkness. At the end, however, the woman's face slowly brightens and begins to radiate, which corresponds to the decision taken by the heroine to free herself from the situation that causes her sadness.

The events are also staged in such a way that Ewa's melancholy can be considered the main theme of the film. The heroine, even when the sun outside the flat has not yet set, hides behind drawn curtains, cutting herself off from the world outside. Closed in within the four walls of her flat, she alienates herself behind the bolted door. The friend to whom Ewa opens the door pays attention to the surprisingly large number of locks that Ewa turns: "I would feel like I was in a cage", she says. And in fact, the flat that belongs to Marek, who keeps her with him as "the other one", functions as a golden cage in which Ewa has everything but what she really desires.

Her aimlessness, lack of activity and signs of depression are visible in the objects scattered all over the home. On the refrigerator there lies an abandoned slice of buttered bread, testifying to the woman's lack of appetite. The piano which, as she declares, she can play "even four-handed" is very dusty, which means that Ewa is not capable of expressing her feelings through sounds: she has neither the strength nor the inclination to play because melancholy has a paralysing effect on her.

The behaviour of the woman during her friend's visit also indicates a deeply rooted state of melancholy: although she tries to pretend to be happy, she reveals herself to her guest, to whom she even cannot talk naturally. She answers all questions with monosyllables or clichés, and every now and then bursts into tears. Her inability to communicate can also be seen in a telephone conversation with Marek when he makes a comment on her speaking very quietly. It is so quiet that she is hard to understand, so she basically remains mute. She also refuses to open a gift from the man although she is encouraged by both her lover and the woman visiting her. Later, it turns out that if she had rejected the belief that there was nothing valuable for her in the box, the story would have turned out completely differently.

[5] See: W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje szczęściu pojęć*, Warszawa 2014.

Ewa's inability to conduct a fruitful conversation, either with Marek or her childhood friend, is part of what Julia Kristeva wrote about melancholy, pointing to the dialectical process that takes place between what is semiotic and symbolic.

A spectacular breakdown of meaning in the case of a depressed person (...) allows us to suppose that this person has a problem with the integration of a universal, meaningful chain, i.e. language. (...) In the case of a person with depression (...) speech is for them like a foreign skin: a melancholiac is a stranger in the native language.[6]

Even Ewa's way of speaking fits in with what Kristeva writes about the semioticity of depressive discourse when she points to a "repetitive rhythm, monotonous melody, slowing down the language's intonation features that co-exist with the general slowing down and helplessness of people with depression".[7]

The turning point of the student film, decisive for the sequence of events, is the appearance of a childhood photo for which Ewa and her friend pose together with an old suitcase. They agree that at that time they were "naïve and stupid" although Ewa remarks with sadness that they were "at least happy". This is the turning point in which the heroine is able to see herself, to reconstruct her lost subjectivity, like a child seeing itself for the first time in the Lacanian mirror. The fact that she does not have any photos with Marek does not allow her to achieve a similar effect of integrating her personality as the persona she has become. She states bitterly, admitting to putting on a show in front of her friend, that "all she has is this old suitcase" from the picture, and then she takes out the pillow from under the dress – the pillow with which she pretended pregnancy. This statement is at the same time an auto-reflection about being naïve and stupid.

Deciding to open up to a friend and explain the situation to her, she takes the first step toward making the big decision to leave Marek. The loss of sense, the non-sense in which the protagonist gets herself stuck, is explicitly confirmed by an outsider. Ewa's opening to another person is the key to changing this state of affairs: "The transformation of suffering into the symbolic one, into a novel – is an attempt at one's own creativity, personal narrative; 'one can bear the worries if they are expressed'".[8]

The figure of the friend requires a few words of commentary. She acts primarily as a therapist, on whose couch (in one of the scenes Ewa is leaning her head on the woman's legs) the problems that torment the main heroine are put into words. However, the status of this character is not entirely clear: the director skilfully uses the accepted aesthetics of chiaroscuro so that in some moments the women's similar physiognomies get blurred, which makes them hard to distinguish. Also, the

[6] J. Kristeva, *Czarne słońce. Depresja i melancholia*, trans. M.P. Markowski, R. Rzyziński, Kraków 2007, p. 58.

[7] T. Kitliński, *Obcy jest w nas. Kochać według Julii Kristevej*, Kraków 2001, p. 40.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 43.

resemblances between the women are often emphasised in the plot: the friend likes Ewa's fur coat, and her husband also reacts positively to perfumes that Ewa, in fact, received from Marek. Both women are connected by the memories of childhood, but also by aspirations: when Ewa, before letting guests into her house, is looking through the peep-hole, the friend is touching up her make-up: she is applying lipstick. Thus, in Ewa's eyes, she is the figure of a fulfilled woman, whose life has gone in the direction the protagonist has longed for. That is why she initially decides to play a happy person in front of her friend, and that is also why she is constantly trying to deflect her friend's questions and absorb information about someone else's life. However, the fact that the mysterious figure is not named, and hence, does not gain full-fledged subjectivity, allows one to speculate that perhaps it is simply the inner voice of Ewa herself. After this visit, there are no traces left: even a gift bottle of perfume ultimately remains in the flat. The woman may or may not have been real. It may only be an inner vision that ultimately wakes Ewa from torpor.

The gaze fixed on a childhood picture and a meeting with an old friend allow Ewa to regain her lost peace of mind, to return to her old dreams and gather strength to regain her abandoned feeling of self-esteem and recognise her need to search for lost subjectivity. As Melanie Klein put it, it is "by rebuilding his inner world, which was disintegrated and in danger, that he overcomes his grief, regains security, and achieves true harmony and peace".^[9] Everything indicates that the step taken by the heroine in the final scene may allow her to return to a state of happiness.

After the final sequence, however, it can be concluded that Ewa has made a mistake in hastily deciding to leave Marek without talking to him. The lover swears that he has left his wife in order to go with Ewa to Canada. However, one of the scenes depicting Marek in the office, which is a place he wields unlimited power, also shows how he talks to his wife. However cool this conversation was, it did not display any traits of actually signalling his intention to end their relationship. The promise to leave for Canada could always have been another empty promise.

The most important thing, however, is that the heroine breaks out of the opposition that situates what is feminine as passive and what is masculine as active.^[10] She ceases to be just a toy in the hands of a lover who decides about her "to be or not to be" and begins to make decisions and live her own life. *Late Afternoon* is, despite appearances, a film with positive overtones, emphasising the importance of striving to maintain self-control over one's own subjectivity.

Renard skilfully constructed his film in such a way that the stylistic and fictional devices accumulated in it consistently outline

[9] M. Klein, "Mourning and its Relation to Main-Depressive States", [in:] *Essential Papers on Object Loss*, ed. R. Frankel, New York 1994, p. 120.

[10] H. Cixous, "Śmiech meduzy", trans. A. Nasiłowska, "Teksty drugie" 1993, no. 4/5/6 (22/23/24), pp. 144–166.

the direction in which the story unfolds. The film gives the impression of being well thought out, although it is impossible to escape the impression that the director ultimately remained under the influence of sympathy for the choices usually made by his mentor, Krzysztof Kieślowski. And the issue of melancholy, as well as the excess of music or colours to build the mood in his films, was not alien to him.^[11] Nevertheless, Renard is quite a skilful student in this imitation, and his film remains the testimony of what a great film personality Kieślowski's students had to face.

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[11] A. Kulig, "Barwy samotności w tryptyku Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego *Trzy kolory – Niebieski,*

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