

KNIFE IN THE WATER

Directed by Roman Polanski
Produced by Stanislaw Zylewicz
Distributed by Film Polski
Released in 1962

A film shocking in its quiet horrors, *Knife in the Water* stands as one of the greatest achievements in Polish cinema. It was Roman Polanski's only Film Polski feature. Much like Chopin, he left his native land but always maintained the Polish spirit through his art.

We begin with a man and a woman driving down a quiet stretch of country highway. They are well acquainted with each other but seem strangely distant. Soon we learn they are married. They pick up a hitchhiker, a young, strapping man barely in his twenties, but his background is as opaque as his intentions. He is never asked to share his name. A subtle rivalry develops between the older man, Andrew, and the young man. The latter accepts a taunting invitation to join the pair on their small yacht. So begins a series of escalating challenges between older and younger, wealthy and indigent. Christina's impassiveness wanes as matters escalate. Eventually, the three weather a storm below, where the unknown man's knife emerges as a potent symbol, expressing the threat of violence and symbolizing masculine sexuality. The rivalry by this point has drawn in Christina, so that a sexual triangle has formed. At first light a fight breaks out, the young man goes overboard, is suspected drowned, and Andrew swims to shore. But the enigmatic stranger emerges from the waters and seduces Christina. In the end we leave Andrew and Christina at a literal crossroads as the husband wrestles with the consequences of reporting this apparent death to the police. We're left with the sad knowledge that their marriage will continue as a heartless charade or will finally, pitifully, die.

So, what would have happened if the hitchhiker had never been picked up, or if he had never been invited on board? Why did all this happen? One possible explanation is Andrew's twisted ideas about his relationship with his wife. Obviously the two aren't communicative or loving (at the beginning of the film, she responds to his passionate kiss on her back with stoic indifference). Things have been disintegrating for some time. The hitchhiker is Andrew's means of expressing his superiority, of proving to his wife that he is still man enough for her, that all other men pale in comparison to him. Allowing his competition to be such a young, healthy, handsome man seems foolhardy, but it is merely an expression of Andrew's overwhelming sense of self-superiority. He may not want to really win his wife's renewed love, but he does want to prove that he is deserving of her, to reassert his possession.

When Andrew almost runs over the vagabond, he calls him an "asshole" and slams his car door rudely. The sky is very gray, a thunderhead looming ominously. Christina and the drifter exchange a look, with Christina reluctantly diverting her eyes. The camera is situated from the perspective of Christina, more or less, looking over to Andrew. Here he may see the loafer staring at his wife, but we can't be certain. The cutting here is slow, just as it is throughout the movie, evoking the static nature of the lake. (Mise-en-scene is far more important in Polanski's shot selection.) Andrew turns to Christina and looks just past the lens.

We cut to Christina smoking her cigarette and looking out the windshield, apparently at the hitchhiker, paying no heed to what her husband is telling her. Her visage conveys a palpable disdain for her husband and a hungry curiosity to know more about this "puppy," "child," "boy" (he's given a lot of dismissive titles). As Andrew realizes that she would have picked him up had she still been driving, he sarcastically does an about face, now welcoming the mysterious man to join them. Here is clearly established the concept that Andrew takes on the hitchhiker out of jealousy.

But he never intended to bring him aboard the boat. Before long, the trio have arrived at the marina. In a two-shot sequence at the docks, Christina takes the bag handed to her by the stranger, he exits the car, helps her with the luggage in the trunk. He catches a duffel bag she drops, and, their faces momentarily close, he asks "Where to?," to which she replies (depending on the translation) "Come" or "This way." She could have just asked him to drop it, and Andrew would have carried it to the boat, but she invites him to go out on to the docks. During this exchange Andrew is not visible. He is on the other side of the car preparing to change his clothes. The opened trunk blocks Christina and the stranger from Andrew, shutting him out as their body language and furtive glances reveal more than their few words. She brusquely asks for the keys, and so the two of them begin walking down the dock, away from Andrew. If he is surprised by this, he is way too macho to let on. We cut on movement, Andrew turning from facing the car, to facing the docks, as he removes his tie. He watches the pair intently. The back of his head fills the right-most side of the screen as his wife and the stranger walk right to left down the docks, gradually balancing the composition of the shot. We can't see Andrew's face, but his movements seem strangely jerky. He seems to tear at his clothes, watching the two proceed. The overall effect is one of silent menace.

Later in the film, as the three are forced below by a storm, one of the most important sequences in the narrative occurs. As the three change out of their wet clothes, the camera finally settles on a shot demonstrating the best in depth-of-field photography. Enclosed in a tight space, we see Andrew on the left, and the stranger on the right. Christina is changing her clothes between them, in the background. This symbolizes that she is between the two men emotionally. She says "Don't look." But the way she says it conveys something different. She stands in profile, where she could have situated her back to them (the most sensible way to maintain modesty). Andrew sees the stranger, chasing a fly, dwelling on her half-clothed figure. Andrew shoots him a dirty look, and so begins their most protracted round of competition. They challenge each other in a race to inflate mattresses, then enter into a strange game of strip pick-up sticks with Christina. As the stranger begins to prove his ineptness at this contest, he throws his knife, and we cut hard to the knife as it enters the wall. The pair exchange throws. They also compete over killing the fly, still exchanging subtle barbs and verbal jabs. All the while Christina sits between them, the camera angles changing slightly, except for the knife throwing, when her back is to the camera and they turn to face the opposite wall. As the hitchhiker's knife symbolizes sex and power in the film, this contest is the most visually potent of all that have passed before. With the object of sexual desire between them, the restrained anger of the knife throwing symbolizing violence is a perfect setup for the final scenes to follow the next morning.

After the drifter is found slumbering, Christina asks her husband why he brought him on the boat. He doesn't answer. He can't, because he can't reveal his fears to her, and that is, ultimately, why the film ends at a crossroads. He brought him on board to strengthen the marriage, but in a sad twist of irony, left it irreparably damaged.

Knife in the Water is a film rich in characterization and detail. Though it is strongly dialogue driven, the fact that it is in Polish redirects the attention of an American audience to its visual cues. Polanski sets a mood of isolation and gloom-ridden threat, with characters confined in a small space, but each still feeling alone. Like the boat, itself, they are all adrift.

It is an assured work, a minor masterpiece.