Fetishizing the Holocaust

By relying on gimmicks and avoiding specific stories, Russian Oscar-contender 'Shoes' betrays the memory of Holocaust victims.

By Olga Gershenson Dec. 16, 2013 | 2:51 AM

Russia’s submissions to this year’s Oscars include a short film about the Holocaust. At first glance, this is remarkable: Finally, a country plagued by centuries of anti-Semitism produces a film mourning Jewish loss. A cause for celebration? Not so fast.

“Shoes” (“Tufelki”) by Russian filmmaker Konstantin Fam, is a Russia-Belarus-Czech coproduction, made with the support of organizations including Israel’s Yad Vashem and Poland’s Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.
Throughout the 18-minute movie, the camera follows the tragic story of a Jewish couple, from courting to gas chambers. The problem is that the camera only shows us feet, never rising to the character’s faces. There is no dialogue either, only overbearing ambient music (conveniently, there is no dialogue to translate). The nameless characters on screen literally don’t have a voice.

A young Jewish woman (represented by her feet) buys a pair of beautiful red shoes, falls in love, married, has a baby, and loses it all when the Nazis invade. Betrayed by a local collaborator (all shoes), the characters are taken to Auschwitz. The most difficult scene is that of gas chambers, when dozens of bare feet obediently shuffle to a melancholy melody before dissolving into a bluish light. The film then switches to the present to show the pretty red pumps, now desiccated and wrinkled, in a famous exhibit of piles of shoes belonging to victims of the Holocaust. The collaborator, now an old man, comes to the museum to pay tribute to the deceased. Ironically, his is the only figure the camera shows in full. Everyone else is feet only, as if they were deprived of their humanity even before being reduced to piles of objects.

Today, so many years after the actual events, so many works of literature and art later, simple moral outrage at the Nazis is considered low-hanging fruit, too easy a choice. Made after Claude Lanzmann’s “Shoah,” which confronted us with the excruciating details of survivors’ testimonies; after Eyal Sivan’s “The Specialist,” which investigated the perpetrator; after Asher Tlalim’s “Don’t Touch My Holocaust” and Yael Hersonski’s “A Film Unfinished,” which wrestled with questions of memory and commemoration, “Shoes” is out of sync with our time. In its complacent treatment of the Holocaust, “Shoes” stands in sharp contrast to recent Polish films, such as Wladyslaw Pasikowski’s “Aftermath” and Agnieszka Holland’s “In Darkness,” which grapple with issues of local collaborators and violence against Jews. Even in Soviet Russia, despite the strict censorship, some probing films were made.

At this point in time it is morally objectionable to make the Holocaust into an abstract picture, devoid of historical detail, devoid of authentic story. Esthetically, it’s not only in bad taste. It fetishes the Holocaust. Nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in the camera’s focus on shoes. The shoes in question — red, with bows — are a close relative to the red coat worn by a little girl in “Schindler’s List.” As in Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster, that red swath, standing out in the black-and-white world of the movie, creates a sensationalist and sentimental image. But there was nothing sentimental about the Holocaust, and presenting it through a perspective of footwear is a gimmick.

One can easily envision sequels to “Shoes,” such as “Hair” or “Eyeglasses.” In fact, Fam plans to follow with two more films, forming a trilogy. The second installment will present — wait for it — the Holocaust told from the perspective of a Jewish family’s pet dog, who is taken to guard a concentration camp. The final part will deal with the Holocaust by tracing the history of a violin, from its creation in pre-war Nuremberg all the way to a concert near the Western Wall in present-day Jerusalem.

By relying on gimmick, and by avoiding particular stories, grounded in actual historical and cultural context, “Shoes” not only betrays the memory of the victims (whose stories are generalized to the point of cliché) but also avoids addressing uncomfortable issues of historical responsibility. Even as Soviet censorship ceased to exist, the story of the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet territory remains largely unrepresented. For Russians, it is
safer this way: No need to rock the boat, to ask difficult questions about elderly neighbors, or even one's grandparents. It's easier to locate the Holocaust story in a nostalgic never-never land, to depict brutal death as an ascent into the light and to come up with an unusual angle — literally, a camera angle on the shoes. This is why the film ends in Auschwitz, and not in Kiev, Minsk or Smolensk.

In the West, the Holocaust is a cinematic sacred cow, with its visual repertory holding tremendous power over us. No wonder that “Shoes” has already run a victory lap through European film festivals, and is scheduled for screening at various Jewish film festivals across North America. Its Russian premiere, at the Moscow Center for Documentary Film, is slated for December 20.

It's a feel-good Holocaust story: Jews are good, Nazis are bad and even a collaborator repents. No challenging questions, no probing aesthetics and no uncomfortable revelations. What's not to like? One hopes the Oscar jury will know better.

Olga Gershenson is an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and author of “The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe.”
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