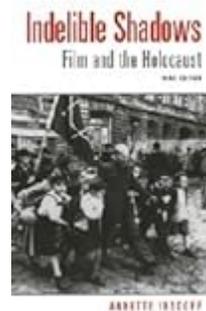




Annette Insdorf. *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xix + 410 pp. \$28.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-01630-8; \$89.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-81563-5.



Reviewed by Fred Davies (Centre for Continuing Education, University of Sussex)

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The Holocaust Revisited

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When this book first came out in 1983 it mapped out an important new field. Indeed, there were barely two other books on this specific subject by the time of the second edition in 1989: Ilan Avisar's *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (1988) and Judith Doneson's *The Holocaust in American Film* (1987). Insdorf's 1989 second edition, however, had the most impact, not least because of its foreword written by Elie Wiesel, who was at the height of his fame as one of the prime movers behind the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, as its founding chairman and as a Nobel Laureate in 1986. Insdorf states that "the avowed purpose of this book is not merely an exercise in film criticism but grappling with the legacy of the Holocaust" (p. xix). Her project is to look at films with "artistic as well as moral integrity" (p. xv), but with the proviso that they "require historical and theoretical analysis that falls outside the scope of this book" (p. xviii).

Yet, this third edition is very confusing. It is only at page 246 that Insdorf finally produces a proper introduction or preface and states "this update is intended as

a modest supplement to my original work, comprehensive but not exhaustive." Before that there are references to "this edition" that are actually to the second edition and not the current one. The filmography and bibliography are divided very awkwardly into those for the second and third editions. Only the notes and index are actually integrated. The "update" consists of about seventy pages and is followed by an annotated filmography of a further forty pages, which is tiresomely subdivided into sections on "non-fiction," "fiction Germany," "fiction France," "fiction other European countries," "English language films," and "Holocaust as background." The result is highly confusing and one wonders if there is anything here than cannot more easily be found by typing the keyword "Holocaust" into the Internet Movie Database. Admittedly, as Insdorf states, there are about 170 films that have come out since the previous edition, but this strategy is less than helpful to tackle them. Nonetheless, there is a useful new list of websites.

Insdorf chose to structure her book thematically rather than chronologically or by country. However, some of the themes are not so focused and this becomes

a real problem as she fails to incorporate the new material into the old, but instead just tacks it on. Thus, much of the argument around *Schindler's List* was very similar to that around the TV mini-series which opens the book in the chapter "The Hollywood Version of the Holocaust." And, even then, her argument is not very extensive. For instance, Insdorf's statement "it could be argued that the documentary about Schindler made by Jon Blair for British television in 1983 is even more moving than *Schindler's List*" opens and then closes what could have been an interesting discussion (p. 262).

Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* is let off the hook. Many questions were raised around his comedic fable but Insdorf does not address them adequately. It would have helped to compare it with *Divided We Fall*, and more importantly with Francesco Rosi's adaptation of Primo Levi's autobiographical *The Truce* (1997), which does not get even a mention. Many considered Benigni's film to be an affront to Levi's Holocaust legacy, which is surely as great as that of Wiesel or Paul Celan; this failure to even mention Rosi is a grave fault in the book considering the number of films of suspect value that are discussed. However, Insdorf ends with a truly remarkable film, Jablonki's *Fotoamator* (1998), which sadly is very difficult to view, although it has been transmitted on television in France, Germany, the United States, Poland, and the United Kingdom, as well as at film festivals around the world. It raises all those questions which Insdorf fights rather shy of around representation and the use of original German footage.

Thus, more recent films that are treated could have been related to earlier ones. There is only a note on *Apt Pupil* which could have been compared with *The Pawnbroker* and *Sophie's Choice* as part of the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust in the chapter on "Meaningful Montage." Likewise, *Into the Arms of Strangers* could have been inserted into the chapter on "The Jew as Child" and bracketed with films around Anne Frank.

It is perhaps the inevitable fate of this sort of book that important films came out just as it went to press. But surely Insdorf must have known that Costa-Gavras was making *Amen!* and Roman Polanski *The Pianist* (both 2002). It is invidious to pick out films that are not covered because of Insdorf's disclaimer that her book is not being comprehensive or exhaustive, yet there are several that must be pointed out. The Israeli documentary *The Specialist*, produced entirely from black and white video

footage shot at Adolf Eichmann's 1961 trial for Nazi war crimes against the Jewish people, also merits attention. This could have been nicely compared with *The Man in the Glass Booth*. Equally, the German TV documentary *Holocaust* (2000) merits attention, as does Errol Morris's documentary on Holocaust revisionism *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.* (1999).

On the other hand, one of the merits of Insdorf's book is the inclusion of East European films, many of which are difficult to locate, such as *The Last Stop*, but which are key films for this area. In the update she picks up on Radok's extraordinary film about the Theresienstadt concentration camp, *Distant Journey* (1949); but why does she not give more detail given it is difficult to view and why does she not link it to Lanzman's own documentary about Theresienstadt, *Visitor from the Living*, which is relegated to the notes (as is Lanzman's other film since the second edition about the escape from Sobibor)? And why does she confusingly mix up the modern Czech name Terezin with Theresienstadt? But the balance is also sometimes off. Why is there so much coverage of István Szabó's *Mephisto*, that is about Nazism and collaboration, but hardly anything about the Holocaust, when his previous trilogy is ignored, as indeed is his *Sunshine* (1999)? Is it appropriate to give barely two pages to what must be the most important Holocaust film, Lanzman's *Shoah*, and to cover *Shine*, which is only marginally related to the Holocaust, in the same amount of space?

In conclusion this is a disappointing follow-up to a great book. Insdorf falls between not two but several stools. Is this to be a critical analysis of Holocaust films or an attempt at an exhaustive coverage? Despite her disclaimer, an "annotated filmography" covering the 170-odd films on the Holocaust released since the second edition promises that. Not to engage with the key book on *Schindler's List*, Spielberg's *Holocaust*, though it is listed in the bibliography (for the third edition), and then enter into the debates is a failure. She acknowledges that much has been written on the Holocaust in the past decade, but her project cannot be just a series of often ill-chosen films collated in what seems a sometimes random manner and with no reference back to what has been covered in the previous editions. That said, there is some excellent coverage and analyses of films like Wajda's *Korczak*, Verhoeven's *My Mother's House*, and Jablonski's *Fotoamator*. Despite the reservations, this book is a key resource for this area and it is excellent to have it available in print again.

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