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The Pianist as a Testimonial Narrative

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Abstract

A testimonio is a narrative of social and political inequality, oppression, or any specific form of marginalization. The goal of testimonio as a form of narrative inquiry, then, transcends awareness and gravitates toward political intention, questions about institutional power, the need to speak for justice, the creation of stronger pockets of resistance, and the importance of solidarity and coalition as keys to building more equitable social frameworks. Testimonio is implicitly or explicitly a component of what Barbara Harlow has called a "resistance literature."

Keywords: *Testimonial Narrative, The Pianist, Film Narrative and Film Adaptation.*

Testimonio, a Spanish term understood as “witness account”, embodies a narrative research methodology rooted in Latin American history (against the backdrop of social inequality that has plagued the region since the 1950s). A testimonio is a narrative of social and political inequality, oppression, or any specific form of marginalization. As opposed to other forms of narrative research, where the researcher helps mold the narrative or becomes a conduit to voice the stories, in testimonio it is usually the narrator her/himself who is the research tool, with an interest in telling the story from that individual perspective which, in turn, represents a larger, collective story that took place in the community that the narrator inhabits. The goal of testimonio as a form of narrative inquiry, then, transcends awareness and gravitates toward political intention, questions about institutional power, the need to speak for justice, the creation of stronger pockets of resistance, and the importance of solidarity and coalition as keys to building more equitable social frameworks.

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Testimonio may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novella-testimonio, nonfiction novel, or "factographic literature. Testimonio is implicitly or explicitly a component of what Barbara Harlow has called a "resistance literature."

The Pianist is adapted from Warsaw concert pianist and composer Wladyslaw (Wladek) Szpilman's plainly written but moving 1946 memoir of the same name. In *The Pianist*, Roman Polanski illuminates the traumas and triumphs inherent in Holocaust survival through his cinematic portrayal of the survival of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a renowned concert pianist, composer, and star performer of Polish radio, and one of 20 out of 360,000 Jews who survived the Nazi occupation of Warsaw.

In the main, the film adheres very closely to the memoir, both in detail and in its cool, controlled tone. Given that director Roman Polanski himself escaped the Krakow Ghetto when he was only seven years old. . In an interview about why he chose Szpilman's memoir to express aspects of his own parallel and heretofore unnarrated tale of survival Polanski stated-

> I had searched for decades for a model parallel to my life, which I couldn't film myself…Szpilman's book was the text I was waiting for—a testimony of human endurance in the face of death, a tribute to the power of music and the will to live, and a story told without the desire for revenge. (Polanski, n.d.).

This comment is somewhat ironic coming from a director whose earlier films center around themes of revenge and vengeful versus dialogic encounters between victims and victimizers (e.g., *Rosemary's Baby*, *Knife in the Water*, *Death and the Maiden*). Indeed, in *The Pianist*, the director Polanski, whose life and work epitomizes the mad underbelly of survival, encounters a subject that epitomizes the grace, the exaltation of survival. We might hypothesize that Polanski found in Szpilman's memoir an idealized version of his own struggle to survive.

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It's the film most emotionally close to his own experience, though not in any way based on it. The film's narrative is chronological and linear (beginning with the German invasion in September 1939 and ending with Poland's 'liberation' by the Russians in January 1945) and Polanski doesn't indulge in crosscutting, montage, or any other displays of cinematic virtuosity. The film opens with Szpilman imperturbably playing a Chopin nocturne on Warsaw radio as the Germans begin to bombard the city. Szpilman, performed with grace, muted expressiveness and power by a very angular Adrien Brody (who is on the screen in almost every scene), is a pampered, successful member of a large assimilated, cultivated Jewish family - a segment of Warsaw's population of 350,000 Jews.

Polanski, following the memoir's lead, is not interested in providing us with more than a sketch of this warm family. He, like Szpilman, views them totally from the outside, so they are not really individuated, nor do we understand much about the family dynamic except that Wladek and his cynical younger brother are always at each other's throats. When the Germans occupy Warsaw, they pass humiliating discriminatory laws, and the Jews are forced to wear armbands branded with a Star of David. Soon Szpilman and his family, along with nearly a half million other Jews, are penned into the teeming, roiling one and a third square miles of the Warsaw ghetto.

The first half of *The Pianist* centers on the experience in the ghetto of Szpilman and his family. Polanski evokes the systematic dehumanization they endure, but he does so with a striking lack of theatrics or emotional manipulation. Some of his imagery is taken straight from Nazi documentaries depicting life in the Warsaw ghetto. The dead litter the street, the tattered poor begs or crawl abjectly to slurp up spilled soup from the ground, others become mad and roam about aimlessly, and little boys, risking their lives, sneak dangerously in and out of holes made in the ghetto's walls, smuggling in food from the outside. The Nazis gratuitously brutalize and murder without restraint or reason. In one scene, they toss an old man in a wheel-chair over a balcony, and in another, they sadistically make old and crippled Jews perform a grotesque dance just to enjoy a sardonic laugh and display their power to debase. Polanski examines the variety of ways the ghetto's inhabitants respond to their incarceration, and does so in a notably clear-

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eyed, unsentimental way. He never romanticizes the Holocaust's victims. A great many of the wealthy collaborate, and make money out of poverty, social class playing the same role in the ghetto as it does in the outside world. Younger men with connections gain special privileges by serving in the ghetto police, aiding the Nazis in the repression of their fellow Jews (though they are ultimately fated for extinction like everybody else in the ghetto). A brave socialist and his family cheerily print anti-Nazi pamphlets and help to organize the ghetto resistance movement. The rest of the population try to survive (most of them removed from the activities of the resisters), and, along the way, become inured to the horror that confronts them every day. When lined up in a compound before being deported on the death trains, some try to comfort themselves with the logical notion, against all contrary evidence, that the Germans won't destroy them because they need their labor. But most, silently and mournfully, accept that there is no escaping their destiny.

Polanski captures the terrifying nature of the ghetto ethos with great economy, without ever underlining its profound misery or coercing the audience's sympathies with manipulative close-ups. Meanwhile Wladek, to make money, plays piano in a café for a crass, moneyed Jewish clientele. As is his wont, he remains detached from his audience, which one senses he quietly scorns. *(In the memoir, Szpilman writes that the ghetto experience shattered his belief in the "solidarity of the Jews.")* Polanski never makes explicit what Wladek is feeling - even if he has any particular feeling about being a Jew. We know he is a sharp-eyed, remote, solitary man, who, though liked by the people to whom he relates, does not seem close to anybody, including his family though he feels loyalty toward them. He remains an opaque figure throughout the film, an apolitical, not especially heroic or anti-heroic person, who has two passions - music and his own intense desire for survival. He is also graced with astonishing luck that allows him to escape deportation, as the rest of his family head towards their death. It's true that Wladek has sufficient courage to offer help to the ghetto resistance, but though he aids them in acquiring arms, he's already left the ghetto and is in hiding by the time the doomed revolt takes place in 1943. One knows, however, Wladek is not an activist, but a keen observer who watches events unfold, from a distance, through the windows of the flats in which he's hiding.

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In the second half of the film, Polanski depicts the Polish underground hiding Wladek by moving him from flat to flat. He's first moved to a flat a block away from the ghetto, where he despairingly watches a vastly outnumbered resistance movement heroically holding out against the Nazis, and sees the ghetto ultimately enveloped in flames with the few survivors lined up and killed. Polanski does not fully detail Wladek's time of hiding, but we see that much of his energy is spent acquiring enough food to keep alive. He's essentially alone in hiding (except for the sporadic visits from Polish underground members who bring him food) with his thoughts and his fingers compulsively miming the playing of some soundless Chopin nocturne from memory. The music is one thing we see him achingly long for summed up in a brief scene where, before being transferred to another flat, he poignantly watches a Polish woman friend practicing on the cello. Wladek may have a capacity for solitude, but this time his loneliness is not a choice, it is forced on him by the Nazis. He writes in his memoir that in hiding he *"was lonelier than anyone else in the world."*

By the time the Polish underground revolts in the summer of 1944, the film shows him looking half mad. Through parted curtains he watches the sixty three day armed struggle between the Polish Home Army and the German troops that concludes with the total destruction of Warsaw and the loss of 250,000 Polish (non-Jewish) lives among the 950,000 who still lived there. With his flat being shelled and the Germans burning to the ground everything that is still standing, a gaunt, wraithlike Wladek escapes the German troops by hiding in an abandoned hospital. When the shooting stops, he flees into a blasted Warsaw. This visually striking scene - an extreme long shot of Wladek clambering over the rubble filled streets is followed by his miraculously being given another turn of good fortune. He is discovered by a German army officer, Capt. Hosenfeld, who, upon learning he's a pianist, asks him to play. In what may seem like a scene straight out of Hollywood, Wladek plays Chopin with astonishing fluidity, as if he were still sitting in the 1939 Warsaw Radio studio, and the years of degradation and imprisonment had not intervened.

However difficult it is for the film viewer to suspend disbelief here, Polanski is sticking close to the memoir where Szpilman describes his playing as permeated with despair and a sense of loss: *"The glassy, tinkling sounds of the untuned*

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strings rang through the flat and stairway, floated through the villa on the other side of the street, and returned as a muted, melancholy echo." What is most arresting about Szpilman's relationship to his music is that it is the key to his identity, and yet the film never suggests that music saves him. *The Pianist* also doesn't intimate that there is any causal link between a nation or individual's love for music, and being humane or moral. The film offers no explanation for what prevents Hosenfeld from taking Wladek's life.

But from Hosenfeld's diary, whose extracts were published with Szpilman's memoir, we learn that he was a religious man who saw the Nazis as "*riff-raff*" and "*brutes,"* and himself as a *"coward"* for allowing the *"crimes to be committed."* The diary also informs us that Hosenfeld, while trying to adhere to *"God's commandments,"* was able to courageously save a few other people besides Wladek from death. Hosenfeld is just one of the characters that Polanski, adhering to Szpilman, uses to grant the film a sense of balance and objectivity though almost all the Germans in the film are barbaric. Polanski's Poles run the gamut from Szpilman's pre-war artistic friends who are willing to risk their lives for him, to a conman underground member who derisively steals the money that he is supposedly raising to feed Szpilman. And there are anti-Semitic Poles (in most film seen as characteristic Polish behavior), who, spying Wladek hiding in a flat, attempt to turn him over to the Nazis.

The uniqueness of *The Pianist* lies in its capacity to evoke the horrific world of the Holocaust without ever constructing virtuoso set pieces like the destruction of the Krakow Ghetto sequence in Schindlers List, or reviving up the tension and action so that we are constantly being shocked and excited. In fact, most of the violent action in *The Pianist* is glimpsed in long shot. *The Pianist's* point of view is a modest one. It is Wladek's perspective that dominates almost every scene in the film, allowing us to see and experience only what he does. Given that Wladek is essentially apolitical, we learn little about the complex politics of the ghetto resistance (e.g., struggles between Bundists, Left Labor Zionists, General Zionists, and Communists) or of the nefarious role that the Soviet Union and the Communists played in the Warsaw Uprising.

Wladek is not larger than life - he's no heroic antihero like Schindler, who literally dwarfs everybody around him. He survives because of luck rather than bravery.

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He's so undramatic and silent a figure that the film moves us to view the Holocaust (as it should be seen) as a collective rather than an individual tragedy.

Conclusion

The Pianist is remarkably devoid of melodrama, suspense, and voyeurism - the anti- Schindlers List of Holocaust films. Despite its subject, it is Polanski's most deliberate and least sensational work. Its cumulative power comes from Polanski's gift for compression and quiet intelligence, and his willingness to trust in simply telling the unadorned truth. The solidity and gravity of *The Pianist* gets closer to the heart of the Holocaust than any narrative film that I have ever seen.

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