

Rebecca Scherr

*Other Voices*, v.2, n.1 (February 2000)

□

---

Copyright © 2000, Rebecca Scherr, all rights reserved

---

In narrative accounts of Holocaust testimony, explicit discussions of sexuality and eroticism are almost nonexistent. If the theme does occur in eyewitness accounts, it is often the enforced lack of sexuality that is the object of commentary:

"Spread your legs," yelled the *blokowa*. And the body hair was shorn too.... We ceased to exist as thinking, feeling entities. We were not allowed any modesty in front of these strange men. We were nothing more than objects on which they performed their duties, nonsentient things that they could examine from all angles....It did not bother them that we were women and without our hair we felt totally humiliated. <sup>1</sup>

As Sara Nomberg-Przytyk remembers, the prisoners became, in the eyes of the Nazis, "nonsentient things" the moment they entered the concentration camp. Trauma, displacement and incarceration, starvation and its consequent exhaustion, overwork, the segregation of men and women, the destruction of family units, the shaving of body hair, the cessation of menstruation, the constant presence and threat of death—all of these factors conspired to strip the individual of any means towards imagining oneself a being, human and sexual. This is not meant to imply however, that sexual relationships, sexuality, and eroticism are *not* alluded to in survivor accounts. Charlotte Delbo, for example, recalls witnessing a kapo and her girlfriend "play 'wedding' all night," <sup>2</sup> but this memory of Delbo's constitutes one small segment of her long narrative recounting her experiences in *Auschwitz and After* and is by no means the focus of her writing.

However, in researching *fictional* narratives that take the Holocaust as subject matter, numerous works focus on sexual relationships and eroticism as the dominant relationship between the main characters in their experiences of the Holocaust. In Liliana Cavani's film *The Night Porter* and D.M. Thomas' novel *The White Hotel*, eroticism emerges as the central trope for examining the difficult subject of Holocaust experience and memory. These fictional works of art replace the absence of sexuality characteristic of memoirs of camp experience with an overabundance of erotic imagery, a sign that indicates a general discomfort with the historical facts or methods one can employ to represent the Holocaust. Moreover, it is the female body which becomes the site for displaying this erotic impulse. It is on the bodies of the female characters that the authors project a kind of sexual paranoia, and it is through watching these sexualized bodies that the reader/viewer participates in navigating between sex and violence and sex and death, in a fictional Holocaust universe both Cavani and Thomas attempt to render "real."

Thomas's and Cavani's use of an erotic imagination in relation to the Holocaust takes the form of transgressive sexualities such as perversion, sadomasochism, rape, and nymphomania. Cavani's 1975 film *The Night Porter* centers on the sadomasochistic relationship between a Nazi camp "doctor" and his favorite female prisoner, while simultaneously depicting such "sideshow perversions" as the rape of a male camp inmate, an ex-Nazi's struggle with his repressed homosexuality, and an aging female collaborator's taste for young gigolos. Thomas's protagonist Lisa Erdman in *The White Hotel* writes erotic poetry in which she figures as an

exhibitionist nymphomaniac, hallucinates "falling from a great height and...being buried by a landslide" <sup>3</sup> whenever she engages in intercourse, and whose eventual murder in the ravine of Babi Yar is described in sexualized, yet horrific, prose. What is the point of using eroticism as *the* central medium for giving meaning to Holocaust memory in a work of fiction? How does this reflect on the historical reality of the Holocaust? How does the trope of the sexualized female body contextualize the memory and the fact of the Holocaust in these works of fiction? I will explore these questions as they apply to *The Night Porter* and *The White Hotel*, and then I will examine a few passages from survivor memoirs which address the issue of female sexuality, passages that position the access of sexuality as deliberate acts of resistance.

*The Night Porter* is a perplexing film that tells the story of ex-Nazi officer Max and Lucia, his "little girl," who was once a prisoner and his mistress in a camp where he played doctor. The film opens in 1957 Vienna, where Max is working as a night porter in a large hotel, a sanctuary for ex-Nazis, who both staff and live in this hotel. As the film unfolds, we find that these ex-Nazis are involved in an enterprise of attempting to bury all traces of their wartime pasts. They hold mock trials among themselves, exonerating each other of their wartime deeds, and literally destroying any existing documentation of their criminal actions as Nazi officers. The destruction of documentation includes actual survivors, of whom there are few. Those still among the living who can recognize the Nazis' faces, and could potentially point a damaging finger at them, are killed. One night, as Max is working at the hotel's desk, a group of opera-goers enter, and among them is Lucia, who is now married to an American who is a visiting conductor of the opera's orchestra. The recognition between Max and Lucia is immediate, and the movie cuts quickly into a flashback. We see a line of people, mainly Jews identified by the yellow stars sewed onto their clothing, and among them is the young Lucia. <sup>4</sup> We see Max holding a film camera, walking to and fro filming the prisoners, when the bright light falls upon Lucia, in whom he takes an immediate interest. Max's camera penetrates Lucia's space, moving from her head to her feet, and she blinks in confusion, then looks away. The movie cuts back to 1957, to Lucia in her hotel room, contemplating her face in a mirror, visibly disturbed.

As the movie continues, Cavani employs the flashback as a means for establishing the nature of the relationship between Max and Lucia. It is important, too, that in the first flashback described above, Max looks at Lucia through his own movie camera, signifying that in the flashback sequences, we as spectators see Lucia through Max's lens. These flashbacks, used as a device to denote memory, contain no dialogue. As a consequence of the absence of word-exchange, these memories come across as ambiguous insofar as the spectator relies on purely visual clues to "read" these moments. Cavani manipulates the spectator's habit of reading by projecting onto the body of Lucia a kind of paranoid eroticism as seen through Max's lens. The camera achieves this through the extreme close-up, interrogating Lucia's face and body. In one flashback, a very thin and naked Lucia stands alone, cowering against a wall of showers. Max is shooting at her, purposefully missing, but marking his absolute power over her fate. Her body is extremely skinny, an obvious signifier of the "real" starvation actual prisoners suffered. But here Lucia's emaciated body becomes an erotic site, because we are already aware of Max's interest in Lucia, so that "shooting one's gun" is evident also as a sexual metaphor. We closely examine her nakedness and vulnerability, as the camera, like Max's camera, lingers on Lucia's skeletal body and conventionally beautiful face. In short, Lucia becomes a site of (erotic) investment and speculation to the spectator through Max's vision. This purposeful manipulation of the gaze—transforming the starved prisoner's body into an erotic spectacle—communicates the first twinges of discomfort Cavani leads the spectator to experience.

The beginning of Max's and Lucia's sexual relationship occurs when we see a group of impassive prisoners looking on as a Nazi officer rapes a male prisoner in his bed. Max walks into the room wearing his doctor's

coat, takes Lucia by the hand, and leads her to a room where they are alone. Though Max forces Lucia to perform oral sex, Lucia's facial expression is indeterminate. It is as if Cavani demands that the spectator read this ambiguity, since her use of the extreme close-up forces us to examine Lucia's expression, the look in her eyes, and what we gain is only discomfort—Lucia doesn't seem unwilling, nor does this other "rape" seem to cause her any feelings of displeasure. This scene is disturbing because it is unclear whether she abhors this act of violence or whether she somehow consents, or feels a certain amount of pleasure. The tension between violence (rape) and pleasure (Max's and possibly Lucia's) is, in this moment, left suspended. Cavani opens up the possibility that sexual pleasure is one dimension of the relationship between the Nazi and his prisoner.

The confusion as to Lucia's feelings toward Max is compounded by the fact that Lucia and Max resume their sexual relationship in the filmic present, willingly throwing away any signs of conventionality they have re-established in their post-camp lives. The two hole up in Max's apartment. He breaks with his Nazi cohorts and quits his job; she leaves her husband to devote herself entirely to Max. Max's Nazi associates are aware of Lucia's presence and her identity as a former prisoner. Since Max is unwilling to eliminate her, and he claims they are in love, the Nazis wait outside Max's apartment for a chance to assassinate them both. Eventually driven by starvation to flee the apartment and obtain some food (the Nazis cut off any possibility of food delivery to the apartment), Lucia and Max are, predictably, shot to death.

One of the overall effects of the story of Max and Lucia seems to be the deliberate blurring of clear demarcations between the experience of memory for the victimizer in relation to the victimized. As Marga Cottino-Jones writes in her article "What Kind of Memory? Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*":

[Cavani's] main motivation was that the basic difference between victims and victimizers consisted in the fact that victims remembered, while victimizers searched to find excuses in the logic of war in order to forget. *Night Porter* seems to work out this notion in general terms, but by concentrating on the story of Lucia, the victim, and Max, the victimizer, this basic concept gets blurred. Confusion arises when both victim and victimizer are projected as victims, leaving the audience with a moral dilemma which profoundly disturbs our basic beliefs about Nazism and the Holocaust. <sup>5</sup>

"Our basic beliefs about Nazism and the Holocaust" refers to the assumption of a clear division that separates the oppressor from the oppressed, and the concomitant associations generally ascribed to each. For example, that Max is prisoner in his own apartment, where he and Lucia suffer fear of death and starvation, much as we know, historically, real prisoners suffered in the camps, gives Max a new status as one of the hunted. Once a member of the hunters, he is now marked out for execution by the same group he once belonged to. The Nazi, as a symbol of our "basic beliefs" of Holocaust history, represents evil; he is unquestionably guilty, without conscience, a born revisionist and denier. Cavani complicates Max's identity as Nazi by transforming him into a figure who becomes prey to the cannibalistic trajectory of Nazism, whose experiences toward the end of his life uncannily resemble those experiences of the prisoners he tortured and murdered.

Cottino-Jones continues her analysis by arguing that the disturbing effect of the movie is further emphasized by the film's "voyeuristic effect and its subtle manipulation of the spectators' gaze and reactions....what [Scott] Montgomery calls 'the power and erotics of the image itself—the ability of images, for example, to overwhelm and ravish, to enlist a voyeuristic pleasure of almost any subject, no matter how monstrous.'" <sup>6</sup> *The Night Porter* turns the concentration camp memory into a memory of sexual play, a place where the prisoners and the film spectators watch Max and Lucia enact their psychosexual drama. In effect, Cavani transforms the memory of the camp into a "sexy memory," which, through the depiction of eroticism and the sexualized female body, elicits a reaction of pleasure in

the spectator, completely warping the historical facts of the Holocaust: in particular, the fact that the Holocaust was by no means, in any way, sexy. The flashback sequences always foreground Lucia's body as an erotic spectacle, a beautiful woman of distinct interest to the viewer in the midst of "equally naked but older prisoners totally devoid of any physical attractiveness."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, every flashback, every "memory," contains a sexual encounter between Max and Lucia, whether it be explicit or suggested. The images of the bizarre power-sex games Max plays with Lucia are always juxtaposed with the faces of the other prisoners as they hover in the background, watching. The prisoners, like the spectators of the film, become voyeurs of the erotic games enacted between Max and Lucia. The camera's concentration on the beautiful woman as erotic spectacle, and the flashback "memory" as one that only contains moments of sexual ambiguity and voyeurism, are more intent on representing perversion and sensationalism than in recreating Nazi atrocity, hence decontextualizing the concentration camp from its historical facticity.

Although the erotic scenes in this film are ostensibly perverse, they nevertheless communicate a sensation of both discomfort and pleasure. In itself, the act of watching sexual intercourse unfold on-screen holds the power to sexually excite the viewer, for this watching taps into a kind of scopophilic desire, which Laura Mulvey defines via Freud as the "desire to see and make sure of the private and forbidden."<sup>8</sup> We as viewers experience voyeuristic pleasure in having privileged access into Max's Viennese apartment<sup>9</sup> (where Lucia is willingly chained inside), which Max has barricaded from the exterior world. We can further see into the space where he and Lucia play out their psychotic-sexual drama, while the other film personalities are barred from entering. This potentially triggers a scopophilic desire to watch Max and Lucia as objects who will stimulate in the spectators a feeling of sexual excitement when we watch them make love. Our feelings of desire will be further heightened, perversely, because of the "forbidden" nature of sex acts between a Nazi and his prisoner, especially when, towards the end of the film, it is the prisoner who initiates intercourse. Furthermore, these sex acts take place within the confines of an apartment sealed off from the rest of the world of the filmic plot, but laid bare for our privileged access and subsequent enjoyment. In short, the viewer is manipulated to experience the pleasure of the "peeping tom."

As to the discomfort we feel in opposition to this pleasure, we as viewers/readers fall into a trap Lawrence Langer articulates; namely, that the atrocity of the Holocaust is so heavy and unimaginable that we search for moments of redemption, acts of resistance, in Holocaust narratives in order to render "more manageable...impossible circumstances" like the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> In *The Night Porter*, our discomfort stems from the absence of any acts of redemption and resistance from the victim, Lucia, or even a redeeming characterization of her personality. She has almost no personality in the film; the only aspects of her character developed in the film are her disturbing passion for Max and how she reacts to his presence. We watch her repeat her victimization, and then she dies. "Our basic beliefs" of the Holocaust incite in the spectator a desire to watch her flee, to resume a "normal" life, to repudiate Max and all the history he represents. In other words, we want to see a narrative of redemption through Lucia's resistance to Max's seductive power, a power she could not resist while his prisoner, for resistance meant a sure death. But now that she is "free," she can reject him, point a finger, and enact her/our revenge. She does not enact this revenge we so desire the victim to do; rather, she causes us discomfort because of the enslaving passion she carries for her oppressor.

Cavani deliberately infuses Lucia's identity as victim with ambiguity, as she does with the oppressor's character, further blurring the line between victim and oppressor. When discussing the factors that inspired her to create *The Night Porter*, Cavani referred to two interviews she conducted with Italian women of the Resistance for her 1965 television documentary, *La donna nella Resistenza*. One survivor returned to Dachau each year during her vacation for reasons she could not clearly articulate, stating only

that her incarceration was the most important experience of her life. The other, a woman who had survived Auschwitz, remarked to Cavani, "Don't believe that every victim is innocent."<sup>11</sup> Cavani uses these two stories to create the character of Lucia: Lucia's return to Max's embrace signifies "the psychological grip of the past [that] locks characters into repetition compulsion"<sup>12</sup> like that of the woman who returns to Dachau, and Lucia's willingness to be Max's mistress, a choice initially made to better her chances of survival, also taints the "innocence" associated with survivorship, in that she slept with, and in a sense, collaborated with, the enemy/oppressor. Cavani states that the two women's stories best illustrate the point she wanted to capture in her film: "In reality, I was searching for an explanation for the ambiguity of human nature" which she claims to have discovered "in fetishism, in the power of masochism...in the violence that arises within us, from all that is hidden in the unconscious."<sup>13</sup> How these issues relate to the Holocaust in particular Cavani does not address in her discussion of the film, nor does she state how or why eroticism is the chosen vehicle for representing this interrogation of ambiguity in human nature. It is as if the Holocaust is secondary and dispensable, a simple stage-set, for the author's meditation on "the ambiguity of human nature" through the presentation of perverse and sensationalistic eroticism.

Lucia's erotic body is the focal point for the spectators as we navigate the thrill of a perverse passion; Lucia's body is both the site of eroticism and the site of memory. Her presence as Holocaust survivor recalls the traumatic experience, yet that physicality can only express itself through the language of eroticism controlled by her oppressor. This is reminiscent of Mulvey's formulation that "Woman...stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on *the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.*"<sup>14</sup> Since the memories presented in Cavani's film are particularly Max's memories, as seen through his lens, Lucia stands as the silent bearer of (his) meaning. In fact, she rarely utters a word throughout the entire film. The victim here does not make meaning; the woman's body stands for the atrocity and memory of Cavani's fictional Holocaust, but remains prisoner to it, contained within the boundaries of Max's perverse, erotic rhetoric. The meaning assigned to Lucia is that of the center focus of the gaze, the captive body that is looked at and desired, a positioning that succeeds in illuminating the interconnections between pleasure and perversity, but a position that fails to communicate the horror that was the Holocaust. Perhaps the horror of the Holocaust can begin to be represented when it is the victim who becomes the maker, or producer, of meaning.

The ambiguity Cavani sought to investigate in her film is certainly a fascinating dimension of the plot, but what is not as apparent is how the theme of the Holocaust is (ab)used in her film. In centering on the notion of ambiguity, vague by its very nature, Cavani admits that it is not the Holocaust nor the concentration camp that she is interested in exploring, but rather the ambiguity associated with the fascination and pull of Nazism.<sup>15</sup> This allows her to depart from any allegiance to reality in the depiction of the camp, and instead use it as a backdrop to the erotic/sadomasochistic misadventures of Max and Lucia, Nazi and victim. By not exploring in depth the reality of camp life, the film's use of the Holocaust comes across, to use Cottino-Jones's assessment, as "shallow."<sup>16</sup> Instead of an insightful examination of the past's grip over the psyche, a psyche that has experienced the full atrocity of concentration camp life, the more central erotic and arguably romantic components of this film transform the story of Max and Lucia into a "sentimental idyll...exalting romantic love between victim and victimizer, against the brute reality of Nazi violence."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, by relying on the use of the erotic female body as the central trope of the film, *The Night Porter* borders on soft-porn in its play on voyeurism. The film's use of an erotic language to talk about the Holocaust succeeds only in probing Cavani's central question, that of "the ambiguity

of human nature," and fails to add itself to the growing number of Holocaust-related works of art that deal rigorously with the question of how to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive. [18](#)

D.M. Thomas's novel *The White Hotel*, more nuanced and complicated than Cavani's film, recounts the story of Lisa Erdman, a woman of mixed Catholic and Jewish heritage, whose "Cassandra-like" ability, her second sight, allows her glimpses of her future murder at the Babi Yar massacre. While a patient of Thomas's fictionalized version of Freud, and in the grip of what Freud believed to be hysteria, Lisa writes an erotic poem in which she fantasizes a sexual adventure at the White Hotel where she and Freud's son incessantly make love:

So pulling me upon him without warning, your son impaled me, it was so sweet I screamed but no one heard me for the other screams as body after body fell or leapt from upper stories of the white hotel. I jerked and jerked until his prick released its soft cool flood. Charred bodies hung from trees, he grew erect again, again I lunged... [19](#)

At this moment in Lisa's poem, the upper levels of their hotel are ablaze, but the couple cannot be bothered to leave their love-making, while simultaneously they watch as other guests at the White Hotel fall and leap to their deaths. The image of people falling to their deaths will, much later in the text, reveal itself as Lisa's own fate when she is shot by German soldiers and drops into the corpse-packed ravine of Babi Yar. Only when Lisa fantasizes about sex, or when she actually engages in intercourse, do these catastrophic visions rise into her mind. The fictional Freud, who narrates a large part of this novel, draws the conclusion through Lisa's case-analysis that sex and death are intertwined phenomena. Later, when Lisa actually falls into the ravine—shot, yet barely alive—Thomas repeats this perverse sexual/erotic rhetoric when describing Lisa's death. The kind of death Lisa will experience is veiled in the language of the above quote, but is revealed in the sexualized language he employs to describe her moment of her death:

With Semashko's assistance he found the opening, and they joked together as he inserted the bayonet, carefully, almost delicately. [Lisa] was not making any sound, though they could see she was still breathing. Still very gently, Demidenko imitated the thrusts of intercourse; and Semashko let out a guffaw, which echoed from the ravine walls, as the woman's body jerked back and relaxed, jerked and relaxed. But after those spasms there was no sign of a reaction, and she seemed to have stopped breathing. Semashko grumbled at their wasting time. Demidenko twisted the blade and thrust it in deep. [20](#)

In Lisa's poem, she uses the phrase "I jerked and jerked" to describe having sex with Freud's son, and also writes that "[he] impaled me." We see in Lisa's death scene, Thomas as narrator repeats these two actions. The soldier moves his bayonet inside Lisa's vagina to give Lisa's body the appearance of engaging in sexual intercourse ("[her] body jerked back and relaxed, jerked and relaxed") and eventually this same soldier "thrust [the bayonet] in deep"—he impaled her.

According to Laura Tanner, this death scene, "finally reveals the true cause of Lisa's excruciating pain, but it is the stark description of that violence that displaces once and for all Freud's abstract symbolism and the metaphorical forms in which that symbolism cloaks the facts of violence." [21](#) In the death scenario above, Thomas strips the prose of the heavily symbolic vocabulary based on psychoanalytic terms that functions as the dominant mode of expression for all previous chapters of the novel, and in its stead he reveals brute violence. Tanner argues that this strategy of revelation is effective because the reader is able to experience horror at the "sight" of Lisa's death-rape. The brutal and horror-inducing description of Lisa's death works to oppose the passage from Lisa's poem quoted above, which disallows access to the sensation horror even when the reader "witnesses" the violent image of "charred bodies." In Lisa's poem the violent images are subsumed by the erotic rhetoric of the poem, "cloaking" violence in metaphorical language, particularly erotic language, so that the "facts of violence" disappear into the erotic dimension of the poem. [22](#) In other words, the erotic component of Lisa's poem writes

violence in the terms of eroticism, so that the violent images become part of Lisa's sexual landscape, increasing the power of her orgasm while simultaneously removing these images from the realm of atrocity and horror. We see this problem of (erotic) metaphorical language cloaking the facts of violence in *The Night Porter*, since atrocity itself never confronts the spectator, but only *metaphorical violence* as depicted in the sadomasochistic relationship between Nazi and victim.

Thomas's prose explores this profound point, though at the expense of sexualizing and trivializing one survivor's testimony of Babi Yar. The section of the novel entitled "The Sleeping Carriage" is the most imagistic and powerful part of the novel; it is also the chapter where Babi Yar is described in horrifying detail, and the only part of the book that actually takes place during the Holocaust. For this chapter, Thomas relied on the testimony of one of Babi Yar's few survivors, Dina Pronicheva. Holocaust literary critic James Young explains, "Seemingly torn between presenting Babi Yar as a fictional construct and simultaneously asserting that Babi Yar was not a fiction, Thomas has thus labored to create the authority of an authentic witness within the realm of his [fictional] text."<sup>23</sup> What Thomas does is layer-in this testimony with his own prose style, and thus he has "appropriated Dina's voice *as a style*, a rhetorical move by which he would impute to his fiction the authority of testimony without the authenticity of actual testimony."<sup>24</sup> At moments in this chapter, Thomas actually plagiarizes Dina's testimony as recorded in Anatoli Kuznetsov's docu-novel *Babi Yar*, and inserts her testimony into the flow of his own prose.<sup>25</sup> Thus Thomas appropriates this eyewitness account, and the testimony becomes subsumed within the fictional world of D.M. Thomas, thereby undoing its authority as testimony, as actuality. In other words, Thomas cloaks the power of Dina's testimony in the voice of a fictional narrator. The testimony does not stand on its own; it becomes threaded into the fiction, and becomes "novelized" and severed from any tether to the reality of the Holocaust. Thomas as narrator seems to realize this when he writes, "After a while Dina Pronicheva stopped admitting she had escaped from Babi Yar."<sup>26</sup> In reverting back to silence, Dina, as the referent, the memory of Babi Yar, like Lucia's identity as reminder of the concentration camp, ceases to speak the victim's story. After this fall to silence, the words Dina leaves behind are open to appropriation and re-creation by others—namely, by Kuznestov and Thomas himself. Thomas's novelistic twist on this testimony brings Dina's experiences into the realm of fiction—a dangerous move in our era of Holocaust deniers, who claim the Holocaust itself is a conspiracy perpetuated through narrative and photographic fiction.

Although Young's analysis of the relationship between Thomas's fiction and Pronicheva's testimony is an interesting discussion of the relationship of fiction to documentary evidence, he chooses to read only this aspect of Thomas's text. He does not consider the other chapters of the novel, nor does he delve into a discussion of the effect that Thomas's layering-in of Pronicheva's testimony with Lisa Erdman's death-scene has on the reading of the whole text. Already uprooted from its own context and connection to the historical reality of the Holocaust, the testimony is eroticized in this novel through Thomas's rhetorical style. This is not the same kind of erotic impulse that Cavani creates, but it is similar. While Thomas does incite the reader to experience a moment of horror by employing erotic language to depict a scene of violence and exposing the dissonance between the two, Cavani's characters fail to move beyond the struggle of pleasure and perversity, and hence fail to represent Holocaust violence as horrific. Nevertheless, both use an erotic language to explore the notion of death in the Holocaust. By positing Lisa's death as the horrific conclusion of her earlier fantasies of sex and death, Thomas, through juxtaposition, lends this kind of explicability and closure to Dina's real experiences. In *The Night Porter* Cavani deliberately juxtaposes the watchful prisoners' faces with Max's and Lucia's erotic entanglements, which consequently transforms the prisoners into an anonymous group of voyeurs. Likewise, Thomas's juxtaposition of Lisa's fictional life and death with Dina's testimony, ends up subsuming Dina's story into a novel that

centers on a woman's sexual fantasy life, and how these fantasies predict the occurrence of the massacre. In short, both Thomas and Cavani, through the use of the erotic as their central trope, eroticize the shreds of the "real" they attempt to layer into their works of fiction. The documentary material they rely on for creating "authenticity" in representing the Holocaust becomes fictionalized and severed from their connection to the real event.

All Holocaust fiction is in danger of taking the facts of the Holocaust, and by writing them into the work of fiction, placing the historically real into the category of fiction, thereby turning the lived experience of the survivor into a narrative conceived in the mind of the writer. This formulation holds true for Holocaust memoir as well. As Young points out:

For even though ghetto-diarists, survivor-memoirists, and docu-novelists all seem to fear that the essential rhetoricity of their medium inadvertently fictionalizes the events themselves, the diarists and memoirists also fear that the empirical link between their experiences and their narrative is lost in literary construction. <sup>27</sup>

For the memoirist, this fear of losing the connection between the word and the event is, of course, driven by the *necessity* of communicating the lived experience of the Holocaust so that its fact and impact does not disappear or fade from collective memory. Furthermore, it is evident that many Holocaust memoirists are also driven by the need to memorialize, and remember, the many dead who were not properly buried or mourned. <sup>28</sup> As such, there exists no Holocaust memoir which centralizes sexuality and eroticism as the focal point of the narrative, since the survivors' words seek to recall an historical and lived experience, an experience that was anything but erotic. Rather, the memoirists are intent on infusing the fact of the Holocaust with narrative authority and authenticity, and therefore it is unfathomable that a memoir would be written that foregrounds eroticism as its overriding trope.

As stated in the introductory paragraph, this does not mean that sexuality and eroticism are absent from testimonial works. There are moments in survivor memoirs which describe, or remember, instances when sexuality and eroticism became one fragment of the Holocaust experience. <sup>29</sup> These moments, though, are never central, but are one small shred of the conglomeration of pieces that constitute the memory of the camps. Both Charlotte Delbo's and Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's works refuse the unifying tendency of the novel or the narrative film. Young, when writing about Nomberg-Przytyk's *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grottesque Land*, mentions "the sense of broken time and lives" that her vignettes preserve. <sup>30</sup> Each of the 40 stories in the collection can stand on its own; they are each a fragment of memory and experience, containing the seed of its "own discrete truth, its own possibilities of meaning." <sup>31</sup> Nomberg-Przytyk does not try to subsume her experience into a unifying narrative, or try to express her camp experience through the use of a single vehicle or trope, as Cavani and Thomas do with the erotic components of their fictions. Instead, Nomberg-Przytyk's memoir maintains a sense of broken time, and from these shards grow multiplicities of meaning.

Likewise, the survivor Charlotte Delbo, in her trilogy *Auschwitz and After*, utilizes a kind of "vignette" style, although her prose is more poetic and her lines are more compact than Nomberg-Przytyk's. A single sentence in Delbo's work can, if studied carefully, produce numerous images and meanings that relate to the time she was in Auschwitz, and reach further to explore the moral and metaphysical aspects the facts of the Holocaust demand. She creates a sense of fragmented memory by swinging, sing-song like, between the different and disparate images she remembers from the camp. <sup>32</sup> Sometimes she will place only one piece of her memory, written in four sentences, on a whole page. The visual layout of a minimal amount of print within the larger space of the blank page communicates a sense of fragmentation, of ruptured time and lives and space, barring the reader from an attempt at relating this piece of evidence to a larger, unifying narrative. <sup>33</sup>

As an example of another stance representing the female body in Holocaust literature that differs considerably from Thomas's and Cavani's, I will isolate some instances in these two survivors' works when the sexualized female body becomes, in their world of Auschwitz, a site which speaks of resistance. Their portrayal of a kind of "Auschwitz" sexuality also points to the reality of the incomprehensible and surreal value systems that informed the camps. These moments that depict sex and eroticism are by no means the defining characteristics, the center focus, of their memories.

Toward the end of Delbo's first chapter "Arrivals and Departures" in *None of Us Will Return*, she writes the following image:

A kapo will masquerade by donning the bridegroom's morning coat and top hat, with her girlfriend wrapped in the bride's veil. They'll play 'wedding' all night while the prisoners, dead tired, lie in their bunks. Kapos can have fun since they're not exhausted at the end of the day. <sup>34</sup>

These packed sentences are somewhat shocking, not because of their lesbian content, but because of their reference to sexuality, erotic games, and the nature of relationships among the inmates at Auschwitz. The difficulty of expressing the inexpressible, Holocaust experience, is here made clear by Delbo's reliance on the rhetoric of normalcy to describe a union of individuals that is by no means "normal." On one level, Delbo transposes the objects of heterosexuality (the costumes of the bride and groom) to talk about the sexual relationship between two women. She then further complicates the scenario by placing a portrait of two people "having fun" in the context of the death camp, where starvation, despair, and death are the realities of everyday life. Because we see this scenario through the eyes of the survivor, the kapo and her girlfriend are framed as mocking the other "prisoners, dead tired," who witness their game-playing. In Cavani's scenario of the prisoners who watch Max and Lucia, we see the prisoners through Max's point of view, since the moment is contained in the flashback memory (Max's lens), which turns the nameless prisoners into voyeurs, whose watching heightens the intensity of Max's pleasure. Delbo does not eroticize her own point of view, nor does she give this to the reader; she witnesses this performance and opens it to far different interpretations than Cavani's narrative allows. For one, the kapo, whose role as supervisor and disciplinarian grants her more privilege within the camp system than other prisoners can access, and whose girlfriend enjoys these privileges through the kapo's favor, are nevertheless prisoners themselves. The kapo perpetrates violence upon the bodies of other prisoners, but she suffers the violence of incarceration and probable death as well as the others. Therefore, this brief sketch could be read as an act of resistance. The kapo and her girlfriend are not the "nonsentient things" the Nazis view the prisoners as, for they discover routes toward sexual expression. Perhaps this is perverse in the midst of the death camp, but it still allows them to maintain their humanity through moments of acting out pleasure and desire.

The kind of dizzying value system this memory comments on is a sense of inescapability, and that beneath each memory and image of Auschwitz lies utter horror, regardless how "normal" something appears through its representation in language and narrative. The camp is a place where the signs of a normal life can only be mockery and illusion, and therefore there is no space of refuge, within or without these signs. In the above quote, the horror lies in the representation of the actual costumes of the bride and groom the kapo and her girlfriend wear. A few pages prior to the introduction of this image, Delbo lists the arrival of various kinds of people to Auschwitz, and she includes on this list the arrival by train of a bride and groom, "the bride all in white wrapped in her veil wrinkled from having slept on the floor of the cattle car/ the bridegroom in black wearing a top hat his gloves soiled." <sup>35</sup> All those who have "arrived" in the place that Delbo describes become the fuel that feeds the gas chambers. It is as if the kapo and her girlfriend can only transpose the illusion of "normalcy" upon their bodies and their relationship by wearing the clothing of those who have met their deaths in the gas chamber, by appropriating the possessions of other victims. These "masks" are a sign of the blood others have shed, and

what seems so "normal" and innocent—the wedding costume—has no place in the camp save for a mocking reminder of violence and murder. Delbo is not simply exposing the rhetorical impossibility of talking about Auschwitz in familiar language, but also showing how behind the use of "normal" language and signs, exists the reality of murder, violence, and horror. The reality of murder and violence is the price these women pay for creating the illusion of the normal. Behind every image Delbo invokes, this horror is manifest, impossible to convey fully, but nevertheless present in everything in and about Auschwitz.

Delbo emphasizes this point once again when she recalls, "[a] blockhova will cut homey curtains from the holy vestments worn by the rabbi to celebrate the sabbath no matter what, in whatever place."<sup>36</sup> The use of the word "homey" refers to this illusion of the normal abode, of familiarity, but Delbo ruptures this sense of familiarity she first invokes by tracing the material of the curtain to its origin—its identity as a sacred cloth, worn by a rabbi who is most likely dead. The object belies an indication of the normal, the familiar, the explicable, which have no place in Auschwitz. All objects which seem normal are plundered signs from the life of the Holocaust victim, and can never actually be normal, no matter how they are used in the camp. There is no place in Auschwitz that can contain the normal; there is no way to use language to convey the horror of Auschwitz. Language, a normalized tool used to describe culture and experience, can likewise never contain the Holocaust. Similarly, Delbo's point of departure having been the sexual games played out between a kapo and her girlfriend, she communicates that this scenario is not about the familiar site of eroticism, but rather it speaks of the impossibility of speaking, of normalcy, of language and signs, to represent the memory of the Holocaust. In recognizing the failure of language to represent the Holocaust, Delbo acknowledges the experience of the victims who struggle to find the words to communicate their stories.

One of the most famous memories of resistance through the enactment of eroticism/sexuality is recorded in a number of memoirs by Auschwitz survivors. This is the story of "the dancer" who, upon her arrival at Auschwitz, immediately recognizes the horror that is occurring there, and chooses to resist. I will quote the story at length as it is told by Filip Müller and as it appears in Young's book:

The woman, as soon as she noticed that the two men were ogling her, launched into what appeared to be a titillating strip-tease act. She lifted her skirt to allow a glimpse of thigh and suspender. Slowly she undid her stocking and peeled it from her foot. From out of the corner of her eye she carefully observed what was going on around her. The two SS men were fascinated by her performance and paid no attention to anything else.... She had taken off her blouse and was standing in front of her lecherous audience in her brassiere. Then she steadied herself against a concrete pillar with her left arm and bent down, slightly lifting her foot, in order to take off her shoe. What happened next took place with lightning speed: quick as a flash she grabbed her shoe and slammed its heel violently against Quackernack's forehead...At this moment the young woman flung herself at him and made a quick grab for his pistol. There was a shot. Schillinger cried out and fell to the ground. Seconds later there was a second shot aimed at Quackernack which narrowly missed him.<sup>37</sup>

Young comments that although this story appears in varied forms in a number of memoirs, and the details of the woman's clothing, nationality, and religious affiliation varies considerably, the overall message of the story, for the prisoners, "represented courage, desperation, resistance, justice, or hope; and as it represented these categories for the prisoners, it also inspired the prisoners to act on them."<sup>38</sup> In Nomberg-Przytyk's account of the incident, entitled "Revenge of a Dancer," the dancer is a young French woman of unusual beauty who wore a two-piece bathing suit.<sup>39</sup> What is significant about Nomberg-Przytyk's version, though, is that the dancer, after shooting at the SS guards, "saved the last bullet for herself."<sup>40</sup> Not only does she resist the Nazis by turning violence back on them, but she resists, too, by committing suicide, by not allowing the SS the chance to murder her. The dancer uses her beauty and power of seduction to hypnotize the guards, to draw them away from their

immediate concerns, and enact her revenge through the simulation of an erotic performance and consequent suicide. The relationship between eroticism and resistance is clear here, and by no means does this story become a tale of erotic intrigue at the concentration camp, as do Lucia's various performances in the fictional camp of *The Night Porter*. Rather, the story of the dancer is one of the most paradigmatic examples of resistance and heroism that the survivors of Auschwitz remember.

Both Delbo and Nomberg-Przytyk emphasize *appearances* when they recall camp memories that deal with issues of the (female) body as a sexual site. The appearance of sexuality and eroticism denotes meanings that go far beyond Cavani's and Thomas's use of eroticism as exploitation and sensationalism. In the works of the two survivors, sexuality is never an end in itself; rather, it is a framework for discussing resistance, and it is about accessing the very human desires of the body that the SS tried to kill in their prisoners. Sexuality also is a sign of its own lack, its absence as a central aspect of camp life as illustrated in the quote by Nomberg-Przytyk in the introduction. Through her brief description of the sexual relationship between a kapo and her girlfriend, Delbo points to the impossibility of language to adequately render the true horror of camp life, as she taunts the reader/spectator to "Try to look. Just try to see." [41](#)

In conclusion, I have taken the position that the narrative works of the survivor memoirists own a kind of authenticity and authority that the Holocaust fiction writer can never match, whether or not the fiction writers base their fiction on testimony and/or documentary evidence. The writers of the memoirs I cited in this paper intuitively maintained the sense of rupture and broken times and lives the Holocaust wrought on its victims, and mirroring this impression into their narrative works, come closer to communicating the historically real event of the Holocaust than the unifying narratives of the fiction writers. The survivors maintain the link between the event and the word because of their actual link to the Shoah as bodily reminders of the atrocity, and the attempt at maintaining that link through language infuses their works with authenticity and honesty. The more "fictionalized" aspects of their narratives—in the sense that the placing of experience into narrative form necessarily changes the actual event as it happened—are subsumed into the writer's authority as witness, and their works maintain their connection to history through the writer's body of experience (as conduit). Cavani, and to a lesser extent, Thomas, misread the Holocaust by abstracting the event into works that center on the erotic female body, works that sensationalize the Holocaust because of their reliance on representing perverse and paranoid sex as symbolic of Holocaust memory. The memory of the (Holocaust) body is misread by Thomas and Cavani because they attempt to write about bodily memory solely through the rhetoric of erotics, and hence their works fall short as meaningful memorializations of the Holocaust. Their narratives grossly misrepresent historical facts, even the fact of the Holocaust itself, by transforming the memory of the Holocaust into a "sexy memory."



#### Endnotes:

[1.](#) Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, trans. Roslyn Hirsch (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) 14.

[2.](#) Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 8.

[3.](#) D.M. Thomas, *The White Hotel* (New York: Viking Press, 1981) 123.

[4.](#) We learn later in the film that Lucia is not a Jew. Rather, she is "the daughter of the socialist." She is not wearing a yellow star in this scene.

[5.](#) Marga Cottino-Jones, "What Kind of Memory?": Liliana Cavani's *Night Porter*," *Contention* 5.1 (1995): 107.

- [6.](#) Cottino-Jones, 107.
- [7.](#) Cottino-Jones, 108.
- [8.](#) Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988) 59.
- [9.](#) When I mention "Max's Viennese apartment" that he has barricaded from the outside, this refers to Max's apartment in the filmic present, 1957.
- [10.](#) Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) 2.
- [11.](#) Ciriaco Tiso, Cavani: Liliana Cavani (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1975) 97. All translations are mine.
- [12.](#) Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 137.
- [13.](#) Tiso, 96.
- [14.](#) Mulvey, 58. Emphasis mine.
- [15.](#) Tiso, 96.
- [16.](#) Cottino-Jones, 110.
- [17.](#) Cottino-Jones, 110.
- [18.](#) See Cottino-Jones's concluding remarks, 110.
- [19.](#) Thomas, 20.
- [20.](#) Thomas, 249-50.
- [21.](#) Laura Tanner, "Sweet Pain and Charred Bodies: Figuring Violence in *The White Hotel*," *Boundary 2* 18.2 (1991): 145.
- [22.](#) Tanner, 146-9.
- [23.](#) James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 56.
- [24.](#) Young, 56.
- [25.](#) Young also points out that Kuznetsov actually wrote Pronicheva's testimony as he remembered it years after she told him her story. Furthermore, Thomas used an English translation of the testimony which was originally written in Russian by Kuznetsov. If Thomas is "invoking a second-hand rendering of a third party's memory," how valid is Young's claim that Thomas is not trying to "violate the factual integrity of real events"(Young 56)?
- [26.](#) Thomas, 252.
- [27.](#) Young, 23.
- [28.](#) For a discussion on how the memoirs of some female survivors memorialize the dead in literature, see Marlene E. Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986) 122-9. This theme is especially pertinent to Delbo's work.
- [29.](#) In her article "Lessons Learned from Gentle Heroism," Myrna Goldenberg quotes Elie A. Cohen, who documented that women in the barracks discussed sex often: "Others confide that there was 'everlasting talk about sex and smut [which] may be considered as compensatory satisfaction.'" Goldenberg's article can be found on the WWW at [30.](#) Young, 43.
- [31.](#) Young, 44.
- [32.](#) The sing-song tone that swings from image to image is most apparent

in the first part of Delbo's trilogy, *None of Us Will Return*.

[33](#). See, for an example, p. 84 of *Auschwitz and After*.

[34](#). Delbo, 8.

[35](#). Delbo, 6.

[36](#). Delbo, 8.

[37](#). Young, 48.

[38](#). Young, 49.

[39](#). Nomberg-Przytyk, 108.

[40](#). Nomberg-Przytyk, 109.

[41](#). Delbo, 86.

#### **Works Cited:**

Cavani, Liliana, dir. *The Night Porter*. Perf. Dick Bogarde and Charlotte Rampling. Lotar Film Productions, 1975.

Cottino-Jones, Marga. "What Kind of Memory?: Liliana Cavani's *Night Porter*." *Contention* 5.1 (1995): 105- 111.

Delbo, Charlotte. *Auschwitz and After*. Trans. Rosette C. Lamont. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Langer, Lawrence. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." *Feminism and Film Theory*. Ed. Constance Penley. New York: Routledge, 1988. 57-68.

Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara. *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*. Trans. Roslyn Hirsch. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

Tanner, Laura. "Sweet Pain and Charred Bodies: Figuring Violence in *The White Hotel*." *Boundary 2* 18:2 (1991): 130-49.

Thomas, D.M. *The White Hotel*. New York: Viking Press, 1981.

Tiso, Ciriaco. Cavani: Liliana Cavani. Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1975.

Young, James. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

#### **Error. Page cannot be displayed. Please contact your service provider for more details. (13)**

Holocaust fiction is seen by many readers as--at best--a weaker, softer kind of testimony when compared to the rigors of history, or--at worst--a misleading, dangerous confusion of verisimilitude with reality. Louis Begley, in reflecting on the connection of his novels to his personal experience as a child survivor, succinctly articulates what many readers find most problematic about the idea of Holocaust fiction: "To separate what is true from what is not would be like trying to unscramble an omelet" (Fein C10).<sup>1</sup> The present study presumes fiction as a serious vehicle for thinking about the Holocaust. The trope of muteness, predominant in Holocaust narratives of all sorts, functions in fiction deliberately and explicitly to . . . SUBSCRIBE TODAY! Full access to this book and over 94,000 more. ^ Lauren Stratford: From Satanic Ritual Abuse to Jewish Holocaust Survivor â€" Cornerstone magazine's exposÃ© of Stratford's claim to be Laura Grabowski. ^ "Mutant Message Down Under". ^ "BOOK NEWS Other literary hoaxes", Los Angeles Times, 2008-03-09. ^ J. Michael Houlahan, â€œFiction as Fact: False Memories of WWII in the Philippinesâ€, Asia-Pacific Social Science Review (De La Salle University,

Manila) 10:2 (2010), pp. 83-86. ^ Sascha Weinzheimer Jansen, Philippine Scouts Heritage Website, <http://www.philippine-scouts.org/cgi-bin/yabb2/YaBB.pl?num=1271251020>. ^ "Gang Memoir, Turning Page, Is Pure Fiction". The New York Times. 4 March 2008. New York -- A Holocaust survivor's memoir of love in a Nazi concentration camp, which was yanked from publication last month when he admitted it was a hoax, may reappear as a work of fiction. Berkley Books, a unit of Penguin Books, has canceled a planned publication of Herman Rosenblat's memoir, *Angel at the Fence*. But York House Press, a small publishing house based in White Plains, New York, has said it was "in serious discussion" to publish the book as a work of fiction. "We believe Mr. Rosenblat's motivations were very human, understandable and forgivable," York Ho

Holocaust fiction is seen by many readers as--at best--a weaker, softer kind of testimony when compared to the rigors of history, or--at worst--a misleading, dangerous confusion of verisimilitude with reality. Louis Begley, in reflecting on the connection of his novels to his personal experience as a child survivor, succinctly articulates what many readers find most problematic about the idea of Holocaust fiction: "To separate what is true from what is not would be like trying to unscramble an omelet" (Fein C10).  
The present study presumes fiction as a serious vehicle for thinking about the Holocaust. The trope of muteness, predominant in Holocaust narratives of all sorts, functions in fiction deliberately and explicitly to . . . SUBSCRIBE TODAY! Full access to this book and over 94,000 more. ^ Lauren Stratford: From Satanic Ritual Abuse to Jewish Holocaust Survivor -- Cornerstone magazine's exposé of Stratford's claim to be Laura Grabowski. ^ "Mutant Message Down Under". ^ "BOOK NEWS Other literary hoaxes", Los Angeles Times, 2008-03-09. ^ J. Michael Houlahan, "Fiction as Fact: False Memories of WWII in the Philippines", Asia-Pacific Social Science Review (De La Salle University, Manila) 10:2 (2010), pp. 83-86. ^ Sascha Weinzheimer Jansen, Philippine Scouts Heritage Website, <http://www.philippine-scouts.org/cgi-bin/yabb2/YaBB.pl?num=1271251020>. ^ "Gang Memoir, Turning Page, Is Pure Fiction". The New York Times. 4 March 2008. New York -- A Holocaust survivor's memoir of love in a Nazi concentration camp, which was yanked from publication last month when he admitted it was a hoax, may reappear as a work of fiction. Berkley Books, a unit of Penguin Books, has canceled a planned publication of Herman Rosenblat's memoir, *Angel at the Fence*. But York House Press, a small publishing house based in White Plains, New York, has said it was "in serious discussion" to publish the book as a work of fiction. "We believe Mr. Rosenblat's motivations were very human, understandable and forgivable," York Ho

Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust. Marianne Hirsch. Columbia University Press. The Generation of Postmemory will be a major reference in Holocaust and genocide studies for years to come. Susan Rubin Suleiman, author of *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*. *The Generation of Postmemory* is Marianne Hirsch's finest and fullest description of her paradigm-changing concept of postmemory. In dialogue with a dazzling array of writers and photographers as well as scholars across the humanities, it shows how the 'hinge generations' that have directly experienced or inherited the traumas of the Holocaust and other twentieth-century genocides have sought to conc