

What are the limits, and the possibilities, for representing the Holocaust on film?

The movie camera was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account

Dziga Vertov, 1929.

Historians are confronted with a range of dilemmas when seeking to convey history via the medium of film. These include the question mark about the necessarily subjective nature of the medium which is ultimately a cluster of images assembled according to the subjective and often conflicting requirements of director, cinematographer, and editor. There also the problem whether, given the limitations of time, it is possible for sufficient meaningful content to enable serious historical debate, reflection or verification. Others regard archival footage itself to be never objective and therefore its use problematic. These are some of the perceived difficulties that face the historian seeking to make films about general history, but further complications come into play for those that consider the representation of any aspect of the Holocaust on film. As Jay Cantor says, "to admit that the Holocaust might be represented seems almost to deny the enormity of its horror, and its singularity."¹⁴⁴

In this essay I will explore the limitations and possibilities of Holocaust film representation, focusing in particular on Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, and ponder the problems that exist in this specific sphere of historical film production. In doing this I shall consider the visual aesthetics specific to cinematic treatments of the Holocaust, and will analyse how cinema aesthetics work to challenge, illuminate and/or limit audience understandings of various experiences of the Holocaust. I will also, in the course of this analysis, be looking at how the extreme events of the Holocaust affect the cinematic possibilities for Holocaust representation.

The main aspect of many Holocaust films is the use of black and white footage, either in the form of archival footage, or (as in the case of *Schindler's List*) to suggest reality by the 'look' we associate with the Holocaust after years of exposure to films utilising archival footage. With black & white footage, Spielberg seeks to recreate the

authenticity of the newsreel, even though, ironically, newsreel footage itself is questionable historical material because of the subjective circumstances in which it was shot. The use of black & white footage in *Schindler's List* is also an attempt to create an appropriately sombre tone for the serious subject matter, and is thus a subtle acknowledgment by Spielberg of the enormous difficulty of representing such an horrific event as the Holocaust on film.

The problem of representing the Holocaust primarily involves the question of how does one portray mass death. Director of *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann, said that, "The problem of my film was to show death"¹⁴⁵, and the same problem confronted Spielberg who, in *Schindler's List*, resorted to the essential metaphor of Holocaust films, smoke. This signified Spielberg's inability to come to terms with the question of death, and this was further accentuated in the gas chamber scene where he takes us (in a voyeuristic manner) into the gas chamber but is unable to represent death, so resolves the moment in Hollywood cliché. Even in the times when death is represented on screen in *Schindler's List*, Spielberg still cannot help but to resort to classic cinematic conventions of Hollywood so that death is stylised. As Ivan Avisar points out, "Despite Spielbergs claim to documentary truth, *Schindler's List* ought to be recognised as a film that marshals the familiar codes of Hollywood cinema."¹⁴⁶

Part of the problem confronting Spielberg seems to be the unwritten rules for Holocaust representation, called by Terrence Des Pres an, "uncertified set of assumptions and procedures", and defined by him as follows,

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.

¹⁴⁴ Cantor, Jay, 1996. "Death and the Image.", In *Beyond Document: Essays in Non-fiction Film*, edited by C. Warren. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, p. 25.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁴⁶ Avisar, Ilan. 1997. *Holocaust Movies and the Politics of Collective Memory*. In *Thinking about the Holocaust: after half a century*, ed. by A. Rosenfeld, H Bloomington: Indiana University Press. p. 49

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.¹⁴⁷

Des Pres said that these unwritten conventions, "function as regulatory agencies to influence how we conceive of, and write about, matters of the Holocaust" and they may well have psychologically inhibited Spielberg as he made *Schindler's List*. Even so, when Spielberg ventured into the gas chambers he resorted to a cheap Hollywood suspense trick to spare his audience the moment of mass death.

That moment in *Schindler's List* also serves to remind us again that the narrative in any Holocaust film is that of witness, which means that paradoxically only those who survived are witnesses. The camera has adopted the vantage point of the survivors. It 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."¹⁴⁸

Another aspect typical of Holocaust film representation's resort to metaphor is in the train journey. In *Schindler's List* the train features and the audience knows the journey ends in death, thus the train and the journey become (however inadequate) symbolic of the horror and death of the Holocaust. Lanzmann in *Shoah* employs imagery of now empty lines of cattle wagons at Auschwitz to accentuate the memories of survivors and to represent the silent voices of the dead. Thus trains and cattle cars have become synonymous with Holocaust filmic representation as one of the acceptable ways in which a film maker might convey horror and death in an indirect manner.

Given all the aforementioned limitations of filmic Holocaust representation one wonders how it might be possible to convey a moderately historically accurate Holocaust story on film. Some argue that the only possible way is by documentary, as

¹⁴⁷ Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust Laughter?", in B. Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, Holmes & Meier: New York, 1988, p.217.

¹⁴⁸ Omer Bartov, "Spielberg's Oskar: Hollywood Tries Evil", in Yosefa Loshitzky (ed.) *Spielberg's Holocaust: Cinema Images of the Unimaginable*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997, p. 49.

if the genre was somehow free of the limitations, restraints and unrealistic portrayal of narrative cinema. It is important to understand that even in documentary there are hidden pitfalls that compromise the integrity of historic representation. In the Holocaust documentary genre virtually all films but *Shoah* rely heavily on historical, archival newsreel style footage.

This is in itself a substantial inherent weakness due to the unreliability of archival footage given the subjective nature of its creation. In the case of Nazi shot footage it is obvious that the film images are shot and edited from the subjective, anti-Semitic perspective of its makers; and also originally made to be anti-Jewish propaganda, so the very images themselves of Jewish victims are tainted as an objective historical document. In addition, even archival footage filmed by the Russian and American liberators is not necessarily an accurate image of the camps, the survivors or the dead. The liberators footage, as Bartov pointed out, can 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".¹⁴⁹

A documentary is as much a construct as a Hollywood drama. We must remember that the original images and the sequence into which they are now constructed really represents the perspective of the filmmakers. Furthermore, representation is not the same as interpretation, and that the use of archival footage to create a realistic representation in a documentary is an act of interpretation. These are some of the reasons that Rosenstone has said 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.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our idea of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p.22.

Having examined the limitations in filmic representation of the Holocaust, I now turn to the possibilities that exist with both the narrative feature and documentary. The first thing to be said about the advantage of cinema as a medium is its ability to reach a mass audience. In the case of *Schindler's List*, the director set out specifically to target a mass audience, but some have argued that in doing so he was forced to compromise historically, aesthetically and artistically, which in turn weakened the film as a historical document. But to merely bring the Holocaust to a mass audience and have some of the important historical questions posed, is in itself, an important positive aspect of Spielberg's film.

Having brought the story to a mass audience, Spielberg manages to avoid much of "the kitsch and sentimentality which have plagued so many previous films on the Holocaust", in part because of Spielberg's background in Hollywood film direction and also because of the conventional Hollywood cinematic codes in use in the film. So, at times, it might be possible that mainstream cinematic conventions, aesthetics and codes can be mobilised in a positive way in historic films, although overall this could not be said to be the case with *Schindler's List*.

One of the few other positive things I could say about *Schindler's List* is that it had a profound effect internationally in stimulating on-going interest, debate and discussion about the Holocaust. This was particularly intriguing in Germany where, to the surprise of the director, reception for the film was "overwhelmingly positive" and it was one of the most popular films that year among German high school students. The interesting thing was that, despite the film's popularity, the general response of Germans was one of 'shame'. As Michael Geyer says, "So the Germans did remember

after all..."¹⁵¹ To have succeeded in making the German people confront, for the first time in a serious and public manner, their history and past in a way which did not nationally alienate or isolate them, is probably a good and politically healthy thing.

To conclude however, I am inclined to think that because of the manner in which films are constructed and the cinematic conventions of code and genre that are part of that construct, there are substantial problems confronting the filmmaker/historian. When it comes to the history of the Holocaust, all the attendant problems of film and history are magnified by the scale and horror of the event. So it is true that the extreme events of the Holocaust do seriously inhibit the cinematic possibilities for Holocaust representation. Thus, in my mind, whilst Spielberg's film is a better than average attempt to apply Hollywood-style filmmaking and storytelling to a Holocaust story, it fails as a serious and credible filmed history. This is because of the compromises, some mentioned above, Spielberg has had to make in the process.

This is not to say that film cannot enlighten us about the history of the Holocaust, as I believe Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, despite its own flaws, is an example of how it might be achieved. It may be an unfair comparison given that *Shoah* is the complete antithesis of *Schindler's List*, but that only highlights further the complex problems for anyone contemplating making a film about the Holocaust.

©Gary Foley 1999

¹⁵¹ Geyer Michael, 1996, *The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Germany*, in Joan Copjec (ed.) *Radical Evil*, New York: Verso, p. 191.

Bibliography

- Avisar, Ilan. 1997. Holocaust Movies and the Politics of Collective Memory. In *Thinking about the Holocaust: after half a century*, ed. by A. Rosenfeld, H. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Avisar, Ivan. 1988. *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*. in Yosefa Loshitzky (ed.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bartov, Omer. 1997. "Spielberg's Oskar: Hollywood Tries Evil", in Yosefa Loshitzky (ed.) *Spielberg's Holocaust: Cinema Images of the Unimaginable*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Cantor, Jay, 1996. "Death and the Image.", In *Beyond Document: Essays in Non-fiction Film*, edited by C. Warren. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press.
- Clendinnen, Inga, 1998, *Reading the Holocaust*, Melbourne: Text Publishing.
- Doneson, Judith E. 1987. *The Holocaust in American Film*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Library.
- Des Pres, Terrence. 1988. "Holocaust Laughter?" in B. Lang (ed.). *Writing and the Holocaust*. New York: Holmes & Meier.
- Farrow, Boyd. "Kampf followers", *The Age*, 28th February 1999, Melbourne.
- Geyer Michael, 1996, The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Germany, in Joan Copjec (ed.) *Radical Evil*, New York: Verso.
- Gill, Anton. 1989. *The Journey Back From Hell: Conversations with concentration camp survivors*. London: Grafton.
- Hartman, Geoffrey H. 1988. "The Cinema Animal", in Yosefa Loshitzky, (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspective's on Schindler's List*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Manne, Robert. 1999. "Life is not so beautiful". *The Age*, 15 February, p. 13.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. 1994. *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. New York: Verso.
- Rosenstone, Robert. 1995. *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our idea of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Slavin, John. 1996. "Schindler's List: Seminar Two. *Metro Education 8*. Melbourne: ATOM.

¹ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust, 1996,

¹ Hans Mommsen, There was No Führer Order, 1986, p. 36.

¹ For example, Law for Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Progeny, 1933, Law against Dangerous Habitual Criminals, 1933, and Marriage Health Law, 1935.