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2019

Holocaust in Film

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Recommended Citation

Mittelman, Roy, "Holocaust in Film" (2019). *CUNY Academic Works*.
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JWST 12300
The HOLOCAUST in FILM
Spring 2020
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A great Hasidic master, the Rabbi of Kotsk, used to say, "There are truths which can be communicated by the word; there are deeper truths that can be transmitted only by silence; and, on another level, are those which cannot be expressed, not even by silence." And yet, they must be communicated.

Elie Wiesel

Between Silence and Screen: The Holocaust in Film

This course is fraught with some danger: how does one go about making an artistic statement about genocide within a medium usually used to entertain? One frequent quote in the in the post-Auschwitz era maintains that "there can be no poetry after Auschwitz". The precipice is particularly thin: If no attempt is made to tell what happened, if silence is the only adequate response, then the risk of future generations having little or no knowledge becomes real. If one chooses to tell the story, then the trap of trivialization looms large. How tell the story of gas chambers in fifteen minute segments separated by a television ad? One person after seeing Schindler's List suggested "now I know what happened". But film by its nature has limits: it can only be a feeble echo of the original event, diffused through the subjective lenses of the director and viewer.

This is not a course focused in historical method or the genocide of World War II. Rather, it should serve as an intense introduction to the ways, over the last 50 years, that the Holocaust has been approached through film. The initial cinematic attempts at portraying this event were largely from countries at our near the scene of genocide. They will be the films we screen first. In more recent years, especially over the last decade, there has been a shift toward portraying the Holocaust from directors in this country: some refer to this trend as the "Americanization" of the Holocaust.

Not all of the films we will be reviewing are unqualifiedly good. A few have won international acclaim and many Academy Awards, but are still mired in critical

controversy: it will be instructive to form our own understanding of them. The hope is that by the end of this course you will be a more independent, critical interpreter of these films.

I. Introduction: The Problem of Representation

Lecture: Film representations and the Americanization of the Holocaust

II. The Calm Present Confronts the Turbulent Past

Screening: Alain Resnais (France, 1955): *Night and Fog*

Reading: "Representation of the Holocaust in 'The Last Stage'" in Marek Haltof: Screening Auschwitz (2018)

III. Individual Responsibility and Collaboration

Screening: Kadar and Klos (Czechoslovakia, 1965): *The Shop on Main Street*

Reading: "Is History an Old Movie?" in Thomas Elsaesser, European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood (1986)

IV: Assimilation and Imposed Identity

Screening: Vittorio De Sica (Italy, 1970): *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*

Reading: "Bridging History & Cinema: 'Privileged' Jews in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* & Other Holocaust Documentaries" in Adam Brown, Judging Privileged Jews (2013)

V. Childhood Innocence and Adult Injustice

Screening: Louis Malle (France, 1987): *Au Revoir les Enfants*

Reading: "Jews and the Holocaust in Poland's Memoryscapes: An Inquiry into Transcultural Amnesia" in Slawomir Kapralski, The Twentieth Century in European Memory" (2017)

VI. Individual Survival versus Communal Annihilation

Screening: Roman Polanski (United Kingdom, 2002): *The Pianist*

Reading: "Portraying 'Privileged' Jews in Fiction Films: The Potential to Suspend Judgment?" in Adam Brown, Judging Privileged Jews (2013)

Reading: "The Dispute over the Status of a Witness to the Holocaust: Some Observations on How Research into the Destruction of the Polish Jews and into Polish-Jewish Relations during the Years of Nazi Occupation Has Changed since 1989" in Antony Polonsky, New Directions in the History of the Jews in the Polish Lands" (2018)

VII. Humor as “Balm and Buffer”

Screening: Roberto Benigni (Italy, 1997): *Life is Beautiful*

Reading: “Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat: Memory, Home & Hollywood*” in Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (1986)

VIII. The Next Generation: The “Americanization” of the Holocaust

Screening: Steven Spielberg (USA, 1993): *Schindler’s List*

Reading: “Return to Auschwitz: The Making of the Holocaust Classic” in Marek Haltof: *Screening Auschwitz* (2018)

Reading: “In or Out? Identities and Images of Poland among Polish Jews in the Postwar Years” Audrey Kichelewski in Polansky, et.al., editors, *New Directions in the History of the Jews in the Polish Lands* (2018)

Course Projects

1. Beyond the readings we will cover in class, research and write a paper that is critical of Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. The sources you use should not include those that have already been assigned for class discussion. Papers should average between 3-4 pages and include a detailed bibliography of the sources that you have used. Papers will be due no later than the week before we review *Schindler’s List* in class (near the end of the semester).
2. Roberto Benigni’s film *Life is Beautiful* won several Oscars, including Best Film. While many enthusiastically applauded this film, there was a strong and very vocal opposition that intensely disliked it. Choose one position or the other (you don’t have to see the film first before making this decision) and write a 3-4 page outline summarizing the arguments you uncover. Be sure to include a bibliography listing the sources you reference. You should have this outline ready before we view the film in class (in the middle of the semester).
3. For each of the films we cover this semester, write a short two-page “lab report” of your observations and reactions. These reactions should not focus on your likes and dislikes of the film. Instead, you might focus on: How are specific film techniques used to advance the narrative? How are Jews and non-Jews portrayed? What message does the film convey, if any, about the acceptance of and reaction to Fascism among these respective

communities? Of course, any other questions that you want to bring to this discussion may be included.

Attendance and lateness requirements:

Much of the “business” of this class happens in class. It is key that you come to class early enough to be ready to begin on time. We will follow the standard practice at City College: more than four absences will result in a drop from the class. Two latenesses will count as one absence. Plagiarism will result in an automatic class failure – please be careful in your attribution of sources.

Please submit all papers via e-mail as PDF files to rm@bway.net. No late papers accepted.