

TEUTONIC KNIGHTS, HAKATISTS, FASCISTS: THE PICTURE OF THE GERMAN IN THE POLISH POST-WAR CINEMA

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What strikes us at once is the comparatively poor corpus of films on the basis of which a film-picture of the German could be reconstructed. It is poor, especially when approached from a thematic perspective. Let us have a look at it: 80 per cent of all the titles of Polish film production for cinemas in the period 1946-1995 that can be classified as films portraying the German nation are about WW II and the repercussions of those times—social, political, psychological. Films referring to the 19th and 20th centuries up to the year 1918 amount to only 10 per cent, let alone the films focusing on the interwar period (5%) or the history before the turn of the 18th century (4%). In a way this is understandable; however, the repertoire is also poor in respect to specific genres.

If we agree that most of the war films are battle films, i.e. war films *sensu stricto*, this means that the theatre of war is the basic archive of the collective memory of the Germans. Again, it is not extraordinary, yet this fact has far-reaching consequences to be discussed later. The picture of the German people fixed in these films creates an inexhaustible reservoir of features taken over also by other media. On the other hand, what is surprising is the fact that in spite of the usually strong opposition of the perception of the German from the Federal Republic and his neighbour in GDR, the cinema remained completely insensitive to this dichotomy. There does not exist in our film repertoire any portrait, not even a trace of the sketch of a portrait of both nations, so expressively contrasted in popular social representations, and hence in stereotypes.

Let us say straight off: the picture of the German has been reduced to a historical (or rather historicizing) pattern, especially the one from the most recent history; it is a repeatable tableau rather than a picture of the nation marked by variety. If we

add up all thematic categories, it turns out that the picture of Germans is based on an image of a timid, stupid and criminal soldier, a bloodthirsty capitalist, or else a ruthless and aggressive clerk as a representative of the authorities of the partitioning country and later of the occupier. TV films and series do not change anything in this stereotype, but make it even more vivid. Similarly, even if not completely black, German characters happen to flash across the screen, not having much impact on the overall narrative. Obviously, the situation will be very similar, for example, in the French or American cinema, because the answer of art to historical rights cannot be any different. Thus, if this stereotype, just like any other, grows from the discourse of history, then it is essential to look at it more closely, now that history has finally defined our neighbourhood more felicitously.

WE AND THEY

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The way in which this mechanism operates is relatively simple and psychosocially understandable. The picture of Germans propagated in the war films has a bearing on the whole tradition of the cinema and in consequence it becomes fixed. This refers to, for example, *Teutonic Knights* (*Krzyżacy*, 1960) by Aleksander Ford, which, in the mediaeval setting, makes use of the system of stereotypes typical for the war-cinema, consisting in the opposition of the morality of the Teutonic and the ethics of the Slavs. The Teutonic Knights implement their policy of *Drang nach Ost* under the flags of the Virgin Mary and Christ, yet because the mission of the Order proves in reality a mission of barbarians, the Teutonic Knights cannot win this war. God leaves the barbarians and backs up the Slavs, even though many of them had hardly emerged from the darkness of paganism.

Whenever the topos of Germans as barbarians realizing their own mission of conquest in the east is exploited, the opposition—we / you, fellow countryman / stranger—takes on an especially distinct form, which becomes the basis for stereotypes. In this way there comes into being a system of characters based on binaries: affirmative—negative, good—bad. Such distinct oppositions lead to generalizations, which in turn produce schemata resulting in national stereotypes. The construction of characters is limited to only a few recurring traits, used contrastively; obviously, in this dichotomy, “we” is viewed favourably. Finally the process leads to the fixation of binaries in the long-term memory of viewers (but also authors themselves), which allows for all kinds of projections into the future: Germans as criminals and spies involved in an affair threatening the Polish *raison d'état*, or agents who smuggle weapons into a peaceful country (cf. *Gdziekolwiek jest, jeśliś jest*, *Wherever You are, if You are*) by Krzysztof Zanussi (1988).

Such an opposition of we / they is particularly strongly ideologized in our cinema. The enemy neighbour is portrayed predominantly—and almost invariably—as an aggressor, and not only a military one. Even if, as in *Promised Land* by Andrzej Wajda

(*Ziemia obiecana*, 1974), its mission consists in laying the foundations of the capitalist economy in an underdeveloped country, it is still an ambiguous mission, because it only conceals the myth of the colonizer, one of the most ancient myths about western neighbours. Germany wants to buy out our country and afterwards even to occupy it, sounds the warning and the source of the mobilization. This is a more gentle variety of the topos of the conqueror, revealing the still existing schemata of *Drang nach Ost* and reinforcing the image of Germans as invaders.

This is also the subject of Filip Bajon's *Inspection of the Crime Scene* 1901 (*Wizja lokalna* 1901), which, despite a different setting, also speaks about the violence of one nation against another; it is violence in the area of culture, which makes it the most threatening one, because its results are sometimes incalculable. A gallery of German clerks of repulsive countenance creates a chamber of horror, wherein the first fiddle is played by primitive "morons," such as teacher Koralewski or rector Fedtke, and sophisticated "intellectuals" like landrat Mossenbach or secret councillor Wagner, hastening to their relief from Berlin. Both the morons and intellectuals have only one mission to accomplish, common to the members of the Hakata Society: to ravage the spirit of Polishness in the nation, even if it is to be done by compulsory religious instruction in German. And each of them does it in his own the way. Baron Mossenbach is guided mostly by sentiment, by faithfulness to the ancestral memory rather than by political motives. By contrast, councillor Wagner, standing guard over the political interests of the Reich, with his absurd call to teach religion in Polish, even though by Germans, will humiliate the baron: "Politics [...] has one aim: governing. And governing must be efficient. [...] And it is often the case that events originally unprofitable for the state finally gain the value of advantageousness."

In the film *The Magnate* (*Magnat*, Polish–West Berlin–GDR–co-production, 1986) the history of the lordly family von Teuss gains an interesting philosophical interpretation. It is here that the idea of *Kulturträger* appears, yet von Tuess is capable of being a peaceful, friendly, and educated neighbour and a lord, even if over time the reality proved more complicated than could be foreseen by the film heroes themselves.

FROM FORBIDDEN SONGS TO FORBIDDEN LOVE

Let us return, however, to the genre that was most productive in the representation of Germans, and that most strongly serviced the fixation of the stereotype of Germans as a barbarous nation: to the war film. Already in the first Polish post-war feature film, in *Forbidden Songs* (*Zakazane piosenki*, 1946/1948) by Leonard Buczkowski, Germans were shown as a foreign power and an enemy, not only in its military aspect, but—what is interesting—also as an enemy to civilization and culture. This power, by means of guns, tries to enforce a foreign lifestyle: the music of Chopin is to be replaced with jazz, and the theatre with tingel-tangel. In short, the civilization of high culture is to be ousted by cheap entertainment. Invaders are no longer only

representatives of a foreign force, but mostly representatives of a foreign race which does not fit the space of Polish culture at all; even though they are neighbours, they are hostile. So when in the second version of the film (because the first was found too gentle—for example, German soldiers are shown treating children with sweets), by order of the censors, the terror of the invaders (shooting of the young street singer, the round-up) has been intensified, the picture of the fighting in the invaded Warsaw was elevated to the role of a topos of the defence of the European civilization against barbarians.

What is paradoxical is that the film producers weakened the awe of the Nazi occupation by attributing it features typical of the Weimar Republic, which the Nazi system persecuted ruthlessly. Buczkowski “Americanized,” so to say, the Hitlerites, because he credited them with qualities identified by themselves as belonging to the Jewish (that is: American) culture, against which they fought most fiercely: jazz, freedom of action, noisiness... The manner of creating a picture of invaders was strange, but, after all, it was ideologically just. It was so, because such a representation made it possible to kill two birds with one stone. The other bird was America, even if the producers were not quite aware of what they were doing because in the year 1947 the ideological frontline ran in a different place than in the years related in *Forbidden Songs*. 355

Different, though far from homogeneous, is the representation of the occupation period in so-called camp-films. In one of the later productions of this sub-genre, the existential morality-like film *Kornblumenblau* by Jacek Wosiewicz (1988), we look at the camp as the hell administered by Nazi robbers and human wrecks. And though little is changed in this system by the “humane” block-overseer, who occasionally treats prisoners with an apple or by the chef who remains rudimentarily “human” even when he terrifies others, at least one can follow the principle revealed to the fellow-prisoner by Tadeusz, the hero of the film: “You must be ... careful in what you are doing. Never panic. Analyse the situation. Normally you will not win with them. But take it easy. There is a way out. Each of them has some human weaknesses. You must take advantage of them, as much as possible. As much as possible.” And it is exactly according to this rule that the Germans shown in the film behave.

Beyond such a topos of *the Angel of Extermination* there can be found other camp-films, especially *Last Stage (Ostatni etap, 1948)*, *The End of Our World (Koniec naszego świata, 1954)* by Wanda Jakubowska, and *The Passenger (Pasażerka, 1962)* by Andrzej Munk and Witold Lesiewicz. The first two inscribe themselves not into the strategy of a witness but rather an ideological censor, as a consequence of which the Evil gets its univocally political interpretation: the executioners are exclusively Hitlerites, victims—Jews and Communists, and among them, of course, are also German antifascists. Such a distinction, according to the Marxian ideological assumption, acquires the status of the all-powerful cliché, which determined the picture of “good” and “bad” Germans until the 1990s.

It is only in Munk's films that this symmetry becomes unsettled. But Munk would not be himself if he did not add to the symmetry a touch of deep and painful irony. In the second story of *Eroica* (1957), in the setting of a prisoner-of-war camp for Polish soldiers, decorated with the slogan "The Festival of the Contemporary Music," an officer cannot understand the camp-world: "What a strange nation these Germans are. There they are burning people in stoves and here they permit us to organize festivals." "The Geneva Convention. Another life"—the other one replies. That is to say, after all, it is a civilized nation that complies with international conventions. What an irony, one would say, remembering the German officer betting with the German philologist Tomicki—the title character of *Don Gabriel* from the film by Ewa and Czesław Petelski (1966). Tomicki, trusting the alibi of his Leipzig-Heidelberg philosophical education, still believes that a philosophical disputation with the Hitlerite makes sense. Yet the latter has only one answer to all ethical questions: "The intellectual is happiest when he submits to an authority." And he takes the gullible professor

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But let us return to *The Passenger*. It is most probably the only Polish war film where the straight oppositions of the "we—they" type, based on the ideological criteria (or political ones), are completely discarded. Contrary to what others tried to prove, the director seems to be saying that Germans as a nation are not predestined to be murderers, because neither biology nor the psyche, and not even history, make people barbarians. It is only when they have to take decisions and act that they cannot defend their human nature. Thus who is to blame for the death of millions of victims is not an abstract Nazi system, but the concrete officials of this system who blindly trusted the ideology hostile to human beings. Aufseherin Liza—the mixture of tenderness and cruelty—represents the other end of the range of Germans from the camp supervision in the film by Jakubowska. In human terms she is a woman on par with the prisoner Marta, with whom she strives for domination while being on the other side of the camp barrier.

This psychodrama, painful to both sides, makes Liza realize her part in the criminal system. But her drama lies also in the fact that Marta does not want any longer to play the part of a slave and, what is more important, that she tries, quite efficiently, to humiliate Liza, annihilating her good intentions, so rare in the camp-hell. Liza unceasingly believes that she does her duty for the Reich and to succeed in this she is ready to sacrifice everything. The lack of political argumentation on the one hand, and a mythologizing perspective on the other, place the character of Liza somewhere within the area of problems of conscience. This is a rare case of treating the problem of guilt and punishment and the executioners and victims in the Polish cinema.

A similar approach can be seen in Ford's adaptation of *The First Day of Freedom* (*Pierwszy dzień wolności*, 1964), although this follows from the drama by Leon Kruczkowski rather than from the director's intention. For the first time ever there appears the character of a noble German, a provincial doctor, one of those Germans who did nothing that should cause them to flee, and who have no special reasons to

stay, one exception being the responsibility for the ill and wounded. Although the Polish-Soviet army is approaching, Doctor Rhode and his daughters do not evacuate westward. He belongs to those who knew much about the crimes of the system of which they were a small part. However, they did nothing against it and in consequence they cannot feel quite innocent. So he is at the disposal of his new lords—Polish soldiers returning from an officers' prisoner-of-war camp and believes that in this way he will atone at least for a part of his failure—his own passivity—but also for the guilt of his own degenerated nation. In the portrayal of the doctor's family there is a rich menu of German features—victims of the system who did not kill but only silently contributed to legalizing the authority of the Hitlerites, with their economic stability, with indifference of *Gemütlichkeit*, with the care for placidity at any cost... The price the doctor will pay for his decision to stay at his place will be high: the eldest daughter will be raped first by war vagrants, and afterwards once again by a fanatical German soldier, her former fiancé Otto, who in a moment of hopelessness can only pay homage to the wisdom of the Führer: "What is worth a nation which cannot win?" 357

At last Inga herself will shoot at those thanks to whom a moment ago she could feel a little safe and could understand anything of the war tangle. However Ford's film, in spite of all its merits, fixes the stereotype according to which the German nation can be divided into wild criminals and their victims—common men. Even though this well-mannered German becomes a murderess of Polish soldiers, she commits the act under duress and finally gets killed by the man whose wounds her father dressed not long before. This requires a word of comment. Both film adaptations of Kruczkowski's Germans were produced by foreign cinematographers: the first one, made in 1951, entitled *Die Familie Sonnenbrucks* and directed by Georg C. Klaren, came into being in GDR's Defa. The other one, made in 1996 by Zbigniew Kamiński, was an American-Polish co-production. Does that mean that we are afraid to face the drama by Kruczkowski in the country of the writer?

Very close to such a moral perspective is the picture of Germans in the film by Jan Rybkowski *When Love was a Crime / Kiedy miłość była zbrodnią* (*Rassenschande*, 1967), all the more that in this film about Polish *Landarbeiter* in the Reich there appears an erotic plot. The beautiful widow Bethman takes to her farm a Pole to whom she takes a liking. She treats him like a human being, invites him to her table, does not have him live in the cow-shed, although she is aware of the possible consequences. This relation does not evolve into a sexual one, yet there emerges a kind of agreement between them, or at least understanding. Another German woman, a waitress from a café, even has an affair with a Pole. Rybkowski draws an interesting portrait of women who—though for different reasons—place feelings higher than the regulations on the cleanness of races.

Thus, on the one hand, there are ruthless administrators of the system, avenging for any relation between Germans and Poles. On the other hand, we find "normal" women, who in spite of the war want to love, and they do not divide men into locals and strangers because it is not their idea of division. To be sure, the opposition of

“good” and “bad” Germans reappears, but only in terms of the emotional relations between women and men. Rybkowski’s film bears the palm. One should remember that it is not antifascists who are the heroes of this story, but modest workers of the system, and that the film was made by Polish and West Berlin producers. Surely, the expiatory intentions of the co-producers must have influenced the conciliatory character of the film, which agitated the Polish guardians of race in 1968.

WAR AND THE POP-HISTORY

Of course there is no place for such nuances in various popular representations of battles and military campaigns. At the war front there are no people, let alone individuals, but only a diverse mass of enemy soldiers who, simply as a mass of representatives of a criminal nation must be defeated. He—the enemy—represents the war-machine, we—victims—must face it. It is enough to remember Jerzy Passendorfer’s *Direction Berlin* (*Kierunek Berlin*, 1968) and *Last Days* (*Ostatnie dni*, 1969), which set a model for this type of film, to see the ideological beauty of that opposition. Here “we” signifies exclusively the soldiers of the People’s Army (AL), whose “healthy core” consists of workers and peasantry. In this way the truth of history falls victim to the half-truths of history textbooks, servants of the propaganda. This explains the multitude of national heroes designated as such “in the name” of the people to represent its historical rights—simple workers and peasants opposed to German Junkers. The fight against Germany becomes somehow ideologized as a fight for a new social order. For this reason victory is certain. Such is the law of history that the winners are those who fight for noble goals. That’s why in this fight one can lose a battle, but not the war.

Here lies one of the most productive mechanisms of stereotyping, so frequently made use of in war comedies and partisan films. The splendidly armed and trained Nazi army can be conquered thanks to cleverness, the ounce of luck, but also enormous devotion. What really counts is not the intelligent decisions of strategists, but the smart operations of single plebeian heroes—Smiths and Browns—for whom the war is an opportunity to prove their smarts and courage, that is to say, war is simply an adventure. Such a pop-history of the war, enjoying strip cartoon structure and replacing the discourse about History with an effect of history, triumphs in the film by Tadeusz Chmielewski *Where is the General?* (*Gdzie jest general?*, 1963), to get settled for good in the television series *Four Tank Crewmen and the Dog* (*Czterej pancerni i pies*) and *The Stake Greater than Life* (*Stawka większa niż życie*). Chmielewski introduced to the Polish cinema that thoroughly German genre of the plebeian Volksstück and its variant, the garrison comedy, trying to beat the Germans with their own weapon. It is here that absurdity reaches its climax with the picture of a primitive German soldier, easy to bribe or get drunk (present already in Kutz’s films, e.g. in *People from the Train* / *Ludzie z pociągu*, 1961, and in *On Guard I will Stand* / *Na*

straży swej stać będę, 1983, or in the short story *Scherzo alla Polacca* from Munk's *Eroica*). This image was picked up afterward in numerous variants, not only in war film and also beyond the medium of cinema. Knock the gun out of the enemy's hand, tear off his elegant uniform, get him drunk, and you will see a scoundrel who has to be put to death. Such is the motto of these films. But after all the film by Chmielewski is a typical comedy, and in comedy everything is allowed, well, almost everything. This carnival-like ideological trick belongs to the favourite ones in the Polish cinema, and its echoes are numerous in our national image of Germans.

FAMILY LIFE IN UPPER SILESIA AND MASURIA

Polish-German relations in the borderland are not popular with our filmmakers. Specifically, the relations in Upper Silesia have not enjoyed an honest picture of both nations. The bard of this land, Kazimierz Kutz, consistently makes films about Silesian Poles, while Germans can be found only in the background, like a German nurse involved in a fleeting love affair with the insurgent Gabriel, or an elegant gentleman debating a solution of the Silesian problem in *The Salt of the Black Earth* (*Sól ziemi czarnej*, 1969). 359

More details to the portrait of a German are provided by Janusz Kidawa, although they are brought down almost exclusively to the clichés fixed in the social consciousness. Kidawa's films, however, are comedies, and, moreover, comedies based on the poetics of the sketch. This is why the manner in which the stereotypes are constructed can be seen with the naked eye. For example, the picture of a little Hitler in the mine in *The Sinful Life of Franciszek Buła* (*Grzeszny żywot Franciszka Buły*, 1980), who cannot stop admiring how big German rats are, is just a cabaret-like character. In *Famous like Sarajevo* (*Sławna jak Sarajewo*, 1987), the slogans about obedience as the foundation of the German nation and order (the famous "Ordnung muß sein") are repeated by German or Germanized clerks of all ranks, but turn out to be nothing but clichés which add to the element of the grotesque in this film. The continuously drunk German in the attic room of lustful Cylia (who does not care whether she has a Polish postman or a German shady character), is a close relative of the General in "Where is the General?"—another element in the mosaic of German drunkards, sublimating our native anxieties about the (film) picture of Poles in the world.

In *The Milcarek Family* (*Rodzina Milcarków*, 1962) by Józef Wyszomirski, it was for the first time that a Polish-German married couple was shown on screen against the background of the difficult political situation during the armistice after the third Silesian Uprising in 1921. This German is a coal-mine foreman and an activist of paramilitary Selbstschutz. The plot concentrates around a sabotage perpetrated by German owners of mines as their answer to the awarding to Poland a part of Upper Silesia. All Germans are shown here as separated from Poles with a very solid barrier. It is one's nationality that is decisive in whether one is good or bad. This is easy

to understand, however, since the director of the mine, which the Germans want to flood, states directly that a virtue of Germans is their obedience, in the face of which it is good for Germany to kill and to destroy, because what is “important is only Germany.” It is even easier to understand this standpoint if we realize that the film was made at the peak moment of “the cold war,” in the era of a full embargo on a less critical picture of the German on the other bank of the Elbe, and also conspiracies of silence in any matters concerning nationalities in Upper Silesia, especially the German minority.

Free from these limitations were Magdalena and Piotr Łazarkiewicz, who, soon after the Polish breakthrough at the turn of 1980s, started the Polish-German co-production of the saga of a Mazurian family. *The Departure* (*Odjazd*, 1991) is an exceptional film because it brilliantly interweaves the history of this land with complicated national relations within the span of almost sixty years. Nothing in this film is completely black or white; it is its half-tones that authenticate the drama of

360 Augusta and her daughters. Here a former Hitlerite finds his new vocation as a political indoctrinator in the new reality of the early Polish People’s Republic, a young Pole departs from Poland after the war with the Germans, leaving his sweetheart Hilda, and a mother with her daughter stays in Poland, not emigrating even when she can do it without any difficulty. The problem of the nationality of Augusta and Hilda is solved by heart, and not by politics, not even by the pressure from her German husband, an obdurate Hitlerite who dies long before he can do something useful for the Führer (similar to his son, trained in the Hitlerjugend). It is natural that their hearts beat to different rhythms—the mother’s heart beats for Germany, the daughter’s for Poland. The freshness and reliability of this portrait consist in the very portrayal of a simple truth as the one that it is necessary to try to live together, even if the so-called historical rights speak against it. What is regrettable is that this trend still receives no recognition from Polish filmmakers.