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HOLOCAUST OBSCENITY:  
REPRESENTING GENOCIDE  
AS A CRIME OF PASSION

Any attempt to understand the Holocaust is obscene. This is the position maintained by Claude Lanzmann, who describes his obligation as a documentary filmmaker in the following terms: “There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of *Shoah*. I clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude” (204). Lanzmann’s “obscenity” posits the Holocaust as a limit event: an absolute transgression of moral limits that requires, on his part, a strict respect for epistemological and representational limits. There is a compensatory ethics at work in this formulation—moral monstrosity calling for representational reticence—but also a distrust of representation in the modes of dramatization, exposition, and historical analysis.

Lanzmann’s endorsement of survivor testimony over historical explanation and dramatization aligns him with a school of Holocaust scholarship associated with Jean-François Lyotard, Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth, and other proponents of what has come to be called “trauma theory.”<sup>1</sup> This school follows George Steiner in understanding the Holocaust

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<sup>1</sup> It is a basic assumption of trauma theory that historical, literary, and filmic narratives function analogously to survivor testimonies; gaps, inconsistencies, and repetitions are understood as *acting out* as form what cannot (and should not) be *articulated* as content. This assumption has been subject to a growing body of criticism. Naomi Mandel, for instance, argues that trauma theory’s “rhetoric of the

as a historical rupture that severely damages, or even destroys, language's capacity to signify. In its more moralistic formulations—and Lanzmann and Steiner should both be included here—trauma theory transforms the linguistic *cannot* into a normative *should not*. As Steiner puts it, “The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the unspeakable is to risk the survivance of language as creator and bearer of humane, rational truth. Words that are saturated with lies or atrocity do not easily resume life” (123). This argument is circular but not without its moral force. It claims that any attempt to make language represent what by definition cannot be represented is transgressive—life-denying to use Steiner's terminology, or in Lanzmann's register, obscene.

The word “obscene” suggests a link between ethical and representational limits, and it figures this link as a *corporeal* one (as does Steiner's term “survivance”). This essay takes Lanzmann's judgment—and his register—seriously by exploring representations of the body in Holocaust literature, photography, and film from the immediate postwar years until roughly the 1980s. We argue that many early representations can be accurately described as obscene or pornographic, and that Holocaust pornography is a much more widespread phenomenon than we usually recognize.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, pornography is an important if uncomfortable precursor to trauma theory, *acting out* as passion what trauma theory will later *describe* in terms of the more archaic (and religious) meaning of passion, i.e., suffering or martyrdom. In both pornography and trauma theory the body becomes a site of excess, literally *embodying* what lies beyond representational and moral limits as physical feeling or sentiment. This essay will demonstrate how a particular image of the body emerged during the years immediately following the war as both a symbol and symptom of the sheer statistical

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unspeakable” functions primarily as a strategy of moral absolution: One distances oneself from historical atrocities—and by extension contemporary ones—by claiming it is impossible to talk about them at all. See Mandel 225. See also Linda Belau's argument that the breakdown of signification has a signifier in “Trauma and the Material Signifier.”

<sup>2</sup> We will treat obscenity and pornography as roughly synonymous terms, although there have been interesting attempts to distinguish them. Hal Foster proposes the following distinction based on an analysis of aesthetic distance: “Might this be one difference between the *obscene*, where the object, without a scene, comes too close to the viewer, and the *pornographic*, where the object is tagged for the viewer who is thus distanced enough to be its voyeur?” His follow-up question suggests the difficulty of maintaining this distinction: “In a sense this is the other part of the question: can there be an evocation of the obscene that is *not* pornographic?” See Foster 153, 156.

immensity of genocide, a way of simultaneously evoking and turning away from the *mass* aspects of mass murder by figuring violence as an intimate transgression or a crime of passion.

### Mass Murder, Mass Culture, and the Collapse of Aesthetic Distance

Edmund Wilson's *Europe Without Baedeker* (1947) is one of the earliest texts in English to discuss the impact of the concentration camps on the symbols we use to represent them. The discussion is brief—limited to one paragraph—but it already hints at the contours of contemporary debates over the limits of representation. Wilson suggests that the horror of the camps renders the oppositional aesthetics of high modernism (his example is surrealism) irrelevant. Where high culture runs aground, however, consumer culture—in the form of glossy magazines and advertising—forges ahead. Wilson recounts a conversation with the Italian surrealist artist Leonor Fini that took place in Rome shortly after the war:

One day Signorina Fini showed me a copy of *Vogue* which she had just received from America and expressed an amused astonishment at an article on Buchenwald, with pictures of human incinerators, piles of tangled emaciated corpses and bodies hung up on hooks, followed immediately by new flowered hats and smart bathing brassieres, with an article that ran over into the back among the cosmetic ads. This was embarrassing to me as an American, but her instinctive reaction to it was not itself, I thought, without a certain incongruity, for she had just been engaged in executing, with a good deal of finesse and elegance, a series of pen-and-ink drawings for the *Juliette* of the Marquis de Sade: dim figures of men and women hacking one another to pieces and performing other questionable acts. The Surrealists had cultivated deliberately a sadism of the parlor and the gallery; but now the times had overtaken and passed them in a manner so overwhelming that it was impossible for Leonor Fini not to be shocked by the impropriety of juxtaposing these wretched victims with the refinements of Saks-Fifth Avenue. The Surrealist exponent of such horrors who makes out of them objects of art that the lover of art will enjoy, with a shudder of pleasure or pain, cannot help being startled at finding them served up as if they were detective thrillers or merely a whet to the appetite in the enjoyment of articles of luxury. (244-245)

Part of this paragraph's impact comes from its placement directly after one expressing Wilson's "shock" that Fini's "dearest hope" was to emigrate to America, a place she describes as offering "*sauvage*" freedom (243). This juxtaposition suggests a relation between what Wilson and Fini find shocking:

the myth of the United States as a locus of freedom, on the one hand, and the bad taste of American mass culture, on the other. In fact, the relation established through Wilson's irony contradicts the attitude he attributes to Fini, which might be described as vacillating between European philo-Americanism (America as land of the free) and avant-gardism (America as anti- or mass culture). Using Fini as a foil, Wilson posits a continuum between the United States and Europe, and between advertising and high art. He identifies himself quite clearly as an American traveler in *Europe Without Baedeker*, but he refuses to figure the United States as an *exception* to Europe in either moral or cultural terms.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he insists on the cultural continuities between the continents, between high and mass culture, and even between mass culture and mass murder, which can be served up in the manner of a "detective thriller," presumably with enough moral outrage to make it palatable for advertisers.

It is worth noting that the Wilson of 1947—despite his aversion to dialectics (Dabney 259)—comes extremely close to the Adorno of 1949, whose misunderstood dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" points to the continuity between totalitarianism and "total society," the post-war society in which mass culture is the dominant medium of representation.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Adorno never claimed that poetry

<sup>3</sup> The concept of American exceptionalism has been most thoroughly elaborated by Sacvan Bercovitch. For a summary of his arguments and others, see Deborah L. Madsen's *American Exceptionalism*.

<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship convincingly argues that the object of Adorno's critique is not so much the aesthetic *discontinuity* between representation and its object as the historical *continuity* between totalitarianism and the "total society" of consumer culture, which Adorno describes as an "open-air prison" in *Prisms* 34. See in particular Fredric Jameson's *Late Marxism: Adorno, or The Persistence of the Dialectic* 106, and Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* 35-36. The connections between advertising and totalitarianism were commonly explored in the 1940s and 1950s. While this topic is rarely discussed today, it does provide the necessary context for understanding Adorno's claims. Hannah Arendt, for instance, attributes the advertising-totalitarianism connection to Hitler's own analogy between soap commercials and propaganda in *Mein Kampf*. See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 345, fn. 9.

Adorno's often misquoted "dictum" is usually taken out of context from the following passage in "Cultural Criticism and Society," written in 1949 and originally published in 1951: "The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today." See *Prisms* 34.

could not or should not be written after Auschwitz. His “retraction” of this argument in *Negative Dialectics* actually reaffirms the main thrust of his culture critique, which posits continuity between mass murder and the profit motive.<sup>5</sup> For Adorno, mass murder does not lie beyond the limits of representation—something demonstrated by *Vogue*’s documentation of the concentration camps. It is not representation *per se* that is impossible but distinguishing between *forms* of representation, i.e., between high culture and mass culture, surrealism and *Vogue*, philosophy and popular journalism. This collapse of representational categories appears in the part of Adorno’s dictum that is often ignored: “Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter” (*Prisms* 34). We might understand Fini’s objection to *Vogue*, made while she is engaged in illustrating de Sade, as a form of “idle chatter.” Wilson charitably labels her position as “incongruous,” but it is clear that *he* feels her art loses its moral and aesthetic traction at precisely the moment the avant-garde loses its oppositional status. Distinctions between high art and mass culture—as well as between Europe and the United States—are no longer tenable after Auschwitz. Modernism goes mainstream at the same point that reality—again building on Wilson’s and Adorno’s arguments—becomes horribly surreal.<sup>6</sup>

Fini, as Wilson depicts her, attempts to distance herself from both mass culture and mass murder, the aesthetic denial of the former relating metonymically to an ethical rejection of the latter. Wilson, who is unconvinced by this strategy, suggests that what distinguishes Fini’s illustrations from those in *Vogue* is neither the latter’s content nor its function but its marketing niche: i.e., a select group of aesthetes who regard

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<sup>5</sup> Adorno: “But since, in a world whose law is universal individual profit, the individual has nothing but this self that has become indifferent, the performance of the old, familiar tendency is at the same time the most dreadful of things. There is no getting out of this, no more than out of the electrified barbed wire around the camps. 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. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared.” See *Negative Dialectics* 362-63.

<sup>6</sup> This is the line of argument that develops into the contemporary understanding of postmodernism as a traumatized culture that is simultaneously a culture of consumption.

pain “artistically” instead of for the thrill. It is tempting to understand the “incongruity” of Fini’s position as hypocrisy, an interpretation that is suggested by passages in the text Fini was engaged in illustrating.<sup>7</sup> Wilson, however, who seems to admire Fini, suggests that her dilemma is typical for the post-World War II avant-garde, which can no longer play the old game of “épater la bourgeoisie,” either because “shock” is the only moral attitude possible or because the general populace is so numb from shock that nothing—except perhaps obscenity—can penetrate its blasé shell. Shock can no longer serve as a distinguishing feature of avant-garde art because of (1) the mass presence of shocking images and (2) their mass appeal. After the war people seem to *want* to look at horrific photos and read accounts of atrocities; hence the article in *Vogue* and the growing popularity of Sade in Europe and the United States.<sup>8</sup>

The article that aroused Fini’s “amused astonishment” appeared in the June 1945 edition of American *Vogue* and was entitled “Germans Are Like This.” The photographs and most of the text were produced by the American war correspondent Lee Miller who, like Margaret Bourke-White, traveled with the troops and documented the horrors first hand, including the entry of American soldiers into Buchenwald and Dachau. Miller had herself been a successful fashion model for magazines such as *Vogue*, going on to learn photography from the other side of the camera by working with her lover, the surrealist Man Ray, in Paris through the 1920s. The text accompanying the photographs, but not the photos themselves, does run into the back pages of the magazine, where it is framed by advertisements for Pond’s Cold Cream, Maidenform Bras, perfume, and pajamas. Miller’s prose is forensic in the rhetorical sense, mobilizing the photographs as evidence against German claims of ignorance about the camps—a readymade excuse provided by Americans, Miller feels, who are anxious to blame the few in order to win the support of the many. Miller’s style resembles the hard-boiled detective fiction Wilson suggests her sensationalistic photographs would complement. She concludes her article with the ironic anecdote of a German honest enough to admit he was a Nazi: “Personally, I found him very refreshing, and if he wasn’t in jail a hundred and fifty miles away I’d go and spend a few days in his company. I’m sick and tired of meeting self-styled ignoramus, with hundreds of party badges in their baggage” (“Germans” 192-193).

<sup>7</sup> At one point in it Juliette addresses a corrupt cardinal with these words: “you who penned your attack upon libertinage with such energy and ingenuity that the reader of your lines comes away worshipping what you condemn.” Sade 674.

<sup>8</sup> On the post-war popularity of Sade see James Steintrager’s “Liberating Sade.”

Miller deploys such hard-boiled prose to define her relation to the horrific scenes she photographs. The issue here is proximity or keeping “company” with war criminals. She presumably never visited the Nazi in jail, but she did occupy Hitler’s Munich apartment and Eva Braun’s house. In the service report Miller sent to *Vogue* along with her film, she wrote of her fascination with the traces of Hitler’s personal life that made him seem more human, and therefore more terrible: “He’d been an evil machine monster all these years, until I visited the places he made infamous, talked to the people who knew him dug into backstairs gossip and ate and slept in his house. He became less fabulous and therefore more terrible” (Menzel-Ahr 199-200). Miller’s interest in the human being behind the monster, the actual perpetrator behind the machinery, is also forensic: she wants to assign blame where it belongs. However, the moral impulse expresses itself in a style and behavior that deliberately flirts with obscenity. Miller took a series of photographs in Hitler’s apartment and Eva Braun’s house, some of which appeared in the British *Vogue* one month later, this time under the title “Hitleriana” (July 1945). The photograph that has received the most critical attention is one of Miller posing naked in Hitler’s bathtub, with most of her body turned away from the viewer or concealed by the side of the tub. The man who took the photograph, *Life* magazine’s David Scherman, appears naked in the bathtub in another picture that was not published by *Vogue*. Also included in “Hitleriana” is a picture of Eva Braun’s bed. Scherman took a photograph of Miller resting in this bed, but it is not included in the article. What does appear there is a famous, staged picture of an American sergeant reclining in Hitler’s bed reading *Mein Kampf*.

Why the bathtub and bedroom shots, some of which were deemed appropriate for the (British) readers of *Vogue* and some not? No doubt the photos display a morbid fascination with fascism, but they also document the conqueror’s profanation of the enemy’s property, and perhaps a ritual cleansing intended to purge the Hitler cult of its power. Critical attention has focused on the fact that these photographs were taken immediately after Miller and Scherman had recorded the horrors at Dachau.<sup>9</sup> Apparently they stumbled upon Hitler’s apartment when returning to Munich from the

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<sup>9</sup> In an obscure booklet on Dachau issued by the liberating US Army, there is this quotation about the time of liberation: “Then a jeep arrived...The first American was hoisted into the air and two others... were dragged out of the jeep and carried around the grounds on the internees’ shoulders. A blond [sic] journalist in uniform was also in the jeep, and she climbed the tower by the gate with a young officer.... Over the loud speaker system the blond [sic] journalist said[,] ‘We are just as glad to see you as you are to see us.’” Surely this must be Miller. See *Dachau* 30.

concentration camp. Katharina Menzel-Ahr has suggested that the military boots displayed in the foreground are meant to dirty Hitler's white bathmat with ashes from the crematoria. It is clear that Miller and Scherman staged the bathtub scene, improbably placing Hitler's picture in the shower in order to mark the location of the shot, and directing the Nazi leader's gaze towards the sculpture of a naked woman reportedly popular at the time, which embodies a corporeal ideal typical of Nazi art. Miller's tired and modest pose disrupts the line of sight between the Hitler photograph and the sculpture, countering the Nazi aesthetic with her body and confronting the enormity of history through a gesture of intimacy. Even without defining the precise nature of this intimacy (profanation? ritual cleansing? morbid fascination?), it seems likely that such personal acts of transgression come to stand for, and act out, the horrors of mass murder.<sup>10</sup>

If we are to relate Fini's illustrations of Sade to the photographs of the camps—as Wilson's poignant juxtaposition insists—we must notice a strong family resemblance between the strategies deployed by Miller and Fini, underscored, perhaps, by a common orientation towards surrealism. Miller's photographs, like Fini's drawings, act out the horror of mass murder through their presentation of the individual (especially female) body. What Miller acts out in Hitler's bathtub and bed and Fini in her illustrations of Sade, is the uncomfortable proximity of terror to titillation on the one hand, and the compulsion each artist feels to look at (and produce) horrific images on the other. Fini's parlor sadism and Miller's use of the sadist's parlor together illustrate one of the consistent mechanisms of Holocaust representation up to the 1980s: the "obscene" displacement of political and moral outrage onto the individual, corporeal register. These obscene representations of the Holocaust tend in fact to gravitate towards the more conventional obscenity of pornography, which provides an important idiom of styles and gestures to post-war artists, writers, and photographers.

## **Pornography and the Holocaust**

Obscenity, as we are defining it, emerges at a moment of representational crisis. When avant-garde representational strategies no longer offer the possibility of recuperating the pain of others for individual or social improvement; when, in other words, it no longer seems likely that art can shock or that shock can change the world for the better, then spectacles

<sup>10</sup> For a summary and analysis of the various interpretations of Miller's photos of Hitler's bathtub and Eva Braun's bed, see Menzel-Ahr 205-212.



of suffering begin to seem obscene or pornographic, and pornography becomes the most readily available source of figures and narratives of suffering. We might summarize this dynamic by saying that in times of representational crisis, the *un-presentable* (pornography) comes to stand for the *un-representable* (suffering). It is worth pointing out that the dialectic between suffering and pornography, shock and titillation, that emerges in connection with the Holocaust also manifested itself around the time of the French Revolution. Eighteenth-century sentimental humanists such as Adam Smith believed that the representation of other people's suffering served a moral end, motivating empathy and ultimately philanthropy.<sup>11</sup> However, there is a clear line to be drawn from eighteenth-century sentimentalism's investment in the spectacle of suffering to sadism and pornography. Karen Halttunen has convincingly argued that "The spectacle of suffering—which had first emerged from moral philosophy, found its full articulation in sentimental literature and art, then assumed increasingly sadistic forms in popular sensationalism—became the dominant convention of sexual pornography by the early nineteenth century" (317). It seems likely that sentimental humanism ran aground on the cruelties of the French Revolution in the same way that avant-garde modernism ran aground on genocide: in both cases, the awful realization of the human capacity for cruelty made the spectacle of suffering unavailable to the moralizing gaze but strangely suitable for prurience and voyeurism. We interpret this turn to eroticism as offering an alternative to cynicism or indifference; the confrontation with moral and representational limits does not leave art cold but strangely aroused. Eighteenth-century writers such as Edmund Burke would align this arousal with the sublime.<sup>12</sup> Today we are more likely to call it obscene.

It is common to dismiss obscenity by arguing that it lies in the eyes of the beholder. Thus Carolyn Dean goes so far as to detach the term "pornography" from its object in order to depict it as the projection of contemporary cultural anxieties, arguing that it has become the preferred epithet for describing "a deficit of proper empathy" vis-à-vis "the American collective relationship to the Holocaust" (16). Pornographic representational strategies, as we have noted above, can be understood as

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<sup>11</sup> See Halttunen 307. See also Klarer 573-574, 578.

<sup>12</sup> Burke defines the sublime feeling that is occasioned by other people's suffering in the following terms: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience." See Burke 36.

avant-gardism minus its shock value or sentimentalism minus its empathy. However, while the charge of Holocaust pornography doubtless tells us something about those making it, pornography does have an aesthetic—which is to say a characteristic form and experience—and it does do cultural work. It is our argument that Holocaust pornography not only testifies to a failure of empathy but also dramatizes that failure in a way that makes it available as bodily sensation. Pornography, in other words, becomes the preferred means of countering the bankrupt pieties of sentimentalism and the obsolete provocations of the avant-garde without giving in to mere apathy or indifference. It is a way of acting out the contradiction between what we cannot or should not represent but feel compelled to represent anyway.

This is roughly Linda Williams's argument in her work on pornography. Williams argues that the Latin etymology of obscenity defines it as something that takes place "off-scene" (3). The "off-scene" is produced through mechanisms of social denial that operate through cultural displacement. Those images and texts deemed obscene must be brought to public attention in order to be prohibited, a dynamic Williams claims could be better described through the neologism "on / scenity." Obscenity is unique insofar as denial energizes, rather than negates, its basic form. It depends on a double gesture that both establishes and goes beyond a limit that is at once moral and representational. It goes "too far" in order to break generally agreed-upon taboos, and the breaking serves to confirm—and paradoxically to uphold—their presence.<sup>13</sup> This breaking of taboos, and the guilty pleasure associated with it, "works" because we experience the transgression of moral and representational conventions as a transference between the symbolic and the physical. If the taboo disappeared, so would the excitement. Another way to put this is that pornographic transgression excites *passion* rather than *understanding*. What Lanzmann calls "the obscenity of understanding" is an obscenity that takes the place of understanding; it is a set of feelings that emerge when we stumble over a limit we cannot do without.

It is central to our argument that the feelings excited by Holocaust pornography have an elegiac rather than exploitative function; they

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<sup>13</sup> "Thus a certain 'limit of representability' defines the "'normal' love story or melodrama," while pornography by definition '*goes too far*'" (Williams 5). Georges Bataille was already making the argument that transgression confirms rather than challenges taboos as early as 1957. The chapter on "Transgression" in his book *Eroticism* begins with the following italicized epigraph: "*The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it*" (63).

dramatize the vulnerability of the body in a way that attempts—but necessarily fails—to reaffirm the individuality destroyed by mass murder. Pornography provides an idiom for representing the awareness of mass murder as a limit experience or a failure of representation. It also activates limit experience as feeling.

Obscenity is not only a feeling or a limit experience; it also has a characteristic form. Susan Sontag provides a helpful analysis of this form in “The Pornographic Imagination.” Devoting her attention to serious literary endeavors such as *The Story of the Eye* and *The Story of O*, she defines narrative pornography as a necessarily two-dimensional representational strategy that strips away all “feelings” and mental states that are not instrumental to realizing the primary goal of arousal (66). Empathy for the characters in pornography would interfere with arousal in the same way that empathy for the objects of slapstick would interfere with laughter (55). Pornography poses a fundamental challenge to any aesthetics grounded in humanism because its focus is not on the individual, but on a state of “psychic dislocation” in which extreme states of consciousness and feeling are only “contingently linked” to “concrete persons” (47, 52).<sup>14</sup> According to this definition pornography is sentimentalism drained of its empathy, or as Sontag puts it, realism drained of its subject. It is also the formal opposite of both. Flat characterization and bodies composed exclusively of organs are the distinguishing features of anti-humanism, the cultural expression of selves dislocated from their own subjectivity.

A number of theorists, including Sontag, have turned to pornographic accounts of anti-humanism to explain both the actions of perpetrators and the ongoing popularity of the Nazi aesthetic. The earliest example of this approach is probably Horkheimer and Adorno’s controversial pairing of Kant and Sade in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Both, they argue, embody a moment when “pure reason became unreason,” when Enlightenment rationality calls for the sacrifice of the subjects it was supposed to ennoble, something evident in the systematic organization of inhuman tortures, spaces, and orifices in *The 120 Days* and the impersonality of the categorical moral imperative (90, 88, 117-118). Klaus Theweleit famously characterizes the *Freikorps* volunteers, many of whom later became leading Nazis, as misogynists who demonstrated their masculine ideal in mass formations (i.e., anonymously) while projecting their anxieties about “contaminating” women and communism onto the bodies of substitute victims (429-435).

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<sup>14</sup> See also Sontag’s discussion of the “dehumanization” that results from “social disorder and [the] mass atrocities of our time” in “One Culture and the New Sensibility” 301.

Saul Friedlander has argued in *Reflections on Nazism* that the fascination with “Nazi kitsch” survives in contemporary culture for similar reasons, i.e., because even today people are morbidly invested in the fascist imagery of “kitsch and death” (74). Sontag’s “Fascinating Fascism” argues that “Nazi chic” provides a stimulating symbolic register for subjects who, indifferent to history and ultimately their own “personhood,” are interested only in extreme kicks: “Sadomasochism has always been the furthest reach of the sexual experience: when sex becomes most purely sexual, that is, severed from personhood, from relationships, from love. It should not be surprising that it has become attached to Nazi symbolism in recent years” (105).

It is not our intent to argue that Nazis are sadists or that those interested in sadism—or pornographic representations of the concentration camps—are Nazis.<sup>15</sup> Such judgments merely feed into the “on-scenity / off-scenity” dynamic defined by Williams, and they are not supported by eyewitness accounts of the camps.<sup>16</sup> Rather, we see sadism and pornography, the philosophy and genre of de-individuation, as symptomatic of the fundamental moral dilemma presented by mass murder’s assault on the human individual, and the representational or aesthetic dilemma that is its result. The Holocaust confronts Western society with the undeniable fact of dehumanization in human form. In “The Concentration Camps,” an essay published in *Partisan Review* in 1948, Hannah Arendt argued that the camps represented the essence of the totalitarian regime, which was to reduce people to mere bodies by denying their moral and juridical individuality before finally doing away with them as mere vermin. Bettelheim, who also understands the camp as the most central aspect of the totalitarian regime, talks about the conversion of individuals into “functioning corpses” (a category he controversially also applies to the SS); he calls this “depersonalization” and “the theoretical nonexistence of the individual” (234-235). As Primo Levi pointed out in *Survival in Auschwitz*, the Nazis were brutally successful in their endeavors to deny humanity in the camps, producing large numbers of victims who seemed

<sup>15</sup> For an account of Holocaust pornography exploring the connections between violence and representation, see Jean-Pierre Geuens, “Pornography and the Holocaust: The Last Transgression.”

<sup>16</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, for instance, prefigured much contemporary research on the perpetrators of genocide as “ordinary men” in his brilliant though controversial book of 1960, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age*. Discussing the way his fellow prisoners tended to misperceive the SS as the embodiment of “pure evil” rather than as individuals, Bettelheim has this to say: “Many of them [the SS] were quite dangerous, some were cruel, but only a small minority were actually perverted, stupid, bloodthirsty or homicidal” (220). See also the section on Sartre later in this essay.

to die as individuals before they did as organisms. These living dead were called, in camp slang, *Muselmänner*: “One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand” (90). Giorgio Agamben, elaborating on Levi’s shattering observations about the *Muselmänner*, states their horrible significance in the following terms: “There is thus a point at which human beings, while apparently remaining human beings, cease to be human” (55). Agamben’s term for human beings denied their humanity is “bare life.”

Ordinary human beings had difficulty responding to the dehumanized “products” of the camps. It was physical disgust that rescuers frequently felt—at least at first—in spite of any good intentions, a visceral response to a creature that has been reduced to a body lacking the normal trappings of civilization: filthy, barely clothed, eyes vacant, with bones outlined through the barest covering of flesh. Many liberators at the end of the war—including General Patton who vomited at the Orduhf KZ—found themselves seized with loathing for these pathetic survivors, thus demonstrating the efficacy of the Nazi assumptions underlying the camps. Reducing individuals to this level was intended to justify everything that was done to them.

The moral dilemma presented by dehumanized human beings is of course not one of judging the perpetrators. As Daniel Levi and Natan Sznajder have argued, the condemnation of the Holocaust is perhaps the closest we get to a universal moral standard, at least in the West (10). On the contrary, the moral dilemma has to do with representing the dehumanized victims, and this is simultaneously the aesthetic difficulty. Berel Lang states the problem succinctly in his contribution to Friedlander’s important collection, *Probing the Limits of Representation*:

The denial of individuality and personhood in the act of genocide; the abstract bureaucracy that empowered the ‘Final Solution,’ moved by an almost indistinguishable combination of corporate and individual will and blindness to evil, constitute a subject that in its elements seems at odds with the insulation of figurative discourse and the individuation of character and motivation that literary ‘making’ tends to impose on its subjects. (316)

The incommensurability of the Holocaust with any individualized mode of representation leads Lang to call for an impersonal art that is, at least according to his definition, no longer art at all. He argues that literature should approach the standard of history in the factuality of its description, that history should approximate the chronicle in its renunciation of narrative linkages and character development. In other

words, Lang responds to the inhuman nature of the Holocaust by making the renunciation of the aesthetic a moral imperative. While his arguments are compelling, they are far removed from the actual state of affairs. Holocaust narratives abound, and the non-human has found its own figure, form, and experience. The figure is naked, the form is pornographic, and the experience is passion.

### **Passions of Resistance and Violence: Nudity, Mass Murder, and Sadism**

The most widespread symbol of resistance in the immediate post-war years was that of a beautiful, naked woman, about to become the victim of rape or murder in a concentration camp, who kills one of her tormentors and then pays with her life. One apparent source is Jankiel Wiernek's testimony "A Year in Treblinka," written immediately after he escaped that notorious camp as a participant in the organized rebellion of 1943. Wiernek tells how the Ukrainian guards "frequently selected the bestlooking [*sic*] Jewish girls from the transports of nude women passing their quarters, dragged them into their barracks, raped them and then delivered them to the gas chambers. After being outraged by their executioners, the girls died in the gas chambers with all the rest. It was a martyr's death." Wiernik continues:

On one occasion a girl fell out of line. Nude as she was, she leaped over a barbed wire fence 3 meters high, and tried to escape in our direction. The Ukrainians noticed this and started to pursue her. One of them almost reached her but he was too close to her to shoot, and she wrenched the rifle from his hands. It wasn't easy to open fire since there were guards all around and there was the danger that one of the guards might be hit. But as the girl held the gun, it went off and killed one of the Ukrainians. The Ukrainians were furious. In her fury, the girl struggled with his comrades. She managed to fire another shot, which hit another Ukrainian, whose arm subsequently had to be amputated. At last they seized her. She paid dearly for her courage. She was beaten, bruised, spat upon, kicked and finally killed. She was our nameless heroine. (32-33)

Versions of this story have surfaced in a number of Holocaust narratives. Arnost Lustig wrote a novel based on the legend, called *A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova*. Joan Miriam Ringelheim points to its occurrence in Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way to the Gas Ladies and*

*Gentlemen*, Sylvia Rothchild's *Voices of the Holocaust*, and Filip Muller's *Eyewitness Auschwitz* ("The Unethical and the Unspeakable"). Hermann Langbein attributes the story to Jerzy Tabeau's "Report of a Polish Major," one of the earliest eye-witness accounts of Auschwitz, which appeared shortly after Tabeau's escape in 1943 over the electric fence he had temporarily disabled. According to Langbein, even the commandant of the camp Rudolph Höss apparently gave a version of the story during the first Nuremberg Trial, vague about the gender of the rebel but providing the identical date as Tabeau's story: October 23, 1943 (498). In these versions the dancer—or whoever it was—inspires a general rebellion in the shower room, with victims attacking and severely injuring members of the SS with teeth, nails, and bare hands.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the most influential version of the tale occurs in Bruno Bettelheim's *The Informed Heart* (1960). Bettelheim attributes it to Eugen Kogon, whose *SS Staat* (translated as *The Theory and Practice of Hell*), published in 1946, devoted three sentences to the anecdote of an Italian dancer who kills a Nazi guard at Auschwitz (Kogon 167). In Bettelheim's account, an SS officer orders a famous dancer, naked and about to be gassed, to dance for him. She does so but then seizes his gun, shoots him, and is immediately shot by the other guards. Here is Bettelheim's gloss on the story:

isn't it probable that... dancing made her once again a person?... No longer was she a number, a nameless, depersonalized prisoner, but the dancer she used to be. Transformed, however momentarily, she responded like her old self, destroying the enemy bent on destruction, even if she had to die in the process.... this one example, and there were several like her, shows that in an instant the old personality can be regained, its destruction undone, once we decide on our own that we wish to cease being units in a system. Exercising the last freedom that not even the concentration camp could take away—to decide how one wishes to think and feel about the conditions of one's life—this dancer threw off her real prison. This she could do because she was willing to risk her life to achieve autonomy once more. If we do that, then if we cannot live, at least we die as men. (259)

<sup>17</sup> Susan Gubar has found other examples of the dancer story, the first in an interesting poem by Jaqueline Osherow, "Brief Encounter with a Hero, Name Unknown," from her book *Moon in Transit* (1996). Osherow claims that her father, a survivor, told her the story, and Gubar matches it to Borowski and finds a historical source in Zalmen Gradowski's "The Czech Transport" in David Roskies' edited volume *Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Jewish Publication Society, 1989). See Gubar 20.

Bettelheim's masculinist interpretation of this story of female resistance ("at least we die as men") might strike contemporary readers as incongruous. However, his emphasis on personal responsibility and resistance is typical of early responses to the Holocaust, and it depends on his iconic configuration of the female body as being meaningful for the male gaze.<sup>18</sup> There is a sense in which the dancer's rebellion transcends her gender and her nakedness. This aspect of Bettelheim's argument is anticipated by a famous passage in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*: "Nothing is less 'in the flesh' than a dancer even though she is nude" (506). However, the nakedness that may be secondary to her rebellion is absolutely central to its representation. The dancer offers an updated version of Delacroix's painting of the half-naked "Liberty Leading the People," but with the essential difference that she has been forced to disrobe and perform. Bettelheim mentions this, of course, but nevertheless represents this compulsion as the first instance of her autonomy. The slippage between compulsion and autonomy, which has everything to do with the severely constrained possibilities of resistance in the concentration camps, is inscribed in the body of the dancer as spectacle (she is *forced* to perform but others *want* to watch and remember). The spectacle serves the purpose of reaffirming the individuality denied by nakedness, rape, and genocidal violence, but this individuality is as much the spectator's as it is the dancer's, and perhaps more so. The shift from dancer to spectator is evident in the

<sup>18</sup> Pertinent here are Terrence Des Pres' critiques of Bettelheim in *The Survivor*. Kali Tal provides a useful summary of the debate between Des Pres and Bettelheim: "In Des Pres' model, the survivor is destroyed as an individual, but can serve as a voice that redeems the collective through testimony, changing the moral order. For Bettelheim, conscience is always individual and 'autonomous,' and the survivor bears witness to the truth and value of a moral order in which life is not meaningless" (38). The arguments about "absurd" freedom made by Sartre and Camus are also pertinent to the debates over heroism and individuality in the concentration camps. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, and Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, especially the eponymous essay, 1-3, and the essay on "Absurd Freedom," 38-48. See also Viktor Frankl's account of moral purpose as a survival tactic in *Man's Search for Meaning*. The immediate post-war years were characterized by the widespread belief, expressed most notoriously in Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* but found in many other texts of the time, including Bettelheim's, that the Jews "went like lambs to the slaughter." This led many thinkers to go to great lengths to explain how some sort of freedom might be possible in concentration camps. The models of freedom and the possibilities of rebellion suggested by the individualistic-heroic perspective of Sartre, Camus, Frankl, and others were called into question from the very beginning, even by Arendt herself in her earlier piece on the concentration camps in *Partisan Review*, which was then incorporated into *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Lacan writes in his critique of Sartre in "The Mirror Stage" that freedom in the existential analysis is questionable if it is to be found only "within the walls of a prison." See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* 6.



paradoxical nature of the moral Bettelheim draws from the story. The dancer is forced to dance, but her dance is a symbol of freedom; she is forced to disrobe, but the nakedness meant to demean her constitutes her iconographic status. She becomes an important symbol of “individuality” in the camps because of what she tells us about mass murder and what she allows us to avoid. She transforms bare life into naked rebellion—and naked desire.

There is no question that rape occurred in camps, and the origins of the dancer story are well-documented. The fact that the story is so widespread, however, suggests that the primary work it is doing is legendary, not historical. The legend has the effect of figuring the machinery of death, designed to destroy the individuality of its victims, in the individual, tragic terms of desire and sacrifice. It appeals to readers on an emotional, physical level, evoking interest and desire rather than the horror usually provoked by images of corpse-like survivors and stacks of emaciated bodies. Nudity is not the same as bare life or mass death. It is the individuated form of de-individuation, the humanized form of dehumanization. The figure of the dancer humanizes both violence and its victims, suggesting that passion lies at the heart of genocide and is the necessary means of resisting it.

The “passionate” analysis of genocide is extremely prevalent in post-war literature. Perhaps the most famous example is Sartre’s “Portrait of the Antisemite [*sic*],” the first chapter of *Anti-Semite and Jew* to be translated into English.<sup>19</sup> Sartre defines anti-Semitism as a passion, not an idea (164, 166). He then defines this passion as a form of “sadism” and “a mixture of repugnance and sexual attraction for Jews” (174, 175), and goes on to elaborate what passion means in a language whose register shifts from the analytical to the impassioned:

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<sup>19</sup> Sartre did not use the term “genocide,” which did not achieve widespread usage until the passage of the eponymous UN convention the following year; however, he struggles to come to terms with the mass aspects of anti-Semitism and violence throughout his text. Sartre’s definition of the Jew as a construction or projection of the anti-Semite—“If the Jew did not exist, the antisemite would invent him”—was influential but also heavily criticized. See *Anti-Semite and Jew* 13. In her preface to the 1967 edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, for instance, Arendt remarks on the popularity of Sartre’s definition, at the same time commenting on its unfortunate propagation of the “myth” that “Jewish self-consciousness was ever a mere creation of anti-Semitism.” This myth, she continues, “has become somewhat fashionable in intellectual circles after Sartre’s ‘existentialist’ interpretation of the Jew as someone who is regarded and defined as a Jew by others” (xv). Nevertheless, Arendt also discusses anti-Semitism in terms of “the passion-driven hunt of the ‘Jew in general,’” and in discussing the “intellectual” climate that gave rise to Nazism, she says of those promoting survival of the “race”: “They read not Darwin but the Marquis de Sade.” See 87, 330.

In the words 'a beautiful Jewess' there is a specific sexual connotation, very different from that which is understood in the words 'a beautiful Romanian,' 'a beautiful Greek woman' or 'a beautiful American.' The phrase 'a beautiful Jewess' has a kind of flavor of rape and massacre. The Beautiful Jewess is the woman whom the Czar's Cossacks drag by the hair through the streets of a flaming village; and the special works devoted to descriptions of flagellation give Jewesses a place of honor. (175)

Sartre's fable of anti-Semitism quite literally provides the frame narrative to the story of the dancer, who assumes the "honored" role of the "Jewess" in the pornographic literature alluded to here. Let us focus on two points in this compelling analysis. The first is the tendency, in any analysis of violence *as* passion, for exegetical language to mimic what it describes. This can be explained in terms of the logic of "on / scenity," but Sartre himself offers a compelling analogy: "In Berlin I knew a Protestant whose sexual desire took the form of indignation. The sight of women in bathing suits infuriated him; he welcomed this rage, spending his time in swimming pools. The antisemite does the same thing" (174). By his own definition, Sartre "welcomes his rage," as do any number of artists and writers who condemn the Holocaust by representing it. Contrary to his argument, this passion is not the exclusive property of the anti-Semite. Indeed, according to observers like Bettelheim and Arendt, the most dangerous anti-Semites, such as those in the SS, were more conspicuous for their brutal and bureaucratic efficiency than for their sadism or impassioned hate.<sup>20</sup> Sartre's passionate discussion of impassioned hate illustrates the most distinguishing feature of obscenity, i.e., its ability to perpetuate itself through mechanisms of denial. Thus the widespread critique of Nazis as sadists led to the "popularity" of sadism as a theory and theme after World War II. It also led to the proliferation of images of the favorite object of sadism, the naked female body.

<sup>20</sup> The characterization of Nazis as sadists was treated with scepticism from relatively early on. Bruno Bettelheim argues that while "truly sadistic SS" did indeed exist, most of them actually tortured and killed Jews out of a sense of duty. He understands their notorious cruelty as an externalization of their feelings of guilt in the form of redoubled aggression. See *The Informed Heart* 224-25, 237. Arendt's famous characterization of Eichmann follows: "Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain.' Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing.*" See *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 287.

The second point has to do with the implications of sadism as a theoretical model. Sadism, for Sartre, is a kind of sexual obsession that leads to violence because it is intent on reducing the other to the status of an object or mere flesh (*Being* 518). Sadistic violence, no matter how widespread, is based on individual passions, and is directed personally against the body of a specific other. The Jew is always a *type*, of course, a synecdoche of his or her "race"; indeed, it is Sartre's argument that the anti-Semite reduces himself to a type by objectifying or stereotyping the Jew (*Anti-Semite* 178). The types themselves, however, are pretexts for the violence and passion they enable, not their end. Any account of the Holocaust that emerges from this model will represent genocide *cumulatively* rather than *collectively*, as the sum total of personal acts of violence rather than as a social movement defining itself through a debased cultural "ideal" of "racial purity."<sup>21</sup>

The individual body and its passions became the basis for an entire generation of critical theory and a range of comparisons between genocide and other social evils that tend to strike contemporary critics as troubling (or obscene). The surprisingly "passionate" orientation of this social theory might be one of the factors contributing to the widespread myth that the Holocaust was "repressed" until recently. We "misrecognize" or ignore the fact that the Holocaust was compulsively discussed, but in a different way.<sup>22</sup> Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), for instance, includes a chapter on "Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp," in which she understands housewives as having "adjusted" to their

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<sup>21</sup> See Eric Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* for an account of the "positive" (i.e. not nihilistic) content of genocide, i.e. the way mass murder is ideologically organized in terms of national and racial "ideals." The individualistic and emotionalist orientation of the existential analysis of genocide becomes clear in the important work of Jean Améry, a concentration camp survivor whose essay "Torture" deliberately invokes an existential model of sadism to define Nazism as the politics of torture, and torture as a form of "rape." See *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. Améry draws an explicit analogy between the violation of corporeal boundaries that occurs during rape and the violation of national boundaries involved in a military invasion. While his analogy between the individual body and the body politic is deliberately provocative, it leads to conceptual difficulties in defining the collective, ideological nature of genocide, which is, after all, a form of violence directed against a genus or "type," and not directed against individuals as such. The existential definition of anti-Semitism is that of a violent passion directed towards violating the boundaries—and ultimately destroying the existence—of the other. Its logical conclusion, according to Améry and Sartre, is not the construction of a racially "pure" state but the destruction of all life. Existentialism holds genocide to be a form of "nihilism"; Weitz and other contemporary historians understand it to be a form of degenerate utopianism.

<sup>22</sup> See Lawrence Baron, "The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945-1960."

suburban homes in the same way that prisoners “‘adjusted’ to the conditions of the camps[,] surrendered their human identity and went almost indifferently to their deaths” (305-306). Her source is Bettelheim, and her conclusion is based on his: housewives must dance, i.e., regain control of their own bodies, so that, like the female prisoner, they can regain their identities (309).<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, the tale of rape, and its tragic-heroic configuration, allows for the possibility of resistance. It also allows for historical comparisons between victims of the Holocaust and other atrocities. For Friedan, and many who followed her, the Holocaust was not a unique event protected from trivializing comparisons by a “ring of fire,” to use Claude Lanzmann’s metaphor. Rather, the Holocaust was the paradigmatic example of social repression. Pointing out the similarities between, for instance, the suburbs and the concentration camps was an accepted rhetorical strategy for effecting social change. The privileged symbol of this comparison was the female body, victimized but transcendent in her victimization, and therefore comparable to other bodies victimized in other situations.<sup>24</sup> The prescribed response to this naked body was *feeling*, which peaked in outrage but was never far removed from desire, the ultimate measure of its social significance.

## Conclusion

In a recent essay “Holocaust Pornography: Obscene Films and Other Narratives” the authors discussed the obscene representations of nakedness in Holocaust narratives from the 1950s to the 1980s. In that essay we applied the definitions of obscenity elaborated in the previous sections: obscenity as the embodiment of a transgression, the materialization of a representational crisis, the compulsion to look at suffering that cannot or should not be artistically evoked, and the feeling of desire (and disgust) accompanying this compulsion. In Holocaust narratives, obscenity at once represents and masks

<sup>23</sup> Our thanks to Mary Ann Snyder-Korber for pointing out this passage.

<sup>24</sup> The counterpart to the naked, female victim was Norman Mailer’s “hipster,” an existential hero who identifies with African Americans and is prone to violence (violence and blackness are linked in his analysis) because aware of the universal danger posed by “the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb.” See “The White Negro” 303. Eroticism and eroticized violence were dominant tropes of genocide by the 1950s, enabling comparisons between genocide and other social problems, especially racism and sexism in the United States. The connection between violence and sexuality in turn influenced early trends in cultural studies, most notably in Herbert Marcuse’s influential theory of the correspondence between political and psychological repression, developed in *Eros and Civilization* xiv-xv.

bare life as naked desire. The suffering body is sometimes heroic but always iconic, evoking the contradictions of viewing (we do not want to look but we must) in the dance of compulsion and desire. The passionate inflection of this representational style has more to do with the “guilty” quality of looking than with the mass aspects of genocidal violence. Because of the central importance of the act of looking we emphasized filmed narratives, proceeding chronologically as well as thematically. We began by exploring how the eroticized body of the victim is linked to pornographic representational style in *House of Dolls*, by Ka-Tzetnik 135633 (Yehiel Dinur),<sup>25</sup> an Israeli novel in which a beautiful young Jewish woman is forced to serve German soldiers sexually at a concentration camp. We then proceeded to explore how prostitution and female nudity becomes a figure for comparing genocide to American racism in Edward Lewis Wallant’s novel *The Pawnbroker*, as well as in the film version of it. An analysis of Liliana Cavani’s film *The Night Porter* illustrated how pornographic representational styles threaten the distinction between perpetrator and victim while figuring a viewing position that can be characterized as guilty pleasure; and a comparison of that film with Lina Wertmüller’s *Seven Beauties* explored what impact the gendering of the positions of spectator and spectacle had on the “desirability” of viewing. We concluded with a reading of *Sophie’s Choice* as both the culmination and reversal of obscene narrative strategies. Alan Pakula’s film and William Styron’s novel each differ from their predecessors in *not* figuring compulsion as sexual liberation. By focusing on a tortured mother instead of the rebellious dancer or beautiful victim, *Sophie’s Choice* figures compulsion, and by extension compelled eroticism, as offering only false freedom or a “choiceless choice” (Sophie is compelled to choose which of her children is to be exterminated) that forever damns the victim.

This genealogy is intended to demonstrate the argument with which our chapter briefly concludes, namely that Holocaust pornography constitutes an early version of trauma theory, acting out as passion what would later be described as symptom. In proposing that Holocaust pornography is the precursor to trauma theory, we claim that one grows out of the other in the way the “choiceless choice” emerges from the beautiful victim in *Sophie’s Choice*. In both cases, feeling makes up for a perceived failure of representation or understanding: what pornography dramatizes as the passion of desire, trauma theory describes as the passion of pain. This may represent a return to the sentimental roots of pornographic conventions, the

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<sup>25</sup> Ka-Tzetnik 135633 was the pseudonym adopted by Yehiel Dinur. The numbers refer to the number Dinur was given at Auschwitz when he was a prisoner there and was tattooed on his arm.

belief—or the hope—that the spectacle of suffering can serve some moral purpose. It certainly returns us to a powerful insight Hannah Arendt had about the camps as early as 1948. Her essay “The Concentration Camps” repeats a story told by Albert Camus the previous year (in *Twice a Year*), “of a woman in Greece, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which among her three children should be killed” (Arendt 757). Arendt offers the account to illustrate the principle she sees at work in concentration camps: the destruction of human beings first as juridical entities, then as moral subjects, and finally as individuals. Arendt believed that totalitarianism strove to make all people superfluous (761). She also predicted something that has been horribly borne out by the history of the long twentieth-century: the repeated implementation of genocide as a means of obtaining political objectives. Humanity disappears as it becomes clear that “man’s ‘nature’ is only ‘human’ in so far as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, man” (759). The unnaturalness of humanity might, after all, be the ultimate commentary on our desire to witness other people’s suffering, or empathize with it, without ever being able to do enough to prevent it.

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