

## **Extended Essay**

### **Cinematic depictions of the Holocaust: an impossible task?**

**To what extent are fictional forms of film appropriate when representing  
the Holocaust?**

Film Studies

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## ***Introduction***

On Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> April 2017, the White House Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, referred to the World War Two concentration camps as 'Holocaust Centers'. He stated that Hitler "didn't even sink to using chemical weapons against his own people" (Smith, Jacobs, & McCarthy, 2017). This implicit suggestion that Hitler was not as bad as the current leader of Syria, caused worldwide outrage and many were calling for him to be dismissed, illustrating how sensitive people need to be when discussing what is considered one of the worst crimes against humanity.

Many filmmakers have ventured into the "murky waters" of representing the Holocaust, so many in fact that it is recognized by some as a film genre. On the other hand, it can be perceived as something that has "traditionally been understood as sitting beyond the limits of representation". (Larsson, 2016) This very public debate on depicting and recounting the Holocaust began with Gillo Pontecorvo's **Kapò** in 1960 (Singer, 2016). Representing the Holocaust in film presents obvious challenges for filmmakers. The concern is that the representation of genocide for entertainment and profit, can be considered unethical and inadequate. Does the Holocaust require more care than other genocides when it is being represented? Is the only ethical representation of the Holocaust in film one that "obey[s] the rules of tragic realism"? (Viano, 1999) There are countless questions on the ethics of representing the Holocaust and what should and should not be done. In spite of this, many argue (Gershenson, 2013, p.6) that the cinematic representation of the Holocaust has become a vicarious way for the audience to be part of the experience.

This essay will analyse the decisions that filmmakers have had to make when creating films about the Holocaust and the critical responses received. Claude Lanzmann's ten

hour and thirteen minute **Shoah** (1985) is considered the most aesthetically and ethically successful approach when representing the Holocaust (Bradshaw, 2015). In contrast, Steven Spielberg's **Schindler's List** (1993) was shunned by some for exploiting the Holocaust (Leibovitz, 2011).

There are many hundreds of cinema depictions of the atrocities of the Holocaust, both fictional and documentary, but for the purpose of this essay three will be used, each of varying levels of "fiction". Alain Resnais' **Nuit et Brouillard (Night and Fog)**, 1955), Roberto Benigni's **La Vita è Bella (Life is Beautiful)**, 1997) and László Nemeses' **Saul fia (Son of Saul)**, 2015) All of these directors make personal and subjective choices when choosing the cinematic language that they use to portray the Holocaust. However, if German philosopher Theodor Adorno's "Poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno, 1967) - holds to be true, it begs the question, are the events that took place during the Holocaust truly impossible to represent in film, let alone fiction.

The discussion of the Holocaust and how it is portrayed in film becomes an issue of whether an event of this magnitude can be recreated through conventional forms of fictional cinema. Leading to the question "To what extent are fictional forms of film appropriate when representing the Holocaust?". The focus of this thesis suggests that whether fiction or nonfiction the cinematic and stylistic choices of the filmmaker in representing this event are more important.

### ***Nuit et Brouillard***

**Nuit et Brouillard**, or **Night and Fog**, was released 10 years after the liberation of the Nazi Concentration camps in 1955. The documentary was directed by Alain Resnais and its title was taken from “Nacht und Nebel” which were the abductions and disappearances caused by the Nazis in 1941. (Wikipedia Contributors, “Night and Fog”, 2017)

The main cinematic and stylistic feature of the film is the contrast of coloured footage, shot in 1955 and, black-and-white footage from the Nazis themselves. The key use of this technique in the film is how Alain Resnais masterfully juxtaposes the two. *Nuit et Brouillard* begins in 1955 with a still shot of a peaceful landscape, the camera then pans down to reveal the barbed wire fence of Auschwitz as shown in Figure 1. As the camera tracks across the grass, the narration, written by holocaust survivor, Jean Cayrol, introduces the setting (Insdorf, 2003).



Figure 1: (Resnais, 1955)

The film uses some of the most gruesome and horrific archival footage of the Holocaust ever released to the public. The juxtaposition of rigid, black and white archival footage and smooth colour footage taken in 1955, presents the audience with two different viewpoints of the horrific events as seen in Figures 2 and 3. Resnais begins with the present day, portrayed with smooth pans and camera movements, which are detached from the atrocities illustrated in the archival



Figure 2:(Resnais, 1955)



Figure 3: (Resnais, 1955)

footage. He then imposes this shocking recount of history on the viewer; mountains of

human hair, rows of headless corpses, soap and lampshades made from human skin as well as living skeletons wandering the compound, disposing of bodies. Resnais does not attempt to depict this horror in the present-day footage of the camps, which many other films have tried to do and failed. Instead, he strove for “the most realistic color, the most faithful reproduction of the actual place.” (Lopate, 2003)

The cinematography uses many tracking shots and panning approaches. The various smooth colour images



Figure 4: (Resnais, 1955)

from 1955 are seen as a time to reflect on the gruesome archival footage the viewers observed. Resnais uses this to allow the viewers to

process the images of the camps, sinisterly yet magnificently constructed by the poetic and sombre voice-over. These montages filmed in 1955 offer a very subjective and alternative view of the concentration

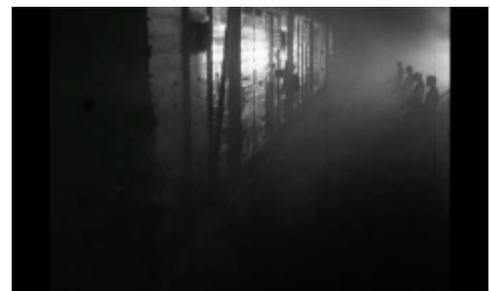


Figure 5: (Resnais, 1955)

camps, and are tremendously different in colour, composition and movement, as illustrated in Figures 4 to



Figure 6: (Resnais, 1955)

7. This technique allows the viewer to reconcile the two worlds; the calm, reflective present and the hellish environment of the concentration camps. (Christie, 2014)



Figure 7: (Resnais, 1955)

Another important feature of the film is the bleak and bitter narration which was written by Holocaust survivor, Jean Cayrol, and narrated by Michel Bouquet. The narration gives the viewer more information than they would have gained simply from the images. It explains, rather than suggests, what is occurring and enables the filmmaker to use the images to provide information more effectively. The narration also employs an interesting use of tense. The original footage from archives is narrated in the present tense whilst the tracking shots from 1955 are narrated mostly in the past tense. This encourages deeper engagement and reflection from the audience. (Christie, 2014)

Hans Eisler's score lends itself almost ironically to the footage. The light and delicate music clashes with the extremely distressing images. This score was a more modern composition and not what is usually expected from film background music. This aligns with Carol's text which is also unusually poetic for a film voice over, especially in a film like this. (Christie, 2014)

Alain Resnais originally turned down this project when he was first offered it by Argos Films and the Comité d'Histoire de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale. He felt that it was important that the person who directed such a film had a direct personal experience of the Holocaust. "To make a film about the concentration camps, it seemed to me you had to have been an inmate, or deported for political reasons, " the director confessed. "I accepted only on the condition that the commentary would be written by Jean Cayrol because he was himself a survivor."\_(Insdorf, 2003) He made the film only ten years after the closure of the camps and was conscious to never appropriate the suffering of the victims.

Due to the delicate and ironic way it is presented to the audience, many have interpreted this film as an opportunity to contemplate the reality of one of humanity's most horrifying events. It is not a film that fills the audience with hope. Instead it leaves them with the terrible reality of what occurred. It is therefore difficult to critique cinematically with any sense of negativity.

Holocaust films have been accused by critics of commercialising and exploiting the experiences of those who suffered in the concentration camps. It is felt by some that these films diminish this horrifying experience to nostalgic and emotional entertainment (Rothberg, 2006). However, the director of **Night and Fog** was sensitive from the beginning of the project, as shown by his choice to use Jean Cayrol as scriptwriter and not attempt to recreate the Holocaust in modern day footage.

**Night and Fog** is far from a fictional form of filmmaking. It is a film which portrays the truth of the Holocaust with extreme authenticity. Resnais was careful to truly represent its horrors, by sensitively mixing horrific, traumatic and shocking archival film with his own footage. The morality of representations of the Holocaust and the ethics of the film cannot be questioned, as it is simply relaying the truth to the audience. **Night and Fog**, although gruesome, does justice to those affected by the Holocaust and is entirely appropriate.

## ***Saul Fia***

**Saul Fia** or **Son of Saul** was released in 2015. The Hungarian film is directed by László Nemes and like **Night and Fog** it takes place at Auschwitz concentration camp. The entire film follows a particular Hungarian Sonderkommando (an inmate forced to assist in the annihilation process), Saul, in his quest to bury the boy he believes to be his son. It is set against the backdrop of Auschwitz. The film won the Best Foreign Language film at the 88th Academy Awards among various other accolades. (Wikipedia Contributors, “Son of Saul”, 2017)

Contrary to the usage of pure truth in **Night and Fog** , **Son of Saul** combines historical fact with fictional narrative and utilizes dissimilar cinematic techniques. The editing is very simple so the film is reliant on long cinematic sequence shots. One of the key stylistic features of the film is that the camera focus is always on Saul, played by Geza Rohrig. As shown in Figures 8 to 9, the camera remains very close to Saul and rarely leaves the back of his head or his face, giving the effect that the audience is connected to Saul, almost maneuvering through the chaos of Auschwitz with him. This is partnered with the very shallow depth of field so that the background is always out of focus. By doing so, the Cinematographer Mátyás Erdély does not allow the audience a view on what is happening around Saul. Erdély does not allow



Figure 8: (Nemes, 2015)



Figure 9: (Nemes, 2015)

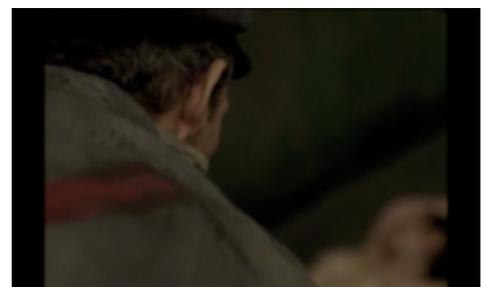


Figure 10: (Nemes, 2015)

separation from Saul or direct viewing of the atrocities and horrors of Auschwitz. Viewers are not offered another perspective on this violence, just a chaotic and claustrophobic viewpoint, which reflects Saul's character in the film and the panic of the camp. (Russell, 2016) This is emphasized by using a shallow depth of field so that nothing surrounding the character is understandable, or viewable, leading to him appearing lost in his own world. The effect creates Saul's character as the focal point in a storm of human tragedy.

Another key stylistic aspect of the film is the use of the Academy Aspect Ratio. The 1:1.37 ratio leads to an almost square, portraiture-like image. The Director of Photography, Erdély described this as "cut[ting] the sides of the frame off essentially." (Eastman Kodak Company, 2016) This aspect ratio creates a large negative area, in fact larger than all formats except for anamorphic, super wide screen. This leads to a sense of claustrophobia which strongly reflects the environment of the concentration camps. It aids in depriving the viewer of their own perspective, instead inextricably linking it to Saul. In an interview Erdély stated: "I think that we created something that is more effective by limiting and controlling the image". Erdély explained: "By doing that, we created a background that is out of focus and very hard to read. The basic idea was chaos. Nothing that is surrounding this character makes sense, wholly. We were really trying to recreate the actual atmosphere that the character might have been going through as a Sonderkommando member." (Eastman Kodak Company, 2016)

This claustrophobic framing is partnered with a handheld camera, shallow depth of field, and the cinematographers insistence on staying with Saul, results in a very restricted

image prompting the use of the audience's imagination. Nemes' use of non-diegetic sound helps to support this imagination.

As the viewer follows the main character, Saul, through the gas chambers, one is aware of the bodies that frame the scene. However, the spectators "morbid fascination" with what lies there is thwarted by the camera's tight, blurred and abstract images. This, accompanied by extremely long periods between cuts, leaves the audience with no repose from the intimate portrayal of the death camp and Saul's experience. (Larson, 2016)

**Son of Saul** captures the viewer's attention with graphic horror from the beginning, when it starts with a gas chamber scene. One does not immediately realise what is occurring as the image is focussed on Saul's face. On the sides of the frame in Figure 11, the viewer can notice prisoners being sent to their death through trickery and false promises. However, Nemes only allows the viewer to glimpse these horrific images. All that the audience is



Figure 11: (Nemes, 2015)

left with are images of Saul. The Sonderkommando, supervising the production line of death, presenting the audience with the horrors that these men both participated in and endured. (Larsson, 2016)

To pay suitable homage to those who lived through the horrors of the Holocaust this subject matter has to be represented with careful attention and purposefulness. The script from Nemes and Clara Royer utilises short, often unfinished sentences, with an astounding but representative eight languages woven into this measured and restrained use of dialogue. Much of this speech is whispered, and wordlessness dominates the film.

Its reliance on the images to communicate the horror and devastation capture the audience and connect them to Saul. It provides the viewer with a perspective of the concentration camps never seen before. (Lemire, 2015)

This film is not about the Holocaust in general, rather it follows the journey of a single man, Saul. Its focus on his face throughout the film and the fact that the viewer is not shown the wider perspective, certainly means that the scale of the Holocaust is not represented accurately. Film critic Jan Kolar's point that the film focuses on the perpetrators and those forced to help survivors, highlights the fact that no survivors were portrayed (Kindness, 2016). It is also thought that the genocide is misrepresented, as once victims went into gas chambers they did not emerge alive. Nemes was also criticised for his obscure and muddled depiction which could be said to have obscured the truth of what occurred. However, the subjectivity of the film also reveals that there cannot be one, single definitive depiction of the Holocaust.

During a debate about the film at the Charles University's Faculty of Arts Jindřiška Bláhová, the host suggested that the scale of the Holocaust makes it almost impossible to contemplate capturing it definitively. The experiences of Holocaust victims are unfathomable to those who did not experience it. So depicting the Holocaust, whether on a large scale or through the eyes of a single person, will always be hugely challenging. (Kindness, 2016) It was suggested by an audience member that whilst it is impossible to capture the experiences of all victims in one film, six million movies as compelling as **Son of Saul** should be made to depict and represent the stories of those victims whose tales deserve to be honoured and remembered. (Kindness, 2016)

**Son of Saul** does not tell six million stories, only one. However, it is a thoughtful, creative and stylized depiction of the horrors of the concentration camps through one man's eyes and, whilst offering a shard of hope, does nothing to brush over the real suffering of victims. In this way, **Son of Saul** is a successful fictional portrayal of the events of the Holocaust. Nemes' artistic decisions allow for an ethical representation of the Holocaust, by connecting viewers with Saul. He does this through his interesting uses of sound, editing and cinematography and offers the audience this chaotic and unsettling experience through the eyes of one man.

## *La Vita è Bella*

**La Vita è Bella**, or **Life is Beautiful**, was directed by Roberto Benigni and was released in 1997. The film is based in an unnamed concentration camp and tells the story of a father who attempts to protect his son from the atrocities and truths of the camp and the war. Like **Son of Saul**, the film also won the Academy award for best foreign language film. (Wikipedia Contributors, "Life Is Beautiful," 2017) **Life is Beautiful**, however, received mixed reviews from critics. Many believed that this heartfelt film did justice to the Holocaust, but some believed that producing a film about the Holocaust in the comedy genre was inappropriate. (Dawson, 2002)

Unlike **Son of Saul** and **Night and Fog**, the film did not use many stylistic features that stand out and the cinematography, sound and editing suited the film and generally conformed to the conventions of the genre. Benigni transitions from warm lighting to cool lighting in the different sections of the film, before the entry into, and during the scenes in the camp. The soft and warm lighting shown in Figures 14 and 15, is used; either when constructing the game for his son, Joshua, when comedy is being used, when depicting normal life in Italy and when the tone is light-hearted. By using this lighting Benigni presents the audience with a happy, safe and romantic setting. The harsh and cool



Figure 12: (Benigni,1997)



Figure 13: (Benigni,1997)



Figure 14: (Benigni,1997)



Figure 15:(Benigni,1997)

lighting displayed in Figures 12 and 13, which is seen in the concentration camps in scenes which involve the atrocities of the camps, contrasts with this. The temperature of the lighting helps the audience to denote when Benigni is using comedy or when serious topics are being discussed.

Another cinematic technique that is noticeable in **Life is Beautiful** is the use of visual hierarchy to show power, as seen in Figures 16 and 17. It is most evident in the concentration camps where Nazi officers are always shown using low angles and, height wise, are always above Benigni's character, Guido. Partnered with this, Guido is also shown with high angles, making him appear smaller and overpowered by the camp, foreshadowing the end of the film.



Figure 16: (Benigni,1997)



Figure 17: (Benigni,1997)

Guido's 'game' to protect his son, Joshua, begins as a 'joke' as he attempts to protect his son from things he has overheard. His son tells him that he has heard people saying they 'burn us all in the oven ... [and a] man was crying and he said they make buttons and soap out of us.' Guido reassures his son with humour saying 'Just imagine ... tomorrow morning I wash my hands with Bartolomeo ... Then I'll button up with Francesco. ... I've heard of a wood oven, but I've never seen a man oven before!' His creation of a comedic but entirely believable way to shield his son, emphasises how irrationally horrific and beyond belief the realities of the death camps were. Therefore, it can be said that Benigni's film deals with telling the story of a death camp in a sensitive and sympathetic manner unlike the brutality

of **Night and Fog** and **Son of Saul**. It does not try to find a way to sum up or interpret events in the death camps. It simply highlights the fact that what happened there beggared belief and was so far beyond the realms of human morality that it was easier to believe a masquerade that hid the horrors from a small child than the reality. (Leaver, 2004)

This theme is continued within the 'fable' context as Benigni makes no attempt to expound upon the Holocaust. (Leaver, 2004) His contrary approach is shown when Guido meets his uncle after the man has been attacked. When asked why he did not cry for help, perhaps something that would be considered a normal response, his uncle says 'Silence is the most powerful cry.' (Resnais, director, 1955) This explanation is a metaphor for the atrocities that follow. The awareness but absence of the horrors the viewer knows are occurring; the gas chambers, torture, death and the horror of life, builds huge tension and makes them all the more obvious.

However, the film came under fire from many critics for "diminish[ing] the suffering of Holocaust victims" (Dawson, 2002) and by using a " 'beautiful' shot of a mound of corpses the most glaring of several directorial misjudgements." (Dawson, 2002). It is not my opinion that this is the case. From this analysis of the film, I believe that Benigni's light use of comedy effectively portrays the father - son relationship and the absurdity of the Holocaust. He does not abate the suffering of the victims but instead commemorates the terrible events that occurred.

Benigni's opinion that filmmakers 'can't show unimaginable horror' in film (Leaver, 2004), led to the absence of any direct representation of these atrocities, making it completely

different to another film that achieved success, **Schindler's List** (Spielberg, director, 1994). **Schindler's List** attempted to mimetically recreate the experience of the Holocaust. In **Life is Beautiful**, Benigni creates a depiction of the Holocaust that acknowledges that this was a horror that will never be adequately represented in a way that would honour those who suffered.

Whilst the medium of cinema is often about what the viewer is shown, Roberto Benigni has worked almost as if creating a sculpture, with the space left empty saying more than the solid form. What is left unsaid is often more powerful than what is said. This, along with the ironic use of humour, enables Benigni's film to capture the imagination of viewers, whilst never presuming to fully know the experiences of those who endured the camps.

## *Conclusion*

Each of these three films; **Night and Fog**, **Son of Saul** and **Life is Beautiful**, fiction or nonfiction, have taken dissimilar stylistic approaches when pursuing an ethical and moral depiction of the Holocaust. **Night and Fog**, received praise for its “ethical” representations. **Son of Saul**, for its integrity when portraying the horrors and chaos of Auschwitz and **Life is Beautiful** was commended for its sensitive mix of comedy and tragedy. However, these films were also criticised for these same approaches. From this analysis it is clear to see that the subjective opinion of the public on whether certain films are appropriate when representing the Holocaust, is decided by one ironic rule. To represent the Holocaust ethically, whether with fiction or nonfiction, one must not attempt to recreate it in its true horror. **Son of Saul** never clearly shows the violence. **Night and Fog** uses archival footage and **Life is Beautiful** subtly exhibits the true horrors of the concentration camps. These films have exemplified that it is highly problematic to depict the Holocaust in any light. Although the films are all extremely successful, they seem to hide behind blurred backgrounds, archival footage and comedy. They have chosen not to exhibit the cruelty, but to provoke the audience's imagination into attempting to conceive the ‘unimaginable’. To conclude, and endeavour to answer the question, “To what extent are fictional forms of film appropriate when representing the Holocaust?” it must be accepted that there is no black and white answer. On the one hand, the Holocaust can be portrayed to some extent using fictional forms of film, yet at the same time do justice to those who endured it. However, it is not the varying levels of fiction used that are most crucial. The crux of the issue is the conventions used. These films have merely attempted to portray the Holocaust. They have not attempted to truly “represent” it. To truly represent such a monumentally harrowing event, filmmakers need to look beyond the conventions of traditional cinema and take inspiration from Claude Lanzmann's **Shoah**. Much like

Picasso's artwork **Guernica** (Picasso, 1937), Lanzmann understood that a conventional sized canvas was not appropriate for representing an event so sweeping, which is why the film is ten hours and thirteen minutes long. **Shoah** also allows victims to tell their own direct and unfiltered story. This is why many refer to Lanzmann's epic as the most ethically successful approach to representing the Holocaust (Bradshaw, 2015). However, due to its nature, **Shoah** falls beyond the scope of the essay. Conventional forms of film remain adequate, but to come closer to doing justice to the magnitude of this event, perhaps filmmakers need to approach this monumental task on a grander scale.

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