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Son of Saul and the Ethics of Representation: Troubling the Figure of the Child

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Introduction

***Son of Saul,* Holocaust Memory, and Cultures of Witnessing in the era of YouTube**

Abraham Warszawski: Who's this boy?

Saul Ausländer: My son.

Abraham Warszawski: But you have no son.

Saul Ausländer: I do. I have to bury him.

Abraham Warszawski: You don't need a rabbi for that.

Saul Ausländer: At least he'll do what's right.[1]

László Nemes' acclaimed Holocaust film *Son of Saul* (2015) is based upon interviews with Sonderkommando survivors and collected texts by Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando members, written in secret, hidden and buried.[2] True to its origins in these first-person accounts made under duress, it works to evoke the 'here-and-now of the extermination machine',[3] a world of uncertainty and decontextualised trauma from which there is no escape. It tells the story of a Sonderkommando working in one of the gas chambers of Auschwitz who, upon witnessing the miraculous survival and subsequent murder of a boy, embarks on a

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quest to secure the boy's corpse for a sacred burial. In doing so, the film narratively restages and imagines the scene of the actual history of four photographs taken inside and smuggled out by prisoners of Auschwitz desperate to show this reality of mass, industrialised murder. Nemes' film is thus in dialogue with Didi-Huberman[4] whose exhibition of these photographs and critical intervention into Holocaust remembrance through these surviving blurry images forms a significant part of the film's back story, inflectingits aesthetic commitment.

In this discussion, we view Nemes' film as a critical/creative essay on the ethics of witnessing, particularly as they are configured through the image and idea of the dead child. In the act of killing the child, one form of child death, the future is also murdered; thus, the child is a compelling figure in the logic of genocide—in complete erasure without trace. The figure of the child also births the future and thereby materialises the abstraction of time—a symbol and reality of the survival of a people, a culture, and the future of humanity in general. The figure of the child as Lury suggests has often enabled 'film-makers to radically and creatively re-tell the past and, in particular, inform us about the strangeness, the murky ambiguities and the real trauma of war'.[5] In Holocaust representations the child is omnipresent, prominent in public memorials and popular narratives, such as the exhibit 'Remember the Children: Daniel's Story' (1993-present) in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,[6] Steven Spielberg's film, *Schindler's List* (1993) and John Boyne's fabular novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2006). A multivalent site of identification and empathetic connection, the figure of the child is changeable and sometimes controversial in its relation to public memory and historical understanding,[7] marking the threshold of representability. Most pertinently for this discussion, the figure of the child returns us to and appears to consolidate ethical questions over how the Holocaust—likewise other genocidal events and other victims—can or should be represented and memorialised. And what responsibilities are associated with or entailed by those affective forms of witnessing associated with this potent, troubling and troubled image.

Holocaust cultures of witnessing have always been on the move with changes in media, shaped and reshaped by media technologies of access and representation, as Reading confirms in her essay 'Clicking on Hitler: The Virtual Holocaust @Home' which focuses on media-specific experiences of 'traumatic memory and recovery'.[8] Accordingly, debates concerned with Holocaust representation have moved beyond a focus on the mass cultural versus the modernist, with Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) its illustratively polarised examples.[9] As Larsson argues, *Son of Saul* is part of a generational shift particularly, within French philosophical thought, which has challenged the orthodoxy of the Holocaust's unrepresentability.[10] Like art cinematic representations of the past, *Son of Saul* resists the generic certainties of popular Holocaust narratives, refusing their 'narrative urge to make sense of, to impose order on the discontinuity and otherness of historical experience'.[11] And in some respects, its oblique, traumatised, first-person perspective on the horrors of the gas chamber appears as an empathetic reinvestment in the representational taboo—*Bilderverbot*[12] —against any attempt to screen 'an event that is totally and irrecuperably Other'.[13] At the same time, the representational field in which *Son of Saul* intervenes is far more complex now than that which framed Spielberg's and Lanzmann's films twenty and thirty years ago, appearing particularly fraught in the current age of the Internet archive. YouTube has moved Holocaust witnessing beyond those forms of curatorial and representational control offered by the museum and the documentary, into a post-sacred realm where images of horror and violence are no longer set apart or quarantined from media publics of denial, appropriation and exploitation, its material artefacts duplicated, mediated by paratexts of likes and dislikes, the commentary space, and the distractions of advertising click-bait.

Against and within this desacralised and crisis-ridden contemporary field where Holocaust remembering is always on the verge of being subsumed by distraction and forgetting, *Son of Saul* thematises narratively and aesthetically the challenge of witnessing in the midst of chaos, according a special place to the narrative and ethical demand of the dead child. This discussion, situated within the broader thematic of the troubled image in a digitised mediascape and engaging with the perpetually troubled category of Holocaust representation points to the ongoing role and special status of the art film, despite the fact that binary oppositions of high and low cultural representation, the mass cultural and modernist, no longer appear particularly relevant. In a complex and rapidly-changing representational field, of importance is art cinema's delineation of an 'impure' institutional space, between commercial filmmaking and its 'artisanal others'.[14] Speaking from this 'impure' space, *Son of Saul* returns to and reframes popular Holocaust narratives, insisting upon an affective mode of empathic identification as a response to horror while also drawing attention to how this figure of the child troubles its representational ground as a mode of understanding and witnessing. Its representations resonate with a broader history and contemporary field of visioning war's losses and genocidal attacks on the marginalised through the body of its child victims. And its representations return us to the question of empathy, risks and value, in Holocaust representation and experience, a major debate in the literature.[15]

The film focuses entirely on the experience of Saul (GézaRöhrig), and yet renders his subjectivity through an aesthetic that prevents any easy identification. In this way, Nemes directs the film against popular Holocaust narratives, which he feels are 'more or less based on ignoring the individual plight, the individual experience—with its limitations, with the impossibility of knowing the moment that's about to come'. For Nemes,'to make the experience more understandable [is] to minimise it'.[16] In its refusal to be easily understood, *Son of Saul* adheres to an aesthetic similar to what La Capra terms 'empathic unsettlement',[17] where one feels for another while simultaneously perceiving, critically and self-reflexively, the distinctiveness or difference of their experience. But we argue that *Son of Saul* takes one beyond this mode of witnessing. It prompts us to consider its representation in terms of the more difficult and enigmatic ethics of Emmanuel Levinas' work, which unsettles an ethics framed primarily through identification, empathy, and affect.[18] Levinas' ethics always already troubles the primacy of subjectivity and identification as the primary or first order mode and bind of responsibility between self and Other.

For Levinas, alterity comes before identity (as its condition of possibility) in a structure of incommensurable asymmetry in the relation between self and Other. This means, in effect, that the human-to-human relation, figured through the face,[19] begins in a radical inequality in which the encounter between one and another is not grounded in either an immanent or transcendent universal or essence—the common humanist model in the claim for equality through a fundamental sameness.[20] This sameness would constitute for Levinas' a secondary structure of ethics. In the face of the other person we face an excess of alterity that goes beyond knowledge and grasp:

> *At the heart of Levinas' ethics is the impossibility of making any two human beings, who face each other, equivalent or equal by grounding them in some shared essence or identity. There is no unifying centre or common ground that reconciles or ultimately cancels out the difference between them. Thus God is not a unifying ground or figure reconciling the difference but is rather a name for a radical otherness that ruptures and refuses to make equal or self-same. We*

> *can never cancel out this excess of alterity because this would mean finally doing justice to it (thus ending responsibility) by equalling the bind [a cancellation] between one and another.*[21]

This philosophy of infinite responsibility transforms ethics into a mode of perpetual obligation in which we are never 'let off the hook' in thinking we have done enough for others, particularly those in circumstances of desperation, profound need and seeking justice.[22]

Ethics of trauma witnessing, the aesthetics of empathic unsettlement, and the transformative figure of the child

Son of Saul both invokes and unsettles an ethics framed primarily through identification, empathy, and affect, partly by refusing those conventions that support identification and are 'designed to reassure the audiences', pursuing instead an 'immersive', alienating aesthetic.[23] The film opens with an out-of-focus image, refusing to offer the appearance of the world in any intelligible or graspable form, effectively exiling the viewer-subject from a place of certainty, knowledge and ontological security. Instead, the viewer enters into a traumatic scene where barely visible bodies enter the frame bringing the spectral history of the Holocaust into a performative reality. The first clear image is Saul, and the first spoken words of the film are 'let's go'.

From this point, we shadow Saul, a handheld camera fixed on his vulnerable neck or back marked with the red x of the Sonderkommandoas he hurries through his tasks, a functionary in the chaotic, intense-yet-routine world of concentrated death work, his perspective restricted by shallow focus. He briskly herds prisoners into gas chambers, as they are soothed by lies, promises of food and work; he attends the process of killing; sorts through valuables; carries the bodies of dead; cleans up traces of blood; drags bodies into furnaces; shovels ashes into the river. Deadened himself by his role in industrialised death, Saul's subjectivity seems absent. Saul's alienation in the half-world of the Sonderkommando, reprieved from death but likewise under a death sentence, forbidden to speak or interact with those outside his crew, likewise his refusal to see, apparent inability to feel or to understand, elide both his subjectivity as a person and also a significant historical event. He embodies the systematic erasure of Jewry that was the aim of the Holocaust: nothing to see, it says, nothing to comprehend or to care about and finally, simply nothing.

Son of Saul is shot in multiple languages and its subtitles appear as fragmentary as the rest of the information gleaned from its approximation of Saul's perspective. Isolated by the multiple languages of the camps and his own limited knowledge of Yiddish, Saul has only the limited community of other Hungarians, making him as actor Röhrig reflects, a 'community of one' at the beginning of the film.[24] He forges connections with others in the camp and only becomes an active subject when the impossible happens—a young boy manages to survive the deadly gas. This miracle child, whom he claims as his son, provides Saul with an identity and a narrative purpose that carries him through the next day and a half: to find a rabbi and provide the boy (killed by a Nazi doctor who breaks his neck upon discovery) with a sacred burial, the rite denied millions. It is an irrational quest, at least in the goal-oriented terms of success and survival ascribed to by many popular Holocaust films.[25] Moreover, Saul fails at his quest, but the promise of the child and the challenge of 'child death' becomes the centralising agent of the film that the camera is not. This miracle child—or more precisely, Saul's concern that his corpse not be destroyed, reduced to the ash he shovels daily—is a means of mediating 'stranger relationality' in a space characterised by multiple linguistic and national groups,[26] as well as the overwhelming proximity of imminent death.

The way that the child transforms the chaotic visual and sonic field of the film, thus Saul's perceptions and subjectivity, thus our own sense of this confusing and horrible world, is noteworthy. Prior to discovery of the still-living boy (by a sound of gasping that compels Saul to follow) a mobile camera propels us haphazardly through the regimented-yet-incomprehensible space of the film, doggedly at Saul's shoulder. As Larsson writes: 'Nemes solicits our voyeuristic desire to look, only to frustrate it, by leaving the bodies abstracted, blurred and out of focus. The spectator's desire to assume mastery of the scene is denied by the blurring effect.'[27] The moment Saul looks at the boy's body is the first clear POV(point of view) shot of the film, its editorial demarcation and framing claiming the space for Saul's subjectivity, for the first time expressed in a look that connects him (and us) with this terrible environment, without distraction or obfuscation. True to Nemes's working assumption that cinema has a particular representational and ethical role to play that cannot be replicated by other media—to connect, contextualise, give the world 'weight and meaning'[28]—it's a self-consciously cinematic moment, in which the depth of field expands, the camera stills, a corpse of the murdered is shown to us, whole and in focus for the first time. It is a moment that, in its stillness, recalls what Hariman and Lucaites have noted to be the effect of the iconic photo in a world that is 'awash in images', a 'torrent of sights and sounds'.[29] This child, like the iconic photo in the contemporary media environment, commands attention and imposes on chaos 'a consciousness that is almost a form of slow motion'.[30] This important moment of revelation, and stillness, in a film that plunges us into the feverish activity and cacophony of a death mill and deliberately looks askance at the familiar brutalities of the Holocaust film—especially the 'impossible space of the death chamber'[31]—focuses upon the familiar-yet-representationally-difficult figure of the dead child.

To appreciate the significance of this moment, some contextualisation within cinematic histories is useful. Firstly, it is worth noting that—outside the genre of horror, at least—the cinematic image of child death, of the dead child, remains relatively rare and potent as a consequence (as for instance, the harrowing drowning death of the protagonists' young daughter in the opening of Nicholas Roeg's 1973 thriller *Don't Look Now*). At the same time, the *threat* of child death—and a fascination with infanticide—is ubiquitous. Death hangs over the very young across cinematic genres, including those aimed at child viewers themselves, as for instance in the case of animated Disney features whose anthropomorphised animal characters come of age through tragedy. In *Cinema's Missing Children* (2003) Emma Wilson observes how contemporary European art cinema returns repeatedly to child death, and a fear of child death, a fascination with and repulsion by the possibility of infanticide,which underpins the representations of the missing child—presented as 'an ultimate in psychic violence and horror' exposing the 'inadequacy of art forms in the face of trauma and suffering'.[32]

The cinematic fascination with and deep reluctance to show child death, along with infanticide's positioning on the edge of representability, appear to inflect the history of the child in Holocaust screen narratives. Specifically, there is a dearthof cinematic representations prior to the 1980s of the fate of children in the Holocaust,[33]—despite the fact that an estimated 1.5 million of the 6 million Jews killed were young children, sent with their mothers directly to the gas chambers on arrival at camps. An exception to this is the 1945 documentary *Death Mills/Todesmuehlen* directed by German emigre Billy Wilder (a Berlin-based filmmaker, born in Poland of Austrian Jewish parents, who emigrated to Hollywood) for the US Army Signal Corps, for release in occupied German and Austrian territories. Its short but harrowing tour of the varied modes of mechanised death delivered by the camps offers unblinking,

uncensored images of what it estimates to be 20 million corpses—with only one dead child identified as such, a newborn curled at the feet of its mother's corpse. Nevertheless, it points out signs of child victims in the form of infant shoes, piles of toys and dolls and shows the effects of the camps on surviving children, their starved bodies examined by Allied medical personnel, also the numerous orphaned of Auschwitz, the voiceover noting that because their parents and relatives have been murdered 'most of them have forgotten their names and have nothing left to identify them but the numbers Nazis tattooed on their arms' which they display to the camera. These lost, orphaned children of genocide echo across post-Holocaust histories of such globally diverse geographies such as Cambodia (1975), Rwanda (1994), Bosnia (1995) and more recently (2016-) the Rohingya people of Burma.

The important, but not unproblematic role of the child in contemporary popular Holocaust remembering is anticipated by Anne Frank. Her diary, translated to English and released by American publisher Doubleday in 1952, was one of the first eyewitness accounts of the Holocaust to become globally popular, franchised with a Broadway play (1955) and film (1959) to follow. Before its release, her diary was edited to downplay her Jewishness in favour of her identity simply as a culturally or ethnically-neutral child, which, by default, anchors her for passing within unmarked 'whiteness'. This representational strategy created '"a bridge of empathetic connection, even identification between the fate of European Jewry and ordinary American readers who had no ethnic or religious link to the victims"',[34] with the film itself depicting her as the beloved daughter in an 'all-American family'[35] —a racial demarcation for which non-white Americans are its necessary constituting outside. This trope, of the child who stands in for an entire culture and religion and as such effectively advocates for and ultimately wins over Gentiles has since, according to Golan, become something of a meta-narrative in European Holocaust films. In films such as *Monsieur Batignole* (Jugnot 2002) reluctant – sometime even explicitly racist—Gentile rescuers have a moral awakening attributed to the influence of the child at risk of death.

Dominating contemporary popular representations of the Holocaust is the child hedged about and threatened by death, synecdochic of the war's losses, often representing the trauma of war specifically as a parent's trauma. An important example is Alan Pakula's film *Sophie Choice's* (1982). When Sophie attracts the sexual attentions of an SS commander and uses the frightening encounter as an opportunity to save her children, she is forced to choose between her two children–to keep one and let the other go to a certain death. The extremity of this choice without choice, because both will be taken from her and killed if she refuses, is a scene of traumatic madness, psychic violence, and overwhelming guilt. She begs and begs not to choose, this murder by proxy the trauma at the heart of the film. The power of the child victim and witness to figure, inform, or transform adult perspectives on the Holocaust are given yet a different twist in the book and film adaptation of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*,[36] where readers and film-goers are afforded the opportunity to re-see the Holocaust through the eyes of complete childish innocence and ignorance. Privileging the perspective of a child betrayed by parents who wrongheadedly attempt to shield their son from the realities of Nazism and the death camps and their own complicit livelihood within this industry, its privileging of the child perspective recalls how the heroic narrative of *Schindler's List* used extreme high and low angle POV shots to situate the audience as dependent children in relation to the (literally and figuratively) towering heroic figure of Schindler (Liam Neeson). Yet both films also figure and consolidate the losses of the Holocaust in the loss of the child. In considering the child as iconic figure it is notable that the father-son relation dominates the narrative culture of these and indeed many Holocaust films and *Son of Saul* is no exception. The film *Sophie's Choice*

based on the 1979 novel by William Styronis one of the few narratives in which the mother-child relation is central.

The role of the child in *Son of Saul* both registers and radically reorients the central role played by the child in such popular Holocaust narratives, in its focus on the dead child, at once a figure of alterity that nevertheless makes an ethical claim, impelling responsibility and prompting an awakening, as well as a transformed perspective. The claim of this child victim on Saul, who is transformed at this moment into a witness, is profound and immediate. It is also a moment in which the film viewer is placed in *the witnessing of witnessing* and becomes morally tethered to the protagonist's awakening into an obsessive drive to give this boy a burial with a Rabbi reciting the Kaddish. It prompts us to consider how the image of the child operates more broadly, a not-unproblematic image that through which the obscene and the unthinkable are mediated and made visible. Saul embarks on a course of action calculated to save the child, not from death, but rather from dissolution, invisibility, erasure. He will be saved from becoming an undifferentiated otherness in the ash mounds of destroyed bodies of nameless others. Members of the Sonderkommando repeatedly ask Saul - is this your son? The equivocation of Nemes' film in respect of this question- and Saul's answer - prompts us to reflect on how Saul's claim on the child isan ethics inimical of Levinas'. It brings into question those moralities (contra Levinas) that would give priorityto actual biological kinship or a shared identity as abasis and boundary marker from which responsibility to the suffering and needs of others might proceedor be rationalised.

Child victim as icon and Levinas' ethics of the other

Considering the role of the child in the aesthetic commitments of Nemes' film provides us with a point of entry to a broader discussion of the child victim-as-icon. Specifically, the positioning of the child in *Son of Saul,* the way he is framed in the visual field, the ethical and moral imperative can be read in terms of Levinas' ethics of the Other, with its antecedent responsibility in face-to-face encounter. The face-to-face encounter, as ontological ethics of infinite responsibility, disrupts the assumption (and thus the egoism) that the other is a mirror and resource of the self —an object of reflection, mastery, source of self-gratification, or indeed a human resource. The relation to the Other is one of moral-ethical subjection. The revelation of a face in the midst of the many faceless dead is the key to Saul's transformation into an active participant in his own narrative, the demand it makes on him outstripping the demands of industrialised death. In his desperate struggle to bring divine law to a place in which all human and divine law is gone, Saul wants this child to have some form of restorative justice in death beyond the fate of all other deaths as lives without any value —in the status of *homo sacer* or 'bare life' outside of human and divine law as conceptualised by Giorgio Agamben.[37] Haunted by the Holocaust, Levinas' ethics is aprimarily (though not only) a pre-emptive call to justice (before it is already too late) in that resounding call of 'never ever again' so resonant with post-Holocaust remembrance and human rights advocacy.[38] This Levinasian ethics of the call to infinite responsibility helps us to unpack, for example, the key role taken by anonymity in the work of iconic images of the child victim.[39]

For instance, the anonymity of the 'Warsaw Ghetto Boy' of 1943, one of the most frequently reproduced images of the Holocaust, made him 'a substitute for numerous other children who perished', available to survivors as a repository for 'constructed identities which addressed their own loss'.[40] (Jürgen Stroop Report to Heinrich Himmler from May 1943, found here.) An image of broad cultural resonance, and wide circulation, it has been reproduced and recontextualised in a range of films, art installations, and publications.

Interpolated into Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), for instance, as an image of historical trauma and then later transformed in Roberto Benigni in *Life is Beautiful* (1997), which gives the boy a happy ending, a miraculous survival. The boy has likewise been repeatedly claimed by those who see in him their own child or the child they themselves once were. As a consequence, controversy erupted when he was identified as Zvi Nussbaum, a doctor living in New York, as the photo in its mystery was considered a 'sort of sacred document'.[41] In his persistent anonymity and appeal to the viewer at the moment of imminent death, the 'Warsaw Ghetto Boy' registers the importance of the child-victim as icon and cipher, as he serves as a prompt to lived memory in some and to vicarious witnessing for many more, a central figure in what Marianne Hirsch terms 'postmemory' of the Holocaust 'a space of remembrance more broadly available through cultural and public, and not merely individual and personal, acts of remembrance, identification, and projection'.[42]

The 9 year old Vietnamese-Canadian girl, Phan Thi Kim Phúc, who is the focus of AP photographer Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize winning photograph entitled 'The Terror of War', appears similarly anonymous, and has often simply been called 'the napalm girl'. ('The Terror of War' AP file photo by Nick Ut, 8 June 1972 here.) The child victim is thus identified metonymically with the devastation wreaked by Vietnam War-era weaponry, while, more generally, becoming an icon of wartime atrocities against civilian populations as a whole. Naked and vulnerable, her clothing burned away, she appears alone and in pain in Ut's photograph, running down an anonymous road with other civilians. Auchter considers whether this image can escape capture within anxieties concerning the sexual exploitation of children—'Given the heightened concerns of today about photographs of children, particularly unclothed children, could we publish such a photo today?'[43] (And, in fact, removed by Facebook after being posted by a Norwegian author writing about horrors of war in 2016.) This question raises the further question of who this 'we' might be, potentially unable to publish an image of a naked child in pain and mortal danger without the contamination of a sexual impulse? Indeed, isn't the issue of this child (not any child but a particular, singular child) without clothing, running for her life, desperate in the very limbs of her being, precisely a call to a Levinasian way of seeing? The moral contamination of sexuality projected into this image in the censoring anxiety surrounding its publication speaks to a lack of ethical imagination —one that demands that most extreme 'naked exposure' of responsibility to the other for their life. In 'The Trace of the Other', the face is described as nudity itself, in the sense of being a pure exposure which hides nothing but at the same time cannot be seen.[44] The figuration of nakedness and nudity in Levinas' work challenges us to consider the semiotics of conventional associations and modes of thought. The anxieties that subtend well-trodden pathways of thought and responses to troubling imagescan end up sacrificing and silencing a much more primordial, unsettlingethical moment of engagement and response.

Like the 'Warsaw Ghetto Boy' Phan Thi Kim Phúc appears isolated despite the fact she is in a crowd of others, menaced by soldiers whose relation to her is nevertheless ambiguous. The isolation of the child victim, its separation from family, is part of the power it exerts over the viewer. As she races toward the viewer, the photo offers a face-to-face encounter which carries with it a claim to empathy and moral responsibility—the strength of which is heightened by the apparent lack of both on the part of the armed and uniformed South Vietnamese soldiers following behind.[45] Her image is one through which a variety of publics have since engaged with the Vietnam War and its memory, as it has circulated widely, appropriated in multiple ways over the decades. In this respect, Kim Phúc serves as a figure of collective memory much as the Warsaw Boy does, ghostly or spectral in the way that she conjures the past.[46] But she

likewise functions as a site where the past and future remain persistently in conversation, insofar as her image is one around which public discourses concerned with war, the state, moral and ethical responsibility have repeatedly re-formed themselves. And, whereas the discovery that the Warsaw Ghetto Boy may not have died sparked anxiety that this might diminish the photograph's power, in the case of Kim Phúc we see instead how the iconic function of her child-image persists into the present, durably evocative as it doubles, shadows, and informs her adult roles in the public eye, for instance as a Unesco Goodwill Ambassador.

Then, consider the way that the 2015 image of Alan Kurdi changed when the story of his family's flight from Turkey was told, his father blamed and shamed for what was viewed as the unnecessary deaths of his wife and two children.[47] Once the story of Alan's father became an object of media speculation, a discourse of parental responsibility reduced the frame of its ethical claim to his culpability alone. The father became 'framed' for the death of his child in the course of applying an all too familiar strategy of de-contextualising and disavowing material and political circumstances of war, Kurdish persecution and the ISIS threat, in the course of demonising an ordinary human desire to seek a better a life. Against this image of the culpable father, the Turkish coastguard filmed in the tender act of picking up the deceased Alan Kurdi becomes a redeeming, substitute father. (Turkish border guard holding the Alan Kurdi, by Nilüfer Demir, DHA/Doğan News Agency, 2 September 2015, here.)

We see Alan Kurdi in multiple and multiplying frames of witnessing in the cropping, editing, enhancing and reordering of his image. In one prevailing media image, we see him as the solitary boy, abandoned, alone and found face down on the beach, the iconic child victim. We also see frames within frames of the witnessing of witnessing as the Turkish coastguard, who picks up Alan Kurdi's body, who at this point is a nameless child. The photographic act is mobilised through media culture to the extent that Alan Kurdi becomes a witnessed child of war and persecution in an archive of photographic journalism and intimate media publics of memory and biography. Multiplied and circulated, Alan Kurdi's image, captured in Nilüfer Demir's photographs,is incorporated into the biographies of millions of people around the world. He is part of a generation of living memory and his image will at some point remediate as historical memory and even post-memory witnessing.

The media forms of witnessing and representation of the child as icon and moral cipher in this paper includes various genres of exposure, representational aesthetics, not to mention different specificities of war, geographical context, to include consideration of historically changing technologies of the photograph itself, its production and circulation. In the parlance of mediatisation, each of the child images has emerged in media publics. Here the media increasingly, and perhaps arguably parasitically, mediates itself. The image of Alan Kurdi was mediatised both in terms of actual circulation volume of his sleep-like death image across diverse media platforms and in terms of the media language of the viral—he became the viral child.[48] His image became a source of media activism through memes creatively mobilising his dead body for morally disruptive rather than complacent, familiarised reception. Nevertheless, the familiar/familial was a key resonating affective trope in the movement of his image in political discourses with world leaders such as British Prime Minister David Cameron responding as a father and thereby self-constituting his moral political role within an affective frame of parental love and responsibility for the child.[49] (Alan Kurdi by Nilüfer Demir: DHA/Doğan News Agency, 2 September 2015, re-tweet by Liz Sly here.) The restaging of Alan Kurdi's body as a peacefully asleep child with the props and comforts of a child's bedroom also brought the uncanny to affective, unsettling familiarity. This dead child's body so 'close to home' inscribes the unthinkable trauma of child loss for those who do not have

to imagine or face losing a child in such vulnerable, desperate circumstances of precarious, unhomely migration. In addressing some of the negative responses to the memeification and vast circulations of Kurdi's corpse image in both media and academic debate with concerns framed predictably around exploitation, spectatorship, or prurient voyeurism, Papailias makes an important intervening argument on the agency of ghost: 'While the debate about the Kurdi photographs centred on the agency of the (Western) public in viewing and disseminating (or not) of these images, we should not forget that ghosts seek us out. This itinerant, importunate, unpredictable, and 'unkillable' quality is precisely what makes ghosts frightening'.[50]

Conclusion

Papailias' analysis of Kurdi's image brings us back to the instability and power of the image of the child victim over time: 'itinerant, importunate, unpredictable', specifically how it serves as a prompt to identification but can also challenge the logic of care with or through identification. The imaginative act of positioning oneself where one is not is an essential part of bearing witness and being accountable in the mode of 'as if'.[51] Identification is a fundamental process in binding human subjects in relationships of love, desire and ethical responsibility. Without identification there can be no recognition of the other within the self, which, in psychoanalysis, constitutes the very formation of subject as it defends against loss, by the physical act of incorporation. In psychoanalytic thought the capacity to mourn is tied to identification in the wound of self-consciousness. In this respect,the child can be read as the symbolic bearer of the wound of separation and primal loss. This is part of the pathos of child that a parent and caring adult unconsciously recognises as the shadow world of their own forgotten childhood. Parents particularly, are situated in a kind bifurcated mourning—towards themselves as the lost child of forgotten self-memory and towards the child standing before them as distinct, unique other in a relation of irreversible substitution. Part of the pathos of love for the child as a parent or adult is the inability to swap places with them when one might most wish to protect by being in their place. This was part of the response of Alan Kurdi's father who wished himself dead and announced that his life was over.

To return to *Son of Saul* and its narrative focus on the transformative image of the child: what is important and valuable in Levinas' work is that he brings a positive notion of otherness that is generally unthinkable, indeed the very opposite, in post-colonial discourses concerned with dehumanisation and racism. This radical otherness is also what he calls the trace —the idea of an infinite bind and irreducible responsibility for the Other that goes beyond their death, our death, and mortality itself. This way of thinking ethics is important in the context of this paper, and the analysis it has made of the film *Son of Saul* and the child more generally. In a kind of epiphany of the ethics of face, Saul *finds his self*, indeed becomes morally awakened, even perhaps reborn as subject (morally subjected in Levinas' sense), in and through an unbreakable responsibility to a dead boy that he calls his son. Under the sign of death, the boy's death marks the very beginning of a bind of responsibility beyond mortality. Saul escapes along with the others from the camp, carrying the dead boy on his back—the very image of the ethical bindof self and other.

Struggling as he crosses the river Saul loses his grip on the dead boy whose body floats away downstream. Not interested in his own survival Saul is saved from drowning by another escapee who binds Saul to his own existence forcing him to keep up with the other men. The men all reach anabandoned barn (not unlike a death chamber) and catch their breath. The final scene of *Son of Saul* is a joyous moment of misrecognition between Saul and a young boy child who appears from nowhere. In this scene, all the men are looking away from the barn

door, except Saul, who, seated on a stool is looking towards the open door and sees the flicker of the face of child tentatively peering in around the door's edge. The child gradually reveals himself, standing in full view at the centre of the doorway looking directly into the face of Saul who cannot believe his eyes. Saul is the only one to see this boy child. Is this an apparition ofthe dead child reborn? Or, to paraphrase Papailias, a ghost who has sought Saul, and we, the viewers, out? Is this child an angel of death come to release Saul and bring a sacred moment before final execution? This face-to-face encounter pushes us back into the realm of Levinas. We do not get the measure of what is happening in this enigmatic scene but the presence of the child arguably marks a moment of grace or generosity. In that face-to-face encounter we gradually see Saul's face radically transform into a profound *jouissance* just before approaching soldiers kill him.

As this paper has shown, Levinas' idea of ethics is particularly important in a film that does not locate itself within the politics of a heroic saviour, as in the manner of *Schindler's List*. Saul is not a heroic, Christian or Hollywood father-figure whoredeems himself within the symbolic order. Saul's acceptance of infinite responsibility to the dead child makes this film an intervention into the ethics of Holocaust representation and witnessing trauma history, in the particular terms set by Nemes, whose specific aim for the film was to move away from heroic tales of Holocaust survival and 'to talk about the dead because we never talk about them' while pursuing an aesthetic that speaks of his belief that cinema is about the involvement of the imagination of the viewer'.[52] This imaginative engagement, we contend, entails a particular ethical perspective enabled by its aesthetic reframing of and narrative focus on the dead child.

It is possible to grasp and to mourn the loss of a single child especially when such a tragedy is frozen in time by a still photograph. In *Son of Saul* it is possible for the central character to forge a sense of consciousness through the body of a child who may or may not be his biological son. Mass death is unfathomable but a single life is grievable; moreover, if it is the life of a child then it has the capacity to restore meaning and faith because his or her life trajectory is open to the future. The figure of the child as both survivor and victim of genocide in *Son of Saul* troubles us because what is challenged are the very foundations of our humanity. We argue that Nemes' oblique cinematic style fosters an ethical perspective through which the obscene and the unthinkable are mediated. What is achieved is a moving portrait of a man who seeks redemption through a child, a child who operates as a signifier of both hope and despair. The figure of the child functions as a roving identity that is fluid enough to represent our greatest desires and fears.

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2. Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2005; Anonymous, *Des voix sous la cendre : Manuscrits des Sonderkommados d'Auschwitz-Birkenau par Anonyme*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 2005.

3. Nemes quoted in Megan Ratner, 'Imagining the Unimaginable: Interview with László Nemes on *Son of Saul', Film Quarterly*, vol. 69 no. 3, 2016, p. 62

4. See Chari Larsson, "Making Monsters in Laslo Nemes' *Son of Saul*", Senses of Cinema, Issue 81, hyperlink to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_of_Saul

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6. Introduced in 1993, the exhibit is described by the website as one of the museum's 'most popular experiences'. https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/museum-exhibitions/remember-the-children-daniels-story.

7. See, for example David Bathrick, 'Rescreening 'The Holocaust': The Children's Stories,' *New German Critique* 80, 2000, 41-58; Mark M. Anderson, 'The Child Victim as Witness to the Holocaust: An American Story?' *Jewish Social Studies* vol 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1-22; Yvonne Kozlovsky Golan, '"*Au revoir, les enfants*": The Jewish Child as a Microcosm of the Holocaust as Seen in World Cinema', *Shofar* vol 30, no. 1, 2011, pp. 53-75; Jessica Gildersleeve and Beata Batorowicz, ' "He is Telling Us Fairy Tales": Parental Anxiety and Wartime Childhood in *Life is Beautiful, The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *Fairy Tales from Auschwitz, Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2018, pp. 26-44.

8. Anna Reading, 'Clicking on Hitler: The Virtual Holocaust@Home', in Barbie Zeliser (ed.) *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, Bloomsbury, London, 2001, p. 337.

9. For a critical summary of the debate, see Miriam Bratu Hansen, '"Schindler's List" Is Not "Shoah": The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1996, pp. 292-312; also Barry Langford, '"You cannot look at this": Thresholds of Unrepresentability in Holocaust Film', *Journal of Holocaust Education*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1999, pp. 23-40.

10. Chari Larsson, http://sensesofcinema.com/2016/feature-articles/son-of-saul/

11. Hansen, 'The Second Commandment', p. 298.

12. See Hansen, also Gertrud Koch, 'The Aesthetic Transformation of the Image of the Unimaginable: Notes on Claude Lanzmann's Shoah', trans. Daniel and Hansen, *October*, vol. 48, 1989, pp. 15-24; Karyn Ball, 'For and against the *Bilderverbot*: The Rhetoric of "Unrepresentability" and Remediated "Authenticity" in the German Reception of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's* List, in David Bathrick, Brad Prager, Michael David Richardson (eds.), *Visualising the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory*, Camden House, Rochester, 2008 pp. 162-184

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16. Quoted in Ratner, p. 62.

17. Dominick La Capra, *History In Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2004.

18. The value and perhaps, for some and in some contexts, the limitation of Levinas' work is that it is not a practical ethics – it is a philosophical ethic with a particular aesthetic that resists translation into applied ethics (with all that this might imply at the level of writing and representation). Levinas' thinking could indeed inform ethical thought more broadly but would perhaps never constitute a mode of understanding, discursive commitment and orientation in the context of *real* politics and applied ethics in policy-formation. This is both it value and its difficulty.

19. The figure of the face is the call, a summoning or interdiction of the other that brings my conscience and consciousness into existence.

20. We know that the concept of the human acts just as equally as mode of exclusion accounted for and marked by the turn into posthumanist ethics.

21. Margaret Gibson, 'Death scenes: Ethics of the face and cinematic deaths', *Mortality*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2001, pp. 306-320.

22. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1995, pp. 86-87

23. Quoted in Ratner, p. 62.

24. Quoted in Carlos Aguilar, 'Fighting Death, of Cinema and Humanity: László Nemes and Géza Röhrig on the Blazing *Son of Saul', MovieMaker*, 18 December 2015. https://www.moviemaker.com/archives/interviews/laszlo-nemes-and-geza-rohrig-on-the-blazing-son-of-saul/

25. On this issue Nemes says: 'There are no survivors in my film; I have only the dead. I didn't want it to tell the story of survival. All these older films establish a safe road for the viewer, and at the end, some kind of liberation. But that's not the story of the Holocaust. That's the story of how we want the Holocaust to be. It's not the story I wanted to tell'. Quoted in Andrew Pulver, 'Interview: László Nemes: 'I didn't want Son of Saul to tell the story of survival', *The Guardian*, April 15 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/14/laszlo-nemes-i-didnt-want-son-of-saul-to-tell-the-story-of-survival

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27. Larsson, 2016, http://sensesofcinema.com/2016/feature-articles/son-of-saul/

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29. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007, p. 4; Robert Hariman and John Louis

Lucaites, 'Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of 'Accidental Napalm', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 20, 2003, p. 62.

30. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, 'Public Identity and Collective Memory', pp. 35-66.

31. Langford, p. 23.

32. Emma Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children, Wallflower Press*, London and New York, 2003, p. 10. The fascination with the lost child or child at risk is likewise a topic of interest in *Lost and Othered Children in Contemporary Cinema*, Debbie Olson and Andrew Scahill (eds.), Lexington Books, Lanham Maryland, 2012.

33. Golan, pp. 53-75

34. Alan Mintz quoted in Anderson, p. 4.

35. Golan, p. 57.

36. John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, David Fickling Books, 2006; Mark Herman, *The Boy in the Striped PaJamas*, UK and US: BBC and Miramax Films, 2008.

37. Agamben, Giorgio, *The Omnibus: Homo Sacer*, California, Stanford University Press, 2017, pp. 69-71.

38. Emmanual Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1979.

39. In saying this, however, we are not claiming that the child represents a particular kind of ethical command or call. This would be contrary to the spirit of Levinas' work, which is not based on the bind of responsibility emerging out of pre-existing intelligibilities of kinship or privileged forms of identity. On contrary, the call to responsibility brings the subject into being not through identification (which already supposes a way of seeing and knowing) but rather non-identifiable otherness.

40. Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, p. 140.

41. Zelizer, p. 141.

42. Marianne Hirsch, "'Projected Memory' Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer(eds.), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 1999, p. 8.

43. Jessica Auchter, 'On Viewing: the politics of looking at the corpse', *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, vol. 7, no. 2-3, 2017, p. 232.

44. Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Trace of the Other', in Mark C. Taylor (ed), *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, pp. 353-355.

45. Hariman and Lucaites, 'Public Identity and Collective Memory', 2003.

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50. Penelope Papailias, '(Un)Seeing dead refugee bodies: mourning memes, spectropolitics, and the haunting of Europe', *Media, Culture and Society*, prepublished 18 February, 2018, pp. 1-21.

51. Hoffman.

52. Quoted in Aguilar.