A modern Antigone: *Son of Saul* by László Nemes

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Directed by László Nemes; written by Nemes and Clara Royer, based on the book The Scrolls of Auschwitz and various prisoners' memoirs

Hungarian filmmaker László Nemes's debut feature film, *Son of Saul*, treats almost unimaginable horror: a day and a half in the life of a member of the Sonderkommando (special unit), made up of prisoners who staffed the gas chambers, at the Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp. More than one million people were murdered at Auschwitz from 1942 to 1944, 90 percent of them Jews, transported from all over German-occupied Europe.

Henryk Mandelbaum, the last survivor of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz, who died in 2008, called the unit members living corpses. Their average life expectancy in the position was two to four months. Under threat of death, the Nazis used them to conduct people to the gas chambers and burn their bodies in the crematoriums.

Most of the death camp *Sonderkommando* members were Jews. An aspect of the Nazis' diabolical plan was to make the victims partially responsible for the Holocaust. To other camp inmates they were traitors. Only about 200 of them survived the war.

The unit members had to extract gold teeth, remove jewelry and other valuables, cut hair and disinfect the chambers. After reducing the burnt corpses to ash, they had to throw them into the nearby river. Isolated for fear of spreading panic, they received more food than other prisoners, but had little time for sleep or rest. The work was constant, the tempo brutal. Many, of course, could not cope and experienced nervous breakdowns, some committed suicide. After being forced to cover traces of the Nazi crimes, the "bearers of secrets" themselves were shot.

Nemes's *Son of Saul* depicts the events of October 7, 1944, when one of the biggest *Sonderkommando* uprisings took place. Some 450 out of 663 special unit prisoners took part in the revolt. Learning that they were slated for extermination, the prisoners attacked the SS and Kapos with two machine guns, axes, knives and grenades, killing three and wounding 12 German soldiers, as well as blowing up Crematorium IV. The rebellion was quickly crushed by the SS.

All the insurgents were killed. Those who managed to escape and reach the nearby village, Rajsko, were surrounded in a barn and blown up with hand grenades. Five young Jewish women who worked for the Weichsel-Union-Metallwerke, a munitions plant within the Auschwitz complex, and who had smuggled small amounts of gunpowder to aid the uprising, were later hanged.

Unlike previous portrayals of the *Sonderkommando*, such as the one in Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone*, which treated the conduct of the individual members as "shameful," *Son of Saul* is a sincere attempt to depict the complex reality of the concentration camp and the multiplicity of connections between victims and their oppressors.

Saul (Géza Röhrig) is a Hungarian Jew who—humiliated and paralyzed in the face of the enormous scale of the hellish mass murder—numbly collaborates with the Nazis to stay alive. After witnessing the murder of a teenage boy who has just arrived in a transport from Hungary, and believing the youth might be his son born out of wedlock, Saul decides to steal the body to ensure the boy's proper burial.

The recreated reality of the movie is brutally precise and historically accurate. Cinematographer Mátyás Erdély uses a technique similar to that of the Dardenne brothers, following his main character very closely,

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providing a deliberately narrow field of vision, to immerse the viewer in the immediate surroundings. We can almost smell the dirt on Saul's body, feel his torment. Screams and moans in Yiddish, Hungarian, Polish, Russian and German substitute for a soundtrack and broaden the imagery's realism.

Despite the blurry background, we are well aware of what is taking place at all times. It is precisely the lack of details that horrifies the most. Then there are the scenes in which terrible discoveries are subtly conveyed, such as the realization that the mountains of dust shoveled into the river are composed of human remains.

Judaism forbids cremation of the body and treats it as a sin. The corpse needs to be wrapped in a *tallit*, a special fringed garment, and buried as quickly after death as possible.

Like Sophocles' Antigone, who defies the tyrant Creon's edict forbidding the burial of her rebel brother, Polynices, Saul revolts against the brutal laws of the Nazi totalitarian state in defense of human and, to him, divine principles. He knows beforehand the rules and the consequences—his "crime" is conscious and deliberate. Until the very end Saul remains untouched by and indifferent toward the authority that will crush him. Suffering beyond endurance, he accepts his fate: He can do nothing but die.

Saul dies, but all is not lost for humanity. We know the Nazi regime ultimately collapsed, like that of the of the King of Thebes in Greek mythology.

In *Son of Saul* Nemes accomplishes something rare for a modern artist, skillfully reviving the principles and themes of an ancient drama, sculpting the essence of a human tragedy. The viewer might question the uncompromising religious values Saul stands for. But it is undeniable that his clash with the camp authorities is of immense importance to human beings today who sense the vast gap between their innate sense of "what is right" and the doings of the global rulers.

Saul is defending an old and annihilated order, now only an unreal shadow. By desperately searching for a rabbi in a world where such an individual's functions have been obliterated, he seeks to link the nonexistent with the existent. The respect paid to the body of what might be his offspring becomes a symbol of universal honor paid to all those slaughtered and then burnt in defiance of their religion in the inferno of crematoriums. Stealing the boy's body becomes an act of retribution: the extermination of the Jews will not be completed because something will be left of them, even if in a grave.

In Nemes's film, there is little room for subjectivity nor much interest in Saul's individual personality: the man is a universal "self" and represents the community of people caught up by forces bigger and independent of themselves. He is an actor confronted on the stage not only with his oppressors, but with the chorus of camp resistance members who accuse him of "failing the living for the sake of the dead." One of the chorus members, a Soviet soldier, even kicks him in the gut.

There is something fixated and even psychotic in Saul's determination. It makes him endanger his own life—and the lives of other—to fulfill his "duty." Had he not lost the gunpowder due to his obsession with the dead body, would the uprising have been successful?

It is perhaps difficult to identify with the cold, robot-like, half-dead Saul. But it is also difficult to condemn him. His face, although at times it resembles a predator's, should invoke some compassion. Saul's condition speaks to something broader than his own individual fate: the wretchedness of all those forced against their will to toil for a system they did not create, merely to survive.

Despite the film's physical and intellectual constraints, which reduce the conflict largely to the ethical plane and omit any reference to the historical roots of the horrors it depicts, *Son of Saul* is a valuable artistic achievement. It is a matter of utmost importance that such a work reaches global cinemas. Fascist political tendencies are again on the rise and various European governments are adopting Nazi-style measures against refugees, including the confiscation of their money and valuables upon entry into miserable camps.

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