LIMINAL FIGURES, LIMINAL PLACES:
VISUALIZING TRAUMA IN ITALIAN HOLOCAUST CINEMA

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree Masters of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University
2009

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ABSTRACT

My intention in this study is to provide insight into the problem of representing the trauma of the Holocaust in Italian cinema. In the tradition of Neorealism, in which filmmakers investigated socio-political issues of contemporary and historical Italy, the paucity of Italian films that deal with the Final Solution is remarkable. I will explore this contradictory attitude of Italian filmmakers towards a particularly obscure and unpleasant past, and while focusing on the ambiguous filmic representations of the Shoah, mainly through the study of liminal figures (in particular the Muselmann and the kapo) in a selection of Italian Holocaust films. My study will be divided into 4 chapters. It will include an introduction, in which I will briefly examine the notion of trauma from a critical perspective and introduce the idea of liminality. Then, I will examine five Italian films (Kapò by Gillo Pontecorvo, 1959, The Night Porter by Liliana Cavani, 1974, Seven Beauties by Lina Wertmüller, 1975, Look to the Sky by Roberto Faenza, 1993 and Life is Beautiful by Roberto Benigni, 1997) which depict the Holocaust experience, and will focus my attention on the ambiguous figures produced by the concentration camp experience.
La traumatica esperienza dell’Olocausto è sempre stata parte della storia della mia famiglia. Il padre di mia madre, Guglielmo – nonno Memo per i nipoti, è stato prigioniero a Dachau per due anni. Tutt’altro che reticente a parlare, nonno Memo ha sempre cercato di raccontare tutto ciò che la sua lucida mente ricorda dell’esperienza di guerra. Dalle sue parole si è formata la mia coscienza di un trauma profondo che ha coinvolto milioni di persone nella mia terra d’origine, e che ancora oggi causa dolore. Ciò che più mi stupisce, ogni volta che ascolto nonno Memo parlare dell’esperienza nel campo, sono i dettagli: mi sorprende come un uomo di 92 anni possa ricordare perfettamente alcuni termini, correlati alla vita nel campo e necessari per sopravvivere, in tedesco, lingua che non ha mai studiato. Altri dettagli completano un bagaglio di ricordi incancellabili; la descrizione sin troppo precisa della stazione dei treni, l’episodio che costò a nonno Memo un mese di frustate legato ad un palo nella Appellplatz, i nomi (o numeri) di amici e nemici.

Nonno Memo fa parte di quei sopravvissuti che vogliono parlare, che sentono il bisogno di trasmettere i loro ricordi per evitare che la gente dimentichi e le storia si ripeta. Questo studio sulla rappresentazione del trauma è il mio impegno a portare avanti la storia di nonno Memo, che è la storia di milioni di persone che sono morte senza poter raccontare la loro versione dei fatti.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my adviser, Professor Dana Renga, for her incredible encouragement and aid during this process. In the first year of my Masters at The Ohio State University, Professor Renga’s survey course about gender in Italian cinema created the initial spark of interest that has brought me to the process of writing this thesis and to pursue my studies in Italian and Film at the PhD level. Her interest and vast knowledge of the subject matter helped me to shape this project, from narrowing the topic to directing me towards new and interesting sources and into final revisions.

Both of the other members of my committee, Professor Charles Klopp and Professor Heather Webb have also helped me greatly in the two years I spent at The Ohio State University. They each have been great instructors, who gave me the opportunity to broaden my knowledge of Italian literature and encouraged me to explore new topics of interest in my study.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my friends and family members who have been encouraging and patient. I am particularly grateful to my father Marco and my mother Annalisa for their love from Italy, and Salvatore and Donna for their kind words and endless support. This has been a very instructive experience, which I will treasure in my future as an individual and as a scholar, and I know it would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of these individuals.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION:
LIMINALITY IN ITALIAN HOLOCAUST CINEMA

“Solo una retorica schematica può sostenere che lo spazio [che separa le vittime dai persecutori] sia vuoto: non lo è mai, è costellato di figure turpi o patetiche, che è indispensabile conoscere se vogliamo conoscere la specie umana.”

- Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*

“Auschwitz is something else, always something else. It is a universe outside the universe, a creation that exists parallel to creation. Auschwitz lies on the other side of life and on the other side of death”

- Elie Wiesel

In 1978, Elie Wiesel claimed in the pages of *New York Times* that “the Holocaust [is] the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted” (Wiesel 2). With these words, Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps, expresses the peculiar difficulty that characterizes the transmission of Holocaust memory since 1945. Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* maintains that trauma has come to occupy a central position
in modern debates, especially after World War II. He notices that “trauma and its symptomatic aftermath pose particularly acute problems for historical representation and understanding” (LaCapra 9), thus underlining the traumatic event as a twofold obstacle for memory and testimony. First, trauma hinders a precise representation of trauma and requires a new language or code in order to be accurately expressed; second, a traumatic event usually eludes the audience’s comprehension. The difficulty that the Holocaust and its consequences create in the process of remembering and witnessing has been widely discussed and expressed: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub defined the Shoah as an “event without a witness” (Felman 80), and Nadine Fresco (quoted also in Felman and Laub’s work) called the trauma of the camp experience a “gaping, vertiginous black hole” (Fresco 418), an expression also used by Carlo Celli¹ in his chapter on Gillo Pontecorvo’s Kapò. Primo Levi in I sommersi e i salvati blames the incomplete testimony on memory, which he defines “strumento meraviglioso ma fallace”, particularly if “falsificata” by a traumatic event (Levi 13). To the “lenta degradazione” (Levi 15) of individual memory, Henry Rousso opposes “carriers of memory, [or] any source that proposes a deliberate reconstruction of an event for a social purpose” (Rousso 219). According to Rousso, the collective memory of a nation can be perpetuated through different vectors: officials, i.e. the institution of public ceremonies and celebrations², organizational, cultural and “scholarly.” Cinema, in particular, has assumed a central position in recent years as a


² A good example is the recent (2000) institution in Italy of the “Giorno della Memoria” on January 27th, in order to remember the liberation of Auschwitz
way (a vector) to create proximity with a past that is more and more distant. As a cultural and scholarly vector, due to its capacity to reenact and interpret facts according to a personal or documentary logic, cinema becomes a *medium* that “makes events remote in time seem suddenly close, [...] unlike most works of history or even novels” (Rousso 240).

However, as Annette Insdorf explains in *Indelible Shadows*, the fundamental objective in confronting Holocaust memory is to find “an appropriate language for that which is mute or defies visualization” (Insdorf xv). But how is it possible to create a representation with words and images of something that is unimaginable? This question seemed to have found its answer in Italy in the 1940s, when filmmakers created a tradition of *engagé* cinema which aimed to raise awareness towards controversial issues inherent in Italy’s national history by using cinema as a way to denounce and spread information. Despite this invested interest towards polemical socio-political matters, Millicent Marcus in *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz* points out that “of all possible cultural venues for working through the troubled history [of the Holocaust], it is cinema that surprises us most with its reticence. Filmmakers working in a realist tradition known for its courage in facing socio-political injustices past and present, show a surprising reluctance to confront Mussolini’s racial laws and the ensuing genocidal campaign” (Marcus 13-14). Marcus highlights a lacuna in Italian film production of the past and notices how the Holocaust has been avoided or ignored by several directors. Only in more recent

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3 Italian *engagé* cinema continues today: in 2008, two films were released, *Gomorrah* by Matteo Garrone and *Il Divo* by Paolo Sorrentino, which shed light on Italian recent controversial past.
decades Italian filmmakers have attempted to come to terms with an unpleasant past and tackle the question of problematic memory by adopting a critical perspective in their representation of the Shoah; one might think of Luchino Visconti’s *The Damned* (1969), Vittorio De Sica’s *The Garden of Finzi-Continis* (1970), Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1974) or Lina Wertmüller’s *Seven Beauties* (1974), or more recently Roberto Faenza’s *Look to the Sky* (1993) and Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* (1997).

In this study, I will explore this contradicting attitude of Italian filmmakers and their tendency to create a distance from a particularly obscure past, as underlined by Marcus. My intention is to provide insight into the problem of representing the trauma of the lager and the difficulty of witnessing in a selection of Italian Holocaust films. Particularly, I will examine depictions of concentration camps in three Italian films and one French work: in the second chapter, I will focus on Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Kapò* (1960), which represents Italian immediate and non-mediated reaction to the Shoah. I will compare this film with the French short documentary *Night and Fog* by Alain Resnais (1955) and I will discuss the two directors’ different approaches to trauma - approaches that will be central to the origin of two distinct filmic traditions in the representation of the Holocaust. On one side, Pontecorvo bases his work on the personal story of an exception – a Jewish girl who becomes kapo in a concentration camp; on the other side, Resnais adopts a documentary and objective perspective by showing present and past images of Auschwitz dramatically juxtaposed. In the third chapter, Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* and Lina Wertmüller’s *Seven Beauties* will be the subject of my study. I will argue that a new awareness arose in the 1970s
in Italy and films such as Visconti’s *The Damned* and DeSica’s *The Garden of Finzi-Continis* demonstrate a new tendency in Italian cinema to confront the past in a somewhat violent and ambiguous way, a method that drifts away from the objectivity of the French tradition, well-represented by Marcel Ophuls’ *The Sorrow and The Pity* (1969).

The problematic transmission of the Holocaust experience will constitute the basis of my study. In *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben explains Felman and Laub’s concept of “an event without a witness” in two ways: as the impossibility of witnessing from inside because “non si può testimoniare dall’interno della morte” as well as the impossibility of witnessing from outside, since “l’outsider è escluso per definizione dall’evento” (Agamben 33). Elie Wiesel, too, is skeptical of any attempt to narrate an incommunicable experience. In his article “Trivializing the Holocaust”, he maintains “just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz” (Wiesel 3). Through this interpretation, he creates a suspended space in time where Auschwitz exists; outside this space, the *lager* experience is impenetrable. In fact, notwithstanding the abundance of narratives written right after the end of Second World War, i.e. *La notte* by Elie Wiesel (1958) or *Se questo è un uomo* by Primo Levi (1947), there is a weak attempt to explain what happened or to understand the reasons behind the Holocaust. Levi defines his desire to tell his story as an “impulso immediato e violento” characterized more as a physical need than as a rational elaboration of facts, to the point that “rivaleggiava con gli altri bisogni elementari” (Levi 14). Objective analysis is here substituted with a fragmented narration, divided into “capitoli [...] scritti non in successione logica, ma
per ordine di urgenza” (Levi 14). Thus, the author is motivated by a compulsion to write without didactic intention; rather, he aims to create an authentic document that can be read by future generations as a plea not to forget. However, in his later essay *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986), Levi wonders “siamo stati capaci, noi reduci, di comprendere e far comprendere la nostra esperienza?” (Levi 24); here, his concern is of the matter of understanding rather than a pure description of facts.

Giorgio Agamben reinforces the impossibility to understand this “particolare statuto modale” of the *lager*; as a “verificazione assoluta della politica nazista, cioè *l’arte di rendere possibile ciò che sembrava impossibile*” (Agamben 71), the camp is unintelligible and unimaginable for those who did not directly experience it (the impossibility of witnessing from outside mentioned above). Conversely, for survivors such as Levi and Wiesel, the same “particolare statuto modale” of the camp makes it absolutely true and incommunicable (the impossibility of witnessing from inside). Agamben underlines this dichotomy by defining Levi a partial witness since gaps are present in his memories; instead, Agamben proposes the *Muselmann* as the real witness, the “testimone integrale, colui che ha toccato il fondo” (Agamben 31), who, paradoxically, is no longer able to witness. Levi also explains his position in *I sommersi e i salvati*, when he repeats “non siamo noi, i superstiti, i testimoni veri. [Chi ha toccato il fondo] e ha visto la Gorgona non è tornato per raccontare, o è tornato muto”. Later in the book he adds “parliamo noi in vece loro, per delega” (Levi 64), thus confirming himself as the voice on behalf of the true witnesses while questioning the authenticity of his own testimony. The idea of the *Muselmann* has been defined by Levi as well, in *Se questo è un uomo*: “la loro vita è breve ma il loro
numero è sterminato; sono i Muselmanner, i sommersi, il nerbo del campo; loro, la massa anonima, continuamente rinnovata e sempre identica, dei non-uomini che marciano e faticano in silenzio, spenta in loro la scintilla divina, già troppo vuoti per soffrire veramente. Si esita a chiamarli vivi, si esita a chiamare morte la loro morte” (Levi 121). Several other documents⁴ attest to the existence of these figures and at times present certain contrasting details; however, the Muselmann is of crucial importance since it represents, according to Agamben, “non solo o non tanto un limite tra la vita e la morte, ma piuttosto, la soglia tra l’uomo e il non-uomo” (Agamben 50). As such, the Muselmann embodies the true nature of the lager in that it represents the total annihilation of the individual, a figure that has lost every aspect of its humanity.

In my study, I will analyze the depiction of this figure suspended between life and death in Italian cinema. Moreover, I will compare the Muselmann with a different kind of liminality, which blurs the boundaries between a victim and a perpetrator and is expressed by the figure of the kapo. Levi once again offers a precise definition of the term in Se questo è un uomo: he describes the Prominenten as “il tipico prodotto della struttura del Lager tedesco” in that they pass from a stage of submission as prisoners to a privileged condition as kapo, and they are immune to the “legge comune” of abuses and persecutions and as such “tanto più odiosi e odiati” (Levi 122). In I sommersi e i salvati, Levi expands upon this concept when he defines the privileged prisoners as a “discorso più complesso” and he decides to explore “lo spazio che separa le vittime dai persecutori” (Levi 27). He concludes that this space is “una zona grigia, dai contorni mal definiti, che insieme separa e congiunge i due

⁴ Among others, Jean Améry, Aldo Carpi, Elie Wiesel, Zdzisław Ryn and Stanisław Klodzinski.
campi dei padroni e dei servi” (Levi 29), thus acknowledging the existence of an undefined interval that problematizes a distinct separation of good and evil.

In my analysis, I will apply this idea of “zona grigia” to Italian Holocaust cinema and I will examine characters such as Edith/Nicole in Pontecorvo’s Kapò, Lucia Atherton in Cavani’s the Night Porter and Pasqualino Frafuso in Wertmüller’s Seven Beauties, to illustrate how these directors represent the impossibility to categorize the survivors of the Shoah, and to disprove Levi’s words about films of this period: “questa identificazione o scambio di ruoli fra il sovraffiatore e la vittima [...] non è un terreno vergine, anzi è un campo arato maldestramente, scalpicciato e sconvolto” (Levi 34).

Agamben, in his analysis of the lager in Homo Sacer, takes the idea of Levi’s “zona grigia” to an extreme and defines the whole camp as a “stato di eccezione permanente.” Placed outside the norms of natural laws and as such independent from “ogni controllo giudiziario” (Agamben 189), the nature of the camp justifies the impossibility to witness the lager experience. Levi confirms Agamben’s words: in the beginning of Se questo è un uomo, he relies on an infernal metaphor to efficiently convey the horror experienced⁵, then he better defines the difficulty of prisoners faced with a “mondo [...] si terribile, ma anche indecifrabile, non conforme ad alcun modello” and correlates the place, undefined and thus unintelligible, with the dissolution of human connections and personal identity in the camp⁶. That is

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⁵ “Questo è l’inferno. Oggi, ai nostri giorni, l’inferno deve essere così, una camera grande e vuota, e noi stanchi di stare in piedi” (Levi 25).

⁶ “Il nemico era intorno ma anche dentro” (Levi 25).
particularly evident in his words “il noi perdeva i suoi confini”, in which Levi recalls the concept of *limen* that dissolves in order that “non si distingueva una frontiera ma molte e confuse, forse innumerevoli, una fra ciascuno e ciascuno” (Levi 25).

In my study, while discussing the four films, I will focus my attention on the opacity that characterizes the representation of the Final Solution and of memory in Italin cinema. It is this opaqueness that allows these films to create a “soglia d’indistinzione fra il dentro e il fuori” (Agamben 33) and therefore to belong, paradoxically, both inside and outside the representation of the camp in that they present figures that evoke the liminality addressed by Agamben and Levi. I will employ the idea of “transitional status” expressed by Arnold Van Gennep in *Rites of Passage*: he defines the life of an individual as a series of passages from a defined stage to another, through intermediate stages that are characterized by their distinct indeterminacy. Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* echoes Van Gennep’s ideas and develops the concept of “liminal *personae*”, to which he confers attributes necessarily ambiguous, since “these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner 95). Thus, Turner defines individuals who present the same characteristics as the *lager* of exceptionality and impenetrability. He continues: “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner 95) and thus individuates an “in between” space where these figures are, a condition that at times becomes
permanent. In my study, I will apply Van Gennep and Turner’s theories to the concentration camp, which emerges as a space of permanent exception in which undefined and liminal entities can exist.

Then, I will examine the impossibility of these liminal entities to exist outside the lager that created them and to reintegrate into a society that is trying to erase a shameful past. Laura Pietropaolo’s words assume particular importance here: she recounts the story of an Auschwitz survivor, who had tried but was unable to resume a normal life after the war. Filled with sentiments of shame, embarrassment and exclusion, she finally moved away from family and friends. Pietropaolo focuses on the influence that this woman had on Liliana Cavani’s The Night Porter when she said that “the lager had made her realize her own potential for good and evil and discover the ambiguities inherent in human nature” (Pietropaolo 71). With Cavani and Wertmüller’s works, which constitutes the central part of my study, I will demonstrate that Italian Holocaust cinema in the 1970s uncovers ambiguous perspectives and contrasts with other attempts to depict the extermination of the Jewish population. Kriss Ravetto in The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics explains the difference between films like The Night Porter or Seven Beauties, whose “emphasis on aesthetic style” creates a striking contrast with films like Resnais’ Night and Fog, which instead “uses documentary footage in order to appeal to history and to promote an image of historical reality”, and Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1980), which “mimics realist modes of narration” (Ravetto 155).

7 “With the increasing specialization of society and culture, [...] what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities ‘betwixt and between’ defined states of culture and society has become itself an institutionalized state. [...] Transition has here become a permanent condition” (Turner 107).
I will conclude my study with a brief afterword, in which I will discuss two films of the 1990s - *Look to the Sky* by Roberto Faenza and *Life is Beautiful* by Roberto Benigni – that represent a new way to reflect on the Holocaust through the perspective of two children, Jonah e Giosuè. With these two examples, I will discuss a recent tendency in Italian cinema to assume a child’s gaze as the main point of view in an attempt to re-teach the past to an audience that has begun to forget.
CHAPTER 2

STANDING ON THE THRESHOLD: LIMINALITY

IN GILLO PONTECORVO’S KAPÒ AND ALAIN RESNAIS’ NIGHT AND FOG

Considerate se questo è un uomo
Che lavora nel fango
Che non conosce pace
Che lotta per mezzo pane
Che muore per un sì o per un no.

Considerate se questa è una donna,
Senza capelli e senza nome
Senza più forza di ricordare
Vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo
Come una rana d’inverno.

- Primo Levi, Se questo è un uomo

Before the end of the Second World War little to no direct footage of the extermination of the Jews in Europe exists. In Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust Joshua Hirsch mentions only one piece, filmed in 1941 by Reinhard Wiener: a public execution perpetrated by a mobile Einsatzgruppe unit in Latvia. Soon after, Himmler prohibited the shooting of any activity related to the “Final Solution.” The lack of filmic evidence before 1945 contributed to the difficulty of grasping what Celli defines as a “narrative black hole” (Celli 34), a story that defies
every traditional *modus* of representation and constitutes a category in itself: the Holocaust.

In this chapter I analyse how two different directors, Alain Resnais (*Night and Fog*, 1955) and Gillo Pontecorvo (*Kapò*, 1960), attempt to recreate the camp experience for millions of deportees. I will focus on the treatment of liminal figures such as those that Primo Levi calls the *Muselmänner*, inmates that lost all hope and became “non-uomini che marciano e faticano in silenzio” (Levi 121), and what he defines as *Prominenten*, or privileged individuals that assumed an ambiguous role halfway between prisoners and guards, with particular attention to the figure of the *kapo*: through the analysis of these figures, I will argue that the camp itself becomes a liminal place, thus defying any representation or understanding of what happens in the grey area demarcated by the barbed wire.

After 1945, European countries were eager to forget what had happened in the concentration camps. In France, Henry Rousso defines a “resistancialist myth” (Rousso 18), or the idea of a unified state that resisted the German Occupation and liberated itself with little aid from the allies: a myth that favoured the repression of the memory of the Holocaust and “enclosed [the Vichy experience] in parentheses” (Rousso 17). Much like France, Italy after the end of the war felt the need to reconstruct a strong national identity and forget such a shameful chapter of its history. Millicent Marcus in *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz* describes how the deportees “disturbed the fragile postwar peace of the living” and therefore “most Italians closed their ears to the reports brought back by these ghostly messengers” (Marcus 14). It is especially surprising that Italian writers and filmmakers decided to
avoid a subject like the Holocaust, which offered an opportunity to mourn the victims of the Shoah; as Marcus points out, the Italian cinema d’impegno in those years strived to acknowledge, “through representation on the movie screen, the tensions and contradictions at the basis of the Italian national self” (Marcus 15). This dominant tendency to deny a past too recent and traumatic recalls Eric Santner’s definition of “narrative fetishism” or “a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness” (Santner 144). Santner further maintains “narrative fetishism releases one from the burning of having to reconstitute one’s self identity under ‘posttraumatic’ conditions” (144), and in fact in postwar France and Italy the propensity to minimize the impact of the Jewish genocide continued until the 1970s.

However, the first evidence of an attempt to take a critical stance with regards to the Holocaust and its aftermath can be found in Alain Resnais’ Night and Fog (1955), which inaugurates in France a long tradition of documentaries about the Shoah such as Marcel Ophüls’ The Sorrow and the Pity (1969) and Claude Lanzmann’s epic Shoah (1984). In Italy, instead, Gillo Pontecorvo’s Kapò represents the birth of a series of extremely controversial films that problematize the impact of the Holocaust both on inmates inside the camp and on camp survivors; this trend will reach its climax in the 1970s, first in Luchino Visconti’s The Damned (1969) and then with Lina Wertmüller’s Seven Beauties (1974) and Liliana Cavani’s The Night Porter (1974).

In Night and Fog, Resnais privileges the simplest of frames: a male voice narrates a script written by Jean Cayrol, a member of the French Résistance and
survivor of Gusen concentration camp turned poet. Hanns Eisler’s musical score
accompanies present and past images of several concentration camps in Poland,
which constitute the director’s denunciation of the camp experience and serve as a
visual counterpart to Cayrol’s voice in order to create a warning for new generations.
Hirsch argues that Night and Fog is “a rejection of classical realism” – intended as a
transparent depiction of a plausible reality – and works instead as a narrative
“constructed on the subjectively fragmented terrain of memory” (Hirsch 42). Thus,
the director chooses a documentary format, commonly regarded as objective and
impersonal, and combines it with a montage that reflects a “hyper-realistic
representation of the way reality is perceived and given meaning by the mind”
(Hirsch 41) in order to show what for Elie Wiesel is “uncommunicable”.

Wiesel in 1989 states that “the truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes”
in explaining the impossibility to “retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz”; he further
maintains “the unspeakable draws its force and its mystery from its own silence”,
which refers to the idea that those who experienced the true lesson of the Lagers
cannot talk, because they are already dead. However, Giorgio Agamben in Quel che
resta di Auschwitz seems to disagree: he speaks of a gap in witnessing – a
“testimonianza mancante” (Agamben 32) - and argues that survivors like Primo Levi,
who wrote about their experience in the camp and discussed its effects, cannot voice
the testimony of the true witnesses, i “testimoni integrali” or “musulmani” who are
still alive but saw the reality of the camp and “non hanno testimoniato e non
avrebbero potuto farlo” (Agamben 31)
Echoing Agamben’s take on the true witness, in Night and Fog the prisoners have no voice; the only sounds are non-diegetic and off-screen and often contribute to increase instead of diminish the distance of the viewer from the images. Michel Bouquet’s narrating voice wonders “what hope do we have of truly capturing this reality?” while the camera, through long pans and close ups on a face, a latrine or a detail on a blue-striped uniform, embodies Resnais’ critique. The director’s attention dwells on different moments of the story of the Holocaust and creates a personal bond between the sequences filmed in the remnants of the concentration camps in 1955 and the footage of the inmates during the war. In particular, the viewer’s gaze is lead through a group that becomes an indistinct and anonymous mass of bodies and then turn into corpses. Thus, Levi’s idea of the Muselmann is recalled. In Se questo è un uomo, Levi describes the Muselmann as “una massa anonima, continuamente rinnovata e sempre identica” and encapsulates all the evil of our time in their “presenza senza volto” (Levi 121). It is precisely this anonymity that Resnais underlines, when he creates a striking contrast between the images of Jewish people just arrested, who are well dressed and different in their attitudes, and the indistinct mass that arrives at the camp “in the night and fog.” The following dolly on the present day railroad tracks strengthens the idea of a transition from one status to another: the train then marks the borderline between a group of individuals and an anonymous number of bodies. After arriving in the camp, the prisoners lose their status as humans: as the narrator clearly points out when he says “first sight on the camp, it is another planet”, the first image of the camp is an extreme long shot of a multitude of people who can barely be described as human. Their naked and shaved
bodies contribute to create a sense of Levi’s “presenza senza volto”, while the close ups on tattoos and numbers suggest continuity between what is alive and what is inanimate. Every element in the camp works in sinister symbiosis and contributes to delineate what Giorgio Agamben in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* calls a “figura-limite” that “abita la soglia estrema tra la vita e la morte” and “toglie per sempre ogni possibilità di distinguere tra l’uomo e il non-uomo” (Agamben 42). In *Night and Fog* this is particularly evident in the hospital sequence, where a series of shots show dying prisoners laying on their beds, unable to stand or talk but alive, their eyes and their bodies moving. As the narrating voice explains “in the end, each inmate resembles the next: a body of indeterminate age that dies with its eyes wide open,” the camera lingers on a prisoner looking straight into the audience, who cannot determine whether he is alive or dead. Suspended in an indistinct condition between life and death, he becomes the visual representation of what Levi notices about the *Muselmann*: “si esita a chiamarli vivi, si esita a chiamar morte la loro morte, davanti a cui essi non temono perché sono troppo stanchi per comprenderla” (Levi 121). In the *Muselmann*, personal trauma is denied as the mere concepts of ‘humanity’ and ‘personality’ lose meaning. It represents the final lesson of the camps, the *testimone integrale* whose annihilated identity Levi calls “demolizione di un uomo” (Levi 36).

Giorgio Agamben further connects the idea of the *Muselmann* with that of the camp itself: he explains that “Auschwitz è precisamente il luogo in cui [...] la situazione estrema diventa il paradigma stesso del quotidiano” (Agamben 44), a place where the exception becomes the norm and the laws that regulate life in a civil society lose their meaning. Recalling Hannah Arendt’s idea of the “banality of evil”
(Arendt 135), the camp becomes a place where evil becomes “banal” as it is the principle that informs life in the state of permanent exception. Due to its peculiar nature, the Lager is the place that, in Agamben’s words, “permette di decidere cosa è umano e che cosa non lo è, di separare il musulmano dall’uomo” (Agamben 43); the Muselmann is created by the camp and lives in it as a “massa anonima, continuamente rinnovata e sempre identica” which constitutes “il nerbo del campo” (Levi 121). In Night and Fog, concentration camps are depicted from their construction to a detailed description of their structure and the “surprises” that every camp provides (a zoo, an orphanage, an orchestra). In this way, Resnais attempts to unmask the tragic irony of an evil that turns into habit, thus enhancing the idea of a liminal space suspended between life and death, work and extermination. The camp is presented as a permanent exception, where the extreme becomes normal; as such, it is placed outside the real world, but within its limits.

On the train to Auschwitz, Levi notes “ci sentivamo ormai ‘dall’altra parte’” (Levi 25), and upon entering the camp he states “questo è l’inferno” (Levi 30), hence conferring a supernatural quality to the tragic reality of deportation, a quality that Agamben translates into the idea that “il campo è il luogo in cui ogni distinzione tra possibile e impossibile viene radicalmente meno” (Agamben 70). The lager becomes then, as the voice in Night and Fog explains, a “closed, self-contained universe, hemmed in by observation posts from which soldiers kept watch” and the outside world exists for the inmates as illusion. This idea of an illusive façade, a peaceful landscape that seems idyllic to the viewer but hides a dreadful reality, is particularly apparent in the lengthy tracking shot that opens Resnais’ documentary, where the
camera slowly moves from a beautiful landscape to the space delimited by the barbed wire. The director directly involves the viewer in the problematic opposition between appearance and reality, as the camp eludes normal representative modes. Furthermore, Cayrol’s words “here is the setting: buildings that could pass for stables, garages or workshops” seem to deny at first the importance of the place where the traumatic events took place. However, through the use of strategic juxtaposition Resnais gives new meaning to the space of the horror. Agamben’s “remnants of Auschwitz” become a symbol of the tragic experience of the past and serve for the director as the trigger for memory: they define a place out of time by constituting a bond between past and present, and the effect is, in Annette Insdorf’s words, “not only opposition, but a deeper unity in which past and present blend into each other” (Insdorf 38). Therefore, due to its liminal nature, the camp becomes a grey area in which even “la morte e la fabbricazione di cadaveri divengono indiscernibili” (Agamben 70); as such, it is unconceivable and corresponds to Elie Wiesel’s words “Auschwitz is something else, always something else. It is a universe outside the universe, a creation that exists parallel to creation. Auschwitz lies on the other side of life and on the other side of death” (Wiesel 3).

Resnais introduce the kapo as another example of a borderline figure that reflects the liminality of the camp. In addition to the mass of inmates and the SS guards, the director engages the idea of privileged prisoners who assume a dominant role over their fellow inmates and are usually in charge of a barrack. A series of shots depicting prisoners is followed by a close up on the arm band that a kapo wore, a symbol of a different status, followed by a quick tilt to show his face. The plump
cheeks and the fierce look create a stark contrast with the mass of other inmates, who appear emaciated and deprived of any hope, although a clear difference with SS guards is pointed out by his striped uniform, which classifies the kapo as still a prisoner. This figure then becomes ambiguous in that it blurs the borderline between a victim and a perpetrator, and like the Muselmann it becomes difficult to understand and place into a distinct category. In Kapò, Gillo Pontecorvo focuses on the concept of limen as embodied in the figure of the kapo. However, the director insists more on the human and psychological aspects of the word, presenting throughout the film the fall and redemption of Edith, a young Parisian Jewish girl deported to a Nazi camp who first assumes the identity of another woman, Nicole, in order to survive, who then becomes a kapo and eventually sacrifices herself to allow her lover and other prisoners to escape.

In her frequent passages from one status to another, Edith recalls Arnold Van Gennep’s idea of the “liminal phase” of rites of passage. Van Gennep argues: “a man’s life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings” (Van Gennep 3), and in every transition he distinguishes three phases, which Victor Turner calls “separation, margin (or limen, signifying “threshold”) and aggregation” (Turner 94). The intermediate phase, which is the focus of my study, presents ambiguous characteristics in that the subject of the transition enters a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Turner continues: “the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these people elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner 95). Edith as a
kapo becomes then an exception and eludes any attempt at fixed categorization: she is a character that expresses a distinct “liminal state” characterized by indeterminacy and a tendency to continuous evolution. Pontecorvo underlines her multi-layered ambiguity in the film by constructing the film around Edith’s transformation from a young Jewish girl in Paris into an identity-less creature in the camp, and finally into a kapo.

In the beginning of the film, Edith is portrayed as a naive girl playing the harpsichord under the patient gaze of her music teacher. From the very first shot, she is the focus of the action as the camera follows her with a long tracking shot in the streets of Paris. Thus, Pontecorvo invites the viewer to identify with the innocent Edith who is unaware of the threat of the Nazi occupation in Paris and of the danger of wearing a yellow star on her coat. When she arrives home and sees her parents being taken away, the director first introduces her temporal indeterminacy. In the crowd gathered around her house, no one moves besides the young girl, who directs the gaze of the audience and creates a moment suspended in time in which every other person in the shot frame stands still. It is only when Edith tries to reach for her parents that the people helplessly watching the scene finally seem to come to life; the girl voluntarily breaks the silence and immobility that surround her and joins her parents thus causing the reaction of a woman, who tries to stop her. In this way, Edith creates a distance from the crowd, in that she reacts very differently to the initial experience of violence perpetrated by the Nazi soldiers and emerges as a defined example of innocence. In the camp, Edith is separated from her parents; her abrupt coming of age happens quickly, as she alone escapes from the extermination that
usually awaits children and is rescued by an improbable cooperation between an
inmate and the camp doctor. Her salvation occurs through a drastic change that
involves every aspect of the girl’s identity: Edith becomes Nicole, a political
prisoner- a status which ensures her a better chance of survival -. She receives a
number tattooed on her arm, her hair is shaved and her clothes are taken away. She
resembles the unsettling description of a woman in the incipit of *Survival in
Auschwitz*, where Levi writes “considerate se questa è una donna/senza capelli e
senza nome/senza più forza di ricordare/vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo” (Levi 15).
The price for her lost identity is evident in her tears and screams at the sight of her
parents walking toward the gas chambers; looking at them through a window,
Edith/Nicole is now placed outside the story but within the film frame, in a privileged
position of spatial indeterminacy. As Marcus notices, the newborn Nicole is an
“identity-less creature” (Marcus 38); transferred to a work camp with other female
prisoners, she will move through several stages marked by an increasing moral
degradation until she becomes a *kapo*, following her “determination to ‘live and that’s
all’” (Marcus 38) and recalling Van Gennep’s theory of ritual stages. Celli discusses
the plausibility of the paradoxical status of Edith, a Jewish *kapo*, and criticizes
Pontecorvo for inaugurating a tradition of “Holocaust exception narratives” that will
“approach the Holocaust through stories with an individual perspective” (Celli 34),
stories that will fail to grasp the anonymous horror of the camp experience. However,
in the film the work camp provides the space where “lo stato di eccezione coincide
perfettamente con la regola” (Agamben 44) and where figures “on the threshold” can
live, thus justifying the existence of Edith/Nicole. In a place where the extreme
becomes routine to the point of being unconceivable for those who were not part of it, a character such as Edith/Nicole can exist because she represents an exception that defies understanding, just like the Lager itself.

Becoming a kapo enhances the liminal quality of Nicole. Somewhat akin to the Muselmann, who is suspended between life and death, the kapo is a figure that stands between two states of being; he or she, however, is also involved in change of social status. Primo Levi calls “prominenti” those figures that reach a position of relative power in the camp; he continues “[i prominenti ebrei] sono il prodotto tipico della struttura del Lager tedesco: si offra ad alcuni individui in stato di schiavitù una posizione privilegiata […], esigendone in cambio il tradimento della naturale solidarietà coi loro compagni, e sicuramente ci sarà chi accetterà” (Levi 122). In fact, there exists in the film an inversely proportional relationship between the fall of Edith/Nicole’s morality and the rise of her power, which expresses what Celli calls a “narrative about individual versus collective values” (Celli 37). Nicole steals Teresa’s potato, escapes selection by baring her breast, shuns the other inmates to become friends with the kapo Alice and eventually gives up her virginity to a SS soldier in order to obtain more food. As a kapo, her split identity becomes more evident: she is a Jew and a criminal, a prisoner and a guard. Her two names, Edith and Nicole, reflect the duality of her condition. Victim and a victimizer at the same time, she constitutes a problematic intermediate figure that cannot belong to any group and is thus suspended and indefinite. Furthermore, as Levi explains, “[il kapò] è sottratto alla legge comune e diventa intangibile” (Levi 122). This immunity from punishment and starvation, the two main concerns of the inmates, pushes Nicole into a condition
halfway between that of a prisoner and that of a guard and recalls once again Van Gennep’s idea of a transitional status. Her distinctiveness is also marked physically: far from the timid girl whose short hair symbolized her lost innocence, Nicole now appears as a strong feminine figure. Her hair has grown long again, she wears boots and a dark jacket with an armband that says “kapò”, elements that show her rank and favour among the SS. However, the whistle around her neck and the club in her hands, symbols of her newly acquired power, create a striking contrast with the prisoner’s uniform still visible underneath: this contrast continuously recalls the dichotomy of her role.

The indeterminacy of her situation also hinders Nicole’s romantic relationships. Pontecorvo ultimately depicts love as a means for redemption, but there is no salvation attainable for Nicole, who has already been saved and started a new life as part of the camp. Her relationship with Karl, the SS guard, is possible because she has been emptied of any sentimental drive that would have caused the kapo to question herself and her position. However, when Nicole meets and falls in love with Sasha, an idealistic Russian prisoner who reminds her of the outside world, an acute awareness of her emotions strikes her and causes a final shift towards redemption that is doomed to fail. The relationship with Sasha pushes Nicole to reconcile with her previous identity; she confesses to him alone that she is a Jew and tells him her real name, Edith. However, while talking with Sasha about their future, she glances down and says “io sono diversa”, thus acknowledging her different condition as a kapo and the impossibility to revert to her initial condition of intactness.
In its embodiment of a transition between a definite beginning and a definite end, which is usually not reached, the figure of the kapo recalls the idea of the Muselmann. They both express a stage in which boundaries, between life and death for the Muselmann and innocence and guilt for the kapo, become indistinct. Both liminal figures are originated by the peculiar state of exception that characterizes the space delimited by the barbed wire. Both can exist inside the Lager but not outside of it, since their transient nature, in which opposite aspects come together and form a new indistinct unity, is a product of the camp itself. In Night and Fog, the prisoners stare at the audience from behind the fence, as they wonder whether they will able to live again in a society that is not an eternal paradigm of exception. In Kapò, Nicole cannot live to go with Sasha to the idealized village in Russia that they imagined. She dies in the camp after switching off the power of the electric fence, shot by Karl who cannot leave either.

As liminal identities created by the lager, both the kapo and the Muselmann are incomprehensible; the camp itself emerges as an anomaly, an absolutum situated where life and death, morality and immorality lose their meaning. Thus, the camp and its inhabitants represent a suspended space in memory, a liminality that, in Agamben’s words, “fluttua senza trovare una collocazione definita” (Agamben 76) and “tradisce l’impossibilità della ragione di identificare con certezza il crimine specifico di Auschwitz” (Agamben 75). Due to this shared condition of indeterminacy, the memory of the camps recalls again Celli’s idea of a “narrative black hole” (34) and eludes the possibility of its representation or the attempt at explaining the experience of the Shoah. In the same way, this traumatic memory of
the past continues to haunt the camp survivors. As Levi explains, for survivors, in the years following the liberation of the concentration camps, there was a compulsion, an “impulso immediato e violento [...] di raccontare agli “altri” e farli partecipi” (Levi 14) that was perceived as self-liberation. However, history has shown that survivors cannot truly communicate the horror they have witnessed. The impossibility for survivors to reintegrate into society and resume normal lives will stand at the forefront of Italian Holocaust films in the next decade, especially in the problematic works of Liliana Cavani and Lina Wertmüller.
CHAPTER 3

GUILTY MEMORIES: LIMINALITY IN LILIANA CAVANI’S *THE NIGHT*

*PORTER*

AND LINA WERTMÜLLER’S *SEVEN BEAUTIES*

Not all victims are innocents because a victim too is a human being.

- Liliana Cavani, *Liliana Cavani*

“You disgust me. Your thirst for life disgusts me. Your love disgusts me. [...] You sub-human Mediterranean larva, you found the strength for an erection. And because of this you will manage to live on.”

- Hilde, *Seven Beauties*

È una zona grigia, dai contorni mal definiti, che insieme separa e congiunge i due campi dei padroni e dei servi.

- Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* (45)
Italian Holocaust cinema between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s, most notably in Luchino Visconti’s *The Damned* (1969) and Vittorio De Sica’s *Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1972), presents a tendency to portray enclosed spaces and personal stories where the historic reality of the repression and persecution of the Jews serves mainly as the background against which the characters are developed. Millicent Marcus points out that De Sica’s work, in particular, “forms a strategic bridge” (Marcus 46) between films of the previous decade such as Pontecorvo’s *Kapò*, characterized by a melodramatic tone and the sacrifice of the protagonist, and the new approach to the Shoah in the 1970s, which “brings to the foreground a cinematic self-consciousness that complicates the less sophisticated realism of its predecessors” (Marcus 46). Italian filmmakers in this period, far from capitalizing upon the sentimental tone that characterized films in the 1960s, reflect upon the Holocaust experience through creating complex characters and depicting their relationships; thus, they formulate a more profound representation of the Holocaust experience that delves into the gray areas of human behavior and recalls Primo Levi’s words “la maggior parte dei fenomeni storici e naturali non sono semplici, o non semplici nella semplicità che piacerebbe a noi” (Levi 44). In the midst of this trend, the works of Liliana Cavani and Lina Wertmüller stand out for their controversial stance regarding both the role of survivors and their choice to blur the boundaries between victims and perpetrators, thus resisting what Levi calls a “tendenza, anzi bisogno, di dividere il male dal bene” (Levi 44). Much like the liminal figures created by the concentration camp, such as the Muselmann and the kapo seen in Resnais’ *Night and Fog* and Pontecorvo’s *Kapò*, the idea of the survivor as a victim becomes
problematic in Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1974) and Wertmüller’s *Seven Beauties* (1974). In this chapter, I will investigate how these two directors portray the transitional nature of the memory of the survivors of the concentration camps, who are haunted by a sense of guilt and represent a wound that is still bleeding in the present.

In 1974, Liliana Cavani and Lina Wertmüller produced two films that enjoyed an immediate success and caused endless controversy for their treatment of the Holocaust experience and their ambiguous response to the problematic process on the part of the survivors of reintegrating into society. In *The Night Porter*, Maximilian Aldorfer and Lucia Atherton, a former SS officer in a concentration camp and a female inmate with whom he had a sado-masochistic affair, meet in Vienna in 1957. Through several chance encounters that trigger a series of flashbacks from their shared past, they reenact their relationship in the present and blur the distinction between victim and victimizer; thus they become a lynch pin in postwar bourgeois Vienna, a “society that has replaced the Nazi insignia with the insignia of wealth, or rather of an order founded on continuity and authority”, as stated by the co-writer Italo Moscati in an interview. In order to escape Max’s ex colleagues, who disapprove of their love, they lock themselves inside Max’s apartment but will be murdered in the end by former Nazi officers. Thus, Cavani depicts the impossibility of a return to normalcy for the two protagonists. In *Seven Beauties*, Wertmüller tells the story of a Neapolitan dandy, named Pasqualino Frafuso, who lives off his seven sisters’ work and is the custodian of the family honor in a picturesque pre-war
Naples. When a local pimp disgraces his oldest sister, he murders him and is caught by the police. Then, he is sent to an asylum where he rapes a female patient and is forced to join the army to obtain his freedom. Sent to the Eastern Front, he deserts but is captured by the Nazis and interned in a concentration camp. There he seduces the SS commandant and is promoted to kapo, which enables him to survive the camp experience. The film ends when Pasqualino comes home and discovers that his seven sisters and his young fiancée have become prostitutes; thus, his initial guiding concepts of honor and masculinity are disrupted and he adopts a new ambiguous stance on survival and morality, which he voices to Carolina: “there isn’t much time to lose. I want children. [...] We must become many, and strong. It’s a matter of self-defense. Look at the crowds out there. Soon we will be murdering each other for a glass of water or a piece of bread.”

The complex plots of the two films are developed through the juxtaposition of past and present: several flashbacks are present in both films that shed light on the protagonists, revealing details of the past that help to convey the director’s ideas about the morality of survival. Cavani and Wertmüller explore the problematic idea of surviving ‘at any cost’ and create two characters, Lucia in The Night Porter and Pasqualino in Seven Beauties, who renounce their dignity and integrity in order to escape death. As Eli Pfefferkorn notices, this choice to present the audience with ambiguous characters, who problematize the notion of survivorship, leaves the viewer “at loose ends, which are both intellectually confusing and morally disturbing” (Pfefferkorn 20). For this reason, the two films evoked angry reactions from a
The Night Porter was violently criticized for its ambiguous depiction of the victim-torturer relationship and considered scandalous and in poor taste. Bondanella quotes a comment by Andrè Giroux, who described the film as “a thinly-disguised Fascist propaganda” (Bondanella 349), while Rogert Ebert defined the film as “a despicable attempt to titillate us by exploiting memories of persecution and suffering. […] Nazi chic” (Ebert 256). Thomas Quinn Curtis went so far to label Lucia “a mad sadist without a trace of conscience; […] a complacent slut, a singularly weak-willed moron” (Quinn 1). Similarly, Bruno Bettelheim bitterly criticized Wertmüller’s idea of survivorship in Seven Beauties, as it appears that “all that matters is […] life in its crudest, merely biological form” (Bettelheim 38). He further maintains that “this depiction of the survivor…robs survivorship of all its meaning” (Bettelheim 34) and states that it is necessary for the inmates to preserve their humanity to prevent the total destruction of the self that leads to physical decay and ultimately to death8. Kriss Ravetto, in The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics, argues that “Bettelheim’s criticism of [Wertmüller’s] film derives precisely from the depiction of a survivor as someone who compromises even the most basic human values in order to survive” (Ravetto 190), thus underlining Wertmüller’s (and Cavani’s) refusal to comply with the traditionally rigid distinction between innocent victims and guilty perpetrators. The two directors recall instead Levi’s words in Se

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8 Bruno Bettelheim, a Jewish native of Austria and survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps, became known as a child psychologist and writer after he immigrated to the United States in 1939. In The Informed Heart he further argues “those who stood up well became better men, those who acted badly soon became bad men” (16-17). Also, he maintains that “an integrated personality and strong inner convictions, nourished by satisfying personal relations, are one’s best protection against oppressive controls” (105).
*questo è un uomo*, where he maintains “sopravvivevano i peggiori, cioè i più adatti, i migliori sono morti tutti” (Levi 64), thus locating the necessary condition for survival in the ability to adapt to the extreme situation rather than in the conservation of one’s moral integrity. Giorgio Agamben in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, after discussing the ideas of Bettelheim and Terrence Des Pres, who reproaches Bettelheim for underestimating the inmates’ everyday struggle for survival, concludes that the intimate connection between the “rivendicazione della dignità e del senso di colpa” and the “esaltazione della sopravvivenza” ultimately proves that “esse sono le due facce dell’impossibilità per il vivente di tenere separate l’innocenza e la colpa” (Agamben 87). Wertmüller and Cavani support this idea in their representation of the concentration camp: in their films, Lucia and Pasqualino echo Levi’s concept of the “zona grigia”, which refers to “la classe ibrida dei prigionieri-funzionari che costituisce l’ossatura, ed insieme il lineamento più inquietante [del campo]. [...] Possiede una struttura interna incredibilmente complicata, ed alberga in sé quanto basta per confondere il nostro bisogno di giudicare” (Levi 45). Lucia and Pasqualino give up their status of innocent victims in order to obtain privileges and survive, thus entering a gray area and becoming what Levi defines “Prominenten” (Levi 82): Pasqualino becomes a *kapo* and Lucia assumes the role of Max’s “little girl”. Their transitional status recalls once again Van Gennep’s theory of rituals: from a defined stage of victim, Pasqualino and Lucia pass through a liminal phase that will lead to a new distinct position, that of victimizer. However, they fail to complete the transition

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9 Des Pres maintains that “la chiave della condotta di sopravvivenza si trova nella priorità dell’essere biologico” (228). He continues “il sopravvissuto è la prova che vi sono oggi uomini e donne abbastanza forti, abbastanza maturi e abbastanza consapevoli, da affrontare la morte senza mediazioni e abbracciare la vita senza riserve” (245).
due to the liminal condition of the camp itself. As Agamben explains in *Homo Sacer*, “il campo è lo spazio che si apre quando lo stato di eccezione comincia a diventare la regola e [...] acquista un assetto spaziale permanente che rimane costantemente al di fuori dell’ordinamento normale” (Agamben 188). In the camp, then, the extreme becomes routine, creating a “zona di indistinzione fra esterno e interno, eccezione e regola” (Agamben 189) in which indistinct figures such as Lucia and Pasqualino remain suspended between innocence and guilt.

The price for surviving is two-fold: on one side, it is seen literally in blood, through the sacrifice of another inmate. In *The Night Porter*, Max offers to Lucia the head of another inmate, who previously annoyed her. Lucia’s terrified expression reveals an abrupt awakening of awareness: she suddenly realizes that she lost her initial purity and cannot be defined as a morally irreproachable victim anymore, as she has entered an area in which the boundaries between victim and victimizer cease to exist. As Ravetto notices, she is “displaced from the language of absolutes” (Ravetto 178) and instead assumes a shifting identity that denies what Ravetto calls the “alleged social need for stable subjective identifications” (Ravetto 183). In *Seven Beauties*, Pasqualino is ordered to shoot his best friend Francesco, who tries to cause a riot among other inmates. In “a dramatic act of self-assertion in defense of human dignity” (Pfefferkorn 17), Francesco chooses to defend his integrity and sets up an example that expresses Pedro’s theory of the “man in disorder”, which opposes the rigid order of the Nazi régime, and celebrates Bettelheim’s idea of a moral survival. However, he is soon caught and killed by Pasqualino: his sacrifice proves to be futile,
as “in the concentration camp, whose primary purpose was to deprive inmates of life, dying was no way of achieving martyrdom or heroism” (Pfefferkorn 19). Thus, the camp environment denies the possibility of a heroic death and instead recalls the idea of ‘life in its crudest and merely biological form’. Hence Pasqualino’s rapacious ability to give up his morality and humanity in order to stay alive is presented as the only way to survive in the camp. However, by killing Francesco, Pasqualino acknowledges his dual position as victim and victimizer and undergoes the final stage of his transformations; Wertmüller underlines this final shift into the status of a ‘non-uomo’ through a quick shot-countershoot sequence that juxtaposes Francesco’s frightened face as he begs his friend to kill him, and Pasqualino’s silent and empty look. The camera focuses on his hand when he shoots Francesco, and lingers on it still holding the gun and then zooms out in the grey dust of the Appellplatz. When Pasqualino’s face is shown again, after his return to Naples, he appears far away from his initial “hyperbolic self-image (Ravetto 207), and his emptied eyes recall Agamben’s idea of the “non-vivo”, the Muselmann.

On another side, survival enters into the sexual realm: while Lucia is chosen for her skeletal beauty and complies with Max’s desires, assuming then a more active role in the relationship, Pasqualino uses his ‘skills with women’10 to try and seduce the unattractive SS commandant Hilde. While differences in the treatment of the sexual relationships are apparent, both Cavani and Wertmüller depict a dialectic relationship between victim and victimizer in which “the positions are not fixed” and

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10 In the camp, Pasqualino tells Francesco: “I am ugly, but in spite of my looks I appealed to women. They loved me. People were amazed. [...]”
“identification is something that always has to be constructed” (Ravetto 182). In both films, the climax scenes are similar in that the protagonists acknowledge their complicity and their loss of innocence and accept their share of responsibility and their ambiguous nature as a price to avoid extermination. Cavani and Wertmüller set the scenes in enclosed spaces, smoky and dark rooms, and both use low-key lighting and blue and green filters to accentuate the idea of an indistinct place. Great importance is placed on the mise-en-scène. In The Night Porter, it recalls a grotesque cabaret scene: through a pan, Cavani shows a small band wearing theatrical masks and playing a Marlene Dietrich song, and a girl is apparent in the frame (probably another inmate turned prostitute in order to survive) with a light blue ruff, holding the hands of two SS officers. Lucia is the main performer: she appears on the left of the frame, partly dressed in a Nazi uniform but bare breasted, to signify the “transgressive force” of seduction which “disrupts the traditional constructs of power” (Ravetto 171) based on a fixed relationship between subject and object. In this way, Lucia blurs the boundaries between victim and victimizer, pure and impure, thus undermining the “production of meaning and morality” (Ravetto 158). As she walks into the room singing, the director enhances the ambiguity of the scene through canted framing, which destabilizes the viewers and places them in the same uncomfortable position as the Nazi officers who are watching Lucia’s performance. The extreme opposition of black and white on the walls in the background is softened by a smoky light, which blurs every color into a gray atmosphere. Lucia’s skin also looks gray, and contrasts with the black SS hat, the suspenders, the black gloves and the masculine pants, which becomes the only distinct elements in Lucia’s appearance;
Laura Pietropaolo discuss the SS uniform as a “formal erotic presence”, which “clearly alludes to [Lucia’s] lost innocence and to her complicity”\(^\text{11}\) (Pietropaolo 77), and visually ties her to the SS officers in the room. Thus, Lucia is both victim and perpetrator: her previous role as a prisoner defines her as a victim, but both her conscious attitude in overt collaboration with the Nazi guards and her sexual dance, which is rewarded with the head of an inmate who previously annoyed her, show a clear complicity. As both prisoner and guard, Lucia assumes a shifting nature and embodies Levi’s “zona grigia”, as opposed to the Nazi officers, whose black outfits indicate their defined position as victimizers.

In *Seven Beauties*, when Pasqualino is shown while singing alone in a dusty, empty courtyard, Lucia’s performance is recalled, in that he gives up his ideal of honor and morality, as well as his defined status as a victim, in order to seduce the commandant and survive. The SS commandant Hilde silently observes him from a window, far away, thus recalling the male audience who watched Lucia’s dance. When two SS guards take him to the commandant’s room, he lands directly on the *swastika* on the floor; from the smoky and indistinct atmosphere of the *Appellplatz* he is now thrown in full view and under bright light. Much like Lucia, the gray prisoner create a stark contrast with the black and white Nazi emblem on which he lays, thus reflecting Pasqualino’s undefined position as opposed to Hilde’s strong faith in the Nazi *régime*. The bright light used to show Pasqualino also opposes the dim, green filter that characterizes Hilde and connotes her as the strong, controlling force, which

\(^{11}\) Pietropaolo quotes Cavani on the SS uniform: “È orrendamente bella la divisa SS. È un travestimento. [...] Il travestimento deriva dal feticismo...”
dominates Pasqualino’s attempts at sexual seduction. Furthermore, the opposed angles of framing (high angle for Pasqualino and low angle for Hilde) confirm the idea that the prisoner is in a larva stage, completely subdued by the commandant’s presence; it is only when she orders him to “strip” that he can stand up. A great number of props displayed in the commandant’s room provide further clues. In particular, a portrait of Hitler behind Hilde’s desk and Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time by Bronzino in a corner suggest a grotesque mingling of eros and thanatos. The Freudian association of sexual and death drive is visually shown through juxtaposition of Hilde undressing against Hitler’s portrait in the back and Pasqualino standing in front of Bronzino’s painting, and is then voiced by the commandant, who first ironically proposes to have sex with Pasqualino and then kill him, and then orders him to “fuck me or die.” Pasqualino is only allotted one way to survive and become a privileged prisoner: to plunge deeper and deeper into a gray limbo in which honor and dignity no longer matter. Through the sexual act, he obtains the gift of survival, but he is left in a fetal position, recalling Levi’s words “non è uomo chi, perso ogni ritegno, divide il letto con un cadavere” (Levi 152); his face, half in the light half in darkness, represents his total defeat as a human being and portrays his split status between an innocent victim and a guilty collaborator. As he pants after the coitus, Hilde stands up and addresses him as a “sub-human larva”, lamenting the fact that “miserable creatures lacking ideals” like him will “eventually win” against the German Aryan elite, who are “doomed to fail” despite their high “dreams of a master race.” Thus, she asserts Pasqualino’s successful ability to survive thanks to his “thirst
for life”\textsuperscript{12}, which results in Bettelheim’s notion of “life in its crudest, merely biological form” (Bettelheim 38). Pasqualino then renounces Bettelheim’s idea of humanity and morality and becomes one of Levi’s “peggiori [che] sopravvivono”. His transition to a twofold identity as both victim and perpetrator is again marked by Hilde’s words. After ordering that Pasqualino be in charge of barrack 23 and that he must choose six inmates to be eliminated, the SS commandant comments “now you’re a butcher like the rest of us”, thus voicing Pasqualino’s newly acquired status as a \textit{kapo}. What is more, Hilde’s expression “sub-human larva” recalls Agamben’s idea of the \textit{Muselmann} as “la larva che la nostra memoria non riesce a seppellire [e che] fluttua senza trovare una collocazione definitiva” (Agamben 76), thus strengthening the non-humanity of Pasqualino and adding new depth to his manifold nature.

In \textit{The Night Porter} and \textit{Seven Beauties}, erotic seduction is the method by which to attain a privileged status: both Pasqualino and Lucia must literally take off the garments that distinguish them as inmates in order to lose their status as prisoner. They switch from one uniform to another: Pasqualino becomes a \textit{kapo} and earns a whistle and a black jacket through his sexual performance while Lucia assumes a more ambiguous role as Max’s “little girl”, wearing a modest pink dress first and a Nazi uniform later in her transition. In \textit{The Night Porter’s} camp scenes, Lucia’s different garments mark her transitions from a stage of pristine innocence as an

\textsuperscript{12} Hilde’s words are: “You disgust me. Your thirst for life disgusts me. Your love disgusts me. [...] You sub-human Mediterranean larva, you found the strength for an erection. And because of this you will manage to live on and eventually you will win, miserable creatures (\textit{piccoli vermi vitali} in the original Italian) lacking ideals and ideas. And we, we who thought to create a master race, are doomed to fail.”

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inmate, defined by his prisoner uniform, to a first acknowledgement of Max’s sexual interest, when she receives the “little girl” dress from him, to a state of complete self-awareness as a privileged prisoner in the dance scene. Destabilizing the boundaries that separate opposite positions in matters of guilt, gender and responsibility, her ambiguity works at different levels. First, she is half dressed and half naked, thus she is both a prisoner and a guard: her skeletal body reveals her malnutrition and her original status as an inmate, but the partial SS uniform she wears shows that she has become compliant with Max’s desires and is collaborating with the guards in order to survive. In addition to that, Lucia is both feminine and masculine. Although in her sensual cabaret dance she might appear to embody Laura Mulvey’s notion of the “woman as representation/image” (Mulvey 837), that is, the woman as the passive object of the male gaze, Ravetto notices that “Cavani delves into these over determined aesthetics of feminine sexuality in order to expose and explode the radical inconsistencies and artificial consistencies of the discourse of purity and masculinity” (Ravetto 176), thus undermining a modus representandi that relies on a attribution of roles predicated on gender. Lucia covers her breast with both hands and when she sits down she assumes a masculine pose; by exposing her androgynous nature, she opposes what Ravetto calls the “demand that the victim be desexualized, [so that] one can identify with either the sadistic Nazi or her absolute victim” (Ravetto 184) and instead embodies an ambiguous transition between masculine and feminine, which adds to her liminal nature. Finally, as the lyrics of her song suggest, Lucia is

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13 “I love to live, I can only say, I love to please, even if not always, I love to love / I don’t know what I want and yet I expect much / If I could wish for something, I wouldn’t know what to wish for, a bad
controlling and being controlled at the same time. As the only figure moving in the scene, she becomes the object of everyone’s gaze. Recalling again Mulvey’s idea of the woman as the object of the gaze, Lucia’s voluntary exhibitionism meets the guards’ visual pleasure and responds to the voyeuristic drive by which the Nazi guards and the film viewers create a broader audience for the performer. However, Lucia’s dance is also unsettling in that she appears always in flux, thus denying the viewer’s identification with one privileged subjective position and destabilizing power and gender relations in her “sensual blurring” of roles, which “oscillates between images, causing them to converge and diverge” (Ravetto 171).

Lucia’s liminal role is comparable to that of Edith/Nicole in Pontecorvo’s Kapò: both women become collaborators (although it is not clear whether Lucia assumes the role of a kabo in the camp), but they do so in a very different way. Whereas Edith/Nicole’s transformation is shown through the juxtaposition of her virginal innocence in the beginning of the film and her self-confident new identity as a kabo after she assumes her new identity in the camp, Lucia in the dance scene is suspended in between the two stages. She is threatening in her newly acquired power yet still scared and helpless in front of Max’s gift, the head of another inmate. As a primadonna in the show and a “little girl” at the same time, she eludes a defined position and reveals her shifting nature, which Ravetto explains: “by disintegrating [the] official line that divides good and evil, Cavani blurs the aesthetics of domination, nazism, victimization and submission” (Ravetto 183). Lucia then in this

or a good time / If I could wish for something, I would wish for some happiness. For if I were too happy I would long for sadness.”
scene becomes a threatening femme fatale in that she is the embodiment of liminality, and therefore unsettling in nature, recalling Mulvey’s idea that “the female figure implies a threat of castration” (Mulvey 840). Hence the pleasure of looking is threatened by Lucia’s trespassing of her role as the object of the look. The effect of Lucia as a transitional figure is controversial: the spectator is pleased to watch something that should be unpleasurable, recalling’s Freud’s idea that “the satisfaction of one instinct can take the place of another” (Freud 42). Thus, Lucia mingles the pleasure principle with the death drive, thus creating a sado-masochistic dichotomy in her dance. Much like her biblical counterpart Salomé (and recalling Pasqualino in Seven Beauties), through the erotic seduction she obtains the gift she longs for, i.e. survival, yet at the same time causes death. The punishment for crossing the boundaries of her position as a victim and of her passive role as a woman is her own death at the end of the film, after leaving the liminal place (the camp) that originated her new status as an exception. As the embodiment of a past that cannot be washed away, Lucia cannot revert to a normal life and is “filed away with all the other unpleasurable relics of the past” (Silverman 8) by a society that needs to reinstate a binary order.

In Seven Beauties, Pasqualino operates through the modus of seduction too, and his metamorphosis throughout the film culminates in his extreme effort to seduce the camp commandant. However, before entering the camp, Pasqualino’s sexual adventures follow Mulvey’s idea of a phallocentric order, in which the male subject occupies an active position and the woman is defined through passivity and “to-be-
looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 3). As a Neapolitan guappo in the beginning of the film and a rapist in the asylum, he represents the dominant “bearer of the look” male figure, in which the spectator can identify, and pushes the story forward. In the camp instead, as he is humiliated by the SS commandant and is stripped of his clothes and of his identity, Pasqualino is relegated to a passive position and becomes the object of Hilde’s gaze. As a larva huddled up on the floor, he contrasts with the commandant, who assumes total control over him and is characterized by distinctly masculine features. In fact, while Pasqualino confesses his love for her, she drinks alcohol and smokes. Although he cries out “there is a real female under that uniform” and he imagines her “rosy flesh, delicate and beautiful”, she undresses quickly and mechanically, taking off her Nazi uniform and showing a pair of unflattering boxer shorts and a vest. Her costume becomes thus the opposite to Lucia’s sexualized Nazi uniform, which serves to seduce and threaten. Hilde sits down as Pasqualino crouches on the floor and she ironically invites him to come closer by waving her whip, asserting again her control of the situation. The director underlines this aspect through low angle shots, which becomes extreme low angle when Pasqualino is given a bowl of food. The camera assumes the prisoner’s point of view on the floor and tilts up to the commandant’s body: here she appears as the symbol of male dominance and control, through her position and Hitler’s portrait behind her. Furthermore, while he eats, Hilde sits on a chair and observes him, positioning him as the object of her gaze. She embodies Mulvey’s threat of castration when she tells Pasqualino “fuck me or die”, and strongly contrasts with the goddess painted in Bronzino’s picture behind her. In order to have an erection, Pasqualino must revert to his memories, where his
first love Fifi dances on a stage and he is the violent guappo who takes women with violence. Thus, in his mind he recreates the phallocentric order that Hilde has disrupted and regains his masculinity through the sexual act. However, in doing that he completely demolishes his initial sense of honor and pride and he undergoes the transition that will bring him to his final stage, of both victim and perpetrator. In the camp, this liminality translates into the position of kapo, and as such he kills his best friend Francesco and sentences six more men to death. After the complete demise of Pasqualino’s humanity, the director lingers on his hand holding a gun as he is glancing down. Then the camera zooms away, over the lines of gray prisoners into an indistinct atmosphere, and abruptly cuts back to a colorful, postwar Naples.

Pasqualino has returned, and through his eyes the audience can experience the striking contrast between the desolation of the camp and the lively atmosphere of the city. However, like Lucia, Pasqualino cannot revert to a normal life because the camp has caused him to assume a new status. These two characters echo Pietropaolo’s recounting of an Auschwitz survivor, who “had tried to resume a normal life […], but, feeling that she was a shameful, embarrassing living memory […], she decided to move away. She told Cavani that the lager had made her realize her own potential for good and evil and discover the ambiguities inherent in human nature for, as she pointed out, le vittime non sono sempre innocenti” (Pietropaolo 71). As a victim, a survivor, a kapo and eventually as a ghost, Pasqualino’s ambivalence works on different levels. In the final long take, his face is initially hidden by partial darkness, which recalls his transitional nature; then, his eyes empty, he looks into the mirror and straight at the viewer, and visually portrays Agamben’s words: “[il musulmano]
si presenta come il non-vivo, come l’essere la cui vita non è veramente vita. È il non-
uomo che si presenta ostinatamente come uomo” (76). Wertmüller lingers on
Pasqualino’s eyes, which seem to silently question the audience on the matter of guilt.
Similarly, in the final sequence of *The Night Porter*, Cavani addresses the spectator
with a provocative shot in which the camera follows Max and Lucia walking away in
the dim morning light. By choosing not to show who shoots the two lovers, the
director suggests a connection between the society in the film and audience. The
camera leads the viewers’ gaze, as if the audience were aiming at Max and Lucia and
then shooting them. The sequence leaves the audience with an uncomfortable feeling
of guilt and participation, recalling Levi’s words “occorre affermare con forza che
davanti a casi umani come questi è imprudente precipitarsi ad emettere un giudizio
morale. Deve essere chiaro che la massima colpa pesa sul sistema […]; il concorso
alla colpa da parte dei singoli collaboratori grandi e piccoli (mai simpatici, mai
trasparenti!) è sempre difficile da valutare” (Levi 47). Thus, guilt is placed on the
community and not on the individual. Following this line of thought, the two directors
strongly refrain from asking that the viewer judge these liminal figures, who
ultimately are “intossicati dal potere di cui disponevano [nel campo]” (Levi 47).
Instead, they problematize the notion of responsibility and the distinction between
victim and victimizer, by creating two characters that stand in between guilt and
innocence, and deny to the audience the comfort of an easy moral identification.

Lucia and Pasqualino, like Edith/Nicole in *Kapò* and the ghostly figures in
*Night and Fog*, are figures created by the camp and that can exist only inside of it.
Cavani and Wertmüller explore the contrast between biological survival and human dignity in the concentration camp, but they do not provide an unequivocal answer. Rather, they visually express Levi’s idea of the lager “l'ingresso […] era un urto per la sorpresa che portava con sé, il mondo in cui ci si sentiva precipitati era sì terribile, ma anche indecifrabile: non era conforme ad alcun modello” (Levi 44), in that in both films, the concentration camp becomes an unintelligible space of exception. Furthermore, the camp lacks an ontological quality, in that it does not exist as a real place, but it is portrayed only in the flashbacks that haunt the survivors. Giorgio Agamben maintains that this state of exception, this “arte di rendere possibile ciò che sembrava impossibile […] esprime perfettamente il particolare statuto modale del campo, la sua speciale realtà, che lo rende assolutamente vero e, insieme, inimmaginabile” (Agamben 71). Wertmüller in an interview maintains that it was her goal not to perfectly represent an existing camp, but rather to portray an environment that could convey a claustrophobic feeling of despair and create a striking contrast with the picturesque image of Naples in the beginning and in the end of the film. Cavani, too, utilizes the lager mainly as a way to portray her idea on the morality of survival: she refrains from a realistic representation of the camp and substitutes historical accuracy with a detailed depiction of symbolic scenery in several key scenes, i.e. the sumptuous mise-en-scène of Bert’s dance scene or the dimly lit room where Lucia dances. A realistic visualization of the historic lager then is replaced in
these two films by a symbolic place of memory, which becomes as important as memory itself. This tendency continues in the following decades, especially in the works of Roberto Faenza and Roberto Benigni, who problematize the representation of the lager in that they adopt the perspective of a child.
AFTERWORD

ROBERTO FAENZA’S LOOK TO THE SKY AND ROBERTO BENIGNI’S LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL

“Questa è una storia semplice, eppure non è facile raccontarla, come in una favola c'è dolore, e come in una favola, è piena di meraviglie e di felicità.”

- Roberto Benigni, Life is Beautiful

“Siccome nel campo le domande sono proibite, restiamo sempre senza risposta.”

- Jona, Look to the Sky

Millicent Marcus in Italian Film in the shadow of Auschwitz argues that “Holocaust history can only be confronted in a post-ideological age,” explaining how the dissolution of the dichotomous Cold War ideology favoured the “outpouring of films” (Marcus 81) that characterized the last decades of the twentieth century. Directors all over the world started to depict the Holocaust on screen, with a surprising variety of topics and approaches. From Claude Lanzmann’s epic Shoah (France, 1985), Alan J. Pakula’s dramatic Sophie’s Choice (USA, 1982) and Louis Malle’s private Good-Bye Children (France, 1987) in the 1980s, an array of new films were released in the following two decades all over the world, that includes
Andrzej Wajda’s *Korczak* (Poland, 1990), Agnieszka Holland’s *Europa Europa* (1990), István Szabó’s *Sunshine* (Germany/Austria/Canada/Hungary, 1999), Steven Spielberg’s international success, *Schindler’s List* (USA, 1993), and more recently Jan Hřebejk's *Divided We Fall* (Czech Republic, 2001), Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist* (France/Germany/UK/Poland, 2002) and Stephen Daldry’s *The Reader* (USA/Germany, 2009).

Italian cinema also enjoyed international recognition and took on a new approach to the Holocaust by dissociating itself from the ambiguous sexuality that characterized previous films like *The Damned*, *The Night Porter* and *Seven Beauties* and instead following closely Malle’s example in *Goodbye Children*. Roberto Faenza’s *Look to the sky* (1993) and Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* (1997) introduce a new take on the Shoah, a perspective that passes through the eyes of two children, Jonah and Giosuè, and align these films with a broader tendency to represent child’s trauma in Holocaust cinema, as for example the recent *Fateless* (Hungary, 2005) by Lajos Koltai, and Mark Herman’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (USA, 2008). Millicent Marcus, in *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age*, maintains that “this historical text of witness to a truth that defies human understanding [...] invites a multileveled approach to interpretation;” thus, she supports a constant reprocessing and elaboration of the Holocaust experience, in order to adapt to a new generation of spectators “the testimony [...] that invests its receivers with the moral obligation to convey their knowledge to others” (Marcus 269). Furthermore, she invokes a notion of “bearing witness” that “while affirming the truth value of the historic referent, encourages a multiplicity of narrative means” (Marcus
Faenza e Benigni, in their decision to adopt the narrative structure of a fable and avoid the display of violence, take up Marcus’ challenge and find a way to re-tell Holocaust history in simple yet touching terms to an audience that can no longer relate directly to the historical events treated.

Roberto Faenza in *Look to the sky* rdescribes the dramatic disruption of a family in the *lager* through an allegory with the biblical story "Jonah and the Whale"; Benigni instead uses a “mixture of personal witness and fairy tale, of documentary reference and the fantastic” (Marcus 270) in order to create a narrative that eludes genres and can appeal to a large audience. Both directors rely on a split plot to express the *lager* experience: they depict a blissful initial condition of intactness for the children’s family, a condition that will soon disintegrate with the arrival of Nazism. They both create a striking contrast by juxtaposing the first half of the film, characterized by a bright and colourful *mise-en-scéne*, playful music and a comedic tone, with the second half, set in a grey camp, in which the lack of colour mirrors the end of a short-lived fairytale. 14

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14 Roberto Faenza’s *Look to the Sky* (1993), based on the story of the child camp survivor Jona Oberski, starts in Amsterdam in 1942 and depicts a Jewish family struggling through racial laws and the increasing anti-Semitic attitude of the non-Jewish population. Notwithstanding the evident difficulties, Jonah and his family are happy: Max and Anna are devoted and loving parents who raise their child in a “haven of coziness” (Marcus 70) and protect their family from the threats of Nazi round-ups. The director creates a short-lived blissful atmosphere that clashes with the subsequent deportation to several camps. While Max does not survive the *lager* experience, Anna protects her son until the camp liberation and Jonah, although traumatized, returns to Amsterdam and lives to become a doctor and write his memories. Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* (1997), although not based on a survivor’s testimony, recalls the experience of Benigni’s father, who spent two years as an inmate in a concentration camp. The film starts when Guido Orefice, an Italian Jew, arrives in Arezzo and falls in love with Dora, who will become his wife. After the birth of their son Giosuè, their bliss is complete, although racial laws frame the story to remind the audience of the Fascist threat. The family’s happiness, portrayed similarly to *Look to the sky* with colorful and cheerful music, is soon destroyed by their deportation to a Nazi concentration camp. In the camp, Guido decides to preserve his son from the horror of the extermination camp and creates a game, in which guards and inmates compete for a
In the strong contrast created by the directors with the dichotomous structure of their films, the elements that ensure the continuity of the story are Jonah and Giosuè. The two children move from an initial condition of happiness and freedom to being prisoners in the “inferno più terribile di tutti i tempi” (Benigni ix) and again to a new condition of freedom when the camps are liberated, without experiencing the mental and moral annihilation that adults undergo in the camp. Through the strenuous efforts of their parents (Jonah’s mother and Giosuè’s father), the children avoid the lager’s innermost seduction, death. Furthermore, both maintain their innocence and humanity. In *Looking to the Sky*, Anna protects her child when her husband dies. In the camp, Jonah runs around with other children, eats the remains of the SS officer’s food thanks to a kind cook and even plays in a mortuary. Although surrounded by death, his experience in the lager does not appear tragic to the viewer. The only confrontations with tragic reality for Jonah are personal and inside the family: his father dies of illness and his mother gradually loses her mind. In *Life is Beautiful*, Benigni describes Guido’s efforts as a “fatica immensa, [Guido] deve costruire una cattedrale gotica per convincere il figlio che il campo dove si trovano è un posto da ridere mentre intorno ci sono camere a gas, forni crematori e cumuli di cadaveri.” (Benigni x) In the lager, Guido creates a game for his child, where every person in the camp is a player, and everyone is competing in order to win a “real tank”. Thus, Guido creates a fictional setting that will allow Giosuè to live through the horror of the camp. However, both Faenza and Benigni show that there is a price to pay for tank. Although he succeeds in keeping Giosuè from death and de-humanization, Guido is killed in the end: Giosuè will keep on living and tell his father's story.
fighting the camps’ death drive and protecting their children: Anna slowly falls into mental sickness and dies soon after the liberation from the camp. Guido is killed while he tries to rescue his wife, during his last night as an inmate. Thanks to their sacrifices, Jonah and Giosuè retain their humane qualities and can live on, free from the true memory of the lager.

In depicting a child's perspective, both Look to the Sky and Life is Beautiful are indebted to Louis Malle, who in 1987 encapsulates his traumatic personal experience of Nazi anti-Semitism in his work Goodbye Children. The film depicts the story of a friendship between Julien Quentin, the young son of a wealthy Parisian family sent to an exclusive Carmelite boarding school to avoid the Occupation of the French capital, and Jean Bonnet/Kippelstein, a Jewish refugee who is hiding in the school. Through the boys’ adventures and interactions, the viewer is provided an intimate representation of the Jewish genocide, where the historical events of 1944 are shown sporadically in the background, more as a threatening presence than as a reality, until reality breaks in, abruptly, at the end of the film. Jean is captured by Nazi soldiers and sent to an extermination camp where he will die shortly after, and the two children exchange a last silent look before Jean is taken away. Although the last scene shows that Julien has understood the situation and moved from childhood to adulthood, the film relies mostly on a vision of the adult world filtered through the eyes of a child, who cannot usually understand the mechanisms of war and anti-Semitism. Furthermore, Julien's voiceover narration "until I die, I will never forget that morning of January in 1944" underlines the last meeting between Julien and Jean in what were the director’s own words, since Malle had had a similar experience that
he uses the film to elaborate and to create a narrative distance between him and his past. A similar solution will be adopted by Faenza and Benigni in their works in that they also use voiceovers by a grown-up protagonist that accompanies and explains the most important scenes of their films. These voiceovers mediate between the events narrated and the viewer and create a narrative distance from the events. While in *Goodbye Children* Julien’s voice appears only in the end of the film, in *Life is Beautiful* Giosuè’s voiceover opens and ends the film, creating a fairytale frame with his initial words “questa è una storia semplice, eppure non è facile raccontarla; come in una favola c’è dolore, e come in una favola, è piena di meraviglie e di felicità” and his final comment “questo è il sacrificio che mio padre fece per me.”\(^\text{15}\) In *Look to the Sky*, Jonah’s voice is central from the beginning and throughout the film. The protagonist explains the song that accompanied the opening credits (“Questa canzone a me piace tanto”), introduces the main theme of the film (“la mamma diceva che se Giona era riuscito dal ventre della balena, allora noi non dovevamo mai avere paura”) and links the song and the Biblical reference to his own story: “anche io mi chiamo Giona, sono nato ad Amsterdam.” The protagonist’s voiceover thus becomes a necessary element for an understanding of the events and of Jonah’s point of view, and provides a key to understand the film’s allegorical meaning.

Faenza and Benigni also recall Malle by avoiding visual violence in their films; far from the explicit and unsettling images that characterized Italian films in

\(^{15}\) As noticed by Marcus, there is a “biographical impetus behind Benigni’s performance” (Marcus 271). Marcus then reports Benigni’s words, as he was telling about his father’s experience in a Nazi labor camp in 1943: “Night and day, fellow prisoners were dying all around him. He told us about it, as if to protect me and my sister, he told it in an almost funny way – saying tragic, painful things but finally his way of telling them was really very particular. Sometimes we laughed at the stories he told” (271).
the 1970s, such as the devious representation of the Essenbeck family in Luchino Visconti’s *The Damned*, the camp flashbacks in Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* and the grotesque images of corpses and inmates in Lina Wertmüller’s *Seven Beauties*, the horror of the Holocaust is here suggested rather than clearly shown. Nevertheless, Faenza and Benigni’s films are striking in that they are partly set inside two concentration camps, places where violence was physical and visible. As Benigni explains, “la violenza non viene negata, i morti ci sono e ci sono le camere a gass, ma rimangono ai margini della scena.” (Benigni X) The decision to hide violent scenes and instead portray the confrontation with death through the reactions of two children to a personal loss in the camp (their fathers’ deaths) proves again that the dominant perspective in these films passes through the eyes of a child.

Thus, how can the *lager* be represented through a child’s gaze? Annette Insdorf in *Indelible Shadows* mentions that “[Faenza] admitted that he was less concerned with the authenticity of historical reconstruction than the poetic nature of a universal story of childhood amid violence” (Insdorf 338). Benigni adopts the same perspective in an attempt to achieve a similar goal. In his script to *Life is Beautiful*, he maintains “un *lager* che non è un campo di concentramento preciso: che importa sapere se è in Italia, Germania, o dove? In questa storia è il luogo dove sono portati gli ebrei, ma non è ricostruito filologicamente: è “il” *lager*. Rappresenta tutti i campi di concentramento del mondo, di qualunque epoca” (Benigni ix). By Benigni’s own account, then, the *lager* is not represented realistically in these films. As in Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* and in Lina Wertmüller’s *Seven Beauties*, the realistic visualization of the historic *lager* is replaced by a symbolic place of memory. Just as
in *The Night Porter* the camp loses its ontological nature and is portrayed in the character’s flashbacks, and in *Seven Beauties* an accurate depiction of the lager is replaced by an indistinct place that conveys a claustrophobic feeling of despair, in Faenza and Benigni’s films Jonah and Giosuè, as children, are unable to grasp the true, deathly meaning of the camp. Hence, both directors rely more on the inner world of Jonah and Giosuè’s families and a vision of the outside world filtered through the children’s eyes. Since the tragic nature of the camp and the importance of a specific geographical location cannot be understood by a child, the lager becomes an indistinct place, where “gli orrori non sono descritti nei particolari, ma evocati, suggeriti per sentirne il dolore al di là del raccapriccio.” (Benigni IX)

It is precisely in this respect that Faenza and Benigni’s works assume a particular meaning: by choosing a fairytale structure and adopting a child’s perspective throughout their films, while avoiding violent or sexual scenes, they imply the existence of a new generation of viewers not directly involved in the Holocaust memory and to whom they feel the need to “narrate the Holocaust”. Forty years after the events of the Shoah, these two directors have found a new way to preserve and spread the memory of the Holocaust so that, as Marcus comments, “in the case of Italian film, the shadow cast by Auschwitz is no longer an obstruction to the screening of this narrative, but a darkness that has found its place in the cinematic chiaroscuro of the present age” (Marcus 9).
WORKS CITED


FILMOGRAPHY


