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A Body Without a Face: The Disorientation of Trauma in *Phoenix* (2014) and New Holocaust Cinema

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Abstract:

This article analyses Christian Petzold's exemplary 2014 film *Phoenix*, tracking a new development in Holocaust cinema that focuses on phenomenological narratives of embodied experience of trauma. It examines the film through the cinematic representation of the traumatised body. While there is no dearth of scholarly inquiries into the relationship of trauma and the body and how it is mediated through film, these are often more concerned with the way in which the body becomes a projection screen for repressed or collective trauma and less about the lived conditions of individual trauma. The present analysis offers a rethinking of the traumatised body as one beset by the condition of disorientation. As a methodological guide, it turns to Sara Ahmed's pivotal phenomenological study *Queer Phenomenology* (2006).

Keywords: Petzold; Ahmed; Trauma; Queer Phenomenology; Holocaust Cinema; Disorientation

What do we do, if disorientation itself becomes worldly or becomes what is given?

– Sara Ahmed (2006, p. 159)

What can this body still do? In a traditional sense, the traumatised body is one wrought by physical damage as the result of violence – an accident, war, torture, physical abuse. Trauma etymologically takes its roots in the

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Greek word τραῦμα, meaning bodily wound. An exogenous trauma, this original notion of trauma was one of external factors. At the time when Sigmund Freud was writing about trauma, most prominently in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/2003), he maintained a clear distinction (as he often did) between two categories of trauma: physical (or exogenous) trauma and psychic (or endogenous) trauma (see, e.g. Hirsh, 2004, p. 8). Although Freud privileged the latter in his work, an entire post-Freudian discourse on trauma studies exemplifies the urgency to think beyond this uneven binary. Trauma has not only been re-diagnosed as a potentially collective and historically conditioned experience as paradigmatically explored by Cathy Caruth (1996), but furthermore the division of the effects of trauma between body and psyche have even more recently been ceremoniously shed by phenomenologists and affect theorists alike. A body is not simply the projection screen upon which psychic trauma may be displaced; it is also physically and phenomenologically altered and debilitated by trauma. But even within phenomenology, thinking about the traumatised body literally forces one in radical new directions. It necessitates an epistemological abandonment of the habit body asserted by Edmund Husserl (1964), Martin Heidegger (1962), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) and turns instead toward different types of bodies and positionings that may be the result of unfamiliar experience and alteration. In an exploration of the traumatised body and its profound ontology, I propose two moves: first, a consideration of queer phenomenology and the pioneering work of Sara Ahmed (2006),¹ and second, an analysis of the 2014 film *Phoenix*, by German filmmaker Christian Petzold, about a Jewish concentration camp survivor who must “re-learn” or “learn anew” how to orient herself in the world.

The Body and New Holocaust Cinema

Indeed, what can this body still do? This is a question inspired by Baruch Spinoza and a turn to the body in his philosophical treatise

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1. It may be noted that Merleau-Ponty also begins to think about the role of orientation for phenomenology, especially in his chapter on Space in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2007, pp. 283–347). However, he does not extend this thinking to disorientation and reorientation. For Merleau-Ponty the question of why being is oriented is explained by the condition of the habit body, of what is incorporated into the body. Ahmed (2006) writes: “Habits, in other words, do not just involve the repetition of ‘tending towards,’ but also involve the incorporation of that which is ‘tended toward’ into the body... Reachability is hence an effect of the habitual, in the sense that what is reachable depends on what bodies ‘take in’ as objects that extend their bodily motility, becoming like a second skin” (p. 131).

Ethics (1966): “For what the body can do no one has hitherto determined, that is to say, experience has taught no one hitherto what the body, without being determined by the mind, can do and what it cannot do from the laws of Nature alone, in so far as nature is considered merely as corporeal” (p. 133). As one of the first philosophers to express interest in the body as an ontological entity, Spinoza opens up this inquiry about the body. In her study of contemporary Arab cinema, Laura U. Marks (2005) similarly begins with this Spinozan line of thought: “We do not know what a body can do” (p. 118). My own rephrasing of this statement into a question and the addition of the conjunctive “still” operate through a logic of afterness (not to be mistaken with the belated sense of “afterwardsness” [*Nachträglichkeit*]). While the body may continue to present a “conceptual blind spot” in western philosophy, as Elizabeth Grosz (1994) has provocatively stated (p. 3), much ground has been covered since Spinoza’s erstwhile inquiries. Yet this logic of afterness is not simply about the long and complex genealogy of the body in philosophy – an axiomatic “and what now?” – but also a literal query directly concerned with the damaged body, the traumatised body. What is the traumatised body still capable of?

There is a capacious archive of literary and cinematic mediations of the traumatised body, which could easily supply any number of objects for this study. I propose a turn to contemporary Holocaust cinema whose investment in narratives of trauma cannot be underscored enough.² As E. Ann Kaplan (2006) has critically indicated, trauma studies developed in the context of Holocaust studies (p. 1). A panoply of Holocaust films has emerged since the turn of the new millennium and an almost equal number of monographs to track them (see, e.g. Kerner, 2011; Kobrynsky & Bayer, 2015; Picart, 2004; Saxton, 2008). Oleksandr Kobrynsky and Gerd Bayer (2015) suggest that this recent proliferation is in broad part an attempt to account for a diverse and transnational range of perspectives and traditions, whose memory work must be given a voice (p. 1). I further

2. Scholars of Holocaust cinema struggle with this terminology. First, it is because it operates on the assumption that the Holocaust can even be artistically mediated and represented. Writing against Theodor W. Adorno’s thesis, in his famous article “Holocaust *Laughter?*” (1984), Terrence Des Pres discusses the limitations of the received ethical parameters of Holocaust representation that dictates that the Holocaust must be represented truthfully and without artistic intervention. Even today, this is a dictum that weighs heavily on filmmakers, writers, and scholars who work on the Holocaust. Second, the use of the word “Holocaust” as a panoptic term, whose original meaning is “a burnt offering,” about the genocide of the European Jews during the Second World War is not unproblematic (Kerner, 2011, pp. 2–3). For further reading also see Santner, 1993; Hirsch, 2004; Lowenstein, 2005; Kaplan, 2006.

suggest that the significant number of Holocaust films hailing from Europe has been part of an important cultural response to and form of resistance against the renewed rise in anti-Semitic sentiments and acts that currently plague the continent, especially in countries such as France, Greece, and Hungary.³ In their introduction to the edited volume *Holocaust Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (2015), Kobrynsky and Bayer offer a useful taxonomy of the attributes of new Holocaust cinema. They propose that these more recent films often cover new historical ground; they are more self-referential in terms of how they use cinema as a potential medium of representation; and, finally, these films tend to break with stereotypes about the passive Jew (pp. 3–5). Despite this rich and ever-growing field of inquiry, however, there seems to be an overall dearth of writing on the “embodied” traumatised body and its mediated forms in Holocaust cinema. As this is an expanding area of discourse in postcolonial cinema and cinema of the Global South (sometimes referred to as [Third] World Cinema), for as Laura U. Marks (2015) has succinctly put it, “some people in the world have never been able to forget [that they have bodies]” (p. 121; see also Kaplan & Wang, 2004; Marks, 2000; Marks, 2015; Quinlivan, 2015), it surprises that the traumatised body has not been more extensively taken up in studies on Holocaust cinema.

By no means a survey of contemporary Holocaust cinema, the following instead invites a possible rapprochement between Holocaust cinema and phenomenological inquiry through a localised example of the traumatised body and its cinematic representation. *Phoenix* is one of the latest films by Germany’s Berlin School director Christian Petzold. Loosely based on French author Hubert Monteilhet’s 1961 novel *Le Retour des Cendres* (*The Return of the Ashes*), the film is about a Jewish concentration camp survivor, Nelly Lenz (Nina Hoss), whose face has been shattered and disfigured after suffering a bullet wound to the head. For nearly the first quarter of the film Nelly is confined in a head cast. Even after her

3. In late 2013 the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights published the results of a study exploring the experience of Jewish people living in the European Union. In the key findings, it is noted that 66% of respondents claimed that anti-Semitism is a “major problem” in their country and 76% stated that the problem of anti-Semitism has increased in the last five years. See detailed results of this study on the webpage for the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, <http://fra.europa.eu/en/press-release/2013/combating-antisemitism-more-targeted-measures-needed>.

On a similar note, in a recent public discussion with German journalist Carolin Emcke at the Schaubühne in Berlin, “Streitraum: Antisemitism in Europa,” on April 3, 2016, the Jewish-Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller proposed that László Nemes’s *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, 2015) has been an important response to the continuing (and increasing) anti-Semitism in Hungary.

mask is finally shed, the encounter with an altogether unfamiliar face flings Nelly further into a state of self-alienation. Her fate displays both a literal and figurative mode of displacement and disorientation from the habit body that affects the ways she sees, moves, speaks, and interacts with people and objects. The film attends to how her traumatised body – struck by hate and physical violence – becomes reshaped as she reorients herself in the world. *Phoenix*'s cinematic contribution is singular but also similar to the cadre of Holocaust films that have been released and have also gained international acclaim in just the last few years with respect to their preoccupation of physical searching for a truth that is itself embodied. Certainly Paweł Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2013), Christian Petzold's *Phoenix* (2014), László Nemes's *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, 2015), and Atom Egoyan's *Remember* (2015) are all occupied with exceedingly disparate types of bodies. Yet the fundamental vector that seems to traverse these films, and that distinguishes them from earlier Holocaust films, most famously Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), and Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (*La vita è bella*, 1997), is their phenomenological corporeality. The body is not only a trope of memory and trauma in these later films, but also a phenomenological being that experiences the world in unique ways. In this regard, I propose that *Phoenix* offers an example (without being formulaic) that may provide a new point of entry to Holocaust cinema and its relationship to and representation of the traumatised body.

Behavioral scientists often locate the traumatised body at an ontological crossroads where the Cartesian mind-body split and the embodied mind face a re-challenge (see, e.g. Goodwin & Attias, 1990). There is at once a desire to objectify the body as a means of dealing with intense pain and the aporetic inability to do so. Elaine Scarry (1985) famously explains that “it is intense pain that destroys a person's self and world... Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates” (p. 35). But other scholars, among them especially black studies scholars, would urge against complete dismissal of all subjectivity of the body in pain and instead underscore the potential of bodily pain as a possible site of performance and even resistance, where new directions open up (Brooks, 2006; Hartman, 1997; Moten, 2003; Weheliye, 2014). This brings me to Ahmed's insightful study, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006). In her book, Ahmed does not directly address the traumatised body; however, she offers alternative ways of approaching embodiment that may begin to account for bodies that have been altered by violence or physical limitation. While the nub of her work in this book is a rethinking of sexual orientation as a possible phenomenological

orientation, her methodology also accounts for and attempts to respond to processes of racialization and othering more broadly. Ahmed's project is thus not only applicable to the queer body qua the gender or sexually nonconforming body. Instead, what is crucial to queer phenomenology is its avowal of the experience of orientation, specifically of disorientation and reorientation. These constitute acts that one may regularly negotiate without recognition, if one's body aligns with compulsory norms of space, time, and affect. However, for bodies that defy these norms, orientation can be a tricky matter that can entail an endless course of bumping into and tripping over things. Drawing from Immanuel Kant's essay "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" (1786/1998), Ahmed provides the classic example of walking blindfolded into an unfamiliar room (p. 6). Such a situation induces a bursting sense of uncanny disorientation, both in terms of spatial navigation as well as the body's limited coordination as a result of the obstruction of a sense so crucial to both epistemological and phenomenological positioning and formation – sight. Although Ahmed's work on disorientation and reorientation does not explicitly address the medium of film, the emphasis on the power of the visual nonetheless spurs me in this direction. Further, with its own inherent concern for movement, space, and bodies, film responds in kind.

Disorientation Without a Face

Phoenix opens with a blindfold and a blind spot. It is Germany 1945 immediately following liberation. The Jewish German Nelly Lenz has been miraculously rescued from a concentration camp (secondary sources seem to indicate Auschwitz), where she had been shot in the head and left to die. Nelly's rescuer, Lene (Nina Kunzendorf), is a Jewish friend and lawyer for the Jewish Agency who had survived the war by fleeing to Switzerland. In this opening scene the question of sight takes on a fiercely literal tenor. The two women are traveling by car from Switzerland to Germany and reach the makeshift border checkpoint controlled by American GIs. The American soldier demands to see their passports, which Lene provides, but the soldier aggressively insists on also seeing what is hidden beneath Nelly's entirely bandaged and bloody face, save for slits for eyes. Defensively, Lene retorts that "She's not Eva Braun," Hitler's long-term female companion. Yes, but who is she? This is the question that indicatively thrusts the film forward. Neither satisfied with this response nor with the explanation that she's "from the camps," the soldier vehemently repeats: "I want to see her face!" With sobs of anguish and fear, Nelly is forced to unwrap her bloodied bandages and show him the devastated flesh, which was once a human face. But the promise of truth and revelation in this establishing scene never comes to fruition for the

viewer. Nelly's face remains an empty center, a hollow abyss. There is no reverse shot. The viewer does not see what the soldier does or does not see. The foreclosure of the shot–reverse shot formation feels like a partial blindfold, an extra layer of mediation. In a medium close-up the viewer can only observe the response of the soldier to this image: a mixed mien of shock, disgust, sadness, and shame crosses his face as he now recognises what he failed to recognise earlier – absence in all its bloody horror. With recoil he desperately looks away and quietly apologises. The opacity of Nelly's (non-existent) face is the film's blind spot.

The blind spot is of course no stranger to the film noir, which is discernibly the generic frame that gives this film structure (and a genre often employed by Petzold), what Elsaesser (2000) has called “the conceptual black hole of film noir” (p. 424). While it might be a stretch to call Nelly a femme fatale figure, with the mystery surrounding her identity she is thematically and formally set up as such. In the film noir, the femme fatale figure metonymically stands in for this blind spot. She is, as Mary Ann Doane (1999) indicates, always the enigma, the problem that must be solved (p. 18). In German cinema history and especially in the cinema of the Weimar period the femme fatale has served as a slate upon which not only desire but also experiences of trauma may be projected. Barbara Hales (2007) writes that in the wake of the First World War men “transfer[red] their damaged psyches onto the character of the femme fatale” (p. 227). As a result, when confronted with the specular image of this damaged ego head-on, one can only imagine that the reaction would be something like that of the American soldier in *Phoenix*: shock, disgust, sadness, and shame. As the force of such a powerful sensorial and emotional response, the femme fatale has also come to embody a figure of incredible loss and mourning in cinema. Indeed, Eugenie Brinkema (2014) links the blind spot to mourning: “The visual field, in mourning, is reduced entirely to the blind spot” (p. 54). The loss of the object in mourning leads to a kind of blindness, both epistemological and physical. Brinkema continues: “Eyes seek (a) being, but they do not see – for *being is no longer there to be seen*” (p. 54; emphasis in original). Seeing and not seeing are the twin opposites that form the paradox of the film's establishing scene and that seems to prevail until the final shot. That Petzold begins the film with a shot that ostensibly appears to be from Nelly's point of view (a peripheral medium shot of Lene driving) but does not account for her evidently limited visual perspective is striking. There is no gauzy or inhibited glimpse that would align with Nelly's subjective gaze – a traumatised gaze. Instead, Nelly's obstructed gaze, her near blindfolded view, is inscribed in the film's own blindness that I would argue points back to Ahmed's concern with disorientation.

Astutely articulating the affective connection between blindness and disorientation, Brinkema offers the following formulation: “If blindness were to be redescribed as an affect, it would be the affect of a stricken disorientation” (p. 55).

Mourning, blindness, disorientation: these are the entangled markers of the traumatised body that haunt the figure of Nelly. The traumatised body is a body without its bearings, a body not fully intact. Such a body is unable to extend itself and to perform habitual movements. Like the blindfolded subject in Kant’s analogy (1786/1998), the traumatised body is a being that cautiously and reluctantly attempts to feel her way around in the dark, desperately grabbing for something – anything – familiar to provide orientation. Injuries sustained to the body alter its contours and often deaden or numb motor-sensory capability. The body is thus violently thrust into an unfamiliar positioning, where the world becomes oblique. Space and orientation must be renegotiated.

Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the world from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 155)

For nearly the first quarter of the film Nelly’s face remains invisible: her head tightly wrapped in a skull cast and bandage. Her vision is impaired and her speech is slurred, if present at all. Further, her body moves with a slow and awkward stiffness. In an interview, Hoss explains that at the beginning she tried to give Nelly a childish, erratic, and weak quality to match her cadaverous appearance. It is only with time that Nelly forms her body again and begins to slowly reorient herself. As Hoss explains, “[Nelly] needs self-awareness, she has to trust herself in order to hold up her body”.⁴

4. The original quote from Nina Hoss, which I have borrowed from here reads as follows: “*Ich habe versucht, der Nelly am Anfang etwas Kindliches, auch etwas Fahriges, Haltloses zu geben, so wie ihre Haare, da ist alles so grau and eigentlich nicht da... Und mit der Zeit formt sich der Körper wieder, sie fängt wieder an zu wissen, wer sie ist. Sie muss wieder ein Selbstbewusstsein haben, sie muss auf sich vertrauen können, um ihren Körper aufrecht zu halten.*”

[I tried to give Nelly something childish, also agitated, and weak, just like her hair, which is all gray and not really there... And with time her body takes shape again, she begins to recognise who she is. She has to have self-assurance again, she has to be able to trust herself so that she can hold her body upright.] Quoted from the film book that accompanies the DVD. (My translation).

With her face invisible and her movements strangely zombie-like, Nelly's traumatised body appears objectified in these early scenes. She is at once ominously invisible and hypervisible. Critics have aptly likened this image of Nelly's traumatised body, her face set in white mask, to the figure Christiane (Edith Scob) in Georges Franju's macabre *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*, 1960), who spends most of the film behind a white mask because her face was destroyed in an automobile accident.⁵ In its debility and misshapeness, the traumatised body can often stand in for the horrible and horrifying body in cinema. Yet taking *Phoenix* to the register of horror film risks reducing the traumatised body of Nelly, a Holocaust survivor, as abject. It is rather the crisis of the body as a phantom subject that must be reckoned with. Even when Nelly's mask is finally shed, she remains unrecognizable to herself and others. Her surgeon's reluctant attempt (at Nelly's unwavering insistence) to reconstruct her face as it was before the trauma appears to have failed. Nelly now bears the face of another. In one scene, she symbolically encounters her unfamiliar self, still hollow and bruised, appropriately in the shards of a discarded mirror among the ruins of her former house: a multiplied and refracted mirror image fills the frame. Here the crisis of the body is forcefully illuminated. Overcome with shock and loss, Nelly literally flees from this strange specular image and utters the self-annihilating statement: "*Mich gibt's nicht mehr*" ("I don't exist anymore"). The existential crisis that ensues as a result of this encounter with her traumatised body sets Nelly not to a deferral or a reliving of the trauma, as one might expect, but to a "turning" toward the past to a time and place before the traumatic event. In Ahmed's account, the act of turning determines the direction of the body in and through space. It is by turning that the subject may begin to become situated in the world and in relation to things (Ahmed, 2006, p. 6).

Reorientation – Minor Revolutions

Nelly's "revolution" begins with a desperate search for her errant husband Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld). The only problem is that he presumes her dead, as he was the one who directly or indirectly orchestrated her capture by the Nazis and her deportation to Auschwitz. Roaming the streets of the rubble-filled kaput city of immediate postwar Berlin, Nelly stumbles upon

5. As films that feature a bandaged protagonist, I would also add the classic Japanese postwar drama *The Face of Another* (*Tanin no kao*, 1966), directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara. There is also the recent Austrian horror film, Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala's *Goodnight Mommy* (*Ich seh, ich seh*, 2015).

him one night in a makeshift cabaret for American soldiers called Phoenix. In this and subsequent scenes at Phoenix, Petzold appears to apply all the *mise-en-scène* conventions of New German Cinema in the spirit of Fassbinder (garish colour and lighting, theatrical spectacle, unnatural blocking) (see, e.g. Nayman, 2014). In Rainer Werner Fassbinder's postwar classic *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, 1979), the eponymous figure (Hanna Schygulla) eventually gives up searching for her husband and procures work at a bar for American soldiers. Elena del Río's (2008) suggestive reading of the figure of Maria as a body beset by the national and historical trauma of Nazi Germany whose movement is coded by a "self-conscious choreography" removed from "natural-looking flow" (pp. 78–79) speaks to Nelly's own kinetic awkwardness in these earlier scenes. Unlike Maria, however, Nelly is not a representative figure that can be read hermeneutically. Her performance is more subjective and direct; without being overwrought with pathos, it leans toward pure presentation. Consider Nelly's first encounter with her husband Johnny. Nelly's desire for a familiar object by means of which she may align and reorient herself is at first shattered. Her attempt to turn toward the past is met with repudiation. She is unrecognizable to Johnny as Nelly. Ahmed (2006) observes that "turning" in phenomenology also lends itself to strategies of subject formation of address. While Judith Butler (1993; 1997), following Louis Althusser (1971), has argued that the "turning around" that transpires when one is hailed by a person of authority is a forced form of subject constitution that needs to be deconstructed, for Ahmed (2006) the physical turning that occurs in this "turning around" can also be affirmative insofar as it "might take subjects in different directions," where "different worlds might even come into view" (p. 15). Thus, in a reverse-Althusserian manner, the absence of (the reciprocal) address becomes a form of renewed debilitation and even trauma for Nelly, because it leaves her nowhere to turn. In this scene Nelly appears in a close-up as she calls out Johnny's name and in a reverse shot he looks up but there is no eye-line match. Instead, he darts his eyes around the room in a confused manner. Not only does it appear as though he has not seen a familiar face, he does not seem to see anyone with whom he could match this voice. It is as though this woman standing before him did not exist at all. Once again, Petzold's foreclosure of classical continuity editing serves as a method of displacement and renewed disorientation, both for Nelly and for the viewer.

A tenor of disorientation manifests itself throughout Petzold's films (*Ghosts*, 2005; *Yella*, 2007; *Jerichow*, 2008). His characters are frequently set to a kind of less-than-grandiose wandering that overwhelmingly results

in an extended sequence of wrong turns that nonetheless play out in interesting ways. Marco Abel (2013) has observed that in Petzold's films "being out of place, out of sorts, oddly unhinged, askew, in a word: lost" (p. 72) is the idiom which conditions all of his narratives and characters. Perhaps this also explains Petzold's penchant for citation in his films, as a non-committal means of bringing a more structured (read: oriented) teleology in through the backdoor. He has indeed stated directly that he works in "the cemetery of genre cinema" (quoted in Abel, 2012, p. 72). In *Phoenix*, also thought to be an example of Petzold's (recent) more genre-oriented direction in filmmaking distinct from his earlier Berlin School days (see, e.g. Abel, 2013; Fisher, 2014), the viewer is haunted by an itching sense of cinematic déjà-vu when Nelly seeks Johnny out a second time and he decides that this uncannily familiar yet strange woman may be of use to him.

On a textual level, the film invites a curiously enfolded Hitchcockian narrative in which Johnny does eventually spy something familiar in Nelly's anemic body and beckons her into a scheming thespian plot to procure his deceased wife's (her own) estate. A number of scholars, including Petzold himself, have been quick to point out the film's clear homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) (Nayman, 2014). Johnny's aim is to turn this shadow of a woman into the image of the scintillating woman he once loved. Unlike Scottie in Hitchcock's film, however, broken down by war and loss, Johnny is not interested in love or sexual desire; he simply wants the wealth that would allow him the chance to start over. As he indicates, he plans to leave Germany once he has secured the money. Convinced that through her husband's eyes she too will be able to pick up the broken pieces of her body and reorient herself, Nelly goes along with his scheme. But as Johnny stubbornly tries to shape Nelly into "his Nelly," it becomes evident that his memory of his wife is more fantasy than anything else. From the writing of a shopping list, to the descending of stairs, the length of her dress and the colour of her hair, Johnny coerces Nelly into a fetishistic performance of his fantasy. This is not merely a male, Oedipal fantasy, as Laura Mulvey (1990) has delineated in the case of *Vertigo* (pp. 37–38), but a national, historical fantasy based on the inability to face German guilt in the wake of the Second World War. In protest Nelly weakly explains that no one will possibly believe that she would return from the camps looking like her old self, dressed to go celebrate in a red dress and stylish shoes from Paris. This is where she errs: here belief is relative, and therefore suspended; what is more important is what people want to see. Indeed, Nelly's second (feigned) arrival in Berlin, which she and Johnny meticulously plan, is not to prove her physical existence to their former circle of friends, as they too are involved in the

plot to wangle Nelly's money. Instead, the superfluous performance of arrival and reconciliation of the final sequence of the film stand out more as a symbolic alleviation of guilt than as any course of action within their broader plan.

But something goes awry in the performance of Nelly's return. I am not speaking here of a fatal accident à la *Vertigo*. Rather, Johnny's blind attempt to (re)fashion this woman into his wife, that is, to interpellate her into an identity of his own making fails. Nelly does "turn around" at his beckoning, but in the end she follows a different direction. Johnny's expressed ignorance (and more likely repression) of what she "could have" experienced at Auschwitz – the extreme horror and violation – pushes Nelly to remember on her own terms. There are two occasions in the film in which memory and trauma aspire to formal modes of narration: first, through an oneiric flashback⁶ in which Nelly is visibly dressed in striped prisoner garb and confronts Johnny at the site of her capture; and second, through the telling of an anecdote about Auschwitz that Nelly disguises as a news report she has read, over which she is nonetheless visibly upset. While Nelly experiences the flashback prior to reuniting with her husband, there is a curious return of the flashback later on, but in its return the scene is shown in real time and within the film's narration.

Consider the formal structuring principles of the flashback. The cinematic double reframing of the past through a flashback, a narrative device Petzold otherwise exclusively avoids in his films,⁷ is almost a fixture in Holocaust cinema. Joshua Hirsch (2004) has called the flashback "the signifier of historical trauma in the cinema" (p. 89). In *Phoenix* the flashback opens with a tracking shot, in which Nelly is visible from behind as she makes her way down a narrow hill to a houseboat on the water's edge. Inside the boat Nelly appears again in the frame in a frontal view as she descends a narrow staircase into the belly of the boat; however, she is set in shadows and her face remains obliquely obscured. In a reverse shot Johnny can be seen standing at a piano and playing. The flashback here does not offer a retrospective plot or even provide coherent information, for at this point in the film the viewer has no reference to the houseboat.

6. I refer to the flashback as oneiric because it is narratively out-of-sync. Some might argue that it is a dream sequence; however, it is formally structured like a flashback insofar as it appears to mediate the subjective memory of Nelly.

7. That is not to say that Petzold does not play with nonlinear narratives or editing. For example, his film *Yella* (2007) is a brilliant experiment in circular narrative filmmaking that disorients as much as it thrills. In a quasi-remaking of Herk Harvey's Indie horror-thriller *Carnival of Souls* (1962), Petzold opens and closes *Yella* with one and the same car accident, and offers thereby two possible narratives: the victims live; the victims die.

Speaking more generally, what the flashback does supply is the surge of memory that haunts and repeats itself, dreamlike in its interiority but phenomenologically real in its presentation (Turim, 1989, p. 2). The flashback serves to exteriorise memory on the level of form, to make it tangible and real for the viewer. Further, it can exemplify the disturbance of memory and the disorientation of narrative time, as experienced by the traumatised character. While time-consciousness (what Husserl [1964] calls “*Zeitbewusstsein*”) is not a prevailing concern in Ahmed’s study on orientations, it is a topic of tremendous phenomenological preoccupation. According to Heidegger (1962), “the meaning of Dasein is temporality” (p. 38). If being is constituted in time, then a flashback is a glitch in temporal order that indicates a splintered being. At the same time, however, a flashback can also indicate a re-turning and a reopening of time, where one might work through moments in the past. The return or re-performance of the flashback scene later in the film at a moment when Nelly seems to have finally recognised her husband’s betrayal attests to this crucial labor of confronting and reanimating the past in a search for truth. In this later scene, Nelly willfully reenacts her earlier flashback/dream and deliberately returns to the boat where she had hidden from and had been subsequently discovered by the Nazis. This striking almost Lynchian return of the flashback marks a flashpoint in Nelly’s hitherto complicity to participate in Johnny’s plot and as such also a clear point in her “turning” away from him.

The following day when it comes time for Nelly and Johnny to execute their plot about Nelly’s “long-awaited” return and their contrived amorous reunion, the woman who emerges from the train in this second arrival to meet Johnny and their old circle of friends (what Petzold has called “the ‘real’ beginning of the film” [quoted in Nayman, 2014]) is one the viewer has not previously encountered. Nelly does not simply act in this scene – she acts out. Unlike her cinematic stepsister in *Vertigo*, Madeline/Judy, Nelly will not be silenced by death (or attempted reconciliation, for that matter) and instead ends the film in this final sequence on her own terms – that is, through her own reorientation and performance. After a decisively contrived train station welcome, followed by lunch, drinking, and hammy toasts to celebrate her return, Nelly beckons the party into a music hall with the promise of a duo performance for old time’s sake performed by her and Johnny. As is revealed earlier in the film, Nelly was a celebrated singer before the war and often performed with her pianist husband. A confused but willing participant, Johnny takes a seat at the piano and at Nelly’s request begins to play “Speak Low.” A musical motif in the film, not uncommon for Petzold, this standard jazz tune can be heard on a number of occasions,

both diegetically on a Kurt Weill record, and extradiegetically in an instrumental version as an overture to the film. Nelly's performance begins slowly, hesitantly, quietly. In near whispering tones, she mouths the first few lines of the song. Gradually, though, a willful transformation unfolds. Nelly is made present.

In this theatrical *mise-en-scène*, Nelly appears imposing. She towers over a diminutive-looking Johnny in her vertical position next to the piano. Adding to this larger-than-life perspective of Nelly, the camera itself matches Johnny's perspective from below, forced into an upward cant in order to gaze at her. At one moment, in what may be described as cinema's most rarefied look of loathing, Nelly casts her gaze down at Johnny and then begins to really sing. The beauty and talent of her voice is hauntingly electric and disarming. Immediately recognizing her true identity through the power and beauty of her voice, Johnny's eyes simultaneously rest on the number tattooed on her left arm, the indissoluble physical trace of her internment at Auschwitz, and he ceases to play the piano. With a look of utter consternation, now slumped down at the piano he freezes entirely. Having brought the scene to an abrupt abeyance (in a reverse shot the small audience now also looks on almost comically stupefied), Nelly picks up her coat and walks toward the door. In typical Petzoldian fashion (nearly all of his films end with bodily movement away from the camera), this final shot shows Nelly's red silhouette as it turns away, awash with light and visually obfuscated as though viewed through tear-filled eyes. Likely not the point of view of any diegetic perspective, Nelly's exit is for the viewer only.

Nelly's downright diva performance-within-a-performance at the close of *Phoenix* does more than puncture a few holes in the fourth wall. The theatrical performance embedded in this film, with its stage and additional spectators, illuminates the performer (here Nelly and Hoss) as pure presence. In his book *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret* (2009), Shane Vogel asserts that "while the musical diva may be difficult to reach offstage, onstage she offers everything in her performances; she elaborates a social, corporeal, and affective excess that marks pure presence" (p. 168). Nelly sings herself into a vibrant presence in this scene, whose performance's overwhelming sensuous spirit contrasts with her character's otherwise childlike demureness throughout the film – indeed, her hitherto utter lack of presence. The dramatic fusing of performance and performativity here yields Nelly's long sought after moment of self-actualization and reorientation. Her reorientation operates both on a personal and political-historical level. Finding her voice and rendering herself visible again, Nelly ironically does not give the embedded audience what they seek – exoneration, reconciliation – but in fact the

exact opposite. In her display of reorientation, she also reveals the disorientation of her traumatised body. This is a disorientation shaped by the hate and violence that has been directed on her marked Jewish body by the hostile gaze of non-Jewish Germans. In this scene Nelly returns the gaze and spectacularly subverts Johnny's and his fellow spectators' own performance of historical amnesia and elision. Together with the fourth wall, the *tabula rasa* collapses.

Return of the Blind Spot

While disorientation is crucial to processes of reorientation, it can also lead to an irresolvable crisis, where the body becomes "lost, undone, thrown" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 156). On a diegetic level, the song Nelly sings, "Speak Low," in this final scene is dedicated to her recently deceased Jewish friend and savior Lene, who ends up killing herself out of grief. In an earlier scene, Nelly asks Lene if she could one day sing this song for her. But the loss of loved ones and humanity more generally proves too much for Lene to bear. If anyone in the film represents Caruth's figure of the historical witness, then it is Lene rather than Nelly. In a rare scene earlier on in the film, she is shown without Nelly conducting work in an archive for the Jewish Agency. She meticulously compares long lists of names with photographs of prisoners and corpses. Her job appears to be to index the dead. Upon discovering the identity of a close friend, she is forced to retire from the task and leaves the room to cry. Her shedding of tears is discreet and brief but nonetheless legible. Framing Lene from a distance, Petzold avoids an overly affective close-up. Curiously, in this unobtrusive medium profile shot, Lene's long and angular body maintains its stiff line even in this minor outburst of emotion. Her tears are the only exterior (I dare say, phenomenological) evidence of her unbearable grief. For in the act of crying a condition of blindness (or blindfoldedness) also sets in. Moistened eyes are clouded and vision becomes impaired.⁸ Lene's disorientation is thus much subtler. Her resulting traumatised body – her anguished corpse – is never made visible in the film. Like Nelly's violated face at the beginning, Lene's corpse closes the film with another blind spot.

The charge of Lene's corpse as evidence of what the body cannot do (unless one wants to read suicide as some kind of subversive act, but I do

8. Brinkema's analysis of the exteriority of tears in *The Forms of the Affects* (2014) is tremendously rich and insightful (p. 54). While I would not go so far as to shed the subject (or the body, for that matter), as she does, thinking about tears as a physical display of grief is helpful to a phenomenological reading, as well.

not pursue such a reading) weighs heavily on the opening question of this essay: what can this body “still” do? The traumatised body is not so easily shed. Although it may seem as though the film has all too easily done away with Lene, whose supporting role of witness and truth bearer (she informs Nelly of Johnny’s betrayal) appears to no longer be needed, the resonance of her lifeless body remains. The light that floods the final shot of Nelly turned away from the performance scene and moving on is cut (and cut off) by a black screen. Light and illumination are severed by their ultimate lack. At once the symbol of blindness and the site of a contemplative liminality, the black screen marks the spot where in the absence of a frame onscreen and offscreen appear to bleed into one another. Petzold’s move to place a dedication discreetly positioned at the top center of the black screen invites this contemplation. It reads: “*gewidmet Fritz Bauer*” (dedicated to Fritz Bauer). Many German viewers or German studies scholars would recognise the relevance of this dedication in the context of the film’s narrative. Bauer was a Jewish German judge and prosecutor, who was instrumental in initiating the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials (1963–1965) to bring SS personnel who served in the concentration camps, especially Auschwitz, to justice. The script of this dedication offers a trace. This trace does not replace or disavow presence, but maintains it as though a placeholder, a monument even. Dedications attached to films, unlike monographs, are always “in memoriam” – that celluloid may stand in for bodies now absent. This dedication not only memorialises Fritz Bauer, it also memorialises Lene.

Phoenix tracks the traumatised body as a body beset by disorientation, whereby both the world and the contours of the body are rendered unfamiliar. The traumatised body is one thrown off course, out of line with the rest of the world. Debility caused by violence and oppression conditions this discombobulated body. Yet the traumatised body, like the body in pain, is not an utterly negative condition and this film traces its force as much as it does its limits. Ahmed’s phenomenology of orientation proffers a context within which to examine the traumatised body in cinema beyond (or at least alongside) its attenuating metaphysical baggage, in order to attend to the question of “what this body can still do.” This method of investigation opens up a possible new point of departure for thinking about the presentation of how trauma is not simply projected on the body but can also be embodied, and what that embodiment looks and feels like. Particularly in a period when Holocaust cinema appears to have taken a turn away from universal historical narratives to focus more on the personal and the minor. As a different kind of film about the trauma of the Holocaust, *Phoenix* not only brings this topic to the German screen, a feat which Elsaesser (2002) would describe

as an anomaly in German cinema (p. 182), but it locates the disorientation of the traumatised body directly in a discourse of embodied experience that is cinematically rich with promise.

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