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Evolution of a Filmmaker: A Conversation with Philippe Mora

Lee Babb · Wednesday, February 4th, 2015

If we're lucky, and we live long enough, we get to have conversations with wise men. In the case of Philippe Mora, the acclaimed director flips this adage on its ear with his upcoming film, *Three Days in Auschwitz*. A prolific filmmaker whose work includes *Mad Dog Morgan, Brother Can You Spare a Dime* and *Swastika,* Mr. Mora has a singular talent for bringing the dead back to life so that film-goers may have conversation with them.

Every ten years or so, the world pauses to recognize notable events from our collective past. This month, we remember the Holocaust, the ultimate hate crime. Archives are mined. Hordes of Nazi perpetrators erupt across the airwaves. Grainy images of their victims, the walking dead, temporarily supplant horrific images from numerous but not dissimilar modern crises. Streams of grey footage that flood television screens, and therefore our minds, bear witness to the all-too-human capacity for fear and hatred, lest we "forget" what horrors man is capable of. Raw footage from the period is so brutal, so painful to look at, one wonders why look back at all.

"The end of our exploring," wrote T.S Eliot, "will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Sometimes a look back can help one see what lies ahead. Who better then, to lead us forward into our shared past than director Philippe Mora, the guiding hand behind 1973's *Swastika*, "the most controversial film about Adolf Hitler ever made."

"We made the film with the belief that everyone thought Nazis were bad," said Mora during a panel interview hosted by the British Film Institute at a revival screening of *Swastika*. Once reviled, the film was banned in both Germany and Israel for decades. "It was baffling," says Mora, who was 23 at the time. *Swastika* has experienced a renaissance of sorts since its 2012 release on DVD and Amazon.com. After being picked up for online distribution, the film and its director began receiving a measure of long overdue acclaim. In September, for instance, the Oldenburg Festival in Germany honored Mora with a retrospective of his work.

Born in Paris and an artist at heart, Mr. Mora's films tend to show, rather than tell. In doing so, Mr. Mora provides more than mere information, but context which, judging from world events of late, is badly needed. As his conversation with BFI reflects, it can be a shock to learn that many of those with whom we share this planet do not live as we live, do not believe as we believe. Nor do they desire to do so.

Phillipe Mora stands next to one of the camp's infamous barbed wire fences.

This is where the true genius of Mora's work is revealed. For *Swastika*, for example, Mora eschewed voiceover narration, effectively one-upping Eisenstein himself. Instead, Mora re-assembled pre-war Germany almost entirely of archival footage, allowing viewers to see, hear and experience the "Why" of hate; rather than inundating them with the "How." In doing so, Mora avoided the trap of telling viewers what to think. It is this bold choice that both enthralls and perplexes contemporary viewers.

With his current film entitled *Three Days in Auschwitz,* Mr. Mora comes full circle, from the pre-war Germany of his earlier works to the place where the Nazi's so-called "Final Solution" became a horrifying reality. Here, Mora focuses his unflinching eye on the present day. The result is a filmmaking experience he characterizes as "the most difficult I've made to date." Hard to fathom, coming from a man whose work spans from Nazi Germany to Depression-era to the Australian outback.

Days also represents Mora's first foray into crowdfunding. Over the thirty-day run, kindred spirits showed up online in support of the director and his work. Support came from friends, fans and total strangers, some of them Holocaust survivors.

When viewed collectively, what's ironic about Mora's work is how he maintains a curious light despite his dark subject. No one knows exactly how many Polish Jews and other prisoners entered the camp's infamous gates. Historians estimate that roughly 1.2 million of them never came out. Seven decades later, it's easy to forget that virtually every crime the Nazis perpetrated here was, to them, perfectly legal.

Looking closely at still photographs from *Days,* one gets a sense that Mora is on to something with his attempt to rescue the place from the grey. The story of Auschwitz is not one story at all, but many; stories of love and loss, of violence and vigilance, of risk and redemption. True, it is a story of shared grief, but also one of hope and resilience, both individual and collective. Last, the story of Auschwitz is a story of the greatest tragedy of all – of surviving war and coming out the other end, to find how much has been lost. The hardest part of living with loss is just that – living; for it means learning to let go.

Whatever stories lie at Auschwitz waiting to be told, there is no doubt that in *Three Days of Auschwitz,* Mora will deliver. The artist's view is a long view, indeed.

Top image: Philippe Mora filming at Auschwitz in 2011.

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