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AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00-15:30

The Holocaust in Film – Christian Ideology and the Portrayal of the Jews

by
Nancy Brown

During the Third Reich, audiences were hardly a passive public manipulated by an ideological apparatus. Over 1,000 German feature films premiered from 1933 to the end of the war in 1945; ticket admissions increased from 245 million in 1933 to over 1,100 million in 1944. Entertainment during the Third Reich emanated from "ministry of illusion," not a "ministry of fear." Hitler and Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, keenly aware of film's ability to mobilize emotions and immobilize minds, created overpowering illusions and captive audiences without displaying overt propaganda. Ideology came packaged in gripping, engaging, and pleasant entertainment steeped in traditional values that coexisted with other emanations of everyday life and culture.

While the Nazis would never have promoted traditional Christian ideology, religious imagery and symbolism were familiar to the general population. When examining films produced during the Weimar era, along with those produced during the Third Reich to Hollywood and European productions, we will consider how religious symbolism portrayed in pre- and post-Holocaust films promoted Christian ideology—particularly the Christian doctrine of sin, punishment, and redemption as the moral lesson to be drawn from Nazism—along with the negative stereotype of the Jew. Films made in different decades, using different modes of production, with different cultural codes, and reflecting entirely different attitudes toward the theme of the war and the Jews share these commonalities including the portrayal of the Jew as both physically *and* spiritually weak.

The horrors of the Holocaust have posed crucial historical, ethical, psychological, and theological problems, producing many artistic versions loaded with ideological overtones that not only betray the event's authenticity, but also conform to prevailing social attitudes and convey a comforting, rather than a challenging message. Through the investigation of artistic representation, I will confront broader issues raised by the study of Holocaust—antisemitism that enlisted the apparatus of the state to raise mass murder to the highest ideological imperative and the ease with which people accepted the fundamental breaches of human and civil rights. By focusing on the transmission and consequences of Christian antisemitism, I will analyze how the stereotypical identity of the Jew was preserved through the films of the Weimar era and the Third Reich, and how this negative image persists in the popular culture of the post-Holocaust world.

Weimar Cinema and Jewish Identity

Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished

historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think of identity as a "production," which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation. —Stuart Hall

Films in the 1920s codified "Jewishness" in metaphors of the city—the embodiment of capitalism, urban exploitation, and power. The "Rich Jew" represented the thriving industrialist, the modern capitalist, the slumlord who manipulates the powerlessness of his fellow citizens and who dominates physical, financial, and political exchange. Within the German concern over *Judenfrage*, Weimar cinema discovered a popular social, cultural, and political question through which to pursue the perceived problems of the big city and thus visually solidified the identity of the Jew. "In the streets of Berlin, one is not seldom struck by the momentary insight that one day all this will suddenly burst apart. The entertainment to which the general public throngs ought to produce the same effect."

In the early 1920s, some movies invoked the Exodus image of "Ahaverus" as Jewish exiles facing persecution in their host countries and dependent upon the Gentile community for their freedom. By introducing biblical symbolism (or biblical passages) in film, the past reemerges in the form of narrative myth, but focuses on the historical immediacy of the modern Jewish Question. The effect of the myth in film was not to challenge or stimulate the audience to rethink their views, but only to confirm what they already knew to be "right," to explain the status quo, and to give some sort of rationale or etiology for why things happen as they do. As witnessed in Hans Karl Breslauer's film of 1924, *Die Stadt ohne Juden (The City Without Jews)*, and less overtly in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Gruens (Nosferatu, a Symphony of Terror, 1922)*, the mythical image of the Jew raised the question of expelling the unwanted inhabitants of the city, an image that provoked a wide range of responses in later years.

Jews portrayed on the screen, corresponded to the common images of Jews in Weimar society. Symbolizing both the modern assimilated German Jews and the immigrant *Ostjuden*, these celluloid Jews—or what would later be called "imaginary (or mythic) Jews"—evoked at once capitalistic dominance, political prowess, and scientific insight on the one hand and stifling swarthy, exotic practices, ghetto sensibilities, and female eroticism on the other. On the screen and by association in real life, Jews represented dark, scheming, and intrusive elements that threatened to invade all of German society.

By the very nature of the experience, the cinema was a powerful, all-absorbing medium, more immediately affective than cognitive, engaging feelings before logic and rationality. Although we cannot possibly estimate the impact that these images had on the audience of 1920, the potential seems extraordinary. To explore the ways in which Jews were portrayed in film during the 1920s is not simply to suggest that these images led directly to Nazism, the destruction of the Jews, and mass barbarism. The power and poignancy of Weimar cinema lies in its role in defining an explosive identity of a targeted minority, one that was constructed through memory and fantasy, history and myth, racial ideology and religious antisemitism.

The Third Reich and Film as the "Ministry of Illusion"

Nazi cinema is to be seen in the content of a totalitarian state's concerted attempt to create a culture industry in the service of remaking German culture and the nation's political body, and, ultimately, in the service of mass deportation. Goebbels's "orchestra principle" characterized

everyday life with an aura of drama and excitement, organizing work and leisure time, occupying physical and psychic space, and thus militating against alternative experience and independent thought. Images and sounds worked in a variety of modalities to account for the entire spectrum of human experience, presenting a worldview that literally sought to encompass and control everything. Goebbels sought to create a popular domestic cinema that would be not only profitable and entertaining but also ideologically effective and politically useful, both a stabilizing force and an animating energy. Speaking in 1940, he declared: "We must give film a task and a mission in order that we may use it to conquer the world."

On a typical outing to the movies, viewers experienced a colorful, audiovisual variety show: advertisements; a newsreel (generally more overtly ideological); in fancier cinemas, a live stage show; a documentary short subject (*Kulturfilm*); and, finally, the main feature. "What the entertainment films (featuring revues and romance) might have lacked in primary Nazi ideology was more than made up for by *Kulturfilm*." The mix provided an affective variety for a diverse audience. The premiere screening of *Jud Süß* in 1940, for instance, was preceded by a short subject titled *Unsere Kinder—Unsere Zukunft* (*Our Children—Our Future*), the weekly newsreel, and a live performance of Franz Liszt's "Les Préludes."

Many film commentators throughout the years have underestimated the primary role of mass culture and particularly popular cinema in the Third Reich's creation of collective will. Like the films of the Weimar era, Nazi films did not exhibit overtly Christian symbolism. However, within a predominantly Christian nation, Christian themes could be recognized consciously or unconsciously as they appeared implicitly within the film's production techniques and images: the power of music, the "resounding silent image" that contributes to the existential religious experience; Biblical images of Jews as moneychangers in the temple (Jew as capitalist, industrialist, and exploiter), or the prostitute who is shunned except for the mercy of the man Jesus (the contamination by Jewish women and the racial purity of German women); and the association of German nationalism with Christian values intended to promote collective identity and collective will.\

While synagogues and Jewish businesses burned on Kristallnacht, 10 November 1938, several antisemitic features were in production. In keeping with Goebbels's "orchestra principle," the films had a wide generic range, from broad comedies to earnest dramas, from historical features to topical documentaries. Implicit Christian themes that could be derived from the examples listed above include *Robert und Bertram*, a musical comedy that premiered in July 1939 and featured two vagabonds who take up the cause of an honest village innkeeper exploited by a "nouveau riche" Jewish lender. *Leinen aus Irland*, released in October 1939, showed Jewish profiteers attempting to put linen weavers out of business. "Once again, though, German honesty and integrity triumph over the unscrupulousness of foreign elements." *Jud Süß* was released in 1940 as part of a concerted effort to bolster the collective identity of the nation with scenes of exploitation, torture, and rape by a Jewish character. Süß represented a secularized devil with various guises to carry out his desire for sex, greed, and infiltration into German society. By 1943, over 20 million viewers saw the movie that also became the top-rated film in France during the same year. Reviewers observed that the antisemitism of 1939-40 was nothing special—"it drew on paradigm, clichés, and long-standing Christian traditions

The National Socialist State's production of death and devastation would not have been possible without Goebbels' dream machinery. This medium enabled Germans to withstand awful truths and ignore hideous events; film served as a shield and a blindfold that ensured uplifting fictions no matter how bitter the realities. A nation faced with material hardship and a spiritual void hailed Hitler's promises of a better life while shunning enlightened rhetoric. Simulations supplanted direct experience, and illusions superceded reality. Mass culture, thus, became a crucial precondition for mass murder.

Film from the 1940s to 1970s:

The Image of the Jew in the Context of Christianity

In examining just a few of the five hundred war-related movies produced in Hollywood in the years 1940-1945, we discover a striking avoidance of any explicit presentation of the Jewish catastrophe (with the exception of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, 1940). "It would be bad for the public to get the idea the Nazis are persecuting the Jews . . . The solution is not to show the Jews at all. They become a Czech or some kind of Central European the 40,000,000 (movie goers) can view impersonally."

In order to ensure that the few Jews who did appear on the screen were sympathetically accepted by the forty million, a new convention emerged that portrayed the Jew in Christian terms. The first Hollywood movie to explicitly attack and condemn the Nazi regime in Germany and its persecution of innocent people was *The Mortal Storm* (1940). While failing to acknowledge the place of antisemitism in Nazi Germany, the film also failed to mention the word "Jew" once in the film, even though its main character was a Jewish professor whose ethnicity was described as "non-Aryan." This tale of Christian morality is evident in Professor Roth's appeal to "love" rather than resistance during his imprisonment. In the final chase scene, his half-Jewish daughter runs toward the border with her Christian lover with church bells pealing in the background symbolizing freedom and salvation. Shots are fired, she dies in his arms as he reassures her, "We can hear the church bells"—turning the non-Aryan heroine into a Christian martyr who finds eternal shelter in the church. This message could be seen as the call of Christendom offering salvation to the Jewish victims of the Nazis by Christianizing them.

Address Unknown (1943) features a Jewish actress persecuted by the Nazis, arrested and eventually killed when she refuses to comply with Nazi orders to remove "offensive lines" from the play. The lines for which she sacrifices her life are from the New Testament: "Blessed the meek, for they shall inherit the earth; blessed are the peasants, for they shall be called the children of God."

The message of traditional Christian ideology prevalent in post-Holocaust films perpetuates the condemnation of the Jews for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah; nevertheless, their continued existence is necessary as witness to the Christian doctrine of sin, punishment, and redemption, as well as to test the qualities of mercy and goodness incumbent upon good Christians. This antisemitism takes cinematic shape in two types of benevolent relationships: one depicts the Christian/gentile in an attempt to rescue the weak Jew; the other reflects a sexual attitude whereby the male Christian saves a female Jew because he loves her. According to Judith Doneson, the variety of fiction Holocaust-related films released since the end of World War II made it appear that "goodness infiltrated Europe during this evil era," for a majority of these

films portray, in some manner, Christian/gentiles attempting to save the lives of weak, passive Jews.

Theologically, Otto Weininger, a Viennese Jew who converted to Christianity, and authored *Sex and Character* in 1906, believed Christianity to be heroism at its highest point but that Judaism was "neither very good nor very bad, with nothing in the Jew himself of either the angel or the devil." He is, then, theologically, in limbo—a place, according to Gertrude Grace Sill in *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art*, which is found in the lower part of the earth, close to hell, where reside, among others, unbaptized souls. That is where the Jew appears in the earliest representations of the Holocaust in film following the end of World War II—in perennial limbo, in a defective state—that of Jewishness. The following films are representative of this Jew/Gentile/Christian relationship.

The Last Stop (Poland, 1948) Filmed at Auschwitz. The film has only one central Jewish character. The remainder of the Jews are in the background, marching silently to the gas chambers. The champions of the film are political prisoners planning a rebellion. Martha, the Jewess, is brought into the resistance and made a heroine by the gentile organizers.

The Distant Journey (Czech, 1949) Filmed at Thereisenstadt. The main character, a non-Jew, risks his life to save his Jewish wife and her family by entering Thereisenstadt ghetto. The strong, gentile male is the savior of the feminine Jew, in this instance, for the sake of love.

The Diary of Anne Frank (USA, 1959) The Franks hide together as a family and are sustained by their Dutch Christian saviors.

Kapo (Italy, 1960) Jewish girl sells her soul to the Nazi devil by becoming a kapo, a concentration camp overseer, and only receives salvation through the love of a Russian prisoner of war.

The Shop on Main Street (Czech, 1965) Tono is tormented by his Catholic conscience over whether or not he has the courage to save the Jewish Mrs. Lautman. None of the Jews in this Slovak town do anything to help themselves.

The Pawnbroker (USA, 1965) Social drama reflecting civil rights issues in the sixties. Sol Nazerman, a Holocaust survivor and pawnshop owner in Harlem, is saved by a Christian, sacrificial martyr, Jesus Ortiz. Nazerman is later redeemed that pierces his hand on a spike in an act of crucifixion—Christianized through love, grace, and suffering. In this film, the Jew cannot survive alone; while he is alive, his soul is dead. Another dimension is added to the image of physical weakness—spiritual weakness.

Black Thursday (France, 1974) Paul tries to fulfill his Christian duty and his role as a male protector in his efforts to save the Jews; but the Jews refuse to listen and so they are deported from Paris.

Voyage of the Damned (USA, Great Britain, 1976) The German captain, protects his cargo of Jews, who set sail from Germany on the ship St. Louis as if on a cruise

until they are refused entry into Cuba and the United States, which turns them into hysterical and frightened refugees—the damned, dependent upon the sensitive dignity of the captain. The ship is the vehicle of the modern wandering Jew—damned for the past and damned in the present.

The imposition of Christian values and symbolism on the historical material leads to the distortion of the Jewish identity of the victims, almost to the point of denying their reality or innocence suggesting that their Jewishness is some sort of an inherent flaw whose salvation lay in a benevolent Christian relationship or in Christianity itself

Schindler's List: The Continued Presence of Christian Ideology in Film

In the fifties and sixties, Hollywood films made a considerable contribution to the distinction between "Germans" and "Nazis," serving Western interests in the Cold War and expressing faith in a denazified postwar Germany. In the nineties, *Schindler's List* makes a contribution to a cultural mood that shifts attention from murderers and victims to rescuers and survivors.

Avisar argues that Spielberg focuses on extraordinary qualities of courage and moral strength at the expense of recognizing the genocidal evil that prevailed over a number of years and at the cost of millions of lives. Beyond the issue of happy endings, American optimism also defines a belief in the power of the individual to determine his/her fate. All the principal Jewish characters that elicit our emotional involvement manage to survive, with many demonstrating their ability to actively avert their death. However, in historical reality, most survivors stress the elements of luck or coincidence that saved them from death

While trying to offer a narrative that encompasses most of the important stages of the genocide (ghetto, deportations, labor camps, selections, death camps), Spielberg refrains from any references to antisemitism as a driving force for the Holocaust or to Germany as the state apparatus that organized the destruction. The treatment of the perpetrators displays "political sensitivity," pitting a malicious German (Goeth) against a good German (Schindler). This balance naturally diminishes the crucial role of the Germans in the Final Solution and may explain the favorable reviews of the film in Germany.

Numerous examples of Jewish stereotypes appear throughout the film along with images of passive Jews and their unheroic behavior toward one another. Apart from Itzhak Stern, there is not one Jew who exhibits even a hint of strength and courage. Jewish response and Jewish resistance, both mentioned in Thomas Keneally's novel, do not appear in the film. Views of the Krakow Ghetto pictures once active Jews standing in the cold warming themselves. But in reality, the ghetto had three hospitals, a home for the elderly, an orphanage, workshops, synagogues, schools, underground newspapers, and a fighting organization. Since there are no references to resistance within the ghetto, the Jews remain the perfect victims—weak, ineffectual, and incapable of helping themselves. If someone strong, fearless, virile, and Christian—an Oskar Schindler—does not act on their behalf, they are doomed. This makes the role of Schindler all the more meaningful—the Jews need Schindler; Schindler needs the Jews to unleash his dormant compassionate transformation.

The conflict of good and evil is expressed in the rivalry between Schindler and Goeth. Observing the numerous Jewish prisoners from the top of the commandant's veranda, or looking at the ghetto liquidation from a hill, both Goeth and Schindler are like the devil and God (or savior) competing over the fate of human beings in the lower spheres. Another example of Schindler as savior image is his contact with Helen in the basement, where even his gentleness in explaining Goeth's behavior toward her informs us that the myth of Schindler as savior has invaded his own perceptions. When he first confronts a frightened Helen in the cellar, he assures her: "Do you know who I am. I'm Schindler." Doneson states, "He has become the embodiment of a holy shrine. Touch him and you are saved."

The film's final scenes leave no doubt that Oskar Schindler is indeed a holy man, an anointed figure. Schindler's Jews and their progeny march over a hill and into the present, to the Christian cemetery on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. The visible cross on his grave displays a humble respect for the Christian symbol that may have the effect of suppressing the Christian contribution to antisemitism and perhaps the genocide itself. Yet it is the Christian "savior" who ends up in the highest moral position—even accusing himself of not doing more for the Jews. It lends emphasis, once again, to the notion that Jewish survival depends upon Christian benevolence.

Conclusion

Beginning with the on-screen, negative identification of the Jew during the Weimar era and the Third Reich, Christian ideology continues to dominate the cinematic treatment of post-Holocaust culture. The manifestation of Christian attitudes and Christian symbolism, however, varies from film to film. We have a Jewish character behaving like a Christian, an implicit conversion of the Jew to the dominant religion; a Jew appearing as a Jew but advocating Christian ideas; a Jew being presented through the prism of Christian stereotypes of Jews; and a presentation of the greatest tragedy of the Jews being neatly resolved in Christian terms. Avisar believes that the extensive use of Christian themes is not part of an indoctrination campaign or a conspiracy to vilify the Jews, but a failure of artistic imagination. The result of the extensive, powerful use of Christian motifs and symbols protects the audience while it distorts the crucially authentic details of the historical experience and projects ideological themes that betray the memory of the victims

Hollywood's universal approach to the Holocaust seeks to address specific social concerns in order to avoid burdening a basically indifferent public with the unbearable facts of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. It consciously avoids indicating that the Holocaust, rooted in Christian antisemitism, grew out of the heart of western civilization, was initiated by the "Allied" Germans, and was carried out while the entire Christian and Western world stood by, unable and unwilling to stop the process of destruction.

The Holocaust in Film
Christian Ideology and the Portrayal of the Jew

Education Workshop

Objective

European antisemitism, whether based on religious prejudice or modern Nazi racial ideology, was rooted in the history of the Jews of Christian Europe and in 2,000 years of Christian antisemitism. Since this subject continues to be one of the most difficult and controversial areas to confront, especially for a non-Jewish audience, I propose that cinematic art be used as a tool to critically present the historical pervasiveness of implicit and explicit symbolism that contribute to Christian antisemitism.

Overview

While the Nazis would never have promoted traditional Christian ideology, religious imagery and symbolism were familiar to the general population. When examining films produced during the Weimar era, along with those produced during the Third Reich to Hollywood and European productions, we will consider how religious symbolism portrayed in Holocaust films promoted Christian ideology, concepts and values and perpetuated the negative stereotype of the Jew. A brief overview of the role of religious consciousness in film will be helpful as we experience this workshop and evaluate the films during the Weimar era, Third Reich, and post-Holocaust world.

The Sacred through the Secular: Film as a Stimulus for Theology

Cinema is a powerful affective medium. It engages us at the level of the feelings and emotions. It is much more immediately affective than it is cognitive; engaging our feelings before it does our logic and rationality. The "willing suspension of disbelief" is the phrase sometimes used for this: watching a film does not involve simply being duped, but it does involve being drawn into the world created by the film.

By the very nature of the experience of watching it, film tends to be all-absorbing, especially when viewed in the cinema. The experiential dimension of watching a film, which can be close to being an existential experience, can mimic or stimulate the existential dimension of religious experience. After watching a film like *Schindler's List* or the most recent production *Life is Beautiful*, the audience is completely silent. The experience is like being in the presence of something awesome. Like Isaiah in the temple, we felt the overpowering sense of the numinous, and after that experience, words were inadequate. (Isaiah also realized the inadequacy of human speech as he cried out with "unclean lips"—Isa. 6:5) The effect of the film was to make us think very profoundly about issues of religion, ethics, and humanity.

Film is one means of presenting themes of religious importance, and these need not be restricted to what has traditionally been labeled as "religious," but include all the questions, which pertain to human experience and destiny. Religious encounter, then, may not be limited to sacred buildings, religious symbols or architecture, or even writings that are religious or theological in

character. What does this have to do with film? In the words of Paul Tillich: "everything that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not." What we view in the films of Weimar and the Third Reich is a threat to this secure world.

Engaging us at the level of feelings and emotions before it affects our logic and rationality, we cannot underestimate the power of film to stimulate, convince, and affect the viewer. To the extent the film may keep the audience passive in an immediate social situation, but in anesthetizing the audience, it will affect it and perhaps be impetus for long-range mutations. We must, therefore, instruct our students to critically evaluate the world created by film.

Workshop Activity

This activity is part of a semester-long course devoted to culture and propaganda prior to and during the Third Reich that includes the role of the church, women, family, film, and other forms of propaganda. A special emphasis is placed on Jewish life before within the context of interwar Europe and pre-World War II. A packet of handouts will include copies of the overheads used in the presentation below.

- ❖ Introduction to the checklists "Analyzing a Narrative Film" and "Reading a Film Sequence" to expose students to the critical process of analyzing a film.
- ❖ View film clips from the Weimar era and the Third Reich. Briefly discuss how an original audience of ordinary citizens would perceive these films?
- ❖ Brainstorm a list of "religious" symbolism, images, and the behavior expected of the Gentile/Christian; then the stereotypical symbols, roles, and images of the Jew.
- ❖ View film clips again and make comparisons of identity formation. Briefly discuss what effect films and their implied messages may have had on the German audience.
- ❖ View film clips from the post-Holocaust era. Observe how these films persist in portraying Christian ideology and the negative (or weak) portrayal of the Jew.
- ❖ Films such as *Schindler's List* and others preceding it aesthetically links the Holocaust with Jewish revival and independence in Israel. Since the existence of the State of Israel is a theological contradiction for Christianity, contemporary interpretations may also include the dilemma of a strong Jewish state or a more confident Jewish role in society that poses a threat to the Christian/gentile world. In considering the following story, what might be the attitudes of current audiences toward Israel and the Jews?

It was some days after the Six Days War that a team of the Dutch Church Television came to make a film in Jerusalem about the Jews. Now they could take pictures in the original sites in the Old City of Jerusalem. Then

I met a new reaction to Jewish reality. These professing Christians disliked Jewish soldiers—the conquerors—and said openly how much more beautiful were the eyes of the Jews saved from Auschwitz than the proud looks of the soldiers

(David Flusser, Professor of Comparative Religion at Hebrew University, 1978; quoted in Judith Doneson, "The Image Lingers.")