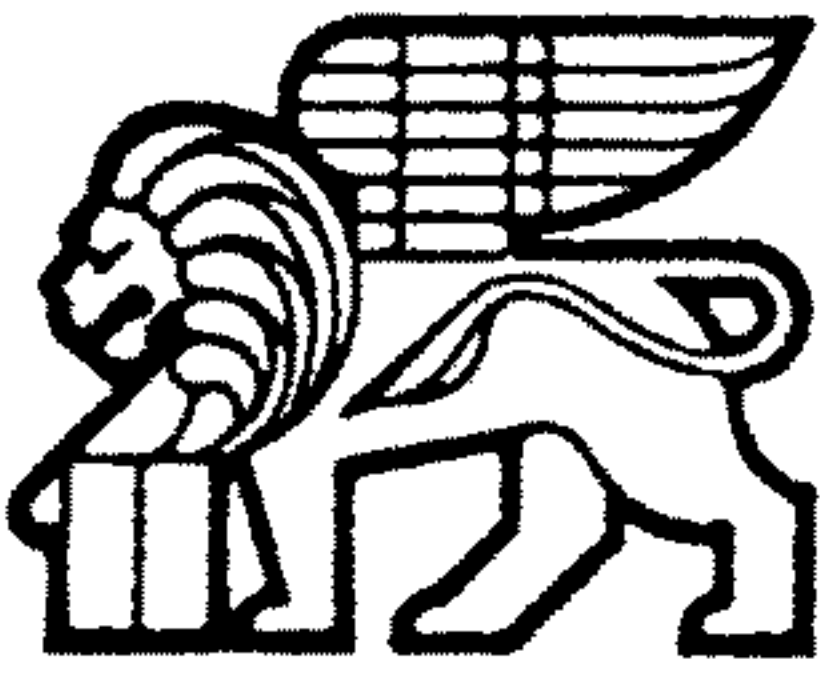


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In Competition

"The Imperative" by Krzysztof ZANUSSI

Synopsis

A gloomy winter morning. In a small, German university town Augustine, an English assistant professor of mathematics (Robert Powell), observes melting snow on a rooftop and makes a bet on when it will fall. Yvonne, his biologist girlfriend (Brigitte Fossey), is tired of Augustine's philosophical obsessions. Practical and down to earth, she finds it absurd that a promising scientist should make a show of himself by watching melting snow sitting naked on the ledge of a window. Provoked by Augustine's ironic reaction, Augustine climbs down the wall to the street, giving proof of his freedom by committing a gratuitous action.

At the university Augustine's master is an old Serbian professor of mathematics (Siegfried Steinert), to whom Augustine sends taped messages revealing his inner crises. On the way back from the university Augustine meets a madman (Eugenius Prowiezienczew) who has just escaped from an asylum and tries to commit suicide, barely missing Augustine's car.

Tired of his unsolvable problems, Yvonne decides to leave Augustine. Deeply upset by her decision, Augustine tries to find consolation by talking to a theologian (Mathias Habich), but in vain. Dry, academic theology offers no help for his existential doubts.

Following his growing fascination with mysticism, Augustine pays a visit to an Orthodox church in a nearby town which serves a tiny community of immigrants. The local priest (Jan Biczyski) explains to Augustine the difference between Eastern and Western religions, stressing that the concept of the sacred is far stronger in mystical, Eastern thought. Augustine, until

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then an agnostic, is deeply impressed by the priest's religious fervor.

In the meantime, one of Augustine's students (Christoph Eichorn) wins an impressive sum of money in the local casino by applying a system created on the bases of Augustine's lectures on the theory of probability. Augustine is puzzled deeply by the fact that such a system works and, when making a revision, he discovers a simple mistake which proves that the success was purely accidental: a mere whim of chance, or luck.

Augustine wants to share his discovery with the old professor but calls just as the old professor dies. Deeply moved, Augustine attends the mourning service at the university and then the funeral at the Orthodox church.

Later that night, at the depths of his depression, Augustine visits the professor's grave and talks to the dead man, begging him to give a sign that there is something after death. Incidentally, snow falls from the cross, but Augustine takes it for a natural, physical phenomenon.

Dramatically disturbed, Augustine secretly enters the empty Orthodox church and commits a sacrilege there. His intention is to provoke God into manifesting His existence. No such thing happens and the next morning Augustine turns himself over to the police. Suffering the first symptoms of madness, he is taken to the lunatic asylum.

There he is visited by his millionaire mother (Leslie Caron) and by the theologian, who both try to comply with the psycho-analytical treatment ordered by an agnostic psychiatrist (Zbigniew Zapasiewicz).

The treatment, both brutal and painful, remains unsuccessful. Eventually Augustine finds the solution himself and, admitting his guilt, punishes himself by amputating two fingers. Apparently cured, he leaves the asylum.

Yvonne joins him again and both make plans for the future. Augustine's ambiguous behavior leaves open the question of whether he becomes enlightened or totally insane.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

"The Imperative" was conceived as a continuation of my two favorite previous films: "Illumination" and "The Constant Factor". Commissioned by the TV station in Saarbrücken, the project was conceived as a Franco-German cinema-TV co-production.

Two days before shooting was to begin the co-production fell apart, jeopardizing the entire project. But within two days it was brought back to life by the desperate will of the crew and by an unusual sacrifice by the leading actors who, following Robert Powell's example, agreed to annul their contracts and play for a minimum TV fee.

On a reduced budget, we started shooting in mid-November in Saarbrücken, Baden Baden and Metz.

On December 13th, the Polish members of the crew survived a shock that will remain forever in our memory. Listening to the confusing radio news broadcast directly from our country, hour after hour, we managed to finish the film on schedule.

And now, at last, we are showing it for the first time to the public here in Venice.

Krzysztof ZANUSSI