

Indelible Shadows

Indelible Shadows investigates questions raised by films about the Holocaust. How does one make a movie that is both morally just and marketable? Annette Insdorf provides sensitive readings of individual films and analyzes theoretical issues such as the “truth claims” of the cinematic medium. The third edition of *Indelible Shadows* includes five new chapters that cover recent trends, as well as rediscoveries of motion pictures made during and just after World War II. It addresses the treatment of rescuers, as in *Schindler’s List*; the controversial use of humor, as in *Life Is Beautiful*; the distorted image of survivors; and the growing genre of documentaries that return to the scene of the crime or rescue. The annotated filmography offers capsule summaries and information about another hundred Holocaust films from around the world, making this edition the most comprehensive and up-to-date discussion of films about the Holocaust, and an invaluable resource for film programmers and educators.

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Indelible Shadows

Film and the Holocaust

Third Edition

Annette Insdorf



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Dedicated to the
Memory of My Father,
Michael Insdorf

and of My Mother-in-Law,
Regina Berman Toporek

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Foreword by Elie Wiesel

A great Hassidic Master, the Rabbi of Kotsk, used to say, “There are truths which can be communicated by the word; there are deeper truths that can be transmitted only by silence; and, on another level, are those which cannot be expressed, not even by silence.”

And yet, they must be communicated.

Here is the dilemma that confronts anyone who plunges into the concentration camp universe: How can one recount when – by the scale and weight of its horror – the event defies language? A problem of expression? Of perception, rather. Auschwitz and Treblinka seem to belong to another time; perhaps they are on the other side of time. They can be explained only in their own terms. Only those who lived there know what these names mean. And for a long time these very people refused to speak of it. “In any case,” they thought, “no one would understand.” An ontological phenomenon, “The Final Solution” is located beyond understanding. Let’s be honest: In this sense, the enemy can boast of his triumph. Through the scope of his deadly enterprise, he deprives us of words to describe it.

Having completed his masterpiece “The Blood of Heaven,” the late Piotr Rawicz was left with a feeling of defeat. Other survivor-writers could say the same. We know very well that we speak at one remove from the event. We have not said what we wanted to. The essential will remain unsaid, eradicated, buried in the ash that covers this story like no other. Hence, the drama of the witness. He realizes, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, that only what cannot be said deserves to not be silenced. But then, what will happen to his testimony? To his deposition? To his knowledge? If he takes them with him in death, he betrays them. Will he remain faithful in trying to articulate them, even badly, even inadequately? The question inexorably asserts itself: Does there exist another way, another language, to say what is unsayable?

The image perhaps? Can it be more accessible, more malleable, more expressive than the word? More true as well? Can I admit it? I am as wary of one as of the other. Even more of the image. Of the filmed image, of course. One does not imagine the unimaginable. And in particular, one does not show it on screen.

Too purist an attitude, no doubt. After all, by what right would we neglect the mass media? By what right would we deny them the possibility of informing, educating, sensitizing the millions of men and women who would normally say, “Hitler, who’s

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he?” But on the other hand, if we allow total freedom to the mass media, don't we risk seeing them profane and trivialize a sacred subject?

These are the serious and disturbing questions Annette Insdorf analyzes with the deep erudition and striking talent that render this daughter of survivors the best critic in America on Holocaust films.

Certain productions dazzle with their authenticity; others shock with their vulgarity. *Night and Fog* on one side, *Holocaust* on the other. Up against Hollywood superproductions, can poetic memory hold its own? Me, I prefer it. I prefer restraint to excess, the murmur of documentary to the script edited by tear-jerk specialists. To direct the massacre of Babi Yar smells of blasphemy. To make up extras as corpses is obscene. Perhaps I am too severe, too demanding, but the Holocaust as filmed romantic adventure seems to me an outrage to the memory of the dead, and to sensitivity.

Nevertheless, I am wrong to generalize. Certain films resonate with us. *The Garden of the Finzi Continis*, *The Boat Is Full*, *The Revolt of Job*, *Under the World* succeed in moving us without falling into cheap sentimentality. *Les Violons du Bal* and *The Shop on Main Street* are works of art. Unlike certain other films, these don't purport to show or explain everything, the how and why of the Nazi era. They reveal to us, like a secret imprint, human beings undergoing the curse of the gods, and that's all. Their restraint, their humility, I'd almost say their self-effacement, contribute to their strength of conviction.

As for documentaries, they present a different kind of difficulty. For the most part, the images derive from enemy sources. The victim had neither cameras nor film. To amuse themselves, or to bring souvenirs back to their families, or to serve Goebbels's propaganda, the killers filmed sequences in one ghetto or another, in one camp or another: The use of these faked, truncated images makes it difficult to omit the poisonous message that motivated them. These Jewish policemen who strike their unfortunate brothers, these starved individuals fighting for a piece of bread, these “VIPs” who, in the midst of the most naked misery, spend their evenings at the cabaret – will the viewer continue to remember that these films were made by the killers to show the downfall and the baseness of their so-called subhuman victims? Nevertheless, we can't do without these images, which, in their truthful context, assume a primordial importance for the eventual comprehension of the concentration camps' existence.

Annette Insdorf treats these ambiguities with tact and passion. Her criticism is never gratuitous; her enthusiasm, often contagious. While discussing films, she manages to take a step back and evoke – in the name of a nameless suffering – the fear and the hope of a generation for whom everything is still a mystery.

(Translated from the French by Annette Insdorf)

Preface

Ever since I was a little girl, I have heard about “the camp,” “Auschwitz,” “Lager,” “Belsen” – words mysteriously connected with the number tattooed on my mother’s arm. Throughout my adolescence, I never tried to know more: it embarrassed me when my mother got visibly emotional about painful memories of her experiences. When I was a graduate student at Yale, however, I saw the film *Night and Fog*, and, for the first time, I had an inkling of what my parents – among others – had endured. The film provided a shape for, and a handle on, abstract fears. It occurred to me that if I, the only child of Holocaust survivors, needed a film to frame the horror and thus give it meaning, what about others? How great a role are films playing in determining contemporary awareness of the Final Solution?

As my involvement with the cinema grew, I began writing a screenplay in 1979, based on my father’s escape from a labor camp, and his hiding in the woods with Polish peasants. The more I struggled to reshape the true stories, the more I realized how difficult it is to make a film about this era. How do you show people being butchered? How much emotion is too much? How will viewers respond to lighthearted moments in the midst of suffering? I was caught between the conflicting demands of historical accuracy and artistic quality. As I sat in Paris movie houses and observed how other filmmakers had yielded to or had overcome such obstacles, I put the screenplay away, and decided to wait until I had more distance from the stories of my father and his heroic cousin – and until I had learned from what others had done on screen.

Perhaps Elie Wiesel’s comments about Holocaust literature are applicable to film. In *A Jew Today*, he declares: “There is no such thing as Holocaust literature – there cannot be. Auschwitz negates all literature as it negates all theories and doctrines; to lock it into a philosophy is to restrict it. To substitute words, any words, for it is to distort it. A Holocaust literature? The very term is a contradiction.”¹ And to substitute images? Can the camera succeed where the pen falters? These questions gave rise to the following pages, where the reader will find a descriptive voice yielding to a prescriptive one, and film scholarship tinged with moral concerns. I have decided to respect both tones, for the tension between them is inherent in the cinematic experience; surely the goal of the film critic (like that of the filmmaker) is to move as well as observe, to challenge as well as record, and to transform as well as perceive. Moreover, as Terrence Des Pres articulated at a “Teaching Holocaust Literature” session of the 1981 Modern

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Language Association conference, there is a moral imperative implicit in this subject, and a natural connection between consciousness and conscience.

I wish to acknowledge the inspiration and encouragement of Terrence Des Pres, as well as the kind assistance of my agent Georges Borchardt, Robert Bender, Harold Bloom, Norman Briski, Karen Cooper, Florence Favre Le Bret, Renee Furst, Claude Gauteur, Miriam Hansen, Bernard Henri-Lévy, John Hollander, John Hughes, Michael Insdorf, Stanley Kauffmann, Howard Lamar, Robert Liebman, Arnost Lustig, Peter Morley, Marcel Ophuls, Alan Parker, Alain Resnais, Jeannie Reynolds, Robert Seaver, Charles Silver, François Truffaut, Claude Vajda, Michael Webb, Elie Wiesel, Ken Wlaschin, John Wright, Dan Yakir. For assistance during the preparation of the second edition, I must add the generosity of Arthur Cohn, Axel Corti, Eva Fogelman, Guy Hennebel, Aviva Kempner, Elizabeth Maguire, and Louis Malle.

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Introduction

Filmmakers and film critics confronting the Holocaust face a basic task – finding an appropriate language for that which is mute or defies visualization. How do we lead a camera or pen to penetrate history and create art, as opposed to merely recording events? What are the formal as well as moral responsibilities if we are to understand and communicate the complexities of the Holocaust through its filmic representations? Such questions seem increasingly pressing, for the number of post-war films dealing with the Nazi era is steadily growing. I had seen at least sixty such films from around the world by 1980; when I completed the first edition of this book in 1982, another twenty had been produced; and by 1988 there were approximately one hundred new films – forty fiction, sixty documentary – that merited inclusion.

My point of departure is therefore the growing body of cinematic work – primarily fiction – that illuminates, distorts, confronts, or reduces the Holocaust. Rather than prove a thesis, I wish to explore the degree to which these films manifest artistic as well as moral integrity. The focus is on the cinema of the United States, France, Poland, Italy, and Germany,¹ because these countries have released the most significant, accessible, and available films about the Holocaust. This new edition also covers many recent films from Austria and the Netherlands. Throughout Eastern Europe, fine films have treated the effects of World War II, but they are difficult to see in the United States. (Titles are included in the Filmography.)

While it might have been easier to structure the book by chronology or nation, I have chosen a thematic approach because a number of central issues emerged from the films themselves:

1. The development of a suitable cinematic language for a unique and staggering subject. I contrast Hollywood's realism and melodramatic conventions with the tense styles and dialectical montage of many European films, as well as present notable American exceptions. This section includes discussion of the savage satire in black comedies about the Holocaust.
2. Narrative strategies such as the Jew as child; the Jew as wealthy, attractive, and assimilated; characters in hiding whose survival depends on performance; families doomed by legacies of guilt.



The Vilner Troupe, from *Image before My Eyes*, directed by Josh Waletzky. PHOTO COURTESY OF CINEMA 5

3. Responses to Nazi atrocity, from political resistance to individual transformations of identity, and to the guilt-ridden questions posed by contemporary German films.
4. A new form – neither documentary nor fiction – that shapes documentary material through a personal voice. Here, attention is paid to the films made by survivors, their children, and especially to the works of Marcel Ophuls.

A major question throughout *Indelible Shadows* is how certain cinematic devices express or evade the moral issues inherent in the subject. For example, how is Alain Resnais's tracking camera in *Night and Fog* involved in moral investigation? In what ways does editing not only shape but embody the very content of *The Pawnbroker* or *The Memory of Justice*? And to what degree can montage be manipulative? On a national scale, what change in attitude, if any, is implied by the sudden surge in the early seventies of French films dealing with deportation and collaboration? What about the increasing number of German films that are finally turning their lenses onto the Nazi era? Whether the film is a dark comedy like Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* or an enlightening drama like Andrzej Munk's *Passenger*, these works suggest both the possibilities and limitations of nondocumentary approaches to World War II, especially the ghetto and concentration camp experience.

The term "Holocaust" requires definition, for popular usage has particularized it from a general idea of disaster to the brutal and massive devastation practiced by the Nazis during World War II. I have chosen to use the word in this latter sense, and more precisely to refer to the genocide of European Jewry. For unlike their fellow victims of the Nazis – such as political opponents, Gypsies, and homosexuals – Jews were stripped not only of life and freedom, but of an entire culture that flourished throughout Eastern Europe in the early thirties. As chronicled in Josh Waletzky's superb documentary *Image before My Eyes* (1980), Polish-Jewish civilization was highly developed between the wars and included experimental education (a Montessori school in Vilna), progressive politics (the *Bund*, a Jewish Socialist party), and ripe

artistic movements (Yiddish writers' groups like *Di Khalyastre*). The Nazis' avowed intention was not merely to annihilate the Jews, but to wipe their traces from history, and to destroy the very notion that a Jew was a human being. Even within the concentration camps, the Nazis developed a hierarchy among inmates: political prisoners were enemies, but Jews were insects. Hitler declared, "Anti-Semitism is a form of de-lousing . . . a matter of sanitation." Among the female inmates in Auschwitz, for instance, only the Jewish women's heads were shaved.

One of the dangers inherent in my argument, however, is the assumption that the Holocaust "belongs" to – or is the domain of – one set of victims more than another. Does the Holocaust belong to the survivors? To those who were killed during World War II? To those who died in concentration camps or ghettos? To the Jews who were the main targets of the Nazis? To all Jews today? Some individuals claim the Holocaust as a personal tragedy. Many Jews claim it as a religious one. And then there are those who had no direct experience of the Holocaust but feel transformed by learning of its cruelty and mass indifference – as well as of resistance and survival.

And to whom do the dead "belong"? The ending of *Just a Gigolo* (1979), an otherwise negligible British film, presents a chilling image of appropriation: a bumbling young man (David Bowie) with no interest in politics is accidentally killed in a street fight between a Nazi group and its adversaries. The Nazi leader (David Hemmings, who also directed the film) takes the corpse, dresses it in the brown-shirted uniform of the SA, and has the young "hero" displayed and buried as a Nazi. How many of the dead are likewise unable to defend themselves from the post-factum appropriation of groups who claim the Holocaust as theirs?

The Holocaust is often exploited by those who simply have access to the media. The only versions of Nazi persecution that we see in film are the few that have made it to the screen, and often this is less a question of choice, quality, or logic than of chance: the commercial exigencies of film make it a dubious form for communicating the truth of World War II, given box-office dependence on sex, violence, a simple plot, easy laughs, and so on. Nevertheless, it is primarily through motion pictures that the mass audience knows – and will continue to learn – about the Nazi era and its victims. Whenever I show *Night and Fog* in my courses, students are shocked and profoundly moved, for it is generally their first encounter with the palpable images of Auschwitz.

The cinema thus fulfills the function articulated by film theorist Siegfried Kracauer about thirty years ago. In his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, the morally vigorous German critic recounted the myth of the Gorgon Medusa,

whose face, with its huge teeth and protruding tongue, was so horrible that the sheer sight of it turned men and beasts into stone. When Athena instigated Perseus to slay the monster, she therefore warned him never to look at the face itself but only at its mirror reflection in the polished shield she had given him. Following her advice, Perseus cut off Medusa's head with the sickle which Hermes had contributed to his equipment.

The moral of the myth is, of course, that we do not, and cannot, see actual horrors because they paralyze us with blinding fear; and that we shall know what they look like only by watching images of them which reproduce their true appearance . . . the reflection of happenings which would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life. The film screen is Athena's polished shield.²

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Kracauer's analogy is particularly apt for films that show or reconstruct scenes of ghettos, deportation, and extermination. However, his argument includes the belief that "these images have nothing in common with the artist's imaginative rendering of an unseen dread but are in the nature of mirror reflections." To merely show the savage surfaces of Auschwitz might not lead to much beyond a numbing of response. One of the purposes of this book is to see how filmmakers apply their art in shaping history into a heightened form of communication.

Kracauer understood "that the images on the shield or screen are a means to an end; they are to enable – or by extension, induce – the spectator to behold the horror they mirror." But we are bound to raise the same question as Kracauer: Do such films serve the purpose? His conclusion was that the mirror reflections of horror are an end in themselves, beckoning the spectator "to take them in and thus incorporate into his memory the real face of things too dreadful to be beheld in reality. In experiencing . . . the litter of tortured human bodies in the films made of the Nazi concentration camps, we redeem horror from its invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination."

In fifty years, the average person will probably not be drawn to source material like archival footage from the camps, or the Warsaw Ghetto diaries of Emanuel Ringelblum or Janusz Korczak. Knowledge of the Holocaust might be filtered through the fictions of the television program *Holocaust* and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. This places a special burden on the filmmaker who is trying to illuminate rather than exploit the Holocaust – and on the film critic with a stake in historical truth. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., warned, "fiction films do live as much by cumulative dramatic convention as they do by fidelity to fact, and addiction to stereotypes dilutes their value as historical evidence."³ Does this mean that more first-person accounts by survivors must be filmed before they die? Certainly, but even survivors' accounts can provide only a segment of the truth: many of the most courageous victims perished. Each individual story is a sorely needed (and often dramatically rich) piece of the puzzle. Other pieces might never be found. For example, how many of the six million Jews died not as passive victims but as active opponents of the Third Reich?

Some of these questions require historical and theoretical analysis which falls outside the scope of this book. The issue of anti-Semitism is a case in point: it was not born with the Holocaust. As Bernard Henri-Lévy demonstrates in *The Testament of God*, Jews have always constituted a threat to national authority. Throughout history, they have embodied perpetual resistance to oppression, from ancient Egypt to contemporary Russia. As thinkers ready to transform governments and structures of life, many Jews represent subversion – in the most resilient and constructive sense of the word. It is not hard to understand why some ideologues of the Argentine military dictatorship singled out three Jews in their verbal assault on Jacobo Timerman:

One of the most elaborate definitions went as follows: "Argentina has three main enemies: Karl Marx, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of society; Sigmund Freud, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of the family; and Albert Einstein, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of time and space."⁴

It is significant that this scene comes not from a German concentration camp but from an Argentine prison in the 1970s.

It might appear facile and cheap to compare the destruction of European Jewry with other attempts at genocide; after all, there is no comparison for the rabid persecution of individuals who were a respected and assimilated part of European life, especially after it became strategically unsound for trains to transport concentration camp inmates rather than the soldiers and ammunition needed for battle. Nevertheless, the impulse behind Nazism – if not the massive scale of its realization – has been shared by other peoples and nations. This can take the form of synagogue bombings in Paris, marches in Skokie, or witch hunts in Argentina.

Consequently, the avowed purpose of this book is not merely an exercise in film criticism, but a grappling with the legacy of the Holocaust. As long as there are people like Professor Faurisson in France who proclaim in print that the gas chambers did not exist, there must be active resistance by those who know they did exist. The luxury of forgetfulness is not possible, because the Holocaust is neither a closed chapter nor an isolated event. As Alain Resnais explained to me about his film *Night and Fog*: “The constant idea was to not make a monument to the dead, turned to the past. If this existed, it could happen again; it exists now in another form.” I hope that the following pages result in insight and incitement, reflecting the conviction that films not only commemorate the dead but illuminate the price to be paid for unquestioned obedience to governmental authority. In recognizing our ability to identify with characters, whether Jewish, German, Kapo, or Communist, we move one step closer to guarding against that which permitted the Holocaust to develop – indifference. Perhaps the beam cast by film projectors can pierce the continuing willed blindness.