



Movie Club

Schindler's List (1993)

1. Although a fictional film, Spielberg utilized many techniques to gain an authentic feel for the film, like filming in black and white (to mirror documentary footage), filming primarily with handheld cameras and refraining from using Steadicams, elevated shots, or zoom lenses (McBride, Joseph [1997]. *Steven Spielberg: A Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster) as well as filming in actual locations such as Schindler's factory and the gates of Auschwitz. The film is also structured around historical events, like the liquidation of the Kraków Ghetto. Likewise, Thomas Keneally, the author of the novel on which the film is based, said in his introductory author's note that he wrote the work as a novel (as opposed to a work of historical non-fiction) "because the novel's techniques seem suited for a character of such ambiguity and magnitude as Oskar", but made a point to "avoid all fiction" as it "would debase the record" (Keneally, *Schindler's List*, [New York: Simon and Schuster, c1982], p. 13-14). If narrative forms (like novels and films) are reasonable methods to look at historical events, what responsibilities do these forms have regarding things like historical accuracy? As well as historical accuracy (i.e. getting facts correct) is there a need for accuracy of sentiment? For example, when told that Schindler's List was a good representation for the Holocaust, Stanley Kubrick responded by asking "think that's about the Holocaust? That was about success, wasn't it? The Holocaust is about 6 million people who get killed. *Schindler's List* is about 600 [sic] who don't. Anything else?" (Goldman, A.J. [August 25, 2005]. "[Stanley Kubrick's Unrealized Vision](#)". *Jewish Journal* [Tribe Media Corp]). Can such works truly explore a subject so complex and devastating? Can a single work provide a strong sense of the Holocaust, or are different works needed to explore different facets of such an event?
2. One of the most compelling things is Schindler's transformation from opportunist to humanitarian. Early in the novel Keneally admits that "it is a risky enterprise to have to write of virtue" (Keneally, *Schindler's List*, p. 15), and attempts to list rather than explain many of Schindler's less than honourable behaviours in light of the concept of 'virtue'. This seeming contradiction makes Schindler's story more compelling and more enigmatic, and some have argued that trying to provide an explanation for "why did he change?" would be "too simple, an insult to the mystery of Schindler's life" (Ebert, "[Schindler's List](#)" [Review], 1993). How does it deal with the "risky business" of representing virtue, especially given some of Schindler's less virtuous proclivities (womanizing, drinking, swindling)? How does the film handle this dual nature of Schindler, especially given that many of Schindler's less virtuous qualities (black market dealings, bribing) made his rescue of the 1,100 Schindlerjuden possible?

3. Outside of Schindler's transformation, some have charged that the film indulges too much in a "pure evil vs. pure good" approach. They have charged that the film neglects the link between sexuality and violence in its depiction of women, as well as not exploring the scope of ordinary German's who came to either participate or accept the action of the Holocaust (Horowitz, Sara [1997]. "But Is It Good for the Jews? Spielberg's Schindler and the Aesthetics of Atrocity". In Loshitzky, Yosefa. *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. pp. 119–139). There is also the concept of "the banality of evil" which asserts that many of those affiliated with the Holocaust were not sociopaths or ideological fanatics but simply average people motivated by self-interest into performing these horrible acts (Arendt, Hannah *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil* [New York, N.Y. : Penguin Books, 2006]. We are provided a counter example to Schindler in Amon Goeth, who has no redeemable qualities, and can even be explained away by vaguely stating he is " a study in the stupidity of evil" ([Ebert](#), 1993). In the same way that Schindler's motivations are unclear we have no real explanation for Goeth, in particular the extreme nature of his cruelty. Should we expect an explanation for these actions? Apart from the reformed Schindler, are there any good Germans? Are there any bad Jews? How does the film deal with the idea of "the banality of evil" regarding the many Germans and Poles who accepted and even revelled in the actions against the Jews?
4. Repetition and lists feature prominently in the film and aid in representing the Jews as well as the Poles and Germans that aided in the Holocaust. We see Germans lining up tables, emptying out suit cases and sorting personal items into large, ordered piles, as well as numerous instances of lists of names being read out. It adds a sense of scale, as well as a sense of methodology. It becomes an act that is second nature, but also forcefully intentional. It intends to dehumanize the Jews in the eyes of those performing the tasks, yet paradoxically humanizing them, revealing the full extent of the human toll. This is transformed into a triumphant action by the end of the film, when the Schindlerjuden place stones on Schindler's grave as an act of thanks and sign of respect. How does this reversal account for the human cost? Is it a happy ending, why/why not? Do you agree with Kubrick's sentiment that rather than being about the Holocaust the film is about a rare moment of success?
5. Some have argued "that Shoah [The Hebrew and French term for the Holocaust] constitutes such a catastrophic historical rupture as to situate it completely beyond ordinary representation-especially beyond the conventions of classic narrative cinema to which Schindler's List adheres" (Greenberg, Harvey, "Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on "Schindler's List" by Yosefa Loshitzky" [Review], *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 4 [Summer, 1998], p. 58). One contender for a more 'authentic' handling of the subject is Claude Lanzman's [Shoah](#) (1985), a mammoth documentary that dealt with the Holocaust in Poland. Do you feel that something as devastating as the Holocaust could ever be accurately, or meaningfully, explored in fictional, or even non-fictional, works? Is it appropriate to think of fictional works (like Schindler's List) as being less meaningful or useful in this discussion than non-fictional works (like Shoah)?