



HOLOCAUST AESTHETICS: FOUR FILMS¹

J.P. Piskulich

Mr. Frank Buckles died on February 27, 2011, of natural causes. It was a Sunday in Charles Town, West Virginia and he was 110 years old. He was also the last surviving American veteran of World War I—the last doughboy. As happened so often, he had to lie about his age (16) in order to enlist. Although he spent most of the war as a courier in England, he eventually finagled his way to France. Unhappily, his assignment was not to kill Huns; rather, he was ordered to escort a dentist to Bordeaux. The closest he would ever get to the proverbial whites of their eyes was only after the armistice; his unit was assigned to accompany POWs back to Germany (“The Last Doughboy . . .,” 2011). With his passing we interred at Arlington the last set of American eyes to have looked directly upon what turned out to be neither *the war to end war* nor *the great war* considering its ugly brutality.

Buckles was eager to insert himself because he considered the war “an important event. . . . The world was interested in it. I was interested.” Yet the passage of time, of course, turns bearing witness into burying witness: inexorably, secondary

¹ Author’s note: This essay is part of a larger monograph under development around my summer film course, PS 309: Politics Through Film. The current working title of the larger work is *Classics of Political Film: The Grand Debates on Screen*.

sources are all that remain. The result, according to the Durants, is that “Most history is guessing, and the rest is prejudice” (1968, 12). Barbie Zelizer puts it more delicately: “[H]istorical recording not only accounts for a so-called truth but actively attends to the needs of those doing the accounting” (1997, 19). Even so, in order to gain “the warning reminder of man’s follies and crimes” then man’s inhumanity to man, if inevitable, merits special attention. Yet the means and ends associated with preserving memory, particularly in the case of the Holocaust, are quite controversial.

“If You Could Lick My Heart It Would Poison You”

Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) is a most ambitious effort to create an historical record of the horrors inflicted on the Jews by the Nazis. The title word is Hebrew for “catastrophe” or “calamity,” intentionally distinct from the more common “holocaust” used to refer to persons of all ethnicities who died as part of the larger genocide.

Lanzmann, typically accompanied by an interpreter, interviews 30 people, including those somehow lucky enough to have escaped death and a small handful of Germans who participated in and/or witnessed the other side. The result is 566 minutes of sad and terrible testimony around three of the extermination camps in particular: Chelmno, Treblinka, and Auschwitz. The Warsaw ghetto uprising receives substantial attention in the film’s fourth and final segment.

A core theme that develops is the extent to which the death machinery was improvised and refined over time—there was no blueprint at the start of the war. In fact, the Nazis did not conceptualize the “final solution” until the 1942 Wannsee Conference in Berlin. Early on, “gas vans” (reportedly the size of moving vans) were used: victims were locked in back and the driver would attach an exhaust hose to a hole in the floor. A tank engine was employed to similar effect in the gas chamber at Treblinka. Later, Zyklon crystals were dropped through the

roof at Auschwitz, the ultimate factory for producing death efficiently in great numbers.

Fast forward to the present. Abandoned buildings, the foundations of those long since razed, empty roads into the woods, rusted railroad sidings, fences with barbed wire—all of these images weave in and around the oft-anguished faces of those sitting before the camera. Add wind blowing through trees and the absence of the departed is tangible and haunting.

As if death was not enough, many other cruel indignities accompanied the Shoah. Among the richer Jews arriving from Western Europe, women would attend to their hair and makeup just prior to stepping off their trains and onto the platform where they would be herded on the run to the undressing room. They would sometimes encounter Jewish barbers spared their fate so as to keep them calm prior to being “disinfected.” Like the slaves of the Sonderkommando, the barbers were forced to conclude that a kind word and a soft touch were all they could humanely offer. Afterwards, Jews were responsible for collecting the possessions, removing the bodies, and cleaning the facilities in preparation for the next incoming trainload. The initial plan for the Warsaw ghetto was a healthy labor force. But fear of incubating epidemics, especially typhus, led the Germans to wall it off—paid for by taxing the “residents” it was meant to quarantine. Similarly, lacking the tax required for burial, families were forced to leave loved ones who died in the street. Naked corpses accumulated due to cold Polish winters and a dearth of clothing for the living.

Lanzmann tapes some of his German subjects surreptitiously. A VW microbus parked outside in the street holds electronic equipment and two technicians gather signals via a roof-mounted antenna on a swivel. One subject, Franz Suchomel, a former guard, uses pointer and map to walk us through the layout and mechanics of Treblinka. “Don’t use my name” he says early on, to which the director replies “No, I promised.” The ethical challenge is only momentary given the many ruses employed by the Nazis to facilitate “processing.” Upon arrival, the

aged and sick were sent to the “infirmary” for treatment; there they were “cured with a single pill”—a gunshot to the neck by an SS man at the edge of a pit in which a fire burned continuously. This was also the fate of solitary children who got separated from their families. “People burn very well,” says Suchomel. Lanzmann also faced risks: the family of one German war criminal, upon discovering Lanzmann’s clandestine set-up, destroyed his equipment and put the director in hospital for eight days (Liebman, 2007, 10).

The Red Cross, its symbolism perverted, flew above Treblinka, as well as adorning the gas vans. Benches and hooks were provided for clothes removed in the anteroom to the gas chamber under signs extolling the virtues of proper hygiene. “Cleanliness is health!” “A louse means death!” Although rumors circulated, panic had to be contained lest stampede lead to massacre: clean-up would stop the line from processing the next trainload. Auschwitz was capable of handling 3000 people in two hours; people were reduced to ashes within about three hours from their time of arrival. Even so, all was not as seamless and antiseptic as it sounds. Bodies would spill out of the doors afterwards “like rocks from a truck.” There would be a vacant circle at the place where the crystals fell into the chamber, and instinct led the ablest to claw their way in the dark up the heap where the gas was thinner or toward the doors. Children and the elderly were invariably found at the bottom—crushed, smashed, features unrecognizable. The requirements for keeping the killing machine running are the film’s second major theme.

A third involves collective responsibility, but writ large enough to include the Poles living near the camps or moving into the houses abandoned by the departed. Most of this part of the story unfolds as expected: the locals had good reason to avert their eyes, and boasts about small acts of mercy running against this grain come across as unconvincing reinventions long after the outcome was determined. There are really only two remarkable segments in this storyline. The first is seeing one of the two Chelmno survivors (thirteen at that time, now

an adult) surrounded by smiling townspeople reminiscing in predictable fashion about an epoch that was anything but. The second involves the protestations by Reich underlings that they did not know where the special trains or special passengers would end up; our modern encounters with tall organizations and bureaucratic silos make them almost convincing.

Night and Fog

On the evening of December 7, 1941 (also the day of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor), Hitler signed the infamous *Nacht und Nebel* decree, by which enemies of the state were to be made to disappear into the German *night and fog*. Its intent was global and indiscriminate; not only Jews, but Western Europeans in general were targeted, including the Soviets and the French.

Ten years after the war's end, director Alain Resnais agreed to make an attempt at documenting life in the camps. The result was *Night and Fog* (1955). It is *Shoah*'s opposite in both approach and duration: historical footage lies at its heart (Lanzmann used none), and its length is a mere 31 minutes.

Resnais' method is to juxtapose present day ruins, in color and under sunny skies, with film fragments and stills in black and white which match the title. (Scenes from Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* are used early on to evoke the nascent regime of the 1930s). The visuals are well-known given that much of his material was captured by shocked and horrified Allied troops upon reaching the gates. Those still living are hollow-eyed skeletons wearing a bit of skin. The dead lie in heaps, or in pits, some charred but only just, others bulldozed into mass graves. There are several more unusual horrors on display: corpses literally stacked like cordwood, with logs between, awaiting the pyre; decapitated bodies lying neatly in a row, necks perfectly aligned under a shelf-like device for severing the heads, now a jumble in a wooden barrel nearby; a mountain of women's hair.

We see cloth purportedly made from that hair, soap from

fat, and paper from skin. (Bones, report the narrator, failed as a fertilizer). This reinforces what we learned in *Shoah*: there was no budget line for the final solution, it had to be self-financing. Personal possessions were collected, sorted, and stockpiled in hopes of paying for infrastructure and operations. Regarding the latter, death trains were required to pay border fees in local currency, for example.

The final voiceover delivers the intended homily:

War nods off to sleep, but always keeps one eye open. With our sincere gaze we survey the ruins as if the old monster lay crushed forever beneath the rubble. We pretend to take up hope again as the image recedes into the past, as if we were cured once and for all, of the scourge of the camps. We pretend it all happened only once, at a given time and place. We turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to humanity's never-ending cry.

“Whoever Saves One Life Saves the World Entire”

So states the *Talmud*. This is the affirmation inscribed inside a gold ring bestowed upon Oskar Schindler at the end of *Schindler's List* (1993). The ring has been forged from the gold fillings of a grateful employee. It is five minutes after midnight, five minutes after the German surrender has become official, thus ending the war in Europe. Schindler, a war profiteer, is preparing to flee the criminal charges sure to follow.

This is Hollywood's version of the holocaust, winner of seven Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Director (Stephen Spielberg). Even so, Claude Lanzmann dislikes this film “deeply;” his take is that its sentimentality and uplifting ending bear false witness to the obscenity that was the Shoah (“Maker of ‘Shoah’ . . .,” 2010). His point also fits with Ernest Giglio's (2007) admonition that widespread distribution and popular appeal demand, as in this instance, the addition (or contrivance) of sex, drama, and suspense. To wit, the tall and handsome Schindler (played by actor Liam Neeson) beds sev-

eral beautiful women. Children sing as they climb onto trucks headed, ominously, into the forest. The growing panic of naked and shivering women terrified of what is about to come out of the showerheads above them in a squat and windowless cinderblock chamber is palpable. Some middle ground is that both Spielberg and Lanzmann gain access to one's heart-strings, if via different routes, both undeniably compelling.

Schindler's transformation from mercenary to guardian is the overarching storyline. Recognizing the money-making opportunities associated with war, he descends upon Krakow in 1939 seeking to grab his share. He inserts himself immediately, cultivating the local Nazi hierarchy with wine, women, and song. The roundup and registration of Jews is just beginning. He needs cash to establish a business; they have no sure alternative for keeping their money and other valuables out of Nazi hands. The result is the *Deutsche Emailwaren Fabrik* (DEF), a factory producing pots, pans, et al. for the German army.

It is purely a business proposition at the outset: Schindler offers goods tradable in the ghetto in return for their investment, and skilled Polish workers cost more in daily wages. He works the regime on the outside while Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley), his accountant, handles finances and personnel from the inside. Stern converts his weakest compatriots' papers into those of "highly skilled metalworkers" in order to get them sent to work at DEF.

Schindler resists the suggestion that his bribes have made his factory a haven. But his innate humanism cannot be covered up any more than can be the sadism of his foil, Untersturmführer Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes), commandant of the Plaszow Forced Labor Camp created by liquidating the Krakow ghetto. By the end of the film, as Russia advances, the camp is to be dismantled and all traces eliminated; e.g., Goeth must exhume and incinerate those buried previously. Schindler is now fully invested, both psychologically and financially; he spends everything he has earned to buy 1100 of "his" people for work at a new factory in his Czech hometown.

This act is “an absolute good,” says Stern. “The list is life. All around its margins lies the gulf.” Hence the film’s title.

Although the opening and closing scenes are in color, Spielberg shot the film in black and white, presumably to apply an historical patina. The other notable exception is a little girl, maybe five years old, in a (colorized) reddish coat. She appears onscreen twice, first, walking home with purpose through the mayhem of the ghetto liquidation, somehow unfazed and untouched, and much later, dead on a cart of corpses rolling toward Goeth’s fire. She appears to be a vision to Schindler, perhaps a miniature of the film’s larger aim: putting individual faces on what is otherwise an historical episode (thus congruent with *Shoah*). This may also mark the pivot of Oskar’s transformation; i.e., death has taken even the color from this place but life, and thus hope, might be rekindled from the embers.

Stylistically, this was a rather novel technical device at that time, and the color=life technique matches Resnais’ use in *Night and Fog*. Other memorable images and moments demonstrate the director’s skill:

- Having to make room for new arrivals, those too sick to work are culled in what was known as a *Gesundheitaktion* (Health Action). They are undressed and run through a line of doctors for examination, to music from a phonograph via the camp loudspeaker. The giddy relief of mothers having been spared—this time at least—is abruptly twisted into a horrified stampede toward the wire; their kids are on those trucks passing just beyond.
- All the usual hiding places crammed full, a young boy must crawl into the camp latrine; he is up to his shoulders and splattered with filth, light streaming down upon his upturned face from the hole through which he descended.
- A paperwork error means that the train carrying the women and children Schindler is relocating ends up at Auschwitz. Their destination is beginning to dawn upon them when they see a small Polish boy standing alone by the tracks watching the train pass. He sports a

sinister grin as he makes a slashing motion across his throat, ear to ear.

- Schindler hurries to Auschwitz and manages to get his trainload back, if just, given the demeanor of the official he must bribe. As the women re-enter the cramped boxcars, guards grab the children away from them. Challenged as to why he needs them, he claims that only their fingers are small enough to polish the inside of bomb casings. That he is improvising is readily perceived; credit Neeson's acting here.
- The rabbi among them is spared only when each of Goeth's two pistols jam. That death is arbitrary is a recurring theme. Although Schindler has suggested to him that such killing reflects power and not justice, the latter is on display as a coda—Goeth's executioners are similarly frustrated in several attempts to kick the stool out from under him at his hanging.

Despite Lanzmann's criticism, *Schindler* contributes to collective memory in at least a couple of ways. First, whether by intention or derivation, it confirms facts we learned in the prior films. One example: the language of the genocide is indirect—Jews are to undergo *Sonderbehandlung*—"special treatment"—and can be delivered as "fresh units." Another: locals throw mud at Krakow's Jews being evicted from their homes, their class resentment on display. Second, reenacting the various mechanics of the death machinery communicates the horrors inflicted in a more tangible way than witnessing alone can accomplish. This is particularly important for audiences some two generations removed from these events and living in a hypermedia/visual culture.

That's not to say we don't see some new things. As the Nazis turn the ghetto upside down, a mother removes a strip of wallpaper hiding stashed jewelry. Wrapping rings in bits of bread makes them softer to swallow. Cut to hospital. Doctor and nurse administer doses of poison to the bedridden, whose inevitable deaths occur in the name of "mercy."

The war ends and the *Schindlerjuden* are liberated by the

Russians. In the penultimate scene, Spielberg spreads them across the horizon as they march over fields toward town. The camera travels face to face; they fill the screen one-by-one demanding us to remember that each means a life, an individual, saved. In the final scene, the color returns and present-day survivors (accompanied by their actor counterparts) file past Schindler's grave on Mount Zion, each placing a grieving stone on the engraved slab.

Life is Beautiful

The Shoah with comedy and romance? Yep, and with three 1999 Academy Awards to boot: Best Foreign Language Film, Best Actor (Roberto Benigni, also director and co-writer) and Best Music, Original Dramatic Score. (Benigni's exuberance as he walks across seatbacks to accept the Oscar from Sophia Loren is worth a peek on *YouTube*).

This is fascist Italy, 1939. Guido Orefice (Benigni) and his buddy Ferruccio have traveled from country to city looking for work. Ferruccio is an upholsterer and Guido wants to open a bookshop. Meantime, Guido waits tables at the Grand Hotel, at which his uncle is headwaiter. Smitten after a couple of chance encounters with Dora, a local schoolteacher, Guido arranges several others, always greeting her with the salutation "Buongiorno Principessa!" (Good morning Princess!) He woos her and wins her; they marry and have a son, Giosue (Joshua).

This is the foreground action. Anti-Semitism grows in the background. Threats are painted on his uncle's horse and later, across the bookshop's security awning. Guido and young Joshua eventually are put on a train for Auschwitz. Although she is not Jewish, Dora gets herself put into another boxcar before it departs. The rest of the action takes place in the camp: Guido spares Joshua the truth of their situation by creating an elaborate fiction—they are part of a game and the winner gets his very own tank. Suffice it to say that the ending is bittersweet when the Americans roll in.

The dominant dynamic is of a madcap Benigni, full-on. He mugs for his son and the camera. He pulls it off in that his character is arguably endearing, particularly so his sustained effort to protect his family. The slapstick is trite: broken eggs, boxer shorts, Dora unaware that the back of her skirt is missing. Somewhat more amusing are two instances of irony-cum-commentary. The first involves schoolteachers bemoaning the difficulty of a math problem, the substance of which is the total savings to the state of eliminating various groups of undesirables. In the second case, Guido thinks the camp doctor, a friend before the war, will aid an escape. Nothing of the sort. Dr. Lessing pleads for help—in solving a vexing riddle. Shoah ad absurdum.

The film's popular appeal lies in its heart; it turns out to be a syrupy valentine from son to father. Perhaps an homage to Resnais, *Life* opens with a man carrying a little boy through the foggy dark. The voiceover declares this to be "a simple story but not an easy one to tell. Like a fable there is sorrow, and, like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness." The image repeats much later. But this time the fog lifts just enough to reveal a pit full of tangled corpses. Horrified, Guido stumbles away quickly. At film's end we now know the closing voiceover belongs to Joshua: "This is my story, my father's sacrifice, his gift to me." If *Schindler* is pernicious hagiography, *Shoah's* Lanzmann dismisses *Life* outright (ibid.). If there is a case to be made to the contrary, it lies in the film's title: there were warm and sunny days before and after the storm. Terrence Des Pres has argued that laughter is possible without betraying conviction, an expression of resilience that is life-reclaiming (1987, 232).

Holocaust Aesthetics

Both before and after Susan Sontag's famous assertion of a fascist aesthetic (1975), a weighty literature on aesthetics and ethics has developed around the question of whether and how

to portray the Shoah. The oft-cited opening volley was fired by Theodor Adorno in 1955: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1967, 34). At the other pole lies the fact that there are now some 16 Holocaust museums in the United States (“Memories of . . . ,” 2011.). Somewhere between portrayal as obscenity and fear of Disneyfication lies Elie Wiesel’s contention that “The Holocaust in its enormity defies language and art, and yet both must be used to tell the tale, the tale that must be told” (Weissberg, 2001, 18).

To what extent, then, is there cultural responsibility to transmit the “true” memory of historical events, and within what moral and practical limits? Attempting to capture the spirit of the debate—and by no means to trivialize it—Des Pres has formulated three “commandments” which ground the various controversies involved:

1. The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history.
2. Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason—artistic reasons included.
3. The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead (van Alpen, 46).

In this universe of values, *Life is Beautiful* is easily dispensed with, either as blasphemous (rarely) or as beneath contempt and thus to be ignored (almost always). Its mass appeal made *Schindler’s List* immediately suspect, sometimes scorned in intellectual circles, enough so that Dominick LaCapra could later reference its need for rehabilitation (1997, 228n34).

The critical perspectives at work here cross several dimensions. First and foremost is the contention that it is impossible to imagine the horrors aesthetically. This led to Adorno’s admonition that all such efforts be abandoned (Koch, 1989, 128). Lanzmann concurs. Much has been made

of the fact that *Shoah* contains no archival footage. This is intentional, and depending on the interview with the director, is either a matter of fealty with this philosophical position or a reflection of the practical difficulty of knowing what was shot where and when. In fact, Lanzmann's search for authenticity lead him to create what he believes to be a new genre, "a fiction of the real." His are not merely recorded interviews, rather, those who emerge from some 12 years of work, 350 hours of footage and more than 5 years of editing are those "actors" able to *live* the past onscreen. Lanzmann hired a locomotive, allowing its now-wizened Polish engineer once again to pull into Treblinka. For Abraham Bomba, one of those ante-room barbers at Auschwitz, he rented a hair studio; he works on the head in front of him as he describes what he sees. Says Lanzmann: "The film is not made out of memories, I knew that right away. Memory horrifies me: recollections are weak. The film is the abolition of all distance between past and present; I relive this history in the present" (Chevrie & Le Roux, 1985, 45). The result is likely the only "documentary" containing no direct image of its principal subject (Camper, 1987, 110). The result is "presence by absence" (Wieseltier, 1986, 91): "the silence of the faces and sites filmed *contains* the destruction of the bodies, transmits this fact and simultaneously preserves them" (Didi-Huberman, 2003, 119). This is central to the film's power.

On these terms Lanzmann's is the *only* possible representation of the Holocaust (Bartov, 1997, 55). Or is this false pathos; i.e., can there be other legitimate forms of expression? (Koch, 128). One thing that frightens historians, historiographers, and others about the mass appeal of *Schindler's List* is that it might in effect become THE Holocaust story, depending on generation, ethnicity, level of education, et al. Although difficult to believe today, awareness of the atrocities committed did not really begin to diffuse until Eichmann's capture and trial in 1960-61. Ironically, Hilberg's painstaking and definitive *The Destruction of the European Jews*, also released in 1961, did not even use the term (Cole, 1999). There is no question that

we must look to the historians' professional norms for help in sorting this out. But even they grapple with the notions of absolute truth and the diversity of those doing the retelling. One way to reconcile the tension here is to create a new standard of *representation*, distinguishing between the event-as-it-happened and the event-as-it-is-retold, thereby making room for legitimate popular expression (Zelizer, 1997, 23).

Such a standard also leaves room for criticism on the grounds of Hollywood trope and contrivance. A well-known example considered grievous comes from Pontecorvo's *Kapo* (1959). A camp inmate throws herself against the electrified outer fence; a brief shot of her limp, dead hand follows. Whether indecent, gratuitous, or merely vulgar, one critic claimed that the director "deserves only the most profound contempt" ("Kapo' . . .", 2010). Charges of similar gravity have been leveled at Spielberg for filming women being run, undressed, and herded into the showers at Auschwitz. Somewhere in the normative middle lies fact that Amon Goeth is a much more villainous foil for Oskar Schindler than would be the Eichmann painted by Hannah Arendt at trial (Cole, 71). And depending on one's point of view, the last two scenes of *Schindler*—wherein Oskar laments his inability to save more lives, followed shortly thereafter by the survivors marching toward freedom—represent either the film's emotional climax or "positively repulsive kitsch" (Bartov, 44).

Olem Bartov augments this line of thinking by disaggregating representation into four modes: fiction, documentary, memory, and plastic visual display, i.e., systematic re-creation (1997, 56). The line between the first two is blurred given Lanzmann's contention above and Spielberg's decision to film in black and white. Add to this author Thomas Keneally's classification of *Schindler's Ark* (renamed in film version *Schindler's List*) as a novel—despite its being well-grounded in surviving persons and documents—lest it be buried in *Judaica* at the back of the bookstore (2007). Besides the sheer passage of time, all Holocaust testimonies are suspect to the extent that they inhabit "the haunted terrain of traumatized memory"

(Zeitlin, 2001, 128) or similarly, because they are the products of *postmemory* socialization and transmission (Hirsch, 2001).

Issues of objectivity, authenticity, and realism are no less problematic in the case of Holocaust museums, exhibitions, or other shrines meant to preserve memory. That any collection of artifacts offers a more or less explicit narrative is a given. Whether those exposed can gain any measure of true understanding cues Adorno's condemnation. In his *Selling the Holocaust* (1999), Tim Cole worries over its "Americanization"; moreover, what does it mean that one can buy a Holocaust cookbook or tour locations where Spielberg filmed? Even with *Night and Fog* lies the risk that its images become "icons of destruction"—at least desensitizing and at some point cliché (Hirsch, 226).

Another major critical dimension revolves around narrative, in terms of perspective and ownership. The centrality of "the good German" to Spielberg's film is controversial for that reason and for several others, most notably (a) that the death machine could be defeated through the actions of one heroic individual, and (b) the ethics of focusing on one small group of survivors in the face of the millions who died (Bartov, 46; Cole, 88). In terms of ownership, it is the survivors' story, yet the focus is on Schindler saving a cohort of what Frank Rich described as "generic" Jews (Loshitzky, 114). Moreover, missing from Zelizer's logic above is the fact that there are almost certainly ethnic or experiential bona fides required of any director attempting a Holocaust film. Lanzmann was decorated for his role in the French resistance. Pontecorvo was Jewish and an anti-fascist Italian. Speculation at the time had it that Spielberg needed to show that he was capable of a "serious" film while also serving "his" people.

It is not difficult to understand Lanzmann's objection to the notion that there is redemption to be found in the cataclysm, i.e., for Oskar Schindler. Yet *Shoah* also suggests redemption in that it begins in Poland but ends in the state of Israel (Cole, 86). Additionally, keeping the Holocaust front and center threatens the possibility of serious negotiation with re-

spect to the peace process (144). Indeed, the most serious charge leveled against the film is its unremitting requirement of full empathy and identification with the victims, or the inverse with respect to Suchomel, et al. (LaCapra, 214, 219). Besides the interviews with less compelling “actors” which were discarded, there are important omissions, including Riefenstahl’s gypsies, homosexuals, any member of the *Judenrat*, and higher ranking officers of the SS. The role of women is understated as well (214). If art’s truest reason, as Geoffrey Hartman suggests, is to “expand the sympathetic imagination while teaching us the limits of sympathy” (2000, 122–23), there is also a tipping point at which history is engineered à la Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

Links to Social Science

1. Causality

Lanzmann, Hilberg, and others are convinced that the Shoah is an inexplicable event, a singularity. Here is Lanzmann:

Obviously, there are reasons and explanations for the destruction of six million Jews: Adolf Hitler’s character . . . the German defeat in 1918, unemployment, inflation, the religious roots of anti-Semitism . . . the image of the Jew, the indoctrination of German youth . . . and so forth. All these psychoanalytical, sociological, economic, religious, etc. explications, taken alone or together, are both true and false, which is to say, totally inadequate. If they were the necessary precondition for extermination, they were not a sufficient condition. The destruction of Europe’s Jews cannot logically be deduced from any such system of presuppositions. Between the conditions that permitted extermination and the extermination itself—the fact of the extermination—there is a break in continuity, a hiatus, an abyss. . . . All discourse that speaks about the “engendering” of violence is an absurd dream of the nonviolent. (1981, 33–4)

This truth is seen as negating any sense of meaning, redemption, or mediation (Des Pres, 232).

If that is the systemic truth, its individual-level corollary adheres to Primo Levi's oft-cited recounting, that "Here there is no why." Like Amon Goeth's target practice at Plaszow, the sorting of those few saved from the many drowned is all the more horrific for being merely arbitrary (another core *Schindler* theme). This also explains why euphemism was required. "Had they named this act [genocide], they couldn't have accomplished it" says Lanzmann (Camper, 106).

2. State control

The bureaucratization of the death machinery unfolds eloquently across witnesses in *Shoah*, and the tyranny of the paperwork drives Oskar's need to bribe the Nazi hierarchy in *Schindler*. That both are meditations on the nature of evil resurrects Arendt's Eichmann, Stanley Milgram—and Ward Churchill.

3. Ideology & identity politics

Tim Cole argues that Anne Frank became the patron saint of liberalism in 1950s America. Her belief that "in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart" was the closing homily of the stage and film adaptations and is the core tenet of the left. Beyond the Holocaust, the work also can be interpreted as a metaphor for the treatment of blacks, Native Americans, and suspected communists (33–35). Similarly, Miriam Hansen believes that Spielberg deserves credit for engendering a public space much broader than identity politics would predict (1996, 148).

4. Nationalism & collective memory

Hansen believes that as in *The Birth of a Nation*, this is a struggle over "what gets remembered and how" (148), a politics of memory (Loshitsky, 11) or forgetting (Lehrer, 1997, 218). Asked if he was aware that his film was an accusation against Poland Lanzmann, ever candid, replied "Yes, but it's the Poles

who accuse themselves. They mastered the routine of extermination. No one was troubled by it. . . . There could not have been extermination camps in France” (Ash, 1985, 141).

Yet the French also struggle. “Vichy syndrome” is a latent affliction, flaring up with the trial of Klaus Barbie (“The Butcher of Lyon”) in 1987, of Paul Touvier in 1994, and with *Schindler’s List’s* release a fortnight prior (Lehrer). It is also troubling that Resnais does not identify Jews as the primary victims of the death camps in *Night and Fog* (Bartov, 52).

The German reception of *Schindler’s List* at its premier in Frankfurt was characterized by tears and silence. The German press wondered how it was that the film had not been produced and directed by one of their own (Weissberg, 2001, 174,182).

“Why did they not fight?” is a question of socialization for Israeli children and a source of cleavage between the Diaspora and European Jewry. The Shoah has been appropriated by the state for Zionist purposes, especially as a justification for its existence and defense thereof. Haim Bresheeth therefore considers *Schindler’s List* “a most necessary transgression” given its discourse on power and powerlessness (1997, 210).

5. On leadership

Even so, making the individual the protagonist of history is an error made not just by Hollywood. The “Great Man” thesis is insidious and unhelpful as an explanatory variable in history and in politics (cf. Estes, 2006). Yet it persists, among other reasons, due to its synergy with a political economy glorifying individualism. There is some ambivalence, however. Several scholars have suggested that linking faces to losses was likely required for building the American Holocaust mythology. Dispersing pain and responsibility (e.g., *Night and Fog*) threatens to make these events “amorphous, almost ahistorical” (Bartov, 53). Thomas Keneally argues that it is only possible to *imagine* the Holocaust by telling the story on a human scale (2007, 1529).

Aesthetics and Ethics: A Middle Ground?

The role of the *Judenrat* with respect to the ghettos remains an open wound. Some point out that their mere existence facilitated the process by imposing order the Nazis could not otherwise have achieved. Others suspect or accuse the *Judenrat* of complicity. Bryan Chayette (1997) argues that the system was dehumanizing, complicity was enforced, and that attempting to survive was a rational strategy. Predictably, conveniently, or appropriately, he asserts that ethical uncertainty should be the yardstick used to measure all representations of the Holocaust; this was a terrible, yet decipherable world (227).

Some Additional Notes on Style

Shoah's architecture as a film is quite interesting. Fred Camper rightly observes that its length allows the steady accretion of detail across witnesses, thereby building a compelling narrative of absence (104). Lanzmann indicates that his composition turns on pivot points discovered while editing the miles and years of footage, e.g., the massacre of the "model" family camp. He also struggled with the fact that there is no "although" in film: "You can say it in a book, via a detour in a sentence, but if you want to say it in a film, what you want to *insert* immediately becomes a kind of absolute, killing what precedes it and determining what will follow." The risk is that the parenthetical becomes a major proposition. An example: Polish locals recall their relief in the silence which would inevitably follow the unsettling noise of Auschwitz arrivals, a few hours later. Where this thread is sewn, and its relationship to the fabric around it, could cause it to be construed either as incidental or damning (Chevie & LeRoux, 47).

Geoffrey Hartman describes some practical issues associated with taping Holocaust testimonies generally. Zooming in and out of close-up adds expressive potential, but from the outside in, i.e., it is the director who adds emphasis. Filming sur-

vivors in their homes provides comfort and better visuals, but studio filming changes the flow of memory by reducing diversion or disruption. Cutting to the interviewer adds veracity and reduces monotony for the viewer, but removes the subject from the center of the frame each time it happens. The aim is to release memory, which also requires, off camera, a shared sense of community and trust (116–7).

Coda

In 2011, a significant development in the complex aftermath narratives of the Holocaust has been the uploading of the first online database of property lost in the Holocaust. Called Project HEART (the Holocaust Era Asset Restitution Taskforce), the effort is sponsored by the Jewish Agency for Israel. The first piece of property was recovered in May, 2011. A Polish woman from Lodz, near Auschwitz, says that her grandmother used to leave pots of soup in the bushes for those laboring in the camp. Coming to collect the pots one night she found a jeweled necklace. She has returned it as “Jewish property”; it will be sent to Yad Vashem for safekeeping (“Property Lost . . . ,” 2011).

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor. 1967 (trans.). *Prisms*. MIT Press.
- Ash, Timothy Garton. 1985. “The Life of Death: *Shoah*—A Film by Claude Lanzmann.” In Liebman, 135–148.
- Benigni, Roberto. (Director and Producer). (1997). *Life is Beautiful*. [Film]. Italy: Cecchi Gori Group, Tiger Cinematografica, Cecchi Gori Pictures, Melampo Cinematografica.
- Bartov, Omer. 1997. “Spielberg’s Oskar: Hollywood Tries Evil.” In Loshitzky, 41–60.
- Bresheeth, Haim. 1997. “The Great Taboo Broken.” In Loshitzky, 193–212.

- Camper, Fred. 1987. "Shoah's Absence." In Liebman, 103–112.
- Chayette, Bryan. 1997. "The Uncertain Certainty of Schindler's List." In Loshitsky, 226–238.
- Chevrie, Marc and Herve Le Roux. 1985. "Site and Speech: An Interview with Claude Lanzmann about *Shoah*." In Liebman, 37–50.
- Cole, Tim. 1999. *Selling the Holocaust: How History is Bought, Packaged, and Sold*. Routledge.
- Des Pres, Terrence. 1987. "Holocaust *Laughter?*" In Berel Lang (ed). 1988. *Writing and the Holocaust*. Holmes & Meier.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2003. "The Site—Despite Everything." In Liebman, 113–124.
- Durant, Will and Ariel. 1968. *The Lessons of History*. Simon and Schuster.
- Epstein, Julia and Lori Hope Lefkowitz (eds.) 2001. *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust*. University of Illinois Press.
- Estes, Todd. 2006. "The Unpopularity of Popular History in the Academy." *Oakland Journal*. 10:9–26.
- Giglio, Ernest. 2007. *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film & Politics*. Peter Lang.
- Hansen, Miriam Bratu. 1996. "Schindler's List *Is Not* Shoah: Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory." In Zelizer, 2001, 128–151.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. 2000. "Tele-Suffering and Testimony in the Dot Com Era." In Zelizer, 111–124.
- Hilberg, Raul. 2003. *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Yale University Press.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 2001. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory." In Zelizer, 214–246.
- "'Kapo': Portraying the Unthinkable in Art." 2010. *Los Angeles Times*. 11 April
- Keneally, Thomas. 1992. *Schindler's List*. Wheeler Publishing. (large-print version)
- _____. 2007. *Searching for Schindler: A Memoir*. Doubleday. (e-book)
- Koch, Gertrude. 1989. "The Aesthetic Transformation of the

Image of the Unimaginable: Notes on Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*." In Liebman, 125–134.

LaCapra, Dominick. 1997. "Lanzmann's *Shoah*: Here There Is No Why." In Liebman, 191–230.

Lanzmann, Claude. 1981. "From Holocaust to 'Holocaust.'" In Liebman, 27–36.

_____. (Director). (1985). *Shoah* [Film]. France: Historia, Les Films Aleph, Ministere de la Culture de la Republique de Francais.

Lehrer, Natasha. 1997. "Between Obsession and Amnesia." In Loshitsky, 213–225.

Liebman, Stuart (ed.) 2007. *Claude Lanzmann's Shoah: Key Essays*. Oxford University Press.

Loshitzky, Yosefa (ed.) 1997. *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*. Indiana University Press.

"Maker of 'Shoah' Stresses its Lasting Value." 2010. *The New York Times*. 7 December.

"Memories of Holocaust, Fortified." 2011. *The New York Times*. 23 April.

"The Last Doughboy of World War I." 2011. *Smithsonian.com*. (<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/last-doughboy.html>).

"Property Lost in Holocaust is Catalogued Online." 2011. *The New York Times*. 3 May.

Resnais, Alaun. (1955). (Director). *Night and Fog*. [Film]. France: Argos Films.

Spielberg, Stephen.(Director). (1993). *Schindler's List*. [Film]. USA: Universal, Amblin Entertainment.

Sontag, Susan. 1975. "Fascinating Facism." *The New York Review of Books*. 6 February.

van Alpen, Ernst. 1997. "Deadly Historians: Botanski's Intervention in Holocaust Historiography." In Zelizer, 2001, 45–73.

Weissberg, Liliane. 1997. "The Tale of a Good German." In Loshitsky, 171–192.

_____. 2001. "In Plain Sight." In Zelizer, 13–27.

Zeitlin, Froma I. 2001. "The Vicarious Witness: Belated Memory

and Authorial Presence in Recent Holocaust Literature.” In Epstein and Lefkowitz, 128–160.

Zelizer, Barbie. 1997. “Every Once in a While: *Schindler’s List* and the Shaping of History.” In Loshitsky, 18–35.

_____, (ed.) 2001. *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*. Rutgers University Press.