

Xueling Huang

Constructing Cultural Memories of Trauma
in Popular Holocaust Films

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Memory of the Holocaust in Film

Taken to be the most horrible event in the first half of the 20th century, it urges us to revisit history, provides insight into our present life and influences the way we foresee our future. "For young Jews and Poles or second and third generation Poles in the US and Britain," writes Anna Reading, "the Second World War and the Holocaust was something that was always present in their lives whether overtly spoken about or not" ("Young People's Viewing of Holocaust Films" 215). By marking the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, January 2005 refocused the attention of the world on the Holocaust, encouraging peoples of different cultures and nationalities to advance research on the event. The Holocaust, in that sense, belongs not only to the "then" and the "there," but also to the "now" and the "here."

The Holocaust also raises the question of trauma, which "notably with respect to major historical events [...] has become crucial in modern thought in general and is especially prominent in post-World War II thought" according to LaCapra (LaCapra ix). It impels us to reflect on the role of trauma in the humanities, to seek possible answers of how we should tackle trauma in our lives, independent of whether it occurred in the past or the present, and whether it occurred there or here.

Film has become an important medium through which the Holocaust is represented, narrated and fictionalized in the present. According to Ginsberg, what Finkelstein might call the "Holocaust film industry" has developed from the "highly abstract poetic documentary," (12) such as *Night and Fog* [*Nuit et brouillard*] (Alain Resnais, France, 1954), to Hollywood melodramas, which were soon accompanied by American television interviews about the concentration camp experience. It then passed into "the 'post-realist, retro-style' and high art films of the European auteurs" (12) represented by Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), and was eventually appropriated into a "'New Hollywoodian' aesthetic format, most notably and paradigmatically represented by *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993)" (12). Following a brief introduction to historical films, Marcia Landy notes, "the Holocaust has been one of the most widely used subjects for film and television in the last decades of the twentieth century" (13).

Studies of Holocaust films have proliferated and expanded at the same pace as the films themselves. They touch on heterogeneous themes and aspects, including gender, ethnicity, political implications and narrative styles. However, many of them have demonstrated a preference for high culture over low culture, for modernism over post-modernism, thus re-inscribing "a high-modernist fixation on vision and the visual" (Hansen, "Schindler's List" 77).

Claude Lanzmann, the director of the one of the most important documentaries of the Holocaust, *Shoah*, argues that the Holocaust cannot be fictionalized or directly "pic-

ture." In *Shoah*, he intentionally avoids inserting any footage and concentrates exclusively on oral testimonies of survivors and Germans. His modernist view is exemplified in his excoriation against Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, in which he argues that any fictional representation of the Holocaust could destroy, trivialize and distort the unique nature of the horror. To represent the Holocaust in this manner would eventually become sacrilege. As he writes,

The Holocaust is above all unique in that it erects a ring of fire around itself, a borderline that cannot be crossed because there is a certain ultimate degree of horror that cannot be transmitted. To claim it is possible to do so is to be guilty of the most serious transgression. Fiction is transgression. (14)

Lanzmann's view exemplifies what Ginsberg calls "a converse movement in cultural theory" (12). That movement takes us in a new direction of Holocaust films. It "relies on a general consensus [...] of the proverbial assignation of the Holocaust as beyond intelligibility or cultural representation" (12). Yet despite scholarly criticism of the popular dramatization of the Holocaust, many such films about the Holocaust have been produced since the 1990s and have aroused wide public attention. They have provided new generations with powerful and intimate audiovisual access to the Holocaust. The proliferation of popular Holocaust films has led more and more film critics and Holocaust scholars to reconsider the value of these movies and to recognize their significant role in configuring the past and reshaping the present.

Annette Insdorf, for instance, focuses her research on the internal features of Holocaust films with regard to genre, theme and film narratology, addressing the question of how cinema "illuminates, distorts, confronts, or reduces the Holocaust" (Insdorf xv). Judith Doneson plays an important role in developing the studies of the Holocaust films from cultural and political perspectives. Having discussed a large number of Holocaust films in her book *The Holocaust in American Film*, ranging from less-known examples to widely recognized titles, Doneson argues that those films have helped integrate the Holocaust into the consciousness of American society and have transformed the event into a symbol of modern suffering.

Some scholars have recently criticized the modernist view of fiction films about the Holocaust. Miriam Bratu Hansen, for instance, criticizes that point of view for reducing "the dialectics of the problem of representing the un-representable to a binary opposition of showing or not showing" ("*Schindler's List*" 77). Having carefully analyzed the narrative techniques in *Schindler's List*, he points out that the film employs such complex and creative techniques that it requires careful and detailed treatment instead of general argumentation guarded by the modernist stand. Hansen's attitude towards *Schindler's List* reveals his general attitude towards the Hollywood mode of narrating the Holocaust: despite limitations, the mode deserves serious scholarly attention.

Similarly, Thomas Elsaesser implies the significance of "postmodern" cinematic representation of the Holocaust in his analysis of *Shoah*, *Our Hitler* (1977), *Heimat* (1984) and *Schindler's List*. He points out that films such as *Schindler's List* are also "media events" and they create "subject positions" and assume "speaking positions" that are