

REPORT



The Holocaust and the Czech new wave: revisiting *Diamonds of the Night* (1964)

One of the unexpected benefits of the pandemic this past year has been the democratization of scholarly events. Zoom has made lectures and workshops accessible to many, regardless of geographic location or university affiliation. For the film scholars among us, it has been particularly heartening to see new organizations and networks spring up even as traditional sites of *cinophilia* – film theaters and festivals – have struggled. One of these is “Liberating Cinema,” a new collective established by Mina Radović and dedicated to “the restoration, preservation, and exhibition of world cinema heritage.”¹ The organization’s first public events – a master class with Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitai and a scholarly workshop surrounding the recent restoration of *Diamonds of the Night* (1964) – took place on 14 and 15 December 2020, respectively.

The digital restoration of the film was supervised by the Czech National Film Archive. Matěj Strnad, Head of Curators at the Archive, emphasized that the team had taken “a conservative approach” to the restoration, making sure that the digital version would not look “better” than the original. Czech film expert Jonathan Owen then provided some helpful context, explaining how the organization of the Czechoslovak film industry in the 1960s allowed for a relative degree of creative freedom. *Diamonds of the Night* was not only Jan Nemeč’s debut film – announcing an important new talent in Czech filmmaking – it also coincided with debuts by Miloš Forman and Vera Chytilová, essentially launching the “New Wave” as such. Owen stressed the heterogeneity of the New Wave, its lack of “a coherent program,” and its sources in a variety of earlier movements including Italian neorealism, cinema verité, and both native and foreign traditions of Surrealism. Owen then distinguished two major trends within the Czech New Wave: one, embodied by Forman, which rooted itself firmly in realism, and another, embodied by Chytilová among others, which privileged allegory, stylization and experimentation.

Diamonds sits uneasily on this spectrum. Based on a 1958 novella of the same name by Arnold Lustig, the film chronicles two teenage boys’ escape from a cattle car train transporting them from one circle of hell to another. As Dina Iordanova notes in an essay published by “Liberating Cinema” to accompany the event, “the plot is simple – they run, they try to hide but hunger and thirst overpower them, they ask for food, they are reported on, they are hunted down and captured, they are kept in captivity, and then they are killed. Or not. The ending remains unresolved.”² The brutality of this narrative, with its emphasis on survival and bodily sensation, endows it with an indisputable degree of realism. Throughout the film’s 63 minutes, the camera adheres to the boys’ bodies and insists on their physicality. Yet this chronicle of their struggle is intercut with transcendent visions—a mixture of memories, daydreams and hallucinations. In this constant alternation between inner and outer world, *Diamonds* seems to have been inspired by another film about a young mind processing ongoing trauma during wartime: Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Ivan’s Childhood* (1962).

As Iordanova (2021) points out, these “subjective visions” are clearly marked as such by the peculiar soundscape which accompanies them. Dialogue in the film is sparse: reserved for moments when the boys ask for food and water or are shouted at by their captors. The rest is made up exclusively of diegetic noises. Occasionally, these overlap with the visions; more often they are accompanied by either bits of sound-memories or an expansive silence that endows the images with mystery and gravitas. For Iordanova, it is this aspect of the film that makes it stand out in the annals of films about the Holocaust. *Diamonds*, she writes, “will remain forever in the history of cinema for its unique usage of surrealist imagery alongside a Holocaust narrative.” Like the Czech film critic Jan Žalman (1967), she credits Ester Krumbachová, Neměc’s partner at the time and an art director on both his and Chytilová’s early films, with the Surrealist influence.²

Though *Diamonds* might have been the first film to adopt this approach, it was not the last: the following year, Zbyněk Brynych would produce *The Fifth Horseman Is Fear* (1965), a film that is both more explicit about its protagonist’s Jewishness and committed to using surrealist imagery to convey his sense of impending doom. Finally, even the much more “realist” *Shop on Main Street*, winner of the 1965 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, concludes with a dream sequence in which the two recently deceased protagonists dance together around the town square. If surrealism was the answer Neměc offered to the problem of how to represent the Holocaust, it was one that other New Wave directors took up eagerly.

Yet Neměc does not only draw on surrealism for his own purposes, he also encourages us think critically about how it works. While surrealism has been thought of in predominantly visual terms, *Diamonds* points out the importance of sound to its cinematic variant. As Šárka Sladovníková, the third and final speaker at the “Liberating Cinema” event, argued, sound comes to dominate image at multiple points in the film. As the boys run through the forest in the film’s opening sequence, the noise they make is exaggerated to imitate their perception. Similarly, the sounds that accompany the visions or dream sequences are exceptionally loud and crisp, becoming events in their own right. The film thus appears to toggle between sound and image as main carrier of information in much the same way that it shifts between a documentary and surrealist aesthetic, or between objective and subjective point of view. The tension this creates at every level, from the cinematography to the editing, is what helps the film convey its sense of urgency. Moreover, it allows Neměc to challenge what has, since the introduction of sound in the late 1920s, become a logocentric art form. Sladovníková pointed out that it takes a full 13 minutes before a single word is uttered in *Diamonds*. Language (be it dialogue or interior monologue presented as voice-over) no longer guides our perception.

Sladovníková sees in the film’s refusal of narration an acknowledgment that it was never intended for a mass audience. This raises the question of how *Diamonds* fits in beyond the Czech New Wave, into the longer history of films wrestling with the legacy of the Holocaust – particularly in Eastern Europe. The very first films to address the Holocaust were made there – in Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia in the years immediately following the war.³ Stalin’s refusal to acknowledge the mass destruction of the Jews put an end to this brief cycle of films once these countries were officially annexed to the communist sphere of influence in 1948. For the next decade, the Holocaust would become a taboo subject.

This longer history reveals *Diamonds of the Night* to be a doubly courageous enterprise. With his very first film, Neměc dared to break the silence. The boys are never explicitly identified as Jews. Scholars have tended to assume that they are because of the

autobiographical nature of the source text – a Czech Jew, Lustig had survived Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Buchenwald before escaping in 1945 from a train carrying him to Dachau. Sladovnicková sees in Neměc's decision to leave the boys' identity vague not so much political caution as a desire to universalize the experience – to make it possible for viewers to identify and sympathize regardless of their background. Such a reading is supported by Neměc's decision to cast a Roma actor (Antonín Kumbera) as one of the two boys. It is his emotionally more expressive face that becomes the heart of the film.


Neměc's fearlessness, both in terms of the content and the form, was rewarded with the grand prize at the Mannheim-Heidelberg International Film Festival and the film's acknowledgement as one of the first international successes of the Czech New Wave – though it would be censored, along with Lustig's entire literary oeuvre, after 1968. For many years, its strikingly subjective and small-scale approach remained very much an exception within the canon of Holocaust cinema. In 2015, however, Neměc's near-namesake László Nemes produced *Son of Saul* – a film that was much-praised for showing that Holocaust stories could still be told in fresh ways. Few critics noticed its similarity to *Diamonds*. Unlike the more canonical films like *Sophie's Choice* (1982) or *Schindler's List* (1993), these two provide no back story for their characters; they take place not over the course of a longer period that would allow for a “now” and a “before,” but on a timescale of a few days; finally, both focus not on those who survive, but those who perish. They ask more of the viewer by making it impossible for us to “get lost in the story” or fully identify with the protagonists. Perhaps, they do not even ask us to identify at all but to perform that most sacred duty – to bear witness.

Notes

1. “About” section, *Liberating Cinema* website. <https://liberatingcinema.org.uk/about/>
2. Žalman writes of Krumbachová: “She is the first to bring her gift of philosophical abstraction and Kafkaesque understanding of symbolism [...] to bear upon the somewhat limited world of Czech cinematic reality.”
3. These include: Kurt Maetzig's *Marriage in the Shadows* (Ehe im Schatten, 1947) and Harald Braun's *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Zwischen gestern und morgen, 1947) in East Germany, Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stage* (Ostatni etap, 1948) in Poland, (filmed on location in Auschwitz, where she had been a prisoner) and Alfréd Radok's *Distant Journey* (Daleká cesta, 1949) in Czechoslovakia.

References

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