

LECTURAS PARA CLASE

Jews in Nazi Cinema: Films propagate the Holocaust

Ahmed .Z. Albasyouni

The Holocaust and its cultural meaning

Graduate School for Social Research (GSSR), IFIS/PAN

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Abstract

This paper examines 3 Nazi anti-Jews films, *The Eternal Jew*, *The Jew Süß* and *The Rothschilds*, which were produced in 1940 during the reign of Adolf Hitler (1933-1945). Questioning the extent of influence these productions created on spectators against the Jewry. Moreover, the essay attempts to connect these visual representations of the Jews with theoretical frame of anti-Semitism. This includes the anti-Jewish stereotypes. Jews have been portrayed in some characteristics through Nazi films that propagated some anti-Semitic historical myths or facts to German spectators.

The analyzed films vary from documentary to feature film. They raise questions of organized propagandistic plan. The theory used in this paper is discourse analysis. The thesis here is that propaganda films in Nazi Germany legitimized the final solution of the Jewry, however,

killings started since at least the crystal night in November 1938. Other societal factors composed the context of the Holocaust such as fear, totalitarianism and ultra-nationalism pride, which are enhanced by these films.

This paper gives a background about the 3 films, and then demonstrates the concept of stereotypes and its relation with anti-Semitism. Moreover, analyzing the messages of the three films together and each film respectively. Finally, the paper comes to conclusion that these three films facilitated the killing of Jews to some extent but it was not the only incentive.

Introduction

Films in the period before and during WWII have influenced audiences significantly. In cinemas, films demonstrated the developments of the world through news bulletins, features and documentaries. Nazi Germany was a contributor in this field whether by producing films or being depicted in others' films. Among these motion pictures, come the Holocaust propagandistic works produced by the ministry of propaganda in the Third Reich headed by Joseph Goebbels. These productions were either glorifying the Aryan race or demonizing the Jews or both, creating this polarization between self and the other. This established a dehumanized image making the Holocaust customary in the masses' minds. (Baron 2010)

Hitler and his government defined the purity of their so-called Aryan race through different ways such as films. They did use cinema to prove this claim of superiority and purity. Therefore it helped them to define the other too, the Jews in this regard. (Welch, 1983)

Goebbels, Hitler's minister of propaganda always believed in the strength of motion pictures.

He knew that moving images are more influential than written or spoken words. (Doob, 1950)

The Nazi ministry of propaganda used the power of film in spreading its anti-Semitic messages. Therefore in 1938 film production companies were asked to produce a film promoting the hatred towards Jews, no matter what the plots or the titles are. (Hull, 1969)

The following analyzed films manifest how anti Semitic stereotypes of the Jewry facilitated their mass murder.

Three Anti- Semitic films in 1940

Historically, the first anti-Semitic Nazi film was produced in 1939¹. In 1940, three other films - a documentary and two feature films - were screened. These motion pictures were screened in the middle of WWII when Germany had the upper hand in Europe after

¹ - The first German anti-Semitic film was (Robert and Bertram), directed by Hans H. Zerlett. For more information about this film, David Stewart Hull's book mentioned in reference list could be helpful.

² - A documentary is a form of visual art which describe visually and in motion the daily lives of ordinary people aesthetically:
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/john-grierson/>
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/film/gaines/documentary_tradition/Eitzen.pdf

While feature or fictional, or narrative film is an art format which is established on dramatization of humans' lives but in imagined way in most cases, however using historical events or depicting people's biographies are quite known in the field:
<https://www.videouniversity.com/video-how-to/whats-the-difference-between-documentary-and-feature-film/>

concurring Poland, France, Belgium, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Austria and Czechoslovakia.

This was part of a vision in Nazi Germany to produce a trilogy against Jewry. (Welch, 1983)

As mentioned in the beginning of the three motion pictures, the events are based on historical events.

The first film is Die Rothschilds³. Its genre is fictional drama based on the biography of the Rothschilds family. The film's length is around 100 minutes and it was released for the first time in Germany on 17 July 1940. Interesting to mention that the name of the film worldwide was (The Rothschilds' Shares in Waterloo). This version was recut. The film directed by Erich Waschneck⁴. A renowned German director started working during the Weimar republic in 1925. He continued his directorial career till 1953, directing 49 films. The Rothschilds' producer is C.M. Köhns⁵.

The film tells the story of a famous European Jewish Family, the Rothschilds. Nathan Rothschilds was the protagonist of the film. He and his family played a role in controlling the finance of Europe by establishing banks in various cities in Europe continent during the beginning of the 19th century. Nathan lived in London and had a strong financial position in the country. He was a British citizen but the British elite believes that his citizenship would not cover his Jewishness. Nathan Rothschild is smart, he approaches the British military commander offering him money to continue the battle against France and Napoleon Bonaparte. The commander had to accept the offer because of the financial shortage. Nathan

3 - http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0248379/?ref_=ttrel_rel_tt

4 - http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0913297/?ref_=tt_ov_dr

5 - http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1868714/?ref_=tffc_fc_cr2

gained more power, so his brothers in other capitals in Europe. When the situation of the war became ambiguous, no one knew who could win. Nathan with his brothers started to support whoever wins. Jewish assistants of Nathan began spreading Rumors among English people that Napoleon won the battle of Waterloo. This resulted that British financiers panicked and sold their holdings in the stock market. Nathan has managed to buy all these assets before people know that Napoleon was defeated in the war. The film ends when many British wealthy men become poor and leave the country to Nathan and his family that controls Europe. (Köhn & Waschneck, 1940)

The second film is the Jew Suss and its original name is Jud Süß⁶. Its genre is fictional drama. Its length is around 100 minutes, and it was released for the first time in Germany on 24 September 1940. The director of the film is Veit Harlan⁷. A famous German director during the Nazi era directed more than 30 films between 1935 and 1965. The producers of the film are Otto Lehmann⁸ and Eberhard Wolfgang Möller⁹.

The plot of the story took place in the 18th century in the duchy of Württemberg, Germany. Joseph Süß Oppenheimer¹⁰ is the main character in the film. He is a smart Jew, working in trade. He and his fellows, the Jewry, are banned from entering Stuttgart, the capital city of Württemberg. Süß managed to reside at the duchy and acquired a high position as financial advisor of the duke Karl Alexander¹¹ who is a weak ruler. A young man, his name is Faber,

6 - http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032653/?ref_=nm_knf_t

7 - http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0363235/?ref_=nv_sr_1

8 - http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0499733/?ref_=tfc_fc_cr2

9 - <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/judsuss.html>

10 - <http://db.yadvashem.org/deportation/place.html?language=de&itemId=5440373>

11 - <https://www.geni.com/people/Karl-Alexander-XI-Herzog-von-W%C3%BCrttemberg/6000000001543487593>

knows how devilish Süß is, he started mobilizing people against the Jew Süß who wanted to marry Faber's fiancée. The film ends when Süß is hung before the eyes of Württemberg people after he put the duchy on the brink of a civil war. (Lehmann & Harlan, 1940)

The third film is *The Eternal Jew*¹² and its original name *Der ewige Jude*. Its genre is documentary. The length of it is around one hour. The first screening of the film was on 28 November 1940. *Deutsche Film Gesellschaft*¹³ was the producer of the documentary. *Gesellschaft* is a part of the ministry of propaganda of the third Reich. The film director is Fritz Hippler¹⁴ whose cinematic works were during the Nazi era. He directed 15 films between 1938 and 1943. He had been a prominent figure at Goebbels ministry of propaganda. The documentary's focal theme is that the Jew is a parasite. Real footage of Jews in certain physical features is screened in the film. In addition, putting Jews in a comparison with the Aryan Germans. A historical review of the life of the Jews and their diaspora, have been displayed. (*Deutsche Filmherstellungs & Hippler, 1940*)

Stereotypes and anti-Semitism

In his diaries, Goebbels (1948) wrote after a meeting with Hitler " ... In all the world, he said, the Jews are alike. Whether they live in a ghetto of the East or in the bankers' palaces of the City or Wall Street." (p.377) Looking at this quote, it underlines the term of stereotyping, which is related to the Jewry in many ways.

¹² - http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0156524/?ref_=nv_sr_

¹³ - <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/derewigejude.html>

¹⁴ - http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0386162/?ref_=tt_ov_dr

A Stereotype means how a group or community of people creates their opinions, images and general vision of themselves or towards another group. These images establish social, physical, mental or behavioral characteristics of the stereotyped group. One of the main features of stereotyping is generalizing, all or nothing. For example, all Jews are greedy, smart and having hawked noses. This explicitly means that we can't find a Jew without these characteristics according to stereotypes.

Stereotyping in many cases does not use information or facts to be used in judgment. However, when scientific facts are used, stereotypes become more powerful. With stereotyping, a group can simply build a vision about another group without any research, just some distorted facts or myths. (Rinehart, 1963) After testing wide range of studies about stereotypes Rinehart (1963) found that “Jews are commonly believed to be: shrewd, mercenary, industrious intelligent, ambitious, sly, clannish, overaggressive, extravagant, proud, rich and powerful, in control of business a scrupulous, and overbearing.” (p.139) These descriptions could be used neutrally or to praise Jews or to be against them, this depends on the context.

This example shows some of the common beliefs established about Jews during the 20th century. However, these stereotypes towards the Jewry have a long history of narratives.

Tracing it back to the early history of Christianity, stereotypes, myths and folktales about Jews, as a homogenous group that has certain physical features and lifestyle.

In his book about the anti-Semitic stereotypes in Eastern Europe, mainly Romania, Oișteanu (2009) found that myths and stereotypes about Jews are deep in the roots of history “In

Antiquity and the Middle Ages, physiognomy was the art of revealing the character of an individual by scrutinizing the features of his face [...] the hooked nose and thick lips more often than not aroused the aversion of the common people” (p.41) This implies how societies at these times envisioned Jews as flawed defected humans.

In European folklore and literature, stereotypes about Jews’ physical features such as stereotypes hooked noses, thick lips, with side-locks like a dog had been established. (Oişteanu, 2009) Interestingly enough to mention that these characteristics mostly describe the male Jew, while the female is beautiful and seductive.

Propagandistic films with clear messages

Films have their own language to influence spectators, the spoken language by actors, the visual unspoken language through scenes, cuts, shots, and lighting. Hannah Arendt (1958) said, “[...] in totalitarian countries propaganda and terror present two sides of the same coin” (p.341). The films in this paper were not just propagating for the extermination of the Jews, or hating them, but also propagating a set of values, which Aryans should blindly accept it. (Arendt. 1958)

Propaganda was repetitive in Nazi Germany. It was used to make information as much as self evident in the minds of masses. The theme of anti-Semitism was a significant example of Nazi propaganda in these motion pictures. The delivered message was intended to address the masses rather than intellectuals. (Doob, 1950) Besides, depending on manipulation of the

feelings of masses, as films should affect their emotions of empathy or aversion towards some social group. (Welch, 1983)

History was used intensively in the three films, dating back the Jews' problem to the 18th century through recreating stereotypes about the evil Jewry. Goebbels was skeptic about propaganda spreading among audience without facts or evidences, which would make the influence of film weak and refutable. (Doob, 1950) He (1948) found that “We must now institute a new propaganda system, going more into the particulars, describing more details [...] attacking the enemy once more.” (p.241)

The three films used historical events and characters that could be delivered as facts, which can't be refuted or rejected. In addition to a strong message was folded in the three films regarding the Jewry. When Jews have power, they will damage people's happiness and stability. Oppenheimer in the Jud Suss levied taxes on people after becoming a financial advisor of the Duke. Likewise, Nathan Rothschilds spread fear and instability, after controlling the stock market and pushing people to chaos. This implies that one Jew can damage millions of innocent lives.

Science and history speak in The Eternal Jew

The Eternal Jews was simple direct documentary to absorb. It is not a hard task to get its encoded messages. This was how the Nazi system wanted the propaganda outputs to be delivered. Hitler (1925/1941) believed in such thing when he said “ The great masses

receptive ability is only very limited, their understanding is small. [...] All effective propaganda has to limit itself only to a very few points and to use them like slogans until even the very last man is able to imagine what is intended by such a word” (P. 234) Therefore, simplicity was a way of screening a Jew in film. As propagandistic films don’t tend to be sophisticated but direct bullets to the audiences. (Lippmann, 1922)

The narrator of the film mentioned how inactive and unproductive the Jews are. On the other hand, he spoke about the Aryan productive German character. It was obvious through the documentary how Jews are inferior unworthy wealthy creatures that live as parasites. Arendt (1958) has found in her analysis of the way Nazis think that “[...] wealth without visible function is much more intolerable because nobody can understand why it should be tolerated.” (P.4).

The Jews through the film were described with words such as Natural inclination, instinctively, murderous nature and parasites. These descriptions were correlated with the Jews’ physical features to assume that the Jews are filthy, devilish, liars by nature. Moreover, there was a comparison between Jews and rats’ in terms of evolution and expansion all over the world. (Deutsche Filmherstellungs & Hippler, 1940) The comparison seems historical and scientific; consequently, the extermination of these Jews does not contradict with any ethics because the Jewry are simply parasites and inhumane. No difference between a Jew and a rat. Scientificality was the way of a totalitarian regime in forming propaganda. (Arendt, 1958)

Applying the law against the Jew Suss

Württemberg¹⁵ was “the most blessed land among the Germans” (Lehmann& Harlan, 1940), but when one Jew had a permit to live among Germans, life turns upside down. Jews are evil and must be excluded from the German soil. This message has been mentioned straightforwardly.

Hitler was never mentioned in this film, but the old Duke of Württemberg was the opposite example of the Nazi leader. So it was obvious that there is an equation the film demonstrates: weak old ruler + devilish Jew = devastated outraged society, which results inevitably to a revolution. Moreover, the character of the young rebellious Faber who fought the Jews could be explicated as embodiment of the hero who rebelled with dignity and honor against Jews and saved the country.

Oppenheimer was portrayed unethical man who sexually abused Faber’s wife. The dignified woman killed herself due to feeling dishonored. Oppenheimer here has many deficits because he is a Jew.

Religious excerpts were mentioned to justify the hatred of Jews as “the worst enemies of Christian people”. (Lehmann & Harlan, 1940) However, this hatred did not trigger any Christian revenge against the Jewry who creates chaos and subversion in Württemberg. Germans did not kill Oppenheimer; they did not commit a crime. They applied the law

¹⁵- Württemberg is a former German duchy and a republic till its division after the second World War. For more information: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Wurttemberg>

against him because he was a traitor to the German soil. He damaged the life in a flourish duchy.

It is stated clearly at the end of the film that peace would prevail in the duchy when Jews leave it. Therefore a decree was issued to ban them and next generations should abide by it to spare their lives. The end implied the way of how to exterminate Jews in the outfit of legitimacy and rightfulness.

The Rothschilds are conspirators against the world

Goebbels (1948) in his diaries distrusted Jews and envisaged one solution to their problem, annihilating them “I am of the opinion that the greater the number of Jews liquidated, the more consolidated will the situation in Europe be after this war.” (p.114)

Conspiracy was a major concept in Nazi Germany and Jews were one of the conspirators against the third Reich because they were causing misery to Europe. (Goebbels. 1948)

The film events took place in Britain. This implies that the danger of the Jewry already affected the British people. It is not a problem in Germany only. Jews are a worldwide problem.

The protagonist, Nathan, is greedy. Money to him was more valuable than anything; even in Sabbath, he made business with God. The film stressed on the differences between the good Christian and the bad Jew. This binary is screened most of the time, especially when some bad examples of British aristocrats agreed to deal with a Jew. A noble lieutenant, Mr. Crayton, refused the devious way of Nathan who lied to the people of England and told them

that British army was defeated in Waterloo. Crayton tried to tell the truth but the people did not believe him till they lost their money in the stock, which has been controlled by Nathan Rothschild. Thereupon Crayton did not stay in a country controlled financially by a Jew, because he is a good British citizen.

Nathan and his brothers had no limits of their desire to money and power. They wanted to control all Europe by finance. (Köhn & Waschneck, 1940) This facilitates reinforcing the stereotypes about wealthy conspiring Jews who control the world and damage it.

Conclusion

Stereotyping can make humans prejudge effortlessly. Films with historical events or facts can confirm stereotypes because they –films- provide audience with visuals.

The three films in this paper facilitated continuation of Jews' exclusion and propagated the holocaust to some extent. Yet these films were not the only motive to annihilate the Jewish people, as other factors such as fear, totalitarianism and ultra-nationalism that accelerated the killing machinery.

The films framed the narratives in one pattern by recreating rooted anti-Semitic stereotypes through motion pictures. Using History and science was a tool to prove the factuality of these films, the evil of the Jewry and to give no space for debate or refutation. This trilogy says obviously that either exterminating Jews or expelling them out of the country is the solution to save millions of innocents from those demons. Otherwise, they control the economy, devastate the people's lives and conspire against the world.

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DR. MIGUEL ÁNGEL SÁNCHEZ DE ARMAS
Profesor de asignatura
Postgrado en comunicación
Departamento de comunicación

