Making sense of Holocaust representations: a reception study of audience responses to recent films

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Abstract

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This thesis provides a complex and in-depth analysis of the reception, by actual audiences, of recent films about the Holocaust. Drawing on approaches from cultural studies, and using an original methodology developed for this project, the analysis of film text and context was combined with an empirical, qualitative reception study. Using Britain as a case study, it is demonstrated that the reception process of feature films and docu-dramas about the Holocaust is multi-faceted and cannot be fully understood through textual analysis alone. The thesis challenges the widespread generalisations about films’ alleged impact on ‘the public’ in the literature about Holocaust representations. By analysing the data, the ways in which a select number of films are made sense of immediately after the film viewing are explored, and how the Holocaust is understood through these films. It is demonstrated that the reading of films is simultaneously multiple and emanating from the text, which triggers and facilitates a range of interpretations. The process of making sense of Holocaust representations is an active process, which is influenced, guided and at times constrained by preconceptions, emotions, and the extent to which films are considered as authentic. As such, the thesis makes a long overdue contribution to the study of the representation of the Holocaust.
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# Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iii

Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1
  General Introduction & Context....................................................................................... 1
  The Representation of the Holocaust in Films and Documentaries ............................... 5
  Scholars, Films and Viewers.......................................................................................... 14

Part I: Film Selection and Methodology ........................................................................ 22
  A Contextual View of Five Recent Films .................................................................... 23
  Studying Reception: Methodological Framework ....................................................... 48

Part II: Making Sense of the Holocaust through Film .................................................... 63
  Transmission of Historical Understanding................................................................... 63
  Interpretations of Perpetrator Behaviour and Motivation ........................................... 97

Part III: The Reception of Holocaust Representations .................................................. 131
  Film and Reality.......................................................................................................... 131
  Modes of Reception...................................................................................................... 156
  A note on films’ long-term reception.......................................................................... 180

Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 187

Appendices ....................................................................................................................... 197
  Appendix One: Questionnaire...................................................................................... 197
  Appendix Two: Interview and Discussion Guide ........................................................ 199
  Appendix Three: Participant Information .................................................................... 200
  Appendix Four: Call for Participants ......................................................................... 201
  Appendix Five: Consent Form .................................................................................... 202
  Appendix Six: Sample Sequential Analysis.................................................................. 203

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 206
  Primary Sources............................................................................................................ 206
  Secondary Sources....................................................................................................... 218
Introduction

General Introduction & Context

Historical films are often accorded with ‘almost magical qualities inherent to the moving image’ and are believed to hold ‘great power to influence the viewer and that, when widely distributed, the moving image may have an impact on society that is of historical importance.’¹ And yet, it is ‘notoriously difficult’ to interpret to what extent a film influences audiences and individuals.² This has rarely prevented scholars from speculating and theorising on the impact of films on viewers, and historical memory and consciousness more generally. The field of Holocaust Studies is no exception. Alongside official and institutional expressions of memory, for almost 70 years the Holocaust has been the subject of feature films, documentaries and television series, which have reached large audiences all over the world. A field of study has emerged that focuses on ‘afterimages’³ of the Holocaust. Scholars from a range of disciplines have produced a considerable amount of research about the representation of the Holocaust in film and television. These studies are mostly concerned with theoretical considerations regarding Holocaust representation, memory and ethics, or with analyses of particular films, genres, national cinemas, and comparisons between them. Studies into film reception, for the most part, focus on historical audiences (by using e.g. diaries or audience letters) or reception in the media and public discourse. How ‘actual audiences’ in the present make sense of these films, has remained largely elusive.⁴

This thesis sets out to fill this gap in current research in the field of Holocaust Studies by exploring the reception of films about the Holocaust by actual audiences. Using Britain as a case study, this research project seeks to develop a feasible research methodology, and to generate and analyse empirical data to (re-) evaluate the relationship between history, film text and film reception. For this purpose, 68 people, 52 of them British (predominantly English) and one from Northern Ireland, were interviewed individually or in groups about one of five films selected for this study,

² Ibid.
³ J. Hirsch, Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust (Philadelphia, 2010).
⁴ The paucity of research into the individual reception of films has been noted e.g. in F. Bösch, ‘Film, NS-Vergangenheit und Geschichtswissenschaft: Von “Holocaust” zu “Der Untergang”’, Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2007), p. 1.
immediately after the film viewing. Based on the analysis of these interviews, the following questions will be addressed in this thesis: to what extent do films shape, alter and impact how the Holocaust is understood outside the academic profession? How do audiences, which are conceptualised as active and multiple, make sense of films representing the Holocaust? To what extent are film ‘readings’ determined, restricted and dictated by the film ‘text’? To what degree do viewers’ backgrounds, interests and preconceptions influence and shape the ways in which they make sense of the films? The core of this thesis is a qualitative audience reception study seeking to bridge disciplinary boundaries. The thesis will also scrutinize to what extent theoretical assessments of audience reception can be confirmed or reformulated in light of empirical evidence. This explorative study will make a unique contribution to knowledge by providing the first thesis-length study into the individual reception process of a number of films about the Holocaust, which will complement existing research and open up further routes of enquiry.

A Note on Definitions

The term ‘Holocaust’ will be used throughout this thesis due to its widespread use and acceptance in the English-speaking world. It is acknowledged that its origin from the Greek word ‘Holocaustos’, meaning ‘burnt offering’ or ‘sacrifice’, is problematic in the context of the Nazi genocide of the European Jews. The term is also often used to highlight a wide range of issues, such as by animal rights organisation PETA, which condemned the consumption of meat and dairy products as ‘The Holocaust on your plate’. The inclusion of victim groups other than the Jews under the term ‘Holocaust’ is equally contested and controversial. The Hebrew word ‘Shoah’, meaning ‘catastrophe’, is often favoured to describe the Nazi genocide of the Jews, yet it is not widely used in the British and American context. For the purpose of this thesis, the term ‘Holocaust’ is used to denote the Nazi genocide of the Jews of Europe.

5The thesis draws on research about Holocaust representation, memory and education in Britain. It should be noted that neither of these can be seen as monolithic and that there are significant differences within Britain. While most interviewees were English, the term ‘British’ will be used to reflect both the general discourse, and how the majority of respondents identified themselves. The Northern Irish respondent will be included in the discussion of the results from the ‘British’ interviews, but it is acknowledged that the Northern Irish discourse is distinct from the British and English situations.

The subject of this project is the reception of films about the Holocaust which are sometimes termed ‘Holocaust films’. The term is not without controversy and scholars’ opinions as to what constitutes a ‘Holocaust film’ often differ. Some suggest that there is, in fact, no distinct genre of Holocaust films. Among them is Lawrence Baron who argues that filmmakers use ‘traditional genres and assume audience familiarity with Holocaust cinema, images and symbols’ and that the genres and themes used by filmmakers change over time to make the topic of their films accessible to audiences who are increasingly distant generationally and geographically to the events under discussion.  

This thesis adopts Judith Doneson’s definition, according to which Holocaust films are about ‘the gradual evolution to destruction, as well as the destruction itself’ and also include films which are ‘influenced by the Holocaust’. The selection of films used for the qualitative reception study reflects this broad definition and includes films that represent persecution and destruction as well as films to which the Holocaust is peripheral or that deal with its post-war impact.

The term ‘audience’ which is central to this thesis also requires definition. The study draws on British cultural studies (Birmingham School) which ‘broke with the passive and undifferentiated conceptions of the “audience” as it had largely appeared in traditional research.’  

Rather than regard the audience as passive and homogenous, it is understood as an active audience – or rather active audiences – with differing readings and interpretations of the various representations of the Holocaust. Stuart Hall is among those who correctly criticise mass communication research for its linear concept of communication. The process of communication is in fact not a linear one in which encoding and decoding necessarily coincides. Hall also stresses that ‘polysemy’, or multiple readings, should not be mistaken for pluralism as he sees a hegemonic culture with ‘dominant or preferred meanings’.  

Feminist theorist Christine Gledhill further suggests that films are negotiated by audiences. She argues that ‘meanings are not fixed entities to be deployed at the will of a communicator, but products of textual interaction shaped by a range of economic, aesthetic and ideological factors that often operate

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unconsciously, are unpredictable and difficult to control. More recent approaches in the strand of audience reception research influenced by British cultural studies assume that ‘reception processes’ are ‘simultaneously individual and communal’ because meanings are at once due to a particular socialisation and to interpretative communities which suggests some stability in meaning.

According to these audience reception approaches, it is assumed ‘that neither the semiotic analysis of media texts nor questionnaire-based analysis of media gratifications’ alone can do justice to the ‘complexities of the media experience’ of groups and individuals. This is why this thesis adopts a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews, which will be discussed in detail in Part I below. Kim Schrøder et al. have also highlighted that ‘audience research can never claim to find the truth about audience practices and meanings, only partial insights about how audiences use the media in a specific context.’ The Birmingham School approach is not the only tradition within the field of cultural studies. In the highly influential Frankfurt School tradition, ‘audiences and users of media are seen as the powerless victims of mass seduction, arising as a consequence of both the intentional attempt by the privileged and powerful to deceive in order to stay in power, and - more importantly – the economics of cultural production that result in cultural products that pander to the lowest common denominator of taste.’ While much scholarly work on films about the Holocaust is informed by the Frankfurt School, this thesis, on the other hand, follows the Birmingham School tradition because its approaches and insights ‘overcome’ the Frankfurt School’s ‘limitations … by systematically rejecting high/low culture distinctions and taking seriously the artefacts of media culture. Likewise, they overcome the limitations of the Frankfurt School in their conceptions of an active audience that creates meanings and the popular.’ This thesis sets out to provide a ‘multi-perspectival approach’ by combining the study of the text and context of select

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13 K. Schrøder et al., Researching Audiences (London, 2003), p. 132. See also P. Goldstein and James L. Machor (eds), New Directions in American Reception Study (Oxford and New York, 2008). For an overview of different approaches to audiences or spectators, see e.g. J. Staiger, ‘Reception Studies in Film and Television’, in G. Turner (ed.), The Film Cultures Reader (London, 2002), pp. 46-72.

14 Ibid., Researching Audiences, p. 122.

15 Ibid., p. 17.

16 Ibid., p. 40.

films, and their reception by actual audiences. An approach like this depends on a variety of disciplines which includes film, cultural and historical studies, and the methodologies of the social sciences.

**The Representation of the Holocaust in Films and Documentaries**

**The limits of representation**

The visual representation of the Holocaust in films, documentaries, and television has received much scholarly attention, ranging from critical analyses of particular films to theoretical considerations about the representability of the Holocaust. The question of representation continues to stir interdisciplinary debates. This discourse has been informed by Theodor Adorno’s dictum written in 1949, that ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ and both critics and advocates of Holocaust representations have been referring to this command.

Most notably, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel takes the position that because ‘no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz. The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes.’ Wiesel maintains that ‘the Holocaust is not a subject like all the others. It imposes certain limits.’ These ‘limits of representation’ were the subject of a conference in 1990, whose contributions have been influential ever since. Saul Friedlander states that while the ‘extermination of the Jews of Europe is as accessible to both representation and interpretation as any other historical event’ at the same time this is ‘an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an “event at the limits.”’ Linked with this is the ‘question of an aesthetics after Auschwitz’ and whether any meaning can or should be extracted from the Holocaust. This debate is closely related to the discourse regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust with those calling for a prohibition on

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images advocating the unique character of the event as a singularity. This stands in marked contrast to the more recently developed comparative genocide research strand. If the Holocaust is not unique, then it is subject to representation, however flawed and inadequate, like any other event in history. Uniqueness, on the other hand, would demand ‘limits of representation’ not imposed by other events.

Critics of Holocaust representations particularly criticise filmmakers’ use of Holocaust iconography, such as swastikas, barbed wire and chimneys. The deployment of narrative strategies that have beginning, middle and end are equally contentious. Experimental films and documentaries that point to the breaks and traumas in the history of the Holocaust are often favoured. Some films may also succeed in providing a personalised and emotional approach to history and thereby offer new ways of looking at, and relating to, the past. It is argued that visual representations of the Holocaust in films and documentaries challenge our traditional understanding and cannot be simply dismissed as ‘poor history’, but rather be seen as ‘an alternative form of history that informs us about the past through different means’. Hayden White notes in this respect that ‘the historical monograph is no less “shaped” or constructed than the historical film or historical novel. It may be shaped by different principles, but there is no reason why a filmed representation of historical events should not be as analytical and realistic as any written account.’

Many scholars have left behind this debate and have instead concentrated on the question of how the Holocaust is represented across different films, genres, and national cinemas. From early post-war films like The Last Stop (Ostatni Etap, Poland, 1947) or Night and Fog (France, 1955), to the Nazi-exploitation films of the 1970s, and melodramas like Holocaust (USA, 1978) and Sophie’s Choice (USA, 1982), the ongoing confrontation of the Holocaust in film and television has been intensely studied.

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29 Ibid., p. 34.
31 Baron, Projecting the Holocaust into the present, p. 6.
by scholars of different disciplines in the past two to three decades. Rather than add to these discourses, this thesis seeks to go beyond the film analysis and assigns crucial importance to the film reception by individual, ordinary viewers.

**Film and memory**

Within this area of research into the representation of the Holocaust, the relationship between film, history and memory has received growing attention. The field of memory studies, in particular, has grown and diversified in the past decades. The term ‘collective memory’ was coined by Maurice Halbwachs, who stressed that ‘a person remembers only by situating himself within the viewpoint of one or several groups and one or several currents of thought.’\(^{33}\) Within collective memory, Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka distinguish between communicative and cultural memory. The former ‘includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communication’ which can be counted as ‘collective memory’ and which are studied in oral history research.\(^ {34}\) Cultural memory, on the other hand, describes ‘that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch’ which serve ‘to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image’.\(^ {35}\)

Visual representations of the Holocaust have relevance for the realm of memory because they are not produced in a social, historical, political, or cultural vacuum. Filmmakers have their own specific backgrounds and belong to a particular culture of memory; each film has a context and is shaped by cultural and communicative memories which may in turn be influenced by films.\(^ {36}\) One example for the significance of the context is Alan Resnais’s well-known documentary *Night and Fog* which had to censor images attesting to French collaboration and largely omitted the Jewishness of the victims. The film was also influenced by, and a reaction to the Algerian War.\(^ {37}\) While memory may play an important role for the content of a film, other considerations such as ‘uncertain market conditions, daily censorship battles, prevailing

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industry practices, and powerful financial considerations must also be taken into account.

Film cannot be solely attributed to either communicative or cultural memory. While films are expressions of cultural memory, they also find their way into communicative memory as can be seen in references to Holocaust films in oral history accounts. The latter phenomenon points to actual memory and its storage of visual images. Within what is commonly referred to as ‘long-term memory’ one can distinguish between semantic and episodic memory. The former describes ‘knowledge of the world’ and the latter the ‘memory of personal events’. Emotions play a significant role for episodic memory and can be evoked, for example, when memories of atrocities seen on TV news are retrieved. Autobiographical memory combines episodic and semantic memory because ‘our memory of our lives is composed of both our memory for events from our lives and the facts of our lives, some of which may not be based on the memory of individual experiences.’ Recent research in neuroimaging has found that images are stored in the brain’s visual areas as analogue images or pictures. In an attempt to bridge the academic divide between neurosciences and humanities, so-called ‘neurocinematics’ have also become an emerging field. Memory research is of relevance for this study insofar as it suggests that visual representations of the Holocaust in film and television may be related to autobiographical memory processes, especially when films evoke emotions.

In his research on Holocaust memorials and their meaning for memory, James Young points out that memory has an agenda, as it is ‘never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure.’ Young’s work on the use of memorials may also be applied to the study of Holocaust films. He states that the ways in which memorials are used and made sense of can be rather different to the initial and official intentions.

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41 Ibid., pp. 89-90.
42 Ibid., p. 90.
43 Ibid., p. 167.
He points towards a reciprocal and fluid process, highlighting that the meaning of a memorial can undergo ‘an evolution in the memorial’s significance’. He also notes that there is an inherent danger in memorialisation, arguing that ‘In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden.’ Similarly, film may also have the effect of a proxy-memory that remembers for us, suggesting that watching a film is to remember. Related to films and the memory of the Holocaust is also the issue of Holocaust iconography, or what Susan Sontag termed ‘emblems of suffering’. What is problematic about the well-known images ‘that allow us to remember’ is, according to Sontag, ‘not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, of remembering.’

Visual representations of the Holocaust are also thought to shape historical consciousness which relates ‘both to the past, the present and the future, in the respect that a perception of the past gives the framework for understanding the present, and, again, expectations of the future.’ Historical consciousness ‘serves as a key orientational element’ which may be ‘guiding human activity’. In their analysis of an intergenerational study of the memory of the Holocaust and National Socialism in German families, Harald Welzer et al. argue that historical consciousness is built on many distinct sources and that there is a significant difference between cognitive knowledge of the Holocaust and emotional notions of the past. Interviews with three generations of family members suggest that while young people have extensive factual knowledge about the Holocaust, they tend to ‘rewrite their grandparents’ histories into tales of anti-Nazi heroism and resistance.’ The researchers propose that visual representations such as films, computer games and novels, alongside stories that have been passed on within families inform historical awareness and ideas about the past among young people. Formal education, on the other hand, ‘cannot compete with the

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46 Ibid., p. 3.
47 Ibid., p. 5.
49 Ibid., p. 79.
53 H. Welzer, Grandpa Wasn’t a Nazi: The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance (American Jewish Committee, 2005), p. 2.
emotional impact of images from the past offered by more immediate sources. With regards to visual representations of the past, the study suggests that images and scenes from film and television were interwoven with autobiographical stories as well as having served for the study’s participants as historical evidence for the past. According to Welzer et. al., it is precisely feature films (as opposed to documentaries) that for many seem to provide evidence for the past because they appear to carry no pedagogical intentions. While acknowledging the existing important research on memory and historical consciousness, this thesis will ‘step away’ from some of the more abstract concepts in order ‘to get closer to individual reception.’

Holocaust memory and representation in Britain

The majority of respondents for the audience reception study of this thesis were British (that is, most identified as British but the majority was, in fact, English), and it may be assumed that a particular British identity and history form an important ‘interpretative community’ for the reception of films. The reason for the focus on Britain is two-fold; the first is of a pragmatic and practical nature due to the researcher being based in England; the second relates to Britain’s particular history and relationship to the Holocaust. Britain was one of few European countries to be neither occupied (apart from the Channel Islands), nor to have collaborated with Nazi Germany. Its war-time experiences and its memories of the war and the Holocaust are therefore very different from countries like France, Denmark or Poland, and, of course, Germany or Italy. Britain’s relationship to the Holocaust has come under increased scrutiny by scholars in the last two to three decades, particularly the restrictions to Jewish immigration to Britain and also Palestine during the war, the inaction of the government in light of reports on crimes committed against the Jews in continental Europe and the post-war redefinition of the British engagement and its uses for the

54 Ibid., p. 1.
55 Welzer et. al., ‘Opa war kein Nazi’, p. 106.
56 Ibid., p. 133. For similar studies from other European countries, see e.g. O. Jensen, “‘One goes left to the Russians, the other goes right to the Americans” - Family Recollections of the Holocaust in Europe’, in M. L. Davies and C.-C. W. Szejmann (eds), How the Holocaust looks now: International Perspectives (Basingstoke, 2007), p. 26. For the English context, see McKay, A multi-generational oral history study.
The British war effort and the ‘Battle of Britain’ have long been part of Britain’s and particularly England’s cultural memory, but the Holocaust only gradually became the subject of official memory and visual culture from the 1980s onwards. The implementation of the Holocaust as part of the English national history curriculum (1991), the permanent Holocaust exhibition in London’s Imperial War Museum (2000), and the establishment of the annual Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) in 2001 granted the Holocaust an important place in Britain’s cultural memory for the first time. Andy Pearce describes this process as an institutional approach materialised through ‘memorialisation and musealization’. At the same time, he highlights that one cannot speak of a monolithic, homogeneous collective memory but that influences outside the political sphere such as popular culture must also be considered.

Tony Kushner criticises that British history was distorted and rewritten after the war because Britain ‘falsely constructs the British war effort as officially and self-consciously fought against the anti-Semitism/racism of the Nazi regime’ for the purpose of barring immigrants and asylum seekers after 1945. At the same time, in this official memory, the Holocaust is separated from the Second World War. In Britain’s post-war memory, particularly myths such as the ‘Dunkirk spirit’ are important to Britain’s ‘self-perceptions, for they underline and confirm’ a ‘sense of apartness, of otherness, of self-reliance and insularity, of coolness under tremendous pressure, of surviving against the odds.’ While the Holocaust does not fit easily into this narrative, the Kindertransports occupy a prominent place in the memory and representation of the Holocaust in Britain.

Among the visual representations of the Holocaust in Britain, a lasting impact can be assigned to the newsreels of the liberation of the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen by the British army in 1945. In these images, the persecution of the European Jews was present. The Holocaust and the ‘Battle of Britain’ have long been part of Britain’s and particularly England’s cultural memory, but the Holocaust only gradually became the subject of official memory and visual culture from the 1980s onwards. The implementation of the Holocaust as part of the English national history curriculum (1991), the permanent Holocaust exhibition in London’s Imperial War Museum (2000), and the establishment of the annual Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) in 2001 granted the Holocaust an important place in Britain’s cultural memory for the first time. Andy Pearce describes this process as an institutional approach materialised through ‘memorialisation and musealization’. At the same time, he highlights that one cannot speak of a monolithic, homogeneous collective memory but that influences outside the political sphere such as popular culture must also be considered.

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largely ignored and the National Socialist crimes and their victims were universalised.\textsuperscript{65}

The images from the liberation of Bergen-Belsen by now constitute some of the most well-known, most recurring images that form part of Holocaust iconography. Bergen-Belsen ‘came to symbolize German perfidy.’\textsuperscript{66} Sontag reminds us that these images were actually ‘misleading’ because they were atypical for the camps when they were still in operation.\textsuperscript{67}

One of the most influential fictional visual representations of the genocide of the European Jews was Marvin Chomsky’s TV series \textit{Holocaust} which had a significant global impact, and particularly on West Germany’s dealing with the National Socialist past and facing the Holocaust. According to Wulf Kansteiner, the series ‘accelerated the rise of the survivor paradigm in West Germany’s historical culture’.\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Holocaust} ‘heightened awareness of both the historical facts and the problems of how to dramatize them on film ... \textit{Holocaust} must be appreciated for its stimulation of concern, both in America and Europe, but questioned for its manner of presentation’.\textsuperscript{69} World-wide, 220 million viewers watched the programme, 15 million of them in West Germany.\textsuperscript{70} In Britain, ‘the BBC paid a sizeable sum for the rights to transmit the series over four consecutive nights, but critical reception of the programmes was decidedly mixed’ with the viewing audiences’ attitudes toward it being more positive than those of critics.\textsuperscript{71} Overall, ‘direct viewer response to the show was less than the press hype in the run up to screening \textit{Holocaust} suggested and sought to generate’ and significantly less than in West Germany and the United States.\textsuperscript{72}

Though Claude Lanzmann’s documentary masterpiece \textit{Shoah} (France, 1985) constitutes one of the most critically acclaimed representations, the success of Steven Spielberg’s \textit{Schindler’s List} (USA, 1993) has remained unparalleled in terms of viewing


\textsuperscript{67} Sontag, \textit{Regarding the pain of Others}, p. 75.


\textsuperscript{69} Insdorf, \textit{Indelible Shadows}, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p. 5.

\textsuperscript{71} Pearce, \textit{Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain}, p. 190.

\textsuperscript{72} T. Cole, ‘“Marvellous Raisins in a Badly-Cooked Cake”: British Reactions to the Screening of \textit{Holocaust}, in Sharples and Jensen (eds), \textit{Britain and the Holocaust}, p. 74.
numbers, popularity, reach, and use for education.\textsuperscript{73} It also remains unrivalled with regards to scholars’ debates surrounding the film, perhaps only matched by the discourse about Roberto Benigni’s \textit{Life is Beautiful} (Italy, 1997). Though the latter was by no means the first, or last, comedy about the Holocaust, it certainly sparked the most controversy for its use of slapstick and humour in the context of a concentration camp.\textsuperscript{74} In recent years, perhaps the most successful and influential film to enter the public sphere in Britain has been \textit{The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas} (USA/UK, 2008). According to Michael Gray, who researched English pupils’ preconceptions about the Holocaust prior to their formal education about the subject, 54 per cent ‘of pupils asked had either read the book or watched the film of John Boyne’s \textit{The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas}.\textsuperscript{75} This compares with 65 per cent of pupils who had either read \textit{Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl} or watched the dramatisation, 21 per cent had seen \textit{Life is Beautiful} and seven per cent had watched \textit{Defiance} (USA, 2008).\textsuperscript{76} Gray notes that ‘somewhat discouragingly, none of the pupils had ever seen either Roman Polanski’s \textit{The Pianist} or Stephen Spielberg’s \textit{Schindler’s List}, which may be due to age classifications or the format of these films.\textsuperscript{77} It may also denote a generational change as young people today are more likely to watch recent films than those from 20 years ago. A 2009 teacher survey by the Institute of Education reports that teachers’ subject knowledge about the Holocaust was overall limited and that ‘76\% of all teachers said they were likely to use feature films about the Holocaust, 81\% reported that they were likely to use documentaries’, including \textit{The Pianist, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, The World at War (‘Genocide’) and The Nazis: A Warning from History}, with \textit{Schindler’s List} being named most frequently.\textsuperscript{78} Despite this significant use of films and documentaries in education and the familiarity of young people and adults alike with representations of the Holocaust on film, very little is known about the ways in which these images are made sense of and understood by different audiences. This thesis therefore seeks to


\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 15-16.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 16.

provide insights both into film reception process more generally, and into the specific ways in which people in Britain make sense of films about the Holocaust and the history they represent.

According to Judith Petersen, the programmes surrounding the commemoration ceremonies in 1995 had a significant impact on collective memory of the Holocaust in Britain and may have increased Holocaust consciousness. At the same time, television programmes appeared to favour Britain’s war memory as opposed to assigning a more significant role to the representation of the Holocaust. The role of cinema and feature films was, however, not further explored by Petersen and the alleged impact on ‘historical consciousness’ was not put into question. It should be noted that the impact of digital developments (new media, online streaming services) on viewing habits and reception has yet to be evaluated. The impact of the Internet on knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust remains equally under-studied. An exception is Dörte Hein’s research on ‘online cultures of memory’ for which she investigates websites offering information about National Socialism and the Holocaust, and for which she conducted both expert interviews and a quantitative survey with online users. Hein highlights how online services have sparked myths, speculations and warnings regarding their alleged impact on Holocaust memory. This is similar to the discourse surrounding the representation of the Holocaust on film which has long relied on speculation and generalisation when it comes to individual audience reception and especially regarding the impact of films on memory, historical consciousness, or knowledge of the Holocaust.

Scholars, Films and Viewers

The study of film and the notion of ‘the public’

The study of film has a long tradition and goes back to the very beginning of the medium. Relevant for the context of this thesis are developments in the field of film studies since the 1970s, where one can distinguish between formal-aesthetic and social-
ideological approaches. The latter analyse films for their political and ideological contents and increasingly turned towards cultural studies’ perspectives. This perspective within film studies assumes a differentiated model of society and dismisses approaches that allow for only one reading of films. The study of feature films and documentaries has also increasingly attracted historians, who have often been criticised for mainly focusing on historical accuracy, content and context of films while the methods and theories of film studies were largely ignored. At the same time, film historians criticised that film studies centred too heavily on the text and thereby operated in a social and historical vacuum. In the last two decades, scholars of both film and historical studies have increasingly sought to overcome this disciplinary division and its ‘text-context-dualism’.

One of the appeals of the study of popular film is the assumption that ‘popular culture also reproduces the tenets, principles, and practices that support existing arrangements … and it legitimates the very contexts and practices that are showcased.’ Siegfried Kracauer argues in this context that ‘To make a film or book intelligible to a broad public, a work of popular culture must draw on familiar tropes that allow the viewer to contextualize and comprehend the work.’ Said viewers have remained under-researched in the field of both film history and Holocaust studies. The film analysis and qualitative study of this research project are informed by, and indebted to, the aforementioned concepts and studies into Holocaust representations. Crucially, this thesis aims to elucidate viewers’ own accounts rather than make assumptions about them. In doing so, it will generate empirical evidence to critically evaluate the existing scholarship.

The work on (and often against) visual representations of the Holocaust in film and television is largely informed by assumptions and speculations about ‘the audience’ or ‘the public’. Yosefa Loshitzky, for example, states that ‘We all well know that most

84 Ibid., p. 6.
people derive their historical knowledge from popular culture and not from scholarly
sources."\textsuperscript{90} For many scholars, this indeed seems to be a fact that does not require
further attention or research. This includes scholars whose assessment of films about
the Holocaust is more favourable. Ilan Avisar contends that ‘In spite of Hollywood’s
inherent incapacity when it comes to dealing with a subject of the magnitude of the
Holocaust, the popular media can be instrumental in enlightening ignorant people about
the course and nature of the Nazi evil.’\textsuperscript{91} This is echoed by Insdorf who stresses that
films may help guard against ‘indifference’ which ‘permitted the Holocaust to develop.’\textsuperscript{92} These assessments are generally not substantiated by empirical evidence.

To Baron films are ‘expressions of a particular mind-set, place and era in history.
They do not merely reenact the event they are depicting; they alter it to render it
relevant to the audiences they hope to attract to watch it at theatres or in their homes.’\textsuperscript{93}
How does this altering of events, relate to audiences’ perceptions? What is the impact
of viewers’ own experiences, knowledge and backgrounds which they bring to the
viewing, interpretation and perception of films? Baron himself acknowledges that he
observed ‘generational differences in the responses’ to Holocaust films that he showed
to different people.\textsuperscript{94} James Chapman, who widely researched the production context
and reception of the British documentary series \textit{The World at War} (Thames Television/ITV, 1973-1974), highlighted the discrepancy between the reception of films and documentaries by scholars and critics on the one hand, and by viewers on the other. Enthusiastic comments from historians and journalists contrast with a much more mixed popular reception of the series. In the case of the ‘Genocide’ episode, however, viewers and critics alike were ‘divided over the suitability of “Genocide” for television broadcast’, due to its harrowing imagery.\textsuperscript{95}

Despite concerns about the lasting impact of film on the viewers and the future of
Holocaust knowledge, memory and education, particularly as the survivors are passing
away, empirical evidence is still scarce. Ien Ang, known for her influential audience
reception research, criticises that in many textual film analyses, ‘the ordinary viewers’
perspective is almost always ignored’ and instead, critics, academics, or producers

\textsuperscript{90} Loshitzky, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{91} Avisar, \textit{Screening the Holocaust}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{92} Insdorf, \textit{Indelible Shadows}, p. xix.
\textsuperscript{93} Baron, \textit{Projecting the Holocaust into the present}, p. viii.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p. ix.
speak ‘for or about’ the audience ‘from a position of distance’. This is certainly also true for the study of Holocaust representations. It may attest to a certain ‘fear’ of the audience and a desire to ‘control’ the ways in which audiences make sense of a given film. One of the most well-known examples for this is the ‘incident’ in a cinema in the United States which screened Schindler’s List to High School students in 1994. When some of the students laughed at a scene in which a Jewish woman is shot, they were asked to leave. Spielberg himself later spoke to the students, though he was among those who defended the teenagers. This indicates the existence of a notion – however contested - of a correct and appropriate way of responding to and understanding films about the Holocaust.

Existing audience research of Holocaust films

The study of films and documentaries about the Holocaust has so far remained largely sheltered from developments in other disciplines, which have researched actual audiences. Few studies so far have sought to investigate the reception of Holocaust films by ‘the public’ through conducting audience research. Existing studies on the reception of films about the Holocaust largely deal with the reception in the public sphere, including newspapers and politics or by looking at historical audiences. Marvin Chomsky’s TV series Holocaust prompted a number of (generally quantitative) surveys of its reach and impact in West Germany. A more recent qualitative study by Juliane Finger and Hans-Ulrich Wagner researched the long-term significance of TV programmes related to the Holocaust in Germany. Their qualitative empirical study was combined with a contextual view of the political and media landscape of the 1970s and the heightened awareness of, and interest in the Holocaust.

One of the first research projects to systematically explore viewers’ reception of

98 This includes the field of Museum Studies, where the plurality of responses to exhibitions is increasingly acknowledged. See e.g. E. Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture (London and New York, 2000).
99 For the German and Italian context, respectively, see M. Thiele, Publizistische Kontroversen über den Holocaust im Film (Thesis, University of Göttingen, 2001); E. Perra, Conflicts of Memory: The Reception of Holocaust Films and TV Programmes in Italy, 1945 to the Present (Oxford, 2010).
specific feature films dealing with National Socialism was a study conducted by media psychologists who analysed the effects of the film *Downfall* (Germany/Italy/Austria, 2004) on German students and the implications for the ways in which Germany is dealing with the National Socialist past. The results of their quantitative, questionnaire-based study suggest, among other things, that those students who had seen the film were more likely to perceive Hitler as a human being and to feel fewer negative emotions towards him than the control group who did not view the film. While the film had some significant effects on the viewer, these could only be made sense of when considering participants’ demographic backgrounds as well as their personalities.

Most of the existing studies tend to focus on the impact of films about the Holocaust on German viewers or, more specifically, their understanding of the National Socialist past, and to what extent they accept historical responsibility and reject racism and anti-Semitism. A refreshing departure from this focus on Germany was made by Anna Reading, who explored the meaning of gender for the memory of the Holocaust. Part of her study draws on interviews with 54 young people from Poland, the United States and Britain. The aim was to identify how these individuals obtained their knowledge and what role films ‘actually play in the construction of people’s “socially inherited memories” of the events.’ Reading criticises assumptions ‘that Holocaust films in some simple and direct way affect our understanding and memory of the events’ and calls for empirical studies aiming to gain insight into the ‘actual reception of Holocaust films as part of people’s everyday lives.’ Her study concludes that while film and television do play a role in young people’s acquisition of Holocaust memory and knowledge, ‘personal encounters with survivors, teachers or family members’ were generally much more important. This contrasts with Annette Insdorf’s claim that ‘it is primarily through motion pictures that the mass audience knows—and will continue to

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105 Ibid., p. 212.
106 Ibid., p. 213.
learn-about the Nazi era and its victims.’ 107 The reception of Holocaust films is influenced by what Reading terms the ‘interpretative community’ in which particular ‘inherited stories and memory practices socially agreed by their family and community’ are internalised as a way of ‘making sense of themselves in relation to the wider world.’ 108 Reading’s insightful study did, however, not primarily focus on the ways in which films are understood and made sense of, but sought to establish the various and often distinct means by which young people acquire knowledge and add to their memory of the Holocaust.

An empirical study on ‘heritage film audiences’ conducted by Claire Monk is also relevant for this project. Though directed at the viewers of period films rather than films about the Holocaust, crucially, Monk challenges the dominant ‘textually derived speculative constructions’ of the heritage film discourse and ‘offered insights into period-film audience members’ own accounts’. 109 Therefore, the privileging of textual analysis from which assumptions about audience reception are derived is not a phenomenon affecting films about the Holocaust alone but is symptomatic of more general tendencies within film studies and film history, in particular.

A comparable research approach to the one used in this PhD thesis was developed by Gudehus et. al. who conducted a reception study of the film Hotel Rwanda (USA, 2005) with 41 people from the United States and Germany using face-to-face interviews. While the researchers interviewed their participants about Hotel Rwanda, they used it primarily as an example ‘to elicit individual reception strategies’. 110 Similar to Monk, they criticised that not enough attention is paid to the ‘reception process’ itself. 111 Their study highlights ‘how viewers can react very differently to the same subject material, even those who have watched the same film and were posed the same questions by the same interviewer.’ 112

Although comparable to this thesis in terms of approach, scope and scale, Gudehus et. al. focused primarily on the reception process rather than specifically on the representation of the Rwandan genocide and its memory. This thesis, on the other hand, aims to shed light on both reception processes and the ways in which the history of the

107 Insdorf, Indelible Shadows, p. xvii.
111 Ibid., p. 347.
112 Ibid., p. 345.
Holocaust is made sense of through films. The existing studies, though still few in numbers, demonstrate the feasibility of, and need for, inter-disciplinary approaches for the study of film reception.

This study is unique in its methodology and exploration of the immediate reception of several films which will highlight differences and similarities in reception. The thesis makes a unique contribution to knowledge by adding to our understanding of how films about the Holocaust are made sense of, the historical understanding they may transmit, and of the relationship between film text, extra-textual factors, and film reception. It is not the work of a film scholar but the thesis positions itself at the intersection of cultural history, cultural studies and the social sciences. If films have in fact, as some scholars claim, superseded the historical profession in transmitting knowledge and understanding, then we need to explore the process of reception in all its complexity.113

The study is not designed as a representative study, but will open up the field for further research and its findings could be quantified on a larger scale, or qualified in different national, social or cultural contexts.

The thesis is structured in three parts. Part I is divided into two chapters. The first one of these discusses five recent films which were selected for the qualitative audience reception study. In the form of case studies, this chapter provides a contextual view of these films, some of which have so far received little academic attention. To move beyond the textual film analysis usually seen in studies of Holocaust representations, the second chapter of Part I provides an in-depth discussion of the methodological framework, which was developed for the audience reception study. This involves detailing the study design, the demographic details of the participants, and the study’s limitations. Part II and Part III both focus on the results from this reception study. Part II concentrates on the ways in which the interviewees of the study made sense of the Holocaust through the films presented to them, and the implications of these interpretations for historical understanding. Its two chapters link the interview analysis to an analysis of the films’ text and context. The first chapter explores the transmission of historical understanding through the five films by focusing on the topics the interviewees commented on the most. Their interpretations are put into relation with the filmmakers’ intentions and any factors which may have influenced these particular film

readings. In the second chapter, the focus is solely on interviewees’ interpretations of perpetrator behaviour and motivation as depicted in the films, which was an aspect the interviewees spoke about very frequently. Part III of the thesis concentrates on film reception processes more generally. Its three chapters examine, firstly, the relationship between film and reality, which includes a study of interviewees’ experiences of the films as authentic, notions of authenticity, and their impact on the film reception. Interviewees’ pre-conceived ideas about Holocaust representations and how these may relate to the film reception process are also addressed. The second chapter studies modes of reception, which involves a detailed discussion of interviewees’ preconceptions which may inform their reception of the film. It also explores how films are remembered by looking at interviewees’ memory of particular film scenes. The chapter further looks at the ways in which the interviewees talked about the films and their different styles of narration, and how these relate to the reception process. Part III concludes with a view towards the long-term reception of films through examining interviewees’ memories of films seen in the past.
Part I: Film Selection and Methodology

This thesis links the analysis of select films, their historical context, and an empirical, qualitative interview study seeking to evaluate the reception and sense-making processes among viewers of films about the Holocaust. A combination of methods and approaches was applied to address the specific aspects of each of the research tasks. Owing to the aforementioned paucity of existing studies into audience reception and interpretation of historical films in general, and Holocaust films in particular, a unique study design was developed.

The first chapter of Part I will discuss the films selected for the audience reception study. For this exploratory study, five different films were included. This will allow for a comparison of the ways in which individual viewers make sense of particular films and to provide insights into the differences and similarities of the reception process. The films were selected according to the following criteria. They were to be recent (of the last decade, 2000-2010), English-language films and, therefore, UK or US (co-) productions to be accessible for British audiences, of different genres and levels of commercial and critical success, contain a television drama, and films based on fiction and on ‘true stories’. In addition to this, they had to reflect different aspects of the Holocaust (e.g. female perpetrators, Jewish partisans), and be of a manageable length (under two hours, not including the credits) to accommodate interviewees’ time constraints.

Well-known films from the 1990s like Schindler’s List and Life is Beautiful were thus excluded from the study. It was decided that they would carry too much ‘baggage’ in terms of discourse and preconceptions among interviewees, and that more recent films would better reflect recent developments in terms of cinematography and focus of Holocaust films. In addition, given the age of these and other ‘classics’ of Holocaust representation, it can be assumed that they will, over time, be less well-known and other films will take centre-stage. The more recent The Pianist (France/Poland/Germany/UK, 2002) was considered but ultimately excluded due to its long running time (150 minutes).

The films selected include The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, The Reader (USA/Germany, 2008), and Defiance. Alongside these economically successful and critically acclaimed films, a film was selected that can be regarded as a box office flop,
namely, *The Grey Zone* (USA, 2001). In addition to these four feature films, the TV production *Conspiracy* (USA/UK, 2001) was selected. Each of the films focuses on different aspects of the Holocaust and the film analysis will reflect on their distinct approaches and their commonalities. The focus of the first chapter is the films’ context and their respective source texts. The chapter will provide brief film synopses and examine the films’ relationship to other representations, and, where available, reviews in the British press and in trade magazines. It should be emphasized here that the film analysis constitutes ‘an act of interpretation’ [sic] on the part of the moving image researcher.  

The second chapter of Part I will detail the qualitative study design and the process of conducting, transcribing and analysing the interviews about the five films listed above, which were generated for this project. It will address the theoretical and methodological framework underpinning and guiding the research, an overview of the interviewees who participated in the study and a discussion of the limitations inherent in such a project.

**A Contextual View of Five Recent Films**

This chapter analyses the five films which were selected for the qualitative audience reception study which is the focus of this investigation. All five films were released between 2001 and 2008 and form part of a new surge in films on the subject in the new millennium. They are further removed from the actual events of the Holocaust, and come after many of the ‘taboos’ had been broken by Chomsky, Spielberg or Benigni, and at the intersection of living memory turning into history with the passing away of the last survivors and eyewitnesses. Scholars such as Alvin Rosenfeld have warned of a trend towards the universalisation of the Holocaust, its memory and legacy. Films such as *Schindler’s List* have also been criticized in this respect for universalizing the Holocaust and for obscuring ‘that the Holocaust is a specific event in history, not a generalized horror.’ This type of universalisation ‘involves finding connections and meanings from the Holocaust that are relevant to all people and human experience’ and

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‘entails consideration of the universal humanistic lessons’.

Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider propose that the memory of the Holocaust is in the process of globalisation and de-contextualisation.

The Holocaust and the Second World War serve, despite disparate experiences, as a shared history, at least in Western Europe. With the Stockholm Declaration in 2000, ‘the Holocaust became officially anchored in European memory’ and ‘has become the new founding moment for Europe.’

The Holocaust is evoked as a universal phenomenon rather than a specific event in the not too distant past; it serves to teach certain lessons and to educate about democracy, citizenship and tolerance, or against racism and even bullying. If the Holocaust is seen as relevant for today rather than as purely historical event, it will remain pertinent to future generations and there is the potential to gain a better understanding of the preconditions and legacies of genocide; on the other hand, the Holocaust as a ‘universalised’ event risks to obscure its historical particularity which, in turn, could prevent crucial insights and level important differences between events.

Perhaps with the exception of Conspiracy, the films in this selection mirror and reinforce this trend of universalisation by utilising the Holocaust as a backdrop, an easily-recognisable and well-known trope signalling, symbolising and signifying universal themes rather than the particularity of the events.

**Conspiracy**

The only TV film and docu-drama in the film selection is Conspiracy (2001), which was directed and produced by the late Frank Pierson (Citizen Cohn, 1992; wrote the screenplay for Dog Day Afternoon for which he won an Oscar in 1974; died in 2012) and written by Loring Mandel (The Little Drummer Girl, 1984). It was distributed by HBO Films and jointly produced by BBC Films and HBO Films.

Starring Kenneth Branagh as Reinhard Heydrich, Stanley Tucci as Adolf Eichmann, Colin Firth as Dr Wilhelm Stuckart, and David Threlfall as Wilhelm Kritzinger, Conspiracy sets out to recreate the Wannsee Conference, a meeting of fifteen senior National Socialist

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6 D. Levy and N. Sznaider, Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust (Frankfurt/Main, 2001), p. 42 [translation by the author].

7 Ibid., p. 187.

8 Conspiracy [DVD Film], dir. by Frank Pierson (BBC Films and HBO Films, 2001, DVD distributed by Warner Home Video); another DVD edition includes different bonus features: Conspiracy [DVD Film], dir. by Frank Pierson (BBC Films and HBO Films, 2001, DVD distributed by Benelux Film Distributors).
officials from the SS, the party and the civilian ministries on 20 January 1942. The film was largely shot on the premises of the House of the Wannsee Conference which, since 1992, has been a memorial, museum and educational site. Conspiracy was nominated for, and won a number of awards, including the Movies for Television Award (Directors Guild of America Awards, 2002) and Best Supporting Actor for Stanley Tucci (Hollywood Foreign Press Association, 2001).9 It was ‘shown as part of a number of programmes commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day’ in Britain in 2001, and ‘was critically acclaimed when it was shown on HBO’ with favourable reviews in the Los Angeles Times and the Hollywood Reporter.10

The historical event which has become known as the ‘Wannsee Conference’ took place in a villa in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee. The meeting’s purpose was to discuss the task with which Reinhard Heydrich had been charged by Hermann Göring in the summer of 1941: ‘to carry out all necessary preparations in regard to organizational, practical and material measures requisite for the total solution of the Jewish question in Europe’.11 The minutes of the meeting, also referred to as the Wannsee Protocol, were found by staff of the American prosecutor at the German Foreign Office when they were collecting information for the Nuremberg Trials. The minutes are, however, not an exact transcript of what was being said. Adolf Eichmann – as far as his evidence can be relied upon - said during his trial in Jerusalem in 1961 that the minutes had been edited by him and Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) and Reich protector of the occupied Czech territory, who had invited the other participants to the meeting.12 Despite the use of euphemisms, the Wannsee Protocol clearly reveals that the killing of all Jews was aimed for.13

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The question of the significance of the meeting is closely related to the question of when mass murder turned into genocide. Historians have argued that the decision was made in mid-July 1941 ‘just before Himmler moved to extend the killings in the Soviet Union’ or mid-September 1941 when Hitler ‘approved the deportation of German Jews eastward.’ There are also arguments for an October/November 1941 decision and Dieter Pohl contends that the decision was only made in 1942, at least in terms of completing the planning. Christian Gerlach, on the other hand, proposes that the Wannsee Conference is closely related to what he terms Hitler’s ‘Grundsatzentscheidung’ (fundamental decision) in early December 1941 which meant that all Jews were to be killed, including the western European and also German Jews. The meeting served to ascertain the authority of the SS over the civilian ministries in the ‘Jewish question’ after there had been clashes over competence in the past, and to share responsibility and complicity for the crimes.

Conspiracy is based on the minutes that remain from ‘one of the most infamous gatherings in world history’ and adds to this document its own interpretation of the event. In only 96 minutes - which is to reflect the duration of the historical meeting - the film offers a glimpse into how the conference may have unfolded. The language is English and focus of attention is Heydrich, charmingly and coldly played by a very blond and blue-eyed Kenneth Branagh, while little effort was made to have the other actors physically resemble the historical participants of the meeting. The only music is a piece by Schubert on a record which is played by Eichmann at the end of the film.

A voiceover informs the viewer at the start of the film of the wider historical context of the invasion of Poland and the war situation by January 1942. It is further explained that ‘In two hours, these men changed the world forever’ and that only one record of ‘what was said and done’ survives. After the gradual arrival of all invitees, they enjoy

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18 ‘Conspiracy’, BBC Press Office.
food and wine and talk about the political news as well as speculate about the meeting’s purpose. Once Heydrich has arrived, the meeting commences with an introduction round in which the invitees introduce themselves with name and department, office or rank, which is, presumably, for the benefit of the viewer as there is no record that this in fact happened or that there would have been any need for it.

Heydrich sets out the meeting’s agenda – the ‘complete solution of the Jewish question’. Heydrich and Eichmann explain how the Reich finds itself confronted with millions of Jews in Europe. Heydrich suggests that all able-bodied men and women are to work in construction whereas the others are to be transferred to an old-age ghetto such as Theresienstadt. Next on the agenda are sterilisation and the re-classification of ‘racial categories’ so fewer Jews will be able to escape. This part of the agenda takes up a large amount of time and thus corresponds (to some extent) with the minutes of the meeting. The conference is repeatedly interrupted by the serving of food and discussions between some of the invitees, most notably Kritzinger and Stuckart, and Heydrich. Towards the end of the meeting, they discuss ‘method’. Eichmann talks about the mobile gassing vans that had been in operation for several months and also explains the benefit of using Cyanide instead of carbon monoxide. The meeting ends with all men around the table agreeing to the proposals. Eichmann, Heydrich, and Heinrich Müller sit together for a while, drinking alcohol, and Heydrich recounts a story Kritzinger told him during the meeting. The film closes with the display of the actors’ photographs in their film character with a text underneath describing the fate of those who attended the meeting. The narrator tells the viewer about what happened to Heydrich and how Eichmann carried on with the ‘final solution’ out of a sense of ‘honour’.

The acting and cinematography are very matter-of-fact: the film is set largely in one room around a conference table and is heavy on dialogue, and kept bleak in colour. Conspiracy evokes the sense of a documentary rather than a fictional film and seems to come without an agenda. Simone Gigliotti notes that the ‘feeling of simulation was evident in the rather theatrical set for Conspiracy, to generate a claustrophobic feel for the place by placing the actors and the audience at desk level, and filming at certain

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camera angles reinforced this audience participation. The ‘camera angles induce involvement in the meeting, and close-ups create the illusion of intimacy with the perpetrators … At the end of the Conspiracy, viewers have become trespassers to the Nazi regime’s secret death work’.21

The dialogue is largely the invention of screenwriter Mandel who had to make the characters ‘interesting and conflicting enough’.22 This ‘blurring of record versus conjecture’23 is evidenced, for example, in a scene in which Stuckart and Gerhard Klopfer have a heated argument, which results in an angry and anti-Semitic speech by Stuckart. The tension between the two men is a creation of the filmmakers because the historical Stuckart and Klopfer together founded a journal in the autumn of 1941 and must have at least known each other and been able to co-operate.24 The strategy of making the film more ‘watchable’ by breaking the monotony of fifteen men sitting around a table, and more entertaining is not least exemplified by the star cast, and particularly Branagh’s interpretation of Heydrich.

The film is rich with intertextual references. At the beginning of the film, while the meeting’s participants are waiting for Heydrich to arrive, we can see his plane approach and land nearby. This is reminiscent of Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 Nazi propaganda film Triumph of the Will and Hitler’s god-like descent from the skies by plane. There are also historical references whose origins are not in the Wannsee Protocol. For example, Josef Bühler talks about how they could not shoot all the Jews which is reminiscent of at least a part of a speech held by Bühler’s superior, Hans Frank, on 16 December 1941.25 Conspiracy is not the first film to dramatise the Wannsee Conference. Based on very much the same sources, Heinz Schirk’s film Die Wannsee-Konferenz (West Germany, 1984) offered a different reading of the infamous meeting.26 Compared to Conspiracy, the German film placed less emphasis on Heydrich’s dominance and more

21 Ibid., p. 133.
26 Die Wannsee-Konferenz [DVD TV Film], dir. by Heinz Schirk (Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), Infrafilm, 1984, distributed by Rearguard Films, DVD distributed by Verlag Komplett-Media GmbH Munich/Grünwald, 2005).
on that of the SS overall as parts of the meeting take place in the form of private gatherings of members of the SS; the film includes female personnel; the atmosphere is jovial from the start with many (appalling) jokes; Stuckart is depicted as arrogant and proud but is not being taken seriously by the others; the invitees talk about killings and gas vans from the beginning; and, finally, the decision-making of the ‘Final Solution’ is explained as a result of a crucial meeting between Himmler and Hitler, and follows an intentionalist interpretation with Hitler having allegedly planned the extermination of the Jews since the writing of Mein Kampf. Like Conspiracy, Die Wannsee-Konferenz is striving to be educational and seeks to convey the meeting and its importance to a wider audience. Though Conspiracy has put its own spin on the representation of the meeting, one can also see similarities between the two films in terms of source base, dialogue and the significance assigned to the Wannsee Conference. The 1984 film, however, makes a clear distinction between the mass murder of the Soviet Jews and the turn towards genocide of all Jews of Europe.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

The second film in this selection to be told from a non-Jewish German perspective takes a very different approach to filmmaking and to representing the Holocaust. Mark Herman’s (Brassed Off, 1996, and Little Voice, 1998) film adaptation of John Boyne’s 2006 best-selling novel The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, which is often used in secondary schools ‘as a starting point to help young people discuss ethical dilemmas about humanity’, achieved high box-office results in the UK and internationally. It stars Vera Farmiga (mother), Rupert Friend (Kotler), David Thewlis (father), Jack Scanlon (Shmuel) and Asa Butterfield (Bruno), and also won several awards, such as the British Independent Film Award for Best Actress. It was produced by Miramax Films, BBC Films and Heyday Films, with a score by James Horner, known for the music for films such as Avatar and Titanic.
*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* depicts the fictitious and unlikely friendship of Bruno, a German boy and the son of a concentration and death camp commandant, and Shmuel, a Jewish boy who is an inmate of this camp. The film begins in war-time Berlin when eight-year-old Bruno is confronted with the news that his father was promoted and the whole family will move to the ‘countryside’. Bruno is very lonely in the new house where he has no friends. From his window he can see a concentration camp but believes it to be a farm. His mother prohibits him to enter the back garden and to look out of the window. When she is away one day, Bruno sneaks out of the house and encounters a large fence surrounding the ‘farm’ where he meets Shmuel, an eight-year-old Jewish boy who is imprisoned in the camp. The two boys make friends and regularly meet at the fence.

Parallel to this, another story unfolds as tensions rise between the parents. The turning point for the mother is the accidental revelation of Lieutenant Kotler, one of her husband’s subordinates, of the camp’s true purpose. The family increasingly disintegrates until it is agreed that the mother is to leave with the children. Meanwhile, Bruno had been growing increasingly aware that the farm was in fact a camp and that his father may not be the man he thought he was, particularly after Pavel, a camp inmate forced to work in the house, is beaten to death by Kotler during a family dinner. But when he catches a glimpse of a propaganda film about the camp, he regains trust in his father. Before Bruno has to leave with his mother and sister, he digs into the camp to help Shmuel find his missing father. Bruno and Shmuel are soon pushed to the gas chamber with other inmates and are killed together. Bruno’s parents, having noticed his absence, arrive too late to save their son.

Though the film is not so much about the Holocaust than about its presumed ‘lessons’ for today, distributor Miramax and London’s Jewish Cultural Centre commissioned a survey in 2009, marking the release of the DVD. For the survey, 1,200 secondary school children aged 11 to 16 were asked, among other things, what Auschwitz was, and the results revealed some significant gaps in knowledge. The film was thus explicitly linked to Holocaust education. Until its closure in 2013, the UK

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30 ‘Auschwitz is a beer, schoolchildren tell researchers’, *The Telegraph* (9 March 2009), http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/4957314/Auschwitz-is-a-beer-schoolchildren-tell-researchers.html [Accessed 28 April 2014].
charity Film Education and Miramax worked together ‘to encourage the film to be used as a way of improving children's knowledge about the Holocaust.’

The film reviews in the British press were polarised and largely revolved around a critique of the film’s lack of realism, of its (im)plausibility, and of Bruno’s innocence and naivety. Among the critics who are concerned with the film’s realism and plausibility is Xan Brooks (The Guardian) who wonders, ‘were camp inmates really able to slope off for a casual chat with passers-by?’, but who is reconciled by its ending.\(^{32}\) Linda Grant (The Guardian), on the other hand, is less forgiving; to her, the film ‘represents the Disneyfication of the Final Solution’ and she criticises the ‘enforced identification with Bruno as an innocent victim’ and that ‘the camp is largely peripheral to the main action.’\(^{33}\)

While Boyne’s novel was termed a fable and told almost entirely from Bruno’s perspective, the film provides a broader point of view focusing not only on Bruno but also his family. Like the film, the novel received much criticism, particularly with regards to ‘historical inaccuracies’, its ‘implausible’ premise and ‘the fact that most children of Shmuel’s age would have been exterminated on arrival at Auschwitz.’\(^{34}\) Ruth Gilbert further argues that it ‘is entirely unbelievable that a boy of Bruno’s age, the son of a high-ranking Nazi, would not have been inundated with the anti-Semitic ideology of Hitler’s Germany. This, for many readers, is likely to be an obfuscation too far.’\(^{35}\) At the same time, others, such as Alice Curry, found praise for the novel as being ‘effective’ in its ‘retrospective condemnation of cultural ignorance and ... exploration of blind prejudice.’\(^{36}\) The film can be understood as containing a warning against racism and intolerance, with ‘lessons’ to be learned from, which may resonate with the British approach to Holocaust commemoration and education.\(^{37}\)


\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 363.


\(^{37}\) See e.g. A. Pearce, ‘Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day: Inculcating “British” or “European” Holocaust Consciousness?’, in Sharples and Jensen (eds), Britain and the Holocaust, p. 200. For research on the
At the same time, the novel’s ‘fable’ appendix was dropped for the film and great efforts were made to ensure period detail and as much historical accuracy as possible. In terms of cinematography, the film’s colours get progressively darker and drained in the course of the film, which emphasises the increasingly grave and tense situation. The film’s running themes are stripes and bars, not only in the form of the prisoner uniforms but especially within the family’s house, highlighting Bruno’s own ‘imprisonment’. The film is marked by a tension between providing a faithful adaptation of the book and attempting historical accuracy (possibly so not to offend, or in order to educate) whilst also dealing with questions of responsibility, knowledge, and propaganda. Other changes between novel and film appear to have been made for dramatic effect, suspense, and to condense the story line. The ending, for example, features a Hollywood-style race against time that the parents lose as their son is killed whereas in the novel the ending is more open and less dramatic. The film ending is also reminiscent of Oskar Schindler’s race against time in Schindler’s List when a group of Jewish women are deported to Auschwitz rather than to Schindler’s factory. While in Schindler’s List the women discover that they were led into showers, in The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas the ‘shower room’ is actually a gas chamber. Other intertextual references include well-known images from the liberation of the camps alongside Holocaust iconography: smoke, mud, bars and stripes, barbed wire, and trains. It should also be noted that the memoir by the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß, and Gitta Sereny’s work on Franz Stangl, the commandant of Sobibor and Treblinka, served as sources of information and inspiration for the filmmakers.

Where scenes were added, these serve to advance understanding or to address plausibility issues. In the film, the mother, Elsa, seems a lot more naïve and more approving of her husband’s promotion and relocation than the novel’s counterpart. The effect of this in the film is that the disintegration of the family to come, and Elsa’s growing awareness, is more radical and deep-felt. One of the key scenes in the film, which was not taken from the novel, serves as a decisive moment for the mother’s character development: Kotler accidently reveals to her that Jews are killed in the camp. She then confronts her husband and we can observe not only the breakdown of their effects of Holocaust education on values and attitudes in Scotland, see H. Maitles, “‘Why are we learning about this?’ Does Studying the Holocaust Encourage Better Citizenship Values?”, Genocide Studies and Prevention, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2008), pp. 341-52.

marriage but also Elsa’s psychological disintegration. In the novel, on the other hand, Elsa has known all along about her husband’s ‘work’ but finds it increasingly difficult to live with this reality in such close proximity to the camp. In both novel and film, her opposition only ever goes as far as wanting to take the children away rather than offer resistance to the regime or help the persecuted Jews.

The perpetrator perspective on the victims in this film is similar to other Holocaust films, such as Schindler’s List in that neither Shmuel nor Pavel move the plot forward, and all other camp inmates and victims remain an amorphous mass. Bruno is at the centre of attention in the film, while the suffering of the Jewish victims is marginalised. At the end, when both boys are killed, one could almost forget about Shmuel and the other inmates. The filmmakers attempted to counteract this by ending the film with a shot panning away from the gas chamber door revealing hundreds of prisoner uniforms, thus pointing to the wider context of the film and remembering the millions of victims. But one cannot help but feel that this comes a little late and as an afterthought, particularly after the previous shots of the parents screaming and crying at the loss of their son, implying that ultimately, all suffering is equal.

The Reader

The third film in this study to be told from a non-Jewish German perspective, The Reader, based on a fiction novel and set across half a century, is possibly the one with the least overt link to the Holocaust. This award-winning film, based on Bernhard Schlink’s best-selling novel Der Vorleser (1995), was directed by Stephen Daldry (Billy Elliot, 2000) and stars Kate Winslet as Hanna Schmitz, Ralph Fiennes as Michael Berg, and David Kross as the young Michael.39 The film is divided into three parts, spanning from the 1950s to the 1990s. It tells the fictional story of teenager Michael who begins an affair with an older woman, Hanna, who demands that he reads to her. The relationship is marked by Hanna’s often erratic behaviour. When offered a promotion at work, Hanna disappears without notice. Several years later, now a law student, Michael attends a trial of former SS concentration camp guards. Hanna is one of the several defendants accused of murdering 300 Jewish women by leaving the doors of a burning church locked. Rather than provide a sample of her hand-writing to establish whether or not she wrote an incriminating report, she confesses to being its author, and Michael

now realises that Hanna is illiterate. He eventually decides against telling the judge, and Hanna is sentenced to life in prison. Whilst incarcerated, she teaches herself to read and write with the help of tapes sent to her by Michael. After 20 years in prison, Hanna commits suicide prior to her release. In her will, she tasks Michael with giving her tin of savings to one of the two survivors of the church fire. The film ends with Michael opening up to his estranged daughter at Hanna’s grave.

Reviews of the film in British newspapers and trade magazines were varied and highly polarised. The most scathing review was written by The Guardian’s Peter Bradshaw to whom the ‘dramatic and emotional structure of the film insidiously invites us to see Hanna’s secret misery as a species of victimhood that, if not exactly equivalent to that of her prisoners, is certainly something to be weighed thoughtfully in the balance, and to see a guilt-free human vulnerability behind war crimes.’ Bradshaw was challenged over his review by the film’s producer, David Hare, and scholar Julian Dodd, who contends that Bradshaw ‘failed to understand’ Daldry’s adaptation of Schlink’s novel. He demands that we need to ‘accept that people who commit atrocities have stories, too’ so that we can ‘understand how such atrocities can be committed in the first place’. Similarly favourable was Tony Rennel’s review in the Daily Mail in which he made an attempt at exploring which historical perpetrator Hanna might be based on. The critic highlights that ‘thousands of women’ helped ‘to run the brutal death camps in Hitler’s Third Reich, places where all compassion was erased, replaced by terrible cruelty and torture, all the more unspeakable because it was so routine and so casual.’ For critics like Rennel, The Reader appeared to provide valuable insights into the motivations of female guards, some of whom ‘were sadists who enjoyed abusing the prisoners’, while the majority, like Hanna, allegedly ‘fell into this way of life almost by accident, and then found they couldn’t get out of it.’

At its core, The Reader is about Germany’s coming to terms with the National Socialist past, and especially the second generation’s confrontation with the parent generation. This contested process of ‘coming to terms’, for which the controversial

43 Ibid.
term **Vergangenheitsbewältigung** was coined, is, according to Peter Reichel, Germany’s ‘second history of National Socialism’. The term has to be understood both in terms of a judicial and political process and in terms of the official memory culture, aesthetic culture, and the scholarly research into the history of National Socialism. It is controversial because it suggests that it is possible to ‘overcome’ or ‘work through’ the past in the sense of attaining closure. The 1990s were a crucial time in a process of positive reinterpretation of the National Socialist past. Young termed the way in which Germany has been dealing with the past ‘anti-memory’ of the Holocaust by which the ‘new Germany’ is idealised, and by which victims and perpetrators are commemorated in the same way. In a major paradigm shift in 1995, the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, increasing attention was paid to allied bombings, flight and expulsion and thus overall, to the (non-Jewish) German ‘victims’ of the war. On this basis, experiences of suffering were levelled which indicates how contested the memory of the war was and still is. Schlink’s 1995 novel has to be understood and interpreted against this backdrop.

The film addresses both the process of coming to terms with National Socialism and its legacies as described above, and the legal history of (not) prosecuting the perpetrators who had in their thousands murdered, or aided and abetted the murder of, millions of people. These processes are still on-going as the next ‘last’ Nazi trial is in preparation. The trial in the second part of *The Reader* was influenced by the Auschwitz Trial, 1963-1965, during which 22 (male) perpetrators were prosecuted for their crimes under the National Socialist regime. Owing to particularities of German criminal law, ‘the law came up against the limits of its capacity to deal adequately with systematic genocide’ as the crime of genocide ‘did not depend wholly on the specific

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45 See e.g. J. Musiol, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in der Bundesrepublik: Kontinuität und Wandel in den späten 1970er Jahren* (Marburg, 2006).
46 Young, *The Texture of Memory*, p. 53.
individual motivation of any of its numerous perpetrators.\textsuperscript{51} Crucially, the trial led to a ‘focus on individual perpetrators’ as dominant representations of Auschwitz.\textsuperscript{52}

Though the majority of the perpetrators were male, and although women played a subordinated role in the National Socialist ideology, women not only benefitted from the regime in different ways, they also participated in its crimes. Their participation ranged from supporting their husbands who were in the army, SS, the Nazi party or in civilian ministries, to working as secretaries in the RSHA, or working as guards in concentration, labour and death camps.\textsuperscript{53} Though male and female SS officers and guards acted no differently in the camps, overall, female perpetrators have particularly stirred popular emotions and discourse, due to popular notions of femininity.\textsuperscript{54} This was not only obvious in the press but also in representations of female perpetrators (and also of female victims) in films and on television.\textsuperscript{55} The most notable examples of representations of alleged ‘female (sexual) deviance’ on film are Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS (Canada/USA, 1974) and other Nazi-exploitation films, Night Porter (Italy, 1974), Kapo (Italy/France/Yugoslavia, 1960), but also Sophie’s Choice (UK/USA, 1982) and, with its explicit sex scenes and Hanna’s sexual relationship with a teenage boy, The Reader. Schlink’s decision to make the perpetrator atypical in terms of being both female and illiterate is particularly interesting when considering Silke Wenk’s notion of the ‘feminisation of fascism’.\textsuperscript{56}

The film adaptation differs markedly from the novel in one crucial aspect. The latter was written from Michael’s perspective and is very clearly about Germany’s coming to terms with the past when he reflects on the relationship between student movement,
generational conflict’ and the Nazi past.\(^{57}\) This introspective is absent from the film which focuses much more on Hanna, though Schlink maintains that, nonetheless, ‘the second-generation situation comes out pretty well.’\(^{58}\) More focus on Michael may have provided a clue for viewers that the film is about the continuing impact of the past on the present over generations, and the negotiation of the ways in which Germany has confronted its history since 1945. If Michael in the novel is indeed, as Bill Niven argues, an ‘unreliable narrator’, whom we are not meant to follow in his defence of Hanna, this may not necessarily come across in the film.\(^{59}\) The film, therefore, becomes a much more universal story about the lasting impact of war on society, and about questions of guilt, responsibility and justice.

**Defiance**

The three films discussed above share their focus on the perpetrators and bystanders of the Holocaust. The fourth film in this selection takes a Jewish perspective that is at once familiar and unusual. *Defiance* was directed and produced by Edward Zwick (*Blood Diamond*, 2006, *Legends of the Fall*, 1994, and *Glory*, 1989). The film is set in Belarus in 1941/42 and is based on the book *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (1993) by researcher Nechama Tec who is a survivor of the Holocaust.\(^{60}\) The film is a US production but two of its main protagonists are played by well-known British actors. Daniel Craig, now best-known for playing James Bond, stars as Tuvia Bielski and Jamie Bell (*Billy Elliot*, 2000) as Asael Bielski. American actor Liev Schreiber (*Jakob the Liar*, 1999; directed *Everything is Illuminated*, 2005) plays Zus Bielski. The film was successful at the box office and received Oscar and Golden Globe nominations, and won a couple of awards, including the Las Vegas Film Critics Society Award (Best Score).\(^{61}\)


Defiance depicts the survival of a group of Jewish refugees in the Belorussian forests during the Second World War. At the centre of this ‘true story’ are three unlikely heroes, the Jewish brothers Tuvia, Zus and Asael Bielski. When their village is destroyed by German forces and their parents are killed by Belorussian collaborators, the brothers hide in the forest and encounter increasing numbers of refugees, many of whom are old and sick. Though initially reluctant to help them, particularly Zus who would rather fight the Germans, the Bielski partisans, led by Tuvia, eventually ensure the survival of 1,200 Jews. Early on in the film, Tuvia kills the Belorussian police officers responsible for killing his parents. This is crucial for Tuvia’s transformation as he realises that revenge is not the answer. Their community is endangered by local collaborators selling them out to the Germans but also from within when some members of the group seek more power and privileges. Meanwhile, Tuvia and Zus fall out over their disagreement on how best to respond to the German onslaught. Eventually, Zus and other refugees join Russian partisans to fight both the Germans and the Belorussian collaborators. At the film’s finale, Zus, disillusioned with the Russians’ anti-Semitism, returns to the community which narrowly escapes a German attack, and helps fight off a German detachment.

The British film reviews of Defiance are remarkably similar to each other. They either praise the film, or, more commonly, praise the story and the acting but loathe the directing. All reviewers call the story of the Bielskis ‘extraordinary’ or ‘fascinating’, and almost all emphasise it being a ‘true story’. The Daily Mail’s Derek Malcolm is no exception. While calling the story ‘extraordinary, all the more so because it is true’ and praising the performances of the actors, he criticises Zwick’s ‘pedestrian telling of the tale’, the ‘very ordinary screenplay’ and the ‘direction which constantly puts one in mind of an old-fashioned Second World War thriller that happens to star Jewish heroes rather than John Wayne or Errol Flynn.’

The reviews of both The Daily Mail’s Chris Tookey and The Guardian’s David Cox are informed by the armed conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas which was, at the time of the film release, still on-going. Tookey writes in this respect:

This is a fascinating story, all the more relevant in view of current events in Gaza, which could also be interpreted as a response by Jews to being under attack, but with more arms at their disposal, and much more powerful friends. I suspect that the

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current wave of virulently anti-Israeli sentiment among opinion-formers in this country may result in this film being judged more harshly than it deserves.\(^6\)

This stands in contrast to Cox’s critique which soon leaves the film behind to turn to the subject of Israel and Gaza. It would seem that the representation of Jewish resistance stirs up controversy; this may primarily have had to do with the timing of the film release (early January 2009) coinciding with a time of armed conflict between Israel and Hamas. The release date itself may have been geared towards the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz, or even the Academy Awards. Cox’s polemic readily connects the film and the contemporary conflict, comparing not only Israeli politician Tzipi Livni to Zus Bielski, the shooting of Nazi collaborators to the Israeli strikes against Hamas, but also the plight of the European Jews during the Holocaust to the situation of Muslims after 9/11. Claiming that anti-Semitism has declined thanks to the depiction of Jews as victims in films (which in his view is due to Hollywood allegedly being dominated by Jews), he argues that ‘the world identifies more readily’ with the Israelis hiding from Hamas’s rocket attacks ‘than with those other families undergoing Israeli bombardment’.\(^6\)

These reviews indicate the impact of both contemporary geopolitical factors (the conflict in Gaza) and political views (pro-Israel/anti-Zionist) on the critics’ film reception.

The film was inspired by Tec’s book, which is largely based on her interviews with former members of the ‘Bielski otriad’ and served as the film’s main source text.\(^6\)

Defiance took a number of artistic liberties compared to Tec’s book. This includes the amalgamation of a range of characters and events. For example, in the film, the Bielskis’ parents are killed by local Belorussian collaborators and Tuvia takes revenge by killing the local police officer and collaborator, Kuznicki, and his sons. According to

\(^6\) C. Tookey, ‘We shall fight them in the forests…’, The Daily Mail (9 January 2009), http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-1110093/Defiance-We-shall-fight-forests-.html [Accessed 28 April 2014].


Tec’s research, the parents were, in fact, killed in a German ‘Aktion’ in the ghetto of Nowogrodek soon after its establishment in December 1941. According to the book, there was a local collaborator named Kuznicki, a peasant, who was captured by Zus and killed by Russian partisans, but who had nothing to do with the parents’ death. Defiance stayed true to one of Tuvia Bielski’s main concerns, which was, according to Tec, the enlargement of the group to save as many Jews as possible. Most of the changes made for the film adaptation serve to condense the story and attempt to capture the essence of the Bielski partisans’ experience: fear of attack by the Germans or by Belorussians, Russian anti-Semitism, the particular hardships faced by women (epitomised in the film’s story of one woman who got pregnant after having been raped by a German, and the protection female partisans sought from their male counterparts), dangers of starvation and disease, the tensions within the group, and the importance of building a community.

The film begins with black-and-white archive footage accompanied by a voice-over of a speech by Hitler, which he gave to the Hitler Youth at the Nuremberg Party Rally in 1934, depicted in Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will, which is not subtitled. The footage gives way to historical re-enactment which was shot in a ‘living museum’ in Lithuania. German forces murder people in a village while an SS officer is filming the killing. The film now changes from black-and-white into colour film. Defiance could be argued to be positioned in opposition and with reference to Schindler’s List. The latter film begins and ends in colour but is in black-and-white for the rest of the time. This black-and-white filming provides the film with an aura of authenticity as viewers would know about the Holocaust through black-and-white photographs. It also ‘distances’ the audience as ‘it marks this particular past as different, as elsewhere, as “another country”’. Defiance, on the other hand, is filmed as if it was happening now: hand-held cameras, close-ups and bright colours give the impression that what we see could be happening anytime and anywhere. In this way, Defiance bridges past and present and highlights the relevance of the story for today. In addition, the number of Jews saved –

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66 Tec, Defiance, p. 43.
67 Ibid., pp. 87-8.
68 Ibid., p. 61.
69 The words audible at the beginning of the film are ‘Vor uns liegt Deutschland, in uns marschiert Deutschland, hinter uns kommt Deutschland’. This would translate to ‘Germany stands before us, Germany marches within us, and Germany follows behind us.’
70 E. Zwick, ‘Film with Audio Commentary by Edward Zwick’, Defiance [DVD].
by Jews, not Gentiles – exceeds that saved by Schindler. Further intertextual references include the re-enactment of Nazi photographs of mass graves. In a scene towards the beginning, one of the refugees encounters a long, narrow mass grave filled with hundreds of bodies. The image is fleeting and slightly blurred, and no details can be made out. Defiance also cites from Come and See (USSR, 1985) during some of its explosion scenes, a film which was set in Belarus.⁷²

Of the five films selected, Zwick’s film is, in many ways, the most conventional. Reading remarks that ‘in order for feature films to reach a mass audience they tend to use established Hollywood conventions in narrative and character, sanitising the events so that real terror, despair and degradation are rarely seen.’⁷³ Defiance certainly reflects these ‘capitalist imperatives’.⁷⁴ At the same time, the film is remarkable on at least three counts. First of all, it is set in Belarus rather than Western Europe or the ghettos and camps in Poland. Not many, if any, mainstream films about the Holocaust deal with the extermination of the Jews in countries such as Belarus and Russia. Even documentaries tend not to devote much time to the war in the East and the crimes perpetrated there by Wehrmacht and Einsatzgruppen. It is further a film about Jewish resistance: Jews who fight and Jews who save other Jews. Few films take this perspective, among them Escape from Sobibor (UK/Yugoslavia, 1987), The Grey Zone, and Naked among Wolves (East Germany, 1963). If the rescue of Jews is the focus of films, it is more generally Gentiles who save the lives of Jews or are instrumental to their survival or escape, such as in Schindler’s List or The Pianist. Some Belarussians collaborated with the Germans which is also depicted in Defiance.⁷⁵ Finally, Zwick’s film is, at least partly, an action film, a genre not usually associated with the representation of the Holocaust. Despite being distinct from other films on the subject, Defiance is conventional in its choice of a redemptory narrative, and its use of familiar and universal formulae. This includes the pursuit of love interests, brothers-at-odds, coming-of-age, heroic struggle, fighting-against-the-odds and narrow escape. It follows the tropes of both action film and melodrama, including the utilisation of Klezmer and violin music, which is not dissimilar from Schindler’s List.

⁷² Zwick, ‘Film with Audio Commentary’.
⁷³ A. Reading, The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust: Gender, Culture and Memory (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 94-5.
⁷⁴ Ibid.
⁷⁵ See e.g. S. Ginaite-Rubinson, Resistance and Survival: The Jewish community in Kaunas, 1941-1944 (Oakville, 2005), pp. 126-7; M. Dean, Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941-44 (Basingstoke, 2000).
In both memory and research of the Holocaust, the image of passive Jewish victims has been dominant. Instances of Jewish resistance in its many forms have only slowly received attention. Most notably, Raul Hilberg argues that there was a two-thousand-year-old continuity of Jewish responses to anti-Jewish measures. He maintains that the ‘Jews were not oriented toward resistance ... Measured in German casualties, Jewish armed opposition shrinks into insignificance.’ Yehuda Bauer, on the other hand, criticises the marginalisation of other forms of opposition as propagated by Hilberg and other scholars, and he suggests a rethinking of how resistance is defined. The forms of Jewish resistance depended on time and location. Unlike Jews in Western Europe, who could at times hide their children with Gentiles, Eastern European Jews were faced with a different situation and a brutal war from the onset. Apart from the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, there were rebellions in 24 other ghettos in the General Government, and attempted rebellions and break-outs in at least 60 additional ghettos in Eastern Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. At least 20,000 Jewish partisans fought against the Germans and an additional 10,000 survived due to the protection of these partisans. Jewish prisoners rebelled in the death camps of Sobibor, Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The Grey Zone

The final film in the selection is also told from a Jewish perspective but takes a radically different position as it confronts the predicament of the so-called ‘privileged’ Jews. The Grey Zone was directed by Tim Blake Nelson (O, 2001; better known as an actor in e.g. O Brother, Where Art Thou?, 2000). It stars David Arquette (Hoffman), Mira Sorvino (Dina), Allan Corduner (Nyiszli), Harvey Keitel (Muhsfeld) and Steve Buscemi (Abramowics). The film is based on multiple sources, most prominently a memoir written by Miklos Nyiszli and an essay by Primo Levi, but also manuscripts buried by members of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, on which some of the main

79 The Grey Zone [DVD Film], dir. by Tim Blake Nelson (Killer Films, Martien Holdings A.V.V., Millennium Films Inc., Goatsingers, 2001, DVD distributed by Lionsgate).
characters were loosely based. Economically, *The Grey Zone* grossed only around half a million US Dollars. It won the National Board of Review’s Freedom of Expression Award in 2002.

*The Grey Zone* is set in one of the crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the most notorious of the Nazi death camps. It focuses on the survival of the gas by one girl, the attempt to save her life, and the twelfth Sonderkommando’s uprising in October 1944. The Sonderkommandos consisted largely of Jewish prisoners who were forced by the Nazis to work in the crematoria, ushering deportees into the gas chambers, ‘cleaning’ the gas chambers, cutting hair and pulling teeth, burning bodies in the furnaces, and disposing of the ashes. In return, these so-called ‘privileged’ prisoners received a temporary reprieve from death, better rations, alcohol, and linen. After around four months, they were killed and replaced by the next group.

The film ‘plunges its audience into the netherworld of loathsome choices’ and depicts the daily horror faced by the members of the Sonderkommando in what is to date the most graphic and relentless depiction of the killing process and its aftermath. The focus is on several Sonderkommando men, Hoffman, Schlermer, Rosenthal and Abramowics, and Miklos Nyiszli, a Jewish doctor forced to assist the notorious Dr Mengele with his experiments. They are subjected to the SS, particularly Oberscharführer Muhsfeld. Parallel to the narrative strand in the crematoria, several female prisoners from the women’s camp have been aiding the camp resistance by smuggling gun powder from the munitions factory, where they are forced to work, to the Sonderkommando. The camp SS has heard rumours about an uprising and tortures the women to gain information. Meanwhile, in the crematoria, the Sonderkommando find a girl still alive after a gassing. Their desperate attempt to save her life coincides with the uprising. The prisoners are outnumbered and outgunned by the SS who shoot dead all Sonderkommando, apart from Nyiszli, still alive after the rebellion. The girl is

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84 Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the present*, p. 252.
made to watch until she, too, is shot by Muhsfeld. The film ends with a ghostly and poetic voice-over by the girl, followed by short texts informing viewers of the outcome of the historical rebellion, and the fates of Muhsfeld and Nyiszli.

Scholars have largely praised the film for its unsentimental and non-voyeuristic representation of the predicament of the *Sonderkommandos*. Matthew Boswell characterises the film as ‘an example of a post-testimonial work in which an engagement with survivor philosophy takes precedence over fidelity to survivor testimony. A kind of benign revisionism is its working mode.’\(^{85}\) Critically, the reviews were mixed and revolved around the questions of realism and its limits, the film’s unconventional modes of representation, and the universal questions raised by Nelson. The overall tone may be best captured with a review of the theatrical play (1996) preceding the film: ‘I’m not sure why anyone would want to see this play, but I’m very sure it’s important that you do.’\(^{86}\) Nelson’s sense of mission he attached to his film can be seen in his response to criticism. He stated unflinchingly that he had expected the mixed critical response and that the ‘movie is grim, and it should be, given its topic.’\(^{87}\)

The film is characterised by a realist style, a claustrophobic atmosphere, handheld camera shots, drained and dark colours, and ‘staccato-like dialogue’\(^{88}\) in American accents. At the beginning of the film, a short text explains and contextualises the predicament of the *Sonderkommando*, while brief summaries of the outcome of the uprising, the fates of Muhsfeld, and of Nyiszli, who survived the Holocaust, are displayed at the end of the film. Adam Brown commends the dialogue for its ‘alienating’ effects on the viewers, which in turn discourages audience identification and sets the film apart from other representations.\(^{89}\) Aaron Kerner, by contrast, suggests that the film’s dialogue ‘suffers as a result’ of being based on a theatrical play.\(^{90}\) All sound in *The Grey Zone* is ambient, ‘most notably the constant roar of the crematorium


\(^{89}\) Ibid., p. 176.

One music track towards the end of the film is a record played by the doctor, and earlier, a band of prisoners accompanies the Jewish victims on their way into the gas chambers. Baron notes that ‘Although such orchestras entertained the SS, greeted Jewish transports, and performed for inmates marching to work, they never played background music for Jews descending into gas chambers.’

*The Grey Zone* is Nelson’s affirmation that ‘no event is sacred’ or exempt from representation. First and foremost, it is a film about the human condition. The Holocaust as an event at the extreme and at the limits of comprehension, and particularly the ‘choiceless choices’ faced by the *Sonderkommando*, serve as the ultimate predicament: what would you do? How far would you go to survive? What – and whom – would you be willing to sacrifice? Though Nelson emphasised that his film ‘does not pretend to be a historical document’, he went to great length to make one of the most realistic films about the crematoria to date.

The biggest influence on *The Grey Zone* is, arguably, Levi’s essay of the same name. Brown contends that the ‘ever-present tension between the particular and the universal, between extreme coercion leading to moral compromise and a pre-existing human inclination to it, is an unresolved – and unacknowledged – aspect of Levi’s grey zone.’ Though this is not the first film about ‘privileged’ prisoners, it is the first film to explore Levi’s concept of the ‘grey zone’ and, much like Levi’s essay, it oscillates between the particular – the experiences of the *Sonderkommando* and the Holocaust – and the universal – the human condition. In the director’s notes issued to crew and actors, Nelson explained that ‘although we will be ruthlessly thorough in our efforts toward historical accuracy, we’re not setting out to create a historical piece. Nor are we making a “holocaust film.” ... This movie, while accurate to period in every way, must feel for the audience as though it’s happening now.’ This leads Axel Bangert to regard...

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92 Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the present*, p. 253.
96 Ibid., p. ix.
*The Grey Zone* as ‘part of a more general trend to universalise the legacy of the Holocaust’.  

To bring the predicament of the *Sonderkommandos* to life, Nelson took some liberties. Most notably, this includes the conflation of events that did not occur in this order. The women who were involved in the smuggling of gun powder were tortured and hanged *after* the revolt was put down.  

The film pays tribute to Róža Robota, one of the women involved in the underground and in the smuggling of explosives who was tortured and hanged after the uprising. Though according to Nyiszli’s memoir, a girl was indeed found alive after a gassing, she was killed shortly afterwards on Muhsfeld’s order and this did not coincide with the uprising. According to Nyiszli’s memoirs, ‘Every woman wanted to help, as if she were his own child’ bringing clothes, tea and broth. Nelson conflates the two events ‘for dramatic tension... the story of these two events ... have a great deal to do with one another ... If we do our work honestly, the result will be no less “true” than a film pedantically obsessed with historical chronology.’ To Bangert, the conflation of the two incidents ‘highlights the inmates’ moral dilemma in opposite and complementary ways’ as they are striving for ‘moral self-assertion’ to both the inside and outside.

In addition, ‘Images of children’ in Holocaust films fulfil a symbolic function and ‘have a long tradition ... partly because they easily activate mechanisms of empathy and identification with the victims of genocide, and partly because the killing of children constitutes one of the fundamental taboos of civilisation which were radically transgressed in the “Final Solution”’. While there may be similarities in this respect between *The Grey Zone* and *Schindler’s List*, the girl in the former film ‘undergoes an existential loss of innocence ... The effort undertaken by Nelson to provide a different image of Jewish victimhood thus entails the radical disenchantment of childhood innocence.’ Baron notes in this respect that the girl ‘bears a resemblance to Anne

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100 Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the present*, p. 253.
105 Ibid., p. 21.
106 Ibid.
Frank’ and ‘may have been a means of discrediting the optimism Anne clung to before she was deported.’

Rivalling only his description of the gassing process, Nyiszli’s observation of the pyres are among the most graphic, horrifying accounts, and is represented in the film as a re-enactment of the infamous photo of the pyres that was smuggled out of the camp by the resistance. The Grey Zone cites other well-known images of Holocaust iconography, from cattle cars to chimneys and smoke, to well-kept lawns and water sprinklers. While most films about the Holocaust stop short of depicting the gassings, and those which transgress this last ‘limit of representation’ tend to resort to ‘the peep hole as the device to gain entry into the gas chamber’ (which controversially positions the viewers to see the victims from the perpetrators’ perspective), The Grey Zone offers a glimpse into this last taboo. It does so in the form of what can be interpreted as either the girl’s flashback or the men’s imagination, the basis of which can be found in Nyiszli’s account. Apart from this scene, Nelson ultimately follows ‘cinematic convention in respecting the prohibition against showing the death struggle in the gas chamber.’ Though the gassing is not depicted, The Grey Zone offers one of the most graphic depictions of the process following the extermination, including the cleaning of the gas chamber and the cremation of bodies. Eschewing the type of voyeuristic gaze Schindler’s List has been criticised for, Nelson deleted a particularly graphic scene (though it can be found on the DVD) which depicts the gas chambers immediately after the gassings.

Summary

Each of the five films approaches the Holocaust from a different perspective and is based on distinct sources, ranging from historical documents to survivor testimonies and fictional novels. Conspiracy is perhaps the only film of the selection which is supposed to be about that which it depicts, and is attempting to portray a particular aspect of the Holocaust. This docu-drama consciously blurs fact and fiction to provide an account of how the historical Wannsee Conference unfolded. In doing so, it offers its very own interpretation of the event, particularly in terms of how the decision-making
process of the so-called ‘Final Solution’ is understood and represented. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, too, attempts to be faithful to the historical record as much as is possible given the film’s fictional base. Its main thrust is a universal approach to the Holocaust and its ‘lessons’ as containing a warning against racism and intolerance. *The Reader* is equally concerned with more than the Holocaust. A universal and eternal tale of generational conflict, truth and reconciliation, *The Reader* brings to the fore the contested process of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* through the prism of an uneven relationship and of a post-war trial representing a complex history of confronting the Nazi past of the parent generation. *Defiance* utilises the genre and conventions of an action film, which is highly atypical for films about the Holocaust. Its subject matter is also unusual as the film concentrates on a band of Belorussian Jewish brothers helping a large group of Jewish refugees survive the Holocaust by forming a partisan group. In other respects, the film is very conventional, including its tropes and cinematic devices, its redemptory approach, and its orientation vis-à-vis *Schindler’s List*. Finally, *The Grey Zone* is a film about the often-cited ‘human condition’ and the length to which humans are prepared to go in order to survive. The Holocaust serves as a setting representing the ultimate challenge for humanity and the ‘grey zone’ of human behaviour. The implications of the particular ways in which the Holocaust is represented by these films for their reception by viewers will be explored in Part II and III.

**Studying Reception: Methodological Framework**

**Study Design**

The previous chapter discussed the five films selected for the audience reception study. To explore the ways in which audiences respond to these films and make sense of them, an innovative methodological framework was developed. The study utilises a mixed methods approach which combines textual analysis and ‘field’ research, and different qualitative methodologies and elements of quantitative studies (questionnaire; computer-assisted analysis; individual interview; focus group). As Anders Hansen *et. al.* point out, ‘good research usually benefits from the use of a combination of methods.’

The study was designed to capture the immediate responses of interviewees to the films to ensure a degree of consistency. To this purpose, interviewer and interviewee(s)

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viewed the film together, and immediately afterwards a short questionnaire was handed out, containing demographic as well as some general and film-specific questions (Appendix One). The project’s working title was ‘The Holocaust in British Popular Culture: Interpretations of Recent Feature Films.’ With the aid of the questionnaires, participants’ gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, occupation, education, political affiliation, disability, nationality and religious background were recorded. In addition, there were open-ended and multiple-choice questions, for example, asking where knowledge about the Holocaust was obtained, what the participants expect from a film about this topic, and which other Holocaust films or documentaries they had seen. It is assumed that personality and demographic background of the empirical study’s participants play a decisive role for media reception. The significance of gender, age, education and political attitudes for the effects of media influences has been examined and substantiated in a number of empirical, quantitative studies. For this project, the categories of ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and religion were added in order to establish if and to what extent, for example, experiences of discrimination or dominance, or religious belief, influence the reception of Holocaust films.

Following the film viewing and the completion of the questionnaire, the interview or group discussion was conducted and recorded with the participants’ consent. Other methodologies were considered but ultimately dismissed. These included ethnographic observation which was not practical as it would have involved visiting all interviewees at their home and observing them while watching the film. This method is more suitable when exploring every-day viewing habits. In addition, focus groups ‘allow the researcher to observe how audiences make sense of media through conversation and interaction with each other.’ Though some may argue that it may be a problem that some individuals would exert greater influence within a group discussion and that there are often tendencies towards consensus, this also yields interesting insights into group and social interaction. The possibility of a quantitative survey was ruled out due to the aforementioned scarcity of comparable studies on which such a survey could have built its questionnaire. A quantitative approach would have furthermore been unsuitable to explore the topic under discussion in-depth, as was the intention of this study. Though

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113 There was one exception to this. Tim Nicholson who was interviewed about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was shown the film on one day during his lunch break and interviewed the next day, again during his lunch break. He told the interviewer that he researched the film on the Internet after viewing the film.

114 Baumert, ‘Laughing about Hitler?’, p. 45.

questionnaire-based research allows for a larger number of participants and can lead to important insights, it ‘does not usually allow space for an on-going, in-depth investigation of attitudes and opinions.’116

For the qualitative approach selected, the interviews were semi-structured in-depth interviews for which an interview and discussion guide was used (Appendix Two). The guide was used to ensure some consistency and to ensure the flow of the interviews. Interviewees’ approaches varied and ranged from responding to questions in length, to providing short answers for each question without much ‘free’ talk, to associative talking and dominating the interview with their own interests. The interviews always began with the same question (‘Could you please summarise the film in a few sentences?’) to ‘break the ice’ and to explore what the interviewees remembered about the film and which aspects seemed important to them. The remaining questions were not always asked in the same order, some questions were omitted, and the interviewer was able to ask further questions and to deviate from the interview guide; likewise, the interviewee could ask the interviewer questions and was not interrupted when they talked about seemingly unrelated or tangential topics. The interviewer attempted not to interfere too much but encouraged the interviewees to continue talking through appropriate looks and sounds (‘Mm-hmm.’) and through guiding questions. The aim was to gain insights into the participants’ thoughts about these and other films, their reception and interpretation strategies, and the ways in which they made sense of visual representations of the Holocaust. A participant information sheet was also provided before the film screening, detailing the purpose, rationale and method of the project (Appendix Three). Interviewer and interviewee furthermore spent several hours together (for film screening and interview, three to four hours on average) during which they were able to bond and talk ‘off the record’. For the data analysis, the interviewer’s interventions and questions were also examined to avoid that the interviewees’ responses could be taken out of context. As Pierre Bourdieu has highlighted, the questions the study participants are asked may not be questions they would have necessarily asked themselves. It should also be noted that they may have interpreted questions in distinct and unintended ways.117

116 Ibid., p. 232.
The questions on the interview guide can be arranged in three groups: questions specific to the individual film the interviewee(s) watched (e.g. film characters, memorable scenes); general film questions (e.g. about other Holocaust films); and questions about interviewees’ knowledge about, and interest in the Holocaust (e.g. Holocaust education). The interview duration varied; on average, individual interviews lasted between 30 to 40 minutes and group discussions for around 40 minutes. Interviewees were recruited using the University of Leicester’s email bulletin, adverts in local newsagents, museums and post offices in Leicester, and through word-of-mouth and local contacts who aided with the recruitment of participants (Appendix Four).

The initial aim was to interview a minimum of 50 British nationals, that is, ten interviewees per film. In total, 68 people were interviewed in 37 individual interviews and 11 group discussions. The film to be shown to each individual or group was either selected at random or interviewees were given a choice between films. Towards the end of the interviewing process, to achieve an even number of British interviewees per film, the study participants were shown films for which less than the target number of ten British interviewees had been achieved. Nine of the 11 group discussions were initiated by interviewees who asked to bring along one or more friends or acquaintances. One of the two German groups was composed by the researcher who asked two prospective interviewees if they would be prepared to take part in a focus group discussion to which they both agreed. One of the British groups was constituted of three students who attended a film viewing of The Grey Zone which was part of a university module and who agreed to stay behind after the screening to participate in this group discussion. All interviews were conducted by the author of this thesis between March 2011 and May 2012, predominantly in Leicester, England. The majority of interviews and discussions, including the film screenings, were conducted in rooms booked at the University of Leicester. Three individual interviews and three group discussions were conducted in the interviewee’s home, and two individual interviews and two group discussions were conducted at the interviewer’s home. Altogether, around 36 hours of interview material were recorded.

The limitations of conducting qualitative research projects are summarised by Olaf Jensen, who highlights that due to the time and labour consuming processes of

118 This resulted in two of the group discussions including one Czech interviewee and one Spanish interviewee, respectively.
119 Five hours out of the total of 36 are from the interviews with non-British interviewees.
interviewing, transcribing, and analysing, ‘only small numbers of interviews can be conducted, especially by individual researchers. Moreover, samples are self-selective: only people who are willing (or able) to talk can be interviewed, and studies often have a regional or local focus with regard to general conclusions.’ \(^{120}\) Gabrielle Griffin suggests for the scope of a PhD thesis to interview between 20 to 40 respondents. She assumes an average duration of between 90 and 120 minutes for an in-depth interview. \(^{121}\) This project goes beyond the suggested number of interviewees for a PhD thesis and falls within the suggested hours of recorded material despite the overall shorter average duration of individual interviews and focus groups. It should also be noted that this thesis not only generates and analyses interview data but also includes film analyses and the development of a complex study design.

Throughout the thesis, when first mentioning a particular interviewee, their age and occupation at the time of the interview will be stated. All interviewees were asked on the consent form, in accordance with university regulations and ethical research standards, whether they request their names to be disclosed (Appendix Five). Names were made anonymous, i.e. pseudonyms were assigned, where this was requested by the interviewees (43), and where no preference was stated (14).

The first group discussion (two people) conducted on 10 March 2011 about Defiance served to test and further develop the interview and discussion guide. The discussion established the effectiveness of the questions already developed and informed the addition of new ones. After conducting around one third of the interviews and group discussions, the interview guide was further adjusted. It was decided in accordance with the primary supervisor to add some ‘challenging’ questions. Towards the end of the interview, respondents were confronted with scholarly assumptions about films (e.g. trivialisation, excusing perpetrators) and asked for their opinion, especially in relation to the film they just watched. If interviewees talked about factuality and authenticity, they were asked how they decided what to take as facts and what to leave as artistic license. Others were asked what they thought about artistic license and whether they felt there should be any limits to artistic freedom.

All interviews were transcribed by the author of this thesis using the transcription software Express Scribe Pro (NCH Software). The time it takes to transcribe an

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interview can vary considerably, depending on the quality of the recording, individual enunciation and background noises. On average, it took around ten hours to transcribe one hour of recorded material. The 36 hours of recorded interviews resulted in around 550 pages of transcripts. The transcription adopted the Free University of Berlin’s Visual History Archive transcription guidelines provided by the Center für digitale Systeme (© CeDiS 2009). Any pauses, ‘fillers’ (e.g. ‘er’, ‘erm’), background noises, and incomprehensible parts were included in the transcripts. The following punctuation marks were used in the transcripts:

Change in speakers: // … ///
Simultaneous speaking: || … |||
Comments, non-verbal/para-verbal expressions, interruptions or background noise, and distinctive speech: < … > (e.g. <sighs> or <laughs>)
Incomprehensible words or sequences, and pauses: ( … ).
Abruption of a word: -. (e.g. ‘I w-., I am shocked.’)
Abruption of a train of thought: _. (e.g. ‘I think it was _, I have not seen many other films.’)
Italics are used for film or book titles, e.g. Shoah or The Book Thief.

The use of transcripts bears a number of benefits and risks. It is a time-consuming process but one that ‘can bring a much closer appreciation of the meanings in the data, and this is often the time at which ideas for coding ... arise, as well as ideas for topics to pursue in subsequent interviews’.122 Transcripts also allow for the data to be searched more easily. At the same time, transcripts may add costs or delays to a research project, and nuances, including intonation, speed, hesitation, among others, may get lost in the process. Even with the greatest effort, a transcript ‘can never fully reproduce all of the dimensions of the “live” interview’.123 The latter is acknowledged in this project and the analysis was based on both transcript and recording to reflect nuances in tone, speed, and emotion of the interviewees that may not be fully represented in the transcripts. The qualitative analysis of the data was assisted by using qualitative data analysis (QDA) software (NVivo 9; QSR International Pty Ltd. 1999-2010, Version 9.0.204.0) which

allows for coding of the data, recording of the individual steps of analysis and the quick comparison of data.\textsuperscript{124} The use of QDA software was decided due to the large amount of data and because it ‘serves to facilitate an accurate and transparent data analysis process whilst also providing a quick and simple way of counting who said what and when, which in turn, provides a reliable, general picture of the data.’\textsuperscript{125} The interview collection will remain the property of the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Leicester and can be used by future researchers on request.

The data collection and analysis followed a Grounded Theory approach which largely disclaims hypotheses but seeks to generate them by permanently analysing the material and to develop theories only when the hypotheses can be verified in the data.\textsuperscript{126} This approach was deemed most appropriate for this project due to the small number of comparable studies and due to its explorative character. Grounded Theory analysis begins at the time of data collection to guide the interviews and to ensure that all relevant observations are incorporated into the ongoing collection of data.\textsuperscript{127} Cultural values, political tendencies, social movements and economic conditions are regarded as a broader societal context that influences and determines the phenomena under examination, which are incorporated into theory development.\textsuperscript{128} One of the central elements of Grounded Theory is the use of ‘constant comparisons’ in order ‘to explore variations, similarities and differences in data.’\textsuperscript{129} This project is particularly informed by the constructivist approach as developed by Kathy Charmaz which criticises the positivism of traditional Grounded Theory.\textsuperscript{130} Constructivist Grounded Theory is influenced by Chicago school pragmatism and ‘assumes that interaction is inherently dynamic and interpretative and addresses how people create, enact, and change

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{126} U. Flick, ‘Stationen des qualitativen Forschungsprozesses’, in U. Flick et. al. (eds), \textit{Handbuch qualitative Sozialforschung: Grundlagen, Konzepte, Methoden und Anwendungen} (Munich, 1991), p. 150.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid., p. 6.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p. 11.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Ibid., p. 146.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
meanings and actions.' Charmaz thus argues that the backgrounds of both interviewees and interviewers influence the interviewing situation. Interviews must be regarded as ‘contextual and negotiated’ and as ‘a construction – or reconstruction – of reality.’

For the analysis of the interviews and group discussions, Hermeneutic Dialogue Analysis was selected as the interpretative approach. Its main focus is on interactions and on the situations in which the contributions by participants or interviewers occur. During the time of data collection, four ‘interpretation group sessions’ were conducted with the primary supervisor and postgraduate students, where analytical categories were established inductively by examining exemplary case studies. An interview was selected and each sequence to be examined was analysed following seven steps: contextualising the sequence; paraphrasing of what is said; the speaker’s intention; interactions and the role of interaction; the speaker’s motive(s) and unintentional expressions; the preceding communication (if applicable); and, finally, general relationships and connections to theories (Appendix Six: Sample Sequential Analysis). Importantly, successive communications are not used to analyse preceding interactions. Subsequently, the categories and perspectives resulting (or ‘induced’) from this detailed examination were utilised to analyse the remaining data. During this process, the induced categories can still be extended, reduced, dismissed, or revised. This approach can be described as a combination of Grounded Theory and Qualitative Content Analysis as developed by Philipp Mayring. While Hermeneutic Dialogue Analysis is particularly useful for a detailed analysis of interview data, due to the time-consuming nature of this method, applying Qualitative Content Analysis can be understood as a more pragmatic approach to establishing categories.

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140 Mayring, ‘Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse’, paragraph 12.
common that they focus on what is important to the studies’ participants, rather than to the researchers.

The Interviewees

68 interviewees volunteered for the project, 53 of them were British. The target of interviewing at least ten people per film was achieved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>British interviewees</th>
<th>Other nationalities</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conspiracy</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Reader</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defiance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Grey Zone</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>53</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Number of participants interviewed for each film and overall, split by nationality British/other.

13 people were interviewed about the film *Conspiracy* (one of the 11 British interviewees identified as ‘European’; one was US American, one Spanish), 18 about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (one of the 11 ‘British’ interviewees identified as British/American, and one as Northern Irish; one was Spanish, and six were German), 11 about *The Reader* (one of the ten British interviewees identified as English; one was Czech), 15 about *Defiance* (nine identified as British and one as English; one was French, and four Cypriot), and 11 about *The Grey Zone* (eight identified as British, one as British/English, and two as English). In the interview analysis, the main focus was on the British participants, but the responses of other interviewees were also taken into account.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>British interviewees by gender</th>
<th>All interviewees by gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conspiracy</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Reader</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defiance</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Grey Zone</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>31</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Gender of interviewees: British/all interviewees.

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143 This figure includes one Northern Irish participant (Sam Caine) who was interviewed about the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. This is also the case for the subsequent tables and the discussion of the interview results in Part II and III.
37 of the interviewees responded to adverts, while 31 were recruited through word-of-mouth and local contacts. More women followed the call for participants through both adverts and gatekeepers: 44 out of 68 interviewees were female. Though due to the small number of interviewees this may be incidental, it has been suggested that women may have a ‘greater interest in the past than men’.144 Among the British participants, 31 of the interviewees were female and 22 male.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>British interviewees</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66-75</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76-85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Age range of British/all interviewees.145

The majority of interviewees were between 18 and 35 years of age. 32 of the British participants and 46 of all interviewees fall within this age bracket.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>British</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Student</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate/College Student</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Occupation of British/all interviewees.

In terms of occupation, just under half of the interviewees were students, with the other half being professionals or retired. With regards to education, there is a bias towards well-educated participants (many held or were studying towards a BA):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>British</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GCSE &amp; vocational</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-level/O-level or equivalent</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA, PGCE</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Highest qualification British/all interviewees, obtained or currently working towards.

145 One of the interviewees about Conspiracy (Chemmal Choudhury) did not provide information about his age.
40 of the 53 British interviewees identified their ethnicity as White (35 of them as British, three as English, one as Scottish and one as Northern Irish), two as Jewish, three as Indian, one as Chinese, and six as ‘Mixed’, and one did not provide an answer. Politically, 34 of the British respondents identified as left-liberal (broadly defined as ranging from Labour to Socialist), five as Conservative, and 14 either did not answer this question or responded they were ‘neutral’.

Holocaust education

When asked where they had learned about the Holocaust, 22 of the British interviewees responded that they had learned about the subject at school; an additional seven told the interviewer that they had learned about it at school but not in great detail. Six said they could not remember whether the topic was dealt with at school. Nine were certain they did not learn about the Holocaust as part of their school education, and nine did not mention school. 17 of the British interviewees said they had visited exhibitions related to the subject, and 16 had been to memorial sites or memorials. 29 interviewees cited films or documentaries about the subject as sources of knowledge. Books were a source of knowledge for 16, and 13 had completed relevant modules at university. Two of the British interviewees remembered the newsreels, and survivor testimonies were cited by six as a source of knowledge about the Holocaust. Those with a family connection to the Holocaust or a particularly strong interest in the subject were more likely to remember when they first encountered the topic. The majority of interviewees were unable to pinpoint when they first heard about the Holocaust. One of the interviewees told the interviewer that he could not remember any specific lessons at school but that he does ‘remember always being aware of it’, a sentiment which was echoed in other interviews.¹⁴⁶ On the questionnaire, interviewees were asked the same question but were given a range of possible answers they could select (Appendix One). According to the responses on the questionnaire, school education, films and documentaries, and books are the most important sources of historical knowledge about the Holocaust. Newspaper articles, exhibitions and visits to memorial sites also feature prominently. Less important seem family, university and newsreels, with eye-witness accounts forming the least likely source of knowledge for the interviewees.

¹⁴⁶ Daniel Potter, in Group Discussion Mary Gaynor (MG), Richard Poynter (RP), Daniel Potter (DP, Elizabeth Jones (EJ) and Marina Soukoup (MS), The Reader, 11 October 2011, [line] 1050.
Limitations

The project is faced with a number of limitations. Firstly, as discussed above, the study was designed to capture the immediate responses of interviewees to a particular film to ensure a degree of consistency. This study design has a number of implications. The advantage is that it provides a consistent basis for comparison as all interviewees (with the aforementioned exception of one interviewee) were interviewed immediately after the viewing. This means the responses would be, at least initially, immediate and unfiltered. Using this design, it can be established what matters to the interviewees and why, following the film viewing. The interview may constitute the structuring process for the interviewees, which may result in the interviewees leaving the interview with a more structured, firm memory and interpretation of the film than they would have when watching the film by themselves and without an interviewing situation. The latter may have caused them to pay more attention to the film than they might do in a more natural and comfortable setting. In fact, they may have never watched the film had it not been for the interview. In this way, the study may even contribute to the altering of interviewees’ historical knowledge and consciousness. Most importantly, the study is limited by its focus on the immediate responses. What viewers take away from a film long-term, that is, days, weeks, months, even years after having watched a film, was not the subject of this study and cannot be measured using this particular study design. The final chapter of Part III will, however, briefly explore the long-term reception of films as the study provided the basis for some hypotheses through examining interviewees’ memories of other films they had watched in the past. The long-term impact could be the subject of a follow-up study for which the present study could form a ‘base line’ to be used for future comparisons. A longer-term view (e.g. in the form of follow-up interviews) was considered for this thesis but could not be realised due to time, funding constraints and the limited scope of the project.

The explanatory power of the study is further limited by the restricted number of interviewees both with regards to the overall number and for each of the five films. It is considered that the study nonetheless provides powerful insights into an under-researched area of contemporary Holocaust studies, as generalisations can be made based on empirical, qualitative research. This ‘does not mean representativeness in

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147 Ten interviewees had already been familiar with the film. This was addressed in the respective interviews and will be briefly discussed as part of the final chapter on the long-term impact of films in Part III.
qualitative research, but studies may have ‘wide-ranging, “general” implications for how we think about media influences.’

This is the first systematic attempt to investigate (British) audience responses to a range of popular films about the Holocaust using a multi-disciplinary, qualitative approach that is informed by cultural studies traditions. Conceptualised as an exploratory study, it is hoped that the project will prompt debate and further research. Future studies could either test some of the findings of this thesis through quantitative surveys, or more targeted interviews of a larger number of individuals representing different age cohorts, genders, education backgrounds and occupations, and so on, about one or two select films.

It is difficult to establish the impact of a German interviewing people who were largely British citizens about Holocaust films. It can be assumed that the interviewer’s nationality may have affected interviewees’ responses (e.g. being more polite) but only a few explicit examples of this were identified. Four respondents directly addressed the interviewer in this respect. Overall, the responses provided by the interviewees, especially with regards to German perpetrators and bystanders, resemble those given to Thomas McKay, an English researcher, who collected interviews about the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust with different generations of English families. The interviewees’ interpretations of perpetrator behaviour and motivations will be explored in more detail in Part II.

The composition of the study’s participants poses an additional limitation. Only certain people would volunteer for a study like this or be recruited through gatekeepers. It should be noted again that neither the study nor the ‘sample’ is meant to be representative of people in Britain or elsewhere. Most interviewees were recruited in Leicester in the East Midlands region of England which again limits the study’s scope. The demographic composition, in particular, is not representative of the diverse and multi-cultural city of Leicester. Attempts at recruitment from different social, religious and ethnic backgrounds were made but to limited avail. In some cases, interviews fell through and not all people who responded to the call for participants ultimately agreed to take part in the study. More importantly still, the interviews only provide snapshots; had a different film been shown on a different day to the same or a different person, the responses may have been very different. In addition, in line with the Grounded Theory


149 McKay, A multi-generational oral history study, pp. 185-94.
approach, the interview and discussion guide was adjusted during the interviewing process which means that not all questions were asked to all interviewees.

Though ultimately constituting strength rather than a limitation, it should be noted that the study design was time-consuming if compared to quantitative and other qualitative approaches. Unlike the study conducted by Gudehus et. al., for which copies of the film *Hotel Rwanda* were sent to the participants to be watched at home,\(^\text{150}\) in the study design developed for the purpose of this project, the interviewer watched the film together with the interviewees before handing out the questionnaire and conducting the interview. This limited the number of people that could be interviewed, particularly seeing that no monetary incentive was offered to the study’s participants. The great advantage of this design is that, apart from ensuring some consistency, interviewer and interviewee(s) were able to build rapport in the course of the three to four hours spent together. The resulting interviews reflect this rapport, proven by many very personal stories told by some of the interviewees. The use of the interview and discussion guide meanwhile ensured that this rapport would not preclude some challenging questions. Any future follow-up or comparative studies may need to adapt the research design to their particular circumstances, including budgetary considerations, available timeframe, and number of researchers involved in the project. To meet time constraints, and depending on budget, outsourcing the interview transcription process could also be considered for future projects.

Finally, as with all scholarly work, ultimately, this thesis is the product of the researcher’s interpretation. Other scholars analysing the same sources may reach different conclusions or place a different emphasis. To restrict the impact of subjective interpretation, the study utilised the following control mechanisms: interpretation groups; Grounded Theory approach; Hermeneutic Dialogue Analysis and Qualitative Content Analysis; regular discussion with supervisor and postgraduates and presenting results at conferences.

The methodology developed for this project will provide a feasible basis for future research. An aspect of the methodology that could either be dismissed or would require reconsideration is the questionnaire. It may suffice to ask the interviewees only about their demographic details. The additional questions yielded few results and were thus largely omitted from the thesis. Areas that could not be fully discussed in this thesis

\(^{150}\) Gudehus, ‘Understanding *Hotel Rwanda*’, p. 349.
include those parts of the interviews that dealt with personal stories, visits to memorial sites, or other aspects only tangentially relevant for the subject of the film reception study. The selection of what is included in the thesis was made based on the frequency of examples of a particular phenomenon in the interviews. The comparison between the interviews about the films served to seek explanations for the popularity or lack thereof of a specific category or phenomenon. On fewer occasions, interviewees’ responses to particular questions of interest to this study were analysed and compared, and chosen to be included, which will be indicated in the relevant sections.
Part II: Making Sense of the Holocaust through Film

Part II will focus on the results of the interview study which will be linked with the film analysis and scholarly debates, and the filmmakers’ intentions. As outlined in the introduction, feature films, documentaries and docu-dramas about the Holocaust have inspired a myriad of research, which has provided fascinating insights into the production and meanings of these texts. The reception by actual audiences, both past and present, has remained among the most elusive subjects. This part of the thesis discusses the findings from the qualitative audience reception study that relate to the ways in which the interviewees made sense of the Holocaust as it was represented in the films under discussion. It seeks to explore, in particular, the historical understanding transmitted by the films. Do films, as Doneson suggests, ‘result in awareness’?¹ Do they have the ‘potential to inform’ about the past and make it relevant for the present?² The main focus here will be on the interviews with the British participants. To begin with, the main topics which emerged from the interview analysis for each film will be discussed. How did the interviewees understand the history presented to them on screen? What kind of historical understanding and awareness did the films transmit according to the interviewees? Some of the most-discussed elements in the interviews were the motivation and behaviour of perpetrators of the Holocaust. This will be discussed separately in the second chapter to reflect on the differences and similarities in the interviewees’ interpretations.

Transmission of Historical Understanding

The introductory film analysis in Part I outlined the distinct features, genres, and viewpoints offered by the five films. This thesis set out to go beyond the textual examination of films, and to study the relationship between the representation of history on screen and its understanding by individual viewers. In the interviews about the films, one or more key topics emerged for each film that stood in relation not only to the ways in which the representation of the Holocaust is made sense of, but also the history of the Holocaust more generally. This chapter will provide a nuanced exploration of interviewees’ interpretations of these key topics. In the interviews about Conspiracy,

² Ibid., p. 213.
two unique topics emerged: the decision-making of the ‘Final Solution’ and bureaucracy. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* led to a focus on the topic of childhood and childhood innocence. Major topics of discussion in the interviews about *The Reader* were illiteracy and Germany’s coming to terms with the past. For *Defiance* and *The Grey Zone*, key topics discussed were Jewish resistance and, for the latter film, the predicament of the Sonderkommando. This chapter will explore these key topics both in relation to scholarly debates and the historical context, and how the interviewees made sense of them. Their interpretations will be contrasted with the filmmakers’ intentions and agendas by examining the filmmakers’ self-representation in interviews, publications and DVD bonus material. Of interest here is less to what extent their accounts are reliable – as the filmmakers may pursue particular marketing and representational strategies when publicly speaking about their films – and more on the extent to which their films are read as ‘intended’ and how their respective agendas are reflected in the films. The chapter will further evaluate the implications of interviewees’ interpretations for their understanding and awareness of the Holocaust.

**The Wannsee Conference and the ‘Final Solution’**

As indicated in the film analysis, there is still debate among historians regarding the place of the Wannsee Conference in the decision-making process of the ‘Final Solution’. *Conspiracy*, on the other hand, presents the viewer with a largely neat and simple story: the ‘Final Solution’ had already been decided and Heydrich led the meeting’s participants – either through their voluntary involvement or through coercion – to agree with, and contribute to, the extermination of the European Jews. *Conspiracy* draws on the work of historical advisor Michael Berenbaum, according to whom the ‘Final Solution’ had been decided by the summer of 1941 as the infrastructure for the killings had been set in place, and the Wannsee Conference mainly served as an announcement of a policy decision that was already in effect.3 Though Berenbaum’s favouring of the summer 1941 argument may provide the general direction for the film, there were also indications that not all of those involved in the film’s making followed this line of interpretation. The voice-over at the beginning of one of the DVD features informs that this is ‘the story of a secret meeting that altered the course of history’, while actor Stanley Tucci explains that ‘the whole purpose of this meeting was to let it

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3 Bonus feature, *Conspiracy* [DVD] (Benelux Film Distributors). See also M. Berenbaum (ed.), *Witness to the Holocaust* (New York, 1997).
be known that the SS would co-ordinate this Final Solution as swiftly as possible’. The brief making-of feature on the DVD reveals that Heydrich was the focus of the film and that the meeting was assigned crucial significance in the decision-making of the ‘Final Solution’. These disparate suggestions indicate that even the people who are part of the filmmaking may not necessarily interpret the film in the same way.

All 13 interviewees who watched Conspiracy were asked whether they had known about the Wannsee Conference prior to watching the film. Eight of the interviewees had not been familiar with the Wannsee Conference, and five reported some awareness of the event. Three of them did not know much or any detail about it apart from the term ‘Wannsee Conference’ being familiar. Three interviewees had heard of Eichmann and one of them was also familiar with Heydrich. The interviewees of this study are not alone in lacking knowledge about the Wannsee Conference. The Institute of Education’s aforementioned teacher survey found that ‘The Wannsee Conference and the mass murders by the Einsatzgruppen are only the 21st and 22nd most likely topics to be taught’.

The decision-making process of the ‘Final Solution’ received considerable attention with 40 text segments relating to this particular phenomenon coded across all interviews. Eight interviewees suggested that the ‘Final Solution’ was decided at the Wannsee Conference. Asked for her thoughts about the director’s intentions, Abbey Mills, a 33-year-old PhD researcher, characterised the film as ‘an untold story people didn’t realise that that was how the whole of the Holocaust was organised and decided upon just around a table with some men’, a process dominated by Heydrich. 57-year-old administrator Charlotte Harris, who was asked the same question, argued:

> there were these few people and they decided the fate of millions of people between nine in the morning and sort of half past two in the afternoon with break for lunch and, and he was trying to get home to people that, that, it wasn’t some great long drawn out committee with huge plans laid over years, it was done in a very, very short space of time and it was rubber-stamped, like, ‘this is what we are going to do now, you are going to agree with it or you’re done’, and off they went. <makes sound of shivering/disgust>

It did not seem to play a role whether or not the interviewees had prior knowledge about the Wannsee Conference in terms of how the decision-making of the ‘Final Solution’ as

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4 Featurette #2 with Kenneth Branagh, Stanley Tucci, Colin Firth, David Threlfall and Director Frank Pierson, Conspiracy [DVD Film] (Warner Home Video).
5 Pettigrew and Foster, Teaching about the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools, p. 42.
6 Interview Abbey Mills (AM), Conspiracy, 2 November 2011, 112-15.
7 Interview Charlotte Harris (CH), Conspiracy, 13 May 2011, 211-16.
it was depicted in *Conspiracy* was interpreted. While Abbey, who had studied the representation of the Holocaust as part of her degree, was not familiar with the Wannsee Conference, Charlotte had some knowledge about the event, and yet, both interpreted the film in a similar way. Altogether 18 examples were recorded in which the film was interpreted in this way.

Seven interviewees (nine examples), on the other hand, proposed that the decision had already been made (two of the interviewees, Rachel Cooper and Chemmal Choudhury, argued both that the decision was made at the meeting and that it had already been decided). Among them was 32-year-old website manager Ellen Lawrence from one of the group discussions. In her response to the first interview question for a summary of the film, Ellen suggested:

> they were deciding the Final Solution, it was the meeting at which it was kind of passed down to everybody so they could, erm, discuss it although it was obviously, as it went on, obvious that it had already been decided and people were just gonna be bullied into it.\(^8\)

Her answer, to which her group discussion partner Magdalena Lopez Garcia, a 32-year-old Spanish PhD student, agreed, suggests a familiarity with the topic as she used the term ‘Final Solution’ which was used in the film towards the end, and also appears to be already familiar to her. Ellen assigned significance to the Wannsee Conference, which she had heard of before, though not in any detail, and which she described as ‘the’ meeting at which the plans were disseminated. There is no indication who had ‘already’ decided the genocide. The notion of ‘bullying’ implies opposition or disagreement, which will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on interpretations of perpetrator behaviour, and echoes Charlotte’s statement above about the decision-making process.

The secret character of the meeting and the decision-making process, as portrayed in the film, not least by its title, was referred to 15 times by eight interviewees. Four of them re-produced the title’s term ‘conspiracy’ to characterise the meeting. Among them was 64-year-old probation officer Martin Thompson, who summarised the film as being about ‘the conspiracy that planned the Final Solution’.\(^9\) What stands out particularly here is the absence of any responsible agents. The film title is certainly ambiguous; it could be understood as a conspiracy against the Jewish people; a conspiracy even

\(^8\) Group Discussion Ellen Lawrence (EL) and Magdalena Lopez Garcia (MLG), *Conspiracy*, 3 August 2011, 4-7.

within the ‘Third Reich’ (a decision made at the top without knowledge of those below them); or a conspiracy in the sense that the wider German population was to be kept from the information (while measures were taken to keep the genocide secret, information nevertheless filtered through to the general German public). It may also point to the ever-important impact of the Nuremberg Trials on the understanding of the perpetrators of the Holocaust with the focus on high-ranking officials rather than ‘ordinary’ Germans. This secrecy aspect places Conspiracy within the context of docu-dramas and even ‘historical event television’; though not a ‘spectacle’ per se, it conveys ‘a sense of presenting special and exclusive material’ never seen before. It should be noted that a sequel called Complicity had been planned but was never made due to ‘back pressure’ at HBO because the film would have taken a critical look at the British and American governments’ inaction despite their knowledge about the genocide. The title may thus also be owed to marketing considerations and with a view to the sequel. The fact that the secrecy aspect featured so prominently in the interviews could also be owed to the myth that the crimes committed against the Jews were not known about in Britain during the war. The continued relevance of this myth was demonstrated by McKay, whose inter-generational oral history study into the memory of war and Holocaust in England identified the frequent ‘belief that the Holocaust was not known about in Britain, and information about it was not readily available, until after either the discovery of Belsen or the end of the war.’

In the film, the portrayal of secrecy takes the form of notes taken by the participants being destroyed or the secretary being told to stop taking minutes at critical moments (e.g. when the killing methods are discussed). These passages were referred to six times by four of the interviewees. In one of the group discussions, 40-year-old warehouse operative Nigel Cole (NC) and 37-year-old dance and movement artist Margaret Knight (MK) talked about aspects of the film they found ‘intense’. Asked by the interviewer to elaborate, Margaret highlighted the ‘vocabulary’ and the ‘sheer reality of what was being discussed’ as ‘really emotional’. Nigel added:

12 Bowie, ‘Interview with Loring Mandel’.
13 McKay, A multi-generational oral history study, p. 183.
14 Group Discussion Nigel Cole (NC) and Margaret Knight (MK), Conspiracy, 9 December 2011, 21-2.
NC: And how, how they knew what they were doing was so awful ‘cause they didn’t want to keep any records and they were really careful about that but || MK: Yeah. ||| they wanted to do it anyway and || MK: Yeah. ||| were not gonna be deflected from the path of (-) making the, this decision that had already been decided, kind of thing.¹⁵

Nigel appeared to accept what he saw depicted in the film as fact and to make sense of the perpetrators’ secrecy by alleging the perpetrators may have had a bad conscience. A different interpretation of the secrecy element was offered by 33-year-old accountant Rachel Cooper, who was ‘surprised’ that the meeting was ‘so clandestine’.¹⁶ Asked by the interviewer why she thought it was clandestine, Rachel proposed:

Because it’s quite horrific and even someone with that sort of ... ability to reason with themselves that ... it’s a good idea to go down that route could understand that actually maybe some other people might not think it was a good idea, I guess, and, er, I suppose it’s ... about traceability as well in terms of convictions for war crimes, erm, ... if that was in any way on their (-) horizon that that was gonna be a possibility, then they wouldn’t want that decision to be traced back to them ...¹⁷

Though she was ‘surprised’ at the secrecy of the meeting, Rachel, too, did not question the veracity of the depiction. Rather, she tried to make sense of it by suggesting that the perpetrators may have been aware of public opinion and may have even considered post-war implications and thus attempted to leave as little trace as possible of who made the decision for genocide. The two examples above demonstrate that one and the same aspect of a film can be understood and interpreted in very distinct ways.

None of the interviewees possessed in-depth knowledge of the Wannsee Conference and interpreted Conspiracy’s representation of the meeting in two ways: contrary to Berenbaum’s and also Mandel’s interpretation of the Wannsee Conference, around half of the interviewees said the decision was made at the meeting. The aspect of secrecy found particular emphasis in the film and was reproduced by a number of interviewees who took at face value the film’s depiction of secrecy and conspiracy. Despite the film’s simplified and at times contradictory take on the Wannsee Conference, Conspiracy may have succeeded in turning a complex historical event into a concise and comprehensible film; even though viewers may not understand the complexities of either the meeting or the decision-making process, they may still come away with increased knowledge and awareness. While the film may be educational in many ways, the interview analysis also suggests that the film could obscure a deeper understanding

¹⁵ Ibid., 24-7.
¹⁶ Interview Rachel Cooper (RC), Conspiracy, 4 October 2011, 24-5.
¹⁷ Ibid., 30-5.
of the Holocaust and how it developed over time and in different places. The film does not convey that the question of when mass murder turned into genocide still constitutes a contested subject. To understand this would be a crucial prerequisite for a thorough engagement with the subject. Christopher Browning highlights in this respect that ‘a study of decision-making restores a necessary sense of contingency and human agency.’

While *Conspiracy* may be useful for transmitting awareness of, and knowledge about this particular historical event, the limits of the medium also become clear. The extent of the scholarship and debate cannot be conveyed in the space of 90 minutes, certainly not in an entertaining and engaging format.

One could certainly argue that this is not what films should be judged by, and that films open up possibilities that literature and scholarship cannot; precisely *Conspiracy*’s claims to historical authenticity, however, expose this docu-drama to criticism of the history it portrays and its implications for viewers’ knowledge and understanding.

**Bureaucracy and Genocide**

*Conspiracy*’s depiction of ‘fifteen educated, civilized bureaucrats from an educated, civilized society’ who ‘gave the nod to genocide’ places particular emphasis on the importance of modern bureaucracy for the genocidal process in the case of the Holocaust. In the past decades, the understanding of bureaucracy, and the role of bureaucrats, has undergone a re-evaluation. Franklin Mixon *et. al.* suggested that the case of Eichmann was ‘typical ... of how the murder of 6 million Jews was carried out in a flexible organization wherein subordinates devised creative solutions to the “Jewish question”’, and received ‘dramatic payoffs for ... proffering the most creative and/or efficient solutions.’

According to this model, individual perpetrators can be held accountable as ‘superiors accomplish their aims not by dictating rigid top-down orders to passive subordinates, but by allowing competition among parts of the bureaucracy and trading “informal services” for “informal payments” over time.’ The Wannsee

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19 For alternative approaches to docu-drama filmmaking, see e.g. historian Fearghal McGarry’s and film scholar and director Des Bell’s docudrama *The Enigma of Frank Ryan*: Queen’s University Belfast, Film History & Education, Archival Dialogues, [http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/frankryan/Achivaldialogues/](http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/frankryan/Achivaldialogues/) [Accessed 28 April 2014].


22 Ibid., pp. 855-6.
Conference serves as an example of ‘vertical trust networks’ enhancing ‘the terrible efficiency of the Nazi regime’. In his post-war testimony, Eichmann attempted to portray himself as merely having followed orders and claimed that he was not allowed to speak at the conference. Alan Steinweis comments about *Conspiracy* that ‘Stanley Tucci’s interpretation of Eichmann as proactive anti-Semite represents a refreshing departure from the old, and inaccurate, cliché of the “banal” bureaucrat.’ The film is somewhat flexible in this respect, however, as it has also been interpreted as an example for Hannah Arendt’s concept of the ‘banality of evil’, which she developed during her observation of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

The film’s pre-occupation with the bureaucrats and ‘desk murderers’ was reflected in all interviews. Interviewees referred to what is represented in the film as a meeting or business meeting, the bureaucratic nature of the meeting and/or of the Holocaust, the documentation of the crimes at the time, and the use of euphemisms and the dehumanisation of the victims. 37 examples were identified in all interviews that demonstrate that this was an important aspect of the film for the interviewees. The way in which the Jewish victims are dehumanised by the perpetrators in the film was highlighted by eight of the interviewees. One of them was 29-year-old IT support officer Faith Jackson who was asked for her thoughts about the director’s intentions for making the film. She responded:

> I think he was trying to show ... the efficientness [sic] of Germany at that time and I, I should really say the SS and the, the government at the time ... the fact that, you know, it was documented, everyone was given a piece of paper and the fact they didn’t actually really think of, er, Jews as people at the time, they just saw them as a problem that needs to be resolved and ... a few of them ... were trying to ... make people realise that ... the Jews were humans ... and I think the director was trying to show ... that ... they were just methodically saying, ‘well, no, this is an issue we need to fix’, and that’s the way that it was at that time.”

The motifs found in this sequence are the common stereotype of German efficiency, the

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perpetrators’ documentation of the crimes, and the dehumanisation of the victims who appear as a logistic or bureaucratic problem. Faith also appeared to assign a high degree of authenticity to the film as she seamlessly combined the film with her existing knowledge on the subject. The type of language used in the film was discussed in 17 examples from nine interviewees, six of whom specifically noted the use of euphemisms. In her response to the opening question for a summary of the film, 18-year-old college student Claire Jordan recalled that ‘the film was about a meeting between people who were very high up in the Nazi Party discussing what to do about their, their problems with the s-, they called storage of Jews because they’re saying that they didn’t have a lot of money or resources to keep them, to store them ... so, they then sort of came to the conclusion of using gas chambers.’ Claire assumed the high ranks of the meeting’s participants even though this is not clearly spelt out by the film. This may be due to the idea that only those ‘high up’ would be privy to such meetings and the decision for the ‘Final Solution’. She particularly highlighted the term ‘storage’ but at the same time seemed to reproduce the justifications (lack of resources) by the film meeting’s participants which they used to demand the physical annihilation of the Jews.

For the interviewees, Conspiracy appears to have succeeded in highlighting the role played by bureaucracy and dehumanisation through language in the process of the annihilation of the European Jews. These elements were identified in all interviews and were triggered by the film. It may have resonated with views and knowledge of the Holocaust and notions of National Socialists as being very ‘efficient’ and organised. In some instances, an unreflective reproduction of Nazi terminology and justifications was observed. Conspiracy’s focus on bureaucracy and the ‘banality of evil’ may, to an extent, distort the realities on the ground, which were often chaotic, especially outside the camps and ghettos. In addition, many of the men ‘round the table had given direct killing orders or had themselves experienced killing.’ One can therefore not speak of ‘desk murderers’ versus ‘men in the field’. In the film, direct involvement in the killings on the ground was addressed through the depiction of Rudolf Lange from the Einsatzgruppen. In the interviewees’ readings of the character of Lange, however, he became an almost positive or at least pitiful figure, arguably due to the film’s depiction of him as a conflicted yet dutiful ‘soldier’ who merely follows orders. Ten examples

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28 Interview Claire Jordan (CJ), Conspiracy, 22 May 2011, 3-7.
30 Ibid., p. 139.
from nine interviewees relate to Lange and largely focus on his standing up in the film and asking for clarification for what the word ‘evacuation’ means and whether his shooting of 27,000 Jews in Riga constitutes ‘evacuation’.

At the same time, it may be precisely the recognisable and universalising ‘bureaucracy’ theme that enabled seven interviewees in 12 examples to interpret Conspiracy as being relevant for today.31 The film was connected to the persistence of racism, other genocides, and contemporary conflicts such as the Iraq war. Among them was retiree Michael Fox who was asked whether he would take anything away from the film. He responded that the film made him think about how ‘problems’ are dealt with today and named the situation in Libya at the time of the interview as an example. He also talked about ‘euthanasia’ which was briefly discussed in the film and which he connected to current debates about ‘euthanasia’ and its legal practice in Switzerland.32 This may be the case due to his age. At 77, questions of ‘euthanasia’ and the ethics of dealing with death and illness may be a more common topic of thought. To Michael, it would appear, the film served as a way of considering ethical issues in the present and future, and to draw parallels between then and now. Despite Conspiracy being the film in this selection that is most specifically about the Holocaust, it prompted interviewees to think about contemporary and universal issues. It would appear that the modern, bureaucratic way of decision-making as portrayed in the film resonated with many viewers and provided a framework with which to make sense of present-day issues.

The Holocaust through the prism of childhood innocence

Childhood is measured out by sounds and smells and sights, before the dark hour of reason grows.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas opens with this quote by British poet John Betjemen (1906-1984), which sets the tone for the film. Childhood and especially childhood innocence is the film’s leading theme. According to producer David Heyman, ‘it somehow makes, might make the Holocaust comprehensible to young children’33 More than this, however, it depicts the Holocaust through the prism of childhood innocence and is characterised by a lack of any cause-effect relationships. In the film, only Bruno retains this innocence, while his mother gradually realises that the ‘work camp’ is, in

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31 This was also seen, to a lesser extent, in interviews about The Reader (five examples from six interviewees) and The Grey Zone (one example from one interviewee).
32 Interview Michael Fox (MF), Conspiracy, 9 April 2011, 141-55.
33 D. Heyman, ‘Friendship Beyond the Fence’, Bonus Features, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas [DVD].
fact, a death camp. At the same time, Bruno’s sister Gretel becomes increasingly enthusiastic about National Socialist ideology. There are parallels with Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* (1997). Bruno initially believes that the number on Shmuel’s prisoner uniform is part of a game which is reminiscent of *Life is Beautiful* in which the father is trying to protect his son from the horrors of the concentration camp by pretending they are all playing a game. In another scene, Bruno discovers Gretel’s undressed dolls in a pile in the cellar which resembles the pile of corpses discovered by the father while carrying his son through the foggy camp in Benigni’s film; it also resembles the well-known images from the liberation of the camps, especially in a British context and may thus strike a particular chord. Gretel discards her dolls due to her growing infatuation with Nazi ideology and her father’s lieutenant, and so the dolls may also represent a loss of innocence.

Bruno remains unaware of the true nature of the camp until the very end. According to director Herman, a propaganda film which was screened as part of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* served to explain ‘Bruno’s restoring his faith in his father’. A scene, in which Bruno’s friends in Berlin scorn a Jewish man, was deleted because it would have made Bruno’s naivety less plausible. It is precisely Bruno’s naivety that possibly creates one of the major problems for this film – the son of a high-ranking SS officer and camp commandant not knowing much about Jews or camps seems hard to believe, particularly as the family initially lives in Berlin. While Philippe Codde argues that the child perspective adopted by some recent novels emphasizes ‘our limited understanding of historical processes’, Bruno’s naivety may, in fact, serve as a metaphor for the German population as a whole, thereby exculpating millions of bystanders and profiteers. Boyne has defended any criticism of his novel and particularly of Bruno’s innocence:

Bruno is kind of representing the rest of us who are trying to understand the Holocaust and find some answers to it. Also, when the camps were liberated, the world was surprised through 1945 and 1946. The majority of the Holocaust had taken place over four years and, granted, it was a different information age but I still

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35 M. Herman, ‘Film with Audio Commentary by Mark Herman and John Boyne’, Bonus Features, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* [DVD].
36 Ibid.
maintain that in those sorts of movies, the naivety is appropriate. It’s based on real life.\textsuperscript{38} Boyne here takes on the task of interpreting history while disregarding research about Allied knowledge about the crimes that the Germans and their collaborators were committing against the Jews.\textsuperscript{39} He also appears to equate a child with the German population and ‘the world’. Similar positions are held by director Herman and producer Heyman. The latter suggests that ‘it’s very hard looking back’ and that ‘it’s hard to believe even now ... that it could be impossible to imagine the extent of this horror.’\textsuperscript{40} Among the 11 British interviewees of this film, three offered interpretations that suggested that the Germans did not know about the crimes (six examples). Crucially, this was largely connected to the mother, rather than the child. One of them was 18-year-old law student Emma Bennett, who was asked by the interviewer if she would recommend the film to anyone. Emma responded in the affirmative and explained that this is because the film highlights interesting aspects of ‘German life’ and the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{41} Asked to elaborate, she said:

\begin{quote}
like the grandma and ... the mother and (--) how not everyone knew exactly what was going on, some people did, and some people wouldn’t know straight away ... like the grandmother knew what was going to be happening and she didn’t agree with it ... and the mother (--) was all for moving and supporting ... her husband until she realized what’s actually happening in the camps. I think there is a debate about whether German people actually knew what was going on ... and if they just sort of bypassed that ... so it highlights that ...\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

Emma connected the depiction of the mother and the grandmother in the film to her subject knowledge, which she acquired through school and by participating in the Holocaust Educational Trust’s ‘Lessons from Auschwitz Project’.\textsuperscript{43} These two film characters highlighted to her both the alleged lack of knowledge and the alleged opposition of some Germans.

In addition to the filmmakers’ suggested link between the innocence of Bruno and the alleged lack of knowledge about the crimes among the Germans and also the Allies,

\textsuperscript{39} See e.g. M. Gilbert, ‘What was Known and When’, in Y. Gutman and M. Berenbaum (eds), \textit{Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp} (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998), pp. 539-52.  
\textsuperscript{41} Interview Emma Bennett (EB), \textit{The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas}, 18 October 2011, 16.  
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid.}, 18-26.  
\textsuperscript{43} Holocaust Education Trust, \textit{Lessons from Auschwitz}, \url{http://www.het.org.uk} [Accessed 28 April 2014].
the filmmakers interpreted the film’s purpose in different ways. To Heyman, this purpose is one of universalisation: ‘It is a first step. We want to encourage people to read more. As far as this film is concerned, it is really, really important – not just to keep the Holocaust alive and to remember the 11 million people who died. But also because today – and ever since – there are holocausts of a different scale.’  

To producer Rosie Alison, on the other hand, it is ‘all a story about secrets and lies and about deception and people not understanding their prejudices even though they’re right before their eyes’. It should also be noted that The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas deviates from other representations of children in films about the Holocaust. While other films may also feature children, such as Life is Beautiful, Schindler’s List, or the Grey Zone, the children in these films are Jewish. They often serve as symbols of the innocence of the Jewish victims and the representation of their suffering ‘wields enormous emotive potential’. In this respect, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas featuring and focussing on a naive and innocent non-Jewish German child – who is the son of a perpetrator - may be seen as a significant paradigm shift.

The degree to which the childhood theme was discussed in the interviews differed considerably between interviewees. For some, it represented the film’s key topic, while others barely mentioned it. All but one interviewee talked about childhood and childhood innocence or naivety to at least some degree in 42 examples. Among the British interviews, 26 segments related to the topics of childhood, innocence and naivety, most of them in relation to Bruno as a victim of some kind. This was at times extended to perpetrators and bystanders. An example for this was provided by 32-year-old clerk Judy Evans who was asked for scenes she particularly remembered from the film:

I like the scenes where, erm, Bruno is running through the forest, erm, sort of to go and meet Shmuel because you kind of feel that he’s actually sort of enjoying being a child at that point, you know, he’s always sort of running through the forest or skipping or kind of pretending to be an aeroplane or something and there doesn’t seem to be much of that kind of movement in the house, erm, I think it’s quite interesting that when they pull up, erm, and they first see the house, it’s quite meek in colours and it almost looks like it’s part, it, like it could be part of the concentration camp, erm, and there never seems to be sort of much activity, sort of

44 Carnevale, ‘Mark Herman and David Heyman Interview’.  
45 R. Alison, 'Friendship Beyond the Fence', Bonus Features, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas [DVD]; see also M. Herman, ibid.  
much fun, or sort of liveliness in the house, it, it always seems to be on the bits
where he’s going to meet his friend that he can sort of run about and have a bit of, bit
of fun.\(^{47}\)

Judy’s focus was on Bruno and his experiences. Feelings of pity appeared to be
concentrating on Bruno rather than Shmuel and the other Jewish inmates. Judy even
compared the look of the family’s house with the concentration camp. What also comes
across in this example is a particular notion of childhood as an unburdened and
untroubled time of joy and imagination.

Seven of the British interviewees offered universalising interpretations of the
childhood motif (eight examples). 19-year-old Northern Irish student Sam Caine was
asked whether he thought there was a ‘message for today’ in the film. His response
highlights one of the inherent problems of the film:

Yeah, pretty much, erm, don’t let your kids climb under fences ... I suppose, try to
explain these things, like kind of bad things in the world to your children, don’t keep
them in a complete innocence ... He didn’t know what was wrong with going ... to
the other side ... if he had known, maybe he would have been a bit more standoffish
but then you kind of think, well, the fence, that, that whole thing shouldn’t have
existed anyway, the concentration camps, so it’s, it shouldn’t have existed and he,
like as a child, shouldn’t have to know about it, shouldn’t have to burdened with
these kind of terrible, terrible events and emotions and stuff, so it’s, it’s, I don’t
know, it’s very hard to reconcile what I think towards the movie, I think.\(^{48}\)

First, it should be noted that the interviewer asked a somewhat ‘loaded’ question
presupposing that the film does, in fact, have a ‘message’. But Sam’s immediate
response suggests that he was not surprised by the question and he provided a detailed
answer. His response reflects what David Cesarani warned of in relation to *The Boy in
the Striped Pyjamas*: that Bruno’s death ‘becomes less a consequence of prejudice and
more a bizarre health and safety incident. If Bruno had been properly instructed about
the camp (as would have been the case in reality) he would not have gone inside.’\(^{49}\)

Though Sam realised that this ‘message’ is flawed as the concentration camps
‘shouldn’t have existed’, it is Bruno for which he appeared to have concern (Bruno is
the one that should not be burdened) rather than Shmuel. Gilbert argues in this respect
with regards to the novel that a ‘perhaps unintended effect’ of the ‘enforced

\(^{47}\) Interview Judy Evans (JE), *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, 28 September 2011, 166-74.
http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/cesarani_10_08.html [Accessed 28 April 2014].
identification with Bruno’ may be that at the end, ‘we are supposed to be somehow devastated, along with the Nazi commandant, that the wrong boy died.’

Another example for a universal interpretation of the childhood motif was recorded in the interview with 30-year-old research assistant Anna Smith. When the interviewer asked her if there was anything that she would take away from the film, Anna responded: ‘the innocence of children ... to them everyone’s the same, it’s the adults that there’s differences that they, they put between people ... that’s the general message.’ Sue Page has noted with regards to the novel that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is not for child readers but ‘implicitly, it is for adults, who want to believe that a child can maintain his naivety, ignorance and/or innocence in any situation ... Bruno is not realistic, but he serves a real purpose – to reinforce a popular contemporary adult belief about childhood.’ Though a range of timeless themes and messages were detected in the interviews about all films except *Conspiracy*, the most frequent one of these was that ‘all people are the same’, as seen above in Anna’s example. 11 examples of this were recorded from seven interviewees about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas.* The way in which the film was marketed as a ‘timeless story of innocence lost and humanity found’, reveals the central role played by both the childhood motif and universal messages.

As for the child’s expression of horror at the end, the mother’s pain was seen as an expression of the Holocaust. In this reading, the film becomes a lesson about the cost of war to all of those involved without indication of cause-effect relationships or even distinctions between victims and perpetrators. The risk of reducing the Holocaust to a set of ‘lessons’ was highlighted by Tim Cole who argues that ‘When the lessons become more important than the history, the tendency is for the complexity of the past to be reduced to a number of rather banal statements designed merely to meet the needs of the

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present. At the same time, Judith Berman contends that universalising the Holocaust would ensure continued relevance of the institutions that carry Holocaust remembrance ‘for the multicultural, Western-orientated societies in whose midst they were established.’ 170 segments across all interviews relate to universalising interpretations of the five films or the Holocaust more generally. This includes statements about the alleged universal setting of the film under discussion or universal messages taken away from it. This was most pronounced among interviewees of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (44 examples from all but one interview; 26 from ten British interviewees), *The Reader* (50 examples from all interviewees) and *Defiance* (37 examples from 14 interviewees). These three films appeared to have been most successful in translating their universalising approaches in a way that was widely understood or, alternatively, in appealing to preconceptions about the Holocaust and its representation.

Some of the responses to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* confirm that depictions of children yield high emotive power over audiences. It was also observed that not every interviewee responded in the same way to these images or focused on the topic to the same extent. While to Sam Caine and Judy Evans, the childhood motif and particularly the character of Bruno seemed very important, to others, such as 64-year-old Jewish artist and educator Ruth Jones, other aspects proved more significant. Ruth offered an abstract, meta-level reading of Bruno when she suggested in her response to the interviewer’s (INT) opening question for a film summary that Bruno and Shmuel, unwittingly find themselves, erm, sent into the gas chambers and the very machinery that the father has been helping create to wipe out Jews kills his own son so a lot of it is about (-) seeing, erm, (-) how the aggressor becomes a victim and (-) also the child, the Na-, the German child being imprisoned in this, erm, artificial world that is, that the Nazis have created. So he is a victim as well, || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| that’s largely what it is about.58

Ruth’s reading of the film goes beyond the film plot and connects it with the wider context of the Holocaust. Bruno is a ‘victim as well’ of the ‘machinery’ built to kill Jews. More than that, ‘the aggressor becomes a victim’. Both novel and film have been criticised precisely for implicitly turning ‘Germans into victims of the Holocaust.’

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57 19 examples from nine interviewees of *Conspiracy*; 20 examples from ten interviewees of *The Grey Zone*.
59 Cesarani, ‘Striped Pyjamas’. 
Turning German perpetrators and bystanders into victims was a recurring theme in the interviews about this and other films, and will be explored further in the subsequent chapter on the interpretation of perpetrator behaviour and motivation.

These examples also illustrate what Dan Stone termed the ‘current infantilisation of Holocaust memory’ which is ‘directed towards children of all ages’ and which is ‘didactic and prescriptive’.

Though this study’s participants were all adults, the film’s child perspective appears to facilitate a film reception that ‘tends towards a belittling of the Holocaust and a removal from the discussion or at least a downplaying of the horror that demanded our interest in the first place’, while Stone calls this an inevitable problem ‘of making the Holocaust accessible for children and lay-people’ the interviews also revealed exceptions in this respect.

The childhood motif drew much attention and appeared to lead to an increased focus on Bruno whose death was of greater concern to most interviewees than that of Shmuel. One interviewee, however, was highly critical of the film. When the interviewer asked if anything and what can be gained from films about the Holocaust, Barbara Parker, a 58-year-old retiree, voiced her concerns:

Well, there will always be some people who’ll respond positively ... and who’ll look at things in a different way and maybe that, that film there would affect some people, they might (--) you know, because they would have sympathy with Bruno dying but whether they would (--) _ , I’m not so sure that the parents in that film had any sympathy for the other people in the camp ... and so I don’t know whether the viewer would (incomprehensible, 1 word) ... Because they might think, ‘oh, poor Bruno, he didn’t deserve to be there, he wasn’t one of them’.

This demonstrates that the interviewees’ readings of the childhood motif differed from one another and included at least one critical view of the film’s focus on Bruno. It can be suggested that a viewer’s individual focus or interest is decisive in terms of how much significance is allocated to a particular theme and how it is evaluated. It should be noted that Barbara told the interviewer that she had suffered from verbal anti-Semitic abuse as people often assumed she was Jewish, because, as she said, of her appearance. She also talked about experiences of racism directed at her and her family because of her father’s Sri Lankan background. Barbara was the only British interviewee of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas who was very critical of the film throughout, particularly of

60 D. Stone, ‘From Stockholm to Stockton: The Holocaust and/as Heritage in Britain’, in Sharples and Jensen (eds), Britain and the Holocaust, p. 215.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Interview Barbara Parker (BP), The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, 18 August 2011, 326-32.
its marginalisation of the Jewish victims. She appeared to identify with the Jewish victims and rejected the focus on Bruno at the expense of the victims. She also explained her interest in the Holocaust partly with her own experiences of racist abuse and her friendship with a Holocaust survivor. One could thus suggest that an interest in the Holocaust, the experience of discrimination, and contact with survivors of the Holocaust or their relatives, would increase the likelihood of empathy with the Jewish victims and thus a rejection of perpetrator-centric narratives that blur the boundaries between victims and perpetrators.

**Illiteracy and Culpability**

Hanna’s illiteracy plays a crucial role in *The Reader* and it is one of the most-discussed aspects of the novel. Asked how her illiteracy was meant to be understood, Schlink explains that it merely explains why she became a guard as ‘there are all kinds of reasons people like Hanna got into what they did.’\(^{64}\) Rejecting ‘misinterpretations’ of his novel that Hanna may not be guilty due to her illiteracy, he clarifies that he does not believe that literacy equals morality and cites the demographics of members of the *Einsatzgruppen* who were often academics. Hanna was thus no typical perpetrator.\(^{65}\)

To the 11 interviewees, Hanna’s illiteracy mattered to varying degrees. 43-year-old student Lara Williams highlighted this aspect to a great extent, possibly due to her dyslexia and being able to identify with someone struggling to read and write. 25-year-old student Andrew Campbell, by contrast, largely ignored Hanna’s illiteracy and focussed on the relationship aspect instead, arguing that the Holocaust was merely an interchangeable backdrop. To many, Hanna’s illiteracy served as an excuse, or at least as a reason and explanation, for her crimes and behaviour. 29 segments pertaining to illiteracy were identified in all interviews. Hanna’s behaviour, including her crimes, was explained with her illiteracy in around a third of the examples. 11 examples were recorded from seven interviewees where Hanna’s illiteracy is a crucial factor for making sense of her behaviour, and to some, it may even serve as an exculpating or mitigating factor. As this included all five members of the group discussion, it can be suggested that the dynamics within the group may have led to a consensus with regards to certain topics, while others were marginalised.

\(^{64}\) Shea, ‘Q&A with Bernhard Schlink’.
Nine interviewees further suggested that Hanna’s illiteracy was the reason for her admittance to the crimes. In the group discussion, the leading respondents were 34-year-old teacher Mary Gaynor (MG) and Richard Poynter (RP), a 35-year-old computer programmer. They suggested that Hanna admitted to the crimes due to an inability to think through the consequences and because she merely followed orders, both of which were argued to be potentially owed to her illiteracy. The example is taken from just after the beginning of the interview when the group discussed what the film was about:

MG: I’m not saying what she did was right ‘cause obviously … it’s not … but I do think her illiteracy did have something to do with why she joined and why she did what she did and looking at what she said in the court, it was very, ‘we had to do this, this and this’ … she just followed the facts and she just gave facts where the others, ‘no, we didn’t do this, we, of course we didn’t do this, no, no, no, we were, we’re victims here as well’, she said, ‘no, we all did it’, she just, it just came out of her ...

RP: I think the others … were thinking more about the consequences to themselves || MG: Mm-hmm. || … she was just, ‘well, I didn’t do anything wrong’ … MG: I don’t think she understood necessarily … what she did was wrong …

RP: ‘Why are you wrong if you do what you’re told … I mean, I was told to do it by someone who was above me’, || MG: Yeah. || and she didn’t have that intelligence to be able to see through that. || MG: Mm-hmm. || Whereas the others did and they knew the consequences and they were thinking of themselves. || MG: Yeah. ||| Mary and Richard portrayed Hanna as less intelligent than the other defendants, which they appeared to understand as being either the cause or a result of her illiteracy. Hanna thus becomes a victim of her inability to read and write which not only led to her joining the SS but also to her sentencing. While Mary criticised the other defendants for pretending to be victims, she elevated Hanna to being more honest or, rather, unable to lie to avoid a harsher sentence. Richard, on the other hand, drew on interpretations of perpetrator behaviour that assume obedience to authority and that soldiers and guards had to ‘follow orders’. In the film, the judge asks Hanna, when she confesses to leaving the church doors locked, whether they would have faced consequences had they unlocked the doors. Hanna states that they were ‘responsible’ for the prisoners and could not let them out as there would have been ‘chaos’ and order could not have been restored. As Hanna does not explicitly claim to have been following orders from ‘above’, it can be argued that Richard’s interpretation of her behaviour in this way was projected onto the film viewing and stemmed from his preconceptions.

The notion of illiteracy being linked to moral development found in the previous example was echoed by another interviewee, Harriet Langford (consultant/student, 60), who was familiar with the model of behavioural development after Lawrence Kohlberg, which is cited in educational study guides for the novel. William Donahue remarks in this respect that ‘Hanna’s handicap functions ... as a pliable metaphor for a more general state of deprivation that is meant to explain why some people turn to evil. It is precisely because this developmental model of behaviour enjoys popular credence that Hanna, too, for all her apparent particularity, comes to stand for the many.’ Schlink’s choice of illiteracy has been criticised for being a thinly veiled metaphor for moral ‘Unmündigkeit’ (immaturity) which supposedly serves to explain perpetrator behaviour. Niven, on the other hand, argues that shame is the key element of the novel and the key to understanding Hanna. Among the interviewees, Hanna’s shame for her illiteracy was named as a reason for signing up to the SS and admitting to the crimes in court on 16 occasions (eight interviewees). One of them was Harriet Langford who was asked by the interviewer if she ‘empathised’ with Hanna’s character. According to Harriet, she did not empathise with the character but was able to ‘appreciate that this was an illiterate woman ... who was terribly ashamed of being illiterate, so ashamed that she allowed herself to take the hit for a, you know, when it was a collective responsibility’.

44-year-old public health professional and MSc student Heather Stuart, on the other hand, offered a more abstract, meta-level explanation for Hanna’s admittance to the responsibility for the crimes, one that does not deny that Hanna knew about the consequences of admitting to the crimes. When asked for memorable scenes from the film, Heather, who had seen the film once before, explained that when watching it for the first time, she could not understand why Hanna did not simply reveal her illiteracy to save herself from life in prison,

and then the second time I read it as being actually in a way she is choosing to take on the guilt of, of a nation because she does know the consequences or potential

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70 Interview HL, The Reader, 313-19.
consequences of not admitting it, erm, so that, that scene probably stood out hugely for me this time.\textsuperscript{71}

To her, Hanna’s illiteracy makes her vulnerable and the other defendants realised this and made her ‘the scapegoat’, as she suggests later on in the interview.\textsuperscript{72} Altogether ten similar examples were recorded from six interviewees. Heather’s and Harriet’s interpretations have in common that Hanna’s individual responsibility for the crimes she committed disappears behind what Harriet terms ‘collective responsibility’ for which Hanna takes ‘the hit’, and Heather’s suggestion that Hanna is taking ‘on the guilt of a nation’.

Though the interviewees’ focus and interpretations may differ, the issues of whether Hanna wrote the report and was thus guilty of three hundred murders, whether she was ashamed or took the blame for the other defendants, or whether she was able to think through the consequences of her actions and the reasons for her signing up to the SS, all tend to serve to distract and deflect from the crimes she and the other defendants committed. This contributes to the view of Hanna as a victim, which forms one of the most frequently observed themes in the interviews and which will be discussed in more detail as part of the next chapter on interpretations of perpetrator motivation.

**Coming to terms with the National Socialist past**

As noted in Part I, *The Reader* is preoccupied with Germany’s coming to terms with the Nazi past, the second generation, and post-war justice. The latter has been fraught with controversies and shortcomings. *The Reader* draws on notions of the justice system as having prosecuted only the ‘minor’ perpetrators while letting the ‘big’ ones get away. Hanna’s lawyer is depicted as being young, inexperienced, overwhelmed and largely incompetent; Hanna’s co-defendants simply deny all charges while Hanna freely admits to them; and the judge does not probe any further when Hanna admits to having written the incriminating report. This may give the impression that justice was not served and that Hanna, and by implication many others, did not receive just sentences or fair trials.

The intentions both of the filmmakers and the novel’s author are marked by a tension between telling a specifically German story and a universalising approach to history. The film and novel are both about Germany ‘coming to terms’ with the past and about

\textsuperscript{71} Interview Heather Stuart (HS), *The Reader*, 2 December 2011, 42-5.

\textsuperscript{72} *Ibid.*, 160.
universal themes such as judgment, truth and reconciliation. Author and jurist Schlink is often consulted as an expert on German Vergangenheitsbewältigung. His novel is about ‘how the second generation was implicated in the guilt of the first’. Schlink characterises his novel as working against clear-cut binaries of ‘good and evil ... Abroad, this tendency has long influenced the image of Germany, whereas The Reader demonstrated: We have to live with the fact that people who commit monstrous crimes are not always simply monsters.’\textsuperscript{73} His novel, and by extension the film, reads as an autobiographical assessment of his generation, rejecting the ways in which it confronted the past, and the way in which the law dealt with it.

While Schlink, Hare and Daldry all agree that the film is not supposed to be about the Holocaust,\textsuperscript{74} both Daldry and Hare quoted Godard in interviews with regards to their motivation: ‘If ever a film is to be made about Auschwitz, it will have to be from the point of view of the guards.’\textsuperscript{75} To Hare, ‘The Reader is not simply a novel specific to the postwar German experience. It is also a more far-reaching exploration of the painful and difficult process we all know under the name of truth and reconciliation.’\textsuperscript{76} Daldry considers the situation of the second generation and the impact the crimes of their parents would have had on them: ‘Does that invalidate your love? Does it mean your love is then dirty? How is it possible to love anybody given the circumstances that their country perpetrated?’\textsuperscript{77}

The film’s middle part of the court trial was widely discussed by the interviewees. 17 examples from nine interviewees relate, in particular, to questions of fairness of the trial and of Hanna’s sentence, or justice more generally. Nine of these examples were recorded in the group discussion. Richard Poynter focused heavily on the question of ‘justice post-war and whether or not I suppose it was right or wrong in that justice. ... did she get justice or did she get revenge.’\textsuperscript{78} Richard later on acknowledged that his sympathy with, and pity for the character of Hanna was increased by his perception of

\textsuperscript{73} P. Ahne and S. Geyer, ’Interview mit Bernhard Schlink: “Nicht nur Monster begehen Verbrechen”’, Frankfurter Rundschau (11 April 2013) [translation by the author], \url{http://www.fr-online.de/kultur/interview-mit-bernhard-schlink--nicht-nur-monster-begehen-verbrechen-1472786.22340012.html} [Accessed 28 April 2014].
\textsuperscript{74} ‘Adapting a Timeless Masterpiece: Making The Reader’, Bonus feature, The Reader [DVD].
\textsuperscript{76} Hare, ‘Truth and reconciliation’.
\textsuperscript{77} ‘Adapting a Timeless Masterpiece: Making The Reader’, Bonus feature, The Reader [DVD].
\textsuperscript{78} Group Discussion MG, RP, DP, EJ and MS, The Reader, 10-16.
her trial constituting a ‘miscarriage of justice’ as she was not judged for what she had actually done.\textsuperscript{79} The notion of revenge in Richard’s example is also interesting. It points to notions of ‘revenge of the victors’ and may be linked to public perceptions of the Nuremberg Trial. The fictitious trial of Hanna in \textit{The Reader}, on the other hand, took place in a German court under German law and was, as mentioned previously, inspired by the Auschwitz Trial. Like Richard, 36-year-old manager Nicole Trevena was concerned about the trial. The film prompted her to think about post-war trials more generally and to question their justice and lawfulness. Although she did not possess any in-depth knowledge of any of the historical trials, she made generalisations about them based on what she saw in the film when she commented that ‘you assume a trial is a fair and just thing but actually the way in which ... it was conceived was wrong’.\textsuperscript{80} She did not think that the trial in the film was fair as Hanna should have only been sentenced like the other defendants. None of the interviewees suggested that the sentence the other defendants received for the charge of aiding and abetting should have been more severe.

Stephanie Porter, a 20-year-old student, was less concerned with the fairness of the sentencing than with the alleged suffering of ‘normal German people’ which she argued is ‘very unfair’ as ‘they’re never really thought about’.\textsuperscript{81} Towards the end of the interview, when asked by the interviewer whether there may be a ‘danger’ that \textit{The Reader} could ‘somehow excuse the perpetrators’, Stephanie suggested that ‘complete blame shouldn’t be put on these individuals because it could happen to anybody ... when that society is already been set up for you and you, you’ve been born into that type of system.\textsuperscript{82} These examples indicate that the interviewees’ film reception often went beyond the film itself and that they made generalisations about the history of the Holocaust based on, or in conjunction with, the films presented to them.

31 examples from nine interviewees relate to Germany’s coming to terms with the National Socialist past as a theme in the film. Harriet Langford, for example, after providing a detailed summary of the plot at the beginning of the interview, added:

So that was essentially, if you like, the bare bones of the story ... but actually the story ... kind of operates on many different levels ... and you can’t help but think that this is also about ... Germany thinking about its past, || INT: Mm-hm. || you know, and how the German peoples have come to terms with all of this ... this is

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Ibid.}, 466-80.
\textsuperscript{80} Interview Nicole Trevena (NT), \textit{The Reader}, 21 October 2011, 92-3.
\textsuperscript{81} Interview Stephanie Porter (SP), \textit{The Reader}, 26 October 2011, 216-17.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ibid.}, 387-9.
actually a story about coming, the whole trial itself was about, you know, coming to
terms <laughs> with (--) what had happened ... 83

She thus identified at least one part of what the film was about, the story about post-war
Germany. Though this was most pronounced in the interviews with Harriet Langford
and Heather Stuart, it can be suggested that the film was ‘successful’ here in bringing
this across to the majority of the interviewees. The particular aspect of inter-
generational conflicts explored by The Reader, on the other hand, featured less
prominently in the interviews. The examples relating to the trial have also demonstrated
that, much like the issue of illiteracy, the depiction of an ‘unfair’ trial can be used to
distract from Hanna’s actual guilt. And as seen in the case of Stephanie Porter, to some,
Hanna may stand in for ‘normal Germans’ who suffered and thus appear as victims of
the Holocaust while the Jewish victims find little mention.

Defying the myth of Jewish passivity

Defiance and The Grey Zone represent instances of Jewish resistance, yet in
fundamentally different ways and with distinct agendas. Defiance’s depiction of
successful Jewish resistance and of Jews saving other Jews has rarely found its way into
popular films or the public discourse. Defiance is, apart from one scene in which Tuvia
Bielski convinces a ghetto population to risk escape into the forest, set outside the
ghettos and camps which have come to dominate the screens and the popular
imagination regarding the Holocaust. Director Zwick and author Tec shared the goal of
making known the story not only of the Bielskis but of Jewish resistance more
generally, and to bestow late recognition onto Tuvia Bielski. Tec’s book was written to
rectify the silence about Jews who, while themselves threatened by death, were saving
others, and the common description of European Jews as victims who went passively to
their death. Defiance ‘shows that under conditions of human degradation and suffering,
Jews were determined to survive – they refused to become passive victims.’ 84 American
Jewish filmmaker Zwick learned about the Holocaust as a teenager through the ‘grisly
iconography of passivity and victimization’ which are ‘not only an article of faith, but
also a source of secret shame.’ 85 Tec’s book evoked in him ‘something utterly primitive
and deeply personal, a roiling wave of fear, awe, humility, and admiration. And

83 Interview HL, The Reader, 52-8. Harriet’s laugh here does not indicate that she was laughing about the
trial in terms of finding it amusing, but serves to underline her subject knowledge.
outrage, too – that such a story was not better known."86 This appreciation for the extraordinary story of the Bielski partisans was shared by co-producer and screenwriter Clayton Frohmann, and actors Daniel Craig and Jamie Bell.87 In addition, the film has a more universal concern. Zwick claims that the film ‘asks a question which is to say … does one have to become a monster in order to fight monsters? Does one have to sacrifice one’s humanity in order to save humanity?’88 At the end of the making-of which is included on the DVD, Zwick told the crew that this was ‘work with meaning’ and while it was ‘done to entertain people’ it was also done in memory, in conscience, ‘and with a purpose’.89

The film is thus both about Jewish defiance to genocide, and the filmmakers’ defiance to the representation of Jews as passive victims. Neither the film’s backdrop of the mass shootings in Eastern Europe and Russia, nor Jewish resistance is part of popular knowledge about the Holocaust. The majority of interviewees – 11 out of 15 (including the French and Greek Cypriot interviewees) – had no knowledge about Jewish partisans, the killing squads or Jews hiding in the forests of Eastern Europe/Russia prior to watching the film. For example, asked whether she had heard anything about this before, Ellen Holmes, a 22-year-old university intern responded:

No, I didn’t know, || INT: Mm-hmm. || I didn’t know anything about that. The only thing I knew about, the whole Russian aspect of it, was that, erm, German forces who tried to invade Russia … were kind of s-, scared off by the winter or something, <laughs> … but it was really interesting to see that from a historical point of view.90

Ellen acknowledged her limited knowledge about the war in Russia which is highlighted by her self-critical laugh when telling the interviewer about the only aspect she had heard about. The filmmakers may have succeeded in providing viewers with added knowledge about the Holocaust and, potentially, even an impetus to seek further information. All interviewees talked about elements of resistance, fighting, or defiance. 27-year-old police constable Theodore Robinson (TR) picked up on this immediately when asked to summarise the film at the beginning of his group discussion with James Thorley (JT), a 34-year-old civil servant:

TR: It was about defiance which is the, the, the name of the film, wasn’t it, the, er, title, erm, sort of, er, trying to adversity I think was, erm, I think seemed to be a main topic throughout, erm, and yeah, obviously, er, regarding the, the Jewish resistance,

86 Ibid., p. x.
87 ‘Return to the Forest: The Making of Defiance’, Bonus feature, Defiance [DVD].
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Interview Ellen Holmes (EH), Defiance, 13 November 2011, 23-6.
er, in the Second World War in Belarus, I think that’s where they were, wasn’t it? // JT: Yeah. /// Yeah, that’s where it was.\textsuperscript{91}

Theodore provided little information about the film plot but summarised what he regarded as the ‘main topic’: defiance and adversity. He contextualised the film as being about ‘Jewish resistance in the Second World War in Belarus’, rather than just about this one group depicted by the film. The film is thus regarded as representing a wider history and to hold historical significance. 29 examples relating to resistance were recorded in all interviews.

Three of the interviewees (Yasmin Jenkins-Aribas, Thomas Gunasekara, Howard Pearson) demonstrated an awareness of the notion of Jewish passivity and recognised the film’s significance and contribution in this respect. 20-year-old student Yasmin Jenkins-Aribas, in particular, suggested that ‘maybe this film was made because it, is there a lot of criticism that the Jewish people didn’t actually fight back and they gave in too easily?’\textsuperscript{92} Yasmin had studied the Holocaust in-depth for her A-levels and also visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, possibly as part of the ‘Lessons from Auschwitz Project’. She was familiar with Holocaust research and was thus able to contextualise the film within a particular discourse. 63-year-old retiree Andrew Lee, who was the most critical of the film, was also familiar with the notion of Jewish passivity. In contrast to the other three interviewees, Andrew conformed to and defended, rather than challenged, the myth of passivity. When asked about key scenes in the film, he cited the Russian commander telling Zus Bielski that Jews ‘are only good for dying’. Andrew argued that the Jews ‘did not rise up, like there’s a few isolated instances, but they did not rise up against the oppressor, they allowed themselves to be put upon and downtrodden and repressed and murdered and, and, and they lost their dignity’.\textsuperscript{93} He connected one of the scenes in the film with his knowledge and preconceptions and interpreted it in a way that confirmed and consolidated his existing views. This example demonstrates that not only was he unaware of alternative and more recent discourses regarding Jewish resistance but he also reproduced anti-Semitic stereotypes and problematic notions of alleged Jewish complicity in their own deaths.

He presented himself as an expert on the subject and did not reflect – at any point in the interview – on, or question, his subject knowledge. This is in marked contrast to

\textsuperscript{91} Group Discussion James Thorley (JT) and Theodore Robinson (TR), \textit{Defiance}, 10 March 2011, 6-10.
\textsuperscript{92} Group Discussion Yasmin Jenkins-Aribas (YJ) and Camilla McCartney (CM), \textit{Defiance}, 4 November 2011, 97-8.
\textsuperscript{93} Interview Andrew Lee (AL), \textit{Defiance}, 11 January 2012, 141-5.
Howard Pearson, a 25-year-old PhD candidate, who conceded that he was ‘genuinely curious about this story of the Jewish partisan resistance. That’s really interesting, erm, and something ... I’ve never thought about so ... I admit to being guilty of this ... when I was saying this ... representation of the Jews as entirely passive in their own extermination’. Despite being overall critical of Defiance and representations of the Holocaust more generally, what Howard nonetheless took from the film was a core of historical fact – the existence of Jewish resistance – and to question his own knowledge.

In terms of interviewees’ characterisations of Jewish film characters, fundamental differences were identified between the five films. In Conspiracy, the Jewish victims are entirely absent, which is noted by a few interviewees who referred to the dehumanising language used by the meeting’s participants when talking about Jews. In The Reader, the only Jewish characters are two women, mother and daughter, who survived the church fire, and who are barely mentioned by the interviewees. The characterisation of Jews was most diverse and positive among interviewees of Defiance, who stressed differences within the partisan group and their community spirit. Crucial here is that the Jewish refugees and partisans appeared largely as active agents. The opposite was the case among the interviewees of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas. The Jews are mostly described in passive terms, with notions of pity and sympathy. The Jewish victims overall appeared as a passive and homogenous mass without any distinguishing features. A more ambivalent, negative and partially passive picture was painted by the interviewees of The Grey Zone who tried to make sense of the Sonderkommando’s ambiguous behaviour and the extreme situation these men were forced into. This indicates that the ways in which Jewish characters were described by the interviewees is linked to their depiction. Films like Defiance could therefore not only draw attention to the plight of Jews during the Holocaust but also transmit a more active and varied picture, even though the responses cannot be foreseen, as the example above from Andrew Lee has demonstrated.

The elements of escape, survival and hiding in the Belorussian forests were considered by all interviewees in 50 segments. Ellen Holmes, for example, summarised the film as being primarily about ‘trying to live’, seeking protection in the forest and fleeing from the German invasion. The film, like Tec’s book, also places considerable emphasis on the community that was built in the forest and puts forward the notion that

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94 Interview Howard Pearson (HP), Defiance, 15 December 2011, 393-7.
95 Interview EH, Defiance, 10.
this enabled the survival of the group. The aspect of working together and of the community created by the refugees was reflected in 14 examples from 12 interviewees (including the French and Cypriot participants). James Thorley suggested that maybe so many survived because the group did not turn anyone away:

JT: I mean, obviously kind of like the moral he was getting over, was, you know, to live as human beings. TR: Mm-hmm. you know, and if, if they died by doing so, then so be it. TR: Yes. Yeah. I suppose is, I don’t know, probably the, captured the, I suppose, the moral of the story really TR: Yeah. Yeah. and perhaps is why, perhaps why in the end they did all survive and do, do as well as they did.96

The aspect of community was, indeed, of major concern for Zwick who established the community as a ‘character’.97 The ways in which many interviewees made sense of Defiance is remarkably close to the aims set out by Tec and Zwick. It could be suggested that Defiance’s conventional narrative, adherence to familiar tropes, and obvious symbolism may enable viewers to decipher what the filmmakers were trying to achieve. At the same time, this reliance on a conventional narrative, particularly the film’s focus on survival rather than death, may also lead to simplifying and potentially de-contextualising the history of Jewish partisans and resistance. The flipside of some of the interviewees’ interpretations of resistance in Defiance – and this is true, to an extent, also in relation to The Grey Zone – is the notion that the Jews had a choice and could have either saved themselves or died in a different way as ‘human beings’.

The Grey Zone is, by contrast, not meant to be a film about resistance. 17 examples from eight interviewees nonetheless pertain to the uprising, the saving of the girl, and resistance more generally. Some interviewees interpreted The Grey Zone as focusing on these aspects. Louise Scriven, a 20-year-old student, who watched the film for a seminar at university, summarised the film in her response to the opening interview question in the following way:

Erm, okay, er, it was about, erm, the group of people who, the, the Jewish group who have to, erm, do what the Nazis tell them, as in like help out and burn the bodies, bury them, that kind of thing, it was about them trying to, er, de-, er, create an uprising and blow up, er, two of the crematoriums INT: Mm-hmm. and then half-way through, erm, the issue about the girl appears as well.98

While Louise also referred to the particular situation of the Sonderkommando, she saw the film as being primarily about the uprising. One could suggest that the predicament

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96 Group Discussion JT and TR, Defiance, 335-9.
97 Zwick, ‘Film with Audio Commentary’, Defiance [DVD].
98 Group Discussion Doreen Lamb (DL), Louise Scriven (LS) and Oscar Sandford (OS), The Grey Zone, 28 March 2011, 3-6.
of the Sonderkommando along with the finding of the girl, are both subordinated in this reading of the film to the overarching story of the uprising and thus resistance. Despite not being primarily about resistance, The Grey Zone nonetheless conveys an important and lesser-known aspect of the Holocaust. Prisoners in the Auschwitz complex tried to escape and sometimes did so successfully. There was a camp resistance and reports were smuggled out by escapees.\textsuperscript{99} Though there were also uprisings in the death camps of Treblinka and Sobibor, Gideon Greif highlights that the rebellion of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz-Birkenau ‘was unique because it was the only demonstration of armed resistance in the history of Auschwitz. The heroism and valor of the Jews who took part in the uprising are magnified by the fact that they operated in total isolation.’\textsuperscript{100} Noel Baxter, a 58-year-old university porter, who was one of three interviewees with some prior knowledge about uprisings, also summarised the film at the beginning of the interview as being about a rebellion:

> the narrative of the film was about, er, a group of men who decided to rebel in virtually hopeless conditions rather than accept their fate meekly. ... I think the inclusion of the girl being found, whilst I’ve read of that story before, I don’t know whether it’s factual or not, erm, it kind of muddled the, the waters to some degree ... it confused the film rather than adding anything to it. ... but in, in narrative terms, the film was about a group of men who rebelled against their captors and found a survivor amongst millions of people they helped to kill.\textsuperscript{101}

Similar to Louise, Noel pointed to the predicament of the ‘group of men’ and their ‘hopeless condition’. He appeared to favour ‘rebellion’ over allegedly accepting one’s fate ‘meekly’. This may again point to the myth of Jewish passivity and the privileging of armed resistance also seen in the case of Defiance. To Noel, the film’s story of the men finding the girl seemed to detract from the uprising, which for him was, or should have been, the main focus.

A different and more abstract, almost poetic interpretation was offered by 37-year-old Meera Rangan, the managing director of her own company, who summarised The Grey Zone as being about ‘the inmates ... in Auschwitz and their struggle to ... to cope with what’s happening around them and yet try and survive and yet there’s a burning need within them to try and salvage some life out of all the death that they’re seeing

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\textsuperscript{100} G. Greif, We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz (New Haven and London, 2005), p. 40.
\textsuperscript{101} Interview Noel Baxter (NB), The Grey Zone, 18 July 2011, 3-9.
\end{flushright}
around them and ... that’s what they ultimately died trying to do."102 Her focus was more on the group of men trying to save the girl rather than the uprising. Her film summary was otherwise vague and provided little information about the plot other than the setting, the protagonists, their rationale and the ultimate outcome.

These examples indicate that the interviewees’ reading of the film is both prompted by the film text and that it may vary in terms of focus and interpretation. Particularly the emphasis placed on the uprising, the saving of the girl and the predicament of the Sonderkommando was seen to differ widely. Contrary to the director’s intentions, the uprising featured prominently in many of the interviews. Despite this, the situation of the Sonderkommando was also explored by the majority of interviewees. Greif demands that “The extreme conditions under which the Sonderkommando prisoners had to live should remind us to contemplate their plight with the utmost sensitivity.”103 To what extent this was the case and how the interviewees made sense of the prisoners’ situation, will be explored below.

The predicament of the Sonderkommandos

Tim Blake Nelson was chiefly responsible for The Grey Zone’s agenda, which he laid bare in his publication of the director’s notes and screenplay. Nelson’s ‘grandparents and mother were refugees, and while the holocaust wasn’t spoken of with unhealthy frequency, it certainly cast a shadow over our lives.’104 Having been introduced to the Holocaust through The Diary of Anne Frank, when Nelson researched for a script and read Levi’s essay ‘The Grey Zone’, he found a story that contradicted what he had learned thus far, and ‘much of Levi’s writing seemed to oppose the themes of Anne Frank. People were not essentially “good at heart.”’105 The Grey Zone’s ‘context’ may be the Holocaust ‘but it’s a film about being human.’106

Six of the 11 interviewees (Oscar Sandford, Ryan Gledhill, Meera Rangan, Noel Baxter, Jayne Orme and Sarah Allen) possessed some knowledge about the Sonderkommandos. 15 examples from ten interviewees specifically relate to their predicament. When asked for her knowledge about the Sonderkommandos, Meera Rangan told the interviewer that The Grey Zone was ‘the first film that I’ve seen ...

102 Interview Meera Rangan (MR), The Grey Zone, 16 May 2011, 3-6.
103 Greif, We Wept Without Tears, p. 53.
105 Ibid., pp. xi.
106 Ibid., p. xiii.
covering the entire aspect … of what they did’ but then remembered having seen *Escape from Sobibor* a ‘very long time ago … that covered a lot of it’ and was ‘very similar’.107 *The Grey Zone* appeared to have triggered memories or images from *Escape from Sobibor* which Meera remembered as being similar to Nelson’s film. This is interesting as the two films are similar in only some respects; their setting in a death camp and their depiction of an uprising by members of the Sonderkommando. *The Grey Zone* is much more graphic and explicit, and contains no uplifting message about the human spirit.

The interviewees struggled to varying degrees with the situation and behaviour of the men of the Sonderkommando. Siobhan Williams (SW), a 20-year-old shop assistant, was the only one who could not comprehend at all how the men could have acted the way they did. She repeatedly voiced her disapproval of their actions and affirmed that she would have acted differently. The following sequence is taken from the group discussion between her, Sarah Allen (SA), Jayne Orme (JO) and D. Goddard (DG),108 when the group was asked how they liked the film. The example highlights the communication process within the group and the different positions the interviewees are occupying:

SW: I’ve never really watched anything like that before, so that was new to me. || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| But I’ve heard about it and stuff in school but I’ve never watched anything about it and I think it would like, it’s opened me eyes a bit to it, || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| I’ve never actually realised how bad it was. ... JO: It … showed how the Germans really, well, not Germans, the Nazis as they were, er, just took control of everything ‘cause they also made, to me, they also was making the, erm, (-) certain Jews kill Jews, || SA: Mm-hmm. ||| you know, they didn’t, you know, they, they was forcing them to do it but it, you know, and it’s just, they were making them do it, if they didn’t do it, they would kill them, wouldn’t they? || SA: Mm-hmm. ||| SW: It does make you think though why they did it because they were gonna get killed anyway, so rather than, I did agree with what the one man was saying about, erm, at least they’ll die with dignity, || JO: Mm-hmm. ||| that is not making people do … I, I’d never be able to do anything like that, that would, go against my own people to get in with ano-, no. JO: … like, erm, Danny said, it was a good representation of what did happen during that time, er, you know, and what they, this was the power they got over people to do it.109

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108 The first name is abbreviated as D. Goddard did not spell out his first name on the consent form.
109 Group Discussion Siobhan Williams (SW), Sarah Allen (SA), Jayne Orme (JO) and D. Goddard (DG), *The Grey Zone*, 12 September 2011, 16-31.
Throughout the group discussion, Sarah Allen (48, student) and Jayne Orme (52, shop assistant), who had some prior knowledge about the Sonderkommandos, frequently stressed how the men were forced to do their ‘work’ and that they would be killed by the Germans otherwise. Their existing knowledge may have enabled them to make sense of the situation and behaviour of the Sonderkommando whereas Siobhan, who had very little knowledge about the Holocaust, approached the film from a different perspective and seemed unable to either comprehend or empathise with their situation. At the same time, the example above also shows that Jayne had to search for words initially before being able to express that the men were forced to work in the crematoria. One is reminded of Lawrence Langer who suggests that ‘Audiences have little difficulty dealing with heroic gestures where the agent is in control of the choice’ but ‘To understand and to sympathize with unheroic gestures ... withholding endorsement of blame but finding instead an admissible frame for them in the moral discourse of our culture’ appears to be much more difficult.\footnote{L. Langer, \textit{Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory} (New York, 1991), pp. 26-7.} The Grey Zone appears to pose such difficulties for audiences who may be unaccustomed to an un-heroic and ambiguous depiction of Jewish Holocaust victims, and therefore struggle to contextualise what is presented to them within the framework of their own morality and familiar images. A few of the interviewees reflected on the ‘privileged’ prisoners’ particular situation. Siobhan’s statement above is in sharp contrast to Noel Baxter who acknowledged that ‘unless you’re placed in that situation, you don’t know what you would do’, when he was asked how the Jewish inmates were represented.\footnote{Interview NB, \textit{The Grey Zone}, 212-13.} Noel thus came close to Levi’s demand that judgement of the Sonderkommando members must be suspended.\footnote{Levi, ‘The Grey Zone’, pp. 28-9.}

There may also be unintended consequences of the film’s focus on the actions and choices of the Sonderkommando, while the SS is largely in the background. Five interviewees compared the Sonderkommando men to the Nazis. One of them was 21-year-old student Oscar Sandford, who emphasised, when asked for his thoughts on the representation of the Jews in The Grey Zone, that it ‘is one of the first films I’ve seen that deals with the Jews as actually being perpetrators themselves, erm, and acting more savagely in some cases than the Germans in the film’ and that this ‘sheds a new light on
the Holocaust’. In the aforementioned group discussion, the situation the men of the Sonderkommando were forced into and that of SS Muhsfeld was equated when the group discussed the representation of the Nazis and agreed with 22-year-old sales assistant D. Goddard’s suggestion that Muhsfeld ‘was in no different situation in theory … to those Jewish people because … they would have then probably killed him, so he was in, in theory … in exactly the same situation as those Jewish people … he would have been shot and killed.’ The readings offered by D. Goddard and Oscar do not seem to grasp the concept of the ‘grey zone’ put forward by Levi, that is, the exploration of the ‘space which separates … the victims from the perpetrators’. Instead, they implicitly equated the situation of victims and perpetrators notwithstanding their fundamental differences.

The film’s core issue is the human condition, moral ambiguity and compromise, and what people will do to survive. These issues were discussed on 21 occasions in all interviews (without Doreen Lamb and Louise Scriven). Ryan Gledhill, a 46-year-old administrator summarised the film in a way which, at first glance, matched the director’s intentions:

it dealt with the uprising of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz in, er, late 1944 || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| and, er, the moral compromises they had to make, in the process of just staying alive || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| and I suppose the film examines the differences, er, th-, well, considers the point at which, er, survival becomes collaboration and how, how easy that is to live with in impossible circumstances.

Out of the eleven interviewees, Ryan possessed the most knowledge about the subject and had a professed interest in the subject. He was also familiar with a considerable number of films about the Holocaust and one could suggest that both his knowledge and his media literacy enabled him to ‘recognise’ what the film was about beneath the depiction of the uprising and the finding of the girl. At the same time, Ryan focused less on the human condition as such and more on the circumstances of the Sonderkommando and the specific compromises which he regarded as potentially akin to collaboration. The latter, in particular, may point to a familiarity with the discourse surrounding ‘privileged’ Jewish prisoners.

As shown above, one of the group discussions struggled with the film’s depiction of moral ambivalence and did not recognise the film’s more universal ambitions. For 20-
year-old student Madeleine Keane, too, the film’s inherent moral ambiguity was a challenge. Asked whether the film had left her with any questions, she responded that she ‘kind of’ understands that ‘some Jews were kind of, erm, working for the Nazis but they were still against the Nazis’. The doctor and ‘some of the other male actors, they keep saying, erm, “we don’t kill”, and things but like to be honest, like he’s supporting the Nazi cause, like he’a, a valuable attribute to the Nazi cause, so like, I feel like he kind of embodies himself, so it’s, it’s kind of, erm, am-, am-, ambiguous ... his role. Madeleine did not possess much subject knowledge and struggled with the ambiguous depiction of the Jewish inmates. Nelson’s film may thus be intelligible in the way he intended mainly to those with a certain level of knowledge about the Holocaust and familiarity with other representations. At the same time, The Grey Zone did prompt many of the interviewees to think about the Sonderkommando and in some cases, introduced them to this particular aspect of the Holocaust for the first time. For those who neither have knowledge of nor interest in the subject, however, The Grey Zone could leave them with the impression that the Jewish inmates and their persecutors were, in essence, in the same situation.

Summary

This chapter has explored the filmmakers’ intentions and the ways in which their films were made sense of by the interviewees of this study. The filmmakers’ intentions were ‘decoded’ by some, depending on their subject knowledge, interest in the topic and familiarity with other representations of the Holocaust or films more generally. The interview analysis demonstrated that for many interviewees, the films appeared to have increased their knowledge about specific aspects of the Holocaust, which are seldom part of education, public discourse, and other representations. This included the films’ transmission of insights into the Wannsee Conference, Jewish resistance, the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, German post-war trials of Nazi perpetrators and the country’s ‘coming to terms’ with the past. It can thus be argued that the films have, to varying degrees, provided the interviewees with new information or different perspectives, and may have even sparked their interest in these topics. At the same time, some of the film interpretations by the interviewees would also suggest that the historical understanding taken away is limited and simplified at best and distorted at

117 Interview Madeleine Keane (MK), The Grey Zone, 31 January 2012, 201-2.
118 Ibid., 203-11.
worst. This included the ways in which the interviewees made sense of the Wannsee Conference and its relationship to the ‘Final Solution’, or the notion of childhood innocence in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and its potential transfer onto the historical German population. The decisions made by filmmakers, be they for reasons of style and cinematography, or to fit their respective agendas, have implications for the film reception and may also facilitate some unintended and unforeseen film interpretations. While the interviewees made sense of the films in a range of different ways, it appeared that their readings were not free-floating but emanated from the film text which set the parameters of potential interpretations.

**Interpretations of Perpetrator Behaviour and Motivation**

The questions of how the Holocaust was possible and how ordinary people could become (mass) murderers, continue to stir debate. The last two decades witnessed prolific research activities into the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Most notable is Browning’s influential research on the ‘ordinary men’ of police battalion 101, but also seminal works such as those by Gerlach and Pohl, which demonstrated the range of options available to German functionaries in the occupied territories. In addition, there has been a debate over ‘utilitarian’ versus ‘ideological’ motives, pointing to ‘immediate material interests in the persecution of the Jews’. The representation of perpetrators in the last decade may, to an extent, reflect the developments in academic research and its increased focus on ‘ordinary perpetrators’. The majority of feature films about the Holocaust, from *Naked Among Wolves* (GDR, 1963) to *Life is Beautiful* and *In Darkness* (Poland, 2011), focus on the victims or survivors. In recent years, however, filmmakers have increasingly turned to take on the subject of more ‘ordinary’, nuanced and ambiguous perpetrators, leaving behind the pathological type of an Amon Goeth in *Schindler’s List*, in films as varied as *Good* (Hungary/Germany/UK, 2008), *Amen* (France/Germany, 2002), or *Eichmann* (Hungary/UK, 2008).

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Jenni Adams notes a continuing ‘sense of literary and cultural unease which surrounds attempts to conceptualise or depict the perpetrators’. Among the concerns with such representations is that a ‘self-conscious and critically-mobilised interest’ may ‘shade into identifications with and exculpations of these figures, or into the quasi-fascist celebration of kitsch and death’. For the interviewees of this study, perpetrator behaviour and motivation appeared to be an important issue. 325 segments relate to the perpetrators, bystanders or collaborators, and their actions and motivations. The responses were grouped into three broad categories: exculpation; turning perpetrators into victims; de-contextualisation. Of course, there are intersections between these categories and some responses may fall under more than one. It should be noted that the majority of sequences relating to perpetrators were identified in the interviews about Conspiracy (90 segments), The Reader (98) and The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (82). These three films feature and focus on perpetrators or bystanders, who tend towards the ordinary and ambiguous. The aforementioned cinematic change in both focus and representation may have an impact on the viewers of these films in terms of explaining, interpreting, and judging perpetrator and bystander behaviour and motives. Defiance and The Grey Zone only marginally feature perpetrators, and the smaller number of segments relating to perpetrator behaviour and motivation (26 and 29, respectively) reflect this.

**Exculpation**

The most frequently named type of interpretations of perpetrator behaviour and motivation voiced by the interviewees can be characterised as exculpating the German perpetrators and bystanders and finding mitigating circumstances for them. Grouped in this category are explanations of perpetrator behaviour and motivation with fear and coercion, assumptions of opposition to genocide, the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism, and include the allegedly subordinated role of women, and a focus on, or evocation of, Hitler.

**Fear and Coercion**

Notions of fear and coercion constituted the most widespread explanations of the behaviour of the films’ representation of perpetrators and bystanders. This was

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123 An additional 27 segments in the German interviews about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* relate to perpetrator motivation.
particularly prominent in the interviews about *Conspiracy*. The consensus was that some or even most men around the table had to be coerced into agreeing and contributing to the genocidal plans. All 13 interviewees argued in 32 examples that the men were afraid, bullied, overridden, spineless, or following orders. One of the interviewees, Abbey Mills, commented that she was ‘actually quite surprised that they all stayed round the table and agreed but then I suppose they would have been shot if they hadn’t’. While the film insinuates that Heydrich was the leading figure in this coercive process, threatening or flattering people into agreeing, there are no concrete suggestions about what would happen to opponents of genocide; this gap is filled in by the viewers and may reveal popularly held notions of consequences faced by dissenters of the National Socialist regime.

This was also seen, to a lesser extent, in the interviews about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Fear of consequences, and being under pressure to commit crimes were referred to 14 times by six British interviewees. Ruth Jones, some of whose family members were killed in the Holocaust, and who was involved in developing exhibitions about the Holocaust, repeatedly mentioned fear as a bystander motive and stated:

> it was very moving and particularly to see how the Nazi’s wife, the Nazi general’s wife was affected, and how she was so powerless ... I realised that even though I know ... some Germans may have been bystanders out of fear, you see the extent to which ... people can be quite helpless in such a brutal situation.

Ruth turned the ‘Nazi general’s wife’ into a victim by describing her as powerless and also helpless. She connected *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* to her knowledge of bystanders’ motives and through the film ‘realised’ the alleged helplessness ‘in such a brutal situation’. Fear appeared as the main motive, while potential consequences of dissent and what the wife would have been afraid of, were not further explored by Ruth. The film does not appear to have added to her knowledge but merely delivered a visualisation of, and catalyst to, existing ideas.

Explaining perpetrator behaviour with fear and coercion was less pronounced among the interviewees about *The Reader*, with nine examples from four interviewees. Overall, the focus was less on Hanna’s crimes and more on her fears and her alleged suffering. Seven interviewees did, however, make sense of perpetrator motivation and behaviour by suggesting Hanna was following orders or the rules, did not question authority and, consequently, was merely inactive rather than (pro-) actively committing crimes.

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Among them was Lara Williams who interpreted the behaviour of Hanna and of the historic perpetrators more generally in this way. When asked for her thoughts on the director’s intentions for making The Reader, Lara said it showed ‘the human side of the guards’ and that they were following orders and ‘a lot of them didn’t feel they had any choice’. To Lara, the film appeared to be much more than merely the fictional story of Hanna and it stands in for the story of ‘the guards’. Hanna’s actions are interpreted as part of a wider history in which individual responsibility is replaced by the chain of command, and in which the actual victims find little to no mention.

Five interviewees about The Grey Zone made sense of perpetrator behaviour by referring to fear and coercion, and especially alleged consequences of any form of dissent. Madeleine Keane suggested that the SS ‘would have been killed as well’ had they refused to kill Jews. This may be related to Madeleine’s prior understanding or to the film’s depiction of Muhsfeld claiming that the SS, too, will be killed and face the same fate as the Jews. Defiance, on the other hand, hardly features any German perpetrators with the exception of a captured German who is killed by the partisans.

Five interviewees made sense of German perpetrator behaviour in terms of being coerced or in fear of consequences. The Belorussian collaborators were discussed in similar ways. While two interviewees felt that both German perpetrators and Belorussian collaborators were portrayed in an overly simplified way, four commented on the ‘difficult’ situation the collaborators were in.

Not all responses were simply exculpating: James Thorley and Theodore Robinson discussed the collaborators in some detail when they were asked about the depiction of the Germans in the film. James explained how he initially thought they were Nazis until finding out that the local police force was responsible for hunting Jews. He suggested that they are forced to ‘sympathise’ with the Nazis but then clarified that it might rather be the case that they felt ‘overpowered’. Theodore countered that the collaborators in the film were receiving money for every Jew they handed over to the Germans and he argued that they were ‘acquiescing to German control’. He emphasised how the Jews were persecuted from all sides, even their ‘fellow compatriots’. James added once again that they were the local police force, which he appears to find particularly shocking, possibly due to a more positive image of the police (and, of course, Theodore worked as a police constable) whose ethics and morals went ‘out of the window’. Theodore added

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126 Interview Lara Williams (LW), The Reader, 1 February 2012, 132-3.
127 Interview MK, The Grey Zone, 63.
that he knows that in France, too, local people sympathised and that police forces were involved in hunting Jews and concludes that *Defiance* must, therefore, have offered a realistic portrayal. James highlighted that the Nazis otherwise hardly feature despite being ‘ultimately in the film the driving force’. Though both, and especially James, overall lacked the detailed historical knowledge to explain and contextualise their observations, together they nevertheless pointed out some crucial issues: the involvement of local police forces, i.e. local elites; the importance of a material element; and the permanent threat of the Germans to the Jewish partisans even if not always visible. Though the specifics of French and Belorussian collaboration are very different from one another, Theodore judged the plausibility of local Belorussians collaborating with the Germans by drawing parallels to his knowledge about the French context. This indicates that viewers apply their existing knowledge to the film viewing. It could even be suggested that their existing knowledge may be guiding their view and that they look for images and details already familiar.

Though the films may have encouraged exculpating interpretations to varying degrees, the film texts alone appear to be insufficient to account for the widespread assumption that perpetrators acted out of fear and coercion, and would have been killed had they refused to participate in the crimes. Perpetrators on trial used this as a defence strategy after the war which may have had a lasting impact on the ways in which perpetrators and their motivations are thought of. The UK’s continued military engagement, and particularly the on-going ‘war on terror’ led by the US and the UK, may also inform the British interviewees’ perception of the range of choices available to civilians and soldiers, particularly if they possess little detailed knowledge about the subject of National Socialism and the Holocaust. Education could also be playing an important role for making sense of perpetrator motivation in this way. English school textbooks explain the lack of resistance ‘by claiming that the Nazi regime was terroristic based on violence and persecution and was lethally dangerous to those who opposed it.’ Browning, however, highlights that the perpetrators themselves – in his case study of the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 – faced no lethal consequences if they did not take part in acts of killing, as this ‘did not challenge basic police discipline

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or the authority of the regime in general.’

McKay demonstrates in his oral history study of intergenerational memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust in England, that explanations of perpetrator motivation with fear, coercion and propaganda are widespread and thus not merely linked to films. In addition, the people he interviewed made ‘a clear distinction between ideological Nazis and other, ordinary, Germans’. At the same time, the fact that such interpretations were most widespread among interviewees of Conspiracy also suggests that there is a close relationship between film text and film interpretation. At the very least, films can be seen as encouraging or triggering certain interpretations, and they resonate with preconceptions and knowledge obtained elsewhere.

### Opposition to Genocide

If perpetrators and/or bystanders are seen to be merely afraid of the consequences and forced into committing or tolerating crimes against Jews, the implication is that, deep-down, they were ‘against’ the persecution of the Jews. As seen in the previous section, this interpretation is problematic on a number of levels. First and foremost, it reduces the circle of ‘actual’ Nazis to a few leading figures while providing the majority of perpetrators and other Germans with mitigating circumstances, and it elevates them to a status of ‘inner opposition’.

The most dominant motif in relation to perpetrator behaviour in the interviews about Conspiracy was the explicit suggestion that there was opposition to genocide at the Wannsee Conference as depicted in the film. Though one must certainly be cautious with Eichmann’s post-war testimonies, according to him, the meeting ‘was conducted very quietly and with courtesy, with much friendliness ... not much speaking and it did not last long ... waiters served cognac, and in this way it ended.’

The film, on the other hand, creates tension and conflicts between the characters that were invented by the filmmakers. One of the implications of these alleged conflicts is the construction of Kritzinger and, to an extent, Stuckart, as being opposed to the genocidal plans. In all interviews about Conspiracy, 33 examples were detected that demonstrate how opposition to, or reservations towards, genocide was assumed by the interviewees. Historically, there is no evidence that any of the meeting’s participants would have

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130 Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 74.
opposed genocide. The character named most often in the interviews for allegedly being opposed to the genocidal plans is Kritzinger, who is portrayed as being ‘a bold dissenter’ only reluctantly giving in to the threats of Heydrich. Michael Fox commented that he ‘thought he was leaving the meeting totally and … was going away, and I thought, “he will have his comeuppance and that will be the end of him”’. This example demonstrates both the expectation of serious consequences faced by dissenters and the expectation of Kritzinger as being opposed to the propositions made at the Wannsee Conference. Though the historic Kritzinger expressed ‘feelings of shame’ in post-war trials, Conspiracy’s depiction of him as opposing the annihilation of the Jews while representing some kind of ‘moderate’ anti-Semitism is a rather far-fetched filmic strategy serving to exaggerate characters in order to achieve greater variety of opinion and diversity among the participants of the meeting.

There were fewer references in the interviews to Stuckart as being opposed to the genocide. Stuckart is played by actor Colin Firth, whom audiences would know from films such as Pride and Prejudice or Bridget Jones and, more recently, The King’s Speech, and possibly attach certain expectations to that particular actor. Firth, known for playing essentially ‘nice’ if somewhat awkward characters, seems to play to this reputation: as Stuckart, we are made to believe initially that he disagrees with what is proposed to be the ‘Final Solution’ until a sudden anti-Semitic outburst reveals that this assumption was wrong. The casting of Firth as Stuckart could be interpreted as a clever choice by the director: audience expectations are being played with and, eventually, not only disappointed but reduced to the absurd. At best, it could lead audiences to reflect upon their own expectations and hopes (for at least someone to be good). At worst, Stuckart’s anti-Semitism could be downplayed and overlooked and instead the focus could be on the earlier part of the film when he talks to Kritzinger about the quality of the law as opposed to what the SS stand for. The latter was, in fact, the case for four interviewees (including the Spanish interviewee). They focused on what he says about law and legality, ignoring his anti-Semitic views, while also revealing a lack of knowledge about the Nuremberg Laws. One of them was Faith Jackson, who remembered the scene where Stuckart ‘was saying that you should stick to the law, that was quite an interesting one … and pointing out the fact that … they were breaking the

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133 Roseman, The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution, pp. 139-40.
135 Interview MF, Conspiracy, 131-2.
law effectively … or the law that had been put in in 1935, to do this.”\textsuperscript{137} The casting of Firth may be a contributing factor to reading the character in this way, as may be the lack of any detailed historical knowledge about the Holocaust and this particular event. At the same time, one of the interviewees, Nigel Cole, reflected on this scene and how his expectations were ‘dashed’\textsuperscript{138} which would give weight to the argument that the scene can, potentially, go both ways and either lead to reflection or to an uncritical acceptance of Stuckart as somewhat better than the other men at the meeting.

Several characters in the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* may invite viewers to believe that they were opposed to the Nazi regime or the killing of Jews. 21 examples suggesting opposition to the Nazi regime and/or the Holocaust were recorded from all British interviewees, with the mother as their focal point.\textsuperscript{139} To 22-year-old MRes history student Benjamin Riley, the mother ‘highlighted the fact that not everyone was an ardent Nazi supporter’.\textsuperscript{140} While this may be true, the mother in the film is, after all, the camp commandant’s wife and it may thus be misleading to suggest that she may not have been a ‘Nazi supporter’. This further demonstrates how interviewees may be making historical generalisations based on film characters, or how the film may merely serve to reinforce previously held beliefs and knowledge about this particular historical period. This was no lone incident. Among the 21 examples related to opposition, 13 of them, from eight British interviewees, went beyond the film and its characters and made generalising comments about the history of the Holocaust, the perpetrators, and the German population.

Understanding the behaviour of perpetrators in this way tends to distinguish ‘Nazis’ from ‘Germans’ and to obscure the participation in the Holocaust of thousands of ordinary Germans and its acceptance by millions. Donald Bloxham notes in this respect that soon after the end of the Second World War, ‘Anglo-Americans were happy to accept the notion … of a dividing line between the Nazi leadership and the majority of ordinary Germans’.\textsuperscript{141} The previous section regarding fear and coercion, and the present argument regarding the often assumed opposition to genocide, are closely intertwined. The results of McKay’s study also demonstrated ‘the belief that there was a fanatical elite, the Nazis, who carry the burden and responsibility for the Holocaust and the vast

\textsuperscript{137} Interview, FJ, *Conspiracy*, 85-7.
\textsuperscript{138} Group Discussion NC and MK, *Conspiracy*, 90-6.
\textsuperscript{139} One example of this was identified in the interview with the Spanish interviewee, and eight examples were given by four German interviewees.
\textsuperscript{140} Interview Benjamin Riley (BR), *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, 15 November 2011, 86.
\textsuperscript{141} Bloxham, ‘Confronting Nazi Atrocities at the End of the War’, p. 168.
majority of the rest of the German nation who were compelled to, and were only acting under, strict orders from above.\textsuperscript{142} In this project, the generalisations about Germans, ‘bystanders’ and perpetrators, tended to be positive and attempted to either find mitigating circumstances or to argue that many or most disagreed with the regime and the genocide of the Jews. The findings by McKay would indicate that these positive responses cannot be reduced to being due to the interviews being conducted by a German researcher but may express widespread perceptions of National Socialist perpetrators in Britain, and possibly beyond.

\textbf{Women and the Holocaust}

The portrayal of the mother’s ignorance about the crimes in \textit{The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas} may prompt conclusions about the historic German population, and relate to gendered notions of National Socialism. Four interviewees connected the character of the mother in this film with the role and situation of women of that period in general, assuming that women played a minor role.\textsuperscript{143} In the group discussion, particularly David Taylor (DT), a freelance dance teacher, and Peter Taylor (PT), a freelance arts practitioner, both 26 years old, read the mother’s character in terms of women’s rights or lack thereof at the time, while in 25-year-old IT professional Anthony Connor’s (AC) interpretation, the father’s alleged secrecy was the crucial factor to make sense of the mother’s ignorance. When Anthony suggested that the mother was initially unaware of the camp’s function, the interviewer asked the group what the mother would have thought of the camp’s purpose prior to her finding out. While Anthony put the emphasis on the role of propaganda, David and Peter offered a different interpretation:

\begin{quote}
DT: I don’t know, I think she, she’s of a time in world history where, er, it wasn’t really, for her it was more ... she was also part of a time where it wasn’t deemed really important for the women to know the full thing ‘cause they were kind of, the suffragettes movement, wasn’t that around the 40s, 50s? So, when did this occur?
PT: Yeah, she had her responsibilities as a woman. || DT: Yeah. || maybe, rather than, and she was very focused in her responsibility as a woman of that era.
DT: And also, the man is, rules the rooster at that time more so than nowadays.
AC: But, er, her husband had always like keep his work like behind that closed door, like right at the beginning, he’d say, ‘I’ve got work to do’, and then he’s in his office and then the other soldiers like shut the door.\textsuperscript{144}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{142} McKay, \textit{A multi-generational oral history study}, p. 189.

\textsuperscript{143} Four German interviewees and the Spanish interviewee also commented on the role of women in Nazi Germany.

\textsuperscript{144} Group Discussion David Taylor (DT), Peter Taylor (PT) and Anthony Connor (AC), \textit{The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas}, 30 April 2011, 284-93.
This resonates with actress Vera Farmiga’s assessment of the character she plays, suggesting that the mother ‘starts off as an accomplice to her husband’s ideals, his desires, his ambitions, needs and wants. But that was the ideology of the time … But she chooses to be oblivious.’\textsuperscript{145} Despite this notion of choice on the part of the mother, her alleged ignorance of the crimes committed by her husband and others may serve to exculpate the German population in general, and possibly women in particular. Examples like this illustrate Kerner’s argument that ‘Setting Bruno’s mother, Elsa, outside the camp establishes a thin partition between a safe feminine domestic space and a masculine space which is inscribed with barbarity and violence … The constellation of gendered roles in the Nazi genocidal program though is firmly re-inscribed … and it is mobilized for melodramatic purposes.’\textsuperscript{146}

The fact that the perpetrator in \textit{The Reader} is female did not receive much attention from the interviewees, at least not explicitly. Seven examples from five interviews (four individual interviews and all five participants of the group discussion) addressed the issue of female perpetrators, often only when prompted by the interviewer. Though knowledge of female perpetrators appeared to be limited, interviewees appeared to accept in principle that both men and women can commit crimes. Interesting in this respect is the group’s discussion of the film’s two ‘twists’, the revelation of Hanna’s past as an SS guard, and her illiteracy. The group agreed on four separate occasions that they had not expected Hanna to be a perpetrator. When specifically asked for their thoughts on the film’s focus on a female perpetrator, the group’s responses indicated that none of them associated a female character with being a perpetrator and that they had ‘the impression she was going to be a victim’ of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{147} There may also be implications to the fact that the first part of the film is about the sexual relationship between 15-year-old Michael, and Hanna, who is in her mid-thirties.\textsuperscript{148} One can but speculate that the reactions may have been somewhat different if the relationship were between an older man and a teenage girl. The interviewees were asked for their thoughts about the age difference and some mentioned this aspect without being

\textsuperscript{146} Kerner, \textit{Film and the Holocaust}, p. 132.
\textsuperscript{147} Marina Soukoup (MS), in Group Discussion MG, RP, DP, EJ and MS, \textit{The Reader}, 749-50.
\textsuperscript{148} This was critically noted in some film reviews. See e.g. C. Tookey, ‘The Reader: Winslet shows her class in a Nazi old mess’, \textit{The Daily Mail} (1 January 2009), http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-1103970/The-Reader-Winslet-shows-class-Nazi-old-mess.html [Accessed 28 April 2014].
prompted by the interviewer (16 examples from all interviewees). Three of the female interviewees - a teacher, a public health professional, and a student - saw a problem in the age difference whereas the others did not or at least hesitated to make a judgement (the latter was the case especially in the group discussion).

Heather Stuart was very explicit in judging Hanna’s behaviour. She argued that because of Hanna’s preying ‘on someone who was vulnerable’ one’s sympathy with the character is diminished. She concluded that the relationship was not ‘loving’ but ‘destructive’. It can be suggested that as a public health professional, Heather had an understanding of what constitutes vulnerability and exploitation and that her background informs her assessment of the relationship. The terminology she used and the fact that she is the only one that characterises the relationship as controlling, and Hanna as preying on someone vulnerable would support this argument. Harriet Langford was among those who took a different position and argued from a more personal or ‘common sense’ perspective. When asked about her views about the age difference, she merely stated: ‘I know these things happen, we all know it happens.’

There appeared to be little understanding of vulnerability, child protection, or sexualised violence. Others told more explicitly about their own experiences or those of relatives. Criticism of the relationship was eclipsed by this common sense approach, as the interviewees were reluctant to judge their family, friends or themselves, or to speak to the interviewer about this. It can thus be suggested that personal experiences and professional backgrounds play an important role for the ways in which viewers make sense of films and whether or not moral judgements are applied or verbalised.

**Alcohol**

Some of the explanations of perpetrator behaviour were limited to a particular film. In *The Grey Zone*, alcohol plays an important role. Many of the SS officers are depicted as drunk, and the *Sonderkommando* members also consume a lot of alcohol. Five interviewees emphasised the role of alcohol for the perpetrators (six examples). Asked how the Germans and especially Muhsfeld were represented in the film, Ryan Gledhill pointed to the use of alcohol:

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I liked the way that it highlighted the role of alcohol, er, which is, you know, something that’s hitherto been neglected ... from sort of interviews I’ve sort of seen with members of Einsatzgruppen, erm, they said they were usually drunk ... so ... I thought that was important but again, perhaps you only see that if you’re looking for it.152

Ryan appreciated the depiction of alcohol abuse as it resonated with his knowledge. He presented himself as an expert on the subject by referring to interviews with members of Einsatzgruppen he had seen which is further emphasised when he stressed that ‘perhaps you only see that if you’re looking for it’. As seen in other examples, Ryan drew parallels between something already familiar from other sources and the film’s representation. While he left open what this ‘role of alcohol’ exactly is, alcohol was characterised quite clearly as a coping mechanism in this example from the interview with Meera Rangan:

most of the German officers ... seemed to be dosed up in some way ... they’re basically drinking themselves to the ground ... to get through. I mean they must have all come from, you know, fairly moral, you know, lives ... they didn’t grow up in, in <laughs> this situation, so they must have obviously had a conscience somewhere ... but ... they were doing whatever they could to, <laughs> to try and mask whatever conscience they had ... to try and get through.153

Meera’s words are interesting in terms of suggesting a moral conscience on part of the perpetrators that was disturbed by their killing work and thus needed to be calmed with alcohol. Her laughing in this sequence points to what she seemed to regard as an absurd rather than funny situation. The notion of conscience in Meera’s example posits a universal moral code, a notion that has come under increased scrutiny. Wolfgang Bialas argues that the perpetrators followed their own particular ‘morality’ which he terms ‘ethnic conscience’.154 One can think here of Heinrich Himmler’s Posen speech and the notion of having remained ‘decent’ while faced with the ‘task’ of killing the Jews.155

While alcohol may have helped perpetrators to carry out their murderous work or deal with the psychological effects, The Grey Zone’s depiction of intoxicated SS may

152 Interview RG, The Grey Zone, 131-7.
153 Interview MR, The Grey Zone, 134-42.
inadvertently suggest to viewers that alcohol was a coping mechanism and that, deep down, the perpetrators had a bad conscience about their deeds.

**Hitler**

Both in the popular imagination and in some scholarly circles, Adolf Hitler is often thought of as being chiefly responsible for the decision to exterminate the European Jews. Scholars have long debated whether Hitler was, in fact, a ‘weak dictator’ and whether it was a ‘twisted road’ that led to Auschwitz, with local initiatives paving the way to genocide.\(^{156}\) Most representations of the Holocaust refrain from depicting Hitler, and the films selected for this study follow this general rule. Hitler is, however, evoked in *Conspiracy*, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and *Defiance* through different means. In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Hitler features on a poster on Gretel’s bedroom wall, and a condolence card is sent by the ‘Fuehrer’ to the grandmother’s funeral. Hitler was referred to 21 times by eight British interviewees and the term ‘Fuehrer’ was used on five occasions. 11 of these examples from five interviewees were in relation to the film, while ten examples (seven interviewees) made no direct connection to it. Judy Evans was among those who assigned crucial importance to Hitler in terms of the decision-making of the ‘Final Solution’ when she was asked about her thoughts on the representation of the Jews in the film. The ‘Final Solution’ was characterised by her as ‘Hitler’s plan of genocide’ which attests to the continuing focus on Hitler and would indicate that structuralist explanations of the development of the ‘Final Solution’ may not have permeated the public sphere to the same extent as the intentionalist view of how the genocide was planned and executed.\(^{157}\)

In *Conspiracy*, Hitler is evoked by Heydrich and Kritzinger, and also the frequent Hitler salutes. In the interviews, Hitler was discussed in ten examples from six interviewees. He was mentioned in terms of surprise that he was not present during this meeting, or as crucial for deciding genocide. The importance assigned to Hitler for the persecution of the Jews is highlighted in an example from Chemmal Choudhury, a customer service advisor who did not provide his age, who noted that there was ‘not one indication in the movie, did they say why they wanted to eradicate the Jews, erm,


it’s just something that Hitler didn’t, Hitler didn’t like Jews’. 158 This highlights that while Conspiracy presupposes a certain level of knowledge from its viewers that would allow them to put the film into context, this cannot, however, be taken for granted, as Chemmal’s example demonstrates.

Hitler certainly continues to occupy a prominent place in the popular imagination when thinking about the Holocaust. While Hitler’s role should certainly not be underestimated, focusing on Hitler may divert responsibility from the individual perpetrators onto Hitler and a handful of other Nazis. 159 None of the interviewees about Defiance mentioned Hitler which indicates that the ‘citation’ of Hitler alone does not necessitate that Hitler will be discussed.

Turning perpetrators into victims

Though related to, and often intersecting with, exculpation, instances of interviewees turning perpetrators and bystanders into victims will be discussed separately here. Examples of this phenomenon were most pronounced in the interviews about The Reader, followed by The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas. It was also observed, to a lesser degree, in the interviews about The Grey Zone and Defiance (five examples from five interviewees, and five examples from four interviewees, respectively). It could also be argued that the assumption of fear and coercion, as well as opposition to genocide, could be interpreted as a variation of portraying perpetrators as victims. Conspiracy, therefore, perhaps also allows for implicitly turning its characters and, potentially, the perpetrators of the Holocaust, into victims.

One of the major points of contention regarding The Reader is the implicit – and at times explicit – levelling of differences between victims and perpetrators. In a crucial passage in the novel, Michael compares his experience of observing the trial, the experience of perpetrators, and the experience of survivors and victims of the Holocaust. Literary scholar Jane Alison argues in this respect that Michael is ‘shielding Hanna from an incriminating context that would lessen the reader’s sympathy for her, and withholding information that would prompt the reader’s sympathy for the victim.’ 160 The film ‘succeeds’ in translating the written word to the visual representation in this respect. In the interviews about The Reader, the characterisation

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158 Interview Chemmal Choudhury (CC), Conspiracy, 29 October 2011, 171-2.
159 See also McKay, A multi-generational oral history study, p. 190.
of Hanna as a victim was pervasive. Ten interviewees turned Hanna into a victim of post-war justice, her illiteracy, her disadvantaged upbringing, or the SS and the system during which she grew up. 41 examples of this were identified in the interviews, which made it the most dominant interpretation of perpetrator behaviour and motivation.

This may be owed to the film’s depiction of Hanna’s illiteracy and the trial and sentencing as unfair. Screenwriter Hare offered his own interpretation of perpetrator behaviour in an interview about The Reader in which he stated:

Ordinary people become part of the killing machine, partly to save their own lives. There are an awful lot of people who live under a dictatorship who are caught up in that machine and do things they wouldn’t otherwise do. … It would be comforting to believe that war crimes are only created by monsters. … While you watch the film, you go through a hundred different feelings. You’re being horrified, and then you feel close to her and feel some sympathy for her.\(^{161}\)

Particularly noteworthy is the passive language used by Hare (‘people ... who are caught up in that machine’), which was also identified in the interview study. Distinct about the interviews about The Reader was the frequent use of such passive terminology by eight interviewees when describing Hanna’s crimes. 28 examples were identified where things are happening to Hanna. This can be seen in the following example by Stephanie Porter, who responded to the interviewer’s question about the film’s ‘message’:

That, erm, that the Holocaust affected more than, it’s affected everybody’s life, like not just the, the chosen victims such as the Jews and like, erm, homosexuals and things like that but also just normal people that, and they were drawn into the, the Holocaust without even, like knowing. They weren’t even meant to be victims but they were, like emotionally like she, her whole life was ruined just because of, she took up a job.\(^ {162}\)

Stephanie furthermore interpreted Hanna’s situation as representative of the wider German population. The experiences of ‘normal people’ like Hanna were implicitly compared to those of the Jews. Surprisingly, Hanna’s crimes were not mentioned in this context by Stephanie, neither were the experiences of the victims. As noted previously with regards to the issue of illiteracy, questions of justice and the fairness of the trial can serve to distract and excuse from the crimes Hanna and the other defendants committed, and any wider-reaching discussion of guilt and responsibility. Stephanie had studied the Holocaust at school and university, and had participated in the ‘Lessons


\(^{162}\) Interview SP, The Reader, 56-60.
from Auschwitz Project’, which did not preclude her from interpretations which exculpated the German perpetrators and turned them into victims. Notably absent were any indications of cause-effect relationships and the general context. Her responses may either give an indication of the implications of current Holocaust education, or suggest that Holocaust education alone may not suffice to transmit in-depth historical understanding. It can certainly not dictate which aspects of the education are ingested and incorporated into a person’s historical knowledge. Stone has remarked in this respect that it is ‘worth asking whether the current focus on the Holocaust – ostensibly with the laudable aim of teaching children to be better human beings – can actually live up to its expectations.’

Turning Hanna from a perpetrator into a victim also occurred through contrasting her with the Jewish survivor, and by downplaying her crimes or, rather, brushing over them by using vague terms or focusing on other aspects of the film instead, as demonstrated in the following example by Nicole Trevena:

the Jewish woman at the end … she’d done very well, hadn’t she, for herself, she’d written a book, she’d earned a lot of money, she was in a … good state of affairs and poor old Hanna, all she was trying to do was earn a living. I feel sorry for her, don’t I, || INT: Mm-hmm. || and yet she was a guard, maybe the message is also that there were two sides to the story and that not everyone was doing the, it wasn’t intent, they weren’t intent on killing people, they were just intent on surviving themselves, like the prisoners.

Nicole seemed to feel ambivalent about her sympathetic emotions towards Hanna. As seen above in the statement by the producer, David Hare, prompting feelings of ambivalence and complicating clear-cut notions of perpetrators were among the filmmakers’ intentions for the film. In this example, Nicole resolved her ambivalence and any contradictions by explicitly levelling the differences between victims and perpetrators: the act of killing is transformed into a struggle for survival. Nicole’s response may also be interpreted as revealing anti-Semitic stereotypes which is certainly aided by the film’s depiction of the Jewish survivor. The latter’s portrayal, particularly in contrasting her with Hanna’s underprivileged background and lifestyle, was criticised sharply by Alison who asks: ‘if Schlink’s legal drama presents both the Nazi perpetrator and postwar interrogator as victims, what becomes of the actual victim of the crime?’

One could argue that in the novel – and by extension the film – there is

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163 Stone, ‘From Stockholm to Stockton’, p. 213.
164 Interview NT, The Reader, 186-91.
no place for the Jewish victims; victimhood is reserved for Hanna, Michael, and other non-Jewish Germans.

Characterising Hanna as victim could be argued to be linked to the identification and empathy with her that the film may invite. One example by Stephanie Porter will serve to further explore the implications of such identification. Stephanie was asked for memorable scenes and responded:

I thought in the court … when people started shouting ‘Nazi’ at her, I thought that was quite upsetting because going back to what I said, like how it wasn’t really her fault. She was just a person that got caught up, caught up in it. That could have been anybody, like that could have been me, making a choice what you seem, what you think is right at the time. She was just trying to better her life by getting a better job with … good prospects and that … completely impacted her whole life.\(^\text{166}\)

In this example, Hanna appeared as a victim of circumstance without individual responsibility for her actions, which trivialises both her crimes and agency. Stephanie seemed to have experienced an emotional reaction to this particular scene. It is instructive that she said ‘that could have been me’. It can be suggested that she felt so strongly about this scene because she empathised and, potentially, identified with Hanna.

Bloxham suggests that identifying with the perpetrators and bystanders is a prerequisite for making sure that genocide is not repeated or forgotten.\(^\text{167}\) The extent to which this applies to films facilitating identification appears to be limited. In the case of Stephanie, identifying with Hanna seems to have prohibited considerations about the question of how ordinary people become perpetrators or why she thought she would have reacted in a similar way; rather than reflect on this, she reacted in a defensive manner. In communication studies research, it was argued that identification, which involves empathy and a ‘loss of self-awareness’, ‘is less likely to produce critical readings’ and the viewer, at least temporarily, adopts the perspective of the character with whom they identify and that character’s goals, and experiences their feelings.\(^\text{168}\)

\(^{166}\) Interview SP, *The Reader*, 29-34


This type of limited reflection was observed in 15 examples from eight interviewees of *The Reader*, who asked themselves what they would do in the same situation, or proposed that they were unable to judge in hindsight as they would have acted in exactly the same way, or simply that the times were different then. This referred not only to Hanna’s crimes and her signing up to the SS but also, though to a lesser extent, to her affair with a much younger boy in the first part of the film. Though at first glance, such reflection may be a welcome effect (or by-product) of the film, it may, in fact, constitute a form of identification which could impede, rather than enable or encourage reflection. The predominantly female interviewees may have been more likely to identify with Hanna and this could have added to the perception of Hanna as a victim; a larger and more representative study may be able to establish if there is a relationship between this phenomenon, the gender of the viewer, and the gender of the cinematic perpetrator.

Instances of such limited reflection were also recorded in interviews about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and *Conspiracy*, though to a lesser degree. This may have been so pronounced in the interviews about *The Reader* because the film facilitates the identification and empathy with Hanna in different, interrelated ways. Her illiteracy, her sentencing and the perception of her as a victim of injustice, alongside her gender and the lack of visualisation of her crimes, may ultimately deflect from her actual guilt and responsibility. What may further add to a largely sympathetic characterisation of Hanna is the cast of Kate Winslet, an attractive actress known for playing nice characters in films such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Titanic* (1997) and *Finding Neverland* (2004). At the same time, casting Ralph Fiennes, known for playing ‘villains’, in particular, Amon Goeth in *Schindler’s List* and Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* films (2005-2011), may further complicate viewers’ understanding of his role as Michael in *The Reader*.

There is also a scene in the film that may have prompted viewers to consider their own behaviour if put in a similar situation. In court, when the judge asks Hanna about the selection process in the camp in which she was a guard, Hanna addresses the judge and asks him: ‘What would you have done?’ The judge is unable to respond. Though this scene is only specifically referred to by three interviewees, this may have subconsciously led to such reflections. Bauer argues that the Holocaust is neither
inexplicable nor unique, and that the ‘warning contained in the Holocaust surely is that it can be repeated, under certain conditions, by anyone.’ The recorded instances of reflection in the interviews about The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas and The Reader could, therefore, also be interpreted more positively. Rebecca Jinks notes in relation to many films and exhibitions about the Holocaust that ‘there is a fundamental resistance to exploring the motivations and identities of the perpetrators, presumably to ensure that clear moral lessons are drawn.’ Jinks contrasts the simplified, and demonising representation of perpetrators in the Imperial War Museum’s Holocaust exhibition with the more reflexive approach of the same museum’s ‘Crimes Against Humanity’ exhibition. The interviewees of this study refrained from ‘demonising’ the perpetrators and bystanders and the films, as seen in the case of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas and The Reader, encouraged a degree of self-reflexion. Brown argues that an examination of ‘the complexities of judgement and responsibility in relation to perpetrators is crucial in order to develop a deeper understanding of the Holocaust’.

While the acknowledgement of one’s own potential for committing great crimes and atrocities may be important towards developing such an understanding of the Holocaust, the particular type of reflection seen in the interviews may fall short: rather than reflecting on one’s own behaviour and ways of prevention, the emphasis is on identification with, and most likely protection of, the perpetrators. Donahue notes in relation to The Reader that ‘Hanna is said to confront us with a moral “gray [sic] zone.” The extent of her moral freedom has been significantly circumscribed by her handicap, and we, like [Michael] Berg, are left with the dilemma of either understanding or condemning. Doing both simultaneously seems impossible.’ Katharina Hall, too, argues that ‘empathetic identification’ with the German memory and experience during the National Socialist period tends ‘to obscure the Jewish experience of the Holocaust and to allow an avoidance of an engagement with the issues of responsibility and

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170 R. Jinks, ‘Holocaust Memory and Contemporary Atrocities: The Imperial War Museum’s Holocaust Exhibition and Crimes Against Humanity Exhibition’, in Sharples and Jensen (eds), Britain and the Holocaust, p. 143.
171 Ibid., pp. 144-53.
guilt.' One could thus propose that *The Reader* and also *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, unlike films that centre on Jewish victims and survivors, enable or even enforce viewers’ empathetic identification with perpetrators and bystanders. This in turn, as Robert Eaglestone suggests in relation to the commandant losing his son in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, could evoke ‘a terrible and possibly unjust sympathy.’ 175 Neither of these two films included both the perpetrators’ and the Jewish perspective in the same measure; the victims disappeared and the Germans emerged equally as victims in these representations.

As some of the examples in this study have already indicated, generalisations were often made pertaining to the perpetrators and the wider German population, based on the characters of Hanna and Michael (19 examples). For the majority of the interviewees, *The Reader’s* pre-occupation with the impact of the Holocaust on the German post-war society thus led to turning not just individual film characters but German society and the perpetrators more generally into victims. Four interviewees explicitly proposed that the perpetrators may also be victims.

The only interviewee not to characterise Hanna as a victim was Andrew Campbell. Throughout the interview, Andrew maintained his distance to the film as he repeatedly questioned whether *The Reader* is about the Holocaust and frequently argued that the Holocaust merely functions as an interchangeable background setting. Andrew argued that the film could have been set ‘in modern-day Leicester … the plot would generally be the same … and instead of it being a Jewish lady that she wishes to donate the money to, it could be … an Asian family because it was an Asian family she tried … to kill’. 176 Later on, when asked for a comparison of *The Reader* to other films, he describes it as being ‘almost … like … a really weird Romeo and Juliet with, with a concentration camp as a kind of historical background’. 177 His lack of identification and empathy with Hanna, along with his incomprehension of the relationship between Hanna and Michael, and his refusal to see any connection between *The Reader* and the Holocaust may have led to Andrew’s response to Hanna being so different from that of the other interviewees.

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176 Interview Andrew Campbell (AC), *The Reader*, 19 September 2011, 98-105.
Though not as pronounced, the motif of alleged German ‘victimhood’ was also identified in the interviews about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, with 12 examples from five British interviewees in which either the film characters or the Germans in general were perceived as victims. In more than half of these examples, this was extended to the historical perpetrators. In the group discussion, Peter Taylor implicitly compared the experiences of victims and perpetrators when he reflected on the impact of the film on him after the interviewer asked the group if they were taking anything away from the film:

> It made me feel more compassionate towards both sides in this kind of issue between maybe Jews and Germans, although I’m only using those kind of terms to, to categorise … if anything, I’ve taken away … a grander understanding of not just the Jewish people and the problems they faced but the German people and the problems that they faced, too, and then these things coming together.  

It would appear that the more prominent (ordinary) perpetrators and ‘bystanders’ are featured in a film, the likelihood of turning them into victims increases, particularly when films invite viewers to identify and empathise with them. Scholars have noted that their efforts to contextualise and differentiate perpetrator motivation must ‘avoid giving the impression of excusing or of minimizing guilt’. It could be argued that both filmmakers and viewers struggle to understand differences in perpetrator motivation in a way that is not exonerating, or diminishing individual responsibility.

The (self-)victimisation of Germans and Germany has been a topic of heated debate among scholars. According to Dan Diner, an important part of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is the question of guilt, ‘or, more precisely, the effect of a constant sense of guilt’. Aleida Assmann notes that crucial for the discourse of German victimhood is what she calls the ‘(Un-)Vereinbarkeit von Leid und Schuld’, the ‘incongruence of suffering and guilt’: a focus on German suffering displaces, overlooks and ignores the suffering of the victims of Germans and Germany. The German film *Downfall* (2004), David Cesarani notes, ‘enables Germans to see themselves as victims

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178 In six examples from five German interviewees, and one example from the Spanish interviewee, similar instances of turning perpetrators into victims were identified.
182 Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* [translation by the author], p. 199.
of Hitler, Nazism and war rather than as perpetrators’. 183 The Reader and The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas are remarkable as non-German productions that transform guilt into suffering and that are also understood in this way by British viewers in the context of this thesis.

De-contextualisation

Some of the ways in which interviewees made sense of the behaviour and motivation of perpetrators as depicted in the films did not easily fit into one particular category. These include a downplaying of National Socialist ideology, though there were notable exceptions to this; propaganda, emotional deficits, and human nature. They have in common that they universalise and de-historicise intrinsically historical phenomena, thereby disconnecting them from their specific contexts and preconditions.

Ideology

The perpetrator research of the last two decades largely concentrated on structural motives. In recent years, the focus has increasingly been returned to racist ideology as ‘[s]ocial psychologists have identified ideology as a necessary but not sufficient cause for participation in genocide.’ 184 Michael Allan, for example, highlights that some of the engineers, bureaucrats and administrators directly involved in the ‘Final Solution’ accepted National Socialist ideology as consensus. 185 In the interviews about the five films, it was mainly Conspiracy which appeared to lead to an appreciation of the role of ideology for the Holocaust.

Nine interviewees (including the American interviewee) about Conspiracy acknowledged or considered National Socialist ideology as a perpetrator motive in 19 examples (one of them downplayed the role of ideology and one focussed on Hitler’s ideology). Two interviewees, Rachel Cooper and Claire Jordan, vocalised that they had not realised the importance of racist and anti-Semitic ideology for the persecution of the Jews prior to watching the film. Conspiracy can therefore be regarded as being able to raise awareness of ideological motives behind the Holocaust, even though these should be understood in conjunction with other explanations of perpetrator behaviour.

Ideological motives were touched upon by four interviewees of the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, though one of them relativised the role of ideology. This is somewhat surprising as ideology is an important factor in the film. For example, the father is portrayed as standing firmly behind the ideology when he explains to Bruno how Jews ‘aren’t really people’ and to his wife how his ‘work’ is a ‘vital part’ of the war. Four British interviewees highlighted in this context that the parents had no compassion for the Jews, only for their own son. One of them was Barbara Parker, who was asked about the mother’s development in the film and responded:

I think ... some of the scales were removed from her eyes, erm, but ... she was a mother and at the end, erm, ultimately ... she’d seen the little boy, Shmuel, come in and knew that he was in the camp, she didn’t have that motherly feeling towards him and what he might be going through in the camp but ... obviously she was distraught when her own son was exterminated by accident in the camp but, erm, that was just because it was something that happened to her own son and she wasn’t thinking about it in terms of, this is happening to thousands of children every week, or every day, you know ...

Barbara’s critique of the mother’s character emphasised that the mother was distressed because her own son was killed but that her empathy was reserved for her own family. This example also points to possibly gendered notions of empathy as Barbara would appear to expect a ‘motherly feeling’ resulting from having a child to extend to more than just the mother’s own family. During the interview, Barbara also talked about her own daughter, which could indicate that being a mother herself, she linked her own experience to the mother in the film.

Conspicuously absent in the film itself, ten examples from six interviewees (including the Czech interviewee) of *The Reader* nonetheless relate to questions of ideology. Most downplayed or denied its significance, either in Hanna’s case or more generally. Among them was Nicole Trevena who ruled out ideological reasons for Hanna’s behaviour with surprising certainty when talking about Hanna’s illiteracy and her signing up to the SS, arguing that at Hanna’s allegedly young age at the time,

you’re just trying to get by, aren’t you? And the whole Germany is probably, well, she didn’t realise what the SS was, she probably couldn’t read what they were, <laughs> she didn’t join up for any ideological reasons. <laughs> (4) Yeah, I think it [her illiteracy] probably held her back a lot and she didn’t know what she was signing up to.

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186 Two additional interviewees, Ramona Sagredo (Spanish) and Sabrina Unkel (German), hinted at National Socialist ideology but did not go into any detail.
Preceding this sequence, Nicole had told the interviewer that she felt sorry for Hanna. When asked to elaborate why, Nicole referred to Hanna’s illiteracy and her shame about it, and how she must have come from a disadvantaged background. Nicole asked whether Hanna is at fault or whether it is the environment in which she grew up. Her laughter in this sequence is not a sign of being nervous nor does it suggest that Nicole found this amusing. On the contrary, the laugh indicates Nicole’s confidence that Hanna did not sign up for ‘ideological reasons’, the idea of which Nicole appeared to rule out categorically. She also oscillated between the specifics of the film (Hanna signing up to the SS and her illiteracy), an empathetic or common sense approach (‘you’re just trying to get by’), and a general or universal interpretation (‘the whole of Germany’). Nicole’s reading of the film and of Hanna’s motives, in particular, may not only point to ideas of class and Nazism, but also to gendered notions of perpetrators and ideology, and the widespread idea that women are somehow less ideological and fanatical. Insa Eschebach argues in this respect that in East German trials of female guards at the Ravensbrück camp,

three main devices were used in legal discourse in order to exonerate those women indicted: first, the emphasis was put on the youthfulness of the accused (most of the female SS guards trained in Ravensbrück were born around 1920); second, their activities were described as moral lapse; and third – and here the particular nature of the legal texts of the Soviet zone becomes apparent – the working class status of the accused was highlighted.\(^\text{189}\)

We find some interesting parallels, both to the depiction of Hanna in the novel and the film, and to some of the interpretations of her character put forward by some of the interviewees, including a lack of choice, young age and being disadvantaged. Eschebach notes that these interpretations of female perpetrators’ behaviour are part of a tradition in which ‘women are denied the capability of forming intentions of their own, that is, they are denied the status of subject. Their activity as camp guards is interpreted as a lapse, a youthful jolly.’\(^\text{190}\) The question is whether these can be regarded as gendered or general notions of perpetrator behaviour. What was absent from the interviews about *The Reader* were notions of female sexual deviancy, which had been so prominent in news reports about female perpetrators on trial.\(^\text{191}\)


\(^\text{190}\) Ibid., p. 257.

\(^\text{191}\) See e.g. A. Przyrembel, ‘Der Bann eines Bildes: Ilse Koch, die “Kommandeuse von Buchenwald”’, in Eschebach *et. al.* (eds), *Gedächtnis und Geschlecht*, p. 249.
No one in the interviews about *Defiance* mentioned racist ideology as a motive, neither for the German perpetrators nor their collaborators. Discussions of National Socialist ideology as perpetrator motivation were recorded on four occasions in three interviews about *The Grey Zone* and included comments on Mengele’s ‘research’ and Nazi anti-Semitism. An example from the interview with Madeleine Keane reveals a sketchy knowledge of the Holocaust and anti-Semitic stereotypes. Madeleine was asked how the Jews were represented in the film and responded:

I was a bit like shocked, er, surprised because, for example, when they’re first like, erm, put into the changing rooms and ... there’s only one guy that actually like stands up to the guards and I guess maybe the others are too afraid but, erm, I would have hoped that maybe at least one other person, <laughs> like, erm, kind of talked to him, tried to calm him down or supported him ... but they all just seemed like accepting of their fate and like that’s frustrating for me as well, <laughs> ... they look typically Jewish or what was then thought as the ... stereotypical, erm, appearance of a Jew but then there’s like one of the girls that was plotting with the powder, I think she’s blond, so it’s like, erm, I think it shows how like later on, it, it didn’t even matter if you didn’t look Jewish, you kind of like got persecuted anyway, ... I think they just seem a bit like tame, they just seem a bit kind of ... accepting of their fate and things which is like obviously, erm, yeah, it’s frustrating in a way but then, erm, then you have like the ... main male actors who kind of, erm, counter that and kind of show that there was some strength in people, even though obviously in a place like that, you don’t really have much hope ...

Madeleine characterised the Jews as ‘tame’ and ‘accepting of their fate’ which reproduces the myth of Jewish passivity discussed previously. Her interpretation of Nazi anti-Semitism also shows gaps in understanding and reproduces anti-Semitic stereotypes of ‘Jewish appearance’. Armed (and male) resistance is privileged here while other responses to the Nazis are experienced as ‘frustrating’ and her laughing on two occasions in this sequence highlights her frustration and indignation. It should be pointed out that Madeleine was, as she highlighted herself in an earlier part of the interview, from a ‘multi-ethnic background’ and ‘open’ to other cultures. Her focus on ‘appearances’ may thus, perhaps, indicate experiences of discrimination she may have suffered herself, or relate to simplified notions of prejudice and stereotyping, and to which she drew parallels as her closest frame of reference, given her lack of detailed knowledge about National Socialist anti-Semitism.

Both *Conspiracy* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* pick out ideology as a theme, though this was more prominent in *Conspiracy*, and ideology was acknowledged to

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varying degrees in the interviews about these two films. Though *The Reader* did not make National Socialist ideology a topic, it was discussed by the interviewees who tended to deny its importance in the case of Hanna. There must therefore be other reasons for disregarding the role played by racist ideology. Factors privileging such interpretations that either altogether ignore or deny ideology may be both a rather sketchy knowledge about the Holocaust and the, perhaps related, aforementioned focus on ‘lessons’ from the Holocaust rather than on historical context and detail. Though Holocaust education has been part of the national history curriculum in England and Wales since 1991, the amount of hours spent on teaching the Holocaust can vary considerably.\(^{194}\) In the teaching of the Holocaust in other subjects, such as Religious Education, the focus is less on what happened but what one can learn from it.\(^{195}\) This is by no means limited to formal education alone. The annual Holocaust Memorial Day and charities such as the Anne Frank Trust UK or the Holocaust Educational Trust also put particular emphasis on ‘lessons from the Holocaust’.\(^{196}\) This approach was recently exemplified by the Prime Minister’s announcement of the new Holocaust Commission which will oversee the consultation on a UK Holocaust memorial and most of whose members are from outside the academic historical profession.\(^{197}\)

**Propaganda**

At first glance, making sense of perpetrator behaviour and motivation by referring to propaganda could be part of the interpretations termed ‘exculpating’. It is also related to the question of ideology. There is yet another level as propaganda tended to be understood by the interviewees as an all-powerful, timeless and faceless force which

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\(^{195}\) Ibid., p. 109.


was largely de-contextualised and remained unchallenged. Explaining perpetrator and bystander behaviour with propaganda was limited to the interviews about *The Reader* (four interviewees) and especially *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (16 examples from nine British interviewees).¹⁹⁸ In the latter film, National Socialist propaganda is addressed through the children’s private tutor, and through a propaganda film. This film is a re-enactment inspired by a 1944 Nazi propaganda film about the Theresienstadt concentration camp made to deceive a Red Cross delegation: *Terezin: A Documentary Film from the Jewish Settlement Area*, also known as *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*. The film ‘was in the end probably not shown more than four times—mostly for private audiences inside or not far from Theresienstadt’ and only 25 minutes of it remain.¹⁹⁹ In the group discussion, Anthony Connor suggested that the mother knew so little because she ‘probably would have seen that ... propaganda film’.²⁰⁰ The theme of propaganda was used by interviewees to explain not only the children’s behaviour and the mother’s lack of knowledge but also, to some extent, the behaviour and lack of knowledge of the German population more generally. This was addressed explicitly seven times by four interviewees. Among them was Emma Bennett who was asked for her thoughts about the director’s intentions or ‘message’:

> I think, erm, throughout the film it’s key that ... not everyone knew what was going on or that some people put up with it and ... maybe (---) also that they didn’t, they (-) sort of, the brainwashing, erm, sort of (--) distanced them from the emotions because, erm, they thought Jews were not hu-, not humans, or they thought they were vermin and ... caused ... the Great War ... so effective brainwashing and ... maybe, erm, showing how (---) this, people can commit such atrocities but also ... contrasting that with the child who doesn’t understand and isn’t, isn’t as subject to the brainwashing as much because it doesn’t understand ...

Emma both reproduced terms and tropes from the film (‘they thought Jews were not humans’, ‘they thought they were vermin and ... caused the Great War’) and drew on preconceptions of Germans’ knowledge about the crimes and notions of ‘brainwashing’. According to the film’s producer Rosie Alison, ‘one of the hardest challenges’ for them was ‘to convince an audience of people’s naivety about the Final Solution’.²⁰² She explains that they read about the commandants of Auschwitz and

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¹⁹⁸ Seven examples of this were also given by three German interviewees who put particular emphasis on the role of propaganda.


²⁰² R. Alison, ‘Friendship Beyond the Fence’.
Sobibor and found that ‘both their wives actually hadn’t ... known for quite a while what was going on in the camps, and both thought they were labour camps.’ This exemplifies how filmmakers make conscious decisions regarding the historical context and content: while anticipating that many people may find it hard to believe that individuals in the vicinity of a death camp may not know about the mass murder, they nevertheless pursued the story in the way they held to be accurate, to the extent of using the memoirs of a death camp commandant as evidence of the ignorance of commandants’ wives. While in some respects taking on the role of historians, they did not question the reliability of Höß’s account and neither do they appear to have consulted more recent research on women in Nazi Germany and ‘ordinary Germans’. The claim made by many Germans that they did not know about the mass murder of the Jews still appears to hold a very powerful place in the popular imagination. Various studies have demonstrated, however, that the general population must have known far more than they admitted after the war, be that from letters sent home from the front or soldiers returning from the occupied territories, the public arrest and deportation of Jews, or the proximity to thousands of concentration and forced labour camps.

Propaganda was not a topic of The Reader but was mentioned by four of the interviewees. This may be due to interviewees’ preconceptions or background knowledge with which they made sense of the film. In the group, the interviewees discussed whether there may be a link between illiteracy and an inability to question authority. 31-year-old primary school teacher Elizabeth Jones (EJ) argued that the answer to this would depend on how Hanna signed up to the SS and whether she fully understood what the work would entail. Richard Poynter and Mary Gaynor added:

RP: It’s not just that, I think also, I know from personal experience that when your confidence is really low, you can be easily led, you can be, you can be dragged into things just wanting to belong. || EJ: Yeah. ||| You’re just wanting to || EJ: Be part of something. ||| be part of something. ... And, and I know how powerful that can be ... MG: Well, that’s it, to take the, to take the edge of this, look at nowadays, there are cults everywhere that indoctrinate people, are we saying that all those people that are indoctrinated into doing the mass suicide things and like that, are they stupid? ... RP: Or do they lack, lack personal confidence.

203 Ibid.
In this example, Richard and Mary effectively prevented the discussion of Hanna’s culpability and responsibility which Elizabeth may have tried to initiate. Instead, they argued for the powerful and persuasive nature of ‘indoctrination’ while simultaneously introducing the notion of ‘low confidence’ as a factor favouring the effect of such ‘indoctrination’. While Mary compared Nazism to present-day cults, Richard linked this aspect to his own ‘personal experience’. It is not entirely clear if the ‘low confidence’ in this case refers merely to Hanna or to the German people more generally serving as an explanation for being ‘led’ by Hitler into war and genocide. The notion of Germans being effectively ‘helpless in the face of the level of propaganda produced by the Nazis’ was also established by McKay’s study, which would suggest that this is not an isolated phenomenon of this particular study or in relation to particular films but points to popular knowledge and narratives. At the same time, it should be noted that ‘propaganda’ featured mainly in interviews about The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas and, to a lesser extent, The Reader but was largely absent in the interviews about the other three films. This would indicate that the film text does have, in fact, a strong impact on the direction viewers’ interpretations of perpetrator behaviour and motivation are taking, but it is not entirely clear why a text triggers or facilitates certain responses from the interviewees.

Perhaps surprisingly, the ways in which the six German participants of this study made sense of the behaviour of perpetrators as depicted in The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas mirrored the responses from the British respondents. Propaganda, fear and coercion, and alleged opposition to the regime, particularly on part of the mother, featured prominently in the German interviews. This would again suggest that the film text may have a decisive impact on the way in which the film is made sense of. Alternatively, the similarities in understanding perpetrator behaviour may indicate wider, globalised or European patterns of interpretation. There were responses that may be argued to point to a specific German interpretative community as they were not identified in this form in the remaining interviews. 22-year-old Bettina Metz (BM) and 24-year-old Sybille Unger (SU), both students, talked about the film’s ending. The interviewer asked them to speculate what would happen after the father discovered his son was killed:

206 McKay, A multi-generational oral history study, p. 193.
SU: ... there’s two possibilities, either he understands or he doesn’t || BM: Yes. || and if he understood, then || BM: And if he understood, then he has a big problem. || <laughs> then he has a huge problem, yes, that’s obvious.
BM: I mean, especially. I guess he was a big gun <laughs> || SU: Definitely. || and especially those, if they opposed it, they had the possibility to either get way and in fact really just run away, go into hiding || SU: Yes. || or you face the same fate as the poor Jews. ...
SU: Well, I don’t think that he was so pigheaded that he didn’t understand but you’re right, if he got it, then ... he can’t really do much. That’s always that problem, what can you do as an individual.207

Bettina and Sybille appeared to be in perfect agreement. If the father ‘understands’ (precisely what this understanding would entail is not further specified) then he would have ‘a big problem’. Sybille’s laugh here indicates that this was not in question for her. Both Sybille and Bettina were very self-assured and confident in their answer which they readily connected with their subject knowledge. As one of the ‘big guns’, as Bettina somewhat sarcastically remarked, the father would allegedly find himself in a particularly difficult situation where he was faced with only two possibilities: go into hiding or ‘face the same fate as the poor Jews’. Bettina’s remarks encountered no opposition from Sybille. Implicit here is the threat of serious consequences that would be the same as the persecution and murder of the Jews, which has also been seen in the British interviewees. Sybille’s subsequent remarks, however, about the alleged powerlessness of the individual were not identified elsewhere. Despite some of the similarities between the responses from German and British interviewees, they must be understood in their respective historical contexts. For the German interviewees, the history of the Holocaust, even when told through film, is, arguably, a lot ‘closer to home’. As Sybille put it rather poignantly when asked for the director’s intentions or ‘message’:

as you can see from the mother, you cannot keep your distance to it, you couldn’t then and perhaps neither can you today, but it, you come whether you like it or not, into contact with it and ... yes, that’s just ... that you eventually ... that the mother eventually realised this, this horror and no longer had her shield .... that it could not prevent her from being involved.208

Neither the British interviewees nor the Spanish respondent voiced any similar sentiments in relation to this film. The suggested inability to keep ‘distance’ to the Holocaust which Sybille linked with the present and the alleged victimhood of the

207 Group Discussion Bettina Metz (BM) and Sybille Unger (SU), The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, 12 November 2011, 49-58 [translation from German original into English by the author].
208 Ibid., 29-35 [translation from German original into English by the author].
mother, could be seen as unique to the German discourse of ‘coming to terms’ with the past outlined above in relation to the film *The Reader*. Due to the small number of interviewees, no conclusions can be drawn from this. A larger, more systematic bi- or multinational comparison of responses to films in different countries may be able to provide more insights into the ways in which national interpretative communities affect attitudes towards the past and towards representations of history.

**Emotional Deficits**

An often-observed phenomenon in the interviews were characterisations of perpetrators as ‘distanced’ from their emotions or by using negative or pathological terms and attributes. This was most pronounced in the interviews about *Conspiracy* (19 examples from nine interviewees) and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (16 examples from 11 interviewees), followed by *The Grey Zone* (11 examples from eight interviewees) and *The Reader* (13 examples from six interviewees), with only few instances of this in the case of *Defiance* (three examples from two interviewees). These included terms like ‘sadist SS type’, ‘bully’ and ‘morally bankrupt’ (*The Grey Zone*); ‘heartless’, ‘brutal’ and ‘cold’ (*Conspiracy*); and ‘emotionally immature’, ‘bottled up’ or ‘unemotional’ (*The Reader*). In the interviews about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Ruth Jones described the father as ‘just almost robotic’, while the other Germans ‘just came across as ... bullies and ... totally ... robotic, emotionless, erm, crazy almost.’

This was echoed by Judy Evans, to whom the ‘dad particularly seemed to be sort of quite emotionally detached from his kids ... perhaps that just kind of reinforced the message that he really didn’t care about human life very much maybe ... because he was sort of ... quite cold to his children perhaps that made it easier to do the job that he was doing at the camp’. The father and his lieutenant were generally characterised as brutal, ruthless, robotic, and without emotion or detached from their emotions. What comes through here is the notion of the perpetrators as either trying to protect themselves, or as being emotionally deficient in one way or another rather than of perpetrators as ordinary human beings who can both love their families and kill Jews. An effect of this is not only the de-contextualisation from the history of the Holocaust but also an emotional distancing of the viewers from the perpetrators. Such interpretations of perpetrator behaviour have a long tradition but have been refuted by

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Historians in the past few decades.\textsuperscript{211}

**Human Nature**

Many interviewees made sense of the films by referring to universal themes. This includes the idea that the Holocaust can be explained anthropologically by ‘human nature’ or that it signals ‘man’s inhumanity to man’. In these interpretations, the crimes and the perpetrators are entirely de-contextualised and de-historicised. This trope was identified in several interviews about all films, apart from *Conspiracy*, with 19 examples from 13 interviewees.\textsuperscript{212}

Five interviewees of *The Reader* evoked ‘human nature’ on eight separate occasions when discussing the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Evolutionary psychologist James Waller suggests that good and evil may be ‘hard-wired’ into the human brain: ‘Human nature contains some built-in mechanisms that can be adapted and recruited into the service of extraordinary evil.’\textsuperscript{213} Though Waller is careful not to ignore other factors contributing to genocide, this approach nonetheless risks essentialising and naturalising events and behaviour that arise out of specific social, political, cultural and economic conditions, and thus turn murder and genocide into ‘natural’ rather than socially, culturally and politically constituted phenomena. Stephanie Porter, for example, took this universalising approach to the Holocaust when she was asked whether it is good that films are made about the Holocaust. She talked about her visit ‘to Auschwitz’ and that the ‘memory of the Holocaust should be kept alive ‘cause I think we can learn a lot from it.’\textsuperscript{214} She then further argued that ‘we should always let the Holocaust stand as a … remembrance that man is capable of this’\textsuperscript{215} Films here appear to fulfil a similar function as memorial sites and may serve to preserve and pass on the memory of the Holocaust. Harriet Langford, when asked about her thoughts of artistic freedom, commented on the film *Life is Beautiful*. Initially, she had reservations about the film, but then ‘rapidly changed’ her mind and ‘thought, actually there is something about the human spirit, it’s brilliant.’\textsuperscript{216} This would suggest that ‘human nature’ can have two


\textsuperscript{212} See also Gudehus, ‘Understanding *Hotel Rwanda*’, p. 354.


\textsuperscript{214} Interview SP, *The Reader*, 183-4.


\textsuperscript{216} Interview HL, *The Reader*, 262-3.
different meanings and is a rather flexible concept. Whenever the issue is crime, atrocity, or violence, ‘human nature’ is called upon to offer a wholesale explanation that, in essence, relieves of individual responsibility. In relation to human co-operation and perseverance in the face of adversity and despair, however, the ‘human spirit’ is called upon, which universalises, or absorbs and appropriates, the brave or kind acts of individuals.  

Summary

The scope of interpretations of perpetrator behaviour and motivation in the interviews reveals both closeness to the text – for example, propaganda did not feature (much) in the interviews about Conspiracy or The Reader but was a widespread interpretation in the case of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas – and the importance of generalisations and preconceptions, seen particularly in interpretations of perpetrators or the wider population as being afraid or coerced into committing crimes. It can be argued that these interpretations were encouraged by the film texts but depended on viewers to fill in the gaps left by the films. Some explanations of perpetrator behaviour, on the other hand, were identified in a range of interviews and were not limited to a particular film. The discussion has demonstrated that despite some exceptions to this rule, the interviewees tended to make sense of both cinematic and historical perpetrators in ways than can be characterised as exculpating, turning perpetrators and bystanders into victims, and de-contextualising. Notably absent were indications of any options and choices available to the perpetrators and bystanders.

The films’ representation and the interviewees’ interpretations of perpetrator motivation may reflect an increasing pre-occupation with ‘contextualisation and complexity’ described by Peter Longerich as the ‘challenges’ faced by contemporary perpetrator research. Although the films went to great lengths to give their characters depth and nuance, they fall short in portraying the full scope of motivations explored by Holocaust scholars. In his study of the novel The Reader, William Donahue argues in this respect that ‘an unreflective embrace of moral ambiguity may, in the very name of complexity, effectively deny it.’ Filmmakers and viewers seem to resort to popular

\[217\] This more positive interpretation of ‘humanity’ was detected in nine examples from five interviewees about Defiance and in three examples from three interviewees about The Grey Zone.

\[218\] Longerich, ‘Tendenzen und Perspektiven der Täterforschung’ [translation by the author].

\[219\] W. C. Donahue, Holocaust as Fiction: Bernhard Schlink’s “Nazi” Novels and Their Films (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 79.
notions of fear, force, and propaganda, often neglecting ideological motives, and look for mitigating circumstances. If Pearce noted a ‘latent anti-Germanism’\textsuperscript{220} in a range of newspapers around the time of the first Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) in 2001, it would seem that today, at least according to a majority of the interviews, the opposite may be the case. Rather than suggest a ‘demonisation’ of German perpetrators and a reluctance to identify with them, the interviews indicate a view of German perpetrators and bystanders that shows, overall, appreciation for, and understanding and sympathy for their situation. One of the reasons for this phenomenon may lie in the interviewees’ largely left-liberal background, which may discourage them from expressing any anti-German sentiment, particularly when interviewed by a German researcher. Other possibilities are that anti-Germanism or demonization of perpetrators may not have been as widespread as assumed or has decreased, either more recently or particularly for younger generations. Perhaps, part of the answer is in the films which prompt such exculpating responses as were seen above. As McKay’s memory study has indicated, however, interpreting perpetrator behaviour in these ways is not confined to viewers’ responses to popular films. Jensen has noted a ‘circular movement between public opinion and filmic representation’, which may also have a bearing on some of the responses discussed in this chapter.\textsuperscript{221}

Viewers may also often lack the necessary historical background knowledge to be able to contextualise what is presented to them, not only when faced with films like \textit{Conspiracy}, \textit{The Grey Zone} or \textit{Defiance} striving to be historically accurate, but also fictional accounts such as \textit{The Reader} and \textit{The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas} which transport little to no historical information. The interviewees’ generally high educational standard would furthermore indicate that education alone, including subject knowledge about the Holocaust, may not suffice to put films into context and to understand the Holocaust in its complexity rather than through simplified notions, such as fear and coercion or propaganda.


\textsuperscript{221} O. Jensen, ‘The Holocaust in British Television and Film: A Look over the Fence’, in Sharples and Jensen (eds), \textit{Britain and the Holocaust}, p. 118.
Part III: The Reception of Holocaust Representations

Part II was concerned with the ways in which the interviewees made sense of the Holocaust through the films presented to them. Part III will explore how Holocaust representations are made sense of in terms of reception processes. Though the main focus is on the British interviewees, all interviews will be considered for this investigation. Is it the case, as Omer Bartov maintains, that ‘the lay public is most likely to be exposed to those historical interpretations least likely to offer a reliable representation of the past, yet would be prone to take precisely such stories at face value because they would be presented as the culmination of scholarly research’?\(^1\) Or do personalities and preconceptions have a much bigger impact on the film reception than is acknowledged?

To address these and other questions, the first chapter will reason why, and discuss to what extent the interviewees perceived and experienced the films as authentic. Looking at this relationship between film and reality will include an analysis of interviewees’ notions of ‘authenticity’ and preconceived ideas about ‘Holocaust films’, and how these may relate to the films’ impact on historical understanding. Subsequently, the impact of factors external to the film will be explored in more depth by examining different modes of reception. The second chapter will discuss a range of preconceptions which interviewees referred to in order to make sense of the films. Further to be considered are the ways in which films are remembered and recalled, and different styles of narration. Finally, a look at the long-term reception of films will provide some hypotheses of how films may be remembered years after the viewing.

Film and Reality

In scholarly literature on historical films, critics’ reviews and also in this interview study, a recurring topic is the extent to which films are, and can be, authentic, historically or otherwise. In the field of Holocaust studies, there tends to be a ‘hierarchy of authority’ with different degrees of authenticity measured by ‘temporal and physical proximity’ to the events of the Holocaust on the one hand, and characterised by a

‘hierarchy of persons’ on the other. The five films selected for this study are positioned at different points on this scale of authenticity, depending on both their source text and also the filmmakers’ backgrounds. They all can be regarded as part of a tradition in which ‘Realism assumes the omniscient point of view of one who is outside history epistemologically, emotionally, and morally... And realism presents the past unself-consciously, drawing attention to the events presented, and away from the film’s own act of presentation.’ In scholars’ criticism of feature films, the aspects of realism, factuality and authenticity play an important, and often the dominant role. Popular film is frequently rejected as a medium to represent the Holocaust as it is claimed that ‘its nature, film cannot be made properly respectful of the mysteries and the ambiguities of actual experience.’ Jerome de Groot, on the other hand, suggests that authenticity ‘is an obviously empty category’. If authenticity is indeed an ‘empty category’, then viewers may fill it with different meanings. The next sub-chapter discusses how, why, and the extent to which the interviewees regarded the films presented to them as authentic. It will also be explored to what degree the experience and perception of authenticity have an impact on viewers’ knowledge or historical understanding.

**Perceptions of Authenticity**

**Types of authenticity**

175 text segments in all interviews related to the perception of the films as authentic, and indicated to what extent, and what, the films may have added to interviewees’ knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. The interviews about *Conspiracy* and *Defiance* had the highest numbers of examples in this respect, followed by *The Grey Zone, The Reader* (13 examples from five interviewees) and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (24 examples from nine interviewees) were experienced as authentic to a lesser degree. In the analysis of the responses relating to authentic film aspects, different types of authenticity emerged.

In the interviews about *Conspiracy*, 57 examples from all 13 interviewees pertained to the film or certain aspects of it being perceived as authentic, factual, realistic, informative or educational. This related almost exclusively to factual historical

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knowledge and therefore describes historical authenticity, which was similar in the interviews about *The Grey Zone*, where 26 out of 31 examples (nine interviewees) were about historical details or the portrayal of the characters. Steinweis proposes that ‘Although academic specialists will doubtlessly be perturbed by inaccuracies and interpolations, *Conspiracy*, to its credit, does not stray very far from what is factually plausible. The main danger with this kind of film is that most viewers will not be able to tell the difference between plausible speculation and documented fact.’ This aspect may hold true not only for *Conspiracy*, but also for the other four films which equally employ, to varying degrees, a mix of fact and fiction. In the case of *Defiance*, just over half of the 41 examples (11 interviewees) relating to authenticity were about the historical background more generally, including Jewish resistance, and the depiction of the Russian and the female partisans. One of the interviewees of *Conspiracy*, Michael Fox, when asked how he liked the film which he had seen once before, told the interviewer how impressed he was with the film ‘originally and just as impressed this time around’ because of the acting, the dialogue, and the ‘apparent’ authenticity of it. Despite not having known about the historical event before watching the film for the first time and without indication that he may have sought more information on the topic since then, the authenticity of the film was not in question for him. The interviewer here did not ask any further questions about what made the film so ‘apparently’ authentic. This is partly due to the fact that this exchange happened at the beginning of the interview and the interviewer did not want to direct the interview too much; yet, in other interviews and at other points of this interview, follow-up questions were asked so this could be seen as an oversight and a missed opportunity to illuminate different notions of authenticity.

The second type can be termed ‘emotional authenticity’ and was recorded in interviews about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, *The Reader*, and especially about *Defiance*. For some, *Defiance* appeared to have succeeded in creating a sense of happening now, of drawing the viewers in to experience the story with the characters. 11 examples from five interviewees indicated that the interviewees put themselves in the refugees’ shoes, and that it felt – at times – as if they were there with them. In one of the group discussions, 19-year-old student Camilla McCartney, when asked if she would take anything away from the film, responded:

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7 Interview MF, *Conspiracy*, 10-12.
I feel exhausted. <laughs; INT: laughs> Erm, but I think that’s a good thing though, I think it’s good that, like you’re refreshed of that, that feeling ‘cause I think, like you can carry on hearing about the story that I think that a lot of people, you keep in tune with the way that people felt, I think it’s difficult to understand, some of the things that they did, like the exhaustion may have led to them like giving themselves up and then, if you not appreciate it like the emotions they were going through at the time, you might as well see it in a different way, so I think it’s, that was good that the film seemed to capture that ...

For Camilla, the film was ‘exhausting’ as she put herself in the refugees’ situation. She commended the film particularly for this effect because it helped her to connect and to appreciate the situation the refugees were forced into. The film’s portrayal of the refugees’ experiences was seen as authentic. Rather than constituting historical accuracy, here we can speak of ‘emotional authenticity’ the film was credited with. One could interpret this example as evidence for a ‘cathartic’ effect resulting from the emotional engagement and impact of the film. It could also be seen as an expression of enjoyment, which ‘as the core of media entertainment experience not only manifests itself in many different ways but also depends on the audience’s readiness and ability to suspend disbelief, to empathize with the characters at play, to engage in parasocial interactions and relationships with the personae, to be present somewhere else and with somebody else, and to have an interest in what the media presents.’

Some interviewees appeared to distinguish between a core of facts or truth and artistic embellishments which can be regarded as another type of authenticity. This was the case, in particular, in interviews about The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas and The Reader. The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas’s fictional base did not preclude it from being perceived as authentic. This included the film’s historical background and context, and was recorded in 20 examples from eight interviewees. One of them was Ruth Jones who was asked to elaborate why she thought it was not important for this film to be ‘realistic’. Ruth argued that it was ‘very clear ... where the poetic license ... has been taken ... the fundamental truths of the film remain ... in the important areas it was realistic’. For her, it appeared to suffice for historical realism that the film showed

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8 Group Discussion YJ and CM, Defiance, 431-7. Camilla’s expression of her exhaustion was heart-felt and made her laugh, to which the interviewer joined in.
9 P. Vorderer et. al., ‘Enjoyment: At the Heart of Media Entertainment’, Communication Theory, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2004), pp. 402-3. The notion of catharsis, going back to Aristotle, has been increasingly contested in more recent research into the effects of ‘entertainment’ that tends to differentiate between different media experiences.
10 Ibid., p. 397.
11 An additional nine examples were identified from four German interviewees.
core facts, namely, that ‘the camps existed, that people were ... killed and burnt ... in the ovens’, that there was brutality, and that ‘people were coerced out of fear’.\textsuperscript{13} While she had doubts regarding some details, for example, that the commandant’s house ‘would have been quite so close to the extermination’ (though, in fact, the house of the commandant of Auschwitz, Höß, was within the camp complex), she called upon her historical knowledge and remembered to have heard ‘that people in the villages could smell the burning bodies’.\textsuperscript{14} It could be suggested that what she judged to be realistic was information taken from her existing knowledge rather than anything new conveyed by the film. The film was understood as being authentic in terms of core facts which were distinguished from artistic embellishments. Doneson argues in this respect in relation to the series \textit{Holocaust} that style aside, ‘its content imparts the “truth” about the horrors of the Holocaust to a mass audience.’\textsuperscript{15} To some viewers, then, films may be seen as capturing this ‘truth’ without having to be faithful to every historical detail.

The fourth type of authenticity was mainly identified in the interviews about \textit{Defiance}. 15 examples pertained to ten interviewees perceiving individual film characters’ responses to certain situations or the personal relationships and dynamics within the group as authentic. The core element is that characters are behaving in ways that can be related to, that are expected, or that are plausible. This is exemplified in this excerpt from the interview with 46-year-old student Maud Saunders when she was asked about the main characters’ representation:

\begin{quote}
I think they were good and I think a lot of the, er, responses they gave to certain situations would be perhaps what you would anticipate people doing, especially being brothers ... they both lost their wives and kids et cetera, so they would start to get mad and being obviously not reluctant to use a gun ‘cause this is all, all just happened to them then I would have maybe expected them to have gone out and trying to shoot people, || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| you know, just in retaliation ...\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The characters behaved in ways that she understood; this is how people would be anticipated and expected to react in particular situations. She framed the characters’ responses in terms of ‘retaliation’, ‘loss’ and ‘being brothers’. These universal themes allowed her to interpret the characters’ behaviour even though their situation is highly specific and difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. This is also true for 21 examples from 11 interviewees which relate to perceiving the way in which the film

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13] Ibid., 44-5.
\item[14] Ibid., 46-8.
\item[16] Interview Maud Saunders (MS), \textit{Defiance}, 16 November 2011, 91-6.
\end{footnotes}
represented the life in the forest and the partisan group as authentic, including elements such as group conflicts and pregnancies.

This demonstrates that authenticity can be filled with different meanings. It can denote historical and factual or emotional authenticity; distinguishing core facts from embellishments; and plausibility. It was also seen that each film may invite specific notions of authenticity. In the case of Conspiracy and The Grey Zone, historical authenticity dominated the interviewees’ responses; in the case of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, telling facts from artistic license was most dominant with fewer instances of emotional authenticity; in the interviews about The Reader, three different types were found: both historical and emotional authenticity, and the distinction between core facts and embellishments. The interviews about Defiance also contained these three types and the additional variety of plausibility.

Genre, style and aesthetics

As indicated above, some films were more likely to be perceived as authentic. In this section, it will be explored how authenticity is constructed by analysing the role of stylistic devices, aesthetics and genres in interviewees’ experiences of the films as authentic, realistic or factual. The focus will be on the interviews about Conspiracy, Defiance and The Grey Zone where interviewees commented most on such aspects. In the case of Conspiracy, it can be argued that it was regarded as conveying historically accurate information because of its docu-drama style and look. According to de Groot, ‘History on television strives to attain a kind of hyperauthenticity, a silently acknowledged un/reality. Both drama based on novel sources and those based merely in period strive to present the “reality” of the past in authentic fashion and therefore present their product as in some way true.’ Conspiracy, in particular, can be argued to take ‘a classical realist form, the illusion of experiencing not discordant memory, but the authentic reproduction of reality’.

An example for the impact of stylistic devices on the reception of Conspiracy is taken from the interview with Faith Jackson. She was asked how she felt about the characters, their roles and how they were portrayed. Faith responded that although she did not know what the ‘actual people are like’, ‘initially, it does seem to be quite factual’. The interviewer then asked her to elaborate on signs or hints that made the film

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17 De Groot, Consuming History, p. 181.
seem factual to her. Faith’s response highlights the potential impact of the film’s documentary-style devices, as she referred to what ‘they actually said at the beginning and the end about the report’. The way in which the film was framed with the narration telling the evidence for the Wannsee Conference appeared to have had a considerable impact on the way in which Faith perceived the film. While acknowledging that ‘they have to dramatise a bit of it’, she explained this by suggesting that the actual minutes must contain gaps. She concluded this from the interventions in the film, when Eichmann stops the typist from recording particular parts of the conversation. Faith had no prior knowledge of the Wannsee Conference and was not aware that the Wannsee Protocol is not the actual set of minutes of the meeting but an edited summary written by Eichmann and as he claims, also by Heydrich. While she recognised that ‘a bit of drama’ may have been added, she was unable to pinpoint the parts where artistic license had been taken. Apparent dramatisations and even inconsistencies may, therefore, be explained and bridged by viewers to keep intact the notion of authenticity or factuality.

Although 17 out of 57 examples relating to the perception of Conspiracy as authentic, from nine interviewees, indicate that some of them had questions, doubts or concerns regarding the film’s accuracy, the film was still interpreted as authentic. One of the most poignant examples for this phenomenon was recorded in the interview with Martin Thompson. When asked to elaborate on the question of accuracy, which he had mentioned before, he responded:

I can only assume it was pretty accurate based on the minutes and probably other information about what people said and how they justified their part in it. But I don’t know ‘cause I’ve not read those accounts, so … I don’t feel the need to interrogate that film, do you know what I mean. || INT: Mm-hmm. || or interrogate the data, I’m happy to believe that that’s a pretty accurate representation of what went down.20

Despite his acknowledgment of his own lack of knowledge and not knowing how accurate the film was, he was ‘happy to believe’ and to ‘assume’ that the film ‘was pretty accurate’. While some interviewees acknowledged that not everything in Conspiracy may be factual, most interviewees were unable to tell fact from fiction. It would appear that if in doubt, the film is credited with being historically accurate.

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19 Interview FJ, Conspiracy, 28-47.
20 Interview MT, Conspiracy, 105-9.
The film partly achieves this through its ‘blend of fictional and non-fictional truths’. This is, of course, not limited to Conspiracy but can be identified in all representations of the Holocaust. Margaret Knight discussed a film scene with Nigel Cole which resonated with her knowledge about the Holocaust:

it did remind me … I liked how they were talking about their plan for, erm, getting the Jews to build the concentration camps. I remember || NC: Yeah. ||| learning that when I was a kid. || NC: Yeah. ||| So I quite liked that being represented in it and the way it was said … there was almost like a celebration about that, wasn’t there, it was like, ‘what a great idea, || NC: Yeah. ||| that’s genius’, oh, that was gross. // NC: Dig your own grave. /// Mm-hmm. Unbelievable, isn’t it.

The fact that she had learned about an aspect featured in the film when she was younger, appears to have had the effect of seeming authentic as it appealed to Margaret’s prior knowledge. It could be suggested that this potent mix of known facts woven into the film, alongside fictitious elements and ‘informed speculation’ is key to the power of both feature films and docu-dramas. They appeal to viewers’ pre-existing knowledge, providing them with a basic frame of reference. Other, more fabricated elements, are then either disregarded or overlooked, or, in the absence of any more detailed historical knowledge or critical attitudes towards media products, also regarded as factual or at least plausible. Film and media scholar Tobias Ebbrecht remarks in this respect that the ‘combination of documentary and fictional modes of representation corresponds to the audience’s desire to see their own received understanding of history confirmed by historical evidence.’

A closer look at some select examples will serve to further explore the widespread perception of Conspiracy as authentic. The way in which the film represents history appears to be crucial. Among the film’s aesthetic aspects highlighted by ten of the interviewees are Conspiracy’s one-room setting, the alleged lack of drama, a contrast to Hollywood productions, and the voice-over at the beginning of the film. 21 examples make particular reference to these and other elements. Three interviewees, for example, distinguished the film from feature films by comparing it to documentaries. One explanation for this phenomenon could have to do with the film being, at least partly, a BBC production and the common perception of the BBC as producing high-quality

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22 Group Discussion NC and MK, Conspiracy, 405-10.
documentaries and films. As Charlotte Harris put it, films like Schindler’s List and Life is Beautiful ‘are aimed at really ... a big international audience and ... this is more of a drama-documentary, the sort of thing the BBC do do very well, erm, but ... it’s not a cinema film, ... it’s not the great big, you sit there in your cinema with a great big soundtrack thing, erm, it’s more like ... the World at War that BBC did as well, it’s ... that sort of thing that they can do so brilliantly.’ It is interesting that she saw Conspiracy to have more similarity with The World at War than with other non-documentary modes of representation. Charlotte incorrectly assigned the Thames Television/ITV documentary series to the BBC, which further highlights particular expectations and preconceptions regarding the BBC. An appreciation of, and trust in, the BBC as a production company could therefore add to the viewers’ experience of an ‘authentic’ film. Pearce has pointed out that in Britain the documentary form has often been preferred over the feature film approach, which is partly due to a preference for history over entertainment. The documentary look of the film could therefore be assumed to have a strong impact, as may have done the cast which is largely British and includes some very well-known actors. Historical and heritage films are also a common sight on British television. The ‘past is a highly visible presence in the British landscape’ and its uses and misuses for national identity politics have been widely discussed. Though Conspiracy’s topic is of course not British heritage per se, it can nonetheless be placed within the tradition of British docu-dramas and through its construction of the ‘Other’, in this case the Nazis who were fought off by the British war effort, may still contribute to a sense of national identity and heritage.

Finally, nine examples from eight interviewees demonstrate that a certain amount of trust is bestowed upon the filmmakers. One of the interviewees who assumed that the filmmakers must have thoroughly researched the topic was Rachel Cooper. Asked about her thoughts on artistic license, she responded that the story needs to be interesting. She was ‘assuming’ that the filmmakers must have looked into the history and the character traits and could have established whether they would have been opposed to ‘that sort of solution’. She argued that it was thus possible to imply ‘some level of coercion’ although the conversations may have been ‘anyone’s guess’. The question remains

25 See e.g. de Groot, Consuming History, p. 185.
26 Interview CH, Conspiracy, 169-73.
28 J. Leach, British Film (Cambridge, 2004), p. 199.
29 Interview RC, Conspiracy, 68-74.
whether these assumptions are made because of the film’s authentic look, or whether there is a general trust in filmmakers working on historical films (especially docudramas and documentaries) regarding the effort they put into it, essentially taking on the role of (public) historians. This was, in fact, the case for *Conspiracy*. Screenwriter Mandel revealed in an interview that he extensively researched the Wannsee Conference at different institutions in the United States and Germany.\(^{30}\)

*Defiance* was perceived as authentic in relation to historical and core facts, emotional ‘truth’, and plausibility. The latter, as described above, may be a result of the film’s deployment of universalising strategies and familiar tropes. Nine interviewees particularly highlighted, in 11 examples, aspects of film aesthetics, including the use of Eastern European accents and Russian language, the ‘text’ at the beginning and the end, the fighting scenes, the acting and the ‘look’ of the film. All these factors appeared to contribute to the experience of authenticity. There was also a flipside to this as 19 examples from ten interviewees (including the French interviewee) pertained to (Hollywood) film conventions and tropes or formulae that the interviewees identified and perceived as such. Andrew Lee, for example, believed the film was no more than an ‘action film with Jews’ and returned to this point and what he saw as the conventions of action films, several times during the interview.\(^{31}\) Seven examples from five interviewees make specific reference to, or comparisons with, ‘Hollywood’ and all place *Defiance* within a tradition of American/Hollywood films which they regarded as big productions eschewing the use of subtitles, relying on Hollywood tropes, and bearing a danger of trivialisation. For example, 38-year-old French interviewee Adele Chardin, a finance administrator, talked about a scene at the end in which the refugees cross a marsh and are ambushed by a contingent of German soldiers which to her was an ‘American thing’ and she wondered ‘whether they added that for the … drama effect’ or whether this actually happened.\(^{32}\) Her familiarity with, or at least idea of American films enabled her to question a scene of *Defiance* which was indeed an invention of the script writer. This example highlights certain expectations attached to especially American films which are implicitly read as opposed to, presumably, European, British, or independent cinema. Although *Defiance*’s style of filmmaking appeared to have contributed to an authentic experience, it also detracted from it on

\(^{30}\) Bowie, ‘Interview with Loring Mandel’.

\(^{31}\) Interview AL, *Defiance*, 3.

\(^{32}\) Interview Adele Chardin (AC), *Defiance*, 11 November 2011, 66-70.
many occasions. This was mainly in relation to its action genre and use of particular
tropes and conventions. This may also be the reason why Defiance was the only film
prompting three interviewees to respond to the interviewer’s question about the
director’s intentions by suggesting the film was only made to make money or for pure entertainment. Defiance’s depiction of heroic action, and all of that by Jews whom audiences are more used to being depicted as helpless, passive victims, may very likely contribute to the suggestion by these three interviewees that the film was merely made to entertain and to make money.\footnote{In the interviews about the other films, most commonly interviewees responded to the question about the director’s intentions that the film was made to provide knowledge or other insights (esp. Conspiracy and The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, but also The Reader and The Grey Zone), or to convey universal messages (esp. The Reader, Defiance and The Grey Zone).}

For most of the interviewees of The Grey Zone, it was its realist style which led to
their perception of the film as authentic. Libby Saxton notes in this respect that the
film’s ‘meticulous reconstruction unsettles the distinctions between documentary and
fiction’.\footnote{Saxton, Haunted Images, p. 83.} Its grim, relentless, brutal and violent tone and look found particular appreciation as a realistic portrayal according to 11 examples from five interviewees. Madeleine Keane was asked how she liked the film and responded that it ‘was like quite shocking … it was like a fair representation of … the kind of things that went on there … just … seeing the images … hammers it home … it was … gripping to watch right till the end.’\footnote{Interview MK, The Grey Zone, 16-24.} This was echoed by Siobhan Williams in one of the two group discussions.\footnote{Group Discussion SW, SA, JO and DG, The Grey Zone, 16-19.} For both Madeleine and Siobhan, The Grey Zone appeared to have been realistic or authentic – or simply shocking – enough to ‘hammer it home’ what happened in the death camps. Neither of them had previously been exposed to any Holocaust representations and their knowledge about the event was limited.

Five interviewees highlighted the film’s realism, in six examples, by comparing it
with other films. Ryan Gledhill voiced his preference for The Grey Zone over
Schindler’s List:

because it’s less glossy and I can’t help think if something’s glossy and, er, generally upliftinng at the end, er, that’s a little too, too Hollywood … to feel authentic, no matter how good elements of it may be. Erm, this works better, er, like more downbeat ones … like Fateless … and it sort of compares reasonably well with doc-, elements of documentaries like Shoah because you feel this … reflects the … reality
of the Holocaust better. … You know, the happy endings are, are very few and far between. … I think happy endings are largely out of place.37

‘Hollywood’ appears to function as signifying something negative, and less realistic, as seen above in examples from interviews about Defiance and Conspiracy. Ryan saw The Grey Zone on a par with Fateless and Shoah, even though the latter is a documentary. What they have in common, according to Ryan, is being ‘downbeat’ and reflecting the ‘reality of the Holocaust better’. The format of the film, its (non-)entertainment value, or that of other films, was a topic in 19 examples from eight interviewees. Madeleine Keane likened The Grey Zone to a horror film,38 while for Noel Baxter, it did not seem to go far enough in portraying the ‘horror’.39 The Grey Zone’s portrayal of the process of annihilation not only ‘transgresses established ethical boundaries’, but according to Bangert, the director also draws on Holocaust iconography as much as he is trying to ‘establish an iconography of the extermination process more or less unprecedented on historical and artistic levels’.40

The Reader and The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas are both based on fictional novels. They were perceived as authentic to a lesser degree by the interviewees. Most of the examples that relate to authenticity can be characterised as referring to emotional authenticity or distinguish between core facts and artistic license. This would indicate that interviewees understood to an extent that the films are not based on ‘true stories’. Four interviewees of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, and seven of The Reader still wondered if the stories portrayed by the films could have, in fact, happened. It was suggested that the films may have been based on a ‘true story’. Asked what she thought about films like The Reader that are based on fictional novels, Lara Williams proposed that there is a difference between stories that are altogether ‘made-up’ and stories that were ‘closely related to events’. She asked, ‘as you say, it’s a novel, I mean … where did the author get his ideas from …? Is it from personal experience, is it through what somebody has told him so in a roundabout way it could be <laughs> based on true events, that’s, well, that’s the impression that I got with that one.’41 Lara appeared to propose both a core of truth and the possibility that the story actually did happen, as the author may have found his inspiration from ‘true events’. It should be noted here that

37 Interview RG, The Grey Zone, 88-95.
39 Interview NB, The Grey Zone, 82-6.
41 Interview LW, The Reader, 348-53. Lara’s laugh here serves to emphasise her argument that the film could be based on a true story.
*The Reader* does draw inspiration from Germany’s process of confronting the past, as discussed previously, and Hanna has been argued to bear resemblance to historical perpetrators.⁴² Other, perhaps more significant elements of *The Reader* are owed to a particular German discourse on the one hand, and the filmmakers’ decisions on the other. Both *The Reader* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* seem to have the potential to appear as based on historical fact or truth which may, in turn, exacerbate their impact.

At the same time, on many occasions (85 examples), interviewees also questioned the authenticity of the films or some of their elements. As noted above, certain aspects of *Defiance* drew criticism and put the film’s authenticity into question. All but one interviewee commented on inauthentic aspects of *Defiance* which may thus be somewhat off-setting its impact. Most of the 22 examples related to the format and genre of the film. Those interviewees who possessed some knowledge on the subject tended to focus on the historical accuracy of the film whereas those without much subject knowledge concentrated on cinematic tropes, particularly if they were, like Howard Pearson and Thomas Gunasekara (46, archaeologist), familiar with a range of films from different genres. For them, it was the recognition of tropes and formulae that enabled them to doubt the authenticity of certain aspects of *Defiance*. One example for this is taken from the interview with Howard. He argued that:

> There’s no blurred lines, there’s no grey areas if you make it a … biblical story, we make it about good versus evil, we make it like *Star Wars* or something, you know, it, it fits it into this kind of narrative of, of any sort of great story, it’s the … victory of good against all the odds, … against evil … I’m not sure how useful that is for historical understanding …⁴³

Howard likened *Defiance* to *Star Wars* and other Manichean narratives that are very clear-cut and celebratory but that may not necessarily aid historical understanding. The film’s use of, and references to, biblical and epic or classic stories make the constructed nature of the historical narrative more transparent, at least for Howard who was familiar with a range of films, genres and conventions.

Inauthentic aspects were also highlighted in the interviews about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (16 examples from seven British interviewees; 11 from four German interviewees), *The Grey Zone* (11 examples from six interviewees) and, to a lesser

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⁴³ Interview HP, *Defiance*, 22-6.
extent, *The Reader* (three examples from three interviewees). As indicated before, in the case of *Conspiracy*, 22 examples from all but one interviewee (Michael Fox) reflect a concern about the film’s source base. The voiceover at the beginning of the film, which informed that only ‘one piece of evidence’ , the Wannsee Protocol, ‘survived the wreckage of what was the Thousand Year Reich’ and formed the basis of the film, appears to have resonated with the interviewees. While indeed only one set of minutes remained – found in the Foreign Office and belonging to Martin Luther – there are several other documents relating to the Wannsee Conference and post-war testimonies discussing the meeting. The interviewees voiced doubts about the film’s allegedly only source, they did so on the basis of the voiceover’s announcement of this at the beginning of the film and possibly also due to the film’s depiction of secrecy. This would suggest that this information was taken at face-value, perhaps due to a lack of detailed knowledge about the Wannsee Conference, but also due to the persuasive power of voiceovers or information texts displayed at the beginning and/or end of such films. Rachel Cooper, for example, said that she found it difficult to say whether the film was an accurate representation ‘given that there’s only one, what seems to be one set of minutes from that conference in existence, the rest of it is the filmmaker’s ... artistic license’. The actual reflection on the sources falls therefore short: while interviewees considered the impact of only one source text on the film’s artistic license, the narrator’s claim that there was only one such source is not put into question.

**Authenticity and Film Impact**

According to Robert Rosenstone, we ‘live in a world deluged with images, one in which people increasingly receive their ideas about the past from motion pictures and television, from feature films, docudramas, miniseries, and network documentaries.’ As demonstrated above, a range of factors has to be taken into account when considering the reception of films by actual audiences. It will be explored in this context to what extent the films, as Rosenstone claims, added to, or even changed, interviewees’ knowledge. In this respect, *Defiance* and *Conspiracy* appear to have been the most powerful and persuasive.

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44 See the resources on House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Educational Site, [http://www.ghwk.de/?lang=gb](http://www.ghwk.de/?lang=gb) [Accessed 28 April 2014]. The documents include the invitations to the conference, Hofmann’s letter of acceptance, and Eichmann’s testimony, amongst others.


It was argued above that different factors contribute to the experience of *Conspiracy* as authentic, including its docu-drama format and documentary feel, its potent mix of known facts woven into the film alongside speculation, and interviewees’ trust in filmmakers as conducting research and using sound evidence for the film. 26 examples from 11 interviewees indicate that facts and knowledge not previously held may have been taken from the film. 13 examples from five interviewees explicitly express that the film changed pre-existing ideas and knowledge (compared with six examples from four interviewees about *The Reader*, four examples from four interviewees (two of them German) about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, and seven examples from four interviewees about *The Grey Zone*). Some voiced their surprise at the film and said that it was contrary to what they had previously thought or known. Asked if she would take anything away from the film, Rachel Cooper explicitly stated in relation to *Conspiracy*’s depiction of the decision-making of the ‘Final Solution’ that her ‘view of how the whole thing was orchestrated has changed’. The fact that she adapted her knowledge, rather than doubting or challenging what was represented in the film alludes to the power of the medium or at least of this particular format. This was echoed by Martin Thompson who told the interviewer that he ‘wasn’t aware that there was so much, so many differences of view within the group’ and, secondly, he ‘wasn’t aware that they discussed the methods they would use either, so that’s, that was quite a revelation.’ He expanded on the former point that he ‘hadn’t realised ... that there was a debate about that, you know, I just assumed that it had been decided they kill people and then left it to local officials to work out how they would do it.’ This would suggest that what was presented on screen contradicted his own knowledge, which he then adapted to the new information presented to him. None of the elements he took away from the film are firmly supported by the historical record.

*Defiance* appeared to have succeeded in adding to the interviewees’ knowledge about the Holocaust in terms of increasing their knowledge about the Holocaust in Eastern Europe and Russia, and about Jews in hiding, surviving and resisting, outside the camps and ghettos. Most of the 22 examples from 12 interviewees were in relation to having gained knowledge about the historical context. Among them was Maud Saunders, who was asked specifically if she learned anything by watching this film. Maud responded:

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Yes ‘cause... I didn’t realise that they lived out in the woods. I knew that the ghettos had been cleared but just assumed that they would go straight to Auschwitz or whichever one so I didn’t realise that x-number of them had ... got out and lived in woods and, I think it said twelve hundred ... that’s a good number.49

It is worth noting again how little this important part of the Holocaust is known and to what extent the public understanding of the genocide is dominated by images of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In contrast to Conspiracy, which convinced viewers of its authenticity both through its docu-drama style and its depiction of the ‘novel’ aspect of the decision-making process, Defiance may have had such an impact mainly due to its ‘novelty’ subject matter.50

A majority of the interviewees found Conspiracy to be very factual and informative despite their questions regarding the film’s sources. In the context of a lack of detailed, or any knowledge of the Wannsee Conference, and the power of this particular style of filmmaking, this seems hardly surprising. Defiance, too, despite interviewees’ questions about the film’s authenticity, led to some taking away new knowledge from the film viewing. Some of the interpretations found in the interviews reveal significant gaps in subject knowledge. As has been seen throughout this thesis, a related phenomenon is that interviewees’ film interpretations often went beyond the film and that generalisations were made about history and the Holocaust based on the film content. This was the case most significantly in the interviews about Conspiracy (85 examples), The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (76) and Defiance (59), with The Reader (43) and The Grey Zone (20) following behind. As seen above, Conspiracy was very powerful in terms of being perceived as factual, authentic, accurate or realistic. This perception also had an impact on the way in which the film was interpreted. Rather than merely describe and discuss the film, its plot, format, merits, and so on, all interviewees – to varying degrees – linked the film to the history of the Holocaust. Cole has noted in this respect that a ‘degree of confusion exists between the myth of the “Holocaust” and the historical event itself. The critical distinction between the two tends to be neither stressed by the heritage industry nor picked up on by the increasing numbers of “Holocaust” tourists.’51 While some of the generalising responses in the interviews would certainly confirm this, it should be highlighted that they could have been also

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49 Interview MS, Defiance, 58-61.
50 See the aforementioned teacher survey in terms of teachers’ overall focus on Auschwitz rather than e.g. murders by the Einsatzgruppen: Pettigrew and Foster, Teaching about the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools, p. 42.
51 Cole, Selling the Holocaust, p. 185.
encouraged to an extent through the interviewer who may have assigned particular historical significance or relevance to the film by means of particular questions, for example, when asking interviewees if they had had any prior knowledge about the Wannsee Conference before watching *Conspiracy* which implies that the film may, in fact, hold informational value about this historical event.

In the case of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, too, we find a considerable number of generalisations, which may be surprising given the film’s literary rather than factual base. For example, when asked to elaborate what stood out to her about the scene in which Bruno denies his friendship with Shmuel, Ruth Jones responded:

I think he was just frightened ... that’s what he said later ... and you realize that a lot of people would act out of fear, that was very powerful, ... so it’s either gonna be the fear or the indoctrination (--) or both.\(^52\)

Bruno’s behaviour, that is, the behaviour of a fictional, eight-year-old character who denies his friendship to a Jewish boy of the same age which results in the latter boy’s punishment, and which Bruno later regrets and tries to make up for, was transferred onto a wider entity and generalised as human behaviour, potentially serving to explain how German society (in)acted. The reasons for the behaviour of ‘bystanders’ and perpetrators were seen by Ruth as resulting from ‘fear’ or ‘indoctrination’, and no apparent distinction was made between the fictional story portrayed in the film and the complex historical reality, nor between the behaviour of a child and that of millions of adults.

If viewers make generalisations about history based on visual representations, then scholars’ suspicions towards especially feature films may be justified, particularly when considering some of the more problematic interpretations discussed above. And yet, it cannot be said with any certainty whether what was seen on screen was taken and applied to history, or whether existing knowledge and ideas were indeed applied and put in relation to what was seen on screen. It is certainly interesting that many interviewees made no distinction between fictional representation and history or historical fact. What was seen on screen was either not doubted, moulded to fit the interviewees’ preconceptions, or, rather, they focused on aspects *already* relevant and known to them.

Critical Reflection

Ian Wall contends that ‘film allows no time for reflection, debate or verification. We are carried along by its narrative flow. We are involved with individual characters as opposed to broader issues.’ 53 Some of the findings presented above would appear to confirm Wall’s assessment, especially in terms of acquiring knowledge and understanding through films. There was, however, evidence of critical reflection in the majority of the interviews. 53 interviewees (43 of them British) demonstrated, to varying degrees, an understanding and critical awareness of the constructed nature of representations of the Holocaust on film. To an extent, this was encouraged through questions by the interviewer, for example, for interviewees’ thoughts on fictional versus factual films, or whether films could simplify the history of the Holocaust. Altogether 181 text segments were coded under the category ‘critical reflection’. These segments were distributed largely equally between the five films, suggesting that films, or at least particular aspects of them, are understood by many as representations of history rather than necessarily constituting historical reality. The interviewees reflected on questions of genre conventions, the impact of particular actors on their perception of the films, their own expectations, or artistic license. One of them was Ellen Holmes who noted dramatic or cinematic strategies employed by the filmmakers of Defiance when she was asked by the interviewer whether she thought the film was ‘well-acted’. Ellen responded that the film may have been ‘Perhaps a little bit, when you think of it from a historical point of view it’s probably a little bit over-dramatised in places’. Asked to elaborate, she suggested:

It’s the same with most films, but you know when kind of like, erm, the fighting scenes and stuff like that, it’s all kind of drama and glory whereas actually it would have been a bit more, you know, horrible and there would be more like body-parts flying everywhere and stuff like that, || INT: Mm-hmm. || it wouldn’t have been as clean and as like, heroic or something, it just would have been like nasty ... 54

While she was able to recognise aspects of the film that may have been ‘over-dramatised’, this did not preclude her from an overall positive assessment of the film. The aforementioned study by Gudehus et. al. also found that critical reflection was not necessarily always applied to the film under discussion, or impacted the ways in which the film was perceived. Though many instances were recorded in which aspects of the


54 Interview EH, Defiance, 31-8.
film *Hotel Rwanda* were understood as ‘dramaturgical strategy’, this did ‘not prevent a positive reading of the film’.\(^{55}\)

For the fifth of interviewees who did not critically reflect on issues of media and representation, the reasons could not be discerned, as they were of different age groups, genders, nationalities, and educational backgrounds. It may be interesting to note that in one of the group discussions about *The Grey Zone*, not a single instance of critical reflection was offered. Though it may be coincidental, in terms of educational backgrounds, the four participants of this group discussion were the least formally educated compared to the other interviewees. There could be a link between formal education and (critical) media literacy, that is, ‘the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content and to create communications in a variety of contexts’.\(^{56}\) A targeted, in-depth qualitative study, or a quantitative survey of a larger and more representative sample, may be able to provide more insights into the relationship between socio-economic background, education and critical media skills and awareness.

**Defining ‘Holocaust films’**

The discussion thus far has demonstrated that the films used for this study utilise different genres, stylistic devices, tropes and conventions with varying effects and implications. Though they all stand in relationship to the representation of the Holocaust, their individual focus and subject differs from one another. During the data analysis, it emerged that films about the Holocaust may be understood as a distinct genre by the interviewees and that their preconceptions and expectations informed the ways in which they made sense of the films under discussion. Of course, the fact that interviewees had answered a call for participants for a study aiming to investigate ‘Holocaust films’, may have already implanted the idea that there may be such a category.

**Holocaust films, enjoyment and entertainment**

The interviews about *Defiance* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* differed from those about the other three films in that many of the interviewees talked about entertainment or enjoyment. 22 examples from all interviews about *Defiance* express

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\(^{55}\) Gudehus, ‘Understanding *Hotel Rwanda*’, p. 357.

feelings of enjoyment and entertainment, or a rejection thereof, while 18 examples of this phenomenon were coded from eight interviewees of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Five of them, in particular, appeared uncomfortable that they had ‘enjoyed’ the film. It could be suggested that Holocaust films may indeed be regarded as a different kind of film, a different genre, which is not watched – or at least should not be watched – for entertainment or enjoyment but for more honourable, important reasons.

A popular film like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which encourages viewers to feel for Bruno and contains some potentially endearing moments, would then be a ‘guilty pleasure’ requiring justification. One could argue that there may be an element of self-censorship, particularly vis-à-vis more conventional or entertaining films, such as *Defiance* or *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Benjamin Riley, for example, initially spoke about his enjoyment of the latter film, but when asked by the interviewer to elaborate on what he enjoyed about it, retracted his earlier statement:

> it’s not like I enjoy a film regarding this period, because obviously that would be terrible but (--), it shows the naivety of the children and, erm, not their obnoxiousness, erm, but their blasé nature of, ‘I’d rather play on a swing than, you know, (---) finding out what’s happening’, erm, as, as Gretel, she became entrenched with the, the Nazi education, I thought that was (--) particularly well done, erm, not that I say it was enjoyable but, erm, I liked the way that that was put across ...

Benjamin turned enjoyment into appreciation by means of what he knows about Nazism. The interviewer’s follow-up question may have seemed like a criticism or accusation against which he had to defend himself which may explain his retracting of an earlier statement. He may have tried to give the ‘right’ answer to the interviewer which highlights the issue of ‘social desirability’ often cited as a problem in qualitative research or, indeed, any social research. It can be suggested, however, that the assumed social desirability of the statement may demonstrate popular notions of the limits of representing the Holocaust. The results from the study’s questionnaire are also telling in this respect. One of the questions asked interviewees to what extent they agreed with the statement that the Holocaust is in the past and that we should focus on the present instead. 25 disagreed and 31 strongly disagreed with the statement. Eight neither agreed nor disagreed, and only four agreed. Though this question is certainly biased and suggestive, the responses still either reflect a real concern for the continued

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preoccupation with the Holocaust or an awareness of what the ‘correct’ or ‘desired’ answer would be.

Holocaust films may thus be distinguished from other historical films in terms of audience expectations. Monk’s empirical study of heritage film audiences operated using terms of ‘pleasure’ and ‘enjoyment’. Though these terms were also used by some interviewees of this study, they often felt the need to explain, negotiate or negate this ‘enjoyment’. Both the interview analysis and the questionnaire evaluation indicate that entertainment is either not sought from Holocaust films or not considered an appropriate or ‘desired’ response. What should also be considered is that while Monk’s study asked specifically for viewing pleasures and enjoyment, this project did not. The only interview question which would ‘allow’ such answers was towards the beginning of the interview, when the participants were asked how they ‘liked’ the film. On the questionnaire, participants were asked what they would expect from a film about the Holocaust. They could select a range of options, including expecting the film to be entertaining. The other answers were far more sombre in tone and thus could have been interpreted by interviewees as the ‘right’ answers. This also reflects how the study design is informed by the researcher’s own preconceptions of films about the Holocaust. According to the responses to the question about expectations on the questionnaire, 46 interviewees expect a film about the Holocaust to be authentic, 49 to provide factual knowledge, 30 to contain an ethical message, 16 expect a gripping story, and 27 expect an emotional approach to the topic. Only seven interviewees ticked the box that would indicate they expect a film about the Holocaust to provide entertainment. This may point to certain expectations attached to Holocaust films, or could, again, be seen as the ‘desired’ answer to give.

The interview analysis suggested that films about the Holocaust are assessed not for entertainment or artistic skill but historical meaning, information load, perceived significance, or fidelity to the historical record, which may distinguish these films from films about other subjects, and also other historical periods. The possibility of mere entertainment or story-telling was rarely considered. Particularly films using familiar Holocaust iconography, such as The Grey Zone, have an aura of authenticity and significance; only films that deviate from established Holocaust film conventions – especially Defiance and, to an extent, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas – may lead to a

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58 Monk, Heritage Film Audiences, esp. pp. 116-64.
questioning of the filmmakers’ motives and the viewers’ own enjoyment and entertainment.

Perceptions of ‘difference’

An interesting and recurring feature of many interviews about all of the five films was that the film under discussion was perceived as ‘different’ from ‘other’ films about the subject. This was sometimes the case even if the interviewee(s) had not seen many or, indeed, any films about the Holocaust before. This would indicate certain preconceptions regarding the characteristics, content, look and genre of ‘Holocaust films’. The perception of ‘difference’ was most widespread among interviewees of Defiance and Conspiracy.

In the interviews about Conspiracy, 21 examples from eight interviewees relate to the perception of the film as ‘different’. The majority of these highlight the perceived difference of Conspiracy as compared to ‘other films’ (which in turn are seen as very similar to one another); in terms of Conspiracy being more factual and containing less drama; and regarding the film’s perspective and subject matter. 12 examples from seven interviewees relate to Conspiracy’s alleged difference in terms of its (unique) perspective, which generally meant the focus on the perpetrators rather than on the victims or on the concentration camps. Abbey Mills described the film as an ‘unsettling and disturbing take’ on the Holocaust and ‘it’s an aspect that other films about the Holocaust which I’ve seen don’t, are totally different from that.’

Asked for details, Abbey explained:

most of the other things which kind of are in my mind ... like Schindler’s List, things which are very much about the ghettos or about the actual, erm, the, the camps and things like that, this was totally different. So it was, erm, there wasn’t really any action as such ... nothing about the real Jewish people at all ...

Conspiracy’s ‘difference’ is constructed by Abbey in opposition to Schindler’s List and other films focusing on camps and ghettos, and Jewish people. Her definition of ‘action’ may point to Conspiracy’s one-room setting, with the effect of making the film seem more matter-of-fact and, potentially, as taking less artistic license than other films.

A particularly interesting example was recorded in the interview with student Claire Jordan who compared Conspiracy to ‘other films that depict Nazis’, where they are ‘evil villains’ without ‘real like depths to them which is obviously not how it really

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59 Interview AM, Conspiracy, 37-8.
60 Ibid., 40-4.
was’, judging that the depiction in *Conspiracy* ‘made realistic how it would be ... they’re not all going to agree with it as to what to do and they’re not all completely like evil, I guess.’ 61 *Conspiracy*’s representation of a difference in opinion among the meeting’s participants seemed more ‘realistic’ to Claire than other films which allegedly present Nazis as one-dimensional characters. What is interesting is that she neither possessed much knowledge about the Holocaust nor had she (consciously) watched any other films about it; her verdict of other films depicting Nazis as not realistic must, therefore, stem from her preconceptions about the representation of Nazis in films or, potentially, Second World War films.

*Defiance* was regarded as different in a range of ways: its subject matter and focus; less graphic or harrowing than other films; more hopeful and positive; and its format as an action film/Hollywood production. 30 segments pertaining to how the film is different to others were recorded from 13 interviewees. In around half of these examples, the perceived difference was seen with regards to the film’s subject matter, focus or perspective. Though this was overall regarded as positive, five of the interviewees suggested that the film was less powerful and less harrowing or shocking than others. Theodore Robinson, when asked for a comparison of *Defiance* with other films on the subject, proposed that its setting outside the ghettos did not reflect the ‘gritty’ truth and the ‘futility of life as a Jew’ in the German sphere of influence:

> I think this film, er, I think some of the other ones I’ve seen had been ... much more effective in, erm, demonstrating the futility of, er, life as a Jew in Nazi-occupied wherever, Nazi-occupied countries, you know, because it would have been the case that, you know, you would have been in the ghetto or camp and slowly you, you’d been ostracized, you’d been asked to, you know, put you star on your sleeve or whatever and then, you know, given some sort of hope but eventually everyone’s just gonna get transported away and, and, you know, killed and that’s the, the gritty sort of truth and I think this film maybe didn’t bring over that really horrific side as much as other ones ... 62

Theodore highlighted that stories of survival as depicted in *Defiance* were rare. To him, the film was therefore less effective in bringing across the essence of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust. As discussed in Part II, Zwick’s aim in making this film was precisely not about transmitting the suffering and hardship as such but to celebrate Jewish resistance and defiance, which is thought of so little in popular discourse. To

61 Interview CJ, *Conspiracy*, 47-52.
Theodore, this focus on survival and resistance appeared to lessen the film’s impact in terms of transporting historical understanding.

The perception, and appreciation, of the film as taking a different perspective was also seen, to a lesser extent, in the interviews about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (nine examples from seven interviewees, two of them German), *The Reader* (13 examples from six interviewees), and *The Grey Zone* (11 examples from six interviewees). In the case of the latter, this concerned the alleged difference of the film in terms of a lack of a ‘happy ending’, its subject matter, and its unsympathetic characterisation. The interviewees regarded the film as grittier, more realistic, or different in terms of its subject matter. For example, in the group discussion, when asked how *The Grey Zone* and *Schindler’s List* would compare, Sarah Allen and Jayne Orme responded:

SA: I think furthest because it showed you what, what actually went on inside the, the camps. You know, where they had to put them, when the bodies were, you know, when they killed them in the gas, they had to move all the bodies, didn’t they, just chuck ‘em and all that lot and then they had to put them in that fire …

JO: … you could see more what they actually did. … I think *Schindler’s List* was more on Schindler saving the Jews … that’s what that portrayed more than anything. || SA: Mm-hmm. || it’s the saving more than the killing, I thought *Schindler’s List* was.63

Sarah highlighted that *The Grey Zone* is more explicit than many other films in terms of depicting the killing process. To her, this seemed to be very realistic as the film showed ‘what actually went on’. Jayne added to this assessment a more abstract definition, in which *Schindler’s List* is about the saving of Jews, whereas *The Grey Zone* is about the killing of Jews. To both, the two films appeared to be on opposite sides with *The Grey Zone* leaving a strong impression.

As all of the five films were regarded as ‘different’ to other films, though to varying degrees, even when interviewees’ exposure to other films was limited, it can be suggested that, firstly, many people have certain pre-conceptions of what a ‘Holocaust film’ is like. This may be why *The Grey Zone*, which is set in a camp and focuses on the Jewish inmates, was not seen as being ‘different’ to the same extent as *Conspiracy* and *Defiance*. Secondly, these pre-conceptions may not necessarily be based on having seen a range of films; and, thirdly, the discourse of what Holocaust films are like appears to be shaped by particular films, such as *Schindler’s List* and popular notions

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and discourses about film and the Holocaust. In terms of the interpretations and appreciation of ‘difference’ in *Conspiracy*, *The Reader* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, it can be argued that there is a strong interest in, and fascination with, the perpetrators of the Holocaust and their perspectives.

There appears to be a need or desire among people to watch films that focus on perpetrators or are told from perpetrators’ perspectives rather than from the victims’ point of view. The question is whether this is due to a kind of fatigue and the feeling that the victims’ perspective has been sufficiently explored in films and any films dealing primarily with the victims are just repeating what has been said many times before; a continued or new fascination with ‘evil’ and/or ‘ordinary’ perpetrators, their motivations and perspectives; the increased focus on perpetrators in research has actually filtered through into the public sphere and has led to an increased interest in this topic; or, maybe, the increased distance to the events and the passing away of both victims and perpetrators may now allow for a pre-occupation with the perpetrators that is not insensitive to survivors.

One could also propose that the perception of the films that concentrate on perpetrators as different and the particular appreciation of this is either due to an alleged saturation of victim narratives in the media, or due to a lack of victim perspectives being transmitted in education and the wider public sphere and hence a lack of interest or empathy. According to the aforementioned Institute of Education’s survey, school education about the Holocaust tends to focus more on ‘perpetrator-oriented narratives’ rather than on the victims.\(^64\) It could further be suggested that the appreciation of perpetrator narratives may point to dissatisfaction with the interpretations of perpetrator behaviour offered to people in the public sphere. Based on the interview analysis, it would appear that certain preconceptions of what films about the Holocaust are supposedly like, in addition to the dominance of a small number of films, shaped many interviewees’ ideas. Once presented with an ‘actual’ and more recent film, they were largely pleasantly surprised and praised the films’ conveying of a ‘different’ perspective and unfamiliar aspects of the Holocaust. Preconceptions thus appear to be a key aspect of the film reception process, which can be characterised as an active sense-making process. Preconceptions shape the way in which a film is watched and interpreted; often in relation to, and in exchange with, other representations.

\(^{64}\) Pettigrew and Foster, *Teaching about the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools*, p. 8.
Summary

The interviewees understood authenticity in different ways and in ways that may be different to scholars’ definitions. In the interviewees’ interpretation, authenticity can relate to historical accuracy, emotional authenticity, a distinction between core facts and artistic license, and it can be constructed vis-à-vis other representations. It was also demonstrated that viewers may distinguish between fact and fiction, even though not always necessarily correctly. The interviews about Defiance, in particular, have shown that authenticity can also be understood in terms of ‘common sense’ or that which seems plausible and makes sense rather than being historically accurate. The format or the aesthetics and genre of the films under discussion appear to have had a significant impact on the ways in which the films were made sense of. In many cases, historical knowledge was indeed taken away from the film; at times, what was taken away could be seen as adding to the interviewees’ understanding of the Holocaust – for example, knowledge about the Holocaust in Russia and Eastern Europe outside the ghettos and camps (Defiance). In other cases, knowledge taken from the films may have impeded rather than aided historical understanding. This has been indicated, for example, by the example of one of the interviewees of Conspiracy, who added precisely those elements of the films to his knowledge that have little historical foundation, namely, the assumption that the participants of the Wannsee Conference fundamentally disagreed and that they discussed gas as a killing method. For many interviewees, the films added to, challenged, or even changed their knowledge and ideas about the Holocaust, while to others, even films that were based on fictional stories were considered authentic and as though they could have happened. While viewers may, to an extent, be aware of the limitations of the medium and view (some) films critically, they may still take away and construct meanings that contradict their approach to, and their understanding of films, particularly when films are based on a ‘true story’. The degree to which viewers may take away information or insights from a film appears to be linked to the extent to which a film was experienced as authentic. The latter is influenced by film aesthetics and genre, audience expectations, and also the novelty factor of the narrative.

Modes of Reception

The reception process, as we have seen in this discussion thus far, is multi-layered and multifaceted. How films are made sense of by viewers was demonstrated to be strongly influenced by the film text and its aesthetic and stylistic devices. The
complexity of the reception process lies in the observation that the film texts alone do not suffice to account for the different readings and interpretations of films offered by the interviewees of this study. Monk, in her empirical research on heritage film audiences, also demonstrates that ‘audiences’ viewing and ideological positions in relation to period films … need to be understood in relation to a complex social, educational intertext extending beyond the films themselves … different viewers can like the same films, yet respond to them from different and complex reception positions.’ 65 This chapter will therefore explore extra-textual factors that have a bearing on the ways in which a film is understood and recalled. This will include a look at preconceptions and interviewees’ memory of particular films scenes. Gudehus et. al. have pointed out that the interview process itself, or what they term ‘the recall’, must be regarded as ‘a considerable component of the reception process. Only through this process does the viewer arrange what was seen and heard and then, within the intersubjective communication process, provide meaning.’ 66 In this study, the significance of the communication process for the construction of stories and meaning was also observed, which will be discussed by exploring different styles of narration.

**Preconceptions**

The importance of preconceptions for the reception process has been indicated throughout this study. We have also seen how some interviewees either took away new knowledge from the films they watched or overrode their pre-existing knowledge, which would suggest a strong impact of the film text. This has been put into question by Gudehus et. al. who argue that even the much-discussed Schindler’s List may have been merely ‘so successful and the subject of so much debate precisely because it aligned so perfectly with the dominant modes of interpretation and thus delivered illustrative material.’ 67 McKay established that the participants of his oral history study used their personal knowledge, and knowledge of iconic images, to make sense of the photos they had been shown to stimulate discussion about the Holocaust. 68 In this study, too, there was strong evidence to suggest that the majority of the interviewees related what they saw on film to their existing knowledge, other representations of the Holocaust, and other preconceptions, in order to make sense of the film. This phenomenon does not

appear to be limited to historical films as, for example, research by Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor indicates that preconceptions play an important role for media reception more generally. This chapter seeks to illuminate the relationship between film text and preconceptions by providing a detailed discussion of the impact of preconceptions on film reception.

**Knowledge**

152 examples from 58 interviewees indicate that existing knowledge was applied to the film viewing and interpretation to make sense of and contextualise the film. For *Conspiracy*, 41 examples were recorded from all 13 interviewees, for *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* 33 examples from 15 interviewees (18 of them from the six German interviewees), 21 examples from all interviewees about *The Reader*, 32 examples from ten interviewees about *Defiance* (including one of the Cypriot students and the French interviewee), and 25 examples from nine interviewees about the *The Grey Zone*.

Charlotte Harris, for example, was asked whether *Conspiracy* had left her with any questions. She highlighted that the narration at the end pointed out that ‘so many of them’ were ‘released for lack of evidence.’ *Conspiracy* provides some information about the participants of the Wannsee Conference post-conference and post-war, including the fact that some of those who survived the war were released due to lack of evidence or served short sentences. To make sense of this lack of prosecution of National Socialist perpetrators, Charlotte then referred to her pre-existing knowledge and proposed: ‘it looks to me that was probably the second Nuremberg when the Americans’ attention was going elsewhere and the second lot of Nuremberg trials ‘cause they did a lot of acquittals and I just feel that they weren’t actually punished for what they had done’. The interviewees’ responses to *Conspiracy* illustrate Gigliotti’s suggestion that ‘the film’s emotional and moral power depends critically on the viewer’s knowledge of the outcomes of the conference.’ Though only few knew details about the Wannsee Conference, all were familiar, to varying degrees, with a general history of the Holocaust and were able to contextualise what *Conspiracy* presented to them, drawing on their knowledge, which may have increased the impact of the film on these viewers.

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70 Interview CH, *Conspiracy*, 199-200.
71 Ibid., 201-4.
72 Gigliotti, ‘Commissioning Mass Murder’, p. 133.
This is further emphasised in an example from the interview with Ruth Jones (*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*) who was asked about her thoughts about the film character of Gretel. Ruth referred to the ‘Nazi youth movement’ of which ‘we’ve seen pictures ... so we know it’s based on fact’. This would suggest that film and reality, representation and history are mixed by viewers who, in their attempt to make sense of the images, refer to images they have seen elsewhere, be that in other films and documentaries, exhibitions, books, or education more generally. A result of this may be the blurring of lines between fact and fiction. If the knowledge of the existence of the Hitler Youth suffices to make the film’s depiction of a fictitious young girl seem realistic and authentic, almost anything could be depicted in almost any way as long as viewers are provided with familiar images to trigger some of their knowledge and the corresponding images in their minds.

Stephanie Porter was asked towards the end of the interview whether she thought that *The Reader* could serve to excuse the perpetrators. Stephanie used her knowledge of the Hitler Youth, indoctrination and denunciations, none of which formed part of the film, to make sense both of Hanna’s behaviour and that of individual perpetrators. This resulted in alleviating the gravity of the actions of Hanna and the historical perpetrators – suggesting that we cannot judge individuals and that the system is at fault. Stephanie filled in the (many) gaps left by the film with her knowledge and preconceptions. Due to her above-average subject knowledge – or at least her understanding of herself as possessing in-depth knowledge due to her intense engagement with the Holocaust through school and university – she appeared highly confident in her interpretations and left no room for reflection or alternative readings.

*Other representations*

It also emerged in a number of interviews that other representations – generally films, but also books – were related to the interpretation of the films under discussion. This was most often the case in the interviews about *Conspiracy* (18 examples from nine interviews) and *Defiance* (20 examples from eight interviews). For *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, four examples from four interviewees (half of them German) were identified, five examples from three interviews about *The Reader*, and six examples from three interviews about *The Grey Zone*.

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74 Interview SP, *The Reader*, 61-71; 379-89.
Interviewees would often compare the film under discussion to other representations. Among them was Ellen Lawrence, who compared Conspiracy favourably to other films on the subject when assessing the film’s portrayal of the meeting’s participants’ allegedly different levels of knowledge about the ‘Final Solution’:

I thought that was interesting how it kind of went into that idea that like who knew what, erm, how informed were people, erm, ‘cause it’s, how could you get away with killing that many people and then they were all kind of saying, ‘oh we didn’t know’, I thought that was quite interesting ‘cause in other Holocaust movies it’s like all of the Germans knew everything that’s going on and it’s very black-and-white and it kind of takes a step away from that.\textsuperscript{75}

As seen previously in the case of Defiance, in absence of any detailed subject knowledge, other representations of the Holocaust served as a frame of reference by which Ellen contextualised and made sense of Conspiracy.

Prior to watching The Reader, neither Nicole Trevena nor Lara Williams had heard of female perpetrators. Both explained their lack of awareness of female perpetrators with referring to other films about the Holocaust in which the perpetrators are generally male. Lara, asked whether she knew much about female guards before watching The Reader, responded that she had ‘just assumed they were all male’ from ‘what you’re shown ... because literally what’s shown generally in ... the films mainly ... I can’t remember ever seeing another one where it’s had a female guard in.’\textsuperscript{76} Lara’s response may provide a glimpse into the long-term impact of feature films about the Holocaust which informed the way in which she thought about perpetrators.

Films can be evaluated using other representations, not just other films about the Holocaust, but any films or books that support the process of making sense of a film. Ellen Holmes, when asked for her thoughts about the group of refugees, likened Defiance to other ‘hideaway’ situations and films like Castaway and The Beach.\textsuperscript{77} Defiance’s use of and reliance upon recognisable themes and tropes makes it accessible and universal but, as this example demonstrates, this may also have a trivialising effect. The majority of examples in which interviewees drew parallels to other representations were in the interviews about Conspiracy and Defiance. This may be related to these two films being the ones that were considered most different, authentic and novel in terms of their subject matter. For lack of existing knowledge, other representations are drawn

\textsuperscript{75} Group Discussion EL and MLG, Conspiracy, 44-8.
\textsuperscript{76} Interview LW, The Reader, 146-50; Interview NT, The Reader, 144-67.
\textsuperscript{77} Interview EH, Defiance, 113-14.
upon using intertextual recognition to be able to make sense of the story and the history represented.

**Experience**

In the interviews about *Conspiracy* and *The Reader*, some of the interviewees related their professional experiences to the film interpretation. In the case of *Conspiracy*, experiences of attending business meetings served to make sense of the film’s depiction of an historic meeting, and for *The Reader*, two interviewees applied their teaching experience to the interpretation of Hanna’s illiteracy, while an additional interviewee had experience of working with adult illiterates which she related to the film.

In the interviews about *Conspiracy*, three interviewees drew parallels between the meeting on film and business meetings they had attended in their professional lives. One of them was Michael Fox who felt reminded of meetings where he had witnessed how ‘powerful’ chairmen can ‘persuade people’ and how some participants could not express themselves with enough ‘importance’. 78 The meeting is interpreted as a business or bureaucratic enterprise which he made sense of by referring to his professional experience. Heavy emphasis is thus placed on both universalisation (the Wannsee Conference becomes comparable to any business situation) and the bureaucratic and organised character of the Holocaust, as discussed in Part II.

In the interviews about *The Reader*, seven examples from three interviewees were recorded in which professional experiences as teachers or educators were applied to the film interpretation. One of them, Elizabeth Jones, sought to explain Hanna’s behaviour using her experience of teaching abroad. Her professional background provided her with authority and she argued that there were similarities between Hanna’s behaviour and illiteracy, and knowledge and experiences gained in her profession. She compared present-day Thailand, where she was working as a teacher, with Nazi Germany and argued that neither would allow for the questioning of authority, though the worst consequence in Thailand would be the loss of employment. Thailand, which she experienced as more strict and authoritarian than Britain, appeared to serve as her closest frame of reference to make sense of Hanna’s behaviour and any alleged pressures she may have been facing. Elizabeth’s interpretation was not challenged by the other participants of the group discussion, two of whom appeared to agree with her

assessment and Richard Poynter further added to her argument by drawing on his knowledge of Nazi Germany.\textsuperscript{79}

No similar examples were identified in the interviews about the other films. This may be coincidental and due to the interviewees’ specific backgrounds; or perhaps, the experiences of the Sonderkommando, the fictitious story of a camp commander’s family, or a band of refugees and partisans in Belarus, are not easily related to in terms of professional know-how.

There were also a few examples of personal experiences being related to a film or potentially influencing the film interpretation. One of them was recorded in the interview with Noel Baxter. He related his experience of being a father to The Grey Zone. When asked for memorable scenes, he referred to a particularly ‘harrowing’ one for him:

the scenes where the men were putting the bodies into the ovens … especially when they were talking about the old man … whose, er, family came through, erm, and that must have happened … a lot, I would imagine, erm, so that was, er, that was pretty awful. … I’ve got two children of my own and you wonder how anybody can do that to … children …\textsuperscript{80}

In addition to such personal experiences or feelings shared and applied by the interviewees, there were also instances revealing the transfer of what might be best described as ‘common sense’. Using ‘common sense’ to interpret the films is strongly linked to perceptions of films as authentic in terms of being ‘plausible’ as explored in the previous chapter on the relationship between film and reality. For Conspiracy, six examples of this were recorded in three individual interviews. Faith Jackson based her assessment of Heydrich on a ‘common sense’ approach:

obviously … he must have had a meeting with the Fuehrer that said, ‘right, you need to sort this out … but I don’t know anything about it’ … I suppose … with any situation like that where you wouldn’t want to take sole responsibility in a way so you wanna got [sic] everyth-, everyone involved and got [sic] them all to agree, one way or another, whether it be for your own safety or, erm, <clears throat> to sort out the problem that you’ve got that’s making your life hard …\textsuperscript{81}

Despite not knowing anything about the history of the Wannsee Conference, Faith based her interpretation on common sense assumptions, implying it is comparable ‘with any situation like that where you wouldn’t want to take sole responsibility’. Using

\textsuperscript{79} Group Discussion MG, RP, DP, EJ and MS, The Reader, 89-97.
\textsuperscript{80} Interview NB, The Grey Zone, 168-72.
\textsuperscript{81} Interview FJ, Conspiracy, 66-72.
common sense allows viewers to make a specific event and person in history accessible and comprehensible. As seen with references to other representations, the implication is that historical understanding may be obscured while the particular circumstances and context are simplified and trivialised.

The application of ‘common sense’ was most frequent in the interviews about Defiance, with 12 examples from seven interviewees. It would seem that certain aspects of the life of the forest community can be related to more easily by some of the interviewees. It may also indicate a lack of historical knowledge which is compensated for by applying ‘common sense’ to the interpretation of the film. This implies both an attempt to authenticate what is represented on screen and a degree of identification with a character or situation, that is, the interviewee has to be able to put themselves in somebody else’s situation to decide whether what is presented to them ‘makes sense’ and is plausible. Steve Lipkin notes in this respect and with relation to docudramas – though in the widest definition, Defiance could be regarded as such – that the ‘viewer is invited to accept the argument that re-creation warrants, that what we see might have “really” happened in “much this way.” The notion of warranting is particularly helpful here, since a warrant locates the basis in common knowledge, common sense, and/or rules of logic that allow an argument to make the necessary shift from fact to value.’

Academic and abstract concepts

Some interviewees, depending on their educational background and level of knowledge, applied academic theories or other, more abstract concepts to the interpretation of the film, particularly to the behaviour of the perpetrators. Academic or abstract theories and concepts regarding perpetrator behaviour and motivation were applied to the films by two interviewees of Conspiracy, one of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, six of The Reader, and one of The Grey Zone. Among them was Martin Thompson who made sense of Conspiracy, and particularly of the fact that all the men at the meeting agreed to genocide, by referring to ‘Temporary Systems Theory’ which he had applied to his Masters dissertation and which he thought was also applicable to the Wannsee Conference. According to this theory, if people are taken out of their normal setting and put together somewhere for a period of time, certain patterns of behaviour and dynamics will occur which are similar to those of other people in other

groups, or ‘temporary systems’.\textsuperscript{83} He sees ‘it all the time’\textsuperscript{84} and the viewing of 
Conspiracy was no exception. His talking about Temporary Systems Theory and 
relating it to the film and the behaviour of perpetrators more generally took up 25 per 
cent of the interview. Ellen Lawrence interpreted the behaviour of the men at the 
Wannsee Conference in Conspiracy by applying her knowledge from studying racism 
at university and her knowledge about ‘that psychology experiment they do where they 
give people an electric shock … and someone tells them to do it … so they keep turning 
it up … it sort of reminded me of that … at which point is the individual’s kind of 
conscience just get totally steamrolled by … authority and institution’.\textsuperscript{85} She mentioned 
issues to do with science, racism, psychology and group dynamics seven times 
throughout the interview, accounting for around 13 per cent of the group discussion.\textsuperscript{86} The only other interviewee who interpreted a film so consistently through the prism of 
academic or abstract concepts was Howard Pearson, whose PhD research was 
concerned with Enlightenment ideas. He interpreted Defiance in terms of classical 
stories of ‘good versus evil’ on various occasions.\textsuperscript{87} Altogether, interpreting the film 
along these lines or merely talking about his interest in this respect accounted for 
around 60 per cent of the interview.

In the other interviews, this was much less pronounced in terms of time spent talking 
about a particular theory and relating back to it. Emma Bennett (The Boy in the Striped 
Pyjamas), for example, merely referred to ‘studies into obedience’ without providing 
进一步 details.\textsuperscript{88} In the interviews about The Reader, different interpretations were 
offered, including references to the Milgram and Stanford Prison Experiments, the 
aforementioned notion of ‘human nature’, and Hannah Arendt’s concept of the ‘banality 
of evil’.\textsuperscript{89}

As far as such concepts were known, they were used to make sense of the film under 
discussion. Solely Ellen Lawrence, Martin Thompson and Howard Pearson, however, 
appeared to have in-depth knowledge of the concepts they mentioned as they were the 
only interviewees who provided some detail and who kept returning to these concepts.

\textsuperscript{83} Interview MT, Conspiracy, e.g. 250-370; 373-402.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{85} Group Discussion EL and MLG, Conspiracy, 521-8.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., e.g. 76-85; 624-40.
\textsuperscript{87} Interview HP, Defiance, 23; e.g. 3-13; 147-97.
\textsuperscript{88} Interview EB, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, 222.
\textsuperscript{89} Group discussion MG, RP, DP, EJ and MS, The Reader, 57-65; Ibid., 65-7; Interview SP, The Reader, 
117-29.
It could be suggested that the more knowledge of a particular concept or theory someone possesses, the more likely it will be that they read a film by referring to known concepts and making sense of what is (re)presented to them through the prism of their knowledge.

**Interests**

For some interviewees, their personal interests informed the way in which they interpreted the film. Among them was, once again, Martin Thompson, who professed a strong interest in Raoul Wallenberg through which he also related to *Conspiracy*, drawing on his knowledge about Wallenberg’s negotiations with Eichmann. Altogether, Martin talked about Wallenberg or issues related to Wallenberg and his interest in him for around 37 per cent of the interviewing time.\(^9^0\) Chemmal Choudhury voiced a range of conspiracy theories and focused particularly on *Conspiracy’s* secrecy aspect, accounting for more than 30 per cent of the interview. The conspiracy theories included the death of JFK, doubts as to whether Bin Laden was actually killed, and claims that Hitler did not commit suicide but escaped to Argentina. His interest and belief in such ideas seemed to strongly inform the way in which he interpreted the film; not only did he focus particularly on the secrecy aspect of the meeting as represented in the film, but he also believed that one of the participants may have been ‘a mole … that’s working for somebody … high up in the organisation, might even be for … an enemy.’\(^9^1\) He also thought that Eichmann was Jewish. In the film it is insinuated that there was a rumour about Heydrich being Jewish. Chemmal misunderstood this (as did Abbey Mills, Claire Jordan and Margaret Knight) and thought the rumour referred to Eichmann. In his reading, Eichmann was half-Jewish and had been hiding his true identity.\(^9^2\) When told by the interviewer that this was merely a rumour which referred to Heydrich, Chemmal then concluded that it was Eichmann’s task to protect Heydrich’s identity because ‘it would look very bad on Nazi Germany if that came out in the open public, maybe that’s what it is, I don’t know’.\(^9^3\) While more unsure now, he still assumed some kind of ploy or conspiracy behind it rather than accepting that it may have been only a rumour. What

\(^9^0\) Interview MT, *Conspiracy*, e.g. 23-58; 193-217; 461-93.
\(^9^1\) Interview CC, *Conspiracy*, 68-70.
\(^9^2\) Ibid., 190-5.
\(^9^3\) Ibid., 212-3.
this example also highlights is that, as Frank Manchel put it, directors cannot ‘control how an audience interprets and uses their motion pictures.’

**Remembering Films**

Despite the similarities in interpretations observed in the interviews, every interview was different. This was most apparent when looking at film scenes and other elements which interviewees deemed memorable. All interviewees were asked for scenes that left a particular impression, and most interviewees also discussed specific scenes at many other points during the interview without being prompted to do so. Gudehus *et. al.* suggested in their study of the reception of *Hotel Rwanda* that a variety of scenes are remembered by the interviewees and that ‘no one scene is addressed by a clear majority … the most well-represented excerpts are highly compressed scenes, in which the basic aspects of the event are described.’ This study, too, identified a large range of different scenes which were remembered by the interviewees. A total of 624 interview segments relate to specific film scenes and are spread largely evenly across the interviews about the different films. There was considerable variation in terms of how many different scenes were mentioned by interviewees; while some recalled a range of specific scenes, others discussed the film far more generally without referring (much) to particular elements of the plot. One of them was Martin Thompson who talked about only one specific scene; as seen above, he was more concerned with the wider context and the meaning of the story depicted by *Conspiracy*, particularly with the way in which it related, in his view, to Raoul Wallenberg and Temporary Systems Theory. Similar to Martin, Ryan Gledhill mentioned only two specific scenes from *The Grey Zone*; he, too, focused more on the wider context of the story. The large number and variety of scenes remembered by the interviewees indicates that viewers perceive and remember films in different ways and may also focus on different elements of a film depending on their interests, backgrounds and knowledge as demonstrated particularly in the previous chapter. While most interviewees remembered specific scenes, others connected the film much more with their knowledge and interests and related it to the wider context and background rather than focus on specific aspects of the film.

A number of scenes were discussed by several interviewees, but were often made sense of in distinct ways. To exemplify the variety of readings of the same scenes,

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excerpts from interviews about *Defiance* will be discussed. The part of the film in which the group of Jewish refugees beats a captured German soldier to death, was discussed by 11 interviewees in 13 examples (all but the Cypriot group). Asked about the main characters of the film, Andrew Lee argued that a film needs conflict to be more watchable. He argued that Tuvia was not a particularly ‘powerful leader’ and he interpreted the scene in which the German soldier is killed as contradicting ‘some of the messages’ Tuvia ‘said about not killing … he didn’t continue with because he allowed that German soldier to be killed and he was involved in some fairly random acts of violence, erm, so he wasn’t necessarily true to his beliefs from the beginning of the film but then war <sighs> does that to people … it brutalizes people’.  

Ellen Holmes, on the other hand, though ‘uncomfortable’ with the scene, rationalised the killing of the German as a necessary evil when asked if there was anything that she did not like about the film:

> there were bits where it made me uncomfortable … or … frustrated … I don’t really like violence … so it’s annoying that their solution to everything seemed to be killing people but then you could see why those decisions were, like with the German soldier who came in, if they hadn’t have killed him then, erm, then he could have easily gone back and told people where they were, || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| so, erm, and then if they would have kept him there like as a prisoner of war he’d have probably just got abused anyway …

These two readings relate to the same scene and yet are highly distinct. Andrew took the significance of this scene beyond the film itself and placed it within a larger context of war and brutalization. Ellen’s response may reveal more empathy with the group of refugees as she tries to make sense of their behaviour as an act of (pre-emptive) self-defence. It is interesting that she proposed that the German soldier would have been ‘abused anyway’ had he been kept as a prisoner of war (POW). This suggestion may stem from existing knowledge or other pre-conceived ideas about POWs during the Second World War or it may relate to more recent revelations about the torture of prisoners during the ‘war on terror’. Andrew’s reading of this scene also appeared to be informed by preconceptions, which in his case were universalising notions of the psychological impact of war. The scene is certainly significant in that it is ambiguous and moves away from the binary opposites of good versus evil. It is based on Tec’s book but diverges from the source base in terms of depicting the killing of the German

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96 Interview AL, *Defiance*, 117-22.  
as a mob-style group action whereas, at least according to Tec, it was one person alone who killed the captured German.98

Though other factors may also play an important role, the interview analysis indicates that scenes were often remembered or deemed memorable because they had an emotional impact on the interviewees. ‘Emotions’ are defined here both as explicit (e.g. ‘I felt exhausted’) and implicit (e.g. shivering) expressions of emotions. Emotional responses to specific scenes were recorded in interviews about all five films in 103 segments, which were spread largely evenly across the interviews about the different films. To give an example, 25-year-old finance assistant Tim Nicholson responded to the question for memorable scenes in The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas that the ‘gas chamber scene’ was the ‘most intense toward the end where ... they just closed the door and you ... just saw a light where poison was being put into the ... vaults and there was just (--) knocking on the door and banging and then just silence, and that’s quite, quite upsetting, yeah.’99

Meera Rangan, when asked for memorable scenes in The Grey Zone, immediately responded without waiting for the interviewer to finish the sentence:

INT: Are there, are there any other scenes in general in the film that left a particular impression, any, || MR: Oh, the ovens. ||| any scenes? The ovens. Mm-hmm.
MR: Yeah. I, I don’t think there’s, erm, there’s anything that can, er, that can compare, you know, to those very, very graphic, graphic scenes and yeah, it just pushes all, <laughs> all the, all the, you know, all the buttons that are making one human, <laughs; INT: laughs> you know, ‘how could they’, || INT: Mm-hmm. || you know, how could anybody do that, that’s a, it, it never fails, you know, erm, I mean there were all the other aspects, I mean I think, erm, they were, that, I mean the ovens are very, very graphic, || INT: Mm-hmm. || very graphic, yeah.100

Meera’s and Tim’s responses demonstrate how the emotional impact of a scene that is particularly shocking, graphic or moving may make it memorable to the person experiencing these emotions. Hirsch has suggested that although there ‘is no such thing as a traumatic image per se ... an image of atrocity may carry a traumatic potential, which, as it circulates among individuals and societies with common conceptual horizons, may be repeatedly realized in a variety of experiences of vicarious trauma.’101

McKay’s study of intergenerational memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust suggests in this respect that while overall showing little sympathy for the

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98 Tec, Defiance, pp. 177-8.
100 Interview MR, The Grey Zone, 226-33. Meera appears self-conscious about the emotional effect of the furnace scenes on her, which is indicated by her laugh and her self-reflective remarks.
101 Hirsch, Afterimage, p. 16.
Jewish victims, ‘participants would focus on the distress it caused them to hear about events associated with the Holocaust’. In this study, an emotional impact or response was however not only caused by particularly gruesome, graphic, sad or shocking scenes. Andrew Campbell named a scene of *The Reader* which contradicted his expectations, indicating that unexpected elements would also be remembered as they draw the viewer’s attention:

> when he went to visit one of the camps, erm, it kind of struck me how everything had been left in situ so there were shoes still left, the bedding was still left, erm, I kind of wondered whether that was an intentional thing, whether that was historically accurate, erm, if people just didn’t want to dismantle it or whether it was a museum already and he gained access very easily. I would have assumed that at that period it would have been fairly well secured against people entering because potentially it was a crime scene and also for respect for, for the things that had happened there, so that, that struck me || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| from the film.  

Andrew’s remembering of this scene was thus also due to an emotional response (‘it kind of struck me’) but it was not because the scene was particularly shocking. It follows Michael through a former concentration camp which he visits after one of the scenes in court. This is the only time in the interview that Andrew explicitly questioned the historical accuracy of an aspect of the film. It may be the case that he regarded the rest of the film as obviously inaccurate and thus questioned only the one aspect that may have related to a reality outside the film, i.e. the former concentration camps. He also appeared to lack some of the contextual knowledge regarding post-war history which may explain why he thought that the former camps were ‘crime scenes’ in the 1960s. His choice of words is interesting and denotes police jargon, possibly even from TV programmes, more than the terminology associated with the Holocaust and its legal legacies.

**Talking about Films: Styles of Narration**

If the communication process of the interviews is part of the process of reception, attention should be paid to the ways in which the interviewees constructed their narratives. This includes a discussion of emotional and factual approaches to recalling the films, the extent to which interviewees adopted the language used in the films, the narration of personal stories, and also the reproduction or criticism of anti-Semitic stereotypes.

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Language and Narration

Froma Zeitlin suggests that certain representations, such as Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus* or the documentary *Shoah*, may be functioning as ‘vicarious witnesses’. This is marked by ‘an obsessive quest to assume the burden of memory, or rememoration, by means of which one might become a witness oneself.’ For some interviewees, the films can indeed be argued to have had a strong and emotional impact, as already seen in relation to specific film scenes. One of them was Camilla McCartney who responded to *Defiance* in an emotional way as she appeared to empathise with the Jewish refugees:

> it was a bit disturbing in some parts like, erm, when you saw the, them coming closer, kind of, you could feel their panic and every time something bad happened, it felt like, you felt it for them, so it was a bit disturbing to watch because obviously we know the his-, historical background to it but I think it, erm, portrayed it really well like I think it was a really good recount of the | SJ: Yeah, || actual, what, what happened.105

Camilla empathised with the refugees and felt ‘their panic’, and also found the film ‘disturbing’. She appeared to have immersed herself in the film and with the characters. 36 interviewees expressed their responses to the films in this ‘emotional’ way on 104 occasions, which alludes to the emotive power of the medium of film. Gudehus *et. al.* distinguish between two different modes of narration in the reception study of *Hotel Rwanda*: emotional and factual. They propose that emotional approaches are ‘less reflexive’ than the factual kind.106 The findings of the present study also suggest different ways of talking about films and distinct styles of narration, but they point to a more complex picture. Those who reflected on film as a product were often also among those who expressed emotions when talking about the film, and 27 interviewees reflected on the emotional impact the films had on them on 76 occasions. Responses of either type were found in interviews about all of the films. An example for the reflection on the emotional impact of a film is taken from the start of the group discussion about *The Reader*. In response to the opening question for a film summary, Richard Poynter suggested that ‘in the beginning of the film, you’re made to feel quite warm towards her but then … they drop this on you and you’re thinking, well, I was

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105 Group Discussion YJ and CM, *Defiance*, 7-11.
thinking, well, you know, it, it, does that, do I still have that feeling for her’. Richard reflected on his own journey with the character of Hanna. In the first part of the film, he had positive feelings for her but in the second part it is revealed that she was an SS guard and he began to question the emotions he felt for her. He subsequently asked himself if her crimes outweigh any understanding he may have had for the character.

26-year-old Czech student Marina Soukoup took this reflection further when she responded to Richard: ‘And the question of why we actually, you know, feel positive towards her at the beginning of the movie when she was considerably older than the boy, he was fifteen, you know ... and she used him for her own ends.’ Marina questioned the positive emotions evoked through the film and contrasted them with the character’s sexual relationship with a much younger boy, but this line of inquiry was not pursued by the rest of the group. One could argue that these instances of reflection and introspection are a product of the interviewing situation and cannot necessarily be assumed to take place during the viewing itself or without a similar communication process.

Though both the expression of emotional responses to the films, and the reflection on their emotional impact were identified in interviews about all films, there were some interesting differences. The study thus again benefits from having explored a number of films rather than focussing on only one film. The number of ‘reflexive’ examples (and the number of interviewees voicing such reflection) was greatest among interviewees about The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas and The Reader and even outnumbered the purely ‘emotional’ responses. In the case of Conspiracy, Defiance and The Grey Zone – the three films based on ‘true stories’ – the opposite was the case. This could be merely coincidence and the small sample certainly does not allow for generalisations. It could, however, indicate that purely fictional stories may indeed have the potential to explore emotions without necessarily overpowering viewers but rather encourage reflection. More ‘factual’ or ‘authentic’ films like Conspiracy, Defiance and The Grey Zone, on

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107 Group Discussion MG, RP, DP, EJ and MS, The Reader, 12-16.
108 Ibid., 17-19.
109 Reflection on emotional impact: The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: 25 examples from nine interviewees; The Reader: 29 examples from nine interviewees; Conspiracy: four examples from two interviewees; Defiance: 12 examples from three interviewees; The Grey Zone: six examples from four interviewees.
110 Emotional responses: The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: ten examples from six interviewees; The Reader: 22 examples from eight interviewees; Conspiracy: 16 examples from six interviewees; Defiance: 26 examples from eight interviewees; The Grey Zone: 30 examples from eight interviewees.
the other hand, would appear to be stimulating this kind of reflection to a lesser extent. This may be linked to their quest for, and claim to, authenticity.

Not all interviewees expressed emotions or reflected on the emotional impact of the film, while some did both. Some took up an expert position, some only on occasion when they commented on a particular aspect of the film as an ‘expert’ on history, filmmaking or other aspects, and some occupied the expert position throughout the entire interview, especially Martin Thomson (Conspiracy), Richard Poynter (The Reader), Ryan Gledhill (The Grey Zone), Howard Pearson (Defiance), Benjamin Riley (The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas) and Andrew Lee (Defiance). There was a male bias concerning the ‘expert’ position. This does not necessarily denote actual expert knowledge but the way in which interviewees presented themselves and how confident they talked about the film, their knowledge, or related aspects. The fact that more men than women took this ‘expert’ position could be seen as significant, given the overall lower number of male participants in this study, and may be linked to a particular gendered ‘habitus’ and socialisation.111

The impact of gender on the reception of the films could not be substantiated to satisfaction in this study. A more representative sample with equal numbers of male and female interviewees, and also different age cohorts, would be required to explore the impact of demographic factors more systematically and in more detail. As was mentioned in Part II, the widespread characterisation of Hanna as a victim by interviewees of The Reader may be linked to the majority of the respondents being female, and therefore a potentially increased likelihood of empathetic identification with the film character. Another indicator for the significance of gender was seen in interviews about The Grey Zone, where the female film characters and especially their being tortured were discussed by all of the female interviewees but none of the male respondents.

Despite the aforementioned emotional responses to the films, most interviewees tended to talk about the film in a rather matter-of-fact, factual and detached manner. An altogether more emotional approach was seen in the case of especially Charlotte Harris (Conspiracy), Camilla McCartney (Defiance) and Madeleine Keane (The Grey Zone). In group discussions, frequently one person emerged or presented themselves as the

‘expert’ in the group: Theodore Robinson (Defiance) presented himself as expert on war films and general Second World War knowledge, as did Richard Poynter (The Reader) who also presented himself as expert in matters closer to everyday life. Yasmin Jenkins-Aribas (Defiance) was the expert in her group as the one with more in-depth knowledge about the Holocaust, and Jayne Orme (The Grey Zone) imparted knowledge to the other members of the group discussion. It should however be noted that the interviewees occupied a range of fluid subject positions that may be characterised as emotional, reflective, detached or expert at different points during the interviews.

The way in which the interviewees discussed and talked about the films was, to an extent, also influenced by the language used in the respective film. Certain terms, expressions, quotes or themes from the films were used and reproduced by the interviewees when communicating about the film. Altogether 220 segments were coded in which interviewees cited directly or indirectly from the films.\footnote{112} This was most pronounced among interviewees about Conspiracy and Defiance. In the case of Defiance, particularly the film’s reiteration that the Bielski partisans must avoid behaving like the Germans or that survival is the best vengeance, was adopted by seven of the interviewees in 11 examples. Meredith Barkham, for example, summarised the film as being about ‘not to become ... not to behave the way ... they saw the Germans behaving ... and only to ... use violence ... when they had to.’\footnote{113}

An additional phenomenon that was identified across all interviews was the use of vague, imprecise or abstract terminology, especially when talking about the extermination of the European Jews.\footnote{114} In the interviews about Conspiracy, 86 examples from all interviewees relate to the crimes committed against the Jews but remain vague as to the details (compared with 43 examples where the crimes are spelt out more explicitly). Examples include references to the crimes and the genocide as ‘the whole thing’ (Martin Thompson), ‘the policy in regard to the Jewish population’ (Michael Fox), the ‘plan’ (Elizabeth Caballero), or ‘things that had happened’ (Ellen Lawrence).\footnote{115} 17 examples from nine interviewees refer to ‘soldiers’, the ‘military’ or the ‘army’, although no one from the Wehrmacht was present at the Wannsee Conference. Six interviewees correctly named the SS or at least recognised the SS when

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\textsuperscript{112} Excluding the German interviews as these were conducted in German but the film was shown in the English original.  
\textsuperscript{113} Interview Meredith Barkham (MB), Defiance, 10 November 2011, 5-7.  
\textsuperscript{114} Number of vague versus explicit segments: 269 versus 210.  
\textsuperscript{115} Interview MT, Conspiracy, 84; Interview MF, Conspiracy, 16; Interview Elizabeth Caballero (EC), Conspiracy, 28 October 2011, 45; Group Discussion EL and MLG, Conspiracy, 72.
asked about their role in the film. The difficulty to tell SS from Wehrmacht was also seen in the interviews about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. 51 examples relate to soldiers, generals, and lieutenants. Only three interviewees identified Kotler, the commandant and others as members of the SS. In both films, members of the SS are referred to as ‘soldiers’, which may have influenced the way in which the interviewees talked about these characters. The use of vague and imprecise terminology could point to either a lack of knowledge, or to a discomfort of spelling out the gruesome details. Another explanation could be, at least in relation to the crimes, that interviewees may have assumed this to be shared knowledge which does not require further specification. Gudehus *et. al.* have further suggested ‘that informal conversation, in comparison to academic affairs, fundamentally sets less stock in the employment of precise terms.’\(^{116}\)

While in the interviews about *Conspiracy*, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, and *The Reader* vague descriptions of the crimes against the Jews outnumbered more explicit terminology, a different picture emerged from the interviews about *The Grey Zone* and, to an extent, *Defiance*. In the interviews about *The Grey Zone*, explicit descriptions of the ‘work’ done by the Sonderkommando members and the crimes committed against the Jews clearly outnumbered instances where such descriptions remained vague, imprecise, or commonplace. The crimes were spelt out rather explicitly and the interviewees talked about killing, gas chambers, the burning of bodies, and murder. In the interviews about *Defiance*, explicit descriptions slightly outnumbered more vague vocalisations. This would suggest, and this may relate back to the previous section highlighting how film language and terminology were adopted by the interviewees when talking about and recounting the films, that the more explicit a film, the more explicit the conversation about the film and what it depicts. It could also be related to the survivor-centred/victim-centred approach of *Defiance* and *The Grey Zone*. Given *Conspiracy*’s topic, the proportionally lower number of explicit conversations about the crimes in the interviews may be surprising. Here, the reason may be found in the fact that not many of the interviewees were familiar with the history portrayed in the film and thus rather recurred to vague language or non-descript commonplaces. Another explanation may be that interviewees accepted or adopted some of the euphemistic language offered by the film. It may also point to the lack of visualisation of the crimes in *Conspiracy*, *The Reader* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*; spelling out the crimes

\(^{116}\) Gudehus, ‘Understanding *Hotel Rwanda*’, p. 354.
would also, potentially, complicate some of the exculpating interpretations of perpetrator behaviour discussed in Part II.

**Personal and family stories**

Though the interviews were not conceptualised as life history interviews, some of the interviewees still narrated personal stories. This included family stories, or talking about their interest in the subject or visits to concentration camp memorial sites. 19 of the interviewees talked, to varying degrees, about their families. For some, the Holocaust was a deeply personal topic as they lost family members or knew people who did (Margaret Knight, Harriet Langford, Ruth Jones, Meredith Barkham, Barbara Parker). Others told stories about the war passed on to them by their families. This occurred even though they were asked where they obtained their knowledge about the Holocaust rather than the Second World War. The frequency of these family stories indicates the importance of stories handed down between generations explored in detail by studies into the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust.\(^{117}\) In her study of the social inheritance of Holocaust memory, Reading identified that those interviewees whose family members ‘had fought in the Second World War, defined these personal handed-down stories as having significant meaning in the early construction of their memories of the Holocaust. For those with no direct personal connection through family with the events, school was usually cited as the first point when they came across the Holocaust.\(^{118}\) In this study, it was also observed that the war stories are much closer to home for some of the interviewees: the stories transmitted within their families, some funny, some tragic, some lucky; these are the stories that matter, and that they can talk about with some certainty and authority.

Several interviewees had visited concentration camp memorial sites or museums which had left a particular impression. A large number of interviewees further talked about themselves more personally and their interest in the subject, ranging from talking about their children, to their own political activities, and their interest in the subject. Personal stories took up a considerable amount of the interviews and were generally encouraged by the interviewer through follow-up questions. For some interviewees, the film and the interview appeared to serve, at least partly, as an opportunity to talk about themselves, their lives and interests. This was also among the findings of Gudehus *et al.*


who concluded that the ‘strongly emotional approaches … take the product, the
movie, only as an opportunity for the speaker to talk about him- or herself.’ In this
study, a connection can be suggested between age and the extent to which the
interviewees spoke about themselves, which was not exclusively linked to emotional
approaches. That the films or, rather, the interview, appeared to trigger mainly personal
stories or prompted interviewees to talk about their lives, interests and ideas, was most
pronounced in the interviews with Charlotte Harris, Martin Thompson, Michael Fox,
Barbara Parker and Andrew Lee, the oldest participants of the study. Both Charlotte and
Michael, for example, when asked whether they had had any prior knowledge about the
Wannsee Conference before watching Conspiracy, responded only briefly to the
question and immediately began to talk about themselves. The reasons for this remain
open to speculation. At their age, the interviewees may simply be more self-assured and
confident than the younger participants who often revealed very little about themselves.
Or it may be that the older participants felt they had more to say than their younger
counterparts, or wanted to impart their knowledge. One could also suggest that they
were born and grew up much closer to the events of the Holocaust and of the war and
this may be more connected to their own identities so that talking about the Holocaust,
even if through the medium of film, is seen as linked to their own lives. Charlotte also
explicitly mentioned her restricted mobility when she was asked for her thoughts about
the meaning of the Holocaust in Britain. To her, the Holocaust appeared to be very
important because, as she said, it is ‘partly at the back of my mind as well, being born
not able to walk and I get times I think, “I could be one of those that could have been
rounded up”, because I couldn’t walk’. This would indicate that disabilities and other
personal circumstances may affect the extent to which viewers draw parallels between
their lives in the present and the events of the past.

Gender, age, ethnicity and nationality may not be the only demographic factors
bearing on the communication process. Among the demographic details interviewees
were asked for on the questionnaire, was sexual orientation. There was no indication in
the interviews that this affected interviewees’ understanding of the films under
discussion and this was therefore excluded from this discussion. The results may have
been different had the films been about the persecution of homosexuals during the
‘Third Reich’.

120 Interview CH, Conspiracy, 113-14.
It has been noted in Part II that the responses of the German interviewees to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in relation to interpreting perpetrator behaviour shared many of the features seen in the British interviews. As with other demographic factors, the impact of nationality could be assessed more systematically in future research. The relevance of the national background or the interpretative community was alluded to in a number of interviews, though not always in direct relationship to the films under discussion. Sam Caine was asked by the interviewer about the memory of the Holocaust in his native Northern Ireland as compared to England. Sam talked in detail about his Irish Catholic background and explained that the memory of the war is more linked to Protestants in Northern Ireland. This was an isolated example but it points to some crucial differences in the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust even within the United Kingdom. Spanish interviewee Magdalena Lopez Garcia and the Cypriot group argued that their respective countries had been further removed from war and genocide and that the memory of the Holocaust was, therefore, less prominent there. Some of the interviewees made their national background and identity a topic without being prompted by the interviewer. Adele Chardin, for example, was asked for the most powerful film she had seen about the Holocaust. She responded ‘The Round-up because, you know, because of my background, because I’m French and, and it’s, knowing that we did that.’ Her French nationality informed her views on the film *The Round-up*, at least this is how she presented herself. *The Round-up* was closest to home in its depiction of French collaboration in the Holocaust and may have thus left the biggest impression on Adele because it resonated with her and was the most relevant to her. Although the issue of Holocaust memory in different European countries can only be touched upon here, a multi-national study into the memory of the Holocaust, especially at the periphery of war and genocide would prove interesting. In particular, Cyprus, Spain and Northern Ireland could make for compelling comparisons as they are all also countries with their own, and more recent, history of conflict.

**Anti-Semitism**

Finally, in a range of interviews, instances were identified that can be interpreted as anti-Semitic or at the least conveying prejudice and stereotypes, anti-Zionist positions, and some examples where anti-Semitism was addressed in terms of personal experiences or a criticism of anti-Semitic stereotypes in the films. As mentioned above,
Barbara Parker reported having suffered from anti-Semitic abuse, and Ruth Jones highlighted the persistence of anti-Semitism today. Three of the interviewees criticised anti-Semitic stereotypes in *Defiance* (Yasmin Jenkins-Aribas and Thomas Gunasekara) and *The Reader* (Harriet Langford). Harriet, whose mother had escaped Nazi Germany with the Kindertransports, reflected on the anti-Semitic representation of the Jewish survivor in the latter film, arguing that ‘almost you could come away from that film thinking, “oh well, they did alright in the end”, and the people who are damaged are the, ... you know, if you like, the minor players’. At the same time, Harriet was one of three interviewees (Nigel Cole, Ramona Sagredo) espousing anti-Zionist ideas, which included comparisons between Israel, Nazi Germany and Apartheid South Africa. Though these were isolated instances, they should still be mentioned, particularly in light of a left-wing tradition of anti-Zionist views and engagement. This includes, for example, the popularity of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign in the UK and elsewhere.

Seven interviewees made comments that can be interpreted as reproducing anti-Semitic stereotypes and prejudices (Nicole Trevena, Heather Stuart, Margaret Knight, Sarah Allen, Jayne Orme, Madeleine Keane, Oskar Sandford). These comments tended to centre on myths of Jewish wealth and power, and ‘Jewish’ appearance, and also included the claim that the Jews allegedly murdered Christ. An example will serve to elaborate on the ways in which this occurred in connection to the films. The participants of one of the two group discussions about *The Grey Zone* were asked by the interviewer about the representation of the Germans in the film. One of the interviewees, Jayne Orme then ‘explained’ the Holocaust to the others in the group. She argued that the Germans ‘didn’t want, the Jews ... had all the money and the power ... so they wanted to get rid of all the Jews so they could have the money and the power. That’s what it is right down the bottom of the line, right from the beginning, that’s how it, why it all started. I’m sure. ‘cause I watched quite a few different films.’ In this example, anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish wealth and influence were interwoven with what is

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123 Ibid., 370-1.
presented in *The Grey Zone* and also *Schindler’s List* which Jayne subsequently referred to. It should be noted that Jayne strongly condemned the crimes committed against the Jews and presented the Nazis as greedy and begrudging the Jews’ alleged success. She imparted her ideas about the Holocaust to the others and particularly impressed Siobhan Williams who had no knowledge as to why the Jews were persecuted. Jayne’s explanation of jealousy and greed as the main motives seemed very convincing to her. Similar results were identified by McKay in his research into intergenerational memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust.\(^{126}\) These instances of anti-Semitic prejudices attest to the persistence of anti-Jewish sentiment and stereotypes and warrant further research.\(^{127}\)

**Summary**

This chapter has demonstrated that extra-textual factors such as preconceptions and interviewees’ styles of narration play an important role for the film reception. Existing knowledge was by far the most-utilised tool to interpret and make sense of the films. Where this knowledge exactly comes from may remain more elusive, and is potentially highly varied. These results would suggest that knowledge is as much applied as it is taken away. As Andrew Higson notes with regards to heritage films,

> What we are faced with is a series of different and often competing readings, ways of engaging with the same text under different circumstances and from different perspectives. Producers, promoters, censors, critics, analysts, and audiences all try to fix the meanings of texts, to limit their ambivalence, but how specific audiences negotiate the meanings of a text, how they use that text, will always escape legislation, however formal and however rigorous.\(^{128}\)

Viewers are, therefore, not merely passive receivers of information. They draw on their knowledge or apply their interests to the film viewing and to making sense of the film. Film reception has to be regarded as a process of communication in which multiple and active audiences construct meaning in relation to and with the film. If viewers of films relate what they see on film to their knowledge, experiences and interests, they may already focus mainly on those aspects of the film during the viewing that are relevant to

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them, and which they can make sense of within their own frame of reference. The alleged strong impact of film on historical knowledge and consciousness must, then, be re-evaluated and the preconceptions viewers bring with them should receive close attention.

Different people remember films in distinct ways and the interviews provided some indication of the diversity of scenes remembered and the multiplicity and plurality of readings. The analysis suggests that emotional scenes, which can include particularly shocking or sad, or even unexpected images, are likely to be remembered, though they may be emotional to viewers for different reasons and may not be emotional for every viewer. Particular styles of narration also appear to influence the ways in which viewers understand and recall films. The particular language employed by a given film, for example, may be adopted by viewers, and films that explicitly represent violence may be more likely to prompt viewers to spell out the crimes committed against the Jews. Films which remain vague or employ euphemistic language, on the other hand, appear to increase the likelihood of vague terminology and commonplaces also being adopted by viewers.

**A note on films’ long-term reception**

The study was designed to illuminate the immediate responses to films about the Holocaust and the individual reception and communication processes that are involved in making sense of representations of the Holocaust. The long-term memory and impact of films, on the other hand, was not the primary focus of this study and is, arguably, even more elusive as additional variables have to be taken into account. This final chapter will nonetheless propose a number of hypotheses regarding the long-term memory and impact of films by analysing interviewees’ responses in relation to films other than the one shown to them as part of the study. As this was not done in a systematic manner, this final discussion will only serve to highlight interesting observations to inform future research.

As previously demonstrated, some of the interviewees drew parallels to other films seen in the past in order to contextualise and make sense of the film presented to them as part of the study. Many perceived the film they watched as ‘different’, either in terms of the perspective offered, in terms of subject matter, or with regards to the format or film genre and aesthetics. When speaking about other films about the Holocaust, it also emerged that while few details were remembered, the emotional impact of the film at
the time appeared to be much more memorable. One example of this is taken from the interview with Faith Jackson, who referred to Schindler’s List as one of the sources of her knowledge or awareness, when asked where she had learned about the Holocaust:

one of the big movies that ... got what I’d say widely published and lots of people learned about the Holocaust has to be ... Schindler’s List || INT: Mm-hmm. || and obviously the, the little girl with the little red jacket, very well done. <clears throat> And ... I think a lot people cried at that one, I think everyone cried <laughs> at that movie.

INT: Do you still remember that point when you saw the, the girl in the red coat?
FJ: Yes. Yeah, I, I’ve got quite a bad memory, but ... that I remember especially at the end where it’s on the conveyor-belt ... very cleverly done, yeah.129

The interviewer later asked Faith whether she thought that Schindler’s List, almost 20 years after its release, still has ‘some relevance for today’. Faith argued ‘definitely’ because ‘it’s all about, don’t make the same errors, don’t make the same mistakes’ and that ‘anyone who’d sit down and watch it would still get the same message, you know, ... still end up crying at the end, <laughs> yeah, and, you know, learn lessons.’130 It is interesting that what she remembered most or what came to her mind first, was the girl in the red coat and how she assumed ‘everyone’ reacted, that is, by crying, which she remarked in a somewhat self-consciously joking manner. To Faith, feeling and expressing emotions appeared to play an important role for the process of learning lessons. Interestingly, she seemed to think that this scene, which is crucial to Schindler’s transformation (along with the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto before) in the second half of the film, occurred ‘at the end’. The emotional impact of the scene appeared to have been strong enough that Faith, who confessed to a ‘bad memory’, can still remember it almost 20 years later. Finger and Wagner, too, argue that the long-term impact of the (documentary) TV programming surrounding the Majdanek Trial on the older participants of their study was partly due to emotional responses to particular programmes at the time.131 This, in turn, would suggest that fiction and documentary films may have, to an extent, a similar impact. If strong emotions are experienced in relation to a film, this can be remembered even many years later. The reason could be that the experience of watching the film becomes part of the viewer’s own (autobiographical) memory. 132 Four other interviewees specifically mentioned

129 Interview FJ, Conspiracy, 130-6.
130 Ibid., 172-7.
131 Finger and Wagner, ‘Was bleibt von Fernseh-Darstellungen des Holocaust?’, p. 344.
132 Ibid., p. 340.
remembering the girl in the red coat but, generally, not much else. Nicole Trevena (NT) was asked if she had seen any other films, apart from *Schindler’s List*:

NT: Not really. INT: Mm-hmm. Not really. Am I right in thinking that *Schindler’s List* had a little girl with a red coat?
INT: Yes, that’s, that’s right.
NT: See, that’s all I remember INT: Mm-hmm. And, erm, and Ben Kingsley, of course. … And, erm, but once again, there’s poetic license, why do [sic] the little girl have a red coat, and why do you keep seeing her in different scenes, do you know what I mean, INT: Mm-hmm. It’s like, it, it pulls at the heartstrings, it’s there to, for a bit of, of artistic license, erm, but that was certainly more graphic, wasn’t it? You saw more of what went on. That’s all I can really remember.133

Reading found that, among the interviewees of her aforementioned study who had seen *Schindler’s List*, while ‘women tended to remember “the girl in the red coat” wandering the street in Cracow after the ghetto was destroyed and its people forcibly moved, men remembered particular scenes of shooting or violence’.134 Reading argues that the ‘young men re-articulate images that require a negotiation between different discourses of masculinity – male violence versus the male as protector. The young women, in contrast, articulate socially inherited memories of what is considered to be part of the feminine domain in specific contexts: images of children’.135 Though four of the five interviewees remembering the girl in the red coat were female, women constituted the majority of interviewees, and, therefore, no generalisations can be made based on this. Also, in terms of remembering violence and graphic scenes, both men and women talked about such elements. The same is true for the emotional impact of the film. In this respect, partly owing to the particular sample of this study, again no firm conclusions can be drawn in relation to the impact of gender on the reception or memory of films.

Faith and Nicole were not alone in remembering *Schindler’s List* mainly for its emotional impact. Among the 46 interviewees who were familiar with *Schindler’s List* (which was mentioned on 73 occasions), few were able to recall details about the film. 13 particularly highlighted its emotional impact. Andrew Lee, for example, contrasted *Defiance* which he was highly critical of, with *Schindler’s List*. Asked for his definition of a ‘Holocaust film’ (which he had denied *Defiance* was), he responded:

I think a Holocaust film is a film which would make the, the viewer emotionally attached and, and emotionally affected … and you sit down at the end as the credits

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135 Ibid., pp. 158-9.
Andrew appeared to have a very clear definition of a ‘Holocaust film’ which also came with a set of expectations. *Schindler’s List* seems to serve as a yardstick in terms of emotional impact and, one could argue, cathartic experience, by which other films are measured. Andrew’s response also points to the perception of *Schindler’s List* as authentic (‘that’s possibly how it was’) as compared to *Defiance*, even though both films are representations that took significant artistic liberties. One can also assume from this example that following watching *Schindler’s List*, Andrew did not seek any additional information about the historical context as *Schindler’s List*’s historical accuracy is not questioned by him. At the same time, in Andrew’s view, watching a film does not necessarily have to be educational, but should be a life-changing, emotional experience.

A further eight interviewees argued that most films about the Holocaust were more or less similar. To them, it was once again *Schindler’s List* which served as an example for films that show the Holocaust from a similar (presumably, victim-centred) perspective, providing similar information over and over again. One could suggest that there is a popular, shared notion of Holocaust films that may be due to the impact that *Schindler’s List* had, leaving people with the idea that all films about the Holocaust are like that, even when they have not seen many or indeed any other films on the same subject. The impact of *Schindler’s List*, then, could be hypothesised to lie mainly in providing a frame of reference for judging other representations of the Holocaust.

There was also some evidence that insights taken from films were incorporated into thinking about the Holocaust. Adele Chardin was asked by the interviewer whether she had had any knowledge about Jewish partisans or Jews hiding in forests prior to watching *Defiance*. She responded by referring to a scene in Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglorious Basterds* (USA/Germany, 2009):

INT: Were you aware in general that there were, erm, Jewish partisans or, erm, Jews hiding in forests?
AC: Not at all, no. || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| No.
INT: It’s probably not something that is common knowledge.
AC: I don’t think it’s necessarily common, yeah, common knowledge really. || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| I mean you, you, you, you can assume that people have been hiding

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and, you know, lived wherever they, they could, sort of thing, || INT: Mm-hmm. || but you know more of people sort of hiding in, er, you know, like in, in Inglorious Basterds, you know, under, under floorboards and stuff like that rather || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| than, than actually in, in the woods and quite amazing to see that they actually built a, a sort of, kind of Robin Hood type thing really, sort of village, ‘cause they had, they had a sort of community, like they said in the film, it’s, it is, it was a community really || INT: Mm-hmm. || that they had where everybody participated and, and they lived. 137

She may have already known about Jews hiding from the Nazis from sources other than Inglorious Basterds and merely used this example for illustrative purposes. Crucially, she visualised instances of Jews hiding from the Nazis by referring to a film that very obviously deviated from the historical record and also ‘Robin Hood type’ stories to characterise the community built by the Bielski partisans in the forest. It would appear that popular culture and literature provide a frame of reference for particular ‘types’ of stories representing familiar tropes. This example suggests that viewers may take information from films – even though they are obviously fictional rather than based on actual events – and incorporate certain details into their understanding of the Holocaust. This would suggest that films do have an impact on historical understanding and consciousness, albeit in less direct and sometimes unexpected ways. On the other hand, Adele’s response could also indicate that films may merely provide an illustration, a visualisation for something that is already known.

Two additional examples will be included in this discussion as they point to an important aspect not previously addressed. Two of the interviewees who talked about Schindler’s List, Rachel Cooper and Martin Thompson, appeared to have re-evaluated their initial response to the film. Both said that in retrospect, they realised that Schindler’s List was simply a ‘representation’ (Martin) or that at the time they did not question its ‘authenticity’ or ‘factual correctness’ (Rachel). 138 As alluded to in the study design, ten interviewees had already seen the films they were shown: four in the case of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, four had seen Conspiracy before, one knew The Reader, and one had already watched Defiance. Out of these ten, only seven were able to remember details from their first viewing. Three told the interviewer their impression of the film had not changed, while for four the opposite was the case. That would suggest that meanings derived from, or constructed in response to and in relation with

137 Interview AC, Defiance, 17-27.
138 Interview MT, Conspiracy, 115; Interview RC, Conspiracy, 295.
films are not static and fixed but are fluid and can change over time, for example, when exposed to other films or information, or even when exposed to the same film again.

Finally, in addition to the 11 people interviewed about *The Reader* as part of this study, the film had been seen by an additional 11 interviewees, who talked about *The Reader* during their interviews about one of the other four films. A brief look at their responses may provide a glimpse into this film’s long-term reception. Here, little emphasis was placed on the emotional impact of the film. Significantly, the phenomenon of turning Hanna into a victim discussed above was also a recurring theme in the responses by the interviewees for whom the viewing of *The Reader* had occurred much longer ago. Those who remembered details about *The Reader*, tended to focus on Hanna and her alleged victimhood. In addition, the notion of the film being ‘different’ due to its perpetrator perspective was also identified among these responses. Overall, *The Reader* was remembered in a positive way by the interviewees who saw this film; what is striking is that they perceived Hanna as a relatively positive figure; Michael hardly featured in their memory, neither did the Jewish victims. The focus tended to be on the court aspect of the film, Hanna’s Nazi past and her motives, and excuses were made for her behaviour. Meredith Barkham shared her memory of the film:

> it was just so awful that she had to hide that she couldn’t read, yeah, obviously couldn’t read, she couldn’t write, you know, and how, erm, and, and she kept saying at the end that she was only following orders, her job was to guard the prisoners and that’s why she couldn’t open the door, you know, at the end, when there’s the fire || INT: Mm-hmm. || and they all die, erm, yeah, I thought that, that, that was good, it was done completely differently from any, well, any recent film, erm, I’d seen. I suppose I’ve got into that more because || INT: Mm-hmm. || it’s all, was her story really and his story and how it related or || INT: Mm-hmm. || didn’t relate to her, erm, yeah, no I thought that was really well done.139

In this example, we find the notion of difference of the film, interpreting Hanna’s crimes as a result of following orders and the timeline of the film has been changed. Hanna also appears as a victim, as any communication of empathy is for Hanna (‘it was so awful that she had to hide that she couldn’t read…’) rather than the Jewish victims or even Michael. Making sense of Hanna’s behaviour by suggesting she was merely following orders was prominent among these respondents, with six interviewees making such suggestions. Altogether five interviewees confused the timeline of the film, placing the trial at the end of the film, presumably as this part left the strongest impression and appeared to be the highlight of the film.

139 Interview MB, *Defiance*, 266-73.
Summary

Though the long-term reception of films is more difficult to measure than the immediate responses, this final chapter has provided a number of hypotheses regarding the lasting impact of Holocaust representations. Some general suggestions can be made which could provide the basis for a larger, more systematic survey. Films can be hypothesised to be often remembered not only because of their emotional impact, but also that mainly this very impact is being recalled. Despite the overall faded, fragmented and vague memories of films seen months or years ago, there was evidence of knowledge or insights having been taken from films or films being used to visualise existing knowledge obtained elsewhere. This was seen particularly in the case of Schindler’s List, which was remembered largely for the emotional impact it had had on the interviewees many years ago. It appeared to be also used as a yardstick by which other films were measured and compared to, as has been seen on a number of occasions throughout this thesis. In addition, there was also evidence that the memory and assessment of films can change over time. Schindler’s List, for example, was critically reassessed by two interviewees years later once other representations had been seen and/or once additional subject knowledge had been obtained. The long-term reception of The Reader to an extent mirrored some of the immediate responses in terms of key topics, understandings and expectations. This study could thus be used for comparative studies in other contexts, or a follow-up study with the interviewees could yield insights into long-term reception processes.
Conclusion

The research on the representation of the Holocaust in films and documentaries constitutes one of the most prolific areas of research within the field of Holocaust Studies. Scholars frequently comment on the potential impact of films about the Holocaust on memory, historical knowledge, and historical consciousness. The often purely text-derived analyses of film audiences, studies of critical reception, and quantitative surveys are ill-equipped to explore the topic of individual reception, without which the impact of films cannot be fully understood. In this context, Kansteiner notes that ‘historians of collective memory can profit from the sophisticated discussions about reception and audience behaviour in media and cultural studies.’¹ Despite the field of Holocaust Studies’ increasingly inter-disciplinary orientation, media and cultural studies approaches have played only a minor role for research into the representation of the Holocaust in films and documentaries so far. This thesis makes a unique contribution to Holocaust Studies by expanding our knowledge and understanding of the reception of films about the Holocaust by individuals. It is the first detailed comparative and qualitative study of audience responses to Holocaust representations to date.

The discipline has largely focussed on discursive analyses, philosophical and ethical considerations, critical and public reception, and contemporary media responses. Despite the paucity of empirical research into ordinary viewers’ reception of films about the Holocaust, scholars have often made and perpetuated assumptions and truisms regarding the supposed impact of Holocaust representations on viewers which are not sufficiently, if at all, substantiated by empirical evidence. This thesis adds to, and challenges, existing work on the subject of Holocaust representations by demonstrating the feasibility and productivity of applying qualitative audience reception research approaches to the study of film reception. Stepping away from the more general level of memory studies and studies into historical consciousness, the study examines the reception of films by individuals. It does so by providing empirical evidence to explore the reception of representations of the Holocaust in terms of individual reception processes at the point of reception. In other words, rather than making assumptions about viewers, by conducting an empirical, qualitative audience reception study, this

thesis provides a detailed and nuanced exploration of viewers’ own accounts. In doing so, it has yielded important insights inaccessible through more traditional and established sources and methods.

It has been demonstrated that films indeed have the potential to increase awareness and knowledge about certain aspects of the Holocaust. This appears to be especially the case for viewers with limited subject knowledge, and with regards to films portraying lesser-known parts of the Holocaust. For others, films seem to mainly consolidate existing ideas or provide them with a visualisation for their preconceptions. At the same time, some of the interviewees’ interpretations of the history portrayed by the (often already very compressed) films were highly simplified, and also contained misconceptions about the history of the Holocaust. This included interpretations of the motives of perpetrators (which tended to be exculpating, turned perpetrators into victims, or were de-contextualised), the responses of Jewish victims and survivors, and the decision-making process of the ‘Final Solution’. The findings substantiate some of the (often contradictory) assumptions in existing work on the subject. This thesis stands out by demonstrating, through empirical evidence, as to how films may raise awareness or lead to a potentially distorted historical understanding, which aspects receive particular attention and why, and, crucially, how the reception process works on an individual level. The study’s results challenge notions that films have an inevitable or clear-cut ‘effect’ or ‘impact’ on viewers. Rather, the reception process was shown to be highly complex and multi-layered. While the filmmakers’ creative decisions had implications for the ways in which the films were made sense of by the interviewees, their films did not add to knowledge and understanding in any simple, direct, and predictable way.

While much of the research on Holocaust representations has been influenced by the work of the Frankfurt School, this thesis innovatively draws on cultural studies approaches of the Birmingham School tradition. In doing so, it challenges conceptions of viewers of Holocaust films as merely passive receivers of media texts. Viewers are instead conceptualised as multiple and ‘active’ audiences, and the reception process, therefore, as an active process of constructing meaning and making sense of any representation. It has been indicated that the film reception is linked both to the film text and other influences, including individual styles of narration and preconceptions. They have a strong impact both on what viewers focus on during the film viewing and their communication about, and interpretation of, a given film. The thesis expands our
understanding of the relationship between the film text, extra-textual factors, and the film reception. Gudehus suggests that the reception process is without ‘clear cause-effect relationships.’ This study, too, has demonstrated the complex interdependencies of film text and preconceptions. All of these – textual, inter-textual and extra-textual – factors interact and viewers make use of the interpretative resources at their disposal. Although the film text alone may be insufficient to understand viewers’ responses, it has been indicated throughout the thesis that the film text is crucial for the film reception as it triggers and facilitates particular narratives, ideas, and images. Films set parameters of possible interpretations, within which considerable variations can be found. The latter, in turn, depend on viewers’ preconceptions and interpretative communities.

This thesis is further distinguished from existing studies by its exploration of both reception processes and how the history of the Holocaust, as represented by the films, is interpreted by ordinary viewers. It uniquely combines textual film analysis and empirical research into audience responses to the films under discussion. Among a range of preconceptions, particular national interpretative communities provide an important framework and context within which viewers make sense of Holocaust representations. This was particularly the case when looking at interpretations of cinematic and historical perpetrator behaviour, which can be connected to oral history studies on the subject of Holocaust memory and certain trends in British Holocaust education, memory and commemoration, and museum practice. The plurality and ‘activeness’ of audiences should thus not be overstated as the reception process is a process of negotiation between individual backgrounds, a number of preconceptions, and their wider interpretative frameworks, and the film text.

The study’s comparative perspective through its use of five different films sets it apart from the majority of existing work. By using this approach, in addition to the findings discussed above, further patterns in the interaction between text and viewer have been identified. Crucially, the interview analysis indicates shared reception processes that appear to be more or less irrespective of the individual film on the one hand, and differences in the reception of the five films on the other. It is precisely this comparative perspective which led to some of the most significant findings. These could not have been obtained otherwise. It was demonstrated that a number of

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preconceptions, some of them entirely unrelated to the Holocaust and its representation, play an important role for the film reception. All interviewees, albeit to varying degrees, applied their knowledge, interests, backgrounds, and experiences to the film reception and made sense of the films through the prism of their existing knowledge and ideas. The origins of these preconceptions could form the subject of future research. Far from merely consuming films and taking them at face-value, irrespective of the individual film the majority of interviewees critically reflected on the medium of film as a representation, rather than a reflection, of reality. This was particularly the case for interviewees who were familiar with a range of films and documentaries, either about the Holocaust or more generally. Reflecting on the medium of film did, however, not preclude positive attitudes towards the films under discussion, and critical comments directed at one film were not necessarily also applied to another. The majority of interviewees attached certain expectations to films about the Holocaust which may set such films apart as, indeed, a distinct genre. While the interviewees remembered a large range of different scenes from the films they watched, it was demonstrated that scenes were more likely to be remembered if they caused an emotional response. This suggests a strong link between affective reactions and film impact, which was further supported by interviewees’ memories of films seen many years ago, and the emotional impact they had had on them.

Alongside these shared interpretative strategies, crucial differences were identified in the reception of the five films. Firstly, it was demonstrated that the films’ genre and stylistic devices affected the extent to which they were perceived as authentic, and how ‘authenticity’ was understood by the interviewees. A link could further be established between the extent to which films were perceived as authentic and the degree to which historical knowledge and understanding were taken away by the interviewees. *Conspiracy* and *Defiance* were the most persuasive in terms of interviewees adding to, or even altering, their ideas about the history of the Holocaust. Both the films’ formats and their perception as portraying a novel and lesser-known aspect of the Holocaust were demonstrated to play a crucial role in this context. The film reception was further influenced by the communication process during the interview and different styles of narration. *The Reader* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* appeared to encourage interviewees to reflect on their emotional responses to these films, whereas this was less so in the case of the films based on ‘true stories’. This indicates that purely fictional and highly emotional films do not necessarily overwhelm viewers but can instead facilitate
critical reflection. There was also evidence that interviewees adopted and reproduced the language and terminology from the films they watched; the vaguer the film in terms of spelling out or visualising the crimes committed against the Jews, the vaguer was the language used by the interviewees to talk about these crimes. Future studies could explore to what extent the terminology, and possibly also imagery, adopted from films in the short-term have a long-term impact on the ways in which viewers communicate about films and the history they represent. Finally, personal stories and attitudes played a considerable role in the interviews, especially family stories, and particularly for older participants who often used the interviews as an opportunity to speak about their own lives.

The Constructivist Grounded Theory approach to data collection and analysis proved well-suited for this explorative study. Specifically, it provided the necessary critical apparatus to effectively reflect on the study’s limitations and the interviewer’s role in the production of the data. The combination of Hermeneutic Dialogue Analysis, Grounded Theory and Qualitative Content Analysis as interpretative approaches to the analysis of the collected material complemented and practically implemented the study’s theoretical and conceptual cultural studies framework.

This thesis has opened up a plethora of routes for further enquiry that could not be pursued in the scope of this project, or elucidated with the study design. Based on the findings, a number of recommendations for future research can be suggested. The strong focus on what was important to the interviewees alongside the study’s quantitative element made transparent the process of data analysis, and is consistent with the study design. At the same time, this approach may have resulted in the over-representation of interviews about films which led to particularly rich, detailed, and productive discussions as seen especially with Conspiracy and The Reader. As a result, contrary to the focus on individual reception, individual nuances may be lost in this process. The interview collection could thus be re-visited and analysed using a different method and the interviews about each film could be examined as case studies in their own right.

Building on the results of this study, a more targeted and directed interview guide could be used to focus on open questions. As the questionnaires did not yield many additional results, further studies could either develop more effective questions for the questionnaire, or include these in the interview guide. Any future research may, therefore, have to adapt the methodological framework developed by this study to their
particular research question and conceptual background. In-depth qualitative face-to-face interviews and group discussions were demonstrated to be particularly effective. Crucially, they allow for the exploration of under-researched topics, for follow-up questions, and for an analysis of researcher-interviewee interactions. A tested, open-ended qualitative questionnaire would nonetheless have strong research potential and enable a larger number of study participants, both for studies of immediate and long-term reception. Whilst the study design was specifically aimed at illuminating the immediate responses to the selected films, more research is required to understand how films are made sense of long-term, and how the film reception may change over time. Studying immediate film reception provides important insights into the media reception process. Future research should explore the extent to which viewers integrate and incorporate their short-term responses to films into their cultural and communicative memory, historical consciousness and knowledge, and whether they inform their attitudes and behaviour. A qualitative, longitudinal study could be particularly productive, while a quantitative research design could lead to more representative results.

Oral history studies on Holocaust memory and historical consciousness, such as the study by Welzer et al. into intergenerational family memories of the National Socialist past in Germany, have indicated that many people refer to films and documentaries, and even incorporate them into their memories and family stories of the past. Contrary to the assumed strong impact of films on historical consciousness and memory, Gudehus et al. question in relation to Schindler’s List whether films merely serve as ‘illustration’ for existing interpretations of the past.³ The findings of this study certainly support arguments for a strong impact of the film text. At the same time, existing knowledge or the lack thereof, and the extent to which a film resonates with preconceptions, appeared to be important factors for the film reception. The interviewees’ memories of Schindler’s List unquestionably point to a continued impact of this film, as seen in the ways in which it served as a yardstick, not only for measuring – both favourably and unfavourably – the quality of other films, but also for defining ‘Holocaust films’ as a distinct genre. The question of whether Schindler’s List and other films since have an impact on viewers due to being either illustrations of existing ideas or novel representations may remain elusive to some degree. The answer depends on individual

viewers’ levels of knowledge, interest, and exposure to the subject, including other films, as has been indicated in this thesis. Alongside studies into the long-term impact of films, exploring both people’s first encounters with the topic and the sources of their preconceptions may lead to more conclusive findings. This could be achieved by designing a study using audience research methodologies, ideally conceptualised as a longitudinal, larger-scale project, and by incorporating a comparative perspective.

The impact of interpretative communities on film reception has been intimated in this thesis and in existing scholarship. Country-specific case studies and transnational comparative research would add to our understanding of how different interpretative communities, particularly in a national context, affect the ways in which Holocaust representations are made sense of. Future research could build on this study by using films with a direct link to Britain, such as films and documentaries about the Kindertransports and the liberation of the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. The impact of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity on the film reception also requires further exploration and could be integrated into prospective studies. Differences and similarities in the reception of documentaries, feature films, and docu-dramas could also be investigated, as docu-dramas seem to be particularly powerful and persuasive. The overwhelmingly positive and often exculpatory evaluations of cinematic and historic Germans, bystanders and perpetrators alike, may warrant future study. Of relevance for the fields of Anglo-German relations, memory studies, and Holocaust Studies, this could include research into the ways in which the perception of Nazi and post-war Germany has developed in Britain and the UK since 1945, using a range of different sources. An additional angle may be to explore to what extent this phenomenon is limited to Britain alone or constitutes a wider trend.

The study’s findings have potential ramifications both for Holocaust Studies and other disciplines. In the past few years, research into the digital representation of the Holocaust has increased, and projects such as the University of California Shoah Foundation’s IWitness seek ways to encourage students and educators to creatively and critically engage with their resources. The study of audience reception and digital media could be productively linked by exploring how audio and video testimonies of survivors are made sense of by their ‘users’ and the potential learning outcomes, and the impact on Holocaust memory resulting from the shift from living to recorded

testimony. Bearing in mind how the interview analysis has indicated that audiences may respond in unexpected, unintended and incontrollable ways to representations of the Holocaust, taking an audience research approach to digital media could aid in evaluating new digital strategies to memory, teaching, and learning.

This thesis fits well with the growing interest in Holocaust memory and education in Britain. Existing studies have demonstrated that films are frequently used in education, often by ill-equipped teachers, with uncertain consequences. This study could serve as a foundation for studies into the uses of film in Holocaust education. These could include surveys into how films are utilised by teachers and pupils, and examine how to critically employ films as an educational tool by encouraging discussion and reflection. Organising film viewings and discussions, perhaps inviting university scholars from film studies and historical studies, and film industry practitioners, could provide a starting point for pupils to critically engage with films. Widely distributed study guides specifically tailored for schools and pupils of different ages could assist teachers and students alike to appreciate the complexity of the subject. Pedagogically, the study has also highlighted some of the potential implications of the privileging of ‘lessons’ over subject knowledge in education and commemoration, as many viewers of films about the Holocaust may lack sufficient breadth of knowledge about the Holocaust – that is, why, how and where it happened, the motivations and identities of perpetrators, and the responses of the Jewish victims and survivors – to contextualise the films, which they instead authenticate using other resources and pre-conceived ideas.

The field of museum studies could provide an important link between pedagogy and reception research. A constructivist approach to audience evaluation would allow museums to critically assess both visitors’ experiences and the reception of museums’ exhibitions, and the discourses they are transmitting. The fact that the meanings of films are not fixed and can often be very different to filmmakers’ original intentions (or, rather, the filmmakers’ self-representations and marketing strategies), has ramifications not only for the study of feature films and documentaries, but also for the use of these and other representations, including photographs, especially those taken by perpetrators, in school education and in museums. What visitors and viewers take away from films and exhibitions cannot be ‘controlled’ and predicted. Rather than attempt to direct a

particular narrative and elicit ‘appropriate’ responses, pedagogical strategies could be adopted that foster and encourage reflection and critical engagement with the subject and the act of representing history in films and museums. The extent to which exhibitions related to National Socialism and the Holocaust, in particular, are self-reflexive or prescriptive could form the subject of further research.

Both the number of films about the Holocaust and the scholarly work about them is ever-growing. While the research into Holocaust films has diversified, and reception research is receiving growing interest, individual reception processes are still widely ignored. Media studies’ research into audience reception has, in turn, largely bypassed historical films. While this study focused on films about the Holocaust, it has wider relevance for historical films more generally, including period, heritage, and costume dramas, and films about other significant historical events. The ways in which such films may shape viewers’ historical knowledge, consciousness, and their identities on an individual level, still require in-depth exploration. A turn to interdisciplinary methods could add important insights and bridge the gap between the disciplines. Media and cultural studies, and particularly audience reception research, could similarly benefit from broadening their focus by taking notice of historical films as products of popular culture.

This study has effectively utilised cultural and media studies approaches and methodologies to fill a gap in current research. It has challenged the perpetuation of assumptions and speculations about viewers of films about the Holocaust, and approached Holocaust film audiences and their experiences, and the factors influencing film reception, by exploring viewers’ own accounts. It has demonstrated that there are limits to the extent to which textual analysis alone can illuminate ordinary people’s responses to Holocaust representations. Understanding ordinary viewers’ reception is a crucial prerequisite to understanding films’ impact on, and place in, Holocaust memory. With the Holocaust passing into history, the question of how the Holocaust is remembered and how its history is transmitted to future generations, is closely linked to questions of representation and, ultimately, reception. As this research has indicated the inherent unpredictability of the reception of, potentially, any representation, researchers and educators, in particular, should explore non-didactic ways of engaging lay people with the history of the Holocaust and its legacies. If films really are one of the main sources of historical information for many people, and indeed feed into historical consciousness, only a mix of methods can increase our understanding of how the
reception process works at both the individual and communal levels. Acknowledging this may be a first step towards opening new routes of enquiry and disciplinary approaches which, ultimately, may illuminate the complex relationship between history, film, and memory.
Appendices

Appendix One: Questionnaire

1. How old are you?

2. What is your gender?

3. What is your occupation?

4. What is your sexual orientation?

5. How would you describe your political views?

6. What is your religious background?

7. How would you describe your ethnic background?

8. What is your nationality?

9. Would you consider yourself to have a disability? If yes, please specify.

10. What is your educational background? For example, GCSE, A-level, BA, MA, NVQ, PhD, etc.

11. Where did you obtain your knowledge about the Holocaust?

   - School
   - Family members
   - Documentaries
   - Feature films
   - Newsreels
   - University
   - Exhibitions
   - Memorials or memorial sites
   - Eye witness accounts
   - Books
   - Articles in newspapers or magazines
   - Other: ________________________________

12. Have you seen any other feature films, documentaries, or TV series about the Holocaust? If yes, can you give their names, or describe what they were about?

   _______________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________
13. If you answered the last questions with yes, which of the films about the Holocaust you have watched has left the most impression?
________________________________________________________________

14. Based on your knowledge regarding Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, was the film you just watched an adequate representation of the Holocaust? Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree  □ □ □ □ □

15. Do you tend to follow up on a (Holocaust) film? If yes, how? □ Yes □ No
   □ Read reviews
   □ Engage in forums or blogs
   □ If the film was based on a novel, read the novel
   □ Consult history books or the Internet for more information
   □ Discuss the film with friends
   □ Other: ___________________________

16. What do you expect of a feature film dealing with the Holocaust?
   □ To be authentic.
   □ To provide factual knowledge.
   □ To contain an ethical message.
   □ To have a gripping story.
   □ To provide entertainment.
   □ To provide an emotional approach to the topic.
   □ Other: ___________________________

17. How do you decide whether to watch a (Holocaust) film?
   □ Recommendation by a friend/relative
   □ Interest in the topic
   □ Good/interesting trailer
   □ Appreciation of the director
   □ Particular actors
   □ Adverts/posters
   □ Film reviews
   □ Other: ___________________________

18. Please state to what extent you agree with the following statement: “The Holocaust happened a long time ago. We should better focus on present issues.” Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree  □ □ □ □ □

19. Please state to what extent you agree with the following statement: “Films and documentaries shape our historical knowledge.” Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree  □ □ □ □ □

20. Additional comments:
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
Appendix Two: Interview and Discussion Guide

- Would you like to summarize what the film you just watched was about?
- How did you like the film?
- How did you feel about the main characters of the film?
- How do think were the … [e.g. Germans; women; Jews; victims] depicted?
- Were there any particular scenes that left an impression?
- Was there anything you kind of particularly liked or disliked in the film?
- What do you think is the moral of the film? If there is any? Is there a message for today? What were the director’s intentions for making this film?
- How was the Holocaust represented in this film?
- Did you know anything about … [e.g. Jewish partisans; female perpetrators; Sonderkommandos] before watching the film?
- Do you think you learned something new now about the Holocaust and World War II?
- Have you watched any other films or documentaries about the Holocaust?
- How do the films you’ve seen compare with this one?
- Do you think in general that it is good that films are made about these topics?
- What do you think might be the meaning of the Holocaust for Britain today?
- What do you think about Germans/Germany then/now?
- Where did you obtain your knowledge about the Holocaust?
- Have you been to any exhibitions or memorial sites?
- What do you take away from this film?
- Are there any questions this film has left you with?

From August 2011 onwards, the interview guide also included these questions:

- What do you think about films based on fiction compared with films based on ‘true stories’?
- How do you decide what to take from a film as fact and what to leave as artistic license?
- Some scholars say that films could trivialise, simplify or distort the Holocaust. What do you think about that, and would it be true for the film you watched?
- Some scholars say that the film could excuse the perpetrators or the German population. What do you think about that?
Appendix Three: Participant Information

The Holocaust in British Popular Culture: Interpretations of Recent Feature Films

A PhD research project organised by the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies (SBC), University of Leicester

In the 21st century, the Holocaust continues to occupy an important place in British society which can be seen in the Holocaust Memorial Day that has been taking place every year since 2001, the permanent exhibition in the Imperial War Museum in London, or in Holocaust Education that has been part of the National Curriculum for History since 1991.

For 65 years, the Holocaust has been the subject of feature films, documentaries and television series. Films like Schindler's List and Life is Beautiful have reached large audiences all over the world. While scholars have produced a considerable amount of theoretical work about these and other films, there has been, however, a notable absence of research of the British audience's perception of feature films that deal with different aspects of the Holocaust.

We wish to show selected feature films dealing with the Holocaust to different individuals and groups. This shall take place at the University of Leicester. Following the screening of the film, we will hand out questionnaires containing some general questions for participants to fill in. In addition, we wish to carry out and record either an individual interview, or a group discussion with a number of participants. Interviews and group discussions are expected to last no longer than one hour. The film screening and the interview/group discussion will, depending on the duration of the film, last approximately three hours altogether. At the end of the interview or group discussion you will be asked to sign a form that will grant the project the legal rights to use your interview responsibly for their studies. Your name will remain anonymous unless you wish your name to be disclosed in the study.

The films may contain some potentially unsettling content and imagery and you can leave the screening at any time.

All interviewers have undergone special interviewing training by the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA), University of Leicester, however, if you feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview the interviewer can pause the recording and you can take a break or you can stop the interview. You are free to withdraw your participation from the interview/group discussion or the project at any point, including withdrawing your consent for us to use the interview after it has been made, if, for whatever reason, you do not feel comfortable taking part any further.

This project aims to contribute towards gaining a better understanding of how historical films on the Holocaust are received by the audience, how they are being made sense of, and how they may or may not contribute to our knowledge of the Holocaust and to preserving its memory. This is becoming an increasingly important issue as the generations of survivors and eye-witnesses are passing away.

With the Holocaust passing into history, the question how the Holocaust in popular culture - feature films in this study - is perceived and interpreted by today's audiences has long been neglected. The project aims to address this deficit and to further scholarly knowledge on the key issues it addresses. The data collection will serve teaching and research purposes and will be used to enhance public knowledge and awareness of the subject.
Appendix Four: Call for Participants

Interviewees needed for reception study of Holocaust films

‘The Holocaust in British Popular Culture: Interpretations of Recent Feature Films’

A PhD research project organised by the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies (SBC), University of Leicester

For more than 65 years, the Holocaust has been the subject of feature films, documentaries and television series. Films like Schindler's List and Life is Beautiful have reached large audiences all over the world. Scholars have produced a considerable amount of theoretical work about these and other films, their impact, their discourses, dangers and potentials. There has been, however, a notable absence of research of the British audience's perception of feature films that deal with different aspects of the Holocaust.

I am seeking participants for a multidisciplinary PhD-project that aims at gaining a better understanding of the many different ways in which people in Britain perceive and interpret Holocaust films, and how their knowledge and memory of the Holocaust may be shaped by visual representations.

I wish to show selected feature films dealing with the Holocaust to different individuals and groups. The film screening will be followed by either an individual interview or a group discussion, and a questionnaire will be handed out. This should take no longer than three hours, depending on the duration of the selected film. Unfortunately, no payments or reimbursements can be made.

These interviews will help to address a deficit in current research by looking at audiences’ various interpretations of Holocaust films rather than making assumptions about them. The collection will serve teaching and research purposes and will be used to enhance public knowledge and awareness of the subject.

If you are interested, please contact me at sr189@le.ac.uk or on 07779615841 and I can send you more information about what the study will involve. Your time and interest is appreciated and will make a considerable difference to a very under-researched area.

Stefanie Rauch, PhD student at the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Leicester.
Appendix Five: Consent Form

Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust Studies, School of Historical Studies, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

The Holocaust in British Popular Culture: Interpretations of Recent Feature Films
COPYRIGHT ASSIGNMENT & CONSENT FORM FOR ORAL HISTORY RECORDINGS

The purpose of this assignment and consent is to enable the ‘Holocaust in British Popular Culture’ project to permanently retain and use the recorded recollections of individuals.

In respect of the content of a sound recording made by and, or, being deposited with the ‘Holocaust in British Popular Culture’ project, consisting of the recollections of a contributor and constituting a literary work as defined by the Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988:

As present owner of the copyright in the contributor content (i.e. the words spoken by the interviewee), I hereby assign such copyright to the ‘Holocaust in British Popular Culture’ project. I hereby waive any moral rights which I presently own in relation to this work on the understanding that the content will not be used in a derogatory manner and that the author of the contribution will be correctly identified in all uses of it. I understand that no payment is due to me for this assignment and consent. In assigning my copyright, I understand that I am giving ‘Holocaust in British Popular Culture’ the right to use and make available the content of the recorded interview in the following ways:

- use in schools, universities, colleges and other educational establishments, including use in a thesis, dissertation or similar research
- public performance, lectures or talks
- use in publications, including print, audio or video cassettes or CD ROM
- public reference purposes in libraries, museums & record offices
- use on radio or television
- publication worldwide on the internet

Do you want your name to be disclosed? YES/NO

Brief details of deposited material (indicate name(s) of recordist):

Signed: ……………………………………….. Date: ………………………………………
(Print name):
…………………………………………………………………………………………
Address:
…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………
Postcode ……………………………. Telephone: ………………………………………
Email: ………………………………………

‘Holocaust in British Popular Culture’ project use
Signed on behalf of ‘Holocaust in British Popular Culture’ ……………………………
(Print name): ………………………………………
Subject of deposit: ………………………………………………………………………
Accession number: ……………………………
© in sound recording also assigned YES/NO or N/A
Appendix Six: Sample Sequential Analysis

Sequence:

INT: Ok, erm, would you like to summarise what the film we just watched was about in a, in a few sentences?
JE: Erm, (-) yeah, it was, I suppose, about, erm, the operation and running of a concentration camp through a Nazi officer’s son’s eyes, (-) erm, sort of how he understands what’s happening, what his dad’s doing, kind of the war and the persecution of the Jews, I suppose.

Context (‘what happened’): Judy Evans (JE) is a 32-year-old admissions clerk who volunteered for the project by responding to an advert posted in the university’s email news bulletin. She watched the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. The interviewer asks the first interview question following the joint film viewing and the completion of the questionnaire by Judy. The interview takes place in a room at the University of Leicester which the interviewer (INT), a German PhD student, booked for the purpose of the film screening and the interview. At this point, Judy and the interviewer have already spent around two hours together for the film viewing and Judy’s subsequent completion of the questionnaire. Judy responds to the first question she is asked as part of her voluntary and un-paid participation in the project.

Paraphrasing the sequence (‘what is said according to the wording’): the interviewer asks for a summary of the film they watched together in a few sentences. Judy responds that the film was about the operation of a concentration camp and was told through the eyes of the son of a Nazi officer. The son begins to understand his father’s role, the war and the persecution of the Jews. Judy’s answer is brief.

Speaker’s intentions (‘what the speaker is trying to say’): the interviewer is trying to begin the interview with a general and casual-seeming question about the film. She is asking for a short summary as the words ‘in a few sentences’ imply. She is asking for the interviewee’s summary of the film in their opinion. Judy’s answer is very factual and appears to pick up where the film left as the persecution of the Jews and the concentration camp come to the fore only in the last part of the film. Judy is trying to provide a ‘correct’ answer that demonstrates an understanding of the wider context of the film and of the Holocaust. She appears to understand the film as being both about the operation of a camp and about the boy’s learning about his father’s involvement in this, and the war and the persecution of the Jews more generally.

Interactions and the role of interaction (‘how is the interaction developing in this situation’): the interviewer does not mention the title of the film and her opening question is open rather than investigative. She begins her sentence with ‘Ok, erm’
which suggests she still has to find her voice in the interview process. The way the question is asked also suggests that it is not completely read from a script or absolutely memorised. Though it is not improvised, it comes from the top of the head. It is a starting question and not very directive. This first question also establishes the hierarchy of the interaction: the interviewer is ‘in charge’ asking questions, and Judy is responding to them. It can be suggested that this opening sequence represents the negotiating stage of the interaction in which both parties are ‘feeling their way’. Judy’s response is short and follows the interviewer’s instructions. Her answer appears slightly insecure and she may be awaiting the interviewer’s approval or encouragement that her answer is ‘right’. Her response is not interrupted by the interviewer, letting Judy complete her answer before moving on to the next question.

Speaker’s motives (‘what is the speaker expressing unintentionally’): the interviewer wants to begin the interview but does not appear too comfortable yet with her role. The way she asks the question could also suggest that she is trying to make the interviewing situation seem more casual and to relax Judy by asking an open, general question to which there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. She is trying to limit the response by positing that it should be ‘in a few sentences’ rather than a detailed description of the film plot. It could also be interpreted as an attempt to not put the interviewee under too much pressure by asking for a more detailed film description. In her response, Judy does not mention the friendship depicted in the film or the childhood and naivety motifs.

Her answer is about the Holocaust as a whole and much of it may stem from her existing knowledge rather than from the film itself. Her answer suggests that she has an active interest in the Holocaust and so this is the first which comes to mind. And, of course, the call for participants and the participant information were very clearly about a study of the reception of films about the Holocaust, so there may also be an attempt to link her impression of the film with the study in which she is partaking. Judy is not summarising the film plot but is already jumping to an abstract or meta-analysis rather than looking at the process of the film. She may be trying to make sense of the film with her existing knowledge about the subject. She is also still looking for words and seems unsure what the interviewer ‘wants’ to hear. She offers what she is saying as an option (‘I suppose’) and leaves it open to interpretation. She is using vague terminology (‘what’s happening’, ‘sort of’, ‘kind of the war’) in her answer which may be due to her insecurity about the correctness of the answer and thus leaving it more ambivalent, or
due to a lack of more detailed knowledge, or possibly due to an inexperience of talking about films, the Holocaust or, specifically, Holocaust films. Though she suggests that The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas was about the ‘operation and running of a concentration camp’, the film only touches on this aspect. Seeing that the film depicts a gas chamber, Judy could have used the term death or extermination camp, so her answer may point to a lack of knowledge of the difference between types of camps.

The term ‘Nazi officer’ suggests a mid-rank position and is vague. She neither used the terms SS nor camp commandant. The term ‘Nazi officer’ is also distinct from, for example, ‘army officer’ so she appears to be distinguishing between the army and Nazis. Alternatively, the use of the term could indicate that she is trying to encapsulate all so she cannot go wrong as it could mean anything from army to SS. She also suggests the film is about Bruno understanding ‘what’s happening’ though in the film, he never fully understands, right until the end, what is happening and the role played by his father. The final part of her answer, ‘kind of the war and the persecution of the Jews, I suppose’, suggests that she does not want to give any wrong answers, and it covers the ‘basics’ of Holocaust knowledge. The fact that she volunteered for the study rather than being recruited through a local contact or word-of-mouth may also suggest an active engagement with, and interest in the Holocaust and its representation. At the same time, she uses the term ‘persecution’ rather than ‘extermination’ which may point to the film’s eschewal of any explicit scenes of violence.

**Preceding communication (‘is there a general structure’):** the sequence was taken from the beginning of the interview so there is no preceding communication to be analysed. If the sequence was taken from a different point of the interview, the general structure, tone, direction and discourse of the interview and interaction could be analysed.

**General relationships (‘is there a connection to any theories’):** existing research indicates that preconceptions and recipients’ personalities play an important role for media reception. Recipients of media may also be assigned to either an emotional or factual type of reception. Judy’s technical, matter-of-fact narration could thus be analysed further as a particular type of narration and reception. Judy’s attempt to give the ‘right’ answer could be connected to social desirability theory. The preliminary categories that can be deduced from this short sequence are in relation to narration and language (abstract, technical, vague) and in relation to Judy’s existing knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust which she appeared to have referred to in order to make sense of the film.
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