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“Show Me the Shoah!: Generic Experience and Spectatorship in Representations of the Holocaust”

By Walter Metz

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I. Introduction

Critical attacks on films like *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) proceed from the assumption that a populist form like the melodramatic cinema does injustice to the victims of Nazi genocide. However, there may be generic strategies that are just as moving, intellectually precise, or important as the “proper” representations of the Holocaust—solemn and reverent—found in the documentary, *Night and Fog* (Alain Resnais, 1955). While it is certainly possible, and indeed currently in cultural practice, to do damage to the victims of the Shoah—as the case of the Holocaust deniers attests—there are a number of other well-known texts which deserve academic recognition as significant representations of this particularly heinous event in human history. To rescue these popular texts will require paying attention to reception contexts rather than only placing critical emphasis on their form and content.

One can have a profoundly important experience with either *Schindler's List* or *Night and Fog* if one brings to bear a working combination of emotional and intellectual acumen. But, just as important, one can have a devastatingly inappropriate response, as in the case of the high school students who laughed during depictions of Nazi atrocities at a screening of *Schindler's List*, prompting Spielberg himself to appear before the students in a valiant attempt to transform the exhibition circumstances of his well-meaning, if flawed, film. In my own classroom screenings of even short selections from *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), initial student response is inevitably that it is “boring.” These brief pedagogical anecdotes reveal that, even with the most solemn texts, we must struggle to construct the most beneficial reception circumstances for our students to learn about, and react to, the historical events which gave rise to the Holocaust. There are alternative texts that may prove at least as useful in conveying the horrors of this time to a world which consists now almost exclusively of individuals who have no immediate personal connection to these events.

Steven Alan Carr has defined contemporary America’s “Literal Correctness” as a tendency of the culture to rely only on “common sense,” or social science poll data, for making claims about political and textual meaning. In his 2002 analysis of Peter Jackson’s film, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), he sees an allegory for President Bush’s antics in Afghanistan. In terms of Holocaust culture, this Literal Correctness indeed holds sway; only the “surface” experiences of the Holocaust (the grim realities of the camps) and not any allegorical engagements with its deeper meaning, are the appropriate domain of representation. In his discussion of Holocaust comedy, Sheng-mei Ma refers to a “post-Holocaust interdiction... against comedy [which] arises from the Holocaust discourse which encourages certain literary and artistic strategies while condemning others” (47). To combine Ma’s and Carr’s terms to form this paper’s method, the post-Holocaust interdiction uses the litmus test of Literal Correctness to approve of the proper representations of the Holocaust, denying a place for work which requires more allegorical analysis.

I propose then to discard the notion that some representations of the Holocaust ought not to be attended, and instead focus on the cultural climate in which such representations are received. As the anecdote of Spielberg’s screening of *Schindler's List* indicates, it is as critical to grapple with a spectator’s engagement with a text as to consider the content of the text itself. I do not here discount the need for documentary evidence about the Holocaust. However, since 1945, this documentary evidence (such as the film footage of the liberation of the camps) has been forthrightly and publicly available. Its presence has not seemed to have

had the final effect that the defense of literal correctness implies, that only the historical Real should be presented to viewers because that is the only form that will convince people of its Truth.

Instead, we need to build a critical climate in which the academic norm (showing a film in order to teach about its relationship to the historical Real) becomes the standard of our public discourse. In such a method, even cultural artifacts otherwise considered impoverished can be useful in exploring cultural meaning. This method would extend to Holocaust culture: artifacts marginal to the Holocaust “canon” indeed allow for discussion of issues in Holocaust studies and may even raise new questions and prompt different directions for study.

The genre practices of three sorts of cultural artifacts deemed inappropriate to representing the Holocaust—a film, a children’s book, and a museum-cum-amusement park—allow for a discussion of the reception and exhibition contexts of each. First will come the generic tension between melodrama and comedy in the controversial Holocaust film, *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1997). Then, using the inappropriateness of Holocaust comedy as my point of departure, a consideration of the Dr. Seuss children’s book, *The Sneetches* (1961) will allegorize the Holocaust. And finally, a shift from these two studies of comedy toward the larger category of amusement, will claim that the new, popular conceptualization of museums as amusement parks is defensible even in the case of the Holocaust. This discussion will direct itself toward the architectural design of Daniel Libeskind’s astonishing Jewish Museum Berlin.

II. “Cheap, Cheap, Cheap”: Genre and the Holocaust in *Life is Beautiful*

In *Life is Beautiful*, Guido Orefice (Roberto Benigni) convinces his young son, Giosue (Giorgio Cantarini), that they are playing a game instead of being held prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. The film has suffered much negative critical response: the critics’ ire focuses on the immorality of the very idea of a film which brings what the critic Maurizio Viano, in his essay, “Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter,” calls Benigni’s *vis comica* (comic vision) near a representation of life in a concentration camp. In a piece representative of this vein of critique, *Boston Phoenix* reviewer Gerald Peary called the film a “blasphemy,” “obscene,” and went so far as to call Benigni a “revisionist,” absurdly connecting the film to the diabolical project of the Holocaust deniers. In his e-review of “the grotesque folly of this film” at Salon.com, Charles Taylor makes this point most succinctly, emphasizing “the sheer callous inappropriateness of comedy existing within the physical reality of the camps.” Most recently, Kobi Niv forwards a book length critique, *Life is Beautiful, But Not For Jews: Another View of the Film by Benigni*, to present the film as “another mediocre, annoyingly banal comedy” (xvi) whose moral is that “Christian Europe is better off with its Jews, like the Visigoths, gone forever or, at most, banished like spiders” (83).

Niv’s extremely negative response to the film has prompted most recent critics to come to its defense. In *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*, Lawrence Baron calls Niv’s reading “an egregious case of intellectual casuistry” (148), rejecting Niv’s claims that *Life is Beautiful* forwards a Christian allegory. Instead, Baron postulates that the surfeit of images of the Holocaust in the 1990s encouraged directors like Benigni to experiment with comedy as a mode of representation of the Holocaust (149).

Positive reviews praised *Life is Beautiful* for its emotional power. In “But Wasn’t It Terrific?,” Hilene Flanzbaum argues, “For the parents in the audience who have lost sleep over what they might do to protect their own child, the film proved overwhelming. Benigni accomplishes a great deal when he defamiliarizes the Holocaust enough to make viewers feel it all over again” (286). However, one defense in particular was as anti-intellectual as the negative reviews that branded Benigni a Holocaust revisionist. In denouncing the film’s detractors in *The Christian Science Monitor*, comedienne Julia Gorin claims, “Some people, rather than letting their feelings guide them, let their brains get in the way. They’re more confused than they are offended.” My

response to such anti-intellectualism is similar to that which activated my response to students in my class watching *Shoah*. I cannot possibly accept Gorin's assault on the serious, historically-informed responses to the Holocaust, however much I agree with her defense of attending to feelings.

What this study of the reception of *Life is Beautiful* indicates is how bifurcated into binary oppositions it is, and how the difference in treating emotional affect is tied to genre issues. That is to say, there are few, if any, ambivalent responses to the film. Crucial here is the fact that these diametrical readings fall into traditional splits between mind and body, between trusting reason and trusting emotion, and between body genres (like comedy and melodrama) and high art genres (like tragedy and social realism). In other areas of film studies—feminist criticism, for example—such binary thinking has been eroded over the past twenty years. However, the sanctity of the Holocaust as a representational space has kept such transformational critical interventions at bay.

I hope then, to lay out a scheme for seeing the Holocaust comedy, *Life is Beautiful*, through the framework of criticism that takes both reason and emotion seriously. But accepting the emotional appeal of the film is clearly worrisome for *Life is Beautiful* critics. For example, Richard Schickel ends his review for *Time* with a disturbing claim, that the emotional impact offered by the film is in fact akin to the Fascism that it is purportedly critiquing: "Sentimentality is a kind of fascism too, robbing us of judgment and moral acuity, and it needs to be resisted. *Life is Beautiful* is a good place to start." Taylor echoes this attack on the film's use of sentiment, arguing, "The horrors of the camps become the familiar heart-tugging moments of melodrama."

While the critics' concern that the memory of the Holocaust could be reduced to comic fodder is well taken, such a reduction of the film to "only melodrama" (to use Don Willis' blunt critique of the films of Fritz Lang) misses much of the complexity of *Life is Beautiful*'s project. To rescue the importance of sentiment, my analysis of *Life is Beautiful* offers a genre-based approach to emotion that attempts to build an understanding in parallel to recent cognitive theories which have served the discipline well by forcing us to attend to affect in ways that extend beyond Freudian psychoanalysis. Such a genre-based analysis of *Life is Beautiful* continues a project begun by Millicent Marcus in her essay, "The Seriousness of Humor," which positions Benigni's film within the history of Italian comedy, from *Commedia dell'arte* to Luigi Pirandello (271). Similarly, Colin MacCabe defines *Life is Beautiful*'s project as a collision of genres: "Comedy is the genre that celebrates the social... Tragedy is the domain of the individual, traditionally ending with the death of the hero who can't conform to the demands of the community... Benigni's magnificent film attempts the impossible: to make a comedy out of the Holocaust, to find an affirmation of society in the death of all social relations" (Qtd. in Insdorf, 290).

Suspicion of sentiment has led to a criticism of Holocaust narratives that has become extremely normative, splitting into two problematic camps, and the criticism of *Life is Beautiful* is no exception. On the one hand, many of the popular reviewers who dislike *Life is Beautiful* insist that a realist strategy is the only one possible. For these reviewers, *Schindler's List* (1993) becomes the archetype for an appropriate representational model. Maurizio Viano summarizes this position: "To many, of course, the Holocaust allows for no artistic license; its depiction must obey the rules of tragic realism—the only mode/mood commonly held fit for fictions" (30). Charles Taylor similarly berates Benigni for not toeing the classical realist line: "Benigni isn't even trying for straightforward realism. And any treatment of the camps that attempts to dodge the singular and irreducible fact of them hasn't reckoned with its subject."

However, Taylor's claim that *Schindler's List* is "the one good film set (at least partly) in the camps" would clearly not sit well with many academic critics, even those who also detest *Life is Beautiful*. This second group of normative critics respond to Adorno's plea that traditional representation simply not continue after the Holocaust. Alvin Rosenfeld, for example, argues: "The nature and magnitude of the Holocaust were such

as to mark, almost certainly, the end of one era of consciousness and the beginning of another” (1-2). In this mode of thought, once the Holocaust has occurred, traditional forms of representation, in our case visual representation (the classical realist fiction film and the realist documentary) become incapable of grasping the reality of the Holocaust.

Such critics argue that, given the way a classical realist film like *Schindler's List* works to monopolize the experience of the Holocaust for contemporary culture, we need to return to transgressive films, that is, films which employ the modernist critique of classical realism. The Holocaust films respected by this group of critics—Yosefa Loshitzky's anthology critiquing the classical realism of *Schindler's List* most commonly cites *Shoah*—are those that respond to the crisis in representation by interrogating the very nature of that representation, in the midst of a fictional or documentary narration. Thus, *Night and Fog* uses juxtapositions between shots filmed in 1955 in color, and black and white newsreel footage of the camps being liberated in 1945 in a definitive modernist gesture to make the present complicit in the atrocities of the past. Similarly, *Shoah* includes a meta-textual reflection on the stakes of the documentary project, as director Claude Lanzmann includes footage of his breaking the documentarist's ethical code. We thus see Lanzmann on hidden camera assuring former S.S. officer Franz Suchomel that he is not being taped, lying to him on film to gather testimony.

Modernist aesthetic practices are not necessarily the *only* ones capable of producing this critique of the ideological culpability of classical realism. Indeed, the very techniques of sentiment in *Life is Beautiful* which critics use to revile the film—namely, melodrama and comedy—give the film its critical force. Recent work on the melodrama as a genre calls into question critics' consideration of sentiment as inherently problematic. As an example, Laura Mulvey's "It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession," argues that 1950s American melodramas engage, rather than hide from, as is commonly suspected, the historical traumas of World War II. Douglas Sirk's *Magnificent Obsession* (1954) places its traumatized male protagonist (played by Rock Hudson), a man who has ruined the life of the woman he loves through his selfishness, in front of a *mise-en-scene* backdrop that envisions the massive destruction of Europe.

Maurizio Viano reads *Life is Beautiful* in similar terms. Emphasizing the Manichean nature of the film's ending, Viano contrasts the shocking death of Guido, the protagonist of the film, with the euphoric escape of his son, Giosue, as he encounters the American tank which rescues him and takes him to his mother, who has also survived. Viano argues: "[T]he . . . 'we won!' at the end of *Life is Beautiful* is not the happy ending that seals a trivialized Holocaust—it is the grief stricken cry of triumph with which a people marked for extinction transformed their darkest hour into a new beginning" (32).

Defending the melodramatic nature of *Life is Beautiful* is one necessary project for expanding our definition of how the Holocaust may be meaningfully represented beyond the devices of classical realism and modernism, but I believe it is only one in a larger terrain that needs to attend to what Charles Affron terms the politics of affect. Useful in this regard is Linda Williams' essay on what she terms body genres, namely horror films, melodrama and pornography. Williams is interested in how these genre films are seen by an elite intellectual culture as suspicious because they are designed to appeal to the body, not to reason: melodrama makes you cry, pornography makes you aroused, and horror films make you scream. Significantly, the one body genre that Williams does not discuss in detail is the comedy, even though it fits her definition as a form that elicits a bodily response, laughter.

Life is Beautiful is most characteristically panned for its audacity in building a comic framework around the Holocaust. However, in "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny," Sander Gilman traces a precedent of comic Holocaust narratives, including Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber* (1973) and Jurek Becker's *Jakob the Liar* (1969), to defend *Life is Beautiful*'s comic project. Interestingly, Gilman does not make

reference to the television sitcom, the most popular form of American comedy, despite his interest in popular cinema (Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be*) and comic book culture (Art Spiegelman's *Maus*). The popular critical opponents of *Life is Beautiful*, on the other hand, rarely miss an opportunity to denigrate Benigni's film by comparing it to the late 1960s television sitcom, "Hogan's Heroes." Schickel argues of the film: "The prisoners don't seem to see much of their jailers, who, when they do turn up, act as if they've drifted into this film from a 'Hogan's Heroes' rerun, barking incomprehensible orders to cover their comic ineptitude."

Given the project of this case study, a different sitcom intertext for *Life is Beautiful* is in order, the infamous *Schindler's List* episode of "Seinfeld," entitled "The Raincoats" (NBC, 4/28/94). Jerry, seeking respite from his parents' long visit, flees with his girlfriend to the movies, where they make out for the entire three hours of Spielberg's film. In an astute assessment of the anti-Semitic nature of the television sitcom, critic Lisa Schwarzbaum analyzes this episode:

[T]he senior Seinfelds. . . are properly shocked to learn that their son and a girlfriend smooched nonstop during a showing of *Schindler's List*. . . . Echoing the assimilationist realities of those behind the camera, [Jerry's girlfriends are] usually non-Jews, starting with Elaine—who nevertheless, has oh so much "shiks-appeal" that a bar mitzvah boy and a rabbi both put the moves on her. . . . And it's probably just as well the comedian goes for the goyim, because when the subject is overtly Jewish, ambivalence curdles the humor. . . to sour cream. (80)

However, to what extent we are to see the senior Seinfelds' shock as "proper" is for me the crux of the episode. At the very least, the sanctity of *Schindler's List* is exposed as assailable, a necessary spectatorial response for seeing the use-value of a comic exploration of the Holocaust. Jerry's movie *faux-pas* brings us back to my argument's beginning, the highly publicized April 1994 screening of *Schindler's List* at an Oakland high school that elicited student snickers, where Steven Spielberg was prompted to visit the school to encourage a more staid and sonorous spectatorial response. Sander Gilman's parenthetical analysis of Spielberg's response will suffice: "Anything and everything at a school assembly is understood by high school students as potentially the butt of laughter" (281).

The *Life is Beautiful* controversy is not the first time that the concept of a Holocaust comedy has confronted American culture. In 1972, Jerry Lewis shot a Holocaust film, entitled *The Day the Clown Cried*, about a cynical clown hired by the Nazis to lead children into the gas chambers. Predicting the hyper-emotional tragic ending of *Life is Beautiful*, Lewis' character realizes his moral culpability and steps into the showers with the children at film's end. I have not seen *The Day the Clown Cried* (a studio in Sweden seized the film because it claimed to be owed money, and although it has never been shown publicly, *Spy* magazine did a piece, entitled "Jerry Goes to Death Camp," attempting to reconstruct it) but it is worth pondering why *Life is Beautiful* succeeded with audiences whereas *The Day the Clown Cried* never even made it past a rough cut.

I believe it is because *Life is Beautiful* compellingly combines comedy and the Holocaust into a narrative form that is not ridiculously incompatible. As Viano argues, "Guido's obvious optimism constitutes an absurd response to an absurd reality." That is to say, Guido's use of the comic is narratively tied to the absurdity that surrounds him, and thus comedy becomes a legitimate representational form to encompass his experiences. Viano claims, "*Life is Beautiful* is faithful to reality—it dramatizes its deepest implications. It is faithful to reality in spirit." That is to say, it is correct, but not "literally correct," to again invoke Carr's powerful concept.

The best example of this interrogation of absurdity in *Life is Beautiful* occurs when, inside the camp, Guido meets up with his former acquaintance, Dr. Lessing, the Nazi doctor. Significantly, Dr. Lessing is played by Horst Bucholz, star of the German comedy, *The Confessions of Felix Krull* (Kurt Hoffmann, 1957), and the

West Berlin-set, anti-capitalist, *One, Two, Three* (Billy Wilder, 1961). Before the war, Dr. Lessing was fond of posing riddles to Guido. Inside the camp, Guido hopes that Dr. Lessing will be able to help his family escape, but the doctor is fixated on another riddle, this time one that has tendentious meaning, to use Freud's analytical term for theorizing joke structure.

The great irony is that Dr. Lessing's blindness to the racist riddle, "What is yellow and goes 'cheap cheap cheap'?"—the answer to which, I think, is, "a Jew"—replicates his obliviousness to Guido's plight, sealing our hero's fate in the camp. While much of the film's first half is comedic, the comic is in fact self-consciously deconstructed at this moment, and the now-impossibility of laughter becomes the final stage of development in *Life is Beautiful*.

The point of this analysis is to indicate the organic unity of *Life is Beautiful*, a complex bifurcated structure whose tragic second half "short-circuits" (to use Viano's term) its comic beginning. It is here that we have arrived at the comedy's point of confluence with the modernist interrogation of meaning. The absurdity of Dr. Lessing's blindness recalls the heart of post-war modernism's absurdist critique, as in Beckett plays like *Endgame* or *Waiting for Godot*.

Thus modernism is not the only potentially appropriate response to the crisis in representation elicited by the Holocaust. Benigni's comedy can also be seen as a transgressive attempt to circumvent traditional realist and modernist approaches by violating all of the prescriptions for solemnity in representing the Holocaust. In *Life is Beautiful*, Benigni's comedy has found a way to have both the political engagement of *Night and Fog*'s modernism as well as the emotional immediacy of *Schindler's List*. Perhaps *Life is Beautiful* thus represents a post-modern film about the Holocaust, if we consider Jim Collins' sense of that term, in his essay "Television and Post-modernism," where he refers to texts working in the aesthetic realm of modernism without losing contact with a popular audience.

III. Thou Shalt Not Animate the Holocaust

One of the first post-war accounts of the Holocaust in the American weekly press raises the concern over the ethics of representation for an event of such horror and sorrow. In his essay, "Should We Exploit the Atrocity Stories?" published in the June 30, 1945 issue of *Saturday Review*, William S. Lynch argues in the negative because "Averted eyes and quiet burial are the final rights of human dignity" (14). Visually, the article also refuses direct representation, using an abstract sketch of a quiet graveyard.

Visual abstraction thus provides a mode of representation after Hiroshima and the Holocaust, an era in which traditional modes of figuration become impossible or inadequate. This is what Gilles Deleuze means, I believe, when he suggests that "the time image," the obsession of cinema after World War II, produces an awareness of the inadequacy of the "recollection-image," his term for the photographically reproductive base of cinema. Deleuze thus describes *Night and Fog* as "the sum of all the ways of escaping from the flashback, and the false piety of the recollection-image" (122). I believe we can find other post-war cultural artifacts that point to the crisis in the recollection-image, not using the aesthetic practices of European modernism, but instead using the melodramatics of the American experience to produce allegories of cultural redemption.

I choose as my second case study a children's book by Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches*, first published by Random House in 1961. The post-*Anne Frank* date, I believe, has tremendous pertinence for this project: In *The Holocaust in American Life*, Peter Novick convincingly argues that the shift in American response to the Holocaust did not even begin until the Eichmann trial, also 1961, and more forcefully, with the Arab-Israeli wars of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In Dr. Seuss' book, a group of fanciful birds who live on a beach are treated poorly by their comrades because they do not have stars on their bellies. An entrepreneurial fellow named Sylvester McMonkey McBean arrives on the beach with a machine that, for a \$3 fee, will place stars on these birds' bellies. McBean makes a pile of money fitting all of the birds on the beach with belly stars. However, when the former star-bellied birds discover that they are no longer unique, McBean presents them with a "star off" machine (\$10) which will allow them to remove the stars from their bellies. He proceeds to make another pile of money. Soon, all of the Sneetches have spent all of their money entering and exiting his machines to remove and/or add stars to their bellies. The book ends with a parable of racial unity, when the Sneetches get wise, decide to end this foolishness, and forget all about stars.

I find the book's symbols useful for discussing the Holocaust with my own children: specifically, a star that indicates cultural difference, and a crass capitalist who profits by placing his victims inside a machine. *The Sneetches*, however, is a site of interest for cultural studies that extends far beyond my little allegorical reading. Dr. Seuss was a committed liberal political cartoonist during World War II. As documented in Richard Minear's book, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*, writing for the leftist New York daily tabloid, *PM*, Seuss drew funny and angry critiques of Hitler, America First, and Charles Lindbergh throughout 1941 before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The foreword to Minear's book is authored by Art Spiegelman, famous for the two-volume graphic novel, *Maus*.

Although Spiegelman's *Maus* is literary, stunning, and direct Holocaust writing, compared to the more simplistic, allegorical work of Seuss, Spiegelman recognizes in Seuss' political cartooning a fellow traveler. The distinction between Seuss and Spiegelman has tremendous pertinence, however, to my project's critique of literal correctness. Spiegelman's two-volume comic book is a literally correct Holocaust text *par excellence*. It works tremendously hard to document its authenticity, using realist strategies such as including photos of Art's father as a liberated camp victim, and of his brother Richieu who died during the war, and the modernist use of alternation between drawings about Vladek's experiences during the Holocaust and the present day narration of that story by Vladek directly to Art.

Spiegelman's work was immediately and thoroughly accepted into the Holocaust canon as a graphic novel, garnering a Pulitzer Prize and spawning a host of academic analyses. While the critical success of *Maus* raises the question of whether any form of cartooning, or animating the Holocaust, besides Spiegelman's literally correct mode, could possibly be accepted, I suggest that it is Spiegelman's allegorical use of animals (evil Nazi cats, vicious Polish pigs, and meek Jewish mice) that demands artistic continuity with Seuss.

After the United States' entry into World War II, Seuss continued to cartoon on behalf of U.S. military efforts in preparation for fighting the war. In 1943, Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel) enlisted in the army, assigned to Frank Capra's Signal Corps filmmaking unit in Hollywood. There, Geisel made military training reels (the famous *Private Snafu* films). After the war, Seuss made two startling live-action films about the defeated Axis powers: 1945's *Your Job in Germany*, with a vicious hard-line message against fraternization with a blonde, female enemy, and 1948's *Design for Death*, a critique of Japanese militarist culture. This latter film won the Best Documentary Academy Award.

The complex political life of Geisel before he became a best-selling children's author in the 1950s and 1960s, as presented in Ron Lamothe's documentary, *The Political Dr. Seuss*, helps contextualize the allegorical reading of *The Sneetches* as an engagement with the Holocaust. Seuss' left-liberal critique of commercialism and defense of fairness, tempered by his support of traditional American militarism when confronted by Fascism, helps situate the kind of visual representation that *The Sneetches* engages. For, on the one hand, the story offers a quintessentially liberal defense of human unity, positing that everyone in the community, star or not, is an equal.

On the other hand, the positioning of the Irish capitalist as a subhuman “McMonkey” relies on the same sort of stereotyping that fueled early 20th century anti-Semitism, a topic that was frequently a major target for the German-American Geisel. For example, a September 18, 1941 cartoon entitled, “Spreading the Lovely Goebbels Stuff,” depicts a demonic looking Charles Lindbergh astride a fetid pile of garbage on a “Nazi Anti-Semite Stink Wagon.” A Nazi wearing a swastika arm-band drives the truck, while in Spigelmanesque allegory, Lindbergh is shoveling mangy cats off of the truck.

Similarly, in a remarkable image given Seuss’ post-war fame as a children’s book author, an October 1, 1941 image features a prim woman with “America First” printed across her shirt front, reading a picture book entitled, “Adolf the Wolf,” to two horrified children. The caption reads, “... and the Wolf chewed up the children and spit out their bones... But those were Foreign Children and it really didn’t matter.” Given Geisel’s vocal opposition to anti-Semitic behavior in Germany, it is both fascinating and disturbing to see him perpetuating other ethnic stereotypes in his own work.

In his book *White*, Richard Dyer most clearly theorizes the connections between Irish and Jewish peoples as white but “dirty,” that is, not quite white enough to escape vicious discrimination: “There are also gradations of whiteness: some people are whiter than others. Latins, the Irish and Jews, for instance, are rather less securely white than Anglos, Teutons, and Nordics” (12). Dyer details exactly the visual representational tradition from which Seuss’ McMonkey character emerges: “With the rise of the Fenian movement for Irish liberation, British representation of the black Irish intensified, notably through a comparison of the Irish with chimpanzees and gorillas, the first live specimen of the latter being brought to London in 1860 with great public success. The idea that the Irish could be looked on as the ‘missing link’ between apes and humans ran through both written and visual satire of the period” (52).

My point is not to vilify Dr. Seuss via contemporary whiteness theory for using a racist stereotype in McMonkey McBean, a formulation that would not have been available to Seuss, and would not have crossed his mind as such. Indeed, the disparity between the intentional meanings and their present-day visual force is what makes the case study so fascinating. For this reason, I would like to consider in detail how *The Sneetches* is included in Ron Lamothe’s documentary as an example of Dr. Seuss’s political art. In the section of the film devoted to *The Sneetches*, we learn that a friend came over to Geisel’s studio, and commented that the star-bellied sneetches would remind people of the Holocaust, thus making the book susceptible to charges of anti-Semitism. Lamothe documents that Dr. Seuss so took the criticism to heart that he nearly destroyed the book until an editor at Random House convinced Geisel that his worries were unfounded.

Ironically, given the contemporary valuation of *The Sneetches* as a Holocaust allegory—the ITVS/PBS website houses a resource for educators that suggests *The Sneetches* be used in secondary schools to treat the themes of anti-Semitism, racism, and tolerance—Seuss’ friend seems to have suggested to him that the use of the belly stars would indicate anti-Semitism, not critique it. Seuss’ initial response to scrap the book seems indicative of the liberal’s deep commitment to racial equality. However, the shock that he purportedly felt at the meaning of the stars indicates that the book was not, at least consciously, considered by him as an allegorical statement on the Holocaust.

This is fascinating because it reveals how difficult it is to assess the politics of a text. Is *The Sneetches*, then, a Holocaust allegory? Despite Dr. Seuss’ working on a different intentional plane, it certainly seems to be. My adult discovery of this interpretation while reading to my own children the book, familiar, yet not in this form, from my own childhood, would indicate so. However, what kind of Holocaust allegory would position the perpetrator of the abuse of the sneetches’ bodies, not to Hitler or Goebbels (both familiar targets of Seuss from his PM cartoons), but instead to an equally offensive Irish stereotype, as Dyer suggests, one of the two

cases (the other being Jewishness itself) of white power protecting itself from its less than white, “dirty” counterparts?

Both Minear and Lamothe point to a similar contradiction in Seuss’ World War II cartoon work. In a sketch featuring Japanese-Americans loading up with dynamite and awaiting the orders for sabotage from across the Pacific, Dr. Seuss forwards as racist an image against the Japanese as any that were offered in mainstream World War II-era American culture, for example, the 1943 Warner Bros. cartoon, *Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips* (1943). In Seuss’ image, dated February 13, 1942, stereotypical Japanese-Americans with slanted eyes and buck teeth pick up TNT from a shop with a sign, “Honorable 5th Column.” The caption reads, “Waiting for the Signal from Home.”

No satisfying explanation is offered for the incongruity by either Minear or Lamothe. One would imagine that a cartoonist so angrily opposed to the war-time discrimination against African-American workers and to Lindbergh’s anti-Semitism would realize that to render Japanese people as sub-human replicates the very Fascist values against which the country fought. It is certainly not enough to argue that Dr. Seuss hated the Japanese because his country was at war with them, for while Hitler and the Nazis are ridiculed in his cartoons, they are not racially stereotyped.

Nonetheless, *The Sneetches* represents a compelling critique, not only of the discrimination against African-Americans in the United States in the early 1960s, to which it is literally responding, but also to the Holocaust. Dr. Seuss’ war-time imagery, given what the mainstream American press was presenting about Germany and anti-Semitism at the time, is shockingly radical. In what is to me the most surprising historical anomaly in Seuss’ war-time work, a July 20, 1942 image features Hitler and Laval, the French collaborator, singing, “Only God can make a tree / To furnish sport for you and me!” In the background of the image, there are humans lynched, each with the sign, “Jew,” pinned to their dead bodies. Literal correctness cannot be summoned to explain this prescient critique.

One final piece of evidence firmly establishes *The Sneetches* as a compelling engagement with the Holocaust. A September 22, 1941 cartoon features another critique of Lindbergh’s assault on Jewish people in the United States: A bird wearing Uncle Sam’s hat sits in a stockade. “Sheriff” Lindbergh has issued a public notice: “This bird is possessed of an evil demon!” A sign hangs from the bird’s beak, reading “I am part Jewish.” While Minear comments that the bird is often Seuss’ war-time allegorical figure for Uncle Sam, the bird’s status as an early figure for the Sneetches—he looks *exactly* like a Sneetch—is also incontrovertible. Dr. Seuss may have been surprised by his friend’s observation that the 1961 Sneetches were reminiscent of war-time Jewish victims of the Holocaust, but at some unconscious level, he had merely returned to his own allegorical tradition of representing Jewish-Americans using his Uncle Sam bird, 20 years prior.

IV. Of Museums and Amusement Parks

My first two case studies have hewn closely to traditional textual artifacts, a film and a cartoon book. To conclude, I want to turn to a less obviously textual representation of the Holocaust, the Jewish Museum Berlin, designed by deconstructionist architect Daniel Libeskind. Despite the differences from films and books offered by the museum as a cultural site, my argument will remain consistent. While *Life is Beautiful* and *The Sneetches* violate the literally correct Holocaust narratives by embracing comedy, the Jewish Museum Berlin goes many steps further, diminishing the distance between the museum as a holder of historical artifacts, and the amusement park as a place where people go for fun.

It is a scandalous notion that the Jewish Museum Berlin’s offering of amusement and the Holocaust in the same space might be fully defensible. The concept of amusement is, of course, fraught with baggage. We are

ready to dismiss amusement as anti-intellectual, as a diversionary pastime, but the term is not necessarily bound to that limited meaning. To take the literal amusement park as a case in point, it is true that most people go so that they can partake of the visceral experience of riding a rollercoaster.

While the emotional thrill of one's stomach getting unsettled while riding the contraption is its dominant effect, it is not true that there is no possibility of intellectual thrill available. For example, in *The Culture of Time and Space*, Steven Kern discusses the art of modernity as being influenced by transformations in human experience having to do with the production of speed. Motors and engines allow people to safely travel at speeds which transform their vision beginning in the late 19th century. As an amusement of modernity, the rollercoaster partakes of this cultural transformation. There has never been an instance when I have not thought about Kern's thesis while in a rollercoaster as its cars ascend the track.

The intellectualization of pleasurable experience is not the goal, merely a more fluid sense of the connections between the emotional and visceral on the one hand, and the intellectual on the other. I propose something similar when defending Libeskind's museum as an amusement park about the Holocaust, although this position is clearly dangerous. When the Disney Corporation wanted to build an historical theme park in Manassas, Virginia, academic historians rightly protested with virulence against the "Disneyfication" of American history: "It's a Small World, After All," after all, has chilling implications in the age of corporate globalization. The Disneyfication of the Holocaust would clearly not be a good thing. The reservations about these forms of memorial are well documented in Mike Wallace's excellent series of essays in his book, *Mickey Mouse History*.

While it may seem odd to treat a museum as an example of popular culture, the different cultural context matters here. The more popular nature of high culture in Germany is one consideration. Berlin supports three opera houses. There is a considerable public commitment (if more through funding than attendance) to the opera as an art form, certainly dwarfing any such support in the United States. In addition to this, the Jewish Museum Berlin is the most popular museum in Berlin, flooded each day not only with tourists, but also huge numbers of public school children. Finally, the notion of the Holocaust museum in general implies more popularity, than, say, an art gallery. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, at least in its opening years, rivaled the clearly populist Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian in terms of public interest.

My experience visiting the Jewish Museum Berlin was a life-changing event in the most heartfelt sense possible. Libeskind clearly offers his building as an attempt to make the museum a more emotional, and less intellectual, place. Everything about the space presents memory as an artifact of feeling. The outside of the building is marked with gashes to remember the devastating effects of Berlin's government on European Jewry. Inside, the halls are organized into "axes of disorientation," a return to a German Expressionist form of Modernism in order to give museum-goers the experience of being Jewish within the Third Reich.

Much of the museum space is devoted to a series of three experiences: the Holocaust Tower, the Garden of Exile, and the Memory Void. Each of these events intends to deliver to museum guests a bodily experience rather than literally correct historical facts, and in that sense they forge the connection to the visceral rides offered at amusement parks. I found the Holocaust Tower to be the most compelling of these experiences in terms of its ability to invoke raw emotion. The tower is approached down a long, barren hallway, at the end of which is a museum guard. Without words, the guard opens the massive door, you pass through it, and the door is closed behind you, leaving you trapped in a barren concrete bunker with one small hole 30 feet up the wall letting in a tiny shaft of light. While no simulation can match the true horror felt by Holocaust victims herded onto railroad cars or into gas chambers, the shock of this unannounced entombment elicits raw emotions that are deeply unsettling.

The Garden of Exile is similarly designed to throw a visitor off balance, consisting of an outside “garden” maze constructed out of huge pillars of concrete. Anyone who enters begins drifting toward the walls because the floor of the space is built at a slant yet the stone pillars are housed perpendicularly to the angled floor. Thus, to one’s eyes, it seems flat, when in reality it is not. The truly unsettling bodily experience prompts the visitor to imagine being ripped from one’s stable, comfortable life.

The final experience, the Memory Void, a tall, barren concrete space, leads toward an art installation, “Fallen Leaves,” which is the most powerful piece of art I have ever experienced. Created by Menashe Kadishman, “Shalechet” is an installation which consists of a huge array of (some 10,000) metal faces lying on the ground. Each “face” is unique, individually crafted from hand-cut disks of inch-thick sheet metal, with the faces haphazardly piled three or four deep in a long corridor. The card as you enter tells you that the artist requests that you walk upon it. It takes a step or two to realize you are stomping on representations of Holocaust victims, a shock exacerbated by the unbearably loud clanking generated by stepping on the stacked faces in the concrete tunnel.

My wife and I could not bear it and turned back. Both horrified and morbidly curious, we wondered what other visitors would make of the exhibit. To our fascination, as we found a nearby bench to unobtrusively observe the installation, we saw a number of visitors (mostly German high school students) traverse the sea of faces with little problem. But however far we each went, confused at such unusual instructions but without thinking about disobeying the artist, we all walked on the faces. We “just followed orders.”

Perhaps even more disturbing was my inherent fascination with the whole exhibit, watching quietly to see what others would do. It thus turns out this artwork is also about spectatorship: it asks us to question not only what kind of human being walks on others, but what kind of human watches such stomping and does nothing. Who is the more barbaric? I found this whole experience utterly devastating. It testifies directly to what an emotional engagement can do to transform consciousness: “Fallen Leaves” viscerally encourages one to come to terms with one’s role as perpetrator, something that even the U.S. Holocaust Museum, at which one is given a passport to identify with a victim, refuses to do.

V. Conclusion

At the end of his new book, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*, Laurence Baron engages with the recent popular Hollywood film, *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000). Attempting to move away from Ma’s “post-Holocaust interdiction,” Baron cites literally correct Holocaust critics of the film who offer their outrage that a populist film based on a comic book would dare begin with the creation of the villain Magneto at the gates of a Polish concentration camp.

Baron buttresses his defense of the comic book film with its relationship to Spiegelman’s literally correct example: “If Art Spiegelman can be acclaimed for presenting the Holocaust as a conflict between Jewish mice and Nazi cats, then why is it inappropriate for a cinematic allegory about the fear and persecution of genetic mutants to draw parallels with the Holocaust?” (261-2). While I think Baron’s book is quite good, covering a huge range of Holocaust cinema not typically included in the canon, in the terms of my present essay’s concerns, it too is beholden to literal correctness. Baron includes the *X-Men* film in his study precisely because it begins, literally, at the gates of a concentration camp.

My project is instead to expand the definition of what constitutes Holocaust culture itself. If historian Robert Rosenstone is correct in his speculation that “we always violate the past, even as we attempt to preserve its memory in whatever medium we use” (135), then we should not reify cultural products that maintain a blind belief in fidelity to the historical Real. In my case studies of *Life Is Beautiful*, *The Sneetches* and the Jewish

Museum Berlin, I have shown that there are complex issues that suffuse popular entertainments and present a point of opportunity for engaging everyday people in complex questions about humanity. We have a very crucial choice. We can continue to police the borders of what we think is appropriate, or we can make sure we engage as much of the culture as we can muster, and apply the rigors of academic analysis to control the spectatorial conditions under which these artifacts are discussed and processed.

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