

Biografie door Olaf Zagreb

In some way, Lech Kowalski has always been ahead of his time, or at least-if we take a look at his classic works, such as *DOA: A Right of Passage* (1980) or *Gringo* (1984, a.k.a. *Story of a Junkie*), they are simply here, present, contemporary, but actually far ahead into the future of films, where happiness and suffering are possible, honest, as important parts of what people call life, and still ever-so-rarely do... And even the fact that now, when he is dedicating his films to distant past, he is being "discovered" even by those who probably never would have seen *Gringo* as a matter of principle, even that has its own logic. Not a simple one, but Kowalski was never afraid of such ambivalence, on the contrary, he always tried to look for it and usually found it. Lech Kowalski was born in 1951 in London, where his family fled. What they fled from is explained in the first half of the film *East of Paradise* (2005) by his mother, Maria Werla Kowalski. As a child, Kowalski came to the USA. His family moved to a small industrial town Utica (N.Y.) where, just like in England, he never felt at home-up until the age of ten his English was, apparently, quite bad. Polish –the language of his parents and their whole world-was much closer to him.

At the age of thirteen Kowalski got a second-hand Super-8 camera, at the age of fourteen he made his first film, *The Danger Halls* (1965), about high school and the horror of conformity. He tried to escape conformity by going 'to New York, 'to the School of Visual Arts, where he met one of his biggest role models, Shirley Clarke. The part of *East of Paradise* about the mother is usually compared to Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), although it seems the point of reference is actually Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (1967.), where an Afro-American bisexual and a male prostitute opens up his soul to the camera, without much additional editing by the author. Another one of his role models at that time was Tom Reichman, who is nowadays known only by jazz aficionados thank to the great documentary *Mingus* (1968); Reichman could be an important role model for Kowalski: he was thought of as genius, he became famous as a master for all genres, he used to make porn movies as industrial movies, and in mid-70s he took his own life-the first of many people to have died too soon, who left some mark in Kowalski's work. Kowalski himself also had his first experiences as a professional filmmaker by making porn movies: the mob allegedly financed and Kowalski made them; allegedly, they're lost... and, once again allegedly, they were so dark, depressing and rough, completely focused on the body and its fragility, that one had to ask himself who could have masturbated to such films? But that is how New York porn movies looked like in those years: paranoid and depressing, made under constant supervision, with a catholic feeling of guilt running through them, which was typical for the local culture and wasn't of religious nature; one of such works is the loops

of Violence-what more is there to be said with such a title? Porn movies, by definition, are necessarily documentaries as well "and that is why documentaries about porn actors are always productively conflicting. Kowalski in his "first real" films, *Sex Stars* (1977) and *Walter and Cutie* (1978), takes a look at the everyday life and the lifestyle of the lumpen proletariat.

Soon after punk stormed into New York and Kowalski was there. He saw and recognized the theme of his life: from *DOA: A Right of passage* to *The Boot Factory* (2002), the first part of his trilogy, *The Fabulous Art of Surviving*, a.k.a. *The Wild Wild East*. His work constantly (or even solely) revolves around punk culture in all its brutal beauty:

Rough sounds, torn clothes-only the boots had to be solid, for defense -mountains of drugs, as well as the awareness of its own repulsiveness. When Kowalski made a film about homeless people, *Rock Soup* (1991), even that was punk. Actually, everything he's ever made is punk- he is Romuald Karmakar's step-brother. A part of this ethos is that there are no genre boundaries, there is only an attitude towards people for whom it doesn't matter whether they are "acting" or they are simply "there", because they are always both, and it is always about being the opposite of the opposite, about partnership, about being there-one is never alone. Solidarity is what it is all about. *East of Paradise*, the third and final part of the trilogy *The Fabulous Art of Survival*, is the highlight of his work so far: an *autoduography* which takes us to the core of his work: honest compassion.

With his film *The Boot Factory*, did Kowalski return to his family's homeland? Not quite, because it isn't his homeland, or is it? Anyhow, he went to Poland, where his film *DOA: A Right of passage* and there he met members of a Polish punk band, who work in a boot factory. Their work is so successful, that they have enough time to listen to all punk records, starting with the commercial ones. The second part, *On Hitler's Highway* (2002), is a road-movie in the first person singular. We see people by the end of the highway, outsiders of all kinds-there, in the past, in their consciousness and memory, the history of constantly destroyed Poland becomes visible, as well as Kowalski's attempt to make a relationship with that country. Finally, *East of Paradise* is the story about the 20th century told by two characters, Kowalski and his mother. The film is, as usual, structured in a very simple way: first the mother talks in front of the camera, since there are no images to accompany her story, then Kowalski, through off narration, talks about images from his early days of film making, creating new images behind them, which we can't see, but have to take a stand. Which might sound paradoxical only to those who can't stand Kowalski's ambivalence, to those who want to run away when they should stay, who don't want to look when they should. Enough of running away, we shall finally stay.

Olaf Möller

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