

Shimmer and whisper

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The author of the article, one of the acclaimed Polish cinematographers, describes his practical efforts involved in making two short documentary films on Holocaust directed by him. The first one, *Sonderzug* (1978), was based on Stok's idea to recreate his first emotional reaction to the landscape around Treblinka in the film that lasts 9 minutes, as long as the way of the Jews from the ramp to their end in the death camp. The other film, *Prayer* (1981), is the portrayal of a Japanese Buddhist monk praying at the site of the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. The formal inspiration of the film came from Japanese visual art.

KEYWORDS: Holocaust, documentary film, author cinema, Japanese art, making-off, short film

Ingmar Bergman writes: "as far back as I can remember, I carried a grim fear of death."^[1] His wrestling with it in *The Seventh Seal* was a powerful personal early influence. How to grasp the spiritual dimension in visual form? How to tackle in a documentary the memory of a death factory, an immense, indescribable subject?

Maciej M., the editor-in-chief of one of Warsaw's minor documentary production outfits, phoned me: – 'I saw your directing debut *Time Falls* at the Kraków Festival; we'd like you to make a short for us, too.' – 'Right. What about?' – 'Treblinka...' – I froze. – 'A cemetery again, and a wartime extermination camp at that, no. I've had enough of depressing subjects for now, thanks, but no thanks.' I feared the unspeakable evil of the subject, the enormity of suffering. I was also apprehensive of getting pigeonholed in martyrology after the Powązki cemetery film. A couple of weeks passed. He kept badgering me: – 'Let's keep talking, at least do go and have a look at the place and then decide', he insisted. I agreed to make the trip and finally close the matter.

I left behind our driver and production manager. The vast eerily empty meadow was spookily still; even the birds had left it. I was alone, in stunned silence save for the hiss of the wild eternal flames of the monument. Tall blades of lush grass gently waved in a breeze. A thick duvet of unnaturally intense green covered the horrible place. But the surrounding countryside was yellowed, burnt by the sun. It hit me that layer upon layer of human ashes are so fertile. Elsewhere, German farmers from around the Gross Rosen concentration camp had to put their names on a waiting list for sacks of the best fertiliser, human ashes from the crematorium. A German expression goes that "grass grows over everything", or "time heals", as we would say. But not there. Here was

[1] Ingmar Bergman, *Images*.

a strong feeling of a presence. Some visitors of the Somme battlefield feel the disquieting pull of the place, hellish and paradisaal, poisoning yet cathartic, lonely and strikingly beautiful. The 19th-century Scottish anthropologist J.G. Frazer captured the feeling: “In the summer after the battle of Landen, the most sanguinary battle of the 17th century Europe, the earth, saturated with the blood of 20 thousand slain, broke forth into millions of poppies, and the traveller who passed that vast sheet of scarlet might well fancy that the earth had indeed given up her dead.”

A couple of kilometres away, on a rail side-track stood a few old rusting cargo-carriages, like abandoned mute witnesses. These cattle carriages looked eerily like they conceivably could have come from that other horrible time. We found remnants of rusty rail tracks leading to nowhere. An old wartime ramp for unloading human cargo lay overgrown in the middle of the field, left untouched as part of the monument.

On my return, I could not get the devastating impression of the visit out of my head. The Jewish martyrology of a chosen nation, their world and culture vanished in the war years, was deeply ingrained, still hot for Poles and Jews. And I loved the metaphysics of Kafka, for good measure. One could sometimes overhear an anti-Semitic joke. The pogroms[2] were a not easily touched taboo, a painful place in the subconscious. A controversial Israeli author[3] recalls his father urging him to try to comprehend *the other*: “We are living with Arabs, we have to understand them... through knowing the Arabs, you know yourself better.” His Arabs were my Jews. I worked with some of the Jewish friends whose parents fervently served their communist Big Idea, the Idea that had my uncles and my father imprisoned. Now their sons often contested that ideology. The different pasts and separate traditions entwined. These people with quite another identity were, in many respects, a mystery. The compulsion to delve into this gruesome subject came from all of this. I was already deep into it, even though not knowing yet how to proceed.

[2] Anna Bikont, the journalist of a wide-reach daily founded on the wave of 1989 velvet revolution, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, wrote a non-fiction book about the pogrom in Jedwabne, one of the nastier stains on the 20th-century history of this corner of Europe. When, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, in 1939 Soviets invaded Polish Eastern territories, the Jewish community invited them. Poles remembered it bitterly and also the forcible mass expulsions of Poles to Siberia led by many KGB's Jewish officers. Jews feared Nazis, naturally. After the eruption of the German-Bolshevik War in June 1941, the new anti-Semitic occupants cruelly persecuted Jewish families, their houses requisitioned, shops ruined. In Jedwabne, the worst crime was committed. Incited by the Germans, on 10 July 1941 the mob murdered over a thousand Jews. This is an incontestable fact.

The newspaper's editor, Adam Michnik, one of the regime's leading contestants in the 70s and 80s, a historian from education, Jewish from origins, initially hesitated to engage his team in digging up this politically hot subject. But the factually source-based book *The Crime and the Silence* emerged, hotly debated by various political orientations. Bikont, who only as an adult learned about her Jewish ancestry, passionately reaches to her roots, clear in her interpretations and conclusions. In a knot of social animosities, fallible memories can be one-sided. Jewish survivors at times sharpen their undoubtful suffering. The shadow of the crime still divides families in Jedwabne. They don't want to return to such memories, refuse to speak out. Some, however, talk.

[3] A.B. Yehoshua.

I sifted through piles of documents and photographs in the archives of the Courts at Warsaw's Leszno, files of post-war investigations, statistics, sources from the Nuremberg trials, scant depositions of the few escapees and witnesses. A Polish railway worker involved in the resistance at the time recorded the passing transports: "I stood there in that station day after day and counted the figures chalked on each truck. I added them up over and over again. The number of people killed in Treblinka must have been 1,200,000, no doubt about it whatsoever." The official German evaluation was 900,000. In a careful estimate, during only one year, at least 800,000 died there. What were the people behind the numbers like? I considered several variants of tackling this hellish subject. Some fifteen years later, Spielberg staged it in *Schindler's List*. I thought re-enactments unimaginable for this documentary. Primo Levi described it in *If This Is a Man*[4] and Tadeusz Borowski in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*[5] and Imre Kertész, quite differently, in *Fatelessness*,[6] but the film adapted years later from the latter novel seems to me now a step too far, too beautifully rendered for the everyday enormity of its horror.

What if I were to recall the immediate impact of my encounter, here and now? I did not at the time know Ansel Adams' thought: "a great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels, in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed". He also wrote, "when I see something, I react to it and I state it, and that's the equivalent of what I felt. So, I give it to you as a spectator, and you get it or you don't get it, but there's nothing on the back of the print that tells you what you should get". That is what I felt. *Time Falls* was a precisely thought out and structured documentary; now I sought to embrace and catch on film – almost impossible to pull off – my transient first impression. See the place with bleary eyes, like thirty years earlier the condemned victims saw it when pushed out of the goods carriages. To make a restored emotion graspable, if only ever partially – a reawakening of a sensual imprint, rather than action or insistent information. Shoot only what I felt there, no archives, interviews, stills, documents.

Making a film, even on a small scale, is complex. The impulse of the initial emotion gets filtered through other people and applied technology. To concentrate on the overview of telling my story, I usually did not photograph the films I directed. This time, I feared diluting my first shuddering flash of recognition.

[...] I don't like to rely only on myself. My cameramen colleagues helped me a great deal, Jacek Petrycki in my directing debut, Piotr Kwiatkowski in the film about Katarzyna Gawłowa, a folk painter from near Kraków. In *Sonderzug*, though, my input as cameraman was greater. A recreation of my private initial shock of confrontation with this place seemed too difficult

[4] P. Levi, *Se Questo è un Uomo*, US title *Survival in Auschwitz*, first published 1947.

[5] T. Borowski, *Proszę państwa do gazu*, Warszawa 1947.

[6] Novel first published in 1975, the subsequent Lajos Koltai film *Fateless* (Hungarian: *Sorstalanság*), 2005.



Il. 1. Sonderzug /Special Train/, screenshot

to pass on to another cameraman. [...] I wanted to change the point of view from an objective to a subjective one. I returned to my original first experience. In *Sonderzug*, I tried to, as faithfully as possible, recreate my first emotional reaction, hold on to what usually escapes during shooting, live it rather than show it. (from the 70s interview[7])

I was lucky to be able to go ahead and film it, and not be pushed for a detailed script of such an unfilmable subjective idea. We shot it quickly, from the hip, over two long summer days, dawn to dusk, in all the available daylight hours, always on the trot.

The core of the film consists of two takes.

It wasn't just a cameraman's trick, though, but a confrontation of contemporary sensibility with such a place, of the person who knows only a little and tries to imagine the journey of thousands of victims to death.[8]

On the train, uneasy silences and snatches of a still-hopeful Yiddish lullaby intersperse a mother's disjointed whispers to her child. Wisława Szymborska caught the hopelessness of that ultimate trip with no return, in a short poem[9] about the non-Slavic names in the carriages of cries.

In sealed wagons
Across the country the names travel,
But where to they go,
And when they'll arrive,
Do not ask, I'll not answer, I do not know.



Il. 2. Treblinka site

I did not know that poignant poem at the time, but that is what I was after. Our dried-up time spanned to these incomprehensible times, as their names are mocked by *wheels clamouring on to rails*. It ends:

Yes, so, yes. Through a forest a transport of cries goes.
Yes, so, yes. Woken up at night I hear,
Yes, so, yes. Clattering of silence into silence.[10]

The landscape around Treblinka – seen by our camera from the train – was a witness, hardly changed since the War. Flat fields, little dirt roads, someone on a pushbike, only the electricity pylons added.

One can assume that prisoners travelling to Treblinka then could have seen what I show in the first take, shot through the tiny window of a mov-

[7] WS interview by Bogdan Zagroba, *Film weekly: Longing for transcendence (Tęsknota do Transcendencji)*, 1978.

[8] WS interview: *Longing for Transcendence*.

[9] The poem *Still (Jeszcze)*.

[10] „Tak to, tak. Lasem jedzie transport wołań/ Tak to, tak. Obudzona w nocy słyszę/ tak to, tak, łomotanie ciszy w ciszę”.

ing goods train, in haphazard fragments, interrupted by the passing lumps of smoke as though coming from a steam locomotive. [...] And the second shot, using the handheld camera – is the last journey. The vibration of this heated shot infects the whole film.

Weeks passed since I first reced the site and we found some of the buoyant overgrown grass mowed or in places withered in strong summer's heat. But the place stayed as eerie as ever. For the second set-up, impersonating one of the rushed along, condemned new arrivals, I ran – hand-holding camera – through the old railway tracks and the field. Then, I ran into the old goods-unloading railway ramp, too tall to jump on. Continuously moving, I passed the running camera to my assistant Janek, waiting on the ramp just out of frame. I scrambled onto the ramp behind his back, using a prepared wooden step, while Janek panned the camera 360 degrees over the place at the end of which I took the camera back in one swift movement and ran with it again, swaying, for some 100 meters.

Irregular-shaped large stone boulders stood scattered around the site, with carved inscriptions: Greece, Łódź, the names of the towns and countries from which the victims came. Grass underfoot, I could hardly catch my breath, grass again, and already the blackened grate, flames, blackness.

It all lasted a few minutes, exactly as long, we calculated, as the precisely efficient killing machine allowed the arriving disorientated people to live, from the instant when thrown out of *the special train* to the moment of their deaths. The heap of blackened remnants of bricks was the spot of the final destination of the herded Jews: the ovens. They had 9–10 minutes between the ramp and the end. The whole film is 9 minutes long.

Years later, by a strange intuitive convergence, a US composer created *Different Trains*^[11]. *Sonderzug* was shown at several film festivals, but I do not for a moment believe he has seen it or just appropriated the idea. A decade apart, on opposite sides of the planet, we both felt this was the natural inroad to try to comprehend that horrible Time.

Incidentally, I learned then about the complexity of crucial attention limits in screen reception. I asked Zygmunt Konieczny to write a score for the film. We had all listened to his heart-wrenching tunes of



Il. 3. Sonderzug

[11] S. Reich, *Different Trains* (1988) 27, for string quartet and tape. The composer writes: "The idea for the piece came from my childhood. When I was one year old my parents separated. My mother moved to Los Angeles and my father stayed in New York. Since they arranged divided custody, I travelled back and forth by train frequently between New York and

Los Angeles from 1939 to 1942 accompanied by my governess. While the trips were exciting and romantic at the time I now look back and think that, if I had been in Europe during this period, as a Jew I would have had to ride very different trains". <<https://www.boosey.com/cr/composer/Steve+Reich>>.

songs created for Ewa Demarczyk, the black-haired diva of Kraków's magical Cellar under the Rams. He arrived from Kraków for the screening of the first edit, his nose freshly bitten-off by his dog. He was tipsy, playing with the dog, he said, and – chomp – the tip of the nose was gone. They sewed on, not quite convincingly, a replacement. Zygmunt fervently threw himself into composing the score. His soul-catching, haunting echoes of whispers and howling winds were beautiful. And that brought a problem. When we added his splendid, expressive score to the assembled images - strong in themselves – the film fainted. Both highly expressive, the picture and the music cancelled out each other's impact, to a disastrously flat effect. I had to make a tough decision. As much as I truly adored his melancholic yet vibrant score, I had to abandon most of it to save the film's power. We replaced chunks of the score with sound effects, like the squeaks of the goods-carriages' gates being unbolted. We blended at a lower volume what was left of the music with the distant howling wind and natural diegetic sounds of the field. The film breathed again, returned to that original expression of the first-felt moment. For a time, Zygmunt pretended he did not know me. That was the price I had to pay. Later on, when we saw each other, the Maestro did not touch on the subject. Perhaps he did not realise we had recut the music, or he had come to understand and forgave.

Music and film image should complement each other, but occasionally too strong a score fighting for the room can muddle a film. Ennio Morricone, the wizard of screen music, says: "Some very nice music doesn't work because of that: it is too strong, it can become an element that disturbs the film, rather than giving something to it. Yet in some cases, the music must be very, very strong when it is necessary to give a particular dynamic to the storytelling course of the film, rather than, say, a person's feelings." [12] Hearing music happens in an abstract domain of the mind, best if it does not conflict with the film's image, of its nature figurative and object-orientated, except when film music steps out of creating feelings, moods, emotions, and sets to convey or even to illustrate, literal meanings. It is treacherous terrain.

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My documentary *Prayer* started from a brief mention in a daily newspaper. A Japanese Buddhist monk on a solitary pilgrimage from Hiroshima was fasting for several days while praying for peace at the site of the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. A Buddhist offering amidst Christian onlookers, at a very special place where mostly Jews, but also Gypsies and Poles, were annihilated during the war, seemed an intriguing capsule of emotions, conflicting cultures and the cleansing powers of meditation. The event was already underway; the

[12] *The Guardian*, JL Walters interview, 7 Nov 2003.

project involved a tiny crew for a brief shoot. The WFD studio made an instant decision. The next day, we were on our way.

The expression of simple, transient humane serenity in face of ultimately unspeakable man-made horror needed a concise form. We wanted the film to approach the essence of the monk's experience, his deep immersion in extreme solitude. He had shed earthly attachments, all the better to concentrate. We seldom talk about our prayers, and we show our spiritual journeys even less frequently. Is Buddhist meditation, predicated as it is on the impermanence of all things, Buddhism included, graspable at all in a visual expression?

I hoped a stylistic texture somewhat akin to a Japanese film might lead us closer to our monk's world. The aesthetics of Japanese films has always attracted me. Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman of the Dunes*, in sparse black and white, is a cruel and sensual story of a Man and a Woman of whom we know little, trapped in an eerie ever-encroaching universe of unforgiving sand dunes. Or *Hara-kiri*, or anything by Kurosawa. Washizu's death in the hypnotic *Throne of Blood*, pinned down by a storm of arrows like an oriental St Sebastian, is etched in a collective movie-making memory, just like Eisenstein's pram on the Odessa Steps. The strong discipline of composition, precision and economy of expression in diagonal lines, like that of roof tiles in the overhead shots, rules the frame. The Japanese love the formal symmetrical composition, something I instinctively shirk from. But a calming accord of a single hanging branch or a serene floating plume often delicately breaks the symmetry. Peripheral elements are planted not to clutter the corners, but as a promise of possibilities that may open beyond the frame. Decorative nostalgia merging with nuances of calligraphy, highly refined subtleties obedient to the rules of settled traditional codes and symbolic matrixes, falls into a dense system of simplicity. The landscape's clarity broken by the silhouette of a tree clasped to the edge of a precipice – the universe and I, escape and salvation. Taming the concentrated energy of nature in a stylistically locked convention. Intimate and quietly intense mysteries flow from Taoist spirituality and the essence of Buddhism. The refined moment living in the ephemeral "floating world", the concept of *Ukiyo* complements the elaborate rituals of tea-houses and gentle movements of geishas. An allusion of a silhouette, quietly resonating stylistic condensation, may disquiet the never-resting impatience of "long noses" imagination. Many ancient, sophisticated Eastern cultures prefer matte surfaces, a soft touch, understatements of shimmer and whisper. Eastern beauties admire the mystery of jade's mature depth; Western blonds prefer the bright shooting sparkles of diamonds.

The grounded design of interior and exterior harmonise in contemplative reticence, as opposed to the forceful tale-plotted definite direction of an insistent narrative 'tune'. The piety of subtle, only reflected and filtered, smooth light permeates traditional Japanese house, its sources carefully secreted behind matte-paper lanterns or a shoji screen. The feeling of the interiors' ambient lighting reflects the

appreciation of the nuances of a praised atmosphere. Save for Bergman/Nykvist psychological masterpieces, one had never seen such extremely softened light as in some Japanese films.

I thought about a pictorial organisation of Japanese prints. Tranquillity, the delicate refinement and softness of reined-in outrages of violence embracing undercurrents of emotional forces. A range of pain, sorrow, humour, joy, wisdom, mystery, stretching between the extremely stripped-down haiku verse so lightweight it almost does not exist, and the exuberance of a kabuki play. We might find Far-Eastern eruptions of phantasms, brutal dream scenes, violent apparitions and extreme cries of passion beyond our Western outsiders' 'good taste'. Like Kipling, we react to "a strain of bloodthirstiness in their /Japanese/ composition" with squeamish unease: "the grim fidelity that makes you uncomfortable". Now, an invasion of the anonymous alienation of nervous neon energy drives modern Tokyo or Shanghai. Driving to the location, we talked about all these things, mixing Chinese and Japanese art disciplines in our dilettante understanding of the 'Eastern style'.

The monk prayed continuously only during daylight hours, so we did not even load any lights. With only two days left to shoot, we took two cameras. We did not take a dolly; for a couple of top shots, one of us with a handheld Arri 2C climbed a ladder borrowed from local firefighters. Only the black and white stock was available, but that suited the formal unity. The distracting colours of visitors' dresses, etc., did not interfere. The opening b&w archive shot of a deserted road taken directly after the 1945 Hiroshima explosion set the tone. The monk came from there.

We photographed the first sequence of swaying overgrown grasses that cover the Auschwitz camp's terrible reality. The landscape, grim but alive, was laden with heavy meaning. One could physically feel a chill of absolute, distilled hatred, an inhuman concentration of acute evil. The quiet sparseness of mostly static shots, in step with the monk's becalmed rhythm of monotonous drumming and perpetual wailed incantations, seemed a fitting choice. Focused internally, he barely moved, not even to twitch or swat a fly away. We allowed little camera movement during his prayer and only deviated from that to follow his minute movements when setting up his praying altar. In the introduction, the panning telephoto-lens shot follows the arriving monk: he is moving, but in the filmed effect he is kept within the same part of the frame as the background moves behind him. The image of the road book-ends the film: he walks into the place at dawn and at dusk departs to the place of his next prayer. There is the Japanese concept of reading poetry backwards, starting at the end and working gradually to the beginning. That would be the best reception of *Prayer*, to look back from here and now, and to reflect on how and why.

We did not understand the words of his cyclical mantra at the time and could not organise a Japanese translator at such short notice, but his humbly quiet persistence was involving enough. The Warsaw

University's Japanese faculty later translated his incantation as *beauty is in the lotus flower*. Only when the film was finished and shown did I realise that the lotus flower is an age-old Buddhist symbol of purity. It emerges from muddy waters, white slowly turning into pink, like Buddha rising from the corruption of the material world into enlightenment. The monk's subtle but by no means weak message of the healing power of beauty against the ultimate cruelty became ours. We kept information scarce, avoided commentary or interview. No early establishing shots reveal where we are. Only gradually, towards the final dusk sequence, wider shots disclose the environment's context as we make out the severe shapes of sinister structures looming behind the monk. The iconically recognisable concentration camp watchtowers, dominating the flat landscape, connect with the horrors of the Holocaust.

Our two cameras quietly witnessed his gestures, hands, robes, not daring to intrude on his actions. The face blessed with the all-embracing smile he shared with onlookers. To resonate with the sense of his departure into the trance of boundless meditation, we disregarded editing direction rules, crossing the axis line to strengthen the impression of stepping out of the normal rhythm of everyday experience into a non-space, nowhere and anywhere. In a day's timeframe, as the hours unfold, groups of visiting and curious local people, drawn in by the sound of the monk's drum, encircle him, a little unsure of what is going on. In postproduction, we looked for an element in the soundtrack to correspond to the presence of their world. We wanted to expand the perception of space beyond the sparse frames - through a perspective of sound enriched by a hint of another dimension of, as if drifting on the wind, subliminal echoes from the surrounding rural countryside. Together with Małgosia Jaworska, my inventive soundwoman, we found a recording of tinkling altar bells and a murmur of Christian communal praying, in the studio's sound archives. But then, a little too keen to put my stamp on it, we overdid it in one respect. We came across an authentic sound recording of John Paul's II praying at the very spot: - 'From hunger, fire and war,' - [here he repeated it in a voice trembling from emotion] - 'and war...' - 'deliver us, oh Lord.' It was temptingly fitting and we included it in the track of the closing sequence. The use of voice was extremely limited in the film and, with hindsight, I feel that forcing the Pope's message in his speech was possibly my mistake. Instead of trying to help the Polish audience grasp the incomprehensible enormity of evil in a close-felt encounter, maybe I should have put the distant sound of a Hebrew Kaddish floating on the wind. More appropriate. It would not have been motivated by the



II. 4. Prayer

present time reality we found there, but rather by a thought arching over time. It would have been even subtler, more in keeping with our images, to restrain completely from words.

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Why bundle in one breath my reflections on the practical efforts involved in making these two short documentaries? Bergman talks of “walking through dark portal” as an opaque euphemism for death. In my little way, I was exorcising the same anxiety of life coming to an end. These films were for me an entrance to, or rather an exit from, a theme-obsession. Dealing with a transcendental domain proves how these ungraspable subjects are resistant to being pinned down, expressed or explained in words. I feel still far from seizing the enormities of human suffering in the places these two shorts encounter, but perhaps an attempt to open a screen space to the viewer’s imagination while not over-commenting verbally gives a chance to conspire together in a chain: the Deed (genocide, in these events) – Memory – Filmmaking – the Viewer. Sharing a feeling in an unlocked, not over-described mental space, a lingering thought may cast itself into the present. I felt that words were getting in the way. On this opaque territory, the mood, emptiness of spaces, movement or stillness, the impulse, presence in absence – all outplay an awkward verbalised interpretation. When is absence stronger than presence? There is rarely a univocal, correct recipe. Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that the limits of our knowledge are determined by the limits of our language: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in *silence*”[13].

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PS. I review this text amidst the 2020 virus plague, with daily deaths and the impermanence of our existence very much on our minds...

[13] Translation by DF Pears and BF McGuinness, from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Logisch-Philos-*

ophische Abhandlung), first published in German in 1921.