Holocaust and Hollywood: An Annotated Filmography

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This paper offers a list of Hollywood movies pertaining to the Holocaust. Its aim is to facilitate the access of individuals, libraries, foundations, film clubs, and Holocaust-related study groups to this powerful material. These movies enhance empathy and knowledge regarding the Holocaust and thus serve an important psychoeducational function for all, but especially for those not directly affected by this great human tragedy.

KEY WORDS: Holocaust; movies; empathy; psychoeducation.

The Holocaust is the greatest calculated and most ruthless, government sponsored act of man’s cruelty to his fellow human beings. A macabre culmination of sustained anti-Semitic prejudice, Nazi concentration camps left profound, pervasive, and persistent effects upon their victims and their generations to follow (e.g., Bergman & Jucovy, 1982; Kestenberg & Brenner, 1996; Kogan, 1995). A burgeoning literature, including wartime documentaries and later interview material and trial transcripts, seeks to document this. The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. provides a soul-wrenching encounter with what Hitler’s lieutenants did to millions of innocent civilians.

The legacy of trauma in this context is accompanied by a parallel emphasis upon the value of remembering. We know that memory supports vigilance. In one or the other form, memory is integral to signal anxiety necessary for avoiding retraumatization. It is to sustain this useful function of

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memory and knowledge that we offer a listing of Holocaust-related movies. It is our hope that familiarity with them will enhance empathy and knowledge about the Holocaust, especially for those not directly affected by it. Watching movies, we believe, offers a unique opportunity for partial ego regression and identification with the subjective elements of a narrative. Knowledge thus gained, rather like the empathic immersion in a patient’s material, is authentically felt and renders deep conviction.

To foster such conviction and dispel any remnant shreds of denial in this realm, we began a search for Holocaust-related movies. We consulted movie catalogs (e.g., Connors et al., 2000) and computerized data bases including those compiled by the Fritz Bauer Institute (http://dalzer.de/fh/) and the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archives (http://sites.huji.ac.il/jfa/jfa/htn). We also obtained relevant information from the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. As we undertook the compilation, editing, and synthesis of this material, we were inundated with questions. Should we restrict ourselves to movies in the English language? Should we include documentaries or focus upon feature films? Should we list only the movies produced in Hollywood or include foreign films as well? How direct a reference to the Holocaust should a movie have to qualify for being in our list? (To wit, we ourselves had not actually seen all the movies and were guided by the abstracts provided by the various catalogs). What about short films? And, so on.

In the end, we took the route of humility and pragmatism. We restricted ourselves to English language, Hollywood produced, overtly Holocaust-related movies. Our sacrificing comprehensiveness in this regard reflected a depressive position (Klein, 1940) acknowledging the limits of time, resources, and knowledge available to us. We were aware that we were ending up with a list that is a bit short on subtlety. Furthermore, it includes movies where the specter of Nazi atrocities plays a secondary role in the plot (e.g., The Sound of Music) and excludes those where the motivations of a particular character are subtly hinted to have arisen from the Holocaust-related trauma (e.g., the father in Shine). Our compilation thus lacks both an omnipotent coverage as well as the watercolors of nuance. Nonetheless, we believe that what we offer here is quite useful.

THE FILMS

All Through the Night (Warner Bros., 1942, directed by Vincent Sherman). Spy spoof and crime thriller in which a gambler takes on a Nazi spy ring.

Apt Pupil (Tristar Pictures, 1997, directed by Bryan Singer). A high school senior persuades a concentration camp commander and Nazi war criminal