

## Book Reviews

**The Holocaust in American Film**, by Judith E. Doneson. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002. 288 pp. \$19.95.

*In Memory of Judith E. Doneson (1947–2002)*

I received my review copy of the second edition of Judith Doneson's pioneering study of American feature films about the Holocaust the same day I learned of her death. It is still difficult for me to believe that I will not meet her every year at one of the Holocaust or Jewish Studies conferences where we regularly presented papers dealing with cinematic representations of the *Shoah* and then sneaked away for a cup of coffee to discuss and dispute each other's conclusions. Despite our disagreements, which will become apparent in this review too, I always valued our friendship and her unwavering advocacy of the role films could play in popularizing the memory of the Holocaust and relating the issues surrounding it to contemporary concerns.

When *The Holocaust in American Film* was first published in 1987, the prevailing attitude towards the "Hollywood version of the Holocaust," as Annette Insdorf dubbed it in her survey of Holocaust cinema, was articulated by Elie Wiesel in the foreword to that book: "One does not imagine the unimaginable. And in particular one does not show it on screen."<sup>1</sup> While Insdorf praised several American pictures about the Holocaust, Ilan Avisar bluntly dismissed Hollywood's ability to make a significant movie about the ordeal of European Jewry during World War Two: "Unlike the personal drives of west and east European filmmakers, who deal with the Holocaust in order to explore and express their own national traumas, . . . the American interest in the subject is motivated by other considerations which are not necessarily rooted in a genuine concern with the disturbing truth of the historical tragedy."<sup>2</sup> When the majority of Holocaust scholars and survivors suspected that Hollywood inevitably would Americanize, trivialize, and universalize the Jewish genocide, Judy Doneson commended undertakings like NBC's miniseries *Holocaust* for raising public awareness about the event and establishing it as a "model, a paradigm, or a framework for understanding history" (p. 7).

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<sup>1</sup>Elie Wiesel, "Foreword," in Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xi. The first edition was published in 1983 by Random House.

<sup>2</sup>Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 132–133.

The first four chapters of Doneson's book contain only minor alterations from the first edition. Therein she traces the evolution of the portrayal of Jews and the Holocaust in American films from the 1930s to the 1970s. Doneson repeatedly cites Pierre Sorlin's crucial insight that movies about historical topics mirror "contemporary circumstances" more than the past.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Avisar and Insdorf, Doneson focuses on the historical contextualization of American movies rather than on comparisons of national cinematic styles or treatments of common themes. She analyzes how the characterization of Jewish figures in American films changed from the contradictory image of the Jew as a crafty usurer and useful ally in *The House of Rothschild* (1934), to the Jew as the victim of antisemitism abroad in *The Great Dictator* (1940) and domestic bigotry in *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1947), and finally to the Jew as a universal proxy for any target of ethnic, religious, or racial hatred in *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959). These shifts in emphasis conveyed prewar warnings against the dangers Nazism posed to Europe and postwar extrapolations of the lessons of the Holocaust to combat manifestations of American intolerance. Doneson correctly observes that in the Forties and Fifties the minimization of Jewish distinctiveness was fully congruent with American Jewish aspirations for assimilation into their host society.

The achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, the protests against the Viet Nam War, the Six Day War, and the gradual displacement of the "melting pot" model for American society by the ideal of cultural diversity provided directors with the opportunity to make films about the Jewish particularity of the Holocaust. While analogies of Jewish suffering under Hitler with the situation of American blacks still persisted in movies like *The Pawnbroker* (1965), the liquidation of the Jews eventually occupied center stage in theatrical releases like *Voyage of the Damned* (1976) and the television docudrama *Holocaust*. Fending off contemporary criticisms of the latter's melodramatic rendition of "the Final Solution," Doneson documents that the screenwriter Gerald Green drew on recent Holocaust scholarship to conceptualize his epic about how Nazi discrimination against German Jews incrementally escalated into the extermination of European Jewry. Nevertheless, *Holocaust* managed to personify vast historical forces in the complicity of an individual Nazi official and the responses of members of a middle-class German Jewish family with whom an American audience easily could identify. Doneson is convincing when she claims that "*Holocaust* does not trivialize, but rather popularizes the Holocaust in such a way that its message is available for all to share" (p. 196).

The new chapter in Doneson's book is devoted to Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. It is an expanded version of an essay that appeared in Yosefa Loshitzky's outstanding

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<sup>3</sup>Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980), p. 71.

collection of scholarly analyses of the film.<sup>4</sup> Though Doneson credits *Schindler's List* with heightening global consciousness about the Holocaust, she criticizes the movie for perpetuating traditional European stereotypes of the passive "feminized" Jewish victim who is dependent on a proactive "masculinized" Christian hero. As early as 1978, Doneson applied a gendered interpretation of the emplotment of many Holocaust movies to account for the cinematic convention of vulnerable Jews requiring courageous Christians to intervene on their behalf or protect their lives as in *Crossfire* (1947), *Gentlemen's Agreement*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), *The Pawnbroker*, *Voyage of the Damned*, and *Julia* (1977). Her chapter on *Schindler's List* weaves this intellectual thread which ran throughout her articles into what sadly turned out to be her last word on this subject.<sup>5</sup>

*Schindler's List* does replicate the typical pattern of male and female relationships in the protagonist's paternalistic shielding of his Jews from the Nazi machinery of death and in the scenes of Goeth alternating between abuse and seduction of his beautiful Jewish maid. Yet is this consciously or subconsciously sexist or Christological on Spielberg's part, or does it approximate the dilemma the Jews of Krakow found themselves in and Goeth's maid faced every time she encountered her sadistic boss? Is the collaboration between Yitzhak Stern and Oskar Schindler "reminiscent of an old fashioned, arranged relationship" (p. 209) with Stern assuming the role of the wife who works behind the scenes for the success of her husband? In my opinion, the dynamic of this partnership does not reflect the dichotomy between man and woman, but rather the reciprocity between Stern who had the brains to make employing Jews profitable and Schindler whose heart was big enough to adopt them as his extended family when he ultimately understood that his Nazi cronies intended to kill every Jew, including little children like the girl whose red coat attracts Schindler's eye in the midst of masses of Jews being summarily shot.

I also cannot concur with Doneson's perception of "an ambivalent tone in *Schindler's List* regarding the Jewish state" (p. 213). She speculates that Spielberg shares an idealized image of the powerless Jew which was shattered by the military prowess of Israel in the Six Day War and its subsequent repression of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. To be sure, this confirms her view that Spielberg is ensconced in the stereotype of the defenseless Jew, but how then do we explain his decision to end the movie at Schindler's grave in Israel to the melody of "Jerusalem of

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<sup>4</sup>Judith E. Doneson, "The Feminization of the Jew in *Schindler's List*," in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 140–152.

<sup>5</sup>Judith E. Doneson, "The Jew as a Female Figure in Holocaust Film," *Shoah: A Review of Holocaust Studies and Commemorations*, I:1 (1978), pp.11–13, 18.

Gold," a song associated with the reunification of Jerusalem and Israel's stunning victory over hostile Arab countries in 1967? After all, the movie was released when the prospects for peace were considerably brighter than they are today. Moreover, the sandwiching of black and white footage of Nazi oppression between the nostalgic yellow glow of the Shabbat candles being lit in a Jewish home before the Holocaust began and the final scene of Schindler's Jews marching over a hill and time into a sunlit procession to place stones on his tombstone which lies in the Jewish state symbolizes the *aliyah* the Jews have made from an endangered minority in Europe to a ruling majority in Israel.

Doneson has updated her bibliography to include new books like those by Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Shandler which substantiate her qualified faith in the potential of popular culture to educate Americans about the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> She also omits many other books on American film in general which champion the role cinema has played in transmitting historical memory to the masses. Historians like Robert Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin have taken up the cause that Doneson promoted ahead of the time when Holocaust scholars were ready to be receptive to it.<sup>7</sup> Her book is a reminder that all of us who pursue the study of Holocaust cinema today are deeply indebted to her.

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**Rethinking the Holocaust**, by Yehuda Bauer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 335 pp. \$29.95.

*Rethinking the Holocaust* is not only a book on Holocaust history but also a meditation on the writing and implications of this history by one of its most influential interpreters, Yehuda Bauer. Bauer is the former director of the International Institute for Holocaust Research of Yad Vashem, Professor of Holocaust Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the author of a dozen books in English on the destruction of European Jewry. *Rethinking the Holocaust* brings together several of Bauer's seminal essays,

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<sup>6</sup>Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001); Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup>Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996).