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From the Selected Works of Robert Erlewine

2001

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Robert Erlewine, *Illinois Wesleyan University*



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When the Blind Speak of Colour: narrative, ethics and stories of the Shoah

Robert A. Erlewine

Abstract

This article discusses Richard Kearney's proposed resolution to the recent debate between Claude Lanzmann, director of Shoah, and Steven Spielberg, concerning mimesis and Schindler's List. Kearney advocates finding an Aristotelian mean between the uniqueness and communicability in stories involving the Shoah, stressing the importance of empathy in the narrative process. This article agrees with Kearney, but stresses the difficulties in finding such a mean, using such writers on the Holocaust as Jean Amery, Elie Wiesel, and Lawrence Langer as evidence. This paper especially deals with pop culture movies that privilege empathy at the cost of obscuring the horror of the events, and analyses Schindler's List and Life is Beautiful as two such movies. The essential thrust of this paper is the discussion of the precariousness of such an Aristotelian mean, of bearing in mind the micro-narratives while still preserving the magnitude of the horror of the events of the Shoah.

Introduction

It is now over fifty years since the events of the Shoah were perpetrated. Its dark legacy has made a profound impact upon the imagination of the world, visible through the many monuments and museums dedicated to the memory of those murdered by Nazi Germany. Several prominent figures in the intellectual sphere of our day survived the death camps and serve as living reminders of the legacy of National Socialism. Aside from such impact on academic spheres, the Holocaust has impressed itself on the landscape of popular culture, perhaps most notably in the field of cinema. Such films as *Life is Beautiful* and *Schindler's List*, representing events concerning the Nazi regime and the destruction of European Jewry, were by and large both highly regarded by film critics, and also commercially successful. And yet, I worry. I worry that this preoccupation with the Holocaust in popular culture, especially in film, obscures our view of the depths of its hellish abyss. I worry that these films obscure the horror of the events so as to enable us to resume our lives as if nothing of extraordinary significance transpired during the Shoah.

In this essay, I will examine the importance and difficulty inherent to the telling and retelling of narratives related to the Shoah. I will begin by discussing the ethical importance of narrative retellings of historical events and personages in general, and why these testimonial narratives are particularly important in regards to historical injustices and atrocities. Once the importance of such narratives is established, I will explore some difficulties relating to this task, through the extreme case of the Shoah. I will do this through briefly examining a current debate surrounding the presentation of stories about the Shoah, and I will discuss one possible resolution to this debate. Next, through the insights of various writers, I will explore the difficulties of the proposed resolution to underscore the precariousness (if not impossibility) of the task of adequately representing the Shoah. Then, I will examine and evaluate *Life is Beautiful* and *Schindler's List* as fictional or quasi-fictional narrative retellings of the Shoah, so as to reveal a serious danger present in narrative retellings of those events. Finally, I will reflect once more upon the proposed resolution to this difficult problem and the danger present in narrative retellings in hope of reaching a better understanding of what is at stake in the situation regarding narrative retellings of the Shoah in popular culture.

The Importance of Testimonial Narrative

Many philosophers, both past and present (including Kant and Aristotle¹) have stressed the importance of narratives and narrative understanding for practical/ethical concerns. In this essay, I will be focusing on testimonial narratives, those narratives that tell stories about people and events of the past. Before I can discuss the importance of testimonial narratives concerning atrocities, I must first briefly examine two functions of testimonial narrative that relate to ethical praxis in general: first, how testimonial narrative illustrates the enactment of ethical virtues in the real world, and second, how testimonial narrative opens the subject to the other.²

The first ethically significant function of narrative concerns its ability to educate people about how to incorporate ethical maxims into their real-world lives. While ethical philosophies often espouse abstract precepts, narratives furnish people with examples of what these precepts might look like employed in real life, and how to go about enacting them. We learn from these stories and incorporate the knowledge into our own lives. For example, a philosopher might stress the importance of being courageous, but we would look to the story of Achilles to understand what courage means.³

The second ethical function of testimonial narrative concerns our openness to the other. Our narrative imagination, which is the source of both ethics and poetics, can propel us beyond our own narcissism into genuine relations with the other. Narrative brings us into the world of other people. That is, the process of narrative enables us to *suspend* our own lives temporarily so as to *take part in* the struggles, emotions and dilemmas of others. Richard Kearney writes that the narrative imagination:

is ethical to the extent that it suffers the other to be other while suffering with (*com-patire*) the other as other. Its power of reception becomes compassion. The ethical imagination allows the other to exist 'without why' – not for *my* sake, or because it conforms to *my* scheme of things, but for its own sake.⁴

In narrative re-enactment, there is a mixing of the Same and the Other.⁵ What happens in narrative retellings of events, is that part of the Other is brought into the Same, through the narrative function of figuring *as*. What this means is that through the 'hermeneutic act of transfer by analogy'⁶ we can experience past events and foreign worlds by refiguring them so as to be somewhat similar or analogous to our present experience. Without this similarity there could be no identifying or recognition in the Other-landscape outside our Same. Of course, it is very important to remember that in this process of 'othering' the Same, we must realize that there are differences, that the past is not wholly brought within the Same, that it remains ultimately different, and that we must respect these differences. However, we are given at least a partial picture of the world of the other, which enables us to see the sanctity of the existence of the other, which helps us become aware of our obligations to the other.⁷

This ethical obligation to the other does not just hold for the living other, but for the dead as well. Thus, it is our ethical responsibility to tell and retell the narratives of the victims of history, those whom history has prevented from telling their own stories. Elie Weisel, a writer who survived Auschwitz, states, 'I owe the dead my memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them.'⁸

This ethical phronesis imparted by testimonial narratives, especially as it relates to narratives concerning atrocities, allows us to meet two important ethical obligations. In enabling us to move beyond our 'now', our Same, both temporally and subjectively (that is to the degree that we can take into account the other), we can meet our ethical debt (if only partially) to the memory of the dead by remembering their stories, and better meet our ethical obligations to those living in the present and the future.

By recalling and retelling the stories of the Shoah, and of the victims of the event, we can enter into a discourse of sorts with the others of the past who were victimised and ultimately silenced, and thus by resuscitating their voices (by however small a degree) we can begin to answer our ethical debt to the dead. Paul Ricoeur writes:

By remembering and telling, we not only prevent forgetfulness from killing the victims twice; we also prevent their life-stories from becoming banal...[by being explained away through master narratives]...and the events from appearing as necessary.⁹

Our responsibility to remember their stories is compounded by the fact that the world has already failed these people twice: by neglecting to act on their behalf both during the Holocaust and afterwards, both when their lives could have still been saved and when those responsible were never forced to answer for their involvement.¹⁰

Through the sympathetic engagement with the stories of these victimized others of the past, we are able to look to the present and future and attempt to safeguard humanity from allowing such events to transpire again. While nothing can undo the monstrous injustices of the past, we can become conscious of them. By doing so, we can meet our ethical obligation to the present and future by seeking to prevent such evil from taking place again. Rabbi Irving Greenberg expresses

this in terms of a combination of the sentiment of lament over our inability to help the dead, coupled with the ethical imperative to battle injustice (coming out of the Shoah) when he says:

To talk of love and of a God who cares in the presence of the burning children [the children who were burned alive in Auschwitz] is obscene; to leap in and pull a child out of a pit, to clean its face and heal its body, is to make a most powerful statement – the only statement that counts.¹¹

Thus, however problematic the stories of the Shoah render traditional views of theology and philosophy, and however difficult it is to conceive of theoretical responses to them, there is one immediate authentic response we can, and are obligated to, make. That is, we must combat injustice through preventing similar events from transpiring. By recounting the stories of the Shoah, and sharing in the pain of the victims, a great impetus to fight injustice everywhere is imparted to us, which bolsters our motivation for meeting our ethical obligation to others in the present and the future.

Difficulties of Narrating Stories about the Holocaust

If we see the ethical importance of remembering and retelling stories of the Holocaust, then we are presented with a very serious problem. Given the tremendous nature of the evil and unjust suffering present in the Holocaust, how do we go about telling and retelling stories of its events? Can we treat a story about the Holocaust like any other story?

Firstly, how do narratives work? Aristotle pointed out that there are cathartic and poetic (from *poiesis*) functions taking place in the mimesis of the narrative. Through the cathartic function of the narrative, the audience is able to sympathise with the characters of the story, while simultaneously maintaining an air of distance. One engages in the story as if it were real, but one also knows that it is 'just a story.' We, the audience, receive a purgation of emotion through our participation in the story, because of the dialectic of attachment to and distance from characters of the story. This 'empathic detachment' is made possible through the fact that narrative operates as *poiesis*: the disclosure of the hidden causes of one's actions. Thus, the audience of a narrative has a privileged view of the events of the story, both involved and yet detached from its unfolding events.¹²

Many prominent thinkers and writers who deal with the Holocaust, as well as many survivors, have expressed the difficulty of any substantial sort of empathy with, much less any catharsis through, stories relating the horrors of the Shoah for those who were not there. The reason for this is that the world of the Shoah differs entirely from the world we know. In the Kingdom of Night, there was no redemption or clarity, only horror that seems impossible in its extent. Thus, essentially, it is impossible to share in the stories of the victims through a narrative figuring *as*. It is especially immoral, according to people holding this position, to try to retell stories of the Holocaust hoping for some salvific or healing result. One of the most acclaimed movies about the Holocaust, *Shoah*, specifically does not use any of the above mentioned narrative structures. Claude Lanzmann, the film's director, feels that the Holocaust is too immense and horrible to be communicated about directly, through some sort of mimesis. Any mimesis of the events would only betray the truth rather than illuminate it. Instead Lanzmann includes nine and a half hours of interviews with survivors, witnesses and perpetrators. Saul Friedlander points out that in *Shoah*, 'Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid.'¹³ Lanzmann, who sees his position as the only ethical one, sharply criticised Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* for attempting a mimesis of a story relating to the events of the Shoah.

Richard Kearney, in various articles and books, has discussed the debate concerning Claude Lanzmann, his ally, the postmodern philosopher Lyotard, and Stephen Spielberg. Against Lanzmann's approach, which testifies to the unrepresentability, the untellability, of the events, Kearney stresses the merit of Spielberg's attempt to retell some of the events of the Holocaust using a method that employs the cathartic and poetic functions of narrative. Kearney writes:

certain injustices appeal to *narrative imagination* to plead their case lest they slip irrevocably into oblivion. Ethical experiences of good and evil need to be felt upon the pulse of shared emotions. The horrible must strike the audience as horrible. It must provoke us to *identify* and *empathize* with the victims. And this requires an act of moral – because morally outraged and scandalized –

imagining.¹⁴

What Lanzmann and Lyotard fail to see, Kearney argues, is that an essential factor in the power of narrative is empathy. It is not sufficient to evoke the horror of the events in a purely indirect manner, as Lanzmann does through interviews with survivors and perpetrators, but that more people will be reached, and reached more deeply, if they are made to *feel* and *experience* the suffering and horror *as if* they were present at the events. We need to 'rememorate' the victims and their stories, and these stories cannot be remembered adequately without being felt. Kearney argues that just as Lyotard and Lanzmann see themselves as ethically motivated, so too is Spielberg. Citing Kantian 'representative thinking,' Kearney stresses the need for people to be able to identify with as many fellow humans as possible, even those of different times and places. Kearney sees the solution in some sort of Aristotelian mean between the two rival parties. He argues:

...a practical wisdom (phronesis) of historical narrative requires in this age of easy forgetfulness...a proper balance between the dual fidelities of memory to the *uniqueness* and communicability of past events.¹⁵

While I am inclined to agree with Kearney's general position, I find it necessary to stress the difficulty (even, perhaps, the impossibility) present in finding such an Aristotelian mean with regards to narratives told about the Holocaust. While I respect Kearney's position concerning the importance of empathy, and the experiencing *as* in the narrative process, one must also remember the arguments of survivors such as Jean Amery and Elie Wiesel, who stress the impossibility of communicating the experience of the Shoah. Even Lawrence Langer, who is certainly more optimistic of our (we who were not there) ability to empathise than either Amery or Wiesel, stresses the immense obstacles present to any such empathy.

Jean Amery wrote that, while the Holocaust may have become the existential reference point for all Jews today, only those who were sacrificed to the Nazi 'logic of destruction' can truly understand its horrors. This 'sad privilege' is reserved for Amery and his fellow survivors. One who was not present is encouraged to empathise and imagine the horrors of the Shoah, but regardless of how noble one's intentions may be, and how much effort one supplies to the task, the person will 'still sound like a blind man talking about color.'¹⁶ With truly chilling clarity, Amery describes the event of his being suspended by a meat-hook and tortured by the SS (an experience which forever deprived him of trust in the world), before being sent to Auschwitz and having his entire self (including any metaphysical notion or abstract potentiality or possibility) reduced to his starving and battered body in the death camp. With no great pride, he maintains that these events irrevocably separate him from those with no comparable experience.

Elie Wiesel often speaks of the contradiction of being obligated to tell the story of the victims, thus keeping alive their memory, while convinced of his inability to convey the level of the Shoah's immensity. Wiesel writes:

We [the survivors] all knew that we could never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words – coherent, intelligible words – our experience of madness on an absolute scale. The walk through fiery nights, the silence before and after the selection, the toneless praying of the condemned, the Kaddish of the dying, the fear and hunger of the sick, the shame and suffering, the haunted eyes, the wild stares – I thought that I would never be able to speak of them. All words seemed inadequate, worn, foolish, lifeless, whereas I wanted them to sear.¹⁷

Wiesel, feeling that the truth is more fantastic and hellish than any possible fiction, staunchly opposes any fictional retelling of the Holocaust. In an article entitled 'Trivializing Memory', Wiesel attacks the 'merchants of images and the brokers of language' who profess to speak for the victims.¹⁸ Rather than fiction, Wiesel argues that the Holocaust should be studied via non-fiction texts and films. One should read the works of historians like Raul Hilberg, read the diaries of people such as Emanuel Ringelbaum or Chaim Kaplan, read the poetry of children written in the camps, or see non-fiction documentaries like Lanzmann's *Shoah*.¹⁹

Lawrence Langer, whose superb work *The Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* explores the traumas revealed in survivor testimony (especially oral testimony), argues that it is not so much the case that the events of the Holocaust are inherently incommunicable, but rather it is our traditional Western mindset, with its perspectives and values, that impairs our

vision when looking at the events of the Shoah. For example, Langer argues that our notion of heroism, and our traditional view that one is always an agent in control of how one responds to one's fate, prevent us from looking accurately at the *actual* events.²⁰ These preconceived notions cause us to impose our own constructs on the reality spoken of by the survivors, or to turn away, saying that it is too horrible to imagine. For example, Langer recounts the tale of how, during an interview with a survivor named Hannah F., the interviewers refused to hear the dark content of her testimony. When Hannah F. repeatedly asserted that she survived out of 'stupidity' and 'dumb luck,' her interviewers continued to assert that she survived out of an indomitable will to live, a deep inner strength.²¹ We are so tied into the Western tradition of narratives that centre around the active agent in control of her destiny, or at least how she responds to it, that we fail to see how the Holocaust deprived almost all of its victims of any choice regarding their fate. When speaking of an incident where prisoners were reduced by hunger to the point of cannibalising a severed hand, Langer writes: 'We lack the terms of discourse for such human situations, preferring to call them inhuman and thus banish them from civilized consciousness.'²²

I think Amery, Wiesel and Langer would all agree that a major reason for the difficulty in representing the events of the Shoah is that its nature is so extreme, so paradigm shattering, that the reality becomes more fantastic and hellish than fiction, that what is revealed casts much of what we understand as reality into question. Many survivors have even expressed disbelief at the events they witnessed transpire. Thus the question of how one tells a story about the Holocaust necessarily invokes consideration of mimesis, catharsis and poesis. Whether in literature or film, how does one go about presenting stories of such events? Did Wiesel's *Night* transgress a boundary by giving us a central character who we can empathise with and follow? Would the depiction of violence and death approximating the level *then and there* lose effectiveness in regards to the audience, because the level of destruction goes beyond our ability to empathise, therefore trivialising the events?

Geoffrey Hartman, in his essay, 'The Book of Destruction' explores this theme, and others, in great depth. He reminds us of Voltaire's censure of a certain line in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for not being elevated enough for tragedy. Such a line, Voltaire argued, would have an alienating effect on the audience and among other things would diminish the play. While Hartman is not suggesting a reversion to enlightenment values, he does see wisdom in maintaining such limits of representation. When there are no limits to representation, there remain limits to our ability to conceptualise [and there are no limits to representation today for two reasons: 1) the current state of technology allows for a complete mimesis of anything, and 2) that today artists and writers have a nearly unlimited freedom of expression]. When examining the Shoah, 'We rediscover Aristotle's criterion of probability. That the truth can offend probability is the dilemma of the artist who must follow that truth without renouncing art.'²³

The dilemma, as I see it, is how to preserve the human element in the immensity of the tragedy, and yet to stay true to history. It comes back to the question of Kearney's Aristotelian mean. How do you allow the audience to empathise with the victims, as sympathetic human beings with lives that were so horribly interrupted, while depicting the magnitude of the evil perpetrated against them? We can get a better understanding of this mean if we look at some notable contemporary films dealing with the Holocaust, and examining where they fall short of this ideal position.

If we are to hold such a theoretical standard, (which I am not convinced is attainable) Lanzmann's film *Shoah* falls short in focusing exclusively on the evil and the incommunicable nature surrounding the events of the implementation of the 'final solution', rather than tracing the human elements of the victims. Of course, Lanzmann would regard our ideal as impossible, and see his own film, which is arguably the best about the Holocaust to date, as focusing on the need to recall our own forgetfulness. The survivors interviewed are not asked about their lives before or after the war. When they tell their experiences, it is to give voice to the voiceless dead, to bring to light what happened. While I would certainly argue that *Shoah* is an extremely important and well-made film, I would also agree with Kearney's reservations about it. As horrifying as the stories being told by witnesses in the film are, there is a sense of detachment from them. This comes largely from not being allowed to empathise with, to share in the pain (however partially) of the victims, which we are confronted with only indirectly, through memory.

The majority of the movies made about the Holocaust, those designed primarily for the popular culture,²⁴ err in the opposite respect to *Shoah*. These films focus so much on the human level that they obscure the horror of the large-scale events. We must bear in mind that the film-makers of popular movies, as opposed to *Shoah* and perhaps a handful of other documentaries, are not always concerned with being true to the magnitude of the horror. They are often more interested in the little narratives of their characters, which they can embellish to make the stories more optimistic, than in the horrors of the extermination. Two examples of such films are *Life is Beautiful* and *Schindler's List*.

I find the failure of this latter class of films in terms of the ideal mean to be far more troubling than the former, because when these films fail they do so in ways that obscure the immensity of the horror. The heart of the problem, I believe, lies not with the micro-narrative itself. It lies in the film-makers' manipulation of these small narratives in order to help society cope (in ways I consider to be inauthentic) with the horror of the macro-narrative of history and, more generally, with our society, which is all too eager to promote such tales of hope and triumph of the human spirit. Whereas Lanzmann is thoroughly dedicated to remembering the events in all their horror and magnitude, films such as *Life is Beautiful* and *Schindler's List*, to differing degrees and in different ways, ameliorate the events they represent, thus making it easier for the audience to come to grips with the existential horrors and problems raised *then and there*, so that in a certain sense they are a form of forgetting.

Life is Beautiful

Of the two movies mentioned above, *Life is Beautiful* is the more guilty of obscuring memory. It ignores the reality of the concentration camps to affirm the power of love, testifying first and last as to how love can overcome all obstacles. Unfortunately, as the Holocaust makes all too painfully clear, the truth is the contrary; at times events can and do conquer everything we regard as sacred, even love.

What this movie fails to take into consideration are the ways in which people were deprived of any sort of agency, and placed in the terrible predicament of being reduced to what Langer refers to as 'choiceless choice.' There was no free choice for the victims of the Shoah, and when people acted as if they had some sort of control over their destiny, at least how they met it, disaster ensued. One positively horrifying example of such an event is recounted in the testimony of a survivor. She tells of how she witnessed a Jewish father's attempt to rescue his son, an infant, who was being held in the hospital where she worked. The man was caught by a guard, who then proceeded to crush the baby's skull against a brick wall.²⁵ Langer stresses how commonly the theme of disaster following the attempt to take control of one's destiny appears in survivor testimony. Couple this lack of control with the demoralising effects of starvation, savage and sadistic guards, the ubiquity of death and unprecedented suffering, and the brutal hierarchy among the prisoners (where the Jews were at the absolute bottom), and we can begin to understand the absurdity of this film. That a man could keep his child hidden and safe is ridiculous enough (as evinced by Langer's example above), but to remain a loving father who is able to hide the evil from his child is simply untenable.

And yet, perhaps such a trespass on history is not surprising. In an article titled 'The Americanization of the Holocaust', which was, incidentally, written well before this movie, Langer points out the inability of traditional (as in Western tradition) sensibilities and expectations to grasp the situation of the Holocaust. As an audience, we have had the notion of the agent, of the person in control of her responses to situations in which she finds herself, inculcated into us. Even in the Greek tragedies the hero was always given choice, even if that choice was only to die with dignity. Stories about the Holocaust, which necessarily involve the loss of agency, fall outside of this tradition's way of understanding the world.

Schindler's List

Schindler's List is a far superior film to *Life is Beautiful*, in terms of retelling the events of the Holocaust. And yet, dark as the picture this movie paints is, it still obscures the reality.

Spielberg, to his credit, effectively steers clear of many of the dangers to which *Life is Beautiful* succumbs. He deprives the audience of all security with regard to the state of the well-being of the Jewish characters in the film. By focusing the film around Schindler, a German who becomes increasingly sympathetic to the Jewish plight, and by putting the Jewish prisoners in roles where they are deprived of agency, Spielberg enables the audience to empathise with the story; while simultaneously showing the absolute precariousness of the well-being of the Jewish prisoners. By graphically depicting the randomness and impulsiveness of murders which are extremely unsettling to watch, Spielberg's approach to the Jewish characters transports his audience to a world outside of traditional storytelling. Lawrence Langer applauds *Schindler's List* for conveying how the imprisoned victims were denuded of their agency, by showing how their behaviour became environmentally determined.²⁶ By weaving the narrative concerning the prisoners of the concentration camps with the story of the secure character of Schindler and the hope he promises for the victims, Spielberg prevents the audience from becoming numb to the horror.

While I regard *Schindler's List* as a masterful work, one quite superior to *Life is Beautiful*, I do believe it falls short of our ideal mean as well. In this film the horror of the Shoah is diminished in two respects: in Spielberg's presentations of the position of

non-Jews regarding the Holocaust and in the movie's scope. The first shortcoming of this movie is the way in which it often avoids depicting the complicity of the non-Jewish world in the events of the Shoah. One commentator, Ilan Avisar, offers stern criticism for Spielberg's allowance of his political 'sensitivity' to stereotyping to interfere with showing anti-Semitism as a major cause for the Holocaust. A major example of this inauthentic 'sensitivity' can be seen in the manner that Spielberg 'balances' his portrayal of the Germans, pitting Schindler (the good German) against Goeth (the evil German). Avisar is not surprised that this film received favourable reviews in Germany, as it 'diminishes the crucial role of the Germans in the Final Solution'.²⁷

Lawrence Langer, who for the most part met the film with approbation, offers similar criticism. He points out the 'deplorable' scene where, as the war ends, Schindler tells the SS stationed at his factory that, instead of murdering all the prisoners before the official end of the war at midnight, they could return home as decent people. Langer argues that this scene is indicative of Spielberg recoiling from acknowledging the degree to which the Holocaust undermines the traditional Western views of human nature and morality. Langer writes:

He [Spielberg] insists on pretending that decency is a salvageable virtue for those so recently conspiring in mass murders, as if the lives of the Jews could suddenly matter more to them than saving their own necks from swift Russian justice.²⁸

The second way in which *Schindler's List* obscures the horror of the Shoah concerns its scope. As Avisar correctly points out, *Schindler's List* is based upon a marginal text of the Holocaust, and yet, Spielberg proceeds to 'elevate it to central canonical status.'²⁹ As noble as the real Schindler was, and as important as it is to recall his heroic memory, one must bear in mind how few Germans actually made any attempt to aid the Jews. This film is primarily centred on Schindler's heroism rather than on the extermination of the Jews. To illustrate this Avisar points to the scene where Schindler rescues Stern, the Jewish manager of his business. Stern, who has been loaded aboard a cattle car by the Nazis to be sent to his death, is rescued by Schindler's courage and quick thinking. The camera then focuses on the two men walking away, rather than on the thousands of other innocent people on the train heading to their certain death. By having almost all of the major secondary Jewish characters survive thanks to Schindler's heroism, the presence of the others who were not so fortunate is minimised.

Conclusion

I believe we now see the precariousness of an Aristotelian mean in relation to depicting the Holocaust. Perhaps the darkness of the Kingdom of Night can only truly be comprehended by those who were there. Elie Wiesel has stated:

After the war every survivor was asked the same question by the dead: Will you be able to tell *our* tale? Now we know the answer: no. Their tale cannot be told – and never will be. Those who spoke were not heard; the story you heard was not the story they told.³⁰

One thing is certain, even if art and testimony can never adequately convey the depths of the Holocaust, it is nevertheless of paramount ethical importance to keep trying.

However, in doing so we must not dilute the narratives to make the horror easier for the audience to bear, or flinch before reality by disproportionately representing hope. To do so would be to trivialise the event and the suffering of the victims. We owe it to the dead, and to the victims of the present and the potential victims of the future, to open ourselves to the suffering of the victims of history. In the case of the Holocaust this means not stopping our eyes before the depths of its abyss. As painful and shattering an experience as this is, we must not let the suffering of the victims fade into forgetfulness. This can happen either through outright forgetfulness or through the narrative retellings of events from the Shoah filtered through the rosy-coloured lenses of popular films that minimise the suffering and evil so as to focus on the overwhelmingly small presence of hope and the triumph of the spirit.

In conclusion, I believe that Richard Kearney is essentially correct concerning his Aristotelian mean between the incommunicability and the importance to empathise in regards to narratives of the Holocaust. However, it is vitally important to remember the precariousness of such a mean. It is better to err on the side of truth than to trivialise the events, which can ultimately lead to a sort of forgetfulness. Stories of the Holocaust should sear our very souls, bringing us to the brink of despair. Anything less fails our obligation to the dead, and to victims of history in the present and the future.

Notes

¹ Aristotle's *Poetics*, Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

² These two ethical functions apply to narrative in general and are not limited solely to testimonial narrative.

³ Richard Kearney makes this point in numerous essays.

⁴ From 'Vive L'Imagination', p.223.

⁵ The terms 'Other' and 'Same' are important in post-Heideggerian philosophy, and they relate to Heidegger's revolutionary extension of the self so as to transcend the Cartesian notion of the self as a body-mind to include the world of one's involvements in one's very identity of selfhood. Thus the term 'Same' denotes that which makes up one's secure world of involvements that, while exterior to our bodies, never the less through various forms of manipulation and knowledge, nevertheless fundamentally belongs to the self. The term 'Other' denotes what is forever beyond our powers of manipulation and understanding, that which is forever exterior to our powers. The term 'other' is often employed as a special variation of the term 'Other,' and denotes other people, whose very identities including their narrative histories are forever alien to our powers of possession

⁶ From Kearney's 'The Narrative Imagination: Between Poetics and Ethics', p. 95.

⁷ This paragraph is largely inspired from Kearney's 'The Narrative Imagination: Between Poetics and Ethics', pp. 95–96.

⁸ From 'Why I Write', p.16.

⁹ From "The Memory of Suffering", p. 290.

¹⁰ As Jean Amery so powerfully and hauntingly points out in his essay 'Resentments', the criminal never really had to face the 'truth of his atrocity'. p. 79.

¹¹ From 'Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire', p. 331.

¹² From *The Poetics*.

¹³ From Introduction to *Probing the Limits of Representation*, p. 17.

¹⁴ From 'Narrative Imagination – the Ethical Challenge', p.253.

¹⁵ From 'Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance', p. 31.

¹⁶ 'On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew', p. 93.

¹⁷ From 'Why I write', p.15.

¹⁸ p. 166.

¹⁹ This is not to say that Wiesel would necessarily side with Lanzmann in the Spielberg/Lanzmann/Kearney debate in terms of mimesis and empathy. *Night* by Wiesel is a narrative where one sympathises with a character and follows him

through a story. Wiesel, despite his claims to the impossibility of conveying the reality of the Shoah, makes use of empathy and feeling as if in telling his story.

²⁰ That is, the events as told by survivors.

²¹ *The Holocaust Testimonies*, p. 64.

²² p. 118.

²³ p. 328.

²⁴ Whereas the length and style of *Shoah* seems designed for intellectuals.

²⁵ From Langer, *The Holocaust Testimonies*, p. 125.

²⁶ From the Introduction of *Admitting the Holocaust*, p. 11.

²⁷ From 'Holocaust Movies and the Politics of Collective Memory', p. 51.

²⁸ From the Introduction of *Admitting the Holocaust*, p. 11.

²⁹ From 'Holocaust Movies and the Politics of Collective Memory', p. 49.

³⁰ 'Art and Culture After the Holocaust', p. 404.

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