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# Son of Saul, Auschwitz and the Final Solution



*Son of Saul* • László Nemes • Film 2015 • DVD 2016

*Final Solution* • David Cesarani • Macmillan 2016

*Black Earth* • Timothy Snyder • The Bodley Head 2015 • Penguin 2016



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**A** WORK of art inspired by real events may itself inspire an unrelenting search for truth. Did it really happen like that? And why did it happen? These questions may never receive fully satisfactory answers, but the urge to seek them remains undeterred. This is especially true of acts of inhumanity, where the desire for an explanation is matched by our inability to comprehend the causes or scale of the horror.

This is especially true of the Holocaust or 'Final Solution', perhaps the greatest crime in history, in which 6 million human beings, 1.5 million of them children, were murdered simply because of a religious label attached to them. How could this obscene barbarity have been perpetrated in the 20th century, not long before I was born? How could the nation which gave the world Goethe and Kant, Bach and Beethoven, have also given it Auschwitz and Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka?

Is it even possible to describe what happened to the 6 million? Is their fate so horrific and so unique that it is beyond both intelligibility and art? Saul Friedlander talked of 'the limits of representation', and Claude Lanzmann, the maker of the 9-hour documentary *Shoah*, even argued that it is wrong to imagine the unimaginable. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno, son of an assimilated Jew who had converted to Protestantism, rather harshly suggested that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric".

Yet there is another view. In his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Siegfried Kracauer, a friend and mentor of Adorno, recounts the myth of the Gorgon Medusa, who is so horrible to look at that when Athena orders Perseus to slay her, she advises him never to look at her face itself but only at its reflection in the polished shield she has given him. Films of the Nazi death camps could, like Perseus's shield, mirror unspeakable horrors and thus incorporate into the memory the real face of things too dreadful to behold in reality. The film screen is Athena's polished shield.

Unfortunately, since 1960 when Kracauer's book was written, so much blood has been shed on those killing screens that millions have become inured to violent imagery. In fact, it has become appealing and seductive. The potential of cinema as art has been virtually extinguished by cinema as mindless violent entertainment, no different from violent video games. Whether it is demonstrating to their peers that they are 'man enough' to take it, whether it is a need for sensation and excitement, whether it is a desire to escape from oneself into a fantasy world, the sad fact is that, for most young people, especially males, violent imagery is attractive. To put it bluntly, they get a real 'buzz' out of watching it.

That is hardly the response that is sought when making a film based on the Final Solution. No serious

director wants his or her audience to enjoy it, for that would be the ultimate insult to the 6 million innocent victims. How, then, should such a subject be treated in the cinema?

Steven Spielberg's solution in *Schindler's List* was to pluck a story of triumph and hope out of the ashes and give us a drama of survival rather than death, redemption instead of annihilation. In a sense, this was an exemplar of the colonisation of the Holocaust by American culture, with its unquenchable thirst for heroes, sentimentality and happy endings. The rescuer of the 1,100 Jews is a white Christian to boot! The Schindler narrative obscures the fact that in the Holocaust most of the Jews died and most of the Germans collaborated with or passively accepted the perpetrators. Perhaps most disturbing of all, the victims sent to the 'showers' were usually gassed, in contrast to the terrifying scene where Spielberg, the master of suspense, slips dangerously close to the pornography of horror by teasing the audience with jets of water instead of Zyklon-B. Shoah business was certainly not show business.

Of course, we can forgive Spielberg for blocking out the reality of the gas chambers, for otherwise he does not spare us the horrors, and *Schindler's List*, for all its faults, remains a great film – a powerful and heart-rending movie that sweeps us along in a tide of torment and tears. If ever a work testifies to the power of cinema, this is it. →

**T**HE same applies, but for different reasons, to *Son of Saul*, which won the 2015 Cannes Grand Prix and the 2016 Oscar for Best Foreign Film. It opens with one of the most harrowing scenes I have ever watched. A group of Jews are being led to a gas chamber. In the undressing room, as they hang up their clothes before ‘showering’, they are told by the voice of an SS man to “remember your hook number” and to “hurry up or the soup will get cold”. In they go, and the iron door clangs shut. Soon the muffled screams and banging on the door are heard outside by waiting men. We do not see inside but our imagination works overtime and we too want to scream to escape the nightmare.

Hungarian director László Nemes, whose debut feature it is, cannot be accused of sensationalising the Final Solution. Although it is clearly set in Auschwitz 2 (Birkenau), we strain to catch a glimpse of what horrors are being perpetrated because the film is shot using a lens with a shallow depth of field in a boxed-in 4:3 aspect ratio, thus creating a sense of being trapped in a fog of living hell. There is no thrill to be had from watching but only sorrow and exhaustion.

The initial inspiration for Nemes was *Voices from Beneath the Ashes*, (or *Scrolls of Auschwitz*) a collection of testimonies written by and about the Sonderkommandos, and buried in the grounds in 1944. Sonderkommandos, or Special Squads, were predominantly young Jewish prisoners chosen by the SS to do their dirty work: to shepherd the transports to the crematoria, to get them to undress, herd them into the gas chambers, gather the clothes, extract gold teeth from jaws, cut the women’s hair, remove and burn the corpses, and shovel the ashes into nearby ponds or the river Vistula. They also had to scrub the gas chambers of the urine, excrement and menstrual fluids in preparation for the next transport. Far from such work being liberating, it is surely a direct route to insanity. “Arbeit macht dich verrückt” (work makes you mad).

After a few months, as the ‘bearers of secrets’ who were kept away from the other prisoners, they too were ‘processed’ in the ‘assembly line’ of this factory of death and replaced by a new batch. There were about 400 of them in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943, but their number swelled to over 900 to accommodate the increased rounds of murder when Hungarian Jews were deported there in 1944.

Primo Levi, one of 650 Italian Jews sent to the IG Farben factory at Auschwitz 3 (Monowitz), in 1944, discusses the Sonderkommandos in ‘The Grey Zone’, chapter 2 of his final book *The Drowned and the Saved*, in 1986. He writes: “I ask that we meditate upon the story of



**Pope Francis leaving Auschwitz 1 in July 2016. “Arbeit Macht Frei” reads in English: “Work makes you free”.**

‘the crematorium ravens’ with pity and rigour, but that a judgment of them be suspended”. He says that they represented a demonic Nazi attempt to shift the burden of guilt on to some of the victims, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence. In other words, the Nazis made some of the victims partly responsible for the Holocaust. But he asks: why didn’t they rebel? Why didn’t they prefer death? He acknowledges that some actually did. A group of 400 Jews from Corfu were included in the squad, but refused without exception to do the work and were immediately killed by gas. And in October 1944 a group of Sonderkommandos rebelled against the SS, blew up crematorium IV and tried unsuccessfully to escape.

This incident forms the backdrop of the film. Hungarian locksmith Saul

Auslander (played by Géza Röhrig) is a Sonderkommando who finds a teenage boy alive in a gas chamber. An SS doctor arrives and suffocates him. Saul believes that the dead boy is his son and resolves to take the body and find a rabbi to say the Kaddish – the Jewish prayer of mourning. As strict Judaism opposes cremation and demands burial within 24 hours, he must act quickly. Meanwhile the Sonderkommandos, knowing that they are dead men walking, plot an escape. Saul is tasked with getting explosives but loses the packet while seeking a rabbi. His obsession with the boy has compromised the rebellion.

I shall not relate what happens to the dead boy or Saul, but we might ask what is the point of Saul’s mission? Why does it matter what happens to the dead boy? After all, it is only one body in a million and anyway he is not likely to have been Saul’s son because a friend says that he has no children. And the director himself is not religious.

Levi describes a similar incident in *The Drowned and the Saved* which probably provided an inspiration. Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian physician who was one of the last Sonderkommando survivors, recalled how a young woman was found alive on the floor of a gas chamber. The men hid her, warmed her, and brought her beef broth. Suddenly, “they no longer have before them an anonymous mass, the flood of frightened, stunned people coming off the boxcars: they have a person”. And a person who has survived the gas chamber. Like the boy in *Son of Saul*, she was found and killed, but for a moment the men discovered meaning again.

So too does Saul. We could say that he seeks redemption through sacrifice and a reaffirmation of dignity and humanity in a living hell where his survival strategy has been to screen out his fellow Jews’ identities. The boy gives him the chance to reconnect with the kinder, caring world he once knew and to feel that there is hope for the future. A new dawn will rise from the ashes of Auschwitz. —>



Claude Lazmann has praised *Son of Saul*, calling it a kind of ‘anti-Schindler’s List’. This is true in that it eschews heroics, sentimentality and melodrama. With its frenetic pacing and intense use of sound, it has a documentary feel. It is quite an achievement to convey the Horror of the Holocaust by keeping it out of focus rather than in plain sight and encouraging us to use our imagination while spending nearly two hours staring into a man’s deadpan face or over his shoulder.

Géza Röhrig, a Hungarian actor and poet, gives an outstanding physical performance as a man drained of all emotion – his face literally made grey with the ashes of his fellow Jews – who finds meaning and purpose in the midst of this moral hellhole, beside which Dante’s Inferno is a playground. Yes, *Son of Saul* is a bleak film but it offers a crack of light in an abyss of darkness. It is nothing less than a cinematic tour de force.

It is also a cerebral work which inspires a strong desire to find answers. A good starting point is the late David Cesarani’s 1000 page tome *Final Solution*, published a few months after his death in October 2015 at the age of 58. It covers the period from 1933 to 1945, with an epilogue that takes the story up to 1949. There is much information about other extermination camps such as Treblinka, north east of Warsaw, where in 155 days in 1942 (before Auschwitz became the main centre) over 700,000 Jews were killed – an average of 4,600 a day or nearly 200 per hour. “It was the most lethal place on earth”, writes Cesarani (p508).

Auschwitz 1, originally a Polish army barracks in the suburbs of the town of Oswiecim (in Polish), was initially conceived in 1940 as a concentration camp to detain and terrorise Poles. Then in 1941 Himmler ordered the building of a bigger auxiliary camp 2 kilometres away in the village of Brzezinka, which the Germans renamed Birkenau (Auschwitz 2). It was meant to ease congestion in the main camp and hold the anticipated Russian prisoners of war, but they never materialised and so Jews were substituted for Soviet POWs. After the Wannsee Conference and the decision of the ‘Final Solution’ in January 1942, Jews were gassed mainly in Auschwitz 1, but it could not cope with the volume. Four new crematoria were built in Birkenau and the bulk of the killing was shifted there by June 1943 (p532).

This suggests that the Holocaust was not inevitable. Cesarani contests the view that “Nazi anti-Jewish policy was systematic, consistent or even premeditated” (xxi). Rather, “the Jews paid the price for German military failure” (xxxv). He argues that, even as late as the autumn of 1941, the Nazi regime was unsure whether to expel the Jews from Europe, place them in ghettos or put them to death. There had been an idea in the 1930s that they could be shipped to Palestine and later that they could be dumped on the island of Madagascar, and if Germany had defeated Britain in 1940 and gained control of the seas, this plan might have been executed. Cesarani thinks that extermination was only decided when the failure of the blitzkrieg against Russia scuppered the plan of expelling them to Siberia, and America’s entry into the war ruined any idea of holding them as hostage to deter it.

Cesarani is expounding the functionalist view of the Final Solution, in contrast to the traditional ‘intentionalist’ interpretation which claims that extermination was basic to Hitler’s and Nazi ideology. Timothy Snyder’s *Black Earth* (hardback 2015, paperback, 2016) appears to support the intentionalist theory since his theme is that Hitler was a racist not a nationalist and valued Germans (he himself was Austrian) only because they were capable of obliterating Jews, whose ideology

was anti-racist. In Hitler’s political religion, Jews were essentially internationalist and humanitarian, seeing everyone as human beings and believing in justice, law, conscience and equality. These were ‘weak’ ideas that subverted, indeed infected, the natural order which was one where races struggle against other, starve each other to death and try to grab more land. It was therefore a good thing to eliminate the Jews so that human nature – the survival of the fittest – could be restored.

This argument strikes me as pretty convincing. It implies that from the outset Hitler and the Nazis would have eliminated the Jews if the opportunity arose. It implies, too, that Hitler’s racism was anarchic and thought little of nations or states unless they furthered racial ideas. And the opportunity did arise to exterminate the Jews because, as Snyder argues, there was no opposition to the policy in the failed states that Germany conquered.

The Holocaust took place mainly in the territories between Germany and the Soviet Union – areas whose inhabitants were stripped of the protection of the state. Where the state institutions remained in place, even under German occupation, Jews were safer from extermination. Thus 99% of the Jews of Estonia died, whereas virtually all the Jews of Denmark alive at the time of the 1940 German invasion survived. The reason was not because Estonians hated Jews and Danes did not but because the Estonian state was destroyed whereas in Denmark the state institutions, headed by the monarchy, were left largely intact. Again, in the Netherlands, where the monarch and the leading politicians fled, Jews were largely killed, whereas most French Jews survived because they had a government, despite the fact that it was antisemitic.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Holocaust happened because Hitler and the Nazis wanted it to happen, and they were allowed to do it because (a) they received passive support from other antisemitic Europeans and (b) there were few individuals or states strong enough, courageous enough or moral enough to stop them. □