

Representations of the holocaust

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When on the topic of representations of the Holocaust, two films come to mind, those being Roman Polanski's film *The Pianist* and Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds*. Though these films do not appear to have anything in common other than the fact that they are based on the same time period, there are many connections between them. *The Pianist* is based on the life of Wladyslaw Szpilman and his survival in Warsaw during the war. Where *Inglourious Basterds* is mostly known for being a film about a band of Jewish soldiers violently attacking Nazi soldiers for revenge. Though there is another story, that being the story of Shosanna Dreyfus. Each story re-enacts important times in history in its own ways. First, exploring the representations of the Holocaust through the violence in each film. Secondly, covering the topic of Jewish identity. Lastly, the artistic acts showed throughout the film and how they played a vital role in the survival and success of each one's stories.

The two films depict the violence of the war and holocaust in different ways. *The Pianist* and *Inglourious Basterds* tell the story from two different sides. One telling the story of a Jewish Pianist trying to survive the constant abuse from the Nazi soldiers, the other, a story of a band of Jewish soldiers and Shosanna taking their brutal fight to the Nazi soldiers themselves. The constant fear of violent acts and inhuman actions is made apparent throughout *The Pianist*, as the Nazi soldiers consistently attack the Jewish people forcing them into unimaginable situations through random acts of violence. Shortly after the Jewish people are forced out of their homes and relocated into a Jewish only ghetto, Nazi soldiers arrive at the building across from Szpilman and his family. For no given reason or trial, a man in a

wheelchair is thrown from his balcony because he did not stand up when told. His family is then pulled from their home down to the street, forced to run while being shot in the back. One of the most important scenes in the film is when the Jewish people are being forced onto a train headed for their death. This scene can be argued as the most disturbing scene in the film as it is not only Nazi soldiers pushing people on the train, but the Jewish police are as well. Working side by side they are sending thousands of Jewish people to their deaths. The Film *Inglourious Basterds* shows the other side of the war, that being the side of the Americans. Most the violence shown throughout the film is caused by Jewish soldiers against the Nazis. The *Basterds* and *Shosanna* both create a plan to attack the theatre while Hitler and the high ranking Nazi officials are inside. Though they both have plans on how to pull off this attack, they are unaware of each other's plan. The *Basterds* bring explosives into the theatre strapped to their legs, as well as guns in order to kill Hitler and other Nazi officials before blowing the building up. *Shosanna* places her own film into the middle of the Nazi film shown, just before her segment plays she has the doors locked so the Nazi officials cannot escape. Her plan is to use the film reels that she has stored in the building to quickly burn the place down with everybody inside.

Their plans were not far off from each other's plans, as well as not far off of the historical mass killings the caused by the Nazi's towards the Jewish people. Each film's major violent attack replicates real actions made against the Jewish people. Historically the Nazi's were known for sending Jewish people to slaughter, and each film replicates that in its own way. The *Pianist* depicts this action in a more accurate to history sense as they force the

Jewish people onto a train, heading to a camp where they will be executed. This was not uncommon during the Holocaust, as they frequently used the railroads to transport Jewish people from work camps to gas chambers. As said in Raul Hilberg's article "German Railroads/Jewish Souls" (German Railroads/Jewish Souls. By: Hilberg, Raul, Society, 01472011, Jan/Feb98, Vol. 35, Issue 2) "Year after year they transported millions of Jews to the mysterious "east" where the victims could be annihilated quietly, out of the range of peering bystanders and prying cameras". Since Inglourious Basterds is a film based on revenge, the actions that replicate the holocaust are caused by the Jewish people in the film, and not the Nazi's. The attack on the cinema can be interpreted as their own version of a gas chamber or shooting range against the Nazi's. In the same way that the Nazis had used them against the Jewish people during the Holocaust. The Basterds show the shooting range side as they are shown shooting down at the Nazi officials as they are trying to run for the door, as where Shosanna's fire can be taken as the gas chamber side, locking them into a room where they will die from smoke inhalation and burning to death. "The film and the book The Pianist represent more than just one Holocaust survivor. Szpilman represents all survivors" (Thomas Jefferson Law Review, July 1, 2005) This thought can be easily seen through the constant vile acts Szpilman is surrounded by and forced to live with. Jewish people throughout the film are constantly under attack physically and mentally from the Nazi soldiers as they were throughout the war. The Nazi's force their laws onto the Jewish people, restricting them from walking on the sidewalk, having more than the allowed amount of money and wearing a star of David to show that they are Jewish.

Not only are they forced to follow these rules, but they are forced out of their homes into a walled-off ghetto, unable to be associated with anyone who is not Jewish. As the emotional and mental abuse wears them down, it dehumanizes them, putting them in a state of non-resistance.

In Diana Diamond's article "Passion for Survival in Polanski's *The Pianist*" she uses a quote from Rubenstein and Roth (2003) stating that "Polanski's searing saga of Szpilman's survival is embedded in a film, which—perhaps more than any other commercial Holocaust film to date—portrays, without sentiment or sensationalism, the banality of evil of the Nazi regime; that is, the systematic random cruelties perpetrated by victimizers freed from all moral restraint, that were designed to reduce its victims to a helpless, defenseless, and dehumanized aggregate mass as a prelude to their absolute extinction" Page 3 of 16, passion for survival in Polanski's the pianist. Even though there is always a chance they could become a victim of the random violence caused by Nazi soldiers, they do not revolt. During the film, there is a scene where Szpilman's father and 2 other men are questioning where they are going to the train station. They silently come to the conclusion that they are being sent to their deaths, but they still do not resist all while knowing they outnumber the Nazi soldiers heavily. Regardless of knowing that their time has come to an end, they do not try to fight back. *Inglourious Basterds* takes a much different approach to Jewish Identity, as Jewish people are portrayed as the strong revenge seeking people capable of doing whatever it takes to complete their mission. Coming from "Shofar: an interdisciplinary journal of Jewish studies page 95" Benjamin Schreier says in regards to *Inglourious Basterds* that "Jewishness exists simply as the

justification for an Americanist historical revenge fantasy". The film itself revolves around the main characters getting back at the Nazi's for what they have done to their families, and to the Jewish people. The introduction of Lt. Aldo Raine comes through his speech to the 8 Jewish soldiers he is trying to enlist to his mission. The mission's intention is clear, " we're gonna be doin' one thing and one thing only... killin' Nazis". Lt. Aldo Raine's goal is to strike fear into the German army through " cruelty in disembowelment, dismembered and disfigured bodies of their brothers we leave behind". His reasoning behind his intentions is that " Nazi ain't got no humanity.

They're the foot soldiers of a Jew-hatin', mass murderin' maniac and they need to be dee-stroyed". This revenge mission becomes successful as even Hitler becomes aware of the Basterds, especially Donny " The Bear Jew" Donowitz. Though the violent acts of vengeance from the Basterds become known throughout the German soldiers, the most unexpected act of vengeance doesn't come from the Basterds, but from Shosanna herself. Years after her family was killed by Nazi soldiers, she takes on Le Gamaar Cinema under her new name Emmanuelle Mimieux. When she is forced into hosting a private event for high ranking Nazi officials, she uses it to her advantage and creates a plan to burn the place down. Just before the building goes up in flames, Shosanna's face appears on the theatre screen and telling everyone that they are going to die by the hands of a Jewish woman. Securing her as " the face of Jewish vengeance". When looking towards both films you can see that Szpilman's story represents the emotional and physical damage done towards the Jewish people, suppressing them and removing their ability to fight back against their

oppressor. Shosanna and the Basterds story represent the inner vengeance suppressed by the Nazi's abuse, and when given the right circumstances they are able to overthrow this oppressor and fight back. Artistic expression is a large part of these films, as in each story they are passionate about their work. When it comes to *The Pianist*, his ability to play the piano is the reason he was able to feed his family in the ghetto, as well as survive his encounter with Captain Hosenfeld. When Szpilman is found by Captain Hosenfeld, he asks him what he does. Szpilman replies saying that he is a pianist and instantly is ordered to the piano for the captain. As Szpilman is playing for him, you can see Hosenfeld become completely mesmerized by the music and his ability. This interaction could have gone a much different path if Szpilman was not a pianist, as he would have had no way to get himself out of the situation. In the words of Alexander Stein " In experiencing music, complex mental events are triggered and, in attempting to describe music's effects within us—our aesthetic/emotional experience—we are immediately focused upon the internal psychological world of the listener, composer, or performer.": *psychoanalytic inquiry*, sept 1, 2007 pg 442. Szpilman's musical ability was able to resonate within the mind of captain Hosenfeld, almost as his music was able to restore some humanity to Captain Hosenfeld, allowing him to see Szpilman as another man.

The artforms present in *Inglourious Basterds* happen to be used in much more violent ways, as the main focus tends to be on Shosanna's film to the Nazi officials informing them of their soon to be deaths, and the swastika carvings that Lt. Aldo Raine does on the foreheads of Nazi soldiers.

Shosanna's plan relies heavily on the use of film in order to make sure the

Nazi officials know that their deaths are by her hand. She is able to film herself speaking to the camera, but she is unable to add the sound to the film without assistance. In order to solve this issue, she risks being exposed of her plan and beats a man until he is willing to help her cause. In addition, when looking towards Lt. Aldo Raine, you can see that he takes pride in his work, more specifically the swastika carvings on Nazi's foreheads. The first time you are shown of his carvings Donny "The Bear Jew" Donowitz says to Lt. Aldo Raine that he's getting good at it, Lt. Aldo Raine then states that the only way you get to Carnegie Hall is by practicing. This conversation between the men creates the impression that they see Lt. Aldo Raine's carvings as a work of art he has been perfecting. Moving on to the last scene in the film, you see one last carving by Lt. Aldo Raine placed on the forehead of Col. Hans Landa, the man responsible for Shosanna's family's deaths. In this scene Lt. Aldo Raine closes off the film by declaring this last carving his masterpiece. The artistic abilities shown throughout both films play a vital role in the success of each one's story.

Szpilman's struggle to survive throughout the war was assisted by the ability to play the piano and ultimately allowed him to survive his encounter with Captain Hosenfeld. If Szpilman was unable to play the piano his name would not have been public knowledge, since he would be unknown he would have surely died with his family. Also, if Shosanna did not film her message before the night of the Nazi event she would not have been able to become the "the face of Jewish vengeance" due to her untimely death. Lastly, the carvings of Lt. Aldo Raine secure the image the Basterds want to be known for, as it allows them to spread fear through the German army. As well as

allowing the Nazi soldiers to never hide the fact that they are responsible for the inhuman actions that happened during the war. When comparing the two films violent acts you can see how inhumane and disturbing the actions of the Nazi soldiers were towards the Jewish people. As well as how the mental and physical abuse wore down the spirits of the Jewish people, making them unable to resist. Lastly, how art played a large role in the success of the journey of each character throughout their stories, allowing them to accomplish what they were after. Sources