PROJECT WITNESS MICROSHORT STORIES · STUDENT HANDOUT

THE BOXER

Salamo Arouch. Two hundred forced fights at Auschwitz. He never lost. The form of the telling is itself a position in an ongoing debate about how to represent the camps.

GRADES 11–12

STEP 1 OF 4 · BEFORE VIEWING

Before we begin: a primary source on choice

Langer on "choiceless choices"

"These are situations in which all available options are morally unacceptable — where the normal framework of moral choice has been destroyed. Behavior in the camps cannot be viewed through the same lens we used to view normal human behavior."

Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (SUNY Press, 1982)

Langer's framework is the theoretical spine of this lesson. Hold it in mind as you watch.

Key terms you will encounter

Choiceless choices (Langer, 1982)

Situations in which all available options are morally unacceptable. The Nazis engineered such situations deliberately. Langer's insistence: behavior in those situations cannot be evaluated by the moral vocabulary that applies to ordinary life.

Thessaloniki (also Salonika)

The Greek port city home to the largest Sephardic Jewish community in the world for over four centuries; arrived as refugees from the 1492 Spanish Inquisition. Ninety-four percent murdered in 1943.

Sonderkommando

Jewish prisoners forced under threat of death to operate the gas chambers and crematoria. Not the subject of this episode, but the camp context that produced Salamo's forced fights operated under the same coercive architecture.

***Triumph of the Spirit* (1989)**

Robert M. Young's Hollywood feature film about Salamo Arouch, starring Willem Dafoe, was the first commercial fiction film shot on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Roger Ebert gave it one star, arguing the sports-film structure made audiences "behave no differently from the Nazis in the story." This microshort is, in part, a deliberate answer to Ebert's 1989 critique.

Yad Vashem · USHMM · Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum · USC Shoah Foundation

The field's primary institutional repositories of Holocaust historical record. (See About the Series · Glossary of Institutions for fuller entries.)

Framing · before we watch

PREDICTION PROMPT

Langer argues that the camps destroyed the very framework of moral choice. The Nazis, in his view, constructed situations in which surviving was itself a moral injury. **What does it mean to "win" in a situation engineered so that every option destroys something?** Come prepared to defend your interpretation after viewing. Notice what the film does and does not give you.

WATCH THE FILM

The 90-second microshort

A heads-up before pressing play

The film depicts Salamo Arouch's forced boxing matches at Auschwitz, framed by his pre-war life in Thessaloniki and his liberation at Bergen-Belsen. The matches are stylized. There is no graphic blood, no facial detail of impact, and no recognizable depiction of what happens to the losing fighter. That fate is conveyed by an empty floor in the next shot, not by depiction. The destruction of Salamo's family is named in voice-over; nothing is shown.

If at any point you need to step outside, you can do that without explaining anything. You can come back when you're ready. There is no penalty.

Watch the film now

Open *The Boxer* on the class screen, or follow the link your teacher provides.
Hold onto the framing question you just thought about.

Analyze

AFFECTIVE CHECK-IN · FIRST, BEFORE ANY ANALYSIS

Take a moment. One word for what you felt. Not analysis yet. Just noticing.

Discuss

Work through these questions first in writing on your own (5 minutes silent), then with a partner (5 minutes), then as a full class. The best 11–12 discussions begin with positions individually committed in writing.

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

1. The film imposes a 90-second constraint on a life that spanned eighty-six years and a history that implicates millions. What structural decisions does the film make under that compression? What does it include, what does it omit, and what does the compression itself argue?
2. The story is narrated in the third person rather than in Salamo's own voice. Compare this to survivor testimony you have read or watched. What does the distance between narrator and subject shape about how you receive his choices? Would a first-person narration change the film's moral argument?
3. The 1989 feature film *Triumph of the Spirit* told Salamo's story with a traditional dramatic arc. That arc included rooting interest, fight scenes designed to produce cheering, and a title that names the outcome. Roger Ebert gave it one star, arguing the structure made audiences "behave no differently from the Nazis in the story." How does this microshort answer that critique? What specific choices does it make to refuse triumph?

HISTORIOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

4. Lawrence Langer coined "choiceless choices" in 1982. Holocaust education has often asked, "What would you have done?" How does Langer's concept reshape that question? What better question does it make possible?
5. Other prisoners also boxed at Auschwitz: Tadeusz Pietrzykowski (a Polish political prisoner who lost a bout at Auschwitz I and survived), Harry Haft, Victor "Young" Perez (murdered on the death march), Jacko Razon (who later sued Arouch, claiming his own story had been conflated). What does the presence of these other accounts, some of them contradicting the "lose means die" framing, require of a responsible film?
6. The film centers Salamo. It does not show the opponents he defeated, and it does not name them. Is this ethically necessary, ethically troubling, or both? What obligations does a biographical film have to those who were not survivors?

HOOK ANALYSIS · THE OPENING AS RHETORICAL EXORDIUM

7. "Win, you live. Lose, you die. So he never lost." In classical rhetoric, this opening is the *exordium*, the move that establishes the speaker's authority and frames the rhetorical situation before any evidence is offered. Analyze the opening's three sentences. What *ethos* does it establish for the narrator? What does the parallel structure of sentences one and two do that prose without that structure would not? What does the inversion in sentence three ("so he never lost") commit the viewer to feeling before they have seen anything?
8. The opening line is the film's argument made before its argument is named. It claims an implicit position on a question Langer raised in 1982: can the camps' moral architecture be represented at all? Does the film's opening signal that representation is possible, that it is impossible, or that it is necessary precisely *because* impossible? Defend your reading with specific language from the opening and at least one move the film makes later.
9. Compare the opening line to Ebert's critique: the 1989 film made audiences "behave no differently from the Nazis in the story." How does the microshort's opening line preempt that critique? Is the opening line itself a kind of warning to the viewer about how to watch the next 89 seconds?

INVESTIGATE FURTHER · WHAT THE FILM DOES NOT DECIDE

A question the film deliberately leaves open. Take it home; come back with what you found and a position you can defend.

10. Roger Ebert's 1989 critique of *Triumph of the Spirit* is the explicit interlocutor of this microshort's form. Find **one other Holocaust-related film review Ebert wrote** (his reviews of *Shoah*, *Schindler's List*, *Life is Beautiful*, *The Pianist*, *The Grey Zone*, or others are publicly archived at rogerebert.com). Read it. Identify, in his own words and with at least three direct quotations, the **specific standards** Ebert held films about the Holocaust to. Then write 400–500 words applying those standards to the microshort you just watched. Does it meet them? Fail them? Move past them in a way Ebert did not anticipate? Defend a position. Cite Ebert verbatim where you draw on him.

Create

COMPARATIVE MEDIUM ANALYSIS: TWO FILMS, ONE MAN (400–500 WORDS)

Two films have been made about Salamo Arouch. The 1989 Hollywood feature *Triumph of the Spirit*, directed by Robert M. Young and starring Willem Dafoe, was the first commercial fiction film ever shot on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It used the structure of a sports drama. That structure included rooting interest, fight scenes built for cheering, and a title that names the outcome. Roger Ebert gave it one star:

> *"By making audiences root for Arouch in the fights, the filmmakers in effect force audiences to behave no differently from the Nazis in the story."*
>
> Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 8, 1989

The 2026 microshort you have just watched is, in part, a deliberate answer to Ebert's critique. Write a comparative analysis (400–500 words) that makes an argument about the relationship between form and moral responsibility when representing Holocaust history. Your essay should:

1. Identify the specific narrative choices the microshort makes to refuse triumph (scoring, pacing, framing, what is shown and what is absent).
2. Explain how each choice functions in light of Langer's concept of "choiceless choices" (1982).
3. Assess whether Ebert's critique applies only to *Triumph of the Spirit* or to a wider class of stories about survival. Is the sports-film structure itself ethically compromised when the subject is genocide?
4. Conclude with an argument about what the microshort asks of its viewer that the 1989 film did not.

Cite at least two sources beyond the films themselves.

STEP 4 OF 4 · CLOSING

Reflect

AFFECTIVE CONSOLIDATION · FIRST

Take 30 seconds. Say one word out loud for what you're carrying right now. Do not analyze it. Just name it.

Open-ended reflection: Langer, Ebert, and us

Lawrence Langer wrote in 1982 that the Nazis "destroyed the very meaning of choice — and then asked their victims to choose." Roger Ebert wrote in 1989 that a film that makes us cheer for Salamo Arouch in the ring has asked us "to behave no differently from the Nazis in the story." This microshort, forty-four years after Langer and thirty-seven years after Ebert, is an attempt to finally tell Salamo's story without asking us to cheer.

Write a sustained reflection (one page) on the following question: **Holocaust education is sometimes framed around the question "What would you have done?" Is that the right question to ask?** What does Langer's framework suggest instead? And what does this film, which does not give you a hero pose, does not swell with music, and does not let you leave the theater uplifted, ask of you as a viewer, a student, and a person living in the present?

There is no single right answer. The goal is to think rigorously and honestly about the relationship between how we tell stories and what those stories do to the people who listen to them.

Ethical quandary · whose story survives

Salamo Arouch won more than two hundred fights, by his own count. The men he defeated, men forced into the ring by the same SS, against the same threat, are not named in this film, in the 1989 feature, in the Wikipedia article on Arouch, in the obituaries. They have no obituaries. The historical record of the camp boxing matches is, almost entirely, the record of the men who won.

Sit with the quandary. The microshort gives us Salamo because Salamo survived to be given. The men he defeated were, by the very mechanism of survival, removed from the record by people who needed them removed. This is not the fault of the survivors who lived; it is the structure of how testimony reaches us. But the silence is real, and it is consequential.

REFLECT, IN WRITING (300–400 WORDS)

"History is written by the winners, even when the consequences are terrible." In what specific ways does this film acknowledge that the men Salamo defeated are absent from the historical record? In what ways does it not, or cannot? What would it mean to make a microshort about one of *them*, a person we know only by the fact of his loss, and what kinds of evidence, sources, or imaginative work would that film have to draw on? Is that film possible? Is it ethical to attempt? Defend a position.

Closing discussion · full class

Your teacher will ask: *"Name a position from elsewhere in the room, not your own, not your partner's, that you can articulate clearly and still disagree with."* The exercise is not to resolve the disagreement. The exercise is to **articulate** a position you can defend in someone else's voice and still disagree with. You are leaving the room with the disagreement intact. That is the lesson. Holding what cannot be reconciled is what an adult intellectual response to this material looks like.


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136954

Prisoner 136954 was a number Salamo Arouch carried on his left forearm for sixty-four years after the war.

A severe stroke in 1994 left him dependent on his wife Marta's care for the last fifteen years of his life. Salamo Arouch died on April 26, 2009, at the age of eighty-six. He carried the weight of every fight for the rest of his life. That is not a metaphor.

> *"We fought until one went down or they got sick of watching. They wouldn't leave until they saw blood."*
>
> Salamo Arouch (1923–2009), interviewed in *People*, 1990

EXTENSION · FOR INDEPENDENT OR HONORS-LEVEL WORK

Make your own microstory

A short original work, in *any* medium such as film, writing, audio, comic, photo essay, or song lyric, modeled on the craft of this series. The aim is for you to occupy, briefly, the position the makers of *The Boxer* occupied: choosing what to show, what to withhold, what to compress, what to credit, and how to refuse the easy ending.

Subject anchor

The natural subject for an episode about Salamo Arouch is any person, historical or contemporary, who faced a choiceless choice. Suggested fields:

- Another camp athlete (Pietrzykowski, Haft, Perez, Razon) or any prisoner forced into a system of survival that traded another's life for theirs.
- A member of the Greek-Sephardic communities lost in the deportations, such as the rabbis, the press editors, the dockworkers, or the children of Thessaloniki, Rhodes, Corfu, Janina.

- A person from history or the present who acted under a choiceless choice and either lived or did not. The framework is Langer's; situations where every option destroys something.
- A person from your own family or community who carried something forward through impossible conditions.

Get your teacher's approval before you begin so the historical claims you'll make are defensible.

The constraints · apply to every medium

1. **One named person at the center.** Not "the Holocaust." *One specific person*, named, whose story you can stand inside.
2. **Hook-first.** Your first sentence (or first shot, or first line, or first panel) must commit. *The Boxer* opens with a specific line. *"Win, you live. Lose, you die. So he never lost."* That line tells the entire story before the story begins. Yours must do something equivalent.
3. **Hard compression.** Pick your medium; live inside its cap. The cap is a wall, not a target.
4. **One primary-source anchor.** Reference, describe, depict, or quote *one specific verifiable historical artifact* and credit the source (institution, accession number where known).
5. **No invented dialogue from the dead.** If a historical figure's words are not documented, do not put words in their mouth.
6. **Refuse the easy ending.** Salamo's story has no triumphal close. Your work should resist the urge to "wrap" the subject into resolution.

Pick a medium

- **Short film or video** · up to **90 seconds**.
- **Flash fiction or micro-essay** · up to **250 words**.
- **Poem** · any form, up to **20 lines**.
- **Spoken-word or audio piece** · up to **90 seconds**.
- **Podcast cut** · up to **2 minutes**.
- **Comic or illustrated sequence** · up to **6 panels** on one page.
- **Photo essay** · up to **5 images** from public archives, ethically captioned.
- **Song lyric** · one verse and chorus.
- **Graphic memoir page** · one page.

Submit a 400–500 word artist's statement alongside your work

1. Explain your **representational choices**. State what you decided to show or say, and what you decided to *withhold*. Engage Roger Ebert's critique of *Triumph of the Spirit* explicitly: how does your work guard against the failure he named?
2. Defend your **medium choice** against at least one plausible alternative medium for the same subject.
3. Your engagement with Langer's "choiceless choices" framework. How does your work hold the philosophical weight of the framework without flattening the subject into either victim or hero?
4. What it would mean for your work to **fail.** Name the specific way your piece could go wrong, such as sentimentality, exploitation, historical inaccuracy, or the false-triumph problem, and the move you made to guard against it.

© 2026 Project Witness · *Microshort Stories* Episode 2: The Boxer · Student Handout, Grades 11–12

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