
The representation of the Jewish Holocaust through graphic humor and comics

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The following is a brief summary of the lecture delivered by Dra. Livia Carolina Ravelo at the annual convention held by Escuela de Lenguas Modernas at Universidad del Salvador (USAL) on 18 August 2022.

Introduction

This brief summary purports to show the extent to which, and the various ways in which the Jewish Holocaust (Shoah) may be represented by means of comics and graphic humor.

To achieve the above mentioned, some single frames or strips were selected considering the following criteria: (a) Pictures which depict “the manipulation of the self” from both a literal and non-literal perspective (the manipulation of the human body and the destruction of the “Jewish identity”, respectively); (b) Frames conceived (due to the above mentioned) as controversial cases, owing to the inclusion of presumably pornographic signs and the portrayal of trauma and suffering through unorthodox humor resources.

Humor as a valid means for Holocaust memory construction

The concept “Holocaust memory” is typically defined as a field of study. The plural “memories” is used here to refer to the varied narratives about the genocide. In other words, “the different representations of the Holocaust may be considered as cultural products, conceived as memory producers, which contribute to the remembrance of the massacre and the maintenance of its memory” (Ravelo, 2022, p.33).

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The depiction of the massacre has always given rise to the debate about any possible representation boundaries, concerning a so-called "Holocaust etiquette", which "dictates that anything pertaining to the Holocaust must be serious, must be reverential in a manner that acknowledges (and supports) the sacredness of its occasion" (Des Pres, 1988, p. 278).

This presumed norm can make us reflect on two possible variants: serious vs. trivial Holocaust memory representations. Alejandro Baer (2006) explains that serious narratives are described as cautious depictions. On the contrary, the unconventional (i.e. the ones which to some extent do not abide by the norm) have a disobedient nature which makes them "trivial". So, some discourses seem to be more "acceptable" than others— fully based on ideological reasons. The author rejects this distinction as there is no legitimate genre, language or tone to represent the Holocaust. Multiple representations (meant for different target audiences) should be widely shared to safeguard Holocaust memory remembrance and maintenance.

Considering the former, graphic humor and comic strips may be regarded as valid resources to learn about the Shoah. Besides, humor is indeed the means to protect the sense of self. It is the healthy way of feeling a "distance" between one's self and the problem, a way of standing off and looking at one's problem with perspective (May, 1953, p. 42). As Des Pres (1988, pp. 278-281) explains, humorous content and laughter seem to be more powerful and effective to canalize horror, generating some emotional distance and arousing resilience to atrocities and suffering; "laughter is life-reclaiming".

From a discursive perspective, any representation implies the selection of the most apt and plausible signs (in a given context) to make messages maximally understandable. What is more, any semiotic mode has to have the capacity to form *texts*, complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they are produced (Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen, 2021, 14-18).

Analysis of Frames (Holocaust memories)

Figure 1 belongs to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel, which is the story of Vadlek Spiegelman (author's father) before, during and after the Holocaust. It is made up of two volumes: *My father bleeds history* (1986) and *Here my troubles began* (1991). The characters are anthropomorphic creatures. Jews are mice; the German are cats; American people are shown as pigs.

Spiegelman's text has become a controversial case in dispute. In relation to this, it is worth mentioning that due to a Russian law passed in December 2014— which bans the portrayal of Nazi propaganda—*Maus* was removed from Russian bookstores in 2015 because of the Nazi swastika on its cover. More recently, in January 2022 a school board in Tennessee voted unanimously to ban *Maus* from being taught in its classrooms because the book contains material that board

members said was inappropriate for students for it contains curse words and naked bodies.

In this image the destruction of identity is gained by means of physical and psychological torture. Despite the overt presence of the genital organ, the frame does not display a pornographic scene. These mice have a naked *human* body. The presence of this sign (the penis) may be interpreted as a reminder that, despite the Nazi effort to dehumanize Jews, they were torturing human beings, not a plague.



Figure 1: Deprivation of one's body¹

Figure 2 and 3 have been taken *Hitler = SS*, a French series of humorous comics created by Jean-Marie Gourio (writer), Philippe Vuillemin (cartoonist) and Gondot (cartoonist) originally published in France in installments between 1984 and 1987 in *Hara-Kiri* underground magazine and also published in Spain by Makoki publishing house in 1990.

It is set in World War II (particularly in Nazi concentration camps) where the events are depicted through black humor. The harsh treatment of the Shoah made this text highly controversial due to the overt display of sexual harassment, victims' suffering and torture. It is nowadays forbidden in both countries. It also had repercussions in some other countries, raising a debate on the limits of freedom of expression.

In both frames the use of genitals is grotesque and brutal; in *Figure 2* (women are so skinny that their rapist needs to pile them up to sexually abuse them. The victimizer (presumably Aryan) looks like a monster; one possible reading is that his Aryan nature has become contaminated as a result of the fluid exchange with his Jewish victims. "Tu gran polla de judío dentro mi horno lleno de mierda"² has two signs denoting sexual organs: "polla", Spanish word to refer to the male genital and "horno" to mean "vagina". This phrase contradicts what is actually depicted in the frame. Who is the rapist? The victimizer, whose "dick" has become Jewish? Or the Jewish victims whose sexual organs do not belong to them any longer?



Figure 2: Naked bodies more than naked³



Figure 3: Sexual harassment in crematorium 5⁴

In *Figure 3*, besides the hideous depiction of sexual assault (with overt exposure of sexual organs) the frame illustrates emotional humiliation (as she is raped next to her husband). Abuse takes different forms: carnal and psychological abuse.

Figure 4 is part of Sergio Langer’s book *Judíos*. In this book, the Jewish Argentinian humorist portrays caricatures about Jewish life during and after the Holocaust. Langer’s use of stereotypes is recurrent. Here the reader understands that the fictional situation happens in Auschwitz, due to the sign over the gate which reads “Bananas in pajamas” instead of “Arbeit Macht Frei” (i.e. “Work Will Free You”). Both the victimizer and the prisoners are portrayed as food (German sausage and bananas), which are typical metaphors to refer to the penis. However, their employment is not meant to be disgusting or cruel.



Figure 4: German sausage vs. Jewish bananas⁵

Conclusion

The semiotic analysis reveals the extent to which these images may constitute themselves as valid Holocaust memories to allow the reader to thoroughly reflect upon this genocide.

What may cause controversy is not the use of humor or the genre selected to create Holocaust representations, not even the overt portrayal of naked bodies or sexual organs is necessarily disruptive or seemingly pornographic. Disruption is, in fact, the result of how an artist decides to employ signs to materialize some underlying meanings or intention which may raise multiple interpretations.

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¹ Spiegelman, 1991, p.25.

² "Your big dick in my oven full of shit" (the translation is mine).

³ Vuillemin & Gourio, 1990, p.55.

⁴ Vuillemin & Gourio, 1990, p.23.

⁵ Langer, 2015, p.291.