

Three Minutes—A Lengthening: Nazi barbarism in Poland

... and Private Desert from Brazil

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If there is a spate of films about Nazism and the Holocaust at present, it is not simply that artists and others remain determined to bring out the truth about one of the most terrible episodes in human history, worthy as that effort may be.

The new films are clearly a response as well—fully conscious or not—to the rise and threat of the far right in Germany, the US and elsewhere. These works are as much a warning about the present and the future as they are an attempt to shed light on the past. To what extent they dig deeply enough into the traumatic phenomena, despite their undoubted sincerity and artistic seriousness, remains an issue.

Three Minutes—A Lengthening (which opened recently in the US and Canada) is a moving tribute to a town and a population destroyed by fascist barbarism. As a child, David Kurtz emigrated from Poland with his family to the US. In 1938, now living in Brooklyn, he returned to Europe for a sightseeing trip and visited the place of his birth, Nasielsk, some 35 miles north of Warsaw, focusing on its Jewish community in particular. He bought a 16mm camera specifically for the European jaunt.

In 2009, Kurtz's grandson, Glenn Kurtz, came upon old family films in his parents' house in Florida and found the footage shot by his grandfather decades before. The younger Kurtz published a book based on this experience, *Three Minutes in Poland: Discovering a Lost World in a 1938 Family Film*.

The director of *Three Minutes—A Lengthening*, Bianca Stigter, explains that some 80 years later, David Kurtz's "ordinary pictures, most of them in colour, have become something extraordinary. They are the only moving images that remain of Nasielsk prior to the

Second World War. Almost all the people we see were murdered in the Holocaust." Of the 3,000 Jewish inhabitants of the town in 1938, less than 100 were alive by the end of World War II.

Stigter explains that for "this film essay I examined the footage in the fullest detail, to see what the celluloid would yield to viewers almost a century later. The footage is treated as an archaeological artefact to gain entrance to the past." The filmmakers document the effort, first of all, simply to identify the town and then to determine the identities, if possible, of any of those who were filmed.

After establishing the location, Nasielsk, remarkably, Glenn Kurtz was able (in 2012) to track down seven survivors from this "lost town." One of them, Maurice Chandler, who appears in the 1938 footage as a 13-year-old boy, was living in Detroit.

Three Minutes, narrated by Helena Bonham Carter, also includes a harrowing first-hand account, hidden for the duration of the war, of the fate of Nasielsk's Jewish population. In December 1939, they were rounded up in the town square and sent by train to Treblinka, where nearly all of them died. One Nasielsk inhabitant escaped to the Soviet Union, but upon returning at the end of the war, found no family members left alive.

Private Desert

Private Desert from Brazil (Aly Muritiba) is a drama that screened at this year's San Francisco International Film Festival. It also opened in theaters recently in the

US.

Daniel (Antonio Saboia) is a tough veteran policeman on administrative leave for violently assaulting a trainee, an incident that made national headlines in Brazil. He lives with his father, suffering from dementia, a former policeman. Daniel believes himself to be in love with Sara (Pedro Fasanaro), someone he has never met, only texted with, and who lives 1,500 miles away. He pursues Sara, who turns out to be Robson, a young man in a blonde wig and a dress. For Daniel, unsurprisingly, the discovery provokes a crisis.

Private Desert concerns itself with sexual oppression, by others and oneself.

The film, despite its undoubted sincerity, has self-serving and formulaic features. As soon as we realize that “Sara” is a young man, is there truly any doubt as to where this film is going? Isn’t it probable that Daniel’s severe anger and frustration will be located, at least in part, in repressed desires?

The director Muritiba told *Variety* that “when making this film it was clear to me I wanted to do a love story in a country that is fighting, torn between its own contradictions and led by a man like Bolsonaro. I thought if this love story could be lived and felt ... by a policeman, who discovers that he can love, even for a day or a week, another man, then this could be a great success.” A great success from which point of view?

One has the distinct impression that Donald Trump and his Brazilian counterpart Jair Bolsonaro figure prominently in this film. A certain portion of the artists, taken aback and overwhelmed by changes and processes they do not understand very well, are working *backward* from the fascistic leaders and drawing misguided conclusions about the population and its supposed shortcomings or neuroses. (See also Jane Campion’s *The Power of the Dog*.) According to this line of reasoning, social violence and reaction at the top are the inevitable expression of broader sexual and family dysfunction, including, especially, “toxic masculinity.”

The filmmakers forget that “the consciousness of men depends on their being, and not vice versa.” It is not Trump’s psychologically damaged state or delirium (or Bolsonaro’s, or Biden’s, for that matter) that has produced the current crisis-ridden state of affairs, but the current crisis-ridden state of affairs that has produced Trump, Bolsonaro and Biden and placed

them at the head of society.



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