

Question 4.

Films such as Schindler's List, Life is Beautiful and The Boy in The Striped Pyjamas take different approaches to the Holocaust. Are films such as The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas useful or problematic?

Gillian Walnes (GW):

It's been an interesting challenge with The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas, it's a good film, but it's not a historically accurate film and there has certainly been debates between those that teach history and those that teach citizenship about its value. I personally would not describe it necessarily as a film about the Holocaust. I would describe The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas as a film about growing up. So it's actually a fable, and it is a fable, that could be set in different scenarios, it could've been set on a slave ship, it could have been set in a Victorian workhouse, it's a fable about growing up. And certainly as a Holocaust film it does present difficulties historically because there are things that simply could not have happened, but I know it's been a very popular film, I know that it's been very well-received when it came out and the book also was very well-received by Holocaust survivors as well and I've spoken to a lot of survivors and children of survivors as well about the book, but I think one has to be aware that although it's a representation, it's not real, it couldn't have happened, I do think, as you said earlier Toby, it will engage curiosity particularly among young boys that again can identify with those two boys, that can relate to them. And if they want to find out more and they want to find out what actually *did* happen, that's good.

Dr. Toby Haggith (TH):

So one could say that from a moral position Schindler's List, Life is Beautiful, The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas, are trivialising this terrible story. And my response to that would be first of all, should we deny any artist the opportunity to find their way to articulate the Holocaust and of course we shouldn't and secondly we're not going to stop people doing it anyway and they're going to choose to find ways of articulating it and you can't ban that. And the other thing is, I was actually struck again when we had a debate at the Imperial War Museum about this very subject, how many Holocaust survivors actually said, you know, I don't mind a film like Life is Beautiful, yes it's a fable, but there are aspects of it that did reflect the experience of the Holocaust, the experience of people who were in concentration camps, they didn't really have a problem with it. I think their feeling was as long as somewhere there is access to a proper account of the Holocaust they were OK with allowing people to explore it in more metaphysical ways or more fantasy ways if you like, which are distilled or drawn away from this central kernel, the

central story. So I think as long as we find a way of giving people a true account, I'm OK with these problematic films and actually they're quite valuable because they often get to the heart of some of the things that we find problematic about the Holocaust that are controversial for us.

GW:

How many young people are going to sit through Claude Lanzmann's Shoah for nine-and-a-half hours? And the historical correctness of that film compared to getting them in to see the story of The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas or Schindler's List which can have an incredible impact and getting them engaging with it. I actually remember the impact that the American television series, Holocaust had when it came out in the late 1970s, people were talking, talking, talking about it and it actually resulted in the German government banning the statute of limitations which meant that war criminals could not be tried after 30 years after the end of the war. They overturned that because of the impact worldwide that that American...very "schmaltzy" but got to you on an emotional level and even talking to Jewish people that had learnt a lot about the Holocaust through seeing that mini-series on television.

TH:

The other thing I would say actually, the thing you have to remember is that even a film like Life is Beautiful or Schindler's List, to some extent they seem to run riot with the facts and there's often factual inaccuracies but a film like Shoah for example, has been criticised by many scholars and many Holocaust survivors and Holocaust experts because of the degree of manipulation that Claude Lanzmann brought to that film, I mean, he is notorious for bullying his witnesses, he's notorious for using various, actually very cinematic techniques, almost fictional techniques, that he incorporates in a very subtle way into his film making and in fact as Claude Lanzmann has gone on as a director, he's employed more techniques of re-enactment, or fictionalisation almost in order to get across his story, his account of the Holocaust. There are so many forms of representation, even some from which our perspective, or when compared with Schindler's List or Life is Beautiful, would seem the clear, unexpurgated documentary narrative account, we know that they are extremely problematic as well, I mean any representation can be problematised.