

Article

Finding God in Pawlikowski's *Ida*

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Academic Editor: Joseph Kickasola

Received: 26 March 2016; Accepted: 1 June 2016; Published: 8 June 2016

Abstract: Pawel Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2014) tells the story of a nun who must learn to resituate her faith in light of new experiences and information. Through *Ida*'s encounters, Pawlikowski suggests that God may be encountered in unexpected places. This theological meditation is done primarily through the elements of the film's color, framing, costuming, music, art direction, and character interactions, all of which work together to demonstrate Pawlikowski's thesis. By exploring this topic on film, Pawlikowski not only expresses his thoughts on where to seek God, but invites others to join him in his search.

Keywords: *Ida*; transcendence; immanent; icon; grace; work

1. Introduction

In an interview with *Filmmaker Magazine*, director Pawel Pawlikowski discusses several of the themes behind his film *Ida* (2014) including, "What does it mean to be Christian? Can you be a good Christian without being Polish Catholic? Is religion a tribal demarcation or is it something spiritual within you?...Can you escape all of these definitions and live a purely spiritual existence?" [1].

Set in 1960s Poland, *Ida* tells the story of a young woman known as Sister Anna in the convents she has lived in as long as she can remember. Just before taking her final vows, and moving from novice to nun, the mother superior tells her that before taking these vows she must visit an aunt she did not know existed. Within the first minutes of meeting her Aunt Wanda, Sister Anna is told that her given name is *Ida*, that she is Jewish, and that her parents were killed in the Nazi occupation of Poland during World War II. The two women embark on a journey to find the place *Ida*'s parents are buried. Along the way *Ida* forges an identity of her own and wrestles with her faith and understanding of God in light of her travels with her aunt.

The questions of faith *Ida* wrestles with in the film reflect filmmaker Pawel Pawlikowski's questions of faith. Instead of answering his questions of faith with dogmatic theology, Pawlikowski provides a meditation using cinematic theology. The film *Ida* depicts the journey of faith on which the title character embarks, after discovering she is Jewish and that her parents were killed in Nazi-occupied Poland. Through this story, Pawlikowski constructs a cinematic theology that locates God in the midst of the world.

This view of God is similar to what Jürgen Moltmann describes as an immanent transcendence. In his book *The Spirit of Life* Moltmann writes, "it is therefore possible to experience God [the Transcendent] in, with and beneath each everyday experience of the world" ([2], p. 34). For Moltmann, humanity's embodied existence is not an enemy of the Transcendent, but a means of encountering the Transcendent. In this view, God's transcendence is found in God's presence in all things, "It is the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal, and the enduring in the transitory" ([2], p. 35). It is precisely God's transcendent nature that allows God to be present in all things.

As this paper discusses in more detail in a later section, *Ida* fits within the filmmaking tradition described by Paul Schrader in *Transcendental Style in Film*. Contrary to Moltmann's immanent

transcendence, Schrader writes, “The Transcendent is beyond normal sense experience, and that which it transcends is, by definition, the immanent” ([3], p. 5). For Schrader, the Transcendent is above the embodied experiences of humanity ([3], p. 169) and therefore the enemy of the immanent ([3], p. 11). Though a tension between these two views is present in *Ida*, the film expresses the Transcendent in the midst of the immanent rather than elevated above it.

The Transcendent, for Schrader, is not strictly synonymous with the Judeo-Christian God. However, the Roman Catholic history of Poland, in general, and *Ida*’s religious training, in particular, provide a context in which *Ida*’s experience of transcendence would likely be attributed to an encounter with the Judeo-Christian God. Due to the cultural context of the film, this paper applies an interpretive lens that accepts *Ida*’s expectations and takes for granted that *Ida*’s encounter with the Transcendent is an encounter with the Judeo-Christian God.

Likewise, while Pawlikowski identifies himself as “not deeply religious,” he does suggest that “Christ’s teachings are not irrelevant” to his religious beliefs [1]. Though the questions explored in *Ida* are common to many people of faith, they are extremely personal for Pawlikowski. The director set the film in the Poland of 1962 in part because of the way it reminded him of his childhood in that country. *Ida*’s tension between the Catholic Church and Jewish ancestry are also mirrored in Pawlikowski’s family: while his mother’s family was nominally Christian, his father’s family was half Jewish, most of whom died in the Holocaust [1].

It is fitting that the main character, the viewer’s guide through this meditation, bears both the names Anna, from the Hebrew Channah, meaning grace, and *Ida*, derived from the Germanic *id*, meaning work.¹ *Ida*’s encounters with the Transcendent shape both her vertical relationship with God (as characterized by grace) and her horizontal relationships with other people (as characterized by work). While *Ida* keeps these planes separated in the earlier portions of the film, the film’s latter parts indicate an integration of the two planes. Through *Ida*, Pawlikowski explores faith through a type of cinematic theology.

This essay will analyze several elements of the film’s *mise-en-scène* in order to see how Pawlikowski constructs this theology. Through the film’s limited color palette, the director opens up the viewer’s imagination to new possibilities. *Ida*’s interaction with religious imagery communicates both the changing nature of *Ida*’s relationship with God and the location where an encounter with God takes place. Considering *Ida*’s interactions with others within a variety of evocative locales reveals the importance of *Ida*’s horizontal relationships in her journey. The costuming in the film helps to show the ways *Ida* identifies herself and how that informs her actions. The music in *Ida* helps locate the film in a particular time and place and, at a key point in the film, gives insight into *Ida*’s frame of mind. Finally, the cinematography communicates the presence of the Transcendent in the immanent frame, particularly when placed in conversation with Schrader’s transcendental style.

2. Color: Seeing the Invisible

From its very first frames, *Ida* sets itself apart from other contemporary films in several ways. Immediately noticeable is that the film is shot in black and white and presented in academy aspect ratio. Pawlikowski, uses these techniques to evoke his memories of Poland as they resemble Polish television from that era [4]. However, while *Ida*’s color palette is restricted to shades of gray, color makes its presence known through suggestive evocation.

The opening scene of *Ida* depicts the titular character in the convent where she has lived since infancy, painting a statue of Jesus (Figure 1). Several seeds are planted in this short scene. First is the use of religious imagery in spiritual practice. Second, *Ida*’s creative outlet connects her to her mother’s

¹ Though her birth name is *Ida*, her name in the convent where she was raised is Sister Anna. Anna/*Ida* is not the only character whose names carry particular meaning in this film. Though something could be said for each of the characters’ names, two are of particular significance. *Lis*, the saxophonist, has a Polish nickname meaning fox or sly. *Wanda* derives from the old German meaning wanderer.

creativity. Finally, and most importantly here, this scene is the first hint that color exists in the Ida's world, even if it is not shown to the viewer.



Figure 1. Ida paints a statue of Jesus.

Like so much else in *Ida*, color is introduced so subtly that its significance may easily go unnoticed. Pawlikowski references color sparingly, but does so with potency at important junctures in the film. Color is invoked by characters mentioning a specific hue and through the implied presence of color in various pieces of art. In *Ida*, the only color specifically mentioned is red, which occurs three times: once during a trial over which Wanda presides as judge (in reference to the color of flowers), once to describe Ida's hair, and once as her aunt's nickname, "Red Wanda," which she earned while a state prosecutor for the Polish communist government.

In addition to these references to red, color is implied, though no hue is specified, at other key points in the film. The first is Ida painting in the opening scene. The second is her mother's stained glass window, which is first mentioned by Wanda as she reminisces about her sister, Ida's mother. Later, Ida sees the window for herself when she visits the farm her parents once owned while on a road trip with Wanda. She stands transfixed, staring at the window for nearly 30 seconds of screen time. Though the viewer is not told why, the absent presence of color is key to understanding this experience.

Here in the cowshed, Ida bears witness to a reality of color beyond the viewer's ability to comprehend (Figures 2 and 3). The audience is told that color exists, and sees the way it affects Ida, but cannot see it for themselves. A type of "faith" is needed to connect Ida's full experience of color to the viewer's limited chromatic experience in the moment.



Figure 2. Ida at her mother's window.



Figure 3. The light of the window on Ida.

The sum effect of these references to color in a colorless film is a kind of presence in absence. Ida and her mother's artistic expressions and the specific mentions of the color red gain significance because they remind the viewer that there is more at work in the film's world than the viewer can perceive. Just as Ida experiences the invisible transcendent presence of God, the audience experiences the invisible presence of color through Ida. In this way the invisible is made visible, and the audience is given vision to see Ida's encounter with God.

Here Ida encounters God in a mundane space. In a reversal of the traditional pilgrimage, Ida's journey takes her from a convent to a barn in rural Poland. Instead of hanging in the walls of a chapel, Ida's stained glass window is located "next to cow shit," as her aunt points out. Wanda's comments remind the viewer that the location of Ida's encounter with God is one where intense work is performed; the fecal matter in question must be cleaned out, and the cow must be fed and milked.

Yet, rather than diminishing the experience, the location of this encounter is vital for Ida's journey of faith. For the theologian John Wesley, God's grace is synonymous with God's presence ([5], p. 120). So, when Ida encounters God at the window, she gains a measure of God's grace in a place of work. Indeed, in keeping with the grace/work tension mentioned in the introduction, we would do well to remember Wesley, whose theology famously paired grace and work together.

Through the encounter at the window, Ida suggests that God's grace may be found in the messiness of the world, as opposed to the isolated safety of a convent. This is a pivotal moment in Ida's faith journey that transforms her relationship with God and others. In fact, a line might be drawn dividing the scenes prior to Ida's encounter at her mother's window from those after.

3. Art Direction: Religious Imagery and Imagining God

Religious imagery, and Ida's interaction with it, communicates Ida's relationship with God. While the first portion of the film depicts several instances of religious imagery, they gradually fade from the film entirely. Ida also interacts less and less frequently with these objects of religious devotion when they do appear.

Three objects in particular characterize Ida's relationship to religious images early in the film: the Jesus statue Ida paints at the beginning of the film, a prayer card bearing the image of Jesus, and a shrine on the side of the road. When Ida is first seen, she stands face to face with the Jesus statue as she paints it. The statue is then carried outside by a group of novices and is placed on a stand outside the convent, where Ida and the other novices cross themselves in religious devotion. This brief sequence indicates much about Ida's connection to her faith.

Ida's posture facing the statue indicates her positive relationship with this Jesus; she literally sees eye-to-eye with him (Figure 4). This is not unexpected since she grew up in the convent and has known little else. Indeed, the viewer is given every indication that she obediently follows the dictates

and religious observances of her order. As a result of her reverence for this religious imagery, Ida compels Wanda to stop the car during their road trip so she can say a quick prayer at a shrine built at a crossroads. Later, while the two women wait for someone to return home, Ida prays in a church, focusing on a card depicting Jesus' face.



Figure 4. Ida stands eye-to-eye with Jesus.

Ida's changing relationship with God in the second portion of the film can be seen through some of the same images that defined her faith early in the film. After leaving the farm her parents once owned, Ida spends the night in a room at a nearby church. As she lays in bed, unable to sleep, she sees a statue of an angel with its back turned to her. This shows that Ida is no longer completely synchronized with God or the servants of God in the way she once understood those relationships to function. Later, in a hotel room, Ida has trouble locating her prayer card of Jesus, even though it has been placed in an existing picture's frame on the wall. Her encounter at the window was so disruptive that she has trouble finding God in the usual places.

While religious imagery is excluded from the film for a while, Ida's transforming relationship with God is indicated when she returns to the convent, about two-thirds into the film (after a great deal of sadness and personal revelation), and the Jesus statue is once again shown on screen. Back at the convent, Ida is no longer able to pray the ritualized prayers that once comprised her faith. Instead, standing once again at the foot of the statue, Ida prays simply, "I'm not ready. Forgive me." Where the viewer once saw the image of Jesus clearly, here all that is seen is the silhouetted outline of the Jesus statue against a snow-covered field (Figures 5 and 6). In light of Ida's encounter with the Transcendent, these old objects of devotion no longer reveal the light of God to Ida, but are, for now, shrouded in darkness.

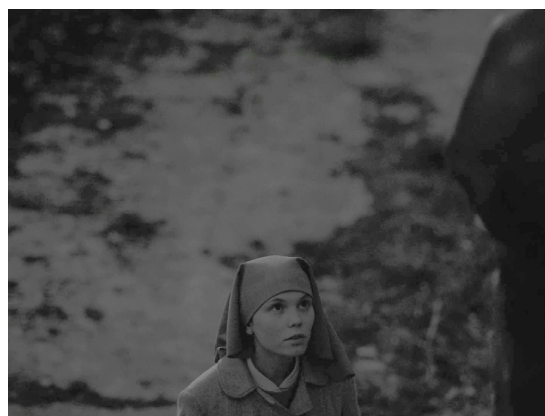


Figure 5. The darkened statue.



Figure 6. Ida prays, “Forgive me.”

Ida’s encounter with God at the stained glass window disrupts her faith because Ida’s previous life in the convent did not provide the imaginative framework through which to understand new experiences of God’s grace. At the core of Ida’s struggle with faith is the question Pawlikowski asks in his discussion of Ida’s themes, “Can you be a good Christian without being Polish Catholic?” [1]. In other words, who is allowed to mediate the teaching of Christ, and who may determine what an encounter with God looks like?

The objects that guide Ida’s spiritual life early in the film are all manufactured for the purpose of deepening the meditative practices of those who use them. However, intentionally or not, these manufactured objects of worship shape Ida’s imagination in a particular direction. Since these objects are made in the church, they serve to reinforce an image of God that is sanctioned by the Church. The Jesus statue, for example, is made in part by Ida herself and bears a greater resemblance to Northern Europeans, like Ida, than the historical Jesus who was a Middle Eastern man. In a sense, Ida has made this Christ after her image, rather than herself being conformed to the image of Christ, as the Bible suggests is proper (Rom. 8:29).

While the film challenges the practices of the convent, it does not negate them. Ida’s life in the convent taught her to seek God, which allows her to sense the presence of God at the window in a way that Wanda cannot. Though Ida will briefly set aside her monastic life, the film ends with the implication of her return to the convent. The journey of faith depicted in the film is not one in which Ida rejects her old faith and practices in favor of a completely new set. However, this journey is a maturation of her faith in which she learns to see God in new ways, and to interact with people outside the safety of the convent.

Both the prayer card and the statues of Jesus stand in contrast with the abstract nature of the stained glass window. Nearly all the religious imagery in the film is figurative, depicting angels, saints, or Jesus (Figure 7). The window, on the other hand, is comprised of irregularly shaped pieces of tinted glass (Figure 8). By mediating Ida’s encounter with the Transcendent through abstract art instead of an image of Jesus, Pawlikowski suggests that one may encounter God in places beyond those created by the church. As a result of her abstract encounter with the Transcendent, Ida’s imagination expands to include a conception of God that exceeds what has been dictated through her experience in the Church. This does not come easily for Ida, and she struggles to incorporate this experience into her understanding of faith.

Ida does not abandon her faith, despite its disruption, but she tries to hold even tighter to her old mode of religious observance. One night, Wanda returns drunk to the hotel room she shares with Ida. When Ida pulls away from Wanda’s affection, Wanda suggests that, in contrast to Ida’s behavior, Jesus adored people like her: an inebriated “slut” by her own description. When Wanda reaches to read from the Bible, Ida wrestles the Bible out of Wanda’s hands. Ida’s religious training has shaped her

faith to be a cloistered faith, as opposed to the vulnerable faith that Wanda suggests was characteristic of Jesus. Since Wanda is not a part of the Church, Ida is resistant to her interpretation of the Bible.



Figure 7. A prayer card used by Ida.



Figure 8. The stained glass window.

More important than a picture of God, Pawlikowski seems more interested in the Imago-Dei, the image of God found humanity. An in-depth discussion of Imago-Dei is beyond the scope of this paper, but Garrett Green's understanding of this topic in *Imagining God* is helpful for *Ida*. For the Christian, the Imago-Dei can be understood as the Christ-like "pattern of their activity in the world" ([6], p. 102). After her encounter at the window, Ida's pattern of activity toward others changes and becomes more Christ-like. As Wanda suggests, Christ engaged the world with vulnerability instead of cloistering himself from the world. Following Christ's example, Ida also begins to engage with the world.

4. Setting and Locations: Ida and Others

Ida's encounter with God also galvanizes her relationships with other people. Ida begins the film as a passive character, allowing events to transpire around her. By the end of the film, however, Ida takes charge of her circumstances.

No doubt the result of life in the convent, where sisters must take a vow of obedience, Ida largely does what she is told. When the mother superior tells her to visit her aunt, Ida obeys, though not without expressing her dissatisfaction with the situation. Though the film bears her name, Ida is not the driving force for the first portion of the film. While Ida suggests the road trip to find her parents' grave, Wanda sets the course and dictates how events unfold. When visiting the family farm for the

first time, Wanda questions the matriarch while Ida, somewhat uncomfortably, waits passively at her side. Just as with her life in the convent, Ida remains at a distance from the rest of the world.

Ida's encounter with the presence of God through the stained glass window provides the dividing line between Ida's isolation and her engagement and vulnerability with the world. Viewers are only given a glimpse of Ida's life and are unaware whether she has even encountered God in this way before. However, this encounter is profound, with lasting implications for Ida's life. The grace of God's presence showing up in such a messy place, where hard work is regularly performed, is not incidental. Rather, it is precisely as Ida works amongst the messiness of life that the film suggests she should expect an encounter with the Transcendent.

By setting Ida's encounter with God's grace in a barn, Pawlikowski evokes images of the nativity. The Incarnation is the apex of the union between God's grace and work in the world. In choosing a barn as the setting of Ida's encounter with God, Pawlikowski re-emphasizes the importance of the cooperation of grace and work in Ida's faith journey.

In contrast to her early passivity, Ida's agency in the film begins when she gets angry with Wanda and storms out of the hotel room. From this point onward Ida gradually begins to engage more deeply in the world. Later, Ida decides for herself to listen to the jazz band and ends the night in a conversation with Lis, the saxophone player, on the patio of the hotel.

When the two women try to locate Szymon (the man who likely knows more about Ida's parents' story), Wanda becomes frustrated in her attempts to pick the lock of his home. Now the roles are reversed and it is Wanda who stands uncomfortably, smoking a cigarette, while Ida leads the way to the hospital where Szymon is dying. Where Wanda is unable to open doors through force, cunning, or a decent set of picks, Ida succeeds through her status as a minister of the church.²

Ida's engagement with the world is not forceful like her aunt's; rather, Ida engages with vulnerability through service to others. When Ida and Wanda finally speak with Szymon, it is Ida who is able to get him to talk, not Wanda. When Wanda breaks down in tears, Ida comforts her. When they are finally able to locate her family's burial site, Ida and Wanda carry their family's bones together and rebury them in a family grave. Ida is no longer content to stand by the sidelines, instead kneeling side by side with her aunt digging a grave in the forlorn cemetery. Pawlikowski makes a point of focusing on Ida's dirt-covered hands as she helps bring closure to the tragedy that she only just discovered she was connected to.

Here, at last, the viewer sees the meaning of Ida's name (work) in its fullest form. Where Ida was initially passive, choosing to isolate herself from the world, she now chooses to engage with the world—to work—as the meaning of her name implies. Ida's interaction with the world results in a vulnerable love with Wanda. Though Ida and Wanda spend much of the film at odds with one another, when Wanda drops Ida off at the convent, the two embrace and though her back is to the camera, we see Ida wipe a tear from her face.

Having returned to the convent, it seems that Ida no longer fits in with the other sisters. Instead of remaining silent at meals, Ida laughs at a private memory. When the other novices pray, Ida seems unable to follow their example. Ida's disconnect might be understood as what Wesley called "The Wilderness State" in a sermon of the same name. Wesley writes that, for believers in this state, "The light of heaven does not now 'shine in their hearts,' neither do they 'see him that is invisible;' but darkness is again on the face of their souls, and blindness on the eyes of their understanding" [7]. Wesley's language is reminiscent of what other theologians might call the dark night of the soul. However, Wesley explicitly rejected this doctrine, despite the fact that he "kept backing into its logic" ([8], p. 307, loc. 6770). For Wesley, the biggest problem was that this feeling of separation from

² The viewer is not shown whether Wanda succeeded in opening Szymon's door. Instead Ida is shown pacing back and forth in front of his building, and Wanda attempting three times to light her cigarette. Whatever the status of the door, Wanda was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving her goals.

God, as it was traditionally described by the dark night of the soul, was initiated by God. Contrary to this view, Wesley taught that the wilderness state was initiated by a person's actions or inaction.

While it is tempting to view Ida's experiences upon returning to the convent as a dark night of the soul, Wesley's wilderness state may be the more appropriate framework for understanding her struggles. Wesley writes, that "if we do not 'stir up the gift of God which is in us'...this will effectually darken the soul" [7]. In order to prevent this darkening, Wesley wrote that people should be "zealous of good works" such as visiting the sick and providing comfort to others [9], both of which Ida performs. By returning to the convent, Ida ceases these activities.

When Ida's mother superior sends her to meet her aunt Ida is instructed to "stay there for as long as necessary." Though no definitive time is given, both Ida's discomfort in the convent and Wanda's suicide seem to indicate that Ida returned to the convent too early, triggering a wilderness state. This premature return causes Ida's vertical relationship with God to suffer as well, leading Ida to delay taking her final vows until she is truly ready.

Wanda's suicide tragically prevents Ida from reconnecting with her aunt directly, but it provides her with the opportunity to deepen her relationships with others outside the church. Pawlikowski explores Ida's increasing vulnerability with others through costuming.

5. Costuming: Clothing and Identity

Through most of the film, Ida remains clothed in the habit of a Catholic novice and, thus, is identified with the church, affecting the way she sees herself and the way she is seen by others. Nearly everyone she encounters, including the man her aunt was sleeping with when Ida arrives at her apartment for the first time, greets her with "God bless." Ida's identification with the church is also indicated by the color of her habit, which matches the walls of the convent so closely that she nearly blends in (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Ida blends in with the walls of the convent.

When Ida leaves the convent the second time she stops wearing her habit and dons her aunt's dress instead. This is the same dress Wanda wears to drink and carouse in a hotel bar in an earlier scene (Figure 10). The dress had been offered to Ida then, but she refused to wear it, instead remaining in her room to pray. Wearing the dress shows an attempt on Ida's part to connect with her departed aunt (Figure 11). Not only does Ida literally spend time walking in her aunt's shoes, but she also tries engaging with the world using the same sensual means her aunt used. In this way Ida exhibits a kind of vulnerability with the world. Contrary though it may be to her religious upbringing, Ida attempts to be both in and of the world (John 17:16). In a montage, the viewer sees Ida put on makeup, smoke a cigarette, and get drunk for the first time in her life.



Figure 10. Wanda at a party.



Figure 11. Ida in her Aunt's dress.

This connection with her aunt provides a new paradigm for engaging with others. At the beginning of the film Ida interacts with others as little as possible, and reluctantly when called to do so. At her family's farm the matriarch asks Ida to bless her child. Ida seems shocked at the request, but complies. After her encounter at the stained glass window, Ida becomes emotionally vulnerable with her aunt. Her interaction with both Szymon and Feliks also exhibit a level of vulnerability, desiring to understand their circumstances, not simply condemn their actions.

At Wanda's funeral, Ida once again meets Lis the saxophone player. After a night of dancing they have sex. There is a tenderness and vulnerability in their union that seems absent from Wanda's dalliances. As they lay in bed together, Lis promises Ida an ideal life with a house and children, both of which her life as a nun prohibits.

The morning after her first sexual encounter, Ida sits in bed naked. Her nakedness is one of identity as much as it is a lack of clothing (even when bathing with the other novices at the convent, earlier in the film, Ida was shown wearing clothing). Sitting on the bed, she is free for the first time to choose what path she will take, which identity she will chose. In the end, she puts her habit back on and leaves the apartment with Lis still in bed.

Ida's choice to wear the habit shows her decision to once again employ a mode of interacting with the world that is informed by her desire to be of service to God and others. Though we do not know Ida's destination after leaving Lis, it is likely she is returning to the convent to take her final vows and be wed to Christ.

Pawilkowski's depiction of Ida's sexual encounter represents the culmination of her journey of vulnerability. This level of vulnerability is only possible outside the convent with its prohibitions against alcohol, tobacco, and sex. However, it is through these sensual encounters that Ida returns to faith. For Gerard Loughlin, this is especially true of sex since "In the *Divina Commedia*, the love of man and woman is made the means, rather than the obstacle, for ascent to God" ([10], p. 151).

Though Ida's experiences have brought her to a place where she can now say "I'm ready" to Christ, Pawlikowski is not likely suggesting sex is an essential path to God. While Ida's vulnerability with Lis is life-giving, Wanda's sexual encounters are anything but. For Wanda, her sexuality and alcohol consumption are a means of numbing feelings of pain, guilt, and loneliness, and even as she is physically intimate with men, she still invulnerable to them. By contrast, when Ida engages in the same activities, a grace-filled vulnerability with others is shown that begins with Wanda and finds its fulfillment with Lis.

Ida's vulnerability with Lis also reveals the limits of her aunt's mode of engagement. As they lay in bed together, Lis promises Ida an ideal life with a house and children. It may seem wrong for Ida to leave Lis and his promises of love behind without even saying goodbye, but this is actually the best course of action, since Lis' promises are insincere. Pawlikowski reveals this insincerity through the meaning of Lis' name, a Polish nickname meaning sly or fox. In addition, Lis has already expressed his desire to avoid getting married in a previous conversation with Ida. Though Lis seeks Ida out at several points, even attending Wanda's funeral to see her, he is obsessed rather than truly devoted to her. Ida recognizes this insincerity and leaves.

With this experience behind her, Ida once again dons her habit. Her time outside of the convent has taught her to be vulnerable with others and the appropriate limits of that vulnerability. Now she returns to a vulnerable connection with God. Given her recent experiences, this is not a commitment of naiveté, but one born of experience. Pawlikowski suggests that these experiences help to deepen Ida's vows. As Wanda says of carnal sin, "You should try...otherwise what sort of sacrifice are these vows of yours." Now, at the end of the film, Ida knows exactly what sort of sacrifice she is making, and embraces that sacrifice, indicated by wearing her habit. Ida's habit alone is admittedly thin evidence for her return to God, but Pawlikowski's use of music and the film's framing corroborate this reading.

6. Music: An Outward Sign of an Inner Grace

For most of Ida, the music is diegetic, no matter the genre. Nuns chant their prayers, accompanied at times by a small organ in the chapel. Classical music comes through Wanda's car radio and is played on her record player. Lis and his band play several jazz numbers, some of which are also heard on the radio. The lives of the people that inhabit Ida's 1962 Poland are fleshed out through their interaction with music, establishing the setting and grounding it in that place and time through tangible details. Pawlikowski goes so far as to include radio recordings from that time period as part of the film's sound track.

As Ida walks down the road during the last shot of the film, Pawlikowski inserts the longest extended instance of non-diegetic music in the film. Again, Pawlikowski draws the viewer's (hearer's) attention to the presence of the Transcendent other, as encountered beyond the walls of the church. This sudden interruption of music with no apparent source indicates this Transcendent presence. In *Scoring Transcendence*, Kutter Callaway writes, "non-diegetic music is...unique in its ability to signify what is not in the image at all...non-diegetic music has the power to speak from a transcendent realm beyond the image" ([11], p. 88). Pawlikowski suggests this is the case here, through the extended duration of the music, its surprising non-diegetic character (*i.e.*, it contrasts with the primarily diegetic music in the rest of the film), and the hidden textual cues behind the music.

The piece chosen communicates Ida's interaction with God. Ida's journey is accompanied on piano by Bach's "Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ." Though the lyrics of Bach's Cantata are not heard, the first stanza of this piece translates to "I call upon You, Lord Jesus Christ/I pray You, hear my complaint/Grant me mercy at this time/Let me not despair/The true Faith, O Lord, I mean/You would give me that:/To live for you/To be of use to my neighbor/And to abide by Your Word" ([12], p. 422). Pawlikowski thereby gives insight, albeit indirectly, into Ida's state of mind, and all that she has learned.

While Ida's destination is uncertain at the end of the film, through the use of non-diegetic music coupled with the meaning of the lyric in the original cantata, Pawlikowski indicates her connection with God and her return to a mode of interacting with the world filtered through her relationship with

God. Where she once prayed to Jesus, “I’m not ready,” now her prayer to Jesus, as communicated through music, is “To live for You.” Through her experiences in the film, Ida has learned how to do just this, both in the convent and without.

7. Cinematography and the Transcendent

Much of what visually sets *Ida* apart from the modern film landscape is anchored in transcendental style, as described by Paul Schrader [3]. He outlines a filmic form that, he argues, is capable of evoking the Transcendent. To do this, he draws on the films of Ozu, Bresson, and to a lesser extent Dryer, all of which express the Transcendent in similar ways, despite their disparate contexts. In *Ida*, the static cinematography and editing and the non-expressive acting of Ageta Trebuchowska (*Ida*) evoke the films of Bresson ([3], pp. 66–68). Pawlikowski’s use of a stationary camera for most of *Ida* also draws on films of Ozu ([3], p. 22). These techniques are used to minimize the emotional manipulation that is inherent in cinema ([3], p. 164). Pawlikowski’s attempts to downplay the emotional response from the audience can be seen when he says “Whenever a shot looked self-consciously beautiful or contrived, it didn’t survive the cut” [1]. Like Ozu and Bresson, *Ida* uses these techniques as a means of expressing the Transcendent through film.

Though Pawlikowski claims to have removed any “self-consciously beautiful” shots, the cinematography in *Ida* draws attention to itself in other ways. Traditionally, characters are framed so they fill most of the frame. However, *Ida* is frequently framed in the lower corners of the screen, leaving large portions of the frame unoccupied. At other times only portions of *Ida*’s face appear on screen (Figure 12). For example, while they drive from one place to another, *Ida*’s face is cut off on the left side of the screen when she rolls the window down to escape the smoke from Wanda’s cigarette (Figure 13).



Figure 12. *Ida* in an unbalanced frame.



Figure 13. *Ida*’s face falls off frame.

This feeling is compounded by the immobility of the oddly placed frame. With the exception of the final two shots of the film, every shot in *Ida* features a stationary frame.³ By not tracking the movements of the characters on screen, scenes that begin framed in a traditional style (Figure 14) might end with the character framed at the extreme edge or bottom of the screen (Figure 15), as in a scene where Ida briefly talks with a priest. The whole scene is done in a single shot that begins with more comfortable framing. When the priest leaves the room, Ida sits down, but since the frame remains stationary, Ida is no longer the focal point of the shot in which she is alone. Such extreme deviations from typical filmmaking conventions make *Ida* appear out of place in the movie, even though the story bears her name. Relegated to the corner of the frame, the viewer is often made to feel as if scenes were framed for someone other than Ida. Through this use of this static framing Pawlikowski presents the viewer with a supposedly objective view that is indifferent to the activity depicted on screen.



Figure 14. Early in a scene with balanced framing.

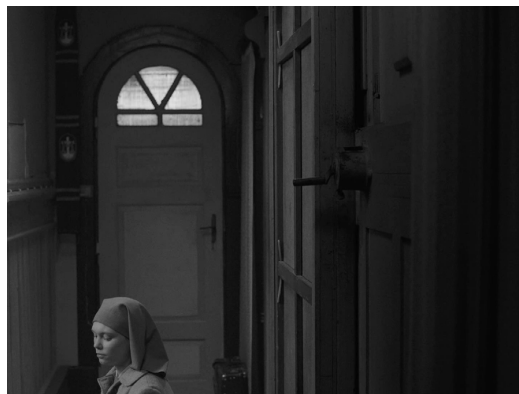


Figure 15. Later in the scene with unbalanced framing.

Further, Pawlikowski follows the steps of the transcendental style to give an expression of the Transcendent at the end of the film. The beginning of film, depicting Ida's life in the convent, is the clearest example of step one: the everyday ([3], p. 39). Ida's customary patterns of life are interrupted when the mother superior sends her to visit her aunt Wanda, which leads to step two: disparity ([3], p. 42). While Ida experiences disunity with the world outside the convent, she slowly learns to adapt to this setting. This adaptation leads Ida to a place where, even if she is not exactly in

³ A few shots in the film are stationary relative to Ida's location, but show movement from her point of view. For example, when Wanda and Ida are riding in the car, the viewer sees trees passing, though the camera remains within the car. Pawlikowski highlights the unique movement of the last two shots in his interview with *Filmmaker Magazine* [1].

unity with the outside world, she has changed enough that she experiences even greater disunity upon returning to the convent. Ida's disparity is partially a result of her encounter at the window which gave her a "sense of something deeper than [herself] and [her] environment," ([3], p. 71) a technique also employed by Ozu and Bresson. This disparity leads to a final "decisive action" when Ida puts on her habit and leaves Lis.

Despite these similarities, Pawlikowski breaks from the transcendental style at this final step; moving from disparity to dynamism instead of Schrader's prescribed move from disparity to stasis ([3], p. 49). Though Ida remains non-expressive in this scene, the film's framing communicates a shift in her relationship with God. Contrary to the static framing of the rest of the film, the final shot in *Ida* uses a dynamic hand-held camera. Here, the camera follows Ida as she walks down a dirt road, with cars driving past her (Figure 16). Instead of the removed objective viewer, as in the majority of the film, these few hand-held shots move the viewer into the immanent frame. It is precisely as the camera responds to Ida's movements as she walks down the road that the Transcendent enters the immanent.



Figure 16. The camera tracks Ida's movement.

While this dynamism breaks from Schrader's prescribed style, it maintains the form. Like stasis, Ida's dynamism has the same effect of "an unsettling stylistic shock" ([3], p. 164). Both stasis and dynamism show "the 'new' world in which the spiritual and physical can coexist." ([3], p. 84). Neither resolve the disparity; stasis freezes the disparity ([3], p. 49), while dynamism reveals the presence of the Transcendent in the midst of disparity.

The difference emerges from where Pawlikowski and Schrader locate the Transcendent. Schrader sees the Transcendent in opposition to the immanent ([3], p. 50) and the goal of transcendental films to lift "the viewer to Christ's level" ([3], p. 164). Locating the Transcendent in this manner might be expected, given Schrader's background in the Reformed tradition ([13], p. 104).

Pawlikowski, in contrast, sees the Transcendent already at work in the immanent. For Pawlikowski the Wholly Other character of the Transcendent is one of degrees, not location and is expressed through Ida's dynamic reinterpretation of Schrader's form. The final scene of *Ida* reinforces the presence of the Transcendent in the midst of the messiness of life, a reality that has been hinted at throughout the film. Just as Schrader's view of the Transcendent stems from his religious heritage, so does Pawlikowski's view of an immanent Transcendent, flowing from his Polish Catholic culture.

Schrader writes that "a form can express the Transcendent, an experience cannot" ([3], p. 51). However, because Pawlikowski locates the Transcendent within the immanent, he is able to both present an expression of the Transcendent as well as Ida's experience of it. This is accomplished by creating a deep connection between the audience and Ida.

In several scenes, Pawlikowski allows the camera to rest on Ida's expressionless face for long uninterrupted periods of time. Schrader identifies the same techniques in the films of Bresson, linking

them to Byzantine iconography ([3], p. 99). The highly stylized icons of the Eastern Church hint at a transcendental reality, in part, by choosing “intellectual realism over optical realism” ([3], p. 13). Schrader claims that Bresson’s films “evoke a sense of distance ([3], p. 100) by using the same techniques as the Byzantine iconographers.

However, Schrader fails to take into consideration the inherent differences between the two media (film and icon) and their effect on the viewer. By its very nature, film produces a photo realistic image that stands in sharp contrast to the specifically stylized icons of the Byzantine era. In *Religion and Film* Brent S. Plate writes that, “on film the face becomes something supremely real, deeply encountered by viewers, and confronted with this countenance the viewer cannot maintain their own stability” ([14], p. 61). In other words, as a result of these long intimate portraits of Ida, the boundaries between the viewer and Ida begin to dissolve. As the audience engages with Ida, they begin to imagine themselves responding to the situations of the film in Ida’s place.

In his book *Engaging Characters*, Murray Smith explores the ways viewers engage with the characters in a film [15]. According to Smith’s framework, Pawlikowski’s use of shots mimicking the iconic style brings the audience into alignment with Ida’s character. Though Smith acknowledges the importance of a film’s point of view in establishing alignment ([15], p. 146), his focus is primarily on the “access we have to the subjectivity of the character” ([15], p. 150). Though the transcendental style intentionally limits viewer’s access to Ida’s subjective interiority, the extended shots of Ida’s face invite the viewer to contemplate what Ida’s interior life might be. Further, the film brings the viewer into allegiance with Ida, since she is morally empathetic ([15], p. 188). Finally, Smith suggests that as a result of these character engagements the viewer can, through the use of imagination, know “what it is like to be someone or something other than oneself” ([15], p. 236).

Due to the viewer’s engagement with Ida, the audience shares Ida’s experiences of the Transcendent, though in a mediated form through a central imagining ([15], p. 236). In her essay “The Scene of the Screen” Vivian Sobachak writes, “the cinematic exists as an objective performance of the perceptive and expressive structure of subjective lived-body experience” ([16], p. 101). To put this in other terms, film mediates experiences. In this case, Ida presents us with a performance of the main character’s experience with the Transcendent. As Ida encounters the Transcendent, the viewer imagines his/her own response to this situation. However, the viewer’s experience of the Transcendent is somewhat limited to the viewer’s previous experience of the Transcendent. The viewer’s ability to imagine him or herself in the place of a character is dependent on his/her ability to connect what is on screen with his/her own experiences. While film offers a means of knowing beyond a viewer’s own experiences ([15], p. 235) that knowledge is extrapolated from the viewer’s experiences. An encounter with the Transcendent is a unique kind of experience. Therefore, a viewer who has not had this kind of encounter may not share Ida’s experience to the same degree as a viewer who had. Those viewers who have encountered the Transcendent are more capable of sharing Ida’s experience, imaginatively recontextualizing their own experience with the Transcendent in light of Ida’s encounter at the stained glass window. While film may not be able to mediate Ida’s encounter with the Transcendent *ex nihilo*, it can mediate her encounter by recalling the viewer’s own similar experience.

Despite the differences between references to iconography in the films of Bresson and Pawlikowski and Byzantine iconography itself, the filmmakers’ use of the form produces some similarities. Schrader suggests that Bresson’s use of the iconic style “identify [his] protagonists as objects suitable for veneration” ([3], p. 100). This is certainly true of Pawlikowski’s film as well. Ida, like all icons, helps the viewer see the world differently. As William A. Dyrness writes in *Poetic Theology*, icons give the viewer new vision that make the invisible visible ([17], p. 23). However, while the Byzantine icon, with its rigid stylization, is removed from the “world of sensation” ([3], p. 98) the iconic form in film, by its very nature, presents the invisible world in the midst of the world of sensation. Thus, with Ida, Pawlikowski uses film to present the viewer with a vision of the Transcendent in the embodied experiences of life.

8. Conclusions

Pawlikowski says that “In central and Eastern Europe, religion tends to be a tribal marking of some kind, which is deeply un-Christian. If anything, Christ’s teachings are fantastically universal” [1]. In *Ida* he explores this universality through the particularity of the Jewish nun called *Ida*.

Through the cinema’s rich formal means, Pawlikowski produces a theology that locates God outside the walls of the church, though not necessarily in opposition to it. Indeed, *Ida*’s life in the convent laid the foundation of her faith that grows over the course of the film. Further, the movie ends with *Ida*’s apparent return to the convent, and a “new energy” [1] in her relationship with God.

This is largely a matter of embodied interaction; though she appears to return to the convent at the end of the film, she does so with a renewed understanding of her relationship with God, and the nature of embodied, lived theology. At the window *Ida*’s sight is engaged. As she digs a grave for her family’s bones, she feels the dirt. When she connects with *Lis* she tastes the alcohol, hears jazz, and smells tobacco smoke. It is through these sensual, embodied experiences that *Ida* comes to a new understanding of God, even as she is rightly wary of the sensual excesses of her aunt. As William Dyrness writes in *Poetic Theology*, “The deepest human experiences are not in spite of our bodies, but through and in terms of them” ([17], p. 30).

The viewer is drawn to share *Ida*’s journey as he or she moves from the suggested objectivity of the stationary frame to the intimacy of the handheld frame at the end of the film. As we watch *Ida*’s interactions with God and others on screen, the viewer is compelled to imitate *Ida*’s journey. Indeed, Stephen Apkon cites extensive neurological research which indicates “We are primed to experience unconsciously—or even in a sense, to imitate—what we watch” ([18], p. 82).

This cinematic theology engages the audience in ways that invite participation in *Ida*’s search. As *Ida* discovers God in the midst of the mundane so, too, does the audience. With expanded imaginations, the viewer may now engage the world with new sight, expecting to encounter God no matter where the road leads. As *Wanda* has taught us, “God is everywhere.”

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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