Essay 02 – Scene Analysis

Son of Saul

Ever since the realties of the Holocaust became truly known to the world, debate on how to appropriately portray the horror has been rampant. German culture critic and theoristTheodor Adorno famously remarked “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” – and then he later on less-famously remarked that “perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream. Several landmark attempts have been made – most notably the sleek, incredibly stylized, almost romantic Hollywood-bluster Schindler’s List directed by Stephen Spielberg – whose approach to the subject has been regularly criticized as inappropriate since.

The 2015 Hungarian film Saul fia (Son of Saul) is in many ways approached in the exact opposite way. The protagonist of the film, Saul, is a slave-laborer (Sonderkommando) in a German death camp (implicitly [Auschwitz II–Birkenau](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auschwitz_concentration_camp#Auschwitz_II-Birkenau), in Brzezinka, Poland). tasked with operating its killing chambers and desposing of the bodies. The film is built from the ground up to illustrate his authentic, human experience as realistically as it can. Employing a 40mm lens and shot in the academy ratio, there is a consistent narrow field of view, imposing a sense of claustrophobic tunnel vision. There is no score at all, leaning into whatever the sound of the environment he is in at the time. The camera never leaves his side, either showing what is implied to be his direct perspective, or closeups of him and his surroundings. To counteract the spatial gaps intentionally left by the techniques above, intricate sound informs the viewer of everything going on around Saul. Nearly every shot is are long tracking shots that pivot around Saul in an unmotivated way.

The film is a deeply personal and emotionally resonant attempt at portraying the horrors experienced by victims such as Saul without falling into the all too common ground of exploiting these attrocities for audience’s personal pleasure. One might think that the restrictions imposed on the filmmaking might therefore cripple the abilitiy to truly convey the chaos and horror imposed on these victims, but it does not, and that can be illustrated no better than in the closest thing in the movie resembling an “action scene”.

The scene in question goes from 1:06:25 to 1:13:40. Saul has agreed to a deal with Soviet POWs to be allowed outside to find a Rabbi to bury his son – if he also retrieves a bomb from a woman he knows in the female camp. After having retrived said explosive and hidden it in his trousers, the scene starts. Carrying a wheel barrow in a close tracking shot behind his shoulder, very little can be seen besides him and the man he is talking to, besides some silhuettes in the background. Suddenly the sound of trains gain in volume, the silhuettes gain in number and start moving, and frantic voices are heard. Saul, having asked where they’re going, has been informed that they’re newly arrived Jews from Hungary going “To the pits. The ovens must be full”.

Nemes uses this technique to great affect. The historical weight and infamy of the setting allow the implications to be fully conveyed to the viewer without assistance. Musical stingers, exposition, or a drawn out sentimental monologue are not required and would actively undermine the films characterizations and themes. At this point, Saul has already lost his humanity. He is numb to it all.

Saul uses the chaos of the moment to enter the crowd of prisoners being led into the woods to find a rabbi. Saul centered within the frame, he frantically looks around the crowd, asking anyone he suspects if they are a rabbi. Suddenly, a burst of gunfire breaks out offscreen – a woman is heard crying almost right near the camera. A baby cries too. Saul pays no direct attention to this, only having his search be more frantic. The camera pivots back behind Saul, a closeup of his silhouette surrounded by blinding floodlights he walks closer to. Gun-fire and cries still happen off screen spuradically. Still silhuettes, things start to spiral when we catch the glimpse of some women start to run, and watch them get shot to death with far louder fungire and muzzle flair lighting up Saul’s silhouette.

The constantly evolving crowd in each shot highlights the immense detail of the “background” of each shot. Extermination camps such as Auschwitz were full of prisoners of all over Europe, all speaking in their own languages and accents, wearing clothes of their culture when those are not taken from them. Son of Saul tries its best to emphasize all of this, employing all sorts of classes, ages, accents and languages seen and heard in the background (not intended to be intelligible by audiences as to not distract, and to focus on Saul – who also did not understand them).

Gun-fire now constant alongside German demands, the camera pans in front of Saul onto a different silhouette and settles. The face of an old man is slowly lit and looking past the camera to where Saul is implied to be. For the first time, the shot cuts. Now on Saul’s face, he affirmatively says “Rabbi,” – who is orderered to undress and continue marching into the forest. Now past the blinding floodlights, we see a sea of orange unfocused in the distance and the sound of wood crackling. Flames shoot from one side of the backdrop into said sea of orange accompanied with the sound of propulsion, and the implication is clear.

Saul comes across a fellow prisoner (Schlojme) who is confused, asking Saul if he is wanting “replaced” with a close-up of the two side-by-side over the shoulder of the Rabbi, and the distinctive silhouette of an SS officer in between them and the backdrop – entirely covered by flames. Suddenly said officer pushes Saul away and cuts between all three characters, now lit. He takes away the officer. Schlojme pushes Saul away, the camera tacking him to the ground.

Now cut to a perspective shot from Saul, we see the SS flametrooper firing more into the sea of flames and the Nazi pusing the rabbi towards another soldier while a crowd of nude silhuettes move to obscure it. Once the crowd clears, the Nazi executes prisoner after prisoner shoved to him – including the rabbi. Yet again, nude prisoners obscure the backdrop. Out of that crowd comes a bearded man with a cap, frantically saying “Rabbi” to Saul, the camera pans back to beside the rabbi and saul facing eachother. Saul immediately takes off his designated Sonderkommando jacket to cover the rabbi with and reaches for a different jacket on the ground, attracting the attention of a Nazi. Saul frantically says “Sonderkommando” to deescalate the situation. Another Sonderkommando attempts to also frantically see Saul is a Sonderkommando, and that he is too – but a Nazi executes him and the Panera pans away. Saul is continuously pushed closer and closer to the executioner from an offscreen, disembodied nazi arm. A Soviet prisoner recognizes him as a Sonderkommando, all while the exectutioner is clearly lit between the two, continuing to execute prisoners. The soviet directs him away, demanding a bribe.

Now again dressed and safe, the French rabbi approaches Saul. Saul tells him “You’ll help me bury my son”. They leave the frame, leaving the backdrop unobscured. Unfocused flames silhouette the rhythmic execution of prisoner after prisoner for several seconds. The shot cuts to the two back safe at camp.

The techniques here might come off as repetitive and undynamic from second to second, but that is clearly the intention. Shots in Son of Saul rarely feel distinct from one another, it is a constant unrelenting lurch forward through Saul’s experiences, conveying his mindset, utterly desensitized to the horrors he is constantly forced to endure. Auschwitz was not a place of hope or making the best out of the worst of circumstances. Auschwitz was a place of death and dehumanization of nearly every prisoner. To convey any light in the shadow of darkness is to lie. To celebrate any darkness is villainy. Son of Saul’s only message of Auschwitz is a message of despair and inhumanity.

By extension, the camera is not the filmmaker’s tool to use Auschwitz to tell the audience anything but the reality faced by its victims. In his essay *Camera Movement*, film scholar Paul Schrader brings attention to a contemporary review of such an example:

In 1961, Jacques Rivette wrote a […] review of […] a grim Holocuast drama whose many horrors include the sight of a young concentration camp prisoner prisoner […] hurling herself fatally against an electrified fence. “The man who decides at this moment to employ a tracking shot to reframe the corpse from below, taking care to emphasize her raised hand […] deserves nothing but the most profound contempt”

Doing so was not, as Adorno described, the expression of perennial suffering. It was the mocking of suffering. To write poetry of Auschwitz is barbaric, and perhaps no dramaticization of the events has gotten closer to conveying this barbarism than *Son of Saul*.