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The Limits of the Language. Holocaust(s)? Between Decorum and a "Rhetorically Useful Concept" (The Case of Discourse in Poland)*

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The article presents several examples of the rhetorical use of the Holocaust in contemporary public discourse in Poland, the place where the extermination of the Jews took place on the largest scale. It evokes a recapitulation of the discussion of the uniqueness and recurrence of the Holocaust experience, and the ways in which this experience is metaphorized in contemporary popular culture, especially in the Polish public discourse. An important part of the text consists of case studies (rather limited for formal reasons), i.e. the rhetorical use of the concept of the Holocaust in relation to issues relevant to the public sphere in recent years. In the Polish context, these are mainly: issues related to the protection of animal rights; to the Polish abortion law; discussions about the COVID-19 pandemic and the refugee crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border.

Keywords: Holocaust; rhetoric; Holocaust discourse; COVID-19; prenatal ethics; Polish–Belarusian border crisis

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in my country they burn the rainbow
just like once they burnt people in barns
our daily Polish hate
like bread, like dinner on the table
Maria Peszek, *Modern Holocaust*

Introduction

In contemporary discourse, in Poland and beyond, the notion of the Holocaust has been subjected to many processes, including metaphors, rhetoric and taboos. It is sometimes a source of conflict, or a simplified sentimental costume. It is re-analysed, re-defined, viewed and read. The constant need for this multidimensional, interdisciplinary and multi-tool interpretation stems from the specificity and complexity of this unimaginable, indescribable, inexplicable experience, incomprehensible despite the millions of pages written and testimonies recorded on various media. Interpretation-wise, we are at the beginning of the road, and we have failed to settle what is allowed and what is not allowed in the context of Holocaust remembrance.

This article presents several examples of the rhetorical use of the Holocaust in contemporary public discourse in Poland, the country where the extermination of Jews took place on the largest scale. This spatial limitation does not consign to oblivion discourses (that sometimes ring a bell) in other European countries or the United States. The use of the Holocaust metaphor in campaigns for animal rights, or against abortion or vaccinations is nothing new[1]. It seems, however, that in a country so strongly marked by the experience of the Holocaust, struggling to come to terms with the difficult memory of the victims and the perpetrators,

1 As far as the last case is considered, many of the protests organised in this way took place in the Czech Republic and Germany. The Central Council of Jews in Germany pinpointed at the instrumentalisation and defamation of Holocaust victims. Its president, Josef Schuster, stated that wearing the so-called yellow Jewish stars should be seen as relativization of the Holocaust, which could be regarded as incitement and a punishable offence (see, for example, Axelrod, 2020).

struggling to find the right terminology and the "proper"(?)[2] rhetoric in historiography or literature, cases of (over)use[3] of Holocaust topics should be approached with caution, sensitivity and "mindfulness." This is not the case. The Holocaust is one of the dominant rhetorical tricks in the fanatical anti-abortion discourse. It has also become oratorical fodder for statements made by opponents of compulsory vaccination and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the example of foreign campaigns, it has been used "creatively" by representatives of animal rights foundations/movements. Also (though I need to strongly emphasise that this is an example from a completely different area of meaning and with a different emotional and ethical charge), it has become a point of reference in comments on the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, which began in 2021[4].

At the time of writing, the global community had not yet witnessed the tragedy unfolding in the Gaza Strip. Of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict changes both perspectives and narratives. I am aware that publishing a text which omits the most recent aspects of Holocaust discourse may appear to be an avoidance of the subject. However, I feel that supplementing the text at this stage would be irrelevant. Furthermore, my text provides an overview of selected strategies for using a specific term in social discourse and does not address issues related to contemporary manifestations of anti-Semitism, political censorship, or culturally conditioned moral censorship. These are undoubtedly important factors influencing public debate on the Gaza Strip in Poland and other European countries. Moreover, the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not alter the fact that certain social groups use the term "Holocaust" in their rhetoric, more or less consciously employing it for

2 The quotation marks used here are not accidental. I mean in particular the numerous disputes in recent years over texts dealing with Polish participation in the persecution of the Jews (especially books written by Jan Tomasz Gross and Barbara Engelking).

3 I would like this word to have a neutral connotation, at least in this place.

4 For more information about the crisis, see for example an article in "The New York Times": *Belarus-Poland Border Crisis* https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/poland-belarus-border-crisis.

ideological purposes and thus ignoring the scientific background and objective findings of researchers on the subject.

The border(s)

Bitter reflections on the relativisation and valuing of human life have accompanied the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border in recent months. In this case, analogies to World War II are triggered automatically and subconsciously. It seems to be done without calculation or sober evaluation of the gains and losses. Rather, it is an unconditional reflex, showing certain patterns of thought and rhetoric as intuitive and protective processes.

It is not without reason that I would like to refer here shortly to Mikołaj Grynberg's latest book, *Jezus umarł w Polsce* [*Jesus Died in Poland*] (2023)[5]. Agnieszka Holland, an eminent Polish director, the author of The Green Border (2023), a film that was loudly commented on all over the world, but ignored or even discredited by Polish officials for political reasons, wrote:

5 His earlier journalistic work had a significant influence on the publication of *Jesus Died in Poland*. Mikołaj Grynberg, a photographer, psychologist and grandson of Holocaust survivors, has authored two volumes of interviews with representatives of different generations affected by the same (though not quite the same) trauma. He is also the originator and creator of an artistic and educational project *Auschwitz, what I am doing here*. He positions himself as a representative of the second generation, variously described in the literature as the "generation of post-memory", the "hinge generation", "guardianship of the Holocaust". The volume collecting Grynberg's conversations with survivors is *subtitled After us no one will tell, at most someone will read…* Grynberg's text, entitled *Oskarżam Auschwitz. Historie rodzinne* [*I accuse Auschwitz. Family Stories*], revolves around talks to his "brothers and sisters after the Holocaust" as Anka Grupińska referred to them in the introduction. The form of the referenced interviews published in 2012 and 2014 connects with the traditional school of reportage. The interviews with representatives of different generations of Holocaust victims say with conviction that one of the pillars of Holocaust remembrance exists independently of fashions and pop-cultural trends. It is the mentioned conversation. Today, it is most often transformed into a meeting of three generations (the "owners" or "users" of different types of memory: the classic memory and memory enriched with "post" and "pop" prefixes).

> No one is more qualified than Mikołaj Grynberg to write this book, to listen to the stories of today's Righteous and unrighteous from Podlasie. This is where past and present traumas, challenges and decisions come together. Recent events reopen old scars and we can see that they have never healed. The mystery of evil seems relatively easy to decipher. On the other hand, few people, even the greatest, have managed to explain the mystery of goodness. This book is a beautiful and honest attempt to understand this (Grynberg, 2023, cover).

It is not a coincidence that those, who are helping refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border have just turned to Mikołaj Grynberg for listening. And it is not a coincidence that in a situation where humanitarian aid becomes dangerous (just to mention the trail of five volonteers[6]), is considered illegal and threatens social exclusion, historical associations begin to emerge. Agnieszka Holland writes about the "Righteous of Today," clearly suggesting a similarity to the title "Righteous Among the Nations" given to people who saved Jews during the World War II. There are clear allusions and associations in the interviews, for the times are full of "Jewish analogies," as one of Grynberg's interviewees claims

> (...) It is not true that we have learned the lesson that there will never be another war, another persecution, another pogrom. Nonsense, everything is possible, everything can come back, we can do the same things again. And maybe we will be even worse (Grynberg, 2023, 32).

6 The trial starts on January 28th 2025. According to the original motion filed by the Hajnówka Prosecutor's Office, the five volunteers were charged with 'facilitating a stay in the territory of the Republic of Poland' (Article 264a of the Criminal Code), an offence punishable by up to five years in prison. They were accused of providing food and clothing to refugees and transporting them deeper into the country.

The Holocaust – The Rhetoric

Polish academic discourse is pervaded by understanding and remembering the Holocaust. It is analysed in increasingly new contexts; it also remains a very important issue in the core school curriculum. To a great extent, each discussion on the Holocaust, be it in the context of literature, film, art, popular culture, public debate or, finally, purely commercial use, keeps balancing between the well-established criteria of uniqueness, non-uniqueness and universality. Each of these positions has its staunch supporters and opponents, and they all advance convincing arguments. A rational summary of this endless discussion has been offered by Norman Davies, who wrote: "according to the rules of logic, the uniqueness of any phenomenon can only be proved by comparing it with similar phenomena" (cf. Kawa, 2017, 29). In the context of the rhetoric used in the public debate on the social issues discussed in this article, a sentence written by Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg also seems important: "The Holocaust, through which the world of death became part of the landscape of modernity, left behind the prospect of new exterminations, the possibility of future holocausts" (Milchman, Rosenberg, 2003, 13–14). This quote results from my somewhat twisted logic as I know that the authors' intention was to treat the Holocaust as an obvious warning in the context of world politics, human nature, various *-isms* dividing the society, phobias and the resulting potential genocide. Future "holocausts," as well as past, distant ones, remain for years the subject of unabated academic (cf. for example: Shaw, 2007; Morawiec, 2017) as well as completely non-academic discussions[7].

The fact that the historical memory of the Holocaust is "divided" has been already covered by Raul Hilberg in his canonical *The Politics of Memory* from 1996. It is divided in various ways. The demarcation lines

7 One of the best-known examples of such comparisons on the international stage is the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1917, which is sometimes referred to as the 'first Holocaust'. For years, the politically motivated denial of historical associations and obvious analogies has served to reinforce the term 'Holocaust' within the international network of dependencies.

of this memory sometimes coincide with lines marking national borders. The divisions also concern the ways in which the Holocaust is interpreted through the lenses of other genocides, or treated as an exceptional and incomparable event (in a text entitled *Breath*, Nancy Jean-Luc writes that the memory of the Holocaust should be untouchable, and while we should try to save it, it should never be exploited [cf. Potocka, 2018, 222]). Finally, the divisions concern methods of commemorating, remembering, recalling, perpetuating, preserving in literature, language and public debate. The limits of memory and the boundaries of *decorum* in representing the tragedy of the Holocaust, repeated for years, remain relevant. While literary and artistic conventions have, as it were, been exempted in recent years from the requirement of maintaining "adherence of form and content" (I do realise how simplistic this statement sounds...), it is difficult to dispense with judgements concerning the rhetoric present in the public sphere and the modes of (linguistic, but not only) imagery that reaches the average viewers. Viewers who often lack sufficient historiographic knowledge to objectively respond to the juxtapositions and comparisons offered to them. The two areas of Holocaust representation, the theoretical-cognitive and the public, from the ethical point of view should of course complement each other. It is significant that in the discourse typical of public debate, the theoretical-cognitive context is very often conspicuously absent (or perhaps neglected, as the concept of employing rhetoric for ideological ends essentially entails a rejection of scientific and objective principles).

Obviously, Holocaust debate in Poland occupies a special place and is the subject of political and social disputes. Since March 2018, a law has been in force in Poland that provides for a sentence of up to three years of imprisonment for those who trigger off associations between the Polish state and nation and the crimes committed by the Nazis during WWII. Piotr Cywiński, former director of Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, and the International Auschwitz Committee, spoke out against this law. Although it appears to be only an ineffective legal provision, it has been of great importance from a political point of view, and its critics have spoken openly about the threat it poses, namely stifling free discussion about history and the Polish perpetrators of the

Holocaust[8]. The case of high-profile discussions on the research carried out by and books written by Barbara Engelking and Jan Tomasz Gross, held in Poland and Europe, shows perfectly the conflicts of Polish social memory and what happens "when suddenly a nation's memory is restored in public, memory of what it wanted to forget" (Kawa, 2017, 8).

The debate that has been going on for years about how adequate the term Holocaust is and the arguments in favour of other terms do not change the fact that it is precisely this term that carries specific

8 Poland's official policy of remembrance of the World War II and the Holocaust has had narrative problems for decades. In recent years, the political situation and the rise to power of right-wing groups have led to a significant nationalisation of the discourse, primarily by emphasising the Polish perspective and removing inconvenient facts and biographies from the collective memory. However, the Polish space for official discussion of the Holocaust is not homogeneous: on the one hand, the authorities are lenient towards the act of burning a Jewish puppet during anti-immigration demonstrations. On the other hand, they thundered in the context of Jewish organisations after the screening of Artur Żmijewski's film *Berek* (in which naked people are enjoying themselves in the gas chamber of the Stutthof Memorial Museum). In 2023, on the eve of the election campaign, an anti-government journalist's post suggesting that those in power would soon be sent to a 'chamber' (in Polish, the term can refer to a prison cell, but the public's associations were clear) caused outrage. The reaction of the power camp was to release an election ad with numerous shots of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp.

Historian Irena Grudzińska-Gross commented on the need to formulate historical policy without politics: "(…) because women write about the Holocaust in a specific way – without putting themselves in a position of authority. Their method is tenacious modesty. They seek the truth on a fundamental level, above all in human biography (…). They do not resort to elevated speech, they are down-to-earth. They back up their words with precise footnotes and a conviction that the truth can be found and must be presented as it is: bitter and naked. They pursue it by bracketing the circumstances of the moment. They are historians, anthropologists and journalists: Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Barbara Engelking, Alina Skibińska, Anna Bikont, Elżbieta Janicka, Anna Zawadzka, Karolina Szymaniak, Aleksandra Domańska, Monika Sznajderman and many, many others who focus on undeniable facts from archives, families or neighbourhoods. Their work requires knowledge and great diligence, because it takes place in the shadow of the «theatre of history» of POLIN Museum and the government's patriotic agitation. The members of the new school of history practice historical politics without politics. This is the only way to write about the Holocaust today" (Potocka, 2018, 80–81).

associations, a symbol, a key word used most frequently in public discourse, especially one in which there is no room for relativism or doubt[9]. Polish scholars, however, are abandoning the use of the English term, suggesting "Shoah," "Extermination," and "Annihilation" instead. The unnecessary "religious saturation" of the Holocaust has been pointed out by Michał Głowiński, a prominent Polish literary scholar and language researcher. It seems, however, that the original etymology of the term "Holocaust," referring to the theological sphere, has long been superseded by the modern understanding, according to which, as Alvin Rosenfeld argues, the Holocaust includes the spiritual and physical resistance to genocide, the damage (difficult to evaluate) done to traditional notions of God and humans, as well as broader issues related to the preservation of memory.[10] The "universal" Extermination, on the other hand, demands a complement in the Polish language and thus forces the language user to specify the Extermination in question (of Jews? of Poles?), thus perpetuating the recent national divisions and dimensions of the tragedy, obvious and difficult to evaluate. Lawrence L. Langer wrote about the Holocaust's legacy of the "helplessness of words" that attempt to represent it, understanding the Holocaust as a phenomenon that compels the search for concepts and language, while sharply attacking the neutralisation of the experience. Of course, underneath the aforementioned "neutralisation" lies a plethora of more and less morally debatable treatments, which scholars have tried to cover with terms like aestheticization, Americanisation, and holocaustization[11]. However, a neutralising message is also a message that explicitly compares, simplifies, and reduces all shades of grey.

Are all these terminological uncertainties known to the authors of the slogans, campaigns and comparisons presented later in this article?

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9 Recently, Magdalena Kawa (2017) and Marta Tomczok (2017) covered the issue extensively in the Polish context.

10 Words or images that are iconic in the Shoah narratives lose their original meaning and are used to describe experiences beyond the World War II. Rosenfeld calls this phenomenon "the end of the Holocaust" (Rosenfeld, 2011).

11 The term has been coined by Elżbieta Janicka, a Polish literary scholar, artist and photographer.

I doubt it, just as it seems unlikely that the terminological complexities are sought to be resolved by the average recipient of their communications.

Metaphorization

It is not surprising to refer here to a fundamental scholarly work reversing and refreshing the perception of a metaphor, by Lakoff and Johnson, also frequently cited in Holocaust discourse. In their understanding, a metaphor becomes a constructive feature of language (any language, not only literary language), and is thus a full participant in the communicative process, playing a fundamental role in affecting social, political and cultural reality. Its additional function, extremely important in the context of the Holocaust discourse, is to organise the thinking process. In view of the crisis of language and the crisis of rational thinking that the world faced in the wake of the Holocaust, metaphorization appears to be a salutary process. Yet in specific cases, it can also be a field of historical, political and ethical manipulation (cf. Kawa, 2018, 21). Since, according to Lakoff and Johnson's theory, metaphors create parallels, comparisons of the Holocaust and abortion in public space, or the invocation of the Holocaust in the context of the COVID pandemic, or in animal rights campaigns, can also have a causal effect, create new (dangerous) patterns of thinking, and impose non-obvious (disturbing and unauthorised) analogies. No matter how much ethical and aesthetic resistance such comparisons arouse – they are present, they manage to exist in language and imagination. If we treat them as metaphors per se, they fulfil their defining duty: juxtaposing elements representing different categories, coming from different worlds. In this sense, the metaphorical element of the Holocaust on the posters of animal advocates or in the campaigns of radical anti-abortion and anti-vaccination milieus should be treated as a simple rhetorical figure. Although it is probably closer to blurring and distorting memory, we can, somewhat contrary to expectations, view it as another means of perpetuating memory. Long-standing debates about the appropriateness of Holocaust discourse have demonstrated that it is not, and never will

be, simple. It is imperative to ask about the ethics of this metaphorical element, i.e., first and foremost the awareness of historical references/comparisons and the intentions behind them.[12] A relevant analysis often remains the only way out and the only basis for forming judgements.

As Marta Tomczok stated, "today, the Holocaust has become a historical costume used to solve many contemporary problems; it is revealed more clearly in some popular narratives and less clearly in others" (Tomczok, 2017, 18). After all, the adequacy of this "historical costume" in public debate is questionable. When writing about contemporary popular narratives of the Holocaust, Marta Tomczok stated: "They are inappropriate because they disrupt the memory of the victims, trivialise history, neutralise the Holocaust, allow and normalise simplifications, manipulate history, and are ultimately an act of barbarism and vandalism, even necrophilia, which no one who wants to write seriously about literature should opt for. Unfortunately, although most of these claims are true, as an argument they do not serve the discussion, but end it" (Tomczok, 2017, 23).

The examples cited below are certainly not appropriate. They simplify, perpetuate stereotypical thinking, manipulate facts and emotions. However, my intention is to take them as cases to be analysed and reflect on the language and thought mechanisms behind their formulation. Stanley Fish wrote that rhetoric is a field of simultaneous interaction between the needs and concerns of society (S. Fish, cf. Tomczok, 2017, 34). In this sense, it also becomes a symbolic battlefront in defence of someone else's interests, pursuing specific aims. It is not only the use of literary topos of the Holocaust in such a universal context that seems questionable but above all, instrumentalisation thereof. In analysing topos, Władysław Panas defined it as "the existence of a common treasury of images, a common cultural code," adding, however, a comment on the social use and abuse of this code (Tomczok, 2017, 65). There is no space in it only for the term Holocaust. It is a space embracing the toponymy Auschwitz, the word "chamber," the famous "civilization of death"

12 The issue of Holocaust comparisons has been well described and defined in Mark Webber's (2011) article.

and, finally, the slogan "Arbeit macht frei." Perhaps a discussion on the existence of these terms in the public space, manipulation thereof, the abuses and simplifications that accompany their use would be helpful in developing tools to effectively defend the memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

Polish Vegetarianism

"It may offend someone to talk about the Holocaust of animals, but this is how animal exploitation is being referred to. I think we need to call a spade a spade, define it, make it clear," said in 2019 a Polish MP from a left-wing party. Her statement did not receive explicit public criticism, perhaps mainly due to its "marginal" nature. In 2020, however, a storm was sparked by a politician who shared a post on X (formerly Twitter), featuring a graphic design by Jo Frederiks, an artist involved in the fight for animal rights. Against a backdrop of walls splashed with blood, chained cows stand, wearing distinctive striped uniforms with yellow stars[13].

The discussion about the adequacy of the comparisons made in the US PETA campaign in 2003 returns every few years. In Poland, it arose in earnest in 2004, when the American exhibition (the originator of which was Matt Prescott, a descendant of Holocaust victims) arrived in Warsaw. Earlier, it had been presented in Germany and the Czech Republic and met with particularly sharp reactions from German viewers, the campaign was also quite quickly censored by the European Court for Human Rights.[14] *The Holocaust on Your Plate* exhibition was available in Poland for two hours.

This article does not provide space to cite the fate of the mentioned campaign and its similar activities opposing the treatment of animals in Poland. Indications of thinking of the mass production of food as a Holocaust of animals recur every few years and always arouse similar

13 The official website with the artist's works: https://www.jofrederiksart.com/.

14 Cf. for example: Gliszczyńska-Grabias, 2022; Webber 2011.

controversies. Perhaps the fundamental mistake of PETA's pioneering campaign was not limiting itself to rhetorical references? After all, the very term "Animal Holocaust" arouses emotions and becomes a contribution to the discussion on the appropriateness of such a transfer of meanings. Was it really necessary to supplement it with photographic evidence of crimes against humanity? Or does the multitude of ideas about the uniqueness and universality of the term even allow for such shocking comparisons?

The authors of *The Holocaust on Your Plate* campaign acknowledge that it was not their intention to simplify transfer meanings, violate memory or be ethically questionable in terms of the dignity of the Holocaust victims. The intended effect was achieved, a discussion was simulated that drew attention to the problem of mass meat production. But did it really? Didn't the debate over the adequacy of the form obscure the substance of the campaign and discourage some audiences from the activist effort? At the same time, wasn't the cruelty of the Holocaust averted, despite the heightened interest in remembering the Holocaust triggered by this shocking comparison?

The resolution is not obvious, all the more so in relation to the worldwide discussion of the campaign. It has aroused particularly intense emotions in Germany, which, by the way, is not at all surprising in the context of the caution so characteristic of the German peri-holocaust narratives. Yet PETA is not to be blamed for this comparison; animal protection movements have been using similar metaphors for years. It is difficult to judge to what extent they have been taken (in an informed way) from texts that are not easy to unequivocally reject or negate. "For animals, all humans are Nazis, and their life is an eternal Treblinka" wrote Isaac Bashevis Singer, the 1978 Nobel Prize for Literature winner, in his *Letters to a Writer*. In his book (in fact in its very title) Charles Patterson alludes to this line, comparing the modern societies' treatment of animals to the inhumane actions of humans against humans known from history, including the Holocaust. *Eternal Treblinka. Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust*, published in 2001, while still controversial, has been received with great enthusiasm by critics. The story of pointing out the analogy between the fate of animals and the victims of the Holocaust is therefore not the story of the famous PETA

campaign and what has happened around it since 2006. Shortly after the war, in 1949, Martin Heidegger claimed in his Bremen lectures: "Agriculture is now a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps" (quoted by Cezary Wodziński, in: Potocka, 2018, 340). The statement provoked a violent reaction, all the more critical in the face of the well-known "Heidegger's silence on the Holocaust."

What seems most disturbing in the Polish context, however, is the aftermath of reflection on the adequacy or inadequacy of the term "animal holocaust." Interpretation and evaluation are sometimes determined by detail. The use of inverted commas or failure to do that, the inclusion or not of an authentic photograph of the victims or, finally, the nationality and worldview of the author of the comparisons. The Polish political scene, extremely divided in recent years, and the equally conflicted public opinion show that often the greatest abuse is not the unfortunate comparison or inadequate juxtaposition, but the tone of the discussion it provokes. It often speaks the language of exclusion, discrimination and hatred and, allegedly, it defends the memory of those who have been condemned to extinction by a similar message.

Pandemic restrictions on freedom and violations of dignity

Another example of the use of the Holocaust metaphor in the Polish public space is, as in many other countries in the European Union or the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic-anti vaccine discourse is again becoming an "attractive," multidimensional field for Holocaust abuse. Protests comparing the discrimination and stigmatisation of the unvaccinated to the persecution of Jews during WWII have swept through mainly Western European countries and the United States. In Poland, they did not attract so much publicity and the pandemic deniers used mainly the Internet, airing a global conspiracy (usually Jewish, by the way) and preaching about a planned and perfectly prepared extermination machine. In public discourse, similar comparisons are met with quite radical opposition and immediate

reaction in Poland. This was also the case with the high-profile appearance of several politicians of the ultra-right Confederacy party under a banner stylised as the inscription "Arbeit macht frei" over the entrance gate of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. The slogan "Vaccination makes you free," borrowed perhaps, against the Euro-sceptical nature of the Confederates, from some Western European protest, met with widespread outrage of Polish politicians. It was matched by the outrage of critics provoked by Polish rapper Quebonafide's 2020 track "Matcha Latte", in which the reality outside the window is called a "modern holocaust." It is unclear whether the artist is thus commenting on the tense political situation in Poland, or rather on the limitations inflicted by the pandemic.[15]

> Cold matcha latte, me doing yoga with gangsta rap going on
> I was supposed to be on tour the whole summer long
> But I'm stuck at home selling tea, that's my ammo
> Cause I'm offered peanuts for the cancelled shows
> My mates they want money but no such luck
> My city's all infested by the virus, we're stuck
> I guess I have it all worked out Mr Floyd
> I just do what I love
> With modern holocaust outside my door.

Anti-abortion rhetoric and black protests

Here we come to the outstanding rhetorical "achievement" in Polish public discourse, namely terms like the "civilisation of death" or the "holocaust of embryos." However, this is not just a single metaphor but

15 Under current Polish law, abortion is only allowed in cases where the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother (as of Spring 2024). It is not insignificant that the protest against the pandemic orders and restrictions was supported by Kaja Godek, chairwoman of the fanatical pro-life organisation Ordo Iuris, known in Poland primarily for its anti-abortion protests and civic projects completely banning legal termination of pregnancy.

a whole barrage of associations and pseudo-analogies, meticulously constructed by the Church hierarchy under the spiritual leadership of St John Paul II. The role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and its co-responsibility for anti-Semitic sentiments and attitudes has been extremely critically discussed in the Polish context by, among others, Jacek Leociak. He bitterly concludes on the contemporary hypocrisy of the clergy protecting the unborn and disregarding those already in the world.

> The language of the crusade in defence of the life of the unborn is persuasive and magical: it creates reality, imposes judgements, defines once and for all a communicative situation from which there is no escape, it is like a trap (Leociak, 2018, 185).

The phrase "civilisation of death," used by John Paul II in opposition to the "civilisation of love" known from the writings of Paul VI, has appeared more than once in comments on the black protests that have erupted regularly since 2016 in connection with increasingly oppressive abortion laws in Poland. In their comments, people associated with the Catholic Church added a variety of metaphors willingly using colourful symbolism. In this argument, the black protest became an expression of evil, heavenly powers, a metaphor for darkness and the civilisation of death. In spite of the colour white that is pure, moral and innocent.[16] The very definition of the "civilisation of death" leaves no illusions – for it recognises abortion, euthanasia, murder, genocide, contraception and in vitro fertilisation methods as equivalent elements that constitute it.

> For the most dangerous thing is that the poison in this type of language is very often overlooked and ignored. Yet this language is not innocent (Leociak 2018, 33).

The Polish debate includes many extreme examples in this regard, to mention the infamous sermon by Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski

16 The so-called "white marches" were organised against the "black protests" organised by the All-Poland Women's Strike social movement.

inaugurating the March for Life and Family, in which the former deputy chairman of the Polish Bishops' Conference and Archbishop Metropolitan of Krakow (since 2017) compared gynaecologists' consulting rooms to the selection ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and those who perform abortions to Nazis. Similar rhetoric is used in the campaigns and on posters produced by activists of some prolife organisations, adding the juxtaposition of frozen embryos with medical experiments carried out on concentration camp prisoners.

This does not mean, therefore, that rhetoric using associations with the most traumatic experience of the 20th century is reserved for one side of the political spectrum. The arsenal of examples of "left-wing" imagery of the "extermination of animals" has been expanded to include far-right ideas about the holocaust of unborn children. The rhetorical utility of the Holocaust also becomes tempting to those who can hardly be suspected of making this metaphor instrumental in an informed way.[17]

> Catholic fundamentalists, secular and clerical alike, speak of the "holocaust of embryos" or compare abortion with the Holocaust. Hardly discernible during the war – today the Holocaust rhetorically comes in very handy (Leociak, 2018, 79).

In this case, expecting the creators of this type of public representation of the Holocaust to have in-depth theoretical and cognitive knowledge is utopian. While the use of metaphor in the other discourses referred to in this article is justified and motivated to varying degrees, it is difficult to speak of any ethical boundaries being observed in this case, even when confronted with the findings of bioethics or prenatal ethics. This is because it is a purely ideological discourse that is often supported by fictitious scientific data which supposedly justifies the adopted narrative and the comparisons used in it.

17 I refer here to a statement made by actress Magdalena Cielecka after one of the black protests, when she described herself as a 'child of the Holocaust' when describing her return from the demonstration (cf. Tomczok, 2017, 103).

In the publication *Wielogłos o Zagładzie* [Multiple Voices on the Shoah], published in 2018 by the MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow, the authors of the introduction write about the need to resist dogmatisation in the Holocaust discourse. They discuss holding contemporary art accountable for "inadequate" means of expression, and propose a solution – "interpretive openness", as "an interpretive approach" is an expression of greater respect for the Holocaust than a "memorialization" of the memory (cf. Potocka, 2018, 9). The impetus for the publication were the critical voices (including the demand to close the exhibition) that accompanied the exhibition entitled Poland – Israel – Germany. The Experience of Auschwitz and, as the authors of the publication write, "arguments of pain" rather than "intellectual arguments" (Potocka, 2018, 12). Despite the passage of time and the multitude of Holocaust narratives, it is still the "pain argument" that dominates the public discourse. However, the criticism of the exhibition became an impulse to search for the (non?)existing boundaries of artistic expression, and perhaps even playing with the convention of the Holocaust, and re-asking extremely important questions. They were addressed to 95 people in various ways related to Holocaust research and its literary and artistic representation. In the nearly 50 responses to the question "how can the memory of the Holocaust be offended" that were referred back and published by the editors, two reactions are repeated in particular – one of them is a discussion with the statement that it is not possible to "insult memory," the other argues that only negationism is offensive to this memory. However, there are other voices as well. Erez Israeli writes that placing images of the Holocaust "in an artificial context evokes – even if this was not the author's original intention – pleasure, and this should be assessed clearly – as pornography" (Potocka, 2018, 95–96). Jürgen Kaumkötter, on the other hand, sees a threat to the memory of the Holocaust in the "exploitation of survivors for publicity," the use of the Holocaust for political purposes, and the creation of "Disneyland of horror" (Potocka, 2018, 107–108). The manipulation of memory for political purposes, excessive metaphorization, frivolity, provocation, scandal, commercialization, instrumentalization, careless use of the term Holocaust in the public space could and should raise ethical doubts. But the real insult to memory is revisionism and denialism, as well as the "cruel pop Holocaust," from which

"a suspicious duty to remember" (Zyta Rudzka) emerges. In a text entitled *Against the Commandments and Taboos of the Holocaust*, the literary scholar Ernst van Alphen writes: "A set of conventions defining the attitude towards the Holocaust stifles ethical honesty. This gives us the morality of the Holocaust, or, as Michaels writes, 'ethical kitsch'" (Potocka, 2018, 321).

What scale can be used to judge the appropriateness of comparisons? How can one distinguish between those who abuse and dishonour the memory of the victims and those who, above all, warn with the well-known slogan "never again"? The answer seems extremely simple (perhaps too simple?), but it is hidden in the word "hate," which describes the oldest and most recurrent emotion in the world.

In 2016, the Polish actress and singer Maria Peszek recorded the album *Karabin* [The Rifle]. In the song *Modern Holocaust*, which prompted a number of critics to accuse the artist of kitsch and populism, Peszek sings:

> The great furnace of Polish hatred burns
> There's nowhere to flee, nowhere to run away
> And like a sip of dirty vodka
> Polish modern holocaust.

The fragment in which the burning of the rainbow, an artistic installation associated with the LGBTQ movement, was juxtaposed with the burning of Jews in a barn, aroused the greatest controversy among critics. However, Peszek herself argues that the Holocaust never ended, but began innocently, with words (today we would call them, even in Polish, "hate"). The litany of insults directed at the artist, which she quotes from letters sent to her, shows the extend of the hatred and the sense of impunity. A lack of responsibility for the word that begins it all. Gathering intuitions and emotions and taking responsibility for the word are the great tasks of modern societies. How can we be sure that the prohibition of thinking in terms of analogies will not turn into a prohibition of thinking at all? Although this is a rhetorical question, which could provide a fresh perspective on the examples of the use of the term "Holocaust" in various social and political contexts that were presented previously.

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