Painting Ida

Ida is a black and white film which can any day become study material for cinematography students. Directed by Pawel Pawlikowski with cinematography by Lukasz Zal (2013)

The way it is shot, one is left admiring at the way light is managed in the entire film. Rarely do you see these days this kind of tonal quality in a black and white frame. The control over the tones is exceptionally well controlled in the film. Light keeps flooding the frames at times in patches like deft brush strokes on a painting. Most of it is softly diffused white of varied shades and intensity. It looks like the film team went to shoot only when they found some verticals and horizontals in the space they were going to shoot. Whole film is filled with lines prominently defining each frame. Trying to keep track of the verticals and the horizontals one may even begin to forget the strong narrative of this beautiful film.
One may study leisurely the frames and keep admiring at the artistic effort so obvious in each of it. Cinema is a creative process involving the entire team of technicians. Most beautiful cinematography won’t get you a fulfilling cinematic experience. It has to be backed by the content that holds the entire narrative structure. The technique cannot afford to attract more attention to itself and make the viewer overlook the content. The script has to support the cinematography and vice- versa. The film succeeds brilliantly in all the departments. Ida is a Jewish orphan girl left at a church when she was a child. She is about to take her vows to become a nun. The church informs her that she has got an aunt who had not responded to any of their several  letters till then. Now the aunt who is her mother's sister wants to meet Ida. The church authorities send Ida to meet the aunt before she finally takes the vows and gets confirmed as a nun. The film is referring to the events at the time of the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany. Black and white and the aspect ratio of 4:3 chosen to film it in, seems to be the most ideal format for telling her story as she goes on a journey of self realization. The film begins with the frames of Ida’s head and that of the Jesus Christ statue she is painting. We get two prominent motifs for the films entire framing structure from this opening scene. One is the bust like two heads composition that of the statue head and Ida’s face. As the space opens up we can see the statue standing alongside her and providing a strong vertical element in the frame. There is constant reminder to these vertical lines and they are her constant companions in almost all the frames that follow. The next immediate shot is of the statue being carried to be installed in the courtyard. The statue is now in horizontal position face up cutting the top left edge of the frame diagonally in the snow filled courtyard. The sudden shift in the position of the statue from vertical to the horizontal has a nice surprise effect. The verticals and the horizontals in the film are thus established very early in the film The bust like close and mid close compositions are almost always supported by the verticals and horizontals in the frame. At one place Ida is almost like Vermeer's painting titled "girl with pearl ear ring". Whole film has frames that look like paintings. People sitting in a row while eating, sleeping or walking around form nice frame divisions. Nun’s lying down face down on the vast church floor before taking vows is a stunning composition. In the beginning when she is being told by the Mother Superior about her aunt, Ida is peculiarly framed in the bottom left corner leaving open space behind and above her. Various interpretations are possible for the viewer due to the peculiar framing. The strong presence of the vertical and horizontal lines breaks only when there is a drastic change in the value system or belief of the central characters Ida. Camera suggests the narrative shift through different style of composing after that. Now frames begin to place arches obliquely and later prominently in the frame. Till such narrative shift we never get to see any such arches in the frames. Ida’s protected world inside the four walls of the church is jolted when she is unexpectedly exposed to the harsh world outside. Constant presence of the soft painterly whites and grays begin to get transformed to the more natural day to day lights of the life outside. The lighting of the music performance and the night club is a noticeable contrast to the more painterly like brush strokes with light in the beginning. Light and camera are the pen with which the script gets written on the screen in a telling way. The visual structure of the film is worth studying. Ida's family in a village was betrayed by their neighbor who has killed them and taken over their property. The little girl Ida is spared as she was very little and the killer taking pity on her leaves her at the orphanage. The aunt’s young son who she had left with, Ida’s mother, her sister’s family is also killed mercilessly. Aunt tells her that most people killed at that time were buried in unmarked graves and very few people know the exact burial place. The painful journey slowly reveals the aunts tragic personality as they travel to the village. She was a public prosecutor sending war criminals to the gallows. Now she is a judge. The war has devastated her life and she has become an alcoholic. They manage to find the criminals who put conditions for revealing the unmarked grave where the family is buried. Ida and her aunt agree to give up their right over the property and only then they are shown the grave by the killer himself. He digs up the bones from where he had buried the bodies. They bring the available remains of the dead to their family graveyard and give them a proper burial. In the course of the journey Ida’s personality changes completely from an innocent nun to that of a woman of the world seeing the harsh truth of the real world. The framing and lighting also changes with this. Unable to bear the depression her aunt commits suicide in her apartment as Ida is about to take vows as a nun in the church. She hurries to the dead aunt’s house and begins to behave exactly like her. She begins to copy all the habits of her aunt, doing everything exactly what the aunt did. When the musician she had met and slept with proposes that they should marry, have children and start a family, Ida leaves him and goes away at the end of the film. It is not clear what she would do thereafter.

The lighting of a master shot of the three nuns sitting in a room is explained by the cameraman Lukasz Zal and is detailed by Benjamin B in his article in the American Cinematographer May 2014 issue. Benjamin’s article is far more detailed and goes into several aspects of the lighting and the films salient points. I have borrowed details as given by the article for one master shot. As I do not have permission for using his interesting sketch about the master shot, I have not reproduced it here. But I have used his details about the lights used for the shot marking spots in the image itself. The original article is available freely on the net and those interested can refer to it for further study. The shot showing three nuns has four lights mimicking day light. Good amount of smoke is present in the scene and grains were added in post to achieve that particular look in the shot. ( image is marked by numbers 1 to 4 as explained)

1. The 6K key light is placed outside the window. The interior walls bounce the light and the added smoke gives it a natural look. It passes through a silk butterfly.

 2. There is a 4 tube Kino Flo on the fire stove as a fill towards the back side of Ida’s head. The light passes through a 1/2 white gel.

 3. The fire stove gets a 575 watt light beam directed through a black wrap .

4. The sink gets 1.2 K spot light through a lace fabric to give it mottled effect. A flag narrows the beam on the sink. The two lights marked 3 and 4 are separated by a flag between them. The two lights work as if the light from the window is falling on those two spots.

The film was shot in 1.33:1 (4:3) with Arri Alexa camera. It was shot in color and then converted to black and white. The is best watched on a large screen.