

The representation of the holocaust in films



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Omer Bartov, in his article on Schindler's List in the Course Kit (pp. 142-152) raises a number of important issues regarding the representation of the Holocaust in popular film.

He concludes that:

“ Schindler's List shares many of the failings of numerous other representations of the genocide of the Jews, be they works of fiction, scholarship or film. The conventional difficulties of representing any historical event, the inevitable process of selection and elimination, generalization and simplification, become all the more pressing when dealing with such a traumatic and unprecedented event as the Holocaust.”

Discuss the various problems Schindler's List poses in its representation of the Holocaust and whether and why you think it ultimately fails or succeeds in overcoming these problems. Your answer should draw comparisons with any of the films viewed so far and should include some general arguments and conclusions about whether a medium of popular culture such as film can ever legitimately represent the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is central to modern history. Retelling those stories and accounts surrounding the Holocaust have become a long-standing issue since many debate whether the Holocaust can even be retold using any medium at all, be it through a book or film. However, the problem of representing the Holocaust in film or book can also be seen as the core problem of history. Given that one cannot truly represent the past, factually or fictionally as it once was without some bias, it is therefore always presented in a version of the way it possibly once was or may have been.

History portrayed on film is largely based on appealing to an emotional response, in an attempt to make the audience feel as if they are learning about the past by vicariously living through its moments. These experiences come in stories, which both connect the dialogues of history and add something to that dialogue to maintain interest (Rosenstone 2006: 145). In any representation we inevitably alter the past, lose some of its meaning, that is to the actors or acting, and at the same time impose other meanings upon events that even those who may have lived through it, would have difficulty recognizing its accuracy. Therefore, films always violate the past regardless of the intentions or goals trying to be reached. In this paper, Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* holds no exception to this rule.

The most popular and certainly the best-known film ever to be made on the subject, Steven Spielberg's 3 hour work, shot almost completely in black and white – possibly as an attempted effort to deglamorize the subject of the Holocaust – holds in particular a special place on films on the Holocaust. The story traces the intrinsic transformation of a sketchy war profiteer, Oskar Schindler (played by Liam Neeson), into a rescuer of the Jewish people during WWII and the Nazi onslaught. Schindler dominates the story, appearing in almost every scene. The camera delights in looking up at Schindler, who is seen as tall, attractive, and distinctively Aryan looking. He portrays a commanding presence, who essentially 'looks' down on the Jews who are employed under him. The Jews in this film are presented as short, dark, passive and helpless individuals. The exception of course is one individual, Itzhak Stern (played by Ben Kingsly) – a quiet, yet stubborn

individual – who becomes the accountant and business manager of Oskar Schindler's wartime manufacturing factory.

Schindler, dressed in a sophisticated manner, meets and befriends high Nazi officials in night clubs and parties. He bribes and charms his way into a profitable business venture, and ownership of a metal factory which produces metal kits for the German Army. For the entire movie, he views his factory workers as simply a source of wealth, referring to them as “ My Jews.” He protected them from additional deportation to death camps such as Auschwitz, but did so largely as a matter of good business practices (suggesting that the time and cost of retraining a new worker would outweigh the benefits to keeping an existing one). His source of wealth therefore is based on the continuous efforts of the factory workers.

It is only after some time, that the transformation of Schindler from a profiteer to saviour occurs. He uses all his wealth to create a new manufacturing factory in Czechoslovakia, and to buy from corrupt Nazi officials, all the 1100 Jewish workers to bring with. This had inherently saved all of the workers from Auschwitz death camp. The intrinsic transformation occurs clearly as a result of his exposure to an environment in which gross atrocities had continued to increase and one where the norms and values of traditional society had been replaced with that of barbaric proportions (acts of violence and murder, both arbitrary and deliberate).

From the first scene that shows German administrators processing and registering Jews (writing their names and numbers on lists, confiscating their property which would be sorted and sent back to Germany) and conscripting

them to forced labour, the audience witnesses the major bureaucratic steps of systemic dehumanization by which peoples identities are removed and replaced with a number (Baron 2005: 212). In essence, the first scene of the film shows the beginning of the Jewish people's complete marginalisation throughout Europe.

This is followed by a horrendous depiction of soldiers brutally shouting and shoving, dogs barking, individuals being brutally pushed and herded out of their house and crammed into trucks. Some are nonchalantly clubbed, shot, or tossed off balconies. Patients in the hospitals are shot in their beds, children and the elderly gunned down in the streets. Heightening the effects is Spielberg's handheld camera, which in a jerking manner, shows the audience the horrors so close up that it's as if the audience becomes participants in the action, ducking, and hiding to save their own lives from the homicidal torrent inundating us (Baron 2005: 211).

One of the main problems of Schindler's List, as with all historical films, is that mainstream Hollywood films tell history as a wholesome story, with a beginning, middle and an end plot, which leaves the audience with a moral message and usually a feeling of uplift (a story entrenched in a larger view of history that is always progressing). Even if the subject matter is as dark and disturbing as the Holocaust, the message usually progresses towards a story that has gotten or is getting better. Schindler's List follows this notion, with a fairytale ending that sees Schindler being thanked by his " Jews." The problem with this is that the story of Oskar Schindler and his " Jews" is not the only story involved in the Holocaust. Members of the audience, who may otherwise be unfamiliar with the Holocaust at all, may leave the impression

or with the implicit understanding that the Holocaust was simply a quantity of Jews that worked during the war as factory workers for the Nazi Party.

Spielberg portrays all that had been created and destroyed during the Holocaust, both materially and spiritually, in an attempt to re-establish a rebirth of the Jewish people after it had been over – “ It creates a dream world of glimmering images that hovers momentarily over the debris of reality and then remains in our minds as a comforting tranquilizer” (Bartov 1994: CK 143). The audience takes solace and comfort in believing that the “ ends justified the means.” However, Oskar Schindler did not act the way he did until witnessing the increase in horror. Perhaps had he not been a witness, he may never have transformed in the first place. Furthermore, the Jews made Schindler into a more glorified hero than he truly was. At the end of the film they create for him a ring to demonstrate their thankfulness in his assistance and glorify his actions.

To begin, if one was to reflect on human nature and behaviour (and the qualities that define a hero) Schindler should not have been made a hero in the slightest. Rather, one must consider that his ‘ for good actions’ at the end, should have not required a transformation only after witnessing firsthand the atrocities that occurred throughout the film. His actions should have come instinctively at the moment he first witnessed the evil doings of the Nazi Party. What is heroic in any fairy tale story is an immediate call to action, that’s heroism.

Schindler’s List also gives the impression that not all Nazi’s had been innately evil, and were provided a choice in their actions. While Schindler at

the end had been glorified with the status of 'hero', this was merely an attempt by Spielberg to follow the traditional notion of Hollywood films to best appeal to the cinematic nature of modern cinematography. In actuality, many survivors of the Holocaust were able to survive simply by living in the camps on a day-to-day basis. Not many had been afforded the luxury of working for a 'transformed' Nazi profiteer.

What's more is that Schindler's List omits certain aspects of the Holocaust that are exceptionally pertinent to its overall understanding and also for a larger part exploit women. For example, Schindler's women, who have mistakenly been taken to Auschwitz, are actually among the rare people who visit a genuine shower room. They also pass by a line of people who are descending into the gas chambers next to the crematorium, with its huge smoke stack spewing flames and cinders into a dark sky. In this regard, Schindler's List does a disservice to the representation of the genocide of the Jews, by misleading the audience in believing that the women were about to become victims.

The Holocaust has been and will continue to be represented in a multitude of ways and perspectives. Schindler's List focuses on the salvation of a group of individuals, rather than the individual themselves. Other films such as Shoah or Night and Fog had documented the stories and concentration camps as they once were. However, many still criticized the above films to contain an element of biasness. In Night and Fog, critics noted that the Jews were not represented as the primary victims of Nazi death Camps. Hollywood films by contrast, such as Schindler's list sought out to mainly illustrate the horrors inflicted upon the Jews by the Nazi throughout the entire film.

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The larger issue of films on the Holocaust, especially Schindler's List, are its observed qualities. This is done by exploiting film as a legitimate medium of learning. Film (specifically those from Hollywood) essentially provides a fantasy world for the audience, which for a little while is observed, and taken through a journey of the problems, moments and stories of other lives in different times. By doing so, Hollywood and 'historical' films provide the audience with a historical insight and a greater understanding. To view these films and 'live' vicariously through them, is essentially to be exposed to some of the worst (or in Schindler's case the best) of human actions and behaviours, as played out during one of humanities darkest moments. However, if one were to view these films and consider the information within the film as something of pure factual history, would ultimately ignore the historical event altogether. The other films, such as Night and Fog do not to the same extent create a historical fantasy world for the audience to immerse itself in. It as a film of history, which plainly shows the infrastructure created to house the atrocities of the Holocaust. While it does create an element of bias, it does not to the same extent violate the past as much so as a Hollywood film similar to Schindler's List would.

As with other films on the subject of the Holocaust and history, Schindler's List violates the past and shares many of the same failings as any other historical film (specifically in regards to failed misrepresentation of the genocide of Europe's Jews and the whole history or the events that took place). At the same time, it partially succeeded in retelling (at least on a minor scale) the atrocities of the Holocaust as a whole, the power driven, insane and illogical behaviour of Nazi Party officials and the veil of ignorance

of the German people. Yet this violation of history is inevitable, as it is part of the consequences in our attempts to understand our ancestors' vanished words. In this the Holocaust is like any other historical dilemma, a series of events created by humans and inflicted upon humans, which continue to disturb our culture, and which we continue to deal with in various manners.