

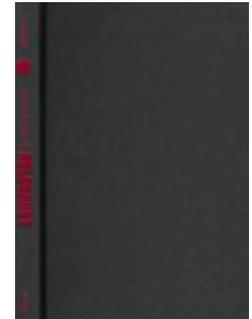
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Yosefa Loshitzky, ed. *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. viii + 250 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21098-2; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33232-5.

Reviewed by J. David Slocum (New School for Social Research)
Published on H-Film (March, 1998)



Despite being exceedingly complex and rooted in a variety of intellectual fields, the ongoing debate about the representation of the Holocaust is familiar to many humanists who perceive the event as a potential limit-case for a range of aesthetic, religious, and historical practices. In cinema, the 1985 appearance of the documentary *Shoah* and director Claude Lanzmann's well-publicized strategy of working to invoke memory through oral recollections rather than explicit images endorsed the unrepresentability of Holocaust experience on screen. Hollywood's infrequent treatment of the subject in productions like *Sophie's Choice* (Alan J. Pakula, 1982) and *Triumph of the Spirit* (Robert M. Young, 1989) implicitly confirmed the same assumption and avoided direct representation of the genocide. Even a handful of scholarly works from the late 1980s— Ilan Avisar's *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, Judith E. Doneson's *The Holocaust in American Film*, and Annette Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*— underscored the separation between public discourse about the Holocaust and the productions of popular culture.

In late 1993, the release of *Schindler's List* profoundly challenged the terms of debate about representation by offering a Hollywood-style narrative dramatization of the Jewish genocide. That challenge also constituted for many a troubling initiation of the Holocaust debate into a mainstream culture arguably ill-equipped to do it justice. The film compelled the public and critics alike to rethink how the Shoah could be imagined, remembered, and given historical meaning.

The twelve essays in Yosefa Loshitzky's *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on 'Schindler's List'* en-

deavor to address both the film's presentation of explicit images, "real" characters, and a "true" story and the emerging popular cultural discourse about the Holocaust to which the film is central. In the former category, contributors assess the imaging of graphic violence, the depiction of the camps at Plaszow and Auschwitz, the individualized focus on the Germans Schindler and Goeth, the more collective (and, to some, stereotypical) portrayal of Jews, and the use of "realistic" narrative filmmaking conventions to render the Holocaust. In the latter, they consider the broad cultural histories of responses to the film in the United States, Germany, Israel, and France, its role in constructions of the popular memory and history of the Shoah, and the more general significance of Hollywood cinema to contemporary global and national cultures. The best pieces, like Barbie Zelizer's meditation on the shaping of history and Miriam Bratu Hansen's analysis of American public memory, effectively combine these two areas of concern. They make plain how timely was the production of Spielberg's film: it appeared at a moment of active memorialization of events from nearly a half-century before, increasing receptiveness of public cultures in the U.S. and other nations to popular constructions of history, and growing preoccupation in American cinema with the problem of historical memory.

These changing contexts have themselves received a great deal of critical attention in the 1990s and are crucial to making sense of *Schindler's List*. A generational transition between historians and a push to memorialize the Holocaust roughly fifty years after its occurrence have provoked reconsideration of its history and representation. Books like Omer Bartov's *Murder in our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation*, Saul

Friedlander's *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Vol. 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939*, and, especially, Daniel J. Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* both revised previous scholarship and engaged popular readers. Holocaust museums opened in the United States in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles in 1993, prompting public dialogue about the Shoah and its cultural significance. Several writers reflected specifically on issues of representation and remembrance of the Holocaust: consider James Young's *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, and the collections edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, and Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*. And responding to Hollywood's recent emphasis on history in movies like *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992), *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), and a glut of putatively "true stories," film scholars, notably Robert Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin, turned during the last decade to examine the conjunction of cinema, memory, and history.

Working amidst this seachange in the intellectual and popular imagination of the Holocaust, history, and popular cinema in the United States and elsewhere, what do the contributors to Spielberg's Holocaust conclude

about *Schindler's List*? For most, the film is intricately and unavoidably related to broader cultural changes, a newly predominant element in the continuing process of working through collective memory and remaking popular history. Yet persisting in the essays are also expressions of singularity. Despite passages of criticism and even contempt, they confirm the signal importance of *Schindler's List* to recent, especially American, filmmaking and cultural mythmaking. They also both invoke the traditional belief in the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its unrepresentability and ascribe a novel distinctiveness to the event following its initiation into mainstream popular culture. The achievement of Spielberg's Holocaust is its skill at combining sophisticated reflections on the singularity of Spielberg's film, the representability of the Jewish genocide, and the wide-ranging cultural processes that today shape meaning, memory, and history.

This review is copyrighted by Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies and the Historians Film Committee, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~filmhis/>. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Film & History reserves print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollinspc@aol.com).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-film>

Citation: J. David Slocum. Review of Loshitzky, Yosefa, ed., *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*. H-Film, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1839>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.