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A celebration of the imagination, Andrzej Jakimowski and his film about the blind; *Imagine*

A philosopher and dreamer

The director Andrzej Jakimowski about Kant, Freud, Fellini and the beautiful greyness of his native Poland

(caption under the photograph) Searching for real dramas, not just lurid ones. Andrzej Jakimowski, 50

Bio

With only three films over the last ten years, Andrzej Jakimowski has established an important position for himself in Polish cinematography. Born in 1963, he studied philosophy in his native Warsaw, and then at the Krzysztof Kieślowski Film School in Katowice. He received the Golden Rose at the Sochi IFF and the SKYY Prize at the San Francisco IFF for his debut feature *Squint Your Eyes* (2003). In 2009, his second film *Tricks* came out. The portrait of a small boy searching for his father by doing magic tricks won international acclaim. It was shown at many festivals and screened at cinemas in 40 countries. *Imagine* is his first film chiefly in English and shot abroad, in Portugal. Since April it has been showing in Polish cinemas, where it has been seen by around 100 000 people.

*Let's start with a few questions beginning with "Why?". Why is your film, which shows the lives of children and young people in a centre for the blind, set in a Portuguese monastery?*

It's connected to my first idea for the film. There's a school for the blind run by nuns in the village of Laski, near Warsaw. The way the nuns work with the children and teenagers inspired the film's story. I have a critical attitude towards fictional stories, including the ones I've written. I like to steal ideas from real life, because life writes the best screenplays.

*Why is the film set in Portugal and involves children from three different countries, who speak three different languages, and in spite of that they understand each other without any problems? It's a little hyperrealistic.*

I wanted to shoot it in Portugal. Later we began to look for co-producers who would share my idea. Right at the start we had a French partner, but shooting the entire film in French would have limited it to the Francophone market. The British side offered no funding, but came up with a close-knit group of blind children, and was responsible for the casting and the organisation of the complicated shooting permission. The fact that the film is in other languages than English is no hindrance. In reality people speak various languages, and in spite of it understand each other.

*Why did you use music in the film, even if it was discrete? Wouldn't everyday noises have been enough in a film about blind people? Steps, the sound of a window being closed, the cooing of pigeons?*

Music is an emotional element for audiences. I thought it would be better like that. But you're right, I could have done it without music. However, I did the best I could. No one's perfect.

*In your films you celebrate human imagination, fantasy, and also irrationality. In a word, you studied philosophy...*

...and I was a very diligent student.

*If you had to choose: a philosopher or a dreamer?*

That's easy; a dreamer. I wrote my MA dissertation about Sigmund Freud and his theory about the interpretation of dreams; a very scholarly work. In the cinema, however, philosophy loses a lot in the cinema, they are two, distinct worlds. I don't like films where the characters philosophise too much.

*At this point some people, such as Terrence Malick, also a philosophy scholar, might protest loudly.*

There are several ways to achieve one's aims. Mine is different.

*What are your philosophical models; ideas, figures?*

I'm a big fan of Kant and analytical philosophy, which wouldn't be possible without him. And Socrates. We can learn a lot from him, even these days, from his unhurried debates which always head towards the discovery of the truth. I read Plato and Xenophon in the original; we had ancient Greek at university. It's an amazingly poetic language, I adore it.

*And going back to cinematography: did you approach it intellectually or did you experience something like an impulse?*

I don't recall any specific moment. I was 7 when I began to make films in my imagination. As a teenager I experimented with 8 mm film. Films stimulate my imagination, they accompany me as something natural. I'll never forget the most important of them.

*For example?*

Fellini's *La Strada*; it's a masterpiece. A perfectly told story, where the most genuine cinematographic values interpenetrate: aesthetics, movement, language, everything. I'd love to reach those heights one day. Or the powerful, visual language of Orson Welles. Or Werner Herzog; his sense of time and simplicity. Or the absurdity of Buster Keaton. He's a recluse in this world; as I am.

*Do you have in mind solitude?*

No, in the sense that everything seems strange and absurd. Of course there's an existential element. It's beautiful.

*That almost sounds like the central theme of Imagine, like the relationship of the blind children to the world. Where did the idea for such an unusual subject for a film come from?*

When I was a student in Warsaw I had a blind friend. He was always very active, always on the go. From that moment I've thought about the world of the blind, about blindness as a potentially tremendous metaphor; only later did the idea for the film arise. I followed my intuition, and because I'm keen on working documentarily, on researching, studying material...

*...concerning echolocation, teaching blind people spatial orientation...*

*...and at the end there was also a tremendous metaphor. There still is.*

*There've been quite a few films with blind characters. Did you watch them as part of your preparations?*

Yes, several. *Scent of a Woman* was helpful, but it convinced me even more that I wanted to portray the blind in a more realistic way, not like Al Pacino played them. Blind people move around in a different way, turning their heads towards the source of sound. They also have very lively facial expressions which can't be trained. Different to what the sighted have. We watch people's facial expressions from when we are very young.

*Or Lars von Trier's Dancer In The Dark with Björk playing the lead?*

I never thought about that. Unlike him I'm a long way from great drama and tragedies. In my films there's much less upheaval. On the other hand, my film is possibly more radical, because I'm searching for genuine drama.

*With Imagine did you also want to show that blind people more completely and attentively perceive the world than the sighted, because they rely more on their other senses?*

Work on the film brought me to even more far-reaching conclusions. We, the sighted, perceive the world very similarly to the blind. We also don't see what's important. The things we argue about or have to fight over. And we can't be certain if something is true or not, either. We're all blind.

*Just like the blind? Or in a sense are we blinder than they are?*

Even more, because in their own way they compensate with other senses. They are forced – I learned that observing the children on set – to use creative imagination every second, in every situation. Blind people can't see, so they have to understand better. We could learn from them how to deal with our blindness better.

*One more word about your country. The old stereotype says: Poland is grey and ugly. In your films you celebrate colours and light. Is there some connection here?*

There's no point fighting against stereotypes, it's impossible to win. On the other hand I suffer because of my country's greyness. Poland isn't Italy – which is seen in its great works of art – it's a country through which lots of foreign armies have swept. At the same time I love it and its wounded, damaged beauty. Just like in the small town in my film *Tricks* there are several neglected streets. I want to show real life. I want to show how beautiful the greyness of that world is.

Jan Schulz-Ojala