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Casa Blanca, dir. Aleksandra Maciuszek © Kijora

Krzysztof Gierat talks with Krzysztof Kopczyński about his latest film **Dybbuk**

Meeting the Master: the return of **Bogdan Dziworski**

Report: what's new in Polish animation

Catalogue of the latest film releases

Between two worlds

UKRAINE – A HOT SPOT ON THE MAP OF TODAY'S EUROPE

Krzysztof Kopczyński recently finished working on his latest documentary feature 'Dybbuk. The Tales of Wandering Souls', to be released in May 2015. The film is an attempt to understand the cultural and religious tension existing in Uman, a Ukrainian pilgrimage destination for Hasidic Jews from all over the world. In his conversation with Krzysztof Gierat, the film's director talks about his fascination with Jewish culture and Ukrainian history.

KRZYSZTOF GIERAT: Dybbuk has a growing presence in the imagination of Polish artists, but mainly in the theatre. It appeared in the works of Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Warlikowski, Maja Kleczewska, and now in Marcin Wrona's *Demon*. I seems that in your case, however, Dybbuk was not the original inspiration. It came to you while you were already working on the film...

KRZYSZTOF KOPCZYŃSKI: Years ago, I was asked whether I would like to make a documentary about Michał Waszyński, the director of *Dybbuk*, a Yiddish cinema classic. At that point, I was interested in the Hasidim. In spring of 2008, I went to Kiev to present my previous documentary *Stone Silence* at the Docudays.UA festival. I learned that there was Rebbe Nachman's tomb in Uman, which is a mayor pilgrimage site for Hasidic Jews, and I decided to go there for a day. As it happened, the local unorthodox Jews where just celebrating Purim. They invited me to the celebration.

You mean those familiar Jews who have lived there for years.

Yes, those who were born there, many of whom fought in the Patriotic War. They were not religious, but they cared about Nachman's legacy. They were the ones who took me to Nachman's grave and told me about what was happening there. I learned that there was animosity between the incoming Hasidim and the Ukrainians, who did not take well to the visitors. Obviously, not all Hasidim and not all Ukrainians shared this feeling, but the conflict was intense.

Two years earlier, Paul Mazursky filmed a documentary about pilgrimages to Uman. It offered some cheerful images of the Ukrainians welcoming the visitors in hope of lifting themselves from poverty. With time, however, conflicts started emerging.

Uman is a unique place. I quickly understood that this was one of the most interesting places in Europe, with important things

happening there. I visited Uman on several other occasions and I felt more and more at ease there. The fundamental question that I was asking myself was whether religion can help a modern-day person to overcome death. Rebbe Nachman promised that each Jew who would visit his grave on the Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New year, and chant 10 chosen psalms, dance and sing, would be dragged by their sidelocks from Gehenna by the rabbi himself. This meant ensuring their salvation.

Such a simple solution!

Very simple indeed! It meant: go to Uman for the Rosh Hashanah, chant ten psalms, dance, sing, and you will be redeemed. No wonder that thousands of people go there every year.

When you said that you felt more and more at ease in Uman, did you refer to the local Jewish community, or did you mean all of its residents and visitors?

It is fairly easy for me to connect with people. Even though I don't speak Hebrew or Yiddish, the Hasidim saw that I had certain knowledge of mysticism. They were surprised by this, since filmmakers usually tend to be looking for more sensational subjects. And there I was, reading Polish-Ukrainian literature of the mid-19th century that treats about death and claims that Ukraine is a hell mouth, that the historical processes that occur there are beyond anyone's understanding. I was also familiar with the recent history of the Eastern and Central Europe, so I could talk with post-communist Jews who were born in Ukraine and fought in the Patriotic War using a language that they would not find offensive. As to the activists of Ukrainian organisations in Uman, they didn't have bad intentions. The fact that Wiktor Dunajew, who talks about the cross in the film, has been called the greatest anti-Semite in Ukraine by some Jewish websites is a misunderstanding. He simply didn't want for the money brought in by Hasidic Jews to end up in private pockets. He fought corruption and he was something of a local defender of ordinary people.

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For me Dybbuk is a metaphor. Dybbuks are those miserable souls wandering around Ukraine. They are the ghosts of the local Hasidic Jews, Ukrainians and Poles. Perhaps Russians, too.

Please correct me if I'm wrong, but I get the impression that the focus of your camera lens shifted at some point? At the beginning you wanted to understand what attracted these throngs of people to Uman, what was in Nachman's teachings to attract thousands of pilgrims. But at some point you became interested in this escalation of emotions, this clash of religious and national orthodoxy leading to a growing mistrust.

I saw that both sides were communicating on the grounds of their common interest. This is an enormous business: dozens of thousands of people go there, which means big money. But I was also looking for an answer about the direction Ukraine is heading in. I've been interested in this for years. I was used to thinking about Ukraine as a place that was important for Poland and for our interests in the East, but also as a place of mystery. We don't know why Gonta and Żeleźniak, who murdered Jews and Poles in Uman, are now celebrated by the Ukrainians as their national heroes.

In Ukraine, this is quite obvious. You show what they teach in their schools, what they say in the streets: 'yes, they did murder people, but they did this "in the name of",' because this was a fight for independence, and the Polish magnates along with the Jews stood in the way. This is the curse of history – for some, 1768 is a reminder of pogroms and slaughter, for others it evokes a heroic uprising against Polish and Jewish oppressors.

The Poles that used to live on these lands in the 18th century sometimes did act in a despicable manner. Uman used to belong to Stanisław Szczęsny Potocki, who built Sofiyivsky Park for his wife Sofia, a Greek courtesan. The garden cost 15 million zlotys, an equivalent of today's 200 million dollars. There were 400 thousand people working for Potocki – Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians. After the partition of Poland, Potocki asked Empress Catherine for Russian citizenship and thus became the first Russian oligarch in the Ukraine. While his wife would listen to Nachman's teachings in the very same park, which Nachman liked to visit. He used to go there to pray and meditate.

In your documentary, there is a recurring theme that 'everything has to be done according to the law': these are the words spoken by the Ukrainian mayor, then repeated by a Jewish policeman. If there is no other way to communicate, then we should stick to the established rules. The locals are most afraid of what they do not understand, like advertising banners in Hebrew. Why do these ads bother them so much? Maybe they could bring in money?

POLIS DOCS

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Or perhaps for them the ads are a sign that they are losing their land? This is why they feel the need to put up crosses and to chase away evil spirits with incense.
There are two reasons. There is the fear that the Jews will take over, and the evidence that both municipal and regional authorities accept bribes from Jews in exchange for permitting these ads. Or letting the Jews build a canteen that obstructs a road, or putting up tents at the riverfront, where there should be passage. And they have gathered a lot of similar evidence. It is hard to say what the bribes were and who exactly accepted them. It is clear, however, that after the protests at the Maidan square all members of the Uman's municipal authorities resigned. They did not want to wait for being deposed by force. Now, there is a plaque on the door of the current mayor's office that says 'we do not accept bribes'.
Your documentary has a universal message, as it shows that the things happening in Uman could happen anywhere. Even here. We are now at the Krakowskie Przedmieście Street in Warsaw, the place where on each anniversary of the plane crash in Smolensk our own internal 'wars' break out. We are supposed to be a united nation, but still we have so many differences. Does this mean that pacifying our emotions and forgetting is the only way to be able to communicate?
We should learn how to reign in our emotions, but also how to respect otherness. This is not easy. We saw this time and again while shooting this film. One time, we were trying to persuade the most important rabbi in Uman to collaborate with us for the film. We asked the headmaster of a Hasidic school, who believed that what we were doing was valuable, for his support. He said: 'Fine, I will ask him. But remember, with just one look at you he will be able to tell your intentions. And if what he sees is bad, then no Hasidic Jew will agree to be filmed'. The rabbi listened to us with patience and kindness, then nodded to show his agreement. This caused incredible joy among the Hasidim standing around him. We understood then how much importance these people attach to seeing the world through intuition.
What did you tell your protagonists when they asked what was the subject of your documentary?
I told them that I was making a film about the relationship between the Hasidim and Ukraine. That I was interested in Rebbe Nachman, but that the film is not about him. That I was interested in Hasidic Jews, but the film would not be limited to the Hasidim. That I was interested in the historical conflict, but this would not be a historical film. And that I would not present a Hasidic or a Ukrainian point of view, but my own.
Let us go back to the title of your film. Would you say that Dybbuk infected those most hot-tempered on both sides of the conflict? That the souls of sinners possess the living preventing agreement and harmony, confusing languages, stirring up this well of emotions?
For me Dybbuk is a metaphor. Dybbuks are those miserable souls wandering around Ukraine. They are the ghosts of the local Hasidic Jews, Ukrainians and Poles. Perhaps Russians, too.
So they are more miserable than evil?
They are being punished for something, and not always justly. Kabbalists claim that Dybbuk is evil. But in Ansky's drama

The fundamental question that I was asking myself was whether religion can help a modern-day person to overcome death.

Dybbuk is good. Once, I asked a rabbi in Jerusalem whether it was possible for Dybbuk to be good. He replied that it was indeed possible. This reminds me of the second part of *Dziady*. In his drama, Mickiewicz described beings similar to Dybbuks: there are demons punished for their sins, but there is also a girl turned into a demon for never having experienced love, for having rejected the advances of all her suitors. This world is very complicated and we do not know whether such a being must always be evil. I am convinced that the soul of Potocki is still among those evil Dybbuks wandering Ukraine in punishment for the crimes that he committed. Anna Sajewicz and I are working on a book on the subject, due to be published this autumn.

So leaving aside the national and religious point of view, Dybbuk is a symbol of evil, unfulfilment, and penance. But if there are so many Dybbuks haunting this land, then what future awaits Ukraine?

I am a great admirer of Ukraine and I am aware of the glorious moments in its history. But it's difficult for me to talk about the future. Everyone in Uman is aware of what is Ukraine's biggest problem nowadays – the corruption, the oligarchs' connections to Russia, and the intrigues weaved on both sides. And corruption remains, even after the Maidan victory.

The pilgrims confirm that it is getting worse. But it is comforting that even with all this tension there is still hope thanks to good people like Volodia, a goy, and a beautiful and symbolic figure. There is this wonderful scene when the Hasidim visit a psychiatric hospital, talking about Carlebach's teachings, and then they visit Volodia's widow to pay her homage. However, there is also something alarming in the scene: even though they claim to be ecumenical, they see everything from the point of view of their own religion. Even a non-Jew may be admitted in the Kingdom, if he becomes 'ours'.

This is the issue with the chosen people. I don't know whether there is a way for people who come from such different cultural backgrounds and who profess such different values to connect. But it is possible for Volodia, who shows great wisdom and humility, living near a cemetery, among ghosts.

And in a house built above the dungeon where Rebbe Nachman used to stay...

For the Hasidim, death doesn't really exist. This is why they approach eschatological issues with such joy, unlike the Ukrainians. In Poland, most things were said about Ukraine in the Romantic period, when people understood that this land had been terribly punished throughout history. But nobody could explain why there were moments in history when there was no good there whatsoever, only evil.

Your documentary comes at a particularly important moment in the relations between Poland and Ukraine. It may be important to Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians alike, especially considering the rise of nationalist sentiment and the praise of heroes that we cannot accept. It emphasizes the considerable differences existing between us, and how much good will is necessary for us to at least tolerate each other. This is why I am glad that your documentary will be distributed in the cinemas and that it will also be accessible to wider audience beyond festivals.

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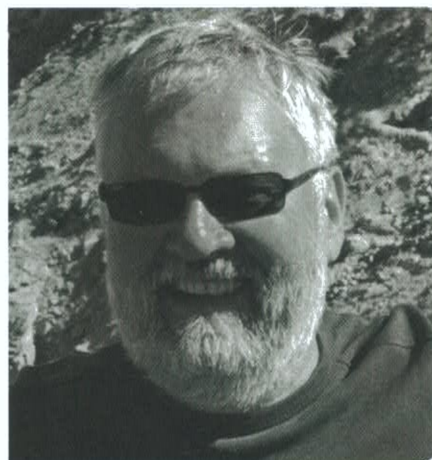

KRZYSZTOF KOPCZYŃSKI – a Doctor of Humanities, university lecturer, during the martial law period he was an underground publisher. Since 1995 he has been a producer and director of documentaries. An owner of the Eureka Media company, author of books and articles on the media, film and culture of the 19th century and contemporary period. A coauthor of educational film projects 'Russia – Poland. New Gaze' and 'Kabul – My City'. He produced more than 130 films and TV programmes that were shown in more than 30 countries and won more than 50 festival awards. *Stone Silence* is his directing debut.

KRZYSZTOF GIERAT – director of the Krakow Film Festival.