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Screening Auschwitz

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The Legacy of Wanda Jakubowska

After years of critical neglect in her native country, Wanda Jakubowska's films and her role in Polish postwar cinema have been recently reevaluated from a feminist perspective by Monika Talarczyk-Gubała.¹ In books on Polish cinema, Jakubowska's name is almost exclusively associated with *The Last Stage*. The silence over her later films has to do largely with her staunch involvement with communist ideology (she was a dedicated communist throughout her entire life, even after the collapse of communism), which resulted in some painfully didactic and propagandistic films promoting the communist cause.

Some of Jakubowska's films are classic examples of blatant communist propaganda, and as such were praised and awarded prizes immediately after their release, while becoming objects of ridicule for some contemporary viewers. One example, *The Soldier of Victory* (*Żołnierz zwycięstwa*, 1953), the two-part epic film about Soviet-Polish general Karol Świerczewski, covers a span of forty years, beginning with the revolution of 1905; introduces historical figures, including Stalin and the Cheka (Soviet secret police) founder Dzerzhinsky; and portrays a multitude of then current political topics that are unapologetically presented from the Stalinist perspective.

Jakubowska's Later Returns to Auschwitz

It has to be noted that later in her career Jakubowska returned to her camp experiences in three films: *Meetings in the Twilight* (*Spotkania*

w mroku, 1960), *The End of Our World*, and *Invitation* (*Zaproszenie*, 1985).² These films, rarely seen and often neglected in discussions of the filmic representation of the Holocaust, are set in the present and rely on the flashback structure to tell the story of Auschwitz. All three films were scripted by Jakubowska, and they feature familiar characters and situations: concentration camp survivors, mostly communists, strong-willed professionals who are unable to free themselves from the shadow of their wartime experiences. Jakubowska's films also contain explicit denunciation of fascism, praise of human solidarity, as well as criticism of Western-style consumerism and the "tourist" approach to life.

In the Polish–East German production *Meetings in the Twilight*, made at the peak of the Polish School phenomenon and filmed by Kurt Weber, Jakubowska developed a contemporary story with wartime references. Based on *Let Us Shout* (*Pozwólcie nam krzyczeć*), a novel by Stanisława Fleszarowa-Muskat (who also served as coscriptwriter), the film introduces a Polish pianist, Magdalena (Zofia Słaboszowska), who, while performing in West Germany, remembers her imprisonment in a labor camp.

The main character in *Invitation*, Anna Górka, is a successful, self-sacrificing pediatrician. After she meets her first love, Piotr (Kazimierz Witkiewicz), they travel together to places she cannot erase from her memory: Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbrück. It is not a coincidence that Anna is played by Antonina Gordon-Górecka, who earlier appeared as the German nurse Anna in *The Last Stage*.

The End of Our World is arguably the most accomplished of all Jakubowska's later camp films. She made this film in the mid-1960s, when Auschwitz became widely known in the West as the site of Jewish extermination. The film was made after the capture of Adolf Eichmann by Israeli Mossad agents in Argentina, his historic trial in 1961, and his conviction and execution in Jerusalem. The film also coincided with the much publicized Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial of twenty-two SS guards from Auschwitz (1963–65). Notwithstanding the lack of official diplomatic relations between West Germany and Poland, the Polish authorities assisted the Frankfurt investigation; for example, they allowed the German judge and other officials to inspect the site of the concentration camp at Auschwitz.

For the world, the meaning of Auschwitz had broadened in the 1960s

from that of an Eastern and Central European emblem of German atrocities and a place hidden behind the Iron Curtain and used for propaganda purposes to a site of international significance and the symbol of the Holocaust. Despite the Polish state award for Jakubowska, her film was barely noticed by critics and (particularly) audiences in Poland; it also remained virtually unknown in the West.

The End of Our World is based on the 1958 novel of the same title by writer and communist political activist Tadeusz Hołuj (1916–1985), who is also cast in the film. This was one of Hołuj's several returns to his own experiences in Auschwitz, where he was imprisoned in 1942 (camp number 62937). Jakubowska and Hołuj, however, were not the only Auschwitz survivors who worked on this film. Assistant to the camera operator Wiesław Kielar and costume designer Marian Kołodziej (camp numbers 290 and 432 respectively) were sent to Auschwitz in May 1940 with the first transport of 728 Polish men, mostly political prisoners, from the Tarnów prison.³

The End of Our World focuses on a former (communist) political prisoner at Auschwitz, Henryk (Lech Skolimowski). Several years after the war, he becomes a reluctant guide at the camp for two American tourists—a young woman named Julia, whose father perished there, and her male companion, who is reduced in the film to an almost cartoonish “Western character” familiar from communist propaganda, thanks to his ignorance and his lack of compassion.

Henryk's presence at the State Museum in Auschwitz brings back his own camp memories. The film depicts Henryk being captured on the streets of Warsaw for helping a Polish mother and her child who were being mistreated by a German policeman. For this deed, he is sent to Auschwitz.

Unusual for Jakubowska, the initial scenes at Auschwitz resemble the representation of the camp by Borowski.⁴ The stress is on the monstrous aspect of camp life, which would later be more fully developed in Leszek Wosiewicz's *Kornblumenblau* (1989). *The End of Our World* depicts Henryk's miraculous survival as a *Muselman*, his brush with death, the help he receives from other inmates (mostly political prisoners), and the change of his camp identity.

The second part of the film is more conventional and utilizes elements of melodrama coupled with the ideology present in *The Last Stage*. Hen-

ryk learns that his wife Maria (Teresa Wicińska), who was convinced of his death, has married his friend Jan Smolik. Later Smolik is imprisoned at Auschwitz, where he quickly perishes. Maria also finds herself in Auschwitz. Despite Henryk's connections and help, Maria dies with a group of children she is taking care of in the Gypsy Family Camp.

Once again, the most important aspect of Jakubowska's film is the protagonist's gradual involvement with the camp's resistance. Henryk becomes a reluctant *Kapo* at the request of other political prisoners. With a hidden camera, he captures images of extermination inside the camp. He even helps the Jewish *Sonderkommando* to destroy the crematoria, and later participates in the *Sonderkommando*'s uprising on October 7, 1944.

Writing about Henryk's heroic exploits, Hanno Loewy rightly states that "Jakubowska is turning the history of the camp's resistance upside down."⁵ The heroic version of the Auschwitz resistance was, however, strongly advocated not only by Jakubowska, but also by scriptwriter Hołuj, for whom "the camp had fought and won the battle. Auschwitz was not only martyrology, but struggle as well."⁶ Hołuj defended this way of representing the camp by saying that "the issue of the camp resistance was shown in the film well, faithfully, and truthfully, albeit sometimes not in line with the fixed ideas [about the camp]." He admitted that the history of the *Sonderkommando* uprising proved to be the most difficult to represent: "We don't have a single witness of the very uprising itself. However, recently uncovered documents from the rubble of the crematoria confirm the whole process of preparations [for the uprising]."⁷ Hołuj emphasized that a framework was needed to link the first scene—Henryk defending a Polish mother—with the scene when the protagonist helps those who "fight alone."⁸ The symbolic image of a communist Pole helping Jewish insurgents in their suicidal fight, although distorting the historical reality, was one the communist state as well as the makers of the film wanted to preserve and to elevate.

Stylistically, Jakubowska utilizes a similar set of images to that which she developed in *The Last Stage*. She cuts from the shot of a Jewish transport to a long shot of smoke over the crematoria. She also portrays the women's orchestra playing classical music near the gate leading to the camp. Furthermore, she stresses the multinational aspect of the camp (several languages are spoken, including Polish, German, Russian, Yid-

dish, Slovak, Roma, and Italian), and portrays the political (mostly communist) prisoners at Auschwitz as heroic members of the resistance.

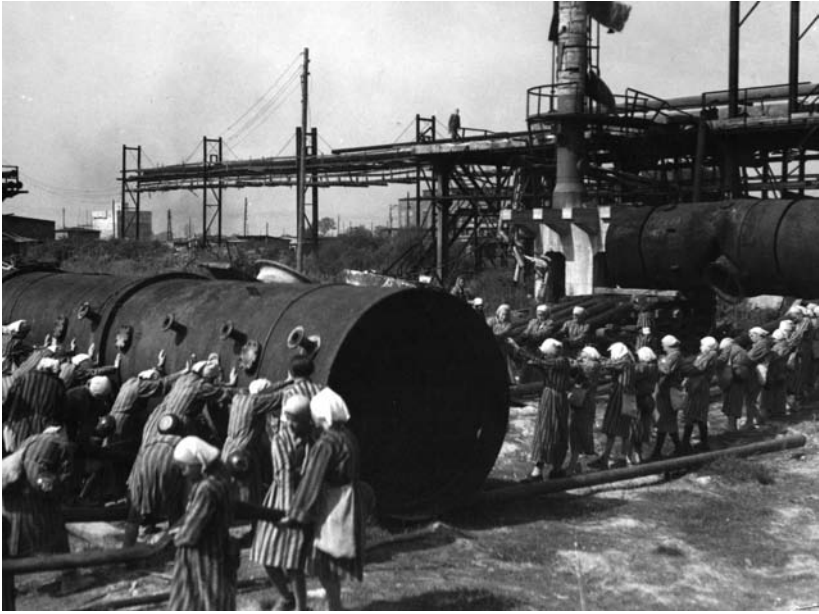
Since the main protagonist is a well-connected *Kapo*, he moves relatively freely within the camp, enabling the viewer to witness the different subcamps of Auschwitz. Jakubowska uses archival footage as well, such as photographs of Jewish transports taken inside the camp. In addition, she models some scenes on remaining documentary photographs.

The Eyewitness Testimony?

Discussing the reception of Jakubowska's film in America, Steven Alan Carr aptly points out that the emphasis on production details, an important part of the publicity machine, added an element that is now a staple in Holocaust cinema. He argues that "such production history lore became part of the discursive practice for Holocaust films such as *Schindler's List* (1993) and *The Pianist* (2002), where the 'making-of' history for these films became history in its own right. Even if the historical factors concerning the making of these films remained subordinate to actual Holocaust history, in its relation to the Holocaust, such details and use of location bestowed added credibility to what might otherwise serve as an ordinary fictional account of the Holocaust."⁹

Jakubowska was aware of the impact of her film on future filmmakers: "Before shooting their films they probably had to watch *The Last Stage* and treat this film as documentation."¹⁰ Without a doubt, Jakubowska's imprisonment at Auschwitz and her postwar on-location shooting with the participation of other Auschwitz survivors granted extra trustworthiness to her portrayal of the camp. Soon after its premiere, *The Last Stage* started to function not only as a para-documentary film, as Jakubowska intended, but as a genuine testimonial document. Increasingly, images from *The Last Stage* became incorporated as quasi-documents into several films to follow. In *Night and Fog*, directed by Alain Resnais, there are two scenes taken without proper acknowledgment from Jakubowska's film: the scene of a train with Jewish prisoners arriving at night to awaiting SS men with their dogs, and the image of a truck transporting victims to the gas chamber.

Another film, George Stevens's classic *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), incorporates a scene from Jakubowska's film: images of the *Appel*-



The Last Stage: representation of slave work at Auschwitz. Author's collection.

platz showing closeups of women prisoners “waving” during the roll call. This nightmarish dream scene depicting the concentration camp, the only one in the entire film, is uncredited in Stevens’s film. The fragment taken from *The Last Stage* functions in *The Diary of Anne Frank* as documentary footage. According to Steven Alan Carr, this is one of the first scenes in Hollywood cinema with explicit references to a concentration camp. Interestingly, as Carr explains, even in the 2003 DVD edition of the film, which features commentaries by George Stevens, Jr. (the film’s associate producer), and Millie Perkins (who stars as Anne Frank), the origins of the camp scene are never revealed.¹¹

Several scenes and images from Jakubowska’s film influenced numerous Hollywood films, including *The Pawnbroker* (1964, Sydney Lumet), *Sophie’s Choice*, and *Schindler’s List*. Stuart Liebman also points out that “in 1995 Steven Spielberg incorporated shots of the selection and the work brigades in his hour-long promotional television program for his ‘Survivors of the Holocaust’ project without any acknowledgment that these were Jakubowska’s fictional reconstructions and not documentary images.”¹² Jakubowska’s film also had an impact on Zica Mitrovic’s West

German–Yugoslav coproduction *Witness from Hell* (*Die Zeugin aus der Hölle*, 1967), a story about Leah Weiss (played by Irene Papas), a former Auschwitz inmate forced into prostitution and later a victim of medical experiments. Here, once again, images from *The Last Stage* serve as Leah's repressed memories—she, however, refuses to testify in a trial (the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, 1963–65) and commits suicide.

The Passenger

The impact of Jakubowska's film has also been discernible in Polish films, chiefly in a classic film by Andrzej Munk, *The Passenger* (*Pasażerka*, 1961–63).¹³ The film is based on the story by Zofia Posmysz-Piasecka, who was incarcerated in Auschwitz from 1942 to 1945. Her radio broadcast, *The Passenger from Cabin Number 45* (*Pasażerka z kabiny 45*), aired on Polish radio on August 28, 1959. Munk, who listened to the broadcast, asked Posmysz-Piasecka to write a television play, which he later directed.

At the center of *The Passenger* is the relationship between the German SS woman at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Liza (Aleksandra Śląska), and the Polish inmate, Marta (Anna Ciepiewska). Years after the war, a chance meeting between the two on a luxury liner heading from South America to Europe brings back memories of the suppressed past. Munk decided to abandon the contemporary dimensions of the literary source and to focus on the past, which is revealed in his film in three powerful retrospectives.

The first flashback from Auschwitz, the uncontrolled flow of Liza's repressed memories, includes both moving images and archival stills, among them images of naked female prisoners tormented by SS guards and *Kapos*, Alsatian shepherds sitting as if ready to attack, SS dog handlers walking along an electrified barbed-wire fence, a group of prisoners pulling a road roller, and a female prisoner being tattooed. Liza explains her strange behavior to her new husband Walter by admitting that she was an overseer in Auschwitz, not an inmate. Liza's attempt at explaining the past to her husband, but also to herself, introduces another flashback, this time much longer and stressing her sense of duty: quasi-documentary images of the camp after the gassing of one of the transports (the main gate leading to the camp, the railway, the barbed-wire fence, belongings left by the victims). The panning camera stops in front of the crema-

torium and tilts to reveal heavy black smoke from its chimneys. Liza's commentary describes her duties in the camp, her professionalism and devotion to the cause, and her version of the relationship with Marta, whom she chose to be her clerical help. Liza tries to distance herself from crimes committed in Auschwitz, although she admits being a witness of mass killings. She comments that she only supervised a gigantic storage space, *Effektenkammer*, where goods seized from killed victims were collected and catalogued. The third flashback reveals Liza's true role in the camp. From behind a fence separating the *Effektenkammer* from the crematorium, she watches the newly arrived Jewish transport walking toward the gas chamber, which is covered in black smoke. She observes two SS men on the roof of the gas chamber. One of them, wearing a gas mask, opens a canister with Zyklon B and methodically dumps it into the killing zone through ventilation openings.

Bolesław W. Lewicki—who shared the sentiments of a large group of local critics and scholars—persuasively argued in a 1968 essay that *The Passenger* functions as a polemic with Jakubowska's *The Last Stage*.¹⁴ Undeniably, there are several elements that justify such a comparison. In both films, the perpetrator is played by Aleksandra Ślaska; but unlike her *Oberaufseherin* in Jakubowska's film, in *The Passenger* she no longer plays a pathological sadist but a psychologically complex individual, a part of the killing industry. Like Marta Weiss in Jakubowska's film, Munk's Marta is a privileged prisoner who performs a similar function in the camp's structure. Both Martas are also part of the resistance (left-wing in Jakubowska's work, unspecified in Munk's film), and they smuggle information about Auschwitz to the outside world. Both have lovers in the camp named Tadeusz (Tadek). Unlike Marta Weiss, Marta in *The Passenger* is Polish, and there is no indication that it was planned otherwise at an earlier stage despite Munk's Jewish background and story of survival. (Munk survived the occupation in Warsaw where he did not reveal his Jewish ancestry and worked on the "Aryan side.")

Similar to Jakubowska, Munk (in his own words) had to "solve a difficult problem—how to show Auschwitz without depicting its realistic dimension. . . . A realistic portrayal would be unbearable."¹⁵ Like Jakubowska, he does not show the process of killing graphically. Instead, he relies on images that he singled out for emphasis in his last interview, conducted on 18 September 1961, and published after his tragic death:

“masses of female prisoners, groups of naked people, small baby carriages, barbed wires, and posts.”¹⁶ Like Jakubowska, in *The Passenger* Munk deemphasizes the issue of nationality. His film features images of the Jewish transport walking toward gas chambers and the search for a hidden Jewish newborn in Liza’s *kommando*, but its focus is on political prisoners, mostly Poles. Jews are relegated to the role of passive victims.

Unlike Jakubowska, Munk relies on diegetic sounds of the camp and on the almost surreal, yet historically accurate, diegetic music—for example, the march from *Carmen* by Bizet, which is played by the Auschwitz orchestra near the gate leading to the camp. The exception is the framework with still photographs, which is illustrated by Tadeusz Baird’s musical score.

Similar to Jakubowska, Munk decided to shoot his film on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau to enhance verisimilitude (he stayed in the commandant’s office), a decision that had an enormous impact on the film’s crew. Like Jakubowska, he was surrounded by people who had experienced Auschwitz firsthand, for example, coscriptwriter Posmysz-Piasecka and production manager Wilhelm Hollender, who had also worked on *The Last Stage* (credited as executive producer).¹⁷ In Andrzej Brzozowski’s documentary tribute to Munk, *The Last Pictures* (*Ostatnie zdjęcia*, Polish Television 2000), actress Ciepielewska commented on the “unbearable noise of the barbed wire” on the set of the film. “I’m listening to Bach to calm down,” wrote Munk in a letter to his wife. He was also reading Rudolf Höss’s memoirs, which were published for the first time in Polish in 1956, and this certainly contributed to his portrayal of Liza.¹⁸ The horrors of the not-so-distant past were also emphasized in press reports from the film’s set. One of them (published after Munk’s death) had the following fragment: “On the ground, near the crematorium, there was a small metal object. My guide [Wilhelm Hollender] picked it up carefully. This was an authentic key that was used to open tin canisters with Zyklon B.”¹⁹

In addition to the earlier mentioned *Night and Fog* by Alan Resnais, images from Jakubowska’s film are also recycled in other documentary films, such as Leo Hurwitz’s *The Museum and the Fury* (U.S.–Poland, 1956), another essay on memory and the representation of memory that was produced for Film Polski but never distributed in Poland; and Al-

lan Holzman's *Survivors of the Holocaust* (1996), which blends survivor testimonies with archival footage.

Images from Jakubowska's narrative film, such as the arrival of a train, roll calls, the muddy terrain of the camp, the smoke over the crematoria, and barbed wire, have been appropriated as authentic, documentary images. Sometimes, as Hanno Loewy rightly observes, "in many of these films the arrival of the train (and its white steam) is immediately connected with the dark smoke, coming from the crematoria."²⁰ Images from *The Last Stage*, writes Loewy, are used by other directors "to authenticate their own visions, as others did with newsreel material or photographs."²¹

Writing about the adoption of images from Jakubowska's film, Steven Alan Carr points out eloquently:

The subsequent appropriation of the film's iconography, together with the mystification of its provenance, ultimately work to enhance the film's authenticity as a mystical black and white document that somehow managed to emerge from the ashes of Auschwitz so that other films could show us how terrible life was in a concentration camp. Like a dream sequence itself, iconography from *The Last Stage* slips in and out of other Holocaust films, leaving the audience to imagine its footage as actuality, and to wake up to subsequently less authentic and more comfortably fictionalized representations of the Holocaust.²²

The arrival of a train under the cover of night, the roll call in front of the barracks, the smoke above the crematoria chimneys, a prisoner approaching the electrified barbed wire, and several other shots from Jakubowska's film function today as quasi-archival images. Scholars often pose the question of whether these images from *The Last Stage* were employed by Alain Resnais and other filmmakers due to the absence of the original footage or, given Jakubowska's own Auschwitz experience, as actual "testimonial material."²³

Indeed, *The Last Stage* can be taken as Jakubowska's eyewitness account, but also as a testimony to postwar politics and the pressure of communist ideology. Despite Jakubowska's often voiced desire for authenticity and the semi-autobiographical (and quasi-documentary) nature of her film, her fervent embrace of the communist ideology resulted in a

politicized image of Auschwitz—more a testament to postwar politics and Stalinist principles in the arts than to the harsh reality of the camp.

Despite this criticism, I must ultimately agree with Jan Alfred Szczepański, who in 1964 reviewed *The End of Our World* and stated that regardless of their filmic value, the Auschwitz films by Jakubowska would always serve as a point of reference for other camp films.²⁴ Often overlooked but invaluable, *The Last Stage* may, in this sense, be the most important Polish film.

