Kronotop Journal of Communication 2025; 2(2): 427-441

A Review: *Nickel Boys* (2024) on the Axis of Memory, Violence and Identity*

Deniz Kurtyılmaz**

ABSTRACT

This review analyzes *Nickel Boys* (2024) as a cinematic narrative shaped by suppressed historical traumas and structured through silent forms of witnessing. Based on true events that took place in a reform school in 1960s America, the film does more than present a historical drama; it constructs a unique narrative language that represents the absence of justice through visual and auditory reductions. The use of the camera, often confined to the characters' perspectives, prevents the viewer from remaining a passive observer and instead invites them into the ethical burden of witnessing. Through the two characters' identity, the story reveals how individual memory becomes inseparable from collective history. The lack of courtroom scenes, legal processes, or institutional representations of justice signals that, for some, justice is rendered impossible from the outset. Silence functions as both an aesthetic and ethical strategy throughout the film. This article argues that *Nickel Boys* delivers a powerful cinematic testimony by portraying what remains unseen and unheard, giving voice to a silenced Black past. Although it may not have gained mainstream popularity, the film leaves a lasting impression through its artistic restraint and political depth.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Witnessing, Identity, Segregation

Article Type: Film Review
Received: 16.04.2025
Revised: 21.05.2025
Accepted: 26.05.2025

* This text contains narrative analyses and character discussions related to RaMell Ross's film *Nickel Boys*. It includes spoilers regarding key events.

** Asst. Prof., Giresun University, deniz.kurtyilmaz@giresun.edu.tr, 0000-0001-8123-8034

Kronotop İletişim Dergisi 2025; 2(2): 427-441

Bir Kritik: Bellek, Şiddet ve Kimlik Aksında *Nickel Boys* (2024)*

Deniz Kurtyılmaz**

ÖZ

Bu yazı, *Nickel Boys* (2024) filmini, geçmişin bastırılmış travmalarıyla hesaplaşan ve sessiz tanıklık üzerinden ilerleyen sinemasal bir anlatı olarak ele almaktadır. Film, 1960'ların Amerika'sında bir ıslahevinde geçen gerçek olaylara dayanırken, yalnızca tarihsel bir dram sunmakla kalmaz; aynı zamanda adaletin yokluğunu, görsel ve işitsel eksiltmelerle temsil eden özgün bir anlatım kurar. Karakterlerin bakış açılarıyla sınırlanan kamera kullanımı, izleyiciyi pasif bir seyirci olmaktan çıkararak, tanıklığın sorumluluğuna dahil etmektedir. İki karakterin kimlikleri üzerinden gelişen hikâye, bireysel belleğin kolektif hafızayla nasıl iç içe geçtiğini göstermektedir. Filmde mahkeme, yargılama ya da adaleti temsil eden hiçbir kurumun sahneye çıkmaması, adaletin bazıları için zaten en baştan imkânsız olduğunu ortaya koyarken sessizlik, film boyunca hem estetik hem de etik bir araç olarak kullanılır. Bu yazı, *Nickel Boys*'un görünmeyen üzerinden kurduğu anlatının, siyah geçmişin bastırılmış sesini bugünün izleyicisine taşıyan güçlü bir sinemasal tanıklık sunduğunu savunmaktadır. Popülerlikten uzak olmasına rağmen, film sanatsal sadeliği ve politik derinliğiyle önemli bir etki yaratmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Travma, Bellek, Tanıklık, Kimlik, Irk Ayrımı

Makale Türü: Film Analizi
Başvuru: 16.04.2025
Revizyon: 21.05.2025
Kabul: 26.05.2025

* Bu metin, RaMell Ross'un *Nickel Boys* filmiyle ilgili anlatı analizleri ve karakter tartışmalarını içermektedir. Önemli olaylara dair spoiler içermektedir.

** Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Giresun Üniversitesi, deniz.kurtyilmaz@giresun.edu.tr, 0000-0001-8123-8034

Introduction

Some films are not merely watched; due to their historical significance, they demand to be witnessed. RaMell Ross's 2024 film *Nickel Boys* similarly calls upon its audience to bear witness. The film is an adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by American author Colson Whitehead. The novel narrates the events that took place over the course of the 1960s at a reform school in the town of Marianna, Florida. The director remains faithful to the source material in his adaptation.[1] It is important to emphasize from the outset that both the novel and the film succeed remarkably in producing a serious discourse that carries responsibility not only for the past but also for the present.

This text aims to interpret *Nickel Boys* not merely as an adaptation, but as a cinematic representation of historical violence, institutional racism, and memory. The narrative structure, character development, visual aesthetics, and spatial strategies in the film will be examined with particular attention to how they bear witness to the suppressed history of Black existence. Throughout the text, the film will be evaluated not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its formal and ethical choices, discussing concepts such as the crisis of representation of the Black body, policies of silence, memory spaces, and aesthetic-political responsibility. In this context, Nickel Boys will be read as a cinematic example that does not merely recount the past but transports it to the present, making the audience a part of the act of witnessing.

Fact and Fiction Intertwined

To better examine Ross's work, it is necessary to present some historical background alongside the film analysis. The setting of the film, Nickel Academy, is inspired by the real-life Dozier School, and -like its model- embodies America's legacy of violence against Black individuals. The Dozier School (officially known as the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys), established in 1900, operated for 111 years until 2011. Although the school was officially described as a "reform institution for wayward boys," during the years of segregation in the United States, it became a center of systematic physical, psychological, and sexual violence against Black children. In such a way, in 2010 and 2011, excavations

[1] Although the film adaptation remains largely faithful to the novel, I cannot help but point out that the novel offers a much more layered narrative. Since intertextuality is not the main focus of this study, I won't go into detail on that front. Still, it's hard to ignore that the novel explores its themes -both socio-economic and psychological- in a far more nuanced and in-depth manner than the film does.

conducted by forensic anthropologist Erin Kimmerle from the University of Florida uncovered dozens of unmarked graves on the school grounds that were not listed in official records. Severe violence marks were detected on the bones of some victims (Kimmerle et al., 2011).

Drawing from this historical background, Ross places a particular emphasis on the setting. As the camera focuses on the school's architecture, walls, and gardens, the space is portrayed as a panopticon that both surveils and punishes, a concept woven into the narrative. Perhaps more importantly, however, this place serves as a kind of necropolis where America buries its violent past. Here, Pierre Nora's concept of "sites of memory" becomes especially relevant. According to Nora, places that a society forgets or wishes to forget are, in fact, the very places that must be remembered most (Nora, 1989, p. 8). *Nickel Boys* reminds viewers of what is most often sought to be forgotten: the blind violence unjustly inflicted upon a particular group, through the lens of place. The film frequently shifts its focus from the interior of the school to its exterior -the cemeteries, the surrounding vacant lands, and the now-abandoned buildings- thereby decoding these sites of memory.

The unearthing of the remains through archaeological excavations should also be seen as a symbol of resistance against forgetting. Director Ross skillfully incorporates real footage of the remains obtained during the forensic investigation. Presented as court evidence and as photographs, these remnants capture and preserve the "echo of unrecorded violence" inflicted upon the voiceless (Hartman, 1997, p. 10), thereby powerfully bringing it into the present in a fully documented form.

The violence and murders within the institution cannot be seen as isolated incidents. There is a historical ethos -still relevant in certain respects- that makes these horrific acts possible: Segregation. This is a race-based system of discrimination that enforces the forced separation of Black and white people in public spaces, education, transportation, and social life. It begins with the school housing Black and white children in separate buildings and culminates in Black children becoming victims of violence. In essence, the school exemplifies the flawless spatial execution of segregation.

Segregation derived its legitimacy from the Jim Crow laws, federal and local statutes that enforced mandatory separation between Black and white Americans in the southern United States from the late 19th century until the 1960s. These laws emerged as a response to the abolition of slavery following the

American Civil War (1861–1865) and were part of an effort, particularly in Southern states, to reestablish white supremacy. Through various regulations, Black individuals were compelled to use separate schools, buses, restaurants, hospitals, restrooms, parks, and even cemeteries.[2] American historian Leon F. Litwack defines the Jim Crow laws not merely as a system of physical segregation but as a regime of oppression aimed at systematically suppressing the citizenship rights of Black people (Litwack, 1998, p. 5).

It appears that the segregation within the school is not only physical but also ideological. From the very beginning, Black children are told, "You have no future!" In this sense, *Nickel Boys* is also a narrative about the destruction of the American Dream, one of the most fundamental myths of American society. The film constructs childhood not as a symbol of innocence, purity, or the future, but as a period systematically suppressed, exploited, and obliterated—so much so that the death of childhood (literal or metaphorical) becomes a metaphor for the collapse of a national ideal. Thus, childhood is effectively transformed into a "political construct." From the outset, Black children bear a political guilt: their very existence is seen as a crime. Actions that white children might dismiss as "mischief" are categorized as "crimes" for Black children, emphasizing that this chain of injustice reveals that the American Dream has always been valid only for a specific class and racial group.

In this context, Dozier School not only inflicted physical violence but also systematically detained Black children for years in conditions akin to labor camps, effectively eliminating any prospects for social mobility. During the mid-20th century, African Americans fought against this oppression. The events depicted in Nickel Boys witness the formation of the Civil Rights Movement[3]

[2] The laws take their name from a Black character named Jim Crow, portrayed by a white actor, Thomas D. Rice, in stage shows throughout the 1830s (Woodward, 2002, pp. 7–9). This character perpetuated negative and stereotypical representations of Black people as lazy, ignorant, entertaining but inferior, and over time the term "Jim Crow" became a term representing racial discrimination (Lhamon, 2000, p. 45). There are a few more interesting facts: David W. Griffith's film The Birth of a Nation (1915), well known to anyone familiar with film history, also played an important role in strengthening Jim Crow laws and institutionalizing racial discrimination at the federal level. The film functioned as a tool that fueled racial fears in society and provided a psychological and political foundation for discriminatory legal arrangements (Stokes, 2007, p. 116).

[3] The Civil Rights Movement was a mass social and political struggle in the United States from the 1950s to the 1960s, led by African Americans to achieve racial equality, voting rights, and citizenship rights. The movement opposed institutionalized racial discrimination through Jim Crow laws and became symbolized by pioneering figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. Through peaceful protests, boycotts, and marches, the movement

which arose in response to the deep-rooted and continually reinforced inequalities. The film's protagonist, Elwood Curtis (Ethan Herisse), being influenced by Martin Luther King's speeches at a young age, is no coincidence.

Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech,[4] delivered on August 28, 1963, in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., had a profound impact on the young Black generations of the time. One of the most significant influences shaping the character of Elwood Curtis in *Nickel Boys* is King's rhetoric. Throughout the film, recordings of King's voice resonate like an inner conscience within Elwood. The primary source nurturing Elwood's belief in justice and equality is King's principle of nonviolent resistance. In this respect, Elwood transforms into a seeker of justice who carries King's legacy through the darkness of the era.

According to African-American philosopher Cornel West, Martin Luther King is not just a civil rights activist, but also "the spiritual conscience of American democracy" (West, 2006, p. 28). Thus, Elwood's internalization of King's teachings represents not merely an individual rebellion, but a collective response to the system's distortion and injustice. However, the tragedy is that King's ideals, presented as a kind of "lost prophet" figure, hold no meaning in the reform school. Elwood, who listens to King's wise and moderate words, is ignored by the system; clearly, King's voice has not reached everywhere. In fact, these speeches we hear throughout the film only become a dramatic irony in the violent environment of Nickel Academy.

A *Lacunar* Film About Silently Bearing Witness

As I stated at the beginning, Ross's cinematographic approach does not merely transport us to the past; it also constructs the present as a structure woven from the remnants of history. RaMell Ross skillfully employs formal elements to serve this purpose. The static shots favored throughout the film emphasize a deepening of time rather than its linear progression, allowing it to layer both for the characters and the audience. The camera often remains at eye level with the characters (and thus the viewers), focusing on walls, empty spaces, or the objects

generated political pressure, leading to landmark reforms like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

[4] "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

themselves and their silence. This visual approach evokes Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the "historian who looks at the ruins of history." The past is not a straightforward progression; it is a collapsed, motionless ruin embedded within the present. Benjamin assigns the historian the task of gazing upon these ruins and seeking the truth that awaits rescue within them (Benjamin, 2003, p. 392).

Similarly, rather than dramatizing the violence, the camera in *Nickel Boys* turns to the voids and traces it leaves behind, transforming the viewer into a witness gazing at silent ruins. Silence, in my opinion, is the aesthetic embodiment of a historically suppressed, unrepresented, or ignored memory. Throughout the film, music is almost entirely absent; however, this absence is also a deliberate silence. Ross's choice invites the audience to listen to the natural sounds of the spaces and the silence of the characters, rather than directing them with dramatic music. Footsteps within Nickel Academy, the creaking of doors, the hum of the wind in the empty corridors are the main sources of sound that define the spirit of the film. These diegetic elements are successful in creating a sensory space of memory that identifies with the suppressed voices and unexpressed thoughts of the characters.

The film draws the viewer into a realm of implications, omissions, and silences rather than loud narratives. The silence aestheticizes the invisibility of systemic racism and institutional violence while placing the problem of representation at the center of the narrative. Considering the historical representation of the Black body in cinema, *Nickel Boys* stands outside this tradition. In the film, the physical presence of Black children is often pushed to the edges of the frame, left distant from the camera, or presented only through reflections. Ross's cinema does not expose the body; instead, it withdraws it, positioning it closer to invisibility.

The scene where Elwood is whipped is one of the most striking examples of the film's approach to ethical representation.[5] The director chose not to directly depict the violence; instead, with each lash, the faces of the victimized children appear on the screen in the form of black-and-white photographs. These faces are often not clear, erased, or stained; some have become invisible, while others remain outside the frame. These "incomplete" visuals lead to the haunting presence of past violence being felt in the present. At this point, the concept of "emotional spectatorship" by visual culture theorist Tina Campt (who is also

[5] As for the political implications of referring to the room where children are whipped as the "White House", I prefer to leave that to the reader's interpretation.

African-American) comes into play: She discusses a form of viewing that responds to the visual representation of Black people not just with the eyes, but on a bodily and emotional level (Campt, 2017).[6] In this scene, the viewer does not merely see what is happening; they feel it, almost sensing it in their own body. Therefore, what is at play here is not just an ordinary aesthetic preference based on omission; it is a powerful ethical gesture that carries the historical burden and traumatic memory of the representation of the Black body, in my opinion.

It is reasonable that Ross's film does not include courtrooms, police interrogations, or dramatic scenes directly related to justice. It is reasonable because justice has already been made impossible for one group from the outset. This is another strategic omission and a cinematic projection of the concepts of "bare life" and "state of exception" as defined by Giorgio Agamben. According to Agamben, modern power reduces some individuals to merely a level of biological existence; it suspends their rights and keeps them outside the status of citizenship. The Black children in *Nickel Boys* also become "bare lives" in Nickel Academy, merely recorded but not legally recognized or protected. In this context, the school itself is a concrete representation of the "state of exception." This structure, which appears to be a state institution from the outside, is a gray area inside where the rule of law is suspended and individual rights are ignored. Nickel Academy both incorporates children into the system and offers them no protection. In this respect, this dual position, which remains both inside and outside the law, only overlaps with a "camp" structure (Agamben, 1998, p. 72). Rather than stereotypically dramatizing the spatial exception regime, the film deepens the impossibility of justice by visually marking its silence and emptiness.

Who is Who? Who am I? Carrying Someone Else's Memory

The character development in *Nickel Boys* is shaped through the historical and ethical dilemmas of the Black subject. First, it should be noted that the actors portraying Elwood and Turner deliver a minimalist performance. The slight tremors on Elwood's face and the moments when Turner silently gazes into the void represent not so much "acting" in the classical sense, but rather a generation that has learned to be silent bodily. This inward-facing style of acting is directly related to the silence historically imposed upon Black existence. We are faced

[6] "Affective engagement is not about identification or recognition, but about feeling the frequency of images -their emotional resonance, their sonic memory" (Campt, 2017, p. 9).

with individuals who do not wish to be unseen, but who have chosen to remain silent because even when they are seen, they are not listened to.

We primarily see the two protagonists, Elwood and Turner (Brandon Wilson) -as much as we can, of course. The director forces the viewer to directly identify these characters by using a subjective camera angle for almost the entire film. Whatever we see, we see through the eyes of Elwood or Turner. Even the characters are made visible only through each other's gaze. This subjective perspective confines the viewer to the character's limited field of vision, conditioning us to identify with them. This formal choice, which can be challenging for the viewer at times, seems very appropriate to me. The subjective camera movements contribute to portraying Elwood and Turner as interchangeable, transforming entities. In some scenes, it becomes indistinguishable whose perspective we are inhabiting.

Du Bois emphasizes that Black individuals develop a conflicting identity shaped by the obligation to "see oneself through the eyes of others" in society. This is presented as both a deficiency (not being able to see oneself fully) and a privilege (a second sight) (Du Bois, 2007, pp. 8–9). The subjective camera aesthetic in the film formally embodies this concept of "double consciousness": The fact that the characters only become visible through each other's gaze visualizes the impossibility of the subject's direct access to itself, a state of being that exists in a constant state of mediation.

Elwood being the "eyes" for Turner and Turner being the "eyes" for Elwood can also be interpreted as a commentary on the Black subject's identity being fragmented and constructed through both their own body and the gaze of others. This becomes even more meaningful when we learn at the end of the film that Elwood is dead and that Turner is continuing his life by carrying his identity. In fact, the film visually provides the viewer with clues that prepare for this significant dramatic fracture from the very beginning: these two subjects, who roam the same places, look at the same objects, and exist in the same silence and oblivion, are actually two different modes of the same Black experience.

Turner not only becomes Elwood's surviving self but also his representation and future, while Elwood becomes Turner's memory and past. Therefore, the subjective camera angles should not be seen as merely a visual preference. It is also a technique used to show that the two characters are reflections that complement each other on a semantic level. Instead of separating the characters, RaMell Ross gradually blurs the identity boundaries between

them as the film progresses. As one turns into the other's gaze, the viewer becomes a witness not to two separate identities but to a divided existence. In other words, Turner and Elwood's characters, which contain a certain degree of opposition but are fully intertwined, are quite effective in conveying the film's relationship with memory and representation as a collective issue.

However, before witnessing an identification between the two characters, we observe a distinction between idealism and realism. Elwood Curtis is a figure who believes in the law, justice (unfortunately, these are not the same), and equality. As mentioned earlier, he has adopted Martin Luther King's moral idealism. In contrast, Turner has already internalized the ruthlessness of the system and successfully employs "survival strategies." Turner's situation reminds us of the "hidden transcripts" described by James C. Scott -forms of everyday, simple resistance that keep people out of harm's way (Scott, 1990, p. 17).

Rather than Martin Luther King's idealistic speeches about collective consciousness, Turner appears to have heeded the often-unnoticed directive still systematically given to Black children today: "You will save your own life!" (Sharpe, 2016, pp. 95–97). Appropriately, Turner does not give the letter written by his grandmother to Elwood. It would be a rather shallow analysis to see this as an act of jealousy. Rather, it is a ruthless but appropriate move aimed at making Elwood realistic enough to survive; at eliminating anything that would prevent him from doing what is necessary in the deadly situation he is in.

After Elwood's death, the adult Turner's confrontation with the past, and even his attempt to bring the events that took place at the school to justice—far from being an individual pursuit—are understood retrospectively as the film progresses. As viewers, we are also forced to rely on our memory to comprehend the story. Turner's continued engagement with the past, even after finding a happy life, can be seen as an effort to lay the groundwork for the construction of collective memory. Therefore, the violence Elwood endured and his eventual disappearance in the film create a ripple effect that will influence subsequent generations.

Turner continuing his life by changing his identity shows that this echo persists with a bodily and identity transformation. Turner lives with the ghost of the past; although Elwood's voice continues to live within him, this cannot be seen as merely an individual wound. What is experienced is, rather, a cultural trauma, as Turner is as much a carrier of the Black identity as he is an individual

in his own right. To put it a bit simply, he is a type before he is a character. Therefore, the traumas, often presented through archival footage, also take on a collective dimension; the past, with all its burden, becomes a part of his social identity by taking place within cultural narratives (Assmann, 2011, p. 37).

Nickel Boys develops a narrative form that can be explained by Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post-memory." According to Hirsch (2008, p. 106), post-memory refers to historical pains that are internalized as if they were one's own experiences, although they were not directly experienced by the individual but were transmitted through traumas from the previous generation. This type of memory transmission can be conveyed not only through oral narratives but also through visual images, silences, spaces, and the body. In the film, Turner experiences exactly this: He does not merely observe what happened to Elwood; he makes the violence, the suppressed voice, and the loss Elwood endured a part of his own identity. The silence that resulted in Elwood's death continues to exist as an echo that has permeated Turner's life. Turner may not be able to keep Elwood's ideals alive, but he stubbornly carries Elwood's silence and the identity that comes with it. This has clearly become a matter of moral responsibility for Turner. One of the clearest instances of this is the final scene in which Turner stands silently in front of the abandoned Nickel Academy building, tracing the walls with his hand. His bodily presence, standing where Elwood once suffered, visualizes Hirsch's post-memory: Turner is not remembering the past, he is re-living it as if it were inscribed in his own body.

This moment does not offer resolution but rather introduces a way of inhabiting memory through silence and physical proximity. It marks the beginning of a different kind of testimony -one that is quiet, persistent, and inseparable from the body. The silence we witness throughout the film (especially in his adulthood) represents not suppressing the past but living with it. Moreover, it is not difficult to understand that he struggles to expose what happened at Nickel Academy, even if silently. This attitude is crucial for Black historiography: not forgetting, but remembering and carrying the experiences, no matter how horrific, into the future.

This inevitably brings to mind Gloria Jean Watkins, known by her pen name Bell Hooks, who is recognized for her serious work on racism. Hooks notes that Black people do not merely remember past pains; they reproduce and transform this memory with collective consciousness, which she terms "re-memory" (Hooks, 1990, p. 147). Of course, the word "re-" in this context implies

that the bearer of memory is not in a passive position; it signifies a conscious and contextual activity related to remembering. Turner's appropriation of the past and living with Elwood's voice is a dramatic counterpart to this act of "re-memory."

However, the film does not depict any process of restoration or a cathartic revelation of the truth; it merely seems to explore ways of living with this collective trauma. In this context, *Nickel Boys* functions as a ghost story about an America haunted by repressed memories and forgotten bodies: at the end of the film, when it is revealed that Elwood has actually died, the entire narrative is understood as the memory of a vanished existence. Once again, we return to the question of memory. The scene where Turner, years later, encounters Chicke Pete (Craig Tate) in a bar is particularly meaningful from this perspective. From his demeanor and words, it is evident that Pete, who seems unable to hold on after what he experienced at Nickel Academy, has a weak memory -much like his presence itself.

Pete's inability to remember the events of the day Elwood and Turner escaped from school is a significant detail. In a film where memory and existence are so closely intertwined, Chickie's state as a kind of zombie deprived of his memories is unsurprising. We see that Cathy Caruth, who works extensively on memory and trauma, is right: the real trauma "does not emerge within memory, but in the absence of memory," and this has two meanings. First, an individual does not experience the traumatic event at the moment it occurs but later through recurring symptoms. Second, trauma only becomes perceptible and meaningful when it is relieved (Caruth, 1996, pp. 4, 11). In this context, Pete, by not remembering the past and thus lacking trauma, ceases to be someone who can truly sense his surroundings and fully live.

Conclusion

If The *Nickel Boys* is evaluated merely as an adaptation or a film that brings a historical tragedy to the big screen, it would be an injustice to the film. Under RaMell Ross's direction, the film transforms the story of Black children who have become silent witnesses to a traumatic past into an aesthetic, political, and ethical narrative that does not merely remember but carries that memory into the present. The faith of Martin Luther King Jr., echoed in Elwood's voice, and the deepening vulnerability in Turner's silence represent not only two characters but also the suppressed memory of Black history with remarkable success.

RaMell Ross's cinema is masterfully built around the tension between showing and not showing. The camera avoids directly revealing trauma while working through memory without fragmenting it. The subjective camera angles are not merely a visual strategy; they serve as a visual counterpart to the intertwined identities of Elwood and Turner, and the transformation of one into the other. Turner's survival by inheriting Elwood's identity is also a manifestation of post-memory. It involves individuals who have not directly experienced the past but have internalized traumas inherited from previous generations or peers as if they were part of their own memory, and this forms the emotional core of the film.

Nickel Boys offers more than artistic and ethical depth; it delivers a sharp critique of systemic racism by showing how Blackness is treated as a political liability within American institutions. Through its narrative and aesthetic choices, the film reveals that racial injustice is not the result of isolated acts but the outcome of entrenched institutional structures. One of the film's most striking decisions; the absence of legal and institutional figure is not a narrative gap but a conscious act. By leaving out agents of law and state power, the film suggests that justice for Black individuals is never guaranteed. It is always precarious, frequently delayed, and often entirely denied.

The gradual merging of Elwood and Turner's identities underscores how racial regimes erode individual subjectivity. Their blurred selves reflect a condition in which Black existence is made hyper-visible as a threat, yet invisible as a person. In this sense, *Nickel Boys* is not only a narrative of memory but also a postcolonial meditation on the present.[7] Racism is portrayed not as a closed chapter in history, but as a shape-shifting force embedded within institutions.

Taken together, *Nickel Boys* becomes a film of quiet intensity. It speaks through absence, conveys trauma without spectacle, and transforms silence into testimony. Rather than seeking popularity, it confronts the viewer with moral and political responsibility. Ross's restrained visual language allows the weight

[7] For instance, Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks (1967) examines how colonial systems create racialized identities stripped of full humanity, a dynamic mirrored in the treatment of Black children at Nickel Academy. Again, Achille Mbembe's Necropolitics (2003) similarly explores how modern power determines which lives are protected and which are rendered disposable. The film's portrayal of Black youth as invisible, criminalized, and expendable reflects these theoretical concerns. Thus, reading the film alongside thinkers like Fanon and Mbembe can offer valuable insights into the structural nature of racial violence.

of historical injustice to reverberate in the present. In doing so, the film becomes not merely a story, but an ethical imperative to remember.

Kaynakça

Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford University Press.

Assmann, A. (2011). *Cultural memory and Western civilization: Functions, media, archives*. Cambridge University Press.

Benjamin, W. (2003). On the concept of history. In *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings 1938-1940* (Vol. 4). Harvard University Press.

Campt, T. M. (2017). *Listening to images*. Duke University Press.

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. John Hopkins University Press.

Du Bois, W. E. B. (2007). *The souls of Black folk*. Oxford University Press.

Hartman, S. V. (1997). *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America.* Oxford University Press.

Hirsch, M. (2008). The generation of postmemory. *Poetics Today*, *29*(1), 103–128. https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019

Hooks, B. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. South End Press.

Kimmerle, E., Wells, E., & Jackson, A. (2011). *Investigation of the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys and the Jackson Juvenile Offender Center, Marianna, Florida*. United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2011/12/02/dozier_findltr_12-1-11.pdf

Lhamon, W. T. (2000). *Raising cain: Blackface performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. Harvard University Press.

Litwack, L. F. (1998). *Trouble in mind: Black southerners in the age of Jim Crow*. Vintage Books.

Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations*, *26*, 7–24.

Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.

Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On Blackness and being*. Duke University Press.

Stokes, M. (2007). *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A history of "The most controversial motion picture of all time*. Oxford University Press.

West, C. (2006). *Hope on a tightrope: Words and wisdom*. Hay House.

Woodward, C. V. (2002). *The strange career of Jim Crow*. Oxford University Press.