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**REPREZENTAREA HOLOCAUSTULUI ÎN FILM  
THE REPRESENTATION OF THE HOLOCAUST  
ON FILM**

**- SUMMARY -**

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*Keywords: Holocaust; representation; misrepresentation; history; memory; trauma; film; working-through; acting-out*

The Holocaust has come to occupy a significant place in the historiography of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the body of works dedicated to analysing the various facets of this grand tragedy growing every year. Without making a history of Holocaust historiography – since this falls outside the scope of the present thesis –, I need only mention here a few of its landmarks: Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews* (whose first edition was published in 1961, after having been rejected for almost six years by many prestigious US publishing houses),<sup>1</sup> Yehuda Bauer’s 1978 *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*,<sup>2</sup> Steven Katz’s 1994 *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, Michael Marrus’s *The Holocaust in History* (1987)<sup>3</sup> or Dan Stone’s *The Historiography of the Holocaust*,<sup>4</sup> these being, of course, but a few of the countless number of works published on this subject. One of the main ideas present in many of these works refers to the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust as an historical event and to the characteristics that make it a particular case of genocide, a subject that this thesis also explores in its first chapter.

Since the object of the present paper is not the historiography of the Holocaust, but the representation of the Holocaust, I would like to start by pointing out that this particular aspect of Holocaust studies, although it does not necessarily have a long history behind it, has been one of great interest for scholars, occasionally stirring significant controversies. Perhaps the entire debate surrounding the representation of the Holocaust in art in general was born out of Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum about writing poetry after Auschwitz; ever since, the works dealing with this subject have been divided into two broad categories: those that argue in favour of the possibility of representing the Holocaust in art (primarily literature and film) and those that emphasise the sheer impossibility of representing it adequately, or representing it at all. I should point out here that the body of works falling in the former category is far greater than those belonging to the latter and that even the most fervent supporters of the “irrepresentability” of the Holocaust (such as Elie Wiesel or Claude Lanzmann, for example) have created works of art that represent it. The vast majority of books and studies dedicated to the representation

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<sup>1</sup> Complete references for the works that will be cited throughout the content of this paper will be provided at their first citation.

<sup>2</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

of the Holocaust have been published in the United States beginning with the 1990s; one needs to mention here Saul Friedlander's *Probing the Limits of Representation* (a collective volume of essays edited by the American professor), Dominick LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust* and *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, Berel Lang's *Holocaust Representation. Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics* or Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism*. Many of these highly influential books take into consideration and attempt to analyse the question of the limits of representation when it comes to the Holocaust (an aspect that arises from the very particular nature of the Holocaust as an historical event), arguing in favour of the idea that such limits do or should exist. Despite the relatively large number of works dealing with this topic, consensus on what a definitive theoretical model of Holocaust representation should look like is still far from emerging, although all these analyses bring forth viable models and ideas.

The present paper starts out from the premise that it is possible to represent the Holocaust in art – and that, moreover, it is necessary to do so in order to preserve the memory of the historical event by means other than historical sources. Many recent studies have shown that film, television and the internet have replaced scholarly books and studies as the primary sources of historical knowledge. This being the case, the issue of the representation of the Holocaust on film becomes more and more significant, as the number of films dealing with the topic tends to grow with the passing years. One viable explanation for this may be the fact that the meaning of the Holocaust has acquired new dimensions in recent years: if, for almost four decades after the end of World War II, the term “Holocaust” was used to designate the extermination of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, in more recent times, this name has started to be applied to a wide range of events, from military conflicts to environmental disasters, thus losing a part of its specificity and being used more and more as a universal symbol of evil. Given the almost universal appeal of film as a mass medium, this can be an important tool in preserving both the memory and the historical specificity of the Holocaust, provided that, of course, films themselves do not present these two aspects in a distorted manner.

The representation of the Holocaust on film constitutes a relatively narrow field of research within the broader spectrum of Holocaust studies; again, the vast majority of the works focusing on this topic have been published by American publishing houses beginning with the 1980s: the first ever serious study of Holocaust cinema was published by Annette Insdorf in 1983. Her pioneering effort has been continued by other scholars,

among whom Ilan Avisar, Judith Doneson, Omer Bartov or Lawrence Baron. Especially after 1993 (the release year of the global phenomenon known as *Schindler's List*), the interest in this topic has been renewed, several other books being published, some of them dealing with analyses of particular films (such as *Schindler's List* or *Shoah*), while some others (like Joshua Hirsch's *Afterimage*) take a closer look at the representation of trauma in Holocaust cinema. Certainly, the number of scholarly studies and film reviews is significantly greater than the number of books, many such studies being published in prestigious journals such as *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* or *Screen*. While the representation of the Holocaust on film is a relatively well-known topic in Western universities, nothing has been published so far in Romania, except for a few film reviews in popular journals and magazines; none of the important books on the subject have been translated into Romanian yet. Nevertheless, Romania has produced (or co-produced) a few Holocaust films that have gained international recognition: first of all, Radu Mihaileanu's *Train of Life*, winner of several important international awards, Costa Gavras's *Amen* (partially filmed in Romania and using some Romanian actors) and the most recent one, Radu Gabrea's *Gruber's Journey*, released in 2009.

This being the current state of research on this topic in Romania, my choice of subject may seem rather unusual; indeed, I was first introduced to this issue during a course on *Researching Europe* that I took while studying at Durham University in the United Kingdom. It was there that I first saw fragments of *Shoah* and *Night and Fog* and I realised the impact of such images: certainly, that was not the first time I was seeing images of atrocity or hearing about the extermination of European Jews, but the reaction I felt was similar to the one described by Susan Sontag upon seeing photographs of Nazi death camps published in an American magazine;<sup>5</sup> after the class debate on the subject of “appropriate representations of the Holocaust on film” was over, I spent a good deal of time thinking about this subject. Later, as I started researching it, I realised that a discussion on “the most appropriate filmographic representation of the Holocaust” might be doomed to failure, because such appreciations are, after all, to a great extent, a matter of personal taste and perception, and began wondering instead what other models of analysis would make sense of Holocaust cinema and the way it represents the extermination of the Jewish population of Europe during the Second World War. The overwhelming majority of the bibliography on film and the Holocaust avoids the question

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<sup>5</sup> See *infra*, p. 89.

of “the most appropriate” or “least appropriate” type of representation and focuses instead on analysing how particular films use various narrative and aesthetic strategies to depict this event, certainly, with the odd dissenting voice that argues that comedies, for example, would be “inappropriate” means of representation. However, I would argue that the question of the limits of representation might be applied (and, in some cases, it should be applied) to the content of the film rather to the formal means of aesthetic expression (i.e., genre) through which representation is achieved; in other words, why should a drama be a more appropriate genre for representing the Holocaust than comedy? Therefore, the present paper does not try to make a ‘hierarchy of genres’ from the point of view of their appropriateness; instead, it reads particular films through a different framework of analysis.

This framework of analysis is mentioned in few of the works dealing with the issue of Holocaust representation in general and Holocaust representation on film in particular; in fact, it is discussed at length in Dominick LaCapra’s *Representing the Holocaust* and, to a lesser extent, in *History and Memory after Auschwitz* and *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, while other books, such as Saul Friedlander’s *Probing the Limits of Representation*, make reference to it. In the literature of Holocaust cinema, there are two significant works that incorporate it: Caroline Picart and David Frank’s *Frames of Evil* and Joshua Hirsch’s *Afterimage*. This particular framework of analysis is based on the premise that Holocaust cinema is, first and foremost, a traumatic cinema: a body of films whose underlying motif is the representation of trauma, and more precisely, the way in which the victims of the Holocaust relate to the trauma they were subject to. In *Representing the Holocaust*, LaCapra discusses this issue through the lens of Freud’s analysis of trauma and the modes he describes for dealing with it: acting-out, by which the subject cannot escape the grip of the past and compulsively and melancholically repeats the trauma in the present in various forms (not necessarily in the exact same way in which it was experienced) and working-through, by which the subject is ultimately released from the compulsion of repeating his or her trauma after a process of mourning and coming to terms with the pain of the past. My intention was that of applying this model of analysis to the trauma depicted in the various Holocaust films analysed as case studies in order to see what is the dominant mode of its representation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more details about the framework of analysis and the selection of the case studies, see *infra*, pp. 85-87 and 127-135.

The paper is divided into three main chapters, each including various sections and sub-sections; thus, the first chapter “The Holocaust and the (Im)possibility of Representation”, deals with the unprecedented dimension of the Holocaust as an historical event, as well as with the way in which the term “Holocaust” has undergone a change in meaning, emerging as a symbol of universal evil. I also include here an analysis of the relationship between history and memory as it is presented in the works of some well-known scholars such as Pierre Nora, Dominick LaCapra, Lawrence Langer, Berel Lang or Hayden White. The second section of the first chapter focuses on the broad issue of Holocaust representation, reviewing the works and theories of Alan Mintz, Alvin Rosenfeld, Sidra Ezrahi, Berel Lang, Dominick LaCapra, Michael Rothberg, Ernst Van Alphen or Michael Bernard-Donals; this section also includes a historical presentation of the main issues concerning Holocaust denial, seen as an evident case of Holocaust misrepresentation.

The second chapter, “The Shape of Memories to Come: Film and the Holocaust” begins with a discussion on the continued relevance that the Holocaust has in our time, also taking into consideration the impact of film as a mass medium on the transmission of historical memory. The second section of this chapter presents a thematic and historical overview of Holocaust films beginning with the immediate post-war years to the present day, briefly discussing some of the most significant cinematic achievements of the past sixty years, as well as the changes in the genres and narrative strategies employed.

Chapter three, “Case Studies: The Traumatic Holocaust Cinema”, takes up the largest part of the paper and takes an in-depth look at sixteen films whose analysis is based on the framework outlined in the first two chapters. The selection of case studies was done taking into consideration diversity as the main criterion: I wanted to include both American and European films, both documentaries and feature films, both comedies and dramas or docu-dramas. Many of these films have already been discussed in the previous bibliography of the subject, but from different approaches and points of view; a few of them are mentioned only in a limited number of sources (*Apt Pupil* or *Amen*, for example), and only one – *Shoah* – is discussed in a study by Dominick LaCapra from the same perspective as the one I have adopted in the present paper.

The conclusion will highlight a few observations derived from the analysis of the films and will argue that, for the future, film will remain one of the most significant vehicles – if not the most significant – by which the memory of the Holocaust as an historical event will be perceived by the coming generations, especially in the light of the

fact that the number of Holocaust survivors, these live “vessels of memory”, diminishes with each passing year. The paper also includes two appendices, the first being a list of Holocaust films ordered chronologically, the second an annotated filmography including brief analyses of a selection of ninety films which I consider representative for the category of what is known as Holocaust film.

The large body of reference material necessary for writing the present paper (a very small proportion of which is available in Romanian libraries) has been gathered through various visits to the libraries of Columbia University and New York University in the United States, the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem and the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt, Germany (whose film archive was especially valuable to me during my research).

The multitude of historiographical, literary and artistic works, the countless articles and references to the Holocaust that one is bound to hear almost every day, the numerous Holocaust museums and memorials all point in one direction: they reinforce the relevance that the Holocaust, as an historical event, has for our age – and, most likely, the importance it will continue to have for the future generations. The Holocaust is no longer, if it ever was, just an event pertaining to Jewish history, literature or memory. The Holocaust belongs to world history, to world literature, to world memory, it has attained the status of a symbol of evil, suffering, and intolerance. As Yehuda Bauer stated in the introductory chapter of his compelling work, *Rethinking the Holocaust*,

The Holocaust has become a symbol of evil in what is inaccurately known as Western civilisation, and the awareness of that symbol seems to be spreading all over the world [...] As the awareness of the universal implications of the Holocaust spreads, the Holocaust becomes – again – two things: a specifically Jewish tragedy and therefore a universal problem of the first magnitude.<sup>7</sup>

However, the fact that the Holocaust has entered world public conscience may not always be a blessing: the more works are produced on a topic, the more references are made to it in the most various contexts, the greater the danger is that these references might end up at some point obscuring the true nature of the event and distorting its meaning and significance.

The fact that the Holocaust still matters enough for people to write about it and discuss it or to mention it as often as they do, more than fifty years after the event, tells us something about its relevance and impact. Nevertheless, I would argue that it is not so important that ordinary people and scholars should talk and write about it: the way they

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<sup>7</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, pp. x and xiii.



write about it, the way they depict it, the way they represent it is what truly counts. The representation of the Holocaust is the element that still generates and will continue to generate controversy. The way in which the Holocaust is represented in historiography, literature, film, and ultimately, in the public conscience, will be decisive for its future relevance and for the way it will be remembered long after any Holocaust survivors - who represent a first-hand source of information in this case - have passed away.

Recent history has witnessed the development of a long and not always productive dispute regarding the history and the memory of the Holocaust – more precisely, the way and the form in which the memory of this historical event should be transmitted. Representations of the Holocaust are essentially based on both – and since this paper deals primarily with Holocaust representations in film (film being understood here as a form of art), a series of questions arise, questions that need to be addressed in relation to history and memory.

One of the underlying assumptions this paper will take up is the fact the Holocaust representations, be them in literature, film or any other artistic field need to take into account the unique nature of the Holocaust as a historical event, which presupposes the existence of a deep-seated trauma whose expression should always include a moral dimension. While it is true that Holocaust is, unfortunately, but one among many traumatic historical events, one should not forget the fact that it has a set of unique characteristics which cannot be overlooked<sup>8</sup> - therefore, the question of Holocaust representation should be addressed against the background delimited by these two (not necessarily competing) aspects. The difficulty of dealing with them has been acknowledged by a number of historians and theorists, among whom Dominick LaCapra, who began his work, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, with a series of questions that the present paper will also attempt at answering:

What aspects of the past should be remembered and how should they be remembered? Are there phenomena whose traumatic nature blocks understanding and disrupts memory while producing belated effects that have an impact on attempts to represent or otherwise address the past? What, in general, is the significance of trauma in history? Do some events present moral and representational issues even for groups not directly involved in them? [...] Does art itself have a special responsibility with respect to traumatic events that remain themselves invested with value and emotion?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See the following sections for a detailed discussion on the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a historical event.

<sup>9</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 1.

The overview of different models of Holocaust representation, of various arguments concerning its depiction in historical writings and in art, as well as the discussion about Holocaust denial as example of misrepresentation, begs a number of questions that I will try to address with the aim of formulating a model of analysis to serve as basis for the examination of the Holocaust films considered as case studies in the context of the present paper.

Are there some limits when it comes to Holocaust representation, as Saul Friedlander argues? To my mind, the answer to this question is yes: Holocaust denial and films that fall into the infamous category of “Holocaust pornography” are examples of how these limits are transgressed.

Are history and ethics two such limits, as Berel Lang tries to demonstrate? Yes, to a significant extent, but not in absolute terms: fictional representations of the Holocaust in art (when speaking of Holocaust art in this context, I am primarily referring to literature and film, not visual arts, unless expressly specified) do have a certain amount of freedom when depicting past events; they may depart slightly from what is known as historical fact documented by evidence, they may employ counterfactuality or present characters and events that do not occur anywhere in the wealth of historical evidence, without necessarily misrepresenting the Holocaust. The answer to the question of the ethical limits of Holocaust representations is probably one of the most intricate: judging one representation or another as inappropriate from an ethical viewpoint implies a great deal of subjectivity and value judgements. Holocaust art should be responsible to the kind of life and death it seeks to portray; artistic choices that blatantly depart from this demand may well run the risk of misrepresenting the event and turning it into something it was not.

Perhaps the most overwhelming dimension of the Holocaust is trauma, something that lies deeply within all those who experienced the event. The traumatic dimension of the Holocaust, perhaps even more so than anything else, is likely to create empathy and identification in anyone who reads survivor memoirs or watches films inspired by their plight, the traumatic nature of the Holocaust being transmitted by means of memory rather than history. My argument is that artistic representations of the Holocaust – especially films, since film is such an accessible means and has the potential of reaching mass audiences – should first of all take into consideration how to depict this traumatic dimension. Starting from Freud’s application of the concepts of working-through and acting-out in psychoanalysis, refined by Dominick LaCapra’s observations about texts

that work through or act out trauma,<sup>10</sup> I would like to suggest a framework of analysis for Holocaust films whose focal point is the way in which the cinematic representations considered as case studies incorporate the traumatic dimension of the Holocaust either as a case of working-through or as one of acting-out. Such a model of analysis based on the representation of trauma would be, to my mind, a move beyond debates on what the ‘most appropriate’ type of representation would be or on whether historical representations are more valuable than artistic ones, debates that, more often than not, raise more questions than they manage to address.

The analysis of the traumatic dimension on film will certainly take into consideration the limits of or demands on representation discussed above, integrating them into a more complete model whose aim is to reveal how the memory of Holocaust trauma is preserved and rendered through film to viewers who did not experience the event and perhaps will not be exposed to any other Holocaust text except the films they see. It is in this sense that, I argue, Holocaust films work in two ways: to establish a transference relation with the audience (being, to some extent, vehicles for vicariously experiencing trauma) and to preserve the memory of the historical event for future generations.

The contribution of scholarly books and studies about the Holocaust to revealing the historical truth about this event is undisputed. The impact of the Holocaust literature, be it in the form of diaries and memoirs, fictional novels and short stories, or plays and poems cannot be overlooked by anyone who has even a remote interest in the event. However, the continued relevance of the Holocaust can no longer be maintained only by means of literature (scholarly or otherwise), of the written word. Tragic as it may be, the decline in book reading is now a general phenomenon, affecting primarily the large mass of ordinary people who matter most when it comes to statistics measuring the popularity or the relevance of a particular event. It is the general public who make up the largest part of a society. The same statistics show that television accounts for the main source of information of these ordinary people, whereas the decline in book reading is small only among intellectuals (university students, academics, scholars, etc.).

Ever since its invention in 1895, the cinema has attracted millions and millions of people “to the movies”, many of these people citing historical films as their only source of knowledge about any given historical event.

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion on the meaning of the two concepts and their application, see *supra*, pp. 51-56.

This being the case, the Holocaust, ranked among the most important events of world history, not just of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, could not have been left out of the broad spectrum of film topics and representations. The popular and commercial success of many films dealing with various aspects of the Holocaust (here, *Schindler's List* and *Life Is Beautiful* are perhaps the first examples that come to mind) has proved that, on the one hand, the Holocaust as an historical event is still relevant to contemporary audiences, and on the other hand, that the representations of the Holocaust on film can take the most diverse (and even surprising) forms – including, in the two examples mentioned, the biopic and the comedy.

The most important works discussing the representation of the Holocaust on film were published beginning with the 1980s, including Annette Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows*,<sup>11</sup> Ilan Avisar's *Screening the Holocaust*<sup>12</sup> and Judith Doneson's *The Holocaust in American Film*.<sup>13</sup> Two of them (Insdorf's and Doneson's) have been re-edited at the end of the 1990s to include analyses of more recent films. One of the latest works published on this topic is Lawrence Baron's *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*, in 2005.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout my research, I initially tried to see whether the question “is there an appropriate way to represent the Holocaust on film?” could find an answer. A definite answer to such a question would inevitably result in making a hierarchy of all the different film genres<sup>15</sup> and narratives used to represent the Holocaust – and I believe that any such hierarchy would be, to a greater or lesser extent, flawed, because the very object of research is not susceptible of being ranked in the first place. Trying to rank in a “hierarchy of appropriateness” the various means and ways of representing the Holocaust on film would be tantamount to trying to rank suffering and deciding, for example, that a person who was shot suffered more (or less) than a person who had a limb amputated. Last but certainly not least, when addressing such a question, one needs to consider also the specific nature of the medium used for representation.

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<sup>11</sup> Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows, Film and the Holocaust*, New York: Vintage Books, 1983; 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New York, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present. The Changing Focus of the Contemporary Holocaust Cinema*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> “Genre” is a term “used to describe the way in which groups of narrative conventions (involving plot, character, and even location and set design) become organized into recognizable types of narrative entertainment” (Ibidem, p. 13).

Marshall McLuhan's statement, "the message is the medium"<sup>16</sup> should not be ignored, especially when it comes to the analysis of the visual. People react more strongly and immediately to something they see than to something they hear or read, because the human mind, more often than not, operates according to the principle that "seeing is believing". The visual image has a more direct and immediate impact than any other form of image, as it imprints a certain pre-fabricated kind of representation on the peoples' minds and perceptions. The visual representation of a particular event will almost always linger in peoples' imagination more than an image they may have formed with the mind's eye after reading a detailed description of the very same event they see represented by means of still or moving photographs.<sup>17</sup> However, two of the pitfalls associated with this primacy of the visual over the written consist in that fact that, firstly, the visual image almost inevitably embodies one particular individual's perception of a certain event (be him a photographer or a film director), which is presented as reality and, secondly, this "manipulated reality" may quite often pass for "real reality" and remain as such for vast numbers of people who relate to it as if it were authentic. Thus, any visual representation of an event in one form or another implies a certain amount of "real reality" or authenticity attached to it.

This aspect is particularly important when one discusses the cinematic representations of a certain historical event – in this case, the Holocaust. While the experience of reading a Holocaust diary or memoir is an "unmediated" one, in the sense that there is no intermediary between the writer and the reader, the act of seeing a Holocaust film is perhaps the epitome of "mediated experience", because the viewer does not see historical reality as it was, or even as it was experienced by the real (or fictional) characters in the film, but sees the film as a whole as it was imagined and shaped by the visions of the director, the scriptwriter and the actors. A film is, basically, one man's (or one team of men's) vision of a certain event, which is then presented to the filmgoer as having a seemingly "real" character. This seemingly real character is reinforced especially if the film director includes different elements that are specific to a certain historical

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<sup>16</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1962.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Sontag, for example, describes her first encounter with photographs depicting Nazi atrocities as a kind of "negative epiphany": "Nothing I have seen – in photographs or real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about...when I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying". (*On Photography*, New York: Dell, 1979, pp. 19-20).

period or to the nature of a specific event, by making use of the wide range of possibilities provided by filmmaking, such as costumes, set design, makeup, music, montage, special visual effects, computer-generated imagery, etc. The writer of literature, unlike the film director, has only a limited array of means at his disposal, the evocative power of his words also depending on the willingness on the part of the reader to make an effort to delve into the literary work. Seeing a film, however, requires a far smaller effort, since visual images have the intrinsic quality of “speaking for themselves”.

Referring to the difficulty of words to portray the reality of Holocaust, Primo Levi wrote,

just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say ‘hunger’, we say ‘tiredness’, ‘fear’, ‘pain’, we say ‘winter’ and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born, and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one’s body nothing but weakness, hunger and the knowledge of the end drawing near.<sup>18</sup>

Commenting on Levi’s statement in the light of cinema’s primacy over literature, Ilan Avisar argues,

Primo Levi touches on the most fundamental issue when he questions the qualifications of the basic means of literary expression, namely words and language, to adequately portray the authentic horrors. Theoretically cinema has an advantage over literature in the quest for realism. Compared with words, the photographic image is a better means of objective representation and has a stronger immediate and sensuous impact on the viewer. The extraordinary power of revealing and arresting photos rests on a complex mental process whereby the visual perception is associated with the knowledge that what is seen is the result of objective recording, and hence the content of the picture is immediately recognized as a piece of authentic actuality. This recognition is at the heart of the fascination with the image, especially when the picture exhibits extreme human situations.<sup>19</sup>

These points of view echo a fairly long debate in Holocaust studies, namely that the event asks for the creation of a “new language” by means of which it could be represented; however, since innovations in the field are rather unlikely at this point, Holocaust representations need to use the means provided by the “old languages” or genres.

The impact of the visual image can also be explained through that “power of resurrection”<sup>20</sup> that the photograph possesses, considering that a photograph of a past event somehow bridges that gap between that event and the present and confirms that

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<sup>18</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf, New York: Collier Books, 1961, p. 112, quoted in Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, loc. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. ibidem, loc. cit.

what we see in front of our eyes actually existed in that very form at a given moment in history.

One should also keep in mind that one of the primary functions of cinema, of the moving image, apart from that of entertaining, is achieving that state of “catharsis” that the ancient Greeks were seeking to obtain through their theatrical performances. Their plays used devices which, compared to the modern possibilities of cinema, appear rudimentary, but, as long as the desired effect was achieved, the play was considered successful, and why not, an appropriate means of portrayal. Similarly, the modern-day filmmakers seek to induce the same state of catharsis, which guarantees the commercial success of a certain film. However, a successful film about the Holocaust is not always similar with a Holocaust film which is true to the nature of the event it seeks to depict.

Without necessarily raising the thorny issue of appropriateness in the filmographic representations of the Holocaust, one should take into account the fact that the nature of the Holocaust as an event that is both unique and unprecedented could be affected by certain types of representations and could even be significantly trivialized and minimized for the future generations, given the impact of visual image in the contemporary society. Therefore, as Berel Lang argued, “certain limits based on a combination of historical and ethical constraints impinge on representations or images of the Holocaust, as a matter of both fact and right.”<sup>21</sup> That is why the model of analysis put forward in the present paper, as I have argued in the last section of the previous chapter, will be one that seeks to examine how the traumatic dimension is represented in various Holocaust films either as something that can be overcome by means of working-through or as something that is endlessly repeated and replayed as acting-out.

Alison Landsberg, referring to the development of mass media technologies in the last few years, argues that

the mass cultural technologies that enable the production and dissemination of prosthetic memories are incredibly powerful; rather than disdain and turn our backs on these technologies; we must instead recognize their power and political potential.<sup>22</sup>

The interpretation given to “prosthetic memories” describes them as “those [memories] experienced vicariously through their re-enactment in cinema or other mass media”.<sup>23</sup>

Presenting serious themes as a form of entertainment may rob them of their social impact,

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<sup>21</sup> Lang, *Holocaust Representation*. p. ix.

<sup>22</sup> Alison Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture”, in Paul Grange (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 158, quoted in Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, *loc. cit.*

but if done well, this may also make the historical and current injustices endured by diverse groups accessible to audiences anywhere and might be instrumental in generating empathy and articulating an ethical relation to the other.

Alison Landsberg's thesis is that modernity enables and renders necessary a new form of public cultural memory which she terms "prosthetic memory":<sup>24</sup>

[this new form of memory] emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum. In the process that I am describing, the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live.<sup>25</sup>

Landsberg's argument that films are instrumental in the emergence of this new form of memory is a valid one, especially in the light of the fact that memory, unlike history, implies a subjective, affective relation to the past which ensures a higher degree of empathy with past events and characters. The author explains the use of the term "prosthetic memories" through the fact that these are not natural, not the product of lived experience, but are derived from a mediated one, such as the act of seeing a film; like an artificial limb, or a prosthesis, they often occur as a result of a traumatic event. Mass media, in this case, (and film in particular) act as a transference space in the Freudian sense, enabling people to gain a sense of events through which they did not live.<sup>26</sup>

Landsberg's claim that one of the most important roles of prosthetic memories is that of facilitating ethical thinking, in keeping with my argument about the necessary ethical dimension of Holocaust representations:

Representing the Holocaust is about making the Holocaust concrete and thinkable. It is about finding ways to "burn in" memories so that they might become meaningful locally, so that they can become the grounds for political engagement in the present and the future. [...] Part of the political potential of prosthetic memory is its ability to enable ethical thinking. Thinking ethically means thinking beyond the immediacy of one's own wants and desires. Prosthetic memory teaches ethical thinking by fostering empathy.<sup>27</sup>

The representation of the Holocaust on film faces some of the same difficulties that one finds in the case of the literary representations of the Holocaust, namely, how does one show what is "unimaginable", what sometimes transgresses even the limits of fiction? What sort of cinematic language is both appropriate and able to record the

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<sup>24</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memories: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 111.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 139, 149.



extreme atrocity and tragedy of the Holocaust? Elie Wiesel, who also supported the view that the Holocaust is unrepresentable in literature,<sup>28</sup> wonders:

does there exist another way, another language, to say what is unsayable? The image perhaps? Can it be more accessible, more malleable, more expressive than the word? Can I admit it? I am as wary of one as of the other. Even more of the image. Of the filmed image, of course. One does not imagine the unimaginable. And in particular, one does not show it on screen.<sup>29</sup>

However, many people do not share Wiesel's view, one of them being Lawrence Baron himself. Baron also disagrees with those scholars who support a one-dimensional representation of the Holocaust in films, which focuses on the "utmost realism and reverence."<sup>30</sup> Such a unilateral representation of the Holocaust would not be able to include the many dimensions and nuances of this complex tragedy, and, in the long run, would even lead to the obliteration of its relevance, since it could not adapt to the changing demands of both the viewers and the times.

Lawrence Langer, in contrast to Wiesel, argues that not only is representation of the Holocaust possible, but it is only art that "can lead the uninitiated imagination from the familiar realm of man's fate to the icy atmosphere of the deathcamps".<sup>31</sup> According to Langer, Holocaust art is a "necessary art", even more so as the distance between the event and the present increases: since historical documents in themselves do little to shed light on why "a civilised country in the midst of the twentieth century coolly decided to murder all of Europe's Jews", art needs to mediate for present and future generations the search for answers to such questions.<sup>32</sup>

The "appropriateness" or "inappropriateness" of the different types of filmographic representations cannot be analysed through the same filter one might use in the analysis of appropriate or inappropriate literary representations, simply because the two mediums, the written word and the film, are not similar. Whereas the film has some clear advantages over the written word as far as the directness and the immediacy of its impact are concerned, it also has some drawbacks, the first of them being the fact that a film, unlike a book, has a limited duration. Consequently, filmmakers try to acknowledge and deal with this constraint by focusing on the presentation and representation of far

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<sup>28</sup> "There is no such thing as Holocaust literature – there cannot be. Auschwitz negates all literature as it negates all theories and doctrines; to lock it into a philosophy is to restrict it. To substitute words, any words for it is to distort it. A Holocaust literature? The very term is a contradiction". (Elie Wiesel quoted in Insdorf, op. cit., p. xi).

<sup>29</sup> Elie Wiesel quoted in Baron, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. viii.

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 174-175.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, loc. cit.

fewer aspects than writers, which may sometimes give the impression that films lack in perspective and gloss over significant details much too easily, creating a somewhat simplified and biased view of the historical events and of the characters that participate in them. When it comes to film, I find it much more relevant to analyse the impact that a particular type of representation or cinematic genre has on the filmgoer, especially in terms of the potential of creating a sense of identification and empathy between the viewer and characters; that is one of the reasons why I chose a model of analysis based on trauma, something that contemporary viewers can understand and empathise with.

Having considered that, I would like to briefly draw on Annette Insdorf's consideration regarding the challenges that filmmakers face when representing the Holocaust, and on the function that cinematography as a form of art fulfils.

Insdorf rightfully remarks that

filmmakers and film critics confronting the Holocaust face a basic task – finding an appropriate language for that which is mute or defies visualization. How do we lead a camera or pen to penetrate history and create art, as opposed to merely recording events? What are the formal as well as moral responsibilities if we are to understand and communicate the complexities of the Holocaust through its filmic representations?<sup>33</sup>

While Insdorf acknowledges that some film genres and narrative strategies succeed better than others in manifesting “artistic as well as moral integrity”,<sup>34</sup> she also notes “[the trivialization of the Holocaust by using realism and melodramatic conventions] is a lesser evil than having the memory of the Shoah disappear from cultural attention”.<sup>35</sup>

Insdorf also recognizes that one of the most common dangers associated with the cinematic representations of the Holocaust is the exploitation of the event by those having access to the media:

the commercial exigencies of film make it a dubious form for communicating the truth of World War II, given box-office dependence on sex, violence, a simple plot, easy laughs and so on. Nevertheless, it is primarily through motion pictures that the mass audience knows – and will continue to learn – about the Nazi era and its victims.<sup>36</sup>

In this respect, argues Insdorf (and, I daresay, in connection with the idea of catharsis discussed earlier),<sup>37</sup> the cinema fulfils a role defined by Siegfried Kracauer through a parallel with the ancient myth of the Gorgon Medusa,

whose face, with its huge teeth and protruding tongue, was so horrible that the sheer sight of it turned men and beasts into stone. When Athena instigated

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<sup>33</sup> Insdorf, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, *loc. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> Annette Insdorf quoted in Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Insdorf, *op. cit.*, p. xv.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *supra*, p. 3.

Perseus to slay the monster, she therefore warned him never to look at the face itself, but only at its mirror reflection in the polished shield she had given him. Following her advice, Perseus cut off Medusa's head with the sickle which Hermes had contributed to his equipment. The moral of the myth is, of course, that we do not, and cannot, see actual horrors because they paralyse us with blinding fear; and that we shall know what they look like only by watching images of them which reproduce their true appearance...the reflection of happenings which would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life. The film screen is Athena's polished shield.<sup>38</sup>

It is precisely because of the incomprehensible and extraordinary nature of the Holocaust that a need for representation and comprehension rather than for mere "presentation" of the events arises.

The form that the "reflection" of the Holocaust takes in various films differs also with regard to the aesthetic vision of the director, for one must not forget that cinema is, after all, a form of art. Despite criticism (even on the part of filmmakers such as the French director Claude Lanzmann, author of the documentary *Shoah*) that no form of art (cinema least of all) could represent the horrors of the Holocaust, and that, moreover, finding a form of expression that could elicit aesthetic reactions from the viewers would be tantamount to blasphemy, one can easily see how aestheticised some cinematic representations of the Holocaust are, especially those found in the Italian and French cinemas. Such works, by highly-acclaimed directors such as Vittorio de Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Alain Resnais, François Truffaut or Luchino Visconti, far from trivializing or distorting the nature of the event, increase the value of their works as artistic and historical documents.

The issue of Holocaust representation on film is closely connected to the issue of memory, as Ilan Avisar argues, as the process of filmic representation and the act of memory bear a close resemblance to each other:

in both, reality elements are inscribed as vivid pictures; stock narratives are repeated and recycled; and past experiences are translated into two-dimensional, arresting images and gripping dramatic actions. [...] Both cinema and memory engage in framing the past, editing the past and reifying the past in pictures and narratives.<sup>39</sup>

In this respect, one of the main challenges a filmmaker may face is that of producing an image whose purpose is not that of making the viewer see what the witness saw, but whose effect upon the viewer could be likened to the effect on the witness, the act of "secondary witnessing". Transforming the spectator into a witness would then inherently

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<sup>38</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 305, quoted in Insdorf, op. cit., p. xv.

<sup>39</sup> Ilan Avisar, "Holocaust Movies and the Politics of Collective Memory" in Alvin H. Rosenfeld (ed.), *Thinking about the Holocaust after Half a Century*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

involve a moral dimension as well: looking is not simply a passive act of seeing, it also involves to some degree taking pleasure in seeing – so how is one to derive pleasure from looking at atrocity while at the same time paying respect to the memory of the dead, as Holocaust film is, after all and to a great extent, a representation of the “presence of the absence”, the absence of the millions of dead? How can Holocaust film function in such a way as not to transform viewers into bystanders? The playwright Richard Skloot tries to address this delicate issue by identifying some aims that a filmmaker or a playwright who seeks to represent the Holocaust should keep in mind:

(1) to pay homage to the victims, if not as individuals then as a group; (2) to educate audiences to the facts of history; (3) to produce an emotional response to those facts; (4) to raise certain moral questions for audiences to discuss and reflect upon; (5) to draw a lesson from the events re-created.<sup>40</sup>

As can easily be seen from these preliminary considerations, the representation of the Holocaust in cinema, far from being a matter of simply categorising films into “appropriate”, “inappropriate”, “good”, “bad”, “tasteful”, “tasteless”, “authentic” or “inauthentic”, raises issues of ethics, limits, demands that require careful reflection and critical judgment. What the present section of the paper tries to do is, first of all, see how the representation of the Holocaust on film evolved throughout the decades in terms of themes, genres and means of approach and, second of all, how certain films considered as case studies, analysed through the lens of the trauma model outlined earlier, as well as in the light of the above considerations, ultimately function as a kind of “memory sites” (to borrow Nora’s term) where the memory and the relevance of the Holocaust live on for the future.

Anton Kaes’s book title, *The Return of History as Film*, is an expression of a phenomenon that is overwhelmingly present in contemporary society, i.e. the way in which mass-mediated images imprint on our minds images of certain historical events, thus forming well-established criteria for comparison to any descriptions one might find in history books, for example. One might wonder, how many of us can think about the Russian Revolution without some scene from Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* springing to mind? Or how many can read about the Vietnam War without recalling frames from Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*? As Kaes points out, film has come to replace both historical experience *and* historical imagination, to shape historical consciousness, becoming, in a

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Skloot, *Theatre of the Holocaust*, vol. 1, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983, p. 14. In addition to these, Skloot puts forward a sixth aim that he discusses in relation to plays about the Holocaust, but which could just as well be applied to films: “the ways in which playwrights can achieve these specific objectives through new approaches to their subject at a time when cultural and political understandings have become more or less monolithic or universal than a generations ago”. (p. 9).

sense, a kind of “memory bank” in which images of innumerable historical events are stored and recalled in an instant; in this respect, Kaes argues, film is transfigured into a redemption of memory, as it preserves details that memory, given its fallibility and subjectivity, might not.<sup>41</sup>

If we were to regard film truly as a redemption of memory, the legitimate question that follows would be “memory of what”? In the case of the Holocaust, as I have argued in the previous sections of this work, the memory of trauma should take central place in its cinematic representations so that Holocaust films should all represent the traumatic dimension of the historical event in one form or another. The study of the representation of trauma has been approached, more often than not, in terms of binary oppositions: melancholia/mourning, acting-out/working-through, historically irresponsible/historically responsible, and realism/modernism.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, Freud’s work in the field of studying and dealing with trauma has been seminal for all the subsequent attempts to theorise the issue; in his two well-known articles, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” and “Mourning and Melancholia”, the Austrian psychoanalyst draws a clear distinction between the healthy process of mourning by which the subject gradually works through the loss of the object (regardless of its nature) by distancing itself from the object and remembering the loss an event occurring outside the self and the pathological state of melancholia in which the subject refuses to let go of the lost object, instead compulsively acting out the loss and thus repeating (rather than remembering) the trauma, which means that the loss is constantly enacted as a self-torment.<sup>43</sup> Although Freud himself suggested that these two processes, mourning and melancholia, and their associated actions, working-through and acting-out, should be seen in a relationship of interdependence, subsequent studies on the issue of the representation of trauma have tended to regard them as opposite instead of complementary elements: virtually all modernist representations of trauma are regarded as favouring working-through, while the realist representations predominantly feature unhealthy melancholia expressed through acting-out.<sup>44</sup> My argument, along the lines of the one expressed by Freud, is that there can hardly be any clear-cut distinctions between acting-out and working-through; they cannot be bluntly separated from one another: any working-through implies some degree of acting-out and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, pp. 193-199.

<sup>42</sup> See Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation. Historical Trauma, National Cinema and the Modern Horror Film*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, chapter 1.

<sup>43</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, op. cit., 1976, pp. 3041-3053.

<sup>44</sup> Lowenstein, op. cit., p. 17.

the other way around. By applying this frame of analysis to films about the Holocaust, I seek to uncover which is the *dominant* mode of representation in each of the case studies taken into consideration, as well as the means through which either working-through or acting-out is achieved.

Starting from the premise that Holocaust trauma does not fall within the boundaries of the unrepresentable, that it can be communicated through representation, means acknowledging the fact that trauma can thus reach a far larger mass of people than those in its immediate point of impact. As Lowenstein argues, it is somewhat counterproductive to label representation as “healthy” or “unhealthy,” “to divide it into ‘realist’ or ‘modernist’ categories, or to judge it solely as ‘historically accurate’ or ‘historically inaccurate’”, because that would mean robbing it “of the power to negotiate meaning and feeling beyond such labels.”<sup>45</sup>

The meaning of the Holocaust for those who did not experience the event would fall, as Joshua Hirsch argues, under the category of “posttraumatic cinema”,<sup>46</sup> “a cinema that not only represents traumatic historical events, but also attempt to embody and reproduce the trauma for the spectator through its form of narration”.<sup>47</sup> His interpretation of Holocaust memory results in the imperative that all Western societies that lived through the event or were affected by it must encounter the Holocaust in the “deepest possible sense, to admit the Holocaust into their historical consciousness, whatever that encounter or admission might mean”,<sup>48</sup> nevertheless, this assertion may appear rather problematic, because there is no guarantee that it will not result in Holocaust denial or in the misappropriation of the term for political purposes, for instance. What prompted Hirsch to argue in favour of such a point is precisely the idea that trauma and representation are inextricably bound: trauma implies a crisis of representation in which the mind becomes incapable of translating the aftermath of an event into a coherent mental representation. Those who did not directly experience a traumatic event – in this particular case, the Holocaust – are exposed to a kind of second-hand, vicarious trauma through viewing films that represent the event.<sup>49</sup> The posttraumatic cinema would then

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<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Although when discussing Hirsch’s arguments I will employ his concept of “posttraumatic cinema”, his observations apply very well to what I have referred to so far as “traumatic cinema” of the Holocaust, as I regard this concept in the same manner he does, namely as an attempt to represent a terrible event to people who did not experience it in a direct manner.

<sup>47</sup> Hirsch, op. cit., p. xi.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, loc. cit.

<sup>49</sup> Hirsch uses examples from psychiatric studies to prove that subjects who viewed films that were considered traumatic (involving explicit violence, torture and degradation) experienced significant levels of

represent a compromise between the shock of the initial traumatic encounter experienced by the eyewitness and the attempt to make sense of that trauma through post-factum representation; this representation takes the form of a traumatic afterimage, “an image that formally repeats the shock of the original encounter with atrocity – both the original eyewitnessing of the atrocities themselves, and the subsequent cinematic encounter with the images of atrocity.”<sup>50</sup> Hirsch convincingly argues that a film need not necessarily include atrocity footage in order to belong to the category of posttraumatic cinema: *Shoah* does not include any historical footage, while Istvan Szabo’s *Father* makes reference to the Holocaust only in the plot background; therefore, the inclusion in the category of posttraumatic cinema is not done taking into consideration the presence of atrocity footage, but rather the attempt to discover a form, a mode of representation that reproduces for the spectator the effect that an image would have had on the eyewitness.

As such, the posttraumatic cinema reverses the conventions of the classical realist historical film as far as tense (that regulates the relations between the temporality of the film and the temporality of the historical events represented), mood (that regulates the point of view of the film on the events represented) and voice (that regulates the film’s own act of narration) are concerned.<sup>51</sup> Thus, in posttraumatic memory, the linear chronology collapses, as time is experience as being fragmented and unmasterable; the memory of trauma is not experienced in the same way as normal memories, from the point of view of the subject in the present, but rather as an invasion of the past into the present, which causes the subject to self-consciously attempt to make sense of something that appears utterly senseless to him. Posttraumatic cinema should then attempt to incorporate these shortcomings of memory into a narrative that makes sense for an audience who is not familiar with these kinds of shortcomings.

In Hirsch’s view, the first successful attempt in the field of posttraumatic cinema is Alain Resnais’ 1955 documentary, *Night and Fog*: “[it] constitutes a key link between the genre of Holocaust films, the development of post-World War II modernist film, and the appearance of post-traumatic cinema.”<sup>52</sup> However, Hirsch is aware of the fact that not all

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posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to these studies, persons who had prolonged contact with traumatized subjects came to experience that trauma themselves. The question that Hirsch asks in this context is whether a single expose to a traumatic film – an experience that he considers quite similar to eyewitnessing – can result in vicarious trauma; to exemplify, Hirsch makes reference to the “negative epiphany” described by Susan Sontag upon seeing photographs from Bergen-Belsen. (Ibidem, pp. 16-17).

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980, pp. 26-32.

<sup>52</sup> Hirsch, op. cit., p. 24.

modernist cinema exhibits posttraumatic features and that not all Holocaust films strive to elicit a posttraumatic reaction.

One significant question that a number of film and Holocaust theorists have attempted to address is whether Holocaust films constitute a genre in themselves, whether we can speak about “Holocaust film” in the same manner in which we speak about musicals, westerns or film noir. Any film genre is governed by a set of stylistic and thematic conventions that are easily recognizable by the public and elicit certain expectations from them – when one goes to see a horror film, for example, one expects to experience fear and anxiety, whereas seeing a comedy means feeling uplifted and amused. But do these rules apply to Holocaust film as well?

Annette Insdorf and Barry Langford are two of the critics who argue that the Holocaust can be considered a genre in itself;<sup>53</sup> however, they are forced to admit that defining the genre of Holocaust film is a nearly impossible task:

Films like *Schindler's List*, *Sophie's Choice*, *Triumph of the Spirit* and *Jakob the Liar* are unashamedly and indeed doubly generic: they both trade in existing generic templates like *film noir*, the war movie and soap opera for their initial appeal, and in themselves help trace out the parameters of a still-nugatory new genre.<sup>54</sup>

Even if we were to formulate a few stylistic and thematic conventions of the Holocaust genre, these would most certainly apply only to a certain number of Holocaust film: for example, if we admit that images of trains, chimney smoke and barbed wire fences would represent one such convention,<sup>55</sup> how do we accommodate films like Truffaut's *The Last Metro* or Visconti's *The Damned*, where we have no such images? If images of gruesome torture and killing were the norm, how do we categorise a film like *Shoah*, where we only see witnesses speaking about the past and former places of atrocity? It is the difficulty of answering such questions that makes me argue against the idea of considering Holocaust films a genre in themselves; instead, they borrow conventions from various other genres.

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<sup>53</sup> See, in this respect, Annette Insdorf, op. cit., 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, pp. 245-249 and Barry Langford, *Film Genre. Hollywood and Beyond*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 262-267.

<sup>54</sup> Langford, op. cit., p. 265-266.

<sup>55</sup> Barry Langford admits the existents of a set of “recognisable representational conventions and narrative templates” in Holocaust film, which have been used long before *Schindler's List* in various types of historical drama: “Thus, the problematic notion of ‘the Holocaust film’ as a genre raises ethical questions alongside critical ones. [...] the opening sequence of *X-Men* (2000) [a very popular SF action movie featuring a series of characters endowed with extraordinary powers who fight to save the world] which depicts the future ‘Magneto’ as a child deportee, using his destructive telepathic powers for the first time as he is separated from his parents at the gates of Auschwitz suggests strongly that the Holocaust has become increasingly available as a point of reference for genre films well outside the categories of ‘serious’ historical drama”. (Ibidem, pp. 264-265).



Perhaps no other genre has influenced the aesthetics of Holocaust film more than the horror. Defining this genre has not been free of controversy;<sup>56</sup> in Noel Carroll's opinion, a film cannot be considered horror unless it features a supernatural monster and elicits a reaction of fear or deep anxiety on the part of the audience. The origins of horror in literature lie in the mid-eighteenth century Gothic novel – such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; in film, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century German expressionist tradition (Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) are the most notable examples in this respect) and the “shock” techniques used by the representative of Soviet montage, Sergei Eisenstein (the climax of the famous Odessa steps scene in *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) shows a Cossack officer slicing open the eyeball of an elderly female victim), pioneered the aesthetics of the horror film. Hollywood horror films began appearing on a wide scale in the mid-1920s; a historical overview shows that the number of American horror films significantly surpasses that of European or Asian movies. As such, it should not be surprising that the main conventions of the horror genre were defined by these American productions.

The connection between the aesthetics of the horror and the Holocaust films has only been explored in a handful of books and articles; among these, perhaps the most notable contribution is *Frames of Evil* by Caroline S. Picart and David A. Frank.<sup>57</sup> Their analysis focuses on two major case studies, *Schindler's List* and *Apt Pupil* in order to demonstrate how Holocaust film, in its depiction of “heroes” and “villains” adopts many of the aspects of classic horror film. The two authors draw on Dominick LaCapra's theories of historical trauma<sup>58</sup> and on the way in which he uses the Freudian notions of “working-through” and “acting-out”, in order to explain the formation and function of “frames of remembrance” (frames designed to explain the historical trauma of the

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<sup>56</sup> The American philosopher and film critic Noel Carroll, in his widely-acclaimed work, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York and London: Routledge, 1990, put forward a definition of the genre that has stirred numerous controversies: he claims that a work should be included in the category of horror if it attempts to arouse fear and disgust in the audience as the result of the present of a monster, a menacing creature that is not supposed to exist according to the laws of science. (pp. 12-29). However, as many films traditionally considered horror movies show, the presence of a supernatural, fearsome monster is not a necessary condition: the “monster” in *Psycho* appears to be quite an ordinary human being and the serial killer in “slasher” films is equally human.

<sup>57</sup> Caroline Joan (Kay) S. Picart, David A. Frank, *Frames of Evil. The Holocaust as Horror in American Film*, Carbondale, ILL.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006.

<sup>58</sup> See part 1 of the present thesis for a detailed discussion of LaCapra.

Holocaust) in the American Holocaust film;<sup>59</sup> their preliminary conclusion is that many American Holocaust films tend to “act out” the traumatic event through repetitive cinematic representations. Picart and Frank support LaCapra’s claim that the response to Holocaust trauma in the case of secondary witnesses falls into two categories:

The first is narrative redemption, in which the audience vicariously suffers with the victims to achieve a transcendent affirmation or self or group identity. Such is the case with *Schindler’s List* and its Zionist coda. The second is excessive or unqualified objectification, a response that seeks a definitive answer to what happened during the Holocaust.<sup>60</sup>

These cinematic representations are often constructed according to the conventions of two main horror frames: the classic and the conflicted, or “postmodern”, horror frame. The two authors argue that the “classic” horror frame includes the narrative patterns characteristic of the Hollywood horror films of the 1930s and 1940s, which present evil in the form of a monster represented as something that is radically different from human beings (such as Dracula, King Kong, Godzilla, Frankenstein), something that exists outside the sphere of the normal or the scientifically explicable,<sup>61</sup> in other words, the boundary between good and evil, normal and monster is clearly drawn. The origin of the classic horror frame is to be found in a pre-existent Gothic narrative mode – primarily the supernatural Gothic. Within this mode of representation, the horrific episodes are clearly separated from the “normal time”, being usually introduced by means of ominous music or other cues.

On the other hand, the conflicted, or “postmodern”, horror frame is a more recent mode of representation: the monster-as-human seems to have emerged in public consciousness after the Eichmann trial; we are no longer dealing with a fearsome beast, but with a very “banal” villain. As Picart and Frank argue, “in contrast to the classic horror movie, which establishes and develops the innately evil monster, some movies weave evil into normality, refusing to recognize an unassailable gap between the two spheres”.<sup>62</sup> In the conflicted horror frame, we no longer have a clear-cut separation between “normal time and space” and “evil time and space”, the boundary between the two is effaced and the viewer is left with the task of trying to resolve the ambiguity of weaving together the normal and the abnormal; in this case, the feelings of fear and

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<sup>59</sup> Picart, Frank, op. cit., pp. 3-5. With the exception of Joshua Hirsch, the two film theorists are the only ones using such a psychoanalytical frame of analysis to investigate the representation of the Holocaust on film.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> “The classic horror frame features a transgressive, metaphysically evil monster and a clearly demarcated time and space for horror, all clearly distinct from normalcy”. (Ibidem, p. 5).

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

anxiety emerge from the intrusion of the “other” into the normal space. Consequently, if the classic horror ends with the demise of the monster, the conflicted horror cannot offer such a closure: the definitive exorcism of the monster is not possible, since he is the enemy from within, not the enemy from without. The epitome of the conflicted horror frame is Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960).

The interference between horror and Holocaust films appears natural, if one thinks about the persistence of Nazi imagery in various horror films, as Steffen Hanke argues:

Making a horror film that utilizes the Third Reich as a source of cinematic thrills would appear to many a dubious proposition. This seems paradoxical because horror film is the one cinematic genre devoted primarily to the sensation with which most regard the Holocaust. But horrors on the screen and horrors in history occur on different ontological levels, a difference that translates into profound ethical differences.<sup>63</sup>

Picart and Frank also find a parallel for the classic vs. conflicted horror frame in Holocaust cinema in the famous intentional vs. structuralist debate in Holocaust historiography: according to them, the former would employ a classic horror frame of representation, while the latter expresses itself by means of the conflicted horror frame. In Holocaust film, the best example of classic horror would be *Schindler’s List*, while Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* is *the* cinematic representation of the conflicted horror frame.<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, I would argue that such clear-cut distinctions between the two horror frames applied to the analysis of Holocaust films are rather hard to support; the authors themselves concede that a “frame that blends the two orientations best captures the historical reality of the Holocaust’s horror”.<sup>65</sup> In fact, the two types of frames should not be regarded as antonyms or binaries any more than “working-through” and “acting-out” should; as LaCapra points out, both are part of the psychological processes of healing trauma.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Steffen Hantke, “Horror Film and the Historical Uncanny: the New Germany in Stefan Ruzowitzky’s *Anatomie*”, *College Literature* 31 (2004): 117-43.

<sup>64</sup> Picart, Frank, op. cit., p. 17. In their concluding chapter, the two authors argue that “the relationship between Holocaust studies and horror film is one of critical importance. Until Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, traditional representations and explanations of the Holocaust assumed the gratuitous evil of the Nazis, bracketing them as monsters responsible for the Holocaust. Until the advent of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, horror films were distinguished by their monsters that made ‘ontological breaks’ with the norm”. (p. 127). Nevertheless, as the authors do not fail to point out, the classic horror frame, rather than the conflicted one, is dominant in Holocaust films.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>66</sup> “[...] especially in an ethical sense, working through does not mean avoidance, harmonisation, simply forgetting the past or submerging oneself in the present. It means coming to terms with trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past”. (LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, p. 244).

The frame of analysis formulated by the two authors, although critically refined, cannot be universally applied to all Holocaust films for a number of reasons. First of all, as I have argued earlier, the majority of horror films are American-produced and, as such, the conventions embodied in their mode of representation were primarily devised for the understanding of an American audience. Consequently, the frames of horror contained in such films are much more susceptible of being applied to American Holocaust films.<sup>67</sup> There are in fact few European Holocaust films which can be convincingly interpreted through either the classic or the conflicted horror frames – the exceptions in this respect would be, to my mind, *The Night Porter*, *The Damned* and perhaps *Amen*. Secondly, many Holocaust films, both American and European, are constructed according to the conventions of other genres, such as the melodrama, the comedy or even the musical, so they would use virtually no horror-inspired images or conventions.<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, the analysis of the frames of horror in Holocaust films is a valuable critical tool and will be used whenever possible in the discussions of the case studies presented in the next section. Given the sheer number of Holocaust films that have been produced (and here I understand the term “Holocaust film” in the spirit of Judith Doneson’s definition quoted above), the selection of some relevant case studies for the present paper has not been an easy task. In the light of the frame of analysis proposed, I have chosen not to include films presented from the perpetrators’ point of view (such as *Our Hitler – A Film from Germany*, *Downfall*, *Max*, *Conspiracy*, *The Reader*, *Hotel Terminus*) – although valuable in both form and content, they are unlikely candidates for the category of trauma cinema; then, I have eliminated made-for-television films (*Holocaust*, *Heimat*, *Escape from Sobibor*, *Uprising*), since they essentially belong to the group of “Holocaust television” rather than “Holocaust cinema”. My intention was that of

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<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, Picart and Frank see European films as well through the lens of the horror frame; in addition to the point they make about *Shoah* which was discussed earlier, they argue that in the 1960s and 1970s, the Nazis began to replace other kinds of monsters as standard villains in cinema in films like *The Night Porter* (1974), an Italian production directed by Liliana Cavani. (Ibidem, p. 27).

<sup>68</sup> Some of the most recurrent images in Holocaust films that have been borrowed from the horror frame are, according to Picart and Frank, the peephole and the shower scene, both of which occupy a central place in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. The role of the peephole would be that of separating the murder scene (which is viewed by the public through the peephole) from the “normal” space of the audience who are placed at a safe distance from the terrible events, but still close enough to experience a sort of “guilty pleasure” (a pleasure that Freud terms ‘scopophilia’) when seeing an utterly vulnerable, sexualised (usually female) victim. Actually, *Psycho* is considered responsible for ending the illusion of the “secure space” in Hollywood film; as Langford argues, “audiences after *Psycho* could no longer confidently rely on narrative, generic and representational conventions to ‘protect’ the integrity of their viewing experience, any more than they could be assured that a violent attack would still be prepared for – as had hitherto been the convention – through cutaways to sinister figures shambling across misty marshes, etc.” (Langford, op. cit., p. 171).

selecting a number of *representative* case studies in terms of popularity (here, *Schindler's List*, *Life Is Beautiful*, *Sophie's Choice* were obvious choices, although the selection includes some lesser-known productions such as *Apt Pupil*, *Black Book* or *Diamonds of the Night*), country of origin (I have selected American, German, Italian, French, Czech, films, as well as European coproductions) and genre (documentaries, narrative feature films, comedies, dramas, biopics, melodramas). I certainly do not claim that the selection of case studies includes *the most* representative examples of Holocaust film, but, hopefully, it will eventually reveal the various facets and modes through which trauma is represented and it will show that ultimately, "all history comes back as film".

The primary purpose of the research I have carried out on the topic of the Holocaust representation on film was that of seeing how this historical event is depicted through one of the most popular mass media of all times. I started out this journey with the question of why: unlike Claude Lanzmann or Primo Levi, who reject this question from the start with the statement "here (in the Holocaust) there is no why", I would argue that the question of "why" matters to a large extent; not the question of why the Holocaust happened, because this question has been asked and answered innumerable times in the past sixty years – moreover, quoting Raul Hilberg, I did not want to start with big question for fear I would only be able to provide insufficient answers.

So, instead, I wondered why the Holocaust continues to occupy such an important place in the public discourse sixty-five years after it took place; why people continue to go and see films inspired by it, why historians continue to research it and why some go to such great lengths to try to deny it ever happened. Leaving aside historical arguments (many of which I have discussed throughout this paper), I would answer this question in the simplest, most straightforward manner: because the Holocaust says something profoundly disturbing about human nature. That it should be possible for a civilised people, in the middle of the world's most civilised continent, to round up and physically exterminate another people in an unprecedented process of industrial killing – and to almost succeed in achieving complete annihilation – is not incomprehensible, as many Holocaust scholars and survivors have argued, but profoundly disturbing, because it fundamentally upsets the very basis on which the community of the human race rests.

Taking into account this response to the "why" question, it should not be surprising that many Holocaust scholars speak about the limits of its representation, about the boundaries that should not be transgressed by art (any form of art) when it attempts to depict an event whose horrific nature was, after all, limitless; this is, I think, one of the

major paradoxes underlying what is commonly known as “Holocaust art”, in its various forms of manifestation: that it needs to present an infinite type of brutality within the confines of some finite limits imposed by history or ethics (as Berel Lang has tried to show). The danger of transgressing these limits is even greater in the case of Holocaust film, because of the impact that such a medium has on the viewer, as I have shown in the introduction to the second chapter of this paper. Many film scholars and critics who have analysed Holocaust films have considered that using some genres – comedy in particular – to represent the Holocaust indicates a serious transgression of these limits.<sup>69</sup> I do not agree with them; I consider that the limits of representation should be observed in the case of the *content* of a representation, not in the case of the formal, conventional mode chosen for its expression. Those critics who rejected *Life Is Beautiful* on the grounds that “one cannot make a comedy about the Holocaust” either forget its illustrious predecessors – such as *The Great Dictator* – or ignore the fact that one of the best known and appreciated Holocaust works is Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, which is, after all, written in the form of a comic book seemingly addressed to children.

This is the primary reason why I have tried to find a model of analysis that would not end up dividing films into “appropriate” and “inappropriate” modes of representation, but that would take into consideration a more profound dimension, that of trauma. By adopting such a framework of analysis, one does not only see how the mechanisms of trauma function in the case of a film’s characters, but is also given the opportunity to assess whether and to what extent this representation of trauma succeeds in establishing a transferential relationship with the viewer of a particular film; in other words, whether the viewer himself is likely to vicariously experience or relate to such a trauma. Having avoided the danger of the sterile division of films into appropriate and inappropriate types of representation, I have then attempted to avoid another binary opposition, between films that act out trauma or films that work it through. As Freud himself pointed out in his works, some degree of trauma repetition is necessary for working it through. Among the case studies I have analysed, few are clear examples of either working-through or acting-out trauma; in the majority of cases, both modes are present in different proportions.

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<sup>69</sup> I do agree with the idea of limits imposed on film genres used to represent the Holocaust in one particular and highly controversial case: that of the so-called “Holocaust pornography”, although the point of departure here should be whether or not pornography is a genre in itself, in the sense in which comedy or drama are; such a discussion, however, falls outside the scope of the present paper, although I should point out the fact that the few film scholars who have analysed this issue have shown that the term “Holocaust pornography” does not indicate a film genre, but a kind of film focusing on a particular subject.

The popularity of Holocaust films, especially in the last two decades, has shown that the interest of the public in this subject does not disappear as the distance from the event grows. Without arguing that Holocaust films serve primarily a didactic purpose, that of educating the mass of (largely) ignorant people about this historical event, thus replacing books or other means of information, I do not contest their importance and impact in doing so; the images of the Holocaust that linger in many people's minds are borrowed from the feature films or documentaries they have seen, not from the history books they have read: the Jewish women in *Schindler's List* gazing in terror at the shower heads in an Auschwitz gas chamber, Alain Resnais's camera exploring the traces of the past in the death camps in *Night and Fog*, Sophie Zawistowska's melancholic eyes as she relives the terrible memories of the past in *Sophie's Choice*, Sol Nazerman's desperate wandering through the streets of Harlem in *The Pawnbroker*, Guido's attempts to protect his son from the horror of the concentration camp in *Life Is Beautiful*, Dussander's nightmarish stories in *Apt Pupil*, Wladislaw Szpilman playing the piano in the middle of a the destroyed Warsaw ghetto in *The Pianist*, Lucia singing for the SS officers in *The Night Porter*, Riccardo Fontana's black cassock with the star of David on top of a pile of clothes in *Amen*, Marion Steiner's courage to hide and save her husband in *The Last Metro*, the immobile faces of the two boys captured by the old villagers in *Diamonds of the Night*, a poor woman being forced to kneel and carry a bucket in her teeth in *The Distant Journey*, Salomon Perel's desperate attempts to survive in *Europa, Europa*, Rachel being forced to sing on the same stage with the man who murdered her family in *Black Book*, Anne Frank's optimism when she proclaimed that "men are really good at heart" in *The Diary of Anne Frank* or Filip Muller's face when he recounts the meeting with the Czech Jews outside the gas chamber in Auschwitz and his decision to die with them in *Shoah*. Holocaust cinema *is* trauma cinema; virtually all men can relate to trauma on its simplest level and can empathise with the characters experiencing it. Many of the large number of films included in the category of Holocaust film are based on actual historical events or on the memoirs and diaries of survivors, which reinforces their claims of authenticity in the minds of the viewers, as they become aware of the fact that what they are watching on the screen has, at least to some extent, the status of "real history".

Each of the case studies analysed in the present paper represents the traumatic dimension of the Holocaust in such a way that it facilitates viewer identification and empathy. Some of them – like *Schindler's List*, *Shoah*, *Night and Fog* or *Life Is Beautiful* – have achieved an iconic status in their own right, becoming part of what is loosely

known as the “canon of the Holocaust films”. All of them are vehicles through which the memory of the Holocaust is transmitted, which is in itself a positive fact. As I have argued before, however, every film is limited in terms of how much it can show (either in terms of duration or in terms of the actual events it depicts). What all these films actually show are “stories” or “fragments” of the Holocaust – no film could claim, or should claim, that it shows *the Holocaust* in its entirety. Therefore, the memory of the Holocaust transmitted by means of film runs the risk of becoming “fragmented”, in a sense: by focusing on episodes, or on individual stories, the ultimate effect might be that the viewer will miss out on the “big picture”: the perspective or the context from which a particular episode is derived might become of secondary importance or might disappear entirely. Nevertheless, comparing this risk with that of the event being completely forgotten, I would argue that this is “the lesser evil”, one that may nonetheless have consequences for the memory of the Holocaust in the more or less distant future.

So, the immediate question remains – how could this risk be minimised? At this point, I would like to remain true to the intention expressed earlier, that of not asking big questions – and this, I think, is one of them. I would argue instead that watching a film – any film – should be a responsible act done with a certain critical distance. While it is true that the purpose of most contemporary cinema is that of providing entertainment and escapism, while it is equally true that the effect of catharsis sought by the Ancient Greeks is nowadays achieved, more often than not, by means of special effects and computer-generated imagery, the cinema-goer ought to keep in mind that fact that no film should be equated with history, even though it may be based on or inspired from actual historical events. Holocaust film is not history – it may give us a sense of what happened, but an accurate re-experiencing or re-enactment of what the Holocaust meant for its victims is not possible. What the makers of Holocaust film can do is understand these limitations and attempt to provide meaningful representations that fall within such inherent boundaries; as I have argued at the beginning of this section, part of the continued significance of the Holocaust in our time is that it says something about human nature. As long as Holocaust films succeed in making this fact visible to the future generations of viewers, the aim of preserving the memory of the historical event will be fulfilled. What this memory will look like in a hundred years’ time is another big question – one that history, always preoccupied with such big questions, will hopefully provide an answer to.



