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Towards an Aesthetics of Auschwitz

Theodor Adorno's ominous and oft-cited dictum that claimed, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," seemed to cast a great pall over the possibility of creating art out of the horrors of the Holocaust (33). At worst, Adorno did not simply suggest that only the kitsch or the vulgar might result from the artistic representation of such an event, but instead, that the subject itself, the Holocaust, and its archetypal spaces of trauma, would equate the artistic process with brutality. In truth, however, Adorno's long de-contextualized proclamation is more useful if read as a sobering reminder of the latent barbarisms inherent in the particular forms of mass culture that abetted the final solution. The line, rather than an obtuse or blanket prohibition against art from one of the champions of the avant-garde, seems, instead, uniquely positioned to address film: that emerging art form of the 20th century, and the form whose status as a mass, industrial product was disturbingly central to the modernity that erected the gates at Auschwitz.

Prior to the war, Walter Benjamin's seminal 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction," foregrounded Adorno's postwar anxieties in a strangely prescient prewar context. In a chilling coda to that essay, Benjamin discusses the dangerous and unsettling fusion of film and fascism. Replete in its visual and sonic grandeur, film had a troubling propensity to render its spectators utterly docile, malleable, and violent. Problematically, history would actualize these prewar concerns when Hitler's propaganda machine made frequent and terrifying use of film's power to animate the rabblement. For example, the appropriation of the audiovisual, from the films of Leni Riefenstahl to the ceremonious playing of Wagnerian opera cues within the camps, seemed to reinforce some of the reservations made by many prominent Jewish intellectuals regarding film as a mode of artistic representation.

On a more primal level, these reservations did reinforce a kind of artistic anathema within the larger international filmmaking community: namely, that an historical record of annihilation should best

be left to the written word. This was to be the work of sober historians, of statisticians and archivists, and of singular and harrowing first-person narratives, not of filmmakers interested in subverting and reinventing form. How could one possibly narrativize an atrocity that dealt in multitudes given film's propensity for the heroic arch of a singular protagonist? On a representational level, could the spectator be brought to descend into a *re*-presentation of the gas chambers, and if so, what would such a compulsion suggest about humanity itself? To write about the horrors inside Auschwitz-Birkenau based on lived experience seemed essential; to recreate, visualize, or act for the camera and for collective consumption could approach the pornographic.

In the face of many of these deeply serious ethical and aesthetic questions, three filmmakers sought to claim their own aesthetics for representing a specific site of physical and psychological trauma. In different but equally audacious formal terms, Alain Resnais's 1955 documentary short, *Night and Fog*, Claude Lanzmann's 1985 magnum opus, *Shoah*, and László Nemes's recent 2015 feature, *Son of Saul*, present their own challenging poetics that transform the unspeakable into a complex and self-aware artistic form. While *Night and Fog* remains groundbreaking as the first attempt to film the Nazi concentration camps after the war, its inclusion in this analysis is for its poetic rather than its political influence. *Shoah* and *Son of Saul* have been included as ideal examples for their ability to subvert their respective forms: in the case of *Shoah*, the long-form documentary, and in *Son of Saul*, the feature film. Ultimately, what unites these diverse works of art is a rigorous commitment to a representation of a particular physical and psychic site of trauma, and in the case of each, a paradoxically moving and harrowing evocation of character, place, and personal and collective memory.

Night & Fog: Avant-garde Anti-documentary

From an historic sense, it is appropriate to begin this discussion with the first real attempt to create filmic art out of the experience of the Holocaust. Initially skeptical about treating the subject, French film director Alain Resnais was ultimately convinced to undertake the project when poet and Holocaust survivor Jean Cayrol agreed to participate in writing and voicing the film's iconic narration.

Ultimately, Resnais's film stands alone as a staggering piece of imagistic, avant-garde filmmaking about the most harrowing of subjects. Formally speaking, the film's 32-minute running time reimagines the very language of the documentary, while also challenging the narrative of lived experience, for unlike his literary contemporaries, Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel, or notable filmmakers like Lanzmann, Spielberg, Polanski, and Nemes, Resnais is not a Jew. In the end, *Night and Fog* is the most baroque and formal of the filmic depictions, in spite of its classification as a documentary.

Before the first images are projected, the film opens with a tragic, Bach-sounding fugue from Austrian composer Hanns Eisler. The music that plays during the opening, the most harmonically coherent musical cue in the film, acts as an elegy for an entire civilization in ruin. As the film begins, and the black and white newsreel footage ensues, Eisler's score moves to an atonal, avant-garde soundscape punctuated by brisk percussive hits and portentous horn cues. Ultimately, this is an interesting metaphoric use of sound: as the old order breaks down so does the harmonic ideal. It is as if the horrors of Nazism can't bear to be juxtaposed with a more traditional, romantic use of music.

Perhaps the film's boldest aesthetic choice is the juxtaposition of black and white to color imagery, an editing strategy that is the most formally audacious and self-conscious within filmic representations of the Holocaust. Throughout the film, Resnais oscillates between the haunting stillness of the present and live newsreel footage in black and white. Ironically, the vibrancy of the color photography is undercut by the physical desolation of the camp: the present *mise-en-scene* is populated by objects and ruins while the living footage of the past is deadened by chilling black and white photography. It is as if Resnais wants to complicate and revise the filmic grammar used to recall the past. Perhaps, most daring, is his rationale for cutting between these two visual schemes. In a particularly illustrative example, he graphically matches a color, low-angle tracking shot of a fence post to the marching legs of a Nazi official. Here, the horrors of the past echo forward across time to reverberate in the present.

In addition to the film's application of montage editing, *Night and Fog* contains a remarkably poetic voiceover. At times sincerely moving, at others, filled with moments of ironic distance, the narration gives a literary quality to Resnais's examination of man's inhumanity. Near the end of the film, the tone even becomes playful as the narrator claims, "the Nazis may win the war. But they do lose." Here, Resnais hints at the potential of an alternate or revisionist history. In essence, the past can be understood only as it pertains to the historical memory of the present. It is against a shallow and cheap understanding of history to which the film reacts. Later, in a more self-reflexive manner, Resnais even goes as far as to doubt the power of spoken or written language. Paradoxically, it is as if Resnais mobilizes language, via the voiceover, to negate the worth of any linguistic account of the Holocaust. As the camera menacingly tracks beside a block of deserted prison cells, the narrator ironically intones that there is "no need to describe these cells." This moment, one that gestures toward the futility of language, encapsulates the very human failure of not being able to accurately describe what can only be seen, heard, or imagined.

Thirdly, Resnais's camera is fixated on depicting a past populated with people, all the while showcasing a present filled only with objects and relics. In a memorable tracking shot, he takes the viewer over the endless latrines of Auschwitz, each hole evoking a kind of hellish vortex. In other moments, he is equally persuaded by presenting lockets of hair and close-ups of soap. This fetishizing of objects has its cruel apotheosis in one of the film's final black and white images: a stack of human bodies lying motionless beside a barrel of severed heads. This is a fleeting and shocking image of humanity at its most abject. For most of the film, Resnais has abstained from the graphically shocking image, but in the end, he seems to suggest that a failure to present such a history would be even more barbaric.

Despite the fleeting instance on highlighting the most grotesque, Resnais provides a deeply moving and unironic coda that seems to implore his audience to remember the past and to avoid collective or societal amnesia. At once, it complicates the film's more ironic interrogation of the past by offering a sincere plea for humanity. In the end, his film leaves us in 1955, tracking outside the ruinous

and broken monuments of history. Miraculously, as if to suggest the sudden reemergence of humanity, Eisler's harmonic score from the opening credits resumes. In the closing lines of the film, the narrator laments: "with our sincere gaze, we survey these ruins, as if the old monster lay crushed forever beneath the rubble...we turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to humanity's never-ending cry." To this final plea, the camera recedes from one of the camp's bombed-out, stone structures, recalling both a tomb and ark. This is a final and elliptical moment that eludes easy categorization, for at the same moment Resnais demands we confront the "old monster," he seems to darkly forecast the futility in doing so. Ultimately, his film, in its highly stylized manner, achieves the opposite effect of many documentaries whose aim is to clarify and detail. Here, Resnais leaves his viewer in a state of very human ambivalence.

***Shoah*: The Haunted Visage & Interior Trauma**

Any discussion of Claude Lanzmann's 1985 epic often begins with a comment on its monumental length. At over nine hours, the film combines oral histories recorded approximately forty years after the Holocaust (histories in which director/interviewer Lanzmann often inserts himself) with haunting, anemic photography of the deserted camp sites. This juxtaposition, all in color, works differently than the cross-cutting between color and black-and-white in Renais's film. Here, Lanzmann is only interested in chronicling how the present can be haunted by an unseen past, as if cutting to newsreel footage is too jarring, or even, formally speaking, too easy. His interrogation of history begins by responding to the central question of forgetfulness. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann forgoes temporal cross-cutting to focus on the reverberations of personal and collective memory, and how, in bearing witness to storytelling, we might project our own horrors onto the stories narrated by survivors. And Lanzmann's collected history is just that: an episodic, detailed, and forceful account of survival. In considering the aesthetics of *Shoah*, this analysis will focus almost exclusively on the film's depiction of Auschwitz-Birkenau in order to compare Lanzmann's representation of place to Resnais's.

The visual moniker of this film, and of perhaps of the entire filmic history of the Holocaust, is Lanzmann's laborious and ghostly tracking shot, some of which literally follow the tracks into the Auschwitz gatehouse. Unlike the swift, lateral tracking of the camp perimeter in *Night and Fog*, Lanzmann utilizes a protracted, low-angle crawl. While some of these movements follow tracks, others climb menacingly over the snow-covered rubble of former camp sites. In either case, he wants the viewer to painstakingly penetrate the interior of the space rather than circle its periphery. The sustained length of these moments, and of the film as a whole, forces the spectator to reinvest in the image. Like literature, Lanzmann is after a slowing down of experience; he wants his viewer to feel the physical contours of place: the eroded tracks, the overgrown grass, and the snow-covered barracks. In addition, his color palette is morose and muted compared to Resnais's. In the case of the latter, there was a kind of ironic vibrancy in the 1955 color photography, perhaps to implore a reluctant French public to contend with the historical reality of the event itself, and most importantly, their own complicity in its actualization.

The tracking shot is a movement that reemerges throughout the nine hour film, each time seeming to return with a kind of renewed gravity. British film historian Mark Cousins has called the iconic camerawork in *Schoah* "the tracking shot at its most morally serious" (*The Story of Film: An Odyssey*). Cousin's claim is fitting in that it recognizes a film devoid of all forms of irony. Unlike sections of the voiceover in *Night and Fog*, *Schoah* strives for a sobering austerity; a totally sincere viewing experience. There is no musical score, no easy identification with one or two characters, only Lanzmann's fascination with a myriad of human faces as they desperately try to put words to their haunted memories. His camera wanders in and out of spaces, returns to faces, leaves them for an hour, and then returns back, almost miraculously, where Lanzmann had last left them. It is this quality of meandering through history that is the film's structural hallmark.

In addition to its precise wide-angle mapping of camp geography, *Schoah* is most notable for its focused interviews of survivors, most of whom focus on the minutia and details of their experiences. Central to the story of Auschwitz is Lanzmann's interview with former Slovak sonderkommando, Filip

Müller. Here, in his deceptively simple aesthetic approach, Lanzmann presents a tragic character, a broken man, visibly terrified at the idea of giving speech to the actions he was forced to commit over forty years ago. These sorts of interviews serve two purposes. The first is historical, as Müller outlines the relevant details of the Nazi gassing operation (e.g. “to the right were the steps that led to the underground dressing room”). The second, and more complex, is psychological in nature: namely, the interview seems to comment on the psychic stresses of the retelling process itself.

As Müller begins his narration, Lanzmann refuses to present his face. Instead, he prefers to have his speakers enter the film audibly before they are seen, giving the words an ethereal quality, a disembodied voice from the abyss. When Müller’s narration is first heard, Lanzmann juxtaposes it with lateral tracking shots of an elaborate clay model of the Auschwitz crematorium. As Müller speaks of the capacity of the larger crematorium to incinerate 3,000 human beings at a time, the camera languidly moves past an abstract depiction of suffering, the clay figurines crammed against one another to form a chilling, motionless tableau. Müller’s delivery of the facts is extraordinarily slow, sometimes waiting as long as eight to ten seconds before continuing the same sentence. Here, Lanzmann forces his viewer to navigate the model, to study its geography, and to gain a sobering appreciation of its horrors.

After nearly five minutes, Lanzmann finally reveals the origin of the narration and cuts to Müller, in his 60’s, dressed in a short sleeved linen shirt as the venetian blinds cast a latticed shadow over the proceedings. This is an incredibly atmospheric entrance; we’ve been invited to a small room to hear a singular survivor speak of his harrowing experiences. At this point, Müller describes the final moments of those awaiting their fate in the gas chambers, a moment he poetically refers to as the “great struggle”. He addresses Lanzmann casually, his left leg cocked over his right, as if to belie the seriousness of the information he relays in his warm German baritone. He goes on: “[p]eople fell out like blocks of stone, like rocks falling out of a truck...they struggled and fought in the darkness...vomit...blood... excrement ... there was everything for that struggle for life, that death struggle.” Müller’s last line, poetic as it reads, captures the violent fury in the final moments of those prisoners, importantly, a violent fury the viewer is

forced to imagine rather than to witness. Again, Lanzmann refuses to cut, allowing the scene to breathe and his audience to observe the remarkable poise Müller endures while recounting his experiences. Müller finishes by solemnly commenting: “It was terrible to see. That was the toughest part.” At this moment, Lanzmann slowly zooms his camera in on Müller, closing in on his face. Dramatically, Lanzmann reveals the name of his speaker with a simple title card. This delayed revelation is significant, for we realize that unlike the nameless hordes he describes, Müller has a name, he was one of the lucky ones, and he seems deeply disturbed at having survived. One can read horror, shame, and resignation during that dramatic zoom-in. But ironically, we will never really “see” as Müller does, for we can only bear silent witness to his storytelling, an unseen presence in the banal, dimly-lit present.

This quality of waiting, used to dramatic effect during nearly all of the film’s extended interviews, contributes to the forcefulness of the film’s conclusion. But more generally, Lanzmann’s patience extends to the larger construction of his film as a whole. After the introduction and initial segment with Müller (about 15 minutes), the larger narrative moves on. Lanzmann will, of course, return to Müller three or four more times before the film concludes, but the audience will have to wait. This structural approach requires a remarkable faith in the spectator: that they too will be compelled to return to the room to hear the rest of the story.

In the end, the final segment with Müller, held in that same space, is perhaps, the most moving and emotionally distressing interview in Lanzmann’s film. However, it takes on a heightened gravity because we have waited for over an hour to witness it. Returning to Müller for the final time is like returning to an old friend; troublingly (considering the content of his message), we are eager to hear the conclusion. However, his reintroduction is again, sudden. In a prelude to his narration, Lanzmann’s camera stalks through the rubble of Auschwitz’s Crematorium II at twilight. Menacingly, we approach the stairwell to the gas chamber in rough, hand-held mobile framing until Lanzmann descends us into the darkness. Suddenly, we hear a familiar voice as Müller’s voice returns from outside the diegesis. In response, the film cuts to reveal an intimate close-up of Müller’s face; his head consumes almost the

entire shot, his eyes now visibly teary. The room has become noticeably darker; night is approaching, and this is perhaps the last take Müller will give. Movingly, he describes the final heroism of a group of Czechs in the undressing room. Knowing they awaited imminent death, Müller describes how his fellow countrymen, “like a chorus,” began to spontaneously sing “Hatikvah” in an act of unified defiance. Müller, now visibly unsteadied, pauses, looking at the ground. Uncomfortably, Lanzmann’s camera refuses to cut. Suddenly sobbing, Müller pleads with the director to stop filming; however, almost as soon as he utters the phrase, he looks down at the ground, as if gathering strength from some unseen reservoir, and continues on. While we immediately want to question the ethics of Lanzmann’s method, it becomes equally clear that Müller is achieving a kind of catharsis: he wants to finish his story. His voice cracking uncontrollably, he laments that after seeing that display, he hurled himself into the chamber along with his fellow countrymen. Awaiting his own death, he describes meeting a woman, who upon recognizing him as a member of the sonderkommando, pleads with him to spare his own life: “You must get out of here alive, you must bear witness to our suffering.” With that line, and with a tight close-up of Müller’s tear-sodden jowls, he exits the film (figure 1).

The power of Lanzmann’s aesthetic approach is on full display during this kind of interview. Notably, this is not an actor methodically emoting while trying to imagine such an atrocity. Rather, Müller’s anguish is real and, in cinematic terms, has been developing for over three hours since his initial introduction. Ultimately, it is a shattering moment that seems to shame any attempt by the feature film actor to portray this kind of raw unleashing of human emotion. For example, take the climactic scene in Spielberg’s film when Liam Neeson’s Oskar Schindler cries out, “I could have done more!” After viewing Müller, such a performance seems hollow, inauthentic, and almost inappropriate for the historical reality of genocide. In the end, Lanzmann is fascinated by the physical contours of the human face, in its paradoxical ability to both say everything and nothing; to relay interior traumas, but also, to hide dark secrets. And although *Shoah* requires a Herculean test of its viewer’s stamina, but similarly, it makes us ponder the stamina of its interviewees, many of whom are forced, quite brutally, to come to

terms with the contents of their own repressed consciousness. Lanzmann's aesthetics are about the ordinary and terrifying power of storytelling, of furtive glances and enigmatic pauses; of a chosen few desperately searching for the right word.

Ultimately, the bravery of eyewitnesses like Filip Müller would help to inspire the last of the films in this analysis: László Nemes's *Son of Saul*, which presents a feature film recreation of a member of the sonderkommando at Auschwitz. Like Lanzmann, Nemes seems to have harnessed the dramatic potential of the close-up. In 2015, Nemes would give a brutal visual language to the kinds of stories referenced by Müller. Ironically, perhaps, Müller is a beautifully human and fully-realized portrait of a man, whereas the titular Saul remains a complex cipher, and one whose daily degradation has tragically altered his ability to feel.

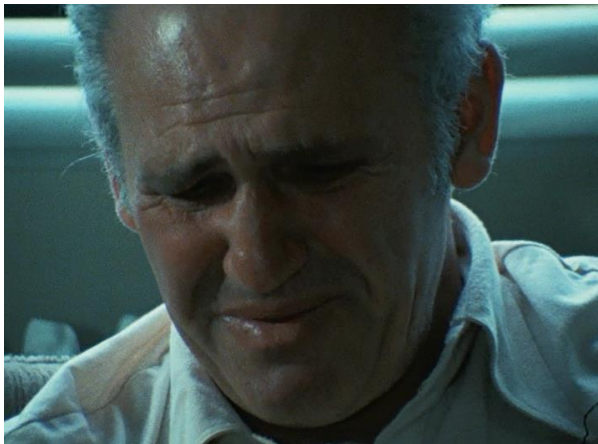


Figure 1 – Sonderkommando, Filip Müller, haunted in cathartic close-up during the final movement of Lanzmann's epic (*Shoah*, IFC Films)



Figure 2 - Downcast, hollowed out, Saul is forced to reckon with the terror behind the wall (*Son of Saul*, Sony Pictures Classics)

Son of Saul: Vérité Abjection

Hungarian László Nemes's *Son of Saul* takes an immersive and chaotic aesthetic approach to its depiction of Auschwitz. As if in response to earlier filmic iterations of that place, Nemes actively works against the glossy, wide-shot aesthetic of Spielberg's *Schindler's List* in favor of a disorienting, viscerally overwhelming visual sense. Largely, there is an anonymity and degradation in this experience, as Nemes refuses to provide his audience with the familiar visual cues we have come to associate with Auschwitz: the train tracks, the meticulously lined barracks, and the wide shots of approaching cattle cars are all

notably absent. Lanzmann's and Resnais's ghostly tracking shots, movements which carefully delineate the geography of the camp, are completely foregone in order to privilege a kind of hyperrealism: a poetics of disorientation. It is as if Nemes, in dislocating both the spectator and his protagonist, Saul, is aiming to depict some kind of literal hell outside of history; he is forcing the spectator to descend into the belly of the beast.

The film opens with perhaps the director's signature cinematographic trope, the close-up filmed in 40 mm lens. Ironically, however, there is no one to accept the optics of the shot. The opening is dramatically out of focus, a hazy bucolic greenspace punctuated by a soundscape of chirping birds and the heavy breathing of a gravedigger, at once encapsulating one of the film's central themes: the indifference of the natural world to human toil and suffering. Suddenly, the sound of the chirping birds is violently interrupted by an off screen whistle call from a German commander: the round-up has begun. In response to the whistle call, a darkened shape approaches the camera out of the vapor. Expectantly, we watch as an amorphous, spectral figure approaches until, dramatically, he comes into focus in tight close up. Almost miraculously the hero of the film materializes before our eyes, commanding the entire screen. Dark-haired, weathered, and brow-beaten, this is the titular Saul in an initial close-up that suggests equal parts determination and futility.

In this opening moment, haze and fog work as dynamic visual motifs but perhaps with different thematic implications than their use in Resnais's *Night and Fog*. In the case of the latter, the titular "fog" is suggestive of a larger historical and collective amnesia: the terrifying prospect of a nation, of the world, forgetting. In *Son of Saul*, this motif works literally as the formal myopia of Nemes's lens mirrors the subjective myopia of his protagonist. But furthermore, the near-sightedness is also our own, as this disorienting position will be forced on the spectator for the entirety of the film. This is a fascinating and complex choice by Nemes. Unlike the wide shots of *Sboab* where the viewer's eye may wander in and out of his deep space compositions, Nemes's close-up, hand-held aesthetic gives our gaze little choice; we

can either surrender to his conception of human misery or perish. In shoulder height, jostling mobile framings, we experience a similarly narrow, claustrophobic, and alienating worldview.

With a flourish, Nemes jockeys his camera, dipping with Saul's shoulder as another prisoner enters the frame. In a rare two-shot, the fellow *sonderkommando* somberly intones, "Let's go." This is an injunction to follow and not a question; we are compelled, perhaps dragged eye-level behind Saul into the gas chambers. Crucially, however, the story is not filmed from the protagonist's point-of-view. That is to say, the handheld movements through the camp are not simply the aligning of the audience with Saul's consciousness. Instead, Nemes has a more challenging responsibility to bestow on his viewer. In these opening moments, we are asked to act as silent accomplices, the witnesses to his Sisyphean task to bury a child who may or may not be his own son. Ultimately, Nemes has outlined a difficult and demanding role for his viewer, one that involves a complicity in the Nazi death machine.

What follows is a breathtaking and harrowing long take (over seven minutes) as Saul and his fellow *sonderkommandos* ferry the latest transport of Jews to their ignominious deaths. From behind, we follow him at shoulder height as the camera reveals a crudely painted red "X" on the back of his tattered coat. Saul is a marked man, yet, ironically, he will be spared the ultimate disaster until later. At this point in the sequence, Nemes's soundscape has descended into complete cacophony as the earlier whistle has instigated a sonic *mélange* of crying children, barking dogs, and incoherent German yelling. Throughout the film, this will remain the aesthetic favored by Nemes. This formal decision to only use natural, diegetic sound, seems rooted in a reaction against more romantic depictions of human suffering. Again, Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and to a lesser extent, Polanski's *The Pianist*, offer instructive points of comparison. In each of those feature films, the application of a nondiegetic musical score, particularly the haunting violin cues in the case of the former, seems to offer a kind of melodic respite against disaster. It is an interesting aesthetic problem, the idea that the pathos evoked from music outside the diegesis could, in some way, soften the dystopian peril. Similarly, this is perhaps what Resnais had in mind with the use of the Eisler score during the moving finale of *Night and Fog*. Nemes, however, seems

to have considered the ethical implications of such a use of music to argue for a sober, austere, and realistic depiction of sound. This is an honest and brave artistic and intellectual calculation. If the prisoners being marshaled to death could take no such comfort in the power of music, why should the audience?

As the long take continues, Nemes's camera swirls to Saul's reaction, now tracking with him in reverse; he is both silent and stoic. His expressionlessness tells us that this is not the first time he has been commanded to aid in a death march of his own people. As if in response to the throng of Jewish prisoners he now leads, he looks back over his shoulder at the growing procession, at once a brief gesture of guilt and unease. The return of his face to the camera, at first downcast and then resolute, is both haunting and unsettling; there is no pause in his step, only a face suggesting a silent, moral terror. As the camera continues to track with Saul's face, an alpine polka becomes audible over an unseen camp loudspeaker. Here, the juxtaposition of death and destruction to a Tyrolean romp adds a cruel irony to the sequence, as the pomp and ceremony of a German march underscores a mechanistic determinism to the Jewish one taking place before our eyes.

After tracking with Saul for over two minutes, the camera finally pauses as he enters an antechamber, the muted morning light nearly extinguished. The camera pauses on Saul, providing a figurative breath for the spectator in the narrow entryway. In a profile shot, his downcast face, now shrouded in shadow, looks off screen right at the floor as dozens of shirtless prisoners pass out of focus in front of his purview. Here, Nemes's framing positions Saul as a kind of gatekeeper to the underworld, seemingly unwilling to accept his role in the rounding-up. To stare at the faces as they enter is too painful, and so his gaze remains fixed on the floor. Again, the claustrophobic framing forces the viewer to observe the anonymous prisoners, each out of focus, as they dart unaware in front of the camera. Seeming to count the feet as they pass, Saul finally closes the iron door, leaving the spectator in total darkness. This final and determined movement encapsulates the role of the sonderkommando: a

desensitized cog in the machine of destruction. Crucially, this is the first cut in the film as Nemes has allowed the rhythm and pacing of Saul's task to provide a rationale for editing.

Nemes then resumes his mobile framing from behind Saul, who now enters into a yellowed, dimly-lit changing room directly outside of the gas chamber. His entrance is marked by the call of an anonymous S.S. officer who ironically boasts: "after the shower and the hot soup, come directly to me." Nemes refusal to cut to the source of that line seems to encapsulate his moral and aesthetic approach. To show the S.S. in this moment is to humanize him, to put a face to the horror. Instead, Nemes is interested in presenting a nameless terror, one that mocks, tortures, and kills off screen. This is perhaps a unique tact in the cinema of the Holocaust. *Night and Fog* includes documentary footage of Hitler, *Shoah* painfully and clandestinely records the boasting of a Treblinka Nazi official, while *Schindler's List* offers a supreme, even superhuman villain to which the audience can attach its antipathy. *Son of Saul* is far less interested in a personalization of evil, as if to suggest the evil on display is a larger, potent, and altogether more human one.

The camera then moves with Saul from behind, at shoulder height, as he mechanically helps an older, kippah-donning man remove his shirt. The man's gaze is fixed on Saul, who, as in the earlier shot, cannot bear to receive his look. Turning away, Saul takes the shirt and hangs it on one of the last remaining pegs in the room. The camera continues to move with Saul as he enters the overcrowded chamber, until finally resting behind his head in another over-the-shoulder close-up. In an exact mirror of the earlier close-up, Nemes has given us a more distressing view of Saul as gatekeeper and human herder. This time, however, the camera only observes the back of his head, as a hazy mass of naked bodies pass in front of him and into the gas chamber. It is as if bringing the camera around to the front is too painful. We know it is Saul, but we only see a marked man, dressed in black, waving the men and women into the crowded room.

As an S.S. officer closes the door, the camera returns to Saul's face where it will remain. Frantically, he collects articles of clothing from the coat hooks, a menial task that forecasts the coming

human carnage. This is a symbolic gesture, at once recalling the mounds of shoes and lockets of hair in Resnais's film, one that essentializes or equates a human being with an anonymous article of clothing. As the sequence approaches its expected conclusion, Saul's collection is interrupted by a fellow sonderkommando who orders him to fall into line to prepare to reenter the chamber. As Nemes returns to a familiar close up (figure 2), the inhuman din from the chamber begins to rise. Soon the sound of banging fists, screaming children, and muffled anguish reaches an almost hysterical level. Bravely, Nemes keeps his camera fixed on his protagonist's face. In this harrowing moment, sound acts a metaphor to mirror the turmoil of Saul's own consciousness: his soul is tormented, but his face remains a blank slate. Ultimately, the sequence achieves a greater vitality than if he had descended his camera into the room. Not unlike Müller's graphically articulated accounts in *Shoah*, the projected horror, for both Saul and the viewer, becomes far worse than its actual realization before our eyes.

In a close reading of these opening long takes, an entire aesthetic approach is forcefully outlined: a poetics of disorientation. In a feature film, there is no possible way to comprehend the 6,000,000 dead. With Nemes, the individual case – the trials of a single man – works as the only way of approaching or attempting to understand irreconcilable slaughter. In the end, Nemes's film is the apotheosis of the vérité style: viscerally jarring and supremely economical in its editing. And yet, his film is rigorous, and paradoxically, incredibly intentioned: a style at once so "real" that it shouts for attention. Nemes's camera acts as a violent, insurgent force, refusing to let go of the spectator for the film's nearly two hour running time. And while the lengths of *Night & Fog* (32 minutes) and *Shoah* (nine hours) offer their own relative tests in spectator stamina, Nemes has devised an aesthetics able to induce a physiological reaction from its viewer.

Ultimately, all three films, when considered together, seem unified in their interpretation of depicting the horrors of Auschwitz. For Resnais, the haunted relics of the present are perhaps more important and instructive than the graphic photography of the past. Similarly, for Lanzmann, the present is an equally persuasive force; a place in which a fractured humanity may whisper in dark rooms to weave

stories of its own, stories that seem somewhat irreconcilable to a fictionalized retelling of past events. And even Nemes, in his rigorous, highly cinematic language, refrains from presenting moments of ultraviolence, preferring instead to keep the truly horrible heard and imagined, rather than visualized. And after detailing the stark differences in these approaches, each artist ultimately produces a nuanced, honest, and intellectually serious attempt to unite the spectator with one of the greatest barbarisms of the 20th century.

Finally, each of these texts serves to destabilize many of the assumptions which attempt to neatly differentiate film form. Crucially, in blending and subverting elements of both the feature film and the documentary, Resnais, Lanzmann, and Nemes question the very concepts of reality and verisimilitude. In uniting these three varied approaches to filming Auschwitz, the grammar of film (particularly, its editing strategies) moves away from the kind of unthinking reification Adorno and Benjamin's had long feared. Each of the directors, in his own way, engages film form as a vibrant dialectical process; one that allows for elliptical moments of critical reflection; and one that invites the spectator to make meaning of a haunting close-up or jarring intellectual juxtaposition. In the end, these films hold the spectator at an important, ironic distance, asking them to engage with film as an active and critical subject.

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