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Order in Andrzej Żuławski's Chaotic *Possession*: Insurmountable Divisions

Despoina Poulou

Despoina Poulou

Department of Cultural Technology and Communication, University of the Aegean

E-mail: d.poulou@aegean.gr

Abstract

Polish filmmaker Andrzej Żuławski made *Possession* (1981) after his self-exile in France and the great success of *The Most Important Thing: Love* (*L'important c'est d'aimer*, 1975). Set in West Berlin, *Possession* explores Anna and Mark's marriage dissolution into chaos, and, in that sense, it is a domestic drama, full of political connotations implanted by the constant depiction of the Wall. However, due to its puzzling story that includes violent fights, unexpected killings, inexplicable doppelgängers, hysterical performances, and a notorious miscarriage scene in a subway station, somehow explaining the presence of the film's polymorphic monster, *Possession* is often limited to the genre of horror, and its complexity is overlooked. Indeed, the state of *Possession* is pandemonium, and Żuławski's anarchic artistic mentality, attracted by a turbulent directorial approach, only intensifies the sense of disintegration, despair, and horror in the film. But chaos only rules in a well-designed form, as little seems incidental in Żuławski's compositions. Taking a closer look, one can observe a solid geometry that divides the cinematic space while imprisoning the protagonists into two separate worlds that do not communicate. Division, therefore, becomes a kind of 'leitmotif' in *Possession*, present in Anna and Mark's alienated relationship, in the characters' contrast between themselves and their doppelgängers and, finally, in the partitioning of Berlin.

Keywords: *Żuławski, Possession, composition, division, alienation*

Słowa kluczowe: *Żuławski, Posiadanie, kompozycja, podział, alienacja*

Introduction

> May I tell you a story, my friend. This is the story of a Russian Count who decided to write a novel against women because he despised his own wife. The heroine of his novel leaves her husband and child for a nobody, and, in doing so, destroys the lives of the good husband, the lovely son, and the sweet nobody. Our count started to describe this woman as short, thick, ugly beyond words. He wrote and wrote but a strange thing happened in the process. The husband and the lover became mean and petty even the son stopped being so lovely, but the woman became beautiful, profound and a victim. The count even changed the title of the story. He gave it the name of this woman, Anna. But you know what title he intended to give it when he began the book? *The devil.*[1]

Set in Cold War Berlin, *Possession* (1981), Andrzej Żuławski's (1940–2016) only English-speaking film, follows Anna (Isabelle Adjani) and Mark's (Sam Neill) marital crisis. According to the Polish filmmaker, this is his most personal work, marking his tumultuous divorce from the actress Małgorzata Braunek during the same period.[2] Soon, of course, one discovers that the film surpasses the boundaries of a family drama, and with the Berlin Wall as a backdrop, the narration becomes an allegory "of life under communism" (Goddard 2014, 245–6). That is not, after all, the first time Żuławski used a 'mask' (Bird 2009), as he calls it, to make a political statement: in *The Devil* (*Diabeł*, 1972) he criticizes socialist Poland in 1968 during the student's riots, through a narration that takes place in 1783 after the invasion of the Prussian Army in the country, while in *On the Silver Globe* (*Na Srebrnym Globie*, 1988), under the veil of the science fiction genre, he attacks the fabric of authority.[3]

[1] With this story of how Tolstoy wrote Anna Karenina, Andrzej Żuławski and co-writer Frederic Tuten were planning to open *Possession* (Bird 2009).

[2] *Possession*, according to Żuławski, "was born of a totally private experience. After making *That Most Important Thing* in France, I went back to Poland to get my family (which at the time was my wife and my kid) and bring them to France. […] But when I returned to Poland, I saw exactly what the guy in *Possession* sees when he opens the door to his flat, which is an abandoned child in an empty flat and a woman who is doing something somewhere else. It's so basically private." (Barton-Fumo 2012). Before their divorce, actress Małgorzata Braunek starred in Żuławski's *The Third Part of the Night* (*Trzecia część nocy*, 1971) and *The Devil* (*Diabeł*, 1972).

[3] *The Devil* was banned in Poland until 1987, forcing Żuławski to move to France from where he returned after the success of his film *The Most Important Thing: Love* (*L'Important c'est d'aimer*, 1974), for the filming of *On the Silver Globe*, the shooting of which was interrupted by Polish censorship. Nevertheless, Żuławski presented a version of the film eleven years later.

Often confined unfairly to the horror film genre, *Possession* comprises, due to its dense dialogue, its mysterious doppelgängers, its polymorphic monster, its 'hysterical' acting but also due to Żuławski's giddy directorial approach, full of swivelling camera movements and distorting wide-angle deep-focus shots, a richness of signs and images which, because of their loose connection, allow for a multitude of assessments and interpretations. However, despite its chaotic atmosphere, *Possession* is a film with remarkable discipline in illustrating the couple's alienation. Several scenes focusing on their unbridgeable disconnection reveal an intricately planned *mise en scène* that strictly arranges the cinematic space by dissecting it into separate, clearly defined areas. Such narration, mainly found in the first part of *Possession*, introduces vital information about the film while setting "the tone and atmosphere" (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 42); the frames are cut in half, entrapping Anna and Mark into adjacent but delimited zones while mirroring most vividly the irredeemable rupture in the couple's relationship.

Possession opens with different shots of the Berlin Wall. The infinite concrete structure is captured along with the aggressive Y-shaped iron supports, a cross, and graffiti proclaiming, "The wall must go."[4] Mark appears in the backseat of a taxicab returning home after the completion of a spy mission, the details of which are never clarified. Anna's character is also introduced upon his arrival, with her back facing the audience as she tensely approaches her husband. The camera follows her with analogous distressing movements, while Andrzej Korzynski's music reinforces the ominous overtone. As the couple stands uneasily on the pavement, their brief dialogue suggests the central theme of the film.

"You can't just say you don't know. That's what you said on the phone. When will you know?" says Mark.

Anna replies: "I don't know."

Information on the couple's history is clearly withheld, thus structuring an enigmatic context for the relationship to unravel. It is immediately understood, though, that a somewhat suffocating feeling possesses the woman that no longer allows her to exist in their marriage as before. Later in the film, we find out that she has taken a lover, Heinrich (Heinz Bennent),[5] a man who

[4] Żuławski explains that he chose Berlin because it allowed him to film the movie "the closest possible to this part of the world in which the film was invented, which is the communist side of the world and Berlin seemed really the right place, being surrounded by this wall and this communist empire all around" (Bird 2009).

[5] When Mark decides to confront Heinrich by going to his house, what he finds is a rather absurd intellectual living with his mother. Żuławski describes Heinrich's character as a phony dandy: "He's a pseudo Buddhist, a pseudo sexual being, a pseudo everything, and in fact if

is the absolute opposite of Mark. Other than that, there is no clear explanation for Anna's radical change of feelings. However, for the time being, and for the sake of their child Bob, who awaits his father's return, Anna agrees that Mark should stay in their apartment and not in a hotel, as he suggested.

Emotional divisions in space: seeing the alienation

In the apartment, the opening sequence's earthy colour tones withdraw as white prevails in a way that obscures the confined space's structure while reflecting the couple's emotional suffocation and distance. Anna's blue-grey dress and Mark's brown sweater comprise the few colour strokes in the sterilized white setting. The shot is divided in half by a wall occupying the centre of the frame, a framing pattern in *Possession*, which suggestively recalls West and East's Berlin division. Mark is allocated in the limited space on the right and in front of the bathroom door, as he is kept busy with his son Bob having a bath.[6] Anna, wearing a pinafore, is standing on the left of the frame, in the brighter space of the kitchen, preparing a meal.

Appearing once more with her back to the audience, she again seems withdrawn from reality. Probably in an effort to pull her back in, Mark invites her to admire Bob's splashing about in the bathtub. For a moment, the two parents sincerely enjoy the child's innocent play in the water, but the shot's framing undermines their happiness. In a low-angle shot, Bob can be seen in the foreground as both parents observe him from the background. By placing the camera 'inside' the bathtub, adopting the child's point of view, Żuławski makes the parents seem remote, giant-like, and even terrifying. When the child dives into the water, he is looking, like Anna, to escape from the baffling reality into a womb-like environment. Furthermore, it is no accident that, in one of the film's final shots, Bob repeats the same gesture – sinking in the bathtub water – after becoming aware of his father's doppelgänger presence at the apartment's front door.

Żuławski's spatial manipulation, suggestive of the insurmountable distance between the leading characters, is also visible in the following scene, where Mark and Anna are lying naked in their bed, trying to have a discussion. The overhead camera hovers above their heads, observing them in a suffocatingly close shot allowing only minimum movement.

you look at the film attentively you'll see that you never know what kind of trade he's in. He's not a writer, he's not a painter, you won't know by the end of the film" (Barton-Fumo 2012).

6 The child's presence is initially made known only by the sound of his playful voice.

"Maybe all couples go through this," says Anna.

Contrary to the calmness of her voice, her moist, red eyes and rigid shoulders betray her psychological tension. The vertical axis shaped from the two joined pillows between her and Mark functions again as a dividing line. Despite the closeness of the bodies, the line confines each character to their own separate space and prevents a potential union. In other words, the strict composition visualizes the fruitlessness of the couple's efforts to communicate and affirms their inability to comprehend the cause of their sudden alienation. The obstacle may seem insignificant, but it is insuperable. As the issue of unfaithfulness comes up in the conversation, some form of self-punitive resignation appears:

"There's always someone else when these things happen," Mark declares with some conviction, but Anna denies the accusation.

"What's happened to us is just natural. Feelings change. But without you, I wouldn't feel anything at all," is Mark's realization.

Later on, of course, Anna leaves because, as she explains on the phone, she needs time to think, and Mark discovers that she does indeed have a lover[7]. Previously in the same sequence, Mark returns home after yet another cryptic meeting with his supervisors, bringing once again to mind the context of Cold War espionage and ending with a pretty absurd question indicative of the prevailing sociopolitical paranoia: "Does our subject still wear pink socks?"

Mark wanders alone in the house while waiting for Anna to appear. At one point, he stands in front of a window with a view of the Wall and two guards standing on the East Side; one raises his binoculars and looks straight at the window (and the viewers). Thus, the Wall is confirmed as the film's ghostly presence, not only establishing the sociopolitical context for the relationship's fission but also acting as an extra (voyeuristic) omnipresent character that is always observing and invading the characters' private lives.

During their phone call, Mark agrees to meet Anna in a café to discuss the practical aspects of their divorce. The warm lighting of the café is again a significant change from the apartment's cold, sterilized atmosphere. Mark is already seated at a table when Anna approaches him and seats herself at an adjacent table. Their bodies thus form a right angle as their backs are slightly turned against one another. (An equally triangular frame construction echoes in the first scene where Anna and Mark meet in front of a red-bricked corner building block.) They both spread their hands on the tables before them

[7] Infidelity is established here by the discovery of a postcard showing the Taj Mahal with the inscription: "I've seen half of God's face here. The other half is you..."

in a somewhat rigid position. Hence, before they even start talking, they are again nailed down and separated by the dividing line between them.

When Mark states his intention not to visit Bob anymore, Anna, surprised and upset, tries to persuade him against it. The camera follows the discussion with a slow-motion semi-circular movement, which places Mark in the foreground at the exact moment jealousy makes him lose control, sending all the objects in front of him flying with his hand. Anna bolts from her seat and, in a low-angle shot that increases her imposing tension, her face all red, her eyes expanding, and her mouth in aggressive movement, comes out with: "No one is good or bad, but if you want, I am the bad one. And if I knew he [Heinrich] existed in this world, I would have never had Bob with you."

This final statement enrages Mark, who gets up and starts chasing the screaming Anna. She is running and knocking chairs behind her to block Mark's path, but he comes after her, hurling the chairs in the air. Thus, despite the initial emotional stiffness and detachment, the scene rapidly evolves into an outburst, the intensity of which drags along the surroundings in the swirling chaos of the couple's monstrous relationship.

From then onwards, the couple's meetings become increasingly violent, as the characters (especially Anna) are subjected to ordeals seemingly exceeding their mental and physical boundaries as they plunge into a frenzied state. Żuławski notoriously provokes excessive performances from his actors, as he is perhaps genuinely "convinced that primal-scream apoplexy is the sanest response to a mad world" (Atkinson 2008, 81).

His directorial approach, aiming to expose a type of spirituality hidden in agony, can be traced back to Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, though Żuławski's "way of working with performers reveals a completely different metaphysics to Grotowski's, one based on Nietzschean than ultimately Christian premises" (Goddard 2012, 307; see also Owen 2014, 105).

For Żuławski, being an actor is "almost a religious feeling" (Barton-Fumo 2012), and that is a notion imprinted in the 'sacrificial' way *Possession*'s characters confront life's absurdity.

Splitting parts of the self: the doppelgängers

After the meeting at the café, Mark suffers an epileptic seizure of sorts. When he returns home, he finds Bob sitting all alone on the floor. Later, when he accompanies Bob to school, Anna's doppelgänger, teacher Helen (also played by Adjani), appears for the first time. She looks just like Anna, but her hair is different, her eyes are green, and she is always dressed in white, whereas

Anna is always dressed in blue. The difference in colour between Anna's and Helen's clothes denotes their opposite qualities: Anna is explosive, almost hysterical, and oversexed, while Helen is calm, motherly, and pure, as her white dress affirms. MacCormack, in her insightful reading of the film, notes:

> Female sexuality in phallocentrism is speculative as reflective — two women, the double of Anna, the mysteriously arrived schoolteacher/virgin also played by Adjani, Helen (in white) and the virgin mother dressed in blue, Anna. One key aspect of female sexuality's subjugation to the male is the shift of female sexuality to that of maternity. In a perverse turn of the virgin-mother/barren-whore paradigm, *Possession* shows that the mother has failed because she is not a whore (MacCormack 2010, 102).

Anna seems truly divided between herself and her doppelgänger, between her husband and her lover, but also between the "two sisters" pursuing her: "Faith" and "Chance." Naturally, the continuous splitting of characters cannot be read independently from the great division of West and East Berlin, haunting *Possession* with the constant depiction of the Wall. As Mazierska and Rascaroli (2003, 118) note:

> In Zulawski's film every character has a split personality and is also represented by its double, who is physically similar but with a very different mentality to the original, in the same way as Berlin was divided into two separate parts. Thus, the housewife's double is a gentle teacher, and her husband's double is a monster.

By extension, Goddard is correct to say that the film is about Żuławski's "wrenching loss: not only of his family but also of his former social context" (Goddard 2014, 248).

Later in *Possession*, Mark actually attacks Anna for this ambiguous attitude, but his words could also convey Żuławski's own contradictions between capitalism and communism:

> You're not as strong or as sure of yourself as you thought, so you keep coming back. You must be torn apart. […] I guess when you're there [with the lover], you want to be home, and when you're home, you want to be there.

Thus, while Anna strives to return to domestic normalcy, undefined forces keep driving her away. When Mark tries to control her by using the child as a guilt mechanism while ignoring her own personal needs, she slaps him across the face. Their conflict rapidly escalates when Anna attempts to leave,

and Mark blocks the threshold with his body. She starts yelling, throws herself on the floor, and tries to get up. He throws her back down and hits her.

When she lifts her head to look at him in the eye, he says: "You know what this is for? The lies."

She retorts: "Then you have to add much more."

Immediately after, Anna opens the door and leaves while Mark follows her calling her a bitch. These extreme conflicts seem to go hand in hand with physical pain and gradually become the couple's only way of contact. But while in this painful agony, Anna and Mark appear to desire to inflict pain on one another as much as they want to inflict pain upon themselves.

This psychological rift and internal conflict are clearly revealed in yet another fight scene in the apartment. Anna returns once more unannounced. In the suffocatingly limited space of the pristine white kitchen where the couple's blazing rows often take place, Anna is attempting to regain her role as wife and mother. Using an electric carving knife, she cuts a piece of meat while the exasperated Mark begs her to talk to him. He explains his insistent conflict: when she is away, he thinks of her "as an animal or a woman possessed," but when he sees her again, all this disappears.

Then he poses a series of questions: "Are you happy?", "Do you love him?", "Does he love you?", "Do you want to live together?", "Then there's something else… you must tell me. Why are you afraid to tell me? Are you afraid of me? Are you afraid I'll get mad again and beat you?"

To these questions, Anna, with her back turned to him, answers with silent nods of her head. At the same time, she is putting chunks of meat in the meat grinder, turning it into mince.

Mark has his back turned to her when he poses his perhaps most crucial question: "Are you afraid I won't like you?"

In a close shot, Anna seems to nod affirmatively, though her answer is only visible to the audience. The couple's shattered communication is visualized through their unequal placement in the dialogue (usually, one is placed in the foreground of the frame as the other is left in soft focus in the background), but also through the position of their bodies that indicates their refusal to feel the agony of their interlocutor.

"Help me!" Mark cries out desperately, and Anna grabs the electric carving knife and slits her throat.

With the same knife, Mark also inflicts multiple slashes on his arm after he has affectionately treated his wife's wounds. Does this mean Anna is ready to sacrifice herself to end Mark's agony? Does he inflict injuries upon himself to understand her suffering, or have they both gone mad and see pain as their only comfort?

As far as Anna is concerned, turning mental anguish into physical tension goes a step further and enters a new, almost metaphysical realm of horror in a scene that returns to an unfamiliar point in the past to explain the monster's presence.[8] It all starts in a subway station and with a hysterical laugh. By filming the scene in the oddly empty underground ducts of the divided city, Żuławski once again appropriates West Berlin's urban space only to create a horrific experience of undetermined evil and thus reintroduce the familiar as unsettling and horrific. Anna begins hurling herself onto the walls, yelling, convulsing on the floor. The eggs in her shopping bag break, and the milk spills all over her. Drenched in various liquids, she abandons herself to a series of extreme spasms which result in her discharging a thick white fluid from her mouth and another red (amniotic?) fluid from her shoulders. This is the moment Anna gives birth to the mysterious creature, which is to be sheltered in the empty apartment she stays in when she is not with her family.

In the scene following that of the subway, Anna explains to Mark: "What I miscarried there was Sister Faith and what was left is Sister Chance. So I had to take care of my Faith to protect it".

The monster, at first, remains hidden in half-darkness. Afterwards, it takes the shape of a mucous creature with tentacles and gradually takes the form of a human, namely that of Mark; Although the incident seems surreal, it can be read as Anna's most vile part, and a tangible manifestation of her suppressed sentiments.[9] In order to protect this monstrous child/lover[10], Anna even commits several murders: using a broken bottle, she kills the private detective hired by her husband to spy on her, she murders his co-worker who reaches the apartment to investigate his disappearance, injures Heinrich who has discovered her crimes and kills her friend Margie. Oddly enough, this brings her closer to Mark, who finally seems to understand her behaviour and decides to help her.

As a result, at the end of the film, Mark is sought by the police, most probably for Heinrich's murder. After a wild chase consisting of car crashes, explosions, and the overturning of a motorcycle, Mark finds refuge in a building.

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[8] The monster was designed by Italian special effects artist Carlo Rambaldi who also collaborated with H.R. Giger on Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and worked with Steven Spielberg on *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982).

[9] According to Grbavac's reading, this is the "biological, physical manifestation of a need of the main character to burst out of her mental, physical and sexual imprisonment" (Grbavac 2016, 49).

[10] "He is very tired. He made love to me all night," Anna tells the private detective's co-worker, who visits her in the apartment where she keeps the monster, while later in the film, her husband finds her having intercourse with it.

Injured from the conflict, he climbs a spiral staircase to escape.[11] Soon, Anna appears along with the monster, which now looks exactly like Mark.

"I wanted to show it to you. It is finished now", the satisfied Anna tells him.

Mark raises his gun to kill his doppelgänger, but the policemen shoot him and Anna multiple times. Fatally wounded, Anna drags herself near Mark's blood-covered body and kisses him before they both commit suicide, thus sealing the morbid nature of their relationship.

Ultimately, the hyperviolent conflicts, nightmarish histrionics, disturbing doppelgängers, and surreal events justify *Possession*'s categorization as a horror film. However, one finds something much more horrific in the way Anna struggles in anguish to handle her suffocation, and in the raw manner Mark inadequately tries to keep her bound to him. Żuławski effectively captures the abyss separating two people who once cared enough to have a child together and now suffocate in the repulsive but still desirable presence of each other.

Their agonizing limbo is given form through the meticulous manipulation of cinematic space. When Anna and Mark are not separated by some (actual or symbolic) wall cutting the composition in half, they are isolated in different frame levels, suggesting their non-communicative state. Simultaneously, this 'departmentalization' of space associated with the couple's relationship becomes a constant reminder of Berlin's actual division and vice versa, thus enabling an expanded reading of the film, not only as a marital but also as a political drama. *Possession* is "at least three films at once" (Pyzik, 2014, chap. 2), intrinsically intertwined in a way that documents Żuławski's creative uniqueness.

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[11] A similar staircase can be found in the opening sequence of *The Third Part of the Night*, in which the protagonist, Michal (Leszek Teleszynski), is saved from the Germans thanks to a man who looks like him and dies in his place.

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