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## An American Reflection: Steven Spielberg, The Jewish Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict\*

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On the face of it, the sense of discomfort, even outrage stirred by Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005) is quite bewildering. Indeed, Spielberg was often censured for "infantilizing the audience, reconstituting the spectator as child, then overwhelming him and her with sound and spectacle, obliterating irony, aesthetic self-consciousness, and critical reflection."<sup>1</sup>) The terms in which *Munich* was censured, however, diverge from this familiar rebuke and suggest that much more is at stake than the artistic merit of the film. More than any other of Spielberg's films, *Munich* attracted ire for its *politics*, for what some viewed as a highly distorted treatment of terrorism and violence in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Critics thus decried what

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\* I would like to thank Sangjun Jeong and Dongshin Yi for their insightful comments on my argument.

1) Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-drugs-and-rock-'n'-roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 343-344.

they saw as “a shocking reluctance to distinguish murderers from their murdered victims—or perhaps not a reluctance at all but rather a deliberate attempt to suggest that all were equally victims,” as Gabriel Schoenfeld, writing for the conservative *Commentary*, puts it.<sup>2)</sup> For critics like Schoenfeld, however, the gist of the matter lies elsewhere, in how Spielberg’s endeavor to portray “the way vengeance and violence—even necessary, justified violence—corrupt both their victims and their perpetrators,”<sup>3)</sup> and how that endeavor ultimately turns into a vilification of the state in general and, more specifically, the State of Israel. In language that supplants earlier protests against the lack of nuance and ambiguity in Spielberg’s films with the accusation that *Munich* distorts the Manichean character of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Schoenfeld reproaches *Munich* as a “blatant attack on Israel in virtually every way, shape, and form.”<sup>4)</sup> Schoenfeld’s harsh words

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- 2) Gabriel Schoenfeld, “Spielberg’s ‘Munich,’” *Commentary*, February 2006, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/spielberg%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cmunich%E2%80%9D/>; see also David Brooks, “What ‘Munich’ Left Out,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2005, [http://select.nytimes.com/2005/12/11/opinion/11brooks.html?\\_r=1](http://select.nytimes.com/2005/12/11/opinion/11brooks.html?_r=1); Leon Wieseltier, “Hits,” *The New Republic*, December 19, 2005, <http://www.tnr.com/article/washington-diarist-21>. For positive reviews of the film see, for instance, Richard Schickel, “Spielberg Takes On Terror,” *Time*, December 4, 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1137679,00.html>; Roger Ebert, Review of *Munich*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 23, 2005, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051222/REVIEWS/51214004>; David Ansen, “Catch and Kill Them If You Can,” *Newsweek*, December 19, 2005, 64. For a review of the reception of the film, see Nigel Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 359-375.
- 3) Schoenfeld quotes here Michelle Goldberg’s favorable review of the film; see Goldberg, “The war on ‘Munich,’” *Salon.com*, Dec. 20, 2005, <http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/feature/2005/12/20/munich/index.html>.
- 4) Schoenfeld, “Spielberg’s ‘Munich.’”

betray great anxiety, and in what follows I shall try and trace that anxiety's source.

One does not have to subscribe to Schoenfeld's vehement political condemnation of Spielberg's film to note that his critique does hit the mark. For, as I shall submit, one of *Munich*'s central themes is indeed the manifest suspicion of the role played by the state and its security apparatuses. Still, Spielberg's suspicion of the state is not limited to *Munich* and characterizes, I would suggest, his directorial output as a whole. Indeed, many of his films from at least the early 1990s on—films as disparate as *The Terminal* (2004), *Minority Report* (2002), *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and *Amistad* (1997) come to mind here—seem to revolve on one particular question: do the measures taken by the state and carried out by its legal and security apparatuses truly mete out justice?<sup>5)</sup> Does not the willingness of the state to initiate violence either in its own protection or under the guise of protecting its citizens undermine the ability of its citizens to claim justice? And what is the nature of this justice?

The articulation of the question in *Munich*, however, is unique and radical insofar as Hollywood cinema is concerned. Whereas in Spielberg's films the state is commonly figured by the United States and its apparatuses, in *Munich* the state takes the guise of the State

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5) My argument here is thus more radical than Fredrick Wasser's who, in a recent book, contends that Spielberg's films have always presented "distrust of institutions" (Frederick Wasser, *Spielberg's America* [Cambridge: Polity, 2010], 6) or "general loss of respect for authority" (Ibid., 71). Whereas my paper focus on the representation of the State of Israel and the US in Spielberg's film, I argue that he directs his critique at the state itself, and not simply at its agencies.

of Israel.<sup>6)</sup> The audience is thus lead to ask (and here we borrow the title of Claude Lanzmann's 1973 film): *Pourquoi Israel?*

This query—*why Israel*—might explain why Spielberg's *Munich* appears to have raised more anxiety than any of his other films, at least among some of its viewers. For Spielberg explicitly links Israel's existence to the cataclysmic Jewish history of the twentieth century and, more specifically, to the Jewish Holocaust. As he has Golda Meir—the Israeli Prime Minister who ordered the assassination campaign of Palestinians in Europe that inspired *Munich*—say early in the film: “It's the same as Eichmann [...] Ambushed and slaughtered again. While the rest of the world is playing games, Olympic torches and brass bands and dead Jews in Germany. And the world couldn't care less.” Thus, for Spielberg—as it is for Lanzmann—the question of the state, inasmuch as that state is embodied in the State of Israel, cannot be dissociated from the fate of Jews in Europe between 1933-1945. Spielberg himself, as is well recognized, is one of the figures of the U.S. entertainment industry most identified with the subject, thanks in large part to his 1993 Academy Award Winner *Schindler's List*.<sup>7)</sup> Consequently, I suggest, *Munich* should be viewed

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6) One need only to recall here the paranoia films of the early 1970s, like Allan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974) and *All the President's Men* (1976) or Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), though one can go much further back to such comedies as Frank Capra's *You Can't Take It with You* (1938) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939).

7) As is well known, Spielberg's investment in the cinematic representation of the Jewish Holocaust did not end with this film. He used the profits of *Schindler's List* to set up the Shoah Foundation, an archive of filmed testimonies of Holocaust survivors. He further served as the executive producer of several documentaries on the subject: the 1996 *Survivors of the Holocaust*, 1997 *The Lost Children of Berlin*, the 1998 Academy Award Winner *The Last Days*, the

in the context of that earlier film.

The linkage between the two films was not lost on those who reviewed the later one. As Robert Ebert notes, “The director of ‘Schindler’s List,’ the founder of the Shoah Foundation, the most successful and visible Jew in the world of film, has placed himself between Israel and the Palestinians, looked at decades of terrorism and reprisal, and had one of his characters conclude, ‘There is no peace at the end of this.’” More than Ebert’s particular conception of *Munich*, what is of interest here is the link he suggests between *Schindler’s List*, *Munich* and Spielberg’s subject position. For what renders *Munich* significant, Ebert contends, is not so much the director’s unmatched position within the U.S. entertainment industry—which Ebert elides, presumably because it is self-evident—but, rather, his investment in the Jewish Holocaust alongside his religio-ethnic identity. From this perspective, *Munich* should be viewed first and foremost as reflecting its creator’s subject position. Thus, before I turn to deal specifically with *Munich* and *Schindler’s List*, a few words on this matter are in order.

If anything, Ebert’s words point at the centrality of the director’s preoccupation with the Jewish Holocaust for this subject position. It indeed seems that the director’s avowed position as an American Jew galvanized in the process of making *Schindler’s List*.<sup>8)</sup> “For him,” writes John H. Richardson in 1994 in an apparent paraphrase of Spielberg himself, “the story of Oskar Schindler is the definition of

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2006 *Spell Your Name*, as well as all of the films included in the 2002 *Broken Silence* miniseries. Here I limit my discussion to *Schindler’s List*.

8) See also Morris, *The Cinema of Stephen Spielberg*, 214-217.

the labor of love, a tribute to his Jewish heritage and to the heritage of black-and-white film, as well as the struggle to free himself from the commercial brilliance that has made him the most successful filmmaker of all time.”<sup>9)</sup> Spielberg’s words (via Richardson) interestingly conflate Jewish heritage and film heritage and probe the exchange between these two and the director’s position within the film industry. These comments suggest that one should view his cinematic production from the early 1990s on doubly, both as reflecting his central position in the U.S. entertainment industry and through a religio-ethnic prism.

This is all the more true—as Ebert’s review suggests—of *Munich*. Consequently, the film should be assessed both as reflecting the way mainstream U.S. media has addressed key contemporary issues, such as terrorism and the “War on Terror,” and as mediating between the perspective of American Jews and that of the “general”—i.e. white Christian-US audience. The film should be assessed, that is, as an endeavor to mediate between two modes of identification that are not necessarily interchangeable or even alike. This endeavor is symptomatic of the subject position of American Jews inasmuch as it explores the relationship between the two perceived pillars of Jewish American identity formation—Israel and the Jewish Holocaust—on the one hand, and the US on the other.<sup>10)</sup> It is, indeed, symptomatic inasmuch as it sets Jewish American identity in between the State of Israel and the

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9) Lester D. Friedman and Brent Notbohm, *Steven Spielberg: Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 158.

10) The term “American Jewish identity” is misleading for it obscures more complicated modes of Jewish identity in America, such as the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox (i.e. Hassidic). The latter is beyond the scope of my argument here.

United States; the relationship of Jews to the state thus becomes the primary means of figuring their identity.

One should note in this context that at least in some of its aspects *Munich* stands out in the landscape of mainstream features made in the aftermath of 9/11. Whereas numerous features have sought to probe the impact of al-Qaeda's attacks on U.S. soil and the subsequent U.S. "War on Terror," few filmmakers have associated it directly with the Jewish Holocaust as Spielberg does, though the association was not absent from political rhetoric, analysis and news coverage of the attacks and their aftermath.<sup>11)</sup> In this respect, Spielberg's film presents an affinity not so much with its contemporaneous U.S. films as with earlier Hollywood renditions of Israeli history, many of which were directed by some of Hollywood's most prominent Jews. *Munich* should thus be juxtaposed, first and foremost, with Otto Preminger's 1960 *Exodus*, as well as with Melville Shavelson's 1966 *Cast a Giant Shadow* and Daniel Mann's *Judith*, released that same year. To view Spielberg's cinematic production in this context is not merely to point at Hollywood's continued endeavor from the 1950s on to turn Jewish history in Europe and the Middle East of the twentieth century—ostensibly far removed from the concerns of most Americans—into a paradigmatic American story.<sup>12)</sup> It also allows one to trace the recent changes in

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11) The best known conscious endeavor to establish a link in public opinion between the "War on Terror" and the cataclysm of World War II is, of course, the term "the Axis of Evil," used by President George W. Bush in his State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002.

12) This is the main argument of Judith Doneson, in her *The Holocaust in American Film*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

the perspective of American Jews on that history.

Indeed, *Exodus*—a fictionalized account of the emergence of the State of Israel—is crucial to any discussion of the host of questions that are of interest to us here. The film sought to align the American audience (white, protestant, middle class) with the Israeli cause and, more specifically, with the military campaign to establish a Jewish independent state in Mandatory Palestine. Its main plot line thus revolves on the conversion of Kitty Fremont (played by Eva Marie Saint)—a “representative” American inasmuch as she is a white, blond, Presbyterian woman from a small town in Indiana—from her mild distaste of Jews into a whole-hearted investment in the Jewish military struggle in Mandatory Palestine. Central to that conversion is Kitty’s encounter with Holocaust survivors, whose plight and struggles she joins. The film thus parallels the story of Kitty’s conversion with the story of the survivors’ miserable existence in a makeshift camp in Cyprus, a camp constructed by the British mandatory authorities in an effort to curb the flow of Jewish refugees to Palestine. Kitty’s conversion thus turns into the story of the survivors’ daring escape from that camp and their ultimate arrival in Palestine—an escape orchestrated by the Jewish resistance movement in Palestine—and their ultimate immersion in the military struggle in Palestine, fighting against both the British colonial presence and hostile Arab forces. The film thus turns the suffering of Jews in Europe into the moral justification of the Israeli cause. It also presents those who object to that cause, whether British or Arab, as yet another embodiment of the Nazis of old.<sup>13)</sup>

Yet *Exodus* is of significance not only for its plot, but for its style

as well. For in its Super Panavision 70 widescreen, soaring musical score, and thrilling action sequences (by the standards of the day), it partakes in Hollywood's "spectacular cinema," an important precedent to the blockbuster style of immersion that evolved in the 1970s and of which Spielberg was one of the primary exponents. As Geoff King puts it:

Big widescreen cinema claims to fill the viewer's vision. Multichannel hi-fi sound [...] adds significantly to the impression of immersion in a three-dimensional experience. Viewers are assaulted by a brand of spectacle that might amount to sheer space and kinetics; to loudness that can be felt as bodily vibration, and brightness that makes the eyes contract. Special effects occasionally become sequences of almost abstract audio-visual 'impact', the specific or detailed motivated realism of which may be less than clear. The viewer is sold the illusion of being transported into the world on-screen, of *experiencing* more directly the moments which [...] are often those of the frontier or its analogues, moments of direct engagement with extremity of character within the fiction.<sup>14)</sup>

*Exodus* serves as a prime example of how to tie the immersive techniques and themes of spectacular cinema to an explicit political end. Spielberg would pick up this lesson and apply it *Schindler's List*

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13) On *Exodus*, see Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity politics on the Israeli screen* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2001), 1-15; Rachel Weissbrod, "'Exodus' as a Zionist melodrama," *Israel Studies* 4, no. 1 (1999): 129-152.

14) Geoff King, *Spectacular narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 33. For a brief characterization of Spielberg's style, an heir to classical spectacular cinema, see Wasser, *Spielberg's America*, 61-65. For a more detailed discussion of Spielberg's contribution to the blockbuster style, see Warren Buckland, *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

and, even more than that, to *Munich*—but not without radically revising both cinematic epic narrative and spectacular cinema. Herein, no doubt, is the source of the resistance to the latter film of some of Israel’s advocates.

### ***Schindler’s List***

Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* relates the story of Oscar Schindler, an ethnic German businessman, who saved the lives of more than a thousand Jews during World War II by employing them in his factories. The film bears striking similarities to Preminger’s *Exodus*, for like that film it revolves on the conversion of a white Christian—significantly a capitalist entrepreneur, a figure central to the US ethos, and one with whom American audiences could identify—into a sympathetic and involved participant in the plight of Jews. Spielberg was indeed applauded for so capably turning the destruction of European Jews into a film that is both historically accurate and with a wide appeal. Yet he was also severely censured for producing kitsch in molding these horrific historical events as a trite Hollywood melodrama.<sup>15)</sup>

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15) See, for instance Yosefa Loshitzky, ed., *Spielberg’s Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler’s List* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) and, in particular, Miriam Hansen’s insightful summary of the critique leveled against Spielberg (Miriam Hansen, “Schindler’s List Is Not Shoah: Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,” in *Spielberg’s Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler’s list*, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997], 77-103); Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 140-149; Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of*

One of the faults of *Schindler's List* pointed out by Spielberg's detractors is the denouement of the plot and the conclusion of the film. What is commonly missed in discussion of the film, however, is its relation to the concluding scene of *Exodus*. In the latter, Jewish troops bury in one grave Taha, their Palestinian ally, and Karen, a teenage Jewish refugee, both murdered by Palestinians who, the film suggests, are instructed and motivated by ex-Nazi officers. At the open grave, Ari Ben-Canaan (played by Paul Newman) delivers an emotional eulogy:

We of all people should no longer be surprised when death reaches out to us. With the world's insanity and our own slaughtered millions, we should be used to senseless killing. But I am not used to it. I cannot and will not get used to it. I look at these two people, and I want to howl like a dog. I want to shout "murder" so that the whole world will hear it and never forget it. [...] A few miles from here, people are fighting and dying and we must join them. But I swear on the bodies of these two people that the day will come when Arab and Jew will share in a peaceful life this land that they have always shared in death. Taha, old friend and very dear brother. Karen child of light, daughter of Israel: Shalom.

As Ernest Gold's Academy-award-winning musical score dramatically swells, the characters leave the grave to mount moving trucks that drive towards the horizon—that of the newly established State of

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*Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 125-158; Judith Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, 197-215; Annette Insdorf, *Indelible shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, 3rd ed., (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 258-264; Lawrence Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the present: The Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005): 207-215.

Israel. *Exodus* thus ends, like so many classical Hollywood films, with the establishment of a new world order in the aftermath of great violence, a world order embodied by the new state, which Preminger and his scriptwriter, Dalton Trumbo, endeavor to invest with a universal value that elides the concrete grounds for national conflict in the region. The conclusion of Spielberg's *Schindler's List* presents discomfort with such a resolution, a discomfort that would become fully articulated, as we shall see, in *Munich*.

In fact, in *Schindler's List* Spielberg appears to hesitate between four different endings, as if he did not quite know how to enclose and frame the story and as if—consciously or not—he was seeking to avoid the effect of an integrated conclusion such as *Exodus*'. Spielberg's film thus ends with some twelve minutes of protracted endings (*Exodus*' final scene, by contrast, runs a little over five minutes). Here a rather schematic account of these endings will have to suffice.

Ending #1: the conclusion of Schindler's story. Schindler takes leave of "his" Jews. After he is presented with a ring on which his "workers" have engraved a Hebrew saying, "Whoever saves one life saves the world entire," Schindler breaks down weeping for not having saved more Jews. "His" Jews reassure him that he has done all he could, undress his business suit and dress him up with the striped suit of the concentration inmates, push him to the car, and the car drives away. Importantly, the scene plays against the background of an orchestral arrangement of the film's musical theme, which was composed by John Williams and for which the solo part is played by the Israeli-American violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman.

Ending #2: Schindler's Jews are awakened by sunlight the next morning. A Soviet dragoon arrives to announce their liberation by the Red Army. "Where should we go?" one asks the dragoon. "Don't go east, that's for sure, they hate you there" the dragoon answers, and continues: "I wouldn't go west either, if I were you." When another Jew notes that they could use some food, the dragoon points at the nearby town. Cut. A wide-angle long shot of a line of people stretched along the horizon moving forward and approaching the camera—the Schindler Jews as they walk in the direction of the town. Another cut takes us to a medium shot of some of the Jews as they walk forward. On the music track, the Israeli song "Jerusalem of Gold" takes the place of Williams' score.

Ending #3: As the Israeli song continues to play on the soundtrack, a short scene shows the hanging of Amon Göth and the desolated Schindler factory, while subtitles inform us of their fates after the war.

Ending #4: As the Israeli song continues to play on the soundtrack, Spielberg cuts back to the wide-angle long shot of the filmic "Schindler's Jews" approaching the camera, and then cuts to a color documentary shot of the actual Jews saved by Schindler at the present (2005). He cuts again to Schindler's tombstone in Jerusalem and to the real-life Jews Schindler saved, now accompanied by the actors who played them in the film, as they pass by the tombstone and place little stones upon it. Simultaneously, the musical score switches back to Perlman playing the original film score.

*Exodus* ends by pointing at the horizon where, as Ari Ben-Canaan puts it, the battle for the new nation state is one and the same with

the battle for universal camaraderie and peace. The musical theme of the film that accompanies the final images of the trucks carrying the film's characters towards that horizon suggests that that is where the dramatic progression of the narrative as a whole culminates. The endings of *Schindler's List*, on the other hand, likewise point at the horizon, but what that horizon holds for the survivors is not as obvious as most detractors of the film would have it. For that horizon is *not* an integral part of the dramatic progression of the film, as the switch from the musical score to the Israeli song (and later, in the fourth scene of the ending, from black and white to color, and from fiction to documentary footage) suggests.

Since the music track plays such a conspicuous role in this conclusion to the story of Schindler, a few words on "Jerusalem of Gold" are in order. Written by Naomi Shemer, one of Israel's most popular songwriters, it was first performed in May 1967. Some three weeks later, on June 7, 1967, Israeli paratroopers took over the Old City of Jerusalem. The radio broadcast of the fighting over the city culminated in the gathering of the paratroopers in front of the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, where the Chief Military Rabbi recited a prayer and blew the *shofar*; immediately afterwards the soldiers spontaneously began to sing "Jerusalem of Gold." In the aftermath of the war, the song became so popular that there were repeated proposals to make it Israel's official anthem, instead of *Hatikva*.<sup>16)</sup>

As Spielberg's detractors especially in Israel were quick to note,

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16) Dan Almagor, "Eikh nolad ha-shir 'yerushalayim shel zahav'," *Ha-doar* 75, no. 7, (1996): 14-16.

the song is not only very clearly identified with the State of Israel, but more than that, with its expansionism, which was a cause for much political consternation, especially in the wake of the first Palestinian uprising and the budding Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. In response, for the Israeli release of the film, Spielberg replaced “Jerusalem of Gold” with the song “A Walk to Caesarea,” better known as “Eli, Eli” (“My God, My God”), penned by the Jewish Hungarian poet turned paratrooper Hannah Szenes, who was captured by the Germans while on mission behind enemy lines and executed.<sup>17)</sup>

*Schindler's List* thus seems to perform a double move. At their liberation the Jews appear to be left not only homeless, but stateless, without a place to which they can go. As the Soviet dragoon instructs them: “Don’t go east, that’s for sure, they hate you there. I wouldn’t go west either, if I were you.” Yet the Israeli song that plays as Schindler’s Jews stretch along the horizon suggests that this non-territorialization is only temporary and the near future bears the promise of a reterritorializing in the Jewish State. In this, Spielberg appears to reproduce the narrative strategy of *Exodus*.

Surprisingly, however, Spielberg does not fully embrace the ideal of the State of Israel and, in fact, seems rather apprehensive about it. This apprehension is most evident in what the film actually shows us

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17) See, for instance, Omer Bartov, “Spielberg’s Oskar: Hollywood Tries Evil,” in *Spielberg’s Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler’s List*, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 45 and Haim Bresheeth, “The Great Taboo Broken: Reflections on the Israeli Reception of *Schindler’s List*,” in *Spielberg’s Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler’s List*, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 205.

of the State of Israel. Our view of that state is limited to a cemetery in Jerusalem, where Schindler had asked to be buried. Quite disturbingly, Schindler's tombstone appears to be located in an unadorned patch, overgrown with noxious weeds and thorns, a far cry from the idyllic landscapes commonly shown in this context. Whereas the State indeed acknowledged him in 1958 as a "Righteous among the Nations," it appears to care little for his remains. The switch back from "Jerusalem of Gold" to the melancholic film theme in this final sequence appears to me as a pointed critique of the state, albeit a hesitant one.

Such a critique could be traced to the historical circumstances that shaped the Jewish-American cultural sphere in the early 1980s, when Spielberg first started to develop the script for *Schindler's List*, circumstances curiously glossed over in the scholarship on the film. Spielberg first encountered Schindler's story in Thomas Keneally's novel *Schindler's Ark*, which was published in October 1982, and which won the Booker Prize for fiction that year.<sup>18</sup>) One cannot explain the reception of that novel in the U.S. as well as Spielberg's investment in that story without reference to Laurence Jarvik's film *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die*, which was released earlier the same year. Though quite basic, even primitive cinematically speaking, and thus as far as a film can be from spectacular cinema—and although its appeal was for this reason limited for Jewish literati—it shattered the spectacular illusion of films such as *Exodus*. Vincent Canby, reviewing the film for *The New York Times*, observed:

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18) Ian Freer, *The Complete Spielberg* (London: Virgin, 2001): 220-237.

It's not a story to be proud of. It's all about priorities, grand strategies, intramural disputes and lives lost with the loss of time. Or, as it's put by the still-angry Peter Bergson of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, most of the victims could have been saved had the United States Government and American Jewish leaders been more responsive to the immediate situation, had they been bolder and less fearful of their constituencies.<sup>19)</sup>

*Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die* juxtaposes archival footage from Billy Wilder's documentary *Death Mills*, shot upon the liberation of concentration camps in Western Europe, with interviews with U.S. politicians and civil servants and Zionist functionaries in the U.S., to explore the American response to the plight of European Jews during World War II. Indeed, what is interesting about the film is the way it conflates the *lack of response* of the Roosevelt administration and the Zionist leadership with the news of the extermination of millions of Jews. Controversial at first, *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die* was quickly credited as an important source for our understanding of U.S. immigration policy and of Zionist politics in the U.S. during the 1930s and 1940s.

The impact of *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die* on Holocaust discourse in the U.S. in general and on Spielberg in particular seems to me clear. For is it merely coincidental that a few months after the release of Jarvik's film Spielberg purchased the rights to a story of rescue and survival that explores the ability of an individual to choose to act morally in the face of criminal malignancy and general

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19) Vincent Canby, "American Roles during the Holocaust," *The New York Times*, April 19, 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/19/movies/american-roles-during-the-holocaust.html>.

apathy to the plight of the Jews? Is it merely coincidental that over and against the implication of both the U.S. government *and* the Jewish Leadership in North America in the extermination of Jews in Europe, Spielberg turns to a story that altogether sidesteps the question of the role played in the destruction of Jews by warring states in general, and by the allied states in particular?

It is in this context that one has to view the sentimentality, admittedly so dominant in the final sequence of *Schindler's List*. Spielberg is often censured for the sentimentality of his films. His detractors argue that such sentimentality does not merely come at the expense of his ability to tackle his themes of choice with any complexity or nuance, but also undercuts whatever critical edge his films may have. These films—so his detractors maintain—end up reaffirming, even celebrating conservative values and simplistic view of the world. Yet Spielberg's sentimentality here seems much less celebratory than it is often made to be. In fact, I suggest that we view it in Schillerean terms, as a critical rather than as affirmative narrative strategy.

For Schiller in his tract "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," the sentimental is the articulation of a crisis of politics and civilization, of an aesthetic response to the social and political upheavals of the day. The sentimental, he argues, marks the search for a lost harmonious moral existence, a sensuous unity of culture and nature that, since it cannot be found in the morally and aesthetically corrupt present, is sought in the past. Within the sentimental, the past—as it appears to humans in the beauty of nature—becomes a moral edict:

They [a humble flower, a brook, a mossy rock, the chirping of birds, the humming of trees] *are* what we *were*; they are what we *should become* once more. We were nature like them, and our culture should lead us along the path of reason and freedom back to nature. Thus they depict our lost childhood, something that remains ever dearest to us, and for this reason they fill us with a certain melancholy. Because at the same time they portray our supreme perfection in an ideal sense, they transport us into a state of sublime emotions.<sup>20)</sup>

The sentimental is formed by the endeavor to reconcile the forces that threaten the harmonious unity of the inhabitant of the modern state. For Schiller, the sentimental desire for such reconciliation, acknowledging as he does that it cannot be realized in the current state of human civilization and can only be pointed at in its absence through art, is the only guarantee of human freedom. Freedom depends, that is, on an endeavor to realize an ever-elusive ideal.

The sentimentality of *Schindler's List*, as well as of the later *Munich* (alongside such films as *Terminal*, *Minority Report*, and *War of the World*) appears to arise out of a similar impetus. Indeed, the two films seem to decry the broken promise of modern democracies be it the United States or the State of Israel—to uphold liberty, equality and justice; they decry, in other words, the incommensurability between political rhetoric and real politics. Cinematically, Spielberg's sentimentality emerges as a both an appeal to the spectacular cinema of the 1950s and 1960s and, simultaneously as rejection of such cinema. More precisely, sentimentality emerges as an intertextual

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20) Friedrich Schiller, "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," *Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 180-181.

allusion to the effect of spectacular cinema of the 1950s and 1960s (as embodied by the final scene of *Exodus*), an allusion, that is, to the promise of the coalescence of spectacle and political ideal, of narrative logic and the nation state. Still, notwithstanding the allure of such coalescence, Spielberg's films fail to realize it, indeed, they point at their own failure to do so, for the logic of their narrative appears to undercut its very possibility.<sup>21</sup>) In this sense, Spielberg's sentimentality suggests that his films have to be viewed as studies in the failure of the genre in which they are made, a failure that cannot be mastered from within the rules of that genre. Herein perhaps is the source for highbrow critics' discomfort, so often articulated, with these films.

### ***Munich***

*Munich* is arguably the film in which Spielberg's double apprehension of the United States and of the State of Israel receives its clearest articulation. The film takes place on horizon of the nation state at which *Exodus* only points but never probes. It is certainly not coincidental that Spielberg names that horizon "Munich," and so links it directly not only to the murder of the Israeli athletes, but also to the devastation of European Jewry perpetrated by Germany.

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21) Spielberg's films of the 1990s and 2000s thus radically diverge from the films of other practitioners of the blockbuster style such as George Lucas, Ridley Scott, James Cameron, Robert Zemeckis, John McTiernan, and Peter Jackson; they even diverge from his own earlier films in that genre, such as *Jews* (1975), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Arch* (1981), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), and *Jurassic Park* (1993).

But here Spielberg depicts that horizon as radically transformed. Indeed, though still permeated with violence, Jews are no longer the prime victims of that violence. Although they are still haunted by the specter of the Jewish holocaust, they become active players (rather than merely passive victims) in a game in which all simultaneously perpetrate and are subject to violence.

“A historical fiction,” as Spielberg has called it, *Munich* depicts the dirty war of murder and assassination taking place between Palestinian radical groups and the Israeli *Mossad*.<sup>22)</sup> More specifically, the film follows the endeavors of Avner Kaufman (played by Eric Bana), the leader of a *Mossad* hit squad that is assigned to track down and eliminate a Palestinian suspected of masterminding and carrying out the murder of eleven Israeli athletes during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich. Avner initially embraces the claim of his operators that, in the face of unchecked Palestinian terrorism, this course of action is both called for and just. Yet the more his mission is extended, the more suspicious he becomes of the portrayals he is provided of the Palestinian targets and their involvement in anti-Israeli activities. Are they truly as guilty as charged? Spielberg never fully discredits the indictments leveled against the Palestinians on Israel’s most wanted list. He does, however, illustrate the murky reality in which Avner finds himself. As Avner loses sight of his moral ground, he not only develops what the film presents as an all-too-justified paranoia but, more importantly from our perspective, an all-too-justified mistrust of his operators.

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22) On the genre of *Munich*, see Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg*, 362-368.

As noted in the introduction to this paper, Spielberg's *Munich* attracted the ire of some for equating the Israeli *Mossad* agents with terrorists. Others have lauded the film precisely for its portrayal of the moral ambiguity of the war against so-called terrorists. As in the case of *Schindler's List*, both proponents and detractors of the film miss its critical edge in its double condemnation of both Israel and the U.S.—the two states most identified as “Jewish polities” at the present. In a reversal of *Exodus*, *Munich* elaborates on what was merely hinted at the end of *Schindler's List* and presents the Jew as once again homeless, without a place to go. Yet whereas *Schindler's List* points at some hope for future refuge in a Jewish state, mistrusted as it may be, in *Munich* for the possibility of such refuge is renounced as an illusion.

Here I wish to comment on two scenes. Towards the end of the first third of the film, following the assassination of Mahmoud Hamshari, the PLO representative in Paris, Avner arrives surreptitiously in Israel to see his wife, Daphna, who is about to give birth. Avner paces the hospital room with his newborn daughter in his hands, and here is the dialogue:

AVNER. I want you to move. For a time. I've arranged a place for us in Brooklyn. I can't come back to Israel. I don't know how long for—[...] I can see more of you this way.

DAPHNA. Don't you want your daughter to be an Israeli?

AVNER. She'll always be an Israeli.

DAPHNA. But in Brooklyn she'll just be another homeless Jew.

AVNER. I cannot do what I am doing if I cannot see you.

DAPHNA. What are you doing? [when Avner fails to answer, she continues]

Don't do it then. This is our home.  
 AVNER. You're the only home I ever had.

The scene involves a *double entendre*, and quite a coarse one at that. On the face of it, the dialogue spells out Avner's commitment to his wife and family. Indeed, in this respect it seems to sit well within the Hollywood tradition that valorizes the American nuclear family, a tradition with which Spielberg is often associated. Simultaneously, however, the scene is quite radical, for it undoes the allegorical move that lies behind such valorization, the move that seeks to read the nation (and, more specifically, the American nation) in terms of the nuclear family. It does so, interestingly enough, both for Israel and for the United States. For the Jewish family in question here does not merely find itself pushed away from its nation state by the nature of its sacrifice and service to that state. It is also facing the certain prospect of perpetual homelessness, notwithstanding the status of New York City as the largest Jewish city in the world and America's celebration of itself as the protector of the persecuted—and of persecuted Jews in particular.

This intimate scene also points at the difficulty (more apparent here than in any other Spielberg film) of reconciling the coordinates of spectacular cinema, within which *Munich* is clearly situated, with the political reality of the modern nation state, which resists—so the film suggests—rendition in such spectacular terms. Spielberg indeed immerses the viewer in a thriller that explores what King described as “the frontier” and the extremity of character and action that shape it. Spielberg does so, however, only to suggest that the thrill the viewer

derives from this exploration—a thrill immeasurably enhanced by his spectacular style—leads not to a spectacular celebration of personal and political hope (which films like *Exodus* conflate) but, rather, to destruction. As in *Schindler's List* before it, *Munich's* critique is made visible at its very end, with its vision of the horizon.

When his mission is concluded, Avner goes first to Israel, to report to his operators. Nevertheless, and despite the pressure on him to continue his work for the *Mossad*, he quickly leaves the country to join his wife and daughter in Brooklyn. It appears that he mistrusts his past brothers-in-arm as much as he fears the revenge of his enemies. On the face of it, then, Brooklyn offers shelter from both. Yet the American suburb is no Promised Land for Avner and his family. Its streets—with their grainy, de-saturated look—are only too reminiscent of the streets of the European cities that served as a stage for the *Mossad* clandestine campaign. In fact, it is here that Avner experiences the full psychological impact of that campaign.

The very last scene of the film brings together again Avner and his Israeli operator Ephraim (played by Geoffrey Rush), who is trying to convince him to return to service. The scene is shot at the East River waterfront.

EPHRAIM. Do you think we would hurt your family?

AVNER. I think anyone is capable of anything. Did I commit murder? I want you to give me proof that everyone we killed had a hand in Munich/ [...] if these people committed crimes, we should have arrested them. Like Eichmann.

EPHRAIM. If these guys live, Israeli die. Whatever doubts you have, Avner, you know this is true. [...] You killed them for the sake of a

country you now choose to abandon. [...] You father is sick, your mother will be alone. You're a Sabra. Your wife and daughter are sabras. What I came to say is this: come home.

Avner declines but nevertheless asks Ephraim—as a fellow Jew—to break bread with him; Ephraim declines and leaves. As Avner turns and leave as well, the camera pans to a shot of the Manhattan skyline on the horizon, centering on the World Trade Center towers, blurred by distance and mist.

Like *Exodus* and *Schindler's List* before it, then, *Munich* ends by sentimentally pointing at the horizon. That horizon visually presents what Spielberg's American audience once *were*, what it would no doubt like to be once more, what it knows with the certainty of the impending ruination of the iconic towers of Manhattan's skyline that it can never become once more. This final shot further invites the spectator to conflate the past Israeli "War on Terror" with the present American one. Yet, the conflation of past and present, of Israel and the U.S., indeed, the suggestion that the U.S. and Israel face a common enemy and hence revert to similar tactics, does not cement an American-Israeli pact, as some Israeli and American pundits in the aftermath of 9/11 have hoped. On the contrary, that conflation serves to accentuate the radical alienation between Avner and both Israel and the U.S., indeed his hopeless state vis-à-vis both. Ultimately, the rift between him—and by extension, between the citizen—and the U.S./Israel appears to be unbridgeable. From the perspective of the State of Israel, Avner—the prime product of its hope and nourishment—has betrayed it. From Avner's perspective, the state was revealed

not as a shield and protector but as a menacing, murderous apparatus that uses its citizens for possibly nefarious ends and builds itself through their destruction. Indeed, the cynicism involved is so great that it undercuts not only the possibility of establishing a dialogue with one's enemy, but also of whatever natural bond Jews may have with each other.

### **Coda**

On June 10, 2010, Peter Beinart, former editor of *The New Republic*, published an essay in the *New York Review of Books*, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment." The essay caused somewhat of a scandal both among American Jews and—to a lesser extent—in Israel. Beinart writes:

Among American Jews today there are a great many Zionists, especially in the Orthodox world, people deeply devoted to the State of Israel. And there are a great many liberals, especially in the secular Jewish world, people deeply devoted to human rights for all people, Palestinians included. But the two groups are increasingly distinct. Particularly in the younger generations, fewer and fewer American Jewish liberals are Zionists; fewer and fewer American Jewish Zionists are liberal. Morally, American Zionism is in a downward spiral.<sup>23)</sup>

Beinart, an orthodox Jew and a Zionist, traces the growing alienation

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23) Peter Beinart, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment." *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment/?pagination=false>.

of American liberal Jews to Israel's recent jingoism and, in particular, to its continued failure to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a failure for which more and more liberal Jews blame Israel. Yet, if I am correct in tracing Spielberg's critique of Israel to his engagement with the story of Oscar Schindler, the heated debate stirred by Beinrat's words is not only somewhat misguided, but also belated. For it seems that the current crisis in the relationship of liberal American Jews with Israel may have begun much earlier, and its roots have little to do with either the Israeli Palestinian conflict or, indeed, with the present threat of terror in general. From this perspective, 9/11 and its aftermath played only a small role in shaping and forming the concern of American Jews. Clear it is that 9/11 did not work to align American Jews more closely with Israel, though for the duration of George W. Bush's presidency, it did appear to align the leadership of the U.S. more closely with Israel. If anything, it seems that the growing antagonism of liberal American Jews from President Bush's foreign policies translated itself to a more often expressed uneasiness with Israel's policies towards Palestinians. What the final scene of *Munich* does evince is that 9/11 provides a conceptual framework through which literati like Spielberg could translate these particular concerns to the general US public.

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■ 논문 투고일자: 2011. 4. 3

■ 심사(수정)일자: 2011. 4. 18

■ 게재 확정일자: 2011. 5. 13

## Abstract

# An American Reflection: Steven Spielberg, The Jewish Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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This paper examines Steven Spielberg's vision of the State of Israel and, to a lesser extent of the U.S., as presented in *Munich* (2005). The paper argues that Spielberg mounts a critique of the two states and their security apparatuses. The willingness of the two to resort to violence either in the name of their own protection or under the guise of protecting their citizens, *Munich* suggests, does not merely undercut their claim as democracies to embody the universal values of liberty and justice, but also the very well-being of their citizens.

Spielberg's mistrust of the state (and of the State of Israel in particular) is already hesitantly suggested more than a decade earlier in his treatment of the Jewish Holocaust in *Schindler's List* (1993). I trace this mistrust to two cinematic sources: Otto Preminger's *Exodus* (1960) and Laurence Jarvik's *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die* (1982). Whereas the former Hollywood epic sought to align American audiences with the State of Israel and its military campaigns, the latter documentary exposed the inaction of both the Roosevelt administration and the Zionist leadership in the face of the mass murder of European Jews during World War II. Spielberg's films could thus be seen as a revision—both in plot and in form—of Preminger's spectacular celebration of the State of Israel in light of Jarvik's damning revelations. *Exodus* turns the story of the rise of Israel out of the plight of Holocaust survivors into "spectacular cinema." Spielberg's films, on the other hand, and *Munich* in particular, suggest that spectacular cinema conceals the incommensurability between the plight of individuals and the logic that

guides the action of the state and its apparatuses. In that respect, Spielberg's films—considered prime examples of the latest incarnation of spectacular cinema—undercut their own logic of representation.

**Key Words**

Steven Spielberg, Laurence Jarvik, Otto Preminger, *Schindler's List*, *Munich*, *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die*, *Exodus*, The Jewish Holocaust, The State of Israel, The United States, Spectacular Cinema, Friedrich Schiller, The Sentimental, Peter Beinart, Terrorism, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict