

Pop-Holocaust(s)? Potential and Challenges of Pop Cultural Representations in the 21st Century

When the call for papers for this special issue was released, we thought that the thematic frame for “pop cultural representations of the Holocaust” was well defined. With increasing time lag, more and more voices have been raised in the past decades about the commercialization of the Holocaust experience and its memory. The Holocaust industry is one of the clearest and probably the most shocking manifestations of the phenomenon we tentatively call “(pop)Holocausts”. Looking at the versatility of the concept of “pop culture” the articles in this special issue apply, the question about the appropriateness of maintaining the binary system of “popular” and “high” culture comes to the fore. Is it timely to uphold the hierarchy that somehow implies artefacts of popular culture are inferior in terms of quality? In times, where almost anyone can get a discussion started through hashtags that might not be long-lasting but can reach hundreds of thousands of recipients while trending, literature, on the other hand, is always tied to linguistic barriers in the first place and cannot reach further audiences unless it has been translated? Ranging from representations on social media to literary metaphors in novels, to digital literature, we realized that pop culture's inherent feature is the power to support transnational thinking about commemoration: English as the dominant language

online enables artists and authors with non-native English backgrounds to contribute to the discussion and share it with a worldwide audience. In that way, narratives about the Holocaust have become diversified. However, from a Central European point of view, one needs to ask about the Americanization of the Holocaust (cf. Holý, 2018, 101–112; Mintz, 2001) and to which extent the memory of the Holocaust in countries that were the main sites of the Jewish genocide differ from that perspective? And if the main narratives of remembrance are dominated by English (speaking) discourses, does this also bear the risk of creating a perspective on East-Central European cultures of remembrance as something inferior? (Hiemer, Holý, Firlej, Nichtburgerová, 2021, 2).

The notion of pop culture is more than a discussion about the appropriateness of humor, an element that has been largely acknowledged as a powerful tool to deconstruct fear (Steir-Livny, 2017). Numerous studies accept the variety of pop cultural representations as rather positive since they help to keep Holocaust remembrance alive without judging such attempts as constructive or negative,¹ thus rather acknowledging the “collectiveness” (Stratton, 2008). The historian Wulf Kansteiner made an important observation in that regard. “Holocaust culture was invented in the era of analog media [...]. But also the renowned Holocaust learning sites, like Yad Vashem or the USHMM, have crafted thanatouristic entertainment potential, otherwise, they would not be as popular as they are” (Kansteiner, 2017, 130).

As editors we believe that all representations are worth considering in scientific analysis, even if this open concept might entail challenges for the individual understanding of esthetic or appropriateness. Cultural artefacts alluding to the Holocaust in their main motif or metaphor indeed can offer a counter narrative to the political memory practices (cf. Kołpak, 2023, 65–89) or allude to a lacking awareness in public commemoration (cf. Petó, 2019, p. 471–480). This feature however also bears the danger of an instrumentalization of the Holocaust topic in order to shift notions of victimhood towards a nationalistic memory culture (cf. Hiemer, 2023, 118–120).

1 Cf. Demsky, 2021; Tomczok, 2017.

Moreover, the change in media consumption in times of social media and the Web 3.0. must be considered when analysing Holocaust representations. For humanities and especially for the studies of literature and culture, the changes introduced by the digitalization of our lives, open up a very productive field of research: Knowledge about the construction of online narratives (Pfanzerter, 2015, 250–271) and ‘traditional’ channels of popculture like songs, arts, comics (cf. for example Boswell, 2011), or – as the literary scholar Arkadiusz Morawiec suggests – taking the Holocaust as a conceptual reference point in the studies of other genocide literature (cf. Morawiec, 2018). The Polish novelist Sylwia Chutnik concludes “All tricks are allowed, including the rhetoric, seemingly distant to the actual historical event. This is an extreme exercise where the results are suspended in a tension between silent contemplation over the tragic memory” (Chutnik, 2022, 9–10).

Furthermore, the pandemic unexpectedly added a lot of questions to the discussions about Holocaust remembrance and instrumentalization. In the last few years, we can observe the growing trend of Holocaust comparisons, which are, on the one hand trivializing the experience of extermination, while on the other hand drawing attention to other deprecated cases of genocides, crimes against humanity, or social and ecological catastrophes: examples are the usage of Holocaust allusions by people involved in animal protection (Cherry 2010, 463), anti-abortion movements or the COVID-19 pandemic.²

The idea of this special issue is to present case studies from the latest research in literary studies that are dedicated to the questions

2 For instance, during protests and demonstrations against mask and vaccination regulations; supporters were misusing of the Holocaust imaginary, especially to describe how governments were allegedly persecuting citizens by pandemic prohibitions and orders. Besides an anti-Semitic rhetoric (suggesting that Jews stood behind a global conspiracy to spread the COVID-19 virus to upend the world order), some started to wear yellow Stars of David to emphasize their alleged marginalized position. The Central Council of Jews in Germany spoke of instrumentalization and defamation of the Holocaust victims. Its president, Josef Schuster, declared that when people wear the so-called yellow Jewish stars, this should be seen as a relativization of the Holocaust, which could be regarded as incitement and a punishable act (cf. for example: Axelrod, 2020).

raised above: Limits and possibilities of remembrance online, the distinction between professional and popular works, interpretative sovereignties, and minorities. Although in the call for papers for this issue we indicated a few thematic areas, the final composition of texts is a kind of surprise for us. This Central European mixture of threads, themes, problems, reactions, methods, memories, and finally different ways of remembering, confirms that the problem of the Holocaust in pop culture and pop-cultural ways of depicting the Holocaust experience, remain, despite the unflagging interest over the last decades, a great task of contemporary humanities. Each article published here is a sign of cultural changes around the depiction and aestheticization of the Holocaust. Some texts in this volume “fit” into the narrative about non-traditional and non-obvious literary strategies (articles by Agata Firlej, Ewa Szperlik and Sabina Giergiel). Some papers present new approaches to literary works that are read and reviewed currently in Central Europe (Reinhard Ibler, Andreas Ohme). Zuzana Mojžišová looks at the (un)memory of the Holocaust of the Slovak Roma. Marzanna Kuczyńska’s article, in turn, shows that not only Central European space is marked by the experience of the Holocaust and endless attempts to formulate a testimony. For the memory of the Greek Spinalonga, passed through the filters of social networking platforms such as Instagram, the Holocaust, and the forms of its representation in contemporary culture remain an important point of reference, a central problem in discussions on memory methodologies characteristic for pictorial and virtual reality (Nowak). Clifford Gertz’s “common sense” becomes the starting point for Marek Kaźmierczak’s reflections on the subject of understanding and not understanding the past, cognition and description of reality, and “local memory”. The thematic block is complemented by texts presenting content analysis on the Wattpad platform (Charlotte Kitiznger) and the unusual project of “memory cards”, implemented as part of the Innovation and Entrepreneurship for Holocaust Memory run by Western Galilee College by Katarzyna Taczyńska and Kamila Pałubicka.

Our volume closes with an obituary of Leszek Engelking, an outstanding translator and poet, but also an expert on Holocaust literature. In his article entitled *Dolls for Sale. Playing in the Holocaust and Business*

with the Holocaust, published in Prague in 2007, the point of reference for considerations on the subject of “decorum of art after Auschwitz and art about Auschwitz” and its “legislators” (Engelking, 2007, 79–94) is a poem written by Václav Burian in 1994.

No bones, no liver, no kidneys and no ribs,
they are made of corn leaves,
paper, sidelocks of bristles,
they play violins behind the exhibition glass.
Ah, not until tomorrow, the gas cells will not arrive until tomorrow³

This volume is only an introduction to the discussion, a sketch and an attempt, a signal of the breadth of the Holocaust imaginarium in the Central European cultural space.

Elisa-Maria Hiemer

Urszula Kowalska-Nadolna

³ Václav Burian, *Pro panenky*, translation into English by Urszula Kowalska-Nadolna.

References

- Adamczyk-Garbowska, M., Ruta, M. (2011). *Od kultury żydowskiej do kultury o Żydach*. In: *Następstwa zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010*. Eds. F. Tych, M. Adamczyk-Garbowska. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, pp. 715–732.
- Axelrod, T. (2020). *Munich bans display of yellow stars at coronavirus lockdown protests*. “The Times of Israel”. <https://tinyurl.com/yxtr68dd>, 20.07.2023.
- Boswell, M. (2011). *Holocaust impiety in literature, popular music and film*. Springer: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cherry, E. (2010). *Shifting Symbolic Boundaries: Cultural Strategies of the Animal Rights Movement*. “Sociological Forum”. No. 3, pp. 450–475. DOI: 10.1111/j.1573-7861.2010.01191.x
- Chutnik, S. (2022). *Holo-polo, or the sweet tales of the Holocaust*. “Analecta Política”, no. 12, pp. 9–10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18566/apolit.v12n22.a05>
- Czollek, M. (2018). *Desintegriert Euch!*. München: Hanser.
- Demsky, J. (ed.) (2021). *Nazi and Holocaust Representations in Anglo-American Popular Culture, 1945–2020*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Engelking L., (2007). *Laleczki na sprzedaż. Zabawa w Holokaust i handel Holokaustem*. In: *Holokaust – Soa – Zagłada v české, slovenské a polské literatuře*. Ed. J. Holý. Praha: Academia, pp. 79–94.
- Gorelik, L. (2012). „*Sie können aber gut Deutsch!*“ *Warum ich nicht mehr dankbar sein will, dass ich hier leben darf, und Toleranz nicht weiterhilft*, München: Pantheon Verlag.
- Grjasnowa, O. (2012). *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt. Roman*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag.
- Gruber R.E. (2002). *Virtually Jewish. Reinventing Jewish culture in Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Hiemer, E.-M. (2020). *Zwischen (selbst)bewusster Desintegration und multipler Ausgrenzung: Junge jüdische Literatur aus Polen und Deutschland*. In: *apropos. Perspektiven auf die Romania*. No. 5, pp. 71–78. <https://doi.org/10.15460/apropos.5.1582>
- Hiemer, E.-M. (2023). *Shaping the Future by Reconstructing the Past. Polish-Jewish Autobiographic Writings beyond the Holocaust*. In: *Voicing Memories, Resurfacing Identities: Studies in the Twenty-First Century Literatures of Eastern and East-Central Europe*. Eds. A. Konarzewska, A. Nakai. Wilmington–Delaware: Vernon Press, pp. 118–120.
- Hiemer, E.-M., Holý, J., Firlej, A., Nichtburgerová, H. (2021). *Introduction*. In: *Handbook of Polish, Czech, and Slovak Holocaust Fiction. Works and Contexts*. Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, p. 2.
- Holý, J. (2018). *Arnošt Lustig a ti druzí*. “Bohemica litteraria,” vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 101–112.
- Kaminier, W. (2004). *Russendisko*. München: Goldmann.
- Kansteiner, W. (2017). *The Holocaust in the 21st century. Digital anxiety, transnational cosmopolitanism, and never again genocide without memory*. In: *Digital Memory Studies. Media Pasts in Transition*. Ed. A. Hoskins. New York: Routledge.

- Kołpak, K. (2023). *Poland's False Symmetry: How Szczepan Twardoch's Jakub Szapiro Knocks Out the Myth of Polish-Jewish Conflict*. In: *Voicing Memories, Unearthing Identities: Studies in the Twenty-First-Century Literatures of Eastern and East-Central Europe*. Eds. A. Konarzewska, A. Nakai. Wilmington-Delaware: Vernon Press, pp. 65–89.
- Mintz, A.L. (2001). *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*. University of Washington Press.
- Morawiec, A. (2018). *Literatura polska wobec ludobójstwa*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Petó, A. (2019). *Non-Remembering the Holocaust in Hungary and Poland*. "Polin Studies in Polish Jewry," vol. 31, pp. 471–480. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/713514.
- Pfanzelter, E. (2015). *At the crossroads with public history: mediating the Holocaust on the Internet*. "Holocaust Studies," vol. 21, no. 4, pp 250–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2015.1066066>
- Steir-Livny, L. (2017). *Is it OK to Laugh About it? Holocaust Humour, Satire and Parody in Israeli Culture*. Vallentine Mitchell.
- Stratton, J. (2008). *Punk, Jews, and the Holocaust: The English Story*. In: *Jewish Identity in Western Pop Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230612747_10
- Tomczok, M. (2017). *Czyja dzisiaj jest Zagłada? Retoryka – ideologia – popkultura*. Warszawa: IBL PAN.