

Holocaust, Hollywood Movies and the Pedagogical Approaches towards the Discourses of Identity and Cultural Studies

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ABSTRACT

Integrating films into classroom pedagogy has become an efficient method to delve into the discourses of identity formation and cultural studies in particular historical contexts. The visual and emotional impacts that films hold on students' minds make it a powerful tool to unpack the complexities of power relations and the marginalization of certain groups. This paper aims to present that the Holocaust, being a profoundly complex and traumatic event in the history of human beings, can be very difficult for the students to grasp only through traditional texts. Thus, films may bridge the gap between traditional learning and contemporary historical understanding, making history more accessible and relatable to modern students. This paper also represents that exposure to visual narratives leads to a better understanding of the influence on contemporary understanding of race, ethnicity, and oppression. By aligning films to cultural studies, students will get a deeper exploration of identity and the socio-political forces that shape it. Films like *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *Schindler's List*, *Life is Beautiful*, *The Pianist*, and *The Reader* offer visual and emotional narratives that present the Holocaust from varying perspectives. By addressing themes of trauma, memory, and identity, these films enhance classroom pedagogy by inviting students to critically analyze how cultural memory and historical representation are constructed, making it easier to comprehend the moral, social, and political implications of the Holocaust.

Introduction

In the last several years, the integration of multimedia materials into pedagogical settings has significantly altered traditional methods of teaching. Among these materials, film has emerged as a particularly useful medium for exposing students to complex historical, cultural, and ideological context. Unlike traditional texts, films engage multiple senses through the combination of visual imagery, dialogue, sound, and symbolism that can evoke emotional responses and enhance deeper understanding of complex material. In the field of cultural studies, and the discourses of identity, film is more than a narrative medium. It is a pedagogical bridge that connects past brutalities to present consciousness. As educators struggle to make historical events real and meaningful to students, the cognitive and affective potential of film offers an interesting way of exploring memory, trauma, and historical narrative construction. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Holocaust films can be used as effective pedagogical tools for teaching identity construction and cultural memory in the classroom. This paper argues that visual texts have the potential to make the Holocaust more comprehensible for students in a way that traditional texts cannot by providing emotional depth and multivocality. Through an exploration of some selected movies such as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *Schindler's List*, *Life is Beautiful*, *The Pianist*, and *The Reader*, this paper illustrates that how each of these movies builds a different construction of memory and identity, often around questions of trauma, survival, and moral ambiguity. While research has explored the pedagogical possibilities of Holocaust films, most studies focus on their historical accuracy or their emotional impact on students. Scholars such as Lawrence Baron in *Teaching about the Holocaust through Film* have shown the promise of film for engaging empathy

and personal identification. Annette Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows* is a close examination of film representations of the Holocaust, with a discussion of how films shape public memory. Relatively few studies, however, have situated these films within the cultural studies and identity construction context, particularly in the classroom. This paper fills that void by overlaying filmic texts onto critical pedagogy and cultural studies in an effort to show how Holocaust films educate not just about history but also about critical thinking in terms of identity, representation, and power.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in the principles of cultural studies. The study involves a close textual and visual analysis of the selected Holocaust films to examine how cinematic narratives contribute to the understanding of identity, memory, and cultural discourse. The chosen films, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *Schindler's List*, *Life is Beautiful*, *The Pianist*, and *The Reader* were selected for their popularity and their diverse representations of the Holocaust from multiple perspectives, including victims, convicts, and bystanders. The analysis focuses on recurring themes such as trauma, moral choices, and the silencing or amplification of certain voices. Each film is examined for its narrative strategies, use of symbolism, emotional tone, and its potential pedagogical implications. Furthermore, classroom applications of these films are considered in light of how they can engage students emotionally and intellectually with the Holocaust, encouraging critical reflection on issues of race, ethnicity, power, and oppression. By combining film analysis with theoretical insights from cultural studies and identity discourses, this paper aims to illustrate how films can serve as valuable educational tools in exploring identity formation and historical consciousness.

Holocaust Films as Cultural Pedagogy

The intersection of film and cultural pedagogy provides a rich site for students to investigate historical trauma, identity, and power in ways that are not easily available with more traditional texts. Cultural pedagogy, rooted in a broader discipline of cultural studies, foregrounds how education happens through media, symbols, and narratives that move through a culture, not only in the classroom but through the course of daily life. Cultural studies theorists like Stuart Hall have traditionally argued that identity is not essential or fixed but is constructed in language, representation, and social relations contexts. Classroom spaces are therefore turned into spaces where students can critically reflect on the construction of identities with regard to cultural memory, ideology, and historical discourse. Amartya Sen's *Identity and Violence* complicates this even further by suggesting that the violence of the postmodern world is more likely to rest on the illusion of single, essential identities. Sen takes up the cause of a theory of plural identity, one based on several affiliations like national, religious, ethnic, and personal. Holocaust testimonies, when read within this context, are rich case studies on how identity was not so much constructed, but armed, dehumanized, and ultimately used to justify mass violence.

But where such subjects are studied through texts alone, students will struggle to imagine the cultural and emotional meaning of such abstraction. Holocaust films, with their visual and affective power, offer a complementary teaching resources that can bridge the gap between theory and experience. By immersing students in the cinematic representations of trauma, moral complexity, and survival, these movies make the language of cultural studies and identity construction more accessible and inviting. As products of culture, they invite the viewer to engage the politics of memory and the narrative's place within the formulation of collective consciousness. The cultural studies and identity discourses can be intensified by looking at films such as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, that overtly show the impact of imposed identities and violence that they create. The story is told through the pure friendship between Bruno, a German boy, and Shmuel, a Jewish boy who is imprisoned in a concentration camp. The fence that divides them becomes a powerful symbol of the cultural, racial, and ideological boundaries imposed by Nazi ideology.

Cultural analysis, which challenge the construction of identity by power structures, ideology, and representation, have fertile ground to grow in this film. The characters are located within a Nazi

ideology which dehumanizes Jews and promotes Aryan supremacy. Bruno's schooling and family indoctrination show how cultural institutions propagate dominant ideologies. Yet, his inherent curiosity and empathetic sensibility problematize the monolithic identity imposed on him. This tension follows closely the criticisms of Amartya Sen in *Identity and Violence*, when he criticizes a reduction of human beings to a single kind of affiliation which leads to exclusion and violence. Sen describes identity as "a general evil," that the ways of classifying people through their several identities in the communality "can restrain the exploitation of a specifically aggressive use of one particular categorization" (Sen, 4)

Sen's notion of "plurality of identity" also manifests in the case of Bruno and Shmuel. In spite of attempts from the state to rigidly separate them, experiences they share growing up enable an emotional connection transcending categories constructed for them. The tragic ending where both Bruno and Shmuel meet their deaths together emphasizes the wreaking havoc created by single identities and the illusory quality of invulnerability provided by power. Another film, *The Pianist*, graphically depicts the effects of imposed identities and the violence they elicit. *The Pianist*, offers a powerful investigation of identity and violence through the biography of Władysław Szpilman, a Polish-Jewish pianist who survives the Holocaust. The film shows the brutal truth of how a human being's complex identity is reduced to one label by repressive authorities. Szpilman, who was a renowned musician, is pushed into the Warsaw Ghetto, where his identity as a Jew is reduced to persecution and suffering.

Szpilman's journey is a perfect example of the consequences of narrowing the identities. His multifaceted identity of a musician, Polish, son is erased by the power of the Nazi ideology, which confines him to being merely a Jew, an identity that brings him nearer to death. But the film also proposes moments of refusal of this imposed identity. Szpilman's musician identity remains at the centre of his survival, and in a moment of desperation, his playing of the piano for a German officer leads to an act of unexpected kindness. The scene works to reinforce Sen's notion of the multiplicity of identity. In spite of being an officer within the Nazi rank, his understanding of Szpilman as an artist allows him to step beyond the regime-imposed cultural and political boundary. This excursion into identity discourses and cultural studies can also be carried over into the analysis of films such as *Life is Beautiful*, *Schindler's List*, and *The Reader*, which offer profound insights into the processes by which identity is shaped, challenged, and brutally enforced under circumstances of oppression.

Life is Beautiful, is an emotional, darkly comedic portrayal of a Jewish father, Guido, using humour and fantasy to protect his son from the horrors of the Holocaust. The film beautifully balances tragedy and comedy in its exploration of how identities, particularly those imposed upon us by oppressive regimes, can be transcended through human connection and love. Guido's determination to shield his son from the reality of their internment camp represents concept of plural identities. Guido is a father, a husband, a Jew, and a human being with a very complicated cultural identity. Yet, under fascist rule, the Jewish identity becomes the sole characteristic of his existence. Amartya Sen says, "one still has to decide what exact importance to attach to that identity over the relevance of other categories to which one also belongs" (Sen, 6). Guido, through his imagination and love, rewrites his relationship with his son and resists the reduction of his identity as victim. On the other hand, *Schindler's List*, is a grim depiction of the Holocaust drawn from the life of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who saved over a thousand Jewish lives by offering them jobs at his factory. The film illustrates the dehumanizing effects of Nazi ideologies that transformed Jews into numbers, stripping them of their individuality and humanity. Schindler's own development from a self-interest-driven opportunist to a compassionate hero negates the given identity of the Jew as "other" or "enemy," as well as revealing the moral complexity of identity in times of war. Sen's theory of identity multiplicity is invaluable here. Sen says, "a sense of identity with others can be a very important-and rather complex-influence on one's behavior which can easily go against narrowly self-interested conduct" (Sen, 23). Schindler himself is initially motivated by self-interest but, through his actions, his identity changes from that of being complicitous in the machinery of oppression to that of a savior of lives. His complex identity businessman, Nazi Party member, German citizen, and moral agent serves to remind us that identity is never fixed but can be transformed based on choices and actions.

Lastly, *The Reader* is a movie concerning guilt, shame, and the quandary of post-Holocaust identity. The film revolves around a young man, Michael, who engages in a romantic relationship with an older woman, Hanna, only to discover afterward that she was a Nazi concentration camp guard. This compels Michael to re-evaluate his idea of morality, justice, and personal identity. Hanna's identity as a guard can be reduced to an oppressive, violent identity, but the film complicates this by revealing her illiteracy and the psychological burden that she carries. The film emphasizes the multiplicity of identity, as Hanna's perpetrator identity is juxtaposed with her vulnerability and humanity. Michael's own identity is also fluid as he grapples with coming to terms with the passion of his youth and the realization of the atrocities of the woman, illustrating how easily individual identities can be so completely influenced by historical context and personal choice. Sen argues that "Even when a categorization is arbitrary or capricious, once they are articulated and recognized in terms of dividing lines, the groups thus classified acquire derivative relevance... and this can be a plausible enough basis for identities on both sides of the separating line" (Sen, 27). The film promotes reflection on how identities of individuals can shift under pressure of history and personal action. Collectively, all these movies provide excellent material to dissect in this crossroads of culture, identity, and violence. Each of these films examines the breakdown of identity, its metamorphosis, and how it struggles against oppressive ideology. Teaching cultural studies through these movies offers an active way of engaging students in exploring how political and historical powers shape individual identities and the consequences of viewing individuals based on a single facet. Through the use of Sen's identity and violence theory, students can critically examine the construction, contestation, and often violent enforcement of identity while considering the possibilities of human agency and resistance against systemic oppression. The films in this list underscore the need to acknowledge the diversity of identities and the ethical nuances required to deal with past violence.

Conclusion

The use of films as a pedagogical tool in the classroom offers an interesting method of exploring historical events like the Holocaust, particularly from cultural studies and identity formation viewpoints. Perhaps most significant of this research is the discovery that films do not merely reenact history but are in fact actively building collective memory and identity. By their emotional resonance and visual storytelling, Holocaust films enable students to challenge broader questions of race, power, ethnicity, and oppression in both historical and contemporary contexts. Positioning these films within the paradigms of cultural studies allows educators to move beyond the conventional didactic approach, encouraging critical thinking and enabling students to recognize the socio-political forces that construct identity. The relevance of this research is its interdisciplinary scope, bridging teaching history, cultural studies, and film study. As the Holocaust becomes ever more temporally distant from today's students, there is a need for innovative pedagogical answers. Through thoughtful and critical utilization of films, educators can make the Holocaust's moral, social, and political aspects living, accessible, and relevant. Further research could be conducted on comparative studies of students' engagement with films in relation to other forms of media, such as graphic novels or web-based storytelling websites. A study of Holocaust film usage in multicultural classrooms could also provide rich findings regarding how diverse student identities engage with discourses of trauma and oppression. A wider analysis to include non-Western Holocaust representations could further enhance the analysis of global memory cultures and representational politics.

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