

# The Drowned and the Saved

## CRYSTAL DOWNING

As our economy struggles to keep its head above water, recriminations abound. Some blame the avarice of media-controlled consumers living beyond their means; others indict mortgage lenders who exploited consumer dreams; many focus on the capitalist greed of Wall Street moguls who padded their life jackets with millions before allowing their companies to bob in barrels at the top of financial falls. All, of course, are complicit, having collectively floated through calm waters without taking heed of Niagra-like devastation ahead. Americans at all economic levels and in both political parties have been counterfeiting financial stability for over a decade.

Complicity and counterfeiting inform a recent film about a government plan to intentionally drown the American economy. Winner of the 2008 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, *The Counterfeiters* tells a fictional story based on the memoir of Adolf Burger, a Slovak Jew placed in a special ward of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1942. Along with other Jews who had paper-making, engraving, banking, or printing-press skills, Burger was compelled to manufacture British pounds and American dollars that the Germans planned to pour into Allied countries in order to devastate their economies.

Granted special favors—ample food, comfortable beds, hot showers, fresh toiletries—these Jews aided an enemy decimating their race. Counterfeiting in more ways than one, they illustrate what Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi called “the gray zone of collaboration.” In *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi says of his Holocaust experience, “the enemy was all around but also inside[;] the ‘we’ lost its limits.”

*The Counterfeiters*, then, is about the complexity of defining the “we.” Focusing on tensions among the counterfeiting Jews themselves, it dissolves easy distinctions between victims and perpetrators of evil. Doing so, the film distinguishes itself from many cinematic portrayals of Nazi atrocities, which manifest what Levi calls a “Manichaean tendency” to make clear-cut distinctions between good and evil:

Popular history, and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichaean tendency, which shuns half-tints and complexities: it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels—we and they, . . . winners and losers, . . . the good guys and the bad guys, respectively, because the good must prevail, otherwise the world would be subverted.

In contrast, *The Counterfeiters* gives us half-tints as subtle as those the Jewish prisoners seek to capture on forged American bills.

The film opens with a scene shot in half-tints. In the muted tones of twilight, a man dressed in black sits on dark gray stone, watching a gray-blue sea beneath a light

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gray sky. Picking up a black briefcase and walking by newspaper debris announcing the end of the war, the man enters a Monte Carlo casino, where bright lights and garish colors contrast dramatically with the preceding subdued tones. Donning a tuxedo bought with money pulled from the briefcase, the man proceeds to the gaming tables, where he gambles and wins. The next morning, after bedding a gorgeous woman in an opulent hotel room, he sits on a luxurious patio, where he is served a bottle of champagne in a silver bucket.

The shot dissolves into a graphic match: in the exact same spot on the screen a champagne bucket is placed on



a different table in a different location during an earlier time: 1936 Berlin. The same black-clad man apparently manages this tawdry bar, endearingly joking with his sleazy customers, but also roughing up thugs who fail to deliver what they owe him. Just as we decide this man, called “Sally,” warrants little respect, we are given a new scene. In a room above the bar, Sally counterfeits passports to help Jews escape Germany. Our opinion does another about face when Sally hesitates to make a passport for a beautiful woman until she offers to sleep with him. Sally, a Russian Jew originally named Salomon Sorowitsch, obviously cares only for himself, counterfeiting not out of compassion but for the money. He replies to gratitude for his services with “Our people? I’m me and the others are others.” When a German officer bursts into the room and sends Sally off to prison, it almost seems like a bit of poetic justice.

Our ambivalence about Sally, the film’s fictional protagonist, prepares us for the ethical ambiguities of the rest of the film, ambiguities foreshadowed as Sally is marched

to a concentration camp. He witnesses a prisoner ferociously pummel a fellow Jew, while a German guard encourages the brutality. The shot—like much of movie—is filmed in tones of gray, as though alluding to Primo Levi’s zone of collaboration.

Sally must negotiate this gray zone when taken, five years later, to the Sachsenhausen camp to aid the counterfeiting scheme. He willingly dons clothes given to him by prison guards: clothes still bearing owner tags of murdered Jews. Even more symbolic is a scene near the end of the film. After guards flee the concentration camp to escape advancing Allied forces, dirt-covered malnourished prisoners break through the barrier that separates them from the healthy counterfeiters. Wielding abandoned guns, the gaunt prisoners threaten to kill the counterfeiters, assuming that such clean, well-fed men could not be part of the abused “we.” Thus, as Jews threaten Jews with Nazi weapons, we get a visual metaphor for the gray zone of collaboration.

Only one Jew in the film refuses to collaborate: Adolf Burger, the colotype expert who wrote the memoir inspiring the film. While all the other counterfeiters abet the Nazi cause in order to save their own skins, Burger refuses complicity by unabashedly sabotaging their efforts. In fact, the first time we see him, he refuses to wear the clothes taken off the bodies of dead Jews, eliciting condemnation from the others, who worry that such defiance will threaten the lives of them all.

Like all films based on historical incidents, however, *The Counterfeiters* counterfeits its narrative. While the real Burger was arrested for counterfeiting baptismal certificates to enable Jews to stay in Nazi-controlled territory, the film’s Burger is arrested for printing anti-Nazi propaganda. We assume early on, then, that Burger is the film’s hero, refusing complicity. But such an assumption reflects Primo Levi’s “popular history,” in which “the good must prevail.” *The Counterfeiters*, refusing to shun half-tints, sets up Burger as a hero in order to destabilize our very definition of heroism.

For example, when Sally asks him why he looks so healthy having just arrived from Auschwitz, Burger explains that his job was to sort luggage on the train platform as Jews arrived for the gas chambers. He therefore had access to food scavenged from Jewish suitcases. We cannot help wondering how eating the food of dead Jews differs from donning the clothes of dead Jews. Furthermore, even as Burger contemptuously disparages a

fellow Jew, a one-time banker, for collaborating with capitalism, he is at that very moment collaborating with the production of the British pound. It is only later, during the counterfeiting of the American dollar, that he sabotages the machines.

When Burger tries to escape the gray zone of collaboration, our ambivalence only increases. For his sabotage puts the lives of his Jewish colleagues at risk. Herzog, the S.S. officer in charge, tells the counterfeiters that if American bills are not produced in one month, five Jews, including Burger, will die. Though we admire Burger’s willingness to sacrifice himself in order to slow down Germany’s destruction of millions, we feel sorry for the four others who had no say in the matter. The film has made them sympathetic to us, successfully passing them off as real people—just as the Germans have successfully passed off counterfeits of British money as real. We as viewers thus collaborate in a counterfeiting scheme—history in cinema—as we watch a movie filmed mostly in shades of gray.

The gray grows murkier when Burger explains why he defies his captors—"It's the principle"—and one of his fellow Jews responds, "Nobody's prepared to die for a principle." Because Burger identifies himself as a Communist, we cannot help thinking of Stalin's tactics: sacrificing many to sustain Communist principles for the majority. Indeed, screenwriter/director Stefan Ruzowitzky juxtaposes Burger's commitment to the well-being of the majority with Nazi actions based on the same "principle": a guard, upon discovering that one of the counterfeiters has tuberculosis, shoots the sick man in the head, explaining to the prisoners that the sacrifice is necessary to protect the lives of the majority. The "we" has lost its limits.

Significantly, in the sleazy bar scene early in the film, Sally tells a thug that repayment of a loan "is a matter of principle," and a bit later someone says to Sally, "I hope you're not a Communist." We get the sense that actions based on "principle" easily lead to ethical gray zones. As Russian Orthodox philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev once put it, "If a man is possessed by the idea that all evil in the world is to be found in the Jews . . . or the bolsheviks, in the heretics or in the bourgeoisie (and these not the real people but an idea of them invented by the imagination) then the best of men will be turned into a wild beast." Berdyaev spoke from experience, having been exiled by Stalin for his opposition to practices bred from Communist principles, ending up first in Berlin and then in Paris, where he experienced the gray zone of German occupation.

We should take note, then, when Sally abandons his principles to protect the lives of his fellow counterfeiters. Sally's principles, of course, were problematic to begin with: "Our people? I'm me and the others are others." But this makes his transformation in Sachsenhausen all the more interesting. While at first motivated solely by his own survival, Sally eventually takes personal risks to save the lives of "others," taking and giving blood when necessary. He stops a guard from beating a bloody prisoner; he covers up—in several senses—the man with tuberculosis, cutting his own finger to rub blood on pallid cheeks to disguise the illness; he prevents another man from committing suicide, inadvertently smearing his own face with the prisoner's blood; he defends Burger from the attacks of other prisoners, even after Burger calls him a "cheap whore." When Burger continues to sabotage the counterfeiting machines, Sally stays up all night rectifying the subversion so that no one—including Burger—will get killed. Sally has exchanged "I'm me and the other are others" for a new principle that he states twice: "One doesn't betray one's mates."

It is a gamble for Sally, who is betting that Allied forces will stop the Nazis before British and American economies are destroyed. This explains why the film begins with a transition from twilight grays to a casino, where Sally gambles and wins. Indeed, the writer/director maintains a gambling motif throughout the film, establishing Burger and Sally as betting against each other. When Burger contemptuously

announces that all capitalists are criminals, he places a deck of cards in front of Sally, who responds, "I win even when I don't cheat." Burger seems to prove him wrong as he continues to sabotage the counterfeiting efforts, causing Herzog to line up five bullets on a table—like five cards laid out for a poker game. At the last minute, Sally rushes in and places piles of American bills on the opposite side of the table, reminding us of the bills he earlier placed on the casino table. By counterfeiting American money, Sally wins five Jewish lives. As he later tells a disgusted Burger, "I'm just not cut out to play the martyr. Got any cards?"

Sally's gamble pays off when the German guards abandon the camp. But then, as we have seen, Sally and his fellow counterfeiters are forced to play another hand as malnourished, disease-ravaged Jews aim Nazi guns at them. Only when the counterfeiters roll up their sleeves to show the numbers tattooed on their arms do the abused and suffering prisoners lower their rifles.

The camera then cuts to an unnerving shot: robust counterfeiters cower against a wall as the incredulous walking dead wander through the collaborators' tidy dormitory, touching clean sheets and thick mattresses with stupefied amazement. To ease guilt over their treatment, a counterfeiter points to Burger, saying "He's a hero." As one of the drowned adoringly touches the saved "hero," tears flow down Burger's cheeks, generating another gray zone of ambiguity. Why does he cry? Because he is embarrassed by his creature comforts? Because he didn't do enough to sabotage the Nazi cause? Because his principles nearly got five Jews killed unnecessarily? Then, to intensify the gray, we see Burger and Sally smile at each other, like comrades who have fought side by side. Perhaps, then, Burger cries because he is still alive—thanks to the interventions of Sally. The scene reminds me of the appropriately titled Spike Lee film *Do the Right Thing* (1989), which closes with statements by both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, one advocating peaceful resistance, the other encouraging violent disobedience. Lee suggests that both did "the right thing" in response to gross injustice.

*The Counterfeiters* ends by returning us to Sally in the casino. While at the start of the film a chilled champagne bucket mediates the transition of Sally from 1945 Monte Carlo to 1936 Berlin, a more chilling image brings him back. After the camp's liberation, Sally discovers the suicide of one of his "mates": a lad who counterfeited knowledge of engraving to get out of Auschwitz and therefore contributed little to the Nazi counterfeiting scheme. As Sally carries the body through a corpse-lined area of the camp, he moans, "Where do I take him? He's dead." And we hear a voice answering "full house," as though in reference to the camp filled with bodies. But then "full house" is repeated again as the shot cuts to the casino, with a close-up of four aces in a five-card hand. Though four aces trump a full house in poker, the man holding the winning hand—Sally—folds to the player with the full house. By connecting camp with casino,

the phrase "full house" implies that one must sometimes fold one's principles when it comes to life and death, even when those principles seem like the winning hand.

In our own day, as we attempt to recurate from the nasty name-calling of the recent election, let alone negotiate the finger-pointing of the current economic distress, we might do well to think of conditions exponentially starker than our own. There, even there, as shown in *The Counterfeiters*, good and evil cannot be reduced to easily identifiable categories of

"we and they, . . . winners and losers, . . . the good guys and the bad guys." Significantly, *The Counterfeiters* closes with the same tones of gray with which it began, the screen divided into three parallel stripes: the sky above, the sea in the middle, the pebbles below. We see the figure of Sally filling the middle strip of gray, like the letter S filling a space on lined paper. With him is a woman who watched him fold in the casino, over and over again, until he lost all his counterfeit money. She dances with Sally, as did Burger, in a gray zone of collaboration. B&C