

1 Introduction to Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust

OF THE mass murdering of more than ten million people in German concentration camps, extermination camps, POW camps, euthanasia centers, *Einsatzgruppe* actions, and Jewish ghettos during the Second World War, there is only one known piece of motion picture footage, lasting about two minutes.¹ It was shot in 1941 by Reinhard Wiener, a German naval sergeant and amateur cinematographer, stationed in Latvia, who had received permission from the navy to film in the area of the fleet. According to testimony given by Wiener in Israel in 1981, he had walked into the town of Liepaja one day in August of that year carrying his 8mm camera loaded with stock, as he did whenever possible, in case he saw something he wanted to film. He was walking in a wooded park near the beach when a soldier ran up to him and told him not to walk any farther, because something “awful, terrible” was happening there. Asked what it was, the man replied, “Well, they’re killing Jews there.”

At the time, there was a Jewish forced labor detachment assigned to the naval base, and Wiener had heard stories from some of these Jews about family members who had been rounded up and killed. In fact, Wiener had a Jew working for him personally, a technician who built him a “filming installation.”

Told that Jews were being killed farther along the park, Wiener decided to go and see for himself. He came to a clearing where a group of German soldiers had gathered near a trench to watch the proceedings. When a truck arrived full of people wearing yellow patches on their chests and backs, he began filming. He recorded about two minutes of film, in which one can see people running into the pit and then being shot by a firing squad.

Wiener sent the undeveloped film to his family’s farm in Germany, but it was inexplicably confiscated by German military police at the



Illustration 1.1. The Wiener film: of the mass murdering of more than ten million people by the Nazis, this is the only known piece of footage. Courtesy of Richard Trank, Executive Producer of Moriah Films, The Simon Wisenthal Center.

Latvian-Lithuanian border, and disappeared for four months. In the meantime, he was transferred to a submarine school in Germany, where he was able to get the film back. He then mailed the film to an Agfa plant, where it was processed and mailed back to him. It was about this time that Himmler outlawed the filming of any activities related to the extermination of Jews, which had begun in June with mobile killing actions by *Einsatzgruppe* units, such as the one seen in Wiener's film, and continued with gassing in special extermination camps starting in December.

Wiener testifies that he did not tell his family what he had witnessed. In 1942, however, in Germany, he did tell a few of his comrades in the navy. They did not believe him. Certain that the film would be confiscated if it was discovered at this time, he had six of his comrades swear an oath of silence, and then showed them the film. He describes their reaction. "They were depressed. I was observing their faces and saw how shocked they were. We had never seen or found out about any-

thing like it in the navy. The same happened to me while I was filming, I was shivering all over, I was that agitated.”

Wiener again sent the film to the family farm, this time successfully. When the front reached the area in 1945 and his mother had to flee, she placed her son’s films in a trunk and buried it in the pigsty, covering it with dung. After the war, Wiener returned to the farm and dug up the film. It was sent to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Israel in 1974.²

Wiener’s story and film will lead to a theory of cinema as both a transmitter of historical trauma and a form of posttraumatic historical memory. The subsequent chapters will examine a series of documentary and fiction films that made significant contributions to the development of a posttraumatic cinema of the Holocaust in Europe and the United States: primarily the documentaries, *Night and Fog* (France, 1955) and *Shoah* (France, 1985); the fiction film, *The Pawnbroker* (United States, 1965); and three autobiographical fiction films by the Hungarian filmmaker and Holocaust survivor, István Szabó—*Father* (1966), *Love Film* (1970), and *25 Fireman Street* (1973).³ These films responded to the trauma of the Holocaust by rejecting the classical realist forms of film narration traditionally used to provide a sense of mastery over the past, and adopting instead modernist forms of narration that formally repeat the traumatic structure of the experience of witnessing the events themselves.

THE LIMITS OF HOLOCAUST CINEMA

There have been thousands of Holocaust films, and their variety has been virtually as wide as the variety of cinema itself. There have been, among other genres, compilation documentaries, cinéma vérité exposés, docudramas, melodramas, biographies, autobiographies, experimental films, Academy Award winners, slapstick comedies, horror films, and pornography. Accompanying these films have been debates in the media and academia about their historical accuracy, validity, and effects. Since the 1993 release of *Schindler’s List*, the volume of production of Holocaust films, and of debates about them, has risen dramatically, at the same time that Steven Spielberg’s Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation has created a new cultural space of production, incorporating video, film, and digital forms.

Debates among philosophers and critics on the limits of Holocaust representation date most notably to 1949, when Theodor Adorno wrote his now famous dictum, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."⁴ The question of the limits of the cinematic representation of the Holocaust in particular was first catapulted into public discourse with the 1978 broadcast of the television miniseries *Holocaust* in the United States.⁵ The series itself was instrumental in bringing the historical memory of the Jewish genocide into the mainstream of U.S. and Western European societies. It elicited much grandiose praise in the U.S. mass media, as well as in Germany, where it was considered to have caused a long overdue coming-to-terms with the nation's responsibility for the Holocaust. In an article in the *New York Times* entitled "Trivializing the Holocaust: Semi-Fact and Semi-Fiction," however, Elie Wiesel articulated what would become a paradigmatic critique of *Holocaust*, and of its classical realist and melodramatic conventions as a form of Holocaust representation. (The term *classical realism* began to be used by film theorists during the 1970s to describe the dominant form of fictional cinema that originated in Hollywood during the 1910s. The classical realist film employs an array of formal conventions in order to give the spectator the sense of experiencing not a particular narrative construction of reality but its authentic reproduction.)⁶ Wiesel criticized *Holocaust's* "indecent" tendency, as a classical realist historical film, to show what he argued should not, indeed cannot be shown; he criticized the contrivance of its attempt to show not just a particular story of the Holocaust but the whole story; and he criticized its misplaced epistemological confidence ("You may think you know now how the victims lived and died, but you do not"). He also criticized what he considered to be the "cheapness," emotional manipulation, and stereotyped characterizations of the series as a melodrama. He summarized his critique with these words: "People will tell me that filmmaking has its own laws and its own demands. After all, similar techniques are being used for war movies and historical re-creations. But the Holocaust is unique, not just another event."⁷

Wiesel's assertion that the Holocaust exceeds the representational means of the conventional historical film is an example of what Berel Lang has called "moral limits" of representation (should nots), the paradigm of which is Adorno's earlier argument.⁸ Wiesel, however, goes further; he also argues, as some others have done, for the existence of what

I would call an *inherent* limit of representation: that the Holocaust is ultimately unrepresentable in any form. “The Holocaust?” Wiesel writes. “The ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted. Only those who were there know what it was; the others will never know.”⁹

A paradigmatic defense of *Holocaust* against the kind of criticism leveled by Wiesel was articulated by the German scholar Andreas Huyssen in an article published in 1980.¹⁰ Huyssen critiques the modernism championed by many of *Holocaust*'s critics as too intellectual for the cultural needs of the public, and defends conventional realism and melodrama as facilitating the emotional identification with individual Jewish characters that, he argues, is necessary in order for the public to have a significant engagement with the memory of the Holocaust.¹¹

The historical debate between Wiesel's and Huyssen's arguments, however, has its own limits. Wiesel's dismissal of melodrama as a possible genre of Holocaust representation, and his assertion of the essential unrepresentability of the Holocaust by cultural means, are inconsistent with basic and compelling laws of representation promulgated within the field of semiotics. The assertion of absolute unrepresentability, while appealing as a response to the terrible sense of otherness that seems to characterize the Holocaust, implies both a rule of representational transparency to which the Holocaust is the exception, and an assertion of an essential truth of the Holocaust known only to witnesses. Following Hayden White and others, on the other hand, I would argue that no historical representation gives access to essential truth, not even the memories of witnesses. All historical representation is, rather, limited in at least three ways: by signification (the ontological difference between the reality and the sign, including the memory-sign), by documentation (limited documentation of the past), and by discourse (limited framing of documents by the conventions of discourse).

I agree with Huyssen that the dismissal of melodrama by critics like Wiesel seems to be motivated more by aesthetic prejudice—the supposed incompatibility of the Holocaust as a “high” theme and melodrama as a “low” genre—than by a serious consideration of representational modes and their limits. On the other hand, Huyssen's own view of emotional identification with the victims is itself reductive, and forestalls critical discussion of the nature and effects of such a response. Also reductive is his equation of the dichotomy modernism/realism with the

dichotomy cognition/emotion. Some modernist works, as I will argue, have indeed engaged the emotions.

This book joins more recent writings that seek to reframe the concept of limits of Holocaust representation through an examination of the metapsychological structures and formal conventions of discourse, and attempts to systematize that understanding in relation to the cinema.

THE QUESTION OF TRAUMA

One of Wiesel's statements in his article on *Holocaust* seems to lead in a different direction. He writes, "The witness does not recognize himself in this film."¹² Indeed, as may be evident from my emphasis on the Wiener film, I hold that an investigation into the cinema's confrontation with the Holocaust begins with the question of witnessing. From the beginning of "the Final Solution," the question of witnessing was central. The genocidal program was to be kept secret from the Jews and thus, necessarily, from the general public, in order to minimize Jewish resistance during the processes of deportation, concentration, and extermination. Perpetrators were sworn to secrecy, bureaucrats were protected by euphemisms, and Jews who were allowed to witness extermination because they had been selected for slave labor were slated for eventual extermination themselves. There were to be, effectively, no witnesses.¹³

Although the Nazis were shockingly successful in their attempt to exterminate the Jews (they succeeded in killing approximately two-thirds of the Jews of Europe), technically speaking, of course, "the Final Solution" failed. Witnesses survived. From this survival, some questions have arisen. What are the effects of having witnessed such things? Can something of this witnessing be transmitted to the public?

A case can be made for the special significance of the cinema in this respect. In addition to being one of the most influential mass media in the West at the time of the Second World War and its aftermath (arguably, it was the most influential medium outside the home, while radio was most influential in the home), cinema was the medium most closely analogous to both perception and fantasy. On the one hand, through the indexical recording of images and sounds, film imitates the experience of witnessing real events.¹⁴ Documentary films in particular allow spectators to witness events after a fashion, but even fiction films carry with them this indexical aura, which can be used to create a sense

of witnessing history. On the other hand, as Christian Metz argued, “more than other arts, or in a more unique way, the cinema involves us in the imaginary.”¹⁵ Both formally and technologically (through the projection of giant images in the dark), film imitates and engages the experience of processing what has been witnessed through mental imagery, memory, fantasy, and dreams. In these two senses—which are both complementary and contradictory—the cinema constitutes a kind of witnessing to both the outer, physical reality of historical events and the inner, psychological reality of the effects of those events on people. Insofar as historical films—both documentary and fictional, though with different emphases—contain a tension between the witnessing of reality and the witnessing of fantasy, they both help construct historical consciousness and embody a contradiction within historical consciousness.¹⁶

What happened when the Holocaust and the cinema came into contact with one another—when the technological, industrial, and formal apparatus of the cinema confronted the Nazi apparatus of genocide and its abysmal effects? If the cinema presented a significant opportunity for the public witnessing of history, and the Holocaust presented a significant difficulty for the public witnessing of history, in what ways has the cinema succeeded and failed as a witness to the Holocaust? Was the cinema changed by its confrontation with the reality of the camps? How has our understanding of these events been affected by their representation or lack of representation in documentary and fiction films? What is at stake, what are the consequences for historical memory, when different kinds of cinematic representations of genocide are produced and viewed?

The model of witnessing I will use to address these questions derives from the psychological concept of trauma. Since the 1990s, during the same period of time in which Holocaust films have become more prominent, the concept of trauma has emerged from its former place as a specialty of physical and psychiatric medicine to become a cornerstone in the discourses of historical memory and social representation. The questions asked in this book, then, have to do specifically with the Holocaust as a traumatic rupture in the Western experience and understanding of history, and with the possibility that the cinema may have been able to engage that rupture at the level of cultural practice—to represent the Holocaust *as* a rupture, to embody that rupture for the audience, perhaps even to assist in mourning that rupture.

Trauma originally referred to a physical phenomenon: a violent disruption of the body's integrity. In the late nineteenth century, the concept began to be applied to psychological phenomena by pioneers like Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet in their work on hysteria. Psychological trauma was defined as an experience that overwhelmed a person's normal means of mentally processing stimuli. The unprocessed memory of the experience remained embedded in the mind, resulting in pathologies of memory, emotion, and practical functioning. The therapist viewed these symptoms as clues to the nature of the trauma, and hoped to assist the subject in belatedly processing the memory.

From the beginning, there were two strands of thinking about trauma. Initially, the emphasis was on exogenous trauma—trauma caused by external events, such as child sexual abuse (what Freud called “seduction”), mining disasters, and train wrecks. Freud later began to emphasize endogenous over exogenous trauma—trauma caused by psychic events such as fantasies and instinctual excitations, with no external counterpart. A series of historical developments, however, repeatedly returned exogenous trauma to the attention of the psychiatric establishment: the two World Wars, the Vietnam War, and the modern women's movement, with its attention to rape and child sexual abuse. The treatment of what has come to be called posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) now constitutes a major focus of psychiatry, with a generation of clinicians trained to treat the victims of natural and technological disasters, wars, and violent crime.¹⁷

During the 1990s, the psychiatric discourse on trauma began to be applied to the study of culture in a systematic fashion. The intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra has analyzed a series of historical and theoretical texts—primarily texts dealing with the Holocaust—in terms of a group of categories derived from Freud's work: texts that deny trauma, texts that act out or unconsciously repeat trauma, and texts that work through trauma. The poststructuralist literary critic Cathy Caruth has focused not on texts that explicitly treat historical trauma, but on the ways in which the traumas of twentieth-century European experience, including the Holocaust, are implicitly or symptomatically inscribed as forms and figures of language in a series of theoretical and literary texts.¹⁸ Theories of cultural trauma have also begun to be applied to film, with a collection of articles on the subject in a 2001 issue of *Screen*, several books forthcoming, and a number of articles on trauma in *Shoah*.¹⁹

As James Berger has suggested, and as I hope to demonstrate, the application of trauma theory to culture may offer at least one method of bridging the apparent gaps between a historical approach to culture and a textual approach; between a focus on the past signified by a historical text and a focus on the text's work of signification in the present; between documentary and fictional modes of representing history; and between individual and collective experiences of history.²⁰

At the same time, cultural trauma theory has its own dilemmas. Analogous to the conflict between exogenous and endogenous models of trauma are the conflicts between exceptional and universal models, between empirical and theoretical models, and between a model that emphasizes the traumatic event itself and one that emphasizes its "deferred action."

Many who write about the trauma of natural and human-made disasters, including most writing on the Holocaust, have tended to view trauma as an exception to normal experience. Another tendency, often found in poststructuralist writing, tends to universalize trauma as inherent in history, language, or even experience itself.²¹ The poststructuralist tendency has its counterpart in contemporary colloquial discourse: the use of the word *traumatic* to add emphasis to the representation of potentially any unpleasurable experience. Caruth argues convincingly, however, that trauma must be understood as neither an exceptional experience nor the rule of experience, but, rather, a possibility of experience.²²

One of the problems with relatively universal models of trauma is that they ignore existing empirical criteria for and evidence of trauma. Theories of cultural trauma in relation to concrete historical experiences such as the Holocaust can begin from an empirical model of trauma, citing the symptoms of individual survivors. Theoretical work, then, moves from the level of psychology to the level of culture. Relatively universal models of trauma as inherent in history, language, or experience, on the other hand, begin and end in theory.

Eric Santner's valuable work on German films as a form of cultural memory of Nazism demonstrates the significance of this distinction. In his 1990 book, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Post-war Germany*, Santner follows the German psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in arguing that Germans collectively have had difficulty accepting responsibility for the Holocaust and mourning the

victims because they have not yet worked through their own melancholic dilemmas: the loss of their idealized self-image in Hitler and the Third Reich. Santner's critique of classical realism as a potential form for this "working through" process makes explicit an argument that remains implicit in earlier critiques such as Wiesel's: that classical realism, with its need for conventional resolution, promotes avoidance of the dilemmas of the past, rather than a working through of those dilemmas. To realism, Santner opposes not modernism but postmodernism, exemplified in Hans Jürgen Syberberg's 1977 experimental production, *Hitler: A Film from Germany*, and Edgar Reitz's 1984 television series *Heimat*.

It is appropriate that Santner and others have discussed the German memory of Nazism in terms of mourning and melancholy, while those of us working on the memory of the Holocaust from the victims' point of view have more often focused on trauma. (Trauma implies issues of loss and mourning, but the reverse is not true. Many losses require mourning but are not traumatic.) The problem is that Santner and others have increasingly begun to use the word *trauma* to refer to the German loss of self-image.²³ While many Germans must certainly have been traumatized by specific experiences of Nazi terror, World War II combat, Allied bombing, and postwar migration, I know of no empirical evidence of Germans being traumatized by the loss of Hitler and the Third Reich as symbolic objects. This application of the concept of trauma is thus entirely theoretical, with no empirical foundation. There may be nothing wrong with nonempirical theorizing per se, but to deempiricize the concept of trauma and appropriate it from the victims on behalf of their victimizers may constitute a symbolic repetition of the original victimization.

Relevant to any discussion of cultural trauma is the distinction emphasized by Angelika Rauch between an approach that emphasizes the traumatic event itself and Freud's original emphasis on "deferred action" (*Nachträglichkeit*). According to Rauch, American psychoanalysts, in their focus on the traumatic event itself, have mistakenly dismissed Freud's theory of deferred action, according to which the trauma must be understood in relation to the subject's belated and repeated restructurings of the memory of the event as time passes and circumstances change.²⁴ While I resist the poststructuralist tendency to efface the significance of the event itself as an empirical cause of trauma, I acknowl-

edge the value of Rauch's argument insofar as it suggests that the way a cultural work narrates a trauma is a function not only of the nature of the event and its initial impact on the victims, but also of the conditions of the work's production and reception. Films respond not only to the past but also to the present, with its own ideological conditions through which the trauma is reinterpreted. These ideological conditions determine to what extent a film denies trauma and to what extent it repeats trauma, and they direct that posttraumatic response—explicitly, implicitly, or symptomatically—toward political processes that may have little to do with the Holocaust itself. In the chapters that follow, I may stress the continuity of posttraumatic response in order to draw attention to a significant cinematic discourse, but I hope to be sensitive also to the ways in which this response is always conditioned by historical context.

I do want to qualify my own use of trauma theory, however, by stating that I regard the concept of trauma as necessary but not sufficient to explain the crisis of representation brought on by the Holocaust. I would identify at least five aspects of this crisis. First is the broad problem of representing the past, of reckoning with the absent and haunting dimension of the past. Second is another problem of a more general type: the deforming effects of pain on representation, which have been addressed by writers like Julia Kristeva and Elaine Scarry.²⁵ Third is that specific type of haunting by past pain known as trauma, where the pain is unassimilable, and therefore punches a hole in the temporal continuum of past and present. Fourth is that dimension of trauma that is specific to massive human-inflicted violence—to concentration camps, genocide, and nuclear bombing. All trauma involves shock, pain, and loss, but in these cases they attain the force and scope of annihilation. In the case of the Holocaust, what was lost is so massive—the millions of dead, the communities, the culture, the language—that it constitutes the very ground of Ashkenazik Jewish collective memory, so that all representation of prewar European Jewish life or the Holocaust itself comes up against its own impossibility. Finally there is what Maurice Blanchot has called “the annihilation of the annihilation,” the Nazis' partly successful attempt to erase the traces of the genocide, so that the loss itself becomes lost.²⁶ In their most profound moments, I think, the films in question take up the formidable task of reckoning with all five aspects of this crisis, not only with the single aspect of trauma.

THE HOLOCAUST AS A TRAUMA

Central to our understanding of the Holocaust as a trauma is the fact of its having lain beyond the Western imaginative horizon. The ban on filming certainly had a strategic function, but Himmler's commitment to secrecy seems to have had another motive as well. This is suggested in a secret speech given in 1943 to his immediate subordinates in the SS, in which Himmler called "the Final Solution" "the most glorious page in our history, one not written and which shall never be written."²⁷ One interpretation of the curious appearance of the word *never* in Himmler's speech is that he knew "the Final Solution" was so unthinkable that even in a future victorious Germany, it could never be assimilated into any conceivable public historical narrative. The Third Reich had a cinema policy of unparalleled ambition, as exemplified by the structuring of the 1934 Nuremberg Party Congress *around* the filming of *Triumph of the Will*, rather than the reverse.²⁸ But, for Himmler, "the Final Solution" lay outside the historical purview of cinema. The traumatic potential of Wiener's film is thus partly attributable to its giving a view of something deemed so transgressive that it was to disappear from history.

Deception of the victims was crucial to the implementation of "the Final Solution." En route to the unthinkable, they were given explanations that were painful but bearable—bearable, because there was a precedent for "resettlement" in the Jewish collective memory. They would not actually see the killing process until the last minute. At Treblinka, for instance, victims were sent to the gas chamber via the *Himmelstrasse* (road to heaven): a path bordered on both sides by barbed wire fences into which pine branches had been woven by a Camouflage Squad to block the view.²⁹

A key moment in the traumatization of the victims, then, was the moment of finally seeing the unthinkable. Describing his first day in Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel wrote:

Not far from us, flames were leaping up from a ditch, gigantic flames. They were burning something. A lorry drew up at the pit and delivered its load—little children. Babies! Yes, I saw it—saw it with my own eyes . . . those children in the flames. . . . I pinched my face. Was I still alive? Was I awake? I could not believe it. How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent? No, none of this could be true. It was a nightmare.³⁰

This is as good an articulation as any of what Freud called “fright” (*Schreck*), which, he argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is crucial to the experience of trauma. Fright, he wrote, is “the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise.”³¹ In the case of an event like the Holocaust, however, fright goes beyond Freud’s rather understated notions of ill preparedness and surprise. Fright resulted not simply from the fact that one did not know that one was going to be deported to a camp and gassed, or that one was going to see babies burned. It resulted from the fact that such things were literally inconceivable, that they did not fit any imagined possible reality.

FILM AS VICARIOUS TRAUMA

I want to return now to the story of the Wiener film, and particularly to Wiener’s description of its effect on him and the comrades to whom he showed it. (“They were depressed. I was observing their faces and saw how shocked they were. We had never seen or found out about anything like it in the navy. The same happened to me while I was filming, I was shivering all over, I was that agitated.”)

Of course, Wiener’s statements, like all statements, are subject to question. But putting aside for the purposes of this argument the complex questions surrounding the German memory of the Holocaust, I remain interested in Wiener’s story insofar as it suggests the way in which the victims’ experience of suddenly seeing the unthinkable was often repeated in a muted form in the experience of others who witnessed the events or their aftermath. Indeed, the diagnostic criteria for PTSD found in the most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* apply not only to the direct experience of trauma but also to the witnessing of it.³² Some witnesses, like Wiener, however, not only experienced a shock themselves, but also took advantage of the rare opportunity to record what shocked them, or to continue recording even after the shock, making it possible for others to witness what they had witnessed—in effect, to violate Himmler’s ban by keeping the shock in motion. Wiener’s film functioned as a traumatic relay, transmitting a shock from a specific scene of victimization—the shock having been presumably experienced by the victims only a moment

before death—to other scenes, scenes of remote and mediated witnessing by spectators who received the shock in the form of what I will refer to, following recent work in psychology, as *vicarious trauma*.³³ If photography—in its ability both to reproduce a moment of vision and to be itself mechanically reproduced and disseminated endlessly throughout society—shattered the traditional “aura” of art and replaced it with a new politics of the image, as Walter Benjamin argued, then one of the effects of this new politics is the potentially endless reproduction and dissemination of trauma.³⁴

The cinematic relaying of trauma exemplified by the Wiener film was repeated on a massive scale in 1945 when military film crews accompanied Allied troops liberating the camps, filmed what they saw, and sent those films back to production offices where they were edited into newsreels and documentaries and widely distributed in movie theaters. I do not believe that historians have yet adequately understood the nature of the shock experienced by the West when it first encountered those images of emaciated bodies stacked, piled, and strewn over the ground; of gas chambers, ovens, and mass graves; of skeletal survivors staring back at the cameras with eyes that seemed to testify to unimaginable horrors. Nor have we been able to understand adequately the meaning of that shock for the Western understanding of both cinema and history—of what this tool we had built could show us of ourselves, and of what there was to be shown. I would certainly not be the first to characterize this moment as a major epistemological shift in modern Western history.³⁵

Crucial to the traumatic potential of these films (like *The Death Camps*, which will be discussed in some detail in the following chapter) was the condition of the human bodies represented. Close-up shots of individuals showed bodies and faces apparently stripped of everything that the Western imagination associates with meaningful human existence: individuality, personality, reason, dignity. Long shots showed masses of bodies strewn, piled, stacked, or dumped on the earth—bodies converted into things (“stacked like cordwood,” the reports said), bodies that no longer had anything to do with persons.

Also crucial to the traumatic potential of the concentration camp footage, to its ability to cause “fright,” was the prior absence of such images. The public had previously been exposed to written reports of concentration camps and mass killings—which, however, had vastly

underestimated the extent of the violence—but there had been no footage. Suddenly there was an inundation of images. The British government, in fact, heightened the traumatic potential of these images through its policy of censoring explicit combat footage during the war, and then forcing first-, second-, and third-run theaters to show widely advertised concentration camp films without an “X” certificate to prevent children from attending.³⁶

Perhaps the clearest statement on the relaying of trauma to the public through photographic imagery is Susan Sontag’s often quoted description of her initial reaction not to atrocity films, but to atrocity photographs:

One’s first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about. . . . When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.³⁷

But I want to guard against a reductive conception of traumatic relay. It is not a process by which a thing called *trauma* is mechanically and wholly conveyed via an image from one person to another. Trauma, first of all, is not a thing, like a letter, that can be delivered. It is not even an event, not even a genocide, which cannot in itself be relayed, but which—perhaps this too is unthinkable—merely happens. Rather, trauma, even before being transmitted, is already utterly bound up with the realm of representation. It is, to be more precise, a crisis of representation. An extreme event is perceived as radically out of joint with one’s mental representation of the world, which is itself partly derived from the set of representations of the world that one receives from one’s family and culture. The mind goes into shock, becomes incapable of translating the impressions of the event into a coherent mental representation. The impressions remain in the mind, intact and unassimilated. Paradoxically, they neither submit to the normal processes of memory

storage and recall, nor, returning uninvited, do they allow the event to be forgotten.³⁸

There is no such thing as a traumatic image per se. But an image of atrocity may carry a traumatic potential, which, as it circulates among individuals and societies with common conceptual horizons, may be repeatedly realized in a variety of experiences of vicarious trauma.

I also want to guard against the notion that the exact force and characteristics of traumatic experience are retained as that experience is transmitted across positions: from victim to eyewitness to spectator. Some of the more poststructurally inflected work on trauma and culture, such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's 1992 *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (including Felman's influential reading of *Shoah*), has been criticized, rightly I think, for erasing important distinctions between historical experiences in the process of describing trauma as a text-based contagion.³⁹ The critic, I would argue, is responsible to the historical specificity of traumatic experience—whether, for instance, it takes place in the context of a concentration camp or a movie theater.

While my definition of the Holocaust as a trauma does ultimately rest on empirical research on PTSD in survivors, my argument about vicarious trauma resulting from the viewing of atrocity films remains, at this point, hypothetical.⁴⁰ There are, however, two strands of related research that support such a hypothesis. First is a series of psychiatric studies carried out between 1962 and the present that have compared subject responses to a "traumatic" or "stress" film and a neutral film. The traumatic film most often used was *Subincision*, an anthropological documentary showing an Australian aboriginal puberty ritual, described as containing repeated scenes of "extensive penile surgery, bleeding wounds, and adolescents writhing and wincing with pain." Repeated studies have verified that subjects display significantly higher levels of stress following the traumatic film, where stress is signaled by physiological symptoms, mood changes, and intrusive thoughts and mental images. The psychiatrist Mardi Jon Horowitz has argued that the data support Freud's theory of a repetition compulsion following traumatic experiences. While these studies were not concerned with the specific characteristics of film-induced trauma (what another researcher called "analogue" trauma) as opposed to what might be called

direct trauma, they do at least indicate that film viewing can lead to symptoms of posttraumatic stress.⁴¹

The second strand of research supporting a theory of vicarious film-induced trauma is the study of vicarious trauma in the therapists and family members of PTSD sufferers. Lisa MacCann and Laurie Anne Pearlman have found that such people, who come into contact with trauma victims over a prolonged period, can themselves come to suffer from PTSD.⁴² According to one report, a therapist treating a Vietnam veteran experienced a posttraumatic flashback of one of her client's memories as if it was her own.⁴³ The question is whether, if vicarious trauma can result from prolonged contact with a traumatized person, it can also result from a single exposure to a filmed representation, which, as an indexical sign, affords an experience closer to eyewitnessing.

While a hypothesis of vicarious trauma resulting from the viewing of atrocity films might be better left to psychiatric experts, I would suggest that it is a response to a different form of unpleasurable excitation than is direct trauma, because a film would be perceived by the viewer, barring severe psychological disturbance, at a degree of existential remove from the self. The excitation would be easier to defend against, and the effects may not normally be as severe or long lasting as in direct trauma. But the effects may include a number of the symptoms of PTSD, such as shock, intrusive imagery, grief, depression, numbing, guilt feelings, and loss of faith in humanity.⁴⁴

The passage from Sontag, in fact, provides a remarkably clear picture of vicarious film-induced trauma, which, we might say, Sontag has simply renamed a "negative epiphany." There is the lack of preparedness Freud discusses, Sontag having come across the photographs "by chance." Reminiscent of Freud's notion of traumatic excitation breaking through a stimulus barrier is Sontag's formulation, "Something broke. Some limit had been reached." There is the use of the word *cut* to describe the immediate effect of the photographs, which recalls the indebtedness of the notion of psychic trauma to an earlier notion of physical trauma. There are the senses of shock, of numbing, of being forever changed. There is a reference to belatedness ("it was several years before I understood fully what they were about"), that aspect of Freud's writing on trauma that has been so stressed by Cathy Caruth.

And there is the suggestion of the posttraumatic collapsing of time in the formulation, “something is still crying.”

POSTTRAUMATIC DISCOURSE IN FILM

As this interpretation of the Sontag passage demonstrates, my interest in vicarious trauma ultimately lies less in the realm of empirical experience than in the realm of discourse. It is my contention that there exists a period of time in the life of a society that has suffered a massive blow—after the initial encounter with a traumatizing historical event but before its ultimate assimilation—in which there arises a discourse of trauma. In the case of the Holocaust, this discourse is made up of texts such as the above quotations from the survivor Elie Wiesel, the witness Reinhard Wiener, and the photographic spectator Susan Sontag. Its significance for the purpose of this argument transcends the literal referencing of any particular experience of trauma or vicarious trauma—of surviving atrocity, witnessing it, or seeing images of it—and lies, rather, in the staking out, in the languages of various media, of a discursive space pertinent to all these experiences. One may be traumatized by an encounter with the Holocaust, one may be unable to assimilate a memory or an image of atrocity, but the discourse of trauma—as one encounters it in conversation, in reading, in film—gives one a language with which to begin to represent the failure of representation that one has experienced.⁴⁵

It is in the discourse of trauma that we can move from the notion of individual responses to traumatizing events toward the notion of collective responses. Indeed, Dominick LaCapra has suggested that it may be a misconception of the significance of psychoanalytic theory to think of it as applying primarily to individual psychology and only secondarily, and by analogy, to societies and texts. Perhaps trauma is, instead, a broad social phenomenon, exemplified in individual psychology and in public discourse alike.⁴⁶

When photographic evidence of genocide first appears, it may need relatively little narrative support in order to cause vicarious trauma. It would be enough for the image to be presented by a reputable source (newspaper, magazine, newsreel), to be identified in historical context (“this is a liberated concentration camp”), and to be authenticated (“this is an actual photo taken by Allied photographers”). This initial phase

does not last long, however. Public interest wanes, the images leave the broad public sphere and become a specialty interest. Some have discussed this turn of events in terms of collective numbing and psychic defense.

In the second phase, when relatively unsupported images are no longer effective, the film must, in a sense, work harder. It must overcome defensive numbing. Documentary images must be submitted to a narrative form whose purpose is, if not to literally traumatize the spectator, then to invoke a posttraumatic historical consciousness—a kind of textual compromise between the senselessness of the initial traumatic encounter and the sense-making apparatus of a fully integrated historical narrative, similar to LaCapra's notion of "muted trauma."⁴⁷ The resulting cinema, exemplified by *Night and Fog*, attempts to produce in the spectator a traumatic afterimage, an image that formally repeats the shock of the original encounters with atrocity—both the original eye-witnessing of the atrocities themselves, and the subsequent cinematic encounter with the images of atrocity. This is less a cinema of vicarious trauma than a posttraumatic cinema.

While this second phase may have begun in a relatively direct fashion, through the reframing of atrocity footage within a posttraumatic narrative discourse, it did not always continue to rely on atrocity footage. Less direct but, I would argue, not less significant forms of posttraumatic cinema have included documentaries that, like *Shoah*, omit atrocity footage altogether, and fiction films that visualize atrocity through fictional construction (e.g., Szabó's *Love Film*), or refer to the Holocaust without visualizing it directly at all (e.g., Szabó's *Father*).

As trauma is less a particular experiential content than a form of experience, so posttraumatic cinema is defined less by a particular image content—a documentary image of atrocity, a fictional image of atrocity, or the absence of an image of atrocity—than by the attempt to discover a form for presenting that content that mimics some aspects of posttraumatic consciousness itself, the attempt to formally reproduce for the spectator an experience of suddenly seeing the unthinkable. And insofar as what is historically thinkable is partly constituted by the conventions of the historical film genre, the instigation of a posttraumatic cinema becomes a question of upsetting the spectator's expectations not only of history in general, but also of the historical film in particular.

The notion of a discourse of trauma can lead to a reframing of the question of the limits or impossibility of representation. Insofar as trauma deforms and throws into crisis a witness's mental representation of an event, it can be said to impose inherent limits of representation—limits of intelligibility and narratability. These inherent limits of representation, however, are different from those asserted by Wiesel. Wiesel's limits rely on an essentialist notion of representation: the distinction between an essentially transparent representation and an essentially oblique one. The limits imposed on representation by trauma, on the other hand, rely on a more historical notion of representation: the distinction between conventional representation and unconventional representation. The discourse of trauma, then, transforms the inherent limit of the witness's private memory into a moral limit of public memory; it transforms an involuntary psychological symptom into a voluntary aesthetic.

TRAUMA AND NARRATION: REALISM AND MODERNISM

The conventional historical film at the time of the Second World War was (and in many ways remains) a subgenre of the classical realist film. The classical realist historical film claims to make the past masterable by making it visible. The original, fictional variant can be traced back to films like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and forward to films like *Titanic* (1997) (both films represent traumatic historical events).⁴⁸ The documentary variant coalesced in a more piecemeal fashion, and arguably it was the Second World War itself that provided the impetus for its coalescence in films like the *Why We Fight* series (1942–45).

In discussing the narration of trauma in the following chapters, I will borrow the method of analyzing literary narration that Gerard Genette elaborated in his book *Narrative Discourse*.⁴⁹ Adapting this model to the historical film, I propose that *tense* regulates the relations between the temporality of the film text (screen time) and the temporality of the historical events represented by the film (as well as, in the case of documentary, the temporality of the filmic evidence, e.g., concentration camp footage). *Mood* regulates the point of view of the film on the images and events represented. And *voice* regulates the film's self-consciousness of its own act of narration.

In the realist historical film, tense works to provide the spectator with a sense of mastery over time, a sense of power to travel back in time to