

Workshop 4: Perpetrators in Movies and the Role of Film Education

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The Dramatic Portrayal of Perpetrators in Holocaust Film [DRAFT]

Since the end of World War II, and particularly over the last thirty years, the Holocaust has been dramatised onscreen numerous times. Many different aspects of the genocide, from the experience of Jewish life in occupied Europe (*The Last Metro*, *Aimee & Jaguar*) and the Polish ghettos (*Schindler's List*, *Jakob the Liar*, *The Pianist*), Jewish armed resistance (*Uprising*, *Defiance*), and survival and death in the camps themselves (*Triumph of the Spirit*, *The Grey Zone*, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*) have supplied the premise for screen dramas, some based closely on recorded fact, some largely or wholly fictitious. It has indeed become possible to speak, with or without scare quotes, of "Holocaust film" as a genre in its own right.¹ Few of these, however, have centred on the portrayal of perpetrators. Although Hitler himself continues to exert a demonic fascination for filmmakers and – perhaps especially – for actors ranging from Alec Guinness and Bruno Ganz to Steven Berkoff and Robert Carlyle, the overwhelming majority of Holocaust films prefer as their protagonists the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and/or their German or other Gentile sympathisers and rescuers; or almost as frequently, children, whose own limited comprehension of events throws the moral universe of the Holocaust into even starker relief (for example, *Au Revoir Les Enfants*). Such preferences may be understandable enough for commercial reasons: almost by definition, a feature-length drama spent in the company of an unrepentant mass murderer or accessory to mass murder forecloses on the redemptive trajectory or "character arc" on which much commercial narrative cinema depends.²

¹ See Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 262-267.

² I am not drawing the conventional distinction here between Hollywood and European cinemas: in the globalised film markets that have evolved in the last quarter-century, the narrative – and hence ideological – norms of Hollywood cinema, the globally hegemonic mode, have largely colonised other cinematic traditions and blurred if not wholly erased traditional differences.

However, inasmuch as popular moving image media provide a key interface of historical research and the public dissemination and comprehension of that research, and crucially mediate collective memories,³ this general absence of Holocaust perpetrators from cinema and television screens, bar their narrativisation as antagonists typically conceived in the most stereotypical terms as ideological fanatics and/or psychopaths, is troubling. For of course – and as this conference itself testifies – the exploration of the motives, the psychology, the enabling institutional and material contexts, and the varieties of moral and ethical experience, of Holocaust perpetrators in all categories and at all levels of the genocide has been a major dimension of historical Holocaust studies, whether based on direct testimony and interview, as in Gitta Sereny's pathbreaking *Into That Darkness*, or through painstaking archival work, as in Christopher Browning's equally seminal *Ordinary Men*.⁴ Moreover, a common theme of this research has been precisely to disabuse conventional assumptions that participation in perpetrating crimes against humanity can only be explained by fanaticism or pathology, and furthermore that "evil" is transparent, readily visible and accordingly vulnerable to individuals and groups of courage and good faith.

This apparent compunction over the in-depth portrayal of perpetrator personalities and psychologies does not apply to other creative forms, notably literature: novels such as Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991, based in part on Robert Jay Lifton's research on medical "research" at Auschwitz and other camps), and more recently Jonathan Littell's Prix Goncourt-winning *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*, after Aeschylus) have explored the interior (emotional, moral and spiritual) landscapes and the social and political contexts of perpetrators intimately, unflinchingly and at length. Cinema's general reluctance to follow suit may reflect assumptions about the readership of literary fiction versus the film audiences; equally, it may bespeak ingrained convictions concerning fiction film's capacity to manage ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction. A more generous appraisal might perhaps suggest that Holocaust filmmakers, conscious of their role as informal public

³ See for example Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

⁴ Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1974); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

educators, have tended to stress the outward recreation of key events (the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, deportation to the camps, etc.) over the exploration of more problematic and in all likelihood controversial areas such as the human experience of the perpetrators: particularly given the persistent perspective, voiced by some survivors' groups and amplified through the media, that to place perpetrators rather than victims centre-stage in Holocaust narratives is in some way unethical (as if to understand criminal behaviour is to absolve or even vindicate it).

Whatever one's view, it is in any case inarguable that few if any dramatic portrayals have approached the complexity and comprehensiveness of documentary films such as Marcel Ophuls' *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie* (1988). As the film's subtitle suggests, the understanding Ophuls seeks of the "Butcher of Lyon" takes in not only the war years but the entirety of Barbie's career – where he proved his usefulness both to postwar US intelligence and subsequently to a variety of Latin American dictatorships. The opposite of the demonic portrayals of fanatical Nazis often encountered in Hollywood cinema, Barbie's film argues that however particular the structures and genocidal policies of the Third Reich, it relied in the final instance on personnel – exploitative, ambitious and ruthless men devoid of compassion and scruple – who are all too commonplace, and whose "talents" recommend them to murderous and repressive regimes at diverse times and places. Ophuls fully exploits the multivocal, open-ended qualities of what Linda Williams has termed the "postmodern" documentary to offer a portrait of a war criminal that – without ever qualifying its obvious revulsion at Barbie's crimes – avoids facile judgments or a straightforward accounting of guilt.⁵ Rather than calling down condemnation on Barbie alone, it explores the ramified networks of complicity, self-interest and evasion that enable the ongoing perpetration of atrocities.

The motives of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) are far less worldly than those of *Hotel Terminus*, but his encounters – "interviews" is far too neutral and bland a term for Lanzmann's intense engagements with his subjects –

⁵ Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History and *The Thin Blue Line*," in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Film and Video*, Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998): 379-396.

possess a comparable complexity. In filming a variety of perpetrators from different parts of the genocidal apparatus, from extermination camp personnel to transport bureaucrats and civilian administrators in the Nazi empire, Lanzmann reserves his fiercest and most tangible disapproval not for those who are most demonstrably bloodstained – such as the Treblinka guard Franz Suchomel – but rather for those, of whatever degree, who try to cloak their answers to his painstaking questions in evasion and feigned amnesia. (Memorable examples of this include the train scheduler Grassler, who is unable to recall the name of “that camp in the Oppeln district...I’ve got it, Auschwitz”; or former Belzec NCO Josef Oberhauser, whose refusal to answer even the simplest question concerning his current trade as a publican exemplifies the bad conscience and worse, bad faith of his whole life.)

Turning to fiction film and documentary drama, the most extensive perpetrator portrayal perhaps remains that of Erich Dorf (Michael Moriarty) in the 1978 NBC mini-series *Holocaust*. A fictitious adjutant to Heydrich, Dorf begins his Nazi career in 1935 as an ambitious but essentially apolitical lawyer, impelled to join the SS by opportunism, careerism and the urgings of his wife rather than out of any particular ideological affinity. Once enrolled, his application and eye for detail ensure his quick advancement. As Heydrich’s protégé, Dorf is speedily enlisted into the innermost circles of Nazi racial policy, touring the killing fields and monitoring techniques of extermination and economic exploitation alike. By the war’s end Dorf’s unflinching commitment to his duties finds him, alone of the senior SS, urging that the defeated Germans should – in keeping with their racialist principles – be proud to acknowledge and even publicise their deeds rather than attempting to conceal them. Only after he is captured by the Allies and confronted with the evidence of his crimes does Dorf, now cut off from the insulating environment of the Nazi power structure, finally recover his moral perspective and take his own life.

This arc – from opportunist to strategist of mass murder – is in itself both plausible and compelling. Yet Dorf (as written by *Holocaust* scenarist Gerald Green) remains fundamentally a plot mechanism, a means whereby the series – whose explicit agenda is through a carefully selected set of

“representative” characters to portray all aspects of the Holocaust, from the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws to liberation – can bring the viewer into the secret deliberations of Himmler, Heydrich, Eichmann and other key perpetrators. His own emotional and moral life remains for the most part obscure: a late scene where he breaks down, beset by the images of murdered Jewish children, lacks dramatic impact because without access to Dorf’s evolving inner life his sudden and fleeting guilt appears arbitrary and unmotivated. Interestingly, the text itself appears half-aware of the inadequacy of Dorf’s conception: a recurring visual trope finds the camera zooming in tight onto Dorf’s expressionless, unblinking face following some typically callous discussion of the murder programme amongst the SS brass. It is as if the camera’s interrogative gesture bespeaks a textual unease beget from an awareness of the insufficiency of the dramatic material itself.

Notwithstanding, insofar as Dorf is required to carry a significant strand of the narrative of *Holocaust* he is at least afforded scenes, however inadequately dramatised, in his own right – a relative rarity in the dramatic portrayal of perpetrators onscreen. Far more typically, perpetrators are seen through the eyes of either their victims or of anti-Nazi protagonists. Ralph Fiennes’ painstaking performance and the sheer power of the film as a whole tend to mask the truth that Amon Goeth in *Schindler’s List* conforms to the generalised onscreen stereotype of the Nazi as murderous sociopath. Only his attraction to Helen Hirsch somewhat modifies this portrayal. Elsewhere in American film particularly the straightforward depiction of Holocaust perpetrators as psychopathic criminals persists with little modification. The camp personnel at Sobibor in Jack Gold’s TV film *Escape From Sobibor* (CBS 1989), for example, are boorish, drunken, gratuitously violent, wildly sadistic and wholly devoid of humane attributes. Harvey Keitel’s performance as Auschwitz SS officer Mussfeld in Tim Blake Nelson’s *The Grey Zone* (2002) is more technically accomplished but little different in conception. The point here is not of course that this is not by all accounts an accurate characterisation of many or most rank and file perpetrators (though here too Sereny’s researches for *Into That Darkness* point up unexpected adjustments to expectations, with at least one Treblinka guard recalled by a *Sonderkommando* survivor as “a

good man”). Rather, it is that such externalised portrayals cannot incorporate the processes of progressive brutalisation, ideological conditioning, group thinking, and the evacuation and inversion of moral and ethical categories under totalitarianism, that combined with innate individual propensities to sadism and violence to produce perpetrators.

By contrast Elijah Moshinsky’s black comedy *Genghis Cohn*, produced for the BBC in 1992, unfolds almost entirely within the private psychological landscape of a perpetrator wrestling with his unquiet conscience. Bar a brief prologue tracing the declining fortunes of the title character (a Jewish stand-up comedian played by Antony Sher) and his flight eastwards to death at the hands of an *Einsatzkommando* under the command of Otto Schutz (Robert Lindsay), the film takes place in postwar Germany. Here Schutz, his wartime crimes concealed, is now the police chief of a small Bavarian town whose complacent economic miracle-era prosperity is brutally disrupted by a series of sex murders. Amidst this crisis, Schutz is suddenly confronted by the ghost – literally – of Genghis Cohn. Cohn’s shade torments Schutz, confounding his investigation, compromising him in the eyes of his superiors by his increasingly erratic and eccentric behaviour, and extorting a series of penitential gestures which see the former Nazi performing the Jewish rituals, secular and profane – making chopped liver, saying Kaddish at an abandoned synagogue – no Jew remains alive to undertake. An allegory of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, *Genghis Cohn* explores the traumatic residue left on the social body of postwar Germany by its unacknowledged past, delivering both psychological and socio-political commentary via broad farce: Cohn’s first manifestation, for example, is triggered when Schutz’ dons SS garb once again in a fetishistic encounter with a desirable countess and Nazi widow; fleeing Cohn’s apparition he finds himself scuttling through the streets of his town in Nazi uniform in broad daylight – the hunter become the hunted..

In recent years, more filmmakers appear to have begun to overcome their compunction or squeamishness over placing perpetrators at, or near, the centre of dramatic fictions. Since 2002, several significant films and TV movies have featured perpetrator portrayals. *Amen* (2002), Constantin Costa-Gavras’ rather melodramatic adaptation of Ralf Hochhuth’s controversial 1966

play *The Deputy* – accusing the Vatican of avoiding its ethical responsibilities during the Holocaust and engaging in a conspiracy of silence – shifts the dramatic balance of the original by dividing screen time equally between the fictitious titular papal nuncio and the historical figure of Kurt Gerstein, a chemical specialist commissioned by the SS to procure the Zyklon-B fumicide used at Auschwitz. Gerstein, about whose actual motivations and deeds there is considerable controversy amongst Holocaust historians, is portrayed as a wholly reluctant accessory to mass murder, a (Protestant) believer tormented by his own complicity and frustrated by his inability to persuade outside agencies such as the Vatican to present his irrefutable proofs of the genocide to the world. At the close of the film, Gerstein is apprehended by the Allies as, ironically, a suspected war criminal and hangs himself in custody – a martyr to the truth.

As an anti-Nazi activist, albeit an unsuccessful one, Gerstein basically conforms to the tradition of the “good German” protagonist. A much more unusual film in that it features no Jews or German anti-Nazis whatsoever, rather portraying exclusively wholly unrepentant perpetrators, is Frank Pierson’s *Conspiracy* (2002), a BBC-HBO production dramatising the Wannsee Conference of January 1942. Faced with this unpromising material – a 90-minute meeting unfolding in real time, exclusively peopled by major Nazi war criminals and their subordinates – *Conspiracy* plays adroit games with star personae to manipulate audience expectations and avoid the somewhat sterile living-history tone that characterised the previous (1984) Austrian dramatisation of the Wannsee proceedings.⁶ Kenneth Branagh thus plays Heydrich as a charismatic impresario whipping his colleagues into line with ruthless panache – a characterisation perhaps intended to resonate as much with Branagh’s off-screen reputation in theatrical circles as an old-school actor-manager – while Stanley Tucci’s portrayal of Eichmann modifies the fussy punctiliousness this actor typically brings to his roles as right-hand-man in *Big Night* and, more recently, *The Devil Wears Prada* with an unexpected coldness and ruthlessness that on occasion erupts into physical violence. But the pivotal screen presence is Colin Firth as the Justice

⁶ *Die Wanseekonferenz* (Heiz Schirck, Germany/Austria 1984).

Department lawyer Wilhelm Stuckart. An actor typically associated with romantic comedies, Firth is strongly identified with characters of slightly awkward integrity – most famously, of course, Mr Darcy in the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* and Darcy's contemporary avatars in the two *Bridget Jones* movies – and somewhat beleaguered decency (in, for example, *Fever Pitch* and *High Fidelity*). He is from an early stage clearly counterposed to other Nazis – notably the sottish and obese SA man Klopfer (Ian McNeice). His visible disquiet at the direction the conference proceedings are taking, and his early bridling exchanges with Heydrich combine with his amiable star persona to encourage the audience to regard him as an identification figure and a likely antagonist to Heydrich, clearly the principal “villain”. The revelation, therefore, that Stuckart's objections to the “Final Solution” are unrelated to the moral enormity of the crime and relate solely to the absence of a “legal” framework for mass murder in the Nuremberg Laws (specifically his insistence that Nuremberg's discrimination of degrees of *Mischlinge* – “mixed-race” Jews – be made the basis for distinguishing those to be killed, “merely” sterilised, or reprieved), confound audience expectations and reveal the inverted moral universe of Nazi ideology. The strenuousness of Stuckart's legalistic nitpicking only accentuates the moral vacuity of his actions.

Eichmann, played by Thomas Kretschmann, takes the spotlight alone as the title character of Robert Young's⁷ 2007 film (which omits the Wannsee Conference, presumably because of the earlier release of *Conspiracy*). The film focuses on Eichmann's interrogation following his capture by Israeli agents in Argentina in 1960, with brief flashbacks to the war years whose principal function is to belie Eichmann's obstinate pretence of a purely administrative role in the Holocaust. This device theoretically allows the viewer privileged access to Eichmann's memories; yet our point of identification throughout the film is the Israeli police captain charged to obtain Eichmann's confession, and extensive screen time is devoted to the impact his growing obsession with Eichmann has upon his family life. While we hear extracts from Eichmann's own letters to his family in voiceover, for the most part he remains an opaque presence. Screenwriter Snoo Wilson's decision to

⁷ Not to be confused with Robert M. Young, director of the 1989 Auschwitz drama *Triumph of the Spirit*.

try to create suspense around Eichmann's attempts to withhold an admission of guilt seem perverse given that the audience must be expected to be familiar with the outcome of his trial. Thanks to Hannah Arendt, Eichmann is an overdetermined figure and the film seems unsure whether to adopt the "banality of evil" thesis or to portray him in more conventionally melodramatic fashion. One particularly overheated flashback – possibly a fantasy sequence though not formally marked as such – during which Eichmann recites the statistics of Europe's murdered Jews as part of sex play with a naked anti-Semitic Hungarian countess, seems to hark back to an earlier cinematic generation's lurid associations of Nazism and sexual perversion, such as Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (1968).

A much smaller-scale, even miniaturist, approach to perpetrator psychology is offered by Benjamin Ross' 2005 short film *Torte Bluma*.⁸ The film expands an anecdote related by former Treblinka commandant Franz Stangl to Gitta Sereny and recorded in *Into That Darkness*; it aims to resituate the concept of "unrepresentability", much debated in discussions of Holocaust art, away from the spectatorial register into a cognitive dimension of the event itself, one arguably crucial to the ability of both perpetrators and victims to continue to function in the *univers concentrationnaire*. While the film itself avoids graphic horror, seeing and representation are explicitly thematised within the text itself, thus relocating questions of what is, or may not be, "seen" away from sometimes abstract questions of the ethics of representation into a key dimension of the interpersonal and affective relations that made the Holocaust possible. Stangl and *Kapo* Blau are portrayed as afflicted, out of choice or necessity, by complex – and reciprocal – blindnesses which allow each man to continue to function in the hell of Treblinka. The film aims to show how Stangl, played here by Stellan Skarsgaard, carefully constructed and maintained his own self-preserving account of himself as a decent man in impossible circumstances, and how such an objectively grotesque fiction was not only sustainable but inevitable in the inverted moral universe of the camps.

⁸ The screenplay for *Torte Bluma* was written by the present author.

The 2008-09 season sees the release of two high-profile films centring on Holocaust perpetrators, Stephen Daldry's adaptation of Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (scripted by David Hare and strongly tipped for BAFTA and Academy Awards) and Vicente Amorim's adaptation of C.P. Taylor's celebrated play *Good*, first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1978. *The Reader* has already been the object of considerable criticism for what some viewers have felt to be its overly charitable depiction of its central character Hanna Schmitz (Kate Winslet), an illiterate German woman who voluntarily enlists as an SS camp guard and its implicit paralleling of her "outsider" status – socially isolated by her illiteracy – with that of the Jews. The suggestion that her illiteracy leaves her open to the overtures of National Socialism – and a career where illiteracy is no obstacle – seems ill-judged at best; to me at least it recalls the sophomoric suggestion of Julian Mitchell's play *Another Country*, which accounts for Guy Burgess' subsequent career as a traitor by his failure to be made a prefect at his homophobic and hypocritical public school. Her eventual suicide, and the apparently penitential gesture of leaving her life savings to a survivor, seems to invite the audience to absolve her from the full implications of her actions – implications she herself has consistently been unwilling or unable to face. *Good* has yet to be released at the time of this writing, but potentially at least it will confront the process of the Nazification of a passive and feckless yet, initially, apolitical individual with greater subtlety and sophistication than any previous account.

What accounts for the emerging greater readiness to focus on perpetrator experience in recent cinema? The trend may reflect the Shoah's inevitable retreat from living memory and the somewhat less febrile atmosphere that accordingly surrounds Holocaust representations generally; as well as a sense that with the historical outlines more generally familiar to audiences – thanks in part to the cinematic visibility of the Holocaust in the last decade-and-a-half, as well as the international institutionalisation of Holocaust memory in museums and public commemorations – film has greater leeway to explore other dimensions of the events. A more contentious interpretation might suggest that the insistent politicisation of the Holocaust by Israeli politicians, and its exploitation as an alleged justification for Israeli strategy for

dealing with the Palestinians – not to mention the repeated polemical comparisons of Israeli policy in Gaza and elsewhere to German war crimes – have made the nature and motivation of perpetrators a highly charged and topical area for representation. The objective merits of these parallels and exemplars are less important than that they demonstrate the ways in which historical events are inevitably accommodated to the ideological demands of the present. In most of the films I have discussed briefly in this paper, such pressures are at least as apparently at work as any considered effort to disseminate the fruits of historical research as understood in scholarly community. Arguably *Conspiracy* and *Torte Bluma* demonstrate most clearly, though in very different ways, a relationship to Holocaust historiography. Most dramatic portrayals of Holocaust perpetrators, however, have at least as much to do with generic conventions and national cinematic traditions as with either scholarship or public education as understood in public policy circles.