

"The many cinematic resources available to us were not created equal," observes Mark Gudgel. "Which films we teach and how we use them to enhance and enrich our students' understanding are critical decisions that have a powerful impact on how our students come to understand the Holocaust—or don't."

Mark Gudgel

When the Lights Go Down: Critical Perspectives on Popular Holocaust Classroom Films

When the lights go down in a classroom and student attention shifts towards the screen, what follows can do much to enhance—or convolute—student understanding of the topic at hand. When that topic is the Holocaust, a complex and arguably already often misunderstood event, the choice of film matters that much more. In the ideal setting, with attentive students and the necessary pre-teaching completed, film as a supplement can bring to life what textbooks and lectures cannot. Used ineffectively, however, films about this difficult and grim history can confuse and even traumatize.

A 2015 study I conducted of 420 American teachers nationwide showed that 226 different films were being used in the Holocaust studies classroom. Of these, however, only 12 enjoyed popularity above the rate of 5%, and only four were reportedly used by more than 10% of classroom practitioners.

The tremendous diversity of the films shown in American classrooms was a fascinating discovery. The table below [Table 1] displays the percentage of teachers who used these most common films, in descending order.

These 12 are the only Holocaust films screened by 5% or more of US teachers. The 2015 study also found that, as a topic, Anne Frank was taught via film by some 7.8% of American teachers, but the wide variety of films they used to teach her story prevented any one film from breaking the 5% threshold.

The study participants were teachers who had received some form of training from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), which may in part account for the popularity of three videos the USHMM was instrumental in creating (*One Survivor Remembers*, *I'm Still Here*,

FILM TITLE	% TEACHERS REPORTING USE
<i>Schindler's List</i> (Spielberg, 1993)	25.71
<i>One Survivor Remembers</i> (Antholis, 1995)	16.19
<i>I'm Still Here</i> (Lazin, 2005)	11.19
<i>The Pianist</i> (Polanski, 2002)	10.71
<i>The Boy in the Striped Pajamas</i> (Herman, 2008)	9.29
<i>Defiance</i> (Zwick, 2008)	6.67
<i>The Path to Nazi Genocide</i> (USHMM, n.d.)	5.71
<i>Life Is Beautiful</i> (Benigni, 1997)	5.23
Oprah Winfrey's (2006) interview with Elie Wiesel	5.00
<i>Conspiracy</i> (Pierson, 2001)	5.00
<i>The Last Days</i> (Moll, 1998)	5.00
<i>Escape from Sobibor</i> (Gold, 1987)	5.00

TABLE 1. Most-used films as reported by teachers and percentage of teachers using them.

and *The Path to Nazi Genocide*), as well as the omission of other popular free resources, including the ADL's Echoes & Reflections (1.9%) and the USC Shoah Foundation's digital archive of survivor testimony (2.3%). I suspect that if study participants had been drawn from teachers trained by the ADL or USC Shoah Foundation, those figures would have been substantially greater, because both of these programs offer easily accessible, excellent, historically sound, classroom-friendly resources.

No one is more acutely aware than a classroom teacher that, as the expression goes, what is popular is not always right. That these films are the most used does not mean that they are the best choices, but rather simply the choices teachers have thus far most frequently made. What follows is a critical analysis of the eight most widely used films as

reported by teachers, and an accompanying overview of key information, a brief synopsis of each film, and an attempt to synthesize data and personal experience to provide practical ideas and recommendations about how, and whether, to use these films in today's classrooms.

OVERVIEW

Film title: *Schindler's List*

Running time: 3 hr 15 min

Genre: Historical drama

Rating: R (graphic violence, sexuality, nudity, strong language)

Grade for historical accuracy: C

SYNOPSIS

The story, based on true events, revolves around the life of Oskar Schindler, a Nazi who opened a factory near the Płaszów concentration camp to take advantage of Jewish slave labor during the Second World War. Over the course of the story, the protagonist, Schindler, opens his heart to his Jewish workers and uses his vast resources and influence to save, ultimately, over 1,000 Jews from almost certain death before fleeing prosecution at the end of the war.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Schindler's List enjoys the highest popularity of any film among Holocaust educators in the United States by a wide margin, with more than one in every four teachers reporting using it in his or her classroom. Of the total number of survey respondents who reported using *Schindler's List*, just under 58% used the film from start to finish, while slightly more than 42% indicated that they in some way cut or abbreviated the film.

However, most teachers interviewed, including those who used it, expressed concerns with the film. There are numerous sexual scenes and scenes depicting nudity, including, but not limited to, necropornographic material, which make the film unsuitable in classroom environments. Furthermore, the film is quite lengthy, and most educators in my study complained of having too little time to teach about the Holocaust even without showing films. Said one California teacher when asked about *Schindler's List*, "Showing that movie would take 4.5% of a 180-day year."

Perhaps most troubling, however, are the historical inaccuracies of the film. Thomas Keneally's book (1982), the basis for the screenplay and subsequently the film, is classified as "Fiction/Judaica" on the back cover, while the front cover refers to it as "a novel." While numerous historically inaccurate events are portrayed in the film, including a scene of Schindler arriving personally at Auschwitz to rescue "his" Jews, it is perhaps the very premise of the film, the notion that Oskar Schindler created a list of people to save, that is its greatest historical flaw. "In

reality, Oskar Schindler had absolutely nothing to do with the creation of his famous transport list," according to the preeminent Schindler historian of our time (Crowe, 2004, p. 361). Moreover, Schindler's wife, Emilie—who was all but written out of the movie when, in fact, she was working alongside her now-famous husband the vast majority of the time—portrays things quite differently from Spielberg's version. In her memoir, *Where Light and Shadow Meet* (1996), she quotes her former husband from a dinner discussion about the making of such a list:

Another problem that worries me is the list of people we are to submit to him [Camp Commandant Amon Göth]. I don't really know the men, their families; I barely know the names of the few who come to our office when something is needed. (p. 63)

The appeal of a film that not only is engaging and emotionally compelling but also covers many of the topics that teachers attempt to include in their respective units (e.g., ghettos, concentration camps, death camps, rescue) is understandable. However, the drawbacks of presenting *Schindler's List* to young people are numerous and significant. Teachers are advised to proceed with great caution and to consider their students, their environment, and their rationale for teaching about the Holocaust before including any film, especially this one.

OVERVIEW

Film title: *One Survivor Remembers*

Running time: 39 min

Genre: Documentary

Rating: Not rated

Grade for historical accuracy: A

SYNOPSIS

This Oscar-winning documentary is largely composed of interviews with survivor Gerda Weissmann Klein and, to a somewhat lesser extent, her husband, Kurt. Their on-screen interviews are supplemented by narration and still images that ultimately tell the story of Gerda from her life before the war to the time she was liberated by American GIs, her future husband, Kurt, among them.

IN THE CLASSROOM

The film is part of a kit designed expressly for classroom use. A cinematic companion to Gerda Weissmann Klein's memoir, *All but My Life*, the film was produced by HBO and the USHMM.

Arguably, if not paired with the book, the film requires more context than it provides in its short running time. That said, it appeals to educators for a whole raft of reasons, from its brevity, historical accuracy, and lack of cost to the

level of engagement by students who watch it. Another selling point for teachers is that it is accessible to students from grade 6. The film deals with many topics often covered in units, including concentration camps, death marches, and liberation, and introduces students to two individuals with whom they can connect and begin to sympathize. The kit, which includes the documentary film, Klein's memoir, a teaching guide, and more, is available for free to teachers through Teaching Tolerance, an initiative of the Southern Poverty Law Center, at www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/film-kits/one-survivor-remembers.

Though survivor testimony in general is based largely, if not entirely, on the memory of an individual who is likely not a historian, it holds tremendous value in helping students to connect and reflect on the experiences of the Jews during the Holocaust.

OVERVIEW

Film title: *I'm Still Here*

Running time: 48 min

Genre: Documentary

Rating: Not rated

Grade for historical accuracy: A

SYNOPSIS

I'm Still Here is the companion to Alexandra Zapruder's *Salvaged Pages* (2002), an edited collection of diary entries from young people who endured the Holocaust. It tells partial, episodic stories of European Jewish youth. The narrators include such famous actors as Zach Braff and Kate Hudson, and the soundtrack was composed by the musician Moby.

IN THE CLASSROOM

A desirably short film, students have expressed a preference for this over other options at least in part due to the efforts of producer MTV and the combination of famous actors, catchy music, and well-done cinematography. The film is engaging and powerful from start to finish and is cool, a fact that makes it appeal to students but may prompt slight hesitation in some classroom practitioners, given that within the first few minutes of the narration, the speaker uses a curse word.

Nevertheless, the film inspires high levels of student engagement and couples historical accuracy with a message that is anything but cool: that the Holocaust was a horrific event that claimed the lives of millions, including children, to whom the film does a terrific job of helping students relate. *I'm Still Here* is an undeniably useful teaching tool and a pedagogically sound selection, especially for those teachers who already use Zapruder's *Salvaged Pages*.

OVERVIEW

Film title: *The Pianist*

Running time: 2 hr 30 min

Genre: Historical drama

Rating: R (violence, strong language)

Grade for historical accuracy: B+

SYNOPSIS

Based on the memoir of Holocaust survivor Władysław Szpilman, the movie is set inside the Warsaw Ghetto, where Szpilman, a pianist, is separated from his family and avoids deportation by hiding until, at last, he is liberated by the Russians.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Like *Schindler's List*, one problem with *The Pianist* is that it is a feature-length film, and as such cannot possibly be shown in one class period, even with block scheduling. It makes good sense to use this film when pairing it with Szpilman's memoir of the same name, though on its own the story portrays the Holocaust through the limited lens of the Warsaw Ghetto and thus fails to help students understand what took place outside of that extremely important but limited setting. In short, the film is more set during the era of the Holocaust than it is about the Holocaust, and will require of any teacher who uses it a serious effort to fill in the many blanks not covered.

There are disturbing scenes of violence and cruelty, but also moments of levity and goodness that make the feature-length film something slightly more than tragic. The story of the German officer who, toward the end of the war, helps Szpilman, for instance, properly complicates students' narratives about those who perpetrated the Holocaust. There are abundant curricula, including study guides and lesson plans, that have been written around this widely used film and are easily found online. Though lengthy and somewhat narrow in its focus, the film is well done and engaging and contains only minor dramaturgical liberties, with no egregious historical inaccuracies to confuse meaning.

OVERVIEW

Film title: *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

Running time: 1 hr 34 min

Genre: Fiction, fantasy

Rating: PG-13

Grade for historical accuracy: F

SYNOPSIS

A German officer takes the job of commandant of a death camp, which is clearly modeled after Auschwitz-Birkenau, and moves his family into housing on the outskirts. There, his son, Bruno, befriends a little Jewish boy, Shmuel, who

is interned on the other side of the electrified fence and wears a prisoner's uniform. Bruno digs his way under the fence to play with Shmuel, and the two boys, along with hundreds of others, ultimately die in a gas chamber.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Much has been written in response to the popularity of this film, not least by academics and practitioners who are outraged by its absurdities and their implications. The late David Cesarani (2008) wrote that the film “beggars belief” (n.p.), while Alan Marcus (2017) of the University of Connecticut pointed out that the Jews portrayed in the film lack complexity and voice, making the film a “dangerous” choice for educators. Both agree that the very story is both implausible and misleading. As Marcus (2017) put it, “There are numerous flaws that make *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* a good fit for entertainment and a failure for education” (p. 170).

Furthermore, the film raises questions that need not be asked: If Bruno can dig his way into the camp, then why did all Jews not dig their way out? Did the Germans really not know what was happening to the Jews? Did Zyklon B lead to a quick and painless death? Could imprisoned Jewish children have played with non-Jewish children, visiting on both sides of a fence? Chasing such proverbial rabbits calls into question some of what is known about the Holocaust, and is at best a waste of time, at worst a nudge in the direction of Holocaust denial.

Further, in addition to the many serious historical inaccuracies and incorrect implications, what I find especially disturbing about the film are the emotions elicited by the events portrayed toward the end. While an even reasonably astute student can easily infer that tens or even hundreds of thousands of people have been arriving and being murdered at “Out With” (Auschwitz) non-stop since long before the movie began, the moment at which the story is designed to pull strongest at the heartstrings, especially of students who are understandably most able to connect with and care about characters close to their own age, is not the death of any of those seemingly countless people, but rather when the young German boy, Bruno, mistaken for a Jewish child, is murdered in the gas chamber. In fact, the scene elicits a strong sense of pity for the commandant and his wife, who are overcome with grief when they discover the fate of their son. The commandant is portrayed less as a murderous SS functionary and more as a doting father, ignoring the fact that he is largely responsible for the death that surrounds him, including Bruno's. His wife is similarly portrayed as a good mother, oblivious to the murder of the Jews around her, including her own household help.

The movie has no value as a teaching tool, save perhaps for upper-level film students who already possess a deep

understanding of the Holocaust and might choose to analyze it critically. It offers nothing that other films cannot provide without distorting history and denying the facts.

OVERVIEW

Film title: *Defiance*

Running time: 2 hr 17 min

Genre: Historical drama

Rating: R (violence, language)

Grade for historical accuracy: C+

SYNOPSIS

Set in 1941 in Belorussia, the film focuses on the Bielski brothers and the group of partisans that they lead. Together, the partisans engage in attacking occupying German forces and protecting the Jews who have successfully escaped the Nazis' murderous grasp.

IN THE CLASSROOM

This film has enjoyed both the enthusiastic support of organizations such as the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation and the scrutiny and disdain of the Polish Government (Leigh, 2009). While based on the historically true story of the Bielski Otriad, the omission of the crimes of which the Bielskis have been accused, coupled with an exceedingly narrow focal point, paints a picture that can at best be described as incomplete.

The laser focus on partisan resistance, though an important and worthy avenue of study, is far from representative of the Holocaust as a whole. Most Jews were not partisans, and most Jewish resistance was not armed. For this reason, *Defiance* is perhaps best used only in small clips, or as part of a much longer unit on the Holocaust than most educators have the luxury of teaching. To show this film from start to finish as a substantial part or the entirety of a unit on the Holocaust would be, as the USHMM (2017) terms it, to “romanticize history” by failing to “strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust” (n. p.).

OVERVIEW

Film title: *The Path to Nazi Genocide*

Running time: 38 min

Genre: Documentary

Rating: Not rated

Grade for historical accuracy: A+

SYNOPSIS

Divided into four chapters, this short film traces a historical route from the turn of the 20th century to the conclusion of the Second World War, focusing on antisemitism, the Nazi rise to power, and ultimately the Holocaust, its causes, and its aftermath.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Available as a free download and also widely circulated on DVD at USHMM events, *The Path to Nazi Genocide* is a teaching tool that helps most students comprehend the rapid transition of events from the peace, prosperity, and growth of 1900 through the First World War, the Great Depression, the rise of the NSDAP, the Second World War, and the Holocaust.

Engaging yet accessible, suitable for students in middle school and up, the film provides necessary historical context for understanding the events that quickly set off what we call the Holocaust. This makes it especially well suited for teachers who may lack such background, such as English teachers (like this author) who are tasked only with teaching a novel, yet need to contextualize that text for their students.

In a few places, graphic images may be difficult to watch or even inappropriate for some, most notably perhaps the film clip of a 1941 Einsatzgruppen action in Liepaja, Latvia. Prescreening is always a must, especially for teachers in private or religious schools and with younger audiences.

OVERVIEW

Film title: *Life Is Beautiful*

Running time: 1 hr 56 min

Genre: Fiction

Rating: PG-13

Grade for historical accuracy: D-

SYNOPSIS

The movie is presented in two distinct parts. In the first, a charming if arguably silly man woos a lover, who eventually concedes to marry him. This part is a comedy, thanks in part to the acting and direction of Roberto Benigni, who plays Guido, the main character. He is persecuted for being Jewish, and the persecution extends to his wife, but nothing is taken too seriously. They have a child, time passes, and the father and his young son of seven or eight, but not his non-Jewish wife, are deported to a death camp.

The second part details the life of the father and son in the camp, where the father goes to heroic (and absurdly impossible) lengths to successfully convince the son that their deplorable conditions are merely part of a game they are playing. A contest of hide-and-seek and other shenanigans often elicit laughter from students and allow them to easily forget the very real and somber history that should have contextualized this film. Ultimately, the man dies and his son survives.

IN THE CLASSROOM

As Lawrence Langer (2006) bluntly responds to the film, "Life is not beautiful" (p. 30). Of course, one can easily argue that point, especially in times of peace, yet his allusion to the movie and his sardonic invocation are more

than warranted here. The Holocaust was many things, but it most certainly was not beautiful. As Langer goes on to say of director Benigni's best-known film:

The film's allure is based on a willing suspension of disbelief: that in Benigni's version of a death camp milieu, it really was possible for a victim to preserve enough physical and spiritual mastery to "outwit" singlehandedly the murderous intentions of the Germans. Benigni seems unconcerned that by infusing the gloom of his Holocaust scenario with the comic ingenuity of his character he allows Guido's antics to profane the solemn impact of the surroundings. . . . Benigni has thus shaped a legend of survival to counter the darker truth of how the Holocaust experience threatened to erode the reigning image in Western civilization of an inviolable self. (pp. 30-31)

Life Is Beautiful, not unlike *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, requires that the viewer completely and utterly separate from reality in order to engage with the story and accept what Cesarani (2008) described as "a travesty of the facts" (n.p.). The film ultimately succeeds in portraying the Holocaust and the plight of camp inmates as something far less grim and murderous than it really was. The father dies in the end, gunned down in an alleyway off-screen, yet his small son, improbably, lives. All this takes place within a camp in which foolish guards are easily duped and the freedom to play hide-and-seek is somehow part of this alternative reality.

While the film is engaging (and of an altogether higher literary and dramatic standard than *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*), there are other films that engage without deliberately and grossly distorting the realities of the Holocaust. I recall vividly the great offense that a survivor friend took upon seeing this particular film, and would thus strongly encourage fellow teachers to avoid screening it.

The film may also be considered uplifting, given the humor and the attempt at a happy ending. Yet while the Holocaust gives educators countless opportunities for reflection and growth in the classroom, the opportunity to uplift is not rightfully among them. There is no happy ending to the Holocaust. We are not to leave its study feeling uplifted, but rather enlightened, enraged, and perhaps empowered with the knowledge that what happened was preventable, and that what is still occurring in the world around us is equally so.

CONCLUSION

While administrators and school boards in some districts across the US have unscrupulously wrested the right to select materials, including film, from the purview of classroom practitioners, in the main, these titles represent

choices made by teachers with well-thought-out learning objectives and long-term goals in mind. Nevertheless, several are seriously flawed. Films about the Holocaust must be meticulously examined for historical authenticity and strict adherence to the reality of the Jewish experience. If they fail these tests, they should not be shown.

While some of these films were designed to be educational and geared towards a student audience, others were created for their entertainment value with the singular goal of profit. The latter still possess the potential to be efficaciously utilized in a classroom setting by a thoughtful and skillful practitioner, but their use places a far greater burden on the teacher to be diligent in her examination of the facts and situations presented than do the former.

The Holocaust has become widely taught in American secondary education, and film is an integral, possibly even necessary, supplement to that study. A close examination of the films most in use today suggests the imperative that we be deliberate, thoughtful, and cautious about how we select and use film in the classroom. The many cinematic resources available to us were not created equal. Which films we teach and how we use them to enhance and enrich our students' understanding are critical decisions that have a powerful impact on how our students come to understand the Holocaust—or don't.

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