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Part I

Finding an Appropriate Language

The immensity of events calls
for restraint, even dryness,
and this is only fitting where
words do not suffice.

– Czeslaw Milosz
Native Realm

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1
The Hollywood Version of the Holocaust

Few American films have confronted the darker realities of World War II – ghettos, occupation, deportation, concentration camps, collaboration, extermination. The Holocaust has been only touched upon in such Hollywood studio productions as *Exodus, Cabaret, Ship of Fools, Marathon Man, Julia, The Boys from Brazil,* and *Victory,* and brought to the fore in only a handful of postwar films like *Judgment at Nuremberg, The Diary of Anne Frank, Voyage of the Damned,* and – increasingly – movies made for television. When "Judgment at Nuremberg" was first presented as a teleplay on *Playhouse 90* in 1959, however, commerce clearly got in the way of authenticity: the sponsor of the show, the American Gas Association, objected to the use of the word "gas" in reference to the concentration camp death chambers. According to the producer Herbert Brodkin, the sponsor wanted it deleted; he refused; they got their way behind his back: "Although the program was televised live, CBS delayed its transmission for a few seconds, long enough for an engineer to bleep out the word gas each time it was mentioned."[1] The major difference between "telefilms" like *Holocaust* and *Playing for Time* and theatrically distributed features is the commercial interruptions to which the former are subject. In conception, style, and appeal to a mass audience, nevertheless, these *are* "Hollywood" films, simply made for a smaller screen. Moreover, in the cynically realistic appraisal of screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky:

> NBC wanted to do *The War Against the Jews.* That's before they did *Holocaust.* I said the subject was simply too painful for me to write about. But if I had agreed to do it for television, I'd have had to make a soap opera of the whole thing. You'd have to get high emotional moments, regularly, because you have these damn ten-minute intervals all the time. You can never really accumulate the power; you have to capsulize a lot of emotion, and you have to overdramatize things. In fact, the word critics used on *Holocaust* was "trivialize," and in a sense that was an unfair criticism, even though accurate. Trivialization *is* television.[2]

Whether on a small or silver screen, there is perhaps nothing inherently wrong in an entertaining film set against the backdrop of World War II, like *Victory,* for example.

James Woods (Karl) and Meryl Streep (Inga) in *Holocaust.*
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But as we move further in time from the realities of Nazism and closer to comforting myths, many people shrug off the complexity of history to embrace the simplifications offered by films. It is consequently a premise of this study that filmmakers confronting the Holocaust must assume a special responsibility, commensurate with its gravity and enormity. Elie Wiesel told an interviewer, "Before I say the words, Auschwitz or Treblinka, there must be a space, a breathing space, a kind of zone of silence."[3] His fear that the Holocaust is becoming "a phenomenon of superficiality" is applicable to films.

The television program *Holocaust* (1978) heightened awareness of both the historical facts and the problems of how to dramatize them on film. This miniseries took Nazi atrocities out of the province of specialized study and made them a "prime-time" phenomenon – with both the benefits of exposure and the drawbacks of distortion. Its case illustrates the rewards and tendencies inherent in films made for mass audiences – from the power of sensitizing, to the danger of romanticizing and trivializing. Indeed, *Holocaust* must be appreciated for its stimulation of concern, both in America and Europe, but questioned for its manner of presentation – including commercials (for example, it packaged devastating gas chamber scenes into neat fifteen-minute segments separated by commercials for an air deodorizer and panty shields).

Holocaust was saddled with the dubious term "docudrama," which coproducer Herbert Brodkin now repudiates: "In my mind, what are called 'docudramas' don't exist. We like to take a real situation, then create a drama out of it."[4] The introductory voice-over says: "It is only a story. But it really happened." *What* really happened? Not

Deborah Norton (Marta) and Michael Moriarty (Erik) in *Holocaust*. PHOTO COURTESY OF LEARNING CORPORATION OF AMERICA

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Meryl Streep (Inga) and James Woods (Karl) in *Holocaust*.
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the story of the Weiss family, but the backdrop of events. The second "it" blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, as does the rest of the film. Directed by Marvin Chomsky from a teleplay by Gerald Green, *Holocaust* traces the victimization of the Weiss family – cultured Berlin Jews – by the Nazis, incarnated especially by Erik Dorf (Michael Moriarty). The Weiss family is uprooted, deported, and killed (with the exception of the youngest son, Rudi) in scenes that depict the growth of Nazism, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the "efficiency" of Nazi planning, Auschwitz, the partisans in the forest, the "model" camp Theresienstadt, and the departure of Rudi (Joseph Bottoms) for Palestine.

The ground-breaking telecast sparked a great deal of controversy in the United States; some critics and viewers praised the fine acting of Moriarty, Rosemary Harris, Fritz Weaver, Meryl Streep, James Woods, Tovah Feldshuh, among a uniformly good cast, and the sensitizing effect it could have on mass audiences, while others decried the program for its lack of accuracy (a Jew keeping his suitcase in Auschwitz?!) and melodramatic contrivances. Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, for example, faulted *Holocaust* for distorting the image of the victims: most of those who perished were not cultured Berlin doctors, but ordinary Jews – shopkeepers, housewives, and day laborers as well as Yiddish poets and Talmud scholars – he claimed in an "NBC Reports" program that followed the rebroadcast of *Holocaust* in September 1979. The program came up with some astounding statistics: 220 million people had seen *Holocaust,* and in West Germany alone, 15 million. The broadcast in West Germany on January 22, 23, 25, and 26, 1979, provoked passionate public response. Television station switchboards and newspapers were flooded with reactions attesting to the failure

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of general education and historians regarding Auschwitz. Many writers credited the program with destroying a taboo and creating a climate favorable to discussing the Holocaust at home, work, and school:

> From now on German has been enriched by a new American word "Holocaust," which simultaneously covers the Jewish genocide, the TV movie and its personalized tragedy, and the emotional and political reactions it provoked. These five days of collective emotion seem to have permitted the younger generation to perceive the Auschwitz trauma and the Jews from a totally new perspective, which could be called "the pedagogy of the Holocaust."[5]

Nevertheless, critics of the telecast presented forceful arguments against its aesthetic – and by implication, ethical – shortcomings. Like Elie Wiesel in the *New York Times,* West German critics denounced the "soap opera" and its "kitschy music," inaccuracies, and sensationalism. As an article in *Der Spiegel* put it, "*Holocaust* as docudrama blurs fact, trivializes events, and neither illuminates nor forces one to think about them."[6] Critics ultimately acknowledged – albeit grudgingly – that drama could have more emotional power than documentary, that trivialized information was better than none, and that the history of the Final Solution could be made accessible only through dramatic presentation: "The death of six million is beyond human comprehension, hence empathy, the death of six is not. . . . Finally, critics maintained that Germans had to experience the Holocaust emotionally, even if it was portrayed in Hollywood terms."[7]

More than ten years later, the effects of the program are less palpable. Although an article in a 1979 issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma* claimed "that the fiction of *Holocaust* has more effect, *today* . . . than all the documentary material ever accumulated on the genocide of the Jews,"[8] time has taken its toll. In the opinion of German filmmaker Peter Lilienthal, "*Holocaust* was like a thriller, and the level of the reaction was on the level of the film: how long did it last?"[9] For the *New York Times* television critic John J. O'Connor, "the event demands intensity and a searing vision. NBC's 'Holocaust' can claim neither."[10]

Intensity does not necessarily mean sweeping drama: given the emotion inherent in the subject matter, perhaps the Holocaust requires restraint and a hushed voice – a whisper rather than a shout – as evidenced by the effective understatement of films like Lilienthal's *David* or Markus Imhoof's *The Boat Is Full.* Simplistic and emotionally manipulative, *Holocaust* is characteristic of American feature films on the subject. For example, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Judgment at Nuremberg* – the former originally a hit play and the latter a television drama – depend on a confined theatrical setting, superfluous dialogue, star turns, classical editing (mainly with close-ups), and musical scores whose violins swell at dramatic moments. These studio productions essentially fit the bristling new material of the Holocaust into an old narrative form, thus allowing the viewer to leave the theater feeling complacent instead of concerned or disturbed. The fact that both films are in black and white gives them a stark quality – which is, however, undercut by their lush scores.

The Diary of Anne Frank (1959) was adapted by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett from their 1956 Pulitzer Prize–winning play, based on the published diary of a young victim of the death camps, and some brief location footage was shot of

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the Amsterdam house where she wrote it. Reality also enters by way of documentary footage of camp life. Nevertheless, the authenticity of the tale is compromised by Hollywood conventions of casting and scoring. The thirteen-year-old Anne is played by Millie Perkins, who is clearly much older; when she dresses up, the thin, dark-haired actress bears a striking resemblance to Audrey Hepburn, one of the most popular female stars of the fifties. Peter, the boy on whom she has a crush, is played by Richard Beymer, a teen idol who later played the All-American lead in *West Side Story.* From the very start of the film – a postwar present tense that introduces a long flashback – the soundtrack plays an overly prominent role. Upon returning to his home after the war, Mr. Frank (Joseph Schildkraut) finds and puts on a scarf, and the lush Alfred Newman musical score signals that this is *significant.* (The scarf will subsequently be revealed as a gift from Anne.) The same thing occurs when he is handed Anne's diary; and when Anne and Peter are about to kiss, the music again rises – a redundancy, considering the image. The soundtrack also dominates by means of Anne's voice-over narration, as well as through the punctuation of sirens and Allied bombings that symbolize the continuous danger outside the attic. The only real "cinematic" element added to the play is superimposition, such as the sequence with the sneak thief at the safe on the second floor while at the same time the Jews remain immobile in the attic above. This spatial layering within a fixed frame is an effective device for stressing their claustrophobic life.

Judgment at Nuremberg, directed by Stanley Kramer in 1961, begins with more cinematic élan: an iris shot of a swastika opens up to reveal that the symbol is

Millie Perkins (Anne) in *The Diary of Anne Frank.*
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on a monument. During the credits, we hear a Nazi marching song; the swastika suddenly blows up; and a hand-held camera leads us through a hazy dissolve into ruins. We read "Nuremberg, Germany, 1948" before meeting the crusty American judge Dan Haywood (Spencer Tracy) who has come out of retirement in Maine to pass judgment on four Nazi war criminals. Most of the film is devoted to the tense trials, which are orchestrated mainly by the raging American prosecutor Colonel Tad Lawson (Richard Widmark) and the equally excitable German defense lawyer Hans Rolfe (Maximilian Schell). Their key witnesses are Rudolf Petersen (Montgomery Clift), a nervous young man who was sterilized by the Nazis for political reasons (Rolfe tries to justify the sterilization on the grounds that Petersen is feeble-minded), and Irene Hoffman (Judy Garland), who must be coaxed to testify about a case of "racial pollution." Finally, the most important defendant – the German scholar and jurist Ernst Janning (Burt Lancaster) – breaks his silence. Respected by Judge Dan Haywood for his earlier writings on jurisprudence, Janning now bitterly explains that in a period of indignity, fear, and hunger, Hitler had returned to Germans their pride. "I am aware!" he yells. "Were we deaf? Blind? If we didn't know, it's because we didn't want to know."

Rolfe's trenchant rejoinder is that if Janning is guilty, as he himself insists, then everyone is guilty: the Vatican, Churchill who indirectly praised Hitler in 1938, American industrialists who helped Hitler rebuild his armaments, and so on. The American judge finally indicts the men in the dock because, even if many more people are guilty, these four individuals *were* responsible for their actions. "If these murderers were monsters, this event would have no more moral significance than an earthquake"; on the contrary, he warns the court, "How easily it can happen." After the four men receive sentences of life imprisonment, Rolfe wagers with Judge Haywood (who refuses to accept the bet) that the sentenced men will be free in five years. The prescient cynic's prediction is fulfilled, for the closing title informs us that not one of the ninety-nine defendants sentenced in Nuremberg is still serving time.

This film raises central issues of responsibility – individual, national, and universal – but almost exclusively through dialogue. The self-conscious opening and frequent visual flourishes do not seem anchored in any conception of a unified cinematic style. Perhaps Stanley Kramer thought he was making the film less theatrical by panning 360 degrees around a speaker like Lawson, or zooming into a tight close-up for emphasis; however, both of these techniques seem gratuitous and manipulative. For example, when Lawson takes the stand as commander of the American troops who liberated the camps, he shows harrowing archival footage of the camps and inmates, of children tattooed for extermination. Rather than letting the images imprint themselves upon us, Lawson (and Kramer) hammer them in: Lawson's voice-over is a harangue, and Kramer intercuts reaction shots which force audience identification with the surrogates in the courtroom rather than a personal response. Here, much of the same footage that is used in *Night and Fog* is material for prosecution rather than illumination. And as in Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936), projecting a film in the courtroom carries the self-conscious suggestion that film is equivalent to truth.

Judgment at Nuremberg is more successful in the scenes dramatizing personal relations, relying as it does on the casting of recognizable stars. Some are used for their suggestion of integrity (Tracy, Lancaster, Garland), and the relationship between Haywood and Janning resembles that of Rauffenstein and Boeldieu in *Grand*

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Maximilian Schell (Rolfe) and Richard Widmark (Lawson) in *Judgment at Nuremberg.*
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Illusion, Jean Renoir's classic film about World War I. These men are bound by a code that cuts across national boundaries; their commitment to justice leads to a parallel situation in which the man in charge (Rauffenstein/Haywood) must destroy the other (Boeldieu/Janning), who understands and accepts his fate. On the other hand, Montgomery Clift and Marlene Dietrich connote the dubious psychological or moral states of their own film personas: for example, when the song "Lili Marleen" accompanies Haywood's walk with this German woman, her identity resonates beyond the frame. Dietrich's German accent rings true, whereas Hollywood's traditional neglect of language differences mars other parts of the film. At the beginning of *Judgment at Nuremberg,* there is a realistic quality when Rolfe speaks German and we hear a simultaneous translation. But after a zoom-in to a close-up, he suddenly breaks into English. Subsequently, he and Janning – two Germans – speak English between themselves! It is an accepted convention that an American film should be in English, but a strained one when we initially hear a major character speaking in his native language.

The histrionics of both Rolfe and Lawson are in keeping with their characters.[11] However, a voice of rage is not necessarily the best way to reach an audience; not unlike the violins that enter when Lawson convinces Irene Hoffman to testify, the sentimental tone betrays a fear that the material itself might not be sufficiently compelling. Some might argue that our numbed cinematic and moral senses demand a shout just to shake us out of lethargy. Nevertheless, the danger is that one could get so caught up in the emotion as to be incapable of reflecting on the message.

Otto Preminger's *Exodus* (1960) avoids this danger by presenting Auschwitz through a dispassionate verbal recollection, in the scene where the Irgun (Israeli

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Underground) members interrogate Dov Landau (Sal Mineo) before initiating him. The question-and-answer session about the gas chambers and ovens is powerful not because Dov shouts but because he finally remains silent; he cannot reveal "who dug the graves." His questioner (David Opatoshu) divines that Dov – who entered Auschwitz at the age of twelve – learned about dynamite as a *Sonderkommando,* digging mass graves. With these credentials, he is accepted. Auschwitz thus exists as a prelude to the Israeli struggle, and *Exodus* insists on the connection between Nazi and Arab anti-Semitism: the Grand Mufti's urbane emissary tells Taha (John Derek), the Arab friend of Ari (Paul Newman), that they must destroy the Jews. This emissary is a former Nazi, ready to train new storm troopers.

The Boys from Brazil (1978) is an entertaining thriller that raises some important questions of Nazi continuity, but never really explores them. Adapted from Ira Levin's novel, the film is directed by Franklin J. Schaffner for maximum suspense at the expense of verisimilitude. The rather contrived plot revolves around the attempts of Dr. Josef Mengele (Gregory Peck) and his Nazi network in South America to clone Adolf Hitler, and the efforts of Nazi-hunter Ezra Liebermann (Sir Laurence Olivier) to discover their scheme and stop them. Liebermann learns that Mengele managed to create and deposit around the world ninety-four little Adolf Hitlers (we see at least four incarnations, all played by Jeremy Black) through reproduction of the Führer's blood and skin samples. Mengele's group is to assassinate each of the ninety-four fathers, thus replicating Hitler's lack of a father during his adolescence. These two obsessive dreamers – the chief doctor of Auschwitz and the Jewish survivor clearly modeled after Simon Wiesenthal – finally confront each other at the home of one of Mengele's victims. The sinister physician is killed by a pack of black dogs, and Liebermann subsequently destroys the list of thirteen-year-old Hitler clones still at large.

To its credit, *The Boys from Brazil* calls attention to contemporary indifference – an imprisoned Nazi guard (Uta Hagen) yells at Liebermann, "Thirty years: the world has forgotten. Nobody cares!" – and to the relatively untroubled existence led by Nazis in Paraguay and other countries equally hospitable to war criminals. We see the local military leaders bowing and scraping before Mengele at a party dotted with swastikas. The film also conveys a chilling sense of the impersonality of Nazi death dealing: young "Bobby," one of the Hitler clones, sets the dogs on to or off visitors by calling out "Action!" and "Cut!" as if he were directing a film. And when he tells them to kill Mengele, the order is "Print" – appropriate terminology for the clone of a man who murdered by the "remote control" of barked orders.[12] There is also a striking shot that functions as a visual foreshadowing of the plot: when Liebermann visits the home of the first man murdered by Mengele's organization, he is greeted by a surly, dark-haired, blue-eyed boy. A mirror in the hall reflects – and multiplies – the boy's image, endlessly repeating itself into the heart of the frame (like the famous extended mirror image toward the end of *Citizen Kane*). When the plot reveals that there are dozens of little boys with exactly the same appearance, one is reminded of this shot's expressive construction.

Nevertheless, *The Boys from Brazil* is saddled with typical Hollywood conventions, including recognizable stars like James Mason playing Nazis. (And can we really believe that upstanding Gregory Peck with his Lincolnesque gravity is the man responsible for killing two and a half million prisoners in Auschwitz?) Moreover,

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