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Echoes of Reality: Representation and Alienation in Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*

Despite the large-scale tragedy of the Holocaust, people have not shied away from re-presenting it in different forms. Film is among one of the more popular forms, and so the representation of the Holocaust on film has become a crucial point of debate. How does one even begin to attempt a visual depiction of the atrocities of the Holocaust? Is there a boundary between realism and insensitivity? What makes one Holocaust film more realistic than another? What does the Holocaust film mean for its survivors? While it is universally acknowledged as a horrible tragedy, memory of the Holocaust varies from individual to individual, which helps explain the eclectic genre of Holocaust films produced since the end of WWII. The concept of realism, then, becomes a loose term when trying to describe Holocaust films. Because true reality can never be fully translated into an artistic form, films can only "connote[] reality." Films "connote[] reality" not just through the content of the film, but also through the editing process and the cinematography (Kerner 17). In this paper, realism will be defined as the extent to which a film adheres to a sense of believability using film techniques.

Generally, Holocaust scholars tend to favor documentaries over feature films when it comes to realism, and in good reason. Documentaries usually achieve their authenticity through the use of Nazi footage, photos, or other primary sources of that period (Baron 8). Feature films, on the other hand, attempt to achieve a sense of realism by reconstructing the details, actions, and emotions of that time. An example is Roman Polanski's 2002 film, *The Pianist*, based on the

memoir of the same name. Although *The Pianist* opens with real video footage of Warsaw in 1939 like those in documentaries, the rest of the film is primarily a reconstruction. Polanski's film follows a Polish-Jewish musician, Wladyslaw Szpilman, as the Holocaust unfolds before his eyes. As Polanski himself was a Holocaust survivor, this film resonates with him on a personal level. He does more than just re-present the Holocaust and Szpilman's tale of survival. He skillfully employs simple film techniques while turning away from more dramatic ones in order to create a film that showcases a sort of gritty realism. The simplicity of the cinematography suggests the film's role as Polanski's own way of coming to terms with his past experiences. Additionally, the subtle, direct camera work pushes Szpilman as a symbol of alienation for Holocaust survivors. *The Pianist*, therefore, stretches beyond the typical conventions of "representing the unrepresentable" (Kerner 6).

The Holocaust has often been referred to as "unrepresentable" because of the mass persecution and murder of Jews, the Roma, and many other ethnic groups. As a result of this persecution and murder, hundreds of Jewish communities crumbled under the Nazi regime. By the war's end, there was a huge loss in Jewish memory and identity. Some Jews, like *The Pianist*'s Wladyslaw Szpilman, sought to regain what they lost by turning to various art forms. Written not long after the war, Szpilman's memoir enabled him to "work through his shattering wartime experiences and free his mind and emotions" (Szpilman 8). However, his memoir was relatively unknown until his son took the initiative to republish the book nearly fifty years later. Szpilman's story appealed greatly to Polanski. The two both survived the horrors of a German-occupied Poland. Polanski found that Szpilman's experience was close enough to his own without it being explicitly *his* own. Prior to *The Pianist*, Polanski had already achieved a great amount of recognition in the cinematic world. Despite this fact, he had never involved himself in

creating a motion picture addressing his childhood experiences. It was not that he did not want to create a film on the Holocaust, but it was how to do it that created difficulties. In fact, Steven Spielberg had even offered Polanski to direct *Schindler's List*. Polanski turned the offer down, presumably because the story was a bit too close to his experiences (Ain-Krupa 139). Szpilman's memoir, while also exhibiting a myriad of similarities to Polanski's life, could better intertwine with Polanski's story so that the latter followed the shadows of the former without ever directly revealing itself.

For the most part, Polanski's representation of the Holocaust diverges from the typical discussion of representation that scholars have on this topic. Aaron Kerner, a professor of cinema, claims that there is no single "right" way to represent the Holocaust on screen. However, he does admit the frequency in which Holocaust films are rendered a "dramatic spectacle" that "only serves as a backdrop or narrative alibi for dramatic conflict and/or a test of a character's fortitude that fosters his or her transformation" (Kerner 31, 32). At the same time, resistance and defiance are a common representation. *The Pianist* falls under this as "a resistance to Nazi brutality" and as a way to emphasize the transcending effect of music during such brutality (Kerner 72). Music is a key component to resistance and survival. Jewish history professor Lawrence Baron makes a similar claim regarding Holocaust representation as a whole, that it should not be limited. He also states the dramatizing present in Holocaust films, particularly narrative films. This purposefully tries to elicit an emotional and reflective response from the audience, which has led many scholars to prefer documentaries over feature films. *The Pianist*, despite being more "credible" because of Polanski's role in its creation, is no exception to dramatization (Baron 8, 244). Michael Stevenson, unlike Kerner and Baron, does not point out *The Pianist* as a dramatic film. The film and theater professor suggests it is the opposite, a film that is quieter and calmer to

juxtapose the "frantic experiences of attempts at survival" (Stevenson 149). This juxtaposition thus allows for easy opportunities to expose the audience to the atrocities of the Holocaust as well as give them a chance at reflection.

While Kerner, Baron, and Stevenson concern themselves primarily with the representation of the Holocaust, Alexander Stein places more importance on the role of the survivor and his art, particularly as seen in *The Pianist*. Stein, as a training analyst, considers *The Pianist* as a unique genre of the Holocaust film that speaks with brutal honesty. Polanski pushes the honesty further through a "deliberate manipulation of conventions of realism" that resolves the debate over a proper representation of the Holocaust (Stein 442). He also stresses the art of music as Szpilman's primary survival tool. The absence of a formal consensus when it comes to what can and cannot represent the Holocaust on screen merely means that, as Baron mentions, cannot and should not be restricted to one genre.

Restrictions of representation certainly cannot be placed on Polanski's *The Pianist*. The events and details of *The Pianist* are primarily true, but Polanski does take some artistic liberties with the film. While he does not necessarily dramatize the film, it does seem to follow the dramatic structure of a protagonist who undergoes harsh conflict, but eventually overcomes it. But the typical plotline of the film is just following Szpilman's memoir. This seemingly contrived plot is how Szpilman's story actually plays out. To avoid this structure would be to not tell his story at all. Instead, Polanski counteracts potential triteness by downplaying the dramatics of scenes. He does not drag on scenes when it is unnecessary or purposely create suspense, unlike *The Grey Zone*'s gas chamber flashback scene and *Schindler's List*'s shower scene. In his previous films, where he could "indulge in a certain dance," Polanski opts to create a controlled, but calm mood. A certain kind of simplicity is evident, where the camera movement is not as

noticeable so that the audience is "absolutely unaware of the director" (Polanski). Polanski achieves this simplicity in *The Pianist* with frequent point-of-view shots, long shots, and establishing shots. The mise-en-scène of the film is not flashy and easily blends into the atmosphere while inviting viewers a glimpse into that world that cannot be understood. Polanski cleverly incorporates diegetic sounds at crucial times to highlight Szpilman's isolation, as well as to heighten a sense of realism. He makes sure to forgo more dramatic techniques—extreme close-ups, jump-cuts, and quick zooming to name a few—because it would not be true to his or Szpilman's experiences. The lack of dramatics and the camera's strict focus on Szpilman also helps to emphasize the period of isolation he is forced to accept. Although he is alone for majority of the film, Szpilman is followed by the invisible company of other survivors who also can relate to his story. Polanski's compellingly straightforward style delivers a powerful understanding of what it really means to be a Holocaust survivor.

While true that Szpilman's solitary state in the latter part of the film is undoubtedly central to the story of the Holocaust survivor, the scenes he spends with his family hammer down the emotional difficulty endured. In one of the scenes, Szpilman and his family are eating dinner, but are interrupted when German soldiers stop and enter the apartment across from theirs. As they are speaking and eating, the sounds of car wheels screeching in the background from the streets below causes them to completely freeze for a second before realizing what is happening (Polanski 28:22). The screeching is not particularly loud, but is amplified by the silence. The reaction to instantly cease all conversation over the screeching clearly suggests that this is out of the ordinary and is recognized as some sort of danger. Szpilman's brother, Henryk, immediately goes over to the window to confirm their suspicions and tells Szpilman to turn off the lights. From that point on, the Szpilmans all gather at their windows and watch in silence as the Nazis

round up the inhabitants in the street, force them to run, and then proceed to shoot them all as they attempt to flee (Polanski 28:22-31:02). The point-of-view shot allows audiences to see the event that occurs below the same way that the Szpilman family does. It places viewers in the room with them, also looking out the window. Through the POV shot, Polanski evinces the feeling of constant anxiety, fear, and helplessness of the Szpilmans as they watch. The POV is set for the viewer to look down from above from a relatively high distance. The "eyes" of the camera follow closely to whatever is happening. At one point, the camera tilts slowly up, stopping at each window of each floor until reaching eye level at the fourth floor. With each floor, the lights of previously dark rooms are turned on (Polanski 29:23). At first, it might not be completely clear what the Nazis are planning, but the process of turning off the lights and being quiet suggests an awareness of what is going to happen, and the slow tilts reflect the Szpilmans' reluctance to accept it. Even though they have an idea of what is going on, they are also aware that it is not in their power to do something.

By being aware of everything that is happening but not being able to do anything, the Jewish victims are reduced to a state of powerlessness. The murders of the Jews in the scene are all long shots. The long shots further the distance between victim and spectator, both literally and figuratively. Although Szpilman, his family, and very likely the rest of the tenants do not agree with what the Nazis are doing, they do not feel a particularly strong connection with the victims.

There is no fixed bridge among them, despite being in the same situation of fear and helplessness. The Jews separate themselves from each other so that they only care for themselves. This powerlessness thereby "captures the terrifying nature of the ghetto ethos" (Quart). Rather than saying that fellow Jewish spectators *cannot* help the victims, they in fact *will not* help the victims. The psychic environment of the Holocaust is thus understood to mean only looking out for oneself. There is no defined moral code that exists among the Szpilmans and the victims, no attempt to go out of one's way to save another unless there was an established relationship beforehand. Polanski implies that the Holocaust effectively separated a group with a common identity and continued to severe any existing communal identity by allowing an unobstructed view of the Nazis' atrocious acts.

In addition to long shots, the steady transition from completely dark windows to light also suggests that separation. Every time the shot stops at each story, there is about a second gap before the lights in the rooms turn on, putting an end to that darkness (Polanski 29:03). Here, Polanski twists the traditional motif of light as a sign of hope into a symbol of death. The use of light in an unconventional matter merely brings more alarm to the shockingly overwhelming atrocities committed at night (Szpilman 76). Any of the rooms that stay dark are presumed to be safe, to have escaped death for the moment. The ones that continue to stay in the dark are still a part of the Jewish collective identity, but the Jews that have their room lights turned on are pulled out of their homes and out of their community. They become cast out from others and are essentially isolated, especially when they scatter before being murdered. Their corpses lay on the vast, empty ground spaces apart from each other; even in death they are still being isolated from the Jews, and especially from the Germans. In fact, these deaths actually solidify the inevitable alienation that will happen to the Jewish victims, like Szpilman.

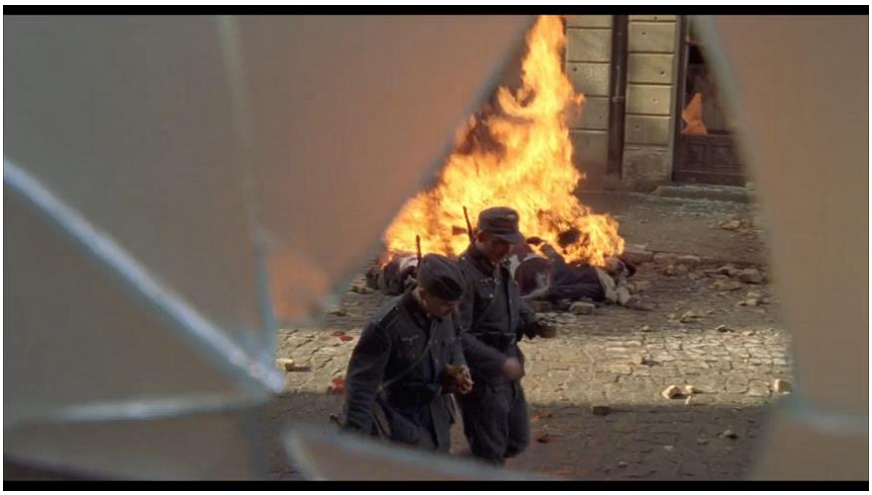
As expected, Szpilman must accept his own alienation after being torn apart from his family some time after. Once devoid of any familial relations, the film takes an even narrower turn, as now everything is seen and heard straight from Szpilman's limited perspective, whereas earlier, viewers could get a broader sense of what was happening in part because of his family. Polanski uses the scene where Szpilman flees his locked apartment room when the Germans begin bombing to illustrate his isolation as well to effectively immerse viewers into the situation. Right as the explosion hits Szpilman's room, a loud ringing runs on for a rather long duration. Every other sound is muffled in comparison to the ringing as Szpilman makes his escape (Polanski 1:47:25). The ringing mimics what the deafened Szpilman hears at the moment, and only comes to a stop when it has stopped for him. The aural POV makes it seem as if the viewer is actually there with him at the time of the explosion. Auditory senses are teased so as to briefly relive the moment. After Szpilman has escaped his room and the ringing has come to a stop, another example arises where Polanski incorporates sounds—in this case, the language spoken—so as to align with how detached Szpilman is in that moment. As Szpilman runs up to the attic of the demolished building in desperation to escape the Germans, the latter are heard speaking in

the background (Polanski 1:48:22). Majority of the film is in English, but often the German soldiers will speak German with each other and with the Jews even though the latter often didn't speak much German themselves, including Szpilman. The film, however, does not provide translations for the audience when German is being spoken. It is very likely that the general audience will not understand the Germans, thus being left out of the film experience like how Szpilman has been left out from human contact. The high-frequency ringing and the untranslated German is how Polanski continues to recreate the reality of the Holocaust from the perspective of a helpless survivor.

Polanski not only uses diegetic sounds to reconstruct the experience of the Holocaust, but he also uses the mise-en-scène for a similar function. Right as Szpilman's room is struck, the dust and debris fill up the screen so that it becomes difficult to see clearly. The low-key lighting does not help as well, as Szpilman is mostly seen as just a dark figure when he makes his way through the dust (Polanski 1:48:38). For the most part, details are enveloped by translucent dust. Because a veil of dust essentially covers the screen, the destruction can only be caught with a glance but not to its full extent. Szpilman is only focused on escaping in this scene, so the destruction takes a backseat. It is not given the primary attention because Polanski intends for the audience to be reeled into Szpilman's mind. Although acting as a backdrop, the entirety of the destruction can still be sensed, suggesting that the losses incurred by Holocaust survivors cannot be forgotten.

Polanski accepts the reality of his own experiences and realizes that they cannot be forgotten, but acknowledges that all the atrocities that have been witnessed have nearly desensitized such horror. After Szpilman finds temporary refuge in an abandoned hospital, Polanski cuts straight to a POV shot. The shot is mostly covered by a window, and the outside

can only be seen in part because of a hole. The view is very narrow, but it is easy to see that German soldiers are piling up corpses before setting them on fire (Polanski 1:53:16).



While Szpilman watches all this, there is no visible reaction from him. There is "no drama in his expression, only curiosity, and a bearing witness to the events as they pass" (Ain-Krupa 146). By this time, the number of deaths Szpilman has seen no longer has an effect on him. He understands that the Germans, their murderous actions, and their victims cannot be avoided. Since Szpilman deals with what he sees calmly, the mass killing of the Holocaust is magnified without shoving it completely in the audience's faces at every moment.

While Szpilman has mostly learned to react rather stoically to the deaths around him, he is actually unprepared for exposure of the sheer amount of destruction in Poland. As he made his earlier escape from the apartment room he had been locked in, he had not been able to register the same shock he does later on when he is exposed to the destruction once again. Szpilman is forced to relocate from the abandoned hospital when the Germans set it on fire. He flees through one of the windows and makes his way over a stone wall. From here, an extreme long shot slowly reveals a completely destroyed Warsaw that stretches on endlessly (Polanski 1:55:54). The long shot provides a startlingly captivating image of the degree of wreckage. The endlessness of the ruins serves as a reminder that this tragedy did not just stop there. It continued on and on, with no hopeful prospects. The dull grays of the ruins and even the cloudy sky of this

shot work together to further dampen and destroy any hope. As Szpilman recounted in his memoir, he was "alone in a whole city that only two months ago had had a population of a million and a half" (Szpilman 167). The fact that that kind of decimation could occur in a relatively short time span really emphasizes the ferocity of the German assault. The extreme distance from the camera to Szpilman also makes his isolation even more prominent. He is the lone figure that stands among the rubble, looking around in hopeless despair. His losses and the losses of the survivors he stands for are all projected onto those rows and rows of buildings. With just this single shot, the entire story of the Holocaust can be articulated: the story of destruction and "total isolation" (Stein).

Polanski's ability to capture the entirety of the Holocaust in just one shot with very little action and no dialogue reinforces the film's function as a piece of memory. Polanski aims not necessarily to entertain, but to present a story true to his experiences. As mentioned previously, he deliberately avoids such filmic devices like extreme close-ups, jump-cuts, and quick zooms, thereby turning "away from sentiment and melodrama." The unsentimental take on the Holocaust draws the audience instead "towards difficulty" (Stevenson 156). Although the

audience is pulled into the movie as a silent observer, they are not allowed access to the emotional experience. Their "identification with [Szpilman] is rather more distant" (Stevenson 149). Polanski never attempts to present Szpilman or any other characters with empathy, never tries to reach for an emotional response as Baron suggests. The emotional distancing along with the film slowly becoming dominated by Szpilman's own perspective provides an opportunity to comprehend the Holocaust on the surface, but not anything more simply, because it is beyond the realms of full comprehension for an outsider.

Overall, Polanski's method of pulling in the viewer, yet at the same time keeping them at a distance is his method of revealing to the world the "unrepresentable." He immerses the viewer into Szpilman's world through multiple visual and aural points-of-view. The magnitude of destruction the Germans cause becomes all the more real in the eyes of a helpless Polish-Jew, who must consistently depend on his luck to survive. Time and time again, Szpilman makes narrow escapes or is saved from death by benefactors. Contrary to Stein's claim, music is not his savior. Szpilman does often turn to music for comfort, but it is far from being the key to his survival. In actuality, music becomes his sole companion after he is cut off from human contact. His alienation from the world, as highlighted by the impressive long shots and mise-en-scène, is representative of Szpilman, Polanski, and all other Holocaust survivors. It makes sense, then, for Polanski to avoid the conventions of dramatic theater when it comes to *The Pianist*. Even if *The Pianist* serves to help Polanski confront his past experiences, the loneliness stays with him. He understands that film cannot convey what is truly real; the world of cinema can only touch the surface and attempt to mirror the past, but will never be able to entirely render it.

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