

The Shoah in Film: A Valuable Contribution to the Historiography of the Holocaust and a Glimpse into the Shuttered Voices of the Shoah

La Shoah en el cine: una contribución sustancial a la historiografía del Holocausto y una mirada a las voces silenciadas de la Shoah

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Abstract

Almost all the voices of the six million Jewish men, women, and children who perished in the Shoah were shuttered in the massacres of the *Einsatzgruppen* and inside the gas chambers (and vans) of the six German extermination camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka II, Bełżec, Sobibór, Chełmno, and Majdanek). Some of the victims' accounts and chronicles have survived, and these testimonies remain today a fraction of the millions of voices that were lost forever. In this paper, I argue that the (reconstructed and often fictionalized) voices that can be found in Holocaust feature films represent a homage to the victims, and that these films (independently of their commercial success or their minor historical errors) bring the victims' suffering, antisemitism, the ghettos, the transports, the massacres, the *Vernichtungslager* (VL) and the *Konzentrationslager* (KZ) to the attention of the vast public, and represent a glimpse into the shuttered voices of the Shoah. I also argue that, approached with caution, Holocaust films (antisemitic German propaganda films, post-war documentaries and post-war feature films) can be a valuable contribution to the historiography of the Shoah.

Keywords

Shoah, Holocaust, historiography, antisemitism, Holocaust films, Jewish victims

Resumen

Casi todas las voces de los seis millones de hombres, mujeres y niños judíos que perecieron en la Shoah fueron silenciadas en las masacres de los *Einsatzgruppen* y en las cámaras (y camiones) de gas de los seis campos de exterminio alemanes (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka II, Bełżec, Sobibór, Chełmno y Majdanek). Algunos de los relatos y crónicas de las víctimas han sobrevivido, y estos testimonios son solamente un fragmento de los millones de voces que se perdieron para siempre. En el presente artículo sostengo que las voces (reconstruidas y a menudo ficcionalizadas) que pueden encontrarse en los largometrajes sobre la Shoah representan un homenaje a las víctimas, y que estas películas (independientemente de su éxito comercial o de sus pequeños errores históricos) dan a conocer al gran público el sufrimiento de las víctimas, el antisemitismo, los guetos, los transportes, las masacres, los *Vernichtungslager* (VL) y los *Konzentrationslager* (KZ) y representan un acercamiento a las voces silenciadas de la Shoah. También sostengo que,

abordada con cautela, la filmografía sobre el Holocausto (películas propagandísticas antisemitas alemanas, documentales de posguerra y largometrajes de posguerra) pueden ser una valiosa contribución a la historiografía de la Shoah.

Palabras clave

Shoah, Holocausto, historiografía, antisemitismo, filmografía sobre la Shoah, víctimas judías

Introduction

The Shoah is, without a doubt, a turning point in history, philosophy, and theology. The “incomparable uniqueness of the Holocaust”¹ is absolutely horrific; however, the Shoah “was an event which was *both* unique and universal”:² indeed, it was a tragedy for the Jewish people and for all humanity. Yehuda Bauer argues that the Holocaust “has assumed the role of universal symbol for all evil because it presents the most extreme form of genocide, because it contains elements that are without precedent”.³ Katz states: “The Holocaust (...) is historically and phenomenologically unique”;⁴ Rubenstein points out the religious dimension as responsible for this unicity: “No other instance of genocide (...) elicits associations so directly to the Bible (...) as does the Holocaust”;⁵ Kaufman states: “The uniqueness of the Jewish tragedy in the Holocaust is that Jews were murdered not because of their own faith but because of the faith affirmed by their ancestors”.⁶ In *Shoah*, Hilberg defines the Holocaust as an unprecedented catastrophe where antisemitism was nothing new, but where the Germans invented for the first time in history the meticulously planned extermination of the entire European Jewish community: the so-called *Endlösung*:

They invented very little. They did not invent the portrait of the Jew which [...] was taken [...] from writings going back to the sixteenth century [...] [,] from Martin Luther to the 19th century [...] They had to become inventive with the Final Solution. That was their great invention [...] When the bureaucracy moves into [the Final Solution], that was a turning point in history. And the Final Solution [...] is really final because people who are converted can yet, in secret, be Jews; people who are expelled can yet return; but people who are dead will not reappear [...] This was something unprecedented and something new.⁷

Six million⁸ Jewish men, women, and children perished in the Holocaust, under the most horrific conditions. The Shoah was devised, meticulously planned and carried out

¹ Ronnie S. Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust. Its History and Meaning* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (US: Yale University Press, 2002), 270.

⁴ Steven T. Katz, “The Uniqueness of the Holocaust: The Historical Dimension”, in *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, ed. Alan S. Rosenbaum (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 49.

⁵ Richard L. Rubenstein, “Religion and the Uniqueness of the Holocaust”, in *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, ed. Alan S. Rosenbaum (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 35.

⁶ William E. Kaufman, *Contemporary Jewish Philosophies* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1992), 109.

⁷ Raul Hilberg in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*.

⁸ As Saul Friedländer states: “an exact estimate of the number of the victims of the Holocaust is not possible [...] Between five and six million had been killed”, *The Years of Extermination. Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939–1945* (London: Phoenix, 2008), 793, 662. Raul Hilberg gives an estimate of 5,100,000 Jewish

by Germany with appalling efficiency: “While members of other national groups aided the Germans in their slaughter of Jews, the commission of the Holocaust was primarily a German undertaking”.⁹ Since I strongly believe that the Holocaust was a product “made in Germany”, I will therefore use “German” in this paper, and not “Nazi”, since many Germans who were a cog in the vast (antisemitic and bureaucratic) machine that started with discrimination and ended with the massacres of the *Einsatzgruppen* and the gas chambers were not even Nazis, but just ordinary Germans. Jean Améry wrote some of the most coherent words about collective guilt in *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*: he argues that, although guilt is always individual, if we add all the individual guilts in the 1930s and 1940s in Germany, the result is an overwhelming guilty majority; he also states that it is impossible to erase twelve years of a country’s history (so, if the German people are proud of their composers and poets, they ought to be at the same time terribly ashamed of the Holocaust). Bauer states that “Goldhagen is absolutely right when he insists, contra his critics, that by 1940-1941 German society had become a reservoir for willing executioners”,¹⁰ and Browning asserts: “As the story of Reserve Police Battalion 101 demonstrates, mass murder and routine had become one. Normality itself had become exceedingly abnormal”.¹¹ Avisar declares that the “refusal to acknowledge that the perpetrators of the incomparable crime were Germans and that the main victims were Jews means ignoring the crucial facts of history”.¹² Furthermore, during the 1930s and 1940s, I believe that the British were British, the French were French, the Italians were Italians, the Poles were Poles, the Ukrainians were Ukrainians, and the Germans were Germans.

It is absolutely obvious that nothing can give a better depiction of the Shoah than oral and written testimonies from the victims and survivors. Autobiography is, indeed, the “most direct form of history”.¹³ Nevertheless, I argue that Holocaust feature films (even with their historical inaccuracies) represent a homage to the victims. Why? Because

victims (*The Destruction of the European Jews*. CT: Martino Fine Books, 2019), 767 (estimate which is on the low side, as Friedländer argues). Donald Niewyk and Francis Nicosia give an estimate of more than 5,000,000 Jewish victims (*The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 45. Léon Poliakov and Josef Wulf state: “6 000 000 Juden erlitten den Tod”, *Das Dritte Reich und die Juden: Dokumente und Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1987 – originally published in 1955), 226, and give the figure of 5,978,000 (on page 229) given by Jacob Leszczynski in “Bilan de l’extermination” (edited by the World Jewish Congress, June 1946); Poliakov adds: “Sechs Millionen sind statistisch und dokumentarisch bestätigt”, 234. Yehuda Bauer gives a total of 5,700,000-5,860,000 Jewish victims, and states: “During the Holocaust, probably 5.8 million Jewish people died” (*A History of the Holocaust*, Danbury: Franklin Watts, 2001). Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth give the number of “six million Jewish lives” (*Approaches to Auschwitz*, London: SCM Press, 1987, 6). Lucy S. Dawidowicz dedicates *The Golden Tradition. Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1996) “IN REMEMBRANCE of Zelig and Riva Kalmanovich d. Estonia, 1943, TWO OF SIX MILLION”. According to Yad Vashem, the estimate number of Jewish victims is near six million: “More than four million eight hundred thousand of the near six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their accomplices are commemorated here [...] The names of more than one million of those who were murdered remain unknown”. “The Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names”. Yad Vashem, <https://yvng.yadvashem.org/>.

⁹ Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1997), 6.

¹⁰ Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 102.

¹¹ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2001), xvii.

¹² Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust. Cinema’s Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 91.

¹³ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Golden Tradition*, 6.

they tend to reach a wide public (not only scholars) and contribute to the fact that the Holocaust and its six million victims are not forgotten. Even if Claude Lanzmann “denounced *Schindler’s List* as the antithesis of *Shoah*”,¹⁴ and even if scholars debate about “the potential impact of films about the Holocaust on memory, historical knowledge and historical consciousness”,¹⁵ it is important to remember that Holocaust feature films have a huge impact on a broad audience: “Reading about European Jews being executed is not the same as watching it on the screen (...) Film has the ability to recreate the past in a way that can bring its audience closer to the truth, which is ultimately the paramount purpose in historical movies”.¹⁶ Indeed, Shoah feature films can teach current and future generations about the atrocities committed by the Germans and their collaborators, giving a voice to the millions of Jewish victims who were massacred by the *Einsatzgruppen* and who became ashes in the crematoria of the six German extermination camps (*Vernichtungslager*): Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka II, Belżec, Sobibór, Chełmno, and Majdanek.¹⁷

In the present paper I discuss the value of written and oral testimonies from victims and survivors (first section of the present paper), the value of putrid antisemitic German propaganda films (second section), the value of post-war documentaries about the Shoah (third section), I state that Holocaust feature films are powerful (fourth section of the present paper), I discuss feature films that depict daily life in the ghettos (fifth section), feature films that depict extermination (sixth section), feature films that depict concentration camps (seventh section), feature films that depict antisemitism after the Holocaust (eighth section), and feature films that depict the failure of justice (ninth section); before the Conclusion, I open a discussion about the value of comedy-drama feature films about the Shoah (tenth section).

Concerning the debate about what films can provide for the historiography of the Holocaust, I argue that, seen with a critical lens and prioritizing historical accuracy, antisemitic German propaganda films, post-war documentaries and post-war feature films can be a positive, useful and valuable contribution to the historiography of the Shoah.

Written and oral testimonies of victims and survivors: the paramount sources

The heartbreaking oral testimonies preserved by the USC Shoah Foundation, the written testimonies of survivors, and the contemporary testimonies of victims who perished, like the diaries, poems, short stories, drawings, watercolors, and even jokes known as the *Oyneg Shabes* Archive (the Ringelblum Archive) (some 6,000 documents

¹⁴ Lawrence Baron, “Film”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 452.

¹⁵ Stefanie Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film: Audience Reception between Preconceptions and Media Effects”, *History and Memory*, [vol.] 3, 1 (2018): 151.

¹⁶ Adam J. Ring, “Studying History through Film: A Reflection”, *Journeys into the Past. An online Journal of Miami University’s History Department*, (February 7, 2019). <https://sites.miamioh.edu/hst-journeys/2019/02/studying-history-through-film-a-reflection/>.

¹⁷ Some scholars do not consider Majdanek an extermination camp; but, nevertheless, “Majdanek [...] shared with Auschwitz the distinction of combining extermination and concentration camp facilities” (Niewyk and Nicosia, *The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust*, 21). Saul Friedländer states: “the ‘Aktion Reinhardt’ camps [were] Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Majdanek at a later stage” (*The Years of Extermination*, 346).

containing about 35,000 pages)¹⁸ are a poignant and tragic evidence of the Shoah: “During the Holocaust hundreds of individuals wrote. They wrote diaries, laments for murdered children, essays, poetry, and fiction”.¹⁹

As it is known, the *Oyneg Shabes* was led by Emanuel Ringelblum (murdered along his wife and son by the Germans in 1944 in Warsaw), Chaim Aron Kaplan (gassed in Treblinka II in 1942), Gela Seksztajn (killed in April 1943 during the Warsaw ghetto uprising), Josef Kirman (murdered during the liquidation of KZ Poniatowa in 1943), rabbi Shimon Huberband (gassed in Treblinka II in 1942), and other Jewish men and women who collected material about the Warsaw ghetto, wrote, drew, painted, and left an invaluable record for the future: “fragments and pieces remain the only traces of individuals who vanished forever”.²⁰

The *Sonderkommandos* have left us horrific testimonies that describe the arrivals of the transports to the *Vernichtungslager* (VL) and the actual extermination: *Sonderbehandlung. Meine Jahre in den Krematorien und Gaskammern von Auschwitz* by Filip Müller, *Die Falle mit dem grünen Zaun: Überleben in Treblinka* by Richard Glazar, *Dans l'enfer des chambres à gaz* by Shlomo Venezia, and the so-called *Scrolls of Auschwitz* (testimonies by Leib Langfus, Zalman Lewental, Zalmen Gradowski, and other *Sonderkommandos* who did not survive).

Other accounts that speak of deportation, atrocity, loss, and survival are the testimonies of Primo Levi (*Se questo è un uomo, La tregua, Il sistema periodico, I sommersi e i salvati*), Simon Wiesenthal (*Die Sonnenblume*), Elie Wiesel (*La nuit*), Jean Améry (*Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*), Viktor Frankl (*...trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen. Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager* – known in the USA and in the UK as *Man's Search for Meaning*), and Abraham Sutzkever (*Fun vilner geto*).²¹ Some survivors (David Olère, Leo Haas and Halina Ołomucka) portrayed the ghettos, the KZ, the VL, and the gas chambers in heartbreaking drawings, paintings, and sculptures.

The testimonies of victims and survivors occupy, indisputably and undeniably, a paramount and uppermost place in the historiography of the Shoah. But, what about antisemitic German propaganda films, post-war documentaries, and post-war feature films?

¹⁸ The 38 Polish-language version volumes (*Archiwum Ringelbluma*) are available online at Centralna Biblioteka Judaistyczna, <https://cbj.jhi.pl/collections/749436>. The English-language version (*The Ringelblum Archive*) comprises five volumes so far, and it is also available at Centralna Biblioteka Judaistyczna, <https://cbj.jhi.pl/collections/1274292>. Some documents translated into English can also be found in *Voices from the Warsaw Ghetto. Writing Our History*, ed. David G. Roskies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). Ringelblum wrote originally in Yiddish: “During three and a half years the ghetto archive was run by the group called Oyneg Shabes [...] The Germans did not care what the Jews did in their own homes. So the Jews began to write. Everyone wrote: journalists, writers, teachers, community activists, young people, even children [...] A great deal was written, but the largest part by far was destroyed along with the end of Warsaw Jewry in the Deportation. All that remained was the material preserved in O[yneg] S[habes]”, “Oyneg Shabes”, in *Voices from the Warsaw Ghetto. Writing Our History*, 35, 36-37.

¹⁹ Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

²¹ פון ווילנער געטא *Yiddish Book Center*. Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc210761/sutzkever-abraham-fun-vilner-geto>.

The value of antisemitic German propaganda films

Even if it may seem paradoxical, other valuable sources (approached with extreme caution) are the grotesque antisemitic German propaganda films of the 1930s and 1940s (pseudo-documentaries and propaganda feature films). We can actually learn a lot from *Triumph des Willens* (1935), *Jud Süß* (1940), and the revolting, perverse and preposterous *Der ewige Jude* (1940). *Triumph des Willens* (with a nauseating use of swastikas and torches) depicts the Nuremberg Rally of 1934, and the SA, the SS, the *Hitlerjugend* and the masses pathetically glorifying Hitler; *Jud Süß* distorts with antisemitic stereotypes all the Jewish characters; *Der ewige Jude* (described in the opening credits as “*Ein dokumentarischer Film*”) is an outrageous attempt (imbued with brutal antisemitism) to dehumanize the Jewish people: it includes excerpts from the Warsaw ghetto and the Łódź ghetto, and it ends with the infamous Hitler's speech of January 30, 1939, promising the extermination of the Jewish people in case of war.²²

All these propaganda films enjoyed great success: “*Jud Süß* was launched at the Venice Film Festival, in September 1940, to extraordinary acclaim; it received the ‘Golden Lion’ award (...) The film's popular success was overwhelming (...) By 1943 the number of viewers had reached 20.3 million”.²³ Indeed, film served “as a mass mobilizer and an ideological weapon”.²⁴ Both in *Jud Süß* and in *Der ewige Jude* “the goal was the same: to elicit fear, disgust, and hatred”.²⁵

Today, it is crucial to state that the only ones dehumanized in these hateful German propaganda films are the own Germans who produced these abominable films.

Post-war documentaries about the Shoah

Although it is true that even in documentaries “there are hidden pitfalls that compromise the integrity of historic representation”,²⁶ the value of Holocaust documentaries cannot be denied. Post-war documentaries (approached with caution) constitute a significant addition to the historiography of the Shoah.

Some documentaries that depict the atrocities committed by Germany against the Jewish people are Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* (1956), Arnold Schwartzman's *Genocide* (1982) (introduced by Simon Wiesenthal), Irmgard von zur Mühlen's *Die Befreiung von Auschwitz* (1984), Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour-long documentary (without any historical footage) *Shoah* (1985) (with the testimonies of Polish Jewish Chelmno *Sonderkommandos* Szymon Srebnik and Mordechai Podchlebnik, Polish Jewish Treblinka *Sonderkommando* Abraham Bomba, Czech Jewish Treblinka *Sonderkommando* Richard Glazar, and Slovak Jewish Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* Filip Müller) – which is probably the best documentary about the Shoah ever made –,²⁷

²² “The film closed on Hitler's January 30, 1939, speech to the Reichstag, announcing that in the case of another world war, the European nations would not be destroyed, but the Jewish race would be exterminated”, Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 100-101.

²³ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁴ Eric Rentschler, “German feature Films 1933-1945”, *Monatshefte*, [vol.] 82, 3 (1990): 257.

²⁵ Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 102.

²⁶ Gary Foley, “What are the limits, and the possibilities, for representing the Holocaust on film?”, *The Power of Whiteness and Other Essays* (Centre for Indigenous Education, University of Melbourne), 91.

²⁷ Ilan Avisar states: “Lanzmann's *Shoah* [...] has been recognized as a documentary masterpiece by film critics and as a canonical text in Holocaust studies primarily because of its relentless presentation of the

Tadeusz Wudzki's *Auschwitz* (1991), *The Last Days* (1998), directed by James Moll and produced by Steven Spielberg (with the testimony of Greek Jewish Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* Dario Gabbai), Ireneusz Dobrowolski's *Portrecista* (2006) (with Wilhelm Brasse, the Polish photographer who took the famous Auschwitz portraits), and, more recently, Suniti Somaiya's *Survivors: Portraits of the Holocaust* (2022).

The power of Holocaust feature films

Elie Wiesel said: “Parfois l’on me demande si je connais ‘la réponse à Auschwitz’; je répons que je ne la connais pas; je ne sais même pas si une tragédie de cette ampleur possède une réponse”.²⁸ The Holocaust “was perhaps the most savage and significant single crime in recorded history; yet, it remains, on many levels, an unfathomable mystery”.²⁹ Yehuda Bauer argues that “the Holocaust is a human event, so it can be explained”;³⁰ and he adds: “This does not mean that the explanation is easy. On the contrary”. Feature films, in any way, get closer to that answer; nevertheless, they can be a valid contribution to the historiography of the Shoah and surely represent a homage to the victims whose voices were silenced forever, constituting a valuable source of remembrance.

After the liberation of the *Konzentrationslager* and of the only *Vernichtungslager* left, Auschwitz-Birkenau,³¹ and after the unconditional surrender of Germany signed on May 7 (Reims) and on May 8 (Berlin), 1945, the general mood was to forget the German atrocities, the gas chambers, the massacres, the ghettos, and the war; thus, only a few feature films talked about the Shoah: some showed some original footage of concentration camps (*The Stranger* by Orson Welles, 1946) and others just depicted evil Nazis who had escaped justice (*Notorious* by Alfred Hitchcock, 1946). Later on, and especially from the 1960s onwards, due to the Eichmann Trial, the Shoah seemed to emerge from oblivion.

I will talk next about some brilliant Holocaust feature films, which I found extremely compelling and (mostly) accurate. These Holocaust feature films have made (and will surely make, in future generations) the voices of the victims resonate in the heads and hearts of millions of viewers across the world; and that makes them extremely powerful, valuable, and necessary.

Feature films that depict daily life in the ghettos

On November 10, 1939, Jewish men and women, boys and girls above twelve years of age in the *Generalgouvernement* were ordered by the Germans to wear the

core of the horrors, its consistent attention to the details of the mechanism of genocide, and its formal strategies for bridging the chasm that separates the viewer from the unimaginable”, “Holocaust Movies and the Politics of Collective Memory”, in *Thinking About the Holocaust After Half a Century*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 40.

²⁸ Elie Wiesel, Préface, *La nuit* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2012), 23.

²⁹ Ronnie S. Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust. Its History and Meaning*, 3.

³⁰ Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 7.

³¹ Bełżec was dismantled by the Germans in June 1943; Treblinka II was dismantled in the fall 1943 (the *Sonderkommando* uprising took place on August 2, 1943, and speeded up the dismantling); Sobibór was dismantled by the Germans right after the *Sonderkommando* uprising in October 14, 1943; Majdanek was liberated by the Red Army in July 1944, and the Germans left Chełmno on January 17, 1945. As it is known, the Red Army entered the gigantic Auschwitz complex on January 27, 1945.

Judenstern.³² Possibly the two most famous films about life in German-occupied ghettos are *Schindler's List* (set in the Kraków ghetto) and *The Pianist* (set in the Warsaw ghetto).

Schindler's List (1993), directed by Steven Spielberg and written by Steven Zaillian (based on the book *Schindler's Ark* by Thomas Keneally) (with cinematography by Janusz Kaminski and music by John Williams, with Liam Neeson, Ralph Fiennes, Ben Kingsley, and Embeth Davidtz) depicts the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto (March 13, 1943), KZ Płaszów, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Kraków ghetto had been sealed in March 1941 (trapping inside 18,000 Jewish men, women, and children). The survivors of the ghetto massacre were gassed in Bełżec, sent to KZ Płaszów, or gassed in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The little girl in the red coat clearly symbolizes the 1,500,000³³ Jewish children who perished in the Shoah.

The Pianist (2002), directed by Roman Polanski and written by Ronald Harwood (based on the 1946 memoir *Śmierć miasta* by Polish Jewish pianist and composer Władysław Szpilman) (with cinematography by Pawel Edelman and music by Wojciech Kilar, with Adrien Brody, Frank Finlay, Maureen Lipman, Ed Stoppard, Jessica Kate Meyer, Julia Rayner, Emilia Fox, and Thomas Kretschmann) is a masterpiece that portrays the suffering and death of some 445,000³⁴–450,000³⁵–460,000³⁶–500,000³⁷ Jewish men, women, and children trapped in the Warsaw ghetto. Today, many people know Szpilman's story thanks to Polanski's movie: "Szpilman documented his struggle for survival in a memoir written immediately after the war, but it took Polanski's film – with its juxtaposition of music and words, sound and silence, image and dialogue – to capture the soul of Szpilman's saga of survival".³⁸ The Warsaw ghetto was sealed on

³² "Herr Generalgouverneur ordnet an: Ferner soll eine Kennzeichnung der Juden (weiße Armbinde und blauer Davidstern) eingeführt werden, die von allen Juden und Jüdinnen vom 12. Lebensjahr ab zu tragen sei. Jede Zuwiderhandlung müsse entsprechend bestraft werden. (10 November 1939)", Léon Poliakov and Josef Wulff, *Das Dritte Reich und die Juden*, 179.

³³ Yehuda Bauer states: "At least one million Jewish children under the age of thirteen died in the Holocaust" (*Rethinking the Holocaust*, 211). Saul Friedländer asserts: "among [the victims of the Holocaust] almost a million and a half were under the age of fourteen" (*The Years of Extermination*, 662). According to Yad Vashem, about "one and a half million Jewish children were murdered in the Holocaust", Yad Vashem, "Children in the Holocaust", <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/children/index.asp>.

³⁴ "In March 1941 the population of the Warsaw ghetto reached its peak at 445,000 people [...] The high mortality in the ghetto [...] can be described as a gradual extermination", Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw 1939-1943. Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*, trans. Ina Friedman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 63.

³⁵ "Masses of refugees who had been transported to Warsaw brought the ghetto population up to 450,000", Yad Vashem. "Warsaw Ghetto", <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/ghettos/warsaw.html>.

³⁶ "The ghetto reached its highest number of inhabitants in April 1941 [...] 395,000 Varsovians [...] of Jewish descent, 50,000 [...] resettled from the western part of the Warsaw district, 3,000 from its eastern part as well as 4,000 Jews from Germany ... Altogether there were around 460,000 inhabitants. 85,000 of them children up to the age of 14". "Daily Life in the Warsaw Ghetto". Imperial War Museum. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/daily-life-in-the-warsaw-ghetto>.

³⁷ A German document written in Kraków on September 12, 1940, states: "Eine halbe Million Jude im Warschauer Ghetto" (Léon Poliakov and Josef Wulff, *Das Dritte Reich und die Juden*, 179).

³⁸ Diana Diamond, "Passion for Survival in Polanski's *The Pianist*", *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, [vol.] 27, 4 (2007): 425-439.

November 15³⁹-16⁴⁰, 1940: “Conditions were beyond the inhabitants’ imagination. Masses of Warsaw Jews were pushed into these crowded quarters enclosed by wall”.⁴¹ The depiction of the Warsaw ghetto in *The Pianist* is absolutely accurate.⁴²

Another masterpiece about the Warsaw ghetto is *Love Gets a Room* (2021), directed by Rodrigo Cortés and co-written by Cortés and David Safier (with cinematography by Rafael García and music by Víctor Reyes, with Clara Rugaard, Ferdia Walsh-Peelo, Henry Goodman, Anastasia Hille, Valentina Bellè, Mark Ryder, Freya Parks, Jack Roth, Magnus Krepper and the beautiful and talented Dalit Streett Tejeda as little Sarah). Cortés “juxtaposes a musical comedy performance in 1942 in the Warsaw ghetto with the sadly desperate offstage lives and loves of that play’s largely youthful cast”.⁴³ Indeed, *Love Gets a Room* includes a play inside the movie: excerpts of Jerzy Jurandot’s play *Miłość szuka mieszkania*, a comedy in three acts (originally written in Polish, translated into English in the film) that played at the Femina Theatre in the Warsaw ghetto in 1941-1942. What is fascinating is that the original play by Jurandot is preserved in his own writing at the Ringelblum Archive I/519, which can be found at the Centralna Biblioteka Judaistyczna.⁴⁴ In the first page of the play, Jurandot writes: “wystawiona w Feminie 1941 rok” [staged at Femina year 1941], which makes it clear that the play premiered in 1941. Nevertheless, the *Gazeta Żydowska*⁴⁵ of January 23, 1942 (preserved also at the Ringelblum Archive and quoted by Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak) states in an ad: “Teat. ‘Femina’, Warszawa, Leszno 35 / Od piatku 16 stycznia i codziennie / w soboty o godz 3 i 5.30 / SENSACYJNE PRZEDSTAWIENIE / ... Komedia w 3- ch aktach / Miłość szuka mieszkania / Jurandot i Wesby ego / Rewelacyjus obsada ...” [“Teat. ‘Femina’, Warsaw, Leszno 35 / From Friday, January 16, and every day on Saturdays at 3pm and 5.30pm / SENSATIONAL PERFORMANCE / ... Comedy in 3 acts / *Miłość szuka mieszkania* / Jurandot and Wesby / Sensational cast ...”].

³⁹ According to the USHMM: “November 15, 1940. Warsaw Ghetto Sealed”. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/1939-1941/warsaw-ghetto-sealed>; and according to the World Jewish Congress: “This week in Jewish history: Warsaw Ghetto sealed off”. <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/this-week-in-jewish-history--warsaw-ghetto-sealed-off>.

⁴⁰ According to Israel Gutman: “On November 16, 1940, the ghetto was sealed. Jews who arrived at the gates found them blocked by Polish and German police”, *Resistance. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, (Boston: Mariner Books & USHMM, 1994), 79; according to Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak: “We concentrate on the history of the Warsaw Ghetto from when it was sealed on 16 November 1940 to its final liquidation on 16 May 1943”, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, trans. by Emma Harris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) xii; according to Kassow: “Ghetto borders on November 16, 1940 (the date the ghetto was established)”, *Who Will Write Our History?*, xiv; and according to Yad Vashem: “On November 16 the Jews were forced inside the area of the ghetto”, “Warsaw Ghetto”. Yad Vashem. <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/ghettos/warsaw.html>.

⁴¹ Israel Gutman, *Resistance. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, 80.

⁴² “Vue et ressentie à travers les yeux du héros du film [...] la persécution des Juifs par les Allemands nazis est reconstituée avec une précision clinique, peu sentimentale, effrayante, réaliste. Tout concourt à traduire avec exactitude la situation du ghetto de Varsovie”, Michel Cejtlin, “*Le pianiste* de Roman Polanski”, *Les Temps Modernes*, [vol.] 657, 1 (2010): 260.

⁴³ Jonathan Holland, “‘Love Gets a Room’: Review”, *Screen Daily* (December 21, 2021) <https://www.screenandaily.com/reviews/love-gets-a-room-review/5165940.article>.

⁴⁴ Centralna Biblioteka Judaistyczna. “Miłość szuka mieszkania”, <https://cbj.jhi.pl/documents/966613/1/>.

⁴⁵ The *Gazeta Żydowska* was the “official newspaper for all the ghettos in the Generalgouvernement [which] was published in Kraków and licensed and censored by the Germans. It came out twice, and from July 1941, three times a week”, Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, 35.

Mary Berg writes in her diary (originally written in Yiddish)⁴⁶ that the play premiered on October 29, 1941,⁴⁷ and Engelking and Leociak follow the info given by the *Gazeta Żydowska* and argue that the play premiered on January 16, 1942.⁴⁸ The conclusion that we can draw from the unmatched information is that the play most probably premiered towards the end of 1941 (following the information given by the own Jurandot on the first page of his play, and by Berg) and that it enjoyed such a success amongst the Warsaw ghetto Jewish men and women (due to its joyful tone amidst suffering, hunger and death) that many performances at the Femina Theatre followed the premiere, at least until January 1942.⁴⁹ Set some months before the Great Deportation to Treblinka – *Große Aktion*),⁵⁰ *Love Gets a Room* represents a homage to the will of survival, to love, and to all the Jewish victims who perished in the Warsaw ghetto.

Feature films that depict extermination

“The German destruction of the Jews was not interrupted”, states Raul Hilberg.⁵¹ After the beginning of the massacres by the *Einsatzgruppen* (with the effective help of the German Orpo and Wehrmacht, assisted by local collaborators – Ukrainian, Latvian and Lithuania),⁵² the first extermination camp, Chelmo, started operating on December

⁴⁶ The diary was translated into English by Norbert Guterman and Sylvia Glass and published in the USA in 1945 under the title *Warsaw Ghetto: A Diary in 1945*; the 75th Anniversary edition is entitled *The Diary of Mary Berg. Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto* (London: Oneword, 2018).

⁴⁷ Mary Berg writes: “October 29, 1941. Today I went with Romek to the opening of a play at the Femina Theater. It was a musical comedy dealing with present-day life in the ghetto, entitled *Love Looks for an Apartment* [...] The audience laughed heartily and spent a few pleasant hours in the comfortable theater, completely forgetting the dangers that lurk outside. The author of the play is Jurandot, and the principal parts are acted by Stefania Grodzińska, Aleksander Minowicz, Rigelski, Noemi Wentland. Liebermann painted the settings”, *The Diary of Mary Berg. Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto* (London: Oneword, 2018), 101-102.

⁴⁸ Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, 566–567.

⁴⁹ In *Love Gets a Room*, the actors have performed the play several times already, because Ada (Valentina Bellè) says: “They will clap today, I promise”.

⁵⁰ “The mass deportation [...] of the Jews of Warsaw began on Wednesday, July 22, 1942 [...] and continued, with occasional short pauses, until September 12, 1942. During these seven weeks, some 265,000 Jews were [deported] from Warsaw, transported to the Treblinka death camp, and murdered in the gas chambers” (Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw 1939–1943*, 197). From September 13 to September 20, 1942, there was a halt in the deportations, and then, on September 21, the day of *Yom Kippur*, the Germans deported the last Warsaw Jewish men and women: the “victims [that day] were the Jewish policemen and their families” (*Ibid.*, 211).

⁵¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 639.

⁵² The “Germans were able to implicate others in the slaughter, and they were able to recruit squads among the Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Latvians” (Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, 128); the “Germans also encouraged the local population to launch pogroms and spontaneous massacres” (*Approaches to Auschwitz*, 128). The Wehrmacht was indispensable for these massacres: “It would be impossible for the *Einsatzgruppen* to conduct a monumental killing operation within a war zone without the wholehearted approval and cooperation of military authorities [...] Moreover, the army frequently participated in the killing in order to get the job done quickly” (Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, 130). The Germans and their local collaborators managed to massacre 2,000,000 Jewish men, women, children, and babies: “One third of all Jewish Holocaust victims died as a result of shooting acts [...] At least 1.5 million and possibly more than 2 million Holocaust victims died in mass shootings or gas vans in Soviet territory” (“*Einsatzgruppen: An Overview*”. Holocaust Encyclopedia. USHMM). Dan Michman states: “the status of Auschwitz (with its iconic picture), as the ultimate symbol for the Holocaust [...] has been challenged in recent research literature through a growing emphasis on the killing sites in Eastern Europe, where about half of the victims of the Holocaust were murdered in the most primitive and brutal ways”, “Historiography on the Holocaust in Poland: An Outsider’s View of Its Place within Recent General Developments in Holocaust Historiography”, in *New*

8, 1941, systematically exterminating with carbon monoxide Jewish men, women, and children in gas vans. In Chełmno, Sobibór, Bełżec, and Treblinka II, the Germans used carbon monoxide to exterminate their Jewish victims; in Auschwitz-Birkenau it was used Zyklon B: the commercial name of a gas (stored in crystal pellets inside labeled cans: these pellets became gas in contact with air) based on hydrogen cyanide (also called prussic acid) that contained painful eye and throat irritants (Zyklon B was more efficient, since death amongst the suffocating victims occurred some minutes earlier);⁵³ in Majdanek (a hybrid camp) it was used both carbon monoxide and Zyklon B.

Probably the most realistic and crude film about the Holocaust is *Saul fia* (2015), directed by László Nemes and co-written by Nemes and Clara Royer (with cinematography by Mátyás Erdély and music by László Melis, with a breathtaking performance by Géza Röhrig). *Saul fia* is a masterpiece that portrays the process of extermination in Auschwitz-Birkenau;⁵⁴ the macabre scenery is truly heartbreaking: the transports arriving to Auschwitz-Birkenau (filled with Jewish men, women, and children), the screams, the fear, the horror that was awaiting the victims (“A Birkenau il camino del Crematorio fuma da dieci giorni”, wrote Primo Levi),⁵⁵ and the *Sonderkommandos* being forced to do the most horrific work. Dario Gabbai, Shlomo Venezia’s cousin and one of the last remaining *Sonderkommandos* (he died in March 2020, at age 98) saw *Saul fia* and praised the film. Spoken in Hungarian, Polish, Yiddish, German, Russian, French, Greek, Slovak, and Hebrew, the film brilliantly illustrates the chaos of languages in the camps.⁵⁶ In the movie, the spectator sees, through Saul’s eyes, the gas chambers, the corpses, and the brave and desperate acts of the *Sonderkommando* (the burying of the so-called *Scrolls of Auschwitz*, the taking of the priceless *Sonderkommando* photographs, and the heroic but failed *Sonderkommando* uprising of October 7, 1944).

Saul wants to say Kaddish for a dead boy (indeed, the Holocaust “continues to haunt those closest to its victims, with the added anguish that most of the dead lie unburied and

Directions in the History of the Jews in the Polish Lands, ed. Antony Polonsky, Hanna Węgrzynek, and Andrzej Żbikowski (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 389-390. The massacres by the *Einsatzgruppen* are called “the Holocaust by bullets”; Poliakov has called them “les exterminations ‘à ciel ouvert’”, *Histoire de l’antisémitisme, Tome II. L’Âge de la science* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1981), 525. Apart from shooting, the *Einsatzgruppen* also used gas vans as a method of extermination (Cameron Munro, “The Science and Engineer of Murder: The Nazi Gas Vans: 1939-1945”. Tiergarten 4 Association. May 11, 2023. <https://youtu.be/qbgfZSDjh68>).

⁵³ Cameron Munro explains the effects of carbon monoxide in the victims: “Carbon monoxide poisoning involves three stages: stage 1 (which is where the concentration of carbon monoxide attached to the hemoglobin is between zero and thirty percent) [...] faint, heart palpitations, breathlessness [...]; stage 2 (between thirty and forty percent attachment of the carbon monoxide to the hemoglobin) ... faint, defecation, nausea, vomiting [...] and once the concentration is above forty percent: tendency to unconsciousness, and when you get to 65-70 percent, death”. The effects of Zyklon B were similar to the ones of carbon monoxide, but death occurred some minutes earlier (“The Science and Engineer of Murder: The Nazi Gas Vans: 1939–1945”. Tiergarten 4 Association. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbgfZSDjh68>).

⁵⁴ The first transport of Jewish people (997 women and teens) arrived to Auschwitz from Slovakia on March 26, 1942. Selections and gassing of Jewish men, women and children (in Auschwitz-Birkenau) started in spring-summer 1942, ending only in November 1944. The mass gassings of Jewish victims in Auschwitz-Birkenau took place in the Bunker 1 and Bunker 2 from 1942 and in the *Krematoria* II, III, IV and V from March 1943.

⁵⁵ Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014), 123.

⁵⁶ Primo Levi writes: “*La confusione delle lingue è una componente fondamentale del modo di vivere di quaggiù; si è circondati da una perpetua Babele, in cui tutti urlano ordini e minacce in lingue mai prima udite, e guai a chi non afferra a volo*”, *Se questo è un uomo*, 30.

inadequately mourned”)⁵⁷ and the power of faith and religion amidst extermination is heartbreaking. In *Die Sonnenblume* Wiesenthal confesses that it is impossible to continue believing in God after the Holocaust.⁵⁸ Viktor Frankl, on the contrary, refuses to murder God in the pits and in the gas chambers, and states: “God is not dead (...) not even ‘after Auschwitz’”.⁵⁹ Filip Müller describes in *Shoah* how the Jewish victims screamed, wept, despaired and prayed the *Shema Israel* (שְׁמָא יִשְׂרָאֵל) inside the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau. “Nous avons découvert le Mal absolu”, said Elie Wiesel.⁶⁰ Viktor Frankl declares with sadness: “Ours is a generation tried in suffering, experienced in the deepest degradation”.⁶¹

Feature films that depict concentration camps

Mijn beste vriendin Anne Frank (2021), directed by Ben Sombogaart and co-written by Marian Batavier and Paul Ruven (with cinematography by Jan Moeskops and music by Merlijn Snitker, with Aiko Beemsterboer and Josephine Arendsen) is based on the life of Hanneli Goslar, and illustrates the tragic end of Anne Frank in KZ Bergen-Belsen. Although Anne Frank writes in hiding on November 8, 1943 that she can't imagine the world being ever again normal to her (“Ik spreek wel over ‘na de oorlog’, maat dan is dat alsof ik over een luchtkasteeltje spreek, iets wat nooit werkelijkheid kan worden”),⁶² the movie gives another angle to the rather positive tone of Anne Frank's diary (*Het Achterhuis*), which was written from June 12, 1942 to August 1, 1944 (three days before her arrest).⁶³ The film's portrayal of a starving, despairing, sick, and frightened Anne Frank in KZ Bergen-Belsen (that joyful girl who wrote about love and dreams for two years in the attic of Prinsengracht 263, in Amsterdam) is truly heartbreaking.

In *Die Fälscher* (2007), written and directed by Stefan Ruzowitzky (with cinematography by Benedict Neunfels and music by Marius Ruhland, with Karl Markovics, August Diehl, Devid Striesow, and Sebastian Urzendowsky) the brutality of the KZ (Mauthausen and Sachsenhausen) is perfectly portrayed. The film focuses on the biggest con operation of the entire history: Operation Bernhard, which managed to counterfeit more than 134 million British pounds and some American dollars.⁶⁴ *Die*

⁵⁷ Ronnie S. Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust*, 3.

⁵⁸ “Einmal habe ich gelesen, man könne den festen Glauben eines Menschen nicht brechen. Wenn ich das jemals für wahr gehalten haben sollte –das Leben in Lager hat mich eines anderen belehrt”, Simon Wiesenthal, *Die Sonnenblume* (Frankfurt: Verlag Ullstein GmbH, 1990), 13.

⁵⁹ Viktor Frankl, Preface to the First English Edition of *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (Cambridge: Perseus Books, 2000), 19.

⁶⁰ Elie Wiesel and Jorge Semprún, *Se taire est impossible* (Paris: Éditions Mille et une nuit, 2016), 19.

⁶¹ Viktor E. Frankl, “Religion and Existential Psychiatry”, in *Gesammelte Werke. Band 5. Psychotherapie, Psychiatrie und Religion. Über das Grenzgebiet zwischen Seelenheilkunde und Glauben*, ed. Alexander Batthyány et al. (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2018), 134.

⁶² Anne Frank, *Het Achterhuis. Dagboekbrieven 12 juni 1942– 1 augustus 1944*, comp. Otto Frank and Mirjam Pressler (Amsterdam: Prometheus and Anne Frank Fonds, 2021), 132.

⁶³ Anne Frank was deported in the last transport from Westerbork to Auschwitz on September 3, 1944. Two months later, in early November, she was transferred to Bergen-Belsen, where she died in February 1945, at age 15, from starvation and typhus.

⁶⁴ Created in 1942 by the Germans and developed in Sachsenhausen's Blocks 18 and 19 by 142 Jewish prisoners who were forced to forge millions, Operation Bernhard could have given a dramatic turn to the war (the Germans counterfeited not only British pounds and American dollars, but also many passports, identity cards, birth and marriage certificates, other official documents, and stamps). Around 134 million counterfeit British pounds were produced at Sachsenhausen. In 1945 Operation Bernhard moved to Mauthausen. In 1959 some of the boxes with counterfeit British pounds were discovered at the bottom of

Fälscher is based on the memoirs of Slovak Jewish typographer Adolf Burger (who was present in the making of the movie), originally written in Czech (*Komando padělatelů*) and first published in 1983.⁶⁵ One of the Jewish inmates tells a macabre joke about the absence of God in Auschwitz: “Warum ist Gott nicht in Auschwitz? Der kam nicht durch die Selektion!”.

Feature films that depict antisemitism after the Holocaust

In *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Sartre states that the “Jew” only exists in the eyes of the antisemite, and adds: “si le Juif n'existait pas, l'antisémite l'inventerait”.⁶⁶ Indeed, the “racist-antisemitic ideology was the rational outcome of an irrational approach (...) that was a cancerlike mutation of the Christian antisemitic ideology”.⁶⁷

Es war einmal in Deutschland... (2017), directed by Sam Garbarski and co-written by Garbarski and Michel Bergmann (with cinematography by Virginie Saint-Martin and music by Renaud Garcia-Fons, with Moritz Bleibtreu, Antje Traue, Tim Seyfi, and Mark Ivanir) is a post-war tale set in Germany that depicts German antisemitism. The movie has some comic moments, but the message is, as the protagonist says: “Hitler ist tot, aber wir leben noch”, similarly to the 614th *mitzvah* proposed by Emil Fackenheim.

1945 (2017), directed by Ferenc Török and co-written by Török and Gábor T. Szántó (with cinematography by Elemér Ragályi and music by Tibor Szemző, with Angelus Iván, Marcell Nagy and Péter Rudolf), tells the story of two Hungarian Jewish survivors who come to a small village to bury some objects of their loved murdered ones.⁶⁸ Antisemitism, guilt, and indifference are shown by the Hungarian villagers (who did not have any problem in taking the houses and possessions of the Jewish victims and who refer to the Hungarian Jewish survivors as “Jews”, not “Hungarians”). The film masterly succeeds in describing flawlessly the general post-war antisemitism.

Feature films that depict the failure of justice after the Holocaust

Lake Toplitz (in the Austrian Alps), and in 2000 the same company that discovered the Titanic pulled out from the lake many boxes with counterfeit British pounds and American dollars.

⁶⁵ The translation into English was published only 26 years later, in 2009, under the title *The Devil's Workshop: A Memoir of the Nazi Counterfeiting Operation*. Burger and his wife were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942 (his wife perished in Auschwitz). At that time, he was making fake baptism certificates to save Jewish people. In Auschwitz-Birkenau he was tattooed with the number 64401. He survived 18 months in Auschwitz-Birkenau and was then transferred to Sachsenhausen (April 1944) to work in Operation Bernhard. On March 16, 1945, he was transferred to Mauthausen (he arrived on March 20): “I had been number 64401 in Auschwitz, number 79161 in Sachsenhausen and now I became number 138409”, Burger, *The Devil's Workshop* (London: Frontline Books, 2009), 221. On April 4, 1945 Burger was transferred to KZ ‘Shlier’-Redl-Zipf (a subcamp of Mauthausen), and on May 4, to KZ Ebensee (another subcamp of Mauthausen); the US Army entered Ebensee two days later, on May 6, 1945. Burger died in Prague in 2016, at age 99.

⁶⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 15.

⁶⁷ Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 266.

⁶⁸ Although the movie has some small incoherences, like the use of “Max Bruch’s widely used composition for Kol Nidre, a Yom Kippur prayer that seems inappropriate for this particular context” (Ben Kenigsberg, “Review: In ‘1945’, Hungarian Villagers Are Forced to Revisit Wartime Sins”, *The New York Times*. October 31, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/movies/1945-review-ferenc-torok.html>) – one would expect the Kaddish, although there is not a minyan – it depicts really well antisemitism and guilt during and after the war.

Im Labyrinth des Schweigens (2014), directed by Giulio Ricciarelli and co-written by Ricciarelli and Elisabeth Bartel (with cinematography by Martin Langer and Roman Osin and music by Sebastian Pille and Niki Reiser, with Alexander Fehling, André Szymanski, Johannes Krisch, and Gert Voss) is a film that shows the culpability of ordinary Germans in the Holocaust. Indeed, as Hannah Arendt said: “The Nazis were no ‘barbarians’”,⁶⁹ but terribly ordinary and mediocre human beings. Even if they knew about the atrocities, only a few Germans had heard about Auschwitz before Eichmann’s trial in 1961. The film focuses on the period prior to the trials that took place in Frankfurt between December 20, 1963 and August 19, 1965 (*der Auschwitz-Prozess*) against a few SS who operated in Auschwitz, and shows the extreme difficulty of bringing the murderers to trial: “even Bonn’s minister of justice (...) pleaded that the ‘murderers amongst us’ be left in peace”.⁷⁰ The trials were, sadly, an insult to the 1,100,000 victims (from which 1,000,000 were Jewish men, women, and children) who were murdered and gassed in Auschwitz: from the more than 8,000 SS (8,000-8,200 SS men and 200 female guards) who operated in Auschwitz, only twenty-two were judged at the Frankfurt Trials: six got life imprisonment (some were later released), some got ridiculous sentences ranging from three to ten years, and five were simply released. According to Arendt, the defendants had during the trial “grotesquely unrepentant, aggressive behavior”.⁷¹

In any case, Auschwitz (and the Shoah) did not happen solely because of 8,000 *monsters*: many factors made the extermination possible: the collaboration of the vast majority of ordinary Germans (following Jean Améry), the efficient German bureaucracy (following Hilberg), a brutal antisemitism (following Poliakov, Friedländer, Goldhagen, and, in part, Yehuda Bauer), German nationalism, idealism, and indoctrination (following Fischer), German persistence and collaboration (following Cesarani), and the banality of evil (following Hannah Arendt). That gigantic machine of death needed, indeed, the collaboration of the vast majority: “The Holocaust was made possible not only because of the ‘bureaucratization of genocide’ (...), but because of the *trahison des clercs* –the complicity of the elites: physicians, church leaders, judges, lawyers, engineers, architects, educators”.⁷² The role of the bystander was also crucial.

It is true that many collaborated with the Germans, but, as Goldhagen states, that does not detract from the fact that the Holocaust was a German enterprise. There were, indeed, many Poles, French, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Latvians who were highly antisemitic before and during the Holocaust, but there were also some non-Jewish people amongst these nations who helped Jewish people (under the risk of great personal danger), as the numbers of Righteous Amongst the Nations per country show: Poland holds 7,232 Righteous Amongst the Nations; France, 4,206; Ukraine, 2,691; Lithuania, 924; and Latvia, 138.⁷³ Even if the number of non-Jewish people who helped Jewish men, women

⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt, “The Destruction of Six Million”, in *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken, 2007), 493. Arendt also states: “the personal or moral issue, as distinct from legal accountability, hardly arises with those who were convinced adherents of the regime: that they could not feel guilty but only defeated was almost a matter of course, unless they changed their minds and repented”, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship”, in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 35.

⁷⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Auschwitz on Trial”, in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 228.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁷² Irwin Cotler, “Conscience”, in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (USA: Indiana University Press, 2013), 281.

⁷³ “Names of Righteous by Country”. Yad Vashem. <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/statistics.html>. “Attitudes towards the Jews during the Holocaust mostly ranged from indifference to hostility [...] In a

and children was very low,⁷⁴ each effort to save a Jewish life was an act of bravery, courage and heroism amongst terror, cruelty and death.

Comedy-drama feature films about the Shoah. Is that even possible?

Even comedy-drama feature films about the Shoah, which clearly distort the reality, have a comic flavor (as long as the jokes are addressed to the murderers and never to the victims),⁷⁵ or fantasize some historical facts, are a homage to the victims, since they help to ensure that the Shoah is not forgotten. This is the case of contemporary satires like *The Great Dictator* by Charlie Chaplin (1940) and *To Be or Not to Be* by Ernst Lubitsch (1942), films that “ridiculed the (...) Manichean ideology of Nazism”⁷⁶ and contribute to a better understanding of the general ignorance of the brutal reality in non-occupied countries.⁷⁷ Other important comedy-drama feature films are *La vita è bella* (1997), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), and *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), which also play a positive role in the remembrance of the victims (in spite of their unorthodox portrayal).

La vita è bella (1997), directed by Roberto Benigni and co-written by Benigni and Vincenzo Cerami (with cinematography by Tonino Delli Colli and music by Nicola Piovani, with Benigni, Nicoletta Braschi, and Giorgio Cantarini) is probably one of the few films about the Holocaust that children can watch without feeling deeply disturbed. Even if “debate often still revolves around whether or not Benigni’s film denigrates the historical record and memory of the Holocaust through humor”,⁷⁸ the result is a sensitive film that manages to portray the Shoah in a non-horrific way. Guido’s attitude echoes the efforts of Janusz Korczak, trying to protect the children from despairing.⁷⁹

Inglourious Basterds (2009), written and directed by Quentin Tarantino (with cinematography by Robert Richardson and music by various artists, with Christoph

world of total moral collapse there was a small minority who mustered extraordinary courage to uphold human values. These were the Righteous Among the Nations”. Yad Vashem, “About the Righteous”, <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/about-the-righteous.html>.

⁷⁴ We have to have in mind, as Yehuda Bauer has suggested, that the total number of Righteous Amongst the Nations (non-Jewish men and women who risked their lives to save Jewish lives) is extremely low (28,217 – as of January 1, 2022) compared to the almost 300,000,000 inhabitants of Europe during WWII (the statistics in mid 1941 are: Germany and Austria: 76,000,000; Germany’s European allies: 78,000,000; German-occupied countries: 129,000,000; Aaron O’Neill, “Population of Germany, its European allies and German-occupied areas during the Second World War in 1941”. *Statista*. February 2, 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1262482/wwii-population-german-occupied-areas-mid-1941/>).

⁷⁵ In regard to *The Great Dictator* and its humor, Judith E. Doneson states: “Certain scenes contain elements of humor, most glaringly the slapstick sequences between Hynkel and his rival, Napaloni. However, at no time does Chaplin make fun of the Jews”, *The Holocaust in American Film* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 40.

⁷⁶ Lawrence Baron, “Film”, 444.

⁷⁷ *The Great Dictator* “was the period’s boldest cinematic attack on the German leader as well as the first film in the west which showed a Jewish protagonist against the background of the Nazi world”, Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust*, 134. Charlie Chaplin confessed that, had he known the atrocities, he could not have made a comedy (Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust*, 148).

⁷⁸ Alan L. Perry, “Benigni’s ‘La Vita è Bella’: Viktor Frankl and the Alchemy of Meaning”, *Italica*, [vol.] 96, 2 (2019): 305.

⁷⁹ “We know from survivors [...] and from Gestapo records, that Korczak, hatless, [...] holding two young children by the hand, was at the head of the orderly procession of 192 children and 10 staff members, including the loyal Stefa, who had turned down offers to escape”, Betty Jean Lifton, “Who was Janusz Korczak?”, in *Janusz Korczak’s Ghetto Diary*, trans. Jerzy Bachrach and Barbara Krzywicka (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xxvii.

Waltz, Brad Pitt, Mélanie Laurent, Diane Kruger, Michael Fassbender, August Diehl, Denis Ménochet, Eli Roth, Daniel Brühl, Til Schweiger, and Jacky Ido) is a triumph of justice. Just as *Saul fia* is probably the most realistic film about the Shoah (terribly real, breathtaking, and depressing), *Inglourious Basterds* is the great antidote to all the sadness and anger that one feels when studying the Holocaust. Tarantino, ultimately, gives justice (and a sweet vengeance) to the horrible injustices of mankind.

Jojo Rabbit (2019), written and directed by Taika Waititi (adapted from the book *Caging Skies* by Christine Leunens) (with cinematography by Mihai Mălaimare Jr. and music by Michael Giacchino, with Roman Griffin Davis, Thomasin McKenzie, Scarlett Johansson, and Sam Rockwell) tells the story of a German Jewish girl hidden by a German woman (thus showing the tiny minority of German civilians who actually did help their Jewish compatriots) and depicts the vast indoctrination of German children in the 1930s and 1940s.

Even though some Holocaust scholars, Holocaust survivors, and children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors may feel offended by *La vita è bella*, *Inglourious Basterds*, and *Jojo Rabbit* (arguing that these comedy-drama feature films diminish the atrocity of the Shoah), the fact that these movies reached millions of people is exceedingly positive.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Although it is obvious that nothing can depict better the horrors of the Shoah than the testimonies of survivors and victims, we can argue that Holocaust feature films (approached with caution and a critical eye) contribute positively and significantly to the historiography of the Shoah; the same can be said about antisemitic German propaganda films (approached with extreme caution) and post-war documentaries.

As a tool for perpetuating the memory of the victims, Holocaust feature films (even comedy-dramas) have become indispensable. Since reading the testimonies and watching documentaries about the atrocities can be too heartbreaking and disturbing for the majority, Holocaust feature films emerge as an invaluable tool for remembering the biggest catastrophe in human history.

Even if a vast number of Holocaust scholars “believe that the positive and universal spin Hollywood puts on the Holocaust strips it of historical particularity and irremediable inhumanity”⁸¹ (it is certain that European movies tend to have a more realistic approach to the unimaginable atrocity that took place in the ghettos, the massacres, and the gas chambers), and even if the “extreme events of the Holocaust affect the cinematic possibilities for Holocaust representation”,⁸² the truth is that watching Holocaust documentaries can be challenging; therefore, Holocaust feature films that try to convey the atrocity with a tiny hope are more likely to have an impact in current and future generations, thus contributing to remembrance and memory. This tiny hope can be

⁸⁰ In these movies’ defense, it is important to point out that Benigni’s own father (although not Jewish) spent some years in KZ Bergen-Belsen, that many of the actors of *Inglourious Basterds* are Jewish (Scarlett Johansson, Mélanie Laurent, Eli Roth, B. J. Novak, and Julie Dreyfus), and that Taika Waititi (born Taika David Cohen) is of Māori and Jewish descent and identifies himself as a Polynesian Jew.

⁸¹ Lawrence Baron, “Film”, 450.

⁸² Gary Foley, “What are the limits, and the possibilities, for representing the Holocaust on film?”, 88.

translated by a tiny hope in the survival of the Jewish people, Judaism, and the State of Israel (following Fackenheim: *To Mend the World*; Berkovits: *Faith After the Holocaust*; Heschel: *God in Search of Man*),⁸³ a tiny hope in the faith in God in spite of the horror (following Viktor Frankl: *...trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen, Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning, Synchronisation in Birkenwald*), a tiny hope in spite of God's silence (following Martin Buber: *Eclipse of God*), a tiny hope in spite of God's powerlessness (following Hans Jonas: "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice"), a tiny hope in humanity in spite of the horror (the "Holocaust proved not merely what man was capable of doing to the Jew. It proved what man is capable of doing to his fellow"),⁸⁴ and a tiny hope in culture and civilization (Adorno said that to write poetry after Auschwitz was impossible and that it was "*idiotisch*" to think that after the extermination of millions of Jewish men, women and children life would continue like before: "*Normal ist der Tod*").⁸⁵ This tiny hope (despite) is the ultimate message of almost all the Holocaust feature films, and, certainly, the message of the movies that I have mentioned here (except for *Saul fia*).⁸⁶

In sum, although some Shoah feature films have some historical errors, although one of the most problematic questions about representing the Holocaust in film is "how does one portray mass death",⁸⁷ and although the relationship between history, film and memory is complex,⁸⁸ overall, every film that depicts the Holocaust brings a dead voice to life: a voice that is an echo of the six million voices that were silenced. And the remembrance of the victims of the Shoah is a moral obligation and a needed gesture of empathy and humanity in this inhumane, unjust, destructive, and auto-destructive world.

We can hence argue that the Holocaust in film can be a valuable contribution to the historiography of the Shoah, and that Holocaust feature films represent an homage to the Jewish victims and a glimpse into the shuttered voices of the Shoah. Furthermore, since today, in 2024, 89 years after the *Nürnberger Gesetze*, 86 years after *Kristallnacht*, 83 years after the beginning of the massacres by the *Einsatzgruppen*, 82 years after the mass deportations, 81 years after the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and 80 years after the gassing in Auschwitz-Birkenau of the Jewish men, women and children portrayed in *The Auschwitz*

⁸³ "We have faith in God and faith in Israel. Though some of its children have gone astray, Israel remains the mate of God [...] We live in spite of peril", Abraham Josua Heschel, *God in Search of Man. A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 424.

⁸⁴ Bulka, 329.

⁸⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019), 62.

⁸⁶ In *Schindler's List*, this tiny hope is represented by the survival of the 1,200 Jewish men, women and children that Schindler managed to save; in *The Pianist*, this tiny hope is represented by Szpilman's survival; in *Love Gets a Room*, this tiny hope is represented by Edmund's and Sarah's escape (although we know that all the other Jewish characters most likely will perish in the gas chambers of Treblinka II, in the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto or in the ghetto uprising); *Saul fia* is a film that does not represent any hope (only extermination, and, thus, it is surely one of the most realistic films ever made about the Shoah); in *Mijn beste vriendin Anne Frank*, this tiny hope is represented by the survival of Hanneli Goslar and her little sister; in *Die Fälscher*, this hope is represented by the survival of few Jewish inmates; in *Es war einmal in Deutschland...* the hope is represented by the survivors; in *1945* the hope is represented by the two survivors; in *Im Labyrinth des Schweigens* there is a tiny sense of justice with the trial; in *La vita è bella*, Giosué and Dora do survive; in *Jojo Rabbit*, Elsa survives; and in *Inglourious Basterds* the murderers are killed.

⁸⁷ Gary Foley, "What are the limits, and the possibilities, for representing the Holocaust on film?", 89.

⁸⁸ Stefanie Rauch argues that "[u]nderstanding individual reception is a crucial prerequisite to understanding films' impact on, and place in, Holocaust memory", "Understanding the Holocaust through Film", 180.

Album, antisemitism is sadly still rampant⁸⁹ (the embarrassing global antisemitism after the horrifying massacres of October 7 is extremely alarming and disturbing – Jean Améry well said many years ago that anti-Zionism is the new antisemitism), Holocaust feature films seem like an indispensable tool for fighting antisemitism, Holocaust distortion and denial, indifference, silence, and oblivion.

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⁸⁹ The three Ds formulated by Natan Sharansky that unmask modern antisemitism are: Demonization, Double standards, and Delegitimization, “The New Antisemitism and the Three Ds”, *Echoes & Reflections*, https://echoesandreflections.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/11-02-09_StudentHandout_The-New-Antisemitism.pdf.

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