Which Narrative of Auschwitz?

A Narrative Analysis of Laurence Rees’s Documentary Auschwitz: The Nazis and ‘the Final Solution’

ANETTE H. STOREIDE

Introduction

The documentary *Auschwitz: The Nazis and ‘the Final Solution’* was aired on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The main topics of the series are, first, the planning and building of the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz and, second, the perpetrators’ motives; the latter is part of an attempt to explain why Auschwitz was built and made into “the site of the largest mass murder in history,” a statement often quoted throughout the series.

The creative director of the history programs at the BBC, Laurence Rees, wrote and produced this six-part documentary, a coproduction of the British BBC and the American KCET, an independent public television station. The American title of the documentary is *Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State*. Rees is also the author of the accompanying book *Auschwitz: The Nazis and ‘the Final Solution’*. A BBC survey presented as part of the press release before the airing of the documentary in 2005 stated that a large part of the British population knew little or nothing about Auschwitz and the Second World War (BBC Press Office). Thus, one expressed intention behind the documentary was to transmit knowledge of the Nazi mass murder to a broader and also younger audience.

The series is based on up-to-date research. The opening of the former Soviet archives, where among other aspects the complete building plans of
Auschwitz were discovered, has given historians new and important sources for research on the Second World War. This new knowledge is reflected in the series. A team of experts on the Holocaust, including the well-known historian Ian Kershaw, provided support and advice during production. As part of the documentary’s pedagogical aspect, Learning Resources were published on the Internet (http://www.pbs.org/auschwitz/).

The historical facts presented in the documentary were well known to historians when the series was broadcast in 2005. It can be viewed as a summary of the current research and knowledge of the Nazi persecution and mass extermination, with focus on the events in Auschwitz, available sixty years after the end of the Nazi era. Promoted as the “definitive screen history of the evolution of Auschwitz” in which “the reality of life in the camp is exposed in unflinching detail” (according to the text on the back cover of the DVD), the documentary contributed to making the latest historical research available to a wider public with no or limited academic interest in historical research on the Second World War. As the series was aired, it became very popular in several European countries. Although it may come as a surprise that a documentary on a historical subject would attract that much attention, the public’s interest in the Second World War and the Nazi regime has hardly faded, and the year 2005 also marked the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Nazi dictatorship. This essay will argue that the narrative strategies used by Rees to construct this narrative of Auschwitz—especially the implementation of dramatized scenes and the intensive emotional and dramatic aspect, which will be a main focus of the essay—may have contributed significantly to the documentary’s widespread success and made the history of Auschwitz and the Holocaust “available” to new generations of viewers. The application of these key narrative strategies, which are important pop-cultural features, may have promoted the emotional involvement and interest of a wider audience. Although Rees’s series proved successful, however, its effect was not comparable to that of the American TV series Holocaust (1978)—a hugely popular series that also introduced “the Holocaust” as a common term for the Nazi genocide. Furthermore, the two series differ significantly in the adaptation of historical reality (I will elaborate on this point later). While the American TV series does not present reenacted scenes, Laurence Rees’s series is presented as a documentary, but at the same time it contains a wide implementation of reenacted scenes and even credits a drama director. Thus, a major critical concern of this essay is the use and consequence of implementing reenactments in documentaries.

The possibility of establishing a narrative of a traumatic experience such as the Nazi mass murder has been widely discussed. Appropriating Jürgen
Habermas’s definition of the term “Holocaust” (Habermas, in Feuchert 5ff.), the thesis of the unspeakability of the Holocaust dominated philosophical and literary perspectives for many years. However, since the 1980s there has been a growing focus on memory, and the perspective of research on memory has turned from which memories are depicted to how memories are constructed. One of the main foci in research on testimonies of survivors in the last years concerns more how the memories are narrated and represented as text than which memories of persecution and imprisonment the survivors present. One of the initiators of this perspectival shift, Lawrence L. Langer, calls it the second phase of reaction to the Holocaust ("Die Zeit der Erinnerung" 53). The phase of questioning the representation is followed by a phase of analyzing the representation.

Responding to this new trend of research, this essay focuses on what narrative is presented of Auschwitz and how this narrative is presented. I thus use the inclusive definition of narrative given by Jens Brockmeier and Rom Harré, who consider narrative as an “ensemble of linguistic, psychological, and social structures, transmitted cultural-historically, constrained by an individual’s level of mastery and by his/her mixture of communicative techniques and linguistic skills” (41). I transfer this definition to filmic representation in which not only the verbal (spoken and written) discourse about the history of Auschwitz has to be considered, but also the complex combinations of images and sound (including music). I use this extended definition of narrative to emphasize that the historical, political, and cultural context of a narrative cannot be separated from the narrative itself. Each narrative is a social construction dependent upon the context of its narration, and Rees’s narrative of Auschwitz not only contains knowledge on the historical events in and concerning Auschwitz, but is also constructed under certain political and cultural conditions sixty years after the liberation of the camp and the capitulation of Nazi Germany. These aspects, and not only the facts about Auschwitz, also need to be considered in an analysis of Rees’s narrative.

Considering the series as an attempt to establish a narrative of Auschwitz sixty years after the end of the Nazi era, I will examine the combination of the images (photos, film, original recordings, dramatized scenes), music, interviews (with both surviving victims and perpetrators), and the speaking voices (both of the main narrator and of the interviewed persons). I will consider the filmic construction of the narrative by analyzing the narrative strategies, focusing mainly on the combination of documentary strategies and dramatization. Important questions include: Why does the director implement dramatizations in this attempted documentary? What effects do such strategies have in and on a documentary? Moreover, which situations
are being dramatized and which are not? The extensive use of dramatization in this series blurs the limit between documentary and historical drama. Main points argued in this essay are that the series therefore in many aspects can be interpreted as a “docudrama” and that its conception as a drama of this kind may have contributed significantly to its widespread international success.

The Narrative of Auschwitz according to Laurence Rees

Rees’s narrative contains six parts, each running approximately fifty minutes. The six parts are titled 1) “Surprising Beginnings,” 2) “Orders and Initiatives,” 3) “Factories of Death,” 4) “Corruption,” 5) “Frenzied Killing,” and 6) “Liberation and Revenge.” The narrative represents a temporal chronological construction mainly from April 1940 in Poland until approximately the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. The beginning is defined with the preliminary considerations of establishment of the camp. The end is less definite because it refers to various aspects of the postwar period and to what happened to some of the survivors without specifying the time of event. Recent retrospective reflections are incorporated into the narrative through the interviewees. In addition to this main focus, recent footage of Auschwitz and other sites and places—as well as recent interviews with perpetrators, victims, and others involved—represent a different time level as well as an aspect of topicality. The narrative switches in time mainly for two reasons: the pictures from “then” (both original and reenacted) and the interviewees. As we shall see, they are “telling and commenting” on the story in retrospect.

The first episode, “Surprising Beginnings,” presents the development of Auschwitz from April 1940 until the decision to build Birkenau in the winter of 1940–41. This part starts with the establishment of Auschwitz I through the decision to use existing barracks earlier used by the Polish army as a site of imprisonment for prisoners of war (POWs) and Polish political prisoners. Early in the program, the interest of the German company IG Farben, a chemical industry conglomerate, is presented in a dramatized scene that shows people visiting the site as part of an intended industrial expansion. The voice-over narrator issues a “warning”: the situation will get worse. It is clearly stated that the establishment of IG Farben and the war against the USSR resulted in a radicalization of the Nazi policies against the Jews and other victims. This part of the first episode also tells of the exploration of different ways of murdering prisoners, which led to the application of the gas
Zyklon B for mass killings. Although these historical facts may be expected to be part of “common knowledge,” the first episode is constructed around the presentation of basic information and the indication of later developments (“it gets worse”; “this came to be the site of the greatest mass murder”). Although dealing with what can be considered as well-known historical facts and events, the documentary’s attempts to trigger suspense through warnings, remarks, and hints of the advancing catastrophe are comparable to strategies routinely implemented in popular drama.

The second part, “Orders and Initiatives,” describes the development of the camp Birkenau from 1941 until the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942. This part shows that the combination of orders from above and initiatives from below led to the development of Auschwitz as a site of industrial genocide. The focus remains on what proved to be the preamble to industrial mass murder in Auschwitz–Birkenau: the ghetto of Łódź, Chelmno, and mass killings in Eastern Europe, as well as experiments on Soviet POWs in Auschwitz I. Part 2 ends by concluding that the phase of testing and experiments with gas ended in the early weeks of 1942. Now permanent buildings for gassing were constructed in Birkenau, and Jews from all Europe were to be brought there to be gassed. Parts 1 and 2 of the series thus describe the preparations leading toward the industrial genocide, and hence toward the so-called narrative peak.

“Factories of Death,” part 3, presents the widespread Nazi persecution of the Jews, leading to arrests and deportations even from remote parts of the occupied territories such as the British Channel Islands, the island of Corsica in the Mediterranean, and the city of Tromsø in Northern Norway. This third part of the documentary presents the camps of Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka as they operated in 1942. On the one hand, these camps are seen as preparing the ground for Auschwitz; on the other hand, they are said to come even closer to the “final solution” than Auschwitz because they were pure killing factories where 99 percent of the prisoners died within two hours of arrival.

The fourth part, “Corruption,” focuses on the “crucial phase of Auschwitz in 1943” as the camp developed into the “site of the largest mass murder in history”—a remark repeated several times throughout the series. Thus the emphasis is put on the result, the mass murder, rather than on the perpetrators or the victims. The year 1943 is described as the “bloom year for the Nazis,” presenting a grotesque contrast to the camp inmates’ horrific conditions. The development of sub-camps and the exploitation of the prisoners as slave labor in the armament industry are mentioned, but the main focus remains on the corruption in the camp, the Canada command (where the
belongings of the victims were sorted and stored), and the thefts among the SS guards and the soldiers.

Part 5, “Frenzied Killing,” presents the year 1944 as a period of massive extermination in Birkenau. This part marks the “peak” of the narrative: the industrial genocide, which has been announced several times in the preceding parts. Thus, the first four parts of the documentary illustrate the stages of the dynamic process of Birkenau’s development toward becoming the site of “the greatest mass murder.” In 1944 the construction of four large crematoria with gas chambers was completed, as well as the railway line leading directly into the camp. The result was that the mass murder could be carried out more effectively. Part 5 shows the year 1944 as marked by both the peak of the murders in Birkenau and the breakdown and chaos in the camp.

The sixth and last part of Rees’s narrative, “Liberation and Revenge,” presents the evacuation of Birkenau and the Soviet liberation of the camp on January 27, 1945, also applying archival footage. Main topics of the last part include the fighting in Berlin, the liberation of Bergen-Belsen (incorporating some of the original footage), the punishment of the perpetrators (e.g., Rudolf Höss), and survivors returning to their prewar homes.

**Significant Aspects of Rees’s Narrative**

When one is analyzing Rees’s narrative of Auschwitz, it is important to consider both what is told and what is not told. One important achievement of Rees’s narrative presentation is the correction of the stereotypical, popular, and static image of Birkenau through a sustained focus on the *phases* of genocide and the *process* that led to the genocide and transmitting this important point to a broader public. Placing Auschwitz I–III in the context of other camps, and illustrating the dynamic process of the Holocaust, the series thus provides a more nuanced view than stereotypical presentations, which tend to highlight the singularity of Auschwitz as the center of mass murder.

Rees’s presentation of Birkenau as one of the last camps with massive killing capacity has been interpreted as a correction of myth, but this knowledge has been an essential part of the “historians’ narrative” of Auschwitz and the Holocaust for several years (e.g., as presented in Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews*). However, Rees’s documentary series may have added this aspect to the “public or popular narrative” of the Holocaust, which has been dominated by a narrow-minded focus on Auschwitz as the singular, the unique, place of mass murder.
The enormous number of Nazi camps, especially in Eastern Europe, and the heterogeneity of the victims are two important aspects of the Holocaust that are often ignored. An asset of Rees’s documentary is its mediation of knowledge of death camps other than Auschwitz, and also of victims other than the Jews, because the Nazi genocide is often stereotypically reduced to the gassing of Jews in Auschwitz. For example, the fate of the European Gypsies is often forgotten in the public narrative of Auschwitz, and it is to Rees’s credit that he does not do so but instead pays close attention to the Porrajmos (the Nazi genocide of the Gypsies). An important part of the fifth installment presents the Gypsies killed in Birkenau: 20,000 out of 23,000 Gypsies brought to Birkenau were murdered. They “suffered more proportionally than any group apart from the Jews,” the documentary states. The Gypsy camp was destroyed in the course of one night in the night of August 2, 1944, when all remaining inmates were killed in crematorium V.

Part 2, for example, highlights topics that are controversial and parts of so-called grey zones in a moral narrative of right and wrong, of good and evil. These include the Jewish leadership forced to cooperate with the Nazis in running the ghetto of Łódź as well as the leader Rumkowski’s abuse of power, including deporting people who opposed him and sexually abusing female inmates. In this way the series makes us aware of difficult topics and questions that have often been repressed. Although these aspects hardly present new facts, to a large extent they have been taboo outside historical research.

The series also does important work in showing the problems that survivors faced when returning to their prewar homes in Eastern European countries, such as their frequent failure to regain their property and, incredibly, meeting widespread anti-Semitism. The persistent hatred against the Jews is presented as a problem especially for survivors in Eastern Europe. One may query, though, whether this was only a problem in Eastern Europe: it has been well documented that many returning prisoners faced the same problems in countries such as Norway, France, and the Netherlands. For example, not until the last ten years has there been any attempt to recognize the Norwegian responsibility for the deportation and extermination of the Norwegian Jews—only 34 out of 771 deportees survived—and not until 1997 did the Norwegian government pay compensation for confiscated Jewish property during the time of Nazi occupation (1940–45). Providing a striking contrast to the problems of many survivors, the documentary tells of the good life of many Nazi perpetrators in postwar Germany, for example, the interviewed Oskar Gröning who was an SS guard in Auschwitz. The Nuremberg Trial of Major War Criminals found the SS to have been a criminal orga-
nization. Like many other members of the SS, however, Gröning, although identified, was never punished for his actions. Focusing on events such as the Eichmann trial, this part of the series rightly stresses that most perpetrators, around 90 percent, were never put on trial. Surprising, though, is the focus on Rudolf Höss, who is presented in the series as the main persecutor, whereas Adolf Hitler and the other leading Nazis remain in the background. Nor does the series elaborate on the postwar reintegration of Nazis. In actual fact, most Nazis could continue their professional positions and personal lives after the downfall of the Third Reich without encountering great difficulties because of their Nazi past (Storeide 96ff.). In 1949 and 1954 West Germany adopted two acts: 1) the so-called amnesty laws, which promoted and reinforced the reintegration into society of a number of “minor offenders” and people with a Nazi past; and 2) the so-called 131 Act of 1951 that enabled many employees in the judiciary and public administration to continue their jobs despite their connections with the Nazi regime.

The word “beginnings” in the title of part 1 of Rees’s narrative suggests the establishment, initial experiments, and planning of Birkenau—the preparation of what was to become the largest industrial genocide the world has seen. But was it really surprising? The radicalism of Nazi ideology and actions against people considered “unworthy of life” was more than clear in 1940: the Nazi persecution of their political opponents started immediately after they gained power in January 1933; concentration camps had existed for seven years; the racial laws that established the legal basis for discrimination against and persecution of Jews were adopted in Nuremberg in 1935; and the killings of so-called disabled persons had been going on for a long time. Yet “surprising” may also refer to the fact that Auschwitz originally was established as a camp for Polish prisoners, and not for Jews, whereas Auschwitz today is most “famous” for being the site of the “largest mass murder of the European Jews.” However, establishing an important link between the Nazi mass murder program and the later mass murder with gas, part 1 also presents the beginning of the testing of gas for purposes of murder in barrack B11 in Auschwitz.

When a narrative of Auschwitz is constructed, it is also important to consider what is not included. A major weakness of Rees’s narrative is that it fails to appreciate the significant role of German industry in the Holocaust. The presentation of economic aspects of the Auschwitz camp complex focuses on the corruption and the thefts in the camp (part 4). The fourth part, which presents the year 1943, also concentrates on sexual abuse of female prisoners, on Mengele’s experiments performed on twins, and on the countries that did not cooperate in the deportation of Jews: Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, and especially Denmark. A major flaw of the narrative is that it does not
clearly show that the years 1943–44 were marked by a widespread cooperation between German industry, especially the armament industry, and many camps where prisoners were exploited as slave laborers. During these two years, the net of sub-camps and satellite camps where prisoners had to work as slaves expanded fast. Even though the role that IG Farben played in establishing Auschwitz is stated in part 1, the company’s responsibility for the construction of this site of mass murder is to a large extent ignored in Rees’s narrative of Auschwitz. The industry’s contribution and the existence of Monowitz, a camp that operated in close relation with Birkenau, are hardly mentioned. The camp Monowitz is referred to only once, and then only in connection with the Allied bombing. Yet this camp was in charge of a large number of sub-camps where prisoners were abused as forced laborers; many of them died because of the inhuman working conditions. Rees’s failure to recognize the great impact that German industry exerted on the development of Auschwitz and other concentration camps may induce the viewer to consider Rees’s narrative as an acquittal of industry—industry that gained substantial benefits from the exploitation of inmates as slave labor and from extensive economic and industrial cooperation with the Nazi regime (Orth 48ff.; Zimmermann 730ff.). Since Rees’s narrative completely ignores the camps as sites of slave labor, it fails to bring out the close connection between the economic aspects and the mass murder that took place in the numerous Nazi camps. It also fails to question what German civilians knew of the ongoing political and racial persecution and genocide and the role that so-called ordinary people played in the Holocaust. The German interviewees are former soldiers and members of the SS; to give a broader presentation of the “German perspective,” Rees might also have interviewed German civilians such as housewives and children.

The Filmic Construction of a Narrative of Auschwitz

Important narrative aspects of Rees’s documentary are the use of contrasts, various narrative voices, and the implementation of dramatization and reenactments—strategies that may promote the emotional involvement and interest of a broader audience.

The Use of Contrasts

The application of contrasts represents an important strategy of narration in this documentary. The use of contrasts may promote the emotional involve-
ment of the audience and reinforce the impression of brutality and suffering. The main contrast lies between the lives of the perpetrators and those of the victims, that is, between life itself and the threat against and extermination of life. One significant effect of Rees’s use of this kind of contrast is to highlight the perpetrators’ brutality and careless attitude to the victims, including their pain and the terrible conditions they lived under. There is an enormous gap between the comfort of Höss and his family and the appalling conditions of the prisoners, between Höss’s apparently happy and peaceful family life and the experiments with gas, and between the singing at the perpetrators’ parties and the cruelty of the camps. Furthermore, the stories told reinforce the crucial contrast between the Nazis’ conspicuous lack of empathy and the suffering among the prisoners. This contrast is highlighted by using quotations from Rudolf Höss’s autobiographical report (which conveys his ignorance of the fact that his actions actually were crimes and that he committed crimes against humanity) as “comments” on the victims’ suffering, which is presented by either reenacted or original footage or interviews.

In some passages the documentary constructs contrasts by making surviving victims tell stories in which the brutality, dehumanization, fear, and suffering are opposed to the ignorance and neglect—and in many cases continuing anti-Semitism—of former perpetrators. One illustrative example is the presentation of mass executions of more than 10,000 Ukrainian Jews in August 1941 (part 1). In this scene there is a strong opposition between the surviving victim Vanyl Valdeman and the perpetrator Hans Friedrich. The interview with the former SS guard Friedrich, who took part in such mass shootings, makes abundantly clear that he is still an anti-Semite who even talks openly about his hatred against Jews. The image shifts from the interviewee Friedrich to reenacted images of soldiers, scenes in which shots can be heard, followed by images of cartridge cases falling down. One reason why focalization remains on the SS guards may be that most original footage approximates the perpetrators’ perspective as they are dealing with their victims. Here, however, the viewer can see the perpetrators in action. The reenacted footage then shifts to original footage of naked people before the execution squad and naked bodies in mass graves.

Telling about his participation in the execution, Friedrich states that he did not feel anything—he just focused on secure hits. When the female interviewer (whose voice we hear) asks him directly about his feelings, he repeats that he did not feel anything at all because of his lifelong hatred against the Jews. In his childhood, his family was cheated by some Jews, he says, and that is why he hates them. He confirms that the people he shot did not have anything to do with those who cheated his family. But they were Jews, and that is
why he did not feel anything, he concludes. As a contrast to this perpetrator’s lack of regret, the Jewish survivor Valdeman tells about his and his mother’s escape from the ghetto and their rescue by local villagers and about the extermination of the Jews in Eastern Europe. The contrast between the victim and the perpetrator, combined with the brutality of the images and the survivor’s story of the victims’ suffering, may serve to enhance the viewer’s emotional engagement. Similar constructed sequences are observable throughout.

The series implements interviewees from both sides, both victims and perpetrators. For many years it was a crucial point whether the perpetrators’ stories could be told in this way, without being contradicted. In Rees’s documentary the perpetrators are given the chance to tell their story without obstacles and, as I have shown with reference to Friedrich, may state their lack of regret. But the archival footage and the victims’ testimonies provide an effective contrast to the stories and attitudes of the perpetrators, highlighting them as grotesque.

In some cases the documentary contrasts the “then” of the Second World War and the “now” of the filmmaker and viewer. It contains scenes in which the horrible stories of what occurred in the camps represent a glaring contrast to the beautiful landscapes of the sites pictured today. This construction method is, for example, implemented in the presentation of the death camp Chełmno (part 2): A female survivor tells about the ghetto of Łódź, at the same time original footage is presented. Then there is a shift to reenactments of the Nazis’ planning of Chełmno; the planning of this extermination camp was the result of the overcrowding of the ghetto in Łódź and the need for more space. Rees presents a reenacted scene in which Herbert Lange, an SS officer who had been involved in the murder of disabled people in East Prussia and had participated in using gas vans for killings, is being driven in his car to his “new mission”; Lange talks about the tasks that await him. Then the narrator’s voice takes over, stating that the purpose of Chełmno was to exterminate Jews in order to create more space in Łódź and concluding that Chełmno was not the only such place at this time. Providing a thought-provoking contrast to this chilling story, the footage changes to images of the peaceful and beautiful scenery as it looks today. Stressing the inordinate brutality of the events, this shift in footage may reinforce the audience’s emotional engagement in the story. Thus, the recently recorded footage does not signal recovery, although the landscape obviously has recovered and the sites of the atrocities are no longer visible. Rather, it creates a feeling of a peaceful community whose life was abruptly ruined by the Nazis, thus accentuating the contrast between an innocent nature and the danger of fanatic culture. This strategy calls Claude Lanzmann’s masterpiece Shoah strikingly to mind,
although Lanzmann distanced himself from any implementation of dramatization in his documentary work.

Another narrative strategy of the documentary concerns oppositions between the images shown and the narrating voice, either that of the main narrator or that of one of the interviewees. This method is used, for example, at the beginning of part 3. The images show Paris, the Eiffel tower, German soldiers eating grapes, and people promenading. While a joyful French song is being played, the main narrator tells about the deportation of the French Jews; as he does so, the image changes to a recent picture of Paris by night. Then the perspective changes again as a female survivor is describing her own arrest in Paris. While her story is told, the image shown on the screen changes from Paris today to a dramatized scene of French policemen running upstairs to an apartment to arrest someone. The woman’s brother also serves as a narrator in this story. The topic is the arrest of Jews in France. The narrative strategy is a blend of stories told by survivors, original footage from the French camp Drancy, and reenacted scenes of arrests made by the French police. Contrasting with this deportation story, images show the happy life of German soldiers in Paris during the war and stereotypical, well-known images of Paris by night. A similar strategy is implemented in the story of the war in the Channel Islands (part 3). Presenting a holiday paradise, the footage establishes a stark contrast to the narrator’s and the witnesses’ stories about the registration and the deportation of local Jews in Guernsey.

The music applied, not only in these sequences but also throughout the series, may further and support the audience’s emotional engagement, not only through its recurrent theme, but also by means of modulations of light and heavy chords, reminding the viewer of marching soldiers. The music seems to be implemented in ways that support Rees’s elaborate use of contrasts. For instance, while the visual images of Paris at the beginning of part 3 are made more joyful by the accompanying happy music on the soundtrack, the story told elaborates on the tragic story of the deportation of Jews from France.

The Narrating Voices

Rees’s documentary contains a variety of narrating voices. I have mentioned Rees’s use of an unidentified narrator. Performing a key role in the documentary, this narrator has different functions. First, he serves as introducer, inviting the viewer into and guiding him or her through the documentary. Thus this narrator, whose narrative characteristics largely fit those of voice-
over, fills in the gaps between the images (both original and reenacted). Second, he comments on pictures we see and on stories we are being told (also by interviewees). Finally, he serves as the expert stating facts and statistics.

The interviewees have different roles too. When interviewed, the surviving perpetrators and victims are pictured sitting in a chair, shown from the waist-up and looking straight into the camera. In this way, they are, first, telling their stories when communicating “directly” with the viewer. Second, since their narratives are linked to the original or reenacted footage, the survivors serve as commentators on the images we see. This aspect of the interviewees’ narrative role is often contrastive because their stories are those of brutality and suffering while the footage shown may be peaceful images of the beautiful present-day landscapes today (cf. the discussion above of the filmic presentation of Chełmno). Third, the interviewees comment on their own stories or other events.

In some of the dramatized scenes the actors playing the historical characters speak as if history repeats itself in front of the eyes of the public. These dialogues and fragments of speech are partly based on historical documents such as reports and letters, partly constructed from what we know was the result of, for example, a meeting. The latter variant means that a fictional element has been added to the attempted documentary, because although the result of a meeting may be known, the discussions, gestures, and so forth, almost invariably remain in the dark. This does not mean that the presented stories are untrue, but it shows that elements of imagination are implemented in the documentary. Fiction (from the Latin noun *fictio* and the verb *fingere*, “to invent or construct”) is traditionally defined as any narrative invented by the author. Clearly, Rees did not invent the narrative of Auschwitz—it refers to historical facts and events. To a certain extent and in certain situations, however, fictional elements are implemented in Rees’s reenactments. They are no doubt based on facts, but because of the limited knowledge and lack of information of some situations, meetings, discussions, and so on, certain aspects have been invented and therefore represent fictional elements of the documentary, although they are constructed as close to the historical reality as possible.

The readings from Höss’s autobiographical report by an unknown voice are also part of the narrating voices. In Rees’s documentary, Höss’s report functions as a transmitter of facts, especially about Auschwitz and the events that occurred there. This kind of function is linked to, and supported by, the value and reliability of the information, which many historians attribute to the genre of memoir. In this particular case, however, it is questionable whether an autobiographical report can be identified as the truth or as a
reliable source of what actually happened, for the documentary also uses the report as evidence of Höss’ guilt as a perpetrator and as a contrast to stories told by victims. Considered as a contrastive narrative, the report represents an insensible and non-regretful speech given by one of the main perpetrators, who in Rees’s narrative functions as the main perpetrator of all the Nazis responsible for the Holocaust.

**Beginning and End**

The beginning and ending represent crucial aspects of any narrative. Rees’s documentary opens with a long shot of Birkenau today, showing a huge, almost empty landscape. Some barracks are still intact, some ruins remain, and it is green and quiet. This opening shot slowly blends into a dramatized computer-reconstructed image of how the camp looked when it was in operation during the Second World War. A narrative voice announces that “this is the story of the evolution of Auschwitz and the motives of the perpetrators.” The word “evolution” is somewhat unexpected given that it has various connotations, including that of “natural development,” whereas the development of Auschwitz was intentional and pursued by human beings, which is also one of the main points of Rees’s narrative. The camera’s focalization is comparable to the eye of the viewer. It takes the viewer down to the gas chamber, and the screen goes dark, as if the viewer is captured in the darkness of the chamber. This technique—which is similar to that of other scenes in which the camera’s perspective approximates that of the viewer, thus serving as the public’s eye—may create an emotional engagement and enhance the impact on the audience.

At the end of the last part of the series, there is a similar shot of the site of Birkenau today. The narrator announces that of the 1.3 million people sent to Auschwitz–Birkenau, 1.1 million were killed. Recent footage of the remaining railway tracks, the wood, the barracks, and the main entrance with its watchtower pass the screen while the narrator’s voice elaborates on the numbers of the different groups of victims. Dan Diner has argued that there can be no narrative of the Holocaust, only statistics (“Gestaute Zeit” 126; “Vorwort des Herausgebers” 9). As if to bear out this point, the main narrator of Rees’s narrative sums up the tragic statistics of Auschwitz. Then archival footage of Jews on the way to the gas chamber is presented, and a female survivor’s voice identifies her aunt with four children in the footage. In this way, the horror and immense dimension of Auschwitz and the Nazi genocide are personalized and taken into the context and narrative
of a family. The statistics contain someone’s aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and children. The narrative ends by focusing on Birkenau. The image changes again, presenting recent footage of the destroyed crematoria of Birkenau. Through computer graphics, this image changes to one computer-reconstructed image of a crematorium with a gas chamber reconstructed as one of the crematoria put into operation in 1944. Rees’s narrative of Auschwitz closes with the narrator’s voice stating that the ruins remain as a “reminder of what human beings are capable of”—Auschwitz was the result of an intended construction process and of the Nazis’ firm determination to exterminate millions of human beings.

Visual Aspects and the Use of Reenactments

The visual aspects of Rees’s documentary include, first, archival footage as expected of a documentary, a convention that Claude Lanzmann, among others, famously worked against in Shoah. Rees’s documentary features a collection of original recordings, both pictures and film, made by perpetrators, victims, and the Allied forces. Second, the documentary presents a surprisingly large number of dramatized scenes. The filmmakers seem to have been seeking to fill in the gaps in the narrative by incorporating reenactments of the “missing” sequences.

Holocaust documentaries have conventionally limited the representation to original recordings, material, and interviews with participants. They have strictly avoided dramatizations and fictionalizations often interpreted as strategies typical of the fiction film in opposition to documentary film. Since, as indicated already, Rees’s documentary makes extensive use of reenactments, important questions in my further analysis are: Why does Rees implement dramatizations in this attempted documentary and what effects do they have? Furthermore, which situations are being dramatized and which are not—what principle of selection is operative here?

An important aspect of the discussions of the Holocaust is whether and how this genocide can be represented. The so-called image ban or aniconism (Bilderverbot) implies that every imagination necessarily becomes a banalization and a twisting of the historical event (Oster and Uka 251ff.). Elie Wiesel and Claude Lanzmann are both prominent representatives of those who have connected the image ban on cinematic presentations with the aniconism of the Old Testament, and thus added restrictions on how the Holocaust can be represented as film. Wiesel has opposed any kind of fictionalization and dramatizations of the Holocaust (314). And Lanzmann
clearly turned against the use of both original photography and film footage and dramatized sequences when he made Shoah, a film also made as a response to the American television series Holocaust (1978). Lanzmann criticized the latter for its fictionalization that turned the Holocaust into a soap opera and represented a violation of the aniconism of the Holocaust (Reichel 295, 299). Shoah differs from most documentaries on the Second World War by its renunciation of both archival footage and reenactments. Concentrating on interviews with surviving victims, bystanders, and perpetrators, it consists solely of present footage of the sites the witnesses talk about.

Important questions concern which photos and images of the Holocaust can be presented and how the detailed descriptions of the Holocaust are deemed acceptable. An unwritten rule has been that the images should not be shown at the expense of the victims and should not satisfy the audience’s need or greed for sensations and shocking images. After the publication of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners, there has been a radicalization of detailed presentations of violence, abuse, and murder (Kran-kenhagen 202). Containing a large number of close-up realistic depictions of torture, suffering, and killing, Goldhagen’s study attracted considerable attention when it was published in 1996. The interest in his book may have promoted a change in the perception of the image ban or aniconism of the Holocaust.

A documentary deals with historical events, facts, and nonfiction. Even though the term “documentary” is often used synonymously with the terms “document” and “documentation” (Sørensen 14–17), however, it is crucial to remember that a documentary is a construction of scenes, focalization, time, and narration that separates it from what actually occurred. Since a documentary is a selection and construction of a narrative of the reality it seeks to present, it is an interpretation of historical reality. The events to be presented are part of a past that cannot be reached but instead must be constructed from the present, relying on the “ruins of memory” (Langer, “Holocaust Testimonies” 1991) and on remaining documentation. Inevitably, gaps exist between the past and what we can possibly know about it. Such gaps between historical events and present knowledge of these events can be reduced by using a main narrator and by interviewing persons involved.

Rees’s documentary is distinguished precisely by the use of dramatizations as a way to overcome the narrative gaps. The reenactments enable Rees to visually present situations and events that have not been preserved through original recordings and documents. At the same time, the reenactments blur the line between fiction and nonfiction, thus incorporating a
fictional element into the attempted documentary, as I have mentioned already. Rees constructs his narrative on extensive historical research, but events that we do not have full knowledge of are reconstructed through reenactments. This does not make Rees’s narrative a fiction because it deals with real historical events that are reconstructed as accurately as possible. However, since the dramatized scenes require imaginative representation where historical knowledge is missing, fictional elements are inevitably implemented in the documentary.

The dramatized scenes are reconstructed in a manner that makes them appear as realistic as possible. As stated by Rees himself, the reenactments are based on research on, for example, the shape of the rooms; they are also indebted to primary source documents such as minutes or protocols from meetings; letters; diaries; and trial testimonies by or interviews with participants (Gallagher 2004). For example, the reenacted meeting before the invasion of the Soviet Union (part 1) is based on the original minutes of the meeting. Yet there will always be a gap between the past historical event and the filmic reconstruction of an event, no matter how accurate the film aims to be; thus fictional elements have to be added. One difficulty concerning the reenactments in Rees’s documentary is that since the reenacted parts are often filmed in black and white, in many cases it can be difficult for a viewer without some relevant historical knowledge to decide whether the footage is original or dramatized.

The dramatized sequences present events, meetings, and situations, but they do not show prisoners in gas chambers or in similar situations of abuse and suffering. In the case of the reenacted scene of the mass shootings of Ukrainian Jews already discussed, the reenactment concerns the SS guards lining up and the dropping of the cartridge cases. These images were perhaps chosen because a reenactment of the victims being shot may have been seen as a violation of the aniconism of the Holocaust and as disrespect toward the victims. Instead, Rees has implemented original footage of people before an execution and of naked bodies in a mass grave. Yet although aniconism is often neglected, Rees obviously imposes limits on representation when it comes to the reenacted parts, especially those concerning the victims of the Holocaust.

As a counterpart to Rees’s documentary and hence to aniconism, I want to briefly comment on another BBC documentary. Written by Andrew Bampfield and directed by Richard Dale et al., *D-Day 6.6.1944* (2004) goes even further than Rees both in the implementation of reenacted scenes and in the dramatization of scenes where people are suffering and/or dying—for example, in the presentation of the Allied forces’ landing on Omaha Beach
on June 6, 1944, and the liberation of the city of Caen. Both events are presented by the use of original footage and reenacted scenes. Some of the reenacted scenes are very detailed in showing pain and suffering and injuries and damage. Furthermore, in this documentary the stories of the interviewed survivors, Allied soldiers and Germans alike, are partly reenacted, and the interviews of the survivors serve in many cases as comments or elaborations on the reenactments. As the reenacted scenes in *D-Day 6.6.1944* are shot in color and unambiguously reenacted, there is hardly a risk of a mix-up between the film’s original and dramatized footage. For this reason, Dale’s *D-Day 6.6.1944* is more easily associated with the genre of docudrama than is Rees’s narrative.

In addition to reenactments, Rees uses specially commissioned computer images to fill in the information gaps of his documentary. These narrative techniques are used to present the gas chambers: the scenes are constructed through an extended focalization in which the camera serves as the eye of the public, taking them into the door of a reconstructed crematorium building, down the stairs, and into the waiting room, making them look around the room, enter the gas chamber, turn around to the door which is closed—and then it gets dark. This scene is repeated with a few changes throughout the series, marking, for example, the end of part 2. The gassing was an “event without witnesses” (Laub 80) where the “real witnesses” were murdered (Agamben 31–33; Levi 83–84). However, by using computer graphics, Rees’s filmically constructed narrative shows us the inside of the gas chambers, thus attempting to fill in the gaps in the narrative of Auschwitz.

The repetitively displayed images of the gas chambers from inside can be viewed as violations of the aniconism of the Holocaust and as a presentation of images of the “event without witnesses,” even though the actual gassings are not dramatized. These reconstructed scenes of the gas chambers may function as important emotional triggers for the audience, also prompting the question of how far one should go in applying strategies of emotionalization in order to attract the audience’s attention. Although it is important to evoke interest and involvement to further and enhance the viewer’s empathy with the victims, sensational and shocking effects should never be promoted for their own sake. As I have shown, Rees clearly imposes ethical limits of representation on his film, although on several occasions he neglects aniconism in general.

The strategy of reenactment blurs the limit between fiction and nonfiction and separates Rees’s documentary from documentation, also removing it from the transmission of the “pure document” as attempted, for example, in Lanzmann’s *Shoah*. Different as they are, both films are interestingly linked
to Steven Spielberg’s historical drama *Schindler’s List* (1993), which presents the story of the German industrialist Oscar Schindler who saved over 1,000 Jews during the war. Spielberg’s hugely popular film adapts aspects from the documentary genre. It is made almost completely in black and white, but at the end the images switch to color and the viewer is presented with the real “Schindler-Jews” (not actors) standing at Schindler’s grave in Jerusalem. This documentary scene may serve to justify and authorize Spielberg’s film as authentic and real. Lanzmann criticized the film for showing images of the Holocaust that do not exist, for example, the gas chambers (Reichel 313). This aspect is radicalized in Rees’s documentary where the camera acts as the audience’s eyes, thus taking us as viewers into the gas chambers and even showing when the doors are shut. While *Schindler’s List* uses documentary codes to enhance the authenticity of the film, Rees’s documentary employs dramatic elements to fill the gaps of the visual narrative of Auschwitz.

Rees’s focus on historical research and primary sources, as well as the implementation of original footage and interviews with survivors of both sides, make his documentary different from the American fictional television series *Holocaust* (1978). In many ways Rees’s series is situated between two important Holocaust series, being more nonfictional than *Holocaust* (and also *Schindler’s List* where the fictional aspect concerns the form as a historical drama, not the story told) and more fictional than *Shoah* because of the dramatizations. I conclude by considering Rees’s series partly as a “docudrama” because of the extensive use of reenactment. To the extent possible, the reenacted footage is based on realism. Yet in the presentation of meetings, for example, fictional elements are inevitably implemented because of the lack of information. The story of Auschwitz is a true story, and Rees’s narrative contains a large amount of information collected from primary and secondary sources. For Rees, however, reenactments take over where the archive does not exist.

The problem of reenactments concerns the following aspects: First, in many cases it is difficult to decide which recordings are original and which are dramatized scenes with a view to a large and heterogeneous audience. The series was made to reach a wider public, and the dramatizations are a way of attracting the attention of different kinds of viewers. And yet we have seen that, not least because the reenactments are in black and white, people without basic knowledge of the Holocaust can find it difficult to separate the reenacted scenes from original recordings; thus reenactments are potentially misleading. Second, there are methodological and ethical problems linked to the aspects of entertainment on the one hand and historical information and rational thinking on the other. Emotional engagement does not neces-
sarily further critical reflection on the topic of the Holocaust. Leading the
audience behind a curtain, the series blurs the difference between original
and reenacted images and scenes, and in several cases the reenacted scenes
lead to confusion about source materials and references. The effect is similar
to that of a history book without footnotes, written for an audience without
background knowledge. If the dramatized scenes were not shot in black and
white or marked as dramatizations in some way—as in D-Day 6.6.1944—the
potential confusion would have been avoided. Crucially, narrative strate-
gies as such are not a topic of discussion in the series; it does not comment
or reflect on the gains and problems of the narrative strategy employed.
Even though it might be difficult to do this, the absence of such reflections
removes the series from a main concern of film and literature on the Holo-
ciaust (Krankenhagen 181–85; Langer, “Die Zeit der Erinnerung” 53). In Bill
Nichols’s terms, Rees’s film can be characterized as documentary in the par-
ticipatory mode because of the use of interviews and archival footages, but
at the same time it has important expository segments because of a narrator’s
verbal commentary (33–34, 105–109, 115–24). The reflexive mode, though,
is neglected and completely absent in the series (34–35, 125–30).

The third visual aspect of the series—footage of present-day sites and
landscapes that play an important part in the strategy of contrasts—has been
discussed already. A fourth visual aspect consists of the interviews in which
the interviewees, both former victims and perpetrators, are sitting in a chair
in their own living room, telling their stories. Reaffirming and strengthening
both the link and the contrast between “now” and “then,” these interviews
further increase the impression of the brutality and suffering of the “then”—
the Second World War and the Holocaust. The witnesses of both sides serve
as transmitters of the past, telling their stories with hindsight “now” and also
commenting and reflecting on the gruesome events of the past.

“Auschwitz” Revisited?

In conclusion, we may ask how Rees’s narrative—in both form and content—
is related to other narratives on Auschwitz. This narrative contributes to the
mediation of important aspects of the “historian’s narrative”—aspects that
to some extent had been taboo—for a more general public, using popular
transmission techniques such as reenactment, repetition, drama, excitement,
emotions, and so forth, which move the documentary toward the genre of
docudrama. While the extensive use of reenactments in this presentation of
the history of Auschwitz may have triggered the attention and interest of a
larger audience, it problematically blurs the distinction between fiction and nonfiction and between drama and documentary.

One fundamental problem in constructing a narrative of Auschwitz more than sixty years after its liberation is the absence of presence. For many years the survivors have represented a link between the past and the present. In a few years there will be no survivors left. Reenactments may serve as an alternative strategy to create presence for the past.

Presenting important facts about the development of the Holocaust as a process with different phases and a complex of camps, Rees’s documentary draws the viewer’s attention to “grey zones” of the camp system such as brothels, corruption, and Sonderkommandos, and to the insufficient legal persecution of Nazi criminals. Important as it is, this focus on “sensational” aspects of the story of Auschwitz must not suspend the transmission of general facts. Unfortunately, Rees’s narrative of Auschwitz comes close to acquitting German industry, which actually played an important role in the exploitation and killing of many hundreds of thousands of enslaved laborers. The series’ most significant contribution is the transmission of new historical knowledge to a broader, and specifically to a younger, audience, and the presentation of the Nazi genocide not as the killings of madmen but as the result of a rational and logical decision process led by human beings.

Works Cited


Gallagher, Patrick. “Historians Play Major Role in New Documentary on the Holocaust.”


