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Abstract

Holocaust scholarship of the post-witness era has turned increasingly to environmental histories of the event as a means of implicating ecological sites and more-than-human lifeforms as powerful agents of memory. In this context, emergent concepts such as ecological memory and witnessing become useful paradigms for representing and remembering the Holocaust in places marked by the absence or erasure of human voices in particular. This article examines the role and representation of these concepts in Polish directors Anka and Wilhelm Sasnal's film It Looks Pretty from a Distance *(*Z daleka widok jest piekny*, 2011), in which ecological sites and landscapes bring the repressed local history of wartime Jewish murder and Catholic Polish collaboration to the surface of a provincial Polish community. I argue that the film reconceptualises humancentred notions of witnessing and testimony according to the theoretical works of Roseanne Kennedy and Shela Sheikh, and considers how Holocaust representation can portray the vitality of more-than-human ecological landscapes without their romanticisation.*

INTRODUCTION

Around thirty minutes into *It Looks Pretty from a Distance* (*Z daleka widok jest piekny*, 2011), a film by Polish directors Anka and Wilhelm Sasnal, an unnamed elderly woman gazes from the open window of her neglected farmhouse and cries out into the void. Lasting nearly ninety seconds, the repeated droning of this prolonged, guttural sound—described by Collette de Castro as "unfeeling"—intensifies, the camera slowly pulling back to reveal the rural Polish landscape surrounding

Figure 1. Paweł's mother cries out toward the forest from the window of her home.

the building.[1] As it does so, visual details of the deteriorating landscape (where exactly in Poland this is we are never told) fill the screen, including a dilapidated wooden fence perimeter, browning grass and a pile of red bricks and other household items strewn haphazardly across the front lawn. But for what reason is she screaming? No audiovisual clues exist, and nothing lies beyond the house other than the forest into which the camera retreats, its presence established earlier in the film. All that can be intuited is that the dense trees, or rather the *memory they appear to contain*, signify the source of her traumatisation.

"As both lived spaces and remembered spaces," trees and forests, Tim Cole observes, have functioned "materially" as well as "imaginatively" during the Holocaust and its postwar retelling.[2] Doubling up as sites of mass killing and wartime survival for Jews, these and other rural environments—including fields, mountains and bodies of water—have come to provide "alternative spaces for memorialising the Holocaust," the flora and fauna they contain constituting "vicarious witnesses and carriers" of memory.[3] Indeed, memory is "etched" into these landscapes, which are violated by genocide in figurative as well as material terms. And yet the ecological possibilities of remembering the Holocaust remain overlooked, despite a growing body of scholarship dealing with ecological sites and ecocritical perspectives of the event on the one

hand, and examinations of climate catastrophe informed by genocide studies and related fields on the other.[4] I refer to ecological landscapes and sites throughout this article to encompass not only naturally-occurring physical environments, but also the interactions between living organisms, species, and ecosystems within those spaces. Although understudied, ecological sites of memory and witness proliferate in Polish "aftermath cinema"[5]—a nation-specific genre explored in detail in the recent work of Matilda Mroz and concerned, among other things, with the difficult legacy of wartime relations between Polish populations and their Jewish neighbours in provincial communities. Tapping into a cinematic register of rural post-Holocaust landscapes simultaneously devoid of human (Jewish) life yet vital in their (ambiguously rendered) more-than-human subjectivity, the sequence described above exemplifies the powerful role played by ecological lifeforms as agents of traumatic memory, both within and beyond the film's diegesis.

This article examines the representation and function of ecological memory (eco-memory) and witnessing (eco-witnessing) in *It Looks Pretty from a Distance*, in which the sudden disappearance of protagonist Paweł from his insular Polish village activates a series of malign incidents within the community, including the dissolution of his family's home and the sporadic murder of several residents. According to its directors, the film is "a metaphor of a plot" from Poland's wartime past,[6] when some Catholic Poles killed their Jewish neighbours, took Jewish property and initiated "conspiracies of silence" in the wake of these incidents.[7] This erased history is hence only allowed to surface through its figurative coding within the film's ecological environments environments, such as a local river where at the beginning of WWII, we come to discover, Jews drowned themselves rather than be killed by their gentile neighbours. Over the course of the film, the village's Catholic residents are called back to the river—which simultaneously embodies Holocaust death and the vitality of its memory in an interconnected human-nonhuman assemblage—as an inescapable ecological referent for genocide, haunting the community and propagating the perpetration of evil misdeeds in the present. Other ecological sites as well as their animal inhabitants are implicated tangentially (but no less significantly) in this coded cinematic invocation of Holocaust memory, including the forest, farmhouse and surrounding pastures that dominate the film and

are transformed into interspecies loci of antisemitic violence through its symbolic worldmaking. Drawing from the discourse of ecocriticism, the article investigates the possibilities afforded by ecology not only as a methodological approach and aesthetic mode of remembering and representing the Holocaust in the very places it has been forgotten, but as an animated site of human-nonhuman interconnectivity embodying, in and of itself, an altogether different form of memorialisation.

In order to decipher the mnemonic currency of these cinematically rendered ecological sites and landscapes, the article briefly outlines recent invocations of ecology to different (and often anthropocentric) ends by scholars within Holocaust studies and related fields. It then examines the dual concepts of eco-memory and eco-witnessing as fruitful ways of reconceptualising human-centred approaches to Holocaust remembrance, before finally demonstrating their operation within *It Looks Pretty from a Distance*. By reading the film through an ecocritical lens, I aim to posit the environment and its constitutive organisms and processes as a meaningful and enduring form of more-than-human witness uniquely able to reveal unwanted Polish memories of Holocaust co-perpetration. In so doing, I demonstrate the wider relevance of ecological approaches to places marked by the precarity of Holocaust memory. For, the Holocaust sites contained within the film not only constitute "non-sites" of memory—the term used by Roma Sendyka to designate localities of genocide and atrocity characterised by the absence of "material forms of commemoration (plaques, monuments, museums)" and the presence of a "physical disturbance to the organic order (human remains, plants, animals)".[8] Rather, owing to their importance to Polish national identity, these landscapes also invoke the highly disputed nature of state-sponsored memories of local Holocaust collaboration in Poland in the present, where the current ruling Law and Justice (*Prawo I Sprawiedliwość*; hereafter "PiS") party has sought to revise the history of the Holocaust on Polish soil to bolster national founding myths of martyrdom and victimhood. While I argue that the complex entanglement of ecological life in the film is ultimately generative, I also consider the implications of this ecological mode of Holocaust memory and witness as in some way hostile, acting upon the village's habitants and redoubling the past in a way that bears likeness to other works of Polish aftermath cinema.

MEMORY AND WITNESSING BEYOND THE HUMAN

Over the last two decades, Holocaust research has turned increasingly to environmental histories of the event as a means of drawing attention to overlooked genocidal environments, and of expanding ideas about what it means to be a witness.[9] Such scholarship has exposed the necessity of ecological approaches to Holocaust memory in the present, not just for elucidating the ways in which the environment and its ecosystems have been instrumentalised for genocidal ends, but for restoring nature's agency as an "important participant" in the Holocaust and its memorialisation.[10] Yet within "dominant modes" in Holocaust scholarship, Jacek Małczyński et al. argue, the "'representation paradigm' prevails and discussions focus on the ability to represent the Shoah," while the victim, perpetrator and witness mostly serve as human categories.[11] These modes include memory and trauma studies, but also ecocritical explorations of the Holocaust in literature and film, which have often resulted in the romanticisation and aestheticization of nature.[12] Such approaches tend to reproduce the anthropocentric gaze at the heart of Nazi ecology which, as scholars like Peter Staudenmaier and Thomas M. Lekan have shown, manifested in a fixation on "nature mysticism," "agrarian romanticism" and the mythology of "salvation through return to the land."[13] They also overlook the interconnectivity of and mutually constitutive relationship between human and nonhuman agents when it comes to memory systems of the Holocaust—the very systems depicted in *It Looks Pretty from a Distance,* where rural post-Holocaust sites and landscapes function as ecosystems comprising humans, nonhuman animals, plant life and organic matter (including human remains).[14] When read through the lens of concepts rooted in ecology as well as aesthetics, however, Holocaust cinema is able to transcend anthropocentric perspectives of the event and its environmental history in specific ways.

Owing to their reduced visibility and evolution over time, unmarked and uncommemorated ecological sites of mass violence pose particular challenges for researchers. "'[C]arefully hidden,'" writes Sendyka quoting Martin Pollack, sites such as mass graves "'are absorbed into the landscape, *are* the landscape.'"[15] [italics own] By bringing the relations between unstable and more-than-human agents of memory into focus, eco-memory and eco-witnessing prove especially useful as mnemonic

paradigms uniquely able to invoke Holocaust trauma in ecological environments marked by the absence—or erasure—of human voices, bodies or memorialisation practices. Understanding how ecological actors "remember" or otherwise transmit information about the past in the present first requires a reconceptualization of what it means to witness or experience trauma from an ecological perspective. In what follows, I outline what is meant by these dual concepts, before applying them to Anka and Wilhelm Sasnal's film in the succeeding section. I am careful, here, to pay attention to the ways in which we can think through ecology's relationship to human-centred concepts of memory and witnessing in ways that not only challenge anthropocentric modes of thought but extend the limited parameters of these concepts within Holocaust research in transformative ways.

While constituting a particular mode of "seeing", ecological witnessing entails a fundamental departure from the singular human figure of the witness that has become synonymous with Holocaust testimony, as well as the sacred status (or "piety") they are often afforded.[16] Shela Sheikh's characterisation of the witness as a "missing figure" when it comes to environmental Anthropocenic violence is particularly useful for this task, since it at once critiques the reductive ways in which humans have viewed ecology's role in bearing witness to its own destruction, yet emphasises the enduring and at times disembodied nature of ecology-as-witness.[17] "The figure of the witness," Sheikh argues, "has traditionally been confined to the human,' who has in turn understood nature and its 'condition of missingness'" against its own likeness.[18] Nature is silenced and spoken for by humans, who often treat it "as an *object*, 'a resource *without voice or rights*'"—even when seeking to 'protect' it, as the example of Nazi ecology shows. While underpinning the Holocaust in ideological as well as practical terms, Nazi ideas about nature and ecology were often contradictory. At the same time as employing zoological ideas to justify the extermination of Jews and the pursuit of racial "purity", Nazi ecology involved the selective cultivation and conservation of plant life and particular animal species, as well as the reorganisation of land.[19] As such, the paradigm of the "missing" figure in Sheikh's work designates "the very manner in which we conceive of the witness, ontologically (across various forms of life and temporalities), epistemologically and politically."[20] Since ecology,

like testimony, is inherently relational and intersubjective, comprising entangled human-nonhuman collectivities that are not always visible, ecological witnessing can only be conceived of in more-than-human terms. This is especially the case when it comes to histories of human-induced environmental degradation, which implicate human and non-human actors alike. Witnessing in this context, Sheikh argues,

> is not the act of *bearing witness* (*testifying*) in the present to an event that took place (*was* witnessed or experienced) at a determined moment in the past. Rather, unlike the classical conception of testimony in which the 'thing' experienced is no longer present to the witness, and as such is recalled through memory, witnessing is here conceived of as an ongoing process that entails the simultaneous registration (witnessing) of experiences and representation (bearing witness) to a public . . . witnessing is understood as an accumulation of grievances in the context of environmental degradation and the subjugation of certain 'subjects' (be these human or nonhuman).[21] [italics original]

This re-thinking of witnessing as an ongoing, concomitant process of registering and representing experiences decentres the human, muddying the past/present binary that has conventionally underpinned conceptions of memory as well as testimony, which are organised around a specific historical moment. Extending beyond human-centred processes of testimonial recall crystallised in survivor or bystander figures, here witnessing figures as a cumulative interspecies phenomenon (an "accumulation of grievances") which is always already *re*-presenting that which is witnessed ("registered"). The emphasis placed here on the enduring nature of ecology's destruction and, by extension, its vitality, de-monumentalises trauma, the semantic shift from witnessing to registration acknowledging the very insufficiency of the term "witness" when it comes to encapsulating nonhuman actors.

As a multispecies alternative to this anthropocentric vocabulary, Sheikh offers the term "witness collectivities," and explores other suitable terms for witnessing grounded in environmental science.[22] These include "bioindication," the process by which species are able to detect changes (adverse or otherwise) to ecosystems and environmental health—including changes to the temperature, air quality and population

of an environment.[23] Observable in bioindicators including plants, animals and microbes, these environmental changes register physiologically in the bodies, habitats and relations of organisms. Described by Jennifer Gabrys as "a process of biological 'sensing'," bioindication signals an intuitive, automatic process of bearing witness which relies on a different kind of perception.[24] Like Sheikh's phrase "witness collectivities," which emphasises the interconnected nature of ecology as an assemblage of human and nonhuman actors, this biological form of sensory processing exemplifies ecology's agential role, thereby inverting the anthropocentric equation of nature's "missingness" with its silence or passivity.

This form of environmental detection is not new to scholars engaging in environmental Holocaust histories, having been explored in Ewa Domańska's research on the forensic potential of ecological processes occurring above and below ground at sites of Holocaust killing, for instance.[25] Nonetheless, ecology's value as an active and more enduring alternative to human witnessing remains overlooked—perhaps because of the false dichotomy often drawn between material inscriptions of violence in the landscape (traces of decomposed bodies, for example) as *evidence* and between violent legacies represented symbolically by the environment (either in cultural texts or the landscapes themselves) as ambiguous and unreliable by contrast. Indeed, ecological sites of trauma are constantly in flux, vulnerable to natural as well as human-imposed processes of transformation, from photosynthesis and decomposition to climate degradation. Rather than demonstrating the incompatibility of concealed and unstable ecological systems with the objectives of witnessing or remembering violence, however, this exemplifies the insufficiency of presence and reliability as guiding tenets of humancentred conceptions of memory. This makes ecological witnessing a ripe paradigm for the study of traumatic memory, not only as an alternative means of "remembering" the past in unmarked and forgotten places, but as an inherently representational mode bringing past and present into dialogue with one another.

MULTIDIRECTIONAL ECO-MEMORY

Adjacent to the kind of multispecies witnessing outlined above, ecological memory is a term deriving from biological sciences and designating

"the influence of past events on the response of an ecosystem to exogenous or endogenous changes."[26] While discussions about ecological forms of memorialisation and heritage have informed approaches to post-Holocaust landscapes and memorials in generative ways, such scholarship has often implicated nonhuman agents of memory only superficially. Roseanne Kennedy makes a similar observation in her article "Multidirectional eco-memory in an era of extinction," in which she draws on Michael Rothberg's well-known work on the dialogic capacity of memory to theorise a model of intersecting human and more-than-human memories of suffering.[27] Memory scholars, she argues, have conventionally conceptualised the environment "in terms of place understood as land or landscape," and have consequently engaged only selectively with the destruction of species and their habitats.[28] Even as scholarship devoted to understanding the relationship between ecocide (the deliberate destruction of the environment) and human genocide proliferates, human and animal suffering are seldom treated with the same reverence. In fact, Holocaust scholars have pushed against terms like "ecological holocaust" as a descriptor for climate crises due to the perceived reduction of the Shoah to a metaphor of evil, while comparisons between animal slaughter and Nazi genocide remain taboo.[29] The implication here is that Holocaust victims matter because they are *human* and hence exceptional, rendering human genocide entirely separate from ecological death.

Proposing a postcolonial environmental humanities perspective that is informed by her reading of entangled indigenous murder and whaling in Kim Scott's *The Deadman Dance*, Kennedy's conception of eco-memory brings animal as well as human (and in particular indigenous) lives into focus, stressing the linkage of "their histories of harm, suffering and vulnerability in an expanded multispecies frame of reference."[30] In doing so, it expands Rothberg's multidirectional configuration of memory, in which disparate histories of violence are conceived not as competitive but as mutually reinforcing. In his work, Rothberg brings Holocaust and postcolonial studies together to argue that in our age of globalisation, histories of the Holocaust can give rise to the articulation of more marginalised legacies of violence and genocide, including that of the colonial past, and vice versa. Via a productively comparative lens, Kennedy shows that legacies of animal violence can

be brought into productive dialogue with those of human violence. Like Sheikh, she is concerned with the challenge eco-memory poses to limited understandings of our relationship to the natural environment, and to the temporality and singularly human remit of conventional conceptions of traumatic memory. With Kennedy, however, discourses of ecological violence and violence against specific animals converge more explicitly. For her, eco-memory

> encompasses but differs from the memory of place, which is typically associated with the anthropocentric concept of collective identity. In contrast, I propose eco-memory as grounded in a deep memory of a habitat, conceived as an ecological assemblage in which all elements, human and nonhuman, are mobile, connected, and interactive. Eco-memory . . . requires critics to expand outwards to a multispecies horizon . . . to examine how events, actions, and processes affect elements in the assemblage. Multidirectional eco-memory places memories of the violence against and dispossession of particular human populations in complex, nuanced relation to memories of the suffering, slaughter, and engagement of animal populations. It means seeing ecological vulnerability neither exclusively in human animal nor in nonhuman animal terms but as interconnected.[31]

Thinking comparatively about human and more-than-human histories of violence highlights overlapping inequities and mnemonic connections veiled by human exceptionalism, and reflects the layered and interactive structure of ecology itself. Aligning multidirectional eco-memory with a "deep memory" of "habitat", concepts grounded in trauma theory and environmental science respectively, Kennedy integrates ecology within memory studies as a means of producing "new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice," as Rothberg argues of multidirectional memory more broadly.[32] Resonating with the kind of more-than-human "sensing" described above in relation to bioindication, deep eco-memory emphasises affect and sensory knowledge as signifiers of trauma and mnemonic activity. Distinct from "common memory (*mémoire ordinaire*)", which is associated with cognition and serves a restorative function in the aftermath of trauma, French Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo uses "deep memory (*mémoire profonde*)"

to refer to the unconscious mnemonic layers that lurk beneath. Whereas common memories "mediate atrocity,"[33] deep memory "preserves sensations, physical imprints";[34] it is a kind of memory which, like trauma itself, ruptures the reconstructed realities of trauma survivors unexpectedly yet cannot be articulated or accessed in full.[35] The ineffable quality of deep memory at once exemplifies trauma's profound impact and suggests that (human) language is not a requirement of its transmission. Rather, recast here as a multispecies concept, deep memory gestures toward a different kind of affective register—one implicating more-than-human ecological elements as well as the human body as inherently multi-layered sites of posttraumatic affect.

As Sean Cubitt argues of our more-than-human environments, ecological actors "are constantly communicating" with one another, whether through the kind of affective chemical sensing involved in bioindication, or via visual, auditory, or touch-based signals.[36] Moreover, posttraumatic engagements with Holocaust landscapes are often concerned with the "feel" of these sites (or "affective atmospheres", to borrow Ben Anderson's phrase) and their contents, precisely because a collaborative process of affective transference has taken place between human and nonhuman actors. This process demonstrates the affective agency of organic matter, vegetation and other ecological elements, which have the "capacity to impact other bodies viscerally, even while remaining recalcitrant."[37] More-than-human agents, as exemplified in Sonja Boon et al's account of the mnemonic potential of mud, are thus capable of articulating (or "remembering") multispecies histories of violence. As an agential substance that "drags its histories along", mud, they argue, "carries within itself not only the sands that mark its journeys, but also human sediments: the storied bones, the fishnets, the plastics, the detritus of lives lived and lost."[38] A constantly moving "transcorporeal" assemblage, mud invokes Kennedy's use of habitat, which refers not only to the locale and biological characteristics of a given species, plant or organism, but to the interconnected elements and unfinished processes by which they are constituted.[39] Mud in this sense demonstrates something of an ecological temporality, simultaneously challenging memory's "backward orientation" by bringing traces of the past into the future, yet invoking the earthy origins of human life.[40] Far from the kinds of officiated, institutionalised memory tech-

nologies characterising much Holocaust remembrance and stored in the archive, eco-memory—like mud—signifies a repository of continually evolving mnemonic relations and information. This evolutionary logic brings the human closer to its animal origins, showing that ecomemory does not displace the human but merely serves as a means of encapsulating the *longue durée* of humancentred trauma as situated within a broader network of living things.[41]

By presenting human-nonhuman life as critically entangled and interactive, Kennedy inserts the human firmly within the conceptual as well as material boundaries of ecological life in a way that accords with the work of Donna Haraway. Bridging the gap between the human and nonhuman, Haraway conceives of ecology as a "naturalcultural contact zone" in which encounters take place between "knotted beings," and in which nature interacts with human life as an active participant.[42] The discourse of knottedness emphasises the multidirectional impact of traumatic events on ecological agents and acknowledges that the ways in which these agents experience and recall violence are not the same. Situating the Holocaust within the frame of ecological violence, for instance, does not tell us that victims of Nazi genocide and ecocide are the same; rather, it illuminates the precarity of both Jewish and certain human and more-than-human lives as those harmed with impunity. Viewing Holocaust sites as multispecies habitats helps us to move away from anthropocentric conceptualisations of ecology and the environment, and to view Holocaust violence *as* ecological violence. The operation of these ecologically rooted concepts within the film discussed below demonstrates their transformative potential when it comes to remembering the Holocaust—even when viewed within the "prevailing" representation paradigm.

POLISH AFTERMATH CINEMA AND THE POLITICS OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY IN POLAND

It Looks Pretty from a Distance relies on ecology to vitalise buried memories of Jewish murder in Poland, where the politics of Holocaust memory has "for many decades been an arena of dispute and, at times, bitter public controversy."[43] This is perhaps surprising since in many ways, to paraphrase Larry Ray and Slawomir Kapralski, Poland signified the

epicentre of the Holocaust: it lay claim to the world's largest pre-war Jewish population and was the chosen location of all six Nazi extermination camps, while half of the Holocaust's six million Jewish victims were killed on occupied Polish territory. Crucially, however, a proportion of these victims perished at the hands of their (mostly) Catholic Polish neighbours, who collaborated with the Germans in the massacre of Jews in their towns. The brutal details of such instances of local violence were controversially exposed by Polish-Canadian historian Jan T. Gross in his well-known study Neighbours, which traced the destruction of an entire Jewish community by Poles in a village called Jedwabne in the summer of 1941. First published in the year 2000, this landmark book changed the debate about Holocaust murder in Poland and the question of Polish culpability, by showing how Jedwabne's Jews were murdered not by faceless Nazis but by those who knew them intimately. As with new historical scholarship on Polish-Jewish relations published since, Gross's book triggered a wave of right-wing nationalist denial and revisionism in Poland, on which scholars including Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking have commented extensively. This is in part because, as argued in the salient work of the former scholar, "many Poles perceive their own society through the lens of 'victim history,'" according to which "Poland was victimised at the hands of stronger (and ruthless) neighbours," against whom the nation "maintained the high moral ground…and provided an example of heroic defiance to Nazi and Soviet totalitarian barbarisms."[44]

State-sponsored mechanisms of denial and revisionism have minimised these histories of local co-perpetration, especially since PiS rose to power in 2015. In an effort to exonerate the Polish nation from responsibility for the deaths of Polish-Jewish victims and preserve national founding myths, PiS has sought to "de-Judaise" the Holocaust, engendering sanitised narratives of the past that disproportionately highlight Polish wartime suffering as well as instances of Jewish rescue. These narratives have manifested in new memory institutions in Poland, such as the Institute of National Remembrance, and the infamous 2018 Holocaust Law, which criminalized attributions of Nazi concentration camps to Poland (now a civil offense). Implicating a range of memory actants, the ensuing debates, often invoked as "memory wars" to encapsulate their inflammatory nature, threaten the future of Holo-

caust memory and the integrity of Jewish voices and experiences. They have also, as Grabowski points out, contributed to the Europe-wide rise of ethnonational sentiment and antisemitism.[45]

Despite the instrumentalisation of hierarchies of suffering at institutional levels in Poland, local cultivations of Holocaust memory and representation have persisted, entailing varying degrees of reflection, self-accusation and nuance when it comes to addressing unwanted Jewish-Polish wartime histories. Polish aftermath cinema denotes one such example, referring to a body of films which "stage the difficult processes of 'coming to know' these histories in their aftermaths," as Mroz puts it, often in rural or small Polish towns (see *Demon* (Wrona, 2015); *Ida* (Pawlikowski, 2013); *Aftermath* (Pasikowski, 2013)). These filmic works are not set during the Holocaust therefore, but deal with the painful exposure of memories of Polish co-perpetration in different ways, many of them emerging "within a few years of each other" during Poland's previous liberal-conservative coalition government.[46] They also, as I have written elsewhere, often invoke horror motifs, including haunting and the supernatural, psychological fear, and dark rural landscapes.[47]

Depicting the contemporary misdeeds and lingering wartime memories of an insular agricultural community in Poland, *It Looks Pretty from a Distance* invites a closer look at relations between Polish Jews and Catholic Poles in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In a 2013 interview, landscape painter and co-director Wilhelm Sasnal elaborates on the title of the film, which serves as a metaphor for the contemporary state of these interethnic relations:

> When you get closer to history you see these nuances . . . When you see the Polish-Jewish relationship from a distance, it's like a visual landscape; when you see it with a distance it appears sort of neutral, but when you look at their behaviour you see it is something . . . sinister. Nature is a witness of everything that happens between people.[48]

Sasnal's commentary on the interplay of visibility/invisibility and distance/proximity reveals the central role played by narrative and representation when it comes to remembering the Holocaust in Poland, where particular narratives associated with Holocaust suffering have been repurposed to elevate the suffering of Poles under communism

as well as during WWII. It also speaks to a key methodological issue that is partly answered by the film's eco-cinematic poetics: that of how to represent the legacy of Jewish murder in spaces from which Jewish voices are threatened with erasure. Imbuing nature with an omnipresence that is cinematographically implied throughout the film in ways I come to discuss, the final sentence of the above passage suggests that ecology-as-witness is the sole mnemonic agent capable of uncovering the past (at least within the film's diegesis). And yet this only gives rise to further questions: what, for instance, is the implication of this for the integrity of Holocaust memorialisation in Poland? How can eco-memories of the Holocaust be communicated on screen, particularly in non-anthropomorphic ways? Where do Jewish voices come into this?

In attending to these questions, I argue that suppressed memories of wartime Jewish murder in the film primarily surface via animated ecological sites that haunt this unidentified Polish village and come to bear on its inhabitants, culminating in acts of human and nonhuman animal cruelty that reproduce the past in revealing ways. Over the course of the film, the unseen remains of Jews who perished here during the Holocaust are animated by ecology—as indicated by sentient diegetic soundscapes, the inversion of the traumatic pastoral, POV shots implying the "perspective" of the local landscape, and images associated with Holocaust collaboration in Poland—and brought into dialogue with other marginalised subjects, including the village's elderly Polish residents and nonhuman animals. With this, the film incites more-than-human forms of knowledge as the only viable alternatives to conventional modes of Holocaust memory and testimony while weaving a multidirectional tapestry of intergenerational as well as interspecies suffering.

While it is not Jews but Jewish *haunting* which plays a major role in unveiling Holocaust killing in Polish aftermath cinema (whether through the figure of the *dybbuk* as in *Demon*, or the traumatised survivor as in *Ida*), Anka and Wilhelm Sasnal's film uniquely contains no (living) Jewish characters, its Holocaust imagery only ever implied. Drawing attention to the silencing of Jews by some sections of Polish society, the inscription of Jewish erasure in the film's mise-en-scène is central to its message: that memories of Holocaust co-perpetration here remain obfuscated and Jewish communities lost. It also reflects the slow pacing and minimalist register of the film, which is almost en-

tirely devoid of diegetic sound and features barely any dialogue, and whose only named character is its protagonist, Paweł. With no living Jewish characters, all encounters depicted in the film take place exclusively between ethnic Poles, whose constant use of expletives and cruel treatment of one another juxtaposes the tranquillity of their rural surroundings, as well as the film's underpinning motif of Catholicism. Taken together with the film's implied Jewish presences, these hostile relations reveal the necessity of cruelty to the symbolic order of a community gripped by the repressed legacy of genocide. For, while Jews are only explicitly invoked once in the film's diegesis, Jewish death remains close to this place from start to finish—its memory etched into the village's ecological makeup.

ECO-CINEMATIC VITALISM

Much of this film's action takes place in and around its rural landscapes, recurrent images of which establish an ecological gaze from the outset. These include images of Paweł's family home described in the introduction to the present article, dwarfed by an expansive sky above and overgrown yard below; the dense surrounding forest; and the village's murky river, eventually revealed to be a principal site of Holocaust murder. In each case, the agency of these landscapes is established through lingering, often hand-held shots which hold the viewer's gaze for an extended length and puts them in the place of their ecological actants. Initially, such shots exemplify the beauty of the film's pastoral setting, tapping into a romantic tradition of landscape painting with which the Sasnals are familiar. Intensified by the ubiquitous sun, heavily saturated blues and greens dominate the film's frames, which brim with life: together with agricultural workers and other residents, insects and nonhuman animals proliferate in these landscapes, their visual and sonic presence lending the film a more-than-human consciousness. Imparting a similarly animating quality, the quietude of rural life as it is shown here amplifies nature's sounds, from tweeting birds and chirping crickets to the rustling of grass in the wind. Ecology's vitalism is in this way invoked, the film's vivid audiovisuals producing an inviting impression of nature that not only embodies the romantic sensibility, but—in keeping with the pastoral's concern with Edenic

landscapes—renders it an object of religious veneration. This accords with Marcin Galent and Paweł Kubicki's claim that the countryside constitutes the 'native' environment of ethnic Poles, solidified within early twentieth-century ideas of the nation "as saviour, as miracle worker, as rooted in the land and the rhythms of the agricultural calendar" and inextricably linked to Catholicism.[49]

As our gaze upon the village becomes more proximate and the morally repulsive character of its residents surfaces, however, the romantic veneer of rural life erodes and ecology—interpreted, with Sheikh and Kennedy, as an assemblage of human and more-than-human actors that includes the unmarked Jewish remains and living non-Jewish Poles in the village—is transformed into a hostile force. With this, the film sets up a complex (albeit ambiguous) interaction between (i) ecology; (ii) repressed histories of the Holocaust; and (iii) the abuse and killing of marginalised subjects in the present as a contemporary resurfacing of wartime violence against Jews.

Informed by the aesthetics of ecohorror, a subgenre which reflects our fears of "the natural world and the way it exceeds our control", ecology's gaze becomes threatening as images of the landscape come to form the backdrop of a range of morally suspect activities.[50] These include implied incestuous relationships; episodes of animal cruelty; the abuse of the elderly; sudden acts of murder; and, of most significance to the articulation of wartime Polish-Jewish relations, the pogrom-like pillaging and burning of Paweł and his mother's house. With this, the film evokes familiar icons of the Holocaust in Poland and depicts a sinister (and not unproblematic) vision of rural living which, in metaphorising Polish national identity, inverts the racialising discourse of animalisation applied to Jews by the Third Reich and its supporters. Centring abjection in her critique of the film, Mroz argues that "[f]rom close up", the "depicted village and its inhabitants are disgusting" in physical as well as moral terms.[51] The film proliferates with abject bodies which spit, sweat and urinate—sometimes on one another, as on one occasion when Paweł's elderly mother urinates onto a mattress where her son is sleeping. Though never fully contextualised or explained, these violent and at times grotesque acts are not only inextricably linked to Holocaust murder and its repressed memory in ways I come to show but can be causally connected to the traumatisation of ecological sites and landscapes.

Serving as a means of brutalising the film's Polish community and suggesting the unavoidable surfacing of deep ecological memories of trauma, allusions to animal death in the opening sequence foreground a series of human inflicted acts of animal cruelty as well as seemingly natural death on screen, from a close-up of roadkill to the poisoning and starvation of farm dogs by Paweł's girlfriend and his mother's carer respectively. At the film's beginning, local men silently lay animal traps in the village's forest which, consolidated by the ubiquity of forested sites within the horror genre and within Holocaust testimony, not only signifies a point of reference for mysterious or otherwise violent occurrences throughout the film but becomes an implied locus of Jewish murder. Static close-ups force us to imagine the victims of these devices, which include the open jaws of a foothold trap in the undergrowth and a wire noose suspended between trees, too high for capturing game and other small mammals. Exemplifying the indebtedness of Polish aftermath cinema to images associated with ecohorror, shaky hand-held POV shots of hunting activities (which appear to derive from the landscape itself) partially obscured by trees, as well as the motif of getting lost in a disorientating natural landscape, suggest a different—perhaps vengeful—kind of ecological gaze. For, this imagery is highly evocative of the forests and countryside throughout occupied Poland where Jews hid and were hunted by local collaborators, spaces Sendyka terms "landscapes of manhunts" or "cynegetic landscapes"—cynegetic referring to foregone hunting practices.[52] In these landscapes, writes Sendyka via Grabowski, victims "had to 'live like animals'" while trackers "'followed the fugitives into the forests, hoping for prizes offered by Germans'" as well as "'personal items taken from the victims.'"[53] Allegorically read, the forest becomes a haunted interspecies site of (past) Jewish as well as (present) animal suffering, in which the implied memory and material remains of abstracted Jews find expression in the trees and imagined animal prey with which they form an ecosystem of victims.

Far from the bucolic representation of animals and agriculture in romantic era paintings of the European countryside, the killing and abuse of animals preserves the symbolic order of Polish sovereignty over the lives of those deemed other in the film, as inextricably connected to local legacies of wartime Polish co-perpetration in the murder of Jews. As with the film's other ecological sites, the forest in this way forms

something like what Donna Coffey terms the "traumatic pastoral", in which the Nazi idealisation of blood and soil "derived in large part from romantic versions of the pastoral" is inverted.[54] There is a sense in which, as is ultimately the case with Paweł's mother, these animal witnesses have "seen" too much: privy to cyclical human violence throughout the film and tied metaphorically to its wartime legacy, they must be killed. Within this context, the pastoral images described above are rendered nightmarish and off-kilter; even the film's satural colour palette becomes sickly as the "rotten sun" beats down on the community, construing these spaces as ominous where once they were serene.[55]

The ominous construal of the forest as an implied ecological Holocaust site also arises from depictions of Paweł's mother, who appears to suffer from dementia and is disturbed for reasons which remain unexplained but are implicitly connected to unresolved wartime trauma in the landscape. It is significant that, as a symptom of her traumatisation, the film's abject characterisation of this woman is signalled via ecological imagery. Dead insects populate yellow flypaper strips inside the filthy walls of her home, for instance, which becomes the site of several oedipal encounters between her and Paweł—including one in which the former watches her son showering through a peephole, the convergence of psychosexual desire and Holocaust imagery conflating viewers with perpetrators or *Sonderkommando* observing the killing of Jewish victims through peepholes in the doors of gas chambers.

Rendered other by those around her, Paweł's mother, who says not a word during the film, is included in the ecological community of victims described above. Viewers first encounter this woman when she makes a failed attempt to escape to the forest bordering her property, only to be marched back to her house by a begrudging carer. Her preoccupation with this site is once more foregrounded during the earlier-cited pivotal sequence, in which her cries are projected toward the forest as an associated site of Holocaust murder and the implied origin of her trauma. This fixation upon the forest, along with other disturbing behaviours, eventually become untolerable for Paweł and she is driven away to an "asylum" by her son and his aggressive girlfriend. Despite the total absence of Jews from the village, Jewish murder and the covering-over of genocide are central to the forceful banishment of Paweł's mother from her property, since her removal constitutes a figurative means of

expelling the memory of Jewish murder from the village, and a literal means of gaining access to her home and its contents in a way that imitates the wartime dispossession of Jews. As a silent vessel for Holocaust memory and an embodiment of the horrors inscribed within the local landscape and its more-than-human elements, her expulsion heralds the extinction of Jewish life and memory in the village, upsetting its ecological equilibrium and catalysing the perpetration of other violent acts. This is exemplified via an arresting image of maggots writhing on the urine-saturated mattress abandoned by Paweł in his mother's yard after her forced eviction, harking back to the flies encountered earlier in her home and gesturing toward the cyclical corruption to come in the village. Rather than render her perverse, the making-abject of Paweł's mother distinguishes her from those who dehumanise her and reject the memory by which she is possessed, reaffirming Julia Kristeva's contention in *Powers of Horror* that filth, or "a lack of cleanliness," is not what causes abjection but rather "what disturbs identity, system, order."[56]

Aside from the forest, the film's recasting of pastoral ecological landscapes and their more-than-human agents as traumatic rather than romantic often implicates the river at the centre of the Polish village as its only confirmed Holocaust site. According to Sendyka, forests are unique Holocaust landscapes because their inadvertent camouflaging of violent traces of the past serves the interests of perpetrators. Although ostensibly less concealed as an open body of water, the river at the centre of *It Looks Pretty from a Distance* operates similarly. In fact, the memory of wartime Jewish suffering at this site is so repressed that the river forms the nucleus of the film's community and constitutes a site of recreational activity: locals come and go throughout the film to lounge by and bathe in the water which, crucially, must be crossed by boat to access the town's church.

Whenever encountered on screen, the uncanny murmur of the river is amplified, alerting audiences to its vitalism and life-giving qualities in a way which again resonates with the romantic pastoral. Yet a crucial (albeit deliberately muted) point in the film's narrative transforms the innocence of such imagery. According with the film's narrative elusiveness, a fleeting conversation between villagers unveils the disturbing history of the river, after which its vitalism takes on a different meaning. Over dinner, a son asks his father to verify a story overheard from

another child about "people" who drowned there. The father responds: "In wartime, out of fear. Three kids and two women. First, they drowned the kids. Then drowned themselves. But they weren't Polish."[57] Omitting critical details—why were these people fearful, and of whom? Who were they if not Polish?—we can infer the man is talking about Jews, his clarification "they weren't Polish" suggesting Polish Jews are not "real" Poles, their deaths thus minimally important. Mroz notes the historical rootedness of this incident despite its colloquial invocation here, which is taken from Szmul Wasersztajn's testimony of two Jewish mothers drowning themselves in a nearby pond in Jedwabne out of fear a couple of weeks before the pogrom.[58]

Usually revelatory within Polish aftermath cinema, here the process of "coming to know" the past remains anticlimactic: the conversation ends abruptly, and only Paweł's mother is shown to be implicitly affected by these (and presumably other undisclosed) events. Though the river is the site of posttraumatic Holocaust violence, it is the embodiment of this violence in this woman that disrupts the present at this point in the film. The matter-of-fact delivery of this information exemplifies the fact that the culpability of Poles stems not from "direct complicity" in most cases,[59] but, as Anthony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic observe in *The Neighbours Respond*, indifference and passivity in the face of Jewish murder.[60] Yet, as Wasersztajn's testimony reveals, the events described in the film do not tell the whole story; rather, they obfuscate the "assembled hooligans" who "made a spectacle" of the incident, instilling fear with "pitchforks, stones and knives".[61]

Once reframed by the knowledge of wartime Jewish murder and its erasure, the bathing of locals in the river comes to signal their material as well as metaphorical entanglement with dead Jews, whose remains implicitly form the riverbed, are carried to other locations, and become part of the river's "hydrosocial" memory.[62] James L. Smith uses this term to articulate the operation of memories found within water, in which historical violence is expressed aquatically and impacts on the surrounding cultural landscape. Much like mud, waters retain "a sedimentary archival quality," comprising centuries of "accreted layers" and "sedimented narratives" that—although partially occluded—are "internalised" and registered, chemically and otherwise. As an interstitial living entity or archive of wartime power relations, the film's

river becomes a frontier of human and more-than-human Holocaust memory. Beneath the water's surface, we can imagine that the remains of Jewish death react chemically with soils and aquifers (as is the case at documented rivers and lakes where Jews were murdered), and form part of the political ecology of the Holocaust.[63] However, such ecological activity is not dealt with explicitly but is metaphorised within the film's diegesis.

Implicitly affected by its sedimented trauma, the river appears to possess a hostile vitalism which is rendered visually. This is particularly prevalent in an unnerving sequence in which the shimmering heat of the village physically animates the river's undulating current in the rear-view mirror of a labourer's car, creating a mirage whose movement intensifies with the jolting bass of the radio inside the vehicle. Shots of this ecological Holocaust site are later intercut with sequences depicting human murder in the present, creating a chain of associative images which implicate more-than-human ecological agents causally in the community's present misdeeds. In one such instance, a local labourer washes in the river, a faint non-diegetic thumping ominously accentuating its current. In the following frame, the man walks away from the water along a remote country path where a static shot of roadkill was previously shown, until suddenly he is audibly run over off screen by teenagers from the village. Replicating the indifference with which Poles treat one another in the film, the murder is witnessed from the low angle of a camera nestled in long grass, after which dust kicked up by the car obscures our view of the scene, the camera remaining fixed on the unfazed fields through which the victim walked moments before. While ambiguously rendered, the imagistic association drawn between this killing and wartime Jewish death suggests that ecology-as-witness and as a vital force has begun to encroach in some way on the residents of this village in protestation of the forgotten past. It is as though without acknowledging the wartime past in the present, the community will continue to erupt into violence of the kind recalled by ecological actants. Interpreted this way, the ritual washing of this man can be read as a subconscious expression of intergenerational perpetrator or bystander guilt that links ecology causally to his death. Replicated throughout the film, this hostile gaze upon human activity, witnessed through the implied perspective of ecology, renders

the viewer an ecological bystander and shows what is at stake when ecological-mnemonic systems are unbalanced.

Such hostility intensifies as the film draws to a close. When Paweł suddenly disappears one night, the last time we see him is under the dark canopy of the forest at dusk—the very place where the hunting of Jews was symbolically invoked and tied to animal suffering at the film's opening. After his unexpected disappearance, members of the village come with wheelbarrows and cars under the cover of darkness to take the possessions of Paweł and his mother, ransacking the house and leaving with furniture, clothes, kitchenware and even food. Windows are smashed, the panes removed, and unwanted belongings set alight in the yard, where men, women and children gather, undeterred by their crimes. Reminiscent of the pillaging of Jewish homes and the setting ablaze of Jews inside barns and other buildings in wartime Poland, this sequence culminates in pogrom-like imagery that simulates the Polish co-perpetration of Holocaust violence in the present—only without revictimizing Jewish subjects. Here, history variously repeats itself, even in the absence of Jews. This re-enacting of repressed familiar atrocities suggests that in this rural Polish setting, the past and present are simultaneously intertwined and at odds.

The proliferation of this conventionally idealised Polish landscape with criminal human activity also undermines the link drawn between the pastoral and Catholicism within Poland's mythologised self-image, as outlined earlier via Galent and Kubicki. Reflecting the entangled relationship between nationalism and Catholicism in Poland, Catholic symbols abound in the film and are undermined by the morally abhorrent acts of its proponents, from the cross worn by Paweł's girlfriend shortly before she unceremoniously stabs him to death once he returns to the village at the film's close, to the church populated by those who pillaged Paweł's home. And yet the behaviour of Paweł's neighbours not only invokes the violence enacted by some Poles against their Jewish neighbours during the Holocaust, but renders them morally degenerate in a way that reflects the Western racialisation of Poles. Described as "red necks" in reviews of the film, the residents of this village reflect the marginalised Polish rural working class whose identity is built on nationalism, and "in complete opposition to urban, industrial culture." The film's representation of a Polish community as "unkempt and un-

educated 'peasant killers'" draws on "established cliches of Eastern European villages as 'bewildering and self-contained parallel world[s],'" whose detachment from modernity "not only makes it easier for many viewers to distance themselves from them but also tends to elide the fact that people from all socio-economic backgrounds benefitted from Jewish 'absence', and may indeed have hastened it."[64] The ecological register instrumentalised in *It Looks Pretty from a Distance* is in this way firmly multidirectional, bringing together uncommemorated wartime Jewish murder at the hands of Polish co-perpetrators, the abuse and murder of local Polish residents and more-than-human subjects, and the xenophobic stereotyping of Poles.

Here I want to return briefly to this article's thesis regarding the salience of eco-witnessing and testimony in spaces from which the memory of Holocaust violence has been obfuscated. The ecological processes foregrounded in the concepts of eco-memory and witnessing proposed by Sheikh and Kennedy are not made explicit in the film, and in this way reflect the marginalised place of the Holocaust in its depicted community. However, this does not mean that ecology serves as a passive backdrop to human activity within the diegesis. On the contrary, Holocaust history refuses to remain in the past precisely because ecology, as an assemblage of human and more-than-human life, pulls it into the present. Exemplified via the figure of Paweł's mother as a conduit to memory, the film's reinsertion of the human back into ecology implicates its landscapes (the river, the forest and their surrounding pastures) and life-forms (trees, insects and animals) as ecological agents of power. These eco-cinematic agents not only bear witness to but open up a dialogue between past and present violence. The film thereby suggests that only as a multidirectional and interactive ecological collective can memories of the past come to the surface.

CONCLUSION

Responding to ideas explored within a special issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research* on environmental histories of the Holocaust, historian Omer Bartov argues that extending the parameters of the Holocaust beyond the human is an ethically dubious pursuit since the event was a primarily "human" one. Commemoration, he maintains, retains an

"intrinsic political and cultural value . . . specifically relevant to humans rather than non-humans." while ecological Holocaust sites for him bear no *detectable* traces of the past. Recalling a 1997 trip to Treblinka, Bartov notes that although the composition of soil at such sites "must have surely been transformed" by the remains of those "buried or burned there," one "could not detect that by observing the forest." Sites of Holocaust murder not only require "intelligible" markers in Bartov's opinion, but leaving no markers is, he suggests, tantamount to becoming "complicit in the coverup" of those seeking to erase the past.[65]

Aside from the binary it erects between human and nonhuman, the problem with this view is its assumption that the significance of ecological memories of the Holocaust is contingent on their (empirical) detectability. As *It Looks Pretty from a Distance* shows, eco-witnessing involves unconventional processes of "seeing" and narrativizing the past, with memories emerging from the affective as well as material interactions between human and more-than-human actors in places marked by genocide. Described by Mroz as "a scrapyard of unwanted knowledge, people, objects and images," the film ultimately signifies an ecosystem in disrepair without the lives (or human memories) of murdered Jews. These Holocaust victims are unwanted and hence abstracted from view, and yet their presence is invoked throughout via ecology's vitalism. Replete with an ecological sentience that is felt but not necessarily *seen*, the film's eco-cinematic mode demonstrates its attunement to what Laura McMahon calls "non-human perceptual worlds," drawing attention to the ontological association between cinema and the creaturely.[66] Jewish remains implicitly animate the landscapes of Poland within the film, its stripped back register showcasing the agency of ecological actors (including organic matter derived from decomposed bodies and the chemicals they emit) without their romanticisation. Indexical of Holocaust experience, cinema—like ecology itself—in this way becomes an alternative commemorative marker to the kind Bartov describes, through which forgotten sites of Jewish violence are made intelligible.

Increasingly relevant to post-witness Holocaust memorialisation, eco-memories of the Holocaust help us understand the broader systems of violence responsible not just for wartime Jewish murder and persecution, but for the continued obfuscation of these histories in

the present. This is particularly important in Poland where, despite the increased visibility of the Holocaust in the cultural landscape, revisionism and denial persist and at times intersect with other forms of political illiberalism—exemplified by the film's multidirectional treatment of the abuse of animals and old people, as well as the characters' misogynistic language and normalisation of violence. Ecological forms of witnessing and memory thus invite a more-than-human perspective of the Holocaust and its aftermath that foreground the human kernel of multidirectional interspecies violence, and, in this context, highlight the precarity of memories of Jewish genocide.

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