Seeing, Hearing, Remembering: Visual Technologies and the Mediation of Historical Violence in Contemporary Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary cinema plays an important role in mediating historical violence, shaping how audiences encounter, interpret, and remember traumatic pasts. This paper examines the relationship between cinematic form and the representation of historical violence through László Nemes's *Son of Saul* (2015), Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Look of Silence* (2014), and Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (2023). It investigates how framing, sound design, editing, camera perspective, and off-screen space construct different modes of cinematic witnessing. Drawing on memory studies, trauma theory, phenomenology, and documentary ethics, the study adopts a comparative textual analysis of selected sequences from the three films. It argues that their contrasting representational strategies establish different relationships between visibility, historical memory, and ethical spectatorship. While *Son of Saul* restricts visual access to violence through subjective framing and immersive sound, *The Look of Silence* uses documentary encounters to expose the contested memories and continuing social authority of perpetrators. *The Zone of Interest*, meanwhile, locates violence largely beyond the visible frame, making sound and domestic space central to its representation of historical atrocity. By examining these formal strategies in their distinct historical and cinematic contexts, the paper demonstrates that cinematic technologies do not simply reproduce historical violence but mediate the conditions under which it becomes perceptible and interpretable. It further considers the potential of such representations to encourage critical reflection on witnessing, complicity, and the ethics of remembering.

Keywords: visual technology, historical violence, memory, trauma, cinema, ethical spectatorship, perpetrator studies

INTRODUCTION

Representing historical violence has always been a difficult task for cinema. How can films portray extreme violence without turning human suffering into spectacle? Contemporary cinematic technologies offer filmmakers new ways of presenting violence through images and sound. In this study, the term cinematic technologies refers not simply to digital equipment or technological advancements but to the formal and technical devices through which films organise audiovisual experience. These include camera framing, shot composition, depth of field, editing, sound design, perspective, and the relationship between on-screen and off-screen space. The term is therefore used to describe the means through which cinematic form determines what becomes visible, audible, concealed, or perceptible to the spectator. However, technical sophistication alone does not guarantee a deeper understanding of history. What matters is not only what a film shows, but also how it shapes what viewers are able to see, hear, remember, and imagine.

Memory does not simply reproduce the past as it happened. Maurice Halbwachs explains that individual memories are shaped by the social frameworks through which people understand and reconstruct their experiences of the past (Halbwachs 38). Pierre Nora also draws a distinction between lived memory and the cultural sites through which societies preserve and reinterpret their historical consciousness (Nora 8–9). From this perspective, cinema is more than a medium for presenting historical events. It also plays a role in shaping how societies remember and make sense of histories of violence.

This issue becomes especially important when films deal with the Holocaust and other instances of genocidal violence. Such histories involve experiences that are difficult to communicate through familiar forms of representation. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as an experience that cannot be fully understood at the moment it occurs and that may return later through repetition and memory (Caruth 4). Dominick LaCapra, meanwhile, distinguishes between "acting out" and "working through," emphasising the need to engage with historical trauma without remaining trapped in its repetition or attempting to erase its effects (LaCapra 21).

Guided by the research question of how cinematic techniques mediate the representation of historical violence and shape the ethical position of the spectator, this paper examines the challenges contemporary cinema faces in representing historical atrocity. Focusing on *Son of Saul* (2015), *The Look of Silence* (2014), and *The Zone of Interest* (2023), it investigates how framing, sound design, editing, camera perspective, and off-screen space shape the relationship between visibility, testimony, memory, and responsibility. The study argues that cinematic choices do not merely determine how the past is represented but also influence how historical violence is experienced, remembered, and ethically understood by the viewer.

The selection of these three films is based on their distinct approaches to representing historical violence and negotiating the limits of direct visual representation. *Son of Saul* approaches the Holocaust through a fictional narrative structured around restricted subjective vision*; The Look of Silence* examines the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–66 through documentary encounters with survivors and perpetrators; and *The Zone of Interest* explores the Holocaust through a fictional domestic narrative in which the violence of Auschwitz remains largely outside the visible frame. Despite their different historical contexts and modes of filmmaking, these works offer a productive basis for examining how cinema constructs visibility, absence, and witnessing without treating distinct histories as interchangeable.

This study adopts a qualitative comparative textual analysis of selected sequences from the three films, focusing on the formal elements through which historical violence is mediated. Particular attention is given to camera framing, shot composition, editing, sound design, perspective, and off-screen space. The analysis is organised around three interconnected concerns: the limits of visual representation, the relationship between witnessing and historical memory, and the ethical positioning of spectators. Theoretical perspectives from memory studies, trauma theory, phenomenology, and documentary film theory are employed selectively to interpret the relationship between cinematic form and historical representation.

Memory, Trauma and Cinematic Representation

Cinema plays a significant role in shaping cultural memory because it brings together images, sound, movement, and narrative to represent the past. Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory offers a useful way of understanding this process. She suggests that cultural forms such as cinema can give people a sense of connection to events they have never personally experienced (Landsberg 2). Although these memories differ from those formed through direct experience, they can still have a strong emotional impact and shape how people understand historical events.

A similar idea appears in Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which examines how traumatic experiences are passed down to later generations through photographs, personal accounts, stories, and cultural representations. People who have not directly experienced a traumatic event may nevertheless develop a deep emotional connection to it through imagination and inherited narratives (Hirsch 5).

Although postmemory and prosthetic memory both address relationships with past events beyond direct personal experience, they describe different processes of remembering. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory focuses on the transmission of traumatic experiences across generations, particularly through familial and cultural narratives. Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory, by contrast, examines how mass cultural forms, including cinema, enable individuals to develop meaningful connections with historical experiences outside their own lives. The distinction is relevant to this study because the selected films do not simply transmit inherited memories; they also create mediated encounters through which contemporary spectators engage with histories of violence.

These perspectives help explain cinema's role in mediating memories of historical violence. Viewers do not encounter the past itself; they encounter a version of it shaped by cinematic choices. The position of the camera, the arrangement of shots, the pace of editing, and the use of sound all influence how an event is perceived and understood. These choices also shape the distance between the viewer and the suffering represented on screen. However, making suffering visible does not automatically lead to understanding or empathy. Susan Sontag questions how people respond to images of suffering and whether repeated exposure can turn another person's pain into something to be consumed visually (Sontag 117). This concern is particularly important in films about mass violence, where powerful images may draw viewers closer to human suffering while also creating a sense of distance from it. The central ethical concern, therefore, is not merely whether cinema should represent violence, but how it can do so without reducing suffering to spectacle. This question provides an important starting point for examining the different representational strategies employed in *Son of Saul*, *The Look of Silence*, and *The Zone of Interest*.

Restricted Vision and Traumatic Perception in *Son of Saul*

László Nemes's *Son of Saul* presents a distinctive approach to representing the Holocaust by limiting what the viewer can see. Set in Auschwitz, the film follows Saul Ausländer, a member of the Sonderkommando, a group of prisoners forced to assist in the camp's killing operations. Rather than offering wide shots that reveal the full scale of the concentration camp, Nemes relies on close framing, shallow focus, and images in which much of the surrounding action remains unclear or hidden.

This visual approach changes the way viewers experience the film. They rarely get a complete picture of the camp or its activities. Bodies, spaces, and acts of violence often appear blurred or remain at the edges of the frame. As a result, viewers encounter Auschwitz largely through Saul's limited perspective rather than from the position of an outside observer who can see and understand everything. The film makes the limitations of vision part of the experience of watching it.

This relationship between restricted vision and immersive sound becomes particularly evident in the sequences set around the crematorium. The camera remains closely attached to Saul, frequently maintaining his face or immediate movements in focus while the activities surrounding him remain indistinct. The shallow depth of field prevents the spectator from obtaining a comprehensive visual account of the camp, but the soundtrack communicates an environment of continuous violence through screams, commands, machinery, and human movement. The relationship between the image and soundtrack therefore produces an uneven distribution of information: what remains visually inaccessible becomes audibly present. Rather than presenting Auschwitz as a fully observable historical space, the film constructs an experience of limited perception in which the spectator encounters violence through Saul's restricted field of vision and the surrounding acoustic environment.

Amanda Howell and Margaret Gibson observe that the film's visual strategy challenges conventional approaches to Holocaust representation by questioning the assumption that historical suffering must be made fully visible to be understood (Gibson and Howell 153). By withholding a complete visual account, Nemes avoids turning the suffering of the victims into a spectacle for the audience. What remains unseen becomes as important as what appears on screen, making restricted vision an important part of the film's ethical approach to historical violence.

Sound plays an equally significant role in shaping this experience. Teréz Vincze argues that the film's sound design creates a phenomenological and haptic experience, allowing viewers to encounter the camp through sensory intensity rather than visual completeness (Vincze 113). Screams, footsteps, machinery, shouted commands, and distant voices fill the soundtrack, often without a clear visual indication of their sources. The viewer hears the surrounding violence even when the camera refuses to show it directly. Michel Chion's work on cinematic sound helps explain this effect. He demonstrates that sound can extend the perceived space of a film beyond what is visible on screen and influence how viewers interpret the images before them (Chion 13). In *Son of Saul*, sounds from outside the frame constantly remind the viewer of the violence surrounding Saul. The unseen world of the camp is therefore never entirely out of reach; it remains present through what the viewer hears.

Through this combination of restricted images and immersive sound, *Son of Saul* offers a fragmented and unsettling encounter with traumatic history. The film does not allow viewers to gain a complete understanding of the violence through visual observation alone. Instead, it confronts them with the limits of perception and the difficulty of representing extreme human suffering. In doing so, it suggests that engaging with historical trauma may require an awareness of what cannot be fully seen or comprehended, rather than the illusion that the past can be completely reconstructed on screen.

The Documentary Camera as Witness in The Look of Silence

Unlike *Son of Saul*, which limits what the audience can see, Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Look of Silence* uses the documentary camera to bring viewers face to face with the perpetrators of historical violence. The film revisits the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–66 through Adi, whose brother was murdered during the violence. As Adi meets former perpetrators and asks them about their involvement, the film creates encounters in which memories of the past are brought into the present.

In these encounters, the camera does more than record conversations. Its presence makes the act of remembering a public and potentially uncomfortable experience. The former perpetrators are asked to speak about their actions while being filmed, and their responses reveal how they choose to present their own histories. Memory, in this context, is not simply a recollection of past events; it is also shaped by the circumstances in which those events are discussed and the audience before whom they are recalled.

The eye-examination sequences offer a particularly significant example of the relationship between cinematic framing and documentary witnessing. Adi examines the eyes of former perpetrators while asking questions about their involvement in the killings. The physical arrangement of these encounters produces an unusual reversal of the conventional interview structure. Rather than positioning the interviewer as an external observer who controls the exchange, the film places Adi in close physical proximity to those whose accounts he seeks to question. The camera records not only verbal responses but also hesitation, silence, facial expressions, and attempts to avoid direct engagement. The act of looking consequently becomes part of the film's ethical structure. The former perpetrators are not simply sources of historical information; they become subjects confronted with the persistence of a past that their public narratives have attempted to justify or suppress.

Bill Nichols argues that documentary cinema establishes particular relationships between filmmakers, subjects, and spectators. Documentary images are shaped by decisions about perspective, evidence, and representation rather than offering an entirely neutral account of reality (Nichols 34). This becomes especially significant in *The Look of Silence*, where the camera brings perpetrators, survivors, and viewers into a shared encounter with a history that remains unresolved. Robert Sinnerbrink's discussion of memory, witnessing, and cinematic ethics in Oppenheimer's work further illuminates this relationship. The film does not simply reconstruct a historical event that belongs to the past. Instead, it reveals how that past continues to influence the present, shaping relationships, identities, and the ways people speak about violence (Sinnerbrink 63).

The film also makes clear that memories of violence are often contested. Several perpetrators repeat accounts that justify or normalise their actions, while Adi's questions challenge these versions of events. Oki Rahadianto Sutopo's analysis of perpetrator memory through Bourdieu offers a useful perspective on this problem. It draws attention to how recollections are influenced by social positions, established structures, and unequal forms of cultural power (Sutopo 289). The perpetrators' accounts can therefore be understood in relation to the social conditions that allow certain versions of history to persist.

Off-Screen Violence and the Ethics of Absence in The Zone of Interest

Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* approaches the representation of historical violence in a markedly different way. Set beside Auschwitz, the film follows Rudolf Höss and his family as they go about their domestic lives near the concentration camp. Their daily routines continue within a seemingly ordinary household, even as the machinery of mass murder operates on the other side of the wall. Much of this violence remains outside the viewer's field of vision.

Absence becomes one of the film's most powerful representational strategies. Rather than showing the atrocities directly, Glazer allows their presence to emerge through gunshots, shouting, machinery, and other sounds coming from beyond the frame. The contrast between the family's everyday activities and the violence surrounding them makes the domestic setting deeply unsettling. What appears ordinary on screen cannot be separated from the suffering that remains largely unseen.

Noël Burch's concept of off-screen space helps explain how this technique works. The cinematic image is not limited to the area contained within the frame; the spaces beyond it also influence how viewers interpret what they see (Burch 17). In *The Zone of Interest*, the space outside the frame carries much of the historical violence that defines the film's world. The unseen camp is never entirely absent from the viewer's experience. Michel Chion's work on cinematic sound offers another way of understanding this effect. Sound can extend the perceived space of a film beyond its visible boundaries, making the audience aware of events that the image does not reveal (Chion 73). In Glazer's film, the soundtrack continually reminds viewers of the violence taking place nearby. The camp remains perceptually present even when it is visually concealed.

The garden sequences offer a particularly revealing example of how off-screen space operates in The Zone of Interest. The camera frequently observes the domestic activities of the Höss family within carefully composed frames that emphasise the apparent normality of their surroundings. However, the sounds of gunfire, shouting, machinery, and other activities from the adjacent concentration camp continually interrupt this domestic environment. The wall separating the house from Auschwitz therefore functions as more than a physical boundary; it establishes a division between what the characters choose to acknowledge and what the spectator is made to perceive. The contrast between domestic normality and the acoustic presence of mass violence exposes the possibility of ordinary life coexisting with systematic atrocity. The spectator is consequently positioned to recognise a relationship that the family's everyday behaviour attempts to normalise or disregard.

This approach also complicates how perpetrators are represented. Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" provides a relevant framework for considering the relationship between ordinary conduct and extraordinary violence (Arendt 276). The film does not depend on portraying the perpetrators as visibly monstrous at every moment. Instead, it shows how domestic routines and personal ambitions can coexist with participation in a system of organised mass murder.

By withholding direct images of violence, *The Zone of Interest* challenges the assumption that a more explicit representation will necessarily produce a deeper understanding of historical suffering. Viewers must make sense of the relationship between what they see and what they hear, recognising the violence that the image leaves outside the frame. Absence, in this sense, becomes a means of confronting history rather than avoiding it.

Visuality, Sound, and the Active Spectator

Taken together, the three films demonstrate how different cinematic techniques shape the encounter with historical memory. *Son of Saul* restricts vision and draws viewers into a fragmented sensory experience. *The Look of Silence* uses the documentary camera to confront competing memories and unresolved responsibility. *The Zone of Interest*, meanwhile, places much of its violence beyond the visible image, allowing sound and absence to shape the audience's understanding. Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological approach to cinema helps explain why these differences matter. She understands film experience as embodied, involving the spectator's perceptual and bodily engagement rather than being limited to intellectual interpretation (Sobchack 5). From this perspective, cinema does not merely communicate information about historical events. It shapes how viewers encounter those events through sound, images, movement, and the limits of perception.

Laura U. Marks's concept of haptic visuality offers a further perspective, particularly in relation to films that resist conventional visual clarity. Marks examines forms of viewing that encourage a more intimate, sensory engagement with images rather than a detached attempt to master everything represented on screen (Marks 162). This concept is useful for reading *Son of Saul*, where shallow focus and restricted framing prevent viewers from obtaining a complete visual grasp of the surrounding world.

Jacques Rancière's idea of the emancipated spectator also helps explain the role audiences play in these films. Rather than simply receiving a predetermined message, spectators interpret what they encounter, connect different elements, and construct their own understanding (Rancière 13). Each of the three films demands this kind of engagement. Viewers must make sense of partially visible events in *Son of Saul*, evaluate the competing accounts presented in *The Look of Silence*, and interpret the relationship between domestic life and unseen violence in *The Zone of Interest*.

These films consequently demonstrate that cinematic mediation can produce different ways of remembering and understanding historical violence. Restricted vision, testimony, confrontation, sound, and absence each establish a distinct relationship between the spectator and the past. Their significance lies not simply in the technologies they employ, but in how those technologies shape the experience and interpretation of historical suffering.

Cinema as a Form of Ethical Learning

The relationship between cinematic representation and ethical learning deserves particular attention in a world where visual media increasingly shape how historical knowledge circulates. Through cinema, viewers can encounter histories that lie beyond their personal experience. This possibility connects with Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory, which explains how cultural forms can create meaningful connections to events that individuals have not directly experienced.

Yet ethical learning involves more than becoming familiar with historical facts. It also requires attention to the circumstances in which violence occurs, the ways it is justified or remembered, and the responsibilities involved in representing human suffering. The three films encourage different forms of engagement with these questions. *Son of Saul* confronts viewers with the limits of perception; *The Look of Silence* brings them into contact with testimony and the continuing struggle over historical responsibility; and *The Zone of Interest* makes them confront violence through its deliberate absence from the visible image.

Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other offers a useful framework for considering these encounters. His philosophical work emphasises an ethical responsibility towards others that cannot be reduced to treating them as objects of knowledge or understanding (Levinas 194). Applied to cinematic spectatorship, this perspective invites us to consider how films might encourage responsibility towards the suffering of others without suggesting that viewers can fully comprehend their experiences.

The ethical force of these films therefore lies not in their ability to provide simple moral conclusions, but in their capacity to unsettle familiar ways of seeing and understanding violence. They leave viewers with difficult questions about memory, complicity, responsibility, and the limits of representation. Cinema becomes a form of ethical learning when it encourages audiences to engage critically with these questions rather than merely consume images of suffering.

Ultimately, the three films suggest that the representation of historical violence depends as much on how cinema withholds, fragments, or mediates experience as on what it makes visible. By directing attention to the relationship between image, sound, absence, and spectatorship, they demonstrate how cinematic form can shape both historical memory and ethical reflection.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary cinema demonstrates that historical memory is not produced simply by showing the past. It is produced through carefully constructed relationships between image, sound, absence, testimony and spectatorship. *Son of Saul*, *The Look of Silence* and *The Zone of Interest* employ different cinematic technologies to create different encounters with historical violence.

The films collectively demonstrate that restricted vision can communicate trauma, documentary witnessing can expose contested memory, and absence can make violence perceptually and ethically present. Their significance

therefore lies not only in what they represent but in how they position the spectator in relation to what is represented.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that cinematic mediation does not produce a single or uniform experience of historical violence. Instead, different formal strategies establish distinct relationships between visibility, sound, memory, and spectatorship. Through restricted subjective framing, documentary confrontation, and the deliberate use of off-screen space, the three films reveal the limitations of conventional approaches to representing historical atrocity. Their significance lies not in providing complete access to the past but in making spectators attentive to the conditions under which historical violence becomes visible, audible, and remembered. By foregrounding these conditions, the films contribute to a critical understanding of cinematic witnessing and the ethical responsibilities involved in representing histories of human suffering.

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