

Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television Since 1933

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Introduction

Film and television have shaped public understanding of the Holocaust since the Nazi era, first as instruments of propaganda and concealment and later as forms of evidence, testimony, education, mourning, and artistic interpretation. The original discussion focuses on Theresienstadt, the ghetto-camp that the Nazis used in a calculated deception campaign. That example is essential because it demonstrates that moving images do not simply record reality; they can be staged, edited, mislabeled, and circulated to conceal violence. At the same time, Allied footage, survivor testimony, documentaries, television dramas, and feature films have made the Holocaust visible to audiences who did not witness it. Responsible analysis must therefore ask who produced an image, under what conditions, for which audience, and with what ethical consequences (Haggith and Newman; Zelizer; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Theresienstadt”).

Nazi Film as Propaganda

The [Nazi regime](#) understood cinema as a powerful political technology. Joseph Goebbels’s Ministry of Propaganda regulated film production, newsreels, exhibition, and censorship while promoting narratives of national unity, racial hierarchy, militarism, and obedience. Some films attacked Jews openly, while others normalized the social world from which Jews had been excluded. Propaganda did not operate only through crude falsehood. Entertainment, spectacle, documentary style, and selective editing could make ideology appear natural. Films such as *The Eternal Jew* used manipulated images and dehumanizing comparisons to portray Jews as a biological and social threat. Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* transformed a party rally into an image of disciplined national destiny. These productions demonstrate how aesthetic skill can serve criminal politics without directly depicting the crimes being prepared (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nazi Propaganda”; Haggith and Newman).

Theresienstadt as a Site of Deception

Theresienstadt, or Terezín, was established in the German-occupied Czech lands as a ghetto and transit camp. The Nazis presented it at times as a privileged settlement for elderly or prominent Jews,

but prisoners endured overcrowding, hunger, disease, forced labor, family separation, and the constant threat of deportation to killing centers, especially Auschwitz-Birkenau. Cultural activity existed in the ghetto, including music, art, lectures, and children's education, but these activities were created by prisoners under coercive conditions and should not be mistaken for evidence of humane treatment. The camp became central to Nazi deception because its physical environment could be temporarily altered and selected prisoners could be displayed to outsiders. The resulting image concealed both daily suffering and the deportation system of which Theresienstadt was a part (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Theresienstadt"; Yad Vashem).

The 1944 Red Cross Visit

International concern about deported Jews led to pressure for an inspection. Before a June 1944 visit by representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Danish government, the SS organized a "beautification" campaign. Buildings were painted, gardens and shops were arranged, routes were controlled, and overcrowding was reduced partly through deportations. Prisoners were instructed how to behave, and the visitors were shown a carefully staged performance rather than the camp's actual conditions. The inspection report failed to expose the deception. This episode illustrates a central problem of visual and institutional evidence: observers can see real streets, people, and activities while misunderstanding the system that produced what they see. A controlled tour can create false authenticity because the displayed objects are real even when their arrangement and meaning are manufactured (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Theresienstadt"; Yad Vashem).

The Theresienstadt Propaganda Film

After the inspection, the Nazis produced a film often known by the misleading title *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*. Jewish prisoner and filmmaker Kurt Gerron was compelled to participate in directing scenes that showed concerts, sports, work, food, family life, and leisure. The production used carefully selected locations and prisoners to present the ghetto as orderly and contented. Many participants, including Gerron, were later deported to Auschwitz and murdered. The film's surviving fragments are therefore ethically complex. They document real people and spaces, but the apparent normality was staged under the authority of perpetrators. Viewing the images without context could repeat the original deception. Museums and educators must explain coercion, selection, editing, and the fate of those shown so that the footage becomes evidence of propaganda rather than evidence for its claims (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Theresienstadt"; Yad Vashem; Haggith and Newman).

Perpetrator Images as Historical Sources

Images created by perpetrators can reveal uniforms, locations, administrative practices, racial

categories, and methods of self-presentation. They can also expose what perpetrators wanted audiences to believe. However, such material frames victims through the gaze of the regime that persecuted them. Photographs and films may humiliate, exoticize, or erase individuality, and repeated circulation can continue that harm. Historians therefore compare visual material with transport records, diaries, survivor testimony, architectural evidence, orders, and postwar investigations. The question is not whether propaganda contains any factual content but how truth and falsehood are organized. A staged football match at Theresienstadt may show identifiable prisoners, yet it cannot establish that life in the ghetto was freely chosen or safe. Context transforms the meaning of the image (Zelizer; Friedländer; Haggith and Newman).

Allied Liberation Footage

When Allied forces entered concentration camps in 1944 and 1945, military cameramen recorded bodies, survivors, barracks, medical conditions, and evidence of mass death. These images played an important role in documenting crimes and confronting denial. They were shown in newsreels and later used in war-crimes trials. Yet liberation footage also shaped a narrow visual vocabulary in which the Holocaust became associated mainly with emaciated bodies and camps discovered in Germany. The genocide had also occurred through mass shootings, deportation, ghettos, starvation, forced labor, and extermination centers in occupied Poland, many of which were dismantled before liberation. Images of corpses can prove atrocity but cannot by themselves explain antisemitic policy, victim experience, collaboration, resistance, or the long administrative process that produced mass murder (Zelizer; Haggith and Newman).

Film at the Nuremberg Trials

Prosecutors at the International Military Tribunal used film as evidence, including *Nazi Concentration Camps* and *The Nazi Plan*. Moving images allowed the court to present extensive visual material within a legal argument about criminal organizations, aggressive war, and systematic atrocity. The courtroom use of film gave images institutional authority, but it also required authentication, sequencing, and explanation. A film is not self-interpreting evidence. Editors choose what to include, narrators guide meaning, and legal categories determine relevance. The Nuremberg screenings helped establish an enduring expectation that crimes of extraordinary scale should be visually documented. They also influenced later documentary practice, in which archival footage is assembled with testimony and narration to create a coherent historical account. The legal setting demonstrates the importance of provenance and disciplined interpretation (Haggith and Newman; Zelizer).

Early Postwar Representation

In the first postwar decades, direct representation of the Holocaust was uneven. National cinemas

often emphasized resistance, military victory, or general suffering rather than the specifically anti-Jewish character of Nazi genocide. Survivors published memoirs and gave testimony, but broad public engagement developed gradually and differently across countries. Alain Resnais's 1955 documentary *Night and Fog* combined contemporary color images of abandoned camps with black-and-white archival material. Its poetic form influenced Holocaust memory, although its language reflects the period's tendency to universalize victims. Other films used individual stories to approach persecution, guilt, and survival. These works reveal that representation is shaped by the questions a society is prepared to ask. Silence may arise from trauma, political priorities, antisemitism, Cold War narratives, or uncertainty about how mass murder can be represented without exploitation (Insdorf; Haggith and Newman; Wiesel).

Television and Mass Public Memory

Television brought Holocaust narratives into domestic spaces and created shared national viewing events. The American miniseries *Holocaust*, broadcast in 1978, followed a fictional Jewish family and a German family across the Nazi period. Critics objected to melodrama and simplification, yet the series reached a vast audience and stimulated public debate, including in West Germany. Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, released in 1985, took a radically different approach. It rejected archival atrocity footage and relied on extended testimony, present-day landscapes, and interviews with survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators. These contrasting works show that accessibility and formal rigor need not take the same form. Television can educate millions, but narrative compression may create composite experiences or encourage viewers to identify only through familiar dramatic conventions (Insdorf; Lanzmann; Wieviorka).

Feature Films and the Problem of Narrative

Feature films require selection, characterization, pacing, and closure, while the Holocaust resists comforting narrative resolution. Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* made the genocide emotionally accessible through the story of Oskar Schindler and the Jews he helped save. Its impact on public memory and education has been enormous, but critics note that a rescue narrative can center an exceptional non-Jewish hero and produce a redemptive ending within a history of catastrophic loss. Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* used comedy and fable, provoking debate over whether imaginative distance protects viewers or trivializes the camp. Such arguments should not be resolved by declaring one style inherently permissible. The ethical question is whether form clarifies history, respects victims, and avoids turning suffering into spectacle or sentimental reassurance (Friedländer; Insdorf; Wiesel).

Survivor Testimony on Film

Recorded testimony preserves voices, gestures, pauses, emotion, language, and personal perspective. Projects by the Fortunoff Video Archive, the USC Shoah Foundation, museums, and community organizations have collected tens of thousands of interviews. Testimony restores individuality to people whom Nazi records reduced to categories and numbers. It also reveals the diversity of experiences across countries, ages, religious backgrounds, resistance activities, hiding, camps, flight, and postwar migration. Testimony is not a camera-like reproduction of the past; memory is shaped by time, trauma, later knowledge, and the interview setting. This does not make it unreliable as a category. It means historians interpret testimony critically while respecting its personal authority. The filmed encounter also makes the viewer a secondary witness with responsibilities toward accuracy and attention (Wieviorka; Wiesel).

Documentary Ethics

Documentarians must decide whether to show graphic images, how long to display them, whose narration to privilege, and how to identify victims. Repeated use of anonymous corpses can create shock while erasing the lives that preceded death. Graphic evidence may be historically necessary, especially when confronting denial, but it should not be used merely for emotional intensity. Filmmakers should distinguish footage from different locations and dates, avoid illustrative images that do not match the event being described, and disclose reenactment or digital reconstruction. Music and editing also shape response. A solemn soundtrack can guide mourning, but excessive manipulation may replace understanding with sentiment. Ethical representation requires enough context for viewers to know what they are seeing and why the image exists (Friedländer; Haggith and Newman; Zelizer).

Digital Media, Restoration, and New Risks

Digital restoration has made archival footage clearer and more accessible, while online platforms allow museums, teachers, and families to share testimony widely. These developments can support education, but they introduce new risks. Short clips may be detached from provenance, colorized material may be mistaken for original evidence, and algorithmic platforms can place accurate history beside denial or conspiracy content. Artificial intelligence can generate persuasive false images or voices, increasing the importance of archival literacy. Institutions should preserve original formats, provide metadata, and explain any restoration, colorization, translation, or reconstruction. Viewers need skills to identify source, date, creator, custody, and editorial alteration. The history of Theresienstadt propaganda demonstrates why visual realism cannot be treated as automatic truth, especially in an era when images can be modified easily (Zelizer; Haggith and Newman; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Theresienstadt”).

Educational Use of Holocaust Film

Film can introduce historical questions, humanize individuals, and support discussion, but it should not replace structured historical study. Students need timelines, maps, definitions, primary documents, and information about Jewish life before the war. A single film may focus on one country, camp, rescuer, or family and cannot represent the entire Holocaust. Teachers should distinguish fictional characters from documented persons and discuss the choices made by directors. Graphic material should be age-appropriate and used for a clear educational purpose. The strongest lessons ask students to analyze both content and form: What is shown? What is omitted? Who controls the camera? What evidence supports the scene? This method turns viewing from passive consumption into historical inquiry (Insdorf; Haggith and Newman; Wiesel).

Conclusion

Holocaust representation in film and television begins with a warning about the power of images to deceive. At Theresienstadt, the Nazis staged normality, compelled prisoners to participate in propaganda, and used film to conceal deportation and murder. After the war, moving images became evidence in trials, records of liberation, vehicles for survivor testimony, and major influences on public memory. No film can reproduce the Holocaust in its totality, and every representation involves ethical and formal choices. Responsible viewing therefore requires attention to authorship, coercion, editing, provenance, narrative, and historical context. Film is most valuable when it restores individual humanity, supports evidence-based understanding, and makes viewers more critical of both past propaganda and contemporary visual manipulation (Friedländer; Haggith and Newman; Insdorf; Lanzmann; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Theresienstadt"; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Nazi Propaganda"; Wiesel; Wieviorka; Yad Vashem; Zelizer).

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