

**Un-American? Or Just “Inglourious”? Reflections on the “Americanization of the  
Holocaust” from Langer to Tarantino**

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In his 1983 essay “The Americanization of the Holocaust on Stage and Screen,”<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Langer outlines, for perhaps the first time in American Holocaust studies, an argument and a field of inquiry that would later be considerably expanded and amplified by scholars including Judith Doneson,<sup>2</sup> Hilene Flanzbaum,<sup>3</sup> Peter Novick,<sup>4</sup> and—perhaps most insistently, certainly polemically—Alvin Rosenfeld.<sup>5</sup> Individual approaches obviously differ, but essentially these writers share a common thesis: namely, that the establishment of the

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, “The Americanization of the Holocaust on Stage and Screen,” in *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 157–178 [first published in Susan Blacher Cohen, (ed.), *The Jewish-American Stage and Screen* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983)]. Subsequent references in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Hilene Flanzbaum, (ed.), *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “The Americanization of the Holocaust,” in Alvin H. Rosenfeld, (ed.), *Thinking About the Holocaust: After Half a Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 119–150 [first published in *Commentary* in June 1995]; Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

Holocaust as a central “location” in American culture since the 1970s has been accomplished chiefly by the Holocaust’s recuperation, and partial rehabilitation, in the terms of a broadly affirmative cultural discourse that determinedly, if not indeed tendentially, discovers redemption narratives, moral meaning, and ethical guidance for the present in historical events to which such concepts are not only inapplicable but also irrelevant. This process is conducted particularly, though by no means exclusively, by mainstream (that is, popular/commercial) fictional and dramatic representations (novels, films, television dramas, Broadway plays, and so on) as well as by proliferating public commemorative practices and musealization.

Thus the “Americanization of the Holocaust” fundamentally entails a kind of category error as a consequence of which American Holocaust representations typically proffer meanings—for example, civic lessons around the value of tolerance and rational, democratic political discourse, or declarations of human sodality in the face of radical evil—that however generally unexceptionable prove upon closer scrutiny to relate more to the ideological preferences of American public and political culture than to the history of the Holocaust. Such bromides reflect a restorative project that will always tend to collapse into kitsch. At worst, perhaps, group identification with Jewish victimhood through a mythicized version of the Holocaust substitutes for more authentic, reflective, and—not least in relation to Palestine—tolerant forms of contemporary Jewish identity.<sup>6</sup> (The positive case for the Americanization of the Holocaust, in terms of the reaffirmation of fundamentally “American”

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<sup>6</sup> In the miniseries *QB VII* (Tom Gries, 1974), based on Leon Uris’ novel, the assimilated, atheistic, adulterous, and materialistic Jewish-American writer Abraham Cady (Ben Gazzara) reclaims his Jewish identity by determining, while visiting Israel, to write a major work on the Holocaust.

values of democracy, tolerance, pluralism, and so on via the cathartic confrontation with their absolute Other, is a far less common proposition, but can be found, for example, in public statements by founding director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Michael Berenbaum.<sup>7</sup>) Such flaws may be hardwired into any and all such attempts at Holocaust representation “in the American vein” by a fundamental performative contradiction: writing in 1995, Alvin Rosenfeld expressed doubt that “any story of the crimes of the Nazi era can remain faithful to the specific features of those events and at the same time address contemporary American social and political agendas.”<sup>8</sup>

Langer’s original essay identified the Goodrich-Hackett/George Stevens stage and screen adaptations of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the 1978 NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, among other less-remembered works, as key vectors of the Holocaust’s Americanization; in more recent publications, Steven Spielberg’s 1994 film *Schindler’s List* has been most likely to feature as the principal exhibit for the prosecution of the “Americanization thesis.” The tendency to banalize, sentimentalize, generalize, dilute, and instrumentalize the Holocaust will always be exacerbated, the argument proceeds, by the inescapably “prosthetic” nature of collective American Holocaust memory. Far from prompting moral reflection or political action, such representations may supply “screen memories” that ultimately help shield Americans from a fuller engagement with the crimes and traumas of American history itself (slavery, genocide, and military aggression in Indochina, Latin America, and the Middle

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<sup>7</sup> Berenbaum famously called for the USHMM “to tell the story of the Holocaust in such a way that it would resonate not only with the survivor in new York and his [*sic*] children in San Francisco, but with a black leader from Atlanta, a Midwestern farmer, or a Northeastern industrialist.” Quoted in Rosenfeld, “Americanization,” p. PAGE.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenfeld, “Americanization,” p. 131.

East). As Peter Novick argues, “The pretense that the Holocaust is an American memory...works to devalue the notion of historical responsibility. It leads to the shirking of those responsibilities that *do* belong to Americans as they confront their past, their present, and their future.”<sup>9</sup>

Rather than rehearse at length such well-known critical positions, this essay will first make some brief points locating Lawrence Langer’s original essay, which originally framed the prospect of the Holocaust’s Americanization at a specific point in the trajectory of American “Holocaust consciousness,” and will suggest that his arguments—grounded in a humanistic American literary-critical tradition—are at once more narrowly focused (on literary and dramatic practice) and restrained and more rigorous than some of the more broad-ranging later exegeses of the Holocaust in American culture. Taking his 1983 essay on its own terms, therefore, I will go on to measure the continuing salience of his original analysis of Holocaust dramatic narratives, contrasting his position to those of scholars who have argued instead that Holocaust representations introduce dissentient and self-critical, rather than affirmative, strands into American life—or that the paradigms of American mass art such as Hollywood film are themselves in fact more complex and multi-valent than Langer believes.

Taking Edward Zwick’s 2008 film *Defiance* as a contemporary equivalent to the mid-century middlebrow texts on which Langer focuses (alongside the stage and screen versions of the *Diary and Holocaust*, Millard Lampell’s stage adaptation of John Hersey’s Warsaw ghetto novel *The Wall*, Stanley Kramer’s film *Judgment at Nuremberg*—both from 1961—and Arthur Miller’s 1964 play *Incident at Vichy*), the essay concludes by offering an interpretation of Quentin Tarantino’s controversial 2009 film *Inglourious Basterds* as a

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<sup>9</sup> Novick, *Holocaust and Collective Memory*, p. 15.

counter-example. This is a work, I will argue, that systematically repurposes the canons of popular genre film, a field in which “American-ness” is itself a vexed question, with the specific aim of dismantling the notional firewalls between Nazi racial ideology, genocidal violence, tyranny, and sadism on the one hand and “American” values on the other. Ultimately, Tarantino’s film “Americanizes” the Holocaust in ways that radically revise, and invert altogether—or alternatively might actually be seen as a provocative reaffirmation of—Langer’s original proposition. The essay thus proposes to scrutinize, expand, and renovate the conventional model of the Americanization of the Holocaust with the aim of rendering the concept less prescriptive and more usefully analytical than it has sometimes been, or been allowed to be.

### **Americanization in contexts**

Alongside *Indelible Shadows*,<sup>10</sup> Annette Insdorf’s pioneering survey of international Holocaust cinema (still itself a novel category in 1983), whose first edition was published in the same year, Langer’s essay was one of the first attempts to take stock of American dramatizations of the Holocaust in comparative historical perspective. In fact, the essay can be seen as one expression among numerous others at this time of the growing contemporary sense—following key episodes in the late 1970s, including the *Holocaust* telecast and President Jimmy Carter’s announcement of the presidential commission that would eventually lead to the establishment of the USHMM<sup>11</sup>—that henceforth the Holocaust would

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<sup>10</sup> Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Edward Linenthal, in *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum* (New York: Viking, 1995), specifically identifies 1978 as “a crucial year in the

have to be understood not only through the interpretative paradigms of Jewish history, culture, theology, and remembrance, or those of the study of World War II (in fact, at this time the Holocaust was largely relegated to the margins of most historical accounts of the larger conflict), but also in terms of its relationships to and meanings within mainstream American life. But whether this was a process to be welcomed or deplored, whether it would enrich either understandings of the historical Holocaust or the public discourses of late-20<sup>th</sup>-century American culture, were questions very much still in play: Allen Mintz has noted not only “how particularly American were the terms on which the Holocaust purchased its place in our culture,” but also that “those American terms...were far from static.”<sup>12</sup>

The form of Langer’s engagement with this as-yet undefined field, and his critical methodology in this essay, are consistent with the critical practice of his pathbreaking 1975 volume *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*<sup>13</sup>—itself recognizably informed by a humanistic, socially and ethically conscious literary-critical tradition in the American vein of Lionel Trilling—thus reflecting his principal scholarly concerns at this point in his career with literary narratives of the Holocaust. Langer lays out what would one become one of the most widely shared tenets of the broader Americanization thesis: the spuriously redemptive trajectory of American Holocaust fictions that seek out the consoling fiction of moral

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organisation of [US] Holocaust consciousness” (p. 11); Raul Hilberg makes the same observation in Peter Hayes, (ed.), *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

perseverance even in the face of inhuman cruelty and suffering. Thus, Anne Frank's diary is edited and reshaped to ensure the audience is left with Anne's "mercurial optimism at the expense of the encroaching doom that finally engulfed them all,"<sup>14</sup> the unpalatable truth of her terrible end in Bergen-Belsen. Langer indicts the "pitiful cliché" of the play's insistence, via the exemplary rehabilitation of the embittered survivor (embodied onstage by Otto Frank) into tentative renewed hope in human nature, on suffering as epiphenomenal compared to the enduring truth of Anne's now-canonical assertion, with which Goodrich and Hackett conclude their adaptation: "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."<sup>15</sup> Such "fine sentiments," Langer argues, too readily lapse into comfortable abstraction and consolatory evasions—likewise typified by the "noble refrain" of Lampell's *The Wall* that "the only answer to death is more life."

These facile mottos, in Langer's view, at once belie and betray that it is precisely the absence of redemption—indeed, the speciousness of the concept in relation to the Holocaust—that renders it so singularly unpalatable to the normative paradigms of American drama. Langer cites an earlier literary response to genocide, *Heart of Darkness* (thus anticipating contemporary scholarship on the continuities of racial ideology in imperialism and fascism, though Langer does not himself draw any explicit parallel or connection<sup>16</sup>), effectively indicting American writers for the identical moral failure confessed by Conrad's narrator Marlow upon his return to London from the Congolese jungle. When Marlow meets

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> For a fuller rehearsal of the case against the appropriation of the *Diary* as a comforting bromide, see Rosenfeld, *End of the Holocaust*, pp. 140–162.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

with the dead Kurtz's fiancée, he finds himself unable to afflict her with the nihilistic revelation of Kurtz's real last words ("The horror! The horror!") and rewards her desperate pleas for "something—something—to live with" by, offering her instead the reassuring falsehood that Kurtz's final thoughts were indeed of her. In so doing, Marlow avoids a truth that, he insists, "would have been too dark—too dark altogether," lines Langer glosses with the comment that "the Holocaust—alas!—provides us with only something to die with, something from those who died with nothing left to give. There is no final solace, no redeeming truth, no hope that so many millions may not have died in vain. They have."<sup>17</sup> The core reiterated idea of Langer's essay is that the Holocaust defies and defeats efforts to manufacture narratives of heroic resistance (military or otherwise) or the triumph of the human spirit (anticipating his later insistence that survivor accounts testify not to "painful endurance as a form of defiance or resistance," but to "uncompensated and unredeemable suffering"<sup>18</sup>). This uncompromising insistence on the totality of the disaster, and art's corresponding obligation to encounter it without evasion or palliation, would become something of a leitmotif of Langer's work more generally. At various points in his essay, Langer cites survivor testimonies as a corrective to what he sees as the fundamentally disingenuous redemptive tenor of American Holocaust fictions.

However, with the exception of *Holocaust*, of which he is frankly contemptuous, Langer is careful not to indict American writers for their imaginative failures in engaging more fully with the horrors of the Holocaust—more careful, certainly, than subsequent critics of Americanization, but also, perhaps, reflecting his essay's historical position on the cusp of

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<sup>17</sup> Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> Langer, 2000, pp. xiv–xv. [Which work does this refer to? We are missing a full citation]

a massive expansion both in Holocaust scholarship and broader cultural awareness of and engagement with the Holocaust. Langer remarks:

Regardless of artistic merit, the plays and films we are examining share one common purpose: they bring us into the presence of human beings [ie the characters] searching for a discourse commensurate with their dilemma. In order to recognize that dilemma, they must find a language adequate to express it; but in order to find that language, they must first be able to imagine the dilemma. Without such perception, without the words to articulate it to others and make it credible, the individual remains totally vulnerable.<sup>19</sup>

There is an interesting slippage here between the ostensible subjects of Langer's commentary—the (fictional or historical) protagonists of these texts whose failure to find adequate expressive forms for their experience is excused by the historically determined limits of their own perception and understanding—and the postwar writers who render their characters' "dilemma" with the benefit of historical understanding, yet who are in different ways also disabled—by the tenor of American culture, and specifically by the governing conventions of mainstream narrative, with which fatally they do not seek to break—from finding a discourse commensurate with the events and experiences they portray. Of course, Langer does not suggest that the writer's dilemma is in any way comparable to that of victims of the Holocaust; nonetheless, he registers the problem that would later be framed as the "limits of representation question" and would generate a sizeable sub-field of Holocaust scholarship in the decades either side of the new millennium. Again, we can see Langer's 1983 essay as transitional in its efforts—on the one hand to retain the framework of a more traditional critical project, while on the other moving toward an increasingly "exceptionalist"

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<sup>19</sup> Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, p. 165.

model of the Holocaust, with all that implies for the legitimacy of works that seek to accommodate the Holocaust within or to preexisting representational conventions. Indeed, Langer approvingly cites Elie Wiesel's characterization of the Holocaust—in the context of a damning indictment of the failures of the *Holocaust* mini-series—as an “ontological event.”

Generally, Langer's own critical vernacular avoids suggesting that the Holocaust mandates a wholesale departure from representational norms or even that, as Ilan Avisar would suggest in 1995, “authentic” Holocaust representations ought to be measured by the “stammers, restraints and hesitations” whose deformation of the textual body mark the text's self-conscious diffidence or insufficiency in rendering the full enormity of the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup> It may be significant that Avisar's work, like most of the scholarship on the “limits of representation”—but unlike Langer's essay—postdates the 1985 release of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a film that dramatically and polemically (and controversially) redrew many of the parameters of discussion of Holocaust representation, especially in the visual arts.<sup>21</sup> Langer's essay is less absolutist, recoiling from imposing representational ordinances upon the Holocaust (Lanzmann's infamous “circle of fire”), but rather identifying the kinds of questions and problems that Holocaust narratives illustrate, whether through their conscious engagement with such concepts or indeed their evasion or ignorance of them.

Foremost among those questions for Langer, perhaps, is the issue of individual choice and agency, or rather the unavailability and functional impossibility of either in the collapsed moral and ethical environment of mass extermination. Langer's emphasis on this question

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<sup>20</sup> Ilan Avisar, “Holocaust Movies and the Politics of Contemporary Memory,” in Rosenfeld, (ed.), *Thinking About the Holocaust*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Lanzmann had already become a public figure in debates around the legitimacy of Holocaust representation by the late 1970s, inveighing in print against *Holocaust*.

invokes his own key concept of “choiceless choices” (not named as such in the Americanization essay, but first articulated the year before in *Versions of Survival*<sup>22</sup>) and lends his version of Americanization a distinctive perspective largely absent from subsequent works on popular American Holocaust representations. Invoking the Western literary tradition dating back to Greek tragedy, a move that itself reflects his training and background, Langer identifies individual moral choice as simultaneously indispensable to the kinds of conventional dramaturgy embodied by the works he discusses *and* largely irrelevant to the blasted moral and ethical landscape of the Holocaust, thus encapsulating the performative contradiction in which such works find themselves inescapably enmeshed. In dramas such as *The Wall* and *Incident at Vichy*, Langer discerns an agonized struggle on the writer’s part to find a means “to restore...to men [*sic*] an instrumentality in their fate,”<sup>23</sup> a restoration that reinforces a priori assumptions about the tenets of sustainable social life: “The heroic impulse triumphs over truth...and man proves himself still in control of his fate.”<sup>24</sup> But for Langer, not only are concepts of individual or collective self-determination, whether political or moral, unsustainable in the face of the realities of industrialized genocide; the latter refutes, shatters, and extinguishes them in practice and evacuates and falsifies the intellectual and philosophical traditions on which they were premised. In a sense, Langer’s project works to refute its own humanistic practices: to the extent that they are commonly predicated on the persistence of the relevance of categories of individual agency, moral choice, self-reflection, and so on, these works can only evade the truths of the Holocaust; while insofar as such

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<sup>22</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982).

<sup>23</sup> Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, p. 162.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

categories are equally central to the critical tradition within which Langer locates himself, in analyzing them he can do no more than point out their manifest inadequacies, as no secure methodological vantage point (beyond the passing suggestion that “we have a right to expect more”<sup>25</sup>) exists from which an alternative aesthetic might be promoted.

Thus Langer’s critique is, so to speak, a self-conscious performance of the hard truths that a film like *Judgment at Nuremberg* unintentionally sets on display: the latter’s intended validation of an apolitically humane American justice, craggily embodied by Spencer Tracy’s folksy integrity, as a bulwark against murderous tyranny runs aground against the truth (intruding into the film via interpolated documentary footage of the liberated camps) that “uncorrupted justice, the highest embodiment of law, order, morality and civilization is only a charade in the presence of atrocities literally embodied by the mounds of twisted corpses in mass graves at Belsen.”<sup>26</sup> By contrast, the logical corollary of Langer’s own merciless autopsy of such liberal fictions is the evacuation likewise of the foundations of his own starting critical position. Thus—though not motivated by an epistemological insistence on non-identity—Langer’s absolutism ultimately corresponds interestingly with Adorno’s famous stricture in *Negative Dialectics*: “If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS likes to drown out the screams of its victims.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Other Americanizations?**

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>27</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Continuum, 1973), p. 365.

The comparison with Adorno highlights the interesting point that, at least in the Americanization essay, while he deprecates the limitations of the mainstream character-centred films and plays he discussed, Langer, unlike Adorno, does not appear to be invested in the formal stratagems of literary modernism as a means of delivering a more authentic imaginative engagement with the Holocaust—stratagems that by 1983 had certainly become orthodox, at least in European, if not in American, drama (in such works as Peter Weiss’ 1964 play *The Investigation*, the poetry of Paul Celan, etc.). This difference is highlighted by the omission from Langer’s essay of Sidney Lumet’s 1965 adaptation of Edward Lewis Wallant’s novel *The Pawnbroker*, a film that looks to the contemporary modernist practices of European art cinema rather than to Hollywood conventions. The exclusion is a surprising one, given not only the relatively sparse American Holocaust filmography at the time of Langer’s writing and the film’s high-profile and generally positive critical reception, but also that Lumet’s film also seems to accord at least partly with Langer’s demand that Holocaust narratives acknowledge the specificity and radical incommensurability of the event—because Lumet’s deployment of disruptive montage to portray the radically divided subjecthood of the traumatized survivor departs from conventional models of the integrated self that underpin the reassuring assumptions around agency and moral self-determination Langer questions and because it (controversially) posts a relationship between American culture and the Holocaust that is diametrically opposed to the restorative optimism of a near-contemporary drama like *Judgment at Nuremberg*.

The flaws in Lumet’s psychopathology of the survivor—which on some readings amount to a borderline-antisemitic caricature of the Wandering Jew—have been widely

rehearsed elsewhere<sup>28</sup> (as have the bald Christological overtones of the film's melodramatic climax); in any case, more or less authentic versions of Jewishness do not figure especially prominently in Langer's critique of American Holocaust dramas. By contrast, a demand for unalloyed trauma does, and in this respect, certainly *The Pawnbroker* is not wanting—in fact, a frequently encountered critique of the film is that, as memorably portrayed by Rod Steiger, camp survivor Sol Nazerman becomes a one-dimensional character locked into an inescapable cycle of re-experienced and re-enacted trauma by the incommunicable enormity of his suffering. Discussing the inadequacies of *Holocaust's* portrayal of the T5 “euthanasia” murder process, Langer deplores the absence of “any vivid anguish, any searing pain, any terror, pain, or even dislocation of the moral center of [the victims'] being.”<sup>29</sup> An anguished moral dislocation is surely at the very core of Nazerman's plight in *The Pawnbroker*. Nor does the film suggest that Nazerman should be called to moral account for the afflictions visited upon him through no choice of his own: in fact, one function of the film's use of subjective flashbacks to express the insistent and irruptive, yet concealed from everyone around him, presence of traumatic memory in Nazerman's daily life is to disable him as a conscious moral agent. Nazerman is a prisoner of the trauma that screens him from even the most basic human contact with anyone around him in mid-1960s New York. Lumet's adoption of a modernist cinematic language, with discordant jazz score, a stark visual register rich in *chiaroscuro* and overtly symbolic *mise en scène*, and Ralph Rosenblum's disjunctive

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory*, pp. 117–123.

<sup>29</sup> Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, p. 175.

editing,<sup>30</sup> further distances *The Pawnbroker* from the stylistic and ideological stolidity of *Judgment at Nuremberg* or the sentimentality of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Yet had Langer chosen to discuss *The Pawnbroker*, for all these departures from the protocols of middlebrow American cinema, would he nonetheless have discerned other vectors of Americanization in the film? The most obvious, and controversial, of these must be the film's proposition that the racial oppression and violence surrounding Nazerman in his postwar life as a pawnbroker in impoverished, racially divided New York is meaningfully comparable to, or in some way continuous with, the sufferings of European Jewry under the Nazis. For the most part, contemporary reviewers, who afforded *The Pawnbroker* a mostly respectful reception, did not remark upon this linkage, certainly not negatively; more recent Holocaust scholars, however, have excoriated what they see as a tendentious and specious comparison that offends their sense of the particularity (and/or exceptionalism) of the Holocaust. Ilan Avisar's 1988 monograph, for example, deplored the film's "bogus analogy between the horrors of the Holocaust and living conditions in Spanish Harlem."<sup>31</sup> To others, the specificity of the Holocaust is diffused still further through an interpretative framework that encounters it less as a historical event, let alone a discernibly Jewish one (the scenes of Nazerman's life in prewar Germany are dreamlike and unanchored in any tangible social or cultural reality) than an existential conundrum of the modern experience whose meaning is as pressing and palpable for Americans and non-Jews. David Desser and Lester J. Friedman suggest that in *The Pawnbroker*, "The Holocaust becomes symbolic of modern America,

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<sup>30</sup> Contemporary critics were quick to note the influence of Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

<sup>31</sup> Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 124.

and...[Nazerman] embodies an aspect of the modern condition.”<sup>32</sup> Lumet’s film thus might be seen to mark not, as it is often received, the start of a more direct and uncompromising engagement with the Holocaust in American cinema following on from the “universalist” ideology of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, but rather—or also—the start of the process wherein the Holocaust becomes a moral index against which other cultures’ claims on justice and tolerance can be measured, and whose very extremity, rather than offering relative reassurance (American racism isn’t as bad as that of the Nazis), sounds a tocsin warning against moral complacency (acts of “lesser” racial discrimination and violence are continuous with and morally and ethically indistinguishable from genocide).

So *The Pawnbroker*, even as it departs starkly from the paradigms of mainstream commercial drama nonetheless illustrates that Americanization—expansively conceived—may be an ineluctable dimension of American Holocaust art. Is to demand otherwise to ask the almost impossible—that artists think themselves outside of the discourses in which they work, and which they share with those to whom they principally speak? This is a question that can also be asked of what would seem to be one of *The Pawnbroker*’s most distinctively “un-American” techniques: its attempt to impart—or even inflict—trauma upon its audience, via the techniques of subjective montage and the stark, unsparing cruelty of its monochrome imagery. Is trauma not American, too? Or can it be made American?

In “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals,” Jeffrey Alexander traces the evolution of the Holocaust in European, and especially American, public discourse from the delimited if meaningful category of war crime, to a world-historical event and a didactic “cultural program”—a “Trauma Drama,” driven by “symbolic extension and emotional

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<sup>32</sup> David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American Jewish Filmmakers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 210.

identification”<sup>33</sup>—whose powerful symbolism underpins a broad project of public moral instruction around radical evil, law, and universal moral values. Alexander’s perspective is explanatory rather than normative: that is, he addresses himself to “the social creation of a cultural fact,” a formulation that itself reflects a basic assumption that historical events do not enter the social field self-constituted and pre-defined, but rather are rendered culturally legible and socially meaningful by their construction through public discourse and their accommodation to contemporary needs—“No trauma interprets itself.”<sup>34</sup> Such an assumption echoes Ilan Avisar’s observation that “Holocaust films reflect the accommodation of historical memory to contemporary political needs,”<sup>35</sup> but runs counter to Langer’s implicit position in the Americanization essay that the forms of mainstream narrative cinema/theater should reconstitute themselves to have any hope of rising to the enormous challenge of authentically representing the Holocaust. Alexander unfolds the story of the Holocaust’s gradual emergence as a transcendent moral absolute in American public discourse by reviewing successive phases of its public reception, starting with well-known accounts of how the first reports of the liberated camps in 1945 prompted a variety of responses ranging

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<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama,” *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2002): p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander, “On the Social Construction,” p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Avisar, “Holocaust Movies,” p. 38; see, for comparison, Sara Horowitz, “The Cinematic Triangulation of American Identity: Israel, America, and the Holocaust,” in Flanzbaum, (ed.), *Americanization*, pp. 145–146: “Cinematic versions of the Shoah comment not only on the murdered Jews of Europe but also on the ideological climate in which the films themselves are produced, distributed, and reviewed.”

from horror and compassion to revulsion and even incredulity. For Alexander, these responses not only reveal the ways in which empathy (as a key vector of universalization) was inhibited by the alien-seeming qualities of camp survivors as depicted in early newsreels and photographs; they also illustrate that, perhaps paradoxically, the events subsequently collectively understood as “the Holocaust,” and in turn as a transcultural, transhistorical marker of abysmal moral implosion—in Kantian terms, “radical evil” or, comparatively, Durkheim’s a “sacred evil”<sup>36</sup>—were initially constructed as in a sense only too historical and concrete: as the actions of a uniquely criminal regime predefined as antithetical to (American) democracy against its racial and political opponents, thus to be dealt with in the military, and eventually juridical and political, rather than moral, spheres. Alexander distances himself from Wiesel’s assertion of the “ontological” status of the Holocaust, noting that whether evil is comprehended ontologically or epistemologically—with the possibility in the latter case that evil can be ameliorated, overcome (a possibility seemingly confirmed by the Allies’ defeat of Nazi Germany), and ultimately superseded in a historical narrative of progressive advance—has far-reaching implications for how it will be understood and handled.

Alexander makes a surprising move by claiming that the de-particularization of the Holocaust entailed in its moral reification—its translation since the 1960s onto a rarefied plane of absolute evil well beyond the specific historical circumstances of the Nazi murder of European Jewry—does not, as one might assume, also remove it from the sphere of individual experience or understanding. Rather, he argues that insisting on “the Holocaust” as a ubiquitous potentiality within human nature—a prospect that also forecloses on myths of progressive modernity and, as Lyotard and Bauman have argued, points the way to the

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<sup>36</sup> Alexander, “On the Social Construction,” p. 27.

postmodern—requires the abolition of prophylactic distance from victim and perpetrator alike and an acceptance, under the auspices of moral universalism, of the need to acknowledge and combat violence and suffering wherever they are encountered. The Holocaust thus authenticates an activist moral stance in relation to others, uncircumscribed by the “explanations” of historical context.

It is worth noting that in charting the reconstruction of the Holocaust as a tragic drama, which in turn became appealing to an American public demoralized by postwar challenges to progressive mythology such as Vietnam, Alexander is not speaking figuratively. In fact, he emphasizes the role of actual dramatic fictions—citing, as Langer does, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Holocaust*—in accomplishing this shift:

In the course of constructing and broadcasting the tragic narrative of the Holocaust, there were a handful of actual dramatizations—in books, movies, plays, and television shows—that played critically important roles. Initially formulated for an American audience, they were distributed worldwide, seen by tens and possibly hundreds of millions of persons, and talked incessantly about by high-, middle-, and low-brow audiences alike. In the present context, what seems most important about these dramas is that they achieved their effect by personalizing the trauma and its characters. This personalization brought the trauma drama “back home.” Rather than depicting the events on a vast historical scale, rather than focusing on larger-than-life-leaders, mass movements, organizations, crowds, and ideologies, these dramas portrayed the events in terms of small groups, families and friends, parents and children, brothers and sisters. In this way, the victims of trauma became everyman and everywoman, every child and every parent.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 34–35.

Alexander echoes here Andreas Huyssen's celebrated analysis of the impact of *Holocaust* on West German audiences, which tried to resolve the consternation of German intellectuals that such a quintessential "culture-industry" product should have generated an outpouring of memory and public debate around the Third Reich that decades of precisely calibrated Brechtian didactic theater had failed to prompt. Huyssen solved this conundrum by arguing that it was precisely as melodrama that *Holocaust* undammed the wellspring of memory: enabling audience identification allowed Germans to grieve for a loss experienced for the first time, via the mechanisms of identificatory drama, as their own, rather than only as crimes of which they were perpetrators and/or beneficiaries and colluders (charges that provoked guilt and psychological denial).<sup>38</sup> Huyssen's sympathetic account of *Holocaust*, originally published three years before Langer's Americanization essay, offers a "immanent critique" of mass culture that Langer's essay, for all its sensitivity to the constraints of the American worldview, largely does not. The generative potential of such a critical stance becomes clear in Miriam Bratu Hansen's 1995 essay on Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. Upon its release in 1993, the film instantly became the focus of intense critical debate, much of which both in scholarly commentary and the wider media reworked positions familiar from the responses to the broadcast of *Holocaust* fifteen years before, yet intensified by the filmmaker's own uniquely high profile, by the expansion of Holocaust consciousness in the intervening years, and by the widespread recognition even amongst the film's many critics that it was an artistic achievement of a considerably higher degree than the NBC miniseries. Alongside claims of historical exploitation and falsification, the marginalization of Jewish

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<sup>38</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification: *Holocaust* and West German Drama," *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 94–114.

characters and even the perpetuation of antisemitic stereotypes, the charge of Americanization was, once again, at the forefront of critical debates, with claims that by highlighting survival (and the agency of the righteous Gentile) over annihilation—in J. Hoberman’s famously withering aphorism, fashioning “a feelgood movie about the ultimate feel-bad experience”<sup>39</sup>—Spielberg had demonstrated once again the propensity of American popular artists to pander to their audience’s preference for affirmative and restorative myths over unpalatable historical truths.

In the voluminous critical literature on *Schindler’s List*, ranking behind only *Shoah* among Holocaust films, in which Spielberg’s “Hollywoodization” of the Holocaust is regularly excoriated for sentimentality and lapses into cliché, surprisingly few scholars have attempted to parse the specific “American” lexicon from and through which Spielberg fashions his epic. Hansen’s essay “*Schindler’s List* Is Not *Shoah*” is a distinct exception, approaching the film not as a failed attempt to make a European art house picture, but as a venture framed in every sense by the conventions and paradigms of a specific American tradition, that of the classical Hollywood cinema. Hansen rightly notes that *Schindler’s List* does not try and fail to conform to the exacting aesthetic strictures of “the nonrepresentational, singular and hermetic *écriture* to be found in works of high modernism”: rather than trying to develop a unique filmic idiom, “it relies on familiar tropes and common techniques” to tell its tale of improbable survival.<sup>40</sup> She argues forcefully, not only that *Schindler’s List* is in many ways a more stylistically and intellectually sophisticated and self-aware film than its detractors have allowed, but more importantly that the rhetorical

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<sup>39</sup> J. Hoberman, “Spielberg’s Oskar,” *Village Voice*, 21 December 1993, p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, “*Schindler’s List* Is Not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Popular Memory,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 22 (1996): p. 302.

opposition of the film (and works in the same popular vein) to a notionally purer representational domain marked out by canonical modernist works such as *Shoah* elides the ways in which the practices of Hollywood cinema themselves comprise a form of “popular modernism.” or in Hansen’s own coinage “vernacular modernism.” Such popular modernism, if it does not qualify as “autonomous art” in the Adornian sense, nonetheless incorporates a capacity both to reflect and at least to some extent to reflect *on* the experiences of modernity that conventional accounts of the culture industry would allow it only to reaffirm. For Hansen, *Schindler’s List* may be read as a “screen memory” in the Freudian sense, with all the ellipses and fantastical structures that imply simultaneously masking and working through complex and contradictory American responses to the catastrophes of modernity—including, but not necessarily limited to, the Holocaust—to which narrative cinema both must and cannot bear witness: “The pasts that it may at once cover and traverse cannot be reduced to the singular, just as the Americanization of the Holocaust cannot be explained by fixating exclusively on its ideological functions.”<sup>41</sup>

Taken together, the contributions of Huysen, Hansen, and Alexander point to the way to an immanent critique of the “Americanization of the Holocaust” that both differs from Langer’s original essay and remains closer to his own critical practice than that of most of the subsequent works that took up his theme: grounded, that is, like Langer’s work in the formal practices of Americanization, its specific rhetorics, narrative paradigms, and representational traditions, while, unlike Langer, conceding that these conventions may be legitimate means, if not of directly confronting than of handling the resistant narrative materials of the Holocaust. I have myself argued previously that Spielberg’s knowing invocation and adoption of readily recognizable generic paradigms in *Schindler’s List*—those of the thriller

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<sup>41</sup> Hansen, “*Schindler’s List* Is Not *Shoah*,” p. 311.

of intrigue, the horror film, the caper film, and film noir, among others—may be understood as a means of bridging the immense cognitive gulf between the experiences and understandings of his audience and the horrors of Nazi-occupied Poland: recalling Alexander’s argument that the Holocaust functions as a “bridging metaphor” through which to arrive at normative judgments about state crimes in the contemporary world.<sup>42</sup>

### **Americanization in/for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Two films released within a few months of one another in 2009<sup>43</sup> suggest both that the conventions of an Americanized Holocaust identified by Langer in 1983 are still very much alive and that alongside them there is a space for forms of popular/vernacular modernism that put those conventions on display or “refunction” them, in the Brechtian sense, from within the parameters of the form.

Edward Zwick’s *Defiance* plays in part like a rejoinder to the most frequently voiced criticisms of *Schindler’s List*: making Jews, not Germans—good or otherwise—its heroic protagonists (in fact, there are no German-speaking parts in the film); carefully including a variety of Jewish characters and types, or at least stereotypes (urban and rural, traders and artisans, religious and secular); and emphasizing Jewish self-determination as an achievement alongside physical survival. The film offers a partly fictionalized account of the historical Bielski group of Jewish partisans, led by four brothers who following the massacre of their own family and community eventually provided shelter and refuge for over 1,200 Jewish

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<sup>42</sup> Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 262–267.

<sup>43</sup> *Defiance* was released in January 2009, *Inglourious Basterds* in July, following its premiere at Cannes in May.

fugitives, including families and children, in the Belorussian forest. Although armed, the group's priority is portrayed—in keeping with the historical record—as the preservation of life rather than reprisal or resistance activities against German forces. In fact, the film's principal focus is to establish the legitimacy of specific forms of resistance vis-à-vis others, and to demarcate acts of violence presented as morally justifiable—those motivated by community self-defense—from those that violate a moral order that must be upheld less despite the Nazi terror as precisely *because* of it. In what the script describes as his “mission statement” (delivered astride a white horse!), Tuvia Bielski (played by Daniel Craig), the eldest brother and leader of the Otriad and the film's moral center, asserts with ringing moral clarity, “We are not thieves. Or murderers. We may be hunted like animals but we will not become animals. We have all chosen this—to live free, like human beings, for as long as we can. Each day of freedom is an act of faith. And if we die trying to live, at least we die like human beings.”<sup>44</sup> Tuvia's declaration echoes Zwick's own summary of his film's core themes: “Does one have to become a monster to fight monsters? Does one have to sacrifice his humanity to save humanity?”

Zwick of course never implies that Nazi violence and the acts of armed resistance and retribution undertaken by the Jewish partisans are morally equivalent, but the film more or less unequivocally adopts a classic liberal stance by suggesting that to surrender to the impulse, however comprehensible, to take violent revenge abases the victim/avenger and risks voiding a supervening moral and ethical framework, even, or perhaps especially, when others have already violated or overturned that framework. Architecturally, this position structures the film through the portrayal of the increasingly fractious relationship between

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<sup>44</sup> Clayton Frohman and Edward Zwick, *Defiance*, The Internet Movie Script Database, <https://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Defiance.html>.

Tuvia and his younger brother Zus (Liev Schrieber), who retains his bloodthirsty rage against the German murderers and whose frustration at what he perceives as Tuvia's passivity and moral grandstanding eventually provokes him to abandon the forest camp and join a Soviet partisan brigade. As the brothers' subsequent experiences unfold in parallel throughout *Defiance's* third act, the film's attitude toward Zus' choice is plain: while Tuvia supervises his community—presented, notwithstanding the privations of hiding, sickness, constant fear, and the Belorussian winter, as an organic community rooted in a common purpose—Zus, despite his best efforts, remains an outsider amidst the Soviet forces, depicted as crudely antisemitic, brutally authoritarian, and hypocritical (in professing an equality and comradeship belied by their anti-Jewish prejudice, which is contrasted with the common endeavor of Tuvia's encampment). In a touchstone scene, recalling a similar parallel montage sequence in *Schindler's List*, as the snowbound forest around them is transformed into a fairytale-like wonderland, the wedding of Asael (Jamie Bell), the third Bielski brother, according to traditional ritual, is intercut with a bloody assault by Zus' platoon on a German unit, complete with coup-de-grâce executions administered by the implacable Zus himself.

The question of “the costs of vengeance” is most clearly posed in two scenes that ask Tuvia himself to arbitrate the line dividing vengeance from justice, as well as chart his moral evolution: again binding the Holocaust into an experience of individual growth that Langer considered entirely redundant. In the earlier of these scenes, after the brothers have first escaped to the forest and more or less accidentally founded the nucleus of what will grow into the much larger Jewish refuge, Tuvia undertakes a revenge mission against the local auxiliary police chief responsible for his parents' discovery and murder. Entering their home, he finds the policeman, whom a previous scene has already established as an enthusiastic Jew-killer, eating with the rest of his family—his wife and two adult sons (also policemen). The officer pleads for his life, but in a scene of hallucinatory intensity, chaotic violence, and graphic

bloodshed, Tuvia executes him and his two sons in the name of his murdered parents and plunges out, breathless, haunted, and haggard, into the rain and darkness, leaving the officer's distraught wife, the sole survivor, begging for her own death amidst the charnel house that was her home.

The sequence is clearly intended as an object lesson of the mutually degrading spiral of murderous revenge. However justified Tuvia's grief and rage are, the ugliness and horror of his actions are equally apparent. Shot in grainy, low-light conditions in the claustrophobic setting of the policeman's parlor, the scene recalls the notorious denouement of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*: in both, a killing spree undertaken as a noble crusade against palpable villains and lowlifes climaxes in a litter of corpses, walls and floors running with blood, and a solitary female survivor weeping and pleading with the assailant, and in both, the spectator is uncertainly interpellated, caught between a measure of righteous justification ("These guys deserve what they get") on the one hand and revulsion at the grotesque spectacle of slaughter on the other. The difference, however, is that whereas *Taxi Driver* can be read as a reflexive critique of Hollywood melodramatic conventions, *Defiance* is firmly and largely uncritically located within them. Whereas Scorsese's climactic scene marks Travis Bickle's final descent into psychopathic violence, the episode in *Defiance* occurs relatively early in the narrative and thus marks a first-act turning point, a crisis from which the protagonist can derive moral insight and move away from barbarism. Tuvia's bearing in the scene and his desperate flight into the night afterwards signal his own horror and trauma at his actions, feelings the film encourages its audience to share.<sup>45</sup> That Tuvia acts alone (Zus is privy to the reprisal action, but for no obvious reason, except that this is a stage of the

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<sup>45</sup> In Zwick's original script, Tuvia feels the need to defend his actions to God: "Lord of the universe, forgive me, I have murdered—but they were monsters and did not deserve to live."

hero's journey he must undergo alone, doesn't accompany Tuvia), isolated from community or companions, also signals that the avenger risks annihilating the true self, which can only be realized in social exchange. From this point in the film, as Tuvia abjures a revenge-oriented policy, avoiding reprisal actions against the Germans in favor of building and protecting the forest encampment, he comes increasingly to identify himself as beholden to and bound up with others.

This scene is then echoed and mirrored by a later one in which Tuvia, acting as the audience's surrogate, is a bystander to an act of uncontrolled murderous revenge, which, although he refuses to intercede to prevent it, he now views from an appalled distance. When an Otriad patrol takes prisoner a lone German soldier, as Tuvia and the camp's other leaders assess the intelligence provided by his papers, which inform them that the Germans are imminently mounting a full-scale assault on the camp, rank-and-file Jews, including a number of women, surround the soldier. Disarmed and helpless, gibbering with fear, this representative of the murderers of their families becomes the cathartic object of their grief and rage, as the Jews swiftly move from shouts and jeers to slaps and punches. A schoolteacher and a political activist, symbolic representatives of the forces of culture, urge Tuvia to intercede to stop the violence—a lynching—but he refuses, watching on as the mob beat the soldier to death with their bare hands.

Given the non-participation of any of the film's subjects of identification—the Jews in the mob are all indistinctly individuated supporting characters—and the inclusion of optical point-of-view shots from the German's point of view as curses, spittle, and blows rain down upon him and us (the viewers), the audience here is actively discouraged from sharing in even the ambivalent rewards of bloody vengeance; the mob killing is depicted as unequivocally tragic, a degraded expression, however comprehensible, of overwhelming grief and loss that only adds to the war's overflowing cup of desolation. Without even a passing sense of

satisfying “payback,” there is only despair: in a coda to the scene, Tuvia comes upon his two youngest brothers in the forest; wordlessly, they contemplate the moral abyss to which war and genocide have brought them. Yet although its characters are thus brought face to face with the enormity of the catastrophe in the ways that Langer urges, rather than prompting a judgment of the unsustainability of conventional ethical stances in the face of the Holocaust, *Defiance* continues to endorse a perspective wherein the actions of self-aware moral agents ultimately prevail.

A murderous episode in Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*, a film that gleefully and systematically inverts the parameters of Americanization while compelling its audience to reflect upon them, makes for a striking comparison to the mob-justice scene in *Defiance*. The eponymous “Basterds,” a US commando unit comprised primarily of Jewish GIs operating behind enemy lines in occupied France, self-identified as in “the killin’-Nazis business,” a business they undertake without compunction and with maximum sadistic relish, have captured two German infantrymen, a private and a non-commissioned officer (NCO). When the NCO refuses to divulge the whereabouts of other nearby German units, far from disappointment, the Basterds’ leader, Aldo “the Apache” Raine, responds with enthusiasm—by refusing to co-operate, the German has signed his death warrant at the Basterds’ hands, via their preferred method: beating to death with a baseball bat, a fate he duly suffers at the hands of Sgt. Donnie Donowitz (“the Bear Jew”) in full view onscreen. The other GIs, ranged along the slopes of a wooded bowl like spectators on the bleachers at Fenway Park. or like theatergoers, a comparison Aldo himself makes (“Watchin’ Donny beat Nazis to death is the closest we ever get to goin’ to the movies”), enthusiastically applaud his murder. The Basterds’ unconflicted bloodlust and the blackly comic tenor of the scene could hardly be more antithetical to *Defiance*’s agonies of moral compunction. If Langer is right that such moral, and moralizing, stances typify the Americanized Holocaust, then *Inglourious Basterds*

would seem as un-American as they come. Yet in truth, it's more complicated than this; in fact, Tarantino seems to be interested less in Americanizing the Holocaust than in the valences of Americanization itself.

Tarantino's complex carnivalesque inversion of the conventional moral parameters of the Hollywood combat film, which maps the violence of continental-scale genocide and interpersonal sadism alike onto the proper/object bodies of Jews, Germans ("Nazis"), and US GIs, has attracted extensive commentary.<sup>46</sup> In the present context, it is perhaps worth reiterating that by rendering his righteous Nazi-hating American commandos blood-drenched sadists who torture and murder unarmed and courageous (if antisemitic—the NCO's last words before Donny's baseball bat connects with his head are "Fuck you and your Jew dogs") prisoners, Tarantino is not trivially leveling the moral categories of the "good war," to imply a specious moral equivalence between the Allies and the Nazis. Nor yet, despite the film's abundantly reflexive devices—most obviously the ultra-violent climactic execution-by-movie of Hitler, Goebbels, and the German High Command as they attend a screening of Goebbels' own nationalistic cinematic bloodfest, *Germany's Pride*—is Tarantino's main concern the obvious questions thus posed to his audience concerning their own appetite for violence as spectacle. Rather, what the film's reflexivity, including the Basterds' self-

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<sup>46</sup> In the present context, see most particularly Stella Setka, "Bastardized History: How *Inglourious Basterds* Breaks through American Screen Memory," *Jewish Film & New Media*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2015): pp. **PAGES**; Gary Jenkins, "Whose Revenge is it Anyway? Quentin Tarantino's *Basterds*, Intertextuality, and America's *Inglourious 'War on Terror,'*" *Holocaust Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2015): pp. 236–249. I am also indebted for several points of detail to Cailee Davis, "*Inglourious Basterds*: Rewriting American History" (master's thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2019).

confessed murderous moviegoing-like voyeurism, suggests is the literalization and exegesis of the idea, proposed as we recall by Hansen in relation to *Schindler's List*, of the Holocaust as American “screen memory,” overlaying and obscuring the historical realities of American violence in a frenzy of righteous outrage (Donowitz’s fugue state as he pumps bullets into Hitler’s lifeless body at the climax) at the crimes of others. Half-submerged citations of slavery (the *King Kong* movie-quiz game in the inn), segregation in the Jim Crow South (a rope burn around Aldo’s neck suggesting he has survived a lynching), the Indian Wars (the Basterds’ trademark scalping of German corpses), and circuitously and anachronistically the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (via a reference to Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*) provide a referential framework suggesting that the ultra-violence of the Basterds—and of *Basterds*—may be undertaking a kind of displacement activity in which the “good war,” and at the core of that conflict the transcendent “sacred evil” of the Holocaust, allow for both the cathexis and the avoidance of the originary traumas of the American experience itself.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Stylistically, tonally, and ideologically, *Inglourious Basterds* is very far removed from either the sober, stolid middlebrow dramas discussed by Langer in his 1983 essay, or the pitilessly unflinching forms of realist representation he invokes by his citation of survivor testimony. It

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<sup>47</sup> Scholars of Native American history such as Russell Thornton, Ward Churchill, and Lilian Friedberg have frequently used Holocaust rhetoric. Indeed, in her 2000 essay, “Dare to Compare: Americanizing the Holocaust” [*American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2000): pp. 353–380], Friedberg explicitly uses the phrase “Americanization of the Holocaust” to express her desire that the US acknowledge its genocide of indigenous peoples as a Holocaust in its own right.

does, however, suggest that American popular art possesses creative and imaginative resources for responding in self-aware and critical ways to the undoubted challenges of Holocaust representation that go beyond the safe traditions anatomized by Langer, which, as we have seen, persist into the contemporary period, as evidenced by productions such as *Defiance*. Andreas Huyssen's and Miriam Hansen's analyses of *Holocaust* and *Schindler's List* meanwhile also suggest that Langer may have overlooked the ways in which popular/vernacular modernisms, such as American commercial film and television, less despite their distance from the austere heights of canonical (European) modernism than precisely because of it, can work with and through popular understandings of history in ways that enable an encounter with the Holocaust that is authentic in its own terms, even if those terms map only inexactly onto the standards of "authenticity" that Holocaust guardians have tended to try to enforce.

Langer's essay established that the Americanization of the Holocaust was already well underway in 1983. Amidst the proliferating and evolving "Holocaust cultures" over the subsequent three-and-a-half decades, the ubiquity of the Holocaust as a point of reference in an enormous variety of contexts—serious and trivial—has ensured that the Americanization of the Holocaust remain a continuing and inescapable fact.<sup>48</sup> And the process shows no signs whatsoever of abating: shortly before this essay went to press in early 2020, Amazon debuted the original drama *Hunters*, a lurid Nazi-hunting fiction set in late-1970s New York. The show was manifestly, even obsequiously, influenced by Tarantino in its jubilantly excessive

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<sup>48</sup> See Barry Langford, "Globalising the Holocaust: Fantasies of Annihilation in Contemporary Media Culture," in Axel Bangert, Robert S. C. Gordon, and Libby Saxton, (eds.), *Holocaust Intersections: Genocide and Visual Culture at the New Millennium* (London: Legenda, 2013), pp. 112–131.

onscreen violence, its ubiquitous pop-culture citations and stylistic devices, and in the basic premise of a stop-at-nothing “dirty” group of homicidal Holocaust avengers. At the same time, the period setting and “Fourth Reich” conspiracy narrative invoke such 1970s films as *The Odessa File* (Ronald Neame, 1974), *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1977), and *The Boys from Brazil* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1978). Yet *Hunters*—ostensibly set close to the publication of Langer’s original Americanization essay—also clearly demonstrates how in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Holocaust now runs readily with, rather than against, the American grain, unlike the 1970s films cited above, where the Holocaust was marginal to the main narrative (*Marathon Man*) and/or those who were most implicated by or in it tended to be Europeans, if not survivors or perpetrators themselves (Wiesenthal<sup>49</sup>/Mengele in *The Boys from Brazil*) rather than Americans. Though the band of avengers in *Hunters* is headed by an Auschwitz survivor, it also includes a retinue of non-Jewish comic-book/grindhouse cliché characters, including an ass-kicking Foxy Brown-style African American, a *Saturday Night Fever*-era Travolta type, and a Chinese-American martial-arts expert. Even more than *Inglourious Basterds*, and lacking the subversive edge of Tarantino’s critical take on America’s own genocides, in *Hunters*, “Holocaust consciousness” is an integrally and wholly unselfconsciously American pastime.

*Hunters*, which met with a lukewarm reception, including a great deal of criticism directed at the series’ lurid scenes of (invented) concentration-camp sadism, indicates that even within mainstream entertainment texts, there is a wide variance of complexity and self-awareness in integrating the Holocaust into American pop-cultural vernacular. It may be that a tendency in scholarship on Americanization, starting with Langer, to deplore many of its

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<sup>49</sup> Lightly disguised as “Joseph Lieberman” (Lawrence Olivier) in the film and in Ira Levin’s original novel.

most egregious manifestations has inhibited a more responsive engagement with the unpredictable (and certainly far from universal) capacity of such texts to interrogate history, its representation, and their own part in both, in sometimes surprising, challenging, and complex ways. While *Inglourious Basterds* is far too singular a work to serve as any “model” for future models of the Holocaust’s Americanization, the complex, surprising, and highly self-aware ways in which it reworks that paradigm—and its considerable distance from a work in a superficially similar vein like *Hunters* that actually lacks *Basterds*’ capacity for reflection both outward to the culture and inward to its own processes of historical reconstruction and representation—suggest that there are in fact many valences of Americanization and that these valences ought to be considered by scholars more seriously, more rigorously, and more on their own merits than has all too often been the case.