

Sonic Dread

Classroom Encounters with the Sounds of Gun Violence through Film

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DURING THE SPRING OF 2021—my last as a full-time secondary social studies teacher—I walked with purpose down a hallway at school, off to complete one urgent task or another. I remember moving quickly through the space, head down, mind occupied by one of many swirling thoughts: planning my next lesson, a parent’s urgent email, the pile of papers waiting for grades sitting atop my desk. That is until a sound slowed, then stopped, both my footsteps and my whirling mind.

Cracking out from a classroom down the hall was a jarring *pop pop*, the noise seeming to ricochet off the colorful bulletin boards and club posters decorating the walls, incongruous and strange. The discordant sound of gunshots in a school is the waking nightmare of so many teachers today. I felt the wrongness of it in my body—my heart rate increased, my breath quickened, the effects of adrenaline coursing through my limbs. I realized almost immediately that the noise I heard was not that of a real gun firing, but I was shaken, nonetheless. My feet began to move again as I approached the classroom and peered in through the opened door. The lights in the room were dimmed, the teacher seated at his desk, the students’ rapt attention focused on a screen at the front of the room. A movie was playing.

Informed by research on teaching difficult knowledge and histories (Britzman, 1998, 2000; Epstein & Peck, 2018; Garrett, 2017; Miles, 2019; Sheppard, 2010; Zembylas, 2014) and sonic studies in education (Dernikos, 2020, 2021; Gershon, 2011, 2013, 2017, Wargo, 2018), this paper critically examines the affective implications of a common pedagogical strategy used to teach difficult knowledge: film.

To conceptualize sound and affect, I take up Dernikos et al.’s (2020) notion of “affective scratchings,” which can be understood as moving beyond a consideration of what affect *is* and into theorizing what affect mobilizes or activates in a complex assemblage. Sonic affective scratchings, when “sounds extend into bodies ↔ bodies extend into sound” (p. 3), vibrate through space and into human, non-human, and more-than-human bodies. The bodily sensations provoked by contact with the sensorium (Massumi, 2002b)—in which sounds are constantly vibrating (Gershon, 2013) and circulating—settle or route (Garrett, 2017) into feelings and emotions (Ahmed, 2015).

Affective scratchings produced by this exchange are “sonorous flickers, gut punches, or complex mobilities [that] reveal crevices and fissures that launch new worlds and open us to multiple possibilities” (Dernikos et al., 2020, p. 3). In a classroom assemblage, the sound of a gunshot might cut through complex entanglements in ways that produce powerful affective scratchings.

Analysis of a film that features the sounds of gunshots is central to this article. Scholarship on the use of film to teach social studies tends to prioritize analysis that examines how students encounter difficult knowledge ocularly through a focus on what students *see* on screen. However, there appears to be little research regarding the ways in which teachers and learners process the sounds of trauma in film—specifically the sound of a gunshot. In a moment when a shooting at school is (tragically) not beyond the realm of possibility, educators must recognize that their eyes are not the only part of our bodies that experience the residue of violent events, that seeing is not the only sense that absorbs the always flowing and constantly circulating forces in the spaces we inhabit. Considering this context, I argue that teachers who choose to use film as a tool to teach difficult knowledge and history should be attentive to both what students see *and* what they hear.

Sonic studies that enrich our understanding of both the epistemological and ontological affects of hearing underpin the conceptual framework of this article. For instance, Evens (2002) explores the affective intensities that occur when particular sounds and noises are processed through epistemologies of hearing, arguing that sounds have a kind of persistence that “hangs in the air, in the room, in bodies,” vibrations lingering and recirculating, causing our bodies to “hum along with the noise of the universe” (p. 177).

Goodman’s (2012) work delves into ontologies of hearing, examining how vibrational forces are registered and felt prior to being epistemologically assigned. Arguing that sounds have reservoirs of potential that produce affective “vibes” in and across bodies, Goodman describes a condition “in which hearing overrides the other senses, displacing the reign of vision in the hierarchy, producing a flatter, more equal sensory ration” (p. 27). These are moments that can transform “bad vibes” into a “sonic ecology of dread: fear activated deliberately” (p. 29). Sounds, like images, are attached to histories and settle into subjectivities that can satisfy, initiate frisson, or provoke what Massumi and Manning (in Weig, 2019) describe as a “schiz in the soma” (n.p.). Similar to seeing trauma, hearing it can be intensely destabilizing.

Goodman (2012) advances a notion of the sonic anticipation of threat, arguing that sounds are charged with futurity, “the *activity of the future in the present*, and therefore a portal into the operative logic of fear within the emergent paradigm of preemptive power” (p. xviii). The sound of gunshots is pregnant with potential dread, located on a grisly map in our minds, a cartography informed by the pervasive and ever-present climate of gun violence in the United States. This is not to say that teachers should avoid constructing encounters that generate discomfort, but rather that educators should think carefully about sight *and* sound when considering pedagogical and instructional approaches and sources.

This article explores how the sound of gunshots in films shown to students in a classroom, understood in the context of the always present threat of school shootings, have the possibility of producing affective responses that move from *bad vibes* to an *ecology of dread* through an activation of anticipatory threat (Goodman, 2012, p. xviii). In the pages that follow, I begin by introducing a theoretical framework that guides my analysis. Using this framework, I explore curricular materials for a film frequently used to teach difficult knowledge. Prior to choosing a film, I considered selection criteria that would help me to illuminate the implications of sonic dread in a classroom space. I wanted to find a film that is widely used by social studies teachers in the United States to guide students in learning about a topic considered difficult history. As well as

being widely used, I sought to locate a film that includes at least one scene that featured the sounds of gunshots. In addition, the film had to have several examples of easily accessible curriculum that would ground my analysis in possible teacher practice. *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1994) best fits these criteria. Though my findings were null, I used my own encounter with the sonic intensities of *Schindler's List* as a way to contemplate the affective potential and implications of inviting the sounds of gunshots into the classroom. The final section of this paper will provide analysis of this process and considerations for pedagogical and curricular shifts that might attend to vibrations that might provoke sonic dread.

Theoretical Framework

Teaching difficult knowledge in social studies is an endeavor layered with enormous pedagogical and curricular complexity for both teachers and students. Encountering the pain and trauma that others have experienced, that has been enacted on humans by other humans while being supported and perpetuated by systems that, in many cases, still exist, is profoundly unsettling. Bearing witness to past suffering simultaneously implicates witnesses while compelling new negotiations with once familiar understandings. Teaching difficult knowledge is—and should be—disruptive. It also plays an important role in guiding students to be able to engage with the social world as ethical citizens (Garrett, 2017). However, challenges to teaching and learning difficult knowledge are compounded by legislative efforts to scrub social studies formal curricula of issues that might provoke discomfort in students (Crenshaw, 2023; Marrun et al., 2023; Singer, 2023).

In order to broadly explore what it means to teach and learn difficult knowledge and histories in social studies, I first briefly trace the epistemological lineage of difficult knowledge and its relationship with emotion and affect in the classroom. I rely on the works of a number of social studies researchers who have produced important scholarship in this field of inquiry, including Epstein and Peck (2018), Garrett (2017), Miles (2019), Sheppard (2010), and Zembylas (2014). Drawing upon research grounded in the psychoanalytic turn to affect, these scholars explore how students and teachers “make sense of the complex intersection of difficult histories, emotions, and affects” (Miles, 2019, p. 478) in social studies classrooms.

Second, I turn to a common pedagogical strategy used to teach difficult knowledge in social studies: film. In particular, I seek to explore the ways in which learners and educators encounter difficult knowledge through sounds heard when watching a movie—specifically the sound of a gunshot. When viewing a film, the audience can choose to shut eyes or turn away from the screen. However, they cannot shut their ears—we lack an earlid (Kim-Cohen, 2009/2021).

Underpinning this analysis is a rich body of research on the role of sound in cinematic experiences, including work by Altman (1992, 1999, 2012), Beck and Grajeda (2008), Chion (2009, 1994/2019), and Holman (2010). In bringing these two strands of inquiry together—difficult knowledge in social studies and sound studies in film—I build upon research on sonic trauma, including important work by Gershon (2018), Goodman (2012), Dernikos (2020/2021), and Daughtry (2015), to explore the implications of hearing the sound of gunshots while teaching difficult histories and knowledge. Given the grim reality of gun violence in the United States, I argue that educators must be attentive to the various ways that learners encounter and process the complex modalities through which difficult knowledge presents—both ocularly, through our eyes, and sonically through our ears.

Difficult Knowledge in Social Studies

Literature on teaching difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998) and history in social studies underscores the complexities inherent in navigating sensitive and challenging topics in the classroom, such as war, genocide, and structural racism. Research on teaching difficult history (Epstein & Peck, 2018; Garrett, 2017; Miles, 2019; Sheppard & Levy, 2019; Stoddard, 2022) frequently draws upon the work of Deborah Britzman (1998), whose psychoanalytical approach to learning difficult knowledge focuses on how such encounters affect learners in two simultaneous and related contexts: “the inside or the psychic, and the outside or the social” (p. 2). Considering the implications of Britzman’s theorization on social studies education, Miles (2019) makes clear that there are important distinctions between difficult knowledge and difficult histories, though the interrelated nature of these two concepts compel social studies researchers who seek to understand the effects of difficult histories to frequently return to Britzman’s findings.

However, before exploring the complexities and implications of these concepts, both taken together and apart, it is necessary to define these distinctions. According to Britzman (2000), where difficult *knowledge* is concerned more broadly with how people attach to the knowledge of the other’s suffering, difficult *history* more specifically refers to “periods that reverberate in the present and surface fundamental disagreements over who we are and what values we hold” (Gross & Terra, 2018, p. 52). As social studies is not limited to history education but instead encompasses a vast array of fields interested in deepening our understanding of the social world (e.g., economics, psychology, anthropology, geography, and civics), both difficult knowledge and difficult history are relevant to this discussion.

A central objective of teaching social studies is to help students become “ethical subjects in relation to other ethical subjects” (Britzman, 2000, p. 37), an understanding Garrett (2017) links to engaging in democratic practices. Proponents of confronting difficult knowledge in social studies argue that teachers must help students to encounter the full spectrum of human behavior and potential. Only through such encounters can students truly and deeply appreciate the historical context that underlies their relationships with others.

Nevertheless, this approach to social studies is by no means universally embraced, as evidenced by the recent spate of anti-memory and anti-history legislation that seeks to surveil and regulate how the past is encountered in the classroom (Gross, 2022; Pollock et al., 2022). Where proponents of teaching difficult knowledge do so in order to render each other ethical subjects and maintain that doing so obligates the learner to “that which was destroyed but has not gone away” (Britzman, 2000, p. 39), opponents propose an education stripped of “pain and remorse.” Instead, opponents favor featuring “only stories of war heroism, emplotment, and redemption” that does not “reenact the past in a way that could give insight into the present” but rather proposes a “congratulatory insistence that the present is better because the past made it so” (p. 39). Among the many reasons an anti-difficult truths/pro antiseptic approach is problematic, Britzman argues that it leaves learners with “nothing to do, nothing to think” (p. 39).

Perhaps, then, what is needed is a less “safe” (Dumont, 2012) and more thought-full and risky (Gershon, 2012) pedagogy. Teaching social studies *through* difficult knowledge by embracing the powerful affects and emotions produced in such encounters offers educators the potential to take students beyond disassociation and present “opportunities for actions of affective solidarity” (Zembylas, 2014, p. 404). In other words, such an approach has the possibility of helping students to feel agential rather than helpless in the face of past, present, and future trauma.

However, introducing difficult knowledge also invites conditions that may provoke precarity, insecurity, and discomfort for students and teachers alike.

Recent research around the affective turn in education (see Dernikos et al. 2020; Snaza et al., 2016) investigates how affective encounters produce different and often unpredictable responses in students. Snaza (2020) argues:

Students' affective attunement to the space, to the other human bodies, and to the histories that materialize in the classroom shapes what they *feel* in ways that determine how they can listen, how they can respond, and how they can engage Bodies in the room vibrate differently, feel differently, and attune differently. And these differences have everything to do with the ways those bodies moved through other spaces (institutional, intellectual, geographic, and psychic) before they walked in or were brought in. (p. 116)

As Snaza (2020) notes, students entering a classroom space compose a unique assemblage informed by countless entangled subjectivities. Teachers who do not heed these complexities while also recognizing the unique cultural moment that students exist within may not succeed when introducing difficult knowledge as a way to create more agentic, empathetic, and ethical students.

Wozolek (2020) powerfully reminds us that

schools do not exist in a vacuum, and the violence that is learned in schools recurs in and through communities and, in turn, impacts schools. Schooling is therefore central to the resonances and reverberations (Gershon, 2017) found in the echo chamber of aggressions within an assemblage. (p. 111)

Likewise, curriculum does not exist in a vacuum. Teachers are curators of knowledge, making pedagogical decisions and content choices that map onto the classroom assemblage in complex ways.

Given this reality, teachers must attend to how difficult knowledge has the potential to create classroom environments that feel simultaneously precarious and fragile (McCall, 2022; Wozolek, 2023). In this case, fragility does not necessarily suggest a thing that is easily broken. Rather, the precarity of a fragile classroom system—one that challenges the lovely and comfortable knowledge baked into the linear, progress-oriented master narratives that often define social studies classrooms—offers untold potential. Once broken, the shattered pieces can be reattached in surprising and previously unforeseeable ways. Fragility contains potent possibilities, systems that are constantly in-the-making because they can be easily broken and rearranged countless times and ways.

In the passage above, Snaza (2020) describes a fragile and precarious classroom space that both individuates and collectivizes bodies. The *collective difference* of individual affects creates a harmony unique to that particular assemblage. It is no mistake that Snaza articulates this phenomenon using sonic terms—attunements and vibrations can be both felt and heard. These affective scratchings can create intense reverberations that have the potential to rupture a student's way of being-knowing-feeling.

Sound and Film

The intersections between sound and film studies situate my inquiry on the affective implications of introducing the sounds of gunshots in classroom spaces while teaching difficult history. Central to rich and evolving fields that investigate the role of sound in cinematic experiences is Chion's (1994/2019) influential work, *Audio-Vision—Sound on Screen*. In this work, Chion argues that sound is not merely an accompaniment to the visual, but is vital to evoking certain emotions from the audience that are “in relation to the situation depicted on screen” (p. 8). Resonant to this article is Chion's theorization on the sounds of horror when Chion writes,

Transformed by the image it influences, sound ultimately reprojects onto the image the product of their mutual influences. There's ample evidence of this reciprocity in the case of horrible or upsetting sounds. The image projects onto them a meaning they do not have at all by themselves. (p. 19)

Similarly, Altman's (2012) concept of “semantic/syntactic” aspects of film sound offers a nuanced understanding of how sound contributes to the narrative structure and emotional resonance in cinema. Altman's (1992, 1999, 2012) research underscores the multifaceted nature of sound in film, emphasizing its ability to convey both specific meanings and broader emotional atmospheres.

Expanding on this groundwork are essays included in Beck and Grajeda's (2008) comprehensive volume, *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*. While the sounds of violence are not directly included, the authors collectively make a compelling argument for the inseparability of audio from visual when producing intense and immersive cinematic experiences. Taken together, literature on the intersections of sound and film makes clear that sounds powerfully affect a film's audience by transforming both what is heard and what is seen. As such, the next section explores why educators must be mindful of both ocular and sonic encounters when introducing difficult knowledge.

Difficult Knowledge in the Classroom: The Sonic Trauma of Gunshots

When confronted with difficult knowledge that produces a “provocation of affect” (Simon, 2011, p. 433), our often linear or hierarchical systems of understanding the world are destabilized. Such encounters have the possibility of producing new potentials that veer from the well-worn refrains that define our conceptualization of the world and our place in it. These breaks can feel profoundly uncomfortable. The inclination, then, might be to turn away and reject difficult knowledge or re-route it to something more familiar (Garrett, 2011).

This tension presents a challenge to educators. On one hand, there exists a desire to leverage difficult knowledge in ways that “repair severed cultural continuities, enhance inter-group understanding, and destabilize problematic boundaries” (Lehrer et al., 2011, p. 8). On the other, the acknowledgement of the limitations to introducing difficult knowledge through filters of media and the “official curriculum,” all while negotiating one's own discomfort with learning and teaching about past violence. This is compounded by our cultural saturation in (and/or obsession with) difficult knowledge—the near constant swirl of bits and pieces of trauma that flow through classrooms and schools (Wozolek, 2020).

Indeed, Lehrer et al. (2011) contend that “simply making people face the horrors humans are capable of perpetrating seems to have lost some of its galvanizing force” (p. 1). Sontag (2003) similarly cautions against obscene voyeurism and treating “history-as-spectacle” (p. 123) and challenges the veracity of compassion fatigue while also acknowledging that “compassion is an unstable emotion” that if not “translated into action” can wither (p. 101).

Teachers, confronted with the potential of student apathy in the face of overwhelming suffering across their study of history, might attempt to initiate a *shock to thought* or a moment when “the expressive momentum hits the body with its full ontogenetic force” (Massumi, 2002a, p. xxxi). A shock to thought is jarring because it halts attempts to merge newly acquired difficult knowledge in ways that produce it as resembling more familiar systems. Dale (2006) writes that “a point of change is the sudden shock when thought realizes itself in the body” (p. 91). Because each body in a classroom is accompanied by diverse and sometimes unknowable worldviews and identities, attempts at provoking a shift in consciousness might have unforeseen consequences.

Although everything has the potential to resonate (e.g., 2020), where some bodies will resonate with each other, finding solidarity and community through attunement of shared experiences and positionalities, others will produce discordant and jarring cacophonies that have the potential to (re)activate hidden traumas. Stoddard et al. (2017) remind us that “trauma can sometimes emerge as a form of difficult history that groups do not want to face or acknowledge—or that they do not want to engage with because they are cognizant of the trauma these representations could induce” (p. 5). In other words, “emotional response is grounded in the individual and collective experiences” of students in shared educational spaces (p. 5).

Each student in a classroom is tethered to a unique blend of inheritances, subjectivities, and encounters. Such differences mean that a sonic shock to thought will produce a diversity of emotional and affective responses in students that a teacher curating such an experience should try to anticipate and make space for, while recognizing that we can never encompass a totality of possibilities in a complex assemblage.

A frequently used vehicle for initiating a shock to thought in students is film. Films provide a sensory experience that saturates the classroom space with sights *and* sounds, immersing the audience in a moment in ways that reading a text may not. The sensory texture produced by watching and hearing a film can communicate a layered and dimensional complexity that plunges the audience into a particular moment (Altman, 2012; Chion, 1994/2019). As such, films can be used in social studies classes to engender historical consciousness and empathy (Donnelly, 2020; Moller, 2018). Anwer and Varner (2019) argue that by guiding students through engagements with violent films, using films not as an “afterthought that help(s) augment an argument or ideas we already knew” (p. 142) but rather as “teaching machines” (Giroux, 2020, p. 68), they are able tap into a deeper understanding of a concept or topic. Through calling “attention to the corporality of the visceral response” they seek to thwart “intellectual tepidness and anesthetizing tendencies that” exposure to violence can induce (Anwer & Varner, 2019, p. 143).

Stoddard et al. (2017) maintain that using film to teach difficult history can effectively challenge dominant narratives, revealing new or unfamiliar worldviews and epistemologies. Walsh et al. (2017) emphasize that showing certain films to students produces affectively difficult history, which “becomes difficult because of the events portrayed and because of the struggle to empathize with the victims, bystanders, perpetrators, and those who resist in order to analyze them historically rather than in a moral, allegorical, or sentimentalized sense” (p. 20). These theorists make a powerful and compelling argument that conscious and collective encounters with difficult knowledge—focusing on the intellectual, emotion, physical, and affective effects of such

knowledge—can create a productively precarious learning environment. These environments challenge students to “explore reactions that don’t resort to the clichés of numbness or revulsion” (Anwer & Varner, 2019, p. 159) but instead interrogate the complexity of difficult knowledge.

While the research above makes a convincing case for the use of film to teach difficult knowledge, these studies tend to prioritize analysis that examines how students encounter difficult knowledge ocularly. Though current scholarship certainly recognizes that films are felt bodily (Sobchack, 2004), guidance around classroom encounters with films about difficult history continue to center what students see and do not similarly emphasize supporting students in processing reverberations of violence. The affective scratchings of difficult knowledge can provoke somatic responses that cannot be avoided by removing the visual field (Dernikos et al., 2020). As Gershon (2017) reminds us,

because people engage their own understandings and imaginations to create visuals with the sonic, these connections can be more difficult to distance from one’s self, unlike a video where such distance is clear and immediate and where closing one’s eyes remains possible. (p. 188)

Bearing in mind that “the ear analyzes, processes, and synthesizes faster than the eye” (Chion, 1994/2019, p. 10), this area deserves more attention.

The imaginations of students who have experienced gun violence themselves or who live in proximity to gun violence in their communities will be activated differently than students who have only encountered gun violence through film or other media. However, it is likely that *all* students in this country are haunted by the specter of school shootings. In 2022 alone, there were 177 incidents of gunfire on school grounds in the United States, resulting in 57 deaths (Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, 2023). In a national context where “killing is normalized and an expected daily event” (Gershon, 2017, p. 187), it may well be the case that students are both numb to the sound of gunfire and terrified for the moment it could invade their lives.

In an effort to “theorize violence through the prism of sound and sound through the prism of violence” (p. 6), Daughtry (2015) labels the sounds of war “the belliphonic,” merging the root for war, “bell,” with “phonic,” a root word meaning sound. In creating his neologism, Daughtry compels us to recognize that the sounds of war are materially and discursively different from other sounds and should be treated as such. Though American schools are not located in war zones, Daughtry’s conceptualization of the belliphonic calls us to consider questions that have important relevance when thinking about learning and teaching about difficult knowledge featuring gun violence in the United States: “What are the ethical consequences of listening to violent acts? How do sound and violence move through the world? What kinds of victims, what kinds of survivors, do belliphonic sounds create?” (p. 5).

Because classrooms are “host to complex sonic ecologies” (Brownell, 2019, p. 551) and audio haptics—being inescapable—can provoke uninvited visceral and emotional consequences, teachers who incorporate the belliphonic into their curriculum should, at the very least, anticipate the impact sonic dread/trauma might have on students. As Goodman (2012) explains, sounds have reservoirs of potential that produce affective “vibes” in and across bodies. When teaching difficult knowledge that includes the sounds of gun violence, teachers should guard against moments when sonic “bad vibes” can transform into a “sonic ecology of dread” (p. 29). While student encounters with the belliphonic are beyond the scope of this paper, further research into the implications of sonic dread on student learning is an important extension of this project. In writing this article, I

hope to open the field to a deeper conversation around the repercussions of belliphonic affective scratchings in social studies classroom spaces. In the next section, I will explore research and curriculum on a film that features the sounds of war in an effort to determine the extent to which sonic trauma is a consideration when showing students a film that depicts difficult knowledge.

Sonic Dread in *Schindler's List*

Criteria for Selection

Following the moment described at the beginning of this article, I sought to develop a deeper understanding of what happens when the sound of a gunshot vibrates through a social studies classroom, producing the potential for sonic dread to invade the assemblage. As my conceptual framework unfolded, I felt the need to ground my theorization in curriculum in order to explore how this idea might be taken up to classroom teachers. Many teachers, children, and parents carry an awareness of the persistent threat of guns in U.S. schools. Gun violence invades the hidden curriculum through the persistent threat of school shootings that manifest in the norms, values, and beliefs that are silently communicated to students—the normalization of lock-downs and shelter-ins, not to mention all too routine active shooter drills.

Gun violence bleeds into a null curriculum that is *not* taught—the content and skills that are ignored in deference to or in fear of guns. The implications of hidden and null curriculum around the sounds of gun violence in U.S. schools demand further study. For this article, I focus my inquiry on a slice of official curriculum—the texts readily available to teachers hoping to teach a difficult history through film.

To this end, I looked for a film that is widely used by social studies teachers in the United States to guide students in learning about a topic considered difficult history. As well as being widely used, I wanted to locate a film that includes at least one scene that featured the sounds of gunshots. In addition, the film had to have several examples of easily accessible curriculum that would attach my analysis to possible teacher practice. *Schindler's List* best fits these criteria.

In a study that explored how and why social studies teachers use film, Marcus and Stoddard (2007) found that the teachers in the sample used “an extraordinary amount of film in class,” with 75% reporting that they use some portion of a Hollywood film a few times a week (p. 308). In their study, *Schindler's List* ranked third of the most used films. In his dissertation research, Gudgel (2015) found that 26% of teachers nationwide say that they show the film when teaching about the Holocaust. Holocaust and film education researchers both recommend *Schindler's List* as an effective tool for teaching the subject in ways that develop historical empathy and illuminate multiple perspectives (D'sa, 2020; Marcus, 2020; Marcus & Mills, 2017; Russell, 2012; Samuels, 2007).

Educational Research on the Use of *Schindler's List*

Most research agreed with Russell's (2012) observation that film can “stimulate a viewer's senses and provide images of historical and social topics that a textbook cannot” (p. 157) and that *Schindler's List* is a “visual textbook” that “conveys historical atmosphere” (p. 158). Marcus and Mills (2017) notes that “the challenge of graphic content [in *Schindler's List*] is exceptionally

relevant for using film given the medium's ability to present a narrative through a combined visual and audio narrative that includes special effects to bring the past alive" (p. 180). Though Marcus and Mills (2017) acknowledge the way that the film's audio contributes to an immersive experience for students, generally, research on the uses of *Schindler's List* focuses on the implications of visual content.

Teaching-facing Formal Curriculum for Using *Schindler's List*

To enact the first step of my inquiry, I selected three guides that teachers might draw upon if they plan to show *Schindler's List* as part of a unit on the Holocaust. Each guide is easily accessible to teachers and was developed by a credible organization known for producing trustworthy educational research. After selection, I conducted a basic quantitative analysis (Schreier, 2012) of the guides, counting the number of words that were in reference to sound. I then read the guides more holistically (Krippendorff, 2018), focusing my analysis on language that called for the audience to engage with the film on an emotional or affective level in ways that might make space for attention to the sonic.

First, USC Shoah Foundation's iWitness features a wealth of resources and activities to support teachers who want to show *Schindler's List* as a part of a unit on the Holocaust. Activities invite students to place the film in historical context through researching central figures in order to make sense of how the "individual is influenced by the political and social context of the time in which they live" (iWitness, 2023, n.p.). While the resources provide students and teachers with rich documents and activities to help contextualize and make sense of what they see when watching the film, there is no instruction around what to listen for or how to help students process what they hear.

Next, Echoes and Reflections, an organization dedicated to supporting educators in teaching the Holocaust, provides a companion guide to *Schindler's List* that brings together a variety of materials, including background information, primary and secondary sources, an audio glossary, and a number of writing questions and discussion prompts. Students are asked to describe examples of antisemitism that they observe, analyze the significance of specific quotes or moments in the film, and think critically about the filmmaker's choices. Though most of the learning activities center on what students see in the film, one question does ask students to consider both what they see and hear:

Schindler's List is filmed primarily in black and white with a few scenes filmed in color. Identify which scenes are in color and why you think Spielberg made this artistic decision. Have students consider other artistic decisions that Spielberg made and their impact on the film. Students might want to consider such things as lighting, camera angles, music and other sounds, e.g., dogs barking, shouting in German. (Echoes & Reflections, 2018, p. 4)

This prompt asks students to think about how Spielberg's artistic choices affected their experience of watching the film yet does not use language that opens space for affective or emotional responses to sensory input.

Finally, *Facing History and Ourselves* (2018) features a resource guide for teaching *Schindler's List*. Of the three examples I examined for this brief study, this formal curriculum is the most steeped in language grounded in potential for students' emotional or affective responses

to content. In its “Viewing: Watching *Schindler’s List*” lesson, the curriculum anchors learning in the question: “How can we be thoughtful, emotionally engaged viewers of *Schindler’s List*? The tasks that attach to each lesson create powerful opportunities for students to process the emotions produced while watching the film. However, there is no language around the sonic trauma that students may encounter alongside the graphic violence that they see with their eyes while watching the film.

These resources offer teachers incredibly valuable support in their endeavors to teach students difficult knowledge through film. However, this short review serves to highlight the absence of discussions in social studies education around how students encounter trauma through sound—in particular, the sound of a gunshot. Given the absence of findings, I returned again to the film and considered how my own encounter with the sound of gunshots might give rise to sonic dread. Conscious of my relationship to the belliphonic—as a mother with children in school, as a former classroom teacher, and as an American—I revisited Daughtry’s (2015) questions: “What are the ethical consequences of listening to violent acts? How do sound and violence move through the world? What kinds of victims, what kinds of survivors, do belliphonic sounds create?” (p. 5). With these, and my own subjectivities, in mind, I watched and listened.

Though there are a number of scenes that include the sounds of gunshots, I listened to one in particular for the way that the sound of gunshots dominates the sonic field. The scene features a Nazi soldier, Amon Goeth, standing on a balcony overlooking a concentration camp crowded with prisoners being forced into hard labor. He holds a rifle and begins to shoot and kill the people below. There is no music, nothing to distract from or dilute the intensity of the intermittent explosions and the screams of terror that follow. It is a thoroughly chilling scene. Watching it a number of times for the purpose of this project unsettled me to my core.

Shutting my eyes and listening to the staccato sound of Goeth’s gun firing—straining my ears between the shots in anticipation of when the next might come and imagining the atrocity that attached to the noise—I became aware of a more layered cacophony beyond the sounds emitted by the film. My mind’s eye imagined what I knew was happening on the screen, and those images became superimposed onto my own relationship with the sounds of violence. Indeed, Chion (1994/2019) reminds us that sounds of horror are steeped in histories and contexts. They “don’t spring from nothingness” (p. 21). The documents I examined prior to this exercise did not account for the feelings of sonic dread that surfaced through hearing. As I listened again and again and again, I wondered: what happens when the curriculum fails to accommodate for this kind of visceral experience? What might happen if we, as educators, call more attention to the affective scratchings of the belliphonic?

Discussion: Seeing and Hearing Difficult Knowledge in a Difficult Context

Lauren Berlant (2008) begins her essay, “Thinking about Feeling Historical,” with a 2008 quote from Frank Rich: “These are not ordinary times” (p. 229). Over a decade later, in the midst of a deadly pandemic, ecological collapse, and a lethal resurgence of White supremacy, a phrase echoing Rich’s sentiment went viral on social media: “I could really go for some precedented times.” Though there are a number of moments in U.S. history that this could be said of—such as the pervasive terror of the Jim Crow era for Black Americans or the persistent threat to many that defined McCarthyism—the confluence of factors listed above, coupled with the extreme surge in gun violence across the country, marks this moment as different. For social studies educators

attempting to effectively teach about historical trauma while also addressing these ongoing present traumas, the historical past and the *historical present* can feel as if they are collapsing into each other. Berlant (2008) writes of this sensation: “This disturbed time is a *historical present* and not just everydayness, because the atmosphere suggests a shift of historic proportions in the terms and processes of the conditions of continuity of life” (p. 231). Berlant goes on to describe how existing as part of a moment that is self-conscious of its own historical significance produces an “affective experience not of a break or traumatic present, but of crisis lived within ordinariness” (p. 231). The collision of turbulent history and the quotidian, a kind of flattening of the past so it coexists with the now, presents social studies teachers with a unique challenge.

As a social studies educator, I feel compelled to support my students as they learn how to distinguish between the past and historical present; to perceive the ways in which the presence of continuity does not negate the achievements of change; and to recognize their own agency, despite the *deja vu* induced by the iterations and recursions of history. To accomplish these objectives, I often tried to locate and incorporate materials that had the potential to interrupt the refrain and provoke a productive dissonance between past and present. Dissonance, in this sense, is felt as tension between what is perceived as finished and distant and what is felt as immediate and proximate (Christman et al., 2016; Kelly & Fetherston, 2008; Lee & Williams, 2017). To this end, photographs and films are often used as a way to concretize the disorienting feeling that we are constantly “on the verge—of *something*” (Berlant, 2008, p. 231) by attaching the recognizable—a person, a building, a machine, a protest—to the abstraction of political or social systems that produce the constant feeling that we are simultaneously tipping forward into an unknown and falling back into the already done.

Guiding students as they engage with visuals can be an effective and powerful way to teach difficult knowledge. Images that invite viewers to engage with difficult knowledge contain within them the potential to provoke a powerful affective response. In offering a snapshot that captures the “violent, tragic, gruesome, horrific, and painful” (Lehrer et al., 2011, p. 7) moments of the human experience, visuals offer a version of the world that might appear “disturbingly foreign or inconceivable to the self, bringing oneself up against the limits of what one is willing and capable of understanding” (Britzman, 1998, p. 433). Photographs or films that show glimpses of difficult knowledge or history compel us to confront “hard to look at cruelties” (Sontag, 2003, p. 41) and serve as “a means of making ‘real’ (or ‘more real’) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore” (p. 7). Images, both moving and still, allow us to briefly inhabit a different existence. How an image is curated and presented can produce a “shock to thought” that destabilizes or fractures the familiar refrains that allow us to comfortably move through the world (Simon, 2011). Visuals can be a highly effective means of communicating a thought, sensation, concept, framework, or worldview.

However, when confronted with an image of difficult history or knowledge, we can choose to turn away and let our eyes rest elsewhere or close our eyes and retreat from the visual field altogether. This choice becomes attractive when an image invades our psychic inner world in ways that are unsettling. Turning away is not always possible, especially when confronted with a sound or vibration that suggests atrocity. We cannot escape a sound in a classroom, cannot shut our ears as easily as our eyes. Nonetheless, though most humans are not limited to communicating through our eyes, or ocularly, when exploring the communication of difficult knowledge in a classroom, expressions transferred in this way have been privileged over sonic communication.

It is not the task of social studies educators to avoid producing feelings of discomfort in our students, especially when learning difficult knowledge. Indeed, language around safety and

(dis)comfort has been weaponized by those who wish to scrape the difficult but necessary histories of race-, gender-, and sexuality-based discrimination and violence from social studies curricula. However, when introducing difficult knowledge through films that feature the sounds of gunshots, social studies educators should be aware of when, how, and why unsettling feelings might emerge and the affective implications those moments will have for our students within the unique contexts they occupy. For instance, the sound of a gun firing is charged with the potential to generate sonic trauma in students who are routinely expected to engage in such practices as active shooter drills while at school. Because “sound is a being/doing/making” and “sounds form systems of meanings” (Wargo, 2020, p. 442), teachers who include sound in curriculum about difficult knowledge must be attentive to what students see *and* what they hear, especially when teaching the difficult knowledge that evokes the (un)conscious inevitability of gun violence.

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