History in the media: film and the Holocaust

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SYDNEY JEWISH MUSEUM’S HISTORY EXTENSION
2012 ‘GENERATION TO GENERATION’ PRIZE – 1st PLACE

‘Evaluate the suitability of the American historical film as a medium for the construction of Holocaust history’.

Synopsis
The systematic genocide of two-thirds of European Jewry under Nazi Germany’s Final Solution is an event that can never truly be represented in any form. Yet the importance of its memorialisation on the historical record has been repeatedly emphasised. Indeed, when producer and Holocaust survivor Branko Lustig accepted the Academy Award for Best Picture for Schindler’s List in 1994, he said, People died in front of me in the camps. Their last words were: “Be a witness of my murder. Tell to the world how I died. Remember’.

In light of the immensity and seriousness of the event, the proliferation of films since 1945 that deal with the Holocaust seems somewhat paradoxical. As a medium so often condemned for fictionalising, trivialising and emotionalising factual subject matter, the ‘historical film,’ which seeks to reconstruct the past by way of dramatisation, seems a strange choice of medium to observe the need for remembrance.

This paper seeks to evaluate the suitability of the Hollywood (as a metonym for mainstream American cinema) historical film as a medium for the construction of Holocaust history, by examining a number of complex issues inherent to the medium itself, including contextual influences, and cinematic techniques. Specific American dramatic features, namely The Diary of Anne Frank (1959), The Pawnbroker (1965), Holocaust (1978) and Schindler’s List (1993) have been used to provide evidence in support, selected in light of their widespread global success. The paper will argue that there are a number of issues that render the historical film inherently inappropriate for the depiction and construction of Holocaust history, but that in light of the importance of human detail, the cinematic medium may also be of some value.

Essay
The Holocaust is often cited as a defining event of the modern era that in many ways defies definition and representation because of the immensity and incomprehensibility of the human suffering that was facilitated by the Final Solution. Paradoxically, it has been represented in approximately 782 dramatic features between 1945 and 1999 alone, a vast number of which were produced by the Hollywood industry. These mainstream productions have in fact been cited as the most influential in shaping the memory of the Holocaust in popular consciousness due to their worldwide commercial success. The historiographical ramifications of this are, of course, vigorously debated, with arguments centred around two main issues: trivialisation and memorialisation. On the one hand, Hollywood films are decried for undermining the immensity and particularity of the Holocaust by universalising, simplifying and individualising history in a ‘closed’ and ‘complete’ cinematic package that can seek to capture only ‘an inkling of the real truth’, whilst paradoxically creating a sense of visual realism that blurs the distinction between fiction and reality, ultimately altering the popular understanding of the ‘truth’ itself. Conversely, the portrayal of the Holocaust in film is praised for conveying the ‘mood’ of history more effectively than is achievable in other mediums of historical writing, preserving the memory of Holocaust victims by establishing a human immediacy between an audience and the people of the past. In evaluating suitability of the historical film for the construction of Holocaust history, it becomes inherently clear that the issues of trivialisation and memorialisation within the cinematic medium are mutually dependent; that Hollywood cannot memorialise the Holocaust without trivialising the facts to a certain extent, simply because of the constraints of film itself. However, when
these shortcomings are acknowledged and understood, it can be asserted that the historical film is somewhat suitable in that it acts to defend the memory of the Holocaust’s human detail and emotional dimension.\textsuperscript{6}

Firstly, Hollywood cinematic representations can be seen to undermine the Holocaust by universalising it as a historical event. Film theorist Pierre Sorlin contends that ‘every historical film is an indicator of a country’s basic historical culture.’\textsuperscript{7} Yet the national proximity of the United States to the Holocaust as compared to the countries of Europe immediately establishes the American historical culture as a markedly separate one. The Holocaust was a distinctly European event; yet the fundamental purpose of popular history - that is, wide historical readership - may be seen as in opposition to this ‘uniqueness.’ This leaves filmmakers with the sense that they must universalise their films in order to achieve audience identification with those who suffered and died in Hitler’s Final Solution. Yet the extent to which the Holocaust has become an ‘artifact of American culture’\textsuperscript{8} suggests that it has not only been universalised, but distinctly ‘Americanism’ by way of the traditional culture inherent to Hollywood.

Universalisation, particularly in the films of the 1950s and 1960s, often meant compromising the “particular Jewishness,”\textsuperscript{9} of the Holocaust. The Diary of Anne Frank is particularly illustrative of this, and is often cited as a ‘landmark’ in the Americanisation of the event.\textsuperscript{10} The scene in which the inhabitants of the Secret Annex celebrate Hanukkah was deliberately scripted in English, rather than the traditional Hebrew, in the belief that this would allow the audience to more readily identify with those on screen.\textsuperscript{11} The omission of the direct references to anti-Semitism and the wider socio-political framework of the Netherlands made in the original Diary may also be seen as contributing to this universalisation. Made in 1965, The Pawnbroker can also be seen as an Americanised tale in that it tells the story of a Holocaust survivor living in the United States, and was filmed entirely in New York. It wasn’t until the mini-series Holocaust was aired in 1978 that the event took on its ‘specific Jewishness’,\textsuperscript{3} but even then, the reliance on English dialogue is indicative of the fact that Americanisation in the filmic medium begins on the most basic level of spoken language, that seeks to facilitate the assumption of a distinctly European event into American identity.\textsuperscript{3}

By interpreting the Holocaust in film by way of the American ideological framework, the event is transformed from a unique act of systematic, industrialised genocide into a metaphor for the universal suffering of mankind. Tim Cole has discussed this idea as the ‘myth of the Holocaust’; the notion that public perceptions of the event now exist as separate to the event itself, and that it has been transformed by elements of popular culture in ‘an attempt to find meaning in the murder of six million Jews.’\textsuperscript{14} In this way, the Holocaust by way of American film has become part of the ‘vernacular of tragedy’\textsuperscript{13} that can be invoked to explore the suffering of other peoples in a historical or contemporary context. Some scholars see the purpose of Hollywood films that explore the Holocaust as didactic, seeking to teach a moral lesson about the importance of tolerance and democracy in American society. Of course, the importance of learning from the Holocaust is undeniable. Yet reshaping the Holocaust to assimilate the event into the American psyche to a certain extent trivialises the history itself, undermining the fact that the Final Solution was not just persecution of a group of individuals, but an act of genocide based upon the hatred of the entire Jewish people, their religion and their culture.

Secondly, the traditional narrative mode as used by many American filmmakers is based upon the perceived need for linearity, closure and catharsis within the constraints of a two to three hour cinematic presentation, yet the concept of closure is indeed a negation of the grim realities of the Holocaust and its legacy, and as such, this form may be considered inherently inappropriate. Fanny Brillestijper, one of the last to see Anne Frank before her death in March 1945, later recalled: ‘She had no tears left… She said that she was crawling so much with lice and fleas that she had thrown away all her clothes. It was the depths of winter and she was wrapped in a blanket’.\textsuperscript{16} Yet the film in which her diary is dramatised, The Diary of Anne Frank, does not acknowledge the harsh reality of her death in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Rather, adhering to the traditional optimism of the Hollywood narrative, her father, portrayed by actor Joseph Schildkraut, acknowledges that his daughter did not survive, before the film’s final voiceover narrates a hopeful line from Anne’s diary: ‘in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart’.\textsuperscript{17} This is not to say that such an ending is entirely inappropriate, in light of the optimistic tone of the original Diary. Yet the fact that an alternate ending showing Anne in a concentration camp was discarded serves to highlight the influence that the conventions of America’s traditional cinematic culture have had on the construction of Holocaust history in film, and how these conventions can minimise the negativity of the history itself.\textsuperscript{18}
Schindler's List is another film that can be seen to adhere to the redemptive narrative phenomenon of American cinema, with survival as a key theme. The film is credited with "finding humanity in an inhumane situation," as the protagonist, Oskar Schindler, saves the lives of 1200 Jewish people by employing them in his factory. The issue here is not the truth or historical accuracy of the story itself, for there is no doubt that Schindler did save the lives of these people. But Schindler's List, the dramatisation of this one particular story, must be judged in terms of the wider historical dialogue to which it contributes. The sense of 'redemption' inherent to Schindler's rescue pushes to the periphery of one's consciousness the fact of death that is fundamental to the Holocaust. The story instead becomes one of survival that, because of the film's prominence and critical acclaim, perhaps legitimises the previous 'upbeat' finishes as seen in such productions as NBC's mini-series Holocaust in 1978, and ultimately comes to dominate the understanding of the Holocaust that can be garnered from Hollywood films.

The use of individuals in the narrative mode to signify or explain a greater historical process or event may also be considered inherently unsuitable to the portrayal of Holocaust history. The first inherent problem in this is that singling out particular personalities to become representatives of the Jewish experience during the Holocaust undermines the fact that the millions who suffered were all individuals, with their own unique backgrounds and stories. In the case of Holocaust, for example, the experiences of the fictional Weiss family as simulated against the backdrop of a real historical situation may come to be seen to be characteristic of the experiences of a wider group during the Holocaust; the ordeals they endure can of course illuminate similar experiences of suffering, yet the vast array of historical omissions reduces the immensity of the event itself, partially diminishing the experiences and the voices of those who suffered in the concentration camps. This becomes a greater issue in films such as Schindler's List in which the narrative plot is in fact driven by a non-Jew, who is ultimately characterised as a Gentile saviour, whilst the experiences of the Jewish characters are somewhat depersonalised; in the words of critic Frank Rich, they "blur into abstraction, becoming another depersonalised statistic of mass death." This thus the representation of individuals in Hollywood narratives can be seen as somewhat unsuitable for Holocaust representation.

The conventions of the cinematic medium also undermine to a certain extent the immensity and wholeness of Holocaust history by dominating public consciousness with conventional Hollywood realism. The language of the cinematic medium is naturally much less dependent on words than written history. Rather, elements such as lighting, sets and mise en scène are combined not to provide an analysis of the past, but to present history as an integrated process and thus create a visual reality. Presenting a narrative, regardless of its factuality, as 'realistic' in film is a convention that has been maintained since the inception of the American film industry. The inherent problem of this realism is the illusion it creates: that the alterations to fact made by the aforementioned cinematic conventions are reflective of the historical reality; that what is being presented on screen is not a historical construct or a particular interpretation, but history itself. In the case of the Holocaust, the ramifications of this are intensified because of the sheer number of historical films that have been produced on the subject; according to Insdorf, 'this means that a film's reality' 'often boils down to how a movie compares with previous film treatments.'

Schindler's List is perhaps a perfect example of the inherent problems of Hollywood realism, having attained in the eyes of one critic the status of a historical document. Another cited the black and white photography and hand-held camera work as having given the film a 'documentary feel.' Yet the fact remains that the film is a cinematic narrative based on Thomas Keneally's novel Schindler's Ark, itself combining elements of fiction with historical events and persons. As film historian Miriam Hansen writes, 'by posing as the 'real thing' the film usurps the place of the actual event,' becoming for many 'The' Holocaust story. The 'false historicity' achieved through skilful use of cinematic techniques is indicative of the implications of fictionalisation in any historical work; yet by blurring the distinction between fact and fiction in relation to the Holocaust, the suffering of those who experienced it becomes trivialised, as their stories become 'tainted' by the fictional elements, which are, at the most basic level, merely contemporary inventions of the minds of script writers and directors. This is a concerning thought, for as the Holocaust recedes further into the past, and filmic depictions assume an even more central place in popular memory, such fiction may well become dominant; and then, as Elie Wiesel writes, 'If an event is embellished to an extent that the inner truth... is gone, what remains?'. Thus the dominance of Hollywood realism may be detrimental to Holocaust history.
However, the aforementioned shortcomings of the cinematic medium are in fact the very same techniques by which 'the dimensions of human experiences,' can truly be highlighted. David Harlan captured the essence of why the past is studied in writing, 'Voice is primary; everything else is driven by and follows from the voices we hear.' If this can be said of the past as a whole, it is perhaps even more true of an incomprehensible event like the Holocaust, which one can only attempt to understand on the basic level of individual suffering. Written accounts often lack the human immediacy that is so effectively portrayed through visual techniques. The use of montage in The Pawnbroker for example, conveys within seconds that the protagonist Sol Nazerman's recollections of a concentration camp haunt his everyday experience, serving to illuminate the impact of post-traumatic stress conditions on the lives of survivors. Even the graphic depictions of death and suffering within the Plaszow concentration camp in Schindler's List, sometimes cited as a transgression of the testimonies of survivors such as Elie Wiesel who stressed the 'indescribable' nature of the Holocaust, can be said to be fundamental to evoking 'an empathy for the facts in terms of their human meaning' by allowing an audience to experience with the characters on screen the emotions associated with the experiences so often described in written forms. Perhaps it can be contended that without the Hollywood creation of a visual reality that is driven by narrative and individual experiences, the 'human detail' of the Holocaust would be somewhat diminished. In this way, then, 'historical film' can be said to be a suitable medium for conveying the emotional experience that is integral to the story of Holocaust victims.

In evaluating the suitability of the historical film for the construction of Holocaust history, it is clear that many aspects of Hollywood's cinematic culture are incompatible with the seriousness and immensity of what is often considered the 'crime of the century.' The universalisation and Americanisation of the event by way of films, as well as the 'all-encompassing' narrative driven by the individual that comes to dominate popular consciousness under the false historicity of Hollywood realism, are problems inherent to dramatic film that undermine the historical accuracy of Holocaust historiography, and in turn, the stories of both survivors and those who perished. Yet it can be seen that the issue is a complex one, in that the cinematic medium is perhaps the most suitable for establishing an accurate 'historical mood' and for the understanding of human detail that is somewhat diminished by other mediums. Perhaps then, the most accurate evaluation should acknowledge both these aspects, that Hollywood cinema is indeed inherently unsuitable for the construction of history in a number of ways, yet in the context of an event such as the Holocaust, in which the human dimension is so immense, dramatic film does have a place.

Endnotes
6 Donelson, 'Holocaust Revisited', op. cit., p. 77.
9 Donelson, The Holocaust in American Film, op. cit., p. 73.
10 Flanzbaum, op. cit., p. 1.
11 Donelson, The Holocaust in American Film, op. cit., p. 74.
14 Ibid, p. 4-5.
15 Donelson, The Holocaust in American Film, op. cit., p. 63.
17 The Diary of Anne Frank, DVD, 20th Century Fox, United States, 1959.
18 Donelson, The Holocaust in American Film, op. cit., p. 76.
24 Heffner, R. D. & Wiesel, E., Conversations with Elie

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Books
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Fensch, T. (ed), Oskar Schindler and his List: the Man, the Book, the Film, the Holocaust and its Survivors, Paul S. Eriksson, Vermont, 1995.

Journal articles

Newspaper/web articles


Documentaries and videos
The Diary of Anne Frank, DVD, 20th Century Fox, United States, 1959. Director, George Stevens; script, Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett.
Holocaust, TV, NBC/TV, United States, 1978. Director, Marvin Chomsky; script, Gerald Green.
The Pownbroker, DVD, Republic Entertainment, United States, 1965. Director, Sidney Lumet; script, Morton Find and David Friedkin.
Schindler's List, DVD, Universal Pictures, United States, 1993. Director, Steven Spielberg; script, Stephan Zaillian.

Across
2. German parliament.
3. Area demilitarised.
6. Gave Hitler dictatorial powers. (2 words)
7. Led a right-wing putsch.
10. Design school.
12. Divided Germany.
15. Written by Hitler. (2 words)
18. Weimar President.
19. Where Hitler attempted a putsch.
22. Who did the Centre party represent?
24. Assassinated communist leader. (2 words)
25. Leader of the National Peoples Party.
26. Radical socialists.
27. Right wing para-military groups.
28. Chancellor and Foreign Minister.
29. Elected President in 1925.

Down
1. Treaty signed in 1919.
4. Joined by Germany in 1926. (3 words)
5. Forbidden to unite with Germany.
8. Basal on which politicians were elected.
11. Intrigued to bring Hitler to power.
13. AIP ‘Taylor said it ‘put the wind in Hitler’s sails’.
14. Working class party. (2 words)
17. Returned to France. (2 words)
23. Targets of Nazi racism.

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