

Final Panel

The Artist's Perception - a Contribution to Citizenship Education?

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Comic relief – laughing about Hitler, Goebbels & Co.: Impulses for Discussion

I.

Yes. You can.

Leggy precision dancers prance across the stage in Swastika-formation as they sing a song entitled 'Springtime for Hitler' – is that allowed? Can you do that? Laugh about Hitler? With the unselfconscious attitude of an American entertainer, Mel Brooks answered that question around forty years ago with a resounding 'yes', and he continues to insist that a comedian should be able to portray Hitler as the "limelight hog of world history" (Brooks interview with Beier, 2006). In 1968, Brooks wrote and directed the film "The Producers", the story of how two Broadway producers decide to put on a musical about Hitler - written by an extremely untalented author – because they need a flop in order to defraud investors. To their horror, the epitome of bad taste they stage turns into a smash hit. The musical version of the 1968 film opened on Broadway in 2001, and was soon granted a total of twelve Tony Awards.

Even so, it took until 2008 for a theatre here to work up the courage to put it on stage. After the German-language premiere of "The Producers" ("*Frühling für Hitler*") in Vienna, the musical will arrive in Berlin in May of 2009. There's very little doubt that it will usher in a heated debate on the feature pages of German newspapers about whether or not you should be allowed to crack jokes about National Socialism. Arguments will probably address an even more complex question: whether people should be allowed to portray Hitler – the personification of evil – in entertainment media; first depoliticizing him, and then turning him into an aspect of a cultural-industrial marketing strategy. These types of debates have proven to be obstinate revenants in the reception history of National Socialism. A primary reason for that is a school of thought dating back to Theodor W. Adorno, whose 1962 comment on Charlie Chaplin's persiflage of Hitler in "The Great Dictator" was that "the political untruth defiles the aesthetic form" (Adorno 1962, p. 420).

Adorno's criticism of Chaplin's film marked a final turning point. After that, a taboo that declared as unacceptable the use of comic, satiric or grotesque means of representation in media accounts of National Socialism and the Holocaust gained in power. Adorno accused Chaplin's slapstick portrayal of a pogrom in a Jewish ghetto of being an outrage and insult to survivors (c.f. *ibid.* p. 418). But in spite of the fact that journalistic and academic discourse has circled the question about the legitimacy of such representations ever since, a large number of de facto cinematic, theatrical and literary works about the Holocaust and National Socialism already exist that approach the topic through the medium of comic elements.

However, the juxtaposition of the Holocaust and comedy still remains a more powerful taboo than the satiric examination of National Socialism. The question of whether or not it is acceptable to use the means of fiction, and even comedy, to show the disenfranchisement, persecution and murder of European Jews is (justifiably) a much more passionate topic of discussion than a cinematic or theatrical caricature of Nazis.

Dani Levy's film "*Mein Führer. Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler*" (2007) (English title: *Mein Führer: The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler*) combines the Hitler-satire with the Holocaust-comedy. One reason the film provoked such an emotional reaction when it was released was because German comic Helge Schneider appeared in the role of

Hitler. Personally, I subscribe to the sentiments expressed by Hanno Loewy in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, who wrote: “Why does no one ask the question of whether the people who say that you shouldn’t be allowed to laugh at Hitler aren’t more ‘suspect’ than the people who have to laugh at his ludicrousness (and the ludicrous cult that was built around him – and still is) in order to retain at least the vestiges of sanity? Those that have to laugh at Hitler -- even if they choke on that laughter.” (Loewy 2007).

II.

The Dramaturgies of the Show

What is actually problematic is therefore not comedy as a form of artistic or media expression, but instead the (presumed) reaction of the recipient -- laughter. The fact that not every joke makes you laugh is seldom taken into account in this equation. I am talking less about the involuntary, physiological reflex movement than I am about laughter in its social context. A social form of cutting an expressive deal, laughter constitutes a Janus-like interaction that excludes and includes in equal measure. Laughing at something or someone is diametrically opposed to the shared laughter that creates a positive ‘we’-identity. And there’s a third type of laughter as well; that which ridicules the powerful. Scoffing, derision, humour and satire are all considered acceptable forms of intellectual resistance. That is why one group of antifascist intellectuals in the 1930s viewed comedy as an appropriate weapon in the fight against National Socialism. In his essay “*Der Nazi und das Unsägliche*” (“The Nazi and the Unspeakable”) Ernst Bloch reflected on the opportunities for an artistic reaction to the Nazi regime and wrote:

“Some resist the preposterous world – freaks and the like – by grotesquely portraying them in the most surprising ways. But when it comes to the Nazis, the grotesque is apparently inadequate; it’s outweighed by speechless misgiving. It seems that it is actually now the turn of comedy, even more so because it exists to expose a nothing, even if it’s dressed-to-the-nines. The strength of humour is to reveal the puny and the bogus in a lightning moment; then it is revealed as naked and ridiculous.” (Bloch 1938, p. 187).

The next question is *how* to “expose a nothing, even if it’s dressed-to-the-nines”. What types of comedy are being used to tell the story of the period from 1933-1945? Do they share the characteristics common to a genre -- so that you could even describe a genre of ‘Holocaust-comedy’? Is there a dramaturgy that constitutes a comedy of terror?

In principle, there are convincing reasons for answering ‘yes’ to that question. In the films that use comic elements when dealing with the Holocaust and National Socialism, the comedy can always be traced back to a single elementary form – that of a game. As an underlying dramaturgical pattern, the playful ‘let’s pretend as if’ is realised in three different ways:

- 1) The ‘game’ as a game (for example in “*Life is Beautiful*”),
- 2) Through the motif complex of theatre (in addition to “*The Producers*”, one prominent example here would be the Lubitsch film “*To be or not to be*”)
- 3) Through playing a social role, which is articulated in realisation most powerfully in the motif of the *doppelgänger* (as in “*The Great Dictator*”, but also in the television production “*Goebbels und Geduldig*”).

The ‘game’, playing on stage and interactions between social roles, establishes a principle of “acting-as-though” that brings the treatment and the reality it presents to a different level -- one that deliberates on itself as a production. Film theorist Josefa Loshitzky also pointed out that the metaphor of acting and staging stands out in Holocaust-comedy (cf. Loshitzky 2003, p. 29). Her interpretation of this phenomenon is that the egocentrism of the genre functions as a kind of imaginary contract with the viewer, establishing that the film or performance is *not* a true or accurate representation of historical reality. At the same time, the Holocaust-comedy also

alludes to the taboo on representing the Holocaust visually and/or verbally. According to Loshitzky, the comedy pushes back the “borders of the depiction of the Holocaust [...] to win greater artistic terrain.” (ibid.)

III.

Function logic

Humour creates distance. It even presupposes an affective distance in order to unfold effectively. As soon as we feel sympathy for the man that slips on the banana peel, we are no longer able to laugh at him. In his treatment on “Laughter”, Henri Bergson calls this phenomenon the “intermittent anaesthesia of the heart” (Bergson 1921, p. 15). Humour is addressed to the intellect. Viewed in this decidedly cognitive fashion, humour in media-based narratives about the Holocaust and National Socialism brings with it a Brechtian distancing effect. While ‘authentic’ or ‘realistic’ narratives seek to entice you into confusing historical events with a media reflection of them, humour isn’t aiming at mimesis or empathy.

Not only does this clarify the principle chasm that lies between *history* and *story*. The many open public debates have additionally shown that humour also functions as a kind of catalyst for social compromise about how to cope with the past. It is apparently easier to remember the Nazi dictatorship if a representation of it is prefixed by comic relief. In addition, the newsworthy aspect provoked by the alleged scandal of a Holocaust-comedy regularly secures media attention. All the same, the breaking of the taboo – the expansion of humour into an area that is not considered the proper arena for it – crosses borders while simultaneously expanding and confirming them. Each person that seriously pursues the topics of National Socialism, Holocaust and humour produces references. In the process, points of reference are the event itself, as well as the documentary and/or serious fictional narratives. The Nazi-comedy is not created in a vacuum; it is always placed within the context of other productions. This observation applies as much to an open letter in the feature pages of a newspaper and/or media-based artefacts as it does to the artefact itself.

An example: when Levy’s film “*Mein Führer*” hit movie theatres in January of 2007, the repetition of certain ideas assumed mantra-like proportions: that there wasn’t a single taboo involving Hitler that hadn’t now been broken, or that Levy’s film was actually a not-very-funny comedy that couldn’t hold a candle to the films -- like those made by Chaplin and Lubitsch – that it was modelled upon. In spite of that, Levy’s film was discussed in more detail and with much more intensity than for example Josef Vilsmaier’s film “*Der Letzte Zug*” (“The Last Train”), a realism-based narrative that premiered around the same time. What’s interesting about Levy’s film is its connection to other monumental portrait studies; “*Mein Führer*” is the satirical counterpart to the to the Hirschbiegel/Eichinger production “*Der Untergang*” (“Downfall”). Helge Schneider’s performance is in fact less a parody of Hitler than it is a parody of how Bruno Ganz played Hitler in “Downfall”. With the exception of the Frankfurter Rundschau, however, the press didn’t seem to notice (cf. Kothenschulte 2007).

Another example: in Claude Lanzmann’s film essay “Shoah” (1985) there is a sequence in which an engine-driver draws his finger across his throat when he talks about his memories of the deportations. In his film adaptation of Tabori’s “Mutter’s Courage” (1995), Paul Verhoeven refers to this image both in how he set up a shot and the gesture itself, creating a relationship to the iconography of a documentary (Holocaust-) film for his own melancholic-humorous work. Geoge Tabori was an unparalleled master among theatre-makers when it came to understanding the dialectics of humour. He used them intensively as a means of artistically coming to terms with the Holocaust – remembrance of the Shoah was at the heart of his work. Trained by Brecht, one of his trademarks became the anti-documentary narrative through the ‘play within a play’. In “Mutter’s Courage” – the story of the miraculous way in which his mother was saved – he demonstrates how memory eventually assumes a literary form. In the grotesque “*Mein Kampf*” (1987) on the other hand, Tabori tells the story of how a young Adolf

Hitler and Jewish book-dealer Schlomo Herzl meet at a home for men in Vienna. The touching, almost mothering interest Herzl takes in the boy from the Austrian boondocks makes him – unwittingly – the creator of a monster. The film adaptation of the play directed by Urs Odermatt, starring Tom Schilling as Hitler and Götz George as Herzl, is slated for release in the spring of 2009. The discourse in the feature pages of magazines and newspapers that is certain to follow (like the film itself) could be even more interesting and profound than with “The Producers”. Where Brooks’ focus is on his usual cheeky slapstick, George Tabori uses humour as a weapon turned against the dictator – a humour that is bold, unabashed, articulate and deeply human.

IV.

Humour and Civic Education

If the assumption that humour catalyses social agreement when dealing with the past is a correct one – and there are many reasons for believing that it is – then the next question we have to ask ourselves is what contribution humour has to make to civic education. In comparing awareness-promoting differences with genuinely serious approaches, Terrence Des Pres comes to the following conclusions in his famous essay on “Holocaust Laughter”:

“The value of the comic approach is that by setting things at a distance it permits us a tougher, more active response. We are not wholly, as in tragedy’s serious style, compelled to a standstill by the matter we behold. (...) As comic works of art, or work of art including a comic element, they afford us laughter’s benefit without betraying convictions. In these ways they foster resilience and are life-reclaiming.” (Des Pres 1988, p. 232).

It’s striking how many of the artists who make use of comic elements in their treatment of the Holocaust have biographical and/or family history ties to the Shoah. People therefore often assume that, when it comes to the integrity of the motives of the author or filmmaker, this is a kind of guarantee that the portrayed events are true-to-life. (Incidentally, his lack of such personal ties was one reproach made to Roberto Benigni after the premiere of “*La vita è bella*”.)

What is more interesting, however, is that works like these adhere to a Jewish tradition of humour, which never aims to be only funny, but always contains an element of critique – whether religious-philosophic, political or social. Although it is next to impossible to formulate an equation for what makes Jewish humour specifically Jewish, one can say that wit and humour serve here as well (and possibly primarily) as a means of defending one’s own cultural identity against that of the majority population. Within this framework, irony and self-mockery are not only important and legitimate instruments in the formation of cultural identity, but also defend one’s own humanity against ideology and violence.

If (Jewish) humour as a mentality has something to teach us, then it is that the comical is a type of performance that is effective as a medium for communicating knowledge. The well-known principles of *prodesse et delectare* can be employed to introduce the memory of the Shoah to young people who might otherwise not ever engage with the topic. Because new space for reflection can only open in the minds of informed recipients, the perception of the comical is closely tied to an act of recognition on the part of those recipients. This could provide a starting point for a civic education that wants to accomplish more than just pass on facts – as important as that is – and is addressed to viewers who are competent in communication. Viewers who learn to recognise the intellectual potential of humour, while at the same time undergoing aesthetic instruction to help them distinguish between good satire and a bad joke.

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