

The Holocaust, Existential Reality, and Urban Angst *The Pawnbroker* (1964)

“I do not believe in God, or art, or science, or newspapers, or politics, or philosophy.”

Production Information

Directed by Sidney Lumet. Music by Quincy Jones. Based on 1961 novel by Edward Lewis Wallant. Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), Jesus Ortiz (Jamie Sanchez), Marilyn Birchfield (Geraldine Fitzgerald).

Film History

First film about the Holocaust. Not a “docudrama” but a film that captures the raw, unhealed wound of the results of utterly profound sorrow and evil. Story departments in Hollywood reading novels about Holocaust but not wanting to “take the chance.” *Exodus* (1960) on establishing state of Israel, heroic and hopeful. Downplayed Jewish connection and stressed universal values. Modest box office. *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) courtroom drama (originally made for TV) focused on importance of Americans bringing evildoers to justice had documentary footage of concentration camps. Lost at box office. *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959) touched on the war but tiptoed around the Holocaust. But hints of interest in “Jewish cinema.” Pushed by Roger Lewis and independent producer and Rod Steiger who was main character.

Difficult to get funding. Stop and go with producers arguing with screenwriters about how Jewish to make characters—producers not want to stress Jewish nature of Holocaust. Film does allow for the Jewishness of the character. Power in the story comes not from universal suffering but of *particular* suffering. This threatens American tendency to blur who does what to whom; letting individuals “off the hook” (“it wasn’t just the Nazis, *anyone* could do that”). “Jews are not metaphors,” argues novelist Cynthia Ozick, meaning that the Holocaust shouldn’t lead away from itself. Film focusing on traumatized Jewish victim of concentration camp.

Rare existence of “serious” films that deal with difficult subjects coming from Hollywood. Abrasive, unpleasant, angry, self-hating. Steiger recalled, “There may be more money to be made in a musical comedy,” he told the press, “but at least I feel I’ve done something worthwhile when I complete a film like this.” An other producer, “because of the years I spent peddling millions of miles of horseshit on film and hating about 99% of it . . . and then having all the smart guys tell that this one wasn’t commercial, would never go, etc.” Rejection of things that were “depressing.” But minority of filmmakers as artists and social critics committed to creating provocative and creative expressions that touch people on a different level.

Experimental images—cut ins and flash blacks. Breaking of force and predictability of narrative. Playing with power of memory. Innovative in using stage sets rather than documentary footage to indicate atrocities.

Rejection by Hollywood: Rod Steiger lost the Oscar to Lee Marvin (for *Cat Ballou*) and rest went to *The Sound of Music* (which could be thought of as the “right” Holocaust movie for the time). Quincy Jones, who scored the picture explained, "Hollywood has a funny sort of prejudice toward films that come out of the East and since *The Pawnbroker* was really an East coast production, the industry resisted everything about it."

Controversy over nudity in the film. Initially film rejected by PCA as "unacceptably sex suggestive and lustful." Producers knew of weakening of PCA with retirement of Breen in 1954. Geoffrey Shurlock thought real human behavior could be depicted. Controversy could provide advertising and promote film. Decided to appeal to MPAA, many independent filmmakers wanted suits to through off censorship and expand their freedom. MPAA grants an “exception” if reduced time of nudity, which was minimally done. Press hailed victory against censorship. The Catholic Legion of Decency tabbed *The Pawnbroker* "C" (for "Condemned") because "that a condemnation is necessary in order to put a very definite halt to the effort by producers to introduce nudity into American films." The times had changed and *The Pawnbroker* became the first "C" picture to play St. Paul, Minnesota, a strongly Catholic city. *Variety* correctly predicted "this may mark a letting down of the bars here for such films."

Opened to only big cities, earned \$3 million. Then nudity “fixed” and re-opened to 5 -10 thousand more bookings in smaller towns

Social History

Significance of Sol being a German Jew. Secularly educated, assimilated Jews in Germany. Fought in World War I. Thought of themselves as citizens, not like “other” Jews in Poland who stayed in own villages following Jewish law. Double assault—their own people, the Germans, are murdering them.

Immediately after World War II and the liberation of the death camps in spring of 1945, Americans did not want to hear about what happened to the Jews. Mention was also not made in Jewish publications, especially those read by non-Jews. Long period of silence until the late 1950s early 1960s. Why?

For Jews, “survivor guilt.” Being adverse to Jewish survivors—continual reminders of fundamental failure of civilization. Avoidance of pain—as when people ignore friends who are fatally ill or who pretend they are not ill. Don’t stress victimhood. Reminder of the end result of anti-Semitism.

Difficulty of switching gears from the universal, census building of war years. Hard to accept that specific groups were targeted, especially groups that Americans had history of not accepting anyway—Jews, gays, Jehovah Witnesses.

Studio heads not wanting anything to look Jewish. Their traditional desire for assimilation for “vanishing” continuing even after Hitler almost succeeded in getting Jews to “vanish.”

But film was popular, why?

Early sixties as finally beginning to recognize the Holocaust. In 1959 publication of popular history *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William Shirer. In 1960 and 1961 serialized in *Readers' Digest* with circulation of 12 million. Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* published in 1961. Important memories of Holocaust survivors Elie Wiesel in *Night* (English translation 1960) and Victor Frankel in *Man in Search of Meaning* (English translation 1963) The trial in Israel of Adolf Eichmann and his hanging in May 1962 were major stories. Highly publicized because as Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion said "We want the nations of the world to know."

McCarthyism was over. Rise of importance of individual identity over bland assimilation. Criticism of suburban similarity and increasing preference for new and "different." Exploration of other's cultural heritage as "novelty." Jewish identity is part of that interesting difference.

Focus on the cities as grimy, criminal, and secretive. Potentially violent underclass. Connection between brutality of Nazis and the social/economic situation that creates ghettos.

Religious History

German Jews as either secular, socialists, or reformed. Thinking of themselves as not different religiously.

Period of reflection on Jewish – Christian relations and the meaning of faith and God in the modern world.

Vatican II and Jews—statement *Nostra Aetate* (40 yrs ago October 28, 1965)

"True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ. Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone."

What is the meaning of the Holocaust for Judaism and Christianity? Where was God? Richard Rubenstein in *After Auschwitz* (1966) concludes that traditional notion of God as

a loving, caring protector of the Jewish people, was in the light of the catastrophe, no longer tenable.

Larger question of: "Where is God in the modern world?" Development of Nietzsche's idea of the "death of God"—the incompatibility of God and the supernatural with the modern world. Simon de Beauvoir: "It was easier for me to think about the world without a creator than of a creator loaded with all the contradictions of the world." Various more positive responses, initially developed and popularized by J. A. T. Robinson, Church of England Bishop in *Honest to God* (1963). Robinson wanted to abolish "supranaturalism" in favor of "naturalism" which identifies God, not with the totality of things, the universe, per se, but with what gives meaning and direction to nature." Not miracles but meanings. Love and compassion, not for heaven but for a better world. It and others became best sellers. Harvey Cox, *Secular City* (1965) finding God and church within reign of the nonreligious: science, capitalism, individualism. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966) professor of religion at Emory. He wrote, "God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence." The Christian traditional understanding of God has isolated God from the world that made God static, unaffected and remote from the world realities. Instead, Altizer see God fully embedded in profane world, person. Absolutely immanent rather than transcendent. *Time* magazine cover April 8, 1966 "Is God Dead?" Point not to convince people to be atheists but to get them to think about the modern world and where Christians should stand in it.

Questions to Think About

What does the physical environments created by the film look like? How do they contribute to the alienation felt by the characters?

Religion does not always have to connect with an organized institution or obvious symbols. Do you think this film is "religious"? Why or why not? Are there Christian symbols embedded in the film? How might those effect its "Jewishness"?

What happened at the end and why?

References

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