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Taboo humor and The Holocaust

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TABOO HUMOR AND THE HOLOCAUST

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Television, Radio, Film and Theatre

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Karin Babbitt Chilcott

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ABSTRACT

TABOO HUMOR AND THE HOLOCAUST

By Karin Babbitt Chilcott

This thesis addresses the topic of taboo humor in performance and how Holocaust humor both defines and defies comedy taboo standards. It examines the nature of taboo, the signifiers and functions of controversial humor in performance, and reviews elements of taboo inducing humor in Holocaust comedies of various performance media.

Research reveals the applicability of the sociological study of taboo by Mary Douglas to the interpretation of taboo humor. In defining taboo as a necessary tool for social control, controversial humor emerges as the comedic mechanism for the shaping of social values. Volatile critical responses exist from many consumers of Holocaust humor because of an implied defilement of the esteemed sacred memory of Holocaust victims. The study indicates that Holocaust humor in performance transcends taboo consignment because of the profound inadequacy revealed in attempts to represent the tragedy in seriousness.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family for their patience and support.
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For my family members who died in the Holocaust: Never Again.

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Taboo Humor and The Holocaust

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of Problem

“Holocaust Humor” is an oxymoron and a discomfoting pairing of words for most that hear it. The category occurs because of a generic process described in Robert Altman’s *Film/Genre* (1999). In this work about types of film, he states that genres evolve from categories that first occur as adjective additions to existing noun titles, e.g.: horror western, comedy sci-fi, women’s road movie. An art form requires a definition, and these inspire further explorations, which then need more specific definition. But what happens when a performing arts genre involving two oxymoronic terms is created? And in the case of humor, what are the perceived limits of decency as dictated by society that resists the creation of the new form? If it is Holocaust Humor, then the public receives it with a singularly negative response. Perhaps no category of humor has met with as much indignation at its forming as the Holocaust comedy. A sacrilege is perceived addressing the humorous side of an historical event as morally devastating as the Holocaust. Critics are inspired to wrath over the trivializing effect that a laugh is supposed to evoke in the consumers of such pieces. However, comedy is a form of entertainment in performance that consistently violates codes of decency. Social conventions operate to control the conditions under which comedy may violate codes of decency. This then leaves the question about the volatility of the audience response to Holocaust Humor. In order to

understand this, we must first answer this question: What are the generic conventions of the genre of Holocaust Humor, and why does the “taboo” response occur so readily in response to these conventions?

I will attempt to answer this question by examining film, television and theatrical works of a comedic nature that take place during the Holocaust, and by examining the analysis and reception of these works. It is important to note that Holocaust Humor as a category of comedy transcends media in which it appears: in fact, operates independently or in spite of media constraints.

Significance

My project is important because it points to the way humor subverts or deepens our understanding of huge historic events. It also addresses the question of whether or not art should be limited by an imposed societal judgement on the decency of a work. Beyond censorship, can some forms of comedy be considered so trivializing in their treatment of traumatic historical events that their very creation is suspect, let alone their viewing? It is valid to state that humor allows people to understand the response to tragedy in a way that serious drama can't. When production of this kind of work is affected by taboo, then authors, performers, and viewers are in peril of losing their right to participate in this form of expression.

Terminology

Clarification needs to be made concerning what is meant by “Holocaust Humor”. How is its existence evidenced? Indeed, the characteristics of Holocaust Humor need to be uncovered to synthesize this issue properly. When one is exposed to the tragedies from

this time in history, whether the tale is about Hitler, or certainly about the agony of the concentration camps, the typical emotional response is one of outrage, anger, profound loss, and that the acts performed were unforgivable and inexcusable. How is Holocaust Humor interpreted as a valid or invalid response to the trauma of the past? The evidence indicates that Holocaust Humor creates a taboo response from many of those exposed to it. Mary Douglas in her great work, *Purity and Danger* (1966), says that taboo refers to the forbidden nature and identification of actions and thoughts not stated in law because of fear of impurities or degradation. But the evidence also points to one of the main functions of comedy as being the challenger of taboos.

The occurrence of the taboo needs clarification also. Hypothetical anger comes as a response from not perceiving the elements of profound outrage against the events of the Holocaust. But does Holocaust Humor actually conform to this response? For this answer we need to look at the works in the genre, and in the resulting consequence of their performance to see if and how the taboo sensibility controls the performance of the comedy. When the event being dramatized is historically tragic, can one successfully assume the generic quality associated with the comic genre? Is the unexpectedness in the treatment of tragic subject matter in a humorous vein the very catalyst that creates taboo? Because no codes or rules exist in the performance of Holocaust Humor, then the resistance must come from taboo. If taboo is as Mary Douglas defines it, a fear of degradation, then it can well be applied to the evidence against this form of performance which is mainly concerned with the trivialization of the most profoundly tragic event ever to occur in the history of the Western World.

Method

With all this talk about humor and decency, why is it that Holocaust Humor has received such violent opposition as no other form has yet? Why does it appear to be the most recent target for the taboo response to performing arts? It would appear that the Holocaust is a special case; one that can only exist as laughable comedy when certain parameters are in place. Innocence, naivete, and distancing in all its forms attempt to make these works accepted. And still, the cultural and individual relativity becomes an uncontrolled variable unless the relationship between the performer, the spectator, and the material is studied in relation to the taboo.

A controversial article attempted to synthesis the taboo response created by the release of three Holocaust comedy films from 1998 (*Train of Life*, *Jacob the Liar*, and *Life is Beautiful*). Shai Oster wrote "Holocaust Humor" for the *Utne Reader* (1999). The intensity of the critical response to these works that was generated around the globe made for an exciting discourse about the sudden proliferation of Holocaust Humor. These films are most often compared with the film that inspired their making, Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), which is seen as an acceptable product, defying the taboo, mostly due to its ingenuous star. However, because the newer films are more graphic and realistic in their portrayal of such environments as Auschwitz, the transport trains and the ghettos, the propriety of the usage of comedy comes into question. In fact, the beloved stars of these films are taken to task for participating in them. The main argument is said to be of the trivializing effect that humor has when applied to an historical trauma.

I plan to identify categories of taboo in humor based on established categories, such as Black, Gallows, and Sick humor. Holocaust Humor challenges these dimensions of taboo (decency) by being endowed with greater emotional weight, due to the induction of innocent sufferers into the equation. I will then dissect Holocaust humor and extrapolate the basic categories involved in this humor. By uncovering jokes that identify the stress of the taboo, I will identify the source of it. I will then research taboo in a variety of media, including the aforementioned films, because the taboo is not bound by medium.

In responding to Holocaust Humor in the theatre, Bernard Dukore addresses Peter Barnes's controversial one Act play *Auschwitz* (1978). He claims that Barnes was never intending us to laugh, that the very tension from the decision to laugh or not is the effect the author means to create (*The Theatre of Peter Barnes*, 1981). This introduces a method of dealing with Holocaust Humor that perhaps holds the only resolution to the question of taboo. Perhaps humor need not be funny to all, and in fact, may be more valuable if it produces tension rather than hilarity. I plan to address these points through my analysis of the play *Auschwitz*, including an unveiling of the categories specific to Holocaust Humor, as it is a most complete work possessing much of the evidence of Holocaust Humor.

Examining film, *Life is Beautiful* and *The Great Dictator* will be analyzed the same way, along with the critical response to those pieces. Also analyzed is the TV film *Angst* (1990) which is about stand up comics from Australia who perform comedic material about their experiences as Second Generation Holocaust Survivors.

Literature Review

The previous discourse on taboo in comedy has been generated mostly by those who were affected by exposure to a specific body of work. Drama theorists acknowledge the existence of the tragic/comic blend, but have strong feelings about the propriety of its presentation. Allardyce Nicoll in *The Theory of Drama* (1931), discourses that only the “morally purer comic dramatists are those who will be most remembered”. This comes on the heels of his position that laughter can’t occur when the comedy is directed toward something righteous. The problem with this position is that it assumes the existence of an absolute condition of moral righteousness. Furthermore, it asserts the existence of absolute moral standards that determine the comic value of performance. However, there are multitudes of types of humor that defy this principle, for example: Nazi Humor. This type of comedy is controversial, and to some audiences, reprehensible. And yet, there is a population of viewers who enjoy this form of humor. Proof of this lies in the fact that the television series *Hogan’s Heroes* enjoyed six successful seasons in the 1960’s. But does unrighteous humor become non-humor because a segment of the population considers the subject area immoral?

And is the morality to be found in the intention of the performance: although the treatment of the subject matter may be irreverent, is it not righteous if the performance evokes thoughtful contemplation of repugnant attitudes? Is it more moral to create a comfortable statement about the Holocaust, or is it more moral, or morally responsible, to create a provocative statement made more memorable because of its confrontational nature? Beyond this, how can one create clear-cut boundaries between the righteous and

the unrighteous? This would be impossible because of the relativity and subjectivity involved in the creation and performance of this art.

Looking at another position, we arrive at the theories of subconscious motive of comedy of Freud and Bergson. These two seem to be in league with each other to promote an absolute condition of comedy that ignores moral constraints on the right to laugh. Freud is the first to introduce the concept of the necessity of release in laughter aimed towards jokes which are “not innocent” or “hostile” (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905) . It is here that we begin to approach the subject of the amorality in comedy; however, once again we are confronted by a theory that contains an absolute notion of comedy. Because of unresolved conflict within the unconscious mind, Freud feels that moral ambiguity detaches one from moral constraints, which allows for the irreverence of humor. The assumption made here is that the intention of the humorist is one of immorality or amorality.

A similar theory of detachment is related in Bergson's essay, “Laughter” (1900). He reports a mechanical detachment from situations that permit the humorous psychological response. Bergson treats this mechanical response as involuntary, because the unconscious determines the comic identity of the action. These detachment theories pose more problems in the area of the definition of comedy, however. Perhaps they serve more to focus on an existing taboo in humor. Freud and Bergson are speaking specifically about the operations of individuals, when taboo concerns itself with social codes. Taboo is relative to individuals, their experiences and cultures. There isn't anything that is

absolutely funny, as there is no *absolute* moral standard or an *absolute* condition of comedy.

Another position on the taboo is held by current theorists who defend the emergence of the most darkly satirical works that have emerged. Permitting that comedy follows the classical structure of jokes, these newer theorists, such as Andrew Horton, are comfortable with the treatment of the darkest subjects with the lightest hand.

(*Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, 1991) Blatantly dark comedy is defended by Ian McFadyen in “Furies of the Guillotine: Satire in the Age of Political Correctness”(1995), where he actually opines that comedy which is not darkly satirical is perhaps not funny and without redeeming value at all. David Owen, in “Taking Humor Seriously” in the *New Yorker* (2000), celebrates the irreverent humor of The Simpson’s head writer, George Meyer, who describes the responsibility of humor as the thing that jolts one into reality. These positions, however, again call for an absolute value placed on a specific work which demands that a piece treated with humor must generate “funniness”.

A third position leads to a closer examination of the relation between taboo and humor. Taboo is a measure of relativity. What then is taboo? Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*, (1966), examines the concept of taboo in this famous sociological study. She discourses that social groups have decided codes about defilement, or impurities, which are constantly in states of being challenged, shattered and renewed. Therefore, a moral structure is in a constant state of flux, from relaxation to restructuring. Because of this fluidity in the phenomenon of taboo, it can’t possibly be considered to be in a constant state of absoluteness.

Because of the attitude of society about not joking about what is traditionally sacrosanct, I propose that a taboo phenomenon is in place in the realm of comedy. And because the ideal of what is acceptable is constantly changing, I self-consciously question the limits of taboo, particularly as it pertains to humor. Comedy is about moral relativity and the relative value of humor. Previous discourse does not address the relativity of comedy in relation to social taboos, and Holocaust Humor has yet to be dissected as the ideal form of the taboo-challenging comedy.

Holocaust Humor is a solid exception to the absolute rules of comedy. It can rigidly follow formulaic rules of joke construction, and fail to be funny to some. At other times, the incongruity can evoke an uncomfortable laugh. Incongruity is the most basic element of humor. From Aristotle through the ages, incongruity is considered the birthplace of humor, as man sees the discrepancies between the ideal life and what we are handed. And yet, with Holocaust Humor, the sense of incongruity can evoke rage at the perceived injustice in the life of the innocent victim. This discrepancy between the presumed comedic intention of the performance and the shocked response of some when exposed to this form of comedy is the evidence of taboo: the legally but socially forbidden treatment of a topic considered too sensitive for comedic treatment.

In fact, Holocaust Humor is a key device to test the relation between comedy and taboo because of the volatility of the reaction to this unique brand of comedy. It defies the application of moral or mechanical restraints. It asks for permission to fight the limits of an imposed taboo in deference to a no-holds barred statement about one of the greatest

tragedies known to mankind. Holocaust Humor entails a self-conscious effort to test or challenge taboo constraints on humor.

Chapter 2: The Nature of Taboo Comedy

Comedy is a form of creative expression which, by its nature, exists to defy convention; to challenge the codes of propriety which society has imposed upon people. It serves to point out and parody imperfect humanity. Robert W. Corrigan's *Comedy, Meaning and Form* (1965) reinforces the feeling of superiority over the mortal state that some theorists claim is the main function of comedy.

To be able to laugh at evil and error means that we have surmounted them.

Comedy may be a philosophic, as well as a psychological, compensation.

Whenever we become aware that this is not the best of possible worlds, we need the help of the comedian to meet the "insuperable defects of actuality" (Corrigan, 1965, 54).

However, what happens when the evil of the world is perceived by the prevailing society as being something that does not contain any laughable elements within the bounds of decency? Then humor about this evil becomes a taboo against the dominant paradigm. Taboo humor is met with social resistance against its existence, and yet, defiance is the nature of humor. Therefore, it can be said that most humor will be offensive to someone depending on the degree of the severity of the taboo violation employed in the structure of the joke.

But then the question of intent is raised. Were audiences supposed to laugh? Perhaps not, as the creation of taboo humor is not necessarily expected to provoke a pleasurable response. As there will always be someone to take offense at indecent humor, there will be those too who will laugh. Can we then say that the most offensive types of

humor were intended to amuse because someone laughs? This question becomes important in the light of the recent explosion in the production of comedy in performance, film and television media which carry the stigma of being examples of Holocaust Comedy. A Holocaust Comedy can be defined as a comedy which deals with themes originating from that period of history during World War II in which Jews in Europe, along with other select minority groups, were systematically terrorized and liquidated by Hitler's program of ethnic cleansing. The humor is characterized by its anxiety producing tone, which goes beyond what conscious culture expects from a work dealing with the Holocaust. A prevalence of tension and unease in the audience is characteristic, as the Holocaust is traditionally dealt with in a tone of solemnity. A classically irreverent example of Holocaust Humor would be this joke passed down orally through the post World War II Jewish culture.

Two Jews are being marched to the gas chamber. As they approach the door of the building, one of the Jews begins to scream in terror, "No! No! I don't want to die!"

The other Jew turns to him and says, "Quiet, Moishe! We don't want to make trouble!"

Obviously, there is nothing funny about people being led to their deaths in a gas chamber. And yet, the irony of the two Jews going to their deaths and still being "well-behaved" is the core of the joke, *and a signifier of the outrageousness of the tragic event*. Is this type of humor employed solely in the structure of the jokes from the Holocaust era? No, but the issue here is the purposeful employment of tabooed humor in a setting

that is traditionally set aside for seriousness. It should also be noted here that the term “holocaust” is not exclusive to this period in history, but that the capitalized noun “Holocaust” has come to be a globally accepted term referring to this era of the mass destruction of the innocent Jew. This being said, it must be asked why some things are deemed too horrible to be defiled by laughter, and what is the function of the creation and performance of taboo comedy.

Douglas and Taboo

In order to understand taboo in performance of humor, we must first understand the nature of taboo itself. In her concise analysis of the origins of taboo, *Purity and Danger*, 1966, Mary Douglas concentrates on the anthropological and religious approach to taboo in terms of it being a violation of purity, or a danger to the existing status quo. A society is composed of a series of agreed upon boundaries of operation, devised to preserve the integrity of the social group. It is the ideal of the purity, or unchallenged goal of perfect order for the group that creates a sense of purity. But in order for a concept of purity to exist, there needs to be a concept of dirt. Mary Douglas refers to this as “essentially disorder”(Douglas 1966, 2). Dirt is anything that mars an existing set of boundaries arranged by a culture to preserve the existing hierarchy established for the survival of the group. She also refers to dirt as being existent “in the eyes of the beholder”. There is a possibility that a person can have an individual sense of right and wrong independent of the group consensus, but this differs from the established code of the unit that exists to define the rules for the unit. Because people have the ability to establish their own principles, they also have the ability to create danger for the whole

group. This is the individual's opportunity to challenge a taboo, and, if uncovered, becomes the society's opportunity to confront the defiling or take a look at revamping its own structure. The atmosphere for evolution of the societal structure allows the creation of a condition that is either more pure or dirtier than the original structure.

Danger is perceived as a dual-edged threat when it concerns moral issues.. On one hand, it can threaten the transgressor by creating disease or disaster as a result of his actions. But a social group creates order by declaring consequences imposed on the transgressor by the group for lapses in morality which are perceived as threatening to the structure, or survival of the group. Adultery is an example of this. for there are, in many cultures, often violent responses to this defilement of an agreed upon marriage commitment between a man and a woman. Mary Douglas tells of "primitive" societies where death is a permissible punishment for the taking of someone else's wife. But, by the same token, there is a permissiveness in regards to these kinds of violations, and often a series of sacrificial punishments or banishment can be seen as an equitable way of repaying the damage done by the transgression. It is in this that we see that humans are expected to transgress, that most of us fall short of an ideal, or perhaps that *at some time in our lives many of us will defy structure as our own personal desires surface and dominate us beyond the boundaries of social control.* "...ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience (Douglas 1966, 4)."

In terms of defilement of a standard by using humor, though, it is interesting to note that by exploring Douglas' and others' concepts of "holiness" and "unholiness" we

can get some explanation for the taboo in some forms of humor. Douglas points out that while people expend energy to refrain from committing that which is profane, or unholy, there is in play a process of maintaining order, even with an ascribed deity. Perhaps unintentionally there is a creation of our own separateness from the existing power by the formation of two delineation: first of all, believers are separate because they make themselves follow behaviors or rituals which can earn the favor or involvement of the power; and secondly they keep the power at bay by not committing certain acts which would attract the wrath of the supreme being. Although the former definition would seem to create a melding, what it does in actuality is point out the fact of the separation between people and their deities by creating a belief system where deities need to be appeased by certain acceptable performances by devotees.

This is what makes the taboo in humor so typically basic in terms of human function. Dramatists perform acts, or rituals (comedic performances) that show propriety, and the willingness to follow sacred, or separate rules (Douglas 1966, 8). There is an avoidance of creating the wrath of the supreme power (in the case of theatre, the public conscience), by not drawing attention to our humor by being inappropriate according to cultural standards. And yet, humor is based on the defilement of what is. It rebels against the society by commenting on the society, and is willing to pay the price for this if there is the possibility of evoking a change in the social order or incurring the wrath of gods.

In terms of recreating what is, or allowing the contamination of what is, the fact that there is a concept of defilement at all proves that an imposed order exists.

Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements (Douglas 1966, 35).

Individuals are also engaged in a constant process of ordering and reordering. In a chaos of shifting impressions, most of us construct a stable world in which objects have recognizable shapes, are located in depth, and have permanence. In perceiving we are building, taking some cues and rejecting others. The most acceptable cues are those that fit most easily into the pattern that is being built up. Ambiguous ones tend to be treated as if they harmonized with the rest of the pattern. Discordant ones tend to be rejected. If they are accepted the structure of assumptions has to be modified. As learning proceeds objects are named. Their names then affect the way they are perceived next time and once labeled they are more speedily slotted into the pigeonholes in the future.

As time goes on and experiences pile up, the prevailing culture makes a greater and greater investment in the system of labels. So a conservative bias is built in. It instills confidence. At any time systems may have to modify their structure of assumptions to accommodate new experiences, but the more consistent the experience is with the past, the more confidence can be had in the assumptions (Douglas 1966, 36).

Definitions of what is good for society and what is bad for society are traditionally based on cues which groups either embrace or reject. Groups tend to embrace ideas that fit into existing patterns, and have little resistance to those things which do not interfere too much with reigning ideology, even if the opinion seems slightly contrary to beliefs. It is when the status quo of current ideas is challenged, as with taboo humor, that there is a

need to decide if there should be a rejection of or an embracing of new terms, evaluating whether or not there is a wish to change the belief structure. But as Douglas says, "It always gives a jar to find our first facile observation at fault" (Douglas 1966, 37). *That "jar" is the moment of taboo.* And this jarring occurs purposefully with the use of ambiguity that is inherent in the world of art. Art is subjective, often created without explanation, and presented for a response, particularly in performance. Performance can only be possible when there is action and observation of action. This creates a situation where there is both an individual response and a group response to the presented expression. And the individual response is prone to being less rigid than the group response because it is lacking in the pressure of the expected group response. If a room full of people decide not to laugh at a joke, then the individual is pressured to suppress laughter, or has to pay a price of possible negative attention for going against the grain. Therefore, "Culture, in the sense of the public, standardized values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals"(Douglas 1966, 38).

Response is not only the job of the audience. The artist responds to life, and the comic artist to life's incongruities. He is faced with the choice of whether or not to adhere to the prescribed collateral set of values belonging to the present culture. If the decision is made to intentionally defy the group, then the "jar" is created intentionally. The audience must then choose whether or not to accept the derivation from the established standard set for propriety. Douglas believes that the initial contact with "polluting" ideology is always initially received with a negative response, because "a polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which

should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone”
(Douglas 1966, 39).

Taboo in Comedy

The danger in humor is that it defies our standards for social control. If I tell a dark joke, for instance, a “Dead Baby” joke, I am saying that the death of a baby is irrelevant enough to address the matter lightly. Therefore, I am in a remote way propagating the belief that dead babies don’t matter very much, and perhaps our protection of our small children is not important. This irreverence towards the subject matter displays the way in which we imperil our group’s survival. In the case of Holocaust Humor, it is supposed that if I make a joke about a death camp, I am saying that a death camp is something that is irrelevant enough to address in a light tone. Therefore, our dedication to making sure that a holocaust of war never happens again is weakened by a new trivializing attitude towards the subject matter. This *seems* to imperil the group that is attempting to survive (the Jews) and also endangers the group that wants to suppress genocidal behavior to prevent its own potential victimization. But just because an artist takes a humorous stance on the Holocaust doesn’t mean that the society embraces the *apparent* frivolous tone towards genocide. This is where the theory of taboo as provided by Mary Douglas more succinctly addresses Holocaust humor. Yes, there is an intentional jarring of the status quo, and no, the desired response is not for pleasure, as humor theorists would dictate as the function of a joke. Yet there is often appreciative laughter at the taboo of Holocaust humor.

The traditional assumptions about jokes can be found in Bergson's renowned theory on the physical mechanics of humor (*Laughter*, 1900), which deals primarily with the humorous response to a defilement of structural rigidity. Beyond this, Bergson has definite opinions on the mechanics of the emotions of comedy, saying it requires the absence of sentiment. He says also that comedy is not possible where empathy is present. Further, he continues that there must be a victim and an aggressor, or at least one who is superior to enjoy the misadventures of the unfortunate comic.

The comic, we said, appeals to pure intellect; laughter is incompatible with emotion. Describe to me as unimportant a fault as you wish: if you present it to me in a manner that moves my sympathy, or my fear, or my pity, all is over: I can no longer laugh at it. Pick, on the contrary, a consummate and generally odious vice. you can render it comic, if you first succeed, by appropriate tricks, in rendering it unable to move me. I do not say that the vice will then be comic: I say that, from then on, it may become so. It must not move me, that is the sole really necessary condition...Unsociability in the character. callousness in the spectator. are together the two essential conditions (qtd. in Dukore: 744).

But in Holocaust humor, the victim is the hero, and we are provoked to empathize with him or her, while abhorring the absurd cruelty of the aggressor. In fact, there are moments when laughter at the absurdity of the aggression occurs, which could not be possible without the contrasting empathy for the victim.

Freud's rigid analysis of jokes in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) places another classical structure on humor, but is defied by Holocaust comedy.

Trying to find a connection between the verbal form and the amusement derived from it, he laboriously reduced joke interpretation to a few general rules pertaining to the “tendentiousness” and the “innocence” of jokes. This theory still insists that jokes must be amusing, whether disturbing or not. But pollution is like an inverted form of humor. It is not a joke for it does not amuse. But the structure of its symbolism uses comparison and double meaning like the structure of a joke. Douglas refers to humor to discuss pollution, which is further proof of humor’s intention to create impurity, or defilement. But does Holocaust Humor exist to create defilement, or is it merely dark, or black for cynical pleasure?

Black humor is a large genre with broad elements present also in the small category of Holocaust Humor. It consists of a sample of tabooed subjects, which are then purposely violated with humorous treatment – “death, disintegration of social institutions, mental and physical disease, deformity, suffering, anguish, privation and terror” -- according to Brom Weber in “The Mode of “Black Humor”(qtd. in Rubin: 388). However, the author in this encompassing work describes black humor as being without a message that it exists for pure entertainment. This is what differentiates Holocaust Humor from being merely dark, as we shall see how it is not intended for entertainment, but for the creation of change through intentionally imposed impurity.

Patricia M.Mandia in *Comedic Pathos: Black Humor in Mark Twain's Fiction* (1991) declares that black humor presents a deterministic world where irony, especially irony of fate is prevalent; when fate makes things occur that are the opposite of what one would expect, irony is produced. As a result of fate, characters in black humor fiction are

powerless to alter their situations. They are usually antiheroes, two-dimensional, bumbling outsiders or misfits whose best efforts avail nothing (Mandia 1991, 3).

Holocaust humor tends to show the classic “Little Man” hapless victim-character also, but his problems avail him plenty, as the highlighting of his agony pierces us with empathy for the reality of the situation, which was based in historical truth.

Most significantly, however, in the difference between black and Holocaust humor, is that structurally black humor is frequently cyclical. The circular plot reflects the black humorist’s conviction that people are trapped in a never-ending circle of problems and can never break out of it (Mandia 1991, 5). This position is defied by Holocaust Humor, which attempts to show through the exposition of horror in the context of laughter that the trauma is one that is artificially imposed by genocidal persons who should be disallowed to operate in society.

The question of destruction of whole classes of ordinary people is addressed by the exposition of the suffering innocents, with the cruel treatment actually made crueler in contrast to *light tone* with which it is addressed. The notion of superiority and inferiority of certain people because of an imposed caste system based on ethnicity becomes reversed in Holocaust Humor, as the terrorism inflicted by the “superiors” or ruling party creates a hero of the “inferiors”.

When Aristotle wrote of the nature of comedy, he decided, because of the theatrical codes of his day, that comedy was about the foibles of the lower class, and that the audience was to enjoy the baseness of the characters involved. Part of the audience’s enjoyment would come from the assurance that the viewers held a superior level of

sophistication in comparison to the base comic. However, through time, it has become apparent that the confrontational nature of comedy is utilized to expose the blemishes in people, regardless of social status. N.A. Scott in Conrad M. Hyers' *The Bias of Comedy* (1969) states that:

Whereas the comic man is not, as Aristotle suggests, worse than we are: indeed, on the contrary, it is his function simply to be an example of the contingent, imperfect, earth-bound creature that in truth we all really are, and it is also his function to awaken in us a lively recognition of what in fact our true status is (Scott 1969, 93).

It is an unavoidable proposition to discuss comedy without being engaged in its comparison to tragedy. Proponents of the comedic form insist that comedy is more efficient than tragedy in blatantly exposing the ills of society and the individual within. In fact, the comic character is said to be one in which self-consciousness is not an inhibiting factor, therefore the author of the comedy has the freedom to become as obvious as deemed necessary to make a point. Scott continues:

The great difference, in other words, between the tragic man and the comic man is something that arises out of their different ways of dealing with the burden of human finitude...the comic man is unembarrassed by even the grossest expressions of his creatureliness: though the world may not be all dandy, he has no sense of being under any cruel condemnation; nor does he have any sense of desperate entrapment within a caged prison (Scott 1969, 93).

But Holocaust Humor defies this rigid description of the comic man, as the hero is so often an anti-hero who is completely aware of his predicament. In my upcoming analysis of *Life is Beautiful* by Roberto Benigni (1998), the example of this is clear. Although broad farcical humor forms are employed throughout the film, the *result* is not laughter, but rather disturbance and/or poignancy. Therefore, the comic becomes an expression of the tragic, and the rigidity of former comedy theories is not applicable to this unique style.

As Slavoj Zizek maintains in “Camp Comedy” from *Sight and Sound* (April 2000, pp. 26-29), the emergence of Holocaust Humor as a dominant force in comedy films is a result of “the obvious failure of the holocaust tragedy”. He particularly cites the moment in *Schindler’s List* where the concentration-camp commander refuses to have a sexual relationship with a beautiful Jewish prisoner. Zizek decides the moment is false because he shames and rejects the girl rather than deal honestly with his conflicting emotions. The over-psychoanalysis attempting to explain the “why” of the brutality of the Nazis has always failed because of the inability to explain away such virulent consistent brutality in such a large mass of people. Zizek then asks:

“ So why not turn to comedy, which at least accepts in advance its failure to render the horror of the holocaust?”... Paradoxical as it may sound, the rise of the holocaust comedy is correlative to the elevation of the holocaust itself into *the* metaphysical, diabolical Evil – the ultimate traumatic point at which the objectifying of historical knowledge breaks down and even witnesses concede words fail them. The holocaust cannot be explained, visualized, represented or

transmitted, since it marks the black hole, the implosion of the (narrative) universe” (Žižek 2000, 27)

Indeed this would explain the newly found justification of the defiant creation of Holocaust comedies, but regardless, they are received with a taboo response to some extent by many that have seen them. This would point back to the notion that by approaching a tragic topic with humor, we are dangerously introducing impurity as expressed through a non- traditional light tone in the face of tragedy. Traditionally, human events with serious consequences are carefully addressed with solemnity to keep the society “safe”. The classical school of theatre claims comedy to be outside of “real” humanity. This surreality creates an illusion of “safety” that is said to make comedy a more palatable form of social commentary than anything in a serious tone.

But is there such a thing as a joke that is funny despite the safety or unsafety of the material? This would mean that comic work must be laughter provoking because it employs certain mechanics that cannot be disputed. Those most responsible for the theories of comedy as a mechanical function are without a doubt Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson. These contemporary theorists attempted to note repetitions in patterning of comedic behavior, claiming them to be absolutes in the foundation of true comedy. As aforementioned, Freud determines that the most important aspect of humor mechanics is his theory of the categories of jokes. He describes them as “innocent jokes” (those without a serious intention) and “hostile” or “tendentious jokes”. One could also refer to “tendentious jokes” as those that would be considered less safe. It is the tendentious joke that Freud attributes to being the conscious tool of choice to create a means to an end.

Where a joke is not an aim in itself -- that is, where it is not an innocent one -- there are only two purposes that it may serve, and these two can themselves be subsumed under a single heading. It is either a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire or defense) or an obscene joke (serving the purpose of exposure)...A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or conspicuously; once again, then, the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible. It will further bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation (qtd. in Dukore: 832).

What this infers is that unsafe comedy is the form with which we can expect a purposeful attempt has been made to evoke a societal change. But he is still maintaining that the ultimate goal is to create pleasure. However, one must question whether or not there exists such a thing as an "innocent joke". In *The Game of Humor* (1997), Charles R. Gruner contests this proposition:

"Harmless wit" was described as humor directed at no one or thing, but which merely relies for its laughter evoking on its verbal form. The important point here is that Freud was unable to provide a single example of "harmless wit"(Gruner 1997, 11).

This position is quite possible, when some of the most innocuous examples of humor are held up to the light. For example, a "knock-knock" joke can be said to have no inferred hostility, and yet, the very act of engaging people in a form where they are

required to parrot back a standard response could be irritatingly manipulative, which could be construed as hostile in its intention.

If hostility is inferred in most forms of humor, then the hostility must be directed towards someone or something. This makes all humor dangerous to some degree towards something. And if danger is a prevalent component of humor, then the degree of danger applied, and towards whom, would be an important consideration of the funniness or pleasure of the piece. The structure of comedy is such that identification with the performer or at least, identification of the condition of the performer by the audience member seems to be essential for comedy. If the condition is unfortunate, then the pleasure is realized from the standpoint of identification with misfortune, and also possibly further encouraged by the relief of the audience member that the position is not currently held by the viewer (hopefully). The fantasy of survival further encourages the viewer to laugh at that that seems obviously fatal. In the Warner Brothers cartoon, it is laughable when Wiley Coyote blows himself up with dynamite and remains alive though completely charred. Viewers can enjoy the possibility of the fact that he has remained alive, albeit it in a terribly altered state, despite the logical outcome that we know to expect. It is the very antithesis of intelligence. In this vein, we can also identify with being not only physically, but also emotionally battered, while remaining in a state, though deformed by circumstances, where we can still continue with our lives. It is the classic survivalist element, though ludicrous in extreme situations, that makes us eagerly empathize with the comic performance. In our illusions of ourselves, we perceive ourselves to be alternately triumphant against the forces of nature, and then ridiculous in

comparison to that which we are powerless against. In 1920 the playwright Luigi Pirandello concurred with these ideas in “On Humor”(qtd. in Dukore: 748).

Let us start, then, from the construction that illusion offers each of us the image that everyone has of himself through the work of our illusions...The satirical writer will be upset by (this). But not the humorist: through the ridiculous side of this perception he will see the serious and the grievous side of it. He will analyze the illusion, but not with the intention of laughing at it. Instead of feeling disdain he will, rather, in his laughter, feel commiseration (Dukore. 1974).

But as in the cartoon, the empathy is contrasted by the surreality created by gross exaggeration. If the Acme dynamite company sends a defective product that blows the hapless victim through the center of the desert mesa, only to walk away later unscathed, the impossibility of this is the source of pleasure. And there is reassurance that the unreality of this outcome proves that the explosion was not real, therefore there never was any real danger. But explosions are no laughing matter, because they kill and maim, therefore they are taboo subjects if not treated reverently. People For the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) would be horrified to laugh at the violent demise of an actual coyote.

Antony Chapman has compiled an exhaustive anthology of writings from lectures about humor theory. In *It's A Funny Thing, Humor* (1976), Jessica R. Milner Davis in “A Structural Approach to Humor in Farce” addresses the importance of space between viewers and tabooed subjects in humor, stating,“(taboo-violations) require, even more than verbal obscenities, that the audience be distanced from the events on stage”(Davis

1976, 391). Milner Davis says the audience will not experience comedy if the taboo-violation is not broadly represented to the point of having to be viewed from a physical distance, creating also space of safety from the hostility. But Holocaust comedy defies this categorization, because it exists in the middle of the most extreme position of danger: that of imposed liquidation. Not only this, but there is not distance created by surreality, because it actually historically happened. Beyond this, time does not yet serve to distance the audience much, because survivors and their children and grandchildren walk among the populace.

Furthermore, Davis exempts the farcical hostility from being verbally obscene, as if the two were not compatible. This exclusion of commonly objectionable language brings us to an awareness of an aspect of taboo, which is the beginning of the discussion of an imposed morality on funniness.

To get to this issue, Eugene Ionesco and his response to criticism he received for his modern theatre pieces becomes a prime example of the defiance of the taboo imposed on some forms of comedy. Ionesco was of the school that vehemently rebelled against imposed classical standards in the theater. His belief system touts violence as the best way to effectively communicate through performance. He calls for "Everything to raised paroxysm, where the source of tragedy lies. A theatre of violence: violently comic, violently dramatic"(qtd. in Dukore: 771).

But what is the definition of "violently comic"? If that is not an oxymoron, then it indicates that such a thing is possible, meaning that the destructive nature of violence has the potential for being comic, despite what a society has decided is morally

appropriate. But we are not encouraged to view violence as comic. It is again something unsafe, and we are told that the condition for comedy to occur must be one of safety, both physical and emotional. If it is impossible for comedy to be funny in an unsafe condition, then what is the goal in the creation of non-humorous comedy? Perhaps it is not to be funny after all, but to be more confrontational than tragedy by being defiantly comedic in tone. Ionesco, in "Experience of the Theatre", intentionally used this position in the belief that:

A serious, solemn, formal production or interpretation can be grafted onto a text that is absurd, wild and comic. On the other hand, to avoid the ridiculous sentimentality of the tearjerker, a dramatic text can be treated as buffoonery and the tragic feeling of a play can be underlined by farce. Light makes shadows darker, shadows intensify light.... As the "comic" is an intuitive perception of the absurd, it seems to me more hopeless than the "tragic". The "comic" offers no escape. I say "hopeless," but in reality it lies outside the boundaries of hope or despair.... I have called my comedies "anti-plays" or "comic dramas," and my dramas "pseudo-dramas" or "tragic farces": for it seems to me that comic and tragic are one, and that the tragedy of man is pure derision (Ionesco, 1964).

It is as if the sardonic laugh of the most miserable is discovered to be the ultimate weapon of confrontation. Yet, is the intention to be funny? Perhaps intention is the key to the experience of taboo. An unintentional laugh is often seen as an innocent, or a non-hostile response. Unintentional laughter has been observed at many culturally inappropriate times such as at funerals, or upon witnessing a particularly unusual accident. It is as if the "I can't help it" factor gives permission to the laughter. If one is an

audience member being exposed to something deemed morally objectionable by the existing dominant culture, and this person is intentionally laughing, then this person is guilty of defying taboo. Yet, Walter Sorell in *Facets of Comedy* (1972) claims that “nobody has ever been ashamed of laughing.” This would mean that people have no conscience about what they laugh at. If this is true, how is the taboo evidenced in response to the most “in-your-face” forms of theatre? Sorell, addressing the purpose in the work of art, rather than the morality of its existence, feels “It has always been questionable to measure a comedy’s significance by the laughter it evokes.” He further frames this discourse in response to the work of Strindberg, which is notoriously taboo inducing:

Tragic endings and a sense of disorientation running as a thread and threat through these comedies bewilder the spectator. They evoke feelings that may weight lightly on his mind because he remains detached. But at the same time he realizes that the comedy is playing Ping-Pong with his mind, and a sensation of being alternately stunned and frightened lingers on. He sees a tragic man in funny situations, a comic figure playing against a tragic background (Sorell 1972, 15).

Although Sorell raises the classic point that comedy seems to require detachment, or distancing from the issue, he relates the sense of shock that one experiences when they’re confronted by an “unsafe” experience in the theatre. As the person prepares for a comedic performance by assuming a role of superiority, that the viewer is about to be entertained by observing the mistakes of others, they are distanced from any personal responsibility in the issue. The laughter occurs when the viewer realizes his own potential

for committing the same error. The distance is reduced. When the audience member is shown the brutality of the problem in the comedic setting, he needs to see the comic lightly rise to the occasion in order to be humorous, or to be sardonically victimized. At this point, the funniness becomes questionable to the socially adjusted.

Perhaps the initial assumption one has when they sit down to enjoy a comedy, is that they will be amused and pleased by the entire spectacle. It is the sudden induction of unexpected confrontational humor that frightens a person, as one realizes they've been held captive, forced to watch matter of a serious nature when perhaps one's intention as a viewer was never to do so. However, this is a natural flow of events because it parallels the process of life.

We instinctively recognize greatness in the comic by sensing the unwept tears behind the laughable. Northrop Frye explained "First, that tragedy is really implicit or uncompleted comedy; second, that comedy contains a potential tragedy within itself"(Sorell 1972, 17).

Further, Sorell debates whether or not the act of delivering taboo comedy is an intentional decision to be highly responsible, rather than frivolous with the time spent carrying a message to a crowd. In the interest of creating first fear, then a cleansing through realization, the writer, performer and viewer decide to risk approval for a higher purpose.

"In this search lies his ability to survive, to come to terms with the inconsistencies and absurdities of life, to understand a seemingly unreal reality, to go laughingly through a catharsis during which man can purge himself from misconceptions and

find sense in the senselessness of reality. The psychotherapeutic means employed are those of shock” (Sorell 1972, 185).

The question that arises here is whether or not comedy is the best form to utilize for the delivery of psychotherapeutic shock. Friedrich Duerrenmatt in *Problems of the Theatre* (1954) indorses comedy as being an enhancer of shock because of the element of surprise in receiving the tragic from a traditionally non-serious form. He states that, for the delivery of the tragic message, “We can achieve the tragic out of comedy. We can bring it forth as a frightening moment, as an abyss that opens suddenly;...”(qtd. in Dukore: 857)

Comedy seems to have overtaken the world of tragedy as now being the leading form in Post-Modern theatre for the delivery of tragic themes.

In a time when our next tomorrow must always be in question, comedy’s tenacious greed for life, its instinct for self-preservation, and its attempts to mediate the pressures of our daily life seem to qualify it as the most appropriate mode for the drama of the mid-twentieth century (Corrigan 1965, 2).

Corrigan believes that comedy is the most appropriate choice because now the lines “ between the tragic and the comic (the serious and the ludicrous, the painful and the painless) have been obliterated...because in our time Nietzsche shouted. ‘God is dead!’ There are no generally accepted values, no universally valid systems, no publicly meaningful hierarchies.” This position is a severe generalization, but delivers truth about the relaxing of imposed Christian morality in the Western World. What this has to do with the imposition of comedy on tragic themes in Post Modern times is that it has been the

prevalence of Christian morality and the strict reverential tone it endorses that has discouraged the application of comedy to tragedy. Although there may exist some contemporary Christian comedies, Christianity in its most rigid application asks us to stay our minds on that which is holy and pure, while comedy asks the very opposite, as previously discussed.

Simply stated, the relaxation of oppressive morality is an encourager of bolder theatre. This relaxation not only takes place in the controversial context of the writing, but also in its defiance of classic formations of genres. If comedy is a lower form than tragedy, such as Aristotle suggests, then perhaps people are experiencing a surge in the dominance of the common man, and a reduction in value of the importance of leaders and rule-makers.

But does comedy mean to be devoid of morality, or that the morality is veiled in a comic setting in comparison to tragedy? Classical theorists, like Allardyce Nicoll would have us think that morality in comedy is not present.

Of direct morality in comedy, as in tragedy, there is absolutely none....Morality ultimately springs from social conventions. and laughter is predominantly social. Laughter, however, as we have seen, is in most of its forms directed against eccentricity of some one type or another. To such an extent is this true, indeed, that M. Bergson has declared that unsociability on the part of the object of laughter is a necessary condition. ...Laughter, then, becomes an attack by society as a whole, or by a particular portion of society, on what it regards as anti-social, something out of the way and possibly provocative of harm. This laughter,

however, is never directed against anything masterful or more powerful than the ordinary.... Just as greatness in the *dramatis personae* of a tragedy presupposes a lack of pity in the audience, so greatness of type in a comedy rules out the possibility of laughter arising at that type, except, indeed, in the few cases where that type is a wit, when the laughter is not at, but with, him (Nicoll 1931, 192-193).

Despite these claims by Nicoll, the past has been filled with contradictory claims. Comedy has long been seen as a liberating and empowering form, giving a voice to the oppressed when a serious voice would be unacceptable. This comedic moral voice represents some of the most dynamic statements that have been made in theatre. In *Comedy in Space, Time and the Imagination* (1983) Paul H. Grawe remarks "At the same time that the twentieth-century criticism has increasingly recognized a darker side of comedy, playwrights have created a theatrical renaissance around the practice of a darker comedy than theatre audiences have ever learned to understand...Ionesco remarks, "The comic alone is able to give us strength to bear the tragedy of experience" (Ionesco 1931, 184). Certainly the "tragedy of experience" contains the sufferings under the hands of those in socially elevated positions. Nicoll continues:

Comedy exists not for any purpose it may have, but in and for itself; it does not even require having any of that sense of high morality that we found to be necessary in tragedy. It may be that the morally purer comic dramatists are those who will most be remembered, because of our sensibility and our feeling of moral fitness, but laughter exists independently of any outward considerations, religious,

moral, or other. It is the laughter we look for in comedy, not the sense of moral right or of moral wrong, not the purpose or the significance of the play (Nicoll, 1931, 195).

Undeniably, much comedy has traditionally existed solely for the purpose of amusement. Plenty of it has not required any sense of morality at all. It is, of course, true that comedy enjoys slapping society in the face with its irreverent stance, and is pleased to evoke a shock reaction (taboo) to excite the audience. But this kind of humor is very much guided by a sense of outrage at that which is perceived to be immoral. And morality, which is imposed upon the audience by the society of which they are members, is then tempered by individual value systems through individual and mass communication. In this PostModern world; many productions are attended more for their controversy than for their humor. The musicals *Hair* from the 1960's and *Rent* from the 1990's are both evidence of this. Although they were touted for their fine music and bawdy humor, it was the controversial rebellious themes of hippie anarchy (the former) and life with AIDS (the latter) that drove audiences in to see these shows.

It is safe to say that many comedies are attended specifically for the enjoyment of their taboo-breaking condition. R.D.V. Glasgow in *Madness, Masks and Laughter* (1995) theorizes that comedy has arisen from the human development of the carnival, or from the desire to pause in that that must be done for survival, which is the basis for a sense of play. But, these carnivals can excite the participants into true rebellion, germinated by a reckless sense of play. The revelry here is not innocent. It is a purposeful undertaking of the celebration of and imitation (parody) of societal roles. This process has been known

to go too far, defying the boundaries of the operating social structure, which is the basis for taboo in play, or humor.

Just as carnival riots have been known to get out of hand and develop into full-fledged revolution, especially in the slave communities of the New World at Christmas and carnival time, so too may comedy be seen as (potentially at least- or perhaps involuntarily) sowing the seeds of dissent. Similarly, irony of events may be linked not simply to an anaesthetizing generation of distance, but also to a dissident spirit of vengeance typified by Poe's Hop-Frog, whose power reversal combines the knave-fool with the master-servant configuration: here we applaud the "foolish" underdog who eventually outwits the knave and overcomes the master. In other words, the antisocial energies may explode their bounds. Festive disorder may portray chaos in a flattering light, and even ironic distance may mean an intellectualization rather than an anesthetization of the bubbling seditious impulse within us. Just as carnival folly may be castigated or celebrated, therefore, so its world-upside-down hovers between conservatism and rebellion. Incorporating both a social and an antisocial tendency, it may both renew collective harmony through ritualized solidarity and effect an anarchic social protest and a critique of order (Glasgow 1964, 239).

This is the nature of the taboo in comedy. It first serves as confrontational, is experienced negatively because social boundaries of acceptability are crossed, then a decision is made as to whether or not the taboo should be relaxed. When a change in society is needed for its survival, resistance to change can be expected from some that

benefit from the status quo, and those for whom the change is beneficial will become advocates for a new order of things. Yet both parties experience the sense of taboo before the decision is made. However, the outcome is either a strengthened faith in the existing order, in defiance or support of presented images, or an agreement to instigate the beginnings of a revolution to move society towards a more appealing standard of morality. This standard is not necessarily a more liberal one, but can be a return to more rigidity after a period of relaxation. What this has to do with Holocaust humor, is that the carnivalesque atmosphere in the face of imminent destruction is revealed to be a traditional form for rebellion. So this form of comedy should come as no surprise to those who view humor about something historically tragic as inappropriate. It is traditional.

Finally, is taboo-inducing humor meant to be funny? After all, when confronted with the choice as to whether or not it is "okay to laugh", sometimes the decision is made not to do so. D. Zillman in Antony J. Chapman's *It's a Funny Thing, Humor* (1977) decides that the challenge to existing morality in hostile humor represses the funniness of the piece.

The emphasis on moral considerations and on dispositional factors in the appreciation of hostile humor appears to hold promise in explaining the impairment or the total inhibition of mirthful reactions (qtd. in Chapman: 299).

This approach once again turns us to the intention of a piece. If it is meant to be funny, it will be authored and presented in a way that will evoke humor through the use of comic mechanics (repetition, exaggeration, wordplay, etc.) *and* the subject matter will be innocuous in tone. If the ludicrousness of the situation points to a fault in society that

causes harm to a segment of the population, then the intention is probably not for the sole creation of amusement.

This addresses the power of comedy as a taboo-inducing force and a catalyst for change. Change occurs through the revelation of that which is significant, not from the trivializing of serious matters. Taboo humor means to be important, and is apparently so in its ability to transform social standards.

The subject area of taboo in humor in performance is most often associated with the violation of socially imposed boundaries on sexuality. Simply, some sexual behaviors are considered by many to be too private to be shown. The vulgar joke is often the first offending example to people considering taboo theory. But sexual vulgarity, though it is the type of humor which lends itself to scrutiny and sometimes banishment, is a small portion of what constitutes taboo in performance humor, which is very much the same as that which is taboo in literature, and in casual conversation as well.

When charting the individual codes of taboo in humor, one of the most prominent themes is that of not further wounding a victim. As comedy is said to be a method of ultimately championing the cause to sustain life, then the promotion of any form of comedic expression which creates a persecution of an innocent (non-threatening) person or group is deemed as “not funny” by some. Collectively “innocents,” or those whom their protectors assume not to have committed an action which threatens the well-being the dominant group but exhibit differences of culture or race which distinguish it from the dominant group, can be called the “outgroup”. The dominant group is dubbed the “ingroup” by humor theorists. Martineau uncovers in the study “A Model of the Social

Functions of Humor,” from *The Psychology of Humor* (1972), that the intention of one form of victimizing humor, racist humor, is to bring the minority or outgroup under the control of the ingroup, to solidify it and to breed hostility towards the outgroup (Goldstein 1972, 121). This imposed attempt at dominance or group destruction obviously fosters offense, and not a humor response in the outgroup (Goldstein 1972, 120) This is a taboo response. However, disparaging comedy can be directed towards the ingroup by the outgroup, and the subjective funny/unfunny taboo response is again noted (Goldstein 1972, 123). The absence of funniness in response to humor by more than one group indicates that the joke is still considered comedy by some, but is taboo to others.

Furthermore, evidence supports that funniness, among many other things, is subjective based on the individual life experiences, culture, race, sex, and neurological capability of the audience member. It is important to note here the work of La Fave (1961), who created an experiment based on this hypothesis: *A “joke” is humorous to the extent that it enhances an object of affect and/or disparages an object of repulsion; unhumorous to the extent that it does the opposite.* The problem this prediction raises, as La Fave discovered, is that the experience of the humor is limited by the situation of the consumer. In *The Psychology of Humor*, La Fave points out this limitation.

In colloquial language: “Jokes are funny when the good guys win and the bad guys lose; not funny when the bad guys win and the good guys lose.”

Does not such a prediction assume, though, that jokes lack absolute stimulating value, that, as Flugel (1954, p.726) observed, no such thing as a good joke exists?

Exactly! In fact, jokes strictly speaking, may nonexistent too (if the above vicarious

superiority assumption holds, for “jokes” then become culturally, i.e., RG, relative; one man’s joke becomes another man’s insult) (Goldstein 1972, 200).

La Fave exposed four different religious groups to 20 ethnic jokes. They were Jews, Catholics, Baptists, and Agnostics (which remain questionable in terms of religiosity, which is difficult to accurately pin-point). He recorded the respondents reactions as to the funniness of each of the jokes. In doing so, La Fave discovered that, as can be imagined, a variety of subjective factors made it impossible to control the study. Inadvertently, he had created a study not on the validity of whether or not humor reflects a treatment of an undergroup, but rather on the sensitivity of certain individuals to humor that perhaps hits too close to home. He found that Jews, for instance, were offended by Scottish jokes about “cheapness”, surmising that the negative response came from offense created by an existing similar negative prototype of the Jew (Goldstein 1972, 200). Another problem in the objectivity of the subjects is that he found that the declaration of one’s faith had little to do with their actual practice of faith. Ascribing to a religion did not necessarily mean that the subject followed its precepts (Goldstein 1972, 203) .

It is with this difficulty in the control of respondents that the case of the absolute universal taboo is one that is difficult, if not impossible to declare. However, evidence of taboo and its violations are clear in the presentation of a funny/not funny response in those exposed to humor which challenges existing personal bias.

So the ensuing list of humor taboos is a list composed of items which are tabooed by some populations, but not by all.

1. Humor that focuses on negative traits or qualities assigned to a specific ethnicity, cultural identity or racial identity.
2. Humor that trivializes tragic human events which are not distanced or are potentially recurrent. The humor is abrasive towards societal structure, rather than lubricant.
3. Humor that does not defuse negative emotions, does not relieve high physical arousal.
4. Humor that liberates repressed subject matters.
5. Humor utilizing a style which defies the tone -- historical reality inhibits comic possibility

Examining the listed factors, we begin with the ingroup/outgroup disparaging humor which is a very subjective and personal taboo area. It has been shown that racist jokes are funny to certain populations, and offensive to others. Racist stereotyping is an extension of the previously mentioned challenging of the outgroup by the ingroup. Therefore, a racial, religious or cultural group as the butt of a joke is going to have an offense response or a taboo reaction. However, once again there are no absolutes, because there are respondents within groups that take offense in different degrees, as well as those who do not identify with the assigned grouping. There are also members of groups who are the butts of jokes and who indulge in humor degrading their own group. This does not eradicate the taboo, as they are then criticized for this practice by members of their own group.

Taboo Humor and Survival

The trivializing of tragic human events is a theme that tends to have a strong social and personal taboo. In the much-parlayed debate over the distancing of oneself from

events in order to permit humor, one of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon is the taboo response to Holocaust Humor. It is a tragic historical event of such global proportion, with so many remaining damaged survivors, that a social taboo has been formed to protect those who were involved in the trauma, as well as attempting to mystically keep the event from reoccurring by a superstitious non-mentioning of the event. It is also expressed that the deliberate taboo-violation in this category creates a sense of mastery over a horrible event, such as the shooting at Columbine High in 1999. Black humor from this event abounded shortly after it occurred, despite the distancing theories, as vulnerable Americans attempted to arm themselves with a caustic positioning, rather than an emotional one, or potential victim stance. The description “Trenchcoat Mafia” was claimed as the comic insult of the day to be applied to persons with cartoon-like anti-social qualities. For example, an apt way of humorously conveying displeasure in a teenager’s poor choice of dates would be to say that she was planning to attend the prom with a member of the Trenchcoat Mafia.

Abrasive humor can create a taboo response when it exhibits unsociability. From “A Model of the Social Functions of Humor”. Martineau looks at the function of abrasive and lubricant humor as a social function.

To realize and explore the full potential of this area of study, we advocate that humor be viewed from the sociological perspective as a “lubricant” and an “abrasive” in social interaction – especially in such common everyday interaction that constitutes the basis of the social order and makes the routine flow of social life possible. By this we mean, to use an analogy, that on the one hand, the

interjection of the humorous serves as oil pumped from an oil can. Humor is intended to initiate social interaction and to keep the machinery of interaction operating freely and smoothly. Indeed, sometimes it may not be sufficient. But perhaps most often this is its intention and objective function. On the other hand, but not mutually exclusive from the former, humor may serve as an abrasive. Rather than oiling the workings of social interaction, it constitutes a measure of sand. The consequence of such abrasive humor is interpersonal friction and a juncture in the communication process which may modify the character of the interaction (Goldstein 1972, 103)

The “interpersonal friction” is again a sign of the taboo created between in and outgroups, and yet is not so much concerned with control as it is with one-upmanship. Plainly, if a person or institution is being attacked with sarcasm, it is to create a sense of correctness in the position of the person supplying the wit.

Humor which denies tragic reality can be taboo. Again referring to the Holocaust, recent works which invoke a sense of play in the setting of a concentration camp have evoked the ire of those who feel that the weight of the reality of the situation is challenged by an impossible act of playing under fire. In *Life Is Beautiful* (1998) under the circumstances of internment in a death camp, the hero pretends with his son that they are involved in a carnivalesque game of survival, where a real tank is the prize. This humor has been criticized for being a dangerous practice by some who say the creation of this kind of piece lays open the possibility that tragic events never happened as recorded.

In March of 1999, the *New York Times* ran an article by Candice Hughes detailing the mixed consensus of the critics on *Life Is Beautiful*.

(Benigni) has achieved the hardest thing: He has entered the hearts of Americans,” the news weekly “*Espresso* enthused recently.

Only *Il Foglio*, a contrarian little daily with a highbrow bent published by Communist-turned-conservative Giuliano Ferrara, dares to be different.

It has run scores of negative articles, accusing Benigni, Italy’s answer to Robin Williams, of creating a “syrupy view of the extermination of European Jewry” to achieve superstardom. It even published a double-page, color foldout of the Art Spiegelman cartoon that ran with a critical piece in *The New Yorker* by David Denby, who called the movie “a benign form of Holocaust denial.”

Similar to this taboo is the kind created when the style of the piece is not relative to the tone of the subject matter. In the notorious animated series of 1999-present on the Comedy Channel, *South Park*, the most somber subjects are attacked with the most cavalier of gags. An emaciated African child is dubbed, “Starvin Marvin”, and he blithely trips through the Thanksgiving Day show using a parody of an African “click language” as his comedic hook. It is the absence of moral propriety which signifies the humor, as the laughter is evoked not only from wit, but from the shock. It is laughter based on taboo defilement, which creates more taboo.

Deeply sadistic humor, or that which enjoys the physical threat to another living creature is filled with taboo connotations. Beyond the obvious tenant that we are commanded by the Judeo Christian ethic that we should not kill, and that we should treat

others as we would want to be treated, the socially correct response to the suffering of another being is to have pity. And yet, Krazy Kat gets hit in the head with a brick by Ignatz, jokes of sado-masochistic sexual relations abound, and AIDs jokes are currently at a premium when millions are dying worldwide. These are jokes which address all five of the taboo humor categories (see list).

In *It's a Funny Thing, Humour*, edited by Chapman and Foot (1977), many essays by prominent humor theorists were published outlining the nature and problems with humor. Within these works, more boundary violations are noticed – taboo areas are specifically reported. The violation of a morally sanctioned precept is a large area for taboo (Chapman&Foot 1977. 162) Incest is considered to be the original taboo, created as such to preserve the purity (strength) of the clan. Jokes about incest are considered to be off-color, because they point out socially destructive behavior using a light tone. The classic incest joke structure from America has to do with the hillbilly population that is purportedly incapable of restraining themselves from inbreeding. This diminishes the tragedy of incest, as well as makes racially disparaging assumptions.

A joke about “unjustified” grief or untimely death is considered taboo. A dead baby joke tells of the destruction of a human who has not been allowed a long life span. For example: What is red and goes round and round? A dead baby in a blender. A baby is considered to be sacred because of its innocence. Jokes about dead celebrities have an air of disrespect about them, but this attitude can be excused by the passage of time (distance). Jokes about young widows and orphans are considered to be “rough”.

When the animated Wiley Coyote falls thousands of feet, creating a cut-out silhouette of himself in the earth after he ultimately lands in a puff of dust, he is immediately seen in the next portion of the cartoon as a frazzled but alive creature who is only inconvenienced by his death defying leap. This is the surrealistic hostility or brutality against a living being. Here the humor is not sadistic, as much as it protects us by its impossibility. However, realistic hostility and brutality is considered taboo in comedy. An individual in a sitcom cannot settle an argument by point-blank shooting his neighbor to death. Any form of anger that is too real is considered to be the antithesis of humor, and therefore taboo. This is the violation experienced by many who view wrestling on television. The World Wide Wrestling Federation makes no bones about staging fights, often with humorous costumes and in absurdly unreal situations. However, the violence that is being mimed can appear quite real at times, and indeed draw blood, which creates an outcry for its end.

Some subjects are considered to be “too serious” for humorous treatment, and when this treatment is applied, a profound taboo reaction occurs. Furthermore, C.Powell in his paper “Humor as a Form of Social Control,” suggests that “a humor reaction is an initial response to a deviation not perceived or thought of as being too serious. When circumstances become defined as serious...an altogether harsher reaction is adopted and different social labels are used.”

The liberating of repressed subject matters commonly evokes a taboo response which then serves as a social equalizer. A good example of this would be the use of obscene humor in the context of politics. Both parties involved in the base humor are

reduced to human and equal terms intentionally applied by the use of tabooed subject matter, creating a form of social criticism.

In the application of humor, the violation of any socially established norm is a form of taboo. This can be tricky, as norms are constantly relaxing and changing. It once was considered innocuous clean fun to characterize women as being chattering biddies with nothing better to do than gossip. This same standard, applied to what we know today with the advent of Feminism, would be outdated at best, if not offensive to audiences. Then again, one could not make a joke pertaining to AIDS in good taste during the late 1980's, when the disease was perceived as uniformly fatal. Nowadays, as the disease can appear to be a chronic condition in many cases rather than a death sentence, jokes are emerging about the foibles of living with the disease in such performance venues as the Broadway smash hit musical *Rent* (1997). In the number "La Vie Boheme" from this show, the cast pauses in singing as a timer sounds during the number, and one cast member notes that it is time for an "AZT break". Therefore, the norm has been relaxed, in this case through the application of hope and distancing from a taboo area, death.

Jokes outside of the prevailing culture are another area of taboo, which differ slightly from the category of ingroup/outgroup humor. This type of taboo includes racist and stereotyping humor, but the groups don't necessarily have to be unbalanced in prominence. Once again, the function of this joke is the same as ingroup/outgroup, where one class struggles to character assassinate another, thereby controlling the other group. However, because neither is the underdog, or has the upper-hand, the focus is not necessarily on dissolving the group but is meant to attack the "foreignness" of the cultural

practices of the group. This type of taboo humor can soothe a culture as it approaches concern for the preservation of its own pure characteristics. Before the Cold War, when Russia was perceived as an imminent threat to the lives of Americans, a common parody was that of Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe on the table as he addressed the United Nations. Cold War Russia was certainly not an anemic outgroup, but the threat was tempered by the use of personality-debasing humor.

Humor which does not achieve the goal of funniness has a taboo mystique of its own. This is where the rotten vegetable throwing at an unsatisfactory performance emerged. An audience shows its agitation at the lack of comedic results from a poorly executed comedy performance. Perhaps "the hook" is one of the most classic symbols of intolerance or embarrassment for the poor entertainer. Granted, these devices were not used solely for comedic performance, but there is a head-shaking response to unfunniness in performance. It is as if to say that the imposed public display of an embarrassingly unskilled comedic performer is unfairly forcing us to put ourselves in their shoes, therefore making us suffer second-hand embarrassment. It is for this that we feel that the performer should be ashamed and removed. We are perhaps incredulous as to why this person doesn't see his or her own failing, and quickly silence the unsuccessful entertainer of both performance and social conversation with a glib, "Don't quit your day job." The unsuccessful attempt at humor becomes a failed effort to diffuse negative emotions, which we are still left with, and are enhanced by the attention drawn to them. This creates a sense of displeased, and if pleasure is the aim of a joke, then this illuminates the failure of the humor.

When humor is farcical, but does not employ the proper atmosphere for its hostility, then it becomes taboo. This atmosphere can be found in the *Festive License* of the farce. This indicates a parameter of understanding, where a truce is called in the name of comedy, the tone is predetermined by the pronunciation of the piece as a comedy, and there is a time limit under which the performance operates. In other words, an understanding has been established before the humor is approached. This is meant to say “just kidding” to even the most serious of subjects. When these situations are not delineated, when the humor is injected into a situation where the Festive License has not been established, then the audience is not advised on how to receive the remarks, and they are free to respond in any one of the taboo categories. No truce has been called.

Sometimes a taboo response can be eliminated if the style of the piece is done in a broadly comedic fashion. Vulgar, or boffo humor employs this tactic. Even though the subject matter is offensive, we can sometimes get away with it if we use comic characters that are associated with comedic styling, garish performance codes are employed, such as exaggerated makeup and costumes, surreal sets, and the like. Performer codes can be employed in the same way, where the performance becomes a grotesque imitation of life, that the audience is cued not to take too seriously. This is the same distancing which modifies cartoon humor, making it more acceptable. However, when the style defies the tone, if the subject matter is acutely serious, a startled response to the irreverent addressing of the topic interferes with the humor response, and a taboo response is created instead.

Probably one of the best noted requirements for humor is the mandatory distancing that gives permission to the viewer to be positively amused. This includes both the distancing from a serious event, such as the passage of time, as well as the physical distancing from the performance. A surreal imitation of, say, an execution can create a disturbance in a person who is sitting close to the sharp blade, whether it actually appears to be employed or not

Biologically, when a high level of physical arousal is employed, a humor response is not possible because the arousal is too intense for pleasure to occur. In "Psychological Approaches to the Study of Humour" (1972), Mary K. Rothbart reports on the work by Berlyne of 1960 of arousal fluctuation and the conditions under which one can experience pleasure. She found that humor has a dissipating effect, or creates a relief phenomenon. It is unremitting tension that leads to agitation rather than amusement. Berlyn's charted sources of arousal "include sexual, aggressive, or anxiety-inducing subject matter, as well as collative variables including novelty, complexity, and incongruity"(qtd. in Goldstein: 87). I would like to suggest that taboo occurs from a heightened physiological point of arousal derived from a reaction to exposure to these arousal sources. This would explain why the humor response diminishes as the defilement of sacred or pure reverential subject areas occurs.

Chapter 3: Categories of Holocaust Humor

Holocaust Humor, a new genre of humor, has evolved as a generation raised in the shadow of the Holocaust emerges and struggles to grapple with this cataclysmic event. For some, particularly those of the Western World, the Holocaust has no parallel in all of history to its horrific proportions. Because of the seriousness of this event, the fact that a surge of Holocaust Comedies has been produced within the past five years is significant. That the application of humor has finally come of age, although not without its controversy, is a significant sign of both the rebellious nature of experimental taboo violation and of the relaxing of the taboo.

The Jewish culture has long enjoyed a wealth of humor. Some say that the Jews have persisted through eons of persecution through their indomitable spirit, using the tool of humor as a cultural and literal survival mechanism. William Novak and Moshe Waldoks attempt to describe the phenomenon of Jewish humor in their book entitled *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (1981):

Jewish humor is...about something. It is especially fond of certain specific topics, such as...survival.... Sometimes the point of the humor is more powerful than the laugh it delivers, and for some jokes, the appropriate response is not laughter, but rather a bitter nod or a commiserating sigh of recognition. Jewish humor tends to be anti-authoritarian... Jewish humor frequently has a critical edge, which creates discomfort in making its point (Novak & Waldoks 1981, XX).

It is this disconcerting treatment of the subject of the Holocaust in Jewish Humor that has created the sensation of “taboo” in both Jews and non-Jews alike. A person

approaches the extremely weighty topic of the Holocaust to a Western world friend or crowd, and gambles with the propriety of his or her words when joking. Probably, shock is the anticipated response, with an ultimate hope for a laughter response eventually.

Typically, the person delivering the Holocaust joke is aware of participating in something controversial, and more often than not, the response is one of shock and discomfort. This being so, a choice needs to be made on the part of the humorist as to whether or not he or she should continue in the potentially offending vein, with a possible apology ensuing. In the case of the entertainer, this creates a problem on several levels.

First, it would appear from an abundance of previous discourse that humor is in fact a survival tool of the Jewish race. Henry D. Spalding follows the history of Jewish humor in his book *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor*. This massive work (453 pages) is a collection of jokes particular to the Jewish people, and follows 40 centuries of Jewish humor. Spalding's exhaustive work traces humor in the ancient scriptural allegories of the Torah, onward to the tales from the Yiddish master storyteller Sholom Aleichem, through the Pogroms of Russia, with a hefty contribution in a chapter entitled "Anti-Semitism," which has a section devoted to jokes of the Third Reich. Sandles asserts that this historical context is anything but incidental. It is the essence of survival of a persecuted people:

The true Jewish joke mirrors the history of the Jewish people. It is a reflection of their joy and anguish, their aspirations and discouragements, their all too brief periods of social and economic well being. It expresses their ages-old yearning for

a world in which justice, mercy, understanding and equality will prevail-not only for themselves, but for all people (Spalding 1981, xiv).

If, therefore, humor is a documented essential of Jewish history, and Holocaust humor is a natural response to that event in Jewish history, should it be accepted in all arenas, including that of entertainment? With entertainment itself being a form of expression deliberately performed for the masses, then with comedy, what is the intention? Is it to please, or can it be said that the product is being offered to persons for a variety of reasons.

Entertainment provides a monetary purpose, an escapist purpose, and comedy serves to express the current or past states of the human condition. Under the most hopeful of circumstances, comedy gives a platform for the exhibition of the talents of those who possess the ability to humorously synthesize the experiential life of the audience. This is the responsibility of the comic performer. But what is the audience's responsibility to the performer?

It can be said that the act of performing is a necessary expression of the artist's ability. Is that the sole intention of the performer of Holocaust humor? There are those who maintain that the expression of Holocaust humor is more importantly essential to the recovery of Holocaust survivors affected by this horrific low point in Western culture. In his article "Holocaust Humor", Shai Oster reminds us that Hasidic teaching regards the mourning process as having three necessary stages: tears, silence, and song. He then quotes psychologist Eva Fogelman who believes that Second Generation survivors (children of those who've survived the Holocaust) are in their final stage. This would

infer that the survivors themselves have lived through the first three stages, and that now, nearly sixty years later, there is a second generation of suffering Jews who need a venue to process the Holocaust. Fogelman speaks of “song”, which can also be considered performance –based art that requests an audience. In this context, humor fits the definition of song. So, we see that there is a personal necessary agenda for the Holocaust survivors and their second generation Holocaust survivor children to claim their right to their tragedy-specific humor, in the name of their emotional recovery. But can Holocaust humor be considered appropriate material for laughter by a Western society with roots deeply entrenched in Judeo-Christian ethics?

In *Theology Today*, in an article entitled “Divine Incongruity: Comedy and Tragedy in a Post-Holocaust World”(1992), Roy Eckhart quotes Rabbi Lionel Blue of London, who affirms that “the most typical weapon of Jewish spirituality is humor”(Eckhart 1992, 400). Eckhart points out that in America, which is a country comprised of approximately 2.5% Jews, how is it that 80% of the comics are Jewish? His response is that we live in a postmodernist world, where the spokespersons are typically those who have lived in the world, but are somehow disenfranchised from the world they live in. This would be a classic definition of the Jewish comic, if one considers the classic perspective of the nervously persecuted Jewish comic living in a perceived or perhaps real world of rampant anti-Semitism. And yet, the problem with this stance is that it is not inclusive of the myriad of other minorities for whom this characteristic would apply. If the person who lives in this world, but is never allowed to be a full participant characterizes the ideal comedic spokesperson, then we should be overflowing with

handicapped comics (of which there are few). There are prominent black comedy stars. However, the inequity of the numbers of opportunities for entertainers “of color” in the film industry has become legendary. The existence of the Black Entertainment Channel on cable television is the proof of this. There is no Jewish Entertainment Channel. There are those who would argue that all television is the Jewish Entertainment Channel, because of the disproportionately high ratio of Jews to Gentiles in the entertainment industry. However, the themes of television shows are only occasionally contextually Jewish.

And so, we return to the Jewish cultural tradition of dealing with persecution through humor as the explanation for the abundant Jewish presence in comedy entertainment. Eckhart notes that “comic laughter is never safe from despair.” However, he supports this argument with an impoverished, but safe argument:

Humor requires tears; tears require humor. Imperializing laughter is not laughter; imperializing tears are not tears. Soft laughter seems to be somewhat healthier and soft tears as well (Eckhart 1992, 402).

But if this is so, then what of the argument that defiance is the essential ingredient in survivalist humor? Eckart quotes the work of W.H. Auden, who says that defiance in laughter leads to the “carnival”, which is the state of being a participant in a life where one is doomed to mortality; to being born into a world with unpredictable variables, and eventually to die. It is stated in this article that the healthy pattern of recovery from tragedy involves a process where one traverses from calamity, to defiance, to the carnival. The idea is that we make peace with events that may appear arbitrary by

claiming the arbitrariness of life, therefore comforting ourselves with the notion that we are not alone in our troubles. Then Eckhart states that to go from carnival to defiance would create tragedy. If this would be true, it is problematic in the light of the rebellious nature of taboo comedy. If comedy is play, and the play becomes defiant, the tone is still one of playfulness, not one of tragedy.

Jewish Humor and Survival

To defy injustices is a given, but the very nature of rebellion is to react to the state of being we regard as “our life”, and to then defy the structures imposed on us in this realm. How can this be tragic? It would be tragic to respond to the carnival with blithe acceptance, particularly in the face of injustice. One can only healthily respond to arbitrary injustice with a firm defiance that hopefully creates a condition where more caution ensues. In other words, a victim stance is precisely what leads to the destruction of many. It is said that Jewish scripture maintains a passive attitude towards persecution. This is the forbear of Jesus’ “turn the other cheek” philosophy in the Bible. It is reported that Rabbis and Jewish scholars were some of the most compliant during the rounding up and ultimate transports of the Jews to the gas. Of course, this statement is controversial, because it implies an alleged weakness, and perhaps compliance with the Nazi plan. It is considered racist to say that Jews didn’t resist their persecution. With this in mind, can we say that one who restricts humor to the safe arena, or that of one who has fallen haplessly into a carnival of injustice, is one who is spiritually appropriate? Or is this a tact that subtly implies that the humor of defiance is invalid because it is outrageous.

shocking, and potentially empowering. This now refers to the ingroup/outgroup issue of imposed control.

Eckhart continues by quoting perhaps one of the most famous Jewish annalists of humor, Reinhold Neighbur. The notion that the primitive basis for all humor is the attention paid to the incongruities of existence prompts Neighbur to criticize the use of humor as being of use only when it is a device that leads to the spiritual resolution:

But as Eckhart points out, ultimately this leads to the revelation that the whole ordeal of coming to terms with the Holocaust through humor is precisely a spiritual question, and painfully, one of irony because we have seen where God is alleged to have made the Jews his Chosen people, and then the Nazis created the edict that all Jews were to be destroyed. Therefore, the irony in this most basic of presentations of the Jewish condition is the foundation of the put-upon humor of the Jew.

Steve Lipman, the author of a renown book on jokes from the Nazi prison camps, *Laughier in Hell* (1993), is at peace with the concept of combined humor and spirituality in the context of the Holocaust:

During the Holocaust, religion and humor served a like -- though not identical purpose: the former oriented one's thoughts to a better existence in the next world, the latter pointed to emotional salvation in this one. Both gave succor and provided an intellectual respite beyond the immediate physical surroundings.... For those who found no solace in the Creator, a few moments of shared laughter-man's modest creation-kept countless persons from taking their own lives or slipping into the zombie-like state of the "Muselmanner." The so-called Muslims.

concentration camp inmates who became soulless shells, spent their days in an emotionless stupor, too detached to smile at any joke or strike at any provocation (Lipman 1993, 12).

Jews have always been comfortable with the notion that humor and God could exist in the same breath. Spalding retells this classic joke:

Some years before he was chancellor, Hitler was making a speech in a Berlin beer hall, and as usual, his voice dripped with anti-Jewish vitriol. To his annoyance, he observed a man in the front row that smiled and chuckled throughout the talk. When the address was over, Hitler sent word to the stranger that he wished to see him in a nearby coffee house. The man appeared a few minutes later.

“Tell me,” said Hitler, noting the stranger’s heroic nose, his patriarchal beard and his mannerisms, “aren’t you a Jew?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Then what were you so pleased about during my lecture? Have you any doubts about my intention to carry out my program against your kind?”

“I have no doubts about that at all,” answered the old man. “That’s why I laughed.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look at it from my point of view. We Jews have known enemies like you before. Pharaoh thought he could enslave us, and, in honor of our flight to freedom, we celebrate the beautiful festival of Passover. Haman tried to exterminate us, and, in commemoration of our survival, we celebrate the joyous

occasion of Purim. The destruction of every such despot has brought us another glad holiday. Now you, Hitler, hate us more than did Pharaoh and Haman put together, so I smile and laugh in anticipation of the supremely happy holiday we will observe after we get rid of you, too!" (Lipman, 1993)

This joke is relatively "safe." It is probably non-offensive to most people, and presents the Jew in a classically innocuous light. Jewish humor has received approval when it behaves itself. When it contains silly characters that are mischievous in their wit, but basically harmless, there is no problem in the public eye. The classic characters of Jewish humor are the Schlemiel and the Schlemazel. It is said that the former is the one who spills his soup, and the latter is the one it lands on. In her book *Jews in Cinema* (1984), Patricia Erens adeptly outlines the classic case of these figures when she approaches the humor of Charlie Chaplin:

The films depicting the adventures of the "little tramp" combined humor and pathos in a sentimental mixture typical of many Jewish narratives. Yiddish literature is dominated by "dos kleine menshele," the Little Man, a "long-suffering, persistent lovingly ironic" anti-hero, a "poor but proud householder trying to maintain his status in the Jewish world even as he grows poorer." Most readers of Sholem Alechem's Tevye, the Milkman, best know him later as the protagonist of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Yiddish literature further possessed several variations on the prototypical Little Man, such as the Sainted Fool, the Ecstatic Wanderer, and the Luftmensch, literally, "air man," a marginal Jew whose luck and dreams are his only means of support (Erens 1993, 153).

The comfort laughing with and at this kind of character has been proven over the ages. Clowns of all types present the well-intentioned fool teetering on the brink of disaster.

But what of the unlovable, ascerbic and biting humor of some Jews that is spawned from the roar of defiance? The sarcastic, assaulting humor of those for whom trauma is an indelible part of their lives remains a serious contribution to the recovery of those people.

In his book *In the Shadow of the Holocaust* (1984), Aaron Haus reports of his emerging recovery from his sufferings as a Second Generation Holocaust Survivor. As an adult, he began to realize the impact of his parent's Holocaust experience on his own psyche. Claiming his right to humor was one of the steps he needed to take,

I grew up thinking that laughter indicated certain superficiality. It was not until I reached my thirties that I understood the value and necessity of laughter. I also had to learn not to begrudge it to others (Haus 1984, 2).

This is a stance taken by a direct recipient of the trauma of the Holocaust. Humor becomes an essential component for wholeness. But, in the case of the Jewish performer, a type of "In Your Face" comic has come of age in the realm of stand up. This is a new form of Jewish Humor, and appears to be the catalyst for the emergence of Holocaust Humor as a new style of comedy performance.

It is difficult to be empathetic toward a performer who is raging against an audience. In the case of Don Rickles, you either love him or you hate him. This stand up comic has made a lifelong career out of insulting audience members. He was the original "In Your

Face” Jewish comic for the voice of cynics, whose only predecessors could have arguably been some of the more audience-oriented comics of the Catskills, or the more underground population following the volatile career of Lenny Bruce. One could say that Rickles’ fans are masochistic. Indeed, the king himself ridicules those who fight to sit in the front row of his shows so that they can claim the dubious honor of being targeted by his barbs. The explanation for this is not difficult to grasp. Some people are desperate to laugh at themselves, while others see this kind of targeting as a challenge – a potential opportunity to one-up the star, and emerge victorious as the winner of a public verbal battle. But the comic dealing the blows must ultimately earn his or her license to be abusive. The prerequisite is that the comic must be a loser to be an acceptable comedic attacker (schlemiel), and if that condition is not painfully obvious, then it is the performer’s obligation to prove that condition. In the case of Don Rickles, he immediately is justified as the neighborhood schlemiel because he makes himself into a cartoon of a Jew, and a Jew is considered someone with the deck stacked against him. He uses Jewish terms, and gestures in a way that Gentiles interpret as ethnically coded. Rickles uses his hands to accent his hopeless shrugs, has a hunched posture, and most credibly, runs his palms across his shiny bald head. These movements, which are underscored by his strong New York accent, combine to create a stereotypical essence of an angry Jewish uncle. With all of these factors, he displays himself as a cartoon of a mostly harmless, hopelessly flawed Jew.

Physical attributes that create societal stigma are an instant validator in the eye of the audience. One need only appear to be bald (Rickles), overweight (Louis Anderson), or to

have comedically distorted features (Woody Allen), and the comedic permission from the audience is practically a given. If a woman is ugly (Phyllis Diller) and/or shrewish (Roseanne, also obese), then she is stamped with a seal of acceptability as suitable for comedic audiences. Most areas of attack are now fair game, because the commentator is seen as humanized, having grossly obvious “defects.” Don Rickles is the most extreme proof of this case, as he is bald, paunchy, beaky, and gets away with hell. In one of his *Tonight Show* appearances in the late Eighties, David Marc reports in his book *What’s so Funny About America* (1997), Rickles finds a way to get away with the a blast of racial stereotyping:

Rickles, scanning the crowd with microphone in hand, walks up to a brown-skinned man, and asks him to stand up, ostensibly to play “Stump the Band.”

“You’re a Mexican-American, sir, a Chicano, aren’t you, sir?” Personally, I think the Chicanos are very important people. My doctor told me that I’ve got to eat lettuce every day in order to stay regular. Without you people, everything comes to a halt-if you know what I mean”(Marc 1997, 21).

In this, Rickles has ridiculed not only the stereotypical Chicano man, inferring that all Chicanos must be a lowly lettuce-pickers, but has also trivialized the vastly historically important United Farmworkers lettuce boycott of California. Marc assures us that this gag was followed by “loud guffaws,” because Rickles used a punchline that assured the world knows that he himself is a constipated loser. This brings us to the crux of the most commonly held theory of Jewish humor, which was devised by the famous psychologist Sigmund Freud.

Freud's work, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), portends that self-deprecation is the most pervasive feature in Jewish humor. His conclusion, however, did not lovingly deal with the Little Man tradition of Yiddish literature. Freud reported that Jews had a virulent anti-Semitism buried in their own humor; that their self-deprecating humor was a form of self-hatred for their unfortunate position of being a Jew.

Other more contemporary theorists of humor don't embrace this dubious philosophy, and focus more on the issues of humor as a universal tool for survival. Norman Cousins covered this subject most publicly in his book *Anatomy of an Illness* (1979). It is probably the most renowned book supporting the theory that laughter actually creates health. In this work, Cousins relates his own recovery from a debilitating disease akin to rheumatoid arthritis. He fed himself on a diet of comedic literature, films, and tapes, experiencing what his doctors referred to as a miraculous rally from his physical problems.

But beyond this well-known argument for the importance of laughter, the use of black humor is seen as the choice of comedy prerequisite to the processing of oppressive political events. In the book *Black Humor: Critical Essays* (1993), which is compiled by Alan R. Pratt, the introduction gives serious thought to the birth of modern black humor, and its literary genre. The literary genre is the beginning of the performance genre of black humor, because performance is mostly written before it is enacted. Pratt presents the arguments concerning the origin of the form; some say this form of humor is said to be spawned in the post-World War II rebellion of the politically outraged and emerging Baby Boomers. He raises the issues of the contention of this idea:

However the recent burgeoning of black humor is explained; something peculiar did happen with American humor in the 1960s which is still with us...it is commonplace to speak of such writers as Vonnegut, Barth, Heller, Hawkes and Pynchon as representatives of the new comic nihilism, iconoclasts who challenged the boundaries of traditional comedy. Nevertheless, it has also been argued that the general features of modern literary black humor can be discerned in the literature of times past. ...

The black humor of the 1960s, directly or indirectly focuses on the entropy in society's social, political, and economic systems. No subject is sacrosanct; myths, taboos, theologies, philosophies, and ideologies are twisted, blasphemed, or lampooned (Pratt 1993, xx,xxi)

Pratt continues in separating the dark humor genres by differentiating between the alienated aspects of existential humor and the decidedly darker attachment of the black humorist to the reality of the moment.

In an essay called "The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humor" (1990), Patrick O'Neill reports on the psychological humor analyst Henniger's account that black humor defends one against the effects of horror. The black humor is aggressive, which produces pleasurable feelings, which propriety demands a following of guilt, which creates more aggression and pleasure. Perhaps this interpretation is valid in sadistic black humor, yet, the humor of the Holocaust is not sadistic from the angle of the Jew, because, for one, the Jew is the victim, and not the perpetrator. Therefore, it is possible to say that Holocaust humor can't be black humor because of this exception. O'Neill recalls that

Plato believed that humor arises from the enjoyment of the sufferings of others, and yet, counters with Nietzsche's remark that "Man alone suffers so excruciatingly in the world that he was compelled to invent laughter" (O'Neill 1990, 68-69). These notes reveal that dark forms of humor have different categories, such as: sick; gallows; and black.

O'Neill then explores the bridge of irony, which he feels connects the comic and the tragic (O'Neill 1990, 76). It is this type of humor that most characterizes the humor of the Nazi death camps. As reported in the body of O'Neill's work, irony is a comic device, which points out the discrepancies between the real and the ideal. This is apparent in that very famous camp joke mentioned earlier where the two Jews are walking into the gas chambers. One of them begins to panic, and starts screaming in terror. The other Jew hushes him quickly saying, "Quiet down! We don't want to make trouble!"

Of course, ironically, they are going to die in minutes, which is as much trouble as any one could be in. This is the reality. The ideal is that someone would care to recognize their polite behavior and spare them from "trouble". The joke is definitely dark, but it is not the black humor of a sadist. It contains an element not found in black humor, which is hope.

However, what makes Holocaust humor defy traditional theory is its ability to transcend the established categories. Clearly Holocaust Humor is about the victimization of people. The Jews walking to the gas chambers are victims. But they are also *the perpetrators*, in the sense that they are the powerful ones many hold in high regard because of the stoicism involved in their martyred deaths. They do not break from the line. They scream, but they continue to be composed, to die with integrity, which gives

them the *superior position* over the Nazis, who now are made to look ridiculously foolish. The responsibility of slaughtering peaceful people falls on the shoulders of those who create the taboo of “unwarranted death”. The killers become the outgroup, and the innocents become the powerful ingroup in their sacrifice. The Jews in the joke become both the victims and the victors. It is this aspect which most powerfully demonstrates the uniqueness of Holocaust Humor, as the tragic event presents itself as possibly the most powerful human tragedy in man’s history.

Next, if satire is a category of humor used to make a political statement, then couldn’t Holocaust humor be incorporated into this category, thus absolving the taboo? The difficulty with this occurs when one breaks down the components of satire. Satire is a grotesque exaggerated representation of an existing structure, which can be said as a key element in camp jokes, such as this common Cabaret joke of the Holocaust era:

What is fratricide?

if Hermann Goering slaughters a pig.

What is suicide?

If someone tells this joke in public (Lipman 1993, 52)

The joke clearly lambastes the infamous Nazi criminal for being porcine, but the satirical commentary comes when the freedom for telling a joke against the Third Reich is declared to be the signing of one’s own death warrant. However, one can replace the personal nouns in this joke, and it can be applicable as a protestation of many dictatorships. Goering can easily become Momar Quaddafi, or the Ayatola, or any other dictatorial special of the day. This would indicate that labeling Holocaust humor as

merely satirical is an oversimplification of the genre. The satirical form imposed in this example can be applied elsewhere. But what makes the joke exceptional as a Holocaust sample, is the *cultural frivolity* in tone imposed upon the subject by the Jews. To religious Jews, pork is “traif”, or unkosher. It is a forbidden unclean food. To parallel the Nazi official with something this abominable is much more defiant than if the insult fell from the lips most other members of different cultures – excepting Muslims, who are forbidden to eat pork also. What completes the exceptionality of this example is the historically true imposition of the price for telling the joke. It is indeed a fact that performers of this humor were loaded onto transports, taken to death camps, and gassed. The actual historical records of these deeds make the unsafety of this ethnic humor unique in its own brand of taboo categorization.

There are those who would claim that Holocaust humor simply falls into the category of sick humor. This is the label reserved for such comedic responses to tragedy as those that make us react with shock to the cultural indecency of the remark. This can be accomplished through the use of obscenity, such as could be heard first in the comedy act of Lenny Bruce, and today which can be heard on some cable televised comedy specials. Oddly enough, one of the most popular sick (and obscene) comedians of today is Robert Schimmel, who is a Second Generation Holocaust Survivor. Both of his parents survived Auschwitz. Schimmel’s graphic allusions to sexual dysfunction and body function have shocked audiences in clubs all over the country for the better part of the last twenty years. And yet, he has just had his HBO special air on national television, without editing. How does Schimmel succeed? Firstly, he is a schlemiel. Schimmel is

short, bald, and is the brunt of his jokes. He is the one on whom the sexual dysfunction falls. If the penis is small, he is the punchline. If the penis is large, he may claim that it is his, but then he will appear sheepish, to let us know that it is not the case. If the penis doesn't operate, he reveals that it is his. He reports on the foibles of premature ejaculation as if it were his personal duty to invite similarly struggling men everywhere to come out of the closet. Schimmel is the classic victim, in this case, of his own body. But he is also the victor because he tells the joke first before it can be revealed. He removes the potential vulnerability by wearing it. What differentiates his humor from classic Holocaust Humor, is that it is not about the Holocaust, and therefore has no martyr's nobility in it. It is simply shocking in its spirit of the blunt honest confession.

Lenny Bruce was a classic schlemiel also, but this was hidden in the fact that he used "bad" words, which made him appear the aggressor. Yet, his monologues were peppered with self-deprecating remarks. He was further victimized when removed from the stage by police, and mistreated in the courts. His alleged suicide made him the ultimate schlemiel. The comic dealt blows to the system, and died an incapacitated drug addict doing it. And if his death was the result of a conspiracy, he was even more truly a victim. However, again, there is no nobility in being a drug addict in the eyes of society. And in Holocaust Humor, the sickness of obscenity or bluntness is dulled by the pervasive atmosphere surrounding the demise of a peaceful civilian group. My grandmother, Jana Gottlieb, Auschwitz survivor, enjoyed telling of the time she had to relieve herself next to someone who had been highly influential in her community, a person she would have never had the chance to socialize with under any other

circumstances. Gottlieb found herself sitting on a board with holes in it that served as a latrine. This arrangement was out of doors, in full view of all, but under the penalty of death, bathroom business was mandatorily conducted at these sites. "I looked next to me, and there was Doctor So-and-so, the most prominent dentist in all of Brno! Imagine! Doctor So-and-so taking a crap just like me!" Though the humor is base, the underlying pathos is the degradation of both the woman forced to eliminate next to a male, and of the prominent doctor's humiliation of having to excrete in public under threat of death.

Is Holocaust humor sick? Sick humor contains an absence of respect, and no hope. As reviewed in the joke about the Jews going to the gas chamber, the hope is present because the inference is that one could potentially earn release by good behavior.

Compare to this the tone of these jokes, circulating orally within a week of the January 1986 explosion of the spaceshuttle Challenger:

Q. What does N.A.S.A. stand for?

A. Need Another Seven Astronauts.

Q. What color were Christa McAuliffe's eyes?

A. One blew here, one blew there.

In a performance at the Comedy Store nightclub in Hollywood, California, the night of the Challenger tragedy, it was observed that a number of struggling comedians had gathered to construct the optimal joke pertaining to the tragedy. A Comedy Store staple named Mitchel Walters suggested this joke:

Q. What was the last thing that went through Christa McAuliffe's mind?

A. The windshield

This sick joke form is interchangeable with any other transportation-accident victim. It was used in contemporary oral joke-passing when Reginald Denny was beaten during the Los Angeles Riots. Instead of the windshield that went through his mind, it was the brick. Sick jokes are characteristically formed from easily transferable structures. The main ingredient seems to be irreverence, not originality. It is the shock from the irreverence that creates the taboo and possibly, the ensuing laugh response. But the humor is notably without hope.

Gallows humor originated at the hangings, which gave it its name. Zolten feels that this form of humor is the laughter that keeps us from crying. In the face of the Challenger tragedy, the country was appalled at the sight of the female sojourner, Christa McAuliffe, who was also a devoted school teacher, being eradicated from existence in the blink of an eye, never mind the obliteration of the other astronauts. This creates a martyred subject, as in Holocaust Humor. But the analogy ceases there, as the gallows humor is about the death of an individual, or perhaps a small group. Holocaust Humor is about the near-liquidation of an entire race, and of the handicapped, the Romas, the homosexuals of Europe, political prisoners, and other smaller groups victimized by hatred.

Gallows humor emerges after a period of time in which we are distanced, or numbed to the empathy we had felt for the killed individual. And as previously shown, the element of distance is considered essential in determining the propriety of the timing with which to invite comedy to a situation. This was well described in an article published in the *Literature/Film Quarterly* entitled "Humor into Film: Self Reflections in Adaptations

of Black Comic Novels” by Nancy Pogel and William Chamberlain (1985). They state from the beginning of the article that the reception of comic novels depends most heavily on the distance that has been allowed to occur between the participant (reader) and the subject matter:

In all comedy there are some prerequisites: there must be, as Walter Blair and others have observed, some distance between the audience and the object of the joke before humor is possible. This distance allows the audience to perceive the contrast between an inflexible norm, or valued convention within an apparently orderly or consistent world, and the more spontaneous, often outrageous or subversive, alternative to that “regularity.”...

...The appearance of Black Comedy as a major trend in modern literature is associated with a well-known Post-World War II consciousness, a climate of skepticism following the years when the silent or placid generation tried desperately to ignore Hiroshima and the Holocaust and to begin life anew as if nothing had happened between 1938 and 1945 (Pogel and Chamberlain 1985, 187-188)

The reference to the “trend in modern literature” is actually a reference to the post-modern era of the Sixties, when the humor in novels became highly deconstructionist in its satirical nature. However, the position claiming that black humor emerged as a means to escape or empower over the nightmares of World War II further proves that the birth of Holocaust Humor has developed a unique position in society. It

certainly does not have the intention of creating a means for psychic escape from the horrors of war.

Yet, the argument of the importance of distance is clearly significant, and is often addressed in the films of Woody Allen. It is dealt with in a subverted manner in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), which should in no way reduce the important message of the significance of distance in Allen's work. Sander H. Lee reports this well in his book entitled, *Woody Allen's Angst: Philosophical Commentaries on His Serious Films* (1997). Allen has written about the struggle between the commercialism in film and television, and of the traditional lack of success of the artistic, highly principled filmmaker. His character in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Lester, is a shlock media producer, who is trying to give a leg up to Cliff, the impoverished maker of relevant documentaries. Cliff convinces Lester to allow him to make a documentary of his success, and is instead comes face to face with his own failure. In the making of the film, Lester espouses that comedy is "tragedy plus time." Lee asserts that the meaning of Allen's dialogue for Lester infers that pain is essential to spark comedy. Then Lee addresses the distance issue, as Lester makes an example of the Lincoln assassination, and how it wasn't fair game for humor the night it happened, but is fair game today.

Lee debates the stance that Allen takes, saying that the reaction of disgust from Cliff, who clearly voices Allen's own distaste for humor based on others' agony, seems to refute Allen's own *raison d'être* in his films: laughing at the pain of Woody Allen. But this is using distance as a figurative approach to the public propriety of humor. Allen is very much intending for the spectator to look at the passage of time as a common

ingredient in the permissibility of black humor. Whether it is acceptable to those who claim a higher social consciousness is not the issue here, even though Allen wants the filmgoer to be enlightened as to the crudeness of commercial exploitation of difficult subjects. The issue is one of the taboo, which indicates that certain specific subjects have earned an off-limits rating:

Thus Lester is wrong in his use of Lincoln's assassination as an example. Because it happened so long ago, and because we today are so accustomed to accepting it, no joke about it would be particularly funny. This might suggest that jokes about more recent such events, like the assassinations of the Kennedys or Martin Luther King, Jr., would be riper ground for humor. However, I think Allen would disagree with this as well. Some events, in fact, are so reprehensible and shocking that any attempt to exploit them for the purposes of comedy would be both inappropriate and tasteless. Using Lester's definition of the components of humor, the Holocaust would appear to be fertile ground for gags. After all, the event encompassed the pain and suffering of millions, and it took place close to fifty years ago ("tragedy plus time"). But, of course, any attempt to make jokes about the Holocaust would be unspeakably vulgar and decidedly not funny. Lester might respond that this is because not enough time has yet passed; however, it is clear that no amount of time, not even hundreds of years, would change our reactions to such jokes, any more than the passage of over a hundred years has made the sufferings of slavery a fit topic for humor (Lee 1997, 273).

And yet, Holocaust Humor exists today, and there are those who laugh at it. Also, there exists a successful punk band called “The Dead Kennedys.” Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech has been parodied on stand up stages across the nation.

Contemporary Holocaust Humor

The humor from the Holocaust era first emerged filmicly in 1940 in Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, again in 1942 in Ernst Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be*, and in Lena Wertmuller’s *Seven Beauties/Pasqualino Settebellezze* (1975). These were later followed by *The Producers* (1967) by Mel Brooks, then in 1985 in the film *Shoah*, and more recently in 1998’s *Life is Beautiful* and *Jacob the Liar*, and 1999’s *The Train of Life*. It is interesting to note that *Life is Beautiful* received the Oscar for Best Picture of 1998. That alone certainly indicates the beginnings of the relaxation, or allowance for impurity regarding the taboo. There is debate as to whether or not the television show of the 1960’s, *Hogan’s Heroes*, was a Holocaust comedy, but it dealt with a situation and location specific to the internment camps of World War II, and had a Holocaust survivor in its cast, Werner Klemperer.

Today, an irreverent television cartoon show has alluded to the camps comedically (*South Park*). Art Spiegelman has won a Pulitzer Prize for his Holocaust comic book, *Maus*.

Innumerable reviews of this matter declare the impropriety of these representations, and yet they occur with more frequency with each passing year. It can be assumed that works of Holocaust humor are generated by those who have a need to tell these tragic stories with a darkly humorous slant, and are consumable by an audience that

is interested in receiving them. Yet, the taboo rages on, in the voices of critics that beg humorists to stop trivializing the Holocaust. Maurizio Viano objectively studies this in an article published for *Film Quarterly*(1999), entitled “Life is Beautiful: Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter”. Commenting on another critic’s review in the *Village Voice*, J. Hoberman, Viano quotes Hoberman’s sardonic prophesy, “it was *Schindler’s List* that made mass extermination safe for mass consumption.”

However, the existence of a very large number of non-angry Jewish re/viewers belies the assumption that being Jewish should automatically be hating *Life is Beautiful*. Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, was approached by leaders of the Italian-Jewish community concerned by and divided on *Life is Beautiful*.

Before viewing it, Foxman remarked that a comic film set in Auschwitz “cannot be done, [it] is trivializing”(Viano 1999, 27-28).

Foxman changed his mind, because he felt the film was “poignant and sensitive.” It would appear, at least by the American standard of weights and measures, the almighty box office, that careful humor about the Holocaust may be losing its taboo. However, a market for the explosively controversial humor of the Survivor and the Second Generation Survivor has not found a place in performance. This is the last mostly uncharted exploitation of the genre of Holocaust humor, because it has been kept behind the closed doors of those directly affected by the tragedy. Typically, the stand ups are attempting to pave the way for the in-your-face brand of humor to emerge, as evidenced by the opening line from Deb Filler’s one-woman show *Punch Me in the Stomach*. “Good

Evening Ladies and Genocides! The last time I saw this many Jews together, they were naked!”(Oster 1999, 84)

It is easy to see how the title *Punch Me in the Stomach* reflects the predictably volatile reaction to the humor contained in Filler’s show. The difficulty with this reaction is that it opposes a portion of the voice of those who remember, and are emboldened by the humor that existed during their tragedy. It also defies the desires of some descendants of Holocaust survivors to pass on their comic legacy. One such descendant is Steve Lipman, who has written the only existing tome that is solely about the humor “used” during the event of the Nazi death camps. In *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust* (1993), Lipman argues with points made by another author, a survivor, Terrence Des Pres. Des Pres is a prominent expert on writing of the Holocaust, and is known for his landmark study of life in the camps with his autobiographical work, *The Survivor-An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camp* (1980). Lipman has taken exception to Des Pres’ insistence upon a formulaic approach to recording the memory of the camps. Des Pres claims that works of literature about the Holocaust must require three elements: insistence on the tragedy’s uniqueness, minimal deviation from the historical facts, and a humorless presentation. Lipman defends the humor as essential to the truth:

When Hitler’s victims themselves laugh at their plight-as many did, to preserve their own sanity-the door is left open for others. Does that explain the questionable contributions of recent mass entertainment: Hogan’s Heroes on television, Mel Brooks’ “Springtime for Hitler” parody in The Producers on screen....Has the post-Holocaust generation usurped the survivor’s prerogative to

laugh at the Hitler years?...Are these efforts ultimate proof of the dictum that humor equals tragedy plus time?

...Wit produced on the precipice of hell was not frivolity, but psychological necessity.

...Nothing about the Holocaust was funny. By appreciating the humor from the period we are not laughing at the victims or their suffering; we are simply recognizing that laughter was a part of their lives, a part nurtured by their suffering. They found humor, sometimes-sardonic humor, in all aspects of their disrupted existence (Lipman 1993, 8-9).

Psychiatrist Victor Frankl observed that in Auschwitz an operative sense of humor both afforded detachment from one's predicament and forced one to recognize it. He tells of the sense of distance that a comic attitude creates, maintaining a buffer, or sense of safety, from the reality of the threatening situation (Frankl 1959, 54-56). It would seem that a portrait of these people displaying their use of a comedic safety net would be correct. Holocaust victims had a dire need for safety and were experiencing the apparent lack of response from a world that presumably knew of their plight, therefore, they did what they had to do, or "used comedy" as Lipman maintains.

Yet, as defensible as this may sound, there is a pervasively resistant attitude towards the telling and showing of humorous incidences in the framework of the Holocaust, and even more resistance to the portraying of individuals who operate comedically in filmic situations. This taboo has been upheld as a response to the notion that to produce or perform in film or television portrayals employing Holocaust humor.

one must be promoting an anti-Semitic agenda. This does not take into account that much of this humor is produced by and for Jews. However, there is also a school of thought that anti-Semitic Jews or self-haters produce this humor.

Holocaust humor has been accepted in literature and in theatre when it is tender, indentifying signifying practices which encode these categories of humor. The jokes are permissible, when they have a cultural tinge of Sholom Alechem, or possess endearing characters that are pervasive in Yiddish literature. But to appear with a character that is bold or sarcastic in humor or to be excessively broad in physical comedy in the setting of the Holocaust is deemed to be a new and disrespectful approach.

Moshe Waldoks in *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (1981) tracks the history of the cultural forms of Jewish humor, as well as addresses issues pertaining to taboo:

That brings us to the central misunderstanding about contemporary American Jewish humor; that it is largely self-hating. According to this view, traditional Jewish humor is warm, sweet, nostalgic, and unthreatening; contemporary Jewish humor, by contrast, is seen as harsh, vulgar, neurotic, and increasingly masochistic (Waldoks 1981, xv).

As an example, a “traditional Jewish” joke might be this classic bit of humor using the Russian mythical prankster, Abram Rabinovich. He is used as the star of jokes which require a clever soul, capable of gently outwitting anti-semitic Soviet aggressors.

The census taker comes to the Rabinovich house.

“Does Abram Rabinovich live here?” he asks.

“No.” replies Rabinovich.

“Well, then, comrade, what is your name?”

“Abram Rabinovich.”

“Wait a minute – didn’t you just tell me that Rabinovich doesn’t live here?”

“Aha,” says Rabinovich. “You call this living?” (Waldoks 1981, 78)

This is a formulaic joke based upon the good nature of a clever but persecuted soul. The contemporary humor can also be exemplified with this joke from the epilogue of the outrageous play by Peter Barnes, *Laughter* (1978).

...set in “Block B. Auschwitz II,”...two Jewish comics, Abe Bimko and Hymie Bieberstein [perform] in their “farewell appearance at a Christmas concert...

Bimberstein: I could be wroing, but I think this act is dying.

Bimko: The way to beat hydrocyanide gas is by holding your breath for five minutes. It’s just a question of mind over matter. They don’t mind and we don’t matter.

Followed by the final stage directions:

THEY *die in darkness*. (Barnes, 1978)

Yet, can one truly be masochistic if one is attempting to stay alive? This would indicate that contemporary humor, which incorporates the emergence of Holocaust humor, is more involved with the challenging of a taboo, than with self-destruction.

Lipman’s anthology defends the right of the Holocaust Survivor and the Second Generation to possess their humor, but it is still taboo. The humor becomes something that is set apart for a distinct group or perhaps a group that has earned the right to use it because of a direct physical connection to the incident. The second definition seems to

clearly state the nature of the taboo as presented by the recent film treatment of Holocaust Humor, as the treatment is “in-your-face” contemporary, and as the humor has never received such public criticism as it has this past two years. There are many hypothetical reasons for the emergence of Holocaust Humor, but the fact remains that never more so in the past fifty-four years than now, have works in this genre infused the realm of film production. As previously stated, three major “Holocaust Comedies”, the film version of the genre entitled “Holocaust Humor”, have emerged. They are: *Life is Beautiful* (1998) by Vincenzo Cerami and Roberto Benigni; *Jakob the Liar* (1998) adapted for the screen by Peter Kassovitz, Didier Decoin and Ron Hutchinson; and *Train of Life* (1999) by Radu Mihaileanu. Tom Tugend, in his article for the *Los Angeles Times* (October 5, 1999) reports on the emergence of these films as being part of an evolutionary process in the artistic perception of the Holocaust, in a pattern similar to the phenomenon of scientific discoveries which occur simultaneously. Tugend uses the word “taboo” in acknowledging the release of *Life is Beautiful*, perceiving that film as being credited for being the first to break the barrier. However, the more slapstick film *Train of Life*, was created simultaneously by the French writer-director Radu Milhaileanu, who refers to *Life* as “Shoah-Lite” (Tugend 1999, online posting, 2). This comment is particularly of interest, as *Train* is definitely more cartoon-like both in its characterizations and narrative.

In many respects, these works follow the traditional route of Jewish comedies. The stars are Schlemiels, or Anti-heroes, or the classic Little Man. They take place among simple folk, in settings that describe the dwelling places of these individuals as

poor and struggling. They all have the persecutor (the Nazis) and involve the cunning of the anti-hero to provide a valiant fight against oppression. Mayhem and slapstick are most often employed as the comic vehicles, as well as more subtle wit.

Traditional Jewish comedy in Holocaust literature has been well received, as is the written version of *Jakob the Liar* by Becker. The taboo seems to come into play with the appearance of projections of imagined comic scenes in relation to the horrifying setting.

Chapter 4: *Life is Beautiful*

Much of the debate about Holocaust humor in film has been encapsulated by Maurizio Viano. Again the name of De Pres, in “Holocaust Laughter” from *Writing Into the World* (1991) takes the forefront in this debate, with his attack on the use of humor in this context. De Pres admires some forerunners of these films because he feels they do not use blatant humor, but rather irony. Viano reports that Des Pres thinks this is a sign of the times, that people are becoming more flexible about interpretation. This would also indicate that Des Pres himself is undergoing an evolution towards a mild acceptance of careful humor in the context of Holocaust. Viano claims that the production of *Life is Beautiful* and Mihaileanu’s *Train of Life* proves that flexibility is occurring. But De Pres becomes passionately critical of Benigni’s treatment of the subject matter in *Life is Beautiful*. De Pres welcomes Holocaust humor in literature, but sees it as having no place in the cinema. He maintains that once the humor is performed, visualized, history becomes written by revisionists (Des Pres 1991, 77-86).

Without further explanation from him, one can only assume that Des Pres’ attitude comes from his objection to comedic performers, non-survivors, placing themselves in the situation of the camps. And yet, in interviews of former camp internees, many have documented reports of true comedic personalities having lived in the camps. At a recent panel discussion I attended at the Actor’s Theatre in Santa Cruz, California, in November of 1999, one anonymous survivor referred to himself as the “clown of the camp”. Yet, De Pres holds that in viewing the clowning, one is witnessing something that could have never happened, wouldn’t have been allowed to happen, and therefore should not be

portrayed. The impressions that anything was light in the context of the death camps is taboo. Yet, an unyielding position of absolute reverence can create revisionist history if it suppresses what truly existed. Therefore, the argument that a representation of humor existing in the camps is erroneous somehow defiles the historical truth of what was. It is perhaps an obligatory reverential tone that pretends as if camp humor was non-existent. This traditional regard for tone creates the revisionism it attempts to prevent. Richard Schickel in *Time* magazine quotes:

Sentimentality is a kind of fascism too, robbing us of judgment and moral acuity, and needs to be resisted (Schickel 1998, 116-17).

Interestingly enough, Schickel went on to bash *Life is Beautiful* for being overly sentimental, saying that it created trivialization, rather than humor . This would directly conflict with the criticism that the film was not reverent enough. Then it was the strictly negative report from Gerald Peary's *Boston Phoenix Review* that reproclaimed the humor aspect in the film as being "revisionist"(Viano 1999, 27). And then, a letter from Peter Frankel to *The Jerusalem Report* vilified both the film and the publication for indulging in support of *Life is Beautiful*:

To use the Holocaust to create a comedy is something I cannot come to terms with. To embellish the Holocaust with stories and "comic" incidents is totally contemptible.

The great Viennese comedian Grunbaum, sent to the camps in 1938, did try very hard to raise his fellow inmates' spirits. That did happen. It is a fact. But for an

Italian non-Jew, not even of the Holocaust generation, to use the Holocaust is almost inhuman (Frankel, online posting, 1998,1).

In this letter, Frankel calls the comedic elements in the film “embellishment”, then contradicts himself by reporting of comedy in the camps. Therefore, he destroys his own argument by proving the accuracy of the film he is negating. He also asserts that Benigni is not properly connected enough to indulge in this humor, thereby supporting the defined taboo.

And yet, the National Director of the sometimes militant Anti-Defamation League, Abraham H. Foxman, writes in zealous support of the film:

Humor and the Holocaust-an oxymoron in terms. Yet, in *Life is Beautiful*,...Roberto Benigni makes it work.

How can one reconcile humor with the greatest horror mankind has witnessed? As a Holocaust survivor I was sure it couldn't be done. but after seeing *Life is Beautiful* I became convinced that Roberto Benigni had created something very special-and very important. The film succeeds because the comedy is used to create a stark contrast between normal life and life during The Shoah. It heightens the level of anxiety the viewer has about the terror..it works because it adds one more layer that connects the viewer, humanizing the tragedy in ways that a more direct depiction may not (Foxman, online posting, November 1999,1).

Maurizio Viano feels that there is an issue at play here that has not been previously recognized, which satisfies him as to why some people are comfortable

viewing within the taboo, and why some find it intolerable. He feels that the acceptance of Holocaust Humor in film has more to do with the “level” of the consumer:

To understand the nature of this obstacle, let us look at the group constituted by all those who write or talk about films from a position of some authority, from local or campus paper reviewers to academic scholars and highbrow critics. An examination of the critical judgements of *Life is Beautiful*, conventionally framed within a low-,middle-, and highbrow hierarchy, reveals that, within limits inherent in all generalizations, the higher the re/viewer’s position the more negative the review(Viano 1999, 28).

The inference made in Viano’s statement is that if one is to approve of *Life is Beautiful* as a valid and inoffensive film, then one does not possess a higher or more refined cultural taste. He bases this conclusion on a comparison he makes between the caliber of the newspapers from which he has selected his reviews to exemplify his point. The favorable reviews, Viano points out, come from the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*. The negative reviews discussed in his article come from “the culturally superior *Boston Phoenix* and *The Village Voice*. “ Viano takes up issues of taste, as defined by the French sociologist, Bourdieu. Bourdieu maintains that taste is determined by time spent and skill exhibited in a given area. Therefore, Viano asserts that the publications with negative reviews are journals that print scholarly articles and display more erudite taste:

Our tastes, choices, and reactions must appear to be the result of freedom, talent, and intelligence rather than sociocultural logic, apprenticeship, and privilege (Viano 1999, 28).

Viano proposes that scholars of film are not influenced by the marketing in the industry. Furthermore, he asserts that it is the well-educated film scholar who, through financial privilege, has access to true art, and therefore enjoys an elevated position in the hierarchy of taste. By possessing an elevated standard for the consumerism of film art, he feels that film scholars are among those who are not influenced by “temptations of the entertainment industry (lowbrow) sentimentalism, media-hype, easy to understand plots, immediate pleasures (slapstick and payoffs)”(Viano 1999, 28).

Viano also states that Benigni as a performer is not capable of being taken seriously by “serious critics”, and quotes Thierry Jousse’s criticism from the Cannes Film Festival declaring that Benigni supporters have no right to compare this star to Chaplin.

Yet Viano supports the intelligence of the title taken from letters by Trotsky as he faced death, and he praises the storyline as revealed in the narrative, all the while struggling to ignore the base physical humor (Viano 1999, 29). However, it is shortly after this that Viano runs into some difficulty as he maintains that the first half of the film has the humor, and the second half has almost none. He feels that the avoidance of base humor in the latter half makes it possible for us to see the absurdity in the life of an Italian Jew of this era; the incongruity of being wrenched from one carefree life into the jaws of a death camp. Granted, a lessening of humor occurs in the film, but certainly humor, both witty and slapstick in nature, occur in both halves of *Life is Beautiful*.(Fig. 1) But Viano is positive that the two halves of the movie are very separate, which makes it tasteful:

Life is Beautiful splices together two halves that are, in fact, recalcitrant opposites, one the negation of the other: slapstick comedy and tragedy (Viano 1999, 31).

Therefore, Benigni is said to be excused from some of the taboo-violation .because he is a physical comic who is addressing the Holocaust with a broadly comic Performer Code *mostly* in the settings not related to the horror of the death camps. The problem with this line of reasoning is that both halves of the film employ elements of comedy (Fig. 1) By Performer Code, the reported activity is that of the actor in terms of his choice of degree of gesture, mannerism, and body mechanics (physiognomy). In both halves of the film, Benigni makes choices that are exaggerated and comedic, and decidedly impossible in reality.

As shown in the ensuing figure, comedy is present throughout the film, but what is disturbing is the apparent neccessity to log the humor in both halves in order to prove its existence. It is this very element that shows how profound the taboo is. as it seems to be negated by Viano to protect the constraints of propriety imposed on the taboo-laden film.

Humor noted is only that in the film which most directly pertains to the explicit and separate nature of Holocaust Humor.

Figure 1

TABOO HUMOR IN FIRST HALF OF *LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL*

- 1 *Car becomes part of Nazi parade.* A slapstick scene with an out-of-control car threatens to decimate a Nazi rally. This is taboo because of what is known about the threat of Nazis. This creates an underlying seriousness in the tone of the parade. The seriousness of the topic defies the treatment with the overt sight gag as the style defies the tone.

- 2 *Entire wall covered with black and white Mussolini painting:* Disparaging humor from an outgroup towards an ingroup. Mussolini's destructive legacy is trivialized by the absurdity of the huge mural in a retail setting. Also, does not defuse negative emotions, rather creates them as his picture is a reminder of the atrocities which occurred under his power, yet a comedic scene transpires in front of the portrait.
- 3 *Guido wears an exaggerated bow across chest:* Trivializes the serious responsibility involved in choosing to wear a fascist uniform. Not distanced enough from trauma signified by the wearing of emblems. Tension is possibly exacerbated by the current resurgence in the wearing of Nazi symbols by Neo-Nazis.
- 4 *Guido gives speech on ethnic superiority:* Casually displaying his ears and navel, Guido presents a farcical imitation of the ingroup by the outgroup which also trivializes one argument supporting Hitler's Final Solution – that of physical "proof" of racial superiority.
- 5 *Punchline about being painted yellow:* Guido jokes that he should be the color of the Jewish armband with "Achtung Jewish Waiter" on himself. This gag does not defuse negative emotions, creating rather than relieving tension. It also liberates repressed subject matter of the enforced wearing of armbands.
- 6 *Man Sieg Heil's the ostrich.:* Sight gag where style defies tone, a cavalier attitude towards the implications of making such a salute.
- 7 *Guido rides horse into the ballroom.* The horse is painted with "Attention, Jewish Horse" on it. Style defies tone, as Guido imitates Prince Charming, sweeping Dora onto the horse. What is meant to be a parody of a romantic scene becomes a spotlight on the contrast between the scenario of the simple attraction of a comic man to a beautiful woman and the humiliation of persecution.
- 8 *Guido explains shop sign to Joshua:* Guido attempts to defuse his son's worry over a sign refusing service to Jews as inconsequential as a "No Chinese or Kangaroos" placard. Trivializes the impact of exclusion to spare son's feelings. Creates a taboo effect in some portions of the audience who feel that by opening the door on the plausibility of an excuse such as this, it creates a minimization of the danger existent at the time.
- 9 *Guido goosesteps for Joshua.:* Humor trivializes the lethal nature of the Nazi soldier by making the marching style appear silly. Also, the threat of death is a reality if Guido is discovered employing mimicry. By his ability to avoid consequence for his behavior, he trivializes the danger existent at the time.

Figure 2
Second Half – Death Camp

- 10 *Guido pretends to order Nazi soldiers around:* Guido insists that the guards return them to their home, for the benefit of his son. He is acting as if internment were a game. Although it is meant to be fantasy rather than historically accurate, this element in the second half of the movie has caused the most controversy in that this humor is that which critics claim to be most trivializing. They argue that any levity in front of Nazi guards would not have been tolerated. There would have been enormous consequences, perhaps death, if Nazi “superiors” had been addressed in a disrespectful tone. The taboo here is one of the trivialization of tragedy, and also that the topic is considered too serious for a light tone. To present a casual gaming atmosphere, even if it is feigned for the benefit of a child, is to dare to say that anything but utter misery was present under these circumstances. Critics claim that these camp jokes create an environment ripe for revisionist history of Holocaust denial.
- 11 *Guido invents survival game rules:* See #10.
- 12 *Guido steps forward to translate German, gives false translation:* See #10.
- 13 *Guido uses public address system:* Guido makes a speech to Dora over the camp’s system. This event is perhaps the most surreal part of the movie. That a prisoner would be free to roam, and would have the opportunity to use a public address system, and would then survive is the ultimate act of fantasy in this setting. This inference is that one could easily get away with a bold defiant act in the setting of a Nazi death camp. See #10.
- 14 *Joshua placed in SS dining room with Aryan children:* This is not especially Holocaust humor, but the implausibility of this advantage happening to an imprisoned child addresses the same trivialization taboo that is created by the fantastic turn of events.
- 15 *Joshua stuffing his mouth:* The fact that his behavior, motivated by starvation, is so outlandish in the polite surroundings, and that, once again, this behavior is overlooked by the elite SS in the dining room, infers that such a thing would be possible. Therefore, it perhaps could create an artificial assumption that the camps were not as dangerous as reported.
- 16 *“Mama Mia, are those guys ever mad!”* Guido shouts this line as the liberation of the camp appears to be near. Dialogue defies tone of the camps, and the joke is outside of the prevailing culture. “Mama Mia” can be a Holy Mother reference. Jews don’t swear by mother images. Therefore, Guido’s Jewishness is in question. Also, he continues to play the game, even as liquidation appears certain. Having not been

represented as being insane, it makes his impending death appear of little consequence.

- 17 *Rolls up pantlegs, puts sweater on head to appear female*: Slapstick that defies the seriousness of the setting.
- 18 *Guido winks broadly, goosesteps as soldier butts him*: With a machine gun digging into his back, Guido is lead away from his son. He winks and clowns. Does not defuse negative emotions, but increases high physical arousal. Guido attempts to be cavalier with his shtick, but the event with the introduction of the gun is too serious for this behavior to be plausible . The son appears addled for believing in the apparent safety of the situation.

As evidenced by the Performer and Performance codes noted in Figure 1 , an abundance of taboo comedy occurs throughout *Life is Beautiful*. Much of this is classic Benigni physical comedy. This would support Viano's and others' theory that physical humor and base humor exist in this film. If this is the definition of what makes a film seem humorous and appealing to a less educated, less-affluent audience, then the ingredients are indeed present. However, as Viano has stated that the absence of comedy in the latter half creates a space for this film's approval by the highbrow scholar, we must object and notice that broad comedy and slapstick do exist fully in the second half of this film. It must be pointed out, though, that many incidences of broad comedy exist outside of the serious camp setting, and fewer exist in the camp setting.

Perhaps the statement that this study makes is that the commercial success of the film may have occurred by a relaxing of the taboo against Holocaust humor. This may have been possible because of the distancing created by the passage of time. However, the conflicting evidence lies in the fact that survivors and their immediate families still live, however, they indulge in this humor. Also, it would appear that the utilization of Holocaust comedy in film could be permissible at this point in time if broad and surreal

comedy is presented in the devastating setting of the location where atrocities were known to have been performed. This may show that if the comedy is highly improbable, it can be permitted because *it doesn't claim to be true*. It also doesn't claim to be funny.

Chapter 5: *The Great Dictator*

Chaplin's movie, *The Great Dictator* (1940), has much slapstick occur in the Jewish ghetto. The ghetto was an infamous locale for atrocities performed by Nazis against Jews.

Censors predicted that Chaplin's controversial comedy would be banned in both the United States and in Great Britain, but the film was a success, both critically and financially. Perhaps this was due, in part, to the narrative's emphasis on the ridiculing of a Hitler figure (Hinkel) and of the dogma of a constructed fascist party which obviously paralleled the Nazi Party. Patricia Erens included a study of *Dictator* in her book, *The Jew in American Cinema* (1984). She addresses the response of Chaplin to those who would criticize the film's propriety:

But Chaplin recalls in his autobiography, "I was determined to go ahead. for Hitler must be laughed at." ...Some felt that a comedy about such a grave situation was offensive.

Chaplin's concept for *The Great Dictator* was to "make fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis" and to "ridicule their mystic bilge about a pure-blooded race." He admitted later, however, that had he known the full extent of the horrors, he could not have made the film. Yet paradoxically the provisional script, according to McCabe, "placed stronger emphasis on the suffering of Jews in Germany than the final version"(Erens 1984, 154).

In one scene, Chaplin removes his prison garb to reveal a pair of toasty longjohns beneath, inferring that the prisoners were allowed to thrive in comfort. Yet, in the script, the references to the camps from those living in the ghetto clearly show that the Jewish

inhabitants understand the exact destination of the transports, and the death that would ensue. Since Chaplin wrote the movie, the evidence shows that he indeed knew the extent of what was occurring when the film was written and shot, which was 1939. It poses an interesting question about the lack of involvement in the war by those who claimed not to know of the atrocities being perpetrated by the Nazis, particularly since this film was widely released and acclaimed. If a comedy film portrayed the Jews in concentration camps as being aware that they were going to their deaths, and the film became a popular success, then why were the camps allowed to operate with relative impunity for six more years? Chaplin's speech at the end of the movie is an impassioned plea to end the atrocities of war. How ironic it is that the scene was the only one in which he was speaking seriously about the Holocaust, and is the one where he appears most self-indulgent and maudlin.

Another interesting concept comes into play as we look at the standard formula of tragedy plus distance equals comedy. *Dictator* was produced in the middle of the tragedy, and was well received. *Life is Beautiful*, *Jakob the Liar*, and *Train of Life* emerged in 1998, and experienced the strong response of those who support the taboo against Holocaust Humor. Because the atrocities were discussed in the film, then the truth to Chaplin's theory, that they were unknown at the time of its making, may indicate that a strong sense of denial was in place about the extent of the horrors being perpetrated by the Nazis. This would then allow for the freedom to accept *Dictator* without acknowledging the taboo. A very negative interpretation of the evidence would be that at the time, 1939, racism was rampant to the point that the nightmare of the individual

sufferings alluded to in *Dictator* were taken to be of not much consequence by an apathetic audience. More realistically, the answer probably lies in the emphasis of this film on ridiculing Der Fuehrer, with a lesser emphasis on the clowning of the Jewish anti-hero.

Viano's point that the highbrow scholar would not respond positively to slapstick is negated by the entitled scholarly admiration *Dictator* enjoys. The work is seen as a courageous political statement with a strong impact that should be lauded (Erens 1984, 153). Besides this, the film is infused with slapstick in every scene in the Performer code. (Fig. 3 and 4). Interestingly, the amount of slapstick and broad humor is by far greater in *The Great Dictator* than it is in *Life is Beautiful*. This would indicate the response to Benigni's performance differs in comparison to the response to Chaplin's, who has earned the reputation for being one of the greatest physical comics of all time. Benigni has not been spoken about in this light in scholarly works. Again this observation takes issue with Viano's theory of the highbrow and the lowbrow taste issue.

When confronting the issue of a Holocaust humor taboo being present in this earlier comedy, there are several elements which point out the difference in intensity of the taboo violation in *Dictator*. Chaplin's film's content (performance code) is less offensive *and* his performance skills apparently excuse those performer elements which would be objectionable if done by anyone less gifted than he. It suggests the talent of an individual, if remarkable enough, can override an existing taboo.

The Chaplin film also contains a vast amount of performance code Holocaust humor in its embellishment of the scenes. *Life Is Beautiful* tends to avoid this in

deference to realism. Therefore, the comedy in *The Great Dictator* is meant to be obviously a surreal parody, but is so closely parallel to the reality of the day, that no question can be had as to what the intention of the piece was. Oddly enough, in its joke-making attempt to broadly lampoon, it draws focus to the truth of the situation more closely than other attempts to be more accurate. This is because the filmmaker is not required to recreate the truth, but guides the audience member to recall reality in order to process the humor. Therefore, the responsibility for accuracy is shifted to the shoulders of the viewer, and is not recordable, as reality occurs in thought form only.

Figure 3 presents the Performance code humor exhibited in the film to showcase this point.

Figure 3

TABOO HUMOR IN THE *GREAT DICTATOR*

- 1 *The symbol of the "Double Cross"*: An invented insignia, the Double Cross, is implemented in the place of the Swastika. The infamous symbol is parodied with an image borrowed from the catch-phrase "double-crossed". The tone is light, but because the actual image of the swastika is implied rather than shown, the gag becomes only mildly taboo.
- 2 *Warm string music for opening credits*: Taboo sensation as style defies tone. However, this is a response appropriate for this time in history, and not for the presumably unaware movie consumer of 1939.
- 3 *Opening narrative (graphic)*: "This is a story of a period between two World Wars - an interim in which insanity cut loose, Liberty took a nose dive, and Humanity was kicked around somewhat". The intentional understatement trivializes the tragic. Violation of a morally sanctioned precept, as humanity is "kicked around a bit" refers to death and destruction, also in a defiantly light tone. Also, the film is contemporarily considered to be of World War II, not of an interim period.
- 4 *Shot of Chaplin's mustache*: Trimmed to imitate Hitler's, or what was Hitler thinking? A controversial subject, there are those who claim that Chaplin wore this first. Nonetheless, it is used in the context here as a parody of a mass murderer and proponent of genocide. Topic (Hitler) is too serious for parody. However, the Little

Tramp character has previously won acceptance in totality, and is a sympathetic anti-hero already in place in the affections of the audience. Chaplin ultimately evades the taboo because of this.

- 5 *Barber carries fainted German Officer*: Chaplin's character, who eventually becomes a barber, carries a wounded Schultz, shown with a tight angle on Captain's posterior. Although this is WWI, Chaplin is fighting on the "wrong side", and is potentially saving the life of a Nazi official. Possible ingratiation tactic, definitely violates the norm where we don't sympathize on the side of the enemy (outgroup), when our own is falling all around. The slapstick makes it nearly innocent, but the problem of presenting the protagonist as enemy remains.
- 6 *Gibberish dialogue of Hinkel's*: Dispersed with phrases such as "Wienerschnitzel and sauerkraut", Chaplin places easily identifiable German words in the script that have become iconic to the English speaking audience of the Western world. This transforms the terrifying shouting speeches of Hitler into nonsensical babble. Lebensborn referred to as "Katzenjammer Kids", which disarms the hideous plot to breed perfect Aryans, devaluing it into the unimportance of a cartoon-strip.
- 7 *Herr Garbage dialogue with Hinkel*: As if mated, Hinkel appears the cranky wife to Herr Garbage. Style defies tone, but this is also the first time we see the Hitler figure feminized. At the time it was created, the feminization of male villain characters was standard comedy practice. For example, cartoons from the era routinely show male antagonists wearing dresses which they have accidentally become entangled in. But the Hitler figure's femininity possibly falls into the problem of not being funny by today's standards. Homosexuality is not universally seen as grounds for comedy as Gay Rights have come to the forefront of consciousness. Also, this has the potential for the audience member to become the butt of the joke, if the audience member is homosexual. Creates a taboo response in the homosexual viewer.
- 8 *Nazis throw tomatoes*: Instead of shooting or beating Jews, the soldiers on patrol throw tomatoes at them. This is an unrealistically mild response, therefore trivializing the soldiers' behavior during The Occupation.
- 9 *Frisky music as the barber restores his shop*: Defies tone, after the ransacking of the Jew's business.
- 10 *Nazi kicks barber in pants*: This occurs after the barber is seen wiping the "Jew" sign off his shop window: Unrealistically moderate response to defiance. Trivializing slapstick.
- 11 *Barber shaken*: Shaking the Chaplin character like a rag doll, we are deceived into believing that this would be a real response to defiance.

- 12 *Nazis slap each other*: Mistakenly hitting each other, the Nazi soldiers appear foolish and not dangerous. Defies the gravity of the situation.
- 13 *Nazi gets hit with frying pan*.: The first of several trivializing slapstick bits involving a frying pan. Scripted cartoon-like humor, surreal and stylized.
- 14 *Dialogue with barber and Shultz*.: "I always thought of you as an Aryan." "I'm a vegetarian..." The light response, the misunderstanding, negates the significance of the remark about the alleged master race.
- 15 *Hinkel has aide lick envelope*: Slapstick trivializes the control Hitler had over his Nazi cohorts, and the scripted action is silly, therefore taboo-inducing.
- 16 *Man in bullet proof suit*: A joke about the inventors of the Third Reich, a scientist attempts to demonstrate his fail-proof suit. Of course, Hinkel kills him, making the comment afterwards. "Far from perfect." The topic of Hitler's indiscriminate slaughter is too serious for this treatment, and yet, the very trivialization of the human life is the structure of the slapstick humor.
- 17 *Professor falls out of window*: Another scientist attempts to show a magical device, falling to his death in the process. Hinkel's response is, "Why do you waste my time like this?" See #17.
- 18 *Hinkel jokes about food*: The Fuehrer character delights about the invention of synthetic food, in this case, sawdust in bread. Trivializes the death by starvation of millions under the Third Reich, but is delivered ala Marie Antoinette in an effeminate way. Whether or not this performer aspect is scripted, the effect amplifies the disregard for the tragedy.
- 19 *Hinkel's ballet*: Arguably one of Chaplin's best-known scenes ever, here he dances as Hinkel the prima ballerina skillfully toying with a balloon globe. This is noted for its genius in the performer code, and is a statement meant to symbolize a madman's casual pursuit to possess a world. The interpretation is broadly farcical, as the dictator indulges in a coy, seductive balloon dance with the planet. The trivialization has an interesting effect here, as it takes a backseat to the genius of the construction of the scene. As the taboo of levity applied to the subject of a devastated world begins, it is then superceded by the imposition of an effeminate interpretation of the character in the performer code. The dance is performed so skillfully, that the taboo is pushed further into the realm of the disturbingly absurd. Knowing what we know about the Holocaust, this classic scene has become more disturbing with distance of time rather than relieving. Thus, it pointedly shows how Holocaust humor defies traditional comedic constraints.

- 20 *Ethereal light beams* : In the dance, a holy beam of light is cast on the desk with globe, along with the Hitler figure who is embraced by the light. This is a violation of the perception of Hitler as one who embodied universal traits of evil. The scene is abrasive towards the safety or purity of the social structure composed of sanctified behaviors and dangerous or evil behaviors.
- 21 *Tight close up of Hinkel's snarling speech*: This speech of Hinkel's creates the taboo on several related fronts. The destructive message in Hitler's speeches is too serious for parody because of the widespread genocidal influence those words created. The liberation of repressed subject matter is loosed here because to impersonate Hitler has become a taboo in itself in this regard: an audience member is forced to regard Hitler imitations to make sure that they are broad enough not to be sympathetic. This camera close-up on Chaplin's mouth excludes the other parts of his body, therefore not giving a viewer an opportunity to distinguish if the impression is punitive enough. Chaplin's imitation is so realistic, that it doesn't necessarily diffuse negative emotions inspired by the barking speech of the Hitler look-alike. The only exception to this would be in the case of the viewer versed in the humorous anomaly of Hitler's speech pattern, the fact that he is ridiculed for having a lower-classed accent in his German, which is lampooned broadly in performance here.
- 22 *Coin in pudding* : As a group of Jewish men determine who will put his life in jeopardy to save the group by being the unlucky one to find a coin in their pudding, this slapstick routine of finding and hiding coins in other people's food is too slapstick for the seriousness of the impending martyrdom. Had this sort of sacrifice not been commonplace in Holocaust history, the scripted joke would have potential for being devised with impunity.
- 23 *Hiding in trunks* : Although this is classic slapstick, it brings to mind those who have hidden but ultimately faced horrible deaths, such as Anne Frank. Introduces negative emotions due to memory of real tragedy.
- 24 *Goose-stepping concentration camp inmates*: Preceding *Life is Beautiful* in this choice for unlikely conduct of prison camp internees, the taboo is the same. The inference made by this portrayal is that one could be a prisoner and escape alive even though lampooning Nazi soldiers. Opposes the historical memories of real camp inmates.
- 25 *Hailing slapstick*: Napoloney (Mussolini character) and Hinkel try to out-Seig Heil one another. The parody of the seig heil is an introduction of negative emotions that occur almost reflexively at a fascist hand signal, but its slight transformation attempts to diffuse the knee-jerk offensived reaction. However, the comedic element of distance from the source of negativity can't be put into play here, because the salute has experienced a resurgence in popularity and has media exposure in the reporting of

Neo Nazi activity. Therefore, the image of a fascist salute has a strong contemporary taboo property.

- 26 *Shultz and barber escape* : Dressed like Nazis, they escape the camp doing broadly comedic impressions of soldiers. Diluting the seriousness of the predicament of being stuck in an internment camp, the ease in the way this escape appears possible reverses the joke and makes the victims appear stupid for staying a prisoner. Almost implies agreement to victimization. The television show *Hogan's Heroes* received criticism for this same implied element.

If it were not for the genius in the performance code of Charlie Chaplin as Hinkel, I believe that this film would have never done well because of the volatility of the subject matter. But unlike *Benigni*, viewers perceive Chaplin's performance art as so captivating, that many of the aforementioned taboos are forgiven as they take a back seat to the enjoyment of his craft. This raises the question as to why a socially threatening impurity device, taboo, can be relaxed when delivered by an exceptional talent.

HUMOR IN CHAPLIN'S PERFORMER CODE IN *THE GREAT DICTATOR*

When Chaplin first appears as the barber, he is portraying a German soldier in World War I. This being the side of the enemy according to much of the world, it is interesting to note that Chaplin has selected his most beloved character for his portrayal: The Tramp, who is a classic schlemiel. This anti-hero moves in an innocuously innocent and amusing way, with dainty steps in a penguin-like gait. His eyes are widely innocent, and his mustache twitches broadly to punctuate his movements. The impotence of his response to danger is the hook of this character. It draws attention to the viewer's sense of lack of control in a perilous world. The laughter is derived from the audience's enjoyment of the incongruity between the little man and his insurmountable existence, and pleasure is

derived from the survival of the little man. For example, in the opening of *The Great Dictator*, the barber (who is never named, further increasing chance for identification with the audience), is tripping daintily around a battlefield. A huge missile points at him, and skips daintily around it, skidding on the toes of one foot as he rounds corners to escape it. The barber then hangs from the barrel of a huge gun, and as it turns, he swings his leg, knocking over several of his comrades. In close-ups, Chaplin bugs his eyes as he pats his helmet into place, but we see the straps dangling unhinged. His choice when looking for a missing grenade, is to pat his body carefully, and then to faint hugely when he finds it. The barber politely calls for his superior with a high pitched "Woo hoo", and then must do a pratfall to avoid a bullet. Finally, during the escape in the airplane, he is a gentleman to the end, not noticing that they are flying upside down. The little man converses innocently as he hangs downwards grasping the throttle, *not acknowledging the danger he is in*. It is this factor, perhaps, which may be the allowance for the relaxing of the taboo. Here, the victim is so out of touch with reality, that his innocence could be the element the audience can embrace as they forgive the beloved and familiar character for fighting on the side of the enemy. Eventually the barber character ceases to be the enemy, and becomes the persecuted Jewish victim. In the setting of the ghetto, Chaplin employs his usual pratfalls and sightgags with his schlemiel character. For example, where the barber must hide from the Nazis he falls into the trunk, his shoes flip off when imitating goose-stepping, and he is responsible for accidentally raining luggage down on the Nazis as he attempts to hide on a roof.

As the movie progresses, however, there are more problematic issues to resolve in the taboo humor. It is here where the parodied Hitler figure is introduced. And it is also where a classic dilemma comes into play. Debate exists as to whether or not Hitler humor can be classified as Holocaust humor. This is widely speculative, as the parody of Adolf Hitler is commonly incorporated into daily life since the making of *Dictator*. A broad farcical adaptation of the character seems to be offensive to few, and in fact may serve to empower those in the ingroup (survivors and/or other Allied participants in World War II), by continuing to denounce the leader of the outgroup. But a taboo conflict occurs when those most affected by the actions of the real Hitler, survivors and Jews, find that the farcical parody of this man does a disservice to survivors by trivializing the devastating impact his life had on them. I maintain that because there is an existing controversy about the propriety of this broad imitative comedy, then the evident taboo supports the theory that Hitler humor is indeed Holocaust humor. The controversy is the evidence supporting itself.

The taboo-diffusing adjustment that Chaplin makes in his portrayal of Hinkel is that he makes the character appear to be so mad that he is harmless. The madness manifests itself in behaviors that are incongruously silly, rather than threatening. More comedy is produced as his followers comply despite the ridiculousness of their leader. The actions are also carried out with great physical comedy skills. For example, Chaplin imposes subtle but remarkably accurate effeminate qualities in choice of movements for Hinkel. The wrists are graceful as he gestures, waving and saluting flamboyantly at times. When Hinkle walks, the hips move seductively, and when he stops to ponder, Chaplin

makes his behind protrude and sometimes waggle suggestively. When Hinkel is upset, Chaplin makes him mince.

Beyond this, by portraying the Hitler figure as a female, an implied weakness in physical ability renders him less of a threat, and the implied homosexuality is meant to be a derogatory comment on Hitler's mental state. It is not clear if the portrayal means to show that Hinkel acknowledges this in himself, or if the madness is derived from the denial of this, which could keep the characterization from alienating a contemporary gay audience.

But the feminine choices in movement are never so skillfully applied as when Chaplin does the ballet with the balloon globe of the world. First Hinkel vamps seductively against a filing cabinet, and then scampers up the drapes. Chaplin plays this like a pursued kitten, who coyly eyes Herr Garbage from the curtain. Then the elegant balloon dance transpires with expertly choreographed kicks and poses. It is important to note that balloon dancing was an erotic form of female entertainment in this day, as the importance of the seductive movements was further stimulated by the coy sheltering of potentially exposed body parts. By engaging in this dance, Chaplin infers that Hinkel is no more than an exhibitionist. Ultimately, the dance ends with an angelic beam transporting Hinkel into the realm of the gods, though the balloon does pop.

The taboo ramifications of this dance are enormous. A sexual taboo is the first statement, as this film was made at a time when the expression of homosexuality was strictly repressed. However, Chaplin seems to defy taboo constraints because of the skilled choices he makes in his performance. Chaplin is outrageous enough to waggle his

posterior, but does it while batting his eyes wildly in a way that makes the gesture bigger than life, and so he is forgiven because he is not playing for reality in that choice. The adroitness with which he defies gravity as he cleverly plucks his way up the drapes distracts from the intensity of the dance of seduction. However, the disturbing effect of the seduction being about world domination sets a particularly ominous tone.

The taboo violation in this movie embraces much of what has been organized to describe the taboo violating properties in *Life is Beautiful*. *The Great Dictator* is filled with humor that focuses on traits or qualities identified within the identity of both homosexuals and Germans. By broadly posturing one of the lead characters as being effeminate, Chaplin liberates the repressed subject matter of homosexuality. The lampooning of the Germans is not necessarily taboo because they are the outgroup. But with the broad display of strange behavior in the Hinkel character, the audience is set up for a taboo response as they are challenged to do something to stop his insanity. By showing the free reign of the unstopped Feuhrer character, the passive viewer is made an accomplice in global destruction by ignoring the perceived threat.

And of course this Hitler humor is trivializing. The tragic events of the Holocaust are felt when the film deals more realistically with the oppression in the ghetto. But the clowning humor of Hinkel and even more broadly, by the other Nazi characters portrayed in *Dictator* colors the reality with a non-existent harmlessness. For example, Nazi soldiers are given pratfalls, Napoloney pratfalls on the moving train, Hinkel and Herring crash heads together when they bow, Hinkel gets tangled in his cape and eventually pratfalls into a lake.

Chaplin tries to make the audience forget the negative emotions stirred up by the subject matter by presenting absurdity. However, the heightened emotions are left undiffused because there is no true release in this humor in the context of the Holocaust. Humor that creates a calming response has reassurance that the human condition is difficult but survivable. Ultimately Holocaust humor returns to the hope of martyrs to create a lasting change in the behavior of man, but first it draws attention to the hopeless plight of victims going to the slaughter. Therefore, the tension created by this knowledge manifests itself in more physical arousal, rather than less.

Examples of imposed absurdity are most obvious in Hinkel's aberrant behavior, making him appear childish and uncivilized in his responses. He has a lack of reaction to pouring water down the inside of his pants. Later he calmly pours water into his ear and spits it out of his mouth. Chaplin lets the character wipe his eyes with his necktie without a problem. Hinkel snorts at the secretary like a wild animal, and pounces her like a lion, even though he has been feminine before. This cartoon-like behavior presents Hinkel as someone who wildly consumes when needy despite his alleged preferences.

Chaplin takes bold in several places in the film where he does little to protect the audience from difficult topics. For example, Hinkel dangerously snarls when giving an anti-Jewish speech, but is made slightly safer with a sight gag as the speech physically melts the metal microphone. Then there is a scene where Garbage and Hinkel stimulate each other with conversation about extermination. They display shivering excitement. But most risky is the balloon dance, where the fate of the world is left to a Hitleresque dancing Geisha. The risk of taboo violation is most predominant in these scenes because

they do not shy away from the historical reality, but permit the topics to be raised in an irreverent atmosphere.

Chaplin's film is the one that *Life is Beautiful* is most often disfavorably compared to. Chaplin is perceived as genius of physical comedy, and Benigni a distant imitation. In the light of the argument that comedic prowess relaxes the taboo of Holocaust comedy, Benigni has received criticism claiming that he was over his head to think he possessed the skill with which to address this genre. In a representational review typical of those comparing the two works, an anonymous Web Figure who refers to himself as "The Film Geek" takes a jab at Benigni, and to those who would negate his right to make the film:

Benigni had every right to confront the Holocaust with comedy. Would these same critics pan *The Great Dictator*? *Life is Beautiful* is very clearly an homage to Chaplin, and I stand with Benigni in his belief that *Life* is the very type of film that Chaplin would have made. Where I take exception is in my opinion that his picture simply isn't that good. Chaplin would have made a better film (The Film Geek.online posting, 2).

Benigni's film is clearly derivative of Chaplin's film. His character, Guido the waiter, parallels the barber character in *The Great Dictator* completely. They both effect The Little Tramp walk of Chaplin's previous invention. Both are naive and uninhibited. Their gestures are broad, yet they affect a constant state of humility. Guido even bears the same prisoner number on his uniform as the barber wears. Perhaps this is Benigni's

purposeful way of staving off the criticism that he was too derivative of Chaplin. If he points out the similarity first, then who can say he was trying to take undo credit?

Besides this similarity, and the similarity in supporting characters (both have a devoted wife who waits in the wings, an older Uncle figure who become the defenseless victims of Nazi aggression, a short, duck-voiced, excitable neighbor, and more), there is a parallel structure in the narrative. Both pictures have a more frivolous first section, and another more serious portion containing elevated incidences of dramatic intensity. And the evidence would point to the prevalence of what Viano would maintain as "low brow humor" in both halves of both films.

Another aspect of the taboo seems to arise from a societal tendency to deny the slapstick in tragedy; to support a simplistic view that all tragedy is devoid of humor. In his *Chicago Sun-Times* review of the movie, Roger Ebert supports this notion as the explanation for negative criticism:

At Cannes, it offended some left-wing critics with its use of humor in connection with the Holocaust. What may be most offensive to both wings is its sidestepping of politics in favor of simple human ingenuity. The film finds the right notes to negotiate its delicate subject matter. And Benigni isn't really making a comedy out of the Holocaust, anyway. He is showing how Guido uses the only gift at his command to protect his son. If he had a gun, he would shoot at the Fascists. If he had an army, he would destroy them. He is a clown, and comedy is his weapon. (Ebert, online posting, 2)

One can say that Holocaust Comedy has been one of the most taboo genres to emerge since the beginning of filmmaking. But can the category ever be reconciled with its taboo?

Ultimately, the answer will come from the productions and the consumers, and as evidenced by the sudden onslaught of Holocaust Comedies, the product will have its showing. Shai Oster, in his article from the *Utne Reader*, asserts that the creations of this type are occurring in this volume because the filmmaker children of survivors are coming to an age where they are becoming introspective about their roots. There are approximately 250,000 Second Generation Survivors, some of whom make films, who find themselves driven by a need to pay homage to their passing survivor parents. Sometimes the form of tribute is comedic. Oster suggests that this generic choice comes out of being raised by survivors with dark humor about their experience. The Second Generation of the Holocaust is living in the shadow of the experience. Quotes Sonia Pilcer, survivor's kid and interviewee on the subject of Holocaust Humor:

It is profoundly and terrifyingly cynical about human nature. Yet funny. The humor is definitely dark"(Oster 1999.84).

If this is any indication of the product to come, then the viewing audience is in for a face-to-face confrontation of the taboo of Holocaust humor.

Chapter 6: *Laughter!*

In 1978, English playwright Peter Barnes created what has become one of the most controversial plays containing Holocaust humor. In the two-act form, *Laughter* covers the commonalities and differences between the reigns of Ivan the Terrible in *Tsar* (Act I) and the Nazis in *Auschwitz* (Act II). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this work is the question of the author's intention. Although structured comedically, the play has the distinct effect of being non-funny to most. Both pieces explore the cruelty of authority, and the human capacity for rationalizing away brutality. *Auschwitz* is a compilation of broad formulaic jokes placed into the Holocaust scenario in a framework of farce. The characters are lower Nazi party officials who hold desk jobs that deal with coordinating the complex paperwork of the death camps. In this atmosphere of strained loyalty to the "Feuhrer-make-him-happy-he-deserves-it", the characters struggle to unquestioningly supply the organizational demands required to implement the Final Solution. In this, they mercilessly compete with each other in both loyalty and ignorance of the facts. Eventually, all the operational secrets are revealed, as is the personal hardship of those at work on the scheme.

Interestingly, *Auschwitz* contains more of the identified Holocaust humor taboo constraints than the two films *Life is Beautiful* and *The Great Dictator*, as well as having the narrative which is the least careful to avoid the taboo. The dialogue is packed with clearly structured jokes with no regard for social conscious. The question of intention then becomes imperative, because the evidence appears to show that the intention of the Holocaust humor piece may not be to create levity or to trivialize at all, but may be to

provoke a volatile taboo response. Barnes gives voice to his position through the character of the Author, who delivers the prologue for *Laughter!*

Laughter! is an attack. It's deliberately worked out to disturb...Comedy itself is the enemy, Laughter...cures nothing except our consciences and so ends by making the nightmare worse...Laughter softens our hatred. An excuse to change nothing, for nothing needs changing when it's all a joke (Barnes 1978, 2).

During the monologue, a series of slapstick mishaps occur, including a pie in the face and the dropping of the Author's pants. Commenting on this piece, Bernard F. Dukor in *The Theatre of Peter Barnes* (1981) supports Barnes' statement of his intention.

The slapstick comedy provides a demonstration of how laughter diverts us from ideas that should engage our attention (Dukore 1981, 33).

As Barnes has the Author deliver a diatribe against humor, the visual comedy occurs to show the audience how humor creates a barrier against strong emotions, and reduces the sense of responsibility towards remedying a cruel slice of the human experience for which we may all be responsible – acts of genocide.

According to conventional opinion, says Barnes in his own person, laughter alleviates suffering and makes us bear our miserable lot with equanimity and a little more grace than if we didn't laugh. But he believes one should examine this view.

There is a strong argument that laughter, far from alleviating, only increases the suffering, in the sense that if we laugh, then we don't change the

miseries and the injustices. Hatred is sometimes more remedial in alleviating injustice than a sense of humor (Dukore 1981.35).

Auschwitz opens in an office in Berlin, circa 1942, where a minor official, Viktor Cranach, is dictating a letter to the secretary, Fraulein Else Jost. An older and sickly Heinz Stroop works at a nearby desk. The opening is devoted to a parody of the Third Reich's obsession with record-keeping minutia.

Cranach:....As civil servants we must be ready at any time to answer for our administrative actions. Actions based solely on past actions, precedents. It's therefore essential we keep accurate records. That's why everything has to be written down. It's the basis of our existence.

The first apparent taboo is that the topic is too serious for this kind of treatment. And in the beginning, the farce is subtle, which does not quite remove it from reality. It is only with the repetition of inane-sounding regulations that the comedy emerges. Eg: "I've always believed in calling a CF/83 a CF/83. How dare AMT D1/1 send me an unauthorized, unsigned KG70?" As Cranach continues, he cautions Else against making errors, and vaudevillian setup/punchline humor ensues:

Cranach: Please Frauline! Remember, where there's a will there's a Gestapo.

Else: Coming to work this morning, I stopped to pull in my belt.

Some idiot asked me what I was doing. I said, "Having breakfast."

Cranach's line displays a truth about individuality not being permissible under the Gestapo, but comes in the form of play on words. It is too truthful to be directly farcical.

and does not adequately defuse negative emotions. The rim-shot response of Else is a formula joke, borrowing from an old premise that is easily transferred into this situation. It is meant to be disturbingly familiar, and trivializes the starving conditions of those in wartime.

Shortly after this, the tone becomes completely serious as Cranach comments on the "mercy in mercy killing" of the infirm. The mixing of genres creates a taboo effect of its own, as the comedy is made impure by the tragic. This also sets the stage for following jokes to be too trivializing in contrast to the severity of the existing tone of the piece:

Else: I thought of praying to God at Midnight Mass for better times, but I know the Feuhrer-make-him-happy-he-deserves-it doesn't like anyone going over his head.

Else is the figure who retains her religious leanings, and is attacked for this by Cranach. This is abrasive towards the societal structure, which tends to favor or at least tolerate spiritual affiliation. It also violates morally sanctioned precepts, such as those in Christianity. The hyphenated nick-name meant to honor the leader is completely trivializing in relation to the serious devastation imposed on the world by Adolf Hitler. The formula gag at the end is a long-standing joke used to mock anyone with an exaggerated sense of authority. It is precisely this kind of traditional gag which evokes a laughing response before the taboo. The cleverness of the remark is recognized, and appreciation occurs for the new way the joke is contorted to fit this situation.

The character Gottleb enters as a minor official attempting to entrap those already present in anti-Reich activity, or in personal law-breaking. Gottleb and Cranach compete to out-do each other in their ability to accurately follow orders. They argue over the proper way to "Heil Hitler", and over which leg of the party has more merit, the old guard or the new. They name-call, using insults that are aimed against the ingroup, but which are not insulting to the outgroup, some of whom are audience members, most likely.

Cranach: Gottleb, a man with a low forehead like yours has no right to criticize...Stand aside Gottleb and let us professionals do our job.

Gottleb: We scarred veterans're not going to be bypassed by you arse-licking, crypto-homo flunkies.

The low-forehead reference is meant to address the alleged mark of racial inferiority as proclaimed by Doctor Joseph Mengele, "Angel of Death" of Auschwitz. People with this random characteristic were said to be mentally deficient, therefore candidates for liquidation to prevent creating impurity in the Master Race. Now Barnes gets to the core of what is darkest in his writing, as he defiantly shocks his audience with his refusal to tread lightly on the most offensive areas. This violates taboo constraints upon insulting those with a mental deficiency, those with a random physical characteristic of a sloping forehead. It is permitting joking at the expense of humans with distinct identified traits and trivializes the martyrdom of innocents.

The anti-homosexual response of Gottleb's is used to allege a weakness in the younger official. It is an example of unrepressed verbal expression of a graphic sexuality

issue, and today would also be a norm violation as society accustoms itself to abandoning anti-gay rhetoric. It has the potential for further alienating audience members, making homosexuals present the target of the joke.

More jokes about departmental procedure occur after this, all formulaic and derivative, as Cranach and Gottlieb compete as to who has the most accurate request forms. The battle finishes as a parody on card games. Anyone familiar with the detailed lists of the dead from Auschwitz can recognize how challenging the light tone of this frolic is in comparison to the devastation so meticulously recorded.

A young man who sells black market items enters with liquor. After berating Wochner for selling contraband, the group begins to ingest the liquor, competitively. With this comes the bawdy jokes of the drunken men approaching the woman in the crowd. First Wochner, the black marketeer woos her with merchandise, and she succumbs, inferring that she is a whore. Else beseeches him to "Woo her, say something beautiful", to which he replies, "One jar of Kiel salt herrings. Two kilos of real coffee, four fresh eggs. One tin of skimmed milk." The gag here is a clever comment on that which reigns important during rationing, but the humor bends when she expresses that she wants him to throw in "three kilos of bacon plus a woolen blanket." He responds that he had "Herr Sauckel's wife for three kilos of bacon. If I'd thrown in a woolen blanket I'd have gotten Herr Sauckel too." This banter is very Jewish, in its perspective of coming from the schlemiel that is trying to make a good deal. But the taboo violation of the norm quickly enters as Wochner reveals his penchant for taking advantage of married women by procuring them through food. Also, the reference to a possibility that warmth

could convince the husband to perform sexual acts gives an impression of graphic homosexual relations, albeit slight. This becomes Holocaust humor as it addresses the state of starvation and other forms of physical depravation prevalent on both sides of the battle.

More of this type of humor continues as Gottlieb delivers a speech about his "saint" of a mother. She then begs food from him, while he continues to extoll her virtues while scolding her for interrupting. She is sent away famished and he wipes a tear from his eye. Physical arousal occurs in expectation of the mother's needs being addressed, and yet this is not satisfied, so the negativity is not relieved.

The group becomes more drunk, and they laugh at various topics such as Else's religious convictions. Poignantly then, Cranach inserts a speech meant to be sarcastic, but which is full of truth about the shame of comedy:

Cranach: Don't laugh. It's an offense to make people laugh. Jokes carry penalties. So don't. Have you tried the new Rippentrop herrings? They're just ordinary herrings with the brain removed and the mouth split wider.

Shrieks from Else and Stroop, while Gottlieb roars and slaps his thigh in delight. Their laughter quickly grows louder and more hysterical.

Gottlieb: That'll get you five years hard labor, Viktor. Here's one carries ten: my dentist is going out of business. Everyone's afraid to open their mouths.

Here Barnes draws an analogy between the new herrings and the Nazis in the room. Following the description of the fish, the three actors proceed to laugh, appearing

mindless and wide-mouthed. despite the warning that laughter is not without its consequence. The price of laughter in this context is that it disguises the horror necessary to address the reality of the atrocities taking place in the camps. It rightly defines those people who worked towards the Final Solution as subhuman and unconscious. But the point is driven home with a comedic joke structure, even though the intention is not to produce a pleasure response, or to offer any relief. The dialogue speaks of impending doom for indulging in the taboo humor.

Cranach: Listen, listen, what do you call someone who sticks his finger up

The Fuhrer's arse?

Gottlieb: Heroic.

Cranach: No, a brain surgeon!

Gottlieb: That's DEATH.

This again is a formula joke put into the context of the Holocaust and utilizes the taboo to effectively violate the ingroup portrayed in the play. The outrageousness of putting someone to death over the telling of a joke is highlighted in this example, again notably without the use of seriousness or tragedy to drive the point home. But after this exchange, Gottlieb produces a hidden tape recorder and attempts to show the others that they are now entrapped. They have committed the ultimate joke taboo, which carries the consequence of death. The machine fails to operate clearly, and the jokers manage to evade Gottlieb's charges. They then taunt him, saying they will accuse him of treason, all the while making him the butt of more jokes.

The ultimate in genre-combining occurs as Gottleb turns on the jokers to confront them with the realities of Auschwitz. He dares them to “see” what they are keeping records for in a manner so graphic that he feels it will ultimately stop their light tone when they recognize the gravity of what they are involved in. So here the character is the one who not only recognizes the taboo style of the play, but inserts more taboo as he forces the tone into one that is so serious and confrontational that the jokers agonize from his words:

Gottleb: ...Even if you read of six million dead, your imagination wouldn't frighten you, because it wouldn't make you see a single dead man. But I'll make you see six million! I'm going to split your minds to the sights, sounds and smells of Auschwitz. Then I'll be rid of you. You'll go of your own accord. You piss-legs haven't the pepper to stay in WVHA Amt-C knowing every file you touch's packed tight with oven-stacked corpses....And at the far end, Crematoria I and II, belching sticky-sweet smoke...hear the screaming?...Mothers try to hide their babes, but the Block Commanders always find 'em. “What's this shit?! This shit can't work!” They use newborn babies as balls, kicking 'em along the ramp shouting, “Goal! Goal!”

Gottleb's description of Auschwitz becomes more and more graphic, continuing for pages, while the other characters writhe and cover their ears, screaming in pain as if they were being gassed. A play within a play begins as the filing cabinets part and a stack of corpses is revealed. Sanitation men rip up the corpses with hooks, farming for eyes and gold. The other characters kick Gottleb out into the corridor. The remaining workers

complement each other for their refusal to quit dealing with minutia in the face of ugly reality, and sing a verse of the song “The Brotherhood of Man” from the musical *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. The gist of the song is that people are all a part of one big eternal group that humans have no choice about belonging to. “Your life-long membership is free...Oh aren’t you proud to be in that fraternity.” This abrupt shift into a tragic monologue, and then into a musical number from Broadway purposefully removes any sense of control over the situation. The viewer is left bewildered by the rapidly changing tone of the play, a device meant to be disarming, and not at all funny. Barnes shames humanity for being capable of such atrocity, and for being able to joke about it. However, in this he takes a risk of bringing criticism down around his head for he himself employs jokes throughout the bulk of his script. His redemption lies in his intention to use the humor as a device to elicit an organic response of repulsion from the viewer, so that the tragedy could be experienced on a visceral level, rather than on an intellectual one.

The epilogue violates most of the taboos on its own. In it, two Auschwitz inmates present their “farewell appearance” in the form of a vaudeville comedy act. The brief scenario takes place between two Jewish comics, Bieberstein and Bimko, who appear emaciated in Auschwitz uniforms, and banter exclusively in a most taboo-inducing format.

Bieberstein: Bernie Litvinoff just died.

Bimko: Well if he had a chance to better himself.

Bieberstein: Drunk a whole bottle of varnish. Awful sight, but a beautiful finish.

Bluish gas begins to pour on stage, and the scene ends with the death of the characters.

This disparaging humor is directed towards the most tragic of human events, the choice of suicide. In this, the victims are making light of their own demise. Tragic human events are trivialized by a play on the word “finished”. Reality is not denied, as all of the Jews (Bernie Litvinoff is name purposefully chosen to communicate Jewishness) are going to eventually die in this suggested configuration. The players performing under this circumstance appear to be sadistic and masochistic, which is included under the umbrella of Sick humor, and which has a taboo code of its own. There is a violation of the morally sanctioned precept that “Thou Shalt Not Kill” as it pertains to suicide. These deaths are tragic because they are not of natural causes. The inferred brutality that drove him to do this is apparent in the representation of the reality of the camps made so clear in the body of the play, and from what is known to be historically true. This topic is considered much too serious to be joked about, and it liberates the repressed subject matters of suicide and death by gas. This violates the norm of the cultural pressure to refrain from jokes about and light tones as applied to the death camps. It does not defuse negative emotions, as the topics of the jokes, though the structure is formulaic, are about grisly events that actually occurred. The ending is tragic, which further introduces negative emotions and heightened physical arousal. And style defies tone as the comedians die choking on blue gas.

There is something noteworthy in the fact that the characters are starved and dressed in real uniforms, thereby not sparing the audience from the harshness of the farce. Indeed, there are still survivors in the world who wore these uniforms, so the taboo is

summoned by the lack of distance from the historical event. Barnes is not a Jew, and so there is a modicum of taboo inherent in the question of his right to use humor connected to the historical event. If these inmates were performing the vaudeville to intentionally leave a legacy of protest against this kind of inhumanity, then Barnes is partially liberated from the taboo stigma. But probably the farce as written by Barnes means to be a shocking contrasting piece meant to utilize the taboo response to draw attention to the brutality of the Holocaust.

Also, indirectly, audience members who are Jews, survivors, friends of survivors, or who are strongly emotionally affected by the events of the Holocaust can become the butt of the joke. By buying a ticket, sitting in a seat, and being present for an event which characterizes suffering Jews as vaudevillians, they become willing participants in a taboo comedy event. They are active participants in the trivialization process by being consumers of the humor.

Barnes said when asked if the people laughed at his show, "Not on a good night." If the intention is not to amuse, but to disturb, and that is accomplished successfully in the audience member, then the viewer is no longer the butt of the joke, but becomes an educated person with a heightened sense of responsibility for taking an active role against genocide.

Chapter 7: *Angst*

As previously touched upon, there is a distinct population that enjoys Holocaust humor, as well as a group that is completely enmeshed in it. These groups include Jews and non-Jews in the group that enjoys this humor, but the enmeshment appears to concern mainly the children of Holocaust survivors. This is particularly interesting in the light of the criticism reviewed in this thesis, which shows a population of survivors themselves who abhor this type of humor, as well as a number who endorse it.

With the stand up comedy boom of the 1980's, a small group of comedians, who were Holocaust survivor's children, or Second Generation survivors, emerged on the comedy scene. At first their humor was generic, or Jewish. But as time passed, some of those performers became devoted to performing Holocaust humor solely. Among these are two Australian Second Generation survivors, Deb Filler and Alexander Gutman (known on stage as Austin Tayshus). A third Second Generation (2Gr) comic, Moshe Waldoks, is also a lecturer on Jewish humor, and is the co-author of the *Big Book of Jewish Humor* (1981). In America, 2Gr comic, Robert Schimmel, came to the comedy club forefront with his graphically sexual schlemiel act, as well as Jack Graiman, whose humor stayed generically on varied standard topics, anti-hero in flavor, but with an ascerbic bite. As a stand up comic who is female, I believe I am the only American female 2Gr performing, and also have an act which is assaulting (angry). It is obvious that the common denominator between most of the 2Gr acts is anger, or perhaps more precisely, angst.

A documentary for television about this issue was entitled *Angst*, and was produced by Judy Menczel in 1993. An Australian production, it featured the acts and lives of Filler, Gutman and Waldoks, possibly because they were the three who were directly addressing the Holocaust issues in their comedy. Neither Schimmel or Graiman have done so, and I only did this for a two-week period in the mid-eighties, and was then told that I was risking unemployment. *The Los Angeles Times* columnist who encouraged me to perform the Holocaust humor, Art Martinez, had his column removed from print for the day he turned in the review of my act. He had recorded some of the humor, such as:

My mother had a number on her arm. I thought it was our phone number. I dialed it once from a phone booth. A man answered. (ala Hitler) Javol?

And...

Jews don't like to buy German cars, and some won't ride in them either. that's because we never know if we're related to the upholstery. Hymie, is that you?

Both examples show an inappropriately graphic matter treated with levity. The tattoo is a physical and spiritual violation, because besides being painfully and indelibly marked as a prisoner of the Nazis, scripturally Jews as are forbidden to have tattoos.

When Martinez's column was rejected during the eighties, Holocaust humor was an anomaly. A sample of semi-acceptable humor of this genre would evoke memories of the *Hogan's Heroes* episodes on television, but even ridiculous humor about the Holocaust was suspect because in these jokes the Nazis were portrayed as endearing fops. The vision of a Swastika in relation to comedy was blasphemous to some. Also, this kind

of humor is part of an ongoing debate about whether or not Hitler humor and Nazi humor are always Holocaust humor, and therefore may not necessarily be subject to taboo codes. And yet, disparaging humor was directed towards and received by an outgroup in *Hogan's Heroes*, and tragic human events were trivialized by the joyful underground activities in the P.O.W. camp. This setting is said to be the thing that justifies the television show as being exempt from problematic ramifications because the prisoners are not innocent members of a racial group, but rather are allied soldiers. This implies that they are not victims, but volunteers in this situation, so they are not completely innocent. Also, a P.O.W. camp is more of a place which has a comprehensible right to exist in war than does a death camp of innocents.

However, some aspects of *Hogan's Heroes* did come perilously close to taboo, and in fact did cause some outrage. The prisoner soldiers were after all held by the Nazis. It did expose suppressed subject matter, such as the internment issues of starvation, lack of medical care, exposure to the elements, and other basic sufferings. But the crux of the show wrapped around the soldier's cunning ingenuity in solving these dilemmas, such as the utilization of a complex underground tunneling system which allowed the soldiers to move freely in places such as the black market, all the way to some of the most luxurious locations available.

It is interesting to note that most of the staff of writers on *Hogan's Heroes* were Jews. It is not clear if any at all were the children of survivors, but as this show was written in the 1960's, these Jewish writers had been alive during World War II. The taboo question as to whether or not the show was distanced enough from the war is certainly in

question. In the year 2000 the world is still trying to sift through the pile of reparations yet to be made on behalf of the survivors and their families. With all of this in mind, it should be fairly evident that Nazi jokes are indeed part of the taboo structure.

On May 6, 2000, a Jewish comic performed a joke on the cable network the Comedy Channel that approached Holocaust humor as it attacked anti-Semites. He proposed that he'd found an Internet site on which anti-Semitic architects were claiming that the Holocaust Museum was never built. This joke is an absurd play on those who refute the reality of the Holocaust by using a literally concrete piece of evidence. It supposed that there are those who are so dogmatic in their anti-Semitism that they hope to convince a large population that the world-famous museum has not been built. Interestingly, it mildly qualifies as taboo, because it deals with the repressed subject of anti-Semitism. Notably, this joke mentions the world Holocaust in the framework of a comedy act, so that at a very basic level the seriousness of the topic is not appropriate to the context of the presentation.

On January 19, 2000, on American cable TV's Bravo channel, Michael Moore's show, *The Awful Truth*, featured a person dressed as Hitler attempting to make a withdrawal from Swiss banks. In this sequence, the camera is hidden, and the humor comes from the tellers who are patiently trying to explain to an ersatz Adolf Hitler that he will have to file a claim elsewhere, because they give him money from plunder without the proper identification, and there are no existing accounts under his name. The intention of this humor is to discredit the alleged neutrality of Switzerland, which it had proclaimed in World War II. In the performer code, the subtly sincere portrayal of Hitler

in opposition to the garishly recognizable costume in the performance code, and the effect this has on the unnerved tellers is where the comedy occurs. But the taboo inadvertently is imposed as the context of the Nazi uniform is placed within the structure of comedy – for some; the topic is too serious for this tone. Also, negative emotions are introduced as the Swiss face accusation of accepting stolen monies, and this recalls that the money in the banks, besides being plunder of accounts and policies of taken from Jews, is also partly from the Nazi confiscation of Jewish property, and more grotesquely, Jewish gold teeth.

How then has the comedy community come to a place where this kind of humor is presented regardless of the taboo stigma? The distancing from the time of war is certainly a possibility, but in the movie *Angst*, a myriad of other possibilities is explored. It is important to note that the bulk of comedy in Western Societies is performed by Jews. Waldoks in *Angst* reports a statistic that between 60-70% of all comics are Jewish. but has “yet to meet a Jewish family that says they are raising their kid to be a comedian.” As previously explored in this piece, humor is an essential part of the Jewish culture. However, the *drive to respond to tragedy with humor* seems to be a vital part of the Jewish culture’ coming to terms with the Holocaust. And perhaps laughter is not necessarily the required response to the humor, nor is it always the intention of the comic. Deb Filler has in her one woman show, *Punch Me In the Stomach*, the tale of taking a vacation with her father, which turns out to be a disappointment because he decides he wants to take her on a tour of the death camps. This clip, featured in *Angst*, shows the audience responding in absolute silence. Filler then queries, “Is everybody comfortable?”

to which the audience then bursts into laughter. Filler is fully aware of the fact that there are portions of her act which will be met with discomfort and silence, rather than laughter. Why would a comic choose to do this? She says in the body of the movie that she never wanted to be a comedienne, and that no one who knew her would have thought she'd become one.

I think when things are really hard to handle and difficult, actually there's something instinctual that makes me want to make it funny rather than heavy or sad, because it's a way of lightening the situation. Probably it goes back to dealing with my father's darkness – a way of accessing that (Filler 1981).

When Filler speaks of her childhood, she talks of being barraged with conversation about and images of Nazi atrocities. Then she allows that there was no place to talk about her feelings as a child, as she, like so many other children of survivors, is told that her feelings are invalid. Feelings of consequence belonged to those who were martyred. As Filler recalls, her father informed her that she didn't have any problems, that she couldn't be affected by the Holocaust solely on the basis of being a survivor's child. He points out that she had nothing to contend with because he gave her a new bike...that she was spoiled.

Filler claims that she learned to adopt multiple personalities to help her soothe her father, who always seemed to be wrathful. She learned to portray all of those whom her father had lost. She claims to have become a sister or an aunt when it was needed. Being all of these separate people, Filler says, "helps you with your act." She plays thirty-six distinct characters in hers. Besides this, Filler recalls one day while her father was in the

middle of a tirade, when she began to imitate him, and completely diffused the situation. From then on, the personalities and the humor became her mode of coping, which parallels the survival mechanism of some who were interned in the death camps.

Waldoks in *Angst* relates that the anger of the survivor parent becomes the primary emotion of the household, because it is the only acceptable one. All of the other emotions suggest the possibility of vulnerability, which is sensed as dangerous by the traumatized survivor. The 2Gr learns to be angry much of the time from the survivor parent. Waldok's wife, Anne, says that "I think Moshe is filled with anger...anger is very connected to his work." Perhaps the same diffusing mechanism is at play here, only in this circumstance, the anger of the 2Gr is self-diffusing. Waldoks states the humor is a "funny way of being in control." He seems to take affront when the interviewer asks him what the appropriate response to the Holocaust should be. "(I think) your first response should be. (shrieks)", he offers. This refers back to the earlier assertion that the Holocaust cannot be dealt with in a tragic medium, because there is no way to adequately and authentically address the magnitude of the horror. To Moshe Waldoks, if not humor, only a profound scream can suffice.

Possibly the most psychologically enmeshed of the comics in *Angst* is Sandy Gutman. Gutman feels he has assimilated both the persona of his death camp survivor father and that of an ordinary Aussie man. He feels, like Filler, as if he has actual vivid memories of the places where the atrocities took place, although he has never been there. He also feels compelled to joke about the experiences without concern for taboo. In addressing the harshness of his act, he claims to have tried a softer approach earlier on,

but that it didn't work with the brash contemporary comedy audiences in Australia. The old style of dealing with it was to come on stage waving a little white flag. Gutman says that he "tried it...and they started throwing beer cans at me...it wasn't appropriate for the particular culture. So I went into the verbal, the aggressive, you know, the rock and roll style, you know – selling the jokes any way I could."

Gutman as Austen Tayshus likes to tell his audience about an event that happened in Melbourne in 1993, on an evening when he hailed a cab and decided to have a bit of fun with the German driver. As the cabbie inquires as to where he is going, Tayshus responds to the thick German accent with one of his own. He then proceeds to talk about how the world has fallen apart since the end of the reign of the Third Reich, and does his impression of the driver agreeing. Tayshus begins to sing "Deutschland Uber Alles", claiming that the cabbie then joins in with gusto. At the culmination of the "Germanic Fervor", Tayshus claims he switched into the persona of an Israeli secret agent.

"You killed six million Jews. We are going to kill six million Germans. Starting with you."

The audience appears to enjoy this brutal statement immensely. But there are those for whom laughter at the Holocaust is impossible, and those are not always direct survivors. In *The Journal of Religion and Film* (1997), a German Journalist, Tania Oldenhage, reviews the filmed version of Filler's show *Punch Me in the Stomach*. She questions herself as to why she didn't think it was funny, after it was recommended to her by a Jewish friend. Oldenhage found herself unamused, so she watched it again to note her reaction.

These scenes are funny, but they are disturbing, too. I had to smile but I felt uncomfortable. I felt that laughing would violate a taboo. In an article entitled “Holocaust Laughter,” written shortly after Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* came out, Terrence Des Pres speaks critically about the proscription against laughter. He describes it as a commonly accepted rule in Holocaust studies, part of a “Holocaust etiquette”, one which “dictate that anything pertaining to the Holocaust must be serious, must be reverential in a manner that acknowledges (and supports) the sacredness of its occasion (De Pres 1991, 278).”

Des Pres disagrees with this prescription. Referring to several comic works including Spiegelman’s cartoon, he argues that laughter, humor and the comic mode are helpful and important at times. A tragic response, he says, tries to stay as truthful as possible to the historical events. whereas a comic response makes no attempt at actual representation and refuses to take the Holocaust on its own terms. The comic mode, therefore has a potential that the tragic lacks: it allows for distance, self-possession, evaluation and protest vis-a-vis the finality and brutality of the events. Des Pres writes: “In the realm of art, a comic response is more resilient, more effectively in revolt against terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic...comic art resists that which has come to pass (De Pres 1991, 281).”(Oldenhage 1997, online posting)

As she watches Filler’s piece a second time, Oldenhage discovers that it is, in De Pres’ words, the “life-reclaiming” and “survival-value” function of the humor that does not serve her because this is not her experience. In her culture, Oldenhage’s reality was one

where the victimization perpetrated by her culture was hidden, and tabooed in it. "I feel like a stranger intruding into something not my own and not necessarily my business. And I think that's why I am not fully at ease when Filler's show makes me laugh." Oldenhage is experiencing even more aspects of Holocaust humor taboo than a non-German audience member is. Her relatives are the outgroup who have perpetrated atrocities on the sympathetic group. The humor is abrasive towards her social structure, rather than a lubricant. The reality of what was done is not denied, as the reality of events is not softened by humor, but the response to those events is. Her culture is thought to be deeply sadistic, violating of morally sanctioned precepts that ask that the sanctity of life be preserved, but instead created uncalled for grief and death, or the suffering of innocents. The topic is too serious for her enjoyment, subjects that have been repressed in her culture openly dealt with, her negative emotions are not defused, but the emotion of shame is introduced. Oldenhage is not distanced from the events. And laughter would only reinforce a taboo against having a callused response towards something one is presumed responsible for, even though the responsibility is no more connected to her than by her shared culture. A German audience member is questionably the most strictly forbidden to participate in laughter at a Holocaust humor event. They are possibly the most suppressed because of taboo constraints in this environment.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

“Humor has to reframe reality. It’s like seeing in two dimensions and then looking through a View-Master and suddenly seeing three (George Meyer 2000,70).”

Holocaust humor has become a subgenre of comedy simply as a result of the occurrence of the Holocaust, and the artistic reaction of the humorist to the event. However, this practice has been discouraged because of the weighty taboo constraints placed on those indulging in the form. In the case of the Holocaust, the abundance of Holocaust plays, films and television are dramas that attempt to portray a slice of life from those times. The audience is asked to put themselves into the shoes of those who really suffered. Then the intention is for the viewer to be impacted with the intensity of the tragedy and the nobility of the survivors. And yet, no matter how thoroughly this topic is addressed in drama, even in the Academy Award winning *Schindler's List*, the audience comes away with a feeling of empathy for *those people*, but are still detached because of the lack of personal involvement. But when exposed to the relatively untested waters of Holocaust comedy, the human experience is visited in its most vulnerable and truthful form.

Therefore, taboo is not always “bad”, or in the terms of Mary Douglas’ theory of dirt, can be necessary to evolve society. Sometimes society needs to confront itself to begin the process of defiling the purity of an unacceptable situation, or to make dirty that which should be fouled out of existence, such as genocide. Holocaust humor has the power to bring about greater understanding about overcoming anxiety about the imposition of impurity.

Holocaust humor is inlaid with a complex series of taboos that admittedly are mostly applicable to any sort of taboo comedy, to one degree or another. What sets this humor apart is what sets the Holocaust apart from other tragedies of this age. Perhaps the Holocaust has come to represent the ultimate taboo committed by man upon man. And to be driven to artistically represent this situation is to attempt to synthesize the experience of what a large portion of living society perceives as the most inhumane time in contemporary history. To the Jew, this was the time when evil was winning as a mostly apathetic world watched. By the time the allies were finally victorious, the evil had been permitted to start, middle, and mostly finish the Jews of Europe. To laugh now without the safety net of taboo consciousness is to allow those who didn't intervene to be irreverent. Not wanting to comply with callousness about genocide, audiences are reticent to laugh when assaulted in performance by the sights and sounds of the Holocaust. Being offended makes the viewer noble, not responsible, not tolerant of abuse, and loyal to those who suffered and perished. And yet, the crowd remains incurably detached from the drama because it is impossible to adequately reproduce the profound tragedy.

Until recent times, Holocaust humor has been diluted in the realm of fantasy comedy. Two Jewish producers in Mel Brooks' *Producers* attempt to horrify a crowd with the sure-fire flop Broadway number "Springtime for Hitler". Like a Zigfield Follies number, Hitler descends a staircase amidst a gaggle of fawning singing Nazis and pigtailed nymphs in dirndl skirts. In order to win a bet, the producers in this movie must present a show that fails. Of course, ironically, this racist abomination becomes a hit.

thereby ruining the producers. Brooks protects the racist stereotype that Jews will do anything for money (especially producers), even if it means exploiting Hitler.

In an article from the *New Yorker Magazine* (2000), George Meyer, a producer/writer from the hard-edged show *The Simpsons*, defends his confrontational style by accenting the triviality of shows from the past.

When you and I were kids, the average TV comedy was about a witch, or a Martian, or a goofy frontier fort, or a comical Nazi prisoner-of-war camp. That was the mainstream (Meyer 2000, 73).

It is interesting to note that Meyer groups the Nazi POW camp with the fantasy settings of the realm of witches, extraterrestrials, and a crazy *F Troop* fort where the cavalry are inept pawns of the local controlling Indians. But the fantasy approach is not fully Holocaust comedy in the sense that the comedy is not placed in a possible setting. Therefore, the taboo is reduced, as the fantasy creates distance from reality.

As previously noted, this surreal approach has been recognized by Slavoj Žižek, one of the most prominent scholars in the realm of film. As Žižek finds himself in a position where he feels compelled to address an emerging “subgenre: the holocaust comedy”, he points out what he feels is the most significant relational fact about the three recent Holocaust comedy films *Life is Beautiful*, *Jakob the Liar*, and *Train of Life*.

Significantly, all three films are centered on a *lie* that allows the threatened Jews to survive their ordeal.

The key to this trend is provided by the obvious failure of the holocaust tragedy (Žižek 2000, 27).

Using the contemporary example of *Schindler's List*, Zizek cites the example of the Nazi official refusing to have sex with the beautiful Jewish slave on the grounds of her race. Because this scene is surreal to Zizek, he expresses that the only authentic way to deal with this situation would have been to choose to portray it comedically; to have the officer turn to the camera, and pronounce his dilemma ala a campy comedian. Zizek feels that the Holocaust comedies fail because they tend to exploit the “banality of Evil” in the persona of the Nazi individual, rather than point up the humanity of the individual.

If we take Adolf Eichmann as a psychological entity, a person, we discover nothing monstrous about him – his psychological profile gives us no clues to the atrocities he executed...So why not turn to comedy, which at least accepts in advance its failure to render the horror of the holocaust (Zizek 2000, 27).

It is as if this purposeful turning away from the arrogant stance that the reality can be adequately represented that gives Holocaust humor a schlemiel presentation. An anti-hero points out the discrepancy between the ferociousness of abuse versus the impotence of innocence. In comedy, the aggressors can become more despicable – more involved in taboo – then they would in a drama. And then:

Evil – the ultimate traumatic point at which the objectifying of historical knowledge breaks down and even witnesses concede words fail them. The holocaust cannot be explained, visualized, represented or transmitted, since it marks the black hole, the implosion of the (narrative) universe. Any attempt to

locate it in its context, to politicize it, equals an anti-Semitic negation of its uniqueness (Zizek 2000, 27).

So Zizek is saying that the comedic and/or surreal approach to this subject is the only possible way to be correct about its representation. In the case of the Holocaust, the victims are the authorities. Anyone who refutes this is potentially an anti-Semite for questioning the reality of the victim's experience. Because *Life is Beautiful* presents the protection of fantasy in the death camps, there are those who say this creates a taboo because it shelters the viewer from the true impact of the suffering. The father, Guido, chooses to cope through humor intentionally, and the son unintentionally. It is this form of protection that the critics object to, and it is what creates the taboo of the awareness that the serious tone of the camps is too much so to allow a fantasy game. But importantly, the creation of the fantasy game draws attention to the fact that the reality is impossible to adequately synthesize. By introducing the improbable slapstick in the setting of grim reality, the audience member notices the incongruity of the situation independently and internally. The viewer is not dependent on a narrative that attempts to forcefully transport one to a place to which non-survivors can never arrive. Empathy occurs from the outrage at what is the discrepancy, for how could anyone truly laugh in an atmosphere such as this thing that much of the world has come to recognize as the dominant symbolic occurrence of consummate evil? The audience is uncomfortable, taboo-stricken, and wants the game to stop, to not be necessary. Critics are irritated that Benigni supposes that the audience could buy this improbable game, that his son buys it.

because it could never be. It is this outrage which makes us resonate authentically with truth, and allows one to briefly stand in the shoes of the survivor.

The reason why tragedy fails to adequately deal with the Holocaust can be found in the Aristotelian structure of the tragedy. In this genre, the hero must lose his life to become even more noble. He becomes immortal in his defeat.

Comedy, by contrast, presents the indestructibility of vulgar, opportunistic, terrestrial life...The stuff of comedy is precisely this repetitive, resourceful popping-up of life – no matter how dark the predicament, we can be sure the small fellow will find a way out (Žižek 2000, 29).

But the concentration camp presents “the universe at its most horrifying” according to Žižek, because “it is no longer possible to sustain this gap between reality and the ethereal domain of infinite life.” It is this naive hopefulness that stabs when that standard joke is made about the two Jews walking into the gas chamber. “Quiet! We don’t want to make trouble!” The listener knows that shortly Zyklon B gas will kill them both and then they will be shoveled into the crematorium. The denial of the reality by the condemned innocents makes more of a tragedy than any inept description of their agony.

Žižek and others note that if the most pathetic of camp internees, the “Muslims”, those reduced to mechanical passive “living”, are placed in a serious setting, their automaton behavior gives the viewer an urge to laugh at their puppet-like behavior. But in the setting of comedy, the humor highlights the outrageous desecration of destroyed human beings; people who were entirely disassociated from reality through unimaginable horror -- the walking dead.

It is only through such cruel humor that the tragic sentiment can be generated in the concentration-camp universe...If we try to present their predicament as tragic, the result is comic; if we treat them as comic, tragedy emerges (Žižek 2000, 29).

But if these jokes are offensive but helpful, then who has the right to make them with impunity? Improper, or defiling humor becomes acceptable around those for whom propriety is not an issue, or with those who are in agreement. In the case of the Holocaust, it is the survivors and their children who claim the angriest darkest form of the humor, which they use in rebellion. It becomes a tool of empowerment, and a tool for intentional consciousness-raising through shock. If they present it to those not in their culture, it is met with a taboo-response. This can be helpful, as it draws attention to anti-Semitism, though there are those who feel it is self-deprecating and trivializing.

The same rule applies to those who are not in the survivor culture who use the humor, but to different degrees. Benigni, Chaplin and Barnes sought to carry a message against the kind of thinking which creates a holocaust. Their good intentions seem apparent. But none of these humorists are Jewish, or survivors, and so they were subject to varied levels of taboo response. Chaplin's was the least because his comedy genius provided a major distraction from the subject matter, as did his careful avoidance of reality. Benigni did not fare so well, because, though attempting to point out the tragedy of the situation through comedy, his fantasy game in the narrative made some feel that he was tempting the creation of revisionist history.

The approach to Holocaust humor has evolved through time. With Chaplin, it was broadly farcical, and he supported this position by claiming ignorance of the severity of the actual reality. Mel Brooks became defiant and silly with the revolutionary flavor of the sixties, as his *Producers* movie provided a framework to be as irreverent towards the subject as one could be at the time. His work focused on making Hitler silly, so it was not nearly as much of a threat as the later trio of Holocaust comedies from the late 1990's. By the time *Life is Beautiful* appeared, the comedy was set in the realism of the death camps, and was no longer comedy for laughter's sake. The goal was clearly to create pathos through charming the audience, and thereby making the final gunblast ending Guido's life a devastating jolt to the conscience of those who would allow this to happen.

In the acts of stand up comics and in the Barnes play *Laughter*, Holocaust humor has evolved to a place where it is without modifiers. The humor is a slap in the face, and in the case of the 2Gr performers, is a defiant shout, "This is what they did to us! See how strong I am, as I hold it up to the light!"

The taboo of Holocaust comedy is real, as evidenced by the cohesive way in which it fits the definition of taboo described by Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. It serves to make anti-Semitism and genocide an obvious impurity that needs to be cleaned out. The Holocaust is the dirt to be dealt with. The audience is confronted with their own personal degrees of dirt, and either complies with the experience or cry that they have been fouled. Because Holocaust humor serves to expose impurity, its main purpose is not to evoke laughter. And it is certainly not to create impurity. It is to create the eradication

of the impurity of racism, through the use of the defilement of propriety. This is the most helpful function of the taboo.

It is unique from other forms of taboo humor in the way it is about an event that much of the world has come to regard as a symbol for the ultimate reign of evil. This comedy addresses the Holocaust more authentically than tragedy can. It is evolving into forms which are progressively confrontational with the erosion of fantasy from the humor, and the imposition of reality present with a comedic tone. With this evolution, more taboo reaction is spawned. Eventually, if the tender comedy of actual Holocaust specific clowning is replicated, such as the humor of camp clowns, then the presentation of the whole disaster of the Holocaust may be complete. Society may be as close to knowing the evil as it may ever get without ever being there.

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