

The Pawnbroker

By Annette Insdorf

Excerpted from "Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust," Cambridge University Press, 2002

Reprinted by permission of the author

"The Pawnbroker" is one of the rare "Hollywood" films (shot entirely in New York) to take on the Holocaust and its legacy with both thematic and formal vigor. Directed in 1963 by Sidney Lumet (but released in 1965), this chiseled black-and-white portrait of a survivor living in New York City is structured through sophisticated editing. Lumet and editor Ralph Rosenblum use montage as a complex visual analogue for mental processes. Although the story takes place in the present, it is punctuated by shots of memory — flash cuts that surface momentarily into the protagonist's thoughts, searing the present with the ineradicable brand of his concentration camp past.

The film begins with a fragment whose meaning will be revealed only midway through the story: in dreamlike slow motion, a young couple, their children, and grandparents relax in a pastoral scene that ends abruptly, yielding to a present tense of vulgar suburban life. The same man, Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), now much older, is being pestered by his sister-in-law and her teenage children. He drives back to his pawnshop on 116th Street, as subjective hand-held shots of lower Harlem identify the camera with his point of view. Nazerman's behavior with various desperate customers — ranging from fatigue to contempt — suggests power, until it becomes clear that Nazerman is as helpless vis-à-vis his black boss, Rodriguez (Brock Peters), as his poor clients are before him.

Nazerman's assistant Jesús (Jaime Sanchez) is the opposite of his employer: an energetic young Hispanic, he wants to move up quickly in the world — as the exhilarating tracking shots of Jesús on ladders or sprinting through crowded streets embody — while Nazerman wants only to be left in peace. When the bitter Jew rejects Jesús' offers of interest and companionship, the offended youth succumbs to his buddies' plans to rob the store. Nazerman also refuses the friendly advances of a social worker, Miss Birchfield (Geraldine Fitzgerald), and spurns Tessie (Marketa Kimbrell), the woman with whom he has been living, especially when her father dies. This cruel indifference is rendered comprehensible only in flashbacks that show Nazerman's earlier brutalization at the hands of the Nazis. Through subliminal flash cuts that



Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger) kneels in anguish beside the body of Jesús (Jaime Sanchez). Courtesy Library of Congress

gradually lengthen into painful scenes, the linear narrative is thickened with the weight of the past.

The first return to World War II occurs when Nazerman walks away from his shop in the Harlem night. The sound of dogs barking triggers a bleached-out flash cut of dogs chasing a Jewish prisoner who is trying to scale a fence. Like a cinematic poem, the film alternates quick shots of the Harlem scene (a gang of kids beating up a black boy) with the camp locale, creating visual rhymes. With a shaved head and a Star of David on his uniform, Nazerman watches his friend die on the fence, his inability to take action extends into the present. The first flashback thus establishes Nazerman's essential relationship to his surroundings: a spectator who cannot relieve suffering, only observe, register, and perhaps absorb it.

The fact that the "prisoner" in the present is black sets up a second level of oppression in "The Pawnbroker." While it is admittedly a facile distortion to posit a one-to-one analogy between the Harlem ghetto in 1965 and the camps of the early forties, Nazerman treats his predominantly black customers with the same disdain that characterized the Nazis' attitude toward Jews. He calls them "creatures," "scum," "rejects" — and his job is ultimately

one of dispossession. Indeed, the pawnbroker can be seen as a contemporary Kapo, controlling the poor clients who barter with him, but also controlled — and imprisoned — by his superiors. He must remain unmoved by the suffering of these “creatures” in order to survive, even as they relinquish their most personal possessions to him.

Furthermore, the shop with its bars and fences replicates the storerooms of the concentration camp. The second flashback fleshes out this connection as a pregnant young woman tries to pawn her ring. This touches off a close-up of hands against wire that grows into a slow tracking shot of rings being removed by SS men from a long line of trembling hands. Once again, Nazerman is powerless before a victim. This is also the case a few sequences later when a desperate hooker offers the pawnbroker her body along with her jewelry. “Look!” she repeats as she bares her breasts. “Look!” says the Nazi to the same man twenty-five years earlier, pointing to the young female prisoners. As the flash cuts lengthen, we see that one of the women being pointed at is Nazerman’s wife Ruth (Linda Geiser), for the film’s first pastoral shot suddenly reappears with the flashback. When Nazerman refuses to look, a soldier pushes his bald head through the glass, forcing him to see. In this film, one pays a price for vision: images are wounds that will not heal.

The violation Nazerman witnesses leads him, not only to refuse the hooker, but then to declare to his boss that he won’t accept money if it comes from a whorehouse. Rodriguez counters with the challenge, “Where do you think the money you’re living on is coming from?” Nazerman is verbally beaten into submission when the overbearing boss pushes him to accept his demands. The cinematic technique eloquently expresses Nazerman’s fractured state of mind, for flash cuts are once again employed — but within the scene itself. That these men exist in different and unreconcilable worlds is shown by their inability to share the same frame: each taunting “Yes?” of Rodriguez results in a violent cut that assaults our eyes as well as Nazerman’s ears. Moreover, the use of the flash cut, already associated with the Nazis, implies that Rodriguez is but a new incarnation of an old demon.

The film’s predilection for quick cutting over pans or long takes underlines Nazerman’s dissociation from people in general. His inability to touch or even see those around him is then developed in a flashback that begins in a subway car. From Nazerman’s point of view, individuals stare at him blankly, until the crowded train becomes

transformed into a freight car crammed with Jewish bodies on their way to misery and death. Once again, the memory sneaks up on Nazerman and is then unleashed. This residual image blinds Nazerman to the actual people in the subway train, encapsulating him within a world where he could still feel something, even if only pain. Nazerman is increasingly unhinged by these vivid ghosts, to the point that he vainly challenges Rodriguez to kill him. The next best thing is a return to the past through what is essentially the only *willed* flashback in the film. A pawned butterfly collection engenders the slow-motion scene with which “The Pawnbroker” opened, a flowing recollection of an idyllic moment. This tranquility is shattered by the arrival of three German soldiers — just as, in the film’s abrupt return to the present, the day-dream is brutally interrupted by the entrance of three thieves. This parallel foreshadows that Nazerman will once again be forced to observe the murder of someone close to him: in this case, Jesús is accidentally shot while trying to save his employer. Numb and impotent, Nazerman can only open his mouth in a scream. No sound emerges.

The mute scream can be seen as the emblem of the Holocaust survivor, the witness of a horror so devastating that it cannot be told. The silent scream might also be the helpless reaction to continued anti-Semitism, as illustrated by the client who calls him a “money-grubbing kike.” The intercuts of black neighbors staring indifferently from windows heighten the dissociation between Nazerman and a world that remains ignorant of his tale. Earlier in the film, one of the hooligans had asked him where he got the tattoo on his arm, but the pawnbroker could give no answer. How could he ever explain that this number was carved into his flesh to establish that he was no longer a human being but merely a statistic on its way to extermination? Subsequently Jesús asks him if the number means he belongs to a secret society, and if so, what does one have to do to join. “Learn to walk on water,” Nazerman cryptically replies.

Furthermore, Nazerman’s soundless grimace expresses his essential isolation, as if acknowledging that a scream would not reach human ears anyway. “The Pawnbroker” supports this notion by presenting New York City as an urban jungle where people look at one another without seeing. Nazerman is not the only passerby who simply walks past the group of kids beating up a black boy; in the subway car, there is no communication among the passengers; and when he walks through the empty city at dawn, the pawnbroker is dwarfed by large, gray, impersonal structures.

In this dehumanized context, Nazerman's attempt to express his pain ultimately shows his inheritance of a Nazi concept: he wounds himself, rendering flesh a mere object. With his hand slowly descending onto the spike that holds pawn tickets, Nazerman turns his body into a receipt. Religious overtones aside, this excruciating shot conveys how Nazerman's need to feel can be realized only through physical pain. Here, the soundtrack insists on dissociation once more, for instead of a scream, we hear Quincy Jones's jazz score. Nazerman's self-inflicted wound makes concrete one of the film's central themes: survivor guilt. As another survivor points out, he identifies with those who died; when Miss Birchfield asks Nazerman what happened twenty-five years ago, he answers: "I didn't die. Everything I loved was taken away from me and I did not die. There was nothing I could do. Nothing." Nazerman is caught not only between heartless exploiters and oppressed neighbors, but between

the dead and the living, between exterminated Jews and manipulative blacks. As a Holocaust survivor, he carries the memory of his murdered family inside him, a living corpse unable to create a new life. By the end of the film, he is a broken pawn.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Annette Insdorf is an internationally renowned educator, and the author of Francois Truffaut, Indelible Shadows: Film and Holocaust, Philip Kaufman and Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski. She is a Professor in the Graduate Film Program of Columbia University's School of the Arts, as well as Director of Undergraduate Film Studies, and Moderator of the "Reel Pieces" series at Manhattan's 92nd Street Y.