The Promise of Return:
Understanding Historical Trauma through Personal Journey Documentaries

Myriam Tremblay-Sher

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By: Myriam Tremblay-Sher

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Marielle Nitoslawska ______________________ Chair

Catherine Russell ______________________ Examiner

Frank Chalk ______________________ Examiner

Thomas Waugh ______________________ Supervisor

Approved by Luca Caminati ______________________
Chair of department or Graduate Program Director

Catherine Wild ______________________
Dean of Faculty

Date September 15, 2012 ______________________

Abstract

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This research explores the capabilities of documentary cinema to innovatively articulate traumatic history and memory and compel the viewer in the construction of meaningful remembrance. Since the mid-1980s, an increasingly prominent sub-genre of historical documentary films has emerged in which survivors of the Holocaust or their descendants travel to regions of Eastern Europe to uncover and make sense of their family's traumatic past. These types of films are what Annette Insdorf has identified as "documentaries of return." They actively engage with three major questions: first, the evolving discourses of memory and their effect on the visual interpretation of traumatic history; second, the documentary articulation of embodied and spatial memory; and third, the conceptualization of the historical image that seeks more than authentic reflexivity.

The challenge, then, is to investigate how documentaries of return, in the context of personal memory quests, enhance the mediation of traumatic history beyond the question of mimetic transparency. Five notable films explore this: *Dark Lullabies* (Irene Angelico, 1985), *A Journey Back* (Brian Mckenna, 1987), *Birthplace* (Pawel Lozinski, 1992), *Shtetl* (Marian Marzynski, 1996), and *Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance after the Holocaust* (Menachem Daum & Oren Rudavsky, 2004). Through their experiential exploration of memorial affect and memorial space, and through their formulation of the image beyond mere historical representation, these films further our understanding of the complexities and nuances of traumatic memory and history amidst the growing abundance of representations of trauma in contemporary media.

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Introduction

The incredible breadth of scholarship and films dedicated to issues of difficult history and memory underscores the contemporary need to make sense of the traumatic past. The Nazi Holocaust has been a major source of inspiration for these works and has launched decades of debates and questionings in various fields over how to understand, remember, articulate, and mediate seemingly unimaginable traumatic events. In cinema, it has inspired a most diverse array of approaches to genuinely and creatively communicating the experience of an ostensibly indescribable history. Though countless horrors other than the Nazi Holocaust have scarred history and warrant analysis and remembrance on and off the screen, a closer look at documentaries that deal with the traumatic remembrance of the Nazi Holocaust will provide crucial entry points for evaluating and inflecting the diverse theories on trauma, memory, and historical representation that were in large part spawned by that particular historical event.

Since the mid-1980s, an increasingly prominent subgenre of historical documentary films has emerged in which survivors of the Holocaust or their descendants travel to regions of Eastern Europe to uncover and make sense of their family's traumatic past. These types of documentaries are what Annette Insdorf has termed "documentaries of return," a growing sub-genre of what she identifies as the "personal documentary," characterized by subjective accounts of return.[1] This research will take a closer look at this specific type of documentary and will expand on Insdorf's concept by addressing how these films actively engage with three major questions: first, the evolving discourses of memory and their effect on the visual interpretation of traumatic history; second, the

[1] Annette Insdorf. *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge

documentary appropriation and construction of space as it defines embodied memory; and third, the conceptualization of the image that seeks to go deeper than the mere mediation of historical events.

Film Corpus

The specific films that will be analyzed have come out in the last twenty five years or so (1985 – present) and come primarily from Canada and the United States; the vast time and space travelled in these films enrich the questioning over the impact of distance on traumatic memory. They have been chosen because they prioritize a personal approach to understanding traumatic history through varied formal and methodological documentary/cinematic strategies:

Dark Lullabies (Irene Angelico, Canada, 1985) involves a return to Germany by the daughter of Holocaust survivors and offers an interesting and extensive use of the interview. Speaking candidly with people with diverse backgrounds, including descendants of perpetrators, Irene Angelico's film provides a broader understanding of how the trying past can be reconciled. It does so through a very personal portrayal of her own journey of understanding. Her voice-over is constant and most shots take the time to carefully frame her reaction to her encounters. Complementing this personal approach, the film also borrows from the expository mode of representation through its use of archival imagery and her historical commentary.

A Journey Back (Brian Mckenna, Canada, 1987) follows Jack Garfein as he returns to his native Slovenia as well as Auschwitz. In this film, the detailed and long

time spent in the actual space of a concentration camp involves the viewer in a compelling spatial encounter with traumatic memory. Through Garfein's animated on-site testimony, the film also compellingly constructs the image of traumatic memory. Though this documentary follows Garfein's personal rediscovery of the dark past, it also adopts an investigative tone in trying to identify a perpetrator from Garfein's hometown during that traumatic time. Furthermore, the narration of the film is not Garfein's own. The film is therefore split between a contemplative aesthetic in the camp scenes and an inquiring approach using archival imagery and journalistic search methods.

Birthplace (Pawel Lozinski, Poland/United States, 1992) offers a direct, unframed plunge into the experience of return and memorial discovery, following Henryk Grynberg as he returns to his hometown in Poland to try to uncover what happened to his family during the war. His search reveals a surprisingly nuanced experience of difficult heritage in this small Polish village. His quest is deeply personal and unfolds within a cold, white, and yet beautiful landscape where, formally, the present peacefulness of the village connects with its complicated history.

Shtetl (Marian Marzynski, United States, 1996) includes multiple return narratives led by Marzynski, which explore complicated heritage and remembrance in present day Poland as well as disturbing spaces of memory. It is the longest of the five films, running for one hundred seventy five minutes. Within this longer narrative, the film takes the form of an expedition. As Marzynski returns to Poland with fellow journeyers, he discovers and learns as a newcomer. However, toward the end of the film he takes on a missionary attitude seeking to radicalize the present collective consciousness of the village. This film also takes the time to introduce the secondary actor in these quests: the

young non-Jewish Polish historian that guides the journeys of return. This expands the journey of return by balancing it with another generation of memorial consciousness from a different cultural background. Stylistically, the documentary is typical of the interactive mode in that it develops through encounters and interactions between filmmaker, subject, and social actors. Marzynski's narration recounts his personal feelings, goals, and challenges, as well as orients the journeys in a more observational way.

Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance after the Holocaust (Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky, United States, 2004) follows Daum's quest to foster open-minded historical memory in his two orthodox sons. While their journey does not prove to be completely transformative, the acts of return and exploration frequently challenge their intolerance as well as enrich the viewer's interpretation of heritage. This film adopts a similar mode of expression as *Shtetl* in which Daum and his family interact among themselves and with local villagers, and those encounters are what drive their self-discovery in relation to the traumatic past. Daum's voice-over narration is more personal than Marzynski's, as he continually brings back his observations to his own concerns and own hopes for his children.

Each of these films is distinctive in some way from the other. *Dark Lullabies* epitomizes the quest of a second generation survivor who journeys through the weight of traumatic history passed on by her parents. *A Journey Back* favours a journalistic and even investigative approach, while capturing gripping and emotionally charged moments of difficult memory. *Birthplace* has a very specific goal of uncovering a personal memory that Grynberg lost decades before. *Shtetl* appeals to a broader range of

memorial experiences by combining different return narratives. Finally, *Hiding and Seeking* emphasizes the continuity and evolution of heritage as it passes down from generation to generation.

Given these differences, the subjects in these documentaries do not respond to traumatic memory in the exact same way. For some, like in *A Journey Back* or *Shtetl*, the subjects retrieve their memory by revisiting it physically and materially. For others, like in *Dark Lullabies* or *Hiding and Seeking*, they work through the weight and elusiveness of their parents or grandparents' memory by learning about the traumatic history of others. *Birthplace* offers an even more particular response to traumatic history, for Grynberg must build his own memory of trauma based entirely on witnesses' testimonies. The film therefore does not assess the ways he deals with memorial information but rather how he gains this knowledge.

Despite these variances, at the heart of these five films is the inextricable link between the representation of history and self-inscription. In these films, subjectivity "is the filter through which the real enters discourse, as well as a kind of experiential compass guiding the work toward its goal as embodied knowledge."[2] Access to the real and to historical understanding is fuelled by a "personalist perspective"[3] rather than a universalist one. This trend in documentary, which began in the 1970s and bloomed in the 1980s and 1990s, reflects the cultural climate of the time, characterized by mass social movements and the development of identity politics that privilege the personal as a vehicle to increase social awareness.

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[2] Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 176.

[3] Ibid.

The films' use of self-inscription also situates them within another important trend in documentary, the "journey film." According to Stella Bruzzi, "journey films are structured around encounters and meetings that are often accidental or unplanned; a corollary of this is that a preoccupation with an end point rarely predominates."[4] The notion of journey, here, is based on encounters: between filmmaker and subjects, between subjects themselves, and indirectly, between viewer and film. This structure of encounters was greatly influenced by two dominant documentary traditions: the observational mode, through its engagement with immediate, uncontrolled, and personal lived experience; and the interactive mode, through its emphasis on the situated knowledge gained from the politics of the moment of encounter.[5] Separating the journey film from the more traditional expository documentary form is its denial of closure. The expository text was founded on a narrative arch that builds tension around the need for a solution.[6] The type of knowledge that the expository mode provides is "epistemic knowledge in Foucault's sense of those forms of transpersonal certainty that are in compliance with the categories and concepts accepted as given or true in a specific time and place, or with a dominant ideology of common sense such as the one our own discourses of sobriety support."[7] By contrast, journey documentaries challenge the ideas of certainty and transparency by enacting actual journeys where chance and exploration lead to unpredictable discovery.

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[4] Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 81.

[5] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 41-42, 44, 56.

[6] Ibid., 38.

[7] Ibid., 35.

This is precisely what the five films at study articulate. As such, they embody the transition in documentary outlined by Bill Nichols in his *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (1994): “Traditionally, the word *documentary* has suggested fullness, and completion, knowledge and fact, explanations of the social world and its motivating mechanisms. More recently, though, documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction.”[8] The documentaries of return examined here explore these issues of subjective construction vis-à-vis traumatic memory and history.

These five films have not garnered substantial scholarship by any means, but they are important to examine, as they both epitomize and deepen Insdorf’s concept of the personal documentary of return. In terms of historical representation and traumatic memory, subjects that continuously invigorate debates in various fields, these types of documentaries must be recognized as offering diverse and creative ways to cinematically treat traumatic history and memory. Through their personal approach to exploring issues of traumatic memory and difficult heritage, their experiential exploration of memorial spaces, and their formulation of the image beyond mere historical representation, these films affectively and critically stimulate further understandings of the complexities of memory and traumatic history and their contemporary significance.

Research Question 1 and Literature Review: A Conceptual Analysis of Memory and a Study of its Documentary Visualization

[8] Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1.

The first question that this research will examine is how the continually evolving discourses of memory enrich as well as problematize the visualization of historical trauma. Much is involved in this question and it will be addressed through a brief ontological overview of traumatic memory and an analysis of how the personal voyage in documentaries of return creates a shared and empathic understanding of the challenging past and its heritage. As traumatic memory has garnered tremendous attention in the fields of history and cultural studies, it is useful to look at the impact of documentaries of return as memorial projects. In order to obtain a better perspective on how documentaries of return treat traumatic memory, it is helpful to gain theoretical knowledge of the concept. Interesting analyses of the nature of memory have developed in recent years, providing new perspectives on its articulation in documentaries of return.

One of the most influential trends on the practice of memorial documentaries has been the post-structuralist turn in cultural and social studies that increasingly privileges experiential memory over historical essentialist truth in order to gain understanding of the past. Janet Walker and Bhaskar Sarkar illuminate the impact of this transition in critical thought on historical documentary in *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (2010) by outlining the different ways documentaries dealing with traumatic history articulate embodied aspects of experience as a means to gain access to that past. It is in this vein that documentaries of return will be analyzed here, for they actively journey through personal experience and memory to deepen historical knowledge.

Important to the examination of the documentary representation of memorial experience is the evolution of the conception of memory as a shared process. This was first elaborated by the French scholar Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s through his notion

of collective memory. For Halbwachs, the past was understood through socially articulated symbol and ritual: "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories."[9] Even on the individual level, Halbwachs believed, people remember in terms of collective frameworks and these frameworks are discursively determined by the social conditions of the present.[10] In recent decades, several scholars have nuanced and reconfigured Halbwach's notion of collective memory and its relation to individual memory. Most notably, Amos Funkenstein, Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, and Alison Landsberg offer helpful distinctions and developments on Halbwachs' concept, which help to better understand the lasting significance of social memorial processes and the changing means by which they are shared, as in documentaries of return.

Funkenstein's contribution lies in his formulation of a more active relationship between individual and collective memory. He conceives of collective memory as the system which is actualized by individual memory.[11] Funkenstein suggests the idea of "historical consciousness" as an alternative way to think about Halbwachs' notion of collective memory. For Funkenstein, historical consciousness acts as a dynamic construct enabling a "creative freedom in the use and interpretation of the contents of collective memory."[12] The documentaries of return examined in this research reflect well Funkenstein's reconfiguration of Halbwachs' collective memory. While it is important to

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[9] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

[10] Oren Baruch Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 4.

[11] Stier, 8.

[12] Amos Funkenstein, "Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness," *History and Memory* 1, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1989): 11.

acknowledge that the memory explored in these films is socially informed, the goal of looking into the past is not confined to creating a sense of cohesive identity; but rather, it seeks to deepen the understanding of a past shared to varying degrees by millions yet still so hard to grasp.

Irwin-Zarecka, like Funkenstein, addresses the idea of giving meaning to the past in terms of collective memory. For Irwin-Zarecka, making sense of the past is inspired by personal experience but materialized by public infrastructures of memory, i.e. the different spaces, objects, and texts that enable an engagement with the past.[13] She situates collective memory less in a form of collective consciousness and more in the resources shared by individuals. Elucidating the past then, for Irwin-Zarecka, implies a culturally mediated memorial engagement by which " 'cultural memory' becomes a refinement of 'collective memory,' exposing the fault lines of agreement and disagreement as they emerge through competing narratives about the meaning of the past."[14] It is therefore, for Irwin-Zarecka, experiential constructions of the past that determine the articulation of memory. What is relevant about her interpretation of collective memory for this research is the understanding of collectivity through the social means and products that access the past. As a medium for the dissemination and sharing of knowledge and experience, documentaries of return are indeed objects and productions of Irwin-Zarecka's concept of collective memory. They engage with the collectivity of memory principally through the infrastructure of memorial transmission. Though the sharing of personal memory projects enables a deepening of a public understanding of the traumatic past, the goal is

[13] Stier 10.

[14] Ibid.

not to foster a bound consciousness of the past. Rather, each personal story explored in the films provides a public access point into a history that is difficult to assimilate.

Building on these conceptions of collective memory, Alison Landsberg has theorized "prosthetic memory" as "the production and dissemination of memories that have no direct connection to a person's lived past and yet are essential to the production and articulation of subjectivity."[15] According to Landsberg, prosthetic memories are "privately felt public memories."[16] They stem from a person's experience of mass-mediated representations of the traumatic past. Landsberg outlines four determining factors for prosthetic memory, which all serve to better understand documentaries of return as productive conveyors of this type of memorial process.

She calls these memories prosthetic first because they are not inherent or the product of lived experience, but are rather acquired from an interaction with a mediated representation.[17] Second, these memories are prosthetic in that they are like an artificial limb; they become part of the body, as they are sensory memories created through the experience of mediated representation.[18] The idea that memory is felt through the *experience* of mediation signals the affective engagement with the image, which will be explained in the third chapter of this research. Documentaries of return mediate a memorial experience that can be shared, at least emotionally and intellectually, creating an inter-subjective encounter with a past that does not have to be lived personally to be engaged with. Third, the prosthetic nature of memories highlights their commodified

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[15] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 21.

[16] Ibid., 19.

[17] Ibid., 21.

[18] Ibid.

form. Commodification, Landsberg contends, is at the heart of mass cultural representations, making images and stories available to people from a wide range of places and backgrounds. While the commodification of mass culture has undergone much criticism for oversaturation, hegemony, and disillusionment, Landsberg argues that its reception is perhaps more complex than expected: "commodities and commodified images are not capsules of meaning that spectators swallow wholesale but are the grounds on which social meanings are negotiated, contested, and sometimes constructed."[19] For example, watching a documentary of return, two viewers may develop a prosthetic memory, but it may not be the same and they may gain differing knowledge and personal significance from it. Finally, the prosthetic qualifier for memory refers to its usefulness. Since they feel real, prosthetic memories help shape how a person thinks about history and may even help formulate an ethical relation to what is considered other.[20] These four defining characteristics are emblematic of the articulation of memory in documentaries of return.

This conception of memory as not natural yet experiential, as well as being neither strictly individual nor collective, is relevant when looking at the subjects themselves in documentaries of return as they try to uncover the meaning of their past or their family's past amidst an immense landscape of mediated history. This notion of memory is equally interesting when addressing the viewers of documentaries of return, who are making sense of the traumatic past through other people's memory projects.

Also of significance in the conceptual developments of memory as a shared process, and especially concerning Holocaust transgenerational memory, is Marianne

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

Hirsch's elaboration of "postmemory" in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997). She describes postmemory as "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic experiences that can be neither understood nor recreated."[21] When applied to documentaries that follow the journey of descendants of survivors, Hirsch's analysis elucidates how the memory of traumatic experiences is transferred to and lived by them.

Another important theoretical development in the study of memory and how it is processed visually is the idea that memory in and of itself is in fact representation. As Oren Baruch Stier points out, "the 're-' is pivotal here, for memory is always 'after the fact,' constructed as the result of some form of narrativization."[22] Trauma memory complicates this natural tendency toward narrativization. Trauma survivors, as explained by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), do not have mere memories of the past, but rather live with an unfinished event that continuously lives on into the present. In order to gain some kind of access to the core of their traumatic reality a therapeutic process is needed, "a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event*."[23] Similarly, Cathy Caruth argues that traumatic memories as "the unassimilated scars of overwhelming experiences," need to be "transformed into

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[21] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

[22] Stier, 11.

[23] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 69.

narrative language."[24] This is precisely what the memorial projects in documentaries of return attempt to accomplish. Perhaps what is most compelling about this narrativization process is its failures, incompletions, and nuances, as predicated by the traumatic nature of memory.

In fact, Walker's assessment of the relationship between flawed memory and empirical historiography in trauma cinema is helpful in evaluating how personal documentaries of return negotiate traumatic memory. In *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (2005), she argues that the vicissitudes of memory should not be viewed as an impediment to ascertain the traumatic past, but rather be accepted and explored as a relevant factor in historiographical construction. She states, "mistaken memory, I conclude, is especially legible in relation to concrete evidence. Yet the book also comprehends physical things as a form of evidence that may be mistaken. This epistemological conundrum—the book's thesis—is that these two ways of coming to know the past may be conjoined to good effect in history writing and film- and videomaking."[25] Walker's work is valuable specifically for its special regard to traumatic memory and its mediation. By embracing the frailty of memory as a means to accessing some kind of historical truth she, first of all, expands the reductive dichotomizing of memory and historical accuracy; and second, opens a more honest discussion of the value and problems of memorial and testimonial projects commonly found in historical documentaries.

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[24] Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 176.

[25] Janet Walker, *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 189.

Also important in the conceptual understanding of memory is Oren Baruch Stier's *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, which offers a comprehensive analysis of the etymology and classifications of memory. Furthermore, at the core of his analysis he contemplates the meaning of the pervasive slogan in trauma studies, especially persistent in Nazi Holocaust studies, which calls for the unequivocal need to remember: "It is the blanket injunction to 'remember' that must be examined and unpacked."[26] The sheer amount of cultural and artistic projects dedicated to the memory of traumatic events such as the Nazi Holocaust point to the obvious need and desire to remember. At the same time, as Thomas Elsaesser ("One Train May Be Hiding Another: History, Memory, Identity, and the Visual Image,"2002), Mark Seltzer ("Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," 1997), and John Mowitt ("Trauma Envy," 2000) point out, the plenitude of such projects may signal a self-serving cultural and social obsession with trauma. Nevertheless, the need for and perhaps overproduction of traumatic memory projects signal a relevant questioning over what is in fact behind this need, for survivors and non-survivors alike? What exactly drives the need to make sense of the traumatic past and what kind of meaning does it bring, truly? Perhaps these questions cannot ever be fully answered, but looking beyond the simple mandate to remember certainly encourages a more nuanced understanding of the purpose and contemporary meaning of this kind of historical reflection.

Traditionally, the understanding of historical memory was characterized by rigid boundaries between past and present. In more recent years, however, studies of historical memory, such as Roth's *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (1995), Paula Rabinowitz's "Wreckage Upon Wreckage: History, Documentary

[26] Stier, 19.

and the Ruins of Memory" (1993), and most notably Andreas Huyssen's *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003), have transitioned toward a more inclusive perception of temporal relations, in which tropes, documents and artefacts from the past are engaged in an active relationship with the present context in which they are studied. This is especially interesting when investigating trauma, which, as historian Dominick LaCapra points out, "is precisely the gap, the open wound, in the past that resists being entirely filled in, healed, or harmonized in the present."[27] In this sense especially, the expanded framework of temporal fluidity outlined by culture and media scholars enables more open-ended avenues for remembrance that invite the artist/filmmaker and the viewer alike to constantly question how their temporal and spatial context affects their understanding of the traumatic past.

This perspective is especially relevant when participating in a memorial project that works through difficult heritage. As personal projects of revisiting the troubling past and through the mere visualization of these journeys, documentaries of return are rich vehicles for this process. A brief overview of the scholarship on Holocaust heritage in Poland is useful to examine the specific qualities of documentaries of return to broaden our reflection on the experience of lived heritage . The legacy of World War II and the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, and especially in Poland, is one tainted with controversy and contested memory. Ongoing debates, as outlined in Zimmerman's work (*Contested Memories*: *Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, 2003) and Robert Cherry and Annamaria Orla-Bukowska's compilation of essays (*Rethinking Poles and Jews: Troubled Past, Brighter Future*, 2007) discuss the historically antagonistic and

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[27] Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 109.

complicated Jewish-Polish relations. With a glimpse of hope for the future, some authors in these works outline preliminary efforts in forging a more inclusive understanding of Jewish-Polish history. Other scholars have been very active in this new line of thought. Social historian Erica Lehrer has developed concrete avenues to create what she calls "conciliatory heritage"[28] between Jews and Poles. Lehrer travelled to Kazimierz, the historical Jewish district of Cracow, and explored this place as a site of converging memory projects, of multi-cultural dialogue, and ultimately, of conciliatory communication and remembrance.

So while much has been written on how various kinds of art forms and media articulate all these discourses of memory, little has been done on how the specific medium of personal documentaries of return interpret, express, and are shaped by all these theories. This research aims to fill this gap and discover how these films contribute, deepen, and problematize the understanding of traumatic memory.

Research Question 2 and Literature Review: Spatial/Embodied Memory and its Documentary Depiction

My second research question concerns places, spaces, and landscapes of memory. Documentaries of return interact with the landscape they visit and experientially engage with the spatial character of memory, invigorating its visual interpretation and understanding. It is helpful to look at the cross-disciplinary significance space has gained in recent scholarship and apply it to its cinematic interpretation. One of the most important contributions to the study of space is geographer Edward W. Soja's

[28] Erica Lehrer, "Can There Be a Conciliatory Heritage?" *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, nos. 4-5 (July-September 2010): 271.

Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory (1989) in which he defines space as a social construction that actively participates in the making of history. Space is not just a physical entity, but rather a geography of social embodiment that translates experience through time. Similarly, Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*,[29] as sites that through human influence and the passage of time become symbols of memorial heritage, re-emphasizes spatiality as a significant player in cultural understandings of history. In sociological and cultural studies, Erica Lehrer ("Can There Be a Conciliatory Heritage" 2010) and Joy Sather-Wagstaff (*Heritage that Hurts: Tourists in the Memoryscapes of September 11*, 2011) have also assessed the dynamic relationship between geography and remembrance and how places inspire meaningful practices of memory. Sather-Wagstaff proposes a performative value to spaces and places, as not mere receptacles of memory, but as active agents in producing memorial meaning: "…I propose that we should treat and speak of such sites as places *for* making memory and history, rather than *of* memory and history."[30] She continues, "meaning-making is a performative process of 'mobilizing and reconfiguring space and places' (Coleman and Crang 2002:10), whereby places and selves are dialogically transformed and multiple, diverse, and sometimes fragmentary meanings and memory are created and performed."[31] All these works offer interesting avenues to look at the reconstructions of memory in material or non-material sites of disjuncture with the past.

[29] Pierre Nora, "General Introduction: Between Memory and History," in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

[30] Joy Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts: Tourists in the Memoryscapes of September 11* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011), 47.

[31] Ibid., 49.

These developments in social studies relate well to cinema, as illustrated in John David Rhodes' and Elena Gorfinkel's *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (2011). They highlight the performative agency of place as both an essentialist and building force of human subjectivity. Through our interaction with and our embodiment of place, our sense of identity is further developed. The cinema's relation with place, especially that of documentary, reflects this configuration of subjectivity. Documentary's visualization of place simultaneously reveals its reality in lived time and formulates a visual construction of it through structural, cinematographic, and editorial choices, enabling different subjective engagements with it. The notion of space as a visual construction. What composes the frame, then, is a result of a discursive construction; a construction that invites the frame space to be followed and read. This conception of the moving image's appropriation of space relates well to Walker's discussion of the cinematic representation of spaces that embody remnants of historical trauma. In *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (2005), she suggests that the physical fragments of historical trauma are not self-referential as historical constituents; they must be read and interpreted also. Therefore, the same work of association involved in the process of memory is required in understanding its material embodiment. Documentaries of return, which engage with as well as formulate spaces for traumatic memory, invigorate the interpretive and affective work with historical spatiality.

Walker further explored the spatial nature of memorial and testimonial projects in her co-edited volume, *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (2010). Walker discusses *in situ* testimonies or testimonies of historical trauma that take place on location: "By figuring the relationship among the body of the individual, the ground from

which s/he speaks, and the past events that transpired of a time but are, at the same time, brought into being by the testimonial act, situated testimony realizes the materiality of testimony in the power of place."[32] Especially interesting in her analysis is her challenge to the assumed value in making meaning out of on-location remembrance. In *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*, she states:

> But I am disturbed by the hint of implication (1) that there is no real understanding to be had out of sight of the referent and (2) that the referent is self-evident. Can we not gain knowledge and be moved from afar and/or in the absence of survivors and eyewitnesses? And is the knowledge we gain really so unequivocal? I fear that the film and others like it, by their prioritization of site-specific learning, imply to a certain extent that, no, we cannot and that, yes, it is.[33]

This is important to take into consideration when looking at documentaries whose focus is discovering and creating memorial meaning through the process of return. While they do not claim the authority of "site-specific learning," Walker's question establishes valuable nuances for the remembrance projects of documentaries of return.

In Jewish studies, historians like Jonathan Webber (*Rediscovering Traces of Memory: The Jewish Heritage of Polish Galicia*, 2009) and photographers like Jeffrey Gusky (*Silent Places: Landscapes of Jewish Life and Loss in Eastern Europe*, 2004) have returned to Eastern Europe to search for remnants and sites of Jewish life and culture before its destruction during the war. While these analyses involve photography, not much has been written in documentary film studies about the visual treatment and interpretation of places whose historical meaning has almost vanished with time, i.e. how to visually conceptualize the relevance of places that have been reshaped or even become

[32] Janet Walker and Bhaskar Sarkar, *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 84-85.

[33] Walker, *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*, 175

empty spaces. The knowledge generated from media, film, cultural, and sociological studies will be applied to this analysis of documentaries of return, whose primary purpose involves retrieving meaning from "everyday" spaces.

Cultural critic Andreas Huyssen has addressed the relevance of such spaces whose meaning evolves through time. Huyssen, in his *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003), adopted a correlative perception of temporality in which the past is not understood as a historical entity but rather as a continually changing phenomenon shaped by present sensibilities. This interactive past-present paradigm has also fostered the development of new frameworks to understand the memorial meaning of places, such as Huyssen's concept of urban palimpsests, in which present and past constantly engage with one another as history continually inscribes itself on particular sites. This notion is of utmost relevance when considering documentaries of return, for their subjective engagements with places and spaces, both physical and emotional, is a key factor in their articulation of remembrance.

Research Question 3 and Literature Review: The Image of History and Memory

My third research question concerns the imaging of traumatic memory and history. I will argue that documentaries of return, through different uses of evocative, naturalistic, and personal imagery, provide different ways to expand historical representation. In order to fully assess how these documentaries have renegotiated this visualization, it is important to understand the discussions over the representation of historical trauma. Much has been written in various fields about depicting historical

trauma and these discussions are constantly evolving. All these works help build a vocabulary to understand the particular films being studied here.

According to Roger Hallas and Frances Guerin in *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (2007), there developed uncertainty in trauma and visual studies toward the reliable use of the image in depicting trauma. This conception of the traumatic historical event was greatly shaped by a boom of interest in trauma and visual studies in the 1980s in the grand question of the Nazi Holocaust, addressing the question of representation and how to truthfully convey its incomprehensible horrors.[34] With the goal of avoiding any kind of distortion potentially compromising its memory, literary representation was deemed more authentic "because it did not claim absolute, mimetic truth."[35] The ambivalence toward the visual representation of events such as the Holocaust was largely due to the idea that the traumatic event's atrocity and enormity explodes any framework for reference and understanding; it constitutes a representational limit.[36]

Survivor and writer, Elie Wiesel, has quite notably shared in this reticence toward the image, stating: "One does not imagine the unimaginable. And in particular, one does not show it on screen."[37] He does nuance this claim, arguing that there is a need for these images, as inadequate as they may be, if only to provide later understanding of the existence of the Holocaust. Indeed, the limits of representation are not definitive. Wiesel

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[34] Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, eds., *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 7.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 4-5.

[37] Elie Wiesel, foreword to *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, 3rd ed., by Annette Insdorf (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xi.

did recognize the attempt to engage with trauma through visualization but points out the inherent incommensurability. As the films examined here will show, however, there developed in documentary the possibility of probing seeming limits of representation, where this incommensurability itself is what can be productive.

Film scholars like Ilan Avisar (*Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, 1988) also focused on the challenges of the visual representation of such a uniquely indescribable event: "First, the Holocaust represents a reality so fantastic and so extraordinary that it defies our basic notion of empirical reality, the raw material of every mimetic art."[38] Avisar's book helps get a sense of the scholarly outlook, right at the boom of theoretical interest in trauma, toward historical trauma and its cinematic representation. Though his book deals only with the Nazi Holocaust, this singularity too reflects the concern of the time. It becomes clear that achieving adequate representation (which could entail no representation at all) of the experience was the ultimate goal.

Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985) as well as his own writings greatly contributed to the authoritative vision of adequate representation expressed by many visual scholars at the time. Through his painstaking avoidance of any archival imagery in his film, Lanzmann refused to depict the terror of the Holocaust and instead relied on testimony as the only way to authentically relay some kind of grasp on the incomprehensible nature of its experience. He explains, "I have precisely begun with the impossibility of telling this story. I have made this very impossibility my point of departure."[39] Similarly, in her seminal book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth

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[38] Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 1.

[39] Caruth, 154.

explored how the traumatic event "both urgently demands historical awareness and yet denies our usual modes of access to it."[40] Significantly, this denial does not necessarily impose an impasse of communication. Indeed, referring back to Lanzmann's comment, Caruth notes: "The impossibility of a comprehensible story, however, does not necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth."[41] According to her, Lanzmann suggests that it is precisely through a refusal to understand that historical truth may be conveyed. What is important about Lanzmann's work for the purposes of this research is that he challenged the mainstream documentary conventions up until that point and provided a new framework in which to assess the meaning of (seeming) in-transmissibility.

His highly moralistic stance on the impossibility of truly grasping and representing the trauma of the Nazi Holocaust and the unbounded praise he has received for it are also useful, for they point to a belief that this research will nuance. Indeed, while it has been important to question the sheer possibility and ethics of grasping traumatic memory and depicting it, it is also helpful to step out of the moralistic frame that often guides the study of trauma representation (and pervades much of Holocaust studies). This enables the possibility to continuously develop varied ways in cinema to communicate, explore, and make sense of the traumatic past and to become open to the possibility that no universal or righteous truth may come of it. The documentaries studied here, some of which made at the same time as *Shoah*, follow in this pursuit. Like *Shoah*, they develop an access point to some kind of historical truth by assuming the impossibility or at least difficulty of comprehension. What distinguishes these films from

[40] Ibid., 151.

[41] Ibid., 154.

Shoah, and what makes them significant as historical trauma documentaries, is that they prioritize a personal narrative of return that serves personal discoveries. It is through the historical self-inscriptions that memorial truth is derived. Personalizing the experience of traumatic memory and history shatters the strict boundaries of representational transparency by prioritizing the development open forms of understanding over focusing on the impossibility of assimilation.

More recent scholarship has expanded this view. It has resisted the search to identify the image as capable or not to adequately present historical trauma and has rather sought to view it as an open-ended means to engage in an experience of traumatic memory. In the last ten years or so, visual media scholars have investigated the specific ways the image dynamically interacts with the viewer to provide her/him with an experiential understanding of the traumatic past. This perspective is especially useful in understanding documentaries of return and analyzing how the films in this study help elucidate the imaging of historical trauma. In contemporary art studies, Jill Bennett (*Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, 2005) expounds the interactive sensorial engagement between the viewer and the image that enables an affective understanding of the experience of trauma, providing an inter-subjective engagement with its politics of memory. Bennett argues for an empathic engagement with traumatic imagery that is not founded primarily on identification, risking a blind sympathetic relationship through the effacement of difference, but rather one that is based on "a form of encounter predicated on an openness to a mode of existence or experience beyond what is known by the self."[42] Though her analysis applies to contemporary art, it

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[42] Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 9.

lends itself well to cinema and enables a deeper understanding of viewer and image as dynamic agents involved in an active relationship.

In visual studies, the aforementioned Guerin and Hallas (*The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, 2007) have conceptualized the agency of the image through its performative function of bearing witness to historical trauma: "material images do not merely depict the historical world, they participate in its transformation."[43] In this way, the viewer is also given agency, for s/he does not merely passively receive historical veracity, but instead affectively engages in the memorial experience of historical trauma and participates in the creation of new meaning. This book is helpful in moving beyond representational evaluations of the authenticity of the documentary image toward an investigation of how its language, form, and wider concerns extend documentary studies.[44]

Jeffrey Skoller expanded this framework to avant-garde cinema in *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (2005) by analyzing the power of avant-garde films to challenge the mainstream practice of merely retelling history and instead find cinematic strategies to engage with its indescribable aspects, which in turn produces an experience of history. His examination of avant-garde films' ability to experientially communicate history rather than reproduce it relates well to the personal documentary cinema that this research investigates. Also in film studies, Joshua Hirsch's *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (2004), in which he elaborates what he has termed "posttraumatic" cinema, offers a bold reflection on what the desire to grasp the traumatic past demands from documentary cinema: "Documentary images must be

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[43] Guerin and Hallas, 4.

[44] Ibid.

submitted to a narrative form whose purpose is, if not to literally traumatize the spectator, then to invoke a posttraumatic historical consciousness."[45] Hirsch's study of both fiction and non-fiction films provides an interesting consideration of the particular affective impact of the posttraumatic structure and aesthetic. With all this previous scholarly work in mind, the challenge, then, is to investigate how the documentary image, in the context of personal memory quests and subjective explorations of traumatic history, enhances this new conceptualization of the image beyond the question of mimetic transparency.

Chapter Breakdown

These three main research questions will be addressed through three respective chapters. The first chapter will discuss the development of theories of memory and traumatic memory and how they are articulated in the personal narratives of documentaries of return. It will begin by briefly outlining the post-structuralist turn in historiographical studies of memory according to Walker and Sarkar, which foregrounds experience as productive means to engage with the traumatic past, and will use examples from *Dark Lullabies* and *A Journey Back*. It will then discuss memory as a vessel and voice for history, as a means to share history beyond the borders of cultural specificity, following the theoretical work of Landsberg, Sobchack, and Huyssen as well as using examples from *Birthplace*. It will also elaborate the different ways memory acts as a shared process for understanding the past through a brief overview of the evolution of the concept of collective memory, using the work of Halbwachs, Funkenstein, and Irwin-Zarecka; through Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory with examples from *Hiding*

[45] Joshua Hirsch, 46.

and Seeking; and through Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory with examples from *Dark Lullabies*. It will furthermore discuss the boom of interest in traumatic memory and the consequences of the potential overload of Holocaust memorializing projects, referring to the work of Seltzer, Mowitt, and Elsaesser, which assess the place of trauma and its remembrance in contemporary culture.

Related to the flourishing fascination with traumatic memory, this chapter will examine the societal need for making sense of traumatic memory, which demands an externalizing process of narrativization. It will do so by looking at the work of psychoanalytic theorists Felman, Laub, and art scholar Bennett, and it will evaluate how this need translates into cultural productions and more specifically, how documentaries of return serve these productions. By addressing this need for externalizing through the construction of narrative and the conception of memory as representation itself, as elaborated by Stier and Huyssen, this chapter will explain how documentaries of return reflect this understanding of memory and contribute to its development. Finally, this first chapter will address issues of difficult heritage as it exists in Poland and Germany. Adopting a widening outlook on the traumatic past that sees memory as actively shaped by and shaping the present, this chapter will outline a brief historiography of Jewish/non-Jewish relations in Poland and Germany and using examples from *Birthplace*, *Shtetl*, and *Dark Lullabies* it will investigate the capabilities of the documentary of return to enable a broadening reflection on the complexities of traumatic heritage.

The second chapter deals with the spatial nature of memory and questions of memorial embodiment. The chapter begins by analyzing space theory primarily through the reintegration of spatiality in critical social theory, as suggested by Soja. It goes on to

discuss and expand on Sather-Wagstaff's interpretation of space as a performative agent for memory as well as Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*. These readings of space will be applied to its documentary representation by elaborating on Rhodes' and Gorfinkel's conception of cinematic space and by analyzing scenes from *Dark Lullabies* and *Hiding and Seeking*. Next, spatial physicality will be analyzed through Walker's examination of the vicissitudes of material historical evidence that bequeath to spaces their need to be read as any other text. This will be brought back to documentary's appropriation and construction of space. *Dark Lullabies* and *A Journey Back* will be used to demonstrate the significance of the documentary formulation of space as a means to re-read the historical meaning of places of remembrance. This analysis of the documentary interpretation of spatial memory will then address *in situ* testimony, as discussed by Walker and Sarkar and as it is performed in *A Journey Back*, *Birthplace*, and *Hiding and Seeking*. Then, using the theoretical work of Delbo and Marks, the representation of sense memory and physical interaction with places will be examined as it is articulated through *Shtetl* and *A Journey Back*. Emotional reactions to spaces and the evocative encounter with memory they engender will be analyzed using examples from *A Journey Back* and *Hiding and Seeking*. Finally, Huyssen's concept of the historical palimpsest will be used to highlight the spatial uncovering of memorial meaning demonstrated by documentaries of return like *Hiding and Seeking* and *Shtetl*.

The third chapter addresses the documentary imaging of historical trauma. This discussion will begin by outlining the debates in trauma and in visual studies over the (in)adequacy of the image to represent historical trauma and the evolution of discourses of representation toward alternative constructs of the image, referring to Guerin and

Hallas's work in media theory, Avisar's work on Holocaust films, Wiesel's writings as a survivor, Joshua Hirsch's work on posttraumatic cinema, and Caruth's cultural critique of the representation of trauma. Then, this chapter will specifically address the materiality of the image as an agent in communicating varied experiential readings of historical trauma. This will be done by borrowing from Skoller, Wasserman, and Bennett and applying their theoretical contributions to the textual analysis of *A Journey Back*, *Cooperation of Parts* (1987), and *Birthplace*. The materiality of the image will then be analyzed through the act of bearing witness, by looking at both the image as witness and the image of bearing witness in *Birthplace*. Finally, this chapter will examine the visualization of personal testimony through its manifestation in *A Journey Back*.

To conclude, these three research questions will be framed within a production study of my own documentary of return that I filmed in the summer of 2010 on my grandmother's roots and her struggle to survive under Nazi rule in Poland. This experience provided me with tangible findings that will supplement my theoretical and filmic analyses.

Working from established and emerging theories of historical and traumatic visual representation as well as from the ever-evolving discourses of memory, this research ultimately aims to shed light on the capabilities and possible shortcomings of the personal documentary medium to cultivate critical and affective understandings of traumatic history and memory.

Chapter 1: The Evolving Discourses of Memory and its Documentary Visualization

The following research seeks to elaborate the specific ways personal documentaries of return evocatively articulate and question the meaning of historical trauma through their revisiting of personal Holocaust narratives. The specificity of the Holocaust as a pivotal traumatic event will be opened up to develop a broader reflection on representational issues of traumatic memory at large. At stake here are two polemics: one, the personal return to traumatic history itself and how this encounter is formulated in the documentary structure and aesthetic; and second, how the different facets of the memory of this traumatic time are explored in the personal documentary form. This chapter will focus on this latter question, examining issues of traumatic memory and their documentary representation. Elusive, contentious, and problematic, memory as an object of study has elicited complex interpretations in history and media studies. Along with the rich work achieved in psychoanalysis to help grasp issues of traumatic memory, this research will apply to the analysis of documentaries of return post-modern perspectives on memory that favour subjectivity, experience, the quotidian, and heterogeneity.

More specifically, this chapter will address how documentaries of return question and investigate the following themes related to memory: the post-structuralist influence in social studies that has privileged personal memory and experience as a valuable means to understand history; the evolving meaning of collective memory and cultural memory and the elaboration of memory as a shared construct; the idea of memory as fluid, being passed down through generations, what Marianne Hirsch has termed “postmemory”; the complexities of traumatic memory and the boom of interest in the field in defining the

term; the popularity of traumatic memory projects and the potential exploitation of Holocaust memorialization; the interplay of representing memory and memory as representation; and finally, working through difficult heritage.

Post-Structuralist Turn in History: Value of Experience

The documentaries of return examined in this study, though historical in nature, provide avenues to look and understand the past through the lens of memory. The conflation of and interaction between history and memory formulated in these films reflects a larger trend in social and cultural studies. Janet Walker and Bhaskar Sarkar in *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (2010) attribute this trend to a post-structuralist shift in the discipline of history that gives increasing importance to memory and to the phenomenological aspects of experience, diverting the modernist fixation on essentialist truth.[46] This shift in critical thought proves especially helpful when considering the traumatic past, which, as Walker and Sarkar remark, "poses challenges for referentiality, representation and knowledge, and brings embodied aspects of experience to the foreground."[47] It is amidst these changing historiographical standards that documentaries of return will be analyzed as historical documents, for they actively privilege personal experience and memory as the vehicle to access historical knowledge.

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[46] Walker and Sarkar, 23.

[47] Ibid.

For example, in *Dark Lullabies* (1985), daughter of Holocaust survivors Irene Angelico travels to Germany and interviews several people from different backgrounds. She speaks with a filmmaker, an artist, a writer who is the son of a prominent race theorist, Neo-Nazis, the granddaughter of a Nazi commander, a tour guide, and others. Though through all these interactions she discusses facts about the traumatic past, it is primarily through sharing in personal memory and postmemory,[48] as well as relating her experiential engagement with the past, that she actively confronts the traumatic history that is so present in her consciousness.

Similarly, in *A Journey Back* (1987), survivor Jack Garfein returns to his hometown of Bardejov, Slovakia and to Auschwitz with journalist Eric Malling to reclaim his traumatic heritage. An important part of the film becomes Garfein's quest to meet Stefan Reistetter, the district secretary of Bardejov's Helinka Party government (a racist, essentially puppet government of the Nazi party, which ordered the deportations of Jews and other minorities during the war). The parts of the film that deal with the Helinka Party and Reistetter use archival documents, maps, and stock photos to explain the wartime context in Slovakia. Though a certain understanding of history is accessed through these archives, the crux of meaningful remembrance culminates when Garfein actually meets with Reistetter, in Hamilton, Canada, where he now lives, and tries to comprehend the part of his past that he had so little control over.

Garfein's motives to meet with Reistetter have less to do with historical curiosity about his hometown and a desire for facticity; rather, they are charged with the inescapable itch of memory and the need to make sense of it. Indeed, when Eric Malling asks Garfein "why Stefan Reistetter?" before meeting with him, Garfein answers: "Eric,

[48] Marianne Hirsch's concept which will be explained later in this chapter.

Stefan Reistetter is not responsible for the war. Stefan Reistetter is certainly not the head of the Slovakian government. But he is the name that I remember in my little town of Bardejov. That's the name that stayed with me. I'd like to see him, I'd like to talk to him." Garfein knows that meeting with Reistetter will not provide him with elucidating knowledge about the deportations or about the Helinka party's anti-Semitism. However, he cannot let go of the image he had created of Reistetter as the symbol of these traumatic actions and he seeks to make sense of that memory. Of course, when he meets with him, Reistetter denies any involvement in the deportations and Garfein is ultimately left still wanting for closure. But what is powerful about this sequence and his quest in general, is that despite historical denial and the repression or falsification of facts, the weight and ambition of personal memory to articulate deeper understandings of the past takes force as a commanding resource to examine the meaning of history in the present.

While Garfein's memory quest pushes toward attaining historical meaning in the present, it must be understood as *his* present and to a larger extent, his cultural, social, and psychological specificity. As Alison Landsberg explains in her *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004), memory is not a "transhistorical phenomenon, a single definable practice that has remained the same over time. Rather, like all other modalities, memory is historically and culturally specific; it has meant different things to people and cultures at different times and has been instrumentalized in the service of diverse cultural practices."[49] This is an important consideration when assessing memory as a mechanism to gain insight into historical questioning. Drawing on Garfein's experience, it is clear that memory is a powerful and moving force to learn about historical events whose significance transcends

[49] Landsberg, 3.

their original temporal place. While watching him, one is necessarily aware that the events Garfein is describing or trying to get in touch with are unfamiliar. Not belonging to his culture, race or generation, one is not making sense of a history with which one necessarily identifies. However, the power of his memorial undertaking lies precisely in what it offers someone without his particular past: distant history is more tangibly questioned in present consciousness when analyzed through the prism of personal experience.

This recalls what Vivian Sobchack describes as the "intransitive middle voice" for the telling of the past. This voice is that of the historian not describing the events of the past objectively, but rather one that encounters and shares. As Sobchack further explains, "it is a voice that refuses to take as the lesson of Auschwitz the notion that historical understanding is no longer possible, a voice that refuses to think about the question of whether or not history is a rational discourse describing rational phenomena, a voice that knows that as part of our humanity we humans can never stop the effort to examine the contemporary significance of the past."[50] Indeed, while the temporal, spatial, and cultural specificity of memory certainly complicates historical transparency, it is an undeniable trait of humanity to collectively desire making sense of the past and to share in its understanding in the present.

Memory and Cultural Specificity: Expanding Borders

[50] Vivian Sobchack, *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 216.

With the remarkable advances in transportation and communication spawned by modernity, the link between past and present is continuously growing stronger. This compression of time and spent has meant that, as Andreas Huyssen points out in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003), "the form in which we think of the past is increasingly memory without borders rather than national history within borders."[51] Moreover, as Huyssen further explains, the compression of time and space has not just extended beyond borders the form in which the past is thought; it has expanded the index of public consciousness, indicating that the contemporary fascination with memory in the present may mean that our critical and active relation with temporality itself is changing.[52] Documentaries of return certainly reflect this shift and *Birthplace* (1992), following Henryk Grynberg's return to his hometown in Poland to uncover the death of his father and baby brother during the war, is a case in point.

What is distinctive about *Birthplace* is that it delves straight into Grynberg's journey in his hometown in Poland. The only establishing shot is of a plane landing in a non-descript field. The only indicator of where the film takes place is Grynberg's narration, recalling his memories from his village during the war. From there, the film simply follows Grynberg as he meets with various villagers and revisits areas of the village in which he remembers hiding during the war. Given no further context, the viewer is completely immersed in Grynberg's journey, who is himself invested in the blurring of spatial and temporal boundaries. He converses with people who remain occupied in their present daily tasks and activities and asks them direct questions about

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[51] Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 4.

[52] Ibid.

events from fifty years ago, which they recall and discuss as if no time has passed. Without giving contextual explanation for the current conditions for the telling of his story, the film dives into the past directly through the present and merges temporalities. While Grynberg's story is obviously specific to a certain time, place, culture, society, and politics, it remains relevant for a broader public; the film's total immersion into his need to cultivate his past transcends the specificity of his context and renders the complexity of his engagement with the process of memory relatable.

Prosthetic Memory: Evolving the Concept of Shared Memory

The notion of a shared memorial consciousness naturally evokes the idea of collective memory, elaborated first by French scholar Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s and rearticulated over the years by many scholars, notably Amos Funkenstein and Iwona Irwin-Zarecka. Halbwachs believed that memory was an inherently social construct. Funkenstein and Irwin-Zarecka reworked Halbwachs' collective framework for understanding memory, emphasizing a more active relationship between personal experience and the social infrastructures that enable revisiting the past to give it meaning in the present. What is relevant about these re-workings of Halbwach's concept is that they highlight the notion that memorial experience is brought into presence by some form of sharing.

In *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004), Alison Landsberg expands on both Irwin-Zarecka's and Funkenstein's reworkings of Halbwach's collective memory. What Landsberg critiques

of Halbwachs' collective memory theory is its dependence on what he calls "the frameworks of social memory," referring to family, religion, nationality, and social class. In other words, she resists the cultural and social specificity of the collective. She believes, rather, that modernity, and more specifically, "the cinema and other mass cultural technologies have the capacity to create shared social frameworks for people who inhabit literally and figuratively, different social spaces, practices, and beliefs. As a result, these technologies can structure 'imagined communities' that are not necessarily geographically or nationally bounded."[53] She proposes a new form of memory that enables this process: "prosthetic memory." Prosthetic memory occurs at an experiential site, such as through a film, where a person encounters an historical narrative.[54] The person does not merely come into contact with it though; s/he absorbs a deeper memory of an event through which s/he did not live and this resulting prosthetic memory has the capability of forging that person's subjectivity and politics.[55]

This particular formation of identity with the past constitutes the pivotal node of distinction between collective memory and prosthetic memory. Prosthetic memory, which is a result of mass-mediation, does not claim any kind of authentic appropriation of the past. One may construct a profound engagement with the past while being fully aware that it is not a part of one's own heritage. While earlier remembrance practices tended to unify people across a wide range of backgrounds by constructing a national identity meant to supplant their differences, prosthetic memory does not deny differences

[53] Landsberg, 8.

[54] Ibid., 2.

[55] Ibid.

or build common origins; it enables one to feel a connection and learn from the past while recognizing one's separate position in the present moment.[56] As a more nuanced and currently relevant interpretation of collective memory, prosthetic memory expands the notion of the collective by conveying a wider, borderless reach, while at the same time deepening the subjective and personal experience of memorial learning.

Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance after the Holocaust (2004) by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky is a good example of this undertaking. In this film, Daum seeks to warn his two Orthodox sons against the danger of extremist, closed-minded thinking about the world. He brings them on a journey to Poland to get in touch with their family history and Holocaust heritage. Daum is a man of faith, but unlike his sons, his belief lies in seeing the godliness in all human beings. He has an openness toward the world, which he wishes to pass on to his children. What he learned from his parents' experience during the Holocaust is the value of keeping faith despite the fact that many questions have no answers. In fact, he believes that living with unanswered questions is at the heart of every faith. Accepting that, for him, is what put down barriers between himself and others who do not necessarily share his religious or cultural background. He decided to bring his sons to Poland in the hope that they would expand their consciousness in that way as well. Devoted Yeshiva students, Akiva and Tzvi Dovid have developed a strong sense of Jewish exclusiveness and scepticism of outsiders and their trip to Poland will bring them face to face with the origins of that rejection.

Arriving in Poland, one of the sons asked how the Poland of today can connect with the Poland of then. It was a different world at that time. Interestingly, it will

[56] Ibid., 9.

ultimately be his engagement with the past, with the memory and experience of his grandfather, which will enable him to open up his conception of "others." It is not until Akiva and Tzvi Dovid meet the non-Jewish Polish family that hid their mother's father during the Holocaust that the two begin to be moved by the impact that others can have on their lives. So far mocking his father's interest in finding holy places throughout Poland or places that were previously inhabited by his family, Akiva's attitude quickly turns around when he arrives at the home of the family who hid his grandfather. Reading a prayer to commemorate this holy site, Akiva cannot even finish the blessing before breaking into tears. This moment shows that the opening up to another family, another people, was made possible through a tangible interaction with the passage of time. Though by the end of the film Akiva is not completely transformed with an open heart to all, it is this personal encounter that planted a seed for a more expansive notion of collective remembrance.

The film obviously deals with a very culturally specific memorial journey: between non-Jewish Poles and Jews of Polish origin. However, the shared experience of trauma, though experienced radically differently, is translatable to many different contexts. What the film shows is that traumatic memory can be productively revisited to formulate a new perspective on collective history. Moreover, the representation of this experiential engagement with the past enables this process to be disseminated and shared by a variety of people coming from different histories with different borders. What is important to consider is that the opening-up process to a wider collectivity stemmed from the reshaping of personal subjectivity in relation to the past. In other words, the family's

evolving openness to the outside world was in large part spawned by a repositioning of themselves with their own personal history.

Postmemory

The two sons, who never experienced the war or Poland directly, are forging an identity relation with a past that is not their own, what Marianne Hirsch has called "postmemory." Postmemory refers to "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic experiences that can be neither understood nor recreated."[57] This concept is useful when looking at documentaries of return, for it addresses the peculiar effect of traumatic memory on further generations still deeply impacted by trauma without having lived through it. As the brothers' experience travelling back to Poland shows in *Hiding and Seeking*, "while the memory of one generation may become history for the next, intergenerational memory can also transform into new forms of personal remembrance."[58] What was detached history for them before slowly became internalized through the passing on of intergenerational memory. Through the subjective transcription of the experience of another, the outside of history joined the inside of remembrance and forged a new connection with the past.

The quest to get in touch with a memory and history that is not quite one's own is perhaps best articulated in *Dark Lullabies*. In this film, Irene Angelico returns to Germany to gain insight into her family's Holocaust heritage. Other than a manuscript

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[57] Marianne Hirsch, 22.

[58] Guerin and Hallas, 160.

that her father wrote about his experience during the Holocaust, her parents have not shared much with her about the horrors they left behind in Europe. She finds herself needing to go to Germany to uncover her obscured postmemory. As she states in voice-over at the beginning of the film: "Thirty-five years later, I am on a train in Germany, trying to understand the experience that separates me from my parents…. My parents' experience was always part of me, yet they never spoke to me about the past. Somehow the knowledge was passed on, in images and impressions I collected through the years. I incorporated their experience as my own, but saw it from afar, through a veil of memory that was not mine." Before leaving on her journey to Germany, she speaks with Haim Rosen, a member of the Jewish brigade of the Allied forces that helped liberate the camps during the war. He tells her that the search for meaning in this past is almost futile for she has inherited a world that even people who participated in it do not understand themselves. Nevertheless, he encourages her to continue her quest.

She realizes that as she asks more and more questions about the Holocaust she finds herself surrounded by a generation of people with similar inquiries, possessed by a history in which they played no part. She heads to a conference in Montreal for children of survivors, where she meets with many other people of her generation who have been plagued with the heaviness of their postmemory and are only now breaking the silence. At one point, a young man speaks of his experience growing up in a home where the weight of his father's experience in Auschwitz was tremendously present yet in complete contrast with their assimilated way of life in North America. He admits his unawareness of the idea of the term "child of survivor." He had assumed it was simply natural to have to carry the burden of Auschwitz himself; that to bear Auschwitz was unique to him. In

another instance, a man actually wonders what it would be like to remove the tattoo from his mother's left hand and place it on his as a means to pass on the legacy of the Holocaust. He wonders how, without visual trace, the memory of trauma will carry on to the next generation. The exchanges at the conference reveal the palpable memorial presence of traumatic experience within these people despite it not having been physically lived by them. Consumed by this presence, postmemory proves to be a powerful source of inspiration to make sense of the past and to transform history into a subjective learning experience.

This is precisely what Angelico sets out to do throughout this film. Once in Germany she meets with several people from a wide variety of backgrounds. At the heart of her journey is the quest to position her own postmemory in relation to that of descendants of perpetrators or descendants of civilian Germans who lived the war differently. Though no concrete answers will arise from her interactions, the dialogue elicited by the working through of the respective postmemories counters the alleged futility of making sense of the traumatic past, whether lived or not. It cannot be denied that the weight of postmemory may never be lifted by clear answers and may leave elements of the past inaccessible. However, meaning may in fact be derived from the way the film stages that limit. Indeed, the value of postmemory quests, as examined in *Dark Lullabies* lies in the continuous subjective questioning over one's present relation with traumatic history it inspires.

Traumatic Memory: Boom of Interest and Description

The curiosity, need, and even obsession to ascertain traumatic memory even when it is not one's own transcends intergenerational memory. As Janet Walker points out, it is important to pursue a continuing and inclusive connection with historical traumas like the Holocaust. It is important to feel affinity without necessarily having a familial link. Walker reminds us that "our status increasingly and in generations to come will be marked less by an inherent, tangible, and personal connection to the Holocaust than by an abstract, imaginative one."[59] As a result, there is a noticeable cultural drive to examine and share in memory. What fuels this incredible determination? What has inspired entire fields of studies or the countless works of art, films, and literature dedicated to memory? There seems to be a very common human interest in seeking to get in touch with what is lost or intangible.

Cultural critic Andreas Huyssen has addressed this memory boom in his books *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003) and *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (1995). Huyssen suggests that the memory discourses of today, presenting memory as "re-presentation" or as making present, run the risk of flattening the temporalizing pull between past and present, especially when the imagined past is absorbed into a present marked by the hyper-mediation of consumer culture.[60] In this timeless present, the growing mnemonic impulses, Huyssen explains, act as an "expression of the basic human need to live in extended structures of temporality, however they may be organized."[61] As Huyssen

[59] Walker, *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*, 173.

[60] Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, 10.

[61] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 9.

points out, then, the need for temporal anchoring within an ever-evolving and fast-progressing historical consciousness in large part fuels the memory boom.

Undoubtedly, though, trauma also adds an insatiable dimension to this drive. Several scholars have outlined the somewhat more somber motives for the current obsession with trauma. Most notably, Mark Seltzer and John Mowitt discuss the voyeuristic and victimizing allure of trauma discourse. Seltzer attributes the cultural fascination with trauma to what he has identified as "wound culture," referring to "the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound."[62] Mowitt even posits the idea of a deeply politically rooted sense of "trauma envy" in the field of trauma studies characterized by a "desire to experience that which authorizes the specifically moral condemnation of others"[63] or more simply, that which provides greater moral capital. The appeal of righteous power is furthermore characterized by the postcolonial society's placing of the figure of the victim at higher moral ground.[64] Whether by sheer voyeurism or need for moralistic anchoring, contemporary society's darker pull toward trauma cannot be ignored or dismissed. That is not to say the sole motives behind any interest in traumatic memory is sensationalism and envy. Though rather extreme, they reveal that the need to make sense of trauma and the traumatic past transcends personal encounter with it. Events that break frames of reference or that breach the limits of our ethical

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[62] Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 3, http://0-www.jstor.org.mercury.concordia.ca/stable/778805.

[63] John Mowitt, "Trauma Envy," *Cultural Critique* no. 46 *Trauma and its Cultural Aftereffects* (Autumn 2000): 280, http://0-www.jstor.org.mercury.concordia.ca/stable/1354416.

[64] Bennett, 5.

understanding, especially when they occurred in a time that has passed, capture humanity's need to reflect and reposition itself historically.

To the survivor, the traumatic event can actually be even more inassimilable despite having been lived. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, who have paved the academic ground for psychoanalytic understanding of trauma in their *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), expound this difficult process. They explain that the traumatic event took place outside the limits of causality, sequence, time, and place and that this lack of defining parameters renders it "other" and places it outside the range of comprehension. As a result,

> trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both.[65]

Felman and Laub suggest that the solution to this entrapment lies in the therapeutic process of reconstructing a narrative or in essence, "re-externalizing the event."[66] The transmission of the story thus entails the sharing of personal experience.

Art scholar Jill Bennett, in *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (2005), sheds light on the process of sharing traumatic experience. She suggests that trauma in itself "is never unproblematically 'subjective;' neither 'inside' nor 'outside,' it is always lived and negotiated at an intersection."[67] She discusses visual art practices that

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[65] Felman and Laub, 69.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Bennett, 12.

address the fluidity of this intersection, mediating trauma not only as a subjective state, but as a transformative process that has a presence or even a force on the world as much as on bodies.[68] Bennett thus argues that "by giving trauma extension in space or lived *place*," visual art "invites an awareness of different modes of inhabitation."[69] In this way, visual renderings of trauma become relational rather than simply expressive. What was once an internally lived experience is negotiated as it embodies a new space where different subjectivities encounter it.

This is precisely what occurs in Marian Marzynski's *Shtetl* (1996). In this documentary, Marzynski brings survivors and children of survivors back to the small Polish village of Bransk to let them relive and discover their family's past. In one story of return, Marzynski accompanies Jack Rubin, a seventy-three-year old clothing store owner who now lives in Baltimore. Rubin not only survived the war in Bransk but had a very productive lifestyle there before the war as a goose farmer. Rubin revisits different parts of the village where he lived before the war and where he hid from the Nazis during the war. All these visits trigger in him vivid memories of his life some fifty years ago. The spaces he visits and the conversations he conducts with the locals inspire the re-externalizing process outlined by Felman and Laub. He energetically recalls his business triumphs as a farmer and with the same animation and clarity he later recounts the intricacies of hiding from the Nazis. His determined recounting of all his memories, traumatic and non-traumatic alike, point to value of documentaries of return as outlets for the transmittal of such memorial information. Felman and Laub argue that the traumatic nature of a lived event often places it outside of temporality. The limits of its

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[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

assimilation can be breached as it is re-integrated into a form of narrative. Rubin's forward recalling of his past experience into stories epitomize that therapeutic process.

Furthermore, as Bennett explains, the context in which he elaborates his past experience creates an inter-subjective site of encounter. As locals converse with and relate to him, his memorial process gains relevance as it establishes continuity with contemporary life in Bransk. Moreover, the on-site delivery of his traumatic memory of hiding from the Nazis in a local's barn imprints itself on the landscape from which he speaks, creating the intersection of where the "inside" of his personal experience is negotiated with the "outside" of the sharing process and its documentary mediation.

Overload of Memory Projects and Holocaust Memorialization

The need for this process of sharing and negotiation, as outlined by Felman, Laub and Bennett, in large part accounts for the countless testimonial works of trauma survivors around the world and the overwhelming interest they elicit assures the perpetuity of this method. Arguably, there is an overload of this kind of work, especially related to the Holocaust, across a wide range of disciplines. This begs the following questions: how can these memorial projects develop innovative perspectives when they are so numerous and frequent? When does trauma envy and wound culture turn into apathy and desensitization? With new Holocaust films coming out every year, what new knowledge can really be gained? Or do they merely serve to fulfill our wound culture's dark curiosity? There are many more cynical ways to look at the overwhelming amount of Holocaust or any historical trauma related art works and films. As Thomas Elsaesser

remarked in his essay, “One Train May be Hiding Another: History, Memory, Identity, and the Visual Image,”[70] these easily contribute to the surplus of cultural obsessions with trauma and blind commemorative rituals of spectatorship and storytelling. That being said, perhaps what may be more productive to examine is less what they teach about that dark time in history, but rather what they say about our constantly evolving engagement with memory.

For some survivors, like my eighty-eight-year old grandmother, for example, every new film and every new book is an opportunity to learn, to indulge, and to enliven her consciousness of the past into the present. There is not a film, book release, play or lecture related to the Holocaust that she will miss. Interestingly, despite having her own very much lived experience of the Holocaust, she has dedicated the last three decades of her life to enriching her personal memory with that of others and with the historical knowledge she has gained. Her memorial quest will never be complete, for she continuously forges new understandings of her own past by sharing in different narratives. Her journey speaks volumes of how we engage with the past because it shows that memory involves so much more than just remembering; it can be formed, grown, shaped, and made meaningful despite or even in spite having been through past traumatic events. In a way, her fascination with stories of that time reflects her desire and need to situate herself historically as well as existentially in the face of a time and space that defied normal points of reference. Thinking about the documentaries of return examined here, it becomes apparent that that is what each personal search shows: a never-ending and continuously evolving need to anchor oneself in a connection between past and

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[70] Thomas Elsaesser, “One Train May Be Hiding Another: History, Memory, Identity, and the Visual Image,” in *Topologies of Trauma: Essays on the Limit of Knowledge and Memory*, eds. Linda Belau and Petar Ramadanovic (New York: Other Press, 2002), 61-71.

present. Whether dealing with memory or postmemory, each person in these films is on a mission to shift her/himself with that connection.

Memory as Representation

It is precisely this negotiation that is productive in films dealing with the traumatic past, no matter how abundant they are. For though they may not bring any new elucidating lessons about trauma or history, with each new personal narrative, they invite a different reflection on how one's engagement with memory shapes their present outlook. This process is perhaps what makes the representation of memorial projects so compelling, for it is universally identifiable. One does not need to have personally lived through (traumatic) events of the past to question her/his relation to the public consciousness of a past time. The different modes of representing memory are thus important to look at, for even their profuseness in itself speaks of the ever-growing need to keep in touch with the passage of current conditions into history as well as the persistent impact of past conditions on the present. As Thomas Elsaesser posited in his aforementioned essay, the hyper-mediation of history has redefined how we identify with the past, where memorial truth is retrieved in representation itself. Though as previously mentioned he warns against the disenchanting consequence of memorial overproduction, what is key to note from his argument is his insistence on the active relationship between representation and memory.

Both Oren Baruch Stier and Andreas Huyssen expound the idea of representation as a defining feature of memory. Stier argues that memory building speaks of memory's

foundation as representation, where the "re-" is primordial because memory is always constructed as the result of some kind of narrativization.[71] Similarly, Huyssen maintains that rather than providing empirical access to some authentic origin, memory is itself based on re-presentation, always coming after and giving the delusion of pure presence. He continues, "the past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory."[72] What both these arguments point to is that there is no pure, essentialist memorial truth that transcends the passage of time and can be accessed without obstruction through mere mediation. The self-reflexive act of representing memory, especially as found in documentaries of return, commands work from both the production and reception side to formulate contemporary meaning out of the enduring presence of past experience. What then distinguishes documentaries of return from the more sensationalist productions of catastrophic historical events that have oddly become so familiar is that they are marked less with the simple guidance that constant reminders of past crimes will enable a better world. Rather, they create what Jeffrey Skoller identifies as an "ethics surrounding the use of memory and experience"[73] in which revisiting the past through its gaps, elisions, shadows, and ineffability enables a deeper and ultimately more relevant understanding of how history cannot be disjointed from the experience of the present.

[71] Oren Baruch Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 11.

[72] Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, 3.

[73] Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005), xlvi.

Revisiting Complex Heritage: Past-Present Interdependency

One way documentaries of return articulate an ethics of memory is through their personal approach to working through difficult heritage. All of these films deal with a traumatic past that is hard to reconcile not only for the individual, but also between nations and cultures. This type of exploration, in which spaces of memory are experienced and lived, calls for an understanding of history involving an active interaction between past and present. Historical trauma, as elaborated by historian Dominick LaCapra, poses a difficult, yet surmountable challenge to this framework. For LaCapra, "trauma is precisely the gap, the open wound, in the past that resists being entirely filled in, healed, or harmonized in the present."[74] The first significant documentary attempt at bridging this gap was undoubtedly Alain Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* (1955). Only ten years after the end of the Holocaust, it not only made visible what was being so rampantly denied; it pioneered an aesthetic language that could represent the unimaginable. Through its innovative editing of black and white archival imagery with contemporary colour shots, carefully contrasting shot length and movement; its juxtaposition of lyrical music over harsh images; and its poetic narration, the film goes beyond creatively showcasing the unthinkable terrors of the Holocaust; it suggests a thoughtful reflection on how to deal with and remember the traumatic past in the present.

The balancing of archival imagery with the contemporary footage reflects best its contribution to historical understanding. This careful montage stimulates the visualization of the history of the Holocaust by jointly alarming the viewer and asking

[74] LaCapra, 109.

him/her to ponder the effacing nature of time. What the contemporary images cannot show, the raw footage can. If the contemporary footage is used to encourage a thoughtful meditation on the unimaginable past, then the archival imagery balances this with a devastating truth. The balancing works the other way as well. The intercutting of the disturbing archival footage with contemporary imagery prevents the sensationalizing of this trauma through a voyeuristic over-saturation of shocking visual material.

This method was quite revolutionary when considering the types of documentaries dealing with the concentration camps that were being made at the time. From the end of the war until the early 1960s, Holocaust documentaries fell into two principal categories: the newsreel-type and the compilation film.[75] In both these forms, the archival imagery was merely used as visual evidence to advance the telling of a moment (or moments) in history. Resnais challenged this classical linear use of documentary evidence and innovated a formal and structural way to manipulate tense and call into question the meaning of the history described. Historical representation in *Nuit et brouillard*, then, made way for a questioning of history that occurs through the evocation of temporal relations. By contrasting the black and white archival material with the colour contemporary footage, the shorter takes of the archival material with the longer takes of the contemporary footage, and the stasis of the archival imagery with the pensive travelling shots exploring the contemporary landscape, Resnais clearly opposed the two temporalities and provided the contemplative space for the viewer to process history as it affects his/her current context.

It is important to note that the use of archival imagery as factual evidence is not devoid of controversy. The collage of archival imagery in *Nuit et brouillard* was

[75] Joshua Hirsch, 32.

criticized for running the risk of homogenizing two separate historical timelines. Indeed, all of the wartime images are forged into a past entity, whether they were taken during the deportation and internment (by the Nazis) or during the liberation (by the Allies). Debates over the value of archival imagery in documentary films reached a pivotal point in the 1980s with the release of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). Refusing to use archival images, Lanzmann's rhetoric and his *Shoah* launched a whole re-questioning of the factual nature of archival material and its adequacy as a mode of historical representation. These debates continue to inform readings of documentary films to this day.

That being said, Resnais' treatment of archives remains relevant today because he used them as part of a greater project to understand the past in a contemporary context. This idea of evoking an experience of past and present is central to Resnais' goal and to the formation of a new mode of historical representation in documentary film. It also places him amidst the shifting discourse in history, moving away from traditional conceptions of history as the summation of past entities. *Nuit et brouillard* elaborated a formula that was able to combine tropes of the past and the present and also provide an experience of history. *Nuit et brouillard* showed that the move away from historiography was not only achieved through avoiding symbols or images of the past, but that it could be done by formally contextualizing signifiers of the past with a contemporary sensibility and still equally treat difficult history as an active process. By innovating a creative interaction of form and reflection, Alain Resnais articulated a cinematic meditation on the limits of memory and representation, which has informed the ongoing debates over archival and historical depiction in film over the years.

What Alain Resnais achieved with detached reflection, documentaries of return realize through affective personal engagement. Indeed, *Nuit et brouillard* offered a way to visualize and gain access to difficult heritage through a more distant, contemplative evocation. As described above, it was the first of its kind and remains an effective process for deepening our understanding of traumatic history and our visual experience of it. Documentaries of return provide another point of access. By personally confronting and engaging the past with the present, documentary filmmakers/subjects returning to sites of trauma form fluid avenues for remembrance that invite the viewer to constantly question how their temporal and spatial context affects their understanding of the traumatic past. At times, resentment and closed-mindedness guides the subject's quest, but for the most part, it is their larger questioning and desire to make sense of their personal history that fosters a more open look toward the past.

Revisiting Complex Heritage: Poland

This effort reflects the larger rethinking of history in Eastern Europe in terms of the evolving, complex relations between Jews and non-Jews. This is particularly true in Poland, where debates over historical truth and experience during the Holocaust are lively and ongoing. Poland has a long history of complicated relations between Poles and Jews and the Holocaust only aggravated these. Several factors enter into question: the fact that most of the extermination of Jews occurred on Polish territory; the already existing anti-Semitism there; the involvement of Poles in the persecution of the Jews; their role in saving Jews; and the pressure and hardship of Poles themselves living under

Nazi occupation. These factors are contradictory and for decades, these mutually exclusive standpoints have informed and driven the disputed Jewish-Polish memory of the Holocaust. The Polish and Jewish perspectives are not entirely irreconcilable, however.

Over the years, the emergence of new knowledge, research, and interaction has opened up the historiographical debates to explore the nuances of these opposing views. For example, in the late 1980s and 1990s, Jewish scholars like Israel Gutman and Rabbi Byron L. Sherwin began recognizing the Poles' own adversity during the war and the incredible risks involved in helping Jews.[76] In Poland during the 1980s, sociologist Alina Cala conducted a study in Polish villages and uncovered historically ingrained anti-Semitism, while scholar Jan Blónski published his famous essay, "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," in which he put forth a sense of shared responsibility by the Poles for their failure to act more against the Nazis and called upon Poles to honestly assess their history.[77] While debates have persisted, studies, conferences and academic writings like these have shed light on the possibility of concurrent narratives of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust.

In the last decade, more efforts to understand Poland's traumatic past have transcended scholarship. Furthermore, these efforts have been characterized by inclusive goals to comprehend and accept the history of the Holocaust beyond "the logic of national suffering."[78] Competing martyrdoms have clearly proven to be ineffectual and

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[76] Johnathan Zimmerman, *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 8-9.

[77] Ibid., 5-6.

[78] Robert Cherry and Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, *Rethinking Poles and Jews: Troubled Past, Brighter Future* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 131.

mutual understanding of this traumatic history, rather, is better suited to further historical and cultural knowledge. Numerous cultural and sociological projects have encouraged this type of mutual understanding among Jews and Poles. Notable among them is Erica Lehrer's work in Kazimierz, the historical Jewish district of Cracow, which provides a concrete example of progressive efforts to reconcile contested memories in Poland. By visiting the district and speaking with shop owners and visitors, and by exploring everyday encounters and interactions between Jews and non-Jews, Lehrer uncovered this place as a site of converging memory projects, of multi-cultural dialogue, and ultimately, of what she terms "conciliatory heritage."[79]

Revisiting Complex Heritage: *Birthplace* (1992)

In some documentaries of return, the primary goal is not to seek conciliatory heritage, but the personal interaction with another group of people shows the potential for a more tolerant look at the past and openness in the present. This is the case in *Birthplace* in which survivor Henryk Grynberg sets out to learn more about his personal roots in Poland and in so doing, a more nuanced understanding about Polish-Jewish relations is revealed. Grynberg returns to his hometown in Poland to learn what the locals remember about his family and his search quickly turns to discovering how his father died when they were in hiding. The film is not very long, just under an hour, and it directly focuses on Grynberg's experience visiting his hometown and speaking with its inhabitants. There is no broader historical or motivational contextualization; it truly indulges the viewer straight into his present journey back to Poland.

[79] Lehrer, 271.

He speaks with several villagers throughout the film, trying to piece together his family's history and tragic fate during the Holocaust. What is most apparent through all his conversations is the strong connection these people have with the past. Many of them remember intricate details about his family and events that transpired during the Nazi occupation. If they are hesitant to discuss what they remember it is still apparent that history weighs heavily on their conscience. The first couple he talks to recalls how lovely his mother was and vividly remembers his parents' wedding: the food, the wine, the dancing, etc. The couple's account gives the sense that socialization and conviviality between Polish Jews and non-Jews was obviously possible and had indeed occurred.

Grynberg then shows his mother's picture to another villager who recalls her fondly. He explains how "you know, we were Poles and they were Jews," but he didn't mind going to their shop. He even jokes that he should have married her instead of his wife because she was so pretty. He confirms that Grynberg's mother and her sister came to his home and his family gave them food. He felt they had to help: "what were they guilty of ?" he asks. Then he talks about the high risk involved in helping Jews. He says there are good people, but there are also bad people, and he was threatened a lot. He explains that you had to be "tough and brutal" in the village in order to avoid trouble with other, less tolerant villagers. What is interesting about this man's account is that he recognizes the dual nature of his people's attitude and behaviour during the war. He does not try to minimize the negative character of these people; rather, he admits that they were "bad" and that helping out was difficult to defend.

Grynberg's next encounter furthers this sense of acknowledgement. The elderly man with whom he speaks avidly states: "Our people murdered them, not German,

ours.…The Jews were scared of Poles and Germans alike. Because our bastards were like that! Perhaps even worse than the Germans." Again, these words nuance the competing historical martyrdoms between Polish Jews and non-Jews. On the one hand, his words reinforce the notion that there was indeed Polish discrimination and violence against the Jews. On the other, he is, as a Pole himself, admitting and denouncing this behaviour. His testimony reflects an honesty toward the wrong doings of his people in the past.

Grynberg then speaks to a few other villagers about the fate of his younger brother, who, still only a baby at the time, was passed on from one farmer to another until he was finally brought to the police. Grynberg speaks with the nephew of the farmer who kept the baby last before having to bring him to the police on orders from the village administrator. The nephew and his wife explain how everybody was scared and no one wanted to take the risk and they deplore the suspicious villagers who were always ready to betray their neighbours even for a sugar reward. What is moving about these conversations is that they do not merely shed light on the problematic Polish-Jewish relations under Nazis; they reveal the incredibly painful consequence of these relations in a way that is so personal to Grynberg. The viewer, learning about this traumatic past along with Grynberg, shares in this devastating memory. The viewer can furthermore deepen her/his knowledge of the complex heritage of the Holocaust in Poland by understanding the complexities of wartime life through a personal story.

Similarly, his quest to uncover his father's death reveals ambivalence among the villagers about coming to terms with their past. Most people are disgusted by his murder and seem to know where he was found dead, but many are hesitant to divulge who killed him. One man is quite antagonistic and resentfully tells him about hiding him and his

father. Although he knows who killed his father, he refuses to tell him. In the background, his wife cries out for him to tell Grynberg, as he is his son and "his heart is bleeding," but the man does not care to do so. Grynberg later meets an elderly woman who ultimately tells him that the man who killed him did so to gain possession of two cows. One cannot help but think of the awful irony of surviving the Nazis but dying for two cows.

Another man tells him that the man who killed his father, and who is now dead, had to leave town because nobody tolerated him in the village after what he did. Grynberg then actually finds the brother of the man who killed his father, but this man denies any involvement and claims ignorance as to his brother's action. Grynberg's journey to uncover his father's death points to the difficult heritage that both he, a returning Jew whose family endured intolerable pain, and the villagers, people who witnessed and who must live with terrible knowledge about their history, must experience. The villagers' understanding of his pained heritage combined with their struggle to explain the past nuance the typically competing historical narratives between Jewish condemnation of Poles and Polish justification. The first step toward conciliatory heritage is the comprehension of historical memory beyond singular experience. In this sense, the film contributes to a better understanding of difficult heritage, for it explores the not so black-and-white ways the traumatic past is remembered and lived.

Revisiting Complex Heritage: *Shtetl* (1996)

There is a delicate balance that exists between understanding the contested past through personal memorial quests and looking beyond singular experience. In Maryan Marzynski's *Shtetl*, that balance is disrupted and with his strong personal convictions and motivations, Marzynski attempts to appropriate Holocaust heritage despite its immense complexity in Poland. In the film, Marzynski, a survivor himself, narrates and participates in different stories of return. Most notably, he accompanies to Poland his Chicago-born friend Nathan Kaplan, whose father lived through the war in the small Polish village of Bransk. Once there, they meet up with Zbysek Romaniuk, a Polish historian with an unusual interest in Jewish history, who is also Kaplan's pen pal. Rare and somewhat of a taboo in Poland at the time, Romaniuk has collected an impressive archive of Jewish stories and artefacts. He becomes instrumental in Marzynski's and Kaplan's search for answers amidst forgotten places and family histories in a much repressed history of Jews in Bransk. After finding hidden places of personal history, retrieving relics, and encountering different people, the tone of the film then shifts from discovery to investigation, as Marzynski becomes increasingly interested in proving Polish betrayal or collaboration with the Germans.

He interrogates elderly Poles, some of whom appear too old, weak or confused to produce a constructive conversation. One man simply trembles and repeats "death already sits on my nose." It becomes clear that what began as a conduit for Kaplan's journey transforms into Marzynski's "personal campaign to hold Poles accountable."[80] This is amplified at the end of the film when Romaniuk has been elected vice-mayor of Bransk and is in charge of organizing the town's five-hundred-year anniversary.

[80] Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 224.

Marzynski joins one of the organizational meetings and aggressively tries to convince Romaniuk to include Jewish history in the program. Romaniuk is hesitant for he fears this is a sensitive issue. Though Marzynski's claims are legitimate, his forcefulness is uninviting and unproductive, for he is attacking the one person who shows enthusiasm for Jewish history in Poland. Perhaps what is most striking about the change of tone in the film is that it ventures from a personal return quest to one marked with accusatory conviction. Through this shift, it loses the sense of personal identification with complex traumatic history it had initially developed and ultimately perpetuates the competing historical narratives of martyrdom between Jewish Poles and non-Jewish Poles. That being said, the screen time and detail attributed to Romaniuk's journey enables a wider outlook on the complexity of traumatic heritage. On the one hand, it acknowledges the shortcomings of his town, which is not fully open to look at the complete reality of its past. On the other hand, it offers hope by shedding light on the quest of one person to keep the memory of the past alive in the present.

Revisiting Complex Heritage: Germany

Holocaust heritage is complex and challenging in Germany as well. Until the 1980s, Jewish and German public discourses of Holocaust heritage pointed to incompatible perspectives on resolution. At the source of the discord was the use of indiscriminate language in public and educational discourses of post-Holocaust Jewish-German relations in which the different parties used similar terms, such as "remembrance" and "reconciliation" as well as "victim" and "victimizer," for different

purposes.[81] This caused much grief among Jews, who emphasized a clear dichotomy between victim and victimizer as well as a need to remember, and among Germans, who sought a more inclusive definition of victimhood and attempted to evade the past as much as possible through forgiving reconciliation.[82] The education system greatly contributed to this ideological stalemate in the understanding of Holocaust memory among Jews and Germans.

After the war, Germany embarked on a headstrong process of restoration and normalization in which the German people sought to present themselves as regular people with regular concerns and collectively looked toward the future instead of trying to process their traumatic past.[83] As a result of this, Holocaust education in Germany throughout the 1960s and 1970s was indirectly addressed, as part of the general history of World War II or as an offshoot of Hitler's dictatorship.[84] In the 1980s, the situation greatly improved and more and more German students knew about the Holocaust, though it remained difficult to inherit a culture that had produced such violence. On the Jewish side, Holocaust education was definitely not lacking, but its strong ideological determination narrowed the collective memory of the Holocaust. While naturally and accurately emphasizing the tremendous suffering and victimization of Jews, it also created a very divisive discourse along the strict vocabulary lines of good/evil and

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[81] Bjorn Krondorfer, *Remembrance and Reconciliation: Encounters between Young Jews and Germans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 24.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid., 32.

[84] Ibid., 33.

innocent/guilty.[85] This dichotomous language complicated attempts to move through the impasse of German-Jewish Holocaust memory.

Revisiting Complex Heritage: *Dark Lullabies* (1985)

While institutional and public discourses may have limited mutual understanding between Jews and Germans, there also developed important cultural and individual efforts to create new avenues for conciliatory heritage. Personal voyages through time and space that seek to make sense of the traumatic memory of the Holocaust in Germany are great examples of this endeavour. *Dark Lullabies* by Irene Angelico is one such documented journey, which develops a meaningful reflection on the possibility of open-minded remembrance. Having completed the film in the mid-1980s and having taken several years to make, Angelico pursued her journey in a socio-historical context of avoidance and hatred between Jews and non-Jewish Germans. As a Canadian Jew whose Jewish German parents suffered the Holocaust in Germany, she embarked on this journey with much fear, hesitancy, and pre-conceived notions of the German people. In an interview I conducted with her in March 2012, she discussed her ambivalence in going through with this project as a Jew trying to understand this complex shared legacy of trauma: "The Jewish community did not want to hear about the German part of it, did not want to hear about the child of survivors going back to Germany, didn't want to know

[85] Ibid., 40-41.

anything about this and many people thought it was a betrayal and so often I thought it was."[86]

Her quest would ultimately enlighten her own clouded postmemory and also shed light on another difficult process of remembrance: that of the descendants of perpetrators and silent bystanders. At the core of her journey is a genuine and deep desire to understand through dialogue. During her trip, she interviews several people with radically different backgrounds to gain more understanding. Her conversations are open and empathetic and involve people around her age, deepening the present understanding of the past through a common generational lens. What transcends many of these discussions is the idea of simultaneous incomprehension about the past alongside its deeply felt impact on self-definition.

When Angelico arrives in Germany, she speaks with Harald Lüders, a young German filmmaker who himself questions his history. He explains how there is a lot of silence, repression, and lies in Germany about the Holocaust. He made a film about a small village named Rinau in which three hundred of the six hundred inhabitants were deported; some of the remaining residents still claimed not to be aware of what was happening. He wanted to shed light on what he calls the "German lie" that members of his generation have grown up with, which tells them that no one knew about anything and no one saw anything. Angelico and Lüders later meet one of Lüders' friends who shares her experience about discovering her own German history. One day when she was having dinner with her family, a Polish man knocked at the door looking for the location of the camp in her town where he had been interned during the war. She had no idea

[86] Irene Angelico (director, *Dark Lullabies*), in discussion with Myriam Tremblay-Sher, March 2012.

about the history of her own town and she accidentally found out through this man. She says that this is a very typical experience for young Germans: having to meet someone from outside their country to discover the history of their own people. Through her meeting with Lüders and his friend, Angelico can begin to elucidate the difficult process of remembrance from an entirely different perspective and let the viewer see that difficult heritage transcends ethnic and national boundaries.

What is interesting about her meetings and interviews is that she converses with rather than interrogates people, contributing to the elaboration of deeper communication and mutual understanding. When she meets with Siedrich Gauch, the son of the famous race theorist, they speak openly and comprehensibly of each other's background, as she tries to understand his relationship with his Nazi father. In fact, he wrote a book retracing his father's life, in an attempt to further understand his own relationship with his father as well his peers' relationship with their Nazi fathers. He explains the particular difficulty of people like him who, on the one hand, loved their fathers, but on the other, could not fathom what they did in the Third Reich. In response, Angelico honestly relays her difficulty in understanding and accepting how the people responsible for committing the atrocities during the Holocaust were not monsters, but fathers who could love, think, and feel. Gauch responds by acknowledging that no one could ever understand that. He does mention that one could find some clarity in looking at the system in place at the time; a system in which no one acted independently and no one was held accountable for her/his actions. The bureaucratic method of killing enabled these people to carry out these actions and believe that they were simply doing their jobs. For this reason, these people never expressed guilt and this, he feels, "no one will ever be able to understand." While

their conversation does not bring new edifying information about how to comprehend traumatic history, it does enact a shared quest between descendants of survivors and descendants of perpetrators to make sense of such difficult heritage. In this way, the mutual non-understanding of the past bridges opposing narratives of history.

In her last interview, Angelico speaks with Ancha Mulka, the granddaughter of the vice-commander of Auschwitz. Mulka remembers she had always regarded her grandfather as a very kind man who would read her stories when she saw him on weekends. When she was thirteen, she found out from a friend about his role in the war and has struggled since to understand her family's unspoken past. At one point, Angelico reads her a passage from Elie Wiesel which contemplates the baffling human ability to commit atrocities and still love. The camera stays on Mulka for a while, creating a beautiful shot of her through which the viewer can see and feel her pain in trying to comprehend this duality in terms of her own family. Visibly moved by this passage, Mulka says that she cannot understand how someone like her own grandfather could be at once so loving and murderous. She admits that it is extremely difficult for her to accept this contradiction even today because she feels it somehow destroys the happy times she had. Angelico then asks her how she has tried to come to terms with the legacy of the past. She thoughtfully replies that she must start by building her own sense of self, separate from her father and her grandfather. When she has learned to do this, she feels she will be able to live with the crimes of her family and of the previous generation and have the strength to live for what she herself believes in.

This whole conversation is very telling of the complexity of Holocaust heritage among descendants of survivors and descendants of perpetrators. Both are faced with an

incredible difficulty to comprehend and accept the horror of their family's past, whether it be received or produced. The experience of both shows how deeply the legacy of the traumatic past shapes their present consciousness and in a way joins them in a similar quest to grow from this knowledge. In the interview I conducted with her recently, I asked her about the sense of conciliatory heritage or at least shared heritage that I felt was revealed throughout the film, especially through the interviews. I asked her if although she experienced incomprehension and hesitation embarking on her journey, did the interviews enable a more open-minded look at the difficult past? She replied:

> Oh there's no question about it. Because I think just the idea of , you have to put this in the context of the time too, just the idea of looking at the Jewish and German side in one film was completely new and hadn't been done before or thought about before and was hugely resisted on the Jewish side because of a lack of, an understandable lack of willingness to go there. And never expected on the German side, because first they weren't dealing with it, and second, they never expected from a Jewish person to come and look at it in the context of this shared legacy. So it's not that I went to do this film with the idea of this is to show openness between these two different sides. I went with the idea to see what are the effects of the Holocaust on these two different sides. But I think that openness came through, if you're willing to deal with this legacy, really, and change things for the future, then that openness has to exist, it's possible and has to exist. Not if you're not. But I think that was in a sense the whole point.[87]

A conversation toward the end of the film between the two filmmakers, Angelico and Lüders, expands this further. Lüders tells Angelico that he envies how her venture into the past can bring her closer to it and to her people, but that his journey somehow distances him from his people and his country's history. Both haunted by their history, they delve into it but reconcile past and present differently. That being said, neither the burden of victimization nor that of oppression eases the experience of heritage. Angelico's film shows that these tendencies are perhaps not too separate and that open-

[87] Irene Angelico (director, *Dark Lullabies*), in discussion with Myriam Tremblay-Sher, March 2012.

minded heritage, in both personal and collective terms, involves acknowledgement of each side's pain and legitimacy.

Summary

Memorial explorations of traumatic heritage as pursued in the documentaries of return outlined above are conflicting quests in which the subject is constantly faced with an indefinable attachment to a dark past that is simultaneously elusive and hard to reach. Whether they lived that past or not, what these Holocaust survivors and their descendants demonstrate through their journeys of return is that the experiential investigation of traumatic memory elicits important questionings over how the past has shaped their present identity and consciousness. The notion that experience acts as a helpful conduit to further understand history is attributed to the post-structuralist turn in the discipline that favoured the subjective and phenomenological aspects of experience over the modernist concern with absolute referentiality. The understanding of traumatic history that documentaries of return provide follows in this trend by showcasing embodied experiences of revisiting historical trauma, relating personal reflection as a vessel to engage with a complex past.

Learning through sharing in personal experience also reflects the expansion of spatial and temporal borders brought upon by modernity that enables a more inclusive understanding of history. The evolving means of communication and travel reflected in documentaries of return point to the expansion of the form in which the past is conceived and the extension of the means to access it. The sharing of experiential memory quests

transcends the specificity of the historical context at study, enabling a relatable means of access to an otherwise unattainable past. The expanding points of access to difficult history through memory point to the value of memory as a shared process. One of the most helpful conceptions of shared memory as applied in documentaries of return is Alison Landsberg's idea of "prosthetic memory," detailing memories stemming from a person's experience of representations of the traumatic past that have no direct link to a person's lived past but are key to the development of subjectivity. Documentaries of return mediate an experience of memory that is affectively shared, enabling a subjective engagement with a past that did not have to be personally encountered.

The inclusive sharing of traumatic memory works not only laterally but vertically as well, across generations. Marianne Hirsch elaborated the concept of "postmemory," designating the experience of those dominated by narratives of traumatic experiences that preceded their birth and that can neither be fully understood nor recreated. This concept is essential to understand the drive behind many documentaries of return whose subject is consumed by the weight of an unassailable memory that is not their own but that is integral to the formation of their identity.

The traumatic characteristic of this memory certainly fuels the drive to make sense of this seemingly inassimilable past. As expounded by psychoanalytic theorists Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, trauma places the event outside the limits of comprehension. Therefore, trauma survivors do not live with memories of a set past, but with an unfinished event that persists into the present, leaving them entrapped by an event that they cannot quite grasp and attains no closure. The therapeutic process to help with this sense of entrapment involves reconstructing a narrative of the event and in turn

re-externalizing it. Documentaries of return provide useful outlets for the experiential retelling of their story.

Undeniably, the process of rebuilding a narrative to work through traumatic experience, especially that of the Holocaust, is a widespread endeavour whose creative manifestations have pervaded the worlds of cinema, art, and literature in the last decades. The overwhelming amount of memorial projects in fiction and non-fiction speak of the insatiable need to externalize and narrate personal stories of historical trauma as well as the extensive public curiosity to share in this experience. Fair arguments could be made denouncing the risk of exploiting historical trauma for sensational appeal through some of these memorial works. Their abounding numbers beg the questioning over their continued relevance. Especially concerning an event as studied and known as the Nazi Holocaust, it can be wondered what new knowledge these memorial projects actually bring to our understanding of that historical trauma. What documentaries of return demonstrate, as emblems of such memorial works, is that the personal revisiting of even a well-known trauma as the Holocaust, reveals new opportunities to reflect on the effect of memory and postmemory on self-definition.

The questioning over how we position ourselves vis-à-vis history reflects the interdependency between past and present that is perhaps best articulated in documentaries of return through their exploration of difficult heritage. Sometimes confronted by legacies of antagonistic cultural memories of war time, subjects return to a difficult past and discover that the complexities of their personal heritage are far more shared than expected. Though experienced differently across cultural and religious borders, the legacy of the trauma of the Holocaust has inevitably pervaded the collective

consciousness of its survivors, witnesses, perpetrators, and descendants. The revisiting of that legacy in documentaries of return demonstrates that no matter which of these categories people fall under, trauma marks a person with the need to reconcile past and present through the complicated tasks of reliving, letting go, and sharing. By representing this memorial process, documentaries of return in fact show that memory itself embodies representation for the one remembering and the one witnessing. Memory and especially traumatic memory activates challenging work to enliven a past that begs to be externalized but resists assimilability. Documentaries of return share that work with a wide public.

The following chapter will examine this complicated process of memorial externalization and resistance as it manifests spatially and on the body.

Chapter 2: The Documentary Depiction of Spatial and Embodied Memory

Amidst all the advancements in memory studies, one of the most prominent lines of thoughts that has arisen is the conception of memory in spatial terms. Related to this notion is the exploration of the memorializing potential of spaces themselves. This chapter will examine the spatial nature and manifestation of memory. Utilizing space/place theory from cultural studies, this chapter will demonstrate that through their exploration of and interaction with various spaces and places, documentaries of return articulate a tangible memorial reflection. Indeed, these documentaries reach towards the idea that memorial contemplation is related to the palpable. As seen in the previous chapter, memory takes on various forms and strongly impacts understandings of history in present consciousness. One of the major ways memory is represented, and one that required its own chapter, is how it manifests spatially and in the body. This chapter will examine this materialization through: spaces and places that actively produce memorial engagement, the vicissitudes of material historiographical evidence, on-site testimony, sense memory and physical interactions with place, emotional reactions to space, and the notion of historical palimpsests. This analysis will show that the spatial and physical embodiment of memory constitutes a constructive way documentaries of return articulate productive engagements with the past.

In order to better appreciate the significance of space in personal memorial quests, it is helpful to situate it first within the larger cultural field. Geographer Edward W. Soja provides a thorough outline of the trajectory of space in critical social theory. In his book *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989),

Soja critiques the long-standing privileging of temporal and historical analysis over spatiality in social theorization. Writing toward the end of the twentieth century, he does note the rise of a postmodern, more balanced critical theory "that re-entwines the making of history with the social production of space, with the construction and configuration of human geographies."[88] The reassertion of space in critical thought envisioned by Soja does not demand the subordination of temporality. Rather, it calls for an "interpretive balance between space, time, and social being"[89] conducive to the making of history. In this context, space must be understood as an active participant in the materialist analysis of history. Soja importantly notes that this was not always the case and that the typically physical view of space had rendered all spatiality with a sense of objectivity, inexorableness, and reification.[90] However, this physical and abstract sense of space negates its active function and construction: "Space in itself may be primordially given, but the organization, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience."[91] Understanding history in this way, as an inclusive social construct of temporal relations and spatial embodiment, has expanded our understanding of the past; of how we remember it, and in turn, of its contemporary significance.

Space as a Performative Agent for Memory: *lieux de mémoire*

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[88] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 11.

[89] Ibid., 23.

[90] Ibid., 79.

[91] Ibid., 79-80.

Considering the post-structuralist turn in cultural studies explained in the previous chapter that privileges experience as a means to understand history, spaces have become understood as more than the settings where events unfold; rather, they are considered to be sites that participate in the exchange of memorial activity. As outlined by Joy Sather-Wagstaff in her book *Heritage that Hurts: Tourists in the Memoryscapes of September 11* (2011), recent scholarship recognizes the performative agency of spaces and places in the social processes of remembrance.[92] Whereas memory is sometimes perceived as being imposed onto places and spaces, Sather-Wagstaff suggests that these are not mere receptacles of memory, but they actively produce memorial meaning, as "places *for* making memory and history, rather than *of* memory and history."[93] This is especially significant as people revisit places for the purpose of reanimating their past meaning, as in documentaries of return. In this sense, the act of remembering spaces of belonging, whether personal or historical, can be understood literally as such, what Anne-Marie Fortier terms "re-membering" in *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity* (2000). Spaces are inhabited, "membered," and as people return, this process is enlivened and continued.

Just as space actively participates in memorial experience, memory is similarly conceived and experienced in spatial terms. As Bennett explains, "as well as being a temporal phenomenon, traumatic memory is envisaged as folding into space in a way that leaves manifest traces: not simply marks that tell a story of the past, but indications of a lived present, of a mode of inhabiting both place and memory."[94] Indeed, memory not

[92] Sather-Wagstaff, 46.

[93] Ibid., 46-47.

only imprints indices of the past on landscapes and architectures, but it acts as a site of encounter between present and past, where people actively engage with history. This in large part accounts for the appeal of returning to a place of historical trauma, as done in documentaries of return, which enables the critical and affective investigation of the spatial layout of memory through its landscapes, architectures, and remnants.

What the subjects in documentaries of return explore is what Pierre Nora famously formulated as "*lieux de mémoire.*" According to Nora, a *lieu de mémoire* is "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community."[95] People commonly experience history and shape their memory through sensory engagement with the environment of *lieux de mémoire* such as commemorative sites (like concentration camps) and historical landmarks. These places, in their conception, construction, and preservation, continually participate in the ever-evolving process of memory-making. As Sather-Wagstaff points out, "commemorative sites are not automatically sacred or otherwise historically important simply because a disastrous event occurred; they are spaces that are continuously negotiated, constructed, and reconstructed into meaningful places through ongoing human action."[96] Each new personal human engagement with these places perpetuates their memorial meaning.

This can be seen in documentaries of return when the subject reflects in an "official" site of memory like a concentration camp. By now, it is considered common knowledge what happened in these places decades ago. The familiar tropes of trauma,

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[94] Bennett, 70.

[95] Nora, xvii.

[96] Sather-Wagstaff, 20.

such as chimneys or barbed wire, do not necessarily reveal new insight into traumatic memory. However, the subject's fresh encounter with the iconic historical spaces inspires a broader reflection on the now so common yet ever so inassimilable symbols of the traumatic past. In Irene Angelico's *Dark Lullabies* (1985), Angelico walks through the Dachau concentration camp where her father was sent. The scene is divided between disturbing stock footage of prisoners in the camp, wide shots of the camp, zoom-ins to ominous-looking towers, rack focuses of barbed wire, and tracking shots of inside the barracks, all under the recurrent musical lullaby theme in the film. While this visual treatment of the space provides an evocative contextualization, what is perhaps most suggestive is the widening pan at the end of the scene. It begins simply on Angelico sitting on a cement edge in the middle of the camp with notebooks on her lap as she twirls a leaf in her hands, and laterally expands away from her to reveal an extreme wide shot of the immense, clean cut camp. As seen in figure 1, her "implacement" in the camp, what philosopher of place Edward Casey describes as "the location of the body within a social or lived space,"[97] combined with the expansive vision of an eerily immense, organized, and empty space, enacts a particular form of the performative agency of the space in her process of remembrance.

Figure 1

Source: Irene Angelico, Dark Lullabies, 1985

[97] Bennett, 76.

Here, it is in the calmness and the pause shared between person and environment that embodies the memorial experience. The close-up on her before the pan, combined with her silence amidst the openness and barrenness of the camp accentuates this.

In the film, she does not reflect specifically on what she feels as she enters the camp. It is only in the interview I conducted with her that I developed a sense of her spatial encounter with the traumatic past. Interestingly, even after twenty-five years of reflection, she still struggled to describe it: "Going into the camp was… [very long pause: eleven seconds of complete silence] I don't know what word to use for it. I don't know what word describes it. It was uh…it was overwhelming, emotion-… overwhelmingly emotional. Everything came, everything surfaced, all, my parents, the people that died. I mean it was… I really don't have words for the experience of it."[98] Her reflection indicates that the engagement with a traumatic space need not be conclusive to be meaningful and sometimes it is the visual, auditory, and spatial silences that inspire meaningful remembrance. The space inhabited here not only acted as the vehicle for this reflection but became pensive itself.

It is interesting, here, to consider *lieux de mémoire* that are not dedicated to remembrance. Innumerable in Eastern Europe, these are landscapes and architectures that have been either destroyed, abandoned, reappropriated, or that are plainly absent. In Jonathan Webber's book, *Rediscovering Traces of Memory*, material fragments of memory of Jewish life in Poland are photographed and identified, rendering forgotten or reclaimed locations ripe with memorial meaning. While photographs make these sites visible, the moving image provides the opportunity to explore these spaces in more depth.

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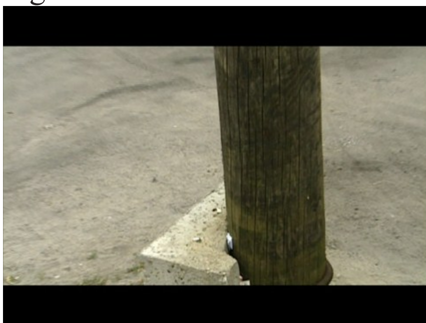
[98] Irene Angelico (director, *Dark Lullabies*), in discussion with Myriam Tremblay-Sher, March 2012.

Documentaries of return, serving personal quests to find and uncover one's roots, participate in such explorations. One of their challenges is the question of how to formally treat places like these, which existed physically only in the past and are now visually absent. Interestingly, the meaning of these places seems to transcend time, for it is precisely the legacy of their vacancy that engages memory.

A good example of this occurs in Marian Marzynski's *Hiding and Seeking: Faith in Tolerance after the Holocaust* (2004) at the beginning of Daum's voyage with his family back to Poland. The family arrives at the location of where a synagogue once stood. The space is now an unoccupied lot, adjacent to a store, where a couple of cars are parked. The camera zooms back to get a wide shot of this barren space and then the shot cuts to a view of a young boy riding a scooter in another much more abandoned part of the space. The image of the boy riding over the rubble of Jewish existence can be seen as a symbol of the appropriation of once thriving Jewish spaces. So many sites of Jewish life were destroyed during the war and the lack of effort to commemorate or revive these places afterwards contributed to their further despoliation. The visual attention to the space in this scene evokes a sense of vacancy and desecration. Daum then enters this space and in accordance with Jewish tradition, he places a piece of paper with prayers for loved ones at this holy site.

Figure 2



Source: Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky, *Hiding and Seeking*, 2004.

As seen in figure 2, this penetration into the space enriches the viewer's conception of this seeming absence, for it locates the synagogue, if only figuratively, in history. Daum's son's subsequent mockery of his father's act further engages the viewer's questioning of this visually absent site because s/he must make her/his own assessment of the space amidst opposing interpretations: the father's revival and the son's dismissal.

The exploration of space in this scene also highlights the importance of place as a building force of human subjectivity. As John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel explain in their *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (2011), "identity is constructed in and through place, whether by our embrace of a place, our inhabitation of a particular point in space, or by our rejection of and departure from a given place and our movement toward, adoption and inhabitation of, another."[99] Daum's celebration of the space of the absent synagogue alongside his son's rejection of it as a site of meaning articulate well their disjointed sense of identity vis-à-vis their history. On the one hand, Daum seeks to reconnect with his past by spatially revisiting it in order to shed light for his sons on his open-minded present consciousness. On the other hand, his son refuses to engage with the spatiality of his family history in order to preserve his physical and cultural separateness. The notion that place informs the construction of identity potentially implies that it itself falls under an essentialist category, a natural entity acting on identity.

However, recent scholarship in geography has sought to demonstrate that place is itself constructed; a social product.[100] The location of the absent synagogue exemplifies

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[99] John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, eds., *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), ix.

[100] Ibid.

this defining characteristic of place as socially constructed, for it embodies the fluid history of the use of space from communal worship to destruction to abandonment to recycling. The filming of this place and the Daum family's interaction with it reflects the double nature of place as a both constitutive and constructive force of human identity and subjectivity. It reflects cinema's shared definition with space as both natural and constructed, as the result of both ontology and codes.[101] Indeed, cinema and especially documentary has been understood as a medium of truth where the material world leaves its impression on the film strip. At the same time though, this interpretation has been revised to conceive of cinema as an illustration of text or language. The documentary visualization of the absent synagogue enacts that duality, for it at once reveals the changed reality of the place and it forms a visual construction of it through its framing and editing choices. In so doing, it simultaneously situates and builds the subjects' identity relation with the place.

This scene's exploration of the space also shapes the spatial relation between past and present by bringing into presence what has been historically made absent. It visually reconfigures space in the way Hans Belting describes "iconic presence" to explain how images substitute absence by a different type of presence: "*Iconic presence* still maintains a body's absence and turns it into what must be called *visible absence*. Images live from the paradox that they perform *the presence of an absence* or vice versa."[102] Daum's reaffirmation of a long standing tradition of personal dedication to space acts not only as a reminder of what is now absent; it also assumes and marks the historical transformation

[101] Ibid., x.

[102] Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2005), 312.

of the space. By placing a traditional piece of writing in a crack in a modern cement post, Daum enacts a jarring spatial encounter that enlivens the tension between past and present.

Similarly, in *Dark Lullabies* the disparity between the presence of the Dachau concentration camp and the traumatic past referred to by the name of the town raises an impression of that past for which there is no visual. Angelico arrives in the town of Dachau and the first eight seconds of the scene show the contemporary sign for Dachau at the train station. In voice-over, she then explains the daily occurrences in this pretty town over shots of people setting up their shops and going to work. The scene then proceeds with Angelico visiting the camp. In her voice-over she comments on the strangeness of a quaint contemporary town harbouring such a dark past with only a spectral presence of it despite its physical remnants in the middle of town. Jeffrey Skoller discusses the meaning of such disparities in revisiting spaces with a traumatic past: "The sense of a quotidian into which past and present flow is disrupted because a gap now exists between the familiar everydayness of life in the present and everydayness of a past now unimaginable.… The intangible presence in this gap creates an insistence that there *is* something that inheres in this site."[103] What this gap points to is an ongoing need for a re-interpretation of the space as time passes.

Nuances of Physical Historiographical Evidence

In *Dark Lullabies* this re-interpretation of the space should begin at the first shot of the sign for Dachau at the train station. That name is instilled with such sinister

[103] Skoller, 114.

historical meaning, as the name of a deadly concentration camp during the war. However, when shown on a sign designating a train stop, with people casually waiting around it, the meaning of the place it designates must be readjusted, at once recognizing its dark history and acknowledging its evolving and diversified signification. Janet Walker addresses this when she discusses the vicissitudes of material historiographical evidence. In examining films that deal with remnants of trauma, like physical elements of concentration camps, she states "such materials are not self-evident as historiographical building blocks. They too must be read."[104] She underscores the challenge that just as some assemblage work is required to understand memory, so is it necessary for understanding physical settings. The sign for Dachau cannot be accepted first hand as just another stop on the train, and yet it cannot be solely read as the emblem of past trauma. It has come to symbolize diverse moments and sites over time and is therefore inherently discursive.

The need for material objects and places to be re-read becomes especially important when considering the visualization of such iconic spaces of trauma like Auschwitz. This is clear in Brian Mckenna's *A Journey Back* when Garfein walks through the eerily barren, snow-covered, and serene landscape of Auschwitz. The rubble, the protruding pipes, the barbed wire and other such physical materials necessarily evoke the inconceivable trauma of the past. They are material remnants of that history. Yet as such, their meaning surpasses historiographical evidence, for as they physically change with time or even disappear, and as different people engage with them and attach their personal stories onto them, they acquire new meaning. Their visualization through the documentary aesthetic further problematizes their vicissitude as historic materials.

[104] Walker, *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*, 176.

Documentary has long been claimed to provide access to the real. However, corresponding the filmic space to the reality of the world is a matter of representation, which is always discursive, and the organization of the resulting images is a further construction. Documentaries of return counteract the objectivity of space by restoring memory and history to it and in turn, reconfiguring a sense of place. Within this framework, the documentary profilmic space must be understood as a coded composition that can be actively processed and interpreted. The fact that the filmed space in documentary is commanded by a lived experience that happened in lived time does not negate its formation as a story from which different meanings may be derived.

This is exemplified in *A Journey Back*. What we see of Auschwitz as Garfein walks through is in part the relics of a known history, in part Garfein's personal memorialization of what those materials mean to him, and in part a multitude of other interpretations that cannot be visually assimilated. The crew filmed the camp when no tourists were there, but a typical day visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps involves shuffling through thousands of tourists. Indeed in 2011 alone, for example, there were 1, 405, 000 visitors at this former German concentration.[105] As millions of people visit the traces of traumatic history in Auschwitz, it is important to ask how this space evolves as a symbolic landscape. As objects are organized, as commemorative and explicative plaques are integrated into barracks where prisoners once lived (and died), and as people examine, pray, cry, and dedicate personal interpretations to various objects and parts throughout the camp, Auschwitz as a lived place is continually transformed.

[105] "Record Number of Visitors to Auschwitz Museum in 2011," Memorial and Museum: Auschwitz-Birkenau, last modified January 12, 2012, http://en.auschwitz.org/m/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=953&Itemid=7.

This transformation is captured by the documentary aesthetic of the film. The immense wide shots that embody the vastness of the space, the ground level shots that highlight the texture of the camp's rubble, and the sheer length of time the camera remains in the space all allow the various silences and stories of history to emerge from the materiality of the space. The various readings from the space are perhaps further enabled by *A Journey Back*'s documentary mode. Unlike *Dark Lullabies*, *Birthplace*, and *Hiding and Seeking*, *A Journey Back* is not strictly autobiographical. To be sure, it is a personal documentary that follows Jack Garfein's journey through his past. However, certain cues point to a somewhat more expository mode of address, most notably, the film's voice-over narration not being Garfein's own. As a result, the "narrative space," though centered on Garfein's story, opens itself up to further readings.

***In Situ* Testimony**

As places perpetually renew their historical meaning, it is interesting to analyze people's interest in returning to those sites and sharing their experience, memory or even postmemory. Documentaries of return showcase these types of "situated testimony" or "reflected interviews delivered *in situ* from the very place where catastrophic events occurred and, in some cases, while the situation continues to unfold."[106] *In situ* testimonies take different forms in documentaries of return. Sometimes they take place on historically iconic sites like concentration camps; other times they occur in more mundane places of personal significance for the subject; and yet other times the subject has no recollection of the space, but it still holds personal memorial meaning. Distinctive

[106] Walker and Sarkar, 11.

to *A Journey Back* is its long situated testimonies in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. In the snowed-in entrance of the camp, survivor Jack Garfein recalls his traumatic memories from his experience in the camp when he was a thirteen-year-old boy. He delivers an interactive testimony, speaking with and even physically manipulating Canadian journalist Eric Malling who joins Garfein on his journey of return. He talks about being separated from his family as they arrived and he actively searches and points to the precise placement of these events. Changing positions, walking to specific spots, and calculating distances, he is constantly engaging with his surroundings so that the articulation of his memory is materialized and localized.

While the representation of this kind of testimony, rooted in place, materializes memorial experience and gives it a sensory accessibility, it is problematic to assume that it is more evocative and even useful to making sense of traumatic memory than testimony in a created setting, such as a composed interview in a home. Walker and Sarkar discuss the potential limits of *in situ* testimony as well as remind us of the discursive agency of place. While they examine the value of situated testimony they acknowledge that:

> the presence of returnees to a "fatal environment" does not by any means obviate the need to comprehend the psychic dimensions and the unassimilability of place and occurrence that make up the traumatic experience of which they speak. The ground of testimony *sur place* – like exilic space – is always, already "other." Here, the insights of critical human geography are crucial, for in this post-positivist sub-discipline a materialist critical spatial perspective is reasserted (against what Edward Soja, for example, sees as "despatializing historicism") such that location matters, but place is not essentialized or reified as a truthtelling topography. The stones don't speak except through a kind of critical ventriloquism, yet they are more than mere inert features of a fixed terrain.[107]

It may therefore be reductive to conclude that more meaningful knowledge is attained from site-specificity. The spatial context of the *in situ* testimony cannot be taken for

[107] Ibid., 86.

granted as inherently revelatory of memorial truth. Landscapes change and memories are imperfect, so the use of both to complement each other in the testimonial act must be received with a critical eye.

What can be said about the value of *in situ* testimony as a productive means of sharing memorial meaning is that the bodily presence at the site and its engagement with space establish an "affective geography"[108] where the personal meaning of the traumatic past is brought into being through the materiality of the testimonial "implacement." This is exemplified in Pawel Lozinski's *Birthplace* (1992) when Grynberg returns to a now buried hiding spot in the forest bordering his hometown in Poland. Unlike Auschwitz, this is by no means an iconic space of traumatic history. He walks through the forest with a couple of locals who help him find a dugout that protected him from the Nazis during the war. As seen in figure 3, this hiding spot is undetectable as such within the forest, blending in perfectly with the landscape.

Figure 3

Source: Pawel Lozinski, *Birthplace*, 1992.

Its material identity has evolved so much over the years that it is Grynberg's and the locals' affective recollection of and engagement with it that re-contextualizes it in space

[108] Ibid., 84.

and time. Grynberg recalls physical and emotional details of the dugout that bring his memory into place. He explains in voice-over that he remembers it being very small and they needed to sit crosswise and could not stand up; he was not allowed to walk or run; it was dark; at night, the men would remove their shirts and wave off the lice into a fire; and he recalls how completely dirty it was. All of these reflections, in their specificity and sensory evocation, materialize and spatially animate his memory.

When he arrives at the location of where once stood the dugout, the locals begin to describe how it was back then. They meticulously recall its placement, how it was covered and with what type of tree branch, and where the opening was for the chimney. As they describe the pit, the camera follows them and cuts to shots of a snow-covered forest ground. The camera's intercutting of the locals' and Grynberg's face with the landscape of the dugout denies a total immersion into the space of historical trauma, for it does not linger. However, the autobiographical tone of the film complements the visual engagement with the space. Since the film very directly chronicles Grynberg's journey and is narrated exclusively through his personal reflections and memories, the visual attention to the space of the dugout, though not extensive, becomes strongly informed by his personal journey.

The documentary mediation of this generic site in the middle of the forest, then, is imbued with a deeper historical imaginary through the subjects' memory of it. Grynberg's interest to revisit this place, to "re-member" it, is elicited by the unfixed and evolving identity of that place. The visual capture of this encounter becomes just as important as that of the space itself. Indeed, "if the indexicality of the moving image might be better understood to name an impatient desire for reference rather than a means

of actually securing the referent, so, too, is place a term and object of desire."[109] The place of the dugout as object of Grynberg's memorial desire is experientially mediated through the use of sound in this scene. Quite simply, Grynberg and the locals are surrounded by forest sounds: birds chirping and branches crackling. These are amplified by the fact that there is no music in this documentary. The aural cues of this scene fuel the search for memorial indexicality, rendering the auditory quality of this scene as a means to deepen the sense of memory as a spatial experience.

The affective engagement with spatial remembrance can be just as powerful even when the memory is not one's own. Indeed the identification of a physical point of reference can be instructive in postmemory quests seeking to revive the significance of pre-existing states of mind. As Guerin and Hallas point out, "our identity is strongly connected to experiential and mnemonic continuity. The paradox for children of Holocaust survivors is that they construct their identities through powerful, disturbing events that were, for them, 'events without experience.'"[110] Therefore, interactions with the real sites of past trauma help to connect this memory "without experience" to some kind of lived experience. This occurs in *Hiding and Seeking* when Akiva, the sceptical and belligerent son, encounters the space of the barn where his grandfather was hid from the Nazis. Until then resistant to this voyage through his family's history, walking through this place and talking with its current inhabitants, opened him up for the first time to the emotional and affective power of postmemorial experience. He is visibly moved by this encounter, as he cries while reading a blessing dedicated to this space.

[109] Rhodes and Gorfinkel, xviii.

[110] Guerin and Hallas, 166.

This points to the power of place in the process of anchoring postmemory to one's own embodied experience *in situ*.

Sense Memory and Physical Interaction with Places

The type of memory that is often triggered and articulated through these on-site encounters is "sense memory." In terms of historical trauma, this concept was best elaborated by Charlotte Delbo who wrote about her experience as a prisoner in Auschwitz. For Delbo, sense memory renders the traumatic past intelligible through a material point of reference. Unlike "external memory" or "common memory," which articulates memory through chronological ordering, "sense memory" avoids the distancing act of narration and rather, makes itself felt.[111] By recording the physical imprint of the event, it is always in the present and can thus be experienced affectively. Visual media that seek to convey this type of memorial experience can thus articulate the past less through historical analysis and instead confront it through the realm of the senses.[112] As Laura U. Marks discusses in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), this type of memory can be encoded audiovisually, by translating the "knowledges of the body."[113] The representation of sense memory in the context of historical trauma therefore enables emotional and bodily connections to be established where the image shown is not necessarily itself traumatizing; rather, it is an

[111] Ernst Van Alphen, "Caught by Images: Visual Imprints in Holocaust," in *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, eds. Shelley Hornstein and Florence Acobowitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 104.

[112] Bennett, 57.

[113] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 130.

"image of the force of trauma—of its capacity to infuse and transform bodies, objects and spaces."[114]

This idea of embodied memorial experience is well manifested in documentaries of return through physical interaction with places. In these instances, the subject touches, feels, and inspects the physicality and materiality of landscapes and sites of past trauma. Through this sensory interaction her/his personal memorial meaning is actualized and at least part of the experience can be shared. An interesting example of this occurs in Marian Marzynski's *Shtetl* (1996) when Marzynski returns to Bransk, Poland, with survivor Jack Rubin. Rubin, now a seventy-three year old man, enters the barn of a Polish farmer in which he hid with his brother for eight months during the war. With vigour, he agilely climbs the latter and investigates the space. He touches the walls and the planks and recalls the details of his experience in the barn years ago. He finds the precise crack in the wood panels through which he would look out. This material encounter with the space can be seen in figure 4.

Figure 4

Source: Marian Marzynski, *Shtetl*, 1996.

His meticulous traversing and handling of the space transforms this seemingly generic barn into a landmark of memorial significance, as it is being experienced tactually and

[114] Bennett, 68.

with such curiosity. Rubin and Marzynski then head a couple kilometers further to another barn in which Rubin hid, unbeknownst to the farmer. He explains how he and his brother would eat when they were hiding there during the war. Fifty years later, standing at the entrance of the barn, he looks for an egg in a nearby haystack along with a piece of straw. Without hesitation, he then cracks open the egg, inserts the piece of straw, and drinks from the egg to show how he and his brother managed to eat clandestinely when they were hiding. This is a gripping visual in which memory is tangibly enlivened by Rubin's physical participation with the materiality of space.

Through these scenes, the film enacts the reconstituting of space, part and parcel of the function of the filmic medium itself: to formulate a cogent discourse of spatial representation.[115] This is especially significant in documentary as "a particular mode of spatial discourse about the real world, a form of symbolic spatial production which creates, through re-approproation and recombination, a new lived relationship with the space-image, not through identification with the figure of the star but empathy with the social subjects of a world we inhabit ourselves."[116] In *Shtetl*, Rubin's sensory expedition through the barn space and his determined re-discovery of familiar materials redefine this space, as they return its past context into presence, rendering it historically meaningful for an audience newly introduced to this lived space.

Another instance of a moving physical interaction with a place of memory happens in *A Journey Back*. Toward the end of the film, Garfein and Malling are examining the landscape of the now destroyed gas chambers used to be in Birkenau and they find a mud puddle through the snow in which they discover pieces of bone. In a

[115] Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 79.

[116] Ibid.

jarring shot, Garfein penetrates this space and picks up a few pieces of bone and thoughtfully rolls and feels them in his hand. It is haunting to see him tactually handling these remnants of trauma. Meanwhile, Malling reflects: "a hundred yards away from where they thought they were taking showers…and I wonder how deep it is." As he utters this somewhat profound thought, it is fascinating to watch Garfein remain still and unresponsive, captivated by these bits of traumatic history (and memory for him), for an entire fifty-two seconds. This kind of physical interaction with traumatic space is quite striking. By gently and pensively touching these bones, their meaning and even their life is reanimated and tangibly memorialized.

Emotional reactions to traumatic spaces also enact poignant connections with a memorial past. Their visualization in documentaries of return reflects the visceral impact of a physical engagement with place. This is strikingly demonstrated in the scene in *A Journey Back* when Garfein is in Auschwitz and manipulates the bones in his hand. Shortly after he handles them, he stands up and painfully tries to articulate his feelings about what he has just encountered. In a completely unexpected turn, this usually articulate and nondramatic man simply says "makes you want to…" and yells wildly and passionately a scream of anger and incomprehension. This jolting moment suspends the watching experience for a second and then empathically engages the viewer even more deeply into the meaning of this historical memory.

Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance after the Holocaust also communicates emotional reactions to places. This is most strongly exemplified in the scene where the family arrives at the barn where Daum's father-in-law was hidden from the Nazis. The sons and their mother conduct a blessing for this place and in an emotional turning point

of the film, Akiva, the previously scornful son, breaks down in tears, overcome by the significance of this place. This scene showcases the film's exploration of the emotional significance of intergenerational memory. The experience of this space brings out the personal meaning spawned by the intersection of history and postmemory. Akiva's strong emotional reaction to this traumatic space, especially considering his character development so far, is quite shocking and enables the reflective space to reassess the newly endowed memorial significance of this barn. The visualization of his reaction to the barn space now elicits more than the imagination of its traumatic history; the personalization of this spatial encounter transforms the barn's "implacement" in the present by reanimating, if only by proxy, the previously unassimilable experience of past trauma.

Palimpsests

By personally engaging in the topographies of remembrance, documentaries like these offer the reflective space for the viewer to process the interactive constellation of history, memory, and identity. Networks of history and memory are also negotiated with the changing uses of places themselves through time. This brings up the concept of palimpsests. Historians have appropriated this term, as it proves to accurately describe sites whose meaning changes as different histories inscribe themselves on them. In his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Andreas Huyssen discusses Berlin after the war as palimpsest: "Berlin as palimpsest implies voids, illegibilities, and erasures, but it also offers a richness of traces and memories,

restorations and new constructions that will mark the city as lived space."[117] This reading of Berlin as palimpsest could easily be applied to the entirety of Poland after the war.

Some places act as more obvious palimpsests than others, but the location of the absent synagogue in *Hiding and Seeking* offers an interesting nuance to the concept. On the one hand, the actual place itself—the synagogue—is completely absent, so there are no traces or lingering "texts" that remain visible. On the other hand, the erasure itself of the synagogue, the use of the abandoned lot for parking, and the new construction around it all imply the potential of the space for new histories to inscribe themselves on it. While the site no longer holds remnants of the synagogue, the family's visit and their interaction with the space symbolically preserve its trace. This is further accentuated when Daum leaves an actual text in the location of the synagogue, perpetuating the historical imprinting of the space.

The historical palimpsest is manifested quite interestingly in Marian Marzinski's *Shtetl* as well. At one point, Marzynski and his friend Nathan Kaplan revisit Bransk, a small Polish village where Kaplan's father grew up. In voice-over, Marzynski explains that in an effort to eradicate Jewish culture, the Germans had ordered Poles to remove gravestones from Jewish cemeteries and use them to build roads and sidewalks. Marzynski and Kaplan therefore head to the Catholic parish of Bransk, where they know that old Jewish gravestones were used to make the sidewalk, and ask the local priest if they can unearth them. They begin digging, and sure enough, they pull out old Jewish gravestones. As can be seen in figure 5, it is incredibly jarring to actually see how the physical landscape of Bransk has been constructed with recast personal histories.

[117] Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, 84.

Figure 5

Source: Marian Marzynski, *Shtetl*, 1996.

Like a palimpsest, the stones never lose their original engraving, and as they are being used rather sombrely in an attempt to rewrite history, new historical meaning etches itself on them.

The team then heads over to a farm where Romaniuk has been informed that another Jewish gravestone was cut into a circle and used as a grinding wheel by the stable. They examine it, pick it up, and show how the Hebrew epitaph is clearly visible. For two years, Romaniuk has been collecting such stones and bringing them to an old Jewish cemetery. The team arrives there with their newly found stones and place them among the dozens of others. Gathered together, in their transformed shapes, the stones once again embody sites where history is rewritten. They had acquired new historical meanings through their use elsewhere and are now returned where they were originally set out to serve as markers of personal history. They thus commence their new inscription in time.

Summary

Memory and commemoration cannot be fully understood without assessing the impact of space on these practices. While memorialization constitutes a strong affective act, it is important to recognize it as a physical act also. Furthermore, the environment in which it is performed is an active participant in enlivening the past into present consciousness. Understanding history, then, also demands the recognition of space as an ever-evolving contributing factor to the manifestation of events and changing social perspectives over time. Space embodies social transformation and experience, thus a more thorough historical analysis necessitates understanding the inclusion of spatiality as the configuration of human geographies. This way, memorial projects and even the act of remembering become more than a mental or historical process; they are imbued with a whole other experiential dimension.

Spaces where memory and history unfold should be conceived as more than the mere setting for this learning. The past is not a secure entity that imprints itself whole on the physical environment of space; it is an evolving manifestation that is continuously reconsidered more thoroughly, a process engendered by the force of its changing landscape. Landscapes and sites in and of themselves also provide triggers for personal and collective memory, signaling the appeal of journeys of revisiting that characterize documentaries of return. The exploration of previously familiar places or faintly acquainted places or even personally unknown places evokes a critical and affective process of situating oneself in history. The documentary visualization of this process enriches it, as it stimulates the activeness of place itself. Indeed, the moving image in

many ways reflects the flux of place and the construction of identity related to it. Documentary problematizes this dynamic by complicated its spatial access to the real. Though engaging with actual, lived spaces, its aesthetic choices and the narratives it follows and develops contribute to a reappropriation of the space and the articulation of a new spatial discourse that further the development of an identity in relation to space. This is especially relevant when considering historical documentaries, such as these documentaries of return, which spatially situate as well as construct memorial identity relations with sites belonging to a shared, inhabited world.

For example, when survivors return to *lieux de mémoire*, they re-experience the past in a way that enables them to reflect on and possibly reshape the knowledge they have gained over the years. For descendants of survivors, *lieux de mémoire* give them the chance to come closer to an experience of history that is not their own, but has had an indefinable deep impact on their self-definition. The representation of these processes in documentaries of return is just as informative whether returning to iconic places of remembrance (iconic places here refer to established historical emblems well known to the public as sites of remembrance) or "ordinary" places, such as hometowns. For the former, the visual examination of the space can be varied and thorough, as in *A Journey Back*, or wide and sweeping, as in *Dark Lullabies*. Though differently in each case, the juxtaposition of spatial exploration with the personal narrative of return and discovery articulates well the complex interplay of memorial distance and closeness to historical trauma. Whereas the representation of sites like these is often automatically compared to previously seen tropes of concentration camps, the visualization of ordinary lived spaces evokes a new, less familiar form of memorial process. Indeed, sites that are not

publically commemorated invite a distinctly personal revival of memorial meaning that brings into presence forgotten, overlooked or seemingly invisible traces of historical trauma.

Whether at an infamous landmark or on a generic lot, retrieving or discovering the significance of the past requires a constant reading of the materiality of the space. Physical traces of history cannot be taken for granted as inherent evidence of past trauma. They must be analyzed as texts that evolve through time. As places continually renew their historical meaning, they invigorate on-site testimonies. It is therefore important to recognize that just like the places themselves, *in situ* testimonies are not inherently more revelatory of memorial truth because they are geographically linked to the past. However, situated testimony bespeaks the possibility for "affective geography" where the bodily presence on site establishes a personal connection with the landscape of history. *In situ* testimony, therefore, holds the distinct value of enabling new memorial understanding to emerge through the critical, sensory, and emotional engagement with the space.

Affective engagement with memory is richly cultivated through physical interactions with and emotional reactions to space. For the person involved, sensing the materiality of the place is often quite cathartic and informative. Moreover, the representation of such an act is very powerful, for witnessing someone immerse oneself so thoroughly in an environment and explore a place with such interest and vigour invites an almost participatory sharing of the memorial experience. Similarly, emotional reactions to places of trauma elicit a strong sense of empathy that makes the personalization of the space more readable.

Interestingly, spaces themselves transform their readability, sometimes quite literally, through time. Here, it is the idea of the palimpsest that offers an interesting way to look at the changing historical meaning of space. A palimpsest perpetually acquires new meaning as different texts are inscribed on it, while never losing its original engraving. Perhaps this is the best way to describe the sites of historical trauma as embodied memory. Always sustaining their original meaning, new stories continually etch themselves on them and returning to those sites involves engaging with this moving history in order to formulate the significance of the traumatic past in the present.

In the next chapter this formulation will be explored in terms of the image itself. It will address how the visual construction of returning to sites of historical trauma opens up varied points of access into embodied traumatic memory through the materiality itself of the image, the act of bearing witness, and the visualization of testimony.

Chapter 3: The Image of History, Memory, and Trauma

The representation of memory discourses and their spatial manifestation lies at the heart of documentaries of return. Another key issue in the analysis of documentaries of return is their mediation of historical trauma. This chapter will investigate this important aspect of representation. By outlining the debates in trauma and visual studies over the (in)adequacy of the image to represent trauma as well as the move toward alternative constructs of the image, by examining the materiality of the image, by studying the imaging of the act of bearing witness, and by assessing the visualization of personal testimony, this chapter seeks to evaluate how the documentary articulation of traumatic history informs the subjective engagement with its personal aesthetic and message of discovery.

Theoretical Developments: Issues of Representation

The representation of historical trauma and questions of traumatic imagery have elicited complex debates over issues of authenticity, ethics, creative responsibility, and education in the last decades. These questionings arose in large part due to the horrifying events of the Nazi Holocaust and the challenges faced by witnesses and creative minds alike to recapture them. In the 1950s and 1960s, filmmakers, artists, writers, scholars, and theologians began to reflect on this dark time in history and what it meant for human nature and morality.[118] It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that historians and media scholars explored issues of the representation of this traumatic event. It was generally

[118] Guerin and Hallas, 7.

assumed that any attempt at visual representation would inevitably fall short of accuracy and in turn could not do justice to an historical trauma of that magnitude. As Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas explain in their seminal volume *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, "in the interests of minimising distortions which might lead to the erasure of the event, literary and textual representation was repeatedly deemed more honest, more responsible because it did not claim absolute, mimetic truth."[119] However, by the 1980s already, visual representations of traumatic events, most notably of the Nazi Holocaust, were abounding. In cinema and in documentary in particular, prominent works such as Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* (1955) and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) had gained tremendous attention and study and were dramatically evolving the way the traumatic past was envisioned and remembered. Evaluating the visual representation of trauma became inevitable and an integral part of a larger questioning on how to make meaning and learn from the difficult past.

Ilan Avisar, in his 1988 pivotal work on Holocaust films, discussed the challenges of depicting traumatic imagery. The mere title of his book, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, pointed to the common perspective at the time, the difficulty of visually achieving what seemed inconceivable. He explained that the representation of the Holocaust is intricately tied to what he calls the "discourse of the Holocaust," which is founded upon "the unprecedented nature of the event, and from the compelling factual sources. The imperative to be truthful determines one chief trait of this discourse…"[120] Problematically, he further argues that the reality of the Holocaust, being so extraordinary and unbelievable, resists the conception of truth, the core of every

[119] Ibid.

[120] Avisar, x.

mimetic artistic endeavour.[121] While there had been hesitation over the adequacy and authenticity of the imaging of historical trauma such as the Holocaust, as demonstrated by the "discourse of the Holocaust," the need to visually interpret and understand an event as incomprehensible as this one remained prominent, as seen through the multitude of documentaries about the Holocaust released since. At issue, then, is the ever-growing drive to create cinematic images of this traumatic past as a means to gain access to it, alongside claims of this effort's inadequacy.

As Elie Wiesel, survivor and writer, has claimed, the Holocaust exists with an inherent limit of representation. It marks a finality "never to be comprehended or transmitted. Only those who were there know what it was; the others will never know."[122] Responding to this statement, Holocaust film scholar Joshua Hirsch found Wiesel's view problematic in that it "implies both a rule of representational transparency to which the Holocaust is the exception, and an assertion of an essential truth of the Holocaust known only to witnesses. I would argue, on the other hand, that no historical representation gives access to essential truth, not even the memories of witnesses."[123] Hirsch's argument sheds light on an important dimension of representation that this research will address. The imaging of trauma and especially of historical trauma should not be confined to a need for essentialist truth, nor does it inevitably claim to convey it. All historical representation is limited, and the representation of historical trauma is perhaps even more limited. However, it is precisely through those limits that the image, and of interest here, the documentary image, may visually articulate a meaningful truth of

[121] Ibid.

[122] Joshua Hirsch, 5.

[123] Ibid.

the event. The moral incomprehensibility of genocide, the visual documentation having mostly been taken by the oppressors, and the sheer horror of so many deaths are all obstacles in developing an adequate visual documentary depiction of the Holocaust. Given this often proclaimed impossibility of comprehension, though, it is still possible to question, learn, and in a muted way, share in the remembered experience of this trauma, and in turn provide entry points to elements of the lived reality of the Holocaust. This is what documentaries of return enable through their visual articulation of personal historical trauma.

A more productive questioning over the use and creation of traumatic imagery in the context of the Holocaust, then, involves embracing the seemingly impossible transmission of its trauma and developing different avenues that enable some form of access. This recalls Cathy Caruth's reflection on the phenomenon of trauma in which she argues that it simultaneously calls for historical cognizance and challenges typical approaches to its access.[124] In assessing Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), she suggests that this challenge does not constitute an impasse, though. In *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann famously avoided archival footage and relied solely on present day, on-site testimony. He remained within the boundaries of what can be imagined by denying any concrete depiction of the murder of millions.[125] Caruth claims that the "act of refusal, here, is therefore not a denial of a knowledge of the past, but rather a way of gaining access to knowledge that has not yet attained the form of 'narrative memory.' In its active resistance to the platitudes of knowledge, this refusal opens up the space for a testimony

[124] Caruth, 151.

[125] Gertrud Koch, Jamie Owen Daniel and Miriam Hansen, "The Aesthetic Transformation of the Image of the Unimaginable: Notes on Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* " *October* 48 (Spring 1989): 21.

that can speak beyond what is already understood."[126] Her assessment of *Shoah* is important here because it points to the way in which "the impossibility of a comprehensible story"[127] does not preclude access to a framework of understanding. In *Shoah*, the point of access is this impossibility itself. Lanzmann uses incomprehensibility as the point of departure for his quest to enliven traumatic memory in present consciousness.

Another important point of access, and one that will be expounded here, is the experience of personal return. In the documentaries examined in this research, the survivor of the Holocaust or the descendant of a survivor spatially and temporally returns to the place of trauma. Her/his emotional, intellectual, and physical journey is what opens the door for the viewer to join, share, and begin to understand the confounding reality of historical trauma. There are three dominant ways through which this opening is visually articulated: the materiality of the image, the act of bearing witness, and the visualization of personal testimony.

The Materiality of the Image

In regards to the materiality of the image, the films discussed here create visual opportunities that elicit the exploration and questioning of the remnants of trauma. Indeed, as the Holocaust becomes an increasingly historical trauma, its visual capture relies on its relics. However damaged, forgotten or even erased these traces are, they

[126] Caruth, 155.

[127] Ibid., 154.

remain full of memorial meaning and constitute a valuable index of historical trauma. As film scholar Jeffrey Skoller points out,

> what remains are indeterminate and contested meanings, opacities, and eventually silence, since there can be no representational consensus about exactly what occurred. In other words, in its unspeakability, its obscured visibility, and gaps in narration, the Shoah has rendered the limits of its representability. It would therefore be impossible to accurately explicate such an event without including these silences, opacities, and gaps, which have no apparent content, as part of the fabric of the telling.[128]

Skoller speaks of a crucial element in the visual articulation of historical trauma. Rather than recoiling from the "silences, opacities, and gaps," it is in fact more productive to let them convey the challenging experience of trauma.

Some of the most thought-provoking scenes in documentaries of return are the ones where the subject (and viewer) is placed at the crossroads of intense closeness to trauma and seeming impenetrability. Of all documentaries of return discussed here, Brian Mckenna's *A Journey Back* (1987) spends the most time on site at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. In this documentary survivor Jack Garfein returns to Auschwitz-Birkenau, to where he was deported during the war, and to his hometown in Slovenia, along with renowned Canadian journalist Eric Malling. Garfein and Malling spend a substantial amount of time talking on site at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The film therefore offers the most in-depth exploration of the camp, providing several opportunities to visually experience such a traumatic place in history.

The camp is seen from a variety of camera angles and shot lengths, making visible its enormous and textured landscape. The low angle shots underscore the endless protruding pipes and rubble, and the extreme long shots accentuate the sheer vastness of

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[128] Skoller, 110.

the space. At the same time, the snow and the grey colouring of the landscape attribute a sense of barrenness and loss evoked by the visualization of such a place. The presence of Garfein ensures that this imaging of the camp does not remain merely aesthetically haunting, reminding the viewer of the very much lived experience of this traumatic environment. At one point, there is an eerily beautiful wide shot taken from behind Garfein and Malling as they walk through the camp (see figure 6). The sun is shining on the show amidst the rusty pipes and there is a certain serenity evoked by their calm walk. Garfein is discussing daily life in the camps in a sort of casual way.

Figure 6

Source: Brian Mckenna, *A Journey Back*, 1987

This creates a very jarring image in which beauty, peace, trauma, and matter-of-fact tone exist together. It at once captures the contemporary camp's unnerving appeal and reveals the striking clemency of the sunshine and tranquillity, all the while evoking the imagination of the dark past as Garfein describes the daily routine.

This visualization is characteristic of the structural tone of many documentaries of return in its creation of a contrast that challenges accessibility to traumatic memory. In this instance, the contrast lies between the aesthetic peacefulness and even beauty of the landscape and the opposing horrifying details of the past described by Malling. The

visual construction of this scene emphasizes this interplay thus complicating the search to gain access to the traumatic past. Indeed, the scene is not overtly traumatic and the mixture of traumatic remnants with the silent calm exuded by the blanketing snow highlights what "exceeds the empirical and representable of history."[129] Ensuing are ethereal presences of the past, which are sensed but remain unascertained, and it is precisely through this conflicting experience that they powerfully wield themselves on the present.

Eerie manifestations of the past can also be more tangibly present in documentaries of return, producing what Tina Wasserman, in Guerin and Hallas' volume, describes as "images that are *encoded* with the past, even while this past cannot be imaged,"[130] and this is found in Pawel Lozinski's *Birthplace* (1992). Before discussing Lozinski's film and in order to better understand the productivity of images encoded with the past, it is interesting to look at another documentary of return, which is not included in this discussion due to lack of access to the film, Daniel Eisenberg's *Cooperation of Parts* (1987). Eisenberg, an experimental filmmaker, returned to Poland to attempt to engage with his parents' terrible past and possibly build his identity in relation to what remains incomprehensible. Discussing his film, Wasserman points out the active role Eisenberg's traumatic imagery plays in shaping a contemplative memorial awareness: "It is ultimately through the filmmaker's consciousness of the past and the capacity of his camera to materialise that consciousness that images infused with history can be

[129] Ibid., xv-xvi.

[130] Tina Wasserman, "Constructing the Image of Postmemory," in Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, eds., *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 170.

produced."[131] In the film, Eisenberg is continually confronted with challenges to reach any concrete connection with his parents' trauma. He therefore utilizes his camera to visually articulate these impasses and to formulate creative ways to situate himself amidst the complexity of his family's traumatic history. Key to his journey is precisely this *attempt*. He does not come to understand his parents' journey, nor does his process enable him to construct a fuller identity. What he is left with is the process of an effort and it is that challenge that the film represents in order to enrich the image with the relatable search for self amidst memory and history.

As Jeffrey Skoller explains in his analysis of Eisenberg's film, "throughout the film, he is at once representing this process and resisting its representation. In the fragmentation that occurs through this contradiction, one begins to understand the complexity of his position and, like Eisenberg himself, begins to ask questions."[132] This understanding of the film is important to this present analysis of other documentaries of return, for it highlights the agency of the image which, in its incongruity, engages the viewer in a much more critical reflection over the conflict of representation and accessibility spawned by traumatic memory. The conflict invites the interplay of empathy with as well as subjective questioning over the memorial meaning of someone else's personal history.

With these analyses in mind and returning to *Birthplace*, it is possible to assess the evocative meaning produced by the image's materialization of memorial consciousness. In *Birthplace*, at the heart of Henryk Grynberg's journey is his quest to uncover his father's death during the war. As he eventually finds out, his father was in

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[131] Ibid.

[132] Skoller, 66-67.

fact murdered by a local non-Jewish Polish villager. At the end of the film, Grynberg discovers where the body of his father was un-commemoratively buried and he goes there with a group of locals who help him find his remains. The scene is patient, as the locals begin to dig the cold winter ground and Grynberg watches carefully, awaiting a sign of his father's remains. The scene alternates between close-ups of the men digging and close-ups of Grynberg reflecting and sharing in voice-over his last memories of his father. This image construction creates a sense of suspense, as it shows Grynberg attentively waiting to see if the locals will find something. At the same time, the long process of digging the earth in the middle of a vast field reveals the seeming impossibility of uncovering the past.

Again, as in *A Journey Back*, this type of visual construction epitomizes the clashing structure, this time between the dire personal search for traumatic memory and material challenge of uncovering that past, which characterizes many documentaries of return. It is this contrasting juxtaposition that produces meaning. Indeed, in this instance, the clash setup between Grynberg's anxious determination to find his father and the endless, open, and bare texture of the landscape manifests the tension that characterizes the intellectual and emotional challenge to reach the traumatic past.

The scene continues and after several minutes of silent anticipation, one of the diggers makes a "cling" sound with his shovel. It was revealed earlier that Grynberg's father was buried holding a milk bottle and that if the bottle was found then so would his body. The sound of the shovel hitting the bottle marks an emotional turning point in the scene, as the locals anxiously hand it over to Grynberg and he inspects it carefully. The "cling" here accentuates well the provocative editing of the scene, for the presence

created by the sound contrasts with the absence of the man for whom they are looking. This simple, generic bottle, covered in mud, becomes the first visible and tangible emblem of this man's traumatic past. There is a culturally acquainted tone to unearthing graves to reach the past, but the materiality of the scene breaks through the familiarity of the trope. It works on multiple registers to draw in but constantly disrupt the viewer's expectation: it can show but it cannot show. Indeed, there is a certain predictability that is established when they begin digging. It can be assumed that they will find what they are looking for and that outcome will inherently reveal the connection between the past and present. However, the sudden sound of a bottle subverts the predictability of their search, for it signals only a hint of presence and through this subversion it opens up the possibility of affectively sharing in the ephemeral quest through traumatic history.

This is further accentuated as one of the locals continues his digging by gently tapping the ground to delicately find the body. The light tapping actually becomes an intense visual experience as it anticipates the discovery of such a fragile remnant of the past. Amidst the mud and the silence, the slow uncovering of the traumatic past is engaging in terms not only of the sense of anticipation it creates, but also of the reflective space it provides to contemplate what it means to find the abandoned humanity of an almost lost yet unforgettable traumatic past. A skull-shaped object suddenly begins to appear in the dirt and Grynberg rushes down the pit. Showing very little emotion so far throughout the film, this moment is powerful as Grynberg desperately reaches for this almost undetectable head amidst the earth and gently digs it out (see figure 7).

Figure 7

Source: Pawel Lozinski, *Birthplace*, 1992

The camera stays on him as he holds it and looks at it carefully, creating a jarring image of contact with the past, but a contact that is strangely humane and alienating all at once. The skull is so filled with mud that it is almost unidentifiable as a skull and it appears lost in time, literally buried like any other artifact from the war. Yet Grynberg's care of it also brings its memorial meaning into the present.

In this way, the image is encoded with the traumatic past through Grynberg's revival of it. This revival is captured with silence, burial, and the jarring inanimateness of human remains. It is this entire picture of traumatic memory that is gripping. Throughout this scene, Grynberg's emotional journey is touching, yet it is inscribed within a greater context of distanciation and contemplation. As a result, this imagery is not solely encountered through emotional identification with Grynberg, but through a more varied involvement with sensation. This recalls Jill Bennett's analysis of trauma-related art in her book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, which she explains is "best understood as *transactive* rather than *communicative*. It often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the 'secret' of personal experience."[133] Though her book deals primarily with contemporary art, her study lends

[133] Bennett, 7.

itself well to other visual representations of trauma, like film. What is interesting about her analysis is that she nuances the notion of empathy as the common form of engagement with traumatic imagery.

Bennett reviews Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement," which he uses to describe feeling for another while being aware of the difference between one's personal sensitivities and the experience of the other. She also discusses the Brechtian critique of identification in art, which Brecht termed "crude empathy," signaling "a feeling for another based on the assimilation of the other's experience to the self."[134] She utilizes both these notions to develop her own concept of empathy that combines affect and critical examination, creating a form of empathic identification "grounded not in affinity (*feeling for* another insofar as we can imagine *being* that other) but on a *feeling for* another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible."[135] The type of imagery that activates this conjunction of affective and intellectual mechanisms cannot be reduced to mere representation; it records the subjective devices that exceed their representation, and in turn, reflects the features of traumatic memory.[136] The image in the previously discussed digging scene of *Birthplace* articulates well Bennett's form of empathic viewing, for it does not inundate the viewer in unbounded sympathy for Grynberg; it constructs a dialectic of sensation, feeling, and difficult reflection that enables the viewer to personally engage with Grynberg's experience while making use of the necessary space to critically examine the impact of active traumatic memory on the present.

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[134] Ibid., 8-9.

[135] Ibid., 10.

[136] Ibid., 23.

Similarly, in another scene in *Birthplace*, Grynberg returns to the dugout he lived in during the war to hide from the Nazis. As described in the previous chapter, the hiding place was in the forest neighbouring the village, and revisited in 1992, fifty years later, it is nearly irretrievable; Grynberg must follow current local residents who remember its emplacement. The manifestation of Bennett's notion of empathic viewing in this scene is grounded upon the opposition created by Grynberg's salient expression and reflection and the material ineffability of the landscape explored. Grynberg thoughtfully recalls details about living in the dugout, conveying the palpable physicality of the space as well as the sense of fear, confusion, and intolerable patience he had to feel at the time. All the while, the dugout itself is covered in snow, appearing as just another part of the forest. As a result, the *feeling for* elicited by this scene is at once compelled by Grynberg's intimate recollection and complicated by its visual inaccessibility.

The Act of Bearing Witness

Birthplace's digging scene also exemplifies the role the image plays in the act of bearing witness. As such, the image becomes more dynamic than a mere reproduction of history; it transforms the process of witnessing. As Guerin and Hallas explain, its active role lies not so much in providing empirical proof of the historical event, but rather in its "phenomenological capacity to bring the event into iconic presence and to mediate the intersubjective relations that ground the act of bearing witness."[137] The productivity of the image stems not in any inherent power, outside of its historical context; it is founded

[137] Guerin and Hallas, 12.

in the performative purpose of witnessing, embedded in its production and reception setting.[138]

In *Birthplace*, the image participates in the act of bearing witness by placing the viewer within the inter-subjective discovery of history along with Grynberg. The image does not only depict a symbol of the past. By inviting the viewer to participate in Grynberg's search, the image shares the exploration of the physical and historical terrain as an active process that reveals the spatial and temporal fluidity of the traumatic past. It is well known that the past may be uncovered (in this case literally) and sometimes even captured, but by documenting the experience of return and the physical interaction with the remnants of the past, the image here enables the act of bearing witness to a historical event as it continues to impact the present. The scene resists the use of archival photos of Grynberg's father, and instead focuses on the rotted skull as the link to the past. This encourages a more active involvement by the viewer, as s/he witnesses only the tangible effect of the passage of time without reference points.

In this context, the image itself acts as witness of traumatic history, for it produces the visual knowledge, as damaged and ephemeral as it is, to enable a viable conception of the past. In so doing it embodies the performative agency attributed to the image by Guerin and Hallas. As such, and as demonstrated by the digging scene in *Birthplace*, the image as witness produces varied possibilities for the affective as well as critical engagement with the mediated experience of traumatic history.

Also of interest, are moments when the image is of the witness herself/himself. In documentaries of return, the survivor or descendant of the survivor often comes into contact with a local witness to trauma. The visualization of this interaction is evocative

[138] Ibid., 4.

in two principal ways: first, it enables the possibility of imagining what is invisible and only heard, yet so vivid and intense. Furthermore, it creates a double witnessing effect, whereupon the viewer is processing this as s/he herself/himself witnesses the witness and the survivor (or descendant of) share in the trauma. Second, left with only the image of the people discussing, the facial expression and body language of the witness as s/he speaks as well as the reaction of the survivor/descendant become quite compelling.

Two scenes in *Birthplace* respectively exemplify these types of visual encounters with bearing witness. What is unique about *Birthplace* in general is that it delves right into Grynberg's search, with no wider context and no visual supplements other than his interaction with the people and the landscape of his small hometown in Poland. This truly immerses the viewer in Grynberg's experience, but also in the visual cues of his conversations, which inspire a deeper reflection on the transmission of traumatic memory. In one scene, Grynberg meets with a villager who witnessed his two-year-old brother's murder. They talk in a snowed-in field where the local retrieves potatoes he stored in the ground. As seen in figure 8, the impromptu setup of their conversation compounded with the barren, cold setting visually inflects the authentic sharing of the local's testimony.

Figure 8

Source: Pawel Lozinski, *Birthplace*, 1992

The local vividly remembers and describes how Grynberg's infant brother was killed. He explains that a policeman escorted him to a dumping ground behind a building in the marketplace where he killed many others; the little boy walked ahead of him and when he turned around, the policeman shot him. Grynberg repeatedly tries to confirm that it was indeed his brother and the local insists that everyone knew it was him; they all heard the gun shots and it happened very close to them: "we deliberately watched and saw it…" Grynberg then simply nods his head and the shot cuts to a close-up of Grynberg's face riding in a car.

Watching this conversation is jarring and intense, as the local's matter-of-fact tone and Grynberg's muted disposition contrast with the extremely disturbing event being described. Since the local is so clear about what he saw, using contemporary reference points to locate the event, and since he delivers his testimony amidst the current frozen, white landscape, this scene evokes a striking impression of this unsettling memory. In this case, the image of bearing witness gains its power through what is in fact invisible and compels the viewer to envision it for herself/himself.

The image itself of the witness and the listener can also be moving. While much thought and emotion can be derived from the spoken (or written) word, watching the words be communicated and witnessing the exchange of traumatic memory adds an affective dimension to the viewing experience. The second scene that creates evocative visual encounters with the act of bearing witness occurs further along in the film, when Grynberg meets with a bedridden elderly lady who tells him how and why his father, Abram, was killed. As it turns out, he was killed by a local villager who simply wanted ownership of Abram's cows. She tells Grynberg this with total revulsion. The shot of his

face as he learns this displays his characteristic restrained yet stunned facial reaction. While Grynberg is not an expressive man by any means, a sense of disbelief and subdued horror at the triviality of his father's murder can still be detected on his face. His only response is to ask her who committed the murder. All of Grynberg's encounters with locals highlight how much trauma they have in their memorial consciousness. At the same time, much of it is not necessarily their own. Nevertheless, they all speak forwardly with him of events that, for any viewer who has not lived through war, seem impossibly difficult to handle. In this specific scene, Grynberg's muted reception of the woman's testimony contrasts with the horror of the events described, creating a perplexing encounter with traumatic memory. As a result, the conflicting context of Grynberg's internalizing process invites curiosity to make sense of this traumatic memorial information.

When looking at these scenes, and any kind of visual testimonial process, it is important to recognize the ways in which it is mediated, what Oren Baruch Stier in his *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* calls "frames of remembrance."[139] Indeed, many frames come into play in the cinematic representation of the memorial process: the way the witness frames her/his testimony; the formal properties of the visual medium itself, like how the editing and the cinematography frames the authenticity of the conversation; the framing of the viewer's interpretation by the historical and discursive context of production and reception; and the viewer's personal, intellectual and affective frames all impact her/his reception of the witness' memory. It

[139] Stier, 71.

is important to ask how these frames shape the process of testimony, the development of witnessing, and the ways traumatic history is captured and understood.[140]

In looking at *Birthplace* and considering all these frames, it becomes possible to see that the memory of trauma is undoubtedly mediated through the image. Most notably, the conversations Grynberg maintains with the locals inherently suggest that the topic of traumatic memory establishes the framework of the communication. Therefore, the witnesses necessarily frame their comments according to the questions Grynberg asks. Furthermore, cutting from the witness to Grynberg's reaction imply that the conversations are edited and it will never be possible to know definitively if his reactions on screen genuinely coincide with the information he is receiving at the moment. As well, in any documentary, it is assumed that locations are chosen to conduct interviews. This is another way the transmission of information is mediated, for the context of the conversation necessarily affects the people speaking and the formal decisions involved in creating the profilmic space affect the viewer. In *Birthplace*, the settings for the conversations are insignificantly arranged. Sometimes they are inside the locals' home, with imperfect lighting and very little space, but often they take place outside, interrupting some kind of work, or even at someone's doorway, in a very impromptu matter. This does not inherently legitimize the authenticity of the conversations. However, it serves to visually de-formalize the shared testimonies and enable the viewer to participate more and feel absorbed in the witness' context.

Moreover, the overriding discourse of the film, as a voyage back fifty years after the war in order to uncover the truth behind personal trauma, conveys a specific lens through which history is analyzed. As well, the viewer's own critical and emotional

[140] Ibid.

assumptions play a role in how Grynberg's journey is interpreted. That being said, what is interesting about *Birthplace* is that Grynberg's facial expression rarely changes and its visual continuity throughout the film enables not only a faith in its authenticity, but also a deeper curiosity to understand it. Therefore, while the editing, the cinematographic choices, the context of production and reception, and the viewer's own spectrum of beliefs, understanding, and socio-historical context should be strongly considered when looking at the visual documentation of witness accounts, they must also be understood for what they are: frames, or lenses through which the image may still reveal valuable knowledge.

The Visualization of Personal Testimony

The visualization of testimony by the survivor also corresponds well to the use of the image as open-ended and interactive. Through personal explorations of space and personal travels through time, the imaging of testimony becomes an opening for the viewer to actively bear witness, empathize, and learn from the lived experience of historical trauma. Much has been written on survivor testimony, on issues of veracity, accuracy, and relevance. What will be addressed here is the meaning that can be derived from its screened manifestation. Unique to the survivor testimony is that the transmission of knowledge does not lay claim on the universal experience of suffering: "survivor testimony locates its truth value precisely in its subjectivity, in its production of embodied knowledge."[141] Visually, that releases the person from standing in for all or for

[141] Guerin and Hallas, 7.

a historical entity. The viewer may listen and watch the testimony and share more ably in that process by picturing that singular experience.

Brian Mckenna's *A Journey Back* is a case in point. Right at the beginning of the film, Garfein and Malling are inside the camp and Garfein is vividly remembering and describing his arrival at the camp when he was thirteen years old. In the barren and snowed-in entrance of Birkenau, Garfein recounts how he held onto his mother tightly as families were being separated, but she abruptly and violently shoved him away toward the men's line, knowing that the line for women and young children was headed for the gas chambers.

What is powerful about this sequence is the way Garfein's narration and re-enactment involves the viewer. While describing to Malling the trauma he experienced at this very place decades ago, Garfein is lively and direct, yet not lamenting. He energetically recalls the details of the event and imposes the recreation of his memory on Malling, utilizing him physically to reproduce what happened with his mother. In a shocking moment, he shoves Malling in the same way he remembered his mother shoving him. He pushes Malling so hard that he actually goes off frame (see figure 9).

Figure 9

Source: Brian Mckenna, *A Journey Back*, 1987

The articulation of this memory becomes palpable for the viewer because it is not a composed testimonial account; Garfein recounts the events with surprising animation. His vibrancy is not overly dramatic, though, providing the viewer with the emotional space to absorb and imagine the experience more freely. Archival imagery could have been used here and may have been haunting to watch, but to see the exact person, now forty years older, share his traumatic experience with such vigour while avoiding melancholy personally engages the viewer in a meaningful act of empathic witnessing. This type of sharing recalls the experiential understanding of the traumatic past that Joshua Hirsch explores through his concept of "posttraumatic cinema," which articulates the need for the documentary image to "be submitted to a narrative form whose purpose is, if not to literally traumatize the spectator, then to invoke a posttraumatic historical consciousness…."[142] It is precisely through this type of visual construction that the image is developed beyond the purpose of authenticity and engages the viewer in the creation of tangible meaning.

Furthermore, the use of space in this scene accentuates the impact of Garfein's enacted testimony. The mere fact that he retells his story at the precise site of the trauma activates the viewer's imagination. While stock footage could also clearly depict this same space, seeing Garfein search for the specific locations of each traumatic moment he lived truly entices the viewer to participate in this recollection and envisage for herself/himself the experience. This recalls what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub expounded in their seminal work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*: "What ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing, spasmodic and continuous, conscious and unconscious, is not simply the information, the

[142] Joshua Hirsch, 19.

establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of *living through* testimony, of giving testimony."[143] The act itself of testimony is productive and Garfein's tact and his embodiment of the space enhance this. Yet this process would not be complete without Malling, and ultimately the viewer, for as Felman and Laub remind, the testimonial process by nature must include the listener.[144]

Joshua Hirsch cautions against what he considers to be this reductive conception of traumatic relay. For him, trauma is not an entity that can be mechanically and completely conveyed from one person to another via an image; or by extension, the force of the traumatic experience cannot be wholly retained when transmitted from victim to eyewitness.[145] He is critical of what he considers Felman and Laub's "poststructurally inflected" position on the transmission of the traumatic experience for "erasing important distinctions between historical experiences in the process of describing trauma as a text-based contagion."[146] Hirsch's critique is important as a reminder that the relaying of trauma and its mediation are not facile mechanisms that are wholly accessible. With this consideration in mind, however, it is still possible to grasp some form of learning from the personal conveying of traumatic experience. As emphasized by Felman and Laub, the testimony is not a one way monologue and its meaning is derived from it being shared. The goal of the type of visualization found in the camp scene in *A Journey Back* described above, then, is not to verify this historical trauma, but to subjectively share in its understanding through personal memory.

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[143] Felman and Laub, 85.

[144] Ibid., 71.

[145] Joshua Hirsch, 15-16.

[146] Ibid., 16.

Summary

As demonstrated through *Birthplace* and *A Journey Back*, the imagery of the historical trauma of the Nazi Holocaust inspires a richness of critical reflection and learning when it involves a personal return. The materiality of the image itself, with its elusions and gaps, invites an active participation by the viewer to envision the meaning of history as it sometimes loses its trace. At the same time, the image's ability to capture emotional and sensory engagements with the visible remnants of traumatic history also permits the inter-subjective discovery of past narratives, broadening the understanding of difficult history through sharing in personal processes of remembrance. The image's productivity lies also in what it reveals through the act of bearing witness. On the one hand, it encourages curiosity and contemplation from the viewer in what it does not reveal, i.e. through the words of the witness and the setting of her/his testimony. On the other hand, the visualization of the witness's expression and composure is equally compelling. Finally, the mediation of personal testimony is another way traumatic memory and history may be accessed, formulated, and shared. As demonstrated through the testimonial process of a survivor returning to the place of trauma in *A Journey Back*, the image, through its capture of engagement with space and its revelation of an emotional and intellectual remembering, affectively involves the viewer in learning about what it is like to live with traumatic memory.

Conclusion

This entire research evolved from my passion for documentary, both as a viewer and practitioner, and my fascination with history, particularly the history of dark times. While history is no stranger to film, its cinematic rendering has elicited complex debates among filmmakers and scholars alike and this research sought to address some of these questions. As Bill Nichols noted,

> Excess is that which escapes the grasp of narrative and exposition. It stands outside the web of significance spun to capture it.
>
> Does this excess have a name? I would argue that it has a simple and familiar one: history. As the referent of documentary, history is what always stands outside the text.[147]

As and in its excess, in its ineffability, and in its grandeur, history may not be captured, but it may be touched, developed, and made contemporarily relevant through personal journey documentaries. When I began my research, I quickly realized that the mediation of memory was to become the framework for my study. Memory, and more specifically, traumatic memory, through its constant itch and simultaneous resistance to assimilation, inspires the reflective work necessary to engage with difficult history. Memory providing a more subjective understanding of history, I chose to study films that were all personal in some way: relaying the story of an individual's memorial encounter with traumatic history. The films all involve a form of return or at least a voyage across time and space to make sense of the traumatic memory or postmemory with which the subjects live. I also chose to study a historical trauma, the Nazi Holocaust, that inspired a wide enough range of such films in order to conduct a more informed analysis. Furthermore,

[147] Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, 142.

the Holocaust is an historical trauma that has invigorated memorial activity in my own family, as my grandmother, Olga Sher, is a survivor from Poland and her stories have long shaped our understanding of our family history.

It is also for this reason that two years ago, in the summer of 2010, I chose to make my own documentary of return, recounting Olga's journey in Poland and exploring the meaning of my encounters with the traces of her past. As the granddaughter of a survivor, as a film student, and as a documentary maker, this experience spawned many questions concerning the capabilities of the documentary medium, its shortcomings, historical accuracy, and creative choices. The thesis research that I subsequently conducted aimed to situate these questions within the fields of memory, trauma, and documentary. I have included my documentary as an appendix to this research as a means to complement my theoretical findings. Looking back on both my academic and practical experiences, I can now fully appreciate just how mutually informative they were and I can see how the issues examined in each chapter will continue to shape how I watch historical documentaries and hopefully how I make them.

Comparative Analysis: Research Questions and Production Study

Research Question 1

My first research question encapsulated several discourses of memory across social studies. Watching documentaries of journey and of return and preparing for my own, I realized that I needed to understand the conceptual developments of memory in order to appreciate how documentary can deepen our engagement with the past. The first

characteristic of memory that struck me from these documentaries was their focus on the personal experience of the traumatic past. I learned that their experiential structure reflected the post-structuralist theoretical advancements in history as well, privileging subjective memorial understandings of the past over indexical transparency. In my own practice, it became clear that learning about my family's past would require my own experiential engagement with it. I had heard pieces of Olga's stories my whole life and I had read diaries and articles about the places of her past, but I felt my understanding of that history would remain too elusive; I had to travel and experience the fragments of her narratives.

The depth of my engagement with the traumatic history of my family was to be defined by a memory that is not my own; one passed down over two generations. Yet like the subjects of the documentaries of return that I watched, I was to discover that memory as a shared process, as translated through time and space, is pivotal in making sense of a history that so deeply impacted a family's self-definition. Documentary proved to be a powerful conveyor of that memorial meaning. The most striking example of this occurred when I visited Olga's old labour camp. Just on the outskirts of her hometown, I walked into what were abandoned army barracks. In this empty lot with broken down buildings, I felt an utmost visceral memorial experience despite it not being my own. I walked in confused and shocked, trying to piece together my postmemory amidst what I saw. My father quickly grabbed the camera and filmed my reaction as I entered. Therein lies the potency of the medium of documentary: the seizure of that precise moment of encounter; an encounter with place, with the past, with memorial contemplation. Documentary captures that meeting in its liveliness and in its audiovisual

context. That postmemorial experience is itself memorialized by the camera. As I reviewed the footage, I was able to reflect on that encounter with memory from a different perspective, with some distance. Then later, as I edited, I made choices as to how I thought the live image and sound could productively communicate the power of postmemory. These different moments of documentary production point to the many levels with which the experience of shared memory can be engaged.

Another way shared memory shapes the viewing and production of documentaries of return is through prosthetic memory. Having been accustomed to a plethora of images of concentration camps and other traumatic representations, I found myself conflicted by what I felt as I stood behind the camera at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The haunting visual cues evoked a palpable sense of memory there. Yet how does the reality of it measure against the innumerable representations of it that have shaped its collective memorial understanding? As I filmed the barbed wire, the chimneys, and the barracks, I genuinely wondered what my documentary would contribute to deepening my understanding of that dark history. Auschwitz not being my memory, not even being my postmemory, I wondered about my place there, as essentially a tourist with a camera. Nevertheless, what struck me about my presence there and from my documentary rendering of it was a form of memorial attachment that does not require my own lived experience. In this sense, the notion of prosthetic memory gives meaning to our explorations of hyper-represented historical places.

This hyper-mediation of the Holocaust, especially in cinema, was also at the heart of my hesitation to conduct this entire documentary project. Amidst all the images and all the possible narratives already told, I wondered about the value of my contribution

(other than the familial memorializing my grandmother's story). In fact, it is precisely the context of the over-production of Holocaust films that guided the production of my own documentary. This project would be not only a recounting of Olga's journey, but it would be an exercise in purposefully engaging with the past across three generations. I did not want to solely depict what Olga remembered; rather, I sought to visit it myself, interpret the similarities and differences with the present, learn from that evolution, and ultimately, interact with the process of memory itself.

Focusing on the process of memory as opposed to the object of memory also opened up new ways to look at complex heritage, such as that of the Holocaust. The Holocaust left behind a highly complicated and contested legacy of trauma across several cultural and social groups. Growing up in North America with mainstream representations of the Holocaust, along with hearing my Polish Jewish grandmother's stories, I have been accustomed to the Jewish claims to trauma. Although I was aware of the traumatic consequences of the Holocaust on many other groups, it was not until I traveled to Poland and the Ukraine and spoke with local villagers that I was truly opened to a variety of historical experiences. Whether they were non-Jewish elders, immigrants, or locals that had lived there their whole lives, what I discovered is that no matter the specificity of their experience, the war weighed heavily on their memorial conscience. Some were victims themselves or their parents were and others remember witnessing the ghettoization or deportation of Jews. What is striking about their remembrance is the forthright narrativization of their memory. Some felt very close to it and cried while discussing the fate of their parents. Some showed outrage when describing what they saw happen to their fellow villagers. Others described what they witnessed quite matter-

of-factly. Regardless of their delivery, the re-externalization of their memorial experience for the documentary demonstrated how the accessible communication media enables the pluralisation of narratives.

This diversity of personal narratives informed my vision of the traumatic past as well as my practice. It was important to me to use documentary as a means to express this variety. At the same time, it caused a moral dilemma: by emphasizing the plurality of traumatic memorial experiences, would I somehow compromise the integrity of Olga's personal experience as the locus of my documentary? I wondered about the singleness of purpose of the personal documentary medium. In giving a voice to a variety of people in their lived context, documentary lends itself well to providing an inclusive portrait of historical experiences. On the other hand, by following a personal journey of discovery, it also conveys a deepened sense of subjectivity. By focusing on the meaning of our engagement with the process of memory, I was able to include my personal discovery of different memorial narratives as part of my exploration of Olga's story. In the end, I discovered that it was precisely through my grandmother's subjective memorial experience that I was introduced to the complexity of traumatic heritage. Trauma leaves behind challenging and sometimes contradictory legacies and journeying with just one lived heritage enables the personal uncovering of many other varied experiences of trauma.

Research Question 2

My second research question concerned the spatial nature and physical embodiment of memory. This was by far the most elucidating aspect of making my own documentary of return: learning that space is not merely the setting for historical events but it actually shapes and sometimes challenges our understanding of them. This lesson was reinforced by the penetration into spaces commanded by the personal documentary. In order to fully explore my family's memorial traces, I had to search for, uncover, and scrutinize sites and landscapes.

On my quest I encountered two types of such places, or *lieux de mémoire*: famous sites of remembrance and ordinary places that hold personal significance. In terms of the first, filming the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps enabled a challenging examination of the interrelation between space and memory. The first and most striking aspect of visiting these death camps was the overwhelming number of other visitors that one must shuffle through in order to explore the site. Walking through with a camera and trying to get shots of this important place in the memorial legacy of the Holocaust created a whole other problematic. On the one hand, it was physically difficult to get shots of just the camp space, without anybody else in the frame. On the other, watching the thousands of people interacting with the space, whether mournfully, spiritually or even politically, inspired a reflection on how the space itself is a continuously evolving memorial engagement.

The landscape itself also triggered memorial work. Many survivors of Auschwitz and even visitors recall its unbelievable grandeur. Indeed, walking along the gates of Birkenau, it is haunting to witness its sheer size. The documentary aesthetic allows the capture of such unimaginable vastness. By zooming in and out slowly, the camera

follows and reveals the immensity of the camp as it exists in real time. This participation with the space makes tangible the experience of memory, postmemory or prosthetic memory.

As for the more everyday type of memorial site that I visited, my grandmother's labour camp proved to be the most palpable spatial postmemory that I experienced. Its rundown look, its emptiness, and its abandonment all enriched my sense of the passage of time. It struck me how such a mundane place could have held such sinister meaning decades ago. Strangely, when I showed Olga pictures from the camp she did not recognize it entirely; it had changed and some buildings were added. Her lack of full identification with the space was at first disappointing, for I had felt an unexplainable yet powerful connection to a place that now seemed arbitrary. At the same time though, her incomplete recognition of the space signaled another important aspect of spatial memory: the vicissitudes of physical historical markers. The same place may hold strong memorial significance, but as it changes, that meaning must be re-read amidst its newly formed emplacement.

Conversely, finding a place that has remained intact amidst radical changes to the landscape around it is powerful in triggering memory. In my grandmother's hometown, Boryslaw, we found the house she grew up in; the only house still standing on the street. The significance of its lasting "implacement" was captured by a mediated *in situ* testimony. My father filmed me speaking with Olga on the phone as I stood by the house. This way, I could share with her what I felt about uncovering her remarkably still standing house and her remembrance was materialized by the presence of our conversation at the site itself.

Right next to her house was a bus station, which used to be a Jewish cemetery. Olga remembers this very clearly, for she recalls hearing the mourners cry from her window. To arrive there and see that this striking component of her spatial memory no longer physically existed was jarring, for it pointed to the fragility and elusiveness of spatial specificity when it comes to historical memory. Other than an abandoned memorial with blatant spelling mistakes, nothing else indicated that this bus station was once a site for memorial significance. Barely a palimpsest, it shows that as new histories inscribe themselves onto spaces, the original engraving very well could be lost or at least hard to find. Memory, then, in all its manifestations, commands our mindfulness of seemingly mundane spaces that shape and are shaped by the passage of history.

Research Question 3

My third research question involved analyzing the mediation of historical trauma through the image itself. There is extensive scholarly work done on this subject and it has evolved greatly since the 1980s especially with the growing pluralisation of creative possibilities to visually articulate historical trauma. So I left to make my documentary with a constant questioning of how I was building images of history, trauma, and memory. At the same time, my experience greatly shaped my interpretation of the theoretical framework for examining the image of trauma as well as my reading of documentaries of return that treat that kind of imagery. It gave me concrete insight into the capabilities and limits of what the documentary image can convey as well as the choices that must be made throughout the representational process. Three main aspects

of representation marked my practice and analysis of the documentary imaging of traumatic history and traumatic memory: the materiality of the image, the representation of the act of bearing witness, and the mediation of testimony. In terms of the materiality of the image, my experience filming at Auschwitz-Birkenau raised a lot of difficult questions. The tropes of historical trauma are so evocative in and of themselves that I had to ask myself why, in the first place, but also what I was going to convey through the construction of the image of such powerful emblems of trauma. For example, with my limited technological skills, I found myself attempting repeatedly to achieve a rack focus of the barbed wire at Birkenau bleeding into the haunting barracks in the background. The more I tried to get "a good shot," the more I was confronted with the contradictory interplay of aesthetic evocation, the search for meaning, and ethical responsibility. The slow movement from the extreme close-up of the barbed wire dissolving into the eerie prisoner barracks on the one hand enabled a reflective engagement with the remnants of trauma. On the other hand, mastering the mechanics of that shot and trying to mold an aesthetic quality to it were clear reminders that this was a visual construction meant to evoke something. Though the elements in the frame are themselves rich traces of historical trauma, the documentary image structures them in a way to induce memorial reflection. This made me wonder if aestheticizing historical trauma somehow violated its memory.

The second issue of representation that I encountered concerned the act of bearing witness. Traveling to Olga's hometown, which is now in the Ukraine, our guide found an eighty-nine-year-old bed-ridden lady that could help us piece together the history of the town. I interviewed her in her small home, where she graciously answered my questions

about what she remembered from the war. Lying in her bed the whole time, she recalled the trauma of the war she had witnessed. Though her memory was frail, she vividly remembered witnessing the systematic discrimination against the Jews of the town and she even remembered seeing her mother give food to and bathe Jews that were hiding nearby. The memorial experience engendered by the recounting of her witnessing was enriched by the visual setting through her feeble physique, her age, and her horizontal placement. The description of what she witnessed seventy years ago, then, was embedded in the visual acknowledgement of the passage of time. This type of visualization of the witness characterizes the documentary of return, doubly mediating the act of bearing witness through the setting of the conversation and through the witness' memory. In this way, it compels curiosity into what it does not directly reveal.

The mediation of personal testimony constitutes a dominant way in documentaries of return to provide access to historical trauma. Since Olga could not travel back to Poland, her testimony was filmed in Montreal, so it did not share the same spatio-memorial dynamic as other documentaries of return. However, I was in Poland, constantly reflecting on the meaning of my encounters with the traumatic past based on her memorial testimony. I therefore sought to create an ongoing relationship between my grandmother's testimonial accounts and my return. My own memorial testimony was captured through my voice-over narration and scenes of writing in my diary. The testimonial link created between Olga and me was therefore visually articulated through my engagement with the settings of her memory. The documentary of return medium enabled me to experience what it is like living with traumatic memory as well as

affectively share with the viewer the contemplation of the traumatic past's impact on our current outlook on history.

Final Remarks

Through my theoretical readings, my textual analysis of five important documentaries of return, and through the production of my own, I have come to see that by expanding the discourses of representation, testimony, memory, and visual explorations of reconstructed (or deconstructed) landscapes, documentaries of return enrich the experiential memorial process and share it with the public, raising the collective consciousness of the trying past. In looking at the remembrance of traumatic history, it has become crucial to examine its visual documentation because it constitutes an increasingly accessible, distributable, and paradoxically blind commemorative method. Amidst the current proliferation of traumatic images, engendering the risk of desensitization and disenchantment, documentaries of return offer a subjective and contemplative alternative that inspires a broadening reflection on the experience of historical trauma.

As traumas ceaselessly occur across the world and attract sensationalist media coverage, they unmistakably deeply mark our collective consciousness and inspire activism on a variety of levels. That is, until their visibility wears out, our empathy tires down or even until a new trauma occurs. But what about ten, twenty, fifty years after the fact? What is the significance of these traumas and their representation as they join the annals of history? In analyzing the many different ways documentaries of return

articulate traumatic memory, this research was really asking how we are shaped by the mediation of historical trauma, now. I first truly pondered this question when I watched *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) by Ari Folman, an animated documentary that chronicles his memorial return into the horrors of the 1982 Lebanon war. Folman, a former soldier for the Israeli army, interviews old friends and other soldiers with whom he fought in an effort to reconstruct his nearly erased memory of that time.

I consider this a documentary of return, for it reveals his experiential journey into traumatic history to make sense of his elusive memory. The animated quality of this documentary personalizes it even more, for it conveys his subjective formulation of his memorial encounters and reflects their fluid elusiveness. Such a creative rendering of a personal journey through traumatic times signals the expansive possibilities of the medium of documentaries of return to enliven our engagement with histories that still greatly shape our understanding of current social issues. Watching *Waltz with Bashir* with very little knowledge of the Lebanon war, I was informed of a complicated socio-political dynamic in a way that elucidated the contemporary relations between the groups involved. Moreover, the sharing of difficult personal experiences with that trauma through evocative imagery, flowing between the touching realness of conversation and the imaginative beauty of its visualization, shed light on the lasting and unavoidable impact of history on the present, thus marking the value of documentaries of return: as traumas persist and become historical, the personal revisits to these traumas in documentaries of return remind us of how fragile the line is between past and present and embark us on moving journeys that help us understand that fluidity.

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Appendix

Title: *The Promise of Return*

Completed June 2012

Written and directed by Myriam Tremblay-Sher

Camera: Myriam Tremblay-Sher and Julian Sher

Music: Daniel Tremblay-Sher

Editing: Myriam Tremblay-Sher and Gary Akenhead

Running time: 51 minutes and 15 seconds

Format: mov file on DVD, 1920 x 1080

Codecs: Linear PCM, H.264

Summary:

This film is a personal documentary recounting my Jewish Polish grandmother's journey of survival through World War II. It also follows my journey through discovering this complicated past. I traveled to Poland and the Ukraine in order to retrace my grandmother's steps before, during, and after the war, and to deepen my own understanding of traumatic history. This documentary is therefore a personal narrative of return as well as an exploration of history, seeking to shed light on the meaning of traumatic memory in contemporary times.

DVD enclosed.