



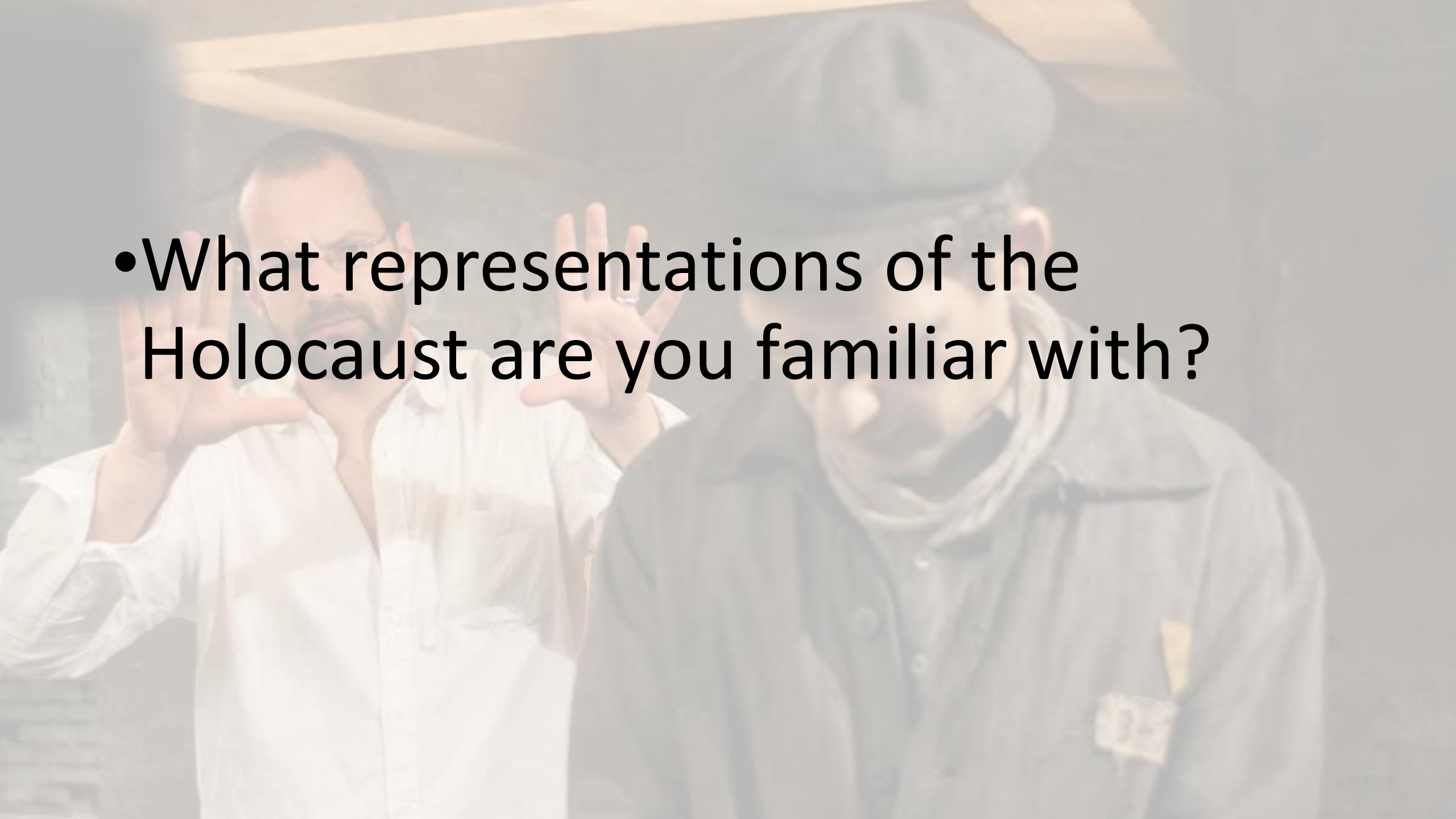
‘Poetry After Auschwitz?’: *Son of Saul* and the Problems of Holocaust Representation



Theodor Adorno:

“Cultural criticism finds itself with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. **To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.** And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.”

- Theodor Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society,’ *Prisms* translated by Samuel & Sherry Weber (London: Garden City Press, 1967). p.

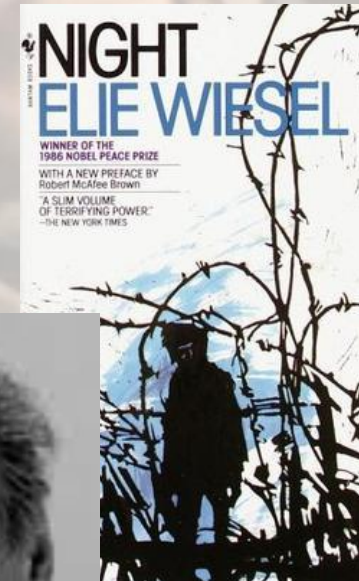
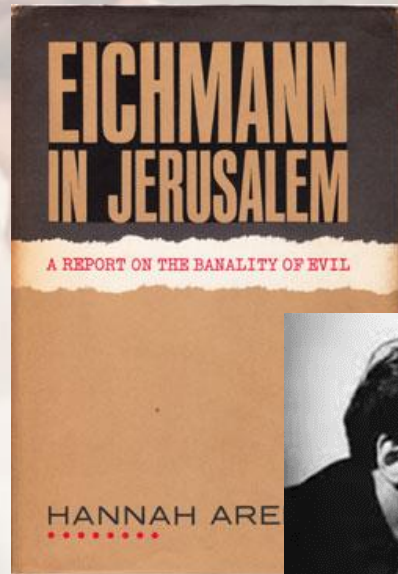


- What representations of the Holocaust are you familiar with?

Two key approaches have predominated in writing and thinking about the Holocaust:

“The
banality
of evil”
(Hannah
Arendt)

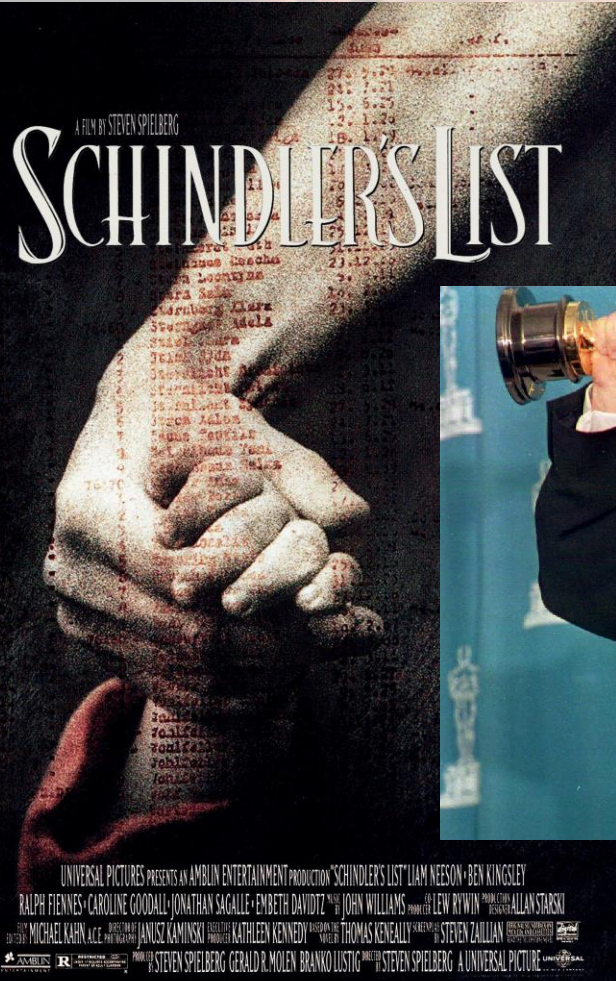
REALIST vs ANTIREALIST



“Auschwitz
cannot be
explained
nor
realised”
(Elie Wiesel)

These map onto some of the debates surrounding Holocaust cinema:

REALIST vs ANTIREALIST



You are about to see one of the most important, affecting, talked-about films of the decade—Claude Lanzmann's monumental epic on the Holocaust, **SHOAH**.

SHOAH contains none of the horrifying images we expect from a film about the Holocaust. Instead we are presented with an assemblage of witnesses—death camp survivors and Nazi functionaries—whose combined testimony amounts to one of the most shattering human documents ever recorded.

SHOAH tells the untellable, makes us believe the unbelievable. Yet **SHOAH** is never morbid—it is infused throughout with a seemingly miraculous appreciation for the beauty and meaning of life.

SHOAH is an experience you'll never forget.

SHOAH

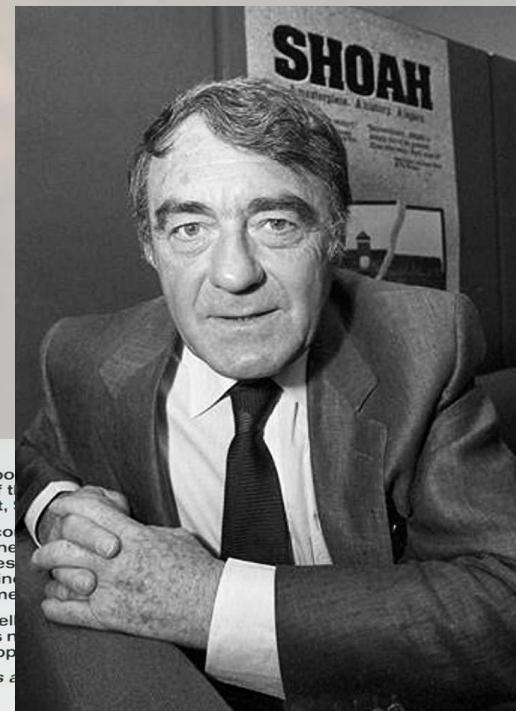
A FILM BY CLAUDE LANZMANN



REALIST vs ANTIREALIST

“[The Holocaust is] unique in that it erects a ring of fire around itself, a borderline that cannot be crossed because there is a certain ultimate degree of horror that cannot be transmitted. To claim it is possible to do so is to be guilty of the most serious transgression.”

- Claude Lanzmann (1925–2018), ‘Holocauste, la représentation impossible,’ *Le Monde*, 3 March 1994; translated as ‘Why Spielberg Has Distorted the Truth,’ *Guardian Weekly*, 3 April 1994. Cited by Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘Schindler's List Is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,’ *Critical Inquiry* 22:2 (Winter, 1996), p. 301.



You are about to see a film about the Holocaust, a film about the bludge of witness whose combining human documents SHOAH tells. Yet SHOAH is not a miraculous approach. SHOAH is a

SHOAH

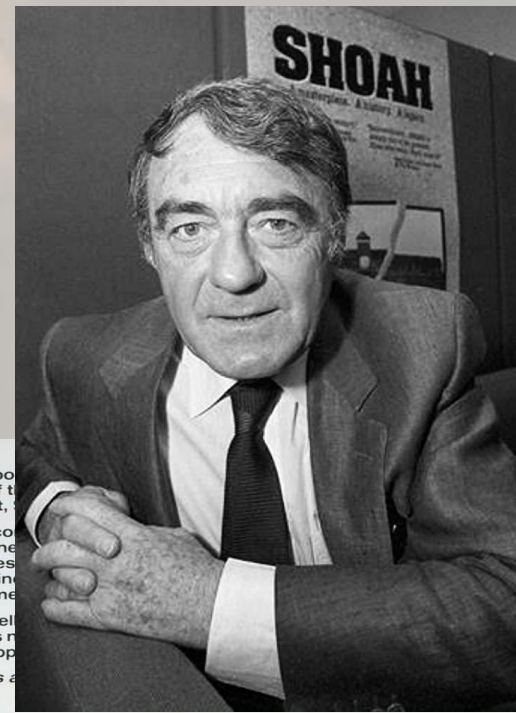
A FILM BY CLAUDE LANZMANN



REALIST vs ANTIREALIST

“Lanzmann radically distrusts Spielberg's untroubled accessing – or, as Lanzmann calls it, ‘fabrication’ – of a visual archive: ‘If I had stumbled on a real SS film – a secret film, because filming was strictly forbidden – that showed how 3,000 Jewish men, women and children were gassed in Auschwitz's crematorium 2, not only would I not have shown it but I would have destroyed it.’”

- Claude Lanzmann (1925–2018), ‘Holocauste, la représentation impossible,’ Cited by Hansen, ‘*Schindler's List* Is Not *Shoah*, p. 301.



You are about to see films of the Holocaust, the Shoah. This is a film about the bludgeoning of witnesses whose combined human documents tell the story. Yet **SHOAH** is not a documentary. **SHOAH** is a work of art.

SHOAH

A FILM BY CLAUDE LANZMANN



REALIST vs ANTIREALIST

Where do Primo Levi and *Son of Saul* fit on this continuum?

SCHINDLER'S LIST

A FILM BY STEVEN SPIELBERG

UNIVERSAL PICTURES PRESENTS AN AMBLIN ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION "SCHINDLER'S LIST" LIAM NEESON • BEN KINGSLEY
RALPH FIENNES • CAROLINE GOODALL • JONATHAN SAGALLE • EMBETH DAVIDTZ "IN" JOHN WILLIAMS PRODUCED BY LEW RYWIN DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES NEWTON HOWARD COSTUME DESIGNER ALLAN STARSKY
EDITED BY MICHAEL KAHN EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JANUSZ KAMINSKI PRODUCED BY KATHLEEN KENNEDY BASED UPON THE BOOK BY PRIMO LEVI SCREENPLAY BY THOMAS KENEALLY DIRECTED BY STEVEN SPIELBERG
PRODUCED BY STEVEN SPIELBERG GERALD R. MOLEN BRANKO LUSTIG PRODUCED BY STEVEN SPIELBERG A UNIVERSAL PICTURE

EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM

A REPORT ON THE BANALITY OF EVIL

HANNAH ARENDT

NIGHT ELIE WIESEL

WINNER OF THE
1986 NOBEL PEACE PRIZE
WITH A NEW PREFACE BY
Robert McAfee Brown
"A SLIM VOLUME
OF TERRIFYING POWER."
—THE NEW YORK TIMES

You are about to see one of the most important, affecting, talked-about films of the decade—Claude Lanzmann's monumental epic on the Holocaust, **SHOAH**.

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SHOAH

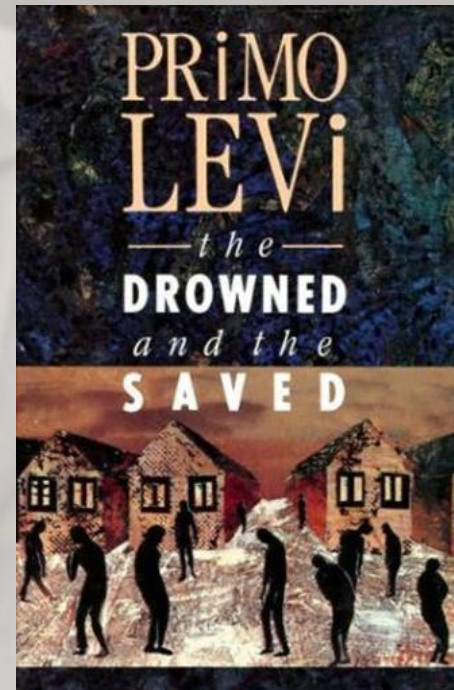
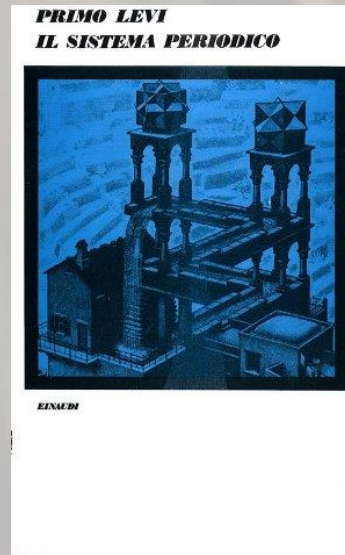
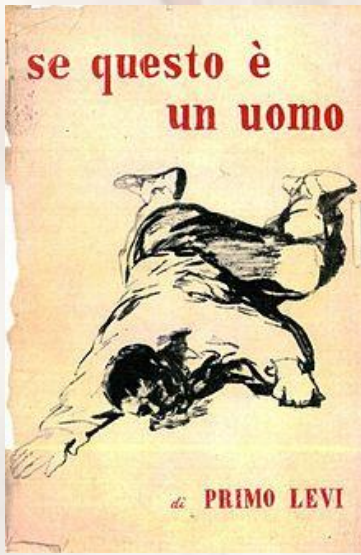
A FILM BY CLAUDE LANZMANN



A New Yorker Films Release © 1985
(READ THE PREFACE BEFORE YOU SEE THE FILM)

Primo Levi (1919–1987)

- Born to liberal, secular Jewish family in Turin
- Member of Fascist youth militia – expelled according to 1938 Italian Race Laws
- During WWII, Levi part of Italian Resistance – captured by German forces and interned
- Transported to Auschwitz Feb 1944; remained there until evacuation of the camp by death march in Jan 1945
- Memoir *If This Is a Man* [*Se questo è un uomo*] published in Italian in 1947 (English version 1959) followed by *The Truce* [*La tregua*] in 1963 (English 1965)
- Reputation enhanced by *The Periodic Table* (1975)
- Committed suicide in Turin



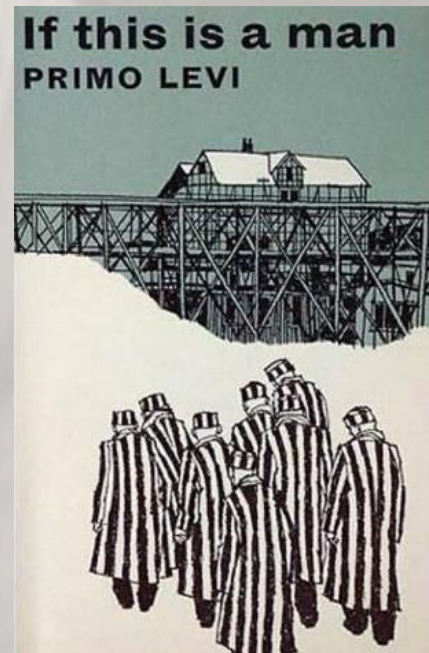
“We know that we will have difficulty being understood, and this is as it should be. But consider what value, what meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily habits, in the hundred possessions even the poorest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs in our body; nor is it conceivable that we can be deprived of them in our world, for we immediately find others to substitute old ones, other objects that our ours in their personification and evocation of our memories.

“Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possess: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint ... he will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity.”

- Primo Levi, 'On the Bottom,' *If This is a Man and The Truce* (London, 1979), p. 33



**Primo Levi
(1919–1987)**



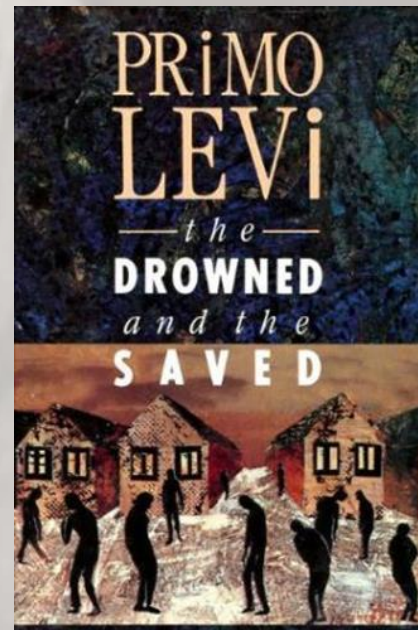
“In 1944, the Nazis blew up the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz, but the ruins remain ... the Warsaw ghetto, after the famous insurrection in the spring of 1943, was razed to the ground, but thanks to the superhuman efforts of a number of fighter-historians who made certain in that rubble, often many metres deeps, or smuggled beyond the wall, testimony survived, other historians could rediscover, how day by day, the ghetto lived and dies. **All the archives in the Lagers* were burned during the last days of the war, and that was truly an irremediable loss, so that even today there is discussion as to whether the victims were four, six, or eight million.**”

- Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus, 1988), p.2

*Lager = “konzentrationslager” (concentration camp)



Primo Levi
(1919–1987)



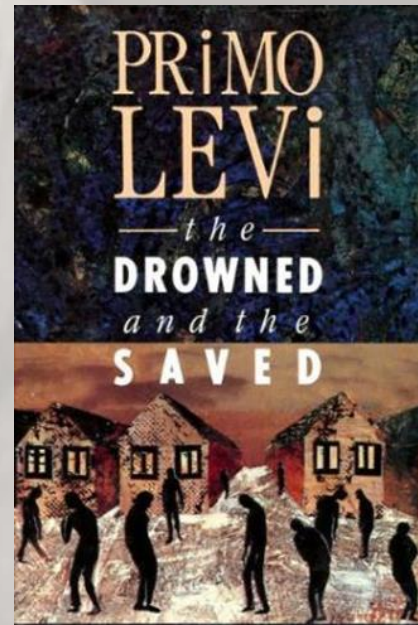
Have we – we who have returned – been able to understand and make others understand our experience? What we commonly mean by ‘understand’ coincides with ‘simplify’: without profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions. In short, we are compelled to reduce the knowable to a schema: with this purpose in view we have built for ourselves admirable tools in the course of evolution, tools which are specifically the property of the human species – language and conceptual thought.

Primo Levi, 'The Grey Zone,' *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), pp. 22-51.

- What is 'The Grey Zone' to which Levi refers, and what examples does he provide of its existence?
- What does Levi have to say about guilt and judgement in 'The Grey Zone'?



Primo Levi
(1919–1987)

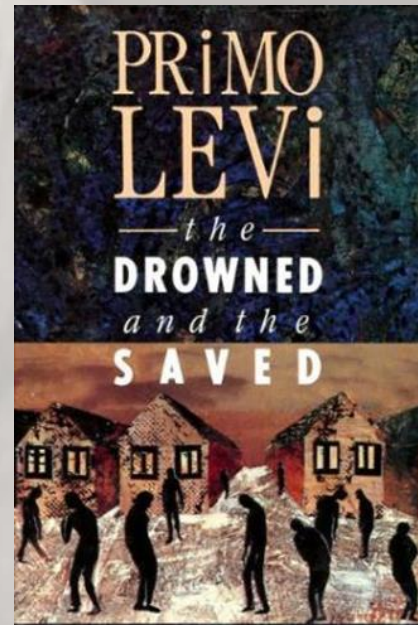


Primo Levi, 'The Grey Zone,' *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), pp. 22-51.

- How might Levi's chapter illuminate your understanding of *Son of Saul*? In what sense might the film be conceived as being about 'The Grey Zone'?



Primo Levi
(1919–1987)



Around us, prisoners without rank, swarmed low-ranking functionaries. They formed a picturesque fauna: sweepers, kettle washers, night-watchmen, bed smoothers (who exploited to their minuscule advantage the German fixation about bunks made up flat and square), checkers of lice and scabies, messengers, interpreters, assistants' assistants. In general, they were poor devils like ourselves, who worked full time like everyone else, but who, for an extra half-litre of soup, were willing to carry out these and other 'tertiary' functions: innocuous, sometimes useful, often invented out of nothing. They were rarely violent, but they tended to develop a typically corporative mentality, and energetically defended their 'job' against anyone from below or above who might covet it. Their privilege, which at any rate entailed supplementary hardships and efforts, gained them very little and did not spare them from the discipline and suffering of everyone else; their hope for life was substantially the same as that of the unprivileged. They were coarse and arrogant, but they were not regarded as enemies.

Andrew Pulver, 'László Nemes: "I Didn't Want *Son of Saul* to Tell the Story of Survival," *Guardian*, 14 April 2016

- What types of sources does Nemes mention as having been used to help research the storyline and setting of *Son of Saul*?
- What cinematic techniques does Nemes discuss in the interview, and what was his rationale for using them in *Son of Saul*? What ideas did he want the film to express about the Holocaust, and why?

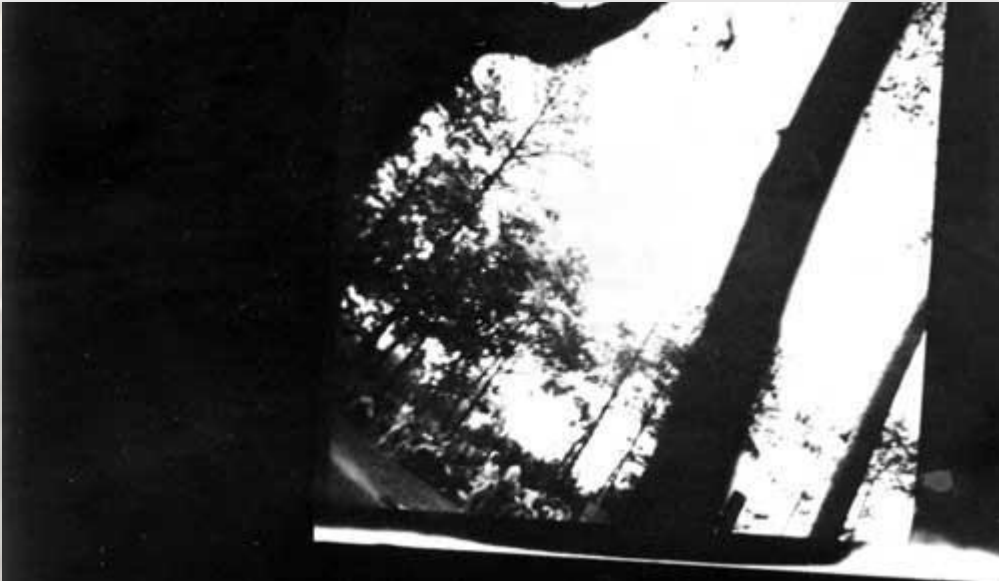




Sonderkommando
photographs Auschwitz-
Birkenau State Museum



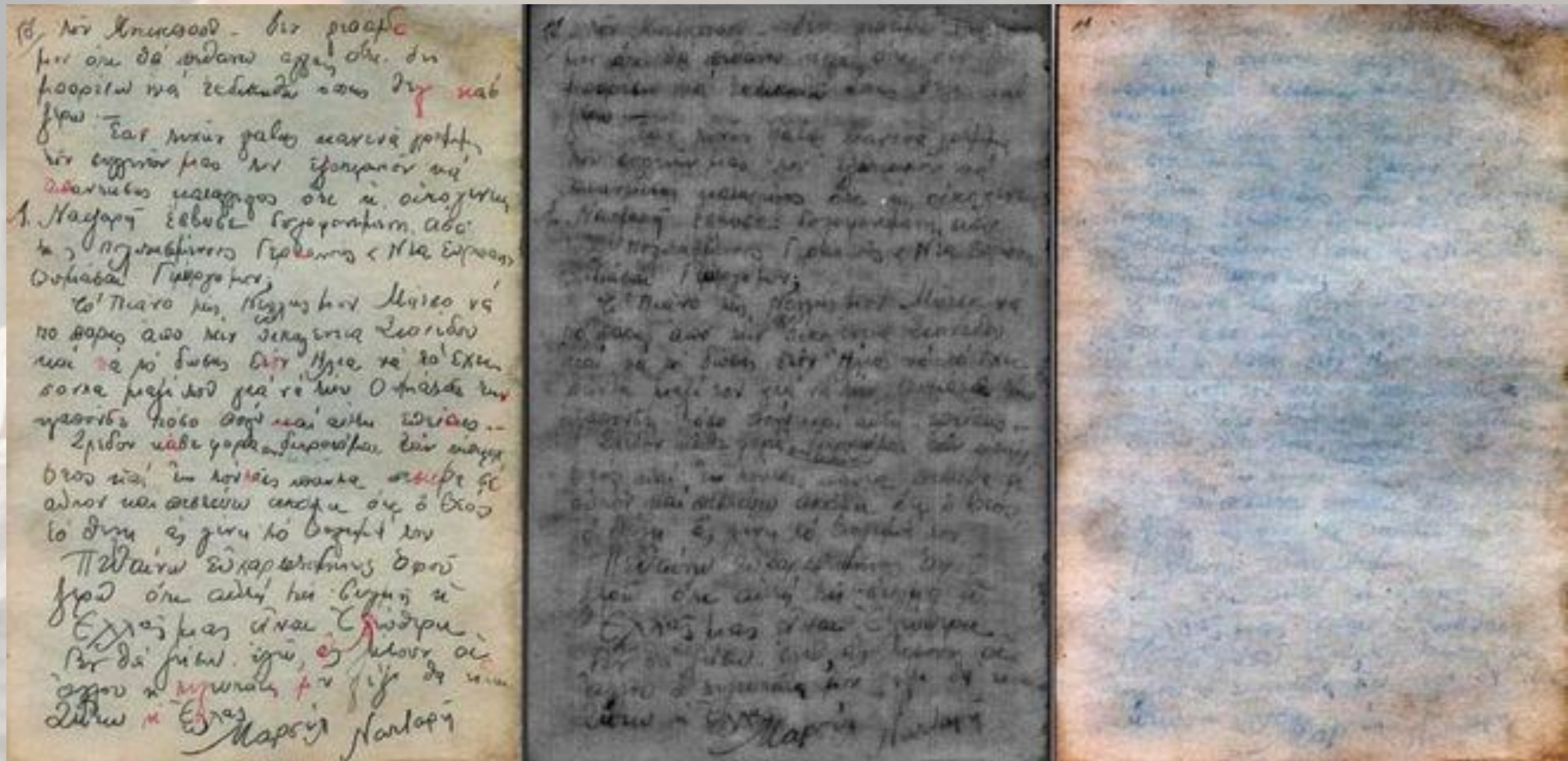
Sonderkommando photographs
Auschwitz-Birkenau State
Museum



“We integrated this moment into the heart of the film, as it corresponds to a segment of Saul’s journey through the camp when suddenly, just for a moment, he participates in the construction of our view of the extermination. And also, because of the representation of the image within itself, we are, **at that point and only then, questioning the very status of representation.**”

- László Nemes, cited by Chari Larsson, ‘[Making Monsters in László Nemes’ *Son of Saul*](#),’ *Senses of Cinema* 81 (December 2016)

Auschwitz Scrolls



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"This is the best brief account of the
Auschwitz experience available."
—The New York Review of Books

AUSCHWITZ

A DOCTOR'S
EYEWITNESS
ACCOUNT

DR. MIKLOS
NYISZLI

FOREWORD BY BRUNO BETTELHEIM



Miklós Nyiszli (1901– 1956)

AUSCHWITZ

Dr Miklos Nyiszli's
eye-witness account
of the atrocities
committed inside
the most terrible of
Nazi death camps



Miklós Nyiszli
Auschwitz
A Doctor's
Eyewitness Account



PANTHER BOOKS 2/6

AUSCHWITZ

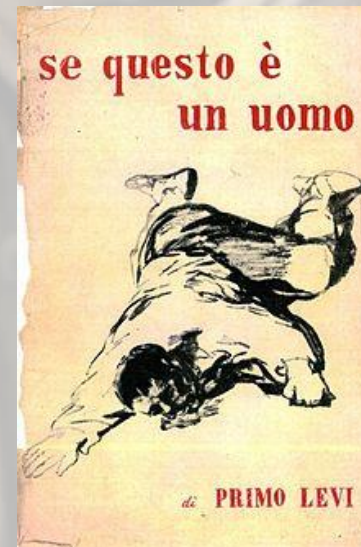
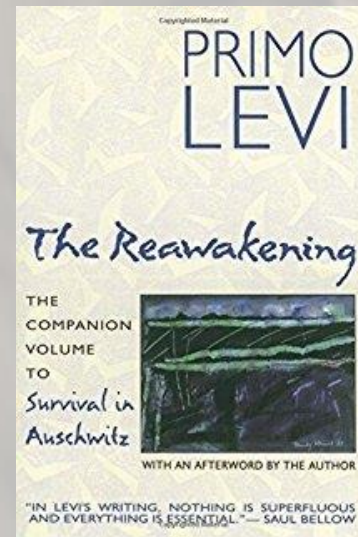
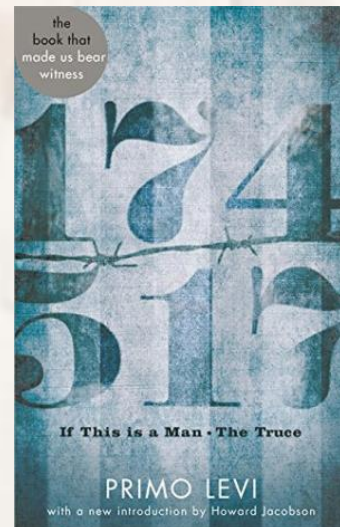
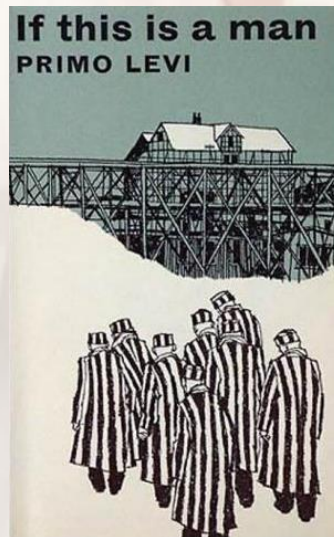
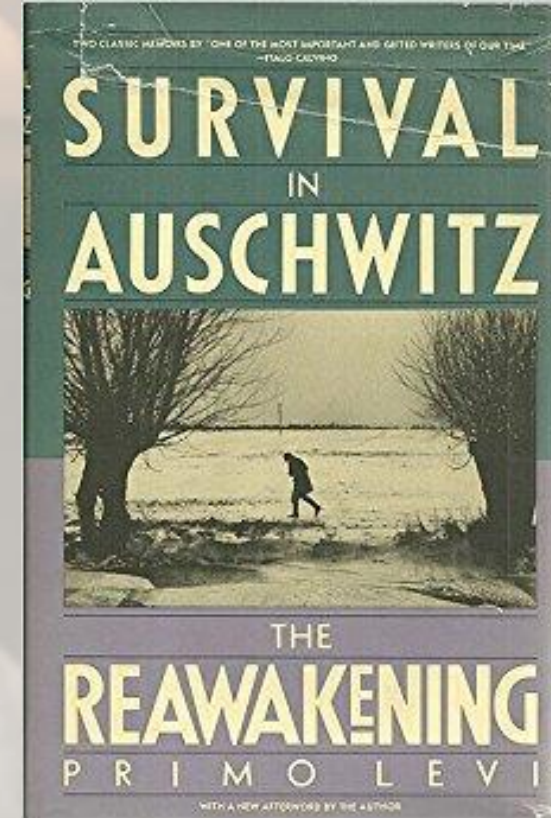
A DOCTOR'S EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT

DR. MIKLOS NYISZLI

HE SAW THE DREADED
'DOCTORS OF DEATH'
CARRY OUT THEIR INHUMAN
EXPERIMENTS - THE ONLY
MAN TO SEE THE HORRORS
OF THE CREMATORIUM -
AND SURVIVE!



The title of the UK version of *If This is a Man* is a direct translation of the original Italian *Se questo è un uomo*, whereas US editions label the book *Survival in Auschwitz*. Similarly, *The Truce* [*La tregua*] is *The Reawakening* in American editions. What do you make of these variations?



Reflections on the Exploitation
of Jewish Suffering

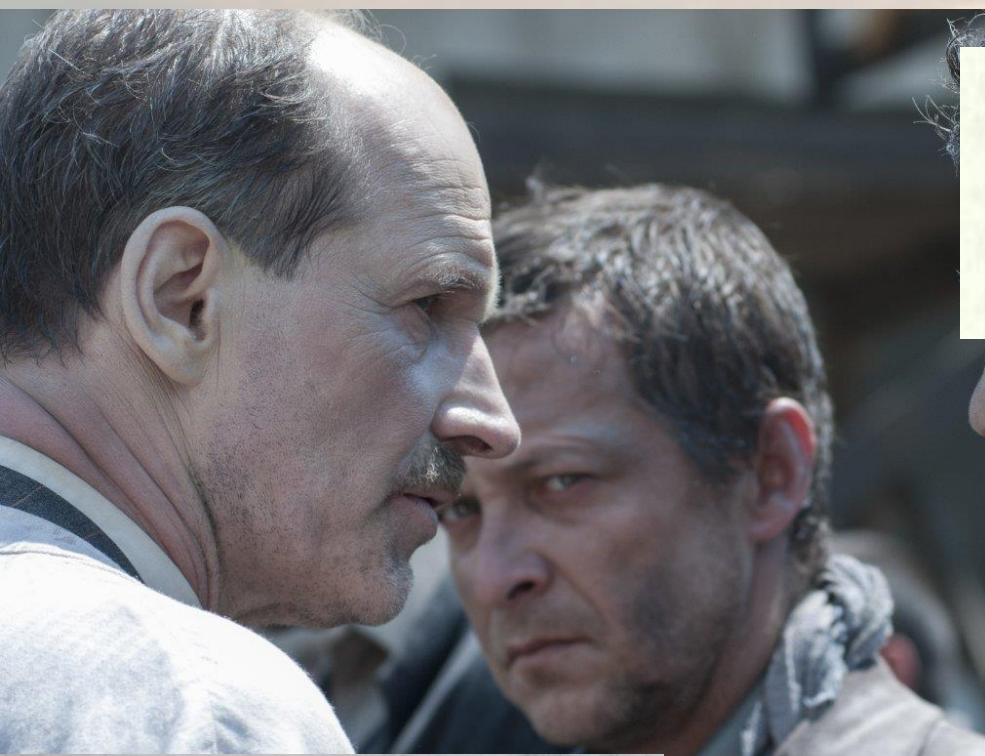
NORMAN G. FINKELSTEIN
THE HOLOCAUST INDUSTRY

Second Edition



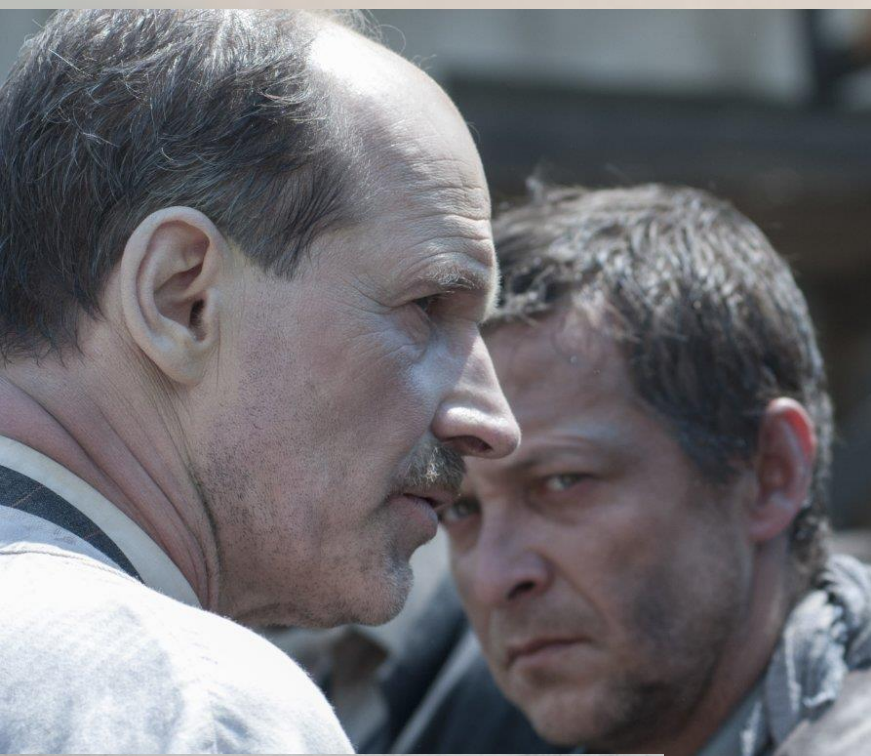


Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian physician, was one of the very few survivors of the last Special Squad in Auschwitz. He was a renowned anatomical pathologist, expert in autopsies and the chief doctor of the Birkenau SS whose services Mengele – who died a few years ago, escaping justice – had secured; he had given him special treatment and considered him almost as a colleague. Nyiszli was supposed to devote himself in particular to the study of twins: in fact, Birkenau was the only place in the world where it was possible to study the corpses of twins killed at the same moment. Alongside this particular task of his, to which, it should be said in passing, it does not appear he strenuously objected, Nyiszli was also the attending physician of the squad, with which he lived in close contact. Well, he recounts an episode that seems significant to me.



Nyiszli describes another episode that deserves to be meditated upon. In the gas chamber have been jammed together and murdered the components of a recently arrived convoy and the squad is performing its horrendous everyday work, sorting out the tangle of corpses, washing them with

hoses and transporting them to the crematorium, but on the floor they find a young woman who is still alive. The event is exceptional, unique; perhaps the human bodies formed a barrier around her, sequestered a pocket of air that remained breathable. The men are perplexed; death is their trade at all hours, death is a habit because, precisely, 'one either goes crazy the first day or gets accustomed to it', but this woman is alive. They hide her, warm her, bring her beef broth, question her: the girl is sixteen years old, she cannot orient herself in space or time, does not know where she is, has gone through, without understanding it, the sequence of the sealed train, the brutal preliminary selection, the stripping, the entry into the chamber from which no one had ever come out alive. She has not understood, but she has seen; therefore she must die, and the men of the squad know it just as they know that they too must die for the same reason. But these slaves, debased by alcohol and the daily slaughter, are transformed; they no longer have before them the anonymous mass, the flood of frightened, stunned people coming off the boxcars: they have a person.



A doctor is called, and he revives the girl with an injection: yes, the gas has not had its effect, she will be able to survive, but where and how? Just then Muhsfeld arrives; he is one of the SS men attached to the death installations. The doctor calls him to one side and presents the case to him. Muhsfeld hesitates, then he decides: no, the girl must die; if she were older, it would be a different matter, she would have more sense, perhaps she could be convinced to keep quiet about what has happened to her, but she's only sixteen: she can't be trusted. And yet, he does not kill her with his own hands; he calls one of his underlings to eliminate her with a blow to the nape of the neck. Now, this man Muhsfeld was not a compassionate person; his daily ration of slaughter was studded with arbitrary and capricious acts, marked by his inventions of refined cruelty. He was tried in 1947 in Cracow, sentenced to death and hanged and this was right; but not even he was a monolith. If he had lived in a different environment and epoch, it is likely that he would have behaved like any other common man.

Andrew Pulver, 'László Nemes: "I Didn't Want *Son of Saul* to Tell the Story of Survival," *Guardian*, 14 April 2016

- How did Nemes seek to differentiate his film from other Holocaust films? What similarities and differences might there be between *Son of Saul* and other depictions of the Holocaust that you are familiar with?

