

## Around the World: Son of Saul

[Morgan Simpson](#) praises the Oscar winning Hungarian film that depicts a harrowing account of the Holocaust

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*Over summer many of us will be going to the cinema to watch the latest Hollywood blockbusters. So as an alternative this August the Nouse team is having a look at some of the gems of world cinema, which are often unfairly ignored in favour of their American counterparts.*



Image: Sony Pictures Classics

With his debut film, László Nemes set out to depict one of the most horrific events in recent human history with utter, uncompromising honesty. For two gruelling hours we follow Saul, a Hungarian-Jewish prisoner in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Saul is given temporary respite from the gas chambers, due to his work in the Sonderkommando work unit. Over the course of the film Saul is forced to perform tasks for the Nazis, such as to dispose of the bodies of fellow prisoners, all through a sea of verbal and physical bombardment. A 4:3 aspect ratio traps us in Saul's perspective for the body of the feature, giving us a glimpse into his absolute powerlessness over his environment.

At its most fundamental, *Son of Saul* is a deeply existential study into human purpose and values. Thrown into a situation where survival is no more than a foolish hope, many of the prisoners seem utterly lost, unable to carry on. Others try desperately to document the genocide; a few even plan an ambitious escape from the death camp. For Saul, his sole purpose in the film is to give a dead boy, whom he claims

is his son, a Jewish burial.

Events in the film shake this purpose and throw Saul's faith into crisis. In this respect, Saul's journey can be paralleled to the crisis of identity and faith felt by European Jews in war-torn Europe. How, as people, we can reckon awful injustice with the concept of a benevolent God, is a question that has troubled theologians and philosophers for millennia. *Son of Saul* takes this question away from the abstract and philosophical, and back into the emotional realm. We see the injustice. We feel the pain. Nemes takes us to the heart of human evil and simply allows us to watch.

What I admire most about this film is its absolute committal to the pursuit of the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it may be. Despite the wealth of films on the topic of the Holocaust, very few strive to capture the true horror of the event. This is, in my opinion, a grave mistake. Probably the best-known film made about the Holocaust is Stephen Spielberg's 1993 feature *Schindler's List*. In my opinion, when compared to Nemes's *Son of Saul*, *Schindler's List* gives a flawed and perhaps reprehensible account of the atrocity. The reason I praise the former and denounce the latter, rests in the nature of the Holocaust.

Genocide is entirely awful. It is humanity and society's failure to protect its citizens. I won't claim that *Schindler's List* is an uplifting or happy film, its not. However, the story at the centre of the film is that of success; the success of a man in saving over a thousand people. As admirable as this may be, the Holocaust was utterly and irredeemably a failure on behalf of humanity. We must confront that. László Nemes's *Son of Saul*, much like Goya's *The Third of May 1808* and Dali's *The Face of War* is a serious work of art; a work concerned the darkest chasms of humanity and presenting them responsibly.

I can't promise that you will enjoy this film, perhaps it's for the best you don't. What I can promise is that László Nemes's first film is a masterpiece, wholly deserving of attention.



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