Tragic History in Peak Tourist Season: On Sergei Loznitsa's *Austerlitz*

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A crowd of people gathers next to the sign Arbeit Macht Frei (work sets you free) at the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Everyone seems to be taking photos, each with his or her own personal camera, sometimes even using a selfie stick. What are they all looking at? We cannot see, as the frame excludes it. What are they trying to capture? We cannot understand, as they all seem to be lost, as we are, in a futile attempt to seize the essence of the place and record it. Is there really anything to watch here? Sergei Loznitsa's *Austerlitz* (2016), a festival stunner that premiered at Venice, went on to Wavelengths in Toronto, and finally grabbed the most prestigious award at Dok Leipzig, is a movie that looks at how other people are looking. Loznitsa's digital camera remains static, placed at eye-level vantage points, to restrainedly observe tourists visiting sites of concentration camps. While not essentially a hidden camera, it is cleverly concealed from the sight of the visitors, or at least they do not seem to notice it. The shots last several minutes, exclude the use of an authoritative voice-over or talking heads, and quickly make clear that *Austerlitz* is not a movie that aims to instruct or to even guide us how to think.

The discrepancy formed between the mundane activities in the present and the historical gravity of the past is quite disturbing to watch. People walk around those sites in shorts and T-shirts, and carry their cameras as if they were visiting a museum exhibition or a theme park. At one point, we notice a man wearing a *Jurassic Park* T-shirt on his visit to a death camp, and another using a selfie stick in an inventive manner. After all, it is a nice sunny day outside and the tourist season is at its peak. Are we allowed to embrace a self-righteous take, and to suspect that the tourists may be taking those horrific memorial sites too lightly, perhaps even humorously? Would we behave differently if we were there? "Ok, a five-minute break for toilets or a sandwich," announces one guide, quickly depriving the site of its original context by turning it into an ordinary location for sightseeing in the present.

Watching *Austerlitz* induces feelings of restlessness and concern. The rich sound design by Loznitsa's long-time collaborator Vladimir Golovnitski amplifies the noise of the crowd, making it louder as the shots linger. Both synchronic to the image and diegetic, by emanating from reality, the soundtrack is frightening and overwhelming in its intensity. We hear the crowd on many of its layers, but cannot grasp any concrete sentences. Not only is there no voice-over to guide us, even the location sound is not helpful for comprehension. The voices of the tour guides, on the other hand, are dubbed and overlapped on top of the images. Their different intonations –whether extremely earnest, way too emotional, or even ironic: "don't worry, this isn't the last time you're ever going to be able to eat," says one of them–often strike us as simply inappropriate. Occasionally, *Austerlitz* may seem like a sociological, or even an anthropological study on Shoah tourism on film–the longer Loznitsa stays at a site, the more people pass in front of his camera, and the better we believe to understand the motivation of their actions.

However, as a philosophical provocation full of paradoxes and enigmas, Loznitsa's film leaves us with more questions than concrete answers. Is it really possible to understand how people relate to the culture of mourning and death nowadays by ethnographically witnessing how they use cameras or take selfies in a concentration camp? As tempting as it may be, is it fair to infer that this culture of tourist photography prevents visitors from truly understanding the historical importance of these locations? If this is part and parcel of what has recently been termed "the pornography of

Still from Austerlitz, *Sergei Loznitsa (2016)*

the Holocaust," on what moral ground exactly are we expecting those tourists to behave differently? Loznitsa is never condescending toward his subjects, and his indifferent and often fixated camerawork keeps us at a distance and invites contemplation rather than pedagogy. This is an essay film that prefers we engage in reflective meditation on these questions rather than provide us with ready-made answers.

By framing the shots according to the architectural logic of the places (the shape of the buildings or the locations of the gates), people's behavior is often guided by the space they inhabit. Loznitsa's is a carefully composed meditation on how we experience a site scarred with traumatic moments, and how photography and film can register such presence. *Austerlitz* is shot by Loznitsa and Jesse Mazuch in black and white, an aesthetic decision that lends everything in the frame an abstract quality. It also produces the effect of an archive, without including one shot of archival material, thus making the footage seem like it is excluded from a specific timeframe. Like *Victory Day* (2018), another observational film by Loznitsa that focuses on the Treptower Park monument in Berlin, this is an attempt to explore how a traumatic past reverberates through the present.

When the film ends, though, the past resonates strongly, even more ironically than before. A crowd of visitors is slowly departing from the same Arbeit Macht Frei gate with which the film opened. Those masses of tourists, leaving the site on one sunny day in the midst of the peak tourist season, inevitably make us contemplate other masses of Jewish victims, crammed through the same gate and extinguished like cockroaches with assembly-line efficiency. If this is what Shoah tourism is all about, sometimes we need cinema to invite disturbing analogies without explicitly stating them.

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*A different version of this review appeared on the FIPRESCI (The International Federation of Film Critics) website, as part of a report on the 59th International Leipzig Festival for Documentary and Animated Film (December 2016).