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"With a little artifice, therefore!" The Ethics of Aestheticization in Holocaust Documentary

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The Ethics of Aestheticization in Holocaust Documentary

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Introduction

In the fall of twenty twenty-two I was enrolled in a class called "Intersectional Identity in U.S. Film" taught by Professor Sonia Misra. A bit into the semester, Professor Misra assigned Saidiya Hartman's essay "Venus in Two Acts," a piece of writing which explores Venus, an "emblematic figure of the enslaved woman in the Atlantic world…"[1] as Hartman effectively implements fiction in order to reimagine a history which has been consistently minimized and reexamine an identity made absent from the larger archive.

In the fall of twenty twenty-two I was also enrolled in a class called "Holocaust and Post-Holocaust Responses" taught by Professor Sharon Portnoff. Even with such a density of history to cover in such a short period of time, Professor Portnoff took great care to look at more abstract Holocaust texts in addition to factual works. Although the fictional texts felt as though they should provide a comfort in their apparent distance from the "truth," they felt so much richer and often more jarring in their depictions of trauma and memory, fostering a sense of constant dissonance.

In the summer of twenty twenty-two I watched Juraj Herz' 1969 Czech New Wave masterpiece *The Cremator*. A concentration camp survivor himself, Herz' film is a darkly comedic illustration of a well-meaning man's descent into murder and cruelty as he becomes indoctrinated with totalitarian ideals aligned with the Nazis.[2] My initial fascination with the film was that although it felt so explicit in its historical implications, the actual temporal setting was rather abstract and confusing. As the film descends into an increasingly spiritual setting, losing much of its historical positioning by the final portion, Herz manages to transgress the boundaries

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[1] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008) 1.
[2] Robert and Carol Reimer. *Historical Dictionary of Holocaust Cinema*. (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2012) 48.

of both fact and fiction. The film transforms history into something malleable, and factuality into something obsolete, as *The Cremator* seems to exist within past, present, and future, effectively creating a new archive for itself.

The film is incredibly aestheticized and stylistically distinct, as Herz pulls from several filmic genres—noir, giallo, documentary, and dark comedy—to form an overwhelmingly eye-catching depiction of the Holocaust. Perhaps my obsession with Herz' strange and sprawling diegetic world was based on my own lack of Holocaust education, with my only memory of learning about World War II from reading Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in sixth grade. There was a tangible lack of Holocaust education not just throughout my public schooling but also in regards to my years at Hebrew school. Possibly a generational attribute, all of my teachers at Beth Israel Congregation seemed adamant not to mention the Jewish experience from 1930-1945, instead focusing on music, cooking, and correcting my truly terrible Hebrew writing.

Since I had such a gaping absence of Holocaust education in my adolescence, I found myself deeply curious about the events of World War II as I entered college. Fiction, in particular, became of great interest, as it seemed to capture the specificity I had well and truly missed, having only heard names, dates, and the occasional story. When Professor Misra introduced Saidiya Hartman's essay, I learned just how effective fiction could be in restoring marginalized histories, informing the process of remembrance as both flexible and individualistic. In regards to Holocaust survivors, this process of fictionalization and aesthetic manipulation also seemingly managed to alleviate some of the burden of being a survivor, as the weight of carrying a factual history became secondary to expressing personal experiences. David Carroll eloquently describes this enablement of fiction in "The Limits of Representation and the Right to Fiction: Shame, Literature, and the Memory of the Shoah," writing:

If the risk always exists that fiction will obscure, if not deform, "the truth," nowhere does

the obligation to memory and historical truth seem to weigh heavier than on survivors,

not just outweighing but even perhaps eliminating what in all other circumstances would

have to be considered a fundamental right of all writers: the right to imagination and

creativity, the right to fiction.[3]

This idea of artists and survivors holding the "right to fiction" stuck with me, and as I

continued down the path of film studies, I became particularly interested in the implementation

of such a right within documentary films. As the documentary genre holds a distinct implication

of factuality and authority, the use of aestheticization and fiction felt counterintuitive, regardless

of its formal effectiveness. Despite this apparent effectiveness, however, I discovered a history of

controversy within the use of fiction in Holocaust texts, as the ethics of recreation and

aestheticization in trauma narratives caused contention among theorists and artists. This is really

where I found my research questions: What are the ethical implications of aestheticizing the

Holocaust? Furthermore, how does the very category of documentary warp audience

understandings of fiction in such narratives?

In an effort to answer these questions, I have explored an expansive catalog of films,

gaining invaluable insight into the illustration of trauma through media as well as developing a

completely novel understanding of my own cultural consciousness. Since the integrity of this

entire project lies in the films I've chosen to analyze, it only felt right to frame each chapter

around one or two filmic texts, with literature acting as a supplementary source. The films I've

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[3] David Carroll, "The Limits of Representation and the Right to Fiction: Shame, Literature, and the Memory of the Shoah," *L'Esprit Créateur* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 70.

selected, though incredibly varied in terms of representation, each hold crucial evidence in attempting to answer my research questions.

Even when I had only started considering this project, I knew Chantal Akerman would be a key player in any attempts to demonstrate the power of filmic mediation within narratives of trauma and memory. Akerman's films have long been of interest to me, perhaps as they seem to externalize a thought I have long struggled with: The idea that silence carries history just as effectively as direct testimony. Following Akerman's logic, my lack of Holocaust education throughout my adolescence did not necessarily indicate a lack of history or memory, but rather demonstrated a depth that felt unrepresentable. Silence, in this case, became an expression of the inability to provide a necessary volume of experience. Even giving my teachers this benefit of the doubt, however, would I not have felt more connected to my ancestral history if I had been provided with even fictitious Holocaust texts? Was fiction not considered "legitimate" and therefore disregarded as a possible method for educating me and my classmates?

The accessibility provided by aestheticized and fictionalized texts, I argue, transgresses the boundaries of ethics in regards to trauma narratives, and maybe the reason I found myself so enraptured by documentary films in general was due to the visualization of such a complex relationship between fact and fiction. Through this thesis, I have attempted to explicitly trace the path of transforming the Holocaust into an accessible narrative, exploring the nuances of memory, history, and film both individually and collectively. By examining the meditative ability of documentary film in regards to such texts, I have not only worked to establish the ethics of aestheticizing the Holocaust, but have also used the referenced texts to piece together my own gaps in memory, forming a new understanding of my positionality and historical identity.

Chapter One

The (Un)Authoritative Gaze of Documentary:

Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* and Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*

The vast variance of Holocaust curriculums across the globe has fostered an explicit lack of consistency among students learning about the events of World War II. As the very term *Holocaust* captures such a massive scale and variety of experience, the impossibility of illustrating the overwhelming archive is understood as an incredibly daunting task for creative artists. Film has held a unique position throughout history, however, as an opportunity to portray such experiences as identifiable and accessible narratives. The ethical implications of such narratives have remained contentious, as many filmmakers argue that the aestheticization of trauma in order to appeal to audiences is immoral. The category of documentary, for many creators, helps to bypass the explicit sense of aestheticization within trauma texts, as there lies an assumption of factuality. Within Holocaust documentaries in particular there are frequent attempts to clearly outline filmic texts as "true" and "real." This assumption of visual factuality is never truly feasible, however, as the very notion of film—no matter the precise genre—hinges upon construction, and is therefore manipulated by definition. Documentarians constantly battle these "untruths" through various suturing techniques, as they draw viewers into a state of believing the image to be unbiased. Some documentarians, however, have embraced the sense of filmic construction within Holocaust narratives, actively drawing attention to the aesthetics of the image as a means of addressing the impossibility of one "truth" in regards to memory. In his seminal work *L'Ecriture ou la vie* famed Holocaust memoirist Jorge Semprún describes the necessity of aestheticization within the space of Holocaust remembrance, writing:

However, a doubt comes to me about the possibility of telling. Not that the experience is

unspeakable. It was unbearable, which is entirely another thing… which does not concern

the form of a possible story, but its substance. Not its articulation, but its density. Those

who will reach that substance, that transparent density, are those who know how to make

their testimony an artistic object, a space of creation and re-creation.[4]

Semprún speaks to an unrelenting struggle of representation within trauma narratives, as

the density of experience overwhelms creators and audiences alike, often to a point of

disengaging with texts. Aestheticization, in this context, becomes the key to bridging the gap of

accessibility, as spectators are granted the privilege of understanding an event of inherently

ungraspable magnitude. In his famed 1985 documentary *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann seeks to

overwhelm the audience with the sheer volume of Holocaust testimony, finishing the film at

nearly ten hours of footage. Although the film is far less explicit in its demonstration of aesthetic

manipulation, *Shoah* holds a clear stylistic attitude towards its footage. In fact, it is Lanzmann's

precise visual and auditory flourishes that aid the audience in attempting to grasp the narratives

the documentary presents.

Opening with a large portion of scrolling text, punctuated in its importance by a complete

absence of score or diegetic sound, *Shoah* immediately asserts itself as a source of authority. The

film then cuts to the first testimony, shared by Chelmno survivor Simon, who sings a Prussian

folk song as his boat drifts along a scenic river surrounded by lush greenery. Lanzmann's stark

shift from words sliding across a black screen to a rich, bucolic landscape scored with sounds of

nature forces the audience to reorient themselves immediately. This established theme of

constant repositioning based on the vast array of testimonies and subjects speaks to *Shoah*'s

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[4] Jorge Semprún, *L'Écriture ou la vie*, trans. Chloe Walsh (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) 23.

fascination with demonstrating the vast array of experiences. Lanzmann's expansive selection of experiences also functions practically as a method of overwhelming the audience. The film draws upon the fear of forgetting by implementing a notion of the archive as an untapped source of history that must be explored in near-entirety. The archive, by Lanzmann's definition, is therefore understood as a factual document of the past.

Other filmmakers take a more abstract approach to illustrating the archive of trauma, instead viewing it as an amalgamation of past, present, and future, fact and fiction. Joshua Oppenheimer's 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing* seeks to build a less static image of history and trauma by using explicit aestheticization to develop an archive unconcerned with truth or factuality, only memory and experience. Oppenheimer's film, an expository look at perpetrators of the Indonesian mass executions of suspected communists—takes an oppositional approach to *Shoah* in representing genocide, directly acknowledging its filmic manipulation. In an attempt to better understand the horrific trauma endured, the filmmaker uses the medium of film to encourage known murderer Anwar and several of his accomplices to reenact their methods of torture. Further than simple reenactment, Oppenheimer provides all of the necessary resources for the men to demonstrate their crimes in their favorite film styles: Western, Noir, etc. *The Act of Killing* utilizes the filmic medium to self-consciously depict memory as deliberately untruthful, imploring the audience to become complicit in the crimes through their own entertainment. Using the promise and practice of recreation, Oppenheimer also manages to gather invaluable information from the perpetrators of the mass killings, demonstrating a practical reason for manipulating documents of history. This active creation of a new archive muses upon the variability of experience, as different audience responses shift the filmic meaning entirely for the individual viewer.

Within the first ten minutes of *The Act of Killing*, subjects Anwar and Herman (perpetrators of the Indonesian killings) sit down to discuss the methodology of creating such a film. "Whether this shows up on the big screen, or only on TV, it doesn't matter. But we have to show… This is who we are!" Anwar says, demonstrating the blurred boundaries between the desires of the subjects and the filmmaker, boundaries which only become more undefined as the narrative continues. The first recreation of the crimes occurs on a rooftop, where Anwar demonstrates one of his "favorite" ways of killing using a member of the production team as a stand-in for the victim. While this particular moment occurs prior to the heavily costumed, explicitly stylized later reenactments (at least within the chronology of the edited film,) it provokes a similar emotional response. With an apparent lack of over-the-top aestheticization, the documentary offers the audience no possible retreat, forcing them to confront the actuality of Anwar's crimes from the very beginning of the film. Although this particular example, within the larger narrative, is by far the most naturalistic in its shooting and production, the constructed nature is mentioned explicitly.

The long take, framed by the bustling city in the background, seems to transform the event which Anwar demonstrates into something seemingly inevitable. Anwar does not feed into this illusion, however, as he immediately notes his victims did not die naturally, instead telling the filmmaker (and the audience) that they died "unnatural deaths." With this singular line, Anwar—and the filmmaker who chose to include it—establishes *The Act of Killing* as a necessary deviation from the authoritative gaze prevalent in depictions of trauma via documentary. After the striking moment of Anwar demonstrating his horrific use of a single piece of wire to murder his victim, the camera cuts to Anwar with the same wire wrapped carelessly over his shoulders while he chats animatedly. This precise shift, in which a weapon of

incredible destruction and devastation suddenly becomes nothing more than a costume piece, allegorizes the filmic desire to aestheticize in order to make something ungraspable, accessible. By watching the rooftop scene, the audience must make a conscious choice to understand the change in tone as more than a device for viewer engagement. Instead, the viewer can attribute Oppenheimer's framing as a practical demonstration of the danger of generalizing trauma by pushing the boundaries of representation.

Establishing a spectrum of representation, while crucial in understanding the ethical implications of filmic representations of the Holocaust, becomes increasingly complex when implemented in such an amalgamated category. Therefore, in order to most effectively utilize such a spectrum, it becomes necessary to understand fact and fiction as inherently intertwined, and consequently part of the same mission: To represent an incredible density of experience while remaining specific.

On one end of the spectrum of representation, one can place a film such as *Shoah*, which asserts itself as "raw" and "real," rewarding the viewer's patience with an enormous volume of information and testimony. If Lanzmann's film is placed firmly on one end of the spectrum—representing a filmic concern for honest storytelling via realism—one could place a film such as Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* on the opposite side. Throughout *Shoah*, Lanzmann relies heavily upon his interview locations, employing particular filmic spaces to draw audiovisual parallels between nature and the content of the stories. Surfacely, the practice of using natural scenery appears to be little more than a vehicle to ground the interviews in setting. However, when understanding the greater aim of the film, Lanzmann's natural rhetoric implicitly comments on the filmmaker's desire to capture the truth represented by nature.

Although Lanzmann's voice is heard consistently throughout the film, as the filmmaker speaks to the subjects directly or through a translator, the film takes great care not to acknowledge its constructed nature as manipulative in any way. In one isolated portion of the film, Lanzmann shows a room of camera operators and audio technicians setting up a secret recording of Franz Suchomel, an SS officer who worked at Treblinka. By illustrating the lengths gone to in order to capture footage of a man who insisted his face and name stay concealed, Lanzmann demonstrates the lengths he is willing to go to in order to create a full document of history. Although this particular scene clearly illustrates the practical function of film, Lanzmann's insistence of the film as "real" speaks to the filmmaker's larger aversion to aestheticization and fictionalization within the genre of Holocaust documentary. David Carroll speaks extensively about Claude Lanzmann's perspective on the implementation of fiction in Holocaust narratives, writing, "Lanzmann condemns fictions that are not truly 'of the real' because they in fact domesticate the alien, negative reality they are supposed to represent by making nothingness familiar or comprehensible enough that viewers will be able to identify with it."[5] Accessibility, for Lanzmann, is the enemy of representing the impossibility of the Holocaust. *Shoah*'s overwhelming volume of footage therefore functions within the filmmaker's larger mission of representing the trauma of survivors as unrepresentable.

Filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer takes a completely different approach to representing genocide in *The Act of Killing*, embracing the power of aestheticization and fiction as an effective method of avoiding the limits of representation. Carroll praises the practical use of fiction in such narratives, stating "…Fiction could legitimately be considered one of the means of exceeding the limitations of historical representation and a way of phrasing what has not yet

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[5] David Carroll, "The Limits of Representation and the Right to Fiction: Shame, Literature, and the Memory of the Shoah," *L'Esprit Créateur* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 72.

found its idiom in or as history."[6] As Oppenheimer's film embraces the inconsistency of personal

memory by openly illustrating absurd recreations of trauma and cruelty, the filmmaker utilizes

the confrontational power of fiction. In the final moments of the film, Oppenheimer shows

Anwar returning to a rooftop where he tortured and murdered his victims. The scene, though

visually adjacent to Anwar's first demonstration of his torture techniques earlier in the film,

holds an entirely different sentiment. Anwar struggles to speak and move around the space,

eventually crouching to vomit with disgust. Even as the subject is clearly distressed and seeking

comfort, Oppenheimer provides no reassurance, forcing the man—and the audience—to come to

terms with the horrors they have witnessed. Although *The Act of Killing* constantly

acknowledges its filmic control and power over memory, it is in this final moment that the

filmmaker defines a clear boundary of memory and truth, recognizing the need for carriers of

memory to come to terms with their personal histories through their own processes.

Although *Shoah* demonstrates the filmmaker's explicit attempt to create a space of truth

via verified experience, Lanzmann does not hide his interference in the slightest, with the

director's voice and figure present throughout the entire work. The filmmaker is increasingly

present throughout the narrative, as Lanzmann is heard and shown speaking to—and often

coaxing–the various interviewees, shamelessly inserting himself into the diegesis and,

subsequently, the audience's understanding of the stories told. Additionally, Lanzmann uses a

translator for many of the interviews, a woman whose voice can be heard throughout the entire

film, providing another literal divide between the subject and the viewer.

Although the filmmaker's insertion of himself within the text does not feel technically

unlawful, Lanzmann's implication of self—particularly in addition to the translator he uses to

speak to many of the subjects—further separates the audience from the subjects speaking. This

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[6] Ibid, 78.

established distance is perpetuated throughout the film, as Lanzmann uses a host of techniques to indicate his own filmic control, effectively positioning himself at an unreachable point of power and authority over the viewer. As the film opens with a large chunk of scrolling text, punctuated by absolute silence, *Shoah* immediately alerts the spectator to its assumption of knowledge, maintaining a tone of authority despite the visual commitment to its subjects.

The voice—both the subject's and Lanzmann's—is of particular interest in understanding *Shoah*'s authoritative gaze, as the film attempts to form an unbreakable thread between the audience and the subject. Irina Leimbacher explores the particulars of the voice in documentary film in "Hearing Voice(s): Experiments with Documentary Listening," outlining the complexities of speech and language (within the scope of documentary) as an indicator of filmic ethics. At its most fundamental, the voice, Leimbacher muses, exists as a signifier of cinematic and narrative authorship.[7] Holding an inherent sense of authority, the positioning of the audience due to the voice has a tangible impact on the viewer's sense of connection to the subjects on-screen. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann's constant auditory presence—as the filmmaker's voice is constantly heard asking questions and interacting with subjects—blurs the boundaries between subject and filmmaker. As the voices become indistinguishable, so do the views of subject and filmmaker, effectively blurring the boundaries of documentary and history.

Lanzmann's transgression of filmmaker/subject boundaries should not be deemed entirely innocent through the lens of memory, however, as *Shoah* is certainly rich with biases and interference due to the filmmaker's voice. Leimbacher quotes filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha, writing "...Trinh criticized the arrogance of filmmakers claiming to 'give voice' to their subjects. This conceals the hierarchy between the filmmaker and the subject, the former selecting

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[7] Irina Leimbacher, "Hearing Voice(s): Experiments with Documentary Listening," *Discourse* (Minnesota: Wayne State University Press, 2017) 292.

and controlling the voice(s) that she or he deigns to include."[8] Understanding the downfalls of

the voice, therefore, becomes crucial when analyzing texts expressing a level of subjectivity and

history. Lanzmann's vocal authority culminates in one of *Shoah*'s most famous–and perhaps

infamous—moments, as barber Abraham Bomba tells Lanzmann that he is too upset to continue

speaking about the experience of reuniting with the family of his colleague at the death camp. As

the man grows visibly distraught, Lanzmann insists Abraham continue. Bomba repeats that he

cannot keep going, as the filmmaker repeats, again and again, that he mustn't stop. Lanzmann's

insistence that Bomba continue speaking through his pain demonstrates a larger theme within

Holocaust literature and film to remember no matter the difficulty. While the idea of this constant

need to never forget the atrocities of the Holocaust makes practical sense, there is also a more

implicit restraint making remembering increasingly difficult. David Caroll explains that the

difficulty of expressing memory lies not in the unspeakable nature of the trauma itself, but rather

due to the "density of experience."[9] Recognizing the inability to capture such immeasurable

trauma through simple fact, fiction and aestheticization become film's greatest aid in attempting

to present such narratives with artistic integrity. Although Oppenheimer and Lanzmann's

approaches to art in relation to trauma narratives vary greatly, both filmmakers seek to utilize the

filmic form in order to transgress the boundaries of representation and the limits of a static

archive.

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[8] Ibid, 295.
[9] David Carroll, "The Limits of Representation and the Right to Fiction: Shame, Literature, and the Memory of the Shoah," *L'Esprit Créateur* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 73.

Chapter Two

Found Footage of the Unimaginable:

Péter Forgács' *The Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle* and Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog*

In Holocaust documentaries, the employment of the unfathomable *archive* draws upon an underlying fascination with that which has not been lived by the viewer themself, drawing audiences into a narrative inherently inaccessible in both its scale and content. The sense of truth which aids in establishing such films' authority is entirely constructed, however, as documentaries are formally and thematically composed just the same as narrative cinema. By constructing a documentary narrative conscious of its own position of authority many Holocaust filmmakers manage to better navigate the limits of filmic representation, as the audience is made aware of the subjective gaze of film. By not only embracing aestheticization in found footage documentaries, but also acknowledging its restorative power within Holocaust texts, filmmakers are able to craft more accessible narratives and increase audience engagement with such crucial historical context. Péter Forgács' 1997 found footage documentary *The Maelstrom: A Family Chronicl*e, for example, carries the seemingly straightforward task of following the lives of the Peerebooms, a family of Dutch Jews, as the Nazis come to power and the family is eventually sent to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps. Although the premise is all too familiar, Forgács' manipulation of the footage—mostly home videos shot by the Pereboom family themselves—paints a portrait of family and newlywed joy that is too often obscured by the shadow of tragedy in such documentaries. As Forgács structures the footage to function as a timeline of a family's life, the filmmaker effectively transforms an increasingly distant and generalized event (the Holocaust) into something specific and personal. Forgács' use of archive

hinges upon the audience's willingness to suture themselves within the lives of the Pereboom

family, which allows the filmmaker to produce a clear and concise narrative contrast between the

primary family and the later introduced Seyss-Inquarts. Not unlike a narrative film family,

Forgács tracks the lives of the Peerebooms by way of identifiable life events. The first shot of the

family is accompanied by a subtitle: *Amsterdam, 8 January, 1933, Flora and Jozeph Pereboom*

celebrate their silver wedding anniversary. As the camera moves through the space, Forgács

freezes on the key "characters," with individual name cards appearing for each one. Through

these title cards, the audience is introduced to the youngest son Simon, the middle son Louis, the

eldest son Max, and his wife Annie. The sequence plays like a sitcom opening, immediately

calling the viewer's attention to the filmic nature of the footage. Forgács further punctuates this

self consciousness by cutting to another clip of Max, with the subtitle "Max, our filmmaker."

The narrative builds, as Forgács takes great care to illustrate the joys of the Pereboom

family and their many neighbors and friends. Unflinching in its narrowed view of the subjects,

The Maelstrom forms an archive of its own, embracing the subjectivity of the look of trauma by

manipulating archival footage into an individualized narrative.

Alain Resnais' 1956 film *Night and Fog* similarly aestheticizes archival footage to

produce an accessible yet dense narrative, but whereas *The Maelstrom* uses the microcosm of the

family to illustrate an individualized perspective of life during the Holocaust, *Night and Fog*

seeks to document a larger, and inherently less specific, sequence of events. Despite their broader

differences, however, both films' self-consciousness acts as a primary bridge to accessibility,

allowing the audience to immerse themselves in a vibrant diegetic world beyond the typical

boundaries of Holocaust documentary. Both filmmakers carefully construct texts concerned with

presenting a great volume of material without losing a sense of specificity.

In order to capture the volume of experience Resnais wishes to show, *Night and Fog* exists textually as both a depiction of life within the concentration and death camps as well as an ethical call-to-action. Using a consistent voiceover narration, *Night and Fog* questions the viewer directly while simultaneously applying the familiar explicitly authoritative gaze associated with documentary. The employment of such a technique offers the audience an initial sense of structural comfort, which Resnais effectively disrupts as the film continues.

Similar in many of their formal choices, both *Night and Fog* and *The Maelstrom* use the conscious shift from black and white footage to full color clips to build a distinct sense of narrative nonlinearity. In *The Maelstrom*, Forgács uses full-color footage of the Seyss-Inquart family only, creating a visual distinction between the families of perpetrators versus victims. This distinction becomes a necessary indicator for the viewer, particularly as the familial structures become visually more difficult to distinguish. Further than simply demonstrating visual difference, the use of color for the Seyss-Inquart family implies a fullness of the perpetrator's narrative, as opposed to the eternally incomplete story of those who suffered. Following this logic, the *archive* established within the film is clearly unfinished and biased, existing as a barely-there, gentle nod towards the history of the victims. Fiction, in this case, becomes a primary form of filling in the obvious gaps in the archive, not only allowing outsiders to better understand the context, but also by giving the victims a way of understanding their own experiences as multi-dimensional.

Saidiya Hartman demonstrates this necessary fiction in her acclaimed essay "Venus in Two Acts," which seeks to illustrate the danger of a single story and the erasure of history via the authority of the *archive*. "The archive is, in this case," Hartman writes, "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a

few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history."[10]Although "Venus in Two Acts" refers to black women, Hartman's ideas regarding the archive and its apparent lack of interest in the specificity of its victims can apply to the erasure of marginalized bodies as a whole, with Forgács and Resnais' films each posing a distinct means of inserting their own narratives into the greater *archive*. *Night and Fog* primarily uses the aestheticization of the "present" footage to warp its presentation of history, using full-color clips to blend the past and the present, effectively writing the film's viewers into the history they are watching. While Resnais implicates the audience in order to warn against the danger of forgetting such a tragic history, Forgács seeks to suture the audience into only a slice of history—one family's experience—warning against the danger of generalizing history.

Resnais opens *Night and Fog* with a full-color clip of a meadow in harvest, using consistent camera movement to immediately draw the audience into a sense of kineticism and active viewership. As the film cuts seamlessly to black-and-white archival footage, Resnais asserts the camera as an omnipresent entity, blending the boundaries of temporality and linearity. Immediately diverging from traditional documentary's linear construction, *Night and Fog* not only shifts the audience's understanding of documentary as a genre, but also pushes the viewer to question the very nature of filmic *truth* as it is often presented in regards to trauma. The film embraces the audiovisual subjectivity of trauma and memory, using a temporally metaleptic structure to push the audience into the mind of someone who has lived through such a fracturing event.

In *The Maelstrom*, Forgács' use of the camera carries more traditional implications of viewership, as the footage holds the look and feel of a home movie, providing a familiar visual nature. By introducing the subjects one-by-one, *The Maelstrom* further clues the audience into

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[10] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008) 2.

the events and lives they are witnessing, aiding the film in forming an unbreakable thread between the viewer and those within the diegesis. Forgács implores the audience to enter the subjects' world by providing a consistent sense of context, creating an inherent sense of connection and empathy for the Pereboom family, who function as a microcosmic representation of the massive scale and variance of victims of the Holocaust.

In the final portion of the film, Forgács shows the Pereboom family sharing a final dinner before their "departure for work camp in Germany," allowing the audience to observe the subjects performing the tasks the film has perpetually associated with each family member: Annie and Flora sew and patch clothing, Max smokes a pipe, and the children play. At this point in the film's timeline, it is undeniably clear what "departure for work camp in Germany" actually means for the Perebooms, and yet, by showing the family in their mundane, familiar form, the audience is forced to make a conscious choice to either allow historical context to color their entire viewing experience, or to further suture themselves into the subjects' lives, and remain hopeful. Posing this final choice demonstrates the strikingly active form of viewership *The Maelstrom* manages to foster, giving the audience a final, nuanced sense of the underlying events. The horrors endured by the Perebooms become both deeply contextualized and simultaneously specific and isolated for the family. Forgács' aestheticization of such a horrific narrative is a large part of what allows for such a duality of specificity and globalization in the film, as the lives of the Perebooms are made accessible to the audience through the filmic imagination.

The second portion of Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" focuses on such a possibility for closure via narrative reimagination, specifically in the instance of two young girls who were murdered aboard the *Recovery*, an African slave ship. Hartman's decision to reimagine the girls

whose deaths were consistently minimized—if not ignored entirely—demonstrates the power of conscious fictionalization to provide a greater grasp of a life ignored. Hartman writes: "The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed."[11] Within the filmic space of *The Maelstrom* and *Night and Fog*, both filmmakers capitalize on the audience's desire to understand that which they have not lived, warping the narratives via audiovisual aesthetics to provide closure which fact alone cannot offer. Jorge Semprún notes the ethical need for artifice in trauma narratives in *L'Ecriture ou la vie,* writing:

> To tell a story well means a way of being heard. We will not achieve this without a little artifice. Enough artifice so that it becomes art! The truth that we have to tell – as much as we want it, many will never have it – is not comfortably credible.. It is even unimaginable… How to tell a truth hardly credible, how to invoke the imagination of the unimaginable, if not by elaborating, by working on reality, by putting it into perspective? With a little artifice, therefore![12]

Where Hartman uses artifice via essay to create a possible narrative for Venus, Forgács and Resnais employ montage techniques to present a self-conscious filmic sequence, visually noting the presence of the *archive*. Forgács' indication of authority comes primarily by way of title cards: As each sequence of clips is outlined via date, location, and subject, *The Maelstrom* forms an unbreakable command of the audience's trust. In the earlier portion of the film, the explicitly stated dates and locations evoke a sense of importance in the personal landmarks

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[11] Ibid, 8.
[12] Jorge Semprún, *L'Écriture ou la vie*, trans. Chloe Walsh (Paris, France: Gallimard, 1997) 135.

shown—weddings, store openings, childbirths, etc.—cementing the underlying sense that the audience is watching a home movie. As the narrative progresses, however, the effect produced by the title cards shifts entirely, reading more and more like a textbook timeline of tragic events.

Not long after Forgács shows Seyss-Inquart being appointed as Reich Commissioner for the occupied Dutch territories, the subtitles switch from names and dates to excerpts from various Nazi orders while the visual footage of the Perebooms and Seyss-Inquarts remains consistent. As young Flora Pereboom is shown flipping through a book, a subtitle fades in, reading: "Persons who are Jews or regarded as Jews should immediately pay their cash and cheques into an account with the bank Lippman, Rosenthal and Co. in Amsterdam." While the Seyss-Inquart family is shown figure skating and playing in their yard, a subtitle reads: "Seyss-Inquart on the Jewish Problem 'We do not regard the Jews as a part of the Dutch people. We shall hit the Jews where we can and anyone to support them will be hit too…'"

This switch in the content of the text indicates a metaphorical shift in the audience's understanding of subtitles as a whole. What was initially used as an objective means of positioning the viewer in the correct time and place suddenly becomes explicitly hateful anti-Jewish propaganda. As the audience is forced to reorient their understanding of "data" in regards to the film, Forgács poses a deeper question of the human inclination to trust such data regardless of its true nature. By noting the subjective quality of the filmic information, *The Maelstrom* experiments with aestheticization as a way of transforming an ungraspable reality into something rooted in identifiable human experience.

Just as Semprún explores in *L'Ecriture ou la vie*, *The Maelstrom* uses a consistently self-conscious filmic lens which acknowledges its own need for imagination and creativity in order to craft a narrative dense with a variety of experiences. By centering the Pereboom family,

Forgács performs an act similar to that of Hartman, offering a sense of both closure and rebirth for a group of people whose fate was entirely out of their hands. Semprún commends artists doing such work, as he understands their creations as a necessary reworking of testimonies in order to reach true understanding of the ungraspable.

> However, a doubt comes to me about the possibility of telling. Not that the experience is unspeakable. It was unbearable, which is entirely another thing… which does not concern the form of a possible story, but its substance. Not its articulation, but its density. Those who will reach that substance, that transparent density, are those who know how to make their testimony an artistic object, a space of creation and re-creation.[13]

The "space of creation and recreation" Semprún speaks of can be found not only in the individual shots of *The Maelstrom* and *Night and Fog*, but also in the ordering of the clips themselves, which are meticulously sequenced in an effort to maximize the emotional impact produced by the films. In addition to establishing a sense of authority and primary emotional affect, Forgács and Resnais' use of montage allows the filmmakers to produce an additional sense of meaning.

In analyzing the effectiveness of montage, an understanding of Eisenstinian montage theory can help illuminate the formal methods of building meaning through the placement of images. Sergei Eisenstein deconstructs the various methods of building meaning within filmic montage by separating techniques into four categories. The first two methods, *metric* and *rhythmic*, describe the use of more measurable editing techniques such as actual clip length and visual duration to determine filmmaker intent.[14] The last two methods, *tonal* and *overtonal*, are

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[13] Ibid, 23.
[14] Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977) 72-79.

far more abstract in both definition and practical implementation. Even these more poetic

indicators of meaning remain eternally tied to legible techniques of film, particularly

following—as Eisenstein posits—a clear rhythm.[15] Understanding the translation of the overtonal

montage via film, one may look critically at an isolated sequence of *Night and Fog*. Resnais' first

filmic cut from full-color footage to black and white archival clips shows an eerily familiar

image of Nazi troops marching to an unflinching beat, cutting to a sequence displaying the

various watchtowers of several death camps. While the marching itself only lasts for a few

seconds, the overtonal rhythm of the march weaves itself into the fabric of the following clips,

providing a constant tempo consistent with the content onscreen. By establishing a monotonous

rhythm within the first portion of the film, the filmmaker fosters significant control over the

narrative overtone, making the intentionally jarring splits in the diegesis all the more striking.

The Maelstrom's overtonal theme, on the other hand, relies largely on events and places, using

visual content to represent a greater sense of community and family through a more traditional

linear structure.

　　Both films' use of montage also seeks to signal the self-consciousness of the material. As

Forgács openly demonstrates the filmic nature of the work via motifs such as the crashing waves

and stark shifts in color filters, *The Maelstrom* implores the audience to view the work as a

carefully constructed sequence of images and sounds in addition to the underlying story and

history. Early in the film, for example, Forgács uses a warm filter over a selection of footage

showing various celebrations of athleticism. The sequence begins with audio of commentators

from the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, set over footage of Dutch athlete Osendarp winning a

bronze medal in the one-hundred meter, and shifting to clips of Annie swimming and playing on

the beach. Gradually, the music shifts and the warm color filter becomes a cool blue, as people

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[15] Ibid.

are shown marching and receiving orders. Forgács takes the sudden shift in the filmic tone a step further, introducing clips of a "Dutch Nazi amateur film." It is in this sequence that the audience sees explicit nazism for the first time, with Forgács lingering on the Nazi salute.

While *Night and Fog* illustrates a more generalized archive for the viewer, *The Maelstrom*'s archival formation fits more in-line with the individualized archival perspective explained by Maria Zalewska in "The Last Goodbye (2017): Virtualizing Witness Testimonies of the Holocaust." Zalewska posits the idea that the greatest and most universal archive in humanity's grasp is the archive of the human body. As the body functions as a living receptacle of memory, visual and auditory testimonies centered around the individual are incredibly effective in triggering the moral effort to document and remember.[16] *The Maelstrom* capitalizes on the ethical inclination to feel empathy for the suffering body, regardless of initial identification with said body. Forgács warps this sense of bodily empathy in order to subvert the audience's expectations of which subjects they are supposed to identify with and care for. He does this by creating constant parallels between the physicality of the Perebooms and the Seyss-Inquarts, perpetually blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator. In a particularly striking moment, Forgács shows footage of Annie leaving a Portuguese-Israelite hospital holding Jacques-Franklin, her and Max' second child. The film quickly cuts to a clip of Arthur Seyss-Inquart playing with a grandchild, kissing their hand joyfully. The families are visually nearly indistinguishable, yet context complicates the audience's sense of familiarity between the subjects.

Bodily identification does not end here, as Zalewska elaborates on the Levinasian principles of such kinetic empathy. Physical and ideological difference, in this sense, becomes a

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[16] Maria Zalewska, "The Last Goodbye (2017): Virtualizing Witness Testimonies of the Holocaust" (California: Spectator, 2020) 45.

key means of understanding the Other, as explained by Zalewska in reference to Emmanuel Levinas' *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*: "Levinas demands that the recognition of the Other's dignity and humanity be not dictated by the identification of commonalities but rather by the acknowledgement of the absolute difference. The face of the Other signals the Other's alterity that demands our unidirectional responsibility for the Other with no expectation of reciprocity."[17] In *Night and Fog* Resnais uses the consistent voiceover to separate the viewer from the Other shown on screen, as well as creating a sense of a larger cultural consciousness of the events shown. Particularly as the film holds little consistency in the composition of the shots, the viewer is pulled in every direction, drawn into the lives of the victims through carefully composed close-ups and yanked away from any sense of identification as Resnais pulls back, into distant, wide-angle footage of indistinguishable crowds. Although this use of the camera may feel counterintuitive to Levinas' points surrounding Otherness, the self-reflexive lens of the film punctuates the inability to truly understand the face of the Other, which, as Levinas would put it, is the closest glimpse we have at transcendence.[18]

In the case of *The Maelstrom*, the face of the Other is far more explicitly outlined, as the viewer spends a significant amount of time connecting with the subjects through the aesthetic of home video. A large portion of Forgács' film shows the construction and opening of Annie's stepparents new shop, taking great care to show something so incredibly mundane and, frankly, not particularly interesting. By granting so much filmic space to an activity so specific and uninteresting to those not connected to the family, Forgács demonstrates the intensely personal nature of *The Maelstrom*. Additionally, the film's categoric identity draws the viewer into feeling as though there must be something sensationally important about every moment of the film, not

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Germany: Springer Science & Business Media, 1979) 194.

allowing the audience to truly disconnect from even the least personally resonant moments. The

home video aesthetic becomes the key to establishing this unrelenting, deeply personal filmic

space, as Forgács falls completely into the particular look and feel of home video. In "There's No

Place Like Home Video," author James M. Moran describes such a category, at its heart, as

> …an active mode of media production for representing everyday life, a liminal space to
>
> negotiate communal and personal identity, a material articulation of generational
>
> continuity, a cognitive construction of home, and a narrative format for the
>
> communication of family legends and personal stories.[19]

Theologically, Forgács' use of home video implicates form as another means of

Otherness. As the aesthetic of home video has been historically marginalized as a lesser form of

film, *The Maelstrom*'s historical importance, in conjunction with the look of found footage,

raises deeper questions about the ethics of filmic categorization. Moran poses such ethical

dilemmas surrounding the nature of home video, noting the historical and contemporary

assertion that such media is unserious and unworthy of critical analysis. "Frequently constructed

by intellectuals and journalists as the abject 'other' against which favored media practices are

measured," Moran posits, "home video has yet to inspire serious and systematic analysis but is

instead cast to the margins, denigrated and dismissed, misunderstood."[20]

As *The Maelstrom* unabashedly uses the home video aesthetic to produce a filmic sense

of family and community, Forgács subverts the audience's assumptions regarding the heavy

subject material, effectively aiding the viewer into a feeling of narrative inclusion, therefore

keeping them engaged throughout the entirety of the film. Not long after the film shows Hitler's

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[19] James M. Moran, "Introduction: Medium Theory, Home Video, and Other Specifications," *There's No Place Like Home Video* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) xviii.
[20] Ibid, xiv.

arrival in Vienna in 1938, Forgács cuts to footage of Max and Annie building their first house. The shift is incredibly jarring, as context informs the audience of the significance of Hitler's arrival, and consequently the *insignificance* of the house being built. In the world of the Perebooms (and Forgács) however, the completion of the house is of the utmost importance, as is demonstrated by the filmic focus on the task. As *The Maelstrom* refuses to relent in its portrait of the family's everyday life, the film confines the audience's knowledge to this domestic space, demonstrating a necessary specificity when attempting to understand the Holocaust.

Forgács does not only offer the audience understanding via direct content and form, however, as *The Maelstrom* constantly relies on more subtle visual and auditory motifs to provide an additional sense of meaning. Water is of particular importance throughout the film, as the footage consistently cuts to clips of swirling and tumultuous bodies of water. The very definition of the word *maelstrom* reveals a bit more about the filmmaker's use of such a motif. The word has two primary definitions: Firstly, a *maelstrom* is described as "a situation in which there is great confusion, violence, and destruction."[21] This definition is rather obvious in its relation to the subject matter, clearly connected to an abstract sense of the Holocaust as unfathomably destructive.

Additionally, however, a *maelstrom* is defined as "An area of water that moves with a very strong circular movement and sucks in anything that goes past."[22] As water is often used as a motif implying uncertainty, transformation, and rebirth, Forgács manipulates the audience's perception of the underlying message of the film using various clips of water. With Forgács constantly returning to clips of water as a visual indicator of the state of events through various points of the film, he subliminally conditions the audience to take hold of even the slightest shifts

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[21] Cambridge Dictionary, "maelstrom (n.)," (Cambridge University Press).
[22] Ibid.

in these clips, perpetuating an active viewing experience. *The Maelstrom* opens with a beach scene; seagulls fly overhead as waves crash against a busy port, and families laugh gleefully as they dodge the water. In these first few seconds of the film, water produces a sense of unbridled, natural joy. Even as the waves swell and the sea storms, Forgács does not allow the audience to retreat into fear or unease, quickly cutting to Flora and Joseph's celebratory anniversary party. The next several clips involving water evoke a similar feeling, often centered around the Pereboom family playing and laughing on the beach, interspersed with close-ups of a calm, sparkling sea. Just over halfway through the film, Forgács once again cuts to a wide-angle shot of the ocean, with the subtitle "On holiday in Belgium." The water is not the primary focus of the clip, as women are shown dancing and laughing aboard a large ship, but the water looks suddenly uncalm. Even as the women continue to dance, the water in the background remains a point of interest, as the camera focuses more and more on the sea. Throughout the rest of the film the literal and figurative *maelstrom* continues to swirl, with Forgács only providing brief and abstract shifts in aesthetic tone, forcing the viewer to actively seek their own moments of change. Given the historical context of the film, the audience is naturally drawn to the dates and locations provided, constantly attempting to pinpoint a precise moment of seismic shift. Forgács never offers this, however, and describes the inclination for viewers to assume such an underlying meaning in an interview with Bill Nichols, saying:

> For us today, here and now, with our historical knowledge, we add an unforgettable and unforgiving dramatic perspective: the invisible shadows over their happy moments. This happy moment conjures in our mind other constructions as a deep undercurrent of unconscious expectations: torturous death in a gas chamber, an undercurrent hidden at this film moment to the future victims. It is therefore never realized, made visible, in my

films. This is not to say much about scenes as sources of fact, but it may explain the structure of a spiraling maelstrom: at which sequence, which episode, do you realize the swirl; when do you start to become anxious and feel their end?[23]

As Forgács' filmic collage is primarily home video, the events shown on-screen are almost entirely positive, as the families have actively chosen to document them. This leaves the development of any multi-dimensional meaning to aesthetic choices and context. By capitalizing on the tonal body of the footage, *The Maelstrom* transforms the viewing experience into an active event for the viewer. Forgács explains the methods through which he manages to create such an experience, describing the rules of his "patchwork game"[24]:

First, no tautology of meanings, and no use of facts as illustration in the work. Second, find what is the magic of these unconscious home film strips, the magic of recontextualizing, layer after layer, to feel the graphic intensity of each frame. Third, I want to make films for my friends, the reference group: 'Look what I've found for you' while I peel the source material to its roots. Fourth, do not explain or educate, but involve, engulf the viewer as much as possible. Fifth, address the unconscious, the sensitive, unspeakable, touchable, but mostly silent part of the viewer. Sixth, let the music orchestrate and rule the emotional story. Seventh, I had to learn how to hear my own low inner voice, the guide of creation— if I can chase away, or reduce, the noise in the channel.[25]

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[23] Bill Nichols, "The Memory of Loss: Péter Forgács's Saga of Family Life and Social Hell," *Cinema's Alchemist: The Films of Péter Forgács* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press: 2011) 44.
[24] Ibid, 45.
[25] Ibid.

Taking note of Forgács' own explanation of his game, *The Maelstrom* clearly seeks to use its aesthetic form to grab the viewer and effectively draw out their own sensitivity and cultural consciousness. By capitalizing on the most personal response possible to the images on-screen, Forgács uses the aesthetic of home video to particularize the Holocaust, using the recorded lives of the Pereboom and Seyss-Inquart families to renegotiate the very essence of the *archive*. Saidiya Hartman poses the question of such renegotiation as she concludes the reconstruction of Venus, asking:

> Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing a
> series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a
> grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a
> narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of
> the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an
> impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.[26]

Just as Hartman uses written language to bypass and question the boundaries of the archive, *The Maelstrom* uses its aesthetic awareness to recontextualize fact, embracing construction not as an obstacle, but rather as a functional bridge to audience understanding. Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* is heavily self-conscious of its construction as well, with Resnais using filmic reflexivity to produce a larger sense of cultural consciousness and globalize the history presented, as opposed to *The Maelstrom*'s mission of representing a personal facet of history. Much of *Night and Fog*'s practical impact can be attributed to its experiential use of archival and contemporary footage, blended together by the ever-present voiceover. Resnais indulges in the

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[26] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008) 11.

inherent aesthetic intrigue of even the most horrific footage, using the contrast between the film's visual appeal and the audience's prior understanding of the Holocaust to foster a sense of creation and truth as inseparable. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis frames such a conversation of Resnais' understanding of his authority in "Documenting the Ineffable: Terror and Memory in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*," writing "By answering social and ethical questions with a work of art and, conversely, by making aesthetic concerns raise issues of history and morality, Resnais succeeds in integrating art and politics."[27] Resnais constantly references the limits of artistic representation throughout the film via voiceover, as narrator Michael Bouquet often verbally notes the filmic inability to grasp the nature of that which is being shown on screen. As the camera cuts to full-color footage surveying the exterior of the Auschwitz barracks through a fence, the voiceover states "The reality of these camps, despised by those who built them, unfathomable to those who endured them–we try in vain to capture what remains of it." The slow visual appraisal of the barracks continues, but the footage now holds a different sentiment. The undeniable beauty of the shots themselves—which have clearly been meticulously composed and selected—set alongside the narrator's aggressively pragmatic perspective, cultivates an increasingly dissonant viewing experience. The contrast does not end here either, as Resnais' aesthetic choices also subtly question the implications of documentary and archive as categories, challenging binary notions of truth and therefore somewhat evading the constraints of representation. Flitterman-Lewis further explores the effects of Resnais' subjective style, stating:

> While Resnais's emphasis on consciousness and memory might seem to contradict the
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> objectivity associated with documentary, it is this very strategy that allows him to

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[27] Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Documenting the Ineffable: Terror and Memory in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog," *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2013) 199.

represent the unrepresentable, to image an unspeakable terror, and to simultaneously

produce both anxiety and reflection on the part of the viewer, precisely the combination

that turns documentary evidence into living history and social action.[28]

As Resnais attempts to symbolically blend past, present, and future in order to trigger an

ethical call-to-action amongst viewers, the archival and contemporary footage becomes less

distinguishable. The clips are shortened significantly, cutting back and forth from black and

white to color footage, forcing the audience to exist in multiple diegeses at once. Practically, by

obscuring any sense of temporality, Resnais builds an increasingly metaleptic narrative,

culminating in a final sequence of contemporary, full-color footage. This final sequence,

concluding with the voice of Bouquet over the camera's slow exploration of contemporary

Auschwitz, implores the viewer to remain haunted by the footage they have witnessed,

mournfully telling the audience:

> *We survey these ruins with a heartfelt gaze, certain the old monster lies crushed beneath*
> *the rubble. We pretend to regain hope as the image recedes, as though we've been cured*
> *of that plague. We tell ourselves it was all confined to one country, one point in time. We*
> *turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to the neverending cries…*

By consistently referencing the present while simultaneously planting the viewer in the

past, Resnais transforms memory into something impossible to define, and nearly transcendent.

Establishing an emotional response is key, as Resnais leaves the audience with something greater

than the memory of images: a sense of being haunted. Flitterman-Lewis describes the haunting

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[28] Ibid, 197.

effect as a projection of responsibility onto the observer, writing "With *Night and Fog* one survives the desperation of the night, sees through the confusion of the fog, and emerges as a social being with a commitment to that human connection fundamental to life—a sense of shared responsibility to (and for) oneself and others."[29] The audience's impending sense of responsibility for the subjects onscreen and that which they symbolize represents a theological shift from the individual's memory into the shared space of postmemory.

Although *The Maelstrom* does not share a precise formal structure with *Night and Fog*, both films continually warp the viewer's understanding of filmic truth and historical memory via the aestheticization of trauma. Both films call audiences into a space of understanding memory and history as malleable and subjective through formal film techniques, aestheticizing trauma in order to increase accessibility and complicate representations of the Holocaust.

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[29] Ibid, 201.

Chapter Three

The Indexicality of Memory:

Chantal Akerman's *News From Home*

As Holocaust survivors perish and their descendants live their own lives and develop their own relationships to the memories of those who came before them, there is a permeating sense of memory and testimony as unstable due to the natural gaps of time. As witnesses age and become distanced from their experiences—through time, or choice, or both—there is a fear of losing a sense of truth within memory. The major fault with this argument, however, is that it posits the idea that memory can ever, and has ever been, static and empirical. In reality, the very idea of memory is incredibly subjective, as there are unlimited facets of remembering, particularly as trauma splinters the foundation of consciousness. One subsection of memory, *postmemory*, is of particular interest when attempting to trace the fragmentation of memories passed through generations, as it is perhaps the most abstract type of memory. Author Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory in "The Generation of Postmemory" as the mark of memory and trauma upon later generations that have not directly experienced such a history. Hirsch delves deeper into the ideology behind postmemory, writing:

Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is 'post'; but, at the same time, I argue, it approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects. Eva Hoffman describes what was passed down to her as a fairy tale: 'The memories— not memories but emanations— of war time experiences kept erupting in flashes of imagery; in abrupt but broken refrains.' These 'not memories,' communicated in 'flashes of imagery,' and

these 'broken refrains,' transmitted through 'the language of the body,' are precisely the stuff of the postmemory of trauma, and of its return.[30]

Filmic mediation, in this case, becomes an invaluable tool for illustrating postmemory, as filmmakers can visually contend with the fragmentation of history and remembrance. Chantal Akerman's 2015 documentary *No Home Movie* facilitates a conceptual exploration of generational memory and trauma through Akerman's relationship with her mother, Natalia, a Holocaust survivor. Akerman herself describes the film as a unique, transgressive view of love, loss, and life, stating:

> This is a film about the world that moves, which the mother never sees; she practically never leaves her apartment anymore. But the world outside is really there; it insinuates itself between the shots of the apartment, like a touch of yellow on the canvas that makes the rest of the painting exist. It's also a film of love, a film about loss, sometimes funny, sometimes terrible. But viewed with an eye that keeps a respectful distance, I think. A film where a transmission occurs, discreetly, almost effortlessly, without pathos, in a kitchen in Brussels.[31]

Distance is a key visual and implicit theme throughout the film, as Akerman explores her relationship with her mother through the diegetic space of her childhood home. Akerman literalizes the overtone of distance by returning to footage of her and her mother speaking via video chat, inserting these moments in between clips which hold more abstract sensibilities. Due

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[30] Marianne Hirsch, "Familial Postmemories and Beyond," *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 31.
[31] Icarus Films, "*No Home Movie* Press Kit," 2015. https://misc.icarusfilms.com/press/pdfs/home_pk.pdf.

to this particular narrative positioning, the moments shared between Natalia and Chantal through the computer screen are somewhat de-suturing, forcing the viewer to reorient at any given point. For instance, cutting from a sustained shot of Natalia passing through a doorway, the film rapidly shifts to Akerman's laptop screen, where the film—as well as Natalia—immediately notes the presence of Chantal's camera during the video chat. "*Why are you filming me like that?*" Natalia asks, to which Chantal replies "*Because I want to show that there is no distance in the world… You're in Brussels and I'm in Oklahoma.*" Akerman's outright acknowledgement of not only the camera's presence, but also its connective power outlines the greater mission of the film, for Chantal to connect with her mother through the past, present and future.

In this moment, Akerman uses multiple dimensions of filmic distance to mediate her relationship with her mother: Firstly, the laptop camera indicates Natalia and Chantal's physical distance, a distance which is minimized by the very concept of video chatting. Additionally, Akerman films the screen itself, once again reorienting the audience by acknowledging a further layer of visual construction, the camera, as the constructed nature of the documentary is revealed and celebrated. Later in the film, as Chantal and Natalia speak again through their laptops, Natalia exclaims "*Your camera! Every time!*" Chantal laughs, and replies "*Because I want to show how small the world is*." Akerman's camera, the film muses, acts as an invaluable tool in relating the worlds of Natalia and Chantal.

Not unlike Péter Forgács' *The Maelstrom*, moments of the film hold the sentiment of a home movie, positioning the audience as both privileged confidant and voyeur. As the audience is brought into the Akerman home for the first time, the camera is immediately regarded as a biased presence with Natalia speaking directly to Chantal behind the camera. Akerman's assertion of the filmic gaze as openly manipulated subverts any preconceived notion of the

documentary gaze as unbiased or objective. Even as the film cuts to distant, world-building shots of the street and yard, Akerman's directorial hand remains unsteady, fostering a constant sense of construction regardless of the content. In the opening shot of the film, for example, Akerman shows footage of a tree blowing in the wind amidst a sandy backdrop, with cars occasionally passing through the background. Akerman lingers on the shot for over four minutes, simultaneously lulling the audience into a sense of complacency as well as keeping the viewer slightly on edge, waiting for something big to happen. This initial shot quickly alerts the audience to Akerman's visual control, as they are forced into practicing extreme patience. Patience becomes a primary emotional effect of the film, as the viewer is visually and thematically instructed to sit with the discomfort of particular moments in an effort to gain a larger understanding of Akerman's relationships with family and memory.

The conversational moments between the subjects are fragmented and often feel unfinished, particularly the discussions which take place in person. The video chats between Natalia and Chantal, however, often linger as the two say goodbye, feeling almost too finished. The distance of the camera, in this instance, seems to provide a comfortable gap between the two women, allowing them to speak longer without discomfort. As distance is often implemented in Holocaust texts as a promise of respect for victims, reminding outsiders of their privilege to view without having to experience the atrocities of such a history, *No Home Movie* utilizes both visual and thematic distance to provide a similar comfort between the subjects themselves. Akerman's technique implies the necessity for such careful treatment of memory and history in trauma narratives as the film acknowledges its privileged understanding of the incomplete landscape of Holocaust memory.

By developing a diegetic space which does not exist in only one landscape, but rather sprawls across fields, mountains, and city streets, Akerman visually interprets the fracturing of memory due to trauma. Much of *No Home Movie*'s emotional potency lies in the framing of the diegetic landscape. Functioning as both a cypher of her and her mother's shared trauma as well as literally providing an emotionally dense filmic world for the audience to fully immerse themselves in, *No Home Movie* haunts the viewer long after the film has ended. The majority of filmic real estate is given to the interior of the Akerman home, as the film surveys every inch of the space with long duration shots of various rooms. As the viewer experiences the space through Chantal's eyes, there is a constant sense of both familiarity and strangeness, exploring the dissonance of revisiting a childhood home. Akerman defamiliarizes the audience even further by subverting any traces of traditional filmic structure (lack of score, variance of shot-length, etc.). Immediately following Chantal and Natalia's first conversation about Natalia's experience as a Jewish woman, the camera lingers on a long shot of the empty kitchen, with only the sound of a vacuum running. Suddenly, the camera begins exploring the house, carefully surveying Chantal's childhood bedroom, peeking into Natalia's room, and approaching the balcony. The vacuum grows louder and softer depending on Akerman's position at any given moment, alerting the audience to the life existing within the home, even in seemingly silent moments. The sound of the vacuum, through this portion of the film, seems to represent the underlying potency of life within Akerman's mother, as the vacuum remains buzzing, even if it is merely a hum.

The audiovisual space of the landscape itself is of particular interest to Akerman, as the beauty and vastness of the land lulls the audience into a feeling of indescribable pleasure. At nearly the exact midpoint of the film, Akerman cuts to footage of rolling hills and valleys beneath a clear, endless sky. The vastness of the landscape is physically jarring, punctuating the

confinement of the previous clip, a video call between Chantal and Natalia. As the camera continues to move through the natural space, a sense of calm and pleasure builds, grounding the audience among nature. As the clip grows longer, however, the emotional charge turns somewhat haunting, as the absence of voices seems too great, and the lack of narrative too sprawling. Chantal Akerman explains this precise phenomenon within her filmic works, stating "I hope to make you waltz with the pleasure that nature, a trip to the country can give…until you start having doubts about this pleasure; until there emerges a feeling of horror, and even of tragedy, in a leaden silence."[32] As the long clip of the mountainous landscape finally ceases, Akerman cuts to a murky sea, with her own silhouette reflected in the water. With this simple shot, *No Home Movie* generously offers the audience a moment of reprieve. Once again, Akerman's presence is noted, a familiar and almost maternal figure herself at this point in the film, as the viewer has been continually sutured into the familial web of *No Home Movie*.

Within the diegesis, Akerman takes a particular interest in the space of the kitchen, with Natalia and Chantal's most explicit discussions of memory and trauma taking place entirely within the room. As the two women sit across from each other at the kitchen table, both Natalia and Chantal appear visibly relaxed, suddenly willing to speak about their anxieties and strife. The kitchen, Akerman muses, is inherently restorative for the two women, providing a space dense with familiarity. As the area of the kitchen is perpetually associated with womanhood, *No Home Movie* draws upon the role of women as carriers of memory and trauma, and the kitchen as a space in which Natalia and Chantal can let such memories rest and exist peacefully.

Akerman's first short film, *Saute Ma Ville* or *Blow Up My Town*, takes place entirely within the space of the kitchen, with Akerman starring as a young woman who spends a day and

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[32] Chantal Akerman, *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste* (France: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2004) 164. Quoted by Marion Schmid in *Chantal Akerman* (England: Manchester University Press, 2010) 111.

night performing familiar domestic tasks before eventually duct-taping the door, turning the oven on, and blowing everything up. Akerman's fascination with disrupting domesticity is literalized through the filmmaker's entire body of work, alluding to the disregard for feminine autonomy and individuality. In a reclamation of such autonomy, Akerman represents silence as a filmic weapon, constantly forcing the viewer to reorient their perspective on how memory and trauma "should" be depicted.

In *Saute Ma Ville*, even as she blows up the house in a climactic release, Akerman's character hums softly, comforting herself and the viewer with the sound of her voice. The vacuum buzzing softly in the background of *No Home Movie*, as the camera carefully explores Akerman's childhood home, provides a similar comfort to Akerman's humming in *Saute Ma Ville*. Silence, in both films, is not absolute, but rather acts as an abstract expression of erasure from the larger archive. By experimenting with the unfamiliar score of silence, *No Home Movie* subverts the audience's understanding of Natalia's experience during the Holocaust, expressing memory as equally present and important whether spoken about or held internally.

As Akerman explores her mother's unwillingness to speak about the atrocities she endured, not only in *No Home Movie* but throughout her entire oeuvre, the process of filmmaking can be understood, for Chantal Akerman, as a necessary mediation between her and her mother. The film explicitly demonstrates moments of Natalia's silence, and Chantal's subsequent frustration, with the two women often struggling to align. In a particularly striking frame, Natalia reclines in the naturally-lit living room, drifting in and out of sleep as her daughters try to pull stories from her. Chantal crouches in front of her mother with a small camera, snapping images of Natalia while Sylviane asks her questions. "I'm listening." Natalia says occasionally, "I understand half of what you say." This particular moment of familial

disconnect implicitly speaks to Chantal and her mother's absolute difference, with the camera acting as both a connective entity as well as a perpetual divide. Outwardly demonstrating the functional ability of the camera, Akerman uses the filmic medium to piece together Natalia's personal history as the audience is drawn into the family space.

Unlike the common understanding of the archive within Holocaust texts as a document of direct and undeniable history, Akerman's exploration of her own family history is incredibly abstract. Despite Chantal and Sylviane's constant efforts, Natalia rarely offers her own stories, only speaking when spoken to. Rather than shying away from this apparent lack of spoken testimony, Akerman leans into her mother's silence, inscribing the film with a sense of horror in the unspeakable nature of the Holocaust and trauma in general. The film's fascination with the untold holds a more personal undertone when considered in reference to Chantal and Natalia's incredibly close yet strained relationship, as the connection between the two women transgresses the boundaries of personal experience. Memory, in *No Home Movie*, is multidirectional, constantly informing itself based on new and old experiences held by both the individual and their community. Natalia's memories are made plural due to her relationship with her daughters, and Akerman's careful display of such memories informs the audience of the filmic ability to make public the personal. Although *No Home Movie* is decidedly unconcerned with efficiency, often lingering on one mundane shot for several minutes, the narrative still feels fragmented and unfinished. Memory, the film muses, is not concise nor efficient, as the lived experiences of the women on-screen are presented as abstract flashes of past, present, and future rather than isolated moments.

The splintering of Natalia and Chantal's individual and shared memories is not evident simply in their conversations of the past, but in every image of the Akerman home, every meal

they share, and every moment of silence. Hirsch explains the effectiveness of the image in both illustrating and reshaping memory and postmemory, writing:

Whether they are family pictures of a destroyed world, or records of the process of its destruction, photographic images are fragmentary remnants that shape the cultural work of postmemory. The work that they have been mobilized to do for the postgeneration, in particular, ranges from the indexical to the symbolic.[33]

No Home Movie acts as both indexical and symbolic, implementing direct discussions of Natalia's experience in Auschwitz as well as providing a tonal and thematic understanding of her trauma. It is not simply the content of the film, but rather Akerman's careful aesthetic construction which allows the film to capture this range of representation, making *No Home Movie* stand as an effective case study in the usefulness of aesthetics in trauma narratives. Soon after the audience becomes acquainted with Natalia's home in Brussels—particularly the kitchen and dining room—Akerman shows a conversation between herself and her mother, as they speak about Natalia's experience as a young Jewish woman. The camera sits just below Akerman's line of sight, formally regarding the audience as secondary, a voyeur to a conversation between family members. This is the first moment in which Natalia directly speaks about her experience during the Holocaust, explaining how her family acquired documents to move to Belgium because of a man who was infatuated with her mother. The conversation does not come easily, as Natalia often struggles to provide the precise details Chantal attempts to lead her to, and the women constantly interrupt each other.

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[33] Marianne Hirsch, "Familial Postmemories and Beyond," *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 38.

It is the very sense of family that makes Akerman's depiction of generational memory so pervasive, as *No Home Movie* uses the environment of the family home and the relationship of mother and daughter to personalize a public memory of the Holocaust. The use of the family to draw viewers into unfamiliar experiences is not novel to Akerman's film, as this particular method of narrative suturing is used frequently in Holocaust museum exhibits. Hirsch uses this example while explaining the publicization of personal photographs and totems, writing that the obfuscation of personal boundaries is made possible due to the "...idea of family, by the pervasiveness of the familial gaze, and by the forms of mutual recognition that define family images and narratives."[34]

Images of family permeate both written and filmic Holocaust texts, as artists rely on the theme of a family destroyed by trauma to produce unwavering emotional affect. Many Holocaust texts rely on this paradigmatic understanding of the family structure to produce a sense of continued or *post* memory. Individual family structures are key to developing the particular mission of postmemory, with the maternal role often holding the narrative position of the carrier of memory and trauma. Not only matriarchs, but women in general, hold the disjunctive role of both carrying history as well as facing constant erasure from the larger archive. Hirsch addresses this impossible position using the example of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, writing:

In Shoah, we argued, women are not simply absent: they tend to function as translators and as mediators carrying the story and its affective fabric, but not generating it themselves… They are haunting voices in the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto, rather than key witnesses to the workings of extermination or to suffering and survival.[35]

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[34] Ibid, 35.
[35] Marianne Hirsch, "Introduction," *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New YorkColumbia University Press, 2012) 12.

The absence of women from trauma narratives is not always a physical lack of being, such as in Lanzmann's film, as women are often physically present in Holocaust texts, yet contextually ignored. Shifting this lens onto Akerman's body of work, particularly *No Home Movie*, Natalia's silence represents a larger implication of womanhood as atmospheric and supplementary rather than literal in trauma narratives. Instead of slipping into the familiar narrative of the mother as an overt bearer of comfort, Akerman utilizes every moment of her mother's silence as though it is deafening, forcing the audience to reorient themselves entirely. Silence, here, is not an absence of storytelling but rather a provocation to remember on one's own. Akerman allows the audience to share her mother's silence, as the unyielding quiet offers space for Natalia, Chantal, and the viewer to exist within the subspace of their minds.

Rather than capitalizing on cultural memory through familiar filmic techniques such as the use of voiceover in Resnais' *Night and Fog* or date and location subtitles in Forgács' *The Maelstrom*, Chantal Akerman instead constructs an individualized portrait of her own relationship with her mother, and their collective, ever-shifting memory and trauma. Due to the incredible specificity of the work in conjunction with the larger scope of historical context, Akerman provides a sense of privilege among viewers, cluing the audience into a deeply personal familial narrative. Such an expression of Holocaust trauma is not without ethical criticism however, as Hirsch posits:

> ...the very accessibility of familial idioms and images needs also to engender suspicion on
> our part: does not locating trauma in the space of family personalize and individualize it
> too much? Does it not risk occluding a public historical context and responsibility,

blurring significant differences— national difference, for example, or differences

between the descendants of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders?[36]

Although many documentarians circumvent this fear of individualization by overtly

calling audiences into action via dialogue and explicit historical data, Akerman simply provides

space for the viewer to consider their own memories in connection with the women on screen.

Postmemory, in this sense, becomes an active way of remembering, as the audience is granted a

diegetic world in which to share and develop their own histories. Akerman pluralizes the act of

remembering, effectively transforming the memory of the Holocaust—and trauma in

general—into something collective.

No Home Movie finishes with a shot of the main corridor of Natalia's home, a space that

has been explored greatly throughout the film. Atop the mantle sits a childhood photo of Chantal

and her sister Sylviane, smiling and laughing. On either side of the photo are two urns, framing

the totem of youth and joy with a visual representation of death. Though the audience knows,

practically, that the two urns must hold the remains of past relatives, the scene immediately

evokes the sense that the ashes metaphorically belong to Chantal and her mother. This scene is

certainly haunting on its own, but when considered in the context of Natalia's death soon after

the film, and Chantal's suicide quickly following, the image of the mantle holds an entirely

deeper meaning. The two women, *No Home Movie* demonstrates, are irretrievably wound

together. Natalia's trauma lives on through Chantal, as the burden of postmemory plagues those

who succeed the carriers of history. Akerman does not view postmemory as inherently negative,

however, as the film focuses on the joyous moments shared between Chantal and her mother in

tandem with the pain they discuss.

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[36] Ibid, 39.

This final scene perfectly illustrates the paradox of memory and postmemory, as the visual representation of pain—demonstrated by the urns—literally frames a more accessible image of the past—the childhood photograph of Chantal and Sylviane. Considering the larger mission of Holocaust documentary, the centering of more accessible visual techniques, even as such aesthetic choices are shadowed by the context of trauma, effectively sutures audiences into otherwise inaccessible narratives. Such creative deviations from conventional depictions of the Holocaust allow creators to represent the density of traumatic experience, individualizing a history increasingly minimized through generalization.

Conclusion

In the winter/spring in-between of this year, I watched James Benning's 1987 documentary *Landscape Suicide* in my Experimental Documentary course with Professor Sonia Misra. Benning's film captures a fascinating feeling of being haunted, with much of the film surveying vast American landscapes. The film uses reenactment to present two different killers, a California teenager named Bernadette Protti and the infamous Ed Gein. Although the reenactments initially seem to be the audience's most direct entry into the narrative, Benning's constant revisitation to sprawling landscape shots increasingly permeates the tone of the film. The landscape imagery becomes haunted by memory and history, as the filmic context develops, demonstrating the intertextuality of the past, present, and future.

Although I was already deep into my thesis at this point, with a developed argument and my filmic and literary texts entirely selected, Benning's film added another dimension to my writing. Whether I knew it or not, *Landscape Suicide* provided a final piece of the puzzle, explicitly demonstrating the incredible flexibility of traumatic history and memory I sought to explain. The undertone of something darker swirling beneath the surface of an accessible, and often familiar landscape such as Chantal Akerman's childhood home in *No Home Movie*, the Pereboom's neighborhood in *The Maelstrom*, or the postcard-perfect abandoned gas stations in Benning's film, alludes to a fascination with memories that are not entirely visible. The "invisible shadows"[37] we use to frame such images, as Peter Forgács explains, are an ever present illuminating light cast by historical context, coloring the ways in which we interact with trauma narratives. By subverting an assumption of documentary truth through aestheticization,

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[37] Bill Nichols, "The Memory of Loss: Péter Forgács's Saga of Family Life and Social Hell," *Cinema's Alchemist: The Films of Péter Forgács* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press: 2011) 44.

however, filmmakers such as Akerman, Forgács, Oppenheimer, Lanzmann, Resnais, and

Benning manage to manipulate history into something individual and specific, warning against

the danger of a single story and imploring the viewer—me—to understand memory as

unrepresentable without the tool of artistic mediation.

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