

# A Bodiless Enemy \*

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Warsaw – bombed in September 1939, devastated during the battles of the Warsaw Uprising, and methodically, systematically, house after house, burnt down after the fall of the Uprising – had four cinemas immediately after the war. To get to these cinemas one had to pass through streets winding between giant heaps of rubble; one passed vigil candles in the city centre commemorating places of execution more or less every thousand meters. In time, the number of cinemas doubled and tripled, and is now close to the European average. But some commemorative plaques from the years of Nazi occupation remain. This may surprise the young European tourist but it can easily be explained. Nowhere else in Europe were innocent people executed in broad daylight on the streets of the city centre.

A Polish historian, Eugeniusz Cezary Król, notes that *the tragic events of World War II meant that for millions of Poles who survived the disaster every German, without exception, became the embodiment of the “absolute enemy” or the “scapegoat”*. For this reason, the trauma of the years 1939-1945 lent support to communist propaganda in Poland. People, coming to terms in this way with their horrendous experiences, willingly watched the cruel enemy being defeated at the cinema <sup>1</sup>. This statement, though generally true, requires some significant revision and additions. The first observation concerns the semantic scope. If in Polish film “every German without exception” has to embody the enemy, this primarily (or solely) concerns the German in a Nazi uniform. The ideological sanction was particularly strong in the first post-war pictures. This was most fully expressed in 1948 by an ex-Auschwitz prisoner, Wanda Jakubowska, in *Ostatni etap (The Last Stage)*, openly declaring the film’s goal: *to show the truth about Auschwitz and to arouse hatred for fascism* <sup>2</sup>. This was the case for many years after in popular film *minorum gentium*: the German in uniform was seen as an advocate of a murderous ideology. The second observation concerns the widespread cinematic image of the German. Awareness of the “cruel enemy having been defeated” very rarely translated into a description of that defeat. This is because Polish narratives of the war and the period of occupation do not manifest the triumph of revenge at all, but are in the great majority martyrological. Finally, there is a certain unacknowledged but important moment in the history of Polish cinema that had bearing on relations with Germany, which I would like to dwell upon here. It concerns the outstanding works of the Polish Film School created at the start of the second post-war decade.

The exponents of this movement, Andrzej Munk (born 1921), Andrzej Wajda (born 1926), and Kazimierz Kutz (born 1929), were too young to have participated

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in the war. The first two, however, came into contact later with the underground Home Army, and the oldest, Munk, took part in the Warsaw Uprising. It was precisely the war, the occupation and the Uprising that formed for them the bond of generational experience. The rich literature on this subject draws our attention to the main directions and differences in artistic attitudes within the Polish Film School. Much less clear, however is the reflection on the moral genesis of these works. In his *Notatki z historii (Notes from History)* published in 1996, Wajda wrote: *We knew that we are the voice of our dead; that our duty is to testify about those who were better*<sup>3</sup>. This declaration leads us away from the previously quoted statement by Jakubowska and the somewhat exaggerated idea of the “absolute enemy” that Król attributed to Polish film narratives about the Germans. From the films that we recall here<sup>4</sup>, there emerges first a toothless enemy, and then a bodiless enemy. There is no place for the absolute enemy because the discussed films are part of the internal issues of a culture. The impulse for hatred also dies out. Wajda says that for him and his peers *the most poignant and painful feeling was the disappointment, which came from wasted hopes and wasted effort*<sup>5</sup>.

This syndrome of fruitless effort and futile sacrifice is inscribed in the structure of *Kanał (Canal)* (1956), the first film narrative about the Warsaw Uprising – a narrative in which, as was pointed out by a German critic, there was *not a trace of hatred for Germans*<sup>6</sup>. The destruction of an insurgent unit was depicted in symbolic language. Not only is the barred exit from the canal a sign of death, but so too is the exit that is open. *Darkness impenetrable and choking leaves a faint hope of salvation*<sup>7</sup>, while the brightness of day ruthlessly takes it away. Wajda’s vision was compared to the image of Dante’s hell. For some this vision was testimony to his artistic skill, for others a sign of escapism, since *the Warsaw Uprising remains in “Canal” an enigmatic creation, in which unknown forces destroy the people*<sup>8</sup>.

True, there is no mention of the Russians or the Germans. As regards the role of the former, Wajda was not allowed to utter a single word at that time; about the latter, he only said a word. In one of the last scenes of the film, the insurgent nicknamed “Wise” comes out of the canal, and finds himself eye to eye with the enemy, who takes the form of an over familiar Charon. We do not even know anything for sure about the nationality of this Polish-speaking hunter of valuables, a robber in German uniform. In the background are the corpses of execution victims. As much as this, only so much. It is a surprisingly succinct fragment of the cruel truth about the Uprising, which Władysław Bartoszewski<sup>9</sup>, the author of *The Chronicle of the Warsaw Uprising*, did not find then in the film, and which would only emerge in 2007 from the documentary scripts written for a film competition on the Uprising.

In contrast to the solemn *Canal*, the picture of the Warsaw Uprising in the first novella entitled *Scherzo alla Polacca* of Andrzej Munk’s 1957 film *Eroica*, is in keeping with realistic, and at times satirical, convention. There is no pathos here; patriotic slogans reverberate in the midst of prosaic daily life. This daily life is not always associated with battle, because the hero of the novella, the Warsaw rascal Dzikus Górkiewicz, does not espouse higher values but is simply trying to survive. On his path he almost never meets any Germans. The ones that he does meet are either tamed by the banality of life or invisible. There is a soldier looking like a depraved reservist, who awkwardly bars our hero’s way with a gun, then gladly lets him pass, accepting a wad of banknotes. There is another soldier who escorts



*Speed*, dir. Andrzej Wajda (1959)

Photo courtesy of Filmoteka Narodowa

a line of refugees from the Uprising, who makes Dżidzius help an elderly woman (in fact, unnecessarily). These are vestigial, civilian images of the toothless enemy. Their traces can be found in Kazimierz Kutz's film *Ludzie z pociągu* (*Night Train*) (1961): at a small train station Bahnschutz sips vodka with the stationmaster, sentimentalizing over the fate of his family, subjected to bombing in Hamburg. The murderous ideology has vanished somewhere, and with it the feeling of mortal danger. In place of the expected executioner–victim relationship appears a category of the fortuitous.

At the end of the war path, Polish survivors meet German marauders. In Munk's film, in which death is anonymous<sup>10</sup>, there are no more such personal images. High up in the sky a plane appears, to drop a few bombs on the city. The pilot, and his barely recognizable target, will remain unidentified too. Just like the crew of the tank that appears behind Dżidzius, as he gorges himself on alcohol above a clay pit pond. Too late to realize the danger, the terrified Górkiewicz falls in the water, begging for mercy. It is not impossible that in this famous parodic sequence the fear is reciprocated. The tank first appears as a giant, soundless ghost, and later on withdraws among the merry cackles of the Germans shut in it. They were lucky this time: the bottle thrown at them by the hero was not filled with petrol.

When the protagonists of *Ostinato lugubre*, the second novella of the same film, walk into a POW camp after the defeat of the Uprising, they are greeted for the first time in a long time with the form *Sie bitte* instead of *du Mensch* (as in another, ultimately not included in the film, novella *Zakonnica* /*The Nun*/, for example). The German superintendents are as always thorough, and polite as never before. One of them stands under a banner "Festival of Contemporary Music" and announces in quite good Polish: *So gentlemen – there will be a bath, uniforms and a search*. The Poles attribute this decency to the requirements of the Geneva Convention. One of them comments: *Strange people, these Germans. They burn people in ovens over there, and here they allow us to organize festivals*. This statement paradoxically finds confirmations in the film's finale. For a long time, the Polish prisoners were sustained by the legend of the heroic fugitive, Lieutenant Zawistowski, who in reality was hiding in the attic. When one day he dies, the officers in the know wish to keep the heroic legend alive. This strange idea, one of many of the Polish nation, can be realized thanks to the discreet help of the camp commander, a representative of the strange German nation.

*Eroica*, the flagship work of the Polish Film School, has met with much criticism over time. Raising the issue of heroism, confronting national mythology with wartime reality, the film inevitably became a source of controversy. We will put this to one side. For us, what is important is that the debate about the fate of Poland, taken on by Munk, has an autotelic character. It is probable that a discussion of such intensity would not have happened without the dramatic events of the war and occupation. And yet it takes place in an inner circle. Its intentional expression is the closed narrative structure of *Ostinato lugubre*, in which Germans remain outside its scope. The enemy wanders somewhere outside. He awakens memories of oppression but is not its necessary, and especially not its demonic, personification. Munk's film is not a tale of Polish martyrdom, blamed on the Germans. It talks about the problems of Polish consciousness, which came to light thanks to the war, just as at other times they were revealed by the plague. We have to deal with this by ourselves.

This attitude is equally clear in the film *Lotna (Speed)* by Wajda. This is one of the very few war films in the history of cinema to feature no enemy. In this movie from the September 1939 campaign, there are no Germans at all. They are not there because the battle episode of the cavalry squadron is part of the national mythology, one more chapter of the same, centuries-old saga of chivalry. The eponymous Lotna is a steed, which in the eyes of the foreign spectator becomes *the symbol of the Polish cavalryman's weapon; it represents the honour of its master and so his ideals of life and death*<sup>11</sup>. This great horse is a harbinger of death, just as Wajda's whole film is an elegy on the death of the old world of the gentry. I once wrote that the symbolic relationship between "Thanatos and Poland" was never more clearly revealed in Polish cinema as in *Speed*<sup>12</sup>.

And this is a very special relationship. A confrontation of the Polish lancers with the German armoured vehicles is inevitable, if we are to relate it to the ancient Sarmatian models of courage, selflessness, sacrifice, and incredible idea of a "handsome death". *You'll see a pretty charge of the lancers* – the gallant officer says to the lady of the manor, preparing himself and his comrades in arms for a hopeless battle that is to take place in a short while. This deeply internalized and symbolic cultural order has all the signs of self-destruction. The existence of the enemy remains beyond this closed universe. That is why the enemy is bodiless and the nationality of said enemy almost interchangeable. Anyhow, it is we, the Poles, who wrestle with our own virtues and vices, hopes and illusions, our own destiny.

And it does not have to come down to the manifestations of egotism. Aleksander Jackiewicz, the critic attached most strongly of all to the Polish School, wrote of a short novella *Pies (Dog)*, from Kazimierz Kutz's film *Krzyż Walecznych (Cross of Valor)* (1959), that *there never was on the Polish screen such a terrible brevity in conveying the relationships between nations, men, each other*<sup>13</sup>. This observation is still valid today. And all the more remarkable is that in this novella-like, miniature portrait of the Polish-German relations, there are no Germans at all. There is only the eponymous dog, found on the road in the final days of the war by three Polish sappers. They take in the Alsatian, as it is lost and stray. Soon, however, they regret this, for the dog's aggression against encountered former Auschwitz prisoners reveals his sinister origins: he probably belonged to an SS man. The discovery becomes the source of contention between the soldiers. One of them still sees the dog as a dog; the other two are ready to swear it is a Nazi hyena. Emotions rise. The members of this miniature anti-Hitler coalition deceitfully get rid of the dog's defender, in order to destroy the animal marked by crime. The soldier Buśko is finally close to administering justice. He stands in front of the dog and aims his gun at him. The dog – helpless or simply trustful – does not run away. However, at the decisive moment the finger does not pull the trigger. An invisible mysterious force drains the executioner of his strength. Probably because he realises he has an innocent animal in front of him. Or perhaps because he is aware he wanted to kill in this way a completely unknown to him, bodiless German.

If we tried to place these problems in an order of values, its contemporary understanding would prove deceptive. The phenomenon of the "bodiless enemy" cannot be recorded in the language of political correctness. Half a century ago, it was too early for the rationalization of the war conflict, and even more so for reconciliation. The discussed works do not propose an immediate reversal of symbols, do

not build the image of a “good German” in place of the negative stereotype. This is not yet the time of *Schindler’s List* or *The Pianist*. *Cross of Valor* is testimony to how hard it is to find empathy in the still smouldering rubble. The war hecatomb did not descend from the sky like a fireball, but resulted from someone’s specific intentions. That way of surviving the trauma is, however, extraordinary and momentous. It is not about revenge, but about spiritual recovery from the disaster. The dematerialization of the enemy does not come from forgiveness, but rather from a particular instinct of self-preservation. It seems to merge psychological needs with moral impulse. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin – as luck would have it, exactly eighty years ago – reflected on the nature of destruction. He distinguished between external and internal destructive forces. On external destruction – cataclysms, shocks, physical annihilation – we have no influence at all; on the other hand, when they end there is a chance we find ourselves in the world of the living.

*What is terrible for us – says Teilhard – is to be irretrievably cut off from things through some interior and irreversible diminishment. Humanly speaking, the internal passivities of diminishment form the darkest element and the most despairingly useless years of our lives*<sup>14</sup>.

It looks like Wajda, Munk and Kutz have intuitively tried to remove this element for their own and the common good. The fabric of their stories, relieved from boulders, cleaned from sand and mud, freed from what Teilhard called *diminishing experiences*, slowly and imperceptibly initiated a new consciousness. We can observe it years later. The noise of propaganda, as any noise, finally stops. The pure tone of art endures.

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<sup>1</sup> E. C. Król, *Wizerunek Niemca etnicznego w polskim filmie po II wojnie światowej*, „Przegląd Historyczny” 2005, vol. XCVI, no. 1.

<sup>2</sup> As cited in A. Madej, *Kino – władza – publiczność. Kinematografia polska w latach 1944-1949*, Bielsko-Biała 2002, p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> A. Wajda, *Moje notatki z historii*, „Kwartalnik Filmowy” 1996/1997, no. 15-16, autumn – winter.

<sup>4</sup> I leave out the reflection on the reconstruction of the September 1939 events: *Wolne miasto (Free City)* (1958) and *Westerplatte* (1967) by Stanisław Różewicz. These films were intended as para-documentaries – the director of *Free City* even chose actors according to their resemblance to the defenders of Gdańsk Post Office.

<sup>5</sup> A. Wajda, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> W. Freisburger, “Die Welt”, 2.08.1958, as cited in A. Wajda, *Filmy*, Warszawa 1996, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> M. Martin, “Cinéma 58”, March 1958, as cited in: ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> B. Michałek, “Teatr i Film”, January 1957, as cited in: ibidem, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> W. Bartoszewski, “Stolica”, 9.06.1957, as cited in: ibidem, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> This was pointed out by B. Stolarska in her essay *Zakładnicy nadziei*, „Kwartalnik Filmowy” 1997, no. 17.

<sup>11</sup> R. Prédal, “*Lotna*”, czyli bolesny obraz przemiany, „Kwartalnik Filmowy” 1996/1997, no. 15-16, autumn – winter.

<sup>12</sup> About this problem and more widely on the cultural background of *Speed*: R. Marszałek, *Filmowa pop-historia*, Kraków 1984, pp. 359-368.

<sup>13</sup> A. Jackiewicz, *Moja filmoteka. Kino polskie*, Warszawa 1983, p. 186.

<sup>14</sup> P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, transl. S. Cowell, Brighton 2004, p. 42.