

Fact or Fable: The Inaccurate Representation of Female Victims and Perpetrators in Auschwitz  
in *Out of the Ashes*

Abstract:

This paper will focus on the flaws in the representation of women victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust in Western media by comparing such representations to historical sources that depict the same people and events. In particular, this paper will dissect the 2003 movie *Out of the Ashes*, an adaptation of Gisella Perl's memoir *I was a doctor in Auschwitz*. Gisella Perl's memoir differs considerably from its film adaptation in the portrayal of the morality and violence of women in Auschwitz. In order to appeal to an American audience, the film alters Perl and her fellow inmates to be at once more innocent and more altruistic than Perl describes in her memoir, instead representing them as perfect victims with little agency and no flaws of their own. Similarly, the film also minimizes or even omits the sadism of the female SS guards in Auschwitz and chooses to leave much of the sexual and gendered violence that survivors of Auschwitz endured off camera. The flawed representation of female morality in Auschwitz in the film *Out of the Ashes* helps to facilitate a classic good-versus-evil story in which the complicated moral and social dynamics of real camp life are ignored. By portraying both the victims and the perpetrators of the Holocaust in an overly simple way, *Out of the Ashes* perpetrates a mythic understanding of the Holocaust rather than a historical one.

The Holocaust has become a fixture in historically-inspired media in America. Depictions of the Holocaust in film range from grim to humorous and vary wildly in their accuracy to historical events. Western films often inaccurately represent women's roles in the Holocaust. Female victims in these films are often perfected in their character and purified by their suffering, whereas female perpetrators are delegated to henchmen or erased entirely. The 2003 film *Out of the Ashes* (directed by Joseph Sargent) is one such example of this flawed representation of women. *Out of the Ashes* is an adaptation of Gisella Perl's memoir, *I was a doctor in Auschwitz*, first published in 1948. Gisella Perl was a Hungarian, Jewish obstetrician who was deported to Auschwitz after the German occupation of Hungary. While imprisoned in Auschwitz, Nazi guards forced her to work as a camp doctor for the women in her block. In her memoir, Perl describes in vivid detail the sadistic policies that governed Auschwitz and the many horrors she endured while attempting to save women's lives. An adaptation of *I as a doctor in Auschwitz*, the 2003 film *Out of the Ashes*, differs considerably from Perl's memoir in its portrayal of the morality of women in Auschwitz. In order to appeal to an American audience, the film alters Perl and her fellow inmates to be both more innocent and more altruistic than Perl describes in her memoir. Similarly, the film minimizes or even does not show the undisguised cruelty of the female SS guards in Auschwitz; in particular, it misrepresents Irma Grese's obvious sexual sadism by portraying her as an extension of Dr. Mengele, rather than her own, unique evil. It also adapts several of the victim's anecdotes that Perl tells, notably her stories of Charlotte Junger and of Yolanda, to give each concrete endings that, while bittersweet, are decidedly more optimistic than the real endings. These changes allow the classic good-versus-evil narrative that is common to American Holocaust films to dominate *Out of the Ashes*, which leads to a mythic, rather than historically accurate, representation of the Holocaust.

Female perspectives of the Holocaust, in particular, have always been underrepresented and misinterpreted in media and popular culture. Perl's memoir was one of the first Holocaust memoirs to be published; however, it was not widely read and went out of print shortly after its publication. *I was a doctor in Auschwitz* has only come back into print recently, as the demand for gender-specific study of the Holocaust has increased. Aleksandra Ubertowska describes how, even in the years immediately following the Holocaust, public representations of women's experiences were "a mere complement" to "the perspective of the courageous male hero," which the public accepted more readily (162). Ubertowska comments that stereotypically, women survivors of the Holocaust have been portrayed to the public by both historians and media as "passive, emotional figures . . . condemned to the role of defenceless [sic] victims" (165). The stereotype of female Holocaust survivors as defenseless victims has led to a common moral representation of Jewish women in fictional accounts of the Holocaust which persists even into the present. The Jew-as-Victim trope, in which Jewish women are the ultimate victims and purified through suffering trauma, features heavily in much Holocaust media, regardless of the truth of female survivors' experiences (Rothe 15-16). In order to reinforce this trope, Holocaust media rarely shows prisoner-on-prisoner violence or even a survivor's own agency in the face of traumatic choices when these survivors are women. Clearly, the public's tolerance for difficult stories, especially women's stories that do not feature them in the passive victim's roles, has always been small. *Out of the Ashes* bastardizes Perl's memoir in a similar way, making changes to fit her experience within such tropes, which allows the public to better tolerate her story.

Auschwitz was the largest of the Nazi concentration camps, where the Germans systematically exterminated almost 1.1 million prisoners deemed racially or otherwise inferior. According to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Auschwitz was divided into more than 40

subcamps in order to accommodate and organize such a large population, with the largest being Auschwitz II-Birkenau, which could support a population of up to 125,000 inmates (“Auschwitz II-Birkenau”). Conditions in the prisoner barracks were awful, with severe overcrowding, pest infestations, little access to fresh water, and inadequate food rations. These poor conditions were designed to encourage the spread of infectious disease among the camp population, which was intended to further dehumanize and humiliate inmates. A medical system existed, but medical care in the camps was limited for many prisoners because of the massive need. Camp hospitals were organized under SS doctors, with many duties and procedures in infirmaries being performed by prisoner functionaries (“Camp Hospitals”). Gisella Perl was one of these functionaries, having been recruited to continue her medical practice after her deportation to Auschwitz. Perl’s specialty of obstetrics before the war gave her special interest in the policies regarding pregnancy and childbirth in Auschwitz. According to David Patterson, these policies ranged from requiring abortions in Jewish women before three months of pregnancy to killing infants after they were born in order to allow the mother to return to work; however, by the time Perl was interned at Auschwitz, the policy was to immediately execute any woman found pregnant, or if she had given birth recently, to exterminate both her and her infant (171). In order to preserve these women’s lives, Perl performed hundreds of abortions on women in her block into the very late stages of pregnancy. She was troubled by this practice, as it conflicted with her Jewish belief in the sanctity of life, writing in her memoir that “childbirth was still . . . the greatest miracle” and that with every abortion she performed “it was again and again my own child whom I killed” (Perl 57). Nevertheless, she continued performing abortions for the greater good of the women in her block.

Perl repeatedly describes her moral conflict over the abortions she performed, beginning with her discussion titled “Childbirth in Camp C” and continuing intermittently until the end of the memoir. However, the film *Out of the Ashes* delves little into the flexible morality that Perl was forced to adopt while interned at Auschwitz, choosing instead to represent Perl as at first naive to Auschwitz’s policy regarding pregnancy and then as steadfastly certain of the morality of her choice to abort the fetuses of the women in her block. By representing Perl as naïve—when in reality she had witnessed the extermination of babies by SS guards before even entering the gates of Auschwitz—*Out of the Ashes* preserves her innocence and allows her to act as an idealized version of herself. This representation denies Perl the agency to make her own choices; instead of having all the information and having to decide whether to uphold her previous moral standard in the face of the consequent death of her patients, she is forced into upholding Auschwitz’s policy through her own ignorance. While Perl’s naivety in *Out of the Ashes* does preserve her purity as a victim and makes her fit more readily into the common stereotype of the female Holocaust survivor, the inaccurate representation of Perl completely erases the moral quandary discussed at length in *I was a doctor in Auschwitz*.

After Perl and the audience of *Out of the Ashes* learn of the fate of pregnant women in the camps, Perl immediately changes her stance on abortion with little self-reflection. In the film’s retelling, Perl even refuses to refer to the lives she aborted as “babies,” as she repeatedly did in her memoir, calling them instead “fetuses,” and correcting other characters who do not use this term (Perl; Sargent). Perl’s use of impersonal language to refer to abortions in the film points to a certain amount of her own denial of the morally-grey decisions she made when aborting late-term pregnancies, but it also allows her character to seem certain and even defensive of her choices when explaining herself to others. While in reality, Perl did feel that she was morally

obligated to perform abortions on the women in her block, she always uses personal, emotional language when describing the procedures in *I was a doctor in Auschwitz*. She writes how she “loved those newborn babies” when referring to the pregnancies she terminated, and how each time she did perform an abortion, it was “[her] own child” whom she had “destroy[ed]” (Perl 57). Her memoir makes it clear that she does not deny the potential moral complications that come along with this decision but instead takes full responsibility for the actions she was forced to take for the survival of others. She reckoned with her own guilt over her immoral actions by relying on religion, saying that she “prayed to God to help me save the mother or I would never touch a pregnant woman again” (Perl 58). The film’s representation of Perl does not allow the character to evolve morally in the same way that she does in her memoir. Despite the obvious moral quandary she faces while in Auschwitz, her character remains heroic and pure; she is just as sure of her initial beliefs as before being interned. While this portrayal allows for a cleaner narrative that is easier to sell on television, it also completely erases the struggle of Perl and other women who were forced to adapt their pre-trauma morals for the sake of their own or others’ survival. Instead of Holocaust media such as *Out of the Ashes* allowing women in the camps to be full characters, with human flaws and real growth, they are reduced to perfection—perfect heroes and perfect victims, with no morally-grey actions or thoughts. The representation of women as purified through suffering, rather than as survivors with real, human flaws, encourages modern trauma survivors, especially women, not to come forward with their morally or emotionally difficult stories. After all, these stories are not celebrated: they are buried. The risk of social judgement, shame, and further emotional pain to women who speak out about their experiences ensure that women’s real stories will remain closely-guarded secrets. Media that

cleans up real stories of suffering like *Out of the Ashes* further coddles the American audience, making sure that they will never be ready to hear the real stories that arise from trauma.

Perl is not the only inmate that *Out of the Ashes* portrays as overtly good; in fact, the writers and director represent the inmate population as a whole as cohesive, altruistic, and above all, innocent. Like other Holocaust media, *Out of the Ashes* represents women prisoners as victims without real agency—innocent despite suffering—a narrative that the public accepts more readily than the flawed woman character. Historical analysis reveals that women victims were likely not as defenseless as fiction likes to portray them. Society still functions in survival situations, and the power dynamics between prisoners remain intact. In her paper, Anna Hájková claims that “prisoner society [is] a society in its own right, rather than . . . a deviant form of social organization” (504). With this in mind, the abuse inmates faced in Auschwitz came not only from guards but also from fellow prisoners as they navigated this complicated moral system trying to survive. Theft, sexual barter, and infighting—all activities that are typically immoral—were common practices among prisoners in ghettos and concentration camps (Hájková). Perl describes these phenomena in her memoir, from the “organization” (a euphemism for theft) of needed supplies from stockrooms and other prisoners, to the bartering for these supplies in the latrine using sexual favors, to the outright attack of other prisoners (Perl 54). She even describes how the “most brutal fellow prisoners” would beat favored prisoners who had obtained supplies like aluminum cups to drink from just to “rob them of their water and their cup” to survive (Perl 54). The prisoners Perl describes are far from the innocent and defenseless victims that *Out of the Ashes* imagines; they used whatever tools they had to fight to survive.

Prisoner-on-prisoner violence is conspicuously absent in *Out of the Ashes*, despite the clear evidence for its existence. This erasure, of course, preserves the innocence of the women it

represents. Instead of showing women prisoners as using whatever agency they still possessed to survive, they show them as completely defenseless to Nazi cruelty. This representation supports Rothe's "Jew-as-Victim" trope, since the victimization of women prisoners in Auschwitz is not complicated by the existence of prisoners acting as perpetrators of violence against their own people. In addition, the absence of violence or even a real struggle for survival in the women's camp helps preserve the stereotype of women victims as "passive," which complies with the public's accepted image of the female Holocaust survivor as proposed by Ubertowska (165). *Out of the Ashes* plays into these stereotypes of the purified female victim in order to keep audiences comfortable. By simplifying camp dynamics in this way, *Out of the Ashes* inadvertently pushes an inaccurate—almost mythic—understanding of the Holocaust onto its audience. Instead of accurately representing the genocide's horrors in all their facets, the movie asserts a classic good-versus-evil tale, where victims are reduced to one-dimensional victim archetypes instead of the complicated human survivors that they were.

The accuracy in representations of Holocaust perpetrators also suffers from the reduction of history to a good-versus-evil narrative. Women perpetrators, especially, are inaccurately represented in many films due to the prevalent essentialist belief that women are less capable of violence than men. In *Out of the Ashes*, Irma Grese, the highest-ranking female officer in Auschwitz, is the best example of this misrepresentation. She is shown as an insane, gun-wielding henchman to Dr. Mengele, rather than the "depraved, cruel, imaginative sexual pervert" that Perl describes in *I was a doctor in Auschwitz* (45). In the film, while Grese is definitely shown to be violent and prone to cruelty, she remains rather playful in her dialogue and actions compared to the representation of male SS officers, to whom she maintains a childlike obedience. For example, when a young woman steps out of line during a roll call, Grese sneaks

up behind her, drawing her gun, before asking the male supervising officer what he would like her to do (Sargent). The violence that Grese's character flirts with in this scene and throughout the film is rarely shown, only threatened and then promptly stopped by another, usually male, character. When Grese's cruelty *is* demonstrated, she always uses a ranged weapon, physically and metaphorically keeping her hands clean. This depiction differs considerably from Perl's description of Grese as a "pervert" who "picked out the most beautiful young women and slashed their breasts open with . . . her whip" in order to see Perl operate on the infected cuts without anesthetics, which she watched with "complete sexual paroxysm" (Perl 45).

The depiction of Grese in the film not only reduces her to a one-dimensional villain who is much less cruel than she was in reality, but it also minimizes her responsibility for her own cruelty by making her second to the men who command her. The representation of female oppressors as subservient to and less violent than male oppressors is in itself essentialist and gives a dangerous amount of leeway to the truly cruel, evil women in history like Grese. By minimizing Grese's violence and sadism, *Out of the Ashes* avoids showing the unique horror of women oppressors during the Holocaust, a topic not readily shown in fiction. Instead of having Grese be a full character, *Out of the Ashes* substitutes a toned-down version of Grese as an example of the female oppressor that acts only as an extension of male oppressors, a concept which audiences are more familiar and comfortable with. In particular, the film avoids showing any of the sexual sadism that Perl describes, an element of Grese's character that gives her an internal motive for violence for its own sake. This decision makes sense to keep audiences comfortable; accepting Grese's sexual sadism requires audiences to question the idea that women are inherently less violent and perverted than men, since it provides a counterexample. By avoiding the truly difficult, uncomfortable stories like Grese's, *Out of the Ashes* not only loses a

good portion of the horror that Perl describes—it perpetuates a simplified view of gender roles in order to promote a simpler, good-versus-evil narrative that employs the traditional, male image of villains.

In order to protect its good-versus-evil narrative of the Holocaust, *Out of the Ashes* must, of course, show good's victory over evil. To this end, the film tends to embellish the individual stories of people Perl's memoir discusses, going so far as to force a completely false happy ending onto an otherwise irredeemably sad story or otherwise omit the ending entirely. A conspicuous example of the latter is the story of Charlotte Junger, to which both the film and the memoir devote significant attention. In *I was a doctor in Auschwitz*, Junger, a teenage girl from the same village as Perl, is given poison by her father, who intends to kill himself and his family before they are deported to Auschwitz. Being in good physical condition, the dose is not enough to kill Junger, who instead reverts to a childlike state where "unguarded [by Perl], she . . . began to dance" (Perl 39). At Auschwitz, Junger is taken to the infirmary, where Perl cares for her until Dr. Mengele hears of the "dancing girl" and takes her away for his own amusement (Perl 39). After several days, Mengele "tire[s] of Charlotte's dancing" and sends her to her death (Perl 39). The film offers the same events, with a few key changes. Instead of discovering her at the infirmary, Mengele discovers Junger dancing and saves her from being shot by a guard for her behavior (Sargent). Most notably, though, instead of Mengele sending Junger to death shortly after he discovers her, after her rescue nothing of Junger is shown on screen again (Sargent). By omitting the tragic ending and leaving the audience to wonder what happened to Junger, the film lessens both the horror and the impact of the anecdote in the memoir. Decoupled from the ending of Junger's story, Mengele's character almost seems sympathetic. By repeatedly cutting off the stories in which the ending is overtly tragic, *Out of the Ashes* preserves the idea that good

conquers evil by failing to show the many stories in the memoir where evil wins. In doing so, the film not only misrepresents the memoir but cheapens the stories themselves. Rather than the anecdotes in Perl's memoir being used to bear witness on behalf of those who lost their lives to cruelty, they are used to push a simple idea that good conquers all and that in doing so, evil can not only be overcome, but ignored. In this way, *Out of the Ashes* gives audiences permission to gloss over the difficult, horrifying stories that have come out of the Holocaust and focus only on the heroism of the survivors. By ignoring the many stories that ended tragically, *Out of the Ashes* and similar fiction promote an incorrect image of the Holocaust as a trial for certain people, rather than as the life-ending tragedy it was. As a result, the film erases the stories of all those who did not survive as somehow less relevant than those who did.

Of course, *Out of the Ashes* does not only ignore the endings of Perl's anecdotes that do not fit the idealized narrative; it also modifies the anecdotes to give them desired happy endings. The most egregious example of these modifications is the story of a young woman named Yolanda in *I was a doctor in Auschwitz* but renamed Leiku in *Out of the Ashes*. Yolanda was a young woman whom Perl helped with fertility issues before the war, and she came to Auschwitz pregnant with the baby that Perl helped her conceive. In the memoir, Perl helps to hide Yolanda's pregnancy until she goes into labor. After the birth, Perl "hid her child for two days, unable to destroy him" before, fearing discovery, she "strangled him and buried his body under a mountain of corpses" (Perl 58). Yolanda is never mentioned again. In the film, events transpire very differently: Leiku asks after Perl after having contractions and requests a late-term abortion. Perl induces labor and the baby, who is born alive, is smothered immediately after its birth. Perl justifies this action by saying Leiku "will have another child, a free child" (Sargent). This prediction comes true, and after the liberation of the camps, Perl meets Leiku in New York and

delivers her son. The addition of a happy ending to Yolanda's story cheapens the power of the anecdote, changing its theme from one about the greater good and Perl's moral sacrifice for the survival of others into one that only emphasizes the survival of women to bear future children. Additionally, it also neatly resolves any moral ramifications for Perl's character by giving her an easy justification for her actions. In reality, Perl, like many others who were forced into difficult choices for their own and others' survival, remained haunted by her actions and the trauma she had endured to the point where she "did not want to live" and attempted suicide shortly after the war (Perl 120).

*Out of the Ashes* repeatedly misrepresents the characters and stories of *I was a doctor in Auschwitz* in order to keep its audience comfortable. The film represents women prisoners as innocent victims without any personal agency, a common trope of female Holocaust victims, despite much evidence in Perl's memoir of her and her fellow prisoners' ability to maneuver in a world with looser moral guidelines. The film also misrepresents female perpetrators, assigning their violence as secondary and lesser than the male violence that happened during the Holocaust. The film alters stories of these victims and perpetrators in order to remove the harsh endings and details that force audiences to examine their own morals and the effect of trauma on morality. In doing so, the movie's theme becomes simple: good people can overcome any evil. Unfortunately, the theme of the film has become completely disconnected with the memoir's intention to bear witness to the horror of Auschwitz and honor those who did not survive. Instead of reflecting the quiet, vivid witness to Auschwitz's horrors that the memoir provides, the film cheapens Perl's experience into a simple tale of good-versus-evil to make it more palatable for an American audience. As a result, it not only misrepresents the main themes of the memoir but perpetuates the mythic, rather than historical, interpretation of the Holocaust in Western media.

This mythic interpretation, in which no morally-grey characters truly exist, erases the many real stories of survivors who did have to adapt their morals to survive. Women survivors, especially, suffer from this misrepresentation, as media and audiences are less tolerant of flawed women than flawed men. Despite not being the perfected victims that the media likes to portray, these women deserve to have their stories told.

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