

Chapter 1

Searching for Humor in Dehumanization: American Sitcoms, the Internet, and the Globalization of Holocaust Parodies

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ABSTRACT

*During the last two decades, to varying degrees, some American sitcom writers have depicted Nazism and the Holocaust humorously. This sort of activity is visible on such shows as *South Park*, *Family Guy*, and *Robot Chicken*. Many of the writers associated with these comedies are of Jewish heritage; but the joking has stirred only limited controversy. This chapter examines the messaging, delivery, and impact in Holocaust humor. It answers questions such as: What are American comedy writers signaling with these absurd stories? How does their comedic employment contribute to a wider process of misremembering, distorting, or diluting known Holocaust accounts? It also analyzes how computer-mediated communications—website like Hulu and Youtube—have transferred these false accounts beyond American audiences.*

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, to varying degrees, some American sitcom writers have depicted Nazism and the Holocaust humorously. This sort of activity is visible on such shows as *South Park*, *Family Guy*, and *Robot Chicken*. Many of the writers associated with these comedies are of Jewish heritage; but the joking has stirred only limited controversy (Eshman, 2013; Holm, 2011, p.10). Such parodies encapsulate a unique variant of Holocaust post-memory, the process by which modern observers commemorate the traumas of those who came before (Hirsch, 2012, p. 4). The iconoclasm also offers a comedy lesson, notably Woody Allen's witticism about humor being the combination of tragedy plus the passage of time. The reasons provoking this type of levity are not altogether clear; also uncertain is its effects on the genocide's global memory. Americans have a long tradition of belittling Adolf Hitler (Wisse, 2013,

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p.179). Lampooning his victims, however, is something new. In this regard, American sitcom writers have razed a boundary, pushing into unknown artistic and commemorative spaces (Kaplan, 2002, p. 343).

American scholars have explored Holocaust humor for more than a decade. In 2001, an organization called the Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches published John Morreall's paper, "Humor in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive, and Coping Functions." His was a theoretical study, referencing Greek and Shakespearean writers, which argued that comedy is not "time out" from real world grittiness. Jokes are simply another vehicle of human expression (Morreall, 2001). Humor is a sign of emotional intelligence; it is a powerful communication strategy. Nothing in life, including the Nazis' genocide, forever eludes mockery (Muller, 2012). Humor can also help heal trauma (Kaplan, 2002, p. 341). It was very much part of camp life (Lipman, 1991). The concern, however, that some current commentators maintain is whether or not laughing at the dead blurs the line between the degeneracy of the mocker, from that of the mocked (Wisse, 2013, p. 234).

This chapter does not consider whether or not Holocaust humor is amusing, or appropriate. Rather, I am studying its messaging, delivery, and impact. What are American comedy writers signaling with these absurd stories (Critchley, 2002, p. 75)? How does their comedic emplotment contribute to a wider process of misremembering, distorting, or diluting known Holocaust accounts (Lipstadt, 1993, p.14)? With regard to its broadcast, I want to analyze how computer-mediated communications—website like Hulu and Youtube—have transferred these false accounts beyond American audiences. According to Katayama (2009), humor brings people together under shared laughter. However, since humor requires highly sensitive linguistic and cultural competence, expressing and appreciating humor is often a challenge in cross-cultural communication (p.125). Whether American sitcom writers intended to engage global Holocaust memory is unknown. My study examines the parodies less for their intention, than for the ways they might help to reshape the discourse.

Since the 1950s, the program of murder that came to be known as the Holocaust has been part of the American cultural experience (Garber and Zuckerman, 1989, p. 202). On television and in theatres and films, successive generations of postwar citizens have internalized its lessons and legacies (Shandler, 1999, p. 44). What differentiates this tradition, however, from humor-based appropriations, is that earlier works promoted vigilance. When shows such as *Star Trek* and *Twilight Zone* represented the Holocaust to ordinary citizens, they did so to teach. This was also the case with the 1970s American mini-series *Holocaust*, which attracted hundreds of millions of viewers. These artifacts laid out what might be called responsible fictions, helping people born after the genocide to learn who did what to whom (Hilberg, 1992, p. 215).

Schindler's List (1993) is the best-known example of this cultural pedagogy. It opened the same year as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, reinforcing Americans' duty to the memory. *Schindler's* reached beyond a Jewish reference group, chronicling a non-Jewish protagonist on his path to forgiveness and redemption, traditionally Christian leitmotifs (Loshitzky, 1997, p. 107). Owing to its compelling story, heavy marketing, and various delivery platforms, the film had a huge impact. Tens of millions of consumers screened the film in theatres. Countless millions more have watched it on television, DVD, Blu-Ray, or online. At the time of its release, the head of Walt Disney film studios remarked that the picture will "end up being more than a movie...it will affect how people on this planet act and think" (Rosenfeld, 2011, p. 82). *Schindler's* profitability cleared a path for additional Holocaust themed productions such as *Life is Beautiful* (1997) and *The Pianist* (2002). Director Steven Spielberg also allocated a portion of his profits from *Schindler's* to establish a video archive that catalogs online thousands of survivors' oral histories (USC).

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