



# The Cold War

**Director:** Paweł Pawlikowski

**Country:** Poland

**Date:** 2018

*A review by Mark Kermode for The Observer.*

Paweł Pawlikowski won the best director award at Cannes in May for this sweepingly intimate love story about a star-crossed couple falling together and apart, through the iron curtain of postwar Europe. It is inspired by (and dedicated to) his parents, whom Pawlikowski has described as “the most interesting dramatic characters I’ve ever come across ... both strong, wonderful people, but as a couple a never-ending disaster”.

Yet while screen lovers Wiktor and Zula share names and character traits with the film-maker’s mother and father, their individual narratives are fictional and allusive, taking us from the countryside of Poland to the streets of East Berlin, from Paris to Yugoslavia, over 15 turbulent years – crossing boundaries that are musical, geographical, political and ultimately existential. The result is a swooning, searing Polish-British-French co-production that unexpectedly put me in mind of *Casablanca* or *La La Land* as reimagined by Andrzej Wajda or Agnieszka Holland – a reminder of the fundamental things that apply, as time goes by.

We open in rural Poland, 1949, where Wiktor (Tomasz Kot) and Irena (Agata Kulesza) are recording folk songs – mournful tales of love, drink and hardship, raw and elemental. Under the banner of the “Mazurek ensemble” (inspired by the real-life Mazowsze troupe), they audition musicians and dancers to showcase the authentic sounds of Poland, ensuring that “No more will the art of the people go to waste!”



Into these auditions comes Zula (Joanna Kulig), an enigmatic young woman posing as a village girl who significantly performs not a Polish mountain tune but a song learned from a Russian movie. Irena detects “a bit of a con” but Wiktor is smitten by Zula, who is whispered to have killed her father (“He mistook me for my mother, so I used a knife to show him the difference”). Soon Zula is one of the stars of Mazurek, unfazed by the authorities’ co-opting demands that they sing the praises of Stalin and agricultural reform. When Wiktor spies a chance to defect during a 1952 engagement in East Berlin, he begs Zula to come with him. But are her pragmatic priorities in sync with his western-leaning dreams?

Returning to the Academy-ratio black-and-white format of the Oscar-winning *Ida*, Pawlikowski and cinematographer Łukasz Żal’s stunning images evolve from the carefully composed static frames of yore to more free-form movements that match the musical shifts of the tale. Just as the Mazowsze folk favourite *Dwa serduszka* (Two Hearts) mutates from a rural tune to a jazzy ballad, so Pawlikowski subtly negotiates a series of aesthetic key changes, mirroring the ebb and flow of this tumultuous love story. There’s a sustained tension between the concisely epic sweep of the narrative and boxy confinement of the 4x3 frame that perfectly matches the film’s twin themes of freedom and incarceration. A scene in which Zula dances drunkenly to the sounds of Bill Haley’s *Rock Around the Clock* vibrantly captures that sense of liberation and entrapment intertwined.

At the heart of it all is Kulig, who previously worked with Pawlikowski on *The Woman in the Fifth* and *Ida*, and who here delivers a star-making performance of astonishing range and depth. Before our eyes we see Zula transform from not-so-innocent young woman (she candidly confesses to spying on Wiktor for



state security) to sultry jazz singer and raddled showgirl; from faux “pure Polish” belle to smoky Parisian chanteuse; from victim to victor and back again. Since *Cold War*’s rapturous debut at Cannes, Kulig has been widely compared to Jeanne Moreau, although her intelligence and tough sensuality reminded me more of Léa Seydoux; like her, Kulig could doubtless slip with ease between accomplished artist actor and badass Bond girl. Coincidentally, Kulig’s co-star, Tomasz Kot, was reportedly Danny Boyle’s choice for the next Bond villain – a possible source of the “creative conflicts” that led to Boyle’s recent departure from that forthcoming film.

Plaudits, too, to musician Marcin Masecki, a key collaborator who Pawlikowski originally considered for the role of Wiktor, and who is credited with the “jazz and song arrangements”. Just as Miles Davis pointed out that “It’s not the notes you play, it’s the notes you don’t play” that matter, *Cold War* is a dark musical full of silences and ellipses. It’s up to the audience to fill in the episodic gaps in the narrative, and to divine the true feelings that so often remain unspoken. Appropriately, it left me speechless.

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