Moving Memories: Propaganda, Documentary and Holocaust Feature Films

‘And if Moses appeared to see a film made about his life – he’d also say “but that’s not me”.

(Frank Reiss, survivor of Theresienstadt, 2001)

Film and memory

Perhaps it is no accident that the word ‘usher’ – which nowadays we associate with the person who shows us our seats in the cinema – has its etymological roots in the phrase ‘the keeper of the door to the bones’. Though the practice of gathering in the darkness of the tomb of our ancestors around their bones to listen to genealogies is less common, in late capitalist mass-mediated cultures people gather together in the dark cave of the cinema to watch on the flickering screen, among other stories, the filmed memories of various pasts. This chapter explores gender and the making and configuration of socially inherited memories in the medium of film. I look at how gender is articulated in propaganda film, liberation footage, documentary and feature films about the Holocaust.

Filmed ‘memories’, according to a national survey in the United States on popular sources and uses of the past by Americans, now form an important part of how we learn about history: Eighty per cent of respondents said they had recently watched movies or television programmes about the past, in comparison with 53 per cent who said they had read a book about the past (Rosenweig and Thelen, 1999:15–16). Within the socially inherited memories of young people who took part in the focus groups and interviews I conducted in the US, Britain and Poland between 1998 and 2001, in all cases at least one feature film, or in some cases several feature films and unspecified documentary films,
were recalled as raising awareness of or contributing to an individual’s already established historical and cultural understanding of the Holocaust. Film was said to make events ‘more real’ or in some way to bring home the facts in the history books. As one respondent put it: ‘Reading about it in text books didn’t really show you what it was about. It was written in, you know, text book form. It was very dry and boring, but when I saw the pictures or films, that really made it seem more real (Jane, aged 22, focus group, Washington DC, April 1999).

Another American student said that films ‘showed what happened’ in terms of the atrocities of the camps, in contrast to history books that seemed too abstract and general:

[W]e were learning about the history of World War Two, you know, the history of why it happened and how Hitler approached to um get his goal to um be in power and that was one of the ways to um eliminate Jews. I guess at that point the teacher was like, ‘you know let’s see this movie cos its – it shows what happened’, like really what happened, how um people was in a concentration camps, I mean what they did to the Jews and yeah, ‘cos in the history text book they just talk about how Hitler wanted to, you know, take over the world and stuff’. (Cindy, aged 16, focus group, New York, April 1999)

The role of film in raising post-Holocaust awareness of the events is not surprising given that the number of moving images related to and about the Holocaust, and our access to these has increased enormously with the diversification of broadcasting and the advent of satellite and cable television resulting in the development of specialized channels, including those for history. Janice Hadlow from Channel Four Television in the UK has estimated that on any evening in the UK it is now possible to see at least one programme related to the Second World War and the Holocaust (Hadlow, 2001). Although, as the previous chapter shows, the written word is certainly one of the most important media for passing on to subsequent generations the events of the Holocaust, film and television programmes also figure strongly in providing translations and versions of past events.

Particular films have had almost universal appeal and have changed the articulation of the memory of the Holocaust. NBC’s TV drama Holocaust gripped viewers in the US and was subsequently shown in many European countries: broadcast for the first time in 1978 in the United States and subsequently many countries elsewhere,