

Ashesh Nepal

Professor Brad Chisholm

FS 260

10 Oct. 2023

Schindler's List: The Sophisticated Barbarism of Nazis in Krakow

"*Was ist das, ist das Bach?*", is a haunting inquiry that has emerged as one of the most iconic lines in the pivotal scene of the movie *Schindler's List*. This movie is based on the real-life story of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman in Poland. Oskar during the start of the war, sees an opportunity to make money from the Nazis' rise to power by using the Jews as cheap labor. However, as the war progresses Oskar Schindler realizes his employment is the only thing that separates these humans from the death camp. Due to his realization of the brutality of the regime towards Jews, he then starts to employ Jews as a means to save their lives in Krakow, and by the end of the war, he is responsible for saving the lives of over 1,000 Jews from the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps.

The topic of the Holocaust presents several challenges for the director, one of which is: How to convey the grim tone of this historical event. The sounds and visuals need to be used in a creative way so that the grimness of this historical event is never lost on the viewer. In this paper, I will be discussing the cinematography of the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto in the movie *Schindler's List* and how Spielberg uses visuals, sound effects, and music to show the detachment of the German soldiers in the Holocaust.

The establishing shot of this scene contains the marching of German Army in the nighttime and cuts to an army person meticulously holding a stethoscope and trying to listen to the smallest of sounds (Campbell, 20). Simultaneously, the audience is shown Jewish individuals

who are concealed in the same vicinity, desperately trying to stay silent and avoid detection. We transition to another scene where German officers are searching for Jews who have been hiding in this Krakow Getto. An officer flips over a bed to discover a Jew tied to it trying to hide another officer then turns his light to a closet to discover several Jews hiding with their hands up to signal their surrender. We are then taken back to the first scene where a Jew crawls out of a piano trying to be as silent as possible, however, due to an unfortunate slip of his legs touches the piano creating a loud sound. The ring of the piano is continued by classical music which for now seems nondiagetic. As soon as the sound is heard, the German army hurries upstairs and starts shooting mercilessly we then cut to another house where the officers are shooting the Jews who have their hands up. Here like thunder we see flashes of light signifying the rain of bullets on the hiding Jews. While all this is going on we hear classical music which later turns out is being played by a German officer. Then two other German officers all while the killing is taking place inquire if that music is that of Mozart or Bach. We then cut to Amon Goeth a Nazi official displaying his tiredness and exclaiming when this night will end, not with sympathy for the Jews but due to the burden of all this task. The scene ends with an extremely long shot of Krakow where we see flashes of light coming from many windows in different houses in the dark, which by now the audiences know the meaning of.

This scene follows a pivotal moment where our protagonist realizes the horror of what the Nazis are doing. Standing on a hilltop, he witnesses the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto and the brutal treatment of its Jewish residents. Before this scene, the Jews had been given orders to leave Krakow and had been rounded up. Those who remained hidden were driven by various motives, with fear of the rumored concentration camps being a significant factor. For the director, the above scene had to show the audience the ruthlessness of the Nazis and accurately

display the events that took place in the “Liquidation of the Krakow Ghetto” where 2000 Jews were shot by the SS (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Subsequently, this scene takes on even greater significance in a later sequence, revealing the grim fate that awaited Schindler's Jews had Oskar Schindler not tried to save them. Moreover, this scene serves as a lens through which the audience gains insight into the personalities of those involved, portraying a stark picture of their disregard for notions of fairness and justice.

One can imagine that in the meeting the Director Steven Spielberg and the Director Of Photography Janusz Kaminski had about this scene the word “detachment” must have been conveyed in one way or another. This scene contains the creative utilization of camera placement and visual cues which are used to show the detachment of the SS. In his book, Campbell describes ariel shots as, “Usually shot from a helicopter, the aerial shot gives a vast sense of space and environment. This shot serves as an introduction to an environment” (24). At the end of this scene, we are presented with an aerial shot of Krakow from a hilltop which accomplishes more than just introducing the environment; it magnificently underscores the vast scale of the atrocities unfolding within the city. In this scene, we never directly see a Jew getting killed however the audience is well aware of what is going on. The use of flashing lights serves as a haunting representation of the shootings and deaths of Jews. This visual disconnect parallels the detachment that German soldiers might have felt; even though they were directly involved in the killings, the Jews were dehumanized in their eyes so it still felt indirect for them. The whole operation is portrayed as another stake military operation more like getting rid of vermin rather than killing actual humans.

This detachment is further exemplified when we see a panning shot of Ammon Goeth, visibly exhausted from his role as an officer, nonchalantly washing his face with cold water

outside. A panning shot which is, “often used to reveal landscapes, particularly if the intended effect is to impress the viewer with the scale of the land” in this shot reveals several dead bodies and flashing windows in the background when Goeth is talking with his officials (Campbell, 26). He remains seemingly indifferent, with the carnage serving as a dispassionate backdrop while he engages in conversation. This scene ingeniously encapsulates the theme of detachment, and the director masterfully employs visuals to underscore this grim reality.

Schindler’s List has a unique visual choice compared to the movies which have been released in 1990. Most directors go out of their way to shoot with the highest quality cameras and try to make movies as immersive as possible for the audience investing millions in small details that few audiences ever notice, Spielberg goes the opposite route of filming the whole movie in black and white. This was definitely a huge risk however, from the success of the movie and to most viewers of this movie we can say that it paid off. The absence of color serves as a poignant reminder of the bleakness of the Holocaust era. There is no vibrancy or hint of life; instead, the film presents a stark canvas where death and evil dominate. In this sense, the movie is more immersive psychologically than it could have ever been with saturated color and in this scene, the color scheme just fits.

Tim Monich was the dialectic coach for this movie. His contributions can be heard in the brief dialogue we have in this scene. Notably, every character in the movie speaks with a distinctive accent, which is an intriguing artistic choice, especially considering that the film is primarily in English rather than in German and Polish. This puts a great emphasis and importance on the accent to set the tone and atmosphere of the whole movie. However, at this moment the German soldiers speak German when inquiring about the music being played. Here the brief German exchange is quite understandable to English speakers and is quite helpful in

immersing us in that place at that time.

The first part of this scene makes use of silence for intensity. In their book *Looking at Movies: An Introduction To Film*, Barsam and Monahan state, “When so used, silence frustrates our normal perceptions. It can make a scene seem profound or even prophetic” (321). This is true for this scene where the intensity of silence is unbearable for the audience. This silence is broken by gunshots and then the sounds of guns can be heard interlaced with screams and music. The sound is also used to show detachment and separation for the senior officers for whom when they have their scenes we only dimly hear the sounds of bullets and screams. The scene takes an indirect approach to tell the audience that people are getting killed without actually showing that and just using flashing of light along with bang sounds to signify it. The music is an important part of the sounds we hear and is what truly makes this scene unique.

The German officer in this scene is indeed playing Bach, specifically, J.S. Bach’s English Suite No. 2 in A minor, BWV 807: III. Courante (“The Diegesis of Schindler’s List”). It is interesting to note that the music was diegetic, usually, classical music in scenes is non-diegetic (Monahan and Barsam, 310). The interplay of this classical music with the sounds of gunfire is a striking artistic decision, suggesting to the audience that the music is being performed with the same meticulous focus as the acts of killing are being carried out—with a chilling detachment. This scene also plays a big contrasting role in showing how Germans try to be civilized with their music while butchering other human beings. This contrast serves as a poignant commentary on the dehumanization and moral dissonance of the Holocaust.

In conclusion, the scene made a major impact on me as the audience. This scene though brief, was packed with meaning and insights about the psychology of the Nazi army. The use of visual elements to convey detachment and the depiction of shootings, coupled with the

meticulous sound design, served to drive home the intended message effectively. The music in this scene is what really made it stand out. The music here was used in a very interesting way to make a vivid contrasting statement about what was going on and I felt was a great statement for World War 2 in general. Spielberg was successfully able to convey to the audience the devastating historical event that took place through his creative use of visuals, sound, and music. When films are used to convey historical truths, their potential for impact becomes exceptionally potent, and this scene is a prime example of the medium's capacity for profound storytelling and conveying the gravity of historical events.

References

Campbell, Drew. "The Language of Film," *Technical Film and TV for Nontechnical People*.

Simon and Schuster, 1 June 2002.

Monahan, Dave and Richard Barsam, "What is Sound?" *Looking at Movies: An Introduction*

To Film. NY: Norton & Co., 7th edition, 2022

"Schindler's List (4/9) Movie CLIP - Bach or Mozart? (1993) HD." *YouTube*, uploaded by

Movieclips, 1 June 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yR0wlrq_h4. Accessed 8 Oct.

2023.

"Schindler's List (1993)". *Shotonwhat.com*, shotonwhat.com/schindlers-list-1993. Accessed 8

Oct. 2023.

"The Diegesis of Schindler's List." *Holocaustmusic.ort.org*,

holocaustmusic.ort.org/memory/holocaust-film/the-diegesis-of-schindlers-list/. Accessed

8 Oct. 2023.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Krakow (Cracow)." *Ushmm.org*, 2019,

encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/krakow-cracow. Accessed 8 Oct. 2023.