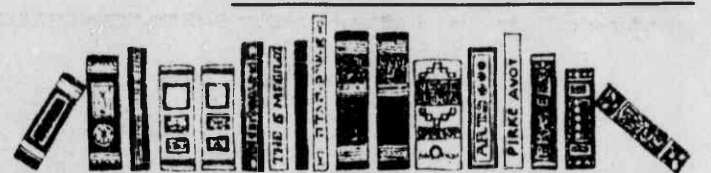




## Book Reviews



*The Holocaust in American Film.* Judith Doneson. The Jewish Publication Society, 1930 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103. 1987. 282 pages. \$22.95.

Reviewed by Annette Insdorf

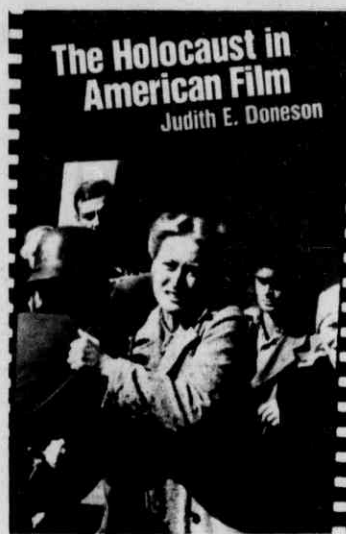
Judith Doneson has done a fine job of historical analysis in her book, *The Holocaust in American Film*. Incisive and illuminating, it tackles not only individual films, but the way they reveal American attitudes from the 1940s to the early 1980s. By her own admission, "this work focuses on film in its historical context and must necessarily bypass film as art." Consequently, film critics might be put off by her lack of attention to cinematic detail; other readers will be richly rewarded by her skillful contextualization.

Part One, "Reflections of Anti-Semitism in Film and the Nazi Persecution of the Jews: 1934-1947," deals with two "warning films" about the specter of the Holocaust — "The House of Rothschild" (1934) and "The Great Dictator" (1940) — as well as "Gentleman's Agreement" (1947), which followed revelations of the destruction of European Jewry. Especially interesting is her chronicle of the American response to Chaplin's cinematic plea for

brotherhood: the film was attacked in particular by a group of senators who supported isolationist policies in America.

Part Two places "The Diary of Anne Frank" in the context of 1950s America. It argues that the film version (as well as the play) exemplifies an American tendency to democratize all minority characters — especially Jewish — ultimately universalizing the Holocaust at the expense of Jewish specificity. We see how Otto Frank — because he was aiming at the largest possible audience — contributed to the "de-Judaizing" of the book. Doneson also persuasively connects the film to the era's McCarthyism, or "the danger posed by the informer."

"Chaos and Social Upheaval" explores Holocaust films of the 1960 and 70s, with a particular focus on "Judgment at Nuremberg" (1961). The author calls attention to the significant context of the Eichmann Trial, including the fact that this film's premiere coincided with the prisoner's sentencing. After making the important point that there is not one Jewish character in "Judgment at Nuremberg," she moves on to other Hollywood productions which constitute "a mirror of American society in the 1960s and 1970s." Although her analyses



of "Ship of Fools" and "Julia" are commendable, she is too sketchy on "Cabaret," and too dismissive of "The Pawnbroker."

Approximately three-quarters of *The Holocaust in American Film* is devoted to motion pictures, with the remaining quarter focused on NBC's "Holocaust." Doneson basically defends the controversial television miniseries as the first film since "The Great Dictator" to present the specificity of the battle against the Jews. Along with background information, she offers a reading of the program in terms of America's guilt for not taking in Jews during World War II. "Holocaust" does not trivi-

alize but popularize...," she concludes, after having established the Jew as the symbol of hope and the promise of America.

It is a pity that the section on television versions of the Holocaust does not include "The Wall," and gives only passing mention to "Playing for Time." Similarly, the Conclusion merely restates such reductive comments as "The Pawnbroker" is a metaphor for trouble in Harlem" (ignoring this film's rich exploration of survivor guilt), rather than tackling the difference between fiction and documentary — a distinction Doneson never really addresses. Indeed, the book would be more appropriately entitled *The Holocaust in American Fiction Film*, as her acknowledgement of documentaries is limited to passing mention of *Genocide, Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die?*, and *Partisans of Vilna*.

When alluding to *Shoah* at the end she does not even state that this film is a documentary.

Nevertheless, her book is an important addition to Holocaust inquiry, especially in its extensive research, attention to particularly Jewish experience during World War II, and moral questioning. Its copious notes, bibliography, filmography, index and photographs strengthen the text — a testament to Jewish history and values.

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