



The “Freedom” of Motion

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Abstract

Throughout Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1994), motion is used in various ways for different purposes. At 1:28’00”, a prisoner is taken out of a factory in order to be executed by Ralph Fiennes. During this relatively short encounter between the prisoner and Fiennes, questions involving fate enter the viewer’s mind. But why? All because of motion (or a lack thereof). Spielberg, in this film, employs motion and/or non-motion to convey complicated and meaningful ideas. Ultimately, in this essay, I propose to (i) analyze this somber scene in its production (i.e., why and how did the scene work so well), and (ii) postulate that, in this specific scene, the ability to move freely is restricted to those who are not facing certain death.

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Throughout Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1994), motion is used in various ways for different purposes. At 1:28’00”, a prisoner is taken out of a factory in order to be executed by Ralph Fiennes. During this relatively short encounter between the prisoner and Fiennes, questions involving fate enter the viewer’s mind. But why? All because of motion (or a lack thereof). Spielberg, in this film, employs motion and/or *non-motion* to convey complicated and meaningful ideas. Ultimately, in this essay, I propose to (i) analyze this somber scene in its production (i.e., why and how did the scene work so well), and (ii) postulate that, in this specific scene, the ability to move freely is restricted to those who are not facing *certain death*.

1:28’00”. The Jewish prisoner has no control over his own movement. Immediately, the prisoner is dragged by the neck outside and forcefully shoved to the ground by one of the SS officers. Then, the prisoner can only sit there - motionless - waiting for certain death. As a matter of fact, one of the Nazi SS officers adjusts the Jewish prisoner’s neck -- the Jew does not have even the slightest control over his own bodily movements. In direct contrast, throughout this entire ordeal, the Nazi SS officers move freely, shuffling side to side, and even talking to one another in a relaxed tone. Also, in the background, other Jewish prisoners, that are not facing certain death (i.e., not facing certain death at that very moment in time), are in control of their movements. Moreover, among the individuals who have the ability to control their own movement in this scene, there is a significant juxtaposition. Spielberg manages to convey a sense of disparity using their movements. For instance, there is an arrogance in the Nazi officers’ movements, whereas there is a pity in the scrambling of Jewish prisoners. The Nazi officers move to kill, whilst the Jewish prisoners move to survive. Thus, it becomes apparent that Steven Spielberg, in this scene, uses motion in a subliminal way to deliver meaning.

In addition to the prisoner’s lack of motion, this scene portrays ‘*non-motion*’ in two other very distinct ways -- the non-motion of: (i) the firearms, and (ii) the camera itself. First, let me define what I mean by *non-motion*. Non-motion is a concept I created in order to classify things that *should move, but do not move*.

(i). A faulty gun is something that *should* cause movement, but, contrary to the normal function of the object, it does not. Therefore, both firearms in this scene, quite clearly, display a lack of motion (i.e., *non-motion*). Through this lack of motion, a viewer could reasonably ponder a myriad of metaphysical questions. Is life predetermined? How is it physically possible for two guns to both, simultaneously, malfunction? Is there really such a thing as luck? Is there an afterlife? Was something or someone protecting the prisoner? Spielberg uses this non-motion to spark a sense of wonder in the viewer. Furthermore, one of the SS guards, as he walks away from the beaten prisoner, says: “strange . . . huh?”, highlighting the incredible nature of this failed execution.

A failed execution is one of the most traumatic experiences an individual can go through. In Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*, the prince remarks that “perhaps the worst, most violent pain lies not in injuries, but in the fact that you know for certain that within the space of an hour, then ten minutes, then half a minute, then now, right this moment - your soul will fly out of your body, and you’ll no longer be a human being” (Dostoyevsky, 27). The prisoner understands, as he is dragged out of the factory, that he would soon be living no longer. And, as Dostoyevsky suggests, waiting for death is hell for the prisoner -- worse than the actual death itself. So, I ask you:

“would it be better for the prisoner’s own psyche if the first bullet just shot and killed him?” These brutal and dark questions are crucial to the study of the Holocaust and many other tragic events throughout history. Inspired by Lawrence Langer’s “*choiceless choices*,” let us call these questions “*answerless questions*.”

(ii). As Fiennes attempts to execute the Jewish prisoner, the camera does *not* move at all -- like the prisoner and the faulty guns, the camera is motionless. As a brief reminder, movement in this scene is strictly restricted to those who are *not* facing certain death. And so, if the camera (the viewer’s *only* perspective) cannot and does not move, what does that suggest? It suggests that the viewer, too, is destined for death alongside the Jewish prisoner -- something outrageous and immoral! For instance, what did the viewer ever do to deserve a death sentence? Well, on that same line of thought, what did the Jewish prisoner ever do to deserve a death sentence? Spielberg employs motion to create a subconscious connection between the viewer and the Jewish prisoner.

The use of motion in this scene is of an ingenious nature. Spielberg’s film elevates the use of motion to a high form of art. Through motion, he conveys a deeper meaning, and thus forms a closer bond between the viewer and the film. In this masterful way, Spielberg educates and challenges his viewer.

“Nothing is more revealing than movement.”
~ **Martha Graham**

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