

CINEMATIC REFLECTIONS ON THE LEGACY OF THE HOLOCAUST: PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES. Edited by *Diana Diamond* and *Bruce Sklarew*. New York: Routledge, 2019, xvi + 253 pp., \$155.00 hardcover, \$44.95 paperback.

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An interest in the human experience of severe trauma and the Holocaust will bring readers to *Cinematic Reflections on the Legacy of The Holocaust: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*. The writings about film collected here show the importance of attaining some space in our minds in order to name and process the horrors of genocide and individual suffering. The medium of film provides enough distance from traumatic events, even if that space is minuscule, to allow us at least to approach some knowledge of the horrid unknowable. The written commentaries in this book help us further organize the disorder of annihilation. This double remove from events—first the films and then these essays—lets us breathe when we feel asphyxiated and unable to survive what is being revealed.

The book's editors, Diana Diamond and Bruce Sklarew, have gathered together psychoanalysts who know film and are fearless in their ability to witness trauma. We learn about the “too much” of the Shoah and about the dimensions of thinking itself. Psychoanalytic concepts bring reflection to the representations of the unbearable horrors and atrocities of the Holocaust. After an initial read-through of the chapters, I realized that the writings in this volume bring wisdom to our psychoanalytic work with the psychic helplessness found in traumatized patients' minds and in our own as witnesses. Each chapter provides helpful psychoanalytic understanding of the severe psychic wounds left in our minds after confronting the Holocaust. The writings here inspire belief in psychoanalysis as a treatment to help individuals and society face deeply painful, often unremitting traumas.

*Reinstating a free-associative process.* Analysts know that the sequelae of trauma cause a shutdown of mind in which symbolization is attacked. The usual movement in the mind from one idea to another, our free-associative process, disappears in the affect storms of traumatization. I came to this insight about the disappearance of free-associative process as I read the chapters and discovered the amazing reinstatement of associative capacities and flow of ideas in each one of them. For example, when a film's depiction of an horrific scene is presented, and is then followed by a description of interaction between people in the film, a discussion can ensue of a psychoanalytic topic such as countertransference or sadomasochism. A healing of mind takes place because the reader experiences the heartbeat of the authors showing their psyches at work making meaning for us. Everyone, though shaken, is simultaneously perceiving, integrating, and working through the traumatic experience as the film's narrative is linked to analytic concepts. The authors, respectful, courageous, and thoughtful, demonstrate in their reflective capacities that the connection between the unconscious mind and the traumatized mind can still exist (Ellman and Goodman 2017). Through their process, the associative capacity that psychoanalysts consider essential to knowing is revived.

Some of the films discussed in the book are truly devastating, bombarding the psyche with images that will never go away. It is thus a remarkable accomplishment to possess capacities of mind even when deeply experiencing the catastrophe of the Holocaust. There are profound lessons here about the "power of witnessing" (Goodman and Meyers 2012), a power that puts the witness in contact with reverberations of annihilation terror and truth. A witness to the Holocaust must be passionate about wanting to know the truth, and these authors demonstrate the essential willingness and force of spirit to face the horrors they see represented in Holocaust films.

*Creating the traumatic metaphor.* Being able to create metaphor is a hallmark of resilience and allows the psychic realities of deep trauma to be communicated (Goodman 2018). I use the term *traumatic metaphor* to honor the unique effort it takes to convey the realities and psychic realities of annihilation and terror. In our psychoanalytic understanding, metaphor holds a special place between conscious and unconscious thought and is where we find unconscious significance often appearing in treatment in transference/countertransference intersubjectivity (Ellman

and Goodman 2017). Throughout the book, the contributors recognize the metaphors being created in Holocaust films and the constant interplay of conscious and unconscious mind appearing on the screen. “Cinematic representations of the Holocaust,” Diamond writes in her introduction, “reveal imagistically not only the consciously held or reconstructed historical experience but also the optics of the unconscious, that is, the unmodulated and unintegrated affects, fantasies, experiences and visual residues of them that are repressed or dissociated” (p. 2).

As traumatic metaphors, the films stun the mind but also astound in their power to communicate to the conscious and unconscious minds of those watching. The discussants help decipher these metaphors, making it more possible to comprehend the realities connected to the films and the multiple ways they get into the mind. The importance of metaphor is central to the thinking of Dori Laub and Nanette Auerhahn. In their well-known paper, “Knowing and Not Knowing Massive Psychic Trauma,” they outline the process of coming to know severe trauma, an evolution that moves from nothingness to metaphor. They speak of metaphor as a reparation of mind occurring when elements of the Holocaust reach a symbolic expressive level allowing communication.

*The need to open space.* Throughout this volume, the authors excavate the imagery of films to find levels of meaning. In my terminology, they open the “living mind” (Goodman 2012b), which communicates through symbolic language opening new space next to dead places laid waste by trauma. Film is a medium that brings the visual and sound and passage of time to the audience in an illusory way. One of the ways film opens space in our minds is by providing image and continuous movement from one thing to the next within the time frame of the film. Such movement is also a hallmark of this volume, both within chapters and in the transitions between chapters. Listening to others digest the genocide and put it into thoughtful, often beautiful language ensures that we readers do not collapse. We are with the film and with the psychoanalytic mind of each author. When watching the films, we may close our eyes or cover our ears when we need to feel some control. When reading these chapters, we can take our time, knowing the analyst/writer is guiding us. Auerhahn and Laub, in their closing discussion of this volume, express the limits of film by invoking Freud’s navel metaphor: “Every dream has a navel—a point that reaches into the unknown, beyond the reach of the attribution of meaning (Freud 1900 [pp. 111, n. 1, 525]). So, too, with

movies, with each failing to fully encompass and master the Real of the Holocaust” (p. 227).

They remind us that the real of the Holocaust is beyond representation, while they also honor what film is able to do. We can be immersed in these chapters and in the films the authors write about as we also know that there is a far worse that is wordless and unrepresentable.

One reason we do not lose our way when reading this book is that the medium of film allows the possibility of feeling “this is true” and “this is not true.” From these discussions of films we learn much about topics we write about—trauma, survivor guilt, transgenerational transmissions, countertransference, dissociation, the limits of symbolic capacities. In a close visual analysis of *Schindler’s List* (Goodman 2012a), I was able to identify patterns that help the audience absorb devastating scenes without needing to leave the theater. Spielberg used camera movement, turning from overwhelming moments to scenes in which feeling could appear, often through facial expressions. I knew this was a vital lesson for my clinical work with trauma. A shift of focus can for a moment titrate shock and helplessness, allowing therapist and patient to be together and absorb the trauma as they take their distance from it. This reprieve creates a space for human contact where symbolization can begin.

*Countertransference to Holocaust film portrayals.* In intimate encounters with our patients’ terror and grief, we as analysts experience countertransference to their psychic trauma. Similarly, I felt intense counter-affects reading the chapters in this book and was drawn to watch films I had not seen before. For that I am grateful. I was slowed in writing this review, as I had to give my own trauma a chance to settle down so I could reflect and think. Thus I became even more aware of the psychic task these authors had had to confront. I feel a human need to know and to always remember the Holocaust and felt throughout that I was with others who feel the same. There is imagery in the films that is searing and will never be forgotten or foreclosed. It is difficult to recover from this experience, and survivor guilt at first fragmented my thoughts and blocked my ability to integrate impressions. Most of all, the writers of these chapters are impressive and feel exquisitely present, thus helping readers, including this one, reflect on the legacy of the Holocaust and work through their countertransference.

*Facing the Holocaust without Dori Laub.* This is the first time I have written about the Holocaust since the death of Dori Laub on June 23, 2018. Dori was a renowned psychoanalytic witness of the Holocaust,

himself a child survivor, and co-founder of the Yale Fortunoff Archives of Holocaust Survivors, established in 1979. He wrote over fifty articles on aspects of trauma and psychoanalysis and in his New Haven practice worked clinically with survivors of atrocities. His project on taking testimony became the way to think of psychoanalytic work with individuals suffering the sequelae of severe trauma. He taught psychoanalysts how to witness and to believe in the possibility of making contact even with people who feel that empathic bonds are permanently broken. Laub showed us that the most severe remnants of trauma, when listened to, can be woven into a narrative within the witnessing process.

When I was working with Marilyn Meyers on *The Power of Witnessing* (Goodman and Meyers 2012), I would call Dori when I felt most lost and overwhelmed. He was a supervisor when I was in training and a colleague and friend for forty years thereafter. I was not sure I could face the genocide without knowing I could contact him and his deep and creative mind. I have discovered that many analysts working with Holocaust survivors and succeeding generations had this same connection to Dori—he was always willing to be there, to hear the experience of trauma. The intense countertransference for me and others who write about the Holocaust must now be met with reassurance from others determined to continue witnessing. The analytic thinkers in this volume and the creators of the Holocaust films they discuss are among those reassuring me and others that witnessing will continue.

*Ways to know the “gas chamber,” to know the abyss.* In one of my last conversations with Dori on the topic of unconscious fantasy and trauma (Ellman and Goodman 2017), he spoke of the difficulty in staying close to the truths of the Holocaust. As we spoke about finding unconscious fantasy and trauma, Dori put it this way: “we can enter the gas chamber but we cannot stay.” He was telling us that we can write about trauma and immerse ourselves in it but that at some point our minds will close down as feelings and perceptions become erased—unless we take time to leave. The full, annihilating knowledge of the Nazi extermination and its heinous methods can be taken in only partially, then left, and then returned to, over and over. Again we discover the need for movement to keep our minds alive and avoid falling into the dead places of “too much” trauma.

Remarkably, Laub has created the gas chamber both as reality and as metaphor. His comment about our inability to remain in the crematorium immediately becomes a metaphor representing a truth of the mind. His reference to the gas chamber both points to a reality and serves as a symbol of

what we cannot bear—the truth of the Holocaust and the unfathomable scenes of it. Some of the chapters here are at a greater remove from the crematorium in their immediate content and symbolic images; some are so close that readers will find themselves in an unbearably claustrophobic surround. We are able to stay because of the author’s shifting focus and evident desire to honor the Holocaust. We also know that we can leave—literally take an intermission from the film or the chapter—something those on the Nazi transports or in the extermination camps could not do.

Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (1955), the earliest Holocaust film dealt with in the book, contains scenes that resonate with the fullness of psychic helplessness. It is a thirty-two-minute visit to horror capturing the timelessness of the awfulness of the concentration camps. Lissa Weinstein in “Two films of Alain Resnais” focuses on the way the filmmaker defamiliarizes in order to shock. She examines how trauma narrative is constructed, especially in documentary or “docudrama” films, and their possible therapeutic value. She shows how portions of the film undo the “viewer’s comfortable remove,” preparing those who decide to watch the film for the disturbance of mind to be endured. “Far from a distant, neutral view, Resnais brings us into the camps as the film proceeds, literally into the belly of the beast, but as he does so, he erases not only the distinction between past and present, but also that of victim and victimizer and the living and the dead upon which the film seems to be predicated” (p. 54).

Not having seen the film before, I was shaken by the scenes before me. My response was a double feeling of “I never wanted to see this” and “Thank you for producing this astounding film.” This is a terribly difficult thirty-two minutes of horrifying historical footage of the camps, and the only reason I could keep watching without total fear is Weinstein’s commentary. I was prepared by her words, as when she writes that language itself falters at a certain point in this newsreel-like film. At this moment she is describing being in the catastrophe and being overwhelmed; but the camera moves on and Resnais’s voiceover continues in an hypnotic and melodic tone. I kept stopping and starting the film, ostensibly to see exactly what Resnais was saying in the English subtitles. This 1955 film overwhelms, with metaphor unavailable. However, Resnais’s voice persists, like poetic couplets, as he seems almost able to contain what he is making visually known.

The film *Son of Saul* (2015), with its disturbing theme of the daily, even hourly work of a Jewish member of the Sonderkommando (who

leads people to the death showers, piles up clothes, collects bodies for cremation in the ovens, and shovels ashes) brings viewer and reader into the killing showers. Catherine Portuges not only describes the history of Holocaust filmmaking leading up to *Son of Saul* but provides understanding and relief with astute observations. For instance, the “relentless use of close-ups, shallow focus, and long takes” by the film’s director, László Nemes, “denies spectators the possibility of de-cathecting or distancing [themselves] from Saul’s experience, nor are we allowed the relative comfort of abstracting his existential fate” (p. 140).

Clara Mucci, in “*Son of Saul: The Remains of Civilization*,” describes the relation of this film to the audience as they become witnesses “to the horror and insane destruction taking place there” (p. 162). In this film, viewers are virtually in the gas chamber—it can be felt and almost smelled and is overwhelming. Again, it is helpful to readers that camera work is described as “portraying the face of the protagonist in a narrow field of vision” that produces an effect whereby we “become” Saul. One story line is that a boy survives the showers but must be murdered for an autopsy; Saul wants to save his body and give him a Jewish burial. This film *is* the crematorium, unbearably so, and yet in the book’s chapters we read about psychoanalytic ideas—the use of symbols, development of meaning, and transference to art forms. The authors have brought our minds to life in familiar ways in the midst of intense disorientation.

*Shoah* (1985) moves us barely a step away from constant death and destruction. Claude Lanzmann’s documentary is nine hours long and took him eleven years to complete. The film contains both footage of the horrors of the extermination camps and interviews with witnesses, perpetrators, and survivors in Germany and Poland. He has added the human factor of facial expressions and tone of voice. Portuges reminds us that Lanzmann’s *Shoah* has been described as a film that is not “about the Shoah” but *is* the Shoah. In describing Lanzmann’s relation to the film, she suggests using ideas of transference and countertransference. She sees the documentary filmmaker or feature director as receiving projections, words, and gestures, rather as an analyst does. We are told how Lanzmann formatted the film to embody his realization that no one could ever come back from the gas chambers; his topic would be death itself. “Rising to that challenge meant plumbing the depths of soul and psyche for all involved” (p. 124). Portuges offers us a way to comprehend the film so that it becomes a bit easier to allow ourselves to take in this monumental film.

Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1964) is another early film about the Holocaust. It focuses on a man who clearly is in a fugue state, existing in a robotic shell. In his chapter, Robert Winer writes about the devastation of the death camps through the character of Sol Nazerman, owner of the pawnshop. Sol is metaphorically the Shoah, moving around but without life. "The only truth that matters to him," writes Winer, "is the truth of the Holocaust, and his life has, through no conscious effort of his own, become a bearing of witness to that suffering" (p. 77). Winer's ability to write about the presence of such powerlessness and defeat in the film invites the reader to perceive and reflect on this individual devastation. The entire persona of the pawnbroker and the inevitable ending are steps away from direct contact with the crematorium, even while presenting it in another register.

Another chapter that focuses on an individual discusses the film *Hannah Arendt* (2012). The film, which depicts Arendt writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and interacting in her social/intellectual world, shows the struggle she had completing the book and justifying her thinking to others. Originally published in the *New Yorker* in 1963, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, aroused much discussion and debate. Diana Diamond and Elliot Jurist review the film narrative and define for the reader the contours of the evolution of Arendt's thinking and relationships in the context of her history. The film provides them material for understanding Arendt, a philosopher and political commentator, as she confronted how to think about thinking. "For Arendt," they write, "thinking was Janus-faced, in that it stemmed not only from solitary self-reflection (shown in the film in the scenes of her thinking while reclining on a couch/daybed thinking about thinking), but also remembering, and fantasizing as one would in a psychoanalytic process" (pp. 91–92). They uncover the mind of Arendt as she worked to understand the mind of Adolf Eichmann and developed her concept of the banality of evil. They then turn to descriptions of the disquietudes of many of the scholars engaged with Arendt. She is quoted throughout their chapter, including a clear statement that the gas chambers should never have happened.

The chapter mixes writing about incomprehensible amorality, Eichmann and all he stood for, and about determination, Arendt's and their own, to comprehend living with these experiences on conscious and unconscious levels. Reading this chapter, one feels the effort it takes to comprehend the atrocities perpetrated by individuals in power. The story of Arendt's loves, past terrors, emigration story, powerful intellectual



journey, and struggle to keep writing is elegantly captured by Diamond and Jurist.

Bruce Sklarew's chapter, "Sadomasochistic Regression in *The Night Porter*," examines how the film translates the terror of death and survival through repetitions of sadomasochistic sex and possession. Lucia had been the possession of Max, an SS officer in a concentration camp. In a later chance meeting, "she attempts mastery rather than victimization in a reversal of roles" (p. 185). There is a constant repetition of the death camp, as what was becomes various reenactments of what is. Flashbacks express a recurring rhythm and circularity commanding attention and bodily arousals. Sklarew suggests that the continuous activation of sadomasochism is a way to survive what Primo Levi, in *Survival in Auschwitz* (1969), called the "Gray Zone." *The Night Porter* illustrates an erotized way of remembering what was seen and lived through in the camps—a way to live, and almost die, as a way to confront and master the reality of the gas chamber. It will remind psychoanalysts of the pain of the erotic transference of many patients and the underlying traumatic resonances played out there.

Another kind of film uses a mix of actual historical footage and face-to-face interviews with survivors and perpetrators across generations. This technique provides more distancing from the crematorium, while also allowing contact with the unthinking and often scarring behavior of survivors and perpetrators, as well as their offspring. We see family members interacting and talking to each other with clear moments of disagreement and puzzlement, as facts are denied and compromises reached to keep the family together. These contemporary documentaries show family members interacting as they try to acknowledge painful truths concerning past traumas and the denials used defensively in their families.

Emanuel Berman writes about the films *Ida* (2013) and *The Flat* (2011) and sees them both as illustrating how the mind, even across generations, has responded to the trauma of the Holocaust with dissociation, repression, and denial that can "color and distort memory of traumatic experience" (p. 197). Both films show the complexity of discovering one's identity. *Ida*, who is becoming a nun, confronts the new knowledge that she is Jewish. *The Flat* is about discoveries made by adult grandchildren when their grandmother dies and they are cleaning out her apartment. The film is directed by one of those grandchildren, Arnon Goldfinger. A special relationship is uncovered between the grandparents, who left Berlin for Israel in 1936, and a German couple with whom they

dined and traveled. The husband was a high-level Nazi, likely making and carrying out policy to murder Jews. The second generation cannot believe the likely connection, and the third generation must find its own way through evidence that there was indeed an ongoing relationship. The subjective experience of coming to terms with personal history is captured in Berman's writing about the scenes in the film of conversations between the director, his siblings, and his mother. The psychoanalytic understanding of denial and confusion concerning secrets of parents and grandparents and the way these secrets are carried across generations is clearly delineated in this film.

Regine Waintrater delves into the difficulty of confronting generational trauma within perpetrator families in her chapter on *Two or Three Things I Know about Him* (2005). The film chronicles Malte Ludin's attempt to bring family members to see their father's actions as a knowing Nazi working to fulfill the goal of extermination. Waintrater sees the unfolding of the interviews as similar to the unfolding of a psychoanalysis. "By fostering associations, [analysis] inspires a multiplicity of reactions on our part that we imagine to be shared by the filmmaker" (p. 215). Questions of guilt and innocence are central themes of the chapter, along with how the psyche splits or denies or becomes full of isolated impressions when facing historical trauma. We may be removed from the gas chamber by generations and the passage of time, but the remove has left deep impressions.

I found the most compelling chapter on the current generation of films to be Anna Ornstein's "*Six Million and One: A Documentary*" (2011). She opens her chapter noting how this film reveals the extreme conditions of the concentration camps with emotional depth. The possibility of staying close to the "gas chamber" and being able to feel and to know is traced through conversations among four Israeli siblings (three brothers and a sister) following the historical path of their father, Joseph Fisher, through the places of horror and survival logged in his diary. The movement between past and present takes place rhythmically, as each sibling expresses his or her opinion about what is most meaningful. Ornstein captures the magnitude of disturbing dualities when visiting the sites of atrocities now inhabited by people who lead lives disconnected from those past realities. The siblings discover the places where their father suffered and barely survived. Ornstein describes the human wreckage at the Mauthausen camp: "Originally it was not considered an extermination camp, but in its crematoria, at its punishment wall, in the

extensive tunnel systems where Jews and political prisoners worked on meager rations, and in its granite stone quarry, people died there almost as efficiently as they did in extermination camps” (p. 42). One of the brothers, the film’s producer, reads from their father’s diary and arranges for them to be taken into the tunnel where the prisoners worked and died.

I viewed many of these films while writing this essay, and it was here, watching the grown children of Joseph Fisher that I felt ill, claustrophobic, almost unable to go on as the camera followed them down deeper and deeper into the tunnel. I think I felt such despair precisely because there was a profound connection between now and then. It cannot be denied that “then” is still in the “now.” It is evident throughout that trauma crosses generations and that knowing will always reverberate within each of us. If Dori Laub were still alive I would call and tell him how I felt the searing difficulty of staying in the crematorium, even though this film was a generation removed. Ornstein allowed me to survive the feeling, to identify it through her discussion of the film, as did the filmmaker and the conversations and even the biting humor among the group immersing themselves in their father’s past.

*Conclusion.* The trauma of the Holocaust, the genocide, the planning, the murder, the destruction, the illogic, the industrial efficiency of experimenting on humans continues to demand our attention. Holocaust films help by bringing camera movement and some narrative to the psychic screen that might otherwise go blank, bringing only dead spaces to our minds. The chapters of this book accomplish what they set out to do—provide reflections from psychoanalytic perspectives on the legacy of the Holocaust.

When we confront the extreme trauma of the genocide of the Holocaust, darkness prevails. It is only when we witness with others that a symbolizing conscious and unconscious begins to appear—often in ghostly gray tones, then in fragments, and finally, if we are fortunate, in meaning and metaphor. As psychic space and the recognition of time develop, the capacity for an associative mind, a “renewal of layering,” returns. The chapters in this book reflect on the legacy of the Holocaust, but they also show how the visual medium of film revivifies the basic function of our minds to associate with layerings of conscious and unconscious imagery and affects.

From reading each chapter of this book and watching many of the films I had not previously seen, I have been led to feel more, to sigh more, to grieve more. Readers will find more living space in their minds having

reflected on the psychoanalytic thinking about these Holocaust films; that is the beauty and gift of this book. I am grateful to its editors and contributors because never again will I be lonely when wanting to watch a Holocaust film. Readers of this book will know better how to witness the gas chamber, recognize the stark reality, and sense metaphor as the mind reconnects to processes of free association.

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