



Wojciech Smarzowski, *Drogówka*

(Wojciech Smarzowski, 118 min.)

by Jarosław Żak

Traffic department (originally *Drogówka*) is the latest movie by Wojciech Smarzowski, who belongs to the younger generation of Polish directors (he was born in 1963). The story takes place in contemporary Warsaw and shows episodes from the life of seven policemen working for the traffic enforcement section. A typical example of Smarzowski's art, the movie is dark, pessimistic, sometimes vulgar, brutal and characterized by a specific kind of humor. In this respect *Drogówka* reminds us some of his previous works: *The Wedding*, *The Dark House* and *Rose*.

At the beginning it looks like a banal story of corrupt policemen who take bribes, visit escort agencies and drink huge quantities of vodka all the time. Therefore, the movie was criticized by real policemen. However, the plot becomes much more complex when one of the seven colleagues is murdered. Then we realize that the aim of the introductory sequence, which takes about one third of the movie, was to familiarize us with the main characters, to present their working environment, conditions, relationships among them and their chiefs or finally how they are treated by the drivers they stop to control.

These policemen are not chosen by accident – they represent the seven cardinal sins. The main character – sergeant Ryszard Król – represents pride. He believes that he knows everything, may solve every problem and does not need any support. He



cannot understand that he will not change the world alone. Pride destroys him totally – he publishes material on the Internet, even if he knows that his family may pay the highest price for that. During an investigation constable Madecka says: “everyone knows he is the only one who does not take bribes”. For Król there are no compromises, there is only one truth and way of behaving.

Sergeant Lisowski represents greed; he loves expensive toys such as cars, watches and fancy clothes. During the movie we discover how he managed to build wealth, which would be impossible to buy with a police officer salary. Sergeant Hawryluk envies everything from Lisowski, which leads to the next cardinal sin – envy. Together with Lisowski, Hawryluk is the darkest character among all seven policemen.

The most complicated temperament belongs to Petrycki, who represents lust. This character adds a considerable amount of special humor, which creates sympathy in the viewers despite his serious sins.

Wrath is connected with sergeant Banaś, who is a xenophobic, racist and absolutely intolerant football hooligan (attentive viewers will notice tattoos related to a local football team on his chest).¹

Gluttony is associated with Trybus, who is drunk all over the movie; he even produces alcohol at home.

Finally, sloth belongs to Madecka, who is unable to find a husband and set up a normal family. She prefers to stay in an informal relationship with Król, even if she knows he will not leave his wife and son.

Real action starts when investigators accuse sergeant Ryszard Król of sergeant Lisowski’s murder. During questioning about the feral night Petrycki declares that the situation was dynamic. The Movie can be described in the same way since this moment. Król steals a police car and escapes. He knows that he does not have much time to prove his innocence.

The previous night, all seven fellows made a huge party and the following morning the character performed by Bartłomiej Topa hardly remembers it. However, Król is sure that he could not have murdered his colleague, and feels that someone is trying to manipulate the whole situation to frame him into a serious crime. He starts his private investigation and discovers dirty connections among policemen, higher officials, businessmen and politicians, including international officials (like corrupted businessmen from Italy). This is possible due to the support he receives from his friends (except Hawryluk).

The first clues are given by Banaś. Thanks to him, Król finds mobile phones and flash drives in Lisowski’s apartment – which is registered under his mother’s name. Recorded videos document the behaviors of a number of drivers after they had been pulled over by the traffic police. Considerable support is also provided by Petrycki, who owes Król a favor – for rescuing him from a troublesome situation. Madecka

¹ The capital letter “L” for Legia Warszawa.



checks many details in police data bases for him; even his principal Gołąb tries to solve this affair.

Fighting for being cleared of the charges becomes a fight for survival. Finally, the audience realizes how hard it is to work in the traffic department, how many constraints are imposed on policemen. Their salaries are low, the equipment is old and low quality (e.g. the comic scene when Król and Madecka chase a new Lexus with an old Ford Focus is revealing), chiefs give unclear orders, which they change on political demand, drivers are aggressive, politicians claim immunity when they commit serious crimes (such as driving under alcohol influence). This creates great frustration, which the police officers try to soothe by drinking vodka, visiting escort agencies and buying expensive toys, as was shown at the beginning of the movie. In the end it is possible to understand why those policemen behave in such a way. Therefore, the final valuation of the policemen performed in the movie is not evidently bad; the audience feels sympathy for them, especially after the dramatic end. The final scene is traumatic and no one can leave the cinema without reflecting on it. Smarzowski makes us think about the extent to which we can act against systems, organizations and structures alone. There is no happy end, we discover how lonely the main character was, even if he had a wife, a kid and – it seemed – friends.

The capital city of Poland – Warsaw – plays a significant role in the movie. However, the city – like the whole movie – is represented from a dark perspective. Even modern streets and places look ugly and frightening. The viewer may have the impression that this huge town is dominated by cheap Asian bars and escort agencies. People drive expensive, posh cars to organize illegal races through the city's network of streets. Everyone offers bribes, politicians drive under the influence of alcohol and blackmail the policemen who want to stop them. Thus a question automatically arises: is this a European city? It rather reminds one of third world chaotic systems, although this makes us think that any city can be described from such a perspective. From the cultural point of view this pessimistic look is universal, not strictly associated with Central Europe. London, Paris or American cities often play the same dark roles in criminal films. The Italian context presented in the scene about corruption in highway construction suggests that those problems are global, not local – bribes were offered by Italians.

Characters are complex, they cannot be simply judged as bad even if they are obviously evil. One of the most complex characters, as was suggested above, is Petrycki, played by Arkadiusz Jakubik. He is totally addicted to sex, and seizes every opportunity to satisfy his almost animal desires. Although he cheats on his wife and behaves in an odd way, he supports Król when he needs that most. The image of Petrycki is totally different once we have insight into his family life. To our great surprise we discover that he has a happy family and loves his wife. He is also worried about his sister (Madecka) and is angry when he discovers that she has a romance with



Król. This is a totally different person from the one he is at work. Therefore, forming judgment about this character is extremely difficult.

This makes the movie universal. The story could happen everywhere, not necessarily in Poland. The idea of seven cardinal sins is reminiscent of "Seven" by David Fincher with Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman. Smarzowski's style is naturalistic, therefore some scenes might be simply disgusting. In this aspect his work reminds one of productions by Quentin Tarantino or Roberto Rodriguez.

With regard to the technical details, the film is shot in a very innovative way by using mobile phones, industrial cameras, etc. The audience has the impression to watch real police material, not a film. The recorded images are shaking, faces are cut and the sound is imperfect, which adds drama and reality. Moreover, in the second extremely dynamic part of the movie scenes are cut – past and present events are mixed on the screen.

It is hard to categorize *Traffic department*: this is neither pure drama nor a thriller/crime story – Smarzowski does not make films which are easy to define. In addition it is worth to notice that in 2013 Arkadiusz Jakubik won the Eagle for the best second plan role.

Watching *Drogówka* is highly recommended, but not to people who are sensitive to vulgar and brutal scenes. It shows the dark sides of police job, the difficulties of behaving in a fair way, the frustrations and the necessity to act in compliance with the system, not against it. This movie definitely makes you think and will not just be forgotten after the credits.

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