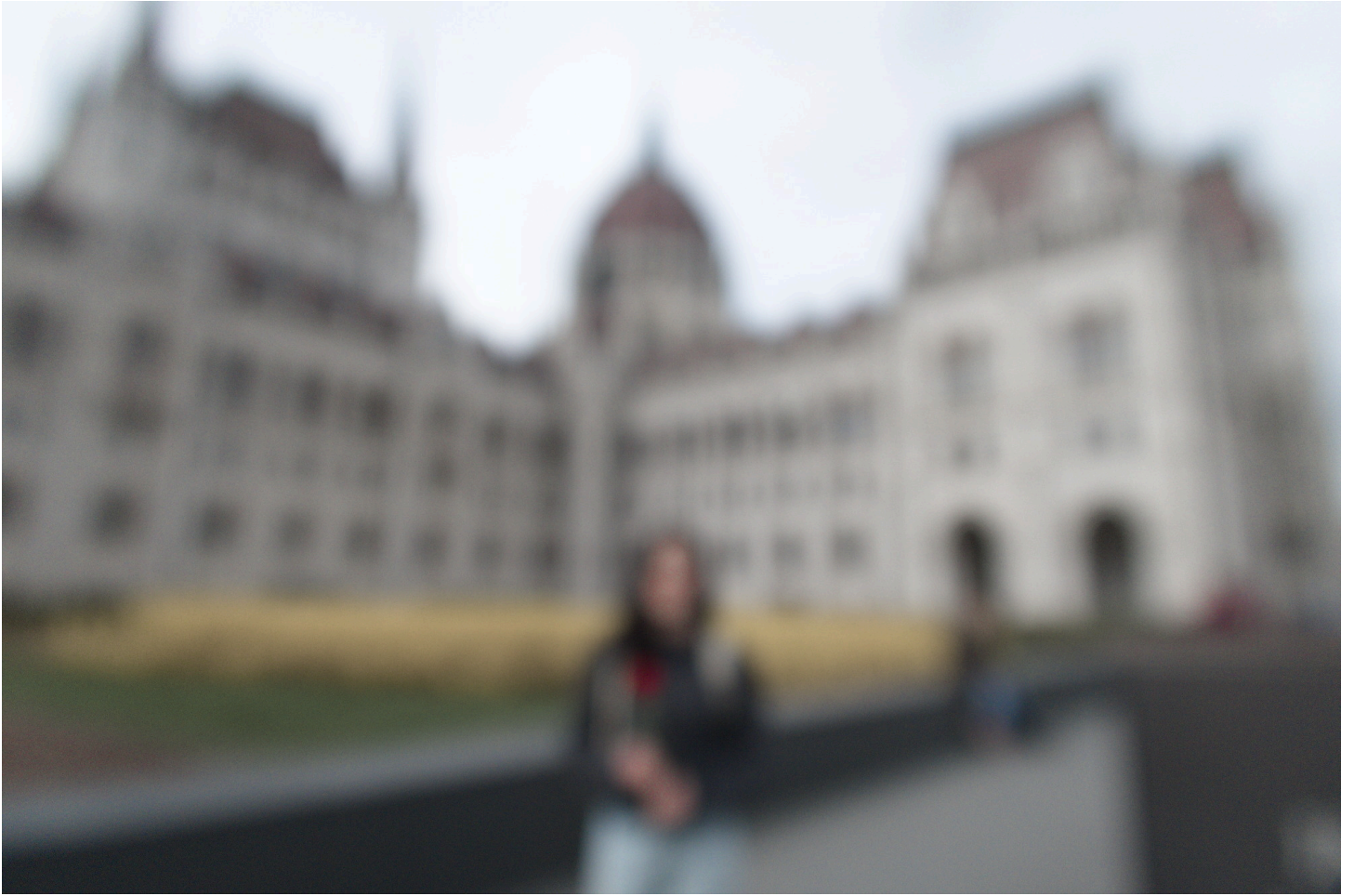


Your Rose: A Photographic Commentary on *Son of Saul*

This photo essay, consisting of 18 photographs, is an attempt to mimic the cinematography and subject matter of the 2015 Holocaust film *Son of Saul*. While watching the movie, I found myself captivated by director László Nemes' use of muted color and blurry backgrounds to showcase the austerity and helplessness of life inside Auschwitz. Lead actor Géza Röhrig plays Saul, a Nazi puppet and member of the Sonderkommando whose main mission throughout the film is to find a rabbi to give a young boy a proper Jewish burial. Röhrig's performance is notable for his lack of emotion throughout the entire movie, save for one of the last shots, where he gives a slight smile at the sight of a young peasant boy outside the shed where he and some other escapees are about to be killed.

In my own creative interpretation of the film, I wanted to follow the general style of Nemes' work, but spin the subject matter into a more mundane story. Thus, I chose to portray the story of a girl going to deliver a rose. The ending of her story, like Saul's, is ambiguous--it's unclear whether the rose is delivered or even appreciated. Also similarly to *Son of Saul* is the intentional blurring and cropping of the background. In my research, I read that the director, head cinematographer, and production designer of the film made a pledge that "staying with Saul means not going beyond his own field of vision, hearing, or presence." In my own work, I sought to emulate this intense focus on one person's senses. The girl depicted is focused solely on one thing--delivering her rose. Here are the photos, with a short explanation for each.



The series starts with a blurry shot of the girl holding a rose and walking towards the camera, just like the initial scene of Auschwitz in *Son of Saul* and the opening sequence of the László Nemes short film that we watched in class.



She slowly walks into focus. From the very first moment, she's invested in this rose. The rose is to her as the boy was to Saul--her *raison d'être*, reason to live, her mission, her hope.



She's in focus now, but notice how the background is blurry and stretched. She is the subject, not anyone else. Though the landscape around her may be beautiful, she is not interested in it--only in her task.



She holds the rose in her fingertips. All other colors are muted.



In the next few photos, we see the girl walking around some of the most postcard-perfect scenes of Budapest, but the backgrounds are intentionally cropped or blurred in each of them. This mimics scenes in *Son of Saul* like the gas chambers and the throwing of bodies into pits, where the cinematography focuses much more on Saul's expressionless face than anything going on around him.



Again, even the people around the girl are just part of different stories. The camera is on her stoic face, gazing off into the horizon. What is she looking at? The viewer can only imagine.



The tram is blurred, emphasizing the transient nature of millions of other stories taking place outside of the girl's field of vision. But as mentioned, this essay is not concerned with the other tourists, locals, and travelers making their way around Budapest in her vicinity. They mean nothing to her. She's become desensitized to their lives, their needs, their goals, even their humanity, because of her own mission. This is just like how Saul loses the package of gunpowder in the frenzy of finding a rabbi. Other prisoners are depending on him to be able to stage a rebellion against the Nazis, but in completing his own goals, he forgets about theirs. Nemes leaves us to wonder whether this is noble or not. On the one hand, Saul is trying to dignify one human life, but on the other, he's ignoring the chance to help dozens of others escape the camp. The audience reaches a moral dilemma--to honor one life, or save many?



The rose is unequivocally red amongst the muted blues and grays of the world around it. This underscores its importance, but also perhaps its harm. Since the girl is completely emotionless, the viewer must wonder--is her mission good at all? Perhaps she is giving the rose to someone she once loved as a plea to get them back, or maybe she's going to prick her fingertips on the thorns to feel pain. At the same time, we must wonder if her ignorance of her surroundings is kind or cruel.



Again, the background, the subject of many a tourist's photos, is cropped, desaturated, and off-center. The people are reduced to black blobs, indistinguishable from each other. The camera follows the girl's mind, where each person is a stranger, and they all look the same.



At the door of the apartment.





Suspenseful, action-driven, urgent. The hand opens the door in an extreme close-up shot. We can feel her anticipation.



Someone opens the door. Who? We don't have the privilege to know.



As the girl looks at the door and holds out the rose, she gives her only smile.



The rose lies against a grimy wall. We reach the end of the story. It's unsatisfying, filled with ambiguity. Did the girl never see anyone at all and simply leave the rose in fear of confrontation? Maybe she tossed the flower to the side in a passionate embrace. Or did her lover throw it away? Or this photo is taken much later? Like *Son of Saul's*, this ending is full of disappointment and hope at the same time. There was real happiness in this girl's story. We saw it in her smile. But in the midst of a harsh world, where roses end up not in loving hands, but in the street, she also has a gritty longing for her life to have meaning.