

INTERVIEW WITH AGNIESZKA SMOCZYNSKA



Agnieszka Smoczynska © Rafal Placek

**DIRECTOR OF “FUGUE”, A FEATURE FILM
SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**

SEPTEMBER 2018

BY KARIN SCHIEFER

“FUGUE”, THE TITLE OF YOUR SECOND FEATURE FILM THAT PREMIERED AT THE CANNES SEMAINE DE LA CRITIQUE IN 2018, REFERS TO A MENTAL DISORDER YOUR PROTAGONIST ALICJA IS SUFFERING FROM –DISSOCIATIVE FUGUE DISORDER. WHAT ARE THE CAUSES AND SYMPTOMS OF THIS CONDITION?

It is a mental disorder that occurs, for example, in a situation of huge distress, when you can't find the words to express your condition. People can live in this state for a very long time, without having the mental power to overcome their state or their trauma. In certain cases their brain rescues them by completely erasing the personal memories. Their feelings for people close to them, even their personality, can change completely. That's what happened to Kinga/ Alicja, our main character. It may be the opportunity to start a new life, but the past still exists and the important thing is that the person confronts him-/ herself with this past.

THE PRINCIPAL ACTRESS IN “FUGUE”, GABRIELA MUSKALA, IS ALSO THE AUTHOR OF THE SCREENPLAY. AT WHAT STAGE OF THE PROJECT DID YOUR COLLABORATION BEGIN? WHEN DID YOU GET IN TOUCH WITH THIS STORY?

I've collaborated with Gabriela before, when I shot my short film “Aria Diva”. At the premiere of this film she told me about her plans to write the screenplay for a long feature film. She had been working as a writer before – together with her sister she had written several theatre plays – and “Fugue” was her first screenplay for a film. She told me about a TV show she had seen, featuring a woman who didn't know who she was and where she came from. During the show somebody called and said that he recognised her, that her name was Maria, that she had a husband and a son. The face of the woman at that moment was so unforgettably moving: she had totally empty eyes as she repeated: “I have a husband, I have a son.” That was the moment which prompted Gabriela to write

a story about a woman without an identity, who has forgotten her own family. I absolutely wanted to make this movie. Gabriela very quickly agreed, since she wanted a woman to be the director and felt that I was the right person for it. We were very curious about two things. Why had she lost her memory and why hadn't the people close to her tried to find her? We did a lot of a research, met Maria and started to develop the story. After a long time a new question came up: What if this woman doesn't want to recover her memory? What if she doesn't want to know who she was? To us, this seemed to be a crucial conflict. It took us several years: Gabriela ended up writing the script on her own and I made another film in the meantime. Once Gabriela had finished the script we worked together again. I absolutely wanted to tell this story.

we started to work on "Fugue" and it was unimaginable to me that the bond between a mother and her child could be cut off. Is it possible to abandon my own child? This was a question that haunted me. It took us a very long time to develop our story. In the beginning our main character Alicja was not a rebel at all. She was very shy and oppressed; she wanted to find out who she was. We imagined the possibility that she might feel good where she was after the loss of her memory and did not want to return to her family. One woman had told us that her husband, who had disappeared for years, only came back to pick up his identity card, but had become a totally different person. He didn't recognise the kids and he didn't want to live with them again. Can you imagine what that means for a family?



"Fugue"

BY USING THE SYMPTOMS OF THIS MENTAL CONDITION YOU LEAD US TO QUESTION OUR CONCEPT OF IDENTITY IN A VERY FUNDAMENTAL WAY: WHO DETERMINES WHO WE ARE/WHO WE BECOME/WHO WE WANT TO BE? IS THIS THE CORE SUBJECT YOU WANTED "FUGUE" TO REVOLVE AROUND?

Definitely. On the one hand I was interested by the question: What defines us? But also by a second one: What happens if you forget your feelings towards the people closest to you? I was a very young mother when

HOW SHOULD WE ENVISAGE YOUR COLLABORATION ON THE SET, SINCE GABRIELA ALSO EMBODIED THE WOMAN SHE HAD CREATED "ON PAPER"?

Before shooting I was nervous about our collaboration. I couldn't imagine the presence of the scriptwriter on the set. But when the shooting started it was great. Gabriela just "forgot" that she wrote the script and became an actress who was simply playing the role. It was very refreshing and helpful for both of us and for the story.

WHILE ON THE ONE HAND IT WAS A MENTAL CONDITION THAT ERASED ALICJA'S MEMORY, SHE ALSO SEEMS TO HAVE A STRONG, ACTIVE DESIRE TO LEAVE HER FORMER LIFE BEHIND.

Exactly. Her mental disorder is tightly linked to the will deep inside her to change her life. Her personality was not powerful enough, so in a way her brain helped her to become a different woman. I wanted to build her path to freedom, so that in the end she is almost reborn. You can see Alicja emerge from the grave, walk on the tracks. These are elements that were not in the script, and neither were the fantastical elements of the animation. They are among the visual elements I imagined in order to show her feelings. They were products of my intuition, since I imagined that this person without memory might have flashbacks or dreams. Gabriela's script focused very strongly on the psychological drama and less on the double reality of her existence. In the animation sequence in the middle of the film flowers fly out of her brain, showing the beginning of her change. I wanted to convey this by fantastical elements rather than by psychological tools.

AGAINST INITIAL EXPECTATIONS, ALICJA STAYS WITH HER HUSBAND AND SON AND SOMEHOW FINDS A WAY BACK, DEVELOPING BONDS AGAIN. IN A VERY MOVING DANCE SCENE YOU SHOW A MAN AND A WOMAN WHO HAVE BECOME STRANGERS AND WHO NOW RECOGNISE EACH OTHER THROUGH THEIR BODIES. THE MEMORY OF THE BODIES SEEMS STRONGER THAN THAT OF THE BRAIN.

The dance scene is another moment that was not in the script but that I added intuitively in order to show that people can know, perceive each other, get closer to each other through their bodies. The scene might seem improvised, but we developed it very precisely with the help of a choreographer. It's the first scene in which they start to look at each other and find themselves. Later they make love for the first time in the house, and after that there's a moment where you can see the three of them – the parents and the son – together on the bed. It is the only moment in the film where the three of them are together. After that, an accident occurs and Alicja's trauma comes back, as well as her life as Kinga.



"Fugue"

She has to create a new person who unites both aspects of her: Kinga, who she was in her first life, and Alicja.

THERE'S A VERY STRIKING USE OF COLOURS THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE FILM, AS IF EVERYTHING HAPPENS BEYOND REALITY – IN A DREAM, IN ANOTHER WORLD? HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THIS CHOICE?

We wanted the two worlds – fantasy and reality – to blend with each other. The strongest moment of confusion occurs in the scene on the beach which starts with Krzysztof, Alicja and their son, all of them together, and all of a sudden Alicja finds herself alone. This scene creates a sensation of profound doubt in the audience. Was the boy on the beach or not? Has Alicja made up this scene in her imagination? We avoided all kinds of warm colours and instead used yellow, blue and green. Just think of the colours of the house. The colours and the materials in themselves reveal her deep loneliness and her feeling of not belonging to this place.

THE SUSPENSE OF YOUR FILM LIES IN THE QUESTION: WILL SHE STAY OR WILL SHE LEAVE AGAIN? IN A SLOW PROCESS KRZYSZTOF AND ALICJA SEEM TO FIND EQUILIBRIUM, BUT IN THE END YOU SURPRISE US WITH THE FIRM DECISION OF A WOMAN WHO OPTS FOR FREEDOM, WHO REJECTS MOTHERHOOD AND FAMILY AND WHO WANTS TO HAVE HER OWN LIFE.

I wanted a woman who discovers her strength and independence. It's very important to me to underline the fact that children and family are not indispensable elements in defining a woman. As soon as you encounter a woman the first questions tend to be: Is she a mother? Does she have a family? Is she single? A woman is defined by her social role. I hope in the future women won't have to deal with the question: Do you belong to a family? Motherhood should be a response to a profound personal decision rather than to the expectations of society or your parents. And one last thing I wanted to point out is the fact that a mother's love is not unconditional. If you forget your feelings towards those who are closest to you, which is what happened to Alicja, that means motherly love is not unconditional. The reason I wanted to make this film was for the final scene when the camera goes through the window and you feel freedom, the

birds and the mountain, which is a very meaningful mountain in Poland with cult associations. If you consider the second, deeper layer of the story, I'd view Alicja's return as that of a *dybbuk*. Her disappearance means she has somehow passed away. When she returns to her family, all her movements are very slow and the members of her family perceive this return as a sort of resurrection. When her son sees her for the first time he runs away: he thinks he is facing a ghost. The *dybbuk* comes back to accomplish something she had to do. These are things that were not in the script and they didn't occur to me while we were shooting. I discovered them only when the film was finished and I watched it on the screen. It was overwhelming for me to discover that this film is richer than the ideas I had about the story before I started shooting. Creating something, which in my case happens very intuitively, means crossing your own boundary.

YOU HAVE MENTIONED THE WORD "INTUITION" SEVERAL TIMES DURING OUR CONVERSATION. DO YOU GENERALLY MAINTAIN A VERY INTUITIVE APPROACH TO YOUR FILM-MAKING, DESPITE THE PLANNING AND PREPARATION THIS ART REQUIRES?

Intuition is one of my most important tools. I don't think a film can be conceived only by using your brain. If you want to gain something that goes beyond the understanding of a puzzle, you have to follow your emotions and your intuition. Unconsciously I made things happen that I only discovered on the screen. When I was working on "Fugue", I was mourning my mother. The parents in the film have lived in a state of incomplete mourning, because the law didn't allow a funeral. Kinga/Alicja comes back to accomplish her departure. In my view it's very moving that the husband and the son nod their agreement and set her free. It was not enough to split up and disappear. She had to say goodbye in her own way.