

## VIEWING HISTORY THROUGH THE FILMMAKER'S LENS

Agnieszka Holland, lecture delivered Sunday, December 1, 2013

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When I was thirteen years old, I became fascinated with ancient Rome. The impulse for that was a highly suggestive Polish TV adaptation of Billy Wilder's *The Ides of March*. I desperately wanted to enter this intense world, and so I decided that I must have reincarnated many times and that in ancient Rome I had been Brutus, with all his complexity and remorse, only to return in the Renaissance, but not as Michelangelo or Leonardo, but as an unknown friend of the latter (who, by the way, had a mysterious, dangerous relationship with Buonarrotti). I even kept diaries as these pretended incarnations of mine. I was also convinced that one of my incarnations lived in occupied Poland during the Second World War, but this seemed to painful to write about. It wasn't until years later that this subject came back to me.

I don't really believe in films describing historical events that happened ages ago. The stronger the remoteness, the more arbitrarily a filmmaker has to present it. This engenders a certain risk of falling into the most commonly encountered kind of kitsch: simplification, anachronisms, and overt aestheticization. The easiest step is to imitate the external time indicators (though even this requires intuition, knowledge, and diligence), such as costumes, props, and architectural details. The most difficult task is to discover the sense of inner truth, which makes the story deeply rooted in the historical context but at the same time doesn't make it look like some history manual article. The recipe for success is to present the historical events in their original complexity, but in a way that would make the modern audience relate to them.

I will not be focusing here on films presenting events from farther times, especially from periods that did not leave us numerous written testimonies: a substantial part of antiquity, prehistoric times, the pre-Columbian America, or the civilizations of the Vikings and numerous barbaric tribes are virtually impossible to recreate, apart from the purely external, superficial level. This is why most of the movies about these times (depending on their budget and on the filmmaker's and producer's concept) are pure entertainment, they are close to a fairy tale or a kind of metaphorical projection of contemporaneity. In this sense, they resemble sci-fi movies, in that they reach a similar cognitive horizon.

I am most interested in modern times, namely in the 19th century and the perversely captivating 20th century (according to the popular Chinese saying: "May you live in interesting times"). I am fascinated by the question of whether a feature film has all the tools to present and express the reality of these times in an objective, meaningful, and modern way (if we acknowledge that objectivity even exists). I will not be focusing here on my experiences with depicting the 19th-century reality, but not because this period is not contemporary enough or because the difficulties I encountered while shooting such films as *Washington Square*, *The Secret Garden*, *Copying Beethoven*, or *Total Eclipse* (by the way, all those films were shot in English, even if the last two represented German and French subjects, respectively) hadn't been instructive and enriching. It's just that two other historical periods, probably for personal reasons, are particularly close to my heart, namely the Communist era and Shoah. To me, they are the most important chapters of recent history. But the essence of these murderous utopias seems extremely difficult to grasp, especially in a feature film. We could say—and this rule most certainly applies to the Holocaust—that the immensity of these barbaric crimes, the mystery of the evil that showed its face during these awful times escapes the limits of classic narration, and every attempt at unveiling this mystery seems to be doomed to failure. The only thing we can do is review the facts, collect

personal testimonies, and ask the same questions over and over again, knowing that we will probably not receive any satisfactory answers.

Claude Lanzmann, director of the monumental documentary *Shoah* and self-proclaimed guru of all Holocaust-related films, criticized very harshly the idea of depicting the Holocaust within the context of a feature film. Lanzmann's view is shared by Paweł Śpiewak, the director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Their arguments are based on reasonable premises. Both Lanzmann and Śpiewak (and surely a lot more specialists in the matter) argue that because the unbelievable level of evil, absurdity, and suffering during the Holocaust surpasses the limits of our understanding, the introduction of the slightest element of fiction, stylization, or emotional manipulation will inevitably lead to a certain trivialization of the horror of Shoah. Therefore, as Lanzmann and Śpiewak claim, the only right way of describing the Holocaust is through a historical documentary, and the only people who have the right to tell this story are historians, witnesses, and survivors (both the persecutors and the victims, but mostly the latter). This is probably why Lanzmann accepted Polański's *The Pianist*, he simply didn't feel in a place to judge the artist who as a child was a victim of the Holocaust. I have to admit that I myself questioned numerous times my right to describe such an unimaginable instance of evil using the film language, especially that of feature film.

Before I dive into my dilemmas and the specific difficulties that I had to overcome during the process of writing, co-writing, and directing my Holocaust-related movies, I want to discuss two arguments against Lanzmann and Śpiewak's viewpoint.

The first argument is purely pragmatic: if we assume that history can teach us a lesson, that we are not condemned to the Nietzschean "eternal return," the recurrence of the same mistakes and crimes committed by humanity in a cyclic pattern (like in the comedy *Groundhog Day*), then we should aim at educating as many people as possible about such events as the Holocaust. Knowing that people can awaken in themselves such unspeakable evil, learning about the mechanisms that lead to such terrible crimes, feeling empathy toward the victims (and sometimes even toward the persecutors), or identifying emotionally with the suffering of millions of people can be a form of inoculation against similar instances of evil in the future. Saying these words, I can't entirely shake a strong sense of existential pessimism. I am not delusional about human nature, I am not even sure whether there is such a thing as the moral progress of humanity, nor whether people can be educated in any different field than technology. But while having these doubts, I am nevertheless convinced that the so-called second generations share a kind of moral obligation to evoke and analyze these instances of evil, whether they believe in the sense of doing so or not.

The Holocaust was introduced to the collective consciousness primarily via audio-visual fictional narratives—feature films and television series. For the American people, for instance, Shoah remained for a long time an unknown or barely known, and certainly not that interesting, aspect of the Second World War. The first impulse was perhaps the publication of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the theatrical play under the same title. But the real breakthrough moment for the American audience was the television series *Holocaust*, in which Meryl Streep had her debut (interestingly enough, the same series played an important role in the discussion about the Holocaust in post-war German society). Who cares that the series was terribly simplified, melodramatic, and sometimes even sentimental? Who cares that *Schindler's List*, another crucial production in contemporary discourse about Shoah in contemporary America and Germany, ended on a highly inappropriate optimistic note? Who cares that the film *Life is Beautiful* by Roberto Benigni misused

the Holocaust trying to find a moral value in this absurd crime by telling the audience that a parent can save a child from death in a concentration camp if he or she loves it strongly enough? But all critical remarks aside, the films and television series I have mentioned taught people all over the world about the biggest crime against humanity of our time. The audiences were so deeply moved by these stories that they decided to incorporate the Holocaust into their national and personal identity. Nowadays, a vast majority of American universities have Holocaust studies departments, not because it is politically correct, but because young people, not only those of Jewish origin, show genuine curiosity for this particular subject matter. A similar, educational-empathic function for American society, only now in the matter of the slavery, has such productions as the television series *Roots* or Steve McQueen's recent film *12 Years a Slave*. Both of these productions (though each one on a different level) present a rather simplified vision of the slavery, racial crimes, and segregation issues, but they nevertheless show an important educational value, are accessible to wide audiences, and offer the opportunity to identify with the fates of the films' characters. It would really be quite inconsiderate to abandon such an effective educational tool!

My second argument against the viewpoint of Lanzmann and Śpiewak on the Holocaust narratives is closely related to the question of the role of art. Taking on issues that are impossible to explain or grasp rationally is one of the most important challenges of an artist. Asking fundamental questions about evil, death, or crime is essential for all mankind. An artist is someone who takes on the arduous task of explaining some of them, despite being aware that it could be compared to the uphill battle of Sisyphus. Artists take the challenge of expressing the unexplainable even though they themselves did not endure the events they address in their art pieces. Why should the Holocaust be excluded from this mental and artistic process? Who has the prerogative to pull artists away from their inner imperative?

All countries have problems when facing their own historical guilt. It seems to me that less influential countries have more difficulties when dealing with their past than powerful international superpowers. In my opinion this could be explained by a fear of revisiting collective traumatic experiences of despair and powerlessness. Revisiting those memories turns out to be so painful that, in order to avoid it, people would rather steer their historical narration toward some kind of a heroic lie. In my opinion this is why honest movies about the atrocities of the past century are so rare in countries such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the former Yugoslavia. The Holocaust didn't find its place in the collective conscience in most of the eastern European countries, like Lithuania, Latvia, or Ukraine. But Japan and Austria, and even France and the USA, were not really much better, and they have fewer excuses. People of these countries, filmmakers included, do not want to talk about what they went through because it was so painful, shameful, and humiliating. Therefore, they choose the escapist way: their stylistic choices gravitate towards irony, the grotesque, or heroics. Even in the best films of the Polish School about the Second World War, the most popular stylistic approach was a mix of heroic tale (Andrzej Wajda's films) and irony (Andrzej Munk's films).

Czech society struggled with a few shameful episodes in its recent history: surrendering without a fight to the Germans after the 1938 Munich betrayal, widespread collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War, and a conformist attitude toward the Communist regime during the Stalinist period and after the Soviet invasion in 1968. It is hard to make claims on a small, hopeless nation for not making the ultimate sacrifice. Though buried deep into the collective subconscious, the shame and bitterness lingered in Czech society. This mechanism of "social amnesia" is clearly described in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and in his other "thoroughly Czech" books. Czech society was eager to "forget" their shameful behavior, and

when it was discussed, it had to be presented in a comedic or ironic way. Because of a similar, though multiplied, inability to face post-Holocaust trauma, Jewish people didn't really want to discuss the Holocaust in the late 1940s and 1950s, when the experience was still fresh. Immediately after the war, there were very few movies, books, and memoirs dealing with this traumatic experience by Jewish authors. In the 1960s, the topic reappeared and together with the publications of numerous testimonies by Holocaust survivors in the 1980s and 1990s it entered mainstream cinema.

*Angry Harvest* (1985), my first Holocaust movie, was shot with extremely modest, even minimalist means. It tells the story of a Jewish woman who escapes from concentration camp transportation and the Polish farmer who takes care of her after accidentally stumbling into her in the woods. He hides her in his basement, falls in love with her, and starts to abuse her sexually. He makes her dependent on him and their relationship gradually looks more and more like that of a guard and a prisoner with a serious case of Stockholm Syndrome, although it is still a relationship between a man and a woman, a Catholic and a Jew. The Second World War and the Holocaust are just a background for this relationship; they happen somewhere off the set. Maybe this strategy of *pars pro toto* helped me to present an important emotional truth about this experience.

My next Holocaust-related movie was *Europa, Europa*. This time the screenplay was based on a real story, and its main character was very much alive when I was shooting the film (still is, by the way). The film tells the story of Sally, who escapes Germany with his family after the Crystal Night. When German troops invade Poland, he flees east with his brother. The eastern part of Poland is occupied by the Soviets, still Hitler's allies at that time, and Sally finishes in a Stalinist orphanage. There he becomes a fanatical Communist, totally indoctrinated by the propaganda. But then German troops invade the Soviet Union. Sally is taken into captivity, but comes clean claiming to be a German orphan. Eventually he becomes a Wehrmacht hero and a student of the most exclusive Hitler's School. His story interested me for numerous reasons. The main character was similar to Woody Allen's Zelig, he takes on various masks and identities, and is tossed by the two 20th-century totalitarian systems (which also left their mark on the history of my family): German Nazism and Stalinist Soviet Communism. Sally's story also included a great deal of questions about identity. For me, this issue is particularly important: I am half-Polish and half-Jewish, and I have always felt in my childhood torn between the leftist viewpoint of my atheist parents and the simple, folk-like Catholicism of my nanny. I was born in Communist Poland, I completed my studies in Czechoslovakia, and in my adult life I became a political immigrant, first in France and then in the US. I am a woman who works in a profession dominated by men, and I also see myself as person with an intellectual sensitivity whose job consists, for the most part, of hard physical work (we film directors are closer to being a corporal than a poet). What is the core of human nature? Is our identity formed by chance, genes, and some imminent individual feature of character, or do we exist only as reflection of other peoples' opinions and expectations? The paradox within the protagonist of *Europa, Europa* is that his Jewish identity is somehow conditioned by his circumcised penis. We could even say that it prevents him from forgetting who he really is and, in a way, saves the boy's soul (although it might also cost him his life). The style of the story was extremely eclectic: it contained elements of classical tragedy, the grotesque, picaresque novel, an 18th-century philosophical tale in the style of Voltaire, and even of modern-day comic books. I had to make the difficult choice to stay true to these aesthetics, even though I knew that was risky. Nobody had ever before told a Holocaust-related story in such a way, and nobody had ever dared to show a victim of the Holocaust in such a caricatured, anti-heroic way. I was afraid that this light tone would displease the Jewish audience, but my concerns dispersed very soon. In fact, I actually met the expectations of the Holocaust survivors: they were fed up with

cheap drama and they preferred a boldly told true story. I was accused of anti-Semitism by two puffed-up German critics, which I thought was actually pretty funny in the context of my own life story.

The first problem I encountered when touching upon the Holocaust was the challenge of depicting its unspeakable horror and brutality. In the times of *Europa, Europa* it was much easier than twenty years later, when I was shooting *In Darkness*. In the beginning of the 1990s, there weren't that many Holocaust-related movies, and the whole imagery of Shoah (the starved dead bodies, the skeletons on the streets of ghettos, the barbed wire, and the striped clothing) had not been trivialized by the film industry. Nevertheless I didn't want to fall into overt naturalism. I sought images that were more suggestive than descriptive and that would be flashes, fragments, and not a coherent totality. This approach turned out to be effective and can actually evoke stronger emotions than even the most stripped-down literalness.

It was much more challenging, from my point of view, to revisit the subject of Holocaust twenty years later. With *In Darkness* I wanted to achieve an extreme verism, even naturalism. This is one of the reasons for the importance of keeping linguistic authenticity (the characters speak various languages, true to the place of action). I strongly felt that this approach was the only honest way to tell this story. I was intent on making the characters ambivalent and not stereotypical, I wanted to break with the tendency to idealize victims of the Holocaust. I was shooting this film after a series of Hollywood productions where all the Jews were shown as martyrs: lifeless, body-less, and angelic. The protagonist of *In Darkness*, a Polish sewer-worker from Lviv, is not an angel: he's a small time crook and a petty thief, full of anti-Semitic prejudice and stereotypes. In the Jews that he agrees to hide in the sewers, he sees a source of easy money. At first it is clear that when they won't be able to pay, he will denounce them. When eventually, he acts differently, he himself seems surprised. But the Jews also have to abandon their stereotypical thinking about the Polish sewer-worker. Both sides have to shake their masks and awaken human solidarity in themselves. The main topic of this story is the fine line between good and evil and how easy it is to cross to the dark side.

But the real problem with telling this kind of story lies elsewhere. Feature films about the Holocaust tend to focus on the storylines of miraculous survivors. The immensity of evil is balanced by a single person's good deed. A character who safely gets through the Holocaust gives us an illusion of comfort. I had tried a few times to tell a story in which none of the characters survives Shoah (which is closer to the truth, in reality less than 10% survived). Sadly, I could not get funding for any of these projects. When Andrzej Wajda was shooting *Kanał*, a film about a division of resistance fighters during the Warsaw Uprising that try to escape the Nazis through the city's sewers, he exposed the tragic fate of the characters at the very beginning of the film, when the image of the young soldiers marching is accompanied by the commentary: "Have a closer look at them, for they are all going to die!" However, the audience accepts the tragic ending because it has a heroic dimension. The soldiers are heroes, therefore they become attractive as martyrs. Victims of the Holocaust led away to death do not possess this "heroic alibi": their death was simply a senseless, inhumane slaughter. We are not ready to face this kind of story. A similar mechanism can be observed in films about natural calamities: we only want to hear about those who survived an earthquake, a tsunami, or a fire. The filmmaker's mission should be to give a voice to those forgotten and dishonored, even if a mass of nameless victims does not possess the features of a heroic character.

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When telling a deeply personal story or a story important for my country it is absolutely crucial that I exercise a kind of psychodrama or psychoanalysis to translate my point of view into a more universal one. After that, I need to find different perspectives within the story in order to make it more objective or complete, similar to the Hegelian concept of "totality of the perspectives." This objectivism, achieved by incorporating numerous points of view into the story, is essential for any epic or dramatic narrative. I think that in order to make something powerful and universal you need to filter it through your own pain and then try to cut this pain out of the story.

For me, the 20th century, and even the last decades of the 19th century, does not belong to the past. These times are so deeply present in the contemporary world that when I am shooting a period film I never think that I am making a movie about the past. I am trying to find traces of past events in the present. I want to convey a feeling of immediate urgency in order to create the impression that what we are watching on the screen is not entirely resolved, but is happening before our very eyes and can still affect our lives in many ways. I do not want to come off as pretentious: I do not believe that films can change reality, I just hope to reach the audience through emotional channels that enable the feeling of empathy.

Even if it was late, the essential experience of the Second World War was represented widely by world cinema, while the subject of Communism stayed untouched. After reading some analysis and lending it some thought, I realized that some feelings behind overlooking Communism in contemporary film and literature are similar to the ones felt by Jews who did not want to tell stories about the Holocaust immediately after the Second World War. The situation of the oppressed during the long period of Communism was extremely un-heroic and humiliating. The later stages of the regime were not so dramatic. Unlike in the times of Hitler or Stalin, there were no regular concentration camps and political assassinations. The regime became "soft" and so a more normal life was possible. A vast majority of the population surrendered to this kind of light but very persistent oppression. The moral strength of people was broken, because they were constantly forced to compromise their ideals and even their common knowledge. They wanted to be happy, to have a family and a job, everything that every human being wants. As soon as they started treating oppression as an inseparable element of their reality, this "artificial" life became normal, seemingly attractive, and surely a lot safer than in the free world.

After the overthrow of Communism in 1989, Miloš Forman compared the life in a capitalist country, where he spent twenty years, with the life in a Communist society. He said that the difference could be explained by the comparison of these two realities to a zoological garden and a jungle. The animals in a zoo live in the state of captivity. They spend their lives in cages or in some other kinds of limited spaces, but they are safe. They are never hungry, they are healthy, and if anything is wrong with them, they are given medicine. The species are separated from each other, so the big animals do not eat the smaller ones. In the jungle (capitalism), the animals run free, but they have to fight for everything, so in a way their lives are much more stressful. The distinction between the people who were made for the jungle and those who were made for a zoological garden is still something that divides societies in post-Communist countries. Interestingly enough, those who have a hard time dealing with freedom are very anti-Communist today, and those who are successful in this jungle-like reality are not so preoccupied with the past. They forgive and forget much easier than those who show a strong nostalgia for the pseudo-safety of Communism.

I think that this paradox makes it very difficult to tell stories about the Communist era in eastern Europe. The enemies are not obvious: those pointed to by the majority are rarely the real

ones. The reality in contemporary narration is so ambiguous and the values so mixed up that we are constantly lying about our past, coloring it by our contemporary political aims. And it is virtually impossible to remain honest about our present if we choose to lie about our past. Consequently, the present becomes crippled by this manipulation. This is why we have not been able to produce movies that would describe the Communist experience of my generation or that of our parents and children, the most important collective experience of our lives, an experience that formed and destroyed at least four or five generations of people from Communist countries. The word "destroyed" is not only a reference to all those who were killed by the regime (millions of people were brutally murdered or kept in prisons by the Soviet system in the Soviet Union, China, Korea, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary), but also to those who managed to lead a relatively normal life under the regime. Millions of wasted lives—this is how it looks from the present perspective. Yet we are still unable to make a single movie that would make the story about Communism accessible to the world and present it as successfully as the movies about the Holocaust did in the 1980s and 1990s. Maybe forty or fifty years from now people will find a way to speak about the Communist era and treat it as an important collective experience of humanity. But I feel angry that we are still not ready for such a narration.

A few years ago the writer of *Burning Bush* wrote to me from Prague and asked me to read his screenplay about Jan Palach. Palach was a 21-year-old student, my contemporary. I attended the Prague film school FAMU between 1967 and 1971, so the subject interested me because it felt so close personally and politically. In 1968 Czechoslovakia experienced a very powerful awakening of freedom, similar to the Polish October in 1956. But in 1956 I was a child and in 1968 I was twenty years old. In Czechoslovakia the process of de-Stalinization came much later than in Poland and happened in the same time when important political and social movements were taking place all over the world. 1968 was the year of student strikes in Paris and in the United States (Polish students were also protesting, but for different reasons)—the whole world seemed to be changing.

In Czechoslovakia, this change was accompanied by the revision of Communist praxis. The prevailing approach was rather naïve, leftist, and humanistic, and the idea of Communism had not been rejected. It was the form of executing and not the ideology that was criticized. Young people all over Prague were marching, singing, dancing, creating modern art, discovering new music, or producing independent theatrical productions. In August 1968 the tanks of the Warsaw Pact came and crushed this innocent spirit. The reaction of Czechoslovakian society was admirable: people went out into the streets to show the world that they would not be broken. These feelings of solidarity and togetherness lasted for about three or four months. In November, we organized a national student strike, which seemed to reinforce those positive feelings. The student union asked that famous politicians, writers, and filmmakers come to talk with us. It was the first time that I met Václav Havel.

By the end of the strike I strongly felt that we had lost. I think that I was one of very few people who had this premonition so early. I realized that even reaching an agreement with the authorities couldn't replace gaining real political power. I was right. It was impossible to win and preserve the freedoms achieved during the Prague Spring. People slowly started to compromise their ideals. Jan Palach also had this feeling. He was a sensitive young man, very moral and brave, and he decided that the time had come to awaken the whole nation. His act of self-immolation was not directed against Soviet leaders, it was addressed to the whole Czechoslovakian society. In his letter, Palach urged people to not give up their newly regained freedom. Politically, he was smart, so he wrote in his statement that his act was a part of a wider conspiracy. He called himself "Torch number 1" suggesting that there were many of them all over the country. He threatened that if his demands

were not accepted by the regime, the next "torches" would follow. We all believed in his words. Among young people there certainly was a high level of excitement and emotional outpouring, strong enough to make the highest sacrifice. The existence of a conspiracy group of young people willing to die for freedom looked very credible. The authorities believed it and were afraid that the youth movement would become more radical. It took Palach three days to die. During that time, the authorities did everything in their power to de-conspire other "torches" and stop others from following Palach's act.

The reaction to his death was monumental. He became a national hero and his funeral turned into a political demonstration. One month later another student, Jan Zajíc, set himself on fire and died immediately. He was not connected with Palach, but he saw that none of the requests of "Torch number 1" had been met, so he wanted to shake up society and the authorities once again. But this time nobody wanted to hear about the self-immolated student. During the month following Palach's act society changed and people decided that they did not need heroes like that. Accepting the painful reality meant accepting oppression, but it became clear that Czechoslovakian society was not ready for sacrifices so extreme.

I think that the extremity of Palach and Zajíc could have actually reinforced the apathy of Czechoslovakian society. For the following twenty years, the country endured the so-called "normalization." Needless to say, nothing about this process was normal. People accepted that they had to live a lie; they were practically prisoners in their own countries. Political immigrants had no contact with their families, and writers were unable to publish their texts. People who dared to protest against normalization were thrown out of their schools or jobs and, as a result, intellectuals and highly educated professionals worked as custodians, janitors, or street cleaners. Czechoslovakia was an extremely unpleasant place; political opposition was very small (a few hundred people altogether), even more prominent figures like Havel were generally unknown to the public. Radio Free Europe was not widely followed—it was difficult to catch the frequency of the station, as it was obstructed by the regime. But I think that even if the station had been accessible, people would not have listened. They did not want to hear about those who showed courage and stepped up against the regime because it stood in juxtaposition to their own conformist behavior. Czechoslovakian society lived like this for twenty years. During this time, in Poland, the strikes in Gdansk were followed by the introduction of martial law. Unlike in Czechoslovakia, Poland had a huge social movement and wide opposition. It should come as no surprise that Czechs and Slovaks did not want to hear about Poland either. But in Poland, the brutality of martial law broke most spirits. The opposition against this Soviet-ruled regime was once again shown to be hopeless.

The so-called Velvet Revolution was initiated by a group of young students and it resulted in a huge wave of demonstrations. It started on the twentieth anniversary of Palach's death. When Communism finally fell apart, people greeted freedom as some kind of gift. It happened to them, they were a part of it and they rejoiced for several weeks, but at the end of the day, they realized that all they wanted was to forget the past. They were not eager to analyze their dull and thoroughly un-heroic lives during the years of Communism. In the following years, very few honest and serious films about this experience were made. There were a few ironic comedies that were all constructed according to the same idea: yes, things were complicated during the Communist era, but "it wasn't all so bad."

When I first read the script of *Burning Bush*, I found it very well written and accurate. The way the story was described felt very close to my memory. I actually thought that the author must have



lived through these experiences. I immediately became interested in the project because it felt very personal to me—witnessing the carnival of freedom followed by the shameful process of normalization formed my personality. When the screenwriter and producers of *Burning Bush* approached me, I happened to be in Poland, where I was finishing *In Darkness*, so the Czechs asked me if they could come to discuss the project. To my surprise, the author of the script and the producer turned out to be very young, they were in their early twenties. At first, I was a bit confused, but they immediately won me over. I was deeply touched by these representatives of a younger generation, who wanted to tell the story seriously. They wanted something real and complex, something as personal and dramatic as possible, a film that would show the tragic dimension of the events, creating an honest recollection of what happened, but without any unnecessary pathos.

They were young and strongly felt that some part of their identity had been amputated by the silence, no one really talked about it when they were growing up. They needed to tell this story in order to find themselves. They knew that the virus of Communism was still very much present in their country. Moses did not take his people straight from Egypt to the Promised Land. They spent forty years roaming the desert until the older generations who remembered the years of slavery perished. Nowadays our lifespan is much longer, so forty years is not enough; we can still feel the virus inside us. I was curious why these young people, who seemed free of the consequences of the aftermath of Communism, asked me to shoot *Burning Bush*. They answered that no Czech director was ready to get involved in this project. On the one hand, I also see myself partially as a Czech filmmaker—I lived through this experience, was involved in the student movement, even spent some time in prison, and was deeply influenced by Czech culture, film, and literature. On the other hand, however, I lived the following years abroad and gained a fresh perspective. This is why they believed that I was right for the job

When we showed the film to Czechs, their reaction was very emotional. Younger members of the audience were equally shaken as people who actually remembered the events. I had done some movies that had a strong emotional impact on the audience, but this one was special. Such a widespread national reaction never happened to me before. I had a feeling that we finally told an overlooked chapter of their history: Czechs and Slovaks treated this film as a cathartic experience, which helped them understand something essential about themselves.

Štěpán did not want to tell Jan's story. He decided to create the atmosphere of mystery around Jan's character and I had supported this approach. We do not know much about him and there is probably not much to know—his life was short and simple. The screenplay starts with his self-immolation, then we follow the consequences of his act and what it meant to other people: his mother, his brother, his fellow students, the regime, the politicians, and the society altogether. The real plot starts in the second and third parts and it looks like a legal drama. In reality one month after Palach's act, Communist newspapers published a speech by Nový, a high functionary who was a congressman and a member of the central committee of the Communist party, claiming to have proof that Palach was not a hero but just some jerk manipulated by the CIA and the political opposition. According to Nový's revelations, Palach did not plan to die; apparently he was told that the fire would be artificial. Nový's lie marked the change in the party's strategy towards the opposition and the definitive end of the Prague Spring. Palach's mother and brother felt that they had to defend Jan's name so they convinced a young woman attorney to sue Nový. Everyone knew that winning this case was practically impossible. Nevertheless, they decided to fight in the name of truth and dignity. We wanted to show the slow process of how Czechoslovakian society gradually became resigned and conformist: the anatomy of a seemingly soft, but in reality brutal,

oppression, and of the moral corruption that crushes all social values and solidarity. But we also wanted to show those who found the courage to go against the stream.

There were only a few attempts to describe the Communist era in contemporary Polish cinema. A few movies, some of them very good, were made in Hungary, Russia, and Romania, but the most popular film about Communism was made in Germany. *The Lives of Others* by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck remains the only film that reached such a huge audience and became widely recognized. I cannot understand why there are no artistically honest and powerful movies about the Gulags, purges, and other Stalinist experiences. The absence of those productions makes the past atrocities vanish from the world's collective memory. Most young Italians, French, Americans, or even young Czechs, Russians, and Poles do not have any idea about the past of their country. In Russia, Stalin is slowly becoming a national hero and the greatest man of the 20th century. I am of the opinion that it was entirely up to us and we failed. Representatives of my generation did not make movies that should have been made. The best films were made when Communism was still in power but censorship was relatively weak. I have mostly Polish examples in my mind, like Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* or Ryszard Bugajski's *Interrogation*. But there are so few when you acknowledge the immensity of this experience. And yes, I still think that we failed and now we have to come up with a way of improving this situation.

If such a highly traumatizing past event like the Communist period is being passed over in silence or overlooked, its virus keeps on circulating in society and constantly renews itself through the corruption of social and political life, interpersonal relationships, and a severe moral crisis of whole nations. All these symptoms are obviously apparent in the countries that seem to have regained their freedom only to realize that they are not ready to put it to use. But in many other countries, unburdened by Communism, we can also observe a growing sense of being on the brink of a serious crisis and a fear that the demons of the turbulent 20th century will come back. In this situation, the least that filmmakers can do is to tell captivating stories, to describe the world around us, and to keep on asking discerning questions about our identity, our guilt in the past, and our responsibility for the future.

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