

**Historians and Hollywood**

L. M. Stallbaumer-Beishline  
Copyright 2014-2016

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

“Let’s be blunt and admit it: historical films trouble and disturb professional historians – have troubled and disturbed historians for a long time.”

R. A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, as quoted by Peter Miskell, “Historians and Film,” in *Making History* (2004), 245.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**“Question:** Why do historians distrust the historical film?

**The overt answers:** Films are inaccurate. They distort the past. They fictionalize, trivialize, and romanticize people, events, and movements. They falsify history.

**The covert answers:** Film is out of the control of historians. Film shows we do not own the past. Film creates a historical world with which books cannot compete, at least for popularity. Film is a disturbing symbol of an increasingly post-literate world (in which people can read but won’t).”

Emphasis added. R. A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, as quoted by Peter Miskell, “Historians and Film,” in *Making History* (2004), 248-249.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Text** What is visible/readable, i.e. what information is provided by the source?

**Context** What was going on during the time period (timelines are a useful tool)? What background information do you have that helps explain the information found in the source (consult the introduction to the document or the topic)?

**Subtext** What is between the lines? Ask questions about the following:  
**Author:** Who created the source, and what do we know about that person?  
**Audience:** for whom was the source created?  
**Reason:** Why was this source produced when it was?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Berlin: July 31, 1941  
 The Reich Marshal of the Greater German Reich Plenipotentiary for the Four-Year Plan, Chairman of the Ministerial Council for the Defense of the Reich [Hermann Göring]  
 To: the Chief of the Security Police and the SD  
 SS Major General Heydrich, Berlin:

As a supplement to the task which was entrusted to you in the decree dated January 24, 1939, to solve the Jewish question by emigration and evacuation in the most favorable way possible, given present conditions, I herewith commission you to carry out all necessary preparations with regard to organizational, substantive, and financial viewpoints for a total solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe.

Insofar as other competencies of other central organizations are affected, these are to be involved.

I further commission you to submit to me promptly an overall plan showing the preliminary organizational, substantive, and financial measures for the execution of the intended final solution of the Jewish question.  
 //signed//Göring

---

---

---

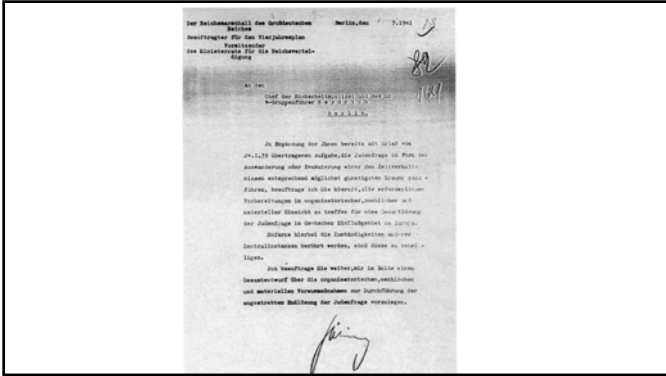
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

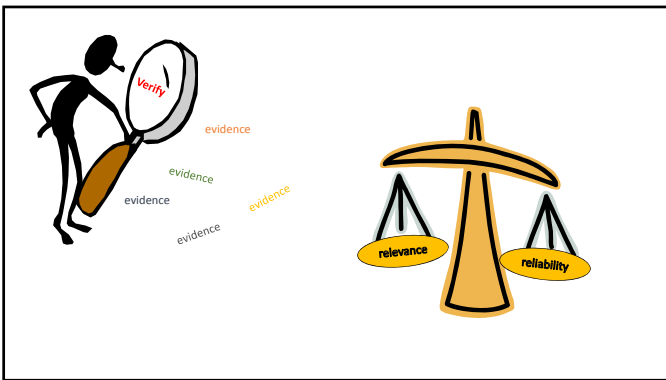
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Historians' Working Assumptions/Ethos**

- Historical understanding is not easy to come by.
- Mono-causal explanations are suspect.
- Multi-causal, complex explanations more plausible and convincing.
- Explaining events through the actions of a few or a single individual usually leads to oversimplification.
- Not just chronicling what happened, but explaining why and how.
- Show the interplay between individual lives and broad social movements.
- The historical record is incomplete and capable of a variety of interpretations.
- Not seeking absolute truth, yet some interpretations are more plausible and more convincing than others.
- Publishing our interpretations is meant to contribute to a dialogue, not reach a consensus because multiple interpretations are plausible.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Standards of the Professional Historian

- Do not arrive at conclusions until we have access to enough reliable information
- All conclusions/interpretations are drawn from the available evidence or we make plausible inferences when the evidence is lacking
- Do not ignore evidence that could contradict our interpretations
- Do not invent evidence
- Utilize a variety of accounts and diverse types of evidence
- Corroborate by a variety of independent accounts or pieces of evidence
- Understand the past according to its own terms, i.e. **context**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Unlike Filmmakers, Historians Do NOT

- Invent situations
  - Invent characters
  - Combine numerous historical figures
- } FICTION

---

---

---

---

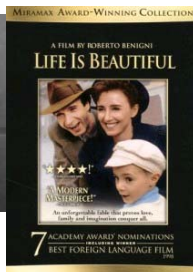
---

---

---

---

### Messages




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Gullible Audiences



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Characters



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Inventing or creating composite characters

- *The Pianist* (the memoir)  
Roman Kramsztyk (p. 92) + Jehuda Zyskind (p. 69) + Goldfeber (p. 94) = one character in the film
- *The Pianist* (the movie)  
Dorota

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Control of Content?

What level of historical errors are acceptable?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Hollywood's Advantages



---

---

---

---

---

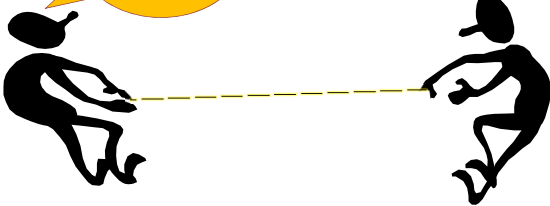
---

---

---

Hollywood is escapist entertainment; can't stick to the truth!

Hollywood has to make money! To \$%&\* with accuracy!



---

---

---

---

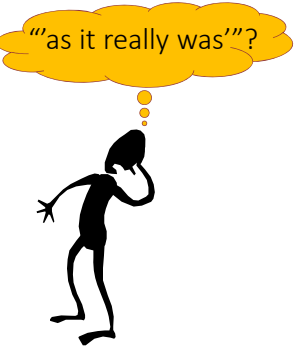
---

---

---

---

"as it really was"?



- Documentary evidence from the past will never provide a complete, total picture.
- *The Pianist* (the memoir) References to Treblinka and extermination (p. 78, 85, 88, 159)

---

---

---

---


---

---

---

---

Accuracy or Authenticity?




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Authenticity: "the spirit of the period" or the "soul of the times"

- Filming locations
- Character development
- Props put you into the period
- Dialogue is believable
- Films that give priority to understanding the past on its own terms
- Impact of cinematography to create the spirit or soul of the times.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Challenges in Common with Filmmakers

- Gaps in the evidence
- What to leave out
- Deciding what is most important

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Directors' Challenges

- Script
- Theme
- Creative control
- Funding & budget
- Shooting schedules
- Scenery, sets, backlots
- Weather
- Working with actors
- Costumes
- Camera work
- Editing and continuity
- Sound
- Studio politics
- Communicating visually



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

“as it really was”?

Filmmakers Ultimate Challenge?



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### Holocaust -- a Sacred Topic?

- Sidney Lumet: "It's impossible to do it justice. .... It's impossible to portray it as accurate. .... You can never portray it, but the dilemma is should you not do it?"
  - Sidney Lumet: "unless you are doing a totally abstract movie, you are dealing ... the vocabulary is literal. ... How do you find a representative image?" [near quotation]
  - Steven Spielberg: "The Holocaust is perhaps the most difficult story to put on film ... ineffable experience only understood by those who experienced the camps." [near quotation]
  - Neal Gabler: "Ethos of Hollywood is first of all the art of the middle, that is, it's meant to appeal to everyone."
- Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust* (2004). Directed by David Anker.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

#### Annette Insdorff, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (1989)

"How great a role are films playing in determining contemporary awareness of the Final Solution? . . . How do you show people being butchered? How much emotion is too much? How will viewers respond to light-hearted moments in the midst of suffering?" (xviii)

"How do we lead a camera or a pen to penetrate history and create art, as opposed to merely recording events? What are the formal as well as moral responsibilities if we are to understand and communicate the complexities of the Holocaust through its filmic representations?" (xv)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

#### Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (1988)

"Art [including film making] takes the sting out of suffering." (viii)

The need for popular reception of a film inevitably leads to "melodramatization or trivialization of the subject." (46)

Hollywood/American filmmakers' "universalization [using the Holocaust to make statements about contemporary problems] is rooted in specific social concerns that seek to avoid burdening a basically indifferent public with unbearable facts of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. . . . [Hollywood] provides the banal, comforting message that everybody is guilty, and everybody suffers, but redemption is still possible, or else that 'people are still good at heart [Anne Frank],' a significant statement not because of its meaning but because of its purpose, namely to disburden the conscience from the implications of unsettling events of the magnitude of the Holocaust." (133)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (2001)**

On the problems of American films universalizing themes in Holocaust films, Mintz writes, "To discern in a discrete institution, historical event, or cultural product a meaning that transcends the particular is to enhance the moral significance of the particular: it is, in a sense, to redeem the particular by rescuing it from its onetime, accidental and specific identity and then connecting it to a large order of value. In the case of the Holocaust, historical significance of the event is supposedly elevated by virtue of its being taken as an example or illustration or a larger rubric such as the individual's responsibility for other human beings.

"At the same time, universalizing is a way to avoid seeing the particular and what is troublingly un-universal about it.

"Universalization is, in the end, a double-edged sword. It evades its subject, on the one hand, yet on the other, it may, under certain conditions, represent the *only* way to approach the subject." (99-100)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---