

Discuss the use and appropriateness of modern media techniques to represent the Holocaust and promote memorialisation of the National Socialist past.

Modern media creates a platform to easily spread messages to millions of people in an instant. Encouraging Holocaust remembrance through these methods is no exception. Film and social media are perhaps the most widely used organs with which to do this and therefore these will be the prime focus of this essay. Sensitive events such as memorialisation of the National Socialist past often cause controversy and, due to the ability to spread the visibility of news stories through social media, this can be exacerbated and can lead to witch hunting. Ultimately this removes the focus from Holocaust remembrance and uses the deaths of millions as a tool of hatred. Earlier this year, the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, said in a speech that “we pay tribute to the memory of the millions of victims murdered during the Holocaust”. Jewish organisations were furious that the message he conveyed had omitted any mention of the Jews or had not condemned anti-Semitism and consequently thousands of people attacked him via social media. What was clearly intended to be a memorial message for all of those who were murdered under the Nazi regime resulted in persecution for which Trudeau had to apologise. This explicitly shows how easily the focus of remembrance can morph into something spiteful, selfish and nasty. However social media can be used effectively and appropriately and several memorial organisations, such as the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, regularly tweet messages in tribute to those who have been murdered under genocidal regimes. The medium of film is no different. Controversies have followed Holocaust films ever since their inception and directors of this genre need to ensure that they are as sensitive as possible to avoid negative press and to ensure that their film is an appropriate portrayal. As this essay will show, it can often be difficult to determine whether certain online forms of remembrance are appropriate and that sometimes social media can cause more harm than good in promoting memorialisation of the National Socialist past.

Many online initiatives attempt to pay tribute to the millions that suffered under the Nazi regime and often have good intentions. However, the result can be unpredictable, leading to inappropriate forms of remembrance. “Selfies with Survivors” was one such trend¹. This

¹ Allison Kaplan Sommer, Selfies With Survivors: Do Holocaust and Social Media Mix?
<<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/routine-emergencies/.premium-1.587546>>

involved people changing their Facebook profile pictures or cover photos to images of themselves with Holocaust survivors and using the hashtag “#WeAreHere”. It was an idea conceived by the Israel Defence Force, encouraging people to “pay tribute to Holocaust survivors”². It was also an attempt to create an interactive map, according to location, of where certain, non-documented survivors were living in order to “document their lives and remember them beyond this generation”³. It is evident that this suggestion was made honestly and with the hope of achieving something compassionate. However, these were rather short-sighted expectations and the reality was that it was greeted with shock. It was in hindsight, quite distasteful and a rather predictable reaction. This movement started to become less and less about the survivors and more about the people standing next to them, utilising Holocaust remembrance for their own social media gains. Trivialising the abhorrent conditions and atrocities these survivors experienced into an image posted online for “likes” shows a complete lack of respect and completely removes the focus from the initial theme. It is perhaps a case of immaturity, but this example only serves to illustrate that social media can be used highly inappropriately. It could possibly be attributed to the fact that those posting are so desensitised to the Holocaust, or even ignorant to the harm they could cause. When posting casually about something as sensitive as the Holocaust it is imperative to carefully consider the effect it could have on others in order to assure that the post is appropriate. The Israel Defence Force may have expected too much of those they petitioned to partake in the initiative, but the fact that something as good natured as it was resulted in catastrophe really depicts the difficulty with addressing these events in the correct manner. It is possible that this represents a fundamental flaw in using social media as a technique to encourage commemoration as the difficulty with regulating the conversation and keeping the discussions on topic is impossible, thus leading to the initial premise behind an initiative such as this being warped beyond recognition.

The aforementioned Holocaust Memorial Day Trust (HMDT) twitter page is a stellar example of how social media could and possibly should be used as a tool for remembrance. The page consistently broadcasts messages of remembrance of the Nazi past, most recently tweeting on the 6th of May that 73 years prior, the “Institute of Sexology was looted by the Nazis...

² ibid

³ ibid

Days later all books from the library were burnt”⁴. The previous day they had tweeted about Mauthausen being liberated by the US army, accompanied with a photo of soldiers and prisoners marching together. It is clear then, that appropriateness is not just measured by the words that one uses, but also visual media plays a role. Although tweeting shock images would undoubtedly provoke more of a response from the viewer, HMDT recognises that this is unnecessary and could potentially cause significant harm. Whilst it is incredibly important that people are fully aware of the barbaric acts carried out under the National Socialist regime, advertising books such as “The Diary of Peter Ginz” and narrating what was happening on this day in Third Reich Germany is a far more sensitive and appropriate way to convey and encourage remembrance. Although HMDT does not focus exclusively on the Holocaust and comments on such events as the Rwandan Genocide, much of their focus is on the Nazi past, potentially signifying their belief of the lasting relevance it should hold today. Whilst it may appear that, at first sight, social media and the Holocaust are not a successful combination and can often lead to inappropriate and insensitive forms of remembrance, HMDT has proven that with careful consideration over the choice of image, and phrasing of their tweets, social media can be used effectively as a tool for education and commemoration of the Holocaust and its victims.

Auschwitz maintains an Instagram page which, curiously, mainly uploads modern day pictures⁵. Whilst it regularly shows images of mugshots of the victims in an attempt to commemorate them and provide a memorial of their lives, it primarily focuses on the reactions of modern-day visitors and the remaining infrastructure of the institution itself (such as the barracks, barbed wire fences, and watchtowers). It is a rather unique form of commemoration, as the idea of Auschwitz carries very negative connotations. The page displays images of the International March of the Living, an annual program which unites students from across the globe to the concentration camp who then march silently from Auschwitz to Birkenau on Holocaust Memorial Day. The page maintains a sense of decorum in not displaying horror images which works in its favour, as the idea of an Auschwitz

⁴ 06/05/1933: Looting of the Institute of Sexology, The Holocaust Memorial Day Website. <<http://hmd.org.uk/content/06051933-looting-institute-sexology>>

⁵ Auschwitz Instagram page <<https://www.instagram.com/auschwitzmemorial/?hl=en>>

Instagram page may initially seem insensitive and unwise but ultimately it performs its intended tasks appropriately.

It is not just social media that can be effective or harmful in conveying the message of remembrance, but also films. However, these are not without their critics and controversies, as many films are accused of inaccurately portraying the events or even Americanising them to create drama, patriotism and, ultimately, profit. Zelizer writes that “the controversies over film [are] symptomatic of larger issues, in particular the ongoing problematic of Holocaust remembrance and the so-called Americanization of the Holocaust”⁶. She references both *Schindler’s List* (the Hollywood blockbuster) and *Shoah* (a nine hour French documentary) as “two mutually exclusive paradigms of cinematically representing or not-representing the Holocaust”⁷ which strongly reinforces the idea that, while they may be popular, films attempting to commemorate aspects of the Nazi past are quite often historically inaccurate or over-dramatised. This is particularly true of *Schindler’s List*, quite often considered one of the all-time great films focusing on this time period⁸, as it concerns itself more with the heroics of Oskar Schindler than the turmoil that the Jews he saved faced. Martina Thiele contended that the controversy surrounding *Schindler’s List* was actually the result of “das Verhältnis zwischen Deutschen und Juden und die Frage nach einer Kollektivschuld der Deutschen”⁹, and that the film itself actually does nothing wrong in portraying the life of Schindler and his heroism. Imre Kertész was, contrastingly, appalled at Spielberg’s portrayal of the film, asking why he should be pleased when “more and more people see these experiences reproduced on the big screen – and falsified at that”¹⁰. His criticism extends to Spielberg himself as he struggled to understand why Spielberg tries so hard to “make his representation of a world he does not know *seem* authentic in every detail”¹¹. This offers the possibility that *Schindler’s List*, through lack of historical fidelity in favour of dramatisation, insults those that survived and those that witnessed first-hand the true horrors of the Holocaust and life under the Nazis. This highlights that inaccurate

⁶ Barbie Zelizer, *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (London: The Athlone Press, 2001), p. 128.

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Roger Ebert, *Schindler’s List* <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/schindlers-list-1993>>

⁹ Martina Thiele, *Publizistische Kontroversen über den Holocaust in Film* (LIT Verlag, 2007), p. 11.

¹⁰ Imre Kertész, *Who Owns Auschwitz?* (Yale University and The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 269-70

¹¹ *ibid*

portrayal is inappropriate and unwelcome and, whilst it may be due to the catalysing effect and resulting inaccurate films, *Schindler's List* receives the bulk of criticism because of this.

Kerner notes that Terrence Des Pres, an American writer and Holocaust scholar, observed three basic "commandments" when representing the Holocaust in film: to treat it as a "unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history"; to keep representations of the Holocaust "as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts... without change... for any reason – artistic reasons included"; and to approach the topic as a "solemn or even sacred event". Whilst Millicent Marcus dubbed these tenets as "Holocaust fundamentalism"¹², for the sake of creating an accurate image of the events as a tool for education and remembrance, it is imperative to follow them closely. Thiele disagreed with this viewpoint, commenting

wie läßt sich der organisierte Mord an Millionen von Menschen durch die Nationalsozialisten zeigen, ohne historische, ideologische, religiöse und vor allem sprachliche Kontexte zu vernachlässigen und damit an Glaubwürdigkeit zu verlieren?¹³

The implication here is clearly that the reality of what happened during the Holocaust would be too devastating to reasonably show in film and that any such attempt to recreate the conditions the Holocaust victims faced accurately would ultimately cause more controversies than the Americanisation of the event. Therefore, the argument moves to whether portraying the Holocaust on film at all can be considered appropriate. Historical accuracy is of paramount importance many would argue, and the inevitable lack thereof in favour of a film which sells tickets will always encroach on the memories of those who suffered. The potential for harm in displaying aspects of the Holocaust appear to far outweigh the positives, as the resulting emotional damage caused by the trespass on this event can be too high. The reality that creating a film which both remains sensitive to those who suffered and is exciting enough to fill cinemas will always be an unobtainable goal due to the unavoidable historical inaccuracies.

¹² Millicent Marcus, *Me lo dici babbo che gioco e?* (Italica 77.2, 2000), pp. 153-170

¹³ Martina Thiele, *Publizistische Kontroversen über den Holocaust in Film* (LIT Verlag, 2007), p. 10.

On the subject of the genre a Holocaust film should take, Hayden White challenged preconceived notions claiming that the expectation is that they will be of “a noble genre – such as epic or tragedy”¹⁴. Following the release of Roberto Benigni’s 1997 film *Life is Beautiful*, critics were in an uproar about the fact that a topic as serious as the Holocaust was being integrated into a comedy as it was considered to cross an “ethical boundary” and had “a lack of historical fidelity”¹⁵. Slavoj Zizek notes that Holocaust comedies centre “on a lie that allows the threatened Jews to survive their ordeal”, and believes that *Schindler’s List* was the impetus for the rise of this genre due to the fact that it did not accurately depict the reality of the Holocaust¹⁶. Whilst Amon Goeth partially disagrees with Zizek’s notes on *Schindler’s List*, he defends the comedy genre as it “at least accepts in advance its failure to render the horror of the Holocaust”¹⁷. These contrasting viewpoints are notably interesting, as the notion that a drama caused an influx in Holocaust comedies may seem baffling at first glance, but it was the fact that it focused more on the protagonist and artistic representation thereof than the actual suffering people faced under the Nazi regime. Hilene Flanzbaum retorted on the criticism of *Life is Beautiful* that “it became too easy a response... to look disdainfully at popular representations of the Holocaust” and considered that “no artistic representation of the Holocaust will ever sufficiently depict the horrors of that event”¹⁸. Her observations were well received and are quite important to the topic of the appropriateness of film as they break down the barrier of what can and should be considered pertinent when displaying such atrocities in a trivialised manner. Lipman believed that “nothing about the Holocaust was funny”, but insisted that by “appreciating the humour from the time period we are not laughing at the victims or their suffering; we are simply recognizing that laughter was a part of their lives, a part nurtured by their suffering”¹⁹. He felt that the denial of humour when it came to Holocaust commemoration was denying a key aspect of humanity and that, whilst the initial reaction to a Holocaust comedy was understandable and well placed, it could be the result of oversensitivity. Not everyone was in agreement, however, and Alvin Rosenfeld insisted that “all such efforts at

¹⁴ Hayden White, *Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth* (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 375-89

¹⁵ Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Film* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011) p. 5

¹⁶ Slavoj Zizek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (Verso Books, 2011) p. 69

¹⁷ Slavoj Zizek, *Laugh Yourself to Death: the new wave of Holocaust comedies!* (Lunds Universitet, 1999)

¹⁸ Hilene Flanzbaum, *But Wasn’t it Terrific?* (The Yale Journal of Criticism 14.1, 2001) pp. 274-84

¹⁹ Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell* (London: J Aronson Inc, 1991) p. 8

‘adapting’ the Holocaust are bound to fail”²⁰. This contention is true depending on interpretation. The notion of failure is admittedly completely subjective, and whilst to many directors a large box office profit would seem a success, to others the number of controversies that come with it would mean failure. Rosenfeld’s opinion that all Holocaust adaptations are bound to fail is on the proviso that nobody could ever recapture the reality of the conditions under the Nazi regime and therefore it will fail in accurately portraying them to the extent that it should. *Shoah* is one of the most notable examples as, despite its critical acclaim, it used absolutely no archival footage and failed to discuss the many Poles who rescued Jews or even to acknowledge the Poles who were killed by the Germans during the occupation of Poland, for both of which the film was heavily criticised.

It is with respect to the immorality of profiting from the memories of those who suffered that these comments were made, but, contrastingly, film is incredibly important as a way of teaching people about these events as it is one of the most popular forms of media and information-intake. It is not just Rosenfeld who argues against the use of film as a medium for Holocaust remembrance. The question of “ownership” also often arises when it comes to film representation, and the possibility of whether those who suffered have a right to almost “own” the event. The belief is that the Holocaust should be considered a “sacred event”, particularly since there are still victims alive today and, possibly moreso, as there are so many victims who are not, the memory of whom is important to preserve. This stance is often criticised, and Imre Kertész, himself a Holocaust survivor, notes quite sarcastically that it is “as though they’d [the Holocaust victims had] come into possession of some great and unique secret”²¹. He suggests that the approach of assigning ownership to the Holocaust is very short-sighted, as doing so would prevent the preservation of the memory of the event if it were unable to live on after the deaths of its survivors. The Holocaust itself is an incredibly disturbing affair and there is perhaps no correct way to depict it on the big screen.

To conclude, when commemorating the Holocaust and the National Socialist past, it is important to remain sensitive in both visual and written depictions. It is not appropriate for Holocaust remembrance to be a social media trend, nor is it appropriate to portray it in

²⁰ Alvin Hirsch Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) p. 154

²¹ Imre Kertész, *Who Owns Auschwitz?* (Yale University and The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 267

certain genres of films if you wish to accurately illustrate the travesties. That *Schindler's List* was the catalyst for non-documentary or non-horror Holocaust memorial films bears some truth, yet it could be too harsh a criticism and was only a matter of time before the artistic style of its portrayal was taken in a completely different direction. *Life is Beautiful* will forever remain a controversial film, but Goeth's observations that a comedy understands that it will not be historically accurate could be the saving grace of Holocaust films of a non-noble genre. Film in general, whilst criticised, is an entirely suitable medium to educate about the Holocaust and honour the past and its far-reaching nature means that it is one of the best ways to spread facts. The issue with film is the blurring of the lines between drama and reality due to some directors preferring their artistic style over actualities. Social media is another way in which to easily spread messages of tribute yet at times, it becomes like "Chinese whispers" and the true meaning behind the messages is lost entirely in favour of the next social media trend intended solely to get as much internet fame or notoriety as possible in the interest of self-validation. It is, conceivably, a cynical approach to introducing sensitive topics such as the Holocaust to social media outlets, but one that is constantly proven to be true. The important question, therefore, is whether this is a fundamental flaw of social media, or simply that the frailty of the human condition is unable to remain mature enough to commemorate the memory of such a horrific event, or even unable to process the terrifying reality of the Holocaust entirely.

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