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Critical laughter: humor, popular culture and Israeli Holocaust commemoration

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Popular culture, humor and collective memory of the Holocaust

An international athletic race is about to begin in Germany. Two people step onto the running track, approach the referee and introduce themselves as ‘the Israeli delegation’. They ask him to let the Israeli runner start running a few meters ahead of the other competitors. Naturally, the German referee refuses. In response, the two Israeli ‘delegates’ shout at him: ‘All you want to do is humiliate us! Haven’t the Jewish people suffered enough? Didn’t you see Schindler’s List?’ After they compare his refusal to the historic Gentile hostility towards the Jews, he agrees to their request and the Israeli runner steps a few meters ahead of the others.

This sketch, and others that appeared on the satirical television show The Chamber Quintet, criticizes established Israeli discourse surrounding (or possibly exploiting) the memory of the Holocaust. In what follows I will argue that this television show indicates a major change in Israeli collective memory and stands for a new voice in Israeli Holocaust commemoration.

The case of The Chamber Quintet exemplifies the constantly changing character of collective memory, and illuminates the multi-layered dialogue that constitutes it: the new (critical) point of view of the ‘third generation’, the use of a popular medium (television) and of a popular genre (humor), serves as an example of how new versions of memory are superimposed over the ‘old’ versions but do not eliminate them.

The article argues that currently collective memory is characterized by a situation of impasse, which allows criticism of the traditional commemoration but can offer no alternatives. It suggests two explanations for this new
The assumption underlying this article is that the Holocaust is one of the enduring aspects of Israeli collective memory. Liebman and Don-Yehiya define it as ‘the primary myth of Israeli politics and the moral foundation of a new Israeli civil religion’ (1983: 137). Hence Israeli society needs to tell itself its version of the Holocaust story time and again, through changing circumstances and for different reasons (Brug, 1998). Thus the ongoing commemoration process becomes an arena for political, cultural and sociological confrontations, where different interpretations compete for their place in history (Sturken, 1997).

The cultural role of the sketches regarding the Holocaust in The Chamber Quintet can be understood by placing them in relation to three analytical perspectives: social context (Israeli collective memory), the medium (popular culture and television) and the genre (humor).

The first is a historical-sociological perspective that deals with the development of Holocaust commemoration in Israel since the early years of the state, a time when the official Zionist perspective dominated public discourse. This perspective evolved with the rise of alternative voices following events such as the Eichmann trial (1961) and the Six-day War (1967) (Segev, 1991; Zertal, 2000), and the influence of the survivors’ children, known as the ‘second generation’, in the 1980s (Wardi, 1992). This article, traces the contemporary dynamics of this perspective by focusing on the role of the Israeli ‘third generation’ as a rising and significant present-day voice.

The second perspective deals with the conflict between popular cultural practices and the conventions of Holocaust remembrance. Holocaust representation has been investigated extensively. This comprehensive research includes areas such as historiography (Friedlander, 1992), literature
Since the 1990s there has been a growing interest in researching Holocaust representation through the various genres of the popular media. This interest has been sparked by a number of works of popular culture that have aroused considerable intellectual and public discourse. Art Spiegelman’s comic-work, *Mouse*, marks the beginning of this trend, (Des Pres, 1988) but the leading cultural event that brought the question of Holocaust representation in popular culture to the forefront was Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film *Schindler’s List* (Loshitzky, 1997). Several years later, in 1998, this debate arose again over Roberto Benigny’s film *Life is Beautiful*. After these two films, public discourse was much more open to recognizing the central role that popular artifacts play in the shaping of collective memory.

Analyzing popular culture helps capture the dual processes of collective memory: the presence of the present in the past and the presence of the past in the present. Most collective memory research has focused on the first process and has shown how each social group constructs its past from the viewpoint of the present, and how the group’s past is shaped by the politics and interests of the present (Halbwachs, 1992 [1950]; Schwartz, 1982; Zelizer, 1995, 1998; Zerubavel, 1995). Schudson (1997: 3) criticizes that approach and argues that: ‘the past endures in the present not only through self-consciously framed acts of commemoration but through social, linguistic and political processes that keep the past alive without necessarily intending to do so’.

Analysis of Holocaust representation through popular culture combines the two approaches. It indicates how Israeli society captures the Holocaust through the present. At the same time, it explores how the past penetrates into the present by studying the representation of the Holocaust as part of the never-ending flow of television broadcasting.

The third perspective deals with the problematic relationship between content (Holocaust) and form (humor). On the one hand, many critics have expressed concern, and even outrage, over works that use the rhetoric of humor to represent the Holocaust, mainly as a reaction to Roberto Benigny’s film *Life is Beautiful* (Gilman, 2000; Niv, 2000). These critics argued that the incongruous, ambivalent and disruptive characteristics of this genre are inadequate to deal with the Holocaust.

On the other hand, some argue that comic representations are more effectively in revolt against horror because, unlike tragedy, they do not accept what has come to pass (Des Pres, 1988). In other words, laughter is a rebellion against the given (Rovner, 2002).
This perspective raises ethical as well as aesthetic questions, and illustrates the radical changes in Israeli collective memory of the Holocaust.

My argument is divided into three parts. The first examines the historical development of Israeli Holocaust commemoration. The second explores the implications of Holocaust representation in popular culture, with an emphasis on the use of humor. The third part analyzes prominent examples of Holocaust representation in the television show, The Chamber Quintet. This part is constructed thematically and explores current trends in Israel’s collective memory of the Holocaust. These trends include the positioning of Holocaust memory between the public realm and the private realm, the criticism of the exploitation of Holocaust commemoration for political and commercial profit, and the reflexive discourse that focuses on the tension between the historical event and its cultural representation. The concluding part of the article analyzes the implications of the use of televised humorous commemoration for Holocaust memory in Israel.

The development of Holocaust commemoration in Israel

During its first years, Israel’s public Holocaust discourse was dominated by official voices and was utilized as a political and educational tool (Zertal, 1998, 2000). The young state’s leaders needed to emphasize the connection between the state of Israel and the Holocaust to justify Zionist ideology. At the same time, however, they had to shape Holocaust commemoration so that it would fit into the Zionist narrative. As a result, the official memory was constructed around a dichotomy between two opposing poles (Zerubavel, 1995). On the one hand were the Diaspora Jews – Holocaust victims and survivors who epitomized passivity in the face of the enemy, an approach antithetical to the Zionist ethos. On the other hand were the Jews who had fought against the Germans who were glorified and praised as paragons of the Zionist ethos.

Thus the official Israeli Remembrance Day is called ‘Memorial Day for the Holocaust (Shoa) and Heroism (Gvura)’. As Feldman (1992: 223) puts it: ‘for us the Day of Holocaust and Heroism was not “Martyrs Day” as my current Israeli calendar translates it, but rather a celebration of resistance and national pride, a prolegomenon to the Israeli Day of Independence’.

Through this process, the Holocaust story was incorporated into the Zionist commemorative narrative. The clearest proof of this perception is the placement of the Holocaust Memorial Day in the Jewish/Hebrew calendar. As Walter Benjamin wrote in ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, ‘Calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness’ (1968: 261–2). Thus, the continuum from the religious holiday of Passover (whose key theme is the birth of the Jewish nation) to Holocaust Remembrance Day and Fallen Soldiers’
Memorial Day, which is immediately followed by Independence Day, creates a mythical order. This commemorative succession is emblematic of a cycle of death and regeneration. The coupling of Fallen Soldiers’ Memorial Day and Independence Day seven days after Holocaust Memorial Day symbolizes the traditional Jewish seven days of mourning. In this way the Zionist narrative uses Holocaust Memorial Day as a justification, symbolizing as it does the Zionist shift from chaos to cosmos (Handelman and Katz, 1990; Young, 1990).

Most researchers identify Adolf Eichmann’s trial in 1961 in Jerusalem as the first turning point in Israeli Holocaust commemoration (Ofer, 1996; Segev, 1991). The nation’s leaders, especially Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, considered the trial an educational tool (Arendt, 1964; Zertal, 2000). It was the first time that the Israeli public was exposed to the intense, continual testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Furthermore, for the first time, Holocaust discourse was not dominated by stories of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising or Jewish partisans’ heroism, but by ‘ordinary’ Jewish victims and survivors of the Holocaust. After the trial, Israeli public discussions of the Holocaust became more frequent and more survivors’ testimonies were published (Bresheet, 1997).

The second event considered a turning point is the Six Day War in 1967 (Shapira, 1996–7). The weeks before the war were fraught with anxiety. The Arab states of Egypt, Syria and Jordan threatened to destroy the Israeli state. Israel felt deserted by the United States and Europe, and military experts abroad warned that Israel would suffer considerable losses. The public discourse in the press as well as in the Israeli parliament was saturated with the memory of the Holocaust. The Arab leaders’ rhetoric, including threats to destroy Israel, together with Israelis’ fear and the ‘silence’ of the free world, led to the comparison between Egyptian leader, Nasser, and Hitler, and between Israel and Czechoslovakia before the Munich Agreement of 1938 (Ofer, 1996: 882).

The Israeli victory in the war and the occupation of the Old City of Jerusalem, with its holy sites, constructed a dichotomy similar to those of Holocaust and Heroism, Death and Victory, European Jews and Israeli Zionists. This dichotomy had an interesting effect on Israel’s collective memory. On the one hand, it confirmed the dominant narrative of the distinction between the European Jews and the Israelis. On the other hand, the Holocaust-like feeling led to more empathy towards the Holocaust victims and survivors.

The blurring of this strict dichotomy between the Zionist-Israelis and the Holocaust survivors/victims became stronger after the Yom Kippur War (1973), which symbolized the emergence of a new Israeli identity, one that was more aware of its own vulnerability and more open and empathetic to Holocaust victims and survivors (Zerubavel, 1995: 192). After the political changes of the 1977 elections, which marked the
decline of Labor Zionist domination and the rise of the right-wing Likud party, the Holocaust became even more evident in Israeli public discourse. The new Prime Minister, Menahem Begin, frequently used terms associated with the Holocaust in order to describe Israel’s political situation and security problems (Don-Yehiya, 1993). By doing so he amplified the interrelation between and the mutual penetration of Holocaust discourse and Israeli culture.

Holocaust memory in the 1980s was dominated by three processes: first, there was an intensive politicization process, spearheaded by Prime Minister Menahem Begin and fueled by the Israeli war in Lebanon (1982) and the outbreak of the Intifada in the Occupied Territories (1987). Second was the emergence of what became to be known as the ‘second-generation’, Holocaust survivors’ children who defined themselves (and were defined by others) as a cultural and sociological group, with common psychological characteristics (Wardi, 1992). Third were the organized visits of Israeli youth and Holocaust survivors’ families to the death camps in Poland.

The major shift in Israeli Holocaust commemoration during the 1980s was the growing emphasis on the question of Holocaust representation. This shift was the result of several factors: the ageing of the survivors that focused public attention on the need to preserve their testimonies; an internal Israeli critical discourse about its history, historiography, and memory; and, finally, a growing interest in questions of representation, as part of postmodern discourse (Holtzman, 1992).

Thus the Holocaust is still an enduring influence on Israeli society and culture, but this influence has been altered in three main ways. Over the years Holocaust discourse has gradually shifted from constant discussions of the historical events to an increasing emphasis on Holocaust memory and commemoration. Second, Holocaust memory has become more privatized (Bresheet, 1997). Finally, over the years, Holocaust discourse had exceeded the well-defined borders of official remembrance days and infiltrated day-to-day Israeli life (Meyers and Zandberg, 2002). Indeed, the Holocaust still functions as a filter through which Israelis interpret issues such as Israel’s foreign policy, atrocities, and wars around the world, as well as domestic issues (Zuckerman, 1993).

**Holocaust memory, humor and popular culture representations**

The shaping of history has long been seen as the terrain of the historians. History was considered a discipline that sought to establish the truth about events that had occurred in the past (Zelizer, 1997: 19). Over time, this perception of history has changed. Hayden White (1974, 1989) and others, by stressing the function of narrative, made a link between historiography
and fiction. The focus of historical research has shifted to questions of language, literary techniques and the social construction of reality. Thus historians began to subvert their own authority as the tellers of the truth, as ‘presenters of the past the way it was’. This trend was accompanied by the broadening of research on collective memory, which strengthened notions about the socially constructed nature of the consciousness of the past. Three processes occurred simultaneously: the narrative-interpretative approach to historiography, which undermined historians’ authority; the expansion of collective memory research; and the increasing awareness of popular culture as a dominant memory agent.

Israeli historian Anita Shapira (1996) has described the resulting situation as a paradox: although more archives are being opened and more information is in the hands of the historians – they (the historians) have less power to shape the past. Cinema and television are considered the authoritative tellers of the past and are the shapers of public memory.

These questions are intensified when it comes to the Holocaust. It is a moral imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust, while at the same time it is not clear if the main human tool for that telling, language, can actually reflect such an ‘event at the limits’ (Friedlander, 1992: 3). The paradox that confronts any attempt to document the Holocaust in a factual manner suggests that one of the more appropriate ways of representing the Holocaust is through art. The lack of obligation for ‘objectivity’ and for the need to describe the indescribable ‘just as it was’, along with an emphasis on the emotional dimension rather than the cognitive, make art the preferred mode of representation. But, at the same time, artistic representations have their own limitations. There is a notion that the scope of the tragedy does not let the imagination take off (Hartman, 1994), a notion that, of course, limits the artist.

One can point to four areas of tension between the characteristics of popular culture products and the conventions of Holocaust representations. First, popular culture is considered part of the ‘cultural industry’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1994 [1972]). As such these representations are, by definition, circumscribed by the economic and ideological tenets of the cultural industry whose primary values are those of entertainment and spectacle. In other words, ‘Is it possible to make a feel-good entertainment about the ultimate feel-bad experience of the twentieth century?’ (J. Hoberman quoted in Hansen, 1997: 80).

Second, there is a conflict between the concept of the Holocaust as a unique event and the standardized nature of popular cultural production. The mere fact that television shows are always part of a flow of entertainment that is frequently interrupted by commercials necessarily secularizes any representation of sanctified subjects such as the Holocaust (Shandler, 1999).
Third, the main virtue of popular culture products is that they do not challenge the consumer. Their inherent superficiality conflicts with the notion that any representation of the Holocaust should command maximum attention and have a long-lasting impact on the viewers.

Finally, in order to make money and please consumers, popular products are designed according to standard models that have been proven successful. It can be very problematic when popular culture products try to fit the telling of the Holocaust into regular dramatic conventions. As Yosefa Loshitzky (1997) puts it, the need to focus on one personalized story can blur the scope of the disaster; the need for conventional and active heroes contradicts the complex reality of the Holocaust; and the need for a ‘happy ending’ contradicts the very essence of the Holocaust.

The struggle between Holocaust representation conventions and popular culture limitations has led artistic creators to adopt two contrasting methods to deal with the problem. On the one hand, some creators aim to construct their authority as valid storytellers of the Holocaust through the appropriation of the modes and styles of high culture. A prominent example of this approach is Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (Zelizer, 1997). On the other hand, some creators might choose the opposite solution and emphasize the characteristics of popular culture in order to create a critical point of view. This is the approach used by Art Spiegelman in his comic, Mouse.

This art-history-Holocaust discourse led to the development of several conventions demanding that: (1) the Holocaust must be represented in its totality, as a unique event; (2) artistic representations of the Holocaust must be accurate; and (3) the Holocaust should be approached as a solemn, or even sacred, event (Des Pres, 1988: 217). These conventions contradict the givens of the genre of humor, which is perceived as an anti-authoritarian, rebellious and ambivalent mode of communication (Lynch, 2002; Mintz, 1999). The nature of humor tends to blur social boundaries and distinctions, transgressing and subverting every rule, making it especially problematic for the conventions of Holocaust representation. According to philosopher John Morreal there are three primary objections to humor in the rationalist tradition: humor is derived from a sense of superiority and is therefore derisive and hostile to society; humor is aligned with the incongruous and is therefore playful, non-serious and threatening to rationality; and humor is irresponsible because it encourages disengagement from dealing with the world (Rovner, 2002: 7).

Des Pres (1988), on the other hand, uses some of these characteristics to defend humorous representations of the Holocaust. He highlights its liberating virtues and particular efficiency: by putting things at a distance humor permits us a more active response. Because of its rejection of valid reality Des Pres finds comic representations more effectively in revolt against terror, and thus more responsible reactions to catastrophe.
Analysis: humor, popular culture and critical discourse – the case of The Chamber Quintet

The Chamber Quintet, whose televised episodes are the focus of this article, stands at the intersection between the three perspectives already described: the historical-sociological, the cultural and the generic perceptions of Holocaust representation. Hence it can help us to trace changes and trends in Israeli collective memory, and, at the same time, illuminate the ways in which humorous representations in popular culture deal with the problems this subject raises.

Sociologically, the show’s creators belong to the ‘third generation’. This description is not a biological one, but rather a cultural one, indicating that their works are a reaction to the products and concepts of the two generations preceding them. Their proximity of age (most of the creators were in their 30s when the show was aired) means they have shared experiences, educationally and culturally. Thus, for example, they were the first generation in Israel to grow up with television (which started broadcasting in 1968).

The prominent place of Holocaust commemoration in The Chamber Quintet makes the debates about the norms and the limits of representation almost irrelevant. What is unusual here is not that the artistic creators use the genre of humor in particular as a way to deal with the Holocaust, but rather that the Holocaust has become just one more target for the humorists. The Holocaust is not the deciding factor in the choice of genre. The Chamber Quintet has its own generic characteristics, and the Holocaust is just another subject subordinated to it.

Another prominent characteristic of The Chamber Quintet is its critical point of view, which is anti-establishment. The program’s approach seems to contradict the concept of popular culture as being part of an industry that always affirms the dominant ideology. This unexpected point of view illuminates the characteristics of both the dominant collective memory and the changes that subvert it.

We can identify three major criticisms that have been leveled in this regard: the contrast between the private experience of the Holocaust memory and its collective image; the politicization and commercialization of Holocaust memory; and the tension between the Holocaust and its cultural representations.

Holocaust memory: between the public and the private

One of The Chamber Quintet’s episodes is a monologue in which a man, while drinking his tea and looking out of the window, tells about his encounter with an English television crew. They knocked on his door the
other day, told him that they were from the BBC and that they had decided to make a film about him and about his art. After he told them that he was not an artist, but worked at the post office, they asked: ‘But you are “second generation”; how come you are not an artist? How do you deal with your pain? How do you reach catharsis?’

‘I don’t know’, he apologizes, ‘I was never drawn to art, I always wanted to work in the post office.’ After they tell him that he is probably repressing his feelings, he agrees. ‘OK then, film me repressed.’ ‘But repression doesn’t film well’, they answer him.

Finally they agree that the BBC crew will wait by his building while he searches for an appropriate means of artistic expression. In the end he is filled with guilt about ruining the film of these nice people ‘who came all the way from England . . . I tried it all: to play the violin, to paint, to write poems. But it doesn’t work, I’m too repressed . . .’

This episode deals with a fundamental issue in Israeli Holocaust commemoration – the tension between the public and the private. While in Israel’s first years Holocaust memory was shaped, almost exclusively, through the national-Zionist point of view, in recent decades there has been a shift in which Holocaust memory is considered a more private experience. It is conceptualized now less as a national event with a defined collective implication than as an historical experience that happened to (and influenced many other) individuals. Thus, Holocaust memory today is considered not as a collective memory, but as a collection of memories (Young, 1993: 280).

However, this monologue amplifies the tension between the conventional public image of the second generation and individual experience. The common stereotype of the survivors’ children as dealing with their own (and their parents’) memory through art or performance was molded mainly in the 1980s, when many Israeli artists publicized themselves as children of Holocaust survivors.5

The episode epitomizes the dominance of collective memory – motivated by the media’s conventions – over actual private experience. It is the individual who has to try to adjust his lifestyle in order to fit the demands of a generic image. It is the individual and reality that are subordinated to a collective media image.

The exploitation of Holocaust memory: politicization and commercialization

The sketch mentioned at the beginning of this article is representative of criticism about the exploitation of Holocaust memory for political ends. This trend, which began immediately after the establishment of the state of Israel, and was accelerated by Prime Minister Menahem Begin in the late
1970s, came under increasing fire in the mid 1980s (Segev, 1991). The political use of Holocaust memory served both internal and external interests and was applied to issues such as Israel’s international relations, where Arab leaders were compared to Hitler.6 The episode pushes the limits of the political (ab)use of Holocaust memory to the absurd. The ‘Israeli delegates’ are asking for ‘a little favor’. They plead with the German starter in the athletic competition to let the Israeli runner start the run a few meters ahead of the other competitors. After the German starter refuses, they first try to convince him by saying (using ‘broken English’) that ‘he’ll finish last anyway . . . all we want is to “smaller” [reduce] the humiliation’. When this argument fails, they try a more emotional one: they show the starter the runner’s mother sitting in the crowd and add, ‘Look, after all she suffered, she came back to see her son running, it will break her heart.’ Gradually they become more and more aggressive.

All we want is to right the historic injustice . . . you Gentiles have a heart of stone. All you want is to humiliate us . . . all the people of the world are watching and you don’t care? . . . Didn’t you see Schindler’s List? Haven’t the Jewish people suffered enough?

In the end, one of the delegates puts the starting gun to his own neck and says: ‘Here, I’m a Jew too, finish the work . . . you technocrat, Eichmann.’ Finally, the German starter accedes to the delegation’s request and the Israeli runner walks few meters ahead of the others. The delegates thank him and promise to plant a tree on the ‘Avenue of the Righteous Gentiles’7 in Jerusalem and name it after him.

This episode’s criticism is directed against the exaggerated use of Holocaust discourse and its deployment as emotional leverage in even the most absurd of contexts. The episode indicts the use of the Holocaust memory by Israeli officials and their emphasis on Jews/Israelis as victims in order to gain political profits. This critique was leveled mainly against politicians who used the memory of the Holocaust as a means to counter criticisms of Israel’s policies, and against the constant presence of Holocaust terms in debates on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The commercialization of Holocaust memory is yet another part of the criticism about the abuse of Holocaust memory by politicians and the banality of traditional rituals. The same criticism that in the past was directed toward the ‘culture industry’, especially its first attempts to deal with the Holocaust in commercial media,8 is now directed at institutionalized formats of commemoration.

A prime example of this attitude is a sketch by The Chamber Quintet that takes place in travel agency. A client is asking the sales-woman about sightseeing in Turkey, a very popular destination for Israelis, when the phone rings. She answers the person on the other end of the line and
talks about visiting Poland in the same way in which she had described visiting Turkey:

There is a weekend in Poland that includes visiting three concentration camps . . . there is a complete week in Poland that includes visiting seven concentration camps and also includes a shopping day in Warsaw. And there is the extended Poland option that includes visiting all the concentration camps, including Auschwitz, but without the day off for shopping in Warsaw.

She recommends the last one, saying that her niece took it and got very excited. ‘She really cried in Auschwitz.’

As the sales-woman talks on the phone, the client in front of her squirms in his chair. After she hangs up he says, ‘I don’t want to insult you, but how can you talk like that? It is dreadful.’ She answers immediately, ‘Well, it is very dreadful what happened there.’

Paraphrasing Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique, the episode criticizes the Holocaust’s ‘memorial industry’ and rails against the transformation of Holocaust commemoration into a mere commodity. What were once rare and private visits to Poland, mainly by survivors and their families, has become a vast, profitable, commercial business. The sales-woman’s use of the same tone and terms in talking about a vacation in Turkey and memorial visits to Poland indicates how trivial those visits – and Holocaust memory as a whole – have become.

These sketches exemplify the tension between content and form. The sketches rail against the extensive use of Holocaust memory in inappropriate (political and commercial) contexts, which leads to its trivialization.

But the genres of humor, used in a popular television show and alongside sketches on other subjects, are the very ones employed to criticize the trivialization of Holocaust memory! Thus the show undermines its own criticism and participates in the very processes it denounces.

**Holocaust memory: between the historical event and its cultural representation**

In recent years Israel’s Holocaust discourse has shifted from focusing on the Holocaust as an historical event to Holocaust-memory as a cultural phenomenon. The commemoration issue is so dominant that it has replaced the Holocaust itself in the public agenda. Memory is no longer a connection to past events but stands, independently, in place of them.

*The Chamber Quintet* has addressed this issue and criticized the blurring of history and its cultural representations. This criticism exposes a self-reflexive awareness regarding the interrelations between collective memory, cultural representation and popular culture. In one sketch they parody a scene in Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*: the visual shows two people
walking in a green field. One of them looks like Lanzman, and the other looks like one of the Holocaust witnesses. The first speaks with a French accent while the other uses Polish words and accent. The Hebrew voice-over translates their dialogue. The ‘witness’ is telling his story, which sounds like a stereotypical ‘Holocaust’ story:

**Witness**: I remember it as if it was yesterday . . . it was a very cold night, and they told everybody to stand in lines . . . women, children . . . around there were barbed-wire, dogs, guards, and all you could hear was shouting.

**Lanzman**: And then? What happened then?

**Witness**: Then he came, with a big black car. The car pulled up beside the wagons and then he got out.

**Lanzman**: That was Oscar Schindler?

**Witness**: Then we didn’t know who it was.

**Lanzman**: And then, what happened then?

**Witness**: Then, he shouted at us: what is happening here?

**Lanzman**: And that was Schindler?

**Witness** (shouting): What Schindler? Spielberg! He shouted that it wasn’t good and we had to do it again . . . they told everyone to get back on the wagons and to start all over again! It was horrible, absolutely horrible.

**Lanzman**: What? And later? What happened later?

**Witness** (very calm): Later? They paid us and we went home. But it was very late, very late. And they didn’t pay much.

**Lanzman**: And Spielberg?

**Witness**: Spielberg? He got the Oscar.

Only towards the end do we understand that the dialogue is not about the Holocaust but about its cinematic representation, and that the conversation is not between an interviewer and survivor, but between the two paradigmatic cinematic representations of the Holocaust. Thus, what the ‘witness’ describes as a ‘horrible experience’ does not refer to the Holocaust but to the experience of being an actor on Spielberg’s set.9

This sketch emphasizes the blurring between history and its memory, between the events and their representations. This example indicates that Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* has succeeded in ‘replacing’ history. The fictional Hollywood narrative film now stands by itself as history.
This highly self-reflexive sketch emphasizes the impasse facing Holocaust commemoration. It suggests that, due to the awareness of the socially constructed nature of collective memory, Holocaust discourse has abandoned its historical scope and has become self-representational. The ‘witness’ in the dialogue has no point of reference in the ‘real’ world (the Holocaust) but rather in the realm of popular culture.

Conclusions

Two young people meet accidentally in the street and start a conversation:

A: Are you coming to the party tonight?

B: The party?

A: Yes, the party. Come, it will be fun

B: I don’t know. I just got home from work. I have to shower and change clothes.

A: So, go and change. It will be a great party.

B: OK. But, how do I get there?

A: Are you coming by car?

B: Yes. Where do I park?

A: Well . . . you go on Warsaw Ghetto, you turn right at Concentration Camps Avenue, and you can park on Dachau Square.

B: Dachau Square? Is it nearby?

A: Dachau? It’s right here, just around the corner.

This sketch expresses the third generation’s criticism of Israeli collective memory of the Holocaust. First, it is critical of official commemorations and the saturation of Israeli life with Holocaust memories. In order to get to the party – ‘here and now’ – young people have to go through the whole history of the Holocaust. Second, the actors use Holocaust terms in a casual manner, which empties the terms of meaning. The terms ‘Dachau’ and ‘Concentration Camps’ are used as empty signifiers cut off from their relationship to the Holocaust. Thus, the phrase ‘Dachau is just around the corner’ criticizes the ‘Holocaustization’ of Israeli life, the intense presence of Holocaust commemoration in everyday existence that causes its trivialization.
But how can this kind of criticism be presented as part of a humorous popular television show? The show seems undermine its own criticism. Going against Holocaust trivialization in a humorous sketch placed between other sketches about politics or sex, has the same effect of trivialization. This deadlock represents the situation of current Israeli culture, which is described by Gadi Taub (1997) as a ‘the dispirited rebellion’, whereby young Israeli creators of popular culture go against their predecessors but do not offer any alternative.

This impasse derives from two main processes: the sociological and the cultural. The first involves the development of Israeli collective memory, and the other is due to cultural imperatives that are both economically and artistically motivated.

The third generation’s commemoration is connected dialectically to those of its predecessors. The first generation’s discourse was shaped by the process of ‘nation-building’. It was subordinated to other monumental events such as the establishment of the state of Israel and the War of Independence. In contrast, the second generation’s discourse, which dominated Israeli discussion of the Holocaust in the 1980s, was intense, pervasive and loud. It dominated television shows, popular music, movies, art and other forms of cultural expression.

Third-generation commemoration looks at the Holocaust from a different point of view, one that encompasses both thoughts about the event and its memory, raising questions about history and its representation. It is the awareness of the social construction of collective memory that has led to the deadlock in Holocaust commemoration discourse. *The Chamber Quintet* exposes the socially constructed nature of Holocaust commemoration. It indicates how political or commercial interests motivate commemorative acts and how media norms and conventions design them. But it also indicates that there is no commemorative ‘truth’ that is free from political, commercial or cultural limitations. Such self-reflective discourse limits Holocaust commemoration to the representational dimension and sterilizes its political and ideological components. The focus is not on the historical fact or the political meaning of the Holocaust but rather on the different cultural practices used to represent it.

The other factor that shapes third-generation commemoration concerns the medium of expression. Popular culture, mainly television, is the major forum for third-generation artistic creators. They use genres such as satire and humor, genres that have rarely been used before to deal with Holocaust memory.

These media and genres have limitations that interfere with the shaping of Holocaust memory. The flowing nature of television (Shandler, 1999) causes the secularization of the Holocaust, because to keep up the constant flow of content, television has to deal with other mundane, everyday topics. Thus, *The Chamber Quintet* sketches dealing with the Holocaust are part of
a show that is composed of other sketches dealing with politics, culture, sex, etc. This makes the Holocaust just ‘another’ subject, without unique characteristics, and one that is dealt with just like any other.

While in the 1950s and 1960s Holocaust memory was determined by contemporary Israeli experience, in the 1980s Israeli life was saturated with and interpreted by Holocaust commemoration. Since the 1990s there has been a cultural attempt to combine the two: to recognize Holocaust memory as a major factor in shaping Israeli culture but at the same time to consider it as determined (partly) by Israeli experience. This dialectical shift is due to the awareness of collective memory and its socially constructed nature. Thus, third-generation commemorators do not look back in fear (like the survivors), or in anger (like the survivors’ children), but rather in a critical self-reflexiveness.

Notes

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1. The show’s 69 episodes (with more then 700 short sketches) were aired for five seasons during the 1990s and were broadcast, intermittently, by all of Israel’s channels: the public channel (IBA), the (then only) commercial channel (Channel 2) and the cable network stations.

2. This trend is evident in the growth and diversity of popular representations of the Holocaust and their analysis in the professional literature. Shandler (1999) analyzes 50 years of Holocaust representations in American television. His research contradicts the popular assumption that in Holocaust television there is an inherent incompatibility between medium and subject. Zerubavel (1995) uses (among other things) satirical supplements of daily newspapers to indicate the trends and themes of Israel’s collective memory. Meyers and Zandberg (2002) analyze Holocaust commemoration through Israeli popular music and argue that the relative vacuum that was created by the weakening of official voices has instead become dominated by commercial ones.

3. A prime example of this process is the case of the ‘new historians’. See: History and Memory (1995) 7(1), this is a special issue of the journal, devoted to ‘Israeli Historiography Revisited’. The introduction, by Anita Shapira, includes a section on ‘Zionism and the Holocaust’ (pp. 17–23).


5. There are many examples, among them: comedian Shmuel Viluzny, singers Shlomo Artzi and Yehuda Poliker, writers Amir Gutfreund and Na’ava Semel, and film directors Orna Ben-Dor and Miri Hanoh. For an analysis of the psychological aspects of the second generation see Wardi (1992). For a case study analysis of the cultural aspects see Meyers and Zandberg (2002).
6. Gamal Abdel Nasser during the 1960s (Ofer, 1996: 882), Yasser Arafat during the 1980s (Bresheet, 1997: 210) and Saddam Hussain in the 1990s (Zuckerman, 1993) are the prominent examples.

7. ‘The Avenue of the Righteous Gentiles’ is an avenue of trees planted in Yad-VaShem (Israel’s official Holocaust museum) in order to commemorate the non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust. The first trees were planted in May 1962, and new trees are still being planted in honor of newly recognized savers (Young, 1993).

8. The issue of commercialization is at the heart of Holocaust television research (Insdorf, 1983: 4; Shandler, 1999: 31–40). In Israel, during Holocaust Memorial Day, commercial breaks are prohibited.

9. This meaning is amplified when one identifies the ‘witness’ as the Israeli actor Rami Hoyberger, who played the character of Josef Bau in Schindler’s List.

References


Zandberg, Critical laughter


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