

From the Margins to the Mainstream? Representations of the Holocaust in Popular Culture

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In recent decades the continued ‘rise’ of the Holocaust in the public consciousness has demonstrated just how dominant the event has become in contemporary culture. The Holocaust is now a staple of popular sentimental fiction such as William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* (2000), and of mainstream films like *Schindler’s List* (1993) and *Life is Beautiful* (1998). The Holocaust has been brought to the attention of millions of people, yet in a softened and distorted guise. The popularity of such novels and films has arguably led to the marked increase in both the number of museums dedicated to the Holocaust, and in the number of visitors to them. Our growing fascination with the Holocaust, coupled with the fall of communism and the opening up of the Eastern Bloc countries, has even led to the curious recent trend of Holocaust tourism.

The starting contention of this article is that the Holocaust has been popularised through novels, films, and museums, most of which affirm life rather than death, survival rather than destruction. Such popularisation has been aided by the marginalization of survivor testimony. The survivor of the Holocaust who gives voice to the true horror of that event has been sidelined and silenced. In many ways the Holocaust has been appropriated; our memory of it has been shaped more by popular representation than by testimony. Our preference for melodramatic Holocaust novels, and for Hollywood Holocaust films with ‘happy endings’, has undermined the survivors’ role as bearers of unique and terrible memories. Why face the uncompromising horror of testimony, or the reality of places like Auschwitz, when one can turn instead to the pathos and ultimate uplift of a film like *Schindler’s List*? The problem here relates both to representation and

reception, for even when the experience of the Holocaust is described to us by survivors, it is often difficult to relate to the extremity of testimony. Primo Levi wrote of his encounter with a schoolboy who, after Levi's talk on his experiences as a prisoner in Auschwitz, asked him why he hadn't managed to escape. Levi stated:

Within its limits, it seems to me that this episode illustrates quite well the gap that exists and grows wider every year between things as they were down there and things as they are represented by the current imagination... it is part of our difficulty or inability to perceive the experience of others, which is all the more pronounced the further these experiences are from ours in time, space, or quality. (Levi, 1995, p.128)

The marginalization of Testimony

The marginal position of survivor testimony in the public consciousness is not a new phenomenon. Initially, in the years following the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, the public was not willing to embrace such horrifying stories from an all-too-recent past. As Primo Levi wrote of his now classic work of testimony, *If This Is A Man*:

So this first book of mine fell into oblivion for many years: perhaps also because in all of Europe those were difficult times of mourning and reconstruction and the public did not want to return in memory to the painful years of the war that had just ended. (Levi, 1993, p.381)

Primo Levi was not alone in encountering resistance to his attempt to share with the world the experience of those caught up in the Holocaust. Nor was the early obscurity of testimony simply the result of subconscious resistance to knowledge of recent events, it was also the result of active repression. When another survivor of Auschwitz, Jean Amery, told a friend of his intention to write of his experiences, he recalled being firmly discouraged:

He said further that I should be discreet and, if at all feasible, avoid including Auschwitz in the title. The public, he felt, was allergic to this geographical, historical, and political term. (Amery, 1999, p.1)

Thus while the survivor of the Holocaust felt compelled to speak about his or her unimaginable experiences, and to testify on behalf of the majority who were killed, society did not feel equally compelled to listen. Sixty years have now elapsed since the liberation, yet the initial resistance to testimony has not disappeared. The Holocaust represents a challenge to existing values and beliefs, yet it is almost as though we live in denial of what the Holocaust revealed, as though a comfortable view of man and of the world is still possible. In this light, survivors have become a problem for a society that has settled into wilful ignorance, a society that congratulates itself for 'bravely' embracing the Holocaust of popular culture (in terms of Holocaust representation, I take popular culture to include everything from mainstream Hollywood films, middle-brow novels like *Sophie's Choice*, and even the new Holocaust museums and the growth in Holocaust tourism which are in many ways responses to the popularisation of the Holocaust). As Terrence Des Pres has asserted:

The survivor, then, is a disturber of the peace. He is a runner of the blockade men erect against knowledge of 'unspeakable' things. About these he aims to speak, and in so doing he undermines, without intending to, the validity of existing norms. (Des Pres, 1980, p.42)

While the early repression which survivors encountered was, at that time, as understandable as it was lamentable, the contemporary marginalization of the voice of the survivor results from a more cynical approach to the Holocaust. We are now ready to engage with the Holocaust, but this is only because it has now been popularised and 'softened'. After the initial silence on the matter in the immediate post-war period, 'acceptable' forms of Holocaust representation gradually emerged which enabled society to consume certain aspects and images of the event without fully confronting it in all of its terrible enormity.

The 1960s saw the first major groundswell of public interest in the Holocaust. This was fuelled by many people's familiarity with the heavily-edited *Diary of Anne Frank* (and ensuing theatrical and film productions of it), and by the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, at which survivors testified to the terrible things that they had witnessed and experienced during the Holocaust. The 1970s saw the popular success of the U.S. television miniseries *Holocaust* in 1978, and also that of William Styron's Holocaust novel *Sophie's Choice* in 1979. The interest in the Holocaust kindled in these decades could be said to have reached a peak in the 1990s. 1993 has been described as the 'Year of the Holocaust', with the film release of *Schindler's List* and the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Peter Novick has commented on this interesting chronology: from initial repression, to a growing obsession in later decades. He states: 'Generally speaking, historical events are most talked about shortly after their occurrence, then they gradually move to the margin of consciousness' (Novick, 2001, p.1).

Yet instead of the Holocaust being edged to the margin of consciousness as a 'historical event', a sanitised, popular image of the Holocaust has come to dominate the public imagination. It is now the survivor, intent on telling the harsh truths of the Holocaust, who has been edged to the margins of Holocaust representation.

The Importance Of Testimony

Of course, it has been argued that the marginalization of the voice of the survivor need not necessarily be considered catastrophic for Holocaust memory. Some sixty years after the 'revelation' of the destruction of the majority of European Jewry, the survivor population is often described (with varying degrees of insensitivity) as 'dwindling' or as 'dying out'. Many have argued that to rely on this ever-diminishing remnant, and to 'stubbornly' refuse to see other forms of Holocaust representation as acceptable, is to commit the Holocaust to the forgotten reaches of history. As Michael Bernstein has argued:

Since the generation of survivors will soon die out, to prohibit anyone who was not actually caught in the Shoah from representing it risks consigning the event to a kind of oblivion interrupted only occasionally by the recitation of voices from an increasingly distant past. (Bernstein in Morgan, 2001, p.338)

Yet these voices from a distant past are at least authentic voices, communicating the Holocaust rather than simply 'representing' it. As Berel Lang states:

If we assume in any image or 'representation' a construct that substitutes the representation for an original, representations will also never be quite adequate, however close they come to the original. (Lang, 2000, p.19)

While I will later address the flaws which are inherent in most forms of contemporary Holocaust representation, I feel it is important to tackle the 'diminishing survivor' argument first.

While the presence of survivors at commemorative events, such as the recent ceremonies and gatherings to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, helps to establish a tangible link between past and present, one cannot avoid the reality that these remarkable individuals will not live forever. Yet this fact in itself does not mean that the Holocaust must now be articulated wholly by novelists and filmmakers without personal experience of the Holocaust. This is especially true when such novelists and filmmakers appear to have no knowledge of testimony or even the basic facts of the Holocaust. While academics like Tim Cole may know more about the Holocaust than a filmmaker like Steven Spielberg, in today's memorial climate it is the filmmaker whose influence is felt more keenly. As Tim Cole has written of his experience watching *Schindler's List* at the cinema:

And from quite a number of years of reading about the Holocaust, and reading survivors' memoirs I knew all sorts of things that in many ways I wished I didn't know. So I wanted to stand up in the cinema as the credits were rolling and say to all these people: 'It was much worse'. (Cole, 2000, p.92)

The fact that a wealth of written testimony from survivors of all backgrounds exists means that if we are willing to face up to its uncompromising nature (instead of succumbing to the lure of the easy-option Holocaust showcased in popular culture), we will gain an understanding of the Holocaust as it impacted on the individual, long after those individuals have ceased to be with us.

Testimony is important both in what it tells us and in the aims behind it. For those who survived the ghettos, killing squads, and concentration camps, testifying to what they had seen and experienced assumed the status of a solemn duty. Many survivors wrote because they were aware that their individual experiences were remarkable, as Primo Levi affirmed: ‘They speak because they know they are witnesses in a trial of planetary and epochal dimensions’ (Levi, 1995, p.121). For other survivors, the duty to testify was part of the responsibility they felt toward those who had died. In the camps, inmates often spoke of the need for the survivors (though at that time they could not believe there would be any) to speak on behalf of those who had perished. As Elie Wiesel, survivor of both Auschwitz and Buchenwald, writes:

The one among us who would survive would testify for all of us. He would speak and demand justice on our behalf; as our spokesman he would make certain that our memory would penetrate that of humanity. (Wiesel, 1999, p.405)

Yet despite the survival and the testimony of individuals like Levi and Wiesel, many more people have seen *Schindler’s List* or read *Sophie’s Choice* than have engaged with the disturbing intricacies of testimony. One can only imagine the anguish of survivors who, having witnessed the destruction of their whole families and communities, now witness the ‘blotting-out’ of their own names and experiences because of the dominance of kitsch. Today when one speaks of awareness or consciousness in relation to the Holocaust, one alludes mainly to a familiarity with the frivolous sexualisation of the Holocaust found in Styron’s novel, or with the emphasis

on survival in Spielberg's film. Elie Wiesel has articulated the survivor's reaction to this state of affairs:

Like Kafka's unfortunate messenger, he realizes that his message has been neither received nor transmitted or worse, it has been, and nothing has changed. It has produced no effect on society or on human nature. Everything goes on as though the messenger had forgotten the dead whose message he had carried, as though he had misplaced their last testament. (Wiesel, 1999, p.346)

It becomes clear that the main problem surrounding testimony relates to its reception. Even when the survivor is able to articulate his or her terrible past, testimony is often misunderstood or ignored by society. Many survivors have written of the incapacity of the non-survivor to fully comprehend the survivor's experience. Primo Levi believed that the daily sufferings of those in the ghettos and camps were underestimated by society. Levi stated:

We are prone to assimilate them to those 'related' ones, as though the hunger in Auschwitz were the same as that of someone who has skipped a meal, or as though escape from Treblinka were similar to an escape from an ordinary gaol. (Levi, 1995, p.128)

Yet the failure here lies not with testimony but with us, in the ways in which we now banalise the Holocaust, how lightly we often treat it. Survivor Charlotte Delbo wrote of the 'useless knowledge' she acquired in Auschwitz, the message she had to share which she felt no one but the survivor would be able to understand. Delbo asked:

Why not rather forget all the morning dead and the evening dead... thirst, hunger, fatigue, since it does no good to remember all of this, and since I'm unable to impart this knowledge? Why not rather forget how time dragged on and on since everyone today firmly believes that twenty-seven months in a lifetime isn't that long, and since I can't explain the difference between our time here and time over there... (Delbo, 1995, p.343)

While the survivor will always have a deeper understanding of the experience of the Holocaust, through testimony the non-survivor can better approach the complexity of the event. One does not have to be a Holocaust expert to see in Delbo's writing, in her description of all the morning dead and the evening dead, how the reality of the Holocaust could never be captured within a popular film or novel.

Misrepresentations of the Holocaust in Popular Culture

To fully appreciate just how worrying the marginalization of survivor testimony is, it is important to analyse how accurately the Holocaust is portrayed in popular culture. One of the most dominant forms of Holocaust representation is the genre of Holocaust fiction. Popular novels which deal with the Holocaust, or more accurately which deal with aspects of the Holocaust, have been emerging since the 1970s (although smaller scale works with lower readerships had been published earlier, such as Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* which was published in 1967). Holocaust fiction has been responsible for bringing the Holocaust to mainstream public attention, through the debates surrounding the very idea of a fiction of the Holocaust, and through the number of Holocaust novels which achieved popular success and were later made into films.

The very existence of this literature is for many an emotive issue. Sue Vice has asserted that there are a number of reasons why we want to know about Holocaust authors' backgrounds and reasons for writing:

One is that readers are suspicious of the motives of outsiders, who might have improper reasons for choosing this subject... Another reason is the simple mistrust of invention in relation to the Holocaust; the more personal distance there is between the author and the subject, the more 'invented' the work must be. (Vice, 2000, p.4)

The debate about the incompatibility of culture and the Holocaust was largely set in motion by Theodor Adorno and his now famous declaration: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno, 1981,

p.34). Despite this prohibition, the problem remains that while it may be 'barbaric' to continue with cultural production in the same way after the Holocaust, it is not literally impossible. Adorno later qualified his statement, admitting:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. (Adorno, 2000, pp.362-363)

Yet while the tortured man has the right to express his suffering, it is questionable whether people other than survivors can adequately describe the torture of the Holocaust. While Adorno accepted the possibility of poetry and literature after the Holocaust, he was scathing as to the moral and cultural value of these offerings: 'All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage' (Adorno, 2000, p.367). Adorno's condemnation of the culture industry fits well with concerns about the popularisation of the Holocaust and the way it has been integrated into mass culture. Adorno argued that the culture industry (the film industry, publishing houses etc.) produced easy, 'pre-digested' (Adorno, 1991, p.58) novels and films that prevented individuals from thinking for themselves. The popular culture produced by the culture industry was also designed to be comforting; it generally aroused 'a feeling of well-being that the world is precisely in that order suggested by the culture industry' (Adorno, 1991, pp.91-92).

Adorno's theory is directly applicable to popular Holocaust fiction which focuses on, if not invents, less disturbing aspects of the Holocaust. Thus in the process of 'remembering' the Holocaust, our desire to hide from its ultimate horror is reflected in the preference of many for representational forms which make it somehow bearable. But we are not simply looking for a bearable Holocaust; we may also be looking for a 'safe' glimpse of horror. Adorno's critique here extends beyond Hollywood, yet his theory about the popularity of some forms of fiction could also explain our contemporary interest in Holocaust films and novels:

In the case of the socio-critical novels which are fed through the best-seller mechanism, we can no longer distinguish how far the horrors narrated in them serve the denunciation of society as opposed to the amusement of those who do not yet have the Roman circuses they are really waiting for. (Adorno, 1991, p.58)

Beyond softening the event, popular Holocaust fiction has also been branded as a literature that appropriates the experience of another, and in the process reduces it. As Elie Wiesel has stated:

Today anybody can say anything on the subject and not be called to order, and not be treated as an impostor. Do they realize that they are cheapening the event? (Wiesel, 1979, p.238)

Here the question of ‘ownership’ arises: writers of Holocaust fiction arguably tell a story that is not theirs. While writers of novels about the First and Second World Wars arguably do the same thing, I believe that the Holocaust should represent something of a special case. The modern, industrialised mass murder of millions simply because of their racial identity is not just another normal episode of war. Yet a problematic circularity is at play. The Holocaust has become better assimilated into the public consciousness through popular fiction and the resulting films, yet the more ‘popular’ the Holocaust becomes, the less it inspires awe. The Holocaust is thus increasingly appropriated and fiction, to a greater extent than survivor testimony, determines how the Holocaust is transmitted and remembered. Elie Wiesel has argued that as there is such a wealth of testimony documenting the genuine experience of the Holocaust, there is little need for non-survivors to invent narratives about this unimaginable period of history. He makes a plea on behalf of all survivors:

You who have not experienced their anguish, you who do not speak their language, you who do not mourn their dead, think before you offend them, before you betray them. Think before you substitute your memory for theirs. (Wiesel, 1979, pp.246-247)

I would argue that the main problem with the ‘memory’ that is substituted for the survivor’s in popular representations of the Holocaust, relates to the wholly inaccurate picture of the Holocaust that dominates our contemporary culture. A novel like *Sophie’s Choice* might seem, at face value, a harmless enough venture. William Styron might be said to be attempting to bring the Holocaust to mainstream public attention, recognising that many people will never read testimony or scholarly works on the Holocaust. Yet Styron’s novel provides a very particularised view of the Holocaust; it also provides a textbook example of how the Holocaust is misrepresented in order to fit in with contemporary culture.

The first and most obvious problem with Styron’s portrayal of the Holocaust relates to his agenda of universalisation; indeed the Holocaust is much universalised in popular representation. The event is made into something which we can all relate to, while the specificity of Jewish victimhood is underplayed. Simply by making Sophie, a Polish Catholic sent to Auschwitz for smuggling ham, his paradigmatic Holocaust victim/survivor, Styron posed a deliberate challenge to Jewish ‘ownership’ of the Holocaust. Beyond simply choosing a gentile to be his less-than-representative Holocaust victim, Styron went further, asserting:

Although she was not Jewish, she had suffered as much as any Jew who had survived the same afflictions, and – as I think will be made plain – had in certain profound ways suffered more than most. (Styron, 2000, p.264)

Styron’s universalist thinking goes beyond simply comparing all victims of Nazi persecution and making out that they all suffered equally, in that he also seeks to compare the Holocaust to other incidences of injustice. Thus Styron uses a Jewish character in his novel to undermine both the significance and the specificity of the Holocaust, comparing it with the racism that pervades the American south. Sophie’s insane Jewish lover Nathan asserts of the lynching of a black man:

I say that the fate of Bobby Weed at the hands of White Southern Americans is as bottomlessly barbaric as any act

performed by the Nazis during the rule of Adolf Hitler.
(Styron, 2000, p.82)

Yet here Styron is trying to make a facile comparison between two completely different things. However barbaric incidents of racial persecution in the American south may have been, they differed from the systematic abuses committed by the Nazis. It is important to remember that under the Nazi regime every Jew in occupied Europe was destined for extermination. The Jews who died during the Holocaust, even those who died as the result of 'spontaneous' mob violence, did so because the murder of the Jews was the chief objective of the Nazi regime. Despite Styron's best arguments to the contrary, the government-sanctioned, industrialised mass murder of an entire race differs greatly from both the persecution of the Poles during the Second World War, and the long history of racism and slavery.

An even more worrying aspect of Styron's take on the Holocaust relates to his 'understanding' perspective regarding the position of some Nazis during the Holocaust. This is a central pillar of his universalist agenda. Not only is the Holocaust just another injustice in a long line, Styron also suggests that no one in particular is responsible for it, that nobody is truly guilty. Styron relied heavily on the memoirs of Rudolf Hoss (which were written in prison while he awaited execution for his role in the mass murder that took place at Auschwitz) to flesh out his portrayal of Hoss in the novel. Styron seems determined to humanise Hoss, and here universalisation borders on Nazi apologetics. As the narrator, Stingo, asserts within the novel:

Reading the sickening chronicle, one becomes persuaded that Hoss is sincere when he expresses his misgivings, even his secret revulsion at this or that gassing or cremation or 'selection', and that dark doubts attend the acts he is required to commit. (Styron, 2000, pp.182-183)

Styron even uses Sophie, his 'witness' to the Holocaust, to undermine the event's significance. Sophie's experience of Auschwitz does not shed light on the horror and brutality that was the lot of the average

prisoner. From Sophie we get the sense that neither the Holocaust, nor the objectives behind it, were crimes, either literally or morally. Thus as a privileged prisoner living in the basement of the Hoss household, what Sophie saw when she looked out of her window differed profoundly from what survivors have described of the chaos of camp life. Styron asserts:

Sometimes she sensed that there was no violence at all, and got only a terrible impression of order, throngs of people moving in shambling docile parade out of sight. (Styron, 2000, p.316)

Thus Styron's depiction of the Holocaust misrepresents at a fundamental level even the most elementary facts of the Holocaust. The Jews are not the primary victims, the aims and genocidal achievements of the Nazis were not that singular, the Nazis themselves were not truly responsible for great evil, even Auschwitz was quite a peaceful place. One simply needs to add to all of this the eroticisation of the female Holocaust victim through the figure of Sophie, to see just how much damage can be done to accurate memory of the Holocaust when the event is articulated by those who did not experience it. Such writers rarely exhibit the necessary restraint and awe that such terrible subject matter should inspire. Styron's narrative adds little to our understanding of the Holocaust; it is as superfluous as it is false. As Alvin Rosenfeld has asserted:

Sophie's Choice shows that more is needed to penetrate so extreme a history than a transposition of erotic and aesthetic motives onto a landscape of slaughter. (Rosenfeld, 1980, p.49)

Yet *Sophie's Choice*, like many subsequent forms of popular representation, polarised critical and popular opinion. While survivors and Holocaust scholars criticised its portrayal of the Holocaust, for those who knew little about the Holocaust the book was accepted as an accurate portrait of events. The Holocaust, in such a softened and sensationalised guise, became of great interest to the public, and the novel undoubtedly paved the way for the success of Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1994)

which would later be re-made by Steven Spielberg as perhaps the most popular Holocaust film of all time – *Schindler's List* (with the title slightly altered to avoid potentially offensive biblical inferences).

Despite its massive box-office success, *Schindler's List* also profoundly misrepresents the reality of the Holocaust. While Spielberg chose Keneally's novel (as a basis for the Holocaust film he had long been planning to make) because of its 'true story' credentials, the Holocaust story presented is that of the exception rather than the rule. Yet *Schindler's List* is more acceptable to the public than testimony precisely because it is so life-affirming. It is the true story of the few who survive because of the kindness of an individual, rather than the story of the majority who were murdered amidst great evil and indifference. Because the film is based on a true story, and because of its black-and-white, documentary feel, it has come to be seen by many as a kind of historical document. Indeed many people have derived all of their knowledge of the Holocaust from the film. Frank Manchel asserts that *Schindler's List* has for many people become 'the most important source of historical information affecting popular perceptions of the Holocaust' (Manchel, 1995, p.84). This has led to criticisms that the film is becoming more important (and more referred to) than scholarship, and is even coming to 'stand-in' for the actual event. Judith Doneson has argued that *Schindler's List*:

Solidifies a phenomenon that historians often fear but that nonetheless is increasingly becoming the reality – the learning of history through the popular media. (Doneson, 2002, p.214)

It could be asserted that the problem relates not simply to the learning of history through the popular media, but also to the way that the popular media tampers with history to make it more acceptable to the audience. The story of Oskar Schindler, through both the novel and the film, sees a morally ambiguous individual undertake a transformation into an almost Christ-like figure. History is manipulated to ensure that complex or distracting side issues are ironed-out so that our enjoyment of a sentimental

epic is not hindered. Thus the last scenes with Schindler involve distortion and have been widely panned for their gross sentimentality. It is known (though by the few rather than the many) that Schindler's last moments with 'his' Jews were rather different than the film would have us believe. Frank Manchel asserts that Spielberg glossed over the fact that:

Schindler was too scared about his fate to say anything, that the car was lined with money for a safe getaway, and that he fled not only with his wife but also with his mistress. (Manchel, 1995, p.99)

Yet history has not only been sanitised in order to leave intact the integrity of the film's hero. Tim Cole asserts that much more important historical realities of the Holocaust have been 'skirted' in order to leave our faith intact:

We have been spared the gas chambers and we are spared a final scene of mass shootings. We have – perhaps – been spared the Holocaust. (Cole, 2000, p.92)

Thus even with his show-all approach to the Holocaust, which does not even hesitate to follow naked female Jews into gas chambers (albeit ones where water rather than gas issues from the showerheads), Spielberg, like Styron before him, allows us to ultimately hide from the Holocaust.

Conclusion

I would argue that the trends of sanitisation and popularisation that I have discussed in this article have allowed the Holocaust to become firmly entrenched in the public consciousness. The reach of popular culture is now felt in all areas of Holocaust memory. Inspired by the subject matter of *Sophie's Choice* and *Schindler's List*, hundreds of thousands of people now go in search of the 'real' Holocaust, visiting Holocaust museums and even the former killing sites which are now tourist hotspots. Yet even the normally austere, unemotive environment of the museum, or the extremity of a site like Auschwitz, cannot guarantee that our current engagement with

the Holocaust is becoming any more real. Here it is worth considering the behaviour of tourists at a site like Auschwitz-Birkenau. When I visited the site in April 2004, I witnessed bored high school children giggling as they jostled for a better view of the artefacts, even running along the infamous railway line at Birkenau laughing, with arms outstretched like tightrope walkers. As my tour group looked around the notorious Block 11 at Auschwitz I, a middle-aged man in our group sent and received text messages without embarrassment. One suspects that such individuals have been drawn to the site to consume the real-life version of the iconic images they have encountered in popular culture. The Holocaust has become a visual phenomenon; we are primarily interested in it as a grimly-fascinating spectacle.

While both the museum environment and the killing sites themselves rely heavily on displays of Holocaust artefacts, the sites themselves can offer us even more authenticity through the promise of an authentic landscape of atrocity, with barbed wire, execution walls, and wooden barracks. Yet our reliance on artefacts and sites, even as what Tim Cole has termed ‘building blocks of memory’ (Cole, 2000, p.160), is problematic. When we enter a Holocaust museum or site, we expect to see certain items from the Holocaust past. No visit to such places would be complete without some time spent in front of glass cabinets piled high with the belongings of those who were deported to Auschwitz and other camps. Visitors are clearly fascinated by the mounds of victims’ shoes, suitcases, ragged prisoner uniforms, even prosthetic limbs and shorn hair. But what kind of memory of the Holocaust can we find in these relics from the past? As James Young has asserted:

That a murdered people remains known in Holocaust museums anywhere by their scattered belongings, and not by their spiritual works, that their lives should be recalled primarily through the images of their death, may be the ultimate travesty. (Young, 1993, p.133)

I would argue that only survivor testimony can re-animate these faceless individuals with their humanity. Most forms of popular Holocaust representation offer us only a superficial appreciation of what the Holocaust was and how it was experienced by the individuals involved. The survivor experienced the Holocaust in a way that should privilege their role as transmitters of Holocaust memory. Yet the survivor's unique ability to convey the Holocaust is *not* privileged; instead the survivor has been silenced by the dominance of popular culture. Without testimony we can never know the Holocaust. Testimony urges meditation and contemplation rather than encouraging us to consume an image of the Holocaust in the manner of *Schindler's List*. Through testimony, we come to understand the inaccuracies of most Holocaust films and novels. The distortions of the culture industry have been such that, with testimony increasingly marginalized, many people do not realise that the 'Holocausts' on offer are mere reproductions substituted for the real thing. Berel Lang states:

So: Holocaust genres. The inventiveness of twentieth-century history has seen to it that one understanding of this phrase would be that Holocausts themselves may come in genres. (Lang, 2000, p.19)

Ultimately there can be no resolution. There is multiplicity and fragmentation in Holocaust memory today, and popular culture and genocide are surely incompatible. The Holocaust has had its 'sting' removed in order to be assimilated into the public consciousness. The project of mass culture is invariably one of sanitisation and simplification. The absolute extremity of the Holocaust is often refuted by popular culture's 'take' on the Holocaust. Omer Bartov has argued, with reference to *Schindler's List*, that the genre of popular film should be adapted to fit with the Holocaust and not the other way around:

By ending the film with an emotional catharsis and a final humanisation of his hero, Spielberg compels us to consider the compatibility of the conventions and constraints of American cinema with the profound rupture of western

civilisation at the core of the Holocaust. (Bartov, 1996, p.168)

Geoffrey Hartman observes that the opposite is generally true: ‘In the light of media over-exposure the evil of the Holocaust becomes strangely weightless’ (Hartman, 1994, p.11). Thus survivor testimony might be said to be the only way to reinvest the anonymous victims of the Holocaust with their human dignity, the only way to reinvest the Holocaust with its rightful weight.

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Filmography

Schindler's List, 1993. Dir. by S. Spielberg, Universal Pictures.

Life Is Beautiful, 1998. Dir. by R. Benigni, Melampo Cinematografica.

Holocaust Humour, Satire and Parody in Israeli Culture or any other file from Books category. HTTP download also available at fast speeds. For many years, Israeli culture recoiled from dealing with the Holocaust from a humorous or satirical perspective. The perception was that a humorous approach might threaten the sanctity of its memory, or evoke feelings of disrespect towards the subject and hurt Holocaust survivors' feelings. Her research focuses on the changing memory of the Holocaust in Israeli popular culture. Her first book is *Two Faces in the Mirror: The Representation of Holocaust Survivors in Israeli Cinema* (Magnes Press, 2009). dominant cultural "memory" of the Revolution of 1905.¹³ Moreover, the cultural "taboo" against attempts at "realistic" representation of the Holocaust, especially in mainstream cinema, mean that Schindler's List has little competition in terms of mainstream representation. Given such a controversial reception for the first mainstream film to deal directly with the Holocaust, Roberto Benigni's decision to set not only a film, but a comedy, during this period guaranteed that *Life is Beautiful* would immediately attract much critical attention.