

# CINEMATIC LOVE AND THE SHOAH: ABNORMAL LOVE DURING ABNORMAL TIMES

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## INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed a change in the **cinematic representation** of major themes in the depiction of the Holocaust. Especially notable is a transition from victimhood to survival and resistance. The change occurred in parallel with new trends in historical research that revealed further information about the mysterious, incomprehensible years, 1941-1945.<sup>1</sup> Hitherto considered "classic" and now considered "revisionist," love themes challenged the narrative consensus of the Holocaust. New viewpoints have emerged some partially anchored in historical narrative and others entirely products of the imagination.

Quentin Tarantino's action film *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) and Bryan Singer's science fiction series *X-Men* (2000), for example, demonstrate the latter approach. But it is perhaps the cinematic attitude toward male-female relationships and love during the Holocaust that especially stands out in the new representations. Under the circumstances, relationships seemed unlikely, if not impossible, but love relationships under extreme conditions did develop. The points of view in these cinematic narratives depict anything but the expected banality of a couple's "normal" love relationship.<sup>2</sup>

After all, "love during the Holocaust" seems almost to be an oxymoron: Were people truly able to preserve a semblance of humanity in Hell and develop feelings of love and a love relationship during these years? Or did the hell of the Shoah distort

the couple's judgment and pervert human relationships?

The current article reviews postwar cinema in Europe and the USA to examine the cinematic representation of love as a litmus test for the concept of love and an "other" perception of the Holocaust. The article analyzes couple relationships bound by the sacred oath of marriage; love between victim and aggressor; love between persecutor and persecuted; and "love" translated into twisted mythic concepts of reciprocal relations that cross the borderline into the perverse, but which may still be covered by the definition of "love."

The current article examines the link between love onscreen and true events of the period (such as the protest by the women of Rosenstrasse), women of the resistance and underground movements, women in concentration camps and between the "translation" of historical narratives into bold, realistic cinematic expression. A clearer, although partial picture, is obtained of intimacy in the camps, which forces us to ask if we may call the depiction of connections during the historical event of the Shoah "love"? Was there love during the Holocaust, and was love even possible? Or perhaps we may say it was an "other" love?

## MYTHIC LOVE

The Italian film *The Night Porter* (Dir. Liliana Cavani) was considered extremely scandalous from its first screening in 1976, since it portrayed a forbidden, difficult and painful love relationship between a Nazi officer, a doctor, and one of the prisoners under his control. Their relationship, which begins with authority and force, ends in mutual love and dependence unto death, and leading to death. The film begins when the two meet by chance in a Vienna hotel several years after the liberation of the (unnamed) concentration camp, where they had begun their liaison. The former doctor is the hotel's night porter. The woman, who recognizes him, is now the wife of a well-known conductor and living in the United States. Despite their attempts at keeping their distance from each other and exercising self-restraint, they renew their tie, which becomes as tempestuous as it was in the past.

Much has been written about *The Night Porter*, which has been categorized as straddling the border between power and sex. The source of this definition is the viewpoint of the masculine gaze, which interprets the sexual discourse between man and woman at its simplest level, the basic love between a man and a woman<sup>3</sup> (Landy, 99-120); or it can be seen as a different type of love relationship, that of a girl-woman who has learned "love's secrets" from a much older man (Renga, 461-483).

When they were in the camp, he beat her but also rewarded her by beheading another prisoner who bothered her, committing the murder to bestow an original "gift" and win her heart. Furthermore, he considered his act of homicide to be an imitation of the New Testament story of the dance of Salome before Herod Antipas, who rewarded her with the head of John the Baptist<sup>4</sup> (*Gospel of Mark*; Wilde). This raises their love story to a mythical level, larger than life in the camp, larger than life altogether.

The doctor had tortured the woman prisoner physically and mentally, had conducted sadistic experiments on her, and in this strange manner explained that that was

the root of his love. Her compulsive love for him was conditioned through her humiliation. Even many years later, her response to him was automatic, similar to the behavior of a battered woman who returns time and again to the source of the violence out of blind love and a misplaced faith in her beloved. The former prisoner's patterns of love, associated with her survival, had been imprinted upon her at a young age in the form of violence, humiliation, pleasure, and pain. Viewing their relationship merely as games of power and domination between the girl/woman and the man, as many reviews and studies did, emanates from the filmgoer's skewed viewpoint: the expectation to see pornography in this relationship rather than looking closer at its deeper psychological layers, which leads to the tragic death of the couple, who were unable to behave differently (Kozlovsky-Golan, 243-253).

The film was shown to audiences in the post-war era, when the boundary between creativity and art was completely blurred as the British historian Eric Hobsbawm has explained: "The school of literary criticism thought that the verdict that Macbeth was preferable to Batman was a ruling that was impossible, irrelevant, or undemocratic" (Hobsbawm, Ch. 17).

In the act of art, new, external powers entered the system, such as politics and capitalism. Art served social and political ideologies and offered an extensive field for protest. Politics was represented by leftist social cinematic productions—a counterbalance to the art of the past. Every moviemaker became, as it were, the voice of his society, in expressing his cultural and social life, his war experiences, his pain (Judt, Ch. 1). In Italy, for example, after the Nazis and the Fascists, movie themes fluctuated, ranging between fascist propaganda and social cinema; prominent Italian directors included Fellini, Antonioni, Pasolini, De Sica, and Bertolucci. The European public wanted to watch movies that were in harmony with its cultural, historical, and social background, films that characterized the national personality of the viewer.

After the war, Europe entered into a period of rebuilding that was manifested in large economic changes, including in industry and in welfare policy. The decade of the 1950s witnessed large-scale urbanization, which altered the aspects of residences and the way of life of the residents. The impact of local problems that were generated in consequence was easily reflected in cinema. Movies did not deal with the problems of high politics or microeconomics; rather, they focused on subjects that preoccupied the masses: life style, morality, and culture in general (Judt). These subjects were manifested in leading cinematic trends and themes, such as a continuation of pre-war cinematic trends, naturalism in acting—non-professional alongside professional actors; natural locations, filming among poverty-stricken neighborhoods and their derelict buildings; true-to-life stories; the representation of Italy/Europe after the war; the search for values that had gone astray—love; a search for clean politics; human nature—its limitations, appetites, and loves; socialism—class differences; loss of human dignity in a society that had decayed; minimal coping with Fascism, which had been their lot for so many years (Judt). Among the films that stood out during this decade were Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* (1947); De Sica's *Shoeshine* and *The Bicycle Thief* (1946); *The Earth Trembles* (1948) and *Bellissima* (1951), all by Visconti; and Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* (1956) (Mast and Kavin, Ch. 13; Sorlin, 1-23).

From 1968 to the mid-1970s, Italy conducted a neo-realistic accounting of what had happened to it during the war and especially in the immediate post-war period. The meager intellectual discourse of that accounting was far from exhaustive. On the one hand, the cinema utterly avoided cooperation with the Fascists, seeing Italy as a victim of Nazi occupation; on the other hand, the movies became an arena and a tool for intellectual expression. Nevertheless, cinematic discourse on all aspects of the Holocaust was minimal, and if spoken about—changed the location of phrase at

all, the Shoah was perceived as a human perversion, not as anti-Semitism. Among the characteristics of this discourse was a kind of underground skirmishing against the Nazis and a discourse loaded with social and socialistic messages—loss of joy, the clash of sensuality vs. spirituality as represented in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), and sex as a way of expressing moral and political suppression as in *Kapo* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1959), *The Damned* (Visconti, 1969), *Salò* (Pasolini, 1975), and *Seven Beauties* (Wertmuller, 1976).

In France, meanwhile, the New Wave cinema of the 1960s was searching for a cinematic formula to express the attitudes of the French toward their current reality. Striving to create an avant-garde cinema that would express their view of life in Europe, the new movie-makers glorified the personalization evinced by André Bazin, the spiritual father of Truffaut, who preached self- or personal creativity, which brought true power and gave expression to future trends of individualism, the multiplication of narratives of historical events (Giannetti), and a new attitude toward the cinematic space as a place for philosophical discussion of the condition of Man. There was a re-examination of cinematic history: emotional extremism—the irrational, presentation of the absurd and atrophy of the parents' generation, the forgery of pretension, a new relationship to cinematic time, new editing as a counter to the classic editing of Hollywood, and the creation of a new narrative comprising stories from the new literary milieu, such as *The 400 Blows*; respect for female sexuality, presented without traces of morality and the woman as having the ability to love two men as in *Jules and Jim* or to love many men, as the heroine in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* testifies about herself.

Directed by Alain Resnais, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) depicts a love affair between a young French woman and a German soldier in the army of occupation. Their forbidden love ends in a double tragedy, the soldier murdered by underground fighters and the young woman losing her mind. The historical narrative was displaced

into another historical narrative, that of the Americans dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II.

Cavani's film did not attempt to address historical issues; rather, it dealt with the essence of life in hell, and the lessons that Europe had learned from its past. The issue of love became the film's major theme, which was what made it a groundbreaking film, although—or perhaps especially because—the love depicted in the film was not “normal love.” The romance between the two protagonists was an overt relationship, known to all, a problematic that was solved by the screenplay's attributing a Christian-Aryan identity to the young woman: being the daughter of a socialist resistance fighter, she was a political prisoner. Nevertheless, the film provided insights on issues it dared engage, such as love and the couple's relationship, which were depicted in a nearly naturalistic manner. The flashbacks of their life in the camp were anecdotal only, hinting at the relationship instead of providing it with depth and explanation, in contrast to the couple's present reality, in which the plot takes place. The flashbacks do make it clear that their love did exist during the war and that it was still in force, with no regrets, during the present. The twisted, convoluted emotional bond created between the two protagonists in the 1940s flourished to the death, as in Christian mythology, in the 1970s. The common denominator of all of these films, from both France and Italy, is the attempt to represent post-war Europe (Reni).

### LOVE UNDER SACRED OATH

The representation of love and romantic attachment between aggressor and victim in Cavani's film provided a cloaked answer to the question as to whether the two loved each other; after all, the woman had been a prisoner and had surrendered to the controlling man. Was the love that developed between them “true love” or not? What risks did they run to maintain their relationship under such conditions? Can love really exist under such hellish conditions?

No onscreen answers to these questions, which were not confined to *The Night Porter*, were provided until the beginning of the new millennium, when love stories in the shadow of the Holocaust were depicted in films portraying the little details of couple relationships.

The 2003 film *Rosenstrasse* by veteran German filmmaker Margaretha von Trotta (who began her career as an actor in Fassbinder's films but has made an independent reputation as a director<sup>5</sup>) engaged the issue of relations between German women and their Jewish husbands and these women's fight to save their husbands.<sup>6</sup> The film made it evidently clear that the bond between the women and their husbands was that of a marriage in which love held them together for better and for worse. The intergenerational discourse raised the issue of loyalty under conditions of mortal danger.

The film, which focused on a lesser-known incident in German history during the Third Reich, is based on true historical events that occurred on the street bearing the name of the movie, Rosenstrasse. There was in Nazi Germany a special type of individuals who was treated differently by the regime. These were the products of mixed marriages, Jews who had converted, and those married to non-Jews. The term “mixed marriage” was defined by the Nazis as one in which one party was completely Jewish, *Volljude*, meaning that his/her four grandparents were Jews, and the spouse was a pure Aryan. Decrees and limitations were placed on the Jewish spouse in such marriages as on the rest of the Jews, such as being forbidden to ride on trams, curfews, and forced labor; on the other hand, they were protected from being exiled to the camps and were exempt from having to wear the yellow patch or being obligated to reside in “Jewish houses” (a neighborhood that was not declared a ghetto and into which mixed couples were concentrated). These were the rules until the end of 1944. The children of mixed marriages, called *Privilegierte Mischehe*, were protected, as well (Buettner).

The authorities looked askance at these marriages, did not encourage them,

and sought to embitter the lives of such couples. Aryan men were asked to divorce their wives in order to be able to continue in their jobs or in army service. Statistics show that a substantial number of Aryan men did as they had been ordered, in contrast to most of the Aryan women, who did not consent to initiate divorce proceedings. The problem was well known and even raised at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 (Paldiel). There it was decided not to deport mixed-marriage couples to the camps, but to require them to undergo sterilization in order not to bring children into the world (or if they had children, not to have any more); in exchange, they would be allowed to live together. However, the imbecilic attempt to control the lives of these couples did not meet with success (Paldiel).

On 27 February 1943, hundreds of Jews (men, women, and children) who had been involved in or were the offspring of a mixed marriage were rounded up (*Fabrikaktion*) in Berlin and imprisoned in the Jewish Community Center building, now transformed into a jailhouse, on Rosenstrasse (Buettner). The Aryan wives of the Jewish men demonstrated in front of the prison facility, demanding to see their husbands and demanding that they be released. The protest steadily

grew, more and more women being added daily and receiving the support of Aryan family members, including soldiers serving the Reich and ordinary citizens (Stoltzfus, *Resistance*, xv-xxv). It was a popular spontaneous opposition that threatened to violate public order and, more seriously, to publicly raise the question of the fate of the prisoners and thereby to generate panic among the public (Stoltzfus, "Limits"). The Gestapo, surprised by the determined stand of the women, did not know how to react to them and gave contradictory directives (Stoltzfus, *Resistance*, xx). The authorities, who were



concerned with keeping an external image of law and order and with obviating violence, especially toward German women, on the capital's streets, began to have regrets and gradually released the prisoners. In the end, thirty were sent to Auschwitz and most of the others were sent to camps in Germany

after a week, though their wives were allowed to visit them and to inquire into the terms of their labor and the condition of their health. In 1944, Hitler ruled that mixed couples, in which the husband was Jewish and the wife Aryan, would move to "Jewish houses." This decision did not include Jewish women married to Aryan men. In January 1945, a directive





tie with her mother and learns about the events on Rosenstrasse in 1943, when the SS decided to send Jews married to "Aryans" to concentration camps, and about the subsequent non-violent struggle by their non-Jewish German wives, who were determined not to let this happen. Their victory was a historical victory for unarmed women (Stoltzfus, "Limits," 117-

was issued to expel all Jews in mixed marriages to Theresienstadt. Most had guessed what was in store for them in the future and initiated fictitious divorces in 1944, then went in hiding while there was still time (Paldiel).

The film *Rosenstrasse* focuses on Hanna, a modern New Yorker. Upon the death of her father, her mother decides to bid him farewell according to the Jewish custom of a seven-day mourning period, "*Shiva*," puzzling the family and alienating Hanna's non-Jewish husband. In an attempt to understand her mother's strange behavior, Hanna begins to seek out details of her mother's earlier life and travels to Germany. There she hears testimony from an elderly woman who has a mysterious



144). It was their presence that had won, and that was due to their "unlawful" love for their husbands, an attachment contrary to Nazi racial laws.

Another cinematic production that discussed the subject of mixed marriages and Aryan women's commitment to their husbands, even if historically less precise, was the 1978 television miniseries *Holocaust*.

Karl (played by James Woods), born to the Jewish Weiss family, is married to an Aryan, Inge (Meryl Streep). After *Krystallnacht*, the husband is violently separated from his wife and sent to Dachau. The separation scene became the central one in the series, etching itself into the viewer's consciousness as a picture



of self-sacrifice and the courage to resist. This scene has been copied in endless cinematic collages demonstrating the connection between the historical event and the cinema and expressing the most prominent example of civil resistance in Germany, that of women for their loved one and their family, despite the many dangers that this entailed. Inge, the brave wife, copes with the society, particularly with her family, who show overt sympathy with the Nazis. She refuses to divorce her husband and moves into his parents' "Jewish



house." On the day the Jewish husbands are rounded up, Inge opposes their separation, erupts angrily against the soldiers, chases after the truck that has taken her husband to the unknown. She learns where he has been imprisoned and requests to visit him. In order to bring him news from home and a little food, she is then forced to pay the price, her body, to the camp guard, who is revealed to have been a close family friend.

The historian Nathan Stoltzfus, who wrote a comprehensive work on the protest phenomenon in Nazi Germany, quotes a German Jew by the name of Ernst Bukofzer, who had been saved thanks to his wife: "If ever the song of German loyalty has been justified then it applies to the non-Jewish

wives of Jewish husbands" (Stoltzfus, *Resistance*, xxvii). Like any oxymoron, the normative feminine instinct to preserve the life of the home and the family at any cost becomes abnormal in a society whose human world of values has fallen apart. Their courage therefore receives added validity as a stronghold of sanity and love, for which only history can summon up for humanity such a sublime opportunity.

Victor Klemperer, an author and professor of literature, mentions a similar incident in his diaries (Klemperer; Stoltzfus, "Limits"). Klemperer, a converted Jew, was married to a non-Jewish German by the name of Eva. The two continued to live together in Dresden during the war, conducting their own private war of survival. Although Klemperer had converted,<sup>7</sup> he was still slated for deportation "to the East," but his marriage to a German woman managed to postpone his

deportation again and again until freed of this fear by the firebombing of Dresden and then the war's end. His writings show a major point that was the lynchpin of Klemperer's life as a couple: from the beginning of the war through liberation, they considered themselves to be entirely German. Klemperer himself mocked Jews who kept to their religion, since he preferred his national identity. His



diaries give the impression that he survived because of this nationalist attitude rather than luck or having his "Aryan" wife stand by him.

As historical fiction, the film *Rosenstrasse* features a broad human panorama, allowing the viewer to contemplate the inner struggles of the various couples who went through soul-searching over difficult human issues that put their love to a test of life or death.

The advantage of the genre of film over an individual's written narrative lies in the cinema's use of broad narratives, which includes human struggles of the soul, as well as pictorial descriptions of how historical events transpired; this quality in film stands in contrast to personal documents, which describe only one individual within the general picture.

In this context, we may note that there are no films depicting Jewish women who were protected by their non-Jewish German husbands. Literature shows the opposite, with books describing women abandoned by their husbands and left to go defenseless to their death. One of the most moving books on this subject is *My Wounded Heart: The Life of Lilli Jahn, 1900-1944*, by Martin Doerry, editor of *Der Spiegel* (Doerry). It is a biography of the life of his physician grandmother, Dr. Lilli Jahn, a Jewess who was married to a Protestant, with whom she had five children, but was imprisoned, divorced by her husband, and finally sent to Auschwitz, where she was murdered.

### LOVE BETWEEN PERSECUTOR AND PERSECUTED

Paul Verhoeven's film *Black Book* [*Zwartboek*](2006) is the story of Rachel, a Jewish member of the underground



resistance in Holland and the affair she began with the Gestapo commander in Amsterdam so she could spy on him and follow his movements. A refugee in her own country following the German invasion, Rachel found herself part of the resistance movement; her beauty, singer's voice, and "Aryan" appearance helped her become the high Nazi officer's mistress. Although he quickly discovers that she is a Jew, though not her association with the resistance, he decides to keep her with him. Despite the huge differences between the two, they form a mutual trust, but one that borders on the absurd, possibly because of the circumstances. He needs her to spy on a subordinate suspected of corruption, while she needs him to learn of the Gestapo's planned moves against the resistance and so help her compatriots to stay one step ahead. The love between the two is depicted as an existential physical need that develops into a mutual emotional need—a momentary refuge from the confusion on the other side of the door. Even after the situation changes and their physical love comes to an end, their emotions continue to throb below the surface.

The film was criticized harshly, since there had been few films that featured a Jewish woman initiating intimate contact with a Nazi, let alone a senior official in the dreaded Gestapo. This was a kind of commonly accepted "taboo" among filmmakers: they



should not depict such relationships, even though such events had actually taken place, so as not to hold survivors up for judgment for their past and to avoid ruining women's present reputations (Kozlovsky-Golan). This is the reason that the portrayal of a Jewish woman as "the German's whore" engendered, even in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, unease among audiences, especially in view of Rachel's developing genuine emotions toward the commander. Furthermore, Sebastian Koch, one of Germany's most noted actors, aroused the viewer's sympathy as the Gestapo officer. In their first intimate scene, the two already feel that they share a common denominator in having experienced tragic losses: his wife and children were killed in the bombardments, while she lost her parents and family to an informer, who first robbed them after promising to smuggle them across the border. The direct link between the incidents at first seems to enrage viewers as being out of place, but the audience, on second thought, realizes that the commander's family were civilians and that injury to them was equivalent to the harm caused to other innocent civilians, such as Rachel's family.



The film's power lies in the powerful acting of Carice van Houten as Rachel. Never for a moment does she give viewers the feeling that she is enjoying her job, only that she considers it a mission and self-sacrifice for a higher cause. The "abnormal love" between persecuted and persecutor is morally reinforced by Rachel's Christian friends in the underground, who give her their blessing. And still, her relationship with the Nazi necessitates saving them both



from the war, and their hallucinatory love is like drowning people grasping at straws.

She is not a whore but, like Mary Magdalene, a heroine. The opening and closing scenes reinforce this association by showing Israeli kindergarten children in a Jewish community near the

Sea of Galilee. The area is fenced in, similar to a military camp, to emphasize the difficult years of struggle to found the Jewish state. Rachel, now the children's kindergarten teacher, has moved from one battle zone to another. In Holland, she had recruited her body for the cause, and now in Israel she is mobilizing her spirit

as the children's kindergarten teacher. The Israeli setting emphasizes that the war has not destroyed Rachel's moral backbone: she understood the role she had to fulfill to help bring the conflict to a close. After that, it is only natural for her to return to herself and engage in education and love of homeland. But a tiny tear at the corner of her eye hints at her longing for "the other."

### LOVE BETWEEN VICTIM AND AGGRESSOR

Tor Ben-Mayor produced his short documentary *Love in Auschwitz* (2003) for television as one half of a two-part program of two love stories that take place in the Auschwitz death camp.

The first part, *A Different Love*, is the story of Helena Citrónová (Zippora Tahori) a Jewish woman from Slovakia, who was about to be killed in Auschwitz and was saved by an SS guard, Franz Wunsch, in 1942. In the documentary, she begins her testimony saying, "I did not forget a minute, I remember everything...I was something different, and everyone knew this story. There was a stain on me; he was an SS man...." The guard fell in love with her after she had snuck into a contingent of women laborers under his command. Just before she was to be transferred to hard labor in the swamps and to her death, he ordered her to sing him a song for his birthday. This caused him to fall madly in love with her, Zippora relates in the documentary, as a number of pictures of the beautiful Helena, dressed in concentration camp clothing, are shown on the screen.

The film focuses mainly on the survivor as a mature woman whose face still bears signs of her youthful beauty. Except for an old photograph of the German officer, there are no other pictures in the film that can describe the warm bond that the SS officer suddenly felt for the young woman and the stormy relationship that ensued between them and lasted until the end of the war.<sup>8</sup>

Helena's oral history has a didactic tone, with no apologetic notes to describe

their relationship, beginning with domination and the officer's one-sided love for her. Despite the hellish conditions of her existence, love gradually blossomed in Helena for the man who had saved her life, explaining her pressing need to love and be loved. At a fateful hour when his love was put to the test, the officer did save Helena's sister in 1944 from the gas chamber (but was unable to save Helena's young nephew). The film corresponds with reality through the survivor's testimony, as she strove to understand the events, which lasted up to the moment of her liberation. Wunsch, who had fled the camp, desperately searched for Helena for two years; in the end, he settled in Vienna and began a new life, marrying and raising a family. However, in 1972, he was caught by the Austrian authorities and tried for his Nazi past. He requested that Helena, as a Jew he had saved, testify in his defense. Helena went to Vienna that summer to testify on his behalf. She was already a wife and mother, and her emotions were in turmoil. Wunsch was acquitted, and Helena returned home without seeing him ever again.

The film's director attempted to maintain a restrained, neutral approach, without overly prying into the survivor's personal life. He wanted to make the film to serve as a kind of platform for her difficult personal confession. Nevertheless, the director leaves the viewer wondering about the conduct of the relationship between the two. How did the other Nazis react to the affair? After all, any contact between "Aryan" and Jew was forbidden on pain of death. How did Helena's cellmates react? And how did the two keep in touch.

The nature of the relationship and its location suggest that, from Helena's point of view, it was played out on the border between emotional attachments she admits that toward the end of the war she had begun to harbor feelings for him. She states that this was true love on his part and that he was willing to risk his life for her; for *her* part, she did not love the officer but had sex with him owing to the circumstances of time and place. The fact is that her life was

saved, thanks to him. "I did not choose this," she tells the camera, "it simply happened. It was a relationship that could happen only in such a place—in another planet. When I was young, I was preoccupied and didn't deal with my past. Now the memories are returning to me, like a boomerang," she says summing up her testimony and drying the sweat from her face.

The feature film *Death in Love* (2008) dares to provide a response to the questions raised by *A Different Love*. Made by two Israelis residing in the USA, Boaz Yakin and Alma Harel, *Death in Love* is crude and sharp, presenting an interpretation of a sexual relationship in the Auschwitz death camp through the survivors' views of "then" and "now" and how this liaison impacted the next generation. The film attempts to describe seemingly realistic situations, allowing the viewer as a kind of "peeping Tom" to gaze upon Auschwitz through the camera lens with the goal of "telling all."

Both films, *A Different Love* and *Death in Love*, depict a different and impossible kind of love in the hallucinatory but all-too-real world of daily life in the death camps. The protagonists of both films are involved in an aggressor-victim relationship between German man/officer and Jewish woman prisoner.

Similar to *Love in Auschwitz*, the film *Death in Love* also depicts a forbidden relationship between a Jewish woman prisoner and a physician, an SS officer in a death camp. However, in contrast to

Ben-Mayor's film, which dialogues with the reality of life in the camp, *Death in Love* corresponds with the cinematic interpretation of that reality and, furthermore, responds to



the cinematic reality reflected years before in Cavani's *Night Porter*: the camera's viewpoint of the gaze observing a Nazi doctor and a woman prisoner has been selected by every director since then to portray the relationship and its background in reality.

*Death in Love* is the story of a seemingly normal American family dealing with shadows from the mother's past, which have an



unbearable impact on her husband's and her children's lives. She had been one of the Jewish women prisoners in the infamous Block 11 in Auschwitz, where the young women were subjected to sadistic "medical experiments." Most involved crudely performed sexual acts on the women, accompanied by brutal rape, amputation of limbs, and in general the destruction of their bodies in horrific ways. Sketches from this outpouring of evil appear in the opening scene, which depicts the completely pornographic aspect of the so-called experiments and serves as the prelude to the surrealistic romantic affair between the doctor and one of the prisoners. She received preferential treatment in terms of better food and warmer shelter in exchange for frequent sexual favors. The sex was not forced upon her: she was the one who initiated their meetings. Her hypnotic, mischievous gaze met the doctor's blue eyes, and prisoner and SS officer became inseparable from that moment on, experiencing hell on earth as paradise. At the same time, reality penetrated their world in the form of starvation.

Meanwhile, the doctor was conducting vicious experiments to test his racial theories on prisoners, causing them irreparable harm and unspeakable pain. The character of the doctor is essentially the embodiment of the psychosis that was Nazism. As a physician, he is the one who decides everyone's fate. His control of life or death through torture turns him into a perverted symbol of the mythical all-powerful father, while the Jews symbolize Law. The Nazi is able to nullify the humanism of the "old order" (which no longer existed at Auschwitz, as the character of the doctor clearly demonstrates), since his actions declare that he does not recognize the basic human law of "Thou shalt not kill" (Bursztein). The nullification of basic human laws, according to his Nazi logic, means that the murder of Jews is permitted, even desirable. The doctor's "scientific" work is therefore drawn into the mass psychosis through the demagogic rhetoric promoting the practical application of racial theory (Meir, 26).

However, the young woman prisoner

is not entirely innocent. The "game" excites her with a feeling of control and superiority because she is under the protection of the mythical father—the doctor. She is willing to accept his dehumanization of victims on condition that she does not become a victim herself; she prefers to be considered one of the many guards and privileged "*prominenten*" who share the doctor's psychosis. The young woman seeks to survive by what she thinks is adaptation to her current reality. It is unclear whether she foresaw what would face her if she went to the doctor. She did, however, know how to take advantage of her situation: she could enter the clinic for an examination and be tortured, or try to exert her charms on the doctor and see what she could gain. Her gamble to try her luck seems, on the surface, to have succeeded, since the film suggests that the doctor's meeting her resulted in "love at first sight."

In one wrenching scene, she eats breakfast with the doctor while a prisoner is ordered to play the violin during their meal. When the doctor leaves the room for a moment, the prisoner stares at the last piece of bread on the table and hints that he would like it. Instead, the young woman makes a show of dipping the slice of bread in the last bit of egg yolk and pushes it into her mouth with a victorious smile. The close-up of her face expresses her state of mind: her laughing eyes, blind to reality, reflects the hedonism and narcissism of the present moment of plenty set against the backdrop of extreme deprivation. For a moment she is the mistress, sitting on her chair in her striped uniform as others serve her. She is experiencing the present, knowing that the prisoner at her side already belongs to the past.

The starving violinist is beyond reason but continues to play mournfully. The background sound track is a rhythmical music, creating a contrasting beat to the visuals onscreen. The contrast is a major element in Boaz Yakin's film, as he sets up polar opposites to definitions of good and evil, holy and profane, victim and aggressor; primarily, though, he metaphorically pulls the rug out from underneath the feet of the viewer, who is used to conventional cinematic nar-

ratives of the Holocaust that usually feature and distinguish the absolute victimhood of the persecuted from the absolute evil of the "bad guys."

Toward the end of the war, the young woman and her lover the doctor separate with his promises to search for her after the war. Decades afterwards, the doctor, his way paved with corpses, finds his lover. She is married, albeit unhappily, and the mother of two boys, now grown men. Her husband's face is blurred, and the viewer does not know who he is. His function in the plot is to show the survivor as a neurotic person without self-control. He is the only member of the family who bears no visible scars of the Holocaust – he is the anchor of the family, his feet firmly planted in the current, obvious reality. He may be faceless, but his body is the link between the family, which is falling apart, and the outer world. He actually embodies the anonymous viewer in the present virtual reality of the family onscreen while simultaneously being the passive observer, as everyone external to the situation is.

Within the larger frame of the film is the story of the two sons in the present. Living in the shadow of their mother, who shaped their personalities along the lines of her Nazi lover, both boys are lost in the world: the elder, who is the narrator, has a self-destructive streak. He manages a fake modeling agency to exploit women who are seeking gender empowerment. He sleeps with them and scorns them, considering the would-be models nothing more than physical bodies. The younger son is an anxious, dependent, and impotent man. He has talent, but is unwilling to do anything without his mother nearby, whether actually present or virtually.

After meeting, the doctor and his lover revert to their perverted sexual relations of

mutual domination and submission. The scene is supposed to remind viewers of the loaded encounter between the lovers in *The Night Porter*, who also meet years after the war. However, the woman in *Death in Love*, the role played by Jacqueline Bisset, differs from Charlotte Rampling's character in *The Night Porter* in being the one who initiates and manages the love affair in the camp. The role reversal in *Death in Love* is complete: it is the "victim" who dictates the terms to the "monster." However, "as in reality" the roles are reversed after the war, and now it is the man who dictates the terms, stating the time and place of their rendezvous. Since the woman/lover/survivor opposes any meeting for a number of reasons, the doctor as "foreplay" to their encounter murders two of her friends to remind her who is the stronger of the two, as well as to "prove" his love and his desire to resume their relationship, whether she wants to or not.



Finally, when they meet in a luxury hotel, they recreate their initial meeting in the camp and, despite their advanced age, make love as if they were 60 years younger. The camera, as it exposes the act of love between two older people and focuses on their wrinkles and skin folds, seems to be trying to demonstrate that love is ageless.

It is here that the unique points in Yakin's film are most evident. He portrays



According to the director, role reversal between normative forms of love and loving the aggressor is scandalous, pushing the discussion of love onto a “slippery slope,” from which values cannot be judged as good or evil. On the other hand, the cinematic selection of the gaze through a “distorting mirror” of reality emphasizes the way in which World War II undermined basic human values and turned them into a “free for all” where “anything goes.” All is permissible.

The screenplay of *Death in Love* is structured as a chapter extracted from the midst of a family’s life. There is no consolation for the survivors, whose past continues to haunt them; neither will the Second Generation (children of Holocaust survivors) cease paying the price. Their protagonists do not accept the past, and their present behavior shows how empty and useless their future is. As for the heroine, who thought that she harbored a special love that had kept her going all these years, she now as an elderly woman finds nothing of her youthful fantasies in the reality of meeting her doctor-lover, only emotional and spiritual death and a lust for sex that never dimmed.

The film is extremely critical, having the evident intent of breaking down common conventions that are part of collective memory, such as treating Holocaust survivors as sacred and Nazis as evil. The film’s narrator, the survivor’s older son, opens with an inner dialogue on woman’s body as a fermenting ball of dough that then rots. Each age has its own rules, as well as the need for the act of love. The young woman prisoner used her sexuality for all the right reasons befitting her age (since she had no historical perspective or genuine awareness of what was happening inside or outside the camp). Indeed, the plot directs the viewer

events in the lives of the sons in parallel with showing events in their mother’s life. Yakin thus raises hidden issues, difficult to accept, that are associated with sex, love, and the Holocaust, incidents whose virtual representation could quickly descend into pornography (Reinharz). First, sexual relations between a woman prisoner and a Nazi officer in the camp take on loaded and impossible meanings, given the mutuality of the emotional relationship that develop beyond relations of forced domination and that are able to take place in a concentration camp. Second, everything the young woman experienced in the camp had direct implications for her life after liberation and for the life of her family until her renewed meeting with the Nazi. The mother suffers from eating disorders and extreme and neurotic behavior. She is frigid with her husband, but betrays him with his friends; she is a compulsive parent to her sons, who in turn have an erotic love-hate relationship with her. However, the plot structure has us understand that her behavior does not result from the existential suffering she underwent in the camp but that it is actually due to her parents, who fled the city when the Nazis marched in and abandoned their daughter to her fate. Parental abandonment, meaning the breakdown of sacred family values, and not life in the concentration camp, is the factor for setting the film’s plot in motion.

to think that she should not be judged for what she did. For the same reasons, the Nazi doctor is portrayed as a professional who should not be judged, since he fulfilled his scientific destiny as a researcher without any external considerations, whereas he is a compassionate lover in his private life and feels very strongly for someone for whom he is willing to commit murder even after decades of separation.

Yakin's script challenges writings by Holocaust survivors, such as Jean Améry, who wrote in the chapter "*Bearing Grudges*," in his book *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*, that he reserves the right to hold a grudge against his persecutors and to bring them to justice. This applies even to those who showed compassion for him, since he considers the Nazis to bear collective guilt and demands that they be placed under the same conditions that had been forced on their victims<sup>9</sup> (Améry). It is only at the moment of executing Nazis for their crimes that the moral truth ("Thou shalt not murder") of their deeds will become clear to him.

According to *Death in Love*, the desire for love overcomes racial theory, moral principles, and the prohibitions and bans that human beings set up for themselves.



The drive for passion wipes away revenge, releasing and leaving only love as the basis for everything—whether the lover is victim or executioner. According to Yakin, we are

all "normal" and also all "Nazis" in our relations to others. The borderline between love and passion becomes blurred, transforming into dependence, pain, humiliation, and infinite sorrow. The conclusion is that love as a concept and as an event cannot, from its very outset, be considered "normal" according to accepted moral principles.

## CONCLUSION

Love during the Shoah took on various aspects, and its cinematic expression expands the perspective for audiences, enabling a glance into the civilization undergoing terrifying collective tests: a family whose normal order and genealogy dissipated in *Death in Love* or is altered as in *Rosentrasse*. The imaginary dimension of the social connection<sup>10</sup> and the coercion of the subject is seen in *Night Porter* and *Death in Auschwitz*, and, the rebelling and opposition to the actual dimension of the Nazi occupation<sup>11</sup> (Bursztein) is seen in *Black Book*. Discussion of love in cinema during the Holocaust is more complex than the four letters of the word LOVE. Love takes on the significance of ancient divine law, "Thou shalt not murder," in *Death in Love*, while in *Black Book* it is

discussed as an oxymoron of hate and purgatory. Nevertheless, it succeeds in containing within it the elixir blinding enemies and survivors alike. In this love, there is no mercy to be expected from the values it symbolizes, and it can be seen quite clearly as abnormal, bordering on the psychotic.

The cinematic medium's ability to express and describe a concept as abstract as love in such a wide range of

circumstances and its ability to provide it with human traits is evidence of a trend attempting to influence a view of the Shoah through different, not necessarily critical

eyes, but eyes that are simply human as only love can be.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In contrast to studies by researchers who ruled out the possibility of intimate relationships between men and women in concentration camps, such as Na'am Shik or Dagmar Herzog, the recent book edited by Saidel and Hedgepeth presents events that clearly demonstrate the existence of such relationships.

<sup>2</sup>Literature has been far in advance of film in dealing with these issues. By the 1960s, an underground pornographic series popularly called "*Stalags*" was being published in Israel. These soft cover booklets, which described the lives of the American POWs in the German camps, featured beautiful, lustful, and sadistic "Aryan" women guards. The stories were supposedly inspired by Yehiel ["KaTzetnik"] De-Nur's *House of Dolls*, which described a concentration camp brothel and aroused a public storm in Israel. The transition from this genre as "junk," sold with girlie magazines from small newsstands, to literature occurred in 2008 with the English translation of Jonathan Littell's book *The Kindly Ones* (2006) which also refers to the concept of "love" but in a different and even more "perverted" way than previous books and films, thought by many reviewers to be a "masterpiece" and a "work of genius."

<sup>3</sup>It is important to note that this is one of the only films directed by a woman to engage in power struggles between the sexes during the Holocaust. We may understand her messages, not necessarily as power plays, but as relations of dependence and youthful, mythical love by the young woman for the officer. Male critics may need to try to refer to the film from the director's viewpoint and "read" it differently.

<sup>4</sup>The scene of the beheading of John the Baptist became one of the most retold stories in Christian culture and was extensively depicted in literature and painting. Oscar Wilde

wrote the play *Salomé*, which became the basis of the libretto of the opera of the same name by Richard Strauss. The "Dance of the Seven Veils" became one of the most erotic passages in classical music.

<sup>5</sup>Margaretha Von Trotta is a director best known for her important film, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (Germany, 1975) and her penetrating look at relationships.

<sup>6</sup>The film received the following awards at the Venice Film Festival: UNICEF Award for Humanistic Film, Best Actress Award, and a Signis Award Honorable Mention.

<sup>7</sup>Klemperer's status as a converted Jew was lower in the eyes of the authorities than a declared Jew who married an Aryan woman. The danger to his life, therefore, was greater. The Nazis called converted Jews by derogatory terms, such as "*Nichtarische Christen*."

<sup>8</sup>It is important to note that Helena's testimony is one of the only statements transmitted openly and sincerely that described forbidden relations between Jewish women and Nazis. Her testimony in Ben-Mayor's documentary film presented a schematic representation of women survivors in Israeli cinema in a totally different light from their usual depiction, which did not enter at all into the complexity of relationships formed in the camps. A flashback lasting several minutes featuring Helena's story (in an interview with her) may be seen in the BBC's 2006 documentary miniseries *Auschwitz*. See also Saidel and Hedgepeth.

<sup>9</sup>Améry includes even those who helped him, such as "that Wehrmacht soldier from Munich, who tossed me a lit cigarette through the bars of the torture cell in Breendonk, the noble Baltic engineer, the technician from Graz who saved my life in the forced labor platoon...."

<sup>10</sup>According to Bursztein, societies heed a certain authority, a leader (an ideal father figure), enabling the nursing of human desire and the added value to its undertakings.

<sup>11</sup>Bursztein explains that the actual dimension of the life of the human collective is unconscious self-pleasures. This refers to the unconscious sexual satisfaction of desire,



which causes the subject pleasure and pain simultaneously. The collective protects itself from unconscious pleasures—the evil that lies within it—by transferring pleasures in violent fashion to a scapegoat: sometimes it is the German to the subjects of his occupation, and sometimes it is the underground in reaction to that occupation.

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