A *Punctum* Scene in *Shoah*

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, in a filmed scene, someone betrays what is really going on in them, and such moments of self-betrayal are without exception fascinating. They form, in my view, cinematographic analogues to what Roland Barthes calls *punctum*, that aspect or power of a photograph in virtue of which some connection with reality suggests itself irrespective of the photo's subject-matter, pricking the viewer. I agree with Barthes that something in the viewer is required for the uptake of *punctum*, but think that he is unduly idiosyncratic about this, which may be due to the fact that he is speaking only of photographs. He thinks certain objects in the photos prick him by mobilizing an association from his own life.

Considering scenes in films, rather than photos, gives priority to persons, rather than objects, as the locus of *punctum*. Here too, a viewer's response is required for the uptake of the *punctum* aspect: one person's self-betrayal depends on another person's subjective understanding of

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gestures and facial expressions. The only thing required is a capacity widely shared, empathy, rather than a private association.

The scenes I am interested in are based on documentary films. We are witnessing peculiar facts about some individual's behavior—history, according to Aristotle—but these facts have the universal scope that Aristotle attributes to poetry. But here historical events provide insights as universal as poetry's. I argue that *punctum* scenes in documentary films are halfway between art and history, on Aristotle's understanding.

Recognizing someone's self-betrayal assumes that we have a good sense of them, which sense must be provided in the scene, or its cinematic context, available to all. Our interest is not historical or journalistic, but, rather psychological and—since we are talking about film—artistic. We are not simply collecting facts about the person, but understanding what type of person they are. My case of self-betrayal comes from *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann's documentary masterwork, but first let us look at Aristotle's distinction between art and history.

Aristotle's Universal Poetic Knowledge

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle lauds poetry for its power to deliver universal philosophical truths. History, in contrast, only tells us of things that incidentally happened. Interestingly, the universal truths of poetry concern what particular people think and do in particular circumstances. Aristotle's formulation is well-chosen:

> By universal truths are to be understood *the kinds of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation*; and this is the aim of poetry, although it gives individual names to its characters. (Aristotle, 1986, 1451b6–1451b10, my emphasis)

There are at least two ways to interpret Aristotle's claim. One is that some particular work, say, *Sophie's Choice*, is about one mother but there are many more Sophies; the film presents one, portraying many. This interpretation treats the film as making a general claim about the inhumanity of the choice she is forced to make in a split second, comparable to a universalization in ethics. Ethical universalization requires that you leave out the peculiarities of a situation to find its ethical core, to compare it to similar situations and discern the relevant ethical principle. Such universalization

involves one in *abstracting* from the particulars in the concrete case, which seems rather inappropriate in regard to works of art—or real-life behavior.

The other interpretation derives a universal truth, in contrast, precisely from the particular details of the situation as they are presented in the work. In art, we do not step away from the particular, but follow it through. It is not just the fact that Sophie is forced to choose between her children. The merit of the film derives from all the details Sophie is confronted with and the psychological and phenomenological plausibility of her responses to them.

This way of understanding the universal in fiction is as a truth about a particular person's behavior in a particular situation. Viewers experience this particularity and understand the predicament of one particular person in these circumstances. The universal knowledge conveyed by a work of art concerns the full truth—one wants to say—about one character's behavior. In real life, too, such truths about all the details of actions might be produced, as well, however hard they may be to retrieve.

A tragedy concerns one action, 'complete in itself', Aristotle says (Aristotle, 1986, 1448a1–18). Yet Oedipus, for instance, is depicted as fleeing his alleged parents, killing a man (his real father), answering the riddle of the sphinx, entering Thebes, and then marrying Jocasta (his real mother), and then gouging out his eyes. How is that a single action? we might ask.

Well, they all acquire a singular meaning as constituents of Oedipus' response to the forecast of the Delphic oracle. Everything Oedipus does is connected psychologically in this peculiar history—of subjective acts and experiences—that defines him. (Rorty, 1992) The result is universal *particular* knowledge of 'the kinds of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation'. The type of person is not a Platonic category (man, woman, child, farmer) but a person fixed so to speak by everything influencing his choices, and by how these choices make him the person he is. Individuals are defined by their specific responses to everything. You are what you do, but why do you do these things?

Arguably, Aristotle's view applies to all the narrative arts. But there is a sense in which it applies even more to film. Due to the technological nature of cinema films present the specific details of situations by way of real details in front of the camera. Moreover, a scene in a film might provide more details than a poem could, of the situations in which Oedipus, to stick with our example, makes his mistakes, and might show more of

their psychological reality. The details that a fiction film presents us with establish that what happens to the protagonist is phenomenologically, psychologically, and rhetorically plausible in such a way that the protagonist's subjective history in its various contexts adds up to the one action that the film is about.

I want to concentrate on this role of particularity in art. Fiction film is, and offers, a form of understanding of a character's behavior. The more phenomenological the knowledge a fiction film delivers, and the more it conveys its story through what happens before the camera—instead of imposing a narrative onto the events for the sake of a message—the more authentic it is. (See van Gerwen, 2018, pp. 175–200.)

How to acquire this understanding other than by following through, in perception, the aspects of a situation or event as they are presented in the film? We track their development in the narrative, as this delivers the psychological coherence of the character. If you get all the details right you get the individual right, they become a person, in the sense of being psychologically and phenomenologically plausible, and authentic, instead of a mere token of a type (a flat character).

In a documentary scene of self-betrayal, all of this seems present by accident. Someone does something and in doing it betrays something about himself he may have wanted to hide. We only find examples of personal self-betrayal in documentary footage where real events are somehow caught unawares. In fiction films, there are so many ways of playing, of actors' behaving on and for the screen, that it is impossible to unearth examples of personal self-betrayal. Viewers lack the means to sort this out, because actors are *always* playing roles. They also know about the camera's power to discern and reproduce any flaws in their acting. So if an actor inadvertently betrays some inner turmoil in front of the camera it may simply be a matter of their awareness of the presence of the camera.

PUNCTUM SCENES

Punctum is an element of depicted situations that somehow stands out from the narrative in the picture. 'A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (Barthes, 2000, §10, p. 27). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes explains a photo's *punctum* as consisting of some idiosyncratic association caused by something real in the photo, unintentionally there. One example he discusses is a photo by Andre Kertész: *The Violinist's Tune*. Abony, Hungary, 1921. Barthes'

'thinking eye' adds: 'I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels in Hungary and Rumania' (Barthes, 2000, §19, p. 45). The dirt road is the photo's *punctum* that takes him back to his travels. The narrative, the subject or topic—which Roland Barthes calls the *studium*—seems to fit the photographer's intentions with the photo, but the *punctum* somehow escapes that. Later, he clarifies this unintended accident of *punctum*: '(how could Kertész have "separated" the dirt road from the violinist walking on it?)' (Barthes, 2000, §20, p. 47).

Another example is *Family Portrait* by James van der Zee, 1926. (Barthes, 2000, p. 44). Barthes is pricked by a belt worn low by the woman with her arms crossed behind her back, but most of all by her 'strapped pumps'. Barthes remarks that his interest has nothing moral to it—it is not related to the *studium* of the photo, which induces his sympathy for these people dressed in their Sunday best. Later he realizes he misidentified this photo's *punctum*, the thing that makes the photograph so intriguing for him. It has all along been the pearl necklace the woman is wearing, which brings him to an aunt of his who wore a similar necklace. So something in the viewer's psychology decides about the *punctum* thing in the photo.

Barthes also reports that he is seeking a good photograph of his recently deceased mother from a large batch of family photos (Barthes, 2000, §45). It takes a while before he comes up with the one photo that in his view shows the *air* of his mother, her typical posture. In this photo she is standing in a winter garden. But she is only six years old. What is this thing that he recognizes in her posture?

> This something is the *air* (the expression, the look). The *air* of a face cannot be decomposed. … All the photographs of my mother which I was looking through were a little like so many masks; at the last, suddenly the mask vanished: there remained a soul, ageless but not timeless, since this air was the person I used to see, consubstantial with her face, each day of her long life. Perhaps the air is ultimately something moral, mysteriously contributing to the face the reflection of a life value? (Barthes, 2000 §45, 107, 109–110)

In sum, according to Barthes, *punctum* is an effect produced by a particular object or objective property that reminds one of something from one's own past. The viewer must add something from another context, something they already know, and this is why *punctum* 'pricks' their

imagination. It is a synecdoche (or *pars-pro-toto*) but one mediated by a personal memory. Although everyone might notice the detail in the photo it is not evident that everyone would also recognize its wider reference. Does it not depend on what the viewer must already have available, like Barthes' 'long-ago travels in Hungary and Rumania', or his aunt's necklace? Understanding it in this way turns *punctum* into a kind of correspondence whose truth cannot easily be established. Is *this correspondence* even there, in the picture?

Barthes takes the recognition of *punctum* in some photo as an effect of studying photos, a criterion of success satisfied only contingently and subjectively. This may have had value for him for liberating him from the clutches of semiotic theory. In contrast, I think that for it to be of genuine philosophical interest, the *punctum* would need to be available in the picture for others too. It must involve something that can be perceived by others, for the *punctum* as such to be an aspect of the picture. Barthes is right to point out that even an idiosyncratic *punctum* is an interesting phenomenon. But I think there is more to it. Photographs as such are isolated still pictures, slices of events brought to a stop, which makes it hard to ward off Barthes' idiosyncratic subjectivism.

In films, however, such technically produced images come in sequences which reproduce meanings that may have been present in the event depicted. I focus on scenes where reciprocal interaction is shown as a process, which can rescue punctum from this idiosyncrasy. Hence the philosophical interest of *punctum* scenes. *Punctum scenes* in moving pictures concern gestures, actions, expressive bodily movements, and, what's more, their authenticity or inauthenticity. What pricks me here somehow mobilizes my prior acquaintance with such authentic or inauthentic gestures and movements, and I assume that this goes for all of us in some measure, since we are all human. Everyone has this capacity of empathy, which allows us to get 'pricked' by a *punctum* scene and to supplement the subjective bit that *punctum* scenes seem to require.

Why are the scenes that I have in mind, of which I will only discuss one, below, samples of *punctum*? This is, I think, because they exemplify something besides the narrative—Barthes' *studium*—which punctures that narrative. For me, too, the trigger is subjective. But it is my body's memory of expressive movements, that through mimicking, adds its own bodily understanding. *Punctum scenes* are about human behavior, not just objects. Indeed, they help us recognize our own human behavior.

Movements

So, like Barthes, I too start from some subjective event that apparently suggests something important in a picture. It is a physical memory of some gesture or look, that I cannot bring home, though I could mimic it. The memories are of gestures in some film. They colonize my thought until I succeed in identifying the films they are from. And the question is: do these scenes provide their profound insights through some correspondence with reality or is it some peculiar sensitivity of mine that opens up my perception to something inhering in the imagery that is not in the storyline? Is it not simply my idiosyncratic association that takes me there, but, rather, my veridical perception, which presumably can be shared? My test is whether I can make other viewers see it, too.

Films can sometimes have a funny kind of influence, on me at least. It is the ways the actors move, the aspect of their existential reality which they cannot but bring to, and imbue their characters with, and which sometimes transfer to me too. I did not realize the extent to which life under lockdown made me stop matching my movements to those of people around me. For months on end, I moved identically through the rooms and corridors in my house undisturbed by others. Isolation removed every surprise factor of normal everyday life and as a consequence, nothing relativized and even 'recalibrated' my own movements—insignificant and plain though they are for me, not to mention, boring, one might add. Realizing this made me think of something Robert Bresson quotes from Montaigne: '*Every movement reveals us*' (Bresson, 2016, p. 83). If movements reveal us, this is certainly a social fact—and it is connected with the movements of the others as well, with this synchronizing. Covid boredom made me realize that I missed the synchronization of my own movements and those of other people. The films I viewed while home alone, however, made me move differently—literally. I found myself copying the movements of the actors, even though within minutes I would notice the change this wrought in me, and stopped doing it: 'I don't move like that, that is not me'. Perhaps too, this is what triggers my subjective recognition of *punctum* scenes. Bresson remarks:

> Every movement reveals us (Montaigne). But it only reveals us if it is automatic (not commanded, not willed). (Bresson, 2016, 83)

Though Bresson uses this argument to legitimate his acting strategy—actors should not play but be themselves, like a painter's models—it helps me to better understand how our movements are a kind of social mechanism that do not merely require our authenticity, but reveal it.

But what if I am merely projecting some idiosyncratic association? It is clear that my suggestions are not objective claims whose truth can be proven by some further objectivist description, nor are they meant as such. This concession forms part of the background of this essay. Subjective properties and aspects of the world and of events are indeed subjective—they cannot be provided by some supposed objectivist methods. But these subjective elements of the world are real nonetheless, and they are shared among subjects. (See Nagel, 1979) Therein lies their significance and normativity. Perception is normative and this is not merely due to the objectivity of its claims. In the case of subjective properties, that require a shared history of subjective events, this normativity requires that these subjective events are shared among perceivers. In the following example from *Shoah* we do not merely see the one protagonist that I concentrate on below, but a whole crowd responding, as one, to the things that are said, and this, we shall see, connects *punctum* scenes with Aristotle's view on universal, particular philosophical knowledge, in its second interpretation.

So far, I submitted that in documentaries people may sometimes betray themselves through gestures and facial expressions, which may be registered by viewers through their mimicking those movements. These movements reveal who one is (Bresson), providing a physical counterpart to the universal knowledge Aristotle expects from poetry. Only this time this occurs in filmed real events, not fictional ones. Through our bodily mimicking these moments of self-betrayal prick the viewer, like Barthes' *punctum*.

Shoah: Srebnik and Kantarowski

'Simon Srebnik surrounded by villagers from Chelmno outside the church' is an episode from *Shoah*, with Simon Srebnik, who returned to Chelmno for the first time since his deportation in the early 1940s, for the sake of this meeting (Fig. 14.1). About Srebnik, Claude Lanzmann, the documentary filmmaker, says:

> During the night of January 18, 1945, two days before Soviet troops arrived, the Nazis killed all the remaining Jews in the "work details" with a bullet in

Fig. 14.1   Simon Srebnik and, behind him, a nervous Kantarowski

the head. Simon Srebnik was among those executed. But the bullet missed his vital brain centers. When he came to, he crawled into a pigsty. A Polish farmer found him there. The boy was treated and healed by a Soviet Army doctor. A few months later Simon left for Tel Aviv along with other survivors of the death camps. I found him in Israel and persuaded [him] to return with me to Chelmno. He was then forty-seven years old. (Lanzmann, 1985a, pp. 3–4)

In the episode, Srebnik is shown standing in front of the local church amidst the inhabitants who are being interviewed about what happened when the Jews were deported and murdered by the SS. Lanzmann talks to the assembled people, through his translator, asking them detailed questions such as, 'Why were the Jews assembled in the church,' and 'Where were they standing?'.

In the morning they were taken into the woods in very big armored vans.

> The gas came through the bottom … *They all knew these were death vans, to gas people?* Yes, they couldn't help knowing. (Lanzmann, 1985a, p. 97)

And so on. The people fill in the details: The Jews were rich, they hid money and diamonds in the 'false bottoms of their pots'. Lanzmann keeps asking for more details: What did they hear exactly? and so on. They needed about fifty trucks to take all the Jews.

In the film, the episode starts with a man—whom we are later introduced to as Mr. Kantarowski—singing and playing the organ in the church, throned high above the congregation but hidden from their sight. We see from his posture that he is aware of the camera, though we are not really paying much attention to the fact of his awareness. Kantarowski looks down on the congregation in the church whilst playing (for) them—through the sounds of the organ and his singing. *He* carries the service, rather than the priests, or so his posture suggests.

Once the service is done, Kantarowski joins the people in front of the church who are already talking to Lanzmann. Almost instantly, Kantarowski is seen gesturing nervously, moving so much that it attracts our attention. Then he steps forward, and plants himself squarely in front of the camera, blocking our view of Simon Srebnik. Kantarowski obliterates Chelmno's only surviving Jew by over-enthusiastically stepping in front of him, in full view of the camera.

He solemnly reports that he had heard of a rabbi from Mindjewyce, near Warsaw, who had reminded the Jews assembled by the SS in the square before him, that it says in the Bible that the Jews had cried out that 'His blood cometh over us'. Kantarowski adds that Pilate had said that they were killing an innocent man, and concludes: 'It was God's will'. And the crowd explicitly goes along with that conclusion. One woman steps forward from the crowd, too, seeming rather angry. (See Fig. 14.2) She explicitly repeats the Pilate scene from the Bible, and concludes, 'The Jews cried out: "Let his blood fall on our heads!" That's all; now you know!'

Kantarowski's report may be true. The rabbi probably did say such things. But why does Kantarowski say this, and why did the rabbi speak as he did? The rabbi most probably thought that it would be better if the Jews did not protest against the unfolding events as they would risk being killed on the spot, leaving no hope at all of escaping harm. But Kantarowski seems to regard the event as proof that even the Jews themselves thought they deserved what was happening to them. Irrespective of what they expected, it was by now evident to everyone that they would not survive.

Fig. 14.2   The angry woman and Kantarowski 'washing' his hands in innocence

Lanzmann assembled the villagers in front of the church to meet the returning Srebnik, and to inquire what they remembered of the past events. Against this background, Kantarowski's report seems rather out of place. And he underscores the fact that it was the rabbi who said it, not he himself, and that he certainly did not think they deserved to be killed. Again, then, why recount the rabbi's words? In one go, he attempts to clear both himself and the villagers of any responsibility for what happened to the Jews.

When the woman repeats Kantarowski's point, that the Jews were killing an innocent man, we see Kantarowski, next to the woman, wringing his hands as though he, too, is washing them in innocence, just as Pilate did literally.

> Pilate … took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I
> am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. (*The Bible*, Matthew,
> xxvii. 24)

But then we notice that Kantarowski realizes what he is doing and corrects
himself by making it look like his hands are cold and he is wringing them
for warmth. And then we see him decide that there is no need for this
charade, and resume wringing his hands. He has just exculpated his fellow
villagers.

To finish off, Lanzmann zooms in on the face of Srebnik expressing in
his look an understanding of what has just happened. Lanzmann's narra-
tive interest requires him to explicitly turn the imagery into a message. But
it is by a sheer cinematographic accident that Lanzmann records how, in
the present, another Jew is betrayed. We can actually see in the *punctum*
of the footage *how* this is happening. What we see is how people are. The
scene shows what all people, in some measure at some time, do or would
have done. We see the phenomenology of our psychology, just the kind of
universal knowledge that interests Aristotle, illustrated in the behavior of
one man.

The scene as a whole, also, exemplifies beautifully how Lanzmann suc-
ceeds in recording the advent of so-called historical sensations through the
testimonials of the witnesses. The notion of 'historical sensation' is pro-
posed by Johan Huizinga, who advises historians to visit the geographical
site involved in the history they are analyzing, so as to get a feel of the situ-
ation. Similarly, Lanzmann brings the witnesses he interviews into situa-
tions resembling those they are going to talk about. Srebnik and the
villagers stand on the exact same spot, in front of the church, where the
Jews were assembled; and he asks the villagers to recount details that will
transport them to the past. In another period in the film, Lanzmann talks
with Abraham Bomba, a barber who is recounting what happened when
he had to cut the hair of women *in the gas chamber* in Treblinka, where
they were about to be gassed, which he knew but they did not. Lanzmann
interviews Bomba in a barbershop in Tel Aviv, and asks him at one point
to show the moves he made when cutting the women's hair, and so on.
The witnesses physically feel the horrors they are recounting, in their
movements, because in part they are in similar circumstances, and are
aware of this. Historical sensations, I submit, are conveyed in documenta-
ries in *punctum* scenes.

In the present case, the people in front of the church are physically and psychologically transported back to those moments when the Jews were driven away in gas trucks. The older villagers have returned to their past and the younger ones pick up on this through the older ones' expressions and body language. Srebnik, too, is feeling as lonely and betrayed as he must have done back then. And we are witnessing all this *in actu*. We are not being told this, but we see, in the images, how in the current situation moral betrayal arises, and that it consists in an inauthenticity that shows in gestures and facial expressions, for all to notice. In the episode, one person's inauthenticity is shown helping others accept their own.

BACK TO ARISTOTLE

My fascination with *punctum* scenes is also connected to the fact that, initially, they are hard to identify. This, we know now, is due to the fact that *punctum* details lack their own narrative structure. As an unanalyzable expressive aspect of physical movement, they are harder to remember or to hold on to. I remember them through the inauthentic gestures that inadvertently I mimic in my imagination.

These associative mnemonic episodes which, often, I cannot easily bring home, are not exceptions to my normal perceptual encounters. We see properties, events, people, and objects all day long and nearly always understand what they are, and what they afford or do not afford us to do with them—if not instantly then within seconds. But once we understand the details we simply move on and use the perceived as we anticipated. You enter a room, looking for a chair, and once you have found one, you sit on it, and forget about it. And then sometimes something comes to mind that we don't know where from, nor what it means. Kantarowski's gestures obsessed me initially not as clear and meaningful images but as movements with a certain coherence that my body was inclined to mimic intuitively. It is the search for the reality and the meaning of that coherence that guided me to their origin.

Are there real-life analogues to *punctum* scenes in films? When I was pondering about non-actors playing a role who thus betray both themselves and their audiences, an episode from my own life came to my mind. I was with P. who had retrieved a copy of his latest book from his publisher and sold it to me. When I handed him the money I made a sniffing sound with my thumb under my nose as though suggesting he had just sold me some coke. Just a sick joke, I thought, assuming that P. would join me in

laughing. Instead, he snorted 'Don't be impertinent'. I did not understand this anger, and did not know how to respond to it except by falling silent and switching to another subject. I had no clue what had gone wrong and hadn't had the slightest intention to offend him. Later I realized that the joke I made was of a type an old friend of mine and myself would standardly have great fun with. Possibly, P. had a history of drug use and, in his view, I had confronted him with this in plain sight. And why was I shocked at his response? Because I realized that the joke was not mine to begin with but my youthful friend's. I made it in bad faith.

I could choose to argue that perhaps my sensitivity for *punctum* scenes stems from an acquaintance with inauthentic situations like this. They psychologically dispose me, so to say, to immediately recognize the slightest hint of betrayal: my own or others'. I guess that must be true, but I refuse to think it is something peculiarly mine. Being human equips us all with this capacity. This is unlike the necklace that pricked Barthes: though everyone may notice it in the photo they will not all have memories about it as Barthes did.

Human gestures, and therefore events such as the one with P., are integral to life. Self-betrayal oozes out of all pores, said Freud. And so does authenticity or inauthenticity. This is the stuff that interpersonal relations are made of, and that a species such as ours depends on. If we can inadvertently betray our authenticity, we can also, at other times, communicate it—in both cases, gestures and facial expressions do the work, rather than the specific things we say. And the anecdote with P. shows something else: that such situations can be painful for all involved. One gets caught for being inauthentic. Isn't this the existential core of shame?

In this incident, everything fitted my mistake like a glove—not that I have established that here, but it is how I remember it (which is how memory works). That is why it sticks with me, possibly due to the fact that it exemplifies so much of the way I lead my life. The incident is not far-fetched. It is one example of one part of that singular action, as yet unknown, that characterizes my life, symptomatic of the possibility of Aristotle's universal particular knowledge.

I definitely also felt inauthentic for some deeper reason—I felt that I had hurt my friend by being out of character and telling a joke for social reasons. This was not an example of *punctum*, obviously, since it is not reproduced here. But such scenes from reality could somehow have been captured in *punctum* scenes. So we must distinguish these real-life examples from fictional tragedies.

In film, art and history sometimes come as one: the reality of historical anecdote and the universal insight provided by something *made*, a representation. Film shows that the cleft between poetry and history may not be as steep as it was for Aristotle; if only the historical representation gives us the phenomenological details, as it may accidentally do, in some documentary scene.

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