The legacy of postwar Polish filmmaker Andrzej Munk

Dorota Niemitz
13 October 2014

"Film is far too serious and too costly to let it deal with trivial matters that are unworthy of our attention."—Andrzej Munk

Andrzej Munk (1921-1961), the Polish director and cinematographer, died tragically in an auto accident one month before turning 40. In his brief career, this talented artist made several films that had a great impact on his contemporaries and continued to exert their influence on Poland's artistic community far beyond the director's lifetime.

His movies filled theaters and were the subject of heated and lengthy debates, becoming the favorites of many critics at home and abroad. American audiences were recently made aware of Munk's film work as a result of the staging of Mieczyslaw Weinberg's 1968 opera *The Passenger* in New York. Munk directed a film (see below), unfinished at the time of his death and released in 1963, based on the same book as the opera.

Andrzej Munk was born in Krakow in a Jewish family. He hid in Warsaw during the German occupation, taking part in the city's uprising in 1944. In 1951 Munk finished film directing and cinematography studies at the prestigious ?ód? Film School, alma mater of future filmmakers such as Andrzej Wajda, Kazimierz Kutz, Wojciech Has, Krzysztof Kie?lowski and Roman Pola?ski. Munk first worked as a cameraman for the Polish Film Chronicle (10-minute newsreels shown in Polish cinemas prior to feature films) and later directed several short documentaries. He is best remembered for his four feature films, *Man on the Tracks, Eroica, Bad Luck* and *Passenger*.

The ethos of labor—*Man on the Tracks*

Munk's first full-length film, *Man on the Tracks*, was released in 1957 during the Khrushchev "Thaw" period, initiated following Stalin's death in 1953, and shortly after the Pozna? October upheavals of 1956, in which masses of Polish workers protested against the policies of the Stalinist regime and demanded better conditions. *Man on the Tracks*, which takes for granted that Poland is a socialist country, deals with the clash between the old and new economic systems. Orzechowski (Kazimierz Opali?ski), an "old school" railway engineer, who had problems adjusting to the new postwar reality, is killed in a train accident and there are suspicions of sabotage. The film reconstructs the events through a series of flashbacks.

Munk's first feature opens with the shot of a moving train dominating the landscape. The image of the solid steel body set against a cloudy evening sky divides the world into nature, on the one hand, and industrial progress, on the other. The steam engine becomes a "beast" human beings need to clean, inspect, repair and "feed" with oil and coal to keep under their control.

The devotion of the rail workers to their jobs is central to *Man on the Tracks*. There is no talk of low pay, the long hours or missing time with friends and family—all the railway men care about is doing their work well. Efficiency and competence are matters of honor, and the failure of a train to arrive on schedule is treated as a personal failure. Taking into account the pressures exerted by the Stalinist regime, these sentiments no doubt also reflect the genuine aspiration of wide layers of the Polish population after the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s to construct a new, more egalitarian society.

In one scene we see Zapora (Zygmunt Listkiewicz), Orzechowski's trainee, jump out of the cabin to fix a jammed air pump, a risky, self-sacrificing maneuver that could cost him his life. Orzechowski is getting older, and yet he views forced retirement as a punishment rather than a reward for many years of service—without his job he feels unfulfilled, his life has little meaning.

Munk was greatly interested in classical music, but he constructed the soundtrack for *Man on the Tracks* entirely out of ambient sound, with workers' tools replacing musical instruments. Human voices and whispers, the whistles and gushes of steam, the rattles and squeaks of the wheels, create a harmonious symphony of the modern world. It is through the poetry of sound producing movement that the machine becomes alive, expresses itself and communicates with humans.

According to a number of critics, *Man on the Tracks* breaks with the tradition of "social realism" by allowing several different opinions to exist side by side, thus admitting that a single objective truth does not exist. First of all, aren't these critics, deliberately or not, confusing the serious treatment of life in art, social realism, with Stalinist "Socialist Realism," which falsified and stereotyped conditions in the interests of a parasitic bureaucracy?

Second, the view that the so-called "Polish Film School," to which Munk belonged, was a rebellion against social realism is conditioned by a crude, over-simplified notion of that trend, which offers a wide variety of artistic approaches. Heavily influenced by Italian neorealism, the postwar Polish directors sought to portray everyday reality in a captivating, artistic manner and concerned themselves with a wide range of social and political questions.

In *Man on the Tracks*, Munk, who was opposed to the national-heroic romanticism of Andrzej Wajda, for example, and had a strong interest in an honest depiction of life, shows himself an heir of social and modernist realism.

The attitude of Munk to his hero and the truth is not ambivalent, or open-ended, but resembles that of a detective meticulously examining the physical clues and the depositions of witnesses to determine the facts and solve the mystery. Thanks to the testimony of three different individuals in *Man on the Tracks*, a team of investigators is able to fit the pieces of the puzzle together and reveal the truth—the truth the viewer has to wait for until the last and most moving scene of the movie.

With great attention to detail, Munk in *Man on the Tracks* was able to recreate the world of class-conscious rail workers in the 1950s, as well as the atmosphere of suspicion and distrust common to the Stalinist period.

© World Socialist Web Site

By depicting the complex process of people's adjustment to industrial progress and the value of labor in human life, the film is also an inspiration.

Accidental heroes—*Eroica*

Released in 1958, *Eroica*, Munk's second feature film, is a satirical and somewhat cynical look at the Polish resistance movement during World War II. Divided into two parts, the work focuses on two individuals who, due to the twist of fate, become accidental heroes.

In part one, a cunning black-market dealer Dzidziu? ("Babyface") Górkiewicz (Edward Dziewo?ski) escapes the Warsaw Uprising in a cowardly manner and accidentally comes across a Hungarian battalion ready to aid the city. Górkiewicz later repeatedly crosses enemy lines to carry messages between the headquarters of the uprising and the Hungarian forces, heroically, and often drunkenly, risking his life in the process.

In the second section of *Eroica*, Polish officers in a German prisoner of war camp, seeing their fellow inmates sink into depression due to long-term incarceration and lack of hope, hide one of their colleagues, Lieutenant Zawistowski (Tadeusz ?omnicki), in a broken boiler in the attic to create the myth of a hero who amazingly managed to escape. The pride and honor of the movie's heroes are contrasted with the submissiveness of the majority of the prisoners, who, protected by the Geneva Convention, manage to "normalize" life in the camp through food-eating contests and festivals.

In *Eroica*, Munk criticizes both the opportunism and the national romantic tradition that demanded heroic sacrifice, showing how crippling these attitudes, two sides of the same coin, were to Poles throughout history. Ending both portions of the film with the irony of success turning into failure, coupled with a reference to Beethoven's Third ("Eroica" or Heroic) Symphony, shows Munk to be a master of tragicomedy.

However, some of the director's experiments with camera work and the "theatrical" use of space in certain scenes (an individual in a large space versus groups stuck in a small one), are less successful and fail to create a cohesive unity. So *Eroica* becomes a bit tiresome, and leaves the viewer with the feeling of an unfinished piece that does not entirely live up to its ambitious aspirations.

Misfortunes of a petty-bourgeois opportunist—*Bad Luck*

Bad Luck (1960), based on Jerzy Stawi?ski's novel *Six Incarnations of Jan Piszczyk* (1959), like *Man on the Tracks*, is a retrospective on a life. It begins and ends with middle-aged Jan Piszczyk, played well by the talented comedian Bogumi? Kobiela, pleading for sympathy with a prison guard by recalling unfortunate events of his life that have haunted him since childhood. The tragicomedy spans several critical decades of Polish history, from the rise of anti-Semitism and political reaction in the 1920s to postwar Stalinism.

Piszczyk, the son of a Warsaw tailor and apparently without any moral compass, tries to fit into every group or party that has the upper hand in a given political situation. He's a generally unattractive and skittish petty bourgeois who dreams of being a hero, but, unable to form opinions and take the necessary risks, chooses instead to falsify his identity and biography to impress others and gain their favor. Unlike many real-life opportunists who are often successful and rarely amusing, Piszczyk always finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, becoming a victim of a never-ending series of fiascos.

At a street rally in the late 1930s, Piszczyk is found shouting both pro and anti-government slogans for the Camp of National Unity (OZN), founded by supporters of the late Marshal Józef Pi?sudski, and the fascist National Radical Camp (ONR), respectively. The scene is probably one of the most graphic representations of opportunism in cinema history.

Afraid to be thought a Jew, Piszczyk ends up getting beaten up for being Jewish at one point and for being an anti-Semite at another. Kissing up to people with opposed views, instead of anticipated rewards, brings him nothing but misfortunes.

Bullied by unfortunate circumstances, Piszczyk's situation is funny because we do not quite wish him well. Uninvolved, spineless and corrupt, he often evokes our disgust and pity. But, understanding the complexity of the human condition, we also feel a little sorry for him. There is a positive side to Piszczyk: his lack of involvement is a form of protest against war. Similar to Jaroslav Hašek's "Good Soldier Švejk," Piszczyk is an anti-hero, a "fool" who manages to frustrate everybody he meets, ridiculing the idiocy of war.

In certain ways Piszczyk even resembles Munk himself, who, due to his Jewish origin, had to hide and change his name during the Nazi occupation and who also had a problem identifying wholeheartedly with any particular political orientation—the expression of a crisis of ideology common to his generation stemming from the traumas produced by fascism and the disappointment with Stalinist "socialism."

Munk claimed to have leftist sympathies and yet during and immediately after the war was an active member of Pilsudski's Polish Socialist Party (PPS), one of the chief political representatives of Polish bourgeois nationalism. Later he joined the Stalinist Polish United Workers Party (PZPR), but was expelled from it in 1952 accused of "right-wing tendencies" and behavior "unworthy of a member."

By offering ironic commentary on the tragedies that shaped Polish society, Munk aimed at distancing the viewer from the traumas of the recent past and making him or her consider them in a critical, non-clichéd fashion. The use of tragic farce, with its exaggerated gestures, puppet-like characters and coincidences, helped Munk reveal specific truths about life. In *Bad Luck*, he borrowed from Bertolt Brecht, who became enormously popular in Poland during the Thaw period, and his "Epic Theater."

Munk hoped his films would become a social medium for change and progress. *Bad Luck*, which has remained popular in Poland to this day, undoubtedly helped many people deal with the postwar dilemmas and reshape their standpoints on heroism and nationalism.

Consequences of the Holocaust—*Passenger*

The director's third "retrospective" film, *Passenger*, although unfinished due to his premature death, is Munk's finest. Inspired by a radio drama, *The Passenger from Cabin Number 45*, by Zofia Posmysz-Piasecka, an Auschwitz survivor, it was first turned into a television drama and later into a play and, as noted above, an opera.

Set in 1960, it tells the story of Liza (Alexandra ?l?ska), an SS officer during World War II, who accidentally meets her former concentration camp prisoner Marta (Anna Ciepielewska), while travelling on a transatlantic liner from South America to Europe. For Liza, the encounter sets off an avalanche of memories. The film considers the ability of individuals to confront the past and asks to what extent they falsify history to justify themselves. Munk treats the Holocaust from the unusual perspective of one of its perpetrators.

Ironically, a luxury liner, like its polar opposite, a grim and murderous

© World Socialist Web Site

concentration camp, is also removed from the regular stream of life and forms an “island” one cannot escape. Marta was at Liza’s mercy at Auschwitz. Now the roles, relatively speaking, are reversed. It is the former prisoner who has the power to expose Liza as a war criminal to her husband. The emotions that hit and overwhelm both women are frozen in black-and white stills of their faces, creating a photo album selected from the footage Munk shot before he was killed.

Liza makes a very “human” attempt to recreate the reality of the Holocaust in a manner that legitimizes her actions. But the horrors of the mass murder, even if treated in a dispassionate and subtle way, cannot be suppressed or absolved and keep haunting her. It is through the avoidance of the most ghastly footage that Munk bolsters our sense of its terror: a single hand hanging out of a cart full of concealed bodies, the smile of a Jewish girl petting a vicious SS dog on her way to the gas chamber, a pile of goods confiscated by the Nazis and the sounds of Bach’s violin concerto covering machine-gun fire. *Passenger*, borrowing in part from Tadeusz Borowski’s works such as *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1959) , brilliantly depicts the reality of the concentration camp and the complexity of human actions under a totalitarian state system. Munk insightfully reveals the multiplicity of relationships between victims and oppressors; the manipulations of those in power and the humiliating responses of some sufferers who, convinced of the futility of any form of resistance, become numb and paralyzed, often ready to collaborate with their tormentors to survive.

All in all, Andrzej Munk’s films were enormously appealing because they dealt with some of the most important experiences of wartime and postwar society. The filmmaker, who represented a generation born between the two imperialist wars and who experienced both fascism and Stalinism, managed to present these difficult, sensitive subjects with courage, intimacy, realistic objectivity and a sense of humor.

Munk’s artistic courage lay in treating so-called “defensive [or just] war” (Poland’s role in World War II), anti-Semitism and nationalism, subjects at the time largely considered taboo as material for art, as the grist for parody. Using grotesquerie and satire to mock national mythology and hypocrisy, never laughing at people but pointing to the historical forces that formed their behavior, Munk successfully reframed the painful, traumatic experience of his generation and set it at a certain distance with the help of laughter. His treatment of the Holocaust was one of the most serious and multi-dimensional in the history of cinema.

Possessed of generally left-wing sympathies, Munk was a sensitive, albeit inevitably conflicted member of the Polish artistic intelligentsia, a victim of overlapping Stalinist and nationalist ideological pressures, a man struggling with the aftermath of the Holocaust and his own social and personal identity, who tried to free himself from the chains of the past through critique and satire. His movies, although somewhat “unfinished” and far from perfect, are intriguing examples of critical realism through which Munk was able to create a humane and authentic portrait of his times.

Three of Andrzej Munk’s films are available on YouTube: *Man on the Tracks* [with English or French subtitles] *Eroica* [with English or French subtitles] *Bad Luck* [with English subtitles].

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site