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# INTRODUCTION

YVONNE KOZLOVSKY GOLAN AND BOAZ COHEN

This issue is dedicated to the fascinating subject of film and the Holocaust. It includes new research and new viewpoints on the presence of the Holocaust in western culture and audiovisual media. The dawn of the 21st century and the decline of postmodernism is an appropriate time to reappraise the place of the Holocaust in movies from the early 1950s to current cinema. This issue presents the reader with a broad spectrum of multidisciplinary work by scholars from the social studies, philosophy, literature, the arts, history and film, and media studies.

At the center of this volume stands the issue of the representation and depiction of the Holocaust in film. Is it represented as an historical event *per se*, or did it metamorphose into an iconic entity used also in places that have no connection at all to the Holocaust? We also focus on nationality, polity and time as variables impacting its representation in films made in the USSR, USA, Israel, France, Hungary and Australia at different moments of their history.

The use of the Holocaust in film and its conceptualization as the ultimate evil on one hand, and its narration as a blueprint for freedom vs. tyranny and hate, on the other, constructed the Holocaust as a *lieu de memoire*, an ultimate site of memory and a repository of historical memories. This is true both for those who lived through it and for those who were born years later. This can be seen in the search for identity as in Melville's *Le Silence de la mer* (1947-49), in self-recrimination as in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), and in the effort to decipher the Nazi "system" as in *Universal Hotel* (1986).

Representation of the Holocaust in film has come a long way since the early camp liberation films shot and edited in the 1940's.

Claude Lanzmann claimed that these could not capture the essence of the Holocaust and failed to interpret the action into visual language. Lanzmann did not believe in Holocaust films as transmitters of memory, but preferred the "authentic" form of the testimony. Yet, one cannot ignore the fact that a visual language and narrative did develop and that as time went on, documentaries and feature films captured the audience's attention and became agents of public, personal and international discourse on the Holocaust and its transmission.

The wide range of possibilities of film can be seen from *We Shall Never Die* (1959), which uses the medium of animation, usually associated with light entertainment, to create simulacra of the Holocaust narrative and its uses and abuses as a prosthetic memory. **Lawrence Baron's** essay, on one end of this spectrum, discusses the work of Yoram Gross, Australia's most successful director of animated films for children and a teenage survivor of the Holocaust. Gross was a pioneer in depicting genocide and war through animated films for younger children. He typically represents the persecution of the Jews in symbolic images and casts the enemy broadly as ecocide, imprisonment, or war. On the other end of this spectrum, **Nathan Abrams** argues, in an essay on the "Sub-epidermic" Shoah, that "the Holocaust is no longer taboo as a subject for humor, abuse, and misrepresentation." He claims that this "normalization" or "casualization" can be explained by generational and cultural shifts in American society.

The inherent possibilities and challenges of visual representation of the Holocaust can be seen in the commentaries by Weissman and Kol-Inbar. **Gary Weissman**

discusses Peter Thompson's *Universal Hotel* (1986) and shows how the film "encourages viewers to think critically about the relationship between photography and narrative in visual depictions of historical events." He claims that it is a "meditation" on how we explore "a past that lies behind a closed door." **Yehudit Kol-Inbar** discusses the decision-making processes involved in planning the new Museum of Holocaust History at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem; the Jewish Pavilion at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Poland; and two major exhibitions at the Yad Vashem Museum. She shows how visual imagery and digital visual media emerged as the major mode of transmitting the history of the Shoah.

A noticeable trend in the work discussed in this issue is the universalizing of the Holocaust and its concerns and lessons, either by excising the specific Jewish content while leaving in general values like compassion, empathy and solidarity (Gross) or by using Holocaust imagery to denote evil, barbarity and brutality (Kubrick). While the overt choice of the filmmakers was to avoid direct reference to the Holocaust and the genocide of the Jews, many of our contributors claim that these works are informed by the very Jewish concerns aroused by the Holocaust. **Geoffrey Cocks** examines the work of Stanley Kubrick and claims that although Kubrick did not make any Holocaust films, he "sublimated his feelings about the Holocaust into his films...Nazis, Jews, and the Holocaust lurk in Kubrick's films indirectly." Cocks discusses Kubrick's *The Shining* as an example of Holocaust concerns embedded in his work. In like manner, **Marat Grinberg's** essay focuses on French director Jean-Pierre Melville and his 1947 film *Le Silence de la mer*. Grinberg claims that, contrary to assertions that Melville was totally disconnected from Jewish culture and concerns, his Jewishness "was at the very core of his artistic thinking," as was "his comprehension of the destruction of Jewish life" in the Holocaust. Unlike these examples that come from western culture, we should remember that in the Soviet Union universalization was not ac-

complished by the Jews but to the Jews. **Olga Gershenson** discusses the absence of Jews in Soviet evacuation films. Although close to a million and a half Jews escaped to the inner reaches of the USSR during the Holocaust, they are glaringly absent from the Soviet feature films depicting evacuation. Gershenson claims that dealing with this Jewish experience would have entailed emphasizing "a special position of Jews as the targets of Nazi violence," unacceptable in the Soviet depiction of the war. "The Holocaust was universalized by subsuming it into the general Soviet tragedy, with Jews euphemistically labeled 'peaceful Soviet citizens.'"

A parallel trend is one in which, in the words of Nathan Abrams, "the Holocaust has become normalized or casualized in film." It appears in jokes, puns and in places where it is totally unnecessary for the narrative or the message of the film. There is no explicit mention of the Holocaust but the educated viewer can easily discern the code. This is, according to him, a *sub-epidermic* presence of the Holocaust. It is here that we can see a generational shift: A new generation of American Jews born after the Holocaust is producing films after the end of the cold war, expressing their Jewishness and freely using Holocaust-related language and icons.

It is indicative that this collection has almost no essay on "proper" historical Holocaust films. One describes a documentary work (Weissman on Thompson's *Universal Hotel*), but even then the story is recounted as a quest or an odyssey by the filmmaker. One can say that there is a shift from producing films that strive for historical credibility such as *Schindler's List* to films giving an openly subjective view of the events such as *Fateless*. **Brian Walter** analyzes director Lajos Koltai's Hungarian Holocaust film *Fateless*, which, he argues, makes "no pretenses to simple, objective witness" in its depiction of Holocaust survivor György Köves's experiences. Walter shows how the film challenges norms of objectivity and authenticity in presenting survivor testimony in film. Although *Fateless*

is based on survivor testimony, its “frank subjectivity...raises the complex problem of the witness’s authority” and challenges its historical credibility. In like manner, it seems from the contributions to this volume, that researchers are less interested now in films that are historical, “objective” reenactments of chapters of the Holocaust and are more attentive to works that demonstrate the Holocaust as a cultural icon of western culture.

The research presented in this collection serves a cultural and social seismograph of how the Holocaust figures in the process of memorialization and the formation of human consciousness. It underlines the Holocaust’s importance to humankind.

The final section of this special issue comprises two book reviews and a review essay. The first review is **JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz**’s review of *The Holocaust & Historical Methodology* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), a collection of essays edited by Dan Stone. The essays in the book discuss issues of historical theory and writing, showing how they inform the historical writing of the Holocaust. They also explore varied ways of approaching the Holocaust, thus making it an important contribution to the discourse on Holocaust historiography and to Holocaust scholars in general.

The second is **Alexis Pogorelskin**’s review of the recent collection of essays edited by Prof. Lawrence Baron, *The Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema* (Waltham MA: Brandeis UP, 2011). The book presents a wide variety of analyses of fifty-nine films on themes of Jews, Judaism, the Holocaust

and Israel, which will be of use to graduate and undergraduate students as well as scholars of film. The critical review surveys the various sections of the book and notes its importance for film and culture research.

The review essay in this section relates to Nathan Abrams’s new book, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 2012). We asked Israeli philosopher/scholar of religion and psychoanalysis and film **Itzhak Benyamini** to respond. He addresses the issue of whether the representation of “the new Jew” responds to the Jew’s new image as a full character, or whether it is a parody and/or simulacrum of the cinematic figure which is imaginary in any case. Perhaps, Benyamini argues, this is a new “filmic Jew” in relation to the “true, real Jew” and thus deviates from the image which is already severed from the conceptualization of the Jew as an independent figure. The image immediately becomes the symbol of both itself and of the archetype of “the Jew.”

It was clear to us that due to the complexity and innovation of the articles and the mode of cinematic and thematic analysis in the current issue, we have included articles likely to arouse discomfort and controversy. However, our goal was to closely examine through new prisms, the wide-ranging and multidirectional engagement in Holocaust research in film, and propose new interpretations. We hope that readers find benefit and interest in the new articles and their important insights

# THE “SUB-EPIDERMIC” SHOAH: *BARTON FINK*, THE MIGRATION OF THE HOLOCAUST, AND CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

NATHAN ABRAMS

“Like the particles of dust filling the air in *The Grey Zone*, images and themes from the Holocaust permeate popular culture”<sup>1</sup>—Lawrence Baron

“Migrating images from the Holocaust appear in movies that are not about World War II and the murdering of the Jewish people. They are more and more used as universal icons for atrocities and emerge in various genres of popular cinema. This is not limited to war films, of which the Holocaust is an important reference point for epitomizing the barbarity of war and terror”<sup>2</sup>—Tony Ebbrecht

This essay explores a new phase of the Holocaust genre in film. Starting with Tobias Ebbrecht’s observation above, I argue that the migration of the Holocaust away from films which are not about World War II and the genocide of the Jewish people, has expanded both quantitatively and qualitatively in contemporary cinema, particularly since 1990, moving beyond its simple usage “as universal icons for atrocities” or for “epitomizing the barbarity of war and terror.” After setting out the context in which these changes have occurred, I explore their impact through close textual analysis of *Barton Fink* (dirs. Joel and Ethan Coen, USA, 1991) as a representative example of this shift, to argue that there is a clear phenomenon in which the Holocaust has now migrated far beyond the confines of serious or historical drama.

While the migration of the Holocaust in film began much earlier than 1990, what has changed is the sheer numbers and nature of these representations. Namely, the

Holocaust has become normalized or casualized in film, which, in turn, has rendered it “matter of fact,” ordinary, even quotidian. Indeed, one might go as far as to say that, at times, the Holocaust appears as “gratuitous” and “superfluous.” There is certainly a clear tendency to render the Holocaust something other than the main point of its presence in the story. Often, in the past, in order to see the Holocaust onscreen, films with a significant and overt Holocaust content had to be viewed. Since 1990, however, there are a growing number of films in which the addition of the Holocaust is neither essential nor intrinsic to the trajectory of the story, plot, or narrative arc, except perhaps to remove a clue to be deciphered by those who understand the cultural codes. It is not confined to any one country, although it is particularly evident in America—the focus of this article—the paradigmatic example of Jewish filmmaking given the sheer volume of Jewish-related films emerging from the U.S.

As has been argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, since 1990 films about Jews together with representations of Jews across the world not only multiplied but also took on a new form, which, within the context of a century of cinema, marked a departure from the past. There had been a steady flow of such representations, particularly since the late 1960s, but from 1990 onwards, it became a veritable flood. What has changed since 1990 are the sheer numbers of films, but also they are less pockmarked by the contradictions of the 1960s and 1970s in which there was a retreat into affectionate, schmaltzy, and sentimental nostalgia, as symbolized by *Fiddler on the Roof* (dir. Norman Jewison, USA, 1971) on the one hand, with neurotic, anxious stereotypes, as mastered by Woody Allen, whose richest period was from 1971–89 on the other hand, or a combination of both, as depicted in the parodies and black comedies of Mel Brooks.

Furthermore, they “essentially continued the 1970s trend of unselfconscious representations of Jewishness, while also occasionally making possible deeper and more nuanced treatments of specific themes.”<sup>4</sup> Given the predominance of Hollywood in general and in Jewish films in particular, this trend was particularly evident in America where Vincent Brook observed a “postmodern surge in American films featuring Jewish main characters and Jewish themes”<sup>5</sup> and Harry Medved<sup>6</sup> proclaimed a “new wave” in US Jewish film.

It was a visual manifestation of the comfort of US Jewry by the late 20th century, that Jews had “arrived,” and were *at home* in the United States. The Jewish community had become one of the wealthiest and most highly educated in the United States, and many Jews had reached the highest professional levels. In 1988, George H. W. Bush spoke of a “kinder and gentler America,” even if this was not much in evidence in reality. Bill Clinton’s presidency oversaw a softening of the United States’ domestic and international image. The simultaneous growth of multiculturalism at home, where difference and cultural pluralism became far

more acceptable and accepted, encouraged Jews to not only maintain, but also to exhibit pride in their ethnic identities. Jews became appointed to high governmental (and other) positions culminating in the nomination of the Orthodox Jewish Senator Joseph Lieberman as the Democratic vice-presidential candidate in 2000. Many public figures, like Lieberman, spoke openly about their commitment to Judaism. Furthermore, as Israel matured into a secure and economically viable state, there was less identification of it as the home of an exiled diaspora community. Instead, American Jews felt a greater sense of rootedness in the United States, producing a concomitant growth of pride in American Jewishness as a distinct religious and ethnic branch of Judaism and Jewish identity respectively. Overwhelmingly middle-class and suburban, combined with “little direct experience of antisemitism in their formative years, little conflict over being a hyphenated American, and little pressure from within the community to hold onto religious beliefs (but little pressure from without to give them up), American Jewry is a comfortable, satisfied group.”<sup>7</sup>

A new and younger generation of Jewish screenwriters, directors, actresses and actors, who were not immigrants, nor were they required to acculturate or to fight for their rights, entered the U.S. film industry where they were able to express their Jewishness in a new fashion. This generation “reached adulthood in a time of unprecedented Jewish accomplishment and acceptance in the United States,” as well as elsewhere in the Diaspora.<sup>8</sup> They defined their Jewishness in different ways to those of their parents and grandparents. They had attained a high level of education, including post-secondary (university) levels. Their middle-class backgrounds, film-school training, and access to national and international financial support assisted them. At the same time, they felt a sense of a receding distinctive Jewishness in post-ethnic, post-melting pot, and post-assimilatory America, which had to be reasserted, producing a dialectical tension between assimilation and multicult-

turalism. The more Jews become accepted, therefore, the more their difference must be defined. Finally, there were a series of additional changes in television that paved the way: less opposition from Jewish advocacy groups, decent ratings for Jewish sitcoms, the Jewish stand-up legacy, industrial competition, and programming changes.<sup>9</sup>

Greater Holocaust education also convinced many younger Jews that a low profile was useless given that anti-Semites were not so discerning in their discrimination. At the same time, hostility towards Jews was on the decline, particularly towards the end of the 20th century. A greater awareness of the receding distinctiveness of Jewish identity was partly overcompensated for by the proliferation of post-1990s Jewish images.<sup>10</sup> In addition, what has been termed a "Holocaust consciousness"<sup>11</sup> was constructed in popular culture by such landmark films as *Shoah* (dir. Claude Lanzmann, France, 1985) and *Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1993) and cemented by national educational curriculum changes, the growth of Holocaust teaching/educational modules and degree programs at university level, the institution of annual remembrance days and establishing of museums and memorials across the globe, including in every major city in the United States and Europe. At the same time, as David Desser and Lester Friedman point out, "For those born toward the end or after World War II, the Holocaust became a secondhand narrative [...] For the current generation of Jews, the Holocaust is a historical event. It is real and horrible but distant and communal. No one they actually knew died in Hitler's ovens."<sup>12</sup>

Together, these changes allowed "younger Jews to become more assertive in declaring their Jewish identity," producing a tangible birth of Jewish confidence.<sup>13</sup> As Jewish screenwriter Frederic Raphael suggested, "assertiveness has now become a licensed form of behavior, and Jews, having got the licence, have no intention of not using it."<sup>14</sup> Clearly Jews began to feel more accepted in the post-1990 period. As Ruth D. Johnston observed, "the desire for

assimilation waned in the 1970s and 1980s as the politics of multiculturalism gradually supplanted the politics of cultural pluralism, this time placing Jews in a peculiar post-assimilationist situation."<sup>15</sup> Annette Insdorf adds: "Jewish identity in the United States is secure."<sup>16</sup> A generation of Jewish (and Gentile) producers, directors, actors, actresses, and screenwriters emerged that was less anxious, less afraid of stoking an antisemitic backlash and thus more willing to put Jewish issues on screen regardless of plot imperative and without feeling the need to either explain, or explain away, their presence/absence.

One of the results of these sociological changes was an unprecedented number of Holocaust films. Between 1989 and 2003 there were over 170 new Holocaust films alone, enough to convince Insdorf that they constitute "a veritable genre" in their own right<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Baron counted approximately 400 feature films since 1990 in which the Holocaust figured as either the main or secondary plotline.<sup>18</sup> A qualitative change has taken place alongside this quantitative shift. In contrast to earlier decades many of these films incorporated either humorous or provocative material, such as *The Nasty Girl* (dir. Michael Verhoeven, West Germany, 1990), *Genghis Cohn* (dir. Elijah Moshinsky, UK, 1994), *Life is Beautiful* (dir. Roberto Benigni, Italy, 1997), *Train of Life* (dir. Radu Mihaileanu, France, 1998), *Divided We Fall* (dir. Jan Hřebejk, Czech Republic, 2000), *Conversation with the Beast* (dir. Armin Mueller-Stahl, Germany, 1996), and *Jakob the Liar* (dir. Peter Kassovitz, France, 1999).

In mainstream U.S. cinema, in particular, the Holocaust has often been conceived of as material for humor. Building upon this, Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (USA, 1968), in particular its infamous "Springtime for Hitler" musical, the Holocaust often appears as an incidental, gratuitous, and/or superfluous throwaway line or in-joke (even if to make deeply serious points). Continuing a career-long fascination with the Holocaust, when asked in *Deconstructing Harry* (dir. Woody Allen, USA, 1997), "Do you care even



about the Holocaust or do you think it never happened?" Woody Allen's protagonist Harry Block responds, "Not only do I know that we lost six million, but the scary thing is records are made to be broken." A slew of more recent comedies, including *Funny People* (dir. Judd Apatow, USA, 2009), *The Hangover* (dir. Todd Phillips, USA, 2009), *Adventureland* (dir. Greg Mottola, USA, 2009), and *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (dir. Danny Leiner, USA, 2004) have continued this trend. The latter film is most notable for the new low it reached, for example when two Jewish characters, Rosenberg (Eddie Kaye Thomas) and Goldstein (David Krumholtz), explain to the eponymous characters that they are not going to White Castle because they want to stay in to watch Katie Holmes' "titties" on the television. Later on in the film, Harold (John Cho) and Kumar (Kal Penn) bump into Rosenberg and Goldstein and referring back to the earlier conversation, Kumar asks, "Oh dude, how were Katie Holmes' tits?" Goldstein replies: "You know the Holocaust? Picture the exact opposite of that." While the joke may, perhaps tenuously, be read as a critique of the depiction of female nudity in such Holocaust films as *Schindler's List*, particularly in what has been criticized as its sexualization of female suffering, the film's screenwriters, Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg, claimed no such moral high ground. They explained: "We think that Katie Holmes' breasts are a great thing. And we think that the Holocaust is a really, really bad thing. And so, this joke is just kind of saying that...we felt it was appropriate. We still do." Amazingly, the lack of response or outrage was palpable. As one blogger wrote, "What the hell? How did that offensive 'joke' ever make it into that movie? And why aren't any Jews openly criticizing it? Some people might find it funny that the deaths of millions of people are used as a punch line in a stupid joke, but I don't."<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary cinema is also beginning to present a new paradigm in Holocaust filmmaking in its refusal to only present what Axel Bangert calls "hagiographic transfigurations of Jews,"<sup>20</sup> that is, an

uncomplicated representation of Jews as weak, passive, and undeserving victims. As its very title indicates, *The Grey Zone* (dir. Tim Blake Nelson, USA, 2001), which is based upon true events, explores that ambiguous "grey zone" in which the sharp distinctions between Nazi perpetrators and their victims are blurred. Roman Polanski's historically based film *The Pianist* (France, 2002) similarly refuses to idealize Jews as victims. Several British films also ultimately refuse to distinguish sharply between victim and victimizer during the Holocaust: *Bent* (dir. Sean Mathias, UK, 1997), *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (dir. Mark Herman, UK, 2008), and *The Reader* (dir. Stephen Daldry, UK, 2008), all of which complicate Jewish victimhood and Nazi guilt.

Furthermore, there are those films in which the Holocaust is rendered inexplicit, but tangible, through their use of imagery, cinematography, iconography, and themes, but which space permits me from exploring in further depth. Science-fiction films have proved particularly apt for in their use of Holocaust parallels, metaphors, and analogies. Baron points out how: "The afterimages of the Holocaust haunt the cinematic future too. They can be incorporated into science-fiction dystopias whose crusades against biological enemies, whether terrestrial or extraterrestrial, and wanton abuse of state power invite comparison with the nefarious iniquities of the Third Reich."<sup>21</sup> Although not always immediately noticeable or obvious in certain films, the Holocaust is indelibly inscribed, forming their bedrock, what George Steiner referred to as "the burden of the Jewish tradition."<sup>22</sup> In such films as *Starship Troopers* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, USA, 1997), *X-Men* (dir. Bryan Singer, USA, 2000), *Artificial Intelligence* (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 2001), *X2: X-Men United* (dir. Bryan Singer, USA, 2003), *V for Vendetta* (dir. James McTeigue, USA, 2005), *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (dir. Gavin Hood, USA, 2009), and *X-Men: First Class* (dir. Michael Vaughn, USA, 2011), the Holocaust has been detached from its moorings and resituated into a decontextualized and dehistoricized context, or is less

obvious, and is rendered “sub-epidermic” in Ella Shohat’s notable phrase.<sup>23</sup> In her focus on the subsurface, Shohat observed “a hidden Jewish substratum” under-girding cinema,<sup>24</sup> producing what might be labelled “implicit,”<sup>25</sup> symbolic, or conceptual Holocaust-ness, that is where it the Holocaust is sometimes “literally *conceived*, more than *represented*.”<sup>26</sup> The result is that the Holocaust is often “textually submerged”; it inheres in film, not only in those where such issues appear on the “epidermic” surface of the text.<sup>27</sup> Such an approach employs “a largely unconscious complex of codes that cross-check each other,”<sup>28</sup> relying on the viewer locating characteristics, behaviours, beliefs, and other tics, either explicitly, or by a range of other signifiers. All of these require a prerequisite and prior knowledge allowing individual viewers to identify and decode those clues that can be read in terms of Jewish specificity, as Holocaust moments, but which a general audience decodes as universal. As Bial<sup>29</sup> and others have argued, minority ethnic readings of cultural texts are frequently marked by specialist knowledge unavailable to majority audiences. Consequently, the individual viewer is given the possibility of reading it thus but not with certainty.

This approach stands in contrast to the general trend in current Euro-American and Israeli Film Studies, which has taken as its task the location, description, and analysis of films in which the Holocaust is explicitly identifiable or of those which clearly belong to the Holocaust genre, restricting itself to *explicit* content, assuming that the Holocaust is being discussed or referred to *only* when it appears directly on screen. In this way, Film Studies has taken on a very limited definition restricted to *visibility*. In contrast, a sub-epidermic approach penetrates beneath the film text, challenging the widespread approach to the Holocaust on film as limited to explicit “content” analysis:

A key and early example is James Cameron’s dystopian futuristic sci-fi film *Terminator* (USA, 1982). The year is 2029 and humans are on the verge of extinction, fighting a war for survival

against a network of intelligent machines (Skynet) that have become sentient and autonomous. Skynet created “terminators” (cybernetic organisms—androids covered in human flesh) to eradicate any surviving humans, one of which (Arnold Schwarzenegger) is sent back to 1984 to kill Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton), as she will give birth to the leader of the human resistance. Simultaneously, John Connor orders Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn) to protect Sarah. While in 1984, Kyle dreams of his past, which is, in effect, yet to be the future. The sequence opens with a close up of piles of skulls littering the ground, as they are crushed under giant bulldozers. He later explains to Sarah that in the future, [Skynet] decided our fate in a microsecond. Extermination. [...] I grew up after. In the ruins. Starving. Hiding from the H-Ks. [...] Hunter-killers. Patrol machines built in automated factories. Most of us were rounded up. Put in camps for orderly disposal. [Displaying a tattoo resembling a barcode on his arm] This was burned in by laser scanner. Some of us were kept alive. To work. Loading bodies. The disposal units ran night and day. We were that close to going out for ever. But there was one man who taught us to fight. To storm the wire of the camps.

The linguistic parallels to the Holocaust are clear, and even uncanny, including the numbers scanned on the survivors’ arms and who, in turn, function as futuristic *sonderkommando*. In *Terminator* the Holocaust is global and all humans function as metaphorical Jews to be exterminated. *Terminator’s* use of the Holocaust has since been mimicked by many other futuristic, fantastical, and often dystopian, science-fiction films in order to render their worlds intelligible, believable even, to their audiences, many of whom have become well versed in Holocaust imagery and iconography since the landmark broadcast of the major television miniseries *The Holocaust* (USA) in 1978, four years prior to the release of *Terminator*.<sup>30</sup>

The time-loop paradox of *Terminator*, which has been much discussed by academic critics and philosophers alike, needed a peg on which to hang itself, and that peg was provided by the Holocaust. These movies reference the Holocaust to represent terror and genocide and to create a plausible story. Their narratives combine several elements that are associated with the Holocaust, which in turn provide central reference points for their plotlines. Using emblematic images and inter-textual references, their visual style often borrows their iconography from such Nazi propaganda films as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (Germany, 1935). The use of the Holocaust as a plot device in these movies "illustrates how the Shoah symbolizes the essence of evil to the average viewer. This is why it has become such an inviting topic to reference in films about human intolerance."<sup>31</sup>

The Coen brothers' darkly comic *Barton Fink* manifests many of the trends under discussion in this article, particularly in terms of its largely sub-epidermic use of the Holocaust, which is also arguably gratuitous, superfluous, and incidental, in a film not positioned within the Holocaust genre nor in a film that uses the Holocaust to any seemingly edifying or didactic effect.<sup>32</sup> It was written while the Coens were writing the screenplay for their film *Miller's Crossing* (dir. Joel Coen, USA, 1990), which apparently so taxed them that they had to set it aside to write the screenplay for *Barton Fink* about a Hollywood screenwriter suffering from writer's block. On the surface, *Barton Fink* focuses on the experiences of an eponymous young, idealistic, albeit self-deluded, Jewish writer (John Turturro) who is making the difficult transition from a celebrated New York playwright to an abject, angst-ridden, existentialist, but blocked hack, attempting to churn out screenplays in the classical Hollywood studio system of the early 1940s. However, a series of clues combine to allow, albeit not with certainty, a sub-epidermic reading into the film of a concern with the Holocaust and more explicitly World War II. Several critics, for

example, noted how "the Holocaust hovers over *Barton Fink*"<sup>33</sup> which suggests "the rise of Hitler's fascism"<sup>34</sup>; "[t]his is perhaps the most absurd, the most blasphemous and arguably the most coherent evocation of the Holocaust"<sup>35</sup>; and "[a]s Barton Fink's inner world grows increasingly nightmarish, the external nightmare of World War II becomes a greater presence in the movie, culminating in the Hotel Earle being engulfed in flames. The image recalls the primary meaning of 'Holocaust' as a 'sacrifice wholly consumed by fire; a whole burnt offering'."<sup>36</sup>

The first clue to this reading is in the film's central trope of blockage. Barton's metaphorical constipation stands as a metonym for the situation that the Coens themselves were experiencing at the time of writing the screenplay for *Miller's Crossing*. Thus, when Seesslen suggests that "Behind the treatment of a writer's block lurks the collective memory of a Jewish story,"<sup>37</sup> it can refer both to Barton and the Coens themselves. The second clue is in the choice of casting for the central character. As Rosenberg has pointed out, "broader ideological factors influence casting decisions, and these in turn become relevant to the film depiction of ethnic experience."<sup>38</sup> While not Jewish himself, Turturro has a history of playing Jewish characters, notably Herb Stempel in *Quiz Show* (dir. Robert Redford, USA, 1994). In *Miller's Crossing* Turturro played Bernie Bernbaum, a gay, venal, crooked Jewish bookmaker for an Italian mobster in a Depression-era gangster movie. Turturro described his character as "a guy who's trying to be a survivor. He's constantly on the move. Which is kind of Jewish history"<sup>39</sup> In the course of *Miller's Crossing*, furthermore, Bernie is led to a wooded area outside of town where he is to be executed. As he walks into the forest, Bernie hysterically pleads for his life, filled with the naked fear and abject terror of one about to die. These shots of a Jew—homosexual at that—being driven in a black car by men in long coats and then walked into a remote forest so he can be executed, has clear connotations of the Holocaust. Indeed, as Sabine Horst has

noted, "It is more like the execution of a man who [...] is different, who is marked out as not the same as other people [...] the whole scenario stirs up memories of fascist crimes, of Gestapo methods."<sup>40</sup> Brigitte Desalm felt that Bernie looked like "one of those unfortunates in Poland or Russia who were brought to be executed at the edge of a lime pit."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, just as the Nazis referred to Jews as *stücke* (pieces), so Bernie is called a "*schmatte*," the Yiddish word for rags or cheap goods, that is "an object that can be bought or sold,"<sup>42</sup> and is regarded as less than human—he is "a weak link in the racial chain."<sup>43</sup> Joel Coen remarked, "People objected to the fact that the character was Jewish and about the way Gabriel Byrne takes him out to the woods to shoot him. It's such a stretch to take this old Chicago gangster behaviour and turn it into a train ride to Auschwitz[?]."<sup>44</sup> Written while the Coens were making *Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink* cannot help but refer back to their earlier film; at the same time, it provides baggage that is almost immediately carried over from one film to the next, particularly in their near simultaneity.

The third clue is the film's *mise-en-scène*. Firmly grounded in the "Golden Age" of studio-era Hollywood, which reached its zenith between 1930 and 1945, the film is shot through with stylized, 1930s and early 1940s period architecture, look, and set-design. Fink's heavy overcoat, his hat, his dark, drab suits, come realistically out of the Thirties, and recall the dress of so many of those murdered during the Holocaust. Indeed, at the end of the film, as he prepares to leave the Hotel Earle clutching a mysterious package, he resembles a deportee. Furthermore, the Coens deliberately chose to locate the film in 1941, on the eve of the bombing of Pearl Harbor<sup>45</sup>, and one year prior to the implementation of the Final Solution, but at a point when hundreds of thousands of Jews had already been murdered, invoked by the pairs of shoes, seemingly ownerless, lining the corridor of the sixth floor of the Earle. The Earle itself is a strange, dilapidated art-deco building, reminiscent of The Over-

look Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (USA, 1980) that, in turn, has been read as a sub-epidermic film about the Holocaust.<sup>46</sup> While Cocks's book was not published until 2004, the Coens sensed what Cocks also recognized, for they admitted that Kubrick was a cinematic model, and cite *The Shining* as an influence on *Barton Fink*. The two films bear certain similarities, most notably in their respective blocked writers seemingly trapped in hotels in which gruesome murders have taken place. Mirroring Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson)'s Adler typewriter in *The Shining*, *Barton Fink* features close-up shots of Barton's Underwood typewriter.

A more oblique clue is provided by the film's deliberate use of the bathroom.<sup>47</sup> Multiple sequences place Barton Fink in or around bathrooms. Indeed, the script uses "bathroom" or related terms eleven times; for example, "Barton stands at a urinal. He stares at the wall in front of him as he pees."<sup>48</sup> In the sequence to which it refers, we see a beautiful low angle shot of Barton, alone, as he urinates at the end of a line of porcelain urinals seemingly devoid of any other person. In a cubicle, fellow screen-writer W.P. "Bill" Mayhew (John Mahoney) is vomiting and when he exits he introduces himself to Barton. Later, when Mayhew's secretary-lover Audrey Taylor (Judy Davis) seduces Barton, the camera pans away from their kiss discreetly downwards to show their shoes being slipped off their feet, before framing up on the door to the bathroom. The shot dollies through the bedroom into the open door of the bathroom, establishing a causal link, before tracking in towards the sink. The continuing track brings us up to and over the lid of the sink to frame up its drain, a perfect black circle in the white porcelain. Meanwhile, we hear the creak of bedsprings and Audrey and Barton's breath becoming labored. As we track up to the drain enveloped by the sounds of lovemaking, they mix into the groaning of pipes. The camera disappears down the drain of the bathroom sink, plumbing the depths of the hotel's plumbing, lending an alternative reading to Barton's claim, "My job is to plumb the depths, so to speak."

I have described in detail the camerawork because it can be read as a clear inter-textual homage to *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1960), which in turn can be read as another sub-epidermic Holocaust film. In 1945, Alfred Hitchcock served as "treatment advisor" (in effect, a film editor) for a Holocaust documentary produced by the British Army. The film, which recorded the liberation of Nazi concentration camps but which also documented Nazi atrocities, remained unreleased until 1985, when it was completed by PBS Frontline and distributed under the title *Memory of the Camps* (USA). Arguably, this documentary indelibly informed several key elements of *Psycho*, which, in turn, became the template for the psychological horror/slasher film, on which both *The Shining* and *Barton Fink* subsequently draw, in particular, how "a clean, bright motel bathroom in the semirural American West becomes a place of sudden, savage murder."<sup>49</sup>

First, Hitchcock's own narration of *Psycho's* trailer, perhaps simply inasmuch as it follows the pattern of Standard English Received Pronunciation, uncannily recalls that of Trevor Howard's in *Memory of the Camps*. Second, Hitchcock significantly chose to make *Psycho* in black and white at a time when most films were shot in color. This gave his film a newsreel documentary realism, as did his attention to other details, such as his decision to set it in the real city of Phoenix, Arizona, on Friday, December 11, at 2:43 p.m. Third, *Memory of the Camps* depicts the *brausebad* ("bathhouse"), the gas chamber, its false shower fittings, and peephole.

These, in turn, became key features of *Psycho's* infamous shower scene, a sequence that Hitchcock viewed as pivotal to the film and to which he paid his typically obsessive attention. In a prior sequence we watch as Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) voyeuristically observes Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) through a peephole. Believing she is safe and unobserved, Marion undresses in an antechamber before stepping in the shower. Several point of view shots, from Marion's perspective, depict the water as it show-

ers down on her naked body before she is brutally stabbed to death. The camera then follows her blood as it seeps down the perfect black circle in the white porcelain before dissolving into a shot of Marion's dead iris. The aesthetic of the sequence evokes images of the Holocaust gas chamber victim, as Kevin Gough-Yates points out, "When [Marion] is savagely murdered in the shower, her hair has become flattened by the water and she looks as though her head has been shaved. The shower sequence relates to the whole social guilt of mass murder and the propensity to pretend it does not exist"<sup>50</sup> Caroline J.S. Picart and David A. Frank argue that, in turn, *Schindler's List*, in its use of black and white, among other techniques, roughly recalls or "pseudo-mimes" *Psycho* by appearing to reverse its order.<sup>51</sup>

Returning to *Barton Fink*, it is the film's denouement that the Holocaust clues are most noticeable by their relative abundance. Greg Hainge, for example, asserts, "surely why parallels can be drawn between the Holocaust and *Barton Fink's* ending."<sup>52</sup> At the Earle, Barton has been rooming next door to the only other seen guest, travelling insurance salesman Charlie Meadows (John Goodman). Two antisemitic detectives, Mastrionotti (Richard Portnow) and Deutsch (Christopher Murney), visit Fink and comment that only an "unrestricted dump" like the Earle would admit a Jewish writer. They inform him that Meadows is in reality the German serial killer Karl "Madman" Mundt who, on the premise of "business" trips, shoots and decapitates his victims. When the detectives hear the elevator arriving, they handcuff Barton to the bed, draw their guns, and go out into the hall to confront Meadows. By this point fire is coming up through the elevator shaft and has engulfed the hallway, yet it seemingly does not burn, despite the clearly intense heat. Michael Dunne has written, "The sequence raises a number of problems about how the audience should receive these events. Is the hotel really on fire? [...] Maybe the fire is symbolic."<sup>53</sup>

Many critics have interpreted this symbolism as invoking the Holocaust. Roger Ebert, for example, opined:

The Coens mean this aspect of the film, I think, to be read as an emblem of the rise of Nazism. They paint Fink as an ineffectual and impotent left-wing intellectual, who sells out while telling himself he is doing the right thing, who thinks he understands the "common man" but does not understand that, for many common men, fascism had a seductive appeal. Fink tries to write a wrestling picture and sleeps with the great writer's mistress, while the Holocaust approaches and the nice guy in the next room turns out to be a monster.

Russell notes, "The holocaust which ultimately consumes the hotel is potent imagery which, in this context, speaks for itself."<sup>54</sup> Andrew Moss suggests, "the German named Mundt has created in the Hotel Earle a neo-Holocaust for the Semitic Fink."<sup>55</sup>

Meadows/Mundt then shoots the detectives. As he does so, he cries out "Heil Hitler!" Not only a clear Holocaust/World War II reference, this can also be decoded as a homage to the moment in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (USA, 1964), itself a film that demonstrated Kubrick's twin concern with, and conflation of, to some extent, the Holocaust and nuclear holocaust, when the title character gives a right-arm Nazi salute and declares "Heil Hitler!" Seesslen suggests Mundt is "the Hollywood return of the fascist murderer as killer cowboy"<sup>56</sup> and Spiro calls him "a murderous Nazi"<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Russell argued: "The rise of Hitler's fascism is embodied in the diabolical Meadows/Mundt, whose eagerness to please veils a bloody agenda."<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the names of the two detectives Mastrionotti and Deutsch invoke the two main European Axis powers. Together these clues allow, as Ethan Coen has suggested, an "even greater apocalypse to be incorporated into the background—the war," adding that "all that brings us back to [the idea of] this world which has become a prison; the tragedy happening to Barton is in fact taking over the rest of the world."<sup>59</sup>

Yet, the significant thing about *Barton Fink* is in its refusal to use the Holocaust

to any edifying or other effect. The Coens seemed not to care whether the import of such references was readily decoded or if they proved too subtle for re/viewers. Critics were certainly puzzled by the ending. Even those who decoded it as referring to the Holocaust, such as Ebert, warned, "It would be a mistake to insist too much on this aspect of the movie, however, since *Barton Fink* is above all a black comedy." While the Holocaust hovers as a phantom-like presence in a film that has been interpreted in any number of ways but which proves especially resistant to definitive interpretation, it is certainly not a plot peg in the mold of, say, *Terminator*, or an example of what Jeffrey Shandler has called the "master moral paradigm"<sup>60</sup> (i.e., the benchmark of evil). Indeed, when the film finally does openly acknowledge World War II, its rage is not aimed at the Nazis but at the "Japs, the little yellow bastards." There is no redemptive or romantic "let's save the Jews" moment.<sup>61</sup> Thus, in spite of the World War II setting, as well as the sub-epidermic and overt references to Fascism, Nazism, and the conflagration engulfing European Jewry, "*Barton Fink* is not a warning about the rise of totalitarianism and genocide."<sup>62</sup> Another scholar may have described the film as a "cautionary tale,"<sup>63</sup> but it is so outlandish that one has to ask: to what effect?

Whether explicit or sub-epidermic, all of these films, therefore, offer potentially shocking and transgressive uses of the Holocaust, and which are not necessarily deployed to edifying effect. Yet judging by the relative lack of outrage the films have caused (the possible exception here being *Life is Beautiful*) they have seemingly and largely been overlooked. Baron has observed how, "As the Holocaust recedes into the distant past, its meaning and representation become increasingly malleable as audiences born after it happened and scattered across the globe respond to films that are allegorically or specifically about it."<sup>64</sup> These films, often written and directed by, as well as starring Jews, demonstrate a consistent irreverence, disrupting certain almost-sacrosanct boundaries in their deployment of the Holocaust.

In so doing, the Holocaust has perhaps lost its power to shock; indeed, the Holocaust is no longer taboo as a subject for humor, abuse, and misrepresentation. I would not want to argue, as some critics did with *Schindler's List*, that these films trivialize the Holocaust, but they are certainly transgressive at times, inscribing the Holocaust into contexts where one would least expect to find it. "Rather than being a traumatic subject that the mass media avoids"<sup>65</sup> the Holocaust has been normalized and naturalized in filmic discourses to such an extent that its presence is incidental at times, in that it has been almost routinized, rendered gratuitous and superfluous. Thus, I would disagree with Baron's assertion that it always "exerts a greater spell today on filmmakers than it did when the first footage of the liberated concentration camps served as evidence at the Nuremberg Trials in 1946."<sup>66</sup> There is a creeping Holocaust irreverence, which is evident in a range of texts that, on the surface, do not appear to be about the Holocaust at all. Furthermore, it says much that word count restrictions meant many similar examples could not be examined here but they include science-fiction, period dramas, comedies, as well as horror. Each could productively be explored in more detail in order to flesh out the migration of Holocaust images.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Lawrence Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present: The Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 262.

<sup>2</sup>Tobias Ebbrecht, "Migrating Images: Iconic Images of the Holocaust and the Representation of War in Popular Film," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 28.4 (2010): 104.

<sup>3</sup>Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>Joel Rosenberg, "Jewish Experience on Film—An American Overview," in *The American Jewish Year Book, 1996* (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1996), 32.

<sup>5</sup>Vincent Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the "Jewish" Sitcom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003), 205.

<sup>6</sup>Harry Medved, "A Jewish New Wave," *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, February 13, 1998.

<sup>7</sup>David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American-Jewish Filmmakers* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: U of Illinois P, 1993), 319.

<sup>8</sup>Desser and Friedman, 317.

<sup>9</sup>Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, 75-82.

<sup>10</sup>Jonathan and Judith Pearl, *The Chosen Image: Television's Portrayal of Jewish Themes and Characters*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999; Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*.

<sup>11</sup>Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

<sup>12</sup>Desser and Friedman, *American-Jewish Filmmakers*, 318.

<sup>13</sup>Stephen Brook, *The Club: The Jews of Modern Britain* (London: Constable, 1989), 417.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Brook, 420.

<sup>15</sup>Ruth D. Johnston, "Joke-work: The Construction of Jewish Postmodern Identity in Contemporary Theory and American film," in *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*, edited by Vincent Brook (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2006), 209.

<sup>16</sup>Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2003), 246.

<sup>17</sup>Insdorf, 245.

<sup>18</sup>Lawrence Baron, "Film," in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies* edited by Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 1.

<sup>19</sup>Paul Fitzroy, "Why isn't media anti-Semitism ever addressed?" <http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=27288608-24>. Last accessed July 2012.

<sup>20</sup>Axel Bangert, "Changing narratives and images in the Holocaust: Tim Black Nelson's film *The Grey Zone* (2001)," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 6.1 (April 2008): 20.

<sup>21</sup>Baron, "Film," 7.

<sup>22</sup>George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1961), 4.

<sup>23</sup>Ella Shohat, "Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema," in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, edited by Lester D. Friedman (Urbana and Chicago, IL: U of Illinois P, 1991), 215.

<sup>24</sup>Shohat, 220.

<sup>25</sup>Rosenberg, "Jewish Experience on Film," 18.

<sup>26</sup>Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, 124.

<sup>27</sup>Shohat, "Ethnicities-in-Relation," 215.

<sup>28</sup>Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor, MI: The U of Michigan P, 2005), 70.

<sup>29</sup>Bial, 70.

<sup>30</sup>The most recent example is in *Prometheus* (dir. Ridley Scott, USA, 2012) in which a crew member describes a pile of alien corpses he has stumbled upon as resembling a "Holocaust picture."

<sup>31</sup>Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust*, 261.

<sup>32</sup>Joel was born in 1954 and Ethan in 1957, thus both benefitted from the changes I outlined at the outset.

<sup>33</sup>Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers* (London: Phoenix, 2001), 45.

<sup>34</sup>C.R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 188.

<sup>35</sup>Georg Seesslen, *Joel & Ethan Coen* (London: Titan Books, 1999), 227-8.

<sup>36</sup>Eitan Kensky, "The Dude as Modern Hero?: Salvation and Jewish Storytelling in *The Big Lebowski*," *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-present)* 9.1 (2010), [http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring\\_2010/kensky.htm](http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2010/kensky.htm).

<sup>37</sup>Seesslen, *Joel & Ethan Coen*, 227-8.

<sup>38</sup>Rosenberg, "Jewish Experience on Film," 26.

<sup>39</sup>Quoted in Sabine Horst, "Miller's Crossing," in *Joel & Ethan Coen*, edited by Peter Körte and Georg Seesslen (London: Titan Books), 109.

<sup>40</sup>Horst, 106.

<sup>41</sup>Horst, 106.

<sup>42</sup>Horst, 108.

<sup>43</sup>Horst, 108.

<sup>44</sup>Bergan, 45.

<sup>45</sup>Bergan, 45.

<sup>46</sup>Geoffrey Cocks, *The Wolf at the Door: Stanley Kubrick, History, and the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

<sup>47</sup>The link between the Holocaust and the significance of the bathroom cannot be underestimated. Films as diverse as *Schindler's List*, *La Haine* (dir. Mathieu Kassovitz, France, 1995), and *The Unborn* (dir. David S. Goyer, USA, 2009) have all drawn upon it. Where *La Haine's* usage is more oblique and sub-epidermic, *The Unborn* literally introduces the Holocaust via the bathroom and via a story of *dybbuk* possession as a result of Mengele's horrific Auschwitz experiments. See Abrams, *The New Jew*, esp. Chapter 8, for more detail.

<sup>48</sup>[http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/barton\\_fink.html](http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/barton_fink.html), accessed June 2012.

<sup>49</sup>Cocks, *The Wolf at the Door*, 169.

<sup>50</sup>Kevin Gough-Yates, "Private Madness and Public Lunacy," in *Films and Filming* (London), February 1972: 29.

<sup>51</sup>Caroline J.S. Picart and David A. Frank, "Horror and the Holocaust: Genre Elements in *Schindler's List* and *Psycho*," in *The Horror Film*, edited by Stephen Prince (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2004), 207-10.

<sup>52</sup>Greg Hainge, "The Unbearable Blandness of Being: The Everyday and Muzak in *Barton Fink* and *Fargo*," *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 27.2 (2008): 46.

<sup>53</sup>Michael Dunne, "*Barton Fink*, intertextuality, and the (almost) unbearable richness of viewing," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28.4 (2000), [http://0-gateway.proquest.com.unicat.bangor.ac.uk/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqi:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:lion&rft\\_id=xri:lion:ft:abell:R00801708:0](http://0-gateway.proquest.com.unicat.bangor.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqi:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:abell:R00801708:0).

<sup>54</sup>Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, 88.

<sup>55</sup>Andrew Moss, "Schizophrenia and Postmodernism: *Raising Arizona*, *Barton Fink*, and *The Coen Brothers*," *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 27.2 (2008): 31.

<sup>56</sup>Seesslen, *Joel & Ethan Coen*, 227-8.

<sup>57</sup>John-Paul Spiro, "'You're very Beautiful...Are You in Pictures?': *Barton Fink*, O



Brother, Where Art Thou? and the Purposes of Art," *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 27.2 (2008): 62.

<sup>58</sup>Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, 88.

<sup>59</sup>Quoted in James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: Life of the Mind* (London: Batsford Film Books, 2000), 84.

<sup>60</sup>Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).

<sup>61</sup>Spiro, "'You're very Beautiful'": 65

<sup>62</sup>Matt Stefon, "'That 'Barton Fink Feeling' and the Fiery Furnace: The Book of Daniel and Joel and Ethan Coen's *Barton Fink*," *Journal of Religion and Film* 12.1 (2008). <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol12no1/BartonFink.htm>.

<sup>63</sup>Hainge, "The Unbearable Blandness of Being": 16.

<sup>64</sup>Baron, "Film," 8.

<sup>65</sup>Baron *Projecting*, 239-40.

<sup>66</sup>Baron *Projecting*, 239-40.

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# INDIRECTED BY STANLEY KUBRICK

GEOFFREY COCKS

In 1994 Dominick LaCapra observed that the Holocaust is “a more or less covert point of rupture between the modern and the postmodern.”<sup>1</sup> The pressure along this faultline had been building ever since 1914. It was this rupture, between modern faith in reason and progress and the brute fact of genocide in the twentieth century, that “undershadowed” much of the cinema of Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick’s cinema, with its focus on the disruptive and the disturbing in human affairs, seems nonetheless marked by a strange absence of reference to the Holocaust. In 1962, Kubrick turned down an offer to make a film of Edward Lewis Wallant’s Holocaust novel *The Pawnbroker* (1961). But in 1975 he asked Isaac Bashevis Singer, in vain, to help him write a screenplay for a Holocaust film. In 1980, the year that saw the release of his film of Stephen King’s horror novel *The Shining* (1977), Kubrick sent writer Michael Herr a copy of Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961), describing the book as “‘monumental’ [and] that, probably, what he most wanted to make was a film about the Holocaust, but good luck in putting all that into a two-hour movie.”<sup>2</sup> Kubrick’s ambivalence here verges on contradiction (“probably...most wanted”), revealing not only his personal reservations about treating the subject of the Holocaust but also those concerning cinema’s ability to treat it (“film...movie”). Kubrick would go on, in the 1990s, to write a screenplay, “Aryan Papers,” on the subject.<sup>3</sup> But he never made the screenplay into a film.

It is one argument of this essay, however, that Stanley Kubrick sublimated his feelings

about the Holocaust into his films, and, in particular, into *The Shining*, along habitual didactic and aesthetic lines of indirection; as his screenwriting collaborator on *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), Frederic Raphael, observed out of frustration as well as admiration, “S.K. proceeds by indirection; who knows where, still less why?”<sup>4</sup> This essay also argues that the effect of Kubrick’s indirection is an especially worthwhile way for viewers and readers of his films to contemplate the Holocaust. From conception to perception and beyond, Kubrick’s indirect discourse on the Holocaust has merit. This is because such indirection avoids problems with the artistic representation of mass extermination and makes for a rich postmodern space of useful, enlightening, and disillusioning contemplation and construction on the part of the viewer. Such indirection is largely postmodern in intent and effect, but its representation of the Holocaust per se serves the modern purpose of universalizing the problem of genocide rather than rendering it via direct visual and aural terms an expression of Jewish experience alone. In, as it were, burying the Jewish victim so deeply, *The Shining* foregrounds a discourse on murderous European imperialism in North America that can engage resentments in post-colonial regions of the world. Both Kubrick’s indirection and Kubrick’s generalization operate on levels of expression and genre that might appeal in particular to peoples and cultures in conflict with Israel over the West Bank and Palestinian statehood. It might also engage those in the Arab world and elsewhere exercised over perceived and actual political use of historical memory of the Holocaust as well as in conflict

with the past and present of Western colonialism and Orientalism.

Kubrick's own life spanned this dark rupture between modern and postmodern. As the Jewish Kubrick put it late in life, "Gentiles don't know how to worry."<sup>5</sup> He was born in Manhattan in 1928 and grew up in the West Bronx. His father was a homeopathic physician who had changed his name from Jacob Kubrick to Jacques, or Jack, Kubrick. The family was descended from immigrants from eastern Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the Kubriks who stayed in Europe were wiped out in the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> Stanley grew up playing chess, reading, going to movies, and taking photographs. In 1942 he read Humphrey Cobb's novel about the First World War, *Paths of Glory*, which he made into a film in collaboration with Kirk Douglas in 1957.<sup>7</sup> After the Second World War Kubrick worked as a photographer for *Look* magazine, regularly attended screenings of European films at the Museum of Modern Art, and made a series of short documentary films.<sup>8</sup> His first feature film, *Fear and Desire*, was released in 1953. It is a fable about war loosely and amateurishly based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in which soldiers wander about in a mishmash of German, Italian, and American uniforms from the Second World War. Kubrick subsequently collaborated on "The German Lieutenant," an unproduced screenplay about the Second World War. In 1958 he married a German actress who played the only German and only woman in *Paths of Glory* and who was the niece of Veit Harlan, the director of the infamously antisemitic film *Jud Süß* (1940), made in the Third Reich, about whom as well Kubrick wanted to make a film. He never made that film either, despite his later observation that he had "never seen a history of Nazi Germany I didn't like."<sup>9</sup>

Kubrick, as Julian Rice has argued, was a modernist who believed in the power of art to call attention to the dangers of the world. But he also shared the deep distrust of Freud and others regarding human personality and society. He also shared with Freud, whose work inspired Kubrick for his entire life, a

wary consciousness of the precarious position of Jews in a world boiling with religious, ethnic, social, and racial prejudice. Kubrick's cinema, while didactic in modernist content and form, is, however, also postmodern in the playfulness of its "open narrative" and its interrogation of film genre and movie convention. In *The Shining*, for example, Kubrick produces a significant "alienation effect" by having the audience see Jack sneaking up on Wendy instead of focusing on Wendy to produce a scary and satisfying "startle reflex" in the audience. The effect is modern in that the audience is, or should be, reminded by the sabotaging of convention that they are watching a movie and that the real world of horror outside the movie theater requires thoughtful attention: That, in this case, the startled Wendy is one more victim of the violent male power structure represented by the film's Overlook Hotel and by Jack, who has struck a low-rent Faustian bargain to serve the hotel's ghostly masters. But the film is also postmodern in its vein of cruel humor and an ending that, like that of *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), seems to promise a horrific "return of the repressed."<sup>10</sup> In the end, the message—or the messenger—is more Lacanian than Freudian. Reason, convention, and language are not guides to improvement and knowledge, but rather acknowledgement of the Real that is beyond words, beyond thought, beyond desire, beyond hope, beyond consciousness, and lies over the precipice of the unconscious within the realm of the organism's drive toward death as well as life.

Kubrick was a rigorous director, insisting upon control and final cut in all his films before and after a miserable experience with filling in as director of *Spartacus* (1960). Still, Kubrick as much "indirected" his films as directed them. The modern, didactic Kubrick wanted his audience to work to derive meaning; as he put it to Frederic Raphael, "You tell people what things mean, they don't mean anything anymore."<sup>11</sup> But, at the same time, Kubrick was also channeling a postmodern emphasis on the "reader's" reception of a film text and an active creation of meaning and so he fills the visual and aural spaces

of his films around the characters and story with details that indirectly carry meaning. Such "indirection" informed his insistence on many takes. Kubrick almost never used storyboards, preferring to have a scene work itself out over time on the set. Such laborious repetition allowed actors to explore expression and emotion in such a way as to discover effects within the setting of a scene that would manifest the ideas behind the film in ways not plotted out beforehand. Editing and scoring, all painstakingly carried out by Kubrick himself, would add or emphasize further levels of reference and meaning to the properties, words, and actions contained in the scenes.

Nowhere was such indirection so evident and artistically significant as when it came to the Holocaust, the epicenter of rupture between modern and postmodern. Because Kubrick's was a consciousness preoccupied with the dangers of the ruptured and rupturing world, visual and aural spaces of "directed indirection" in his films carry great uncertainty and malevolence. While all of Kubrick's films directly and consistently address violence, conflict, and evil, Kubrick's references to the Holocaust and Nazi Germany reside exclusively in the spaces surrounding the stories and characters. This indirection was grounded in artistic and aesthetic concerns. In addition to his commitment to indirect discourse as a means of prompting reflection in the audience, Kubrick was, as we have noted, skeptical about the ability of film to portray the Holocaust. But he also found it personally difficult to deal with the subject. Kubrick almost never included Jewish characters in his films and regularly wrote them out of screenplays based on novels such as *Paths of Glory*, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Barry Lyndon* (1975), and *Eyes Wide Shut*. Part of this had to do with Kubrick's modernist focus on generic, universal human problems rather than on discrete groups. It also had to do with what he saw as a largely non-Jewish film audience; in this regard he was like the Jewish studio heads in the 1930s and 1940s who did not want to aggravate American antisemitism by focusing on Nazi

persecution of the Jews. (See, for example, the indirect discourse in Warner's *Casablanca* [1943] that consists merely of a Star of David on a balcony in the background of an early street scene of refugees being rounded up by Vichy police in French Morocco.<sup>12</sup>) Moreover, Kubrick's own modernism and rationalism disposed him against religion in general. His own upbringing had been secular, and he did not have a bar mitzvah. Even his Holocaust screenplay is about a young Jewish boy in Poland who survives by masquerading as a Catholic, that is, a "non-Jew." But as a Jew who knew "how to worry," Kubrick was almost certainly also hesitant at some level(s) of consciousness to place Jews in his films' environment of omnipresent threat. This was particularly the case due to one consistent, and postmodernist, theme in his cinema: the breakdown of highly rational systems at great human cost. The Fail-Safe system and the Doomsday Machine in *Dr. Strangelove*, the computer HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and the Ludovico Treatment in *A Clockwork Orange* all become menacing. It must have struck the modern but mordant Kubrick that the Nazis "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem" was not a "rational" system gone wrong but one gone "horribly right" at the horrible expense of the Jews. *Of course* the modern system designed to murder Jews works *perfectly!* Gentiles don't know how to worry indeed. Finally, Kubrick was hardly alone in drawing another conclusion from the Holocaust: that it was a frightful mystery of irrational evil, which, in rupturing not just the modern world, had thrown the nature and existence of civilization and of God into shatteringly dark question.<sup>13</sup>

So Nazis, Jews, and the Holocaust lurk in Kubrick's films indirectly. They do so because Kubrick constructed his films in this way. They would have to, in any case, since that which is most repressed is that which is most threatening and must find expression somehow. And they "will out" as well, because words, texts, and images have meanings and associations embedded in them by culture and history over which an artist has little or no control. Thus the

color palette of *The Shining* is increasingly dominated by yellow, a historically loaded choice with regard to Jews. There is a scene in *Spartacus*, another Kirk Douglas vehicle and one marked by a strong collective Jewish consciousness, in which one scene “suggests documentary description of blood spattering Heinrich Himmler as he watched the... shooting of Jews.”<sup>14</sup> There is thus both agency in Kubrick’s oeuvre and also discourse beyond intention in the text of his films. There is, finally, history that flowed through Kubrick’s own experience from childhood on that influenced his psyche and his work. Thus the German Luger pistol that plays an incongruously narrative and metonymic role in Kubrick’s first New York City drama, *Killer’s Kiss* (1953), one shot reproducing almost exactly a shot from the wartime American film *Hotel Berlin* (1945). In *Killer’s Kiss* there is also a shot of mannequins stacked on shelves that recalls photographs of the concentration camps from 1945. Along these same dark lines, the ending of Kubrick’s black comedy *Dr. Strangelove* is the blackest possible analogue to the Nazi Final Solution as a system “gone horribly right.” For in this film the end of the world in a nuclear holocaust is not the end of the world even though it is the end of the movie. Kubrick leaves the viewer with a second ending. The nuclear destruction of the world by the Doomsday Machine is just the means, a penultimate “Final Solution,” to the ends of a new Master Race to take over the earth. Dr. Strangelove, scientific advisor to the American president and once upon a time advisor to Hitler, has a plan (“It would not be difficult, Mein Führer!... I’m sorry, Mr. President.”), according to which a computer will select a group of people on the basis of “youth, health, sexual fertility, intelligence, and a cross-section of necessary skills” to live in mineshafts, a recourse actually proposed by American nuclear strategist Herman Kahn, until the radiation blanketing the earth has dissipated. The last spoken lines of the film are Strangelove’s as he toddles from his wheelchair: “I have plan... Mein Führer, I can walk!”<sup>15</sup> The screen does not fade to black, but cuts to hydrogen bombs detonating and

World War II chanteuse Vera Lynn singing “We’ll Meet Again.” While the song lyrics, like those of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” accompanying B-52s attacking Russia, have a tragically ironic quality given the destruction of the entire world, they also communicate a deeper dread, as, only in a Kubrick film: The Nazis will be back, words which end *Hotel Berlin*. Or, rather, Nazis *abide*. In Lacanian terms, these are men who love war and destruction out of their own organism’s death drive that makes them both desire and fear in every woman they meet (again) the “one woman” who dominated their infancy. As with the ending to *The Shining*, evil survives and echoes the despairing words of Adorno and Horkheimer: “In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men [*sic*] from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”<sup>16</sup>

So it is no surprise that Kubrick continued searching for a book on which to base a film about the Holocaust. In the early 1980s he asked Raul Hilberg for a suggestion, but he did not like the book Hilberg suggested, the diary of the Jewish leader of the Warsaw Ghetto forced by the Germans to select ghetto residents for deportation to Treblinka and who committed suicide after signing the order to deport the children from the ghetto orphanage run by Janusz Korczak.<sup>17</sup> Instead, in the 1990s Kubrick decided to make a film of Louis Begley’s novelized memoir, *Wartime Lies* (1991). As a boy, the Jewish Begley survived the war in Poland by being hidden as a Catholic under the care of “Aunt” Tania. The story is one of physical survival, since the result for Begley was the loss of childhood, loss of identity, and loss of innocence. “Janek” even adopts the defense mechanism of identification with the aggressor in admiring the hard, efficient, and apparently invincible German Wehrmacht and SS when exterminating bedbugs: “I could be a hunter and an aggressor like SS units destroying partisans in the forest, or, very soon, rebellious Jews in the ghetto of Warsaw.”<sup>18</sup> Kubrick must also have been struck by the fact that Begley’s

family came from the same part of Galicia (now Ukraine) as his own ancestors. Kubrick started production work on the film, worked alone on the screenplay, and finally shelved the project on the grounds that Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, which came out in 1994, had beaten him to the punch.

But the elements of *Wartime Lies* that attracted Kubrick also at some levels of consciousness repelled him. Kubrick too admired the technical capacities of the Germans with whom he worked and the German machines, like the Adler typewriters, he used. And his fascination with the history of Nazi Germany, while emblematic of other personal and familial tensions and contradictions,<sup>19</sup> to a certain significant extent represented the same sort of defensive identification with the aggressor that marked young Begley's life. This is why Kubrick often includes German characters in his films, for they can inhabit and represent a world of omnipresent threat and violence in a way Jews for the Jewish Kubrick cannot. Even Begley's book about wartime Poland does not take place in the ghettos and camps, but rather in the world of Germans and Poles. This is reflected in the title Kubrick gave his screenplay, "Aryan Papers," which were the official documents that allowed a Jew to live as a non-Jew in Nazi-occupied Poland and documented all the lies that made Begley's life what it was and remained. Still, all this was not protection enough. Working alone on the screenplay, never once contacting Begley, took an emotional toll on Kubrick; his wife Christiane recalls that never had she seen Stanley as depressed as during the time he was working on "Aryan Papers." He was therefore more and more distracted by plans for another film based on the legend of Pinocchio, which would be made after Kubrick's death by Steven Spielberg. Even Kubrick's claim that Spielberg's Holocaust film had pre-empted his own suggests relief at not having to make his own. This must have been the case because Kubrick told Hilberg that Spielberg had not made the right film, later remarking to Frederic Raphael: "The Holocaust is about six million people who get killed. *Schindler's List* was about six

hundred who don't."<sup>20</sup> Kubrick's reduction of the number of Jews Schindler saved (actually around 1,100) serves not only alliterative emphasis. His reversal of tense in placing the Holocaust in the present and Spielberg's film in the past speaks to a hierarchy of concerns and conflicts coursing through Kubrick's life and work. Kubrick once again contacted Hilberg about a source for a film, but again, nothing came of it.

There is one element of Begley's story, however, that points not only to the film about the Holocaust Kubrick did not make but one(s) he had made already. This is the trope in *Wartime Lies* of a child discovering a dangerous world. This, too, must have attracted Kubrick to the novel since there is an arc in Kubrick's films from 1960 to 1980 that displays the same trope. This arc was prefigured during the 1950s in Kubrick's own passion for Stefan Zweig's novella *The Burning Secret* (1914), in which a young boy is mute witness to his mother's marital infidelity. Kubrick at this time also more than likely saw Vittorio De Sica's film on the same subject, *The Children Are Watching Us* (1943), since it screened at the Museum of Modern Art April 21-24 and June 9-11, 1955, before Kubrick moved to Los Angeles late that summer.<sup>21</sup> The first film in the arc is *Lolita* (1962), which has its own peculiar dynamic in that the young girl in the story (twelve years old in Vladimir Nabokov's novel and fifteen in the film) is sexually aggressive (a "nymphet") and not at all traditionally "innocent." But she is objectified and violated by writer Claire Quilty and Professor Humbert Humbert. In *Dr. Strangelove*, which too has its own perverse dynamic, the world is literally destroyed by adult males and then, for what it is worth, inherited by their Strangelovian Master Race offspring. *2001* also ends with the destruction of the world but in the form of the Star Child, who has evolved beyond the cold, violent humans raised from apes to space travelers. *A Clockwork Orange* reverses the ostensible evolutionary optimism of *2001* in the form of fifteen-year-old thug Alexander DeLarge. But here too youth is victimized by adult male authority. Through the behaviorist



Ludovico Treatment, Alex is “cured” of his urges to sex and “ultra-violence,” but this only makes him a victim of all those whom he has abused in the past. Moreover, unlike the novel by Anthony Burgess, Kubrick’s film ends not with the maturation of Alex into responsible family man but with restoration of Alex’s predatory instincts in service to a fascist government. And in *Barry Lyndon*, a young, ambitious, and selfish Irish upstart is destroyed by an aristocratic society of the late eighteenth century that itself is facing historical eclipse via guillotine.

This trope of a child discovering a dangerous world is most clearly evident in Kubrick’s horror film *The Shining*. In the film it is a world shaped and scarred by history. In King’s novel, the Overlook Hotel is a house of horrors literally as well as figuratively, inhabited by the ghosts of powerful men who had clawed their way to the top and continued to claw at each other, and their women, once there. These are the masters of a new empire, King imagining a postwar party at the hotel on August 29, 1945 lit by “glowing Japanese lanterns” and celebrating America “as the colossus of the world.”<sup>22</sup> Kubrick shifts the temporal focus of America’s ghostly past to the interwar era, 1919 in an early treatment, with the film ending on a photograph of partygoers dated July 4, 1921.<sup>23</sup> As Bill Blakemore points out in Rodney Ascher’s “subjective documentary” *Room 237* (2012), Kubrick also adds a visual and aural subtext about Anglo-American imperial decimation of Native Americans, associating this historical tragedy with white male victimization of child (Jack’s son Danny), female (wife Wendy), and African-American (a “nigger cook”) in the film narrative. That the deep historical dimensions of *The Shining* on the subject of persecution and genocide also include the tragedy of the Jews of Europe is evident in two later films that reference *The Shining*. Martin Scorsese’s *Shutter Island* (2010) “presents the Ashcliffe Hospital in a similar way to the Overlook Hotel” and represents the protagonist’s memories of the liberation of Dachau in music and number combinations used in *The Shining*.<sup>24</sup> Barton Fink (1991) by the Coen

brothers even more clearly pays homage to *The Shining*. The dark Art Deco Hotel Earle in Los Angeles recalls the Overlook as a tomb of danger and murder. Jewish screenwriter Fink is given a novel titled *Nebuchadnezzar* about the Assyrian king who, according to the Bible (Daniel 3:19), burned three Jewish governors in a fiery furnace heated “seven times more than it was wont to be heated.” Insurance salesman Charlie Meadows is serial murderer Karl Mundt, who emerges from an elevator that breathes smoke and fire, pursues a detective down an endless fiery hotel corridor screaming “I’ll show you the life of the mind” over and over, and finally shoots the detective in the forehead with a laconic “Heil Hitler.”

Kubrick’s film of King’s novel also recalls Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924) and Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* (1922). Like the Hotel Berghof in Mann’s novel and the castle in Kafka’s, the Overlook Hotel symbolizes temporal power. Both Kafka and Mann used their settings to symbolize the decline of European civilization to and through the First World War. The Gentile Mann held out hope for the triumph of reason over power and prejudice (including antisemitism), while the Jewish Kafka posits a fundamentally grotesque world of inherent evil and horror. Kafka was Kubrick’s favorite writer and since, unlike Mann as well as Kafka, Kubrick was working after not just the First but also the Second World War, the view of the world from his fictional mountaintop had to factor in a new scale of historical horror with the Holocaust at its bottom. Using the horror genre called upon Kubrick to employ his usual indirection that had the advantage of mitigating or eliminating entirely the danger of trivialization of genuine earthly horror. This choice also reflected the 1970s decade in which horror films were achieving both popular and even artistic success. Carolyn Picart and David Frank have argued that the genre of horror deals inherently with issues central to the Holocaust, such as representation of monsters and their victims, that can effect in an audience mimetic and artistic working through of trauma. Nathan Abrams contends that the many horror films made by Jewish

directors in the late 1960s and 1970s represent a consciousness and negotiation of increasing popular, scholarly, and artistic interest at the time in Hitler, Nazi Germany, and the Holocaust.<sup>25</sup> These same dynamics were manifest in the trend since at least Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), and including King's *The Shining*, in placing horror in fiction and film not in the dark, private spaces of the Gothic "haunted house" but in the brightly lit Kafkaesque spaces of contemporary family, public, and commercial life and activity.

Kubrick, with his eagle eye for evil, was most interested while writing *The Shining* in the character of Jack, a teacher who wants to be a writer. But Danny is the youngest in



Figure 1

a long cinematic line of Kubrick innocents discovering the same type of perilous "found world" of which Kubrick himself became aware as child and adolescent in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>26</sup> Jack has been hired to be the winter caretaker at the Overlook Hotel in the Colorado Rockies. He is enamored of the violent history of the Overlook and becomes the dutiful functionary who attempts to murder his wife and son on "orders from the house."<sup>27</sup> Danny has the ability "to shine," to see into the past and future. The first demonstration of this awesome capacity occurs as Jack is phoning Wendy with the news that he has gotten the job of hotel caretaker. Screen left are red Avis (French for "warning") car rental brochures on the front desk. At home, Danny envisions an ocean of blood pouring

from a slowly opening elevator door (figure 1), a revelation of the bloody past of the Overlook. That this shot, reprised several times in the film, is a Kubrickian symbol of the historical horrors of his century is communicated in aural and visual details of the sequence. On the soundtrack are the dark, mysterious strains of Penderecki's *The Dream of Jacob* (1974), which also underscore Jack's dream of murdering his family. Penderecki lived in Poland during the Second World War and devoted his musical career to themes of tolerance and intolerance, including his *Dies Irae* (1967), also known as the "Auschwitz Oratorio." In the Bible, Jacob is renamed Israel and his sons are the ancestors of the twelve tribes.

Kubrick had familial as well as artistic reasons to construct this into a film about horror in the human family, for "in twentieth-century Christian and Nazi Poland the descendants of Jacob, Israel's father and Stanley's, would awaken, not like the biblical Jacob, to salvation, but to slaughter."<sup>28</sup>

Nazis dwell in the details of this sequence, for the number on the sweater Danny wears is 42 (figure 2), a metonym for the year (Stanley's 14th) in which more



Figure 2

Jews were murdered than in any other year of the Holocaust. In the scene immediately following, the victims themselves are, as argued in Ascher's *Room 237*, embodied in the impossibly huge amount of luggage the Torrances



Figure 3



Figure 4

have packed into their Volkswagen, perhaps also symbolizing the dreadful “baggage” of German history and the psychological baggage carried by Jack Torrance. This luggage, piled in the hotel lobby, is shown in deep focus as a trio of young people passes in front of it on their way out of the Overlook (figure 3). A lap dissolve, one of 27 in *The Shining* suggesting ghostly presence of human absence, slowly fades a group of four other young people in over the Torrances’ luggage (figure 4). This group is upstairs with their own stack of luggage, which they carry into the elevator screen right as the camera tracks left with the Torrances on a tour of the cavernous lounge that will become Jack’s “office.” Millions of Jews (along with their useless luggage) would be brought from all over Europe to Poland to be gassed and burned following a meeting of Nazi officials at Wannsee near Berlin on January

20, 1942. The resultant bureaucratic process, described in excruciating detail in Hilberg’s book, is represented by Jack’s Adler (“eagle”) typewriter, a German machine introduced in a manner similar to that of its mechanical partner in crime, the hotel’s bloody elevator. We see the typewriter close-up in a “one-shot” (see also the opening black-and-white scene of *Schindler’s List*) and as the camera dollies slowly back we see a tidy desk with pencils and paper and an ashtray with smoke curling up from the long ash of a cigarette (figure 5). On the soundtrack is a horrific booming, which a pan upward reveals to be Jack aggressively hurling a yellow tennis ball against a wall over a massive fireplace in the Colorado Lounge. On the wall are figurative Apache sand paintings, the two shots linking European atrocities on two continents in two centuries. (Later in the film, two large swastikas, like those worked into the architecture of one scene in *Full Metal Jacket* [1987] and common in Native American designs, are faintly visible in the wall treatment at the back of The Gold Room when Jack is about to make his deal with the Overlook’s Mephistophelean bartender.) That it turns out that Jack has been typing the same sentence over and over, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” makes clear his Kafkaesque role as bureaucrat doing by (w)rote the murderous will of the hotel’s masters. When Jack has his dream of murdering his family, his head lies on the table in front of the typewriter, whose color has turned from gray to blue, the latter a sign



Figure 5

in Kubrick cinema of cold, malevolent authority. That the typewriter displays an eagle and the German word for eagle underscores the Overlook as a place, like the Chateau d' Aigle in *Paths of Glory*, of mighty, obscene power. Moreover, when we see Jack typing, the music on the soundtrack is similarly linked to the Nazi era; it is the "night music" from Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936). Bartók was a dedicated anti-Fascist and Kubrick twists the filmic and historical blade by prominently displaying in the credits that the recording is by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic. Karajan was an ambitious young conductor in Austria who joined the Nazi party to advance his career, which included conducting for Hitler's birthday and in Nazi-occupied Paris.

The darkly-freighted number 42 appears throughout *The Shining*.<sup>29</sup> These are small details not only because of the over-determined indirection that was part of Kubrick's directorial style, but also because *The Shining*, even more than his other films, is informed by Freudian dream theory. According to Freud, the most dangerous and threatening material in a dream is the most repressed and so manifests itself in the smallest of signs and symbols. Wendy watches the wartime romance movie *Summer of '42* (1971) on television, a license plate contains the number, and a news report mentions a \$42 million dollar spending bill. After Danny faints following his vision of the overflowing elevator, Kubrick uses a series of shot-reverse shots between the boy and the pediatrician called by his mother to play a chilling game of historical peek-a-boo with the number: "the very next scene...foregrounds 42 by having it appear and disappear over the span of eight successive crosscut one-shots of Danny as he is being questioned by the doctor. In the first four close-ups, only the edge of the 2 on Danny's right sleeve can be seen. Then in the fifth shot, almost the entire 42 appears, subsequently disappearing in the sixth shot (as Danny, referring to [his imaginary friend] Tony, says, 'Because he hides') and reappearing in shots seven and eight."<sup>30</sup>

Given Kubrick's meticulous shooting and editing of his films, it is unlikely that this is a simple continuity error, for "[t]he visual alternation draws attention to the number and...adds to the dreamlike quality of the scene in the distortion and repression characteristic of dreamwork."<sup>31</sup> Kubrick uses a different cinematic technique in a similar manner to draw out the same historical horror that lies latent within the manifest content of the narrative dreamwork of the film. This is a painting by Paul Peel, *After the Bath* (1890), of two little girls naked in front of a roaring fire in a large stone fireplace like that in the Colorado Lounge. *After the Bath* has long been popular kitsch, but its placement in *The Shining* creates the same critical, reflexive, and grotesque juxtaposition of cozy



Figure 6

domesticity and historical horror as the same painting's presence does in Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* (2002), a film about memory of the Armenian Genocide in 1915 (figure 6). A print of the painting hangs on the wall of Jack and Wendy's bedroom, but it is depicted in a deliberately indirect, subtle, and gradual way in the background of four shots in three separate scenes over the course of almost the entire film.<sup>32</sup> The struggle to lift psychological and historical repression, denial, and amnesia is represented by progressing from a small part of the picture out of focus (behind Wendy and Jack) to a small part in focus (behind Danny and Jack) to the whole picture out of focus (behind Wendy and Jack) and (figure 7) the whole picture in focus (behind Danny and Wendy). This serial juxtaposition of flesh and fire radiates not (only) coziness and warmth but the mental image of ovens (doubling down on *The Shining's* references to Hansel



Figure 7

and Gretel), gas (showers, not baths), and the corpses of children.

The idea of using numbers, and even the particular number 42, as Kubrick does is not unique to him. In filming Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), Kubrick was aware of the repeated appearance in the novel of the number 42, addresses, highway and hotel room numbers, as signs for Humbert of the workings of malevolent fate. Kubrick used the number 242 as that of the hotel room in which Lolita and Humbert first have sex, an appropriate reference to Nabokov himself, who, after fleeing the Nazis in 1940, lived in hotel rooms all his life. It was also the case that Fritz Lang, whose work Kubrick admired, has Marlene Dietrich in *Rancho Notorious* (1952) refer the audience to 1942.<sup>33</sup> It may also be that especially in the 1970s the number 42, apart from Douglas Adams and Monty Python, was becoming conscious and unconscious cultural shorthand for the Holocaust. Early in *The Odessa File* (1974), for example, 42 shows up both as the street address of a Holocaust survivor and in the tattooed number of an Auschwitz survivor. In *The Shining* the number 42 is also part of a temporal and thematic pattern of multiples, mirrors, and repetitions of the number 7, a number of significance and mystery in Western culture used both in King's novel and in *The Magic Mountain* as well as extensively by Kubrick in *Paths of Glory*. The Overlook Hotel was built in 1907 (on the site of a Native American burial ground); the photograph at the end of the film depicting the July 4, 1921 party is one of 21 pictures (in three rows of seven) on a hotel wall; the

hotel manager describes a triple murder that occurred at the Overlook in 1970; Room 237 (the product of whose numbers, changed from 217 in the novel, is 42) is the Bluebeard's Closet of the Overlook Hotel; Jack's liquor of choice is Jack Daniel's Black Label No. 7; Jack drives his yellow Volkswagen (later, as Jack transitions from caretaker to murderer, a red Volkswagen is shown crushed under a jackknifed tractor-trailer) from Boulder to the Overlook in 3½ hours, a roundtrip of 7 hours; the town of Sidewinder is 25 (2+5) miles from the hotel; 6 cases of 7-Up are stacked in a kitchen corridors.

The particular, or potential, achievement of Kubrick in *The Shining* is the attempt at bridging the rupture between the modern and postmodern that culminated in, and reverberated from, the Holocaust. Kubrick's indirection removes, or at least distances, the subject and its representation from the presentational and the performative sphere of horror film narrative. It thus establishes between the film as modern entertainment and / or education a, as it were, *cordon sanitaire* in which there is space for the viewer / reader of the film to consider on the prosaic grounds of thought, personal reflection, ethical deliberation, and historical analysis the horrors of the real world. Thus the presentational / performative becomes the means to its own end as well to its ends. Kubrick's indirection produces a hypertext for the viewer comprised of the director's own views and methods along with space for its dynamic reception and reproduction. Kubrick's play is in service to a realist and skeptical modernism that employs alienation effects to break the spell of the performance for the audience and thereby alert them to real world problems. But Kubrick's play is also in service to an ironic and indeterminate postmodernism that doubts reason and rejects progress. While in King's novel the Overlook Hotel burns down, in Kubrick's film it remains standing, with Jack, as embodiment of its ironically and inappropriately named caretakers, frozen into its past, present, and future. The very end of the film, after white credits on a black screen have rolled and the play-out dance music

("Midnight with the Stars and You" [1932]) has concluded, is also illustrative of Kubrick's attempt, and failure?, to bridge the rupture. We are left with the sidwinding rattle of applause and hiss of conversation among a crowd of dancers. Perhaps Kubrick the realist constructed this as a reflexive representation of a film audience leaving the theater. If so, then the modernist Kubrick, or the modernist viewer of the film, might construct this as affirmation of the reality of discussion of the film's meaning. But Kubrick the postmodernist, or the postmodernist reader of the film, would construct this as ironic, even cynical, because this literal tag end of the film comes when everyone has long since left the theater or turned off the DVD player. And here's what I think: "At the very end of the film, the dance is over. The message is clear and, ironically and appropriately, unheard. We are that oblivious and complicit audience of applauding dancers on the cusp of Nazi power, in our century, the century of genocide."<sup>34</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), xi.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Michael Herr, *Kubrick* (New York: Grove, 2000), 7-8, 10; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1961); Leonard J. Leff, "Hollywood and the Holocaust: Remembering *The Pawnbroker*," *American Jewish History* 84.6 (1996): 361

<sup>3</sup>Stanley Kubrick, "Aryan Papers" (1993), Stanley Kubrick Archives, University of the Arts, London.

<sup>4</sup>Frederic Raphael, *Eyes Wide Open: A Memoir of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 153.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Herr, *Kubrick*, 53.

<sup>6</sup>208 AR-Z 239/59, Volume 2, 718, Volume 9, 3345, Bundesarchiv, Aussenstelle Ludwigsburg, Germany; Ship Arrivals, Reel T-504, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa; Elias Kubrick Petition for Naturalization, July 12, 1910, Hersh Kubrick, Petition for Naturalization, August 7, 1912, New York City Hall

of Records (courtesy Vincent LoBrutto and Harriet Morrison).

<sup>7</sup>The Papers of Kirk Douglas, 1945-1978, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Wisconsin Historical Society / University of Wisconsin, Madison.

<sup>8</sup>Department of Film Exhibitions, Boxes 2, 3 (1944-1955), Celeste Bartos International Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York City; Look Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Anthony Frewin, "Writers, Writing, Reading," in *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*, ed. Alison Castle (Cologne: Taschen, 2005), 518; Richard Adams and Stanley Kubrick, "The German Lieutenant: An Original Screenplay" (1956/57), Box 22, Folder 2, Department of Defense Film Collection, Special Collections, Georgetown University, Washington DC.

<sup>10</sup>Peter Baxter, "The One Woman," *Wide Angle* 6.1 (1984): 41.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Raphael, *Eyes Wide Open*, 75.

<sup>12</sup>Richard J. Anobile, ed., *Michael Curtiz's Casablanca* (New York: Avon, 1974), 20.

<sup>13</sup>A. J. Goldmann, "Kubrick's Unrealized Vision," *Haaretz*, August 21, 2005.

<sup>14</sup>Margaret Burton, "Performances of Jewish Identity: *Spartacus*," *Shofar* 27:1 (2008): 9.

<sup>15</sup>"Dr. Strangelove: A Continuity Transcript," The Kubrick Site, 50, 52, <http://visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0055.html>, May 5, 1999.

<sup>16</sup>Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 179.

<sup>17</sup>Raul Hilberg, personal communication, June 4, 1991; Raul Hilberg et al., eds, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom*, trans. Stanislaw Staron and the staff of Yad Vashem (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999); Jan Harlan, personal communications, December 9, 2002, October 6, 2003.

<sup>18</sup>Louis Begley, *Wartime Lies* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 93-4.

<sup>19</sup>Natalie Zemon Davis, "Trumbo and Kubrick Argue History," *Raritan* 22 (2002): 180.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Raphael, *Eyes Wide Open*, 107; Raul Hilberg, personal communication, April 15, 1999; Christiane Kubrick, personal communication, November 20, 2002; Louis Begley, personal communication, November 4, 1996.

<sup>21</sup>"50 Years of Italian Cinema," Museum of Modern Art, Box 3, Exh. 55, 59; John Baxter, *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* (Carrol & Graf, 1997), 78.

<sup>22</sup>Stephen King, *The Shining* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 157.

<sup>23</sup>[Stanley Kubrick,] "The Shining," 135/S, James Boyle Collection, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Caldwell, "Shutter Island," *Cinema Autopsy*, February 2010; <http://blog.cinemaautopsy.com/2010/02>, June 6, 2011. Flo Leibowitz, and Lynn Jeffress, "The Shining," *Film Quarterly* 34:3 (1981): 4; Bill Blakemore, "The Family of Man," *Washington Post*, July 12, 1987.

<sup>25</sup>Nathan Abrams, "The Disembodied Evil of Jewish Horror Movies," *The Arty Semite*, August 4, 2011; <http://blogs.forward.com/the-artly-semite/140970/>, November 22, 2011. Carolyn Picart and David Frank, *Frames of Evil: The Holocaust as Horror in American Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2006).

<sup>26</sup>Dana Polan, "Materiality and Sociality in *Killer's Kiss*," in *Perspectives on Stanley Kubrick*, ed. Mario Falsetto (New York: Hall, 1994), 97; Diane Johnson, "Writing *The Shining*," in *Depth of Field: Stanley Kubrick, Film, and the Uses of History*, ed. Geoffrey Cocks et al. (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2006), 58.

<sup>27</sup>Mark J. Madigan, "'Orders from the House': Kubrick's *The Shining* and Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis,'" in *The Shining Reader*, ed. Anthony Magistrale (Mercer Island, WA: Starmont House, 1991), 200.

<sup>28</sup>Geoffrey Cocks, *The Wolf at the Door: Stanley Kubrick, History, and the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 255.

<sup>29</sup>It can be argued that the number 42 also has particular resonance with issues of race in America, since it was the number worn by Jackie Robinson, who in 1947 broke the "color barrier" in Major League Baseball. In Ku-

brick's film baseball is invoked by the bat that Wendy uses to protect herself against Jack and which, in forging a link to the Torrances' New England origins and the historical Polish lineaments of the film's score, bears the signature of the most famous Polish-American baseball player of the 1970s, Carl Yazstremski of the Boston Red Sox. King's Red Sox reference is to Carlton Fisk.

<sup>30</sup>Cocks, *Wolf at the Door*, 232. The 16:9 aspect ratio of the blu-ray DVD (2007) of *The Shining* cuts off most of the number on Danny's sleeve in this scene. This DVD also shifts the color palette of the film too far toward red. In one scene, of Danny playing in the hall outside Room 237, yellow is rendered pink, which subverts a gradual shift toward yellow in the film that has important narrative and historical meaning.

<sup>31</sup>Cocks, 232.

<sup>32</sup>Geoffrey Cocks, "A Quality of Obsession Considerably Further East: The Holocaust in the Cinema of Stanley Kubrick," *Shofar* 28.4 (2010): 80.

<sup>33</sup>Walter Metz, "A Very Notorious Ranch, Indeed: Fritz Lang, Allegory, and the Holocaust," *Journal of Contemporary Thought* 13.1 (2001): 77.

<sup>34</sup>Cocks, *Wolf at the Door*, 256.

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# A FILMMAKER IN THE HOLOCAUST ARCHIVES: PHOTOGRAPHY AND NARRATIVE IN PETER THOMPSON'S *UNIVERSAL HOTEL*

GARY WEISSMAN

In his 1986 film *Universal Hotel*, independent filmmaker Peter Thompson utilizes photographs culled from archives to recreate and reflect upon events involving the inhumane medical experiments conducted by Nazi doctors on prisoners at the Dachau concentration camp.<sup>1</sup> Lying outside regular channels of film distribution and familiar film genres, Thompson's film has not been discussed, much less acknowledged, in scholarship on film and the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> This essay calls attention to *Universal Hotel* as an important work that encourages viewers to think critically about the relationship between photography and narrative in visual depictions of historical events. The film's relevance to considerations of what Saul Friedlander has called "the limits of representation of Nazism and its crimes" is particularly noteworthy given the extensive use made of archival photographs in cinematic treatments of Nazism and the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup>

Just over twenty minutes in length, *Universal Hotel* is an exceptional example of what Phillip Lopate has called the essay-film. Films belonging to this "cinematic genre that barely exists," according to Lopate, are distinguished not by a particular treatment of images but by their use of "words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled or intertitled," that "represent a

single voice," express a "strong, personal point of view," and "represent an attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem."<sup>4</sup> Thompson's voiceover narration dominates and structures *Universal Hotel*, leading viewers to follow the filmmaker (who remains offscreen) in his efforts to work out a problem through a multistep process of trial and error. The problem the film probes is the difficulty of bearing witness to Nazism and its crimes through archival photographs. To best appreciate how the film poses and engages this problem, it will be helpful to preface our analysis of *Universal Hotel* with a consideration of the special role archival photographs play in films about the Nazis era.

## PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM NARRATIVE: CONSTRUCTING AUTHENTICITY

Filmmakers draw upon archival photographs to illustrate Jewish suffering and Nazi atrocity in documentaries and to simulate the look of the past in docudramas. In both cases the referential power of photography, or its distillation in a muted or black-and-white aesthetic, serves to authenticate not only what viewers see on screen but the accompanying stories these films tell. Like captions, these stories tell viewers what the

authenticating images show by emplotting them in film narratives, whether these narratives are conveyed by the voiceover in a documentary or the unfolding action in a docudrama.

In *On Photography* Susan Sontag notes the difficulty of fixing narratives to photographs, or embedding photographs in narratives, in any lasting way: "A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs)."<sup>5</sup> The narrative most commonly affixed to photographs is the caption, which greatly shapes how an image will be construed, at least for a time. "Captions do tend to override the evidence of our eyes; but no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture's meaning," writes Sontag. "The caption is the missing voice, and it is expected to speak for truth. But even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached. And the caption-glove slips on and off so easily."<sup>6</sup> The notable exception, for Sontag, are films in which photographs appear as still images and "the order and the exact time for looking at each photograph are imposed" on viewers in conjunction with the narrative.<sup>7</sup> In such films the relation between caption and image is recursive and reciprocal: the narrative confers the photograph's meaning while the photograph serves as evidence to authenticate the narrative.

This is the case not only when Nazi-era photographs appear in documentary films as black-and-white stills that punctuate the full-color moving image, but also when they appear in fictional films as old paper prints. Consider, for example, the 1989 film *Music Box* in which Ann, a lawyer played by Jessica Lange, defends her aged father against accusations that during the war he brutalized and murdered Jews as the commander of a death squad in Hungary.<sup>8</sup> In the film's climactic scene, Ann, after having assured herself of her father's innocence, chances upon a series of wartime photographs hid-

den in an antique music box. The photographs show her father as a young man in uniform, posing among soldiers and Jewish victims; in one he pulls at the slip worn by a young woman whose hand is raised to hide her face from the camera. Viewers will be reminded of an earlier courtroom scene in which an older woman testifies to having been gang raped by the commander and his soldiers when she was sixteen. She says that her tormentors photographed her.

The creased and yellowed pictures dispensed by the music box coincide with the narratives of the surviving victims who testified in court, forcing upon Ann the undeniable truth of her father's horrific crimes. These photographs, like the Holocaust survivors portrayed by actors, are only simulations; yet they so evoke the evidentiary truth of photographs that they somehow feel truer, more real than the Hollywood drama in which they appear. Like the iconic photograph of Jews captured by German soldiers in the Warsaw ghetto that Liv Ullmann's character studies in Bergman's *Persona*, they seem to have entered the film by way of the archive.<sup>9</sup> This is because photographs are presumed to confirm the past reality of whatever they show. In *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* James E. Young states that "the photograph persuades the viewer of its testimonial and factual authority in ways that are unavailable to narrative," and this because "as a seeming trace or fragment of its referent that appeals to the eye for its proof, the photograph is able to invoke the authority of its empirical link to events."<sup>10</sup> While the survivor attains such authority as a living trace of the Holocaust, the survivor's *narrative* has a more tenuous connection to past reality. Consequently, Young notes, archival photographs have been included in survivor memoirs "to authenticate and to increase the authority" of written accounts.<sup>11</sup>

The documentary film *Shoah* famously eschews the use of archival photographs.<sup>12</sup> Director Claude Lanzmann employs three strategies to make the surviving witness's "empirical link to events" more visible to the eye: he elicits from survivors tearful and

fraught expressions that appear as traces of those traumatizing events; he returns the witness to the site of those events; and he uses footage filmed at those sites to illustrate the witness's voiceover narration. More commonly, documentary films augment the "testimonial and factual authority" of witness narratives by supplementing talking head shots with archival images that may or may not relate directly to the events being recounted. Docudramas, by contrast, appeal to the eye in a way documentarians have largely eschewed: they visually re-create past events.<sup>13</sup> The success with which the black-and-white cinematography of *Schindler's List* mimics the look of documentary photographs has led some critics to assert that the film "makes a false claim to authenticity."<sup>14</sup> Most notably, Lanzmann accused director Steven Spielberg of "fabricating archives."<sup>15</sup> One can take this point while noting that fabrication occurs as well when material from actual archives is used to craft narratives.

Fabricating in the sense of constructing a story (not concocting a lie) is necessary because the still image does not narrate itself. As Sontag puts it, "Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy....Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph....Only that which narrates can make us understand."<sup>16</sup> *Music Box* both illustrates and obscures this insight, for although the photographs Ann discovers seem to tell the truth about her father, it is actually the testimonies of the survivors that do so by explaining what it is the photographs show. Had Ann not already heard their narratives in court, her discovery of the photographs would have invited much "deduction, speculation, and fantasy," to be sure, but would not have marked a moment of anguished understanding. Still, given the photographs' dramatic function in the film, viewers are unlikely to reflect on how the photographs do not explain the past so much as enable them, like Ann, to choose between the prosecution's and defense's

competing narratives. Viewers are likely to presume instead that narrative truth adheres in the photographic image.

*Universal Hotel* leads viewers to contemplate the relationship between photography and narrative truth in more complex terms. Taking the emplotment of archival photographs as its very subject, this essay-film presents not the product but the *process* of using still images to construct a narrative about the Nazi past. Over its course, Thompson performs eight narratives through the onscreen presentation of one or more photographs, each narrative iteration an attempt to realize more fully both the past recorded by the photographer and the story the filmmaker wishes to tell about it. This process begins with a single photograph that leads Thompson to visit several archives and to speculate and fantasize in ways that raise a number of questions. What can we know of Nazism and the Holocaust through archival photographs and their incorporation in narrative film? How do narratives adhere or fail to adhere to such images? How might the desire for certain narratives determine what is seen? How is the desire to witness others' suffering to be evaluated? How might our own ways of seeing—and the essay-filmmaker's "strong, personal point of view"—complicate efforts to bear witness to the other? In raising such questions, *Universal Hotel* encourages those seeking to witness the past through photographs to view these images and their own efforts with a critical eye—an eye that, turned back on the film, may discern presumptions and investments that underlie how the photographs are construed by the filmmaker.

#### THE ORIGINARY PHOTOGRAPH: THE FIRST AND SECOND NARRATIVE ITERATIONS

*Universal Hotel* begins with Thompson telephoning a number of European archives in search of information and photographs relating to the cold water freezing experiments conducted on prisoners at Dachau. "I need information on testpersons who were revived by the women from Ravensbrück," he

tells the director of one archive, and informs another that he will be going to archives in Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris, and Koblenz before travelling to Dachau. When Thompson's voiceover narration begins in earnest, addressing the viewer, we are told what motivates him to visit these archives. "1980. I open a book and see this photograph," he says, his words serving as a caption for the still photograph that appears on screen against a black background.



He continues:

It was taken in Germany in 1942. It records the freezing of a prisoner at Dachau. The prisoner is identified as "Testperson." The doctors sitting to either side are identified as Erich Holzlöhner and Sigmund Rascher. The purpose of the experiment is to find the best method to rewarm German pilots after they crash into arctic seas. The doctors have already tested rewarming methods ranging from boiling water to short waves. The doctors now test women as rewarming agents. They call this method "rewarming with animal heat." The book states that in one case during the rewarmings, a woman revived a testperson and the two had intercourse at the test site.<sup>17</sup>

What Thompson sees and reads in the book leads him to acquire more photographs of the Dachau cold water freezing experiments.

Here as throughout the film Thompson's voiceover makes for what film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum calls a "flat, uninflected delivery." Differing with critic Fred Camper's view that Thompson's narration is "so mechanical that it implies no degree of emoting could capture SS-perpetrated horrors," Rosenbaum proposes that Thompson is "suppressing overt emotion to make room for other kinds of emotional expressiveness, such as rhythm and the meaning of words."<sup>18</sup> A less generous interpretation

might relate the film's voiceover to Sontag's claim that "what seeing through photographs really invites is an acquisitive relation to the world that nourishes aesthetic awareness and promotes emotional detachment."<sup>19</sup>

But I would note that Thompson's undemonstrative narration leaves viewers to generate their own responses, unaided by the moralizing voiceover present in many documentaries or the dramatic musical score at work in both documentaries and docudramas.

Rather than condemn the distancing and dehumanizing language used by the doctors to carry out and document their experiments on human victims, Thompson adopts their pseudo-scientific terminology, referring to "the Testperson" and "rewarmings" throughout the film—one might say to ironic effect, though this will depend on the response of viewers.

Although Thompson suggests that his film originates in the moment he opened a book and saw the photograph of the Nazi doctors seated above a test subject, over the course of the film it becomes increasingly clear that he was struck less by this photograph than by what he read in the accompanying text. Indeed, *Universal Hotel* may be understood as the product of Thompson's effort to bear witness to what the image recording the freezing of a prisoner at Dachau does *not* show: the one case in which sexual intercourse occurred at the test site between prisoners forced to participate in the cold water freezing experiments. Wanting information and photographs that attest to this

one case, Thompson visits three archives where he finds four other photographs of the test subject—that is, assuming, as he does, that the prisoner in these images is the same prisoner photographed with Holzlöhner and Rascher; there is a resemblance, but given the difficulty of making out the Testperson's face in that photograph, one cannot be sure.

Thompson says that the photographs "form this sequence: The Testperson stands before the test site. He enters the water. He floats. He floats under the surveillance of doctors." In this narrative iteration, the original photograph is preceded by the four newly discovered images and no mention is made of women being used as "rewarming agents." The account of what transpired at Dachau is narrated in the perpetual present tense of the still image, as is that of the filmmaker's archival research ("1981. I find four photographs of the Testperson"). Collapsing time and place, the film reflects the temporality not of history but of fantasy and textuality: in reality, Thompson found four photographs in archives in Brussels, Amsterdam, and Paris, which he visited over three decades ago, whereas in the film his textual stand-in, the voiceover narrator, finds them presently. So too the freezing experiment at Dachau recurs each time the viewer joins Thompson in re-creating it through narrated sequences of photographs.

### LOOKING CLOSELY: THE THIRD AND FOURTH NARRATIVE ITERATIONS

After stating that in 1982 he finds several more photographs of the Testperson in the archive at Dachau, Thompson performs a third narrative iteration of what the sequence of photographs, now numbering twelve, show: "The Testperson changes into a flight uniform. He stands before the test site. He enters the water. He floats. He floats under the surveillance of doctors." This is followed by an account of two errors Thompson realizes he has made:

Then I learn something new from an archive in Chicago: that Doctor Holzlöhner left the rewarming ex-

periments four months before the rewarmings with animal heat began. His presence in this photograph means that it was taken at an earlier time and should not be grouped with the other eleven. Then I see something I've overlooked: The Testperson is already wet. So here he's not entering the water, he has left it. And having left it, he stands. Nowhere have I read that a testperson ever left the water fully conscious. So I begin again, and look closely.

In first presenting the photograph of Holzlöhner, Rascher, and the Testperson, Thompson states, "The doctors now test women as rewarming agents." Upon realizing that the photograph does not, in fact, belong to this "now," he removes it from the sequence of images. The originary photograph does not appear again in the film.

Given Thompson's attentiveness to noting and correcting errors, viewers may not observe problematic aspects of his narrative that the filmmaker himself appears to overlook. Most notably, nothing indicates that *any* of the twelve photographs were taken at the time "rearming with animal heat" was being tested, just as nothing indicates that the prisoner shown in these images is the Testperson who had intercourse with the woman who revived him. In fact, postwar testimony indicating that 360 to 400 experiments were conducted on 280 to 300 victims at Dachau makes this statistically unlikely.<sup>20</sup> Nor does the photograph of the prisoner standing in a wet flight suit prove, as Thompson intimates, that he left the tank of ice water fully conscious after prolonged immersion, in a remarkable show of endurance; that the photograph was staged to document the wet flight suit seems a more likely explanation. I assume that Thompson disregards these factors because they conflict with the narrative he wishes to tell.

Thompson preferences his fourth narrative iteration of the photographs with the words, "I begin again and look closely." What does looking closely involve? Other than observing photographic details ("The Testperson stands in a corner. One foot is bare.

He wears a flight jacket, flight pants, and one flight boot”), looking closely involves noting what is *not* shown in the photographs but culled from research—such as that the bins are thirteen feet square and six feet high, the ice water is five feet deep, and wires used for monitoring body temperature extend from the Testperson to a “surveillance table.” It also involves narrativizing the photographs by describing characters and sequences of events that are not shown, as when Thompson, like a writer of historical fiction, states that “Doctor Rascher and an orderly hold a ladder. Doctor Rascher holds the wires at the Testperson’s mouth and looks to the surveillance table.” Lastly, looking closely involves telling the previously untold story of the Testperson who left the water fully conscious. It involves, in short, crafting a narrative to convey what even the closest act of looking cannot make visible.

The fifth iteration of the photographic sequence suggests that it is not enough, in any case, to look closely at the photographs; one must peer beyond them, into the darkness that lies outside the image. To this end, Thompson introduces narrative strategies to render the time and place in which the photographs are taken. This iteration introduces the figure of the photographer and, for the first time, makes the taking of photographs part of the narrative: “[The Testperson] faces the photographer....He is ordered ‘turn left.’ Now he stands, his back to the photographer....He is pushed into the water....The photographer moves to the right to record the angle of the body floating on the surface of the water.” In previous iterations the duration of the still is determined by its illustrative function, the transition of one image to the next coordinated with the unfolding narrative; in this recitation each photograph appears only for a second or two, separated from the next by a black screen designating spans of time that cannot be shown because they were not photographed. The addition of sound effects—howling wind, the splash of water, footsteps, dog barking, a whistle, and, most notably, the camera’s shutter mechanism—creates an illusion of

immediacy and presence. In its very effort to transcend the fixity of the still image and recreate the photographed event, this iteration calls the viewer’s attention to how mute and inanimate are the photographs themselves.

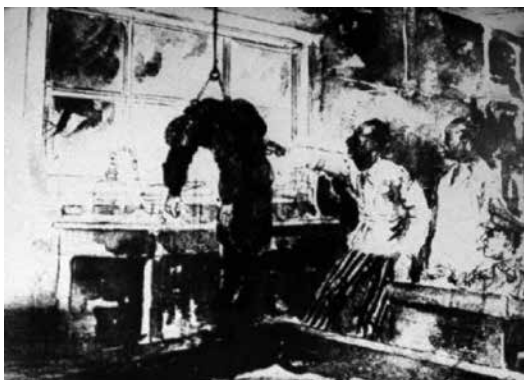
### THE SECOND TEST: THE SIXTH, SEVENTH, AND EIGHTH NARRATIVE ITERATIONS

The sixth iteration introduces a new character: a prisoner from the Ravensbrück women’s concentration camp sent by train to serve in the experiments. Thompson states that whereas the Testperson “was chosen by chance,” this woman “is chosen for a reason: her profession has been demonstrated”: she is a prostitute. Lacking images to portray her, the filmmaker settles on pairing his voiceover narration with a series of close-up images of the Testperson’s head joined by dissolves. This marks a shift in the relation between word and image, for they are no longer mutually descriptive, the narrative explaining the photographs and the photographs illustrating the narrative. That is the case, at least, until the Testperson returns, replacing the woman prisoner as the subject of the narration. For seven months, says Thompson, testpersons have lost consciousness within 53 to 100 minutes of entering the freezing water; “But this prisoner stands at the end of his test.”<sup>21</sup> Onscreen, a close-up image serves to show the face of “this prisoner.” Then, as if to compensate for the momentary disconnect between word and image, a brief seventh narrative iteration pairs a sequence of photographic details with descriptions of what they show: “The details of uniform layering....The details of the retrieval: how the Testperson can still climb a ladder after suffering from deep cold.”

With the sixth narrative iteration Thompson implies that the woman from Ravensbrück arrived at Dachau at about the same time that the Testperson left the water fully conscious. She and the Testperson are brought together in the eighth and final narrative iteration, which begins: “The test site

and the prisoner's uniform are prepared for a second test. The surveillance table is again monitored." The invention of a *second* test immediately following the test recounted in previous iterations allows Thompson to connect the test documented in the photographs with the incident in which "a woman revived a testperson and the two had intercourse at the test site."<sup>22</sup>

In the second test, the Testperson does not climb out of the water and stand before the photographer or Doctor Rascher, but, like the other test subjects, loses consciousness. The narrative continues: "Doctor Rascher leans over the bins. Now he gives the order. A rope is lowered from the ceiling and the Testperson is raised from the water. Doctor Rascher now sits at the surveillance table and lights a cigarette. The artist who sketched the end of the second test is identified in the Dachau archive by the last name of Tauber." Having exhausted his supply of archival photographs in illustrating the first test, and having gone on to narrate events that are not implied by those photographs, Thompson must find or make new images to accompany his spoken narrative. This he does. The images take the form of film footage of ice water and two drawings, the first depicting the prisoner in the water and the second showing him raised above it by a rope or cable.



As one drawing dissolves into the other, the narrator says "the Testperson is raised from the water" and splashing is heard. The confluence of sound and image create the illusion of an animated moment. In refer-

ring to "[t]he artist who sketched the end of the second test," Thompson locates the artist (as he has the photographer) at the test site on the remarkable day in which the Testperson left the water fully conscious, necessitating a second test which also ends remarkably. Narrating what he sees in the moment captured by the artist's second sketch, Thompson states, "Doctor Rascher now sits at the surveillance table and lights a cigarette." One can make much of the post-coital cigarette, but is that Rascher in military uniform, or is he the figure in a white lab coat standing next to the prisoner-functionary who reaches for the limp Testperson?

While lacking the authenticity and verisimilitude accorded photographs, the sketches depict moments more dramatic than those recorded in the posed photographs. In their surfeit of detail, somewhat haphazard cropping of the image, and freezing of scenes mid-action, these hand drawn images appear "photographic" in a way those photographs do not. As if recognizing that their sudden, unexpected appearance might disrupt the narrative, Thompson interrupts the story he tells to provide an explanation: the images are sketches made by someone named Tauber (a prisoner?); found in the Dachau archive, they have the status of documentary evidence. The moving images of ice water do not have this status. Created by the filmmaker, these beautifully lit, tonally rich black-and-white images mark the explicit intrusion of artistry. They also mark a docudrama-like move toward cinematic reenactment, but one undercut by the way in which the close-up, fixed-frame images of light playing on water appear more abstract than illustrative.

Over the darkly shimmering images of ice water the narrator says:

The Testperson is retrieved from the bins unconscious, and the testpersons are placed together on a platform, under bright lights. She revives him. In the midst of the revival they make the gesture of intercourse. In the test report addressed to the Chief of the Secret



State Police, Doctor Rascher will write that animal heat plus intercourse is as effective a rewarming agent as boiling water. After the test, Doctor Rascher leaves Dachau and drives home to his family in Munich.

With this, the conclusion of his last and longest narrative iteration, Thompson joins the one case in which a prisoner-test subject left the water fully conscious with the one case in which a prisoner-test subject had intercourse with the woman who revived him after he lost consciousness in the water. In performing these narrative iterations, Thompson uses archival photographs and other images to re-create, as it were, an event based no more (and perhaps less) in history than in speculation and fantasy.

As the film progresses, the iterations increasingly make aesthetic, rather than referential, use of the photographs, which are shown in extreme close-up; and they increasingly incorporate sound effects as well as non-photographic and non-archival images. This suggests the limited ability of archival photographs to illustrate, authenticate, and bring immediacy to narratives about the past, and a corresponding need to supplement the still image with artistry. Sontag contends that the original uses to which photographs are put are inevitably "modified, eventually supplanted by subsequent uses—most notably, by the discourse of art into which any photograph may be absorbed."<sup>23</sup> This discourse may restage rather than counter previous uses. In its use and re-use of the Dachau photographs, *Universal Hotel* portrays the discourse of art as an intermeshing of history, memory, and imagination.

### **"MY DEAR REICH LEADER": AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE ITERATION**

A contrasting narrative about the testing of women as "rewarming agents" at Dachau can be constructed by turning from the photographs Thompson gathered from various archives to another archival source:

the transcript of the Doctors' Trial held in Nuremberg, Germany, from December 1946 to August 1947.<sup>24</sup> This first volume of *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10* contains briefs, documents, and testimony on the cold water freezing experiments, including reports and letters sent between Rascher and Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer* of the SS and chief overseer of the extermination of European Jewry.

"My dear Reich Leader," writes Rascher to Himmler in September 1942, "May I submit to you the first intermediary report about the freezing experiments?"<sup>25</sup> The report concludes that because body temperature continued to drop rapidly after subjects were removed from the ice water, with "experimental subjects" dying "invariably" when body temperature reached 28 °C, rapid rewarming methods are preferable to slow ones. "I think for this reason we can dispense with the attempt to save intensely chilled subjects by means of animal heat," writes Rascher. "Rewarming by animal warmth—animal bodies or women's bodies—would be too slow."<sup>26</sup> But Himmler was not so easily discouraged. At the Doctors' Trial, Hans Wolfgang Romberg, a physician from the German Experimental Institute of Aviation, testified that at Dachau Himmler told Rascher "that a fisherwoman could well take her half-frozen husband into her bed and revive him in that manner. Everyone said that animal warmth had a different effect than artificial warmth."<sup>27</sup> In response to the report, Himmler writes Rascher: "Despite everything, I would so arrange the experiments that all possibilities, prompt warming, medicine, body warming, will be executed...."<sup>28</sup>

In an October 1942 letter to Himmler's personal aide Rudolf Brandt, Rascher reports that "the experiments have been concluded, with the exception of those on warming with body heat," and that he had only now received the Reich Leader's letter, which was delayed on account of "incomplete address." It seems Rascher had not planned on conducting additional

cold water freezing experiments, but upon receiving the letter he acted at once, requesting that "four gypsy women be procured at once from another camp."<sup>29</sup> Still, Rascher would not report his findings on "warming with body heat" until over four months later. In October 1942 Himmler received a report signed by Doctors Holzlöhner, Rascher, and Finke that concludes: "The most effective therapeutic measure is rapid and intensive heat treatment, best applied by immersion in a hot bath."<sup>30</sup> The doctors acknowledge that "in the practice of sea rescue service it will not be possible to carry out this method, since the necessary means are not available in aircraft and boats," but do not recommend alternative methods.<sup>31</sup> Himmler writes Rascher: "I have read your report regarding cooling experiments on humans with great interest.... I am very curious as to the experiments with body warmth. I personally take it that these experiments will probably bring the best and lasting results. Naturally, I could be mistaken. Keep me informed on future findings."<sup>32</sup>

At the Doctors' Trial, Rascher's former assistant, Walter Neff, stated that Holzlöhner and Finke discontinued the experiments at the end of October 1942, "giving the reason that they had accomplished their purpose and that it was useless to carry out further experiments of that kind."<sup>33</sup> Holzlöhner and Finke appear to have thought the experiments using women as rewarming agents were of no scientific value, but Rascher continued on. In a memorandum dated November 1942, Rascher voices objection to one of the four prisoners sent to him from the brothel at Ravensbrück. He is troubled that she is not a gypsy but "shows unobjectionably Nordic racial characteristics: blond hair, blue eyes, corresponding head and body structure, 21¾ years of age." He recounts telling her that "it was a great shame to volunteer as a prostitute" and her reply that prisoners were told volunteers would be released from Ravensbrück in half a year, and that conditions in the brothel were preferable to those in the camp. The memorandum concludes: "It hurts my racial feelings to

expose to racially inferior concentration camp elements a girl as a prostitute who has the appearance of a pure Nordic and who could perhaps by assignment of proper work be put on the right road. Therefore, I refused to use this girl for my experimental purposes..."<sup>34</sup>

Rascher's summary report to Himmler on "the rewarming of intensely chilled human beings by animal warmth" is marked "Secret" and dated February 1943. It reads:

The experimental subjects were removed from the water when their rectal temperature reached 30 °C. At this time the experimental subjects had all lost consciousness. In eight cases the experimental subjects were then placed between two naked women in a spacious bed. The women were supposed to nestle as closely as possible to the chilled person. Then all three persons were covered with blankets.... Once the subjects regained consciousness they did not lose it again, but very quickly grasped the situation and snuggled up to the naked female bodies. The rise of body temperature then occurred at about the same speed as in experimental subjects who had been rewarmed by packing in blankets. Exceptions were four experimental subjects who, at body temperatures between 30 °C and 32 °C, performed the act of sexual intercourse. In these experimental subjects the temperature rose very rapidly after sexual intercourse, which could be compared with the speedy rise in temperature in a hot bath.<sup>35</sup>

Rascher goes on to write that in another set of experiments the unconscious subjects were rewarmed by a single woman, with better results: in all but one case, which resulted in death, body temperature rose more quickly and subjects rapidly regained consciousness. Rascher surmises that "in warming by one woman only, personal inhibitions are removed, and the woman nestles up to the chilled individual much more intimately."<sup>36</sup>

Still, Rascher pronounces “re-warming with animal heat” too slow a method to prove practical, for really it is not nestling and snuggling but copulating that produces the necessary results. “Only such experimental subjects whose physical condition permitted sexual intercourse rewarmed themselves remarkably quickly and showed an equally strikingly rapid return to complete physical well-being,” he reports, without indicating how many subjects “rewarmed themselves” in this way. He concludes that resuscitation by animal warmth can only be recommended when other methods are unavailable, or when the intensely chilled human beings are “special-ly tender,” as in the case of “small children, who are best rewarmed by the body of their mothers.”<sup>37</sup> In ending his report with this curious example so evocative of the incest taboo, Rascher gestures toward the social inhibitions that impede him from explicitly advocating sexual intercourse as a method for re-warming German pilots recovered from the North Sea.

### THE ONE CASE: REVISITING THE EIGHTH NARRATIVE ITERATION

Was sexual intercourse during the freezing experiments consensual or forced upon women prisoners, initiated by male or female prisoners or instigated by Rascher? How libidinous could these men suffering from hypothermia and women enslaved as prostitutes have been? The narrative I have constructed from archival materials relating to the Nuremberg Doctors’ Trial provides no more indication of what any prisoner-test subject was thinking and feeling than do the narratives in *Universal Hotel*. It does, however, draw attention to choices Thompson made in telling of the “one case during the re-warmings” when “a woman revived a testperson and the two had intercourse at the test site.” Most notably, it indicates—if Rascher’s report is to be believed—that what appears in *Universal Hotel* as a *singular* episode occurred numerous times during the cold water freezing experiments, to the

point that Rascher could measure and compare the body temperatures of test subjects who did and did not engage in sexual intercourse. According to Rascher’s report, of the eight subjects “placed between two naked women in a spacious bed,” half engaged in sexual intercourse. His observation that the women who “warmed” unconscious test subjects individually, rather than in pairs, were less inhibited and nestled “much more intimately” suggests that the incidence of intercourse was even greater in that set of experiments. Rather than an exceptional occurrence, sexual intercourse between the male and female prisoners forced to participate in the “animal warmth” experiments appears in Rascher’s report as a routine sign of a test subject’s “return to complete physical well-being.”

Just as Thompson’s narrative combines the story of the Testperson who left the water fully conscious with that of the Testperson who had intercourse at the test site, so it combines various incidents of sexual intercourse between prisoners during the Dachau freezing experiments into “one case.” Rather than addressing the peculiar *normalization* of sexual intercourse in the freezing experiments, as indicated by the degree to which sex acts were anticipated, monitored, and measured, Thompson’s narrative portrays the act of intercourse as a shocking anomaly, albeit one that Rascher would banalize in his report by writing that “animal heat plus intercourse is as effective a re-warming agent as boiling water.” This is not quite what appears in the actual report, and not only because Thompson speaks of boiling water whereas Rascher writes of a hot bath.<sup>38</sup> And yet, these few words nicely encapsulate the *subtext* of that report—i.e., that copulation is a most effective re-warming method.

Thompson’s narrative not only condenses Rascher’s summary report on two sets of experiments into a few words, but also condenses the summary report into a “test report” on a single re-warming experiment. Likewise, it condenses the four prisoners sent to Dachau from the Ravensbrück brothel into a single woman, and the many

prisoners immersed in the freezing water into a single Testperson. Thompson crafts his narrative in much the same way that writers of creative nonfiction might “condense time, make omissions,...and make composite characters.”<sup>39</sup> Docudramas are likewise crafted in this way; in *Schindler’s List*, for example, two central figures, Itzhak Stern and Helen Hirsch, are composite characters, and scenes depicting the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto and the creation of the titular list radically condense events.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the narrative iterations in *Universal Hotel* reflect the logic of the photograph, which depicts not representative or recurring moments but what was before the lens at a specific instant, a “captured moment.” Just as the photograph presents the singularity of each recorded moment, so the stories Thompson uses them to tell presume the singular quality of the persons and events in those stories: there is but one Testperson, one woman from Ravensbrück, and one case of intercourse at the test site.

Why should the filmmaker be invested in telling this particular story? Why should the very method of rewarmed that so preoccupied Himmler be of particular interest to Thompson and, by extension, to viewers of his film? While the sexual content suggests a voyeuristic or prurient interest, Thompson’s description of the sexual act (“In the midst of the revival they make the gesture of intercourse”) is decidedly nongraphic, inexplicit, anticlimactic. The narrative climaxes, instead, by evoking the *banality of evil* famously ascribed by Hannah Arendt to Adolf Eichmann, both by citing the bureaucratic language of Rascher’s report and by concluding on a note that locates Rascher in the banal world of the everyday: “After the test, Doctor Rascher leaves Dachau and drives home to his family in Munich.” And yet, if witness testimony is any indication, Rascher was a sadistic killer and his home life was anything but banal. In fact, he and his wife were arrested when it was discovered that Frau Rascher had faked her pregnancies and the couple had

purchased or abducted their three children. The Raschers were imprisoned for these crimes and, reportedly on Himmler’s order, executed near the end of the war.<sup>41</sup>

The moment of sexual intercourse between prisoners at Dachau proves anticlimactic in the eighth narrative iteration not only due to the vague language with which the narrator gestures to it, but also because the act remains unseen: the filmmaker has found nothing in the archives to render it visible. Toward the end of *Universal Hotel* Thompson states: “Bunker Five, Dachau. The tests took place here forty years ago. The test site has no drama. Just a concrete foundation. Rocks. Grass. A wall. And the traffic between Dachau and Munich.” The accompanying image shows the concrete foundation where the bunker once stood. Shot from ground level and in color, the image is nearly abstract, made legible only by the appearance of trees, traffic, and people crossing in the distance, across the top of the frame. Where there is nothing to see of the past there is no drama.



### A STRANGE DREAM:

#### A FANTASY METANARRATIVE

The condensing of time, persons, and events in Thompson’s narrative iterations reflects not only the logic of photography but also what Freud describes as the work of condensation in dreams. Much as writers and filmmakers create composite characters, so dreams often include “collective figures” who merge “the actual features of two or more people into a single dream-image.”<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Thompson's engagement with the Dachau photographs should result in an explicit dream narrative. Between his performances of the film's first and second narrative iterations, he tells the following story: "1980. I have a strange dream. Between a fortress and a cathedral is the Universal Hotel. From my hotel window I can see the cathedral's on fire. Outside the hotel, time moves quickly. Inside is the test site where time has stopped. The Testperson stands behind a closed door. We speak through it. I wake and write down what I remember of our conversation." The film returns to his dream after the eighth and final narrative iteration. Presumably following the script of what he wrote down, Thompson performs both speaking roles, playing himself and the Testperson in his dream, while black-and-white moving images of ice water appear again onscreen.

The conversation begins with Thompson saying "Open it," to which the Testperson replies: "If you force it, I'll go behind another door, in another room." The Testperson is unwilling to be seen and declines to give his name. He claims that "talking about the water isn't possible," both for those like himself who were there and for those like Thompson who were not. Their conversation concludes:

Me: I'll be your witness.

Him: Don't dare talk to me about that. I had enough of that.

Me: I want to talk with you.

Him: You might be talking with yourself. I might already have walked away.

Me: Go ahead, walk. I might hear your footsteps.

The notion that *to listen to the witness is to become a witness*, and that to attain an adequately informed and ethical relation to the Holocaust one must become such a witness, is central to much discourse on the Holocaust.<sup>43</sup> Now, when nearly 52,000 witness testimonies on the Holocaust have been collected in a digital archive for educational

purposes, Thompson's dream conversation with the Testperson is all the more notable for speaking to all that *cannot* be witnessed.<sup>44</sup>

As a ghostly figure, a victim who most likely perished in the Holocaust, the Testperson may be taken to represent what Primo Levi has called "the true witnesses," those who "have not returned or have returned mute," and whose testimonies—unlike those of the survivors who comprise an "anomalous minority," even when they number in the tens of thousands—we cannot witness.<sup>45</sup> The Testperson's objection to "talking about the water" suggests that not all brutalized and humiliated victims of Nazi persecution might wish to have their traumatic experiences revisited, documented, and witnessed by others. I recall the photograph in *Music Box* of the woman hiding her face from the camera's view; even though a staged simulation, it serves as a reminder that a great many archival images of the victims, including those of the Testperson, were made by and for the perpetrators.

In Thompson's dream, the Testperson who floated under the surveillance of doctors and posed for the photographer now stands unseen behind a door. What is to be made of Thompson's unyielding determination to be his witness? The filmmaker's insistence and goading of the Testperson ("Go ahead, walk") suggests that the desire to be an eyewitness to another's traumatic history is ethically complicated, that bearing witness may be a selfish rather than selfless act. The Testperson's remark that he "might already have walked away," that Thompson might be talking with himself, is particularly interesting for being true on two levels: in both the dream and his recounting of it, Thompson *does* talk with himself, the Testperson being a figment of his imagination. Taken to its limit, the Testperson's remark suggests that in looking at archival photographs, video testimonies, or cinematic re-creations, we are witnesses not to past events but to our own shadows playing on the wall of Plato's cave.

Thompson's dream encounter with the Testperson resonates with a real-life en-

counter the filmmaker had with a Holocaust survivor in Guatemala in 1979, a year before he saw the photograph of the Testperson and had a strange dream about him. Thompson tells of this encounter in his 1987 film *Universal Citizen*, which may be viewed as a companion piece to *Universal Hotel*.<sup>46</sup> The description he provides of this larger-than-life character, a smuggler who may also be a pimp, strongly evokes the Testperson: "He is a Jew born in Libya and schooled in six countries. He was an inmate at Dachau. It was freezing there. There he dreamed of hot baths and swore he would live in the tropics if he survived. Now he floats in Guatemala every afternoon. And every evening he and a different woman drive into the jungle." The confluence of narrative details and the dream-condensation of time and space (the test site being inside the Universal Hotel, an actual hotel in Guatemala) suggest a shared identity between this survivor and the Testperson. It is tempting to "rescue" the Testperson by imagining that he survived Dachau and is the survivor Thompson meets in Guatemala, that the prisoner who was immersed in ice water in Bunker Five now floats everyday in tropical waters.

But is it tempting to imagine that the Testperson who had sexual intercourse with a woman at the test site now drives into the jungle every evening with a different woman? Thompson names one of these women: she is "Raven, a prostitute from Haiti, who sees clients on the sunroof" of the man's house. The doubling of the Dachau prisoner is completed by his pairing with a prostitute in both films (Raven a kind of shorthand for Ravensbrück), and in both films sexual intercourse is taken to be a life-affirming, revitalizing act.<sup>47</sup> The male victim of Nazism who asserts his survival through intercourse with women is an identifiable, if less noted, trope in Holocaust discourse; I think, for instance, of Noah, "the lover of all women" in Primo Levi's memoir *The Reawakening*. Following the liberation of Auschwitz, writes Levi, this former inmate "wandered around the [main camp's] feminine dormitories like an oriental prince, dressed in an arabesque many-

coloured coat, full of patches and braid," in search of sex partners: "The deluge was over; in the black sky of Auschwitz, Noah saw a rainbow shine out, and the world was his, to repopulate."<sup>48</sup> In *Universal Hotel* the first test ends with the Testperson standing, the second with him copulating—both acts expressions of the victim's virility, his defiant lust for life. In *Universal Citizen* the survivor's relations with women similarly denote his vitality.

The survivor in *Universal Citizen* is also like the Testperson in his refusal to be a witness and to be witnessed. Thompson imagines him not only giving his testimony, but doing so in a highly performative manner for the camera. He says: "I'm staying at the Universal Hotel, and begin to think of him as a Universal Citizen. And then think of filming him on his sunroof, with him changing languages with each turn, and telling about his life in the country of the language he's speaking." The Universal Citizen, however, refuses to take direction or tell his story on film. He agrees only to be filmed from afar when he is floating in an inner tube on the lake and "can't really be seen." The Testperson had no choice but to perform for the photographer and doctors at Dachau; but in the dream he, like the Universal Citizen, can refuse the filmmaker: "I had enough of that."

*Universal Hotel* ends with a curious coda: "1982. While walking to an archive in Amsterdam I hear pulsing sounds and follow them. By chance they come from a memorial to the women of Ravensbrück. Above the inscription is a defacement: Stradzinsky. That week, as I walked to other archives, I noticed Stradzinsky written on other walls." The accompanying film images show the memorial, followed by zoom shots of the graffitied name. Next an older man is shown gesturing to graffiti on a storefront where "Stradzinsky" twice appears. Thompson says: "This man asked me what I was doing. 'Filming names,' I said. He said, 'I've painted this wall three times to take away the names. After each time the names come back. Look, even here. The names come back even here.

They come at night when I'm asleep." The film then ends with a series of close-up, solarized images of the Testperson's face that morph, darken, and fade to black.



Much as Thompson speaks of one Testperson and one case of intercourse at the test site, so "the names [that] come back" are condensed into one name: Stradzinsky. That name is a metaphor, but of what? Recalling the Testperson of Thompson's dream, we might assume that the names that come back in the night belong to the dead, who compel us to remember the past just as Thompson is compelled to tell the story of the Testperson. And yet, this victim's name does not come back: the Testperson refuses to speak it, just as he refuses to speak of the past. The name "Stradzinsky," moreover, belongs not to the dead but to the living, and not to the victims of Nazi genocide but to one who intrudes upon their memorial space by writing himself into it. I think of Thompson coming to the test site at night when he is asleep, and returning to that place "where time has stopped" with each narrative iteration. Meeting the gaze of the Testperson's spectral face at his film's conclusion, I wonder whether it is really the dead who haunt the living, and not the living who haunt the dead.

Another curious coda: recently I received an e-mail from Peter Thompson, whom I had contacted after drafting an earlier version of this essay. He informed me that in digitizing and restoring *Universal Citizen*

for DVD he made a change to the voiceover. This change, which he had wanted to make for years, concerned the Universal Citizen's stories about Dachau. "I never really fully trusted them," he writes. "Over the years that mistrust has solidified."<sup>49</sup> Thompson voices this mistrust in the following narration, added to *Universal Citizen* twenty-five years after he made the film: "As I spend time with the Universal Citizen, his Dachau stories don't ring true—and when *those* don't ring true, things that I can see don't either. Little things—things right in front of me that I didn't notice....I'm left with what I can see, and hear, and feel...that he does speak six languages, that he likes water, and that I like him."

Is the Universal Citizen a Stradzinsky, falsely including himself among the victims? Is he a Wilkomirski, who never experienced Nazi persecution but portrayed himself as a survivor of the camps, or a Kosinski, who did survive the Holocaust but told stories that misrepresent his wartime experiences?<sup>50</sup> The unusual step Thompson has taken in revising his film so long after its completion indicates that the truth—fidelity to history, memory, and biography—matters deeply to this filmmaker. At the same time, his latest narrative iteration, with its reflective consideration of what does and does not "ring true," suggests that we come no closer to the truth than when honestly giving voice to uncertainty.

### ONE NAME, TWO DRAWINGS, ELEVEN PHOTOGRAPHS:

#### A NARRATIVE DECONSTRUCTION

In his discussion of the essay-film, Lopate writes that the essay often follows "a helically descending path, working through preliminary supposition to reach a more difficult core of honesty."<sup>51</sup> If the series of narrative iterations take viewers of *Universal Hotel* down this path, the sequence near the end of the film showing Bunker

Five, Dachau, forty years after the freezing experiments were conducted there, marks the point at which this core is reached. Over the barren image of the concrete foundation, Thompson states:

What I found in seven archives is one name, two drawings, and eleven photographs. The name is the equivalent of a number, the two drawings could document the end of any test, and the eleven photographs emphasize a uniform: how it fastens and how it sags when wet. The making of uniforms was the duty of the Ministry of Textiles. The photographer made the photographs for their designers. I make statements about the photographs that cannot be proven. I speak with uncertainty.

With these words Thompson deconstructs the narrative he has developed over the course of the film through a series of iterations, reducing that narrative to its constituent parts (one name, two drawings, eleven photographs) and acknowledging imaginative leaps taken. At the same time, these words can be construed as a ninth narrative iteration, as they offer yet another story about what the photographs show. In this instance, however, none of the archival images accompany the narrative voiceover; instead Thompson's voice is situated at the scene of the crime, where the absence of a trace of the past is what most meets the eye.

I am reminded of Sontag's remark that as the "missing voice" of the photograph, the caption is "expected to speak for truth," but will fail because "the caption-glove slips on and off so easily" and because whatever truth it speaks will always be partial and limiting.<sup>52</sup> Thompson would provide the missing voice for the archival photographs he has found—indeed, he would *be* that missing voice; but having presented viewers with a sequence of narrative performances as if slipping on and off a series of caption-gloves, he concludes that he speaks not "for truth" but "with uncertainty." Through research he can ascertain for whom and why the photographs were taken, but he cannot

access the lived reality that was before the lens when they were taken.

In *Music Box*, where photographs illustrate the precise events recounted by surviving witnesses, narratives and photographs about the Holocaust are mutually reinforcing: the narratives explain the photographs and the photographs authenticate the narratives. In *Universal Hotel*, by contrast, neither narratives nor photographs prove stable, as is generally the case outside works of fiction. In concluding that his statements made about the photographs cannot be proven, Thompson acknowledges the limits of his efforts to re-create a past event through still photographs and narrative film. *Universal Hotel* speaks to the limits of such efforts, which is not to say that its viewers do not learn something about the cold water freezing experiments conducted at Dachau, the treatment of prisoners as test subjects, and the mentality of Nazi doctors. What is learned, however, is grounded not in the evidentiary truth of photographic images, but in how powerfully these images invite narrative elaboration in lieu of providing explanation. That photographs are far less capable of authenticating narratives than of generating them is the most important lesson to be learned from Thompson's short film about the Holocaust.

The same footage which opens *Universal Hotel* concludes *Universal Citizen*: a woman wearing a long skirt and carrying a bag is shown walking away from the camera, veering off to the right and out of the frame. At the start of *Universal Hotel* Thompson is heard telephoning archives while this incongruous footage appears onscreen, whereas at the end of *Universal Citizen* he provides the following account of it: "In 1981, after trying to film a man and a woman I couldn't find, Mary and I walked through a plaza in another country. I bet her that she couldn't walk to the white fountain with her eyes shut. 'Oh, that's simple,' she said. 'It's right in front of me.'" I recall the fifth narrative iteration of the Dachau photographs, in which the screen is black except at those fleeting moments when a photograph appears on



screen, framed by the sounds of the camera's cocking and film advance mechanisms. We can look closely at archival photographs, but in seeking the past they record we step into the darkness that lies outside the image, like Mary walking with eyes closed toward a fountain she will not reach, like Peter Thompson talking to the Testperson who might already have walked away. *Universal Hotel* is a meditation on what we do in the dark as we seek, through photographic images and narrative means, to know a past that lies behind a closed door.

## Notes

I wish to thank the editors and Julia Carlson for their very helpful suggestions, and Peter Thompson for his great generosity and willingness to discuss his films with me.

<sup>1</sup>*Universal Hotel; Universal Citizen: A Film Diptych* by Peter Thompson, DVD, directed by Peter Thompson (1986, 1987; Chicago: Chicago Media Works, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, Judith E. Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*. 2nd ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002); Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*. 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003); Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Robert C. Reimer and Carol J. Reimer, *Historical Dictionary of Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Saul Friedlander, Introduction to *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 2.

<sup>4</sup>Phillip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film," in *Totally, Tenderly, Tragically: Essays and Criticism from a Lifelong Love Affair with the Movies* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 280, 283-84.

<sup>5</sup>Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor, 1977), 71.

<sup>6</sup>Sontag, *On Photography*, 108-9.

<sup>7</sup>Sontag, *On Photography*, 5.

<sup>8</sup>*Music Box*, DVD, directed by Costa-

Gavras (1989; Santa Monica, CA: Artisan Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>9</sup>*Persona*, DVD, directed by Ingmar Bergman (1966; Los Angeles: MGM Home Entertainment, 2004).

<sup>10</sup>James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequence of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), 57.

<sup>11</sup>Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 60.

<sup>12</sup>*Shoah*, DVD, directed by Claude Lanzmann (1985; New York: New Yorker Video, 2003).

<sup>13</sup>That said, the use of re-creations or reenactments dates back to the earliest documentary films and has become an increasingly common practice as documentaries have become a more popular form of entertainment. For a brief discussion of the ethics of reenactment in documentary film, see Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 22-25.

<sup>14</sup>*Schindler's List*, DVD, directed by Steven Spielberg (1993; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2004); Sara R. Horowitz, "But is It Good for the Jews?: Spielberg's Schindler and the Aesthetics of Atrocity," in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997), 122.

<sup>15</sup>Claude Lanzmann, "Why Spielberg Has Distorted the Truth," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, April 3, 1994, 14.

<sup>16</sup>Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.

<sup>17</sup>While Holzlöhner may be identified as "Erich" in the book of which Thompson speaks, the doctor who oversaw the Dachau experiments (and committed suicide in 1945) was Ernst Holzlöhner, a professor of physiology at the Medical School of Kiel University. He supervised Rascher and Erich Finke. "Erich Holzlöhner" conflates the names of the two doctors who worked with Rascher before they left him to conduct the "re-warming with animal heat" experiments on his own. Wolfgang U. Eckart and Hana Vondra, "Disregard for Human Life: Hypothermia

Experiments in the Dachau Concentration Camp," in *Man, Medicine, and the State: The Human Body as an Object of Government Sponsored Medical Research in the 20th Century*, ed. Wolfgang U. Eckart (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006), 158, 165.

<sup>18</sup>Jonathan Rosenbaum, "A Handful of World: The Films of Peter Thompson, an Introduction and Interview," *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (Fall 2009), 38; Fred Camper, "The Memory of History: Films by Wilst, Thompson, and Sanborn," *Chicago Reader*, April 5, 2001, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-memory-of-history-films-by-wilst-thompson-and-sanborn/Content?oid=905060>.

<sup>19</sup>Sontag, *On Photography*, 111.

<sup>20</sup>Robert L. Berger, "Nazi Science: The Dachau Hypothermia Experiments," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 322, no. 20 (May 17, 1990), 1436.

<sup>21</sup>Thompson states in the film that "the tests have continued since July. It is now January, 1942." He appears to misspeak (saying 1942 instead of 1943) since it has been determined, based on archival documents and witness testimony, that the cold water experiments were conducted from August 1942 to May 1943.

<sup>22</sup>Thompson was already laying the groundwork to introduce the second test in his fifth narrative iteration, for there, after stating that the photographer moves to the right to record the prisoner floating in the water, he says, "The first test ends."

<sup>23</sup>Sontag, *On Photography*, 106.

<sup>24</sup>The Doctors' Trial (officially *United States of America v. Karl Brandt, et al.*) was the first of twelve war crime trials conducted by U.S. authorities in Nuremberg following the Trial of the Major War Criminals conducted by the Allied forces in 1945-46.

<sup>25</sup>*Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10*, vol. 1 (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1949), [http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military\\_Law/NTs\\_war-criminals.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/NTs_war-criminals.html), 219.

<sup>26</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 220.

<sup>27</sup>Maura Phillips Mackowski, *Testing the Limits: Aviation Medicine and the Origins*

*of Manned Space Flight* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M UP, 2006), 94.

<sup>28</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 221.

<sup>29</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 222.

<sup>30</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 242.

<sup>31</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 235.

<sup>32</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 244.

<sup>33</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 261.

<sup>34</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 245.

<sup>35</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 250-51.

<sup>36</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 251.

<sup>37</sup>*Trials of War Criminals*, 251.

<sup>38</sup>Here it is interesting to note the Doctors' Trial testimony of Anton Pacholegg, a Dachau prisoner who served the doctors as a clerk. "Another experiment conducted with these half-frozen, unconscious people was to take a man and throw him in boiling water of varying temperatures and take readings on his physical reactions from extreme cold to extreme heat," he testified. "The victims came out looking like lobsters. Some lived but most of them died." "Translation of Document No. 2428 PS Office of U. S. Chief of Counsel: Testimony of Anton Pacholegg at Dachau, Germany, at 13,00 Hours on 13 May 1945," HLSL Item No. 3080 in *Harvard Law School Library Nuremberg Trials Project: A Digital Document Collection*, <http://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu>, 6.

<sup>39</sup>Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz, *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 164.

<sup>40</sup>Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004), 157, 159.

<sup>41</sup>Berger, "Nazi Science," 1439.

<sup>42</sup>Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin, 1991), 400.

<sup>43</sup>Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 130-31; Annette Wiewiorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006), 133-36.

<sup>44</sup>Steven Spielberg established the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in 1994 to amass testimony from witnesses of the Holocaust. In 2006 its collection of nearly 52,000 video testimonies was given to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and the foundation was renamed the

USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education. "About the Institute," USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, 2007-2012, <http://dornsife.usc.edu/vhi/aboutus/>.

<sup>45</sup>Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage, 1988), 83-84.

<sup>46</sup>*Universal Hotel; Universal Citizen: A Film Diptych* by Peter Thompson. "I think of these films as a diptych," states Thompson in his "Director's Introduction" on the DVD. Information on ordering Thompson's films is available at the Chicago Media Works website, <http://www.chicagomediaworks.com>.

<sup>47</sup>Thompson informs me that the Haitian prostitute's street name was Corbeau, writing, "That translates as 'Raven.' I speak French and was aware of the historical echo that happened when translated into English, so I happily went with that." Peter Thompson, e-mail message to author, August 22, 2012.

<sup>48</sup>Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Touchstone, 1965), 31.

<sup>49</sup>Peter Thompson, e-mail message to author, April 23, 2012.

<sup>50</sup>Benjamin Wilkomirski authored a 1995 memoir, published in English as *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (trans. Carol Brown Janeway, New York: Schocken, 1996), in which he portrays a horrific childhood spent in Nazi camps. The book was deemed a literary fraud in 1999, when it was determined that Wilkomirski, born and raised in Switzerland, had never been in the camps. Jerzy Kosinski encouraged his novel *The Painted Bird* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) to be read as his memoir, although he and his parents survived the war in hiding with a Polish family, and the child protagonist of his novel spent the war wandering the Polish countryside alone, suffering one horror after another.

<sup>51</sup>Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur," 281.

<sup>52</sup>Sontag, *On Photography*, 108-9.

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## Filmography

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- Persona* (dir. Ingmar Bergman, Sweden, 1966)
- Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg USA, 1993)
- Shoah* (dir. Claude Lanzmann, France, 1985)
- Universal Citizen* (dir. Peter Thompson, USA, 1987)
- Universal Hotel* (dir. Peter Thompson, USA, 1986)

# THE MISSING LINKS OF HOLOCAUST CINEMA: EVACUATION IN SOVIET FILMS

OLGA GERSHENSON

One of the unique features of the Holocaust on Soviet soil was the evacuation of Jews from Nazi-occupied territories to the Soviet rear.<sup>1</sup> Its effects are hard to overestimate. As historian Mordechai Altshuler points out, escape and evacuation “marked the watershed between a chance to live and almost certain death.”<sup>2</sup> Even if the Soviet evacuation policy did not favor Jews, close to a million-and-a-half Jews were saved by fleeing eastward to Central Asia and other hinterlands.<sup>3</sup> Some Jews were among the staff of important industries, cultural institutions, and elites, whom the Soviets evacuated in a relatively organized manner, while less privileged Jews fled on their own, covering hundreds of miles by foot or makeshift transport. Soviet Jewish refugees were joined by Polish Jews who escaped from Nazi-occupied territories.<sup>4</sup>

All evacuees faced great challenges, but those unaffiliated with any Soviet institution (like so many Jewish refugees) struggled the most. They had to secure housing in a city overrun with new arrivals, procure food, and find a means of existence when most of their professional and personal networks were disrupted. Survival was far from guaranteed: hunger, homelessness, and disease were rampant, and death was common. For Jewish refugees, growing antisemitism made the situation even worse. In short, Central Asia was no promised land.

The presence of Jewish refugees was felt in every major city that became an evacuation hub. Ghafur Ghulom, an Uzbek poet who

witnessed an arrival of dejected Jewish refugees at Tashkent train station, was so moved that he penned a deeply compassionate poem, *I Am a Jew* (1941), placing Nazi atrocities in the long line of historical persecutions Jews faced. Not everyone was as sympathetic.

In addition to the objective difficulties, evacuees also had to cope with the stigma of evacuation, which was perceived as something shameful in wartime Soviet Union, as a cowardly act of running away and betrayal of one’s civic duty. Evacuees were perceived as “useless” people who contributed neither to the society nor to the war effort.<sup>5</sup> The stigma attached to the evacuation was worst for men, but women also felt it. The only category of evacuees excused from stigma and shame were children. They were seen as a legitimately “weak” group in need of protection and sustenance. Indeed, children were overrepresented among the refugees and evacuees, many of them lost or orphaned.

For Jewish evacuees, increasing antisemitism exacerbated the stigma of evacuation. There were even cases of antisemitic attacks on fleeing Jews. Underpinning this behavior was an unfortunate assumption that “all Jews are cowards.”<sup>6</sup> As historian Rebecca Manley puts it, “The popular post-war joke that Jews had served on the ‘Tashkent front’ merely underscores the degree to which the association between Jews and flight fostered a new wave of popular antisemitism that became a staple of the postwar period.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, when Jewish evacuees returned to their destroyed hometowns from evacuation, they encoun-

tered antisemitism refueled during the war by Nazi propaganda and Soviet policies.

Clearly, the stories of Jewish escape, survival, and return are significant chapters in the history of the Holocaust on Soviet territory. However, in my research on Soviet films representing the Holocaust I noticed that Jewish evacuees almost never appear on screen.<sup>8</sup> Even in the context of the overall limited representation of the Soviet-Jewish war experience in Soviet movies, this fact stands out. This chapter aims to understand the absence of Jewish evacuees from Soviet films.

### EVACUATION ON SOVIET SCREENS

Let us first attempt to understand a general positioning of evacuation in Soviet films. When we consider Soviet war films, it becomes quickly apparent that most of them deal with action on the front, and fewer with life in the rear. Of the latter movies, even fewer are concerned with evacuation. The meager representation of evacuation on Soviet screens is mainly relegated to films made after the war, in the post-Stalin era. During the war, only one film representing evacuation was made, *Simple People* (*Prostye Liudi*, Lenfilm, 1945) by the great Soviet directors, Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg. It was a story of an airplane factory evacuating to Soviet Central Asia. The entire staff, together with new local workers, are united in a heroic effort to restart production as soon as possible. They are safe in the hinterlands, but they are fighting as if they are on the front. Despite the fact that both directors were ethnic Jews, there are no explicitly Jewish characters on screen. Moreover, despite the Orientalist setting, the film abounds with Christian references. To the degree to which it is possible to read Jewishness into this film, one evacuee (played by a famous actress, Tatiana Peltzer, ethnically Jewish) is an upbeat and sympathetic woman from Odessa. Odessa is famed as a Jewish city, and so any Odessan in Soviet film might be read as having at least some ephemeral or residual Jewish

characteristics.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Stalin's ideological watchdogs found the film's depiction of the war effort wanting and banned it as "erroneous."<sup>10</sup> Leonid Trauberg soon fell victim to Stalin's antisemitic campaign against "cosmopolitans." *Simple People* was released only in the post-Stalin era, in 1956, during Khrushchev's Thaw, when other films on the subject were starting to be made.

The Thaw in the late 1950s and early 1960s was an era of liberalization, when war films became less heroic and began to focus more on individual experiences.<sup>11</sup> But even in Thaw movies, there is something compromised about evacuation, and evacuees themselves are hardly heroes: they are portrayed either as morally suspect or hopelessly naïve. A case in point is the Soviet cult film, *The Cranes are Flying* (*Letiat Zhuravli*, 1957, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov). At the center of the plot is a beautiful young woman, Veronika (Tatiana Samoilova). After Veronika's boyfriend, Boris, volunteers for the front and her parents are killed in an air raid, she evacuates with Boris's family. She meets his cousin Mark, who pursues and rapes her. Demoralized by her losses, Veronika marries him. She is an enigmatic character, most unusual for a Soviet on-screen heroine; she is passive, despondent, and unable to make rational choices, while Mark is truly evil: he evades army service and lies his way into evacuation. He is equally immoral in his personal life, cheating on Veronika even after he forces himself on her. It takes Veronika considerable effort to finally leave Mark and put the evacuation behind her. At the end, she returns to Moscow, herself again, but her relationship with Mark, and the evacuation site where it took place, remain equally tainted with shame.

There are no Jewish characters in *The Cranes are Flying*. Still, Mark exemplifies all the negative stereotypes that haunted Jews during wartime. His foreign name (Mark), his profession (pianist), and even his crafty resourcefulness, are all associated with Soviet Jewish stereotypes. In short, Mark is "fighting on a Tashkent front," using an unfortunate Soviet idiom. Mark is not

Jewish, but the mere fact of his evacuation (as opposed to front fighting) immediately endows him with stereotypically negative Jewish characteristics. He is an emasculated, selfish coward.

*The Cranes are Flying* was embraced by the filmmaking community and audiences alike.<sup>12</sup> But conservative critics and the establishment objected to the film on ideological grounds. Most controversial was the character of Veronika, whom they perceived as “morally weak.” So unacceptable was she for the establishment, that Khrushchev allegedly called her “a whore.”<sup>13</sup>

Different types of evacuees appeared in another significant Soviet film, *Twenty Days without War* (*Dvadtsat’ Dnei bez Voyny*, 1977, dir. Aleksei German). Here, they are hopelessly naïve. The film’s main character, a war correspondent serving at the front, Lopatin (Yurii Nikulin), must travel to Tashkent, where a film based on his war essays is being shot. All the people whom he encounters there are either women and children or theater actors, poets, and other “creative intelligentsia” (using Soviet lingo), who are laughable in their attempt to convey the war experience on film without ever having encountered it personally. Here they are not morally suspect, but rather weak and inadequate next to the more masculine figures of fighters. Evacuees keep coming to consult Lopatin on various matters, as if the mere fact of his front experience renders him an adult next to all these child-like dupes. And yet, even Lopatin, once he finds himself in the rear, appears weak and inadequate. He regains his confidence and energy only when he returns to the front. Like *Cranes*, *Twenty Days without War* became one of the most important Soviet films of its era. It also encountered objections by the establishment. Film industry functionaries (read: censors) did not like the fact that life on screen appeared so bleak and un-heroic. After attempts to stall the film’s release, it was finally authorized for a limited release only.<sup>14</sup>

All three of the abovementioned evacuation films encountered resistance from Soviet officials. As seen in this analysis,

evacuation had a bad reputation in Soviet movies. In evacuation there were no heroes, no feats of courage, and no foundations for greatness. If this is how non-Jews are portrayed in the evacuation, how were Jews represented?

## JEW ON SOVIET SCREENS: THE PRESENT ABSENCE

Soviet commemorative practices were highly selective: many categories of people were excluded from the memory of the so-called “Great Patriotic War,” first and foremost, Jews.<sup>15</sup> There was no institution of Holocaust memory within Soviet borders. The word “Holocaust” itself was not used—the particular Jewish loss had no name.<sup>16</sup> There was no clearly formulated, consistent policy regarding the Holocaust, but the tendency was to silence any discussion of the matter. Although this vague policy and its enforcement fluctuated over time, throughout most of the Soviet era the silencing mechanism remained the same: the Holocaust was not explicitly denied, instead it was not treated as a unique, separate phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> Mostly, the Holocaust was universalized by subsuming it into the general Soviet tragedy, with Jews euphemistically labeled “peaceful Soviet citizens.”<sup>18</sup>

In accordance with this policy, few Soviet films represented the Holocaust or any Soviet-Jewish experiences during the war. Still, throughout the Soviet era over 20 films were made featuring the historical events of the Holocaust (such as Nazi antisemitism, mass executions, and death camps) or Jewish service in the Red Army and partisan units.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, only three Soviet-era films deal with Jewish evacuees. Who are these Jewish evacuees then, and how are they represented?

As I showed, evacuation in Soviet films in general was represented through two tropes: shame and naiveté. Films about Jews in evacuation are careful to avoid the first trope in order not to appear antisemitic. Instead, Jews in these films are mostly de-

picted as children or child-like in some way. The first such film was *You Are Not an Orphan* (*Ty ne Sirota*, 1962, dir. Shukhrat Abbasov, Uzbekfilm). Once a major film, even today it is considered one of the best of Uzbek cinema.<sup>20</sup> Behind Abbasov's inspiration for the film is the real-life story of an Uzbek couple who adopted 14 war orphans, a feat of courage memorialized in an eponymous poem by the aforementioned Ghafur Gulom. The filmmaker also drew on memories of his own hungry wartime childhood spent in an Uzbek village among refugees from all over the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup> Abbasov recalls that there were many Jews among them.

Indeed, there is a Jewish boy, Abram (Fima Kaminer), among the adopted children in the film too. Of necessity, an internationalist message is conveyed throughout the narrative, and Abram is only one of the adopted kids of various Soviet ethnicities, which including even a German boy. But it is this Jewish boy who is particularly haunted by traumatic memories. In the most dramatic scene of the film, children play war, with young Abram dressed as a Nazi, in a uniform and with a Hitler-style mustache. He holds another child, cast as a Soviet partisan, at a gunpoint, and screams, "Speak, you dirty partisan!" As he mouths the words, Abram experiences a flashback to his past. He hears the same words said by a Nazi, followed by shooting. Abram faints. Clearly, his game was a reenactment of his trauma: he had witnessed Nazis murder his parents. Importantly, they were killed as partisans, not as Jews. Yet, the scene might be read otherwise: echoing the words of the Nazi executioner, Abram says in Russian, "*Govori, partisanskaia morda.*" Literal translation: "Speak, you partisan mug." In Russian, these words clearly reference a notorious antisemitic slur, "*zhidovskaia morda*," or "yid mug." His parents were killed as partisans, but they were also Jews.

There are other hints in the film of the unique place of Jews. Thus, one of the children says to his adoptive Uzbek father, "If Germans come here, they'll execute you because you adopted Abram. The fascists

hate the Jews." In another scene, the camera pans over emaciated, dirty children arriving on trains bearing the names of their cities of origin—Kiev and Kishinev, sites of mass executions of Jews on Soviet soil.

Unlike other films dealing with the Jewish experience and the Holocaust, *You Are not an Orphan* was embraced by the film apparatus. The fact that it was an Uzbek film also helped, as studios on the Soviet periphery enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than in the center. The film's production went smoothly, with no extensive revisions, no turned-down subplots, nor any of the other problems I have seen in the archival files of other Holocaust-themed films. On the contrary, Abbasov recalls that when Ekaterina Furtseva, then Minister of Culture, watched the film as part of its authorization process, she was moved to tears. She came out of the screening room sobbing, hugged Abbasov, and said: "You've made us feel their suffering! I will promote your film everywhere!" And she was true to her word—Abbasov's film was screened in 33 countries.<sup>22</sup> *You Are Not an Orphan* was unconditionally praised by Soviet critics, and even nominated for the Lenin Prize, the highest honor at the time.<sup>23</sup> Why was this film not considered problematic? Even though it featured the Jewish child and his tragic story, Abram was only one of the many war orphans, each one with his or her own tragedy. In that way, the film was not about the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust, but about the internationalism of the Soviet regime, and about celebrating "the big family of Soviet people." Abram's story was possible because the film's main subject was not a little Jewish boy, but a heroic and selfless Uzbek family. This was fully in agreement with the party line circa 1962.

The film had perfect timing for representing a Jewish story. *You Are not an Orphan* was produced at the peak of the liberal era, soon after 1961, when Evgenii Evtushenko shattered Soviet complacency about the Holocaust with his famous poem *Babi Yar*.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the film came out before 1963, when Khrushchev berated Evtushenko for singling out the Jews, and announced that in the Soviet Union there is no "Jewish ques-



tion.”<sup>25</sup> Khrushchev’s dictum effectively put an end to any kind of public discussion of the Holocaust.

Indeed, the subject of Jews in evacuation reappeared on Soviet screens only many years later, in 1980, in a much weaker and completely forgotten film, *Leningraders, My Children* (*Leningradtsy—Deti Moi*, dir. Damir Salimov). Like *You Are not an Orphan*, this film was also produced at Uzbekfilm, and was also inspired by an eponymous poem, written by Dzhabul Dzhabaev, a Kazakh poet. The plot is also similar: it is set in wartime Uzbekistan, in an orphanage for children who survived the siege of Leningrad and are traumatized by war and hunger, haunted by persistent flashbacks. One of the staff members is Naum Markovich, a tailor turned jack-of-all-trades at the orphanage. Unlike the earlier film, the word “Jew” is never uttered on screen although Naum’s name, dialogue, body language, and casting are all very Jewish. Played by Lev Lemke, one of the “court Jews” of Soviet cinema, Naum keeps lamenting, “What a Singer [sewing machine] have I left at home!” He continuously dispenses bits of pseudo-folksy shtetl wisdom, such as, “My father used to say, if you want to eat bread, you need to work, but if you want to eat bread with butter, then you need to work with your brain.” But there are also hints at greater loss in his dialogue, such as when he says, “When I recall my children and my Vera, then I start losing my mind.” This last lament is ambiguous: “Vera” in Russian is both a woman’s name and a word for faith. Naum laments his wife, but the choice of name is clearly not arbitrary, allowing the filmmakers to invoke faith at least indirectly, which is unusual for a 1980 Soviet movie.

We do not know much about Naum, beyond that he is no “fighter on the Tashkent front.” However his character is a response to this relentless stigma. In a key moment, when a criminal attacks the orphanage, Naum rises to the occasion and attacks the crook. Thus, a little Jewish tailor staying behind the front lines in the safe Uzbek rear turned out to be a hero.

Besides Naum, there is also a boy named Grisha, a dead ringer for Abram in the earlier film: he is a dark-haired, nervous boy. His name, (Grisha—a Russian substitute for Hirsch) may signal Jewishness to Soviet audiences,<sup>26</sup> although his story is not developed as distinct from other kids.

The third and last—and by far the best—Soviet film featuring Jewish evacuation is a remarkable cinematic autobiography by the filmmaker Mikhail Kalik, a figurehead of the Soviet poetic cinema of the 1960s, along with directors such as Andrey Tarkovsky and Sergey Paradjanov. Following an onset of antisemitism, leading to the banning or shelving of several of his works, Kalik emigrated to Israel in 1971. In 1990, in the Soviet Union, he made *And the Wind Returneth* (*I Vozvrashchaetsia Veter*) as a guest director from Israel.

*And the Wind Returneth* is radically different from the earlier two movies. Not only is it made by a Jewish director concerned both with Jewish themes and antisemitism, but it is also a Perestroika-era film, made after censorship ceased to exist, and previously unspoken topics such as Stalin’s repressions and camps (both featured in this film) were no longer taboo. The war and evacuation is not the main focus in *And the Wind Returneth*. They are covered only in one chapter of Kalik’s life story, which encompasses the entire Soviet Jewish experience, from enchantment with Communist ideology to Stalin’s repressions, through WWII, all the way to the eventual rise of Jewish consciousness and emigration to Israel.

However, there is still overlap with *You are Not an Orphan* and *Leningraders, My Children*: Kalik’s autobiographical protagonist is also a young boy through whose eyes we see life during evacuation. For him, the evacuation coincides with his own coming-of-age (he loses his virginity to a voluptuous landlady), but the film also captures the culture and politics of the time.

Aside from the autobiographical main character, all the adults (Jewish or not) appearing in the evacuation segment are actors and directors, musicians and danc-

ers. Kalik's parents are themselves actors performing with a motley crew at hospitals and makeshift stages. Although they are not children, they are in some ways like children, since they play for a living. This representation echoes *Twenty Days without War*, a film where evacuees are creative intelligentsia.

Unlike the earlier two films, Kalik's film makes a point of showing Soviet antisemitism. In one scene, Kalik's parents, who are friends with famous Moscow evacuees, stop by the sets where legendary director Sergei Eisenstein is filming *Ivan the Terrible*, his film that would later be banned. Here, young Kalik overhears an antisemitic actress say on the set, "What a shame, Sarah-Fima [referring to Serafima Birman] plays a Russian boyarynia!...Thank God that at least Tsar Ivan is not played by Mikhoels." This brief scene simultaneously depicts the nascent wartime antisemitism and foreshadows the future tragic events of Soviet Jewish history. Already during the war it was becoming increasingly difficult to cast Jewish actors in key roles. In a few short years, Solomon Mikhoels was murdered on Stalin's orders. Mikhoels, a legendary Yiddish actor and an important Jewish leader, had rallied international Jewry to support the Soviet war effort as head of a Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.<sup>27</sup> After Mikhoels's murder, the morbid wave of arrests and executions of Jewish intellectuals and public figures followed suit.

In another scene, Kalik also confronts the stereotype of Jews as cowards and "Tashkent front warriors" by including a reference to the Soviet Jewish war effort. In an open-air black market, Kalik's mother buys potatoes from a mutilated soldier. When he recognizes her as a Jew, he says, "Don't fret, even among your people, there are some

good ones." He explains that his best friend, a Jew, was killed in the same battle in which he was injured. The soldier's remark reveals his deep-seated antisemitism, but at the same time indicates that Jews were fighting on the front.

As I have showed the two Uzbek films directed in the Soviet era by non-Jewish filmmakers make indirect references to Jewish loss. Amazingly, in Kalik's film, the Holocaust is not even mentioned. This is particularly surprising, given that *And the Wind Returneth* is the most Jewish of the three films and was made by a director who has lived in Israel for nearly 20 years (and was exposed to the Holocaust discourse there). Kalik's explanation is that in this film he was trying to capture only his and his family's experiences during the war. To the best of his recollection, in 1942, during the evacuation in Kazakhstan, he still had not learned about the Holocaust. Such knowledge came later. The Kalik's wartime experience was that of a resurgence of Soviet antisemitism, and as such it substitutes for Nazi antisemitism in his film.<sup>28</sup>

This point is well illustrated by a scene in the film, set in 1948 Moscow, when young Kalik goes to the funeral of Solomon Mikhoels, whose murder was presented to the



*You Are Not an Orphan: Abram dressed as a Nazi.*



*And the Wind Returneth: the protagonist's parents-actors.*

public as an accident. The funeral brought together thousands of people, and eyewitnesses recall that for the duration of the official funeral an old Jewish man played violin on a rooftop of a nearby building. Kalik's film depicts this historic moment. Notably, in this scene, an old violinist plays *Es Brent* ["It's burning"] by Mordechai Gebirtig, a famous Yiddish songwriter. *Es Brent* was written before the war, but it was sung in the ghettos, and came to be associated with the Holocaust. This song, which in the West represents the Holocaust victims, came to represent Stalin's victim in Kalik's film. This fact speaks volumes about the filmmaker's vision, emphasizing Stalin's crimes over Hitler's. Paradoxically, in a Perestroika-era film by a Jewish director, the Holocaust is not present.

In all three films featuring Jewish evacuees, the protagonists are children or people associated with children. This portrayal is double-edged: if the main characters are children, their age is an excuse for why they are evacuated instead of fighting on the front, but such representation also infantilizes the evacuees. The way Jews in evacuation are portrayed is both similar to, and different from, non-Jewish evacuees: both are presented as children or creative intelligentsia;

Jewish evacuees, in contrast, are not portrayed as morally corrupt.

In conclusion, the evacuation, a significant chapter in the history of Soviet Jewry, is almost never depicted on screen. The important context for understanding this is the paucity of films representing evacuation in the general corpus of Soviet war films. Evacuation, unlike fighting on the front, was not a heroic subject, and did not fit the Soviet war narrative. Representing Jewish evacuation was even more problematic: it would have emphasized a special position of Jews as the targets of Nazi violence, and

thus had a potential to tap into the antisemitic stereotype of Jews as draft-dodgers, or "Tashkent partisans." This made evacuation a touchy subject. Films dealing with evacuation handled it in two ways. First, when evacuation is reflected on Soviet screens, Jewish characters are child-like—a weak group legitimately in need of protection and rescue. Second, like other Jewish characters on Soviet screens, Jewish evacuees are portrayed as members of a multi-ethnic community, thus making them just one of many targets of Nazi violence, no different from all the others.

If evacuation received very minimal representation, some chapters in Soviet-Jewish history are not reflected on screen at all. Escape from the occupied territories, not in an organized Soviet effort, but simply as refugees, is not represented in a single film. Similarly absent from Soviet films is the experience of returning home after the evacuation or escape. The reason for such a conspicuous lack is clear: making a film about Jewish refugees or their homecoming after the war would have meant singling out a particular Jewish fate as well as having to deal with the issue of Soviet antisemitism. This was unthinkable. It is significant that

this trend continues in post-Soviet film. In the entire Perestroika and post-Soviet era, when no subject allegedly is off-limits, only one film, *Exile* (*Izgoi*, 1991, dir. Vladimir Savel'ev) tells a story of Polish-Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union, and only one film deals with the postwar Jewish experience, *From Hell to Hell* (*Iz Ada v Ad*, 1996, dir. Dmitrii Astrakhan). However, both these films are co-productions with Germany, supported by a German-Jewish producer, Artur Brauner, which makes them exceptions rather than the rule in post-Soviet cinema. Even in the "new Russia," some subjects seem to have remained taboo.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Mordechai Altshuler, "The Unique Features of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," in *Jews and Jewish life in Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Yitzhak Ro'i (Portland: Frank Cass, 1995), 171-188.

<sup>2</sup>Mordechai Altshuler, "Escape and Evacuation of Soviet Jews at the Time of the Nazi Invasion: Policies and Realities," in *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941-1945*, ed. Lucian Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Armon, NY; London, UK: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 77.

<sup>3</sup>Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P; Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>Yosef Litvak, "Jewish Refugees from Poland in the USSR, 1939-1946," in *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997), 123-151.

<sup>5</sup>Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2009), 154.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>8</sup>Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2013), 225.

<sup>9</sup>The same phenomenon can be seen in the popular Soviet film *Two Fighters*

(*Dva Boitsa*, 1943), where a brave Odessan character played by a famous Jewish singer and actor Mark Bernes, was read at least by some Soviet Jews as one of their own. On the Odessa ethos, see Jarrod Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2011), 48-82.

<sup>10</sup>Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917-1953* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1992), 194-196.

<sup>11</sup>See Denise Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence: Kansas UP, 2007), 107-142.

<sup>12</sup>For account of the film's reception and impact, see Josephine Woll, *The Cranes Are Flying* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 65-80.

<sup>13</sup>Cited by Tatiana Samoilova in a media interview: Nina Kovalenko, "Aktrisa Kotoraiia Povergla Sofi Loren," *Interfax.ru*, May 4, 2008, accessed June 6, 2012, <http://www.interfax.ru/culture/txt.asp?id=11564>

<sup>14</sup>"Pravdivyi Glavnyi Geroy," *Izvestiia*, July 18, 2003.

<sup>15</sup>Catherine Merridale, "War, Death, and Remembrance in Soviet Russia," in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 61-83. In English, the Soviet term, *Velikaia Otechestvennaia Voina*, is usually rendered as The Great Patriotic War.

<sup>16</sup>The term Holocaust came into use in Russian only in the 1990s. The Yiddish term *khurbm* was used only in the Yiddish press.

<sup>17</sup>Zvi Gitelman, "Soviet Reactions to the Holocaust, 1945-1991," in Dobroszycki and Gurock, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, 7. Zvi Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," in Gitelman, ed., *Bitter Legacy*, 14-43.

<sup>18</sup>Karel C. Berkhoff, "'Total Annihilation of the Jewish Population': The Holocaust in the Soviet Media, 1941-45," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 10, 1 (2009): 477-504. Kiril Feferman, *Soviet Jewish Stepchild: The Holocaust in the Soviet Mindset, 1941-1964* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009). Yitzhak Arad, "Sta-

lin and the Soviet Leadership: Responses to the Holocaust,” in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, 1: *History*, ed. John K. Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 355-370.

<sup>19</sup>Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*.

<sup>20</sup>*You Are not an Orphan* has been included in a compilation of ten films representing the best of Central Asian Cinema (*Kino – Tsentral’naia Asiiia*), published by the Center of Central Asian Cinematography, Almaty, 2006.

<sup>21</sup>Author’s interview with Shukhrat Abbasov, February 5, 2012.

<sup>22</sup>Author’s interview with Shukhrat Abbasov, February 5, 2012.

<sup>23</sup>A. Somov, “Sem’ia Kuznetsa,” *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, February 11, 1964.

<sup>24</sup>Evgenii Evtushenko, “Babi Yar.” *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, September 19, 1961. For an analysis of the poem’s impact, see Feferman, *Soviet Jewish Stepchild*, 46-50.

<sup>25</sup>Khrushchev made this statement in his speech at the meeting of the Party leadership with Soviet writers and artists, which was published in *Pravda* on March 10, 1963. Excerpts in English are available in Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews 1948-1967: A Documented Study* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1984), 74-77.

<sup>26</sup>For naming practices of Soviet Jews, see Olga Gershenson and David Shneer, “Soviet Jewishness and Cultural Studies.” *Journal of Jewish Identities*, 4, 1 (2011): 129-147.

<sup>27</sup>Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented Study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995).

<sup>28</sup>Author’s interview with Mikhail Kallik, January 7, 2010.

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- Exile* (dir. Vladimir Savel'ev, Ukraine, Germany, 1991)
- From Hell to Hell* (dir. Dmitrii Astrakhan, Russia, Germany, 1996)
- Leningraders, My Children* (dir. Damir Salimov, USSR, 1980)
- Simple People* (dirs. Grigorii Kozintzev and Leonid Trauberg, USSR, 1945)
- The Cranes are Flying* (dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, USSR, 1957)
- Twenty Days without War* (dir. Aleksei German, USSR, 1977)
- You Are Not an Orphan* (dir. Shukhrat Abbasov, USSR, 1962)

# JEW, KANGAROOS, AND KOALAS: THE ANIMATED HOLOCAUST FILMS OF YORAM GROSS

LAWRENCE BARON

What do an Australian girl lost in the bush, a koala cub searching for its mother, and a Jewish girl hiding in the forest during the Holocaust have in common? They are all products of the fertile imagination and wartime ordeals of animator Yoram Gross. Though he has achieved fame as the Australian equivalent of Walt Disney, Gross spent his adolescence evading the Germans in Poland during World War Two. Known best for his adaptations of Australian children's classics such as Ethel Pedley's *Dot and the Kangaroo* and Dorothy Wall's *Blinky Bill*, Gross incorporates his experiences of escaping capture into animated films and television cartoons about youngsters separated from their parents and surviving in hostile environments with the help of compassionate animals or people. He gingerly conveys the human capacity for evil and passivity to juvenile audiences in plotlines which simultaneously emphasize the human potential for goodness and resistance. In this article I will trace the evolution of Gross's cinematic approach to teaching age-appropriate lessons about ecocide, genocide, and war from his early stop motion experimental film *We Shall Never Die* (1959) through his beloved *Dot* and *Blinky Bill* cartoons, his pioneering animated feature film *Sarah and the Squirrel* (1982), and his more graphic Holocaust shorts *Don't Forget* (2010) and *Sentenced to Death* (2011).

Gross grew up in an affluent Jewish family in Kraków until German troops marched into Poland in 1939. His father and brother Jozek fled to eastern Poland, which fell under

Soviet control. His father perished in the massacres perpetrated by Ukrainians when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, while Jozek was deported to the interior of the USSR for slave labor and eventually served as a soldier in the Soviet-sponsored Anders Army, and then as a British paratrooper. Yoram and his mother, sister Klara, and brother Natan stayed one step ahead of the Nazis by moving from place to place in the vicinity of Kraków. After being interned in the Kraków Ghetto, Yoram and his remaining family escaped and travelled by train to Warsaw on forged papers where they eked out an existence until Natan and Yoram began painting and selling vases to local shops to support the family. The two brothers met Adam, another Jew passing as a Gentile with counterfeit documents, who worked for Żegota, the Polish Council to Aid Jews. He arranged for Yoram to attend a clandestine school for homeless orphans. Soon thereafter the underground Polish Home Army recruited Yoram as a courier. In the interim, his mother was caught and deported to Auschwitz and then to Ravensbrück. As the Red Army pushed westward into Poland in the final year of the war, Yoram visited the liberated death camp of Majdanek and the ruins of Warsaw before returning to Kraków to be reunited with his mother.<sup>1</sup> Having been the victim of bigotry and the recipient of benevolence has shaped his cinematic vision. As he admits, "The thoughts, experiences, the sorrow...reminiscences of the past are always with me like everything in your

throat that you can't get rid of. Somehow, everything I've seen—life and death—these combined, whether purposely or not, influence the themes of my films."<sup>2</sup>

In the immediate postwar period Gross briefly studied to be a musician before becoming an assistant to the Polish director Eugeniusz Cenkalski and the Dutch director Yoris Ivens. These early experiences imbued Gross with an appreciation of endowing his films with compelling narratives and images.<sup>3</sup> Natan also worked in the film industry and wrote and directed the documentary *Mir Lebn Geblibene* ["we who are still alive"] (1947 and the docudrama *Undzere Kindere* ["our children"] (1948) which dealt respectively with the rebuilding of Polish Jewish life and the psychological scars left on Jewish orphans.<sup>4</sup> Yoram served as his brother's assistant director for the latter film.<sup>5</sup>

In 1950 Gross decided to immigrate to Israel to begin a new life in what he describes as the country where he should have been born as a Jew.<sup>6</sup> At first he shot stories as a newsreel cameraman, but disliked how his footage was often taken out of context and distorted in the finished films.<sup>7</sup> He learned the art of animation making training films for the Israeli army. Since he had little money, he and his wife Alina experimented with stop motion films utilizing everyday objects. Their *Chansons sans Paroles* ["songs without words"] (1958) garnered acclaim and awards at international film festivals, one of which it shared with Roman Polanski. The first part of *Chansons sans Paroles* metamorphosed a crumpled newspaper into a bug, a bird, and a girl and boy at play. Its second part bent matchsticks into the shape of three people involved in a love triangle.<sup>8</sup> Gross directed Israel's first feature length animated film, the stop motion bible story *Joseph the Dreamer* [aka *Ba'al Hahalomot*] (1962) whose script was penned by Natan.

In 1968, Yoram and his family immigrated to Australia in 1968 in the wake of the Six Day War. He and his second wife Sandra founded their own studio and achieved international success with *Dot and the Kangaroo* in 1977. Since then his cartoons have become

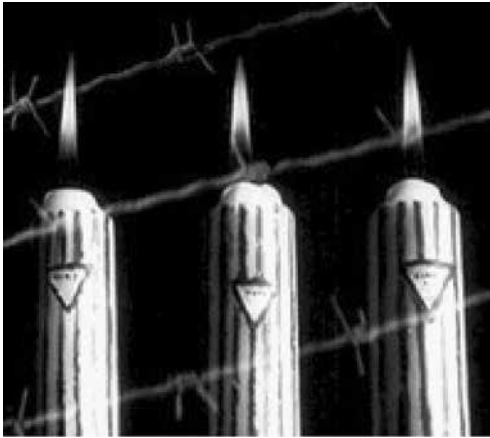
a staple of Australian cinema and television as well as attracting fans worldwide.<sup>9</sup> His work is particularly popular in his native Poland, which has honored him with Warsaw's Medal of Honor for Arts and Culture and Kraków's Medal of Distinction from the mayor of Kraków.<sup>10</sup>

In 1959 Gross produced a stop motion short *We Shall Never Die* (1959) as a memorial to his recently deceased mother and the six million Jews slaughtered in the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup> Though not specifically a children's film, it anticipates images and sounds he subsequently employed to evoke a sense of perseverance in the face of collective loss and symbolize the Shoah. As the title is shown, the sounds of commands being shouted in German and of boots marching in unison on pavement are heard, conjuring up the invasion of Poland. Flames scurry around the screen fleeing in desperation until the camera settles on one candle slowly melting, with molten wax collecting at its base. Three thin candles enter and line themselves in a row as if standing at attention in a roll call. The clatter of the boots resumes. The three candles bear vertical stripes and triangles as shadows of barbed wire flash across the screen. A soothing children's song interrupts the martial cadence of the boots. Yoram's mother used to sing this song to him, and, in the film, her granddaughter, Yoram's niece, sings it.<sup>12</sup> A rag doll and a pair of broken eyeglasses successively materialize. As the march soundtrack and barbed wire shadows return, the three candles burn down. The final scene features a flickering flame resisting being extinguished. War and genocide have reduced the candles to concentration camp inmates whose lives are figuratively snuffed out by the invading army, leaving only the song, doll, and broken glasses as reminders of their existence. Yet the title of the film and the struggle of the last flame to remain lit imply the continuity of the Jews as a living people.

As far as I can ascertain, *We Shall Never Die* was the first animated film to tackle the subject of the Holocaust. Five years elapsed before another animated short dealt with the topic. Paul Julian and Les Goldman's film



*The Hangman* (1964) was based on Maurice Ogden's poem of the same name.<sup>13</sup> Reminiscent of Pastor Martin Niemoeller's famous quotation about how indifference towards the first victims of Nazism paved the way for the persecution of subsequent groups.<sup>14</sup> The executioner comes to a town and consecutively hangs an immigrant, a dissenter, a Jew, and a black man before he slips the noose around the neck of the narrator whose passivity has condoned the prior hangings. Unlike *We Shall Never Die*, *The Hangman* focuses on the perpetrator and the bystanders more than the victims. The audience sees the faces of the townspeople and the hangman, but only the backs of the victims, except for the protester, dangling from the gallows. Like *We Shall Never Die*, *The Hangman* eschews graphic violence in favor of symbols, such as the hangman's face becoming a skull, the statue of justice crumbling, a torn Torah scroll, and the scaffold transformed into a tree that grows bigger as it is nourished by blood. To



*We Shall Never Die* Reprinted with the Permission of Yoram Gross Films.

disseminate its warning against complacency towards contemporary injustices, *The Hangman* was distributed as an educational film by textbook publisher McGraw-Hill.

*Dot and the Kangaroo* (1977) introduced Yoram's signature style of placing animated characters against live action backgrounds. According to him, he "found the technique

most effective in bringing reality to the animation, hence the use of live action backgrounds and historical footage.<sup>15</sup> He situates Dot and the animals who befriend her in a filmed setting of the Australian bush. Dot gets lost chasing a small wallaby into the forest. Scared by the nocturnal cacophony emanating from the bush, she sobs inconsolably until a kangaroo feeds her the "food of understanding" which enables her to talk with animals. Since the kangaroo was searching for her missing baby, she sympathizes with Dot's plight and vows to help her. Kangaroo convenes a council of animals to ask them if they can lead Dot back to her family. The animals initially respond with distrust towards the child. One asks, "What have humans ever done for us?" Kangaroo explains that Dot's plight resembles that of her lost joey. Her rationale models empathy for the vulnerable outsider. Dot still encounters suspicion from Mr. and Mrs. Platypus who resent how humans erroneously classify their species as birds, rodents, or beavers. More mature viewers will perceive parallels with racial categorizations. When Kangaroo is bitten by dingoes, Dot reciprocates Kangaroo's kindness by tending to her wounds. The animals finally guide Dot back home. Even young viewers can understand the elementary lessons about compassion, stereotyping, and tolerance which *Dot and the Kangaroo* teaches.

Gross's shift to producing animated films about serious historical subjects paralleled three trends in popular culture. First, the turmoil of the Sixties emboldened animators to deal with controversial contemporary issues. Animal characters increasingly served as surrogates for promoting topical adult causes, such as the political radicalism and sexual libertinism of Ralph Bakshi's *Fritz the Cat* (1972) or the environmentalism espoused by the displaced rabbits in Martin Rosen's *Watership Down* (1978).<sup>16</sup> Second, the identity politics of ethnic and racial minorities who had been victims of discrimination and persecution engendered a cycle of films dramatizing their marginalization and suffering in television miniseries like *Roots* (1977) and

*Holocaust* (1978).<sup>17</sup> In Australia, this entailed chronicling the plight of the indigenous aborigines and exiled convicts during the European colonization of the subcontinent. In 1978, Air Programs International, a production studio for children's educational programming was commissioned by the Aboriginal Arts Board to make *Dreamtime: The Aboriginal Children's History of Australia*. It animated paintings by aboriginal youngsters depicting the murder and segregation of their ancestors by the British.<sup>18</sup> Third, public awareness and interest in the Holocaust proliferated in Australia as survivors increasingly bore witness in public and regional governments institutionalized the teaching and commemoration of the event.<sup>19</sup>

Yoram Gross's first contribution to this genre was *The Little Convict* (1979). Like its successor, *Sarah and the Squirrel*, it combined an historically-inspired narrative, real footage of the Australian landscape, a human narrator, and animated animals and characters. "Grandpa," played by popular Australian entertainer Rolf Harris, relates the story of a group of prisoners shipped to New South Wales in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Among them are Polly and her 13-year-old brother Toby whose crime consisted of briefly holding the reins of a horse ridden by a highwayman. Upon their arrival, Polly is selected to be a servant for the governor's wife, and Toby is sent to a labor colony with the other convicts. The aptly nicknamed Sergeant "Bully" and Corporal "Weasel" overwork and torment their wards. Although they exceed their authority and end up being reprimanded by the governor, their cruelty towards the prisoners and wanton killing of the mother of the koala cub Toby adopts prefigure the brutality of the concentration camp guards in *Sarah and the Squirrel*. Indeed, both guards force the elderly and frail Dipper to chop down a tree which falls on him because he cannot run fast enough to get out of its way. Before he dies, Dipper bequeaths his heirloom pocket watch to Toby. Toby manages to escape and befriends an aborigine boy Wahroonga who teaches him how to survive in the outback. Allied with animals

from the outback, the two boys engineer the escape of a fellow inmate and save Polly and the governor's wife from the governor's burning house. In gratitude the governor frees Polly and Toby from their servitude, and we learn at the end that Toby grew up to be Grandpa.

Benevolent animals, bestial adults, a clever child who opposes the oppression of the latter, a historical setting, and a well-known star functioning as the narrator provide the same cinematic formula for *Sarah and the Squirrel*. The opening klezmer melody played by famed clarinetist Giora Feidman alludes to the Jewish identity of the film's protagonist. In the prologue, Mia Farrow walks through a grove of barren trees past an upturned soldier's helmet and a tattered rag doll and informs viewers that the following story constitutes "a memorial to all children of all wars." Next, the visually coded but unidentified Jewish inhabitants of Sarah's village panic over the outbreak of war. Documentary clips of World War II bombing raids and artillery bombardments fill the screen. Fiery red and orange hues light the background and colored lines accentuate the profiles of the weapons to render these battle scenes more menacing. Sarah and her father, mother, and grandmother run to the forest where they hide in a dugout. Like Dot, Sarah cowers when she hears the nocturnal noises of the animals, but discovers the next morning that most of the creatures are gentle. She is comforted by the presence of her bespectacled grandmother and the memory of her sewing the rag doll which Sarah holds tightly. Klezmer music accompanies most of these prewar flashbacks, whereas music from Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" serves as the score for the wartime scenes.

Foraging for food, Sarah stumbles upon a barbed wire encampment where she sees her former school teacher clad in a striped uniform faint from exhaustion as he pushes a railway car full of coal under the watch of guards. As she writes an entry in her diary, real footage of refugees carrying their meager possessions on their backs appear

on the page. Her father presumably has gone back to the village to get medicine for grandmother, but the audience surmises he has joined the partisans who had contacted him in the forest. Searching for her father, Sarah returns to the village and witnesses her mother and grandmother loaded onto a truck with the rest of their neighbors. Her mother signals to her to go away and find her father. When she comes back to the dugout, Sarah recognizes her grandmother's broken glasses among the ransacked items lying on its bottom. Kindling a candle triggers a lengthy excerpt from *We Shall Never Die* that foreshadows the fate of the Jews as dwindling candles in the concentration camp and situates the child's song, doll, and eyeglasses in their original context. Despondent over her abandonment, Sarah allows a wolf to approach her in the hope it will eat

she shares acorns with a friendly squirrel and survives a raging forest fire that reminds viewers of the conflagration in *Bambi*. The forces of destruction are personified by snarling black beasts with crow-like heads, pointy spines, and long tails which shoot fireballs. Despite the devastating fire and the continuing procession of trains, Sarah persists in trying to sabotage the bridge. Eventually the bridge collapses as the train traveling across it careens into a ravine. Two soldiers and their guard dog pursue Sarah, but the wolf comes to her rescue. To reciprocate, she bandages the wolf's wounds the way Dot had done to the kangaroo. Lighting a candle for warmth kindles her memories of past Sabbaths with blessings, challah, and wine.

Sarah is last seen walking into the forest holding her doll. Her body transforms into that of Farrow carrying the doll. She reports, "Sarah's war has ended, but there are many other Sarahs in the world today, in all those countries where war still separate families." Farrow assures viewers that Sarah is still alive even though no one knows what happened to her father, mother, and grandmother. She concludes, "Since Sarah knows there is evil in the world, she chooses to remain unseen. When next you're walking through the forest and you see a branch swaying, think for a moment. Could it be Sarah passing by or is it just the wind?"

The ending hints at the tragic fate of Sarah's family while offering her legacy of resistance as a model that might influence future generations to stop war. According to Adrienne Kertzer, this double narrative—"one that simultaneously respects our need for hope and happy endings even as it teaches a different lesson about history"—characterizes the dichotomy found in many children's books on the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup>

To make *Sarah's* tribulations more accessible to young audiences, Gross chose not to explicitly identify the perpetrators as Germans or the victims as Jews. Moreover, he cast war and its collateral damage rather than genocide as the film's villain. The trains



**Sarah's teacher pushing a coal wagon. Reprinted with Permission by Yoram Gross Films.**

her and end her suffering. The wolf senses her predicament and spares her.

Thereafter Sarah summons the courage to stop the war. After observing a thwarted attempt by partisans to dynamite a railroad bridge over which trains laden with armaments regularly cross, Sarah embarks on a plan to sabotage the bridge by removing a few bricks from its foundation every day. To get a hammer and chisel to pry the bricks out, she goes back to her village and finds it has been converted into an army base. In her former school, empty and upturned desks remind her of the voices of former classmates. Between her forays to the bridge,

transport tanks and artillery, not people. As he puts it, "Sarah was a commercial film for children and this is partly the reason why I made it more general and not Jewish-specific....I felt I didn't need to tell the story to adults who knew the subject well enough, but to children who didn't because it happened before they were born or because they haven't experienced war first-hand." He believes it "is impossible to present the complete story of the Holocaust to children, especially in film media, as we adults naturally wish to protect these beautiful innocent children from concepts that are gruesome, horrific, and painful."<sup>21</sup>

Twenty years after its release, American preteens who watch *Sarah* might find its ecumenical approach too general and its plotline too tame compared to the scenes of violence now permitted in PG and PG-13 films. Indeed, *Sarah's* generic identity and the film's PG-13 rating seem anachronistic. After all, American youngsters have grown up reading books like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Night*, *Number the Stars*, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, and *The Devil's Arithmetic* and watched far more graphic films about the Holocaust, war, or fictional cataclysms.<sup>22</sup> Considering what they have learned from popular culture or at school, I surmise many of them could discern that the soldiers in *Sarah* are Germans and the people captured or fleeing them are Jews since these details are embedded in the film's iconography, music, and narrative.

While ostensibly about a koala cub displaced and separated from his mother by a forest fire sparked by careless illegal loggers, *Blinky Bill: The Mischievous Koala* (1992) is more broadly about the destruction humankind inflicts on the environment. The refugee animals fleeing with their possessions resemble scenes of Jews being evicted from their villages and toting their possessions in knapsacks. Gross subsequently forged the connection between ecocide and genocide in his film *Forest Holocaust* (2010) which begins with chainsaws felling eucalyptus trees and ends with the scorched landscape that remains after the fire in *Blinky*

*Bill*. Blinky teams up with a girl koala named Nutsy. Together they infiltrate the woodchip mill to watch the trees where their dwellings once perched reduced to sawdust. Unable to escape the mill with Blinky, Nutsy is adopted by the logger's daughter. Blinky and his forest compatriots outwit the forester and his dimwitted assistant to rescue Nutsy, but not before the two humans try to foil the plot and shoot at the furry conspirators who have broken into their home. In the tumult, Blinky is reunited with his mother who was trapped under logs which were awaiting



**Yoram Gross and a cell of Blinky Bill. Reprinted with Permission of Yoram Gross Films.**

chipping at the mill.

Yoram Gross perceives Blinky's story as autobiographical. He incorporates various incidents from his childhood like his teacher's method of memorizing mathematics with songs into the story. Gross has remarked: "Blinky Bill lost his father just like I lost my father. Blinky is separated from his mother, just like I was separated from my mother during the war. Our main occupation was hiding. Like mice, we fled from place to place to avoid getting caught. We had friends, Jewish friends. We had non-Jewish friends, and they were good people, and we trusted them completely."<sup>23</sup>

Though Gross usually contrasts his benevolent animal characters to malevolent adult humans, he also depicts cruel animals and kind humans in his films to prevent the stereotyping of any species as good

or evil. Dot and the kangaroo are chased by vicious dingoes; Sarah is tracked by a German shepherd; the logger's watchdogs are as relentless as their owner, but his daughter who incidentally is named Klara like Yoram's sister, shields Nutsy daughter Chloe shields Nutsy. The ferocious animal characters in Yoram's films differ from their human counterparts in that they are merely following their predatory instincts or the orders given by their masters. Yoram maintains "that animals kill only to survive and feed themselves unlike humans who choose to kill other humans for religious or political reasons."<sup>24</sup>

Although he remains a prolific producer of television cartoons for children, Yoram recently has crafted more explicit shorts about the Holocaust. The catalyst for this change appears to have been the death of his brother Natan in 2005. Natan had authored a memoir recalling the period when he and his family went into hiding in wartime Poland.<sup>25</sup> Based on Natan's poem of the same title, *Autumn in Kraków* (2007) is both a nostalgic ode to the majesty of the city where Yoram and he grew up and an elegy for the Jews who no longer bustle along its cobblestone streets or reside in its buildings. In contrast to the beautifully filmed architecture of the city's landmarks and the serene autumnal forests, the recitation emphasizes what is missing from the idyllic settings at a time of the year when Jews celebrated Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkoth:

"Yiddish was spoken here,  
Jewish love filled the air,  
Where fresh foliage stretched along the  
Dietla Planty,  
Jewish children played here,  
Holidays were observed,  
With the help of the Lord."<sup>26</sup>

Yoram categorizes his other transitional short *Kaddish* (2007) as "illustrated music." The prologue defines *Kaddish* as a "liturgical chant, a prayer for the dead," and adds that "the music profoundly carries the lamenting emotions of people in mourning." Close-ups of a pianist and violinist performing Maurice

Ravel's "Two Hebrew Melodies" are initially portrayed against the background of Soviet footage of the survivors at Auschwitz. Shots of the musicians playing soon yield to the screening of German footage of starving children in the Warsaw Ghetto and processions of Jews being relocated into the Ghetto. The liberated remnant fills the screen just before the piece concludes on a sorrowful note.

What distinguishes these transitional shorts from Yoram Gross's most recent experimental films is their photographic realism. The newest films are not targeted at juvenile audiences, since he recognizes that "the awesome power these Nazi perpetrators wielded on their helpless victims in the mass murder and callous slaughter of human beings is a heavy feeling that is not easy to watch." Nonetheless, they maintain a semblance of his animated films by inserting clips from those earlier works, digitally manipulating documentary footage, and incorporating children's drawings into them. As the number of Holocaust survivors dwindles, Gross feels compelled, perhaps by the urgency of aging, "not to let those horrors fade away from our minds," and "unintentionally allow history to repeat itself."<sup>27</sup>

Like *We Shall Never Die, Don't Forget* is dedicated to Yoram's mother. It opens with documentary clips of marching German soldiers, starving Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, a limp body hanging on an electrified fence, and Hitler and his minions reviewing troops filing slavishly past them. The images have been digitally drained of all their gray and black tones leaving only their black outlines to indicate their motion and shape. The photographic record of the past appears faint and on the verge of blurring into the white background. Hitler's head and those of his subordinates momentarily turn into the heads of the fire monsters from *Sarah and the Squirrel*. The director "found it hard to portray Hitler as a human," and chose instead to picture him "as a powerful, unlikeable, scary, evil creature."<sup>28</sup> These monsters descend upon the footage of deportation trains, concentration camps, the badges

and numbers used to mark inmates, and the dazed emaciated survivors and mounds of corpses that remained in the camps when the Allies liberated them. After footage from the camps, Gross inserts the scene of Sarah's teacher and his fellow prisoners pushing the coal wagons. The only splash of color is a red

sculpture by Karen Gross, Yoram's daughter, portions of which are revealed in close-ups throughout the film. The piece consists of the faces of broken and whole dolls' heads and limbs which are entwined in baby shoes, barbed wire, burlap, knitted wool, and twine to symbolize the fate of the Jewish children who were "not as lucky" as Yoram. Next the camera shifts to whitened footage of a girl sketching a picture of a locomotive pulling a railroad car. Gross animates the train and adds more cars with people riding them. This technique arose out of Gross's Art Alive Program which encourages youngsters to draw characters or fashion objects that he animates into stories based on their ideas.<sup>29</sup> Accelerating drumbeats portend the imminent danger facing the passengers of the train at the end of their journey.

The train sequence precedes a colored painting by Helga Weisssova who illustrated

her experiences in Theresienstadt from the age of twelve to thirteen.<sup>30</sup> Her pictures initially do not augur how dire Weisssova's situation would become when subsequently deported to Auschwitz. The first painting the audience sees is an ostensibly innocuous portrait of a female hiker poised at a crossroad with signposts pointing to Theresienstadt and Prague. Then a young boy pencils the outline of a person behind a fence. His drawing transitions into Weisssova's painting of a boy sleeping on his cot in the barracks and dreaming of the outside world where people still drive cars and ride bikes. The real boy and girl return as match cuts with a doll's face. The boy copies the iconic photograph of a frightened Jewish youth with his hands up in the air guarded by an armed German soldier. His replica and the original photo alternate on screen. The girl scribbles a sad person frowning. This segues into Weisssova's painting of Jews in their winter coats with Jewish stars affixed



**Fire Monster from *Don't Forget*. Reprinted with the Permission of Yoram Gross Films**

swastika superimposed on the twisted limbs of a cadaver. Near the end, a clip of Sarah kindling a Sabbath candle memorializes those who perished in the Holocaust. The imperative "Don't forget" is translated into over forty languages. The epilogue posts the death tolls of "six million Jews, twenty million Russians, ten million Christians, and nineteen hundred Catholic priests" who were "murdered, raped, burnt, starved, beaten, and humiliated by the Nazis." The film visually indicts Hitler's crimes. Its whitened real footage and animated sequences illustrate how memory can fade and needs to be preserved by history and art.

*Sentenced to Death* was originally titled *Why...*, a question Sarah repeatedly posed to herself as she witnessed instances of the persecution of her family members and fellow villagers. Dedicated to Yoram's childhood friends who died in the camps, the film replicates a child's perspective in three different ways. The first is a mixed media

on them trudging to the camp upon their arrival. Yoram overlays a barbed wire grid



**Sculpture by Karen Gross, Reprinted with Permission of Yoram Gross Films**

on the painting and moves it horizontally to create the impression that the people are marching. This is followed by a pencil drawing of concentration camp inmates in their striped uniforms, which Weissova made in Auschwitz. Panning horizontally along the width of the drawing also lends the illusion of movement. Finally, the barbed wire sweeps across the sculpture. Yoram typically does not appeal to parochialism. The epilogue of *Sentenced to Death* echoes that of Farrow's concluding remarks at the end of *Sarah and the Squirrel*: "In memory of the innocent children who were killed during the holocaust [he uses a small h not a capital one] and the millions of other children who suffer in war-torn countries around the world."

Yoram Gross's films explicitly or implicitly condemn the persecution and violence states perpetrate against their domestic and foreign enemies and model the empathy and solidarity humankind should exhibit towards the victims of discrimination and war. He usually has conveyed both messages with visual symbols that were already evident in *We Shall Never Die*. His animal and human characters endure loss and separation and depend on the assistance of strangers, as well as on themselves, to find their loved ones or resist their oppressors. Even his most recent experimental shorts retain an animated style though they include documentary footage of Nazi barbarism and evince a particular concern for its youngest

victims. Just because most of his films have been directed at juvenile audiences does not mean that they are not relevant to the adults who have abetted or condoned the injustices that have stained human history in the past and manifest themselves in the present. Every Dot needs a kangaroo, every Sarah a squirrel, and every Blinky a Nutsy, or else the dingoes, the soldiers, the fire monsters, and the loggers will prevail.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gross, *My Animated*, 11-165. For a more detailed account of the Gross family's prewar and wartime lives, see Natan Gross, *Who Are You, Mr Grymek?*.

<sup>2</sup>Gross, e-mail communication.

<sup>3</sup>Gross, *My Animated*, 177-210.

<sup>4</sup>Hoberman, 328-335; Konigsberg, 7-19.

<sup>5</sup>IMDb.

<sup>6</sup>Magierski.

<sup>7</sup>Gross, *My Animated*, 211-212.

<sup>8</sup>ACMI Generator.

<sup>9</sup>Gross, *My Animated*, 215-227.

<sup>10</sup>Gross, —e-mail communication.

<sup>11</sup>ACMI Generator.

<sup>12</sup>Gross e-mail.

<sup>13</sup>Ogden.

<sup>14</sup>Marcuse.

<sup>15</sup>Gross e-mail.

<sup>16</sup>Wells, 185-195.

<sup>17</sup>Fishbein; Shandler, 155-181.

<sup>18</sup>Bradbury.

<sup>19</sup>Lawson and Jordon; Rutland, 375-376.

<sup>20</sup>Kertzer, 74-75

<sup>21</sup>Gross, e-mail

<sup>22</sup>Baron, 2005, 2009.

<sup>23</sup>Magierski.

<sup>24</sup>Gross, *My Animated*, 21.

<sup>25</sup>N. Gross, 2001.

<sup>26</sup>N. Gross, 2011, 139-142.

<sup>27</sup>Gross, *Don't Forget*

<sup>28</sup>Gross, e-mail.

<sup>29</sup>Gross, *My Animated*, 226-227; *Seesaw*.

<sup>30</sup>Weissova.

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# “WAS BEDEUTET TREBLINKA?”: MEANINGS OF SILENCE IN JEAN- PIERRE MELVILLE’S FIRST FILM

MARAT GRINBERG

## THE JEWISH MELVILLE

Though clearly acknowledged as a major French postwar director, Jean-Pierre Melville (1917-1973) is often largely viewed as an oddball, a reluctant John the Baptist-like figure for the New Wave, and an exquisite stylist. Born Jean-Pierre Grumbach, to a French-Jewish family of Eastern European origins, his Jewishness is very rarely discussed and essentially ignored. Some scholars and critics call him a “Jewish atheist,” which in this context signifies his complete disengagement from any Jewish or Judaic cares and concerns. The aim of this piece is to argue that Melville’s Jewishness was at the very core of his artistic thinking, indelibly connected to his comprehension of the destruction of Jewish life during the war, permeating his oeuvre. The key to interpreting Melville is in the following statements he made in the introduction to his interviews with Rui Nogueira where he defines what a filmmaker ought to be: “a man constantly open, constantly traumatizable...he must have...a memory...transposed, of course, because I have a horror of showing things I have actually experienced...” Melville adds, “A filmmaker must be a witness of his times....The essential thing is that there must be an intrinsic resemblance between the first film and the last.”<sup>1</sup> Melville’s openness to the pain of remembrance and the desire to be wounded are paradoxical and strong at the same time. What this credo reveals, apart from echoing the auteur theory, is that the most pivotal relationship

for Melville is the one that he, much like the literary modernists, maintains with history. The “central theme” of his films is the moral and existential collapse of his epoch, embodied in the war experience.<sup>2</sup> While the link between Melville’s “gangster pictures” and the memory of the war has been suggested,<sup>3</sup> this essay proposes that the specific Jewish element needs to be recognized as the central undercurrent of his theme and its derivations. Melville’s vision is deeply personal. His fear of “showing things I actually experienced” is tantamount to “showing things I experienced” as a Jew or, in a phenomenological fashion, should have experienced as a Jew. At the core of the philosophy of phenomenology is the structure and subjective ground of experience, indelibly linked to Jewishness in this case. In a Melvillean mode, however, even the confession of the fear of revealing the personal conceals what/how that buried significance most fundamentally signifies.

Claude Lanzmann’s recent portrait of the director lends credence to our argument. Lanzmann, who befriended him not long before his death, recalls Melville’s fascination with his deeply Zionist *Pourquoi Israël* (1973). He writes, “He spoke little except about the film, which he talked about passionately, the eye of the great cinéaste had noticed everything. I realized he had a Jewish sensitivity, which perhaps explained his need for masks. *Pourquoi Israël*, I feel sure, liberated him, and

he lit up when we talked about Jerusalem.”<sup>4</sup> Dave Kehr recognizes this “sensitivity” in Melville as well, although he does not take the step of naming it Jewish, commenting, “There is a drive for safety and stability in Melville—a search for sanctuaries—that lies under his taste for closed worlds....It’s curious that no true family setting, as far as I know, appears in any of his films—there is only the pain of the family’s loss.”<sup>5</sup>

The focus of this essay is on Melville’s first film. Despite expectations to the contrary and the reception of the film as a homage to the Resistance, *Le Silence de la mer* [silence of the sea] (1947-9) needs to be viewed as essentially a Holocaust film. Defining it thus and examining how it conceives of the extermination of Jews enables not only a radical rethinking of Melville’s work, but also the history of Holocaust cinema and the debates over it. The question of trauma and traumatic openness, which Melville himself foregrounds in his credo, warrants specific attention. While *Le Silence de la mer* is both deeply symbolic and thus to some extent oblique, it is at the same time a direct expression of Melville’s philosophy of the Jewish destruction and an artistic solution to how it can be cinematically embodied. It is not what has been termed traumatic or post-traumatic Holocaust cinema. Applying to film the work of such theorists of trauma as Cathy Caruth, Joshua Hirsch maintains that as a result of trauma, “the mind goes into shock, becomes incapable of translating the impressions of the event into a coherent mental representation. The impression remains in the mind, intact and unassimilated.” Hence “belatedness” and “a crisis of representation” are central to Holocaust cinema and art in general in this framework.<sup>6</sup> Melville’s comprehension of trauma is radically different, establishing that not all traumas have to be belated. Indeed, as a director, he is “perpetually traumatizable”; the centrality of trauma experiences for his creative impetus can hardly be debated. As R. Clifton Spargo eloquently puts it in his analysis of art and the Holocaust, “There is trauma; here is rhetoric: everything we

call meaning lies in between, by existing in rhetoric as in culture.” For Melville, this meaning resides not in a belated space when nothing can be said, but, on the contrary, in a perpetual position of being able to respond to immediate history, as traumatic as that history can be, and framing this position through active memory, specific and pregnant with meaningful silences. Much like many Yiddish, but also a number of Hebrew, Polish and Russian poets, filmmakers and historians, Melville confronts and artistically assimilates the Holocaust without delay, which indicates how deeply entrenched he was in the Jewish world and tradition.<sup>7</sup>

### “WAS BEDEUTET TREBLINKA?”

The story of Melville’s involvement with Vercors’s novel and his adaptation of it for screen are well documented. *Le Silence de la mer*, published clandestinely in 1942 by Jean Bruller, Vercors’s actual name, became the most important literary text associated with French resistance during the war. Depicting the silent treatment given by an elderly Frenchman and his niece to a German officer stationed with them, it ultimately argues, in the words of Frances Edge, that the “portrait of the nicest, most un-Nazi like German is deliberately contrived to show that in the end, nice or nasty, they are all the same, because even one of the best of them continues to fight for Hitler, choosing what, in the uncle’s eyes, is the easy option by volunteering for the Eastern Front.”<sup>8</sup> Melville, who probably read the novel in London in 1943, where he was on a mission connected with the Resistance, embarked on making it into a film shortly after the war, despite opposition from Vercors and the French film industry, since Melville was not a member of the film union. Vercors finally conceded after Melville promised that he would release the film only if it met the approval of some of the most esteemed members of the Resistance. He consequently shot the footage in Vercors’s own house, while the “jury” of twenty-four Résistance members gave their approval to the final product. To reprimand

him for working outside its purview, Melville was charged a fine by the film union, despite the fact that the picture was a success at the box office.

In the critical literature, *Le Silence de la mer* is discussed in relation to the mythology of the Resistance, the controversy over the novel on which it was based, and Melville's purely independent tactics and stylistics, evocative of New Wave aesthetics and production methods.<sup>9</sup> According to Philip Watts, "In postwar France, Jean-Pierre Melville may have been the first filmmaker to link silence to a specific political and historical crisis in his 1949 adaptation of Vercors' novel *Le Silence de la mer*. Melville's film, like Vercors' novel and indeed Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 essay 'La République du silence,' was an effort to rewrite the history of the war in terms that proposed silence as a form of resistance to the violence and seduction of the occupying army."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Ginette Vincendeau, the author of the only monograph on Melville in English, views the film as very much in tune with the postwar Resistance epos. Brett Bowles offers another perspective, claiming, "In the context of the late 1940s, *The Silence of the Sea* marks a groundbreaking first step toward revising the hypocrisy implicit in postwar cinematic representations of the Occupation."<sup>11</sup> While Bowles's idea carries much validity, our analysis will reveal the limitations of such direct political readings of Melville's work.

The film follows the novel very closely. Like the text, it is told from the viewpoint of the uncle (Jean-Marie Robain) and consists of his thoughts interrupted by the German von Ebrennac's (Howard Vernon) monologues. Fascinated with and an admirer of French culture, von Ebrennac is convinced that the war would result in a union between the two nations. His vision falters after he visits Paris, where in meeting with other Nazi officers he learns of the German intent to destroy French culture. "Everything that I have said in these six months, everything that the walls of this room have heard... You must forget it all," he reports adding that he was asked to be shipped to the Eastern front

and was granted the request.<sup>12</sup> The last time the uncle and the niece (Nicole Stéphane) see von Ebrennac, she almost imperceptibly wishes him good-bye and thus breaks the vow of silence. Melville adds a few episodes to the novel: the meeting between the niece and von Ebrennac outside in the snow where their glances meet; the recollections of his trip to Paris consisting of two parts: the conversation about Treblinka and the Nazi attitude toward France; and what von Ebrennac sees on the way back to the train station. Absolutely new is the material about Treblinka; it holds the key to the reading of the film presented here. It should be noted that in the conversation with Nogueira, the Treblinka addition is mentioned, but neither the interviewer nor Melville discuss it or explain how the reference should be interpreted.

The conversation about Treblinka takes place between von Ebrennac and an SS officer (Denis Sadier). Seemingly out of nowhere, or perhaps in response to what was said earlier, or because he sees the report on the desk that perhaps bears the heading "Treblinka," von Ebrennac says, "Treblinka." His interlocutor responds, "Yes, what about it?" Von Ebrennac answers, "What's the significance of Treblinka?" "Nothing, nothing now," answers the officer. "Why 'not anymore'?" von Ebrennac inquires. "Let's not talk about it. It's not for the faint-hearted," is the response. As the music reminiscent of Nazi marches continues to play in the background, the camera zooms in on the portrait of Hitler standing on the desk, while the voice-over declares, as if reading from a report, "The mass executions take place with carbon monoxide in the gas chambers constructed here, and in the cremation ovens. Currently 500 people go through here in one day...but improvements are underway so that within two months this figure can be increased to two thousand people a day. Treblinka March 21, 1941." Von Ebrennac, whose face is not shown, asks whether these gas chambers are currently in use, to which the other Nazi retorts, "No, Treblinka has already served its purpose. It's done

with. There's no one left to execute." Now we are shown von Ebrennac's face—he sits motionless, with a very serene and content expression.



Von Ebrennac and the SS officer discuss Treblinka.

Before one can examine the problem of Melville's sources, the scene needs to be analyzed on its own terms. It provides a very accurate insight into the secretiveness that surrounded the Nazis' extermination of Jews. While only the select few were privy to the details of the Final Solution, rumors circulated and the information spread. Von Ebrennac must have heard something about Treblinka and wants to find out what goes on there. In telling him that it is not for the faint-hearted, the other officer, in fact, almost quotes Himmler who famously said in his speech to the SS major generals in 1943:

I also want to talk to you, quite frankly, on a very grave matter. Among ourselves it should be mentioned quite frankly, and we will never speak of it publicly... I mean the evacuation of the Jews, the extermination of the Jewish race....Most of you must know what it means when one hundred corpses are lying side by side, or five hundred, or one thousand. To have stuck it out and at the same time—apart from exceptions caused by human weakness—to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our his-

tory which has never been written and is never to be written...<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the officer does not divulge nearly as much information. The audience is told of the gas chambers and crematoria through the voice-over, while von Ebrennac, we can infer, reads of it in the report on the desk. Though the account itself speaks of Treblinka, it discreetly places it in relation to Auschwitz. Indeed in the spring of 1942 a killing center was set up in Treblinka where, by the summer, daily trains were transporting about 5,000 Jews to the death camp. This was the improvement which the voice-over predicts. Furthermore, after Hoess, Commandant of Auschwitz, visited Treblinka, he decided that the carbon monoxide method was not very "efficient," and switched to Zyklon B in his camp's gas chambers.<sup>14</sup> As has

been noticed, Melville dates the report to 1941, while Treblinka began operating in the summer of 1942. The option that it was an error on his part can be dismissed. The fact that he never decided to correct it or at least hint at the inaccuracy indicates that it was deliberate. The central question is why?

### MEMORY TRANSPOSED

Vincendeau identifies "withholding of information" as one of Melville's premier artistic strategies. She addresses the "notable" Treblinka scene briefly in her extended valuable discussion of the film, writing, "Melville's own Jewishness may have a bearing on his mention of Treblinka, although the report makes no reference to Jews."<sup>15</sup> What is pivotal to recognize is that there is no "mention" of Treblinka in the film—there is an entire discourse on it. There is also no "withholding of information." To presume that Melville's Jewishness was not related to it is improbable at best. A conventional explanation for why no Jews are specifically named would be that there was no concept of a separate Jewish catastrophe within the French discussions on the war at the time.

In fact Vincendeau sees even the “mention” of Treblinka as anachronistic. Indeed, the Jewish element, personal for Melville, is not spelled out in the Treblinka scene, but it is also crucially not omitted. It should be kept in mind that somewhat surprisingly for a French Jew of his generation Melville freely admitted that he joined the Resistance precisely because he was a Jew.<sup>16</sup> Here, however, rather than reflecting on French experiences, he begins to think in Jewish phenomenological and historical terms.

Through the scene’s fundamental question, “Was bedeutet Treblinka?” [what does it signify?]—Melville acts as a witness of his times, an artist who infuses trauma with meaning. As Samuel Moyn reminds us, “histories of Holocaust consciousness that depict “silence” and “delay” in the emergence of attention to the Nazi genocide... often do so only by slighting or ignoring local and often marginal subcultures whose texts and knowledge were not only vulgarized to vast audiences as time went on but also displaced by new kinds of productions.... There is no denying, of course, that Holocaust consciousness came late to the worldwide public...but it did not come late to everyone....”<sup>17</sup> To reiterate the object of this essay, Melville ought to be put in dialogue with such subcultures as a Jewish artist and thinker. Thus, the question of how Melville could have known anything about Treblinka needs to be redefined as soon as we recognize him as a Jewish figure. Writer and journalist Meyer Levin recalls how in 1944, he met a Jew in a Parisian synagogue whose “tales were interspersed with place-names which I had not yet heard, and the world had not yet heard, but assumed they were familiar to me, for what Jews had not lived with them in the forefront of their consciousness? Drancy, Treblinka, Ravensbruck, Auschwitz.”<sup>18</sup> Hence, to know of Treblinka and the wholesale murder of Jews in 1947 in Paris, when Melville began to work on the film, was not at all unusual, as long as one resided in Jewish circles, or even outside of them. While Jean-Paul Sartre, in his *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1944) condemned the

French silence regarding the Jewish destruction, crying out, “Do we say anything about Jews? Do we give a thought to those who died in the gas chambers at Lublin? Not a word. Not a line in the newspapers,”<sup>19</sup> the very fact that arguably the most premier intellectual of his generation would speak here of Lublin, in other words Majdanek, in specifically Jewish terms indicates that the awareness of the Jewish fate in the war was hardly glossed over. Furthermore, as Laura Jockusch has recently shown, the Jewish historical commission was already operating in France during the first years after the war and was involved with both the Nuremberg trials and Polish Jewish historians.<sup>20</sup> While most of the information was transmitted and published in Yiddish, the language of which Melville could very likely have had at least a passive knowledge, some and often much of it spilled over into the French and English spheres, and was certainly shared with Polish and Russian circles.<sup>21</sup>

Hence both Vincendeau and Jacques Mandelbaum’s suggestion that concentration camps were not on the minds of the French in the first decade after the war is not entirely accurate. A documentary, *Les Camps de la mort*, consisting solely of concentration camp footage, was released in France in 1945.<sup>22</sup> Representatively of traumatic and post-traumatic approach, Hirsch proposes, in Stuart Liebman’s words, that “the French public after 1945 failed to register the trauma inherent in compilations of postliberation concentration camp footage.” Liebman is right to question this assumption, arguing, “The absence of more thoroughgoing historical contextualization...leads to empty or pseudo-historical abstractions about changing representations of the Holocaust.”<sup>23</sup> What is of major significance, however, is that Melville speaks not of concentration camps in general, but Treblinka in particular. In the larger Western postwar conscience, no distinction was drawn between death camps and labor camps. The key text in this regard is *The Other Kingdom* by David Rousset published in 1946 in France, which while stating, “The camps for Jews and Poles:

extermination and torture systematized on a large scale," emphatically added, "between these extermination camps and 'normal' camps, the difference is not one of nature but only of degree."<sup>24</sup> This is the thesis to which Melville is openly responding in the Treblinka scene, meticulously and clearly. The episode is not an example of what can be termed "double coding," referring to a piece of information which says one thing to a general audience and something else to a specifically Jewish one.<sup>25</sup> Jacques Mandelbaum, the only critic to explore the scene, interprets it in this fashion, claiming that while Jewish viewers might have realized its Holocaust subtext, others would have completely missed it.<sup>26</sup> Thus, according to Mandelbaum, either Melville himself was not aware of who specifically was exterminated in Treblinka, or he was aware and meant to obliquely educate others. His argument that the Treblinka extermination may be referring to the deaths of non-Jewish French is not viable either historically or in the context of the film. The very fact that von Ebrennac's confidant proclaims that there is no one left to exterminate defeats it. Everything in the scene points to the fact that what had transpired in Treblinka was different from what had ever gone on and was still going on, including the war and the occupation.

Melville neither educates nor obfuscates, but gives expression to his vision of the catastrophe. The German word used in the account on Treblinka, which takes place onscreen in German, is the vague and official "*Personen*," which corresponds precisely to the often euphemistic language used by Nazis; Melville presents a carbon copy of the Nazi stylistics of extermination, which reinforces the suggestion that he was in contact with the historical commissions and their outgrowths.<sup>27</sup> As Hilberg later pointed out, "The victims do not have much individuality in German documents."<sup>28</sup> We do not hear the report in its entirety, but in mid-sentence. In this context, it is absolutely clear (as it would have been to someone like Sartre) who were the "*Personen*" and how

they were identified earlier in the report. It is extremely puzzling why no one has written anything about what Melville accomplished, or at least touched upon, in the Treblinka scene. The general understanding of Vercors's novel must have prevented any recognition of it.<sup>29</sup> Most importantly, Melville's discovery was that there was no need to mention the Jews directly, as this would have been superfluous and broken the film's symbolic poetic structure.<sup>30</sup> The very name Treblinka continuously and persistently names them in a synecdochal fashion, a device central to Jewish literature of destruction as a whole, from biblical Lamentations to 20th century pre- and post-Holocaust poetry.<sup>31</sup>

The question of dates raised earlier must also be answered with this structure in mind. As with trauma, "linear chronology collapses" in the film. But as a result, time becomes for Melville neither "fragmented" nor "uncontrollable."<sup>32</sup> It stops entirely, which Melville comprehends most clearly as an artist attuned to the ruptures of Jewish history. Thus, the reason he places the date for the finality of the extermination of Jews in 1941, the year of the ravine killings in the Soviet territories, ghettoization, and gas vans at Chelmno, is to signal that the Holocaust had all taken place already on the first day of the destruction and must be understood in its totality as an "autonomous event" which irrevocably arrests the flow of Jewish time. By including in the report crematoria ovens, which were constructed per Himmler's order in the last phase of the camp's activity to burn all evidence of the murder, Melville coalesces Treblinka's entire history, which lasted from the summer of 1942 until the autumn of 1943, into one temporal symbol of "1941." While, as the scene suggests, improvements in killings are yet under way and will continue, presumably in other places as well, Treblinka stands as the sign of the attempt at complete erasure of Jews as a people, from mass shootings to deportations and the ultimate gassing and burning in Poland.

Melville's thinking echoes strongly what the Yiddish poets sensed after the destruction as well. Yankev Glatstein wrote in "The Dead Don't Praise God," "We accepted the Torah

on Sinai, /and in Lublin we gave it back.../  
And just as we all stood together /at the  
giving of the Torah, /so indeed did we all  
die in Lublin."<sup>33</sup> Glatstein also uses Lublin  
as a synecdoche. Both view the Holocaust  
similarly, although framed in very differ-  
ent terms—those of "traditional religious  
structures" via modernist verse for Glatstein,  
and the Nazi machinery via voice-over, and  
*mise en scene* for Melville. For both, "Jews  
of all generations...congregate[d] for death  
in the Holocaust."<sup>34</sup> In choosing Treblinka,  
Melville unmistakably locates the locus of  
the destruction in East European Jewry,  
particularly Polish Jewry. He clearly knew  
that a great number of Jews deported from  
France were either immigrants or recently  
naturalized citizens. Significantly, in the later  
*Army of Shadows* (1969), Yiddish would be  
heard in a French camp scene while in *Leon  
Morin, Priest* (1961), there would be glimpses  
of traditional-looking Jews rounded up for  
deportation. Thus, Melville's response to  
the Jewish destruction is the double-edged  
sword. On the one hand, it reflects his fear of  
showing (or speaking of) things that actually  
occurred to him—he is not a East European  
Jew who was deported or gassed and what-  
ever experiences he had during the war as  
a Jew are at the very least obfuscated in the  
film—but on the other, his supreme Jewish  
artistic sensibility allows him to enter the  
realm of destruction under the cover of the  
thoroughly French text of Vercors.<sup>35</sup> The scene  
is an example of memory transposed par  
excellence, where East European Jewry acts  
as a phenomenological bridge between Mel-  
ville's personal fractured Jewishness and the  
entirety of Jewish trauma in the Holocaust.

Treblinka equals absence. As Mandel-  
baum observes, cinema must speak to "the  
simultaneous disappearance of the bodies  
and all trace of their extermination."<sup>36</sup> The  
extension of this is Jean-Michel Frodon's idea  
that "the ethical thought of the cinema will  
have been to a large extent the thought for  
the invisible."<sup>37</sup> Treblinka, which was set up  
solely for the purpose of exterminating Jews  
and, at times, gypsies, ceased operating in  
1943. In accordance with secretiveness, all the

traces of what went on there were demolished  
by the Nazis. It is not improbable to imagine  
that the report read by von Ebrennac contains  
photographs of the camp as well.<sup>38</sup> Yet we do  
not see them since in the postwar universe  
they are in fact absent, forcing Melville to  
find ways of conveying what is "not there."  
Penetrating the Nazi psyche is the impera-  
tive element in the process, as it would be  
later for Raul Hilberg, whose first edition  
of *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961)  
was published without a single photograph.  
Unraveling the Nazi mind is the centerpiece  
which informs the film's imagery and Mel-  
ville's commentary on Vercors's notion of the  
silent dialogue between French and German  
spheres.

### SILENCE AS A "MYSTERY PLAY"

According to Vincendeau, "Treblinka  
is strictly connected to Nazi crimes—as  
von Ebrennac reads about the camp in  
shock...."<sup>39</sup> No shock, however, is detected  
on his face, but rather, contentment and se-  
renity. The controversy surrounding Vercors's  
book, despite its utmost significance, was  
due to what some perceived as the unduly  
favorable portrait of von Ebrennac as a "good  
German." Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg,  
whom Melville quotes in conversations with  
Nogueira, saw the novel as in fact pro-Nazi.  
While, on the one hand, Melville pays close  
attention to the character's subtleties, on the  
other, he uncovers through von Ebrennac the  
Nazi thinking about the Holocaust. His reac-  
tion to a revelation about Treblinka confirms  
Himmler's argument—the extermination of  
the Jews lies outside the zone of good and evil  
and should not be talked about. It disturbs—  
there is initial nervousness in von Ebrennac's  
voice—but must be accepted with stillness.  
Though he is not a member of the SS, but a  
*Wehrmacht* officer, he exemplifies the Nazi  
philosophy of the extermination.<sup>40</sup> As was  
noticed by Bowles, "the cinematic account  
of von Ebrennac's Parisian sojourn—[not  
described in the text]—mirrors that of Hitler  
who toured the capital in 1940 to celebrate  
the armistice."<sup>41</sup> This parallelism spills



over into the portrait of Hitler on which the camera zeroes in as the voice-over speaks of Treblinka. Von Ebrennac is not Hitler; what links them—formally, they are part of a continuous tracking shot—is the supreme secrecy and mystery, which surround the annihilation. Historically, Hitler himself never spoke publicly of the extermination in detail. Melville recreates the Nazi “mystery play”: Hitler is the silent apostle of the erasure of the people; the tranquil voice, announcing the murderous reality and distinctly different from the Fuehrer’s hysterical ravings, belongs to the very law of history. For Melville, there is nothing banal about this evil, to recall Hannah Arendt’s later (in)famous thesis. Thus, the symbol that is Treblinka is a double helix: it connotes the erasure of Jewish history and stands as “the epitome of Adolf Hitler’s Germany” (Hilberg). This is what the “silence” means for Melville, making the Holocaust the central theme of the film.

The contrast between von Ebrennac’s states of mind after learning of Treblinka and then of the German intent to demolish French culture is palpable. Having become privy to the secret of the camp, he continues to walk around Paris in what appears to be spring weather. In the Treblinka scene, he was informed that it is in spring that the final exterminations in the camp took place. Yet the two do not connect in his consciousness and conscience and do not disrupt the flow of life. He attends the Nazi gathering and is outraged by their disdain of the French. The language, reproduced in the film, with which Vercors, through von Ebrennac’s retelling, describes the German attitude toward French civilization, is reminiscent of the Nazi phraseology about the destruction of Jews. This, perhaps, was Vercors’s intent, who himself was half-Jewish and addressed the Holocaust in his other war writings.<sup>42</sup> “They said to me:

‘It’s our right and our duty,’” Von Ebrennac tells the uncle and the niece.<sup>43</sup> Melville is attentive to Vercors’s thinking, which unites French and Jewish suffering. At the same time he strongly nullifies it through von Ebrennac’s behavior and the envisioning of the Holocaust as an autonomous event. It is clear that the ruin spoken of in relation to Treblinka—complete, irreversible and physical—is vastly different in quality and degree from the hypothetical assault on French culture, which belongs within the zone of Ebrennac’s morality.

The last scene in Paris completes Melville’s construction of von Ebrennac’s comprehension of the Jews. On the way back to the train station he begins to notice the hostile attitude of the French toward him as a Nazi; he studies intently the lists of the Resistance fighters shot in reprisals for the murder of a German soldier posted on a building wall—he is visibly troubled by the reality of the war. Finally he walks into a café to buy matches—on the door we see a cut-off sign that reads, “Accés Int Aux Jui” (Accés Interdit Aux Juifs—“Entry Forbidden for Jews”). One can presume that through it Melville confronts the reality of the Vichy involvement in the Holocaust or, according to Mandelbaum, makes the Jew invisible for personal and political reasons. Both of these readings are contestable. It is significant that



Von Ebrennac reads a cut-off cafe sign "No Jews are allowed."

without noticing the sign first, upon exiting the café, von Ebrennac turns around and glances at it. His expression is one of melancholy acquiescence, for he realizes that the sign is excessive. It means not “no Jews are allowed,” but in fact confirms to him the new reality, the knowledge of which needs to be suppressed—instead of Jews there is now only their absence in the world.

Much like the placement of Treblinka in 1941, the café sign conflates different periods—that of the initial anti-Semitic laws and that of the destruction—and restates Melville’s totalizing view of the event. For him, the Nazis are forever visible, while the Jews are forever absent. The former are still marching on the Champs-Élysées, as the opening shot of *Army of Shadows* makes it perfectly clear. In this film, where, Melville claims, he for the first time showed things he actually experienced, all realism, he insists, is excluded, except for the German presence. According to him, the film is not about the Resistance, but something else. This something else is the phenomenological personal he does not show, for it remains embodied in the synecdoche of Treblinka. Formulated once in *Le Silence de la mer*, it is restated and reinterpreted—via silence—in his subsequent films due to the very logic of Melville’s poetics.

The train, not shown on screen, carries von Ebrennac back to the uncle and the niece, not to Treblinka. Melville’s Holo-



**Opening shot of *Army of Shadows*: Nazis marching on the Champs-Élysées.**

caust is a fundamentally German deed and invention. Yet, through complex artistic design, he incorporates it into the French realm, thus adding another layer to his construction of silence. The process begins already in Paris. With the knowledge of Treblinka suppressed deeply within, once outside, von Ebrennac pauses and glances at the direction signs on the road. One of them, which he specifically notices, reads, “Chemical examination post. Medical Plant.” Melville’s design rests on creating synecdochal chains of the film’s objects and devices which in turn build the central synecdochal presence of Treblinka.<sup>44</sup> Thus, ideas are generated via a substitution



**Parisian street sign pointing in the direction of “Chemical examination post. Medical Plant”**

of one conceptually or visually related object with another. With this in mind, the carbon monoxide mentioned in the revelation about Treblinka and this German sign implanted into the very heart of Paris and pointing in the direction of a chemical post—in other words, Treblinka—are parts of such a synecdochal chain.

It is important to recognize that while Melville’s thinking is particularly historical, he approaches history and thus the Holocaust artistically, phenomenologically and personally rather than politically. There are political implications to his expressiveness, but it does not directly or easily trans-

late into them. What is the idea of this “Treblinka” sign in the midst of Paris? It shines through another earlier image in the film.

### FIREPLACE/OVEN

Melville’s method is synchronic rather than diachronic: 1942, 1943 and beyond is swallowed up by 1941. The relationship between the film’s objects, which in turn acquire a symbolic dimension, is synchronic as well. In the book, a fireplace in the uncle’s house plays a significant role. It is also conspicuous in the film.<sup>45</sup> During its first half, the camera zooms in on it a couple of times. With its perpetually burning fire and logs, and decrepit darkened brick walls it conjures up nothing else but a crematoria oven. The ovens used in Treblinka, of which von Ebrennac would learn, were different—they were large pits dug in the earth. This oven, evocative of Auschwitz, houses the absence that is Treblinka and reveals the ubiquity of the destruction.<sup>46</sup>

Considering again how Melville’s images and his central theme function, this transposition is not at all surprising, but rather a perfect illustration of the



**A fireplace/“oven” in the uncle and niece’s house.**

substitution model. Precisely because of it, Melville evades direct documentary footage in all of his films, despite his preference for

non-studio locales. Von Ebrennac, shot in a low angle over the oven/ fireplace, with fire reaching to his face, asks, “How is this different from a fire at home? The wood, the hearth, the flame are the same, but the light is different. This one depends on the objects it lights, on people in this room.” While these words are taken almost verbatim from the text, they acquire a very different meaning here. The question being posed is fundamental: what is the meaning of this light, whose origins are German, and what effect does it



**Von Ebrennac standing over the fireplace**

have on its witnesses, bystanders and those overlooking it?

In truth, the uncle and the niece know nothing and will know nothing of Treblinka in the scope of the film’s time and space. Von Ebrennac preserves his secret. In conveying to them in great detail the conversation about the Nazi intents toward French culture, he mentions that among the officers was his close friend who turned against France as well. This friend, as we realize, was the Treblinka confidant. Von Ebrennac is disillusioned in him only as a result of his anger toward France. Melville’s real question is not who was complicit in the murder of the Jews and who was not; some were and some were not, as he’ll show in *Leon Morin, Priest*. He could hardly have expected human beings to behave otherwise. Nor is

it what and how much one knew. His great discovery is that the occurrence of Treblinka colors all existence with the light and smog of its fire, eroding temporality through its silent diffusion. *Treblinka* is all around and in every moment, forcing to live in the presence of its oblique consciousness. It burns in the absence of knowledge and in the aftermath of it. To localize it thematically, topically, make explicit or mark through conventional memorialization, however noble it may be, is to miss it; to infuse with it the film's entire poetic space and stylistic links is to draw near it. The uncle comes constantly in contact with its glow emanating from what he knows as the hearth of his house and we—as the oven that erases traces of extermination. This is indeed why Melville chose Vercors's novel as the framework for his statement on the destruction. The idea he conveys is that when Bruller was writing his book in this house in 1941, in which the film would be shot, Treblinka had already entered it. With his *Le Silence de la mer*, Melville closes the circle. Thus, one understands why the train which takes von Ebrennac back from Paris is not shown. Due to the cinematic logic of substitution, the train—a potent and, most importantly, explicit symbol of the Holocaust and especially of Treblinka—cannot become a spectacle. Indelibly connected to the other objects (the fireplace/oven, the road sign, and of course, the report) its course, which pervades the film's entire terrain, is necessarily charted toward the death camp.<sup>47</sup>

Coupled with the Nazi ideology of silence, the non-locality of Treblinka manifests the film's main theme. In the context of later couplings of silence and the Holocaust, Melville's notion of it is idiosyncratic. His silence is not of the "Thou shall not" kind: he does not believe that one should not speak of the Holocaust because it is sacred or too painful. Nor does it touch on the silence of the divine. It is also, as was emphasized here, not of the psychological political type (evading responsibility for the culpability in the destruction and keeping silence to assuage one's guilt), or out of disinterest. French Jewish existentialist thinker André



**Doubles 1: Von Ebrennac and the uncle appear out of darkness at the threshold.**

Neher, with whose work Melville could certainly have been familiar, speaks thus of the trope of silence in the Hebrew Bible, "It is not something that is devoid of meaning, nor is it a lacuna in the text or spiritual emptiness; it must be understood as a kind of a pause in a piece of music, without which it is impossible to grasp the composer's ultimate idea."<sup>48</sup> Melville's usage of silence is fundamentally recognizable in these words. Unlike George Steiner who famously linked silence to the ineffable in the context of the Holocaust, Melville posits silence as powerfully referential and hence artistically and phenomenologically constructive. Many critics and commentators have identified silence as his foremost preoccupation. As analyzed here, *Le Silence de la mer* imbues it with a new meaning, with crucial consequences for Melville's entire body of work.



**Doubles 2: Von Ebrennac and the uncle in the Nazi headquarters.**

### MELVILLE'S ALTERNATIVE

Anticipating Claude Lanzmann's concept in the *Shoah* (1985), Melville sees the Holocaust as a forever-present absence, as an ongoing event, which spills over into the whole of reality—the sea—refusing to be confined to cycles of memory. Life and remembrance thus acquire the touch of the absurd, even in the presence of an ethical imperative to go on. Throughout the film the uncle functions as von Ebrennac's double; in a number of scenes, they parallel each other: they both appear out of darkness at the doorstep; they become each other's reflections in the mirror in the Nazi headquarters'

scene. This linking is genuine rather than subversive. Von Ebrennac's theories about the aesthetic, rather than political, rapprochement between France and Germany ring true, at least in the context of the time.<sup>49</sup> In a similar vein, the uncle, who suggests through the quotation from Anatole France to von Ebrennac at the film's end that it is noble for a soldier to disobey unjust orders, has every right to believe in him. The fact that Melville adds this intertext to the conclusion reveals not merely the irony of the situation, but also its intractable entanglement.<sup>50</sup> The uncle, or the niece, infatuated with the Nazi, are not aware of Treblinka, but Melville and we are—this makes the memory of the war and of the Resistance as just all the more complex.

The war for Melville is challengingly redemptive. It, as he claims, "by providing us with topics, allows us to attempt...an evolution of [cinema]... The war is also the hidden ringmaster behind the three characters of *Le Silence de la mer*."<sup>51</sup> What this essay endeavored to show is that the central topic provided by the war in *Le Silence de la mer* is Treblinka, which is what the vague "topics" conceal. This, despite expectations and conventions, does not preclude him from making art. On the contrary, to reiterate, the refraction of the fireplace in Vercors's house into a crematoria oven is the product of Melville's camera eye. Yet the supremely cinematic art that results is predicated on a conflict. Melville does not contribute to the postwar glorification of the Resistance, nor does he invalidate the Resistance legacy. He reveres it, as his letters to Vercors, pleading with the writer to allow him to make the film, particularly indicate.<sup>52</sup> The problem, to which *Le silence de la mer* testifies, is that he needs to reconcile the memories of the Resistance, joyous and painful, with the enormity of the Holocaust.

Jonathan Rosenbaum perceptively notices about *Army of Shadows*, "Melville's oeuvre teems with subtexts, and the primary one... may well be the Holocaust. The deepest psychic wound of some Jews who survived the Holocaust is the guilt over be-

ing spared while so many others were not, and, with the possible exception of *Shoah*... seems to embody that metaphysical defeatism more than any other I can think of." This defeatism, he continues, is grounded in the notion of moral and existential necessity. Indeed, such a dynamic may play a role here. However, it is overridden by the cinematic potential which results from Melville's fear of showing the most phenomenologically personal, as evidenced by *Le Silence de la mer* and its synecdochal poetics of substitution. Unlike the rest of Holocaust cinema, which would proceed in the direction of footage, topicality and mimetic representation, Melville offers another alternative.

He is, as we pointed out, deeply apprehensive about documentary footage, which, thanks to *Nuit et brouillard* (1956), would become especially influential, at least prior to *Shoah*. This uneasiness is of a moral fiber. In his conversations with Peter Bogdanovich, Orson Welles, worshipped by Melville, specifies that the Holocaust was on his mind when adapting Kafka's *The Trial* (1962). At the film's end, he represents K in a more dignified manner than in the novel. Welles explains, "his defiance at the end. That's mine. In the end of the book he lies down there and they kill him. I don't think Kafka could have stood for that after the deaths of the six million Jews... If you conceive of K as a Jew... it just made it morally impossible for me to see a man who might even possibly be taken by the audience for a Jew lying down and allowing himself to be killed that way."<sup>53</sup> Welles's sensitivity and use of "figurative allegory," to use R. Clifton Spargo's term, speak profoundly to Melville's philosophy. Melville has no delusions about the radical nature of the Holocaust; that is precisely why he finds no redeeming value in the footage of degradation. His *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (1959) makes this principle explicit in regard to uses/misuses of the Resistance legacy, which, as we know now, conceals the Holocaust: "History is no longer written, but photographed, but some pictures cannot... must not be.... Not telling may sometimes be more honest."

When it comes to anything but Treblinka, he recreates and represents, even captures, reality; the technique of substitution lessens, but powerfully remains, functioning through characters and types. For him, criminals and heroes are not at all interchangeable, even when the latter wear the masks of the former. In *Bob le flambeur* (1956), Paolo (Daniel Cauchy) is killed and, in defiance of the noir tradition, dies, not falling on his stomach, but thrown backwards, with his arms clutching his chest.<sup>54</sup> This is the death of defiance. Bob (Roger Duchesne) kneels above him in silence, with their eyes meeting each other. The scene's quiet dignity does not mitigate the fact that history stopped in Treblinka; instead, its understatement tries to preserve the humanity of the dead.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Rui Nogueira, *Melville on Melville* (New York, 1971), 8.

<sup>2</sup>I borrowed the term "central theme" from Yuri Shcheglov and Alexander Zholkovskii, *Poetics of Expressiveness: A Theory and Applications* (Philadelphia, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>See, for instance, Ronald Paulson, "The Silences of Jean-Pierre Melville," *The Hopkins Review* 1 (2008): 100-127.

<sup>4</sup>Claude Lanzmann, *The Patagonian Hare: A Memoir* (New York, 2012), 416.

<sup>5</sup>Dave Kehr, *When Movies Mattered: Reviews from a Transformative Decade* (Chicago, 2011), 241.

<sup>6</sup>Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia, 2004), 15, 17.

<sup>7</sup>According to Jeremy Hicks, the first Soviet documentary footage of the Holocaust did not present it as a "rupture" but "assimilate[d] to...ready-made...explanations" of "victory, vengeance and justice."

For Melville, as will be argued, the Holocaust manifests a radical rupture. Jeremy Hicks, "From Atrocity to Action: How Soviet Cinema Initiated the Holocaust Film," in *Justice, Politics and Memory in Europe after the Second World War*, ed. Suzanne Bardgett et al. (London, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>Frances M. Edge, *Vercors: Le Silence de la mer* (London, 2004), 41.

<sup>9</sup>See especially Tim Palmer, "An Amateur of Quality: Postwar French Cinema and Jean Pierre Melville's *Le Silence de la mer*," *Journal of Film and Video* 59, 4 (2007): 3-19.

<sup>10</sup>Philip Watts, "Rififi and the Politics of Silence." *L'Esprit Créateur* 51, 3 (2011): 52.

<sup>11</sup>According to Bowles, "On close examination, the uncle and niece's strategy of resistance through silence is at best inconsistent, motivated as much by self-preservation and their own emotional needs and as their patriotic duty to snub their unwanted houseguest. They could leave the parlor during Von Ebrennac's interminable monologues without fear of reprisal, but do not; the uncle compliantly fills out a tire declaration form at the local Kommandantur, presumably to avoid sanction; finally, just prior to the German's final departure, the niece offers him the coveted gift of saying 'adieu.'" Brett Bowles, "Documentary Realism and Collective Memory in Post-War France, 1945-1955," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 27, 2 (2007): 253.

<sup>12</sup>Vercors, *The Silence of the Sea/ Le Silence de la mer: A Novel of French Resistance during World War II* by "Vercors," ed. James W. Brown and Lawrence D. Stokes (Oxford, 1993), 91.

<sup>13</sup>*Witness to the Holocaust: An Illustrated Documentary History of the Holocaust in the Words of Its Victims, Perpetrators and Bystanders*, ed. Michael Berenbaum (New York, 1997), 178.

<sup>14</sup>Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago, 1967), 565.

<sup>15</sup>Ginette Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville: An American in Paris* (London, 2003), 56.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>17</sup>Samuel Moyn, *A Holocaust Controversy: The Treblinka Affair in Postwar France* (Waltham, MA, 2005), xvii.

<sup>18</sup>David Cesarani, "Challenging the Myth of Silence" in *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence*, ed. David Cesarani and Eric Sundquist (London, 2012), 27.

<sup>19</sup>Laura Jockusch, "Breaking the Silence: The Centre Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris and the Writing of Holocaust History in Liberated France" in *After the Holocaust*, 67.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 67-81.

<sup>21</sup>A serious biography of Melville, which would interrogate his life from a Jewish perspective, is yet to be written. As Vincendeau points out, "The details of Jean-Pierre Melville's life are sketchy and ambiguous—he deliberately cultivated mystery, and the meager sources that exist are mostly interviews, with all the possibilities for biases, exaggeration and contradiction that such encounters contain." Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville*, 6. This penchant for mystery is what Lanzmann sees as his Jewish proclivity for masks.

<sup>22</sup>Vincendeau emphasizes that "at the time the camps were not on French filmmakers' agenda," relying on Pierre Colombat's work. Apart from documentaries, it should be noted that non-French films which dealt with the camps, such as Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stage* (1948), were released in France. Particularly important in this regard is Aleksander Fords's *Border Street* (1949) about the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, which referred to Treblinka as the symbol of Jewish destruction and was released in France three months before its official Polish premiere. I thank Marek Haltof for this information. Vincendeau's equation of Melville making "no reference" to Jews and Resnais's "no reference" in *Nuit et brouillard* (1956) is debatable both because of the crucial aesthetic differences between the two films and Resnais's political and universalist agenda. See Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville*, 56.

<sup>23</sup>Stuart Liebman, "Historiography/Holocaust Cinema: Challenges and Advances" in *Cinema & the Shoah: An Art Confronts the Tragedy of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jean Michel Frodon (New York, 2010), 212.

<sup>24</sup>David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom* (New York, 1947), 60-61.

<sup>25</sup>For a discussion of the term, see David Biale, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005).

<sup>26</sup>Mandelbaum's is also the only piece to deal explicitly with Melville's Jewishness.

<sup>27</sup>Mandelbaum suggests that Melville might have learned about Treblinka from Soviet writer Vasily Grossman's report on the camp, which was translated into French. Though a piece of extraordinary power, unlike in his later *Life and Fate* or the earlier "Ukraine without Jews," in it, for political reasons, Grossman does not emphasize the specifically Jewish nature of the atrocities. His text does not contain Nazi reports on the camp. It also provides an inaccurate number of people killed there, while Melville's "daily" number is accurate. Another important text on the camp is Rachel Auerbach's *In the Fields of Treblinka*, published in Yiddish in 1947. Auerbach was part of the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland, which gathered evidence on the Nazi crimes, and was in contact with Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, which served a similar purpose in France. Auerbach's text, however, also does not contain Nazi reports. Finally, reports on Treblinka were presented at Nuremberg. See in *After the Holocaust*, 15-38. Mandelbaum's other suggestion that Melville might have heard of Treblinka while on a Resistance mission in London is intriguing as well.

<sup>28</sup>Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago, 1996), 132.

<sup>29</sup>Another explanation is that "according to Nicole Stéphane, the passage about Treblinka, spoken in German, was not subtitled in early releases of the film." Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville*, 57.

<sup>30</sup>When Melville himself speaks about the poetic side of the film, of which he grew increasingly apprehensive, he is alluding to the storyline of the niece's infatuation with von Ebrennac. See in Nogueira, *Melville on Melville*, 37.

<sup>31</sup>See in Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse, NY, 1996), 144-9, 17-48.

<sup>32</sup>Hirsch, *Afterimage*, 21.

<sup>33</sup>Jacob Glatstein, *I Keep Recalling: The Holocaust Poems of Jacob Glatstein*, tr. Barnett-Zumoff (New York, 1993), 92.

<sup>34</sup>Edward Alexander, *The Holocaust and the War of Ideas* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1994), 28.

<sup>35</sup>While, as far as we know, Melville was not in Paris in July of 1942, when 13, 152 Jews were arrested, brought to the Vélodrome d'Hiver and later deported to camps, he must have been aware of it.

<sup>36</sup>Jacques Mandelbaum, "Recovery" in *Cinema & the Shoah*, 26.

<sup>37</sup>Jean-Michel Frodon, "Intersecting Paths" in *Cinema & the Shoah*, 9.

<sup>38</sup>On photographs and gassing, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. (Chicago, 2003).

<sup>39</sup>Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville*, 56.

<sup>40</sup>On the SS and the Holocaust, see Andre Mineau, *SS Thinking and the Holocaust* (Amsterdam, 2012). In her important book on post-war French cinema, Sylvie Lindeperg argues for Melville's sympathetic presentation of von Ebrennac due to the difference between *Wehrmacht* and the SS. The analysis here contests her suggestion that Melville places Treblinka in 1941 in order to show the Nazi in a nuanced light because of his shocked reaction to the report on the camp and non-involvement in the atrocities. Sylvie Lindeperg, *Les écrans de l'ombre: La seconde guerre mondiale dans le cinéma français (1944-1969)*, (Paris, 1997), 272-4.

<sup>41</sup>Bowles, "Documentary Realism and Collective Memory in Post-War France, 1945 1955": 252.

<sup>42</sup>See in Annette Wieviorka, "Jewish Identity in the First Accounts by Extermination Camp Survivors from France," *Yale French Studies* 85 (1994): 142-3.

<sup>43</sup>Vercors, *The Silence of the Sea*, 95.

<sup>44</sup>In his 1920s articles on cinema, Russian Formalist critic Yurii Tynianov suggests that the relationship between objects in cinema



functions similarly to a synecdoche in poetry. See in Yuri Tynianov, *Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Kino* (Moscow, 1977), 331.

<sup>45</sup>Incidentally the fireplace was depicted on the first poster of the film. See Lorenzo Buj, "Resisting History's Tide," *Film Comment* November-December (2007): 26.

<sup>46</sup>Memoirs depicting Auschwitz crematoria were published in French immediately after the war. See in Wieviorka, "Jewish Identity in the First Accounts by Extermination Camp Survivors from France."

<sup>47</sup>On a short discussion of the train as the Holocaust symbol in Melville's *Le Deuxieme souffle* (1966), see Richard Brody, "The Free French," *The New Yorker* 17 (2011): 12.

<sup>48</sup>André Neher, *Filosofia Andre Nehera* (Jerusalem, 1984), 70.

<sup>49</sup>On the French fascination with the Germans prior to the war see Karen Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition and the Cultural Seduction of France* (Chicago, 2009).

<sup>50</sup>On the history of this addition, see Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville*, 55-6.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>52</sup>See in Palmer, "An Amateur of Quality: Postwar French Cinema and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Silence de la mer*": 11.

<sup>53</sup>Orson Welles, *This is Orson Welles: Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich*, ed. Jonathan Rosenbaum (New York, 1998), 274.

<sup>54</sup>For a discussion of this gesture, see an interview with Daniel Cauchy included in the 2002 Criterion Collection DVD of the film.

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# 'WHAT DO YOU FEEL NOW?'

## THE POETICS OF ANIMOSITY IN *FATELESS*

BRIAN WALTER

In a scene near the end of the 2005 Hungarian Holocaust film *Fateless*, director Lajos Koltai manipulates the perspective briefly to emphasize the alienation of his adolescent protagonist, György Köves, from the life and people of the Budapest to which he has returned. Standing in the aisle of a bumpy, jostling streetcar, ticket-less György is saved from the conductor by a well-meaning middle-aged man who proceeds to ply the adolescent with sympathetic but controlling questions about the camps. But György responds uncooperatively, emphasizing the logic of life in the camps, refusing to cede the meaning of what he has seen and endured to his questioner. Clearly put off by György's responses, the older man nevertheless attempts to trump the boy's uncooperativeness by asking him, "What do you feel now that you've returned home?" The camera crosscuts back to György for his one-word answer, "Hatred," but suddenly freezes, holding itself steady on the boy's face, the rocking and swaying of the car magically arrested to lend his declaration the authority of a pronouncement. Only when the director cuts back to the questioner—silenced now and unable to meet György's steady, accusing gaze—does the car resume its unsteady motion as the scene soon fades out altogether.

The strikingly unrealistic manipulation of the frame in this sequence offers just one example of the many self-conscious visual tricks and flourishes in the film that work to intensify György's experiences and percep-

tions. Such sophisticated visual strategies have long contributed to the emotional affect of fiction films both in and outside Hollywood traditions, but their prevalence in a film about a victim of the Holocaust raises telling questions. The Holocaust, it has long been accepted, surpassed previous historical limits for human evil, and so those who would treat in the medium of film—a remarkably overdetermined form of art—must portray events as simply and truthfully as possible to let history, in all its remarkable obscenity, speak for itself as directly and forcefully as possible. From the quiet simplicities of Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* to the self-abnegating qualities of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, which drains itself in the opening shot from warm color to austere black-and-white, Holocaust films in general have labored under an imperative to construct an image of unfettered, objective truth rather than indulging personal, subjective visions, particularly aesthetically appealing ones. As Teodor Adorno famously put it, after Auschwitz, there could be no poetry.

*Fateless* situates itself largely against this tradition not only with its penchant for self-conscious visual touches but also in the way that it structures György's story. It makes no pretenses to simple, objective witness in its depiction of the boy's searing experience, carefully setting up three movements and connecting them across the film with a clear goal of showing his ironic growth, the Holocaust used to achieve a kind of *bildungsroman*

in the three-part narrative structure. At the beginning of the film, György is a dreamy youth adorned with a crown of thick brown curls as he walks the streets of Budapest, the Star of David on his jacket little more than a decoration to a boy whose eye wanders to the pretty girl out the window even as he is reciting, with a distraught neighbor, a prayer for his father on the eve of his father's deportation to the camps. The middle portion of the film immerses innocent György within the crucible of the Nazi *Lagers*, marking his downward spiral from the preliminary stop in Auschwitz, where he lies about his age to survive selection, to his transfer to a lesser work-camp where his body and spirit gradually break down and deliver him, helplessly naked and stricken, to the shower-floor where he expects to die. The third and final part of the film brings him back to Budapest, but as a stranger who no longer fits in, transformed by his experience.

In telling this story, the camera maintains a complicated relationship with György's perspective, at times working primarily to convey his emotions, but at others detaching from his limited purview sympathetically, like an older, wiser relative who sees what the boy experiences from a broadly humane perspective. It is primarily in the first register, in its conveyance of György's experience, that the visuals support the narrative scheme, as if the first two parts of the film were geared primarily to justify his self-righteous animosity at the end. His encounter with the middle-aged man on the streetcar is just one of several which simultaneously expose the incomprehension of the uninitiated and underscore the superior perspective of the authentic survivor. Repeatedly, in fact, during the final stages of the film, György's prodigal presence proves unwelcome or, at least, unassimilable in the city of his home, his presence, comments, and pointed questions placing friends and family in awkwardly vulnerable positions. If the war has devastated Budapest physically, the city has sustained considerable physical devastation during the war, it has still offered some refuge to the ones left behind and

confined the camps to the status of terrible rumor—to the shame of those not deported, the film suggests, and to György's palpable estrangement.

In this effect, then, the film perhaps most directly challenges the tradition of stylistic austerity in dramatic treatments of the Holocaust. The three-part structure of the film (György's innocent pre-camp life in Budapest, his experience in the camps, and, finally, his return to Budapest) even comes to resemble the thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure of the classic Hegelian triad. György's final return fuses together the world of his relatively carefree youth with the hellish world of the camps, a combination realized visually by the faded but recognizably camp-issue jacket he wears in his return. The trajectory even follows, to some degree, the conventional Hollywood 'character arc' wherein the narrative dramatizes experiences that leave the protagonist deepened and matured, even empowered in some way.<sup>1</sup> György insists—and the film seems largely to endorse this insistence—that his experience in the camps was more coherently meaningful and, in important ways, edifying than civilian life could ever be.

The polemical capacity of the film's narrative structure and self-conscious visuals not only raise important questions about the motives of *Fateless* but also engage the inherently thorny challenges of making any fiction film about the Holocaust. Perhaps most tellingly, the artificial story design robs the camp experiences themselves of any intrinsic meaning, for, as the antithetic portion of the Hegelian progression, the camp experience serves essentially as a bridge between the thesis of preliminary innocence and the final addition of lacerating knowledge that achieves the synthesis. Interment becomes a rite of passage rather than an end in itself, and as one would expect of such rites, it tends to romanticize the older version of the protagonist who emerges from the camps.

Further, the frank subjectivity of *Fateless* raises the complex problem of the witness's authority. As Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi has argued compellingly in *The Drowned and*

*the Saved*, his final book on the phenomenon of the concentration camp, the collective quest for the true and full meaning of the Holocaust requires us to sift the testimonies of survivors as their stories grow more and more rhetorically stylized—more and more removed from the reality of the experiences—in the years of re-telling. Moreover, perhaps still more dauntingly, how do we reconcile a proper respect for the accounts of survivors with the knowledge that they are not and cannot be the Lager's truest witnesses, not the ones who, as Levi puts it, descended to see the Gorgon face-to-face?<sup>2</sup> As Levi argues, the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps were exceptions rather than the rule, anomalies in a system (successfully) designed to produce their deaths *en masse*; these exceptions emerged alive not because of any special ability or virtue, but because of an unpredictable combination of luck, timing, and certain delimited advantages that somehow accrued their way, such as access to extra food or installment in easier tasks.<sup>3</sup> *The Drowned and the Saved* calls for a skeptical awareness of the increasing stylization of survivors' memories, lest the authentic horror of the Nazi genocide disappear beneath rhetorical overgrowth. If Levi does not, like Adorno, simply forbid art after Auschwitz, he makes it perhaps all the harder to incorporate it into the morality of the historical record, at least where the Holocaust is concerned.

Levi's caution lends itself meaningfully to the rhetorical qualities of *Fateless*, which is based on Imre Kertész's autobiographical novel (his first) published in 1975. If it works to show György's victimization by forces beyond his control, *Fateless* the film nevertheless serves to make the *Lager* experience part of his personal story rather than making his life a part of the obscene drama of the Holocaust, as was the fateful case for millions of other European Jews. The scenes in the camps frequently take on a stark visual quality that aestheticizes György's experience, transforming his interment into a kind of spiritual nether-journey.<sup>4</sup> Far from seeking a "realistic" depiction of life and death

in the camps, *Fateless* embraces a deeply stylized approach in part to justify the prospect of György's damning witness upon his return to Budapest. The beauty of the camp sequences—which reviewer A. O. Scott, for example, described as both "unmistakable" and "a bit disconcerting"<sup>5</sup>—does not result merely from putting this story into the hands of a director trained as a cinematographer, but is, rather, built into it from the ground up, the result of its mission to authenticate the singularity of György's experience. According to József Marx, Koltai worked to make "[b]eauty...the cornerstone of the [film's] concept," working to "find authentic images which were appropriate for the beautiful, human story, to weave images on to the milestones [novelist] Imre Kertész had outlined" (100). Various aspects of the lighting and staging clearly work toward this goal, abstracting and beatifying György's experience, lending it a symbolic value whose very strength would seem largely to overwhelm its historical testimony.

The film version of *Fateless* thus defies both Adorno and Levi by making an unusual case for the specific morality of aesthetic sophistication. In fact, in an interview, novelist Kertész declares the film's moralizing aesthetic a specific response to the clumsiness (as he characterizes it) of *Schindler's List*, a bellwether in Holocaust film studies.<sup>6</sup> As a "corrective," *Fateless* ironically eschews even the complicated verisimilitude of Spielberg's award-winning film in favor of a kind of emotional, impressionistic truth, singling György out of a system that deliberately and programmatically suppressed individualism. As an entry in the lists of Holocaust narrative morality, then, *Fateless* makes a striking case for the educational and edifying value precisely of the idiosyncratic experience, effectively defying Levi's dictum that the necessarily exceptional survivor makes for an inherently suspect witness. Art here boldly appropriates history for its own purposes, ignoring the conventional wisdom that this particular chapter of history not only undermines but forbids the transports of the imagination.

The opening scene of the film not only establishes György's dreamy innocence before his deportation, but also a complex point-of-view, blending György's and a third-person perspective, by means of various visual strategies that defamiliarize and even alienate the objects of the camera's gaze. The film opens with György walking across a town square headed to a meeting with his father and stepmother, who—having learned that the father is to be deported—are in the process of handing over the family business to a trusted friend who will manage it while György's father is in the camps. The visual treatment of this scene at first emphasizes György's detachment from the proceedings, using point-of-view perspective to show the viewer what György sees as he looks in through windows on the conversation from outside the room. In the shots that show him looking, his expression is clear and unresponsive, that of a mere observer who does not appreciate the dangers of the imminent deportation for his father. György has no obvious reason not to simply enter the room with his parents and the family friend, so his lingering outside suggests, among other things, a detachment from his family that is common enough for an adolescent, one that takes for granted the distance between the world of his parents and the one he is constructing for himself.

But the camerawork soon suggests that oblivious György will, in fact, find himself connected to his father's fate. During these first few minutes of the film, the camera has attached itself dutifully and naturally to György as the film's protagonist, tracking his movements and assuming his point-of-view, so when he steps inside the room, the perspective should naturally accompany him. But when György does step inside, the camera declines to follow, looking in on György through the windows, just as he has previously been looking in on his family. It is a strikingly new perspective, deliberately disrupting the point of view the film has so far established. By stepping into the room to engage with his parents at this point, György steps briefly into the greater historical mo-

ment, to be looked at from the outside. Once the three family members leave the room together, the camera re-attaches itself to György's perspective, but the final image of them in the shop basement from outside the window has—in the first instance of self-conscious variation—already foretold his future. The distance that György naturally seeks to maintain between himself and the deadly forces of history that swept up so many victims (including his father) will inevitably disappear.

The pre-camp sequences include more visual touches that disrupt the illusion of objectivity in the camera's perspective, underscoring the innocence in György that both requires expression and encourages sympathetic observation. One early scene finds György in the bath at home, unhurriedly playing with a toy floating across the surface of the water. The perspective and substance of the shot recall a similar scene in another film about a teenage survivor of the Holocaust, Solly Perel in Agnieszka Holland's *Europa Europa* (1990). But where the earlier film's protagonist has his playful bath violently interrupted by the appearance of the SS, forcing him to flee naked out a window and hide in a barrel in the street, György simply floats through his bath scene, which ends with the fade-out transition that is typical of the film's *etude* structure, as the director characterized it.<sup>7</sup> The camera's arrested gaze on György's innocent, even oblivious play proves unsettling not only for viewers of the earlier film, but for the way it still more emphatically detaches György from the horror of his father's imminent deportation. Nothing seems to touch György in these early portions of the film, languishing in the tub, lingering outside the room where his father turns over the family business, his mind and attention drifting easily, almost lazily from his prayers for his father to the figure of his girlfriend out the window, and so on. The camera quietly but systematically in these early sequences finds ways both to convey György's innocence and to hold it up to the viewer's gaze as a quality that cannot endure.

The subsequent scenes in the camps continue to embellish and, in ways, endear György's experience. One of the most indelible images of his time in the camps is, tellingly, one of the most carefully contrived, both narratively and visually. After a day of raking and pushing rubble off a train car, György appears alone, contemplating the ravaged palms of his hands, his shorn head surrounded in a halo of light (a camp-counterpart, perhaps, to his thick curls in the early Budapest scenes). In this lengthy shot begun and ended by the fade out-fade in transition that the film uses repeatedly, the camera takes a low angle on György, who appears first in profile contemplating the palm of his right hand, which he has raised a little above his head in a starkly symbolic image, the prisoner searching for the meaning of his imprisonment in the signs it has scored upon his body. Koltai

instructed Marcell Nagy, the actor who plays György, to look at his hands as if he were experiencing pain for the first time, instructing him, "Hold your palm so, wondering what it's become like!"<sup>8</sup> György is apparently indoors, and the only verifiable source of light is the upper part of an open doorway partly visible in the distance behind him, the rest of the background primarily comprising the darkened walls of the structure rising up beside and above the doorway. But the design also pours apparently natural light down on György from some inexplicable source above him, not only accentuating the illumination of his head and shoulders against the shadowy, indistinct background, but also creating a miasma of light to carry the dust particles magically upward as they swirl around the boy. György briefly raises his left hand up next to his right and then lowers them together as he turns toward the camera, which dollies in very slowly, maintaining its humbly low angle as György fixes it with a steady downward gaze, his

eyes retreating into shadow as the result of the back- and top-lighting seen from the increasingly sheer angle. György's expression also hardens in the course of the shot: it is initially open, even wondering, as he looks at the wounds on his hands, but it becomes fixed when he turns on the camera, its literal inferiority prefiguring the humbled position of the people in Budapest whom he will come to contemplate with much the same accusing air at the end of the film.



**György contemplates his hand (Reproduced with permission of THINK Film).**

This shot contributes more to the key impression of György's solitary spiritual journey than just the symbolically stylized lighting. While the work routines and brutal, desperate conditions of life in the camps would make private meditative moments such as this nearly impossible, György appears conveniently alone in the hand-contemplation scene, with the very set-up of the shot protecting him from the possibility of intrusion; all the markers of a defining moment for the protagonist militate against interruption, the image of his solitude and new self-knowledge allowed to play out as if the camera's gaze were protecting him. Whether or not the novel's author Kertesz found such a moment to himself during his time in the real camps, clearly, this hauntingly eloquent scene in the film is inspired far less by historical reality than by the symbolic weight it carries.

*Fateless* finds another telling opportunity to isolate György from his fellow inmates in a later scene that has him laboring up a

muddy hill at night. György lowers himself unsteadily out of his bunk and heads out into the rain for this effort, the camera gliding along in a tracking shot behind him as he slips and slides his way forward, his body silhouetted against the distant spotlights, the lower part of his right leg grotesquely bent sideways with a knee injury that will be revealed in full two scenes later. The camera twice cuts away to a side perspective on György's struggles, continuing to track beside him in the first but holding the camera in place for the final one, panning right to keep the slowly receding figure in the frame as György reaches a rail and pulls himself to his feet just before the scene fades out.

Like the hand-contemplation scene, György's devastating version of Sisyphus' hopeless trek does little to advance the story, however much it contributes to his gradual spiritual ruin. It follows immediately after



**György struggles up the hill (Reproduced with the permission of THINK Film)**

the hanging of three inmates who have attempted to escape, a spectacle that prompts a wondering György to haltingly join in with the other inmates as they pray for the executed. The hanging seems to break György's will, and his descent into hopelessness begins with the stark symbolism of the climb, György uselessly struggling and falling and getting up to struggle again with no discernible goal, not even a crest in sight for him to reach. György is the only human figure in the frame as he trudges up the hill, the subject and object of the soprano's solo

that rises simultaneously on the soundtrack. It is a defining moment for György, the scene that at once galvanizes his isolation and his despair. The solo, in fact, serves as a musical bridge into a scene that dramatizes his utter hopelessness, György turning his back on his best friend, Bandi Citrom, and denying Bandi's repeated attempts to rekindle his will to live with the simple, dead-end response that he is cold. Bandi finally takes off his own jacket to drape around György's shoulders, but even this gesture of extraordinary compassion (synchronized with a transposition to a higher register by the violin accompanying the vocalist) does not break through György's despair, for in the very next scene, he appears once again alone, silhouetted in the distance, the rain falling once again, the camera craning down to bring the same muddy hill with the same railing from the nighttime climb scene back into prominent view.

The film saves its most striking visual flourish for György's final view of the camp before its liberation. As he is carried, helpless, out of the showers that have released only water instead of the killing gas he clearly expects, György's head hangs upside down—a perspective that the camera emphasizes with inverted point-of-view shots of naked corpses being carted away, one of them bizarrely sagging up toward the top of the frame. This device would seem superfluous; in fact, the sequence of shots that shows György being taken to the showers uses standard point-of-view techniques to present other bodies being hauled to the shower from a conventionally upright perspective—even though György's head lies flat on its side on a cart. But it is precisely the highly stylized “realism” of the subsequent, inverted shots that makes them the most inspired metaphors in



the film. The camp system, as Levi and others have pointed out, served up a grotesque caricature of civilization, the triumphs of human technology obscenely dedicated to the mass production of human corpses; Auschwitz, as Levi and others have put it, was *anus mundi*, the lower orifice turned upward against all logic and morality, to belch out as smoke the human lives it had taken into its maw.<sup>9</sup> György's odyssey takes him to the shower floor where he stares up terrified and helpless into the device that should, by the laws of the camps, end his existence. His survival of the climactic nadir of his camp experience appropriately inverts his perspective as a signal witness to the heinously bottomsided-up world of the *Lagers*.

Having survived the deadly, devastating experience of a world turned upside down, György returns to Budapest filled with not just the hatred he declares to the man in the streetcar, but also possessed of a bitterly ironic authority. In his reunion with his old neighbors at the end of the movie, György takes the same seat as in an early scene in which the neighbors hold forth on the best method for him to go to work (one arguing more strenuously for the fateful bus over the train), but it quickly becomes clear in his return to Budapest that the lines of power have reversed, György repeatedly supplying knowledge that his neighbors cannot muster. Not surprisingly, the visit does not last long, György not even touching the food (an old favorite of his, according to one of the hosts) that they offer him. His former neighbors urge him in parting to go and visit his mother, but the movie ends with a high crane shot of György disappearing on foot into the city, the mother's claim on her son denied in favor of György's final invocation of his beloved early evening hour, the world of bourgeois, civilized Budapest dismissed in favor of the antithetical logic of the camps, where he could discover such telling affinity for this time of the day.

Seen in this light, *Fateless* actually has much more in common with a quasi-Holocaust film like Roberto Benigni's 1997 comedy *Life is Beautiful* than it would appear to at first

glance. Where Benigni places his jokester character in Auschwitz to see what kind of comedy he could still achieve in a place that killed the very possibility of laughter, Koltai's film places an innocent in the camps at a crucial transitional stage of his growth and shows how drastically and devastatingly it determines the young man who emerges. In one important way, in fact, *Fateless* co-opts the Holocaust even more radically than does *Life is Beautiful*, for the earlier film does finally sacrifice the protagonist, honoring Levi's insistence on the historical norm of essentially universal death in the camps, whereas the later film sends the protagonist home against extraordinarily high odds as a youthful rebel with an unassailable cause.

But this understanding of the movie should not diminish the considerable beauty or power of *Fateless*. In many ways, the movie's use of the Holocaust bespeaks a welcome freedom from the limiting claims of "realism" so often laid upon stories that treat the Nazi genocide, the idea that straightforward documentation is not only enough, but the only goal to strive for and the only standard for judgment. As *Fateless* shows, an emotionally and artistically charged treatment need not obscure the lessons of the Holocaust nor dishonor the innumerable victims. *Fateless* uses the scenes in the camps to achieve a poetry of pain and disillusionment that feels all the more authentic and compelling for its un-intellectualized ability to combine wonderment with anger—however stylized the resulting images.

In the authority it lends to György's imaginative experience of the camps, the film version of *Fateless* finally, ironically seems to question the irremediable singularity of the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon. To borrow terms from Joshua Hirsch's useful study *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust*, György's experience is not traumatic and therefore does not pose a particular problem to memory or imagination:

[Trauma] is...a crisis of representation. An extreme event is perceived as radically out of joint with one's mental representation of the world, which is itself partly derived from

the set of representations of the world that one receives from one's family and culture. The mind goes into shock, becomes incapable of translating the impressions of the event into a coherent mental representation. The impressions remain in the mind, intact and unassimilated. Paradoxically, they neither submit to the normal processes of memory storage and recall, nor, returning uninvited, do they allow the event to be forgotten.<sup>10</sup>

The memories that the film presents to the viewer drastically reshape György by the end, but they specifically do not prove unassimilable. If, as Hirsch suggests, the Holocaust has inscribed itself as a kind of historical trauma for Western culture,<sup>11</sup> *Fateless* seems to envisage the possibility of releasing the trauma by transforming it into art. In its creative treatment of various passages from the novel, in its deliberateness and willingness to contrive images that complicate and even disrupt the plot's flow, the film constructs a subtly complex perspective on György's experiences, honoring their impressionistic poignancy more than their traumatic obscenity. Instead of trying to recreate a traumatic experience for the viewer (a significant tradition in Holocaust films, according to Hirsch),<sup>12</sup> the film impresses the viewer with the searing indelibility of these experiences for György, the way that memory works for a once careless, heedless youth plunged into the camps. The bold beauties of Koltai's approach to György's subjective experience conveys more than the animosity of the angry adolescent, finally suggesting new possibilities for memorializing the massive complexities of the Holocaust on film.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The term 'character arc' has become something of a cliché in screen writing literature in recent decades, appearing routinely (and often pejoratively) in reviews, articles, self-help books, and blogs. See, for example, "Writing Strategies," the eighth

chapter of Carlos De Abreu and Howard Jay Smith's book *Opening the Door to Hollywood: How to Sell Your Idea, Story, Book, Screenplay, Manuscript* or the page "Character Arc" in the blog *Write for Hollywood* (<http://www.writeforhollywood.com/character-arc/>).

<sup>2</sup>Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International, 1988), 83-4.

<sup>3</sup>Levi, in fact, emphasizes the moral taint of survival: "The 'saved' of the Lager were not the best, those predestined to do good, the bearers of a message: what I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the 'gray zone,' the spies....The worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died" (82).

<sup>4</sup>The director, Koltai, had the idea of a spiritual journey in mind from the early stages. While planning the film's visual approach to György's story, he even referred to key moments as the "stations of a way of the cross." See József Marx, *Fateless: A Book of the Film* (Budapest: Vince Books, 2005), 100.

<sup>5</sup>A. O. Scott, "Finding the Beauty in a Boy's Days of Horror," *New York Times*, January 6, 2006. <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/01/06/movies/06fate.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Joshua Hirsch persuasively suggests that *Schindler's List* has "changed the way one of the most significant events in modern history is remembered" for its application of postmodern tropes and techniques in a "compellingly realistic historical world." See Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2004), 144.

<sup>7</sup>The director uses this term in an interview included on the DVD of the film.

<sup>8</sup>Marx, 134-5

<sup>9</sup>Levi, p. 65.

<sup>10</sup>Hirsch, 15-16.

<sup>11</sup>See Hirsch, 7.

<sup>12</sup>Hirsch, 7.

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# EXHIBITING THE SHOAH: A CURATOR'S VIEWPOINT

YEHUDIT KOL-INBAR

“Consider that this has been...”  
—Primo Levi (*Shema*, 1946)

## INTRODUCTION

Almost six million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> Entire communities and families were murdered, their property confiscated and looted, many of their names erased from the pages of history. Despite the intensive collection of names over several decades, the database of names at Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Jerusalem, contains only about 4.2 million names.<sup>2</sup> There is little chance of finding additional names, and a gap will always remain between the number of Jews known to be living before World War II and those identified by name as having been murdered.<sup>3</sup> This gap also characterizes our information on other subjects as well. A comprehensive study over recent years by the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel, listed relatively more ghettos than known in the past, based on documents in newly-opened archives in Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> We may assume that some ghettos, from the approximately 1,000 that existed, still will be discovered, but we will never have any information on many. New topics for academic research are now being studied in depth, such as the role of women in the Holocaust, with new information added continuously.<sup>5</sup> The story of children in the Holocaust is an important issue yet to be researched in depth.<sup>6</sup>

All exhibitions dealing with the Holocaust, whether permanent or temporary, must address two issues which have become

more acute in the almost seventy years since the end of World War II: historical data and research studies are increasing over the years, while the original artifacts and materials which can be used in exhibitions, never numerous to begin with, are disappearing, or being destroyed as time passes.<sup>7</sup>

In general, there are few means for exhibiting what the German Nazis and their collaborators did to the Jews, but the materials are relatively extant. The Nazis documented some of the processes and events in writing (less relevant to museum exhibitions), photographs and film footage, and even encouraged the process. Photographs were taken mainly until the German invasion of the USSR, when an order was issued to cease photographing the killings.<sup>8</sup> Almost no concrete evidence remains of four of the death camps (Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka and Chelmno), except for some buried elements, since the Nazis razed them to the ground. However, many buildings and objects remain – both murderers' and victims'—mainly in Majdanek, but also in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The same holds true for additional sites officially declared historical sites, or museums; despite wear and tear over the years, there is still concrete evidence of genocide. Conversely, a process of destruction and disappearance is taking place due to reasons such as natural erosion or real estate development in places not declared official sites, and not destroyed by the end of the war, such as other types of camps, or death pits. The museums at

the remaining sites have lent out objects to other museums throughout the world, such as parts of crematoria, Zyklon B gas canisters, parts of the blocks, prisoners' clothing and other relics of life in the concentration camps, and possessions of Jews taken to the gas chambers. With the increased awareness of the need for preservation, and legislation prohibiting sending objects out of the country for more than a short time, many difficulties have arisen regarding loans.

The lack of materials for exhibitions is especially prominent in exhibitions engaged in the Jewish story. The Jews were not able to document themselves, except for a few notable exceptions. Besides rare archival material, such as the *Oyneg Shabbes* archives from the Warsaw Ghetto<sup>9</sup> or various Judenrat materials, community ledgers, and diaries and letters by isolated individuals, there are very few existing visual materials. Photographs by Nazis in no way reflect the Jewish viewpoint, but show the victims through the murderers' eyes, depicting the Jews as anonymous, humiliated, in a desperate physical and mental state, and often looking sub-human.

Consequently, everyone who attempts to mount a permanent or temporary exhibition on the Holocaust must address the issue of how to provide visual expression to the historical narrative. The means to do so have undergone profound changes.

The current article discusses two permanent exhibitions created by personnel from Yad Vashem, in which I was involved: the Holocaust History Museum at Yad-Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel, inaugurated in 2005; and the "New Permanent Exhibition 'SHOAH,' Block 27, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum," Poland, inaugurated in June 2013. I also discuss two of the exhibitions curated by the Museum's Division of Yad Vashem during these years: "'Spots of Light': To be a Woman in the Holocaust" opened in 2007; and the exhibition on the Righteous Among the Nations—"I am My brother's Keeper," Fifty Years of Honoring Righteous Among the Nations (June 2013).

Based on these four exhibitions, I shall attempt to present conclusions on the philosophical and museological trends that

have developed over the past decade, and the unique place of visual imagery projected in Holocaust museums. As we know, visual imagery makes an important contribution to creating collective memory and building myths which shape identity.

#### THE HOLOCAUST HISTORY MUSEUM AT YAD VASHEM, JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

As long as survivors were establishing the museums and exhibitions, the lack of materials was less crucial. The museum founded at Yad Vashem in the 1960s by Holocaust survivors, curator Dr. Yitzhak Arad, and designer Shmuel Grundman, with its changes and expansions over the years, reflected the survivors' desire to show what the German Nazis and their collaborators perpetrated on the Jews. Consequently the exhibition was comprised mainly of enlarged photographs taken by the murderers, with relevant documents. Several models were built to depict the process of genocide in the death camps, but there were no individual Jewish names or material reflecting a Jewish viewpoint. One exception was the work by artist-survivor Naftali Bezem, "From Holocaust to Rebirth," which opened the exhibition.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition began with two objects—a single boy's shoe and a torn Torah scroll (Scroll of the Law). Only at later stages of the exhibition, when the need was felt to include the Jewish viewpoint, were two slide shows introduced: one described Jewish pre-war life,<sup>11</sup> and towards the end of the Museum there was a film on the "illegal" immigration to Eretz Israel. During a certain period there were also slide presentations on life in the camps<sup>12</sup> and on Jewish partisans, but the presentations were removed at some stage. According to Dr. Robert Rozett, who was in charge of one of the renovations, the plan was to have more films, but none were produced because funds ran out.<sup>13</sup>

In 1994, a steering committee at Yad Vashem, whose members had not personally gone through the Holocaust (except for Yad Vashem's Chief Historian Prof. Israel Gutman) began meeting regularly to formulate the concept for a new museum of Holocaust history. The process took about a year and a

half, at the end of which we issued a conceptual and architectural program constituting the basis for establishing the Museum.<sup>14</sup> The change in approach was dramatic, but can be summed up in a single sentence: from a museum attempting to show what the Nazis and their collaborators did to the Jews during the Holocaust, the new museum would show the Jewish viewpoint, with the processes determined by the Nazis and their collaborators as the framework for the main narrative.

We wanted to personify the Holocaust and give expression to people, both Jews and murderers, not as a mass, but as individuals. Our statement was that the Holocaust was perpetrated by human beings on other human beings, and that individual conscience and morality played a large part in events.

From a curatorial viewpoint, we had barely any visual materials with which to present the Jewish viewpoint, and so began work in several directions simultaneously. We started out by establishing a collection of artifacts belonging to Jews during the Holocaust, and concentrated on documenting the narrative each object represented. We greatly expanded the art collection<sup>15</sup> with as many works as possible created by Jewish artists during the Holocaust, and integrated the artworks into the historical exhibition. The staff conducted wide-ranging research of the photographs and film footage and attempted to identify as many of the people depicted as possible. We also obtained objects from the camps and murder sites to illustrate the sites and means used for genocide, built numerous models, integrated maps and texts, and introduced poetry and extracts from diaries and letters. Fifty testimonies of men and women survivors were added, as were short films on various themes, such as antisemitism, and 100 individual stories, shown on about 100 screens and panels scattered throughout the exhibition. All of the elements came together to make up the overall exhibition. Despite the curatorial choice of idea and themes, the multiplicity and variety of exhibition elements gives some freedom to the visitor.

Visitors walking through the museum are able to create insights for themselves out of all the elements, suited to their personality



**Life in Germany in the 1930s (partial view), The Holocaust History Museum, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2005. Photo: Courtesy of Yad Vashem.**

and perceptions, as active—not passive—spectators. However, most of the visitors to the Museum wish to be guided, or arrive in a guided framework: 73% come in groups, including educational groups. Out of the 23% families and individuals, about one quarter use the audio guide.<sup>16</sup>



**Survivor Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau (former Chief Rabbi of Israel) looks at the photograph of his murdered mother in the exhibition "Spots of Light." Photo: Courtesy of Yad Vashem.**

In addition to the films and testimonies, the Museum has two works of video art. "Living Landscape" by internationally renowned Israeli artist Michal Rovner is screened onto a triangular wall almost 43 ft. high (13m.). The approximately 11 minute film is composed of archival footage, sound recordings and original photographs from Jewish life before World War II, seen against the background of an original map of Europe in Yiddish. The view to the other side of the exhibition hall is the Jerusalem landscape, a look to the future and hope.



Michal Rovner, "Living Landscape," The Holocaust History Museum, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2005. Photo: Courtesy of Yad Vashem.

The second video art, "Epilogue—Facing the Loss" by Uri Tzaig, is projected near the exit. The work is based on original written statements during the Holocaust. Thus, viewers experience artworks upon entering and leaving the Museum, adding to and complementing the museum experience and the feeling of the relevance of the Holocaust. Almost all of the elements can

still stand alone as both works of art, films or testimonies.

The Museum has close to 900,000 visitors annually.

### "SPOTS OF LIGHT: TO BE A WOMAN IN THE HOLOCAUST"

Research focused specifically on women in the Holocaust began only in the late 1980s, many years after the end of WWII, which has implications for the mode of the exhibition. I found myself weaving the information on women from delicate, thin strands of information. I had personal stories which I began to gather around 10 themes to reflect the lives of women in the Holocaust: Love, Motherhood, Caring for Others, Womanhood, Partisans and Underground, Everyday Life, Friendship, Faith, Food and Arts.<sup>17</sup> On the surface, the most banal issues constituted the corpus representing women's lives during the Holocaust; however, we could not find representative information and visual material on them.



Survivor Rudolfine Fini Steindling, visiting "Spots of Light: To be a Woman in the Holocaust," Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2007. Photo: Courtesy of Yad Vashem.

Comprehensive research yielded photographs of the women about whom I had informative data. We had pre-war photographs of the women who did not survive, and photographs of the survivors taken a short time after the war. The designer, Chanan de Lange, said to me after a look at the curatorial brief that actually there was no way to construct

a “conventional” museum exhibition from these materials. All we had were fragments of stories, a few photographs, one original piece of film footage, and a few objects. He suggested digitizing all of the material, which would then be screened. The idea at first seemed too revolutionary, and other options were considered. Days passed, filled with discussions, until we finally understood we had no other choice. We had all of the materials digitized and sent to the editing room. The results were screened on 18 projectors hung near the ceiling for a 360° projection on all walls. The entire space looks like a huge Internet page, constantly moving. One single large bench was installed in the center of the space.

Keep in mind this was 2007. We had no idea how such an exhibit would look or how it would work until the moment the computers and projectors were switched on. When it was finally screened, a few days before opening, we found that the photographs of the women had to be enlarged, some taking up an entire wall. When visitors entered the exhibition, they would see photographs of women looking their best, with only the text narrating their stories during the Holocaust. The dissonance between the positive image and the text imbued the exhibit with great intensity.

The music in the exhibition space was original music from before the Holocaust, played by Alma Rosé (Mahler’s niece, who conducted the women’s orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and was murdered there). At the end of the exhibit were several isolated, small glass display cases with a few original objects which in effect emphasized the “missing presence” of tangible materials.

Two smaller spaces were adjacent to the large space, one for a library of books on women in the Holocaust and a computer monitor with the Diary of Etty Hillesum (murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau); the second space was designed for Michal Rovner’s video art, “To Be a Human Being,” created especially for this exhibition. The artist

interviewed 10 women survivors about their actions during the Holocaust, transformed into beautiful, selfless moments of giving.

The exhibition at Yad Vashem was in English and Hebrew, presenting a challenge in terms of scope of materials.

Later, we created three single-language versions,<sup>18</sup> which became traveling exhibitions in the world, on show at museums of art, history and Holocaust. As the projected exhibitions are without the original objects, they travel very easily: no problem to ship, no insurance, and no problems with original materials. They have infinite possibilities,



“Spots of Light,” Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, 2008. Photo: Courtesy of Dresden Museum.

and can be suited to any space or size.<sup>19</sup> The exhibit looks contemporary but different in each space, and it is moving and surprising to see how each new installation integrates into its new space.<sup>21</sup> Holocaust museums usually add original materials from their collection or



“Spots of Light,” Museo de la Memoria de Andalucía, Granada, 2010. Photo: Courtesy of Yad Vashem.



from members of the community to create a local connection. I sent a proposal to one of the film festivals whose organizers wanted to screen the film on one wall as a linear film, though this did not come to pass. "Spots of Light" overcame the constraints of the paucity and problematic aspects of the material through its design solution; projection of images became an advantage which reinforced the conceptual aspects of the exhibition and generated a fundamental change in exhibitions on the Holocaust.

### THE "NEW PERMANENT EXHIBITION 'SHOAH', BLOCK 27, THE AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU STATE MUSEUM," POLAND

The original exhibition in the Jewish Pavilion was built in the late 1960s, and revamped in 1978. The new exhibition, unveiled in June 2013, was initiated and financed by the Israeli government (with the assistance of the Claims Conference, and in coordination with the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum) which charged Yad Vashem with the curatorship and production. The Pavilion is an original block of two floors used to house prisoners (not Jewish) in Auschwitz I during WW II, and had to undergo comprehensive, expensive conservation work. It is located among other national pavilions in the area of the State Museum at Auschwitz.

Several considerations dictated the philosophical idea behind the exhibition and the ways selected to present it. First, the visit to the Pavilion is part of the overall visit to the Museum, the national pavilions and the site of the Birkenau death camp. Second, except for a short, general introductory film about WWII at the Visitors' Center, visitors receive a great deal of information about the site only. Third, most of the visitors come in organized groups, and have only about 20-30 minutes for the Pavilion (Individual visitors have more time). We therefore decided that the exhibit would present the Holocaust of the Jews of Europe and North Africa in its entirety, instead of referring only to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Another decision arose from the very

problematic issue of maintenance. Except for a security guard on site, there would be



"Ideology" room. (Photo by Pawel Sawicki). Photo: Courtesy of Yad Vashem.

no one to care for original materials; hence the decision not to exhibit original material.

These decisions led to the realization that we needed a curatorial approach which would distill and crystallize both content and materials. The option chosen as the main means of exhibition in the Pavilion was projection (rear and front) of images, films and stills by various means, besides the maps and thematic texts. In the area where the extermination of the Jews is shown, there would be a projection in real time from the



"Geography of Murder, Extermination Camps and Killing Sites" room. (Photo by Pawel Sawicki). Photo: Courtesy of Yad Vashem.

Birkenau site (to emphasize that the murder took place there).

The only areas without projections are the two commemoration spaces, one designed by artist Michal Rover in memory of the murdered children, and "The Book of Names" for those murdered, as well as the Reflections space and the educational space of the "Big Questions," which are not part of the usual visitors' route.

All of the contents are accompanied by extremely short texts, or iconic quotations or statements. The visitor thus receives prepared messages on the major themes. The idea was that viewers would create an integrated experience by connecting the various messages and issues on display to arrive at a basic understanding of the overall event of the Holocaust. Such an understanding would also enable the viewer to put the site into context, as well as the exhibitions outside of the Jewish Pavilion, which addressed Auschwitz-Birkenau exclusively.

<sup>20</sup> All labels in the Pavilion had to be trilingual, in English, Polish and Hebrew, forcing us to minimize and shorten the texts even more.

Approximately 1.5 million visitors see the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum each year, the greater majority from Europe, with a total of about 60,000 visitors annually from Israel, groups and individuals.

## "I AM MY BROTHER'S KEEPER": 50 YEARS OF RECOGNITION OF THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS

This exhibition engages in the pure goodness of being human. It is difficult to describe anything more positive than the actions of people awarded the distinction of Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem in official recognition of saving Jewish lives during the Holocaust, while risking their lives and the lives of their families.

If the Holocaust was mainly the story of human evil, expressed in the greatest moral decline imaginable by nations and individuals, we may say that the approximately 25,000

Righteous are the rays of light illuminating the darkness cast by the millions of perpetrators and bystanders. They show that it was possible to behave otherwise, even at risk to what was most precious to them. These people are the hallmarks of humanity.

But how best to express this in a "Holocaust exhibition"? It was clear that we had to choose only a few stories of rescuers, because we could not show all of them. As in the subject of the women, the visual materials were mainly photographs and documents—and there were very few of them.

The curator's solution was to write the concise essence of five stories and present each as a seven-minute film. Designer Chan-an de Lange proposed building five "hills," places in which humanity rose above evil, and project the films onto them. Visitors could sit around the "hills" alone or with another person, and view the films. In between the



"Interlude Sentences." Photo: Courtesy of Yad Vashem.

projected stories, a short multimedia presentation of floating letters glittering in the dark, slowly line up into a sentence reflecting heroic acts by the rescuers. The design calls for an opening section where photographs of the rescuers are projected, integrated with their statements explaining why they saved Jews. The concluding section describes the Righteous Among the Nations project established



The numbers of the "Righteous Among the Nations." Photo: Courtesy of Yad Vashem.

by Yad Vashem 50 years ago. This section, too, is a projection of texts on the wall, and not written panels.

The exhibit (open June 2013) largely integrates the approach developed in the "Spots of Light" exhibition and in the "Jewish Pavilion at the Auschwitz State Museum." It summarizes the issue in its most concise form, distills it, and presents it in a design to reflect the content to the visitor. One might say that the exhibition can be viewed as a video art installation.

## CONCLUSIONS

What we have now is a change in perception from a conservative exhibition, as may be seen in the Holocaust History Museum, in which film and audiovisual media are only one of the components of the display,<sup>22</sup> to exhibitions comprised exclusively of cinematic, audiovisual elements.

"The projection approach" provides the solution to having only shreds of information and few concrete objects for exhibit, as well as the opposite situation of a plethora of materials, by building a coherent whole, a well-put together, tight structure. It is innovative, using a rapid, young language suited to an audience accustomed to texting, tweeting and other online media, contributing greatly to the dissemination of knowledge on the Holocaust.

The change in the museological approach is reflected to the greatest extent by the fact that the narrative of the Holocaust, by its very complex nature, is seeking new ways to express itself. In the conservative exhibitions of the past, visitors had to build the narrative for themselves out of the components presented, requiring time and effort. The contemporary viewer prefers information "pre-packaged" and, I dare say, "pre-digested," such as in Wikipedia. This may also be seen in the way people visit museums, usually opting for a guided tour in groups, or, alternatively, to have an audio guide. They want the real or virtual docent to mediate between them and the exhibition and select information and materials on their behalf.

An audience accustomed to earphones or a guide mediating the experience frequently denies itself the vital, primary contact with the original object.

Another important element in this approach is the increased significance of curatorship. No museum or exhibition is "neutral" in how it presents materials: every exhibition is a visual reflection representing the philosophy of those responsible for the exhibit. No exhibit is mounted without a concept behind it.<sup>2</sup>

Projecting a digitized exhibit simultaneously maximizes and minimizes choice: minimizing by presenting the material in tightly orchestrated flashes of light and strong visual means, so that it is "well done." It is based on data, but touches the emotions directly through the quality of contemporary means of presentation, "serving it up." On the other hand, the projected exhibition method maximizes the options to present an almost infinite amount of data and its context, which might confuse and overload the viewer, but nevertheless can provide more choices,<sup>23</sup> and also facilitates updating the screened material.

Although we saw the many benefits of the "projection approach," questions arise: Are museums being transformed into movie theatres in which visitors stride through a film instead of being seated to watch it unfold? Are museums losing their uniqueness as places in which the original object and creative artwork are "the main event" which people come to see up close? Are we approaching a point at which there will no longer be a need to come to a museum's physical plant since exhibitions will be online only? Are our "modern cathedrals" – the museums – going to become "white elephants"? Will the unique human tie created between museumgoers disappear? Is there not a possibility here for the dominance of curators? Will the museum become just another SMS or YouTube clip, with its impact dissipating as it becomes part of the information overload? Or will exhibitions become video-art installations, with the curators/designers seeing themselves as artists who creates art, while the historical narrative becomes just one

means among other resources? The answers will probably become clear over the next few years. Let us hope that in the museum world there will be room for many approaches, and along with films, videos, the use of technology and new media, the power of the original artwork and artifact will continue to enrich our lives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The figure is now estimated at 5.7 million Jews murdered. See n. 3.

<sup>2</sup>The number is based on over 2.5 million Testimony Pages furnished to Yad Vashem, which have the validity of legal documents, plus various lists of those murdered found in different archives.

<sup>3</sup>Based mainly on census figures from the 1920s. See Sergio Della Pergola, "Jewish demography: Population growth 1700-1939," in Dan Diner (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Jewish History and Culture*, 5-6, 17.

<sup>4</sup>From the *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, Guy Miron and Shlomit Shulhani (eds.), (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), and the Hebrew online encyclopedia posted on the Yad Vashem website January 2013. See also Aderet Ofer, *Haaretz* (January 25, 2013), 18.

<sup>5</sup>Beginning mostly from the 1980s. See Yehudit Kol-Inbar, "Not for three lines in History," in *A Companion to Women's Military History*, Barton C. Hacker and Margaret Vining (eds.), (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 542.

<sup>6</sup>The Yad Vashem Museums Division is preparing a comprehensive exhibition on children in the Holocaust, planned for 2014.

<sup>7</sup>"Gathering the Fragments," the national campaign initiated by Yad Vashem to rescue personal items from the Holocaust period, generated about 2,000 objects. It seems that there are only isolated items remaining, mostly held by families.

<sup>8</sup>About one month after the invasion, an order of July 22, 1941, was issued by General Otto Woehler, commander of the sector in which the Einsatzgruppe D were active. The order prohibited photography

in the field, ghettos and camps, and ordered the confiscation of all photographs of murdered bodies

<sup>9</sup>Underground archives established in Warsaw by Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, who collected documents, diaries and research studies on the life of the Jews of Warsaw and elsewhere in Poland. Only part of it was found after the war.

<sup>10</sup>Naftali Bezem (b. 1924), cast aluminum relief, 3.7 x 11.8m., collection of the Yad Vashem Museum of Art, Jerusalem. Donated by the Chirurg Family in memory of Pinchas and Hannah Gershovsky. The piece was transferred to the wall facing the entrance to the space of the temporary exhibitions.

<sup>11</sup>At the end of the 1930s in Europe; located at the end of the first hall.

<sup>12</sup>Along with models of the camps in the third hall.

<sup>13</sup>E-mails from Dr. Rozett and from Dr. David Silberklang, February 2, 2013.

<sup>14</sup>Avner Shalev and Yehudit Inbar, "At Eye Level: the New Holocaust Historical Museum at Yad Vashem," in *Massuah Yearbook*, 35, "Islands of Memory: Holocaust Museums in the 21st Century. Kiryat-Ono, Israel: Massuah Institute for Holocaust Studies/Ministry of Defense Publishers, 2008.

<sup>15</sup>The biggest collection in the world, containing about 9,000 works of art, mostly from the time of the Holocaust, see: Y. Inbar, "Power and Fragility: The History of the Art Collection at Yad Vashem," in *The Last Expression: Art and Auschwitz*, Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University (Evanston, 2002).

<sup>16</sup>Labels in the Museum are in Hebrew and English only, while the audio guide offers Hebrew, English, French, Russian, Arabic, Spanish or German.

<sup>17</sup>See also Yehudit Inbar, *Spots of Light: To Be a Woman in the Holocaust*, catalog of an exhibition at the Yad Vashem Museum, Jerusalem (2007), 7-9.

<sup>18</sup>In English, German, and Spanish.

<sup>19</sup>By removing projectors, or combining programs from two projectors into one.

<sup>20</sup>See also Avner Shalev, "Shoah" in *Yad Vashem Magazine* (June 2013): 2-3, and L.

Goldstein, "Designing the Exhibition: The Challenges and the Solution" in *Yad Vashem Magazine* (June 2013): 4. The latter is an interview with the designer, Professor H. De-Lange.

<sup>21</sup>It was exhibited in various types of spaces, such as an ancient cellar in Vienna and a new space in the museum in Grenada, and elsewhere.

<sup>22</sup>In addition to elements such as objects, documents, reconstructions, and more.

<sup>23</sup>See also Yehudit Kol-Inbar, "On Museums, Programs and Magic," in H. Taragan and N. Gal, *Assaph*, 13-14 (Ramat Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2010), 55-58; see also: Yehudit Inbar, *Writing Museum Programs*, The Museum Council, Ministry of Education and Culture, 1988), 1-16.

<sup>24</sup>See also *The Role of Holocaust Museums: Achieving a Balance Between Scholarship and Remembrance*, Stockholm International Forum of the Holocaust (January 2000), 204, 205, 209.

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### **Exhibition Credits**

#### **The Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel**

Chief Curator: Avner Shalev. Curator in Charge: Yehudit Inbar. Historical Consultant: Prof. Israel Gutman. Designer: Dorit Harel. Architect: Moshe Safdie. Senior Curator for Artifacts: Haviva Peled Carmeli. Senior Photography Curator: Nina Springer Aharoni. Senior Art Curator: Yehudit Shendar.

#### **"Spots of Light: To be a Woman in the Holocaust," Yad Vashem**

Curator: Yehudit Inbar. Deputy Curator: Rinat Pavis. Design: Studio Chanan de Lange Ltd.

#### **The New Permanent Exhibition 'Shoah,' Block 27, "The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum," Poland**

Executive Director and Exhibition Curator: Avner Shalev. Senior Curator: Yehudit Kol-Inbar. Curator: Rinat Harris-Pavis. Historian: Dr. Avraham Milgram. Project Manager: Ishai Amrami. Architecture and Design: Studio de Lange LTD.- Hanan de Lange, Tal de Lange, Shirley Marco.

Visual Communication Design: Adi Stern, Yael Burstein, Ori Succary. "ani Ma'amin , I believe - Prayer" Video Installation: Hagit Shimoni. "Jewish life between the two World wars," "Return to Life": Multimedia installations, Niv Ben David, produced by SND, Music - Moshe Baavour, sound design - Chen Nevo. "Nazi Antisemitic Ideology" Sound design - Ishai Adar. "how Jews coped during the Holocaust" Directed by Noemi Schory, Belfilms. "Traces of Life" wall drawings and voices: Michal Rovner. "The book of Names," design: Hanan de Lange.

#### **"I Am My Brother's Keeper": 50 years of Recognition of the Righteous Among the Nations, Yad Vashem**

Curator: Yehudit Shendar. Substance Consultant: Irena Steinfeld. Film Director: Gavriel Bibliovitz. Production: Shula Spiegel and Dana Ariel. Script: Oren Ne'eman. Multimedia production: Udi Morag. Design: Studio Chanan de Lange Ltd.

# BOOK REVIEWS

*The Holocaust & Historical Methodology*. Ed. Dan Stone.  
New York: Berghahn Books, 2012. xii + 324 pp., cloth \$95.

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REVIEWED BY JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz

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*The Holocaust & Historical Methodology* is an edited book in the *Making Sense of History* series. As editor, Dan Stone has gathered an impressive collection of historians whose scholarship on the Holocaust spans a diversity of academic themes and methodological schools of thought. In addition to increasing our empirical knowledge of the Holocaust, the scholars that Stone has amassed in this volume draw us into the larger epistemological debates that frame Holocaust historiography. In his introduction, Stone notes that there are many ways in which we can engage the historical record. However, what if the historical record under scrutiny is the Holocaust? Does the Holocaust qualify as a unique historical event that needs to be bound by its own set of theoretical and methodological guidelines? Or, are there, as Stone contends, “many ways to do history” when it comes to the study of the Holocaust? Stone asserts writers of Holocaust history do engage in a diversity of approaches through their writing of this particular history. If we can approach our study of the Holocaust as “the event” that is never in question, this allows for wider forms of historical investigation that adds to our representation of this particular event.

Stone’s aim in this volume is multifaceted. On one level it is an examination of “historical theory” and “a consideration of historical method and historical methodology” (4). On another, it explores the possibility of Holocaust representation through the utilization of diverse methods and approaches such as culture, memory, testimony,

gender, and even ecology. This diversity of approaches regarding the historical method is important because Stone asserts that there is still “factual” knowledge about the Holocaust that has yet to be discovered. Additionally, varied approaches permit the researcher to escape both the “self-policed” boundaries of Holocaust examination and break free from the somewhat staid predictability of Holocaust historiography. He notes that our historical knowledge of the Holocaust has progressed in recent years owing to the work of scholars such as Saul Friedlander who broke with traditional Holocaust research in going beyond just the presentation of facts to include Jewish voices. One theme that serves as a point of reference for methodological debate in many of the chapters in this volume is Friedlander’s work, especially *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945*.

Stone organizes this volume into four parts. Part I addresses the topic of memory and culture in the Third Reich. Drawing on the scholarship of Alon Confino, Dirk Rupnow, Amos Goldberg, and Boaz Neumann, Stone exposes us to pioneering methods of Holocaust inquiry from the subject of cultural history. In this section scholars explore cultural history and memory within frameworks of identity, such as the perpetrator, and ask how that identity was constructed in relation to a host of variables including, the other. It also opens up a world of “ideas, symbols, and narratives” that provide us with a sense of how the Jews as both individual and collective agents gave meaning

to their lives under the Third Reich—something that the more traditional approaches of intentionalist, structuralist, and functionalist fail to present.

In part II, Samuel Moyn, Zoe Waxman, and Doris L. Bergen discuss the topic of testimony and commemoration. Moyn goes beyond the legal and historical forms of witnessing to include a theological/religious model. Additionally he illustrates the academic divide over what Friedlander achieved with his inclusion of Jewish voices as witness and he reminds us that more study is needed. Waxman maintains that models of testimony such as “spiritual” or “instrumental” do not have to be mutually exclusive. She contends that testimony can retain its ‘spiritual’ place and serve as an important piece of historical information despite Elie Wiesel’s belief that Holocaust testimony should remain *outside* the realm of historical inquiry and only be interpreted spiritually and religiously. Bergen concludes this section with a critical discussion of the types and limitations of commemorative discourse often popularized in slogans such as “never again” and “the triumph of the human spirit.”

In Part III, both Friedlander and Hayden White share their divergent methodological approaches to the study of the Holocaust. Friedlander argues for a more integrated history of the Holocaust. This entails the “inclusion of the Jewish dimension,” which can be gleaned from a number of artifacts including the many diaries and letters written during this event. White, in contrast, takes us on a more philosophical journey that examines the *narratological*, that is, how the Jews gave meaning to their experiences.

In Part IV, *The Holocaust and the World*, Stone completes this volume with an examination of the Holocaust in the context of comparative genocides with observations by Donald Bloxham, Federico Finchelstein and A. Dirk Moses. Bloxham situates the Holocaust in the larger context of European history and its experiences with modernity, changing political borders following the dissolution of multinational empires, and the consequential rise of ethnopolitical violence among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Finchelstein focuses on the intellectual challenges of incorporating the ideology of fascism into a discussion of the Holocaust. He explains that a global study of Fascism and the Holocaust does have wider methodological merit, particularly in a transnational framework. Lastly, Moses reminds us of the competing narratives of the meaning of the Holocaust and how to situate this event in the context of world history. He returns to the origins of the concept of genocide and the pioneering work of Raphael Lemkin who abstained from the promotion of the Holocaust as the paradigmatic genocide. Moses also reminds us that any study of the Holocaust and world history needs to examine Lemkin’s role in the context of genocide studies and to examine the Holocaust not for its uniqueness, but for its complexity.

In sum, Stone’s volume is a valuable addition to our methodological discussions of Holocaust historiography. While it does not provide us with new empirical insights, the authors in this volume make an important contribution to the discourse on how we study this event. As such, this work should be required reading for Holocaust students and scholars alike.



*The Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema*. Ed. Lawrence Baron. Waltham, MA: Brandeis UP, 2011. 464 pp. \$100 (cloth), \$39.95 (paper).

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REVIEWED BY Alexis Pogorelskin

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Lawrence Baron, the renowned film expert and holder of the Nasatir Chair in Modern Jewish History at San Diego State University, has compiled this excellent collection of essays on Jewish characters in world cinema over the past ninety years. The majority of the essays, though previously published, are at last available in a single source. The work under review will enhance courses on Jewish cinema. It will encourage that very rubric in current film studies and film history courses.

Necessity, however, impels selectivity; Baron for the most part has chosen well. The fifty-four essays in the collection focus on fifty-nine films of which twenty-eight are Hollywood productions and thirty-one are "foreign," striking a balance, while giving American cinema pride of place.

The collection avoids categorizing films by nationality, difficult in the light of the American cinematic predominance among the essays. Addressing the evolution of the Jewish question in national cinematic contexts would nonetheless enhance the collection. Baron himself in an essay on the Austrian/German film of 1997, *The Harmonists*, discusses the recent genre of "heritage films" in German cinema. Such films, he notes, "focus on positive German-Jewish interactions ..." (145). What about the missing Jew in British cinema, for example, by way of comparison? Inclusion of Nathan Abrams's pioneering essay, "Hidden: Jewish Film in the United Kingdom, past and present," in *Journal of European Popular Culture* (2010) and his more recent "Jews in British Cinema" in the same journal (2012) in a subsequent edition of the work under review would

open discussion of national distinctions in the cinematic treatment of Jews, a topic that could profitably be added to the collection.

The categories/sections that Baron has included still provide comprehensive coverage:

- Advancement and Animosity in Western Europe, 1874-1924
- The *Shtetl* on the Precipice: Eastern Europe, 1881-1924
- The Americanization of the Jewish Immigrant, 1880-1932
- Revolutionary Alternatives: Zionism and Communism, 1880-1932
- The Holocaust and Its Repercussions
- Israel's Heroic Years, 1947-1967
- Acceptance in Postwar America, 1945-1977
- A Diverse Diaspora
- Contemporary Israeli Experiences
- Contemporary American Jewish Identities

At the same time no category is discreet and most are transnational. As they stand, the above categories provide a "vertical" approach. A "horizontal" approach, making connections and drawing parallels between categories, would enhance the collection. In a subsequent edition the editor could provide introductory essays to each section in which he (or outside editors for some sections, depending on expertise) could note the connection between the various essays of a section, their consistencies and contradictions, as well as their relationship to other categories in the collection. The section editor could offer alternative interpretations to those offered in the essays. In other words

classroom discussion and debate could begin with the text itself.

Such introductory essays included per section could establish additional categories of film analysis. To make one suggestion, the treatment of Russian/Soviet film in this collection needs some general elaboration and contextualization. I would briefly note that Jewish directors in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, Sergei Eisenstein for example, portrayed the proletariat as a Chosen People, struggling to reach and then arriving at the Promised Land. At the same time a first and second generation of Russian Jews in Hollywood found material in biblical sagas with uncannily similar plot lines to the heroic revolutionary formulae of their Soviet counterparts. Perhaps truth lies in the very blurring of categories.

An introductory essay could also provide context for the film *Commissar* (1967), selected as an example of "Thaw" (*Ottepl'*) Cinema. On the one hand the film does depict the *shtetl* in the Civil War, hence appropriate for its category in the collection. On the other the film's suppression also reveals the political and cinematic realities of 1967, which no longer appropriately belonged to the "thaw" era. With Brezhnev's triumph over Kosygin, economic as well as artistic flexibility was lost. Jews had to wait a decade to find a place in Soviet artistic representation, coinciding with American discovery of the Holocaust in the late 1970s.

The absence from the collection of one film in particular, *The Great Dictator*, struck this reviewer as unfortunate. It could join Woody Allen's *Zelig* (included) in the discussion of chameleonism among Jews as depicted in American cinema. *The Great Dictator* also raises the vitally important question of why in 1930s American cinema both Jews and Nazis so rarely found depiction until the very eve of war.

It should be said, no matter how seductive the interpretation of "experts," it behooves the scholar and the instructor to open the door to doubt. Section introductions could challenge received wisdom. In the essay "*They Were Ten Revisited*" the authors

appear to have misinterpreted a vital image at the beginning of the film: "The opening scene of the film reveals the pioneers ... pushing a cart and [they] seem ... to protect it and themselves from the forbidding, alien space ..." (133-34). Absent from the essay is the heavily freighted meaning of the image of Jews pushing a cart as they arrive to make the land their own. Never settled, deprived of the right to own land, consigned to demeaning occupations, the cart imaginatively captures the Diaspora.

It is impossible in this brief review to do justice to this rich collection, but one of the more useful sections for the classroom is the one entitled "The Holocaust and Its Reception." The section is the longest in the collection containing eleven essays, approximately three times that of each of the other nine sections in the collection which average 4-5 essays per section.

In encapsulating Holocaust cinema, Baron has again chosen well. His own essay on *The Harmonists* raises the issue of the "usage of music as an element in Holocaust feature films" (146). Other essays, with their own particular focus, are devoted to such films as *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*; *The Shop on Main Street*; *Au revoir les enfants*, *Schindler's List*; *The Pianist*, *Fateless*, *The Truce*; *Our Children*; *The Pawnbroker*; *Enemies*, *A Love Story*. There is national diversity in the selections as well as diversity in interpretation of Holocaust issues. Useful bibliographies accompany the essays in this and the other sections.

Lawrence Baron has achieved what he set out to do, namely to explain films "that span the modern Jewish experience... conforming to the standard divisions employed to study modern Jewish history." (p. 10) This useful and important work could be even better by incorporating categories of more specialized studies and modeling an analytic approach to the collection. As it stands, however, this reviewer can heartily recommend this collection to researchers and university instructors for whom it will prove eminently useful.

# REVIEW ESSAY

## The Filmic and the Jew: A Re-view

Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2012. 272pp., cloth, \$72; paper \$25.95.

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REVIEWED BY Itzhak Benyamini

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The connection between the trauma of the Holocaust and the pleasure of film is unbearable, outrageous and immoral. Nathan Abrams's compelling and comprehensive book *The New Jew in Film* deals with the later stages of the cinematic representation of the Jew several decades after World War II, when the Holocaust had become somewhat of a vague memory, mediated only through the accessible filmic presentation of an unconvivable reality.<sup>1</sup>

The book's central thesis is that the character of the "new Jew" in cinema is emancipated from the stereotypical one-dimensionality of its pre-90s representation, released from the obsessive infatuation with the issues of antisemitism and assimilation, enabling a more colorful and multifaceted representation of Jews and Jewishness. In addition, contemporary films contain a certain ridiculing aspect of imitation, exhibiting antisemitic motifs from "a newfound assertive position of self-confidence," which Abrams traces to sociocultural changes in the Jewish communities of the West which first brought about the "new Jew" as a real person, not just as a character. This thesis, supplemented by Abrams's brilliant analysis of contemporary films, is certainly convincing.

Nonetheless, the question arises about the actual point of convergence between the old and new Jewish character in film, not only in its historical-developmental sense, but from philosophical, psychological and gender aspects as well. More than a review

presenting its main arguments, the book requires a fundamental re-view of the root issue at hand, presented in the most direct manner in the book's title. This discussion draws on the traditions of continental philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The title and subtitle are mirror images of one another. The motif of the *new*, sliding from one level of the mirror to the other, first qualifies the Jew as "new," then delineates the time frame. The motif forms an additional level in the relationship between title and subtitle, which when unified into the title *The Jew in Film* reflects a melding of the two different levels into a single core. The motif of the new reflects the fact that we are no longer dealing with the classic conceptualization of "the Jew"<sup>2</sup> which deviates from what the "real" Jew indicates (converging in some manner into this unified essence) towards what is beyond and transcendent—"the new."

The concept of "the new" supposes that the new existence extends above and beyond its expressive image of itself, or at least from what it is while it is still understood through the expressive image's conceptuality. The representing expression is divested of its referential content to remain under the same enveloping concept, like "the Jew." New content belonging to the present and future is then poured into it, seemingly an antithesis to "the old."

To some extent, the air of authenticity with which the new endows its object presupposes the possible existence of an existential

authenticity, not just in the sense of allowing a deviation from the prior conceptualization, such as “the Jew,” but also suggesting a possibility of evading the dimension of conceptualization *in-itself*. In other words, “the new” offers the possibility of touching what is not conceptualized (i.e., “real” existence). Precisely because it is new, it is exactly that which is not completely known,<sup>3</sup> and thus constitutes an alleged return to the pre-conceptual essence of that very same essence.

Does “the new” in Abrams’s extensive analysis respond to the imagined essence qua imaginary *character*, in which case we are dealing with a parody and/or a simulacrum to that same character in film which is already fictitious, or are we dealing with a “new” related to a “true Jew,” a uniquely singular person living his life and affiliated with a community called “the Jews?” In the latter case, the conceptualization diverges from what was already disconnected from the conceptualization! Such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Films mostly incorporate archetypal characters,<sup>4</sup> very rarely invoking truly singular ones, but even if so, then this singular uniqueness immediately becomes itself a symbol, an archetype of itself—or does it?

It will be argued, for the sake of strengthening this irony, that filmic thinking is monadistic, in the sense of an independent subject, enclosed within itself and its own world. Film deals with indivisible, individual forms which are the foundations of archetypal structures. Filmic structure is a continuous puzzle of monad-images, each one in and of itself, with each is supposedly in a projected “world” qualifying its existence-for-itself. However, the monad-image is none other than a singularity on the basis of which its unique once-in-a-lifetime wish to present its real-world extra-screen parallels. This is true at least for the screen-subject which experiences only its “world” as independent and completely saturated in instantaneous projection onto *the-screen-being-gazed-at-and-gazing-at-the-subject*. As such, the subject-screen practices worldly experiences with uniquely singular monads

depicting uniquely singular characters. As such, he is parallel to the Leibnizian God<sup>5</sup> as the constituting creator of the monadic world, organizing the relations between them.<sup>6</sup>

Let us put the “new” aspect aside for the moment, and move forward to the discussion regarding the relations found between the concepts and essences of “the Jew” and the “film.” Let us add to the mix the presupposed concept of the “character,” because we are not dealing directly with the “real Jew,” where-or-whatever he or she may be, but rather with an on-screen representation. This conceptual clarification arises because while we wish to discuss the place of the image of the Jew in films (and as such, in the modern era), we have no small issue with a crucial antinomic connection between each of these three fundamentals which create and define one another: Jew, film and character.

The wonderment at the connection between the three motifs of film, Jew and character, allow an examination of each one of these essences which is first an foremostly defined as conceptual essences. Additionally, examined here is the question regarding the definitive article of each one, generalizing and universalizing they conceptualization of each; the Jew the film and the character.<sup>7</sup> We also examined the issue of the definitive article which generalizes and universalizes the conceptualization of each: *the Jew, the film and the character*.<sup>7</sup> We are dealing with three mutually-defining intersections in different variations: between Jew and character; between character and film; and between film and Jew. Our discussion is even further complicated by the fact that there is significant tension between the three intersections, in addition to the internal tensions found within each coupling.

Each person’s existence faces the risk of deterioration when our existential uniquely singular individuality achieves conceptualization. This is the way a general principle, whether abstract or stereotypical, formulates the essence of its existence, because the search for the essence of that very same existence leads to the achievement of an expression, an image, making essence verbal and audible.

The palpable internal essence actually present in the existence then undergoes a reduction extending towards the external expression, concretely articulating the essence. Thus, existence is translated into essence and essence into expression (i.e., image).

This definition is formulated in the context of the *verbal* dimension, as well as in the context of the *imagined* dimension.<sup>8</sup> In the verbal, the word generalizes the existence, while the imagined contains the bodily image of the essence that lies behind the verbal concept, containing static stereotypical forms.

The subjection of the existential to the conceptual occurs with the entrance of one into communal or identifying structures. The identifying concept then formulates the very same real under the concept, so that its unique singular existence becomes entangled with the already-conceptualized, as *a Jew*, *a woman*, *an African American*, or *a Caucasian*. At this stage, or coincidentally with it, the internal concept achieves its external and fantastic stereotypical image, which becomes integral to the formation of its history.

Indeed, the visual-stereotypical expression of the unique being is a forced result of its own past, since the image is formulated through the cumulative gaze at its own past. For the most part, the gaze is external, and hence distorted, not free of ulterior motive or interests. It affixes its past-image on the basis of certain coincidences it experienced, the countless arbitrary instances in which it encountered "the Other" and its gaze.<sup>9</sup> The gaze then constitutes it as this certain *something*, for example as "*a Jew*," but this time, the conceptualized is appropriated by "the Other," updating the concept to enable its formulation as image. It is in this way that the conceptualization of identity in the imagined sense is usually an act of self-determination resulting from *a traumatic encounter with the Other*; an encounter in which the Other rejects that very same (self-)definition. Self-determination itself is based on the myth of courageous overcoming, which is entirely a description of the struggle against the Other, perhaps in the Hegelian sense of the "master of death" and the "slave of consciousness."

If so, the root of the stereotypical image is to be found in the Other's gaze. The Other sculpts its essence anew, not just as an external image but as one that is forced under threat to accept it, to take it into account at best, or completely embrace it as its own, because no other mirror is to be found at hand, and because the concept which is rooted in the original self-definition lies at the foundation of the image. The subject is then left to struggle or even reject the expressive image, but it nonetheless remains as an ever-present reminder of the Other's gaze.

The Other affirms and sculpts the subject's status, scent and image, born from within this struggle for subjective independence. The verbal dimension contains an aspect of self-determination, of self-definition; in the visual, imagined sense, the gaze is sent from the external Other *and* is identified with it. Moreover, the Other is always present in the imagined as the external Other with its fixating image, and in the verbal it is present in the internalized Other which is, like God, even more transcendent than the one found in the imagined.

It is precisely along this axis of tension that the Jew moves, between the verbal expression under the word "Jew," resulting from self-determination from within but also as a reaction to the Other, and between visual expressions which update the concept's meaning, and what they signify in wake of the Others' gazes. The verbal and the imagined are not really two different dimensions, as is presented here for methodological reasons, but rather one in the same in the whirlpool of the subject's anxiety.

Let us return to the first part of the book's title, the part which contains within its the drama of the conflict between the sphere of film and that of Jewishness, and its history. In the case of the Jews, the train of history threatened to continue towards a final culmination qua termination of Jewish history, as a result of a script representing the Jews in the European *Zeitgeist*.

Our exhaustive focus on the title attempts to elaborate on the powerful point of convergence found between the sphere of

pleasurable identification<sup>10</sup> of cinema and the sphere of Jewish trauma, both of which are well situated within the field of the expressive image—the field of the imagined. Film, as a medium, projects the imaginary world onto the screen-eyes of the gazing audience, and the Holocaust as such is the realest of screens onto which the Angel of History projected the image of the Jew, with its horrific results. In both the Holocaust and film, we are dealing with image as a key component of the imagined. Regardless of whether this image is articulated through words, as a stereotypical image it remains a fixated visual form projected onto the other. Hence, what stands at the crossroads between these two spheres is the image: on the one hand it is the image of the Jew (specifically in his most Diaspora-like sense), and on the other, the image of the hero (usually a masculine male) as the same essence.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, there are two levels of direct intersection between the “filmic” and the “Jew,” one, a level of partnership, and the other a layer of radical contradiction. The first is the *imagined* level, in the sense that cinema is a field of images. The power of the expressive cinematic image is stronger than in any other medium; it is overpowering and engulfing in the Wagnerian sense of being a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art enveloping the viewer in a pleasurable nightmare of a captivating phallic spectacle. We are speaking about the level of imagined in which the Jewish history argumentatively twists and turns in the wake of a haunting image chasing after the Jews. Second is the essence of cinema as a field of identification with the (mostly male) hero, while generally, the Jew is conceived in the cinematic context as the one who is the demasculinized anti-hero.

We may now add an additional level, one of stark contradiction, which is very much present but also very indirect, regarding the tension between the literal-Jewish ethos and the imaginary-Christian ethos. In a certain respect one can even claim that it is this imaginary-Christian ethos which forms the mental infrastructure demanded by the cinematic medium. As Christianity, in

contrast to the supposed Jewish iconoclasm, was born out of a merciful and horrified gaze *at* the spectacle of the crucified body of Jesus on the cross, moving from the internal subject *to* the external-narcissistic object, as opposed to the Jewish movement *vis à vis* the Word of the Father-Other. Paul stated, “I determined not to know anything among you, except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians, 2:2). For Paul there was no underlying message behind the cross *except the cross itself*, except the spectacle of Jesus wounded on the cross. The iconic image of Jesus on the cross is not meant to transport us with an ulterior message but rather *is the thing itself*. This icon are an image without any reference; the medium and the icon are Christianity. The medium is the (Messianic) message.<sup>12</sup>

It is the identification with the Jewish God as a masochist, as the “ultimate loser,” and the gaze at the icon which serve as the mental infrastructure of Western culture and its main form of identification, which in turn formed the basis for the cinematic *techne*. This is the cultural condition of the possibility of the filmic. Conversely, from the visual, and not only a Christian perspective, the filmic *techne*, because of its devouring monetary hunger, which demands masses of mass audiences, and because of its uniquely intensive energy, requires a captivating, especially manly, male lead *qua* character. That being said, not every film was produced in Hollywood, and not every film culminates in a Hollywood ending with triumphant supermen; however, the super-male hero movies do actualize this *techne*-mental logic, found deep in the filmic medium, of overall domination of the viewer through an aggressively masculine fictional spectacle.

The cinematic twist, which took over the Christian ethos of the spectacle of the *Passion*, converted the gaze upon the god with the “loser” masculinity to the gaze upon the god with the James Bond-like masculinity. It is no surprise then that the vulgar post-Catholic Jesus from Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is an especially manly stud, which, by the way, continues the Renaissance tradition of attractive portrayals of Jesus. Mi-

chelangelo's buff Jesus in the Sistine Chapel fresco of *The Last Judgment* is the image of a true bodybuilder.

This is not to say that comedies, or artistically independent films, or dramas are not *really* films, but they are not *filmic* in its fullest sense, as an experiential obverse to the *theatrical*. The violence is apparently what differentiates the *filmic* from the (contemporary) *theatrical*. In this way, contemporary cinema recreates the bloody Roman theatre of the Passion of the Cross and the gladiator in the arena.

If there is truth in this thesis, then how are we to understand the (seemingly) "anti-filmic Jew" par excellence, the Jew according to Woody Allen? This Jew, formulated through Yiddish humor with a whiff of self-irony, the image of the Jewish "loser," is a categorical contradiction to the hero invoked in the potent overall post-Christian spectacle. Thus, the neurotic schlemiel from the shtetl is whisked away to be planted firmly in *Manhattan* (1979) for all to watch. As such, the antithesis to the character of the Israeli sabra was formulated, cooperating with the Hollywood trend of heroism.

Furthermore, even though the figure of the neurotic Jew does not exactly inspire pleasurable identification, it does share a common fate with the audience's gaze: its human core (i.e., an identification comprising the desire for renewed self-determination through mimesis). An example is the figure of the *newest* of "old Jews" —the eponymous neurotic lead robot in the film *Wall-E* (2008). Despite his alleged Jewishness, in accordance with the Christian recipe for salvation of the self and the world, he develops from sub-hero to super-hero through a sexual encounter with a female super-robot named Eve, facilitating a happy end for them and a green end for Planet Earth. The ultra-neurotic-Jewish TV series *Seinfeld* (1990-1998) and the depressing to side-splittingly funny *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-) by *Seinfeld's* co-creator, enabled identification with the subject's very Jewish and very human and very frustrating subjective split; the split that fails philosophical conceptualization and allows humor as well irony and many other traits that fall in between the

rigid lines found in the concepts of theory, law and language.

Contemporary cinema presents us with a closure of sorts, as the "old" and "new Jew" and their filmic figures come full circle in the extremely entertaining character of Walter Sobchak from *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Abrams invokes Sobchak solely as the paradigm of the "new" Jew, as nothing but an empty visual expression responding to prior Jewish characters in films: "Walter, therefore, is a complete reversal of the previous filmic characterizations of the Jew."<sup>13</sup> Walter is a distorted version of the "old Jew" in film, but as a character he is a simulacrum,<sup>14</sup> unrelated to the real but rather the imagined. Sobchak is a parody on the actual possibility of conjuring up a figure of a "new Jew." What is this new figure if not the expression of the loser's desire to join the violent thrust of the captivating film, capturing us as a gazing audience?

If we are dealing with mainstream films and their representation of the Jew, it is only proper to conclude our review with a film from the Zionist arena. After all, the stated purpose of the Zionist endeavor was to create a "New Jew" in contrast to the Diaspora Jew, although probably not the multicultural version postulated by Abrams. In Israeli cinema, the character parallel to Sobchak is Gote<sup>15</sup> from the film *Metzitzim* (1972),<sup>16</sup> played by its director Uri Zohar. He was Gote and Gote was Uri Zohar, before Zohar himself, as a real person and Israeli cultural icon, returned to religion. Gote is the ultimate *sabra* [the "prickly" native-born Israeli] who developed from a young, rambunctious party animal into a perverted, dismal and godforsaken man close to middle age, sexually dysfunctional except with a call girl or when peeping into the women's showers at the beach. Gote is the *omni(m)potent* "sheriff" of the beach, where the "old Jew" disembarked from the old (loser) world. We can speculate that Gote is a Holocaust survivor, a survivor of the Jewish identity, arriving with only a hint of the Diaspora on his breath, as in the opening scene when he first enters our world on a fishing boat. His name, pronounced *Gut-te*, hints at the shtetl; in Yiddish, it means, means

“good,” “well,” or possibly “fun” in the pleasurable sense, sexual connotation fully intended. (It is also phonetically similar to the word “ghetto.”) But this is in fact an Israeli simulation ridiculing the *new* expression of the *old Jew*, a caricature not unlike Walter. Although far from being identical, they both partake of the problematic aspect of the “new Jew” character, one in the Jewish Diaspora and the other in Israel.

It is worth noting the relationship these two characters maintain with the “Other.” Gote, the Israeli, wishes to spy on otherness, occasionally raping it; while Walter, the American constantly threatens it, both verbally and physically. Both are Jewish reactions to the *new* adaptation of the Jewish character, aggressively returning their gaze to the Other and the gaze which originally constituted them as characters, and therefore as caricatures. In *Metzitzim* the dimension of otherness is accentuated through objectified female characters, and in *The Big Lebowski* through the ragtag group of Gentiles and nihilistic “Nazis” encroaching on the Dude’s bowling team.

We have come full circle: the simulation of the Jewish character itself serves to ridicule not only the figure of the old Jew but also the possibility of a new one, electively recreating the conditions of its own history, by returning the “lecherous gaze” back towards its creator – “the Other.” In this sense, the process described by Abrams as taking place within American films of the 1990s already took place in the post-Zionist and post-Jewish Israeli films of the 70s.

Let us conclude with the issue of the “new Jew’s” masculinity. The perverted non-Jew and the impotent Jew converge into one bizarre character. The lonely super-sexed Gote, only fully and successfully enjoys his sexual encounter with a call-girl in a Tel Aviv stairwell, while Sobchak was abandoned by his off-camera Jewish wife. There is an additional convergence in that Sobchak identifies as Jewish in an ethnic sense, but is not technically Jewish. Gote, the “born-again” Israeli, is Jewish in a technical, but not a religious sense.

It seems the Coen Brothers designed

Sobchak as a parody on the macho-militant Israeli (in addition to being a parody on the gung-ho American, through Walter the Vietnam vet who endlessly projects his traumatic tour of duty). Gote is a sad reminder, on the eve of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, of the imminent fall from grace of the so-called omnipotent post-1967 Israeli. And it is this that is possibly what pushed actor/director Uri Zohar from visceral frustration back into the arms of the *shtetl* in the form of ultra-Orthodox Judaism. *The new Jew = the old Jew merging into it the Other’s imagined desire.*

The question remains of whether the post-Jew, as a hollow simulation, remains a figure whose existence is nothing but a supportive prosthesis of the phallic Gentile protagonist. Gote serves as a pillar for the endless sexual escapades the film’s true star, the eternal Israeli sabra, Eli, portrayed by the real-world epitome of secular Israeli culture, Arik Einstein. The character of Sobchak serves in a similar manner, supporting the very mellow and almost orgasmically pleasurable life of his friend, the Dude (who is the only one to actualize his potential by having intercourse during the span of the movie, and successfully impregnating a woman). Unlike Sobchak, he is possibly the only healthy model for the “new Jew.” But is the Dude Jewish?

A similar model is exemplified in the TV series *Californication* (2007-) where the character of the unattractive, masturbating Jewish literary agent facilitates the sex-addicted main character’s lifestyle of actual sex; or, for example, the new smart Jew, feminine and gentle, technologically supporting the confident African American masculinity in *Independence Day* (1996).

The Jew remains the supporting prosthesis for the viscerally-imagined spectacle of masculinity as experienced not only by the protagonist, but also by film audiences in the theatre, passively gazing, enthralled by the captivating belligerence screened before them.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>My discussion of the relation between the concept of "The Jews" and the Jewish existential essence is conceptualized following Jean-François Lyotard: *Heidegger and "the Jews,"* trans. Andreas Michael and Mark S. Roberts (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>This written following Lacan's concept of the Real as completely deviating from the field of representation. See, for example: Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Porter (London and New York: Tavistock and Routledge, 1992). (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII, 1959-1960*).

<sup>4</sup>An adaptation to Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the archetype.

<sup>5</sup>See also Leibniz's conception of God and his relation to the world of monads: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology*, trans. Nicholas Rescher (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1991).

<sup>6</sup>On the subject-screen and the subject-text see my forthcoming article: Itzhak Benyamini, "Subjecttext" in: *Continental Philosophy in Israel: The Disaster and the Promise*, eds. Ronit Peleg and Cedric Cohen Skalli (Tel Aviv: The Israeli Society of Continental Philosophy, 2013 [forthcoming]).

<sup>7</sup>See Lacan's discussion of generalized concept of "the Women" as opposed to each specific and unique woman: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar XX, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998).

<sup>8</sup>The distinction here between the concepts "imagined" and "verbal" partially compatible to the Lacanian distinction between "Imaginary" and "Symbolic."

<sup>9</sup>See Lacan's concept of the gaze, which is the point of departure of our current discussion: Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994) (Seminar XI, 1964. ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller). See

also the discussion on Film in connection to the doctrine of Gaze by Lacan in: Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991). See also concerning film theory in Lacanian context: Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (New York: State U of New York P, 2008).

<sup>10</sup>See the Freudian concept of identification, especially in: Sigmund Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921), *Standard Edition*, 18: 69-143.

<sup>11</sup>Within the scope of the present article, I attempt to focus specifically on the male character in films. I believe there is a deeper fundamental reason for this, stemming from the phallic power of the filmic medium in regards to the audience, as I will argue and elaborate later in this paper.

<sup>12</sup>For a more elaborate discussion of both the Lacanian and Paulinian aspects see Chapter 2 in: Itzhak Benyamini, *Narcissist Universalism — A Psychoanalytic Reading of Paul's Epistles* (Library of New Testament Studies, London: Continuum, 2012).

<sup>13</sup>Abrams, *The New Jew in Film*, 27.

<sup>14</sup>Following Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Detroit: U of Michigan P, 1995).

<sup>15</sup>Pronounced *Gut-te*.

<sup>16</sup>*Metzizim*, lit. "peepers," is an Israeli cult film, directed by and starring Uri Zohar, a controversial figure in Israeli culture, who plays the role of Gote, an ageing beach bum who owns a shed on the Tel Aviv's Sheraton Beach which was informally renamed Metzizim in wake of the film. Gote drinks, swims, slaps people around, and frequents a local eatery and call-girl named Rut. More importantly, he and his shed are frequented by the film's true star, his friend Eli, played by the most famous Israeli singer Arik Einstein who was part of Zohar's real-life milieu of celebrities, actors and artists. The film presents Eli's struggling musical career and personal life intertwining with his occasional visit to Gote's beach shelter, where the duo regress, drinking and trying to sleep with women, at times violently. The duo partakes in all man-

ner of childish behavior and of course, go for a swim at the beach. [Ed. note]

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## Films

- Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, USA, 1996)
- Manhattan* (dir. Woody Allen, USA, 1979)
- Metzitzim [Peeping Toms]* (dir. Uri Zohar, Israel, 1972)
- The Big Lebowski* (dirs. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, USA and UK, 1998)
- The Passion of the Christ* (dir. Mel Gibson, USA, 2004)
- Wall-E* (dir. Andrew Stanton, USA, 2008)

## Television series

- Seinfeld* (1990-1998)
- Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000- )
- Californication* (2007- )

## NOTES

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS (cont'd)

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