

# Working through the Trauma of the Holocaust in Three Prominent European Films of the 2010s (Hungary, Poland, and Austria)

Lior Kraus

**Abstract—** This paper seeks to examine contemporary European cinema by exploring views of the post-Holocaust period (1945-1965) during the 2010s. These films revisit their respective nation's traumatic past seventy years after the end of World War II and offer a new perspective on the modes of memory and ways of processing the past. To raise questions about common mod of Holocaust remembrance and differences in the ways Hungarian, Polish, and Austrian films refer to their nations' pasts, this paper examines representations of Holocaust trauma in three major feature films: "1945" (Ferenc Török, Hungary, 2017), "Ida" (Pawel Pawlikowski, Poland, 2013), and "Murer- Anatomy of a Trial" (Christian Frosch, Austria, 2018). These films are part of a slow, ambiguous process of acknowledging the past that entails a struggle over victimhood and the issue of collaboration.

**Keywords—** European Cinema, Holocaust, Hungary, Trauma, Memory.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the intensity and extent of dealing with the phenomena of memory and oblivion attest to the power of the past. By definition, the past is always absent, and memory is used as a mechanism that connects past and present. To understand how, in the absence of the past, it maintains its power in presence, Freud (1953, in Terdiman, 2010) sought ways to decrease or eliminate the past's power. But where is this "past"? How can we access it and control its power?

Adorno (1998) examined Holocaust remembrance in Germany as an aspect of cultural criticism and addressed the question of a society's collective forgetfulness of past events. Postwar Germany, he argues, precludes an adequate remembrance of the past. According to Adorno, postwar Germany did not possess the resources for complete awareness of what happened during this period: it lacked the capacity to acknowledge suffering. The absence of this awareness is, for Adorno, a forgetting or destruction of memory (91-92). It is not forgetting in the common-sense meaning of the term - that is, when something slips from the mind. Rather, it is the effect of a limited consciousness that has acquired an incapacity for knowing reality as it is. In this sense, Adorno, like Freud, views forgetting past events not as amnesia, but as an inability to recognize such events' significance.

Nora (1989) argued that "Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting [...] vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation [...] Memory is blind to all but the group it binds - which is to say, there are as many memories as there are groups" (8-9). Indeed, as the memory of the Holocaust becomes a symbol of extreme suffering, other groups that also view themselves as victims of the Nazis demand recognition (Elsaesser, 2014: 266-267). In Hungary, for example, the memory of the Holocaust was nearly erased. The suffering of the Jewish victims was perceived as part of the injustices committed against the Hungarian population as a whole (Ibid).

Gregley (2015) claims that Hungarian cinema contributed to the perception of the Nazi occupation as a Hungarian national trauma and strengthened the image of the Hungarian nation as a victim. He examines cinematic representations of Jews during the war and its aftermath and finds that Hungarian cinema, which served as a major asset for spreading the government's ideology, omitted the Jews from the Hungarian nation (1). In reality, Jews and Hungarians lived together as neighbors, friends and family until and after the Holocaust (4). Historian Omer Bartov (2008) addresses the problem of ignoring this important geopolitical context: "Eastern Europe is thus not merely the site of the Holocaust in the physical sense that most of Europe's Jews lived there and were murdered there. It was and remains the heart of the Holocaust in that it was where Jewish and Christian civilizations formed a long, though troubled, tradition of living side by side, and where that social and cultural fabric was ultimately shattered in World War II and the Holocaust" (17). Seventy years after the Holocaust, the atrocities themselves are no longer the center of attention. Instead, the descendants of the victims, perpetrators, and bystanders deal with the stories and evolving memories (Levy & Sznajder, 2002: 103).

The discussion of representations of memory and oblivion in the films in question inevitably leads to a discussion about the ways in which the films deal with mourning or working through. La Capra (1997) wrote later to Freud that working through the traumatic past may illuminate historiographical issues and problems in shaping national identity. It may also reveal how grief and work-through are relevant to collective trauma and how these are prevented by various forms of "acting out" in which the past is repeated but does not elicit recognition of and

a critical confrontation with the memory (84-85).

In this article, I focus on the film “1945” (Ferenc Török, Hungary, 2017). I analyze various forms of memory and oblivion based on the framework established by of Sigmund Freud, Theodore Adorno, and Pierre Nora, among others, to show how a struggle between memory and forgetfulness unfolds in the film. I argue that attempts to forget and distort memories, as reflected in the film, prevent not only recognition of guilt and reconciliation with the past, but also relationships characterized by affinity and honesty, between community members in the present.

## II. EXAMPLES OF THE FINDINGS

The Hungarian film “1945” (Török, 2017) raises questions about the memory and oblivion of atrocities committed in Hungary during the Holocaust and their significance in the lives of one village’s inhabitants immediately after the war. The film follows István, the village’s druggist and mayor. On his son Árpád’s wedding day, two orthodox Jews arrive in the village. The former seeks to marry, and the latter seek to bury; the former seek to forget, and the latter seek to remember. However, the film leads the viewers to recognize that only one ritual can take place in the village that day.

The Jews’ return elevates tension in the village to its extreme. Lies about the behavior of the village’s civilian population during the occupation begin to surface, and the fear of revealing corruption, extradition, lying, and property theft, as well as feelings of guilt, lead to the collapse of the residents’ peaceful lives. The film builds the events simultaneously through cross-editing: the Jews’ march from the train station to the cemetery is presented as a cross with, and as opposed to, preparations for the wedding. The villagers hide stolen objects. From time to time, a Jewish object appears: a wall clock with Hebrew letters or an old photo album.

The film’s editing structure causes the Jews’ presence in the village to obligate the Hungarians (and spectators, mainly in Hungary but also throughout Europe) to view themselves and their lives as based on lies. The heart of the film lies in its exposure of an attempt to forget and hide guilt, which prevents the possibility of honest, intimate relations between the villagers. The analysis shows that the Jews’ grief-work (work-through) collapses the villagers’ attempts to conceal and forget and requires them to recall their crimes, but I argue that the remembrance does not lead to the recognition of guilt related to the trauma of the Jews, the injustice that was done to them, and the villagers’ responsibility for that injustice. Therefore, both the possibility of processing the past in terms of responsibility to the Jewish ‘other’ and the ability to cultivate close relationships between villagers in the present are prevented.



The means of oblivion are expressed in the film’s nonverbal aspects, especially by shooting through layers: curtains, fences, windows, and doors. This cinematic language is dominant from the first scene, in which the audience sees István’s wife through a door covered by a lace curtain. This cinematic choice places them in different spaces. Something blocks or separates them regularly. This image expresses the distance between the characters, which increases as the drama continues and the Jews move toward the mourning ceremony at the Jewish cemetery. The space is also symbolically designed to express efforts to conceal and blur the truth and emphasize the difficulty of seeing through attempts to conceal and forget.

Adorno (1998, in O’Connor, 2010) wrote about Germans’ failure to process the past. The expression “working through” served initially as a challenge for the German people to think about what was done during the Nazi regime. Adorno, however, believed that the torturers and their sympathizers exchanged this concept for an attitude that everything should be forgotten and forgiven. This “erasure of memory” is to him a failure of reason. Through this irrationality, the facts of events, as well as their immoral nature, become unknown, making it possible to forget what happened: “The motivation to reconcile with the past, to see and evaluate the object of injustice (the victim) as an individual, the effort not to allow ourselves to be driven by this feeling, leads to an inability to be affiliate towards that object” (142).

An expression of Adorno’s claims can be seen in the alienated social relations between the Hungarian villagers, which emphasize the cost of oblivion. Closeness and intimacy may overwhelm feelings of guilt and expose forgotten or repressed truths. This is noticeable through the film’s music and dark, gloomy palette. The villagers’ interpersonal relations are cold and fair, and they lack love and compassion. “In order to remember well, the wounds must be opened in a certain way, which human beings cannot by themselves. In order to remember well, there is a need for a social structure in which people can turn to others beyond the limits of difference” (Sennett, 1998: 22).

The only relations in the film that seem to involve genuine closeness are between the two unknown Jews. In accordance with the Jewish mourning tradition, the son tears off his father’s

shirt. the son's hand rests on the father's shoulder for a moment. The camera's close-up on the number tattooed on the son's hand is a hint for the viewers, a symbol that says it all. The two men exchange meaningful glances throughout the film. This suggests they share a traumatic past and that there is a strong bond between them. However, they remain "the Jews" throughout the film and thus remain anonymous "others." Zbikowski (2014), a historian at the University of Warsaw, examined protocols from a postwar trial of those accused of collaborating with the Germans to murder Jews in the town of Grady-Woniecko, Poland. "The anonymity of the victims," he writes, "accompanies the entire affair...the people of Grady-Woniecko really didn't know who drove their carts to the unknown? Did they forget the names of the people who used to buy essential goods in the market? [...] Or in this way they have repressed the unpleasant feeling of indifference to the fate of their neighbors?" (271).

Those who oppose attempts to forget and bear the memory are the Jews. They reflect the traumatic events that have taken place in this land not only by returning to a place where horrors occurred only a short time ago, but also by taking the long footpath, passing by the houses and people, and insisting on walking on the land from which they were expelled. Their march constitutes both the connection to the land that was once their home and their sense of control over their fate. "Trauma deprives the victim of the sense of power and control; The guiding principle of recovery is the restoration of it" (Lewis Herman, 1994: 193).



The purpose of their journey, to bury what remains of their loved ones, becomes clear only toward the end of the film, when they arrive at the cemetery, but a hint of this emerges from this frame. The angle is from below, and the camera is under the wagon, suggesting a view from under the earth, where the dead are. Disturbing music accompanies the sounds of the journey, adding emotional significance to the situation. Nora (1989) distinguishes between memory and history and argues that 'Lieux de Mémoire', memory sites, perpetuate and preserve one aspect of history but ignore other aspects. Therefore, memorial sites express, to a great extent, what was gleaned from memory. Memory sites are born and live from the feeling that there is no spontaneous memory and that archives and ceremonies must be created to prevent history from wiping them out (18-19). In the film, the burial of the objects expresses the attempt to

commemorate another memory and create a memorial site of what has been erased. "The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it needs individuals who turn themselves into Memory-individuals" (Nora, 1993: 12).

While the Jews' behavior can be seen as mourning, the Hungarian villagers act of melancholy. In distinguishing between the two processes, LaCapra (2006) argues that mourning may appear as a form of working-through, whereas melancholy is a form of acting out (87). Mourning is a constant response to the loss of a loved one or an abstract object, such as a homeland, liberty, or an ideal. The loss experienced by the perpetrator of a crime involves the loss of a moral identity or, as Lewis-Herman (1994) calls it, the loss of a moral innocence.

Freud considered melancholy characteristic of a process in which the oppressed, traumatized self is haunted by the past, unable to take an interest in the outside world, feels that it faces a blocked future. Mourning, on the other hand, allows trauma to be dealt with to obtain investment and re-engagement in life (Freud, 1917, 243). In mourning, the world becomes empty, whereas in melancholy, the self becomes such. However, despite the reduction of the ego in every aspect, self-loathing and cursing, shame is lacking in melancholy. An example of melancholy can be seen in the beginning of the film, when István's wife refuses to get out of bed, acting out the melancholic symptoms described by Freud (Ibid, 243): loss of interest in the external world, loss of the ability to love, and anticipation of punishment. István removes the blanket from her roughly. Haunted by the past, she is depressed so she sniffs a sedative and is unable to cope with reality.

Another example of melancholy can be seen in Bandi's shameless behavior. Bandi, like István's wife, took part in the property theft of his Jewish neighbors. Now that the Jews have returned to the village, he wants to expose these crimes and confess, but there is no one to listen. Unlike a depressed, melancholic person prone to chatter that satisfies self-reproach (Ibid, 246), Bandi's reflection is revealed to us through the mirror. Immersed in his traumatic past, he drinks a whole bottle of brandy. He cannot imagine the possibility of healing, so he throws the bottle at the mirror dramatically. Drunk, Bandi arrives at the bar and gives a melancholic monologue while hurling accusations in every direction: "You think I'm the only one to blame? You will not get away with it. No one will! not the mayor, not even the priest!" Bandi is forcibly removed from the bar and brought before István and the priest. Before his eyes, they lock the incriminating documents in the cupboard, and István pours water on Bandi's head. No one offers him help, and no one recognizes his distress. Everyone takes part in the concealment; Bandi is a threat that must be silenced.

István's wife and Bandi, who participated in crimes they wish to expose, are trapped in a melancholic experience that replaces the empathy for the victims and is expressed in their inability to work through the trauma. Without a genuine and honest dialogue between the Hungarian villagers, the film presents processing the past as impossible. Török succeeds in creating a clear image of the ethical trauma of the Hungarian

collaborators, perpetrators, and bystanders and their melancholic behavior, which does not allow them to overcome their losses (Ibid, 251). And so, after trying to talk to the priest privately and being thrown out of the church, Bandi feels that he is all alone and decides to commit suicide.

In the Jews burial scene, the Hungarian villagers, holding pitchforks, arrive at the cemetery and watch the Jews through the fence. The Jews perform the ceremony in silence. István arrives and watches them as well. The man who has done everything to hide his crimes assures them in a gentle voice that he will keep the memory of the victims forever. the camera closes up on the handshake between the victims and the perpetrator. The Jews say nothing, and there is nothing to say. They remain silent throughout most of the film, immersed in the memorial ceremony as a meditative act, and are not part of what is happening around them. Their silence indicates that dialogue is not possible. There is no common basis for recognizing the traumatic past from which a discourse of forgiveness and atonement can begin.

Toward the end of the film, the villagers gather in the church for a wedding that does not take place. The groom has left after discovering his father's crimes and lies. István breaks into the church and cries for help. His store is on fire; the abandoned bride burned it. Everyone looks at him, frozen in their seats. His wife looks out the window, but she does not go to help him, and a storm begins outside. This scene looks like István's nightmare. There is no solidarity among the neighbors, the relations between the villagers, as well as between István and his wife and son, are ruined. The villager's refusal to recognize their guilt and acknowledge the trauma of the Jews and their responsibility for it, leads to a climate of concealment and oblivion that prevents honest and close relations between the members of the community in the present.

### III. FILMOGRAPHY

- Frosch, Christian, dir. Murer – Anatomy of a Trial. 2018; Austria: Paul Thiltges Distributions and Prisma Film.
- Török, Ferenc, dir. 1945. 2017; Hungary: Katapult Film.
- Pawlikowski, Pawel, dir. Ida. 2013; Poland: Opus Film,

### Phoenix Film Investments and others

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Adorno, Theodor W. 1998. "The Meaning of Working Through the Past." In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 89–103. Translated by Henry W. Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [2] Bartov, O. 2008. "Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide." *The Journal of Modern History*, 80 no. 3 (September): 557–593. <https://doi.org/10.1086/589591>
- [3] Elsaesser, T. 2013. *German Cinema - Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory Since 1945*, 263–306. New York, NY: Routledge.
- [4] Freud, S. 1917. "Mourning and Melancholia." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytical Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 237–258.
- [5] Gergely, G. 2015. "The Jews who weren't there: cinema, anti-Semitism and Hungarian national identity 1938–48," 1–7.
- [6] LaCapra, D. 1997. "Revisiting the Historians' Debate: Mourning and Genocide." *History and Memory*, 9 no. (1/2): 80–112 <https://doi.org/10.2979/HIS.1997.9.1-2.80>  
———. 2006. *Trauma, Absence, Loss, Writing History and Writing Trauma*, 75–113. Jerusalem: Resling Yad Vashem.
- [7] Lewis, J. H. 1994. *Trauma and Recovery*. Translated by Atalia Zilber. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.
- [8] Levy, D., and Sznajder, N. 2002. "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory." *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (1): 87–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310222225315>
- [9] Nora, P. 1989. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring): 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>
- [10] Nora, P., and Spivak, R. 1993. "Between Memory and History: The problem of the place." *Times: Quarterly History*: 4–19.
- [11] O'Connor, B. 2010. "Adorno on the Destruction of Memory." In *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, edited by Radstone Susannah and Schwarz Bill, 136–49. NEW YORK: Fordham University, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.13>.
- [12] Sennett, R. 1998. "Disturbing memories." In *Memory*, edited by P. Fara and K. Patterson, 22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Terdiman, Richard. "Memory in Freud." In *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, edited by Radstone Susannah and Schwarz Bill, 93–108. NEW YORK: Fordham University, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.10>.
- [14] Zbikowski, A. 2014. "On Polish-Jewish Relations in the Village of Grady-Woniecko in 1942." In *Conflicting History and Shared Presence: New Perspectives on the Polish-Jewish Encounter*, edited by Daniel Blatman, 261–274. Hebrew University in Jerusalem: Magnes Press.