

Fateless (dir. Lajos Koltai, 2005)

This film adaptation of Imre Kertész' novel could be probably seen as an attempt of the Hungarian filmmaker to produce a worldwide recognizable, almost Hollywood-like Holocaust movie. The movie is released just three years after Imre Kertész, who also wrote screenplay for the movie, is awarded with the Nobel prize, which probably also helped the funding of this enormously (at least in local measures) expensive co-production movie. It's a movie that says very clearly „I'm Hungarian, but I want to be seen outside of Hungary as a high quality world cinema piece“ - something that, by my opinion, connects this feature to the *Painted Bird* movie in our context. That is to say more than to the *Pianist*, for example, which, even though strongly identifying itself as Polish, still *actually is* a world cinema (almost blockbuster) piece.

As an adaptation of the Kertész novel, the *Fateless* movie tells the story of a Hungarian Jew in the last years of the war, first being transported to Buchenwald and then coming back again, coping with his fate-to-be after this experience. The historic time itself reminds us of the fact that the Jewish transports in Hungary took place much later than in the rest of the countries. In the movie, especially in the first scenes, where the „Budapest Jews“ identify themselves as someone else from „Polish Jews“, for which they still feel safe from the Nazis, we could see that this fact is pointed out, but also not particularly stressed out. (If I wanted to speculate, I'd say it's because it's a problematic issue in Hungarian history, the question whether Hungary by that time was just cleverly avoiding oppressions, or actually actively collaborating with Hitler. Therefore it's probably not a best topic to open up in a richly funded movie aiming for world reputation... But then of course I can't really presume that.)

Still there are some specific themes connected (not only) to the Holocaust, which are not so often to be seen in comparable Holocaust movies. For example there is the uneven social status of different Jews among themselves – there are the rich Jews and the poor Jews. One would say that in the camps it doesn't really matter anymore, but even the characters have to constantly solve the basic question: Who are you? A Jew, or rather a Hungarian? What does it even mean to be a Jew? What does it mean to be a Hungarian? Maybe that in some way, this could be alternative to this somewhat idealistic narrative that all the victims are just people sticking together, not making differences among themselves like the Nazis do it. The second important and not as obvious theme that the movie takes from the book would be the question how to communicate the experience of Holocaust. Is every Holocaust experience the same despair? How is it different to be in a working camp from being in a death camp? And how can one describe the experience? The movie, in its literal dialogues as well as in its narrative form, follows the fact that it will never be possible to describe the experience in its wholeness.

What the movie actually focuses on then? It's a story of one boy/young man, who is also the narrator of the movie (though quite rarely to be heard in the more than two hours length of the movie). Storywise, we don't track every step of this character, every emotional change he goes through during his suffering. The character and his fate is actually not really special in any way, it's rather an everyman type of character. That goes together with the fact his story isn't narrated as thrilling in any way – we can see he gets transported, we can see he's hungry and suffering and for a short time we are unsure whether he will keep his leg, maybe even survive. But all this time, the movie doesn't really speed up, the Morricone music doesn't get thrillingly dramatic responding to some specific action. Most importantly, the „fade out, fade in“ cuts remain their one tempo through the whole movie, making the movie a series of images. In this sense, the narrating form of the movie is quite consistent and actually makes us wonder if what we see is a special story or rather a poetic imagery and contemplation. Even here I would consider to be parallels (at least in intention) with the upcoming *Painted Bird* movie.

While these aspects I would consider to be a skilled cinematic narration, the thing I consider to be strikingly uncinematic are the dialogues. Not only their content, but also their function and their staging in the movie. I cannot help myself not to see them as unnaturally staged, both literal and literary. And I must say that I thought that even before I discovered that the screenplay was written by Imre Kertész, the novelist.