

Wilkołak

Adrian Panek, 2018

Screenwriter: Adrian Panek

Place: Poland, Germany, Netherlands

Studios: Next Entertainment, Raw Nerve

Length: 88 minutes

Language: Polish

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Trauma Voyeurism in Holocaust Cinema

Set in the grim days of early 1945, *Wilkołak* opens with scenes of final ‘liquidation’ in the Gross-Rosen concentration camp of Lower Silesia in Poland. The film follows a group of liberated children whose newfound freedom offers little consolation after the deprivation and emotional trauma wrought by life in the camp. The director, Adrian Panek, paints a bleak picture of life after ‘liberation’ when hunger reigns and fear remains an inescapable reality.

The original title, *Wilkołak*, which translates to ‘werewolf,’ alludes to the film’s source of horror, quite literally the camp’s former Alsatian guard dogs, who now roam the countryside hunting former inmates. In another sense, ‘werewolf’ signifies the Nazi and SS guerrillas who continue to haunt the region’s hills and forests following their defeat. The film centres on this confrontation between liberation and the Nazi regime of fear which lingers even after its demise; placed between these two forces, the children must choose their own path through adversity.

During the hellish final hours of the camp’s liquidation, the children are spared by a demonstration of their internalised subjugation: one of their number, Władek (Kamil Polnisiak), leads the others in a military exercise of *neder und auf* or ‘up and down’ which satisfies the callous guard that greater pain will be inflicted upon the children by living in their damaged states than by death. The following day, the camp is liberated by the Red Army; however, the children’s would-be-saviours have little interest in their wellbeing. The group is swiftly relocated to a makeshift orphanage in a rural manor house where their sympathetic caretaker, Jadwiga

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(Danuta Stenka), is given little by the Soviets in the way of food and clothing, so the children remain garbed in their striped camp outfits.

Trouble begins only a few days into their stay: the children find Jadwiga mauled by dogs in the forest. Now deprived of a parental figure, Hanka (Sonia Mietielica), the eldest of the group, becomes the de facto leader and despite a scarcity of water and food, the children manage to survive. Meanwhile, Władek, who perhaps exhibits the greatest degree of a quasi-Stockholm syndrome inflicted by camp life, attempts a reconciliation with the dogs by using their camp training in the form of *neder und auf*.

As time passes and supplies dwindle, the children's situation becomes increasingly desperate. Władek eventually realises that the dogs' seemingly mindless aggression is also a product of their own training, namely to attack people wearing the striped uniforms of camp inmates in which the children remain clothed. With this knowledge, Władek alone is able to go outside in search of food where he stumbles upon the camp of the other 'werewolves' — the guerrilla Nazis — from whom he manages to escape.

Back at the house, things come to a head as the children become unbearably desperate for food and water. It is at this point that they discover Władek's trick that by taking off their stripes they are able to make peace with the dogs. The film's final catharsis comes as Władek is chased back to the house by one of the 'werewolves' from whom he is rescued by the other children, and the dogs who are now the children's defenders maul the Nazi.

The film's genre is difficult to place: it is somewhere between horror and drama, an imprecision which is perhaps its greatest hindrance. As a horror film, *Wilkołak* is a cheap and offensive attempt to shock audiences. Its subject matter is an audacious one which is difficult to sensitively depict in the realm of horror. The film's provocative and heavy-handed treatment of other difficult themes such as rape, self-harm, and suicide, as well as its gratuitous gore, makes it difficult to watch and even more difficult to justify. It is often only the most serious films which succeed in depicting such content without a voyeuristic lens or an exploitative treatment of the subject matter.

Despite these downfalls, there is a more successful aspect to the film, one which may not be initially apparent; namely, its commentary on liberation and the disconnect between physical freedom and the (ex)-prisoner's mentality of fear which lingers following liberation. The dogs are

evil and menacing as long as the children remain ‘prisoners’ and it is once they literally shed their prison stripes that the dogs shed their animosity towards the children.

In the final scene, the children and the dogs recognise themselves equally as victims of Nazi tactics and abuse, and together they are able to overcome their traumatic experiences. In this light, the film develops another meaning, one less about ‘horror’ and more about the profound emotional journey undertaken by the children. Nonetheless, *Wilkołak*’s unconvincing execution makes it difficult to determine the film’s ultimate goal, and its underlying themes are regrettably overshadowed by the gratuitously gory depiction of its disturbing subject matter.