In the Captivity of the Present. 
Approaches to Son of Saul 
by László Nemes Jeles

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Abstract. Son of Saul, the Hungarian director, László Nemes Jeles’s film about Holocaust was released in 2015 with great international success: Grand Prix of the Cannes Film Festival, the Academy Award and Golden Globe for best foreign-language film. In my essay, I approach the film from a variety of perspectives. First, by analysing the visual and aural level of the film I intend to show how – in a very original way – Son of Saul is capable of depicting the understandably limited perspective and numb state of mind of the protagonist, a member of the Sonderkommando. In the second section, I compare Son of Saul with the Nobel Prize winner novel, Fatelessness (1975) by Imre Kertész. I argue that these two works show strong similarity in their storytelling and staging of the Holocaust. Both works miss a looking back in hindsight and the historical perspective, confining their protagonists to the present. Thirdly, I examine the relation between the absurd mission of Saul saving the dead boy and the problem of remembering and commemorating the Holocaust. Finally, I try to map the traces of popular genres in Son of Saul. I recon the film applies – on the one hand – the audiovisual techniques of the POV-horror genre while – on the other hand – the media and presentation tactics of first-person-shooter video games. The application of well-known media procedures can thus bring the historical event that can be hardly visualized or verbalized closer to the younger generation. With the Holocaust fading away in the past and the number of survivors and witnesses radically decreasing, this is certainly becoming more and more important.

Keywords: Holocaust, contemporary Hungarian Cinema, Fatelessness, Son of Saul, László Nemes Jeles, Imre Kertész.

The amazing success of Son of Saul (Saul fia, 2015) by László Nemes Jeles (Grand Prix at Cannes Film Festival, Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film, Best Foreign Language Film at the 88th Academy Awards) can be primarily attributed to its depiction of the seemingly indescribable and incomprehensible
historical trauma of the Holocaust in an original and novel way. What makes the international success of the film somewhat surprising however, is exactly these novel and distressing cinematic images. In fact, Son of Saul cannot be considered a viewer-friendly piece of art; on the contrary, its powerful impact results from its shocking and horrifying effects. According to Judit Székács-Weisz, Son of Saul makes us face the trauma of the Holocaust at an elemental, visceral level by forcing the viewer to “enter the all-out, absolute world of body and mind experience and totally eliminates the possibility of personal exclusion” (Székács-Weisz 2017, 45).Reviewing the movie, Zsolt Gyenge also refers to and highlights the essential physical atmosphere of the film. According to him, Son of Saul “shows us mercilessly the harrowing experience of extreme uncertainty” (Gyenge 2015). Georges Didi-Huberman (2020) calls the movie a “monster” which seizes the viewer violently and makes them face the nightmare of the Shoah. There are countless other examples that describe the experience of watching the movie as a set of torturous physical and mental ordeals. These also identify the role of the viewer with the position of the unwilling witness.

In the following, first I will attempt to answer the question what cinematographic and thematic tools are deployed by Son of Saul to force the viewer out of the external viewing position and into the uncomfortable role of the witness. Second, drawing on the uncovered specificities, I will analyse Nemes Jeles’s film, on the one hand, in the context of Imre Kertész’s influential novel Fatelessness (Sorstalanság, 1975) arguing that the film stages the Holocaust similarly to the novel in many aspects, and, on the other hand, I search for related instances or, if you will, precursors of the major cinematographic procedures of Son of Saul in the context of contemporary film and media history.

Images that Cut into the Flesh

The most striking visual feature of the film by Nemes is the positioning of the camera, which is almost constantly fixed on the main character, Saul, showing either directly him or (him and) what he sees. This results in the predominance

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1 Quotations from texts in Hungarian are all my translations in this article.
2 Cf. “the images and screams in your film left me defenseless, unprotected by knowledge. They seize me violently in several ways. First, I must confess, I felt as if I were seeing right there before my eyes something of my earliest and most harrowing nightmares” (Didi-Huberman 2020, 150).
3 The use of the word witness is, of course, figurative as the aesthetic experience of the viewer lacks the real, physical participation and bodily menace.
of close-ups and medium close-ups throughout the film. In the case of the former, the background is regularly hidden behind Saul’s face, whereas in the latter case, there are multiple obstacles to the clear view of Saul’s environment. Moreover, actions in the background are practically invisible due to the shallow focus rendering the surroundings blurred and out-of-focus. Sometimes parts of the picture are simply too dark to make out, or often our depth vision is obstructed by strong counter-light, or, occasionally, by a cloud of ashes [Figs. 1–2].

Another feature that constantly stymies our visual input is the highly restricted picture frames that exclude most of the actions (we do hear or at least assume) happening around the characters. It is the result of this limited filmic representation that we never actually get to see the main location of the film, we never get a view of the death camp (and, consequently, of the Holocaust in general), but have to resort to fragments of pictures and sounds to presume the context of the events happenings in such a narrow frame. The lack of establishing shots and the film’s radically elliptic structure makes the audience experience the surroundings as a frightening labyrinth or maze, rather than a clear, understandable space. As Zsolt Gyenge puts it, “due to the aspect ratio and lack of depth, we are simply deprived of perspectives, we are claustrophobically closed into the frame, we can barely make out what is happening in the background and we are always surprised when somebody or something enters the frame form the side.” Like Saul, we too are “rambling vertiginously along shallow corridors, through dim-lit halls and amongst dilapidated barracks” (Gyenge 2015). Since the distance between the constantly threatened main character and the knowledge of the viewer is minimized, the filmic language of Son of Saul “creates an unreliable and chaotic epistemological structure that baffles us by being fragmented, elliptic and scrappy and entices the viewers constantly to watch out for clues and signs that assist interpretation” (Kiss 2016). As such, it both requires a high level of activity on the viewer’s part and it makes the audience “experience” the chaotic world of the camp together with Saul, the main character; the viewer’s experience here being strictly understood as an aesthetic experience.

In her exceptional essay The Phenomenology of Trauma, Teréz Vincze applies the concepts of Laura U. Marks of haptic and optic visuality to the phenomenological analysis of Son of Saul. In the case of optic visuality, there is sufficient “distance” between the observer and the observed object (on the screen) to be able to identify the object seen, whereas in the case of haptic visuality, there is no such distance.

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4 As several critics mention, the 4:3 aspect ratio used for Son of Saul also limits the available visual information as this aspect ratio can frame less information than, for example, 16:9.
so the identification of objects is encumbered. The distance should be (partially) understood metaphorically as we do not actually sit farther or closer in the former or the latter case, since we are talking about the screen (in the movie theatre). Here, distance is rather taken to mean that the haptic experience limits severely the function of vision to identify objects for various (visual) reasons, whereas in the case of optic visuality, the observer sees and identifies objects from the omniscient position that masters the view. As during the former experience the identification of objects is seriously obstructed, the eyes focus on the surface and texture and try to “scan” it. According to Marks, “in haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (2000, 162). The “sense of touch” joining the sense of vision, or, to put it differently, haptic visuality scanning the surface is triggered, in this case, by changes in focus, graininess, under- and overexposure, wrong perspectives; or, simply put, the “defects” of the image (Marks 2000, 172). (Marks explains facetiously that it is possible to activate haptic visuality if somebody who has impaired vision goes to the movie theatre and takes off their glasses [2000, 170].) The defective, reduced filmic image, full of absences inspires the viewer to engage in a more active, interpretive work of completion in such a way that, in the meantime, the other senses are also “switched on” and the viewer is pushed towards a multisensory perception. It is fairly obvious to see that Son of Saul engages a whole host of haptic images from blurred backgrounds to blinding counter light, from smoke that erases depth of field to extremely narrow frames. Teréz Vincze also highlights the overwhelmingly haptic character of the filmic images. She emphasizes that it can already be seen in the beginning scene as “haptic images are often blurred, which makes their recognition difficult. Son of Saul opens with an image that looks exactly like that: the first image is a greenish blur that fills the screen [...]. After some time, it turns out that the picture is produced by shallow focus and as the hero approaches the camera, finally his face becomes sharp while his surroundings remain relatively blurred” (Vincze 2016, 111). So, the first images activate the multisensory perception related to haptic visuality, and the narrow field of vision throughout the film works against optic, overview-like, “distancing” visuality. As a result, the film does not allow its viewer to take a seat in the master position of an all-perceiving subject. It is exactly this feature of the

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5 “Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.” (Marks 2000, 162.)
film and Marks’s concepts that help Vincze reason with compelling force about the unusual position of the viewer of *Son of Saul*. “The repositioning of the audience, by eliminating the all-perceiving position and the controlling knowledge, makes them more vulnerable in the perceiving situation, and makes the experience more effective. The viewer’s suggested ‘physical’ closeness to Saul makes the perceptive identification more accentuated. [...] All of the haptic qualities present strengthen the possibility that the viewer could be drawn not only into the subjectivity of Saul but also into his environment, perceptively.” (Vincze 2016, 112.)

To summarize briefly, this is how the visuals of *Son of Saul* minimize the difference between the visual perception of the viewer and the protagonist and thus “coerce” the spectator into haptic visuality and epistemological uncertainty. This filmic feature contradicts all understanding and insight, or, subsequent historical interpretation. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that the movie, in fact, relies heavily on what the audience is presumed to know about the Holocaust, i.e. they do have previous knowledge about the history of concentration camps and how they operated. Without this, the viewers would not be able to understand what happens in the gas chambers after the doors are closed, or even infer that the prisoners were in fact ushered into gas chambers. For this is not shown or revealed by the camera. Nor is it revealed that the remains of people are incinerated and that they turn into ashes in the crematorium. We, however, do see the flames and the smoke, and we do hear the banging, but these audiovisual cues could never be accurately interpreted without our historical knowledge about the Holocaust. Moreover, the lifeless and blank face of the protagonist – seen while we hear the faint cries and screams through the massive iron doors of the gas chambers – does not reveal anything of the horrors happening inside [Fig. 3].

**Son of Saul and Fatelessness**

I wrote in detail about the similarities of the narrative structures in László Nemes Jeles’s film and Imre Kertész’s Nobel Prize winner novel, *Fatelessness* (*Sorstalanság*, 1975) in a Hungarian-language essay entitled *Son of Saul and Fatelessness* (Sághy 2015). The most conspicuously similar feature between these two is that the description and display of the events of the Holocaust are tied to the limited point of view of the protagonists. Saul (and the viewer of the movie) does not have a comprehensive understanding of the entirety of the death camp and the events taking place there, just like György Köves, the protagonist in Kertész’s novel, who does not have a grasp on the events he has experienced and suffered through. The
14-year-old protagonist is approaching Auschwitz without having the slightest idea that it is the Holocaust that is happening to him. To be able to fathom that, he would need to be in possession of historical knowledge in the present which is, to use the key expression of the novel, “naturally” not available as this horizon can only come into being while looking back at it, i.e. in hindsight. In the novel, the time of narration and the time of the narrated story seem to be overlapping (Köves, the narrator is narrating what is happening to him), so looking back in hindsight and making judgements are absent from the greater part of *Fatelessness*. The hero of Nemes Jeles’s film, Saul, like Köves, acts in the present of the events depicted without any interpretative distance. Having returned from the camp, Kertész’s hero spells out himself (reflexively) in the final chapter of the novel what seems to be the problem with the (overarching) perspective of looking back. He explains to the two elderly neighbours, Fleischmann and Steiner that it is only “now, and thus after the event, looking back, in hindsight, does the way it all ‘come about’ seem over, finished, unalterable, finite, so tremendously fast, and so terribly opaque. And if, in addition, one knows one’s fate in advance, of course. […] Except that whether one looks back or ahead, both are flawed perspectives, I suggested. After all, there are times when twenty minutes, in and of themselves, can be quite a lot of time. Each minute had started, endured, and then ended before the next one started. Now, I said, let’s just consider: every one of those minutes might in fact have brought something new. In reality it didn’t, naturally, but still, one must acknowledge that it might have; when it comes down to it, each and every minute something else might have happened other than what actually did happen” (Kertész 2004, 258). It is not the bird’s eye view of the historical perspective that allows Köves to experience the Holocaust in a tangible way but the passing of minutes, hours or days. Similarly, *Son of Saul* ignores (historical) panorama pictures and, at the same time, the cinematographic procedures of the film, laid out above, also aim at expressing the minute-by-minute, fragmented perspective of the protagonist. Contrary to this, the actual film adaptation of *Fatelessness*, released in 2005, a Hungarian production directed by Lajos Koltai (its screenplay was written by Kertész himself) lays out Köves’s story through the filter of posterity, that is from the position of retrospection. The most conspicuous methods of this approach are the sweet-and-sad soundtrack by Ennio Morricone, the enticing, gold-tinted pictures of Budapest and the terrifying, dark hued images of the camp as these directorial measures and decisions evaluate and judge (with music and with stylized lights) the events staged.\(^6\)

\(^6\) I wrote in detail about this adaptational relationship and Imre Kertész’s novel *Fatelessness*, and the screenplay published in 2001 in the article *A Sorstalanság Hollywoodba megy, avagy arról:*
Apart from stating the similar features, it is important to mention that Köves’s perspective in the book is still wider than that of Saul in the film. We can only access what the latter perceives visually and, to some extent, what he hears, while Gyuri Köves describes with naiveté and rich details all the things he perceives. On one occasion he is musing at length about the prisoner who helps their settling in. He is wearing striped clothes and is speaking to them in Hungarian. Köves ponders what offense he might have committed to have been sentenced to such a miserable prisoner existence: “I immediately felt a bit sorry for him too, for I could not help but notice and be forced to admit that despite his being a rather young, intelligent convict, the man had a charming face, and I would dearly have liked to have found out from him where, how, and for what offense he had been imprisoned” (Kertész 2004, 92). The irony is palpable in the difference of the protagonist’s interpretation and the reader’s knowledge, as the reader knows what Köves did not know in the moment of his arrival: soon he is going to become a “convict” even though he has committed no “offense.” He does not seem to have access to the real historical context, whereas the reader does. The difference between the two understandings will create the baseline for the dark humour of the novel. The limited perspective of Köves, on the one hand, deconstructs Holocaust stereotypes, and, on the other hand, builds on those from the beginning, as the bitter irony of the novel would not work without the reader’s superior knowledge. As explained above, Son of Saul also draws on the viewers’ knowledge when it steps away from the traditions of depicting the Holocaust and deconstruct them through cinematographic innovations. It keeps most of the events and objects of the death camp outside frames and in haze (or, out of visibility). But, drawing on our previous knowledge, we can still complement (partially) the fragments within the frames (the soundscape of the movie greatly facilitates this). To summarize briefly, Son of Saul and Fatelessness (the novel) are similar to each other in that both depict the events from the limited point of view of the protagonist, none of them build on the (evaluating, judging) perspective (camera angle) of hindsight, and both works of art – with differing aesthetic and rhetoric objectives – build on the previous knowledge of the audience about the Holocaust. It is undoubtedly true, however, that the perspective of György...
Köves is limited due to his lack of information and childish naiveté, while Saul’s perspective is restricted as a result of his horrendous experiences.

**In the Embrace of Horrendous Sounds**

While the predominant visual feature of *Son of Saul* is the limited perspective (and the simultaneous maximization of the interpreting activity from the audience), the aural level shows the very opposite, namely, the overwhelming and alarming torrent of sounds. The audio track of the film mostly transmits the noises, orders, ushering and yelling of the chaotic everyday world of the concentration camps, and, of course, the shots, cries and screams. The horrors of the concentration camp are thus most strongly perceived on the aural level rather than on the visual, which severely restricts the viewer’s sense of space by employing tight frames and lack of depth of focus. This audio level, arriving mostly from outside the tightly framed pictures, however, serves to complete the limited perspective offered by the visuals, so it does – in the end – succeed in creating the imaginary space of the film and is no less terrifying than the visible horror. These sounds reach the audience from multiple directions (a feature of Dolby Surround sound), filling the whole space of the movie theatre and thus embracing the audience. But since these sounds are those of intimidation and terror, what embraces the audience is in fact the sounds of horror.

Looking at the mechanism of hearing from a perceptual psychological perspective, sounds are more likely to trigger more direct experiences than visual stimuli: while the transmission of light (i.e. the triggering of visual stimulus) does not require a transmitting medium, the transmission of sounds is impossible without it. In fact, the medium of sound, i.e. the air around us, does not only move but also surrounds us. According to Edward Branigan, the sound “achieves a greater ‘intimacy’ than light because is seems to put the spectator directly in touch with a nearby action through a medium of air which traverses space, touching both spectator and represented event” (Branigan 1997, 99). The more intimate, more physical experience is mainly due to the Dolby Surround

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8 Mary Ann Doane on the spatial quality of the voice-off: “The voice-off deepens the diegesis, gives it an extent which exceeds that of the image, and thus supports the claim that there is a space in the fictional world which the camera does not register. In its own way, it accounts for lost space. The voice-off is a sound which is first and foremost in the service of the film’s construction of space and only indirectly in the service of the image. It validates both what the screen reveals of the diegesis and what it conceals” (Doane 1999, 368). The extent of “lost space” is considerable in *Son of Saul*, therefore the voice-off is even more significant than in other cases.
sound system of modern contemporary cinemas, which “practically wraps up the audience and creates an unbreakable cohesion by placing vantage points in the real space, facilitating the physical understanding of the plot on the screen” (Dragon 2017, 47). Another key aspect of our perception of sound that explains its visceral nature and effect is the fact that the audience is more capable of “identifying” with sounds than with pictures since light is only perceived while sounds are produced as well. “Our ability to hear sounds being made exists in parallel with our ability to make sounds (which we then hear) whereas light can only be sensed, not made by us. Again, lightness seems to have a distant quality, ‘outside’ and apart from the human body whereas sound seems to be part of us and our movements” (Branigan 1997, 101). Sounds, therefore, are easier to experience, since they surround us and belong to us. As a result, the audio track of *Son of Saul* is all the more dreadful. First, the horrors missing from the pictures are perceived in the audio, constantly intimidating both Saul, as he is trying to find his way in the claustrophobic visuals, and the viewer, who is co-experiencing and visually identifying with him. Second, the overwhelming nature of the audio, as explained above through perceptual psychology, indeed gets “under the viewer’s skin,” both surrounding and overwhelming the audience to a significantly greater extent than the visuals ever would.

The film’s sounds, which consist mainly of orders, threats, shots and death cries, can, on the one hand, potentially trigger the previously mentioned dreadful suspense, and, on the other hand, can strengthen the epistemological uncertainty imposed by the pictures through the turmoil of the audio, that is, the overwhelming and chaotic nature of sounds of various intensity, direction and content with no discernible source in sight. Likewise, some of the dialogues between the characters are often difficult to hear or understand since they are in other languages. The film features eight different languages, some of which remain untranslated in the subtitles (at least in the Hungarian version). The unintelligible utterances stay in the realm of “noise,” and due to their incomprehensibility (or poor sound quality), they intensify the chaos and pandemonium so typical of the concentration camps depicted in the visuals (and perceived in most of the audio as well).

**Saul’s Mission and Memory**

As already mentioned above, the limitations of the visual plane primarily stem from the contemporaneity of Saul and the spectator experiencing the world of the death camp since the camera does not leave him for a second. Consequently, the
claustrophobic visual world of the film seems to represent the limited perspective of Saul’s narrowed consciousness. The connection between the visual limitations of the film and Saul is all the more apparent in several scenes where depth of focus fades away, thus making the background blurry, when Saul enters the picture. As if perspective was actually tuned onto and cleared away by his point of view [Figs. 4–7]. The mechanical behaviour of Saul and his desensitized mind to the stimuli of the outside world is far from being surprising: he is a member of Sonderkommando, a group of prisoners operating the gas chambers and the crematoriums, and, as such, he is an accomplice in the mass murder, which can only be tolerated by a mind which is dull and focused solely on the present. His role excludes the possibility of creating future plans; the only realistic survival strategy for Saul and his fellow inmates is to survive the present moment. The claustrophobic filmic representation of the movie thus suggests that “the prisoners confined in space are also stranded by the hopeless and horrific present” (Gyenge 2015).

Interestingly enough, the first moment with depth of focus in the film is when Saul is observing an SS officer who is suffocating a boy who has survived the gas chamber [Figs. 8–9]. This visual representation seems to suggest that his mind opens up for a moment and his catatonic soul is touched by something. As it turns out later, this is the moment of his decision to save the boy’s corpse, so, in a way, he plans ahead and looks into the future as Saul “interprets the miracle of the boy surviving the gas chamber as a sign for him to do something in order to save his own humanity” (Vincze 2016, 119). This mission of his, however, to save a corpse from incineration and to provide the boy with a proper funeral does seem, under the circumstances, somewhat absurd. What’s more, his action to save a dead greatly endangers his peers who are plotting an escape and a breakout (in fact, it indirectly causes the death of two of them: the rabbi, who is shovelling the ashes and the boy, who is designated to be his companion when they go to procure gun powder). In the light of this, his desperate mission seems all the more questionable. Nonetheless, the cinematographic language that practically fixes the camera on Saul forces the viewer to face his motivations and odds, however absurd and irrational these may seem at first sight. The fact that we experience the death camps through the eyes of Saul does offer a special situation, since, according to Gyenge, “we do not necessarily have to agree with or feel the same way as him, but are certainly made to rethink and experience his options and then ponder about our own” (2015).

But what exactly is the camera fixed on Saul making us contemplate? Why does the saving of a dead person seem absurd in the crowd of many who are alive and want to survive?
Saul is a member of the Sonderkommando, the body of prisoners who (obviously under coercion) collaborated with the German SS, and, as such, he becomes an accomplice in the extermination of his fellow Jewish sufferers. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman talks about this collaboration in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* saying that this coerced collaboration and the creation of the “collaborating victim” was necessary for the operation of death camps. Without the Sonderkommando, *judenrats* and *kapos*, it would have been difficult to get the victims to enter the gas chambers (Bauman 1989, 117–150). This coerced collaboration came at an exorbitant price: it meant the loss of humanity or human dignity. Saul’s mechanical manners and his blank face void of emotions could in fact be interpreted as if his collaboration, coerced by his survival instinct in the camp, has turned him into an undead, a living dead, lacking human nature. Many survivors of death camps have spoken about these “undead,” who were called *Muselmanns*. Similarly to Saul, they renounced their motivation to stay alive and whose (mental) death has started before their corporeal extermination. It is by no coincidence that Abraham accuses Saul in the film of “having left the living for the dead,” to which Saul briefly answers, “we’re all dead by now.” This is why it becomes significant that when Saul sees the SS officer suffocating the boy (and the frame simultaneously receives some depth of focus), he appears to come alive again and seems to look into the future for a moment (even if he does not harbour any hopes of survival). His plan, however, is not aimed at reclaiming his lost human dignity (if such a feat was even possible), but at a righteous funeral for the dead boy. In other words, what he wants is not to save himself from incineration but the boy.

It is at the same time important to see that concentration camps deprived people not only of their humanity, but also of their human death, since the primal aim of death camps was total extermination including the corpses, hence the use of crematoriums working around the clock. Death in death camps “cannot be called death. Not only because it makes no sense and because it bears no meaning to the victims, but because this death is not one’s *own death*: ‘Auschwitz-death’ as Améry calls it. People did not die in Auschwitz; they were exterminated. They were deprived not only of their dignity of life but also, which may be even more

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9 Imre Kertész writes about being a Muzelmann as a stage on the way to physical and mental disintegration: “I can remember the physical pain, but only with my mind, not with my senses; it is actually impossible to recall it. I remember, at a certain point it ceases as well, just like being hungry or cold. We no longer register what is going on around us. Our nose is runny, our eyes well up; our excrements are being produced without hesitation, anytime, anywhere. Anyone who got to this stage was called a Muzelmann. His mind slowly falls asleep and sinks into the confused concepts of his memories. The Muzelmann suffers no more. He enjoys magical inner experiences, unknowingly” (Kertész 1989, 35).
gruesome, as Adorno puts it, of the dignity of death. Even death was disparaged” (Pintér 2014, 74). Saul’s aim could be seen in fact as a way of wanting to give back the boy his own death by means of a proper funeral, for the lack of anything else to give the boy or himself. In a world where total physical and mental annihilation is the ultimate aim, honouring the corpse of the boy with last rites could signify the honouring of death itself or of the memory of the dead boy. “This absurd mission of providing a decent funeral for the dead boy is a story of honouring the memory of the victims, or, the story of our attitude to Auschwitz. What the film makes us realize is that the only thing we could do is to properly honour the memory of the victims.” (Pintér 2017, 52.) In short, Saul’s actions are symbolic and they aim at reclaiming our own death and at saving the right to a proper funeral and to honour the memory of the dead since nothing more could be achieved under the circumstances.

Investigating the issue of commemoration is also interesting in the scene where Saul and Katz are taking pictures of the incineration. They are documenting how the corpses are being obliterated as if the two of them were building the visual “memorial” of the dead [Fig. 10]. While it is the latter who is taking the pictures, Saul is the one who is hiding the camera in the drainpipes to protect the images from the guards who happen on them and to send a “message” to the future. Compared to his catatonic and single-focused state, Saul shows a surprising drive in the documentation of the death camp, which proves that being a witness remains the last important thing for him. When he thinks that the funeral and the memory of the dead boy is more important than those who are alive, Saul, in a way, intimates that the only valid attitude to their desperate situation in the concentration camp is remembering and reminding. A proper funeral means the act of remembering. Making a grave means the creation of a space for memory. At the same time, the scenes of the photos being taken in the camp refer reflexively to the same function of the images of Son of Saul: as they tell the story of how that particular camera got into the drainpipes, they fulfil Saul and Katz’s hope in the present of the reception of the film. Actually, there were photos taken in the camps, surviving to this day, by Alberto Errera, a member of the Sonderkommando in 1944 in

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(10) Didi-Huberman also interprets Saul’s aims as a fight against one’s own death: “[he is] trying to wrest the dead child from an anatomical dismemberment, whatever the cost, to spare him the atrocious den of the crematorium and the anonymous scattering of his ashes in the Vistula. Out of the dark here means resisting the nonexistence of death – whence the necessity, for the dead to exist, of a ritual, an appropriate prayer, a rabbi, and, especially, a dignified burial” (2020, 160–161, emphasis in the original).
Auschwitz-Birkenau. The artistic images in Nemes Jeles’s film commemorate the victims, bereft of their own death.

In my opinion, the scene where Saul smiles can also be linked to the idea of remembering and reminding [Fig. 11]. He smiles for the first time in the film, and, as they are executed a couple of minutes later, for the last time in his life. Knowing that beforehand no emotion has ever registered on his face, this facial expression is highly unusual. It is triggered by a Polish teenager who glances into the shed in which the fugitives from the camp take refuge [Fig. 12]. Saul’s smile might be a response to this glance when he sees the boy: the glance sees their group as living people, not (dead) souls. What is more, this glance is a witness to the last minutes they are spending on Earth and it will survive and keep all of them in his memory.

“For me the Holocaust is a face, a human face; let us not forget this face,” said Nemes Jeles in his acceptance speech at the Golden Globes.11 This remark can, of course, refer to the film’s attempt at offering (again) a “face” to a distant and, therefore, over-generalized (or faceless) past event by showing the fate of an individual victim and a personal perspective instead of a generic Holocaust story. At the same time, Nemes Jeles’s words can also be taken to mean that Saul’s desensitized, dead face comes to life again by taking on the mission of providing a funeral for the dead boy. When he takes on this impossible mission, he tries to break free from a state of inhumanity in order to reclaim his human dignity. As Pintér puts it, “as a result of his mission to reclaim the face of the dead boy, his face is returned to him, if only symbolically: the flesh and blood face remains blank and mechanical practically throughout the whole film” (Pintér 2017, 55).

The Effects of Different Genres in Son of Saul

The cinematographic procedures in Son of Saul described above are truly original among films depicting the Holocaust; they are, however, not unprecedented in cinematography. Gergő Nagy V. (2015) and Dan Kagan-Kans (2016) both draw comparisons between Nemes Jeles’s movie and the opening scenes of Saving Private Ryan (Steven Spielberg, 1998) based on the point of view attaching itself to or identifying with the perspective of the protagonist. Due to the intensified physical effects affecting the viewer, created primarily, in the way mentioned above, by the sound track and haptic images, Son of Saul can also be likened

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to the genre of horror. A well-known procedure used by horror films is the use of a limited (claustrophobic) visual universe, which allows the filmmakers to intimate the constant proximity of an impending force which seriously menaces the protagonists' lives even if we cannot actually see it in the narrow frame of the image. Based on the imitation of the (narrow and limited) perspective of the protagonist, *Son of Saul* can be compared to a certain subgenre of horror films: Point of View Shot (POV) horror films. In this genre, the events are depicted in the movie from the point of view of a character as if that character was filming the movie with their hand-held camera. An early example (or prototype) of POV horror films is *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez), released in 1999 with great success. According to the fictional story, we see some found footage left behind by three university students after shooting in Black Hills about the mysterious phenomenon known as Blair Witch. The footage, shot by handheld cameras (recorded from the point of the view of the protagonists), is frequently out of focus, has a bad angle, is under or overexposed, and the extent of its flaws often prevent us from making out what the images actually depict. The murderous evil force makes the protagonists disappear one by one but is never actually in the frame. The hazy, narrow, night shots recorded often in haste create tension because the recipient never knows what horror is going to be revealed in the next shot, just like in *Son of Saul*. And even though we never actually see any evil, the ghastly sounds, the cries for help, the shrieks which come from outside the frame are all evidence of the presence of a lethal, evil force. Therefore, based on the cinematic procedures (both in terms of visual and audio), *Son of Saul* and *The Blair Witch Project* can be considered to function very similarly.

In the late nineties, around and after the time *The Blair Witch Project* was released, several successful POV horror films and (mainly action) films inspired by the esthetics of found footage were released.¹² POV movies have gained considerable ground in the film industry in the last two decades even though before that stories told from the (subjective) point of view of one of the characters in the film were not necessarily very successful, and therefore they used to be

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scarcely made. As Linda Hutcheon describes this phenomenon, attempts “to use the camera for first-person narration – to let the spectator see only what the protagonist sees – are infrequent. Despite the well-known example of Robert Montgomery’s 1946 adaptation of Raymond Chandler’s *Lady in the Lake* (1943), in which a camera was positioned on the protagonist’s chest, first-person point-of-view films are often called ‘clumsy, ostentatiously and even pretentiously artistic’” (Hutcheon 2006, 54). Telling stories from the point of view of one of the characters was neither successful, nor popular in the 20th century while in the 2000s, POV films produced in a similar fashion, increased in number and in popularity. Therein lies the question: what happened at the end of the 20th century? What brought about this change in the evaluation of first-person camera narration in the 80s and 90s?

To put it concisely, the very end of the 20th century was the era of the revolution of digital media, and this process, especially the appearance and evolution of video games exerted a major impact on the language and perception of films. Digital media (particularly video games) obviously influenced cinematography in multiple and complex ways but reviewing all of them would exceed the limitations of a single essay. However, it might not even be necessary to explore all the complexities of the impact of digital media on films when studying the reasons behind the acceptance of first-person camera narration.

In terms of the perception and cinematography of visual content, what novelty did digital video games introduce?

With the spread of personal computers, new forms of narration (new media narratives) appeared. They are mainly related to video games, artistic installations or projects and are usually called interactive narratives, or, less frequently, simulations. The concept of the interactive narrative can be applied to any and all piece of art which is created through a digital medium, and the experiencing of which requires the active participation or interaction of the recipient. The interactive narratives and other structural features of video games are studied by ludology, or game studies. An important claim game studies scholars make in connection with video games is that during the experience of the game the frontier between the world of the game and that of the player is not as sharp as the frontier between the world of a piece of art of a traditional narrative (e.g. novels or films) and that of the recipient. For example, on the new enjoyment of experiencing video games Jesper Juul claims that “the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a role inside the game” (2001). Moreover, taking into consideration the subject of the player,
Alison McMahan claims that in “interactive narratives the differentiation between character subjectivity and that of the constructed spectator are blurred” (1999, 151) because the player is able to change the course of the scenes (they can decide for example which path they will take next) and the actions of the character (as they themselves control them), and their executive and active possibilities mean the highest degrees of interactivity and involvement. Identification with the fictitious character under the gamer’s control creates the experience of a first-person singular adventure. This train of thought leads us to another important claim by game studies researchers, namely, to the idea that the primordial story-experience of video games is related to the perspective of the first-person singular because the path a story follows is controlled by the motoric activity of the player. Torben Grodal argues that by “providing an ‘interactive’ motor dimension to story experience, the computer adds a powerful new dimension to the possibility of simulating first-person experiences” (2003, 138). Elsewhere, writing about first-person shooter games, he asserts that “for first-person shoot-'em-up games or some types of virtual reality are even closer to our core consciousness, because not only are we able to see and feel, we are even able to act upon what we see in light of our concerns, our (inter)active motor capabilities allow us to shoot at what frightens us or approach what activates our curiosity. Thus, video games and some types of virtual reality are the supreme media for the full simulation of our basic first-person ‘story’ experience because they allow ‘the full experiential flow’ by linking perceptions, cognitions, and emotions with first-person actions. Motor cortex and muscles focus the audiovisual attention, and provide ‘muscular’ reality and immersion to the perceptions” (Grodal 2003, 132). Therefore, interactivity, the blurring of the line between the player and the game, the first-person singular experience and immersion are all interconnected and are related to each other. In fact, this is true in the case of all interactive narratives, even though the most striking examples of this “interconnectedness” are those shooter, fighter or racing games that offer the first-person perspective.

Returning to the universe of films, I believe the unprecedented success of POV movies was chiefly due to the fact that video games had already instilled in gamers the experience of a first-person singular narrative. One of the most prominent examples of the interconnection of the perspective of first-person shooter games and cinematic representation is Hardcore Henry (Ilya Naishuller, 2015), the plot of which is experienced by the viewers from the (action hero) protagonist’s perspective as if it was a game. Presumably, but probably not so strikingly, the success of POV horror movies can also be largely attributed
to the fact that their young audience grew up in a video game culture; they therefore have a primary experience with the reception of first-person singular (interactive) narratives. This cultural change, the influence of video games on film is characterized by Zoltán Dragon in the following way: while “beforehand there used to be an obvious tendency in video games to adopt cinematographic procedures in order to create an even more enjoyable gaming experience, the tide has turned and it is cinema that needs to turn to the visuals of computers. This drives the experimental but growing body of work of those feature films that use the FPS (first person shooter) perspective: presumably the younger generations (Millennials, probably, but Generation Z and Alpha for sure) would regard the historically significant, unique, experimental subjective camera position of Lady in the Lake [...]] as a completely normal, everyday choice” (Dragon 2017, 48).

Having established this and returning to Son of Saul, we can claim that if POV horror film procedures did have an impact on Nemes Jeles’s film in question, then the procedures of (mostly first-person shooter) video games must also have influenced it indirectly, since the formal techniques of POV horror films owe a lot to the visual strategies (media tactics) of video games. It is highly interesting to note that numerous critics and reviewers of Son of Saul mention the direct influence of video games on films several times. Kagan-Kans, for instance, in his aforementioned article The Holocaust Feeling writes that “anyone who in the last fifteen years has played a first-person or near-first-person shooter, adventure, or horror video game (that is, a game where the player’s perspective is that of the character he is controlling) – some of the best known are Call of Duty (set in World War II), Halo (set in space), and Bioshock (set in an underwater utopia) – will recognize what Son of Saul is up to. Immediate perspective; the use of sound to signal the presence of enemies and environmental factors outside the scope of that perspective” (2016). Erika Kiss and Dávid Venyercsán also associate Nemes Jeles’s film with video games because of characters popping up unexpectedly in the limited field of vision. The latter claims that “Nemes Jeles’s film and its utterly narrow visual universe focused on the characters creates a claustrophobic effect through the elimination of the surroundings, and, it is able to call forth distressing and suffocating feelings like a horror game working with similar methods. I believe it is possible to draw comparison between the so called survival horrors of the 90s and Nemes Jeles’s film” (Venyercsán 2017). Kiss refers to the parallel in question this way: “Nemes’s style has been likened to video games as the faces and dangers pop up seemingly out of nowhere in our (extremely restricted) field of vision” (2016). The most important reasons for associating Son of Saul with
video games are the narrow angle, a radically subjective point of view and, thanks to these, an immersive experience of reception.

The origins of the most important cinematographic (and, at the same time, immersive) procedure of *Son of Saul* can thus be found primarily in contemporary video games and POV horror films. So, Nemes Jeles did not do anything else but alloy the “old” topic of the Holocaust with the techniques (tactics) of contemporary, popular movie and video game culture. Most people actually attribute the success of his film to this amalgamation; in other words, how he managed to draw close a fading though fundamentally important historical event, the Holocaust, with his immersive methods, sinking the spectator into the screen. This commendation includes a moral value judgement: drawing close and bringing to life both advance the remembrance of the Holocaust trauma, both foster the collective memory of humankind, and, at the same time, contribute to the avoidance of such events in the future. That is why outcrossing is vital especially for younger generations in terms of the Holocaust because they actively consume video games and POV horror films. Or, exaggerating quite a bit, we could also say that *Son of Saul* speaks to them in their own language. And if this is true, Nemes Jeles achieved one of his noble artistic goals (he elaborated on this in an interview): he mostly wanted to “speak intelligibly to a younger generation about the Holocaust because they do not have the means to get the truth from survivors” (Nemes Jeles 2015). That is why they have to be taken back 70 years and to be led back to the past with immersive methods they know and like.13

**References**


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13 Or, in the director’s own words: “Our goal was to take the viewer back to the present of 70 years ago and to try to make it possible to experience the past, even if for only two hours. We tried to conjure up a feeling of ‘I-am-there.’ This was our goal” (Nemes Jeles 2016, 49).
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