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Representing the Unrepresentable

The Army of Crime *and Biopic Generic Conventions of Identity*

Hila Shachar

> – this page
> I write and
> the silent
> who couldn't cannot
> whom silence
> and I
> cannot what nevertheless
> I nevertheless
> how can I
> write
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> (Feldman 1994, p. 50)

The French film, *Army of Crime* (*L'Armée du Crime*) is a 2009 drama that sits in both categorisations of a Holocaust and a Resistance biopic. Receiving wide release in France, the United States, and beyond, it focuses on the biographical telling and refashioning of the members of the French Resistance subgroup known as the Manouchian group, and the events which led to the creation of a fascist propaganda poster around them following their capture and execution. The film is cowritten and directed by Robert Guédiguian, who has mixed German and Armenian roots, and who is primarily known for his politically charged films that explore working-class life (see Dawson 2009). As explained in an interview, his desire to adapt the biographies of the Manouchian group therefore stems

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from his interest in the group's diverse migrant, religious, and Marxist roots, in relation to his own left-wing politics (Dawson). This will be detailed further, but it is necessary to begin with a wider 'framing' of this film under the heading of a Holocaust biopic.

Irving Feldman's poem about the Holocaust, with which I began this chapter, is ironically the most eloquent manner in which to begin discussing what the film, *Army of Crime*, enacts through its own cinematic representation and 'un-representation' within the biopic genre. The poem stands as an expression of nothingness and silence. That is, Feldman's words reveal little; what they in fact achieve is the breakdown of language, representation, and history in the face of the Holocaust which is, as many critics, poets, scholars, writers, and artists have pointed out, unrepresentable.[1] The Holocaust exists in a realm beyond representation, beyond art and image. In order, therefore, to tackle what the film, *Army of Crime*, does through its attempts to tell a Holocaust narrative within the representational 'frame' of a biopic, this chapter must first engage, albeit briefly, with the moral and artistic dilemma of films about the Holocaust and about Resistance.

The ethics of attempting to represent the Holocaust and its victims, resistance fighters, and survivors has been painstakingly explored by many scholars over the years (see Gubar 2003; Hirsch 2010; Insdorf 2002; Avisar 1988; Heller 1991). It is a topic that elicits complex and often contradictory arguments, but one which is necessary to return to here in order to consider the ideological implications of the biopic genre as it 'collides' with what Annette Insdorf theorises under the heading of the 'Holocaust Genre' in film (pp. 245-249). Her discussion is useful here, as she explains, via reference to a film about another historical event of mass murder (the atomic bombing of Hiroshima), the overarching moral dilemma of attempting to represent victims of genocide.

It is worthwhile quoting her discussion in full, as it articulates some of the main underlying questions filmmakers must grapple with when tackling the Holocaust on screen:

> The beginning of Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) offers a complex questioning in this regard: A Frenchwoman's voice is telling her Japanese lover that she saw everything in Hiroshima. 'You saw nothing', the man's voice responds. 'I saw museums, the reconstructions', she continues. 'You saw nothing', he replies. They are both right. She has seen the images that create awareness and sympathy for the victims of the atom bomb. But these have been only representations, not the horrific event itself. Resnais is foregrounding the difference between apprehension and comprehension, between merely seeing (beholding) and being within (held by) something beyond one's control. (Insdorf 2002, p. 249)

To put it simply, any film about the Holocaust can only 'behold' and replicate, like a staged museum exhibit; it cannot 'be within' or be 'held by' it. To a certain extent, one could argue this about representations of many other historical events;

however, Primo Levi has lucidly pointed out that what makes this debate and dilemma unique amongst representations of the Holocaust is that we are dealing with an ethical 'double murder' of victims when they are replicated on screen, as that representation crosses an ethical and philosophical boundary of what *should* be represented, not just what *can*. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi writes that, 'I must repeat – we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. … We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom' (Levi 2012, p. 64). Those who did 'touch bottom' are those who were 'held by' the Holocaust. There is no realistic, artistic, or metaphorical mechanism via which to represent this bottom and 'holding' rather than 'beholding', for as Agnes Heller points out, the Holocaust is already the ultimate metaphor, when she writes that the 'horrors we are able to describe are comparisons; they are copies of the original. But the Holocaust is originary. It has come to exist in the world as the penultimate metaphor of horror, and no poetical means can heighten, compress, or enrich its content' (Heller 1991, p. 396). Indeed, the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has called this state of being 'held' the 'ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted' (1978, p. 75).

What is at stake here is what Berel Lang has called the 'moral limits' of representation (1992, p. 305), or what Joshua Hirsch has termed the 'should nots' (2010, p. 4). This ties to my own position about the wider implications of Holocaust films that to suggest that we know what that bottom could look like, that we can attempt to represent it on screen, is to cage the victims of the Holocaust within another false identity, as false as the numbers they were given instead of a name, and that like those numbers, 'erases' them again through somebody else's representational politics. It is understandable, therefore, that filmmakers often do not seek to touch that bottom, but rather opt to talk 'around' the Holocaust as a way to engage with it on screen. This has prolifically taken the form of stories about resistance, which sit more comfortably within the genres of traditional war films and biopics, centred on the deeds of 'great men' and the heroes of history.

Resistance biopics tend to make sense out of the 'ultimate mystery' by suggesting a redemptive narrative, or at the very least, a comprehensible one. Much discussion about the ethics of this approach has likewise occurred, with this discussion often being centred on Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), which has been criticised as an appropriation of the Holocaust through an atypical narrative of heroism and survival (see Hirsch 2010, pp. 1–28; Insdorf 2002, pp. 245–249; Hansen 1996, pp. 292–312; Lanzmann 1994, p. 14; Bernstein 1994, p. 429; Gourevitch 1994, p. 51; Stone 2005, pp. 137–139). The focus in this film on one 'hero' out of the majority of those who aided the demise of, stood silent, and did little to save victims is itself problematic. However, it is one of the main ways that filmmakers have tended to talk 'around' the Holocaust.

The significance of *Schindler's List* in this debate shall be returned to later in this chapter, like Feldman's poem. However it is necessary to introduce at this point what

Army of Crime does and what narrative it seeks to represent amidst these debates. Unlike many other war biopics, or biopics about resistance fighters during World War II and the Holocaust, which tend to focus primarily on an individual biography, *Army of Crime* seeks to tell a collective biopic of the Manouchian group. Part of the logic behind this collective biopic is to deconstruct the postwar historical refashioning of many resistance fighters and groups, who were problematically and politically co-opted into a nationalistic ethos of France as a country of resisters to the Nazi regime, underwriting French collaboration during the war.[2] Guédiguian states that one of his aims in this film is to move the biographies of the members of the Manouchian group away from nationalistic French dogma, and reposition them back in their migrant, religious, diverse, and Marxist roots (Dawson 2009). Indeed, the members of the Manouchian group were a diverse group of people, and certainly not representatives of a dominant French nationalism, being composed of refugees, exiles, and Jews. However after the war, they became absorbed under the national myth of 'French Resistance' that often ignored the migrant, multiethnic, and Jewish nature of many resistance fighters (see Friedman 1990, pp. 51–54; Christofferson and Christofferson 2006, pp. 134–135; Baron 2014, pp. 19–21). As Laurence Baron points out, Guédiguian 'posits an alternative to the standard interpretation of the Resistance as an indigenous movement with mass support and British backing' (p. 19). This is certainly the case in the film, but in order to understand why the Manouchian group became absorbed into this myth, and therefore, what the film ideologically does with their biographies as a biopic, it is necessary to give some brief background details about who exactly they were and what the title *Army of Crime* refers to.

The Manouchian group is the popular name given to a group of 23 resistance fighters of the *Francs-tireurs et partisans-main-d'œuvre immigrée* (commonly referred to as FTP-MOI), headed by the Armenian, Missak Manouchian. This was a subgroup of the *Francs-tireurs et partisans* (FTP) organisation, considered part of the French Resistance. As a group, they were composed of mainly refugees and migrants, as indicated by the title *Main-d'œuvre immigrée* (immigrant movement). Of the 23 members, 8 were Polish, 1 was Spanish, 3 were Hungarian, 2 were Armenian, 5 were Italian, 1 was Romanian, and 3 were French. Eleven of the members were Jewish. I write these facts out, as they are historical facts that have ironically become subsumed under a Catholic, French nationalist ideology of Resistance, despite the fact that the members of the group were made famous via a propaganda poster that deliberately announced their immigrant, national, and religious status. This poster is famously known as the *Affiche Rouge* (Red Poster), which was distributed by Vichy French authorities in an occupied Paris during 1944.

The obvious aim of the poster was to denounce and discredit the group to the wider French public by pointing to their 'questionable' backgrounds as suspect 'foreigners' who are plotting against the body of France with their 'terrorism' branded as an 'army of crime' on the poster. The poster was created around the time of their capture, trial, and execution in 1944.

Figure 11.1 Affiche Rouge, 1944. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Affiche_rouge.jpg.

If during the war they were branded as outsiders and enemies of France, after the war they were refashioned as French national heroes; but this occurred only by denying their very individuality, personal identities, and specific biographies. In his aim to reclaim their subjectivity back from French nationalism, Guédiguian undertakes some of his own historical revisionism in the film, which shall be explored in the next sections of this chapter. However, his is a more complex, knowing, and self-conscious revisionism that at its core, has to tackle not only the problematic nature of representing Holocaust narratives on screen but also the legacy and myths built around the French Resistance. The manner in which he tackles both, is, I argue, laid out via a utilisation and appropriation of biopic generic conventions of identity. In that sense, *Army of Crime* demonstrates both the limits and the potential of the biopic form and genre on screen, which moves us away from earlier arguments

about the 'conservatism' of the genre in relation to its representation of history. This charge of conservatism is an issue I have tackled before in my earlier exploration of other biopics, specifically, literary biopics based on authors' lives (see Shachar 2013, pp. 199–218). Here, I wish to expand on this discussion by considering the implications of such a positioning of the biopic genre, in order to then move on to consider what *Army of Crime* does with it.

In my previous exploration of biopics about well-known authors, I discussed how there is often a generally dismissive attitude to the biopic genre, relying on some preestablished assumptions that it is a simplistic mode of storytelling and representation of identity (Shachar 2013, pp. 199–201).[3] One of the main reasons for this is, as I explained, 'the notion that biopics are based on a conservative idea of history as a simplified model of "great" individuals – a model providing a "coherent version of life", identity and history' (pp. 199–200). This model of history and identity has been critiqued and reworked by the prevalent postmodernist deconstruction of the concept of a linear history of 'grand narratives', and 'Western privileging of discourses' of a coherent 'inner self' and individual identity (pp. 199–203).

Since I wrote these words, there is still a prevailing underlying suspicion of the privileging of the inner self, of concepts of objective historical 'truth', and of the 'grand narratives' of 'great individuals'. Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia point out that these underlying assumptions about the limits of the biopic genre are largely shaped by its early 'practices of the star-system', whereby biopic productions were used as vehicles to create celebrities (2014, p. 3). Minier and Pennacchia also note, however, that it is important 'to look beyond the studio era described by Custen' in order to explore the potential of this genre and its evolution (p. 3).[4] One way they point to, via reference to Dennis Bingham's own study of the biopic, is through an analysis of the difference between male and female biopics, as female biographies are told in often vastly different ways than stories about 'great men' (Minier and Pennachia 2014, p. 3; Bingham 2010, p. 13). But I would also suggest that what we need to reconsider is those very early days of the biopic genre, what Bingham calls 'its salad days in the Hollywood studio era' (p. 10), which did not only utilise the biopic in favour of grand celebrity narratives of the privileged Western self but also suggested a wider critical and political context.

In his exploration of American left-wing film critics in the 1930s, Chris Robé suggests that we need to consider the flip side, as it were, of a lot of the practical decisions of Hollywood productions during these 'salad days' of the studio era (2009, pp. 78–79). For example, Thomas Elsaesser has argued that companies such as Warner Brothers shifted to the biopic genre as a way to deal with the restrictions of the 1934 Production Code (1986). I am not so much concerned with exploring this particular argument in detail here, as I am with Robé's own extension of it, where he notes that left-wing American critics did not view this in relation to conservatism and restriction alone, or simply under the banner of 'great stories of stardom'. Rather, they viewed it as a movement toward a more politicised cinema under the cover of the biography, noting that with the emergence of a biopic such as *The Life of Emile Zola* (dir. William Dieterle, 1937), 'the studio inaugurated "a new era in the film industry. For the first

time a commercial producer has given us a film with a broad political idea" in its denunciation of war and fascism' (Robé 2009, p.79).[5] What is important about this debate here is the extent to which a biopic can be viewed through a 'multi-vision' of both collective political critique and conservative celebrity culture. The identities it tackles are not one sided; on the one hand, left-wing critics welcomed the exploration of individuals whose biographies and life narratives suggested a larger, politicised, and collective engagement with the wider world (moving away from what these critics called 'domestic' American films) (Robé 2009, p. 79); but on the other hand, such a political and collective engagement rested on the privileging of Western concepts of identity and history as tied to the individual subject.

These issues are important to my own exploration of *Army of Crime* here, which despite being a collective biopic, relies on certain Western assumptions about individual identity, the self, and interiority, which have shaped the biopic genre and its representation of history. This is a position that both interrogates and reaffirms traditional ideologies of identity in previous biopics; but it is also one that moves us away from a simplistic category of 'conservatism'. I wish to explore in detail in the remaining sections of this chapter how *Army of Crime* complicates the notion of any singular category being applied to the biopic form and instead suggests that we must adopt a plural and layered approach to what these films can do ideologically and politically in the present via their representation of history and identity. I have chosen to do this by closely unpacking some key scenes in *Army of Crime* which point to a highly self-conscious utilisation and appropriation of certain cinematic conventions of the biopic genre as they move and collide alongside the conventions of representing the Holocaust and the Resistance in Western culture and on screen.

Image versus Sound: Moving Beyond Epic Myths of Resistance

The opening scene of *Army of Crime* utilises the common flashback structure often used in personal and celebrity biopics as a way to tackle a key moment in a well-known figure's biography, to 'work back' to the life events which have led to such a moment. It is a neat, eloquent way to 'slice out' biographical elements that often do not 'fit' the overarching narrative of stardom and 'uniqueness' that is often built around the subjects of biopics, for it does not rely on a chronological progression of biography.[6] Indeed, Neil Archer points out that the flashback structure 'is in fact consistent with many biopics of the classical Hollywood era' (2011, pp. 166–167). This technique and structure is evident in other French biopics, most notably, *LaMôme* (2007), in which the narrative moves backwards and forwards as a way to demonstrate how personal trauma has shaped identity, using personal pain as a marker of a unique individual identity. Likewise, *Army of Crime* begins at a key moment of trauma – at the point where the members of the Manouchian group have been captured and arrested – and then takes us backwards and forwards to the events which led to and followed this pivotal moment. Only here, the trauma that is explored in the shaping of identity is not a personal, but a collective one. The manner in which the

film utilises sound and colour here highlights that we are dealing with a highly self-conscious and politicised representation of biography that frames how we are to interpret, and how we are to pay attention to the techniques in the rest of the film.

One of these techniques is the potent use of colour as it intersects with imagery of imprisonment versus freedom and life. The scene begins with the muted colours of black, white, and grey, as we see the members of the Manouchian group behind literal cages in a moving car taking them to their torture and execution. The camera moves from face to face of each member, naming them, as they are framed behind the wire of the car. But then, we move to surprising colours of life as their faces glance out onto the streets of Paris, watching the public undertake daily, mundane activities. We see two artists carrying supplies in golden brown; there is a beautiful young woman walking in pristine white; a couple embracing in vivid blue; a mother bending over a bright yellow pram to touch her baby; posters passing by their eyes in bold red. These scenes of life and love, shot in bright colours, interact poignantly with the sombre, muted palette inside the car. No doubt this creates an intended binary of life and death, highlighting the fate of the prisoners and what they have fought for. But this is not simply a cinematic cliché, it is also a distinct subversion of how many other Resistance films have utilised colour.

In an interview about the film, Guédiguian was questioned about his choice of bright colours throughout it, which the interviewer finds 'surprising' (Dawson 2009, p. 11). To understand why, we need only look to Guédiguian's response, where he notes that he is aware most Resistance films in a French cultural context are shot in 'grey and blue tones' alone, and that in his film, he 'wanted to work against the usual look of Resistance films' (p. 11). This is not an innocent statement, and it is one which needs to be unpacked critically, for he then goes on to explain that the point of this in *Army of Crime* is to bring 'the era closer to our own' (p. 11). Throughout this film, there is a self-consciousness to the creation and use of a cinematic aesthetic to highlight to the audience that what we are presented with is an explicit and self-conscious construction of the past for the use of the present, rather than trying to mask this representational process by seeking an authentic 'period look'. The aim here is to avoid the suggestion that the past can be realistically accessed and to demythologise the use of the past in the present through a self-referential use of cinematic techniques that subvert established tropes of Resistance films.

I would argue that one of the reasons many Resistance films utilise a grey and dull blue palette is because it emphasises sombreness and seriousness and creates a mood and tone of realism – that is, flat, dark, and serious colour is used to convey the 'realism' and seriousness of the representation of history depicted. The aim is to convey to an audience a sense that they are watching history itself rather than a representation of it. This follows in the tradition of not only conventional Hollywood cinema but also of French realist cinema. In subverting this use of colour through a self-conscious dialogue between sombre and bright tones, Guédiguian is requiring an attuned viewer to pay attention to how history is represented to them, and that ultimately, this dialogue between past and present is all about the contemporary here and now; in how history and identity are manipulated, reconstructed, and conveyed in collective cultural myths.

I wish to return here to my earlier references to *Schindler's List*, for the film not only displays a typical biopic trend of privileging the 'great' individual above the collective people who are not represented historically, it also does so through its own use of colour and the tension it seeks to smooth out between the individual and the collective. Notably, the film is shot in a documentary style black and white, suggesting an aura and aesthetic of 'authenticity' akin to a news piece with factual information or a historical newsreel. The famous scene in which Schindler watches the liquidation of the Krakow Ghetto from atop a hill where colour is suddenly introduced through the red coat of the little girl has now become in itself a cinematic cliché, but it is one that needs to be considered here again in terms of what it suggests.[7]

The girl's absolute and heartbreaking innocence here is generalised by the blood red colour of mass murder touching her coat. Rather that providing her with an individual identity, she is instead denied one, representative of 'the Jew' and the general innocence of all the victims who went to their deaths in the camps. It is Schindler's individuality which is here privileged and prioritised, as he remains in historically 'authentic' black and white, conveying that the tension between personal and collective representation of history is smoothed out via his moral 'accuracy' in a somewhat typically Hollywood rendering of the 'great man' about to perform 'great deeds'. This is typical of many other Hollywood historical biopics, but what it also points to is the complicated nature of approaching individual identity when it comes to Holocaust narratives, for, on the one hand, it is problematic to condense the genocide of the Jews into a single personal biopic and claim for it historical 'accuracy' or truth via an overarching documentary aesthetic; but, on the other hand, it is just as problematic to not name and give an individual identity to each victim in the collective of victims, who require that name and that personal identity in order to receive their humanity back from the broad generalisation of 'victim'.

Army of Crime draws attention to these moral dilemmas of representation in its opening scene, not just through its use of colour but also sound. Rather than lifting the victims out of sombre tones into colour, Guédiguian leaves them in the previous tones of cinematic realism, refusing to turn them into aesthetic metaphors. But the film also makes them collide aesthetically with another collective – the collective of the wider French public, here depicted in bright colours, suggesting that the tension here is not between the individual and the collective in biopic storytelling, but between versions of identities, and versions of collective storytelling. In the same interview in which he talks about his use of colour, Guédiguian explains that he made a deliberate decision not to use archive footage in the film, but to use archive sound in the form of radio broadcasts (Dawson 2009). The decision not to use a realist frame of black-and-white footage, akin to *Schindler's List*'s use of a newsreel-like aesthetic, is telling in what this suggests about what Guédiguian calls 'the battle for truth' that often occurs in these films (Dawson 2009, p. 11). But, even more telling, I would argue, is the decision to use sound in a manner that seeks to reclaim history on behalf of victims, turning them into individuals with names and humanity, rather than casting them in the role of mythic heroes or nameless innocent metaphors.

As we view the dialogue between different 'styles' of collective storytelling in the first few shots of the opening scene, we also hear a radio broadcast listing the name of each member of the Manouchian group.

In the context of Holocaust representation of individual identity, it is hard to convey how significant this act of naming – and naming in *sound* rather than *image* – is. To say each name out loud is like a spiritual prayer of remembrance that brings to mind the repeated act during Holocaust memorial days of reading out victims' names, reclaiming their personalities and their individuality from the anonymous numbers imprinted upon their bodies. That is, the violence that was wrought upon the body as an act of silencing and dehumanisation is subverted by an act of naming that moves identity away from the physical body to the 'soul' or spirit. As a religious, ideological, and political act, it reminds me of the words of the fictional character in Gail Jones's novel, *Dreams of Speaking* (2006), who having survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, cannot cope with images, but says that words have saved him: 'At a time, he said, when he felt blasted by images, words had anchored him, secured him, stopped his free-falling plunge into nowhere' (p. 132). The implication here is that what is being conveyed here is not a 'beholding' of the trauma, of history and its victims, but a desire to speak around the 'silence' of being 'held within' it. If we cannot artistically touch the 'bottom' of the Holocaust because we cannot ethically know what that bottom would look like, *Army of Crime* metaphorically alludes to what can be achieved when we speak 'around' it through narratives of Resistance that move away from mythic collective storytelling and seek to find the human individual spirit behind the national heroes.

What Guédiguian is cleverly doing here is also his stated aim of removing the members of the Manouchian group, and other victims of the Nazis and Vichy France, from the overarching discourse of 'epic' national storytelling (Dawson 2009, p. 11). His aim to give them back their individuality, identity, ethnicity, religion, and diversity is reflected in the act of historical naming conveyed via sound, over a conflicted and contradictory aesthetic that epitomises the ideological 'battle for truth' in historical representation. Sound then combats the collective silence of nationalistic appropriation of history, for as Mihal Friedman writes, the postwar 'common mythology' of Resistance films and narratives in France worked on the unspoken premise that to 'exorcise the ghost of' antisemitism, 'there was a kind of spontaneous conspiracy of silence' around it (1990, p. 52).[8] In its place, arose 'epic' storytelling, for as Nathan Bracher explains, from 'its very inception to the present day the French Resistance has been represented and commemorated in the epic mode' (2007, p. 39). Bracher notes that this 'epic mode' was utilised by Charles de Gaulle after the war to galvanise France under a common patriotism, redefine its past, and 'silence' the problems of collaboration and antisemitism on native ground (pp. 42–53). It is a mode that aims to refashion Resistance fighters and victims of the Holocaust as epic heroes, akin to great figures in classical Greek myths, whose newly defined status as 'heroes' rather than 'enemies' or 'terrorists' of the state was 'elevated to the loftiest heights of glory, worthy of comparison with the legendary figures of epics past and assured of occupying a place of honor in the annals of history to be handed down to generations of the future' (p. 43).

The passing down of these 'epic' narratives and heroes through their refashioned biographies is a significant point here, as Resistance films and narratives became part of a process of storytelling that 'can and must be passed on' to each generation, 'reliving' the Resistance as French identity (Reid 2007, p. 189). This is similar, but at the same time, very different from the manner in which the Holocaust is commemorated yearly through ceremonies that take as their primary aim the removal of victims from unnamed silence by 'passing down' their memory and names to subsequent generations. While the 'epic mode' of Resistance storytelling is likewise commemorated and passed down to subsequent generations, it conversely keeps individual Jewish victims within silence and namelessness, for as has been noted by many critics, the Jewish, immigrant, and diverse nature of many resisters was often ignored (Friedman 1990; Poznanski 2004; Bracke 2011; Bracher 2007; Christofferson and Christofferson 2006; Reid 2007; Baron 2014).

In its own representational and storytelling politics in this opening scene, therefore, *Army of Crime* enters the biographies of the members of the Manouchian group into these debates, and ultimately suggests to its viewer that the kind of 'passing down' and 'remembering' that is required here is not a nationalistic one, but a diverse and individual one that is more akin to the commemoration of Holocaust victims. While this subverts dominant ideologies of French national identity, and indeed, conventions of biopic storytelling of Resistance fighters, what it also suggests is a complex and perhaps contradictory engagement with and reflection of some dominant biopic tropes of identity. The most relevant of these tropes is, as Neil Archer (2011) calls it, the underlying ideology of Western subjectivity relying on a private versus public self; that is, behind the manner in which biopics lay out an identity is an assumption that the private self is to be laid out on screen against the public self of the well-known figure. Archer argues that this is often done in biopics via references to images rather than sound, where realistic visual detail, a 'copying' or replication of physical attributes of the biographical subject, and references and analogies to real photographs or historical footage act as a way of 'authenticating' a life and the internal integrity of the private self (p. 170). In comparison, *Army of Crime* seeks to move away from visual fixity, replication, verisimilitude, or 'authenticity', and instead, offers us these qualities of the personal, diverse, layered self through sound and naming which sits alongside the competing narratives of the public selves of national myths that come via its use of colours.

What do we make of this film, then, in terms of what it does as a biopic? It suggests to me a biopic which shows us an inherent belief in the private self as a 'truth' counter to the public self, but which also utilises this typical biopic convention of identity to question how previous biopics have appropriated biography and history. In short, the film is contradictory but shows us the potential of this genre to probe complex questions about authenticity, historical truth, and the self. It is from here, therefore, that I wish to move on to discuss some specific scenes in the film that expand on these issues, to probe the nature of historical and personal 'fact' in biopics.

The ‘Spirit’ of the Truth/‘Truth’ of the Spirit: The Private Self and Historical Revisionism

Minier and Pennacchia have discussed that one of the main issues that determines the ‘perception of the biopic as an adaptation’ of both an individual identity and the biography of a well-known historical figure is ‘the problematic issues of “truth value” and the fiction-verses-fact debate’ (2014, p. 11). Indeed, the fixation with the laying out of the private self against the public self in these films via references to personal tokens, photographs, casting choices that exploit physical ‘replication’ and use of historical newsreels/footage/imagery, is part of this debate about the ‘perception’ that there must be some claim to historical ‘truth’ or ‘fact’ evident in biopics.[9] I would extend these arguments by suggesting that the desire to lay out the private self of the figure who is considered, to a certain extent, ‘public property’, acts as a way to authenticate the underlying belief in the stability and ‘truth’ of the individual self, despite the way such a figure is utilised across different cultural mythologies. That is, the appeal of the biopic sometimes lies in its suggestion that it will metaphorically prise open the physical integrity of the ‘replication’ of the celebrity body and reveal the historical, innate ‘truth’ within.

The thorny question of what is ‘truth’ and ‘fact’, and who gets to decide this as an objective reality, is one that inevitably crops up in such debates, and as much as scholarly postmodernism has fruitfully deconstructed these assumptions of an innate self, of truth and objective historical facts, biopics still often rely on these ideological assumptions, even as they may complicate them.[10] *Army of Crime* is no different, but it enacts its own ‘playing’ with history in a knowing, metaphorical, and complex manner. One of the ways it does so is via its playful utilisation of false, constructed identities and the theme of replication of identity in the film, via its focus on the specific biography of Marcel Rayman in several scenes, alongside an acknowledged rewriting of historical facts.

One of the subplots of the film which has not received the attention it deserves is that of Marcel Rayman adopting the invented persona of ‘Michel Rougemont’ in order to enter and compete in a national swimming championship. Of course, the film alludes to the fact that he is Jewish, and a Resistance fighter, as the practical reasons for adopting this false identity and name. But, it also plays around with it in a highly self-conscious and somewhat deprecating manner that requires an alert viewer, willing to engage with the antics of naming, truth, and identity. Just as Marcel’s girlfriend teases him about adopting this persona, so does the film tease its viewer with its larger, more significant implications. There are two scenes that depict Rayman in relation to this persona: one where he is preparing for the championship during training in a swimming pool and another where he wins the competition and is congratulated by a reporter afterwards, wishing to take photos of him and calling him the epitome of a strong, solid, ‘determined French youth’. The irony here is that Rayman is both Polish and Jewish, the exact opposite of what Vichy France terms the ideal ‘French youth’ and man. Rayman, enjoying this irony and deception, poses

for a photo as he holds his trophy and is asked what he would like to say to 'the Marshal', whom the reporter says, would be 'proud' of him.[11]

Of course, the film is here playing with historical politics, as Rayman is a counterfeit 'French youth', congratulated as the epitome of French masculinity when he has only the 'appearance' of one; that is, to use the essentialist language of fascist nationalistic ideology, he has the appearance of 'Frenchness' without the 'essence' or 'reality' of it. What the film is requiring its viewer to consider here is that replication and verisimilitude are often adopted as 'truth' in biopics; that these films provide a pleasing 'picture' or the 'appearance' of truth, rather than truth itself. It is significant then to return here to Guédiguian's statement that he refused to use historical photographs/footage. With regard to Rayman, he has access to perhaps the most aesthetically pleasing imagery, as historical photographs of him are in abundance over the internet. Handsome and photogenic, he has had his image disseminated on countless online blogs and on social media. The fact that Guédiguian chooses to bypass his popular real image for a counterfeit snapshot in the film of an actor playing Rayman who is in turn enacting a man who never existed therefore tells us that in his film, the viewer will not find claims to historical truth but rather will find the probing around this truth to highlight how 'appearance' interacts with 'fact' in the construction of identity in biopics.

These playful scenes take on a larger significance when we consider that sandwiched in between these 'Rougemont' scenes is a pivotal one depicting Rayman and Henri Krasucki distributing their own 'liberation' poster in the French streets. This occurs in hyper bright red tones and colours, suggesting again that colour is not utilised to convey historical realism or 'truth', but historical storytelling and appearance. What disrupts all the playacting is, however, the fact that when these posters are shown in slow motion falling down in the air, it is once again the use of sound that breaks the 'performance' of fictional identities. We hear the poignant, wailing notes of Jewish music as the political poster falls down. Rayman's Jewish roots are reasserted through the 'truth' and 'naming' of sound rather than image. The song that is played here is 'Tsu der Khupe Geyn' played by musician Joel Rubin. This song is a traditional Jewish one known as 'Klezmer', which is a musical tradition of Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, such as Rayman himself. It is a style of music that has been traditionally played during celebrations, such as weddings, and indeed, the title of the song refers to the Jewish wedding Chupah or canopy and literally translates as 'Going to the Wedding Canopy'. Of course, Rayman does not go to the wedding canopy with his girlfriend; instead, he goes to his death along with his fellow Jews, and so, the use of sound and song here take on a deeper existential and spiritual meaning in which what is 'celebrated' is the reassertion and prioritisation of his private Jewish identity against the political and public backdrop of his life as a resister.

This use of sound as a spiritual 'truth'-marker, disrupting the playful flow of historical playacting and false 'appearance', is reflected in a scene that metaphorically mirrors this one, when Rayman, buoyant from his swimming victory, stops in the street with his friends and watches bus after bus of Jewish people being carted off.

He stares in despair and anger, and suddenly, all is silent in the film. The Jewish Klezmer music colliding with the silence around Jewish murder is beautifully linked here; it is also entered into a wider discussion about where we find 'truth' in these films, for as Baron points out, this is largely an act of historical revisionism (2014, p. 21). The timeline of the deportation of Jews in France did not pan out neatly with the Resistance acts of the Manouchian group. Baron suggests that this particular scene 'fosters the erroneous impression that the offensive FTP-MOI undertook in 1943 was a contemporaneous response to the apprehension of Jewish immigrants in Paris' (p. 21). Indeed, this is true, and Guédiguian has admitted, in a statement at the end of the film, that he reordered the timeline of historical facts in order to tell his own story of the Manouchian group which aims to reclaim their Jewish/immigrant roots and foster an understanding around Jewish/immigrant involvement in the Resistance, despite so many years of its silencing in French culture.[12] The film does not invest in the concept of biopic adaptation as replication of historical reality as an objective truth but rather demands that the viewer accepts that facts will be changed according to ideological need, in the same manner that Jews have been silenced by collective French national discourse.

Army of Crime then, implies that biopic 'appearances' are bound by ideological pressures; but it does not completely move away from the concept of an internal, private truth that is worth reclaiming and laying out before an audience, as previous biopics have also sought to do. Rather than the private self being accessed through footage, photographs, and the appearance of realistic replication, the film demands a more fluid, spiritual truth, similar to the wail and silence of Jewish victims. In the film, Rayman's only link to a coherent sense of self lies in his Jewish identity – this is the only access to a stable, internal, and private self that the film champions without deconstruction. Therefore, Jewish sound and silence take on the role of 'appearance' and 'image' in other biopics; they point to a historical 'truth' not found in collective facts but in the individual spirit. What is adapted here is an *idea* of the internal, private self, championed by previous biopics, rather than the historical facts which have gone into the building of this self. In order to arrive at this truthful private identity and give it a name in history, the film suggests that we must first learn how to 'play' with the 'appearance' of history. The biography of Rayman within this collective biopic therefore expands and extends previous arguments made about the limitations of the biopic genre when it comes to 'truth' and historical fact by ironically championing the spiritual private self as a concept and idea. It also moves us forward to consider what can be 'said' in biopics beyond the 'image' of the biographical subject.

Conclusion: Just Words

In speaking about a term that is commonly applied to Holocaust narratives, 'trauma', Hirsch notes that the word 'originally referred to a physical phenomenon: a violent disruption of the body's integrity' (2010, p. 8). To a certain extent, this is what *Army*

of Crime provides: a disruption to the integrity of the body of epic myth built around Resistance biopics. But it also reflects the disruption and violence wrought upon the private self of those used to create that body of myth, seeking to bring that personal self to light via naming, sound and silence, rather than the 'image' of the typical biopic.

The film gives these issues concrete expression in the last few scenes where we view the literal 'disruption' of integrity wrought upon the physical body as the members of the Manouchian group are tortured, and Jews are rounded onto trains for deportation and execution. Bodies become abject things here, with flesh spilling its boundaries: blood drips from the fragmentary image of chained wrists in the air; a close-up of an eye merges with two hands clasped together in a train before the door closes and the screen blacks out. We learn we are looking at Rayman and his family here through the 'integrity' of words, for although the body is a broken, dissembled mass of parts that do not fit together – an incomplete object that is subject to the power and control of others – the words convey a private self prised open with all the spiritual oneness of Rayman's earlier conviction in his Judaism and family. What we hear via voice-over are the words of the Manouchian group members, written in their final letters to family members before their execution.[13] These words are interwoven with a replication of the making of the 'Red' propaganda poster, so that the authorities reading out their individual names are ironically appropriated themselves. What begins as a way of naming these individuals as 'enemies' ends in naming them with the full integrity of their private selves laid bare to the audience in the moving final letters. As their names are read out one by one by their captors, they meld with the voice-over conveying Missak Manouchian's final letter to his wife, Mélinée. This occurs while the actors playing the Manouchian group members display their backs to us and walk in slow motion away from the camera. Image has halted, while words have taken over. This serves as a 'twin' image to the opening scene, where we saw the actors' faces with the Manouchian group members' names read out loud, while here, they are named as their 'images' and actors literally walk away from public debates about collective national identity and history, to leave us with the 'integrity' of their private selves alone.

I find this ending highly contradictory, as it is both cliché and moving; it both relies on the assumptions evident in many other biopics that identity is indeed located in that privileged Western site of the 'truthful' inner self and also questions the way 'images' of the self have been constructed via this site. Importantly, we are left with words over images, which takes me back to Feldman's opening words from his poem, which say little and everything at the same time. As we hear the words 'what can I write' via the voice-over reading out Manouchian's letter, I am reminded of Feldman's poetic question of 'how can I write'. If *Army of Crime* disrupts the 'integrity' of so many discourses that go into the creation of national, collective, and personal biopics via image but still reconstitutes the 'integrity' of the inner self for its biographical subjects via sound, I would add the question of 'what should we hear' to this discussion.

Perhaps *Army of Crime* does not allow us to invest in the idea that history and the self can be accessed via the biographical form in any clear manner, but it does suggest that we can talk 'around' history and the self and find some form of 'truth' in that. Perhaps what we should hear is both the silenced and the named and utilise whatever art we have at our disposal to speak 'around' them, even if this is in imperfect words. The biopic is not, therefore, a simple art or genre, but one of the tools of this imperfect communication of the self, history, and identity.

Notes

1. There are too many critics/writers to list here, but a few key ones utilised throughout the research for this chapter include Susan Gubar (2003), Primo Levi (2012), Ilan Avisar (1988), Joshua Hirsch (2010, pp. 1-28), Agnes Heller (1991, pp. 393–401), Annette Insdorf (2002), Berel Lang (1992).
2. There are countless analyses and studies on the postwar refashioning of Resistance and resistance fighters in France; however, a few that tackle the issues raised here are Friedman (1990), Poznanski (2004), Bracke (2011), Bracher (2007), Christofferson and Christofferson (2006), Reid (2007), Baron (2014).
3. Steve Neale and Robert Rosenstone make similar lines of argument about the critical analysis of the biopic by historians and theorists: see Neale (2000, p. 60), Rosenstone (2006, p. 89).
4. The reference here to 'Custen' refers to George F. Custen's now foundational study on the biopic genre in his book, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992).
5. Robé is here quoting Peter Ellis (1937, p. 29).
6. Similar arguments have been made by other biopic critics: see, for example, Minier and Pennachia (2014), Archer (2011), Bingham (2010).
7. There are numerous analyses of the aesthetic of *Schindler's List* and this particular scene (far too many to list here; however, several sources on the film listed in the 'Works Cited' section of this chapter illuminate some arguments). It is worthwhile pointing out here that the interpretation I put forward in this chapter is very much my own personal one upon watching the film many times in relation to testimony I have recorded from interviews with Holocaust survivors about what can and should be represented and *how*.
8. Friedman is here also quoting François Furet (1984, pp. 59–75).
9. See also Custen (1992, p. 9), for discussion about these issues of 'truth', fact, and historical accuracy in biopics.
10. For further discussion on the issues surrounding postmodern deconstruction of historical perception/objectivity and their relationship to the biopic, see Shachar (2013, pp. 199–204), Minier and Pinnachia (2014, pp. 7–13).
11. 'The Marshall' refers here to Philippe Pétain, who headed the Vichy authoritarian government in France.
12. See also his statements and further elaboration about these issues in his interview with Dawson (2009).
13. Their full letters can be read in Diamant (1984).

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