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Spaces of Memory in Documentary Film

Intergenerational feminine trauma processing in *Born in Auschwitz* (2021) by Eszter Cseke and András S. Takács.

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

Abstract: *Born in Auschwitz* is Cseke and S. Takács's first full-time documentary film that follows the story of Angela Orosz, who was born in Auschwitz in December 1944 and survived miraculously. The article asks how various visual representations of space are combined in the film to document Angela Orosz's survival in the past and her relationship with her daughter in the present. The paper claims that *Born in Auschwitz* plays with the film lexicon of Holocaust documentary films in that it constructs visual representations of spaces related to the Holocaust by involving diverse modes of graphic spatial constructions along with traditional settings and frames. At the same time, the film also advances its female protagonists' ability to reflect on their relationship to the Holocaust and realize the ways it is present in their daily lives 70 years later. The film not only documents but arguably also triggers an intergenerational healing process of reflection on the legacy of the Holocaust in the protagonists' daily interactions.

Keywords: *Holocaust documentary film, visual construction of space, intergenerational trauma processing, mother-daughter relation, second and third generation survivors, András Takács S., Eszter Cseke*

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Introduction

In 2016, Steven Alan Carr stated that the “Holocaust film is dead.” What he meant by this provocative statement was that the imagery and representation of the canonical Holocaust film have been appropriated broadly, so much so that the Holocaust film “has a cultural exchange value no longer bounded by a privileged spectatorship or the limits of historical accuracy” (n.p.). The crisis of the Holocaust film has come at the time when instead of testimony, only mediation is possible. To be fair, one needs to add that, together with this crisis call, Carr also identifies the possibility of filmic reflection to the crisis. He praises Nemes-Jeles’ *Son of Saul* (original title: *Saul fia*, 2015) as a successful radical negotiation of “ossified and static” Holocaust film tropes. As Walter Metz also showed, the editing schemes of *Son* defy the way conventional classical Hollywood cinema and the spectacular cinema of atrocities break down space in wide shot, medium shot, close-up, and shot-reverse shot sequences. Instead, *Son* has a sustained point of view and “hand-held and long-take close-ups” (Carr), the background is always out of focus, close-ups are only of Saul’s face. These features destabilize the neat visual spaces of the camps constructed so far, which results in a successful dissembling of the previous Holocaust film lexicon.

Eszter Cseke and András S. Takács shot their documentary film about Holocaust survivors titled *Born in Auschwitz* (original title: *Születési hely: Auschwitz*) between 2015 and 2020, right after *Son of Saul*. Their film was released in January 2021. Eszter Cseke and András S. Takács, TV documentary filmmakers of the series *On the Spot*, have been refining their own documentary methods in episodes over many years since 2009. Nevertheless, on their introductory website, they describe their filmmaking philosophy as “presenting pure reality instead of manipulated news,” which is an obvious contradiction, since it is immediately clear that they see important historical phenomena and issues from the point of view of the emotions of the individual through their hand-held cameras (Cseke and Takács S.), i.e. through the witness. Thus, the website’s opposition between manipulated news and pure reality is misleading, since in this medium “pure reality” means the point of view of the witness. For Takács and Cseke, the Holocaust is one of the many eyewitness themes, but a recurring one: two episodes from the 2018 season of *On the Spot* feature Hungarian Holocaust survivors Edith Eva Eger and Dr. Gábor Máté, but the 2016 episode on Dachau also explores the relationship between a surviving mother and her son.

Born in Auschwitz is their first full documentary film that follows the story of Angéla Orosz who was born in Auschwitz in December 1944 and survived miraculously, together with her mother. The film relies on montage technique, it integrates interviews with Angéla and her daughter, travel sequences with Angéla to Dresden, Budapest, Auschwitz, and Jerusalem, archival footage, family photos, a tape recording, several graphic illustrative sequences and landscape views into its representation of Angela´s (Angéla) experience of the Holocaust after the actual Holocaust. It is difficult to think of the film as survivor testimony in a narrow sense: neither Angela nor her daughter has any personal memories of the Shoah, camp life, or the ghetto, even though their lives revolved around the Holocaust. Also, the film was shot mainly on locations unrelated to the actual Holocaust, at Angela’s and her daughter’s homes and at places to which they travelled with the film crew.

The question this article explores in connection with *Born in Auschwitz* is how it relies on the imagery and representation of canonical Holocaust documentary film, and whether it

acknowledges its position as a post-*Son of Saul* Hungarian Holocaust documentary film.[1] More precisely, I would like to study the cinematic construction of space the film performs; how various visual representations of space are combined in it to document Angela Orosz's survival in the past and her relationship with her daughter in the present. In my analysis, *Born in Auschwitz* engages with the visual language of Holocaust documentaries by combining conventional cinematic settings and framing techniques with varied forms of graphic spatial representation to depict Holocaust-related spaces. At the same time, the film also advances its female protagonists' ability to reflect on their relationship to the Holocaust and realize the ways in which it is present in their daily lives 70 years after. The film not only documents but arguably also triggers an intergenerational healing process of reflection on the legacy of the Holocaust in the protagonists' daily interactions. I conclude that the playful use of the Holocaust documentary film lexicon regarding spatial representations parallels the unfinished process of healing the film documents.

To support this argument, I first survey issues of the visual representation of space in Holocaust film. Second, I present three modes of visual reconstruction of space in *Born in Auschwitz* (domestic, geographical, archival/graphic) and investigate how they relate to customary ways of spatial representation in Holocaust documentaries. Third, I focus on the film's use of the interview format to investigate how its cinematographic construction of space is related to the female protagonists' intergenerational healing process.

The contemporary concern with visual reconstructions of space in Holocaust documentary film

In memory studies there is a trend to understand cinema's structure as a metaphor for mnemonic processes (Collenberg-Gonzalez 254). This means that cinema is never able to present a direct image of a physical person or location. What we see on the screen is the result of cinematographic technique, like the way images of the past are arranged in human memory (Radstone 327).

Sue Vice, in her survey "Space in Holocaust Film," draws on the idea of film as a metaphor for memory in her investigation of spatial relations in Holocaust film. She argues that Holocaust films highlight "the difference between actual and cinematic space" (119), as their locations are presented as scenes of atrocities or crimes. In Holocaust documentary film, notorious inside camp locations on screen include specific camp areas like the gate to Auschwitz, crematoriums, and spaces marked by barbed wire and watchtowers. Outside the camp, locations extend to birch forests, ghetto enclosures, cattle cars, train tracks (120). The visual language of Holocaust cinema also includes the construction of shots. Long shots are preferred for the sake of documentation: pans of tracks or wire and long shots of amassed goods or crematorium smoke. These images are recycled by the cinematic canon and the ethical way to use them is a basic concern of Holocaust film criticism.[2] Vice states that new developments in Holocaust film

[1] Richard Brody saw Nemes-Jeles's *Son of Saul* in a less positive light than Carr. Brody argued that the value of *Son* lay in its attention to Lanzmann's *Shoah* but it never evoked the "multiple levels of thought, memory, and imagination" (n. p.) that Lanzmann achieved.

[2] The visual construction of space in Holocaust film became a critical subject in the 1980s. Annette Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows* provides a comprehensive thematic study of Holocaust films. Ilan Avisar's *Screening the Holocaust* focuses on the difficulties of representing the Holocaust artistically, it distinguishes genres, like the

studies "have revealed a fusion of art and documentary" (126),[3] and she predicts that studies into women's and second and third generation survivors' experience of space (126), and of settings outside the "concentrationary" locations (127), present promising areas of Holocaust film studies after the spatial turn. Vice's article represents a critical awareness of space as a social phenomenon. To indicate her theoretical position, Vice refers to David Bordwell's notion of scenographic space in her analysis. Bordwell defines scenographic space as "the impression of a location as constructed on screen for the viewer through the act of filming" (113). Vice brings the example of the image of the Auschwitz gateway as a signature spatial image of Holocaust film that is constructed on screen for the viewer, who is to attach wider significance to the image.

The concern with cinematographically constructed space is put into relief by Fubel, Klei, and Wienert in their introduction to *Spatial Thinking in Holocaust Studies.* They draw attention to the spatial experience the Holocaust meant, the sense of a "shrinking universe" as Eli Wiesel put it (quoted in Fubel et. al. 34), of exclusion (specific locations or ghetto), persecution (cars), and murder (camp, crematorium). They point out that Holocaust spaces have inspired threads of contemporary research into Holocaust topographies that are based on the spatial turn in the humanities; these posit space as socially constructed. Likewise, Fubel et. al. define space as a socially constructed phenomenon that can be historicized and comes into being performatively. They write:

> Spaces are relational orders in which social processes and structures materialize. It is through the relationships between objects and bodies that spaces acquire meaning. Therefore, knowledge, ideology, and power are always inscribed in them. The relational structure is fluid, as spaces are created and imbued with meaning performatively, through permanent activity. (Fubel et. al. 33)

Fubel et. al. express the general need to think spatially and geographically about the Holocaust after the spatial turn in the humanities, and Vice charts specific methodologies of doing so in Holocaust film studies.

Two essays by Sue Vice and Dominick Williams illuminate the interpretative use of spatial theory in the analysis of Holocaust documentary film. Vice and Williams published essays on the spatial dimension of the outtakes of Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) after the US Holocaust Museum made the outtakes available through its online Lanzmann archive.[4] In the first article, they look

documentary film. These pioneering accounts of the visual aspects of Holocaust representation were followed by more spatially conscious studies, like Walden's *Cinematic Intermedialities* and Cinquegrani's *Journey to Poland.*

[3] Lóránt Stőhr's study on Hungarian Holocaust documentary films of the Kádár era (1956-88), distinguishes between two models of documentary filmmaking: the canonical model and the testimonial model. According to the canonical model, the characteristics of the documentary, following Des Pres, are uniqueness, verisimilitude and seriousness, which are clearly incompatible with the fragmented, ambiguous language of the possible discourse on the Holocaust, writes Stőhr. On the other hand, the role of the eyewitness is coming to the fore in the trauma theories of the 1990s: the need to show emotions, to bear witness, to show the gaps. In the context of documentary film, the age of the witness in the 1990s is associated with the rise of a new style in which individual fates, emotions, questions and missions are brought to the fore, making it easier for the viewer to experience them. Stőhr studies how travel in Kádár era Hungarian Holocaust documentary films reconstructs space.

[4] The archive is available at: https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1000017. See Noah Shenker's fascinating discussion of technologies of the archive and the institutional creation of testimonies. He gives an

at Polish location footage in the outtakes. These 11-minute reels have remained uncut and have no post-production sound, and Vice and Williams (“Non-Sites”) argue that, in this state, they are not illustrations of personal memories but function as sites of communal history. When the testifier’s voice is absent, “the camera takes on the role of the agent of such [collective] memory” (50). Their second essay compares domestic spaces in the outtakes to the use of domestic spaces in Chantal Ackerman’s two documentary films. In the case of Lanzmann, Sue and Williams (“Domestic Space”) claim that domestic space in the outtakes reveals much more about the role of women and family than the film does, for instance in the way Holocaust scholar Gertude Schneider and the Zaidel family appear in them (179–86). Ackerman’s films present the homes of Polish Holocaust survivor women as not as nostalgic or haunted but rather as permeated by history (191). For both Lanzmann and Ackerman, domestic spatial imagery serves as a repository of the past.

Methodologically, Vice and Williams’s example projects a toolkit for exploring the visual construction of space in documentary film as a scenographic practice. They rely on the well-known vocabulary of cinematic spatial construction like long shots, middle shot, close-up, shot and reverse shot, shot length, camera movement, angle, frames. These devices construct locally or thematically anchored scenographic spaces of memory. For their study of the new material of Lanzmann’s outtakes, they focus on the role of Polish landscape, domestic spaces and feminine spaces, previously understudied spatial elements. They prefer the comparative method to individual case study.

For Cseke and S. Takács’s Hungarian Holocaust documentary film about Angela Orosz, Vice and Williams’s methodology offers a chance to consider its construction of scenographic spaces regarding signature elements of Holocaust documentary film cinematography. The film’s interest in the afterlife of the Holocaust in everyday experience and space, feminine intergenerational trauma procession, and its inclusion of not only archival abut also graphic elements to accompany its interviews presents a fresh iteration of Holocaust documentary film topoi. In the next section, I look at the visual construction of space in the film in domestic space, geographical space, and archival/graphic space.

The visual construction of space in *Born in Auschwitz*

Born in Auschwitz does not show camp locations, ghetto sites, naked bodies of victims or pans of amassed goods. Instead, it records how its protagonists talk about their past and present lives to the filmmakers and travel with the film crew to contemporary locations. Nevertheless, Cseke and Takács’s documentary film relies on Holocaust documentary tropes such as the interview format, the inclusion of archival documents like photos, and its protagonists’ travel to the site of atrocity. From the perspective of the visual construction of space, at first sight it may seem that the film relies overwhelmingly on domestic spaces for conducting interviews. However, as the narrative of Angi and her daughter Kati unfolds, the repeated appearance of Holocaust-related geographical spaces becomes increasingly prominent. Angi and her daughter travel to Auschwitz together, they visit Germany, Budapest, and they eventually go to Jerusalem.

account of three different institutional contexts in which three US based Holocaust video archives were created and analyzes their approaches to the collection of testimonies and dissemination of them, with reference to USMM as well (esp. 79-138).

At the end of the film, the two interviewees confront each other in the form of an interview between daughter and mother, positioned in a stage-like studio environment.

Domestic spaces dominate the first half of the film, in which the situation and the difficulties of the mother-daughter relationship are shown. The introductory sequence features Angi's daughter, Kati, in her dining room. She articulates the problem that her mother was born in Auschwitz in 1944 and that she, born in 1968, was raised as a survivor. The following scenes are shot in Kati's kitchen and dining room in Montréal, and in her mother's kitchen and living room nearby. Kati explains the psychological problems caused in her early life by her constant fear of Nazi persecution and the need to be strong and her later decision not to pass these fears on to her children. A normal day begins; her kids start out for school through a narrow doorway into the open world while Kati stays in her kitchen to tell her story of anxiety and pain. Simultaneously, the mother shuffles around in her kitchen, and we hear stories about the need for resilience and for being strong in the face of difficulty. In her living room, a middle shot shows her reading Éva Eger's *The Choice*[5] in English with furrowed brows, her normal bustling movement arrested for a second. The domestic scenes present two parallel personal views of the Holocaust: on the one hand, the story of Kati's fears and need for processing them and, on the other hand, the success story of Angi's birth and survival in Auschwitz.

Specific Holocaust-related geographical spaces are shown from the perspective of the protagonists. Their visit to Auschwitz in 2019 happens on account of Pope Francis's official visit to Auschwitz on Holocaust Memorial Day. The camera pans barbed wire and watchtowers from the window of the bus on which Angi arrives, as customary in Holocaust cinema. Angi is an official participant of the ceremony: railway tracks and the gate form an establishing shot as the scene moves to show her sitting in the first row, together with other survivors. The main event of the sequence, however, is her meeting Pope Francis in an interior space, where she hands over a present to him: a family photo. At Auschwitz, Angi is confronted with traces of the past she cannot remember. The camera focuses on her face to document her watchfulness and agitation during the ceremony and her excitement and joy when she meets Pope Francis in person. The gate, the barracks, and the official monument are presented only as fleeting background imagery.

Angi and Kati also visit Germany and contemporary Budapest. Angi goes to Dresden to a conference on trauma transmission in the womb. Angi is invited to talk about the conditions of her birth, her relation to her mother, and the role of Auschwitz in their lives. In the conference room, she is poised, elegant, official, even proud as she relates her mother's defiance of death, the camera shows her face in close-ups again, while two shot/reverse shot sequences reveal that,

in her audience, several listeners are moved to tears by her words, transforming the conference room into a space of communal mourning. In contrast, Budapest is projected as a happy and open space: Angi's former home has been converted into an office, but she explains to Kati enthusiastically (now in Hungarian) what it was like when Kati was a child, why she loved living here, and points out traces of a joyful youth, looking through the window.

[5] Cseke and S. Takács devoted one episode of their documentary series "Children of the Enemy" (2018) to Edith Eva Eger, a Hungarian Holocaust survivor from Kosice, Slovakia. Her autobiographical novel *The Choice* was published to great acclaim, this is the volume Angi reads in the film. Eger published the book in two more versions (*The Gift; The Ballerina of Auschwitz*). Another episode of the series focused on Dr. Máté, another Hungarian Holocaust survivor, who wrote handbooks on trauma procession, cognitive disorders, and dependencies (see *Scattered Minds; Hold On to Your Kids*).

In the final section of the film, Angi and Kati visit Israel. Mother and daughter walk in the desert, and they cross the sea via an artificial road. In Jerusalem they visit and pray at the Wailing Wall. In other words, they ponder several symbolic sites of their Jewish identity. Their visit has no specific reason; it seems to be motivated by the need for the Holocaust film to return to Israel (Olin 8, 13). Accordingly, the walk in the desert appears repeatedly as a cutaway (B-roll): these cutaways function as biblical allusions drawing a parallel between the Jews' long desert wanderings of forty years after their captivity in Egypt and Angi's captivity, release, purification, and survival. The Jews reached the Promised Land after forty years, but Angi is still wandering seventy-five years after leaving the camp, now brought to Israel by the filmmakers. She has not yet symbolically arrived in the Promised Land, although the process of filmmaking facilitates her symbolic migration towards liberation.[6]

Many archival elements are integrated into the footage to indexically link the film's story to the past. The opening shots of the film are taken from a family video produced at the birth of Kati's daughter Feggie in 1991. A central part of the story is a long audio recording from 1984, capturing a lengthy telephone conversation between Kati and her grandmother about Auschwitz and Angi's birth. In addition, several family photographs and archival photos, excerpts from archival sound and film footage are also included in the film.

The family video of Feggie's birth by handheld camera appears as a cutaway in several places. It is used during Grandmother Vera's account of Auschwitz, and again at the end of the film, when Kati talks about stopping the transmission of trauma to her children. The framing of the film by Feggie's birth seems to suggest her birth has replaced or echoed the story of Angi's undocumented birth. Although Feggie's birth in a modern hospital setting, surrounded by joyful family members, seems obviously different from Angi's, its reappearance at the film's conclusion prompts the question of whether this birth can truly escape the shadow of the past—whether Angi's trauma can remain untransmitted to the third-generation survivor.

The only eyewitness testimony in the film comes from Angi's mother, Vera. In 1984, her granddaughter, Kati, conducted an interview with her in English on the phone as part of a school task to draw a family tree. Kati recorded the conversation. The recording has a central position in the film. At first, Vera refuses to talk to Kati about her experiences at the camp, but then, in response to Kati's insistence, she eventually begins to recall her experience. She tells the story of the sorting on the platform, Mengele's experiments on her pregnant body, and the hard physical work she had to perform. She tells of how a female Jewish doctor offered her the option of an abortion in her eighth month, and why she never took it. That night she had a dream about her mother, who told her that an eight-month-old baby was already alive, that life could not be taken from her. Vera gave birth to Angi in the barracks with the help of a Kapo, and three hours later she went to Appel with the others. The baby was so small and weak it could not cry, so nobody knew about it. Vera's struggle to talk is palpable in the recording: remembering is clearly painful for her. Vera's initial reluctance is obvious; she is warming to the recollection only slowly. English is not the language in which the story was born either; Vera answers her granddaughter's questions in English, but her short sentences crackle over the phone with very a strong

[6] Murai and Tóth define four types of spatial reconstructions of the Holocaust: return to the site that bears traces of the past, return to the site that does not bear traces of the past, location in present with speaker talking about the past, archival footage (82–5). The theme of returning to the place of the deed is expanded in *Born* compared to Murai and Tóth's list, because Israel is included in the itinerary of the tour. Moreover, here the survivor makes the journey together with her daughter, directing attention to their present relation.

Hungarian accent. Her event-driven account is an emotionless, almost dry summary of what happened.

As the testimony is only a voice recording, the grandmother’s voice had to be cinematographed for the sake of the film’s audience. The construction of cinematic space in this sequence includes neither domestic not geographical elements, but rather intermedial ones. The sound of the long tape recording is complemented by visual elements and by slow music, which balance the eventfulness of the oral narration. As the story unfolds, the images become less and less figurative. When Vera talks about the possibility of an abortion, we see intrauterine shots of a baby’s hands, then we see blood in the uterus. The blood looks like Rorschach-like spots on the screen, which eventually turn into stylized crematorium smoke. Vera’s face appears as a simple line drawing. After the birth, the outlines of women lining up for Appel are rendered in cartoon form: a landscape is overlaid with a double exposure of the line of women, the figures supporting Vera, the image showing Vera’s physical weakness. The simple female figures indicate the gap in memory: the now dead grandmother’s ghostly voice is the only trace of the experience she had, which is remembered by neither Angi nor Kati. Yet, this experience influences their lives and relationships in important ways. After this long narration and illustration of Angi’s birth, the film once again uses the footage of Feggie’s birth as a frame, evoking in the viewer the initial question of how far the grandchild’s birth repeats that of the grandmother—what the third generation of surviving women inherits. The visual construction of space that accompanies the archival sound recording thus creates a cinematic space for the film’s viewer to fill in.

Another intermedial element of the film is the post-war archival photograph of Vera and Angi that plays an important role in the characters’ filmic memory transmission. In the photo, Vera as a young woman proudly poses with the tiny Angi, who is perhaps five years old. The picture appears in the film when Angi meets Pope Francis in Auschwitz, who welcomes Angi and the film crew as a sign of support for the idea of the film. The camera pans as Angi thanks the pope for his visit and for his exemplary attitude to Holocaust remembrance. Angi then presents Pope Francis with a photograph taken after the war as a gift, because for her it symbolizes that “life triumphs over death.” Angi brought the photo back from Hungary as part of her family photo album, and the present act of remembrance symbolically reinterprets the photo.

Picture 1. Angéla the small “miracle-child” photographed with her mother. © Spektrum TV (2021)

The image represents a particular variation of Holocaust photography. According to Marianna Hirsch, the Holocaust photograph is not only an image of horror (barbed wire, watchtower, camp inmates, bodies, shoes, hair), but also an image that indexically refers to atrocities, for example, family photoes of later victims (“Family Pictures” 5). Hirsch draws on Barthes’ theory of images and Susan Sontag’s analysis of Holocaust photographs to reflect on the semiotic effects of the family photograph genre. The photograph cuts a moment out of time, bringing the image of the frozen moment into the present time of the viewer, even if the people represented in photograph no longer exist. This life-and-death status of the photograph had already been shown by Barthes, and Susan Sontag added that the Holocaust photograph, as a subject, emphasizes this “once upon a time” aspect, since the memory of the victims is preserved in the present only by the photograph (*Regarding the Pain*; Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 6). Hirsch adds that in the photographs of camp horror, the absence of the everyday medium evokes an incredulous amazement in the present (ibid.).

According to Hirsch, the surviving family image of the victims produces a similar effect. The family photograph acts as a substitute for the families that perished in the Holocaust: the perfect home scene replaces the fact that the depicted are no longer alive, the familiar scene is supplemented by the story of incredible horror through knowledge of the context (*The Generation* 61 and “Family Pictures” 7). This complementarity is shared between the images of camp horror and the home scene, although in the latter we must also be aware of the individual context (ibid.). At the same time, shots of the survivor in a peacetime setting also fit Hirsch’s definition. According to Hirsch, such a conventional survivor photograph is as much a

substitution of the unthinkable that has almost happened as its counterpart, which depicts the perished (“Family Pictures” 7).[7]

Picture 2. Pope Francis receives the “miracle child” family photo from Angi at Auschwitz-Birkenau on Holocaust Remembrance Day, 2019. © Spektrum TV (2021)

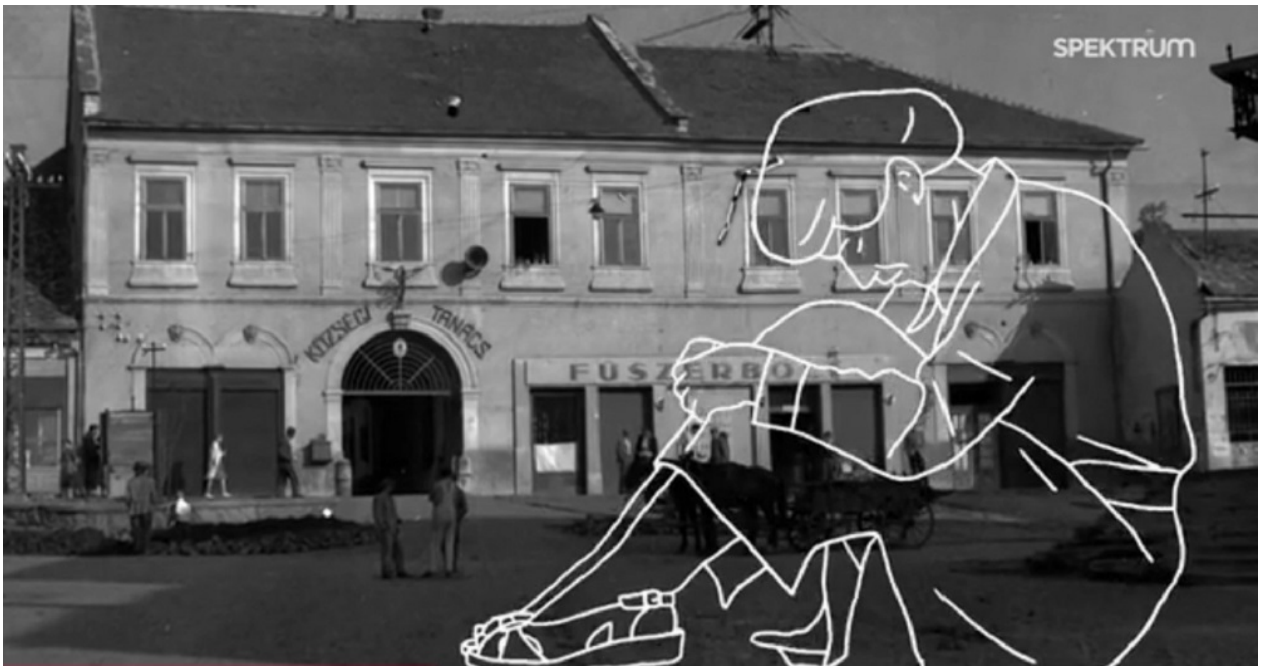
The prominent inclusion of the survivors’ family portrait among the archival material is well related to Hirsch’s analysis above. The family photograph is certainly a Holocaust photograph, but the photograph here is an image of the survivors, not a proxy for the absence of the perished: the missing father is the only index of the dismal past. So here too, we need to know the context to complete the gap the picture hides,[8] and the completion becomes a story of the miraculous escape of life rather than disbelief at the horror. The framing of the image in the present time of the film highlights the film’s interest in the miracle of survival, its orientation towards exploring the possibilities of moving on. The image also becomes a marker of interest in the visual construction of space in the film (the missing father, as it were). Just as the framed photographs in *Maus II* play a meta-visual role, the image gifted to the Pope in the film symbolizes the possibility and reality of surviving the Holocaust of death. The film and the

[7] In analyzing Art Spiegelman’s *Maus II*, Hirsch interprets the status of the two archive photographs wedged into the comic strip. There is indeed a contrast between the cartoon account and the photograph. The photo turns out to have no documentary value in this setup: the comic book needs to try to perform the documentation instead, while knowing that documentation is a reconstruction only. Thus, the comic makes visible the interaction of different visual modes (drawing and image) in the representation of the past, and thus ultimately questions the possibility of a real/fictional distinction (‘Family Pictures’ 11).

[8] In Zsuzsa F. Várkonyi’s book on survivors, ‘*Férfiidők lányregénye*’ [A Girls’ Romance from a Manly Time], the protagonist learns of her foster father’s family members who died during the Holocaust through family photo albums (150-153). Her acquaintance with the albums is also a key scene in the film adaptation of the book titled *Akik maradtak* [Those Who Remained], directed by Barnabás Tóth). Like *Born in Auschwitz,* F. Várkonyi’s novel, in contextualising and using archival material, focuses on the survivors’ emotional reconciliation and the possibilities of moving on, and thus on the future. See also Várkonyi’s ‘*Béke volt’* [There Was Peace].

making of the film also explore the possibilities and realities of survival through scenographic means.

The archival images and footage used are often complemented by simple line animation, as we have already seen in the case of the Auschwitz stories. This method is also used for the portrayal of the camp returnees. The image of Vera returning to Sárospatak, for example, can be seen enlarged on a postcard from the period. Later, the targets of the anti-Semitic attacks of 1956 also appear in this way as outlines on a postcard-like street. The drawing of the Appel, mentioned above, depicted a series of female figures supporting each other against a neutral background.



Picture 3. Line drawing complements archival material in *Born in Auschwitz*. © Spektrum TV (2021)

This technique has been further developed in the film into scenes where only the drawing fills the screen. For example, this graphic visualizing is used in the case of the antisemitic shop assistant who enlightens Angi about the identity of her adoptive father. The assistant is drawn in white on a black background, taking on the form of the iconic villain, Cruella de Vil. The story Angi tells is an incident during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution against Soviet occupation that was accompanied by waves of antisemitic attacks. At Sárospatak, 12-year-old Angi experienced antisemitism at first hand. She was told by the shop assistant that her father was not her real father, as her mother married the older man after the war. The news upended Angi’s whole idea of her life. At home, she was told about the loss of her real father and the loss of her adoptive father’s wife and daughter in Auschwitz. Afterwards, the family had to hide from the stones hurled in through their windows. Both revelation scenes and the attacks are constructed by line drawings. The scene in the shop features Angi and the shop assistant, who transforms into the image of Cruella De Vil iconic vicious face and puts Angi into the place of a defenseless Dalmatian puppy of Disney’s *101 Dalmatians*.

Picture 4. Line drawing replaces archival material in *Born in Auschwitz*. © Spektrum TV (2021)

The graphic elements can complement an archival photograph, a seemingly everyday element of the present, or even appear in the film independently, detached from the documentary expectations, yet illustrating the story being told. Animation can be layered over existing historical footage, serving as a substitute for missing family archival material. It may appear in standard dimensions or in a large, visually striking format—such as a drawing on a postcard—to emphasize its narrative function. It can highlight the individuality of the experience (drawing on a neutral background), or, in special cases, it can take the form of a children’s film iconology of childhood fear (Cruella). The animation versions increasingly place the representation of the past in an imaginary memory space in emotionally charged situations.

The spatial construction of interviews in *Born in Auschwitz*

The filmmakers of *Born in Auschwitz* create specific interview situations for the characters. They constantly interview Angi and Kati, and, although the film only records the answers, viewers can infer the questions. The primary setting of these interviews of mother and daughter are domestic spaces. However, at the end of the film, there is a staged, public-looking interview-style confrontation between mother and daughter, in which the daughter asks questions the mother finds difficult to answer.

The interviews are recorded primarily in the interviewees’ domestic spaces. In her Montréal apartment, Angi discusses her birth in Auschwitz, childhood and young adulthood in Hungary, and her life in Canada. Kati tells us about her mother and her own childhood in a relaxed way, while we see images of her working in the kitchen and sitting comfortably in her dining room. She explains her scientific research into medical data analysis on environmental exposure and cancer at her office. In the interviews, the subjects speak freely, there is no hint of a questioning reporter’s voice, but rather it seems as if they were retelling stories that have been told many times. There is one exception to this impression of calm and order: the mother-daughter confrontation at the end of the film.

The mother-daughter confrontation is staged before an all-black studio background, the two women positioned above the level of the camera. Before the confrontation, Angi and Kati listen to Vera’s account of Angi’s birth that triggers their discussion about the effect of this event on their lives. Angi and Kati’s conversation creates an exceptional situation that breaks the usual

framework of family memory spectacularly, and this situation results in the most dramatic act of remembrance in the film. The filmmakers position Angi and Kati across from each other to listen to Vera’s telephone account of 1984. The characters squirm on uncomfortable chairs in front of a black backdrop as they listen to the tape recording. In the conversation that follows, Kati plays the role of the reporter and Angi the interviewee. The two discuss Vera and Angi’s relationship, then they analyze their own mother-daughter relationship, which leads to the eventual problematization of Angi’s survivalist parenting attitude. At this point, Kati attacks and asks pointed questions, while Angi defends herself in surprise: the scene becomes a real confrontation between victim and perpetrator, in which the survivor mother is accused of recreating Holocaust conditions in her daughter’s early life. The camera focuses on the speakers’ faces and engages in repeated shot/reverse shot sequences. Kati asks confrontational questions she seemed to have asked herself several times before, while Angie is indignant and struggles to face them.

The situation provokes strong emotional reactions on both sides, and the camerawork follows this closely. Close-ups show how Kati’s intellectual irony turns into indignation. The camera zooms in when Angi’s defense weakens, becomes insecure, and she breaks down. At one point, she desperately asks for the recording to be stopped, looking out of the discussion’s space towards the camera. The conversation comes to a breaking point because it touches on a subject that Angi and Kati are not used to discussing, which is how traumatic experiences are passed on to survivors’ children. They have never listened to grandmother Vera’s story about Auschwitz together and, normally, they do not talk about emotional difficulties. This conversation stirs up strong emotions that are almost exaggerated in relation to the grievances that are being raised, probably because the emotions are not specifically related to the actual grievances. Angi is particularly distressed by the disagreeable conversation in the presence of the camera, which is why she asks for the recording to be stopped. But the camera is not stopped, and Angi finally apologizes to Kati, smiling dismissively. In other words, she does what she refused to do earlier even after being asked by an army of psychologists: she accepts Kati’s perspective, at least verbally, and acknowledges the emotional damage her parenting methods have caused in her daughter’s life. In this simulated studio space, the camera generates emotions, forces the participants to speak out, to attack, to reject, to reflect, and even to react.

This cinematically staged provocation of the characters’ processing of emotions in the present also raises ethical questions. The interrogator’s questioning of the witness to change the speaker’s point of view is typical of the documentary of the eyewitness era. However, questions may arise as to why the shooting was not stopped when Angi asked for it, whether something was filmed that Angi would not accept to publicize, whether something was cut out. Viewed from the perspective of the final outcome, the completed film was approved by Angi; thus, the final form of the footage appeared acceptable to her. However, it is also clear that, in the verbal battle between the two women, Kati is the winning party, because the conversation is in English, her language (Kati is a medical researcher with a PhD), while Angi is a pensioner in her seventies who has trouble not only expressing her feelings but also translating them into English. It is easier for Angi to offer a dramatic apology than to clearly articulate that her survivalist worldview—which, in her eyes, helped her navigate rural antisemitism, emigration, language shifts, and two marriages—was not fundamentally flawed, even if it negatively impacted her daughter’s psychological development during childhood. I wonder if the filmmakers devoted as much space to Angi’s perspective as they did to Kati’s.

Conclusion

Born in Auschwitz is a Holocaust documentary film of the era of the witness that shows the effect of Holocaust experience in the life of first-, second, and third-generation female survivors who have passed on their traumas to each other. The questions the film tackles are (1) how trauma is transmitted from generation to generation of mothers and daughters and (2) how it is possible to stop traumatized forms of behavior from being passed on from mother to daughter many decades after the Shoah. The documentary film triggers strong emotions in its protagonists and confronts them with unpleasant emotional content they must narratively and emotionally manage, opening a way for possible future processing. This essay investigated (1) the ways in which the film visually constructs spaces and (2) how these scenographic spaces initiated or advanced the protagonists’ trauma processing, inviting viewers’ interaction.

The film relies on many traditional spatial elements of Holocaust film cinematography but provides a personalized and self-reflective view of how the Holocaust reverberates in the lives of its protagonists to this day. The film takes its characters to Auschwitz and Jerusalem and shows pans of barbed wire, train tracks, the Auschwitz gateway as is customary in the Holocaust film canon. However, these elements appear as fleeting background frames rather than the setting as the plot as is customary in Holocaust film. The film foregrounds personal and feminine spaces like the dining room and the kitchen where the protagonists speak about their everyday experiences. The footage integrates many forms of documentary evidence as is also customary in the Holocaust film lexicon. However, the film transforms and plays with documentary sources, most often through graphic means. In the case of the central story of Angi’s birth, the graphic elements fill in the void in the documentation. The same happens in Angie’s scene of identity, when she is revealed to be the daughter of a Holocaust victim by a shop assistant. The visual construction of space in the film foregrounds the feminine and intergenerational aspects of traumatized experience instead of communal ones.

The title of the film *Born in Auschwitz* also highlights femininity in intergenerational terms. The key metaphor of the film is birth, passing from one secluded space into open space through a tunnel, the journey to a new life. The spatial metaphor of birth in Auschwitz becomes a metaphor of new life and “freedom” after the Holocaust. It is important to locate the feminine and intergenerational aspects of this spatial metaphor, as it is suggestive of the particular survival of a mother and a baby whose new lives have been largely determined by their experiences in Auschwitz.

The visual construction of space in the film is intimately tied to its plot about interpersonal feminine trauma procession. The film’s plot documents spaces of its protagonists’ intergenerational trauma transmission and procession. The film also advances the healing process by creating spaces for reflection and discussion for its protagonists. The two women are asked to talk about themselves in their comfortable domestic contexts, but they also travel together, and finally the confrontation between mother and daughter in front of the camera makes them shift their respective psychological positions about the survivalist attitude to childrearing. The daughter accuses and questions openly, the mother defends her own position, then relents and apologizes, which is an important step in the healing process created and enhanced by the scenographic spaces of the film. In this way, the film constructs a visual space for healing for its protagonists. The process started before filming began and is incomplete at its end, but the film’s scenographic space certainly moved forward the healing of mother and daughter.

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