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The Holocaust in film: witnessing the extermination through the eyes of children

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ABSTRACT

A number of filmmakers cinematize the Holocaust from the standpoint of children, making them the main characters and depicting the genocide through their eyes. Most of such films are framed, at least in part, as a fairy tale, whereby the Holocaust becomes the dominant evil to face and overcome. In the minds of children, the persecution and genocide that simply cannot be imagined as part of their everyday reality become a supernatural evil over which good must triumph. These films do not deny the Holocaust as myth but use those simple and familiar qualities to illustrate its severity.

KEYWORDS

The Holocaust; children; witness; play/game; film

Introduction: the Holocaust in film

The acts committed during WWII by Nazis against Jews, Slavic peoples, and Romanians, as well as communists, disabled or mentally ill people, and homosexuals became known as the Holocaust – one of the most monstrous and far-reaching genocides in world history. The sheer enormity of the Holocaust led to it becoming the most widely reflected genocide in film. By tackling the event from various perspectives, the Holocaust film attempts not only to document and interpret the policy of extermination but also, more frequently, to convey the suffering of the oppressed people in the most authentic way possible. From the systematic persecution of the many minority groups to their hard exhausting manual labor in concentration camps, followed by the infamous gas chambers and mass crematoriums, film has the power to create, shape, and reveal historical narratives, generational tragedies, personal stories, and perverse spectacles at the same time.

This article is certainly not the first attempt to examine the Holocaust film. The representation of the most horrific genocide in history has been tackled from various perspectives and by now has generated an impressive response from multiple scholars. Annette Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows*, Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman's *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television since 1933*¹, Lawrence Baron's *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present: The Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema*², Terri Ginsberg's *Holocaust Film*, Libby Saxton's *Haunted Images: Film, Ethics, Testimony and the Holocaust*³, and many other significant works have thoroughly examined the portrayals of the Holocaust in film. Numerous scholars have been minutely

investigating the cinematic portrayals of the genocide on the one hand and reliability of such portrayals on the other hand. Some scholars heavily criticize fictional films about the Holocaust for their untrue representation of the genocide, for they ‘grossly distort the history of the Holocaust, ... are extremely irresponsible, given the importance of the topic, the power of the media, and the historical amnesia permeating ... society.’⁴ Yet others contend that ‘[a] “Holocaust film” is *not* the event; it is a *re*-presentation of the event,’⁵ thus underlining the crucial difference between the genocide and its fictional portrayal. This, however, by no means undermines the value of the Holocaust film that, although not always being able to portray the history of the genocide authentically, largely comments on its social, political, and moral backgrounds. The omission or addition of specific facts or characters should, in this context, be understood as ‘the filmmaker’s rhetorical strategy.’⁶

The first cinematic representations of the Holocaust were documentaries that revealed the atrocities committed, filmed either by the Nazis themselves or by the Allied forces who liberated the concentration camps.⁷ In the decades that followed, the many films made about the Holocaust expanded to encompass every cinematic genre, including ‘compilation documentaries, cinéma vérité exposés, docudramas, melodramas, biographies, autobiographies, experimental films, Academy Award winners, slapstick comedies, horror films, and pornography.’⁸ Basing their stories on the Holocaust, these films – mostly works of historical fiction – narrate the *history* of the genocide, its victims, survivors, and other participants. Alan J. Pakula’s *Sophie’s Choice*, Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*⁹, Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist*¹⁰, Martin Scorsese’s *Shutter Island*¹¹, and dozens of other films deal with the Holocaust and its aftermath to varying degrees, on the one hand making the tragedy of the genocide more comprehensible for their viewers, yet, on the other hand, overtly suggesting that the Holocaust lies beyond any cinematic attempt to realistically reflect it and transmit the pain, sorrow, loss, and inhumane injustice inflicted on its victims.

In portraying and construing the Holocaust, these films not only dare to create history, but they also frequently transform the genocide from a collective tragedy to a series of personal stories of horror: the Holocaust, indeed, did not simply affect masses of people whose national or ethnic identity, sexual orientation, or health was deemed unfit according to the savage terms set by the Nazis, but it haunted specific families and particular individuals, who often had to strive for survival on their own. Thus, out of the bald numbers of those who perished at the hands of the murderous Nazi regime, the genocide is turned into millions of personal stories, many of which are so similar yet so different. Speaking for themselves, the protagonists of the Holocaust film also speak for their families, their neighbors, and their nations, constructing the Holocaust as a complex event on both individual and collective levels and presenting no easy possibility for the audience to comprehend the fear and suffering endured by millions, which seems to lie beyond any human capacity to bear it.

Children and/in the Holocaust film

Whereas the Holocaust is most commonly cinematized from the standpoint of adults, there are a number of films that reverse this perspective by making children the main characters and depicting the genocide through their eyes. It is significant that from the

historical viewpoint, 'children's perspectives on the Holocaust' are generally defined by scholars as 'precious,'¹² since they, indeed, help one understand how the war was declared not only on adults but evidently also on (un)born babies, children, and teenagers. During the Holocaust, '[k]illing children lay at the heart of the Nazi project of racial extermination.'¹³ Hence, the child's innocence and naiveté should not create the false illusion that children were somehow protected from the genocide. And whereas 'children as protagonists in the Holocaust' is an issue that has drawn scholarly attention, one question persists: 'Can one write a collective history of children as subjects and protagonists within the Holocaust or only a history of their persecution and victimhood?'¹⁴ Indeed, the child's innocence frequently means that the child is portrayed as a pure victim rather than a proper participant in the Holocaust who could somehow withstand evil. Yet by making children protagonists, the Holocaust film attempts to demonstrate that children were not simply members of the victimized part of society but were also among the main characters. This is perhaps stipulated by such qualities as '[c]hildren's ability to adapt to conditions for which nothing could have prepared them.'¹⁵ Indeed, a number of children survived the Holocaust because they 'may have been easier to hide than adults,' because they could more easily adopt 'new identities,' and were able to learn 'new languages.'¹⁶ Such an ability to adapt to the changing environment is perhaps most vividly illustrated in Agnieszka Holland's *Europa Europa* that narrates the story of the Jewish boy Salomon Perel (Marco Hofschneider) who lives with his family in Poland. When the Nazis occupy the country, Salomon manages to escape. He finds a new home in a Soviet orphanage. Yet when he is eventually captured by the Nazis, he lies that he is German and his parents were killed by the Soviets. Salomon, indeed, easily adopts new identities and, for that matter, new nationalities, which eventually helps him survive the Holocaust. It, however, does not mean that children generally survived the Holocaust more easily than adults: those children who were caught by the Nazis and transported to the camps were mostly sent straight into gas chambers as early as during the initial Selektionen, the fact that Alan J. Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* comments on most dramatically.

Given the vast number of children who witnessed and even perished in the Holocaust, this viewpoint seems both significant and vital. Although the number of films that feature this child's-eye view of the Holocaust is relatively small, these films nevertheless offer a fascinating and rather unique understanding of the Holocaust. Furthermore, being aware of Freud's original (clinical) work that frequently turned to his patients' childhood as the repressed moment of traumatic experience whose belated effects stay with the adults, this article insists on the necessity of the analysis of the Holocaust films that have children as protagonists. Obviously, children, just like adults, were living through the Holocaust and kept the memories of the event throughout their lives, thus, just like their parents and grandparents, they were able to pass the memories of the Holocaust on to the next generation: '[R]epressed and/or suppressed memories are carried over into the future and come to surface or sink out of social consciousness in a fluid engagement with the past that morphs over time and across generations.'¹⁷

The tendency to make children the protagonists of Holocaust films dates back to the 1980s, when 'images of child victims and survivors of World War II in Europe [...] captured the imagination of filmmakers worldwide, since they are perceived as a reliable reflection of the war and its horrors.'¹⁸ Yet the focus on children, or rather the choice to make children the core characters in the midst of the extermination, represents both

a brave and a cruel decision, because the child is no longer shielded from harm by parents or other adults, but instead become the object to whom the trauma of the Holocaust is explicitly directed (yet this technique only makes these narratives authentic). My contention is that it is precisely the problematic issue of trauma that makes the child-protagonist phenomenon in the Holocaust film so disturbing. The child's inherent vulnerability and inevitable powerlessness to withstand the Nazi regime – the regime created and imposed by grown-ups, i.e. those who are in all senses stronger than children – seem to foretell the tragic endings of such films. However, when considering trauma as 'neither an exceptional experience nor the rule of experience, but, rather, a possibility of experience,'¹⁹ it becomes apparent that living through a traumatic event can happen to anyone; observation of a traumatic event, incidental contact with it, or direct participation in it is inevitable for some, independent of their race, sex, or age. Not only adults have traumatic experiences; indeed, various narratives, including those of war, vividly illustrate the all-embracing effect of traumatic events, thus foregrounding the all-embracing nature of trauma in general.

By making the child the protagonist of the Holocaust film, directors attempt to investigate the 'conflict between childhood and the adult world.'²⁰ Such films frequently follow similar plotlines, yet there are of course certain deviations. The early European cinema about the Holocaust that examined the fate of children in the genocide often narrated the following type of story:

Children as film heroes are usually the only survivors of big families or two children whom circumstances have joined together as a substitute family. A Gentile with a conscience usually comes to their aid, a non-Jew who bears the risk of saving a Jewish child. The major theme of such films is almost always the child's rescue, which becomes the rescuer's salvation. The children in these films serve as models through which the filmmaker shows how absurd racist Nazi thinking about Jewish children is. Furthermore, heaps of corpses are not normally portrayed, nor are children torn from their mother's arms only to be sent to a certain death – the actual reality of the Holocaust. And, if the children are not saved by the end of the film, the conclusions tend to be open-ended, along the unwritten lines of 'And their fate was unknown' instead of specific closure.²¹

From this observation, however, it is clear that the Holocaust films that have children as protagonists are somewhat morally embellished. This arguably happens due to two main factors: first, because the child as the main character adds the tone of innocence to the narration; second, because these films might be primarily aimed at children. The question of innocence is rather clear in this context: the child, who ideally should be surrounded by his/her family, raised in love, and shielded from the horrors of the adult world (the Holocaust, of course, should not be considered a normality of the adult world; rather, I define it as the horror of the adult world to underline that it was organized by adults), once having found him/herself in the violent world of the Holocaust *should not* experience the true horror in order to be able to preserve his/her innocence. Yet while these children-focused survivor stories allow for identification, they do not represent reality well. The child in the Holocaust film is a character from a fairy tale, who has to fight against evil and eventually wins. Such a representation is arguably one of the major risks involved in turning Holocaust films into children's stories. Another risk relates to the identification with what Jennifer M. Kapczynski has recently discussed as the 'Singular Jew,'²² that is to say, with the implicit suggestions that the focus on the exceptional survivor invites a

redemptive reading of the Holocaust. While the child, indeed, survives the genocide, the audience should not generalize this survival and see it as the fate of all Jewish people during the Holocaust. Kapczynski specifies:

The Singular Jew is individual – a stand-alone ‘stand-in’ representing the fate of German Jewry as such. He is also singular in the sense of ‘remarkable or exceptional,’ both because his fate is the only one of its kind within the story world of the film, and because he can reasonably represent only a tiny fraction of the history for which he serves as a symbol.²³

While most of the ‘child-survivor’ stories can, indeed, be classified as the stories about the ‘Singular Jew,’ László Nemes’ *Son of Saul* provides a reverse understanding of Kapczynski’s concept. The film focuses on the story of Saul Ausländer (Géza Röhrig), a member of the Sonderkommando, who discovers the body of his own son in a gas chamber and decides to bury the boy according to the Jewish traditions. Saul’s determination is strong: in a later scene, when he tries to carry the body over the river, he nearly dies himself. Yet the body of the dead Jewish boy is symbolic in the film – the single dead body stands for all the victims of the Holocaust who were burned and thus vanished. The film’s technique does not belittle the tragedy; instead it intensifies the innocence of the victims who are metaphorically represented as a dead child. The status of a victim changes the child’s portrayal from that one that ‘represent[s] only a tiny fraction of the history’ (if he were a survivor) to the one that represents the majority of European Jews who were exterminated during the Holocaust. The emergence of a smiling child in the final scene of *Son of Saul* only reinforces the innocence of the victims and the brutality of the Nazis.

If the Holocaust films that have children as protagonists distort the historical reality of the Holocaust, making children triumphant survivors, can one argue that these films are pure fantasies à la *Hansel and Gretel* that are aimed only at children? It is undeniably true that these films attempt to ‘avoid traumatizing children and adolescents with overtly graphic depictions of violence or instilling in them a sense of despair about human nature.’²⁴ But do these films become specifically *children’s* narratives? Answering this question, I draw on John Rowe Townsend’s contention that ‘there is no such thing as children’s literature, there is just literature.’²⁵ This argument is particularly relevant to the discussion of the Holocaust literature and, for that matter, film that have children as protagonists. Indeed, it is wrong to consider such films pure children’s narratives because of the historical validity of the central problem, i.e. the Holocaust. These stories, rather, are *adaptations* of an event that is always called brutal, inhumane, and violent when dealing with adults. Yet because these are adaptations – retellings that are not as violent and graphic as narratives about the adult experience – these films, indeed, become *child-oriented*, as they spare the viewer the immediate shock that comes from the observation of real atrocities. Moreover, it is usually the child viewer who can most closely identify with the protagonist of roughly the same age, which shows that the director, indeed, has tried to engage the children’s audience, too. Nevertheless, adults are always part of the audience of such films: whereas the Holocaust film with an adult protagonist is frequently meant only for a mature audience, films with child protagonists are attractive for both adults *and* children because they manage to convey the trauma of the Holocaust in a way that is understandable and psychologically less disturbing for the latter. Thus, the Holocaust film with the child protagonist draws the attention

of both adults and children; moreover, it is created in such a way that it educates both groups about this historical event.

(Un)veiling the trauma: the role of play and the fantastic in the depiction and perception of the Holocaust

To analyze the problem of witnessing the Holocaust through the eyes of children, this article includes considerations of such films as René Clément *Forbidden Games*, Louis Malle's *Goodbye, Children*, Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*, Peter Kassovitz's *Jacob the Liar*, Donna Deitch's *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Gérard Jugnot's *Monsieur Batignole*, Jochen Alexander Freydank's *Toyland*, Mark Herman's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, Gilles Paquet-Brenner's *Sarah's Key*, Roselyne Bosch's *The Round Up*, and Brian Percival's *The Book Thief*.

In making children the central witnesses of WWII and particularly of the Holocaust, most of these films employ a very peculiar narrative technique: They are framed, at least in part, as a game or a fairy tale, whereby the Holocaust becomes the dominant evil to face and overcome. Before proceeding to the analysis of the selected films, it is, necessary to define the main terms that I will use when classifying the elements of particular genres that the films employ, i.e. 'fairy tale,' 'fantastic,' 'fable,' and 'game'/'play.' The fairy tale is 'the wonder folk tale, often called the magic tale which generally focuses on miraculous transformations that enable disadvantaged protagonists to gain advantages and succeed in life.'²⁶ It is crucial that, for example, European and North American fairy tales 'recount the adventures of banished heroes and heroines, youngest sons and daughters, impoverished and *abused characters*, and people who have been cursed';²⁷ the Holocaust, in this respect, can be viewed as an evil environment, whereas the suffering of Jews parallels the stories of abused characters who eventually triumph over evil. The fantastic is something that is '[un]realistic and purported to have nothing to say about the "real" world.'²⁸ This is also an interesting term to use when talking about children who are involved in the unimaginable brutality and atrocity of the Holocaust and who eventually survive it. The fable – 'a fictitious story picturing a truth'²⁹ – is another genre that is used when filming a story with the child as a protagonist who tries to stay alive during the Holocaust. Finally, the game, or the play, is 'an activity occurring within certain limits of space, time, and meaning, according to fixed rules.'³⁰ The use of 'gaming' in film (and literature) about children is frequent: from Peter Brook's *Lord of the Flies*³¹ to Gary Ross' *The Hunger Games*³² Some films about the Holocaust employ this element as well: Having followed the rules of this morbid game, the child is usually able to survive the Holocaust. It is, however, crucial to notice that when the game is used as the central element in film, it is often not a harmless activity that brings joy but rather the one during which a number of participants die. All these techniques – from the elements of a fairy tale to games – portray the Holocaust as an 'unreal' event, which suggests its incomprehensible nature. Hence, in the minds of children, the persecution and genocide that simply cannot be imagined as part of their everyday reality become a supernatural evil over which good must triumph. These films thus underscore the savagery, inhumanity, and brutality of the Holocaust – not by denying the event as myth but by using those simple and familiar qualities to illustrate its severity, which is,

indeed, so sweeping and intense that it cannot be comprehended by their young protagonists on its own terms.

The problem of play or specifically '[g]ames and play'³³ as the central aspect in children's Holocaust literature has already been thoroughly discussed by Daniel Feldman, who claims that 'games and play attenuate the horror of the Holocaust by making atrocity palatable (or perhaps playable) for children' and that '[b]y refracting trauma through pleasure, play makes unpleasant experience more suitable and salutary for youngsters.'³⁴ Play, therefore, becomes a means of veiling the trauma and presenting it from a less shocking perspective: rather than being scared and repulsed, the child is instead invited to understand and even vicariously experience the trauma in ways that adults cannot. In this way, the loss of a parent, sibling, or friend, or such material benefits as a house – particularly the child's room, his/her warm, soft bed, and toys – becomes something that is not exactly the injustice meted out by the Nazis: frequently the child simply cannot comprehend what is happening, as at an early age the child might not understand how exactly he or she is 'different' from his or her peers, and regards the misfortune simply as part of the game, when someone inevitably loses points or is merely 'out.' Those who stay and live through the game and its obstacles will, however, 'win.'

By means of play, children soothe their fears, abstracting from the dangers of the outside world and delving into the imaginary world of their own, where nothing bad can happen to them. Feldman argues that one of the reasons for the child to 'invent a game' is the need to 'cope with his anxiety during his mother's absences.'³⁵ This theory is, indeed, relevant to the Holocaust film where the child, as claimed above, is frequently left alone or with another child, i.e. is not protected by adults. The game, therefore, becomes the child's own shell, under which the world is both safe and welcoming. Discussing the role of games in Holocaust literature, Feldman underscores that games are 'hardly pleasurable'³⁶ in such contexts, as is also the case, I contend here, with Holocaust films, too. Going further, he writes:

[G]ames in such texts do not induct children into a more mature, rational grown-up world, but instead serve as a juvenile means of making sense of the madness and cruelty of a brutal adult realm. In addition, play in children's and young adult texts on the Holocaust is not divorced from reality but rather enmeshed in a complex relationship implicating reality and fantasy in tandem.³⁷

The game that the child plays in the Holocaust film is, therefore, a means to protect the child from the horrors of genocide and war as they come to pass; but it is also, and most importantly, a way to *explain* what is going on and why so much hatred and savagery is aimed even at the innocent.

Indeed, every Holocaust film with a child protagonist involves playing as a means of witness. In this respect, even *Forbidden Games*, which does not explicitly show the Holocaust but rather focuses on the war, reveals how the child, while playing, does not simply imitate the unfolding situation but also symbolically reduces the witnessed violence, making it only part of the game. Specifically, the audience observes two children, who organize a cemetery of animals and insects at an old mill. The preparation of the graves and their necessary attributes, including crosses, becomes a thrilling activity that they happily return to day after day. For the children, and especially for the smaller girl who has lost her parents and a puppy in the bombing, burying the dead is a form of normality

during the years of war, when so many die and so much is destroyed that no one even has time to take proper care of the many corpses of the conflict's victims. More than that, the war teaches children that violence is acceptable. When, eventually, burying becomes a matter of quantity for the children, as they become more enthusiastic about expanding their creation, the audience witnesses that the girl leaves behind her unwillingness to kill more insects and animals because the children can bury only the dead. The war, therefore, demonstrates that it is fun to kill, and this is what the children learn from it. This is one of the main messages in *The Round Up*: after the Jewish children learn what a round-up is, they make it the basis of a game, assuming the roles of gendarmes and Jews and switching these roles from time to time, when those who play Jews, no longer wanting to lose, refuse to 'be' them in the game. The reality of the persecution and extermination of the Jews becomes the only actuality for Jewish children, whereas their belonging to the Jewish people – as is vividly marked with a yellow star on the clothes of each of them – traps them, since unlike in the game, in reality they cannot switch roles and become non-Jews. Through the real situation, and eventually through the game as well, they realize that in the games played by the Nazis, one automatically loses by being a Jew.

Films like *Goodbye, Children* and *Monsieur Batignole* employ games and play in their narratives in order, perhaps, to soften the characters' as well as the viewer's perception of the events portrayed. *Monsieur Batignole* tells the story of a butcher who, having given up his financially secure life, abandons his family as well to help Jewish children leave France. Although the man is first portrayed as a not very bright character, his sympathy and care for the innocent children win the hearts of both the children and the audience. His travels with the children through France are portrayed as an adventure that arguably turns the escape into a game. It is exactly through this adventure that he learns what a true family is, or, as Yvonne Kozlovsky Golan writes, '[t]his "adventure" leads him to form a moving familial solidarity with the Jewish children, an experience that had been lacking in his biological family.'³⁸ His own family members were, indeed, ready to send the children to certain death simply so that they could acquire the well-appointed apartment of their family for free.

Goodbye, Children somewhat stands out from the films chosen here because it portrays the Holocaust in a direct way. This unveiled depiction is arguably the result of the film refusing to depict children as innocent creatures: instead, it claims that, first, they can be cruel, too, and, second, in a time of war, children have to grow up faster and, therefore, start to accept the terms of the adult world more quickly than grown-ups think they would. It is significant that discussing the problem of the portrayal of children in *Goodbye, Children*, the film's director, Louis Malle, noted:

[C]hildren are so easily and quickly cute that you have to be very careful, especially with this subject. From the very beginning, *Au revoir* was meant to be tough ... it was important to show Julien [one of the main characters] as arrogant, a little spoiled, with moments of anguish and solitude ... I don't know about this love affair between the camera and children's smiles.³⁹

In the film, a young man – the cook Joseph (François Négret) – informs the Nazis that Jews are hidden in the school after he loses his job there. Although there is a view that Joseph is 'presented as being led by a chain of circumstances or accidents to collaborating with the Nazis' and that he is 'not presented as being totally responsible for the atrocities',⁴⁰ the director makes his motivation pretty clear: The young man (indeed, Joseph

is no longer a child, yet one perceives him that way because throughout the film he interacts more with the boys who are studying at the school than with adults) acts with cruelty because he has been betrayed. Yet while Joseph loses only his job, the Jews who are eventually found by the Nazis lose their lives. The other children's reaction to the situation is, however, also significant: While at first they (especially Julien [Gaspard Manesse]) treated the Nazi occupation as a game, as soon as their peers are forcefully taken away, the viewer witnesses the other children's shocked realization they will never again see the Jewish boys and the priest who had been helping them to hide. Interestingly, the motif of the game is also present in the scenes where the boys embark on a treasure hunt. During the game, both Julien and his Jewish friend Jean (Raphael Fejtö) are lost, but Nazis on patrol eventually find them and take them back to the school. The scene clearly demonstrates that while the children had first thought they could easily trick the soldiers and escape them, they are ultimately happy that everything ended up well for them, especially for Jean.

Such films as *The Devil's Arithmetic*, *Sarah's Key*, and *The Book Thief* also explicitly focus on the Holocaust as viewed through the eyes of children, yet do so from a slightly different perspective, as both employ elements of game-play and of the fantastic. These films overtly display how in the minds of children the Holocaust becomes evil; thus at times their experience of the Holocaust is not simply prettified by the game(s) that they invent to live through it – life itself turns into a game, or rather *irreality*.

Scholars have already likened *The Devil's Arithmetic* to *The Wizard of Oz* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* in the ways the film (and the novel on which it is based) plays with location and time.⁴¹ The story tells of a modern teenage girl who is transported back in time to the Jewish ghetto in Poland in 1941, and then becomes a prisoner in a Nazi extermination camp. Thus she learns the history of the Holocaust, and specifically her aunt's survival of it. It is a fantastic tale not only due to the way it allows the heroine Hannah (Kirsten Dunst) jump from one place to another and from one time period to another, but also in its portrayal of the Holocaust through the teenage girl's eyes. Hannah clearly refuses to believe that she is in Nazi-occupied Poland during WWII, and her life in the camp and ultimate death in a gas chamber – which transports her back to reality – are portrayed as a bad dream. It is also significant that such a shocking event as her own death brings her back to consciousness. The inhumane conditions in the camp, the hard labor, and her eventual extermination are so far beyond the girl's perception that she can comprehend them only as parts of a dream. Indeed, all her family's attempts to get her to be more attentive to Jewish history, particularly to what happened during WWII, fail, as Hannah always considers the stories boring. *The Devil's Arithmetic*, therefore, successfully 'combine[s] "harsh reality with the magic element of fable."⁴² Significantly, this game (or rather the 'role-play'⁴³ that Hannah experiences in her dream-like perception of Holocaust history) performs an important educative role, since, in the end, Hannah is 'enriched by the knowledge that play can be used to elide the line between ignorance and understanding, fantasy and reality.'⁴⁴

Sarah's Key is another fantastic account of the Holocaust, though it is a more 'realistic' story than *The Devil's Arithmetic*, focusing on the life of a Jewish family in France in 1942 and eventually presenting the aftermath of the Holocaust and its influence on the generations of the survivors and their children up to the present. Yet one element, or rather object, in the film allows the interpretation of this particular Holocaust story as a fantastic

adventure: the key possessed by the heroine, Sarah (Mélusine Mayance). When the police come to arrest Sarah and her mother, the girl hides and locks her younger brother in the boxroom. Sarah and her mother eventually reunite with her father and the three family members spend days imprisoned at the local stadium, together with other Jews. Soon, the girl (with the others) is transported to a concentration camp. Yet having realized that if she does not open the door, the boy will die in the boxroom, Sarah's only aim is to return to the apartment and free her brother. The boy's rescue symbolically turns into a game, where the key is, indeed, the main element, since it is the only means for Sarah to open the door and win the 'prize,' her brother. It is also significant that in those rare scenes when the girl loses her key, she is ready to sacrifice her own well-being in order to recover the cherished object. Sarah's overriding goal now arguably obscures the horror of the Holocaust, and thus although she endures the full spectrum of Nazi inhumanity – from undernourishment to the loss of both of her parents – nothing she experiences is arguably as horrible as her fatal mistake of locking her brother in the boxroom. She eventually escapes the Nazis; nonetheless, when she opens the door to reunite with her only remaining family members she finds, devastatingly, that the boy is dead. The viewer does not see the boy's corpse, yet can tell that the body has already started to decompose because of Sarah's eventual hysterical screams at the terrible stench in the room. It is significant that even had Sarah come earlier and saved the boy, the Holocaust would have, of course, still been a traumatic experience; yet it would be something that the girl had at least partially overcome. However, her inability to free her brother *because* she was herself imprisoned and could not escape – and thus she ultimately lost the game – figuratively portrays the Holocaust as the evil force that the girl was unable to rise above. Significantly, she commits suicide as an adult; but does so arguably not only because she has experienced the Holocaust but mostly because its horror was so overpowering that she could not resist it enough to save her loved ones.

The elements of fantasy, and specifically of the fairy tale, can also be found in *The Book Thief*. The film centers its plot on the story of Liesel (Sophie Nélisse), a girl who is eventually adopted by an elderly German couple. It is exactly through the portrayal of her family that the story assumes its fantastic frame: While her foster father is a kind man, who shows all his love to the girl from the moment they meet, the foster mother becomes the typical stepmother of, for example, *Hansel and Gretel* or *Cinderella*. For the woman, the girl is a real burden; no matter what Liesel does or how she behaves, the foster mother shows her no affection for any considerable amount of time. The boy Rudy (Nico Liersch), who becomes Liesel's closest friend and once plays with her racing for a kiss, might even have become a metaphorical 'prince,' if only the children had been older. Yet although their relationship is not depicted as a love affair, the pair are obviously devoted friends. The city they now live in, Munich, is also portrayed in a rather fantastic way. Specifically, whereas Liesel and her foster parents are clearly represented to be a poor or at best lower-middle-class family, they are contrasted with the city's mayor and his wife, who reside in a real mansion (which symbolizes a castle). The scene when Liesel brings the laundry to the mayor's house once again underlines the social gap between the two families and, in this case, clearly portrays the girl as *Cinderella*.

And although the film's central plotline, focused on the young Jewish man Max (Ben Schnetzer), whom Liesel's foster parents hide in their basement, lacks fantastic undertones,

it is apparent that the above-listed elements create a fairy-tale atmosphere – and make the Holocaust, and specifically the persecution of Jews in Munich, part of that fairy tale, too. Liesel's and Max's ultimate survival of the war and the Holocaust seems to figuratively stand for a happy end that most fairy tales have. And all the loss that transpires – Liesel's foster parents and Rudy die in the Allied bombing – only becomes part of the general deprivation that every good character in the film has to bear. Yet it also serves to somewhat balance the portrayal of war, which is represented as a destructive phenomenon that cannot be overcome if there is no negative experience and pain. Liesel learns this lesson of war, as the war deprives her of her adoptive family, a second loss of family for her. But she also learns how meaningless and cruel the Holocaust was; and it is, indeed, symbolic that out of all her family and friends, the only survivor is a Jewish man (the 'Singular Jew') – who personifies the triumph of justice as well as Liesel's and his winning the brutal game against the Nazis.

Playing and the elements of the fantastic, as the analyzed examples demonstrate, help the child not only to understand the Holocaust and its cruel nature but also to morally and physically withstand and frequently overcome the savage event, emerging from it safe and sound. While none of the films, of course, avoid addressing the loss and sorrow that the Holocaust inevitably caused every victim, including the youngest ones, children clearly managed to live through it more successfully than adults did. This happened both because children adapted to the new environment better but also because they viewed the situation from a different perspective than grown-ups did. The further analysis offered below will only reinforce this contention.

The brutal game? The Holocaust as playground in *Life Is Beautiful*, *Jacob the Liar*, *The boy in the Striped Pajamas*, and *Toyland*

While, as the above examples demonstrate, the Holocaust film that features children as main characters tends to show the extermination either as play or through play, claiming that this is the way the child perceives events that are part of the genocide, this article argues that there are four films that do this most explicitly: *Life Is Beautiful*, *Jacob the Liar*, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, and *Toyland*.

All four films reconstruct the Holocaust environment as a playground that the child either is forced to play in or is simply interested in getting involved with. Thus, in *Toyland* – a German movie that in its mere 14 minutes manages to succinctly but aptly show the life of Germans and German Jews at the time of the Holocaust – the audience witnesses a story of friendship between two boys, one German, and the other a German Jew. When the Jewish family is eventually arrested, the other family's mother, in order to explain to her son why he will no longer see his friend, concocts the lie that the Silbersteins are going on a 'journey' to 'Toyland.'⁴⁵ When at some point he asks whether he might join the Silbersteins, his mother explains that he cannot go '[b]ecause it's too far away' and because 'the teddy bears are huge there.'⁴⁶ Exaggerating the size of the toys in Toyland, the mother is obviously trying to scare the boy so that he would not think of asking to go there. The metaphor of Toyland for the concentration camp is clearly ironic here, since the camp is the exact opposite of what one would imagine Toyland to be – full of laughter, happiness, love, and safety. It is also significant that by calling the camp Toyland, the mother employs a fantastic element so as not to traumatize her son,

who at his age is obviously unaware of the adult world's violence, and thus has to explain the situation to him in a way that a small boy would understand. Yet the metaphor also underscores the savagery experienced by the prisoners in such camps – an immensity beyond the ability of human perception to grasp, so that only an imagined term can account for the situation there.

The desire to protect the boy is evident not only in his mother's actions but also in those of the Jewish family's. When at the stair of the house the boy meets his Jewish friend's father, the man lies to the boy about why his face is bleeding: he 'ran into a rhino'⁴⁷ in the street, the man claims. Therefore, while the child tries to grasp the meaning of what is going on around him, the adults do everything to shield him from that reality and thus protect his innocent childhood. Yet when the boy eventually decides to join his friend on the trip to Toyland, the Jewish boy explains to him that '[t]here is no Toyland.'⁴⁸ It is symbolic that before this revelation, when the German boy runs after the arrested Jewish family, his teddy bear drops into the snow and remains there while the boy continues running after the car. The lost toy, lying lonely in the snow, shatters the metaphor of Toyland, even as it demonstrates that no matter how much the adults try to protect the boy, in the world of war he simply has to grow up and experience that world as a mature boy rather than as an innocent child. Finally, while Toyland works as a metaphor both of the concentration camp and more generally of the Holocaust itself, the motif of playing is intertwined through the film, since the time the boys usually spent together was devoted to playing the piano; and, in the context of this film, playing the piano arguably stands for the act of cooperative gaming among children.

Unlike *Toyland*, the films *Life Is Beautiful*, *Jacob the Liar*, and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* explicitly show how the Holocaust, and specifically life in a concentration camp or in a ghetto, can become a playground in the child's imagination. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* tells the story of the boy Bruno (Asa Butterfield) who, with his family, moves to a new house that, as the audience later discovers, is situated close to a Nazi concentration camp. As the boy meets the prisoners – some of whom help out in his house in the kitchen, while others are confined within the barbed wire of the camp – he particularly notices their striped clothes, which remind him of pajamas. Since the truth about these people is skillfully hidden by the adults, the boy has to understand what is going on around him through his own efforts. His first reaction is, of course, that these people are simply strange, and later, when he meets the Jewish boy Shmuel (Jack Scanlon) separated by the barbed-wire fence, he simply thinks that in the camp they are playing some sort of game. Bruno is clearly unable to understand that something wrong and horrible might be happening at the camp, where there are children. Being unaware of the status of Jews as 'the enemy,' Bruno makes friends with some of the prisoners and realizes that they are absolutely 'normal' people. The audience witnesses how Bruno excitedly runs to visit Shmuel every day to play with him and to bring him some food. The boys eventually become friends and, unaware of the fatal measures that the Nazis are taking in the camp, Bruno accepts the main rule of the camp's 'game' and puts on his own striped pajamas, so that he too can play within the camp and remain inconspicuous. Together with Shmuel and other prisoners, Bruno dies in one of the camp's gas chambers, not knowing that the game he has joined is fatal for every participant.

The Boy in the Striped Pajama vividly illustrates how the child's witnessing of the Holocaust is a failure to understand the world of violence that has been created by adults, including even family members, namely here, Bruno's father. The film not only makes the child re-think the concepts of good and bad, so that he questions the actions of his father and other Nazis who locked up Jews, including children, in the place where they cannot eat properly, do what they want to, rest, and eventually leave if they want to; it also reveals how the child is not ready to witness such a horrible event. Scholars correctly pinpoint that 'the empathy that the story evokes is displaced from Jewish Holocaust victims to the family of a Nazi commandant'⁴⁹; however, when viewing the story in relation to the children, this is not exactly a drawback of the film, as the focus on the Jewish and the German boys, with the sharp contrast in the lives that they lead due to their identities, helps the audience see both the differences and similarities in the boys' understanding of the Holocaust. Certainly, as all the examples analyzed here tend to do, the Jewish boy is portrayed as a more mature child, as he understands that this is not a fun camp but rather that he and other Jews are forced to live there – which, by contrast, the German boy cannot understand or accept for a considerable amount of time. Yet their attitudes to the limits of violence are eventually made equal, as neither Shmuel nor Bruno, entering the gas chamber, realizes that they will be murdered; instead, they agree that they have to stay inside because it is raining outside and eventually, when they are asked to take their clothes off, they are sure that they will only be taking a harmless shower. Both boys, therefore, ultimately do see the Holocaust as a game – not a very pleasant one, and one with unusual rules, but still a *game*, and neither realizes that by the end of the game, they both will be dead.

In this respect, *Life Is Beautiful* and *Jacob the Liar* – the last yet the most vivid examples I will cite of how the child witnesses the Holocaust as a form of play – clearly transforms the concentration camp and the ghetto, respectively, into a playground. In both films, the result is achieved through the adult's desire to protect the innocent child from the horrors of the extermination. In *Jacob the Liar*, it is depicted through the relationship between Jacob (Robin Williams) and Lina (Hannah Taylor-Gordon), a Jewish girl who manages to escape from the train that was supposed to bring her to the camp. While Jacob's lie about the existing radio helps the other Polish Jews in the ghetto hope for the soon-coming end of the war, it, most significantly, creates an imitation of a peaceful life for Lina: the audience witnesses multiple scenes when Jacob allows the girl to listen to good news (that he invents and reproduces himself), to enjoy beautiful music, and dance. The make-believe world that Lina now leaves in, indeed, helps her deal with the loss of her parents, recover from a serious illness, and just know that the Holocaust will end soon.

Life Is Beautiful that, according to some critics, is 'the best-known example of the Holocaust represented as a game,'⁵⁰ creates the atmosphere of magic already in the first scenes. Thus in several comic scenes, the audience witnesses the hero – Guido (Roberto Benigni) – with his future wife, performing various magic tricks to draw her attention. When family is arrested and sent to a concentration camp together with hundreds of other Jews, Guido, trying to protect the boy from the violent world of the camp, tells his son Joshua (Giorgio Cantarini) that they are going on a journey – a ruse similar to the one used in *Toyland*. The boy gets excited about the trip and eagerly joins his parents and other Jews on their journey. Yet almost immediately the boy cannot understand why they have to sleep in

such big dark rooms and on uncomfortable beds, why there is no regular and tasty food in this place, why no one can play with him, and why the soldiers in the camp speak a language he does not understand. The boy clearly shows his dissatisfaction with the trip and asks his father to drive him home; yet Guido manages to trick the boy and explain that they have all become part of an interesting game, where one should work hard in order to win. The winner will eventually receive a great prize – a tank. The boy gets excited about the prize and from now on follows the rules created by his father so that he can literally save the boy, risking his own life multiple times. Kozlovsky Golan comments on the structure of the film's plot:

They [Guido and Joshua] arrive at a camp which is a world within a world. It represents an internal world, standing alone, with its own codes, its management and thinking understandable only to its managers. The adult world becomes even more distorted as the father breaks down reality into concepts that the boy can accept and understand. ... The boy's world is formed parallel to the adult's world while he coexists within it.⁵¹

The film, however, not only demonstrates how the adult can help the child understand the new world created by the Nazis during the Holocaust, re-shaping it into a form that can be clear to the child – and what can be clearer and more interesting than a game? – but it also, unlike all the other examples analyzed in this article, overtly 'suggests that this macabre game can be won.'⁵² Indeed, at the end of *Life Is Beautiful*, the audience watches the happy boy as he sees the tank of the Allied forces, who have liberated the camp right on time to prove that the boy has just become the winner of the game. Thanks to his father's desire to protect his son from the cruelty of the Holocaust – not only physically, but also psychologically and morally – the boy leaves the camp unaware of the many murders committed there, the slaughter of hundreds of innocents, including his father, who died living in the real, adult world, where the Holocaust can only sarcastically be called a 'game.'

Conclusion

The Holocaust has been widely reflected in film. Whereas the stories of the genocide are similar in terms of their plots, they differ in the perspectives taken to view the Holocaust. Thus, some films narrate the events from the viewpoint of a victim, others from that of criminals, still others from the perspective of a bystander (for example, the part of *Sarah's Key* that depicts the Holocaust through the eyes of the contemporary journalist Julia Jarmond [Kristin Scott Thomas], who tries to solve the mystery of her apartment that, as the audience finds out later, used to belong to Sarah's family before the Nazi persecution started). Holocaust films, however, are also divided into those that present the genocide from the perspective of an adult and those that tell their stories through the eyes of children.

All the cinematic examples analyzed in this article not only reveal how WWII and, most importantly, the Holocaust transformed the children of that time – both those who were persecuted and those whose well-being was secured – but they also provide powerful insights into how children could comprehend so horrific an event as the systematic murder and abuse of the innocent. All these films, to various degrees, insist on one fact: Children are unable to fully understand the violence of the Holocaust and, therefore, they adapt the reality of the Holocaust according to the reality of their own worlds –

and thus consider the Holocaust itself to be a kind of make-believe. In such play, the concentration camp functions as a playground, whereas the prisoners become the participants in the game. However, whereas *Life Is Beautiful* shows that this game can be won (arguably due to the very young age of the child), all the other examples insist that the end of the game is inescapably fatal. And although in some of the examined films the children survive the Holocaust, they either later commit suicide or undoubtedly live with the burden of the eventually realized horror for the rest of their lives.

Although they employ the idea of the Holocaust as a fantasy, a myth, or an invented game, none of these films undermines the tragedy of the genocide; instead, they propose that we view the persecution and extermination as acts so cruel that they go beyond the efforts of human perception and imagination to grasp them. Making children their protagonists in these films, the directors invite the audience to look at the world of the Holocaust through children's eyes to imagine the horror that actual children experienced during the genocide, as well as to reconsider the Holocaust as not only one of the many other campaigns of crimes against humanity, but as an event that, to some extent, is supreme on the historical scale of violence, abuse, and savagery.

Notes

1. Haggith and Joanna, *Holocaust and the Moving Image*.
2. Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*.
3. Saxton, *Haunted Images*.
4. Gonshak, *Hollywood and the Holocaust*, 2.
5. Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 3. Emphasis in original.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.
7. Ginsberg, *Holocaust Film*, 1.
8. Hirsch, *After Image*, 3.
9. *Schindler's List*, directed by Steven Spielberg.
10. *The Pianist*, directed by Roman Polanski.
11. *Shutter Island*, directed by Martin Scorsese.
12. Mihăilescu, "Traumatic Echoes," 73.
13. Stargardt, "Children," 218.
14. *Ibid.*, 220.
15. *Ibid.*, 224.
16. *Ibid.*, 228.
17. Gammage, "Trauma and Historical Witnessing," 406–7.
18. Kozlovsky Golan, "Au revoir," 54.
19. Caruth in Hirsch, *After Image*, 9.
20. Kozlovsky Golan, "Au revoir," 54.
21. *Ibid.*, 61–2.
22. Kapczynski, "The Singular Jew," 117.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Baron, "Not in Kansas Anymore," 394.
25. Quoted in Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*, 139.
26. Zipes, "Origins," 27.
27. *Ibid.* My emphasis.
28. Carpenter, "The First Golden Age," 66.
29. Blackham, *The Fable as Literature*, 226.
30. Huizinga quoted in Mäyrä, *An Introduction to Game Studies*, 1.
31. *Lord of the Flies*, directed by Peter Brook.

32. *The Hunger Games*, directed by Gary Ross.
33. Feldman, "Reading Games in Auschwitz," 360.
34. *Ibid.*, 361.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, 362.
37. *Ibid.*, 362–3.
38. Kozlovsky Golan, "Au revoir," 63.
39. Quoted in Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, 88.
40. Colombat, *The Holocaust in French Film*, 263.
41. Baron, "Not in Kansas Anymore," 402.
42. Hoffman quoted in Baron, "Not in Kansas Anymore," 402.
43. Feldman, "Playing with the Past," 89.
44. *Ibid.*, 100.
45. *Toyland*, directed by Freydank.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*
49. Haig, "Introduction," 6.
50. Feldman, "Reading Games in Auschwitz," 371.
51. Kozlovsky Golan, "Au revoir," 70.
52. Feldman, "Reading Games in Auschwitz," 371.

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