

“All I ask is peace and quiet.” Recovery from Trauma in *The Pawnbroker* and *The West Wing*¹

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This paper is concerned not so much with the Holocaust itself as with what Donald Bloxham has termed ‘the Holocaust metanarrative’: a ‘bundle of ideas and preconceptions handed down under the label ‘Holocaust’ that shapes the contours and parameters of our understanding of the subject.’² What this means is that references to the Holocaust can be further and further shortened as the writer or artist can assume correspondingly greater knowledge on the part of their audience. This can be seen in books such as John Boyne’s recent bestseller *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which relies on the assumption that we can penetrate its punning – ‘Out-With’ for ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘the Fury’ for ‘the Fuhrer’ – for its mode of emplotment as a fable to work. Another fable, Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful*, does the same thing filmically³.

As Robert Eaglestone has written, the Holocaust has become ‘something wider, more significant, and, precisely because it is so all-pervasive, very much harder to pin down: a sense of “who we are” and ‘how the world is for us’.’⁴ This can be seen in the ‘i-tourist?’ project, intended to ‘cement[s] the link between the idea of holocaust tourism and the commodity form’⁵ by placing images which use the forms of commercial advertising to ‘promote’ the names of the sites to the right. Underlying this project, though, is the assumption that

¹ This paper was originally developed as a presentation for *The Holocaust in American Film*, a course run at Southampton University by Dr James Jordan, whom I would like to acknowledge for his help and support in developing the ideas.

² Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches*, Manchester University press 2005, p.66

³ For an interesting comparison of the ‘fabular’ presentation of *Life is Beautiful* with the ‘realism’ of *The Pawnbroker*, arguing that Benigni’s approach has much to recommend it, see Hilene Flanzbaum, “‘But Wasn’t it Terrific?’: A Defense of Liking *Life is Beautiful*”, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, Volume 14, Number 1 (2001).

⁴ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Oxford 2004, p.1-2

⁵ Paul Antick, ‘Mock-ups 2’, retrieved from <http://www.visual-culture.com/project/i-tourist/gallery/show/Mock-ups+2> on 22 March, 2007. The same author’s conference paper ‘i-tourist? Notes on the Affective Economies of Holocaust Tourism’ given at the symposium *Journeys Through the Holocaust* (John Hansard Gallery, Southampton University, 11 December, 2006) continues the exploration of these themes, interestingly starting from the idea that holocaust tourism is centred on the desire to experience a ‘traumatic flashback’ to vicariously experienced trauma. Many thanks to Paul Antick for making the text of the paper available to me.

the audience will pick up the cue to see the contradiction: that there is not only an established meaning to the term 'Holocaust' but also a conventional method of representing it which has become international, epitomised by the poster to *Schindler's List*.

More particularly, Jeffrey Shandler has identified the Holocaust as 'a moral paradigm in American discourse'⁶, something which is not only a common reference point but which is seen as embodying – whether negatively or positively – moral principles. The key issue in my two examples here is that of masterability – the degree to which the Holocaust can be recovered from and managed. In *The Pawnbroker*, the Holocaust is an event which cannot be mastered – indeed, re-traumatises its victims and causes further damage. In *The West Wing*, the Holocaust is not only masterable but an event which legitimises present action. Whether this is positive is something I shall come to later.

The Pawnbroker (Sidney Lumet, 1964) tells the story of Sol Nazerman, an Auschwitz survivor plagued with flashbacks to his past. This intrusion of the Holocaust past into Sol's present renders him powerless and leads to the climax of the film, the death of his assistant, Jesus.

What is it, though, that causes Sol's memories to leap outside the past and into his present? Critics have considered at length the technical skill and significance of Sol's flashbacks. Few, however, have considered why he has them, only implicitly suggesting that visual cues trigger his recall. The key sequence (for Joshua Hirsch, Leonard Leff and Ilan Avisar⁷) is considered to be when his assistant's girlfriend Mabel exposes herself to him, with the injunction 'Look', triggering a memory of Sol being pushed through a window to 'look' at his wife being prostituted to the SS. Hirsch argues that Sol's

⁶ Jeffrey Shandler, 'Aliens in the Wasteland: American Encounters with the Holocaust on 1960s Science Fiction Television' in Flanzbaum (ed.) *The Americanization of the Holocaust*.

⁷ Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust*, Temple University Press 2004; Leonard J. Leff, 'Hollywood and the Holocaust: Remembering the Pawnbroker', *American Jewish History* Vol.84 No.4, 1996; Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, Indiana University Press, 1988.

trauma is “the breaking of the family gaze by the Nazis” leading to a disabling of “visual mastery over his surroundings.”⁸ Tempting though it may be, because film is such a visual medium, to focus on the visual, I would argue, following Alan Rosen⁹, that the triggers for Sol’s flashbacks are in fact auditory.

At the beginning of the film, it is Sol’s sister calling him that seems to have turned his sleep into a waking dream of his dead family. His memory, it should be noted, is silent except for non-diegetic music: his sister’s voice links past and present as her question of “Sol?” becomes his family’s calls to rescue them. Later, a fight on the street triggers another memory – even as Sol makes an effort to turn away, to not look at what is happening – the sounds of a dog barking and the victim of the fight scrabbling against the wire fence pursue him¹⁰. The sounds, like his memories, cannot be avoided. In this sense, perhaps sound is a better metaphor for Sol’s memories: we have more choice about what we look at than what we hear. Sol’s tragedy is that what he hears in the present leads to images from the past.

More subtly, the sound in *The Pawnbroker* is rarely without the distant rumble of trains across New York¹¹. Occasionally, we see them (though more often we see their shadow) but the low noise is almost always present. It is certainly present when he talks with Marianne, a concerned social worker who enquires what Sol wants and he says: “All I ask is peace and quiet.”

⁸ See also Sanford E. Marovitz, ‘A Prophet in the Labyrinth: The Urban Romanticism of Edward Louis Wallant’, *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, Fifteenth Anniversary Issue (Autumn, 1985) for another perspective on Sol’s flashbacks, arguing that it is “a genocidal hatred over which he has no control” (p.180) that causes them. The ambiguity – Marovitz leaves open whether Sol is in fact in the grip of a genocidal hatred himself – is one that needs further exploration.

⁹ Alan Rosen, “‘Teach Me Gold’: Pedagogy and Memory in the *Pawnbroker*”, *Prooftexts* 22 (2002), pp.77-117.

¹⁰ See Julian Levinson, ‘The Maimed Body and the Tortured Soul: Holocaust Survivors in American Film’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Volume 17, number 1 (2004) for a similar reading of this sequence. Levinson also argues that Sol’s flashbacks are ‘calling him back to the scene of his trauma’ (my emphasis), though he ultimately focuses on a ‘reading’ of the film’s ‘visual codes’.

¹¹ For an interesting reading of the significance of the city in both the film and the original novel, see Marovitz, ‘A Prophet in the Labyrinth’.

Sound is also a factor in Sol's attempt to tell Marianne what is happening. Traumatized by a subway journey – in which the normal sound of the train is amplified until it climaxes in the memory of the transport of his family – Sol goes to Marianne's apartment, which is notable for being the quietest location in the film. The only locations which are as quiet are his shop – which is constantly disturbed by customers entering, often bringing the sound of trains with them – and his lover's apartment, which is silent except for a ticking clock. Here again, the sound is emphasized – this time by contrast with the music playing as Jesus and his girlfriend make love to jazz and the noises of the street.

When Sol gets to Marianne's apartment – when he has some measure of the peace and quiet he asked for earlier – he is able to express what is happening to him, and he does so in auditory terms:

"It's just that there have been memories that I had, well, I thought that I had pushed them far away from me and they keep rushing in, and then they're words, words that I thought I had kept myself from hearing... And now they flood my mind."

His trauma, then, is something that he hears – words that he cannot stop hearing and which bring with them a flood of images. Joshua Hirsch, though he concentrates on the problems of gaze and visual mastery, notes this synaesthesia between visual and auditory in the sequence with Mabel when he says that "Mabel says "Look," but he [Sol] hears the SS officer saying "Willst du was sehen?"" The consequences of the associations come visually – where they can be suppressed or turned away from – but they are triggered by sound, which keeps breaking through the defences Sol erects.

Thirty-five years later, the employment of a similar synaesthesia of hearing and seeing in *The West Wing* demonstrates a change in Holocaust memory from the 1964 *Pawnbroker*. Where the *Pawnbroker* portrayed Holocaust memory as something which could neither be coped with nor prevented from causing further harm, *The West Wing* presents the Holocaust firstly as something which can – through embracing American values – be recovered from and, secondly, as a paradigm for American involvement in the world.

The most obvious resonance with the Pawnbroker is found in an episode from the second series – *Nöel* – in which Joshua Lyman, the show's Deputy Chief of Staff, is shown experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after being shot during an attack on the President at the end of the first season¹².

The trigger for Josh's traumatic flashbacks is identified as the music which has been played throughout the episode in the lobby of the Bartlet White House. Josh equates the music with the sirens of the ambulances after the attack, producing flashback sequences which mimic the Pawnbroker's as we are shown progressively more as the memory develops.

What is interesting is that the music is not just 'music' but more precisely Christmas music – *Nöel* is, as its title suggests, a Christmas episode. Josh is not just any character but also a Jewish character with a Holocaust past. As he says in a Season One episode, *Six Meetings Before Lunch*: *"You know, Jeff... I'd love to give you the money, I really would. But I'm a little short of cash right now. It seems the S.S. officer forgot to give my grandfather his wallet back when he let him out of Birkenau."* There is therefore a subversive quality to the episode: the Jewish character re-traumatized by a Christian festival.

This subversive quality is heightened through the device of having Toby Ziegler organise the music, also to his irritation:

"Let me tell you something, the last two Christmases in this White House I've been accused of not being in the proper spirit. I was called names. Not this year! For the next three weeks I will be filling this lobby with music in the mornings and evenings so that we may all experience this season of... Would you people stop playing for one damn minute! This season of peace and joy."

¹² More exactly, Josh is shown in therapy for PTSD. For a consideration of the psychological case-history genre (which also includes a lengthy section on The Pawnbroker's treatment of psychological trauma in relation to gender issues) see Andrea Slane, 'Pressure Points: Political Psychology, Screen Adaptation, and the Management of Racism in the case-History Genre', *Camera Obscura* 45, Volume 15, Number 3 (2001). In this context, it is significant that the attack which causes Josh's PTSD is an attack on the President's black aide by white supremacists for becoming involved with the President's daughter, just as his statement of his Holocaust past is made in relation to claims by a black activist for reparations for slavery.

Toby, the White House Communications Director, is the West Wing's most obviously Jewish character – shown in synagogue, well-versed in the Torah, and used in a season one episode on capital punishment (*Take This Sabbath Day*) to argue that “Vengeance is not Jewish”. In *Nöel*, Toby's choice of music – a brass quintet in a marble-floored lobby, followed by bagpipes – becomes an ironic comment on the ‘season of peace and joy’ for the non-Christians in the White House.

The tension between the Christmas music and the Jewish characters brings out an element not really developed in *The Pawnbroker*: that Sol has to some extent broken with his faith. He is, after all, shown working on a Saturday. *The Pawnbroker* seems to suggest that his trauma can only be shattering, while the *West Wing*, in the person of Josh, presents the Holocaust as a centre of one kind of Jewish identity – with the implication that identity based around trauma is fundamentally unstable. Josh's secular Judaism is contrasted with Toby's attendance at synagogue and familiarity with Jewish tradition, and a later barb (in a series 4 episode, *20 Hours in America: Part II*) from Josh that Toby minimises his Judaism by implying that he is more sensitive to antisemitism. Toby's response is typically pithy: “the ancient Hebrews had a word for Jews from Westport. They pronounced it Presbyterian.”¹³

Still more interesting is the subplot to *Nöel*, concerning a Holocaust survivor who starts screaming during a tour of the White House when she sees a painting looted from her family by the Nazis. This is introduced through a press conference, in which C.J. Cregg, the Press Secretary, initially makes light of the incident:

MARK: This is way out of left field but do you know anything about a woman... I don't know how to say this... going a little crazy during a tour?

¹³ For readings of the *Pawnbroker* which take particular issue with the Christian subtexts in the *Pawnbroker*, see Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust*, and Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*, University of Washington Press, 2001, pp.107-125. Also see Sara R. Horowitz, ‘The Cinematic Triangulation of Jewish American Identity: Israel, America and the Holocaust’ and Walter Benn Michaels, “‘You Who Never Was There’: Slavery and the New Historicism – Deconstruction and the Holocaust’ in Flanzbaum (ed.) *The Americanisation of the Holocaust*.

C.J.: *A White House tour?*

MARK: *Yeah, a woman saw a painting and started screaming.*

C.J.: *I don't know Mark. There's a painting of Dolly Madison in the grand foyer. You catch it in the wrong light it can scare the...*

C.J.'s initial levity deepens to curiosity about the incident and she starts to investigate by asking an official in the Visitors' Office what happened. His description of the survivor's screaming is interesting as a reflection of C.J.'s initial ignorance:

"If it was a language at all, its origin was unknown to me. I sent for the agent on duty, who attempted to take a statement, but not speaking whatever language it was simply escorted her out of the building."

As a metaphor for the distance of the Holocaust from the contemporary world, this statement is illuminating: not only does the official not recognise the language; he doesn't recognise the sound as language at all. Confronted with trauma they cannot explain in their own terms – because it does not speak their language in any sense – they usher her from the building. The analogy with survivor experience in the first twenty years after 1945, as they struggled to find a language with which they could communicate the Holocaust to those who had not been through it, what Hilene Flanzbaum has termed 'the slow coming-to consciousness',¹⁴ is striking. Annete Insdorf, writing of Sol in *The Pawnbroker*, has termed his silent scream 'the emblem of the Holocaust survivor, the witness of a horror so devastating that it cannot be told.'¹⁵

C.J. begins to ask questions of her colleagues and the use of sound is once again interesting. The music from the lobby – the sound of trauma – appears and disappears as the subject is raised and then dropped.

¹⁴ Flanzbaum, "But Wasn't it Terrific?", p.278. Flanzbaum also draws attention to contemporary reviews of the film – notably by Stanley Kaufman – which argued that Sol's continuing traumatising by the events of the Holocaust was 'unreasonable': an interesting sidelight on the development of memory worth contrasting with our contemporary assumption of the "naturally" shattering impact of trauma. A more nuanced (because longer) analysis of how the experience of viewing *The Pawnbroker* has changed since its release can be found in Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*.

¹⁵ Quoted in Leff, 'Hollywood and the Holocaust', p.366

Finally, though, the painting is returned to its owner and its history explained. The survivor and her son depart with smiles on their faces, the past restored to them with the painting. The message is clear: trauma can be overcome with the intervention of C.J. and the official. At the same time, Josh receives reassurance that not only will he, in the therapist's words, get better "because we get better", but also because the Chief of Staff, an Irish Catholic, reassures him that: "If you're in a hole, then I'm in a hole. But I've been down here before and I know the way out." As Josh leaves the White House with his secretary – a quintessential WASP – we know that he will be all right: just as the painting was restored by C.J. and the official, so Josh will be restored by his colleagues and their values: in contrast to Sol Nazerman, left wandering the new ghetto of New York, silently screaming in his 'secret society' of grief.

The passage of time changes our perspective on events. Early responses to the Holocaust struggled to uncover the experience which underlay the facts and figures which became available shortly after World War II. Albert Friedlander wrote in 1968 that 'As we examine the fabric of those days, it crumbles dry and dusty between our fingers,'¹⁶ a response reinforced by *The Pawnbroker*, which Julian Levinson has described as marking a transition between two equally negative models of survival: the 'maimed body' and the 'tortured soul'¹⁷. As time has passed, however, the evidence of new generations has seemed to suggest that, as the therapist in the West Wing puts it, we get better "because we get better." However awful Josh's family experiences are – and the show's writers give him his own 'holocaust' in the loss of his sister in a fire he could not prevent – they can be managed within the context of modern American society. The difference between Sol and Josh can also be expressed in the kind of sounds that trigger their traumatic flashbacks. Rosen points to the inarticulacy of the sound which follows – literally, in one case, dogs – Sol, arguing that in *The Pawnbroker* 'present and past are connected by that which is inarticulate.'¹⁸ This inarticulate trauma,

¹⁶ Albert H. Friedlander, 'The Geography of Hell' in Albert H. Friedlander (ed.) *Out of the Whirlwind: A Reader of Holocaust Literature*, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, New York, 1968, p.24.

¹⁷ Levinson, 'The Maimed Body and the Tortured Soul'.

¹⁸ Rosen, 'Teach Me Gold', p.95.

symbolised by 'Holocaust motifs grafted onto the visual background of Harlem'¹⁹ cannot avoid carrying itself into the world around it and causing further damage. For Josh, by contrast, the sound which triggers his memory is music – perhaps the ultimate structured sound. This change could be seen as symbolic of the structure Holocaust memory has acquired: in the 1960s, memory of the Holocaust was 'inarticulate' while now it has become highly structured and coded. And underneath that coding is the knowledge that we get better 'because we get better.'

The certainty that trauma can be recovered from was thrown into doubt by the events of September 11, 2001, three weeks before the scheduled beginning of the third season of the *West Wing*. The search – in both the fictional and real *West Wings* – for what Toby describes in season four (*Arctic Radar*) as "a 500 word stanza on American leadership in a globally interdependent world that moves beyond triumphalism" began at this point.

In response to the attacks in New York and Washington, the producers assembled a special episode, *Isaac and Ishmael*, which attempted to warn Americans of the dangers of over-reaction and prejudice²⁰. During a 'crash' shutdown of the White House caused by the mistaken identification of an

¹⁹ Wendy Zierler, "'My Holocaust Is Not Your Holocaust': "Facing" Black and Jewish Experience in *The Pawnbroker*, *Higher Ground*, and *The Nature of Blood*, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, V18 N1, Spring 2004, p.51.

²⁰ For detailed analyses of the episode, see Rachel Gans-Boriskin, and Russ Tissingier, 'The Bushlet Administration: Terrorism and War on *The West Wing*', *The Journal of American Culture*, Volume 28, Number 1, March 2005 and Fiona McNee, 'Something's Happened: Fictional Media as a Coping Mechanism', *Prometheus*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2002. A very critical analysis of the episode in terms of the series' general depiction of race and gender is offered by Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, 'Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots', *Social Text* 72, Vol. 20, No. 3, Fall 2002. Lynn Spiegel, 'Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No.2 (June 2004) locates the episode within the general effort by American broadcasters and entertainment media to cope with the immediate aftermath of 9/11. the symbolism of the series more generally is considered in R. Lance Holbert et al., '*The West Wing* and Depictions of the American Presidency: Expanding the Domains of Framing in Political Communication', *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 4, October 2005 and the same author's '*The West Wing* as Endorsement of the U.S. Presidency: Expanding the Bounds of priming in Political Communication', *Journal of Communication*, September 2003. For consideration of the *West Wing*'s influence on viewers, see also Staci L. Beavers, '*The West Wing* as a Pedagogical Tool', PS Online, retrieved from www.apsanet.org on 27 March, 2007. Finally, for an intriguing look at changes in American self-perception, see Simon Philpott and David Mutimer, 'Inscribing the American Body Politic: Martin Sheen and Two American Decades', *Geopolitics*, 10:335-355, 2005.

Arabic American White House staffer as a terrorist, the regular characters are seen with a group of students invited to the White House for a 'Presidential Classroom'. In a discussion of racial profiling with C.J., Toby employs the Holocaust as an analogy:

"When you think of Afghanistan, think of Poland. When you think of the Taliban, think of the Nazis. When you think of the citizens of Afghanistan, think of the Jews in concentration camps. A friend of my dad's was at one of the camps. He used to come over to the house, and he and my dad used to shoot some pinochle. He said he once saw a guy at the camp kneeling and praying. He said, "What are you doing?" The guy said he was thanking God. And my dad's friend said, "What could you possibly be thanking God for?" He said, "I'm thanking God for not making me like them." Bad people can't be recognized on sight. There's no point in trying."

Ultimately, the episode came down on Toby's side – using a case of mistaken identity to stress that it is easy in such times to make mistakes based on snap judgements²¹. As Leo says to the staffer wrongly accused of being a terrorist: "I think if you talk to people who know me, they'd tell you that... that was unlike me, you know?" That the message of holding back from premature judgements based on ethnicity didn't make it to the real White House is perhaps the greatest problem now facing us. Along the way, though, Toby's comment brings home how far the Holocaust has become a cultural marker, reducible to homily, or what Jeffrey Shandler has termed 'guest appearance'²². This trend continues in series four, when, in a conversation about whether the Bartlet White House should intervene in genocide in Africa (*Inauguration: Over There*). Josh and Toby turn to the difference between "fighting wars" and "intervening when there's violence against people who are defenceless":

TOBY: Fine, but if we go here, then that means they can go there, and look, there's more injustice over there.

JOSH: We elect these people. And not for nothing, but if we had been the world's policemen in the 30's, you and I...

TOBY: We would have had a lot more relatives.

JOSH: That's right.

²¹ Though for an alternative reading, see Spiegel, 'Entertainment Wars'.

²² Jeffrey Shandler, 'Aliens in the Wasteland', p.35.

There is no need to say more. The audience can be relied upon to fill in the blanks. The question is; what do they put in the blanks?

The Holocaust has become an easy reference point. Films such as *Life as Beautiful* or books like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* depend for their commercial and critical success on being easily understood symbolically. The punning of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* assumes that we know what is really meant. The writers of the West Wing assume we know what they mean when they compare the Nazis and the Taliban.

The reduction of the Holocaust to a series of verbal and visual clichés lends itself to manipulation. The writers of the West Wing used it to highlight the road not taken. Toby's statement that "bad people can't be recognised on sight" is what we all want to believe - and what the government seems to work against. Tony Blair's statement on Holocaust Memorial Day 2006, promising to "rededicate ourselves to fighting racism and to embracing the toleration of difference" was thrown into relief by a speech a week later – which began with a reference to attending his son's school HMD event – in which he promised as his security policy: "policing of our borders, the use of biometric visas and much greater co-operation across Europe on targeting, disrupting and convicting the criminal gangs who menace us." Whether the Holocaust provides an example of why states should be given more control over their citizens is, I think, a moot point.

Toby's statement in *Isaac and Ishmael* was underlined by the apology to the staffer wrongly identified as a terrorist: 'I think if you talk to people who know me, they'd tell you that... that was unlike me, you know? We're obviously all under, um... a greater than usual amount of... you know.' Similar apologies were offered – eventually – to the family of Jean Charles de Menezes in July 2005. The message that "bad people can't be recognised on sight" would perhaps have been useful briefing material for the police that day.

The process of boiling down historical events for inclusion in an ever-broadening curriculum – increasing literally every day – is partly inevitable.

The process does, though, have to be watched. The Holocaust is deployed in a bewildering number of contexts to oppose and justify particular actions or beliefs. It does so because the murder of six million Jews by Nazi Germany shocked Europe into consideration of its capabilities and potentialities. By ignoring the lessons of the past – or worse, by co-opting them into political debate without consideration of the wider implications – we are in danger of devaluing the currency of what ought to be a clear moral example²³. What it ought to be an example, for, however, I will leave for discussion.

²³ In the words of Sidney Poitier in reference to “social-problem films” of the 1960s, “paying court to values that propel us into vacuums”: quoted in Andrea Slane, ‘Pressure Points’, pp.71-72.

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