

WAR THROUGH FOREIGN FILM

Edward Morneau



Journals

What is it like for people to survive war?

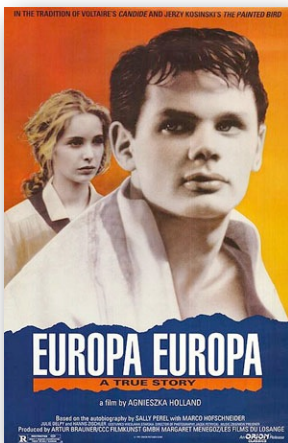
How do people live and function during the time of war?

How do people satisfy their needs in a time of war?

Does war change morality and the rational conscience?

Europa, Europa (1990), Agnieszka Holland's biographical film, based on Solly Perel's life during World War II, is an intimate reflection on the problems of conscience. From the opening shot of children swimming to the amusing and surreal dreams of Nazi Germany that haunt Solly, Holland grapples with the idea of innocence and guilt and how these two dichotomies "play" in the moral conscience of a fifteen year old boy literally caught in the middle of war and genocide. By *literally* I mean that the loyalties to his Jewish background are first replaced by loyalties to Stalin's Communist Revisionist Party and then to the Third Reich Hitler Youth. In each capacity, as a young "citizen" of all three manifestations of ideology or belief systems, Solly's undeveloped moral core makes him oblivious to the moral consequences of these shifting loyalties. The way that Holland arrives upon each shifting loyalty is often comical, approaching burlesque in some instances--a favorite narrative turn for European cultures during this period. This *unbearable lightness*, however, gives way to a "shudder passing through" Solly when

he first sees the desecration of a Jewish cemetery. This awareness intensifies in his trips through the Lodz Ghetto when he witnesses first hand the degradation and suffering of the ghetto's captives. When he meets his brother Isaac in a liberated concentration camp and tries to comprehend his brother's "laughter of despair," Solly seems poised to some encounter with an aged and appropriate moral awareness. Yet, true to the almost irrational mischief of youth, Holland has the brothers urinate on the camp soil and revert to some unique gesture of irreverence, which is the only moral plateau these children can climb at this stage of awareness.



Europa, Europa (continued)

Europa, Europa succeeds because Holland understands this irreverence and uses it in the most subtle ways to mock war itself in general and the Nazi's in particular, suggesting that it is nearly impossible for someone with a developed moral awareness to accommodate war and genocide, never mind a kid navigating through the same hell.

I am reminded of a contemporary film, one that has been subjected to an enormous amount of serious criticism, but attempts, I believe, in uncertain ways, to address the question of awareness of self and other. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008) brings together two boys who seem unable to comprehend on the most basic level what is happening to them and between them. My sophomores saw this film in history class and we referred to it when we were studying Elie Weisel's *Night*. The frequent question was how did Bruno, the son of a Nazi camp commandant, not know what his "friend," Shmuel, was going through as a camp prisoner? Both of these children were nine years old and seemed intelligent and curious, though, in Shmuel's case, he is physically debilitated, lonely, in despair, and desperately worried about his father. His concerns are profound, yet possibly hard for him to define as a child. Bruno just wants someone to play with and is numbingly confounded by the gravity of Shmuel's situation. In this way he is a reflection of his mother, who is either bereft of a moral conscience or is just plain stupid and morally asleep. Alas, she wakes up, but it is too late. But Bruno can never "wake up" as he perishes in a *selection* with his new friend in a "game" of searching "in costume" for Shmuel's father in the camp. It seems preposterous when one describes it as such. Unlike Holland's film, I'm not certain what director Mark Herman is trying to accomplish other than shocking us through an impossible fable. Horror transcends this shock when the story is subverted by the filmmaking itself, and the Nazi parents discover that Bruno has perished in the murderous selection. By burying the parents' screams under a score of plaintive violins, the tragedy exacerbates something that needs no exaggeration. Herman is searching for effect and meaning and finds it necessary to go beyond the fable to find some moral conscience somewhere. In this regard a film about children was really never about children, unlike *Europa, Europa*, which never loses sight of children.



Ordinary Time: *Au Revoir les Enfants*

Every time I see *Au Revoir les Enfants*, Louis Malle's heartbreaking autobiographical film of his childhood experiences during the war, I wind up thinking long and hard about my students and how well I prepare them for life with the literature and films I teach. I wonder how they perceive themselves in relation to the conflicts and themes we encounter; and because most of the literature we teach is formulated around certain moral catastrophes, often the drama within these catastrophes is out of the range of experience my students will ever have. I guess we are in the business of rupturing normalcy, we teachers of catastrophe.

That said, normalcy and ordinariness are implacable truths of everyday life for most people, and when these truths are disrupted, what lies in contrast in terms of coping or retaliation has to measure up to the resolve of how people are prepared to face the dislocating and subversive effects of catastrophe. Malle faces this ordinariness with tragic, Aristotelian resolve.

There's a *plainness* to the film that is naturally made extraordinary by the efficiency of the filmmaking, the tone of the film and how easily and intimately Malle places us within each scene. When I see my students everyday and I get to know them as ordinary, everyday kids (if that is possible these days); and when I measure their relatively wonderful lives

against what children experience in war, I wonder who are the Juliennes and Jeans of my students, and what they would do if they were put in similar situations. Both Julienne and Jean are smart; one is more talented than the other, more self disciplined; yet they share a certain bonding in the woods when they seem lost, so they recognize a common humanity. When one asks: “Are there wolves in the woods?”—and the other doesn’t answer, there is an implied shared understanding of mutual fear they cannot yet identify. The “wolf” reference is Malle being obvious; but children all share a fear of wild animals in the woods, so what works as a metaphor for us is quite literal for the two boys.

So this is my point: Do my students understand war on a figurative or literal level, especially since accumulated exposure to violent images in our society has a constant visual and brutal presence in our media and entertainment and must certainly rise above a figurative representation by virtue of its visual realism.

Take that notion and then amplify it by the moral complexities of the Holocaust—complexities that use betrayal as its chief arbiter—and what is a child to do? I’m not certain my students could see clearly through this, nor I, nor many adults I know. Jean may rationalize his fate to appease Julienne at the end by saying that the Gestapo would eventually catch him, but Malle knows that this is a failure of a moral awareness that, for him (as Julienne) was developed cleverly enough to trade on the black market at school—a cleverness and obstinacy that was sharp enough to enable him to navigate his way through the adult contrivances of school; but when it counted most, he was petrified of the *wolf* and came up with no moral resource to save Jean, his one true friend...the one who found him in the woods. In the midst of all this childhood ordinariness did he know what he was doing? (This may explain his cathartic moment when first screening his own film.)

Au Revoir les Enfants is also a film about what we don’t know, or better, what we put off knowing or realizing—a catching up to the truth. Malle had to make this film to catch up to a fundamental, but impossible truth of his life. I find this courageous filmmaking. I also see the courage in the way he stirs up some supplication for the young Nazi soldiers.

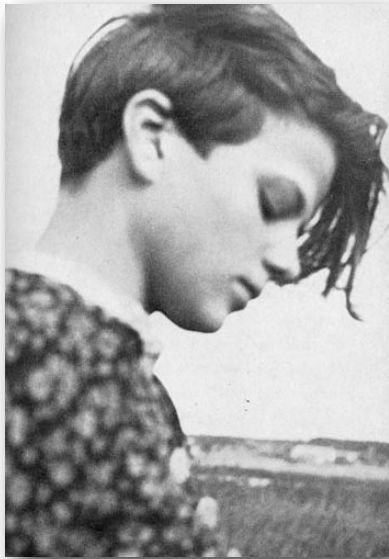
My uncle Robert was an Army prison guard at the end of WWII and was in charge of a block of Nazi soldiers who surrendered to American forces on the last days of war rather than return to Berlin to deal with the Russians. My uncle got to know some of the Nazi soldiers and really stopped seeing them as Nazis and began seeing them as German soldiers. Some of them were horrified by the war and seemed disturbed by their participation, especially those who were furthest from the camps. I don’t want to impugn my uncle, but I believe he was naive, but what do I know? I know the Holocaust and the war from a distance, from books and films; he was there. I read Daniel Goldhagen’s book and I believe in the empiricism of his findings regarding “Hitler’s willing executioners.” But with Malle’s film, I now wonder. These are such clear portrayals of Nazi soldiers cast from his memory, especially the younger one—some barely older than the students at the boarding school. I wonder how long did it take after the war was over for their respective consciences and sense of decency to catch up to some moral self-recognition. They appeared too ordinary to me for moral decency to be thoroughly bleached from them. Does time just stop during war?

Maybe. Like *Europa, Europa*, this is a film about delayed consciousness. Maybe this is

the most subtle effect of war and its inherent tool of hatred, and how this hatred cannot be rationalized, therefore shutting down the very effort the conscience makes to bring grace to the calamity of the soul. There was talk in class about *Ordinary Time*--the period between the baptism of Christ and Ash Wednesday. During this period, in the general liturgy, Christians reflect on Jesus functioning more as a philosopher than a messiah, and may understand that the “ordinariness” of his existence informs the extraordinary conceptual reliquary of his *human* ideas. It is when Christ is scourged and crucified and he resurrects that his ideas become divine, distorted and separate him from humanity, consequently rendering Christ impossibly divine and his human ideas possibly out of our moral, human reach. In the “ordinary time” of Malle’s childhood, childhood happens, kids play, kids probe, kids bully, kids contemplate the normalcy with which they are bored. A drift of conscience begins, and under the siege of Nazi Germany, conscience cannot act as a crucible against so intense a fire. Christ has his moment of doubt in Gesthemane, Pilate has his, Judas hangs himself, The Sanhedrin quakes, and poor Louis Malle as Julienne, functioning *outside* of “ordinary time,” not knowing grace or what to do, can only hold onto what informs childhood when childhood is threatened, and that is the implacable fear of an impossible-to-understand annihilation that ordinariness cannot appease.

Finally, ordinariness and its penetrating simplicity stalk the reversals in this film like the Gestapo stalks Jews and those who give safe haven to Jews. The nun’s eyes pan to the closet to betray a hidden boy; Julienne betrays Jean with a tilt and nod; and the Father Pere Jean’s “au revoir” is quick, casual, and seems like a warm “goodnight, see you in the morning”—quite antithetical to the horror that awaits those who are leaving, totally rupturing whatever normalcy is left for those who are living.

Artifact & Inevitabilty: Sophie Scholl



The dysfunctional conceit behind fascism and Nazism itself shatters before our eyes in Marc Rothemund’s *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (2005). The artifacts that contribute to this evisceration function well, but not nearly as powerfully as the performances of Julia Jensch as Sophie and Fabian Henrichs as her brother Hans, and G. Alexander Held as Robert Mohr, the Gestapo interrogator.

Film depends on artifact to push forth the narrative, and the Ayn Randian-Howard Roarkian, über-sanitized, and empty-hearted German dream architecture that frames the atrium where Sophie and Han’s crime took place looks desolate compared to the passions that fill these characters. The heartbreaking soundtrack by Reinhold Heil and Johnny Klimek is just that; but the human resolve of the main characters is more defined by their words, as the music, in comparison, appropriately corresponds to a secondary, possibly cathartic purpose.

In terms of dramatic arc, in the courtroom scene the doctrinaire fascist delusions of Judge Freisler, played with unbearable ferocity by André Hennecke, reveal the lunacy of the totalitarian mind. However, I’m reminded by Hana Arendt to ask: What is more lunatic: a madness easily identified—one that cannot be reconciled or conditioned for reason and cured; or the indifferent and waking slumber of the sane—those who follow the squeal and appeal of ideological madness and allow it to thrive, then fester, then recompose as an existential pathogen, living beyond its host so as to bring fascism forward in different costumes and more insidious lies?

Rothemund is wise to exhaust the performances of his three principal characters. Mohr is a true believer, but with only a shred of humanity and pity left in him. The pity is not pro-forma Nazi, because the triumph of fascist will is built around remorselessness. He is nearly salvageable, but cannot be saved because, despite some echo in his conscience, he cannot quite hear Sophie or summon the courage to release her, which, initially, is within his power. He is not deaf to her revolution as he contemplates his own revolution, the days of which are numbered. Rothemund bathes him in the grim shadows of his moral destitution, as he never looks upon light, light never looks upon him, and to press the point, Mohr feels obligated to **see** Sophie completely, as he bends and focuses his desk lamp on her face. Maybe he can't quite believe what he sees; we know he doesn't fathom what she says. This may be contrived on Rothemund's part, but it smacks of Mohr lighting his way to some inevitability concerning Sophie—his ambivalence, his living in the grey area of recognition that National Socialism is doomed and he is doomed with it. Indeed, this motif of light is profound, as Rothemund may be referencing the very leaflet that led to the arrest of The White Rose captives:

*Isn't it true that every honest German is ashamed of his government these days? Who among us has any conception of the dimensions of shame that will befall us and our children when one day the veil has fallen from our eyes and the most horrible of crimes—crimes that infinitely outdistance every human measure—**reach the light of day?***

In fact, except for the true madmen (Freisler, et al), inevitability seems to shroud ideological resolve. Desperation underscores the substance of fascist inbreeding, as the Scholls and their friend, Christoph Probst (Florian Stetter), slash through the porous will of irrationality and rupture the fealty to the bloodline of Nazi infallibility: "You know as well as we do that the war is lost. Why are you so cowardly that you won't admit it?" Sophie lectures Freisler, but judging from his judicial hysteria, it is to no avail. As a result they are not given the token 99 day period to meditate on their offenses to the Third Reich and are beheaded immediately. If that was the Nazis "spiritual" genuflection for an enemy of the state to contemplate thoughtcrime, the gesture dissipates like so much of its rhetorical calumny. One can see it on the Nazi officers' faces in Freisler's kangaroo courtroom, as they realize they are all captive of the very lunacy they have sworn to uphold.

Standing in stark contrast to this lunacy, spared of artifact and unbothered by inevitability, are the Scholls and their friends in The White Rose. Sophie herself is the prism through which we see the most focused light of this sanity, and her words and the wise mischief of her mind cannot be matched by the *banality* before her (a word I hesitate to use but cannot find another to replace it).



Anyone for Tennis? Vittorio De Sica's *The Garden of Finzi-Continis* is a difficult film for me for a number of reasons. It's hard to sympathize with the rich, especially the well-educated rich, who should be world weary by virtue of their literacy. I don't really buy into the theory of intellectual insulation, especially for economic reasons. Even the library where Giorgio is forced to pursue his thesis, seems devoid of "apparent" knowledge. What good is it? Wealth knows the connection between politics and economy and usually predicts with some accuracy the consternations regarding what kinds of realpolitik is good or bad for the fiscal elite, no matter what ethnic or religious class is generating wealth.



Worse, Jews participated in Mussolini's government, contributing to a nearly surreal claustrophobia of unawareness. And though I bear no less sympathy for them as victims of The Holocaust, which, as we've discussed, had the capacity to annihilate cultural status before annihilating lives--playing tennis, partying, and waxing romance and rhapsody while fascism is kicking the shit out of most of Europe, seems reason enough not to care about these people. That said, I can't help but admire Micol and the way she anticipates the forthcoming oblivion that awaits her and her privileged cast of friends ("Well if we live, we'll find out." Now that's a woman with whom I can share the end of the world!). Seriously. It's not that I am without feelings, and it has nothing to do with saving up my sympathies for the inevitable. It has more to do with the film's expression of its characters, their language, and its occupation of space and time.

The film unfolds like the shuffling of cards in a game of self-treachery. Micol sums it up: "It is useless." Or is it? There **is** a vitality to the film, but it does not sit well with me. Almost all Italian films from this era are over-dubbed, and though the dialogue replacement is right on the money, it is too over-modulated and seems out of balance with how fascism corrodes everything it touches. Except for Micol, who is so beautiful, but so emotionally inelegant and indelicate she can't even kiss Giorgio, the physical **elegance** of this most romantic of languages persists among most of the characters and creates, for me, a machismo I don't believe, especially from the upper class. That said, it does serve De Sica's purpose of isolating these characters from reality, like the garden estate itself. The garden is **not** like Dachau; and Dachau is not a "hotel in the woods," as referenced by another character, a reference that seems vulgar at best. And by artificially fussing with the sound and not at least burying the dialogue with a little more ambient camouflage, there's not a hint of anything except another day at the beach, which just makes me not believe how clueless these people are. This is a contrivance that I could understand in a state not already in the grips of fascism, but, really: Why is it just Micol that gets it? And she seems sort of psychotic because she gets it. It's an odd conceit with which to saddle a character. Maybe I'm just nitpicking. And I know that's the point of the film, but...

There's also a deliberate pacing to the film that contrasts to the ferocity of how fascism is storming through Europe. I know this is intentional, but it has this neo-realistic rhythm to it that smacks more of a French Chanel commercial than a concentrated view of how the privileged could grind down their waning hours.

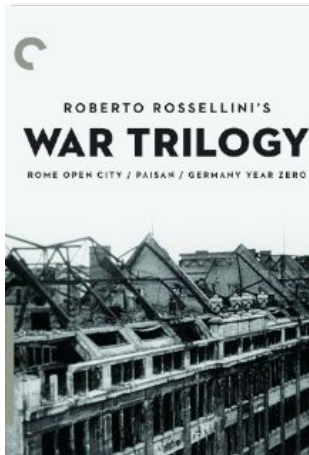
And in those waning hours there is war, which cannot be ignored, even by the privileged. After Mussolini's address to the assembled, Di Sica's thrusts upon us that familiar cello music--a very rich instrument that is **alone**, like an orphan stranded in an orchestra, waiting helplessly to be buried by the violins and violas, as it declines and disappears. "My broken heart is absurd." Indeed.

The enforced ambiguity and muscular symbolism is interesting, though sabotaged by the above. I felt the *wall* between Micol and Giorgio every time he'd stop on that bike path, and couldn't help but

think about one of the worst things that would separate all of Europeans, specifically, East and West Germans, from each other.

There's also the emptiness of wealth--the space of the estate itself and its' sanctuary-like quality. The fact that it unsafe to be there in its repose is a repose now lost to a lot of people whose ambitions are unworthy of the beauty of this space. (Is this "the Dachau in the woods"?). Yet, where is the outrage? Let's just play tennis? I don't get it!

In the end, though, I **do** get it. De Sica's main point is about **not caring**. It is the very imbalance of wealth and power that stirs up fascism itself and the dark arts of scapegoating and repression. There are no better angels when it comes to dividing spoils, only monsters. Totalitarianism is greased on remorselessness and the charities and mercies of the Hebrew, Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu canons will not sate the beast. So, in essence, we are all stunned, rendered mute and stupid. This film just seems to suggest there's something artful to starving this awareness, articulated most painfully by Giorgio's pop: "It is better to die young once and recover than be old forever."



Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City*: These Kids Are Not Just Whistling. No, they're not. And when one of the boys playing soccer with the priest tells him, "These are not days for catechism," we also know that the children see evil much differently than adults. While I love so many of the films we've seen so far in this course, Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* brings me further into the war than the others. It locates me in time of war; has me live with the characters--their courage, cowardice, and ambivalence; and allows me to experience the single, awful feeling of being a bystander to murder, as Pina gets gunned down in the middle of the street, chasing after her fiancé, who has just been arrested by the Italian Gestapo.

Anna Magnani as Pina is as ferocious a war hero as I've ever seen, and Ubaldo Arata's cinematography captures what is for me one of the most poignant **love** scenes ever captured on film. The sequence itself is dislocating, with shifting points of view that dazzle. It begins with Pina's awakening and her fiancé's arrest, then follows her, using multiple points of view, as she moves through the **bystanders**. When she breaks through the fascist police trying in abject futility to hold her back, the POV shifts again and the camera is mounted on the very truck where they've tossed Francesco. Shockingly (I don't know why I was shocked, honestly), she is gunned down in full stride, beseeching the wretched fascists to surrender him to her. We drive off with the camera...with the truck...powerless. It **is** a love story. It has to be. Tragedy demands it: this happens on her wedding day...and she is pregnant. Rossellini is not trifling with us here. It is as clear as it is brave: Such passion cannot be allowed to survive against such evil. Evil strives to be a static force; passion is a dynamic force. Evil can only exist in a state of stupor, oblivion and hate, which are all in opposition to love and hope. This seems a prophecy fulfilled by the drunken, self loathing Nazi officer, Hartman, who predicts, "We will all die without hope." Indeed. This is the master plan from the master race.

The rest of the betrayals are as cruel, yet comparatively cinematically marginal, (though the death of Father Don Pietro is very compelling--that lone chair standing in for our own oblivion). Rossellini does not disappoint with subtext. We meet another disengaged beauty (like Micol) named Elaine, who savors betrayal as a survival mechanism equal to her beauty (unlike Micol, who uses her beauty to betray Giorgio's heart as well as her own heart--not to kill, not for treachery). When Elaine kills Pina's sister, Marina, who is drug addicted and is a prostitute, what registers is that she died some time before Elaine killed her. When Elaine's friend Ingrid--Marina's drug supplier--steals Marina's fur coat, the film is

bloated with deception.

Where can we go to be safe? Where are the children?

They are with the priest, who is about to be executed. But for “catholic” reasons (irony of ironies), the fascist police cannot kill a priest, so a Nazi shoots Pietro in the back of the head while the children are whistling an old familiar song. Just before he dies Pietro says, “It is not difficult to die well; it is difficult to live right.” Pietro dies and little Marcello weeps. But don’t let the tears fool you. All along, as the adult Partisans are trying to outwit the fascist police and their collaborators, as well as protect each other from being found out, it is the children who are blowing things up in Rome and causing mayhem and revolt. The thousand year reich (I refuse to make this a proper noun) is now the Dark Ages.

Rossellini captures this dark age with frightening precision. The gothic tones, the crisp movement, the saturated gloom that marks almost every exterior shot of this film and most interior shots, and the sharp editing (some of it reminds me of *Battleship Potemkin*)--all this craft somehow demonstrates that cinema can replicate actuality, capture the business of terror and resistance, and that a new kind of realism can be accomplished when it comes to confronting the excesses of war and what happens to people under the siege of terror, murder and betrayal. Yet, despite the existential accomplishment of Rossellini’s film, the children save the super text by knowing that a different prayer must invoke a response to totalitarianism, and a childlike remembrance of the past (“Florentine Serenade”) humanizes the effort for the sake of those adults who forget the passions that humanize us.