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# Screening Women's Complicity in the Holocaust: The Problems of Judgement and Representation

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This essay analyses the representation of female perpetrators in Holocaust fiction films, particularly in relation to the persecution of prisoners in the Nazi camps. The screening of women in general, and female perpetrators in particular, is shown to be problematic due to their frequent marginalisation and the gendered, voyeuristic ways in which women's bodies are often objectified in Holocaust films. While the actions of female perpetrators and their depiction in films pose acute problems of judgement and representation that need to be acknowledged, it is argued that films have the potential to effectively explore the issue of women's complicity in the Holocaust.

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In Roberto Benigni's controversial Italian film *Life is Beautiful* (1997), a group of unknowing Jewish women and elderly men is sent to the 'undressing room' in preparation for being gassed. One benevolent man, who is known to the viewer through his brief interaction with the film's protagonist, obediently begins to take off his clothes. At the same time, a stern-looking SS woman enters from the gas chamber and paces the room, stumbling to the floor at the feet of the old man. The Jewish prisoner helps her up, asking 'Are you hurt?' The camera settles on the guard's face as she, without replying, stares at him with only venomous hatred in her eyes. The man sadly watches her walk away as he continues to undress.

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This moment raises the complex issue of women's complicity in the Holocaust, and how this can be represented on the screen. While the scenario described seems to display some potential for a brief 'meeting' of human beings, this remains unrealised and the film makes clear that no such sentiment is to be found. Despite considerable attention being given to the issue of gender in relation to the Holocaust, the subject of female perpetrators has often found itself at the margins of popular and scholarly discourse. Nonetheless, the behaviour of women who were complicit in Nazi Germany's attempt to destroy physically all traces of European Jewry has been explored to varying degrees in Holocaust films. The 2008 film adaptation of Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* has given the subject some prominence in recent years, highlighting emotionally and morally fraught issues of understanding, representation and judgement.

Examining the complexities of judgement and responsibility in relation to perpetrators is crucial in order to develop a deeper understanding of the Holocaust, both in terms of its implementation and the ways in which collective memories have been formed and re-formed in its aftermath. With this in mind, the following discussion examines the experiences and behaviour of female camp guards and how these are addressed through the medium of film. This issue is of considerable importance given that the portrayal of women in Holocaust cinema has proven highly problematic in general. Emphasising the fact that many filmmakers have employed images of women as sexualised and eroticised objects within narratives that pivot on men's experiences, I investigate the modes of representation (and judgement) that have been employed to screen women's complicity in the Holocaust. I argue that while the medium is faced with significant obstacles, some films reveal considerable potential in moving beyond voyeuristic tendencies and representing those responsible for the Holocaust in a nuanced manner.

### **Judging the Perpetrators: Nazism, Patriarchy and the Complexity of Human Behaviour**

[T]he network of human relationships inside the Lagers was not simple: it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors. In anyone who today reads (or writes) the history

of the Lager is evident the tendency, indeed the need, to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to repeat Christ's gesture on Judgment Day: here the righteous, over there the reprobates.<sup>1</sup>

In 1986, the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi explored the crucial intersection of judgement and representation in his highly influential essay, 'The Grey Zone'. Levi's 'grey zone', predominantly a metaphor for moral ambiguity, primarily concerns the traumatic experiences of so-called 'privileged' Jews – those prisoners in the Nazi-controlled ghettos and camps who were forced to 'cooperate' in order to prolong their own and/or their families' lives. Arguing that judgement of these victims should be suspended, Levi emphasises the necessity of avoiding 'heroic' discourses, rejecting black-and-white stereotypes that glorify the persecuted and demonise their persecutors, and acknowledging moral ambiguity – whether this be the controversial behaviour of victims, or moments of hesitation and reluctance on the part of perpetrators. The interrelated problems of judgement and representation in relation to 'privileged' Jews have been discussed at length elsewhere, and it is important to note that Levi's call to suspend judgement did not extend to perpetrators.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Levi does tentatively situate perpetrators within the 'grey zone'.

At times, the 'grey zone' seems to involve a spectrum of moral behaviour that requires close and careful deliberation, and along which inmates and persecutors alike can be situated. Levi's analysis of a brief moment of reluctance on the part of SS *Oberscharführer* Mühsfeldt, who was assigned to supervise the killing process at Birkenau and was not otherwise averse to killing Jews, concludes that he too must be placed, 'though at its extreme boundary, within the grey band'.<sup>3</sup> Seldom did individuals inhabit the far extremes; 'saints' or 'sadists' were, for Levi, an exiguous minority. Meditating on the 'blurred' dividing line in 1984, Levi stated in an interview that while both victims and perpetrators could be seen to have undergone 'dehumanisation', for the former it was imposed, and for the latter 'more or less chosen'.<sup>4</sup> Victims and perpetrators must still be distinguished from one another. Yet in a similar manner to Tzvetan Todorov's more recent reflections on the camps, Levi's writings are permeated with his conviction that victims were neither 'heroes' nor 'saints', and their persecutors neither

'monsters' nor 'beasts'.<sup>5</sup> In what is perhaps the most chilling aspect of the Holocaust, its perpetrators – women and men – were *human beings*, and should be remembered and represented as such, with a view to forming the most complete understanding possible within the vast restrictions of source material, limitations of perspective, and the unprecedented, 'incomprehensible' nature of the event.

When examining women's complicity in the Holocaust, important contextual issues must be taken into account. A considerable literature has established the deeply patriarchal nature of Nazi German society and ideology, in which women were cut off from the 'masculine' sphere of politics and (in theory) relegated to their 'place' in the home as idealised, self-sacrificing child-bearers (although the necessities of war saw their widespread participation in the workforce). In apparent contradiction to the Nazis' blending of fascism and sexism, scholars have also pointed to the 'special appeal of Nazism to girls and young women'.<sup>6</sup> While it is clear that the Nazis' support for, and enforcement of, patriarchal attitudes played a key role in obtaining and consolidating their psychological hold on much of German society,<sup>7</sup> Claudia Koonz observes that, 'far from remaining untouched by Nazi evil, women operated at its very centre'.<sup>8</sup> A tension exists between female perpetrators participating (often enthusiastically) in a system that demonised and persecuted ideologically 'inferior' groups, and the discrimination they underwent on the basis of their sex. Of course, this tension is not enough to exculpate female perpetrators who worked in the camps, though it is an important part of the socio-historical context of women's experiences that needs to be kept in mind.

The diversity of women's experiences ensures that the question of how groups and individuals are to be placed within the commonplace categories of 'bystanders', 'collaborators' and 'perpetrators' of the Holocaust is often a vexed one. Exemplifying the difficult task of neatly 'categorising' those complicit with Nazism is the fact that some women who began as enthusiastic supporters later became ardent opponents of the regime.<sup>9</sup> From a different perspective, Ralph Leck points out that while women who supported the Nazis' 'affirmation of Christian motherhood' cannot be classified as 'personal participants in genocide', they do share the responsibility for the 'uncritical and bigoted atmosphere' that extreme Christian and

heterosexist ideologies created.<sup>10</sup> John Roth contends that 'many German women occupied for the most part a position between that of *perpetrator* and *bystander*', classifying them instead as 'partners'.<sup>11</sup> While women who served as guards in the Nazi concentration camps can readily and with little controversy be fitted into the category of 'perpetrator', this in itself does not resolve the problem of how such women should be perceived and judged. However, my focus here on female perpetrators in the camps is not representative of either the Holocaust, or women's complicity in it, as the Nazis' destruction of Europe's Jews employed a variety of methods and took place in a multitude of different settings.

The work of feminist scholars has gone some way to ameliorating the initially dismal state of Holocaust research into the experiences of women; however, certain paths still remain only lightly travelled. Indeed, the majority of research into women's experiences has (understandably) concentrated on victims,<sup>12</sup> while research focusing on female camp guards is limited.<sup>13</sup> The influential Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer's reconsideration of 'the problem of gender' in his study *Rethinking the Holocaust* makes no mention of female perpetrators.<sup>14</sup> Fifteen years ago, Joan Ringelheim identified the anxiety over, and absence of, discussions of female perpetrators as part of what she termed 'the split between gender and the Holocaust',<sup>15</sup> and to a large extent this still remains. As a result of this split, combined with the fact that female perpetrators were vastly outnumbered by men, the former rarely figure in debates over perpetrator motivation and behaviour. While even Koonz writes that female camp guards were 'statistically insignificant', more than 3,000 individuals served in the main and auxiliary camps during the war, and make consistent appearances in survivor testimonies.<sup>16</sup> These women have, on the whole, been excluded from scholarly discussion.

The historiographical controversy that erupted over Holocaust perpetrators in the 1990s has itself been criticised for its gendered understanding of events.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the controversy revealed a plethora of influences and backgrounds from which (male) perpetrators of the Holocaust arose. The debate continues, although the majority of scholars have rejected Daniel Goldhagen's mono-dimensional thesis that German perpetrators were motivated by a virulent brand of 'eliminationist' antisemitism (allegedly an intrinsic

element of German national identity), and emphasised the need for a multi-faceted understanding of their behaviour.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, while Christopher Browning's characterisation of perpetrators (which, significantly, draws on Levi's concept of the 'grey zone') as prompted by financial benefit, career considerations, peer pressure, and so on, holds substantial weight, their ideological inclinations unquestionably played an important part in events.<sup>19</sup> This is clear in relation to women also, as revealed in Helga Schneider's narration of her traumatic reunion in 1998 with her frail, 90-year-old mother, Traudi, a former member of the SS. Unable to find any signs of a conscience, Schneider recounts her mother's enthusiastic attitude towards the gassing of Jewish children through the perpetrator's statement that: "I was convinced of the rightness of the Final Solution, and so I carried out my tasks with great commitment and conviction".<sup>20</sup>

While female guards were unquestionably affected by, and to varying extents indoctrinated in, Nazi ideology, Gisella Bock points out that many female camp guards were from lower-class backgrounds, and were thus motivated by the promise of 'upward mobility'. Highlighting the complexity of the factors galvanising these women's behaviour, Bock writes that 'racial hierarchy prevailed over gender hierarchy, particularly in the case of female domination over "racially inferior" women and men'.<sup>21</sup> Alluding to the importance of recognising that perpetrators were human beings who may have had some form of conscience (even if they refused to heed it), one study notes that 'the biographies of female concentration camp guards ... show that they faced some of the same moral dilemmas as men'.<sup>22</sup> Bock's reading of survivor testimonies reveals that the question of whether the treatment of prisoners by female guards was worse, better or the same as male guards remains unresolved, with arguments on all sides to be found in different texts. Instead, Bock broadly concludes that both women's similarities to, and differences from, men in perpetrating the Holocaust must be acknowledged where relevant in order to comprehend fully the role of gender and gender relations during the event.<sup>23</sup>

Women who held positions as camp guards played a significant part in the Holocaust. With this in mind, how are female perpetrators to be understood without resorting to the simplistic binary of 'good' versus 'evil' that demonises their behaviour as *inhuman*? Can women

who participated directly in persecution (physical and otherwise) as guards in the camps be judged for their actions, but, at the same time, be recognised as human and portrayed as such? While Levi rarely discussed women in his writings, he felt compelled to reflect on moral ambiguity and the 'grey zone' partly due to representations that he saw as 'trivialising' the complexity of Holocaust experiences by passing simplistic judgements. He singles out popular history and film as particularly predisposed to a 'Manichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities', and resorts to clear-cut binary opposition(s) of 'friend' and 'enemy', 'good' and 'evil'.<sup>24</sup> Levi writes in his essay that 'from many signs, it would seem the time has come to explore the space which separates ... the victims from their persecutors, and to do so with a lighter hand, and with a less turbid spirit than has been done, for instance, in a number of films'.<sup>25</sup> However, many films have been produced since, and while an ever-expanding literature on Holocaust cinema has contributed much to legitimising it as an important field of research,<sup>26</sup> little attention has been given to the judgement and representation of female perpetrators at issue here. It is important to stress that the necessity of judging women who were deeply complicit with Nazism is not open to question; it is *how* these figures are represented that is at issue here. And it is this question that proves particularly contentious when it is negotiated in the arena of Holocaust film, where depictions of women have often painted history with heavily gendered meanings, (re)inscribing patriarchal understandings of the event.

### **Voyeuristic Screenings: Eroticised Bodies and the Camera's Gaze**

Raising the salient issue of how dominant conceptions of gender can taint attempts to understand and represent perpetrators, Bock ponders whether 'the female camp guards were not crueller than the men but only seemed to be because they ... broke through gender boundaries and deviated from feminine behavior'.<sup>27</sup> Just as the perpetuation of antisemitic stereotypes in a number of Holocaust-related films threatens to reinforce ideologies that informed Nazi genocide in the first place,<sup>28</sup> modes of representation that uncritically reflect the intertwined nature of Nazism and patriarchy must also be held up to close scrutiny. Sexist representations of women in

Holocaust films have received some attention, exemplified in Anna Reading's evaluation of the genre's frequent 'stripping away of the rich variety of gendered roles and experiences and the use instead of gendered stereotypes, framed within the particular conventions of – in many cases – American masculinity and femininity current at the time of the film's production'.<sup>29</sup> This trend has resulted in the establishment of a highly problematic cultural context for any filmmaker who attempts to represent female camp guards.

Ulricke Weckel's analysis of the role of gender in liberation documentary footage stresses both the failure of Holocaust Studies generally to address female perpetrators analytically, and the problem of how these figures are judged and represented in post-war Allied films. Noting the simplistic ways in which male perpetrators are depicted, Weckel writes that 'strategies of dehumanising or demonising the originators of the incomprehensible horrors seem to have appeared even more convincing when the films presented pictures of a relatively large group of female SS personnel arrested at Bergen-Belsen'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Weckel locates appeals to 'sexualised (male) fantasies' within the narrators' commentaries overlayed on some footage.<sup>31</sup> Similar problems can be found in fiction films, which often display women's bodies in a voyeuristic manner.

In her influential analysis, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey argues that a viewer's perspective is invariably aligned in film with that of the male protagonist, hence positioning women as the erotic objects of a voyeuristic 'male' gaze.<sup>32</sup> Some feminist scholars have adopted Mulvey's concept of the cinematic gaze to discuss Holocaust films, although the depiction of female perpetrators has seldom been a central focus.<sup>33</sup> For example, Liliana Cavani's controversial Italian film, *The Night Porter* (1974), has been strongly criticised for eroticising the female body in its portrayal of the tormented post-war sexual relationship between Max, a former Nazi officer, and Lucia, the female prisoner he raped in the camp. Marga Cottino-Jones condemns this controversial scenario (which leads to both characters' dehumanisation and deaths) for relying on a 'subtle manipulation of the spectators' gaze' in order 'to enlist a voyeuristic pleasure of almost any subject, no matter how monstrous'.<sup>34</sup>

The body of the female perpetrator has frequently been enmeshed with themes of sexual perversion, sadomasochism, rape and

nymphomania, not least of all in the pornographic film *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS Special Section* (1975). Comprising abundant scenes of physical torture and sexual exploitation, the film has been critiqued not only for sexualising the Holocaust, but also gendering it with ideas that 'a woman in power is evil, a Nazi, a feminazi'.<sup>35</sup> The character of Ilsa is reportedly inspired by the (in)famous figure of Ilse Koch, an SS officer's wife in Buchenwald concentration camp, who was renowned for using her body to trap prisoners into being brutally beaten. Koch was labelled the 'Bitch of Buchenwald', among other gendered titles, and several scholars suggest that 'accounts of a sexually sadistic SS wife may have captured the popular imagination for misogynist reasons'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the character of 'Ilsa' recurs in a series of similar films, demonstrating the voyeuristic value that has been placed on the figure of the female perpetrator and her brutal behaviour. The place of these films and others like it in what Saul Friedländer has termed 'a vast pornographic output centred on Nazism' has significant implications for how female perpetrators can be represented.<sup>37</sup>

A voyeuristic gaze at the body of a woman again modelled (loosely) on Koch can also be found in Lina Wertmüller's 1975 film, *Seven Beauties*. The film follows the comedic exploits of Pasqualino, whose journey encompasses his days as a roguish scoundrel and murderer in Italy, an inmate in an insane asylum, and a prisoner in Auschwitz. The adventures of the egotistical (and mostly unsympathetic) protagonist, who is determined to survive the war at any and all costs, are propelled by his various encounters with women, who are portrayed as by turns erotic and grotesque. Invariably, the film's camerawork invites the viewer to adopt the male's gaze on women, including an obese Nazi female officer in Auschwitz named Hilde (credited as the camp's 'Commandant') who exchanges food for sex. While Eli Pfefferkorn contends that *Seven Beauties* illustrates 'the painful ambiguities that derive from survival in extremities that shame man [*sic*] into hiding',<sup>38</sup> he does not take into account the eroticised (or grotesque) bodies of *women*, and the exploitation of these bodies (by both protagonist and camera). The inversion of Koch's physical beauty, promiscuity and employment of sexual means of torturing prisoners in Buchenwald, to the icy stare and immovable, frigid body of Hilde, mobilises, as Millicent Marcus notes, 'all the mechanisms of the monstrous feminine, with its

connotations of horror, based on atavistic fears of being sucked back into the maternal womb, into the non-differentiation and abjection of the unborn state'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, this reflects Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry's point that 'monster, mother and whore narratives' often characterise depictions of Koch and other female Nazi perpetrators.<sup>40</sup> Alexandra Przyrembel posits that the ideological hold on the popular imagination of the demonised image of Koch may be 'responsible for the tendency, even within women's history, to view female perpetrators in the concentration camps as at most a "remarkably brutal and power-obsessed" minority among women, and for the reluctance, until recently, to address the specifics of these women's "exercise" of power, let alone to address the history of its reception after 1945'.<sup>41</sup> Recent years have seen significant developments in this reception.

The past decade has witnessed an increased cinematic focus on (male) perpetrators of the Holocaust in feature films such as *Good* (2008), *Eichmann* (2007) and *Before the Fall* (2004), which signify a growing interest in moving away from the previously commonplace Nazi stereotypes of indoctrinated, malignant racists, and bumbling, inefficient fools. While the 'humanisation' of Hitler in the German film *Downfall* (2004) provoked a hotly contested debate over how perpetrators should be represented, the dramatisation several years later of Schlink's illiterate, morally ambiguous concentration camp guard, Hanna Schmitz, in *The Reader*, also attracted international attention to the issue. In both cases, the major question raised has been whether or not these films unduly construct an empathetic mode of identification with the perpetrators, again exemplifying the problems of judgement and representation discussed earlier.<sup>42</sup> Schlink has himself written of the widespread criticism of his strategy of depicting Hanna with 'a human face', which he perceives as arising from 'the fear that writing about Germans as victims might damage the image of Germans as perpetrators'.<sup>43</sup> Given the extensive scholarship recently responding to *The Reader*, in addition to the fact that this film only indirectly portrays female guards in the camps, I focus here on several earlier films that provide a more direct representation of their behaviour. While many of these productions exemplify the ways in which female perpetrators have been marginalised in popular culture, several filmmakers have made concerted attempts to represent these figures on the screen.

### Screening Female Perpetrators: From Fleeting Shadows to Complex Individuals

Women's complicity in Nazism and the persecution of Europe's Jews has been thematised to a greater or lesser extent in numerous Holocaust films; however, in many circumstances, the 'screening' of this complicity involves as much a process of *concealment* as one of *exposure*. Indeed, the ambivalence with which many filmmakers have approached the subject of women's support for Nazism can be traced back to (the relatively small number of) Hollywood films that opposed Germany's fascist dictatorship prior to the United States' involvement in the war.<sup>44</sup> One example of this is Frank Borzage's 1940 drama, *The Mortal Storm*, which stars James Stewart as a conscientious German civilian living in the Alps who refuses to bow to the pressure of supporting Nazism as most of the people around him do. Significantly, and with only one exception, those who avidly support Hitler's rise to power and vocally endorse Nazi ideology throughout the film are all men. Apart from a maid who briefly announces Hitler's rise to Chancellor as 'something wonderful', the women in Borzage's film, portrayed heavily in gendered stereotypes, are either 'non-Aryan' victims, stalwart opponents of the oppressive system, or those who conform to the status quo out of sheer terror. The issue of women's complicity is also marginalised in Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, also released in 1940. Present in only one scene, the female secretary of Chaplin's Hitler-esque authoritarian ruler, 'Adenoid Hynkel', becomes a potential victim of rape when she is briefly assaulted by her Führer. Fainting in Hynkel's arms just before he is distracted and marches out of the room, the woman serves simply as a vehicle for demonising Hitler and is not seen again for the remainder of the film. The apparent anxiety on the part of filmmakers over how to grapple with women's role(s) in the Nazi regime, seen in the simultaneous screening and shielding of their complicity, has continued for many decades since.

NBC's highly influential seven-and-a-half hour miniseries, *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss* (1978), purports to touch on 'all' aspects of Nazi persecution; however, the scenes set in the camps show only male members of the SS. In a similar fashion, while a number of Holocaust films visually represent female guards in the

camps, these figures are often constructed only as secondary characters who briefly inhabit the background of the frame. Another landmark in Holocaust cinematic history, Steven Spielberg's Hollywood blockbuster *Schindler's List* (1993), contains brief images of female SS members during the temporary diversion of a group of 'Schindler Jews' to the Birkenau extermination camp. Throughout the ten minute sequence, women are shown counting and beating prisoners alongside their male counterparts. Crucially, however, the female guards only scream in (unsubtitled) German and Polish – even when the male soldiers in the same scene can be heard speaking English – thus depriving them of a 'voice' in 'the' mainstream American film about the Holocaust.

In *The Devil's Arithmetic* (2004), a modern-day Jewish girl is magically transported back in time to be deported to a camp, where her 'transport' is met by stony-faced women with clearly more ideological fervour and violence than the male guards, who stand around in a relaxed manner. During their recreation time in the evening, the now sexualised female guards are without exception shown to be fawning over the SS men. However, after the prisoners' first night in the camp – as if the budget no longer catered for the same diversity of actors – the previously large group of female perpetrators inexplicably disappears from the film. In addition to Benigni's film with which I began, similarly fleeting depictions of unnamed, aggressive and excessive female characters can be found in other films depicting the Nazi camps, including *Kapo* (1959), *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *Triumph of the Spirit* (1987), whereas the portrayal of some male perpetrators in these films is decidedly more complex. Such a trend threatens to demonise and de-humanise female perpetrators, both diminishing their importance and characterising their experiences as marked only by viciousness. Despite the widespread reluctance or inability to engage with the complexities of their behaviour, two Holocaust films that do provide substantial and nuanced representations of female guards (even though they are not the central focus of the narratives) are Daniel Mann's *Playing for Time* (1980) and Joseph Sargent's *Out of the Ashes* (2002). These filmmakers eschew voyeurism and refuse to sexualise women complicit in the Holocaust.

The CBS-TV adaptation of Fania Fénelon's memoir, *Playing for Time*, attracted four Emmy Awards and provoked considerable

controversy over its casting, such that it was boycotted by many viewers.<sup>45</sup> Sporadically combining tinted archival footage with the actors' dramatisation to evoke an enhanced sense of authenticity, the film represents the experiences of a 'privileged' prisoner orchestra in Auschwitz-Birkenau without shying away from the everyday degradations of camp life (which the orchestra is to a large extent protected from). Even though Fénelon, a figure of integrity and the moral compass of the film, shines above all those around her, the 'grey' shades of human behaviour can be found in all characters – and even Fénelon must 'compromise' her values to some degree in order to survive. Refusing to glamorise the victims or demonise the perpetrators, Mann depicts the complex relations between both groups on a number of occasions. Unlike many of the films noted above, the female guards in *Playing for Time* are clearly differentiated from one another in terms of physical appearance and general disposition. One major character within the film is Frau *Lagerführerin* Maria Mandel, described in Fénelon's memoir as the first 'representative of the German race [*sic*] [who] had looked at me, had seemed to be aware of my presence'.<sup>46</sup> Despite her position, the well kept, physically attractive and often smiling Mandel seems to be capable of humane gestures, at one point placing shoes on Fénelon's feet – much to the visible amazement of the rest of the orchestra.

The problem of how to judge Mandel is addressed explicitly through the film's dialogue, when Fénelon finds herself at the centre of a debate amongst the orchestra over how to account for the perpetrator's actions. Reacting to one prisoner's accusation that 'Mandel's nothing but a killer', Fénelon delivers a statement that exemplifies the film's nuanced approach to judging the perpetrator:

Don't try to make her ugly! She is beautiful, and she's human. What disgusts me is that a woman who is so beautiful can be doing such things. We're of the same species. That's exactly what is so hopeless about the whole thing! ... She's human! Like you, like me! You don't think that's a problem?

While an exasperated Fénelon technically has the last word, the issue is left unresolved. With the camera cutting between the proponents of various arguments and others who quietly listen, few of Fénelon's fellow prisoners seem to be convinced. Bearing in mind that the

protagonist had just been the primary beneficiary of luxury items (relative to the camp context) as a reward from Mandel, the scene provides no concrete surrogate to interpret the *Lagerführerin*'s behaviour for the audience, highlighting the fact that all perspectives are contingent on the personal circumstances and belief systems of each prisoner. At the same time, Fénelon's emphasis on the 'problem' of not being able to justifiably demonise Mandel, but also not being able to exonerate her, is borne out to a large degree in subsequent events.

The film makes clear that Mandel's generosity always disguises a personal agenda. When she enthusiastically takes a young boy from a transport – and his distraught mother – the audience is left to negotiate Mandel's seemingly genuine affection for the stolen child and the earlier image of her brutally whipping another mother whose child is being stolen. Thus, a selfish action is used to satisfy an apparent maternal need that is incompatible with her position in the SS. The representation of Mandel seems to exemplify the difficulty of generalising about – and between – women's behaviour(s), reflecting Sybil Milton's characterisation of the differences between women who were 'notorious for their cruelty ... engag[ing] in a bizarre rivalry emulating the excesses and brutalities of their male superiors', and others who 'tried to mitigate the worst extremes', with some women even facing 'sex discrimination on the job'.<sup>47</sup> As Bock notes of female guards, 'usually only unmarried and childless women were hired, and if they became pregnant they were laid off'.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, Mandel's playful manner with the child in front of the orchestra, sharing him with one of the prisoners to dance with and promising to get him 'a nice new suit and some shoes and a sweet little shirt', creates the impression that he has become as much a toy to her as someone she is likely to care for permanently. After she takes the boy outside to play with a ball, the orchestra again debate her behaviour, with half the group arguing against the other. One disbelieving woman exclaims: 'One kid she saves and suddenly she's human? What is happening here?' The problem of how to perceive Mandel's behaviour is exacerbated shortly afterwards when she is portrayed slapping her whip in her hand in an intimidating manner as two attempted escapees are executed. Her position next to a senior male officer raises the question of whether this is a necessary convention she needs to follow. Likewise, Mandel's tearful visit to the orchestra some time later reveals

that she has decided with great reluctance to 'sacrifice' the boy to the gas chambers for her country's 'greater good' (though it is unclear who or what exactly compelled her to do so). Her final appearance as the liberators draw near shows a stammering Mandel on the brink of insanity. With the behaviour of other SS women in the film ranging from killing the orchestra's conductor with poison to providing warnings about an imminent gassing, *Playing for Time* effectively depicts the complexity of the role(s) of female perpetrators.

Sargent's *Out of the Ashes*, also a made-for-television production, focuses on the ethical dilemmas confronting Gisella Perl, a Hungarian-Jewish prisoner doctor in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Perl's ambiguous position of 'privilege' saw her perform a large number of secret abortions on women who would otherwise have been sent to the gas chambers (thus saving many prisoners' lives), while at the same time assisting Dr Josef Mengele with his pseudo-scientific medical experiments.<sup>49</sup> A key figure in Perl's written testimony, on which the film is based, is the notorious Irma Grese. Nicknamed the 'Beautiful Beast', Grese is described by Perl as 'the most depraved, cruel, imaginative sexual pervert I ever came across', who had 'orgastic spasms' upon seeing the physical agony of prisoners being operated on.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, while Cathy Gelbin argues that Schlink's representation of Hanna in *The Reader* drew on the historical figure of Grese for her 'exceptional beauty, meticulous cruelty, and sexual proclivity for women',<sup>51</sup> the character of Grese in *Out of the Ashes* is in no way sexualised.

The film's narrative, propelled by Perl's interrogation by the United States immigration authorities, continuously moves between the harrowing investigation into her wartime activities and flashbacks to her life before and during her incarceration in Auschwitz. For this reason, Grese's appearances on screen are considerably fewer than those of Mandel in *Playing for Time*, yet Sargent is still able to portray her as a human being rather than an incomprehensible 'monster'. Grese's proclivity for violence is readily acknowledged in *Out of the Ashes*. In a scene depicting a roll call, a young Jewish girl – apparently kept as a kind of 'mascot' – dances while Grese and a number of other SS women smile at her. Toying with the girl, Grese points her gun at the back of the prisoner's head when Mengele arrives, asking 'Would it please you?' Grese shows slight disappointment when Mengele replies in the negative and then puts her weapon away. Later scenes

depict Grese knocking a prisoner to the ground by whipping her across the face and torturing Perl by gleefully pretending to shoot her in the head. Immediately after the latter event, a degree of complexity is established in Grese's character through a pivotal scene in which Grese, who has become pregnant, approaches Perl to perform an abortion.

The ambiguity of this situation, along with the extreme nature of the power relations between persecutor and persecuted, are highlighted in a chapter Perl dedicates to Grese's abortion in her memoir:

We were both breaking the rules. Should anyone find out about it, it would mean the end of her career as an S.S. woman ... We were both equally guilty in the eyes of her superiors, yet she held all the cards ... She could easily kill me without having to make an excuse or to give an explanation. I was sure that this was what she intended to do.<sup>52</sup>

In *Out of the Ashes*, Perl is summoned by the perpetrator to her room, the camera panning over expensive furnishings to settle on her lying in a nightgown on her bed, situated under a portrait of her Führer. Holding a gun the entire time and promising to hunt Perl down and kill her if she speaks a word to anyone, Grese's menacing disposition suddenly changes to one of concern – and then fear – as she ironically asks, 'Will it hurt? ... How long will it hurt for? I can't stand any kind of pain.' Perl's ambivalent verbal responses are a mixture of seemingly genuine compassion and mechanical comfort. Through a brief shot-reverse-shot, the victim and perpetrator exchange a moment of recognition as they look each other in the eye. Perl's gaze then shifts from the painting of Adolf Hitler down to a wincing Grese, positioning the viewer to reflect on how a woman could participate in Nazi genocide. The sequence thus highlights that perpetrators of the Holocaust such as Grese were human beings, albeit deeply flawed ones. Indeed, the film's director has himself elucidated the need for a nuanced representation of the complex, unprecedented event. Expressing a sentiment that parallels Levi's reflections on the 'grey zone', Sargent declares that the Holocaust is 'not just one black-and-white, easily identifiable, easily exploitable, and easily understandable hell on earth ... [L]ike so much in life, it contains many complex layers of human behaviour ... I hope [the film] says, if nothing else, that life is a little more complex than simplistic black-and-white.'<sup>53</sup>

Crucial to both *Out of the Ashes* and *Playing for Time* is the fact that the behaviour of perpetrators is always represented through the – often critical, sometimes ambivalent – perspectives of Holocaust victims. In doing so, the films avoid positioning viewers to identify *with* the perpetrators themselves. This kind of problematic alignment of the audience's sympathies reflects the concerns of Levi and others over such films as Cavani's *The Night Porter* and, more recently, Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Downfall*, as threatening to blur the important distinction between victim and perpetrator. As Johannes von Moltke points out in his detailed analysis of the latter film, when the emotional appeal of cultural texts dealing with the history of Nazism 'bathes the atrocities of historical perpetrators in the revisionist light of compassion, [the appeal] is fundamentally misplaced'.<sup>54</sup> While avoiding this potential problem, Mann's and Sargent's complex representations of Mandel and Grese in their films nonetheless refuse to demonise these figures, ambitiously depicting their violent behaviour alongside moments when either humanity or vulnerability – however fleeting – become visible.

Grese's complicity in the Holocaust has also been figured in another recent film only indirectly related to the Holocaust, with her final hours dramatised in the depiction of a British executioner's growing doubts over his profession in Adrian Shergold's *Pierrepoint: The Last Hangman* (2005). The problem of judgement is subtly played out when the film's protagonist is confronted with the youthful and physically attractive Grese, whose stare is by turns cold and vulnerable as she waits to be hanged. The Nazi perpetrator is first glimpsed standing in an outside enclosure with other captured Nazis, with Pierrepoint literally gazing at her through his binoculars as his temporary assistant, an American soldier, lists each perpetrator's atrocities. Interrupting this on-screen voyeuristic gaze and his assistant's grotesque litany, the ever-professional Pierrepoint tells him: 'We're not interested, do you understand? We don't care what they've done. They're human beings and they've got to die. That's all we need to know.' In this way, Grese's practice of 'walk[ing] round the camp with a bullwhip' is acknowledged through the assistant's dialogue, but so too is the problem of how to judge her through Pierrepoint's pragmatic rebuke.

When her measurements are recorded in the following scene, Grese scolds Pierrepoint for doing 'the Jews' work', reminding

Pierrepoint (and the audience) that it *does* matter what the perpetrators have done. Rather than retaliate, Pierrepoint decides that she will be the first executed – not because, as his assistant suggests, she is an ‘arrogant bitch’, but because ‘she’s the youngest, she’ll be the most frightened’. Grese’s stern but unreadable expression as she is led up the scaffold is juxtaposed with a reflective, melancholy musical score of piano and strings in a minor key, avoiding emotive poignancy but also discouraging the viewer from perceiving Grese as a ‘monster’. The celebrity status Pierrepoint finds he has obtained upon returning to Britain, where he is congratulated in the street for hanging the ‘Nazi swine’, further exacerbates his discomfort. By means of the complex portrayal of Grese’s execution through the perspective of the conflicted Pierrepoint, the female perpetrator is portrayed as a human being – to be judged but not to be demonised.

### Conclusion

At one point in his pivotal essay, Levi positions the concept of the ‘grey zone’ as a metaphorical realm with ‘ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. It possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.’<sup>55</sup> This in itself highlights the way in which Levi problematises judgement, as his characterisation of the ‘grey zone’ could be – and often has been – interpreted to involve a merging, if not a blurring, of the categories of persecutors and victims. However, Levi stresses elsewhere in his essay, and for good reason, that ‘to confuse [perpetrators] with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth’.<sup>56</sup> Accepting the inherent difficulties in judging ‘privileged’ prisoners, Dominick LaCapra similarly argues that ‘one may judge quite harshly and with little qualification Nazis who were instrumental in creating the situation that gave rise to the grey zone’.<sup>57</sup> Yet perpetrators were also *affected by* the unprecedented environments that were of their own making, and should not be simplistically demonised through the continued perpetuation of the stereotype of racially indoctrinated, malignant Nazis. In the complex cases of those women who served as camp guards at a time when

fascism and sexism overlapped, I have argued that while they cannot be exculpated from their role as perpetrators, the oppression they faced under entrenched patriarchy must nonetheless be taken into account when attempting to understand their experiences.

More research needs to be undertaken on the issue of how female perpetrators are judged and represented, in film and elsewhere. The voyeuristic eroticisation of the female body (or its abjection) within the camera's gaze has intersected strongly with what Weckel describes as 'fantasies about particularly evil Nazi women – women so wicked that they turned the gender order upside down'.<sup>58</sup> Patriarchal perspectives on women's participation in Nazi genocide, often reliant on the simplistic concept(ion) of 'evil', only detract from attempts to comprehend their behaviour. The depiction of female camp guards in several of the films discussed here underlines the importance of engaging with the twin problems of judgement and representation highlighted by Levi. As Claudia Lenz and Kirsten Heinsohn note in their analysis of the gendered portrayal of women in the documentary *Hitler's Women* (2001), contemporary representations of the Nazi past must continue to be critically examined 'as part and parcel of the cultural regulation of power and dominance'.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, the work of some filmmakers has revealed that the medium possesses considerably more potential for representing this traumatic past than Levi himself had believed. While filmic representations of female camp guards are often fleeting, I have argued that filmmakers can and do play an important role in mediating perpetrator experiences. Films such as *Playing for Time*, *Out of the Ashes* and *Pierrepont* highlight the contrasts and commonalities female guards shared with male perpetrators, exhibiting a nuanced approach to representing the complexities of women's complicity in the Holocaust.

#### NOTES

1. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 23. With many thanks to Trent Griffiths for his assistance in researching this essay.
2. For analyses of the judgements passed in representations of 'privileged' Jews in survivor memoirs, videotestimonies, historical writing, documentaries and fiction films, see Brown, 'Confronting "Choiceless Choices" in Holocaust Videotestimonies',

- 79–90; Brown, ‘Beyond “Good” and “Evil”’, 407–18; Brown, ‘Narratives of Judgement’; Brown, ‘Marginalising the Marginal in Holocaust Films’.
3. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 40.
  4. Quoted in Vigevani, ‘Words, Memory, Hope (1984)’, 253. Ilona Klein stresses this point by defining two ‘grey zones’: one between the Jewish prisoners and ‘another entirely different gamut of ambiguous shades of grey’ between the prisoners and the Nazis. See Klein, ‘Primo Levi’, 85.
  5. See Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 262.
  6. Martin, ‘Women Right/(Re)Write the Nazi Past’, 24. See also Haste, *Nazi Women*. Also noteworthy is Nazi racial ideology’s corruption of Germany’s feminist movement itself. See Johnson, ‘Nazi Feminists’, 55–62; Kirkpatrick, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 110–30.
  7. See Bridenthal, Grossmann and Kaplan (eds), *When Biology Became Destiny*.
  8. Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 6.
  9. See, for example, the discussion of one such ambiguous figure in Hinze, ‘The Case of Luise Rinser’, 143–68.
  10. Leck, ‘Conservative Empowerment and the Gender of Nazism’, 163.
  11. Roth, ‘Equality, Neutrality, Particularity’, 8 (emphasis in original).
  12. For example, female victims are the primary, if not the sole, focus of Hedgepath and Saidel (eds), *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women*; Schaumann, *Memory Matters*; Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück*; Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*; Tec, *Resilience and Courage*; Fuchs (ed.), *Women and the Holocaust*; Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*; Baumel, *Double Jeopardy*. Despite this activity, Zoë Waxman argues that women’s survivor testimonies continue to be marginalised overall. See her ‘Unheard Testimony, Untold Stories’, 661–77.
  13. One exception to this is Brown, *The Camp Women*.
  14. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 167–85.
  15. Ringelheim, ‘The Split between Gender and the Holocaust’, 340–1.
  16. See Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 404.
  17. See Allen, ‘The Holocaust and the Modernization of Gender’, 353–4.
  18. See Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. For further discussion, see Eley (ed.), *The Goldhagen Effect*; Littell (ed.), *Hyping the Holocaust*; North, *Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Holocaust*; Hay, ‘Willing Executioners or Hitler’s Will’, 119–28.
  19. See Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 187.
  20. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, 143.
  21. Bock, ‘Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany’, 89, 94.
  22. Lebor and Boyes, *Surviving Hitler*, 71.
  23. Bock, ‘Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany’, 90, 96.
  24. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 22.
  25. *Ibid.*, 25.
  26. Studies published in the last several years alone include Saxton, *Haunted Images*; Lichtner, *Film and the Holocaust in France and Italy*; Ginsberg, *Holocaust Film*; Marcus, *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz*; Picart and Frank, *Frames of Evil*; Haggith and Newman (eds), *Holocaust and the Moving Image*; Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*; Walker, *Trauma Cinema*; Hirsch, *Afterimage*.
  27. Bock, ‘Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany’, 93.
  28. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Bartov, *The ‘Jew’ in Cinema*.
  29. Reading, *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust*, 95. For further discussion, see Fuchs, ‘Images of Women in Holocaust Films’, 49–56.
  30. Weckel, ‘Does Gender Matter?’, 540, 557.
  31. *Ibid.*, 558.
  32. Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, 6–18.

33. See, for example, Waller, 'Signifying the Holocaust', 206–19; Scherr, 'The Uses of Memory and Abuses of Fiction', 278–97.
34. Cottino-Jones, "'What Kind of Memory?'" , 107.
35. Rapaport, 'Holocaust Pornography', 63.
36. See Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty*, 72.
37. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 74. Further examples include *Salon Kitty* (1976), *Deported Women of the SS* (1976), *SS Hell Camp* (1977) and *Nathalie, Fugitive from Hell* (1978). The eroticisation of female perpetrators in an Israeli pulp fiction series is discussed in Pinchevski and Brand, 'Holocaust Perversions', 387–407.
38. Pfefferkorn, 'The Case of Bruno Bettelheim and Lina Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties*', 676.
39. Marcus, *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz*, 58.
40. Sjoberg and Gentry, *Monsters, Mothers, Whores*, 60.
41. Przyrembel, 'Transfixed by an Image', 399.
42. On *Downfall*, see von Moltke, 'Sympathy for the Devil', 17–43. For a particularly detailed discussion of *The Reader* (more critical of the novel than the film), see Donahue, *Holocaust as Fiction*, 153–86.
43. Schlink, *Guilt about the Past*, 127, 130–1.
44. For a detailed exploration of Hollywood's general (and problematic) avoidance of the subject of Nazi Germany, see Daniel Anker's excellent documentary, *Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust* (2004).
45. Vanessa Redgrave, who plays Fénelon, had expressed support for the Palestine Liberation Organisation. See Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, 20–1.
46. Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 39.
47. Milton, 'Women and the Holocaust', 225.
48. Bock, 'Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany', 89.
49. For further discussion of the film's representation of Perl, see Brown, 'Revisiting the "Victim"/"Perpetrator" Divide'.
50. Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, 61–2.
51. Gelbin, 'Double Visions', 179.
52. Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, 63.
53. Joseph Sargent (dir.), *Out of the Ashes* (Showtime Entertainment, 2002), special feature on DVD.
54. von Moltke, 'Sympathy for the Devil', 42.
55. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 27.
56. *Ibid.*, 33.
57. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 210, n.18.
58. Weckel, 'Does Gender Matter?', 560.
59. Lenz and Heinsohn, 'De-coding the Gendered Order of Memory in *Hitler's Frauen*', 134.

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