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Film Review: *Ida*

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Ida - Film Review

Director: Pawel Pawlikowski
Poland/Denmark/France/UK, 2013

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Evil is a challenging subject for the social sciences. It has traditionally been associated with moral philosophy and theology, specifically with theodicy, which deals with the challenge of reconciling God's existence with the existence of evil. The social sciences emerged in the wake of the Enlightenment as the self-reflexive study of modernity, and came to oppose recourse to the explanation of events in terms of faith and belief. In large part, they were established in the service of human progress and rationality, notions which were dealt a severe blow by the violence of the 20th century, a 'century of genocide'¹. The challenge that is posed by its legacy, and that much of it was committed in the name of progress and rationality, has been reflected upon by numerous social and political thinkers, including in some of genocide studies' most influential works². A forerunner in this debate was Kurt Wolff, a major twentieth century contributor to the sociology of knowledge. In his 1969 essay *For a Sociology of Evil*, Wolff stated that when considering the various catastrophes of modernity—Auschwitz, the Gulags, Hiroshima, Vietnam—we find ourselves caught in a 'paralysing suspension between two impossible worlds: one in which we can no longer believe, a world ordered by religious directives and moderations; and one which we cannot bear, a world without these directives and moderations'³.

This 'paralysing suspension' characterises the tense relationship between the two characters at the heart of Pawel Pawlikowski's *Ida*, the title character Ida Lebenstein and her aunt, Wanda Gruz. The former is an orphaned novitiate nun, on the verge of vowing a life of devotion to the Catholic Church. The latter is a world-weary and disillusioned judge for the communist PZPR (Polish United Worker's Party), nicknamed 'Red Wanda' and responsible for dealing with "enemies of the state". Set against the austere background of the Polish People's Republic in the 1960s, the film follows their short interaction. At the beginning, Ida (known as Anna at this point) is told that she ought to visit Wanda, her only remaining relative, before she makes her vows. Wanda informs "Anna" that she is not who she thinks she is; her name is Ida Lebenstein and she is a Jew, whose parents and brother were killed during World War II. Ida resolves to find her parents' graves, only to be told that they have no graves—"neither they nor any other Jews"—and that their bodies might be "in the woods or in the lake". Wanda warns Ida of the stakes of this venture into a dark past—"what if you go there and discover there is no God?"—but decides to accompany her. The two women set off to find out how their relatives died and where their bodies might be located.

As the pair travel deeper into the countryside, towards Piaski, the tone of the film becomes increasingly disquieting. The area that they visit is less a *gemeinschaft* based on unity and mutual understanding⁴ than one characterised by suspicion and secrecy. Questions about Jews are sidestepped by the villagers. At the old family home of Ida's mother and Wanda, a young family insist that there is no record of a Jewish family ever living there. As the film progresses, however, it is revealed that the bodies are located in the woods. The woods—dark and ghostly, tangled yet desolate—constitute an apt metaphor for the film's memorialisation (or lack thereof) of the Holocaust. On their journey, the two characters do not confront any tombs or plaques commemorating the dead of the kind director Pawlikowski remembers from his childhood in

Warsaw, which he describes as a “city littered with ghosts.”⁵ Poland in the 1960s, as represented here, was far removed from contemporary memorial culture. One is reminded of Primo Levi’s thoughts on how his memoir, *If This is a Man*,⁶ “fell into oblivion for many years ... because in all of Europe those were difficult times of mourning and reconstruction and the public did not want to return in memory to the painful years of the war that had just ended.”⁷

The Holocaust does more than haunt the film’s characters and setting; it haunts the film itself. It is never confronted directly, remaining (alongside Stalinism) a menacing background presence. There are no visual representations of death camps and Nazism, or reconstructions of overt violence and suffering. It is sharply distinct, therefore, from Hollywood Holocaust films like *Schindler’s List* and *Life is Beautiful*, and more broadly from other films about genocide such as *Hotel Rwanda*, films that have attracted criticism for the trivialisation or aestheticisation of genocide⁸. It thus occupies an interesting space in the debate about the visual representation and memorialisation of atrocity and genocide, in which films about the Holocaust occupy a central place. *Ida* is not marked by a voyeuristic, spectatorial gaze, or a desire to find something ‘life-affirming’ in the aftermath of one of the most violent episodes of human history⁹. Nor does it self-consciously attempt to act as what Jeffrey Alexander calls a “bridge metaphor” that provides “the symbolic extension so necessary if the trauma of the Jewish people were to become a trauma for all humankind.”¹⁰ Insofar as *Ida* tackles the subject of the Holocaust (and Pawlikowski has tried to downplay its centrality)¹¹, it does so in a complex and ambiguous way.

Ambiguous too is the presentation of Polish-Jewish relations. Though Pawlikowski states that *Ida* is principally about what it is to be Polish,¹² the film cannot escape this thorny issue. This was made clear in protests against the film by the Polish Anti-Defamation League, who argued that the *Ida* unduly ignores the German occupation during World War II and suggests that Poles (particularly peasants in rural communities) were responsible for the Holocaust.¹³ For Pawlikowski, “when people say that Poles connived with the Nazis – well, some did, some didn’t. Some people, quite a few, behaved atrociously. Others, quite a few, behaved with incredible courage. Most just tried to survive, the whole country was a victim.”¹⁴ For some on the Polish left, however, *Ida* has been attacked for its purported insinuation of the links between Judaism and Stalinism,¹⁵ particularly in the character of Wanda Gruz. As Pawlikowski would have it, *Ida* is an existential film, not one that attempts to “tackle history.”¹⁶ That its success has resulted precisely in a tackling of history in Poland is perhaps a testament to the film’s complexity and nuance.

Both *Ida* and Wanda find themselves in Kurt Wolff’s paralysing suspension, caught between a world in which they cannot believe and a world which they cannot bear. For Wanda, the trip hardens her disillusion with devotion to any form of transcendental principle, be it communism or Catholicism. Attempting to find solace in alcohol, cigarettes and casual sex, Wanda struggles to believe in anything at all and harangues *Ida* about her naïve religious devotion. For *Ida*, discovering her identity and learning of her parents’ fate understandably leads to a questioning of faith. This questioning is emphasised by the pair’s encounter with a jazz musician, a saxophonist with a penchant for John Coltrane who symbolises for both *Ida* and Wanda, perhaps even for Poland, the possibility of an alternative future marked by a gradual Westernization. Whether this is a desirable future, however, is a moot question. This is a film about many things: identity, memory, religion, jazz music, and more. It is, for our purposes, also a powerful treatise on living in the aftermath of genocide and confronting evil.

Title of the Film: *Ida*; Director: Pawel Pawlikowski; Producers: Eric Abraham, Piotr Dzieciol, Ewa Puszczyńska; Screenplay: Pawel Pawlikowski, Rebecca Lenkiewicz; Stars: Agata Kulesza, Agata Trzebuchowska, Dawid Ogrodnik; Cinematography: Ryszard Lenczewski, Lukasz Zal; Film Editor: Jaroslaw Kaminski; Countries: Poland/Denmark/France/UK; Year of Release: 2014; Production Company: Opus Film, Pheonix Film, Portobello Pictures. Duration: 82 minutes.

Endnotes

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- 2 See Hannah Arendt, "Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps" *Jewish Social Studies*, 12, 1 (1950); Zygmunt Bauman. *Modernity and the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Michel Wieviorka, *Evil* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Jeffrey Alexander, *The Dark Side of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 99-122.
- 3 Kurt Wolff, "For a Sociology of Evil", *Journal of Social Issues*, 25, 1 (1969), 115.
- 4 Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, trans. Harris & Hollis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 [1887]).
- 5 Tom Seymour and Pawel Pawlikowski, "Pawel Pawlikowski: I Was a Lost Guy in a Weird City." *The Guardian*. September 18, 2014. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/sep/18/pawel-pawlikowski-ida-warsaw-lost-guy-weird-city>.
- 6 Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, trans. Woolf (London: Penguin, 1993).
- 7 Primo Levi, *The Reawakening: The Companion Volume to Survival in Auschwitz* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1995), 209.
- 8 Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (3rd ed) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-26.
- 9 Sophia Wood, "Film and Atrocity: The Holocaust as Spectacle", in *Film and Genocide* ed. Christi Wilson and Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 21-44.
- 10 Jeffrey Alexander, "The Social Construction of Moral Universals", in *Remembering the Holocaust: a Debate* ed. Jeffrey Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 3-104, 31.
- 11 David Sims and Pawel Pawlikowski, "Ida's Bittersweet Success: An Interview with Pawel Pawlikowski", *The Atlantic*, February 18, 2015. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/02/pawel-pawlikowski-on-the-personal-and-the-historical-in-ida/385568/>.
- 12 Tom Seymour and Pawel Pawlikowski, "Pawel Pawlikowski: I Was a Lost Guy in a Weird City."
- 13 Andrew Pulver, "Polish Nationalists Launch Petition Against Oscar-nominated Film *Ida*", *The Guardian*, January 22, 2015. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/22/ida-oscars-2015-film-polish-nationalists-petition>.
- 14 Tom Seymour and Pawel Pawlikowski, "Pawel Pawlikowski: I Was a Lost Guy in a Weird City."
- 15 For a useful overview of the debate that *Ida* has inspired in Poland see: "Review of 'Ida': Identity and Freedom." *Notes From Poland*, January 9, 2015. Accessed February 23, 2015. <https://notesfrompoland.wordpress.com/2015/01/09/review-of-ida-identity-and-freedom/>.
- 16 David Sims and Pawel Pawlikowski, "Ida's Bittersweet Success: An Interview With Pawel Pawlikowski".