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Forest Spaces: The Smooth and the Striated in Defiance

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Forest Spaces: The Smooth and the Striated in "Defiance"

by Natallia Barykina

1.   Introduction

The 2009 film *Defiance*, based on Nechama Tec's study by the same name of a relatively unknown episode in the history of Holocaust, focuses on the lives of a group of Jewish Byelorussian ghetto fugitives hiding out in the forest during WWII. The story, which the film follows quite accurately, tells of two brothers who are forced to flee their village after their parents are killed; they escape into the woods with their younger brothers. There they establish a moving camp where they accept and harbour the Jewish fugitives who arrive, regardless of age, sex, or state of health. As we see in the film, the brothers also arrange the rescue of Jews from the ghetto in Baranovichi. As Tec writes,

> eventually it became the largest armed rescue organization of Jews by Jews, numbering more than 1,200 individuals – men, women and children [1998, 224].

Tuvia Bielski, the older brother, eventually becomes the leader of the camp, while Zus, a younger brother, joins the Soviet partisan detachment. For two years the Bielski partisans lead a "nomadic existence" [1998, 224], moving in the forest and hiding from Nazi attacks.

In the thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "smooth" space is associated with nomads, while "striated" space is instituted by a state apparatus. In this essay, I argue that *Defiance* envisions, portrays, and performs a "smoothing" out of

space. The landscape in which the action takes place – the forest – is not simply a backdrop or a neutral setting against which the human drama unfolds. I will consider, rather, how a nomadic occupation of the forest and the smoothing out of space as integral to survival are articulated in the film. The film maps nomadic space, and thus provides us with a conceptual framework for apprehending space differently. Relatedly, *Defiance* to some extent deploys a Deleuzean understanding of how the language functions: like nomadic space, language in the film resists and averts the state's overcoding and standardization of the vernacular. What is most compelling about the film for my purposes is its presentation of geography, of the ways in which the fugitives inhabit and practice the space of the forest, in a manner distinct from those of their neighbouring Russian partisans, German soldiers, or villagers.

The film follows realist cinematic conventions and a standard representational symbolic framework; on one level, it offers few interpretive challenges. Being a Hollywood production, *Defiance* employs a number of symbolic associations which in some cases might seduce us into an interpretation of the film that highlights binary opposites: the battle between two antagonistic characters; humanity versus the harsh realities of the forest; death versus life; revenge versus survival; and so on. Take, for example, the parallel editing, when a joyous wedding celebration scene is juxtaposed with images of a bloody attack on the German troops. In his *New Yorker* review, David Denby notes that, dramatically, the film centers on the Biblical struggle of the two brothers: when the two split up after a fight, Zus joins the Russian partisan detachment while Tuvia becomes "a kind of forest-world Old Testament king" [Denby 2009]. Clearly, the film is dramatizing different, even dichotomous, conceptions of social order; the ideal society that emerges is one that combines a chief with egalitarian principles. Zwick is concerned with dramatically representing gender and class dynamics along with human relations with nature in order to revise a prevailing historical sense of European Jews as passive, and to emphasize specific forms of resistance:

> The depiction of Jews in World War II films seemed uniquely to focus on passivity. It seemed to not even acknowledge the impulse toward resistance [...] through the research, I learned that whenever there was a possibility for resistance, it took place. It was often futile or thwarted, but when the natural world offered some escape, they took it. Cities became a kind of trap for them [Zwick 2009].

Focusing on nomadic spaces that the film depicts allows me to trace in which ways the group of ghetto refugees deterritorializes the forest.

The events depicted in the film take place in the former Polish territories that became a part of Western Byelorussia. Preceding the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, a part of the Polish territory was annexed to the Byelorussian Soviet

Socialist Republic in 1939, after the Soviet Red Army advanced into the eastern part of Poland under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact [Dean 2000, 1]. The popular memory of Holocaust resistance, even by revisionist historians, has been constructed in a particular way, prioritizing "the strategy of armed ghetto revolt":

> The Warsaw ghetto uprising and the strategy of internal ghetto rebellion that it followed had come to be regarded as the gold standard of Holocaust resistance [Epstein 2008, 283].

For Barbara Epstein, focusing on specific forms of Jewish resistance can help to reformulate such a "lopsided" memory to include instances of resistance

> that took the form not of internal revolt but of flight to the forest and participation in the partisan movement [2008, 283].

The importance of the "forest" model of the Holocaust resistance in the Minsk ghetto is that

> it reminds us that other [apart from armed revolt] forms of resistance may be possible, and that alliances may be formed even under dire conditions [2008, 290].

Through oral histories, she analyzes how Jews and non-Jews collaborated against German rule, and how many non-Jews helped Jews escape the ghetto and reach the partisans. The Minsk ghetto, unlike neighbouring ghettoes in Warsaw, Kovno, Vilna and others, was characterized by a strong underground organization that relied on external allies. According to Epstein, "a dense network of ties between Jews in the ghetto and non-Jews outside it," describes the specificity of the resistance in Minsk [2008, 260]. In Minsk, the underground network incorporated not only the city residents outside the ghetto, but also *Judenrat*, appointed by the Germans to oversee their orders and provide social services for the ghetto residents [2008, 91]. I find both Zwick's *Defiance* and Epstein's projects similar, insofar as both are focused on relatively small-scale, non-centralized, nomadic forms of resistance. Both speak of strategies of resistance which involve not simply inhabiting and adapting to the striated spaces of the occupying Nazi regime, which aim to regulate identity, establish clear borders, and distinguish between town, ghetto, countryside, and the like, but also transforming these very spaces and practices by producing what Deleuze terms "the smooth."

2.   Nomads and Their Spaces in *Defiance*

In the Byelorussian forest, spaces and subjects become entangled; characters are constantly moving in what Deleuze and Guattari call "smooth space" as opposed to the "striated space" of the State, the ghetto, the village and the town. As Deleuze and Guattari write,

> In striated space, lines or trajectories tend to be subordinated to points: one goes from on point to another. In the smooth, it is the opposite: the points are subordinated to the trajectory […] The dwelling is subordinated to the journey; inside space conforms to outside space: tent, igloo, boat [1987, 478].

However, as Deleuze and Guattari also point out, we should also recognize that striated space operates in a relationship with smooth space. While two spaces exist in mixture, what makes distinguishing between them possible is that they do not relate to each other in the same way:

> Smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space [1987, 474].

In *Defiance*, we can read these operations in the struggle in the woods. The German army striates the space; the Bielski detachment reverses, smoothes. We can think of the ghetto escapees as nomads (rather than simply fugitives), in strictly Deleuzean terms:

> They are nomads by dint of not moving, not migrating, of holding a smooth space that they refuse to leave [1987, 482].

The ghetto escapees are not migrants; they do not go from one point to another, where they might aim to settle. They are occupying the forest, rather than heading to a destination that would provide freedom or safety. They are nomads who move

> from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; points […] are relays along a trajectory [1987, 380].

When the Germans strike, the Bielski detachment navigates the forests without pre-established maps or trajectories. As Tec writes,

> much of western Byelorussia, now known as Belarus, is covered by thick, swampy, partly inaccessible forests. Under the German occupation from the summer of 1941 until the summer of 1944, this area became a haven for a variety of prospective Nazi victims and an important centre for the Soviet partisan movement [1998, 223].

The Bielskis grew up in this part of the country and were familiar with the surrounding forests and villages. In one scene, the Bielski's camp is attacked by the local

Byelorussian collaborationist police. The band is outnumbered and surrounded. The police, however, decide to retreat as darkness falls. Zus, insinuating that his followers know the woods, asks the police how they are going to get out of the forest. In the film, it seems, the Jewish refugees do not use maps. They rely on gossip and hearsay for information. One operates in the smooth space responsively, improvisationally, assessing the ever changing landmarks and orientations as opposed to traveling with a map, ranking places:

> One never sees from a distance in a space of this kind; one is never "in front of", anymore than one is "in" [Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 493].

Striated space, by contrast, requires long distance vision and presupposes a constancy of orientation and distance, the constitution of a central perspective. It is the space of the police, of the occupying German army.

In this light, the ghetto survivors' movements are nomadic, open to encounters, uncertainties. Fugitives from the ghettoes are picked up by the Bielskis in surrounding villages, from the village barns and bunkers, which are simultaneously places of entrapment, misery and danger, as well as transitional "holey" spaces. The holey space emerges in the striated space of the ghetto, patrolled by the Nazis, enclosed with barbed wire. When the Bielskis infiltrate the ghetto, they move transversally, diagonally, using the cars, walls and others obstacles as shelter; we see them from above in a high angle tracking shot as they move diagonally left to right and upwards across the screen, transversal to the street (which is striated, and appears on screen as a vertical axis) and through the fence into the ghetto.

> The smooth – write Deleuze and Guattari – is the pure act of the drawing of a diagonal across the vertical and the horizontal [1987, 478].

We literally see the striations of state space, and the Bielskis' improvised nomadic or haptic occupation and infiltration of the guarded and bounded ghetto in town. In the subsequent scene of Jews escaping the striated space of the Baranovichi ghetto by literally moving through the hole in the barbed wire fence, from the low angle shot of Nazi security guards walking around the fence at dusk, the camera pans and we see people "leaking" through fence holes down the dark narrow winding passages. The tracking high angle shot is followed by a low angle shot of people walking through the forest at dawn. There is certainly psychologism at work in such juxtapositions of shots: the control of the ghetto by the Nazis with dogs and fences, emphasized by a low angle shot, followed by the high angle shot that is used to emphasize the helplessness and vulnerability of fugitives escaping through holes in

the wall, and then returning to the affirming low angle shot of the fugitives walking through the forest at sunrise.

But apart from such representational moments, there is something else: the space is simultaneously striated and smooth:

> The stronger the molar organization is, the more it induces a molecularization of its own elements, relations, and elementary apparatuses [Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 215].

As Epstein writes, life in the ghetto was unstable; it was unclear what the next day might bring: a ghetto transfer could mean executions, compulsory labour, or a move to another ghetto [2008, 30]. Although hiding in the city for an extended period of time was risky, especially since Minsk was the German administrative centre, many people regularly left and re-entered the ghetto in order to find food:

> Most pulled the wire up and crawled under it; some cut holes in the wire, did their best to disguise the severed wires and used these exits repeatedly [Epstein 2008, 88].

It is important to notice that smooth spaces, as Deleuze and Guattari assert, are not in themselves liberatory, but rather that

> the struggle is changed or displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces [1987, 500].

The Bielski detachment will not be "liberated" until after the war, obviously; but within the forest they change the conditions of the struggle and transform themselves collectively. In one of the opening scenes of the film, when the brothers flee from the village after they discover that their parents were killed, Aron (George Mackay), the youngest brother, watches the ants in the forest; suddenly he hears noises, of people who start emerging from behind the birch trees wearing "city" clothes. The camera tilts to the high angle, and intermingled with birch trees we see trenches filled with human remains. The editing imposes a psychological shock, which the viewer shares with the young Aron; additionally, the space of nature suddenly becomes disorienting, de-naturalized, transformed. The forest comes alive, but it also comes as mass death. The space of the forest is "practiced" by the Nazis by disposing of the bodies; they make it into a battleground with the partisans. The space is practiced by the fugitives in a very different way: the forest spaces are transformed by the activities of building shelters and storage for food, but the space also participates in the construction of social relations and practices. In the forest, entirely new social rules and customs emerge; for men it was somewhat of a requirement to take "forest wives", for example. The group of fugitives do, of course, striate the space they occupy: they build housing, small shelters that are situated close to each other; they dig bunkers to store food and

hide from the bombings. At the same time, however these settlements are temporary, and a smooth space emerges any time they have to move:

> There are stops and trajectories in both the smooth and the striated. But in smooth space, the stop follows from the trajectory; the interval takes all, the interval is substance [Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 478].

Deleuze and Guattari also describe nomadic cultures in terms of the "war machine", which constitutes a specific form of social organization, a non-individuated force that moves through the land. The war machine is distinguished from the state apparatus: the state apparatus functions by maintaining internal relations and the qualities of composite pieces. In the machinic assemblage, there are "no intrinsic properties, only situational ones" [1987, 353]. When Tuvia becomes the leader, he says:

> We cannot afford revenge, we cannot lose anyone; our revenge is to live […] We are not thieves or murderers, and if we die while trying to live at least we die like human beings.

For Deleuze and Guattari, nomads and states are not binary oppositions, not strict categories, but processes, constellations: the state attempts to striate, fix, and capture, but can also interact with nomads in numerous ways, not necessarily through appropriation. The state does not just utilize the war machine, but operates as a war machine.

> War machines have a power of metamorphosis, which allows them to be captured by the states, but also to resist that capture and rise up again in other forms, with other "objects" besides war [1987, 437].

Machines and apparatuses arrange space differently: as opposed to constructing the closed "striated" space, in the war machine

> the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival [1987, 353].

> The war machine does not necessarily have war as its object [1987, 417].

> Guerrilla warfare explicitly aims for the non-battle [1987, 416].

Tuvia says to his brother Asael (Jamie Bell) during the attack that prompts the fugitives to move:

> Don't try to fight them [Germans]. Just slow them down and go join us.

Similarly, the strategies of the Red Army partisans are those of sabotage: the destruction of trains, bridges, information transmitters. If war happens, it is

because the war machine collides with States and cities [Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 417].

Thus, war becomes the "primary object" of the war machine only when it is appropriated by the state.

As military leaders, the Bielskis made uneasy alliances with the Soviet partisans. As Tec writes,

unaccustomed to life in the forest, many fugitives were attacked by unruly partisan bands and robbed of their meagre belongings and some were murdered in the process. Without the support of a large group like the Bielski otriad, many died from cold, starvation and epidemics [1998, 81].

The October detachment, with whom the Bielskis share the forest, was well equipped with ammunition, tents, horses, clothes and food. The Red Army partisan detachment can be looked at as a form of an appropriation of the war machine. As partisans, they share the same smooth space of the forest as do the refugees, but they also entertain a different relationship to that space. The partisans are nomads, re-territorialized by the Soviet state. Although the Bielskis' group supplied the Soviet partisans with clothes and food, the soldiers were reluctant to share guns or medicines. Eventually Zus and some other fugitives join the partisans, and experience anti-Semitic discrimination. Such biases persist, in spite of the partisan commander's claim that "soldiers of the Red Army do not distinguish between Jews and non-Jews." One Soviet partisan beats a Jewish partisan, an incident Zus reports to the head of the partisan camp: "Anti-Semitism," Zus says, "is a violation of the party discipline." The man is compelled to apologize publicly, but the atmosphere remains somewhat poisoned.

3.   Language and History

Deleuze and Guattari's ideas about language are helpful in considering the politics of linguistic behaviour in *Defiance,* although the film – aimed at an English-speaking audience – vastly oversimplifies the situation, and tends to use language markers simply to differentiate "good guys" from "villains". For Deleuze, language is operational, a system of instruction. Its primary function is not to communicate, but to give orders [1995, 41]. Language and dialect, major and minor are not different languages, not opposites, but different functions of language; language can be defined as an "imperial overcoding" of the dialect:

The unity of language is fundamentally political. There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language [1987, 101].

It is a process, and

the more a language has or acquires the characteristics of a major language, the more it is affected by continuous variations that transpose it into a "minor" language [1987, 102].

Deleuze and Guattari's argument that there is no mother tongue, just "a power takeover by a dominant language," is to some extent illustrated in the film. At the beginning of the Twentieth century, Byelorussian Jews must have found themselves between several languages: Russian, Byelorussian, Polish. In the ghettos, both Yiddish and Russian were spoken, as well as Byelorussian and Polish: young people who have been through the Soviet school system knew Russian, those who lived in villages, knew Byelorussian and Polish [Epstein 2008, 90]. At the house of the peasant who helps to hide the Jews and transport them to the forest camp, Tuvia addresses him in Yiddish (English in the film); the peasant uses Russian to swear at his wife. When unexpectedly, a group of Byelorussian police arrives, while Tuvia and other fugitives hide in the barn, the villager addresses them in Russian. The master language, Russian, is spoken by (and to) village collaborators and to authorities such as the collaborationist Byelorussian police. Soviet partisans also speak Russian in *Defiance*, by which the script emphasizes the largely oppressive nature of the language.

4.   Cinema and Representation for Deleuze

My aim here is not to determine how accurately the film represents historic events or whether it is faithfully adapts Tec's book. While the film does not highlight the macropolitics of this struggle (except insofar as language and accents are marked), such films as *Defiance* take up the important task of representing historical events and thereby engaging in ongoing debates about the extent and nature of Jewish resistance. I believe *Defiance* reveals a tension between its aspiration to smooth space and its tendency to striate the cinematic space of the screen (via conventional approaches to narrative, symbolic structure, and representation). In closing, I will raise, from a Deleuzean point of view, a few provisional thoughts about cinema and representation. In his varied and often daunting writings about aesthetics and cinema, Deleuze has little interest in problems of representation. As Mark Bonta and John Protevi notice,

Deleuze consistently maintained a critique of the domination of representation in the western philosophy [2004, 135].

According to Daniel W. Smith, consequently, there is no "philosophy of art" for Deleuze:

> Each work of art can be said to confront its own particular problems, using its own particular materials and techniques [2002, ix].

What is specific about cinema as a form of art? What are the concepts it produces?

To start to understand Deleuze's approach to cinema, we need to think about Deleuze's understanding of philosophy. As Smith writes, Deleuze writes about arts not as a critic, but as a philosopher; while artists create "sensible aggregates," philosophers create concepts:

> Great artists are also great thinkers, but they think in terms of percepts and affects rather than concepts […] As a philosopher, Deleuze's aim in his analyses of the arts is to create the concepts that correspond to these sensible aggregates [2002, viii].

Or, as Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam suggest, quoting Deleuze, the concepts that are produced are no longer the "concepts of," but

> exactly like sounds, colours or images, they are intensities which either suit you or don't, which work or don't [Deleuze 1986a, xv].

The work of the film critic, as Deleuze sees it, is to form concepts. Cinema, according to Deleuze, should be analyzed with concepts that relate specifically to cinema:

> It's questionable whether the notion of the "imaginary" even has any bearing on cinema; cinema produces reality [Deleuze 1995, 58].

So, from a Deleuzean point of view, we look at cinema not in terms of representation, but in terms of its affective production of temporalities and movement. For Deleuze, however, what cinema produces is self-movement in images:

> Cinema produces images that move in time [1995, 58].

It is not about an opposition between subject/object; agent/setting. It is the process of becoming that, for Deleuze, defines identity (or subjectivity). The body is not a "container" of this identity; it is measured by its "relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness" and by "the sum of affects it is capable of" [Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 260]. What we see in the movies is movement, intensities, what Deleuze and Guattari call "haecceity":

There is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance […] A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities in the sense that they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected [1987, 261].

Deleuze sees cinema as

a new practice of images and signs, whose theory philosophy must produce as conceptual practice [Deleuze 1986b, 269].

Motion is an intrinsic characteristic of cinema and applying pre-conceived concepts to an image, Deleuze claims, reduces it to an "utterance" [Deleuze 1995, 59]. Filmmakers, like artists think in terms of images, percepts and affects rather than concepts. Philosophy, by contrast, is not about applying pre-conceived notions, but "a practice of concepts" [Deleuze 1986b, 268]. And thus in Deleuze's works on cinema, he aims to create philosophically and isolate specifically cinematographic concepts [1995, 47].

In terms of the concepts that cinema gives rise to and the practice of them, *Defiance* employs a number of "pre-made" Hollywood clichés, there is virtually no formal experimentation in the film with cinematography, or narrative structure. In *Cinema I: The Movement Image,* Deleuze theorizes "a cinema of behaviour" based on an "action-image" [1986a, 159]. The action-image which is employed and developed by many genres such as documentaries, westerns, realist cinema, usually involves a response of characters to a situation or a milieu. As Deleuze writes,

The space of a sensory-motor situation is a setting which is already specified and presupposes an action which discloses it, or prompts a reaction which adapts to or modifies it [1986b, 5].

Defiance could be interpreted as a film structured around an engagement of a strong leader and his milieu. For Deleuze, after WWII this type of film no longer produces philosophy; although many films (historic, costume dramas) continue to be made this way,

the greatest commercial successes always take that route, but the soul of the cinema no longer does [1986a, 210].

In the post-war American cinema, "the passage from situation to action" [1986b, 157] is disturbed by the emergence of what Deleuze calls "the time image"; the crisis of the action-images requires

the rise of situations to which one can no longer react, of environments with which there are now only chance relations [1986b, 261].

The *New Yorker* depicts the cinematography of *Defiance* as "old fashioned" style: there are many rousing speeches, it gets too melodramatic and overly-theatrical. *Defiance* can, of course, be interpreted as a representational symbolic text. I began this essay by showing how the semiotic/representational model focuses on the relations of background/agent (forest/humans or subject/object). Yet, I hope also to have shown with the help of Deleuzian ideas about the smooth space, how the occupation of space of the forest was integral to production of cultural codes, gender ideologies, beliefs and values, how smooth space is practiced in the film. The film's emphasis on the styles of resistance – the nomadic occupation of the forest and the smoothing out of space – apprehends and conceives of spatial production as different, as generative. Additionally, the deployment of Deleuzean understanding of how language functions insists on the productive possibilities of resistance.

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Forest Spaces: The Smooth and the Striated in "Defiance"

Abstract: Edward Zwick's 2009 film *Defiance*, an adaptation of a historical study by Nechama Tec, recounts the story of a group of Jewish Byelorussian fugitives who survived the Nazi occupation, hiding out in local forests and mounting an effective campaign of resistance. Despite its use of genre conventions, the film presents geographical space of resistance as a "smoothing out of space," as theorised by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. This essay considers how a nomadic occupation of the forest and the smoothing out of space as integral to survival are articulated in the film.

Natallia Barykina obtained her PhD in Geography from the University of Toronto in 2015. Her current scholarly interests are situated at the intersections of critical urban geography, the history of architecture internationally, and archival practices. She is currently completing her Master of Information degree at the University of Toronto.