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Historical narrative, movies and meaning. The problem of interpretation and representation in Saul Friedländer's historiography

"A need for synthesis, for a thoroughgoing coherence that no longer excludes anything"[1]

S. Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*

The sources of Saul Friedländer's (1932–) reflections on the Nazi excess and the Holocaust sprung from two mutually complementary streams: the first one was directly filled by experience, initially through witnessing during his hiding in France, and later, in the moment of practical attraction to the state of Israel, but which was thereafter weakened by his growing skepticism; and the second, developed at the level of historical knowledge, continually deepening in the course of the historian's life. The sense of this reconciliation of personal experience and the culture of historical thinking was revealed to him as a kind of mission in studying and writing history:

I was destined, therefore, to wander among several worlds, knowing them, understanding them—better, perhaps, than many others—but nonetheless incapable of feeling an identification without any reticence, incapable of seeing, understanding, and belonging in a single, total movement.[2]

Reflection on his own destiny referred to understanding the difference between historical worlds, mingling real and possible ones. It seems that he tried to preserve the meanings of these worlds in his writings, but with an attempt to situate them on a horizon of the possible whole. In this overall framework, the problem of interpretation of the Nazi transgression and the

[1] S. Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, trans. H. R. Lane, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York 1979, p. 114.

[2] Ibid., p. 156.

Holocaust becomes particularly important in the case of representation of historical worlds in movies, because for Friedländer their form seems to transform—in a more or less subtle way—the meaning of limits between fiction and reality. Insensitivity toward these limits is particularly dangerous for historiography, because the structure of cinematographic imagination confuses historical thinking and, in consequence, could dominate our space of discourse on the past.

The aim of this article is to present Saul Friedländer's considerations on the work of historical imagination in the context of dilemmas of making knowledge and meaning. In the first part, I sketched the development of the historian's methodological awareness which explored a horrific meaning of the Nazi anomaly and the Holocaust, especially in movies. The second part is devoted to the diagnosis of historical self-knowledge toward representations of the Nazi epoch, as well as their relationship to the cinematographic imagination and postmodernism. In the third part, I will try to show how the historian had resolved the problem of representing this period in his project of "integrated and integrative" history.

Explanation and understanding

It seems impossible to comprehend Saul Friedländer's theoretical struggle with the Nazi transgression and the Holocaust, if one ignores the context of his personal experiences.[3] The World War II occurred during his childhood, compelling his parents to emigration from his native Bohemia to France. At the time, however, he did not understand their anxiety or what was happening around him. He did not know either why his parents have to leave somewhere, or why he had to submit to the protection of French catholic priests in Montluçon. Initially, he knew nothing about his parents' death in a concentration camp; sometimes, in his disbelief, he pushed away the thought of their fate. Perhaps, recurring questions about the truth have finally been dispelled by Mme Fraenkel: "My poor," she said, "don't you understand that your parents are dead?"[4] Afterwards, during his conversation with Father L. in the church, he heard more and more horrifying details: "And so, in front of this obscure Christ, I listened: Auschwitz, the trains, the gas chambers, the crematory ovens, the millions of dead…".[5]

[3] See K. Machtans, *Zwischen Wissenschaft und autobiographischem Projekt, Saul Friedländer und Ruth Klüger*, M. Niemeyer, Tübingen 2009.

[4] S. Friedländer, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

[5] Ibid., p. 138.

Because of his deep feeling of loss, the history of Nazism and the extermination of the Jews have become a personal matter for him, giving impetus to his historical studies. As he confessed in *When memory comes*: "I must write, then."[6] In the Sixties, on the one hand, his youthful aversion to the history turns into the historiographical passion in writing several monographs: *Pius XII and the Third Reich: A Documentation*,[7] *Prelude to Downfall: Hitler and the United States 1939–1941*,[8] and *Kurt Gerstein: the Ambiguity of Good*.[9] On the other hand, some differences in the descriptions of the Nazi transgression at the level of monograph revealed insufficiencies in the power of judgment, so he turned his attention towards the synthetic framework, such as *L'Antisémitisme nazi: histoire d'une psychose collective*.[10]

In his early synthesizing works, however, the historian must have seen for himself how problematic it is to explain the Nazi phenomenon in general terms. In *History and Psychoanalysis*,[11] he devoted a lot of attention to the historical method based on psychology: on the one hand, pointing out the limits and possibilities of psychological intuitions derived from life and, on the other, advocating the need for a systematic and critical attitude toward dominant psychological concepts. As he wrote, "the historian ... must limit his choice to the domain of theories of the personality."[12] Nevertheless, as he should not accept all the results of these theories uncritically, "the historian will be obliged to complete his explanation by means of description and intuitive evaluation."[13]

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[6] Ibid., p. 135.

[7] S. Friedländer, *Pius XII and the Third Reich: A Documentation*, trans. Ch. Fullman, Knopf, New York 1966.

[8] S. Friedländer, *Prelude to Downfall: Hitler and the United States 1939–1941*, trans. A.B. Werth, A. Werth, Chatto & Windus, London 1967.

[9] S. Friedländer, *Kurt Gerstein: the Ambiguity of Good*, trans. Ch. Fullman, Knopf, New York 1969.

[10] S. Friedländer, *L'Antisémitisme nazi: histoire d'une psychose collective*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1971.

[11] S. Friedländer, *History and Psychoanalysis: an Inquiry into the Possibilities and Limits of Psychohistory*, trans. S. Suleiman, Holmes & Meier, New York 1978.

[12] Ibid., p. 9. In his letter of 31 December, 1979, addressed to Martin Broszat, Friedländer's note about the nature of the human mind closed not only the letter itself, but also a discussion on the problem of historicization: "the human mind, by a natural tendency which has nothing to do with national circumstances, prefers to dwell on the normal rather than on the abnormal, on the understandable rather than opaque, on the comparable rather than on the incomparable, on the bearable rather than on the unbearable." (S. Friedländer, M. Broszat, *A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism*, "New German Critique," 1988, Vol. 44, p. 126)

[13] S. Friedländer, *History and Psychoanalysis*..., pp. 6-7.

Deepening insight indicates on the vagueness of psychohistory, especially in questions about the possibility of psychoanalytic biography and researching the collective phenomena. For example, the Hitler's case is considered, at different levels, in the context of oedipal complex that could reveal his hatred of the Jews. Psychoanalysis, as the author states, could be helpful in explaining some details of his feelings, but widening the horizon of understanding his complex reveals our ignorance as well: "What we cannot know is how Hitler experienced the events we know, and what fantasies they evoked in him."[14] In consequence, this ignorance is filled by questionable hypotheses, so the explanations either circulate in a vicious circle or go forth *ad infinitum*. If we are trying to explain Hitler's personality, we should understand the political, social, economic, and other conditions. Subsequently, each of these factors would have to be conditioned in the culture, where the anti-Semitism as the Oedipus complex results from the occurrence of Christianity itself. At least, all of these factors have to be introduced to the idea of totality, where the researcher cannot maintain his rigor and strictness. Thus, author writes about the necessity of vigilance which historians should exercise, in order to keep their awareness that "some of the most curious fantasies are occasionally paraded as 'explanations'."[15]

Yet despite that some of the explanations increase our knowledge of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, their understanding is still at the same point. What is crucial at the level of historical systematization are the considerations in the lecture *Some Aspects of the Historical Significance of the Holocaust*,[16] where Friedländer tried to approximate all the essential dimensions in explaining and understanding, especially the coexistence of insanity and rationality. His aim was to relate these different problems to each other, because they are important for thorough interpretation of the meaning of perpetrators, onlookers, and victims. In the historian's argumentation about the possible insight into the epoch, the first group should be called the "insiders," as they thought of themselves they were the "real" bearers of civilization, and the latter called the "outsiders." In the modern world, this difference was recognized by many onlookers, so it could explain, in some extent, their passivity, since they were closer to the Nazis worldview: "To help the outsider against the insider requires a strong motivation indeed."[17]

[14] Ibid., p. 48.

[15] Ibid., p. 2.

[16] S. Friedländer, *Some Aspects of the Historical Significance of the Holocaust*, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 1977.

[17] Ibid., p. 29.

The real challenge for Friedländer's internal need for studying and writing history were increasingly reappearing representations of the Nazi transgression, in which he perceived a hidden horror. In his work *Reflections of Nazism*, the author develops the hermeneutical considerations by revealing the problem of history based on the scientific paradigm. Referring to Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he explicitly states that in contact with the Nazi phenomenon "the historical inquiry seems to strike at an irreducible anomaly."[18] His critical attention to the current paradigm shows that the majority of developed concepts in social sciences and humanities is insufficient to explain the Nazi transgression. Thus, the historian argues that simple explanations based on the Marxist concept of "fascism," liberal idea of "totalitarianism," intentional-functional schemes, and psychological analyses are very doubtful.

At the outset of his analysis of the Nazi anomaly, the author of *Reflections* noticed a certain continuity of imagination forms, which have been transferring their uncanny content into our consciousness since the late Sixties. Therefore, as Friedländer postulated, retracing these transformations could reveal old discursive substance: "The focus shifts from the new discourse, allowing us to grasp some hidden forms of past and present imagination."[19] The historian supposed that the sensation of a "frisson" in contacts with that discourse could be a criterion of cognition.

According to Friedländer, frissons are related to the constant theme of death. Nevertheless, as the author of *Reflections* emphasized, the mortal essence of Nazism was not merely a murderous passion, determining itself not in the immediacy but rather in a certain aesthetic and sacralized form:

> The important thing is the constant identification of Nazism and death; not real death in its everyday horror and tragic banality, but a ritualized, stylized, aestheticized death, a death that wills itself the carrier of horror, decrepitude, and monstrosity, but which ultimately and definitely appears as a poisonous apotheosis.[20]

However, on the other hand, frissons are stimulated not only by the theme of death, while attention in the new discourse is still moving toward element of kitsch. In this way, the deadly content disappears in a new discourse, so the Nazi anomaly can be attributed to the presentation of the idyllic harmony or expelled by exorcism. As the author stated, this total pressure of frissons and accumulation of content marked by kitsch and death revealed the

[18] S. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, trans. T. Weyr, Harper & Row, New York 1984, p. 120.

[19] Ibid., p. 18.

[20] Ibid., p. 43.

glimmering of the Nazi phenomenon. Therefore, both sides have to be taken together and included in the research, because both of them constituted the essence of Nazism:

> In this contradictory series, it is not one thing or another that is decisive by itself; it is their coexistence that gives totality its significance.[21]

The glamorous effect of these discursive structures can be seen particularly clear in the case of filmmakers, who fell (consciously or not unconsciously) into the trap of postmodern cinematographic representations, which attacking the imagination with aggressive images of kitsch and death.[22] For Friedländer the paradigmatic example is Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. In his film about Winifred Wagner (1975), the director mentioned the work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*), which has returned, subsequently, in the famous work *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (1977). This kind of cinematographic approach blurs any guilt by exorcising the Nazi transgression; consequently, the existential or moral focus "ultimately loses all significance from the cosmic perspective . . . about beginning and the end of the world."[23]

In *Reflections of Nazism* the author refers to various cinematographic examples, where he shows a discreetly hidden essence of death in the motives of eroticism. Friedländer demonstrated the presence of such a sexuality involving our attention, for instance, in Visconti's *La caduta degli dei* (1969), Cavani's *Il Portiere di notte* (1974) and Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974). In other productions death is concealed by the motive of love, for example, in Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* (1955) and Ophüls's *Le Chagrin et la pitie* (1969).

Also noteworthy is Fassbinder's *Lili Marleen* (1981), in which the image of the Nazi transgression is blurred in the overall metaphor of struggle between good and evil, but where the "real" evil is hiding. Lili's song was sung by soldiers on both sides of the battlefield. Who, then, is a guilty of bloodshed? The guilty was indicated by the flickering phenomenon of "the Jew," emerging silently from the shadows at certain moments: whether on

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[21] Ibid., p. 131.

[22] The cultural power of the Nazi reflexes, which abolished the temptation of silence, was strengthened by the simplistic structure of imagination in the pop culture. This point of view of the commodification of the Nazi transgression was taken by the historian from A.H. Rosenfeld, *The Holocaust as Entertainment* (1979); see S. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*..., s. 99.

[23] S. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*..., p. 131. In *Probing the Limits of Representation*, the historian wrote about the case of Syberberg that he was "the inventor of an almost endless chain of representations" (S. Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, Harvard University Press Cambridge, London—Massachusetts 1992, p. 15).

the photo inserted under Lili's bra or in a limousine driving away. The Jew as a victim disappears from the horizon and reappears as the "perpetrator" who is responsible for all bloodshed and evil.

Finally, the Nazi transgression was blurred by the experience of will to power. This motive is most apparent in Fest's film *Hitler—Eine Karriere* (1977).[24] In *Reflections*, the historian thoroughly discusses Fest's representation of Hitler as an artist-demiurge who can make a historical mistake. Indeed, the director speculated about the possible world, if Hitler had died in 1938 in an accident or by assassination. In that case he would be considered as a one of the greatest figures of German history, perhaps as a man who could be the fulfillment of all national potentialities.

Although the images of contemporary cinema are falsifying the essence of the Nazi transgression, they still reveal an alluring sense of this falsehood. Therefore, at this point of *Reflections*, returns the importance of deepening the problem of psychologism. Friedländer has proposed a project of "phenomenology of compassion,"[25] which could follow by the movement of imagination internalizing and displacing images, in order to approximate—both in the old and the new discourse—the feeling of intimacy with Hitler and with Nazism in general.

Thus, Friedländer's reflections on the Nazi transgression still oscillate, in some aspects, between psychoanalysis and critical theory. But, the historian is also developing his study on the phantasmatic essence of Nazism at the margins of Michel Foucault's considerations: on the one hand, he refers to his assertions about knowledge and power in general, and, on the other, he follows his one question in the context of particular impact of the Nazi phantasm. Foucault's question concerns on the movies depicting Nazis, where the directors were operating the relation of sexuality and authority. Perhaps, Friedländer argued, the analysis of this relation could be helpful, in some way, to deepen our problematization of essence of the Nazi phenomenon as an absolute will to power.

At the end of *Reflections*, the author seems to maintain that the Nazi anomaly, considered in the context of knowledge and power, reveals in its phantasm a general transgression of human being. The problem of hiding the moment of transgression is so important because both rationalist

[24] As the historian confessed in *When memory comes* after watching the film: "The dazzling rise, the titanic energy, the Luciferian fall: it is all there. As for the Jews, a few words in passing, no more. An inconsequential shadow on this grandiose tableau. For anyone who does not know the facts, the power and the glory still remain, followed by a veritable vengeance of the gods." (S. Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, p. 146.)

[25] S. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, p. 63.

approaches, liberalism and Marxism, which prevail in the modern discourse are ignoring it:

> The liberal creed and the Marxist creed imply assurance of salvation by the cumulative acquisition of knowledge and power. Neither liberalism nor Marxism responds to man's archaic fear of the transgression of some limits of knowledge and power (you shall not eat the fruit…), thus hiding what remains fundamental temptation: the aspiration for total power, which, by definition, is the supreme transgression, the ultimate challenge, the superhuman combat that can be settled only by death.[26]

Both theoretical approaches in their sources established the rationality of the subject; therefore, they can make promise of salvation to his followers, and the purity of conscience to researchers. Thus, the transgression of human existence requires a reinterpretation of the Western idea of rationality in its history, especially in the context of crisis of ideology. There is also a need for inclusion of psychological problems in considerations after Enlightenment, which could be analyzed by a certain category of "counter-rationality." In this sense, for instance, the historian's critical approach resulted in skeptical commentaries about the simple scheme of the instrumental rationality in understanding the evil of the Nazi transgression.

At least, despite the redemptive features of the idea of rationality, Friedländer does not reject the concept of understanding as a whole, but shows the limits of German tradition of *Verstehen* in the face of Nazi anomaly. The potentiality of understanding categories was deconstructed by the historian in questions, as in the case of that one addressed to Marin Broszat: "Where are the limits of *Verstehen*?".[27] Inability to identify these limits causes the vagueness of interpretation which, in many cases, is devoid of concreteness, like Broszat's hope to abolish the problem of the victims' "mythical memory" by a "younger generation of German historians more focused on rational understanding."[28] Indeed, this specific and concrete content is the orgiastic nature of the Nazi transgression: "it is the expression of a *Rausch*, the feeling of an almost superhuman enterprise."[29] For Friedlander, paradigmatic example of such a superhuman undertaking is the objective of Himmler's speech in Poznań on October 4, 1943. In this case, traditional categories of understanding the Nazi anomaly should be extended to a certain apocalyptic dimension of "political religion."[30]

[26] Ibid., p. 136.

[27] S. Friedländer, M. Broszat, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

[28] Ibid., p. 91.

[29] Ibid., p. 109.

[30] Ibid.

Testing the limits of representation

In the context of arising dilemmas in studying and writing the history of the Third Reich and the "Final Solution," in 1989 Saul Friedländer organized a conference titled "Probing the Limits of Representation." Its general objective was to define the limits and possibilities of representations of the Nazi transgression and the Holocaust. As Friedländer suggested, current representations do "not do justice to the *contradictory demands* raised by evocation of this past."[31] Thus, because imposing contradiction should not abolish the overall moral meaning, the problem of representations should be directed to the ethical issues: the "monstrous manifestation of human 'potentialities' would not be forgotten or repressed."[32] Therefore, the historian agreed with Habermas, especially when he stated that "[s]ome claim to 'truth' appears particularly imperative," and added: "It suggests, in other words, that there are limits to representation *which should not be but can easily be transgressed*."[33]

The historian in his comments about the form and content of representations has openly referred to Adorno's thesis, expressing a deep unease toward the possibility of aesthetic discourse after the Holocaust[34]. Perhaps, his considerations revealed for the historian the redemptive spirit of modern esthetics, so that he has generally agreed with the philosopher that every positive statement should be submitted to particular critique, whose aim is, as he put it in Maurice Blanchot's words, "to keep watch over absent meaning."[35]

However, the work on historical notion has illustrated how difficult it is to maintain this meaning, because, since Lyotard, the postmodern discourse has used Kant's scheme of reflective power of judgment, which

[31] S. Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, p. 6.

[32] Ibid., p. 3.

[33] Ibid.

[34] In *Reflections of Nazism* this problem of aesthetic possibilities of representation was expressed in simple questions: "Is there a work of art, a work of literature, for example, that has been able, in a decisive way, to confront these events?" (S. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, p. 93). The problem of proper forms of representation will recur in many other questions. For example, whether the Nazi excess "allows for *any kind* of narrative, or does it foreclose certain narrative modalities? Does it perhaps escape the grasp of a plausible narrative altogether?" (S. Friedländer, *The "Final Solution": On the Unease in Historical Interpretation*", in: *Lesson and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World*, ed. P. Hayes, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1991, p. 33).

[35] S. Friedländer, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1993, p. 134.

renders any mutual reference of aesthetic and practical content impossible. Yet this negativity of postmodern imagination, which was transferred to the historical discussion, indicates some indelible moment of the inexpressible. Moreover, this moment is now hampered by the form of discourse which is rather trying to "utilize" (Habermas) the Nazi excess. For example, *Historikerstreit* allows us to better understand the issue during the discussion between intentionalists and functionalists, thus revealing two sides of the exorcising work of imagination[36]. Nevertheless, since the claim of the decentralization of Auschwitz, the stake of the debate was often the fate of the Nazis, while the Jews were thrown beyond the margin of the discourse into the sphere of the inexpressible.

Thus, these constraints in making representations depend on the form of discourse and the content of memory, which may constitute an unfair disparity of voices in a discussion on the past: "the perpetrator's voice carries the full force of aesthetical enticement; the victims carry only the horror and the pity."[37] Later, this difference showed itself with a great strength in the movies as the phenomenon of stealing the Other's memory:

> The producer and director Edgar Reitz complained that NBC's *Holocaust* had stolen German memory. In response, he produced *Heimat*, which may well have stolen the victims' memory. Then came Lanzmann's *Shoah*. *Heimat* may eventually eclipse *Shoah*, *Shoah* may be too unbearable to neutralize *Heimat*. Almost of necessity, the aesthetic enticement to remember the *Heimat* will prevail over the ethical imperative to remember the *Shoah*.[38]

The historian argued that the division of historical labor was conditioned by division of memory, therefore, in this way historical discourse was destabilized by the many images disorientating the power of judgment.

So, in order to determine the practical and aesthetic content, representations should be considered by "working them through" in the sense of critique at the cultural and ideological domain, where is constituted the relation of images and their meaning. For example, the historian has showed the political context in Syberberg's exorcism of the Nazi phenomenon:

> Syberberg launches his attack on the West from a neoconservative, neoromantic angle. For him, Hitler is the expression of the most secret wishes

[36] As LaCapra wrote, the dispute between intentionalists and functionalist makes an impression of "crazed sacrificialism and scapegoating." (D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore—London 2001, p. 165.)

[37] S. Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, p. 16.

[38] S. Friedländer, *Trauma, Transference, and "Working Through" in Writing the History of Shoah*, p. 47.

> of Western civilization; he is the product of perverted Romanticism, but essentially of the poisoning of the romantic soul by modern rationalism and industrial civilization. Hitler the filmmaker, the stage designer who chose the world as his image, appears in some of Syberberg's utterances, as no more criminal than the producers of the ultimate poison of the Western mind: the Hollywood culture industry. For Syberberg, Nazism is the product and the murderous multiplicator of the all- destructive impulse of modernity.[39]

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the disorientation in cinematographic representations is present not only on the Right, but also on the Left. The best example is the Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). Friedländer wrote that this film in its presentation mode shows the exclusion of straight, documentary realism, but the use of some sort of *allusive of distanced realism*. Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leave the unsayable unsaid.[40] D. Rupnow, who acknowledged Friedländer's position, describes the context of domestication of horror in images of Lanzmann's film, in consequence of which presentation the French auditory "is still focused on the gas chambers as quasi-sacred spaces and a pictureless 'Shoah'."[41]

It seems that the dominance of the cinematographic imagination in the film has coerced the attention towards representations formed in the spatial forms of outer experience.[42] In this sense, films have changed the focus from chronological possibilities of narrative to spectacularization of history, where historical theme is situated in one-sidedness way. For example, by comparing Syberberg's and Lanzmann's films, Anton Kaes showed how in the former's representation the focus is directed toward the infinite intoxication (*Rausch*), while in the latter's it is directed to the particular absence, which was felt in the investigation into the infrastructure of the Nazi murder industry.[43] The constantly developing problematization of event at the

[39] Ibid., p. 17.

[40] Ibid.

[41] D. Rupnow, *The Invicible Crime: Nazi Politics of Memory and Postwar Representation of the Holocaust*, [in:] D. Stone, The Holocaust and Historical Methodology, Berghahn Books, New York 2012, p. 72.

[42] Friedländer's admiration for Bergson, whose name is returning on the pages of *When Memory Comes*, may be an interpretive hint for understanding the dangers of schematization in the film. In this way, the structure of cinematographic representations would determine the form of postmodern humanities, which enclose any continuity within the film frames (analogically to the cinematographic physics which Bergson criticized).

[43] A. Kaes, *Holocaust and the End of History: Postmodern Historiography in Cinema*, [in:] S. Friedländer, Probing the Limits of Representation, p. 221.

limits has deepened the mutual relationship of historical and philosophical self-knowledge. The philosophical idea the historian demanded was the idea of the whole, totality. Therefore, he admitted in Aristotelean sense that "this event [at the limits—M.S.], perceived in its totality, may signify more than the sum of its components." Of course, Friedländer knows how difficult it is to mention the idea of the whole in postmodern discourse, since Lyotard has imposed anathema upon it. Moreover, the mutual positioning of perpetrators and victims together, especially with the claim to reach the total representation, was considered as the "logic" of perpetrators, whose aim was to rule the Otherness. Therefore, the historian reverses the logic of the sense of the whole, which then actually originates from a single detail, revealing the return of the need for a total representation.

Ultimately, metahistorical discussion about the Nazi dual unexpressed excess of perpetrators and victims indicated that positive representations of the event at the limits could not find the proper form in art, especially in films. Instead, Friedländer asserted the primacy of historical writing, in the Lang's sense of chronicle, aiming at the total, master-narrative: the Book of Destruction. But the historian was also very aware how extremely difficult is the duty of establishing a pertinent representation of "the horror behind the words."[44] It seems that this was the premise for the historian's claim: "For further analysis we would need a new category equivalent to Kant's category of the *sublime*, but specifically meant to capture inexpressible horror."[45] However, are we able to produce such a category of analysis in the present form of discourse? Or, could possibly even a temptation to obtain such a category disorient historical thinking?

Integrated and integrative history

In his work *An Integrated History of the Holocaust*, the historian wrote that a stable narrative of the Nazi excess and the fate of the Jews requires analytic categories to be abolished (which are present e.g. in Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*) and replaced by "time units."[46] The horizon of time has become a fundamental element of historical narrative directed toward immediate life in the historical world. According to Dan Diner,

[44] S. Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, p. 1.

[45] S. Friedländer, *Memory, history, and the extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1993, p. 115.

[46] S. Friedländer, *An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Some Methodological Challenges*, [in:] D. Stone, The Holocaust and Historical Methodology, p. 186.

"describing that period in keeping with a rhythm, despite all the drama inherent in that era, corresponded to the beat and tempo of sequences."[47] In this way, narrative gained its theoretical content, while the "events and sequences of events are woven into a meaningful narrative structure in which the modes of narrative themselves acquire an effect analogous to the ordering power of theory."[48]

Through this perspective, historicization had blocked the possibility of such interpretations which impose external meanings (such as modernization of the German state, identity of the German nation, or emancipation of women). Thus, the nature of historicization within the continuity of linear time in the objective world of life in the Third Reich requires constant temporal deconstruction by the disruptive function of subjective "victims' voices," expressing their own experience of the Nazi transgression:

> The victims' testimonies cannot enlighten us about the internal dynamics of Nazi persecution and exterminations, but they put Nazi behavior in its full perspective; they describe the face to face encounter of the perpetrators with the victims during the persecutions, the deportations, and the killing. But, mainly, the victims' testimonies are our only source for the history of their own path of destruction. They evoke, in their own chaotic way, the depth of their terror, despair, apathetic resignation—and total incomprehension[49].

Therefore, integrated and integrative history opens the dual context in the modern objective historiography, namely the idea of the chronicle and the ancient category of eyewitness story. In this way the narrative content is included within an interpretative framework, where the imagination of the perpetrators, victims and bystanders meet together. Nonetheless, the ultimate purpose of narrative work is not historical explanation or understanding, but revealing the sense of time, which in the case of the Nazis and the Jews is determined in the development of two forms of their self-knowledge: the first one is the apocalyptic myth of "redemptive anti-Semitism"[50] with all its glimmering meanings (naturalistic, anti-

[47] D. Diner, *Kaleidoscopic Writing: On Saul Friedländer's The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*, [in:] Ch. Wiese, P. Betts, Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedlander and the Future of Holocaust Studies, Continuum, New York — London 2010, p. 57.

[48] Ibid., p. 59.

[49] S. Friedländer, *History, Memory and the Historian. Dilemmas and Responsibilities*, "New German Critique," 2000, No. 80, p. 15.

[50] See e.g. S. Friedländer, *Ideology and Extermination. The Immediate Origins of the Final Solution*, [in:] The Holocaust and Justice, ed., R. Smelser, Northwestern University Press, Evanston—Illinois 2003.

naturalistic and supernatural), and the second are the Jewish voices in all their diversity.

In his comprehensive presentation the author tried to reveal the sense of time in the Nazi era in order to show the absent meaning of victims' experiences, whose historical interpretation does not domesticate but keeps them in the inner essence of their differentiation. According to this purpose, the project of integrated and integrative history of Nazi Germany and the fate of the Jews in the years 1933–1945 is divided into two volumes: *The Years of Persecution*[51] and *The Years of Extermination*.[52] The volumes covered the years 1933–1939 and 1939–1945, respectively. In some sense, these two periods are determined by the difference between life and death, because both volumes are dealing with the interpretation and representation of progressive transgression in the Nazi activity: in the first one it is the persecution of the Jews, and in the second it is the terror and extermination, and ultimately the *Shoah*.

In *The Years of Persecution* the historian describes the life of the Jews in the Third Reich through the specific impression he calls a "sense of estrangement:"

> That sense of estrangement seems to me to reflect the perception of the hapless victims of the regime, at least during the thirties, of a reality both absurd and ominous, of a world altogether grotesque and chilling under the veneer of an even more chilling normality.[53]

The sense of progressive estrangement in 1933–1939 reveals the fate of the Jews expelled from the German living space within the law, which since 1933 has been permanently purified by its abstract authority:

> the 1933 laws pointed to the exclusion of the Jews from all key areas of this utopian vision: the state structure itself (the Civil Service Law), the biological health of the national community (the physicians' law), the social fabric of the community (the disbarring of Jewish lawyers), culture (the laws regarding schools, universities, the press, the cultural professions), and, finally, the sacred earth (the farm law).[54]

At the level of law, this sense of estrangement reaches its climax in the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws about the purity of blood in 1935. This

[51] S. Friedländer, *The Years of Persecution: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933–1939*, Vol. 1, HarperCollins (digital edition), New York 1997.

[52] S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*, Vol. 2, HarperCollins (digital edition), New York 2007.

[53] S. Friedländer, *The Years of Persecution*, p. 5.

[54] Ibid., p. 33.

ultimate moment in the development of alienation was called by the author, in Montesquieu's terms, as the "spirit of laws."

Thus, there have been "objectively" established in the public sphere certain phantasms which allowed the Nazis to present "the Jewish question" both within the country and abroad. It seems that this spatial placement of "the Jewish question" allowed, within the public discourse, to create an image of "the Jew." The author devoted much of his attention to the film in the Nazi era to approximate the Nazi passion in the enchantment of reality in movies, which have to visualize the significance of "the Jewish question" for the German and international auditorium. In this way, Western public opinion was fed by the propaganda movies that juxtaposed the atrocious fate of the Jews in the ghettos with the images of livable conditions of their life in the "representative" concentration camps. This juxtaposition of images triggered the "appreciation" and "understanding" for the Nazi "problem," the best example of which is the affirmative response of the Red Cross delegation.

Since the war, as Friedländer stated, the myth of redemptive anti-Semitism has radically deepened the conflict between Nazi Germany and the Jews in various crucial situations. In the years 1939–1945, "the Jewish question" has no longer been a purely "technical" problem to be solved in the living space, because during the ongoing war the Nazis, in particular the S.S., have been convinced about the apocalyptic dimension of its ultimate resolution in time. Hence, the historian wrote that in the face of recognizing this "necessity" and of its real objectivization, the mass murder of the Jews triggered a "sense of disbelief:"[55]

> That an important number of personalities belonging to Germany's intellectual or spiritual elites did not take a public stand against the murder of the Jews is easily understood. That not even a few prominent voices were publicly heard is puzzling; that not a single personality of major stature was ready to speak out remains, as some other aspects of this history, a continuous source of disbelief.[56]

In the introduction to *The Years of Extermination*, the historian tried to approximate this sense of disbelief by describing the photograph which he did not include in the book[57]. The picture was taken on September 18, 1942,

[55] The historian borrowed the term from G. H. Hartmann, who referred to the problem of disbelief in the case of Primo Levi's testimony (See S. Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, p. 19; see. G. H. Hartmann, *The Book of Destruction*, [in:] ibid., pp. 318-334).

[56] S. Friedländer, *An Integrated History of the Holocaust*, pp. 188-189.

[57] It seems that Friedländer makes similar use of photos as Didi-Huberman, namely, he shows a complicated process which is the occurrence of photograph understood as a

at the University of Amsterdam on the occasion of Jew Moffie's graduation, who was the last Jew to receive the university diploma in the Third Reich. At the outset, the historian described what was normal and usual on the photograph, to reveal then a meaning which did not immediately draw attention to itself, "the star sewed to his [Moffie's—M.S.] coat, with its repulsive inscription, and to its meaning: The new MD, like all the carriers of this sign, was to be wiped off the face of the earth."[58] The author argues that the picture should not have occurred, because since September 8, 1942 the Jewish students had been expelled from universities in Holland. His interpretation of symbols appearing on the photograph and its possible emergence in the time horizon (determined by the academic calendar) reveal the background for understanding the university's response to the ongoing events. According to the historian, the occurrence of the photograph at the end of the week, which had overlapped with the semester break, suggests that "the photograph documents an act of defiance."[59] Therefore, the author tries to make it clear that, through understanding of its possible emergence, the whole horrific but also unbelievable context of extermination of the Jews was opened up.

However, the sense of disbelief appears not only in the factual situation of the Jews in the Third Reich. During the war, the Nazi transgression spread to cross the German borders, because behind them the "lethal enemy" was hiding, having found there a hideaway for himself: in the world of liberal democracy, as well as in Communist Russia. In the face of war excess, this sense of disbelief was triggered in the context of possible use of nuclear weapons by the Nazis. Jewish physicists such as Albert Einstein (mentioned in one footnote in *The Years of Extermination*) understood this peculiar relation between knowledge and power, and the possibility of fatal consequences of having a nuclear arsenal. For Einstein, this orientation in the Nazis activity, even before the war, was a moment which forced him to change his earlier pacifism. In his letter addressed to incredulous American politicians, the Jewish physicist (*Relativitätsjude*, as the Nazis called him) tried to visualize the possible consequences (not only for Europe, but for

becoming of being a testimony (*cf.* G. Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2004). For both of them, the photograph is a testimony of resistance, which leaves a hint of the criminal activities of the Nazis. However, according to Friedländer, it seems that the direct presence of photograph and its image could, paradoxically, shift our attention and disturb the historical thinking. I guess that the purpose for ekphrasis of photography was to abolish or limit the possibility of eschatological thinking, which could be opened up by the immediacy of photograph.

[58] S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*., p. xxvi.

[59] Ibid., p. x.

the whole world) of the prohibition of uranium in Germany in 1939, which was mined after the occupation of Bohemia.[60] Therefore, by his witnessing, Einstein indicated the glimmering absent meaning as a real possibility of total knowledge and power in the orgiastic transgression, unfolding in the apocalyptic space-time.

Conclusion

Saul Friedländer's reflection opens up on some experience of the negativity (frissons, uneasiness, disbelief) which does not allow, in rational sense, to explain and/or understand the event at the limits. The anomaly was most apparent in the case of film, where the form of representation was determined by a certain narrative closure. Despite the abolition of the captivating power of cinematographic images in evoking victims' voices in the narrative, the anomaly still remains; however, it is understood as their horrific Other.

Notwithstanding, the task of describing the Nazi transgression and the fate of the Jews is a non-domesticating historical narrative, revealing the sense of time. It shines through the descriptions in a sense of estrangement and disbelief as being in the world of the Nazi era, with its hidden and sinister essence. Yet it should not be considered "from its catastrophic end only,"[61] so the result must be integrated with the development of possibilities and direct encounters of perpetrators and victims representing their "humanness and freedom."[62] Thus, integrated and integrative representation implies the need of inclusion of victims' response,[63] understood as an absolute but unequal fight to the death.

These possibilities in historical interpretation and representation exist only in dialectical method, because it could describe an infinite tension between the real world and a possible world in their mutual becoming.[64] In

[60] Ibid., pp. 684-685n.

[61] S. Friedländer, M. Broszat, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

[62] S. Friedländer, *The Years of Exterminations*, pp. xxi-xxii.

[63] LaCapra argued that the victims' voices could be understood as an objective response: "Response included the various modes of survival that could, in these specific circumstances, be seen as acts of resistance." (D. LaCapra, *Historical and Literary Approaches to the "Final Solution": Saul Friedländer and Jonathan Littell*, "History and Theory," 2011, Vol. 50, No. 1, p. 96.)

[64] At the margins of Friedländer's considerations, F. van Gelder wrote about the dialectics understood as a project of historical method: "In trying to puzzle out the relationship between shared convictions, selfreflections, past events and contemporary

the first case, we could refer to the description of experience and its conditions in the real historical world; for example, when the historian mentioned in the first sentence of *When memory comes*: "I was born in Prague at the worst possible moment, four months before Hitler came to power."[65] Whereas in *The Years of Extermination* Friedländer presented the Nazi transgression in its possibility by the description of counterfactual situation: "If Hitler alone were to acquire nuclear weapons, Nazi domination of the world would become a nightmarish possibility."[66] Indeed, this focus on possibilities was "working through" the succession of facts in the context of self-assured modern society.[67] I think that this inclusion of the unimaginable possibilities of the exterminators into the integrated and integrative history writing was necessary, in order to open the context of unwritten history of the Nazi transgression. Perhaps this ultimate possibility, apart describing the real course of extermination, is the unwritten part of the historian's master narrative.[68]

fears about the future, we cannot, it seems, do without theories of the kind once called 'dialectical'" (F. van Gelder, *Psychoanalysis and the Holocaust—or: Subject and Object brought upto date*, http://amsterdam-adorno.net/fvg1995_Pa_holocaust.html (available: 17.03.2014)). However, according to van Gelder, this dialectical method requires its re-historicization, re-philosophication and re-politicization.

[65] S. Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, p. 3.

[66] S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, p. 685.

[67] Cf. W. Kansteiner, *Success, Truth, and Modernism in Holocaust Historiography: Reading Saul Friedländer Thirty-Five Years after the Publication of* Metahistory, "History and Theory," 2009, Vol. 48, No. 2.

[68] In this way, in his comments on Friedländer's *opus magnum*, Dan Diner is focused on the factual level of "oppressive immediacy" and development of extermination in its three periods, therefore, he omits the question of the Nazi transgression with its most horrific but possible meaning (C.f. D. Diner, *Kaleidoscopic Writing*, [in:], Ch. Wiese, P. Betts, Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination, p. 57).

Historical Narrative, Movies and Meaning. The problem of Interpretation and Representation in Saul Friedländer's Historiography

By Maciej Sawicki

Abstract

Saul Friedlander's reflection on studying and writing history referred in many aspects to understanding the difference and relation between historical worlds, both real and possible ones. He tried to preserve the meanings of these worlds in his writings while trying to situate them in a horizon of the whole. In this overall context, the problem of interpretation of the Nazi transgression becomes particularly important in the case of representation of historical world in movies, because for a historian their form seems to transform—in a more or less subtle way—the meaning of limits between fiction and reality. Insensitivity towards these limits is particularly dangerous for historical studies, because the structure of cinematographic images confuses historical thinking (especially by the illusion of immediacy) and might, in consequence, dominate our space of discourse on the past.

The aim of this article is to present Saul Friedländer's considerations on the work of historical imagination in the context of dilemmas of making knowledge and meaning. In the first part, I sketched the development of the historian's methodological awareness, as he discovers a strange meaning of the Nazi anomaly, especially in movies. The second part is devoted to the diagnosis of historical self-knowledge toward the representations of the Nazi epoch, as well as their relationship to the cinematographic imagination and postmodernism. In the third part, I will try to show how the historian resolved the problem of representing the anomaly in his project of "integrated and integrative" history.

Keywords: historical narrative, movie, meaning, understanding, representation.