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Holocaust Pornography: Obscene Films and Other Narratives

Is the Holocaust exceptional? One well-established school of thought holds that it *is* exceptional, which means that any attempt to understand or represent it – at least by non-witnesses – is obscene. The noted director of *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann, describes his obligation as a filmmaker in these terms: “There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of *Shoah*. I clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude” (“The Obscenity of Understanding” 204). In his famous documentary about the Holocaust, Lanzmann used no archival materials, interviewing only survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders (and the historian Raul Hilberg). Although he was a member of the French resistance during the War, Lanzmann (born 1925) did not spend time in a concentration camp, and therefore considered himself a mediator rather than a witness. But he lived in a country that was occupied by the Nazis and was complicit in the transport east of many of its Jews. The great majority of those he interviews in *Shoah* experienced the destruction of the European Jews first hand.

Lanzmann’s “obscenity” posits the Holocaust as a limit event, an absolute transgression of moral limits that requires tact and a strict respect for epistemological and representational limits. From this position Lanzmann derives not only an ethics but an aesthetics, one that distrusts representation in the modes of dramatization, exposition, and analysis. For him only the camera and the voice can (re-)present the experience of the Holocaust. Fictional representation and attempts to “understand” are out of bounds.

The extraordinary role played by the United States in memorializing the Holocaust has run counter to Lanzmann’s provisos. Although home to many thousands of survivors of ghettos and camps, the United States did not contain any of those sites; nor were any of the War’s battles fought on its soil. Nonetheless, almost every large American city has a Holocaust memorial, and its mass media have produced a series of feature films and television programs that have played a large part in raising the consciousness not only of its own citizens but of people elsewhere about events that led to the deaths of almost six million European Jews. The 1978 television series *Holocaust* had huge audiences in the United States as well as an enormous impact in then-West Germany when it was

released in translation the following year. Early plays and films such as the two versions of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (play 1955; film 1959) and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) achieved large audiences in both the United States and Europe. Later films such as, in particular, *Schindler's List* (1993), experienced the same kind of reception from a later generation of viewers in both North America and Europe. The opening of Washington, D.C.'s United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993 – in a building designed to resemble not only a concentration camp but a train station responsible for transporting prisoners to the camps – was a national event sponsored by the federal government. It remains one of the most frequented museums in the nation's capital. The films and the museums are simulacra, available to remind viewers of the events they are experiencing second hand; but they create a vexed notion of what constitutes a memory, since those being asked to “never forget” have had no first-hand experience of what they are being asked to remember. Lanzmann might well think of such things as constituting obscenities. His attack on *Schindler's List* suggests he believes that asking audiences to watch (false) representations of gassings and other such outrages are like subjecting them to pornography (“Holocauste”).

The word “obscene” suggests a link between ethical and representational limits, and it figures this link as a *corporeal* one. This essay takes Lanzmann's judgment – and his register – seriously by exploring representations of the body in selected Holocaust novels and films from the immediate postwar years until roughly the 1980s. It argues that many early representations can be accurately described as obscene or pornographic, and that Holocaust pornography is a more widespread phenomenon than is usually recognized.¹ Indeed, pornography is an important if uncomfortable precursor to trauma theory, *acting out* as passion what trauma theory will later *describe* in terms of the more archaic (and religious) meaning of passion, i.e., suffering or martyrdom.² In both pornography and trauma theory the body becomes a site of excess, literally *embodying* what lies beyond

¹ We will treat obscenity and pornography as roughly synonymous terms, although there have been interesting attempts to distinguish them. Hal Foster proposes the following distinction based on an analysis of aesthetic distance: “Might this be one difference between the *obscene*, where the object, without a scene, comes too close to the viewer, and the *pornographic*, where the object is tagged for the viewer who is thus distanced enough to be its voyeur?” His follow-up question suggests the difficulty of maintaining this distinction: “In a sense this is the other part of the question: can there be an evocation of the obscene that is *not* pornographic?” (153, 156).

² It is a basic assumption of trauma theory that historical, literary, and filmed narratives function analogously to survivor testimonies; gaps, inconsistencies, and repetitions are understood as *acting out* as form what cannot (and should not) be *articulated* as content. This assumption has been subject to a growing body of criticism. Naomi Mandel, for instance, argues that trauma theory's “rhetoric of the unspeakable” functions primarily as a strategy of moral absolution: One distances oneself from historical atrocities – and by extension contemporary ones – by claiming it is impossible to talk about them at all (225). See also Linda Be-lau's argument that the breakdown of signification has a signifier (n. pag.).

representational and moral limits as physical feeling or sentiment. This essay will demonstrate how a particular image of the body emerged during the years following the war as both symbol and symptom of the sheer statistical immensity of genocide, a way of simultaneously evoking and turning away from the *mass* aspects of mass murder by figuring violence as an intimate transgression or crime of passion. The essay uses films and novels from both the United States and other countries to demonstrate that the use of the body to represent the un-representable is an international phenomenon.

In the Holocaust narratives explored in this essay obscenity at once represents and masks “bare life” as naked desire. The suffering body may or may not be heroic but it is always iconic, evoking the contradictions of viewing (we do not want to look but we must) in the dance of compulsion and desire. The passionate inflection of this representational style has more to do with the “guilty” quality of looking than with the facts of genocidal violence. Because of the central importance of the act of looking this essay will emphasize filmed narratives, although for reasons of space the “visual” as such will remain under-theorized in this account. The essay will begin by exploring how the eroticized body of the victim is linked to pornographic representational styles in the Israeli novel *House of Dolls*, then proceed to explore how forced prostitution and female nudity become figures for comparing genocide to American racism in both the novel and film of *The Pawnbroker*. An analysis of Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* will illustrate how pornographic representational styles threaten the distinction between perpetrator and victim, while figuring a viewing position that can be characterized as guilty pleasure; and a comparison of it with Lina Wertmüller’s *Seven Beauties* will explore the impact of the gendering of spectator and spectacle on the “desirability” of viewing. The essay will turn finally to *Sophie’s Choice*, the novel and the film, as both the culmination and reversal of obscene narrative strategies. The film and the novel each differ from their predecessors in *not* figuring compulsion as sexual liberation. By focusing on a tormented mother, *Sophie’s Choice* represents compulsion, and by extension compelled eroticism, as offering only false freedom or a “choiceless choice” that forever damns the victim. This genealogy will demonstrate the contention that Holocaust pornography constitutes an early version of trauma theory, acting out as passion what would be described by more recent theorists as symptom.

Caroline Picart and David Frank argue that Holocaust films are like horror films in the way they “separate the viewer psychologically from monsters” while at the same time allowing the audience “the guilty pleasure of viewing their acts on the female body while absolving them of responsibility” (140). We disagree with their view that eroticism absolves the viewer of responsibility. To the contrary we argue that feeling in this context takes the place of understanding. The issue is not moral but memorial.

Obscenity is not only the first blush of trauma theory, it marks the emergence of memory in historical discourse, or what is now called “second hand” or “prosthetic memory” (Landsberg).

House of Dolls (1953) is one of the most troubling of all Holocaust novels, and it anticipates many conventions used in subsequent novels and films. The author – whose Hebrew name is Yehiel Dinur – signed himself as Ka-Tzetnik 135633, including in his *nom de plume* the number tattooed on his arm at Auschwitz. Having settled in Israel after the war, Dinur became well known outside that country in 1961 when he testified reluctantly at the Eichmann trial. While on the witness stand recalling his experiences in the concentration camp he underwent a complete emotional collapse and had to be carried out of the courtroom, an event that was captured by television cameras. As Ka-Tzetnik 135633 Dinur had become an Israeli celebrity because of his narratives of the ghettos and camps. In *House of Dolls* a beautiful teenage girl named Daniella Prelesnik (based on Dinur’s sister) is forced to serve as a prostitute for German soldiers on their way to the Russian front, thereby becoming a type of the beautiful victim.

The structure of *House of Dolls* anticipates many Holocaust narratives and testimonies – moving from the disruption of life in an original town or city, to isolation in a ghetto, to concentration in a camp. The story of Daniella is balanced against that of her brother Harry, who is appointed as the camp “medic,” even though he has not completed medical training. Each sibling ironically occupies a favored position among prisoners: more food than other inmates, better clothing, and a job that is not immediately life-threatening. Daniella’s prisoner number is tattooed above her breast beneath the name “Feld-hure,” which describes her camp function. Although the story it tells is powerful, *House of Dolls* is not a work of high literary quality. Omer Bartov characterizes it as a unique combination of “kitsch, sadism, and what initially appears as outright pornography, with remarkable and at times quite devastating insights into the reality of Auschwitz, the fantasies it both engendered and was ruled by, and the human condition under the most extreme circumstances imaginable” (189).³ The book enjoyed an uneasy but wide popularity in Israel during the early years of statehood because of its detailed accounts of the camps and the quasi-pornographic style of its descriptions. In the 1950s and 1960s Israeli youngsters often read Ka-Tzetnik because he was the only legitimate

³ Isabel Kershner corroborates Bartov’s claims in a recent article: “It was one of Israel’s dirty little secrets. In the early 1960s, as Israelis were being exposed for the first time to the shocking testimonies of Holocaust survivors at the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a series of pornographic pocket books called *Stalags*, based on Nazi themes, became best sellers throughout the land.” And later, “The books told perverse tales of captured American or British pilots being abused by sadistic female SS officers outfitted with whips and boots. The plot usually ended with the male protagonists taking revenge, by raping and killing their tormentors” (A4).

source of sexually titillating and sadistic literature in a still puritanical and closed society, with the result that the Holocaust somehow became enmeshed in their minds with both repelling and fascinating pornographic images (Bartov 203).

It is acknowledged by historians that hundreds of women were forced to work in brothels at several concentration camps. A 2007 exhibit at the Ravensbrück Memorial Museum has documented this history.⁴ In a photograph by the Israeli photographer Paul Goldman (who emigrated from Hungary in 1940) an Auschwitz survivor bears the tattoo “Feldhure” on her chest.⁵ There is an ongoing historical debate over how frequently *Jewish* women were forced to act as sex slaves in concentration camps, because such usage would have contradicted the Nazi doctrine of racial purity. However, the issue at stake in Dinur’s narrative is not historical accuracy in the narrowly defined sense but the impact of historical events in terms of psychological force. *House of Dolls* represents mass murder as forced prostitution, and it evokes this force through its impact on the individual bodies of victims and spectators. The female victims are forced to “perform,” the other prisoners are compelled to watch, and Dinur and his readers end up confronting mass murder through the titillation of pornographic narrative.

In *House of Dolls* the women of Daniella’s group are allowed no more than three “reports” on their behavior, reflecting either infractions of the pleasure unit’s rules or expressions of dissatisfaction from their “clients.” After a third report, the guilty party is publicly beaten to death by the lesbian Kapo Elsa in a procedure she calls “purification.” The soldiers can dismiss the stigma of contact with the victims of forced prostitution through the knowledge that these women will not survive. And they are right. After months of working in the “pleasure barracks,” Daniella deliberately walks into an area near the camp fence where prisoner access is forbidden, letting herself be shot by a guard in a calculated act of suicide. Her brother does survive, but barely, watching people he is supposed to help be reduced to the walking dead. In both cases, Ka-Tzetnik demonstrates the sadistic ingenuity by which the Nazis destroyed their victims before killing them and the impact of this cruelty on victims and witnesses (Daniella’s brother sees her forced to perform in an orgy, and the shame she endures over this incident leads indirect-

⁴ “Sex-Zwangsarbeit in NS-Konzentrationslagern” was exhibited at Ravensbrück from 15th January to 30th September 2007. An archived record is accessible on the museum website at: <http://www.ravensbrueck.de/mgr/deutsch/ausstellung/sonderausst/sza.htm>.

On the Ravensbrück exhibit see “Nazi Sex Slaves” in *Spiegel Online International* (June 15, 2007): <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,459704,00.html>.

⁵ The Goldman photograph was displayed as part of the retrospective “Hommage an Paul Goldman. Fotografische Arbeiten 1943-1965,” exhibited at the Jewish Museum Vienna in the Museum am Judenplatz from 15 May to 19 August 2007. An archived description of the retrospective is available on the museum website at: http://www.jmw.at/de/paul_goldman.html.

ly to her suicide). The pornographic descriptions suggest the compulsive nature of Dinur's disturbed recollections, but they also stage dehumanization as a form of arousal that, paradoxically, is difficult to distinguish from the destruction of individuality. Susan Sontag has explored this phenomenon in her essay "Fascinating Fascism." As readers we are in the position of Daniella's brother, compelled to read/watch but losing some of our humanity as a result. This describes the equally paradoxical experience of second- and third-generation Israeli immigrants who were obsessed by thoughts of their ancestors' destruction.

It is not clear whether Edward Lewis Wallant read *House of Dolls* before writing *The Pawnbroker* (1961), although an American translation was available as early as 1955. In this novel Wallant, not himself a survivor, writes about one who has started his life over by running a pawnshop in New York City, after witnessing his wife forced to work as a prostitute much like Daniella Prelesnik before she died in a camp. In the novel as well as in Sidney Lumet's film, the sexual violation of the female victim is crucial to the story. *The Pawnbroker* (1964) is the first major American film to place the Holocaust, in the form of survivor trauma, within the context of everyday life. The film uses the Shoah to mount a critique of racism as well as economic and social inequality in 1960s New York City (Spanish Harlem). It was, not coincidentally, the first Hollywood feature film since adoption of the Hays Code to show frontal female nudity, of both a black prostitute who is trying to sell herself to Sol Nazerman, the film's damaged protagonist, and of Nazerman's wife, whom Sol recalls in a flashback being forced to have sex in a camp brothel with an SS officer.

The film's pervasive use of montage begins at the start with a flashback in slow motion and without dialogue that takes Nazerman (Rod Steiger) back to his days as a young philosophy professor in Germany (in the novel he is from Poland). Other flashbacks use jump cuts that last but a second or two to rend the narrative fabric and shock the viewer. This montage enables Lumet to convey the past's wrenching recurrence in the mind of the post-traumatic survivor. Nazerman is determined to ignore the past and its effect on him. Because the Nazis destroyed his family and tortured him for the sake of a racist stereotype, he has decided to enact his own stereotype of the "stingy Jewish businessman." In the blindness of his compensatory behavior he does not realize that by using his shop to launder money for a local racketeer and pimp he is, in effect, supporting prostitution, thus allying himself with criminals like those who had turned his wife into a sex slave. Lumet's decision to make the film in black and white instead of color emphasizes the grittiness of the theme and the Spanish Harlem setting.

Alan Mintz argues that this film reflects a "comparativist" approach to the Holocaust, by emphasizing the continuities between various forms of social oppression; the "excep-

tionalist” argument, by contrast, denies the possibility of historical comparison (39-40, 125). By juxtaposing through flashbacks the naked black prostitute with the naked Jewish victim of sexual assault, the film emphasizes the point of contact between the two forms of repression. In the moral force of the film’s critique, racial rape in the camps becomes analogous to prostitution in a racist society. This comparison is effected through sequential images of female nudity and prostitution which are, as already mentioned, unprecedented in films of this period.

The novel only indirectly compares Sol’s wife and the prostitute. The more important relationship is between Sol and his wife. Wallant underscores this in two ways. First, the racketeer who is Nazerman’s silent partner (Italian in the novel; in the film a gay African-American) forces the barrel of his gun into Sol’s mouth in an act that mirrors the fellatio he is forced to watch his wife Ruth perform on an SS officer (Wallant 163, 169). Second, when Ruth sees Sol watching her, she is “able to award him the tears of forgiveness” (169). These tears foreshadow a kind of Christian forgiveness that he achieves at the conclusion of the novel, after his assistant Jesus Ortiz has placed himself in front of a bullet meant for Sol: “he realized he was crying for all his dead now, that all the damned-up weeping had been released by the loss of one irreplaceable negro who had been his assistant and who had tried to kill him but who had ended by saving him” (278). It is hardly a coincidence that Sol’s assistant is named Jesus or that Nazerman is similar to “Nazareth.” Sol now recognizes the common humanity he shares with the underprivileged of Harlem, but the thrust of the narrative – and the last word of the novel – draws attention to Sol’s damaged ability to “mourn” (279).⁶

Lumet’s film, however, emphasizes the *impossibility* of mourning, or the impossibility to ever complete mourning, and embodies this unending sadness in compulsive behavior. There is no reconciliation here, even after the young Jesus has in effect sacrificed himself for his Jewish employer. In the penultimate scene, Sol impales his hand on a spike used for receipts, in a gesture not included in the novel, thereby taking on the stigmata for Jesus’s death. He opens his mouth to scream, in a pose that seems a reference to Edvard Munch’s famous painting, but nothing comes out and the only sound we hear is the wail of a trumpet. The last shot, a wide-angle view of the pawnshop’s Harlem corner, leaves Sol wandering through the streets alone, emphasizing his inability to mourn

⁶ Lillian Kremer sees Sol’s affirmation of human community as consistently strong throughout the novel: “Nazerman’s response to the Ortiz sacrifice is consistent with his current social restoration, which is characterized by movement from self-willed isolation to engagement. Because Sol’s self-imposed withdrawal is the result of Holocaust trauma, so too an instinctively generous act confirms his recommitment when he elects to risk his life by defying a Harlem gangster on behalf of an underclass prostitute” (79). While our reading of Sol’s character is less optimistic, we also see a return to community in his response to Jesus Ortiz’s death in the novel.

or reintegrate himself in the community. The film also emphasizes Sol's anhedonic inability to desire, explained by his being forced to watch his wife's brutalization. But Sol's spectatorship creates an alibi for our own. Viewers can safely *enjoy* the film's frontal nudity by imagining that they, like Sol, are being "forced" to watch. Compulsion, in other words, serves the purposes of denial by "screening" viewers from their own desire. A central series of juxtaposed images – this time not flashbacks – represents Jesus Ortiz making passionate love to his girlfriend, the prostitute who approaches Sol, along with Sol making indifferent love to the widow of Rubin, a friend who threw himself on the electrified wire at the camp in a gesture similar to Daniella's. It is clearly Ortiz with whom the audience is encouraged to identify. Although his character is flawed, illustrated by his involvement in a plot to rob the pawnshop, his ultimate sacrifice is passionate and heroic. He lays down his life for the damaged survivor, who has by this time become an object of pity. We leave the film thinking we should help Sol by being more like Jesus – passionate, and aroused to understanding problems of historical injustice. The desire that is a form of paradoxical and dehumanized transgression in *House of Dolls* here takes on the trappings of activism, but it remains elegiac in the way it functions to compensate for the impossibility of mourning.

Of all the films discussed in this essay, *The Night Porter* (1973) is the most classically sadistic. Such issues as control, submission, seduction, performance, torture, and obsession are all at play in this troubling, controversial work. Liliana Cavani's casting of Charlotte Rampling (as Lucia) and Dirk Bogarde (as Max) continues the work they had done in Luchino Visconti's *The Damned*. In that film Rampling played the part of Elisabeth, a doomed and beautiful member of the von Essenbeck family (who resemble the Krupps), who was married to an anti-fascist and, because of this, was transported to Dachau where she died. Bogarde (as Friedrich Bruckmann), playing Macbeth to his lover Sophie von Essenbeck, murders his way to become head of the firm only to be dispatched by the depraved son and heir Martin von Essenbeck, who forces Friedrich and Sophie to commit suicide. In *The Night Porter* Rampling's character Lucia is also transported to a camp where she meets Max, one of the SS staff stationed there, who turns her into his sex slave. It is there that they begin the sadomasochistic relationship which they resume in Vienna twelve years after the war's end.

During the film's present time (1957) Max is working as the night porter in an elegant, though fading Vienna hotel. He is active in a group of unrepentant Nazis who meet regularly at the hotel where they conduct mock trials of one another to insure that they are not in danger of being exposed. Early in the film Lucia and her husband check into Max's hotel. She is married to a well-known American musician who is conducting Mozart that week at the opera house. (In one scene Max attends *The Magic Flute*.) When

Max checks them in, he and Lucia exchange long glances of recognition, and it is here that Cavani begins her frequent use of flashbacks that become our connection to the past. We watch Lucia standing in a line of naked prisoners being processed into a camp. Looking through the lens of a movie camera, Max gazes at Lucia closely in a gesture that immediately objectifies her and calls into question the viewer's position. From that point on we experience the development of their erotic connection through a series of such scenes from the past.

In one extraordinary moment – during the film's most frequently cited episode – Max asks Lucia to re-enact what he acknowledges as Salome's dance before King Herod. In a squalid night club constructed at the camp, a simulacrum that recalls The Kit-Kat Club in *Cabaret*, Lucia dances for a cast of people dressed in a variety of costumes, including men with faces painted a deathly white, as well as a nearly nude male dancer; all of this is reminiscent of Weimar decadence. Wearing only boots, slacks, suspenders, and gloves, with an SS death's-head cap slanted at an angle, Lucia sings a sultry torch song. Her almost cadaverous body seems boyish and lascivious, suggesting the anorexia of a fashion model rather than the starvation of a prisoner. In the Wilde-Strauss version of *Salome* Herod becomes so inflamed that when the dancing Salome peels off her seven veils he says she can have whatever she desires. She asks for John the Baptist's head, a wish Herod reluctantly grants, and when presented with the head the depraved Salome kisses it on the lips, at which point an appalled Herod condemns her to death.

Cavani's version has Max, already besotted and associating Lucia with Salome, preparing the head in advance. He has done this as a favor, because the head he presents belonged to a male prisoner about whom Lucia had once complained. When she opens the box that contains her "present" Lucia expresses a barely disguised shock; then her face relaxes into her familiar dissociated smile, a facial gesture she has clearly not shed when she meets Max again twelve years after the war. This psychic strategy is Lucia's mode of survival, and while it has helped her get through the war, it also leads her back to her destructive relationship with Max. Does Cavani intend to warn the viewer, through her erotic portrayal of the victim, against our own seduction by the Nazi past? Or does Lucia's inability to escape the past serve as an alibi, allowing viewers to approach the concentration camps erotically through the safe distance of the decade between Lucia's initial camp experiences and her repetition compulsion? However we answer these questions, it is clear that the "return of the repressed" that would become a key feature of trauma theory, is here one of the core elements of eroticism. Repetition is the structure of compulsive desire, the figure of obscene proximity to the past, and the mechanism that enables voyeurism but also implicates viewers in the re-enactment of historical events.

One of the troubling aspects of the film is its tendency to represent Max as a victim of his own passions. Given the film's tendency to represent victimization in terms of the intensity of experience – the feature it shares with all of the films and texts we are discussing – it tends to blur the lines between Max and Lucia, perpetrator and victim. They both, after all, *feel* intensely. With Lucia becoming the object of his gaze and ours, the viewer is put in the uncomfortable position of identifying with Max's perversions, sexual and, by extension, political. What might also offend many viewers, however, is not just the attraction Max feels for Lucia, but the obsession with him that she reciprocates. Cavani is willing to portray the victim as also being complicit, the masochist inextricably involved with the sadist. The two characters become so enmeshed that Max abandons his hotel and Lucia declines to join her husband on his conducting tour. When the doomed couple moves to Max's apartment, they are effectively imprisoned by the band of Nazis who perceive in Max's obsession the possibility of their own exposure. This enforced isolation leaves the couple to play out their sadomasochistic roles on a stage where only fantasy matters, theirs and the viewer's.

Cavani complicates matters in a number of ways. She lets us watch acts of mutual tenderness and lovemaking that are not coerced. She slows the film's tempo so much that we seem to be watching the tormented characters starve to death, with their food supply cut off. But she also manipulates the viewer by many sensuous shots that tend both to arouse and repulse. *The Night Porter's* eroticism, typical in most ways of films from that period, nonetheless encourages viewers to identify with victims – or at least to “feel” them in terms of passion, which is tantamount to “feeling their pain,” an emphasis more characteristic of films in the 1990s, such as *Schindler's List*. Also, in the uncomfortable relationship it establishes between Max and the viewers, *The Night Porter* has the potential to make viewers question the nature of their interest in the Holocaust, an interest refigured here as another form of sadomasochism. Caroline Picart and David Frank have argued that the “pleasure” elicited by “the spectacle of the vulnerable, eroticized female body” in *The Night Porter* actually mystifies the facts of the Holocaust: “The use of soft-porn techniques creates a sentimental idyll between victimized victimizer and utter victim against the backdrop of Nazi brutality” (138). However, the compulsion to watch is not exclusively a distancing mechanism: it also implicates us in the victim's and victimizer's fate.

In the closing scene, when their fate is inevitable, the starving couple leaves the apartment to take Max's car for a final ride. Lucia is wearing a short dress that makes her look like a girl; Max has put on his old SS uniform. They ride to the middle of a bridge over the Danube and get out of the car. We know they have been followed. Single shots ring out a few seconds apart and each of them drops to the ground. In the background we

see a large cathedral; but we do not see the shooter. Given the repetition compulsion that drives this narrative, from which there can be no escape, the shooter might very well be the camera itself (recalling Max's first camera-view of his victim), and the perpetrators those who want to "film" or watch the show (like the cabaret in the concentration camp) to its bitter end. This has clearly been a suicide, though not entirely voluntary, and the film ends much as did Visconti's *The Damned*. The mutually corrupted couple has been coerced into choosing death, and we, in a sense, are in the position of Herod, demanding their heads after watching the striptease. In this way the film suggests that the pleasure of eroticism is a "guilty" one. By pursuing pornographic representational strategies to their logical conclusion, *The Night Porter* blurs the line between perpetrator and victim and completely de-historicizes the Holocaust; but it also implicates the viewer in this process, making us confront the perpetration of "mere" watching at the end. This uncomfortable feeling distinguishes memory from history not only in the film, but the more recent discourse of trauma theory.

Emboldened perhaps by her countrywoman's willingness to defy Holocaust taboos, Lena Wertmüller uses humor to represent surviving in her classic black comedy, *Seven Beauties* (1975). For her work on this film Wertmüller was the first woman to be nominated as Best Director by Hollywood's Academy, although there were also strong objections to the film, most notably Bruno Bettelheim's.⁷ Wertmüller did not win the Oscar, but she established herself as someone who was willing to take up unfashionable positions, particularly on feminist issues, as in other works such as *Swept Away* and *All Screwed Up*. While there are differences between Cavani's melodramatic and Wertmüller's darkly comic methods, both directors force a confrontation with our fascination with images of the pornographic and obscene.

Why do we look? Conventional wisdom has long believed that it is men who find voyeurism to be a stimulus to desire. Classic feminist theory suggests that certain representational techniques eliciting the "gaze" are coded as heterosexual and masculine by being typically directed towards certain objects. Women may enjoy looking as much as men, but the gaze itself is "masculine" by virtue of its structure.⁸ Whatever the gender and sexuality of the filmic gaze, it is nonetheless the case that two of the most powerfully voyeuristic feature films have been directed by women. Were these films made primarily for a male, heterosexual audience, or are their images directed equally to all viewers? *The Night Porter* does demonstrate the obvious truth that men in power frequently force women to perform acts of sexual submission, but it also reformulates sub-

⁷ See Bettelheim, "Surviving."

⁸ See Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), a classic statement of that position.

mission as a type of complicity that is likely to strike contemporary viewers as blaming and/or eroticizing the victim.

In *Seven Beauties* Wertmüller deliberately reverses the conventional stereotypes. The film features a “comic-strip ‘Godfather’” (Innsdorf 62) named Pasqualino, but nicknamed Seven Beauties because he has seven sisters who are decidedly not beautiful (the Italian title is *Pasqualino Settebellezze*). Pasqualino (played by Giancarlo Giannini) struts around Naples, indulged by his family, while his mother and most of his sisters work at stuffing mattresses. Another sister sings outrageously in a seedy cabaret and has a pimp. Pasqualino challenges the pimp in a hilarious defense of family honor and shoots him accidentally. In a panic he dismembers the body, puts the parts in suitcases, and takes them to the train station. Pasqualino is eventually caught, tried for murder, and sent to a hospital for the criminally insane where he molests women. At a certain point during the war he is freed on condition that he joins the Italian army. Clearly not much of a soldier, he manages to become separated from his unit. When Pasqualino and a fellow deserter come near a group of Jews stripped naked and standing by a pit, they watch German soldiers shoot the Jews dead, while the soundtrack plays “The Ride of the Valkyries.” By this point in the war Italy has ceased to be an ally of the Third Reich, and so when Pasqualino is captured by the Germans he is taken to a concentration camp where the Commandant (Shirley Stoller) is a fiercely unattractive woman. This break in historical accuracy – no camp commandants were women – allows Wertmüller to invert the sadomasochistic gender stereotypes typical of this genre, with the man taking on the masochistic role and without breaking the heterosexual paradigm of desire.

Now dressed in the striped pajamas of a prisoner, Pasqualino decides that his survival requires him to seduce the Commandant. He deliberately flirts with her to save his life. Stoller has characterized the Commandant to be as unappealing as possible. Obese, asexual, and uninviting, she is as austere a Nazi as film convention allows. Responding to Pasqualino’s invitation sadistically, she offers food in order to nourish him for his sexual performance, putting a plate (with no utensils) on the floor to make him eat like a dog. It is from the Commandant’s point of view that we watch Pasqualino eat, waiting, as she does, for him to finish: “First we eat,” she says, “then we fuck.” When it is time for him to act we see the Commandant from Pasqualino’s point of view. The representation is deliberately anti-erotic. The expression on the Commandant’s face indicates her complete dismissal of Pasqualino, whose face in turn is marked by anxiety and despair. If he cannot achieve sexual success, he knows he will die.

We can best understand this representation of the anti-erotic by comparing it to the more conventionally pornographic strategies of the other texts and films we have been discussing. We are not encouraged to empathize with the victim by desiring him, but

rather to recoil from his being forced to perform for a figure of power. Wertmüller's inversion of masculine and feminine roles, and her banishment of the erotic, moves the film from the pornographic register to the grotesque, while raising the question of guilt vis-à-vis the viewer. Pasqualino – petty criminal, pimp, and molester of women – was never innocent. However, his desperate ploy makes his guilt more obvious. The terms of Pasqualino's survival, after “seducing” the Commandant, mean that he must do as he is ordered, and that means he must choose which of his fellow prisoners will die. In a scene that implicates the viewer once again, Pasqualino is commanded to shoot his friend Francesco. He hesitates, Francesco pleads with him to do it, and in the moment before Pasqualino pulls the trigger we are forced to ask ourselves what we might have done in his place.

Pasqualino's desperate acts of self-preservation are worlds apart from Lucia's accepting, without requesting, the head of a fellow prisoner. If the naked female figure offers reassurances especially for the male viewer, transforming bare life into naked desire, then Pasqualino materializes and inverts, in his abject masculinity, the gender and agency of this gaze. When the war is over, we see Pasqualino return home to find his mother, his sisters, and his fiancée working as prostitutes. They have survived the war and seem prosperous. American soldiers are in Naples offering cigarettes. But Pasqualino is deeply embittered. What price has he paid to survive? What would we have done in his place? How far would we be willing to degrade ourselves in order to live? Are we all potentially prostitutes? Or even worse, are we “johns” like the Commandant or the American soldiers with their cigarettes?

Wertmüller's comedy forces us to confront these questions by inverting conventional pornographic representations of the Holocaust. By making the female body monstrous and the male protagonist the one who is forced to trade sex for survival, *Seven Beauties* turns guilty pleasure into complicit disgust. The viewing experience becomes as monstrous as Pasqualino's survival. Just as Pasqualino “deserves” the Commandant, she deserves the “dog” she has turned him into, and we deserve to watch the spectacle of their mutual debasement. As a critique of the films that preceded it, *Seven Beauties* employs a pornographic representational strategy to criticize the voyeuristic and exploitative nature of narrative cinema. The film attempts, like its predecessors, to represent the unrepresentable through obscenity, but this is an obscenity having less to do with desire for the victims than with the viewer's abject proximity to victims and perpetrators alike.

Both William Styron's novel (1979) and Alan Pakula's film (1982) of *Sophie's Choice* contain another complex variation on the issue of survivor and victim, which ends in yet another version of abjection. In this story the ostensible victimized woman is not a Jew but a blonde Polish woman, Sophie Zawistowska, who lost her two children at

Auschwitz and has come to the United States, like Sol Nazerman, to re-start her life. She is now involved with a Jewish man, Nathan Landau, an American who was not in the camps but who identifies strongly with those Jews who had been victims in Europe. He has a large library of books concerning the war and the Jews, and much like the author Binjamin Wilkomirski would later do, he uses the Holocaust as a way of giving structure to his troubled psyche. The relationship of Sophie and Nathan is constituted by a passionate mixture of sexual desire and mutual torment, with each one taking a turn as victim or tormentor. Styron has taken advantage of two facts: 1) while almost three million (out of over 3.2 million) Polish Jews died during the Holocaust, more than three million (out of approximately 30 million) non-Jewish Poles were also killed; and 2) many Poles collaborated with the Nazi occupiers in killing Jews (Niewyk and Nicosia 24, 49).

Styron uses a conventional literary device to maintain some distance from Sophie's and Nathan's madness: a first-person narrator who is heavily involved in the story but is not one of the "main" characters – in the tradition of Melville's Ishmael, Conrad's Marlow, and Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway. With the declaration "Call Me Stingo" the narrator announces his connection to this narrative line by echoing the opening words of *Moby-Dick*. Stingo (played by Peter MacNichol) is a young Southerner just graduated from the university, who has come to New York City to write the Great American Novel – much like a young William Styron. The year is 1947, a time when the war remains a fresh memory, and when Freud's theories of repression and sexuality were part of every intellectual's vocabulary; but it is well over a decade before the United States is to experience a corresponding sexual liberation. Stingo reflects this situation with his constant libidinal longings (he is twenty-two), which take up many pages in the novel but which we are spared in Pakula's trimmed-down version of the narrative (he wrote the script as well as directed). In the apartment house where he lives, Stingo occupies the flat just below Sophie (Meryl Streep) and Nathan (Kevin Kline), and he is often kept awake by their enthusiastic lovemaking. Stingo quickly becomes infatuated with Sophie, feelings that are complicated by his close friendship with Nathan.

Sophie's torments have a number of sources, but they arise mostly from the "choice" she was forced to make when arriving at Auschwitz. The doctor who interrogated her gave her the unimaginable ultimatum to decide which of her children would not be "selected." We hear this story only toward the end of both narratives, when Sophie confesses to Stingo that under duress she chose to save her son only to watch a guard carry off her screaming daughter. Because her son also did not survive, her choice ultimately made no difference; most children died at Auschwitz. But the experience of making such a decision has scarred her badly. We know that Sophie drinks heavily and is subject to mood swings. What we do not realize at first is that she constantly lies about her past.

For instance, she characterizes her father as a man who was friendly to Jews during the occupation; but it turns out that he was a violent anti-Semite who wrote a book about the “Jewish problem” in Poland – a book Sophie had typed before the war. As Daniel Schwartz points out in *Imagining the Holocaust*, Sophie’s impossible choice was not only about which child to save but also about what to tell Stingo and Nathan; her telling is shaped by and repeats her trauma (201). In a series of flashbacks, filmed by Pakula in sepia instead of color to indicate past time as well as their different order in reality, Sophie relates her experiences in wartime Poland and in Auschwitz as someone who worked with the Resistance as well as in the household of Camp Commandant Rudolf Höss. In these flashbacks her rhetoric is simpler and more straightforward than Stingo’s, which lends credibility to her stories even when she is lying.

Nathan Landau also creates a past to fit his needs. He tells Stingo he has a master’s degree in biology and works in a laboratory on experiments of great importance; but he is in fact a paranoid schizophrenic who uses recreational drugs instead of the medicinal ones needed to control his problems. In the laboratory where he is employed he is little more than a file clerk and an occasional librarian who retains his job through the intervention of his brother, an influential doctor. Nathan is also subject to angry fits of jealousy about Sophie, particularly with regard to Stingo, and his personal Holocaust library (an anachronism given the 1947 setting) affords him the narrative structure to play the Jewish victim, on occasion, to Sophie’s Polish perpetrator. He calls her, in one of his violent moments, a “Polish whore,” which causes Stingo to defend her and exacerbate the tension among them. It is the kind of accusation that Nathan makes in order to justify his paranoia, but it is also one that Sophie needs to hear in order to objectify her guilt.

Following his most irrational outburst to date, Nathan disappears and Sophie leaves New York with Stingo, who now gets to act as her rescuer. In recompense for his desire, Sophie finally grants Stingo his sexual initiation, which in the book contains the tremulous overreaction one might expect of an adolescent, but which is more muted on the screen. What seems transformative to Stingo is for Sophie more like the granting of a favor or the payment of a debt. By juxtaposing this episode with Sophie’s revelation of her secret, the film (and also the novel) deliberately links sexual exchange with testimony – a point we will return to in a moment. Stingo and the viewers get to “know” the truth of Sophie’s past, and the horror of the concentration camps, through his long-awaited experience of her body. *Sophie’s Choice*, as both novel and film, may be the ultimate version of pornographic representational strategy: in it the Holocaust becomes a sexual “attraction” that initiates the boy into manhood and artistic maturity. (What the Meryl Streep character thinks about this may be suggested by her consistent mispronunciation of his nickname as the vulgarity “Stinko.”) Leaving Stingo a note, Sophie makes

her suicidal return to Nathan. In the final scene Stingo has returned to their Brooklyn neighborhood to witness the two dead lovers in a back-to-front embrace.

The film is critical of Stingo's role but also guilty of what it criticizes – turning the victim into an object of desire. (We are encouraged to eroticize Streep's Sophie, but we do so at our own peril, turning into "Stinko" when we do.) It is, nonetheless, something like a final statement in the sadomasochistic paradigm of Holocaust representation, with the fake victim (Jewish American) turning the real victim (in this case, Polish Catholic), who is also a perpetrator (because of her "choiceless choice" and because of the work she did with her father), into the oppressor she never really was. Nathan's suicide is also Sophie's murder. He has succeeded in destroying the only survivor he knew well, by taking his murderous self-loathing and turning it toward Sophie. He makes her his victim by pretending to be the victim he never was, and he justifies his own destruction by incorporating hers into his.

The death of the non-Jewish victim, a result of Jewish "victim envy," embodies what some critics consider the most objectionable feature of the story. Cynthia Ozick's pre-publication criticism of the novel, "A Liberal's Auschwitz," set the tone of a line of a critique that has been recapitulated by D.G. Myers.⁹ According to Myers, "Styron vigorously criticizes Jewish scholars and writers for [a] 'narrow' and specifically Jewish interpretation [of the Holocaust]. In its stead he advances a universalist, even metaphysical interpretation, understanding the Holocaust as the embodiment of absolute evil, which threatened humanity as a whole" (500). Styron, in other words, sought to show that non-Jews suffered too, a universalizing perspective which, positively expressed, makes the Holocaust the property of everyone, but negatively expressed, denies the specificity of Jewish victimization, thereby perpetuating, in a liberal fashion, the "erasure" of Judaism also implicit in the Nazi ideology of a "pure" state. The universalizing perspective is, as we have pointed out, typical of those representational paradigms focusing on passion and the body. It is perhaps more muted in the film than the book because of Streep's previous performance as Inga Helms Weiss in *Holocaust*, the TV miniseries. (Streep's character there is Christian, but she is married to a Jew).

This is not the place to enter the debate about the uniqueness of the Holocaust.¹⁰ However, it is worth noting that Styron's universalizing gesture, the subject of so much

⁹ For a brief but thorough account of the critical reception of Styron's novel see Bryan Cheyette's "Liberal Anti-Judaism and the Victims of Modernity." Alvin Rosenfeld makes an argument especially relevant to our purposes: "By reducing the war against the Jews to a sexual combat, [Styron] has misappropriated Auschwitz and used it as little more than the erotic centerpiece of a new Southern Gothic Novel" (165). See also Eric J. Sundquist's expansion of this argument in the context of Polish memorial culture that Styron would have been familiar with from a visit to Auschwitz and Styron's ongoing preoccupation with Nat Turner: "What is most pornographic...is not the graphic detail of Stingo's escapades with Sophie but rather Styron's attempt to endow them, in the context of the Final Solution, with sacrificial, redemptive significance" (122).

¹⁰ See D.G. Myers' article for a summary of the arguments in favor of Holocaust uniqueness. See Also Mintz's comparison of Holocaust "exceptionalism" to "constructivism" (38 ff.). Alan Rosenbaum's edited volume *Is the Holocaust Unique?* contains important perspectives on both sides of the debate.

criticism, depends on both the clearest dramatization of the erotic paradigm that has always served comparativist ends, and also on its ultimate transformation. The passionate experience in *Sophie's Choice* is a trope for both the spectacle of violence *and* for the transmission of memory which, significantly, destroys the survivor. There are two transgressions here: the first, which we have already analyzed, involves showing what should not be shown (pornography), the second acts out what cannot be said (memory as symptom). Sophie's unnecessary death becomes the figure of her impossible choice, and while it may answer the guilt she feels in her own psyche, it remains inexplicable to Stingo, who is nevertheless left to "bear witness." He bears witness because of his emotional and erotic investment in Sophie, and because of the unwitting role he may have played in the reenactment of her trauma, i.e., necessitating her secondary "choice" between Nathan and himself.

But what choice does Sophie have? The "choiceless" nature of her choice, to borrow Lawrence Langer's terminology, marks the other aspect of Styron/Pakula's universalizing strategy, namely replacing the eroticized victim with the more troubling paradigm of the tormented mother. Sophie's breakdown makes her ultimately less a potentially desirable body than an extra-moral entity, forced outside the bounds of conventional morality because of her own impossible decision. Langer says the "choiceless choice" is the result of the extreme situation of the concentration camps, "where critical decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that in no way was of the victim's own choosing" (72). Such situations make heroic actions, and even conventional morality, impossible. Because of this, Langer urges us to become sensitive to the conflicts and contradictions in survivor narratives that are characteristic of their telling. Readers and listeners must be open to *feeling* testimony, which Shoshana Felman vividly defines as "bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (5). *Sophie's Choice*, perhaps because of its deliberately universalizing strategy, effects the transition from pornography's acting out of passion to trauma theory's reformulation of passion in terms of suffering, sympathy, and memory.

Holocaust pornography, then, is a precursor to trauma theory. One grows out of the other in the way the "choiceless choice" emerges from the eroticized victim in *Sophie's Choice*. In both cases, feeling makes up for a perceived failure of representation or understanding: what pornography dramatizes as the passion of desire, trauma theory describes as the passion of pain and memory. This may represent a return to the sentimental roots of pornographic conventions, the belief – or the hope – that the spectacle of

suffering can serve some moral purpose. It is certainly a return to a powerful insight Hannah Arendt had about the camps as early as 1948. Her essay “The Concentration Camps” repeats a story told by Albert Camus the previous year (in *Twice a Year*), “of a woman in Greece, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which among her three children should be killed” (Arendt 757). She offers the account to illustrate the principle she sees at work in concentration camps: the destruction of human beings first as juridical entities, then as moral subjects, and finally as individuals. Arendt believed that totalitarianism strove to make all individuals superfluous (761). She also predicted something that has been horribly borne out by the history of the long twentieth-century: the repeated implementation of genocide as a means of obtaining political objectives. Humanity disappears as it becomes clear that “man’s ‘nature’ is only ‘human’ in so far as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man” (759). The unnaturalness of humanity might, after all, be the ultimate commentary on our desire to witness other people’s suffering, or empathize with it, without ever seeming to do enough to prevent it.

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