

Women in the Shoah: Cinematic (mis)representations and research frameworks of females in the Holocaust narrative

By Haley Yael Firkser

Before realizing my own interest in the intersectionality of feminism, media studies and Jewish Studies, I was unaware of the media's gross misrepresentation of female victims of the Shoah. Watching *Schindler's List* without a feminist critique, for example, would prove to be misleading; a background in media criticism creates awareness of the film's blatant sexual objectification of women, making them passive victims and "spectators" of the Shoah. I will expand on this point further on. After doing some research surrounding the topic, it was made clear that feminist research in Holocaust Studies is relatively new and its foundation quite complex. This complexity leads to questions about overall morality in its research, the framework in which it is executed and how the research affects cinematic depictions of females throughout the Shoah. In this essay, I explore the ramifications of gender-based research of the Shoah and the stories it bears, while using cinematic representations - particularly those in *Schindler's List* - as examples of these stories. To do so, I touch on research and findings by several feminist scholars in the field of Jewish Studies, as well as Laura Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze.

In their book *Women in the Holocaust*, Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman explain that "questions about gender lead us to a richer and more finely nuanced understanding of the Holocaust."¹ In putting together the book and organizing a conference that preceded its publication, they found much resistance to research on gender in the Holocaust. Of some major four concerns that were expressed to them, two seem to be prevalent amongst many feminist researchers; the first being that the differentiation by gender of Holocaust victims took away from the fact that the Final Solution was a complete annihilation of *all* Jews – no matter their nationality, age, class, or, in this case, gender.² The second major concern is that focusing on a gendered research of the Holocaust can trivialize such a unique and tragic event in history.³ While these concerns are reasonable, one must realize what the outcome of such research entails. For example, In *Women, Genocide, and Memory: The Ethics of Feminist Ethnography in Holocaust Research*, Janet Liebman Jacobs puts a very large focus of her paper in describing her desire and difficulties she encountered in *not* trivializing the smaller stories that make up the genocide of six million Jews, nor taking the non-female victims out of the picture, literally and figuratively. She actively works to canonize these stories, but not to the extent that they marginalize other factors of the Shoah. One of the ways in which researchers can use gender-based Holocaust in an advantageous fashion is by conducting research through a positively productive framework. Unfortunately, this is much easier said than done. Joan Ringelheim, a scholar of women and the Holocaust, critiques her own initial research in *Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research*:

my use of cultural feminism as a frame (albeit unconsciously) changed respect for the stories of the Jewish women into some sort of glorification and led to the conclusion that these women transformed ‘a world of death and inhumanity into one more act of human life.’ It was important, perhaps even crucial for me to see choices, power, agency, and strength in women’s friendships, bonding, sharing, storytelling, and conversations in the camps and ghettos, in hiding and passing.⁴

In saying this, she admits to interpreting the victims’ stories in such a way that may have desensitized and downplayed the atrocities that these women went through. This is not to say that her emphasis on the positive outcomes of women’s stories were unwarranted, but they did have major potential to distort one’s understanding of a larger, more complex event in which those stories may have played smaller or less significant roles. This leads to a common question amongst feminist researchers: “does cultural feminism, in spite of itself, glorify the oppression of women?”⁵ By hearing these stories of peace, comfort and solidarity between women we gain comfort and relief, as ignorance is bliss. She further notes that “without a place for a particular memory, without a conceptual framework, a possible significant piece of information will not be pursued.”⁶ This statement explains the need for broader understandings of victims’ stories and further reframing of how interviews and research is conducted, as to not make assumptions that exaggerate or dismiss the significance of one’s story. If researchers are not asking the right questions and emphasizing the wrong events, how must they go about changing the framework of said research? This is just one obstacle that researchers must tackle, though it is not an easy one as the death of informants is becoming more and more frequent.

This notion of emphasizing the “wrong” events in order to properly depict the women survivors of the Shoah’s narrative is a major conflict that ethnographer Janet Liebman Jacobs underwent during her field research at concentration camps and memorial spaces in Eastern Europe. In taking photos of artifacts and visual imagery in the camps and memorial sites, she explains that she has the power to choose “which memory to privilege and which to trivialize, a choice that in the face of genocidal histories, raises serious ethical concerns.”⁷ To further her moral dilemma, Jacobs experienced a crisis of observation in which not only was she questioning her betrayal of other groups (such as men and children) that were victims of the Holocaust, but also found that the very nature of her research project could potentially “contribute to the dissemination of images of women’s subjugation and degradation that were already so pervasive in Holocaust memorial culture.”⁸ Moreover, her multiple identities as a feminist social scientist and a Jewish woman were “at times in contention with one another as the ethical responsibility attached to each role had distinct and different parameters.”⁹

These parameters, I argue, parallel those of the producers, directors and behind-the-scenes people that create Hollywood films about the Shoah. For this example, I choose to focus on *Schindler’s List*. While *Schindler’s List* is in many ways an educational and historically factual reenactment of the story of Oskar Schindler and the Jews he saved during the Shoah, there are scenes in the movie that portray women victims to be passive and naïve characters in the Holocaust Story. Men, however, are educated actors – concerned about the war and more in control of the situation around them. As Jacobs points out, “while the men scheme and plot their

way through the morass of German bureaucracy, women usually accept their fate till a man appears and miraculously saves their lives... the emphasis on women's attractiveness as a tool of survival suggests that those who survived have done so thanks to their looks or their seductive ploys."¹⁰ This is very evident in several scenes. When Schindler is in the process of hiring a female secretary, he "auditions" Jewish women by observing their typing skills. These women are thin, young, well dressed and noticeably do not have honourable typing skills. Schindler looks past this latter point and gazes onto them, moving closer and closer with each interviewee as though they are mythical creatures that radiate excellence. After a montage of these women passes, an older, larger, smoking woman is shown to be auditioned for the job. It is clear that her typing skills outdo those of the previous women, but Schindler is evidently uninterested in her, with his back almost fully turned towards her and a bored look on his face. Schindler is asked to choose one woman for the job, which he has a problem doing. In the next scene, he is standing surrounded by the young women with the older woman nowhere in sight; he hired all the unskilled, but beautiful ladies for his own visual and probably sexual satisfaction. As Jacobs explains, "Oskar Schindler's devotion to his Jews is intertwined with his love for pretty women, and if we admire his protection of the Jews, we must admire his protections of his lovers, love objects, and sex objects."¹¹

Another scene in this movie that depicts the sexualization and passivity of Jewish women in the Shoah is a more serious scene, leaving viewers (and the victim) silenced. Helen Hirsch is (from what we know) the domestic maid of Amon Goeth, a feared Nazi Commandant. We understood her to be in a secure position during the Shoah, as Schindler reassures her in a moment of the young woman's emotional breakdown that Goeth would never kill her, as Goeth "enjoys her too much." If that is not a hint of survival because of her attractiveness and thus objectification, Goeth's words later on reassure her and the film's viewers of what she means to him:

... Sometimes we're both lonely. Yes, I mean, I would like, so much, to reach out and touch you in your loneliness. What would that be like, I wonder? I mean, what would be wrong with that? I realize that you're not a person in the strictest sense of the word. No, maybe you're right about that too. You know, maybe what's wrong isn't - it's not us - it's this. I mean, when they compare you to vermin and to rodents and to lice, I just, uh...No, you make a good point, a very good point. [he touches her hair and face seductively] Is this the face of a rat? Are these the eyes of a rat? Hath not a Jew eyes? [he moves his hand to her breast] I feel for you, Helen [he almost kisses her, then pulls back]. No, I don't think so. You're a Jewish bitch. You nearly talked me into it, Helen, didn't you?¹²

Succeeding this monologue, he beats Helen; he hits her with great force, throws her to the ground then pushes a shelf on her. All this time, Helen stays quiet. Not once during his monologue does she mutter an answer to his questions or voice her opinion. She is shown to have absolutely no agency in this shot. Goeth decides what she is feeling, blatantly objectifies her by asserting that she is not a person, figuratively puts words in her mouth by agreeing to what he would like her to have said or imagined her to have said, sexually harasses her, and then physically abuses her. Meanwhile, Helen stands passively, not as a woman, but as a sexual object.

Laura Mulvey, a prominent feminist film theorist, points out the major problems with such scenes in films. She writes that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.”¹³ The problem with this, as she later points out, is that “the camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion... the camera’s look is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator’s surrogate can perform with verisimilitude.”¹⁴ In essence, what the spectator of *Schindler’s List* sees is what the camera sees – and to the spectator, the camera sees truth.

In the same way that Jacobs positioned her camera in her field research “to record the images under investigation, [her] initial responses of empathy and moral outrage gave way to more pragmatic concerns over lighting, colour and contrast. At these moments in the research process, the subjects became objects to be viewed through the camera’s lens, their humanity and victimization secondary to the needs of observation and data gathering.”¹⁵ Similar to the way her concerns of collecting factual information become subjugated to those pragmatic concerns, so does the Hollywood film suppress reality to make room for viewing pleasure. In short, the necessity for the filmmakers to follow cinematic Hollywood norms in order to be a success consequently creates a misleading representation of women that marginalizes them and their stories and reinforces the patriarchal mythology of the Holocaust Narrative. Women, in fact, were not passive enablers of the Shoah.

The feminist scholar has the responsibility to “interrogate not only the gendered realities of ethnic annihilation but the problems inherent in representing the victimization of women through the lens of sociocultural objectification.”¹⁶ Similarly, filmmakers must realize the power that they have to reshape the traditional narrative of the Shoah, and perhaps form a nuanced approach to Holocaust education. If more females are included in the filmmaking process, the stories told will make the Shoah’s narrative seem less male-centric than Hollywood films currently do, and depictions of women in the Shoah will be less sexualized and marginalized, finally regarding female victims’ complex stories, opinions, positions in and understandings of the Shoah. As Esther Fuchs states in *The Construction of Heroines in Holocaust Films: The Jewess as Beautiful Soul*, “the uniqueness of the Holocaust should inspire new modes of representation... if we want [it] to remain the authentic raw exposed nerve it should be in our collective memory, and if we want Jewish women to be part of this memory, we must question, resist, and challenge the tendency of the ‘master scripts’ to normalize their subject.”¹⁷

I hope that as the framework in which gender-based Shoah research is executed and revised, and as more females take part in the filmmaking process, that the complexities of women’s roles in the Shoah will be made clear and that the current “master script” of the Shoah will demonstrate a more multifaceted representation of Jewish female victims.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, "Introduction: The Role of Gender in the Holocaust," in *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 1.
- ² *Ibid.*, 12
- ³ *Ibid.*, 13
- ⁴ Joan Ringelheim, "Women And The Holocaust: A Reconsideration Of Research," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10:4 (1985): 756.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 758
- ⁶ Joan Ringelheim, "The Split between Gender and the Holocaust," In *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 342.
- ⁷ Janet L. Jacobs, "Women, Genocide, And Memory: The Ethics Of Feminist Ethnography In Holocaust Research," *Gender & Society* 18:2 (2004): 231.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.
- ¹⁰ Jacobs, *Op. Cit.*, 53.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 54
- ¹² *Schindler's List*. DVD. Directed by Steven Spielberg. California: Universal Pictures, 1993.
- ¹³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 11
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18
- ¹⁵ Jacobs, *Op. Cit.*, 228.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 235
- ¹⁷ Esther Fuchs, "The Construction of Heroines in Holocaust Films: The Jewess as Beautiful Soul," in *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 98-112.