

Università degli Studi Roma Tre

**XXXI Convegno Internazionale di Studi Cinematografici**

**40 + 40 = 80 Years of Images about the Shoah (1945-1985-2025)**

a cura di Ivelise Perniola e Francesco Pitassio

17 - 18 novembre 2025

Dipartimento di Filosofia, Comunicazione e Spettacolo

Via Ostiense, 139

Museo Fondazione Shoah

Via del Portico d'Ottavia, 29

**Prima e dopo Shoah di Claude Lanzmann**

Martedì 18 novembre ore 16:00 – 17:45

***Probing the Limits of Holocaust Cinema Viewership: Schindler's List is not Shoah is not Spielberg's List***

Rebecca Ora (University of Birmingham)

In her 1996 article *Schindler's List is not Shoah*, Miriam Bratu Hansen discusses contrasting depictions of the Holocaust by Spielberg and Lanzmann. According to Hansen, Spielberg's use of the Classical Hollywood mode violates norms of depiction (according to Lanzmann, "to make up actors as corpses is obscene") while Lanzmann adheres to a respectful distance from the "line of fire" surrounding the Holocaust. Thirty years later, the circulation of these two pivotal films, the addition of countless cinematic renderings of the Holocaust, and shifts in modes of image generation and distribution (including social media platforms that pour gasoline onto Benjamin's "age of reproducibility"), demand that we revisit this comparison and the discourse surrounding the limits of "appropriate" representation of the Holocaust through the moving image. While neither *Shoah* nor *Schindler* features historical footage of Nazi atrocity, their status as vernacular Holocaust documents is practically unassailable. Lanzmann's refusal to use perpetrator-generated imagery impelled his 9.5+ hour film about witness testimony and the murky relationships of perpetratorship-survivorship and perpetratorship-bystanderism. Meanwhile, Spielberg's bloated epic seeks to supplant memory and archive alike with Hollywood drama and heroic pomp, as demonstrated through Omer Fast's metacinematic *Spielberg's List*. Hanson sketches the relationship between these two films as oppositional; Lanzmann's work maintains respectful distance while Spielberg is transgressive, radical, and perhaps offensive. In retrospect, however, *Shoah* is the more experimental of the two works and *Schindler* the seamless, mainstream, lauded monument to the past. I argue that, in relationship to Hayden White's discussion of the limits of acceptable modes of representation of the Holocaust, experimental cinematic techniques may be necessary, considering the fantasy of the Holocaust as unimaginable and unutterable. *Shoah* and *Schindler* alike might be treated as transgressive objects that test the boundaries of representation of an event whose depiction may always necessarily be "barbaric". Finally, I will discuss the circulation of Holocaust media online through the preponderance of "reaction videos" featuring YouTube influencers watching *Schindler's List* and crying. This phenomenon generates discomfort in its seemingly banal treatment of a film that, as a perceived surrogate for a genocidal event, is often granted special status. The differences between the purgative cinematic experience of *Schindler* and the clinical, durational endeavor of watching *Shoah* can be seen through contrasts in viewer response afforded by these reaction videos. My own 9.5 hour reaction video of me watching the entirety of *Shoah* as a durational performance

and experimental film enters the discourse surrounding not only the politics of depiction of the Holocaust, but also the politics of viewership in second- and thirdhand witness that separate these two films. While the length and complexity of *Shoah* confers a sense of challenge upon the viewer, the emotional catharsis expected of a Holocaust film since *Schindler* is continuously withheld by Lanzmann (and Glazer) to create a cinematic experience that refuses the viewer the satisfying emotional suffering that alignment with a Manichean victim would allow.

**Rebecca Ora** works across video, performance, installation and writing to address taboo, controversial and urgent subject matter--often through dark comedy. Her hybrid theory-practice doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Santa Cruz in Film & Digital Media is titled *Barbaric Poetry: Comedy, Obscenity & Art About the Holocaust*. At California College of the Arts, her Master's of Fine Arts thesis film, *Watching Lillian*, was awarded the Toby Devan Lewis Fellowship. She has exhibited at the Contemporary Jewish Museum (San Francisco, CA); Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco, CA); Chashama Art Space (Brooklyn, NY); Steven Wolf Fine Arts (San Francisco, CA); Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions/LACE (Los Angeles, CA) and Bergamot Gallery (Los Angeles, CA), among many others. Her writing has appeared in museum publications, journals and books worldwide, including the peer-reviewed anthologies *Constructions of the Real: Intersections of Practice and Theory in Documentary-Based Filmmaking* (2022), and the forthcoming *Laughter in War*. Currently living in the UK as an Assistant Professor of Digital Media and Communications at the University of Birmingham, she identifies as a diasporic bicoastal American.