

**THE TRAGEDY OF WARSAW GHETTO IN ZOOKEPPER'S WIFE BY D.
AKKERMAN: BOOK AND THE MOVIE**

***A TRAGÉDIA DE GUETO DE VARSÓVIA NA ESPOSA DE ZOOKEPPER, DE D.
AKKERMAN: LIVRO E FILME***

***LA TRAGEDIA DE VARSOVIA GHETTO EN LA ESPOSA DE ZOOKEPPER DE D.
AKKERMAN: EL LIBRO Y LA PELÍCULA***

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ABSTRACT: The object of this research is the synthesis of two complete different phenomena: Holocaust tragedy and “naturalist stories”. Distinctive feature of works about the Holocaust, both cinema, and literary, is the indispensable documentary basis. The chosen subject itself causes documentalism. It is possible to track D. Ackerman's way to writing of the novel Zookeeper's Wife from professional interest in preservation of animals in the conditions of occupation to the appeal to history of the Holocaust, resistance and heroism. The author tries to represent events in Warsaw through a prism of specifics of fauna, keeping scientific view of the naturalist on the events nature. Constant comparison of people and animals results in a certain blurring of borders between these two worlds. The writer constantly puts the readers in a situation of the moral choice.

KEYWORDS: Nonfiction. Mass literature. Naturalist stories. Animal imagery. Synthesis of fact and fiction. Screen version. Holocaust.

RESUMO: O objeto desta pesquisa é a síntese de dois fenômenos completamente distintos: a tragédia do Holocausto e as “histórias naturalistas”. Característica distintiva das obras sobre o Holocausto, tanto cinema como literária, é a base documental indispensável. O próprio tema escolhido causa documentalismo. É possível rastrear o caminho de D. Ackerman para escrever o romance Esposa de Zookeeper, desde o interesse profissional na preservação de animais nas condições de ocupação até o apelo à história do Holocausto, resistência e heroísmo. O autor tenta representar os acontecimentos em Varsóvia através de um prisma de especificidades da fauna, mantendo a visão científica do naturalista sobre a natureza dos acontecimentos. A comparação constante de pessoas e animais resulta em um certo borramento das fronteiras entre esses dois mundos. O escritor constantemente coloca os leitores em uma situação de escolha moral.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Não ficção. Literatura de massa. Histórias naturalistas. Imagens de animais. Síntese de fato e ficção. Versão em tela. Holocausto.

RESUMEN: El objeto de esta investigación es la síntesis de dos fenómenos completamente diferentes: la tragedia del Holocausto y las “historias naturalistas”. El rasgo distintivo de las obras sobre el Holocausto, tanto cinematográficas como literarias, es la base documental indispensable. El propio tema elegido provoca documentalismo. Es posible rastrear la manera en que D. Ackerman escribió la novela *La esposa del cuidador del zoológico* desde el interés profesional en la preservación de los animales en las condiciones de ocupación hasta la apelación a la historia del Holocausto, la resistencia y el heroísmo. El autor trata de representar los eventos en Varsovia a través de un prisma de especificidades de la fauna, manteniendo la visión científica del naturalista sobre los eventos de la naturaleza. La comparación constante de personas y animales da como resultado una cierta difuminación de las fronteras entre estos dos mundos. El escritor pone constantemente a los lectores en una situación de elección moral.

PALABRAS CLAVE: No ficción. Literatura de masas. Relatos naturalistas. Imaginería animal. Síntesis de realidad y ficción. Versión en pantalla. Holocausto.

Introduction

The theme of the Holocaust has become one of the most popular in mass literature and cinema of the last two decades. The beginning of the 90s also includes a serious appeal of scholars to the phenomenon of mass culture both in the theoretical aspect and in relation to various national literatures. At the same time, special attention is paid to the mass culture of the United States as a homeland of this phenomenon. We can point out that the theme of the Holocaust arises precisely in American mass literature and cinema. The release of Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* can be considered the starting point which marked a new round in understanding the theme of the Holocaust in contemporary art. It should be noted that the film was based on T. Kenilly's novel *Schindler's Ark*, written in 1982 and awarded the Pulitzer Prize, but it was its film adaptation that brought true fame to the novel.

Methods

Our research is mainly based on the works, that underline the synthesis of fact and fiction (NESMELOVA, 2012), and on works on literature and cinema connections (AMINEVA, 2015; LISENKO ANZHELA & SHEVCHENKO ELENA, 2017; SHCHEPACHEVA & KARASIK, 2016), works on Holocaust (GIGLIOTTI & EARL, 2020; ROSKIES & DIAMANT, 2012; EZRAHI, 2008; ERSKINE, 2009). Nowadays the tight relations between visual and verbal expression of different images is one of the main trends in modern literary studies development

Results and Discussion

The film *Schindler's List* in our opinion, does not fit into the framework of mass art⁴, since at the time of its appearance, even with a large number of literary and cinematic works about the Holocaust, such an approach to revealing the topic turned out to be innovative not only at the ideological and thematic level, but also regarding the artistic means that Spielberg used. In fact, the release of this film opened those "doors" through which a stream of works about the Holocaust, which received extraordinary popularity, "poured" into the mass audience and reader. Among the most famous are R. Polanski's film *The Pianist* (2002), based on the true autobiography of Polish pianist Vladislav Shpilman; *The Reader* (2008) by S. Daldry based on the novel of the same name by the German writer B. Schlink; *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008) by M. Herman based on the novel of the same name by the Irish writer J. Boyne; *The Book Thief* (2013) by B. Percival based on the novel by Australian M. Zusak.

Far from always the literary basis for the film is a work of mass art, but the film adaptation becomes its typical example. A distinctive feature of works about the Holocaust, both cinematic and literary, is the indispensable documentary basis. The chosen theme itself determines documentalism. The history of the Holocaust, the very fact of the possibility of a catastrophe of this magnitude, indicates how reality - most often terrifying - can surpass any writing fiction. As O.O. Nesselova notes in her article *War, Fascism, Totalitarianism - by Means of Nonfiction* (2012), the main reason for the violent invasion of documents in literature was the horror of Nazi crimes and psychological upheaval after their publication. Humanity was truly shocked, as reality surpassed the most incredible fantastic fiction. Not a single writer, even in the darkest dystopian fantasies (with the exception of J. Swift) could think of what was created and introduced by man in real reality (Nesselova, 2012) Therefore, even today, in the second decade of the 21st century, events more than 70 years ago are rethinking in literature and the visual arts. Authors who create works about the Holocaust, using new means, in the context of the postmodern paradigm, continue to look for an answer to the question of how this could happen. Partly due to this issue is the "transition" of works to the field of mass art. According to A.M. Zverev, "mass culture satisfies the ready desire of the consumer," high " - somehow destroys the existing stereotype" (Zverev, 1991).

Summary

To date, one of the latest popular films on Holocaust is *The Zookeeper's Wife* directed

⁴ There is still no unambiguous definition of mass art and strict criteria for separating it from the "high," but most researchers agree on stereotyping: following the canon for works of mass literature is almost a prerequisite, while "big" writers feel more free in relation to various rules and regulations [2].

by Niki Caro and released in spring 2017, including Russian big screens. It quite fits into the row of the mainstream movies aforesaid, which have primarily gained viewers' attention around the world due to the painfulness of the theme and strong emotions provoked by the stories of Nazi crimes, the extermination of Jews and their salvation as an unexpected manifestation of humanity amid catastrophe. In our opinion a grand interest is aroused by *The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story*, a novel by Diane Ackerman (1948) lying in the basis of the movie script. Published in the USA in 2007, it has been subsequently translated in Russian in 2017 after the film release.

The novel has evoked dubious reaction among critics and ordinary readership. The first noted an attractive and unusual approach of the writer and drew some parallels between *The Zookeeper's Wife* and *Schindler's Ark* by Thomas Keneally. At the same time the readers reproached Ackerman in dryness and absence of emotionality, indicating to the difficulty of reading the book despite the interesting material involved. We suppose such controversial reviews accentuate fact and fiction nature of the novel, which presents a rather impartial portrayal of events having taken place in Warsaw during World War II. Also, it is connected with Diane Ackerman and her biography. On the one hand, she is a daughter of Polish immigrants, who arrived in America in 1940-s. Curiously enough, Ackerman's nationality has never been officially documented. On the other hand, she is a rather well-known naturalist involved in the rescue of endangered species and an author of popular-science works on the issue mentioned. Particularly this duality of Diane Ackerman's background has defined her approach to the matter of concern.

To our mind, the book demonstrates an attempt to create a docunovel⁵. Ackerman's appeal to this genre could be presumably explained not by the synthesis of fact and fiction as an American national literary tradition, but by her main occupation. She is a naturalist, who studies animal behavior. Probably the scientific practice of the author justifies slightly dry, nearly unemotional and highly laconic style of the narrative. It resembles a 'protocol' description of events and display of facts interspersed with original documents and references.

Apparently, specifically professional interest of Diane Ackerman has made her appeal to Żabiński married couple and their story. It might be assumed that for the naturalist Jan Żabiński is first and foremost a senior colleague, founder and first director of the Warsaw

⁵A synthetic genre appeared in the US literature as the result of aesthetic experiments in 1950-1960-s and New Journalism movement. Its most remarkable representatives, such as N. Mailer, T. Capote, T. Woolf aspired to the depiction of actual events by means of fiction. Subjectivity had become one of the main characteristics of their approach. Later, the genre went beyond American literature. It includes the vast majority of literary works on WW II and Holocaust tragedy: *Death is My Trade* by R. Merle, *Babi Yar* by A. Kuznetsov, *A Book of the Blockade* by D. Granin and etc.

Zoo, zoologist and book writer. In fact, Ackerman is engaged in the same matter as the Polish scientist – she popularizes zoology besides practicing science. However, Jan and his spouse Antonina are worldwide famous not only as scientists and zookeepers. After World War II their feat – the salvation of approximately 300 Jews and Jan’s active participation in the Warsaw Uprising, followed by the declaration of Righteous Among the Nations – comes out to the fore.

Therefore, we may trace the way of Diane Ackerman to writing *The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story*, which conveys the movement from her professional interest in animals’ conservation under occupation to the addressing to Holocaust history, heroism and resistance. Also the dedication “For Antonina and her family, human and animal” gives evidence to this, as well as the author’s preface, where she explains who Jan and Antonina are, defining them as Christian Poles. Ibid Ackerman speculates on what has helped her to create the book: Warsaw Uprising Museum, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the State Zoological Museum and its archives, the documents, letters and memoirs kept in The Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw, as well as the materials of the State Israeli Programme “Righteous Among the Nations” and Steven Spielberg’s the Shoah Foundation. Thus, even before the narrative itself the writer makes the readers recollect everything associated with the Catastrophe of European Jewry and its shrill, tragic history. First of all it is *Schindler's List*, for which an enormous archive of materials has been created by Spielberg. The movie has become the sui generis symbol of Holocaust and its reflection in 20th century art.

The novel lacks clearly structured plot. It rather represents the series of episodes about the rescue of individuals and families, the resistance movement and its working in occupied Warsaw, the Warsaw Zoo and its dwellers’ life – both animals and humans – under the reign of Nazi. The author confirms the veracity of these stories by the quotes from Antonina Żabińska’s authentic diary.

Diane Ackerman makes parallels between animals and people, their existence and reaction to the happening around. The idea that from the first lines the reader is able to figure out the inherency of animals from Żabiński family life and the fact that their mode of life is significantly determined by the zoo inhabitants is quite substantial for the writer.

The Nazi occupation of Warsaw is shown through what has been going on with the zoo in the novel: the destruction of aviaries, buildings and cages or the fusillade of animals. Jan and Antonina have begun with the rescue of animal creatures – they gather the survivors, take those which have been wounded to their villa to cure, store up food and try to reestablish communication and water supply system in the zoo. All these actions seem to be natural,

necessary and logical to the married couple, so thus the idea to hide Jews in the same place becomes equally unconstrained for them. Throughout the entire novel the author emphasizes that the care of nursing is both an act of professional conduct and vocation for Antonina and her husband. The cubs and the sick, being the most helpless and the weakest ones, demand a special tendance. Quite so they treat the ‘guests’ of their villa – the Polish Jews in seek of a hideaway from the Nazis, those secretly coming by themselves and those being leaded out from the ghetto by Jan, who uses his meetings with a famous scientist as a cover.

Conclusions

The author is trying to depict the Warsaw events through the prism of wildlife specifics, preserving presumably scientific view of a naturalist on nature of what is happening. Every chapter starts with a small introduction that tells about one or the other animal. What is more, the introduction is a peculiar synopsis, providing the readers with brief information on the following events. All animal creatures are described from naturalist standpoint; their portraits embody clear popular-science write-up of species. Herewith, such a sciential method of presentment is as well transferred to the characters. The appearance of every personage is accompanied by the parallel with an animal, what is reflected on diverse levels – by dint of their resemblance, repeatedly laid stress on further, or with the help of behavioral characteristics. Suchlike parallels between world of humans and wildlife are sought-for by the writer to emphasize the absurdity and atrocity of the situation even more distinctly. Animals do never kill their own kind just like that, whereas the evil produced by people is absolutely senseless. The horridness becomes evident in the episode when Żabiński are making an attempt to explain their son Richard that cannibalism is characteristic of hamsters. It makes the boy exclaim that humans would never do the same, what turns out in a moral dilemma for Antonina Żabińska, who finds herself in need to explicate the more ruthless demeanor of human world representatives.

The documentalism definitely prevails over fiction in the novel, but, nevertheless, the events depicted with naturalist accuracy cannot but attract the reader’s attention.

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