

From Sarajevo to Didcot: An interview with Pawel Pawlikowski

Les Roberts

Les Roberts (LR): Before *Last Resort* (2000) you were more widely known around the festival circuit as a documentary film-maker. *Serbian Epics* (1992) was one of your earliest works that attracted some attention, and which introduced audiences to your idiosyncratic style of film-making. Can you say a bit about how this film came about?

Pawel Pawlikowski (PP): *Serbian Epics* was shot at the beginning of the war in Bosnia. But it had nothing to do with the war; it was shot on the front line, but looking the other way. The key notion was the oral epic poetry of the Serbs, which was the basis for the nation state, as for 600 years the Serbs didn't exist at all. The Serbian language and identity was preserved around monasteries, and oral epics, which were sung by guys with one-string gusles who roamed the countryside and retold the stories of the medieval greatness of the Serbian nation. In the fourteenth century it was swallowed up by the Ottomans. So in the nineteenth century, when the Romantic movement in Europe started, there was a romantic poet/collector of folklore, Vuk Karadzic, a Serbian, who travelled the country and collected these epics, and who wrote them down and formalized the Serbian language. I just tried to work back from that and look at the Serb self-image and idea of the nation state as something based on and which thrives on the myth, which has nothing to do with reality. Someone told me that around Sarajevo there were still these Serbian gusle players, who retell these oral epics. So I went to Sarajevo, and there were these gusle players who were retelling the battle of Kosovo over again against the Turks. A lot of the songs were about fighting the Ottomans and being in the hills and looking down on the cities where the Ottomans and their clients – in other words, converted Serbs, or Slavs converted to Islam – were doing their business. So all of these things played into the idea for my film, and finally Radovan Karadzic, it turns out, was from a family of gusle players. Karadzic himself plays a little bit and knows these epics by heart, and he's a poet too. So I kind of went there like an idiot asking about oral epics while the war was erupting everywhere. The Serbs were very surprised, but they said OK at least someone is interested in us not being murderers, but having some kind of tradition. So actually, by making a film about the oral epics I got to the very heart of darkness – to all the characters who were leading the war, like Karadzic and so on. It became a kind of reflection on the myth-making, but also a kind of oblique look at the war, through this prism of Serbian self-image.

LR *When it was shown on the BBC I understand that it caused some controversy. Some Tory MPs were up in arms about it and tried to have the film banned.*

PP It was a deeply ironic film, but on television you can't count on people noticing such ironies. Television is a political arena and I strayed into it with this completely bizarre film, which did not have any commentary, so you had to really make sense of it on your own. It wasn't necessarily anti-Serb or pro-Serb; it was just a look through a certain prism at the cultural context of this war. So at one point,

because Karadzic was so surprised I was interested, I had the chance to spend a couple of afternoons with him. I'd read his poetry, and he'd written a poem about twenty years ago about burning Sarajevo – a completely apocalyptic vision. I made him stand over Sarajevo and recite this poem. Sarajevo is in one shot burning and he is reciting his poem about burning Sarajevo. He then turned to this other colleague and said, 'Listen! I wrote this twenty years ago. It's very prophetic – it almost scares me.' And he didn't notice any irony about this thing at all.

LR *In Tripping with Zhirinovskiy (1995), a film about the extreme Russian nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, you seem to have struck up quite a good relationship ... he opened up a lot, I felt, in the film.*

PP I didn't actually want him to open up. I was relying on him to talk – to do monologues. His monologues are very, very surreal. What I did there was just let him speak. I didn't actually ask any questions – or else I asked really stupid questions like, 'What do you like most in the world?', and because no one had ever asked him that before, he started saying this complete nonsense which was actually quite revealing about his imagination. It's quite a superficial film, it's just to show the pettiness and banality of this guy, on the one hand, and to make a surreal film about Russia. It's about the Russian landscape; there's an old tradition of demagogues on rivers, in Russian history there's always these rebels who get on a boat and go up and down the Volga and start insurrections. So this was a kind of pick-up of the Russian tradition.

LR *It's a bit like a latter-day Heart of Darkness ...*

PP Yes, if it had gone further. This is where you are limited by documentary; you try and squeeze as much out of it as reality gives you. Whereas *Serbian Epics* goes as far as a documentary can go into interesting areas without manipulating too much. With Zhirinovskiy it just has one layer.

LR *In your Russian documentaries, From Moscow to Pietushki (1990), Dostoevsky's Travels (1992) and Tripping with Zhirinovskiy, you accompany the films' main characters [the writer and celebrated drinker Benedict Yerofeyev, Dostoevsky's great-grandson Dmitri, and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy] on journeys through national and cultural landscapes, which seem somehow inert, as if blighted by spiritual and moral decay. In Dostoevsky's Travels, for example, Dostoevsky becomes both a vehicle for exploiting Russia's transition to capitalism, and as a cult-like, almost religious figure amongst the conservative elements of Russian society, in which Russia's moral salvation becomes bound up with the restoration of the monarchy. To what extent was Dmitri's story structured towards addressing these broader themes or did they emerge while you were shooting and editing the film?*

PP That was the general idea, because he himself embodied a lot of things. He was not unrelated to Zhirinovskiy, funnily enough – they shared similar ideas. When I first met him in St Petersburg by accident – I was haunting the Dostoevsky museum a few times and somebody said that his great-grandson was still around, and they introduced me – he was talking about how to get a Mercedes, how to sell his little pictures when he's in the West, what he's going to do in the West because

it will be his first time. He told me also that Warner Brothers have a script written by his granny about Dostoevsky – a bio-pic – and he wants to find out if there's any money in that. Then he started talking about how monarchy was a good idea. I thought it was an interesting combination of contradictory things. If planted in the right landscape it could be resonant, and as he was going to the West anyway I thought maybe there's a film. Thankfully the BBC at the time had very good commissioning editors who would give you the money to do it. It was a great story, but I didn't do it very well, I wish I had done it differently. It was a bit too manipulative ...

LR *That's what I wanted to try and get at, because along the way there are some fascinating characters, the Mercedes dealer for example ...*

PP Well, he did go to this garage, but the guys he went to were not very interesting, so I found a guy who I thought was a work of art in his own right. We haunted the markets for a cheap Mercedes and at the market I clocked this other guy, so I befriended him and used him as an actor really. But it was in the spirit of what really happened. It was just more expressive. At that point I realized that sooner or later I would have to make fiction (laughs) ... Great documentaries are usually very slow focused, whereas I like to tell a story or have a bigger, more multilayered thing. So very often to create a world you have to kind of bring things in yourself. Or you spend a whole year with the object of your film and then some amazing things will come out. But I just couldn't be bothered.

LR *Do you use fiction or manipulation in your other documentaries?*

PP Only in that one. In others I throw some things in, like in Yerefev [From Moscow to Pietushki] the vodka ladies, and that kind of stuff because that was in the spirit of the subject. We're dealing with a kind of imaginary ... we're talking about a writer, or about the ghost of Dostoevsky. For the Zhirinovsky film there was nothing fictional, because he was larger than life anyway. With Yerefev you're dealing with a guy who's actually constructed fantastic fiction himself, and his life, somehow, is entwined with his fiction. The narrator in his stories is very close to him, the boundaries between fact and fiction are pretty blurred there anyway, so I just tried to construct a kind of film in the spirit of his writing. That was the guiding idea.

LR *Through the central narrative of the stories you follow they seem to indirectly open up to these wider themes. In Last Resort, for example, you follow what is, in effect, a relatively simple, straightforward story, but it defers, in a way, more indirectly to other, more broadly social and political themes. I know you are resistant to political readings of Last Resort ...*

PP Because the politics of asylum is very complicated. It's not a straightforward matter. To say that everyone who wants to be a refugee is welcome is mad. It would be bad faith for people to say, 'We don't want to solve the problems, just let everybody come.'

LR *With that film and Twockers (1999), your two British films, they both deal with Britain on the margins. In the same way that Last Resort isn't about asylum and*

immigration, Tweekers strikes at the heart of a social reality determinative of how people are forced to live their lives in contemporary Britain. In both films we are confronted with these broader issues.

PP I'm not a political person. Not any more, anyway. When I was in Poland, communism was around and I had an axe to grind. But now that is a distant memory and the real problems of the world are nothing that I can meaningfully do anything about. All I can fight against in my films is the industrialization of life and the industrialization of movies. All I do now, or try to do, is get at something in humans, or characters, which is genuine, authentic and unaffected by the media ... that deforms all reality. So I'm just a kind of romantic director, looking for anything that is authentic and original, and which defies the norm in a believable way.

LR *However, a lot of your characters are drawn, or stand out from landscapes, which are very real.*

PP Yes, but you try and find something that is not defined by the landscape, or which works in an oblique contrast to the landscape. Like when I was preparing *Tweekers* with a friend of mine we were looking for a kid who defied the norm. Because there were hundreds of kids on this estate and other estates, who were great to be in film, they wanted to be and they were very real characters – they were stealing, burgling, doing all these things, wearing Adidas and going clubbing – but they were as boring as hell. They were totally predictable, that was the most depressing thing in my research, there was not a single, original kid that I could hang my story on.

LR *So were they actors that you used?*

PP No. There was a kid, but it took ages to find the kid that I suddenly thought, 'There's a mystery there – an interesting kid, obviously he has his own kind of baggage of feelings and imaginings.' One thing he told me which took me by surprise was that he had a Hungarian penfriend, for example, because there were some Hungarian schoolkids who came, and he told me that he wrote to this Hungarian penfriend – he'd never seen him again, but he'd been writing for years. He told him the sort of secrets that he'd never tell people in his immediate vicinity, his friends. He was very romantic, and very troubled. He had a kind of craving for love, and he had a very poetic way of expressing himself ... He had his own patterns of speech, which we built into the dialogue.

LR *So that was another project, which seemed to fall between drama, or fiction and documentary.*

PP Yes, mainly because I wanted to film not relying on boring scripts. I have a problem in England in that when I am supposed to tell a story from contemporary life everything falls into clichéd stories, and everything's defined by sociological coordinates. So very often I just look at reality, locations and characters, and then think, hey, with a little bit of fiction you can create a lot of resonance, as long as the fiction is believable. But it's tricky because it's very time consuming, and these films don't make any money, not the sort of money that producers are

interested in, or that's noticeable. They are time consuming and slightly unpredictable ... so how do you budget for these things? How do you budget for something original? It's impossible.

LR *We've talked about how your work often straddles and blurs the distinction between documentary and fiction. However, do you think the success of Last Resort as a feature overshadows, or even detracts from your documentaries which, in comparison, remain largely unseen?*

PP Yes, but it's inevitable, because it reached a bigger audience – a sort of audience that wouldn't waste its time watching documentaries. Also I was never a name in documentaries, some people know my work, and it had been written about. But unless you make yourself a kind of media personality like Nick Broomfield or Molly Dineen, where you tackle populist subjects in an individual way, it's harder to make yourself known. But you have to enter a populist arena, like Broomfield does about sex or something, or pop stars; or like Molly Dineen on the Spice Girls. But that's a kind of media world. Whereas I always make films about minority subjects. On the festival circuit they are quite well known, but to reach the media awareness in England you have to go pretty mainstream. Whereas *Last Resort* reached a wider audience.

LR *But in a way, that was an extension of the work you had been doing anyway, in terms of method and approach. It's almost arbitrary, categorizing it as a feature film in opposition to your other work.*

PP Sort of: it is an extension; it's definitely part of a journey – because I'm not very happy with *Last Resort*. It did very well, but I always feel that I am a kind of amateur, discovering things as I go along. All the interesting films I've made were kind of discoveries. It's a process ... I always try to do something original. There's a reason why I fall in love with the story, with the character, with the landscape, and making the film makes me realize what it is. And I think, God, I've learnt something, I've made a lot of mistakes but there's always the next film. Apart from the Serbian film I can't watch any films that I've made.

LR *A lot of your method seems to me very dialogical in how you work out relationships with and between your actors and subjects. Is that an instinctive approach you bring to your film-making?*

PP It's a research thing, you know. It's a desire to follow your instincts. You know you have an instinct why you cast somebody. I've noticed there's only a few stories I keep reinventing over and over. But then you find some character, some actress or actor or non-actor, or whoever, but somebody who can go beyond the text and actually give a kind of life which is documentary, or feels real on screen, but which also is poetic in some way and doesn't feel like bad literature brought to the screen. Which is what most films are. Whereas I find the genius of film is actually what happens on the screen. It's not what happens behind the desk, it's not what happens when actors try to crack some dialogue or some kind of thought process. The actual writing of the film is the making of the film, and if you can win yourself the freedom to do that ...

LR *Do you think you've won that freedom following Last Resort?*

PP Not really, no. Maybe I can use this approach for a bit more money next time. But it's not straightforward – then they want to see more, then you have to show them every stage of your work. Of course, one wants to make bigger films – *Last Resort*, OK, is great, it has some resonance, but it's still not treated as a proper film. It doesn't reach a big audience. The reason isn't that it wouldn't appeal to them, but it hasn't got a chance, because nobody would put money behind it, nobody would promote it, nobody takes it seriously. If the film doesn't cost the producers much, then they don't invest much either.

LR *A theme that surfaces frequently throughout your work is that of the absent father figure. Is this something that comes from your own background?*

PP No, I had a father, but my family was disrupted by ... My father was divorced from my mother and fled to the West first, and then my mother married somebody else and came to England. Keeping the family together was always a big thing ... so the mother-son/father-son thing interests me a lot.

LR *Despite your Polish background, the documentaries and features you have made are almost exclusively about Russia, or Russians abroad.*

PP Yes ... Poland inhibits me. Partly it's become a kind of pragmatic, grey country, as undramatic as England in some ways. People are very sensible and pragmatic; it's a very coherent society, defined by its national faith. You wouldn't find a kind of mixture of grotesqueness, romance, idealism, and absurdity that you get in a pure form in Russia. Which is something I find appealing, as close to the way I see the world. Plus I feel less inhibited in Russia. I felt the same thing when I was in the States just now – that England inhibits me, because everything is measured against some kind of social horizon. When I was making *Twockers*, a lot of my great ideas for the film were so unbelievable, because it was England, and these things don't happen in England. Whereas in America I felt I could tell any story, as long as you find a character who will make it believable. I just felt that maybe I would be much more relaxed making films in America, because England is inhibiting in many ways. You either idealize working classes, or you have to look for gangsters to do something interesting ...

LR *One of the most intriguing aspects to your work is the sense of space and place, which you create. You seem drawn to landscapes, which are in some way devoid of organic content; inert, empty places which evoke a strong feeling that life is always taking place somewhere else.*

PP Yes, I like this idea of yearning, and the clash of people who want something, who have yearnings, who don't accept reality, and a kind of dead environment is always something that interests me; you don't get distractions, you don't get a fake sense that life is happening, that this is life. When you shoot in London it's all like cultural wallpaper, it's a pretty desperate place where everyone is miserable, and yet it feels like things are happening and things are really exciting; a kind of conspiracy that British film seems to promote.

LR *How did you choose the locations for *Twockers* and *Last Resort*?*

PP Just driving around and looking. Whenever I see a place like that I clock it, like Didcot, for example, a town near Oxford where I catch trains sometimes, really fascinates me. I'm sure I'll end up making a film in Didcot. There's something so kind of uniformly abstract – anything that's sort of abstract and feels like a dream, like something you could imagine in a dream. When talking to Trevor, the twocker, you say to him Poland, or somewhere, and he'd say, 'Oh, it's so grim there', yet he doesn't think this place is grim because he thinks: MTV, Adidas, some club where he goes; it's all very exciting – he doesn't realize quite how impoverished his world is, not just physically but spiritually.

LR *How much, and to what ends, did you selectively construct the Margate we saw in *Last Resort*?*

PP I immediately clocked certain objects, and all we had to do really was remove traffic and remove all kind of distractions, and try and keep anything distracting out of shot. So it was a case of stripping things down all the time to make it feel like a slightly abstract stage for a drama, rather than make it feel like this is realism; there'd be extras walking around, and cars, like most British films try to create a kind of simulacrum of reality. Which was why I was irritated when critics wrote that this is a kind of documentary realism, nothing in it is at all documentary. The acting hopefully is authentic, and in that sense the approach is documentary, but every location was chosen because it wasn't quite real, or real but not real. I tried to stylize it to the point where it wasn't the real world at all. I find Margate quite fascinating – I'd be attracted to go there if I saw this film.

