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# THE UNMARKED CHAINS OF *PAPER CLIPS*

Helene Meyers

## Abstract

*Paper Clips*, a prize-winning 2004 Miramax documentary directed by Elliot Berlin and Joe Fab about a Holocaust collecting project that culminated in the Children's Holocaust Memorial in Whitwell, Tennessee, strives to do necessary and well-intentioned memory work. However, it also illuminates culturally overdetermined forms of forgetting and self-fashioning that too often accompany Holocaust memorialization in white, Christian communities. *Paper Clips* exemplifies the ways in which Holocaust education can unwittingly foster competing victimization narratives between blacks and Jews, sanitize both European and U.S. history, and serve subtle but pernicious forms of supersessionism. This essay argues that ethically responsible Holocaust memorialization in the twenty-first century requires critical analysis of the specifically Christian and Jewish desires addressed by such a popular documentary.

*Paper Clips* is a 2004 Miramax documentary, directed by Elliot Berlin and Joe Fab, about an after-school diversity project that morphed into a Holocaust collecting project and that culminated in the Children's Holocaust Memorial in Whitwell, Tennessee. The memorial consists of a German cattle car used to transport Jews to concentration camps that has been reimagined as a final resting place for the lost souls symbolized by the collected paper clips. This documentary was nominated for a 2006 Emmy in the category of Outstanding Historical Programming in Long Form and has been named one of the five best documentaries of 2004 by the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures. Its many awards include a 2006 Christopher Award for the film that "affirms the highest values of the human spirit," as well as numerous audience awards at Jewish and non-Jewish film festivals and the jury award for Best American Documentary at the 2004 Rome International Film Festival. The paper clip educational project, which, at this point, is certainly not identical with but also can never again be wholly separated from the 2004 documentary, has spawned the trend of collecting projects to help school children conceptualize the enormity of the losses of the Shoah.<sup>1</sup> Jewish motorcyclist groups have traveled to the Whitwell memorial on a Ride to Remember the Holocaust; reportedly, news of the Paper Clips Project convinced one despairing Holocaust survivor not to commit

suicide; viewing the film compelled another survivor to write and share his memories for the first time.<sup>2</sup> This documentary devoted to Whitwell's well-intentioned Holocaust memorial has been enthusiastically endorsed by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL); although the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum declined to sponsor a viewing of this film, it does include the DVD among the offerings in its online shop.<sup>3</sup> *Paper Clips* is also part of the Holocaust Pack DVD offered by Christian.cinema.com. That the documentary *Paper Clips* has had a significant and documented cultural impact is irrefutable. However, I want to argue here that even as *Paper Clips* strives to do necessary and well-intentioned memory work, it also illuminates culturally overdetermined forms of forgetting that too often accompany Holocaust memorialization in white, Christian communities.

On the one hand, I feel positively churlish offering a critique of a film—and by extension, an educational project—that is fundamentally about Christians committing themselves to Holocaust memory. At a historical moment when the number of survivors is dwindling rapidly, when anti-semitism is rising alarmingly, and when there seems to be global memory loss when it comes to the Shoah, shouldn't I be celebrating plucky, committed middle-schoolers and their teachers who are determined to learn about and to teach the Holocaust? Shouldn't I join the diverse Jewish voices who have formed a cheerleading squad for this effort? Am I falling into the role and voice of a stiff-necked academic, out of touch with the way that historical consciousness develops and is transmitted by and in mainstream culture? Scholars such as Lawrence Baron and Alan Mintz compellingly argue that Holocaust representation and memorialization necessarily take different forms in different communal, historical, and national contexts<sup>4</sup>; isn't *Paper Clips* testament to that difference, a specific example, as Daniel Magilow sensitively argues, “of how a new generation is relating to an increasingly distant event”? I pose these questions at the outset of this essay and prior to what is, at points, a trenchant critique because I want to foreground my ambivalence about not only this documentary but also this scene of writing. Yet I have chosen, indeed felt compelled, to proceed with this project because *Paper Clips* illuminates the ways in which Holocaust memorialization can unwittingly foster competing victimization narratives between blacks and Jews, sanitize both European and U.S. history, and serve subtle but pernicious forms of supersessionism.

Although the directors assert in the DVD commentary that the Paper Clips Project was selfless work, people “doing good things for its own sake,”

Linda Hooper, the principal of the Whitwell middle school, refutes this view at the outset of the film. According to her, what ultimately turned into the Children's Holocaust Memorial began as "a need" to introduce diversity lessons into the homogenous white Protestant community of Whitwell, Tennessee. As Hooper puts it, "we're all alike, and when we come up to someone who's not like us, we don't have a clue." In the production notes to the documentary,<sup>5</sup> Dave Smith, vice principal and football coach, more specifically articulates this lack of diversity as an impediment to upward mobility; according to Smith, first-year college students from Whitwell were "rooming on floors with people of all different nationalities and religions . . . They couldn't handle it. They came back after two weeks." Studying the Holocaust seemed a good way to bridge this diversity gap, and it's worth noting that students who have participated in the Paper Clips Project have a much higher rate of college attendance and completion than their peers. Sandra Roberts, one of the key educators involved in the project, reports that 90 percent of the students involved with the project seek higher education and 75 percent earn a bachelor's degree (prior to the project, less than 10 percent attended college and less than 5 percent completed their degree). No doubt the \$500,000 scholarship fund established by supporters of the Paper Clips Project has aided such academic achievement.<sup>6</sup> As Alan Mintz has astutely argued, no pure motivations exist for any memorial work, even and especially those that engage the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> Thus the fact that the Paper Clips Project afforded Whitwell students educational opportunities otherwise unavailable to them certainly does not invalidate the worth or integrity of the project. However, it does challenge the coding of such projects and their participants as selfless. The acknowledgment that diverse conscious and unconscious investments are associated with such work enables us to critically analyze the ideology, ethics, and potential unintended effects of such seemingly selfless acts.

Ample evidence exists that this documentary is doing the cultural work of southern self-fashioning. Significantly, the Holocaust was chosen as a good way to bridge the diversity gap because "there are no Jews here. These kids don't know any Germans. It was easier to teach them tolerance by teaching them about people they don't know anything about."<sup>8</sup> Mark Anderson aptly categorizes such a pedagogical project as an example of "no-cost multiculturalism" that "provides the illusion of diversity without requiring that anything or anyone actually change . . . Identifying with Jews who died 60 years ago in a foreign country is safe: no living Jewish community

threatens Whitwell's religious and ethnic homogeneity." Of course, such diversity/tolerance training locates narratives of intolerance elsewhere rather than directly confronting those forms of intolerance closer to home.<sup>9</sup> Dita Smith, a *Washington Post* writer who helped put the Paper Clips Project on the media map,<sup>10</sup> talks on-screen about her research on Whitwell and her discovery that it was located about one hundred miles from the Tennessee town that gave birth to the Ku Klux Klan. In the DVD commentary, Fab indicates that "we didn't see any indications of the Klan or continuing feelings like the Klan would suggest." Certainly the euphemistic and sanitized language—"continuing feelings"—of the commentary is itself suggestive. Notably, the close proximity of Whitwell to the birthplace of the Klan is divorced from the ethno-racial and religious homogeneity of the town; a possible connection between history and contemporary demographics is never considered. Likewise, the lessons about what happens when intolerance is given free rein did not include the bombings of Jewish spaces that occurred throughout the South during the civil rights movement, bombings that were perpetrated by self-described U.S. admirers of Hitler and that included the Jewish Community Center in Nashville, Tennessee, on March 16, 1958.<sup>11</sup> Such lessons about some white southerners whom Whitwell middle-schoolers might know something about would disrupt a pedagogy of "no-cost multiculturalism"; such an educational project would also complicate the profound identification promoted between the students and the Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

That identification between the Jewish victims and the middle-schoolers of Whitwell was actively promoted is incontestable. According to the children's book *Six Million Paper Clips: The Making of a Children's Holocaust Memorial* by the journalists Peter Schroeder and Dagmar Schroeder-Hildebrand, the teacher Sandra Roberts explicitly taught students that "between one and two million of these victims were children. *Children like you*" (emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> Of course, identification with Jewish victims (and courageous Christian rescuers) is a normalized practice of Holocaust education; the most popular and successful Holocaust films—*The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Holocaust* mini-series, and *Schindler's List*—are considered effective precisely because they feature protagonists with which white Christian Americans can readily identify. And it's worth remembering that visitors to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., are each given an identity card for a Shoah victim in order to construct a specific bond between museum-goer and a victim individualized by name. However, such normalized iden-

tification strategies were taken to extremes by the Paper Clips curriculum, which included a mural “in which pictures of the students’ faces were superimposed on cutouts of bodies clad in striped prison garb—which were in turn covered by barbed wire.”<sup>13</sup> This mural was prominently displayed in the school’s hallways so that students were routinely confronted with their own historically recast images. Gary Weissman has written compellingly about the blurring of boundaries between witnesses and non-witnesses of the Shoah and “the desire [of the latter] to be *closer* to the Holocaust.”<sup>14</sup> However, the Whitwell mural takes Weissman’s “fantasies of witnessing” a step further in the direction of replacement or substitution. The discomfiting sense that these students have representationally replaced the historical victims of the Shoah is uncannily reinforced in the aforementioned children’s book: four pages of the book are dedicated to the names and pictures of the students involved with the Paper Clips Project from 1998 to 2004. In sharp contrast, the chapter titled “The Survivors Visit Whitwell” is a scant page and a half. Although the Holocaust “took on a human face, actually four faces,”<sup>15</sup> none of those who embody and witnessed Holocaust history are named.<sup>16</sup>

The identification between Whitwellians and Holocaust survivors is furthered and reinforced by portraying white southerners as the victims of stereotyping. The journalist Dita Smith attests to this shortly after homogenized images of burning crosses and hoods appear on-screen; indeed, she reports that, upon hearing about Whitwell, she “was prejudiced in my expectations—white, Christian, fundamentalist, narrow-minded, that was my prejudice, not their prejudice.” Dave Smith, one of the more reflective voices in the film, explains that “people think about children in the South and think rednecks—can’t stereotype because you yourself are stereotyped, I am stereotyped because I live in the South. I do the same thing about people in the North. That’s what we’re trying to do—break those stereotypes.” This emphasis on stereotype-busting, with the accompanying implication that all stereotypes are equal and have had equal historical weight and consequences, is endemic throughout the documentary and its afterlife. The production notes for the film suggest that a white southern self-fashioning narrative was a prerequisite for access to Whitwell Middle School and the filming of the evolution of the Paper Clips Project. Even after the school board signed off on the documentary, Hooper told Fab, “If I let you make your film here and you make my children look like rednecks, I will eat your heart for breakfast.”

This reconstruction of white southern identity was noted and applauded by many viewers of the film, both Christian and Jewish. Lee Chotiner and Susan Jacobs write in Pittsburgh's *Jewish Chronicle*, "In addition to detailing the lessons learned by the Whitwell students, *Paper Clips* also serves to dispel stereotypes about rural Southerners."<sup>17</sup> A visit from Principal Linda Hooper to a Simon Schacter Day School in New Jersey is credited with causing northeastern Jewish students to rethink their preconceptions about their southern peers.<sup>18</sup> Thus reception to the film and the touring of its real life actors confirm the success of this self-fashioning.

That *Paper Clips* functions as a redemptive narrative for white southerners (who are assumed to be Christians) becomes clearest during an oft-commented on and emotionally powerful scene in which Dave Smith reflects on racial legacies closer to home. After one of the most prominently featured students, Cassie Crabtree, vows that she will pass on what she has learned about the Holocaust to her children and grandchildren, Smith discusses the transmission of racism from generation to generation among white southerners and the role that the Paper Clips Project has played in his commitment to father differently than he was fathered. The production notes describe this as "one of the most compelling scenes"; Joe Fab, in the DVD commentary, classifies it as one that "helps anchor the emotion of the whole movie." Even A. O. Scott, who wrote one of the few critical and skeptical reviews of the film for *The New York Times*, identifies Smith as "one of the few people interviewed who resists speaking in platitudes, and the segments in which he connects the paper clip curriculum with his own sense of identity and history as a white Southern male—both the agent and the object of prejudice—are the most interesting and thought-provoking."<sup>19</sup> This scene opens with shots of photos from Smith's life—his sons, his father, college buddies—accompanied by a voiceover crosscut with Smith talking on-screen:

Growing up in the South, growing up in rural Tennessee, as I have, I've been exposed to a lot of [pause] racial remarks. You know, my dad is the greatest man on earth and I have no doubt in that, but he has a bias and he can make racial slurs and it's not anything against him . . . Going into college, I had a [sic] African American roommate and loved him like a brother and still do but it was nothing for me, even sometimes in his presence, to say racial slurs or . . . And I look at it now . . . I hope that it didn't, I guess, I hope that I didn't hurt *him*.

The film then cuts to close-ups of Smith's sons as he is reading to them at bedtime interspersed with more reflection offered via voiceover: "Now [with] this project, I see things like that. It makes me very aware, you know, and I make sure with two small sons that I don't say it." On-screen again, Smith continues, "because I don't want them to grow up and say that and say my father said this because [pause, choking up] that would be the worst thing they could say." The scene ends with Smith kissing his boys goodnight and instructing them to say their prayers.

Such emotional working through of bigotry alongside brotherhood strikes me as genuine, necessary, and even admirable. I neither want to take such epiphanies for granted nor be dismissive of them. Moreover, it's probably worth noting that the filmed interview was the catalyst for Smith's processing of his own memories. However, even and perhaps especially if we accept Fab's view that this scene is one of real-time raw self-revelation to Smith himself, it still demands critical analysis. The euphemistic "racial remarks" is troubling, though that soon shifts to the slightly stronger "racial slurs" before settling into the repetition of vague pronouns ("it," "this," "that"). Equally symptomatic is the personalizing rather than the historicizing of memory: "hope it didn't hurt *him*." Thus racial epithets, hate speech, become an issue of hurt in an otherwise loving relationship rather than a legacy of slavery and the Jim Crow South. And the real tragedy—defined here as a potential and personal one—would be Smith's sons using memories of their father to justify their own racism. The visuals of this scene are just as telling: the unnamed African American roommate is depicted by static photographs in sharp contrast to the real-time sequences—with frequent close-ups—of Smith and his family. In the DVD commentary, the directors laud Smith for the "generosity" and "courage" of his self-exposure and vulnerability. The impact that this on-screen disclosure might have on Smith's family is discussed: in particular, the potential reaction of Smith the white elder when he watches his son disavow a paternal legacy of racism, and likely conversations between Smith and his own sons as they mature and come to understand the import of this scene. The possible responses of Smith's African American roommate or his roommate's family to this memory of "hurt" remain unrepresented and unimagined.

As the term "black holocaust" indicates, the Shoah has become a touchstone for African American articulation of the experience and aftermath of slavery. However, such comparisons—or "failed analogies," to invoke Eric Sundquist's term<sup>20</sup>—have led to narratives of competing



victimization, evidenced in shorthand by Toni Morrison's dedicating *Be-loved* to "sixty million and more." Emily Budick notes that "blacks, even during the war years, perceived concern for the Nazi Holocaust . . . as deflecting attention from American racism," which is exacerbated, according to Sundquist, by Jewish insistence on the uniqueness of the Shoah. For Sundquist, "comparisons between slavery and the Holocaust have been prompted in part by jealousy—or simply painful awareness—of the undeniable fact that Jewish suffering is publicly acknowledged and memorialized in ways that black suffering is not."<sup>21</sup> The selective and profoundly dehistoricized white southern memory work facilitated by this particular Holocaust project seems destined to foster memorialization envy. Indeed, *Paper Clips* tends to legitimate rather than ameliorate fears about the historical uses and abuses of Holocaust education in the United States, more specifically, the Holocaust superseding and replacing the atrocities of the African American experience.

The real story of this documentary seems to be the celebration of this counterintuitive locale as a site for Holocaust memory work; thus critical distance and historical rigor seem beside the point at all levels of this documentary. Linda Hooper relates on-screen that collecting paper clips to represent the 6 million Jews killed by the Nazis originated from student Internet research that the paper clip, invented by a Norwegian, was worn by righteous Norwegians as a symbol of solidarity with their Jewish compatriots. Implicitly praising her students, Hooper declares, "I didn't know that." Such a humble profession of ignorance turns into irony if you know—which you wouldn't from the documentary—that the basic premise of this collecting project is historically inaccurate: Norwegians donned the U.S.-patented paper clip to express solidarity with their king in exile, not their fellow and sister Jewish citizens.<sup>22</sup> Whitwell middle-school children may identify with Jewish victims of the Shoah for all sorts of complicated noble and self-interested reasons. However, projecting such identification onto Christian European populations of the World War II era effectively denies the extent of the racial and religious antisemitism that enabled the Shoah. Antifascist sentiments and support for Jews were certainly overlapping but by no means identical phenomena; indeed, nationalist discourses that often cast Jews as aliens in their own countries of birth frequently served as the rationale for antifascist/anti-Nazi resistance movements. Thus confusing or conflating support for the exiled king of Norway with support for Jewish citizens is a factual inaccuracy that lends itself to misunderstandings of

context and ideology. The many courageous Righteous Gentiles of Norway need to be remembered alongside some very basic facts: that almost half of Norway's Jewish population was deported to and perished in gas chambers, that the Norwegian government actively worked to restrict Jewish immigration (including children) post-1933, and that Jewish survivors returned to a Norway that neither welcomed them nor adequately punished their persecutors. The article on Norway in *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* ends by noting that "after the war there were a great many stories about the heroic exploits of the resistance, but the true account of the Holocaust in Norway came out only much later."<sup>23</sup> The false foundation for *Paper Clips* unwittingly sets back the historiographic clock.

While citing an abundance of enthusiasm for studying the Holocaust as a diversity/tolerance project, a student acknowledges early in the film that "the teachers didn't know much but they tried to teach what they did know." A segment devoted to this project aired on *NBC Nightly News*; a shot of paper clips accompanied Tom Brokaw's voiceover, "perhaps this generation is teaching us." Ultimately, a Holocaust educational project founded on faulty student research embraced by well-meaning but historically challenged teachers has become a model, thanks in no small part to a documentary that not only represents but also has become part of the media blitz. School boards have embraced the distribution of the film and accompanying curricular materials, and *Paper Clips* has been praised for both its content and its pedagogical acuity.<sup>24</sup> The critical accolades only serve to affirm its educational status.

Selective respect for history also explains the choice of a German railcar for the memorial part of the project. While the collection of papers clips was designed to help students comprehend the enormity of 6 million and to remember gestures of resistance, Mark Anderson rightly notes that such a collection of office supplies to represent Jewish losses uncannily recalls the anonymous piles of Jewish belongings that have come to represent dehumanization and attempted genocide. Anderson continues, "It seems hard to imagine that none of the participants questioned the appropriateness of stuffing these paper-clip tokens of Jewish life into an 'authentic' German railcar that had actually been used for deportations to the death camps." In actuality, the railcar was decided on as desirable after an even more inappropriate idea was rejected. Students initially considered melding the collected paper clips into a sculpture; however, they decided that, given the realities of the crematoria, subjecting these symbolic Jews to a forging

by fire was beyond the pale. The educators involved in the project thus got together to find a more suitable alternative; as local history is related on-screen, Principal Hooper expressed her wish for a railcar as a memorial, to which there was generalized gleeful assent. The surreal scene in which Roberts remembers—and reenacts—the enthusiasm of that moment, exclaiming, “oh, a railcar, oh, we have to have a railcar,” is perhaps matched only by the one in which cheering crowds assemble to greet this vehicle of death when it arrives in Whitwell after delays at port due to the 9/11 attack.

Referring to the German boxcar that has “come home” to Whitwell, Principal Hooper intones, “your history as a death car is erased and now you are a car of new life.” Although the notion of erasing history might seem an odd and troubling way to frame a memorialization project, this language indicates the Christian narrative that subtly but powerfully shapes this documentary. The rhetoric of “new life” is the language of Christ’s resurrection and the New Testament of love superseding the so-called Old Testament of judgment. Notably, the documentary, its credits, and the press often refer to the loving embrace of the Whitwell community, a further Christian coding of this project and film. Indeed, in the DVD commentary Fab suggests that Whitwell is actually “not at all unlikely” for such a Holocaust memorialization project because if you “lived those Christian values, this is how you would respond”; such sentiments are in keeping with the DVD bonus feature “Whitwell’s Churches: It Doesn’t Matter Which One You Belong To.” According to Linda Hooper, the provision of the railcar for the Whitwell Children’s Holocaust Memorial not only sets Whitwell apart but also affirms the “divine hand” of God. The theological crisis that the Shoah foisted on many Jews directly and indirectly impacted by the Holocaust seems not to be an issue for Whitwellians.

In *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema’s Images of the Unimaginable* (1988), Ilan Avisar writes, “What we actually have in most American Holocaust films is a deliberate refusal to leap into unfaith, an attitude rooted in the embracing of solid faith, namely that of Christianity which dominates the cinematic treatment of the Holocaust. Indeed, the striking aspect of the observation of the Christian content of these films is its persistence.” As Avisar bluntly puts it, an otherwise diverse cinematic tradition “share[s] in common the fostering of Christian ideology on the backs of the Jews and their tragedy.”<sup>25</sup> The Christianization of Shoah narratives is a dominant theme in much Holocaust film criticism. Omer Bartov writes that “the predilection for Christian religious symbolism in films about the ‘Jew’ as

victim is one of the most significant aspects of cinematic representations of the Holocaust,” while Doneson is especially attentive to feminized Jews dependent on Christian masculine protection.<sup>26</sup> In assessing the role that the Shoah has played in Jewish-Christian relations, Alan Mintz comments with admirable understatement that it “was considerably easier to revere the Jews in the throes of their martyrdom. The passion of the Jews in the Holocaust made them more compelling to Christian thought than at any time in the past since the emergence of Christianity from rabbinic Judaism.”<sup>27</sup> *Paper Clips* furthers a potentially triumphalist cinematic tradition as it visually connects survivors with the crucifixion narrative. When Bernard Igielski, Rachel Gleitman, Samuel Sitko, and Joe Grabezak—Holocaust survivors from a group based in Cedarhurst, New York—come to Whitwell, a visit the production notes dub “cinematic gold,” they tell their stories in Whitwell’s First United Methodist Church. Notably, they consistently appear in the same frame and almost on the same plane as the altar cross.<sup>28</sup>

Such southern Christian-positive images clearly contribute to the appeal of this film. Noting that it is “rare” for “Miramax Studios (which is run by two Jews, Bob and Harvey Weinstein )” to distribute such a Christian-friendly film, Annabelle Robertson, entertainment critic for the Christian website [crosswalk.com](http://crosswalk.com), unselfconsciously generalizes about media trends:

Very rarely are we treated to a film—any film—that not only communicates truth, but unravels stereotypes about Christians. Most screenwriters and directors seem intent on portraying believers as immoral, uneducated, and cruel . . . Then, for an added dose of formulaic fun, these “Christian” characters are usually Southern, too. It’s the modern-day equivalent of stoning, and it’s just as popular now as it was when Jesus was around. Amazingly, “Paper Clips” contains none of this.<sup>29</sup>

Significantly, such a celebration of southern Christian stereotype-busting manages to entwine anti-Judaic discourses of Jewish denial/betrayal of Jesus (derived here from John 10:30–33) with coded antisemitic charges of Weinstein-esque Jewish media control. Such reception history invites, even demands, questions about the unintended consequences of this well-intended exercise in diversity and tolerance.

Moreover, throughout the documentary, these Christian narratives of new life are allied to nationalist narratives. At the outset of the film, a montage introducing life in Whitwell includes shots of billboards inscribed with “God save America” and “God bless the USA.” The sequence in which

the Whitwell community tearfully embraces the survivors in church cuts to the beginning of the next day at the middle school. Shots of the unfurling of the American flag are followed by classroom scenes in which “The Land of the Free” is played on school speakers and students recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The narrative of one nation under God is advanced by naming Presidents Clinton and Bush, as well as Vice President Gore, as contributors of clips and/or letters of support. The new life/new world narrative of American exceptionalism culminates at the dedication of the Children’s Holocaust Memorial when Linda Hooper expresses that she is “so grateful to live in the United States of America,” gratitude that is greeted with thunderous applause.

Documentary films are assumed to appeal primarily to epistemophilia, the desire for and pleasure in knowledge grounded in the world of fact rather than story and fiction.<sup>30</sup> Founded on historical inaccuracy, *Paper Clips* violates one of the core values associated with its genre. In addition to its foundational factual error and thus a muddying of vital historical contexts and ideologies, the film loses prime educational opportunities. The Children’s Holocaust Memorial was dedicated on November 9, 2001; indeed, that date is prominently displayed on-screen. Although November 9 was knowingly and intentionally chosen to commemorate Kristallnacht, no exposition on the significance of the date is offered in the film.<sup>31</sup> Thus historically illiterate viewers—those who know neither the what or the when of Kristallnacht—leave this documentary experience none the wiser. Notably, although the “Holocaust students” (as they are unfortunately dubbed) take a trip to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington each year, this detail is also absent from the film, perhaps because it might serve to challenge the sui generis nature of the Whitwell project.

Although the desire for knowledge is a potent force in the genre of documentary, Michael Renov has compellingly argued that we need to broaden our notion of the desires at work in the experience of documentary viewing. Documentary spectatorship, he argues, is “embroiled with conscious motives and unconscious desires, driven by curiosity no more than by terror and fascination.”<sup>32</sup> I have already dealt with the interwoven work of southern self-fashioning, Christian redemption, and American exceptionalism. Yet an analysis of the generally positive reception of the film by Jewish audiences and organizations demands that we also ask what specifically Jewish desires are being addressed by this documentary.

First and foremost, Jewish responses to this film suggest an economy of gratitude<sup>33</sup> that will likely grow stronger as the number of survivors

dwindles. As Samuel Sitko pointedly tells the Whitwell students, “Future generations will have to learn about the Holocaust from the textbooks”; Bernard Igielski speaks to the camera about his need to counter Holocaust deniers. In *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, a classic text that treats a multinational tradition of Holocaust cinema, Insdorf disdains the Hollywoodization of the Shoah. Nonetheless, she asserts that “in these times, any film that tackles this subject with good intentions is brave, if not commendable.”<sup>34</sup> And at a *Village Voice* symposium devoted to and largely critical of *Schindler’s List*, Insdorf related that her mother, a literature professor who survived the Shoah, felt “grateful that the story was told by a popular filmmaker who could get the audience into the theater.”<sup>35</sup> Similar sentiments surround *Paper Clips*, beginning with the production and distribution team. All of the partners at Ergo Entertainment—Elie Landau, Donny Epstein, and Yeeshai Gross—as well as their contact at Miramax, Matthew Hiltzik, are observant Jews and graduates of New York’s Yeshiva High School. All had significant Holocaust education as part of their upbringing, and the losses of the Shoah were personal parts of Landau’s, Epstein’s and Gross’s family histories. All of these cinematic powerbrokers were surprised and moved by the fact that non-Jews were so profoundly invested in this project; as Hiltzik puts it, *Paper Clips* is a “film that brought a really fresh perspective to the topic—one that *all Americans could relate to*” (emphasis added).<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in one interview, Hiltzik categorizes these students as “the new generation of Righteous Gentiles.”<sup>37</sup> Although one should beware of such historically facile analogies—after all, these students did not risk their own lives to save Jewish ones—the fact that such analogies are readily employed speaks to the fear of cultural amnesia becoming evermore widespread, especially among non-Jews.<sup>38</sup> When children from “the middle of the Bible belt” who had “never seen a Jew, spoken to a Jew”<sup>39</sup> commit themselves to Holocaust memorialization, such anxiety is assuaged.

Moreover, the loving embrace of white Christian southerners can function to reassure Jews that Jewish difference is not abject otherness. In the production notes, Hiltzik reports that he was often “the only Jewish person in the room, and yet I felt completely comfortable and welcome.” The language of Michael Elkin’s article about Hiltzik suggests that a racialized subtext attends issues of religious difference. The “white-bread existence” of the Whitwell children is referenced, while Hiltzik is described as having “stood out at first as more pumpernickel than white-bread.” Such bread metaphors code Jews as potentially off- (or not-quite-) white.<sup>40</sup> Significantly,

Hiltzik crosses that coded color line by emphasizing that he “respect[s] others who are religious” and uses such a mutually religious admiration society “to reach out to others.” Advocating alliances, Hiltzik asserts that “we need to be able to communicate with others if we expect them to help us address our concerns and vice versa.” According to this logic, projects like *Paper Clips* function to assuage anxiety about not only Holocaust memory but also the normalization of Jews in contemporary (white Christian) America. Tensions between blacks and white Jews caused by competitive memory syndrome likely encourage Jews to embrace white southerners who embrace the Holocaust and token Jews as their own.<sup>41</sup>

Referring to Holocaust memorialization, Alan Mintz wisely notes, “if the situation of American Jews is complicated, then how much more so is the situation of American non-Jews, whose relationship to the Holocaust is rooted in no obvious ethnic or religious kinship?” He continues, “we are desperately in need of a way to understand this daunting complexity” as well as “thoughtful consideration to ways in which we want to remember the Holocaust and have that memory make a creative and constructive contribution to our values and goals.”<sup>42</sup> Gary Weissman also stresses the need for less feeling and more critical thinking.<sup>43</sup> Though *Paper Clips* is full of good-heartedness, such critical thinking seems to be missing, especially by those who are best positioned to provide it: teachers, journalists, and documentarians. “Lost professionalism” is explicitly acknowledged by the German White House correspondents Peter Schroeder and Dagmar Hildebrand-Schroeder. The Schroeders heard about the Paper Clips Project, publicized it in Germany through their own writings, and contacted Dita Smith at the *Washington Post*. They were also responsible for locating the German railcar that became the Children’s Holocaust Memorial. According to Peter Schroeder, professionalism or journalistic critical distance is impossible when “strange kids . . . hug you and greet you like an old friend.” Such offerings of (Christian) love and friendship can be seductive on-screen and off-screen, especially when coming from the mouths of babes sincerely committed to broadening their educational and cultural horizons. Despite my ambivalence and my fear of falling into the role of a stiff-necked academic, I remain convinced that we need to consider the unintended consequences of being uncritically swept off our feet by moving documentaries.

At the close of the smart and profoundly provocative *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present: The Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema*,

Lawrence Baron writes, “the meanings wrested from the Shoah will change over time, relating it to current events and the roles it plays in the histories of particular countries.”<sup>44</sup> In that book, Baron focuses on feature films since he is skeptical about the cultural impact of documentaries given their usual limited distribution.<sup>45</sup> In admirable Jewish fashion, Baron ends his study with a question: in the twenty-first century, “Which cinematic genres and themes will be used to represent [the Holocaust] and render it relevant to future audiences?”<sup>46</sup> For me, a compelling and complementary question is “what ideologies and ethics are at work with particular renderings of relevance?” Clearly, Holocaust education must continue, even and especially in such arguably counterintuitive locales as Whitwell, Tennessee. Yet to remain silent as well-intentioned memorial work perpetuates historical inaccuracies and promotes Christian nationalist narratives of tolerance that supersede unequal but nevertheless interwoven legacies of U.S. racism and antisemitism strikes me as a form of anti-intellectual appeasement. Such appeasement does violence to the memory of those lost in the Shoah as well as to the dwindling surviving remnant. Such appeasement unwittingly promotes memorialization envy and the ridiculous zero sum game of whether the Holocaust trumps slavery or vice versa. And, just as importantly, such appeasement patronizes white southerners, especially young white southerners. Surely, the Christian children of Whitwell, Tennessee, and those impacted so powerfully by documentaries such as *Paper Clips* deserve better models of education in general and Holocaust education in particular. Surely the Holocaust can be taught and memorialized in the twenty-first century without the specter of replacement theology, without such displacements of history, and without so much forgetting.

## NOTES

1. For more about collection projects in general and the Paper Clips Project in particular, see Daniel Magilow’s “Counting to Six Million: Collecting Projects and Holocaust Memorialization,” *Jewish Social Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007), as well as Sheri Shefa’s “Canadian School Collecting Pebbles for Shoah Memorial,” *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California*, February 1, 2008, and Steve Lipman’s “Crayons and Buttons: The New ‘Paper Clips,’” *New York Jewish Week*, April 17, 2009.

2. See Randi Sherman, “Jewish Bikers with a Cause,” *New York Jewish Week*, May 12, 2006; Peter Schroeder’s comments in the extended scene special feature “Dedication of the Children’s Holocaust Memorial,” disc 2 of *Paper Clips*; Eliza Weiss, “At MIT Event, An Alum Breaks His Silence,” *Jewish Advocate*, April 16, 2010.



3. In "Counting," Magilow mentions the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum as one of the institutions that "refuse to endorse such projects." In private correspondence, Magilow indicated that the historical inaccuracies of *Paper Clips* weighed against its screening at or endorsement by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

4. See Lawrence Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present: The Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), and Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of the Holocaust in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

5. Available at [static.theacia.com.au/reviews/p/paper-clips-production-notes.rtf](http://static.theacia.com.au/reviews/p/paper-clips-production-notes.rtf).

6. Jennifer Katz, "Tennessee Town Brings Message of Tolerance," *Jewish Exponent*, December 1, 2011.

7. Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 170.

8. *Paper Clips* production notes.

9. Mark Anderson, "The Child Victim as Witness to the Holocaust: An American Story," *Jewish Social Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007).

10. See Dita Smith, "A Measure of Hope," *Washington Post*, April 7, 2001.

11. See Melissa Fay Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (New York: Fawcett, 1997), esp. 225–27. Also see Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), esp. 92–96.

12. Peter W. Schroeder and Dagmar Schroeder-Hildebrand, *Six Million Paper Clips: The Making of a Children's Holocaust Memorial* (Minneapolis: Kar-Ben Publishing, 2004), 12.

13. Lori Silberman Brauner, "Local Women Moved by Visit to Southern School," *Jewish News*, May 31, 2001.

14. Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), 21.

15. Schroeder and Schroeder-Hildebrand, *Six Million Paper Clips*, 41.

16. Anderson makes a complementary point when he notes that "the identities of the actual victims disappeared when the students meticulously recorded the names of the paper clip donors, ensuring that the memory of their largess would endure."

17. Lee Chottiner and Susan Jacobs, "Dance On!: 'Paper Clips,'" *Jewish Chronicle*, April 7, 2005.

18. Johanna Ginsberg, "Paperclip Project Principal Offers SSDS a Message of Tolerance," *Jewish News*, November 14, 2002.

19. A. O. Scott, "Grasping Extraordinary Evil Through the Very Ordinary," *New York Times*, November 24, 2004.

20. Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 438.

21. Emily Miller Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 71; Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land*, 437.

22. The scholarly sources by both Magilow and Anderson are clear about the historical record and the need to present it accurately; sources in the mainstream, Jewish, and Christian press are not.

23. Per Ole Johansen, "Norway," in *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. Walter Laqueur (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 451.

24. See, for example, Ryan Teitman's "Groups Work at a 'Clip' to Educate about the Holocaust," *Jewish Exponent*, August 9, 2007.

25. Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 131.

26. Omer Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema: From the Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 117; Judith Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

27. Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 12.

28. In the children's book *Six Million Paper Clips*, the short chapter titled "The Survivors Visit Whitwell" contains an inset photograph with the unnamed survivors seated below and in front of the glistening cross.

29. Annabelle Robertson, "Low Budget Paper Clips Doc Flings Hope to Millions," September 8, 2004, [www.crosswalk.com](http://www.crosswalk.com).

30. See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), esp. 31, 111; Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), esp. 96.

31. The bonus feature (on disc 2) devoted to extended coverage of the dedication ceremony does include material on Kristallnacht. It is worth noting that although *Paper Clips* is available on Netflix streaming video, the bonus features are not.

32. Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 96.

33. Arlie Hochschild uses the term "economy of gratitude" in *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking 1989) to describe women's gratefulness for men's "help" with household responsibilities; such gratitude both veils and exposes structural inequalities and systems related to who feels gratitude to whom and for what.

34. Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 255.

35. Qtd. in Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 136–37.

36. *Paper Clips* production notes.

37. Michael Elkin, "New Kind of a Graceland," *Jewish Exponent*, February 17, 2005.

38. Notably, the documentarian Aviva Kempner more carefully refers to *Paper Clips* as the "first cinematic documentation of 'righteous gentiles' in commemorating the Holocaust." Thus she distinguishes between Holocaust-era and post-Holocaust Righteous Gentiles. See Aviva Kempner, "Paperclips: A Powerful Film of Conscience," *Washington Jewish Week*, November 25, 2004.

39. Martha Rich, a Holocaust survivor from New Jersey who visited Whitwell, describes the middle-schoolers thus (qtd. in Brauner, "Local Women").

40. For an expanded discussion of the racialization of Jews, especially in the South, see "The Color of White Jewry," chapter 4 of Helene Meyers's *Identity Papers: Contemporary Narratives of American Jewishness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

41 Anderson's bluntness about the potential limits of "no-cost multiculturalism" is relevant here: "It is one thing for the conservative Southern Baptists in Whitwell to share an emotional moment with elderly Holocaust survivors, or to work for a few months with Jewish filmmakers and producers. But what would happen if they had to live side by side with a sizable community of Jews, some of whom might have supported gun control and the right to abortion, or opposed the teaching of creationism in public schools?"

42 Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 171, 175.

43 Weissman, *Fantasies*, 211, 215.

44 Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust*, 263.

45 *Ibid.*, 8.

46 *Ibid.*, 263.

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