Stücke: Graphic Vignettes and the Haptic Response in László Nemes's *Saul fia*

Sarah Wald[1]

prasog@uvic.ca

Abstract

This article examines László Nemes's film *Saul fia* (2015) and its visual and sonic use of brutalized human bodies to induce a haptic response in its audience. Presented out of focus and often at the periphery of the shot, the visual frame of human death causes viewers of the film to recoil into the centre of the frame—a space typically occupied by the film's protagonist, Saul Ausländer. This article argues that these visually and sonically induced haptic triggers, and the claustrophobia that results, tether the audience to Ausländer to re-centre the viewer's gaze as that of a companion rather than perpetrator. Drawing from extant literature on cinematic haptics and filmic representations of the Holocaust, this article engages with contemporary discourses on graphic Holocaust representations in contemporary feature-length films to examine the impact of graphic imagery and haptic cinematics on the perspective and ability of the viewer to subvert the perpetrator gaze.

Keywords: Holocaust film; haptic cinema; *Sonderkommando*; *Saul fia*; postmemory

Introduction

How photographic and filmic representations of the Holocaust are used has provoked long-standing debate that is central to Holocaust studies (Anderton, 2019, p. 500; Margitházi, 2020, p. 83). At the core of this debate is the concern that the potential for a Holocaust image to educate its viewer through historical veracity comes at the expense of desensitizing the viewer, and that the repeated use of that image may facilitate the creation of a historical metanarrative that discourages critical analyses. By the 1980s, discourses on the potential limitations of representability were further complicated by the advent of Holocaust feature-length films that created and packaged images and narratives from the Holocaust into an accessible cinematic format. Since the precipitation of the Holocaust feature film as a genre in the late 1990s, contemporary filmmakers, predominantly belonging to Marianne Hirsch's (2001) "postmemory" generations (pp. 9–11), sought to challenge established cinematic and narrative conventions by incorporating experimental and extrageneric[2] filmic techniques to alter the ways in which audiences engaged with, and derived meaning from, contemporary Holocaust films (Margitházi, 2020, pp. 83–84).

While postmillennial Holocaust films have challenged these generic constraints in many ways, the use of highly tactile images and sounds to induce physical responses in viewers is of specific interest to this article. How these tactile images and sounds, referred to as "haptic cinematics," function within a Holocaust film to guide the gaze of the audience in a manner that challenges spectator identity formation is examined through close analyses of several scenes in László Nemes's *Saul fia* (2015). Set in Auschwitz during the autumn of 1944, *Saul fia* follows the final 36 hours in the life of Hungarian *Sonderkommando* Saul Ausländer.[3] Against the backdrop of *Sonderkommando* resistance efforts, including the *Sonderkommando* revolt and creation of the *Sonderkommando* photographs in late 1944, Ausländer spends his final day winding through the camp in search of a rabbi to bury the body of a young boy said to be Ausländer's son. Controversial for its visceral imagery and representation of extermination machinery, *Saul fia* provides an intimate portrait of the daily life of a *Sonderkommando* (Ratner, 2016, p. 61).

This article examines director László Nemes's visual and aural depictions of brutalized human remains in *Saul fia*: mirroring the structure of a vignette, blurred and fragmented corpses often border the mise-en-scène to produce a frame of human death. As a result, viewers avert their gaze to the centre of the frame—a location that is typically occupied by protagonist Saul Ausländer. This article argues that the haptic triggers induced by the graphic exhibition of human remains, and the claustrophobia cultivated by the position of corpses within the frame, re-centre the viewer's gaze as that of a companion to Ausländer.

Before engaging with the film itself, this article reviews literature foundational to Judith Keilbach's (2009) examination of the historical veracity of Holocaust photographs. Keilbach's thorough analysis of how photographs establish and uphold historical narratives about the Holocaust underpins a significant portion of this article's analytic framework. In addition, Keilbach's analysis of Holocaust photographs is cited to illuminate the pitfalls of relying on Holocaust metanarratives that are rooted in symbolism as well as the need for ongoing critical engagement when working with visual materials related to the Holocaust. Having reflected on the role of the photograph in constructing historical narratives, this article shifts from photography to

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[2] The term "extrageneric" refers to cinematic attributes not commonly used within a given film genre.

[3] "*Sonderkommando*" refers to inmates forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria of Nazi extermination camps in exchange for improved accommodations. Often, these prisoners were murdered after a few months of work (Wallen, 2021, pp. 325–326, 330, 334).

cinema to focus exclusively on Holocaust feature films. After outlining the development of the Holocaust film as a genre, this article explores how contemporary filmmakers have challenged generic conventions through incorporating haptic cinematics. Concepts addressed in previous sections then converge in a close reading of the mise-en-scène of *Saul fia* to categorize haptic elements, explain their organization within the frame, and highlight the predicted physiological responses induced. Having established how haptic cinematics are used, this article evaluates how these techniques influence the viewer's gaze and inhibits their ability to establish a sense of kinship with the protagonist, which subverts the spectator-victim identity endemic to the Holocaust film.

Photography and Historical Narrative

In her analysis of the value of Holocaust photographs for representing historical truth, Keilbach (2009) has provided a succinct overview of the main arguments for and against their use (pp. 54–76). Markedly, Keilbach examined the claims of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, who concur that it is not possible to accurately ascertain what is depicted in an image, nor the events that surround it, without the viewer constructing that context (p. 56). Further, literary theorist Roland Barthes (1991) has suggested that captions guide the viewer to "the right level of perception" and present a fixed account from myriad interpretations within the dynamic process of image-making (pp. 28–29). Barthes's argument was derived in part from Benjamin's view of the camera as a transformative intermediary between the human eye and subject, which manipulates reality through enlarging, slowing down, or halting the subject in a process that unearths elements unfamiliar to the naked eye (1968, p. 236). According to Benjamin, the camera's capacity for mechanical reproduction renders it the most serviceable method of exhibition (p. 225) due to mass spectatorship of the cinema (pp. 234–235).

Contributing to the argument against the historical veracity of the photograph, essayist Susan Sontag has claimed that repeated exposure to images of atrocity may numb viewers into passivity (2003, p. 108) or may produce fractured or untethered views of historical events decontextualized from the narrative flow of the world to which images are tied (2013, p. 544). Furthering Sontag's claim, cultural theorist Barbie Zelizer (1998) has argued that repeated exposure may reduce graphic images to "familiar visual cues" or to symbols (p. 158). Similarly, literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky (2015) has referred to the reduction of images to symbols as "algebraizing [or] automatizing a thing" so that it is neither fully spoken of nor perceived and, thus, "becomes nothing and disappears," regardless of whether it exists as a tangible object or unconscious experience (p. 162). Questioning the value of context, political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1962) has discussed the risk of misattribution in her critique of the concentration camp images taken by liberating forces (pp. 445–446). Often used to depict daily life within the camps, Arendt has suggested that these images are inaccurate since they depict the *result* of life within the camps and what remained after liberation (p. 446). As Keilbach has outlined, the improper contextualization of Holocaust images is especially troubling given the prominence of photographs taken by perpetrators affiliated with the Third Reich for official and personal use (2009, pp. 62–64).

For better or worse, Holocaust images play an important role in symbol-making and establishing collective memory.[4] In support of Zelizer's claims, Keilbach has examined three popular Holocaust images to unveil how symbolism may encourage viewers to uncritically construct inaccurate contexts (2009, pp. 68–74). In addition, Keilbach has drawn attention to media scholar Nicole Wiedenmann's reading of Clément Chéroux (2004), who has suggested that repeated use may reduce an image to a symbolic husk (cited by Keilbach, 2009, p. 68). However, Keilbach's analysis attests to the existence of a metanarrative within the collective memory of the Holocaust that enables viewers of Holocaust images to recognize and connect with familiar symbols and motifs. Rather than depreciating with repeated use, popular images may call both new and stored information to the forefront the viewer's attention to shape their collective understanding of the Holocaust (Keilbach, 2009, p. 69). As inferred by the memory framework of Aleida and Jan Assmann (2002), moments of reflection generated by viewers' engagement with established Holocaust symbols may facilitate a renegotiation of the relationship between individual postmemory and collective historical metanarratives (Assmann, 1995, pp. 56, 130). In her exploration of photography's ability to aid in the construction of the past, literary scholar Astrid Erll (2011) has employed Marianne Hirsche's concept of "postmemory" (as a form of cross-generational historical transmission) to argue that a family photograph may have value to historians capable of extracting data from the subjects' clothing, facial features, or setting; however, for second- or third-generation family members, a photograph rich in historical value may be legible only to those well-versed in "family stories" (pp. 135–136). As those who witnessed the Holocaust perish, younger generations of memory-bearers must rely on photographs to retain "postmemories" of the events experienced by family members (p. 136).

Alongside engaging with collective memory and postmemory, Keilbach (2009) has examined how images confirm the validity of memory. In the weeks that followed liberation, allied armies forced civilians to visit the concentration camps; often these civilians disclosed that viewing photographs depicting the aftermath of the camps confirmed the reality of their own surreal tour (p. 66). For civilians who did not enter the camps, and who may have initially attributed their reported brutality to exaggeration or hysteria, such images may have educated those who doubted the camps' exterminatory function (p. 67). The confirmatory feature of the photograph is thus attributed by Barthes (2000) to its physicality, which enables the viewer to touch the image as a proxy for the photographed subject (pp. 87–89). It is precisely the tactile nature of the image-viewing experience that may convince the unconverted. In Barthes's review of the photographic process (2000), the physicality of the photograph is said to require a tangible subject to emanate light, which is subsequently captured and displayed in the resulting image. This process of transmission not only offers the viewer proof that the photographed subject once existed; it also links the subject and the spectator as if by an umbilical cord of light (pp. 80–81). As noted by Sontag in her description of photographs, this phenomenon touched her "like the delayed rays of a star" (as cited in Barthes, 2000, p. 80). As established within the reviewed literature, the confirmatory value of the photograph is consistently linked to its tangibility as an object.

However, confirmation of historical veracity is not the only attribute affiliated with the physicality of the photograph. In *Camera Lucida* (2000), Barthes has suggested that the photograph may inflict physical damage upon its viewer. Referring to this experience as *punctum*, Barthes has described this process as the physical wounding, stinging, or bruising inflicted by a

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[4] "Collective memory" refers to the "creation of shared versions of the past … through interaction, communication, media, and institutions within small social groups as well as large cultural communities" (Erll, 2011 p. 15).

captivating element of an image (p. 27). Unlike the tangibility of the photograph or the physicality of the umbilical cord, the role of *punctum* is not to confirm the exactitude nor certainty of the photograph's subject but, rather, to expand the photograph beyond its frame to create a "blind field" (p. 57). Typically reserved for the moving images of cinema, Barthes has defined this blind field as a state that unfastens previously fixed elements so that subjects and objects may flow in and out of a photographic frame (p. 59). Hence, the fluidity of the blind field compels viewers to contemplate components of the image beyond the visible mise-en-scène—a process that may redress Sontag's concern (2013) that fractured or compartmentalized historical narratives may be generated via photographic analyses (pp. 22–23). Significantly, Barthes's scholarship (2000) illuminates a point of convergence between photography and cinema. By expounding on the infliction of a physical wound, the generation of a blind field, and the subsequent contemplation of the wounding element, Barthes outlines the sequence of events frequently experienced by moviegoers when subjected to haptic cinematics: "I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think" (2000, p. 21).

The Holocaust on Film

As the world enters a "postmemory era" (Margitházi, 2020, p. 83), arguments surrounding the use of Holocaust images have produced increasingly complex discourses that include the use of created images to represent the Holocaust (Feigelson & Portuges, 2017, pp. 28–29). The advent of Holocaust feature films, in particular, sparked significant controversy regarding the ethical representation and boundaries of cinematic representability. At the centre of scholarly literature on filmic representations of the Holocaust are three productions: Marvin Chomsky's *Holocaust* (1978) television miniseries, Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). The adaptation of the Holocaust film to fit the generic constraints of a typical Hollywood film—in combination with filmmakers' adherence to a long-standing agreement that the mechanics of death within the gas chambers should not be visually depicted on film—has led to the production of the Holocaust film as a structured genre with recurring tropes reminiscent of the American melodrama (Langford, 1999, p. 24). In particular, *Schindler's List* and *Holocaust* are credited with having established these conventions and are often criticized for their perceived roles in commodifying the Holocaust as a formulaic and accessible form of family entertainment (p. 24). As scholar Barry Langford (1999) has explained, the accessibility of commercial films is begotten through the pursuit of popularity, which relies on "referential and performative conventions whose verisimilitude is measured in circular fashion, not against their relevance or applicability to the 'real world'" (p. 26). In the case of the Holocaust film, this pursuit has led to simplifications perpetuating historical inaccuracies that erase the specificity of Jewish experiences of the Holocaust.

One inaccuracy propagated by the Holocaust film is the myth of the "passive Jewish victim" and sentimental "good Nazi" (Margitházi, 2020, p. 83). Both *Schindler's List* and *The Pianist* (2002) centre on slight and effeminate Jewish men employed in white-collar occupations, who maintain a soft-spoken level-headedness that contrasts with the disposition of other minor characters. The resistance efforts of these protagonists are usually non-violent and rely on the goodwill of a charismatic National Socialist with chiseled features and a recently recalibrated moral compass. This dynamic is perhaps most visible in the relationship between Władysław Szpilman and Wilm Hosenfeld in *The Pianist* (2002) and Itzahk Stern and Oskar Schindler in *Schindler's List.* Consequently, the repeated use of this formulaic approach reduces the complex personal histories of Jewish men to easily accessible symbolic motifs (Langford, 1999, p. 26),

which Zelizer (1998) and Keilbach (2009) fear may propagate both critical disengagement and historical inaccuracies (p. 158; p. 68). In her critique of *Holocaust*, literary scholar Susanne Knittel (2010) has drawn attention to the normalization of the "Jewish Other" in Holocaust films (p. 84). This process of normalization often occurs in feature films that centre on assimilated, bourgeois, Jewish families (p. 84). Initially, this characterization may facilitate audience identification with Jewish protagonists, such as the Weiss family in *Holocaust* (p. 84). However, repeated emphasis on culturally assimilated families may also work to establish a Holocaust metanarrative that neglects to address the experiences of observant Jews or Jewish families with lower socio-economic status. Crucially, the Holocaust film's reliance on theatrically successful yet historically inaccurate motifs has cultivated a metanarrative that invites non-Jewish spectators to uncritically appropriate the perspectives of Jewish victims.

In direct opposition to these conventions, scholars have praised *Shoah* as an ideal approach to representing the Holocaust due to the film's absence of archival footage, 9 hour running time, emphasis on survivor and perpetrator interviews, and perceived lack of aestheticization (Langford, 1999, pp. 28–29). However, Langford's (1999) analysis of *Shoah* has challenged such praise by highlighting the film's reliance on the direction of filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who was extensively involved in the staging of witness interviews (pp. 23–40). Under Lanzmann's guidance, witnesses were encouraged to re-enact their concentration camp duties, which included cutting hair or singing for camp guards, as they provided their testimonies. Langford has argued that *Shoah*'s re-enactment of witness persecution, alongside detailed verbal accounts and intimate shots of reconstructed crematoria, casts doubt on Lanzmann's claim that *Shoah* is a non-representational film devoid of aestheticization (pp. 28, 31). Similarly, Langford has questioned the feasibility of creating a 9 hour film without addressing the issue of form and, thereby, the issue of aesthetic. Indeed, Langford has postulated that, in rejecting the aesthetic strategies of genre films, *Shoah* not only subverts the generic constraints of Hollywood films but also stipulates the appropriate aesthetic framework for representing that which Lanzmann has asserted is unrepresentable (p. 28).

Having outlined how the Holocaust has been cinematically packaged to fit the generic constraints of the melodrama feature film, this section considers the impact of this packaging on the viewer's capacity for critical engagement. In addition to the ethical issues that attend the commodification of the Holocaust, the reduction of complex events to a predictable framework may prompt cursory engagements with and potential misunderstandings of the Holocaust. Simplistic, generic representations of the Holocaust may resemble the later stages of the repeatedly copied image: even when closely examined, minute details are no longer made available to those in pursuit of deeper understandings. To combat the loss of nuanced representations of the Holocaust, film studies scholar Beja Margitházi (2020) has argued that postmemory filmmakers centre "new 'frames of memory transmission'" to compensate for the growing lack of connection with living Holocaust survivors (p. 84). To bridge this gap, filmmakers have explored unique topics within Holocaust studies using advanced technologies to emphasize subjective, corporeal experiences over the presentation of narrative stories (pp. 84–85).[5] As such, postmillennial Holocaust cinema boasts a unique capacity for engaging with the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust (p. 82). Uniting Bennet's sense memory, Hirsch's postmemory, and Assmann's empathetic mode of memory transmission, Margitházi (2020) has argued that this shift in cinematic focus has

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[5] This cinematic shift was accomplished in part by examining neglected or controversial facets of Holocaust studies or by subverting Holocaust myths.

resulted in films that bypass viewer cognition by transmitting a "seeing truth" rather than a "thinking truth" (p. 85). Reminiscent of the literary theories of Shklovsky (2015), postmillennial filmmakers have challenged the automatizing symbolism of precursory Holocaust films by attempting to "create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing" (p. 162). Ultimately, the postmillennial pursuit to increase the viewer's "complexity of perception" (p. 162) is realized through haptic cinematics.

In his analysis of early German war films, scholar Jaimey Fisher (2014) has revealed that audience members may experience expansive and constrictive bodily sensations when presented with highly tactile images and sounds (pp. 60, 65). Positive haptic stimuli, such as watching soldiers cup warm drinks in their hands, may cause viewers' bodies to expand and relax (p. 61). Conversely, negative haptic stimuli, such as watching a soldier grimace in pain or hearing the rattle of a machine gun, may cause viewers to unconsciously constrict their bodies as if shrinking from a perceived threat (p. 62). Fisher's description of these expansive and constrictive motions is further enriched by the inclusion of two additional forms of involuntary movement discussed by Julian Hanich (2010) and Carl Plantinga (2009): somatic empathy and motor mimicry. The first concept (somatic empathy) encompasses a viewer's sudden awareness of their body, whereas the second concept (motor mimicry) refers to the movement of an audience member's body to mimic the movement of the affected body part onscreen (pp. 59–60). Through this lens, film spectatorship has the potential to be a multisensory experience reminiscent of the viewers' physical engagement with Keilbach's photographs and Barthes's *punctum*—particularly in instances that incorporate "sensual details, bodily sensations, and inner points of view" (Margitházi, 2020, p. 86).

Haptic visuals and sounds bypass cognitive forms of communication by imprinting information on the body to facilitate a somatic connection between the viewer and the film (Fisher, 2014, p. 51). Thus, this body-to-film connection is unique because it does not require the audience to connect with the film's characters (Fisher, 2014, p. 66; Vincze, 2016, p. 109). Rather, effective communication through haptic cinematography is accomplished by relating physical sensations familiar to audiences (even if only obliquely)[6] through visually or aurally tactile elements within the scene, such as textures, weights, and temperatures. Through this process, filmmakers can generate a somatic relationship between viewers and potentially unrecognizable characters, such as victims persecuted during the Holocaust. Traits endemic to postmillennial Holocaust cinema include an emphasis on subjective, personal Holocaust experiences, the rejection of the generic conventions that define the Holocaust film, the integration of experimental and extrageneric cinematics, and the use of haptic cinematography to bypass cognitive engagement. All of these postmillennial Holocaust cinematic traits converge in László Nemes's *Saul fia*. Unlike the traditional Holocaust film, *Saul fia* utilizes filmic techniques common to the horror film genre, including close-up shots, chaotic and disorienting soundscapes, scant dialogue, offscreen sounds to expand the cinematic frame, and graphic depictions of human remains (Fisher, 2014, p. 56; Vincze, 2016, p. 120). Although fundamental to the horror genre, the incorporation of these cinematic techniques into mainstream cinematic genres is culturally subversive due to the prevalence of discourses that question the boundaries of the cinematic representability of the Holocaust (Vincze, 2016, p. 120).

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[6] Fisher (2014) has suggested that viewers relate more easily to the sensation of drowning than being shot since being submerged in water and/or unable to catch one's breath is a more common experience (p. 62). Although viewers are unlikely to have been in close proximity to piled corpses, discomfort from a lack of personal space provides another avenue of connection (p. 64).

Despite its overwhelming critical acclaim, some reviewers found Nemes's integration of postmillennial cinematic techniques gratuitously violent and distastefully voyeuristic (Wollaston, 2021, p. 139). Filmed entirely on a hand-held camera using 35 mm film—a nod to the physicality of the archival footage and images utilized by the auteur—*Saul fia* features countless extended tracking shots tightly focused on Ausländer's expressionless face (Margitházi, 2020, p. 88; Ratner, 2016, p. 62). Nemes's use of short focus camerawork emphasizes the protagonist and relegates the brutal mechanics of Auschwitz to the edges of the frame like a sadistic vignette. In addition to challenging the generic framework of the Holocaust film, these attributes produce a "post memory trauma sensescape" (Margitházi, 2020, p. 83) that facilitates haptic engagement with the audience (Auerhahn, 2021, p. 425). Indeed, the mise-en-scène of *Saul fia* consists of a cinescape that bombards the viewer with sensory information to establish a body-to-film connection that enables the transmission of Holocaust postmemory. Since the film's release, scholars Beja Margitházi (2020) and Teréz Vincze (2016) have examined how Nemes renegotiates the boundaries of acceptable Holocaust representation by pushing collective memories toward the unrepresentable experiences of "true witnesses" through haptic visuals and sound (Auerhahn, 2021, p. 453). However, such scholarship tends to centre on the filmic connection between the audience and characters while overlooking the presence of corpses within the film. Perhaps due to an unconscious need to maintain "the zone of privacy" (Wollaston, 2021, p. 132), Nemes's graphic and ubiquitous use of human remains is not remarked on, save as a means to reflect upon the film's transgressive nature or Ausländer's emotional detachment (Vincze, 2016, p. 114; Wollaston, 2021, p. 139).[7] In contrast, this article argues that examining the depersonalized corpses and the mechanisms of their extermination illuminates the pivotal role these bodies play in the mise-en-scène by inducing a haptic response in the audience that tethers the viewer's gaze to Ausländer.

Haptic Cinematics in *Saul fia*

Although most of the bodies within *Saul fia* are blurred and relegated to the edges of the screen where they exist predominantly outside of the frame, there is one instance in which the audience is exposed to the full extent of Nazi medical terror (Nemes, 2015, 00:11:58–00:12:50). As Ausländer enters an examination room, he is confronted by an unblurred, mutilated body on an examination table. Depersonalized and objectified by the corpse's obscured face and use as a corporeal playground for Nazi medical doctors, the body lacks any indication of personhood. The shot-reaction-shot that follows accosts the audience with Ausländer's lack of emotional response to the body. As the camera cuts back to the examination room, the body is now blurred and, aside from a fleeting glance as Ausländer walks past, the scene continues as if the body had never existed. Building from the framework established by Fisher, the viewer's confrontation with this scene results in a constrictive bodily response. The absence of limbs on the corpse is likely to stimulate a haptic response in the audience by drawing greater awareness to their own hands and feet. Yet, during the reaction shot and the responding tracking shot that closes in on Ausländer's face, Ausländer's lack of emotion becomes the dominant element in the frame. Thus, after the audience experiences shock from sighting the corpse, and reflexively recoils from the implicit threat of bodily harm, Ausländer's expressionless presence in this scene provides a haven from the discomfort of continuous negative haptic stimulation. Although Ausländer's stoic presence within

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[7] Szidonia Haragos (2021) has addressed the objectifying process of extermination in *Saul fia* to emphasize the production of corpses rather than the deaths of people (p. 103).

the mise-en-scène functions as a refuge from constant haptic stimuli, this respite does not prevent Ausländer's expressionlessness from unsettling and provoking cognitive engagement in the audience. In fact, Ausländer's incongruous demeanor is repeatedly addressed in interviews and film analyses as a deeply disturbing element of the film that prompts viewers to reflect on the experiences of the *Sonderkommandos*. Yet, in the context of haptic stimuli, Ausländer's expression lacks both the tactility intrinsic to haptic cinematics and the offensive element associated with negative haptic stimuli. In essence, Ausländer's presence does not transmit sensory information to the audience to establish a body-to-film connection; instead, Ausländer's incongruence transmits cognitive information to the viewer. In contrast to Barthes's *punctum,* Ausländer's presence does not assail the viewer to induce a wounding that facilitates reflection (2000, pp. 26, 53). Rather, Ausländer's distressing response to his surroundings exists inwardly as a form of negative space that attracts the viewer.

In contrast to the corpse on the examination table, the majority of the bodies within *Saul fia* are cinematically amputated by the edges of the screen and typically function to border the frame while simultaneously expanding it outward to visually indicate to the audience that more exists beyond their tight proximity to Ausländer. *Saul fia* utilizes blurred bodies to generate a haptic response through a combination of delay of density and flesh tones.[8] Similar to the amputated body discussed earlier, blurred bodies are deprived of their personhood through their lack of identifying features. Shown as segmented portions, the camera amputates and mutilates the bodies of corpses, which are referred to only as *Stücke* ("pieces"). Furthermore, when blurred and fragmented bodies are tightly packed into the mise-en-scène (Nemes, 2015, 00:16:10), the result is a visually dense frame that requires close examination to decipher. The realization that the frame is comprised of corpses causes the viewer to recoil; thus, delay of density draws the viewer toward the bodies before the negative haptic response repels the viewer.

Moreover, in contrast to the murky brown and gray tones that comprise most frames, the pale flesh of bodies gleam against the interior of the gas chamber. Although blurred, these corporeal tones are immediately recognizable; however, such colours do not necessarily produce a negative haptic response in viewers, particularly during densely packed scenes. In these instances, location and shape also play a pivotal role in transmitting negative haptic stimuli to viewers. Flesh tones seen twisted and stationary on the ground (Nemes, 2015, 00:08:03) or stacked to impossible heights (00:08:28) are unnatural bodily behaviours linked to portrayals of death. Through the tripartite relationship between flesh tone, location, and shape, *Saul fia* utilizes fragmented and blurred bodies to create somatic empathy in the viewer. The proximity of the protagonist to the dead, and the proximity of the dead to other corpses, may elicit a claustrophobic response in the viewer. To explain this response, Fisher (2014) has drawn from Carl Plantinga's concept of "proxemic patterns" to denote filmic transgressions of acceptable social proximity between people (p. 64). Fisher and Plantinga have similarly asserted that, in transgressing social norms, films may elicit intimacy and kinship or disgust and revulsion. In the case of *Saul fia*, these "proxemic patterns" may provoke claustrophobia in viewers (Auerhahn, 2021, p. 424; Vincze, 2016, p. 115).

Thus far, corpses' fragmentation, flesh tone, and proxemic patterns have been evaluated for their capacity to transmit negative haptic information to viewers to establish body-to-film connections. Yet, haptic information is also transferred to viewers once bodies are placed in

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[8] First mentioned by Barthes (1997, p. 73), the concept of "delay of density" is revisited and expanded upon by Keilbach (2009, pp. 74–75).

motion. When the *Stücke* are transported from the gas chambers to the crematoria, they are depersonalized by their pliability and "dead weight," which signals to the audience that a bodily threat looms in close proximity. When these bodies are placed in motion, they are dragged along the floor or are carried by the *Sonderkommandos*. In the case of the latter, the unnatural shape of blurred flesh tones in motion catches the viewer's attention. The ragdoll arc of a swinging arm or the indiscernible features of a head bent too far back on its neck function in the same way as the sight of immobile flesh tones on the floor or in a pile. Furthermore, when dragged, the motion adds an aural haptic element to the features observed. Within the film's chaotic soundscape, images of *Sonderkommandos* hauling bodies are accompanied by the thick dragging of flesh across the hard floor of the gas chamber. Already a physical experience in its own right (Vincze, 2016, p. 110), hearing has the capacity to prompt additional haptic stimulation and cause reflexive bodily responses in viewers (Coulthard, 2012, p. 18; Margitházi, 2020, p. 91; Vincze, 2016, p. 110). Together with seeing a slumped body, the viewer can hear its weight being pulled along the ground, which provides new information about the effort required to move the body as well as the condition of the wet concrete surfaces with which the body is in contact. Additionally, when bodies are pulled outside of the frame of the film, off-camera sounds continue to provide viewers with haptic stimulation long after the image has disappeared (Vincze, 2016, p. 112).

Subverting Identity Formation

Understanding how haptic visuals and sounds generate somatic responses in the audience may also provide insight into the perplexing stoicism of the film's protagonist. As director László Nemes confirmed when interviewed, Ausländer's expressionlessness is intentional, and actor Géza Röhrig was directed to play Ausländer as though he, like the audience, was merely responding to the stimuli that surrounded him (Ratner, 2016, p. 59). Thus, as a *Sonderkommando*, Ausländer's life had become so detached and unthinking that he relied on reflex rather than cognition to navigate the camp (p. 62). Similarly, the cinematography of *Saul fia* forces the viewer to move through the film in a way that mirrors Ausländer's chaotic final hours. Nevertheless, these noted similarities between the somatic engagement of Ausländer and the viewer does not facilitate viewer identity formation with Ausländer. Rather, Ausländer's enigmatic stoicism drives a wedge between himself and the viewer, and it is this disconnect that prevents the audience from recognizing themselves in Ausländer, which in turn prevents viewers from using Ausländer's reverse gaze to establish their own identity as Ausländer or as a fellow *Sonderkommando* (Auerhahn, 2021, p. 439; Ratner, 2016, p. 58).[9]

Unlike precursory Holocaust films that utilized archival footage shot from the perspective of perpetrators, or melodramas that encouraged audience identification as a fellow victim, *Saul fia* is constructed to keep the audience in an identity-limbo that simultaneously distances viewers from characters while evoking a sense of disorientation and de-identification that mirrors the characters' own experiences (Ratner, 2016, p. 63). Strikingly, by subverting the audience's ability to identify as characters, *Saul fia* forces viewers to undergo a somatic experience that touches on the self-identity of the characters by transmitting emotional rather than factual information. The viewer's disorientation and lack of identification with Ausländer is further exacerbated by the film's lack of a cohesive narrative, which intentionally renders relationships between characters ambiguous,

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[9] For a more in-depth explanation of the reciprocal relationship between the gaze and reverse gaze on viewer identity-formation, see Daniel Reynolds's (2016) work on Holocaust tourism (pp. 339–340).

violates the established tropes of the Holocaust film genre, and creates space for vastly different interpretations of Ausländer's actions (p. 58). Although Nemes has suggested that Ausländer's actions are intended to confirm the nobility of humanity in the face of oppression, literary scholar Jeffrey Wallen (2021) has convincingly argued that Ausländer's actions are self-indulgent and, if enacted historically, might have threatened the success of *Sonderkommando* resistance plots, such as the *Sonderkommando* revolt of October 1944 and the *Sonderkommando* photographs of August 1944 (p. 331).

Given the off-putting behaviours previously noted, Ausländer is constructed to be so unrelatable that the viewer remains cognitively estranged from, and cannot foster a sense of kinship with, the film's protagonist. Nevertheless, the experiences of Ausländer and the viewer converge in their shared sense of disorientation and receptivity to somatic information. In addition to this point of experiential convergence, Nemes employs cinematography that collapses the physical distance between Ausländer and the viewer. This collapse is accomplished by placing the viewer in close proximity to Ausländer through close-up shots, intimate camera angles, and Ausländer's presence in nearly every frame of the film. Even within frames intended to highlight different components, Ausländer is included, often at odds with what would be aesthetically pleasing within the mise-en-scène. This staging becomes especially conspicuous in graphic scenes in which Ausländer is the only onscreen presence not exhibiting negative haptic visuals or sounds. As a result, Ausländer's expressionlessness may provide a reprieve from the otherwise relentless haptic bombardment experienced by the audience. Through identity subversion and intimate cinematography, viewers are likely to rely on Ausländer as a point of safety and guide within the hellscape of the film.

Conclusion

As the world gradually transitions into the postmemory era (Margitházi, 2020, p. 83), our global collective memory of the Holocaust continues to outgrow the containers built to house those memories.[10] Sometimes memory expands beyond the boundaries of the container, demanding new forms of engagement and transmission as technological advances allow. In other cases, scholars may open the lid to discover its contents have changed shape or, perhaps, had been incorrectly stored this whole time. In all likelihood, the degree to which a container is appropriately shaped or disastrously malformed will continue to fuel debate. As third- and fourth-generation survivors, scholars, and artists engage with the legacy of the Holocaust, our collective understanding of the Holocaust will continue to change as well. The willingness of third-generation survivors, such as director László Nemes, to use critical examination and technological advances to challenge the generic conventions of representability in Holocaust films enables viewers to address issues of the gaze, identity formation, and representation at the heart of Holocaust discourses. Nemes's incorporation of haptic audiovisual techniques more commonly associated with the horror film genre facilitates the transmission of somatic experiences that transcend mere factual information. This shift in emphasis, from the cognitive to the somatic and from the objective to the subjective, renegotiates the relationship between the film's audience and its subject to subvert both the victim-perpetrator and victim-saviour cinematic trope. As seen in *Saul fia*, the postmemory generation transgresses filmic conventions to explore contentious facets of Holocaust metanarratives that, ultimately, generate greater viewer engagement with the after-images of the Holocaust.

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[10] For an in-depth analysis of how the Holocaust is contained within and outgrows its representational containment, see the scholarship of Oren Baruch Stier (2020).

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