

Hollywood and the Holocaust: Remembering *The Pawnbroker*

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"Hollywood is just interested in making money No, to Hollywood, culture is just a dirty word. Callow, that's the word for American culture. They have so much to learn from the Europeans." ¹

Selig (the brother-in-law) in Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker*

In a 1961 novel by Edward Lewis Wallant, Sol Nazerman runs a pawnshop near the Harlem River in New York. A former inmate of the Nazi concentration camps, he has social contacts--a woman with whom he has sex, an assistant who helps him in the store, a sister and her family who share a comfortable suburban home in Mount Vernon with him. But he shuts out the world to grieve for himself and the wife and children he lost in the Holocaust. Grim and ethnic, peppered with phrases like *oy vay* and *gay shluphin*, the novel was unusual screen fare in the year that Elizabeth Taylor won an Oscar for *Butterfield 8*.

Gerald Mast notes in *A Short History of the Movies* that the American cinema of the 1960s "became more a directors' cinema." ² As an account of *The Pawnbroker* shows, though, the roots of the so-called Hollywood Renaissance were not only exceptionally tender--especially for downbeat pictures--but nurtured as much by studios or producers as directors or auteurs. Adapted for the screen and released by Allied Artists, *The Pawnbroker* (1965) was a story of repression and survival. And so, behind the scenes, was the story of the independent producers who, in association with actors, artists, and technicians, created the first stubbornly "Jewish" film about the Holocaust.

Movie company story editors of the early 1960s read virtually everything, even fiction, that concerned the Holocaust. *The Pawnbroker*, though, was not only about the annihilation of the Jews and its consequences--that was rare enough in 1961--but had the rawness of a bleeding wound. The gloomy novel opens as the "subtly deformed" (31) **[End Page 353]** Sol Nazerman tramps to work. The snow he crunches could have produced a pleasant sound, but "the sight of the great, bulky figure, with its puffy face, its heedless dark eyes distorted behind the thick lenses of strangely old-fashioned glasses, dispelled any thought of pleasure" (5). For the anomic, the proper pronoun is indeed *its*, not *his*.

The story arc of *The Pawnbroker* rises, regressively, retrospectively, toward the death anniversary of Sol's wife and children. Instead of action, though, the novel works via memory and things, like glasses. Again and again the stolid pawnbroker dons or removes the "round, archaic" (197) glasses he had found during his internment. These "weird glasses" (168) lead his nephew to wonder whether Uncle Sol can "penetrate and understand" the "murkinesses" of the universe (75), and they so embarrass his niece that she wants to buy him "a decent pair

. . . tortoise shell, those heavy, movie-producer kind" (29). The "unique spectacles" (71) "cut into the flesh of his nose" (191), but Sol goes on wiping (95) and cleaning (134) and rubbing them (85). They are his shield against past "spectacles" like the Holocaust and his weapon against present "spectacles" like Mount Vernon (and Harlem) culture, in one scene "picking up flashes of sunlight and flinging them at [another character] like tiny darts" (109).

Sol does not lack a sense of irony. When the Jewish cop on the beat tries to bully him into giving away a Hamilton Beach mixer, he merely shrugs. "Here he was in the classic role of the interrogated again, and Leventhal was playing the part of the oppressor. It was getting confusing; soon you wouldn't know the Jews from their oppressors, the black from the white" (44-45). He cannot be ironic about what haunts him, though, especially when it occurs with the force of a cinematic cut. "Suddenly [Nazerman] had the sensation of being clubbed. An image was stamped *behind* his eyes like a bolt of pain" (6). The horrendous scenes that follow, italicized in the text, do not conform to the usual survivor's dreams "of improbable paradises, of equally mythical and improbable enemies; cosmic enemies, perverse and subtle, who pervade everything like the air."³ Instead, Sol's daydreams (or flashbacks) have the grit of documentary footage, as when he recalls the "*mountain of emaciated bodies, hands, and legs tossed in nightmare abandon, as though each victim had died in the midst of a frantic dance, the hollow eyes and gaping mouths expressing what could have been a demented and perverse ecstasy*" (146). Sol has seen too much. "*They could see the whole thing from where they stood in the camp square*" (76) on the night **[End Page 354]** the dogs had hunted down Rubin. Now Sol makes love to Tessie, Rubin's widow, another aggrieved survivor, and struggles not to see the ghosts that surround them. "Yes," he tells her, "I have escaped. I am safe within myself. I have made an order for myself, and no one can disturb it" (91). On the final pages of the novel, though, when his assistant dies, Sol can no longer control his "glass-covered eyes" (6). The stoic weeps, and then, gradually, he "wiped his eyes clear again . . . wetness dried on his cheeks and a great calm came over him" (205). He prays for the dead, his assistant and the others. More importantly, he forgives himself.

Like many in Hollywood, Paramount readers thought *The Pawnbroker* "tremendous" but found "no way to whip up any enthusiasm here, especially the moment 'small picture' was mentioned."⁴ Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer had another idea. Bill Zimmerman (of the story department) and Red Silverstein (of foreign distribution) read the book and thought an adaptation at least possible, less as an MGM production than an MGM release. Though the novel was far darker and (apropos the Holocaust) more personal than *Exodus* (1960) or the forthcoming *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), it ended affirmatively and, if quickly produced, could perhaps ride the minor wave of box office interest in "Jewish" cinema. MGM's Joseph Vogel had once hoped to make "a succession of deals with Hollywood's independent producers to put M-G-M on a competitive par with its more alert rivals."⁵ *The Pawnbroker* (likely to appeal to a maverick filmmaker) could test that plan.

Shortly after publication of *The Pawnbroker*, Zimmerman and Silverstein sent the novel to a confrere on the East Coast, the home of many of Hollywood's independent producers. Roger Lewis had worked in advertising at Warner Bros., 20th Century-Fox, and finally, throughout the 1950s, United Artists. He had served briefly as UA's director of promotion and exploitation, then resigned to write for television (he won an Emmy for an episode of "The Defenders") and look for "serious" work in motion pictures. *The Pawnbroker*, he later said, was so serious that it "scared hell out of me." He nonetheless took on the property when Zimmerman and Silverstein hinted that Rod Steiger, a "bankable" actor, was interested in the lead role. In fact, Zimmerman and Silverstein had never spoken to Steiger. Zimmerman knew that Steiger was in New York in a play and thought that Lewis could persuade him to shoot a picture during the day. Lewis was annoyed--and, worse, soon learned **[End Page 355]** that Joe Vogel, like Rod Steiger, had never heard of Wallant's novel. Silverstein hastened to explain that he and Zimmerman wanted Steiger engaged before they approached Vogel about

the production: unless a star was attached, a movie about the Holocaust would languish in the front office.⁶

By early 1962 Steiger had read the novel and talked salary (\$75,000 and ten percent of the net), but he wanted to see a screenplay before he committed.⁷ MGM seemed more encouraging--only because it wanted to exploit the Eady Pool, a British law that afforded the American film industry a generous rebate of distribution costs for pictures shot in England. Since the smaller the budget the greater the protection against loss, MGM tentatively proposed a *Pawnbroker* shot in London for \$400,000. Lewis was skeptical. The setting of the narrative thundered the new world, *New York*, and though \$400,000 would buy more abroad than at home, it was still a paltry amount.⁸

As MGM tarried, Lewis formed a partnership with Philip Langner (whose father ran the Theatre Guild) for production of *The Pawnbroker* as "A Theatre Guild Film."⁹ Langner put up \$7,200 in exchange for one-third of the picture. "Without [Langner] the project would never have happened," Lewis told one interviewer, "so he's entitled to what he got. But I had to give away a hell of a lot for his \$7,200."¹⁰ Lewis and Langner optioned the novel for \$1,000 and drafted a crude prospectus for private investors. *The Pawnbroker*, Lewis wrote, is "a vehicle that will garner attention and awards all out of proportion to the cost."¹¹ The announcement won notice. For instance, Groucho Marx (among others) wanted to play Sol--an odd but not inconceivable choice since Bert Lahr had starred in *Waiting for Godot* in 1956 and (as Bottom) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1960.¹² When no money appeared to be forthcoming, however, Lewis called on United Artists.

UA was the logical home for *The Pawnbroker*: the company not only had a long association with independents (Otto Preminger chief among [End Page 356] them) but experience with the Eady Pool, which was then financing the first of the James Bond pictures and Tony Richardson's adaptation of *Tom Jones*.¹³ David Picker loved Wallant's novel yet referred Lewis to Arnold Picker, head of UA's executive committee and "a hard ass."¹⁴ About "Jewish" pictures, Picker told Lewis, the figures spoke for themselves. UA had bought *Exodus* in manuscript for \$250,000 plus five percent of the profits. As early as 1958, over one year before publication, UA told Preminger (the director) that the studio would promote *Exodus* not as "a book about ancient Israel, but rather one of events that took place in *contemporary* history" (emphasis added). The campaign, in other words, would "keep foremost the idea that this is not a book specifically for Jewish interest, but rather that its contents are exciting universally." *Exodus* stayed on the best seller list for 79 weeks and sold three million copies in paperback. The global box office was just under \$20 million. *Judgment at Nuremberg*, on the other hand, produced one year later and encumbered in part by the salaries of its cast and the length of its narrative, had shown the concentration camps in documentary footage and was on its way to losing \$1.5 million at the box office.¹⁵

Exodus and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (originally a television production) were pre-sold. Since *The Pawnbroker* was not, UA conditioned its support on Lewis' paring the budget to \$350,000 and eliminating the Holocaust theme. "People don't wanna see pictures about concentration camps," Picker told Lewis. Lewis argued. "Well," Picker said, "there're other injustices."¹⁶ (In Hollywood each minority group had its season: when he adapted *The Brick Foxhole* for the screen, as *Crossfire* [1947], Dore Schary was forced to change the victim of Richard Brooks's novel from homosexual to Jew.) Lewis was disheartened. He was also \$30,000 in debt.¹⁷ Then Rod Steiger orally agreed to play Sol. MGM offered Lewis \$2,000 to go to London to scout locations and a writer. At last *The Pawnbroker* was moving.

In London Canadian writer Ted Allan, who would later collaborate with Jan Kadar on *Lies My Father Told Me* (1975) and John Cassavetes on *Love Streams* (1984), agreed to adapt Wallant's novel for £6,000 (salary deferred) plus four percent of the net. To assure his fragile hold [End Page 357] on MGM--and future access to UA--Lewis told Allan that the screenplay

should deliver the "data" about the concentration camp "in [Nazerman's] words, rather than show it in literal scenes." He also wanted to alter the novel's presentation of two female characters. Tessie was another hostage of the Holocaust and too "depressive." Shimon Wincelberg (a Jewish friend) had told Langner that Tessie was "repulsive" and that "Wallant (though presumably a Jew) knows very little about lower-class Jews (or concentration camps, or nazis [sic]) and was able only to characterize them in crude stereotypes."¹⁸ Wincelberg may well have been thinking of the appearance of Sol's lover at the beginning of chapter four:

Tessie Rubin opened the door to Sol and gave him access to a different kind of smell from that of the hallway of the apartment house. The hallway, with its tile floors and broken windows, smelled of garbage and soot; Tessie's apartment gave forth the more personal odors of bad cooking and dust. . . . She had a large, curved nose, and her face was very thin; there were hollows in her temples, and her eyes, stranded in the leanness of all the features, were exceptionally large and dismal. She threw her arms outward, splayed her legs in exhaustion: their thinness was grotesque, because her torso was heavy and short, with huge breasts. (46-47)

The slovenly Tessie nurses both her father and her self-pity. Her dying father whines at her and bickers with Sol, whom she uses as willingly as do his sister Bertha, Bertha's husband, and their children. At dinner with the relatives he dislikes, Sol watches his brother-in-law and niece smile at each another "in a glow of intellectual rapport. You wouldn't even guess they were Jews, Bertha thought proudly" (27). No one reading the novel would guess otherwise. Wallant treats the needy customers of the pawnshop with a compassion he denies the other Jews of the story. From Tessie and Bertha to the venal cop Leventhal and the parasitical survivor Goberman (who collects for the Jewish Appeal), *The Pawnbroker* eerily echoes the Jews of the Nazi propaganda posters and the Cruikshank pen-and-inks for *Oliver Twist*. Roger Lewis was no doubt thinking of them when he asked the screenwriter to reconsider the "crude stereotypes."

The other female character of concern was the social worker, Marilyn Birchfield, who reaches out to the pawnbroker. Following a botched robbery of the shop, Sol's assistant takes a bullet intended for his boss. "For an instant [Sol] saw the immaculate face of Marilyn Birchfield and he said as in a dream, 'No, no, I am too dirty; you must go away from [End Page 358] me.' And then she was gone, banished by his voice, and for a moment he thought he recognized the delicate shape of regret, until that, too, disappeared" (201). Though Sol later calls on Morton (his nephew) for support, Lewis thought that focusing on the social worker rather than the young man would lend the movie audience "a sense of hope and fulfillment that they, and the theme, deserve."¹⁹

Marilyn Birchfield "reads" gentile with her American smile and her social philosophy of good deeds, and though Sol's returning to Morton rather than her would loosen the thread of anti-Semitism that runs through the novel, it would also help reassure Hollywood investors accustomed to a fadeout on the heterosexual couple. Granted, Lewis wanted a screenplay reasonably true to Wallant's novel. He also intended to show MGM that the picture would be commercial, however, and to that end he wanted to cast a Caucasian as the woman who played the girlfriend of the Latino assistant. As he told Allan, "It's a chance, as in the book, to give us a good sex bit."²⁰

Ted Allan finished the first draft in spring 1962, when the studios were retrenching and averse to Holocaust pictures, no matter how circumspect the "data." The screenplay was funereal and the ending dour; unlike Sol in the novel, Sol in the script reaches out to no one--neither his nephew nor Marilyn Birchfield. The screenplay was also chock-full of Jewish characters and Jewish "bits." MGM's Bill Zimmerman read Allan's work and found the "business of Sol's Jewishness" disagreeable. "Granted that he is a Jew and one of millions persecuted or murdered by the Nazis, our audience need not be reminded of it to the extent that this script does it. For example, the Hebrew memorial candle on Page 34 (which, aside

from this issue, is meaningless for the bulk of our audience); the use of the word 'kike' on Page 25; the 'Jewish Holiday' reference on Page 124." Also, the script "badly" needs comedy relief, "easily available" fortunately in a scene featuring Jésus (the shop assistant) and his "cronies and their easy girls in a jukebox bar, etc." Finally, the picture needs an "obligatory" scene of Sol and Marilyn at the close. The couple do not need "a sunset background, but at least they should figuratively touch hands in some manner." ²¹

Again *The Pawnbroker* stalled. MGM was "too financially destitute at the moment," Philip Langner told one associate, too consumed by its **[End Page 359]** runaway production of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962) to bankroll *The Pawnbroker*. Confiding in *Variety* reporter Thomas Pryor in a personal letter whose typos and syntax mirror his indignation, Lewis said that he was "holding a nice fat bag which included a guarantee [sic] to Steiger they [MGM] now found some legal techincaility [sic] for saying they were not bound by, and, of course, my own obligation for the the [sic] advance [on a screenplay]." ²² Though committed to the project, Ted Allan must also have been frustrated: he had not yet been paid and probably wondered whether he ever would be.

Steiger generally liked the screenplay, and by June 1962 Lewis was at work in London on a revised second draft that would hold Steiger yet lure backers (the producer hoped). Steiger was also in London, and nearby. "He would come in and he would have little notes and things about scenes that he had decided on or thought about the night before and he would act them out and he would weep, and I would weep almost," Lewis recalled. "And I would weep, not like Rod, who was moved by his own ideas and his own acting, but because it was so bad." ²³ Looked at another way, the weeping marked the strong commitment of the actor. And, clearly, he was the production's linchpin.

The second draft of *The Pawnbroker* (according to the title page, "by Ted Allan and Rod Steiger") set the structure and retained the dark cast of Wallant's novel and Allan's first draft. Countering the opinion of the studios, Steiger thought that Nazerman's Jewishness and the accent on the camps were essential. Accordingly, the ending was bleak, with the pawnbroker slumped over the figure of Joseph, formerly Jésus. "Sol cries, his pain now finding full expression at the death of his 'son', at JOSEPH's sacrifice, and we know there is hope again for him--and for us." Though he had wanted a more explicit scene, with Marilyn, Lewis was not averse to shopping around the revised screenplay. In order to reproduce it, however, he had to ask his partner for money. "I don't have it," he told Langner, and "I will be digging into my slender resources before I leave here since the corp. account is practically nil." The screenplay was slender, not full length, the result of pruning Lewis had done "in anticipation of the director's involvement." At eighty-four pages it was too short. Rereading it months later, Allan himself conceded that "it needs a lot of work. It lacks passion and originality." ²⁴ **[End Page 360]**

The screenplay alone hardly accounted for lack of interest in *The Pawnbroker*. One problem was budget. Lewis could pay no more than £10,000 for a director, and he had been cautioned against many who worked for less, as Hollis Alpert noted when he wrote Lewis "to warn you against John Cassevetes [sic]." Another factor was the London production base. "It was ridiculous," Sidney Lumet told one reporter, referring to Soho standing in for Spanish Harlem. "I had read the book before, loved Wallant's work, and was furious at the kind of treatment it had been given, so turned it down." ²⁵

Others responded negatively. Stanley Kubrick found Steiger not "all that exciting" and turned down the project. Karyl Reisz (whose parents had been interned and executed in Poland) told Lewis that for "deep, personal" reasons he "could not objectively associate himself with any subject which has a background of concentration camps." Mirroring the corporate culture of the studios, others saw *The Pawnbroker* as a professional cul-de-sac. Stage director Franco Zeffirelli was ardent for film credentials, but *The Pawnbroker* was "not

the kind of subject [he] would wish to direct, certainly not as his first Anglo-American venture." More candid, producer Michael Balcon refused because of the "subject matter" and the fear (more than justified) that the major circuits would have "certain reservations" about the picture.²⁶ Lewis, who was speaking to agents rather than to directors or producers themselves, suspected that the go-betweens had not "made clear the fact that we are handling [the camps] symbolically, not realistically, in the script."²⁷ So unique--and so taboo--was the "realistic" content of *The Pawnbroker* in early 1962 that it discouraged both investors and artists.

In August 1962 Ely Landau stepped forward. An accomplished television producer, Landau was making his first picture, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, whose cast and theatrical origins would guarantee it wide press coverage and thus a fair chance at profit. He offered to pay off Lewis and Langner's past expenses on *The Pawnbroker* in return for eighty percent of the producers' share of the picture. Expecting far more than two-thirds of twenty percent of the picture (Langner would have taken one-third of that twenty percent), Lewis naturally made a counteroffer. Landau was "a mercurial guy who changes his mind ten times a [End Page 361] day," Lewis told Ted Allan, "and, faced with our determination to draw the line and mean it, which [Landau] apparently [*sic*] didn't think was going to happen, he's already begun to back flip."²⁸ Lewis had no other prospects, though, and, faced with an able negotiator, sold Landau eighty percent of *The Pawnbroker*.

By early 1963, at his base camp in the Time-Life Building, Landau had read, without pleasure, yet another revision of Allan's screenplay, and by early spring he had asked Morton Fine and David Friedkin (who won sole screen credit) to rework it. Their 178-page first draft (dated 14 May 1963) was very descriptive, occasionally almost florid, and though they renamed the Jewish cop *Morrow*, their Sol was more Jewish than Allan's, especially in his morbid, dry humor.

Keenly attentive to point of view, as Resnais had been in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1960), Fine and Friedkin portrayed the scenes of Sol in the New York suburbs as though they were "all happening on this side of a swoon . . . no distortion, absolute realism . . . a constant flux of voices and figures which ebb in, then out of focus. And overlapping of dialogues [*sic*], so that oftentime a speech which starts to have moment becomes lost as something new starts. And during the INTERCUTTING, the rising emetic effect on Sol is patent." Lewis' desire for closure has Sol reach out, finally, for Morton. "I need you," he says into a pay phone after the shooting. "Come to me." Per Lewis' desire for a "good sex bit," the screenplay called for intercourse between Jésus and his girlfriend as well as Sol and Tessie--but no nudity, in those scenes or others.²⁹

In their second draft dated 21 August 1963 and thirty-five pages shorter than their first, Fine and Friedkin revised, among others, the scene that would give *The Pawnbroker* its place in the annals of American film censorship. At the pawnshop Jésus' girlfriend unzips her dress a little.

As she does the CAMERA MOVES IN to hold [her and Sol] in a TIGHT TWO SHOT.

MABEL

Look . . .

Sol doesn't move. And now with a languid gesture, looking down at her own breasts, she reaches for Sol, her fingers in back of his neck: gentle gesture for him to look . . . to come closer . . . gently . . . soothingly urging him.

[End Page 362]

MABEL

Just look, that's all.

As Sol looks, the voice of a concentration camp guard orders him to look at the Nazi soldier who sexually menaces Sol's wife, Ruth. The third draft, four pages shorter and finished

seven days later, suggests that the producers were apprehensive about the nudity, for Fine and Friedkin designated "a TIGHT TWO SHOT *from over her shoulders*" (emphasis added). The decision on what to show would finally be answered on the set and, later, in the editing room. Already, though, before Landau had hired the director and editor who would win accolades for the film, *The Pawnbroker* was courting controversy, for, nudity aside, an honest presentation of the Holocaust would itself go well beyond the boundaries of "good taste" in American cinema of the early 1960s. ³⁰

"The successful adaptation," John Ellis writes in *Screen*, "is one that is able to replace the memory of the novel with the process of a filmic or televisual representation." ³¹ On those terms Fine and Friedkin's sixth draft (the shooting script) assured the film's success. Abandoning the pitch black tone of the novel, it nonetheless hews closely to the outlines of the story, especially the characterization of Sol, and yet is potentially strong enough to stand apart from the novel that had seeded it.

The shooting script is not conventionally faithful to the novel. It rearranges or omits scenes. It lightens the characterization of Tessie. It dampens hope at the end of the story. Subtly, it changes even Sol. During the Holocaust he had lost all that he loved, he confesses to Marilyn Birchfield late in the film. There was nothing he could do, and now, as the death anniversary approaches, he feels frightened. The emotion puzzles him. As he says, "It's been a long time since I felt . . . fear." Judith Doneson calls the pawnbroker "a weak, almost feminine, figure," and a link between "fear" and a humbled masculinity does not seem so remote, not according to the theory that the Holocaust "feminized [all] European Jewish men, who were castigated as incapable of protecting their families and were therefore led sheepishly to the slaughter." ³²

Seeing *The Pawnbroker* through the lens of gender rather than Jewish history could universalize the Holocaust, rendering it if not (as Doneson [End Page 363] says) a metaphor for all human suffering, ³³ then a statement on masculinity and its discontents. More so than the novel, though, the screenplay and film treat the feminization without losing the specificity of the Holocaust. Sol is surrounded with weak men. His brother-in-law (not a Holocaust survivor) literally lies prostrate at the beginning of the film, content to be led by his wife and supported by Sol, the "man of the house." One pawnshop customer stutters (he's a pederast in the novel), another lisps. The gangster Rodriguez and the hood Robinson condescendingly call Sol *uncle*, grudgingly recognizing his masculinity, but to their consternation he does not flinch at gunpoint. They may also envy the pawnbroker: though neither "weak" nor "feminine," Rodriguez and Robinson are both gay and thus more "other" than Jews are.

Sol best shows his manhood through his paternal interest in Jésus, the one character in the film whose self-doubts change the direction of the story. In their kitchen, in an odd scene, Jésus' mother supervises her son's bath as he teaches her to say "I am a good boy" in English. ³⁴ When he goes to a nightclub--where an artiste ends her dance act by tearing off her wig and showing she's a man--he tells Mabel that the pawnbroker's "been working my back off all afternoon." When he tells her they should "just go up and sit and talk awhile," she pins his lethargy on his weak sex drive and says heatedly, "I don't like you working too hard 'cuz I don't like you using all your energy." Later he will show her what he can do, he snaps back, but when they have sex, she mounts him. (In the crosscut scene, Sol mounts Tessie.) The barb about "using all your energy" burrows under Jésus's skin: as he knows, day in and day out, a man must *prove* his manhood. Accordingly, when the hoods taunt him about working in the pawnshop ("a chicken business") and about his on-again off-again plan to rob it, he finally cooperates with them not only to steal the money but to show that he's man enough to do so.

Sol may well feel anxious about his manhood: when forced to "look . . . look" (at Ruth and the German officer) he is unable to "act like a man." A minor but telling change from novel to screenplay lets us infer that his "fear" has cultural as well as gendered roots.

Wallant's Sol is Polish. As Dorothy Bilik says in her monograph on Holocaust fiction, the pawnbroker was one of the "secularly educated, assimilated European Jews." And as Annette Insdorf reports in her book on Holocaust film, "Polish-Jewish civilization was highly developed between the wars and included experimental education (a Montessori [End Page 364] school in Vilna), progressive politics (the *Bund*, a Jewish Socialist party), and ripe artistic movements (Yiddish writers' groups like *Di Khalyastre*)." ³⁵

The cinema's pawnbroker is German. As Rod Steiger's unaccented English (purged of "Jewish" syntax and Yiddish expressions) hints, the German Jews were not only the most assimilated of Europe but tended to consider themselves superior to others. They were free, they thought, of the Orthodoxy that characterized many Polish Jews and felt they were Germans before they were Jews. The death camps were in Poland, where the peasantry was notorious for its anti-Semitism, so when the German Jews were isolated from other German citizens they were puzzled, not least because they were so close to the social history that had produced the Nazis. If an awareness of the *shoah* dawned later--and more profoundly--on German Jews than on Poles, then the cinema's Nazerman may have found it harder than his counterpart in the novel to understand and accept what had happened to him as a man, a German, and a Jew. As such, the screen version of *The Pawnbroker* adds nuance to the character's fear.

The Pawnbroker was rehearsed and shot in New York in fall 1963, under the direction of Sidney Lumet and on a budget beyond the \$350,000 once proposed. The principal set (only a few were constructed) was the pawnshop, created by Richard Sylbert and lit, coldly, carefully, by Boris Kaufman. It was (as Lumet wrote later) "a series of cages: wire mesh, bars, locks, alarms, anything that would reinforce a sense of entrapment," ³⁶ and Lumet used each barrier evocatively. Assistant director Dan Eriksen found many of the actual locations: the bleached landscape of Sol's Levittown home; the peculiar second-story church where Jesús's mother worships; the city park where Sol meets Marilyn for lunch (originally to have been the end of a dock, a movie cliché); Marilyn's Lincoln Towers apartment, whose balcony overlooks smokestacks near the center of the frame and a railroad yard of clattering and clanging trains; and the exterior of the pawnshop on 116th and Park Avenues, next door to the Radiante Bar that offers little light and less hope as Sol passes by at the end of the picture.

Along with the locales, the black-and-white cinematography hardens the grittiness of the production. In the 1950s even "small pictures" (like *Tea and Sympathy*) or serious dramas (like *Vertigo*) had been shot in [End Page 365] color to compete with television. Once color reached television in the 1960s, though, Hollywood returned to monochrome, and Boris Kaufman was one of its masters; he had worked on American documentaries before he turned to features, and pictures like *12 Angry Men* and *On the Waterfront* foreshadowed the "realism" of *The Pawnbroker*.

Lumet had good camera sense. He had collaborated with Kaufman on *12 Angry Men* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* and worked fast, usually with two or three takes per shot. He was generous with actors, and the performers responded well, especially Jaime Sanchez (Jésus Ortiz), Eusebia Cosme (Mrs. Ortiz), and Brock Peters, who plays the gay racketeer (Rodriguez) living in a white house with a live-in white lover. Thelma Oliver, portraying Mabel as vulnerable yet brash, had not known that she would bare her breasts; she cried when told, and since (as Eriksen recalls) no "protection footage" was shot, she knew that the nude scene would probably appear in the final cut. ³⁷ Lumet shot the sequence on a cleared stage, and, characteristically, the production quickly moved on.

Rod Steiger was immersed in the role of Sol Nazerman. He had shaved his head (his own idea, he told reporter Arnold Abrams) and hidden "his strong upper lip" behind a gray mustache. "There may be more money to be made in a musical comedy," he told the press, "but at least I feel I've done something worthwhile when I complete a film like this." ³⁸ Lumet

and Steiger were especially attentive to Sol's glasses. He has two pairs, one modern with black rims (the "movie-producer kind") and the other round with wire rims, like those Wallant describes. He keeps the latter at the pawnshop and uses the others elsewhere, until the scene with Mabel. Then, during the last third of the picture, he wears only the older pair, the spectacles that augur the looming and long-suppressed confrontation with the memory of the Holocaust.

Steiger and Lumet worked well together, especially in the last scene. The old-fashioned glasses press against Sol's forehead as he kneels over the dead Jésus, as he shapes a cry that never comes. That mute scream anchors the picture in "Jewishness." According to Annette Insdorf it represents not only "the helpless reaction to continued anti-Semitism, as illustrated by the client who calls [Nazerman] a 'money-grubbing kike'" but also "the emblem of the Holocaust survivor, the witness of a horror so devastating that it cannot be told."³⁹ **[End Page 366]**

By Christmas 1963 *The Pawnbroker* was in the hands of the editor, Ralph Rosenblum, whose account of the picture in two chapters of *When the Shooting Stops* constitutes the only other production history of the film. Rosenblum and Lumet edited *The Pawnbroker* in January and February 1964. They cut out scenes of the cop and the parasite Goberman and, appeasing the brother-in-law in the Wallant novel (who says that Hollywood has "so much to learn from the Europeans"), added the Holocaust flashcuts which Rosenblum has discussed at length.

According to a February 1964 advertisement in *Variety*, the Landau Company was "dedicated to the production of quality motion pictures for that world-wide audience seeking meaningful and provocative screen entertainment."⁴⁰ The *meaningful* would not be the *provocative* shot of Mabel's breasts (assuming it passed the censors) but the integrity of *The Pawnbroker's* representation of a cataclysmic moment in human history.

Throughout early spring 1964 Landau and Lewis looked on as Lumet and Rosenblum tuned *The Pawnbroker*, and by summer the filmmakers were ready to show the \$930,000 production to potential distributors. The latter may have been wary of the content of the film, especially the nudity, which could attract audiences but also litigation. Hoping to establish the bona fides of the picture and soften the censors' anticipated resistance to it, Landau arranged to open *The Pawnbroker* abroad. Lewis later recalled that he had long wanted to screen *The Pawnbroker* at the Berlin Film Festival, and as the award-winning *Bicycle Thief* (1950) had shown, an international reputation could not only trump the Production Code Administration (PCA) office but help a "serious" film set box office records. In early summer 1964 a motion picture trade association panel sponsored by the United States Information Agency chose *The Pawnbroker* as the American entry for Berlin, where it could score an artistic--and political--coup. On 2 July, when the Festival screened the picture, Landau and Steiger were there (and lauded), apparently on the production's budget. Lewis and Langner were also present, on Langner's money, and feeling forgotten.⁴¹

Lewis was the one constant in *The Pawnbroker*, from the option on the novel through (and beyond) the international premiere of the picture, a point overlooked when Rosenblum says that Landau "found [Wallant's] book, optioned it, and hired two men to write the script before the director ever came on the scene. None of this can be fairly omitted from **[End Page 367]** the story of the film's success."⁴² In fall 1964 Lewis could only watch as the months passed and the Berlin publicity evaporated. Lewis begged Landau for prints to show around Los Angeles, and Landau, through an intermediary, responded "that, at the moment, there are only two PAWNBROKER prints in the United States that have the final version. Both of these prints are being used for screenings here. At such time as we make others, I will notify you and will be happy to send one to you." Landau was probably showing *The Pawnbroker* to likely distributors, and probably garnering more compliments than offers. The nudity was one

bottleneck, the Holocaust theme another. "I don't think that Hollywood should deal with anything but entertainment," Paramount head Adolph Zukor had told the press in 1939. "The newsreels take care of current events. To make films of political significance is a mistake."⁴³ As late as 1962 Paramount had turned down *The Pawnbroker* because it was a low-budget production; another factor was no doubt the "depressive" content.

Finally, one copy of *The Pawnbroker* reached Hollywood. Contravening the protocol for feature films, Landau had not sent the shooting script to the Production Code office for vetting,⁴⁴ so agency director Geoff Shurlock may have felt sandbagged. Shurlock quickly screened the picture, though, and on New Year's Eve 1964 told Landau that the bare breasts and one of the sex scenes of Jésus and Mabel were "unacceptably sex suggestive and lustful."⁴⁵ The phrase was boilerplate left over from the tenure of former PCA director Joe Breen and calculated to force the producers into concessions. Another month passed. On 29 January Landau pleaded the moral gravity of the picture but was told that the Production Code would continue to hold the line on nudity and that Landau's only recourse would be a formal appeal.

Another month passed. Landau had arranged for Allied Artists to release *The Pawnbroker*, which, technically, the company could not do without the Production Code seal. Bosley Crowther, whose *New York Times* censure of the PCA's treatment of *Bicycle Thief* helped gain wide release of the picture, reported on 9 March 1965 that the New York censors had licensed *The Pawnbroker* sans cuts and that the Motion [End Page 368] Picture Association appeals board (the parent of the PCA) would soon hear the issue.⁴⁶

On 29 March 1965 representatives of Allied Artists told the appeals board that *The Pawnbroker* "will play specialized theatres for the most part, catering to adult audiences."⁴⁷ Allied Artists could have released the picture via a subsidiary and thus saved the cost and suspense of a confrontation with the Motion Picture Association. Since 1958, however, Allied Artists (a publicly traded company) had been frequently in the red; the price of its stock was hovering in the low single digits, and its next earnings report would show a \$1.5 million loss. Allied Artists needed more than an "art house" hit. A Production Code seal--and controversy--could only help sell an otherwise difficult picture.

Landau assured the appeals board that the nudity was necessary to *The Pawnbroker* and that, more important, he would not exploit it in the advertising. The debate that followed was vigorous. Joe Mankiewicz, the independent producer whose *Suddenly Last Summer* had been a Production Code cause célèbre, defended Landau and *The Pawnbroker* while Spyros Skouras, the former exhibitor whose *Cleopatra* had taken down Twentieth Century-Fox and his presidency of the studio, led the opposition. Another major player, not even present, was Ephraim London, whom Landau had talked with, probably openly, about his plans to sue the Association in the wake of an unfavorable decision. London, having argued the *Miracle* case before the Supreme Court and thus curbed the authority of state and municipal censors, would gladly have taken on the Motion Picture Association, and Landau wanted to do so--despite the thought that other independents producers would have been too soft to join in as plaintiffs.⁴⁸ Based on a 6-3 vote, though, the Association granted *The Pawnbroker* an "exception" conditional on "reduction in the length of the scenes which the Production Code Administration found unapprovable."⁴⁹ Paramount head Barney Balaban warned that "any self-serving statement that the picture is unique and the so-called 'exception' applies only to this particular film is meaningless. The decision is obviously a precedent for the next and the next and we will learn where it ends only after it is too late." Balaban (the son of [End Page 369] Russian Jewish immigrants) was probably swayed by other factors. In 1948 he had told Harry Warner that the return of Loeb and Leopold in *Rope* would have an "adverse influence on [the] standing of our Jewish people in the nation." "Hollywood was itself a means of avoiding Judaism," Neal Gabler says, yet Balaban had toured the concentration camps; too shaken to tell even his family what he had seen, he may have been as averse to Jewish survivors as Jewish killers. Such points of view were not uncommon, as a prominent Los

Angeles rabbi showed after release of *The Pawnbroker*. "All [the Jews] talk about is the Holocaust and all the sufferings," Edgar Magnin told Gabler. "The goddamn fools don't realize that the more you tell gentiles that nobody likes us, the more they say there must be reason for it." ⁵⁰

Whatever else, Balaban was right about precedents. The "reductions" of nudity were minimal, and the press cheered the producers' victory. "If the Motion Picture Code has been broken, it is time that it was re-written," James F. O'Neill wrote in the *Washington Daily News* in late spring 1965. "When you consider what the dirty-movie houses get away with, and what the legitimate stage is offering in the way of artistic achievement, and some of the trash which Hollywood uses to lure the morons, *The Pawnbroker* evolves as a most tasteful, dynamic and dramatic motion picture." ⁵¹ The unspoken achievement was of course the presentation of the Holocaust: *The Pawnbroker* was an acid test of Rabbi Magnin's point of view, and the fray over the nude scenes would be long forgotten before another "Jewish" film superseded the harshness of the concentration camp scenes in the Lewis and Landau production.

The Catholic Legion of Decency tabbed *The Pawnbroker* "C" (for "Condemned"), assured, as one official wrote, "that a condemnation is necessary in order to put a very definite halt to the effort by producers to introduce nudity into American films." Years before, when, according to one bishop, "Jewish control of the industry [was] alienating many of our people," the Catholics might also have been swayed by other factors. The times had changed, though, and *The Pawnbroker* would become the first "C" picture to play St. Paul, Minnesota, a strongly Catholic city; according to *Variety*, "this may mark a letting down of the bars here for such films." ⁵² **[End Page 370]**

Having cleared the censors, the producers now had the harder task of selling a Holocaust picture (the nudity notwithstanding) to an audience of Jew and gentile alike. Landau opened *The Pawnbroker* in Los Angeles at the Pantages Theater, "either suicide or prescient genius," noted the reviewer for the *Hollywood Reporter*. The theater generally screened standard American fare, such as the Sinatra "rat pack" farce *Ocean's Eleven*, which Lewis recalled (in an oral history) was playing in reissue the night *The Pawnbroker* previewed there. The Pantages was RKO's "key West Coast theatre," and the fact that it played *The Pawnbroker* let other exhibitors know that Allied Artists and RKO saw the production as a "big" picture. ⁵³

Major bookings and critical acceptance of *The Pawnbroker* followed, and so did Academy Award nominations. Rod Steiger lost the Oscar to Lee Marvin (for *Cat Ballou*), and, worse for investors, Landau and *The Pawnbroker* lost to Fox and *The Sound of Music*. The outcome was no surprise to Quincy Jones, who scored the picture. "Hollywood has a funny sort of prejudice toward films that come out of the East and since *The Pawnbroker* was really an East coast production, the industry resisted everything about it." ⁵⁴

Playing only key cities, *The Pawnbroker* grossed almost \$3 million. Then, for the smaller houses, American-International took over domestic distribution. A-I cut the nudity, won an innocuous "A 3" from the Catholic rating board and thus, according to *Variety*, opened up the picture to five- to ten-thousand more bookings. A-I reported that *The Pawnbroker* was only two feet shorter: the shot of the bare breasts had been removed "by using a lab blowup that cuts the girl's body off at shoulder level." ⁵⁵ (The video bears the A-I logo but is the original Allied Artists release.) Soon Landau rued his pledge about advertising, for *The Pawnbroker* took in \$1.5 million in Italy alone, thanks to what the producer called the "sex pitch" that had "proved to be a mainstay" in Italian posters for the film. ⁵⁶ Domestically, the Motion Picture Association suppressed one "prominently displayed" part of the movie poster "showing the negro prostitute on top of the man." ⁵⁷ **[End Page 371]**

A beachhead for nudity in motion pictures, *The Pawnbroker* has--unjustifiably--been seen less often as an important picture about Jews, Jewish survivors, and the Holocaust. In the late

1950s *Me and the Colonel* (1958) and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959) had touched on the war but tiptoed around the Holocaust. Business was business, even on Broadway. When he directed *Anne Frank* in New York, Garson Kanin had had the playwrights delete Anne's allusion to the constancy of Jewish persecution, "an embarrassing piece of special pleading," he said. "The fact that in this play the symbols of persecution and oppression are Jews is incidental, and Anne, in stating the argument so, reduces her magnificent stature."⁵⁸ Jews endorsed the strategy: when *Anne Frank* went to Hollywood, the Jewish Film Advisory Committee applauded the authors of the screenplay for expanding the "universal" meaning of the play.⁵⁹

As Sidney Lumet understood and as Judith Doneson says, "Jewish particularism was not popular in the fifties." At the end of that decade Lumet had read Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* and, eager to direct it, flown west to confer with Jack Warner, who had once said that had he known about the Jewish connection to *Rope* he "would not have made any deal to release the picture." Scanning early sketches for the major set of *Marjorie Morningstar*, Lumet was astonished that the resort looked more like Brentwood than the Catskills. Production designer Dick Sylbert was mute, so Warner explained. "'You see, Sidney,' he said, 'we don't want a picture with a narrow appeal. We want something more universal.' I said, 'That means we don't cast any Jews, right?' I was on the three o'clock plane home."⁶⁰

Those associated with *The Pawnbroker* had had doubts about the "particularism" of the story. "In keeping with the screenplay and the original novel," noted Rosenblum, writing more than ten years after release of the picture, the flashbacks portray none of the gross Nazi atrocities. "There were no ovens or executions or horrid human experiments. The story revealed the destruction of an identity," a "human" rather than "Jewish" identity. *Pace* Rosenblum, the flashbacks are not about suffering but Jewish suffering, and they anchor the film in the memory and "particularism" of the Holocaust. *The Pawnbroker* is significant because Sol Nazerman, Jew, is the central character. Absent **[End Page 372]** his Jewishness or his life in the Nazi camps there is (as Patricia Erens says) no story.⁶¹

What then accounted for the relatively brisk box office of *The Pawnbroker*? "Thelma Oliver reveals a forceful personality (and a lovely body, too) as the Negro prostie," *Variety* told industry readers. Though the controversy over the nudity of *The Pawnbroker* surely attracted audiences, current events also produced box office interest in the Holocaust and thus the picture. Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* had been published in 1961, and Hannah Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial (which lasted from April to December 1961) had appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1962-63 and then, hardbound, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963. Both books enjoyed chiefly an intellectual readership; as Irving Howe said, as maddening as were Arendt's views, they "enabled us to finally speak about the unspeakable."⁶² The trial itself and the hanging in May 1962 had been one of the major stories of 1961 and 1962 in the American press. "We want the nations of the world to know," Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion had said of the accusations and the proceedings, and reporters had spread the word.⁶³

McCarthyism was over and the flight to the suburbs and the attendant struggle for assimilation *fait accompli*. In Hollywood and beyond, though, as Stephen Whitfield notes, some Jews "began to realize that the Jewish legacy was perhaps worth nurturing, if the alternative was the blurring of the differences between Jews and their neighbors, if the social contract contained a clause envisioning the end of the Jewish people." More generally, as Lester Friedman notes, there was a burgeoning awareness of ethnicity. Jews and others were now proud to identify themselves as members of a minority group,⁶⁴ and *The Pawnbroker* may have garnered a Jewish audience interested in a taste of Jewish history, one that had been less whitewashed than *Gentleman's Agreement* and **[End Page 373]** *Crossfire*, one that addressed the screen taboo of the twentieth century, the Holocaust.

Both the "general American" and the "minority" audience of the 1960s were curious about others' heritage and history. And like a Western told by a Native American, a Jewish picture about the Holocaust was a novelty. On television in 1959, then on film in 1961, *Judgment at Nuremberg* had been the stalking horse for *The Pawnbroker*, less because, as Annette Insdorf notes, *Judgment* "fit the bristling new material of the Holocaust into an old narrative form, thus allowing the viewer to leave the theater feeling complacent instead of concerned or disturbed,"⁶⁵ than because it raised questions that *The Pawnbroker* could answer. Who were the (anonymous) Jews of *Judgment at Nuremberg*? Telling the story of six rather than six million and how they suffered, died, and were mourned, *The Pawnbroker* personalizes the past.

Finally, no less than Sidney Lumet, Boris Kaufman, Ralph Rosenblum, or others, Rod Steiger was crucial to the popular success of *The Pawnbroker*. Having won an Oscar for *On the Waterfront* (1954) and been nominated for *The Pawnbroker* before it entered general release, he had enough celebrity to sell tickets to the picture yet not so much celebrity that it absorbed the character he played. Justice prevails in *Judgment at Nuremberg* not only because the occasion demands it but because Spencer Tracy sits on the bench. More character actor than star, Steiger has no congenial screen persona that allows us to "excuse" or feel "complacent" about the pawnbroker. He brings Sol Nazerman (not Rod Steiger) dynamically to life, as a Jew, an abrasive, often unpleasant Jew, angry about the Holocaust; in short, he adds to the credibility and "particularity" of the character and assures the story the "small-picture" status that, paradoxically, makes it so powerful.

Ilan Avisar, author of *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, finds *The Pawnbroker* offensive. Jésus' death, for instance, Christianizes Sol, who, when he presses his hand down on a receipt spike after the assistant dies, adopts the stigma of the cross. In a more persuasive reading, though, Annette Insdorf sees the spearing as the legacy of a Nazi rather than Christian concept. Sol "wounds himself, rendering flesh a mere object" and thus "makes concrete one of the film's central themes: survivor guilt."⁶⁶ [End Page 374]

Avisar says that *The Pawnbroker* debases its Jewishness by drawing a "bogus analogy between the horrors of the Holocaust and living conditions in Spanish Harlem."⁶⁷ Lumet had drawn that analogy--but not without an awareness of its flaws, flaws that were, not coincidentally, present in the novel. The latter, for instance, opens on Sol at the pawnshop, where he has his first flashback. The film, on the other hand, opens on Germany before the war, then cuts to the suburbs, blunting rather than reinforcing a connection between the Holocaust and Harlem. And long before the Berlin screening of *The Pawnbroker*, Lumet had continually tinkered with shots of the three Nazis who arrest Sol's family--shortening the shots, then lengthening them, then shortening them again so that the comparison of the three Nazis and the three pawnshop robbers would be hinted at rather than hammered.⁶⁸

Finally, Lumet and his collaborators erected a wall of more than italics (Wallant's device) to separate the concentration camp scenes from those in New York. Quincy Jones scored the present-day scenes with jazz and the backstory scenes with classical music. Boris Kaufman shot the latter to look hallucinatory--less dark, less "aural," less percussive, less densely composed than the New York scenes. And because the past unfolds in fractional seconds rather than whole seconds, it stands in keen and exceptionally filmic contrast to the present, a contrast sharpened by the fact that the concentration camp scenes (unlike those in the novel) are so elliptical that we cannot "read" them.

Roger Lewis once described himself as "often a little too conciliatory [*sic*]."⁶⁹ And so perhaps was *The Pawnbroker*, if not too conciliatory then (for some critics) too universal. The picture testifies nonetheless to the spirit of independent production and, more so, the horror of the event that the story both dramatizes and memorializes. As early as spring 1962, less than three weeks before Eichmann's execution, Lewis, a Jew and a former vice president for advertising, said that he wanted to do not a picture but *this* picture, *The Pawnbroker*,

"because of the years I spent peddling millions of miles of horseshit on film and hating about 99% of it . . . and then having all the smart guys tell that this one wasn't commercial, would never go, etc." ²⁰ [End Page 375]

This picture, *The Pawnbroker*, was the work of *collaborateurs* rather than *auteurs*, which may account for its strengths and no doubt its weaknesses. Whatever its inherent successes or miscalculations, it was the foundation for the widely seen American miniseries about the *shoah* and, later, for the most honored and widely seen of all such theatrical films, *Schindler's List*. As Jésus tells Sol, "You my teacher." For the Holocaust pictures that followed, *The Pawnbroker* served the same function.

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Notes

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