

## 'You Don't Know Me'

### The Breakthrough of Urszula Antoniak

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[ KARIN WOLFS ]

Safe, coquettish, caricatural, wooden and poorly balanced; the terms reviewers have used since 1993 to describe the film-maker Urszula Antoniak's early work have often been fairly harsh. So the breakthrough she achieved with her first full-length feature film *Nothing Personal* at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2009 came like a bolt from the blue. She won six prizes for it, including two prestigious 'Leopards', one for the best debut and one for the best leading actress, plus the international film critics' award. The film also won great acclaim in the Netherlands, and was awarded no less than four Golden Calves: for the best long feature film, best director, best camera and best sound design. This success meant that a year later her second feature film-in-the-making was welcomed to the Ateliers in Cannes, a networking occasion where exceptional international talent is brought in contact with financiers, co-producers and sales agents. This year, that film – *Code Blue* – which was co-produced by, among others, Lars von Trier's Zentropa production company, was given its premiere at the Quinzaine in Cannes, the antechamber for the world's best film-makers.

How is it possible for (opinions of) the quality of a film-maker's work to swing from one extreme to the other in such a short time? Antoniak would probably find the answer less interesting than the question. In interviews she has repeatedly expressed her amazement at the Dutch obsession with finding explanations and their fear of mystery. Ever since her acclaimed film debut, Antoniak has systematically ignored one of the fundamental rules of the Hollywood film tradition: that a film needs a plot-driven leading character acting in a logically explicable way to draw the viewer into the story. Humans are too complex to understand on the basis of a few simple psychological pointers. This is precisely why she uses enigmatic elements which provide the complexity to enthrall her audience; they just have to think for themselves about what lies behind the character's behaviour. Antoniak doesn't give it to them on a plate. If this article had been written like one of Antoniak's films, it would not contain any analysis, only descriptions of her work.

'You don't know me' is perhaps the best summary of what Antoniak's work is all about. Although these words are actually spoken by the leading male character in *Nothing Personal*, the phrase recurs in various forms in several of her films.



The work with which she graduated from the film academy, *Farewell* (Vaarwel, 1993) was already about the extent to which married people are able to know each other. It is a literally and figuratively dark story of an architect called Martin who suspects his wife Liz of having an affair with the lawyer Jacques. To accompany the picture of a sleeping Liz, we hear Martin in voice-over reflecting on how he is trying to see something 'that lay buried deep inside her'.

In Antoniak's first work following her graduation, the television drama *Bijlmer Odyssey* (Bijlmer Odyssee, 2004), a young man loses his new-found love when he leaves her flat in the Bijlmer estate in Amsterdam to fetch some food from a chip shop and gets lost. They have just been in bed together, but don't know each other's names. When the owner of the snack bar asks him to describe her, he doesn't get any further than 'She's special'.

In Antoniak's second television drama, *Dutch for Beginners* (Nederlands voor beginners, 2007), we see a woman teacher of Dutch trying, in a pushy and superior manner, to get the Polish woman Alina to spill the beans about her marriage to a Dutch man by saying 'I understand you'. To which Alina pulls a face and replies 'I *don't* understand you'.

The impossibility of knowing another person is also one of the fundamental themes of *Code Blue* (2011). This film is about a sister in a hospital who looks after terminally ill patients. If she thinks she can help them by doing so, she will even deliver her patients from their suffering on her own authority. By showing what terrible misunderstandings this can lead to, Antoniak mercilessly rebukes the arrogance of thinking one can understand another human. The truth of what Sister Marian tells others about herself cannot be checked. Her neighbour Conrad – who knows more about Marian than most – says she looks like an actress.

*Bijlmer Odyssey, 2004.*



*Nothing Personal, 2009.*

## A miracle in Poland

Who is Urszula Antoniak? What determines her identity as a filmmaker? Antoniak, who has lived in the Netherlands for over twenty years now, gets really worked up when she is referred to as Polish. In an interview on the Kunststof arts programme in 2009 she said: 'I am a Dutch filmmaker. I am a Dutch national but I am repeatedly confronted with my origin'. In the same interview she said: 'Migration forces you to confront who you are. You leave your environment, your culture, your language, family and friends behind and suddenly arrive in a new country where everything is alien. But it's an excellent opportunity to get to know yourself, to find out who you actually are when stripped of all those things'

It is no coincidence that in her films Antoniak makes her characters abandon their possessions and travel abroad (Anne dumps her possessions on the street when she leaves for Ireland in *Nothing Personal*; Penny throws her clothes away before flying to New York in *Bijlmer Odyssey*). Almost all of Antoniak's films feature boxes of possessions that are given away, thrown away, acquired or rediscovered: in *Farewell* and *Code Blue* there are lives hidden away in packing cases and in *Dutch for Beginners* and *Nothing Personal* we see boxes full of things that are superfluous but still not without meaning.

Antoniak's characters are always thrown onto their own resources. Loneliness and death are never far away. As a human being, can you leave your life behind and make a new start?

Urszula Antoniak was born in the town of Częstochowa in Southern Poland, the 'Polish Lourdes'. It is a place of pilgrimage that is home to the 'Black Madonna', a Byzantine icon that is credited with healing powers. She grew up there in a small flat behind the Iron Curtain with her mother, a textile worker, her father, a staunch communist who worked in a steel factory, and her five-years-older sister who is her opposite in almost every respect except their common love of books. Antoniak keeps her date of birth secret, 'because it is often used to typify a generation of filmmakers. I have very little in common with my age group, and besides, immigration takes up three to five years of your life.' When Antoniak was fourteen years old she witnessed a miracle: 'It was in the thirteenth-century baroque church with the Chapel of the Madonna: a dark place that glitters with the votive tablets of healed members of the congregation and a frightening icon of a black woman with an all-seeing angry stare. One evening there was a procession. There was a group saying the rosary. I saw a seriously spastic man rise from his wheelchair, his face absolutely terrified. Everyone went quiet. The man walked towards the icon and collapsed unconscious on the floor. The other people fell to their knees praying loudly and lying on the ground while organ music broke out. 'Wow!' I thought: 'I want this too.' I wasn't interested in the cause of the miracle but in the effect it had on people. At that moment the filmmaker in me was born.'

In the winter of 1987 Antoniak swapped the depressing, repressive climate of her homeland for the freer, capitalist Netherlands. She had just completed a course in film production at the film academy in Katowice. When she arrived in the Netherlands she did all kinds of jobs, 'I started at the bottom of the ladder as a factory worker', before enrolling at the Dutch Film Academy to study directing. She told the newspaper *Het Parool*: 'I thought it was a smart move because then I could learn the language and the profession and make contacts as well'. After graduating in 1993 she worked among other things as a screenwriter and researcher for documentaries. It was a happy time during which she lived with her great love Jacek Lenartowicz, formerly the drummer with the popular Polish rock band Tilt – 'the Polish Sex Pistols', who came to study screenplay writing and directing at the Dutch Film Academy when Antoniak was in her second year there. But in 2003, when Urszula was working on her first television drama, *Bijlmer Odyssey*, fate played a cruel trick. Jacek was diagnosed with a brain tumour and had only six months to live, during which period she cared for him at home. She revealed to *De Volkskrant* that: 'Losing your loved one, witnessing his death, experiencing the loneliness, the reflection which goes with it, changes everything. It increases the urgent need to communicate something.'

## Death is part of life

Following the death of her partner, Antoniak fell into a black hole. She lost virtually all contact with other people, with the outside world. It took months before she found herself again and was able to make choices. 'I felt hardly any connection with life any more, but at the same time that gave me a great sense of freedom. I tried to stay mentally healthy by writing short stories and screenplays,' she told *Het Parool*. She developed ideas that she would later use in her films. As in the subsequent opening scene of *Nothing Personal*, she

deposited her – Jacek’s – things on the street to observe how passers-by picked out what appealed to them. ‘For me, that was his funeral,’ Antoniak said in the same interview.

Antoniak reinvented herself; perhaps she is continuously doing so. After all, what makes a human being into a person? What determines someone’s individuality? And how decisive is contact with others in this? What makes someone change direction? These are the central questions in her work.

The good thing is that after Jacek’s death Antoniak’s work both changed and remained the same. The theme is the same but the way it is presented is bolder. The greatest difference is the extent to which, since her first feature film, Antoniak has relied on the expressive power of the image. While in *Bijlmer Odyssey* and *Dutch for Beginners* each event is still emphasised with superfluous dialogue, probably influenced by TV dramatists, in *Nothing Personal* and *Code Blue* not a single non-essential word is uttered. It is usually the silence that speaks, the landscape or body language. The scenario and editing are much more to the point; perfectly timed, pared down, tightly stylised and stripped of all unnecessary trimmings.

What remained was death, which, with the exception of *Dutch for Beginners*, always plays a role in Antoniak’s work. ‘Death is part of life,’ Antoniak explains; death as a logical presence in films that deal with the possibility of being reborn. About surrender, loneliness, solidarity, love and letting go. The moment when the dead are laid out and disappear under a sheet is depicted with painstaking attention to detail in *Farewell*, *Nothing Personal* and *Code Blue*.

## Kafka and Billy Wilder

Anyone who thinks that Antoniak is a purveyor of doom and gloom doesn’t know her very well. Death needs a counterpart too, and in Antoniak’s work this can be found in harsh, lively, black humour, whose worth in Antoniak’s view can hardly be overestimated: ‘I think irony is the most important thing in life. It is organically bound up with it. I find films without irony unbearable’. In an interview with *Cineuropa* she said ‘For me irony is the spice of life and its greatest wisdom. I feel I belong to the tradition of Mitteleuropa that mixed Jewish, Slavic and German influences. Think Kafka, Musil, but also Billy Wilder and Ernst Lubitsch, who’ve spiced Hollywood movies with this typical ironic touch’.

Even *Code Blue*, Antoniak’s darkest film so far, includes ludicrous situations and dialogues that appeal to a sense of the absurd. When Sister Marian notices at the supermarket till that an error has been made on the receipt, the lady at the back of the queue soon moves her trolley and goes to another till. It’s only a matter of eighty cents, but for Marian it’s a matter of principle. The cashier gives her a form that customers can fill in when they want their money back. Marian refuses to take it and demands to speak to the manager. ‘It was a mistake,’ she tells him, and then, after a silence, ‘but I can live with it’. Then, with a stern, silent, superior gaze, she forces the cashier to confess her guilt.

Antoniak’s visual style always was distinctive, but it has developed considerably: while her graduation film *Farewell* was already an atmospheric blend of existentialist drama in the style of Bergman and Godard, combined with romantic landscapes reminiscent of the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and meticulously lit portrait shots evocative of Rembrandt, *Bijlmer Odyssey* was

*Nothing Personal, 2009.*



surprising for its playfully mobile, lively night-time camera work. In its turn, *Dutch for Beginners* was tightly stylised and carefully framed, using a fixed camera. *Nothing Personal* combined a subjectively observing camera on a tripod turning through wide-angle views of vast landscapes; a style that was maintained in *Code Blue*, but this time with rigid wide-angle shots that outline a chilly, claustrophobic environment composed of the hard, impersonal textures of glass, fabric, linoleum, metal and concrete in which there are hardly any horizons, at most a fragment of sky to provide some 'air'.

The way Antoniak uses sound to make her characters' inner lives palpable is quite striking. In *Farewell* she was already using abstract, gong-like hollow sounds and echoes, as in the scene where the woman wakes with a start when her husband announces on the voice-over that he has found out who his wife's lover is. In *Bijlmer Odyssey*, a thrillingly buzzing, effervescent mix of city sounds contributes substantially to the ominous, macho, alienating atmos-



phere. In *Nothing Personal*, where, apart from the music the two main characters listen to, no melodious music is played to enhance the atmosphere, the mix used for the soundtrack is, conversely, perfect as a soundscape that makes the silence audible. To achieve this, Antoniak called in the American composer Ethan Rose, who had previously created soundscapes for the skating scenes in Gus Van Sant's *Paranoid Park*. He later did the soundscapes for *Code Blue* also. In this film, Antoniak went one step further by leaving deafening silences where the image would normally demand sound. This is the case in the opening sequence, where an old face looms up out of nowhere; motionless, with glassy open eyes. Just when you start wondering whether the face is dead, its mouth opens in slow motion. To say something? The movement slowly continues into a gasp for breath, then ends in a slow, significant, silent scream.

*Code Blue*, 2011.



### **'Lula, I can't understand you!'**

Finally, the way Antoniak plays with reality in surrealist or magical-realist scenes is very interesting. This had already formed the backbone of *Farewell*, in which a woman collects her husband, killed in an accident, from a mortuary. When moving house after his death, she finds the diary in which he describes his suspicions about her adultery and his plan to murder her, and thus posthumously she learns about another side of him. The extraordinary thing is that the story is told not through her eyes, but through his; eyes that see adultery while it is uncertain whether it was actually happening. And in this way the cliché of the mourning widow is also called into doubt once again.

There is a powerful scene in *Code Blue* in which Sister Marian is standing next to the door at home with a bunch of pink tulips in her hand. A couple has come to visit her, and they are admiring her new flat and chatting about the view and the traffic while a gentle wind-like murmur is heard on the soundtrack. When this is followed by a virtually identical shot of Marian with a bunch of tulips in her hand, it suddenly becomes uncertain whether she imagined the meaningless routine visit or was able to predict how it was going to be. Antoniak had previously used



*Code Blue, 2011.*

the same technique in a key scene in *Dutch for Beginners*, where, on a language school outing, the Polish Alina is sitting next to the African Lula on a bench by a windmill right next to its sails as they sweep by dangerously fast. In the next shot they walk into an empty field of corn stubble, speaking each in her own language, while the subtitles fade out until they become illegible. When Alina despairingly cries 'Lula, I can't understand you!', Lula has moved out of shot. Antoniak closes the scene with a shot in which the two women are back on the bench. What went before could have been an illusion, a mirage that made tangible the defective communication between the two women.

Antoniak's work cannot be captured in these few words. Clichés lurk in every sentence. Above all, readers should see Antoniak's films for themselves so as to experience their complex riches and form their own opinion of them. ■

*Translated by Gregory Ball*

**FILMOGRAPHY:**

1992: *Fietser*

1993: *Vaarwel*

2004: *Bijlmer Odyssee*

2007: *Nederlands voor beginners*

2009: *Nothing Personal*

2011: *Code Blue*