

# **Portrayal of the Camp Experience on Film: An Examination of Cinematic and Historical Issues Raised by Schindler's List and Shoah**

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## **Introduction**

It was reported in the Age in February 1999 that in the US alone, this year some thirty films with a World War II / Nazi theme had been produced, along with a similar number being made in Europe. Given Robert Rosenstone's argument that "today the chief source of historical knowledge for the bulk of the population...must surely be the visual media", as well as the intense interest developing in cinematic renditions of the Holocaust and Nazi era, it is timely to consider the underlying issues regarding film representation of history in general, and the Holocaust in particular.

The two films Schindler's List and Shoah seem worlds apart in their respective attempts to portray certain aspects of the Holocaust, but in one respect they have something in common. Both films attempt radically different means of portraying life for the Jewish inmates of concentration camps and death camps. Whilst one might not usually compare a documentary film with a dramatic narrative film, in this instance it will enable us to examine the variety of ways in which one might try to convey the experience in a Nazi concentration camp, and ascertain the ability, or inability, of each film to enhance our historical understanding of the events of that era. A discussion of this nature also necessarily must look at some of the fundamental questions about validity or otherwise of the general filmic portrayal of history.

In this essay I will examine some of the current debate about the compatibility of history and film as a prelude to discussing specifically problems of Holocaust film representation. I then analyse the two specific above named examples of Holocaust cinema in order to see if either film is able to resolve the underlying problems and contradictions of conveying history on film.

## **Problems of historical representation on film**

The representation of history on film has always been paradoxical and problematic, and has stimulated lively debate among historians and other academics. For Rosenstone the main question is whether our written discourse really can be turned into a visual one, and he observes,

...no matter how serious or honest the filmmakers, and no matter how deeply committed they are to rendering the subject faithfully, the history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian as historian.

Both the dramatic narrative and documentary forms have their respective contradictions that negate their ability to be genuinely objective and questioning as required by an academic historian. The medium itself is necessarily subjective and images on screen are always a construct of the filmmakers. Even documentary films are ideological and aesthetic constructs reflecting the concerns of the cinematographer and director.

However, whilst Rosenstone claims that historical feature films often lock filmmakers and audience into generic conventions that would outrage academic historians, he says this does not have to be so. He asserts that, in principle, he can see no reason why a dramatic feature need be different from much of written history. His central argument is that whilst restrictions exist on the amount of "data" that

can be presented on screen within the context of a 2 - 8 hour film, the film medium itself expands the data available by the inclusion of sound and visual signals missing from a written text.

R.J. Raack, a historian who had made several documentaries, is an advocate of filmed history and argues that written history is "too linear and too narrow in focus to render the fullness of the complex, multi-dimensional world in which humans live." Philosopher Ian Jarvie opposes that view. He says that the moving image carries such a "poor information load", and suffers from such "discursive weakness" that there is no way to do a meaningful history on film. Jarvie points out that history is not primarily a "descriptive narrative of what actually happened", but rather it consists of "debates between historians about what exactly did happen, why it happened, and what would be an adequate account of its significance." For him the problem seems to be that "a world that moves at an unrelenting twenty-four frames a second provides no time or space for reflection, verification or debate".

For others there is the equally important problem of archival footage, never, in itself, an adequate representation of historical events. Paula Rabinowitz reminds us that documentary footage is not the same as documentary cinema and Omer Bartov points out that,

...documentary film material about the Holocaust is highly problematic since the circumstances under which it was taken would very often strongly undermine its value as "objective" evidence. A newsreel filmed by a Wehrmacht propaganda company cannot be perceived as an objective representation of an event, whatever the claims of its makers

Bartov adds that films made by the US liberators in Europe also could not be held to be objective portraits of history because of their tendency to "represent the victims as horribly emaciated, only quasi-human creatures...they do not arouse empathy". Furthermore, we should remember that representation is not the same as interpretation, and that the use of archival footage to create a realistic feel to a documentary is not really interpretation.

Also, Rosenstone concludes that we must be cautious of documentaries that purport to convey a sense of the world at a particular time through the use of archival footage or photographs. We must remember that the original images and the sequence into which they are now constructed really represents the perspective of the filmmakers.

So it can be said that the overall area of filmed representation of history remains a lively debate, in both the narrative drama/fiction and documentary forms of cinema. That debate is likely to continue into the foreseeable future, and stands as an important backdrop to the specific issue of filmic representation of the Holocaust.

### **Problems specifically relating to Holocaust cinematic representation**

When we examine the problems that specifically affect the filmed representation of the Holocaust, it is important to recall the underlying, pre-existing controversy about the ability to represent any history effectively on film. Those issues form a backdrop, aspects of which are sometimes accentuated by, and sometimes subverted by, the particular sensitivities operating in the field of Holocaust history. Omer Bartov points out that,

Any representation of the Holocaust comes with a heavy price, and none can claim to be wholly free of bias, distortion, and the limitations of the conventions within which it operates.

So, let's consider some of the specific problems that arise in Holocaust filmed representation, above and beyond those general issues of history representation. Some of these include the almost

impossible task of cinematically replicating the sheer horror and scale of the Holocaust, the problem of who speaks for the dead, and if we only have survivors, perpetrators and bystanders as witnesses then how does a filmmaker/historian seek the truth. On survivors memories, Bartov says, are "not always free from melodrama and manipulations of emotions...both the melodramatic mode and the plain style can be employed in 'remembering' the same event."

In addition, there seems to exist a set of unwritten rules for representation of the Holocaust; an "uncertified set of assumptions and procedures", defined by Terrence Des Pres as,

1. The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history.
2. Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason - artistic reasons included.
3. The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event with seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonour its dead.

It was these unwritten conventions, that Des Pres said, "function as regulatory agencies to influence how we conceive of, and write about, matters of the Holocaust", that caused much of the critical flack for Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful*. Robert Manne, writing a review of Benigni's film in the *Age* cited "the ethical duty to remember the Holocaust truthfully" as sufficient reason to be critical of *Life is Beautiful*. Thus even before the filmmaker plans a single shot, there is in place an internal inhibition which would seem to compromise an academic historians' quest for truth.

Also in the background of any attempt to historically portray the Holocaust on film are the myriad of internal debates on subjects such as "intentionalism" vs "functionalism", perpetrators or bystanders, the issue of memory, and survivor guilt. This latter issue of survivor guilt erupted in controversy during the 1960s, which, along with the general Holocaust representation at that time, had the result that, "the Holocaust became the ultimate tragedy even while its victims bore the guilt for their own victimisation". So again, with the Holocaust cast as a tragedy, further psychological inhibitions prevent artistic, historic and aesthetic freedom to function in a Holocaust film (especially narrative /drama).

If the film is a drama then the normal narrative structural conventions tend to cast the Holocaust as tragedy, and in documentaries there has until recently been a tendency to rely on archival footage to illustrate and provide a sense of realism. The internal contradictions inherent here is yet another of the multitude of obstacles that stands in the path of any intrepid filmmaker contemplating making a Holocaust related film.

### **Two films that represent camp experience (Schindler's List & Shoah)**

Having now identified some of the structural, philosophical, political, artistic and aesthetical problems related to the production of Holocaust films, I now propose to examine two recent examples of the genre, the Steven Spielberg dramatic narrative, *Schindler's List*, and the Claude Lanzmann 9 hour documentary, *Shoah*. In examining these two films I will appraise at their respective attempts to convey the Nazi camp experience, analysing whether either is able to represent anything close to the horror of that experience. It should be said at the outset that I am conscious that neither film ultimately has as its primary central focus or theme, the camp experience, but each does in its own way have an intense look at life in the concentration camps and death camps.

Both of these films have been acclaimed by critics and audience alike, although it should be remembered that Spielberg's film reached one of the biggest mass audiences in history, whilst because of its prohibitive length Shoah was seen by a much smaller audience. This is important to note because in Spielberg's endeavour to reach that huge audience, he utilises the traditional Hollywood cinematic strategies and generic conventions to tell the story of Oskar Schindler, thus immediately placing a question mark on the films' veracity as a historical document. As Bartov says, "Mass-oriented films invariably suffer from an inability to remain consistent with the more important themes they may raise." On the other hand, given that Shoah has been described as "the most important film made on the memory of the Holocaust" , it's a great tragedy that it will never be seen by Spielberg's mass audience, in part because its director refused to compromise to Hollywood audience expectation and limit the film to a few hours.

The first major difference between Shoah and Schindler's List is in Spielberg's deliberate use of black and white film to suggest reality by the "look" we associate with the Holocaust after years of exposure to films utilising extensive archival footage. Spielberg seeks to recreate the authenticity of the newsreel. Lanzmann's approach is the complete antithesis of Spielberg's, refusing to use one single second of archival footage in a 9 hour film. Immediately we know that the approach of the two directors is light years apart philosophically. Among some other general aspects of each film would be Spielberg's focus not on victims but rather a non-Jewish businessman cum Nazi collaborator and a demented Nazi officer, whilst Lanzmann stays totally focussed on the survivors and their memories. Indeed, Shoah seeks to root itself in the present and uses memory as the vehicle to understanding the past.

Lanzmann wants to recreate the camps and to take us into the gas chambers without us actually being there, whereas Spielberg uses his venture into the gas chambers as a tease; a cheap Hollywood suspense trick that spares his mass audience the moment of mass death. This moment also serves to remind us again that the narrative in any Holocaust film is that of witness, which means the paradox that only those who survived are witnesses. The camera has adopted the vantagepoint of the survivors. I cannot speak for the dead. Bartov also raises concern about the Hollywood-style exploitation of sexuality in this same scene of naked women in the shower block, and suggests that by including this scene Spielberg made the audience complicit with the SS "by sharing in their voyeurism and in blocking out the reality of the gas chambers."

Schindler's List also demonstrates how most Holocaust films turn to metaphor, and the ultimate metaphor of the genre is smoke. Spielberg uses smoke to communicate a sense of death because of the impossibility of recreating the genuine horror of the camp experience. But Lanzmann would rather visit the camps in the present and use the words and memories of survivors to paint his picture. Because of the unrelenting gaze of his camera and his own, at times, bullying style of interview, Lanzmann manages to draw a more evocative, powerful and moving account of the camp experience than would be possible in a narrative drama. On the other hand, by comparison, Schindler's List is not able to convey that sense of horror to anywhere near the same degree. John Slavin says that, "Spielberg has had to rely on simplistic, emotionally-charged narrative patterns which shield audiences from the full implications, the horrific extent, of the Holocaust." For Hartmann, these conventional Hollywood narrative patterns create the effect that "the blurring between history and fiction never leaves us free from an interior voice that murmurs: 'It is (only) a film.'"

## **Conclusion**

Neither of the two films examined emerged flawless as attempts to convey aspects of the Holocaust, but they do remain admirable attempts that provide foundations and signposts for future generations of filmmakers. In terms of each film's portrayal of camp life, I believe that Shoah was able to provide a more profound and enlightening insight into life in the death camps, despite both the aforementioned concern about the accuracy of survivor memory accounts, and its nine hour duration.

Whilst it is unlikely that it will be possible to make a film like Shoah again, given the old age and failing health of remaining survivors, it is more likely that we will continue to see dramatised versions of Holocaust experiences in mainstream cinema. One can only hope that both the positive and negative lessons learned in analysing film productions like Schindler's List and Shoah might make it possible to develop more meaningful ways of representing both history and the Holocaust on film.

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