

Guido Vitiello

## Retrospective Voyeurism

### The 'Peephole Motif' in Contemporary Holocaust Cinema

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#### Abstract

The peephole in the door of the gas chamber is a recurring motif in modern Holocaust cinema, appearing across the whole spectrum of film genres – Hollywood melodrama, horror film, historical documentary, European art film, exploitation B-movie. It is mostly shown through the gaze of an SS officer, thus associating the spectator's position with that of the perpetrator. The peephole motif pushes the limits of Holocaust representation and defies the cultural codification of the gas chamber as a 'no trespass' area of the gaze. Its uncanny recurrence is better understood in the light of the growing sacralisation of the Holocaust, which has led to an ambiguous tabooization, fetishisation and even eroticisation of the gas chamber. Vehiculating our cinematic "fantasies of witnessing" (G. Weissman), the peephole motif reconfigures the imagination of the Holocaust as retrospective voyeurism.

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#### In Search of 'la pellicule maudite'

*Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace's 1996 novelistic magnum opus, revolves around a lost and mysterious film able to plunge its viewers into a sort of hypnotic *jouissance*, a state so intense and so absorbing that they lose interest in anything else and eventually die.<sup>1</sup> It may be suggested that Holocaust culture has its own 'infinite jests', or rather its cinematic Holy Grails, constantly evoked, stubbornly sought after, and ambiguously fetishised. Two imaginary films cast their shadow on the theoretical discourses and on the broader cultural reception of Holocaust cinema. The first was hinted at in another American novel, Don DeLillo's *Running Dog*, published in 1978, in the midst of the 'new discourse' wave analysed by Saul Friedlander:<sup>2</sup> It centres on a purported pornographic film allegedly shot in Adolf Hitler's bunker in the final days before the fall of Berlin, for which collectors are eager to pay huge sums.<sup>3</sup> The second is the (in)famous *pellicule maudite* (cursed film) evoked by Claude Lanzmann, creator of *Shoah* (1985). In his review of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), which sparked a well-known dispute with the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, Lanzmann declared that if he had found "an existing film – a secret film because filming was highly forbidden – shot by an SS man, that shows how 3,000 Jews, men, women, and children, die together, choking, in a gas chamber or crematorium, then not only would I not have shown it, I would have destroyed it."<sup>4</sup>

These haunting 'ghost films' – depicting an orgy in the bunker and death in the gas chamber – embody the repressed counterpart of the major aesthetical and ethical taboos built around the representation of Nazism and the Holocaust that James L. Young summarised as follows:

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1 David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, New York 1996.

2 Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism. An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, Bloomingdale 1984.

3 Don DeLillo, *Running Dog*, New York 1978.

4 Claude Lanzmann, *Holocauste, la représentation impossible* [The Impossible Representation of the Holocaust], in: *Le Monde. Supplément Arts-Spectacles* (3 March 1994), 1, 7.

“To this day, many people insist that some scenes from the Holocaust cannot ethically be represented. Because no one survived the gas chambers to describe the terror there, its darkness has remained absolute. Other areas in which artists are practically forbidden to tread include the sexuality of victims and the possible sadosexuality of the killers.”<sup>5</sup>

Both of these taboos have been overtly and aggressively violated in the context of ‘illegitimate’ Holocaust representation,<sup>6</sup> especially in the (mostly) Italian subgenre of ‘Nazi sexploitation’ films produced in the late 1970s that staged sadomasochistic pornography in concentration camps.<sup>7</sup> This sleazy subgenre could be considered an attempt to shoot the two ‘cursed films’ in one. Not only do the sexuality of victims and the sadosexuality of the killers stand at the core of Nazi sexploitation films, but many of them deliberately infringe on the *Bilderverbot* (ban on images) surrounding the gas chambers and the crematoria. Cesare Canevari’s *L’ultima orgia del III Reich* (The Last Orgy of the Third Reich, 1977) features a quite surreal scene of mass death in a gas chamber, or rather in some sort of underground tunnel, where naked women run and scream – historical accuracy is definitely not a high priority in these films. Sergio Garrone’s *Lager SSadis Kastrat Kommandantur* (SS Experiment Camp, 1976) shows crematoria stuffed with the half-dead bodies of women agonising in glaringly sexual poses. In the ‘legitimate’ canon of Holocaust film, such scenes would simply be unthinkable and, in the majority of cases, the final phases of the extermination remain a ‘no-go’ area of the gaze. A couple of rare exceptions are a scene from the TV miniseries *War and Remembrance* (Dan Curtis, 1988) and a few seconds from Claude Lelouch’s *Les Uns et les Autres* (released in English as *Bolero*, 1981). Even in the most graphic Holocaust films, such as Tim Blake Nelson’s *The Grey Zone* (2001), the camera stops respectfully on the threshold of the gas chamber, as in the atrium of a temple. Mass death is never shown.

Throughout the history of Holocaust cinema, a variety of rhetorical devices have been deployed in order to show without showing what happened inside the gas chamber. These devices include synecdochic or metonymic allusions (the camera for example depicting the detail of the pillars of smoke rising from the crematoria’s chimneys, as in Andrzej Munk’s *The Passenger*, 1963); the occasional resort to the expressive potentialities of sound (the screaming of the victims is heard from the outside, as in Jack Gold’s TV film *Escape from Sobibor*, 1987); *topoi* derived from Greek tragedy (the ghastly events are not directly presented, but rather narrated by the voice of a messenger on stage, as in *Shoah* or in the Israeli documentary *Hamachah Hashmonim V’Echad, The Eighty-First Blow*, by Haim Gouri, 1974). Then there is the motif of the peephole.

5 James E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge. After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, New Haven/London 2000, 55.

6 The legitimate/illegitimate opposition I use here is derived, by analogical extension, from Omer Bartov, who applied it to Israeli culture of the 1960s: “In pre-1967 Israel, two types of literature about the Holocaust were available to young Israelis. The first could be called ‘legitimate’ literature. Strongly didactic, imbued with Zionist ideological biases, and often employed as teaching material in the appropriate grades, much of this literature consisted of quasi-fictionalized accounts of resistance to the Nazis. [...] Hence the focus of these stories was on action, sacrifice, and meaningful death. [...] The second type of ‘literature’, which might be called ‘illegitimate’, was passed secretly from one youth to another, a source of illicit excitement and shameful pleasure. These were the so-called ‘Stalags’, a type of pornographic literature that circulated in Israel of the time, [...] replete with perverse sex and sadistic violence. [...] Nothing could be a greater taboo than deriving sexual pleasure from pornography in the context of the Holocaust; hence nothing could be as exciting.”; see: Omer Bartov, *Kitsch and Sadism in Ka-Tzetnik’s Other Planet. Israeli Youth Imagine the Holocaust*, in: *Jewish Social Studies* 3 (1997) 2, 42-76, here 48-49.

7 Marcus Stiglegger, *Sadiconazista. Faschismus und Sexualität im Film*, Remscheid 1999; Daniel H. Magilow/Kristin T. Vander Lugt/Elizabeth Bridges (ed.), *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, New York 2011.

## The Act of Seeing

The peephole in the door of the gas chamber is a recurring trope in contemporary Holocaust cinema. It appears across the whole spectrum of film genres, from Hollywood mainstream historical melodrama (as in the NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, 1978, or in *Schindler's List*) to horror (as in *Apt Pupil*, Bryan Singer, 1998); from documentary (as in Errol Morris' *Mr. Death*, 1999) to didactic film for young people (as in the TV film *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Donna Deitch, 1999, or in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Mark Herman, 2008); from European auteur film (as in Leszek Wosiewicz's *Kornblumenblau* (Cornflower Blue), 1989, or in Costa-Gavras' *Amen*, 2002) to late exploitation cinema (as in *Auschwitz*, Uwe Boll, 2011). This trope allows the very *act of seeing* to be represented, although in most cases the object of vision is hidden to the spectator. Sometimes the scene of mass death, off-screen, is described by the character who is spying through the peephole (as in *Holocaust*), sometimes it is dreamt or hallucinated (as in *Apt Pupil*), sometimes dislocated (as in *Schindler's List*), sometimes merely absent (as in *Mr. Death*). The inside of a gas chamber in operation is shown directly and prolongedly only in the little-known and exceptional case of *Kornblumenblau* and in the 'illegitimate' exploitation film *Auschwitz* by Uwe Boll, in which the peephole also served for the promotional material (the official film poster showed the filmmaker in an SS uniform standing near the gas chamber door) to stress the openly voyeuristic purpose of the film. This last case is especially interesting, since the origins of the peephole motif, as Aaron Kerner has shown, can be traced back to the 'illegitimate' genre of Nazi sexploitation from the mid-1970s in films such as *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975) or Tinto Brass' *Salon Kitty* (1975).<sup>8</sup>

The uncanny recurrence of the peephole motif can be considered from at least three intertwined perspectives. First, there is the question of the intrinsic voyeurism of the cinematic gaze, deeply explored in the field of feminist film studies, as well as in other film theories with a strong psychoanalytic accent. Significantly, this topic has often been addressed with specific reference to the peephole scenes from thriller/horror films of the early 1960s such as Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Caroline Picart and David Frank, in their cross-analysis of the shower scenes in *Psycho* and *Schindler's List*, adopted this point of view.<sup>9</sup> The ethical implications of the pleasures of spectatorial voyeurism and of the power relations underlying the voyeuristic position of course assume a deeper significance when the object of vision is the utter atrocity of the Holocaust, particularly given the fact that in most Holocaust films the peephole is seen through the eyes of an SS officer, sometimes even in 'point-of-view shot', thus associating (or even conflating) the position of the spectator with that of the perpetrator. Libby Saxton explored these issues in an original way, combining film studies and ethical philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

Another possible perspective, more internal to the field of Holocaust studies, explores the peephole motif in order to raise issues concerning the limits of Holocaust representation, addressing the question of the 'unrepresentable', the philosophy/theology of Holocaust aniconism, the strength of representational taboos, and the cultural codification of the gas chamber as an area subjected to an absolute ban on im-

8 Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, New York 2011, 36-52.

9 Caroline J. Picart/David A. Frank, *Frames of Evil. The Holocaust as Horror in American Film*, Carbondale 2006, 36-69.

10 Libby Saxton, *Haunted Images. Film, Ethics, Testimony and the Holocaust*, London/New York 2008, 68-91.

ages. This point of view has been explored for example by Barry Langford<sup>11</sup> and by Vincent Lowy.<sup>12</sup>

The presence of the peephole trope in contemporary Holocaust cinema can also be addressed in wider cultural terms, as a symptom of an emerging attitude towards the Holocaust that, I suggest, can be best understood against the background of the growing sacralisation of the Holocaust, which is in many ways at the root of the tabooisation, fetishisation, and (in a broad sense) eroticisation of the gas chambers. If the Holocaust, as Peter Novick wrote, has been turned into a ‘mystery religion’,<sup>13</sup> the gas chambers are its Eleusinian sanctuaries, attracting both *sacré de respect* and *sacré de transgression* (Roger Caillois),<sup>14</sup> piety and impiety,<sup>15</sup> quasi-religious awe and morbid curiosity. The recurrence of peephole scenes in Holocaust cinema reflects these attitudes and allows us to introduce the topics of ‘Holocaust voyeurism’ and of the ‘eroticisation of (vicarious) witnessing’, tentative formulas by which I mean a fascination for the most hidden aspects of the Holocaust that is often suffused with more or less overt sexualised nuances. This fascination was explored in one of the most original contributions to Holocaust studies to date, namely Gary Weissman’s *Fantasies of Witnessing*. As Weissman observed, “the unspoken desire of many people who have no direct experience of the Holocaust [...] to know what it was like to be *there*” has mostly been dismissed by scholars in moralistic terms, thus impeding a more cautious (and curious) approach.<sup>16</sup>

“I contend that, when nonwitnesses take an interest in the Holocaust, they are not overcoming a fearful aversion to its horror but endeavoring to actually feel the horror of what otherwise eludes them. These attempts are not recognized as such by most Holocaust scholars. When the nonwitness’s interest in exposing him or herself to the horrors of the Holocaust is addressed, it is typically denounced as a perverse fascination or morbid curiosity with atrocity, a fascination, as historian Omer Bartov puts it, ‘with extremity and with artificially recreating the most horror-filled situations so as to be able to observe them from the safety of one’s armchair’. This shaming rhetoric has taken the place of, and made more difficult, a true coming to terms with our desire to observe the Holocaust’s most horror-filled situations.”<sup>17</sup>

That same ‘shaming rhetoric’ has been used against the narrative forms that have articulated this desire to ‘feel the horror’ in popular culture, especially against minor film genres (such as thriller, horror, science fiction, erotic/porn film, and exploitation), constantly accused of trivialisation and commodification.

The first step to overcoming this ‘shaming rhetoric’, I suggest, is a quick revisiting of the anything but frivolous origins of the eroticisation of the Holocaust. This could also help to rethink the legitimate/illegitimate divide in contemporary Holocaust culture.

11 Barry Langford, “You Cannot Look At This”. Thresholds of Unrepresentability in Holocaust Film, in: *Journal of Holocaust Education* 8 (1999) 3, 23-40.

12 Vincent Lowy, *L’histoire infilmable [The Unfilmable History]*, Paris 2001.

13 Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston/New York 1999, 273-274.

14 Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, Champaign 1959.

15 Matthew Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music and Film*, London/New York 2012.

16 Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing. Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*, Ithaca/London 2004, 4.

17 *Ibid.*, 22-23.

## The Holocaust as a 'Myth of Origin' and a 'Primal Scene'

The origins of the eroticisation of the Holocaust can be traced back to the early 1960s, to the time of the Eichmann trial. It began with the Israeli youth's reception of the novelistic memoirs, replete with morbid eroticism, of Yehiel Feiner aka Ka-Tzetnik, such as *House of Dolls* (1953), and with the popularity of the so-called Stalags, cheap pocketbooks of sadomasochistic pornography set in POW camps.<sup>18</sup> In that context, the Holocaust for the first time became a dark and fascinating 'secret room' in which it was tempting to peek. For young Israelis of those years, the question of the Holocaust was the question of their own origins – personal, familial, and national at the same time. In other words, the Holocaust functioned both as a 'myth of origin' and as a sort of 'primal scene' – in Freudian theory, the fantasy (or fantasised memory) of the sexual intercourse between one's parents. Just like the primal scene, the Holocaust became the target of an intense scopophilic desire. In a brief and illuminating article, Nanette C. Auerhahn and Dori Laub analysed the dreams and fantasies of second-generation patients in which the parents' bedrooms and the gas chamber seemed to collapse into one another: "In the primal scene, children typically misinterpret the parents' sexual activity as an act of violence, disguising the life force by aggression. In contrast, we have found that children confronted with the scene of atrocity defend against their knowledge by misinterpreting the scene as a sexual one."<sup>19</sup> It could be argued that Ka-Tzetnik's books and the Stalags provided young Israelis with an imaginary way to enter this primal scene of death and violence by means of sexual curiosity, to approach a scene of atrocity as a scene of desire, and ultimately to conflate vicarious witnessing with voyeurism. The Stalags were the quintessential 'illegitimate' fiction, and Ka-Tzetnik's books, as Bartov suggested, despite being part of the 'legitimate' canon, were read by many young Israelis in 'illegitimate' ways, as a source of shameful pleasure and excitement.

Although such a peculiar condition as being a member of the second generation can hardly be generalised, this kind of attitude towards the Holocaust can be observed – in a different and milder form, relieved from painful biographical implications – in (mostly, but not exclusively, young) people with no family-mediated connection to the Jewish genocide, those that Weissman generically called "nonwitnesses". Defining the Holocaust as the 'primal scene' of our culture would probably be a dubious extension of a clinical notion but, as Gabriel Motzkin and Avishai Margalit suggested, there is scarce doubt that it has become "a negative myth of origin for the postwar world". The Holocaust, the two scholars explain, is a myth of origin because it is "a story that people tell about where they came from and how the situation in which they live was created", and it is a negative myth of origin because it takes "the moment of creation as a moment of chaos and destruction."<sup>20</sup> So, if the Holocaust is perceived as a dark myth of origin, and as a sacred/impure object surrounded with taboos, it comes as no surprise that it attracts a sort of 'retrospective voyeurism'.

18 Amit Pinchevski/Roy Brand, Holocaust Perversions. The Stalags Pulp Fiction and the Eichmann Trial, in: *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24 (2007) 5, 387-407.

19 Nanette C. Auerhahn/Dori Laub, The Primal Scene of Atrocity. The Dynamic Interplay Between Knowledge and Fantasy of the Holocaust in Children of Survivors, in: *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 15 (1998) 3, 372. (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0736-9735.15.3.360>); see also Karyn Ball, Unspeakable Differences, Obscene Pleasures. The Holocaust as an Object of Desire, in: *Women in German Yearbook* 19 (2003), 20-49.

20 Avishai Margalit/Gabriel Motzkin, The Uniqueness of the Holocaust, in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996) 1, 65-83.

This emerging attitude towards the Holocaust can help explain the growing superimposition of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' styles of remembrance in recent film and pop culture (and a similar statement could be made for literary fiction and museum conceptions).<sup>21</sup> The 'guilty pleasures' of Holocaust voyeurism are creeping ever more frequently into mainstream/institutionalised forms of Holocaust remembrance, into the solemnity of more traditional and respected registers.

The quintessential expression of this superimposition of styles is the infamous shower scene in Auschwitz from *Schindler's List*: an 'illegitimate' sequence with strong sexual/voyeuristic undertones, reminiscent of Nazi sexploitation, that appears like a Trojan horse in the climactic moment of the most 'legitimate' Holocaust film – a film employed as teaching material, shown in schools worldwide, even officially promoted by US President Bill Clinton at the time it was issued ("Go see it!"). This conflation of registers did not go unnoticed, to say the least: The shower scene is arguably the most controversial scene in Holocaust cinema, together with the infamous tracking shot in Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapo* (1959).

"Most troubling of all, of course, is the shower scene, since that mass of attractive, frightened, naked women, finally relieved from their anxiety by jets of water rather than gas, would be more appropriate to a soft-porn sado-masochistic film than to its context (and here Spielberg comes dangerously close to such films as Cavani's *The Night Porter* and Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties*). The fact that this 'actually' happened is, of course, wholly beside the point, since in most cases it did not, and even when it did, the only eyes which might have derived any sexual pleasure from watching such scenes belonged to the SS. Hence, by including this scene, Spielberg makes the viewers complicit with the SS, both in sharing their voyeurism and in blocking out the reality of the gas chambers."<sup>22</sup>

This critique, as countless others of the same kind, was based on a very partial consideration of the sequence. As a matter of fact, Spielberg aroused the voyeuristic desire of the spectator only to frustrate it and punish it, and the 'coda' of the same sequence (whose unity is underlined by the continuity of the extra-diegetic music) shows us, through the eyes of one of the surviving Schindler women, a group of prisoners directed to the real gas chambers, followed by the detail of the smoke ascending from the crematorium. What happens in between is kept in darkness, invisible; the *Bilderverbot* is respected. The eroticised look of the SS through the peephole and the sad look of the woman directed at the prisoners walking to certain death belong to two irreducibly conflicting visual and symbolic worlds: No conflation is possible, only a 'friction' that questions the spectatorial voyeurism, associating it with the 'perpetrator position'. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that Spielberg's sequence is a *lectio magistralis* on the limits of representation and the ethics of spectatorship, there is no doubt that his resorting to suspense mechanisms borrowed from thriller/horror films and to B-film stereotypes such as the group of naked screaming women, reveals a radical redefinition of the legitimate/illegitimate divide.

Many examples could be chosen, both literary and filmic, to illustrate this conflation of registers, but I would like to focus briefly on a film in which the peephole

21 I developed this point in: *Il testimone immaginario. Auschwitz, il cinema e la cultura pop* [Imaginary Witness. Auschwitz, Film, and Pop Culture], Naples 2011.

22 Omer Bartov, Spielberg's Oskar. Hollywood Tries Evil, in: Yosefa Loshitzky (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust. Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, Bloomington/Indianapolis 1997, 41-60, here 49. See also Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst. The Holocaust, Industrial Killing and Representation*, Oxford/New York 1996, 170.



motif is part of a complex discourse involving retrospective voyeurism, the eroticisation of (vicarious) witnessing, and the blurring of the legitimate/illegitimate border in Holocaust representation: Bryan Singer's *Apt Pupil* (1998).<sup>23</sup>

### Bryan Singer, Spielberg's Not So Apt Pupil

Bryan Singer is a Jewish American filmmaker heavily inspired by Spielberg (he even named his production company "Bad Hat Harry Productions" after a minor character from Spielberg's 1975 film *Jaws*), and his film *Apt Pupil* could be considered the first chapter of his daring reinterpretation of Holocaust-related topics through minor film genres such as horror and science fiction. The most famous of these is the superhero film *X-Men* (2000), then came the historical thriller *Valkyrie* (2008). The next is likely to be his announced version of *Battlestar Galactica*.<sup>24</sup>

*Apt Pupil* was adapted from a 1982 Stephen King novella with the same title.<sup>25</sup> King's story, set in the 1970s, and Singer's 1998 adaptation have significant differences in plot and are set in different decades, but the basic idea is the same and can be summarised as follows: Todd Bowden, an American youth with a morbid curiosity about the Holocaust, discovers that a former SS officer is living under false pretences in his neighbourhood, but instead of denouncing him to the local police, he chooses to blackmail him. However, young Todd is not interested in money. What he craves most are the old man's memories, his knowledge, and above all his deep personal connection with the 'heart of darkness' of the Holocaust. In other words, Todd needs the help of the reluctant Nazi in order to enact his own 'fantasy of witnessing' and to satisfy his 'retrospective voyeurism':

"I want to hear about it. That's all. [...] The firing squads. The gas chambers. The ovens. The guys who had to dig their own graves and then stand on the ends so they'd fall into them. The...' His tongue came out and wetted his lips. 'The examinations. The experiments. Everything. All the gooshy stuff.'"<sup>26</sup>

This fascination with the death camps goes together with the boy's entry into puberty and therefore has a vivid sexual connotation. In King's novella, Todd becomes curious about the Holocaust after finding a bunch of old pulp magazines such as *Man's Action and True War*, filled with depictions of sex and torture, in the garage of a friend's father (incidentally, the Israeli Stalags borrowed their cover illustrations from such American magazines of the 1950s). The Holocaust populates his 'wet dreams', made up of Stalag-like fantasies of torture, domination, medical experiments, and forced prostitution.

Interestingly enough, in Singer's film adaptation that same curiosity has a 'legitimate' origin: the history classes at school. This significant shift is reflected in the different reception of the two versions. When Stephen King was about to publish his novella, his agent and some personalities from the Jewish world were dubious about a horror story based on the Holocaust. Perhaps recalling those warnings, Singer decided to arrange a pre-screening at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. The film was acclaimed and Singer passed his test. The most 'illegitimate' Holocaust fic-

23 Claudia Eppert, *Entertaining History. (Un)heroic Identifications, Apt Pupils, and an Ethical Imagination*, in: *New German Critique* 86 (2002), 71-101.

24 David Desser/Lester D. Friedman, *American Jewish Filmmakers*, Urbana 2004, 309-314.

25 Mark Browning, *Stephen King on the Big Screen*, London 2009.

26 Stephen King, *Different Seasons*, London 1982, 127.

tion – stemming from the Israeli Stalags, American pulp magazines, and Italian Nazi sexploitation – had found its place, at least for one day, in ‘legitimate’ memorial culture.

Of course, this was possible because the film, intended for a wider audience, did not share the sadistic pornography of the novella. In place of Todd’s extreme sexploitation dreams, Singer’s film has two short sequences – a nightmare and a hallucination respectively – based on the peephole motif and on the uncanny superimposition of the shower and the gas chamber.

In the nightmare sequence, in which the palette changes to icy blue-green tones, the camera moves in a slow tracking shot towards the peephole of a gas chamber, behind which a Holocaust victim appears, staring at the camera with a frightening look, directly addressing the spectator and his voyeurism: It is more a tantalising spell cast on the viewer than a moral indictment. This frontal gaze is followed by a series of extremely fast moving, fragmented shots: In one of them, Todd occupies the position of the victim, on the other side of the peephole. The images are accompanied by a crescendo of orders shouted in German, whispers, and suspense music. In Todd’s nightmare, a radical shift in identification from perpetrator to victim thus occurs. However, it could be argued, using Christian Metz’s terms,<sup>27</sup> that Todd’s “secondary identification” with one or the other of the subject positions involved in the situation are less significant than his “primary identification” with the device that allows him to conduct his experiment in retrospective voyeurism: the peephole/camera.

Later, in the hallucination sequence, the camera follows Todd inside the high-school locker room after a basketball match. The boy covers his eyes with his hands, but when he reopens them, everything is again immersed in the same icy blue-green tone of the nightmare, and instead of his classmates, he sees around him naked and haggard Holocaust victims. As the voice shouting in German and the whispering sounds return, the warm pleasant steam of the locker room is confused with the gas-filled chambers that the Nazis disguised as showers.

Both sequences, the nightmare and the hallucination, recall quite explicitly the shower scene from *Schindler’s List*. But the chasm between the two films could not be greater. In *Apt Pupil*, eroticism and horror collide in each scene, and the peephole trope is not used to question the spectatorial voyeurism but rather to enact the ultimate ‘fantasy of witnessing’, the fantasy that Spielberg did not dare to stage: to hallucinate death in the gas chamber, to enter ‘*la pellicule maudite*’.

<sup>27</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier. Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Bloomington 1982.



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