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# A Very Notorious Ranch, Indeed: Fritz Lang, Allegory, and the Holocaust

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## **A Very Notorious Ranch, Indeed: Fritz Lang, Allegory, and the Holocaust**

**By Walter Metz**

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### **Introduction**

In a recent review of the Stephen Spielberg blockbuster, *Jurassic Park: The Lost World* (1997), critic Stuart Klawans of *The Nation* presents the film as an allegory for the Holocaust.<sup>i</sup> Feigning to merely be repeating the interpretation of his “spiritual adviser,” Rabbi Simcha Fefferman, Klawans argues that the film continues the story of *Schindler’s List* (Stephen Spielberg, 1993) as much as it does *Jurassic Park* (Stephen Spielberg, 1993). Engaging in a bravura reading, Klawans argues, for instance, that the dinosaurs represented are stand-ins for the Jews, and that those who hunt them down are coded as Nazis: “There is a remaining Nazi camp, filled with those relics of history (as they have been called), those dinosaurs, the Jews.”<sup>ii</sup> The complexity of the review lies in the impossibility of finally determining whether Klawans intends to: a) critique allegorical readings which diminish the importance of the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon, b) deride Spielberg’s profiting off of the Holocaust via *Schindler’s List* and off of seemingly apolitical mass-produced entertainment via *The Lost World*, or c) critically illuminate the potential of intelligent readings of even the most seemingly innocuous of cultural texts, or d) all of the above.

Regardless of his intentions, Klawans has added, in Tony Bennett’s terms, an “encrustation” around the text of *The Lost World*; namely, that the film speaks to the meanings of the Holocaust in contemporary America.<sup>iii</sup> Most importantly for my purposes, this incrustation involves one particular construction of the meaning of the Holocaust in America: the way in which the Holocaust, though largely ignored in the representational practices of Hollywood cinema, returns to roost in the middle of the American experience. Klawans’ analysis culminates with an

observation about the ending of *The Lost World*, read through the allegorical framework: “The Nazis import the concentration camp to America!”<sup>iv</sup> Given the history of American inaction regarding the Holocaust, both past and present, this development seems particularly relevant for understanding the specifics of the American intersection with the Holocaust.

*The Lost World* has interest for Klawans insofar as it speaks to the 1990s American (in)experience with the Holocaust. This chapter draws upon Klawans’ allegorical method to illuminate *Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, 1952) in light of the early 1950s American response to the Holocaust. I interrogate the aspects of Lang’s film that “cross-check”<sup>v</sup> with the American experience of the Holocaust as it has been documented in mass-media periodicals of the immediate post-war era (1945-1953). Since *Rancho Notorious* is set in the American West in the nineteenth-century, I allegorically produce the film as a historical precedent for *The Lost World*’s transplantation of the Holocaust to America, forcing the Holocaust into the heart of the American experience.

### **On Benjaminian Allegory and Criticism of the Films of Fritz Lang**

It may seem a bit odd to reactivate allegory at this point in the history of criticism. After all, is not allegory that much despised framework which maps symbolic elements onto the plane of history in a reductionist way? Is not allegory that which Jorge Luis Borges calls “intolerable... stupid and frivolous?”<sup>vi</sup>

In addition, many of the major works of cultural history provide critiques of allegory. For example, Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* is a rigorous warning against the dangers of reductionism implicit in allegorical criticism. Invoking Althusser’s critique of “expressive

causality,” Jameson cautions against constructing a *Avast* interpretive allegory in which a sequence of historical events or texts and artifacts is rewritten in terms of some deeper, underlying, and more ‘fundamental’ narrative, of a hidden master narrative which is the allegorical key.”<sup>vii</sup> While I would certainly reject the notion that the ultimate “key” to *Rancho Notorious* is the Holocaust, this historical event does illuminate the film and early 1950s American culture in meaningful ways.

In producing this allegorical reading of *Rancho Notorious*, I do not wish to suggest that this is the only, or even best, meaning of the film. It certainly is not the meaning that viewers of the period would have bestowed upon the film, as determined by a historical reception approach: None of the mass-media reviewers connected the film to the Holocaust.<sup>viii</sup>

Nor is my interpretive scheme in keeping with the trajectory of academic Lang criticism as it has developed over the past thirty years. Most Lang critics accept as axiomatic that Lang’s films are about violence, but then stop without historicizing the concept. For example, Robin Wood’s extensive essay on *Rancho Notorious* defines Lang’s obsession with violence and revenge, but also declares that the film “has little or nothing to do with history’.”<sup>ix</sup>

My allegorical approach offers an alternative possibility: that the film is about nothing if not history. Most people I encounter who have seen the film are perplexed by it, and Lang criticism offers little to resolve this confusion. The question that remains, after pondering the criticism, which emphasizes Lang’s obsession with violence, is, *why* such a minimalist film, about a man seeking revenge for his wife’s murder, is presented using a baroque style which seems grossly out of proportion with its subject matter of an individual act of violence. My project offers one framework, an historicist one, for explaining the motivation of the violence in this film. If Axel Madsen is correct in asserting that “For Lang, the twentieth-century is more Dachau and

Hiroshima than Einstein,” *Rancho Notorious* as a Holocaust allegory offers significant historical insight not otherwise illuminated by Lang critics.<sup>x</sup>

As it was re-defined by Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, a study of German baroque drama, allegory serves as a critical method to describe how a text might signify within a cultural space characterized by historical trauma.<sup>xi</sup> In *Exiled Waters: Moby-Dick and the Crisis of Allegory*, literary critic Bainard Cowan provides an application of Benjaminian allegory to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*: “I see the term allegory as applicable to *Moby-Dick* not as a word designating a set of literary conventions, nor as an honorific title meaning that the work is profound, but as a mode of discourse employed in past Western literate societies to come to terms with a crisis in the imagining of the relation between the timely and the timeless.”<sup>xii</sup> Cowan continues by seeing “Benjamin’s re-formulation of allegory as especially suited to express the historical experience of loss and decay.”<sup>xiii</sup>

In “The Will to Allegory in Postmodernism,” Paul Smith argues that Benjaminian allegory “emerges from an introverted contemplation of a melancholic and mournful nature, . . . bemoans a loss and tries to redeem that loss by embracing the dead objects of the natural world, . . . [and] veers toward the bombastic, preferring the spoken over the written word.”<sup>xiv</sup> These features of Benjaminian allegory describe the engagement that *Rancho Notorious* makes with the cultural and political context of the Holocaust as it was understood in early 1950s America.

My allegorical approach to the films of Fritz Lang is not without precedent in Lang criticism. Two critics stand out as forging this mode of criticism with respect to Lang. First, Catherine Russell uses Benjaminian allegory to analyze Lang’s last American film, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956). Russell argues that over the course of the fifteen years after World War

II, culminating in the New Wave movements, cinema became saturated in narrative mortality, “the discourse of death in narrative film.”<sup>xv</sup> Russell sees the trauma of World War II as having produced the historical conditions which led to narrative mortality: “The isomorphism of life and narrative in the *bildungsroman* tradition collapses history into identity. In an era of atomic weapons, multinational capitalism and sociocultural heterogeneity neither ‘identity’ nor history can be so neatly parceled out.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Russell also argues that narrative mortality, as represented in the late American films of Fritz Lang and the New Wave movements, may signify an allegorical solution to such devastating historical traumas: “Narrative mortality may in fact be an imaginary solution to the ‘contagion of violence’ that characterizes postwar history. While the image of apocalypse approximates the instantaneity of death as an allegory of discovery, it is also an allegory of necessity.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Russell applies this theory of narrative mortality as a cinematic working through of historical traumas to Lang’s *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956). In this film, Tom Garrett (played by Dana Andrews) agrees to allow his friend, Austin Spencer, to frame him for murder in order to demonstrate the flaws of capital punishment. As Tom and Austin carry out their plan, Tom is arrested and tried for the murder. However, Austin dies in a car crash just as he is about to come forward with the evidence that will clear Tom! Shortly before the execution, Tom’s girlfriend, Susan, discovers evidence that clears Tom of any wrongdoing. However, while celebrating with Susan, Tom accidentally mis-speaks, proving to her that he really did commit the murder, and that the scheme with Austin was all a ruse to avoid being executed. Susan again rushes to the prison, this time to keep the governor from signing Tom’s pardon. The film ends with Tom scheduled to be executed.

Russell connects the film to the Rosenberg executions of 1953: “If it was un-American’ to disagree with the verdict reached in the Rosenberg trial in 1953, and if *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* is read as a deconstruction of symbolic power structures that depend on exclusion, then the film’s uncanniness can also be traced to the historical traumas of the period.”<sup>xviii</sup> The film quite literally mortifies the image, both via Dana Andrews’ grotesquely rigid acting and through its ludicrous plot turns. The final plot twist--the revelation that the hero really is the murderer, after we have invested all our energy into hoping for the truth to be exposed thus proving his innocence--literally stops the narrative dead in its tracks. If the Rosenberg executions are the traumas which allegorize *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, the Holocaust is that trauma which allegorizes *Rancho Notorious*.

Tom Conley is the second critic to use allegorical criticism to interpret the cinema of Fritz Lang. In *Film Hieroglyphics*, Conley connects *Scarlet Street* (1945) to the horrors of the Holocaust. Using a Derridean-based method he labels Ahieroglyphic criticism,” which is based on analyzing what he calls the written “rebus” within the film image, Conley studies an early scene in which the protagonist, Chris Cross, stands under a sign in Greenwich Village which reads “JEWELRY.” Conley argues:

Jewelry allows other inflections to bear upon the protagonist, to mark and endow him with traits running in directions other than the narrative. JEW(EL)RY: thus the word that is a mannequin enclosing another term, the EL, to be heard during the first primal scene, is first anticipated in the center of JewELry. If it is subtracted from the word, the remainder is Jewry, which brings forth the phantasm of genocide at the moment of the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945, a time synchronous with the production of the film. Jewry will be what is redeemed (in the pawnshop) through the passage of Christopher Cross. EL subtends the sign of the Hell of the unimaginable dimensions of the camps.<sup>xix</sup>

Although *Rancho Notorious* also uses jewelry as a figure for the Holocaust, I believe the film

engages with that historical trauma in even more direct ways than *Scarlett Street*.

### ***Rancho Notorious* as Holocaust Allegory**

*Rancho Notorious* begins as the girlfriend of the central protagonist, Vern Haskell, is raped and murdered by Kinch, an outlaw who lives at the mysterious Chuck-a-Luck ranch. Vern spends the entire film tracking down Kinch, infiltrating the ranch, and exacting his revenge. My allegorical view of *Rancho Notorious* as a text pertinent to the American experience of the Holocaust is built upon a scene late in the film. Once Vern identifies Kinch as the murderer, he confronts the Chuck-a-Luck's boss, Altar Keene (played by Marlene Dietrich). Furious with her complicity in her ranch hands' evil acts, Vern forces Altar to look around and contemplate the destruction to which she has been a party:

[My raped and murdered wife] is right there on the floor, right in front of you. And she's got blue, blue eyes. Do you feel them staring at you? You see the blood on the floor? Do you hear her screaming? . . . [Kinch, the rapist and murderer,] coulda been anybody who came to Chuck-a-Luck to hide behind your skirts. . . . What do you see in there: a bedroom or a morgue? Look over here, through that window. What's that: a courtyard or a graveyard?

In the scene, Vern, the American, directly confronts Altar, the German, with an expose of the atrocities that Chuck-a-Luck as concentration camp hides. The odd fact that Altar is played by a seemingly anachronistic German exile, Marlene Dietrich, begins to make sense given the allegorical frame. Vern forces Altar--the leader of the ranch yet one who is purportedly innocent about where the wealth was coming from--to face up to her complicity in mass murder. Vern begins his confrontation with specifics about his wife's death, but quickly moves toward the large scale destruction which has occurred at the ranch. Vern forces Altar to see that these seemingly innocuous spaces of the ranch's living areas are in fact places of brutality and murder. Altar personifies those German citizens who purported to not be aware of what was going on in their

own backyards.

Vern's confrontation with Altar replays any number of published press accounts of American reporters interviewing Germans who lived near the concentration camps. For example, in "Are Germans Human?," published in the July 1945 issue of *Woman's Home Companion*, Patricia Lochridge offers an encounter with the German citizens of Dachau. Lochridge interviews one German woman who says: "Germany must be ashamed. But Germans weren't involved. Der Fuhrer couldn't have known about it. He wouldn't have permitted such a thing."<sup>xx</sup> This story of ignorance of a camp not half a mile from a person's home becomes nauseatingly repetitious as one sorts through the accounts of the camps published in the American press during the immediate post-war years. In contrast with the American journalists' typical silence when confronted by the Germans' lack of awareness, Vern's verbal attack on Altar refuses to let her get away with such feigned ignorance.

The gendered nature of this attribution to the central female protagonist of *Rancho Notorious* is a bit odd, given the masculinist nature of Naziism. Instead of producing a male German villain, the allegorical structure produces the figure of Woman as the perpetrator of atrocity, leaving her male colleague Frenchy as mere collaborator, and Vern as the hapless victim. A potential answer as to why *Rancho Notorious* allegorizes gender in this way lies in how my reading of the film reconfigures its generic position.

Most Lang critics use the film's characters and setting to describe it as a Western. For example, Robert Armour positions *Rancho Notorious* not by its chronological place in the Lang oeuvre, but alongside the other Lang Westerns: *The Return of Frank James* (1940) and *Western Union* (1941).<sup>xxi</sup> By focusing on the arrested love affair between Vern and Altar, a relationship

stopped dead in its tracks by the revelation of past atrocity, my approach suggests the film is dominated by what we might call the melodramatics of history. Lang critics that focus on melodrama in his films usually do so to disparage them. For example, in his article, "Fritz Lang: Only Melodrama," Don Willis argues that Lang's films are only shallowly fascinated by crime and violence and psychopathology" and that there is little to them beyond their tawdry melodrama.<sup>xxii</sup>

New approaches to melodrama, of course, suggest that within the Hollywood apparatus, melodrama may be the textual practice which most activates the potential for cultural critique. In particular, Laura Mulvey argues that melodrama can be the carrier of historical experience, especially when that experience is otherwise representationally prohibited. In "'It will be a magnificent obsession': The Melodrama's Role in the Development of Contemporary Film Theory," Mulvey argues that melodrama asymptomizes the history of its own time."<sup>xxiii</sup> For example, she finds the historical inscription in *Magnificent Obsession* (Douglas Sirk, 1954) by reading the Jane Wyman character's flight to Switzerland as a return to a soothing Europe untouched by the ravages of World War II. My allegorical reading of *Rancho Notorious* as historical melodrama follows Mulvey's approach by investigating the way in which Altar Keene stands as a figure for German atrocities, now come home to roost in the middle of the American experience.

My invocation of the figure of Woman as a symbol of Nazism hiding in America is not without precedent in my research, both in terms of theoretical and historical approaches. At the theoretical level, Angelika Rauch's essay "The Trauerspiel of the Prostituted Body, Or Woman as Allegory of Modernity" explores the way Benjamin's theory of allegory is manifested in the

baroque German dramas he studies in a gender-specific way.<sup>xxiv</sup> In this light, the film's use of Dietrich and the imagery used to surround her actually positions the film as an American cinematic equivalent to the Germanic baroque drama that Benjamin studies. In a scene late in the film, shortly before the aforementioned confrontation, Altar and Vern talk amid giant granite columns. At one point in the conversation, Altar laments that Vern did not meet her ten years ago. Although within the diegesis, this time refers to a moment in the nineteenth-century, extradiegetically, the reference places the time under discussion to be 1942, a moment before the full-scale genocide that motivates my reading of the film. The baroque imagery of the film, in this case the granite columns which frame Altar and Vern, produces a space in which they quite literally discuss the past on an "altar" of history. The baroque imagery here activates a mythopoetic level of the film associated with the trauma of history for which other critical approaches have not been able to account.

At the historical level, a study of the post-war American press accounts of the concentration camps reveals specific discursive links between the atrocities and German women. Again in "Are Germans Human?," Lochridge lays her disgust at German unrepentantness for the atrocities at the feet of German women: "Perhaps in Germany's women, Dachau's women, one could find decent democratic elements around which a new Germany could be built."<sup>xxv</sup> At every turn, Lochridge's quest for the performance of repentance is rebuffed. For example, one woman, Lina Ridel, after being forced by the occupational government to tour the concentration camp, coldly states: "The state put them there. They weren't good Germans. Most of them weren't Aryan."

Beyond the allegorical status of Altar Keene as German woman, *Rancho Notorious* offers further space for tracking the Holocaust's shadow in 1950s America. In light of this reading, Vern's quest becomes not just one of revenge but of hunting down those responsible for mass

murder. As a “Nazi-hunter,” Vern refuses to quit until the perpetrators are punished for their crimes.

Nationality plays a large part in this allegorical structure. The jewelry that allows Vern to track the murderer to the Chuck-a-Luck is specifically identified at the beginning of the film as coming from Paris, France. As in Tom Conley’s reading of *Scarlett Street*, the jewelry in *Rancho Notorious* serves as a reminder of the plundering of the victims’ possessions, as well as their lost lives. In addition, Altar’s right-hand man at the Chuck-a-Luck is named Frenchy, suggesting the Vichy complicity of this character in relation to Altar’s German leadership.

This interpretation of *Rancho Notorious* is by no means completely textual in origin. As mentioned before, Axel Madsen begins his 1967 Lang interview with the following observation: “To him, the twentieth-century is Dachau and Hiroshima more than it is Einstein.” That violence and trauma permeate Lang’s films, particularly those American films after World War II, is a critical commonplace. However, Lang critics have been reluctant to historically specify how and why individual traumas permeate the films, and to what effects. Dachau specifically intervenes into the representational space of *Rancho Notorious*, not as a general critique of violence as Madsen implies, but as a specific critique of passivity in the wake of genocide.

Such a reading serves to shed new light upon the cultural and political significance of American popular cinema in the early 1950s. Like most criticism of American cinema, approaches to Lang tend toward aesthetic and thematic analysis. For example, Reynold Humphries’ analysis of *Rancho Notorious* uses an investigation of gazing relations to thematically assess Lang’s presentation of violence, yet he does not push at what the political significance of this might be. For example, Humphries argues: “[Haskell’s] quest becomes obsessive to the point of his being unable

to distinguish between guilt and innocence: everyone is guilty. His obsession leads him to read the signs on the basis of an absence: ignorant of the context, he imposes on everyone and everything an identity in keeping with his fantasies. The spectator is caught up in his pathological system.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Yet Humphries’ analysis stops at this point: Lang’s films are about violence, revenge, and pathology. These terms are so vague as to be devoid of much political significance.

Within the framework of my allegorical reading, Humphries’ analysis becomes quite illuminating ideologically. Seen now as a Nazi hunter, Haskell’s quest moves from being purely psychopathic to having an understandable motivation. As a personal vendetta, Haskell’s quest is improper because it refuses to let the social system dole out justice. As a public response to worldwide indifference and apathy, Haskell’s quest speaks to crimes with which the social system is clearly incapable of dealing. In the post-Holocaust world, particularly in an America which did little up until the actual liberation of the camps, and then refused to engage in cultural discussion of the implications of this inactivity, everyone is guilty. Haskell’s obsession is built upon an absence, not only of his wife’s life, but of all the people whose bodies are covered over by the soil of the Chuck-a-Luck ranch. Furthermore, the pathological system is no longer of Haskell’s creation, but of the social order which surrounds and engulfs him.

For the spectator to be caught up in this pathological system now has very different implications. Rather than serve as evidence of Lang’s brutality toward the spectator who is being made to identify with Haskell’s vengeance--as Jean-Louis Comolli and Francois Gere hypothesize in their seminal essay, “Two Fictions Concerning Hate”--the spectator is now made to confront what is in other cultural registers absent from American consciousness.<sup>xxvii</sup> The film makes us feel the pathological system which allows the wife’s murder to be conspiratorially covered up by the

denizens of the Chuck-a-Luck, as well as feel the pathological system which allowed the Holocaust to occur and its effects to be discursively deflected from the American people's attention.

## **Conclusion**

In producing this argument about a film made under the authorial sign of Fritz Lang, I do not want to replicate the excesses of auteurism. In other words, I do not see *Rancho Notorious* as a discursive engagement with the Holocaust exclusively because of Lang's experience as an exile from the Nazis. Recent biographical work on Lang has in fact demonstrated the apocryphal nature of Lang's story that he fled Germany the moment that Goebbels offered him the directorship of the German film industry.<sup>xxviii</sup> However, I do believe that Lang's post-war American films are activated by the cultural trauma of the Second World War. Lang's status, as well as that of the film's star, Marlene Dietrich, as exiles from the country that perpetrated many of the atrocities of this war clearly activates my attention to this film. However, the nature of the film's status as allegory extends well beyond the bounds of individual authorial agency. As in other recent cultural historical work on Lang--for example, my essay, "Keep the Coffee Hot, Hugo: Nuclear Trauma in Lang's *The Big Heat*"--I find Lang's films a useful nexus for grappling with the historical content of 1950s cinema.<sup>xxix</sup> To follow Stephen Jenkins' solution to this problem, I am studying the "Lang-text," a discursive construction which may indeed be motivated by the authorial intentions of the director, but which is for the most part beyond the boundaries of individual agency.<sup>xxx</sup>

One way in which my method leads away from authorial agency is that it activates the search for other films of the early 1950s which perform the work of allegorizing the Holocaust. This will allow a determination of whether or not *Rancho Notorious* is anomalous in its allegorical

cinematic grappling with the discursive context of the Holocaust. If one reads the traditional studies of the Holocaust and cinema, one would indeed conclude that my reading of *Rancho Notorious* produces a mere anomaly in 1950s American cinema and its relationship to the Holocaust. Yet part of what motivates my project in the first place is a discontent with the major studies of the Holocaust and cinema: Ilan Avisar's *Screening the Holocaust*, Judith Doneson's *The Holocaust in American Film*, and Annette Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows*.<sup>xxxii</sup> These studies are vastly under theorized, relying on an exceedingly straightforward definition of what constitutes a Holocaust film. If, as literary Holocaust theorists have urgently maintained, that an event like the Holocaust brings about a crisis in the very possibility of representation, should we not push hard to discover the effects the Holocaust had on the American cinematic apparatus?

Even Annette Insdorf, who begins her book with a section on "Finding an Appropriate Language" for studying Holocaust cinema, does not question the changes in Hollywood film language needed for representing the Holocaust. The first chapter of that book, a study of "The Hollywood Version of the Holocaust," does very little to find that appropriate language, using instead a very traditional, literal paradigm for defining Holocaust cinema. For example, her first paragraph reads:

Few American films have confronted the darker realities of World War II--ghettos, occupation, deportation, concentration camps, collaboration, extermination. The Holocaust has been only touched upon in such Hollywood studio productions as *Exodus*, *Cabaret*, *Ship of Fools*, *Marathon Man*, *Julia*, *The Boys From Brazil*, and *Victory*, and brought to the fore in only a handful of postwar films like *Judgement at Nuremberg*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Voyage of the Damned*, and --increasingly movies made for television.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Beyond the theoretical limitation of focusing only on these direct invocations of the Holocaust, the historical nature of this list opens up an interesting problem: The earliest film on the list is *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens, 1959). What of the American cinematic response to the

Holocaust during the years 1945-1959, particularly the ignored period in the early to mid-1950s, after the demise of the social problem films of the late 1940s at the hands of McCarthyite pressure? In between the exploration of anti-Semitism in *Gentlemen's Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947) and of Anne Frank's courage in 1959, the American cinematic response to the Holocaust needs to be discovered and theorized. Due to the McCarthyite terror of the early 1950s, which resulted in no direct grappling with the Holocaust appropriate to traditional film analytical methods, we need new strategies in order to uncover these films.

*Rancho Notorious* offers an example of how allegory produces signification in ways completely impossible otherwise. The American experience of the Holocaust in the 1950s is marked by repression and ignorance. In my study of the post-war American press accounts, I discovered that direct discussion of the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany against Jews and others faded from the periodicals by about 1948.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In the Cold War climate, the German camps were only referred to by way of comparison with Soviet prison camps. Thus, for America in the early 1950s, the German concentration camps were discursively constructed not as a testament to anti-Semitism, but, ironically, to anti-Communism.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

This warped American understanding of the Holocaust motivates the representational strategy of *Rancho Notorious*. The refusal of the direct representation of the Holocaust, and yet the inclusion of social dynamics that describe a world in which it has been experienced, produces a political text whose value transcends its box-office earnings or its critical reputation. Studying the film allegorically speaks to the vastly powerful effects of Cold War historical revisionism, effects which we need to overcome if we are to fully understand the implications of the Holocaust for the world's past, present, and future.

In pursuing this interpretation of *Rancho Notorious*, I by no means wish to denigrate other textual strategies for presenting the Holocaust. The necessity of documentary evidence, as presented by such films as *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), is clearly important in order to preserve the experience within public memory. However, the corollary to this belief in documentation--that fictional representation is suspect because it "Anarrativizes" the Holocaust--is in need of nuanced debate. Often, the Holocaust *is* a representational site off of which immoral profit is made. *Schindler's List* is merely the most recent of films to which this argument could be applied. This caveat warns of the possibility that *Schindler's List* was such a box-office success because it featured a nice German protagonist, thus diffusing confrontation with our own culpability rather than focusing on it.

There are certain drawbacks, however, in looking exclusively at films that directly represent the Holocaust in order to understand this nexus of genocide. First, at a theoretical level, the direct representation of atrocity does not coincide with the belief that the Holocaust brings about a crisis in, if not the demise of, traditional modes of cinematic figuration. One might even go so far as to suggest that the direct representation of the Holocaust itself violates the victims by trivializing their experience, reducing it to yet another sensational event to be consumed within a capitalist economy. Significantly, one of the very early press accounts of the Holocaust in the American press raises this concern over the ethics of representation. In his essay, "Should We Exploit the Atrocity Stories?," published in the June 30, 1945 issue of *Saturday Review*, William S. Lynch argues in the negative because "Averted eyes and quiet burial are the final rights of human dignity."<sup>xxxv</sup> Imagistically, the article also refuses direct representation, using an abstract sketch of a quiet graveyard. Certainly my own project is open to the critique of exploitation,

although I believe that reading texts allegorically works within Benjamin's paradigm to offer a hope for redemption, not the replication, of the experience of the Holocaust.

Allegory could thus provide a mode of representation in an era after Hiroshima and the Holocaust, an era in which traditional modes of representation become impossible or inadequate. This is what Gilles Deleuze means, I believe, when he suggests that "the time image," the obsession of cinema after World War II, produces an awareness of the inadequacy of the "Recollection-image," his term for the photographically reproductive base of cinema.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Deleuze describes Alain Resnais' modernist film, *Night and Fog* (1955) as "the sum of all the ways of escaping from the flashback, and the false piety of the recollection-image."<sup>xxxvii</sup> I believe *Rancho Notorious* points to the crisis in the recollection-image as well, not using the aesthetic practices of European modernism, but instead using the melodramatics of the American cinema to produce a Benjaminian allegory of cultural redemption.

As a study of the early 1950s, this project on *Rancho Notorious* reveals just one intersection between discourses about the Holocaust in mass media periodicals and representational strategies in American cinema. I believe *Rancho Notorious* is not alone as a redemptive allegory of the Holocaust in early 1950s American cinema. Despite their absence in the traditional studies of film and the Holocaust, other early 1950s films use various strategies for debunking the American cultural practice of keeping the Holocaust at a distance. For example, in *A Lady Without Passport* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950), the narrative is brought to a halt by the revelation that the central female protagonist (played by Hedy Lamarr) has a concentration camp tattoo on her forearm.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In this film, we can see another Hollywood cinematic approach to the melodramatics of

history than the one employed by *Rancho Notorious*. *A Lady Without Passport* features an INS inspector whose job it is to keep D.P.'s (displaced persons) from entering the United States illegally. When the Lamarr character shouts at him that she is a victim of Buchenwald, the narrative stops dead in its tracks. From this point onward, the INS agent, who has fallen in love with her, works to smuggle her into the country, thus jeopardizing his job, and the initial patriotic plot trajectory of the film. The INS agent comes to realize that his actions represent the moral thing to do, but this realization is only made when he is forced, by the melodramatics of history, to confront a displaced person in the flesh, as his lover. It is the hope of my project that other work in this vein will surface and bring to light alternative strategies for illuminating how films from the 1950s grappled with the Holocaust and other traumatic historical phenomena significant to our understanding of this period of the American experience.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Stuart Klawans, "Color and Money," *The Nation* (June 30, 1997): 35-36. I would like to thank Janet Staiger for calling this review to my attention.

ii. *Ibid.*, 36.

iii. Tony Bennett, "Text and Social Process: The Case of James Bond," *Screen Education* 41 (Winter/Spring 1982): 3.

iv. Klawans, "Color and Money," 36.

v. I borrow the method of "cross-checking" from Luce Irigaray, who uses this method to map Freud's theory of sexuality onto her description of female melancholia. For more on this method, see my essay, "Another being we have created called 'us': Point of View, Melancholia, and the Joking Unconscious in *The Bridges of Madison County*," *The Velvet Light Trap* 39 (Spring 1997): 66; and Judith Newton and Judith Stacey, "Learning Not to Curse, or, Feminist Predicaments in Cultural Criticism by Men: Our Movie Date with James Clifford and Stephen Greenblatt," *Cultural Critique* (Winter 1992-93): 51-82.

vi. *Other Inquisitions* (New York, 1964): 155. Quoted in Paul Smith, "The Will to Allegory in

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Postmodernism,” *Dalhousie Review* 62.1 (Spring 1982): 105.

vii. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981): 28.

viii. The reviews of *Rancho Notorious* that I studied are: Robert Kass, *Catholic World* 175.1045 (April 1952): 64; *Christian Century* 69.16 (April 16, 1952): 479; William Whitebait, *New Statesman and Nation* 43.1102 (April 19, 1952): 463; Anonymous, *Newsweek* 39.12 (March 24, 1952): 113; Bosley Crowther, *New York Times* (May 15, 1952): 39; Anonymous, *Time* 59.10 (March 10, 1952): 104; and “Bron.,” *Variety* (February 6, 1952): 6.

ix. Robin Wood, “*Rancho Notorious*: A Noir Western in Colour,” *CineAction!* 13/14 (Summer 1988): 85.

x. Axel Madsen, “Lang,” *Sight and Sound* 36.3 (Summer 1967): 109.

xi. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London, 1977).

xii. Bainard Cowan, *Exiled Waters: Moby-Dick and the Crisis of Allegory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982): 6.

xiii. *Ibid.*, 7.

xiv. Paul Smith, “The Will to Allegory in Postmodernism,” 106.

15. Catherine Russell, *Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure, and New Wave Cinemas* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995): 2.

xvi. *Ibid.*, 3.

xvii. *Ibid.*, 20.

xviii. *Ibid.*, 65.

xix. Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991), 26.

xx. Patricia Lochridge, “Are Germans Human?” *Woman’s Home Companion* 72 (July 1945): 5.

xxi. Robert Armour, *Fritz Lang* (Boston: Twayne, 1977): 125.

xxii. Don Willis, “Fritz Lang: Only Melodrama,” *Film Quarterly* 33.2 (1980): 11.

xxiii. Laura Mulvey, “‘It will be a magnificent obsession’: The Melodrama’s Role in the Development of Contemporary Film Theory,” in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, eds. Jacky

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Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1994): 122.

xxiv. Angelika Rauch, "The Trauerspiel of the Prostituted Body, Or Woman as Allegory of Modernity," *Cultural Critique* 10 (Fall 1988): 77.

xxv. Lochridge, "Are Germans Human?," 5.

xxvi. Reynold Humphries, *Fritz Lang: Genre and Representation in His American Films* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989): 90.

xxvii. Jean-Louis Comolli and Francois Gere, "Two Fictions Concerning Hate," *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look*, ed. Stephen Jenkins (London: BFI, 1981): 125.

xxviii. Gosta Werner, "Fritz Lang and Goebbels: Myth and Facts," *Film Quarterly* 43.3 (Spring 1990): 24-27.

xxix. Walter Metz, "'Keep the Coffee Hot, Hugo': Nuclear Trauma in Lang's *The Big Heat*," *Film Criticism* 21.3 (Spring 1997): 43.

xxx. Stephen Jenkins, "Introduction," *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look* (London: BFI, 1981): 1.

xxxi. Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988); Judith E. Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987); and Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1983).

xxxii. Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, 4.

xxxiii. The immediate post-war stories about the Holocaust involve the expected documentary and first-person journalism approaches. The articles in this period, 1945-1948, are: Anonymous, "A Foreign News," *Time* (April 30, 1945): 38-46; Anonymous, "Nazi Atrocities," *New Republic* (April 30, 1945): 572; Harold Denny, "The World Must Not Forget," *New York Times Magazine* (May 6, 1945): 8; Anonymous, "Gazing into the Pit," *Christian Century* (May 9, 1945): 575; Ben Hibbs, "Journey to a Shattered World," *Saturday Evening Post* (June 9, 1945): 20; Michael Gordey, "Echoes from Auschwitz," *New Republic* (December 22, 1947): 14; and Norman Cousins, "An Apology for Living," *Saturday Review of Literature* (October 9, 1948): 9.

xxxiv. By the early 1950s, discussion of the German camps is to be found only in reference to Soviet camps. Representative articles in this vein are: Margaret Buber-Neumann, "Hitler or Stalin: Which Was the Worst?: A Comparison in Concentration Camps," *American Mercury* (March 1952): 74; and Anonymous, "Silence is Suicide: A victim of Nazism gets victims of Communist prison camps to speak up in open campaign against oppression," *Life* (May 8, 1950): 53. In addition, in 1952, the year *Rancho Notorious* was released, a Congressional investigation was launched into 1939's Katyn Forest Massacre, in which Poles were slaughtered. It remained unclear

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whether Nazis or Soviets had committed the massacre. During the war, the prevalent belief was that the Nazis had done it. During the Cold War, the theory was forwarded that the Soviets had actually perpetrated the massacre. See “Who Is Guilty of the Katyn Massacre?,” *Reader’s Digest* (July 1952): 127.

xxxv. William S. Lynch, “Should We Exploit the Atrocity Stories?,” *Saturday Review* 28.26 (June 30, 1945), 14-16.

xxxvi. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989): 46.

xxxvii. *Ibid.*, 122.

xxxviii. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Diane Negra for calling this film’s Holocaust reference to my attention, and for letting me view her copy of the film.