

Images which are not there.

The Representations of the Final Solution

in the Examples of Son of Saul and Kornblumenblau

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Since the problem of representing the Holocaust first emerged, philosophers, writers and filmmakers have tried to find appropriate aesthetic methods of expression. Two approaches dominate the thinking about the Shoah: Claude Lanzmann's claim of "the event without images" and George Didi-Huberman's "images in spite of all". The author's analysis deconstructs these two theoretical approaches through the interpretation of two films: the Polish *Kornblumenblau* and the Hungarian *Son of Saul* and the notion of "the images which are not there", that is, the non-existent photographs of the Nazi "Final Solution". The main thesis of the essay states that cinematic representation and artistic expression can substitute for the lack of historical and visual (mostly photographic) depictions of the Holocaust. With the inspiration of theory (Giorgio Agamben, Siegfried Kracauer), I consider different methods of dealing with the dilemma of "unimaginable Auschwitz" and the concept of "bare life" as an aesthetical problem.

KEYWORDS: Holocaust, Holocaust studies, visuality, Holocaust movies, cinema, representation, film theory, *Kornblumenblau*, *Son of Saul*, bare life

Introduction

When the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben described the accounts of Holocaust survivors, he pointed out the gap which is a constitutive element of every testimony. This gap is a void, an inability to speak, a negation of all forms of communication brought about by the Holocaust, and with it the annihilation of humanity. It is embodied in the figure of the *Muselmann*, whose testimony will never be uttered because the radical experience of dehumanization and inhuman death have deprived him of the possibility of passing on the darkest truth about Auschwitz. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, the *Muselmann* is for Agamben a total witness, and the survivors only 'speak on his behalf'. [1] The *Muselmann* symbolizes the discontinuity and breakdown of speech, language, and text.

The problem of the iconography of the Holocaust can be approached in the same way.

Among the thousands of photographs taken both during the Shoah and after the liberation of the concentration or death camps, there is none which could be an "ultimate testimony", proof which would *explicitly* demonstrate the mass murder in the gas chambers. This gap in photographic documentation of the Shoah was pointed out by the director of the well-known *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann. Justifying his choice of convention for his picture, set strictly within the principles of a documentary film and deprived of any archival resources, he said: "At the source of the film [...] was the disappearance of all the traces: there is nothing left, there is nothingness, and the task was to make a film based on this nothingness." [2] The most

[1] G. Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, New York 2002, p. 39.

[2] G. Didi-Huberman, *Obrazy mimo wszystko*, trans. M. Kubiak Ho-Chi, Kraków 2008, p. 119.

“extreme reality” of the camps, namely the extermination in the gas chambers of Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor or Treblinka, was never officially recorded. This crucial, almost ideological assumption of Lanzmann’s *magnum opus*, was explained in his autobiography:

[...] what was missing was the most important thing – the gas chambers, death in the gas chambers, which no one ever survived to be able to recount. The day it came to me, I realized that the subject of my film would be death itself, death, not survival, a radical contradiction because in some sense it confirmed the impossibility of the enterprise I had thrown myself into – the dead cannot speak for the dead. [...] My film had to meet its greatest challenge: to replace the non-existent images of death in the gas chambers. Everything had to be reconstructed [...] [3]

The lack of a visual testimony of the crime of genocide, of its final stage, is therefore a gap in the camp’s iconography, just as the non-existent testimony of the *Muselman* is a gap in the literature of testimony. I call this gap *the images that do not exist* or *non-existing images*, *ghost-images*. These images were never created to record and testify to the Final Solution, for many reasons: the ban on photography in the death camps and the perpetrators’ plan to cover up all the traces of the crime. Their absence, remarked upon earlier by Claude Lanzmann, makes us think about the consequences that it had for reflections on the Nazi genocide, the condition of testimony, and finally, the memory that is forced to function around this visual

emptiness.[4] A critical stance towards Lanzmann’s ideas was adopted by the French art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman. Analysing the photographs secretly taken in Birkenau by members of the Sonderkommando in August 1944, he argues for the possibility of representation through archival images. Didi-Huberman spoke of “tear-images”, which somehow emerge “in spite of all”, becoming testimony to the impossible Auschwitz. The polemic with his opponents Gerard Wajcman and Elisabeth Pagnoux on the occasion of the famous exhibition *Memoires de camps* became an important voice in the discussion of the validity of the thesis of the Holocaust as an unimaginable event. The author of *Images in Spite of All* took the side of images and their strength in building the discourse of memory.[5]

In this article, I do not consider the fundamental problem of the possibility of representing the Holocaust. Previous works of humanists dealing with this problem show that it has already been sufficiently exploited, and two opposing theses – the claim for the possibilities of artistic representations of the extermination of the Jews, and the one that negates such possibilities – have managed to sufficiently mark our thinking about the Holocaust, and the question itself remains unresolved. Moreover, I believe that nowadays, this dispute, which is associated with the names of Berel Lang, on the one hand, and Hayden White or Frank Ankersmit, on the other, is no longer relevant in view of the many possibilities of historical or artistic representation.[6]

The beginnings of this debate lie in the belief in the unique nature of the Holocaust and attempts to find appropriate means (literary, historical) to describe it. Its origins can be traced to the comments of postmodernists approaching Auschwitz in terms of a catastrophe which overturned previous thinking about values. As Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenfeld wrote, postmodernist thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and their successors argue that the Holocaust marks a breakdown in the state of the West and somehow forces a rethinking of the project of modernity.[7] One of the

[3] C. Lanzmann, *Zajac z Patagonii*, trans.

M. Ochab, Wołowiec 2010, p. 402.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] G. Didi-Huberman, op. cit.

[6] B. Lang, *Act an Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, New York 2003; H. White, *Figural Realism in Witness Literature*, “Parallax” 2004, no. 10(1), pp. 113–124; F.R. Ankersmit, *Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholia*, [in:] *Reclaiming Memory. American Representations of the Holocaust*, eds. P. Ahokas, M. Chard-Hutchinson, Turku 1997, pp. 62–87.

[7] A. Milchman, A. Rosenfeld, *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, Amsterdam – Atlanta 1998, p. 2.

examples of reflection on artistic and visual representations of Auschwitz is Jean-Luc Nancy's text "Forbidden Representation", which, in his theses about the possibility of representation of the destruction (albeit "incomplete"), departed in a sense from Adorno's "prohibition of the image" and the fall of culture.[8]

The course of the discussion within Anglo-Saxon, academic history and historiographic theory is significant. As Jerzy Topolski writes, it resulted in important international conferences with the participation of leading representatives from the field of Holocaust studies, whose theoretical proposals broke somewhat with the existing paradigm of uniqueness (represented, among others, by Habermas and Nolte), thus suggesting the need to look at the phenomenon of Nazi genocide as an example (*exemplum*).[9]

Thus, it became possible for Holocaust researchers to narrativize the event through the application of specific methodological solutions: the representatives of these new research tendencies included Hayden White, Berel Lang, Saul Friedlander, and Raul Hilberg.[10] In their works, Topolski writes, they suggested solutions: explanation, microhistories, chronicles, and the avoidance of traditional forms of language. Berel Lang proposed a "chronicle-like" strategy of representation as one which is able to avoid abuses in the process of explaining the Holocaust; White, in turn, followed his earlier assumptions expressed in *Metahistory* (and elsewhere), assuming that traditional methods of representation are inadequate in the face of the experience of the Holocaust.[11] Debate about Holocaust expression also continued beyond the Anglo-Saxon milieu. The aforementioned Frank Ankersmit developed the area of historical and aesthetic experience. In the text *Remembering the Holocaust: mourning and melancholia*, this Dutch researcher uses the psychoanalytic concepts of mourning and melancholy with the example of the memorial at Yad Vashem as a possible way of working through trauma and loss. Ankersmit also regarded the discourse of memory as an alternative to academic history.[12]

I do not try to solve this dilemma in the context of film narratives, as I start from the assumption that cinematography has managed to develop its characteristic means of artistic expression, which have tried to face the problem of representation with greater or lesser success. I agree here with H. White, who wrote that visuality poses a great challenge to historiography by the means it has at its disposal, which allow for a better recreation of certain historical phenomena, such as the landscape, place, emotions, or complicated events.[13] The historian has to face up to a difficult task: images require a different methodology and criticism than written documents because they are autonomous, discursive statements.[14]

I ask the question: Is it possible to create new artistic and cinematic representations of the Holocaust in the absence of archival resources? Can the attempts by the filmmakers to show the "unimaginable" replace *the images that are not there*? Can the cinematic imagination carry the burden of the experience of victims/survivors, particularly in light of the fact that the last witnesses of the Holocaust are passing away? To what extent do the films challenge the traditional cinematic narration and, to the extent that they do, by what aesthetic and technical means? How do the formal and artistic experiments employed correspond to the theoretical propositions of Holocaust studies?

I am interested in two films that differ in the time and place of their creation, the social

[8] J.-L. Nancy, *Forbidden Representation*, [in:] *The Ground of the Image*, trans. J. Fort, New York 2005, pp. 27–50.

[9] J. Topolski, *Holokaust a język historyka*, "Annales Universitatis Marie Curie-Skłodowska" 1996, no. 51(18), pp. 217–231. See also: *Probing the limits of representation: Nazism and the "final solution"*, ed. S. Friedlander, Cambridge, Mass. 1992.

[10] J. Topolski, op. cit.

[11] Ibidem.

[12] F.R. Ankersmit, op. cit.

[13] H. White, *Historiography and Historiophoty*, "American Historical Review" 1988, no. 93(5), pp. 1193–1199.

[14] Ibidem.

and political context, as well as, and I think this is very important, the generational difference between their creators. Each of these examples therefore offers a new perspective on the subject of the camps and the Holocaust; it is a kind of “voice of a generation”. Using the example of the films *Kornblumenblau* (1989) and *Son of Saul* (2015), I will present strategies for the representation of mass death in the death camps.^[15] First, I will examine the theoretical approaches of S. Kracauer and G. Agamben, based on the metaphor of mythical Medusa. Cinema representations of the Holocaust are considered there as the possibility of image.

Cinema as Medusa/a Gorgon. Kracauer and Agamben

The metaphor of Medusa seems to be very apt in the reflection on cinematic representation of the Holocaust. Analysing the phenomenon of gaze as a taboo sanctioned by cultural

bans, Gérard Lenne speaks of film as the gaze of the Gorgon. The prohibition on looking, censorship of the image and all other forms of communication is the domain of fascism. Facing death in cinema (that is, looking at the face of the Gorgon) should be understood as resistance to the power over image and gaze.^[16] In *Film Theory*, Siegfried Kracauer refers to the well-known myth of the Gorgon, whose monstrous face and eyesight turned victims into stone, interpreting this figure as a metaphor for real suffering, violence and death.^[17] Since, as the German theorist maintains, we cannot as viewers stand the view of what is horrible and real, we have to use a mirror image, which in the myth is represented by Perseus’ shield, and, in Kracauer’s reflection, by cinema. Images of war and atrocities do not serve any didactic purpose, do not serve as a warning or an admonition against war, and do not have the power to provoke concrete and decisive action to stop genocidal politics.^[18] The claim that “mirror images of horror are a goal for their own sake” is, of course, an indication of the aesthetic content of a film, but Kracauer means rather what film does on an affective level:

Seeing rows of calf heads or the remains of tortured bodies in films about Nazi concentration camps, we release horror from invisibility, in which it is hidden by terror or imagination. This experience frees us from one of the most powerful taboos. Perhaps Perseus’ greatest deed was not to cut off Medusa’s head, but to overcome fear and look into the reflection of the monster in the mirror. Isn’t that what allowed him to annihilate the Gorgon?^[19]

Kracauer sees in film an attempt to “save the image” from invisibility and unimaginability. The images of violence have to be confronted and made visible in order to get to know death from within. Tomasz Majewski puts it aptly: “[...] the film screen-gorgoneion – the place of visibility of the “invisible horror” is in its characteristics the area of *what cannot be missed* [my italics – A.J.]. The impossibility of seeing, of which the Gorgon is a symbol, is a kind of challenge to look at what we cannot avoid.”^[20]

[15] They are by no means all the films representing the gas chambers, which is described by H. Bovekerk, *The representation of gas Chambers in Holocaust Films*, https://www.academia.edu/12091577/The_Representation_of_Gas_Chambers_in_Holocaust_Films (accessed: 12.10.2019).

[16] G. Lenne, *Śmierć w kinie*, [in:] *Wymiary śmierci*, ed. S. Rosiek, Gdańsk 2002, pp. 225–226.

[17] S. Kracauer, *Teoria filmu*, trans. W. Wertenstein, Gdańsk 2008, p. 344.

[18] As an example of a violent film image, Kracauer evokes the *Animal Blood* of Georges Franju. It is a shocking documentary about the Parisian massacre, showing the methodical killing of cows and horses, blood on the floor, the quartering of animal bodies by butchers. “It would be ridiculous to claim that these repulsive images were supposed to preach the gospels of vegetarianism”, concludes the author. *Ibidem*, p. 345. See: T. Majewski, *Siegfried Kracauer: teoria filmu po Zagładzie*, [in:] *Pamięć Shoah. Kulturowe reprezentacje i praktyki upamiętnienia*, eds. T. Majewski, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Łódź 2011, pp. 539–552.

[19] S. Kracauer, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

[20] T. Majewski, *op. cit.*

Giorgio Agamben's analysis slightly complicates the meaning of the Gorgon in relation to the death camp's universe. For the Italian author, the motif of the Gorgon present in ancient art is a call that cannot be avoided, an apostrophe.[21] However, Agamben does not give a simple answer to the question of whether the Gorgon is a pure image of what happened in the camp. Nor is it the metaphor of the *Muselmann* that Primo Levi uses in his novel, calling this particular category of prisoner 'the one who saw the Gorgon'.[22] Agamben therefore describes it as "the impossibility of seeing": "that belongs to the camp inhabitants, the one who has touched the bottom in the camp and has become the non-human." [23] The *Muselmann* has experienced this inability to see and knowledge at the boundaries of the human condition—and this is what the Gorgon is, which transforms a human being into a non-human. The shifting of boundaries within the human condition brings with it a radical impossibility of image, both at the level of reception and transfer. Therefore, as Agamben concludes, "[...] that inhuman impossibility of seeing is what calls and addresses the human, the apostrophe from which human beings cannot turn away – this and nothing else is testimony." [24] Agamben's project would therefore consist in making visible what is invisible or (seemingly) can't be represented. The thought-provoking thesis that "we will not understand what Auschwitz was until we understand who or what the *Muselmann* was and learn to look into the face of the Gorgon with him", is just a call to make a difficult attempt to visualize the atrocities of the camp. As Angi Buettner notes, the figure of the *Muselmann*-Gorgon is an aesthetic problem in the reflection of the Italian philosopher:

With this move to an absolute image – that which cannot not be seen – at the core of the politics of seeing, an image that freezes the act of looking in a 'confrontation of gazes', the Gorgon (and by extension the *Muselmann*) designate not just the impossibility of vision, but they also become a cypher for aesthetics. In every invocation, the *Muselmann*

and the Gorgon are used as an aesthetic possibility, utilised to perform an 'apostrophe', to rupture convention and directly appeal to the viewer with what the creator of that image wants to make visible, despite being faced with the impossibility of seeing – that which people will not want to see or cannot see – the violent, threatening or challenging event in question.[25]

The conclusion which emerges suggests that the task of a witness is not only to see despite the impossibility of seeing, but also to show, to make the camp visible by creating an image. If there is a level on which Kracauer meets Agamben, it is the paradigm of image/visualisation, both documentary and artistic. Can cinema in fact save the image of the death camp's universe, especially the ultimate thing, which was the mass extermination of the population? Kracauer's conclusion gives a clear answer that is not disturbed by ethical considerations: the film is supposed to be a mirror-shield in which the horrors of war are reflected in order to overthrow the taboo of death (and perhaps its romantic aura). From Agamben's analysis, however, as Ewa Domańska suggests, arises the notion of the exhibitionist and pornographic abuse of camp scenes as a way of "resurrecting the dead" and a warning against the attempts of bio-power.[26]

Domańska's remark returns to the category of "bare life", which is also significant in the context of Agamben's deliberations. The figure of the "sacred man" (*homo sacer*), derived from ancient law, becomes in Agamben's writings an example of an individual who is deprived of rights and

[21] G. Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz...*, p. 53.

[22] P. Levi, *Pogrążeni i ocaleni*, trans. S. Kasprzyśki, Kraków 2007, p. 100.

[23] G. Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz...*, p. 54.

[24] Ibidem.

[25] A. Buettner, *Holocaust Images and Picturing Catastrophe: The Cultural Politics of Seeing*, London – New York 2011, p. 165.

[26] E. Domańska, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała*, Warszawa 2017, p. 101.

thus exposed to unlimited violence.[27] The killing of *homo sacer* is not a crime, and he may not be sacrificed, which creates ambivalence in the usage of the term “holiness”. It is therefore unrelated to the religious (Christian) understanding of the concept, for it thus defines one who is excluded, cursed, or an exile without rights. According to Agamben, *Homo sacer*, or bare life, becomes the basic principle of sovereignty, which in the modern world manifests as concentration camps. The core principle of biopolitical power (into which the camp is inscribed) is the creation of “bare life”. Here Agamben uses the definition of sovereignty proposed by Michel Foucault, the power of which applies to both life and death, transforming with the birth of modernity into biopower. Thus, the Nazi concept of the concentration camp becomes an extreme example of how biopolitics function and of the creation of bare bodies. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben introduces the mechanism of its functioning more precisely by reference to the methods of inflicting death and dying. The practice of the “degrading death” is one of the principles of how Nazi terror functioned.[28] It relies on treating death and dying in terms of objectified figures (*Figuren*), which in the Nazi system are subject to specific exploitation practices (the extraction of gold teeth, the shaving of hair, and also macabre examples of the use of human skin), as well as the denial of the right to a dignified burial through mass and unmarked inhumation or burning. According to Agamben, the mass scale and anonymity of death, the deprivation of dignity and the “mass production of corpses” embody bare life:

In each case, the expression “fabrication of corpses” implies that no longer possible truly to speak of death, that what took place in the camps was not death, but rather something infinitely more appalling. In Auschwitz, people did not die; rather corpses were produced. Corpses without death, non-humans whose decease is debased into a matter

[27] Idem, *Homo sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1998.

[28] Idem, *The Remnants of Auschwitz...*, p. 71.

[29] Ibidem, pp. 71–72.

of serial production. And, according to a possible and widespread interpretation, precisely this degradation of death constitutes the specific offense of Auschwitz, the proper name of its horror.[29]

The entanglement of this issue in the concepts of population and species divisions (human, non-human) is a challenge not only for reflections on the ontology of a dead body in camp conditions, but also constitutes an aesthetic challenge. How can the “degradation of death” in Auschwitz be shown? Can art handle such an extreme subject, simultaneously avoiding inappropriacy or kitsch? It is not a question of death as such, but rather uniquely brutal and inhumane death.

Kornblumenblau. Modern grotesque

Kornblumenblau, Leszek Wosiewicz’s Polish film from 1989, is in many ways a picture that breaks with the current conventions of presenting camps and the Holocaust in Polish cinematography. The reality of the camp, as seen through the eyes of the protagonist Tadek, a musician and Auschwitz prisoner, is a world in which passions and drives are intertwined with the struggle for biological survival and the constant presence of terror and death. Violence is woven into the regular and repetitive cycle of the camp’s universe, which is marked by work, nights in the barracks, appeals, and selection. Relationships between prisoners are also brutal, often resulting from the established hierarchy, but above all from the selfish drive to ensure the minimum necessary to survive at the expense of others in inhuman conditions. The film is made up of fast, short shots that allow the viewers, as in a kaleidoscope, to embrace the whole with small fragments, frames, so as to present the death camp and the principles governing it as broadly as possible. The film’s creators often use scenes full of dirt, disease, death, physical degradation, and whose potential to provoke arouses in the viewer feelings of confusion, shock, and disgust. The fragments in which prisoners with typhus vomit into latrines, crawl naked and dirty on the stairs of the barracks or, perhaps most unlikely, the scene of the German bar-

racks' head mistress' rape of the main character, illustrate various extreme forms of violence and humiliation. However, sometimes the compulsion to preserve humanity is more oppressive than dehumanization (which has fallen, but can also be a strategy for survival). When, during an evening address, the *kapo* orders prisoners to sing a German song loudly, he shouts: "You are to sing like people." Moreover, music, which is an important element of the plot, is a form of violence. In the sequence mentioned above, one of the prisoners, who does not obey the *kapo's* order, is killed by him with a one brutal blow. The *kommandos* are led to work beyond their capabilities, with screams and the *kapo's* blows, as well as to the accompaniment of the camp orchestra. The titular *Kornblumenblau*, a German drinking song, does save Tadeusz's life when he plays it on the order of a German functionary prisoner, but ignorance of it would inevitably have been the reason for him to be killed. A ballet dance performed by a young Jewish girl from a transport in Birkenau takes place in the gas chamber (about which the main character learns from a fellow prisoner) just before her death. The dance-grotesque and tragicomic-appears alternately with the scene of gassing of the victims. A parade continues in the courtyard of the main camp: the orchestra plays Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, the dancers dressed in striped clothes perform their choreography, the soloists have their faces painted like comedians, and a huge statue of a naked Valkyrie enters the square. Between the shots there are also fragments of archival films from huge parades in the Third Reich.

This carefree play and dance are contrasted with the spectacle of death which takes place in the camp gas chamber. A crowd of naked people-women, children and men-enter the chamber and are forced into it by two prisoners. The true image of the macabre begins when the chamber's heavy doors are locked. The viewer looks at the drama through the eyes of a guard who watches the macabre through a "Judas", without hiding his satisfaction. Panic erupts, naked bodies intertwine in some macabre

movement; people aware of their impending death trample each other, trying to get out. In the background, instead of the screaming of people being gassed, you can still hear the music that imposes the rhythm on the crime that, faster and faster, is taking place. When the prisoners open the door of the chamber, liquid pours out of it, and the dead bodies of the victims look as if they have melted into one, grotesque mass. The dimension of this scene is stripped of all symbolic references, and its naturalism evokes eyewitness accounts. Shlomo Venezia, a member of the *Sonderkommando* in Birkenau, describes the gassing procedure and pays special attention to the condition of the corpse:

We used to find people whose eyes had come out of their orbits from the last effort of their struggling organism. Others were bleeding from all their orifices or lay in their own waste or in the waste of others. The action of gas and fear caused some people to excrete the entire contents of their intestines. There were red bodies and other very pale bodies. Everyone reacted in their own way. But everyone died in terrible suffering. [...] We saw corpses attached to their neighbours, because everyone was desperately looking for a bit of oxygen. The gas thrown to the ground emitted acid, which gradually floated, so everyone fought for air until the last moment, even climbing on others [...]. The image that appeared to us after opening the crematorium door was gruesome; it is impossible to imagine such a scene.^[30]

In *Kornblumenblau*, the scene of death in a gas chamber appears at the end, and as the strongest and most violent, it causes a shock at the moment when the viewer least expects it. The image of the camp universe is brutal, but terror and suffering are constantly intertwined with moments of joy and even carefreeness. As a viewer, we can feel "safe" until a certain moment, having the impression that a film in which the grotesque goes hand in hand with tragicomedy will not surprise us anymore. It seems that the concept of Leszek Wosiewicz's film is far from conceptualization and disputes

[30] S. Venezia, *Sonderkommando. W piekle komór gazowych*, trans. K. Szeżyńska-Mačkowiak, Warszawa 2009, pp. 80-81.

over representation. The “Music Video” formula, about which accusations were made against the director for being inappropriate for a film about Auschwitz, has a completely different effect, because thanks to fast shots, the most terrifying scenes are “pushed out” by the subsequent ones, and the viewer has no time to contemplate the suffering. Wosiewicz admitted that modern means of expression allowed him to make a film completely distant from Hollywood and sentimental cinema.^[31] *Kornblumenblau* was supposed to deliberately shock both with its form and with its story, which has little in common with the idea of camps and the Holocaust developed by earlier productions on this subject, such as Wanda Jakubowska’s *Last Stage* or An-

drzej Munk’s *Passenger*.^[32] The expressiveness of Wosiewicz’s picture, additionally immersed in naturalistic and biological literalness, is an example of the re-evaluation and revision of the heroic-martyrological dimension of memory. The existing paradigms of thinking about the Holocaust are overturned here: Wosiewicz’s film is not interested in Lanzmann’s rejection of the image as a fetish or a false testimony. On the contrary, the strength of the film is determined by the image and it is only by means of the image that one can show the “unimaginable”, imagine, save those *images that are not there*. In the scene of gassing, there is a break with pathos, lamentation and contemplation of suffering.^[33] The death shown in this particular way is a “bad death”: without metaphysics, there is pure carnality and Agamben’s naked body. As Agata Chałupnik writes, *Kornblumenblau* not only allows us to look inside the chamber against the ban imposed by the paradigm of “inexpressibility”, but also “confronts us with the triviality and physiology of death in the gas chamber.”^[34]

The convention of this picture therefore sets a new quality in the representation of the Holocaust, which will be continued by the artistic projects of Artur Żmijewski or Zbigniew Libera.^[35] The “aesthetics of the Holocaust” will gradually break the dictates of negation, and use eclecticism and the interplay of conventions to seek what are often iconoclastic and risky ways of narrating about genocide. Additionally, mixing high art with triviality and historical references in the form of archival materials (films of Nazi marches) is an accusation of totalitarian and genocidal tendencies: “The ridiculousness of the prisoners capering in striped clothes, the japey of the choir soloists painted like comedians, the classic beauty of Beethoven’s work, universally regarded as exemplary... All this, combined with the naturalistic agony of the crowd of people locked in the gas chamber, gives a frustrating testimony of the degradation and devaluation of the civilizational achievements of European culture”, as M. Wróbel writes.^[36]

[31] *Alles für alle. Z Leszkiem Wosiewiczem o filmie Kornblumenblau rozmawia Natalia Chojna*, “Pleograf. Kwartalnik Akademii Polskiego Filmu” 2018, no. 3, <http://akademiapolskiegofilmu.pl/pl/historia-polskiego-filmu/artykuly/alles-f-r-alles-z-leszkiem-wosiewiczem-o-filmie-kornblumenblau-rozmawia-natalia-chojna/648> (accessed: 14.10.2019).

[32] M. Wróbel, *Tadzikowe perypetie z totalitaryzmem. Metaforyzacja rzeczywistości lagrowej w filmie Kornblumenblau Leszka Wosiewicza*, “Kwartalnik Filmowy” 2000, no. 29/30, p. 100, <http://akademiapolskiegofilmu.pl/pl/historia-polskiego-filmu/artykuly/tadzikowe-perypetie-z-totalitaryzmem-metaforyzacja-rzeczywistosci-lagrowej-w-filmie-kornblumenblau-leszka-wosiewicza/511#sdendnote29sym> (accessed: 14.10.2019).

[33] The rhetoric of sadness, martyrology and victimisation dominated all tales about the Shoah for decades - the conviction that only factual and mimetic forms of representation can fully account for the meaning of the event, although under the condition of preserving the ambience of grief or tragedy. See: A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, Lublin 2005, pp. 131–132.

[34] *Ślady Holokaustu w imaginariu kultury polskiej*, eds. J. Kowalska-Leder, P. Dobrosielski, I. Kurz, Warszawa 2017, p. 206.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 207. See: D. Sajewska, *Ciało jako medium postpamięci*, “Politeja” 2015, no. 35, pp. 123–132.

[36] M. Wróbel, *op. cit.*, 107.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the grotesque nature of the scenes in Wosiewicz's picture. The potential of this means of expression is to redefine the reality it represents in a given artistic work. This is based on the definition proposed by Michał Głowiński, where grotesque is "[...] real events or only seemingly improbable, bizarre, surprising, combining seriousness with ridicule, as well as facts, ways of acting, ideas that we consider inappropriate, showing a mental confusion, unsuitable for a given situation or even unwise or downright pathetic in their stupidity."^[37] It should be assumed that its basic premise is precisely the "overturning" of the hitherto existing ways of perceiving and representing, established ideas and assumptions. In a mixture of seriousness and ridicule, characteristic of the grotesque, there is a profane tendency. The impossibility of representation, which reduced the Holocaust to an "unimaginable" paradigm, set a clear limit, the exceeding of which could violate the absolutizing and universalizing vision of Auschwitz as a kind of *sacrum*.^[38] Meanwhile, art, film, or literature carry the possibility of profanation, the essence of which, according to Agamben, is based precisely on the delivery of what is sacred to the sphere of the profane. "The transition from *sacrum* to *profanum* can be made through the completely inappropriate use of holiness (or rather its reuse). I mean making fun," we read in the *Profanations*.^[39] Fun itself, coming from the sphere of sanctity (i.e. marked by ambiguity, which is reflected in the notion, important for this Italian thinker, of *sacer/sacrum*), "turns the sphere of *sacrum* upside down", neutralizes it and restores its use.^[40] The notion of the grotesque as an unconventional and "subversive" form of representation, understood in this way, is realized by Leszek Wosiewicz in *Kornblumenblau*. In the mass death scene discussed here, the atmosphere of seriousness, reverie and silence is replaced by a spectacle of fun and dying which is close to profanation. The absurdity of the parade, in which the orchestra plays Beethoven's music, with the almost parodic dance and the Valkyrie statue is mixed with the rather

dangerous aestheticisation of death. The obscurity of dying is accompanied by the negation of its romantic image, where dignity and the ritual ways of dealing with the dead are considered fundamental to humanity. The industrial production of corpses, called "Figuren" in camp jargon, in artistic and film convention becomes unreal, more "imaginative". Therefore, behind the rebellious character of the grotesque, which saves *the images that are not* there, there is a certain threat. Art can have the potential to save, but at the same time it can usurp the imagery and impose it on the basis of "visual topics". What I mean here is the phenomenon of thinking with images that monopolizes the common notions of the Holocaust, camps and war. That is why a film should be treated as one of the ways of creating reality on the basis of (historical) imagination, which in no way replaces facts and historians' findings. Cinematic reality, even if it is close to historical reality, will always be only an alternative interpretation of the past. In fact, the grotesque as an aesthetic category is far from being a faithful representation; it is a denial of the "faithful representation of reality" and its decomposition.^[41] The *Kornblumenblau* camp is therefore more imagined than real, especially in the last scene, which is an example of total negation or "forbidden representation" (to use the term coined by J.-L. Nancy).^[42] The final sequence of parades and dances could not have taken place in the Third Reich because, as M. Głowiński points out, it is in principle alien to totalitarian art as a denial of the official

[37] M. Głowiński, *Groteska jako kategoria estetyczna*, [in:] *Groteska*, ed. idem, Gdańsk 2003, p. 5.

[38] See: A.L. Eckardt, A.R. Eckardt, *The Holocaust and the Enigma of Uniqueness: A Philosophical Effort at Practical Clarification*, "The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences" 1980, vol. 450, pp. 165–178.

[39] G. Agamben, *Profanacje*, trans. M. Kwaterko, Warszawa 2006, pp. 94–95.

[40] Ibidem, p. 95.

[41] M. Głowiński, op. cit., pp. 12–13.

[42] J.-L. Nancy, op. cit.

programme of National Socialism and as an element of the phenomenon called the degenerated art.[43] This scene, perhaps carrying signs of iconoclasm, is at the same time an act of art's victory over National Socialism and its genocidal practices.

***Son of Saul* as an example of cinema after Lanzmann**

László Nemes's film, which was awarded the Grand Prix in Cannes (2015) and the Oscar in 2016, uses other less literal artistic means. However, the distant images in *Son of Saul*, both in terms of acting and editing, deeply move the perception and emotions of the viewer. The story presented in the film is seen through the eyes of a member of the Sonderkommando, a Hungarian Jew named Saul Auslander; from the very beginning we observe his struggle with the camp rules, which primarily mean forced participation in the extermination process (transporting Jews to the gas chambers, pulling out corpses, collecting things from the dead, pulling out gold teeth, cleaning waste from the inside of the chamber, etc.), and, as a consequence, the collapse of the values that Saul knew in another world. His resistance to the dehumanizing power of genocide is expressed

in an attempt to bury a dead boy in whom he recognizes his son. The protagonist of Nemes's film is the new "contemporary Antigone." [44]

Saul is the embodiment of the liminality of the human condition and the suspension between two worlds: the world of pre-imprisonment values and the reality of the camp. The terror of the concentration camp has changed him: Saul perceives the surrounding events without emotion or empathetic reactions. He is subject to the inhuman law of the camp. He is not, however, completely dehumanized: the sight of the boy who survives the gas chamber triggers in him a need to organise a burial in accordance with divine law and religious commandments. When the child is killed by the SS doctor, Saul searches hysterically for a rabbi to perform the funeral rites. This formal procedure in the script seems to be an insane and useless ideal and could suggest a naive trust in the salvation of humanity. Nemes himself emphasizes, however, that his film is, above all, a film about death, about the lack of hope and chances for survival. The director thus wanted to break with the mythology of survival. His vision of the camp is therefore deeply negative.[45]

The name of the camp does not appear in the movie, but taking into account factual events, we can assume that the film is set in Birkenau.[46] Preserving historical accuracy, including focusing on historical details and facts (a child who survived the gas chamber, taking photographs in 1944, the Sonderkommando rebellion in Birkenau), is a great advantage of this production, and the skilful eye will also notice the director's enormous inspiration from literary and visual testimonies of extermination.[47] Nemes uses well-known clichés and cultural references, and the scenes in the crematorium, or the fragment in which one of the prisoners secretly takes photographs from the inside of a gas chamber, bring to mind the works of David Olère or the Sonderkommando photographs taken in 1944 for the Polish underground. At the same time, by reconstructing the events inside the crematorium or the action of secretly taking a photograph of a burning

[43] M. Głowiński, op. cit., p. 13.

[44] The term borrowed from J. Leociak's, *Anty-gona współczesna*, "Polska Sztuka Ludowa – Konteksty" 2007, no. 61(1).

[45] A. Pulver, *László Nemes: "I didn't want Son of Saul to tell the story of survival"*, The Guardian, 14.04.2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/14/laszlo-nemes-i-didnt-want-son-of-saul-to-tell-the-story-of-survival> (accessed: 18.01.2021).

[46] I. Kurz, *To, co zobaczysz, będzie jeszcze gorsze*, dwutygodnik.com, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/6378-to-co-zobaczysz-bedzie-jeszcze-gorsze.html> (accessed: 5.12.2020).

[47] One can, of course, have reservations about the factual and chronological accuracy of the film. For example, the moment of taking a picture of the burning of a corpse presents the situation from August 1944, while the action of the film takes place in October.

stake, the film's director inserts himself into the discussion about the possibility of visual/artistic representation of the Holocaust, taking an unequivocal stand on the side of the image. The inspirations from Georges Didi-Huberman's famous and widely discussed work *Images in Spite of All*, are also very visible here.^[48] Nevertheless, Nemes does not completely break with Lanzmann's recognition of the archival image as a fetish; here the negation of the thesis about archives as "images without imagination" is much closer. Not a single documentary photograph appears in the film, although the story told here is constructed on the basis of known cultural and historical references. It seems that the aesthetics of the visual (re)construction of events used in the most brutal moments is a form of avoiding the traps of pornographic literalness, naturalism, and ultimately, ostentatious fetishization of the image as such. *Son of Saul* is a compromise between Claude Lanzmann's antithesis and Didi-Huberman's apologia for the image. This feature of the Hungarian film was aptly described by Paweł Jasnowski when he wrote that: "The director shows by hiding and hides, by showing – trying to avoid the problem of disproportion between actual suffering and its representation."^[49] This picture can be treated as a challenge to the film interpretations so far. Nemes's film is an example of cinema after Lanzmann, opening up new possibilities of visual representation.

Scenes in the gas chamber open *Son of Saul*, bringing the viewer right into the middle of a nightmare. The transport of Jews is led inside the crematorium; people undress in the changing room, assured by members of the Sonderkommando that they are going to bathe and will then be sent to work in the camp. When a crowd of women, children and men is shut inside the gas chamber and the door is locked, the camera focuses ostentatiously on Saul's face. For a moment, we stare at his expressionless face. In the background, we hear screams, calls, the muffled sounds of people condemned to death. In the next shot, the main character and the rest of the camp staff are already dealing with the cleaning

of the gas chamber and the collection of bodies. The banality of everyday activities is mixed with the horror of the act of genocide that has just been carried out, which is signified by naked, dead bodies, or just fragments of them, "sneaking" into the background. In this way, Nemes illustrates (perhaps unknowingly) the idea of the camp's "bare life", its assembly-line production, and the "mass production of corpses." Saul's gesture to protect the child's corpse from being burnt should be equated with the desire to mourn in the Freudian sense. We read about this in Agamben when, recalling the images of death in the poetry of Rilke, he writes:

Faced with the expropriation of death accomplished by modernity, the poet reacts according to Freud's scheme of mourning; he interiorizes the lost object. Or, as in the analogous case of melancholy, by forcing to appear as expropriated an object – death – concerning which it makes no sense to speak either of propriety or impropriety.^[50]

The objectification of the boy's body is further emphasized by the conversation with the doctor-inmate, who upon Saul's request to leave the body, replies: "You don't need it, but your boss does." Corpses become the property of the system, subject to the processes of appropriation, economic exploitation or medical experiments.

The applied economy of visual techniques in favour of auditory sensations, a blurred background, focus on the foreground and the character of Saul avoids the scandal of death and suffering in its most drastic dimension. The camera seems to avoid zooming in on naked, dead bodies – these can only be seen in an unclear background. Although the dead are almost invisible, the nightmare of extermination seems to be extremely close and poignant. A similar procedure has been used in the scene of burning corpses in the pit: thick smoke from the

[48] G. Didi-Huberman, op. cit.

[49] P. Jasnowski, *Niedokończony kadisz*, "Res Publica Nowa" 2016, no. 1, pp. 197–199.

[50] G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz...*, p. 73.

burning bodies hides the action, only vague silhouettes of prisoners are visible.

Scenes of death use familiar visual tropes, drawn mainly from archival photographs of the Holocaust. The moment of execution in the pits resembles the regular acts of genocide carried out in the territory of the USSR after the invasion of the Einsatzgruppen. A wealth of sources have been left behind in the form of photographic trophies taken by German soldiers, despite the official ban. Naked forms of Jews, driven by the SS in the scene from *Son of Saul*, are inseparably linked with precursors from Mizoch, Liepāja or Międzyrzecz Podlaski. Nemes thus brings to life the imagination shaped by two-dimensional, black-and-white pictures, realizing a cinematic representation full of tension, the chaos of human voices and gestures. The flames burning in the background further reinforce the contrast with the action taking place, which accelerates second by second with the same haste with which the genocidal action is being undertaken. The filmmakers, however, avoid literalism here as well: the horror of the situation is reflected in the expression on the face of the rabbi, paralysed by the sight of the murder taking place. This is the moment in which *Son of Saul* challenges the “impossibility of seeing”, intertwined with the figure of Medusa, from which you cannot look away. The rabbi’s terror is testimony in the Agambenian sense.

[51] Teréz Vincze uses the term haptic visuality/ sensuality to describe the multi-sensory involvement of viewer perception in cinematography. “[...] the meaning of haptic sensitivity and visuality lies in its ability to arouse memories, feelings, and various meanings that cannot be represented by traditional means of audio-visual representation,” he writes. See: T. Vincze, *The Phenomenology of trauma. Sound and Haptic Sensuality in Son of Saul*, “Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies” 2016, no. 13, pp. 107–126.

[52] Ibidem, p. 120.

[53] Steffan Grisseemann wrote: “Nemes juxtaposes the ruthless horror of genocide with the bravado of a kid who has just graduated from a film school. Instead of thinking about the moral

The horror of mass death is reflected in the film by other means, such as the screaming and banging on the doors of people locked in the chamber, the scene of cleaning the interior of waste, moving corpses with hooks, where all attention is focused on the protagonist, his gestures and facial expressions. The film triggers a play of senses other than sight, and Saul’s constant wandering around the interior of the crematorium, reminiscent of a place from which there is no escape, gives an impression of claustrophobia and fear.[51] In this sense, the use of the aesthetics of horror and gruesomeness takes place on a different level than in *Kornblumenblau* described above: it is not the image that conveys the greatest emotional charge, because it *does not exist*, so the whole tension is created by everything that happens beyond the image, beyond the *gap*: the cacophony of sounds created by human voices and tongues, the sounds of nature, the bustle of the crowd in the dressing room, the barking of dogs, the screams of the perpetrators. To use a paradoxical statement, *Son of Saul* is a visual onomatopoeia, which constantly builds up the tension characteristic of the film genre of horror, as T. Vincze writes: “Narrow visual field, for example, is a stylistic tool often used by horror movies to heighten the tension and to suggest that the threatening force might be very close to us, just outside the narrow frame.”[52] Sound effects play a crucial role here, and the “blinking” of images and their blurring are meant to suggest certain fantasies. The rest belongs to the viewer’s imagination. Nemes perfectly realizes here the idea of *images that do not exist*, building an audio-visual tension through understatements, quotations, and clichés. As a counter-image to sentimental productions such as *Schindler’s List* or *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas*, *Son of Saul* initiates a new direction in thinking about and relating the Holocaust, where the question of whether we have the right to show death in a gas chamber gives way to the question of how to show it. One of the criticisms made by the film critics is the director’s alleged bravado and narcissism.[53] I think that precisely these types of features

of future young artists contain an invaluable causal and performative potential, which brings with it the announcement of new ways of representing genocide and borderline situations.

Conclusion

I consider these two examples of cinematic representation to be challenges for historical, cultural and aesthetic discourses. Both of them were created in different and specific social and political contexts. Wosiewicz shot *Kornblumenblau* at the end of the communist era in Poland, shortly before the country's transformation and at the time when the historical discourse on Polish-Jewish relations in post-war decades started to emerge. Moreover, Lanzmann's *Shoah* has already been broadcast on Polish television and this event is considered a landmark for national debate on, as Piotr Forecki writes, "the empty places in Polish memory."^[54] László Nemes has his own family history – his ancestors were murdered in Auschwitz, so his movie has a personal dimension. The important thing is that while these two directors work in different social, political and cultural conditions, they also come from post-communist countries marked with the experience of Nazi terror and genocide. Both in Poland and Hungary, the Jewish discourse still has no official acceptance and its own place in the official politics of memory. We can read *Kornblumenblau* and *Son of Saul* as the answer to the national debates: Wosiewicz's in the late 1980s; Nemes – contemporary.

Entering the gas chamber, seeing the hell of the crematorium, the characters of the Sonderkommando, the prisoners bustling around piles of dead bodies... it seems that film has revealed to us the possibility of looking at situations that we have not been able or even wanted to imagine so far. Cinema teaches us to look into the face of the Gorgon, and forces us to respond to Agamben's call. Art has an extremely important role to play here, which we may not be aware of: it saves forbidden images, images that have never been created. In a sense, although *Kornblumenblau* and *The Son of Saul* are role-playing interpretations of the camp universe, we can

speak of them as archives that collect images and other understandings of history. When Kracauer wrote about overthrowing the taboo of death in film representations of violence, in the context of Holocaust cinema there will also be something more at stake – the overthrow of the limiting taboo of "unspeakable Auschwitz" and the ban on images. There is no doubt, however, that the artists have a certain responsibility. Cinema can have potential and, by means of visual practices, disenchant existing images and discourses, but it can also be marked with the stigma of power relations that are not easy to expose. The controversy used by contemporary cinematography, which institutional forms of memory seem to be resistant to, may temper the death and nightmare of the Holocaust, but at the same time, it may perpetuate the dominant narratives within a given culture. One of them, which M. Seltzer calls the post-traumatic "wound culture", is "[...] associated with the excitement of a torn and open body, a torn and exposed individual, transformed into a public spectacle."^[55] We should read this warning as an ethical dilemma relating to the victims' experience and appropriateness. Examining Holocaust cinema is first of all an aesthetic challenge; however, we need to be aware of pitfalls such as manipulation and trivialization of the historical narrative.

Translation: Paweł Gruszka
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consequences, it becomes a taboo: pushing aside the Lanzmann ban on Holocaust images and the silence of political correctness with complete cinematic bravado." S. Grisseman, *Atrocity Exhibitionism. Why Son of Saul is an Opportunistic and Highly Problematic Work of Meta-Exploitation*, "Film Comment" 2015, vol. 51, p. 29.

[54] P. Forecki, *Od Shoah do Strachu: spory o polsko-żydowską pamięć w debatach publicznych*, Poznań 2010, p. 149, after: D. Glowacka, *Co-memory, Negative Memory and the Dilemmas of Translation in the Outtakes from Claude Lanzmann's "Shoah"*, "Teksty Drugie" 2016, no. 3, pp. 297–311.

[55] M. Seltzer, *Kultura rany*, [in:] *Antologia studiów nad traumą*, ed. T. Łysak, Kraków 2015, p. 313.

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