

# The Moral of Historical Fiction

About the film *Son of Saul* by László Nemes

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**Since Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, cinematographic representations of the extermination of the European Jews have seemed impossible. *Son of Saul* has challenged this assumption. Nonetheless, the aesthetic and narrative choices this film makes are problematic.**

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*Son of Saul*, by the Hungarian director László Nemes, won the *Grand Prix* at the Cannes Festival in 2015. Nemes' film, dedicated to the Sonderkommandos at Auschwitz - the work units made up of Jewish prisoners who ran the gas chambers and cremation ovens - was well received when it was released in France. It was soon seen as the only film to have successfully overcome the difficulty of showing the horror of the camps without sinking into over-sentimentalism or fallacious reconstitution. Claude Lanzmann sees it as an anti *Schindler's List*; Georges Didi-Huberman commends the work in an open letter to the director published at the end of 2015, under the title *Sortir du noir*. In its December 2016 issue, the recently created review *Mémoires en jeu* (Memories at Stake) dedicated a long feature to *Son of Saul*, justified by the 'questioning power' of the film, 'maybe the last film on Auschwitz', in the sense that 'any fiction filmed after *Son of Saul* would already be outdated.'<sup>1</sup>

Although we well know the extent to which the history of French cinema actively feeds off consecrations, anathemas and conclusive judgements, we need to revisit this film today, at a distance from its coronation. We need to consider what it shows and tells us: a tragic tale, imbued with ancient and biblical references on the one hand, and on the other, a historical film that maybe does not circumvent all the pitfalls specific to the genre.

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to the feature coordinated by Philippe Mesnard, *Mémoires en jeu*, n° 2, December 2016, pp. 47-48.

## A tragic tale at the threshold of the gas chambers

László Nemes wrote the film with the French academic and novelist Clara Royer. He wanted to write a 'simple' and 'archaic' story<sup>2</sup>: in the autumn of 1944, Saul Ausländer, a Hungarian prisoner who belonged to a *Sonderkommando* unit at Auschwitz, is overcome by a crazy whim – to save a prisoner. Not a live one, which would have been absolutely impossible in this universe of systematic destruction, but a dead one. Saul wants to rescue someone from cremation, from the anonymous intermingling of ashes. To start with, there is an anomaly, a hitch in the killing process: at the exit to the gas chamber, a young boy is still breathing. A German officer kills him and sends the body for an autopsy. It is this boy, dead but still alive and soon really dead, that Saul chooses as his 'son'. For him, he sets out to find a rabbi who would be willing not only to recite the prayer for the dead, the Kaddish, but moreover to remove the body from the bunker, dig a hole and bury the body. Saul wants this child's death to be human, unique in the land of industrial death. The crux of the narrative in *Son of Saul* is the attempt to restore the humanity of death when one is oneself a cog in the death machine. This is also the perspective the spectator is offered as he enters Birkenau, without being subjected to an illusory reconstruction of this death factory. We are almost only shown what Saul sees: a world limited to the mundaneness of a *Sonderkommando*'s job, the self-protective resolve to avoid seeing too much. This limited viewpoint, described as immersive, is based on a technical choice (a limited view, always at the same height as the character), which according to Nemes, leaves 'horror out of focus or outside the field of vision' and this is the reason for Claude Lanzman's praise:

László Nemes has invented something. And he was clever enough not to try to show the Holocaust. He knew he could not and should not. This is not a film on the Holocaust, but on what life as a *Sonderkommando* was like [...] What I always wanted to say when I said it was impossible to show the Shoah, is that the idea of showing death in the gas chambers is unimaginable. This is not what we see here. The director looks at the special units that had to do the terrible job of forcing other Jews to get undressed, leave their clothes behind and enter the gas chambers.<sup>3</sup>

Not showing everything leaves the horror out of the frame, hence the film 'does not show' the Shoah: Lanzmann reiterates the moral interdiction of 'showing the Holocaust' ('he could not and should not have'), but introduces a shift, a restriction 'the Shoah cannot be shown' means that it is unimaginable to show death in the gas chambers'. We could hence remain at the threshold or stand at the exit.

So this is the archaic story. A man awaiting death, like all the members of the *Sonderkommandos*, one of the living-dead in the land of the dead takes responsibility for a

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<sup>2</sup> Interview Antoine de Baecque for the press release of the film, available online at: <http://www.advitamdistribution.com/le-fils-de-saul/>

<sup>3</sup> Interview in *Télérama*, 24 May 2015 : <http://www.telerama.fr/festival-de-cannes/2015/claude-lanzmann-le-fils-de-saul-est-l-anti-liste-de-schindler,127045.php>

dead child to help him find the peace of a tomb. In *Sortir du noir* Georges Didi-Huberman, spoke of Orpheus in the underworld; we also recall Antigone and her brother Polynices' body, cruel Creon prohibits her from crying and deprives her brother of a tomb. The rabbis are evasive; Saul finds no one ready to second him in his literally crazy enterprise. At this point, October 1944, the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz-Birkenau revolt is a real event: Saul runs away through the woods with his body, he crosses the Vistula, almost drowns, loses the child and is saved by a comrade, the same pious man, who at the beginning of the story refused to help beyond uttering a simple Kaddish. The child corpse, swaddled in its shroud is lost to the water – the opposite of Moses. There is no miracle. And it is again a child, this one straight out of a Central European fairy tale, a child of the glades, chubby-cheeked and blond, wearing a velvet jacket, who appears for an instant before the group of escapees is executed by their persecutors who have caught up with them. A bright child, who represents life, from another world, another time, and the last images of the film refer us to this elsewhere, the world of the forest and the Polish glades, a world terribly compromised by death.

The story this film tells is a fairy tale, a fiction, it is not confirmed by any testimonies. Questioned by the Israeli historian Gideon Kreif, Yakov Gabbai, a Greek Jew of Italian origin, a survivor who belonged to an Auschwitz-Birkenau *Sonderkommando* unit, indeed said he burnt each member of his family, and each of his acquaintances from Greece, separately. He placed their ashes in boxes bearing the name of the deceased, his or her date of birth and the date of his or her death. He then buried these boxes and said a Kaddish.<sup>4</sup> Saving bodies is the scriptwriters' fiction, as is the search for a rabbi. This is where Georges Didi-Huberman situates 'the argument of the Hassidic fairy tale' in a cruel and Kafkaesque mode, where a man who wants to die is momentarily condemned to survive, and he meets three rabbis who shy away (or they are false rabbis).

There is nonetheless something nebulous in the Jewish aspect of this tale: Jewish religious law emphasises the importance of the ritual bath, in fact evoked in one of Saul's gestures of washing the child's body, and burial in the ground accompanied by prayer. Yet, as the rabbi is not a priest, his presence is not required at the inhumation. The prayer is what is fundamental. From his words we gather that the rabbi Saul seeks is certainly someone who 'knows what has to be done' what words to utter, but his presence is not essential in the way a priest is in the Christian tradition. This hesitation – is Saul seeking a 'man of faith' or rather an intercessor? – has been underscored by certain critics of the film, particularly the philosopher Catherine Perret in the academic journal *Trafic*. She identifies 'major signifiers of the Christianized divine in the film: the figure of the son beside the Father, the search for a priest as an intercessor'.<sup>5</sup> And it is true that a father's adoption of a son, the shot where Saul slowly ascends the steps of the crematorium building with the child's alabaster body in his arms, and the search for a rite of passage, locate us more in the realm of Christianity than

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<sup>4</sup> Testimony mentioned in the compilation *Des Voix sous la cendre. Manuscrits des Sonderkommandos d'Auschwitz-Birkenau*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2005 (re-ed. Le Livre de Poche, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Perret, 'Le kitsch mémoriel et ses enjeux. Le *Fils de Saul* de László Nemes', *Trafic*, n° 98, été 2016, pp. 36-46.

Judaism, and indeed Judaism formally prohibits any contact with a dead body. Maybe this syncretic dimension was necessary to enhance the visibility and appreciation of the film: an 'archaic' story, as Nemes states, in which this gesture of resacralizing death at the heart of the death factory is effectively what allows everyone to grasp what this dehumanization was like. In addition, it is not historically unbelievable that in the face of this Apocalypse, many of the deported Jews employed gestures, images and attitudes drawn from the Christian repertoire, a culture into which many of them were thrust. And it would not be the first time in the history of the Shoah and its 'reception' that Christian universalization would have been the vehicle for the message: we need only think of the importance of François Mauriac's investment in the publication of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, by the editions de Minuit in 1958. Or further, the ambivalence with which the French Jewish circles viewed André Schwartz Bart's book *The Last of the Just*, in 1959, when Jean-Marie Domenach paid tribute to it in the review *Esprit*, hailing it as an immense novel of 'compassion, more painful to read for a Christian than a Jew, a book that made the Jewish people's holocaust a 'universal sacrifice'.

## **A fiction in hell**

So this is this archaic and universal tale: the fictional story of a man who, in October 1944 in Auschwitz-Birkenau, wants to bury a dead child and say a prayer over his body. *Son of Saul* is hence a *historical* film, as one speaks of *historical* novels: it tells a fictional story set against a background of historical truth (the very background or backdrop that is blurred). In a film, historical truth lies in the precision of the reconstitution of spaces and gestures: they consist here of movements between the access ramp for the convoys, the gas chamber bunker, the crematoriums, the block where the *Sonderkommando* are imprisoned apart from the other prisoners, with its special regimen, food, drink, the stalls with beds for them to sleep in, and time to oneself. This is the space of the camp, separated from the killing areas, the Kanada building where the deportees' clothes and possessions are sorted. There is hence a tension, if one can say so, between the perfect precision of the reconstitution – which is recognizable and identifiable in every way – and the fact that the images are blurred. These images that ensure the quality of the film as a *historical film*, clearly represent something, even if the something remains vague. In other words, the blurring is a *position*, both aesthetic and moral that the filmmaker adopts, but it does not resolve the question of showing the Shoah on screen. And then there is the soundtrack, which is not at all blurred, but on the contrary extremely precise to accompany the blurring. It allows us to hear the screams of the condemned inside the gas chamber, the sound of bodies dragged along the concrete, the crackling of the crematoriums, and the logs, as well as the Babelesque language of the camp (Yiddish, German, Hungarian, French...), the sounds of the nearby forest, the birdsong in the morning. Everything that sound can possibly represent – in the sense of *affirming its presence*.

The historical truth exists because the screenwriters meticulously respected the texts left behind by members of the *Sonderkommandos*, the writings that were found buried near the crematoriums, some of which were discovered straight after the camp was liberated. There were also the testimonies of the rare survivors, recorded in 1945 and 1946, during the first Auschwitz trials in Poland. According to Nemes, these writings, compiled in a volume entitled *Voices From Beneath the Ashes* (2004) are, in fact, what inspired him to make this film. They hence constitute the main source for *Son of Saul* and are mentioned in the passage where Saul threatens one of his co-workers with revealing the place where he buries his writings, and again when the same co-worker prevents Saul from digging in 'his' place. The fictional theme, Saul's story, thus reveals the origin of the knowledge that enabled this reconstitution, these texts buried by members of the *Sonderkommandos* to tell the world, and in order for them to survive the certain death of their authors.

We all know the strengths and weaknesses of historical films: the strength of the transmission of history, based on a story, from a certain viewpoint. Here, we will agree that fortunately the story makes sparing use of pathos and there is no danger of identification. So what of the strength of transmission of history, through an acceptable fiction inscribed within, but also on the fringes of this history. This is the limitation of any historical film, which apart from a few exceptions (René Allio's *Camisards* for example) erases the radical otherness of the past. This limitation is often envisaged in *Son of Saul*: the characters remain opaque, their languages foreign. Saul escapes us: madman or sage, he is beyond us. Nonetheless, *Son of Saul* remains a cinematographic work and even a war film – hand-held camera, close ups, the shakiness in the chases, suspense, gunshots ringing out.

It is true that Nemes does not overdo the sense of illusion and the reflections on the lens of the camera are there to remind us that this is only a film. Nonetheless, the sets remain cinema sets, the lights, cinema lights, sometimes marvellously chiselled, like in some of the discussions between the prisoners in the night; the clothes are cinema costumes, they drape well with no unwanted creases, the whites are not too yellow, too dirty, or spotty, and the light creates tones of grey, brown and ochre in the shadows, or in the glow of the burning pits. And then there are the actors who lend their moving faces and bodies to the characters, at times imbued with a disturbing virility or femininity. So there are the bodies, dead or alive, cinema bodies that create cinematographic images with the specific confusion they involve. One of the authors of the *Sonderkommandos* manuscripts, Zalmen Gradowski, wrote his shock at these young people's bodies 'bubbling with life' in the undressing hall: 'beautiful, seductive bodies, blossoming with life will crawl on the ground like repugnant creatures, soiled by the waste, their alabaster bodies stained (...) we will drag the beautiful young girl there along the freezing, filthy ground.'<sup>6</sup> We can only *read* these words in the radical otherness of the experience they capture and transmit – *read*, and halt the images. But what happens if these words turn to images, like in the shot where, to Saul's left, we notice a young woman's full

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<sup>6</sup> Zalmen Gradowski, *The Heart of Hell. Diary of a member of the Auschwitz II Sonderkommando – 1944*, transl. from Yiddish into French by Batia Baum, Paris, Kimé, coll. « Le sens de l'histoire », 2001, p. 86-87.

breasts, stiff and pointed in death? A cinematographic image is born, with its poignancy, its inevitable confusion, which is maybe the contrary of transmission.

The question that has been asked a thousand times arises yet again: can we, should we make historical fictions on the camps, and how should they be made? With the risk, inherent to any cinematographic or literary historical fiction, however well documented, prudent or meticulous: that of fictionalizing truth. Saul's story raises the essential question about the acts of resistance at the heart of the death factory. How does one resist certain destruction, how does one fight dehumanisation? Saul's truly tragic answer consists of this quest to provide a personal tomb in the land of 'wholesale' death, to use the words of the Warsaw ghetto poet, *Władysław Szlengel*.<sup>7</sup> It is tragic, but it is a fiction: a fiction that is of course based on similar acts evoked in the documents. Saul works with and opposes the *Schreiber* – the *kommando's* writer, secretary who is also one of the organizers of the revolt, this man whom we never see writing, but who represents the real Zalmen Gradowski. It is the nature of historical fiction to mix the real with the fictive, to take d'Artagnan into Queen Anne of Austria's bedroom to bring her the diamond ferrets. But it is troubling, as even though it does not seem of great consequence to us today to fictionalize Anne of Austria, to make her, no longer a distant 17<sup>th</sup>-century queen of France, but an adulterous, anxious and fascinating woman, it is nonetheless indispensable that no one ever mistakes for fiction the fact that men buried their writing at Auschwitz-Birkenau. These are our only sources on the nerve centre of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death factory, extremely precise and factual documents on the killing, interspersed with deep moral reflections on what took place there, on the destiny of these men, involuntary collaborators, themselves condemned to death. It is indispensable that *we never believe their [commitment to] writing is a fiction*. It was their form of resistance, their testimony, in the real sense of the term. It is indispensable that we never take for fiction the moral torture that ate away at them, their companionship with death or their surpassing every limit of humanity.

This is why *Son of Saul* can be considered disturbing. Not because it is a cinematographic fiction on the *Sonderkommandos* but because, despite all the discourses around it, it does not do what people say it does, nor what it says it does, and it does what it says it does not do: it does not go beyond the question of representation, nor the question of the use of fiction and the historical film and its limitations and what we can do with these limitations. In 1972, based on the memories of certain *camisards*, the director René Allio recounted the *camisards'* revolt after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes: the film gave voice to the otherness of these texts written in a language that is no longer ours, but by turning them into image and sound, he gave a new lease of life to this episode of revolt and repression. Here, historical cinema depicted its sources without silently turning them into objects of fiction; the fact that he did not fictionalize his sources, in a way, ensured their transmission. *Son of Saul* is hence disturbing because in the same way as fiction, it erases its sources at a time when already, or very soon, we will no longer be able to hear and share with

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<sup>7</sup> Władysław Szlengel, *What I Read to the Dead: Poems from the Depths of Hell*, Marcel Weyland, Brandl & Schlesinger, 2012.

our children the living voices of the survivors in a world where the idea of ‘immersive’ experiences refers to the universe of video games, 3D and enhanced reality. No film could ever claim to ‘immerse’ us in that world: we only need to read the *Sonderkommandos*’ manuscripts to know this, and to make this knowledge the cornerstone of our acts of representation and transmission, even in fiction and images.

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