

PŁASZÓW, OR A SKANDALON: THE COMMUNITY LIFE OF A 'POST-CAMP-SITE'

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From a Scandal to a *Skandalon*

The Polish dictionary defines a 'scandal' as an event resulting from an action that causes indignation and outrage, while, in a broader sense, also affecting its surroundings.¹ The former concentration camp in Płaszów only reenters contemporary collective awareness when something outrageous or 'scandalous' happens that makes the headlines: "human bones have been found again"², "a dog has dug up a human skull"³, "the police are looking for the vandals who destroyed a monument commemorating those murdered during World War II".⁴ Alarming phrases such as "desecration of corpses", "albescent shin bones", "the prosecutor has secured" succeed in attracting attention for a while. Indeed, the particular temporal trait of scandals is that they are short-lived; they clearly differ from everyday events surrounding them; they occur in the here and now; and they cause only temporary tremors.

The site of the former Płaszów camp seems to exist in a different temporal dimension: it exists all the time, and it is invariably *here*. It quickly becomes apparent that thinking about it in terms of a scandal is, in fact, reductive and a simplification, as it presents its existence within a limited timeframe, as if it were just a single point in time. At this moment, the object becomes active in its meaning – all of a sudden, we see it

1 Elżbieta Sobol (ed.), PWN, Słownik wyrazów obcych, Warszawa 2002.

2 Piotr Drabik, Na terenie byłego KL Płaszów budowlańcy wykopali kości, <http://www.dziennikpolski24.pl/aktualnosci/a/na-terenie-bylego-kl-plaszow-budowlancy-wykopali-kosci,9447038/> (6 June 2018).

3 Karol Surówka, Pies wykopał ludzką czaszkę na terenie dawnego obozu Płaszów, <http://www.radiokrakow.pl/wiadomosci/krakow/pies-wykopal-ludzka-czaszke-na-terenie-dawnego-obozu-plaszow-szczatki-prawdopodobnie-z-czasow-ii-w-s/> (6 June 2018).

4 Maciej Grzyb, Zdewastowano pomnik na terenie byłego obozu koncentracyjnego w Krakowie, <http://www.rmf24.pl/fakty/polska/news-zdewastowano-pomnik-na-terenie-bylego-obozu-koncentracyjnego,nld,241711> (6 June 2018).

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clearly, but only for a moment, and only from one drastic perspective. There can be no doubt that this rapid and short-lasting cognitive mode hampers profound understanding of the site of the former camp which by today has evolved into a complex being. In light of this clear incompatibility, I wish to re-conceptualize the 'scandalousness' of the areas of the former Płaszów camp, thus seeking ways to redirect our focus; and this time permanently.

The contemporary understanding of the term 'scandal' is built around a sense of sin and guilt, thus revealing the extent of the influence of Christian culture. However, the word itself is older and its etymology enables a different distribution of emphasis, which in turn transforms our positionality towards the object that mobilizes our attention. The contemporary scandal is a descendant of the Latin *scandalum*, a term present in the Latin of the Church. It came from the Greek *skándalon*. The source of this chain of related terms can be found in the Hebrew Bible: *mikshowl* (לושכמ). It is a 'stumbling block', which is linked to a prohibition: "Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind" (Book of Leviticus 19:14). In the letters of the Apostles, this block was called "a stone of stumbling" (λιθον προσκομματος, *litos proskommatos*) and then "a rock to make them stumble" (πετραν σκανδαλου, *petra skandalou*)⁵. The former Płaszów camp is itself very much a block, making it all the easier to return to the source meaning. It is, quite literally, an obstacle, a block placed on a seemingly straight path. We stumble over it while walking through a well-kept renaissance town which is popular with tourists; it disrupts the course of the narrative of a metropolis widely admired for its rich heritage; it interrupts the smooth story of the history of Jews in Kraków whose key pillars are the foundation of Kazimierz as a town, the erection of synagogues, its thriving culture, the development of a strong academic centre and the contemporary story of the Jewish revival.

5 The first letter of St Peter, 1P 2:8.

Shift of Perspectives: Recognition

“Stone’s time is not ours”, as the eco-philosopher Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has recently written.⁶ A close and sudden encounter with a petrified world makes us aware of the difference between us: “lithic-induced perspective shift triggers an ontological and temporal reeling, a rocky movement of affect, cognition, horizon.”⁷ In other words, stumbling over a *mikshowl* could also incite new thinking and permit different insights: it is an act of cognition; it opens the mind, it initiates a recovery of sight (if we remember that in the Pentateuch a block on the path was a threat to the blind). Thus, a collision with an obstacle may have beneficial results – it may enable a reorientation of thinking and recognition (however painful) of the full complexity of a difficult situation.

However, evasion is a more common response to a resistant object than the strategy of facing it courageously. How do we protect the blind from stumbling? The simplest solution is to remove the block. Large post-camp areas seem to be objects that cannot be removed permanently from physical reality, yet such projects are indeed attempted and sometimes even succeed. The Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk recently recalled one such attempt. In a drama written for the theatre Schauspielhaus Graz about a World War I camp near Graz, he brought the Thalerhof into view again. This was where Ruthenians and the Lemko people were interned. Deprived of necessary food and shelter, prisoners died there in large numbers, with their graves later becoming a site of pilgrimage for contemporary Lemkos. The site of this difficult history has been effectively and permanently transformed, but in such a way that it does not overwhelm the world around it with feelings of guilt and suffering or hinder comfortable movement. It has, quite literally, been absolutely flattened and secured. The area was concreted over and turned into an airfield.

⁶ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, Minneapolis 2015, 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*

One strategy that could potentially lead to new recognition would be to influence the cognitive apparatus of passers-by: indeed, it is possible with practice to train the gaze, calibrating the sharpness of eyesight so that it can recognize a hard object and find a way through it. As a result of the scopic nature of this activity, visual artists are exceptionally effective at such tasks. In the series of works *Tote Winkel* (Dead Corners),⁸ the journalist Ansgar Gilster, in contributions to the journal *Osteuropa*, photographs the locations of acts of mass annihilation: ‘post-camp-sites’, mass graves and places of execution. A distinguishing feature of his series is to direct the lenses so that they omit the line of the horizon which stabilizes the world and provides the eye with a point of orientation; the viewer’s gaze is thus directed towards the ground. This gesture makes the author’s work stand out among many professional and non-professional documents produced by film and photo cameras. The artist seems to look carefully at whatever is placed at a low level, just in front of him. The frame is filled with visually unattractive spots of mud, heaps of dry leaves and unnecessary items; plants sprout between them and water drips. By watching his feet, the wayfarer does not fall because he has time to stop before the “stumbling block” – a human bone.



Ansgar Gilster, *Dead Corners*.
Mass grave, Crimea. Courtesy
of the artist.

⁸ For the project documentation, see <http://ansgargilster.de/deadcorners.html> (6 June 2018).



Ansgar Gilster,
Dead Corners. Mass
grave in the centre
of Dnepropetrovsk
changed into a
football field.
Courtesy of the
author.

Visual work may not result in the cataract being removed from the eyes of the blind. Viewers can be offered additional tools to assist them in seeing more clearly. The sense of sight can be enhanced by markers, charts⁹ or maps thus providing a script for moving about the 'post-camp-site'. Such a practical guide is contained in the series of photos by Jason Francisco entitled *Time in Płaszów* (since 2010).¹⁰ Sensitive to the differing ways in which time is experienced in such locations, the artist

⁹ In the spring of 2003, just before the ceremonies of the 60th anniversary of the liquidation of the ghetto in Kraków, information boards were placed around the camp to read as follows: "Dear Visitors! You are entering the area of the former concentration camp of Płaszów. Please behave in a way that respects the dignity of the place". <http://www.fzp.net.pl/shoa/oboz-pracy-przymusowej-plaszow> (6 June 2018).

¹⁰ For the project documentation, see <http://jasonfrancisco.net/time-in-plaszow> (6 June 2018).

creates a visual narrative, combining past and contemporary photos. He tears today's image off the retina, forcing the viewer to overcome the inertia of the eye and see what cannot now be seen with the naked eye – working prisoners, roads covered with white stone, towers and guards, wires and fences. He constructs a special guidebook supplemented with clear tips for undirected visitors: this is a cemetery, do not sit here, do not sunbathe; barracks once stood here – do not light bonfires here; this is a mass grave – do not play football here; this is the gate to the camp – do not play soldiers here.

Cartographic Abstraction/ Socialized Life

A 'post-camp-site' is related to the "post-ghetto-site" which Jacek Leociak has movingly described on many occasions: "the place has survived but it has been in a way hollowed out, deprived of its contents, interior; [whatever] was here, has been annihilated, but this 'here' has remained, and is obscured by another presence. A frame containing a different reality remains; a topographic point remains; it is a cartographic abstraction."¹¹ The area of the former camp at Płaszów has similar characteristics: the area's durability and ostentatious "still being here" is linked to the absence of symbols carrying a message about the past. It faces the threat – as does the area of former Warsaw ghetto – with "cartographic abstraction".

In Płaszów too, albeit to a different degree, the roads and paths leading through an area marked with violence have changed. The area has been dug through, systems have been installed in the mixture of rock and bones to provide all utilities which are needed today: cables and pipelines put an underground corset on the area. Although the area has not been completely urbanized, a residential estate has been constructed on its north-eastern part. The spaces which could continue to be readable

¹¹ Jacek Leociak, *Aryjskim tramwajem przez warszawskie getto, czyli hermeneutyka pustego miejsca*, in Lidia Burska and Marek Zaleski (eds.) *Maski współczesności*, ed. Lidia Burska, Marek Zaleski, Warsaw 2001, 84.

(“walking across the extensive area of the former camp, one can find foundations of camp facilities, wells, traces of water tanks, ditches, sewage discharge and water supply facilities”¹²), have been covered with plants. It is hard to believe that two aerial maps, a contemporary one and one from during the war, show the same area. Today’s image is intensely green; the one from the past gleams with the bareness of the rock – one cannot fail to think of a bare, uncovered bone.

Which map should be used to read the ‘post-camp-site’? The Proxima Project Group, which prepared a design for reconstructing the areas of the former camp at Płaszów, added several cartographic documents to its study.¹³ Each map is different. There is one that leads us through Austrian fortifications from World War I. Another one marks paths and roads that have transformed the site. Another one shows the network of pipes and ducts transporting water, electricity and gas to houses in Kraków. Another one marks trees, clearings and growths, evident after taking an inventory of flora and greenery. Further on, red lines mark the areas of pre-war cemeteries. There is a map showing the locations of camp facilities. And another one that shows relics and other remains from that period. Finally, there is an administrative map which shows boundaries of land ownership. There are contours and reference points; the scale and a key are provided. Which of these maps is true? Which leads us through the genuine ‘post-camp-site’? The answer is clear: each of them, and none of them.

“I like maps because they lie,” the poet Wisława Szymborska once wrote.¹⁴ Maps falsify the reality that is experienced even when they undoubtedly tell the truth. According to the maps, the camp at Płaszów was located almost entirely in the district Wola Duchacka; however, it is commonly referred to today as “Płaszów” (Płaszów was a neighboring settlement). Maps – like the ones from a historical study, updated for the 2007

12 Ryszard Kotarba, *Niemiecki obóz w Płaszowie 1942–1945*, Warsaw/Kraków 2009, 160.

13 I wish to thank Borys Czarakczew for making this material available to me.

14 Wisława Szymborska, *Map*, in *Collected and Last Poems*, Boston/New York 2015, 432-433.

competition to develop the area of the former camp – do not provide access to the truth of the place. They divide it according to particular categories that make it readable, orderly and comprehensible. A map is flat, rigid, “Nothing moves beneath it / it seeks no outlet”, the colors are clear, everything is “small, near, accessible”.¹⁵ The daily physicality of the ‘place-after-a-camp’ is different: it is inaccessible, unreadable, confusing. The area is not flat. The ground is not stable: it has been dug up and tunneled through by animals (and people), moved by geological forces, and by the strength of plants and water courses; it is changing and transforming, even though the speed of the process renders it barely visible to the human eye. The orders of systems, greenery, etc., might be disconnected in the theory of the map, yet they are empirically inseparable; we know that a technical network cannot be maintained (map No. 3) without getting into the world of map No. 5 (cemeteries) and without intruding into the world of map No. 4 (plants). The roots of trees have grown into pre-war graves. How could we thus separate what Michel Serres calls “us subject-object”, “us, crowd, entangled stones”? “This mixture has no name in any language,” he wrote.¹⁶

The contemporary experience of the ‘post-camp site’ thus entails a danger, namely that of the possibility of failing to recognize traces of the past; this is a (painful) mistake concerning layers of time, one that casually overlooks the difficult part of that heritage. Nothing that could prevent changes from occurring has been introduced to the area; over seventy years the life of the neighborhood has absorbed the past of the site of the camp and developed it for the present, making access to it even more difficult. Płaszów camp now evokes the need to look for guides, guidance, descriptions. A visitor wants a framework, or at least an idea of where borderlines and graves are marked. Where can we go freely? What would produce a different route through the site? How can all these realities be encompassed in one experience – animal and human, the past and present, vegetal and lyric? Our cognitive apparatus demands organization, division

15 All expressions are taken from the poem by Wisława Szymborska.

16 Michel Serres, *Statues: The Second Book of Foundations*, London, 2014, 63.

and reduction. A 'post-camp site', on the other hand, can manage the excess perfectly well; it exists in its subject/object coupling. It absorbs all realities which are irreconcilable for us. Future plans for transformations of the place will have to confront this powerful amalgamated rock of meanings that deserves respect.

One possible way of communicating with this living/dead organism has already been mentioned here – namely, the modest activity of “careful observation of the ground”. “A place like this requires the visitor to think about his own act of looking”, Georges Didi-Huberman wrote about walking through the area of the former camp. “A certain configuration of my own body [...], and a certain fundamental fear – was prompting me to look mostly at things close to the ground. As a general rule I walk with my eyes downcast. Something must have persisted of a very old (not to say childish) fear of falling. But also of a certain propensity to shame, such that for a long time, looking straight ahead was difficult for me. [...] I've acquired the habit of transforming this general timidity in the face of things, this desire to flee or to remain in perpetually vacillating attention, into observation of all that is low: the first things to see, the things 'under your nose', the down-to-earth things. As if stooping to look somehow helped me to better think about what I see. At Birkenau, a particular dejection in the face of history no doubt made me lower my head slightly more than usual”.¹⁷ In Kraków, it is worth following the same plan: bend down to see, to be able to think, bend down more than usual.

Roma Sendyka (Jagiellonian University)

¹⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Bark*, Cambridge 2017, 41-42.

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Jason Francisco,
Time in Plaszow
(Sine 2010).
Courtesy of the
author.



The soil near the
main memorial
at the former
extermination
camp Treblinka II.
Photo by Dorota
Głowacka.