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[FILM REVIEW]

Art After Auschwitz?

Karin Badt

The Pianist. **Roman Polanski, dir.. Focus Films, 2002.**

Roman Polanski's forte is evil; he has treated this theme for the last fifty years. His latest film, *The Pianist* (winner of the Palme D'Or and three Academy Awards) gives the context to his vision: the Holocaust. Using the memoir of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Jewish pianist who survived the Warsaw ghetto, Polanski tells his own story. His parents deported, his mother murdered, Polanski emerged from the war a twelve-year-old boy on his own, determined to make it in cinema. Like Szpilman, he became a world-renowned artist.

Szpilman's and Polanski's stories coincide, it seems, to give the same message of the triumph of art. The film begins with Szpilman playing Chopin in 1939 and ends in 1945 with him finishing his piece—a victory of survival. We are elevated by the chords of Chopin, the celebration of the human spirit, the power of Polanski's film. And yet Polanski's own art, this film, does not really offer this redemption. Instead, it offers us a cruel mirror to ourselves, our own curious relationship to art, our own complicity in evil.

Polanski forces us to watch, just as he did, the painful, progressive, build-up of evil. We are slotted into the same position of passivity and impotence. He tells his story in a cold way, choosing as his lead Adrien Brody, a none-too charismatic non-hero. With the pianist, we watch the walls of the ghetto go up, in five close-up shots of bricks. Images of massacre are cropped so that the victims' heads are close to ours. Off-camera sounds of trams, coughs, and dogs barking put us in the action, now.

Polanski's film gives witness, yet it also calls into question the witness. To scenes that in Szpilman's autobiography took place with two characters, Polanski adds an onlooking crowd. When a man licks up soup from the street, a darkened face in a window watches—and we too are forced to watch. In the second half of the movie, even our stand-in—the pianist—is reduced to watching the Holocaust happen through the window of his hiding place, as if evil itself were a movie.

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Szpilman empties into a shell, disconnected from the events he watches. Once a man who carried ammunition for the uprising, he ends a pessimist, saying "What difference did it make?" As in most of Polanski's films, the world is so dauntingly evil the protagonist grows incapable of imagining an alternative future. Rosemary cannot escape the witches, so she accepts the devil's son. *Death and the Maiden* concludes with torturer and victim in a concert hall, listening together to the very music that accompanied the torture. It's a gesture of resignation. "Forget it Jack. It's Chinatown."

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Polanski wants us to feel the reality of "Chinatown." He does not want to lure us into the complacency of believing in heroes—or the redemption of art. A conspicuous change from Szpilman's autobiography shows this decision. In the autobiography, we learn that the Nazi who saved Szpilman was a schoolteacher motivated by religious and humanitarian beliefs. He saved six Jews. As Szpilman describes him, Holzerlein asks the pianist to play for him not as a test of musical prowess, but, to give the pianist a chance to express his humanity. The pianist plays so badly—his hands ruined—that the men bond in shame for what the war has done.

Polanski's Hosenfeld is a German who appreciates art, period. As Szpilman plays in the bombed-out basement, a blue halo glows. The two men nod in a stoic appreciation of the finer arts. This is hardly the moving moment of Szilpman's testimony. Rather, Polanski draws attention to the ethical limitations of bourgeois art appreciation, its hypocrisy. The piano playing maintains the hierarchy of the German voyeur over his pianist. His chest predominates. His Nazi badge, cap and ring shine in the blue light. He calls his pianist, "Jew."

The film ends with clapping. The hands of the pianist fly over the keyboard in mastery; the audience in the concert hall applauds.

Again the victory of art.

Or so we may think at first. As in at least six of Polanski's other films, including *Macbeth* and *The Tenant*, we cannot shake the notion that the spectators here are also applauding the violence they have just enjoyed. As the credits roll, the backs of the audience rise—and become our own. That audience facing the pianist is us, watching, applauding this film of horrors. We are the crowd who watches an alienated figure return to an alienating world, nothing changed. For Polanski, the audience is always suspect: ready to accept totalitarian regimes, ready to accept that Chopin and a good film are enough. How different are we from the Japanese tourist who reaches out to shoot a picture of Rosemary with her devil? When the movie began, a watch was prominent on the pianist's wrist. The last shot reverses this image. Now the pianist faces right, with no watch, no history. The movie has circled back, creating a cul-de-sac of dead time. The pianist is now a set of disembodied hands, all his connections to emotions and humanity lie in his art. Is this an unmitigated triumph? Is the only hope to be alone with one's craft and earn the awe of others? The alienating universe continues.

Or, is there one final twist? As we rise from our seats, are we not provoked to resist identification with the alienating gaze? Challenged by our complicity in passive spectatorship, we may end by refuting the film's claims, by insisting on our necessary interactions with this world. If so, the film has succeeded and shows the real power of art.

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