

Secularization of Religion from *Mother Joan of the Angel* to *Ida*

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The economic and political systems in Poland have radically changed over the last century. The censorship for Polish Cinema has inevitably changed with the change of the political systems. This essay will compare *Mother Joan of the Angels* (dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz, 1961) and *Ida* (dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, 2013) to discuss the change on the depictions of *the fallen woman* in religion – Mother Joan and Ida – from the Communist to the Capitalist Polish Cinemas. *Mother Joan of the Angels* tells a story that the nuns in a convent are possessed by demons and they wait for rescue from Father Suryn the newcomer. *Ida* presents a journey of Sister Anna (Ida) to the world outside of the convent, a journey to discover her Jewish identity and to enhance her Christianity in the midst of the world. This paper will first discuss the political and social contexts of these films and how they influence the representations of religion and history in these films; and then it will compare these two films to argue that Ida's behaviors are no longer characterized as *a fallen woman* as Mother Joan due to the secularization of religion in Communist Poland; and she is glorified as the one who transcend the mundane world.

Ida (2013) is the manifestation of the reality in the year of *Mother Joan of the Angel* (1961). *Ida* portrayed the post-war Poland that was set in 1962, corresponding to the date when *Mother Joan of the Angel* was approximately released. *Mother Joan of the Angels* and *Ida* refer to the similar political context, but they address it through two different perspectives. While *Mother Joan of the Angels* presents a religious theme from a political point of view, *Ida* presents a political/historical theme from a religious point of view. *Mother Joan of the Angels* had to be set in a historical time due to the strict censorship in Communist Poland. The tale of Mother Joan is based on a short story written by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, takes place in the eighteenth century (Falkowska 65). This historical context ensures that the film does not have relation with the social context, while “the high regard for the author of the short story gives the film's theme the aura of respectability” (Falkowska 65). *Mother Joan of*

the Angels alludes to people's struggle between "the rationalism of the communist state and the faith of the Church" (Townsend, "Mother"), in which this film reveals the human nature rather than simply praising either rationalism or faithfulness. *Ida* is tightly associated with the personal memory of Pawlikowski as a member of a partial-Jewish family. Unlike *Mother Joan of the Angels*, *Ida* is not necessarily set at a historical time in contemporary Polish Cinema. *Ida* is a story simultaneously about "intimacy and personal choice" (Ratner 30); by which it means that the religion is optional for *Ida*. *Ida* presents a story about the journey to unveil the Jewish identity of *Ida* and the tension between her Catholic education and her family history. Moreover, the Roman Catholic still had the strong influence over the Polish society. Michałek states, "The Catholic community saw this film from a religious point of view, and found antireligious elements, so much so that this film was black-listed in Poland at that time" (104). As such, *Ida* was impossible to be released if it had been shown at that time. From a contemporary point of view, *Ida* is more likely to be a struggle of one's spirituality, rather than a story against the dogma.

Does the removal of the wimple is an act of Mother Joan and Ida to express their doubt on God and simultaneously an act to stigmatize them as fallen women? For Mother Joan, she removes her wimple and even tears her clothes when Father Suryn and other priests pray for her at the rooftop. At that moment, Mother Joan falls in love with the kindness of Father Suryn, which is illustrated by the close up shot of her smile. The extreme way she expresses her emotion and desire is the result of the oppression of the dogma. The removal of the wimple certainly stigmatizes Mother Joan as *a fallen woman* because she deviates from the dogma. In *Ida*, the first time *Ida* removes her wimple is after she meets with Liz at the patio of the hotel. She takes off the wimple in a bathroom and shyly looks at her hair, where the hair is usually a symbol for a woman's desire. Compared to Mother Joan's extreme emotion, *Ida*'s removal of wimple is gentler because she is still looking for the way she ought

to live. It is an act to engage with the mundane society but not the rebellion directly against the dogma. Given that *Mother Joan of the Angel* and *Ida* are made in different systems, *Ida* presumes that the human nature is not longer oppressed by the guilty of deviating the dogma. While Pawlikowski emphasizes the faith of an individual at post-war Poland, Kawalerowicz is more concerned about the conflict between the Communism and the Catholic Church. According to Ratner, *Ida* is not “polemic” in terms of the politics; rather, this film is “an ambivalent tribute to a vanished form of the society” (30). In other words, the vanished form of the society implies the fact that fewer people pursuit a purely spiritual existence in a Communist society.

What should be the characteristics of a fallen woman? Interestingly, these two films provide the already-fallen characters, Sister Margret in *Mother Joan of the Angels* and Wanda in *Ida*. They seem to be incompatible with the main characters, but they are the accesses for the main characters to the mundane world. In *Mother Joan of the Angels*, Sister Margaret always goes to the tavern and talks to the people. Callenbach notes that, “Sister Margaret, the shyly devilish nun who the devils did not bother with (because she was too homely, she says) is seduced and decides to remain in the fallen human condition” (29). Therefore, Sister Margaret can be seen as *the fallen woman* in religion because she cannot resist the temptation of material and love. She sings folk songs and dresses like a normal girl at the last night. Her desire of getting married to the squire makes she almost mundane. Sister Margaret is a similar character as *Ida* who has experience in mundane world. But Sister Margaret does not hold solid faith on God, and she even resists going back to the convent by the end of this film. Nevertheless, Sister Margaret unwillingly goes back to the convent and meets Mother Joan through the grid wall. She cries and Mother Joan feels sympathy for her. Mother Joan can feel the loss of love as Sister Margaret does. However, Mother Joan is also characterized as *a fall woman* because she somewhat enjoys the state of being expressive; on the other hand, she

is haunted by the guilt from the sin. Unlike Sister Margaret, Mother Joan leans more on the religion.

In *Mother Joan of the Angels*, Mother Joan and Sister Margaret seldom communicate; but in *Ida*, Wanda has the strongest connection with Ida because she travels with Ida for most of the time when Ida is outside the convent. Ida returns to Wanda's house after Wanda's suicide. She removes her wimple and her robe and dons her aunt's dress. Vredenburg suggests that, "Ida tries to engage with the world using the same sensual means her aunt used" (9). She decides to live a life in Wanda's term once and feels the way that Wanda feels. She loves her aunt, and her aunt is the only reason that she wants to stay in the mundane world. Ida is less likely to be characterized as *a fallen woman* in this case because God's presence is not longer restricted to the Church. Vredenburg argues that, "Ida works amongst the messiness of life that the film suggests she should expect an encounter with the Transcendent" (8). In the scene where Liz and Ida make love, the overhead shot of Ida's face clearly shows that Ida is detached from this behavior. She uses all the means of her aunt to encounter with the world, including sexuality. *Ida* uses the newer Catholic view of the encounter with the Transcendent in mundane life to avoid the label of the *fallen woman* being tagged on Ida.

What is the attitude of sexuality in these two films? Sexuality is treated differently in these two films since the secularization of religion in contemporary Poland has influenced their attitudes towards sex. *Mother Joan of the Angels* tends to employ an older Catholic view of sexuality because the characters are "very suspect of any thought or action contrary to the traditional way of thinking" (Schulte 22). Again, because *Ida* emphasizes on the personal aspect of a nun, the director nevertheless employs the newer Roman Catholic view of sexuality in this film. Schulte states, "They tend to be at ease with their own sexuality, are more self-directed in determining their own sexual conduct" (25). In *Ida*, Ida does not seem to be ashamed of what she has done. The diminishing control of the Polish Catholic Church

over the general public, which is defined as the secularization of religion, will be clearly seen by means of different treatments of the directors with regard to the actions of the nuns.

Secularization refers to “the historical process in which religion loses social and cultural significance” (Wikipedia, “Secularization”). In *Mother Joan of the Angels*, Mother Joan describes the reason for the lunatic behaviors as the possession of the demon. She cannot find any positive term in Bible to describe her real desire for love and sex, because the desire for liberation of the female body is explained as a sin, as *to be possessed by Satan*. The sexuality is seen to be guilty in *Mother Joan of the Angels*. The dogma is against human nature, so Father Suryn and Mother Joan are only able to love each other by the excuse of the sin. During the conversations they have through the grid wall, they express their desires and love by acknowledging their sins.

In *Ida*, Wanda is a very important character who largely influences Ida’s attitude towards love and sexuality. Wanda does not get married and she usually flirts with the anonymous men. She seems to have control over the relationship, and this influences Ida a lot. Wanda is a highly secularized individual in a Communist society who is almost opposite to Ida’s religious life. However, Ida learns the way to encounter with different people through looking at Wanda. In *Ida*, during the second time that Ida returns to the mundane world, she dresses up, smokes, drinks alcohol, and has sex with Liz. She tries everything that Wanda has done. Although Liz offers her something to stay in the mundane world, she decisively leaves Liz and returns to the religious life. Even this strategy is what Ida learns from Wanda. The transition of the attitudes of sexuality from *Mother Joan of the Angel* to *Ida* proves the influence of the secularization of the religion, which generates the newer Catholic view of sexuality. Something should be cautious is that the secularization of religion influences the director’s generation, in which he brings this new attitude to his film. Because these two films nevertheless somewhat portray the same period, but they are radically different due to

the different emphasis on religion and the different periods of the Polish Cinema.

What is Christianity in these two films? When Christianity is no longer shown merely a “tribal demarcation” (Vredenburg 1) but a spirituality within an individual as seen in *Ida*, it shows the religious freedom in a Communist society. An interview with Pawlikowski comes up with a question that “Can you be a good Christian without being Polish Catholic” (Vredenburg 1)? *Ida* apparently explores the relation between one’s spirituality and the faith on God. By contrast, *Mother Joan of the Angel* shows what it means to “be a good Christian with Polish Catholic”, where the dogma must be enforced to those who hold the belief in it. The different roles of religion respectively demonstrate the understandings from the contemporary era and the 60s. *Ida* is given lots of freedom to choose the life she wants to live. Before *Ida* officially becomes a nun, the mother superior tells *Ida* to visit her aunt as long as necessary before she takes the vow. At first, *Ida* has kept her habit of a Catholic novice everywhere before the first time she returns to the convent because she lives like that for most of her life. Nevertheless, she gradually changes her thoughts. For example, in a public bath scene when she gets back to the convent, she starts to notice that the nuns never take off their shirts even when they have the bath. She pays more attention to the sensual part of a human being. Before *Ida* takes her vow, she apologizes to the Jesus statue and she says she is “not ready” yet. The reconnection to her aunt’s items and other people can make her finally desist her solicitude of the mundane world, including the ambiguous relationship between the Saxophone player and her.

These two films have different interpretation about God’s presence. Vredenburg quotes from Welsey that *Ida* enters a “wilderness state” (8) when she first returns to the convent. In other words, *Ida* is unable to see God’s presence in this state because she still has concern other than serving God. *Ida* chooses to “retreat into religion” at the end of the film (Ratner 30). She returns to the convent deriving from her own desire, where the dogma does

not have any oppression on her. Ratner states that, “Her decision to return to the convent is a kind of independence...Walking on her own, she has chosen this path rather than obeyed” (34). Ida returns to the convent for finding the meaning of her life, but Mother Joan can only return to religion because Father Suryn sacrifices himself to remain her as a saint. The ending in *Mother Joan of the Angels* is symbolized by the ringing bell without the sound, which is a symbol for the lack of discipline. The biggest difference between Mother Joan and Ida is that, Mother Joan does not choose the religion and she is suppressed by the dogma of the religion; and Ida is able to choose to return to religion steaming from her own desire. Ultimately, Ida has “immanent transcendence” through the experience in the mundane world (Vredenburg 1), by which it means the presence of the God can be experienced in the midst of the world. At the same time, *Mother Joan of the Angels* still believes that the God only presents for those who strictly follows the doctrine. The means of Ida to engage with the mundane world is considered as an access to experience the God, but not the characteristics of *the fallen woman*.

Finally, *how does the black-and-white images, the composition of the frames, and mise-en-scène help to establish the viewer's perception of God?* These two films employ black-and-white images to enhance a sense of the past and also the religious feelings, but they have subtle differences. In terms of *Mother Joan of the Angels*, the black-and-white images emphasize “the asceticism of the convent scenes” (Falkowska 66), which implies that the convent life is as boring as the monochrome. For *Ida*, the director absolutely has the technical capability to make a full-color film; but it is his choice to make a black-and-white film in the contemporary cinema. When the filmmaker has no longer been restricted to the only availability of black-and-white film long before, black-and-white images becomes an option of formal techniques. The advantage of making a black-and-white film is that the monochrome can eliminate the excessive information within the film and make something

invisible visible in such settings. “Just as Ida experiences the invisible transcendent presence of God, the audience experiences the invisible presence of color through Ida” (Vredenburg 4). In other words, the absence of color actually suggests a metaphor for the invisible God that we can perceive the colors through Ida’s eyes, just as God is perceived through Ida’s experience in the mundane world. The transcendental being is made invisibly present in the absence of colors.

The composition of the outdoor scenes in *Mother Joan of the Angels* highlights the lunar landscape and the tininess of the human being. In the Church scenes, the high-angle shots seem to be a God-perspective where the God is untouchable and profane upon the human being. *Mother Joan of the Angels* actively involves the viewer’s emotion through a large amount close-up shots. By contrast, the composition of the frames relies on the characteristics of the characters. For example, Ida is often situated in the lower corner of the frame and seldom centered. The composition in *Ida* largely distances the viewer to the characters, in which it leaves spaces for the viewer’s meditation. Moreover, the composition also highlights the loneliness of every character. In a dining scene near the beginning of *Ida*, every nun is placed at the bottom of every frame. The tininess of the human being is enlarged in this type of framing. However, the blank space beside or on top of the character is a type of absence as well, where the God might be perceived.

In conclusion, the secularization of religion shows that the search for God is not limited to the obedience to the dogma, as shown by the scenes that Mother Joan is tortured by the meaningless doctrine in *Mother Joan of the Angels*; but through the experience in the mundane world, people transcend to a different level of belief, as shown in *Ida*. The different representations of the 1960s Poland from these two films demonstrate that the depiction of the *fallen woman* changes along with the change of political systems, and thus the change of the social and cultural power of Catholic Church in Poland.

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