

Cold War (2018): Tough Love in the Shadow of the Iron Curtain

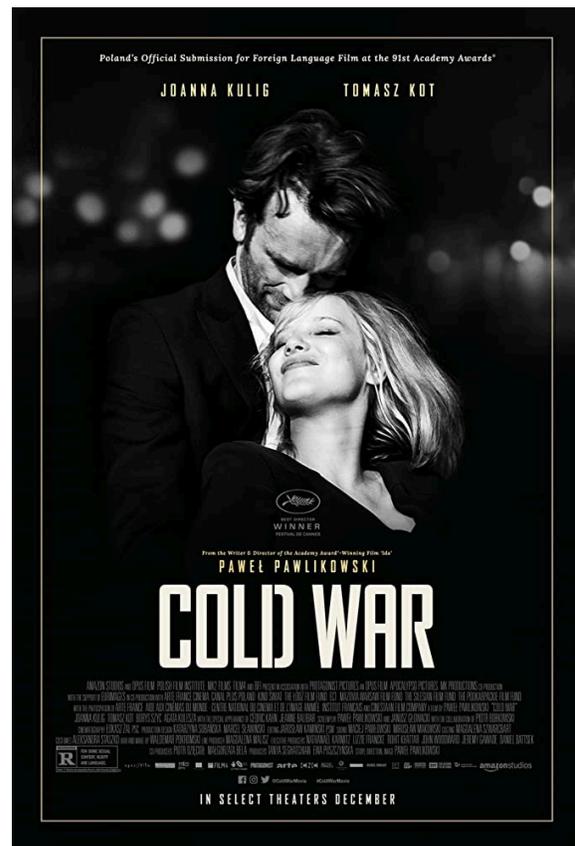
Beata Halicka *

Cold War (2018)
Director: Paweł Pawlikowski
 (Academy Award nominee:
 Best Director)

Despite what its title suggests, *Cold War* is not a war movie but a movie about a seemingly doomed love affair during the Cold War. Its main characters, Zula and Wiktor, are certain of their feelings and do a lot to give them a chance to flourish. At the same time, they cause each other pain as if they were groping around for the best solution to their relationship. Often, however, their decisions do not depend on them. Above all, it is the external factors and borders they encounter on their way which result in this not being a happily-ever-after love story.

Although the Cold War rumbles on in the background, viewers of this movie do not learn very much about it. Under Paweł Pawlikowski's direction, the film is concerned with the fate of individuals rather than grand politics. While those grand politics appear in the background of certain scenes, their consequences determine the fate of its main characters.

The first part of the movie is set in a war-ravaged Poland in 1949, a country in which a communist-run government places great emphasis on education of the young and the social advancement of society's lowest ranks. Wiktor is a musician and is involved in creating a new song and dance group "Mazurek" which, in promoting folk music, is meant to be a cultural showpiece of a new socialist Poland. Zula is a beautiful and talented girl who, having torn herself away from a dysfunctional family, is determined to become part of this new group and thereby change her life. The price of success for



Wiktor is subjugating himself to political pressure from the new government which, apart from folk music, expects him to perform ballads praising Stalin and Poland's communist rulers.

The limits imposed upon him only serve to increase Wiktor's need for freedom, with the artist imagining

* **Beata Halicka** is Professor of History of Central and Eastern Europe at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. Email: beahal@amu.edu.pl Website: <http://beatahalicka.pl/home/>

that he will somehow manage to get to the West, beyond the Iron Curtain. When his folk group travels for a concert in East Berlin, he plans to escape along with Zula. In 1951, Berlin had not yet been divided by a wall while the demarcation line separating both parts of the city was only subject to selective controls. Wiktor manages to get across this boundary with no problem. However, he does this alone as Zula, having weighed the success she has achieved in the group “Mazurek” against her professional prospects in France—not knowing either the country or the language—decides at the last minute to remain in Poland.

The subsequent fate of these two characters are far from the usual clichés according to which those who manage to escape from the Eastern Bloc to the West find the good life, enjoying freedom and opportunities for personal development. Although Wiktor does in fact easily find work as part of a jazz band and enters the artistic milieu of Paris, he does not feel content there. The feelings of loneliness and alienation typical of immigrants are his constant companions. Even when Zula joins him after several years, things don’t work out very well. In order to draw the attention of employers to this talented Polish songstress, Wiktor reveals painful and intimate details of her life. To achieve a desire of making a solo record, Zula is forced to pay a high price. The fate of an immigrant from a country which—in the view of the French—is a far-off land somewhere in the east, leads to numerous humiliations. Being both proud and aware of her own

value as an artist, Zula does not want to accept this. As she had come to France legally, the decision to return to Poland comes easier to her. In the view of the Polish communist authorities, however, Wiktor is both a traitor and a political exile. When he decides to follow his beloved back to his homeland, despite warnings not to do so, he is arrested and receives a long sentence in a prison camp.

The Cold War which divided the world into two camps does not allow people to move freely across the Iron Curtain. Those who manage to achieve this, despite all odds, must pay a high price for attempting to build their own individual happiness, as well as discover their own insignificance regarding the judgment of history. In this war, it is not individuals who matter, but money or the system. Thus, this movie is not only a love story from a period which has passed into history but a universal tale about two people caught up in a machine enveloping their world.

Following the success of *Ida* (2014), which received an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, Pawlikowski has created in *Cold War* another unforgettable picture. It is even more credible in that the director himself could draw on his own personal experience of life in exile. At the age of 14, he left communist Poland with his mother for the United Kingdom, later living in several other countries. It is no accident therefore that he has dedicated the movie to his parents—Wiktor and Zula.