
HOLOCAUST CINEMA: AGENCY, AUTHENTICITY, AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the genre of cinema bearing the name, Holocaust Cinema. Historical considerations of authenticity are examined "Vis a Vis" the ethics and morality associated with a uniquely tragic event. The agency of victims, places and events are given consideration, as are the producers, directors and target audiences. The article suggests a necessary target set whereby an ethical product, and a successful movie are the formative achievement.

Keywords: Holocaust Cinema, Film and Holocaust, Art

Introduction

This paper begins by reviewing the formative standards that affect moving images in Holocaust representation. Next, I discuss contemporary considerations and offer a critique of current trends. Finally, I suggest acceptable approaches to representation. Most films addressing the Holocaust, as a genre, purport to represent authentic or historical information. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes authenticity as follows: "The term 'authentic' is used either in the strong sense of being 'of undisputed origin or authorship,' or in a weaker sense of being 'faithful to an original' or a 'reliable, accurate representation.' To say that something is authentic is to say that it is what it professes to be, or what it is reputed to be, in origin or authorship."¹ Regarding the concept of agency (also addressed in the title of this paper), it may be useful to make a *prima facie* case that the Holocaust was a singularly Jewish event, founded on Jew hatred and manifested as the "final solution."

Note that with the exception of original wartime footage, all film is representational. The genre of Holocaust films and television shows must take into account a moral obligation to the victims,

¹ Varga (2014).

and perhaps to history as well. According to Elie Wiesel, “the question is not what to transmit but how.”²

Film and Holocaust: Historicity

In the foreword to the second edition (1989) of Annette Insdorf’s classic textbook, “Indelible Shadows,” Elie Wiesel quotes the Rabbi of Kotsk: “There are truths which cannot be communicated by the word; there are deeper truths that can be transmitted only by silence; and another level, are those which cannot be expressed, not even by silence.” Wiesel adds: “And yet the story must be communicated.”³ Film and television exist in a world that depends on an audience and on economics that may or may not be subject to political or social pressures. These media are also influenced by culture and scholarship from multiple disciplines. The task of a moral filmmaker is to develop cinematic techniques alongside appropriate narrative strategies.

Documentary and Montage

There have been fine documentaries about the Holocaust. Episodes in the series “The World at War,” which addresses the final solution are a fine example. Most newsreel and armed forces films contain images of reality. There are many other examples of archival footage, which unfortunately are dominated by images of atrocities, given the nature of the crime. Initial experimentation, using minimal footage, used montage as a narrative technique. A notable example is Alain Resnais’s “Night and Fog.” Another example of a work that incorporates real footage in order to develop a story is the 1959 movie, “Judgment at Nuremberg.”

Although individuals are capable of multiple interpretations, the ability of film to alter the meaning as well as the psychology of a series of images, through montage, is unsurpassed. As Elie Wiesel put it, “You see, memory is more than isolated events, more even than the sum of those events. Facts pulled out of their context can turn out to be misleading.”⁴ Andrew Hebard has addressed the use of montage in his article, “Disruptive Histories,” where he explains: “Resnais’s use of archival material juxtaposed with present day footage worked to defamiliarize the archive and to complicate a facile distinction between past and present.”⁵ Hebard goes on to explain the various psychological aspects contained in Holocaust cinema and, elicited by it. Ironically, “Night and Fog,” although an example of highly polished montage, still ranks as a deserving example of Holocaust narrativization according to the previously cited Wiesel

² Wiesel (1989).

³ Insdorf (2003, Foreword).

⁴ Wiesel (1989, p. 123).

⁵ Hebard (1997, p. 88).

essay.⁶ Hebard adds the prescient observation: “This distinction between the past and the present has become one of the primary focuses of work concerning the Holocaust.”⁷

Witnessing

According to Yehuda Bauer, “all testimony is archival information”⁸ and serves meritoriously. This approach is followed by works featuring survivors retelling their story, often while revisiting sites of past trauma and events. Claude Landsman’s “Shoah” is in this category, but because of its uniqueness, it deserves a separate discussion. Testimony films are reserved not only for museum archives, but have also entered the territory of popular cinema. A film such as “Kitty: Return to Auschwitz” is an early example that achieved wide circulation, and at the same time was able to maintain its moral compass. A most curious and quite genuine example of introducing survivors to audiences is the 1952 appearance of Hanna Bloch Kohner on the television show “This Is Your Life.” Although it was maligned later for being frivolous and trivializing, Hannah was not portraying a character but being her real self, demonstrating the character of a survivor in her particular circumstances of life at that time. Her appearance also exposed the American audience to something they had not seen or heard of before: the person of a Holocaust survivor.

In all the above examples, at issue are nonfictional works. Most of cinema, however, is fictionalized with various degrees of honesty, dignity, and integrity. Nevertheless, to reach a wide audience and to maintain appeal, commercialization was inescapable. The Holocaust Miniseries epitomizes this effort. Jeffrey Shandler,⁹ among others, has opened a dialogue concerning the term docudrama. But docudrama is just another name for fictional work, as plainly attested to by the term “drama.” At the same time, storytelling aimed at a wide audience introduces complex issues, such as sponsorship and commercialization, as well as stardom, as discussed below.

Fiction: When and What?

The presence of fiction in the visual narrative is inescapable, and needs to be confronted. Libby Saxton makes perhaps the clearest case for authenticity in make-believe: “Fiction becomes the condition of possibility for authentic testimony while a past that is never reconstructed is nonetheless represented through the bodies of the actor-witnesses as they relive, re-enact, are

⁶ *Op cit.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Y. Bauer was addressing an audience at the Ninth International Conference On Holocaust Education (Through Our Own Lens) July 7-10, 2014, held at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem.

⁹ Shandler (1999).

acted by or ‘incarnate’ their traumas.”¹⁰ One reason for fictionalizing the Holocaust is that it is receding into an ever more distant past, and as a result, its meaning and representation become increasingly malleable for audiences born after WWII, especially as they are scattered across the globe. The response to film is often shaped by the local culture of the audience. Consequently, we find that memory is culturally mediated for those affected by the Holocaust as well as for first, second, and third generation descendants. A discussion of memory and culture is necessary to assess the contemporary works. It is, therefore, important to recognize the difference between cultures directly affected by the Holocaust, as for example in Israel, and the larger diaspora population centers, which continue to be much more directly affected by the trauma.

Commercial Considerations

Recognizing that productions must be financially successful does not necessarily mean that one agrees with the outcome. Notable examples of poor taste in advertisers’ influence include the American Gas Company, sponsoring the originally dramatized television version of “Judgment at Nuremberg” on Playhouse 90, and bleeping out the word “gas” in describing the gas chambers. The musical score in virtually all works of cinema and television adds a further dimension of outside agency. Additionally, on television, the presence of commercial breaks at specific and regular intervals creates an uncomfortable relationship with the the narrative.

Outcomes and Consequences: The Shoah Miniseries

Perhaps the most unexpected consequences were seen in the reaction to the 1978 miniseries, “The Holocaust.” This American television miniseries was broadcast in four parts, on April 16-19, 1978 on the NBC television network. Although the miniseries won several awards and received critical acclaim, it was criticized by some, especially Holocaust survivors, including Elie Wiesel, who described it as “untrue and offensive.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the miniseries enjoyed unexpected popularity. The nightly viewership in the US ranged from 15-20 million households. So many people watched in New York City when it was first broadcast, that during the commercials the local water pressure dropped because of the number of people using the toilets at the same time.

The miniseries was shown in West Germany, in 1979. According to estimates, 20 million people, or half the population, watched it.¹² When it was aired on German television, police switchboards were flooded with confessional calls during the “Kristallnacht” scene. People who

¹⁰ Saxton (2008, p. 38).

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹² Lüdtkke (1993, pp. 544-546)

had participated in the actual event were calling to confess their participation, but because of the statute of limitation no action could be taken against the callers despite their confessions. The ensuing furor led the West German government to change the relevant laws and extend time limits to enable the prosecution of perpetrators.

Yet another consequence of the miniseries may have been the announcement by President Jimmy Carter, on November 1, 1978, to establish the President's Commission on the Holocaust. Chaired by author and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, the Commission recommended to establish a memorial with three main components: a national Holocaust memorial/museum; an educational foundation; and a Committee on Conscience. Ironically, although neither the Weiss family nor Meryl Streep are authentic representations, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is perhaps one of the most significant establishments memorializing the Holocaust, and the television series may have played a role in its establishment.

Culture and Memory in Current Cinema

Pierre Nora, noted for his work on memory and identity, stated that "History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it."¹³ He offers an alternative for consideration, however: the concept of trace.¹⁴ Utilizing archival material (footage) and scenes of witnessing in film clips subscribes to the notion of trace and becomes the postmemory of survivor generations and their contemporaries.¹⁵ Thus, at a certain level, film addresses the postmemory of the audience. Now the question becomes one of latitude, the degree of deviation from what is accepted historiography. By definition, a Holocaust narrative is constructed on trauma. But in the telling of trauma, Ruth Leys, Professor of Humanities at Johns Hopkins, sees the historical aspects of the Holocaust as an example of trauma work, albeit from a psychological perspective, and regards it as "the crisis of representation posed by trauma in our time."¹⁶ Dominick LaCapra considers the varieties of post-traumatic representations as falling into three categories: (a) denial of trauma, (b) working through trauma, and (c) repeating trauma by reenacting it.¹⁷ In the case of film, the reenactment is framed by the verisimilitude of the events that the filmmaker achieves; at the same time, exemplifying the Holocaust for other narratives is an abrogation to be avoided. For some film producers and screenwriters, the primary goal is that which is universal or cosmopolitan in representation; this may include humor,

¹³ Nora (1989, p. 9).

¹⁴ *Ibid* pp. 13 "Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image."

¹⁵ The term "postmemory" was coined by Marianne Hirsch [Hirsch (1997)].

¹⁶ Leys (2010, p. 252).

¹⁷ LaCapra (2001).

allusion, trivialization, whether for a good cause or for political exploitation, and it does not pretend to be authentic. Unavoidably, we encounter works that fall into the exploitation category, which may not merit serious consideration except for the fact that they are highly successful and visible.

Using violence gratuitously and borrowing Holocaust imagery is a clear perversion of trauma cinema (to be discussed under culture and psychology). Unfortunately, such works have found their way into what is termed the “Holocaust genre,” spawning confusion and deceit. Not all films that mention Hitler or Mengele are Holocaust cinema. Consider two highly entertaining, and well-made movies: “Boys From Brazil“ and “Marathon Man.” It is disappointing, if not surprising, that they are frequently found on the short list of “best Holocaust movies.”

This brings up an unexpected agency, that of belonging to the group of scholars, filmmakers and producers, critics, including ourselves, who gather to discuss Holocaust representation in film. In an article titled “The Maimed Body and Tortured Soul: Holocaust Survivors in American Film” (2004), Levinson discusses the 1975 film, “Night Porter.”¹⁸ Scenes of uncontrolled promiscuity are offered to reenact the psychological horrors of the camps. I suggest that none of this is Holocaust related; rather, it stands for an attempt to assert the agency of writers and scholars, who are now claiming to interpret postmemory for the public. This is highly problematic. How the final solution can be depicted through drunken debauchery defies imagination and morality. In an ironic twist, the filmmakers, critics, and scholars are becoming perpetrators, with the audience as victims. In the 21st century, the Holocaust is increasingly becoming a lesson teaching universal values, and cosmopolitanism is competing with authentic narrative and victim/survivor agency for attention. Films engaging in the psychological analysis of the victims’ trauma, and the resulting postmemory transmitted to future generations, serve the agency of scholars and film makers responsible for production and discussion. Representing the Holocaust must choose between representing the past with an ethical response or with a figurative translation serving another agency. When depicting the Holocaust, movies must retain the theme of the final solution. Psychologies of trauma and the postmemory approach are speculative, at best, and may be disingenuous in their treatment of history, victims, and survivors. Finally, we recognize the role of film as artwork, but caution against representation becoming perpetration.

¹⁸ Levinson (2004, pp. 154-158).

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