



# Beyond Representation?

Hollywood, the Holocaust and the Image of History in *Schindler's List*

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**D**espite its Academy Award for Best Picture and its substantial commercial success, Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) remains a critically contested film. This essay looks at a number of its stylistic and dramatic strategies, as well as a number of the critical arguments against them, not in order to pass judgement on the film one way or the other, but rather to consider some of the problems inherent in cinematic representations of the Holocaust in particular and history in general. At a time when filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino are content to rewrite history at will – as in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and *Django Unchained* (2012) – regarding it as mutable content to be shaped in the service of a cinematic vision as opposed to an inheritance that comes with certain responsibilities, it is important that we should again turn to the questions posed in this essay.

### The past is another country's cinema

Nostalgia is an unavoidable element of Spielberg's films, and very often of our relationship with them. The *Indiana Jones* franchise (1981–2008) and *The Adventures of Tintin* (2011) are homages to the adventure serials of the director's boyhood. *Jurassic Park* (1993) references the monster movies of the same period. To anyone whose childhood coincided with the release of these films – *Jurassic Park* was the first PG-rated film I ever saw – they are themselves the adventure serials and monster movies that we now look back upon with a sense of nostalgia.

In *Schindler's List*, Spielberg is less nostalgic for a specific genre of film than he is for the general look and feel of specific movements or periods in cinema's history. The primary vehicle for this nostalgia is Janusz Kaminski's Oscar-winning black-and-white cinematography. Where Spielberg and Kaminski would later attempt to evoke the war photography of Robert Capa in the famous D-day sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), their points of reference for *Schindler's List* were strictly cinematic, coming almost exclusively from the two great pre- and postwar schools of European art cinema: German expressionism and Italian neorealism.

As far as the expressionism goes, we might point to the early scene in which Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) befriends an entire nightclub of SS men and cabaret performers through sheer force of personality and spending power, and in which



the soft-focus black-and-white photography evokes Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930) among other films of the era. The famous Kraków Ghetto liquidation sequence might be the film's most extended nod to the documentary-like rawness of neorealism, though it is in the sequence in which the children of the Płaszów camp are taken away on trucks that the film most directly evokes it. The scene of screaming mothers running after the trucks is a direct quotation from Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), but it is not the only one.

We might compare this approach to the one taken by Martin Scorsese with *The Aviator* (2004), which fetishises the bipack colour and three-strip Technicolor photography of early colour cinema for no better reasons than the filmmaker's love of the films that once used them, and to evoke the period in which those films were made. We might compare it, too, to the approach taken by Steven Soderbergh on *The Good German* (2006), which adheres obsessively to the framing, camera movement and continuity editing strategies of classical Hollywood cinema in a manner that the word fetish doesn't even begin to cover. But where *The Aviator's* nostalgia is little more than a cinephilic novelty, and *The Good German's* an example of formalism at its coldest and most arch, *Schindler's List* employs its aesthetic styles of choice in an attempt to make itself feel like a historical document; by evoking the styles in use at the time of the events in question it attempts to bring the audience closer to its subject matter. Whether or not it actually does so is open for debate. Some have suggested that, even if it does, the unintended and unacceptable cost of the strategy is the manner in which it aestheticises the Holocaust and renders it kitsch.





### Good and evil in black and white

Adrian Martin is one of several critics who have questioned the efficacy of this imitative approach, considering it characteristic of the generation of so-called movie brats who came to prominence in Hollywood in the mid 1970s and who 'interpreted and rendered life accordingly, through the obedient quotation of a hundred beloved movies'. In Spielberg's case, Martin goes on to suggest, this 'adolescent reflex' may also be evidence of the filmmaker's 'bad faith'.<sup>1</sup>

'Spielberg has said that the Holocaust, for him, has mainly existed in the form of stark black-and-white images in documentaries and books,' Martin said in his radio review of the film.

*Lurking also in his mind, I'm sure, is some spurious equation of black-and-white with artistic seriousness, grim tragedy, authenticity and integrity. One must wonder about a filmmaker whose primary approach to the Holocaust is not as a historic human reality but as something fixed in a media archive of recorded images and sounds.*<sup>2</sup>

Martin goes on to criticise Spielberg's fascination with his titular character, accusing both the filmmaker and his screenwriter, Steven Zaillian, of being 'more interested in the angst of Schindler than in the suffering of the Jews who appear on screen, in the details of their lives in the ghetto and the camp'. He continues:

*It is hard not to watch the story of Schindler – a millionaire operator who atones for his many sins by a monumental good deed – and not see Spielberg's furious, wishful self-projection. The public redemption that Schindler achieved through his act is the same redemption that Spielberg hopes to achieve by making this film.*<sup>3</sup>



Whether we choose to give much credence to this reading – by the critic’s own admission, he and others have occasionally been overeager to cast aspersions on the filmmaker’s motivations – it is nevertheless impossible to avoid dealing with his accusation. *Schindler’s List* might be unfavourably compared to Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist* (2002), which goes to great lengths to detail ‘the suffering of the Jews who appear on screen’ and ‘their lives in the ghetto’. (*The Pianist* never quite makes it as far as the camps. *Schindler’s List* does, but declines to commit to doing so: instead of showing the atrocities being committed there, it merely tricks the audience into thinking that it might. The scene in which it does so, which leads the viewer to assume the Nazi gaze before revealing a suspected gas chamber to be a mere communal shower, is one of the most manipulative and controversial in the picture.) Both *Schindler’s List* and *The Pianist* contain a wealth of vignettes involving random Jews in the Kraków and Warsaw ghettos: the girl in the red dress is *Schindler’s List*’s most famous, the old man thrown out of the window in his wheelchair *The Pianist*’s most disturbing. But in *Schindler’s List* these Jews are always the other, to be pitied or saved, and blend together rather more than the filmmaker might like or think. Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Massacre of the Innocents* (1565–7), to which sequences of *Schindler’s List* have been compared, serves as yet another counterpoint: in the painting, each victim of the village’s plunder is rendered a distinct individual. A number of Jewish characters are rendered as such in the film as well – the most obvious being Schindler’s accountant, Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley), who started putting his fellows on his employer’s payroll long before his employer conceived of putting them on a list – but the way the camera pinpoints recognisable faces in the crowd on the factory floor towards the end of the picture merely reinforces the fact that the vast majority of them are not recognisable at all.

The aforementioned girl in red, her importance signified by her hue and saturation, is particularly relevant in this regard, as she serves as the film’s embodiment of this faceless crowd. She represents Schindler’s conception of European Jewry as essentially helpless and in need of outside protection – a conception seemingly held by Spielberg, too, at least to the extent that he presents it uncritically. The film teems with other children, of course, from the little boy who avoids the ovens by hiding in the camp latrine to the little boy who helps a mother and her daughter survive despite their not having the right-coloured sticker on their passes. True to form – think *Jurassic Park* or *War of the Worlds* (2005) – Spielberg bestows these children with a special significance while simultaneously torturing them remorselessly. But the girl in red is the only one who we see atop a pile of bodies. Limp, little and undeserving of her fate, she is a four-foot stand-in for six million dead.

Given Spielberg sees the Jews in this way – as children who, in the main, lack agency or even self-awareness – it makes sense that he should frame his drama as a struggle between two gentiles with different ideas about how to deal with them. Making sense, of course, is not necessarily the same thing as being palatable. But it remains true that the vast majority of the film’s drama stems not from the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, but from confrontation between the characters of Schindler and



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Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes), the commandant of the Płaszów concentration camp. If we are to approach the film on its own terms, even if we do not agree with the terms in question, we have to take this point into consideration.

In and of itself, this is perhaps not entirely reprehensible. The argument about whether we should read the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish tragedy or as a more broadly human one is certainly valid, and the fact that the film appears to take the latter view should not necessarily be condemned. The Holocaust, like World War II more generally, was the by-product of a clash between civilisation and a radical movement intent on destroying it and rebuilding it askew. But even if we should choose to overlook the manner in which Spielberg seems to overlook the Jews in favour of Schindler and Goeth, we need not necessarily acquiesce to his portrayal of these latter characters as the better and worse angels of our nature, good and evil incarnate, respectively.





Admittedly, Schindler is portrayed with a certain degree of moral ambiguity, at least until about halfway through the film, when he becomes singularly obsessed with saving lives after witnessing the liquidation of the ghetto in general and the death of the girl in red in particular. While even a cursory glance at the historical record throws these sterling motives and their representation in the latter part of the film into some doubt, it nevertheless remains true that, at a certain point and for reasons still not entirely clear, Schindler did begin to act in a manner that, heroic or otherwise, genuinely saved lives.

Infinitely more problematic is the caricature-like depiction of Amon Goeth as the apocalypse's fifth horseman. I should clarify this statement by saying that Fiennes' performance in the role is easily the most memorable in the film – though Fiennes is rarely any good unless his characters come with a chip of ice in the heart. (There is a reason his most memorable performance since *Schindler's List* has been as the evil wizard Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* franchise, and it is interesting to note how that franchise becomes an allegory for the rise of Nazism by its seventh and final book.)



But Fiennes' performance as Goeth is memorable precisely because of the character's overall lack of nuance. Despite the Arendtian banality of many of his scenes – getting up in the morning and shooting Jews from his balcony, complaining to Schindler about the workload he faces in exhuming and burning the corpses of those he has already killed – he himself is not banal at all, at least not insofar as one might take the word to mean commonplace or ordinary. Indeed, you couldn't find a character farther from your standard-issue, order-following, banality-of-evil National Socialist. Hannah Arendt described in detail the lack of psychopathological traits in the vast majority of such sympathisers and perpetrators.<sup>4</sup> Goeth, in no uncertain terms, and in striking contrast, is evil's purest psychosexual embodiment. The one sign he shows of being anything more complex – his attraction to his Jewish maid, Helen (Embeth



Davidtz) – is dashed upon the rocks of the scene in which he puts that attraction down to her being a subhuman temptress and beats her to within an inch of her life. While Schindler is a card-carrying member of the Nazi party – a point the film takes care to stress several times – Goeth is clearly supposed to be its representative: not the unreconstructed product of an insidious idea so much as an out-of-the-pocket monster.

In *A Cinema of Loneliness*, Robert Kolker criticised this aspect of the film with gusto. Goeth, he wrote, is

*too unrelievedly brutal. He is a psychopath, and psychopathology is too easy a way to dismiss Nazism and its adherents ... There were psychotic Germans, to be sure; but Nazism cannot be reduced simply to psychosis.*<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, such reductions tend to transform racial and ethnic prejudices, militarism and fascist ideology into aberrations of the individual, personal and containable, as opposed to dangerous and never entirely eradicable currents within even liberal societies like our own; when fascism is a madman's game, we need not keep an eye out for it in ourselves. That Spielberg ignored everything we know about Nazism and the clock-punching ordinariness of those who committed its crimes in order to create an unreconstructed devil for his lead to take a stand against should be taken into consideration.

### Against inevitability

As with everything else that has come in for criticism in this essay, Spielberg's dichotomy between Schindler and Goeth is ultimately up to the individual viewer to judge as valid or otherwise. My gut feeling is that it is not: the dichotomy is certainly a simplification of the situation as it actually stood, and our tendency should be to prefer nuance to the black-and-white artlessness of oversimplified symbolism, even in a black-and-white film with artistic pretensions. The absolute good of Schindler and his list, as well as the absolute evil of Goeth and his phallic hunting rifle, is problematic as drama and very problematic as history. We might compare both characters' depictions in the film unfavourably against that of Captain Wilm Hosenfeld (Thomas Kretschmann) in *The Pianist*, who in his interactions with Władysław Szpilman (Adrien Brody) represents a kind of halfway point between the extremes of Schindler and Goeth and their competing impulses. (Szpilman's music helps Hosenfeld's latent impulse towards civilisation to win out, but so, most likely, did the fact that he heard it at the end of the war, when the Germans were already on the way out.)

But at least Schindler did eventually stand up. He may not have done so as wholeheartedly in real life as he does in the film. He may even have turned Jews over to the SS prior to his list's being written. But the sheer fact that this individual did





something eventually, when so many did not, means that some twelve hundred human beings were spared and that some seven thousand people now exist that wouldn't have existed otherwise. While some may criticise the film's point of view, with its focus on non-Jewish characters who treat human beings as either livestock to be slaughtered or as pets to be bought and sold, it nevertheless matters that an otherwise despicable man should be allowed at some point to represent at least a modicum of our commitment to civilisation. Anybody, however unlikely, should be able to do so: it is what Saul Bellow's *Augie March* so memorably called 'the universal eligibility to be noble'. Forget the perhaps too-crude dichotomy that turns Schindler into a symbol of the good and focus instead on what such a symbol, however problematic, actually suggests. Because the suggestion is striking. The Holocaust was not some inevitable cataclysm. It was a crime that could have been prevented and that certain individuals – regardless of their background or even their motives – did in fact attempt to prevent.

Schindler's attempt to prevent it hinges upon an important irony that is visually teased out throughout the film. The Holocaust appropriated two of modernity's central technologies – the train and the production line, so drastically mistaken by utopian thinkers in the early part of the century as exclusively emancipatory – and transformed them into the ultimate murder machine. Against this, *Schindler's List* posits the machine that

doesn't work: the gun that doesn't fire, the assembly line that produces nothing. 'If this factory ever produces a shell that can actually be fired,' Schindler says after his unlikely transformation into saviour, 'I'll be very unhappy.' Even the manipulative scene in the supposed gas chamber fits into this strategy: the gas chamber that doesn't kill, the train tracks that need not lead to inevitable death. The piles of shoes, clothes and empty

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suitcases left behind at train stations by their owners are contrasted against the piles of unused pots and pans turned out by Schindler's Deutsche Emaillewaren-Fabrik. The film pits the Nazis' industrialised death against Schindler's industry of survival and the latter enjoys a substantial victory over the former.

### Beyond representation?

That the victory in question was not victory enough almost goes without saying. The role of the individual in history is of course a contested one, but even so the effect of Schindler's actions, when stacked up against the crimes of Hitler or even Goeth, was ultimately quite insignificant. What Spielberg offers us is a fantasy: the idea that, because of a single non-Jewish individual's actions, the Holocaust might be read not merely as a story of survival, but also, improbably, as one of rejuvenation. In light of Primo Levi's critique of survival, which focuses on its attendant shame ('The worst survived; the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators ... the spies ... that is, the fittest; the best all died') this may well be regarded with scepticism and even some degree of offence. Whether or not it is so, however, ultimately depends on one's views with regard to the fraught relationship between cinema and history and the former's use or abuse of the latter and to what ends. To whom or what do filmmakers owe their allegiance?

How can we aestheticise historical violence without commodifying or glamourising it? What responsibilities do we have to the past and its actors, particularly the innocent dead, such as the victims of totalitarianism and genocide? By simplifying history and its central figures for the sake of narrative or thematic clarity – by transforming them into metaphors and archetypes, parables and icons – are we inhibiting our own understanding of the complex forces that actually determined the events represented? And what sort of understanding is one that takes most of its cues from the movies anyway?

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Hard Experiences', *Arts Today*, Radio National, February 1994.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Viking, New York, 1963.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*, 3rd edn, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p. 320.