

**THE REPRESENTATION OF GAS CHAMBERS
IN HOLOCAUST FILMS, 1944-2013**

H.C.W. Bovekerk (s4240162)

MA Present(ed) History, Radboud University

Supervised by Dr. Remco Ensel

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Preface

This thesis completes my MA Present(ed) History graduate program at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. My sister Heleen and my friends Kayleigh van Oorschot, Jan van Tienen and Dennis Schep were so kind to read several drafts of this text. I am very grateful for their comments. I remained dependent throughout this project on the guidance of my supervisor Dr. Remco Ensels, whose ideas and comments were of great value both to the content and the process of my research. As the formula goes, the responsibility for any mistakes remaining in this text is solely mine. I thank dr. Aaron Kerner of San Francisco State University for sharing some of his Holocaust film resources; dr. Iwona Gusc, postdoctoral researcher at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies, for translating into Dutch the voice-over of a Polish documentary from 1944; and my friends and fellow students – my brothers from different *almae matres* – Jan van Tienen (again) and Christoph van Veghel for the fine hours we spent together in various libraries and for sacrificing a beautiful summer's day to watch Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* with me. This thesis owes most to my parents Henk sr. and Joke Bovekerk, without whose support throughout my near-decade of university education I couldn't have read as many books, watched as many films, nor traveled as many countries as I have. I dedicate this text to them.

Hendrik Coenraad Willem Bovekerk

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INTRODUCTION

A ‘gruesome depiction of horrific crimes committed by Nazis at Auschwitz’ – that is how *The Guardian* described Uwe Boll’s film *Auschwitz* a year before its publication in 2011.¹ The film’s trailer, which according to the article ‘sparked widespread revulsion’ among critics, begins with Boll in SS uniform leaning against a heavy metal door. As the camera moves closer, the sound of people pounding the door from the inside grows louder and a female face appears behind the door’s spyhole. The next sequence confirms that what we are looking at is an operating gas chamber: naked men, women and children suffocating, pounding the walls, clutching their throats in agony. Then follow shots of a prisoner pulling a dead man’s teeth, of others shoving a child’s body into a furnace, and finally of the infant’s body catching fire – filmed from inside the flames.²

Auschwitz opens with a statement by Boll – according to *The New York Times* ‘often referred to as the worst filmmaker in the world’³ – who claims that almost seventy years after the Holocaust ‘the world shows ignorance again on genocides’ and that therefore it was time to make a movie that ‘actually showed (...) what Auschwitz was.’ He adds that ‘the movies that got made about [the Holocaust] are more telling to heroes, like people tried to kill Hitler (sic) – Stauffenberg, Sophie Scholl or whatever – or, eh, we have special people, they help Jews, like *Schindler’s List* and *The Pianist* and so on, and I think it was time to actually do something what (sic) (...) just showed what it really was, the horror.’

I don’t know if the world shows ignorance on genocides, but what I can point out is that Boll shows ignorance on the history and theory of Holocaust films. His claim that it was time to make a movie that ‘just showed what it really was, the horror’ is weak because it overlooks two facts, one historical and the other theoretical. First, many films have been

¹ K. Connolly, ‘German Director’s Holocaust Film Causes Outrage’, *The Guardian*, 12 November 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/12/uwe-boll-auschwitz-film-causes-outrage>.

² The trailer is available on YouTube via <http://youtu.be/FS8E71RUOLU>.

³ J. Schwartz, ‘Call Him the Worst Director (Then Duck)’, *The New York Times*, 18 May 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/movies/18schw.html?_r=0.

produced that claim to show what Auschwitz or the Holocaust ‘really was’, from Wanda Jakubowska’s *The Last Stage* (1947) to the BBC documentary *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution* (2005). Not all filmmakers show ‘the horror’ as Boll does, but films such as Robert Enrico’s *Au Nom de Tous les Miens* (1983) and Tim Blake Nelson’s *The Grey Zone* (2001) certainly show horrific images as well. Second, and more important, films can never show what Auschwitz ‘really was’ because films cannot give unmediated access to past reality. Representations of historical events are never identical to the events themselves and history films therefore never present the real past, but always a reconstruction of that past.

However, Boll is a filmmaker and not a graduate student in Present(ed) History, and his *naïveté* on these matters may therefore be excused. He is neither the first nor the last filmmaker who claims to represent the past as it really was. The reason I present the story of *Auschwitz* is that it illustrates the problematic I deal with in this paper, which is the representation of gas chambers in films dealing with the Holocaust. My key objective is to describe and understand the changing form and function of gas chamber representations in Holocaust films. This form and function have varied over the last seven decades and from this development it is possible to infer the changing meaning of gas chambers within collective Holocaust memory, because even though the collective memory ‘seems to be an impenetrable and inextricable texture of threads and patterns, of different thickness, color, and material, it nevertheless may be “read” in its concrete forms of expression’ – such as film and television.⁴ Strangely, even though by this logic Holocaust films are a primary source for the historian of Holocaust memory, research into the representation of gas chambers, an element as vital to contemporary Holocaust discourse as it was lethal during the Holocaust itself, has so far been inexistent.

⁴ F. Van Vree, ‘Auschwitz and the Origins of Contemporary Historical Culture. Memories of World War II in a European Perspective’ in: A. Pók, J. Rüsen & J. Scherer (eds.), *European History. Challenge for a Common Future* (Hamburg 2002) 202-220, 202.

In the past seven decades, Holocaust imagery has been widely disseminated, in the West and beyond, through education and popular culture. Film and television, the two most powerful popular media for most of this period, have had a substantial share in this process. Documentaries, fiction films, miniseries and television programs have brought Holocaust imagery, including images of gas chambers, to many millions of people around the world.⁵ Although Boll might disagree, the idea and the image of the gas chamber and its role in the Holocaust is firmly rooted in our historical consciousness. This has not always been the case, of course. When Allied forces discovered gas chambers upon liberating various concentration camps in 1944 and 1945, visual images of gas chambers had yet to be created and dispersed. These forces, among them teams of filmmakers such as the US Army Signal Corps and the British Army's Film and Photographic Unit, were the first to shoot and disseminate concentration camp and gas chamber imagery. American documentary *Nazi Concentration and Prison Camps* (1945), presented as evidence in the Nuremberg Trials, is one result of this.⁶ In the nearly seven decades separating Uwe Boll from these Allied filmmakers, a myriad of Holocaust films and documentaries have been produced, several of which feature images of gas chambers. These images have taken various forms and diegetic functions; from black-and-white images shot at recently liberated camps in order to testify to atrocities committed by the Nazis to graphic genocide reenactments in order to entertain spectators. Some images, such as showerheads and '*Bad und Desinfektion*' signs, have become Holocaust icons while others, such as the Majdanek and Dachau gas chamber doors, seem to have been forgotten.⁷ Images representing gas chambers are never wholly new, because to be meaningful and recognizable they have to employ an already existing symbolic language.

⁵ Cf. Van Vree, 'Auschwitz', 202-203. 'Since the introduction of television – the storyteller of modern society *par excellence* (Grebner) – in the late 1950s and 1960s, audio-visual representations constitute a dominant mode of knowledge in Western culture. This also holds true for the image of the past.'

⁶ Available on YouTube via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCy02267X8A>.

⁷ The signifiers 'gas chamber' and 'Auschwitz' – verbally and visually – have certainly become iconic, a fact to which Boll's film, in contradiction to its stated purpose, attests. As Timothy Snyder puts it: 'Today Auschwitz stands for the Holocaust, and the Holocaust for the evil of a century.' *Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York 2010), viii.

Therefore, as history film theorist Anton Kaes writes about history films in general, ‘images of images circulate in an eternal cycle, an endless loop, in a Möbius strip of cliché images, validating and reconfirming each other (...).’⁸ Nevertheless, there is a variety of gas chamber representations. The function of gas chamber representations within Holocaust films varies as well. This changing function mirrors developments within collective Holocaust memory.

Research Question

How have the form and the function of gas chamber representations in Holocaust films developed since the Holocaust? To answer this question I have analyzed twenty-four films dealing with gas chambers in Nazi concentration and extermination camps. For each film I have asked the following questions: (1) What images represent gas chambers? (2) What is shown explicitly? What is not shown but only implied? (3) In what sequence are these images shown? (4) What is the function of the images within the narrative?⁹ For each period – three twenty-year periods and one eight-year period; a division as arbitrary as it is pragmatic – of Holocaust filmmaking I have furthermore asked: (5) What trends are visible? (6) Which images are recycled? (7) Which images become iconic? (8) Which images break with trends (i.e. iconoclasts)?

Status Quaestionis

Although various Holocaust film studies have been conducted since the 1980s, historical research into the representation of gas chambers in such films is inexistent. Lawrence Baron has compiled an overview of ‘three waves’ of Holocaust film scholarship.¹⁰ The input of historians in this field has been marginal. The first wave of Holocaust film studies arose in the wake of the NBC miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) and Claude Lanzmann’s ten-hour documentary *Shoah* (1985). These studies focused on the development, the accuracy

⁸ A. Kaes, ‘History and Film: Public Memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination’, *History and Memory* 2-1 (1990) 111-129, 112.

⁹ In Appendix I, I have collected screenshots with transcriptions of the relevant scenes from these films.

¹⁰ L. Baron, ‘Film’, in: P. Hayes & J.K. Roth (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies* (Oxford 2011).
<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199211869.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199211869>.

and the impact of Holocaust films in several countries. Insdorf, Doneson, Avisar, Shandler, Mintz and Anker have critically discussed American Holocaust films and television programs.¹¹ On the other side of the Atlantic, Kaes, Santner, and Reimer & Reimer have studied German Holocaust films, Colombat has surveyed French films, and Marcus has looked at Italian films.¹²

A second wave emerged in reaction to Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and Roberto Benigni's *La Vita è Bella* (1997). The success of these films in terms of dissemination and awards gave the production of and the debate on Holocaust films a fresh impetus. Loshitzky has edited a volume of critical reflections on Spielberg's blockbuster. These reactions comprise criticisms for blurring fact and fiction, comparisons with *Shoah*, reflections on the representation of Jews and Gentiles, and national reception studies.¹³ *La Vita è Bella* caused more critical consternation than *Schindler's List*. Some, such as Denby and Niv, have denounced the film for its humorous tone and happy ending.¹⁴ Many others, such as Viano, Gilman, Kertész, Flanzbaum, Siporin, and Celli have applauded the film for its style and integrity in dealing with the Holocaust.¹⁵

Since 2000, a third wave of Holocaust film studies has widened the scope of research to include topics such as the impact of globalization, comparisons with other 'genocide films', the representation of trauma, and the utilization of Holocaust films in education.

¹¹ A. Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows. Film and the Holocaust* (New York 1983). J.E. Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film* (Philadelphia 1987). I. Avisar, *Screening the Past. Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington 1988). J. Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York 1999). A. Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle 2001). D. Anker, *Imaginary Witness. Hollywood and the Holocaust* (New York 2004).

¹² A. Kaes, *From Heimat to Hitler. The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge 1989). E. Santner, *Stranded Objects. Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca 1990). C. Reimer & R. Reimer, *Nazi Retro-Film. How German Narrative Cinema Remembers the Past* (New York 1992). A. Colombat, *The Holocaust in French Film* (Metuchen 1993). M. Marcus, *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz* (Toronto 2007).

¹³ Y. Loshitzky (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust. Critical perspectives on Schindler's List* (Bloomington & Indianapolis 1997).

¹⁴ D. Denby, 'Life is Beautiful', *New Yorker* 75-3 (1999) 96-9. K. Niv, *Life is Beautiful, but Not for Jews. Another View of the Film by Benigni* (Lanham 2005).

¹⁵ M. Viano, 'Life is Beautiful: Reception, Allegory and Holocaust Laughter', *Film Quarterly* 53-1 (1999) 26-34. S.L. Gilman, 'Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films', *Critical Inquiry* 26-2 (2000) 279-308. I. Kertész, 'Who Owns Auschwitz?', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14-1 (2001) 267-272; H. Flanzbaum, 'But Wasn't it Terrific? A Defense of Liking Life is Beautiful', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14-1 (2001) 273-86. S. Siporin, 'Life is Beautiful: four riddles, three answers', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 7-3 (2002) 345-363. C. Celli, 'Comedy and the Holocaust in Roberto Benigni's Life is Beautiful/La Vita è Bella', in: M.F. Norden (ed.), *The Changing Face of Evil in Film and Television* (Amsterdam / New York 2007).

Baron has examined how Holocaust films reflect contemporary cinematic trends.¹⁶ Hirsch has applied trauma theory to films and documentaries concerned with Holocaust inferred trauma.¹⁷ Hirsch and Kacandes have edited a volume on pedagogical and theoretical issues concerning the use of Holocaust representation in education.¹⁸ Kerner, the latest author to publish a book on Holocaust films, has made a broad global survey of more and lesser-known Holocaust films.¹⁹

Only Libby Saxton – Chair of the Film Studies Department at Queen Mary, University of London – has dealt with the representation of gas chambers, but summarily and not from an historical perspective. As part of a shift in the focus of debate ‘from the question of *whether* the [Holocaust] could or should be represented to the question of *how* it might adequately or responsibly be represented’ she has examined how Holocaust filmmakers can encourage responsible as opposed to voyeuristic spectatorship.²⁰ In a chapter called ‘Through the Spyhole: Death, Ethics and Spectatorship’ she analyses how several fiction and documentary films dealing with gas chambers ‘imagine, construct or revisit these sites of unconscionable atrocity.’ The gas chamber representations she discusses – the earliest of which dates from 1974, even though gas chambers feature in many earlier Holocaust films as well – serve ‘to offer some insights into spectatorial agency and responsibility.’ Her study does not outline the changing image of gas chambers in Holocaust films, nor does it reveal developments in collective Holocaust memory by doing so.²¹

It is my contention that such a study is interesting on its own merits. Results would not only show the developing ideas and values of filmmakers regarding the representation of gas chambers in particular and the function of gas chambers in filmic Holocaust discourse in

¹⁶ L. Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present. The Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham 2005).

¹⁷ J. Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia 2004).

¹⁸ Hirsch & Kacandes, *Teaching the Representation*.

¹⁹ A. Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust. New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries and Experimental Films* (New York 2011).

²⁰ Saxton, *Haunted Images*, 2. Italics in original.

²¹ Ibidem, 72-73.

general, but also illustrate how global collective Holocaust memory has developed and how the popular meaning of gas chambers has changed over the past seven decades. In the face of the hitherto inexistence of like research, this study will open up new terrain in both the fields of Holocaust memory and Holocaust film studies.

Before presenting my results, I will first outline the theoretical and historical notions – representing history on film, representing the Holocaust on film, and Nazi gas chambers – that have formed the background to my research.

THEORY & HISTORY

In our largely postliterate society, historical filmmakers have become preeminent public historians. Film – ‘the contemporary medium still capable of both dealing with the past and holding a large audience’²² – disseminates representations of the past on a much larger scale than do for instance books or museums. In Western societies, the historical film has become the dominant mode of public historical representation. Film is a powerful medium: it reaches a global audience in its private sphere. Because films represent the world – even if they do so through analogy or fantasy – it has an impact on people’s worldview. Historical films, popular films most prominently, produce public perception of the past unlike any other medium. As Anton Kaes observed already in 1990, ‘film and television have become the most effective (and paradoxically least acknowledged) institutional vehicles for shaping historical consciousness.’²³

Representing History on Film

History films represent the past. What does this mean? ‘To *re-present* past events’ means ‘to make these events present again’. However, past events are gone and cannot really be made present again, at least not as they actually were. An event ‘cannot be recovered and “re-experienced,” since it is not “out there” to be visited and photographed like a foreign country.’²⁴ What remains of the past in the present are traces in the world and in memory. Based on these remnants, human beings symbolically reconstruct the past by representing it in various forms, from elementary images or propositions to complex narrative structures such as are presented in history books and films. These representations are not identical to the

²² R. Rosenstone, ‘History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film’, *The American Historical Review* 93-5 (1988) 1173-1185, 1175.

²³ Kaes, ‘History and Film’, 112. ‘Historical films,’ claims Kaes, ‘interpret national history for the broad public and thus produce, organize, and, to a large extent, homogenize public memory. Surpassing schools and universities, film and television have become the most effective (and paradoxically least acknowledged) institutional vehicles for shaping historical consciousness. They are powerful because they can make history come alive more readily than commemorative addresses, lectures, exhibitions or museums; they can resituate past events in the immediate experience of the viewer.’

²⁴ Kaes, ‘History and Film’, 117. Although the foreign country comparison is popular with historians because it signifies an actual presence in time and space, it begs the question whether the same objections hold true for representing foreign countries ‘as they actually are’. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, a country is also a narrative construct, a complex system of signs whose ontological ground resides in the imagination.

absent past but symbolically ‘stand in’ for them – another meaning of representation – as a tool to explain and understand the past.

Can historical claims be empirically verified when their referent – i.e. the past – is absent? If they could not, this would delegitimize not only the historical discipline but also the judiciary system; it would furthermore give way to Holocaust denial, because if historical claims cannot be verified then anything goes. Remnants of the past can and do function as empirical data to verify historical claims. But when it comes to narrative structures – stories about the world in the past, the present and the future – verification becomes much more difficult. That is because narrative structures are not ‘out there’ but are imposed on the world by us, like webs we throw over the world in order to get a grip on it in time.²⁵ Some webs are better than others because they incorporate more facts and provide a better understanding and explanation of the world, but all webs are products of the present time of their production. The way a web is spun is dependent on the context in which it is spun. In other words, human explanations and understandings of past, present and future times are themselves subject to and products of time. From this it follows that the narratives we construct about the past not only represent the past events they claim to represent (their salient content), but also represent the present context of their production (their latent content). Therefore we can study the content of representations about the past as primary sources of the present time and place in which they came into being.²⁶

²⁵ Allow me to note that ‘an event’ is itself a narrative construction, with beginning, middle, and end.

²⁶ See Doneson, *The Holocaust (2nd ed.)*, 8. ‘As a product of the society that produces it, film reflects public attitudes and acts, therefore, as a primary source of evidence for the historian. Like a more conventional document, therefore, a film must be “read” and analyzed for what it can reveal to us about the period in which it was created. In this regard, American films that deal with the Holocaust serve a dual function. Yes, they focus on themes portraying National Socialism and the persecution of the Jews; but they also explore contemporary issues that were and are germane to American society at the time of their appearance. Consequently, the analysis must proceed on both levels: on the salient level, the one that depicts the Holocaust itself, and on the latent level, the one that explains a particular film’s contemporary meaning. The two are connected, of course. On the salient level, the Holocaust often works as a metaphor for the discourse taking place on the latent level. Thus the event -- the Holocaust -- is a function of its current environment as well as a reflection of its own history.’

History Film Typology

History films are narrative constructs, complex systems of signs that represent both past events and the present context of their production. Within this conception, variations are possible. History film theorist Robert Rosenstone distinguishes three types of history films: the dramatic feature film, the opposition or innovative film and the documentary film.²⁷

The *dramatic feature film* is by far the most popular type of history film. It typically tells the story of men and women caught up in the sweep of historical events and shows the impact of these events on individual lives. Dramatic feature films are fictional in the sense that most elements are invented: for example, the events are reenacted before the camera in compressed or altered form, the people involved are played by actors, and dialogues are more often written for the occasion than recorded during the actual events. Dramatic feature films are part of the Hollywood tradition but not necessarily produced in or by Hollywood. Their goal is predominantly to entertain the public and to produce profits. Rosenstone gives a six-fold characterization of how the Hollywood tradition presents history: (1) It presents a story with a beginning, middle and end, containing a moral message and usually a view that things have gotten better; (2) It presents a story of individuals who are renowned for heroic deeds or who have suffered from exploitation or oppression; (3) It presents a story of a unitary, closed, and completed past, provides no alternatives to what is happening on the screen and admits of no doubts; (4) It personalizes, dramatizes, and emotionalizes the past, creating the sense that we are not watching a representation of events, but experiencing them directly; (5) It gives us the 'look' of the past; of buildings, costumes, artifacts, etc; (6) It shows history as a holistic process: film brings together things that written history often splits apart.²⁸

The *innovative or opposition film* is a more obscure and less popular mode of historical representation. Most innovative films are produced in opposition to Hollywood

²⁷ R. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow 2006). R. Rosenstone, 'The Historical Film as Real History', *Film-Historia* 5-1 (1995) 5-23. Rosenstone, 'History in Images'.

²⁸ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 47-48.

conventions. They search for a more sophisticated vocabulary in which to render the past on screen and attempt to present history in a more complex, interrogative and self-conscious way. Some of these films can be labeled 'postmodern' in the sense that they self-reflexively foreground their own construction, present history from a multiplicity of perspectives, deviate from dramatic story development, problematize the histories they present, employ humor, parody, and absurdism, refuse to insist on a coherent meaning of events, and 'never forget that the present moment is the site of all past representation.'²⁹ The goal of innovation or opposition films is to gain understanding rather than to provide entertainment.

The *documentary history film* is most like academic history, in that both disciplines make claims about past reality and present evidence to support those claims. Documentary film theorist Bill Nichols defines documentaries as films about 'situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory.'³⁰ What he means is that documentary films tell stories about events and people in the real world, but always do so from a distinct perspective that determines how the story is told. The goal of documentary film is to explain and understand events. Although the documentary seems to give direct access to history, it is fictional in the sense that it is constructed in a present to make sense of the past. The documentary resembles the dramatic feature film in that both often tell a linear story, deal with large topics through the experience of small groups, utilize objects and places to create a 'reality effect'³¹ and aim for an emotional response not only through images but also through the music, sounds and rhetoric. The difference between the documentary and the dramatic film is that the majority of the documentary images is not staged for the camera, but

²⁹ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 18-19, 50-51.

³⁰ B. Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington 2001), 14.

³¹ R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York 1986), 141-148.

collected from museums and archives. Exceptions are illustrative reenactments and ‘talking heads’ segments, i.e. contemporary interviews with witnesses or with experts.³² Nichols distinguishes six types or modes of documentary films: (1) The *expository* documentary speaks directly to the viewer with voice-over and argumentative logic. Most people associate this mode with documentary in general; (2) The *observational* documentary looks on as social actors go about their lives as if the camera were not present; (3) The *participatory* documentary interacts with his or her social actors and participates in shaping what happens before the camera. Interviews are a prime example, often coupled with archival footage to examine historical issues; (4) The *reflexive* documentary calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking and increases awareness of the constructedness of the film’s representation of reality; (5) The *performative* documentary emphasizes the expressive aspect of the filmmaker’s engagement with a subject; (6) The *poetic* documentary stresses visual and acoustic rhythms, patterns, and the overall form of the film, and has a close proximity to experimental, personal, and avant-garde films.³³

Representing the Holocaust on Film

The question whether the Holocaust in general and the gas chambers in particular can and should be represented has been hotly debated. Various philosophers, filmmakers and survivors have claimed – often with reference to German philosopher Theodor Adorno’s dictum that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric – that the Holocaust is beyond representation, ineffable, incommunicable, incomprehensible, and so on.³⁴ ‘Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it be visualized,’ wrote for instance Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel, ‘I who was there do not understand.’³⁵ However, the focus of the discussion on Holocaust representation has shifted from the question *whether* the events could or should be

³² Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 17, 70-74.

³³ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 31-32, 149-153.

³⁴ L. Saxton, *Haunted Images. Film, Ethics, Testimony and the Holocaust* (London & New York 2008), 6-7. Th.W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge 1955), 34.

³⁵ Saxton, *Haunted Images*, 6. Doneson, *The Holocaust* (2nd ed.), 3.

represented to the question *how* they might be represented.³⁶ No event is unrepresentable in itself and each event poses challenges to representation – in that regard the Holocaust is no different from other events. What gives the Holocaust a *Sonderstellung* – if anything does – is the nature and the scale of the genocidal events that go by that name. As Saul Friedländer puts it, ‘we are dealing with an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an “event at the limits” (...) the most radical form of genocide encountered in history: the willful, systematic, industrially organized, largely successful attempt totally to exterminate an entire human group within twentieth-century Western society.’³⁷

Adequate Holocaust representation – constructing a narrative web with which to explain and understand what happened – is problematic for several reasons. First, the Nazis willfully eliminated most witnesses and evidence – primary sources for the historian – of their crimes. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi relates how SS militiamen told prisoners that ‘however this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world would not believe him (...) because we will destroy the evidence together with you.’³⁸ The SS prevented *Sonderkommandos* from sharing their experiences with others, and photography in concentration and extermination camps was prohibited by SS-leadership, resulting in a dearth of visual traces.³⁹ Secondly, the proportions of the Holocaust were unprecedented and unrepeatable.⁴⁰ This poses challenges to

³⁶ Saxton, *Haunted Images*, 2.

³⁷ S. Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Harvard 1992), 2-3. ‘The extermination of the Jews of Europe,’ writes Friedländer, ‘is as accessible to both representation and interpretation as any other historical event. But we are dealing with an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an “event at the limits”’. What turns the “Final Solution” into an event at the limits is the very fact that it is the most radical form of genocide encountered in history: the willful, systematic, industrially organized, largely successful attempt totally to exterminate an entire human group within twentieth-century Western society.’

³⁸ P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London 1989), 1.

³⁹ F. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz. Three Years in the Gas Chambers* (Chicago 1999), 29. Müller and his fellow *Sonderkommando* members ‘had become privy to a secret and were no longer allowed to come into contact with other prisoners or with SS men not in the know.’ Cf. Levi, *The Drowned*, 34-36.

⁴⁰ Despite post-WWII genocides and catastrophes, writes Levi, ‘the Nazi concentration camp system still remains a unicum, both in its extent and quality. In no other place and time has one seen a phenomenon so unexpected and so complex: never were so many human lives extinguished in so short a time, and with so lucid a combination of technological ingenuity, fanaticism and cruelty. Levi, *The Drowned*, 9-10. Although, as Norman Finkelstein points out, the uniqueness of the

representation, because it is so unlike other events that no frame of reference exists for representing and understanding it. As Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote, ‘We can enumerate and describe each of these events, but they remain singularly opaque when we truly seek to understand them.’⁴¹

Nevertheless, based on the witnesses and evidence that have survived, historians have been able to reconstruct, explain and understand the events of the Holocaust to a large degree, and a myriad of filmmakers have attempted to represent these events in film. Between 1945 and 1960 already over a hundred Holocaust-related feature films and television dramas were produced, and many more would follow. Whether in dramatic, documentary or innovative form, the systematic destruction of Jews by the Nazi regime has been the subject of innumerable films, and the body of Holocaust films seems ever growing. ‘Over the past decade,’ observed Terri Ginsberg in 2004, ‘Holocaust films of nearly every generic and formal structure have been produced as well as distributed across an expanding global context, as Holocaust cinema has become an increasingly mainstream, international venture.’⁴² The fact that at least twenty-seven dramatic feature films and twenty-one documentary Holocaust films have been published since Ginsberg’s observation attests to the popularity of the Holocaust film.⁴³

What is true of history films in general – as I have explicated above – is true of Holocaust films in particular. On the salient level Holocaust films represent the events of the Holocaust and on the latent level they represent the time and place of their production, e.g.

Holocaust should not become a dogma. ‘At the most basic level,’ he writes, ‘every historical event is unique, if merely by virtue of time and location, and every historical event bears distinctive features as well as features in common with other historical events. The anomaly of The Holocaust [i.e. the ideological representation of the Nazi holocaust] is that its uniqueness is held to be absolutely decisive.’ *The Holocaust Industry. Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering. Second Edition* (London & New York 2003), 42.

⁴¹ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (New York 2002), 12. ‘From a historical perspective we know,’ he writes, ‘for example, the most minute details of how the final phase of the extermination was executed, how the deportees were led to the gas chambers by a squad of fellow inmates (the so-called *Sonderkommando*), who then saw to it that the corpses were dragged out and washed, that their hair and gold teeth were salvaged, and that their bodies, finally, were placed in the crematoria. We can enumerate and describe each of these events, but they remain singularly opaque when we truly seek to understand them.’

⁴² T. Ginsberg, ‘Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Holocaust and Film’, *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 26-1 (2004) 47-59, 47.

⁴³ Cf. Wikipedia, ‘List of Holocaust Films’, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Holocaust_films.

the meaning of the Holocaust for contemporary filmmakers and audiences. More particular still, it is true of the representation of gas chambers, both in terms of their form and function. The changing image of gas chambers in Holocaust films and the changing role of these images within the story of the Holocaust are revealing of both the changing nature of collective Holocaust memory and the changing role of gas chambers within Holocaust discourse. My findings therefore reveal changes in popular Holocaust discourse and collective Holocaust memory.

Nazi Gas Chambers 1939-1945

A gas chamber is an airtight room that can be filled with gas as a means of execution. Nazi Germany used gas chambers to end what they believed to be *lebensunwertes Leben*, i.e. life unworthy of life. The Nazis began using gas chambers in December 1939 for ‘euthanizing’ handicapped, chronically ill, and elderly Poles and Germans. Victims were brought in under the pretense of medical examinations and were subsequently led to ‘showers’, where they were asphyxiated by carbon monoxide.⁴⁴ In 1941, after Hitler had called the euthanasia program to a halt because of domestic resistance, the Nazis began to systematically murder Jews, Gypsies, Russian prisoners of war and others by the same method.⁴⁵ In December 1941 they introduced the large-scale use of gas vans in the Polish village of Chełmno. Forty to sixty victims were forced into a single van, the van’s exhaust fumes were piped back into the enclosed vehicle, and after several minutes all victims had suffocated to death. Between 152,000 and 310,000 Jews and over 4,000 Gypsies were murdered in this way at Chełmno.⁴⁶

However, this method proved inefficient and insufficient for the millions of Jews the Nazis intended to kill. Therefore they planned – in a project named *Aktion Reinhard*, in honor of assassinated SD-leader Reinhard Heydrich – to build three extermination camps with

⁴⁴ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 256-257.

⁴⁵ Yad Vashem, ‘Gas Chambers’, 1.

⁴⁶ J.R. Fischel, *The A to Z of the Holocaust* (Lanham, Toronto & Oxford 2005), 60.

large, stationary gas chambers in 1942. These camps were Belżec, Sobibór and Treblinka.⁴⁷ When transports arrived at these camps, some victims were chosen to join the *Sonderkommando* while a few others with useful skills were selected to work in the camp. The rest was ‘sent on an assembly line, where they were stripped of their possessions and clothing and their hair was cut. They were then pushed into the gas chambers with their arms raised so the maximum number of people could be jammed in. Babies and young children were thrown in on top of the crowd.’⁴⁸ In these three camps, approximately two million Jews were exterminated during the twenty months of their operation.⁴⁹

Belżec extermination camp, in March 1942 the first to be operational, had three gas chambers in a camouflaged wooden barrack. Jews were gassed with carbon monoxide. An engine was installed at a shed outside the gas chamber from which gas was piped into the enclosed space. Newly arrived victims, having been made to believe that they had arrived at a work or transit camp, were killed in this way immediately upon arrival. Approximately 500,000 to 600,000 Jews were killed at Belżec.⁵⁰ Sobibór, the second *Aktion Reinhard* extermination camp, housed its gas chambers in a brick building.⁵¹ The gassing of Jews by carbon monoxide began in May 1942. Victims had to undress in the railway square and were told that ‘following their baths, they would have their possessions returned to them and be sent to Ukraine, where they would be able to live and work.’ By September, an additional building containing six gas chambers became operational, increasing extermination capacity to 1,200 to 1,300 people a day.⁵² The third *Aktion Reinhard* camp, Treblinka, was established in July 1942. It was modeled after Sobibór and had three gas chambers in a massive brick building that could be hermetically sealed. Between 5,000 and 7,000 Jews arrived each day by freight train and later these numbers were increased to more than 12,000 a day. Upon

⁴⁷ Yad Vashem, ‘Gas Chambers’, 1.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, 2.

⁴⁹ Fischel, *The A to Z*, 32.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, 49.

⁵¹ Yad Vashem, ‘Gas Chambers’, 1.

⁵² Fischel, *The A to Z*, 214-215.

arrival, men were separated from women and children and all were ordered to undress, bundle their clothes and leave their valuables. They were told that after showering they would receive clean clothes. 'The walls of the chambers were covered with white tile, shower heads were installed, and water pipes ran across the ceiling, all constructed in order to give the appearance of "showers." In reality the pipes conducted the carbon monoxide into the chambers.' Ukrainian mercenaries guarded the doors of the gas chambers and started the engine. 'Some 20 to 25 minutes later, an SS officer would check through the window to be sure that everyone had been asphyxiated. Jewish prisoners (the *Sonderkommando*) were then ordered to remove the corpses.' Between July 23 and August 28, 1942 approximately 268,000 Jews were exterminated by this method. Later ten additional gas chambers were built. In total, between 700,000 to 900,000 Jews were killed in Treblinka.⁵³

Auschwitz was the largest of the death camps. It comprised three camps: Auschwitz I, the main Auschwitz camp; Auschwitz II, Birkenau, the extermination camp where between 1.1 and 1.5 million Jews were gassed with Zyklon B; and Auschwitz III, Buna Works, the slave labor camp where Jews were being worked to death. Although execution and genocide by gas took place in Mauthausen, Neuengamme, Sachsenhausen, Stutthof, Ravensbrueck, Dachau, Majdanek, Chełmno, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Auschwitz, the latter above all 'has become synonymous with the Holocaust and has come to symbolize the genocidal policies of Nazi Germany.'⁵⁴ Of the approximately six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust, at least three million died in gas chambers, of which almost half at Auschwitz. Others died from bludgeoning, shooting, starvation and other forms of maltreatment in various ghettos, concentration camps, labor sites, during deportation or in or near their hometowns. Therefore, contra what Boll and many others believe, the Holocaust can be reduced neither to Auschwitz nor to the gas chambers.

⁵³ Ibidem, 236-238.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 39-40; Yad Vashem, 'Gas Chambers', 2. Cf. Snyder, *Bloodlands*, viii.

GAS CHAMBER REPRESENTATIONS

I have found twenty-four Holocaust films that visually represent gas chambers (see Filmography). Fourteen of these are dramatic feature films, ten are documentaries, and one of these documentaries is also an innovative history film. Thirteen are from North America (eleven from the United States and two from Canada), ten are from Europe (five from France, two from the United Kingdom, and one each from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany), and one is a US/UK co-production.⁵⁵

1944-1965

From the end of the war until 1965, seven Holocaust films represented gas chambers.

Year	Title	Country	Type
1944	<i>Majdanek Cemetery of Europe</i>	Poland	Expository Docu
1945	<i>Death Mills</i>	US	Expository Docu
1945	<i>Nazi Concentration Camps</i>	US	Expository Docu
1946	<i>The Stranger</i>	US	Dramatic Feature
1948	<i>Daleka Cesta</i>	Czechoslovakia	Dramatic Feature
1955	<i>Night and Fog</i>	France	Poetic Docu
1961	<i>Judgment at Nuremberg</i>	US	Dramatic Feature

The first film to represent gas chambers was Polish expository documentary *Majdanek: Cemetery of Europe* (1944). Like its American counterparts *Death Mills* (1945) and *Nazi Concentration and Prison Camps* (1945), it was compiled from footage shot by Allied film crews after liberating various concentration camps, not including Auschwitz. All three films show black-and-white (b/w) images of the gas chambers at Majdanek and Dachau (Figures 1 and 2). These shots, recycled in several films until 1968, are embedded within similar sequences showing the gas chamber door with a ‘*Bad und Desinfektion*’ (Majdanek) or ‘*Brausebad*’ (Dachau) sign on or above it, the chamber’s interior, dummy shower heads and

⁵⁵ Saxton additionally discusses the *The Eighty-First Blow* (1974), *Riesen ins Leben* (1995), and *Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland* (1999). I haven’t been able to find these films, although I have found others that Saxton ignores.

pipes protruding from the ceiling, Zyklon B canisters, and the furnaces and chimneys of the crematoria. All three documentaries furthermore show emaciated or exhumed corpses preceding or following the gas chamber representations. Curiously, and attesting to incomplete knowledge of German extermination procedures, the narrator of *Death Mills* claims that ‘not all died slowly and horribly by starvation: millions died quickly and horribly by burning in the furnaces of Poland.’ In reality, millions died quickly and horribly in gas chambers before burning in said furnaces.



Figure 1: The Majdanek gas chamber



Figure 2: The Dachau gas chamber

These early gas chamber images – and the same is true for those in *The Stranger* (1946) and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) – functioned as evidence of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, as outlined by the various narrators.⁵⁶ Survivors are depicted but their testimonies hardly heard. A scene from *Death Mills* illustrates this tendency to focus on the perpetrators and not on the victims/survivors: near the end an image of survivors is

⁵⁶ *Nazi Concentration Camps* (1945) was used as evidence in the Nuremberg Trials (Baron, ‘Film’, 2). Similarly, *The Stranger* (1946) and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) show concentration camp and gas chamber images to attest to the crimes committed by Nazi characters within the story, as outlined by respectively Mr. Wilson and Colonel Lawson.

accompanied by the comment that ‘the faces of these women at Mauthausen tell the stories of their sufferings’ without giving these survivors a voice in the documentary.

Most films from this period recycled these images from Majdanek and Dachau. The one that did not was Orson Welles’s war crime drama *The Stranger* (1946). *The Stranger* follows Nazi hunter Mr. Wilson (Edward G. Robinson) to the town of Harper, Connecticut, in search of fugitive war criminal Franz Kindler (Orson Welles), who now goes by the name of Charles Rankin. Mr. Wilson shows concentration camp imagery to Rankin’s wife (Loretta Young) to convince her of her husband’s Nazi past. The function of this gas chamber image is therefore same as in the expository documentaries discussed above: to testify to the crimes committed by the Nazis, here personified by Franz Kindler. The gas chamber is represented with an image of a brightly lit bathing room never seen before or since in Holocaust films. Mr. Wilson peculiarly comments that in this gas chamber ‘candidates were first given hot showers so that their pores would open and the gas would act that much more quickly.’ Image and commentary attest to the fact that in 1946, gas chamber imagery and information – although *Nazi Concentration and Prison Camps* was used as evidence in the Nuremberg Trials – had yet to find its way to American filmmakers like Orson Welles and through them to the American public.⁵⁷

Remarkably, all four of these early Holocaust films – and the same is true for *Night and Fog* (1955), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) and *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1968) – refer to Holocaust victims as ‘prisoners’, ‘candidates’ or ‘inmates’ but hardly ever as Jews, even though victims were predominantly Jewish.⁵⁸ By contrast, the Jewish identity of the victims is central to Alfréd Radok’s drama film *Daleká Cesta* (1949), the first Czechoslovakian Holocaust film. *Daleká Cesta* – English title *Distant Journey* or *The Long*

⁵⁷ *Death Mills* (1945) was shown to German citizens to inform them of the genocide committed ‘behind the curtain of Nazi pageants and parades’, as the narrator puts it. It was not meant to be shown to the American public, as is evident from an opening statement that reads: ‘This film will not be shown to the general public without permission of the War Department.’

⁵⁸ In *Judgment at Nuremberg*, chief prosecutor Colonel Lawson (Richard Widmark) ‘mentions the Jews, but along with members of “every occupied country of Europe.” In so doing, *Judgment* obscures the reality of Nazi policy against the Jews (...).’ Furthermore, there are no Jewish characters in the film. Doneson, *The Holocaust* (2nd ed.), 99-101.

Journey – tells the story of Jewess Hana Kaufmannová (Blanka Waleská) and Gentile Antonin Bures (Otomar Krejca), a couple whose relationship is complicated by the introduction of anti-Jewish measures. Near the end of the film's mostly documentary overture – before the dramatic story of Hana and Tonik takes off – the image of the Majdanek gas chamber door (Figure 1) signifies the gas chamber in particular and the Holocaust in general. The image is dislodged from the sequence in which it was presented in the documentaries discussed above and employed as a synecdoche (i.e. the image shows a part but signifies the whole) at the end of a sequence showing a speech by the Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher, rallying German children, the slogan 'Jews get out!' painted on a fence, smiling Aryan children, and imprisoned Jewish children (a fictional image that prefigures the scene discussed below). The synecdoche has a double function: extradiegetically (in tandem with the archival images) it signifies the implied logical end of Nazism – genocide – and diegetically (employing fictional images) it prefigures the fate of the Jewish protagonists.

A later scene, at Theresienstadt, evokes the idea of a gas chamber – without showing one – in a sequence that shows Hana escorting a group of newly arrived children to a bathing room (the same image as is used in the overture) and asking them to undress; an adult man undressing; the children hesitating; various quick close-ups of shower heads, pipes and hooks on the ceiling and walls of the shower room, accompanied by ominous musical tones; and finally both children and adults panicking and shouting: 'It's gas! Gas! Gas!' Since Nazi gas chambers were often disguised as shower rooms, close-ups of non-water-dispensing shower heads feature in many later Holocaust films. The striking similarity of these images (Figure 3) corroborates Anton Kaes's claim that 'images of images circulate in an eternal cycle, an endless loop, in a Möbius strip of cliché images, validating and reconfirming each other (...).'⁵⁹ The bathroom/gas chamber scene in *Daleká Cesta* functions to signify the fear of the

⁵⁹ A. Kaes, 'History and Film', 112.

Jewish children – the close ups of the shower heads combined with the ominous music are shot from their perspective and represent their fear – and by analogy that of the Czechoslovakian Jews in general. The film is saturated by fear; it depicts ‘a grotesque nightmare’ writes Kerner, ‘a world thrown into chaos, life was precarious, and the threat of deportation – which meant almost certain death in an Auschwitz gas chamber – hung overhead like the Sword of Damocles.’⁶⁰ *Daleká Cesta* is the only film from this period that represents a gas chamber from the perspective of the Jewish victims. A possible explanation for this, as well as for the Gentile-Jewish love story, can be found in Radok’s family sphere: his father was half-Jewish, his mother a Gentile, his grandfather died at Theresienstadt and many other relatives on the paternal side died during the Holocaust.⁶¹ Radok’s emphasis on Jewish Holocaust victims is exceptional in this early period of Holocaust filmmaking.

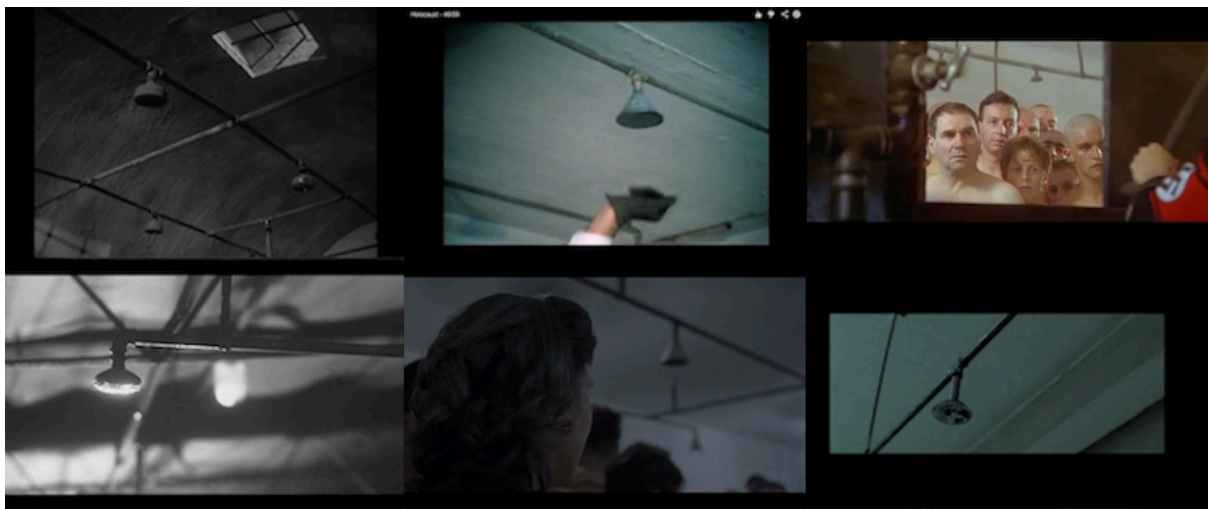


Figure 3: Shower heads in *Daleká Cesta* (1949), *Holocaust* (1978), *Les Uns et les Autres* (1981), *Schindler's List* (1993), *The Grey Zone* (2001) and *Auschwitz* (2011).

Released in 1955, Alain Resnais’s poetic documentary *Nuit et Brouillard*, which outlines the story of Nazi concentration camps from isolation and deportation to concentration and extermination, was the first film to present color imagery of a gas chamber and, more importantly, to focus on the suffering of victims *inside* the gas chamber. It does, however, not emphasize that these victims were mostly Jewish but ‘it takes a more universal

⁶⁰ Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 25.

⁶¹ Ibidem, 21-25.

approach and in fact only references Jewish victims once, along with images of deportees wearing the Star of David.⁶² Early on, *Night and Fog* recycles the image of the Majdanek gas chamber door (Figure 1), which by now can fairly be called a Holocaust icon. It does so in a sequence showing the facades of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Auschwitz I, a face expressing amazement ('First sight of the camp,' says the narrator, 'it's another planet.'), of prisoners gathered in a camp's square, of the Majdanek door with the '*Bad und Desinfektion*' sign, and finally of naked prisoners standing in line. Here again, as in *Daleká Cesta*, the Majdanek door signifies the Holocaust synecdochically.

Later on in the film, the gas chamber fully materializes: after two b/w shots of Zyklon B canisters – similar shots feature in five of these seven films – a sequence of moving color images shows the facade of (again) the Majdanek gas chamber, the inside of the chamber with dummy water container, piping and shower heads, two closed doors with peepholes, and finally a shot moving upwards from a small window to a battered concrete ceiling. 'The only signs, but you have to know, are the fingernail scrapings on the ceiling. Even the concrete was scratched up.' These fingernail scrapings (Figure 4) function to show the suffering of the victims. However, according to Resnais, not only the Jews but all human beings are possible victims of gas chambers, since suffering is the universal and never-ending human condition: although 'war nods of to sleep, it keeps one eye always open. (...) We pretend it all happened only once, at a given time and place. We turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to humanity's never-ending cry.' The gas chamber representations in *Night and Fog* therefore function to illustrate universal suffering, 'humanity's never ending cry', rather than the particular genocide inflicted by the Nazis on the Jewish people.

⁶² Ibidem, 4.

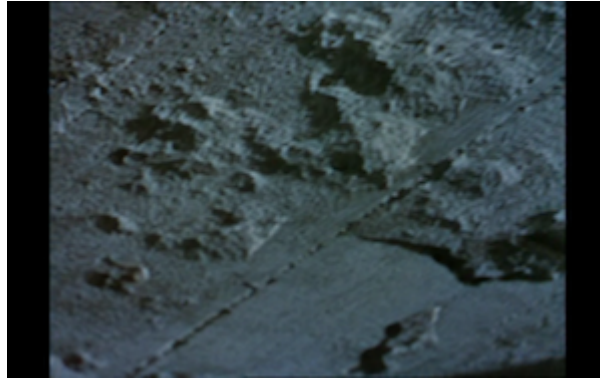


Figure 4: Scratched-up concrete in *Night and Fog*

Stanley Kramer's American courtroom drama *Judgment at Nuremberg* – shot during the trial of Adolf Eichmann and released on the day he was sentenced to death, 14 December 1961⁶³ – recycles the sequence of images of the Dachau gas chamber as shown in *Death Mills* and *Nazi Concentration and Prison Camps*. In good dramatic tradition, *Judgment* adds to this a close-up of presiding Judge Haywood (Spencer Tracy) biting his fist in agony at what he sees.⁶⁴ Preceding and following the gas chamber imagery, the film shows burnt and emaciated corpses, making this the first American Holocaust drama to show explicit atrocity footage.⁶⁵ These images again serve as evidence to the crimes committed under Nazi authority – as in *The Stranger* diegetically rather than extradiegetically – and testify to the guilt of the authorities, signified by the accused Nazi judges.

In this first period of Holocaust filmmaking, both the form and the function of gas chambers representations are remarkably constant. Most films use gas chamber images from Majdanek or Dachau to signify gas chambers and do so in an expository documentary mode, even within the dramatic feature films. The image of the Majdanek gas chamber door is used so often that it can rightly be called an iconic gas chamber image. The function of these gas

⁶³ Doneson, *The Holocaust* (2nd ed.), 93-94. 'The Eichmann trial must have lent authenticity to producer-director Stanley Kramer's film and helped to make it so successful as well.'

⁶⁴ Similarly, in *The Stranger*, the gas chamber image is followed by the horrified face of Mrs. Rankin (Loretta Young), the newly-wed wife of fugitive Nazi Franz Kindler (Orson Welles). This demonstrates well how dramatic feature films, as Rosenstone puts it, personalize, dramatize, emotionalize, and moralize the past that is presented: the emotional reaction visible on the dramatized, diegetic spectator's face instructs the actual spectator how to relate morally to what is shown.

⁶⁵ *The Stranger* does so too, but hardly recognizable as such. A side note: a 1951 teleplay by Aby Mann, of which *Judgment at Nuremberg* is a remake, provides a curious illustration of how Holocaust representations on TV are subject to commercial pressures: the word 'gas' was censored from the teleplay on demand by the show's sponsor, the American Gas Association, which objected to the use of the word 'gas' in reference to extermination camps and gas chambers. Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, 3. Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 29. Anker, *Imaginary Witness*, 46:00.

chamber representations is primarily to attest to the atrocities committed by the Nazis and not to show the suffering of the victims, which is emphasized in only two films. The fact that most Holocaust victims were Jewish is not something you can deduce from these films.

1965-1985

From 1965 to 1985, five films have been produced that represent gas chambers: a Canadian and an American expository documentary, both from the 1960s, a very popular American dramatic miniseries from the late 1970s, and two French dramatic feature films from the early 1980s. Gas chambers are represented more dramatically and increasingly function to show the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust.

Year	Title	Country	Type
1965	<i>Memorandum</i>	Canada	Expository Docu
1968	<i>The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich</i>	US	Expository Docu
1978	<i>Holocaust</i>	US	Dramatic Feature
1981	<i>Les Uns et les Autres</i>	France	Dramatic Feature
1983	<i>Au Nom de Tous les Miens</i>	France	Dramatic Feature

In contrast to most films discussed so far, the Canadian expository documentary *Memorandum* (1965) emphasizes the Jewish identity of Holocaust victims. Shot in the summer of 1965, *Memorandum* follows Bernard Laufer, a Jewish survivor now living in Canada, and twenty-nine other American Jewish survivors on a day-and-a-half ‘pilgrimage’ to Bergen-Belsen. The story of their visit is framed by scenes from a peaceful post-war West Germany on the one hand – e.g. the opening of the Jewish embassy and the Frankfurt Trials against former Auschwitz officers – and archival footage of the Third Reich and the Holocaust on the other.

Memorandum features a contemporary shot (shot during the making of the film) of the entrance to the gas chamber and crematorium at Auschwitz I and several shots of a model of Crematorium II of Auschwitz-Birkenau by Mieczyslaw Stobierski (Figure 5). The camera

moves closely over the sculpted entrance, the undressing room, the operating gas chamber and furnaces as an interviewed German prosecutor explains this ‘devilish idea’ to the filmmaker.⁶⁶ This film is the locus of a transformation in the function, form and location of gas chamber representation. First, as in previous films, it outlines the crimes of the perpetrators, while, as in later films, it zooms in on the Jewish victims. It does so quite literally: by zooming in on sculpted gas chamber full of suffocating people. Secondly, this sculpted scene is a dramatic reenactment, prefiguring later films in which genocide reenactment becomes the dominant mode of gas chamber representation. There is furthermore a scene in which a survivor of Treblinka testifies to his experiences, prefiguring many survivor testimonies in later films. Thirdly, *Memorandum* shows the Auschwitz gas chambers, prefiguring the trend to signify the Holocaust by showing Auschwitz. This film can therefore rightly be called a turning point in gas chamber representation.



Figure 5: Stobierski's model with running gas chamber

Jack Kaufman's expository documentary *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1968) – based on the book by William F. Shirer – which recycles images from Majdanek and Dachau for the last time (Figures 1 and 2), is the only film from this period that does not present new ways or images to represent gas chambers. Its gas chamber representation is formally and functionally closer to the films from the previously discussed period than it is to those from this period. Kaufman's film – aimed to answer the question how it was possible

⁶⁶ The prosecutor also explains that it is almost impossible to sentence those Nazis who killed by memorandum, i.e. from behind their desks using a telephone, to which the filmmaker peculiarly responds: 'So the answer is to use the telephone.'

that ‘an ancient and cultured people steeped in Christianity (...) collapsed into savage barbarism in the mid-twentieth century’ and therefore primarily concerned with Nazi Germany and only secondarily with the Holocaust – presents one new gas chamber image as well: a sequence showing various victim processions, a canister of Zyklon B, and the doors at both Majdanek and Dachau ends with a b/w still shot of a nearly closed door with an peephole, taken from inside the Majdanek gas chamber with heavy backlight shining through the door (Figure 6). Although this sequence functions as evidence to the ‘barbarism’ of the Third Reich, it can be argued based on camera position, lightning, and the climaxing extradiegetic music that this new image – never seen before or since in Holocaust films – is shot from the perspective of the victims nearing their extermination.



Figure 6: Inside the Majdanek gas chamber

Kaufman outlines the Holocaust, from deportation to extermination, but does not use the word ‘Holocaust’ to refer to this process – none of the films discussed so far do. It does use ‘Holocaust’ once, but in another context, that of Hitler’s strategy for the battle against Britain and France, which the narrator refers to as ‘Holocaust from the sky and thunder from the ground.’ Like most of the films discussed so far, *The Rise and Fall* does not mention the Jewish identity of the victims. It mentions ‘Hitler’s racial fantasies: achieve a pure Aryan world’ and continues that ‘to this end, hundreds of thousands of unsuspecting *people* are herded into ghettos and relocation centers.’ (Emphasis added) It furthermore refers to victims

as ‘housewives, factory hands, professors, schoolchildren’, ‘human cargo’, ‘prisoners’, and ‘unsuspecting victims’, but never as ‘Jews.’

The three dramatic feature films representing gas chambers in this period, starting with the American miniseries *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss* (1978), really focus on the victims. They furthermore herald a new trend in Holocaust filmmaking – genocide reenactment. However, none of these films show events inside a functioning gas chamber in the way Stobierski’s model does. This scene, according to Saxton ‘variously described as the “primal scene”, “nerve center” or “constitutive crime” of the genocide,’ will remain off-screen in Holocaust films until the release of Uwe Boll’s film *Auschwitz* in 2011.⁶⁷

Holocaust tells the story of the Jewish family Weiss, caught up in the sweep of German events between 1933 and 1945. It is a dramatic feature film *par excellence*: it personalizes and emotionalizes – Wiesel would say ‘trivializes’⁶⁸ – the Holocaust. All four episodes were broadcast worldwide and its impact ‘may be read from the fact that the term “Holocaust” – which was hitherto limited to the Anglo-Saxon world – since then is used all over the world.’⁶⁹ *Holocaust* dramatically reenacts genocide in gas chambers at Hadamar Euthanasia Center and at Auschwitz. At Hadamar, a group of handicapped people – including Anna Weiss (Blanche Baker), who is traumatized after being raped by Nazi soldiers – is locked into a wooden barn by lab-coated doctors and nurses. There’s no music – only the sound of birds chirping, signifying the casualness of the operation. The camera follows a doctor who walks from the door over to the left side of the barn, where an internal combustion engine and an operator in blue overalls are located. After the doctor starts the engine, the shot cuts away to another doctor checking the time on his watch, after which it cuts back to a close-up of the engine. The camera moves from the engine, over the exhaust

⁶⁷ Saxton, *Haunted Images*, 2.

⁶⁸ E. Wiesel, ‘Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory’, *The New York Times*, 11 June 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/11/movies/art-and-the-holocaust-trivializing-memory.html?pagewanted=print&src=pm>.

⁶⁹ Van Vree, ‘Auschwitz’, 211. 120 million US citizens watched *Holocaust* ‘and following its broadcast President Jimmy Carter formed a presidential commission (...) to determine an appropriate way for the United States to commemorate the Holocaust’, resulting in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 28.

pipe, all the way up to the point where the pipe enters the barn. Neither the suffering of the victims nor their dead bodies are shown. The next shot shows mother Berta (Rosemary Harris) and her daughter-in-law Inga (Meryl Streep) reading the letter from Hadamar informing them of Anna's death. This scene invites viewers to empathize with the victims rather than to despise the perpetrators. 'Whatever feelings the spectator might experience over Anna's fate,' writes Kerner, 'these feelings have less to do with the violence visited upon the character and more to do with an empathetic response to the suffering endured by the family. The loss of a child, a daughter, or a sister is what spawns a spectator's emotional response.'⁷⁰



Figure 7: Inside the *Holocaust* gas chamber

Holocaust features two similar and related gas chamber scenes at a fictional Auschwitz. In the first, Major Dorf (Michael Moriarty), the antagonist of the family Weiss who personifies Nazi Germany, and a professor visit Auschwitz for inspection purposes. Accompanied by a prisoner string quartet, Dorf and the professor meet camp commander Rudolf Höss and enter the crematorium building. The first image signifying that the characters have entered a gas chamber is a close-up of a conical metal showerhead attached to a pipe hanging from a white ceiling. Similar images are used in other films (see Figure 3). As the camera zooms out, several other showerheads appear (Figure 7). While Höss explains the genocidal procedure to the professor – this scene functions primarily as an exposé on gas

⁷⁰ Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 134.

chambers – the trio moves on to the undressing room. After an SS-guard salutes Höss, male prisoners silently and obediently move towards the gas chamber – covering their genitals, showing the American aporia that it is acceptable to show genocide but not to show nudity. Inside, the SS reassures them that ‘it’s only a shower.’ As Dorf, Höss and the professor approach the closed door, the camera cuts away to a gas-masked SS on a roof, emptying a canister of Zyklon B in a chimney (Figure 8; cf. Figure 21). With the sound of coughing and screaming in the background – the suffering is kept off-screen – the professor looks through the spyhole (Figure 9; cf. Figure 18): ‘Absolutely fantastic! Like a scene from Dante’s *Inferno*... and those sounds... almost like they’re wailing in the synagogue.’⁷¹



Figure 8: An SS emptying a canister of Zyklon B



Figure 9: The professor observing the victims

The second Auschwitz scene is played on the same set, making iconic gas chamber imagery – e.g. the close-up of the showerhead, the peephole –redundant. Commanded by SS-

⁷¹ Cf. Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 287n24: ‘In both *Amen* and the NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, the spectator is taken right up to the gas chamber door, and characters gaze through the peephole, but in both cases the films never cut to the subjective view; leaving the spectator right at the threshold. A trailer for a yet-to-released (sic) Uwe Boll film, on the other hand, takes us from the peephole straight into the gas chamber during a gassing.’

men, Berta Weiss and other women undress and proceed to the gas chamber, covering their breasts. After a cutaway to two members of the *Sonderkommando* collecting the women's clothes – one of them is Berta's son Karl, showing that in *Holocaust*, the Holocaust is really a family affair – the camera cuts back to Berta's face as she enters the gas chamber. The scene ends with the sound of Zyklon B crystals falling and evaporating.

The gas chambers have several functions within this story. *Holocaust* tells the story of the family Weiss and through them the story of the European Jews, victims of the Nazis. Therefore, in contrast to the early post-war gas chamber representations, the gas chambers in *Holocaust* function to show the suffering of the Jews. Furthermore, the gas chamber representation at Auschwitz provides the story with closure. It does so together with another closing scene, that of only surviving son Rudi Weiss going to Palestine in 1945. *Holocaust* therefore closes with the following message: the mother dies in Auschwitz but the son survives and goes to Palestine to create the state of Israel. *Holocaust* is the first Holocaust film that directly connects the gas chambers to the state of Israel.

Claude Lelouch's *Les Uns et les Autres* (1981) tells the story of two generations of French, American and Russian artists. The first generation lives through the war; the story of the second generation is set in the 1960s and 1970s. The post-war generation's story begins when French soldiers return to Paris after the end of the Algerian War in 1962 and it ends when a group of second generation artists organize – having learned from both wars, one supposes – an international concert and dance performance on top of the *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris to raise money for the Red Cross and awareness for suffering in the Third World. There is a short gas chamber representation in the first part of the film, aimed more to substantiate the suffering of the war generation in general than to emphasize either the crimes of the Nazis or the suffering of the Jews in particular. The gas chamber in this story is not given special status but is rather one of many things that happened during the war. The gas chamber is

represented in a sequence similar to, though shorter than, that in which Berta Weiss enters the gas chamber: we see a prisoner orchestra playing a sad symphony, naked male prisoners in a white room with showerheads on the ceiling, an SS shutting a rather large peephole framing our view into the gas chamber (Figure 10), the *Sonderkommando* collecting the prisoners' clothes, and finally again the orchestra. Unlike *Holocaust*, the Jewish identity of the victims is not emphasized (although it is acknowledged) and the gas chamber is not the end of the story, because this film is not about Jewish suffering but about universal suffering. In that respect *Les Uns et les Autres* resembles *Nuit et Brouillard*, which is also evident in the film's motto, a quote by Willa Cather: 'There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.' This motto puts the Holocaust on a par with all other 'human stories' and therefore universalises its meaning.

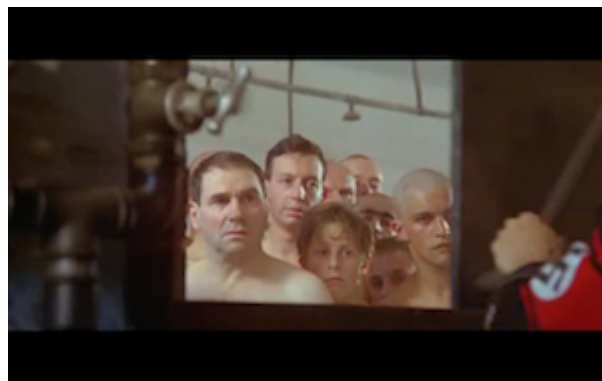


Figure 10: The gas chamber in *Les Uns et les Autres*

Au Nom de Tous les Miens (1983) presents the Jew – personified by the protagonist Martin Gray (Michael York) – as a tragic hero. The gas chamber is part of his defiant life story but not central to it: it is just one of the many things he suffered though endured. Based on the book by the same title, *Au Nom de Tous les Miens* tells the incredibly story of Martin Gray, a defiant Jew from the Warsaw ghetto, who in the fall of 1942 is deported to Treblinka where he is set to work in a *Sonderkommando*. He escapes, returns to the Warsaw ghetto in March 1943 where he helps his father to organize the uprising, after which he joins the Polish partisans. By November 1944 he has worked his way up to the position of Red Army captain

and marches for Berlin to end the war. After the war he migrates to the US to live with his grandmother. He marries and moves to Southern France, where he loses his wife and children in a forest fire in October 1970. Still covered in ashes, he dictates his life story into a recording machine for the benefit of future mankind.

Au Nom de Tous les Miens stages events at Treblinka extermination camp in graphic detail. Twelve minutes into the story, Gray's *Sonderkommando* is escorted to the gas chamber by whip-carrying SS-men. Behind the building, an excavator is digging a mass grave. When they arrive at the gas chamber, a guard checks his watch, then looks inside through a spyhole. After a cutaway to the *Sonderkommando*, the film cuts back to the bottom of the doors, from which a yellow liquid – body fluids of the dead – is flowing into a ditch. After peeping through another hole, a guard yells at the *Sonderkommando* to open the door. What we see is a floor covered with naked corpses, some played by actors and others made out of plastic (Figure 11). The *Sonderkommando* proceeds to transport the corpses to the excavated pit. Halfway between the gas chamber and the pit, the corpses are relieved of their golden teeth – shown in close-up. The scene ends with a shot inside the mass grave, which is full of what look like light blue plastic corpses.



Figure 11: Actors playing mass murdered victims

Au Nom de Tous les Miens is a tragic story: Gray suffers enormously and yet survives to educate future generations. The function of the gas chamber within this narrative is to show one of many things the Jew Martin Gray has suffered. But seeing the nature of the

images – Enrico has attempted to create shocking atrocity footage resembling that of *Death Mills* and *Nazi Concentration and Prison Camps* – it is also to send shivers down the spines of the spectators. *Au Nom de Tous les Miens* is the first film to represent the gas chamber as a horror element.

The form and the function of gas chamber representations in Holocaust films have changed considerably in this period. Where in the previous period gas chambers were represented with images of the Majdanek and Dachau gas chambers to attest to the crimes of the Nazis, gas chamber representation in this period is increasingly done in dramatic mode to signify the suffering of victims of Nazi Germany. That these victims were predominantly Jewish becomes more and more visible in these Holocaust films, although Jewish identity is really central only in *Memorandum* (1965) and *Holocaust* (1978). The form of gas chamber representation, although increasingly through dramatic reenactment, is more varied than in the previous period. Although some elements feature in several representations – e.g. the spyhole and conical showerheads – the language signifying gas chambers is still evolving.

1985-2005

The third twenty-year period of Holocaust filmmaking has brought forth most films dealing with gas chambers: six drama films of which four from the US, one from the UK and one from France and three documentaries, of which one from France, one from the US and one from Canada. The documentary mode of gas chamber representation changes from expository to participatory: documentaries feature more and more testimonial accounts. The dramatic mode remains dominant. All films emphasize the Jewish identity of the victims and the gas chamber becomes more central in these Holocaust films.

Year	Title	Country	Type
1985	<i>Shoah</i>	France	Participatory Docu
1987	<i>Escape from Sobibor</i>	UK	Dramatic Feature
1989	<i>Triumph of the Spirit</i>	US	Dramatic Feature

1993	<i>Schindler's List</i>	US	Dramatic Feature
1998	<i>The Last Days</i>	US	Participatory Docu
1998	<i>Apt Pupil</i>	US	Dramatic Feature
1999	<i>Zyklon Portrait</i>	Canada	Poetic Docu / Innovative
2001	<i>The Grey Zone</i>	US	Dramatic Feature
2002	<i>Amen</i>	France	Dramatic Feature

Claude Lanzmann's ten-hour documentary *Shoah* (1985) – 'the quintessential Holocaust film' according to Kerner⁷² – is a piece of iconoclasm *par excellence*. Over the course of eleven years, Lanzmann shot 350 hours of film in fourteen countries.⁷³ The ten hours of documentary film resulting from this process are entirely devoted to the Holocaust. However, in contrast to earlier films, *Shoah* represent the story of the Holocaust indirectly and fragmentarily, through interviews with perpetrators, bystanders and victims (and with the father of that tripartite distinction Raul Hilberg), and with contemporary shots at Auschwitz and other extermination sites now turned into ruins, landscapes or monuments. Especially during Filip Müller's testimonial account of working in the *Sonderkommando*, *Shoah* shows contemporary gas chamber sites – mostly ruins – at Auschwitz I and Auschwitz-Birkenau and the sculpture by Stobierski (see Figure 5). These images function as an illustration to Müller's account, much like in the early expository documentaries. However, what makes *Shoah* interesting is not so much what it does show as what it does not: Lanzmann refuses to use archival images or dramatized reenactments. He has even stated that if he would find footage of gas chambers in use, he would destroy it.⁷⁴ He claims that the Holocaust is not transmissible through representations – it is rather obscured by them – and they should therefore be prohibited.⁷⁵ For Lanzmann, every attempt to represent the Holocaust is

⁷² Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 203.

⁷³ Ibidem, 203.

⁷⁴ Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 203.

⁷⁵ 'The Holocaust,' claims Lanzmann, 'is unique firstly in that it erects around itself, in a circle of flames, a limit which cannot be crossed because a certain absolute of horror is intransmissible: to claim to do so is to become guilty of the most

immoral. Nevertheless, Lanzmann's *Shoah* is itself a Holocaust representation: it makes the Holocaust present again in the imagination – though by different means. Therefore his interdiction on representation should be interpreted as an interdiction on dramatic reenactment and archival footage only.

The six dramatic feature films from this period perpetuate the trend of genocide reenactment set by *Holocaust* in 1978. *Escape from Sobibor* (1987) tells the heroic story of a group of defiant Sobibór prisoners – mostly Jews but also Russian prisoners of war – who organize an uprising and escape from the extermination camp in October 1943. Halfway into the story, the spectator follows an adolescent prisoner on his way to deliver a message to a guard working near the gas chambers. The scene is accompanied by extradiegetic orchestral music, signifying that something significant is about to happen. Although there is only one route, several signs saying 'Desinfektion' point the boy in the right direction and simultaneously evoke the idea of the gas chamber. Through a wooden gate that also says 'Desinfektion' the boy enters a clearing in the forest. Women and children guarded with whips and shepherds enter a wooden building and come out naked on the other side, joining a long line of women and children on their way to a brick building on the other side of the clearing. The music becomes louder as prisoners enter the brick building. As guards close the doors, the music climaxes and the sound of people screaming is added to the soundtrack. The camera zooms out to show more of the building, cuts away to a zombie-like *Sonderkommando*, then cuts back to smoke rising from the building (Figure 12). The scene ends with a shot of the boy's face, showing his emotional reaction.

This gas chamber representation functions to show why the prisoners organize the revolt: if they do not, they will end up in the gas chamber themselves. Surviving Sobibór therefore means to have escaped the gas chamber. From here it is a small step – though not

serious transgression. Fiction is a transgression; I profoundly think that there is a prohibition on representation.' Quoted in Saxton, *Haunted Images*, 26.

taken explicitly in this film – to the idea that surviving the Holocaust means escaping the gas chamber. The gas chamber has a central place in *Escape from Sobibor*.



Figure 12: Smoke rising from the Sobibór gas chamber

Triumph of the Spirit (1989) – partly filmed at Auschwitz I – tells the story of former Greek Jewish boxing champion and Holocaust survivor Salomo Arouch (Willem Dafoe), who is deported with his family and girlfriend to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Arouch survives by fighting boxing matches for the entertainment of the SS. His father and brother die in the camp. His mother and grandmother and many other men, women and children are gassed upon arrival. The first shot of the gas chamber scene shows them waiting in line before descending the stairs into the crematorium. The shot resembles a scene from Stobierski's model (Figure 13). The semblance of the mise-en-scène to what the real Auschwitz-Birkenau crematorium entrance looked like – as reconstructed in the BBC documentary *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution* (2005) discussed below – is remarkable. 'Things will be better now,' says an SS-officer to the Jews waiting in front of the brick building. 'First you will be going into the bathhouse, where you will shower and be disinfected.' Again, 'disinfection' signifies what is to come. When the men, women and children have entered the building the camera moves upward, showing first the gloating SS-officers and then – resembling *Escape from Sobibor* – the flame-throwing smokestack of the crematorium. Inside, the victims undress, and as they stand naked in the gas chamber waiting for the showers to start pouring water, the image cuts away – as in *Holocaust* – to two gas-masked SS-men emptying a

canister of Zyklon B through a hole in the roof (see Figure 20). As in *Escape from Sobibor* and *Holocaust*, the moment of death stays off-screen. Besides being partly shot in Auschwitz and partly in scenery similar to Auschwitz, the gas chamber representation is not very innovative, possibly meaning that gas chamber representation is reaching a point of saturation in 1989 and that the visual language signifying gas chambers becomes more firmly established. The function of the gas chamber in this film is to show what is at stake for Arouch: losing a boxing game means a one-way ticket to the gas chamber. But Arouch doesn't lose; he wins every game and survives. As in *Escape from Sobibor*, surviving the Holocaust means to escape the gas chamber, and the music accompanying the gas chamber scenes (a requiem of choir and strings, growing more intense as the characters move closer to the gas chamber) signifies that the gas chamber is central to the story of the Holocaust.



Figure 13: Entrance to the crematorium. Stobierski (from *Shoah*) left, *Triumph* right.

Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *Schindler's List* (1993) tells the story of Oskar Schindler, a German Gentile capitalist who starts a pots and pans production factory upon German invasion of Poland and employs Jewish laborers. He makes sure that none of 'his Jews' are deported to extermination camps, thereby saving all their lives. In the process, he transforms from 'a self-centered womanizer' into a 'self-sacrificing savior.' However, as Kerner puts it, 'Jewish survival is not the *narrative aim* of *Schindler's List*; it is rather an incidental artifact of Schindler's transformative accession as savior.'⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 31-32.

Schindler's List demonstrates that gas chamber representation has reached a saturation point. Near the end of the movie, Spielberg tricks the spectator – utilizing iconic gas chamber images such as a flame-throwing chimney, a ‘*Bad und Desinfektion*’ sign and showerheads – in believing that he is about to witness a gassing from inside the gas chamber. On a cold night, female ‘Schindler Jews’ arrive in a snowy (or ashy?) Auschwitz-Birkenau. They have been deported there by mistake: Schindler has given the Nazis a list with the names of Jews that are not to be deported to Auschwitz. After a shot of a smoking chimney – similar to the one in *Triumph of the Spirit* but taller – the women’s hair is cut short. They undress and enter a room with a ‘*Bad und Desinfektion*’ sign above the entrance (Figure 14). The camera follows the women into the room, cuts back to guards closing the doors, and then films the women through the spyhole, aligning the perspective of the spectator with that of the guards (Figure 15). The image cuts back to the naked women inside and to a close-up of a conical showerhead (see Figure 3). Then the lights are turned off. Although these elements trigger our gas chamber alarm, when the lights are turned back on there is water coming from the showers and the chamber turns out to be a bathing room after all, giving both the women and the spectator great relief. ‘Ironically,’ observes Saxton, ‘Spielberg inverts the trick used by the SS to entice prisoners to their deaths without arousing their suspicions; instead of disguising a gas chamber as a shower room, he disguises a shower room as a gas chamber.’⁷⁷ When the women are back outside they see less fortunate Jews on their way to the real gas chamber. They see these people descend into the undressing room, after which the camera turns upwards to show the smoking chimney, in what is almost an exact copy of the gas chamber scene in *Triumph of the Spirit*. After all, Spielberg conforms to the trend not to show the genocide on screen. Like in *Escape from Sobibor* and in *Triumph of the Spirit*, this scene shows what the Schindler Jews have survived: the gas chamber.

⁷⁷ Saxton, *Haunted Images*, 77.

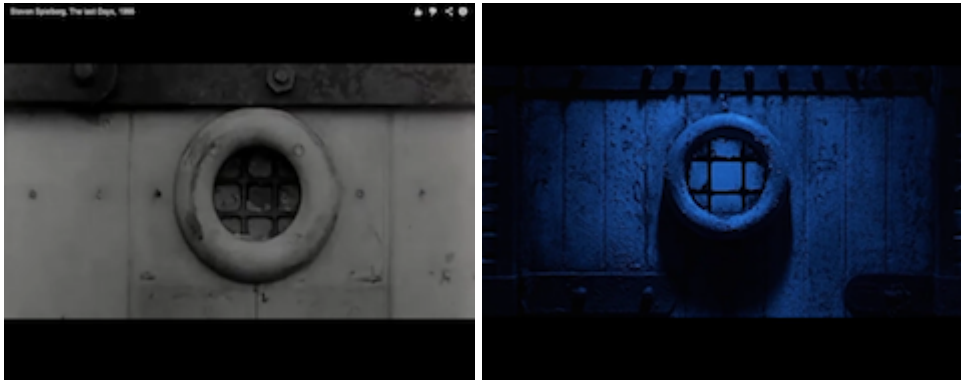


Figure 14: Schindler's Jews enter the shower



Figure 15: Filmed through the spyhole

In contrast to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, James Moll's participatory documentary *The Last Days* (1998) does employ archival images. It tells the stories of a small number of American Jewish Holocaust survivors. Moll illustrates the testimony of former member of the *Sonderkommando* Dario Gabbai with contemporary images shot inside the crematorium of Auschwitz I (like Lanzmann does in *Shoah*) and with archival images. It also shows a hitherto unseen close-up of a door's spyhole, reaffirming this image as iconic. In the same year, this image 'travels' to the dramatic mode, as an imitation of this image is used in the dramatic feature film *Apt Pupil* (Figure 16 and 17). That this dramatic feature film by Bryan Singer is inspired by *The Last Days* is evident not only from this image but also from the striking similarities between the former Nazi interviewed by Moll and the elderly German character of Kurt Dussander (Ian McKellen) in Singer's film.



Figures 16 and 17: Peepholes in *The Last Days* (left) and *Apt Pupil*, both from 1998.

Apt Pupil (1998), adapted from the book by Stephen King, tells the story of high school student Todd Bowden (Brad Renfro) who gets obsessed with the SS past of his German neighbor Dussander. ‘I want to hear about it,’ Todd tells Dussander after school. ‘Everything they are afraid to show us in school.’ Dussander initially refuses, but changes his mind when Todd threatens to inform the police about his real identity. After hearing Dussander’s testimony (another aspect Singer took from *The Last Days*), the gas chamber haunts Todd in his nightmares, which is illustrated by the iconic spyhole image (see Figure 18). This representation functions to make clear that Nazis and gas chambers are really scary; they are the stuff of nightmares, not unlike the usual monsters in Stephen King thrillers. *Apt Pupil* is exceptional in that unlike all other films from this period it is not told from the perspective of Jewish Holocaust survivors, but from the side of the German perpetrator.



Figure 18: Peepholes in respectively *Holocaust* (1978), *Au Nom de Tous les Miens* (1983), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Apt Pupil* (1998), *Amen* (2002) and *Auschwitz* (2011).

Elida Schogt's poetic documentary and innovative history film *Zyklon Portrait* (1999) interweaves a history of Zyklon B – present by a neutral, objective, 'scientific' voice – with the personal history of her ancestors, some of whom died in Auschwitz. Schogt stays away from iconic imagery, giving her documentary an iconoclastic character. She juxtaposes her mother's testimony with blue-colored underwater photography (hydrogen being the main element of Zyklon B), b/w images of Zyklon B canisters and insects (Zyklon B was initially produced to combat vermin), models of gas molecules, bathing rooms, abstract visual patterns and blue x-ray photos of lungs. Without showing iconic gas chamber imagery, the combination of the exposition on Zyklon B and the Holocaust with her mother's memories of *her* mother (i.e. Elida Schogt's grandmother) evokes the idea of a gas chamber quite strongly. The blue visual patterns, the gas models, the underwater photography and the shower room next to a swimming pool (possibly that where the underwater images were shot) are an innovative way to signify the gas chamber. After the male narrator has explained what Zyklon B does to the human body, we hear the voice of the filmmaker's mother, who says that 'those last moments you do not want to visualize.' With this statement Schogt conforms to the by now established norm in gas chamber representation not to show the moment of death on screen.

Of the six dramatic feature films in this period, only Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone* (2001) shows dead gas chamber victims (and one living) on-screen, much like in *Au Nom de Tous les Miens*. All other films suggest death by gassing without showing dead bodies. Besides this difference, *The Grey Zone* is in many ways like the other films, and most like *Triumph of the Spirit*, featuring a stage modeled after Birkenau, a 'Bad und Desinfektion' sign, white-walled gas chambers with conical shower heads and pipes, gas-masked SS-men pouring a canister of Zyklon through a chimney, a prisoner orchestra accompanying the victims down a stairway into the undressing room, and a chimney producing black smoke.

The main difference is that Nelson does not employ the image of the spyhole, but takes the viewer right into the gas chamber. Kaes's claim that in history films images of images circulate in an eternal cycle of cliché images is again confirmed. *The Grey Zone* tells the story of the largely failed uprising of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz-Birkenau in which one of the crematoria was blown up. Named after the essay by Primo Levi in his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, the film is not only set between the grey product of the crematorium, but it also problematizes the distinction between victim and perpetrator, showing that it is not a black and white opposition. The gas chamber functions as the mise-en-scène of this story.

The last dramatic feature film from this period, *Amen* (2002) by Costa-Gavras, examines the attitude of Pope Pius XII and the Vatican towards Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. When SS-officer Kurt Gerstein (Ulrich Tukur), member of the SS Hygiene Institute, discovers that his colleagues are mass-murdering Jews, he notifies the Vatican in the hope that they will inform the international community, which they don't. *Amen* almost literally duplicates the gassing of disabled people at Hadamar in *Holocaust*. It also represents a test run of a gas chamber at a Polish extermination camp by employing the iconic images of gas-masked SS-men pouring Zyklon B through a chimney and SS-officers observing its effect through a spyhole (Figure 19). Again, we see the outside of the building, but not what happens inside.



Figure 19: A test run at Auschwitz in *Amen* (2002).

This third twenty-year period of Holocaust filmmaking has brought forth most films dealing with gas chambers. With the exception of the iconoclasts *Shoah* and *Zyklon Portrait*, gas chamber representation is rather uniform. All dramatic feature films employ similar icons to represent gas chambers. In 1993, the visual language representing gas chambers is so firmly established that Steven Spielberg can utilize it in order to play a trick on his spectators. By 1998, Bryan Singer can represent a gas chamber showing only the iconic image of the peephole. Interestingly, the documentary mode of gas chamber representation changes from expository to participatory. This is no doubt partly due to the influence of Claude Lanzmann's ten-hour *tour de force*, but it can also be due to the fact that before 1985 – possibly before *Holocaust* in 1978 is better – nobody wanted to talk about his Holocaust experiences or nobody wanted to listen. Dramatic reenactment remains the dominant mode of gas chamber representation, which doesn't surprise since dramatic feature film is the most popular form of history film. All films from this period emphasize the Jewish identity of the victims. Where before 1965, Jews were hardly ever mentioned in Holocaust films, their role as victims is by now firmly established. A final conclusion regarding this period is that the gas chamber functions more and more as a narrative element that provides the protagonists with a reason for action: whether it is to escape from Sobibór, to win boxing games, or to blow up the crematorium of Auschwitz-Birkenau, it is all done to escape the gas chambers. In reality, almost no one escaped the gas chambers.

2005-2013

The fourth and final period of Holocaust filmmaking has so far brought forth three films representing gas chambers: an expository documentary by the BBC, a UK/US dramatic feature film and the German film *Auschwitz* discussed in the introduction above. Interestingly, all films are set in Auschwitz, which corroborates the claim put forward at the

end of the previous chapter that Auschwitz ‘has become synonymous with the Holocaust and has come to symbolize the genocidal policies of Nazi Germany.’⁷⁸

Year	Title	Country	Type
2005	<i>Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution</i> ⁷⁹	UK	Expository Docu
2008	<i>The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas</i>	UK/US	Dramatic Feature
2011	<i>Auschwitz</i>	GER	Dramatic Feature

Expository documentary *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution* (2005) tells ‘the story of the evolution of Auschwitz and the mentality of the perpetrators (...) based in part on documents and plans only discovered since the opening of archives in Eastern Europe and informed by interviews with people who were there, including former members of the SS.’ It shows various contemporary shots, computer-animated reconstructions, and archival footage of amongst other places Sobibór, Treblinka and Auschwitz as evidential illustrations to the presented history, which focuses on the perpetrators. The use of computer-animated reconstructions is an innovative strategy of gas chamber representation. One such animation takes the viewer from the stairs descending into the undressing room, to the gas chamber at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This sequence is repeated several times throughout the six episodes. Where previously discussed dramatic feature films reconstructed parts of Sobibór, Treblinka and Auschwitz as stage for a dramatic story, this BBC-produced documentary is the first film to feature a full reconstruction of these extermination camps in an attempt to show these camps *wie sie eigentlich gewesen*. Interestingly, while this documentary employs reenacted, dramatic scenes as illustration to the narrative, it does not reenact scenes involving the genocide. Furthermore, a segment on the Euthanasia Program in the first episode shows previously unseen archival footage of emaciated people arriving by horse carriage and entering a brick building, after which the image cuts away to an image of pipes connected to

⁷⁸ Ibidem, 39-40; Yad Vashem, ‘Gas Chambers’, 2. Cf. Snyder, *Bloodlands*, viii. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* does not specify the camp’s location, but Boyne’s novel does. J. Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (London 2008).

⁷⁹ This documentary is available on YouTube via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAAHqbv8nIU>.

the exhaust pipes of a car and a lorry. Formally resembling the scene at Hadamar in *Holocaust* and in *Amen*, the image moves from the car, over the pipes, to the point where the pipes enter the brick building (Figure 20). From this analogy it could be argued that in both *Holocaust* and *Amen* the spectator's perspective on this scene is aligned with that of the perpetrator.



Figure 20: Rare footage shown on *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution*

Mark Herman's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008) tells the story of Bruno, the young son of the Auschwitz camp commandant, who at the perimeter of the camp befriends an imprisoned boy of his own age. This boy 'in striped pajamas' has lost his father, and Bruno infiltrates the camp to help find him. When the boy's mother discovers that Bruno is missing, she bursts into her husband's office, who is just explaining to other SS-officers how 'the weekly capabilities' of the camp 'will be almost trebled' by an extension of its facilities. As Bruno's father explains this, we see his fingers move over a blueprint of the camp with the words '*crematorium*' and '*gaskammer*' clearly inscribed, prefiguring the scene that is to come. After Bruno's father is informed, images of the parents and SS-men looking for Bruno are interwoven with images of Bruno and his friend in a procession of male prisoners on their way, through the rain, to a gas chamber. Although the story is largely told from the perspective of the perpetrator, Bruno's transformation into victim seems to want to problematize the distinction between perpetrator and victim.

Arrival at the gas chamber is represented by an image of the prisoners descending a staircase with metal handrail, an iconic gas chamber image. Thereafter we see shots of the prisoners undressing, a Kapo repeating the cliché that 'it's just a shower', naked men entering

a room with metal door with iconic spyhole, and all of them crammed together in the room. Then, like in *Schindler's List*, the lights are turned off, and as Bruno and the other boy hold hands, we see from their perspective a shot of a gas-masked face dropping Zyklon B crystals into the room (see Figure 21). Then the image cuts away to a shot of the metal door accompanied by the sound of people pounding the door from the inside. Thereafter the soundtrack is silent, and we see only the door. Again, suffering and death are implied but kept off-screen. The next shot is filmed outside, where an SS-man stores the Zyklon canister in box and where Bruno's parents stand in shock.



Figure 21: Pouring Zyklon B through a hole in the roof in *Holocaust* (1978), *Triumph of the Spirit* (1989), *The Grey Zone* (2001), *Amen* (2002), *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008) and *Auschwitz* (2011).

The only Holocaust film ever made that shows a reenactment of the genocide from inside the gas chamber – in almost pornographic form – is Uwe Boll's *Auschwitz* (2011), explaining why it caused widespread revulsion. It makes Boll an iconoclast, breaking with the trend to keep the gassing off-screen. All other elements of Boll's representation are cliché images: people undressing, the metal door with spyhole, the '*Bad und Desinfektion*' sign, conical shower heads, the *Sonderkommando* taking away clothing and other personal belongings, SS-men emptying Zyklon B canisters into the room, a smoking chimney, and piles of emaciated corpses. Although Boll claims that the function of these images is to show for the first time what Auschwitz 'really was', their form suspects that Boll.

Although all gas chamber representations perpetuate the use of iconic imagery in this period, there are two innovations: first, the use of computer-animated gas chamber imagery and second, the depiction of gassing in operation. In two films, the function of gas chamber representation is mainly to show what Auschwitz ‘really was’, although the method for doing so differs considerably. All three films from this period focus more on the perpetrators than on the victims, and all three films are situated at Auschwitz.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this research has been to describe and understand the changing form and function of gas chambers in Holocaust films. Describing this imagery is what I have done above; now it is time to come to understand its development. In what follows I try to make sense of the changing image of gas chambers throughout nearly seven decades of Holocaust films. But before that, let me summarize my most important findings.

Until 1965, both the form and function of gas chamber representations were remarkably consistent. Gas chambers were represented predominantly by authentic black-and-white images of the gas chambers at Majdanek and Dachau shot by Allied forces after liberating these camps and presented in an expository documentary mode. The image of the Majdanek gas chamber door was particularly popular. Used both often and synecdochically in both documentary and dramatic feature films, it leads me to conclude that this was the iconic gas chamber image of this period. Gas chamber representations functioned as evidence of the atrocities committed by the Nazis and not as evidence of the suffering of the victims. Survivors were depicted but their side of the story was mostly neither heard nor told. Furthermore, the majority of the films did not mention that Jews were the Nazis' primary victims.

In the period from 1965 to 1985, which saw the release of five films showing gas chambers, the form and function of gas chamber imagery changed considerably. Archival footage of Dachau and Majdanek moved out of the picture to make place for dramatic gas chamber representations at Auschwitz and other extermination camps. The focus in these films shifted from the perpetrators to the victims, although their predominantly Jewish identity is not yet manifest in all films. After the broadcasting of the American miniseries *Holocaust* in 1978, in which the Jewish identity of the victims is not only manifest but also central, genocide reenactment became the dominant mode for representing gas chambers. The

moment of death – the gassing – remained off-screen. *Holocaust* represented a gas chamber using a white room with conical metal shower heads hanging from the ceiling, metal doors with peepholes, naked women entering the room and an SS-man emptying a canister of Zyklon B into the room through a chimney-like hole in the roof. Subsequent gas chamber representations in dramatic feature films were similar to that in *Holocaust*, although the variation in this period shows that the visual language signifying gas chambers was still evolving.

The period between 1985 and 2005 has brought forth nine films representing gas chambers, most of them located in Auschwitz. While Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) explicitly opposed both dramatization and archival images, the dominant mode of representation remained the dramatic feature film. Focus remained on the victims until around the year 2000 and their predominantly Jewish identity was fully acknowledged. The gas chamber increasingly functioned as a motive for heroic action by the Jewish protagonists, such as escape and uprising. This means that Jews were no longer victims but became heroic survivors. By 1993, the visual language signifying gas chambers was sufficiently established for Steven Spielberg to deceive his spectators, utilizing iconic imagery, into believing they were going to see an operating gas chamber from the inside. However, in all films the moment of gassing – the genocidal core – remained off-screen. Starting around the year 2000, the focus moves back to the perpetrator, although the distinction victim/perpetrator is increasingly problematized.

Since 2005, three films have been produced that represent gas chambers, of which Uwe Boll's *Auschwitz* was the latest in 2011. All were located at Auschwitz and focus again more on the perpetrator than on the victims. Showing computer-animated reconstructions of gas chambers in Auschwitz and other extermination camps, the BBC documentary *Auschwitz* was the most innovative. The dramatic feature films from this period recycled cliché images,

with the exception of Boll's almost pornographic gassing scene. Where Spielberg tricked his viewers into believing they would witness a gassing on screen, Boll's film actually did so for the first time in the history of the Holocaust film, in graphic detail.

What do these changes in the form and function of gas chamber representations reveal about the changing meaning of gas chambers within collective Holocaust memory? Five general conclusions can be formulated. First, before 1965, gas chambers represented one of several atrocities committed by the Nazis. After 1965, the gas chambers increasingly signified the suffering of the victims. Since the late 1970s, gas chambers signify the suffering of the European Jews. Second, gas chambers have increasingly become a central element of collective Holocaust memory. Since the 1980s, having survived the Holocaust means to have survived the gas chambers. Third, gas chambers have increasingly become associated with Auschwitz, and Auschwitz has increasingly become the iconic image of the Holocaust. Fourth, based on the ratio between dramatic feature films, documentaries and innovative history films dealing with the Holocaust, the Holocaust is remembered more as a closed, dramatic story than as an event continuously challenging human understanding, an event which requires interrogation and reflection, such as is done in documentaries and the rare innovative history films representing the genocide. Fifth, the fact that the gassing of people inside the gas chamber – arguably the greatest crime in the history of humanity – is not reenacted but kept off-screen in all but one film demonstrates that there is still a taboo on the representation of, and therefore a certain reverence for, this 'genocidal core'.

What have we gained by this research? The changing image of gas chambers throughout nearly seven decades of Holocaust filmmaking had not been researched before. Libby Saxton has examined the representation of gas chambers from an ethical perspective. She surveyed a number of gas chamber representations made since 1974 and has judged whether these encourage either responsible or voyeuristic spectatorship. Her study neither

outlined the changing image and function of gas chamber representation, nor interpreted these changes as markers of developing collective Holocaust memory. By describing and interpreting the changing form and function of gas chamber representation in Holocaust films I been able make a number of observations about the changing nature of collective Holocaust memory and the changing meaning of gas chambers in Holocaust discourse, which had not been made before, neither by Saxton nor by other students of Holocaust film and Holocaust memory.

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- 1944 - *Majdanek: Cmentarzysko Europy* (Aleksander Ford)
- 1945 - *Death Mills* (Billy Wilder)
- 1945 - *Nazi Concentration and Prison Camps* (George Stevens)
- 1946 - *The Stranger* (Orson Welles)
- 1949 - *Daleká Cesta* (Alfréd Radok)
- 1955 - *Nuit et Brouillard* (Alain Resnais)
- 1961 - *Judgment at Nuremberg* (Stanley Kramer)
- 1965 - *Memorandum* (Donald Brittain & John Spotton)
- 1968 - *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (Jack Kaufman)
- 1978 - *Holocaust* (Marvin Chomsky)
- 1981 - *Les Uns et les Autres* (Claude Lelouch)
- 1983 - *Au Nom de Tous les Miens* (Robert Enrico)
- 1985 - *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann)
- 1987 - *Escape from Sobibor* (Jack Gold)
- 1989 - *Triumph of the Spirit* (Robert Young)
- 1993 - *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg)
- 1998 - *The Last Days* (James Moll)
- 1998 - *Apt Pupil* (Bryan Singer)
- 1999 - *Zyklon Portrait* (Elida Schogt)
- 2001 - *The Grey Zone* (Tim Blake Nelson)
- 2002 - *Amen* (Costa-Gavras)
- 2005 - *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution* (Laurence Rees, Catherine Tatge)
- 2008 - *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Mark Herman)
- 2011 - *Auschwitz* (Uwe Boll)

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