

## Małgorzata Szumowska – A Few Scenes from a Film-maker's Life (2000–2008)

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2000 – *Happy Man (Szczęśliwy człowiek)*: Szumowska's full-length feature debut. A mother and son story; a signaling of many of the topics and motifs (illness, single motherhood, facing death, the desperate need for love) that reappear in most of Szumowska's movies.

2000 – *Marriage in a House of Loneliness (Ślub w domu samotności)*: a documentary about an unusual couple who decide to get married. She is slightly mentally disabled, while he is an alcoholic.

2001 – *Documentary... (Dokument...)*: a movie Szumowska made about her friends, who speak to the camera about their lives, families and troubles. In the end, it turns out to be a documentary about documentary as such. "We don't usually behave this way...", one of the characters says. Why is that? This is a question that arises as one watches the movie.

2004 – *Crossroad*: represented Poland in the international project *Visions of Europe*. Szumowska films a wooden cross standing at a crossroads and everyone who passes by.

2004 – *Stranger (Ono)*: a feature film about a girl who becomes pregnant, but has nobody she can rely on.

2005 – *Father (Ojciec)*: a short feature film (part of the *Solidarity, Solidarity [Solidarność, Solidarność]* film project). An autobiographical father-daughter story set against the background of Polish historical events from the late 20th century.

2005 – *My Father Maciek (Mój tata Maciek)*: a documentary portrait of Szumowska's father, Maciej Szumowski, a well-known journalist who withdrew from public life after the political transformation in 1989.

2006 – *Nothing To Be Scared Of (A czego tu się bać?)*: a documentary about folk funeral rituals slowly sinking into oblivion.

2008 – *33 Scenes from Life (33 sceny z życia)*: the story concentrates on Julia, whose promising artistic career is interrupted by a serious family crisis: first she loses her mother, then her father dies and her relationship with a talented composer disintegrates. The story is largely based on Szumowska's private life.

These four documentaries plus two short and three full-length feature films represent, generally speaking, almost a decade of movie-making by Małgorzata Szumowska. Yet, statistics are not the issue here. As a viewer, I tried to grasp the above-mentioned filmography in its entirety; I looked, in other words, for a specific artistic stamp that Szumowska left on each of her movies. Have I discovered any traces of such a thing? The answer to this question can be found in the first paragraph, in which I outlined Szumowska's film output over the last decade. However, considering that an attempt at a comprehensive look at anybody's output might be infected by simplification or misuse, I do not want my impressions of this artist's work to be seen as an ultimate judgment. One of the characters from *33 Scenes from Life* is accused of saying too often: "I don't know"; I am sure that Szumowska herself would not repeat this accusation towards the audience of her movies. In terms of the traces I found, two major fields can be marked out:

1. the need for love,
2. facing death or a serious illness.

These two areas, full of thought, emotion and complicated human relationships, give a rough

and imperfect, but still reliable view of Szumowska's movies over the last decade. The situation becomes even more interesting in the context of the constant alternation between documentaries and feature movies – the former seem to inspire the latter, but the reverse is also true. It is more likely that Szumowska owes the coherence of her filmography to this factor. But something more needs to be added here: the director's personal and family history shows through many of the stories told so far. Why is this so important? Because it is another common thread, another trace that can be easily found in more than one story or script. Before I focus on the distinguished motifs (love, illness, death), let me give one characteristic example of the family topic, which seems to tie together the director's body of work.

Parts of the documentary *My Father Maciek* contain video material taken from family archives – its authorship is clear, since we know from the beginning that the main character (the director's father, Maciej Szumowski) was, among his other professions, a filmmaker. Any astute observer could make out that some parts of the same archival materials were used by Szumowska in two of her feature movies – *Father* and *33 Scenes from Life*. Despite the material itself (a set of various scenes shot by Maciej Szumowski, mostly during his career as a television journalist), the decision to use it has significant consequences. Unlike the documentary *My Father Maciek*, there are no distinct signs in the two other movies mentioned that the average viewer – without any knowledge of Szumowska's family background – would automatically relate to her personal life (and tapes found by chance – as happens in *33 Scenes from Life* – can be treated as simply any tapes). The juxtaposition of her personal life with her film artwork is easy to grasp because of the legendary history of Szumowska's parents' marriage (the word 'legendary' having been used in *My Father Maciek*). Maciej Szumowski passed away just a few weeks after the death of his wife, Dorota

Terakowska; a parallel story takes place in *33 Scenes from Life*. I would not go so far as to claim that being conscious of these movie-real life connections (a list of which can be expanded far beyond the example above) is necessary to find the key to Szumowska's filmography. I would rather call it a strategy of *leaving traces*, which function here as the director's subtle signposts and proof of her drawing from personal experiences, but which do not significantly limit the wider message. An excellent example of this is *Father*, the second movie containing scenes from Szumowska's family archives. The film could indeed be perceived merely as the private story of a father-daughter relationship (the models for both of the main characters are easy to identify). But, after all, this is not what this story is all about. It tells and means much more as a part of the series *Solidarity, Solidarity*, which transfers the individual tale to the level of something representative for a large percentage of a certain generation. Let me quote what the female narrator says, recalling the time of a political turning point:

Everything around me changed from one day to the next. The Round Table, and afterwards the first, almost free, elections. And me? My first cigarette in hiding, and my first almost real love. I went to high school in a different country. I guess the one my father had fought for. What I couldn't understand was why he was sad more often now instead of enjoying his hard-won freedom.

Once again, Małgorzata Szumowska turns to her own past in order to use it as a vehicle for wide-ranging message. This includes, first of all, the father's sadness mentioned in the final part of the quotation, which tells a lot about the essential factor of the whole story (which could be called 'disappointment' at what happened with some of the hopes that many people of Solidarity once shared). The movie also has a revealing ending: a silent take of a man sitting and smoking in his old and rather gloomy kitchen, followed by the image of his grown-up daughter, speaking in front of

the camera from an immaculately clean room. There is no doubt that the actress (Maja Ostaszewska) is supposed to look like Małgorzata Szumowska, while the man by the kitchen window resembles her father. But again, they both represent a specific phenomenon, which is implied in the woman's words: "Frankly speaking, I've focused on myself, and I don't regret it. I feel free, after all I live in a free country. My father doesn't like how I live. He says it's a road to nowhere. I don't know, we're different. Besides, he's old and eccentric." Ultimately, *Father* proves to be a movie about the less obvious shades of *hard-won freedom* – great hopes lose their clear shape and communication is no longer easy between people who used to be close. Nevertheless, the differences in their experiences seem hard to ignore. Even though it may sound like a cliché, this nine-minute-long film does not leave the viewer with the feeling that it was just another high school history lesson. Building on the intimate family story, Szumowska manages, in her customary manner, to convey a more universal message: not only the father-daughter relationship is at stake here, but also – at the same time – the relation between two different generations, dissimilarly affected by that "hard-won freedom".

### The need for love

Szumowska's portrayal of the need for love is far from romantic scenes or commonplace phrases. It has much more to do with the poignant and painful feelings associated with affection. In spite of inhospitable circumstances, the desire to love and be loved does not fade away. What makes Szumowska's point of view in this respect so remarkable is that she always illuminates the subject from more than one side. The documentary *Marriage in a House of Loneliness* (2000) has at its centre the story of its main protagonists, but the supporting characters also have their chance to speak out. What they say proves to be as moving and significant as the marriage men-

tioned in the title. "I wish I could lead a quiet life until the end. I wish that someone respected me. I wish I could hear a kind word from somebody. But it won't happen," says an elderly lady in a hoarse voice. She is followed by an old man who says even less: "I wouldn't wish anybody loneliness and longing." This is followed by the image of the married couple moving forward in harsh weather (which can be understood in a wider sense: the marriage of an aging alcoholic and a woman with a mental disability could not meet with approval of the society). The first two shots in *Marriage in a House of Loneliness* show the faces of both protagonists – but pictured separately; in the last shot they find themselves next to each other. What makes these two takes so powerful is the consciousness that not everyone among the documentary's characters was destined to find any consolation – although there was nobody, as we know, who did not wish for this.

*Happy Man* had its premier the same year. In the film, basically everyone displays the need for love, even if they do not always wish this affection for themselves. That is the case of a mother who seems to want nothing more than to see her son, Jan, establish a serious relationship with a woman. The dream comes true along with the appearance of Marta, a single mother bringing up a little girl. She falls in love with Jan and tries to help him, showing him much more commitment than he deserves. She does not ask herself about the point of it. She just does it. This emotional triangle is complemented by a scene of Jan discovering an empty bed in a hospital room, where he hoped to find his mother. Suspecting the worst and not knowing if his mother is waiting for him back home, Jan (as the plot suggests) decides to commit suicide. It becomes clear that along with the disappearance of the only object of his love, his mother, he wants to disappear himself. As it turns out, both women are waiting restlessly at home in the kitchen, but all they can discern outside the window is snow.

The need for love in Szumowska's movies gives the impression of its being far beyond any logical assumption – this becomes quite obvious in a reference to the undeserved commitment of Marta from *Happy Man*. This motive returns – almost in the same form – in *Stranger*. Ewa, a pregnant girl, can find many convincing reasons for not falling in love with Michał, who behaves (intentionally) like a drug addict. He tells lies, his existence is founded on a very uncertain and disturbing basis, he breaks promises and lets people down. Nevertheless, all these faults are invalidated by Ewa's faith in a happy turn of events. She is wrong, after all – Michał does not come to the railway station as they agreed. One can be opposed to the logic of decisions taken by the protagonists in Szumowska's movies, but eventually tough reality arrives, and everyone has to deal with it. And reality (perceived here as something completely independent of people's will or expectations) usually wins. The last words of *Stranger* are meaningful – having just given birth to her baby, Ewa lies in a hospital bed and looking straight into the camera with tired eyes, says: "Silence. I'm alone." Then, after a while, she adds, "I love you."

*Reality wins* – I could not find any better expression to recapitulate this paragraph. Szumowska's documentary entitled *Documentary...* gives what is perhaps the most heart-breaking and meaningful picture of the human longing for love. Among the director's acquaintances who appear in the movie, one can find a married couple, the betrothed, a bachelor and a single mother raising two little children, who seems overwhelmed by the circumstances she has found herself in. "No...", she says at one point, obviously answering Szumowska's question. "No... I'm not happy. But I'm striving to be... Why am I not happy?" she asks herself and answers: "I'm not happy, because I don't feel... [she pauses here for thought], because nobody loves me!" This is said in a voice that is filled not only with sorrow, but also with some

strange kind of discovery – as if the woman has only just realized what is wrong with her life.

### Facing death or a serious illness

If one watched Małgorzata Szumowska's movies in one go and then had to point out their central figure and unchanging component, it would be the pairing of illness and death. Sometimes they wander alongside each other, other times they ultimately march down two separate paths. Nevertheless, one feature remains constant: there is no way back to the state *before*. Human relationships undergo transformation – for good. Szumowska seems to be fascinated by taking this part of reality under observation. Each time she does it, the story unfolds in a different way.

"It's going to be an attempt to find love in the face of a tragedy, in the face of death," [1] Szumowska said in an interview, introducing *Happy Man*, in which an alarming medical opinion makes this attempt possible – in a way it provides a release for deeply hidden feelings. But there is something else worth mentioning here (as an example of a terrific idea for a movie structure) – one of the movie's plot threads is based on pretending: the mother pretends in front of her son that she is all right; the son pretends in front of his mother that the diagnosis was auspicious. The main goal for both of these strategies is exactly the same – to dispose of death, to push it away into the background. What turns out to be Szumowska's achievement is the fact that she manages to spread this script motif to the perception of the movie as a whole. One can always feel death somewhere nearby, behind every decision the characters make, although its presence remains consistently denied. This is how we deal with this inevitable dimension of our existence. This is what Szumowska seems to be saying through her movie.

[1] "Nie mam wyjścia – rzyzykuję!"; September 2000, <http://terakowska.art.pl/goska.htm> [access: 26.10.2011, trans. – P.P.].

One might say that death plays the same part in *Stranger* – this would be in line with the director's desire to show other aspects of life, too. Indeed, *Stranger* is a movie about about to arrive at any moment. While Ewa (the main character) is in the last stage of pregnancy, her father, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, dies – which results in the bright fabric of her life being coloured with sober tones. This does not shatter the celebration of life, clearly present in *Stranger*, but, rather, makes life more complete. Illness and death are reminders of birth.

In *33 Scenes from Life*, both death and illness are more visible and more crucial to the movie's inner universe than ever before in Szumowska's filmography. To quote an excerpt from one of the film's reviews: "Szumowska's movie is not a conventional elegy, which would dwell upon the pain over the death of her loved ones; instead, it is a picture of helplessness against the formal way in which grief-fear-loneliness-and-mourning must be expressed." [2] The dramatic life-and-death struggle depicted, unlike in previous movies, does not help the living in this case. Nor does it have a cleansing effect – what was broken (like a mother-daughter relation), remains broken. Suffering breeds nothing but anger or the urge to let loose at a wild party – no tears included. Szumowska disclosed that all the scenes including anyone crying were ultimately not used. What makes *33 Scenes from Life* probably the saddest of her movies is the feeling of disillusion that turns up right after death. Julia, having taken part in her mother's and father's funerals and split up with her long-time partner, sits in the final scene next to Adrian, with whom she unsuccessfully tried to begin a new stage in her life.

Suddenly, maybe for the very first time, she seems to sense that death has marked the borderline between the present and the past. She has a wish: "I'd like to be a child forever. With my dad, with Piotr, with my mum. I don't know if I can live like this..."

"You can't go back," Adrian says.

"And is it going to be like this forever?"

"Forever." It is Adrian who goes out of the room first, then Julia. Emptiness.

"Just remember that death is not the end"

– Bob Dylan's lyrics are brought to mind as an opposition to one of the overtones of *33 Scenes from Life*: death is the end, at least for Julia. "No hope," Małgorzata Szumowska said, recalling the moment when the decision was made about how to end the movie.

None of Szumowska's characters knows more about death than the people who appear in the documentary *Nothing To Be Scared Of*. They are all average members of the peasantry, but when it comes to talking about dying, one could not find a better group of experts. Moreover, they practice all sorts of rituals related to death: easing the pain, recognizing the signs of death, protecting against evil spirits and others. They think of death very seriously and respectfully, but at the same time, it turns out to be a perfect way of *getting ready*. "One accustoms oneself to death through many rituals, and this really works," Szumowska says, adding, "It's been practiced for thousands of years now, but not in the big cities anymore. There's no space for dying there, there's only a space for living. And no one notices that this is one and the same thing." [3]

*One and the same thing* – one could not say this about the movies forming Szumowska's filmography from the last decade. Even if some topics seem to constantly reappear, they never come back to play the same role. Szumowska keeps moving forward. And I am quite sure that this artistic journey is worth accompanying.

[2] J. Wróblewski, *33 sceny z życia* [film review], „Polityka” 2008, no. 45, p. 61 (trans. – PP).

[3] T. Sobolewski, *Słodko-gorzki smak życia*, „Tygodnik Powszechny” 2008, no. 35, pp. 30–31 (trans. – PP).