

# 'FROM PAGE TO SCREEN: THE VISUAL AND EMOTIONAL LEGACY OF THE HOLOCAUST IN *SCHINDLER'S ARK* AND *SCHINDLER'S LIST*'

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## **Abstract:**

Thomas Keneally is an acclaimed Australian author most famous for 'Schindler's Ark' his novel that follow the life of Oskar Schindler and his efforts to save Jews during the Holocaust. The book won the Booker Prize in 1982 and was later adapted into Steven Spielberg's, an American filmmaker and producer, *Schindler's List*. Spielberg's ground-breaking storytelling and technical innovation is an essential example of visual culture in a film adaptation. This article examines Stephen Spielberg's 1994 film *Schindler's List*, an adaptation of Thomas Keneally's 1982 novel *Schindler's Ark*, and analyses how both works utilize visual and auditory elements to evoke the trauma of the Holocaust. Ultimately, both the novel and film underscore the importance of remembrance, using visual and auditory techniques to emphasize the collective responsibility to prevent future atrocities.

## **Keywords:**

Schindler's list, Schindler's ark, adaptation, visual culture, the Holocaust.

Stephen Spielberg's harrowing exploration of the Holocaust in *Schindler's list*, released in 1994, is an adaptation of Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*, published in 1982. Both apply visual culture through repeated imagery and contrasting colour to evoke trauma. This article considers several visual choices of both the author Keneally and film director Spielberg including his use of colour of

which is black and white to create a documentary feel, Keneally's use of imagery employed to evoke suffering and violence, and a use of sound within the film. These elements are significant in illustrating a sense of sympathy, reflection, and sorrow that would have been experienced by the millions of Jews who faced oppression.

## **Black and White - A documentary feel:**

The decision to film in black and white allows Spielberg to create a documentary-style, immersing viewers deeply into the grim realities of Jewish treatment during the Holocaust between 1941-1945. This visual choice strips away the distraction of colour, forcing the audience to confront the stark, brutal truth of the events depicted. The result of this is an evocation of horror, the placidity of monochromatic film forces the viewer to focus on the Holocaust itself which heightens the atrocious acts and conditions people were forced through reminding us of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. This documented immersion leaves the audience in a sorrowful and helpless state to reflect what the victims felt., which is demonstrated by the 6 million lives lost through this genocide. Alongside this, the darkness of the film leaves us questioning our faith in humanity creating a reflective reminder not to repeat history's mistakes. The lack of colour throughout the film, symbolises the absence of life and joy in a world overrun by suffering and death, reinforcing its sombre message – it teaches us about the Holocaust while also reminding us of the victims' suffering.

## **The iconic use of the colour red:**

Despite the predominant use of black and white the film features a single scene with the use of colour. This scene Schindler in a red coat while he rides on horseback. Although Keneally's use of vivid colour imagery in the novel serves to evoke emotional distress and emphasises the brutality of the Nazi treatment, Spielberg's adaptation of this within the film has a much more heart wrenching effect. It allows us to really visualise the brutality by regaining our attention with colour. Geoff Eley suggests; 'It reduces distance: our images of the Holocaust are constructed in black and white, whether from newsreel or photographs, and the film resonates with this existing archive of representation; it places us immediately into that place of memory.'<sup>1</sup> Especially with it being the only scene with colour underscores a key emotional moment of this young child, the use of colour draws specific attention to the innocence lost amid the holocaust. The child in the red coat symbolises not just innocence but also the contrast between childhood and the horrors surrounding it. This single instance of colour underscores a critical emotional moment – suffering - reminding viewers of the brutality inflicted upon innocents. In the novel Schindler sees 'A line of women and

children... At the rear, dawdling, was a toddler, boy or girl, dressed in a small scarlet coat and cap. The reason it compelled Schindler's interest was that it made a statement, the way the argumentative shift worker in Wegierska had. The statement had to do, of course, with a passion for red.<sup>2</sup> The phrase "a passion for red" suggests deeper layers of meaning as red has many connotations of death and violence. Red can symbolise life, love, and vitality, but in this context, the idea of blood and humans may also evoke feelings of danger and bloodshed through blood as it is a cruel reminder of how fragile we are. This duality of colour emphasises the complexity of the situation, where innocence and vulnerability exist alongside violence and horror. The image of the child and the mention of guards leading the line suggest a stark contrast between the innocence of youth and the oppressive force of the guards. The presence of the guards highlights the loss of agency and safety, suggesting the themes of powerlessness and fear.

### **Suffering through Imagery:**

The film gained attention by Spielberg's deep-rooted portrayal of violence and suffering, thereby allowing Spielberg to initiate further response to the horrors of the holocaust. Spielberg's use of unflinching scenes of brutality; mass shootings, ghettos and concentration camps help to illustrate

the true realities faced by Jews. One of the most haunting moments in *Schindler's List* occurs when the Nazi officer Amon Goethe, played by Ralph Fiennes, lines up a group of prisoners, and begins to question them about a stolen chicken. This scene shows the film's unflinching portrayal of the brutality and dehumanization that characterized the Holocaust, characterised by the severe violence placed upon the millions of Jews. Goethe's casual cruelty, as he shoots a man first in the stomach and then in the head, serves multiple purposes that elicit a powerful emotional response from the audience. The first shot inflicts pain and suffering, a clear message that disobedience will not be tolerated. The second shot, however, is a chilling act of finality, it symbolises the total disregard for human life that defined the Nazi regime. This duality in Goethe's actions forces the audience to confront the truth of the Holocaust while showing the extinguishing of human life simply because of religion, race, or sexuality. Spielberg's use of slow panning across the screen during this scene accentuates is a demonstration of how visual culture aids the storytelling in *Schindler's List*. In comparison to the novel, one morning, Goethe goes out and murders a prisoner at random, establishing his style of ruling:

'The first morning Commandant Goeth stepped out his front door and murdered a prisoner at random,

there was a tendency to see this also, like the first execution on Chujowa Górka, as a unique event, discrete from what would become the customary life of the camp. In fact, of course, the killings on the hill would soon prove to be habitual, and so would Amon's morning routine.' (p.116).

The phrase "murdered a prisoner at random" emphasises the shocking brutality of the act. Initially, such violence might be perceived as shocking or unique. However, the mention of a "tendency to see this also" suggests that Goethe alongside other Nazi guards seemed to compartmentalise their brutal actions, thinking of them as isolated incidents rather than part of a broader pattern. The shooting draws attention to the dehumanisation and complete disregard for human life. The transition from viewing the murder as a 'unique event' to acknowledging it as 'habitual' illustrates how quickly extreme violence can become routine as the Nazi officers would not have seen a problem with their actions. This shift reflects the disturbing ways in which those repeatedly exposed to violent atrocities grow desensitised to their troubled environments. Keneally's depiction of Goethe's actions serves as a notable example of brutality throughout the Holocaust. Therefore, by the guards seeing these murders as routine and not their fault we become aware of how easy it is for a

society to comply to rules if not consequence is given to murder.

Another credible example of suffering through imagery can be seen when Goethe is cruel to Garde as he works on the conservatory:

'Amon grabbed the rising beam with both long-fingered hands, dragged back the end of it, and swung it toward the engineer. Garde saw the massive timber spinning toward his head and understood that it was a mortal instrument. He lifted his right hand and the beam took it, shattering the knuckles and the metacarpals and hurling him to the ground.'(p.120).

The deliberate imagery used to describe Goeth's actions evoke the reader to feel threatened and uneasy as he strikes eagerly and forcefully. The 'massive timber' serves as a powerful symbol of physical force alongside the weight of oppression. As it implies the lethal nature of this act of murder alongside the violence seen in the novel. In addition. The graphic depiction of Garde's injury highlights the brutal reality of the lives of those in concentration camps, he does not receive treatment for his injuries. The idea of violence is reinforced not just through the act itself but also the psychological implications on the victim.

## **Sound and Score and its evocative atmosphere:**

The Score of *Schindler's List* was written by John Williams; his use of the haunting violin theme played by Itzak Perlman adds to the film's emotional backbone:

'Spielberg's efforts to suggest respectability via the idiom of canonized "art music" in order to do justice to the film's status as a historical document can be seen in such comments circulating around the film's release.<sup>3</sup> In their analyses of the soundtrack, musicologists Dieter Moorman and Peter Keller echo this view. Both authors grant the music a special position within the work of John Williams due to the gravity of the subject. The supposed relatively sparse use of music Keller interprets as Williams's "awareness of the difficulty" and strategy for avoiding a typical Hollywood spectacle.'<sup>45</sup>

It captures themes of sadness and loss by creating a melancholy atmosphere. While simple, it assists in Spielberg's creative efforts to generate a notion of mourning and reflection. The score typically contrasts with the brutality that is being depicted on the screen; its juxtaposition of violent scenes being paired with the silence and minimal sound

heightens the need for the audience to confront the horrific events of the Holocaust. The simplistic sound and imagery both make our main focus the pain and suffering of the Holocaust and its poor victims. Moreover, the silence creates an impending sense of doom in the scenes where Schindler's women are in the concentration camps - as they were seen as most one of disposable by the Nazi doctors - and throughout the film. Within the novel Keneally reinforces the emotional depth of the story and drives a long-lasting impact through the pain and suffering to emphasises the brutality of mistreatment and to not repeat history. The lack of speech used in Chapter thirty-three is essential in providing this intense atmosphere as the characters would not have been allowed to talk. Keneally's use of uninterrupted prose is what really drives a lasting impact, his depiction of the women's.

'Feet sticking in the mud, they were marched to the delousing plant and stripped by order of tough young SS women with truncheons in their hands...They knew as much as that about Auschwitz. The SS tattooed your arm if they wanted to use you. If they intended to feed you into the machine, however, they did not bother. (p.188)', evokes a sense of helplessness and entrapment. The image illustrates the prisoners' vulnerability and the grim realities of their

situation, suggesting they are physically and metaphorically stuck in a horrific system. The act of being stripped serves as a metaphor for the loss of dignity, reducing humans to objects of their captors, it is also dehumanising as they are not given privacy or any human rights. Additionally in Chapter thirty-three suspense is built up using Keneally's depiction of 'the first eight days of their stay in Auschwitz, the Schindler women were in enormous danger of death by gassing.' (p.190). This conveys a sense of impending doom while highlighting brutal methods of extermination used by the Nazis. The threat of death and violence is immediate and uncertain and highlights the coldness of the extermination process. This statement explores the tragic fate of concentration

camp prisoners and is a reminder of dangers that lay ahead for not just these women but also other Jews in camps.

In conclusion, both Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* and its adaptation *Schindler's List* by Stephen Spielberg both are a visual testament to the Holocaust. They intertextually weave together imagery, sound and colour elements to echo the realities experienced between 1942-1945 by Jewish communities. Additionally, both allude to the need for remembrance through their uses of visual culture. The film and the text act as reminders for the atrocities of genocide and the collective responsibility towards preventing a historical repetition.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoff Eley and Atina Grossman, *Watching Schindler's List: Not the Last Word*, (*New German Critique*, Duke University Press, 1997), p.47

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's Ark*, (Serpentine Publishing Co. Ltd, 1982), p.76, (Further quotes from this text will be cited within the essay.

<sup>3</sup> Elias Berner, *Music in films about the Shoah: Commemoration, Comfort, Provocation*, (Springer Nature, Switzerland 2024),p.59-60.

<sup>4</sup> Klaus Hubner, *Stars and Sounds: filmmusik – Die dritte Kinodimension*, ( Kassel, Barenreiter-Verlag, 2000), p.82-84.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Moorman, *Spielberg-Variation: Die Filmmusik von John Williams*, (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co, 2010, p.637-647)