
(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Incarceration and Sexual Exploitation in *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*: A Poetics of Violence

Payel Ghosh

Department of English

Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University

West Bengal, India.

payel.ku1995@gmail.com

Abstract

*Cult classics often break the mainstream societal taboo and display sexuality, profanity, violence etc. with a secret purpose or investment. On the other hand, sexploitation film is a film that tries to succeed commercially by exploiting sex in the media. These are generally low-quality “B movies”. Here, I would like to deal with a Nazisploitation film *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975) that depicts the suffering of female incarcerated victims whose sexuality is used to provide voyeuristic pleasure to the audience, as spectacles of pornographication of the prison. This paper aims to concentrate on bodily torture, terror, violence, sexual violence and why people seek pleasure in sexual perversion. Instead of making the audience sensitive and aware of women’s torment, the sexploitation genre basically sells their torment as entertainment. It does not make the audience more conscious of the plight of the women being tortured on screen, rather ends up producing titillation and sadistic/voyeuristic pleasure. The proposed study also focuses on how sexual violence against women is presented before the audience and what kind of pleasure they derive from this.*

Keywords: *Cult classic, Sexploitation, Nazisploitation, Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS, Voyeurism, Culture Industry.*

Introduction:

The 1970s saw the rise of the Nazisploitation films similar in themes, characters and narratives ranging from sexploitation to women-in-prison films. It had its origin in Adventure

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

magazine primarily aimed to provide male readers with the depiction of horrors of war from the comfort zone of home. These depictions were tainted with sexual components between prisoners of war and the guards. These cinemas became popular in grindhouse theatres across America as sellable by-products of the entertainment industry. The important factor for the popularity of these films is the historical context in which these films are made. Moreover, the lionization of this genre also insinuates the audience's preoccupation with Nazism and the sexual deviance of the Nazis. The exploitation films deviate from mainstream films mainly for their economic aesthetics, sensational plot lines, and employment of sex and violence and thereby exploitation films offer an alternative approach to cinematic interpretation. In this context, Eric Schaefer points out that "[T]he clash between the mainstream and exploitation industries created a series of discourses on sexuality, taste, mores, the nature of entertainment, and the function of motion pictures" (Schaefer 294). These films are categorized by their fetishistic gender image of sexualized violence and fascination with the body. Nazisploitation films render manifold similarities with the women-in-prison genre. Both genres portray imprisoned women who are sexually and physically exploited by sadistic male or female prison custodians. The Nazisploitation genre often propagates sadomasochistic iconography by linking sex, power and violence and thereby Nazi imagery has often eroticized and profaned the sacred memory of the Holocaust. Moreover, this category of films incorporates the graphic detail of terrific torture in concentration camps, prostitution, sterilization, castration, rape, and medical experiment. Medical experiments are parts of systematized killings preferred by the Nazis. These films often provide glimpses of the sadist perpetrators who abuse their power for their own sexual gratification and amusement and thereby create an imbalance between the victimizers and the victims. Therefore, the Nazisploitation films beget a nexus between Nazi cruelty, scientific experimentation as cruelty and sexual torture (S/M) and thereby offer the audience titillating and sensational spectacles. Nazisploitation films of the 1970s such as Don Edmonds's *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975), Bruno Mttei's *Women's Camp 119* (1977), Lorenzo Gicca Palli's

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Liebes Lager (1976), Alian Payet's *Helga*, *She Wolf of Stilberg* (1977) spawn some generic tropes and themes decisive to this genre of films. The common denominators of these films are the female characters, the marginalized subjects who are subjugated through sexual violence, torture, and gendered discrimination.

Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS:

Ilsa is an evil warden of a Nazi prison camp. She conducts sadistic scientific experimentation to prove that women can endure more pain than men and they should be allowed to fight in the German armed forces. She is a hypersexual woman who needs a new male prisoner each night for copulation. Ultimately, she finds Wolfe, a blond-haired, blue-eyed prisoner, who resembles the Nazi ideal and this man succeeds to satisfy her. Thereby, he gains the trust of Ilsa. Wolfe along with Mario, another prisoner and female prisoners start scheming against Ilsa. Ilsa convinces a visiting General to show her experiments and gains plaudit for her work. One night Wolfe ties Ilsa to her bed during a sex game and steals her gun to help his comrades. Wolfe pleads with the other prisoners to leave the Nazis to be captured and tried by the Allies. But the other prisoners decide to execute the Nazis, while Wolfe and Rosette escape the camp. The commander comes and shoots Ilsa and gives the order to wipe out the camp. Thereby, he destroys the evidence of their atrocities and brags that the Allied forces will never know what happened there (Edmonds 1:35:00- 1:35:12). The film was severely criticized for the depiction of its graphic violence which includes castration, flogging, and human experiments but at that, Ilsa became a pop cultural icon of strong, aggressive female authority.

Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS as Nazi Porn:

The film can be called a 'Holocaust-sex film' or 'Nazi porn'. It operates within the rudimentary designs of Nazisploitation films of the 1970s trying to legitimize the power imbalance between victimizers and victims, medical experiments, portrayal of female prisoners of war, field brothels and other sensational elements with a historical disclaimer

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

proclaiming that the film should be read as a historical document. The present film opens with a title card from the producer, Herman Traeger-

“The film you are about to see is based upon documented fact. The atrocities shown were conducted as “medical experiments” in special concentration camps throughout Hitler’s Third Reich. Although these crimes against humanity are historically accurate, the characters depicted are composites of notorious Nazi personalities, and the events portrayed have been condensed into one locality for dramatic purposes. Because of its shocking subject matter, this film is restricted to adult audiences only. We dedicate this film with the hope that these heinous crimes will never occur again” (Edmonds 00:02:00- 00:02:17).

The Nazisploitation films of the 1970s often use photos from the camps, and mass graves to legitimize the fact that these films are based on true events. They also portray the Nazis destroying the camps and the inhabitants to hide the history of the horror of the Nazi camps from the Allies. Thereby, these films attempt to validate the fact of depicting the horrors once happened. This portrayal of exploitation transforms the female prisoners’ bodies into a site of fantasy, desire and curiosity. This realm of fantasy is produced through the visualization of naked female bodies, medical experiments, and repetitive sexual deportment (rape, prostitution, sexual violence, genital mutilation).

Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS is set in Poland in 1945 during the closing days of WWII. Ilsa, the Nazi commandant of Medical Camp 9, is assigned to sterilize the prisoners of war. Subsequently, she also conducts personal medical experiments with the aim to prove that women can endure more pain than men. This sadistic feminazi castrates the male prisoners who fail to gratify her carnal desires and she satisfies herself by experimenting with various kinds of exploitation upon the prisoners. So, the sadomasochistic badge has pervaded the Nazisploitation films with its portrayal of sex and violence. Victims and victimizers have become sexual partners in these films and thereby, it has tainted the Holocaust memory with its employment of pornographic imagery. In popular culture, Holocaust memory is generally contemplated as sacred but here it is consistently eroticized, gendered and profaned.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Horror is something that transgresses the sacred and that involves the struggle between good and evil. In that sense, *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* is more of a horror film than a pornographic one. The film comes up with numerous horrific scenes of sexual torture, castration, rape, and sterilization resulting in the degradation of moral order. *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* can be categorized both as Women in Prison (WIP) and sexploitation. But, by the 1960s this Women in Prison genre is appropriated by sexploitation films which replaced the prisons with slavery rings resulting in the production of soft-core porn films. Bob Cresse's *Love Camp 7* (1967) is considered as the first sexploitation film set in a Nazi concentration camp where women captives are used for the sexual gratification of the Nazi males. This film works as an adjuvant for the production of the film *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*.

Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS fits itself into the genre of sexploitation film and reduces the gravity of the Holocaust memory with its titillating sensationalism. With its depiction of graphic detail of sexploitation and sadomasochistic torture in the Nazi concentration camp, it earned its huge popularity. It is highly discussed and critiqued for its portrayal of taboo themes like rape, prostitution, castration, and medical experiment. The director Don Edmonds comments on the making of the film-

“He (producer) told me at the time there'd been a lot of research done on the picture and that the atrocities were real, that there was documentation that those [things] had been done in prison camps over the years... And I believe it... There really was a man named Joseph Mengele. There really was a lady named Ilsa Koch... Dachaus and Buchenwald- they really existed” (Rapaport 58-59).

The sensational way of describing the real person Ilsa Koch and the torture scenes mitigates the historical complexities of Holocaust memory. Though the Nazi sexploitation films like *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* venture to validify them with a historical disclaimer, the gross and heinous incidents of the camps- medical experiments, sexual assault, prostitution, and rape, simplify the historical complexities of the Third Reich. With the aim to provide the audience with titillating and sensational pleasure, these movies have lightened up the gravity

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

of the historical document turning the holocaust memory into basic and primal things. It is true that in the Nazisploitation films, the depiction of sex, rape, torture, experiment is at the forefront, but they offer something more than the sadomasochistic voyeuristic pleasure which is the historical reality. These films comprise of different agendas than the reputable and conventional Holocaust films and they have created their own narratives by simplifying the historical complexities. In some sense, the portrayal of the gross sex and torture scenes may seem to be overhyped, but these things were perpetrated during the Nazi realm. So, in a sense, these films may appear to be a reminder of the past atrocities committed upon the prisoners which must not be performed again in subsequent eras.

Medical Experiments and the Female Inmates as Guinea Pigs:

With the arrival of the new group of prisoners, Ilsa addresses them:

“There is no need for you to be afraid. This is no Dachau, no Ravensbruck. We are doctors, we are here to help you. Your stay with us will be short, but in it, you will be helped to serve the Third Reich. This is your destiny. We welcome you to Camp Nine” (Edmonds 00:06:59-00:08:38).

Ilsa conducts several medical experiments with the prisoners in the camp. Two categories of medical experiments are conducted in the camp- one is sponsored by the Nazi govt. and another kind is conducted personally by the SS doctors. The first category involves sterilization, injection of the serum for various diseases like typhus, gangrene. In the second category, SS doctors perform various scientific experiments on the prisoners’ bodies (an experiment on identical twins by doctor Josef Mengele in Auschwitz). In the film, we see that Ilsa tells the prisoners that they are here to retrain the prisoners for serving the Third Reich (Edmonds 00:09:02-00:12:42).

After inspection, female inmates’ jobs are assigned and some of them are selected for prostitution. Forced prostitution was very common in the Nazi camps and many bordellos were set up in Dachau, Neuengamme, Mauthausen, Gusen, Auschwitz, and Monowitz during the Third Reich. The female inmates were forced to work as prostitutes in the bordellos and

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

they had to fulfill a quota of eight men per day. Women were not always sterilized before their prostitution resulting in pregnancies, forced abortions and the death of many inmates.

In the Nazi camps, women prisoners were used as guinea pigs in medical experiments. The inmates were injected with various drugs to observe the effects of medicines and to set the correct dosage for a disease. Sometimes, the prisoners were infected with disease but no medicine was given to observe them as control groups. These experiments were conducted by the SS doctors with the approval of Heinrich Himmler and on the demands of the pharmaceutical companies and institutes. These experiments were done forcefully with the use of pressure or threat. The sole purpose was to observe the reaction of the drugs despite knowing the harmfulness of the drugs.

Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS also offers various instances of experiments with the bodies of the female inmates conducted by Ilsa and she explains to the prisoners-

“You will serve in a different manner, to help the cause of medical research and thereby save thousands of lives” (Edmonds 00:18:40-00:19:25).

In a scene, we visualize that Ilsa and her associates are sterilizing the female inmates in the laboratory and the inmates are shivering and screaming at this horrific torture but Ilsa and her assistants are enjoying these experiments. Then Ilsa inserts this dildo inside Anna’s vagina but Anna does not make any noise or moan. Observing this Ilsa claims that only Anna can withstand this pain and trauma, she can be used for their experiment further (Edmonds 00:37:35- 00:42:34). Later she shows Anna to the General and says “No man could have withstood such pain” (Edmonds 01:06:35).

Ilsa also conducts her private research to prove that women can tolerate more pain than men and therefore, women should be allowed to take part in the battle along with the men. There is a private chamber in the camp where her private experiments are conducted. When we encounter the female inmates’ chambers, we come to know that the female inmates are infected with bacteria like syphilis, rabies, and tetanus to develop experimental drugs (Edmonds 00:14:31-00:15:02). We find a female prisoner infected with maggots on her legs

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

and Ilsa explains to the General that she is injected with a new strain of typhus. When the general asks Ilsa about anaesthesia, she responds, “One does not give caviar to guinea pigs” (Edmonds 01:09:57).

Culture Industry and Politics of the Female Body:

Adorno and Horkheimer talk of the ‘culture industry’ in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They propose that popular culture is a factory that produces cultural goods- films, radio, programmes, magazines- that are used to manipulate the mass society into passivity. Consumption of easy pleasure of popular culture is made available by mass communication media and it makes people docile and content. ‘Industry’ is not used here literally; it refers to the standardization of the things themselves (such as the Western) and the rationalization of the distribution techniques. They also argue that stylization and pseudo-individualization (product differentiation i.e., a product must have one feature by which it can be distinguished from others) of the cultural product contribute to the successful mass marketing. Here, I will talk about how these films (cultural commodities) exploit the female body for mass marketing.

When the camera represents a beautiful image, it satisfies the spectators’ senses and, in these films, beauty is replaced by the feminine bodies and titillating scenes. These sexploitation films aim to use female bodies to attract the audience and gain profit. So, the women’s bodies are being sold here and the old saying ‘sex sells’ becomes true. Commercialization of sex provides a false impression to the audience about what they are watching on the screen. The movie industry often exploits sexual appeal to increase the sales rate of their product.

Feminist philosophers critique this sex commerce in different social practices like pornography, prostitution, erotic dance performance and the use of sexual images of women for the promotion of products and entertainment. They argue that:

“Pornography, in the feminist view, is a form of forced sex, a practice of sexual politics, an institution of gender inequality. In this perspective, pornography is not a harmless fantasy or a corrupt and confused misrepresentation of an otherwise natural and healthy sexuality.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Along with rape and prostitution in which it participates, pornography institutionalizes the sexuality of male supremacy, which fuses the eroticization of dominance and submission with the social construction of male and female” (MacKinnon 120).

The sexploitation films are continuously exhibiting erotic scenes that transform women into sellable products enjoyed by consumers. The camera is using the female bodies as material objects that satisfy onlookers’ senses with attraction. On one hand, movie makers are using women’s bodies as a weapon for the sake of promoting business, on another, they are institutionalizing gender and exploiting females through pornographic presentation. So, through media, capitalist society is propagating its ideology and retaining its control in the hegemonic form.

Conclusion:

So, it is clear from the discussion so far, the film is an explicit representation of the genre called sexploitation. The genre being submerged with pornography aims to regale the audience with a certain fetish lashing that is graphic violence on women for the arousal of pleasure. It no longer withstands the cult image; it is reproducing the facsimile of sexual torture and perversion. But the arousal of sexual excitement by the portrayal of pornographic scenes raises some questions about the role of popular culture in political and social life. If we are excited by the pornographication of incarceration, does it legitimize the acts of the Nazis? Moreover, pornography is not just about sex, it is about the power imbalance between men and women and the dehumanization of women. A spectator watches a film through the camera’s eye, through the eyes of the characters and through his/her own eyes. In his argument with pornography, Paul Willemen has referred to a ‘fourth view’- the spectator looking at something which he or she is not supposed to look at (Willemen 42). On one hand, popular culture, culture industry, scopophilia, gaze and on the other, pain-pleasure psychology ranging from contractual sadomasochism ending at violence, torture of the victim’s body by the victimizers are allied to produce packaged spectacles which are being consumed by the spectators. So, when the narrative is showing sexual violence against female

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

prison inmates, it is supposed to make the audience sensitive but it is making the whole issue sensational. So, the narrative is taking the audience towards witnessing the hidden stories of women prisoners being tortured but the spectacle or what the audience can see is taking them to the pornographication of the whole issue and that is the way popular culture sustains its culture industry, cinema sustains its gaze and pain-pleasure psychology sustains its fantasies. So, finally, the experience of fear becomes the experience of fantasy, the experience of awareness is summarily replaced by the experience of peak excitement and entertainment.

Bibliography:

Dworkin, Andrea, & Catharine A. MacKinnon. *Pornography and civil rights: A New Day for Women's Equality*. Organizing Against Pornography, 1988.

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Herder and Herder, 1972.

Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS. Directed by Don Edmonds, Aeteas Filmproduktions, 1975.

Rapaport, Lynn. "Profaning the Sacred in *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*." *Shofar*, Vol. 22, no. 1, 2003, pp. 58-59.

Schaefer, Eric. "Resisting Refinement: The Exploitation Film and Self-Censorship." *Film History*, vol. 6, no 3, 1994, pp. 294.

Willemsen, Paul. "Letter to John." *Screen*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Summer), 1980, pp. 53-66.