Abstract

Countless representations of the Holocaust have led to debates about how, or even if, the horror and complexities of the atrocities that took place during the Nazi era can be represented. Cinematic representations become especially relevant within this discussion when we consider the role of films in the shaping of Holocaust memory. Ongoing debates, however, have in no way hindered the outpouring of films which deal with the Holocaust and in 2008 several Holocaust films, including *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, were released which further fueled discussions about the representations of Germans within this discourse. Filmic renderings of the Holocaust which present the German point of view often expose the conflicts Germans faced and give the message that many “ordinary,” “good” Germans opposed the Nazis or were unaware of the horrors taking place; in doing so they elicit empathy for the Germans by projecting them as innocent victims of Nazism. Through an analysis of key scenes, this article tries to provide a critical approach to the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* within the discourse of Holocaust representation. It aims to demonstrate how the film perpetuates the idea of German innocence and the narrative of German victimization through an examination of how the film presents the dichotomy of “good” Germans versus the evil Nazis; how it uses iconic images of the Holocaust associated with Jewish suffering to create visual analogies that equate Jewish victimization with German victimization; and how it employs the idea of redemption for Germans.

Keywords: Film, Holocaust, German victimhood

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Soykırımı imgelerini kullanarak yarattığı görsel analojiler yoluyla Yahudi mağduriyetini Alman mağduriyetiyle eş tutması; ve kefaret kavramını benimseyerek Alman masumiyeti fikrini sunma ve Alman mağduriyeti anlatısını perçinlemesi İdelenmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Sinema, Yahudi Soykırımı, Alman Mağduriyeti

January 27, 2015 marked the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz from the Nazis. As the world remembered the atrocities that took place, commentators emphasized the fact that with each passing year fewer and fewer survivors remain. Alan Mintz points out that “as time passes, the authors of the stories, memoirs, film scripts, and plays are increasingly less likely to have been witnesses, or even the sons and daughters of witnesses, to the catastrophe and their works correspondingly more dependent on the mediation of the imagination” (2001, p. 81). Influenced by Theodore Adorno’s famous dictum that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1981, p. 34), with fewer survivors remaining, the debate over representations of the Holocaust gains further significance.

In attempting to explain what Adorno meant with his statement Irving Howe writes:

Adorno might have been rehearsing a traditional aesthetic idea: that the representation of a horrible event, especially if in drawing upon literary skills it achieves a certain graphic power, could serve to domesticate it, rendering it familiar and in some sense even tolerable, and thereby shearing away part of the horror. (1988, p. 180)

This debate over whether language and art can or should represent the horrors of the Holocaust is equally valid for cinematic representations. This becomes especially relevant when we consider the importance of visual representations in shaping our knowledge and memory of the past, for as Annette Insdorf states, “it is primarily through motion pictures that the mass audience knows—and will continue to learn—about the Nazi era and its victims” (1983, p. xv). Regarding the debates over representations of the Holocaust Judith E. Doneson writes:

What is at the core of the dilemma? Abuse of the Holocaust? Desanctification? Lack of knowledge? Vulgarization? Trivialization? Too much memory? Too little memory? Whom do we please? Which survivors? At every juncture, one confronts what on the surface seem to be breaches of the sacredness of the Holocaust. Serious scholars and writers engaged in soul-wrenching investigation of the Final Solution often evoke phrases like ‘imagining the unimaginable,’ and ‘speaking the unspeakable,’ expressions that imply both rigid obedience to its singular horror and the inability of those who were not there to understand. For them, the Holocaust cannot be relativized or subjected to misappropriated comparisons. (2002, p. 226)
These discussions however, have in no way hindered the outpouring of countless filmic renderings of the Nazi era and the Holocaust. In fact the output, both by European filmmakers and the Hollywood film industry, has led to what is called the Holocaust film genre. The 1978 NBC television series *Holocaust* and Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) are often cited as the screen representations which led to extensive debates on the Holocaust and how it should be represented (Doneson, 2002, p. 223, Loshitzky, 1997, p. 2, Shandler, 1997, p. 153). Many popular representations of the Holocaust, including *Holocaust* and *Schindler’s List*, have been charged by critics with trivializing, distorting, violating, and sensationalizing the Holocaust (Doneson, 2002, p. 185, 223, 227, Hansen, 1997, p. 83.).

Despite ongoing debates, many films, both documentaries and fiction films continue to try to represent the unrepresentable. The year 2008 is noteworthy in that among the numerous Holocaust films that were released several of them dealt specifically with the German perspective, namely, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, *The Reader*, *Good* and *Valkyrie*. The central issue of these films is both German guilt and the victimization of Germans by the Nazis. In relation to their representation of the Holocaust, some film critics have argued that they are “Nazi-apologia” or “Nazi-centric” films which tell their stories exclusively from the German point of view, drawing the viewer into sympathetic identification with their characters. Brett Ashley Kaplan even labeled 2008 “Hollywood’s ‘year of the good Nazi’” (2011, p. 187).

Among the films mentioned above *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* not only presents the German perspective but it substantiates what Bernhard Giesen calls the “narrative of victimization” that postwar Germany constructed to explain how Germany got caught up in the Nazi madness. Giesen states that in this narrative, the Nazis, especially Hitler, “were depicted as insane barbarians” and the ordinary and innocent German citizens “were imagined as having been seduced into blindness, unsuspicious, and completely ignorant of the atrocities of genocide” (2004, pp. 119-120). Creating a clear divide and demonizing Nazi rule “removed the nation from the realm of moral responsibility and culpability. Intoxication, seduction, and blindness allowed Germans even to regard the German nation as the true victim of Nazism” (Giesen, 2004, p. 120).

To provide a critical view of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in relation to its representation of the Holocaust, this article examines how the film presents German innocence and victimhood through

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1 Judith E. Doneson provides an inclusive definition of the genre: “it includes any films that reflect what historian Raul Hilberg describes as a step-by-step historical process, beginning with the laws of April 1933, which removed Jews from the civil services in Germany, and ending in 1945, when the last concentration camps were liberated and the war ended. This definition embraces the gradual evolution to destruction, as well as the destruction itself, which culminated in the death of six million Jews. A film, therefore, that captures elements of the earliest persecutions of the Jews in Germany can be called a Holocaust film. Likewise, a film that refers to the period when Nazi anti-Semitism grew increasingly worse is a Holocaust film. And in the broadest interpretation, a film influenced by the Holocaust is also termed a Holocaust film” (2002, pp. 6-7).

2 Critics have argued that *Schindler’s List* is the first major Hollywood film to introduce the Holocaust into mainstream cinema, and with its scenes detailing the Nazis’ systematic destruction of Jews, it has been taken as a representative film that “encapsulates the totality of the Holocaust experience” (Hansen, 1997, p. 81).

3 Films like Claude Lanzmann’s documentary *Shoah* (1985) and *Schindler’s List* have led to much debate on how the cinema represents the Holocaust. For a detailed discussion and comparison of these two films see Omer Bartov (Chapter 2), Miriam Bratu Hansen (Chapter 4), and Yosefa Loshitzky (Chapter 5) in *Spielberg’s Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler’s List*. 
an analysis of key scenes. It aims to demonstrate that the film does so by taking iconic images of Jewish victimization and recasting them to project German victimization. The article also examines how the film, while dealing with the evils of Nazi ideology and how it was transmitted, offers a sense of redemption for Germans through the use of Biblical symbolism.

Adapted from Irish writer John Boyne’s novel of the same title, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a fictional story told through the eyes of an 8-year-old German boy named Bruno (Asa Butterfield). When Bruno’s father Ralf (David Thewlis), who is a Nazi officer, is promoted as the new commandant of a concentration camp, Bruno, his mother Elsa (Vera Farmiga), and 12-year-old sister Gretel (Amber Beattie), move from Berlin to “the countryside.” Oblivious to the fact that it is a death camp, Bruno wants to explore what he thinks is a farm surrounded with a barbed wire fence with “farmers” in “striped pyjamas”. Although he is forbidden to go there Bruno secretly goes and becomes friends with a Jewish boy named Shmuel (Jack Scanlon) on the other side of the fence. One day the boys plan an adventure and decide to find Shmuel’s missing father together. Shmuel provides Bruno with a prisoner’s uniform and Bruno digs his way from under the fence to the other side. As the boys wander through the camp they are both rounded up along with the men in the camp and sent to the gas chamber.

The film opens with an extreme close-up of a Nazi flag from which the camera pans to reveal a long shot of a square with German citizens and a group of young boys—including Bruno—running around pretending to be fighter planes. This establishing shot reveals the essence of the story about to unfold: the place and fate of young Germans under Nazi rule. The choice of having the story told from an unsuspecting child’s perspective also establishes the theme of innocence from the onset.

In the sequence showing the family moving to their new location we see the first example of a series of visual analogies employed in the film. The camera shows a long shot of a train traveling through the day into the night to the family’s new home near a concentration camp: here the image of the train invokes the iconic images of the freight cars which were used to transport Jewish prisoners to the camps (Fig. 1).

Tobias Ebbrecht explains the cause behind drawing such associations as follows:

> Through its representation in contemporary popular culture, the Holocaust often has become visually stereotyped. A specific pattern of codes and conventions was generated through repetition and constant circulation of the same iconic images. Well-known images of Nazism and the Holocaust comprise a basic part of our cultural reservoir of representing atrocities.

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4 The name of the concentration camp is never specified in the film, but the presence of the gas chamber and crematorium indicate that it is one of the Nazi death camps.

5 In his article entitled “Migrating Images: Iconic Images of the Holocaust and the Representation of War in Popular Film” Ebbrecht discusses how iconic images of the Holocaust “migrate” and are placed in different contexts. He examines how images from the Holocaust appear in movies such as Platoon and Dresden, and V for Vendetta.
Many scholars recognize that the Holocaust functions as a master narrative in popular film and media to describe melodramatic and tragic stories of loss, destruction, and survival. This ongoing repetition creates a situation in which the iconic images become embedded as part of our personal memory. (2012, p. 90)

In effect what this scene does is conflate the two images and “Jewish and German suffering is equated as the Jewish experience of the Holocaust is replaced by the German experience” (Ebbrecht, 2010, p. 98). What Ebbrecht claims in reference to the film Dresden applies here: “Holocaust memory cues are exploited to bridge the gap between the Holocaust victim’s experience and the perpetrator and bystander postwar perception of themselves” (2010, p. 98).

The next shot of Bruno in the train shows him lying on his father’s lap wearing his blue striped pyjamas; his outfit which resembles the striped uniform worn by Jewish concentration camp prisoners further solidifies the link made between him and the Jews (Fig. 2). This sort of visual symmetry between Bruno and Shmuel appears throughout the entire film and is the point of the title. No doubt the aim of saying that these two boys are the same is both to indicate the irrationality behind Nazi racial bigotry and to show how Nazism created victims on both sides. These messages, however, are given by displacing “Holocaust images from their original sources and reception” (Ebbrecht, 2012, p. 90).

Once the family enters their new house, the first shot we see of Bruno is sitting on the stairs literally “behind bars” (Fig. 3). This, and similar visual metaphors like in the next scene, further suggests that Bruno is also a prisoner of the Nazi system. In the following scene we see Bruno in his new room; he looks out of his window at the camp in the distance and thinks it is a farm where the farmers are “strange” because they wear pyjamas (Fig. 4). When he starts to ask questions about it he gets no clear answer, and soon after, his window’s shutters are boarded up implying that Bruno is prevented from seeing the truth. This sequence functions to show not only how the oppressive Nazi system controlled and restrained individuals, but also how people were purposefully kept in the dark.

Giesen, while stating that “[m]ost of the horrors certainly were concealed from the German public,” also adds that “questions could have been asked even by those who were not directly involved…in the killing” (2004, p. 118). Indeed Bruno, and later Elsa, do ask questions but the film shows how innocent Germans were repeatedly lied to. A good example of this comes later in the film when Ralf and several Nazi officials watch a propaganda piece depicting life in the camps as idyllic and pleasant. Bruno watches the film secretly and his belief in his father and thus the system is restored. This sequence illustrates how the Third Reich knew well the power of cinema and used it effectively as a tool for propaganda to indoctrinate or lie to the Germans.

This issue of being kept in the dark is linked to the theme of innocence through the use of Biblical symbolism. In the film Bruno is allowed to play as he pleases in the front garden, but he is not allowed to go in the back garden which faces the camp. Being forbidden to “explore” the back garden, Bruno is symbolically and literally restricted from attaining the forbidden knowledge. In the following scenes we witness Bruno’s symbolic “fall”: as he is swinging from a tree swing

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6 The propaganda piece shown in The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas is reminiscent of the 1944 Nazi propaganda film about Theresienstadt entitled Terezin: A Documentary Film from the Jewish Settlement Area.
in the garden he notices a streak of dark smoke coming from the direction of the camp—which unbeknownst to him is rising from the crematorium—and as he stretches up to see the source of the smoke he slips and falls to the ground. Although Bruno is still innocent, being within the domain of Nazism inevitably brings one closer to the knowledge of evil.

The theme of the knowledge of good and evil is further developed when Bruno’s father decides to hire a tutor to “educate” the children. These scenes provide insight into how young German minds were indoctrinated with Nazi ideology. The tutor’s teachings exemplify the rationale the Nazis used to justify their actions and the anti-Semitic discourse of Nazism which demonized the Jews, making them the enemy. David R. Beisel explains that through pseudo-scientific arguments Nazis presented Jews as destructive parasites and vermin that were causing the downfall of the nation. The Jew was a cancer that had to be removed. “They were also dehumanized. Arriving at the death camps in cattle cars, they could more easily be imagined as so much symbolic raw material ready to be processed—gold teeth melted into bars, hair for mattresses, fat used for soap” (2010, pp. 369-370).

Due to his friendship with Shmuel and his questioning mind, Bruno, though confused, is not so easily converted. His sister Gretel however, who is more susceptible to the indoctrination, is quickly transformed. While initially she was continuously presented as an innocent little girl playing with her dolls, she now hangs posters of the Führer and the League of German Girls on her bedroom walls. These scenes serve to show, in microcosm, Hitler Youth (Hitlerjunge) in the making. As Giesen had stated, very often in discussions of how Germany got caught up in Nazism they are described as having been “seduced” by Hitler and the Nazis. Although this word has several implications including Hitler’s charisma, the Nazi paraphernalia, and the effective use of propaganda and so on; in the film the word acquires a more literal meaning. For other than the brainwashing she receives, Gretel’s attraction to Nazism coincides with a crush she develops for one of her father’s officers. This character, Lieutenant Kotler (Rupert Friend), is a stereotype of the heartless, evil Nazi, the sort typically used in demonizing Nazis.

Gretel’s transformation is strengthened with another example of a visual analogy which equates Jewish loss with German loss. One day when Bruno is down in the cellar looking for a ball he sees the dolls Gretel used to play with discarded in the corner. The pile of tangled and naked dolls resembles another iconic image of the Holocaust: the mass graves of Jews (Fig. 5). As Ebbrecht notes, “the mass graves are essential parts of the visual heritage of the Holocaust” and they epitomize the horror of Jewish suffering (2010, p. 101). In the film however, this visual image of Jewish victimization and death is displaced from its original source and used as a metaphor for the death of Gretel’s purity and conversion into Nazism. This scene points to what Gerd Bayer identifies as “the most difficult aspect of Holocaust cinema, namely the question of how not to re-victimize and visually exploit the suffering of the actual victims” (2010, p. 127).

Indeed in an attempt to show how Germans were victimized, the film, implicitly or unintentionally, re-victimizes the Jewish victims. Another example of this can be given by examining the effect of the film’s narrational stance. With regards to Schindler’s List, which has often been criticized for depicting the Nazi killing of Jews through German eyes, Mintz claims that this form of narration “reinforces a conception of the Holocaust as the narrative of the perpetrators rather than that of the victims” (2001, p. 139). He also suggests that such representations “abet a voyeuristic fascination with evil” (2001, p. 144). To a certain degree these arguments can also be applied to The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas.
Since the story is told entirely through the eyes of a German child the film manipulates the viewer to look through the lens of innocence and causes empathy with Bruno. Furthermore, the fact that throughout the film the act of looking itself is emphasized with close-ups of Bruno looking and the use of point-of-view shots draws attention to what Bruno is looking at. In analyzing photographs of mass executions of Jews taken by Nazis, visual-studies scholar Marianne Hirsch points out that the onlooker unwittingly occupies what she calls the “Nazi gaze:”

In the brutally frontal image, the camera is in the exact same position as the gun and the photographer in the place of the executioner who remains unseen. The victims are already undressed; the graves have been dug. Displayed in their full vulnerability and humiliation they are doubly exposed in their nakedness and their powerlessness. They are shot before they are shot. (2001, p. 233)  

The depiction of Jews in The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas has the same effect. Mintz argues that in Schindler’s List except for Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley) “there are no Jewish characters in the film who either take any action or are distinguished in their individuality.” In fact, in the shadow of Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson), “the Jews are mostly small, nameless, automatons.” (2001, p. 138). Similarly, the Jews in The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas are presented as passive and weak silhouettes. Thus, instead of evoking sympathy for them what this does, as Omer Bartov pointed out for Schindler’s List, is “evok[e] the kind of stereotypes Nazism had thrived on” (1996, p. 49).

Towards the final sequences of the film the theme of the fall is revisited when Bruno temporarily loses his moral compass and betrays Shmuel. We see Shmuel in the house cleaning; Bruno who is happy to see his friend, whom he had always visited secretly, offers him some of the cake on the table. While Shmuel eats the cake Lieutenant Kotler sees him and starts yelling at Shmuel for talking to Bruno and accuses him of stealing food. Shmuel tries to explain to Kotler that Bruno is his friend, and that Bruno offered him the cake. Out of fear, Bruno lies and says he doesn’t know the boy. In this way we see how the fear instilled by the Nazis can change an innocent person into an accessory to violence. Later, Bruno who is repentant of his earlier cowardice goes to the fence to see Shmuel, eventually when the boy comes—from the cuts and bruises on his face—Bruno realizes that he was severely beaten. Bruno, who becomes aware of the suffering he has caused and feels shameful, apologizes to Shmuel for his betrayal and the two boys resume their friendship. When Shmuel says that his father is missing, seeing this as an opportunity for redemption, Bruno offers to help look for him. Thus, despite his wrongdoing, guilt and repentance pave the way for redemption.

In the final sequence of the film Bruno digs his way under the fence to the “other” side and wears “the striped pyjamas” Shmuel has brought for him. Finally, Bruno’s visual transformation into the victim is complete (Fig. 6). As the boys wander around the camp looking for Shmuel’s father, Bruno realizes that the camp is nothing like what he saw in the propaganda film he had viewed earlier. Very soon the boys are rounded up with several of the inmates taken into a room, and ordered to take

7 The sequence in Schindler’s List, which Mintz and Hansen also discuss, with several point-of-view shots of Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes) shooting Jews from his balcony can be given as an example to the “Nazi gaze” in film (2001, p. 144, 1997, p. 83).
their clothes off to take a shower. The last images we see of Bruno are him in the midst of a huddled mass of naked victims in the gas chamber about to be murdered. The high angle shots, with Bruno at the center of the men about to die reaffirm his ultimate status as a victim.8

The pity and fear that is evoked as Bruno is taken into the gas chamber is perhaps one of the most problematic aspects of the film. Here the focus is on Bruno who is about to be killed, the use of cross-cutting editing between Bruno and his parents frantically searching for him heightens suspense, and for a moment even gives the hope that they might save him in time. This sequence raises a disturbing question: has the death of Jews become so familiar that a German child needs to be sent to the gas chamber to make the scene more shocking and tragic? Showing the agony and grief of Bruno’s family as they realize he is dead seems to make the story even more of a German tragedy. As David Sterritt writes “the emotion-drenched finale” is “a disgraceful exercise in misplaced sentimentality” and “soliciting tears for a Nazi parent’s loss is hardly the best way to end a film about Nazi genocide” (2009, p. 60).

The scene of Bruno’s mother collapsing to the ground in the pouring rain and crying as she realizes that her son is dead is of particular significance. The use of parallel editing links the rain which drenches the members of Bruno’s family outside to the gas about to pour from the shower heads in the gas chamber, and ultimately to death. Elsa’s scene of suffering, with the rain pouring down on her almost seems baptismal, offering the mother forgiveness of sins through the death of her son. In the logic of the film she might be seen as worthy of this because Elsa’s character represents those who did not know about the extermination of Jews. The film establishes the fact that she knew about the camps, but did not know about the mass murders. Once she learns about the systematic killing she is outraged and disgusted; we witness a transformation in her appearance and her behavior toward her husband and she eventually decides to leave with her children. Characters like Elsa represent the “ordinary,” “good” citizens who were unaware of the true horrors of the Nazi crimes. Elsa further endorses the narrative of victimization by being punished with the death of Bruno.

In the last shot of the film the camera slowly tracks backward from the gas chamber door to reveal all of the prisoner’s clothes. Visually, this ending functions to remind the viewer of the millions that died during the Holocaust. The aim here is perhaps also to expand from Jewish and German suffering and victimization to a universal lesson of the Holocaust: man’s cruelty against man.

Undoubtedly, films dealing with this dark chapter of human history will continue to be made. Lawrence Baron reminds us, however, that “As the Holocaust recedes into the distant past, its meaning and representation become increasingly malleable as audiences born after it happened and scattered across the globe respond to films that are allegorically or specifically about it” (2012, p. 8). Although filmic representations of the German perspective can lead to a more complex approach to the Nazi past by raising questions about collective responsibility and exploring grey areas, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, instead, presents clear lines of good and evil, guilt and innocence, victim and perpetrator. In effect what the film does by presenting these polarities is further the myth of the innocence of ordinary Germans. Furthermore, by recasting emblematic images associated with Jewish suffering during the Holocaust to create visual analogies that equate Jewish victimization with German victimization, the film ends up perpetuating the narrative of how Germans were victimized.

8 Although Bruno’s death does not absolve a collective German guilt, he does seem to attain a kind of “transcendence, redeeming himself, as it were, by joining the Jews in death” Insdorf makes this assessment, which applies equally to Bruno, for Tono in the film The Shop on Main Street (1965) (1983, p. 149).
Fig. 1. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* 2009

Fig. 2. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* 2009

Fig. 3. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* 2009

Fig. 4. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* 2009

Fig. 5. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* 2009

Fig. 6. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* 2009
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