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Misrepresenting the Shoah in American Film

Madeleine Erica Read

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Misrepresenting the Shoah in American Film

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How should we, Americans, confront our complicity in reproducing the Shoah? For complicit we are, if consumerism is any metric: Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List* had grossed \$321 million as of 2012; more than 40 million people have made the pilgrimage to the sacred US Holocaust Museum; at last count, *The Diary of Anne Frank* had sold 30 million copies. These numbers are stale staples in the debate over the ethics of Shoah representation, of course, but they bear out the skepticism of critics who have questioned American Holocaust consumer culture. And consumerism is only the first of many such ethical quandaries, which include how to deal with the trauma that audiences experience upon viewing Holocaust films and what happens when secondary witnesses overidentify with Holocaust victims.

This paper takes up an unusual form of Holocaust art: misrepresentative film. I discuss two films, Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* and Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, to argue that intentional misrepresentations not only call attention to the pitfalls of traditional representation but also encourage audiences to work through the transhistorical trauma of the Shoah. Released in 2009, Tarantino's was perhaps unique in cinema for its radical alteration of history, intended to give audiences the sheer pleasure of seeing the Nazi regime go up, literally, in flames. Though the film is undoubtedly a revenge fantasy that, using Dominick LaCapra's terms, embodies "acting out" in response to historical trauma, it does so by flipping the traditional narrative: unlike most depictions of the Shoah, it complicates the victim-perpetrator binary, identifies audiences with the transgressors, and constantly calls attention to its own fictionality.

Movies like *The Grand Budapest Hotel* are evidence that Tarantino really did shatter the constraints of the genre. *Basterds* certainly makes no effort toward historical accuracy, but since its appeal depends on the audience's awareness of its inaccuracies, Tarantino is still elbow-deep in real history. Anderson is not. *Budapest* is a troubled film, haunted by invasions, wars, arrests, and displays of arbitrary power, many of which recall the Third Reich. The function of these ominous forces, however, is not to offer commentary on the Shoah but simply to recreate the illusory world of Stefan Zweig, on whose writings it was based. In producing a movie about Nazi-occupied Europe in which the troubles of the period are relegated mostly to the background, Anderson furthers the deconstruction of the Holocaust film genre, raising the possibility that such films can be historically serious without being bound by restrictive rules.

Keywords: representation, history, Shoah, Holocaust, contemporary cinema, film, Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson, *Inglorious Basterds*, *Grand Budapest Hotel*, Dominick LaCapra, Jean Baudrillard

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The American Shoah Fetish

In 1997, Ford Motor Company sponsored a broadcast of *Schindler's List*, uncut and uninterrupted, during primetime on NBC. The film had opened more than three years earlier to both critical and popular acclaim; by the time it closed in theaters in September of 1994, it had grossed \$321.3 million worldwide (Box Office). NBC and Ford, the two corporations that had teamed up to air it, smugly congratulated themselves on their act of public service. "It's unprecedented that an entire three-and-a-half-hour network broadcast is sponsored by one advertiser and has no advertising breaks throughout the entirety of that movie," said Warren Littlefield, president of NBC (Zurawik). "We just felt it was the right thing to do to present this great story of one man's courage," said Gerry Donnelly, communications and advertising director for Ford (Scheinberg).

The NBC broadcast of *Schindler's List* embodies the paradox of contemporary America's relationship to Holocaust¹ memory. For all the hype about altruism and ethics, the film did not air entirely uninterrupted as Littlefield claimed it would: though corporate representatives insisted that they did not qualify as commercials (Zurawik), two ninety-second "intermissions" interrupted the film with the Ford logo displayed alongside the title of the movie. Whether this subtle advertising was a reasonable move for a money-making company or merely an underhanded attempt to profit from the representation of a real genocide is a sticky question of the sort taken up by compelling scholarship on the increasing commercialization of Holocaust memory.² Americans have never been more aware of the atrocities committed by the Nazis as

¹ Because the word "Holocaust" is considered suspect, I have used "Shoah" in this paper wherever possible. "Holocaust" is more common in discussions of cinema, however—as in the term "Holocaust film"—so, in the interest of adhering to the norms of the discourse, I have retained it in most phrases where it functions as an adjective and in all quotes or titles.

² In his book *Selling the Holocaust*, Tim Cole cites critics who doubt the value of according the Shoah such a central place in contemporary culture, not least because it encourages "a process of trivialization" that has produced an

they are now or accorded the victims so much reverence (Novick): more than 40 million people have made the pilgrimage to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), and throughout its various iterations, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, one of the best-known narratives arising from the Shoah, has sold 30 million copies (*About Anne Frank*). Many US universities have begun to offer entire emphases or majors devoted to Holocaust and genocide studies.³ The popularity of films like *Schindler's List* is evidence enough that the event holds a prominent place in the American imagination.

This paradox—that, simultaneously, the popularity of the Shoah as a subject both profanes and sacralizes it—has raised questions about how it should be represented in film. Is there a way to memorialize it without commercializing it? Who is entitled to deal creatively with it? Do directors of Holocaust movies have a responsibility to realism and accuracy? Do representations of the Shoah risk leading viewers to falsely identify with the victims? The stakes of these questions are high, as Daniel Magilow and Lisa Silverman point out: “In just a few years,” they note, “there will be no one alive who actually witnessed the Holocaust....[It] will become like any other long-past historical event, which we can only learn about and remember by reading, watching, and engaging with its representations” (2).

As a partial answer to some of these questions, audiences have developed a peculiar set of rules, unwritten but uncompromising, that reflect their sensibilities about what is (and what is not) appropriate when representing the Shoah. Terrence des Pres summarizes these rules as follows:

entire industry surrounding the Holocaust and turned memory of the event into little more than kitsch (15). Alan Mintz, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Peter Novick are likewise skeptical of the Americanization of the Shoah.

³ Clark University maintains the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, which offers undergraduate- and graduate-level concentrations; Keene State College has a four-year BA and Gratz college a doctoral program. Similar institutions can also be found in several European universities.

1. The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event....
2. Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event....
3. The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even a sacred event. (Lang, *Writing* 217)

Though des Pres advances this list ironically, conscious of its quasi-biblical timbre, others accept the rules quite earnestly. The importance of all three was apparent in the 1997 NBC broadcast of *Schindler's List*. It reaffirmed the Shoah's uniqueness: media rhetoric characterized it as "unprecedented," as if the airing of the film itself mirrored the singularity of its subject. It portrayed the Shoah accurately: shot in black-and-white and mostly on location, it reenacted the cinematic realities of the 1940s. And it did so with appropriate gravity: sure enough, the approach of pundits and commentators gave the act of viewing *Schindler's List* a veneer of ritual solemnity and moral obligation. Reporting on the 1997 broadcast, the *New York Times* announced that "Ford Will Travel the High Road" (Elliott) and the *Daily News* that "NBC Does Right By *Schindler*" (Bianculli).

This holy triumvirate of rules has produced a flood of popular Holocaust movies. Films like *Schindler's List*, Lanzmann's *Shoah*, Herman's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, and Polanski's *The Pianist* claim on some level to faithfully represent the reality of Nazi Germany and honor the memory of millions of murdered Jews. This, after all, is the rationale behind commemorations of the Shoah: they are justified if they have a clear and important pedagogical value for secondary witnesses, those who never experienced the camps but seek to participate in commemorative acts. Peter Novick notes that the Shoah is widely and sincerely accepted as a moral reference point, "the bearer of important lessons that we all ignore at our peril" (12).

Not everyone, however, is comfortable reducing the Shoah to “lessons” or reproducing it indiscriminately in art. While a director’s duty to singularity, accuracy, and inviolability is often taken for granted, these standards can reinforce some of the more pernicious aspects of American Holocaust culture. Especially in the late 1990s, critics argued that American appropriation of Shoah memory dangerously universalized the trauma by erasing the Jewishness of the victims. Some expressed concern that American consumers tended to falsely identify their own struggles with those inflicted on the Jews, though the Jews’ sufferings were objectively far worse, and others warned that attempts to lend meaning to the Nazis’ violence risked, on some level, sanctioning it. Novick in particular worries about the impact on Jewish communities: the more they revolve around memorializing the Shoah, the more the narrative of victimhood becomes the only way for them to make sense of history (7).

Because des Pres’ three rules seem intuitively right to most audiences, films that violate them can be jarring; indeed, many works that satirize elements of the Shoah or raise doubts about its uniqueness are dismissed for their nonadherence.⁴ But given that these norms often pose problems themselves, it may be that directors who defy them are also doing important cultural work. Is it possible for intentional misrepresentations not only to call attention to the pitfalls of traditional representation but also to encourage audiences to work through the transhistorical trauma of the Shoah?

Here, I discuss two films, Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* and Wes Anderson’s *The Grand Budapest Hotel*,⁵ to argue that the answer is yes. Released in 2009, Tarantino’s was

⁴ Examples include Tadeusz Borowski’s collection of short stories *This Way For the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1959) and Edgar Hilsenrath’s grotesque novel *The Nazi Who Lived As a Jew* (1971), both of which went unpublished for years because of their satirical tone. The most significant case is perhaps the German TV series *Heimat* (1984-2004), intended as a portrait of twentieth-century German life. Though influential and widely watched, it has raised hackles for glossing over the war, the Nazis, and the Shoah (Kaes).

⁵ The astute reader may balk at my classification of *Grand Budapest Hotel*, or even *Inglourious Basterds*, as a Holocaust film. After all, the former is a nostalgic rendering of Old Europe that borders on farcical fantasy, and the

perhaps unique in cinema for its radical alteration of history, an alteration whose purpose was not to explore the outcome of a counterfactual scenario but rather to give audiences the sheer pleasure of seeing the Nazi regime go up, literally, in flames. Though the film is undoubtedly a revenge fantasy that, using Dominick LaCapra's terms, embodies "acting out" in response to historical trauma, it does so by flipping the traditional narrative: unlike most depictions of the Shoah, it complicates the victim-perpetrator binary, identifies audiences with the transgressors, and constantly calls attention to its own fictionality. It thus exhausts a form of acting out that had previously been unavailable to viewers, which may be the key to begin working through the cultural trauma the Shoah has produced. In a way, as Todd Herzog suggests, *Basterds* "liberat[es] cinematic representations of the Shoah from the oppressive mores that have constrained them for decades" (Dassanowsky 282).

Movies like *The Grand Budapest Hotel* are evidence of such a liberation. Set in a fictional, interwar eastern European country occupied by Nazi-like soldiers, Anderson's 2014 film also grapples with the difficulties of representing the Shoah. But it is a strikingly different piece of cinema. *Basterds* certainly makes no effort toward historical accuracy, but since its appeal depends on the audience's awareness of its inaccuracies, Tarantino is still elbow-deep in real history. Anderson is not. *Budapest* is a troubled film, haunted by invasions, wars, arrests, and displays of arbitrary power, many of which recall the Third Reich. The function of these ominous forces, however, is not to offer commentary on the Shoah but simply to recreate the illusory world of Stefan Zweig, on whose writings it was based. In producing a movie about

latter, though set in Nazi-occupied France, still never approaches the camps, the gas chambers, or the survivors. My response is that I interpret the term "Holocaust film" more broadly, to encompass not just those that depict Auschwitz and Dachau but any that must grapple with the ethics of representation in a way that is intimately tied up with the Jewish genocide. In his book *Film and the Holocaust*, Aaron Kerner maintains that this is consistent with how the term is normally applied (3).

Nazi-occupied Europe in which the troubles of the period are relegated mostly to the background, Anderson furthers the deconstruction of the Holocaust film genre, raising the possibility that such films can still be historically serious without being bound by such restrictive rules.

Acting Out in Simulacral Films

Given the increasing distance between contemporary audiences and the actual event of the Shoah, an awareness of the pitfalls of representation is crucial. Depicting the Shoah in art poses several quandaries that other scholars have taken up with gusto, but I want to focus here on only two: first, how to deal with the trauma that audiences experience upon viewing Holocaust films, and second, how to address the problems raised when secondary witnesses overidentify with Holocaust victims.

Because of the horrors it portrays, this genre of cinema may inflict a form of secondary trauma on audiences who engage empathetically with its subjects. Of course, the very possibility of vicarious traumatization raises questions about whether it is ethical for secondary witnesses of the Shoah to identify with the victims in any way; after all, falsely conflating one's own trauma with that inflicted on the Jews risks downplaying for viewers its severity. At the same time, however, treating victims entirely as others is a dehumanizing move that can lead audiences to a numbing lack of empathy. Of course, there is no single answer to where a balance between complete identification and complete objectification may lie—so, acknowledging that secondary trauma has at least some validity, such films may inflict it⁶ without offering tools for coping with

⁶ Of course, whatever trauma viewers may experience after watching a film like *Schindler's List* can never be more than the palest echo of what actual victims of the Shoah suffered. The two should never be conflated. Though LaCapra's categories of acting out and working through usually refer to firsthand trauma, I have adopted them to discuss the secondhand trauma Holocaust films might engender; this, however, should not be taken as an indication that I consider the latter to be equal to the former.

it. In search of language historiographers could use to talk about trauma, Dominick LaCapra employs terms from the field of psychoanalysis to describe two ways memory can engage with traumatic events. The first, which he calls “acting out,” happens when victims are so possessed by the past that they compulsively relive through performative repetitions, suffering flashbacks and dreams in which the past takes over the present and the future. Escape from the trauma feels impossible. The second, which he calls “working through,” is a more beneficial remembering, a way of distancing oneself from the trauma in pursuit of a better future and offering more nuanced, self-conscious ways of understanding the Shoah. Working through means learning to distinguish the past from the present and, if not entirely overcoming the acting out, at least finding healthy ways of coping with it.

Representations of trauma are most useful when they help secondary witnesses to “work through” its implications, but many Holocaust films fall into common snags that steer audiences toward “acting out” instead. First, directors are often tempted to offer an uncomplicated treatment of history, one that rewards viewers with unambiguous messages that identify meaning in the traumatic event and denies them a chance to work through it on their own terms. LaCapra calls them “harmonizing accounts” (107). Second, some of the films themselves compulsively relive the past, becoming the vehicle whereby the trauma swallows the present and traps the viewer in reliving it. Either of these pitfalls can keep traumatic wounds from healing because they privilege acting out over working through.

The second issue arises when, at the extreme end of secondary traumatization, viewers uncritically appropriate the trauma for themselves. This results in overidentification, where viewers perceive the onscreen other as an extension of the self. I should reiterate that it is impossible to demarcate a precise line between empathy and overidentification, but this does not

mean we should be cavalier about the problems the latter presents: audiences may believe that they fully understand Holocaust trauma either because (1) they witness the cinematic trauma and assume that trauma in their own past somehow gives them access to it, or (2) they have seen the movie and therefore now know “what it must have been like.”

They may not be wholly wrong, of course. Viewers might indeed better understand the nature of trauma if it is informed by their own experiences, and an emphasis on historical accuracy may grant them a window into the real conditions of the concentration camps. The trouble, however, comes when viewers conflate those representations with reality, superficially assuming that what they see is what the Shoah really *was* and forgetting film’s powerful fictionalizing power. Although traditional Holocaust movies often insist on their own veracity, they obscure the textuality of history, the important fictional dimension of any historical narrative.

For Jean Baudrillard, insisting on the veracity of any representation preserves a false distinction between “true” Holocaust films like *Schindler’s List* and “false” ones like *Inglourious Basterds*. Most critics note an obvious difference between the two: one makes a concerted effort toward accuracy and reverence, the other does not. According to des Pres’ rules, this means that Spielberg’s is a better Holocaust film than Tarantino’s. But Baudrillard would argue that both are simulacral and that labeling one of them “true” only preserves the illusion that audiences have access to an inaccessible historical reality. “Whereas so many generations,” he suggests, “...lived in the march of history, in the euphoric or catastrophic expectation of a revolution—today one has the impression that history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references” (43). The original experience of history has given way to a vacuum, so any modern historical representation is merely a sign disguising the

lack of an original. When Baudrillard published *Simulacra and Simulation* in 1981, he noted that history had supplanted myth as the most popular subject in cinema. He attributed this shift to nostalgia for history as a “lost referential,” the original that has disappeared in deference to signs. We look to history, he says, not because we place hope or belief in it, but because we want to escape the current historical void—in other words, we fetishize history in film to assuage the trauma of having lost it.

Holocaust films that claim historical accuracy therefore often embody the sort of acting-out that LaCapra warned against. The most prominent example is Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), which uses witness testimony to memorialize events at Chelmno, Treblinka, Auschwitz, and the Warsaw Ghetto. *Shoah* is acclaimed for the way it seems to capture reality—for the way it privileges witnessing as a means of accessing truth. It begins, for example, with Simon Srebnik, a Polish Jew in Chelmno whose job was to row SS men up and down the Narew River and who survived because they liked his singing voice. Forty years later, Lanzmann has persuaded Srebnik to return with him to Chelmno and recreate the scene: the opening shots find Srebnik once again in a boat on the Narew River, singing.

While the sense of presence is impressive—after all, we find ourselves at the very scene of the atrocity, witnessing parallel events—the effect is subtly more sinister. Lanzmann encourages Srebnik to repeat moments of his own victimization, a form of acting out that denies him the possibility of moving past a traumatic memory. The director faced criticism for his aggressive behavior toward survivors when recording their testimonies, and his belligerence extends to his audience as well. Reviewer Pauline Kael remarked that “sitting in a theatre seat for a film as full of dead spaces as this one seems to me a form of self-punishment” (67). She characterizes the self-punishment as an unfortunate side-effect of the cinematic style, but for

Lanzmann it is more than that—it is the very purpose of the film. His intent is to subject his viewers to a shadow of the trauma that actual victims suffered decades before, which gives him the semblance of a perpetrator: he forces his subjects to relive unthinkable horrors from their pasts and his audience to experience an act of secondary witnessing as trauma.

When the director becomes a quasi-perpetrator and the viewers quasi-victims, it is hard to deny that their participation is simulacral. Films like *Shoah* do more than simply represent history; they urge audiences to partake in it. The rules of Holocaust representation breed films that reproduce the reality of the event as closely as possible, meaning that moviegoers can come away seduced by the satisfaction of having undergone in some small way the trauma of the Shoah. In their smugness, in the illusion that they have participated in history, they can ignore the nagging anxiety that the cinematic experience they have just had is more fictional than real.

Taking Misrepresentations Seriously

The stigma against misrepresenting the Shoah discourages most artists from even attempting it, and scholarship about such misrepresentations is equally sparse. Those filmmakers who try it are usually dismissed or derided for their crassness. Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (1968), a comedy about Jews who engineer a designed-to-fail Broadway musical featuring Hitler, was deemed tasteless by many critics for lampooning the Third Reich without offering any deeper moral message. The NBC miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) also faced accusations of tawdriness: it often willingly traded historical accuracy for maudlin drama to steal a few cheap tears. These more mainstream examples of misrepresentation keep unfortunate company with much worse ones, such as Nazisploitation films (exploitative sexual fantasies set during the Third Reich) that are not only riddled with historical perjury but also overrun with gratuitous violence and sex. No wonder, then, that misrepresentative Holocaust film is often dismissed as immoral.

But the value of misrepresentation may have a precedent in what Linda Hutcheon has famously called “historiographic metafiction.” Pervaded by scruples about accuracy, historiographic metafiction portrays actual historical events but self-consciously dwells on the porous boundaries between fiction and history, keeping the audience constantly aware of its own textuality. It is fiction preoccupied with how to faithfully recreate historical characters in a written text, with how to deliver nonlinear narratives in a linear format, with how memory, ideology, and even linguistic structures can introduce bias into a story—in other words, with all the problems incumbent in historiography. Laurent Binet’s 2010 novel *HHhH*, for example, is ostensibly about the life and assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, one of the primary architects of the Shoah. But on a deeper level, it is about Binet himself and his complicated search for historical truth. While his writing betrays an obsession with accuracy and complete objectivity, he undermines both at every turn by drawing attention to the narrative conventions he is using. He interrupts himself to acknowledge that he invented a conversation here or left out a character there; he frequently adds an “I imagine” to signal that a detail belongs to him, not to the historical record. It makes it impossible for his readers to forget the futility of extricating history from fiction.

Basterds and *Budapest* both depend on metafictional tropes, and they have a similar effect. Both films certainly use history, but they keep it at arm’s length—they are rife with self-conscious narrative techniques that remind audiences of the constructed, fictional nature of cinema. In the sections that follow, I hope to show how the metafictional distance from history not only helps guard against audience overidentification but also becomes Tarantino’s mechanism for inverting the traditional Holocaust narrative, and how that in turn may suggest the possibility of films, like Anderson’s, that are more confection than history.

Inglourious Basterds: The Implosion of the Holocaust Genre

The initial reaction to *Basterds* was mostly positive, but some critics voiced dissents that cited its lack of moral feeling: “It’s ridiculous and appallingly insensitive,” wrote David Denby of the *New Yorker*, “a Louisville Slugger applied to the head of anyone who has ever taken the Nazis, the war, or the Resistance seriously.” This criticism was echoed perhaps most intensely by Jewish reviewers, such as Liel Leibovitz, who argued in the Jewish-American magazine *Tablet*,

[The movie] is a failure not only of imagination, but also of morality. The desire to turn film into a literal, blunt instrument of revenge drains it of the terrific power it has as a sharp and precise tool with which to cut through myopia, forgetfulness, ignorance, and denial.... Tarantino, however, is not interested in such trifles. He doesn’t see cinema as a way to look at reality, but...as an alternative to reality, a magical and Manichean world...where violence solves everything, and where the Third Reich is always just a film reel and a lit match away from cartoonish defeat.

Leibovitz’s compelling read of *Basterds* echoes a Wiesel-like reverence toward the Shoah. He despairs at the raucous, spaghetti-western-style adulteration of history, at the flippancy and almost maniacal glee with which Tarantino aestheticizes and disrupts Shoah memory. Any Tarantino film provokes a mixture of praise and ire, but the stakes seem higher in this one—if we condone Tarantino’s irreverence, what implications does it have not only for the murdered Jews but for victims of other genocides? Are we somehow permitting the desecration of their memory?

These are urgent questions, and I do not wish to dismiss the valid concerns of those perturbed by Tarantino’s approach. Nonetheless, I suggest that *Basterds* is less amoral, Manichean, or cartoonish than Leibovitz believes it to be. The very way it complicates the

traditional victim-perpetrator binary offers a chance for ethical reflection on the mores of contemporary Holocaust film, and the absurd ahistoricism is what allows Tarantino to avoid giving into those mores himself. By offering a narrative that is presented as fiction rather than history, the film places its viewers at a critical distance from the Shoah and exposes them to both the elation and the disquiet that comes from taking revenge on the Nazis. After the complex emotional response elicited by such a revenge fantasy, audiences may be ready to move toward a healthier working through.

This process begins with how Tarantino inverts the traditional categories of victim and perpetrator, which are inescapably black and white in most Holocaust films. Primo Levi was among the first to suggest that the distinction between the two is usually too rigid; his book *The Drowned and the Saved* reflects on “the gray zone” inhabited by both Germans who occasionally helped Jews and by Jews who occasionally helped Germans. In spite of Levi’s sensitive attempt to unravel and collapse this binary, however, our cultural productions reveal a desire, deep-seated in our collective consciousness, to preserve it. The main antagonist in *Schindler’s List*, for example, is Amon Göth, an SS commander so sadistic that he shoots Jewish prisoners at random as his morning target practice. The problem in Spielberg’s depiction is not that Göth’s character is historically inaccurate; one only has to look as far as Josef Kramer or Reinhard Heydrich for examples of German officers with a dreadfully eager itch to inflict misery on others. But Göth is so heinous that he becomes inaccessible to the film’s viewers, who cannot see in themselves the possibility of ever becoming like him and therefore fail to learn the moral lesson that is the standard justification for Holocaust films.

We tend to enjoy the Manichean morality in such Holocaust movies—so it makes us squirm when Tarantino’s Jews in *Basterds* start scalping, braining, and burning Nazis,

“dislodge[ing],” as Imke Meyer puts it, “positions of power that previously appeared to be discursively fixed” (Dassanowsky 18). The juxtaposition of two of the film’s early scenes brings the audience’s discomfort to the fore. The first, when Landa has the Dreyfus family shot through the floorboards, is one of traditional Shoah-style tension: as in the emptying of the ghetto in *Schindler’s List*, viewers are strung along in agonized suspense over whether the Nazis will discover the hiding Jews. Just moments later, though, the tension is inverted during a scene in which the Basterds become the terrorizers and a sympathetic German the victim. When Lt. Raine demands to know the position of nearby German troops, the captured Sgt. Rachtman refuses to reveal it. Donny Donowitz smirks, “You get that [medal] for killing Jews?”, and Rachtman replies, simply, “Bravery.” The audience is moved by Rachtman’s courage, dignity, and concern for his fellow soldiers’ lives. We like to be able to cheer when Nazis die, the way we relish Göth’s execution at the end of *Schindler’s List*—but because we have been made to sympathize with Rachtman, we cringe when Donowitz, defying the conventions for dealing honorably with captured officers, smashes his head in. The brutal murder, the graphic scalping, and the brazen disregard for the rules of war make it clear that the Jewish-American Basterds are the perpetrators in this film.

Similar moments throughout make us aware of how thoroughly we have normalized the victim-perpetrator binary and how much we depend on the moral certitude it gives us. In the basement tavern scene, rank-and-file members of the German army have gathered to celebrate the birth of a child when they are slaughtered in the shootout between the Basterds and Major Hellstrom. Wilhelm, who finds himself the only German soldier left alive and locked in a standoff with Raine, offers a brief, ardent plea: “I am a father. My baby was born today in Frankfurt, five hours ago. His name is Max. We were in here drinking, celebrating! They’re the

ones who came in shooting and killing!” Poignant, trembling, pitiable, Wilhelm makes us doubt which outcome we want to see—we want the Basterds to proceed with Hitler’s assassination, but not if it means shooting this rueful soldier who has been caught in the crosshairs of a terrible mischance. When Raine strikes a deal, Wilhelm is visibly distraught but, at von Hammersmark’s urging, haltingly lowers his weapon. His conciliatory move earns him a round of bullets to the chest. Once again, we are alarmed to find ourselves sympathizing with the wrong side, with the young German sergeant whose gesture of trust and vulnerability is betrayed by good-guy protagonists.

Curiously, references to the American slave trade abound, almost as if to point out to viewers—at least to white American ones—that they, too, have been the perpetrators of a terrible historical wrong. Gregory Colón Semenza has noted that the fictional Goebbels’ *Nation’s Pride* (or, more directly translated from the German, *Pride of a Nation*) seems to be a loose echo of the D. W. Griffith’s real 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, which portrayed African Americans as savages, glorified the Ku Klux Klan, and celebrated institutionalized racism (75). American moviegoers are thus pestered throughout *Basterds* with a nagging reminder that American cinema used to spew propaganda similar to that of *Nation’s Pride*. Other winking allusions include the brief shot of Hugo Stiglitz being whipped, which inescapably recalls the flogging of black slaves, and, most prominently, the guessing game at the officers’ table in the basement tavern. Major Hellstrom’s unknown character is King Kong, and he asks a series of questions as he tries to guess it:

Hellstrom: Okay, my native land is the jungle, I visited America; my visit was not fortuitous to me, but the implication is that it was to someone else. When I went from the jungle to America, did I go by boat?

Others: Yes.

Hellstrom: Did I go against my will?

Others: Yes.

Hellstrom: On this boat ride, was I in chains?

Others: Yes.

Hellstrom: When I arrived in America, was I displayed in chains?

Others: Yes.

Hellstrom: Am I the story of the Negro in America?

Others: No.

Hellstrom: Well then, I must be King Kong.

Because viewers know beforehand that the answer is King Kong, all of Hellstrom's questions seem to be unmistakably leading up to a correct guess—so when he finally ventures a wrong one, it takes both the other characters and us, the viewers, by surprise. But when told his guess is wrong, Hellstrom does not miss a beat. He shrugs, “Well then, I must be King Kong,” as if he knew the real answer all along but was misleading his listeners to think he was asking about something else. This bait-and-switch reflects a similar one on Tarantino's part: the director misleads viewers to believe they are watching a film about Nazi Germany, but, to their surprise and chagrin, it keeps turning out to be about their own legacy of oppression.

These two moves, in which Tarantino both invites us to sympathize with Nazi soldiers and aligns us with the perpetrators of a centuries-long slave trade, make it impossible for our sympathies to fall unproblematically with the usual victims of the Holocaust narrative. Certainly, we applaud the Basterds' mission to bring down Hitler, we want Shosanna's plot against the Nazi brass to succeed, we are traumatized by seeing her family murdered. But simultaneously,

we are unsettled by the protagonists' brutality and forbidden from sympathizing comfortably with them. The disjunction has two effects: first, it prevents us from falling into the trap of overidentifying with the real victims, since here we identify just as much with the perpetrators; second, it allows Tarantino to break down the rules for Holocaust representation, since it denies both the Jewish role as victims and the American role as deliverers.

Tarantino's master stroke, though, is to put Jews themselves in the position of perpetrators. In a more standard film, the Nazis would murder the Jewish Shosanna, but here their fates are reversed: Shosanna makes herself "the face of Jewish vengeance" by murdering the Nazis. On Nazi night at the cinema, Shosanna's striking red dress, black hat, and pale white skin complete the Nazi palette, a choice of color that suggests she has fully assumed the role of the perpetrator about to avenge her family. *The Basterds* itself is a squad of Jewish-American soldiers, whose scalping crusade represents a chance for American Jews to push back against the decades of victimhood that have defined their communities. When the Third Reich goes up in flames, the Jews are the ones to light the match.

Revenge, of course, lies at the heart of acting out. *Basterds* is the story of Jews who avoid having to work through the trauma of the Shoah by forcing their tormenters to experience a reciprocal trauma, by compulsively reenacting the Auschwitz crematoria burnings but with the roles of victim and perpetrator reversed. Most psychological studies indicate that people who act in vengeance rarely find the sort of healing they seek: "Revenge can never change or compensate for the harm that was done," Judith Herman writes. "People who actually commit acts of revenge...do not succeed in getting rid of their post-traumatic symptoms; rather, they seem to suffer the most severe and intractable disturbances" (189).

Can a film premised on such retaliatory violence really push its viewers toward a healthier working through? Tarantino certainly had no such intentions. The director has made no secret of his unabashed and straightforward love of bloodshed in film, and he likely intended the slaughter as nothing more than what David Cox called “kosher revenge porn.” Indeed, Michael Richardson argues that Tarantino’s brand of stylized violence is artistically uncomplicated: it “does not challenge viewers, but rather soothes the initial revulsion to witnessing such brutal actions” (Dassanowsky 105). But while we, viewers, feel an undeniable, visceral pleasure at the sight of Nazis getting what’s coming to them, we are also deeply disconcerted by the way the film forces us to identify with the perpetrators. *Basterds* gives us the heady rush of exhilaration that comes from torturing Nazis, but at the same time, it confronts us with an unavoidable question: in laughing callously at the Nazis’ brutal deaths, have we not become, on some level, like them? Ben Walters observes that audiences invariably laugh at the most brutal anti-Nazi violence in the film, then notes astutely that “only a thoughtless viewer will not see him or herself reflected in shots of Hitler cackling as he watches Americans being slaughtered” (22). Our enthusiasm for revenge is polluted by its brutality, by a suspicion that the moral gap between us and the perpetrators of the Shoah is narrower than we’d like to think.

It would be a stretch to say that the film offers a moral lesson about revenge, but for a “revenge fantasy” it certainly poses a complicated take on its emotional rewards. It sparked correspondingly complicated responses. The choice to reverse the roles of victim and perpetrator won praise from many critics, such as Rabbi Irwin Kula:

There may be six million stories in the Holocaust, but *Inglorious Basterds* tells the one we have been afraid to tell about ourselves: the story of what we would really like to do to those Nazis.... Kill every last one of them....

Oh how we wish we could! Removing the Talmudic moral complexity and parsing... what we really want is to scalp Nazis, burn Nazis, torture Nazis, murder Nazis, brand Nazis like cattlemen brand cows.

Vengeance is therefore alluring for many Jews, always the victims in Holocaust narratives; viewers often felt that the film portrayed a fantasy they themselves had imagined many times. Yet these same reactions are usually complicated by serious ethical scruples. Even Kula's enthusiastic review acknowledges that enjoying *Basterds* requires "removing the Talmudic moral complexity and parsing." Jeffrey Goldberg begins a piece for *The Atlantic* by describing how, as a child facing anti-Semitic bullying at school, he used to dream of parachuting into Nazi-occupied Poland and killing Josef Mengele. He characterizes *Basterds* as a film that gratified all his violent boyhood fantasies but nonetheless left him feeling ambivalent:

I have a high tolerance for violence in Tarantino's compelling fantasy demimonde. But *Inglourious Basterds* is the first Tarantino movie to reference real historical events. Which might be why I find his anti-Nazi excesses—there's a concept—disconcerting.... Given the chance, of course, I would still shoot Mengele in the face. That would be a moral necessity. But I wouldn't carve a swastika into his forehead. That just doesn't sound like the Jewish thing to do.

This is the film's apparatus for allowing viewers to work through the trauma of the Shoah. In an irreverent, ahistorical romp, *Basterds* fulfills the promise of Jewish revenge, letting its viewers experience the gratifying feeling of seeing the Third Reich smashed to pieces. Yet reviewers like Goldberg reveal that the intoxicating adrenaline of bashing Nazis' heads in may only be short-lived—that, as with any such act, the underlying wounds persist. *Basterds* is indeed a form of acting out rather than working through trauma, but because it takes such an unaccustomed angle,

it represents a heretofore alien way of doing so. It could be that working through is not always possible until all the options for acting out have been exhausted; in choosing this one, Tarantino may have conquered one of the last such hurdles.

Metafiction is an important part of how he does so. When *Basterds* self-consciously fictionalizes history—unlike other Holocaust films that pretend to eschew fiction and embrace reality—it compels us to reflect on the fictions in the traditional recipe for Holocaust films. Unusual cinematic devices ensure that the audience cannot forget they are watching a story, rather than a history: the film is divided into chapters much like a book, and captions imposed on the screen interrupt to give details about characters or events. Occasional narration suggests that the tale is being related, not lived, and establishes distance between viewers and the action. From the beginning, the fictive elements are highlighted by fairytale qualities and reinforced by the spaghetti-western genre the film inhabits. The title of the opening chapter, for example, is “Once upon a time... In Nazi-Occupied France,” which simultaneously recalls both the traditional opening of folk stories and the famous 1968 spaghetti western *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The scene when Landa fits the incriminating shoe onto von Hammersmark’s foot is unmistakably Cinderella-like, but, as with way the film turns historical convention on its head, the act results not in her marriage but in her violent murder at Landa’s hands.

All of these are metafictional ploys that conflate history with fictional genres, obliging the viewer to recognize that film *is* fiction. Where *Schindler’s List* and *Shoah* are totalizing and immersive, intended to make the audience forget the medium and feel present at the scene, *Basterds* is artfully metacinematic, constantly reminding the audience of the medium and keeping reality at a distance. As Todd Herzog wryly notes, Tarantino “is making cinema, not history. His sources are other movies, not historical events” (Dassanowsky 276). The effect is

twofold. First, in its self-conscious absurdity, the film draws attention to the dilemma posed by representing reality in art, one that viewers are quick to forget in the face of traditional Holocaust films. It makes viewers themselves more critical of how they consume the Shoah. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the film subverts all expectations for its content. Moviegoers who anticipate a Holocaust film are forced by their intuitive knowledge of genre conventions—of Des Prez' three rules—to recognize how this one bucks against them, to decide in the face of a striking but brazenly defiant work whether those rules should be held inviolable. If nothing else, the gap between expectation and delivery opens a space for self-awareness, which is key to combatting the costs that critics like Baudrillard fear in the overproduction of Holocaust representations.

On the other hand, moviegoers who arrive with some idea of the film's premise—expecting classic Tarantino, an electric, bloody rollick through aestheticized violence—are confronted with a movie that is much more harrowingly embedded in history than they anticipated. They come expecting a jolly good time killing Nazis but encounter a film that, despite its disregard for custom, still draws its audiences into scenes of legitimate historical import. When Shosanna's family is murdered, for example, or when the games in the tavern erupt into an explosive gunfight that leaves nearly everyone dead—this is not the funny, gratifying Nazi poaching we thought we were in for. The juxtaposition of clear metafictional elements with stark moments right out of the standard Holocaust film tradition is another one of the movie's boobytraps. It obliges us to take Tarantino and his antihistory much more seriously than we were prepared to do.

This heavy gravity at the film's core is a reminder that any antihistory needs history as its opposite, that the movie is so deeply implicated in history precisely because it claims to be its

antithesis. But to take that first step from history to non-history is to suggest the possibility that a Holocaust film could go even further, shrugging off history entirely and refusing to be so bound up in the consequences of the Shoah—which is what happened, five years later, in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

The Grand Budapest Hotel: What Comes After the Death of the Genre?

Just a few scenes into Wes Anderson's film, protagonists Gustave H. and Zero Moustafa are on a train when their car is boarded by uniformed officers. Although Zero's papers are in order, the soldiers seize him over Gustave's protests that "you can't arrest him simply because he's a bloody immigrant!" Just when we are sure Zero is going to be dragged off the train to some unknown fate, the chance appearance of a commander named Henckels saves the day; Henckels, it turns out, has fond boyhood memories of the Grand Budapest Hotel and a soft spot for Gustave, its concierge. Embarrassed, Henckels orders his men to release them—and he sends them on his way with a ticket for "free and unmolested travel," guaranteed by his personal signature.

This scene embodies the world the film seeks to replicate. Gustave has spent his life charming his guests and cultivating their trust, and his old-boy network consistently opens doors and smooths roads where he wants it to. *Budapest* is the story of the protagonists' attempt to clear Gustave's name of murder, but the plot is more or less incidental to the theme: a nostalgia for the fragile, illusory world of Old Europe. It is a fanciful echo of Stefan Zweig's memoir, *The World of Yesterday*, which Anderson names as his inspiration. True to form, Anderson maintains his typical zany, cartoonish style that in Michael Newman's words "revels in its own artifice" (King et al. 80).

Some critics thought that the film's aesthetic was an inappropriate way of representing such a serious period, that its engagement with a very ugly moment in history was naïve, superficial, and brash. Central to its failure, argues Brooke Allen, is "the case of the missing Jew" (303); by entirely neglecting the Jewish question that so defined and troubled Europe during the interwar years, Anderson has turned the period into an abstraction and stripped it of all its useful, concrete meaning. She also criticizes the goofy characters played by Willem Dafoe and Adrien Brody for their failure to convey the seriousness of the evil they represent (305).

Allen is right when she suggests that *Budapest* is a confection and that its commitment to portraying history is glancing at best. Anderson's works have been dismissed as merely "quirky," which, as James MacDowell argues, implies that a film is different from the norm but not enough to offer any serious social commentary (King et al. 54). In her hurry to denounce Anderson's ahistoricism and flippancy, however, Allen may have overlooked its function on an artistic plane—and the more nuanced discussion it invites about the ethics of representing Europe in the 1930s. Her most damning accusation is hard to refute: the absence of Jews may indeed universalize and abstract a trauma that was all too particular and all too tangible. But might it also echo the chimerical texture of Zweig's nostalgia? The Austrian author was a secular Jew, but his world was much less Jewish than cosmopolitan, and the absence of serious problems in *Budapest* very much reflects the imaginary Old Europe he had created in his memoir, a place of rationality, unmarred by racism or conflict, where culture, permanence, and security reigned.

It would be a mistake to label *Budapest* a successor to *Basterds* in a literal sense of the word. There is no evidence that Anderson has even seen Tarantino's movie, let alone that he considers it a groundbreaker for his own. Yet, since Tarantino's upending of the genre makes a film like Anderson's seem less unthinkable, they could represent sequential moves in a general

reaction to the Shoah: taken together, they suggest that on a broader, cultural level, secondary witnesses can move from acting out trauma to working through it. *Budapest* may indicate that film can take up the troubles of the Nazi period without making them a central concern—that Holocaust cinema has indeed been released, at least in part, from the conventions that govern it. Even more fanciful and preposterous than *Basterds*, *Budapest* uses historiographic metafiction not to highlight the fictionality of the standard Holocaust narrative but rather to question the accuracy of Zweig's memories of Old Europe. In other words, it tackles a subject that was deeply impacted by the Nazis and the war, but resists the compulsion to make the Nazis and the war its focus. They are relegated mostly to the background. In doing so, Anderson's film stands as evidence that working through the trauma of the Shoah may be possible not just for individuals but for entire cultures.

Anderson clearly intends his film to evoke a specific historical period. The story begins with a framing device that transports audiences to 1985, when the older narrator is recording the story in front of a video camera; then it jumps back even further to when he heard the story from Moustafa; then to a time still earlier, during Moustafa's youth, when the events actually transpired. Anderson makes a point of identifying the year, 1932. The decision to take us further and further back in time and then to carefully establish a date—an odd step for a film in which history seems to be of so little import—warns us that while we are watching an extravagant farce, it is not meant to be fully detached from reality. Throughout the movie, the fictional universe of Zubrowka echoes the darker realities of 1930s Europe just enough to remind us of what is absent: captions inform us of the closing of the border or the beginning of the occupation, ZZ officers bear a remarkable resemblance to Nazi SS officers, and much of the film is set in a town whose name, Lutz, recalls the real Polish Łódź. When Zero hands Gustave a newspaper,

the camera zooms in on a small article about Madame D.'s death, but not before we catch a glimpse of the portentous headline announcing the outbreak of war. While no character in the film is conspicuously Jewish, immigrants are treated in much the same way Jews were treated in pre-war Europe. Zero is arbitrarily seized and abused on the train, and even when the issue is settled, Henckels has to give him additional documentation to let him travel unhindered. Sinister echoes of the interwar years' real horrors keep the audience from getting too comfortable in the fantasy world the film has created for them.

But these vestiges of history play a different role here than in other films about the time period. Most representations of the Shoah are concerned with accurately recreating Europe under the Third Reich; *Basterds*, a notable exception, is concerned with emphatically rejecting any such recreation. These films embody the opposite extremes of ways to encounter a limit event like the Shoah. Because the first kind compulsively repeats the trauma and encourages audiences to overidentify with the victims, and because the second carries out a bloody revenge fantasy, both are forms of acting out that cannot in themselves lead to meaningful healing for secondary witnesses. Anderson's film, however, is far more concerned with echoing Zweig's world than with either replicating or resisting history. Jesse Fox Mayshark has observed that Anderson's oeuvre manifests a fascination with people and relationships rather than events: "he is interested in documenting a particular social niche—an eccentric, affluent, precocious slice of America, self-absorbed and immature but not, on the whole, badly intentioned" (116). Aside from its setting outside America, *Budapest* is no different. The darkness of interwar Europe interjects not because the director wants a story about the Nazis but rather because it interjects, sometimes forcefully, in Zweig's writings. Hitler's rise to power cost the author his immense literary popularity and drove him into exile in the Americas, stripping him of his fame and alienating

him from his homeland. But more distressing for Zweig was the entire destruction of Europe, its descent into barbarity and duplicity, from an ideal world that he had wished into delicate perfection. “To be frank,” as the elderly Zero says of Gustave H., and as may be said of Zweig, “I think his world had vanished long before he ever entered it.”

To capture the essence of Zweig’s vanished world, Anderson appropriates the tools of historiographic metafiction. *Basterds* may have been gleefully conscious of its own falsity, but *Budapest* takes the confectionary nature of film even further. The very script is fanciful, romantic, interspersed with bursts of poetry that sound like Wordsworth meeting Lewis Carroll, and it has a lyrical quality to it that feels both artistic and artificial. When Zero presents Agatha with a book inscribed with the words “From Z to A,” it presumably means from Zero to Agatha. But conveniently, it is also from the end of the alphabet to the beginning, a pattern mirrored later in the film when Henckels declares that the police will search “from Alvinsburg to Zilchbruk.” Both moments move from one end of the alphabet to the other in the same kind of symmetry makes Anderson’s visual style so distinctive. Everything is exaggerated, from Madame D.’s vampiric family to the bafflingly complex network of monks who lead Gustave and Zero to meet Serge X. Tools smuggled into the prison in elaborate pastries, an unnecessarily extravagant jailbreak plan, Agatha’s Mexico-shaped birthmark, a gun battle across the lobby of the Grand Budapest—all of these moments are captured with a cartoonish delight that makes it impossible to forget we are watching a movie.

Like in *Basterds*, these metafictional elements compel us to consider the confectionary unreality of film. Our consciousness of the fictive, suppressed when watching *Schindler’s List*, is here stimulated in a way that highlights the gap between the movie and the history it represents. But metafiction’s primary function is consistent with Anderson’s vision, one that is not

complicated by scruples about the Holocaust film genre. These moves hint at the unreliability of the film's narrative, and by extension, the unreliability of Zweig's nostalgic memories—signals that Anderson is seducing us into a fantasy world, much like Zweig was seduced into a fantasy world of his own making. In *Basterds*, Tarantino's preoccupation seems to be making viewers feel how the film bucks against the rules for Holocaust representation, which is why he uses so many blatant metafictional tropes. But in *Budapest*, Anderson seems unburdened by such a rebellious sensibility. His film seems to have moved beyond the hyperconsciousness and inescapability of the Holocaust film genre, as if to give evidence that such a distance from the traumatic past is indeed possible.

Toward a New Shoah Discourse

Is it good that Anderson is able to so fully slough off the customary demands for representing interwar Europe? The answer to this question has its roots in a much bigger, more philosophical one, which has long engaged thinkers like Wiesel and Levi: is it better to perpetuate grief by keeping a memory alive, or to let it slip into the past and allow grief to heal? True, *Budapest* risks a kind of forgetting, a decentralizing of history away from its defining event. It opens the perilous door for future directors to make films about Nazi Germany that gloss over the severity of a massacre that cost six million lives, that downplay its great evil, or that fail to condemn the slaughter. It suggests that none of those things is so overpowering that it can demand attention in every representation of the time period. It is a film that denies the monopolizing singularity of the Shoah.

A “singularity” is the scientific term for the impossibly infinite mass that lies at the center of a black hole, a body so all-consuming that it literally bends space-time around it. Not even light can pass through the area without accounting for its presence. Likewise, genre conventions

have long stipulated that art about Nazi Europe must account for the specter of the Shoah. Because of its sheer enormity, it has become the black hole in the fabric of cinematic space, its physics determined by our ill-defined but powerful sensibilities about what constitutes “appropriate,” “respectful,” or “going too far.” Anderson’s history-suppressing move may be edgy, even dangerous, but it promises a means of escape from the rules that have long suffocated the Holocaust film genre. *Budapest* insists on the validity of other, unrelated narratives within the same time and place, despite the Nazi atrocities that they sit uncomfortably beside. It is proof, perhaps, that working through the trauma of the Shoah is possible.

Crucially, though, working through does not entail forgetting. Rather, it means remembering that the trauma remains in the past and that the past is separate from the present. It means moving beyond a compulsive repetition of the traumatic events. Once secondary witnesses have depleted all the options for acting out, once they have identified both with the victims as in *Schindler’s List* and with the perpetrators as in *Inglourious Basterds*, once they have seen the same conventions repeated over and over again in the theaters, they might be able to conceive of a Holocaust film in which the standard elements are present but not overpowering, in which Nazis and the war can convincingly remain in the background. This is what a film like *Basterds* gestures toward even as it accords the Nazis an obsessively central place in its own narrative, and what *Budapest* accomplishes by declining to do the same.

Even for those who are still skeptical of Anderson or Tarantino, these films raise important questions about how we encounter the Shoah in art. Their ability to lay bare convention, to accost audiences with questions about the value of those conventions, may help at the very least to promote self-awareness in consuming representations of trauma. They insist that representations that honor the rules are just as simulacral as those that do not. Because they are

conscious of their own fictionality, they may help to keep viewers from overidentifying with the victims. Is such introspection too much to expect from a lay audience of moviegoers whose entire educations have reinforced the sacrosanct nature of the Shoah? The answer, simply, is that it always will be—unless we continue to fuel the discussion around cinematic rebels like Tarantino and Anderson. Dismissing such films out-of-hand, whatever traditional rules they break, runs the risk of quashing the cultural soul-searching that might help to address the problems plaguing American Holocaust culture.

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