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Performing Holocaust Memory: Judd Ne'eman's Zitra

by

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Memory and its representations can reveal as much about a culture's sense of itself as they do about its past. Israeli critics have traced the ways in which representations of the Holocaust in their country's films reflect, among many other issues, Israeli culture's preoccupation with the construction of Israeli identity. According to one critic, the Holocaust survivor in films of the 1940s and 1950s embodied weakness and passivity: "all the traits that Israeli identity [was] meant to contrast."[1] In the 1970s, another critic suggests, films "read" the Holocaust from a "nationalist perspective…highlighting heroic resistance…."[2] Thus, within a few decades, Israeli cinema seems to have represented in radically different ways—through the lens of the Holocaust—the intricacies of Israeli identity formation: first, by shaping memory in terms of the putative weaknesses of diaspora Jews, contrasting them with the strengths of the "new" Israeli Jew; and later, by emphasizing characteristics that linked heroic resisters with heroic Israelis.

In the 1990s, a film based upon a theatrical performance complicated connections between the Holocaust and the construction of contemporary Israeli identity. Asher Tlalim's *Don't Touch My Holocaust* (*'Al tig'u li ba-Sho'ah,* 1994) abandons what Regine-Mihal Friedman calls the "traditional and acknowledged homage to survivors" that had become common by that time in Israel; the film employs instead techniques of "parody and satire" to highlight "certain repulsive aspects of Israeli culture" that seemed to spring from memory of the Shoah.[3]

1. Nurith Gertz, "From Jew to Hebrew: The 'Zionist Narrative' in the Israeli Cinema of the 1940's and 1950's," *Israel Affairs* 4, no. 3 (1998): 175. For a fuller description of what Dina Porat calls Israeli "attitudes" toward Holocaust survivors in the early years, see, e.g., her "Attitudes of the Young State of Israel toward the Holocaust and Its Survivors: A Debate over Identity and Values," in *New Perspectives on Israeli History: The Early Years of the State*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein (New York and London: New York University Press, 1991), 15–174.

2. Ilan Avisar, "Personal Fears and National Nightmares: The Holocaust Complex in Israeli Cinema," in *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 146–47.

3. Regine Mihal-Friedman, "The Double Legacy of *Arbeit Macht Frei*," *Prooftexts* 22, nos.1 and 2 (2002): 201, 209.

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Acknowledging that the Holocaust was, as Yosefa Loshitsky observes, "the primary formative factor in the shaping of Jewish-Zionist consciousness," this film invokes the past primarily to clarify its effects on contemporary identity and behavior. In Tlalim's own words, the film is "structured like an internal journey and each spectator is invited to look at his own life"; the film encourages Israelis "to relate to memory here and now, see ourselves as we live it now and not as it really happened."[4] Representational emphasis has shifted here from the past to the present, from the suffering of European Jews to the residual damage left by history on contemporary Israelis and their culture. Omer Bartov notes this film's "ruthlessness and self-criticism" of Israeli culture and its " mockery of deeply entrenched platitudes" concerning the Holocaust and its survivors; the film's "empathy for the true victims of inhumanity," Bartov points out, identifies among the victims Arab Israelis, non-Ashkenazic immigrants, and "new" Israeli Jews of the second and third generations. Continuing cinema's preoccupation with the construction of Israeli identity, this film "reveals" that "half a century after the Holocaust and the establishment of the Jewish State, the 'new Jew' of Zionist aspirations is perhaps more than ever the victim of circumstances of his own creation." Bartov refers here, of course, to the historical and political circumstances that linked the beginning of the state and the forging of national identity to the persecution and eventual extermination of European Jewry. The trauma that surrounds this history leaves what Bartov calls a "memory hole," which Tlalim's film attempts to "plug": by satirizing both the effects upon an ethnically mixed population of annual Holocaust memorial observances in Israel, and also the scars borne by survivors whose suffering has taught them to feel contempt for "others" and who pass on their condescension to their children.[5]

Into this stream of cultural adaptation to a scarred and formidable past, Judd Ne'eman inserts his new film, *Zitra* (2008), a documentary that represents neither heroism, nor weakness, nor passivity in those who experienced the Holocaust; that neither parodies nor satirizes them nor holds them responsible for contemporary Israeli identity or cultural shortcomings. Instead, preoccupied primarily with the problem of memory, this film lifts up the possibility of reconciliation with "others" who share this past, and highlights the sometimes transformative power of artistic performance: for its cast of characters, for those imprisoned within the ghetto/stalag of Theresienstadt, and for those who come after—for whom the historical trauma of the Holocaust is, as Shoshana Felman insists, "not over."[6]

4. Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 40–41.

5. Omer Bartov, *The Jew in Cinema: From The Golem to 'Don't Touch My Holocaust'* (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2004), 284, 286–87.

6. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), xiv. The whole question of memory, its uses and abuses, is brought most recently up to date in Susan Rubin Suleiman, "History, Memory, and Moral Judgment in Documentary Film: On Marcel Ophuls's *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbi*," in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, ed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and

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Where the Work Begins

Zitra marks an important shift in the trajectory not only of Israeli films but also of films within Judd Ne'eman's own oeuvre. Winner in 2009 of the Israel Prize for cinema, this director set most of his earlier films in Israel and dealt in them, critically, with contemporary Israeli political, cultural, and social issues.[7] *Zitra* articulates new interests in his work—in the residue of the European past and also in the transformative potential of artistic performance. Here he looks at the effort to carry a traumatic past into a more promising present, filming a troupe of Israeli high school students who perform, with German students in Germany, a play about the Jews of Terezin. He describes the origin and process of its production in this way:

> [T]he performance was conceived in the Tel Aviv High School for the Arts by musicologist Dr. Ruth Katz…and playwright and theater director Eliana Shejter, who wrote the play and staged it with seventh-grade [equivalent to the American eleventh grade] students in theater and music. Eliana based the play on written memories of survivors from Terezin, and on…interviews with survivors in Israel… among them, Manke Alter, who appears in the film. The staged play existed in 2005, when I first saw it as my daughter Liba performed in it. I then conceived and initiated cooperation with the German conservatory of Schwerin, Germany… to create the mixture of Hebrew and German languages and Jewish and German third-generation student players. The new staging with the German and Israeli high school students that I filmed was rehearsed in the Tel Aviv High School in November 2006. We performed in Tel Aviv, and then traveled to Schwerin, Germany, to rehearse and perform there. Then we traveled to Berlin, where I filmed certain scenes on location. Rehearsals took about a week. I conducted all interviews and discussions, but at some points Ruth Katz and Eliana Shejter gave me a hand with the interviewing. In Tel Aviv the play was performed for students and their families and the school staff. In Germany we performed for guests of the conservatory and [the] general public of this small town. All the performances

Jonathan Karp (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 353–80. Suleiman believes that the emphasis on memory has been "justly criticized" by recent theorists and historians "because it can lead not only to dogmatism and kitsch but to political instrumentalization" (355). However, she notes as well, like Shoshana Felman (quoted above), that "memory and memorialization continue to be central preoccupations in Europe and the United States; the 'obsession with memory'…is not something that can be made to go away" (356).

7. E.g., his *The Dress (Ha-simla*, 1969), *Observation on Acco* (1975), *Paratroopers* (*Masa' 'alunkot*, 1977), *Seamen's Strike* (*Ja Brechen*, 1981), *Fellow Travelers* (*Magesh ha-Kessef,* 1983), and *Nuzhat al Fuad* (2006) are all set in Israel; four of these films—like his *Streets of Yesterday* (1989) located partly in Germany—are pointedly political: critical of Israel's training of its soldiers, its social policy toward its Arab citizens, its secret service, and its treatment of Jewish citizens who dissent from governmental decisions. Only *Sheherazade's Tears* (2006), set partly in Israel and partly in the Soviet Union, begins to consider the power of artistic performance to reconstruct troubled social relationships.

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were filmed live. The film was financed by the Tel Aviv Film Fund and shown on Israeli public TV in 2009.[8]

Scenes from the students' play are embedded in Ne'eman's film. But interviews, discussions, and some important new scenes—on location in Germany and onstage, with characters in and out of costume—construct this film as a performance in which fragments of the original play are only one, albeit one essential, element. Rooted in the memory of survivors, the play sets the film in motion and brings its personae together. But the film embraces, augments, and deviates from the play within an entirely different medium and artistic form.

Like *Don't Touch My Holocaust* this film features an earlier, staged, performance; travels with its actors to Germany; and includes a survivor of the Holocaust. But *Zitra* looks primarily at the work of memory: at the way performance enhances that work, and at the possibility that performative engagement itself might change the relationship of Germans to Jews, and of all of us who come after, to the European Jewish past.

The complexity of this project partly reflects both a radical change in Ne'eman's own attitude toward memorialization of the Holocaust and an insight into the possibility of invoking this terrible past and encouraging its memory without enlarging what he calls "the deep need here to go on victimizing ourselves." Unlike the organized trips to Auschwitz that seem to Ne'eman like "touristic entrepreneurism" that may lead Israeli teenagers to see themselves as descendants of victims and thereby give youngsters "permission to become aggressive toward others," this film draws both German and Israeli students toward recognition of the agency of Jewish prisoners and toward a transformed awareness of themselves and each other as active participants in the process of remembering a shared, and still alarmingly painful, past.

Repetition as a Hall of Mirrors

Ne'eman's film is a performance, that encloses a performance, that remembers performances in a place that performed innocence to mask brutality. Like the "labyrinth of reflexions" that one contemporary critic took to be characteristic of André Gide's novels, the technique of deliberate repetition creates an "internal dialogue" within this film, inviting us both to see likeness and to recognize difference among elements that mirror one another.[9] For example, like many other films, *Zitra* offers images of trains in many venues: of railroad cars and stations, of elevated tracks in darkened streets, each image recalling not only the cattle cars that moved Jews across Europe but also, and most significant within the cinematic repertoire, the innumerable trains of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) that thread their noisy way, again and again, toward the death camps.

8. Personal communication from the director.

9. Lucien Dallenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 34, 31.

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For contemporary critics, reflexivity of this sort provides "a means whereby the work can interpret itself" and call attention to its subject.[10] But Ne'eman's subtle and insistent repetitions suggest that reflexiveness within this performative work strikes deeper—into the very fabric of the "world" in which the work was conceived and is performed. In this respect, the film reflects the seminal work of Victor Turner on culture and performance. In part, as Turner has taught us, "cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture…but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself."[11] In his view, "performative reflexivity is a condition in which [members of] a sociocultural group… reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules…which make up their public 'selves.'"[12] He understood that cultural performances were not "simple" reflectors but rather "magical mirrors" that can construct the "self-knowledge of a group." By "arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves,"[13] performance could even provide "an evaluation (with lively possibilities of rejection) of the way society handles history."[14] Anthropology illuminates several ways in which performance becomes reflexive, allowing repetitions not only to let us compare and contrast, but also, perhaps, to provoke us to see through them, into the compulsions that keep them alive and present in our memories.

This film, I believe, honors that deeper function of cinematic repetition in Holocaust films, suggesting an interpretive possibility that helps us to see not only what they reflect but also why they persist. As *Zitra* gives us images of trains carrying young Israeli students toward Germany, as we gaze at enormous railroad stations or watch trains rattle by in the night above German streets where actors dressed as SS men round up actors dressed as Jews for deportation to Auschwitz—the repetitions suggest the failure of contemporary culture to grasp their meaning, to understand them. We see ourselves, inhabitants of a culture unable to forget, still struggling with memories that persist—without making sense of its history.[15]

Liminality and the Possibility of Change

Zitra, which means "tomorrow" in Czech, explores explicitly one possibility of moving beyond this hall of mirrors in which collective memory seems to be caught. The film's subtitle, "truth and reconciliation," suggests the possibility of

10. Dallenbach, *Mirror*, 55.

11. Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1987), 24.

12. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 24

13. Barbara Myerhoff quoted in Turner, *Anthropology of Performance*, 42.

14. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 22.

15. As she draws attention to the uses of repetition in *Don't Touch My Holocaust*, Regine-Mihal Friedman also invokes Freud's classic essay that links repetition to mourning as well as later essays by Deleuze and Lacan that deepen and complicate the range of interpretive possibilities opened by this representational device.

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cooperative, performative recollection that might transform relationships between the descendants of "victims" and "perpetrators." It is a possibility familiar to anthropologists who have studied the intentions and effects of cultural performances: "entertainments" that often seek to create liminal spaces in which social ruptures might be healed. The word "entertainment" itself, Turner pointed out, actually means "liminal in English, for it derives from the Latin 'to hold between,' to be neither this nor that, but the problem in the middle—a problem which, staged in liminal surrounds, 'entertains' rather than threatens."[16] A "liminal" moment, Turner explains, is "that time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another. It is when the initiand is neither what he has been nor what he will be."[17] The *limen* (threshold) in *Zitra* marks a passage across boundaries between one state of being, one way of knowing, and another.[18]

Both the Jews of Theresienstadt and the students who perform the play enter liminal time and space in this film. European Jews had passed into such a state of being when they were torn from their ordinary lives, deported, and ghettoized. Israeli students also pass into a "liminal" state as they are transported to Germany, where they enter into cooperative performance and the mutual self-exposure of interviews and frank discussion with German counterparts who share this troubled history. Israelis and Germans who become characters in this film are caught *en passage*, as it were, between what they have been and will become, within a liminal space "between established cultural subsystems" in which, anthropologists assure us, "'meaning' may be generated."[19] As the students perform memory and speak their own "truths," the film asks us to consider whether they can achieve "reconciliation"—with the past and with one another.

The ambiguities, uncertainties, and ironies that liminality engenders are pervasive in this film. For example, we know from survivor testimony that Terezin was quite literally a liminal space, a way station between the ordinary lives from which Jews had been torn and the gas chambers to which—we know, but they did not—virtually all of them would be deported. Faithful to this ironic sense of Terezin as a literal, historical, threshold, *Zitra*'s students play out first the lives of Czech Jews before deportation—showing us in dialogue and pantomime their preoccupations, their social and domestic pretensions. We watch them selecting fruit to buy, arguing within the family, parading in public—stiff and self-satisfied, all dressed up—then buying and reading newspapers that describe Germans drinking their tea and planning to conquer Europe.

The journey of these Czech citizens from their secure, comfortable world to the ghetto that functions as a threshold to the death camps is ironically evoked in a

16. Turner, *Anthropology of Performance*, 41.

17. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 108.

18. Performance theorist Dwight Conquergood describes the boundaries crossed in performance as "more like a membrane than a wall" in "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 145–46.

19. Turner, *From Ritual to Theater*, 41.

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scene that shows the Israeli and German students who play these Jews—lost, directionless, and unable to comprehend how so many of them will be able to fit into the tiny ghetto of Theresienstadt. In a scene added to the original play by the film's director, students play out their deportation as they wander through the maze of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, where silent stones speak for the murdered millions who no longer needed to "fit in" anywhere, any longer.

A later scene evokes another moment *en passage* as Israeli students on a train, journeying to Berlin, speak by cell phone with a German friend. As always, this scene recalls all the trains that carried earlier Jews to their deaths. But the ambiance here is light hearted, ambiguous, ironic—for although it evokes earlier deportations of European Jews, it pictures the crossing of a threshold: the very different journey of these Israeli Jewish children toward Germans who will perform, together with the Israelis, a problematic fragment of their common history.

As actors, like initiands of earlier ritual performances, these students enter a liminal place of many languages, even become for a time what they are not, as they slip into the personae of the Jewish prisoners and Nazi guards whose roles they will play. They may be transformed in the process, may come "to know themselves better through acting," as Victor Turner suggests.[20] Or they may be transformed in another way, by discovering—within themselves—what is not themselves: "I feel evil wearing this uniform," one actor says in an interview; he is an Israeli boy dressed as an SS officer.

Crossing the boundary that divides self from other, learning at the threshold that identity may be neither fixed nor certain, the performer discovers the ambiguity that social roles and uniforms and ideological commitments often conceal; passage into the liminal space of performance thus liberates an awareness of possibility—for good or evil—within the self.

Performance as Transformation

We actually watch the transformation of one character in the film who plays herself: Manke Alter. A survivor of Theresienstadt who tells stories and sings a song in another scene added to the play in the film—changing as we watch her perform, into the coy, charming young girl who experienced in that ghetto the loss of everyone she loved. As *Zitra*'s student performers play out for us the experience of ironic ambiguity, of multiple and uncertain meanings that seem to belong to liminal experience, other transformations become revelatory. In another scene added to the play by the film's director, an Israeli boy in Nazi uniform sings Leonard Bernstein's "I Feel Pretty" as though he were a girl. As he sings, he reveals what Turner calls "the emergence of demonic and monstrous figures who represent within themselves ambiguities and inconsistencies,"[21] who become "carnivalesque."[22] It is not hard to imagine the transformative effects of

20. Turner, *Anthropology of Performance*, 81.
21. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 113.
22. Richard Shechner's preface to Turner's *Anthropology of Performance*, 7.

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such playfulness on the performer himself, as well as on those who watch his performance uncover the "girlish" vanity beneath the brutality of the storm trooper. As we watch a Jew performing a Nazi in Hebrew, Germans performing Jewish victims in German, Jews and Germans appearing to understand one another, language itself signals the transformative complexities and anachronisms that performance extracts from assumptions about identity.

Beyond these insights into the transformative effects of performance on its performers, the film also works to transform our memory of the prisoners of Theresienstadt. Many of those familiar with the history of the Holocaust, for example, seem always to have known that in this ghetto/stalag Jews were forced to perform innocence, to conceal sadistic Nazi brutality from others. In this liminal place—a way station between ordinary life and the killing factories whose invisible presence lives as an absence at the heart of the film—starvation, disease, and torture were common. But the Germans pretended and forced their prisoners to pretend for visitors from the Danish and Swedish Red Cross that Theresienstadt was a "bright and gay town," a place where "Jews lived happily and were treated in accordance with the principles of humanity."[23] Here prisoners were forced to perform not only for such visitors but also, on occasion, for other Jews on their arrival, and even for a documentary film written and directed by Jewish prisoners, "intended for foreign consumption"—for propaganda purposes.[24]

We also seem always to have known that Nazis tortured Jews by forcing them to participate in this kind of masquerade; other films have constructed our memory of Jewish prisoners who performed in such places. *Bach in Auschwitz (*Netherlands, Michel Daeron, 1999) and *Playing for Time* (USA, Daniel Mann, 1980) have shown us the anguish suffered by Jewish musicians forced to play waltzes—while prisoners were herded into gas chambers; or while they were marched, exhausted and starving, out to work as Nazi officers relaxed and enjoyed the music. Lanzmann's *Shoah* actually opens with the unforgettable image of one Jewish child, chains on his ankles, who "had to sing" for the Germans while "people were being killed"; "he sang, but his heart wept," one Polish witness remembers.

But in Theresienstadt at the end of 1942 the Jews prepared performances for themselves and for one another. Into this place the Nazis had gathered the Jewish musicians, writers, actors, and painters of occupied Europe. *Zitra* honors these and other Jewish artists harmed or expelled by the Nazis: in its sound track that presents their music; in drawings, sketches, and posters that appear with the opening credits; and in scenes that show us the streets where they lived or the monuments that keep their memory. In this respect too, this film is deeply preoccupied with the work of artists and performers. These actors, poets, composers, and painters were ultimately sent from Theresienstadt to the gas chambers in the East. But at the end of 1942 the Germans, wishing to "stabilize" conditions

23. Zdenewk Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1983), 100.
24. Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 108, 119.

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in the ghetto so that transport to the death camps could proceed unhindered, permitted the open resumption of cultural life. Music, art, poetry, and cabaret flourished.[25]

In the students' play, the Jews of Terezin perform not for the Nazis, and not for propaganda purposes, but only for one another, transforming their experience into satire and song. They uncover their instruments with extreme gentleness; they play emotional scenes in several languages so gracefully that one is not disturbed by a question asked in Hebrew and answered in German; German students sing and play the "forbidden Jewish music" as if they owned it; and German and Israeli students together romp through their satiric cabaret performance. They form a chorus line, dancing and high kicking, pausing only to deliver quasi-vaudevillian lines that mock the reality of their experience: "Every show here is special…because every show could be the last!"; "how beautiful is our resort town…reddish bricks…. [T]hey give the place a military look!"; "What have we done to deserve all this?" "Isn't the blame always put upon the Jews? Why not blame the bicycle riders?" "Why the bicycle riders?" "Why the Jews?"

Ne'eman's editing interlaces rehearsals with performances of the cabaret so that one senses the cabaret itself as a ritual gesture, a phenomenon that persists, unchanged, despite differences in costume, cast, and camera angles.[26] This confluence of performances and rehearsals allows the film to carry into perception and memory a holistic, fluid image of an ongoing activity. *Zitra* provokes us to recognize through this montage a kind of ritual in which initiands and their circumstances may vary, may even disappear, but its significance—as a gesture of resistance—persists.

Here, the function of disparate performances is not only to "arouse consciousness" of a troubled past, and of those who lived it then and those who perform it now, but also to raise the possibility that performance itself may help to reconstruct relationship both to the past and to one another. The weave of performances raises such a possibility partly by transforming the image of these Jewish prisoners that one takes away from *Zitra*. The film modifies what we always thought we knew about this historical experience. We are told at the beginning that "only the music survived," but we see that while the Jews of Terezin performed, they were transformed: from victims into resisters. In the student play we see Karel Svenk, the Czech producer, reminding his lover as he is deported not that he loves her, not even that she must remember him, but that she must remember she is an actress. "Are you an actress? Are you an actress? Are you an actress?" he calls to her as Nazi soldiers haul him away. His insistence aims to reinforce the secret of resistance to despair that may save her life.

Volker Ahmels, the German musician and researcher interviewed in the film, understands this: "the cabaret…allowed them to keep their own feelings," he

25. Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 124–25.

26. Performance theorist Peggy Phelan objects to this power of documentary film to repeat the unrepeatable: "Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated," she insists. "It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as 'different,'" in Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 146.

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observes. For them, he explains, "the music was a kind of resistance…that's how they survived…. The ability to make art enabled them to stay human." The film gives us an exact image for this insight into performance as resistance in a scene added to the play by the film's director. A Jewish saxophonist begins to play a marvelous tango on a darkened street. When a Nazi officer takes away the instrument, the prisoner whistles the melody to its conclusion.

This film's power to provoke a new awareness of Jewish victims as resisters is particularly important to those who come after. As Ruth Katz, the Israeli music director, explains: in the 1950s, Israelis "despised the Jews that were killed because they didn't resist." But we see here a different facet of those who were lost. We do not forget, as the German teacher Volker Ahmels reminds us in his interview, that when the Jews were sent from Terezin to Auschwitz they seemed to become less than human; in Auschwitz they had no names, only numbers branded on their arms. But beside that memory the film constructs another perception: we see that while they were in Terezin, as Ahmels told the interviewer, "the ability to make art enabled them to stay human," an almost unimaginable act of resistance in circumstances calculated to demean and diminish their humanity. They play while they can, defying those circumstances. And when they are deported, we see them pass the instruments to those who remain.

Cinema and the Work of Memory

Perhaps even more important, the film transforms not only what, but also how we remember; it suggests that how we remember shapes our connection both to this history and also to one another. For Germans as well as Jews, the meaning of this terrible past is always clouded by the sense of loss that surrounds it. For Jews, of course, the loss of lives and of confidence in the security that once appeared to be guaranteed by legal and social procedures predominates. For Germans there is the loss of confidence in their cultural heritage. But those who speak in this film—descendants of victims, resisters, and their oppressors—also share an uncertainty about how to move toward one another and how to move forward from a past so deeply scarred. Like those who survived the Holocaust, whose experience of trauma often obscured memories, those who come after also experience what Giorgio Agamben calls an "aporia," a gap in which the pain of loss disrupts the narrative of history.[27] While collective memory hesitates, and then stumbles, over this gap, descendants on both sides lose the felt sense of connection to their past and to one another.

Zitra dramatizes that division between then and now, allowing us to visualize and to feel the effort to recall and to clarify what seems elusive, foreign, painful, yet important to remember. Manke Alter, who survived Theresienstadt, acts out for us this aporia, this place of absence that she struggles to fill with recollection. "What did he say to me?" she asks in a scene added to the play in the film. "It was very important!" "What was that song we sang all the time?" she insists,

27. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 12.

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tapping her forehead as if to dramatize, and beg forgiveness for, this gap in memory.

Manke Alter's efforts figure the central issue of *Zitra*, which is the work of remembering. Claude Lanzmann believed that film can help us to remember by allowing us "to relive the most unfathomable aspects of the Holocaust…by an active process of witnessing, a joint enterprise of survivors and those who receive—in reverence and awe—the survivors' testimony."[28] In *Zitra* this process is complex and difficult, for the film moves back and forth across the boundary between the present and the past, as if to suggest that the past this film seeks to recall is peculiarly burdened, peculiarly elusive. "For us," Shoshana Felman explains, the Holocaust has become "a cultural secret…which essentially we are still keeping from ourselves, through various forms of communal or of personal denial, of cultural reticence or of cultural canonization."[29] We may pretend it is possible to simply move forward—"get past it"; or we may turn away, thinking we need not speak of what everyone already knows; or we may elevate it in our rhetorical practice and imagination until every adversary begins to look like Hitler, every threat becomes a path to the gas chambers. But we cannot seem to close the gap that divides what came before from what came after the Holocaust.

Zitra suggests that as we watch this past performed, we may take on a kind of memory that bridges this gap. Such memory is artificial but intimately connected to us: Alison Landsberg calls it a "prosthetic memory" of painful losses. She explains that prosthetic memory can emerge "at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater…. In the process…the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live."[30] The term speaks directly to the dilemma of most viewers of this film, who seek to feel as well as recognize and remember the losses buried in this past.

Cinema becomes a medium peculiarly suited to making such losses present to us because of what one filmmaker calls its "elegiac dimension": "The camera transforms everything it films into a thing of the past," he explains. In the moment after the shutter clicks on an event or a person, it is no longer the same; thus "[f]ilm always has something to do with parting. Film concerns itself with things and people that disappear…. Parting is the great theme of every film."[31] Susan Sontag concurs: "All photographs are *memento mori*," she

28. Quoted in Suleiman, "History, Memory, and Moral Judgment," 355.

29. Felman and Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, xix.

30. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2. Again, Regine-Mihal Friedman, "Double Legacy," 203–4, sharpens one's sense of the complexity of this kind of memory by invoking its analyses by other scholars like Marianne Hirsch, Saul Friedlander, and Larry Langer.

31. The German filmmaker is quoted in Eric Santner's *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 68–69.

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writes, "all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."[32] And as they testify, they "sensitize" us, Eric Santner observes, allowing us to feel "the experience of *chronos*, that is, the passing of time and the losses and separations that belong to [our] being in time."[33] As these different voices, of filmmaker, critic, and historian, insist on the intrinsic power of film to both make a moment stay, in all its emotional complexity, and also record its passing, one recognizes the affinity that draws cinema to the figuring of a traumatic past.

The Persistence of Ambiguity

But as this film performs its reflexive magic, allowing its characters and its audience both to acknowledge the presence of those who came before and also to feel the pain of their loss, characters and audience discover that this process of taking on memory and feeling is deeply ambiguous. Filmmakers acknowledge this ambiguity in montage, by juxtaposing alternatives without choosing or prioritizing among them. One critic identifies this summoning of an audience to confusion with what she calls Max Ophüls's technique of "dialectical montage": a strategy that presents differing testimony by different witnesses, leaving viewers and participants "not only to evaluate critically but to situate [themselves] affectively…" in relation to the film's rendering of "other people's memories."[34] When we screen Ophüls's *Hotel Terminus* (West Germany, 1988), for example, we need to judge for ourselves the rightness or wrongness of characters, of words and deeds, and must feel our way, without the filmmaker's direction, toward some emotional rapprochement with, or rejection of, what we see. The audience becomes its own authority, once the film presents its data.

In *Zitra*, this data is mixed: while some participants remain hopeful about the possibilities of bridging differences between Germans and Jews, others are profoundly disappointed, darkening any expectation of the larger transformative possibilities that the film's subtitle, "truth and reconciliation," promises and that other participants affirm.

Instead, student interactions suggest a more ambivalent achievement, closer to what one performance theorist calls a "dialogical" performance that "brings self and other together even while it holds them apart. It is more like a hyphen than a period."[35] On one hand, the song that names the film, "*Zitra*," articulates hopefulness about the future, about the possibility of transformation: "tomorrow…we'll know serenity is on its way." Sung by students pretending to be the Jews of Theresientadt, written in the ghetto by one of its distinguished prisoners who was later gassed in Auschwitz, this song highlights the film's most optimistic vision: the promise that historic trauma can yield to time, to ritual "play" that illuminates

32. Though film and still photography are not identical, Sontag's insight would apply with equal power to both media. This quote is from *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 15.

33. Santner, *Stranded Objects,* 72.

34. Suleiman, "History, Memory, and Moral Judgment," 364.

35. Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography Performance," *Literature in Performance* 5, no. 2 (1985): 9.

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and transgresses the apparent boundaries of identity, and to the shared performance of a common past.

But student actors call this promise into question as they move among languages, speaking sometimes in English, sometimes Hebrew, sometimes German, as they become characters in the film and different characters in the play that is part of the film. As they struggle in interviews with the director to formulate suddenly fluid understandings of themselves, their memories, and their experiences, we become uneasily aware of deep, persistent impediments to both "truth" and "reconciliation." We begin to sense the presence of a "hyphen" between what can be known, seen, and said, and what can be felt—that still resists the give and take of language and interaction.

In group discussion among Israeli and German students and teachers, we hear persistent differences. One German boy speaks of guilt without knowing what for, of feeling disconnected personally from this history; no one in his family hurt Jews, he says. A German girl insists Germans should be relieved of "the blame that they did it;" she asks, "What Turk feels guilty today for the Armenians?" Israeli students, on the other hand, describe anxiety about meeting Germans, but also the new perspective they develop through working together. Now, one says, she sees "we are all the same…though we speak different languages…we learn from each other." Some Israeli students speak of being challenged and changed by their exposure to Germans. One Israeli boy says, "I want to ask you not to feel guilty, [but] to feel responsible…[to] take responsibility for our history that is combined with yours."

For the Israeli teachers, the director's montage makes even clearer this gap between the desire for reconciliation and the deeply qualified power of this experience to achieve it. When the director interviews Eliana Schejter, the writer and director of the student play, for example, she speaks in Hebrew of her complicated connection to Europe. "I was there," she says, continuing:

> In my subconscious, my memory, my dreams, I was there. I have a great fondness for Europe. I feel like this is home, like I should be living here…. I love the culture, the people, the intensity, the color, the scent of the air. When I see all this beauty, I look for the blood under the floor.

"Whose blood?" the director asks. "The blood of my family," she responds. The entire interview proceeds in Hebrew. But immediately we hear and see students, peering at bronze cobbles inserted into an ordinary street, explaining—in English, German, Hebrew—that these stones represent the deported. The jumble of languages, like the mixed black and gold cobbles, reinforces the terrible ambivalence of Schejter's words in which love and dread and rage, openness to fresh experience and painful historical memory, are so deeply mixed.

The film's montage creates an equally disturbing and distancing mixture as Volker Ahmels, who directs the Schwerin conservatory, tries and fails to get at the truth of his devotion to Holocaust work. A researcher who has studied what the Nazis called the "Entarte Musik" (the "degenerate music" of the Jews), he explains that his grandfather resisted Hitler and risked death by selling forbidden books.

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While he speaks, the film shows us some students diligently washing a stone wall. Ahmels smiles uncomfortably as he recalls asking his grandmother why she "didn't know" what was clearly happening to the Jews; he is unable even now to understand why Holocaust work is important to him. And again, while he speaks, we see students building a brick wall that finally stands: solid and unbreachable as the "mystery" that this smiling, haunted man cannot penetrate.

After all the rehearsals, performances, and discussions, the Israeli playwright speaks of having come to Berlin like a person with a wound; she says she will leave Berlin still wounded, but able to live with it. And Israeli students weep at the end, as they listen to one Israeli boy deny that this experience has brought "closure" for him. When he heard the German audience applaud the play, he says, "I was angry…. I said to myself: 'My God, they are actually having fun from it.'" These responses to the experience of cooperative performance testify to the presence of persistent gaps: between then and now, between "them" and "us." But these gaps are clearly marked, now, by the hyphen of dialogical encounter in performance.

In a time when historians are still struggling to grasp and describe the motives that drove the Holocaust and the larger destructive vortex of which it was a part,[36] this film enables students of the Shoah to imagine themselves as active participants in an ongoing process of remembering and understanding. Without simplifying the nature of that task, and without being sanguine about its outcome, this film clarifies the limits of such creative reworking of a terrible past by descendants of those who suffered it. For *Zitra* suggests that Judith Butler may be right, that however we try, this is a history we cannot "get over" or "work through." Genocide, for Butler, simply defies rational, sequential thought or smooth historical narrative: the gap, or "aporia," it creates in memory becomes the "signature of its history."[37] And we who inherit that history find ourselves in a broken place, an "evacuated world," in which we recognize one another by the losses we share.[38] Neither reconciled nor antagonistic, we begin to understand that in such a world, from which so much is missing, perhaps this is the only kind of reconciliation that is still possible for Jews and Germans.

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36. Perhaps two review essays on recent scholarship in the *New York Review of Books* will suggest the nature and scope of these changes; see, e.g., Anne Applebaum, "The Worst of the Madness," November 11, 2010. http://nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/11/worst-madness (accessed February 28, 2012); and Timothy Snyder, "A New Approach to the Holocaust" (June 23, 2011): 54–56.

37. Judith Butler, "Afterword: After Loss, What Then?" in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 468.

38. Walter Benjamin's phrase, quoted by Butler, "Afterword," 471.

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