

Maxine Nelson's presentation of the film *Ida* at COR's Saturday Descargas

by Shierry Weber Nichol森, PhD FIPA

One of Maxine Nelson, LICSW FIPA's gifts to our community is her devotion to and knowledge of good film, which she has conveyed to us through many projects, from *Luminous Psyche* through the recent Antonioni series at Seattle Art Museum. Her presentation of *Ida* as part of the COR Descargas series on May 9, 2015 is the most recent of these. *Ida* is a film that seamlessly combines a very unusual and in its way beautiful visual presentation with a quiet and tactful depiction of the unbearable. I would wish for all of us to see it. As Maxine pointed out in the introduction to her talk about *Ida*, the term “applied psychoanalysis” sounds as though it depicts something lesser than the clinical work, but in fact much of Freud's inspiration came from nonclinical sources and we can “read” the unconscious at work in films and in their impact on us.

A brief summary of the film is necessary to put Maxine's discussion into context. *Ida* is a Polish film from 2014 and the winner of last year's Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. It takes place in the early 1960s, thus sometime after the ending of World War II. *Ida* is a young woman who has been raised in a convent. She has never known her parents and has no idea of who they were. She is told to go and meet her only living relative, her aunt Wanda, before taking her vows. As the film proceeds, *Ida* and Wanda go on the search for her parents' graves and a complex relationship between the two women evolves. The family, we learn, is Jewish, and during the war *Ida*'s parents were hidden in the woods and then killed by a Polish family, along with Wanda's son. After this discovery, Wanda, who had been a Resistance fighter, then a harsh Stalinist judge and most recently an alcoholic, commits suicide. I will say more about the aftermath for *Ida* in the context of Maxine's discussion.

Maxine titled her paper on the film “Psychic Retreat as a Defense Against Unbearable Loss” and framed her discussion around Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, supplemented with ideas from Melanie Klein and John Steiner. In simple terms, in mourning the reality of loss is worked through in the course of a very painful process, whereas in melancholia the self is subjected to internal violence and it is as though the ego itself has been lost. The unbearable loss in question is multiple: the loss of family members in the context of the Holocaust and its sequelae. The inability to mourn is clearest with Wanda, who has, Maxine argues, drawing on Klein, put up a manic defense against mourning with her harshness as a judge and her later drinking and one-night stands. When Wanda and *Ida* finally confront the graves of *Ida*'s parents and Wanda's son, take possession of the remains and bring them to the family graveyard in Lublin, one might think that an opportunity to confront the unbearable loss and put the dead to rest has been gained, but Wanda then commits suicide. She is unable to bear the guilt associated with her loss. Things are more ambiguous with *Ida*, who as an orphan lost her parents from the beginning, and who during the course of the film forms a bond with Wanda and then loses her. *Ida* goes through a phase of introjective identification

with the lost object: she goes to Wanda's apartment, puts on Wanda's clothes, drinks and smokes as Wanda had, and goes out to her own version of a one-night stand. But then she puts her habit back on and we last see her vigorously walking down a rural road – back to the convent, now to take her vows? Off to pursue a life of her own outside the convent but no longer in identification with Wanda? We do not know. As Maxine points out, however, in the final shot we do see that for the first time the camera is moving, tracking Ida's movement down the road.

This leads me to say something about the movie's visual presentation. It is shot in black and white, in an unusual frame shape – the “academy ration” of 4 to 3, thus almost square. Each frame is almost static; the camera does not pan or track, but makes jump cuts between frames, so that, as Maxine says, we are witnessing something approaching a series of tableaux – except for the final shot. Maxine suggests that the relative stasis impels the viewer to “sit with” what each image brings up, to do the psychic work of it. One of the most arresting features of the film is the subtle gradation of gray within each quiet, almost static frame. There is little if any deep black or bright white. It is as though postwar Poland is covered with a veil of light ash. Within that ash the characters move as small as insects in a landscape of high sky or a landscape of the gray forests of the countryside. Sometimes, though, we see parts of bodies manipulating objects. And like life in the convent, the film is very quiet. For most of the film, we see Ida very still, hands folded, but wide-eyed, looking and looking and saying nothing. Once she and Wanda are on the way to search for her parents' graves, she starts to speak, but only a little. The quietness of the film and its emphasis on Ida's looking gave rise to my own sense of the meaning of the ending for Ida. In her journey outside the convent, it is as though she is taking in the outside world through her eyes, as she takes in the face of the statue of Jesus in the first shot of the film. It is an unexpected and disruptive world. “And now I'm a Jew too” (i.e., along with everything else), she tells the young man who approaches her. My own feeling is that at the end she goes back to the convent, but with conviction. Before her foray into Wanda's life, she wasn't ready to take her vows; now she is. What the world with its brutality offers does not tempt her for long. If the convent represents a psychic retreat, one can see its allure.

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