

“I honestly felt sick:” Affect and the Ethics of Pain in Viewers’ Responses to Holocaust Films

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“Holocaust films” and documentaries, by the very nature of their subject matter, represent some of the most horrific violence and pain inflicted on human beings in 20th century Europe. Susan Sontag’s disquiet in the context of photography, that images depicting violence may not only repulse, but “can also allure,”¹ may also apply to Holocaust films, which represent violence in a wide variety of ways. These include traditional documentary formats, which use archival footage (derived mostly from perpetrator sources), to more experimental or post-modern formats, which eschew such images; and, more prominently, it includes feature films, in which persecution, torture, and murder are either evoked or re-enacted. These films have been the subject of fraught academic and public debates for several decades, with critics denouncing them for their potential to desensitize, trivialize, and distort. It is notably less the violence *per se*, but rather the format by which it is portrayed that arouses suspicion. Feature film’s highly emotionalized, often melodramatic depiction of pain and suffering, is held to have a powerful impact on viewers. What lay people outside the historical, memory and educational professions make of films about the Holocaust has been the subject of much discussion and, indeed, apprehension. An affective engagement with these issues is regarded with optimism by some, and anxiety by others.²

With the affective power and societal impact of Holocaust films often taken as a given, how viewers actually respond – cognitively and affectively – to such on-screen violence remains, bar a handful of studies, largely elusive.³ The predominance of quantitative methodologies on the one hand, and the influence of Frankfurt School approaches on the other, has allowed little room for nuance. Viewers continue to be framed as more or less passive “receivers” of whatever “message” has been encoded by the filmmakers. In this chapter, I draw

on a series of qualitative interviews as part of an exploratory study I conducted between 2011 and 2012 with 68 people, most of them British, about their interpretation of select films.⁴ The study was designed not as representative but as an intervention to unsettle common assumptions about Holocaust films and their viewers.

This chapter will reflect on lay people's responses to representations of violence, and to both the suffering and the inflicting of (physical and emotional) pain, in Holocaust films. It will explore affective engagement with Holocaust films by viewers, the relationship between affect and cognition in the reception of such films, and an ethical dimension to watching films about the Holocaust, and to watching pain, in particular. The aim is not to dismiss the theory on Holocaust representation and merely substitute with viewing "experience," but to add nuance to and enhance existing work. I adopt British Cultural Studies approaches, recasting viewers as actively engaged participants in a non-linear communication process of making sense and meaning.⁵ Through the lens of violence, pain and suffering, I will argue that while Holocaust films are recognized as representations, they are regarded as representations of something real. Viewing them is imbued with importance and a particular code of conduct (self-policing of emotions from the outset). I will further demonstrate that the emotional engagement and empathy such films can foster is not limited to the victims of Nazi crimes but can extend to those who were perpetrators of or otherwise complicit in persecution and murder.

The films selected for the study were released in the 2000s, represent different genres, and focus on a variety of topics. *Conspiracy* (USA/UK, 2001) is a BBC/HBO TV docu-drama directed by Frank Pierson, which dramatizes the infamous meeting, now known as the "Wannsee Conference," of fifteen senior National Socialist officials from the SS, the party and the civilian ministries on January 20, 1942, to discuss the "Final Solution." The adaptation of John Boyne's best-selling 2006 novel of the same name, Mark Herman's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (USA/Germany, 2008) is a film about the friendship between the son of a death camp

commandant and a Jewish child inmate of that same camp. *The Reader* (USA/Germany, 2008), another adaptation of a best-selling novel, Bernhard Schlink's 1993 *Der Vorleser*, focuses on Germany's "coming to terms with the past" through the lens of protagonist Michael and his relationship with Hanna, a former guard at Auschwitz. Edward Zwick's *Defiance* (USA, 2008), based on Nechama Tec's research on the Bielski brothers, is an action-packed film about Jewish partisans who survived the Holocaust in the Belorussian forests. Finally, *The Grey Zone* (USA, 2001), a film by Tim Blake Nelson, takes on the subject of the Jewish *Sonderkommando*, the inmates forced to work at Auschwitz-Birkenau's crematoria, and their uprising of October 1944, to reflect on the human condition.

The chapter will firstly explore the relationship between affect and cognition, and its ramifications for the reception of Holocaust films; and secondly, the ethical challenges of ambiguous portrayals of victims and perpetrators.

Affect and Cognition

I honestly felt sick ... at the end, oh, I am just, my stomach was just churning that people could actually sit there, quite calmly, and discuss murdering millions and millions of people. It's chilling.⁶

Froma I. Zeitlin suggests that certain representations, such as Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1986) or Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (France/UK, 1985), may be functioning as "vicarious witnesses." This is marked by "an obsessive quest to assume the burden of memory, or remembrance, by means of which one might become a witness oneself."⁷ And Joshua Hirsch argues that although there "is no such thing as a traumatic image per se ... an image of atrocity may carry a traumatic potential, which, as it circulates among individuals and societies with common conceptual horizons, may be repeatedly realized in a variety of experiences of vicarious trauma."⁸ While the question of vicarious witnessing or vicarious

trauma may prove more elusive and challenging to answer, the films under discussion undoubtedly had a strong emotional impact on some of the respondents in this study. Charlotte (57, administrator), whose response to *Conspiracy* I quoted above, made her moral and emotional outrage at what the film depicts felt throughout the interview. In part, this seemed an aspect of her personality and due to her professed interest in the Holocaust. In his study of intergenerational memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust among English families, Thomas McKay found that his interlocutors “would focus on the distress it caused them to hear about events associated with the Holocaust.”⁹ This phenomenon certainly also plays a role here. More importantly, Charlotte’s affective responses to the film were owed both to the dissonance between the horror of *what* was discussed but not shown (the genocide of the European Jews), and *how* it was discussed (mostly in a matter-of-fact, bureaucratic, and at times joking manner), coupled with Charlotte’s knowledge about the historical event of the “Wannsee Conference,” and the Holocaust. In other words, affect and cognition are closely intertwined: if she had not already *known* about the outcome of the Wannsee Conference, she may not have *experienced* the same strong emotional reaction to the film. Knowing that it “really” happened, and what happened, acts as a catalyst for affect. Yet her knowledge also enabled her to make sense of her strong, almost overwhelming visceral response, as it slots into an established frame of reference. In other words, the on-screen violence need not be overwhelming on a cognitive level if it can resonate with existing ideas and understandings. Vivian C. Sobchak has argued in this context that meaning is “constituted as both as a *carнал matter* and a *conscious meaning*,” and “grounded” in “having sense” and “making sense.”¹⁰

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that these should prove easy to narrate to someone in a conversation, the few scenes in each film, which attracted the attention of more than one or two respondents, tended to be highly emotive, that is, sentimental, tense, or violent. Which scenes and characters were talked about reveals much about viewers’ empathetic engagement with a

film, and the focus of that empathy or sympathy. Among respondents who watched *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, many referred to a scene in which a Jewish man (Pavel) forced to work in the camp commandant's house bandages the foot of the commandant's son after he falls from the swing, and for which the commandant's wife (Elsa) eventually thanks him. Participants would predominantly interpret the scene as part of Elsa's inner struggle, emotional pain, and ambivalence towards her husband's "work" and the persecution of the Jews; much less so in terms of Pavel's humanity and past life as a doctor. In *The Grey Zone*, several Jewish women, slave laborers in a munitions factory, smuggle explosives to the *Sonderkommando* men in the crematoria in support of the uprising. As the camp leadership begins to suspect, they torture the women to get information and ultimately kill other inmates of their barracks to force them to talk, resulting in the women's suicide. These scenes were recalled by all of the female respondents who watched this film as part of the study, but none of the men. In one scene, one of the women is being tortured and revived by a doctor while being questioned by the SS. Louise (20, student) recalled the scene "as quite powerful," explaining that it "was just horrible" and "striking" how "they weren't even going to give her any respite in being unconscious."¹¹ Meera (37, managing director) articulated how she empathized with the women's selfless acts and their suffering:

It's a desperate story, isn't it ... they came across very powerfully ... they were in a situation where they couldn't immediately affect, erm, what was going on, erm, but they were trying ... even if it meant endangering their own lives. Erm, yeah, I think that was very, very powerful ... and I think the torture scenes were, you know, that's when you, erm, you know, when you really thought, you know, gosh, you know, what they were still going through. Again, they had no idea what's happening on the other side, whether what, you know, whether what they're smuggling over is reaching anybody ...

they were doing all of that without, you know, without any hope of being rescued or, you know, themselves. It was just, I mean from, from what I saw, it seemed to be purely to see, er, to see what they could do to stop this killing-machine. Er, so I think they, they came across very powerfully.¹²

Indeed, isolated and without hope of rescue, the women's support of the uprising provides the only heroics in the film. James E. Young alerts us to the "spectacle" of regarding the pain of women, when "idealized icons of victimization, innocence or even resistance come to substitute for the stories women might be telling about themselves."¹³ But in the female respondents' reactions to women's suffering in *The Grey Zone*, we find that assigning heroic behavior to the women and empathy with what they might have been going through need not be a mutually exclusive exercise. Of interest is the gender aspect: understanding might come easier if we can identify with a character or real person, and gender appears to play an important role.

More generally, stories and particular aspects from a film were recalled if they either confirmed their preconceived understandings or if they were shocking, unexpected or contradictory to respondents' knowledge. This demonstrates once more that we need to consider how what viewers bring with them resonates with the film text. To take an example from *The Reader*, Harriet (60, consultant and student) talked about a scene, in which Hanna withholds information that would lessen her prison sentence but also reveal her inability to read and write. Harriet explains that

I've been in education all my life and I, I think it's totally credible that this horrendous crime of, you know, killing all these, you know, millions of people and yet, the shame of not being able to read and write, so I'm, I mean having being in adult education,

that's exactly how most adult illiterates are so it's totally credible to me that she wouldn't have exposed herself as not being able to read or, and write and, and how that, erm, you know, it seems so small, doesn't it, in comparison to the nature of the crime, so and almost as though she's totally ... uncomprehending ...¹⁴

The scene resonates with her professional understanding, which helps her make sense of Hanna's otherwise barely intelligible behavior, in terms of suffering from her shame for being illiterate. Respondents recall scenes, and perhaps already focus on them at the time of watching the film, because they recognize them within the framework of their own knowledge and understanding. Not only are affective responses linked to (re-)cognition, films and particular film aspects can affect viewers emotionally for various reasons, which can be personal, professional, bound up with prior understanding or demographic background.

But others recalled scenes because they challenged existing knowledge and ideas. Judy (32, administrative clerk), for instance, reflected on why the ending of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, when the commandant's son is killed in the gas chamber together with the Jewish camp inmates, left such an impression on her:

... the scene where they've dropped the gas into the chamber and the door's been shut and you can just hear the noise and the scrabbling to try and get out because I, I've, erm, read a couple of books about ... Auschwitz and other concentration camps and that's the one thing whenever I thought about people going into the gas chamber, I've never assumed that they would sort of scrabble and try and get out, erm, the first time I saw the film that really, I found that quite upsetting, and I don't know why, when I actually thought about it afterwards, I don't know why I hadn't assumed they wouldn't try and get out but it's, erm, it always seems sort of quite horrific when the guy's saying

“oh, it’s just, it’s just a shower, don’t worry,” erm, and I think, thought that they kind of go in there almost just thinking, “ok, we’re, we’re going in for a shower,” is, is much, that kind of makes the end and the end of it, much worse because you know, you know what’s gonna happen ...¹⁵

We see, once again, how closely connected affect and cognition are: the scene’s emotional impact is even greater as Judy knows all along what will happen to the Jews forced into the gas chamber. She tries to comprehend and explain why the scene has such an impact on her, suggesting it is because she had never thought about the victims trying to escape the gas. Perhaps she had assumed that the perpetrators’ disguise of the gas chambers as showers convinced the victims right until their death, and she may not have appreciated the particularly painful nature of the death by gas the victims suffered. There are also echoes here from the myth of Jewish passivity. Her discomfort may further stem from the deliberate shock value of the scene and her empathy with the victims’ pain. The scene affects her both because of its inherent emotive power and because it taught her something she had not previously considered. Of particular note is the fact that she readily questioned and reorganised her understanding upon watching the film.

Films and affective responses to them can act as a vehicle for reflecting on a film and its emotional impact. The two films based on fiction, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and *The Reader*, proved most apt to facilitate such introspection. Sam (19, student) voiced his discomfort with his reaction to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. The film focusses primarily on Bruno, the camp commandant’s son, but is less concerned with the Jewish child, Shmuel. Sam was concerned about his compassion being concentrated on Bruno:

... and you felt really bad about his [Bruno's] death without somehow not being able to focus on the amount of other people who died there ... I suppose this is ... required of him as a protagonist and you want to kind of feel towards him rather than everybody else but I did find it kind of, I'm not sure if I felt cheated but I, it, it's just, you just feel sad about him, you d-, I don't know, because you didn't see much history of the, the Shmuel kid, just, he was just an excess character, he was just there.¹⁶

There is thus potential even or especially in highly emotionalized and fictionalized films. By contradicting received knowledge or expectations, they can foster criticality and reflection on the impact of a film. The more "factual" films – particularly *Conspiracy* and *The Grey Zone* – had this effect to a much lesser degree. Their claim to historical authenticity by being based on "true stories," and a realist aesthetics, often obscures their artistry, thereby overwhelming some viewers and discouraging them from critically engaging with such films.

Knowledge, however limited, about the wider history referred to in Holocaust films exacerbates, or lowers, their emotional impact while also providing part of the interpretative repertoire by which to make sense of both the films and the emotions raised by them. I will now address another consequence of viewers' social, cultural and political embeddedness by returning to the question of "allurement." To suggest anyone may be "allured" by watching representations of violence in the context of the Holocaust, whether "real" or re-enacted, would appear outrageous to most. Indeed, the very question of enjoyment or even pleasure is rarely ever posed when discussing such films. Similar to the context of atrocity photography, where artistry "is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance" and considered manipulative,¹⁷ the question of the artistic merit of Holocaust films is hardly raised. Affective responses are viewed and indeed experienced through a filter of what is acceptable and appropriate. During a screening of *Schindler's List* in 1994 in the USA, some high school students on a field trip,

“most of whom are black, had laughed at a scene in which a Nazi soldier casually shoots a Jewish woman. The theater owner stopped the projector, turned on the lights and told the students to leave.” In the wake of media attention, students issued a public apology, and the school scheduled “assemblies and workshops, where students have listened to historians, psychologists and counselors talk about tolerance, black history and the news media,” and received a visit from director Steven Spielberg.¹⁸

The notion of responding appropriately to Holocaust films is much more widespread and internalized than the extreme example above might suggest. It was evident, for instance, in Charlotte’s response cited earlier, when she voiced her visceral reaction to *Conspiracy*. The phenomenon of respondents at pains to distance themselves from any enjoyment of the films was mostly found among those who watched *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and *Defiance*. Any talk of enjoyment or entertainment was largely absent in the interviews about the other three films, a few exceptions notwithstanding. The former two films are more entertaining and conventional in many ways, with some humorous moments and likable characters. But as they are “Holocaust films,” there is an expectation (voiced by the respondents) that their primary purpose is not entertainment but education, commemoration, or engendering an emotional connection. Respondents characterized or condemned *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and *Defiance* as entertaining, and many clarified that they did not take pleasure from watching them. Benjamin (22, postgraduate student), for example, talked about the former film’s portrayal of Bruno’s sister’s increasing infatuation with Nazi ideology. He seemingly felt the need to qualify his response, and was keen to distinguish between enjoyment and appreciation: “I thought that was particularly well done, erm, not that I say it was enjoyable but, erm, I liked the way that that was put across ...”¹⁹ Most poignantly, Sam, whose reflection on *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* I cited above, got rather agitated talking about this issue of enjoyment,

entertainment, and what a Holocaust film might be for. Asked about his thoughts on such films more generally, he responded in the following way:

I think it is <bangs hand on table repeatedly> probably good that they are made but it's, like, it's hard to sit through a lot of them, I couldn't just go, <claps and rubs his hands> "I'm gonna have a Holocaust film day," you know, just enjoy it, you know, it's not, they are, they're not really there to be enjoyed, they're there to kind of, as a reminder, so it's a different kind of genre of film, they're not entertainment films although they can be entertaining, I suppose, at certain points, of the jokes, the light-hearted kind of feel of it and all movies are basically entertaining by their nature, er, but they are there as a kind of, they're a work of art, they're kind of monument to this thing, it's just a physic-, or a creative monument to the, erm, the, the emotions and the deaths and ideas of the Holocaust ...²⁰

There is, therefore, a considerable amount of self-censorship, performance, and self-policing at work as regards to "Holocaust films," which, arguably, is specific to this type of film. The reluctance, or even injunction, to enjoy or be entertained through Holocaust films (which is equated with trivializing the events they represent, and reflecting negatively on the person enjoying such a film) can find expression in condemning filmmakers for choosing a more entertaining format, and audiences for reacting inappropriately. *Defiance*, in particular, was at the receiving end of such accusations: its director, Ed Zwick, was suspected of making the film merely to make money or purely for entertainment. The film's defiant portrayal of Jewish resistance, community, and survival using action film tropes and conventions was at odds with viewers' expectations of what a Holocaust film should and should not do. One of them was Andrew (63, retiree), who claimed that the film was not "eliciting a great deal of sympathy or

more sympathy [with the victims] than you would have anyway. I think he just created a film, an action film that he wanted to make some money with, for the box office.”²¹ I therefore suggest that for some viewers, watching Holocaust films constitutes an emotionally challenging type of memory or education work.

Ethics of Pain

While Andrew’s critique of *Defiance* for not fostering more sympathy for the victims and its entertaining action film format was echoed in other interviews, for most the film succeeded, to varying degrees, in creating or reinforcing empathy with the victims. Whereas *Conspiracy*’s dehumanizing, bureaucratic language put the absence of any Jewish people in the film into sharp focus, *Defiance*’s portrayal of a Jewish partisan community lent itself particularly well to an empathetic engagement with its characters and their plight. Theodore (27, police constable) felt that “you could imagine yourself being in that situation,” while Yasmin (20, student) judged the film to be “a bit disturbing in some parts like, erm, when you saw the, them [the Germans] coming closer, kind of, you could feel their panic and every time something bad happened, it felt like, you felt it for them, so it was a bit disturbing to watch because obviously we know the his-, historical background to it.”²² *Defiance* does not shirk away from portraying conflicts within the group of refugees. In fact, two conflicts are among the film’s key drivers: differing ideas as to what should be the group’s priority: fighting the Germans and getting revenge, or ensuring the survival of as many Jews as possible, including the old and sick; and infighting within the group where some think that “fighters” should receive better provisions than the rest. But the portrayal relied on established, familiar tropes, such as brothers-at-odds, and a well-known cast including Daniel Craig, Jamie Bell, and Liev Schreiber. Similar to *Defiance*, *The Grey Zone* largely omits the perpetrators and instead focuses on the Jewish characters. But almost all of *The Grey Zone*’s Jewish characters are compromised and far from

likable; even Hoffmann, one of its more sympathetic protagonists, beats another Jewish man to death. This may be why many of the respondents discussed the following, rather unremarkable scene at the end of the film. Two of the *Sonderkommando* men have a brief conversation about where they are from, shortly before they are shot in the back of their necks after the uprising is crushed by the SS. D.G. (22, sales assistant) wondered about the scene,

... you live with these people like for so long and you know nothing about them until like that guy at the end actually realised it, “probably, we’re actually neighbours,” they lived next door to each other and they didn’t even realise, and they were like arguing ... I suppose ... it’s not something you talk about in a conversation, is it, you don’t get, you’re not allowed to talk, you’re kept in solitude. I think the more personal you make it the more harder it gets ...²³

The Grey Zone’s unsympathetic, ambiguous characterization left many participants struggling as they tried to reconcile their knowledge about the Holocaust and familiarity with more conventional representations with what *The Grey Zone* had to offer them. D.G. above was trying to interpret this scene at the end in light of the characters’ otherwise tense, hostile interactions with one another. He was interviewed as part of a group, whose other three members were similarly at pains to make sense of the men of the *Sonderkommando*, particularly the scene, in which Hoffmann punches a Jewish man to death in return for his watch, in the undressing room to the gas chamber. Siobhan (20, shop assistant) voiced her incomprehension at Hoffmann’s behavior, while Sarah (48, student) mused that he “lost it.” D.G. suggested that “it was more to do with the fact that he didn’t wanna upset the other people going in because they were trying to let them die peacefully,” or that “it just got to such a point where it didn’t matter anymore whether he killed these ... people or not because ... they’re

already dead anyway.” Siobhan recalled another scene in the context of this discussion, in which one of the SS says to one of the Jewish doctors how “it was so easy to make them exactly like them, to turn against their own people and yet they were gonna die anyway. So it does make you think about that ... how could they do it.”²⁴ While the others in this group continued to try and understand and rationalize the *Sonderkommando*’s behavior, Siobhan was unable to empathize with their predicament, instead adopting a stance that interpreted the *Sonderkommando* as becoming or acting like the perpetrators.

If viewers are challenged by ambiguous, unfamiliar and unconventional portrayals of victims, how might they react to the characters who inflict pain as perpetrators? Among the respondents, interpretations of perpetrators and their motivations ranged from citing “superior orders”, “coercion,” “fear,” and “bullying,” to suggestions of opposition to or ignorance about genocide, to notions of emotional disorders or human nature. Agency was notably lacking, with perpetrators frequently appearing as victims of sorts (e.g. of the circumstances, their spouses, youthful folly, their upbringing, the Nazi regime, or propaganda). While we need to bear in mind that these are responses to films, as viewers make use of their respective interpretative repertoires, their reactions indicate wide-ranging interpretations of actual perpetrators, as confirmed in numerous instances where respondents conflated film and history.

Depictions of suffering and pain or indications of some inner ambivalence among perpetrators and “bystanders” played a crucial role for such interpretations but will be shown to resonate with existing patterns of thought and understanding among respondents. Ruth (64, artist and educator), who possessed considerable subject knowledge about the Holocaust, talked about the mother in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Ruth expressed her emotional response to watching the film when she emphasized how “it was very moving and particularly to see how the Nazi’s wife, the Nazi general’s wife was affected, and how she was so powerless.”²⁵ Ruth’s compassion focused on the wife of the death camp commandant, who

unravels as she gradually finds out about the camp's true purpose to which, we are led to believe, she was previously ignorant: how she was affected, and her alleged powerlessness. The portrayal resonated with Ruth's existing frame of interpretation. But the way in which on-screen perpetrators behave was also, by some, interpreted in a critical, self-aware manner. In *Conspiracy*, Wilhelm Stuckart (a Nazi Party lawyer, official and a state secretary in the German Interior Ministry) is played by Colin Firth, whom audiences would know from films such as *Pride and Prejudice* (France/UK/USA, 2005) or *Bridget Jones's Diary* (UK/France/USA, 2001) and *The King's Speech* (UK, 2011), and possibly attach certain expectations to that particular actor. Firth, known for playing essentially "nice" if somewhat awkward characters, seems to play to his reputation: as Stuckart, we are initially made to believe that he disagrees with what is proposed to become the "Final Solution" until a sudden anti-Semitic outburst reveals that this assumption was wrong. Nigel (40, warehouse operative) reflected on the "journey" he went through with this character:

The, er, lawyer character [Stuckart] who'd drawn up the Nuremberg Laws, erm, he was sort of treated in, in the first half of the film, he was kind of treated a bit sympathetically, like they were trying to get our sympathies towards him, 'cause he was kind of saying, "what you're deciding is wrong," kind of thing, but then later on in the film he, he's talking about, he's talking about how he feels towards the Jews and it is just as terrible as all the other views about the Jews and that, it sort of, it plays with your emotional connection to that character, you're sort of drawn towards him and then you're like kind of dashed <laughs; interviewer: laughs> ... whereas the other sort of guy who was against it, he's just kind of against what's going on, really, but just goes along with it to, for a quiet life kind of thing, and so you don't really feel, you know, you don't go on an emotional journey with that character really.²⁶

Through the twist in Stuckart's portrayal and the casting of Firth as Stuckart, audience expectations are being played with and, ultimately, not only disappointed, but reduced to the absurd. At best, it could prompt audiences to reflect upon their own expectations and hopes (for at least someone to be righteous). At worst, Stuckart's anti-Semitism could be downplayed and overlooked and instead the focus could be on the earlier part of the film when he talks to Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger (State Secretary in the Reich Chancellery, played by David Threlfall), about the quality of the law as opposed to what the SS stands for. The latter response was, in fact, more common than Nigel's insights, as several respondents focused on what Stuckart said about law and legality, ignoring his anti-Semitic views. The casting of Firth may be a contributing factor to reading the character in this way, as may be the lack of any detailed historical knowledge about the Holocaust, the Nuremberg Laws and the Wannsee Conference. In any event, depending on a variety of factors, the scene can, potentially, go both ways and either foster reflection or allow an uncritical acceptance of Stuckart as somewhat better than the other men at the meeting.

The perpetrators and "bystanders" were commonly seen through a sympathetic, exculpatory lens. They were frequently framed as victims, and never more so than among respondents to the film *The Reader*. In this film, we witness Hanna's (played by Kate Winslet) emotional pain, which results not from her past as a concentration camp guard but her shame for her illiteracy; the evocation of the physical and lasting emotional pain she inflicted as a guard through the accusations by the judge and a witness statement; and the absence of any visual re-enactments of her crimes. Perhaps the most poignant example for the respondents' reception of the film is provided by Stephanie (20, student). Her emotional engagement with the film and her empathetic identification with the character of Hanna becomes apparent in her response to my question of how the film compared with others she had seen. To her, *The Reader*

“makes quite an impact,” praising “the new perspective it opens up that people don’t really consider,” which she felt was missing from school education. She explained:

‘cause it’s very unfair, erm, that normal German people suffered as well but they’re never really thought about, it’s almost like, “shame on you,” for being part of that society and that now their pain and an emo-, erm, almost like an emotional debt, really, whereas the, the Jews and, I mean I know I’m just, erm, let’s talk about the Jews but everyone that’s like physically suffered, that was a physical suffering as well as emotional but like the, the society as a whole hasn’t really healed, I wouldn’t say so, from this thing that they [the German society] carry round with them ‘cause it ... because they carry around this, (-) like almost like a stigma, I’d say and I don’t think people think about how they were, it wasn’t really their ... it wasn’t a choice.²⁷

Stephanie initially stumbled over her own reading when she tried to contrast the suffering of “normal German people” and that of “the Jews,” quickly arriving at the limits of such an attempt. Rather than abandoning this train of thought, she recovered her concern for German Gentiles by denying their agency, concluding “it wasn’t a choice.” Stephanie’s leap from Hanna, the fictional former guard at Auschwitz and on a death march, to “normal Germans,” who “suffered as well” is significant. The film resonates with Stephanie’s prior understanding. But the film’s focus on Hanna and emphasis on injustices done to her clearly shifts attention away from the Jews – of whom we encounter only two in this film and, importantly, not during their ordeal suffered at Hanna’s hands – and onto Hanna.

In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, the pain of the camp commandant and his wife losing their son – relatable and universal – strikes a chord among some respondents. Lara (43, student) recalled the film in the following way:

it comes across that all people are the same, they all feel the same, they all feel the same pain, they go through the same emotions. Er, you got, you've got the, those that are dying through these events and on the other side of the fence you've got the, the German officers and they lose a son through it and they actually go through all the emotions that anybody would, er, their, their son had gone in voluntary ... he got in there on his own although he gone, he ain't gone voluntary into the gas chamber, er, that really hurt them which it would do for anyone ... if it's the same thing or not 'cause they're all forced in there, aren't they, all the people, it does bring across that they all feel it, they're all hurt by it, all go through the same emotions, erm, even these people who are down as being monsters have got another side to them.²⁸

Of note is the passive voice here, and the lack of cause and effect relationships, which was widespread in conversations about fictional, and also actual, perpetrators. She contrasts “those that are dying through those events,” whose Jewish identity remains opaque, and the “German officers” on the “other side of the fence,” who “lose a son through it,” which masks the organised killing of millions through the SS and their accomplices in the camps and beyond. Those who feel pain cannot also be the ones who inflict pain on others. Lara’s summary of the film omits the fact that the parents’ son was killed in the very machinery of death the father himself ran. The fact that the parents *can* hurt already sets them apart from their Jewish victims: whole families and villages were wiped out, without anyone left to mourn them, or whose fates their surviving relatives may never be entirely sure of.

The “hurt” identified by Lara was also of concern to Stephanie, who was familiar with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which she contrasts with *The Reader* in the following way:

their boy obviously gets killed in the same way as ... anyone in the concentration camp would have been killed ... and ... it's their pain for losing their little boy that's quite upsetting ... but ... I just think this is different in the way that she's just a normal person living a normal life, she just takes a job and the next thing you know, she's in court for war crimes and like three hundred murders ... it's just like ... one of these choices, like I make a choice to get on the bus and the next thing you know I did something that caused someone to die ... it was just like progression to her life and ... then she was accused of all these things.²⁹

Pain acts as an equalizer, seemingly eradicating meaningful distinctions between perpetrators and victims, between suffering pain and inflicting pain. Indeed, it is the inflicting of pain which is frequently turned into the suffering of the perpetrator. In Stephanie's reading, Hanna appears as the real victim, someone who made an allegedly innocent choice and then progresses to mass murder without any further agency. The pain of others, fictionalized but embedded within a framework of historical authenticity, is difficult to watch, and brings viewers onto the side of those who suffer, including those on the side of the perpetrators. Pain and empathy, or at the very least sympathy, are therefore closely linked. Assigning agency, and an active voice, to perpetrators, who inflict pain but may also suffer pain of their own, would complicate or preclude sympathy and empathetic identification, perhaps even necessitate self-inspection. As Sue Vice has noted in relation to novels, readers may experience "unease" when "contemplating perpetrators, and the psychic costs of their actions" due to "the uncomfortable and challenging nature of the self-scrutiny that this entails."³⁰ But if perpetrators are considered to be passive, there is no or less need for justification and self-scrutiny. Perhaps, then, such responses point back to the viewers who "protect" themselves from feeling empathy with "actual" perpetrators and what that would say about them and their own morality. Dominick

LaCapra writes “Empathy is an affective component of understanding, and it is difficult to control.” He further argues that:

empathy is bound up with a transference relation to the past, and it is arguably an affective aspect of understanding which both limits objectification and exposes the self to involvement or implication in the past, its actors, and victims. As I have already tried to argue, desirable empathy involves not full identification but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims.³¹

The responses by Nigel to *Conspiracy* or by Sam to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* cited above come close to the “empathic unsettlement” deemed “desirable” by LaCapra (which again implies a certain anxiety and monitoring of “appropriate” responses). Much more common was a type of limited reflection resulting from empathetic identification. This was especially the case among respondents who had viewed *The Reader*. In the film, the judge asks Hanna about the selection process in the camp in which she was a guard, upon which Hanna asks the judge: “What would you have done?” The judge is unable to respond. This scene may have encouraged respondents to ponder upon Hanna’s question, and whether they would have inflicted pain on others. A majority of them mused what they would do if put in Hanna’s situation; reasoned that they could not judge her as they would have done the same as her; or simply concluded that the times were different then. They interpreted Hanna’s crimes, her joining the SS, and her sexual relationship with a teenage boy along these lines. Richard (35, programmer), who along with four of his friends took part in a group discussion about the film, argued that Germans at the time were afraid of starving, due to memories of the post-World War One period and the financial crisis. Against this backdrop, he continued:

Richard: you've got a family to support and someone says, "here's a good job but you gotta do some bad things," || Mary (34, teacher): What would you do to keep your family alive? ||| you know, I, I, as I said, I, I honestly don't know what comes first, your family or your morals, it, that, that's an interesting question.

Marina (26, student): Will they, will they explain to you, "you have to do bad things," in the first place when they offer you the job?

Richard: Well, no, they probably don't and _ . || Daniel (32, unemployed): Well, no, they never come to you, "right, we gotta go and kill loads of things," ||| You fall into it.

|| Daniel: they say, "we're gonna build a new society." |||

Richard: And it sounds all good and then you suddenly realise what that actually means but by then it's too late, even in a position where, "well, okay, I can say 'no', I'll get killed and my family will starve" ... I can understand ... enough to know that I don't understand that fear <laughs> .³²

The Reader can encourage a complex and self-reflexive engagement with the perpetrators. The discussion above goes, of course, well beyond the film and taps into the respondents' prior understandings. Of particular note is a distinct reluctance to pass judgment. Acknowledging one's own capacity for committing crimes and atrocities can be an important step towards developing a deeper understanding. But ultimately, empathizing with Hanna, or the German population more generally, appears to eclipse considerations about agency, why respondents thought they would react in a similar way, or how they could prevent this; the reactions were generally defensive more so than contemplative. Understanding and condemning "simultaneously seems impossible."³³ Katharina Hall warns that "empathetic identification" with the German memory and experience during the National Socialist period tends "to obscure

the Jewish experience of the Holocaust and to allow an avoidance of an engagement with the issues of responsibility and guilt.”³⁴ Indeed, we can think of Alison Landsberg’s concept of “prosthetic memories” produced through films and exhibitions, which sees empathy generated across class, gender, and ethnic boundaries.³⁵ In the case of films focusing on perpetrators’ pain and ambivalence, empathy can also transcend ethical boundaries. *The Reader*, and to a lesser extent *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, facilitated empathetic identification with perpetrators and “bystanders.” Neither film equally incorporated both the perpetrators’ and the Jewish perspectives. Perpetrators and their families can emerge as victims in these films and their reception. Yet none of the above interpretations was formed in a vacuum, but resonates with existing patterns and frames of thought and understanding.

Conclusion

Emotions clearly play an important role in the reception of Holocaust films, which are, by their very definition, films about violence, pain, and suffering. The excerpts from interviews with viewers, which are only snapshots yet indicative of wider trends, suggest that pain and emotions (represented on screen, and experienced and reflected upon by viewers) are a productive lens through which to analyze Holocaust film reception. It helps shift attention away from the film text, and any presumed or measured “effects,” towards the relationship between the text and the viewer, and the wider context in which both are embedded. It clearly matters what viewers bring with them in terms of knowledge, personality, and interests.

Affect, closely linked with cognition, can be a powerful vehicle for an empathetic engagement with the victims of the Holocaust, for introspection and even “empathic unsettlement.” Viewers may abhor the violence, pain, and suffering presented to them, either not enjoy a film or deny that they do, yet they feel obliged to continue watching; to watch a Holocaust film becomes memory work. But we have also seen the very limits of empathy in

this context, that require us to consider the ethics of pain. The suffering of perpetrators appears to eclipse or at the very least balance their infliction of pain on others, a process that is eased by films' omission of explicit violence against victims. The representation of violence is thus as important as a lack thereof. A more nuanced cinematic engagement with violent actors is welcome, and chimes with the on-going trend in historiography. But the move towards ambiguous portrayals and the encouraged identification with perpetrators does not necessitate fuller understanding or introspection among viewers beyond the point of recognizing one's own capacity for evil; it stops short of considering personal responsibility in how to prevent, monitor or challenge such capacity.

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003): 95.

² See e.g. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Christian Gudehus, Stewart Anderson and David Keller, "Understanding *Hotel Rwanda*: A reception study," *Memory Studies* 3 (2010): 347-8.

³ See e.g. Wilhelm Hofmann, Anna Baumert and Manfred Schmitt, "Heute haben wir Hitler im Kino gesehen: Evaluation der Wirkung des Films des Films 'Der Untergang' auf Schüler und Schülerinnen der neunten und zehnten Klasse," *Zeitschrift für Medienpsychologie* 17, no. 4 (2005): 132-46; Marco Dohle, Werner Wirth and Peter Vorderer, "Emotionalisierte Aufklärung: Eine empirische Untersuchung zur Wirkung der Fernsehserie 'Holocaust' auf antisemitisch geprägte Einstellungen," *Publizistik* 48, no. 3 (2003): 288-309. Due to these studies' preoccupation with German audiences, they tend towards an overall focus on "attitudes" towards the Nazi past and its legacy in the present. An exception is a study about the reception of a film about the Rwandan genocide, *Hotel Rwanda*. See Gudehus *et. al.* "Understanding *Hotel Rwanda*."

⁴ The study challenged empirically unsubstantiated assumptions about the impact and effects of Holocaust films on viewers. It established that the reception of such films is multi-faceted and cannot be fully understood through textual analysis alone. Preconceptions, emotions, and perceptions of authenticity ought to be considered in the analysis of film reception. For details on the methodology, demographic information, and comparison of the reception of "true stories" vs. fictional films, see Stefanie Rauch, "'The Fundamental Truths of the Film Remain':

Researching Individual Reception of Holocaust Films” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 18, no. 2 (2017), Art. 14,

<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1702140> [Accessed September 15, 2017], and for a discussion of the role of preconceptions and the British case study, my forthcoming article (2018) in *History & Memory*. The individuals of the study were between 18 and 77 years old (with a majority aged 18-35), more women than men participated in the study, and there was a bias towards left-liberal leaning, White British, and well-educated respondents. Of 68 participants, 52 were British, with the remainder from Northern Ireland, Germany, France, USA, Czech Republic, Spain, and Greek Cyprus. In this chapter, I use real names or pseudonyms when citing from and referring to individuals interviewed as part of this study, in accordance with their express wishes.

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⁵ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* [1980], ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (London: Routledge, 2005): 117-127, esp. 123-24. James E. Young highlights in the context of memorials that their actual uses may be very different from their intended purpose. The meaning of a memorial can undergo “an evolution in the memorial’s significance.” James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993): 2-3. See also Mark Hewitson, “Introduction: Visualizing Violence,” *Cultural History* 6, no. 1 (2017): 14-15.

⁶ Interview with CH, *Conspiracy*, May 13, 2011: [lines] 16-19.

⁷ Froma I. Zeitlin, “The Vicarious Witness: Belated Memory and Authorial Presence in Recent Holocaust Literature,” *History & Memory* 10, no. 2 (1998): 6. Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁸ Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003): 16.

⁹ Thomas McKay, *A multi-generational oral history study* (University of Leicester: unpublished thesis, 2010): 175.

¹⁰ Vivian C. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004): 73.

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- ¹¹ Interview with LS, DL and OS, *The Grey Zone*, March 28, 2011: 89-93.
- ¹² Interview with MR, *The Grey Zone*, May 17, 2011: 409-433.
- ¹³ James E. Young, *The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 107.
- ¹⁴ Interview with HL, *The Reader*, December 7, 2011: 83-90.
- ¹⁵ Interview with JE, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, September 28, 2011: 154-165.
- ¹⁶ Interview with SC, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, February 15, 2012: 18-23.
- ¹⁷ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*: 26-27.
- ¹⁸ “Laughter at Film Brings Spielberg Visit”, *New York Times* (April 13, 1994), <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/13/us/laughter-at-film-brings-spielberg-visit.html> [Accessed August 9, 2017].
- ¹⁹ Interview with BR, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, November 15, 2011: 72-73.
- ²⁰ Interview with SC, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, February 15, 2012: 461-469. < ... > indicates para-verbal expressions.
- ²¹ Interview with AL, *Defiance*, January 11, 2012: 189-191.
- ²² Interview with TR and JT, *Defiance*, March 8, 2011: 289; Interview with YA and MC, *Defiance*, November 4, 2011: 7-10.
- ²³ Interview with SW, SA, JO and DG, *The Grey Zone*, September 12, 2011: 121-128.
- ²⁴ Interview with SW, SA, JO and DG, *The Grey Zone*, September 12, 2011: 96-109.
- ²⁵ Interview with RJ, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, September 27, 2011: 17-20.
- ²⁶ Interview with NC and MK, *Conspiracy*, December 9, 2011: 90-100.
- ²⁷ Interview with SP, *The Reader*, October 26, 2011: 212-224.
- ²⁸ Interview with LW, *The Reader*, February 1 2012: 169-179.
- ²⁹ Interview with SP, *The Reader*, October 26, 2011: 232-239.
- ³⁰ Sue Vice, “Exploring the Fictions of Perpetrator Suffering,” *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 2, nos. 1-2 (Spring/Fall, 2013): 16.
- ³¹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001): 102-103.
- ³² Interview with RP, MG, DP, MS, and EJ, *The Reader*, October 11, 2011: 921-947. Utterances in || ... || mark an interruption of the current speaker by another person.

³³ William Collins Donahue, *Holocaust as Fiction: Bernhard Schlink's "Nazi" Novels and Their Films* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010): 140.

³⁴ Katharina Hall, "The Politics of Memory: Memory and the Dynamic of Empathetic Identification within Historical Accounts of National Socialism and the Holocaust," *The Journal of Holocaust Education* 8, no. 3 (1999): 43-44.

³⁵ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*.