Holocaust Movies: Watching the Unwatchable

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In the summer of 1939, my father-in-law, Noel Galen, was fourteen years old and spending his summer at camp in upstate New York. Noel and his fellow campers were acculturated, first generation, Jewish kids from New York City. Their parents, left-leaning and education-pushing, were unapologetic about their children’s ignorance of their Jewish heritage. Meanwhile, back in Europe, Hitler had other plans for their relatives. It is a story we all know, unspeakably painful to remember, dangerous to forget. Now, in the summer of 2001, I am at Noel’s farm on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, watching Holocaust movies with him and Sam, my fifteen year old son. I am working on a piece about movies of the Holocaust, and find I am baffled as to what to say about such a subject. What can psychoanalysis add to our understanding of something beyond our comprehension? With some vague notion that my sense of the Holocaust is connected to the idea of family, I suggest to Noel and Sam that we watch them together.

It is in the nature of trauma that it is done to us. It makes us respond, even if only to stupefy. So there are two ways we can respond to trauma: passively, in the ways that it makes us be part of it, and actively, in the ways that we attempt to make it part of our selves. As analysts, we try to help traumatized patients heal, drawing on our empathy and our own traumas to connect with them. Artists heal, too, by creating artistic experiences that engage us empathically and give us a circumscribed opportunity to be there and survive. Analysts and artists both try to create a relationship to the traumatic material that will be powerful and empowering. One of the problems with the Holocaust is that it is too big. It defies representation.

In Trauma: A Genealogy (The University of Chicago Press, 2000), Ruth Leys, Professor of Humanities at Johns Hopkins, examines the history of the concept of trauma, including its relationship to psychoanalysis. She describes...
the Holocaust as the paradigmatic example of “the crisis of representation posed by trauma in our time” (p. 252). Dealing with the Holocaust means having to imagine the unimaginable. We can’t, and yet we must. Leys argues that trauma theory contains “a continuous tension” (p. 10) between views of internal and external reality as related to questions of the legitimacy of victimization vs. the possibility of personal responsibility. It is in the nature of trauma for these tensions to emerge and reemerge. Trauma theory is, therefore, forever necessarily driven back and forth between two irreconcilable poles which she calls the mimetic and antimimetic.

*Mimesis*, from the Greek word for imitation, refers to a state of selflessness induced by overwhelming experience. The nature of this state is such that it leads to a profound identification with the experience or the object(s) associated with it, as in identification with the aggressor. Its prototype is the condition of the hypnotic subject under the suggestion of the hypnotist. Mimetic identification, thus, implies that trauma shatters the self to such a degree that the victim looks only to the victimizer for his/her sense of self. This becomes the only way that the trauma can be represented in the victim’s mind. In this state, Leys wonders if we can consider the victim to have even experienced the trauma. Can there be a possibility of memory or personal responsibility?

Further, can there be a possibility of cure if the victim cannot remember the trauma because he/she was not there? Leys shows that, even as the mimetic leads logically to this position, it becomes absurd. The hypnotized subject is not really overwhelmed by the hypnotist, so much as just going along. We must be able to have agency, or at least be sufficiently intact in relation to a traumatic experience to make treatment possible. The antimimetic position leads to a view of trauma as a purely external event that we can stand apart from, but it also means that it has no effect on us.

For Leys, trauma pulls us in two opposite directions: toward the mimetic, where we are totally overwhelmed and helplessly identified with the traumatic experience, or toward the antimimetic, where we are capable of perspective, but inhumanly detached. The question becomes: does an understanding of this mimetic/antimimetic tension enhance our understanding of how we experience Holocaust films? Does it help me understand what happens with my son and father-in-law? Does it give me perspective? One answer is that the artistic and analytic offer a working solution in the form of *action*, an approach that carefully negotiates its way through the minefield between Leys’ two poles. Here we try to create a path that gets us close enough to touch the trauma, while transforming it into something of beauty and hope.

With this in mind, I would like to consider three films, Steven Spielberg’s 1993 “Schindler’s List,” Roberto Benigni’s 1999 “Life is Beautiful,” and