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Narratives of Judgement: Representations of “Privileged” Jews in Holocaust Documentaries

Les récits du jugement : la représentation du Juif “privilégié” dans les documentaires sur l’Holocauste

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Résumés

English Français

Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi’s highly influential essay, “The Grey Zone”, explores the taboo issue of “privileged” Jews, those prisoners who were forced to cooperate with their Nazi captors in order to prolong their lives or the lives of their families. Levi argues that moral evaluations of privileged Jews should be suspended; however, judgements of these liminal figures have permeated representations of victims’ experiences. Taking Levi’s reflections on the “grey zone” as a point of departure, I analyse the ways in which a number of Holocaust documentary narratives construct problematic judgements of privileged Jews; nonetheless, it will be shown that some films engage with the issue in a nuanced manner. While Levi singles out the medium of film as particularly predisposed to simplistic judgements, I argue that documentary film has considerable potential to offer a complex representation of the extreme ethical dilemmas that privileged Jews faced.

L’ouvrage de Primo Levi, survivant d’Auschwitz, intitulé La Zone grise, explore le sujet tabou des Juifs « privilégiés » — ces prisonniers forcés de coopérer avec les Nazis afin de prolonger leur vie ou celle de leur famille. Levi explique que tout jugement moral de leurs actions devrait être suspendu, ce qui n’est pas le cas dans la représentation de l’expérience des victimes. À partir des réflexions de Primo Levi sur la notion de « zone grise », mon analyse interroge un certain nombre de documentaires dont le récit présente une construction
Particularly clear-cut negative judgements can be found in Resnais’ film, which persistently condemns the behaviour of Kapos through what Ewout van der Knaap describes as a “black and white” representation. While the film’s voiceover often self-reflexively questions a filmmaker’s potential to capture the “reality” of the camps and even notes at one point that prisoners were “caught up in some incomprehensible hierarchy”, the narrator makes little distinction between prisoner-functionaries and Nazi perpetrators. On several occasions, a parallel is drawn between the SS and the “privileged Kapos”, with the latter described by the narrator as “the bosses of the camp, the elite.” The demonisation of the privileged is consistently reinforced with little or no acknowledgement of nuance in their experiences and behaviour.

Due to the early context of its production, at a time when a specific and widespread understanding of how Jews were treated by the Nazis did not exist, Resnais’ film seldom distinguishes Jewish from non-Jewish victims — and thus does not really address the subject of privileged Jews. Nonetheless, a number of subsequent productions have engaged with this complex and sensitive issue. Drawing on Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi’s paradigmatic concept of the “grey zone”, this article focuses on the representation of these liminal figures in English-language documentaries, namely Kathryn Taverna and Alan Adelson’s Lodz Ghetto (1989) and Josh Waletzky’s Partisans of Vilna (1986). While a close analysis of these films reveals that strong moral judgements of privileged Jews can be found in documentary works, I argue that the exposure of the image in the filmmaking process can also be seen to offer a heightened potential for judgement to be suspended.

Primo Levi’s “Grey Zone”, the Problem of Judgement and Documentary Film

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. Primo Levi, “The Grey Zone”

An ever-expanding literature on Holocaust film has contributed much to its legitimisation as an important field of research; however, little attention has been given to the ways in which films have represented the traumatic experiences of privileged Jews. As the above passage highlights, Levi’s reflection on the grey zone
responded to what he saw as the trivialising effects of Holocaust (mis)representations — particularly in film — although problematic judgements of victim behaviour also proliferate depictions of the event in memoirs, survivor videotestimonies and historical writings. Scholars have overwhelmingly neglected the crucial and intersecting problems of judgement and representation in relation to privileged Jews, and documentary filmmakers have frequently portrayed — and judged — these liminal figures. With the release of countless Holocaust films since Levi explored the “grey zone” twenty-five years ago, this paper returns to his ideas and re-examines his scepticism of film’s usefulness as a medium to explore this traumatic history.

Levi’s essay was first published in 1986, several decades after his liberation from Auschwitz. He focuses on the extreme ethical dilemmas confronting those Jewish prisoners in the Nazi-controlled camps and ghettos who held positions which gave them access to material and other benefits. This article therefore adopts a very specific definition of “privilege”: it is understood here to refer to the prisoners in the camps who held positions as prisoner-functionaries, such as the supervisors of prisoner barracks and Kapos, or those who were forced to work in the crematoria as members of the Sonderkommandos (“special squads”). It further includes those prisoners in the ghettos who were members of the Judenräte (“Jewish Councils”) and Ordnungsdienst (“Order Service”), or Jewish police — figures who will be the focus of the subsequent analysis.

Subject to extreme levels of coercion, these victims were compelled to act in ways that have often been judged as both self-serving and harmful to fellow inmates. Nevertheless, although they were often able to prolong their own or their families’ lives, they continued to be subject to unprecedented practices of dehumanisation and persecution, and were not exempt from the Nazis’ aim to destroy all European Jewry. Such controversial figures constitute an intrinsically important, frequently misunderstood and hastily judged facet of the Holocaust. In light of this, Levi argues that those who represent the traumatic experiences of privileged Jews should suspend moral judgement of them.

Levi’s “grey zone” is essentially a metaphor for moral ambiguity, a conceptual 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.” (27) This statement in itself highlights the way in which Levi’s concept problematises judgement, as his characterisation of the grey zone could be (and often has been) interpreted as involving a merging, if not a blurring, of the fundamental 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.” (33) In short, the distinction between victim and perpetrator must be maintained. Here then is the crux: how are distinctions between groups of victims — those with privileged positions and those without — to be drawn without undermining the crucial separation of victims from their persecutors? If privileged Jews are not to be condemned for their behaviour in situations beyond their control, can judgement be suspended in representations of their experiences, including those in film?

The ethical dilemmas encountered in both the camps and the ghettos render issues of agency and thus accountability highly problematic, as without choice and subsequent responsibility, the faculty of moral judgement is threatened. This problem is exemplified in what the influential Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer terms “choiceless choices”, which he characterises as “crucial decisions [that] did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim’s own
When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their deaths; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family — how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder.7

Due to their unresolvable quality, Langer argues that choiceless choices do not even involve deciding between a “greater” or “lesser” evil, and can thus be seen to have existed in an environment constructed by the perpetrators not of immorality, but of “non-morality”, one “beyond good and evil.” Persecuted Jews’ “decisions”, if they can be called that, were made under extreme duress and the notions of intent or volition, which are central to most concepts of justice and judgement, are impossible to evaluate. While privileged Jews might be seen to have acted at the expense of fellow prisoners in various ways, for various reasons and under varying levels of coercion, at such a distance of time and experience (and arguably even without this distance), it is problematic for anyone to evaluate the consequences, motivations and personal autonomy that were in play during the events in question.

The problem of judgement highlighted by Levi is evident in the furore sparked by the influential philosopher Hannah Arendt’s writings on Jewish councils. In evaluating their behaviour, Arendt makes a distinction between what she calls the “limited freedom of decision and of action” in the ghettos and the utter lack of choice in the camps, which she views as inhibiting any possibility of effective resistance.6 Her major study, The Origins of Totalitarianism, stresses the unparalleled “total domination” of the prisoners in Nazi camps, including the intentional and systematic erasure of Jews’ legal status, personal identity and moral being. At one point, Arendt describes a situation that to some degree reflects Langer’s concept of a “choiceless choice”:

When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their deaths; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family — how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder.7

Adopting an apparently sympathetic attitude here, Arendt suggests that there is “no moral problem” with regards to Jews in the camps due to the extreme situations that confronted them.8 On the other hand, after attending the Israeli trial of the perpetrator Adolf Eichmann in 1961, Arendt published Eichmann in Jerusalem, in which she aggressively censures the activities of the Judenräte and Jewish police. While some argue that Arendt never intended to judge the Jewish leaders,9 her language clearly condemns their actions. Arendt drew heavily on the work of prominent Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg, arguing that without the “collaboration” of Jewish leaders, “the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people.”10 Many critics contest the depth of Arendt’s understanding of conditions in the ghettos and her sweeping generalisations regarding the Judenräte.11

In “The Grey Zone”, Levi is chiefly concerned with the Kapos, the Auschwitz Sonderkommandos, and the controversial Jewish “Elder” Chaim Rumkowski of the Lodz Ghetto (a figure who has attracted some attention in documentary film, to be discussed later). While Levi unequivocally holds the perpetrators of the Holocaust responsible for their actions, he warns that one should abstain from judging their victims. In the case of the Sonderkommandos, Levi declares that “our need and ability to judge falters” and that any moral evaluation must be “suspended.” (41, 43) Likewise, he asserts that the same impotencia judicandi “paralyses” us when considering Rumkowski’s behaviour. While we should not condemn Rumkowski, Levi writes that we cannot “absolve him on the moral plane” either. (49) At the same time, Levi argues that praising the morally ambiguous behaviour of privileged Jews is also inappropriate, as he feels that “not all their acts should be set forth as examples.” (9) In short, Levi contends that no judgement should be passed on actions taken in extremis in the camps and ghettos and that negative and positive moral evaluations of behaviour should be suspended — although I have argued elsewhere that even
Levi’s sober, questioning and self-reflexive analysis cannot avoid judging those he claims should not be judged. In the light of this, it is not surprising that the modes of representation available to filmmakers have seen the experiences of privileged Jews negotiated onscreen in a variety of ways.

Significantly, in a highly critical essay on Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*, Bryan Cheyette contends that “the ethical uncertainty at the heart of Levi’s writings is the necessary critical yardstick by which one ought to understand present-day films and novels, many of which glibly assimilate the Holocaust in a breathtakingly untroubled manner.” Levi himself singles out the medium of film as particularly predisposed to a “Manichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities,” and resorts to the simplistic binary opposition of “good” and “evil.” While it can be confidently assumed that Levi’s suspicion of film was primarily aimed at fiction films, the construction of documentary narratives also has the potential to simplify the complexity of human behaviour in extremis.

A substantial literature on documentary representation has exposed the strategies, structures and stylistics of the genre at length, showing it to be anything but an “objective” vehicle of historical representation. Gesturing to the role of judgement in the filmmaking process, seminal documentary theorist Bill Nichols writes that “just as various prefigurative choices in the use of language signal the moral point of view of a historian, ‘the camera’s gaze’ may signal the ethical, political, and ideological perspective of the filmmaker.” The treatment of “real” figures throughout all stages of the production process consists of varying levels of manipulation, thus the conventions available to documentary filmmakers result in judgements being developed in a number of ways. The clear narrative trajectory and expository mode of address of many films, which rely on devices such as narrative voiceover, archival footage and the construction of authoritative “witnesses”, frequently evoke the kinds of clear-cut opinions that Levi warns against.

The ways in which documentary filmmakers pass judgement hinge on what the Nichols identifies as a film’s “particular viewpoint” or “argument”, a characterisation reworked by Noël Carroll, who stresses the importance of a “presumptive assertion”, or “assertive stance”, which plays on audience expectations of what is “real.” Indeed, the fundamental tendencies of documentary film have been identified elsewhere as not only to “record”, but to “persuade”, “interrogate” and “express.” This underlines the prevalence of implicit (and sometimes explicit) ideological positions within documentary work. It must therefore be asked what implications the narrative strategies in Holocaust documentaries such as *Lodz Ghetto* and *Partisans of Vilna* have for the representation and judgement of Jewish leaders and police forces in the ghettos of Eastern Europe.

**Judging the Judenräte and the Jewish Police in *Lodz Ghetto***

The role of the Judenräte in the “destruction process” has been the subject of intense debate. The councils comprised up to twenty-four men who were directly responsible for carrying out Nazi policies and overseeing the daily operation of the ghetto. Closely supervised and often abused (verbally and physically) by the Nazi administration, the Judenräte were made responsible for registering and housing the Jewish population, distributing life-prolonging work permits; organising health, education and sanitation services, rationing the always-inadequate food supplies, and providing law enforcement and the required number of Jews for forced labour. Faced with massive unemployment, overcrowding, hunger and epidemics, Jewish leaders found themselves in an impossible situation. After 1941, some council members were forced to draw up lists of people demanded by the Nazis for
deportation to “the East”, although due to their captors’ efforts at secrecy, it was seldom clear that this meant certain death. Members of the Ordnungsdienst (“Order Service”), or Jewish police, often carried out the Nazi regulations that the councils were forced to announce to the ghettos’ populations. Armed with truncheons and sometimes whips, Jewish police were charged with keeping order in the ghettos, guarding fences and Judenrat institutions, collecting property confiscated by the SS; and, most controversially, escorting fellow Jews, sometimes with considerable violence, to the trains bound for extermination camps. While a position on a council or in the police generally bestowed significant privileges, the vast majority of these individuals did not survive the war, having been deported to various camps, shot by killing squads or, in some cases, dying by their own hand.19

Depictions of Jewish leaders in Holocaust documentaries are often brief, with the ethical dilemmas faced by prisoner-functionaries in the camps and ghettos rarely explored in a substantial manner, even in more recent films. For instance, the six-part miniseries Hitler’s Holocaust (2000), which purports to represent the Holocaust in its totality, seems to eschew the issue of privileged Jews almost entirely, offering no engagement with the subject — not even in the episode entitled “Ghetto.” Likewise, despite a lengthy segment on the Lodz Ghetto in another five hour miniseries, The Nazis: A Warning from History (1997), the Ghetto’s infamous leader Chaim Rumkowski — by far the most despised Jewish leader in all survivor testimony — is not mentioned. Other documentary films, on the other hand, have given considerable attention to the behaviour of this controversial figure.15

Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (1877-1944) was an elderly, failed Jewish industrialist who served as the President of the Lodz Ghetto from October 1939 to August 1944. Due to its being located in Poland’s most important manufacturing region, the financial and material value of the Lodz Ghetto to the Nazis helped ensure that it was kept in existence longer than all other ghettos, although its peak population of 750,000 was continuously whittled away by starvation, disease and deportations. Rumkowski and his fellow Judenrat officials believed that, by maintaining the required levels of production, at least a remnant could be saved even though the extermination of Jews was well under way (although it is difficult to evaluate when this became clear to Jewish leaders). Physically beaten and under constant surveillance (the Nazis had his phones tapped), Rumkowski oversaw the running of the Lodz Ghetto until its liquidation just a few months before the end of the war, when he himself was deported to Auschwitz and killed. It has been hypothesised that without the Soviet army’s controversial decision to delay its advance into Poland by halting at the Vistula River, little more than 100 kilometres from Lodz, up to 80,000 Jews might have been saved and Rumkowski could have been memorialised as a saviour rather than a traitor.20

Kathryn Taverna and Alan Adelson’s Lodz Ghetto (1989) situates Rumkowski’s behaviour within a broader narrative that seeks to encapsulate the experiences of the doomed population of the Ghetto. In visual terms, the film relies on a combination of purpose-shot footage of contemporary Lodz and archival images, including hundreds of colour photographs taken by Walter Genewein, the Ghetto’s chief accountant. Accompanying these images, the soundtrack is scripted entirely from primary documents, including extracts from Rumkowski’s speeches and correspondence. Frequently heard throughout the film’s narrative, Rumkowski’s voice has very little emotion and a distinctly sharp intonation, contrasting with the innocent, mournful or hopeful tones of the spoken testimonies it is juxtaposed with. Rendered by well-known novelist, actor and Holocaust survivor Jerzy Korsinki, the lack of compassion and sympathy in Rumkowski’s voice is evident even during seemingly regretful statements: “If I told you everything I know, you would not sleep. This way, I alone cannot sleep.” Later in the film, Rumkowski’s lament “I’m just a servant of the authorities, I have to bow my head and do as I’m told,” is delivered in the same
unfriendly tone.

At one point, the camera pans over photographs of Rumkowski talking to other Jews with a pained expression on his face, though any apparent sympathy is overwhelmed by the soundtrack’s voiceover, which dwells on a seemingly unrelated statement: “I let them speak, then threw them out with a shout, ‘Get out you rabble!’” It is unlikely that the emotion depicted in the photographs is anger and it is, in any case, unclear whether the image directly relates to the protests evoked on the soundtrack at all. Subsequent images of suffering Jewish crowds combine with Rumkowski’s verbal threats and (what appear to be) the Jewish community’s shouts of discontent in the background. Crucially, the film takes photographic material out of its (already questionable) context on various other occasions in order to depict a sharp rift between public statements made by Rumkowski and the conditions suffered by the inhabitants of the Ghetto.

The use of archive material originating with the Nazi perpetrators is widely considered to be problematic due to the fact it was invariably intended for propaganda purposes, and the editing of this footage in combination with other filmic elements plays a crucial role in filmmakers’ judgements of privileged Jews. A comparison can be made with Dariusz Jablonski’s Polish documentary film Photographer (1998) dealing with the same period and setting, which self-consciously illustrates the artificiality of Nazi propaganda images; however, the expository mode of representation in Lodz Ghetto reveals no awareness of what Ulrich Baer has described as the “persistent Nazi gaze” that permeates its source material. The uncritical appropriation and manipulation of images constructed by the Nazis has the effect of evoking strong connotations regarding Rumkowski’s behaviour, imposing the perpetrators’ vision — and judgement — of the privileged Jew on the viewer.

One of the most significant instances of the use of Nazi propaganda is when the camera’s gaze settles on a photograph of the Jewish leader meeting Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS. The image is overlaid with a re-created conversation between the two men regarding work in the Ghetto. While one might argue that the power relations of such a meeting are impossible to conceive, the words exchanged between Rumkowski and Himmler, recited by actors, seem to suggest that the film captures the situation “as it really happened.” The soundtrack’s re-enactment of the conversation between perpetrator and persecuted is underpinned by both characters’ sinister overtones and accompanied by an intense drumbeat. Rumkowski’s apparently enthusiastic, even militaristic, deference to, and compliance with, Himmler results in the elision of the Jewish leader’s ethical dilemma, and thus conditions the viewer to adopt a very negative judgement of his behaviour. Indeed, immediately following this sequence, a child’s testimony accuses Rumkowski of “demagoguery [and] megalomania” and mournfully contrasts his rations with those of three of his classmates who died of starvation.

A frequent point of reference in representations of Rumkowski is his so-called “Give Me Your children” speech of 4 September 1942, in which he explained the need to sacrifice those less likely to survive in order to save the Ghetto’s remaining population. The sequence is given high priority in the film by the inclusion of a subtitle stating the date and by a lengthy introduction through an onlooker’s testimony, which declares this to be “Judgement Day” (implying that Rumkowski is responsible for the decision to deport Jewish children rather than this being dependent on a Nazi decree). Although a woman’s voiceover prefaces Rumkowski’s speech by noting that “he cannot control his tears,” the recording of the speech is aggressive rather than regretful in tone, and his calls for children and the elderly are overlaid not only with photographs of the speech, but also images of numerous young children and empty cots for emotive affect.

Similarly strong judgements are made on the role of the Jewish police, with no indication given of the difficulties — and dangers — facing Jews holding these
positions. The inclusion of photographs of police within the frame is invariably accompanied by the dismissive testimony of non-privileged prisoners in the Ghetto, such as the following passage spoken by a woman’s voice:

The Jewish Police have been bought. Their children were exempted from the order. They've been given three pounds of bread a day for their bloody work, bread to gorge themselves on, and an extra portion of sausage and sugar. They are not to be envied at all.

While this statement could perhaps be interpreted as containing some pity for their extreme situations, the combination of film elements throughout Lodz Ghetto renders this reading unlikely. Images of the Jewish police rounding up other victims for deportation are utilised several scenes later; nonetheless, the subjectivities of these men is never explored and the condemnation remains. The transmission of judgement through the camera’s gaze, exemplified in the expository mode adopted in Lodz Ghetto, serves to reinforce the importance of reflecting on the problems that Levi highlights, for the exposure of the image in documentary film also has the potential to negotiate the ethical dilemmas confronting privileged Jews in a considerably more nuanced manner than has been revealed thus far.

**Toward a Suspension of Judgement: Ambiguity in *Partisans of Vilna***

The representation of Jewish police in Josh Waletzky’s critically acclaimed documentary, *Partisans of Vilna* (1986), differs in many respects from Lodz Ghetto. Waletzky employs expository techniques in a far more subtle manner than many other examples of the genre; however, his attention to the issue of privileged Jews is situated within his main focus on the Vilna Ghetto’s resistance fighters who took up arms against their Nazi persecutors. Given this preoccupation, it might be expected that the filmmaker’s depiction of the behaviour of Jewish police would resort to the commonplace clear-cut moral schematic of a black-and-white binary opposition between collaboration and resistance. Nonetheless, *Partisans of Vilna* refrains from glorifying the resisters, highlighting the ethical dilemmas they themselves confronted in their attempts to revolt against the Nazis’ insurmountable force. In one scene, the well-known resistance leader Abba Kovner describes his traumatic decision to prioritise the cause of the resistance by turning away his mother, who was requesting sanctuary in their bunker. Finding shelter elsewhere, she was caught by the Nazis and killed. In exploring the complex (a)moral environment induced by Nazi persecution, Waletzky allows the viewer more space to reflect on the morally ambiguous situation of the Jewish police.

*Partisans of Vilna* draws on a diverse range of survivor testimonies, with the camera often cutting between shots of the survivors themselves and purpose-shot or archival footage or photographs. Brief references to the activities of the Vilna Ghetto’s privileged Jews are made throughout the narrative, ranging from the accounts of the tension that existed between the Ghetto leadership and the resistance, to examples of assistance given to the latter by members of the police. Indeed, although he does not discuss the film’s representation of privileged Jews at length, Ben Smith has praised *Partisans of Vilna* for “not taking up an obvious position” on whether collaboration or armed resistance was preferable. The film’s substantial portrayal of the controversial Chief of the Jewish Police, Jacob Gens, is particularly noteworthy.

Unlike the situation in the majority of Nazi ghettos of Eastern Europe, Gens was essentially granted leadership of the Ghetto over the Judenrat, and has been roundly condemned in many quarters for his cooperation with the Nazis. Gens assisted the
You can’t totally accuse him of collaborating with the Germans. He wanted to save as many Jews as he could [...] Anything was better than everyone perishing. But a person who’d freely let the Germans come into the Ghetto and take the Jews, that person had to be a certain type. Gens was such a type. He was capable of that.

Through the filmmaker’s editing technique, the several and often conflicting fragments of testimony on Gens from various individuals are edited together to construct a somewhat ambivalent perspective on his behaviour. The uncertainty of how to understand — much less judge — Gens’ activities is exemplified in the view offered by survivor Elchanan Magid, who was a member of the resistance:

You can’t totally accuse him of collaborating with the Germans. He wanted to save as many Jews as he could [...] Anything was better than everyone perishing. But a person who’d freely let the Germans come into the Ghetto and take the Jews, that person had to be a certain type. Gens was such a type. He was capable of that.

Despite an ambivalent shrug of his shoulders, Magid, like two other on-screen witnesses (one of whom is Gens’ daughter), delivers a positive appraisal, stressing Gens’ initial support of the resistance, his sense of duty to fellow Jews, and the hope and stability — however illusory — he provided the Ghetto. This is, however, followed shortly afterwards by the recollections of two other survivors who display vastly different attitudes toward Gens and the Jewish police in general, with one witness describing the “horrible and shameful” act of sending elderly and sick Jews to their deaths. They give little credence to Gens’ justification of such behaviour: “He said if he hadn’t carried it out they wouldn’t have taken only 400 but maybe 1,000 or 1,500 people. They’d have taken young people, not only the old.” While the judgement of the survivor speaking these words so intensely is clear, the fact the film includes (by proxy) the paradoxical situation Gens faced, before immediately cutting to another topic, arguably avoids passing a definitive judgement on him.

Several more excerpts of survivor testimony shed light on Gens throughout the film, fluctuating from admissions of the difficult situation he was in, to accounts of the resisters’ ambivalent attitudes toward him. Furthermore, considerable attention is devoted to the dilemmas facing members of the resistance when forced to give up their leader Itzhak Witenberg to the Gestapo or risk mass reprisals against the Ghetto population, although the similar quandary facing Gens is touched on only briefly. Curiously, while Gens’ execution by the Nazis is briefly acknowledged, no reference is made to his refusal of the Nazis’ offer of escape. Yet reflecting the more self-reflective possibilities of contemporary film production and dissemination, the tension between sympathy for, and criticism of, Gens is also played out in the two commentary soundtracks included on the commercially released DVD, in which producer Aviva Kempner reveals her somewhat sympathetic attitude toward him, while director Waletzky exhibits a more distanced opinion.

By juxtaposing contradictory viewpoints throughout Partisans of Vilna, Waletzky gives the impression that a final judgement is either unattainable or, at the very least, should be left with the viewer. Indeed, the diversity of opinions on Gens’ actions and inactions also highlights the fact that the major voice missing from the documentary’s engagement with the privileged Jew’s situation is his own. This
reflects a point raised by Levi in relation to Rumkowski’s morally ambiguous behaviour. Stressing the difficulty in classifying Rumkowski’s role in the Holocaust and the impossibility of confidently apportioning responsibility, Levi writes that “only he could clarify this if he could speak before us, even lying, as perhaps he always lied, to himself also.” (50) The same sentiment may be applied to Gens, who did not escape the Ghetto; instead, as Waletzky demonstrates, other survivors are left to testify to his behaviour. Given that the film reveals the ethical dilemmas that confronted members of the partisans, let alone privileged Jews, it might be argued that it presents no final authority on the subject of Gens, revealing that documentary film has the potential to provide a complex representation that seems to work toward the suspension of judgement that Levi advocates.

Conclusion

31 Debates over Holocaust representation are ongoing. Alvin H. Rosenfeld has recently warned of the devastating impact of cultural misrepresentations such as Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993), which he sees as contributing to “the end of the Holocaust” in public consciousness.26 The prioritisation of “authentic” or “faithful” representations over “false” or “simplistic” ones (although it is difficult to define exactly what these categories involve) can therefore be justified by pointing to the danger of misrepresentations leading to “an incipient rejection of the Holocaust rather than its retention in historical memory.”27 Indeed, Ronald Aronson contends that language itself “must be rethought in light of both the massive masking and distorting functions it assumed during the Holocaust, and its weakness in rendering what happened.”28 The paucity of language, or what Langer describes as “the inadequate mediating efforts of the world,”29 is particularly evident in attempts to represent the ethical dilemmas of privileged Jews.

32 On the other hand, Libby Saxton’s dismissal of the notion of the “limits of representation” informs her recent argument — which I believe has considerable merit — that depictions of the Holocaust can be the “object and vehicle of ethical inquiry.” At the same time, I would argue that Saxton’s contention that “to articulate moral limits or interdictions on representation can become a strategy for evading a properly ethical confrontation with the event” 30 does not encompass the difficulties inherent in the representation of privileged Jews. Indeed, it is the articulation and investigation of the limit of judgement through Levi’s writings that enables one to understand the possibilities for representing these liminal figures in the first place. The obstacles to, and potentialities of, Holocaust representation are interconnected, and this relationship highlights both the difficulty and importance of engaging with the issue of privileged Jews.

33 Susan Pentlin argues in her essay “Holocaust Victims of Privilege” that in order to develop a deeper understanding of the Holocaust and its moral implications, one must listen to the “voices from the grey zone” that explore the often tabooed issues of “position and privilege.”31 Levi himself writes that the grey zone of “prisoners who in some measure, perhaps with good intentions, collaborated with the authority, was not negligible, indeed it constituted a phenomenon of fundamental importance.” (9) Meditating on the unprecedented situations that privileged Jews faced works toward exposing the horror and degradation of the “Holocaust experience” for its victims, helps to avoid falling into stereotypes, and challenges the ethical Manichaeisms and heroic discourses common to collective understandings of the event.

34 In his literary analysis of the “antiheroic” in Levi’s writings, Victor Brombert observes, “Heroic models and heroic expectations are shown to be illusory and misleading. Offended by any rhetoric that might present the victim as hero, Levi is interested rather in what he calls the ‘grey zone’ of moral contamination.”32 Levi
implies that rejecting stereotypical representations of Jews as passive victims, heroic martyrs or complicit traitors is just as important as avoiding the simplistic demonisation of their persecutors. With this in mind, the preceding analysis has been underpinned by what might be termed a “metaethical” perspective — a reflection on judgements that have already been made — which “seek[s] to understand more fully how those judgements work as well as what limits they face and problems they entail.”

This project is an important one in relation to representations of privileged Jews across all media — none more so than in film.

In their efforts to bridge testimony, history and cinema, documentary filmmakers have at their disposal numerous means of representing the Holocaust. The preceding analysis of the discursive differences between *Lodz Ghetto* and *Partisans of Vilna* that seek in some way to represent the extreme situations of privileged Jews highlights both the limitations and opportunities afforded by the genre. The common tendency to judge according to clear-cut moral distinctions reveals that the problems identified by Levi are ongoing; however, documentary film has considerable potential to represent moral ambiguity and complex human behaviour in the face of unprecedented persecution. Conceding that “completely resolving the uncertainties and ambiguities” of the behaviour of privileged Jews in the ghettos — and, by extension, the camps — is impossible, Martin Dean emphasises the need for nuanced reflections on their extreme situations: “Reconstructing the dilemmas of those caught in the Nazi trap and attempting to understand their perception is now more important than engaging in further harsh moral criticism of Jewish responses to this unprecedented threat.”

In order to search for a deeper understanding of the Holocaust, it is through Levi’s framework of moral ambiguity, underpinned by an ever-present acknowledgement of the problems of judgement and representation, that one might ethically confront the emotionally and morally fraught experiences of privileged Jews.

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**Bibliographie**


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Notes


4 The word “privilege” has also been used at times to categorise Jews in Germany whose deportation was postponed due to prior military service, marriage to non-Jews and so on, or Jews in the ghettos who held a higher socio-economic status than others. Indeed, the use of the term in relation to victims in the camps and ghettos has been far from consistent. For example, Marlene Heinemann’s analysis of camp inmate relations in Holocaust testimonies is partly divided into those of “privileged” and “less privileged” prisoners. Marlene E Heinemann, Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust, Westport: Greenwood, 1986, 87-108.


7 Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, [1951] 2nd ed. 1966, 452. The potential dilemma of “sending [one’s] wife and children” to their deaths appears to fit particularly closely the circumstances of the Jewish police in the ghettos.

8 Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, [1965] revised ed., New York: Penguin, 1994, 123. However, Arendt herself appears to contradict her argument when she accuses the Jewish Sonderkommandos of “committing criminal acts” when they were employed in the “actual killing process,” ibid., 91. Members of the Sonderkommandos mainly worked with corpses and never handled the gas, therefore were not involved in the “actual killing process.” Similarities can be seen here between Arendt’s reflection on the crematorium workers and the difficulty Levi encounters when representing those he argues should not be judged.


11 See, in particular, Jacob Robinson, And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight, 142-226;


18 Ghettos holding fewer than 10,000 Jews formed a council of twelve members, while councils of ghettos with more than 10,000 consisted of twenty-four members. While councils were supposed to consist of the pre-war Jewish community leaders, the degree of continuity varied and there were some cases where the SS chose ordinary civilians. In any case, the ethical dilemmas Judenrat officials confronted were beyond anything they had encountered previously.

19 According to one estimate, approximately eighty per cent of Judenrat officials were killed by the Nazis. Jewish leaders from Central or Western Europe were generally deported to Theresienstadt or Bergen-Belsen, and those in Eastern Europe to extermination camps, notably Auschwitz. Research points to at least forty acts of suicide by Judenrat officials.


25 This omission from the film is significant as the Study Guide provided with the DVD points out.


29 L. Langer, *op. cit.*, 5.


**Pour citer cet article**

Référence électronique

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Adam Brown is a Lecturer in Media, Communication and Public Relations at Deakin University. His PhD thesis focused on judgements of “privileged” Jews in Holocaust representations, and received the Isi Leibler Prize for the best contribution to advancing knowledge of racial, religious or ethnic prejudice in any time or place. Adam also works as a volunteer at the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne, where he has initiated the digitisation, indexing and cataloguing of the Centre’s survivor video testimony collection. Adam is currently working on research in the areas of children’s television, surveillance, new media in museums, and Holocaust film.

**Droits d’auteur**

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