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Katyn

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Katyn

Abstract

This is a review of *Katyn* (2007).

A little over a year ago a renowned American critic of popular culture came to speak to Polish students at my university. The critic had done some homework, and what she managed to read about Polish history convinced her that there was a mountain of material for fabulous films now that censorship had ended. Some such films have been released; Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* of 2002 is an outstanding example. Now, Andrzej Wajda, the Nestor of Polish cinema, has made one of his most powerful films in years on the topic of one of the more heinous Soviet war crimes, the massacre of thousands of Polish officers captured after their invasion of the country a couple of weeks after the Nazis attacked in September of 1939.

The Katyn massacre, named after the site deep in the Ukraine where the mass graves were unearthed, took place in April of 1940, but was discovered by the Nazis three years later, some time after they had turned against their former Axis allies. This was useful for Nazi propaganda, and the fact that the Soviets were at that juncture allies of the West meant that the crime was largely ignored there, much to the chagrin of the remaining free Polish soldiers that were augmenting various Allied armies. Part of this broader context, especially the silence of the West, is absent in Wajda's film; it seems his intent is rather to educate younger Poles for whom the impulse to catch up with the wealthier countries of Europe has diminished their interest in historical reflection, so crucial for a deeper sense of Polish identity. Although that may be the filmmaker's major concern, the tale told

is powerful enough that the film has much to teach those outside the borders of the country.

Like Polanski in *The Pianist* Wajda refrains from innovative storytelling. He masterfully interweaves the fates of the Polish officers and their families, both up to the crime and the subsequent repercussions of the propaganda war between the Soviets and the Nazis on their families back in Poland. Although the officers came from throughout the country, Wajda concentrates on those that came from Cracow, which gives the film a personal tone since that is where the filmmaker himself settled after the war. Even the music for the soundtrack, selected from Krzysztof Penderecki's outstanding oeuvre, is by a composer from the city.

Katyn is even more personal for Wajda in that his father was among the murdered officers; indeed, the film is dedicated to his parents. Perhaps it took this many years after the fall of communism for the director to gain the requisite distance from the event to treat it so even handedly: albeit the Nazi and Soviet apparatus is depicted in all its violence and brutality, the fact that the aggressors were human beings themselves is not forgotten. One of the more touching vignettes within the film is when a Soviet officer helps the wife of a Polish officer, who came to the camp where her husband was incarcerated, escape arrest by the KGB.

Katyn leaves the massacre to the very end through a message-in-the-bottle narrative device. One of the Polish officers had been keeping a diary in his notebook calendar till the very end. After the war, through dramatic circumstances, his wife receives the note book: it had been among the mementoes exhumed from the mass grave, and the viewer is drawn into a flashback after she starts reading. She eventually comes to the blank pages where her husband could no longer write before he is summarily executed. The viewer is hardly surprised when the blank pages are filled in as the narrative continues past those pages to its violent and inexorable conclusion.

However, the arresting image of the notebook pages turning has a deeper symbolism. Many will recall the images of the funeral of John Paul II when the wind started turning the pages of the Gospel on his coffin. The last sequence in the film has the officers who are brutally executed, one after another, reciting successive fragments of the Lord's Prayer as their last words. The last words in the film are: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Although the theme of Christian forgiveness is one of the most powerful religious messages *Katyn* imparts, religion is also explicitly worked into the fabric of the film at a number of seminal junctures. The very last image on the screen is a rosary in the hands of an executed officer about to be covered with earth, moved by a bulldozer, over the mass grave. Images of the overt powerlessness of religion in

the face of a ruthless atheistic aggressor are strategically placed throughout the film. The officers themselves had been detained in a former Orthodox church before being shipped out to the forest where their fate was sealed. The alert viewer knows that the last-shown rosary will eventually find its way into the hands of the officer's sister and that both she and the priest who delivered it to her will be arrested by the communists. However, the viewer who knows his or her history will also be cognizant of the fact that in the long run it was actually religion that was at the heart of Polish resistance to the regime, and played a major role in bringing it down. No one is more aware of this than Wajda, and implicit in his excruciating depiction of the powerlessness of religion at that historical juncture seems to be a sense of amazement at the astonishing role it would eventually play in his country's fate.