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Radu Mihaileanu (dir.), *Train of Life* (1998)

"The Wealth of All Humanity"

*Donna-Lee Frieze*

The use of humor in films about Nazism and the Holocaust is not new. Mel Brooks, Charlie Chaplin, and lately Roberto Benigni have utilized humor and satire to counter the arguably phlegmatic responses to documentary seriousness. Curiously, Radu Mihaileanu's 1998 film *Train de Vie* (*Train of Life*) is often identified as a "Holocaust comedy," but this label is unjust. The film neither laughs at the Holocaust, nor is solely preoccupied with the Holocaust. Rather, Mihaileanu focuses on the vanished world of the shtetl, the Eastern European Jewish village with its spirited cultural community, and other victims of the Nazi genocide, the Roma and Sinti. Instead of depictions of the suffering individual, and trains as symbols of certain death, *Train de Vie* highlights the devastating loss of cultural communities to humanity. In this sense, the film's themes are akin to Raphael Lemkin's conceptual understanding of the term "genocide," which includes, among other important elements, the intended destruction of cultural elements of a group. In a 1933 paper in which he outlines his early thoughts on genocide, Lemkin notes that a group's cultural resources are "the wealth of all humanity." In many ways, Mihaileanu's film embodies this original notion of genocide.

Around 1941, the village fool Shlomo announces that the Nazis are in the next village. The shtetl community must rally to escape the certain Nazi onslaught. The elders of the village cannot concoct anything more bizarre and brilliant than Shlomo's plan: to build a fake deportation train that will take them to Palestine via the USSR. In order to render the ruse more authentic, some of the villagers disguise themselves as Nazis. The community labors to build a convincing deportation train: tailors design bona fide Nazi uniforms; bakers prepare loads of *challah* (Sabbath bread); cooks preserve too many jars of pickles; cobbler pound nails into the new Nazi boots, while musicians provide the tempo and rhythm integral to the spirit of the working community. Most importantly, the fake Nazis must learn to speak German with a perfect accent, leaving behind the vestiges of their Yiddish inflection. Coaching Mordechai (the fake Nazi) on his accent, the instructor tells him:
“The Wealth of All Humanity”

Shlomo (Lionel Abelanski) aboard the “train of life” (courtesy Raphael Films).

“Yiddish makes fun of German. It has a sense of humor.” Mordechai’s innocent response is as heartwarming as it is absurd: “We make fun of their language? Maybe that’s why we’re at war.”

In contrast to many films about genocide, *Train de Vie* combines elements of allegory and fantasy to illuminate the senselessness of the genocidal perpetrator’s intentions. By avoiding narrative realism, Mihaileanu works to portray life, not death. Even the film’s simple title is revealing: after all, stock images of Holocaust deportation trains are rarely associated with life. And yet the film also has its realistic dimension—albeit not the realism usually associated with the Holocaust and genocide narratives. The culturally rich but financially impoverished community of the Jewish shtetl—bickering between neighbors, haranguing among elders, flirting between teenagers, and community support amid poverty—brings a sense of the tangible to a lost world. In order to capture this expanding universe of rural communities, Mihaileanu uses an anamorphic lens, cinematically encompassing “the wealth of all humanity.”

The perpetrators of the genocide are rarely seen in the film. Instead we are treated to the antics, confusion, and discomfort of shtetl members posing as Nazis. In the lavish front carriage, Mordechai, the reluctant Nazi—a highly respected member of the shtetl—acts as the train’s commander, while the
remaining **shtetl** members are camped in the rear wagons (some turning to communism in an act of rebellion against their “captors”). The ghost train, which does not appear on any German timetables, eventually arouses the suspicions of the real Nazis, and Mordechai finds himself face-to-face with a legitimate **Hauptsturmführer**. Here, Mihaileanu creates an atmosphere of menace: the twilight fog embraces the train, and the rattling wheels reverberate like gunshots. Mordechai escapes this encounter only to later confront someone who appears to be an even more sinister Nazi. Perhaps now, Mordechai’s true identity will be exposed? The alarming moment is short-lived when the Nazi is revealed to be just as “authentic” as Mordechai. The Roma and Sinti have also devised a fake deportation transport—not to Palestine, of course, but to India.

When the two groups unite, the film grows increasingly absurd, and also terrifying as it hurtles towards an unexpected but inevitable conclusion. Brewing beneath the surface of the film’s celebration of life is the reality of the death camps, and of the Nazis’ intention to destroy the essence and very existence of human groups. During my many viewings of *Train de Vie*, it is here, at the end, that I have found my understanding of genocide—what it means to lose “the wealth of all humanity”—most enriched.
is akin to dehumanization; but the metaphor of defacing here is too powerful to overlook. The perpetrators likely do not know the family, but have gazed into a representation of the family’s being, and dehumanized it by defacing it. Indeed, the erasure of the faces is a deliberate and empirical act of dehumanization, puncturing the uniqueness of the individual’s life. The photograph resonates with the “intent to destroy”: to literally and metaphorically “wipe out.” It points to acts of genocide extending beyond mass murder, to the destruction of the victim group’s identity. In this respect, the photograph is distinct from the conventional images of terror, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

The obliteration of the face does not only erase facial features: it eliminates facial expressions, which provide clues to the Otherness of the family. I may not be concerned with the color of the family members’ eyes or hair, but I am curious about their feelings. Essential to the dehumanization strategies of genocide is the prohibition of a victim’s self-expression—unless, of course, it takes the form of terror. However, on closer examination, it is apparent that the perpetrators have not entirely erased the faces. The man’s forehead is slightly exposed, as are the chins of the boy and the woman. If it were not for the sketched impalement stakes, it is possible that the expression on the woman’s mouth, too, could be discerned.

Impalement as an element of genocide is critically assessed by Linda Boose in her dense and graphic article titled “Crossing the River Drina,” in which this photograph is also reproduced. By obliterating the expressions, and (super)imposing stakes on and through the bodies, the perpetrators symbolically attempt to replace a familiar, personal memory with a communal, violent one. The scratches on the faces are strikingly neat, and the impalement stakes too are linear and carefully etched. Both acts of defacing raise questions of memory: both its ownership and its attempted destruction. Erasing heads conveys a desire to remove, or at least control, the victims’ thoughts, including their memory acts.

The face of genocide is faceless. This is not because the face of the victimized Other is mysterious or unknowable, but because the ethical relationship between one and the Other is cancelled. The photograph serves as a powerful reminder that, regardless of whether mass killing is involved, genocide always attempts to erase the ethical proximity of Others, seeking to render them faceless and dehumanized.
Evoking Genocide

Rainbow Jews: Gay and Jewish Identity in the Performing Arts (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007). Email: JFriedman@wcupa.edu

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