

## Workshop 4: Perpetrators in Movies and the Role of Film Education

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“Shifting Perspectives on Holocaust Perpetrators in Polish Feature and Documentary Films”

A serious discussion of the cinemagraphic treatment of the Holocaust in Poland cannot start without pointing to its literary context as literature played a key role in shaping Polish cinema in 20<sup>th</sup> century. The following discussion is going to be divided along generic lines: I shall start with feature films and conclude with documentary movies.

The extensive use of two texts devoted to German perpetrators in pedagogy in Poland has fostered a twofold interpretation of the person in question. Kazimierz Moczarski's *Rozmowy z katem* (Conversations with the Executioner) constitutes an account of the conversations of a former Home Army soldier with Jürgen Stroop, responsible for the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto. The analysis employed in the book strives to present Stroop's career in the light of his traditional upbringing and deference to authority. Leon Kruczkowski's drama *Niemcy* focuses instead on painting a panorama of German society under Nazi rule highlighting moral compromises and boldfaced lies employed for personal gain. Another feature which does not escape scrutiny is the choiceless choice – a gendarme Hoppe has no other option but to kill a little Jewish boy handed over to him by a “law abiding” citizen who “supervises” the execution. Hoppe initially decided to release the boy but social pressure exerted by Schultz leaves him with no moral choice. These texts differ not only in the respective genres (biographical conversations written from memory and drama) but also in the status of protagonists: Stroop is a high ranking officer whereas Germans in Kruczkowski's play occupy lower positions on the hierarchical ladder of the Nazi society. The motivation in decision taking may be seen however as a common denominator.

Janusz Morgenstern's short feature film *The Ambulance* (1961) employs a convention of paradocumentary showing the industrialized killing in a nutshell. A group of children accompanied by a teacher or counselor (patterned on Janusz Korczak) wait on a concrete strip of an airfield to board the loading compartment of a fake Red Cross van. The van is being prepared to perform its lethal function in full view of the assembled children who seem oblivious of the impending doom. There are two German soldiers in charge of the van and a guard with an Alsatian shepherd dog. The pipe redirecting the exhaust fumes to the loading compartment is fastened after the van halted in front of the

group of children. The situation is devoid of violence – even the barking dog escapes through the camp gate chasing a gyro plane set airborne by one of the children. The soldiers in charge of the van retain professional distance presenting the operation of the machinery. In fact the technologically distanced process of killing is a factor blocking the emotional involvement of the German soldiers. On the other hand, one cannot neglect the intentions of the filmmaker who decided to represent the truth of genocide in a maximally compact form. The absence of psychological profiles of killers is also attributable to the form chosen i.e. non-dialogue film. Such a presentation of perpetrators at work may be dubbed behaviorist approach (a common device in Polish films about the Holocaust e.g. Wanda Jakubowska's films).

Nevertheless, such a remote vantage point was not the only perspective adopted. Andrzej Munk's *The Passenger* (1963) focuses on the postwar recollections of a former female SS guard in Auschwitz and her role in the camp (she supervised work of inmates in the so-called Kanada – a warehouse with goods taken away from new arrivals). The film offers two flashbacks in which Liza recounts her service and relationship with a Polish inmate Marta. What sets the film apart is the fact that Munk decided to highlight the psychology of the perpetrator and self-serving mechanisms of the recollection of the past. Furthermore, the filmmaker did not shy away from representing the process of industrialized killing rendering signs of weakness in the guard upon witnessing gassing of children. The perspective adopted in *The Passenger* differs from the one presented in *The Ambulance* in the insistence on the psychological dimension of genocide (which is partially understandable with the change of temporal perspective from contemporaneous to hindsight view).

Let me switch focus to the documentary filmmaking. Documentary films of the 1960s were bent on the accusation of war criminals or pointing to the sheer destructiveness of the Nazi rule (e.g. Jerzy Bossak's *Requiem for 500 000*). The identity of individual perpetrators was not of prime importance chiefly due to the use of Nazi archive materials which precluded such messages to be conveyed on film. Jerzy Ziarnik's 1963 *Powszedni dzien gestapowca Schmidta* (Ordinary Day of Gestapo Man Schmidt) jumped on the occasion to rectify this omission taking advantage of the discovery of a photo album of a Gestapo man Schmidt documenting his service in Poland. In the absence of verifiable identification the film relies on voice over commentary to fill in the void in factual knowledge. Thus, perpetrator's self-representation is utilized in order to ask broader questions concerning his motivation and postwar fate (and evasion of justice). Such a presentation of perpetrators was in line with official party propaganda which saw West Germany as a safe haven for former henchmen who managed to avoid being punished.

Furthermore, in his anonymity he stood for a prototypical perpetrator and the film tried to bridge the cognitive gap by raising big questions about responsibility and the lack of justice.

A markedly different strategy was employed by Dariusz Jabłoński in *The Photographer* (1998) devoted to colour slides made in the Lodz ghetto by its chief accountant Walter Genewein. In this case the photographic evidence was a tool in promoting the image of the ghetto as a Jewish city turned into a gigantic production site. The slides are not the sole source of our knowledge about Genewein. We are given the opportunity to get acquainted with his passion for photography paired with blindness as to his role in the factory of death. Jabłoński offers a perspective on the ordinary man involved in the apparatus of exploitation out of concern for personal advancement. Thus, the filmmaker addresses a wider question of the motives driving perpetrators and the proximity of our professional motivations and theirs.

The issue of the Polish participation in Holocaust perpetration found its expression in two documentary films: Paweł Łoziński's *Place of Birth* (1992) – a return movie portraying Henryk Grynberg's search for his father's grave killed by the Polish peasant at the eve of liberation and Agnieszka Arnold's *Neighbours* devoted to the outburst of anti-Jewish violence in Jedwabne in the summer of 1941. These two images pointed to the truth which as late as 1980s was denied in Polish self-image as a victim of war – active participation of Poles in violence directed at the Jews.

Even though the topic of perpetration can hardly be called of prime importance in the Polish cinemagraphic representations of the war and the Holocaust, filmmakers adopted a number of attitudes towards the topic. Approaches varied from behaviorist observation to psychological insight (when the emphasis is put on the possibility of insight into perpetrator's mind) or from speculations based on the archive footage through quoting personal letters of Nazi bureaucrats (Genewein) ending with interviews performed with the perpetrators (for obvious reasons filmmakers targeted Polish participants in anti-Jewish violence). Undeniably, the traditional topics of the Polish stance in the face of Nazi aggression and the sheer dimensions of the losses were at times supplanted with the interest in the sources of genocidal evil embodied in the perpetrators.