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III.ii: Figuring the Grey Zone: The Auschwitz Sonderkommando in Contemporary Culture

Dominic Williams

In December 2010, interest in a soon-to-be-released video game spread from the gaming press to the mainstream media. This new game, *Sonderkommando Revolt*, a modification (or ‘mod’) of the 1992 PC classic *Wolfenstein 3D*, would offer the player the chance to be ‘Zalmen Gradowski’, who escaped ‘execution’ in Auschwitz to lead an uprising.¹ A trailer showed various views of an Auschwitz blended not simply from elements of camps I and II (including Block 11 and the crematoria), but also parts of other concentration camps (such as the gate at Sachsenhausen), before a series of SS men were gunned down in bursts of pixelated gore.² In response, the Anti-Defamation League denounced it as ‘an offensive portrayal of the Holocaust. With its unnecessarily gruesome and gratuitous graphics, it is a crude effort to depict Jewish resistance’.³ Distressed by the publicity, its creator Maxim Genis shelved the game on which he had been working for four years. He says it will never be publicly released.⁴ Less than five years later, May 2015 saw the premiere of the Hungarian film *Son of Saul*. This film approached representing the crematoria and gas chambers by concentrating on one member of the Sonderkommando, deliberately restricting its field of vision through shallow depth of field, an academy ratio frame and a preponderance of close-up shots. It received widespread acclaim, and won many awards, culminating in the Academy Award for best Foreign Language Film in February 2016.

The failure and success of these two approaches, and the ways in which they have been discussed, are suggestive. On the one side, Maxim Genis’s attempt to represent the experience of the Sonderkommando within the tight generic restrictions of a first-person shooter (FPS) game was attacked both for showing too much (it was ‘gruesome and gratuitous’) and (as a ‘crude effort’) for being unable to show anything. On the other, László Nemes was commended for accepting that not everything is visualisable and choosing aesthetic constraints that responded specifically to the subject matter. To frame it in the terms of this journal issue, Nemes was praised for acknowledging the essentially traumatic nature of his topic: the need to go beyond re-enacting the event or fitting it into a pre-

determined framework as Genis had tried to do, and accept that some elements of it challenged the process of representation.⁵ And while no one before has drawn any explicit parallel between these two products from different extremes of the cultural spectrum, it is telling that a repeated motif in criticism (never praise) of *Son of Saul* has been the statement that it feels like a video game.⁶

This dichotomy between a work of high art and a product of mass culture, with only the former being permitted to embody traumatic experiences, is an unsatisfactory one, however. Firstly, as the criticisms of *Son of Saul* indicate, it is possible for ‘high’ and ‘low’ art to combine, or one form to be read through the lens of the other. Secondly, the implication that only high art can deal with traumatic subjects suggests that trauma simply replicates the aesthetic form of modernist art. As Roger Luckhurst notes, there are many ‘lowbrow’ and ‘middlebrow’ cultural products dealing with atrocity and psychological damage which do not conform to the modernist canon, and that reward investigation.⁷

In this essay I will suggest that this is particularly the case with the Auschwitz Sonderkommando. Their almost archetypally traumatic experiences have created difficulties in representing them, but have also provided opportunities for attempts at understanding through personalisation. These opportunities have been taken up by generic, or genre-influenced, forms as much as by the forms of high art. After a brief survey of representations of the Sonderkommando to demonstrate this point, I focus on two recent examples: *The Grey Zone* (2001) and *Magneto: Testament* (2009). Like an FPS game, both of them rely on allowing the audience to identify with the point of view of someone who is the instigator as well as object of violence. It is through their generic conventions, therefore, not despite them, that they encourage their audiences to move towards an understanding of the Sonderkommando.

Representing the Sonderkommando

The Auschwitz Sonderkommando have provoked an uneasy fascination for a long time, a fascination that arises from their paradoxical positions. As slave labourers in the gas chambers and crematoria of Birkenau, they were at the heart of the killing process, witnesses to the Final Solution. But what they witnessed is often deemed beyond representation: the gas chambers, the ovens and pits, the heaps of corpses, the enormous

numbers. They were privileged or potentially compromised figures, as most famously discussed by Primo Levi in his essay 'The Grey Zone'. But they were also people who are known to have risen up in revolt. They might even be said to be central to the Shoah (operating in what eventually became its greatest killing centre, the objects of the Nazis' 'most demonic crime')⁸ and yet also marginal to it: a group of only two thousand at most, whose extreme experiences and relatively narrow background (all were men; most were fairly young and strong) gave them little in common with many of its victims.

Resisting collaborators, witnesses to the unwitnessable, central but of questionable significance,⁹ the Sonderkommando have often met with responses that suggest historians and writers are not sure what to do with them.¹⁰ In the English language especially, very little about them has been published. Gideon Greif's book of interviews *We Wept without Tears* was in print in German and Hebrew for a long time before its English translation. Eric Friedler et al.'s useful compilation of facts in *Zeugen aus der Todeszone* remains untranslated. Editions of the writings that the Sonderkommando themselves produced are out of print in English (although quite easily available in other European languages and in Hebrew) and are nowhere near as well-known as they should be.¹¹ The photographs taken by the SK have only received scholarly attention in the past few years, and have provoked fierce debate about the possibility of images and imagining of the Final Solution, particularly between Georges Didi-Huberman and writers at *Les Temps modernes*.¹²

The SK's paradoxical position has clearly caused problems for representation, but it also replicates some of the key ways that trauma has been conceived: the combination of immediacy and unavailability to cognition identified by Cathy Caruth, or Dori Laub's description of the traumatised survivor as a *Geheimnisträger* who has been made to feel complicit in the crime.¹³ The Sonderkommando could therefore be seen to embody the paradoxes of trauma, having personally undergone some of the most extreme examples of experiences that are difficult to cognize or to ethically judge.¹⁴ This makes them a group that many are reluctant to think about, but for others they have provided a way to figure some of the key difficulties of trauma, particularly in forms and genres which place great emphasis on people and their actions, character and plot.

Indeed, from soon after the end of the war (the 1950s in the West, and even the late 1940s in Eastern Europe) a range of novels, films and plays began to deal with the

Sonderkommando. True, it took some time before they focused on their experiences in the camps, especially in the West.¹⁵ Instead, their time in the Sonderkommando usually featured as an episode in their past, one which had traumatised them,¹⁶ or as something to which they bore witness in a relatively neutral way.¹⁷ Alternatively, it occurred at the end of their time in Auschwitz, as a fate which a main character met just before death,¹⁸ or managed, more or less, to avoid.¹⁹ As Adam Brown points out, few of these stories gave much space to their experience of actually being in the Sonderkommando in Birkenau.²⁰

Nonetheless, this variety of cultural forms provided a number of precedents for the flurry of interest in the Sonderkommando that the twenty-first century has seen. And in these last fifteen years, it is popular culture, or the conventions of genre, that seems to have been most prepared to engage with the group. Pascal Croci's graphic novel *Auschwitz* (2000) uses gothic, vampiric imagery to figure the SK's environment. Elliot Perlman's *The Street Sweeper* (2011) and Sebastian Faulks's *A Possible Life* (2012), fold the story of the Sonderkommando into broader 'middlebrow' concerns about the shape of lives, the necessity of telling stories, and the connections between people.²¹ In *Sonderkommando* (2013), a concept album from the English black metal band The Meads of Asphodel, alongside the inevitable references to hell, they are presented as doomed warriors, with the squad's name repeatedly screamed out like a war cry.²² Even in would-be literary treatments there is little sense of the need to find a new form in which to represent them. Micheal O'Siadhail's poem 'Ravens' (2002) is part of a sonnet sequence that tours the environment of Auschwitz.²³ Martin Amis's novel *The Zone of Interest* (2014) weaves the sufferings of the Sonderkommando member Szmul into a love story and a heavy-handed comedy of national stereotypes.

One of the earliest of these examples, and also one of the most sustained examinations of the Sonderkommando, is *The Grey Zone*, a film which has attracted some attention in recent scholarship.²⁴ In order to bring out the importance of genre to the film, this essay will pair it with another example, the comic mini-series *Magneto: Testament*. Both are serious works that are thoughtful and carefully researched. But both of them too draw deeply on conventions from less culturally consecrated forms within their media. *The Grey Zone* has elements of the pulp gangster film; *Magneto* is not a graphic novel but rather a superhero origin story (although actually of a supervillain). Focussing on two of the

paradoxes I have outlined above, the rest of this essay will examine how the conventions of these forms allow them to address the moral questions of the Sonderkommando's position as supposed collaborators who resisted, and the ways in which they are able to bear witness to what is often deemed unrepresentable.

The Grey Zone

Tim Blake Nelson's film adaptation of his own stage play of 1996, was released in 2001 but never received a commercial distribution in UK cinemas. In its theatrical form it relied entirely on dialogue to indicate the setting and did not attempt to recreate the crematoria on stage; the audience had to gradually come to the realization that the actors were playing Sonderkommandos. The film went for the other extreme. Nelson said he wanted to 'show everything'.²⁵ Its major source is the book by Miklós Nyiszli, translated as *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Report*. In particular, Nelson combined two incidents from Nyiszli's book: the uprising of 7 October 1944 and an earlier one in which a girl survives the gas chamber and the SK try to save her.

Although the wordy dialogue hints of its origins as a stage play,²⁶ the fact that it is written in a contemporary idiom and delivered in American accents also causes it, in a cinematic context, to smack of the verbal skirmishing of gangster films: the wisecracks of Scorsese's *Mafiosi* or the florid speech of Tarantino's bank robbers. This latter similarity is pointed up especially by the casting of Harvey Keitel and Steve Buscemi, who had appeared together in *Reservoir Dogs*. And while the grim lives of the Sonderkommando in the midst of death hardly measure up to the supposed glamour of mob life, there are other similarities in Nelson's construction. His Sonderkommando are morally compromised, mutually suspicious characters doing whatever it takes to survive whilst tormented by their consciences and unable to give voice to repressed feelings.²⁷ They live in relative luxury on goods looted from the dead, and become caught up in the violence of their environment, just like a movie gangster who asserts himself in 'ostentatious displays of wealth' and in 'the violence he inflicts on others'.²⁸

This latter characteristic is dwelt on at some length. In the opening scene of the film Max Rosenthal (played by David Chandler) smothers an old man with a pillow. Half an hour in, David Arquette's character Hoffman beats a middle-aged man to death in the

undressing room when the man refuses to give up his watch. This incident has no basis in any testimony or records of the Sonderkommando. It seems to have been invented in order to express Hoffman's ambivalent and tormented position. There were certainly other ways that the compromised position of the Sonderkommando could have been indicated, such as the football match between the Sonderkommando and some SS guards recorded by Nyiszli. Indeed, Nelson had plans to write a scene along these lines, and filmed some footage of SK and SS kicking a ball around. This behaviour would not have worked by the logic of the gangster genre he references, however. Adam Brown claims that Hoffman and Rosenthal's violence at the beginning of the film 'serves to disrupt formulaic appeals to audience identification'.²⁹ But this scants the role that violence has played in American cinema of the last few decades, as a signal not only of agency but also moral complexity, the possibility of acting and reflecting on that action, and therefore actually the means by which an ambiguous identification can take place.³⁰ Hoffman is redeemable because of his violence, not in spite of it. When, immediately after the man is beaten, the rest of the transport is gassed, we hear their cries while zooming in on Hoffman's face. This is, of course, partly a matter of representing the gassing indirectly, but it is also because Hoffman's psychology, self-degradation and redemption are what the viewers are asked to focus on.

This redemption is heavily qualified, as both of his major attempts, to revolt and to save the girl, are ultimately unsuccessful. But it is part of a clearly defined character arc throughout the film. Hoffman ends by at least trying to do some good, and reaching a modicum of understanding. He finally manages to tell his story, passing it on to the girl the SK are trying to save. The story also redeems Rosenthal, in showing why he killed the old man at the beginning of the film. Left alone with her, Hoffman confesses:

I used to think so much of myself, what I'd make of my life. We can't know what we're capable of, any of us. How can you know what you'd do to stay alive until you're really asked? I know this now. For most of us the answer is anything. So easy to forget who we were before, who we'll never be again.

There was this old man. He pushed the carts. And on our first day, when we had to burn our own convoy, his wife was brought up on the elevator, then his daughter, and then both his grandchildren. I knew him. We were neighbors. And in twenty minutes, his whole family and all its future was gone from this earth. Two weeks later he took pills and was revived. We smothered him with his own pillow. And now I know why. You can kill yourself. That's the only choice.

I want them to save you. I want them to save you more than I want anything. I pray to God we save you. You can hear me can't you? I thought so. Yes, I thought so.³¹

Hoffman's testament has three parts: how he has learnt that he is not what he thinks he was (as all the SK have); the story of the old man; a desire to save the girl and for her to understand. Framed by the shot-reverse shots of the communication between them is a flashback to people handling corpses. The literalist, one-to-one relationship of word to image in this middle part is striking. As he says 'I know this now', the camera shows a seated man with pliers, starts tilting at 'the answer' and stops at 'anything' to show him pulling teeth from a naked female corpse. At 'who we were before', the shot is of Michael Stuhlbarg's character Cohen with a tallit round his neck and tfillin hanging behind him. When the old man is mentioned, he moves forward into frame pushing the cart. Each member of his family appears as they are named, with the camera tilting from one child's body to the other as if to confirm that there were indeed two. The intercutting between Hoffman handling the bodies and the man pushing at the end does suggest that some shots are from the old man's point of view as he looks down at his family, but actually, this part serves straightforwardly as an illustration of Hoffman's words. If anyone is seeing these pictures, it has to be the girl. Hoffman's words seem to be able to straightforwardly conjure up the reality of which he was part. Adam Brown reads this scene, 'the most pivotal passage in the film' as a point where its realist mode breaks down,³² and it is true that the slow motion and eerie whistling noise in the soundtrack do give it a different status from the main run of the film. But they might also be read as psychological, with the scenes taking place in the imagination of the girl, distorted to reflect her feeling of its horror, or her being not yet fully conscious.

However, the content of what Hoffman has told her is not what is important. Just before the revolt breaks out, when he announces to Rosenthal that 'I talked to her', the emphasis is on what has happened to him.

ROSENTHAL: What did you say?

HOFFMAN: Everything

ROSENTHAL: [taking his hand from Hoffman's cheek] Everything? Where she –
You told her?

...

ROSENTHAL: What does that do for her?
HOFFMAN: Maybe it did something for me
ROSENTHAL: Fuck what it did for you! What do you need?
...
HOFFMAN: She'll know who we were.³³

Rosenthal's reaction to Hoffman is one of astonishment, as if it was impossible to say these things, and they had never been said before. The words 'where she' suggests that she cannot know where she was, and cannot understand what she has just survived. Hoffman does not challenge this position but asserts that it did something for him. Telling Rosenthal breaks the connection between them: Rosenthal no longer touches him and he occupies the frame all on his own, and has a gleam in his eye that suggests some vision or realisation. He becomes an individual again.

The message, then, is not something that needs to be told to the outside world, but rather a piece of self-actualisation on Hoffman's part. And, inevitably, the girl does not live to tell, but is shot, and then burned by the thirteenth Sonderkommando. She tells this story herself in ghostly voiceover, explaining how she has turned into smoke, ash, and dust of which they breathe in so much that they no longer notice it. She becomes part of them. Hoffman's message, such as it is, comes back to the Sonderkommando.

Magneto Testament

Magneto Testament built on a fairly well-established origin story for the X-Men's supervillain (although as is common in the comics world, not without its controversies and contestations).³⁴ Magneto started out in the 1960s as a straightforward supervillain and arch-enemy of the X-Men, but over the 1980s and 1990s, especially with Chris Claremont as the writer, he was given a back story as a Holocaust survivor. A story in September 1982 shows him with an Auschwitz tattoo, in March 1987 as the sole survivor of an Einsatzgruppen-style mass shooting, and in August 1987 escaping from Auschwitz with his Romani girlfriend Magda. In March 1991 he was explicitly identified as a person who carried dead bodies and burned them, in other words as a Sonderkommando.³⁵ As well as giving Magneto the new, more plausible, original name of Max Eisenhardt, writer Greg Pak added other details of his life: a childhood in Germany, experiencing the rise of Nazism and its adverse effects on Jews, falling in love with Magda (the school cleaner's daughter),

Pogromnacht of 1938, fleeing to Poland, and living in the Warsaw ghetto. Drafted into the Sonderkommando after his arrival in Auschwitz, Max Eisenhardt buries a written testimony under the floor of Crematorium IV, and is about to commit suicide when he catches sight of Magda and regains his will to live. They escape together in the Sonderkommando revolt of 7 October 1944. He returns in 1948 and retrieves his message.

While graphic novels after *Maus* are almost a canonical form of Holocaust representation, and the Sonderkommando have featured in a number of them,³⁶ approaching the Shoah through a superhero origin story clearly poses some difficulties. In many ways, *Magneto Testament* responds to them very impressively. The comic had to take into account Magneto's back-story: continuity is a very important feature of the comics world, where only one version of a superhero (or villain)'s story is accepted as 'canon', and a great deal of time and ingenuity is spent by both fans and writers squaring a complex of different stories into one.³⁷ Greg Pak managed to integrate the often contradictory elements made known about Magneto with genuinely scholarly research into the history of the Holocaust and of the Sonderkommando.³⁸

In addition, as an origin story, the comic had to show how the schoolboy Max Eisenhardt became the supervillain Magneto. Although the series of cover images do refer obliquely to his future status (particularly through their use of colour),³⁹ the narrative treats it as essentially a question of character, and not one of his discovering superpowers that would have made it easy for him to destroy his persecutors.⁴⁰ Max sets out on the path to becoming Magneto through expressing the desire to fight back. Initially, he learns to suppress this desire because of the danger that it would pose for others, especially his family. Once they are dead and he has nothing to lose, he is ready to take part in the Sonderkommando uprising. Violence, then, so often a feature of superhero comics,⁴¹ is almost entirely deferred to the point when he will become a supervillain. Max is the object rather than subject of violence (actually quite a common feature of superhero origin stories),⁴² who will become Magneto once he has lashed out. For a reader with even a modicum of knowledge about him, therefore, Max's status as victim is made partially bearable by the fact that he will eventually use violence.

It is also possible to identify with him because of the fact that his superpower is already present, in the way that he can witness. He has the sharpest eyesight, which is

particularly associated with seeing the gleam of metal objects, but also allows him to spot blood in a cattle car coming back from Treblinka. Indeed, the entire narrative is driven by Max's witnessing, rather than acting. Greg Pak decided to make him a German Jew so that he could follow the rise of the German antisemitism. The logic of the comic's narrative follows what the Germans did rather than any particular Jewish experience, hence the rather awkward join between being in Germany and moving to Poland.

Max's witnessing becomes particularly important once he is drafted into the Sonderkommando. At the point at which Max gains a sense of the dimensions of the killing, the picture is a double-page splash. Having seen a small group locked into the gas chamber in the Auschwitz I crematorium, he is confronted with a warehouse filled with glasses. The dimensions of the pile of glasses are unreadable; it fills the doorframe in the picture.⁴³ The means of representation are actually rather restricted, with the same shapes of glasses, and the relationships between them, reproduced digitally with a very limited set of patterns. There are only five types of glasses, replicated to make what must be hundreds. One set of rectangular frames balances on top of a slightly more vertical circular-framed pair, both of them with their lenses at about a 60-degree angle to the picture plane, while they are crossed in front by another pair of glasses, only its top edge visible to the reader. Variations of this combination, mirrored, flipped, slightly recoloured, recur perhaps a hundred times, fitted together as if they were tessellated shapes so that the rectangular frames form linear striations through the whole. This utter repeatability of elements bespeaks the technology used to produce and reproduce them, but also suggests that the mound of glasses is only there to be apprehended as a mass. The glasses might at first seem to look back at Max, but actually offer him only blank 'gazes': they are almost exclusively in black and white, with the reflection of light in their lenses being indicated by a white edge around the blackness of the rest of the lens. In fact, this limning occurs in the same place for each pair of glasses, no matter what its orientation, with no consistent sense of a light source. Close examination makes them appear less and less like lenses, therefore, and more and more like a set of miniature black panels with white borders. The other element of light, the flare on a number of the frames, serves its usual function of indicating Max's sharp eyes.

In making a set of black rectangles stand for the victims, and in valorising Max's power as a witness, this image anticipates the spread across the following two pages. An

upper tier of five black panels gradually increasing in size, and a lower of one large black panel, are all that occupy these pages and bleed to their right and left edges. The captions superimposed on the panels are Max's testament, in which he explains what he has witnessed.

My name is Max Eisenhardt.
I've been a Sonderkommando at Auschwitz for almost two years.

I watched thousands of men, women and children walk to their deaths.

I pulled their bodies from the gas chambers.
I dug out their teeth so that Germans could take their gold.

And I carried them to the ovens, where I learned how to combine a child's body with an old man's body to make them burn better.

I saw my fellow workers buried alive under an avalanche of rotting corpses.
I saw thousands of murdered people burning in giant outdoor pits.

I have seen at least a quarter million dead human beings with my own eyes...⁴⁴

Over the page, his testimony continues on two single pages with a sequence of panels showing Max discovering the dead body of his former teacher and mentor Herr Kalb, and then writing and burying a message.

...and I couldn't save a single one...

...any more than they could save me

To whoever finds this, I'm sorry.
Because I'm dead...

...and now it's up to you.

Tell everyone who will listen. Tell everyone who won't.
Please.

Don't let this ever happen again.⁴⁵

As with Hoffman's testimony, the focus is on him: thirteen uses of word 'I' or 'my'. He has carried out all the tasks of the Sonderkommando (which have sometimes been seen as different specialist tasks). His experience stands quite easily for the whole. Much of what he has done is seeing. Such an emphasis when nothing is being shown is not really a contradiction. This too suggests that the telling is relatively straightforward thing to do. The words do not need images because they themselves suffice. So in a strange way the strategies of *The Grey Zone* and *Magneto: Testament* are the same. Words that translate unproblematically into images are the same as words that do not need images, like two halves of an equation in which each half can always be worked out in the absence of the other.

This is also not the first time that black panels feature in this story, nor even the only one where they bleed to the edge of the page.⁴⁶ The mass shooting which Max survives but in which the rest of his family are killed finishes with an overhead view of the pit in which their bodies lie. This panel overlaps a black rectangle, serving partly as panel, partly as gutter, that extends all the way to the bottom edge of the page. Over this and the previous two panels, falling leaves descend, breaking the frames and appearing even in the final black panel. Contrasting with the horizontality of the final picture panel, the leaves emphasise the verticality of the page, and make the blackness at its foot stand for falling, unconsciousness, burial and death. On the following page in a grid of 2 x 3 panels delineated by white gutter, three black panels alternate in a chequerboard pattern with three images of Max: at night standing covered in blood by the still uncovered grave; in day time hiding from a passing cart in the countryside (both of these images still including falling leaves), and finally in an urban setting being pointed out by an informer.⁴⁷ The black panels on this page seem primarily to denote time passing. They speed up the story, moving swiftly from Max surviving the shooting to him being put on a train to Auschwitz. But they also suggest his psychological state after the shooting: holes in his memory, a kind of psychic numbness, or moments that are too painful to think about.

The double-page spread of black panels, summing up Max's time in the Sonderkommando, therefore indicates more than just the enormity of what he has seen. It links together two of the most significant moments from Magneto's back story – surviving a mass shooting and being in Auschwitz – and psychologises them, making them part of his

character arc. The blackness indicates his loss of the will to live, which is also indicated by the narrowing of Max's eyes in seeing Kalb's body.⁴⁸ His writing is a response to Kalb's death. Kalb promised Max that he would help to get him out of the SK. Now he is dead, Max believes he has no hope, and so is writing a testament that will sum up the last two years of his life before he kills himself.

Just like *The Grey Zone*, the story of the SK is presented as unproblematically tellable at the figurative level but unreceivable at the narrative level: it simply returns to sender. Max comes back in 1948 and retrieves what ends up being a message to himself. The story of his writing is not about witnessing, but about character development. His words become psychologised, part of what made Max into Magneto. Max Eisenhardt is dead: it is quite possible that at this point he has discovered his powers.⁴⁹ Indeed, the gleam on the metal canister containing the message, which Max digs up at this point, rhymes with all the gleamings of metal which indicate his superpowers throughout the story, and suggests that he may even have used his powers to find it. The call for this 'not to happen again' becomes not so much a lesson for the outside world as a message from his old self to his new self.

Conclusion

The framing of the Sonderkommando as unable to communicate what they have witnessed is not unique to *The Grey Zone* and *Magneto*. In the TV series *Holocaust* (1978), Karl Weiss is recruited into the Sonderkommando, surviving just long enough after the SS leave the camp to put all he has experienced into a drawing of a suffering figure, but unable to utter a coherent sentence. A short chapter in Bernice Rubens's *Brothers* (1983) is given over to the diary that David Bindel keeps in Auschwitz. 'The pencil with which the diary is written, never existed. Neither the paper on which it is recorded.'⁵⁰ The second part of Tony Curtis's poem 'Lessons' (c. 1984) describes a member of the Sonderkommando 'scribbling lists by the light of the furnaces'. The SS destroy what he has written, and thrust the silent SK man into the oven. His name can only be read in the sky.⁵¹ In *Amen* (2002), the Jesuit priest Riccardo Fontana is placed into the Sonderkommando, and even when offered the chance of being rescued in order to bear witness, he refuses, because 'God lets his children be devoured. I want to understand why.'⁵²

All of these examples might be said to be figuring a traumatic element, but they do so by drawing upon the resources of their forms (narrative, character, fantasy, symbolism) rather than calling them into question. Similarly, *The Grey Zone* and *Magneto* build unrepresentability into their narratives rather than their means of representation. Rather than dwelling on the difficulties of representing what the SK have witnessed, both the comic and the film make their testimonies fairly straightforward pieces of reporting. The impossibility of witnessing – the first of the paradoxes of the SK mentioned above – is rather brought about through the plot, which causes their messages to go nowhere, and become instead a mode by which characters develop.

Such a move speaks to the second of these paradoxes: the Sonderkommando's position as morally compromised resisters. Here too, the generic conventions of plot and character within gangster films and comics enable *The Grey Zone* and *Magneto* to form an image of the Sonderkommando. The overlap between the conventions that these two works use is indicated by one extraordinarily close parallel in an element of their plots. Both stories have a girl taken from among the dead bodies at a point where the revolt is about to happen. One scene even plays out in exactly the same terms: with one Sonderkommando arguing that, as one life against that of hundreds, she cannot be saved, another violently disagreeing with him, and a third, a figure of authority, saying that perhaps they should have allowed her to die, but they are not going to do it now. This may be a reference made by Pak to Nelson's film, but it also shows that the frameworks within which they operate suit similar solutions to dramatising the ambiguous situation of the Sonderkommando, personalising and individualising their dilemmas. Many genre films and superhero comics attempt to demonstrate their sophistication by complicating black and white ideas of good and evil, and blurring them into shades of grey. *The Grey Zone* and *Magneto* are therefore willing to deal with the idea that the SK existed in a 'grey zone', not by portraying them as collaborators, but by showing the excruciating difficulty of some of the decisions that they had to make. A focus on narrative arcs of character development, and on violence as the primary means of action or even of self-expression also help to make this kind of portrayal possible. As this episode reveals, however, this is a model which centres on male subjectivity: it is the men who try to decide (albeit only in the severely restricted way available to them) whether to save or sacrifice female life.⁵³

This concentration on male dilemmas makes it highly significant that the Sonderkommando end up simply as witnesses to themselves, and unable to convey what they have seen of the last moments of the victims, many of them female.⁵⁴ While the affinity of certain genres for the Sonderkommando makes it possible for traumatic experiences to be figured through them, it may also rest on, and reinforce, the last of my paradoxes: that this group at the heart of the Shoah was not representative of all victims, but was only made up of men.⁵⁵

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¹ Gradowski was a real member of the Sonderkommando. See Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, and Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, esp. 60-91.

² The trailer can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7cg443YR0o>

³ <http://kotaku.com/5712163/anti+defamation-league-slams-fun-holocaust-video-game-as-horrific-and-inappropriate>

⁴ <http://kotaku.com/tag/maxim-genis>

⁵ Of course, there can be other ways of understanding Nemes's choice, particularly ones centred around the ethics of representation. For a more detailed discussion of *Son of Saul* see Didi-Huberman, *Sortir du noir* and Chare and Williams, 'Questions of Filiation'.

⁶ See esp. Kagan-Kans, 'That Holocaust Feeling' and Labuza, 'Shallow Depth', but also, e.g., Kasman, 'Cannes 2015'; Lyttelton, 'Cannes Review'.

⁷ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 81. Ananya Kabir notes that adhering to this Euro-American framework for ways to tell trauma occludes the cultural forms used by non-Western victims and survivors ('Affect, Body, Place', 64-66). Kabir's point is also, of course, applicable to many of the forms used by the victims and survivors of the Holocaust itself, for example those writing in Yiddish.

⁸ Levi, 'The Grey Zone', 37.

⁹ Barry Langford has suggested that the SK 'figure in films out of all proportion to their numbers or (arguably) historical significance'. 'Mass Media/Mass Culture/Mass Death', 73.

¹⁰ Cf. Mesnard, 'Parias de la mémoire', esp. 89-90.

¹¹ Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*; Bezwińska and Czech, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*.

¹² Stone, 'The Sonderkommando Photographs'; Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*. See also Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 183-213.

¹³ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 91-92; Laub, 'An Event without a Witness', 82.

¹⁴ Indeed, even Primo Levi, that great believer in the need to communicate what had happened as clearly as possible, saw the experience of the Sonderkommando as calling representation into question. Because they had known such 'extreme destitution' (which appears to indicate both the horrors they had witnessed and the degradation they had suffered), they could not, he wrote, be expected to provide a 'a deposition in the juridical sense of the term, but something that is at once a lament, a curse, an expiation, and an attempt to justify and rehabilitate themselves' (*The Drowned and the Saved*, 36-37).

¹⁵ Certainly this is true of English-language films and writing, and seems to be true for most other languages. The Sonderkommando feature in a number of the stories of Tadeusz Borowski but they cannot be said to be the protagonists. The major exception is the work of the Yugoslavian writer Đorđe Lebović, who, together with Aleksandar Obrenović, authored a play about the SK set in Auschwitz: *Nebeski odred* (*The Heavenly Squad*) (1957), and also wrote a radio play based on the SK's own manuscripts, *Traganje po pepelu* (*Searching the Ashes*) (1985). See: Stijn Vervaet, 'Staging the Holocaust'. *Nebeski odred* was made into a film of the same title in 1961, directed by Boško Bošković and Ilija Nikolić.

¹⁶ This seems to be by far the most common portrayal. Examples include Karp in Mordecai Richler's *A Choice of Enemies* (1957); Dov Landau in Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958); Sol Nazerman in Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1961) (although his past in the Sonderkommando is not included in the film of the same name [1965] directed by Sidney Lumet); Carl Walkowitz in Daniel Stern's *Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die* (1963); Samuel Finkelbaum in Gilles Ségal's *Le marionnettiste de Lodz* (1980); the father in David Grossman's *Ayen erekh: ahava* (1986) translated as *See Under: Love* (1989), and the narrator's great uncle in Roney Cytrynowicz's *Manequins* (1994).

¹⁷ Peter Weiss makes use of testimony from the members of the Sonderkommando given at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in *Die Ermittlung* (1965); a Sonderkommando tells Vladek about the killing process in the second volume of *Maus* (1986).

¹⁸ Karl Weiss in *Holocaust* (1978); David Bindel in Bernice Rubens's *Brothers* (1983); Riccardo Ferrara in *Amen* (2002).

¹⁹ Salamo Arouch in *Triumph of the Spirit* (1989).

²⁰ Brown, *Judging 'Privileged' Jews*, 171.

²¹ The level of research of the two books is rather different. Elliot Perlman's novel is scrupulously researched. Part 1 of Faulks's novel draws on Donald Watt's *Stoker* both for its major premise (an Allied Western soldier drafted into the Sonderkommando) and for some of its more gruesome (and implausible) details such as children surviving the gas chambers because their mothers hugged them so tightly (Watt, *Stoker*, 106-7).

²² See Williams, 'Black Metal Holocaust'. They were not the only metal band to tackle the subject. After the American shock-rockers Gwar in 1994, the death and thrash metal bands *Buried Alive* (Portugal), *Kragens* (France), *Requiem* (Switzerland), *Vedonist* (Poland), *Commando* (Mexico) and *The Obscene* (UK) all recorded songs about the Sonderkommando between 1999 and 2013.

²³ O'Siadhail, *The Gossamer Wall*, 72.

²⁴ Saxton, *Haunted Images*, 82-84; Brown, *Judging 'Privileged' Jews*, 170-186; Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety*, 159-72.

²⁵ Wood, 'Tim Blake Nelson', cited in Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety*, 164.

²⁶ Aaron Kerner describes it as 'dialogue heavy' (*Film and the Holocaust*, 65).

²⁷ Indeed, Matthew Boswell says that it sometimes comes across as a WWII escape drama with the cast of *Reservoir Dogs* (*Holocaust Impiety*, 171).

²⁸ Langford, *Film Genre*, 142.

²⁹ Brown, *Judging 'Privileged' Jews*, 174.

³⁰ See, e.g., Kendrick, *Film Violence*, esp. 102. Omer Bartov points out that the way violence features in *The Grey Zone* is shaped by general changes in American cinematic conventions (*The 'Jew' in Cinema*, 146).

³¹ The Grey Zone 1:13:30-1:15:46. This is my transcription from the film, the equivalent to Nelson, The Grey Zone, 99-101. Note that the shots described in the published screenplay are not the same as those in the final cut of the film.

³² Brown, *Judging 'Privileged' Jews*, 182-3.

³³ The Grey Zone 1:22:20-1:22:55. Again, my transcription, with added 'stage direction'. See Nelson, The Grey Zone, 113.

³⁴ Christensen and Plischke, 'From Perpetrator to Victim'. See also: Jacobs, 'Magneto is Jewish', Malcolm, 'Witness, Trauma and Remembrance' and Kaplan, From Krakow to Krypton, 117-123.

³⁵ Nicholas Pumphrey shows how Claremont introduced this back story to make him a more morally nuanced character and prepare the way for him to end up leading the X-Men ('From Terrorist to Tzadik'). Claremont also discusses this idea briefly in *Comics in Focus: Chris Claremont's X-Men* (dir. Patrick Meaney).

³⁶ In addition to Croci's Auschwitz, mentioned above, the Sonderkommando had featured in other graphic novels of the Holocaust, especially as witnesses to the Final Solution. In Yossel, April 19, 1943 the workings of Auschwitz-Birkenau are described by Yossel's rebbe (in the sense of heder teacher) who worked there as a Sonderkommando. In the second volume of Maus, Vladek is conscripted to the Aufbaukommando dismantling the crematoria, and talks to a member of the Sonderkommando, who is able to tell him how the process of gassing works. The Auschwitz museum itself has produced a graphic novel about the SK, as part of its Episodes from Auschwitz series (Gałek and Pyteraf, Bearers of Secrets). On the rather unexamined assumption that comics are particularly suitable to educate children about the Holocaust, see Gundermann, 'Real Imagination', 240-244.

³⁷ According to Roger Sabin, these concerns are particularly strong among X-Men fans, and were used as marketing technique to encourage them to buy complete sets of the comics (Comics, 158).

³⁸ This story is now the canonical backstory for Magneto, and has been referenced in the recent Magneto series written by Cullen Bunn, especially in issue 9.

³⁹ Christiansen and Plischke, 'From Perpetrator to Victim', 193-199.

⁴⁰ Pak took a similar approach to writing the origin story of the Nazi supervillain the Red Skull, providing a psychological and entirely realist account of how he became Hitler's henchman (Pak and Colak, Red Skull: Incarnate).

⁴¹ Early, 'The 1960s', 71.

⁴² Brody 'Holy Franchise!', 105.

⁴³ Magneto Testament, issue 4, 14-15.

⁴⁴ Magneto Testament, issue 4, 16-17.

⁴⁵ Magneto Testament, issue 4, 18-19.

⁴⁶ No other paneled pages have bleeds, however. Carmine di Giandomenico also said that he chose not to use overlapping frames for his pictures so that they would give a sense of claustrophobia. Reina, 'Carmine Di Giandomenico'.

⁴⁷ Magneto Testament, issue 3, 20-21.

⁴⁸ Ibid., issue 4, 18. These resonances between the black panels and a number of other images in the comic throw into question Ole Johan Christensen and Thomas Plischke's assertion that they provide an 'almost helpless example of unconditional surrender in a visual medium' ('From Perpetrator to Victim', 200).

⁴⁹ See Classic X-Men 1. no. 12 (August 1987): 24-32.

⁵⁰ Rubens, Brothers, 354-63; 354.

⁵¹ Curtis, Selected Poems, 25.

⁵² Amen, 1:52:20-1:52:53. This part is unlike The Deputy, where Riccardo engages the doctor in a lengthy discussion before trying to kill him.

⁵³ The Grey Zone does of course include female characters who have dilemmas and choices of their own to make. But the objects of their dilemmas are also female, and this whole plot element is not as central as that of the men rescuing the girl and starting the revolt. See Wollaston 'Emerging from the Shadows?', 157-158.

⁵⁴ In contrast, actual members of the Sonderkommando made great efforts to record what had happened to women in the crematoria. See Chare and Williams, Matters of Testimony, esp. 74-82 and 109-111. It is also a central concern of Filip Müller who testifies to the murder of women from the Czech family camp in both Claude Lanzmann's Shoah and in his written testimony (Sonderbehandlung, 143-189).

⁵⁵ This is a question that will be pursued in greater depth in Chare & Williams, Representing the Auschwitz Sonderkommando.