

Modern wounds stir ghost of Schindler

Photomonth 2007. Krakow, Poland

Peter Conrad

On a pot-holed track straggling through the rusty industrial fringes of Krakow, Oskar Schindler's factory looks like a down-at-heel, dishonoured shrine. The paint has peeled from its Art Deco facade, and its bristling metal gate, through which Liam Neeson's limo sleekly swept in 'Schindler's List', is scratched and dented. Its streamlined curves, lucid skylights and bricks of shining cubic glass forlornly recall the idealism of the 1930s: architecture then was supposed to redeem mankind, constructing monuments to the white transparency of what Man Ray called 'the age of light'. But even for the Jewish workers Schindler protected, the factory, as Thomas Keneally puts it in his novel 'Schindler's Ark', was only a 'relative paradise'. After their shifts, Schindler's unpaid drudges returned to a concentration camp down the road, where they slept in barracks behind an electrified fence.

When Schindler acquired the site, it housed a bankrupt textile works. He installed metal-pressing machinery and converted it to the production of enamelled pots and pans, for use in the kitchens and military canteens of the Third Reich. After the war, the communist government nationalised the factory, which for another fifty years churned out spare parts for radios. Now it stands empty, except for two rooms that house some relics of Schindler's tenure and a history of the Krakow ghetto, while local pressure groups quarrel over its future. Promoters of tourism want it to house a museum of contemporary art, but Jewish leaders insist that a place sanctified by suffering should not fill up with Warhol soup cans and Jeff Koons rabbits. Here as elsewhere, Westernisation has its own crass agenda, erasing the invidious past: there are currently plans to build a hypermarket in the Katyn forest, where Soviet troops massacred Polish prisoners in 1940.

Last month, the organisers of Krakow's Photomonth rented the premises and invited the British photographer Mark Power to install a series of exhibitions in the derelict sheds behind the front office. He entitled his project 'Theatres of War', and presented work by five colleagues preoccupied by conflict and art's attitude to it. The factory became a battlefield, echoing to the muffled thud of explosions.

Geert van Kestern recreated the jittery chaos of Iraq on multiple screens with a soundtrack of garbled interviews, while Lisa Barnard documented the tragically tacky 'care packages' dispatched to American troops stationed abroad: how can soldiers who ask their families to send them Beanie Babies and whoopie cushions possibly hope to understand or the gangs of Islamic insurgents they are fighting? Christopher Stewart investigated the secrets of a so-called 'kill house', hidden somewhere in the emptiness of Arkansas, in which the American army trains specialists to search for combatants who have gone to ground in private homes. Luc Delahaye's panoramas of Baghdad or Kabul showed nature serenely re-absorbing our petty acts of destruction, as drifting smoke is slowly erased from a bright, politically neutral sky. Watchtowers on hilltops in South Armagh are absurd mementos of a war that is, we hope, finally over: Donovan Wylie photographed them before their demolition, agreed in exchange for the IRA's surrender of its weapons.

Power, a member of the Magnum agency, is accustomed to working on a grandiose scale: two of his books document the redesign of the Treasury in Whitehall and the inflationary expansion of the Millennium Dome. In Krakow, he was confronted by a random cluster of decommissioned sheds with oil-stained floors, pipes going nowhere on the ceilings, dust-clogged sinks with no water connected, and a pervasive stink of chemicals and crumbled plaster. But he triumphantly justified the project's theatrical metaphor, and turned those empty spaces into a succession of stages, with two excursions into darkened rooms that resembled cinemas.

An unforgiving glare shone through a skylight on Barnard's packages, sealed in those zip-lock plastic bags in which our toiletries are X-rayed at the airport. The cheap items posted out as souvenirs of home to befuddled, disoriented GIs are painfully eloquent. Will a Marine on patrol in Baghdad really have time to apply Cool Tie, a moisturised neckerchief for use on sultry summer days? Packages of instant cocoa and marshmallows are a reminder that Americans believe in chocolate as a kind of god, capable of sweetly relieving all problems. For more persistent anxieties there are bags of Tension Tamer, a herbal tea. In adjacent rooms, Delahaye's panoramas extended to encompass entire horizons. A dead Taliban fighter lies in a gutter surrounded by onlookers; the mountains beyond ignore the evidence of our petty brawls. Power, as he says in the Photomonth catalogue, is fond of epic photographs, which stand at a distance from their subject. Delahaye's version of epic is Homeric not Brechtian, as if he were looking down at the world from the vantage-point of the gods: when the angle is wide enough, all human purposes come to seem futile.

Up a creaky, precarious staircase, in the suffocating attic of the same building, Stewart's exploration of the mysterious 'kill house' could have been the set for a Hitchcock film. The windows are blacked out, and the only light comes from slats between the floorboards. A long gallery recedes in perspective towards a photograph of another staircase, perhaps curling up to a scaffold. A twisted metal bed with a gutted mattress hints at ways of interrogating detainees; a nail sticking out of a door left ajar whispers about cruel and unusual punishments. The design, as Stewart says, 'follows fear not function'. Across the way, van Kesteren's multi-media show occupied what might be a labyrinthine cinema, humming with the noise of invisible machinery and the detonation of special effects. Arab slogans unreel across the pitted brick walls, blood-red tabloid headlines silently shout on the screens. Spent cartridges litter the corner. Stumbling, you realise you are walking on sand, bogged down in an indoor desert. The uproar of shouting crowds and exploding cars reverberated through a

partition into the annex where Wylie's watchtowers hung. Again the mise-en-scene made a sad geopolitical point: North Ireland may be pacified, but Iraq goes on erupting, and in this congested setting there was no longer a continent to separate them.

After this tour of the sites where our world is currently splitting apart, a visit to the Schindler memorial above the factory's gates should be soothing. The walls have been painted battleship grey - mournful but not funereal. Solemnly meditative Muzak, pastiching Bach, prescribes your mood. Schindler lived in the factory, abandoning his swanky requisitioned apartment in the centre of Krakow when the walling-up of the ghetto obstructed his journeys to and fro. A ledger open on his desk might be his accounts but is actually a book in which visitors can write comments. A Scottish couple, a little too overcome by vicarious guilt, had recently testified that they toured the place 'with humiliation in our hearts'. The same page contained a scrawled caricature of a Hassidic Jew, complete with side curls, hook nose and a stigmatising Star of David. Similar figures, carved in wood, are sold as tourist trinkets in the Krakow market square, jostling on the shelves with angels to be strung on Christmas trees and cuddly lime-green gnomes. I remembered a conversation with a local official, whose identity I had better not reveal. I asked him about the Jewish population of Krakow. 'About sixty thousand before the war', he said, 'and maybe three thousand now.' At the end of the sentence, a barely perceptible smile flickered on his lips.

Of those sixty thousand, eleven hundred were spared thanks to Schindler. His motives mixed humane compassion with economic self-interest; perhaps he also enjoyed the games of subterfuge he played with the Nazis, confident that he had protectors in the high command. In Krakow there is some irritation with the man's saintly legend. After all, he did not secure a reprieve for the rest of the ghetto, and the road to the airport in Krakow leads on to nearby Oswiecim, better known as Auschwitz. Schindler's list was hardly an ark, which is what Keneally calls it. Noah's ark had room for paired representatives of all species; it preserved all life

on earth, rather than whimsically choosing a few hundred specimens to be rescued. The Torah declares that to save one life ensures the salvation of the world. I'm no mystic, so to me that just sounds like bad mathematics.

'Of course,' as Power concedes in his catalogue essay, 'photography can't change anything, not really.' In fact art can make things worse, by telling emollient lies that treat the Holocaust as a victory for the human spirit, as the Schindler myth implicitly does.

But Power underestimates the impact of the work he assembled: a photograph - whether of a dead Taliban or of the sad consumerist trophies that keep up morale on the other side - can wound us, re-awakening our human sensitivity. An aesthetic response sometimes ripens into a sense of moral responsibility. Shock and awe shouldn't belong exclusively to the Pentagon and its bombers.

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