



Fig. 1: Reuven and Mattityahu Kohn, Buchau, Czechoslovakia. 1917.

In this photo, which shows my father, Reuven Kohn, at the age of four or five with his two- or three-year-old brother (Matti), I see his personality and have a glimpse into his childhood, about which I heard so much throughout my lifetime. I see his confidence with his brother, unaware that this peaceful state would end as they grew. His family (parents and brother) managed to escape in 1939 (he was 17), a week before Hitler entered Prague. However, his two grandmothers and two aunts who remained behind were murdered. My father and his family were saved, but a fracture occurred. It was a harsh transition from their European culture to Israel.

The Holocaust is an exceptional event in history and culture, and as a Jew and film researcher I studied Holocaust films as a mission. Moreover, I wanted to study history in order to understand my father's history. The more I learned, the more I understood the fracture and could bridge the rift that was hidden in him. In that sense, it is a calling to learn from history and preserve the memory of it via films that tell those stories, and at the same time to deal with my father's personal pain.

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Arnon Goldfinger's *The Flat* (2011): Ethics and Aesthetics in Third Generation Holocaust Cinema

In the 1990s and in the first decade of the new millennium, films by the second and even the third generation to the Holocaust were motivated by the gradual disappearance of Holocaust survivors and witnesses.¹ Régine-Mihal Friedman claims that these films, both documentaries and features, are characterized by “the deliberate attempt to probe differently the limits of documentary representation, to reaffirm the unremitting power of fiction, and to celebrate the transfiguration of the real through a personal, creative vision”.² In other words, because it is these generations that struggle with the void, the lack, and the emptiness left by the gradual disappearance of survivors and witnesses (namely the real, the referent), they show a will to overcome the limits of documentary representation via personal, creative vision; to “transfigure” the real, in Friedman’s words, in order to deal with questions of memory and commemoration.³

The Israeli documentary *The Flat* tells the story of emptying the apartment of the grandmother of the director, Arnon Goldfinger. Following her death at age 98, he discovers that after the war his grandparents, Gerda and Kurt Tuchler, renewed their pre-war friendship with an aristocratic German couple, the von Mildensteins. Von Mildenstein was already a member of the Nazi party in 1929 and a senior SS officer by 1932. The Tuchlers arrived in Palestine in 1936 and lived in their Tel Aviv apartment until their respective deaths. Goldfinger sets out to un-

1 Such as the brothers Daniel and Pascal Cling’s documentary *Heritage* (Héritage, France, 1996); Emmanuel Finkiel’s feature *Voyages* (Poland/France/Belgium, 1999) and his documentary *Casting* (France, 2001); Marceline Loridan-Ivens’ feature *The Birch-Tree Meadow* (La petite prairie aux bouleaux, France/Germany/Poland, 2002) (its title refers to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp; and Robert Thalheim’s feature *And Along Comes the Tourists* (Arn Ende kommen Touristen (Germany, 2007).

2 Friedman, Régine-Mihal. (2005). “The Transmutation of Testimony in Cling, Najman and Finkiel’s Aftermath Films.” *Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 5, no. 3, 195.

3 Two made in Israel films, Tal Haim Yoffe’s documentary *The Green Dumpster Mystery* (2008) and Arnon Goldfinger’s *The Flat* (i.e., the apartment) (2011) provide powerful examples.

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cover the nature of this unimaginable relationship. As part of his search, he contacts von Mildenstein's daughter Edda and learns from her that his mother's grandmother, Susanne Lehmann, was murdered in the camps. This fact was never mentioned in his family and Goldfinger, striving to uncover the past, raises questions that the second generation – his mother, Hannah, and Edda von Mildensteins – had never dared ask.

Faced with no firsthand memory of witnesses, and a second generation that dared not ask, Goldfinger uses a variety of artistic devices in a less conventional way for a documentary film. Though it is common in documentaries to commemorate the first generation via photographs and letters, as well as to interview remaining family members (from the second generation) and friends, Goldfinger does more than that: He insists on reviving the first generation in creative ways, as though demanding their presence vicariously in his film. Goldfinger's editing, camera movement, and use of soundtrack, as well as showing his grandparents' portraits at meaningful moments in the narrative, serve to connect and create a dialogue among the first generation (which the director can no longer document or interview), the second (his mother), and the third (himself). His quest constitutes a *responsibility* – an ability to respond. This is an ethical response, a responsibility for the other, in this case the other that is absent, manifested in the documentary film by various aesthetic modes of remembering and representing the dead and forgotten. I claim that looking at the “faces” (and voices) of the first generation as he makes them “present” in his film is a plea to take responsibility. Emmanuel Levinas explains the ethical aspect of the concept of responsibility:

Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face. [. . .] meeting the face is not of the order of pure – and simple perception, of the intentionality which goes toward adequation. Positively, we will say that since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on responsibilities in his regard.⁴

Friedman emphasizes that the other are the victims, as she relates to Claude Lanzman's noting that in his documentary *Shoah*,

Nobody says “I”, meaning that as a rule the eyewitness speaks for an “Us”: those who never came back. This harrowing plea to bear witness, the duty of the “saved” to testify for the “drowned” in Primo Levi's terms, recur in each one of the personal testimonial films.⁵

4 Lévinas, Emmanuel. (1984). “Ethics and Infinity.” *Cross Currents*, vol. 34, no. 2, 194.

5 As quoted in Friedman, “Transmutation”, 198.

Goldfinger's ethical stance is intertwined with his aesthetics. His artistic vision brings the voice and presence of those who did not survive (that he cannot film or record), thus strengthening the ethical imperative not to forget them, taking on, as well, responsibility for remembering those that his family (the second generation) fail to recall.

The Flat approaches the question of trauma and memory of the Holocaust by moving along two axes in the plot: the emptying of Goldfinger's grandparents' apartment and his investigation into the traumatic past. Both are conveyed via the imagery of the apartment. Once cleared (of both objects and subjects), the apartment becomes a symbol of the silenced past, as well as of resisting denial and negation. The prologue shows the flat before it is emptied while Goldfinger's voice-over describes his memories from it, and his dilemmas.



Fig. 2: From *The Flat*: portraits of Kurt and Gerda Tuchler.

We see Goldfinger's grandfather portrait filmed from an ominously low angle. Kurt Tuchler, having been a distinguished judge in the past, perhaps wonders, as a legal and moral authority, what his grandchild will choose. Gerda Tuchler's portrait ends the prologue, as though of young Gerda from the past is gazing back at her grandson's intruding camera in the present. Goldfinger's grandparents are gone; however, the *editing* in of the portraits from the start encourages us to interpret

their gazes as part of a symbolic “silent dialogue” between the gaze of the portrait (the past) and that of the movie camera (the present), thus reframing the past.

The symbolism of the apartment, together with the unique employment of the Tuchlers’ portraits functions as a bridge between generations, between past and present. Marianne Hirsch’s acclaimed notion of postmemory is one way to bridge this gap:

Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right.⁶

As Hirsch emphasizes, the term “postmemory” is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative differences from survivor memory; its secondary, or second-generation memory quality, is based in displacement, vicariousness, and belatedness:

Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation – often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible. That is not, of course, to say that survivor memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly – chronologically—connected to the past.⁷

Postmemory, is based on a direct encounter with a Holocaust survivor or witness, who, like a Lévinasian other, generates an ethical response. Goldfinger’s quest, representing the memory work of filmmakers belonging to the third generation, lacks this direct face-to-face confrontation. The ethical call arises not from the uncovering of any past traumatic truth or event that could result from such an encounter, *but from insisting on investigating it – by establishing a unique aesthetic dialogue between documentary filmmaking and art.*

The Tuchlers’ portraits that open and close the opening sequence, and also reappear at other significant moments in *The Flat*, raise the question of how the *mise en abyme* functions in a documentary film, in particular one whose concern is the Holocaust and familial memory. Lucien Dällenbach describes the *mise en abyme* as “an internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative by simple, repeated, or spacious (or paradoxical) duplication”.⁸ Its functions are rhetorical, reflexive, and metaphorical.

⁶ Hirsch, Marianne. (2001). “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory.” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 1 9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Dällenbach, Lucien. (trans. J. Whiteley and E. Hughes). (1977; repr. 1989). *The Mirror in the Text*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 36.

The images of the apartment and its objects in the opening sequence are encapsulations of the film's themes: a documentary that films the process of emptying a concrete apartment of its worldly goods (a metonymy) also functions as a metaphor. It underscores how the past can be easily erased, emptied, especially now when the Holocaust survivors are no longer with us.

The medium itself, its form and its vocation, is also duplicated: Similarly to the play-within-a-play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (considered by scholars a paradigmatic *mise en abyme*), the Tuchlers' portraits are a "picture-within-a-picture." Throughout they are juxtaposed at crucial points in time when Goldfinger learns new things about his past, creating thus a "meta-dialogue" between the gaze of the camera and that of the portraits. In *Hamlet*, the purpose of the play-within-a-play is to act out the unwitnessed murder of Hamlet's father and make the murderer – the king – succumb to his feelings of guilt. Indeed, he does react to the play: He retreats to his chambers where he confesses, a confession witnessed only by the audience. The common element between Hamlet's *mise en abyme* and *The Flat's* is that the weight of responsibility rests entirely on the playwright/director's shoulders, as well as the spectators.' The portraits and the camera have the power to generate responsibility – the ability to respond – but not to provide testimony.

Gerda's and Kurt's portraits, which strategically constitute an integral part of Goldfinger's use of family photographs, reflect his desire throughout the film to position himself as a bridge to his mother's past. For example, when he tries unsuccessfully to get his mother, Hannah, to remember her grandmother Susanne, who was murdered, he reads in Hebrew from Susanne's letters in a voice-over. Later we see and hear his mother reading as her grandmother addresses her directly – "little Hanele" (who was four years old at the time they were written) as she translates the words first from German to Hebrew and gradually reads only in German, "resurrecting" Goldfinger's mother's mother tongue. This tactic brings Susanne's words (almost gone and forgotten) from the past into his mother's present existence. Goldfinger's mother tongue is Hebrew and he himself has no direct access to the German language of the silenced past. At the beginning of the film, he describes the language gap between him and his grandmother Gerda – she didn't know Hebrew and he didn't know German, so they spoke in English. This reaches its climax when his mother reads her grandmother's request of her: "Don't forget me." Susanne's voice and her subjectivity become "physically" present in the dialogue not only because it is spoken in German, but thanks to the voice of his mother, who had actually been in the presence of her grandmother in the past. Gerda and Hannah met Susanne in Berlin and Susanne came to visit them in Israel before the war– even if his mother does not remember it.



Fig. 3: From *The Flat*: Hannah with Gerda and Susanne in Israel.

It is as though Susanne's voice and her subjectivity return to engage in a dialogue. This can only be achieved in film and this is how Goldfinger strives to engage the viewer in his attempt to give a voice to the dead and forgotten.



Fig. 4: From *The Flat*: Hannah reading Susanne's letter.

He takes a similar strategy of “reviving the physical past” when he and his mother are in Berlin visiting the house where Susanne’s sister lived. A black and white photograph shows Susanne hugging little Hannah during her stay at Berlin as a baby. Goldfinger films his mother looking at the building and turning her head to observe the neighborhood. In a subtle use of a match-cut in the editing, the turning of Hannah’s head, accompanying the circling embracing camera movement implies that he wishes to place his mother in the same position she had been while in her grandmother’s arms in Berlin. Will she express emotions now? His mother, however, remains detached. In this respect, Hannah is an example of what Helen Epstein terms “Lot’s wife” (especially in respect to the second generation): “fear of turning around and looking back lest he or she might turn into a pillar of salt.”⁹ This sequence shows Goldfinger’s postmemory as third generation, indeed differing from the survivor’s memory in both its temporal and symbolic meanings. As Hirsch notes, the textual nature of postmemory relies on images, stories, and documents passed down from one generation to the next. Furthermore, the term *postmemory* is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory; it has been mentioned as a “secondary, or transgenerational quality that is rooted in displacement, vicariousness, and belatedness.”¹⁰

⁹ Epstein, Helen. (1979). *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 72.

¹⁰ Hirsch, “Surviving Images,” 9.

Goldfinger uses the photographs of Susanne and Hannah together as a trace or index, or a *footprint*, for they convey thus a material, physical, and extremely potent connection between the generations. Susanne and Hannah were there together – now they are not and someone has to remember and acknowledge this. Therefore, Goldfinger uses the animated sign of footprints on the 1932 map of Berlin as a representation of Susanne's literal footprints. This is, as it were, a symbol of an index. Since he is denied direct contact with the referent (as are we), he symbolizes it.

This is understood by Goldfinger's other attempts to connect the referent from the past with the present. He strives to obtain a concrete acknowledgment from Edda regarding her father's past, but fails, and he fails again when he tries to find Susanne's husband's gravestone (he had died before the war). The same effort, and failure, accrue in Yoffe's documentary *The Green Dumpster Mystery*. This failing has the same function as the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*, as it calls for responsibility. It is a spectacle of failures: no one sees the king's confession but the spectator; Edda does not acknowledge her father's responsibility when Goldfinger shows her documents uncovering the truth. Edda's only desire is to end his investigation, so she terminates their final conversation by asking arrogantly, "Anything else?"

Goldfinger's ethical aesthetics is based precisely on his persistence in asking as well as showing what is not being acknowledged; it is a refusal to collaborate with denial and silence. The film ends with the emptied apartment, the two portraits hanging on the wall, which Goldfinger takes with him when he leaves. Clearing the apartment may symbolize the desire to "empty" the past, to do away with it. Goldfinger, however, takes the past with him, while resisting this position.¹¹

11 My interpretation of the film differs here from that of Raya Morag that appears in this book.

