Film Noir in Schindler’s List

Alain Silver, in the introduction to his Film Noir Reader, addresses the imbroglio over defining film noir and the subsequent phenomenon of critical approaches, by quoting Barry Gifford, author of the informal survey The Devil Thumbs A Ride, who deems all such endeavors to be "academic flapdoodle." Silver decries such criticism by referring to Gifford as a “pop critic” who “assert[s] that it is formalist mumbo-jumbo to "detect" alienation lurking beyond the frame line in a vista of the dark, wet asphalt of a city street or obsession in a point-of-view shot that picks a woman's face out of the crowd” and argues instead that “to resist such readings is to deny the full potential of figurative meaning not merely in film noir but in all motion pictures.” Fortunately for our purposes here, Silver further defends the pleasing search for meaning in film noir by admitting that “none of the various elements of visual style—angle, composition, lighting, montage, depth, movement, etc.—which inform any given shot or sequence are unique of film noir. What sets the noir cycle apart is the unity of its formal vision.” There is, however, the fear of "oversimplifying things in calling film noir [merely] oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel," as do the French critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton in their 1955 book Panorama du film noir américain 1941–1953 (A Panorama of American Film Noir), the original and seminal extended treatment of the subject. As Borde and Chaumeton suggest, “the field of noir is very diverse and any generalization about it risks veering into oversimplification” (Cochran). The goal of this essay is to seek out selected elements of film noir in an unusual place: Steven Spielberg’s film Schindler’s List (1993). Emphasis will be placed on cinematography and representations of masculinity. References to Citizen Kane (1941) and Casablanca
(1942) will be made for comparison purposes, as they are both exemplars of film noir, as well as to *Crossfire* (1947) and *Shoah* (1985). Connections to film noir and cinematic representations of the Holocaust will be made in keeping with the requirements of the course in an effort to establish a meaningful relationship.

Critical resistance to Spielberg’s film requires mention to develop the argument that film noir and the Holocaust are connected. Certainly, it should be granted that *Schindler’s List* is not a history of the Holocaust—no filmic representation could encapsulate that atrocity’s entirety—but clearly a cinematic version of a single text, Thomas Keneally’s work of the same name, adapted by screenwriter Steven Zaillian. Claude Lanzmann, director of the epic documentary *Shoah* (1985), however, has made it clear that representations of the Holocaust are inappropriate, if not sacrilegious. Whereas Lanzmann’s film “strictly refuses any direct representation of the past, whether by means of fictional reenactment or archival footage,” Spielberg’s film dares to desacralize the taboo on imagining the Holocaust (*Schindler’s List is Not Shoah*). In fact, Lanzmann staged one of the most moving scenes in all of the nine hours of *Shoah* in capturing the remembrances of Abraham Bomba, the Barber of Treblinka. Other luminaries find fault as well: Susan Sontag warns that the simulation of Holocaust atrocity may verge on the pornographic, "making the audience passive, reinforcing witless stereotypes, creating meretricious fascination" (Greenberg). Sontag has a point. Much has been made of the exploitative nature of the shower scene, in which primarily attractive women strip. The gas chamber door’s portal window creates a voyeuristic stance the audience is helpless to resist. Clearly, Spielberg could have eliminated this shot and avoided the subsequent criticism of “providing sexual distraction to the viewers…more appropriate to a soft-porn
sadomasochistic film” (Picart). Nevertheless, it is a shot in keeping with film noir of the Hitchcockian variety. Screenwriter David Mamet thought representing the Holocaust “especially pernicious in the case of Schindler's List” because, “as a Jew, [he doesn’t] like the fact of the Jewish people being exploited, whether in the name of good or ill; attempts to picture Jews going to the gas chambers are exploitative, even if they're done for the best reasons in the world…It's in the Talmud that you're not supposed to say anything when someone is in mourning. What's there to say? (The Salon Interview).

Nevertheless, Spielberg’s effort is laudatory. Dr. Harvey Greenberg’s eloquent review believes that Schindler's List “is a painful triumph, accomplished unabashedly in the rhetoric of classical narrative cinema [emphasis mine]. It privileges one of the earliest functions of the photographic image—memorializing the dead against the erosions of memory…Spielberg has undertaken to illuminate the Jews' dreadful passage at the crucial moment of history when their surviving remnant is dying out (Greenberg). In other words, cinema’s primary function in to capture images for the purpose of memory. If for no other reason, Shindler’s List stands as a testament to an event in danger of being forgotten. Because film was originally black and white, the public’s collective unconscious remembers in black and white. Spielberg’s decision to film in black and white is connected to cinema’s past itself, thus placing Schindler’s List in a deeper vault of reception, and like film noir, disturbs in an oneiric manner. Its classic narrative structure and technique do not impede its devastating effect; it enhances it. Finally, Jean-Luc Godard, in discussing the recent release on DVD of his four and one-half hour experimental series Histoire du Cinema, decries the “fatal nexus of money, cinema, and history-for-sale” and sums up this condition in one word: Spielberg” (Williams). But
Godard, whose *Histoire* contains images of photos of the Holocaust, elsewhere explains his own formulae thus: “What is great in not the image but the emotion which it provokes” (Williams). If that is the case, then public reaction to Spielberg’s many films may make him the greatest filmmaker in history. Additionally, if it’s true, as Mamet says in the same Salon interview, that “film noir is much closer to tragedy than light thriller,” then Spielberg’s occasional employment of its techniques is appropriate to the Holocaust in representation.

The case that *Schindler’s List* contains and benefits from nourish technique, not in spite of but because of its lurid reputation, may now be approached. Film noir is a cinematic term—attributed to French film critic Nino Frank in 1946—used primarily to describe stylish Hollywood crime dramas, frequently based on the Depression-era hard-boiled crime novels of Dashiell Hammett and, later, Raymond Chandler, among others, of the early forties to the late fifties that emphasize moral ambiguity and sexual deviance, two characteristics readily seen in *Schindler’s List* (although exclusively in the two central male characters, Schindler and Goethe). The cinematic look of film noir is low-key lighting in black-and-white that may have roots in German Expressionism. Thus, the hard-boiled stories of pre-WWII American novels and pre-WWII German films combine, though the connection is frankly incidental, to create what became known as film noir. Cinema historians and critics defined the canon of film noir in retrospect; many of those involved in the making of the classic noirs later professed to be unaware of having created a distinctive type of film. Edward Dmytryk, director of the film noir *Odd Man Out* (1947), offers both a pragmatic and aesthetic explanation for what became known as film noir and demonstrates that Jewish themes were present early on:
Crossfire (1947) was a story about anti-Semitism. We didn't know while we were making it whether anybody would go to see such a picture, so number one, we made it a mystery story to sugar-coat the message we were presenting. It worked beautifully. But we wanted to make it cheaply in order to protect RKO's inclination to make these kinds of "prestige" ("message") pictures… We had to have a very quick schedule… I… shot it in 20 days and everything went smoothly. We had used these techniques before, but only spasmodically. What's film noir? You use shadows, chiaroscuro, hot light here, no light there. It takes half the time to light… Of course, we were going for a mood as well. (“Edward Dmytryk, Odd Man Out”).

Characteristics of film noir are expansive, allowing for near endless permutations, and while many do not apply to Shindler’s List, a detailed listing suggests that most do. The tone and subject matter contain themes of melancholia, alienation, bleakness, disillusionment, disenchantment, pessimism, ambiguity, moral corruption, evil, guilt, desperation, paranoia, fatalism, moral transgression, a gloomy, pessimistic worldview, Freudian psychology, and existential sensibilities. The cinematic look contains low-key (or single-source) lighting, long, sharply-defined shadows, frames bathed in inky blackness, tilted camera angles, claustrophobic compositions, an aesthetic of nocturnal, subterranean unreality, deep-focus or depth of field camera work, disorienting visual schemes, jarring editing or juxtaposition of elements, ominous shadows, skewed camera angles, circling cigarette smoke, and unbalanced or moody compositions. Interiors often include Venetian-blinded windows through which light creeps into dark, claustrophobic
spaces. Exteriors are often urban night scenes with deep shadows, wet asphalt, dark alleyways, rain-slicked streets, and flashing neon lights. If the “dark film” entered its heyday during and shortly after WWII, the connections between film noir and the Holocaust become apparent. Sickening photographic evidence of the Holocaust certainly contributed to the “post-war malaise” associated with film noir, and filmmakers may have subconsciously recreated the look of these images. Additionally, whereas the post-war American male may have suffered from a sense of “obliteration made only more intractable by his futile attempts to escape,” the out-of-control moral hysteria of the Nazi regime may believably be construed as the condition’s cause (What Is This Thing Called Film Noir, Anyway?). Greenberg observes of Schindler’s List that “The absence of color enhances the melancholic impression of a vanished past; and contrives to suffuse the film with ineffable intimations of the mythic. Noir chiaroscuro is used sparingly, thus to greater effect, at the nightclub where Schindler ingratiates himself with SS bigshots and during a murderous pursuit through the Krakow sewers.” Schindler’s introduction is a fictional departure from Keneally’s text, and a prime example of Spielberg’s decision to incorporate the tenets of film noir for its cinematic effect. This is an important observation because Spielberg otherwise maintains a fairly scrupulous attention to historical fact as reported by Keneally (Novels Into Film 396). As in Casablanca, the viewer in Schindler’s List is drawn by a traveling camera into a music-filled café, where Nazi officers, elegantly dressed women, and staff fill the space. At this point, Schindler (Leem Neesan) has remained a mystery, as has Rick (Humphrey Bogart). When both are ultimately revealed, it is by movie star low-key lighting. Schindler, however, is highly sexualized; his dressing sequence is clearly fetishistic. His reveal is in extreme key light,
his face seductive, vulpine. The camera travels slowly, lingeringly, left to right, capturing a very masculine face lit more in the style of Greta Garbo than seems necessary. His left hand is raised, partially concealing his face, a lit cigarette held elegantly and, perhaps significantly, straight up, producing a line of thin smoke. A quick, sly smile appears and vanishes as he makes eye contact with a languorously drunken woman seated at another table. His eyes do not stay on her for long. They come to rest on her companions, German officers with high ranking insignia. The reverse shot back to Schindler is particularly striking: his mouth has fallen ever-so-slightly open, as if in awe of the officers. Arousal is apparent. Deviant arousal. Noirish arousal. In this scene, the femme fatale is the irresistible allure of the Nazi’s power. Additionally, both Rick and Schindler are associated with a detached attitude regarding the cruelty of the world—in this case, the Nazis and the situation they’ve created—a characteristic of noir leading men. Rick will “stick his neck out for nobody,” and Schindler, at this point, is an equally amoral capitalist. Similarly, Oscar Schindler, as depicted, bares resemblance to another noir icon: Charles Foster Kane. Kane (Orson Welles) and Schindler are both associated with the excesses of capitalism; but while Kane begins as a liberal proponent of “the people” and collapses into hedonism, Schindler’s arc is reversed: he begins as a war profiteer by employing slave labor but evolves into a conscientious savior of over 1,000 lives.

Few films, if any, have been so scrutinized as *Citizen Kane* (photographed by Greg Toland, who also shot *Grapes of Wrath*, one of three films listed by Spielberg as having cinematic influence on *Shindler’s List*.) Nary a frame has escaped intense surveillance. In the modern era, *Shindler’s List* has taken on the mantle of minute
inquiry, barely touched upon here. Elements of film noir that do not apply to *Schindler’s List* are readily admitted. Helen Hirsch, for example, ostensibly the most important female character, cannot be conceived of as a femme fatale, as she has no agency. She is a victim who functions as forbidden fruit, an object of Goethe’s suppressed erotic desire of the supposedly irresistibly desirable Jewess. Goethe is not suffering from “Rosie the Riveter syndrome.” His status as alpha male is not under assault, at least not by Jewish women. Unlike the Spider Woman, Helen has no independence, strength, or ruthless desire. At most, we might note that Helen does, however, form a triangle with Goethe and Schindler, a noir characteristic of the femme fatale. Regarding film noir’s overt masculinity under assault by the rise of women in authority, a better example may be found in the scene where a Jewish female architect loudly expresses her disapproval with the flawed progress of a concentration camp building, only to be summarily shot by Goethe on the spot.

The real question, as suggested by David Bordwell in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, is neo-formalist: if film noir is heavily reliant on visual style, how does that affect meaning? The answer here is that very nearly all of the characteristics of film noir—its dark ambience in technique as well as in character development in particular—are applicable to representations of the ultimate expression of inhumanity: the Holocaust. While Bordwell argues that film noir is merely an invention of critical commentators, historical evidence suggests that WWII and its subsequent horrors is the real inventor.
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