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Film Review

The Grey Zone by Tim Blake Nelson (USA 2001/2005)

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The black and white film is based on Tim Blake Nelson's theatre play of the same title. Both the film and the play make use of the memories of Auschwitz doctor Miklós Nyiszli and of various diaries from prisoners in Auschwitz that were discovered after the war. The film was made in 2001; its release was postponed until 2005 to make it coincide with the 60th year of the end of Auschwitz.

Tim Blake Nelson, who is also known as an actor from various Hollywood films, among them *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel and Ethan Coen 1999), tells the story of the one and only rebellion in Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is planned and carried out by members of a Jewish special commando who, one day, discover a young girl who has survived the gas chamber. The decision to hide the girl from the Germans eventually leads to the October 1944 rebellion which leaves 45 prisoners dead. Another special commando takes care of their corpses.

The Grey Zone is a highly remarkable film because it marks a clear departure from all existing fictional and non-fictional attempts to come to terms with Auschwitz. First of all, it introduces an element of moral ambiguity which, so far, has been avoided in association with the subject. Established Hollywood stars play roles which are immediately linked to the word "evil." Harvey Keitel, for example, is the commander of Auschwitz. He portrays a man who has long given up on life and turned to drinking. All the time Keitel is surrounded by an extreme aura of fatigue and morbidity. He never discusses Nazi ideology, and anti-Judaism plays no part in his actions.

The film's second star is Steve Buscemi who acts as the leader of the special commando. He plays the part of a prisoner who has agreed to take his brothers and sisters into the gas chambers and to burn their corpses afterwards. Nevertheless, he decides to hide a girl (Mira Sorvino); he risks his life in order to save hers. *The Grey Zone* makes it clear that the members of the commando are victims as well, captured by an anonymous type of killing mechanism that somebody else has initiated. Nobody in the camp seems to be sure about the reason *why* this killing machine is there. In this manner both the film and the theatre play repudiate any notion of morality based on binary oppositions.

The element of moral ambiguity, however, is not the only reason why *The Grey Zone* is an incredible artistic breakthrough. Even more important is the fact that the film links Hollywood's tradition of narrative cinema with a painstaking realism.

There is no doubt that *The Grey Zone* is one of the toughest films ever made. The plot takes us directly into the greatest hell of the 20th century; it spares us nothing. *Everything* is shown.

In that respect, the film is different from all previous attempts to combine fictional elements with Auschwitz. There seems to be an unwritten law or unsigned agreement which says that the horrors of the place can only be represented by documentaries, news reels, photos or autobiographical accounts. This specific approach has been valid even for a novelist like Raymond Federman who uses the letters xxxx to refer to the death of his parents, thus claiming that the horrors of Auschwitz should not be fictionalized. German poet Ernst Jandl (who also lost his parents in the Holocaust) is no exception to the rule. Although Jandl repudiated Theodor Adorno's famous notion that Auschwitz has made poetry obsolete, he used to refer to the events by an extremely elliptical kind of poetic language that hides more than it reveals.

As for the cinema, the rule has been created by a number of documentaries. Claude Lanzmann, for example, deliberately repudiated the conventions of narrative cinema in his series of documentaries entitled *Shoah* (Fr 1974-85). He decided to focus entirely on the reports and testimonies of Holocaust survivors.

This aesthetic approach has laid the basis for all movies so far that have tried to come to terms with Auschwitz. Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (USA 1993) deliberately spares its audience the most gruesome aspects of the Holocaust. Volker Schlöndorff's *Der Neunte Tag/The Ninth Day* (Germany /Luxemburg 2004) points to the horrors of a gas chamber by showing the face of a priest who has peeped through a small window in the door. The gas chamber itself is not represented. An aura of the documentary is created by the use of a hand camera and by a series of images with faded colours. Schlöndorff's approach, in other words, still respects the unwritten verdict that the concrete circumstances of death are not suitable for a movie, an assumption which is also followed by Costa Gavras in his film version of Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter/ The Deputy* (Fr 2001).

The Grey Zone marks a radical departure from that tradition. The film subverts all boundaries between fact and fiction by presenting Auschwitz as a hell which is inhabited by Hollywood actors.

The aesthetic result is incredible.

The artistic quality of the film is so outstanding that we get much closer to the horrors of Auschwitz than we would by watching any documentary. Tim Blake Nelson's superb actors make us understand the human dilemma the characters depicted in the film must have faced; surviving at the expense of the lives of their brothers and sisters.

Be warned: This is not a just a shocking film. This is the most shocking film ever made.