

Visualizing Intergenerational Holocaust Memory through *Tsakalos Blues*

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Yara Haskiel's 2014 documentary film *Tsakalos Blues*' uses of reanimation, strategic framing and foci, interviews, and montaged media illuminate structures of intergenerational trauma and memory. *Tsakalos Blues* visualizes the power of postmemorial documentary storytelling as a tool for reclaiming narratives by reanimating family narratives centered around migrating Holocaust memories. In *Tsakalos Blues*, photography and sound mimic the structures and manifestations of trauma and memory – sometimes jarring, shattered, loud, unexpected, while at other times quiet and subtle.

Photography takes on diverse and distinct meaning in *Tsakalos Blues*. Photographic stills of different parts of Germany, Israel, and Greece as well as family photographs, in both color and black and white continue to appear, drawing our attention to the fact that what we are watching is constructed, like all stories and versions of history. Beyond bringing our attention to the constructed nature of the documentary film, the multilayered media cause viewers to migrate across different time periods and spaces as well as move between personal and collective memories. As film scholar Ute Holl posits, the movement from color to black-and-white in film is often associated with transitions between historical depictions,

memories, dreams and/or fantasy.¹ Furthermore, Holl suggests that temporal transformations can be achieved by a change of material from color to black and white. Indeed, the different colored and black and white stills as well as moving images from embedded footage from interwoven super eight diaries and footage of Krishna Murti blend Haskiel's family's memories with cultural memories and critical messages from across the globe. *Tsakalos Blues* also questions the role of photography by filming people taking lots of photographs at the Dachau concentration camp. Because these people's focus is on the photographs they are taking rather than concentrating on connecting, in an unmediated way, with the material remains at the camp, the camera creates a border between the visitor and the traumatic history they encounter there. Rather than serving as a vehicle for witnessing, the role of the camera here becomes a barrier. Thus, the camera detracts rather than aids in witnessing at the site of historical atrocity.

Cacophonous dramatic soundscapes and blurred visuals mimic structures of trauma. Trauma, which often surfaces and subsequently gets expressed through belated gestures and unexpected mannerisms is demonstrated through visual and verbal noise in *Tsakalos Blues*. The loud soundscapes played while different pieces of text relay information to us – such as different belongings like Haskiel's

¹ Holl, Ute. 'Nostalgia, Tinted Memories and Cinematic Historiography: On Otto Preminger's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958)' in *Palgrave Macmillan memory studies*, edited by K. Neimeyer. 2014: 160-175.

grandparent's knife and ring, the locations, dates, and circumstances of different family members – bring to life the chaotic and traumatic memories that each of these objects and moments carry with them. As trauma theorist Cathy Caruth explains, trauma is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time.² The cacophonic sounds which make threatening suspenseful noises sonically demonstrate the structure of trauma as do the multiple instances of all black and blurry visuals.

The metafictional moments in *Tsakalos Blues* reveal the constructed and subjective nature of documentaries and the process of working through intergenerational Holocaust memory. Beyond including Haskiel's own responses to questions posed by her father and uncles, by including footage which shows their microphones and the film camera, viewers are reminded time and again of the constructed nature of the documentary as well as the physical and emotional labor and baggage that goes into making it and struggles that sometimes arise in the process. These struggles are further seen when Haskiel and her father try and visit the home he grew up in in Munich and are met with skepticism and racism from the person who currently lives there. Rather than becoming upset by not being allowed to enter the apartment he once lived in or being thrown off by the current

² Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

tenant expecting him to know a family who had lived in the building back when he was a child, Haskiel's father cracks a joke that he will be famous because this film will be shown widely.

The interviews in *Tsakalos Blues* shed light on different generational relations to the memory of the Shoah and sites of atrocity. Second generation descendant Solomon reflects that he cannot go to the concentration camps even though his children do. Then Haskiel's uncle, also from the second generation, shares that his parents did not speak about what happened in the concentration camps, the subject was a taboo in his home. The silence from survivors and respect of that by the second generation is common. We are given a lens through which to comprehend the third generation's relations to the memory of the Holocaust through Haskiel's words and filmmaking. Specifically, Haskiel's response to her father asking if she feels burdened by her connection to this difficult family history, illuminates her motivation for making the documentary itself. "I feel more injustice and sadness and wonder about the shame you carry and how you do not talk about this subject because you frame it as being not so important but I don't think you should go around with a bent posture burdened by this history." Finally, Haskiel's discussion with her father at the end of the film about the prevalence of anti-semitism across the globe and racism in Israel leaves the viewer with a multidirectional focus on injustice and discrimination in multiple societies and

shows how for the second and third generations, the postmemory of genocide can be transformed into action and resistance. The creation of Postmemorial art is a form of resistance against the pain of the Holocaust and against other present and future genocides.

Overall, *Tsakalos Blues* is a postmemorial project that re-animates the Haskiel family's Holocaust and migration history in aesthetically interesting ways that prompt viewers to reconsider the role that photography and sound play in remembering and re-articulating trauma. According to Marianne Hirsch, postmemory is a generational structure through which "descendants bear witness to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up".³ Hirsch describes descendants' experiences as "familial postmemory". This is the transmission of "traumatic knowledge and experience" from (grand)parents to children (106). These are "nonverbal and non-cognitive acts of transfer that occur most clearly within a familial space, often in the form of symptoms" (112). Hirsch has explored a wide range of ways later generations manifest imaginative investment, mourning, projection, and displacement through their photographic, literary, and artistic practices.

³ Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Through talking, documenting, and re-telling Haskiel's family narrative, a sense of liberation from the past, a kind of making space for it in the present through acknowledgment, dialogue, and looking at it, can help alleviate the weight of its indelible marks.