

-Research Article-

On The Limit Of Testimonial: Camp Cinema In The Context Of Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' Concept – Son Of Saul

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Abstract

The camp is one of the invisible but decisive structures of the modern political order. According to Giorgio Agamben, the camp is not a place of exception where law is suspended; it is the primary space of modernity. Those living in this space are bodies deprived of legal identity and political subjectivity, reduced to mere "bare life". This study aims to discuss how the human state of being is represented in camp cinema, based on Agamben's concepts of "bare life" and "homo sacer". László Nemes's Son of Saul (2015) cinematically questions both the possibility of an ethical resistance and the limits of testimony through the desire of Saul, a member of the Sonderkommando serving in the Auschwitz camp, to bury a child he believes to be his own son. In this study, the narrative structure of the film, the use of subjective camera, the limitation of the visual field and the sound-image relationship are examined through the descriptive analysis method; in this way, it is revealed how the figure of "bare life" is constructed on the cinematic plane. As a result of the analysis, it was concluded that the film, rather than directly representing a traumatic reality, conducts an ethical questioning regarding the possibility of witnessing; and conveys the bare life buried in silence to the audience through the conscious elision of visual narration.

Keywords: Camp Cinema, Bare Life, Homo Sacer, Son of Saul, Auschwitz

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-Araştırma Makalesi-

**Tanıklığın Sınırında: Giorgio Agamben'in 'Çıplak Hayat'
Kavramı Bağlamında Kamp Sineması– Son Of Saul**

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Özet

Kamp, modern siyasal düzenin görünmeyen ama belirleyici yapılarından biridir. Giorgio Agamben'e göre kamp, hukukun askıya alındığı istisna alanı değil; modernliğin asli mekânıdır. Bu mekânda yaşayanlar, hukuki kimlikten ve siyasal öznelikten yoksun bırakılmış, yalnızca "çıplak hayat"a indirgenmiş bedenlerdir. Bu çalışma, Agamben'in "çıplak hayat" ve "homo sacer" kavramlarını temel alarak kamp sinemasında insanın varlık hâlinin nasıl temsil edildiğini tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. László Nemes'in Son of Saul (Saul'un Oğlu, László Nemes, 2015) filmi, Auschwitz kampında görev yapan Sonderkommando üyesi Saul'un kendi oğlu olduğuna inandığı bir çocuğu gömmeye arzusu üzerinden hem etik bir direnişin imkânını hem de tanıklığın sınırlarını sinemasal olarak sorgular. Bu çalışmada, betimsel analiz yöntemi aracılığıyla filmin anlatı yapısı, öznel kamera kullanımı, görsel alanın sınırlandırılması ve ses-görüntü ilişkisi incelenmiştir; bu yolla "çıplak hayat" figürünün sinemasal düzlemde nasıl inşa edildiği ortaya konmuştur. Analizler sonucunda, filmin travmatik bir gerçekliği doğrudan temsil etmekten ziyade, tanıklığın imkânına dair etik bir sorgulama yürüttüğü; sessizliğe gömülmüş çıplak yaşamı ise, görsel anlatının bilinçli eksiltimiyle izleyiciye aktardığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kamp Sineması, Çıplak Hayat, Homo Sacer, Son of Saul, Auschwitz

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Introduction

One of the most radical ruptures of the twentieth century was the emergence of spaces where human life was disintegrated not only politically or legally, but also in terms of representation. The “camp,” one of the most striking scenes of this disintegration, is not merely a physical space but also the spatial counterpart of regimes of exception that reduce humans from political subjects to governable bodies. The camp must be redefined as an intermediate zone where the individual is deprived of identity, memory, citizenship, and even visibility; a threshold that modernity both excludes and perpetuates. The issue here is not simply a situation where rights are suspended; it is the existence of conditions under which human unrepresentability becomes a political construct.

This state of unrepresentability also becomes one of the fundamental problems of the aesthetic field. In trauma narratives in particular, we encounter an excess: lived but unspoken, seen but unshown. As Jill Bennett emphasizes, the representation of trauma is not merely a representation of the past, but the aesthetic perception of a wound etched in the body’s memory (Bennett, 2005, p. 35). Representation here is not a reconstruction, but an act of observation. Therefore, instead of aestheticizing witnessing, camp cinema strives to make visible its incompleteness, fragmentation, and fragility. This type of cinema focuses not on the event itself, but on the silences, interruptions, and gaps it leaves.

As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, everything shown expresses something else, something repressed (Minh-ha, 2014, p. 71). In camp cinema, the visual field gains meaning not so much from what it shows as from what it excludes, from the void it carries. This cinema disrupts the affirmative structure of representation, replacing it with an epistemic subtraction. The camera is no longer a tool of seeing; it constitutes a site of non-seeing, subtraction, and erasure. The image is no longer a carrier of information; it is a producer of ethical emptiness. On the other hand, as Rosi Braidotti emphasizes in her understanding of the contemporary subject, in the post-neoliberal world the subject is defined through woundedness, fragmentation and permeability rather than fixed identities (Braidotti, 2013, p. 89).

The cinematic subject of the camp is precisely this state of woundedness: neither hero nor victim; neither completely erased nor fully represented. This subjectivity creates cracks not only within the narrative but also within the structure of film language. The image lacks clarity, the camera is unstable, and time is not linear because the subject is no longer monolithic. This fragile, incomplete, and traumatic subjectivity not only keeps the spectator in the act of watching; it also confronts them with the moral burden of witnessing. This rupture is particularly evident in examples of post-Holocaust cinema, which lack moral certainty or narrative cohesion.

The film no longer narrates what happened; it reveals the impossibility of narrating what happened. Thus, camp cinema is not only a visualization of historical catastrophes, but also a way of thinking about the limits of visualization. As Laura U. Marks suggests in her concept of “haptic visuality,” the point is not to look directly at the image, but to establish a bodily relationship with it; Making one feel something rather than showing it is a more ethical way of representing trauma (Marks, 2000, p. 162). This form of cinema does not satisfy the viewer’s desire to see; on the contrary, by constantly postponing this desire, it forces the viewer from being a passive witness to an ethical witness.

In this context, camp cinema is not merely a tool for depicting political violence or documenting trauma; it is a cinematic practice in which representation, witnessing, and ethical responsibility are intertwined. The question here is not only what can be shown, but also what cannot be shown, what is condemned to silence, and how this silence continues to produce meaning. In this liminal dimension of representation, the camp is no longer a backdrop; it is the subject of the narrative. Within this framework, the study aims to rethink camp cinema not

only as a historical genre, but also as a space where aesthetic, ethical, and political boundaries are questioned.

The camp, one of the invisible yet defining spaces of the modern political order, represents human existence detached from its legal and political context and reduced to a purely biological level when considered alongside Giorgio Agamben's concepts of "bare life" and "homo sacer." This study aims to examine how the figure of bare life is cinematically constructed and how the limits of testimony are represented in this context through the film *Son of Saul* (2015), a part of camp cinema. Employing a descriptive analysis method based on a qualitative research design, the study relates the film's narrative structure, subjective camera use, the delimitation of visual space, and the sound-image relationship to Agamben's political theories, establishing a theoretical connection between cinematic language and political-ethical discourse.

The fundamental assumption of the research is that the individual resistance of Saul, a member of the Sonderkommando in the Auschwitz camp, offers not only physical liberation but also an ethical mode of existence against bare life. In this respect, the film avoids directly representing traumatic reality, constructing a unique aesthetic that invites the viewer to the threshold of witnessing through visual inference and auditory intensity. Findings suggest that the film's aesthetic choices align with Agamben's theories of the "state of exception" and "sovereign power," while the character of Saul attempts to generate ethical meaning against the political absence of the body through silence and visual limitations.

This study's unique contribution to the literature is its expansion of the link between Agamben's political theories and the aesthetic strategies of camp cinema through a reading that questions the boundaries of the concept of "ethical witnessing." The research argues that *Son of Saul* not only positions the viewer in the position of ethical witnessing; it also reveals the fragility, contradictions, and shortcomings of this position. Thus, the study argues that ethical witnessing in camp cinema is not the sole or final answer; on the contrary, in the face of the impossibility of representation, silence, visual subtraction, and narrative void can open up spaces for critical reflection beyond witnessing.

This perspective, in turn, suggests that the study must transform the viewer from a passive recipient to a subject actively questioning the limits, responsibility, and fragility of witnessing. It contributes to the debate about whether ethical witnessing is the best course of action in the face of trauma by demonstrating that the film's strategies of making one feel rather than showing, and subtraction rather than telling, engage the viewer in a continuous process of ethical and political self-critique, offering a possibility that goes beyond witnessing.

The Theoretical Framework of the Concepts of "Bare Life" and "Sacred Man"

Within Giorgio Agamben's intellectual framework, the concepts of "bare life" and "homo sacer" (sacred man) are crucial to understanding the functioning of modern political structures. Drawing on the figure of homo sacer in ancient Roman law, Agamben defines sovereignty as the power to suspend law and create a state of exception. This figure, while excluded from both legal and sacred orders, represents a mode of existence that touches upon both. In other words, he cannot be sacrificed for the sake of society's sacred values, and his murder is not considered a legal or moral crime (Agamben, 2013, pp. 89-90).

In other words, homo sacer is neither a citizen protected by law nor a figure sanctified by religion. In other words, killing is not considered a crime, and sacrifice is forbidden. He possesses neither a legal nor a religious "right." This exceptional position demonstrates that the individual is no longer a political, social, or ethical subject, but rather exists solely at the level of biological life. Homo sacer is thus a figure deprived of rights, legal protection, and citizenship, and his life is reduced to a bare existence that merely sustains bodily functions. In Agamben's words, "...Bare life now permeates the biological body of every living being"

(2013, p. 167). In this context, the sacred human is neither fully guilty nor innocent; he is seen as a living manifestation of the state of exception.

Agamben's analysis is directly related to Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. Foucault argues that the fundamental function of modern power is no longer "deadly" but "vital," meaning that power now functions to produce, regulate, control, and govern life (Foucault, 2003, p. 239). However, Agamben goes beyond this framework to argue that biopolitics not only regulates life but also strips it bare by excluding it from legal, political, and ethical frameworks. What is important here is that Agamben sees biopolitics not only as a practice of governance but also as a practice of "deprivation of legal protection." This is directly related to the ethical gap revealed in the film's analysis.

In this sense, biopolitics becomes the absolute control of modern sovereignty over life. Homo sacer is the central figure of this biopolitical logic. It denotes a being neither legally protected nor politically recognized, but vitally controlled. Moreover, Agamben's concept of homo sacer is closely related to the concepts of stateless and disenfranchised people articulated by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt particularly emphasizes that refugees are denied even "the right to have rights" (Arendt 2014, p. 267).

Developing this idea, Agamben identifies the figure of homo sacer with contemporary refugees, thus further deepening the problem Arendt posed in the context of the loss of political belonging with the concepts of biopolitics and the regime of exception. Agamben finds the concrete counterpart of homo sacer in the contemporary world in refugees, stateless individuals, and individuals with uncertain legal status. These individuals, excluded from the state's legal order yet continuing to live, are neither fully citizens nor completely ignored. They exist only as "bare life."

From this point on, when considered in terms of today's migration regimes and refugee camps, the camp is not only a space of the past, but also corresponds to a situation constantly reproduced by contemporary politics. Therefore, Agamben sees the figure of homo sacer as a tool that reveals the dominance of the modern state over life. In his theory, the distinction between "bare life" and political/social life (bios) is of decisive importance. Homo sacer represents the individual excluded from this distinction, deprived of his status as a political subject. This idea is concretized through the concentration camps, which Agamben defines as the most extreme political space of the modern age. The camp is a space of exception where law is suspended and people exist only as bare life. According to Agamben, the camp, which is not a simple extension or transformation of classical criminal law but a direct product of the state of emergency and martial law regimes (Agamben, 1997, p. 106), is "the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity" (2013, p. 147); because contemporary forms of domination tend increasingly to reduce individuals to the level of purely biological life.

In the camps, physical or political distinctions such as "inside" and "outside" lose their meaning; fundamental concepts of the modern legal system, such as rule and exception, legitimate and illegitimate, individual rights, and legal protection, are suspended. This means that the camp becomes not just a place but a regime of absolute uncertainty, where norms cease to function, legal guarantees disappear, and the camp becomes a realm of absolute uncertainty (Agamben, 1997, p. 110).

This state of uncertainty is reproduced visually and audibly in *Son of Saul* through camera and sound design, thus cinematically concretizing the theoretical framework. In this context, those sentenced to death and those held in the camps are subconsciously transformed into homines sacres, a life that can be killed without committing murder. The temporal interval between the sentence and the execution of the death penalty, like the fences marking the camp's border, draws a threshold outside of time and space. At this threshold, the human body is detached from its normal political status and abandoned in the context of a state of

exception amidst the most horrific catastrophes (Agamben, 2013, p. 190). Therefore, the camp is not merely a space defined by concrete boundaries, but a transitional zone where life is severed from all political and social contexts, reduced to purely biological existence, and thus bare life becomes clearly visible.

Considered in terms of time and space, the camp is a structure that reveals both the historical continuity and spatial dominance of modern power. Temporally, the camp represents not a temporary state in which the law is suspended, but a regime of exception that has become permanent and enduring. A permanent state of exception results in individuals being condemned to uncertainty before the law. In this respect, the camp is not merely a structure belonging to a specific historical period (e.g., the colonial period or the Nazi concentration camps), but a model that explains the temporal logic of contemporary political power. Spatially, it represents a place where sovereignty is strictly exercised over bodies, where a lack of political status is enforced. Here, the body is positioned not as a political subject, but as an object that can be controlled, governed, and, if necessary, destroyed.

At this point, Michel Agier's approach to the concept of the camp is important in demonstrating how this space of exception maintains continuity with contemporary refugee and migration regimes. Agier defines camps not only as temporary areas of protection, but also as spaces where individuals deemed undesirable in the contemporary world are governed and excluded from the political system (Agier, 2011, pp. 4-6).

In this sense, the camp is a permanent temporal order in which political allegiance is suspended, and the body is subject to complete surveillance and intervention. Individuals in the camp do not have full legal status as citizens; they are not completely excluded from the system. They are beings governed without inclusion in political society, deprived of rights and mechanisms of representation. This reduces them to the status of "bare life," defined solely by their biological existence and vulnerable to all forms of intervention. According to him, the camp has become the intersection of both biopolitical and humanitarian forms of governance (Agier, 2011, pp. 12-13). Therefore, the modern camp represents a liminal space where sovereignty is reproduced, a space that continues to exist not only in the past but also in today's political reality.

Within the framework of Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty, the sovereign is not only the person who implements or governs existing laws, but also the power possessing the authority to define exceptional situations where the law is not valid or suspended and to decide how to act in these situations. (Schmitt as cited in Çelebi, 1999, p. 71).

The sovereign ensures the continuity of norms and the sustainability of order by detecting and intervening in abnormal situations. The question of how capable the moments of ethical resistance in the film mentioned in this study are of transcending the absoluteness of the state of exception constitutes one of the original areas of discussion in this study. Therefore, sovereignty is a dynamic form of power not limited to law alone, but possesses the capacity to suspend and restructure rules when necessary. While the sovereign defines the limits of law and declares violations, pushing individuals out of political society, the "bare life" that emerges in this process represents a way of life under the sovereign's absolute control, devoid of rights, and existing only at the level of biological existence. Thus, sovereignty and bare life become the most fundamental and intertwined concepts of modern power relations.

Camp Cinema and the Possibility of Witnessing

Camp cinema is a concept used to describe films that, particularly since the second half of the 20th century, explore narratives set in spaces of political and legal exclusion, such as concentration camps, deportation zones, refugee camps, and deportation centers. These narratives encompass not only historical camps but also contemporary refugee camps,

immigration detention centers, and border policies. Therefore, these films aim to cinematically represent individuals deprived of their political and legal status while simultaneously offering a critical framework for exclusion regimes in the contemporary world. The physical and psychological conditions of contemporary refugee camps have begun to be more visibly explored in contemporary examples of camp cinema. These films convey not only individual tragedy but also public and political dimensions to the audience.

In this context, it is possible to establish a meaningful theoretical and aesthetic relationship between camp cinema and migration cinema. As a sociological issue, migration cinema is often shaped around themes such as cultural identity, belonging, diaspora experience, and multiple identities. In such narratives, the individual is still represented as a political subject; Identity construction is addressed through processes such as adaptation or alienation. In this respect, migration cinema is closer to the classical narrative structure; individual transformation, dramatic structure, and the question of belonging are at the forefront (Naficy, 2001, pp. 4–6). Shaped by phenomena such as refugee status, cross-border mobility, forced migration, and anonymity, these films focus on the uncertainty and homelessness experienced by individuals at the transnational level. Camp cinema, on the other hand, examines the encounters of individuals displaced or forced into political statuslessness with structures of domination. These individuals are represented not only as victim figures but also as a new political subject shaped within the camp's boundaries. What is crucial here is to understand how individual dramatic structure intertwines with political themes. For example, a character's search for identity evolves from a dramatic structure to a political narrative when it encounters the bureaucratic and physical boundaries of the camp. Therefore, camp cinema, like migration cinema, transforms into narrative forms that fundamentally question identity, belonging, and place.

Camp cinema emerged as a film genre focusing on the concentration camps that emerged after World War II and the tragic human experiences within them. Historically, this genre began with narratives about the Holocaust camps of Nazi Germany and has expanded over time to encompass processes of exile, refugee status, and deportation in diverse regions. The historical development of camp cinema has varied, from early documentaries to dramatic productions focusing on the Holocaust to films about refugee camps in diverse regions such as Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

This diversity demonstrates camp cinema's capacity to reflect not only past tragedies but also contemporary political crises and human rights issues. Thus, camp cinema bridged historical reality and contemporary political contexts, strengthening cinema's function as a site of memory, testimony, and resistance. In this context, camp cinema functions not only as a historical narrative but also as a visual representation of spaces where political powers embody mechanisms of oppression, exclusion, and control. From a political perspective, camp cinema has historically been a significant tool used to make visible the systematic violence, human rights violations, and state terrorism perpetrated by totalitarian regimes.

The historical and aesthetic formation of camp cinema has been largely shaped by the cinematic representation of Holocaust narratives. Claude Lanzmann's nine-and-a-half-hour documentary *Shoah* (1985), in particular, represents a turning point for Holocaust cinema. Lanzmann eschews archival footage, focusing instead on the narratives of witnesses, perpetrators, and local people. This emphasizes the construction of memory and the ethical responsibility of witnessing rather than simply repeating the past (Lanzmann, 1985). Lanzmann argued that the events at Auschwitz and other concentration camps were too extreme to be grasped by human and moral standards and therefore too extreme to be visually represented.

In other words, direct depictions of the Holocaust—for example, cinematic recreations of gas chambers or death scenes—trivialize and trivialize this horror and lead to ethical abuse. Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), by presenting the Holocaust in a dramatic, hero-

centric narrative, succeeded in reaching a wider audience. However, this narrative style has been criticized by Dominick LaCapra, who labeled it “cinema of catharsis.” The tension between ethics and dramatic representation defines the essence of camp cinema. While viewers may develop an emotional connection to dramatic scenes, an approach based on direct testimony, like Lanzmann’s, fosters a stronger sense of ethical responsibility.

According to LaCapra (2001), the danger of such dramatic structures is that they render historical trauma easily consumable on an aesthetic level, leading to its loss of ethical and political meaning. In this context, cinema’s role should be to address the traumatic nature of the Holocaust through aesthetic distance, rather than dramatizing it or transforming it into a narrative. Cinema must bear both ethical responsibility in representing trauma and avoid concealing the extremity of the event with “orderly” aesthetic forms. Therefore, Adorno’s opposition to aesthetic representation holds a significant place in literature. For him, writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.

Adorno argues that art, and particularly aesthetic forms, are inadequate, even inappropriate, in the face of a disaster like the Holocaust. His critique is that art’s reliance on formal elements such as beauty, order, and narrative unity leads to the loss of the essence of reality in its attempt to represent an extreme event like the Holocaust (Adorno, 2003). In other words, aesthetics, by its very nature, shapes the events it represents, gives them meaning, and makes them “watchable.” However, an event like the Holocaust, where meaning collapses and representation fragments, does not fit within such aesthetic frameworks. According to Adorno, the aesthetic representation of such an event carries a direct risk of ethical corruption.

Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “post-memory” is also related to the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust narratives in cinema. According to Hirsch (2013), generations that have not directly experienced the traumatic past reconstruct this memory through visual and narrative representations. Holocaust cinema, in particular, becomes the bearer of this post-memory. Therefore, camp cinema is shaped not only as a historical narrative but also as an aesthetic-political space where the boundaries of collective memory, ethical witness, and representation are questioned.

When considering theoretical discussions regarding the cinematic representation of the Holocaust and similar traumas, Cathy Caruth’s views hold a decisive place. According to Caruth, trauma emerges not through an event directly experienced by the individual, but through the indirect impact of this event on consciousness over time. Traumatic experience makes itself felt not at the moment of the event, but by recurring at an unexpected moment. This delayed manifestation makes it difficult to grasp trauma linguistically and cognitively (Caruth, 1996, p. 11).

However, Caruth sees the impossibility of representation not as a dead end, but as a field of ethical possibility. He argues that a new form of listening and witnessing can emerge through the traces, gaps, and repetitions left by trauma (Caruth, as cited in Yıldız, 2015, p. 104). This approach focuses on the narrative’s interruptions rather than its integrity; it requires focusing on the unsaid rather than the expressed, the forgotten rather than the remembered. According to Caruth, the essence of traumatic narrative consists of omissions and interruptions. This makes witnessing an ethical responsibility based not only on “telling,” but also on “hearing” and “noticing the unheard.”

Common conclusions that can be drawn from different approaches to the representation of camp cinema are as follows:

- Art, cinema, and especially aesthetic representations, are inadequate in the face of the processing of trauma.
- The representation of trauma in cinema is nothing less than a moral violation.

- The Holocaust is not unrepresentable. However, this representation process should not be aimed at dramatizing the trauma, but at tracing its traces and transforming and understanding it.

- Such productions, instead of triggering a sense of ethical responsibility in the audience, tend towards emotional gratification (catharsis), thus obscuring the place of the Holocaust in cultural memory.

- They provide the audience with a facile and fleeting empathy rather than an ethical confrontation.

- Approaches such as non-directly shown sound, background, blur, and spatial restrictions do not go beyond evoking sensation.

Theoretical discussions regarding the representation of the Holocaust or the camp in cinema center around the question not only of what to show, but also how and within what boundaries. These discussions require rethinking the visual nature of cinema with an ethical responsibility. Representation here emerges not as a mere reconstruction effort, but as a way of thinking woven with silence, absence, and gaps. Where narrative cannot be established, cinema's role is to evoke sensation, to suggest, and to develop aesthetic strategies that shift the viewer from passive witness to responsible witness. In this respect, Holocaust cinema is not merely a reflection of a historical event; it is also a field of cinematic inquiry operating at the boundaries of representation, memory, and ethics.

Method of the Study

This study aims to analyze the narrative structure and aesthetic formation of Giorgio Agamben's film *Son of Saul* (László Nemes, 2015), which falls within the scope of camp cinema, by focusing on the concepts of "bare life" and "homo sacer." A descriptive analysis method was employed in the study, based on a qualitative research design. Descriptive analysis enables the systematic examination and analysis of the film text within a predetermined thematic framework (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018, p. 240).

In this context, the film was evaluated in light of Agamben's concepts of "state of exception," "bare life," and "camp." The transformation of the political subject and the lack of legal/political status were interpreted through cinematic elements. The analysis particularly highlighted the film's formal elements such as its narrative structure, subjective camera use, the delimitation of visual space, and the relationship between sound and image. The relevance of these elements to Agamben's theoretical framework is demonstrated. The film's formal choices are evaluated not only as an aesthetic narrative but also as an expression of an ethical and political stance. The strategies of subtraction employed in the visual narrative are linked to the character's erasure as a political subject and his reduction to the status of bare life. Consequently, the analysis establishes a connection between cinematic narrative forms and Agamben's theory of biopolitics and sovereignty, and the positioning of *Son of Saul* within the context of camp cinema is explored.

Theme of the Movie

Son of Saul tells the story of two days spent by Saul Ausländer, a Hungarian Jew who served as a Sonderkommando at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in 1944. The Sonderkommando were special units isolated from other inmates, tasked with transporting the bodies of those killed in the gas chambers by the Nazi regime to the ovens and cleaning the dead bodies. During the cleaning of a gas chamber, Saul believes that one of the dead children is his own son. With this incident, Saul, now forced to endure the camp's routine, changes his purpose. Instead of sending the child's body to the oven, he searches for a rabbi within

the camp, taking great risks to bury him according to religious traditions. He tries to hide the body and engages in a personal resistance against the camp's strict order. His search is not only physical but over time turns into a moral, spiritual and existential journey. Saul's goal is to create meaning in an environment of horror, to demonstrate human dignity in the face of death. Throughout the film, the audience follows the events from Saul's perspective and through frames very close to him; Thus, both physical limitation and psychological intensity are felt. Rather than attempting to directly show the unrepresentable, the film aims to immerse the viewer in a traumatic experience through silence, limited field of view, and subjective camerawork.

Analysis and Discussion

Visual Removal and Traumatic Representation

In films like *Schindler's List* (1993) and *The Pianist* (2002), narratives that dramatize events, focus on characters, and use wide angles to describe camp life in detail offer the audience the opportunity for emotional witnessing and aim to show the events directly. *Son of Saul* presents a conscious departure from classical narrative practices regarding the visual representation of the Holocaust.

Director László Nemes, instead of directly depicting the horror, pushes it off-screen. With this choice, the film approaches the representational strategy defined by Georges Didi-Huberman as the aesthetics of implicitly pointing to the void, speaking through silence, in the face of the impossibility of seeing (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 22). In this context, visual subtraction prevents the aestheticization of trauma and transforms the audience from a passive witness to an active witness. In the scene in which Saul is employed, the camera focuses on his neck. The gas chamber is not entered. As the doors close, shouts and screams are heard coming from inside. Visual subtraction denies the viewer any spatial context. The horror itself is attempted to be imagined solely through the sounds heard.

Saul's neck and shoulders consistently occupy a large portion of the frame, while violence and death remain blurred and out of focus in the background. These visual choices align with Agamben's notion that Auschwitz is situated "at the edge of witnessing." For Agamben, what happened at Auschwitz is an extreme experience that cannot be witnessed, and the true witnesses are those who died—those who cannot speak (Agamben, 1999, p. 34). Consequently, the film never offers the audience a complete representation; on the contrary, it forces them to share the ethical burden of witnessing through subtraction.



Visual 1: Visual Reduction Focusing on Saul's Neck and Shoulders (*Son of Saul*, László Nemes, 2015)

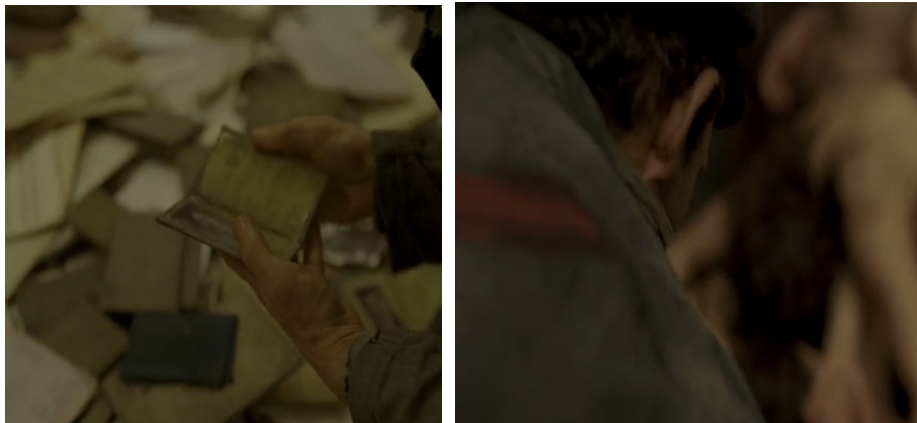
Subjective Camera and the Aesthetics of Witnessing

The subjective camera technique used throughout the film adds not only physical intimacy to the narrative, but also cognitive and emotional intimacy. For almost the entire film, the viewer views the camp from Saul's eye level, often even from his. As Saul carries a body through the camp, the camera moves from shoulder height. The camera is constantly locked on the character. Wide angles rarely reveal environmental details. Saul's walking direction and speed are synchronized with the camera's movement. The image is blurry, and the focus never shifts to anything other than Saul's face or back. This format draws the viewer to the limits of witnessing, experiencing not "seeing" but "not seeing." This narrow perspective replaces the claim of omniscience/showing in classical cinema with a practice of seeing based on limited knowledge and fragmented perception. This visual strategy emphasizes that witnessing is not merely an act of observation from the outside, but also an ethical and existential obligation. Here, the camera is not a tool of surveillance, but an ethical positioning at the edge of witnessing. The subjective camerawork and blurred visual field allow the viewer to experience Saul's bare life, thus offering a concrete cinematic equivalent of the state of exception.



Visual 2: The Practice of Fragmented, Limited, and Blurred Vision in Focus on Saul's Face
(Son of Saul, László Nemes, 2015)

On the other hand, as conceptualized by Agamben, those who enter the gas chambers en masse, undress, and wait to shower are completely stripped of their citizenship status, social affiliation, and legal recognition. They no longer exist as "subjects," but merely as bare life. Each individual is stripped of their identity, name, story, and past, reduced to a mere marked body. In the camp, each individual is often identified by a number; names are erased, faces become uncanny, and personal narratives are suppressed. The fact that the massacred and massacred are stripped of all their identities and forced into symbolic and political nonexistence means that they are governed as beings possessing only biological functions.



Visual 3: Bodies That Failed to Become Subjects in Auschwitz (Son of Saul, László Nemes, 2015)

In one scene in the film, Saul's statement, "We're already dead," expresses a rupture with the Sonderkommando's attempts to cling to life and their survival strategies, a kind of existential surrender. Despite others' retorts like, "We're all going to die because of you," Saul's words imply that even biological survival has lost its meaning in the camp's reality. It's no longer simply breathing, it's living; it suggests that existing without identity, value, and meaning is already a form of death. For Saul, death isn't merely a physical end; it's the bare life itself, imposed by the system itself.

The Politics of Sound: Invisible Violence

In *Son of Saul*, sound plays a crucial role not only as a technical element but also as a representation of violence, a trigger for memory, and a carrier of meaning. Sounds like the slap of shovels on concrete during the cleanup, the scraping of brushes, the roar of incinerators, and the creaking of gas chamber doors serve as audio recordings of the systematic destruction of human bodies in this mechanized space of death. These sounds, on the one hand, make visually censored horror audible; on the other, they reveal how violence became a natural and automatic order in the camp's functioning. Similarly, the Nazi officers' incessant shouts of orders—"Quick!", "Clean!", "Faster"—function not only as a physical pressure but also as a linguistic erasure of the subject.

While the film's images are often blurred, sound fills this gap, confronting the viewer directly with the camp's horror. The foregrounding of sound or the retreating of imagery guides the viewer from direct visualization to an ethical awareness; This demonstrates that homo sacer is not merely a legal or political concept, but can also be considered with its ethical and experiential dimensions. For example, in the gas chamber cleaning scene, the camera doesn't show the interior. Saul and other Sonderkommando members are carrying and cleaning the corpses. However, the true meaning of the scene lies in the sounds; the creaking of doors, the sounds of ovens, orders coming from outside, gunshots, and human screams are all carriers of unseen violence. All these sounds constantly remind the audience that they are in a realm of horror. Similarly, Saul's speech in the film is extremely limited. This silence symbolizes his erasure as a political subject, remaining only a living body.

At this point, Walter Benjamin's approach to historical experience and remembrance is crucial for understanding the film's sonic strategy. For Benjamin, history is not a narrative of uninterrupted progress; it is filled with fragments that establish an explosive bond between the present and the past. For him, the echo of the past can only regain meaning within the experience of the present (Benjamin, 2007: p. 263). The sounds heard in *Son of Saul* become a form of this echoing remembrance that Benjamin describes; in the absence of image, sound functions not only as atmosphere but also as a residual memory trauma. Thus, the film constructs historical testimony through a practice of memory that is not only visual but also auditory.

Subject of Ethical Resistance: Saul

Son of Saul offers no heroic narrative. Saul's action is neither a social revolution nor an escape plan. Rather, it is a quiet but profound ethical resistance. Saul's daily existence within the camp is shaped by the experience of "bare life," a time when violence becomes commonplace and death becomes a daily routine. However, a rupture at the film's center introduces an ethical dimension that resists this ordinariness: Saul decides to bury the body of a child he finds in the gas chamber, believing it to be his own son, with a traditional Jewish burial ceremony. This decision is neither rational nor strategic; on the contrary, it diminishes his chances of survival and may seem "meaningless" to outsiders. While some in the camp secretly try to document the horror, others organize underground and dream of an uprising against the Nazi order. Saul, however, seeks neither documentation nor revenge. He simply chooses to embrace an anonymous dead body. He portrays himself as the subject of ethical resistance, seeking to give meaning and dignity to a body ignored by the entire system.

Saul's desire to bury a child unrecognized by the camp's administrative logic with a religious ceremony can be interpreted as a silent yet profound act of rebellion. This act is a small but effective ethical gesture against the system's efforts to reduce humans to mere objects. Emmanuel Levinas's ethical thought provides a powerful theoretical basis for this. For Levinas, ethics arises from encountering the face of the other, because "the face makes me responsible" (Levinas, 1991). Ignoring, excluding, or assimilating the other within dominant norms produces consequences that resonate not only at the individual level but also in the social, political, and cultural spheres. In this context, Levinas positions an ethical relationship that makes killing the other impossible, in opposition to the understanding of the political subject that legitimizes killing the "other" (Türk, 2013, p. 43).



Visual 4: The Moments in which Saul Encounters the Other, Where He Experiences a Breaking Feeling in the Face of the Banality of Death (Son of Saul, László Nemes, 2015)

Eliminating the existence of the other does not only mean ending their life; it also means destroying the ethical foundations of the self (Küçük, 2023, p. 14). Saul's sensitivity to the dead child is the moment when this ethical responsibility becomes concrete; this imposition of meaning on the child's face treats him not merely as a corpse but as a human being who deserves recognition. In this context, Agamben's statement, "ethics begins where the sovereign creates the exception" (Agamben, 2013, p. 27), makes Saul's action even more meaningful. Saul's ethical intervention opens up a space of meaning and dignity against the bare state of life in a space where the state of exception prevails. The film does not leave this opposition solely at the level of witnessing. It involves the audience beyond witnessing and in a shared ethical responsibility. The narrative is not content with merely presenting us with what is visible; it also asks us to recognize the limits of visual representation and to recognize this deficiency. Silence, subtracted visuals, and Saul's introspective journey point to the construction of an ethical memory beyond mere witnessing.

A key point in the film is that Saul's inner resistance brings about a distinct transformation not only at the narrative level but also in the film's visual aesthetic. Lifeless bodies, colors, characters, and nature, initially framed as blurred, out-of-focus, and blurred, become increasingly more prominent as the narrative progresses. Furthermore, the use of a narrow, out-of-focus frame, which limits any voyeuristic gaze the audience directs at the genocide from the beginning, evolves alongside Saul's awareness and awareness of resistance. This visual clarification is not merely a technical choice but a cinematic reflection of the mental and emotional transformation Saul experiences. Saul is no longer a passive body in the face of the camp's horror, but rather a bearer of ethical awareness. The changing aesthetics of the frame reveal both his inner awakening and his effort to transcend the bare life. As Gilles Deleuze puts it in the context of the movement-image and time-image distinctions, cinema not only represents events but also produces thought through images (Deleuze, 2014, p. 95). In this respect, Saul's relationship with the camera is a way of making his intellectual and ethical transformation visible through images.



Visual 5: The Lifting of the Mists and the Awakening Spirit (Son of Saul, László Nemes, 2015)

Saul's seemingly irrational actions—risking his escape plans for the sake of burying a child who is undoubtedly dead, and disregarding the reactions of the other prisoners—actually represent a refusal to surrender to the genocidal order imposed upon him. In this respect, Saul's action, while not aiming for physical salvation, is a form of moral and spiritual liberation. The film's final scene holds special significance in this context. The scene in which Saul smiles for a moment and sees a boy peering from the bushes can be interpreted symbolically. This child could be interpreted as a reflection of the child he carried as a dead body and tried to bury, but it also represents a manifestation of Saul's faith in humanity, hope, and ethical responsibility despite all the losses. This image suggests that even within the camp's bare regime of life, meaning, resistance, and the humanity evident in the face of the other cannot be completely eradicated. The faint smile on Saul's face is a sign of spiritual completion, of his ability to maintain his own existence as a human being. In this sense, the film tells of a silent but powerful resistance that makes possible an ethical existence beyond physical death.



Visual 6: The Gaze of Ethical Resistance (Son of Saul, László Nemes, 2015)

Conclusion

This study, in the context of Son Of Saul, has demonstrated that camp cinema is not merely a historical narrative genre but also a multilayered cinematic form shaped by ethical responsibility, the politics of visibility, and the question of testimony. It also goes beyond the simple application of Agamben's concepts of "bare life" and camp within a cinematic context. Son Of Saul tests and complicates the representational boundaries of bare life through aesthetic strategies: Choices such as the subjective camera, visual withdrawal, and sonic primacy connect the abstractions of Agamben's theory with experiential and ethical dimensions. Thus, the film demonstrates that bare life is not merely a legal or biological reduction but also involves the

limits of testimony and ethical responsibility. This approach both expands Agamben's concept and allows for a critical rethinking.

In this study, Agamben's concepts of "bare life" and camp provide a powerful framework for the film's political and aesthetic analysis. However, the limitations of this approach are also open to discussion. For example, some researchers find Agamben's concept of camp overly generalizing, arguing that including all forms of spatial exclusion within this category weakens historical and political specificity.

Similarly, while the film's visual subtraction and subjective camera strategies are valuable in terms of ethical witnessing, there are criticisms that they may create distance and make it difficult for some viewers to emotionally connect with the traumatic event. Furthermore, viewers' cultural backgrounds, historical knowledge, and personal experiences can significantly alter how the target of ethical witnessing is perceived. This suggests that a film may not evoke the same ethical awareness in all viewers. Therefore, the assumption that ethical witnessing has a universal impact is empirically questionable.

The analysis, conducted within the framework of the representational possibilities and limits of cinematic art, demonstrates the potential for cinematic narrative to develop new formal tools when traumatic experiences cannot be expressed through classical narrative structures. However, such representational strategies also have inherent limitations and potential criticisms: For example, some viewers may not feel the ethical awareness created by visual distance, or the film's formal perfection may, despite intentions, engender an aestheticist reading. Acknowledging such opposing views deepens, rather than weakens, the argument and more clearly reveals the film's ethical boundaries.

Through aesthetic choices such as subjective camera use, blurred visual space, the decisive role of sound, and visual inference, *Son of Saul* constructs a practice of seeing that removes the viewer from a passive position and demands participatory and ethical responsibility. The camp setting in the film is constructed not only as a historical context but also as a political and existential void. The characters' disidentification, the abstraction of space, and the collapse of time create in the viewer not only empathy but also a sense of ontological discomfort. Saul's individual quest is less about physical salvation and more about the construction of meaning and the production of value in silence. In this context, the film questions not only the possibility of witnessing, but rather representation itself; it asks under what conditions responsible witnessing can be established. The film's deliberate dissonance between sound and image allows the viewer to "feel" the campsite rather than "see." The withdrawal of image and the foregrounding of sound create a cinematic language that establishes moral boundaries surrounding the representation of trauma.

Here, the withdrawal of the visual is not only a strategy that prevents aestheticization but also a conscious choice that centers ethics. However, this choice carries inherent risks: Visual distance can lead to apathy or abstraction rather than ethical awareness in some viewers. Acknowledging these potential limitations reveals both the strength and fragility of the film's ethics of witnessing. In other words, such strategies employed in the film may not have the same ethical impact on all viewers. The film's possibility of aestheticizing trauma in a different manner, or the perceptual differences among viewers, reveals the limits and fragility of ethical witnessing. This allows us to consider potential opposing arguments and evaluate the film's ethical goals within a more realistic framework.

The study also demonstrated that camp cinema not only documents historical catastrophes but also critically renders contemporary biopolitical mechanisms visible. The idea that the camp has acquired continuity as a regime governing lives devoid of legal and political status is not limited to Auschwitz in the past. Today's refugee camps, migrant borders, and spaces of authoritarian control are contemporary manifestations of this "bare life" regime. *Son of*

Saul implies this continuity rather than directly depicts it; it allows the viewer to experience the silence of trauma, allowing associations to form in their own minds. The film's failure to directly represent trauma—that is, to offer “no representation”—can be interpreted as an ethical stance compared to partial representations, which can be linked to Agamben's concept of “unrepresented pain,” as partial representations can create a misleading testimony in the viewer by conveying the experience of trauma in a limited or selective way. Conversely, if the film's formal perfection generates an aesthetic impact regardless of its intentions, a tension emerges between ethical responsibility and aesthetic impact. Ultimately, this analysis positions camp cinema not merely as a narrative form but as a cinematic way of reflecting on the unrepresentable. While questioning the possibility of representation, it also places the ethical dimension of witnessing at the center of cinema. This approach complicates this framework beyond simply implementing Agamben's conceptualization of “bare life”: the film both confirms this concept and presents formal choices that test it.

The originality of this study lies in its examination of camp cinema not only in the context of representing historical events but also as a practice of ethical reflection through visual inference, subjective vision, and sonic aesthetics. While literature frequently utilizes linear narrative structures and dramatic fictions in the cinematic representation of traumatic events, this study offers an alternative analysis by focusing on how unrepresentable trauma can be evoked through cinematic silence, blur, and visual exclusion. However, it also acknowledges that the risk of aestheticizing trauma is not entirely eliminated; that formal perfection, despite intentions, can foster the possibility of an aestheticist reading.

Discussing concepts such as camp, trauma, and testimony not only at the content level but also within the formal structure of the narrative adds theoretical depth to studies in this field. Future studies based on this approach could explore the ways visual narrative assumes or fails to assume ethical responsibility from a broader perspective through comparative examinations of different examples of camp cinema. Furthermore, similar analyses of contemporary refugee representations, digital forms of testimony, and visual materials related to border policies would more comprehensively reveal the continuity and transformation of the camp phenomenon.

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The author of the article declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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