The Phenomenology of Trauma. Sound and Haptic Sensuality in *Son of Saul*

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Abstract. The winner of many prestigious prizes (Oscar for the best foreign language film, Grand Prize of the Cannes Film Festival, and the Golden Globe among them), the Hungarian film, *Son of Saul* – according to most critics – represents the Holocaust trauma in a completely new and intriguing way. The filmmakers have invented a special form in order to tackle the heroic task of showing the unwatchable, representing the unthinkable. In this essay I analyse the representational strategy of the film from a phenomenological point of view, and position it in the theoretical framework of haptic sensuality formulated by Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks, among others. I mainly focus on the use of sound, in particular the role of sound design in the creation of haptic space. With the help of the analysis of the representation and artistic invocation of the different bodily senses in the film, I demonstrate how traditional artistic formal elements (characteristic of highly artistic, even experimental productions) are combined with high impact effects often present in popular film forms. I argue that the successful combination of these two factors makes the film an example of artistic immersive cinema. [1]

Keywords: *Son of Saul*, haptic cinema, senses, cinema of immersion, Holocaust.

The most striking feature of the recent Hungarian film, *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, László Nemes, 2015) – that won the Oscar for best foreign language film in 2016, the Grand Prix of the Cannes Film Festival and the Golden Globe – is the ability to represent the Holocaust in a new and uniquely unsettling way. The filmmakers invented and successfully realized a peculiar film form in order to tackle the heroic task of showing the unwatchable, representing the unthinkable. In the present essay I intend to analyse the representational strategy of the film in the theoretical framework of haptic sensuality. Among other haptic strategies, I will mainly focus on the analysis of the role that sound plays in the film, and on the

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role of sound design in the creation of the haptic environment.² Through this analysis I will demonstrate that the film combines experimental formal strategies (characteristic of intricate artistic cinema) and high impact effects, often present in popular film forms. I will argue that it is the successful combination of these two strategies that made *Son of Saul* into a film that is effective in the sense of popular cinema, while it is also an art film that has remarkable aesthetic qualities.

The film takes place in the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1944. Saul, the main character is a member of the *Sondercommando*. They are prisoners responsible for operating the crematorium: preparing the groups to be sent into the shower rooms, transporting and burning the corpses. Saul finds moral survival upon trying to salvage from the flames the body of a boy that might or might not be his son – the film leaves this question open to interpretation by providing hints, both pro and contra. The answer cannot be determined on the basis of the narrative information provided – the interpretation will depend on the subjective emotional reaction to the narrative information in each viewer.

On a basic narrative level (structure, delivery of plot information), the film has a classical form. The opening situation is changed by a sudden turn of events: a young boy miraculously survives the gas chamber, and after he is killed by a German officer, Saul who witnessed these events decides to find a rabbi and give the boy a proper burial. The film follows the adventures of Saul who is about to accomplish an impossible mission: to steal and bury a body in a concentration camp. In the end, the mission is only partly accomplished: the body that was saved from the flames and intended to be buried in earth, finally finds its peace in water. Saul survives the mission but does not survive the story. Plot information is provided in a realistic, linear fashion. The depiction of plot events does not cause any ambiguity: events take place in the present, the point of view of the narration is an external one associated with the character of Saul.

Haptic Sensuality

Film studies have shown a growing interest in the phenomenological interpretation of perception and understanding of film during the last one and a half decades. Following the trendsetting books of Vivian Sobchack (1992; 2004), the works by Laura U. Marks – who is interested mostly in the dimensions of

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2 Tamás Zányi, the sound designer of the film, was awarded the Vulcan prize for technical achievement at the Cannes Film Festival (2015), and also won the Golden Reel Award for Best Foreign Film of the American Motion Picture Sound Editors (2016).

sensual experience in relation to audio-visual works – have become a widely referenced inspiration for many scholars. In her book *The Skin of the Film* Marks proposes an auratic, embodied, and mimetic theory of representation that could be appropriate for many kinds of cinema, not only for the intercultural works that the book itself describes (Marks 2000, xiii). Marks contends that synaesthesia (the study of which seems to have had a renaissance recently, see Cytowic 2002; Robertson and Sagiv 2004) and haptic visuality (visuality that stimulates not only the sense of vision, but also the other senses) enable the viewer to experience cinema as multisensory. By emphasizing the multisensory quality of perception she aims to shift the discussion of visuality away from the optical terms that usually predominate (Marks 2000, 131).

Although Marks concentrates primarily on the role of the proximal senses, that are not normally considered important in connection with the audio-visual medium (such as touch), her argument helps to re-conceptualize visuality in general, as well as the hierarchy that exists between image and sound in audio-visual media. However, this hierarchy is not only a feature of audio-visual media, the bodily senses in general seem to have a similar hierarchical pattern. Research that studied fifty-three languages has testified that verbs depicting sensual activities are part of a linguistic hierarchy where the strongest is vision, followed by the senses of hearing, touch, taste and smell. The same research also pointed out that "the verb having the prototypical meaning 'see' within a given language has a privileged position in that it commonly can be used in an extended sense as an overall frame with which to describe the perceptual activities of the other sense modalities" (Branigan 1997, 114–115).

Furthermore, psychologists also argue that the primary sense of acquiring information is vision and hence when the information gathered by other senses contradicts visual information, the latter overwrites the former – ventriloquism is based on this very effect (Herschberger 1992). Hence, the intention of redefining the hierarchy of the senses is not only a concern for film perception but it touches upon this hierarchy in a general sense. And haptic modality can provide a common ground for this project since it interprets all of the senses as stimuli addressing the human body. According to Marks, "as vision can be optical or haptic, so too hearing can perceive the environment in a more or less instrumental way. We listen for specific things, while we hear ambient sound as an undifferentiated whole. One might call 'haptic hearing' that usually brief moment when all sounds present themselves to us undifferentiated, before we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to" (2000, 183).

Here Marks speaks about an approach to listening, about the fact that hearing can be haptic, but it is also important that sound itself has proximal qualities. As Edward Branigan notes, "audible sound comes from an object whose mechanical vibrations cause vibratory waves in a medium, as in air, water, flesh, or bone. Sound rubs against and within us" (Branigan 2010, 42).

In general, for Marks the importance of haptic sensuality and visuality lies in its ability to evoke memories, feelings, and content stored by the different senses and not being describable by traditional means of audio-visual representation. Based on the examples analysed in Marks's book, it is clear that this type of representation is often connected to some kind of loss, trauma, and the difficulty of remembering. This suggests that the choice of haptic strategies in the case of depicting topics that traditionally resist representation might be the most adequate solution, and it is especially true in the case of the Holocaust.

Son of Saul, on the one hand, uses the strategies of haptic visuality, but on the other hand, by emphasizing the importance of sound, that already has a basic proximal quality, makes the overall perceptive experience even more sensually accentuated. Because of its material qualities, sound has a more visceral effect on the human body than immaterial light. Our body reacts physiologically to sound: it affects blood circulation, skin resistance, muscle tension and respiration (Recuber 2007, 323). Furthermore, "though we may make sounds, our bodies are unable to create light. Thus, light seems relatively external, objective, and disembodied whereas sound is within us and personal" (Branigan 2010, 43). In connection with sound and materiality it is worth noting that the technology used for shooting *Son of Saul* has a more than symbolic meaning: the film was shot on 35mm film stock – it was recorded on actual material, its existence is real in material terms.

The film opens and ends with sounds without pictures. At the beginning, the screen is still dark when sounds of birds and the noise of a water stream can be heard; a little later the film starts at a place that looks like a clearing in a forest. The film ends in the same forest, and after the last picture of a beautifully green and empty forest disappears from the screen, the darkness is filled with the noise of rain. My personal sensual experience was that the noise of the rain is gradually starting to resemble the crackling of fire. Personal experience and subjectivity play an important role here since hearing is a more subjective sense than vision; often it is more difficult to recognize phenomena based on noise than based on image. Christian Metz summarizes this situation by saying that sound is an adjective while vision is a noun: "[w]hen we see a physical object, he

says, its identification is complete and all that could be added would be merely adjectival, as in a 'tall, reading' lamp. By contrast, when we hear a sound the identification remains incomplete. A 'whistling' sound still needs to be specified: the whistling of what thing? from where? because of what action?" (Metz quoted by Branigan 2010, 49). This incompleteness and vulnerability of the sense of hearing is used in the film in connection with dialogue as well – but more about this later. Also, the rain vs. fire interpretation of the closing sound is not entirely alien to the metaphors present in the film: Saul wanted to save the body from fire and finally buried it in water.

In the meantime, the prototypical form of haptic visuality described by Marks is also present in the film: in the case of haptic visuality the eyes function like organs of touch. "Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze." (Marks 2000, 162.) These haptic images are often blurred, which makes their recognition difficult. *Son of Saul* opens with a picture that looks exactly like that: the first image is a greenish blur that fills the screen [Fig. 1]. After some time, it turns out that the picture is produced by shallow focus and as the hero approaches the camera, finally his face becomes sharp while his surroundings remain relatively blurred. The background of the picture stays almost unrecognizable, probably several people are digging a hole in the ground. Soon we learn that Saul is there to help in managing a fresh arrival of people. Right after we see his face on the screen, he immediately turns away to do his work – with this gesture the film sets its cruising speed and style, we follow Saul throughout the film, mostly seeing his back in medium close-up. The chosen aspect ratio also comes into play here: the traditional 4:3 ratio is used to limit the visual information about the surroundings, and to reduce the viewer's point of view to the narrowed down vision of Saul. The dominant shot type throughout the film is between medium close up and close up, and it almost never exceeds medium shot. There are several dramatically important shots that might be interpreted as wide shots, for example: the killing of the boy, the negotiations with the doctor about the body and the killing of the first rabbi Saul finds.

The consistent use of shallow focus and the narrowing down of the field of vision by aspect ratio and shot size work against optical vision in general throughout the film. Haptic vision is based on closeness and the elimination of distance, while optic vision maintains the distance, and distance "allows the viewer to organize

him/herself as an all-perceiving subject" (Marks 2000, 162). Distance and optic vision, according to Marks, are connected to the question of mastery. The vision that is typical of capitalism, consumerism and surveillance is a sort of instrumental vision that positions the thing seen as an object for knowledge and control. But in contrast, the type of vision, such as in haptic visuality, "that is not merely cognitive but acknowledges its location in the body, seems to escape the attribution of mastery" (Marks 2000, 131–132). The repositioning of the audience, by eliminating the all-perceiving position and the controlling knowledge, makes them more vulnerable in the perceiving situation, and makes the experience more effective. The viewer's suggested "physical" closeness to Saul makes the perceptive identification more accentuated. [Fig. 2]. All of the haptic qualities present strengthen the possibility that the viewer could be drawn not only into the subjectivity of Saul but also into his environment, perceptively. Identification can be processed on the intellectual but also on the perceptual level. This double dynamic plays an important role in the phenomenological concept of embodied vision: "[t]heories of embodied visuality acknowledge the presence of the body in the act of seeing, at the same time that they relinquish the (illusory) unity of the self. In embodied spectatorship the senses and the intellect are not separate" (Marks 2000, 151).

Off-screen Space and Sound

Constraints of visible space in the film create the increased importance of off-screen space that is in close connection with the role sound can play in these situations: "a focus on the ear and sound directly emphasizes the spatiality of the cinematic experience: we can hear around corners and through walls, in complete darkness and blinding brightness, even when we cannot see anything" (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 131). The field of vision can be limited by framing but this does not necessarily mean the limitation of the field of hearing. According to Michel Chion, the medium of film provides a defined and limited place for images, while for sound no predetermined frame of container exists (Chion 1994, 67–68). Similarly, there is a difference between off-screen space and off-screen sound: while the former cannot be seen, the latter is just as present as the sound whose source is visible on the screen – it is impossible to differentiate acoustically between the two (Chion 1994, 83). Since in *Son of Saul* the visible space is limited by various techniques, off-screen sound plays a crucial role.

Chion speaks about two types of off-screen sound: active off-screen sources of sound, which cannot be seen but inspires interest in viewers urging them to

figure out what that sound is exactly, where it comes from, and what causes it – and makes them want to see its source. Active off-screen sound, in a way, controls the dynamics of editing in traditional film composition: the sound is followed by the image of its source. The other type is passive off-screen sound, that creates atmosphere, "surrounds" and stabilizes the picture, does not urge the viewer to look for the exact source of the sound – this sound does not direct the interest towards the exterior of the frame, rather it anchors the frame and the picture in it (Chion 1994, 85). This type of off-screen sound also fits the "traditional use of voice-off [that] constitutes a denial of the frame as a limit and an affirmation of the unity and homogeneity of the depicted space" (Doane 1980, 37–38).

The soundscape of *Son of Saul* combines the two types of off-screen sound. Active off-screen sound plays an important role, although the film does not reveal the events happening outside the frame – viewers have to construct the outside world and visualize the source of the sounds by building on their imagination. In this sense the features of active and passive off-screen sound are merged into an atmospheric sound that delivers important information about the world outside the frame, but at the same time focuses the audience's attention inside the frame since the events of the outside world are to horrid to see. This is how the off-screen space becomes the place for representing the unrepresentable that is significantly assisted by the creative tension that the active/passive off-screen sound creates.

Pascal Bonitzer describes the off-screen area as a disquieting place in which tension can be eased by its revelation and concretization (2008). Hence, it is of paramount importance how a certain film uses off-screen space and articulates the relationship between the onscreen and off-screen. On the one hand, the film can define the space outside the frame as a "reality substitute," of which the role is to imitate being the "natural" continuation of the image that had been dis-incorporated from it: the off-screen space exists in the shadow and for the sake of the onscreen image. On the other hand, a film can accentuate the off-screen: "by accentuating the space of the non-visible it is the imperfectness, openness, dividedness of the filmic space that is highlighted" (Bonitzer 2008). The examples of the latter case are films that have a non-classical form, and do not employ standard continuity editing. *Son of Saul* combines classical and non-classical strategies in this sense: through the tension between onscreen and off-screen space it depicts the problem of representation on a rhetorical level. While human drama is taking place onscreen that is supported and contextualized by the invisible "continuation" outside the frame, the absence of this off-screen space is also heavily accented. The invisible, the absent, makes the presentation of the visible continuously fissured.

Furthermore, as Bonitzer notes: "[a]ccentuating the off-screen as the Other of the on-screen, in fact means that the emphasis has been transferred from image to sound, and sound is freed from being a slave to the realistic stage of the image. And sound, as it is known, is often provocative" (Bonitzer 2008).

Embodied Metaphors

The film's artistic strategy concerning embodied presence is clearly formulated in a dramatically important, highly symbolic moment. Throughout the film we do not see any trace of emotion on the face of Saul, not even at the moment when he supposedly recognizes his own son. He seems to be emotionally dead. He does what he has to do without thinking, moves around like a machine, his body constantly tossed around by his superiors. But there is a crucial moment when he is first left alone with the body of the dead boy. He sits on the bench beside the corpse and takes a really deep breath – we can hear the sound of the air entering his body. At this moment, he seems to return to being a breathing, living human being – as if his soul had returned into him. Breath, in many cultures, traditionally symbolizes the soul (Quinlivan 2012, 9). [Fig. 3.]

In the concept of sensual film experience and embodied vision, breath plays a crucial role. According to Davina Quinlivan, through the conceptualization of breath, film is able to create a connection with the breathing body of the viewer – films are able to influence the breathing rhythm of viewers, make them gasping for air or hold their breath. The breathing of the audience, in a way, is the consequence of the film (Quinlivan 2012, 21 and 125). This mechanism is quite significant in the case of *Son of Saul*. At the point when the above-mentioned scene takes place in the film viewers already understand the relevance of a deep breath in the world depicted. The narrow field of vision that viewers are constantly forced into together with Saul strengthens the feeling of being locked into a small place. Each moment when the film, after long sequences of close ups, lets its viewer look out into the wider space in a middle shot or in an almost wide shot, has a physical effect: it feels as if the film lessens the grip on us and lets us take a deep breath. It might be worth noting here that the word haptic comes from *haptein* (to fasten) (Marks 2000, 162) – it is not only us who fasten the images, but also haptic visuality fastens images around us.

In order to better understand the mental and physiological effects of films, cognitive film theory offers the concept of audio-visual metaphors. According to this idea, sound and image induce bodily and cognitive associations that are

based on a certain perceptive and cognitive topography. Audio-visual metaphors are effective mechanisms that are able to synaesthetically combine figures, objects, spatial formations and certain emotional contents during the process of narration (Fahlenbrach 2008, 86). These emotion metaphors relay pre-symbolic meaning by connecting emotional content to actual sensual experiences. Kathrin Fahlenbrach illustrates this mechanism in connection with the emotion of fear. On a conceptual level fear is depicted as fluid in a container, a hidden enemy, a supernatural being, etc., and these concepts also relate to bodily associations and patterns of experience. The rhetorical devices using these concepts ("to be overcome with fear," "frozen with fear") are powerful because they are able to grasp together the emotional content and a related physical dimension (Fahlenbrach 2008, 89–90). The combination of visual images and sound effects makes audio-visual media a particularly successful tool for creating emotion metaphors, and these can be especially effective in transferring the bodily dynamics of emotions to audiences.

Regarding *Son of Saul*, one of the interesting tropes is the labyrinth and its connection to the sense of fear. The motif of the maze "represents in its gestalt a hermetically closed system full of nooks and crannies, which guide its visitors toward the centre of the maze, which is a trap from which they can only escape with difficulty" (Fahlenbrach 2008, 92). These features make the labyrinth an effective metaphor for the emotion of fear (as a closed container, hidden enemy, or opponent in a struggle) that is able to induce bodily reactions in viewers.

The camera in a labyrinth typically represents a subjective point of view (of the person lost in the maze) and denies the provision of an overview of the space, which makes orientation difficult and causes confusion. Spatial confusion, the feeling of being wedged into a closed system, and the sense of the invisible enemy's closeness – these are all topographic constructions that project the emotion of fear into physical space. It is possible to understand the construction of space and narrative in *Son of Saul* as such a labyrinth, a dangerous and narrow corridor with full of traps, and a monster at the end: the gas chamber. In this sense, the entire film and its spatial construction, with Saul wandering inside and the viewers following him closely, become the audio-visual metaphor of fear. It seems that for Saul it is the body of the boy and the mission connected to it that constitute the thread that helps him to escape the dreadful labyrinth.

Obscurity and Uncertainty

The haptic qualities mentioned earlier, that resist intellectual and objective conceptualization, have a connection with obscurity and uncertainty. Obscurity is one of the central concepts of *Son of Saul* and is present on many levels in the film.

There is a highly symbolic, self-reflexive episode in the film, when Saul, in order to further his personal mission, helps other prisoners, who secretly try to take photographs of the concentration camp. One of the prisoners pretends to repair a broken lock on a door while the other one tries to take photographs of what is happening in the courtyard. Suddenly the wind blows smoke in their direction, covering up the scene, thus they are unable to take the picture. The smoke that reminds the viewer of the process of cremation, at the same time blocks the vision of horror and makes it impossible to be recorded in photograph. The situation mirrors the problems of representation that the film itself wrestles with. The smoke in this scene is a narrative equivalent of the technical tools that are used in the film to express the difficulty of visual depiction, such as the narrowness of vision created by the 4-by-3 aspect ratio, and the constant use of shallow focus [Fig. 4].

Another motif that is not only significant from the point of view of haptic sensuality but also has a metaphoric connection with the smoke scene, is an episode that takes place by the river where later the body of the boy will find its final resting place. In this scene the members of the *Sondercommando* are ordered to the riverbank to shovel into the river the ashes coming from the crematorium. It is a deeply haunting image as ash is filling the air – the fine powder does not cover up anything at this time, since there is nothing to hide there visually, but the entire scene is composed as if it would be possible for the viewer to breath in the flying, light, but also horrid substance. [Fig. 5.] This scene also evokes the sense of smell that plays a significant role in Holocaust literature. The recollections about ghettos and concentration camps often mention the distinctive olfactory experience. The penetrating smell of these crowded places where people were squeezed in under primitive hygienic conditions had become one of the most basic experiences of the victims. "The smell of the ghetto was not just the smell of fear, of dirt, unwashed bodies, unwashed clothes; it was also the sweetish stink of corpses and the characteristic smell of diseases like typhus, tuberculosis, wounds that would not heal, ulcers." (Engelking 2001, 96.) The olfactory experience itself is described very suggestively by Charlotte Delbo, who was deported to Auschwitz: "[t]he smell was so strong and so fetid that we

thought that we were breathing not air but some thicker and more viscous fluid that enveloped and shut off this part of the world with an additional atmosphere in which only specially adapted creatures could move. Us" (quoted by Kremer 2001, 151). [Fig. 6.]

Obscurity and uncertainty are also features of the film's soundtrack. The sound of rain at the end of the film that can be mistaken for crackling fire has already been mentioned. Dialogues are sometimes also represented in a certain, obscure way suggesting that the concentration camp is not a place for words and thinking. Most of the scenes take place in a chaotic, multilingual sonic environment, where sounds are off-screen and signal the horrifying but mostly invisible events. As Tamás Zányi, the film's sound designer said in an interview, the unique concept of vision in the film opened up the possibility for the expansion of the sonic environment. Because of the narrowness of the visible space and the use of shallow focus it was only a very small slice of story space where sound had to be synchronized with visible images. The bigger part of the story's space remained invisible and had to be created by the sound designer – it meant significant freedom but also an enormous task. Zányi used this freedom to "broaden the sonic environment:" the scenes are built wider in sonic sense, noise and human voices can be heard not just from the "middle" of the image but from both sides of the picture.[3] At the same time, partially as a consequence of this strategy, dialogues between characters, that seem to be crucial to the understanding of the story, are muffled, almost impossible to hear or understand.

Designers of filmic soundscapes always have to make a choice between creating a perceptive realism or a narrativized, psychological realism for the audience. The former subordinates the sound to camera position and creates a "sound perspective" suggesting that the viewer is positioned beside the camera and hears the events from the camera's perspective in spite of all the problems this positioning might create. The latter strategy simulates a certain psychological realism by subordinating sound to narrative, positions the microphones close to the events, which are the most important from the point of view of narration at a certain moment, and – even when circumstances contradict it – makes the sound clearly audible (Branigan 2010, 55). This whole phenomenon is related to the idea of "point of view," or as in sound design some have called it: "point of audition." However, Michael Chion has pointed out that the concept of "point of view" refers to two very different and unrelated phenomena: one is about a spatial position, the

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3   Studio discussion with Tamás Zányi in the programme *Pergő Képek* of the Hungarian Tilos Rádió (28 May, 2015).

other is related to the objective/subjective distinction. In the first case sound design tries to create "point of audition" by simulating the sonic environment of a certain point in space, while in the second case the aim is to evoke the subjective position of a character and their auditory experience (Chion 1994, 89, 91).

In the case of *Son of Saul,* the sound design aims for perceptive realism where not all the factors are subordinated to audibility; and at the same time the film's concept of "point of audition" combines spatiality and subjectivity since the camera (and the viewer) follows Saul closely all the time – viewers hear the diegetic world from the spatial position of Saul and this sense of closeness to and identification with the hero also creates the sense of subjectivity in relation to audible aspects. This merged, perceptive and subjective construction affects the comprehensibility of dialogues, which is, in my opinion, used by film-makers as a stylistic tool. However, this effect is not detectable by non-Hungarian listeners since for them subtitles eliminate the obscurity of certain dialogues. Although, based on my repeated listening experience of the film in normal conditions in the cinema, this "problem" is most probably intended by the film makers, it is part of the stylistic concept of the film: it further accentuates that language and verbal communication had lost their relevance and only actions remain important in the situation depicted.

Obscurity of Narration

"In classical cinema, most scholars would conclude that narration, i.e. the filmic realization of the plot, is usually that to which all other parameters (editing, camera work and primarily sound) are subordinated." (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 136.) Haptic visuality, in the meantime, seems to work against narration: "[t]he haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative" (Marks 2000, 163). But haptic imagery can also be used as a tool of classical narration, for example as a trigger for viewer expectations. The viewer would ask: what is the meaning of the mysterious, foggy picture? What is hidden in the background of the image covered by the blur that shallow focus creates? And just as haptic imagery can be used against or in accordance with narrative causes, there are other tools that can be used in a similar manner. For example, in *Son of Saul* the sound sometimes helps narration, sometimes makes it difficult to follow, and the same applies to acting.

On the one hand, the film has a strong, classical narrative structure – the hero has a mission, and in order to accomplish the mission he has to face many

obstacles –, on the other hand, many details work against the clarity dictated by classical narration. The restricted visual field of shots gives the viewer the task to imagine the horror happening outside the frame – most of the clues are provided by sound design. The dialogues are often incomprehensible even in crucial moments, and also kept to the minimum throughout the entire film. Géza Röhrig's acting in the role of Saul is especially expressionless, which might represent the general mental state of the character, but also makes it difficult for the audience to recognize and understand his motives. For example, one of the main reasons why I personally believe in the interpretation that the boy is not his son (neither legitimate, nor illegitimate), is the fact that he remains completely expressionless even when he first sees the boy, and also at the moment when the boy is strangled in front of him. It might be conjectured that his apathy is so severe that he is unable to express emotions anymore, nevertheless, this tiny acting detail has fully convinced me that Saul has not found his son, he only interprets the miracle of the boy surviving the gas chamber as a sign for him to do something in order to save his own humanity.

Saul's expressionlessness causes further narrative uncertainties as well, for example about a woman he meets during one of his errands in the camp. Does Saul know the woman? (He says no, but his friend says otherwise.) Might she even be his wife? It is impossible to guess because of expressionless acting. Viewers' identification with characters is not supported by the acting of the leading actors, rather the film grabs the viewer and keeps him/her locked in the sensually accentuated, sonic environment, and stimulates bodily identification. In this very dense sonic environment the haptic qualities of sound also support identification. As Marks notes: "[i]n these settings the aural boundaries between body and world may feel indistinct: the rustle of the trees may mingle with the sound of my breathing, or conversely the booming music may inhabit my chest cavity and move my body from the inside" (2000, 183). Only that in *Son of Saul* it is not the music that inhabits our chest – there is no music in the film – but the shouts of prison guards and the screams of death. The substitution of staggering images for unsettling sounds makes the film's effect, in a way, more aggressive – it is more difficult to separate ourselves from sound effects than from visual stimuli. Loud sound immediately, unconsciously draws our attention: "processing visual information requires that one actively orient one's eyes toward the stimulus, while processing auditory information does not require that one actively orient one's ears" (Fiske–Taylor 1991 quoted by Branigan 1997, 117).

Experimental vs. Mainstream

Many of the above mentioned aspects of the film draw our attention to its differences from classical film form. For example, the accentuated use of haptic sensuality could signal an artistically adventurous, even experimental film form that is far from mainstream styles. But *Son of Saul* uses these artistic techniques for creating an intense, suspense-driven film that employs the strategies of genre cinema – especially such body genres (Williams 1991) as horror. Narrow visual field, for example, is a stylistic tool often used by horror movies to heighten the tension and to suggest that the threatening force might be very close to us, just outside the narrow frame. The anthropological connection between horror and sound is also well known: "[t]he main 'anthropological' task of hearing [...] [is] to stabilize our body in space, hold it up, facilitate a three-dimensional orientation and, above all, ensure an all-round security that includes even those spaces, objects and events that we cannot see, especially what goes on behind our backs. Whereas the eye searches and plunders, the ear listens in on what is plundering us. The ear is the organ of fear" (Schaub 2005 quoted by Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 131).

Another aspect that helps us to contextualize the intensified sensuality of *Son of Saul* in relation to current trends in mainstream cinema is the notion of "immersion cinema" (Recuber 2007). Recent changes in projection technology and theatre architecture focus on the importance of the physical and kinesthetic experience of the spectator immersed in high-fidelity audio-visual technologies. These technologies can be characterized as attempts to create believable sensorial experiences even if such experiences are not possible in the real world. This approach concentrates on the technological side of the question, such as the invention of new technologies of 3D recording and projection, improvement of sound systems, screening shapes and formats. According to Tim Recuber, mingling the technology produced illusion and the sense of realistic experience in immersion cinema produces a very dangerous mixture that re-contextualizes the concept of authenticity: the viewer has the impression that a depiction of history is authentic because the technology makes it possible to simulate "the experience of being there."[4] Immersion cinema does not deal anymore with such shady tools of uncertain effectiveness as a good script, talented acting or directing, rather it leans on the calculated, predictable effects provided by technology. As a consequence, the ideology of passive, commercial viewership is strengthened, while the social and artistic agency of cinema is diminishing (Recuber 2007, 316).

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4   Recuber's example here is *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) (cf. Recuber 2007, 326).

When speaking about immersion, Walter Benjamin and others used the concept in a metaphorical sense and referred to the emotional and intellectual immersion of the perceivers of art. Today, metaphysical immersion is replaced by the mesmerizing effects of technology (Recuber 2007, 320). "[T]his new, physically enveloping approach to film turns even the most harrowing tales of war's dangers into spine-tingling experiences, making brutal aspects of history fun in the same way that a particularly scary or intense rollercoaster ride is fun." (Recuber 2007, 327.) This excessively technical approach to movie experience seems to bring about the disappearance of socially important topics while replacing active viewer participation with a passive, consumerist approach.

The concept of *Son of Saul* is interesting from this perspective as well. On the one hand, it deals with a historically, socially important topic that is concerned with the politics of remembering, but on the other hand, it builds on the strategies of immersion cinema. The difference between the sensual immersion of *Son of Saul* and the Hollywood blockbusters of immersion cinema might be summarized in connection with the obscurity/uncertainty discussed above. Immersion cinema aims to create a perfectly "narrativized perspective" and "psychological realism" (Branigan 2010, 55), while *Son of Saul* creates a perceptual realism that lacks perfection, but somehow seems to tear the texture of fiction, and gives the impression that we are able to witness "The Real." And sound plays a peculiar role in this experience since, as Christian Metz notes, "auditory aspects, providing that the recording is well done, undergo no appreciable loss in relation to the corresponding sound in the real world: in principle, nothing distinguishes a gun shot heard in a film from a gunshot heard on the street" (Metz is quoted by Branigan 2010, 45). Hence, for Metz, a particular film sound, when believed by an auditor to be typical of such sounds, renders original acoustic situation that created it during filming irrelevant. In this sense, nothing distinguishes the death screams in *Son of Saul* from the screams heard in the gas chambers. "Even in the darkest hours of mankind there might be a voice within us that allows us to remain human. That's the hope of this film." – said director László Nemes in his Oscar acceptance speech. Finally, *Son of Saul*, not least by giving sound such an important role throughout the film, might be able to give voice to the sound of conscience.[5]

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5   In different languages there are many metaphors that connect sound and conscience, see: Dolar 2006, 83.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. Haptic images are often blurred.

Figure 2. Reduced point of view and consistent use of shallow focus.

Figure 3. He seems to return to being a breathing, living human being.

Figure 4. The smoke blocks the vision of horror and makes it impossible to be recorded in a photograph.

Figure 5. Ash is filling the air.

Figure 6. The penetrating smell had become one of the most basic experiences of the victims.