

from Yosefa Loshitzky (ed.),

Spielberg's Holocaust

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Omer Bartov

IN THE SPRING semester of 1994, during one of the first sessions of my class on the Holocaust, several students asked me whether we would discuss the film *Schindler's List*. Having not yet seen the film myself, I promised to go as soon as possible and then decide whether it was appropriate. My curiosity meanwhile aroused, I inquired how many of my students had seen the movie and quickly established that no less than three-quarters of the hundred or so undergraduates present in the lecture hall had already been to *Schindler's List*, and this just a few weeks after it was first released.

To be sure, students taking a class on the Holocaust are not wholly representative of the general student population, let alone the American public as a whole. And yet, even in this group, only a very small number of students would have watched, or even known about, such films as Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* or Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* had they not been screened as part of the course. Nor was there a consensus among the students which film they preferred when asked to compare Resnais's 1955 masterpiece with Spielberg's recent addition to this small and mostly quite remarkable corpus of cinematic representations of the Holocaust.¹ Indeed, one would be hard put to decide which of these films had made more effective use of the techniques of visual representation as far as these specific young American men and women were concerned, whatever historians, film critics, or intellectuals in general may think.

That *Schindler's List* has been the occasion of a renewed debate over the limits and utility of representing the Holocaust goes without saying. It is of some interest, however, that opinions expressed by American, European, and Israeli scholars and intellectuals about Spielberg's film seem to have been informed not merely by the experience of watching it (which in fact some have adamantly refused to do), but at least as much by a variety of commonly held biases and prejudices about the nature of Hollywood productions in general and the qualifications of Steven Spielberg in particular. Moreover, it is quite apparent that there often exists a gap between pure aesthetic appreciation and a willingness (or unwillingness) to evaluate the film's potential public effect and utility. Indeed, it seems that the popular success of *Schindler's List* makes

it especially suspect in some intellectual circles. Conversely, the argument that the film's ability to attract large audiences is one of its merits is rejected as rooted in a snobbish attitude which assumes that only "we" can understand the higher forms of representation while the multitude has to be fed with the usual humble and simplistic Hollywood fare.

What I would like to discuss here is therefore *both* the merits and the limitations, or even pitfalls and perils, of Spielberg's film. I would like to view it critically but without bias, and to examine it within the social, political, and cultural context in which it was made, viewed, and reviewed. Moreover, I will attempt to examine the alternatives to this admittedly flawed, though nevertheless important cinematic representation of the Holocaust, and to ask whether those options, often mentioned by Spielberg's critics, are themselves free of serious defects. Finally, I will argue that *Schindler's List* has already had, and is likely to continue to have a generally positive impact on both the public perception of and the intellectual and artistic debate about the Holocaust, as well as on future attempts to represent mass murder and genocide.

Several commentators have noted that having gone to see *Schindler's List* with very low expectations, they were "positively surprised" by its cinematic qualities, relative lack of sentimentality, insistence on accuracy of fact and filming on location, the intensity of its narrative, and the power of some specific scenes.² Indeed, one may say that within the constraints of a Hollywood production (which were responsible for such a priori low expectations in the first place), Spielberg has managed to strike a fine balance between relatively popular appeal and relatively high artistic quality. This achievement, which to some extent qualifies previous views on the limits of representing the Holocaust, has caused a degree of consternation, even anger and frustration, among at least some scholars, artists, and intellectuals.³

One of the most important (and problematic) aspects of *Schindler's List* is that by choosing Oskar Schindler's story as the focus of his representation of the Holocaust, Spielberg implies that even in the heart of darkness, even within sight of the death camps, the option of hampering the Nazi murder machine never wholly disappeared. This is not to say that the victims could or should have done more to save themselves, an argument rooted mainly in the guilt feelings of survivors or potential victims who were lucky enough to be spared the genocide thanks to geographical or chronological distance from the event. Rather, the film rightly stresses that at any given point during the Holocaust, both bystanders and perpetrators were always faced with the choice to collaborate in, passively observe, or actively resist mass murder, and that resistance could come in a variety of ways and could be meaningful, even if it meant saving only a handful of victims. Hence the film qualifies the impres-

sion created by numerous historical, literary, and cinematic accounts of the Holocaust as an inherently inevitable, fateful, unstoppable event, one over which human agency had no control, except for its dubious capacity for bringing it to an apocalyptic end.

By choosing Schindler, Spielberg can therefore show that a single individual, even under the most adverse circumstances, could and did save lives. Consequently, we are left with the painful question, why were there so few Schindlers, why was his case so extraordinary? At the same time, however, the very fact that this *was* such a unique case is also one of the main problems of the film, as I shall argue below.

What makes the choice of Schindler so crucial is not only that he saved Jews but just as much the fact that he had none of the qualities normally associated with those "righteous Gentiles" celebrated by the State of Israel after the event. Schindler, after all, was a rather common and generally unsuccessful crook before he found (or installed) himself in the heart of the Final Solution. Hence he is, in a very real sense, a true Brechtian character, a crook who sets himself against a state of much worse (but officially quite "legal") criminals, a man who wishes to profit from evil but also enjoys undermining it, a potentially mediocre character who, thanks precisely to his far from respectable qualities, can become a saint in this world turned upside down. To be sure, as Schindler admits in the film, the best thing that ever happened to him was the war and, by extension, the Holocaust. But as the plot develops, Schindler's financial profits are put to moral use as he applies his newly won riches to save the people who enabled him to win them. Finally impoverished, Schindler's real profit is the innocent lives he has saved.

The crucial consequence of this juxtaposition between the crook and the criminal context in which he operates is our realization that its mirror image is the "decent" man who becomes a criminal under the same circumstances. By leading the viewers to this conclusion, without stating it outright, *Schindler's List* subtly (indeed, perhaps quite unintentionally) undermines the Hollywood convention of a cinematic world neatly divided between good and evil. Nevertheless, the film succeeds in remaining within the fold of the genre by simultaneously drawing much of its pathos from the traditional image of the tough, rough, undisciplined, and yet ultimately moral and supremely courageous hero of the classic American Western. Hence Schindler, through Spielberg, manages somehow to straddle these two modes, that of the cynical, pessimistic, corrupt, wholly un-American hero whose moral qualities can only shine in the midst of evil, and the simple, straightforward, completely incorruptible, truly American hero, who is, however, similarly motivated to action only when faced with truly bad guys (as for instance in the film *High Noon*). Schindler can exist on the Hollywood screen only because of his Gary Cooper/John Wayne

facade; but he unmasks himself often enough to maintain his Brechtian characteristics and to persuade us that his is not a world of cowboys and Indians. Only at the end of the movie does Spielberg commit the error of painting a totally new face on Schindler, thus leaving him, and the movie, devoid of any credible identity and consequently on the verge of complete disintegration.

Spielberg therefore manages to complicate the popularly accepted tale of the Holocaust as consisting of victims, perpetrators, and (now especially thanks to Lanzmann, somewhat complicit) bystanders. Schindler belongs to none of these categories, yet potentially he could belong to any one of them. Initially he is a mere bystander hoping to profit from other people's misfortune; later he can choose to join the perpetrators; and, since he elects to help the victims, he stands a good chance of becoming one himself, if caught. Because Schindler chooses to act, and because by making this choice he assumes a new identity, he belies the assertion that his (bystander) world denied one the freedom of choice and the choice of identity.

Spielberg retains admirable control over his film for much (but not all) of the time, no mean achievement considering the character of the material and the conventions of the genre, successfully avoiding the kitsch and sentimentality which have plagued so many previous films on the Holocaust. His decision to make it in black-and-white is also highly effective. If it was motivated by his desire to provide the film with a documentary character, this combination of pseudo-newsreel qualities with on-location shots and historical characters played by gifted actors manages to populate a (fictive) segment of the Holocaust with living human beings and thereby to create greater empathy with the protagonists than any "real" documentary. Conversely, by refusing to shirk confrontation with the popularized and generally misunderstood cliché of the banality of evil, that is, by stressing the sheer brutality and sadism of the Holocaust as it was experienced by the victims, Spielberg has filmed some of the most haunting moments in any cinematic representation of the Holocaust. Yet when all is said and done, *Schindler's List* shares many of the failings of numerous other representations of the genocide of the Jews, be they works of fiction, scholarship, or film. The conventional difficulties of representing any historical event, the inevitable process of selection and elimination, generalization and simplification, become all the more pressing when dealing with such a traumatic and unprecedented event as the Holocaust. It is the danger of hasty generalizations, pernicious simplifications, and distortions open to abuse that must be examined here as part of our evaluation of *Schindler's List*.

Since it is a Hollywood production, *Schindler's List* inevitably has a plot and a "happy" end. Unfortunately, the positively repulsive kitsch of the last two

scenes seriously undermines much of the film's previous merits. Up to this point, Spielberg's intuition led him in the right direction, even if it went against the apparent (Hollywood) rules of his trade; and since the ultimate rule of Hollywood is box-office success, Spielberg managed to show that the rules should be changed, not the film. But his desire to end the film with an emotional catharsis and a final humanization of his hero, coupled with his wish to bring the tale to a proper Zionist/ideological closure, once more raises doubts about the compatibility between the director and his chosen subject, as well as between the conventions and constraints of a Hollywood production and the profound rupture of Western civilization which was at the core of the Holocaust.

The point is of course not that Schindler did not break down upon leaving "his" Jews (he did not). The point is that by this banal humanization of Schindler, Spielberg banalizes both the man and the context of his actions. For only the kind of Schindler who precedes this scene, that do-gooder crook who gets a kick from helping Jews and fooling Nazis, that anarchist underworld character with a swastika badge who never ceases to enjoy his cognac and cigars even under the shadow of Auschwitz, that trickster who befriends one of the most sadistic of all concentration camp commanders, that incompetent failure of prewar and postwar normality who thoroughly relishes the mad universe of the SS where he is king, only that man could have saved the Jews in quite that manner. And this kind of man could not, and did not, break down. Nor was the world in which he operated an appropriate stage for sentimental scenes. Schindler's Jews did forge him a ring, and they remained grateful to him for the rest of their lives. But they did not need or expect him to weep. Tears have no place in this tale, whether "authentic" or not.

Nor does the Zionist closure, ironically accompanied by the tune of "Jerusalem of Gold," which came to symbolize first the euphoria of the Israeli victory of 1967 and then the bitter fruits of conquest, occupation, and repression of others by the young Jewish state. Looking at the joyous survivors striding down the green hill to the Promised Land, one cannot help thinking of Primo Levi's melancholy account of his own liberation in *The Reawakening*.⁴ No less ironic is the fact that the only country in which the screened version of the film contained a different tune was Israel, obviously out of regard for the sensibilities of an audience which might not have approved of such a crass and yet disconcertingly ambiguous connection between the destruction of the Diaspora and the triumph of the Israeli Defense Forces. Thus the land of (by now somewhat disillusioned) Zionists was spared the Zionist punchline of the film which the rest of the world (excepting some Jewish viewers) could not appreciate in any case.⁵ And meanwhile Hollywood proved once more that it could practice the technique of collage just as well as any modernist or post-

modernist studio, cutting and pasting its films to suit public taste, box-office returns, political requirements, moral dictates, and the biases of its directors and producers.

Even more seriously, and similarly related to the film's box-office success, is the fact that precisely because *Schindler's List* has been watched by large numbers of people who had very little previous knowledge of the Holocaust, and cannot be expected to gain much more knowledge in the future, this specific version of the event may remain the only source of information about it for many of its viewers. Moreover, since the film is based on an "authentic" story, its authority as a true reconstruction of the past "as it really happened" is especially great. Thus, a relatively minor, and quite extraordinary case, has been transformed into a representative segment of the "story" as a whole, obliterating, or at least neglecting the fact that in the "real" Holocaust, most of the Jews died, most of the Germans collaborated with the perpetrators or remained passive bystanders, most of the victims sent to the showers were gassed, and most of the survivors did not walk across green meadows to Palestine, but either came to the Promised Land because they had nowhere else to go, remained in Europe, or settled down in other parts of the world.

Consequently, by concentrating on a particular, unique tale, whose power lies in its label of "authenticity," and considering the ignorance of many viewers regarding the historical context in which this tale took place, the film actually distorts the "reality" of the Holocaust, or at least leaves out too many other "realities," and especially that most common and typical reality of all, namely mass, industrial killing. Instead, the film caters to a certain kind of general post-Holocaust sensibility, as well as to a series of specific national and ideological biases.

In our post-Holocaust world two major requirements can be detected in public taste for representations of the past. First is the demand for a "human" story of will and determination, decency and courage, and final triumph over the forces of evil. Second is the quest for authenticity, for a story which "actually" happened, though retold according to accepted conventions of representation. Now, there is obviously a contradiction between these two demands, since authentic stories rarely happen according to conventional representations and even less frequently culminate in the triumph of good over evil. In any case, this can certainly not be said about the Holocaust where, as far as the vast majority of the victims were concerned, evil did indeed triumph. It is precisely due to this "unconventional" character of the Holocaust that Spielberg's movie is both such a success and such a distortion of the event it pretends to represent. Schindler's story manages to be both authentic and conventional precisely because, within the context of the Holocaust, it was so unique as to be untrue in the sense of not reflecting (or even negating) the fate

of the vast majority of victims who were in turn swallowed up in a unique and unprecedented, and therefore (at least as far as Hollywood conventions are concerned) unrepresentable murder machine. Spielberg therefore tells an "authentic" story that (almost) never happened. But the contemporary yearning for authenticity, rooted, no doubt, in a profound sense of distrust in and incomprehension of the present reality, along with the desire for heroic plots and comforting closures, similarly related to the scarcity of such plots in the "real" world, brings crowds to the theaters and bags of money to the film industry.

Spielberg's is an evil we can live with, made in Hollywood, one that can be defeated by skill and perseverance, willpower and determination. This is troubling because so many of the millions who perished had no less will, no fewer skills, were in no way inferior to the survivors, and yet they drowned. The idea of salvation through personal gifts has no place in the Holocaust; it is just as pernicious as its opposite, namely, that the worst survived while the best perished. It was these thoughts which haunted Primo Levi as he wrote his last, heartbreaking collection of essays.⁶ But such troubling ruminations are given no expression in the film since they might confuse its moral agenda and undermine its symmetry, casting doubt on the authenticity of Schindler's case as representative of anything but itself and opening the way for the horrifying distortion of humanity which was perhaps the most authentic element of the Holocaust. Indeed, placing the drowned at the center of this tale would not only have made the genocide itself unbearable to contemplate, but would also have profoundly shaken our own belief in the viability of civilized human existence after Auschwitz, since just as mass industrial murder was not created ex nihilo by the Nazis, this distortion of humanity has doubtlessly been carried over well beyond 1945. It is this that Primo Levi understood with ever greater urgency in the years between writing *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Drowned and the Saved*, just as Paul Celan understood it between writing "Death Fugue" and "The Straitening" (*Engführung*), and Jean Améry already knew when he wrote *At the Mind's Limits*: the very stories told by the saved distort the past, not because they are not authentic (leaving aside the question of personal memory), but because, by definition, they exclude the stories of the drowned, who were the majority, and drowned not because they did not want to be saved but due to a combination of circumstances in which individual will and skills rarely played an important role and chance was paramount.⁷

Schindler's List also manages to comfort several particular sensibilities without, miraculously, causing too much offense to anyone else. For Germans (as the cover of the popular *Der Spiegel* magazine had it, reflecting much wider public sentiments), Schindler (the cinematic character, not the man) was the "good German," presumably both because of his actions and because he

thereby demonstrated that not all Germans were complicit in the killing (at least not in the movies). For Zionists (but not necessarily for Israeli film critics), the film's final Zionist twist brings the whole disturbing notion of the Jews "being led like sheep to the slaughter" to a worthy conclusion, giving (retrospective) sense and meaning to an event which for its victims had neither. (Many Israelis, it seems, while saying that they did not need another film on the Holocaust, were nevertheless flattered by the fact that Hollywood had found the genocide of the Jews important enough to make it the subject of a film directed by none other than Steven Spielberg of *E.T.* fame.) For the general, well-meaning Christian/humanitarian audience, the story had all the heart-warming aspect of the Good Samaritan, the promise of human decency arising even from the darkest souls and the greatest depths of evil (thereby qualifying, even humanizing evil itself, cutting it down to a manageable size). Hence, in a sense, everything the Holocaust actually destroyed, both material and spiritual, is reestablished (on the screen) by Spielberg, with the same wave of a magic wand we have learned to expect from his earlier films. By claiming to provide us with an authentic picture, therefore, the screen does in fact what it has always done best (and recently especially at the hands of Spielberg): it creates a dream world of glimmering images that hovers momentarily over the debris of reality and then remains in our minds as a comforting tranquilizer. We do not feel the pain, ergo, the pain is no longer there.

Mass-oriented films invariably suffer from an inability to remain consistent with the more important themes they may raise. As we have seen, *Schindler's List* cannot sustain the Mephistophelean character of the main protagonist to the end. Hollywood has certainly been known to conjure up cinematic worlds of intense evil, where the few remaining old-world crooks are transformed by contrast into angels. This is, after all, a central trope of the horror film and of one variant of science fiction. But such worlds must by definition remain temporary cinematic fantasies lest they cease to entertain and consequently repel rather than attract audiences. Their success relies precisely on the assumption that they are totally different from the reality beyond the theater walls. Hence the relief felt by audiences when they return to the street, the expectation of which is at the very root of enjoying the fantasy indoors. But, of course, Nazism was no fantasy; there was no "outdoors." Nor did the inverted world it had created simply go up in smoke in 1945, either for the survivors, or for the perpetrators, or for human civilization as a whole, which has never healed since this horrific surge of modern barbarism. But all this, of course, has no room in a Hollywood production.

Another important trope of Hollywood films is the enhancement of the hero's image by a diminution of all other characters, apart, of course, from the villain he confronts. Hence, in this film we find ourselves in the curious posi-

tion of watching Schindler (crook turned saint) and Goeth (the embodiment of evil) towering both physically (as tall, handsome Aryans) and personally (as clearly etched, strong characters) over a mass of physically small, emotionally confused, frantic, almost featureless Jews. The potential victims thereby serve largely as a mere background to the heroic, epic struggle between the good guy and the bad guy, cast in true Hollywood fashion and disturbingly, though unintentionally, evoking the kind of stereotypes Nazism had thrived on.

Stereotypical representations of characters, and especially of Jews, in *Schindler's List*, go beyond their portrayal as small, helpless, passive victims, waiting to be either murdered by one Aryan giant or saved by another. For reasons which I cannot quite fathom, in several scenes Jews appear terrifyingly similar to their images in Nazi propaganda, haggling over loss and profit while their brethren are being tormented and starved, selling their wares during mass in a Catholic church, vacating huge apartments, hiding diamonds and gold in their bread. How badly they come off when compared with Schindler's initially detached, cynical posture, transformed in front of our eyes into a courageous, noble stance.

Similarly disturbing is the film's portrayal and exploitation of women, where it seems that Spielberg, possibly unconsciously, catered to Hollywood's tradition of providing sexual distraction to the viewers. Most troubling of all, of course, is the shower scene, since that mass of attractive, frightened, naked women, finally relieved from their anxiety by jets of water rather than gas, would be more appropriate to a soft-porn sadomasochistic film than to its context (and here Spielberg comes dangerously close to such films as Cavani's *The Night Porter* and Wertmuller's *Seven Beauties*). The fact that this "actually" happened is, of course, wholly beside the point, since in most cases it did not, and even when it did, the only eyes which might have derived any sexual pleasure from watching such scenes belonged to the SS. Hence, by including this scene, Spielberg makes the viewers complicit with the SS, both in sharing their voyeurism and in blocking out the reality of the gas chambers.

The "graphic" violence in Spielberg's film also raises some problematic issues. As reported in several newspapers in January 1994, the field trip of sixty-nine Castlemont High School students from Oakland to a showing of *Schindler's List* ended with those teenagers being asked to leave the theater after they had disrupted the screening by reacting to some of the most violent scenes in a manner reminiscent of audience participation in Rambo-style films. This small scandal in northern California, which involved relations between inner-city African American and Latino youths and the Jewish community, and had teachers, Jewish leaders, and Holocaust survivors scrambling to the school in an effort to transform an embarrassing incident into an educational occasion, revealed nonetheless some of the inherent problems of a "re-

alistic," "authentic" portrayal of Nazi brutality and sadism. Goeth's random shooting of helpless inmates, and the hyper-realistic portrayal of victims being hit by his bullets, does indeed follow tropes and techniques employed in the countless police and war films set loose on the market for the alleged purpose of entertainment. No youth in present day America can take seriously the "graphic" depiction of death and violence in film, since it is part of a vast entertainment industry. On the other hand, so many youths in the United States are constantly exposed to actual violence on the streets that they cannot be expected to be moved by what they know is mere pyrotechnics. The connection between the reality of violence and its cinematic representation is possibly one of the most troubling aspects of contemporary American culture. While people shot in reality are said to die "just like in the movies," shootings in the movies both entertain and furnish examples for actual acts of violence on the street. Hence Spielberg's attempt to provide "graphic" evidence of the sadism of a Nazi concentration camp commander is qualified by the successful dissemination of images of violence by the film industry and is thereby "normalized" as part of a genre to which, of course, it ought not to belong (though in a paradoxical, perverse way it nevertheless does). The students who laughed because the Jewish woman shot by Goeth died in an insufficiently authentic manner were therefore comparing that scene both to other films where, presumably, people die more "authentically," and to their own very real experiences. As one of them said: "My man got busted in the head just like that last year."⁸

In a related sense, *Schindler's List* suffers from the difficulties that any film, not only Hollywood productions, confronts when attempting to recreate reality in a convincing, "authentic" manner. Though shot on location in black-and-white, and with an eye to fine details, the film cannot recreate an inhuman reality. We cannot blame it for not showing people actually being gassed, but only for showing them *not* being gassed; we cannot blame it for not showing the emaciated bodies of concentration camp inmates, but only for showing us the attractive, healthy naked bodies of young actresses whose shorn hair strangely resembles current fashions. It is precisely because of the inability of cinematic representation authentically to recreate a distorted reality that the claim of authenticity, and the sense of the viewers that they are seeing things as they "actually were," is so troubling. Possibly, the best way out of this dilemma is to condemn any representation of the Holocaust which attempts directly to confront what the Nazis called "the asshole of the world," where the actual process of dehumanization and murder was practiced on a daily basis. Thus one might argue that Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1965) dealt much more profoundly and sensitively with the question of trauma and memory among survivors than *Schindler's List*, or that Lanzmann's *Shoah* has shown the way to

avoid the inevitable distortion and kitsch of conventional films dependent on plots and actors, sets and scripts. But if we believe that it is necessary to make cinematic representations of the thing itself, to show not only the forest grown over the death camp but also the death camp in operation, to record not only the survivors' memories but also the circumstances they remember, then we must accept the limitations of the genre and (some of) the price which may have to be paid. We cannot have it both ways. Indeed, as I will argue below, 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.

It is therefore just as important to sketch out the parameters of the debate over *Schindler's List* as to discuss the film itself. Can fiction films be made on the Holocaust? Are documentaries a good alternative? Is memory, rather than either historical fact or fiction, the most immediate, sincere, and authentic element in Holocaust reconstruction? And if so, how can memory be represented in film, and at what price? Finally, how do the various cinematic options of representation relate to other media and means of representing the Holocaust, such as prose fiction, poetry, historical scholarship, memoirs and personal accounts, as well as visual displays in exhibitions and museums?

Assuming that we allow for the possibility of "authentic" fiction films on the Holocaust, one example which immediately comes to mind apart from *Schindler's List* is Holland's *Europa, Europa* (1991). Similarly based on a true story, and sharing the very same quality of being both "authentic" and at the same time too extraordinary to be true as representative of the fate of most Jews in the Holocaust, Holland's film was also relatively popular and owed its success to an adventurelike, fantastic, intense plot and the constant tension it creates between the unbelievable events it tells and the knowledge that at least as far as the protagonist was concerned they did indeed take place (more or less). In comparing the two films, however, it would seem that by and large *Schindler's List*, despite its damning Hollywood label and children's adventure movies director, manages to cope much better with the dilemmas of such cinematic fiction than the European-produced *Europa, Europa*, not only because it contains less kitsch and is more controlled in tone and content, but also because it dares to come much closer to the actual heart of the Nazi genocidal enterprise. Thus *Schindler's List* is less concerned with the incredible fate of a single individual and more (if insufficiently) concerned with that of the multitude of victims and the circumstances of their murder (or salvation). *Schindler's* Jews are doubtlessly exceptional, but they are far less exceptional than the Jewish lad who survives the Nazi onslaught, escapes from a Soviet training school, serves in a Wehrmacht unit on the Eastern Front, is educated in a Hitler Youth insti-

tution, and participates in the bloody Battle of Berlin, remaining both physically and mentally unscathed throughout his ordeal. Moreover, even more than is the case in Spielberg's film, *Europa, Europa* fully exploits the elements of this twentieth-century drama to create a heroic tale of ingenuity, imagination, courage and cunning, qualities which seem to distinguish this resourceful youth from his less gifted six million brethren. In this sense, too, we must therefore conclude that Spielberg's film is by far the less false and more honest rendering of individual fate in the Holocaust of these two "authentic" tales.

Because no cinematic representation of the Holocaust is likely totally to overcome the problem of audience familiarity with graphic violence in popular films, with the consequent diminution of the impact of Holocaust films employing the same techniques as *Dirty Harry* and *Full Metal Jacket*, we may either have to relinquish any attempt to represent the brutality of the Holocaust (say, by focusing on its bureaucratic aspects, as in the film *The Wannsee Conference*), or to search for ways to stress the truly unique element of the Holocaust, namely, the industrial killing of millions in the gas chambers. Indeed, the fact that those who wish to relativize (or deny) the Holocaust altogether attack precisely this aspect of the genocide of the Jews is only one more proof of its centrality in any representation of the event.

All this means, however, that there exists an inherent tension between exposure to the sheer brutality of the event and its trivialization, between complete ignorance of its course and scope and the dangers of partial or distorted knowledge, between a total distancing which breeds indifference and false objectivity, and a false familiarity which breeds an erroneous sense of understanding, between the abhorrence evoked by human degradation and suffering, and a perverse, pornographic curiosity about the limits of human depravity (as manifested, for instance, in Pasolini's *Salò*).

Can these tensions be overcome by perfecting a wholly different genre? Can documentaries, for instance, be used more effectively and truthfully than "authentic" fiction? In evaluating documentary films it must first of all be stressed that their quality depends both on the nature of the documentary material and on such factors as the selection, editing, and presentation of this material, as well as on the commentary which accompanies it, all elements which are extraneous to the document itself. Keeping these points in mind, we would have to admit that even Alain Resnais's justly celebrated *Night and Fog*, in spite of its many merits, suffers from numerous problems associated directly with the circumstances of its making (*not* its documentary material). The most glaring difficulty with this film is, of course, the complete absence of any mention of Jews as the main victims of the Nazi death camps. And, while Resnais's reasons for this lacuna may well have had to do with public sentiment in post-war France and his desire to make viewers understand the enormity of the

Holocaust without blocking it out by seeing it as an event which concerned only other, non-French human beings, this decision by the director (not at all related to the character of the documentary material he employed) does introduce a major distortion of the historical record in a film which is still categorized as a documentary and therefore an "authentic" representation of the past, a cinematic presentation of "objective" evidence. This distortion is also partly responsible for the lack of distinction in the film between concentration camps, forced labor camps, and death camps, since in reality it was their so-called biological identity which determined the inmates' location within the Nazi "concentrationary universe." Indeed, we might even say that Resnais's masterpiece, by presenting the Holocaust as a universal problem which ought to disturb each and every member of the human race, also makes it into an amorphous, almost ahistorical event, where neither perpetrators nor victims are clearly defined, where responsibility is so widely dispersed as to lose all significance, and where a looming sense of anxiety in the face of universal evil is not articulated into any specific call for practical action.

A major peril of documentaries is that they create an even greater illusion of portraying the past "as it really was" than such "authentic" fiction films as *Schindler's List* and *Europa, Europa*. Indeed, in the numerous discussions on *Schindler's List* and its historical veracity, it has often been implied that documentaries would be a much better way to learn about the past, especially *that* past. Yet the case of 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. Films shot by Nazi film crews were clearly intended to present the victims of the regime as precisely the kind of subhumans German propaganda claimed them to be, so as to confirm the arguments of the Nazi leadership, as well as to create horror, disgust, fear, or detachment, but certainly not empathy in the German viewer. Similarly, amateur films also reflect the prejudices, morbid curiosity, or detachment from the victims characteristic of German personnel in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and generally contain the same subtext as the official film material, namely, that since the victims have an unmistakably subhuman appearance, they doubtlessly deserve to be treated as such.⁹

Films made by the liberators inevitably represent the victims as horribly emaciated, only quasi-human creatures, and if they express sympathy for the human debris of Nazi racial policies, they do not arouse empathy. Rather, in accordance with the general propagandistic line of the Allies, the main aim of these films is to create hatred of the enemy and thereby to legitimize the war and motivate their soldiers at the front and the civilians in the rear. Conse-

quently, when evaluating documentary films, we must bear in mind that both the selection of the material and, even more insidiously, the documentary film material itself, can often be just as biased as the "authentic" fiction; indeed, that in many cases, since it had been produced in the service of various propagandistic, ideological, and political ends, contemporary film material may be more biased, as well as more dangerous, precisely because it masquerades as an "objective" depiction of "reality." However much we may try to purge the documentary material from its polluting context, it will always retain some of the qualities which made it useful for those who initially produced it. Hence documentary films on the Holocaust are in constant peril of having a hidden subtext, perhaps unbeknown even to their makers, which may have a wholly contrary effect on the viewers from that hoped for and expected by those who produced them. Indeed, the detachment, revulsion, even anger, felt by modern viewers of documentaries employing Nazi cinematic representations of the victims may reflect much more the intention of the original German filmmakers than that of contemporary directors who inserted these film clips in their own movies.

We may therefore have to concede that documentaries on the Holocaust can be pernicious both because of their claim to veracity (based on the "original" film material they use) and our lesser ability to protect ourselves from that claim than when watching "authentic" fiction films, and because they dehumanize the victims (thanks to the nature of that "original" film material) and hamper our ability to empathize with them. Consequently, documentaries may have the adverse effect of desensitizing, even brutalizing the viewers and making them emotionally complicit in the crime by causing them to see the victims through the lenses of the perpetrators.¹⁰ What then might be a better alternative? Can we turn to the memory of the Holocaust, rather than its "authentic" fictions or polluted documents?

Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, likely to remain the most important film made on the memory of the Holocaust, resists the kind of narrative deemed central to any Hollywood production, and scrupulously avoids using any documentary material from the period. Yet in spite of its remarkable qualities, *Shoah* suffers from some serious handicaps which are at least in part inherent to the genre. As Lanzmann himself has written, in making a film on the Holocaust one can either invent a new genre—which he believes he has done—or reconstruct, which to his mind is what Spielberg did. Reconstruction for him is akin to inventing archival documentation, whereas he would have refused to use even real documents (which he erroneously claims do not exist in any case). According to Lanzmann, Spielberg made a cartoon version of the Holocaust, filling in the blanks intentionally left empty in *Shoah*, whereas his own film is dry and pure, avoiding personal stories, and concerned not with survival but

with destruction. His aim in making *Shoah*, says Lanzmann, was to create a structure, a mold, which could serve as a generalization of the (Jewish) people, that is, would encompass the destruction of the people as a whole. Spielberg, on the other hand, uses the destruction as a background for the heroic story of Schindler and fails to confront the blazing sun of the Holocaust. Hence, says Lanzmann, Spielberg's film is a melodrama, a work of kitsch. Implied in this analysis is not only that *Schindler's List* is the exact opposite of *Shoah*, but also that Lanzmann's film is the only possible cinematic rendering of the Holocaust.¹¹

Yet Lanzmann's is a flawed masterpiece. As he notes in the above-cited interview, whereas the many viewers of *Schindler's List* known to have wept during the film obviously sought the release of catharsis which leads to pleasure, some who had refused to view *Shoah* might have been motivated by the inability to cry (that is, to "enjoy" the film) while watching it. In fact, of course, while *Schindler's List* has elicited all kinds of reactions, including laughter and derision, I have known many people who wept in *Shoah*, including myself. The point here is, however, that far fewer people have actually seen *Shoah*, both because it is emotionally horribly draining and because of its sheer length. I would assume that more people saw *Schindler's List* in the first month of screening than have watched *Shoah* since it was first released.

This is not, as such, a criticism of *Shoah*, but it does mean that the film's impact on the public was much more limited. Nor is *Shoah* as "dry and pure" as Lanzmann would like us to believe. For although it may not tell personal stories, *Shoah* is highly biased, and its biases are intensely personal, stemming directly from its maker's own national and ideological prejudices and finding expression in his style of interviewing, his editing technique, and the content of his comments. Lanzmann himself has admitted that he had eliminated numerous witnesses because they were too weak. In fact, it seems that he sought witnesses who were both strong enough to testify at some length and coherence, and weak enough to finally break down in front of the camera under the incessant pressure of his questions, thereby providing his viewers with that emotional release and personal touch he derides in Spielberg's film. Lanzmann is indeed a brutal interviewer, and though his technique is very effective and has made possible the production of an extraordinary film, it is also highly disturbing. For Lanzmann seems so obsessed with *Shoah* (both the film and the historical event), that the actual survivors serve him only as "documents," as living records, verbalized memories, not as human beings—hence the almost uncanny lack of empathy in a man who devoted much of his life to making a film on the memory of the destruction, and the mutilated lives of the saved, the last carriers of that memory.

Nor can we say that Lanzmann is seeking the "truth" of the Holocaust;

for his obsession with the complicity of the Polish population in the genocide (as well as its swift takeover of abandoned Jewish property and its amazing ability to erase the Jews from its memory) is matched by his relative lack of concern with the Germans and his almost total lack of interest in his own compatriots (in stark contrast to that other masterpiece of French documentary cinema, Ophüls's *The Sorrow and the Pity* [1969]). And because Lanzmann is very much concerned with memory, this last omission is especially striking in view of the role which the memory of Vichy (and its repression) has recently been shown to have played in postwar France.¹²

Finally, the main objection to Lanzmann's film must stem from his own apparent belief that his is the only possible film on the Holocaust. For whether we accept this statement or not (and it is difficult to see it as more than rhetorical), what is true is that only one *such* film can be made. *Shoah*, the film, is unique, for better or for worse. And if we believe that one must make more films on the Holocaust, then they will perforce have to be different, even if they do not reach the rank of masterpiece which Lanzmann's work, in spite of all the qualifications, richly deserves.¹³

One alternative to Lanzmann's enterprise which nevertheless shares some common features with it is the project of recording survivors' testimonies on videotape and depositing them in several video archives in the United States and Israel. These interviews lack the more overtly brutal aspects of Lanzmann's questioning (which tend to compromise the humanistic urge of his film), and are an even "purer" form of memory reconstruction in that they are not accessible to wide audiences. Indeed, these collections are an immensely important source for understanding both the reality and the memory of the Holocaust, as can be seen in a recent study by Lawrence Langer.¹⁴ But in another sense, this is no alternative at all, since while we can say that *Shoah* was watched by relatively limited audiences, these videotaped interviews can only be perceived as oral documents to be used by scholars rather than as the kind of representations which would have any direct impact on the general public.

This brings me to alternative depictions of the Holocaust in other media or forms of representation.¹⁵ By and large, it seems, the available modes of representation can be evaluated according to the same parameters I have employed regarding film, namely, fiction, documentary, and memory, to which we can add plastic visual display. Thus, novels, including such fictionalizations of authentic stories as Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List*,¹⁶ as well as to some extent poetry, fall into the category of fiction; historical scholarship and related disciplines dealing with the Holocaust (sociology, psychology, literary criticism, political science, and so forth), can be grouped under the category of documentary; memoirs and personal accounts belong to the genre of memory;

and museums provide a combination of public display of documents and the organization (as well as the creation, recreation, or fictionalization) of memory.

In the present context I lack the space to discuss the specific merits and problems of each of these genres. Suffice it to say that all of them seem to display many of the same characteristics as the different types of cinematic representation, both in the way they are perceived by the public and as far as their own inherent qualities are concerned. Thus we find a tendency to privilege memoirs or personal accounts over fiction, and scholarship over museums. Moreover, this ranking exhibits the same tensions we have seen above between limited exposure and distortion, imposed both by the nature of the medium and by the greater scope for bias and prejudice in the more popular genres.

Even more crucially, claims for "authenticity" or "realism" are in fact just as problematic in evaluating the relative importance of these genres as in the case of cinematic representation. Museums, which purport to present a dispassionate array of "authentic" artifacts, actually impose a more or less coherent and didactic narrative on their displays by means of their organization, selection, captions, and so forth. Yet the claim of displaying "real" objects often hampers museum visitors from uncovering the subtext that actually orders such plastic reconstructions of the past.¹⁷ Survivors' memoirs too, quite apart from questions of authenticity, are not always free from melodrama and manipulation of emotions, as Naomi Diamant has shown, both the melodramatic mode and the plain style can be employed in "remembering" the same event.¹⁸ Nor is historical scholarship to be seen (as it sometimes is, for instance, by film critics) as immune to prejudice and bias, quite apart from the built-in limitations of every historical text which impose on it a process of selection, evaluation, directions of inquiry, allegiances to subdisciplines, as well as personal interest and style. This does not mean that all historical writing would be wholly unreliable and suspect, but it does mean that some texts may contain a highly distorted or partial representation of the past while nevertheless adhering to the form of established scholarly practice. In this case too, the authority of the historian may play a role in popularizing distorted reconstructions of the past presented as true tales of events "as they really happened," often through exposure to the media of even more simplistic versions of the historian's original work. Hence the lay public is most likely to be exposed to those historical interpretations least likely to offer a reliable representation of the past, yet would be prone to take precisely such stories at face value because they would be presented as the culmination of scholarly research. For while contemporary historians are increasingly aware of the tenuous nature of their claims for objectivity, much of the public still maintains considerable faith in them as judges and interpreters of the truth, at least as far as the past is concerned.

By recognizing the limitations of historical scholarship (both as a source of objective truth and as a means for public enlightenment) on the one hand, and the general ignorance of the past among much of the lay public (even as regards such a crucial event in modern history as the Holocaust) on the other, it would seem to me that we cannot afford wholly to dismiss a relatively well conceived and produced, though flawed, cinematic representation of the Nazi genocide of the Jews which has managed to reach a far wider public than any other such venture since the television series *Holocaust* (1978). Indeed, the latter, though far inferior to *Schindler's List*, is a good example of the positive effect even mediocre films may have if they appear at the right time and in the right place. The impact of *Holocaust*, especially in Germany, can be said in retrospect to have been by and large salutary, in spite, or perhaps precisely because of the biting criticism of the German intelligentsia and the complaint that Hollywood had stolen Germany's history from the Germans.¹⁹

Moreover, since, on the one hand, we as scholars are rarely in a position to prevent the publication of novels, the making of films, and the establishment of museums concerning the Holocaust of which we may disapprove and since we do have an interest in creating a greater public awareness and knowledge of the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity, on the other, we would do well to try to influence the media by constructive criticism or involvement, rather than by outright dismissal of anything which does not quite meet our rather high standards.

For my own part, of all the Oscars recently awarded, both Spielberg's film and Oskar Schindler the man deserved it most. And as for Oscars, this brings to mind Günter Grass's Oskar Matzerath, the protagonist of *The Tin Drum*, and Volker Schlöndorff's cinematic version of the novel.²⁰ There are indeed some striking, almost bizarre similarities between the two characters. Both thrive only during times of war, terror, and hardship: Schindler makes a fortune and becomes a hero, Matzerath remains an eternally beautiful three-year-old whose appearance and glass-shattering voice protect him from all harm. Both are destroyed by peace and normalcy: Schindler fails in business, loses his fortune, drinks, and lives off "his" Jews, despised by his own countrymen; Matzerath is transformed into an ugly dwarf and ends up in an insane asylum. And yet, with all due respect to the literary genius of Grass and the cinematic gifts of Schlöndorff, I still prefer Oskar Schindler, the man and the film, if only because, when all is said and done, the man did save real people, and the film, in spite of all its faults, made an attempt to represent the evil of the time and the valiant efforts of one man to oppose it. The dwarf, Oskar Matzerath, whether in prose or on the screen, could only destroy. And, since he is only a metaphor, he was never much good at saving people anyway.

Notes

1. For a list, which does, however, include numerous films not dealing directly with the Holocaust, and for a discussion of these films, see Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
2. See, e.g., John Gross, "Hollywood and the Holocaust," *New York Review of Books* 41, no. 3 (February 3, 1994), pp. 14-16. For similar and dissenting views by scholars and intellectuals, see, e.g., Fred Bruning, "Beyond Words," *Newsday* (December 20, 1993), pp. 50-51, 59; Philip Gourevitch, "A Dissent on 'Schindler's List,'" *Commentary* (February 1994), pp. 49-52; Janet Maslin, "Imagining the Holocaust to Remember It," *New York Times* (December 15, 1993), pp. C19 and C23.
3. For scholarly views on the limits of representation, see Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
4. Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*, trans. S. Woolf (New York: Collier Books/Macmillan, 1987 [1963]).
5. Nor would most non-Israelis realize that many of the actors speak English with an Israeli accent, or simply speak modern Hebrew, shedding an ironic light on Spielberg's overt Zionist presentation of Israel as the logical conclusion and best means to avoid a repetition of the Holocaust, since the presence of contemporary Israeli actors in Nazi concentration camps reveals the potential vulnerability of all (even Israelis) to evil. For a sampling of the debate over the change of the melody in the Israeli media, see the weekly *Zeman Tel Aviv*, March 4, 1994. "Jerusalem of Gold" was replaced by "Eli, Eli" (My God, My God), a popular melancholy setting to music of the 1941 poem "To Caesarea" by Hannah Senesh, a Hungarian-born Palestinian volunteer parachuted into Nazi-occupied Hungary and executed by the Germans in 1944. This choice shifted the politics of the film's ending from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Israeli-sponsored "heroic" aspect of the Holocaust, stressing not only resistance to the Nazis but also the reinvented, "normalized" Jews "made in Palestine," as the proper answer to gentile hatred and persecution. This revised ending of the Holocaust appears to have been more acceptable, because less controversial, to the Israeli public. On Senesh, see Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry*, trans. I. Friedman and H. Galai (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 646; Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. H. Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), pp. 87-88, 283-84.
6. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. R. Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books/Simon & Schuster, 1988 [1986]).
7. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. S. Woolf (New York: Collier Books/Macmillan, 1959 [1947]); *Paul Celan: Poems*, selected, introduced, and translated by M. Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1980); Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. S. Rosenfeld and S. P. Rosenfeld (New York: Schocken Books, 1986 [1966]).
8. See Kevin Weston, "Laughing Instead of Crying: Why Oakland Teens Had Disturbing Reactions to 'Schindler's List,'" *San Francisco Examiner* (Sunday, January 30, 1994), p. D2; Sandy Kleffman, "A Bid for Understanding after 'Schindler's List' Flap: Holocaust Survivors Offer to Speak to Castlemont Students," *San Francisco Chronicle / Bay Area and California / East Bay Edition* (Thursday, January 20, 1994), pp. A17, A19. I wish to thank Professor Anton Kaes for informing me of this incident and sending me the relevant material.

9. For some examples of such amateur films, see now the film *Mein Krieg*, directed by Eder and Kufus (1989-90). See also my review of the film in *American Historical Review* 97, no. 4 (October 1992), pp. 1155-57.

10. A good example is the problematic documentary *The Eighty-First Blow* (Israel 1975), directed by Haim Gouri, Jacques Ehrlich, and David Bergmann.

11. Interview with Claude Lanzmann by Daniel Heiman of *Le Monde*, published in a Hebrew translation in the Israeli weekly *Zeman Tel Aviv* (March 3, 1994), pp. 48-50.

12. Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

13. For the text of the film, see Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, English subtitles by A. Whitelaw and W. Byron (New York: Pantheon Books/Random House, 1985).

14. Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

15. See, most recently, James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). See also David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

16. Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's List* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1993 [1982]).

17. See, most recently, James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); idem. (ed.), *Holocaust Memorials: The Art of Memory in History* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1994).

18. Naomi Diamant, "The Rhetoric of Holocaust Memory: The Melodramatic Mode and the Plain Style," unpublished paper delivered at Rutgers University, March 1994; idem., "The Boundaries of Holocaust Literature: The Emergence of a Canon" (Ph.D. diss.: Columbia University, 1992).

19. See especially Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

20. Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, trans. R. Manheim (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978 [1959]); *The Tin Drum*, Volker Schlöndorff (1979).