

The Pianist: A film study:
Aesthetics, morality, and
language...

Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein
Austrian - British philosopher - logic,
math, mind, language. Cambridge
Philosophical Investigations.
Bertrand Russell "perfect
example of genius."

The Pianist- Essay: aesthetics, ethics and the Holocaust

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Films with a Holocaust setting pose acute and unique problems for critical and aesthetic analysis. In no other context of human behaviour are important distinctions between moral and aesthetic judgement so disturbingly blurred. The Holocaust stands apart as the most appalling of all examples of man's inhumanity to man - it is, as an historical event, in a sense beyond evil. Wittgenstein in his lecture on ethics in 1929, argued that our efforts to express absolute values, whether safety or the miraculous, were an attempt to go beyond language and thereby logically or 'grammatically' impossible. But he saw this as a common tendency of human beings, worthy of respect.

} Can we, or should we attempt to represent absolute evil aesthetically?

I would argue that if he been speaking post 1945 and had sought instead a case of absolute evil, the Holocaust would have been a uniquely appropriate example, displaying the same grammatical impossibilities as his own examples. His discussion concentrates on the philosophical difficulties posed by efforts to express absolute (ethical) values: the absolute good. I would argue that evil is an ethical value, grammatically necessary if we are to make sense of what we are trying (impossibly) to express in talking of absolute good. I would further suggest that most people would either cite for themselves, or agree in the judgment, that the Holocaust was an example of absolute evil.

} Absolute evil'

Wittgenstein goes on to say in response to efforts to find the correct logical analysis of what we mean by our ethical and religious expressions - "I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description....ab initio, on the ground of its significance....I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence." I believe it follows from Wittgenstein's arguments here and elsewhere, that it is an important fact about human beings that most, though importantly, not all, would agree in this judgment about the Holocaust, just as the tendency to try to go beyond language in expressing absolute (ethical) value is an important common fact about human beings, worthy of respect. I would also argue that to seek to explain, justify, or give grounds for this judgment would display a kind of misunderstanding or even represent a kind of grammatical 'mistake'.

} Nonsensical to attempt to describe absolute evil, good etc.?

Morally and aesthetically, I would argue that the Holocaust occupies what we might call the same grammatical space as Wittgenstein's examples - it is an historical event comprised of millions of attested and documented acts and events - facts - whose ethical significance to us as human beings, is sustained only if we, to paraphrase Wittgenstein above, reject every effort to rationally explain, aesthetically represent it. It can of course, and should, be analyzed historically, politically, even psychologically, these are fact-based disciplines where evidence and grounds are entirely appropriate. But I want to argue, for reasons similar to those I think Wittgenstein was trying to express, that efforts to analyze the Holocaust ethically in terms of rational analysis, reasons, justifications, motivations, etc. is to undermine the unique quality it has, and should retain, as an example of the possibility of absolutely evil systematic, intentional, human behaviour.

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The ethical significance of the Holocaust lies in this demonstration of the possibility of absolute evil in human behaviour. It is a paradigm example of what Wittgenstein described

} Leave the analysis to the sober historian Not the realm of the writer or playwright?

earlier as "...the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have a supernatural value." To seek to subject the holocaust to a reductionist, rational ethical analysis is to diminish its importance, indeed to destroy its essential ethical significance.

Does attempting to depict absolute evil aesthetically diminish the significance of the event? Does it trivialize the event?

Even if this ethical view is accepted, and of course many will reject it vehemently, especially the use of the term evil, it does not necessarily entail that efforts to express our human reaction to the Holocaust through art should be rejected or resisted in the same way. I agree. But it does seem to me that if you accept the uniqueness of the Holocaust in ethical terms as I have argued, this has a profound significance for our judgments of the value of the artistic efforts to represent it. This significance poses particularly serious problems when the artistic medium in question is film, whose aesthetic context in our culture, is irreducibly seen in part at least as commercial entertainment. In almost any other context, I would see no objection in principle, to the idea that entertainment can be art or that art can be entertaining. Though perhaps 'entertainment' would stand in need of some clarification.

Film replete with colours layered and music inserted strategically for dramatic/emotional effect creates an inaccurate depiction of the events?

To explore the issues here let us look at some pitfalls revealed by particular cases. One tempting route is to consider the sincerity or intention of the film-maker - and for this argument despite the collaborative nature of film-making, I will treat the director as the person whose vision the film is considered to be. Given their personal histories and ethnic background - no one would question the sincerity or seriousness of artistic intention of say Steven Spielberg (*Schindler's List*) or Roman Polanski (*The Pianist*). Both films have been critically acclaimed, winning many awards including Oscars. But good intentions do not necessarily lead to an artistic heaven any more than an ethical one. Well-intentioned bad art, bad films, are legion. They were a special bête noir of that most acute of film critics, Pauline Kael. And relative aesthetic judgments are perfectly possible e.g. we might express approval of the fact that Polanski, in *The Pianist*, avoided the visual sentimentality of Spielberg's girl in the red dress in *Schindler's List*.

Both have "street cred." But does this mean that they have created valuable works?

So sincerity of intent and seriousness of purpose are important but not enough. What about 'truth'? Well in the sense of precise historical accuracy, no concept or value has been more undermined, blurred, and distorted by film-makers over the years. In most contexts this is not a problem: factual accuracy can comfortably give way to the spirit of truth displayed in an artistic endeavour. But here we see one of the distinct problems posed by the Holocaust: to exaggerate or dramatize any of its acts or events seems to dishonour the suffering of the people from which the ethical power of the real events derives. To diminish or underplay them, or so to speak use them as artistic means, seems in a sense obscene. Both possibilities highlight not just palpable artistic errors of judgment but also seem to carry an ethical not just aesthetic weight. Thus films which use the Holocaust as a mere dramatic backdrop for a conventional love story say, induce a certain moral queasiness. Equally, the increasingly prevalent practice of using actual Nazi footage of naked, skeletal human bodies being bulldozed into mass graves, to illustrate news items or peripheral issues seems callously de-sensitizing. The constant replaying of these images, eventually diminishes their moral impact.

Does artistic endeavour undermine the accuracy?

Obscene

The Pianist, like *Schindler's List*, portrays some of the horrors of the Holocaust period: the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto, and the horrific, systematic de-humanization of Jewish people. Its narrative includes the transport of people from the Ghetto for extermination at Treblinka. However, true to a valid artistic convention, in each case the audience is drawn into a more personal reaction to the film through the stories of two individuals with whom they can identify - the businessman Oscar Schindler and the classical pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman. Therefore an artistic (aesthetic) motivation can create ethical discomfort - after all in both cases the horrific experiences of the Jewish victims of the Nazis are in a sense artistically subserving the central

Is the enormity of the Holocaust trivialized by reducing its magnitude to mere stories of one or two people?

Or, should we be ashamed that we need to be directed to individual narratives aesthetically?

aim of telling a personal story. To a considerable extent, both these films succeed quite well in overcoming this qualm aesthetically – through I suppose the idea that the audience needs to identify with an individual in order to make sense of the appalling circumstances they are required to witness. But the ethical qualm remains, based on the philosophical argument above – it is precisely the artistic success in rendering these events accessible to the audience, which has the effect of reducing, diminishing their moral impact by, in a sense, providing an aesthetically rational context for them. The ethical consequence of this is to relativize the absolute evil of the actual events. But there is a real dilemma here: after all, is it not a valid ethical and artistic endeavour to show and make more widely known, the courage of both men; the humanity of Schindler's actions; and the extraordinary will-to-survive of Szpilman? (Let alone the fact that his survival finally rested on the extraordinary help of a German Officer).

This conflict between the ethical and the aesthetic becomes acute when it comes to actually filming the atrocities which are the essential dramatic context of what has now become a 'story'. The double horror one experiences in watching, sickened, the actual Nazi footage of atrocities is of course the appalling human barbarity and suffering being shown; but equally numbing to the mind and spirit is the very existence of such film in the first place. Here is evil, not secretly hiding in the shadows, but fully lit, meticulously recorded with a soul-destroying detachment. Here is evil – proud, defiant, open, unashamed.

The obscenity of what is shown and the fact that it is recorded is absolute. One is torn between a sense of a duty to look so as not to deny what happened; and shame at the sense of voyeurism inescapably induced. Of course, relative responses to such images are quite possible and understandable e.g. one might react say, with a hatred of Germans, or talk in terms of the de-personalizing effect of military structures and political philosophies like Nazism. It is a logical consequence I believe of Wittgenstein's argument, that there is, and can be, no necessity here. No incontrovertibly true, or valid response. It is a question of the possible sense certain responses might be understood to have. How might one express a sense of an absolute ethical significance in these events? Well one way this has been put is to say that witnessing them makes one feel ashamed to be a member of the human race. If there is any sense to the notion of absolute ethical meaning in these events, it lies here.

There is I think a special problem in the artistic process of making a movie about the Holocaust. Consider the 'realistic' set up, acting and filming of such actions and events for the purpose of a film. The director is here locked into an ethical and artistic dilemma: the more 'realistic' his depiction of atrocities, the better is his artistic 'vision' served. But there does seem to me to be something ethically disturbing about 'acting out' these events however serious the artistic intent. There is something almost pornographic about this precise simulation of actual evil to serve artistic ends. Perhaps the problem here lies in the fact that movies are such a literal, naturalistic medium. The 'realistic' portrayal of such atrocities in purely representational terms perpetrates an aesthetic misjudgement – that verisimilitude can express the inexpressible. Can art add anything to our understanding of such events? To respond to witnessing such atrocities on Nazi film shot by human beings, with a sense of shame at being a member of the human race, is already to see human life in absolute terms: to see this record of the suffering of these particular human beings at a particular moment in time in this way, is to see them, as we might say – sub specie aeternitatis. This involves the profoundly disturbing acceptance of the possibility of evil in oneself as part of what it is to be a human being. To embrace fully the sense of what it is to be a member of the human race requires acceptance of the possibility of evil as well as good. The resistance of the one and pursuit of the other are equally part of the essential

What does the review mean by ethical and aesthetic conflict?

Is the portrayal of those brutal events done to serve artistic ends, as opposed to finding our way to the truth, accuracy of the events?

Do these films appeal to our need for voyeurism?

ethical challenge of how we should live our life. It is as we might say, part of the human condition.

The reviewer's dilemma.

I find many of these arguments uncomfortable. I want to feel that nothing, absolutely nothing, should be closed to artistic expression. Perhaps my final position is that just because everything can in the end be addressed through art does not mean that it always should be. This for me becomes most acute with a movie. I would not want to say that anyone should be prevented from making a film about the Holocaust – I am just inclined to respect more an active, ethical decision to choose not to do so. I certainly consider it inappropriate for such films to be entered or considered in artistic ‘competitions’ like the Oscars or the Palme D’or etc. Perhaps my argument amounts to the view that movies are just the wrong artistic medium for such events. A disturbing feature of watching *The Pianist* is that as a movie one’s sensibilities are more engaged with events later in the film after the atrocities depicted earlier. During the early part of the film ones sensibilities are not so much engaged as assaulted. It is an uncomfortable thought in some ways, but considered as a film, depicting a story, the second half of the film works much better than the first.

Do you agree with this statement

1. Is discriminating evaluation of the artistic effectiveness in the portrayal of atrocities, an aesthetic or ethical judgment? Well as this is a film, not reality, it is hard to see how it can strictly be an ethical judgment. But to make detached, aesthetic judgments about images with direct reference to the appalling experiences of real people in the real world does seem to induce a sense of moral unease. It is as if, having watched someone killed by firing squad, one were to engage in a detached critical assessment of the quality of marksmanship of the firing squad.

2. In summary, if one accepts the judgment that the Holocaust was an event demonstrating the occurrence of absolute evil in human affairs, then it follows logically that this event demonstrated the possibility of human beings individually and collectively behaving in absolutely evil ways. The grammar of such absolute judgments as suggested by Wittgenstein’s analysis means that it cannot, indeed must not be seen as something to be explained, justified, rationalized, for to do so is to relativize the wrong it represents and thus fundamentally change its role as a normative event demonstrating absolute evil. Therefore: aesthetically and morally, the best, indeed the only acceptable way these events should be treated is in a judgment free, description of what happened. This is the documentary approach of *Shoa* I believe and in a BBC radio ‘dramatization’ based entirely on actual transcripts of evidence given by Holocaust victims at the Nuremburg trials.

Encapsulation

If one accepts these arguments then efforts to represent this absolute on film (with soundtrack and emotive music) are examples of efforts to go beyond meaningful expression, just as much as Wittgenstein argues are the efforts to express absolute value through language. Is the basic problem here that historic events have been turned into a story to make them accessible to us? What makes a story a story? Is it irreducibly an aesthetic concept operating within the context of a representation of real life events. What is it to see ones life as a narrative – a story? After all for one’s own experience this is a story without a subjective end – death is not an event in life: or a totally guaranteed one common to us all – we all die.

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M. P.