

**Can the Nazis be Funny? Can We Laugh at the Holocaust?
Examining Comedic Representations of the Nazis and their
Contexts from World War II to the Present**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

BACHELOR OF ARTS WITH HONORS

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

March 31, 2014

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Introduction

Roberto Benigni's 1997 film *Life is Beautiful* begins with its narrator saying "This is a simple story, but not an easy one to tell." Indeed, this phrase also sums up the story of comedic representations of Nazism and the Holocaust within the United States. Although the story of comedic representations of Nazism appears to be simple, beginning with propaganda driven satire in the World War II era and culminating with a complete falsification of the truth in the form of Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, it is actually filled with complications, and ultimately yields comedic representations of the Nazis that are a reflection of the era in which they were produced. In this sense, my thesis will analyze how the grounds of acceptability and propriety in comedically representing the Nazis and the Holocaust have shifted over the years, and how with additional years of separation from the fall of the Third Reich, certain global events have influenced the methods through which comedians choose to represent the Nazis and the Holocaust. Indeed, both critical and public receptions of comedic representations of Nazism have reflected the eras in which they were produced. We have come a long way from the days of World War II, when a comedic representation of Nazism virtually had to feature a Nazi making a stupid mistake in the propagandistic mold set by Charlie Chaplin and others. Indeed, in large part due to their comedic predecessors and the political environment in which they operate, comedians have historically represented the Nazis in a variety of ways, and continue to adapt their styles as the climate in which they produce comedic representations of Nazis consistently changes.

Comedians who represent the Nazis, who since the beginning of the Third Reich have fought to secure the hearts and minds of the public from the Nazi propaganda machine,

certainly played a large part in assuring that the Nazis were the ultimate losers in World War II in the minds of the public opinion. Similarly important, comedians who have chosen to represent the Nazis have slowly but surely convinced the public that, as time has passed, certain liberties can be taken that have allowed these comedians to create even stronger, more powerful representations of the Nazis through their humor. Indeed, in the years since the fall of the Third Reich, comedians have adapted what they show in terms of their comedic representations of Nazism to adjust to the time period and cultural context in which they were produced. At the same time, with these cultural adjustments comedians have also been able to create wildly entertaining representations of Nazism, and have succeeded in entertaining crowds despite focussing on the often tired topic of the Nazis. Essentially, comedic representations of Nazism have been able to stay fresh as a genre because the material that they cover is constantly changing and adapting to the context in which it is produced. In large part because of these adaptations, comedians who have poked fun at the Nazis have helped to stifle the Nazi's enduring impact on society, and have kept Nazism and the Holocaust as an active talking point within American Society.

The purpose of my thesis is to examine comedic representations of Nazism from a variety of periods, and examine how the societal factors of the eras in which these representations were produced shaped their content, and the message that they attempted to send. Literature to help track these factors and contextualize the comedic representations of Nazism that I will be analyzing includes a variety of secondary books and articles. One such book is Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life*, which traces American opinions regarding the Holocaust and the reasons behind these feelings from the World War II era up

until today. In the book, Novick does a fantastic job of contextualizing representations of the Holocaust (and, to a lesser extent, the Nazis) in American life. Throughout my thesis, I will implement Novick's writings to help express the cultural and political situations and events that elicited the many different comedic representations of Nazism that we have encountered during different eras of American history.

Other secondary literature that I will implement in my analysis of comedic representations of Nazism speaks more directly to specific chapters than to my topic as a whole. For example, one key source that I will discuss at length in chapter one is Michael S. Shull and David E. Wilt's book *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945*. In the book, the authors present a compelling argument in which they articulate their convictions that wartime cartoons, although comical in their nature, actually served the country well and were a crucial item of propaganda throughout World War II. Indeed, other secondary literature that grapples with World War II era comedic representations of Nazism which I will discuss in chapter one includes Robert Fyne's *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II* and Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black's *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies*. Both of these books provide evidence for the propagandistic aspects of World War II era comedic representations of Nazism that would come to define the era.

In chapter two, I will implement literature that grapples with *Hogan's Heroes* and *The Producers*. This literature includes *Hogan's Heroes* by Robert R. Shandley, and *Hogan's Heroes: A Comprehensive Reference to the 1965-1971 Television Comedy Series, with Cast Biographies and an Episode Guide*, by Brenda Scott Royce. Both of these books provide an

inside look at *Hogan's Heroes*, and analysis regarding the show's actors and producers. Also, both books do an excellent job of investigating the motivations that went into the show's premise and production, and the rationale behind the show itself. Literature to help me analyze *The Producers* and to frame its place within American society will rely on Kirsten Fermaglich's article "Mel Brooks' *The Producers*: Tracing American Jewish Culture Through Comedy, 1967-2007". In the article, Fermaglich argues that similar to World War II era representations of Nazism, in *The Producers* Brooks aimed to discomfort his audiences through comedy and absurdity, but made the film more for the purpose of comedy than for propaganda, as many of his predecessors in the World War II era had done.

In chapter 3, I will implement literature that discusses *Life is Beautiful* and *Inglourious Basterds*. One prominent essay about *Life is Beautiful* is Sander L. Gilman's essay "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films". In his essay, Gilman acknowledges that while *Life is Beautiful* faced a good amount of criticism for making light of a serious issue by turning the concentration camp experience into a comedic game, the film still was able to use a comedic representation of the holocaust to show how hope was preserved in the face of the ultimate evil. A key piece of literature that I will use in analyzing *Inglourious Basterds* is Imke Meyer's essay "Exploding Cinema, Exploding Hollywood: *Inglourious Basterds* and the Limits of Cinema". In the essay, Meyer discusses the decisions that Tarantino made in his production of *Inglourious Basterds*, and ultimately comes to the conclusion that it shattered the mold of Holocaust films, and redefined the genre for all who will come after.

Primary source material for my thesis is centered around film reviews, which help to document popular reception, and interviews with comedic filmmakers themselves, which help me attempt to try to better understand the motivations that they held in their productions of their comedic representations of Nazism. In chapter one, primary source material includes film reviews by critics such as Bosley Crowther, who voiced distaste with multiple scenes from Ernst Lubitsch's 1942 film *To Be Or Not To Be*, and Nelson B. Bell, who praised Charlie Chaplin's comedic efforts in *The Great Dictator*. Sources also include a rebuttal to criticisms of *To Be or Not To Be*, written by Lubitsch himself, and published in *The New York Times* in the wake of the negative press that his film received. In chapter two, sources will include primary materials about *Hogan's Heroes* found within Brenda Scott Royce's book *Hogan's Heroes: A Comprehensive Reference to the 1965-1971 Television Comedy Series, with Cast Biographies and an Episode Guide*, and critical reception of Mel Brooks' film *The Producers*. Finally, I will draw on an semi-interview with Brooks, semi-film review about *The Producers* published by Norman Mark in *The Los Angeles Times*. In chapter 3, sources will include reviews that grapple with a variety of representations of Nazism cited within the chapter, including the TV miniseries *Holocaust: A Tale of Two Families*, Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*, Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful*, and Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds*. I will provide positive and negative reviews for these films, notably drawing on Kobi Niv's book *Life is Beautiful but Not For Jews: Another View of the Film by Benigni*. In his book, Niv bashes the film, claiming that it belittles the struggle that his jewish ancestors faced in the Holocaust as a tradeoff for Benigni's pursuit of an Academy Award. I will counter Niv's argument, though, by citing critical praise of *Life is Beautiful*,

and showing how it meshed with the sentiments of the era in which it was produced, and was able to memorialize the Holocaust in its own special way by pushing the difficult themes of the concentration camp scenario into a comedic game for the benefit of his son. For *Inglourious Basterds*, I will cite reviews from critics such as J. Hoberman, who argued for the humor that Tarantino presented in his film. I will also draw upon interviews with Tarantino himself, compiled by Gerald Peary into his collection *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews*, to provide me with additional insight into Tarantino's thought process in his writing and production of the film, as well as his reactions to the reviews that the film received.

As for my chapters themselves, in chapter one, I will focus on comedic representations of Nazism that were created amidst the struggle of the rise of Nazism, and the emergence of the Nazi threat. In this setting, several comedians took it upon themselves to produce brilliant works of propaganda that made the Nazis look stupid, and ensured that American public opinion would lie only with the allies. By doing so, they allowed a public audience that was in fact by and large horrified by the Nazi threat to laugh at the villains that comedians such as Charlie Chaplin and Ernst Lubitsch put on screen. That being said, in the World War II setting, comedians and audiences alike were only willing to go so far with what they would accept as a comedic representation of Nazism. Indeed, many thought that elements of comedy portraying the Nazis, particularly Ernst Lubitsch's film *To Be or Not to Be*, went too far, and grappled with issues that it should have left alone. Indeed, theater audiences at the time weren't quite ready to contend with the stark realities of the situation in which the United States found itself during World War II. Still, though, the work that

comedians did in the propaganda battle against the Third Reich was not in vain, and reflected what the American public required within its comedic representations of Nazism during the World War II era: a representation that was scathingly against the Nazis, yet still avoided showing the full extent of the realities of the atrocities of the Third Reich.

In chapter two, I will examine the comedic representations of Nazism that emerged in the aftermath of World War II and in the “Cold War” context of the 1960s. Indeed, following a period in which totalitarianism became the enemy, and the Nazis and the Holocaust were rarely talked about as the United States tried to repair its relationship with Germany and shift its concerns from the (now defeated) Nazi threat to the Soviet Union, comedic representations of the Nazis returned in a big way. In the form of *Hogan’s Heroes*, which used the World War II context to provide commentary about the Vietnam War, and *The Producers*, which aimed to voice the concerns of an increasingly prominent Jewish-American population, comedic representations of Nazism reemerged as a prominent genre within the American consciousness. Indeed, unlike their predecessors in the World War II era, these “Cold War” era comedic representations of Nazism had motivations other than propaganda in mind, and used their comedic representations of the Nazis to speak to other aspects of American society that they felt needed to be addressed.

In chapter three, I will investigate comedic representations of Nazism that were produced after the 1978 release of NBC’s *Holocaust*, which centered the American consciousness around the Nazi’s Jewish genocide, and made it essential that all representations of Nazism that would follow, comedic and otherwise, focussed on the Holocaust. Indeed, Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List* advanced this sentiment,

creating what was a starkly realistic, “true” story about the Holocaust. In response to Spielberg’s film, Roberto Benigni wrote, starred in, and directed *Life is Beautiful*, which took the concentration camp experience shown in *Schindler’s List* and turned it into a set, a comedic game in which Benigni was the star. Following *Life is Beautiful*, Quentin Tarantino offered his take on representing the Nazis and the Holocaust by completely falsifying history, and drafting his own alternative ending to World War II and the Third Reich. All in all, ever since the beginning of World War II comedians have represented the Nazis, but the way in which they do so and the messages that they attempt to send within these representations greatly vary, dependent upon the era in which the representations were produced and the cultural and political climates to which they spoke.

Chapter 1: Comedy in the Face of Evil

Following the Nazi invasion of Poland and the large-scale commencement of World War II in Europe, American comedians were charged with the task of using propaganda to sway public opinion against fascism and towards the powers of the allied forces. Indeed, this duty was of extreme importance to the war effort, as these films were meant to energize the home front and create a strong, national, anti-fascist sentiment among Americans. Of particular importance to this effort, though, were comedic representations of the Nazis. Peter Novick elaborates on this point in his book *The Holocaust in American Life* by writing, “In the case of Germany – unlike Japan – there was no offense against Americans to be avenged, no equivalent of ‘Remember Pearl Harbor.’ The task of American wartime propagandists was to portray Nazi Germany as the mortal enemy of ‘free men everywhere.’”¹ As Novick states, in the years leading up to and throughout World War II, there was no “Pearl Harbor” type of event that provoked Americans and made them truly despise their German, Nazi enemies. Rather, it was necessary to manufacture widespread distaste for the Nazis, and comedians saw this necessity as their opportunity to contribute to the war effort and use their specialized skill sets for a truly meaningful purpose. That being said, comedians during World War II weren’t exactly sure what audiences would tolerate in terms of comedic representations of the Nazis. As many comedic representations of Nazism would be met with backlash because they made their audiences uncomfortable, and addressed topics that the public at large wasn’t ready to see on the big screen, many comedians confined themselves to films that portrayed the Nazis in a propagandistic way.

¹ Peter Novick. *The Holocaust in American Life*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) 27.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of American comedic representations of Nazism, it would be wise to first look at some of the comedic material that came out of Germany during the years leading up to and the first several years of the Third Reich, to see what perhaps inspired the propaganda filled comedic representations of Nazism that Americans would come to produce during World War II. A German in the Third Reich who employed comedy as a weapon particularly well against the growing threat of the Nazis was the great satirist of Nazi Germany, John Heartfield. In his essay, “John Heartfield or the Art of Cutting Out Hitler”, Jost Hermand discusses Heartfield’s work and emphasizes its importance in negatively portraying the Nazis during their rise to power. Specifically, Hermand discusses how Heartfield’s works served a great purpose during the Third Reich, and still remained relevant and important in the years that followed. Hermand discusses Heartfield’s critical photomontages, claiming that, “his most famous photomontages of Hitler, which were far more critical than any Hitler satires that had previously been published in journals such as *Simplicissimus* or *Kladderadatsch*, appeared in the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* or *AIZ* as it was called at that time.”² The *AIZ* had a very strong circulation of 500,000 copies in 1931, and “published one of Heartfield’s photomontages nearly every month in the years from 1930 to 1938 (a total of 235 to be exact.)”³ Clearly, Heartfield was provided with significant exposure during the early years of the Third Reich, and was one of the primary voices speaking out against the great Nazi threat during this time.

² Jost Hermand. “John Heartfield or the Art of Cutting Out Hitler.” *Unmasking Hitler: Cultural Representations of Hitler from the Weimar Republic to the Present*. Eds. Klaus L. Berghahn and Jost Hermand. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005) 63.

³ *Ibid.*

In his photomontages, through the usage of comedic satire, Heartfield was able to portray Hitler in such a way that his image was soiled and that he was portrayed as the evil, deceitful dictator that he truly was. A great many of Heartfield's photomontages focused on, as Hermand puts it, the fact that "the Nazi movement was in no way a worker's party, but rather was a party in the service of the very same military-industrial complex that had already ignited that flames of the First World War"⁴. Indeed, while many in the press simply ridiculed Hitler and the Nazis for their radical politics during the 1930s, "Heartfield's photomontages were unrelenting in depicting the dangerousness of the Nazi movement and its repressive, militaristic, and war-mongering character"⁵. One example of a Heartfield photomontage that truly takes a stab at the Nazis, and through its comedy sends a strong message about Hitler himself, appeared in the *AIZ* in 1932 with the title "Adolf – der Übermensch schluckt Gold und redet Blech" (see fig. 1), which translates to "Adolf – the Superman Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk."

In the photomontage, Hitler is shown as "sinister looking and unattractively bellowing"⁶, while a stream of gold coins are pouring from his open mouth down into his stomach, which is illuminated by x-ray vision. As Hermand puts it, "In this way, Heartfield effectively portrayed the payoffs garnered from the upper classes following Hitler's famous address to the wealthiest representatives of the Rhein-Ruhr industrialists on January 27, 1932"⁷. But, there are deeper messages that are prevalent in Heartfield's photomontage that

⁴ Hermand, 64.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hermand, 66.

⁷ Ibid.

go beyond simply the present-day events of 1932. The photomontage, which portrays Hitler's facial expression as stern and menacing, also gives Hitler a swastika in place of where his heart should be. The main message here is simple: Hitler is a very dangerous man, heartless and ruthless, and he is a threat that needs to be taken seriously. In the photomontage, Hitler intentionally isn't given a heart, symbolizing his lack of desire to serve the German people. Instead, he is given a Swastika, displaying his ultimate allegiance to his party over his country, and implying that he would put Nazi ideals, such as anti-semitism and eugenics, above the concerns of the German population at large. We see coins pouring into Hitler's open mouth as a symbol of the Money that controlled the Nazi party, also serving to emphasize the evilness of Hitler and his propensity for accepting money from wealthy businessmen.

Another famous Heartfield photomontage that aimed to lower public opinion of Hitler in Germany and expose his bribe-taking actions is "Millions Stand Behind Me. The Meaning of the Hitler Salute" (fig. 2). Hermand describes the photomontage, which was printed on October 16, 1932, by saying that in the photo "Hitler raises his right arm in typical Nazi



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

fashion, so that a towering anonymous industrialist, who is twice as large as he, standing behind him can hand over 1,000 Mark bills to further Hitler's election campaign."⁸ Indeed, in this photomontage Heartfield echoes the sentiment that he had put forth in "Adolph the Superman", claiming that Hitler's policies were not actually in the best interest of the average German, but rather were the result of bribes from prominent, wealthy businessmen.

Ultimately, as a result of Heartfield's efforts against the rise of the Nazis, he was forced to flee to Czechoslovakia in 1933 when Hitler took power and again to England in 1938, where his political satire through the medium of photomontage largely stopped.⁹ Still, though, Heartfield's works are remembered internationally, and have been staged in exhibitions around the world in the years since World War II.¹⁰ John Heartfield expressed before most of the rest of the world the inherent danger associated with the rise of Hitler and the Nazis, but he would be far from the last to emphasize the seriousness of the Nazi threat.

In the United States, throughout the years leading up to the war and the war years themselves, major Hollywood studios produced important cartoons that were screened to massive audiences and often times had very pointed political messages. Hollywood started early with its lampooning of Hitler, with his first cartoon appearance coming in Warner Bros.' *Bosko's Picture Show*, a September 18, 1933 release. Indeed, the first comedic representation of Hitler in American cartoons came in the very same year that Hitler was appointed chancellor.¹¹ While it is important to note that, as Michael S. Shull and David E.

⁸ Hermand, 67.

⁹ Hermand, 72.

¹⁰ Hermand, 76.

¹¹ Michael S. Shull and David E. Wilt. *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1987) 23.

Wilt state in their book *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945* “Cartoons were largely concerned with the antics of funny animals; they were made (in most cases) for the purpose of making audiences laugh, rather than educating, or arousing an audience to action,”¹² the best representations in this genre could achieve in producing both entertaining comedy and education, political message that made these cartoons critical during World War II. Importantly as well, these cartoons were appropriate for children, displayed little to no material that would upset or anger audience members and critics. Rather, as Shull and Wilt remark, they aimed to make audiences laugh first and foremost, and provided many Americans with a form of escapism during an extremely difficult time in our nation’s history.

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, formally bringing the United States into World War II, cartoon studios’ war related output skyrocketed. In the early parts of the war, war related cartoons had represented just a fraction of total cartoon output (15 percent of total 1941 releases).¹³ This is not to say that the Hollywood cartoonists completely sidestepped anti-Nazi works before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In fact, in 1941 alone there were seven works that either directly or indirectly attacked the Nazi regime and/or its leaders.¹⁴ That being said, though, in 1942 cartoon studios truly increased their efforts in war related output, and became the propaganda force that would help to rally a nation during a time of brutal war. Thanks in large part to American involvement in the war, and the desperate nature of the war itself, cartoon studios started creating military training

¹² Shull and Wilt, 7.

¹³ Shull and Wilt, 28.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and public service cartoons. At years' end, the war related commercial output for 1942 reached an astonishing 70 out of 158 works (44 percent)¹⁵, making these cartoons a prominent and widespread form of popular entertainment as well as a propagandistic tool and an essential resource in our war effort in a variety of ways.

One particularly notable and prominent cartoon that represented the Nazis during World War II was Warner Brother's *The Ducktators*. In this cartoon, which was released in 1942, the audience sees the growth of a Hitler duck. In a somewhat biographical portrayal of Hitler's life, the cartoon shows the duck's evolution from a frustrated artist, to his haranguing of other ducks from his soapbox, to his eventual seizing of control of the barnyard with the help of his Italian and Japanese assistants.¹⁶ Indeed, *The Ducktators* takes what is a very serious topic in depicting Hitler's life, and trivializes it using comedy to make Hitler and his allies look foolish as a result of the gravity of the situation in Europe. The ending of the cartoon is most evident of propagandistic model, as eventually a harassed dove of peace rises to defeat the trio of duck dictators and their henchmen. The message here is clear: that peace triumphs over tyranny by means of war. Depictions of the axis powers such as this one were important in America during the war years, and were critical in swinging public sentiment in the direction of the war effort. On another level, though, cartoon interpretations of the Nazis were able to take their comedy further, and take risks that live action films could not at the time. Indeed, the fantastical and inherently unrealistic nature of the cartoon medium allowed for their creators to use comedy to take their representations of the Nazis to the next level,

¹⁵ Shull and Wilt, 40.

¹⁶ Shull and Wilt, 36.

and create truly powerful representations that swayed public opinion and helped promote a positive sentiment for the war effort.

Following the end of John Heartfield's career as a satirist in Europe, another renowned comedian who identified the Nazi threat before the United States entered the war and attempted to publicize the danger of the Nazis in order to educate his American audience on the gravity of the Nazi threat was legendary silent film star Charlie Chaplin. In his film *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin's first talking picture, he takes a serious stab at the Nazi regime by lampooning Hitler and his closest confidants in a satirical comedy that actually raises several critical issues regarding the threat of the Nazis. When *The Great Dictator* was conceived, Chaplin was already well acquainted with satire, and had already traversed the intersection of social issues and comedy. For example, in 1918 during World War I, a cartoon version of Chaplin was released in *How Charlie Captured the Kaiser*. In the cartoon, Chaplin sails across the ocean in a tub, sinks a German submarine, defeats an army of spike-helmeted German soldiers, and eventually finds and captures Wilhelm II.¹⁷ Years later, Chaplin again offered his commentary on social issues with the release of his film *Modern Times*. Meant to be his final film (it debuted in 1936, four years before *The Great Dictator*), the film dealt with the seminal social issue of the day: The Great Depression.¹⁸ Yet, Chaplin could not keep himself away from the big screen for long. As Wes D. Gehring writes in his book *Forties Film Funnymen*, "another social issue, the rise of dictators like Hitler, once again pulled Chaplin and his little Tramp back on the screen in *Dictator*."¹⁹

¹⁷ Shull and Wilt, 17.

¹⁸ Wes D. Gehring. *Forties Film Funnymen*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010) 14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

In the film itself, there are several scenes that convey particularly strong messages against the Nazis and emphasize the threat that they posed to the world during the Third Reich. One such scene that serves as a comedic and convincing message about the dangers of the Nazis occurs early in the film, just after the barber, who is played by Chaplin, recovers from his amnesia suffered during his service in World War I. In the scene, the barber sees storm troopers painting the word “Jew” on the windows of his shop. When the barber goes out to clean his windows, a scuffle ensues. In the end, with the help of his future love interest, Hannah, and her frying pan, the barber is able to escape the storm troopers. Because of the comedic aspects of the scene, though, Chaplin is able to push a deeper message of anti-Nazi propaganda, and enforce his strong anti-Nazi beliefs. First of all, Chaplin uses the scene as an opportunity to make the storm troopers look weak by having Hannah beat them up with her frying pan. Indeed, the thought of a woman beating up a Nazi soldier would be unthinkable within Nazi Germany, but to American audiences who were horrified by the Nazi threat, it served as way to make the threat of the Third Reich seem less severe, and show that, at least on the micro level, the Nazis were a beast that could be destroyed. Importantly as well, the scene serves as an opportunity for Chaplin to show his audiences the extent of ghettoization and the severe anti-Semitic undertones that ran deep throughout Nazi Germany. When Hannah accidentally clubs the barber with her frying pan, a dazed Chaplin returns to his classic form of physical comedy and dizzyingly stumbles down the street from his barbershop. Importantly, though, what the viewer sees in this continuous shot while Chaplin staggers down the street is the word “Jew” painted in every window. Therefore, through the barber’s interactions with the storm troopers and the hilarious frying pan fight, Chaplin is

able to emphasize the dangers of the anti-Semitism that had become a part of daily life in Nazi Germany, and is able to show his viewers the extent of the widespread anti-Semitism that had become rampant in Nazi Germany. Certainly, *The Great Dictator* uses its comedy to engrain into the minds of Americans the seriousness of the threat of the Nazis to Europe and the world at large (epitomized by the scene in which Hynkel is playing with a gigantic globe, and it pops). Moreover, the film remains a constant reminder in the international consciousness of the brutality of the Nazis and their inhumanity in the Third Reich era. In this sense, the comedic genius of *The Great Dictator* is an invaluable weapon against the global reminiscence of the Nazis.

Essentially, it was Chaplin's comedic brilliance that made *The Great Dictator* such an effective weapon against the Nazis. Nelson B. Bell, a film reviewer for *The Washington Post*, wrote about *The Great Dictator* upon its release by lauding Chaplin for keeping his classic slapstick style despite the gravity of the subject that the film covers. Bell explains, "we do not hold with those who contend that '*The Great Dictator*' is deficient in typical Chaplin comedy. It embodies a wealth of the ridiculous slapstick that has become his trademark through the years."²⁰ Indeed, here Bell is defending *The Great Dictator* as a work within Chaplin's classical form, claiming that Chaplin didn't divert from his usual method of slapstick comedy even while making a film about the Nazis. In Bell's mind, *The Great Dictator* is a "2-hour-and-7-minute feature, which, in the view of this department is a mature, developed and irresistible Chaplin at his transcendent best."²¹ Certainly, Chaplin's usage of

²⁰ Nelson B. Bell. "The Great Dictator is Chaplin at his Zenith." Rev. of *The Great Dictator*, dir. Charlie Chaplin. *The Washington Post* 7 Nov. 1940: 18. Proquest. Web. 28 Nov. 2013.

²¹ Ibid.

comedy in *The Great Dictator* helped to emphasize the evil of the Nazis, and was perhaps the most important reason why Chaplin was so effective in emphasizing the Nazi threat.

Essentially, by producing excellent slapstick comedy in which the Nazis looked particularly evil, Chaplin was able to excel in his field of expertise while still conveying a powerful and important message about the threat of the Nazis.

That being said, while most reviews of *The Great Dictator* were positive and the film was a box office success, it was not without its detractors, many of who were offended by its content and thought that it took the comedic genre too far. In fact, Chaplin's resentment over the mixed reception of the film, especially by New York City film critics, compelled him to turn down the prestigious New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Actor²². There were several reasons why the film experienced such backlash. First of all, the film was the first, and for a long time only, film that explicitly dealt with Jewish persecution by the Nazis during the 1930s.²³ Amidst a culture of non-interventionism, the Federal government asked Hollywood studios to only produce fair representations "of the history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations."²⁴ Additionally, most Hollywood studio owners were first or second generation Jews from Europe eager to assimilate, and it was in their best interests to avoid representing the fight against Hitler as a primarily Jewish concern.²⁵ To make matters worse, during the production of the film Chaplin faced immense political pressure from none other than President Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself, "who

²² Gehring, 28.

²³ David Bathrick. "Cinematic Remaskings of Hitler: From Riefenstahl to Chaplin" *Unmasking Hitler: Cultural Representations of Hitler from the Weimar Republic to the Present*. Eds. Klaus L. Berghahn and Jost Hermand. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005) 164.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

scolded [Chaplin] personally for making his life difficult ‘in the Argentine’ where there were large numbers of Germans opposed to anti-Nazi activities in the US” and from his studio, United Artists, who were being advised that the film might be censored.²⁶ Finally, many took a particular issue with the final scene of the film, in which Chaplin breaks character and delivers a three-minute speech where he issues a plea for peace, claiming that it aesthetically ruined the film for them.²⁷ Yet, Chaplin was undeterred. As he said himself, “I was determined to go ahead, for Hitler must be laughed at.”²⁸ Indeed, Chaplin’s bravery paid great dividends, as the film went on to gross \$5 million and earned Chaplin a personal profit of \$1.5 million.²⁹ More importantly, though, it used the power of comedy to emphasize the gravity of the Nazi threat, and alerted many Americans to the horrors that were occurring in Nazi Germany.

2 years later, the talented German American film director Ernst Lubitsch decided to follow in the brave footsteps of Charlie Chaplin and create a risky comedic representation of the Nazis of his own. The results of his efforts were *To Be or Not to Be*, a comedy about a troop of Polish Actors starring Jack Benny and Carole Lombard. In part because of the timing of the film, which debuted in 1942, when the United States was fully involved in the war and the general public was beginning to understand the gravity of the conflict, and also in part because of the film’s storyline, the public had mixed reactions to *To Be or Not to Be*, and many thought that Lubitsch took his creative freedom too far. While Chaplin had

²⁶ Bathrick, 165.

²⁷ Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black. *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies*. (New York: The Free Press a Division of Macmillan, Inc., 1987) 32.

²⁸ Koppes and Black, 31.

²⁹ Koppes and Black, 32.

avoided portraying some of the more brutal realities of the war, such as the Nazi invasion of Poland, Lubitsch chose to address these realities head on. Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black discuss this theme in their book *Hollywood Goes to War* by writing, “By the time of [*To Be or Not to Be*’s] release, 1942, some critics were questioning whether we should ‘laugh at some broad anti-Nazi satire while we are weeping over the sad fate of stricken Poland.’”³⁰ Indeed, *To Be or Not to Be* would test just how much audiences in a warring country were willing to laugh at their nation’s sworn enemies, and would test what the populous felt comfortable with being shown on screen.

In the film itself, Benny and Lombard play the Josef and Maria Tura, a husband and wife who work for a Polish theater group. In the beginning of the film, Maria is having an affair with a Polish pilot named Lt. Stanislav Sobinski. Soon after, Germany declares war on Poland, and Sobinski leaves to join the fight. Indeed, Sobinski joins the Polish division of the British Royal Air Force where he meets a supposed Polish resistance leader named Professor Siletsky. As it turns out, Siletsky is in collusion with the Nazis and tries to recruit Maria as a spy. Later that night, Maria returns to Siletsky’s room and pretends to be sexually interested in him. Just as they are kissing, there is a knock at the door from a Nazi officer, who the audience recognizes as one of the members of the Tura’s acting company. The officer informs Siletsky that he is wanted at Gestapo headquarters, but in reality he takes him to the company’s theater, which has been disguised as Gestapo office with props and costumes from the plays. In this scene, Benny brilliantly pretends to be Colonel Ehrhardt of the Gestapo, but his cover is blown when he overreacts to hearing about Maria and

³⁰ Koppes and Black, 297.

Sobinski's affair through Siletsky. Siletsky then pulls a gun on Tura and tries to escape, but Sobinski wisely notices what is happening and shoots and kills Siletsky.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Tura disguises himself as Siletsky and returns to Siletsky's hotel to destroy the classified information about the Polish resistance that Siletsky had been keeping there. Unfortunately, though, Tura is met at the hotel by a Nazi captain, and is taken to meet Colonel Ehrhardt himself. Tura is able to pass himself off as Siletsky, and learns that the next day Hitler himself will be visiting Poland. Unfortunately for Tura, though, Siletsky's dead body is found in the theater, and Tura is forced to once again meet with Ehrhardt while posing as Siletsky. Tura is able to manipulate Ehrhardt into believing that he is the real Siletsky, and the imposter is dead by attaching a spare fake beard that he was carrying in his pocket. Realizing that Tura may be in big trouble, Maria sends the other actors in Nazi costume to storm into Ehrhardt's office, yank off Tura's false beard, and pretend to drag him away to prison. The trouble is not yet done for the actors, though, as they must now find a way to leave the country. Sobinski and the actors decide to sneak into a show that Nazis are putting on at their theater, dressed as Nazis. One of the actors charges towards Hitler's box, distracting his guards long enough for another actor, Bronski, who had been famous for playing Hitler, to emerge wearing a Hitler mustache along with his "entourage" of friendly actors playing Hitler's men. One of the actors then delivers a very pointed, anti-Nazi speech, which compels Tura, who is acting as one of Hitler's leading men, to order him to be "taken away", and demand that "Hitler" and all of his men leave Poland immediately. After picking up Maria at her apartment, the actors head for Hitler's plane.

Here, at the end of the film, occurs a particularly controversial scene in which Bronski, still dressed as Hitler, simply orders the real Nazi pilots on the plane to jump out without parachutes from mid-air, and the pilots fall to their deaths. Sobinski flies the plane to Scotland, where the actors are soon revealed as heroes and Josef Tura gets to fulfill one of his life's dreams: to play Hamlet on stage. Historian Robert Fyne offers his perspective on the plane scene in his book *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II* by stating that, "the denouement in *To Be or Not to Be*, while admittedly humorous, appeared tasteless."³¹ Indeed, many contemporary critics found the ending to be appalling. Yet, as Fyne argues, it is the scene's tastelessness itself that makes it so effective. Fyne writes, "this final scene, depicting the German airmen blindly leaping out of their plane, reaffirmed the basic theme of this film: the insane stupidity of the Nazi soldier."³² Indeed, this portrayal of the Nazis as stupid, incapable buffoons that debuted while Hitler was bombing Europe and implementing the logistics for the Final Solution offered audiences the chance to escape from the harsh realities of World War II, and see their mortal enemies abroad made to look foolish on the big screen.

Despite the necessary escapism that Lubitsch's comedy provided for many, there was a strong backlash against the film from those who thought that Lubitsch took his comedy too far. Chief among Lubitsch's detractors was *New York Times* film reviewer Bosley Crowther. In his review of the film, Crowther wrote that while "perhaps there are plenty of persons who can overlook the locale, who can still laugh at the Nazi generals with pop-eyes and bungle-

³¹ Robert Fyne. *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II*. (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994) 75.

³² Fyne, 75.

some wits,”³³ there were some moments in the film that simply went too far, and made many in its audiences uncomfortable. Addressing these moments, Crowther wrote, “it is hard to imagine how any one can take, without batting an eye, a shattering air raid upon Warsaw right after a sequence of farce or the spectacle of Mr. Benny playing a comedy scene with a Gestapo corpse.”³⁴ In another review, quoted by Wes. D Gehring in his book *Forties Film Funnymen*, Crowther writes, “You might almost think Mr. Lubitsch had the attitude of ‘anything for a laugh.’”³⁵ Indeed, by the time *To Be or Not to Be* came out, many were questioning whether we should laugh at the Nazis at all, especially considering the fate of Poland and the increasingly bleak outlook for European Jewry.³⁶ Certainly, filmmakers, reviewers, and audiences alike had become increasingly sensitive to what they deemed to be acceptable to show on the big screen in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor and the increased involvement of American forces in World War II. I tend to fall somewhere in the middle of the debate about *To Be or Not to Be*. While I commend Lubitsch for taking a risk, and graphically depicting Poland’s struggles in the first half of World War II, I recognize that many Americans simply weren’t ready to see such a graphic representation of World War II in a comedic context during the war.

Ernst Lubitsch, though, did not take criticism of his film lightly, and responded to his critics with a column of his own in the *New York Times*. In “Mr. Lubitsch Takes the Floor for Rebuttal”, the director defended his film and the comedic liberties that he took in its

³³ Bosley Crowther. “The Screen.” Rev. of *To Be or Not to Be*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch. *The New York Times* 7 Mar. 1942: 13. *Proquest*. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ Gehring, 71.

³⁶ Koppes and Black, 297.

production. Lubitsch writes that with *To Be or Not to Be*, he tried to break away from the traditional motion picture formula of drama with comedic relief and comedy with dramatic relief. Instead, as Lubitsch explained, “I had made up my mind to make a picture with no attempt to relieve anybody from anything at any time; dramatic when the situation demands it, satire and comedy whenever it is called for. One might call it a tragical farce or a farcical tragedy.”³⁷ As Lubitsch himself says, it was not his intention to use the film to comfort his audiences. Rather, as Lubitsch states, “I went out of my way to remind them of the destruction of the Nazi conquest, of the terror regime of the Gestapo.”³⁸ Indeed, the scenes in which Lubitsch depicts the burning ruins of Warsaw and the Nazi domination of Poland are very powerful and certainly resonated with his viewers as emotionally difficult scenes. It is important to note, though, that these emotions are intentional.

As Lubitsch himself said, *To Be or Not to Be* was meant to be a tragedy, and was supposed to properly depict the miserable condition of Poland in the aftermath of the Nazi takeover. At the same time, the film was meant to show the power of comedy, and how the comedic brilliance of Jack Benny, Carole Lombard, and other cast members to make jokes about Poland’s situation while still emphasizing the tragic state of affairs within Poland and Europe as a whole. Lubitsch sums up his argument well by talking about one of the last scenes in the film, the controversial scene where Bronski orders the Nazi pilots to jump out of their plane from high up and without parachutes. He writes, “I am positive that that scene wouldn’t draw a chuckle in Nazi Germany. It gets a big laugh in the United States of

³⁷ Ernst Lubitsch. “Mr. Lubitsch Takes the Floor for Rebuttal.” *The New York Times* 29 Mar. 1942: X3. Proquest. Web. 2 Dec. 2013.

³⁸ Lubitsch, *New York Times*.

America. Let's be grateful that it does, and let's hope that it always will."³⁹ Here, Lubitsch praises his audiences for laughing at the Nazis dying, and commends them for being on the right side of history. As he himself puts it, his audiences "have contempt for people who get a perverted pleasure out of such serfdom"⁴⁰. By allowing themselves to laugh at the Nazis, some in Lubitsch's audiences were able use his comedy as a way of making the Nazis seem less frightening. Understandably, though, due to uncertain nature of the timing of the film and the themes that it presented, not all of Lubitsch's moviegoers in 1942 were comfortable with this humor when it was placed in the context of Nazi occupied Poland.

In the years leading up to World War II and the war years themselves, many comedians sought to use their skills to represent the Nazis. Indeed, the United States turned to Hollywood in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attacks to spur anti-Nazi sentiment, and compel the American people to dislike Nazi Germany even though the Nazis weren't the ones that had directly attacked the United States. Comedians took this seriously, and through doing so, they were often times able to make the Nazis look foolish on the big screen, through both feature films and cartoons. Yet, many of these brave comedians took their representations further than people were willing to accept in a war weary country, and thought that the comedians were being insensitive to the grave dangers that the Nazis presented the world with. After the defeat of the Nazis and the subsequent beginning of the Cold War, though, many of these prior restrictions were lifted and comedians began to represent the Nazis in ways that had previously been unimaginable within American life.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Comedic Representations in the Face of the Cold War

Following the end of World War II and the fall of the Nazis, Comedic imagery of the Nazis largely disappeared from the American consciousness. Americans had tired of being inundated with news and media that featured the Nazis, having just finished the brutal struggle of World War II. On top of that, as Peter Novick tells us in his book *The Holocaust in American Life*, after 1945 “The Russians were transformed from indispensable allies to implacable foes, the Germans from implacable foes to indispensable allies.”¹ Indeed, in the years following the conclusion of World War II, many in the United States were trying to forget about the horrors of Nazism, as Germany had become a critical ally in the new, Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. Novick puts this intriguing situation into context by writing about the extremely quick ideological shift that made Germany a crucial ally of the United States, while making the Soviet Union the United States’ greatest enemy. Novick writes, “in 1945, Americans had cheered as Soviet forces pounded Berlin into rubble; in 1948, Americans organized the Airlift to defend ‘gallant Berliners’ from Soviet threat.”² In the matter of just a few years, the greatest evil in the mind the United States’ government had been entirely relocated, and public opinion would have to be shifted to accept the new worldview.

The struggle to shift American public opinion from a hatred of Nazi fascism to Soviet communism would not be easy, as the political ideologies themselves rest on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Therefore, according to Novick, many began to implement the

¹ Novick, 85-86.

² Novick, 86.

category of totalitarianism as the enemy during this era. Novick writes that although the term was coined in the interwar years between World War I and World War II, it only came into wide usage after 1945, because it “pointed to features of Nazi and Communist regimes that were said to make them ‘essentially alike’ and that distinguished them from traditional autocracies”³. Such features included a comprehensive ideology, a centrally controlled economy, one-party dictatorship, elimination of all opposition, and a populace terrorized through an extremely powerful secret police. Indeed, according to Novick most believed that these totalitarian regimes were limitlessly expansionist and unwilling to reform from within. The only way that totalitarian theorists believed that they could be overthrown was by external force.⁴ Essentially, those who endorsed the totalitarianism theory aimed to show the American public that switching the focus from Germany as the country’s greatest enemy to the Soviet Union as its new bitter rival only seemed like it was a dramatic reversal of alliances. Rather, these theorists asserted that, from the standpoint of the West, the Cold War was simply a continuation of World War II, and the struggle against the transcendent enemy of totalitarianism, first in its Nazi and then its Soviet version. As Peter Novick states, “In the early years of the Cold War, the designation ‘totalitarian’ was a powerful rhetorical weapon in deflecting the abhorrence felt toward Nazism onto the new Soviet enemy.”⁵ Indeed, in this post World War II context, where the United States would need Germany as an ally in Central Europe against communism and the new Soviet threat, discussions of the Nazis and

³ Novick, 86.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Holocaust went nearly silent, and the focus of most American's enmity shifted to Stalin and the Soviet Union.

The silence of Nazi and Holocaust representations in the years that followed the conclusion of World War II was not limited to the media and mainstream America. Even in the (largely segregated) Jewish community within the United States, Nazism and the Holocaust became a taboo subject in the aftermath of the war. Novick addresses Holocaust survivors who immigrated to the United States, saying that "It is said that survivor's memories were so painful that they repressed them, that only after the passage of many years could they bear to speak of what they had undergone."⁶ Yet, Novick quickly corrects this myth about Holocaust survivors, claiming that there were multiple other factors at play rather than simply repressing painful memories that often urged them to keep their stories private in the post-war era. One such factor, as noted above, was the switch in enemies from the Germans to the Soviets in most American's minds. Another crucial factor in the silencing of Holocaust survivors following the war was simple economics, indicated by the number of survivors, and the locations to which they immigrated following their liberations. Novick explains that by the early 1950s, approximately 100,000 survivors had come to the United States, and while some spread out around the country, most settled into urban Jewish neighborhoods, most prominently in New York City.⁷ Thus, with this sudden, massive influx of Holocaust survivors into the United States, and particularly New York City, survivors found that common Americans were uninterested in hearing their individual stories. As Novick describes, "to an unknowable extent, survivors' silence was a response to "market"

⁶ Novick, 83.

⁷ Novick, 82-83.

considerations: few were interested. (Thirty and forty years later, with increased demand there was increased supply.)”⁸

Yet, survivors silence in the United States following the war wasn't only based on a general disinterest by the populace in their stories. Rather, as Novick states, survivors were constantly told “that they should turn their faces forward, not backward; that it was in their interest, insofar as possible, to forget the past and proceed to build new lives.”⁹ Of course, though, there were political tensions at play that urged the survivors to keep their stories silent in this era. As the Soviet Union nearly immediately transitioned from being a critical ally for the West to being its greatest enemy, “caring” for survivors took on its own, special meaning. As Novick explains, “caring for the survivors, along with the establishment of Israel, meant liquidating the legacy of the conflict recently concluded - all the more urgent because of the new conflict now beginning.”¹⁰ Indeed, as Novick argues, the best way to care for Holocaust survivors who immigrated to the United States following the war was to encourage them to forget about what had happened in the past, and do all that they could to settle into their new lives as recently immigrated Americans. This sentiment was reflected in the thoughts of young American Jews, as by the late 1950's in their minds Holocaust could be classified as nothing more than an afterthought. This is evidenced by Novick when he cites a 1957 essay series in *The New Leader*, which featured eighteen personal essays by Americans who had graduated college since the conclusion of World War II. The purpose of the series was to find out what was going on in the minds of young Americans in this post

⁸ Novick, 83

⁹ Novick, 83.

¹⁰ Novick, 84.

World War II, early Cold War era. Novick describes the series, saying “at least two thirds of the respondents were Jewish. In writing of what had shaped their thinking they mentioned a variety of historic events, from the Great Depression to the Cold War. Not a single contributor mentioned the Holocaust.”¹¹ Seemingly, discussions of the Nazis and the Holocaust in America had all but disappeared by the end of the 1950s. Soon, though, as the Cold War became a conflict that lasted for decades rather than years, American’s allegiances were no longer threatened by World War II alignments. The Nazis would re-enter the American consciousness, and there would be a re-emergence of comedic representations of Nazism.

In the 1960s, with World War II increasingly a distant memory and the Cold War solidly a fixture in American life, the intense repression of the Holocaust and the Nazis that had been occurring since the end of World War II began to relax, and a few key events once again brought the Holocaust and the Nazis to the forefront of the American consciousness. Peter Novick discusses some factors that paved the way for the softening of Holocaust and Nazi repression that would occur in the 1960s:

The death of Stalin and the fall of McCarthy, limited liberalization in Eastern Europe and the Sino-Soviet split, the rise to a kind of legitimacy of critics of the nuclear-arms race, perhaps above all the impossibility of sustaining the level of ideological mobilization of the late forties and early fifties - all worked to relax previous constraints on talking of the Holocaust. Alternatively - but it comes to the same thing - one could argue that by the early sixties the Cold War outlook was so institutionalized that it was no longer threatened by the reminders of World War II alignments.¹²

¹¹ Novick, 105-106.

¹² Novick, 127-128.

Indeed, for a variety of reasons, as the 1950s came to an end Americans once again felt comfortable talking about the Nazis and the Holocaust. This was, in no small part, thanks to William L Shirer, whose record-breaking 1960 bestseller *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* essentially, in the words of Novick, “put Nazis and World War II on the American cultural map in a big way.”¹³ The 1,200 page book provided great insight into the inner working of Hitler’s regime and the Third Reich as a whole, providing a detailed history of Nazi Germany from its inception to its ultimate demise. In the book’s foreword, Shirer explains his method for documenting this fascinating and horrifying period of German history. He claims that he would not have been able to write the book had it not been for “the capture of most of the confidential archives of the German government and all its branches, including those of the Foreign Office, the Army and Navy, the National Socialist Party and Heinrich Himmler’s secret police.”¹⁴ Certainly, because of this rare opportunity to examine the Nazi elite’s documents from a variety of governmental branches, Shirer was able to highlight many formerly secretive elements of the Nazi regime, and provide the American public with a look inside the Third Reich that had never before been available to them.

Another absolutely critical event that occurred in the early 1960s and helped to bring Nazism back into the mainstream of the American consciousness was the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann, a former Nazi SS colonel, and one of the major organizers of the Holocaust. Following Eichmann’s capture in Argentina in 1960 by Israeli Mossad agents, all of a sudden the Holocaust was on the forefront of the news and media, and everybody

¹³ Novick, 128.

¹⁴ William L. Shirer. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: a History of Nazi Germany*. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1960) ix.

seemed to have an opinion about it. As Novick puts it, “The reaction of Americans to the Israeli announcement was mixed. All expressed pleasure that the criminal had been captured and would be called to account. But a great many were distressed about the manner in which Eichmann had been apprehended, and rejected Israel’s claim to jurisdiction.”¹⁵ Indeed, detractors were plentiful in the weeks that followed David Ben Gurion’s initial announcement that Eichmann had been captured; newspaper editorials that discussed the subject were negative in one way or another by a margin of more than two to one.¹⁶ This, understandably, caused a great amount of concern in the American Jewish community. Novick explains that “In the United States, several Jewish leaders privately expressed concern about the trial’s promoting the Jewish-victim image; all thought it likely that at least in some circles it would exacerbate anti-Semitism.”¹⁷

Certainly, Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and the Israeli government saw the risk in pursuing and capturing Adolf Eichmann in a different hemisphere, especially without being granted extradition from Argentina. Still though, there were many reasons for Israel to pursue Eichmann and bring him to justice. Hannah Arendt, a journalist for *The New Yorker* who covered the trial and eventually wrote the highly respected book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, helps to explain Israel’s motivation for taking such an international risk by going into Argentina to capture Eichmann and bring him back to Jerusalem for trial. Arendt points out that “for Israel the only unprecedented feature of the trial was that, for the first time (since the year 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the

¹⁵ Novick, 128-129.

¹⁶ Novick, 129.

¹⁷ Novick, 131.

Romans), Jews were able to sit in judgement on crimes committed against their own people, that, for the first time, they did not need to appeal to others for protection and justice.”¹⁸ Indeed, the Eichmann trial provided a unique opportunity for not just the state of Israel, but also the Jewish people as a whole. An historically oppressed group, who had rarely been justly served throughout history, finally had an event in which they themselves could hold one of history’s worst Jew murderers accountable for his despicable actions. There was also a personal aspect to the trial, a certain specificity in its nature since it focussed on only the crimes of one man rather than a great many, as had been the case at the Nuremberg Trials following World War II. While observing Eichmann in the courtroom, Arendt remarked that “on trial are his deeds, not the sufferings of the Jews, not the German people or mankind, not even anti-Semitism and racism.”¹⁹ With the whole world watching, Israel and the Jewish people seized the opportunity to gain some retribution from the Holocaust on their own terms, and by giving Eichmann a trial in Jerusalem, they were able to analyze and prosecute the horrible actions of a single man, and seemingly regain some of the humanity that they had lost during the Holocaust.

When the trial was finished and Eichmann was executed in 1962, the backlash that Jewish agencies had anticipated and voiced their concern over never took place. Novick illustrates this unexpected boon for the Jewish community by saying “criticism of the Israelis fell off considerably between Eichmann’s capture and the beginning of his trial, and even more after the trial began. Whatever the negative consequences of the trial’s portrayal of

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. (New York, Viking Press, 1963) 271.

¹⁹ Arendt, 5.

Jews as victims, it was counterbalanced by the image of Israeli Jews as activists, for capturing and trying Eichmann”²⁰. Essentially, the unexpected positive press that came out of the trial served as a catalyst for the eventual reintroduction of the Nazis and the Holocaust into mainstream America. In the wake of the trial, American Jews shed their inhibitions about discussing the Nazis and the Holocaust, a reticence that they had held ever since the conclusion of World War II.²¹ Importantly as well, the Eichmann trial offered the Holocaust its name and gave it an identity in the American consciousness. As Novick explains, “in the United States, the word ‘Holocaust’ first became firmly attached to the murder of European Jewry as a result of the trial.”²² Indeed, although Israelis had translated the Hebrew word ‘shoah’ into English as ‘holocaust’ since the inception of the state of Israel, it wasn’t until the Eichmann trial, when large numbers of American journalists traveled to Israel, that the term became synonymous with the Nazi’s attempted extermination of the Jewish people. Thus, due to the release of Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and the Eichmann trial, both of which occurred within a few years of each other and gained a great amount of notoriety, the Holocaust suddenly reemerged as a talking point, after years of being a mostly dormant subject, hidden behind the Cold War tensions of the 1950s. With the popularization and institutionalization of the term “Holocaust” to refer to the Nazis’ attempted extermination of the Jewish people, Americans now had a term with which they could refer simply to the Nazi atrocities committed against the Jews. And with Arendt’s 1963 article series in *The New Yorker*, and even more notably with the release of her book later that same year, there was a

²⁰ Novick, 132.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Novick, 133.

great deal of attention in American society focussed on the Nazis. All of this helped to spur a resurgence of media that dealt with the Nazis and the Holocaust. Comedy would be a part of this resurrection, but unlike the examples discussed in chapter one (the World War II era), comedic representations of Nazism that came out of this “Cold War” era had motives in mind besides rallying sentiment against the Nazis. Rather, comedic representations of Nazism from this era aimed to make statements about the events that were occurring in the contemporary world, and held even less regard for audience comfort than their World War II era predecessors.

A key comedic representation of Nazism that first aired just a few years after the conclusion of the Eichmann trial was the television sitcom “*Hogan’s Heroes*”. The show, created by Bernard Fein and Albert S. Ruddy, enjoyed a very successfully 6 year run on CBS from 1965 to 1971, and served as a reintroduction for comedic representations of Nazism in America. The premise of the show is quite simple: Colonel Robert Hogan, played by Bob Crane, leads his group of allied POWs, who sabotage the Nazis through an underground organization run through their prison camp. Every episode, Hogan and his fellow prisoners fool the German guards, most notably and commonly Colonel Wilhelm Klink and Sergeant Hans Georg Schultz. Indeed, Klink, played by German actor Werner Klemperer, displays an especially notable lunacy throughout the show, and certainly evokes images of Adenoid Hynkel from *The Great Dictator* and Colonel Ehrhardt from *To Be or Not to Be*, not to mention the Nazi pilots that blindly jump to their death at the orders of Bronski dressed as Hitler at the end of *To Be or Not to Be*. Similar to World War II era comedic representations of Nazism, “*Hogan’s Heroes*” relies heavily on Nazi stupidity for its jokes, and more often

than not, the humor in the show is found through the Nazi guards at the camp and their sheer incompetence with handling their prisoners.

One such example of this Nazi incompetence can be found in the pilot episode of the show. When Colonel Klink calls Hogan into his office to discuss escape attempts by his prisoners, Klink reaches into his cigar box and takes out one of his cigars. When Hogan tries to do the same, Klink slams the box down, and Hogan is forced to quickly pull his hands back from the box. At one point during the discussion, though, Hogan asks Klink to look out the window behind his desk. As Klink gets up and turns his back to Hogan, Hogan reaches into Klink's cigar box and grabs all of the remaining cigars (fig 1). The punchline of the scene, though, isn't in Hogan fooling Klink by getting him to look away while he steals his cigars. Rather, it plays directly on Klink's stupidity. As Klink dismisses Hogan from their meeting, Hogan pulls one of the cigars that he stole from Klink out of his pocket, then turns to Klink and asks 'you got a light?' (fig. 2). Of course, Klink, in his extreme ignorance to the situation, happily lights Hogan's cigar before he leaves the room, even though common sense would lead him to believe that Hogan had just taken it from his cigar box.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

While “*Hogan’s Heroes*” was generally well received, due to the nature of its subject it was not without its detractors. One particularly notable detractor was Leonid Kinskey, who played the role of Minsk, a Russian prisoner. Kinskey’s character appeared in the pilot but did not appear in the rest of the series.²³ According to Brenda Scott Royce, while those associated with the show state that the Russian character was written out because he did not “work” (perhaps as a result of still intense Cold War tensions), Kinskey insists that it was his decision to back out.²⁴ Royce quotes Kinskey as saying:

The moment we had a dress rehearsal and I saw German SS uniforms, something very ugly rose in me. I visualized millions upon millions of bodies of innocent people murdered by Nazis. One can hardly, in good taste, joke about it. So in the practical life of the TV industry, I lost thousands of dollars, but I was, and am, at peace with myself concerning my stepping out of the great success ‘Hogan’s Heroes.’²⁵

Certainly, Kinskey was not alone in this sentiment. As Susan King’s writes in her article “*Hogan’s Heroes* Lasted Longer Than Actual War”, “*Hogan’s Heroes* garnered controversy from some quarters for making light of World War II.”²⁶ Still, though, as King is sure to note, “defenders of the show noted that several of the cast members were Jewish,”²⁷ and the show did in fact have a run that was longer than World War II itself. All in all, while *Hogan’s Heroes* did receive a fair amount of scrutiny for making light of the POW experience in Nazi Germany, most viewers were able to get past this uncomfortable aspect of the show through its absurdity and its far fetched plot lines.

²³ Brenda Scott Royce. *Hogan’s Heroes: A Comprehensive Reference to the 1965-1971 Television Comedy Series, With Cast Biographies and an Episode Guide*. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1993) 20.

²⁴ Royce, 20.

²⁵ Royce, 20-21.

²⁶ Susan King. “*Hogan’s Heroes* Lasted Longer Than Actual War.” *The Chicago Tribune* 28 Nov. 2009: 1.23. Proquest. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.

²⁷ Ibid.

While there are many similarities between World War II era comedic representations of Nazism and *Hogan's Heroes*, unlike World War II era comedic representations of Nazism, *Hogan's Heroes* direct purpose wasn't to rally American anti-Nazi sentiment. Rather, besides the obvious motives of gaining viewership and entertaining audiences, *Hogan's Heroes* aimed to provide Americans with a desperately needed escape from the Cold War tensions of the 1960s, and the uncertainty surrounding the Vietnam War that was widespread during that era. Throughout their production of *Hogan's Heroes*, Fein and Ruddy certainly faced several challenges in debating what they could and should show on screen, especially given the tensions of the era and the established television norms of the time. For a duo of producers who did not even originally intend to produce a show about World War II POWs, *Hogan's Heroes* would certainly be a challenge. As King writes in her article "*Hogan's Heroes* Lasted Longer Than Actual War", the series was originally set in a United States prison. King quotes producer Albert Ruddy as saying "Hogan was going to be captain of the guards... Klink was going to be a warden. Hogan was an enlightened penologist. He ran a happy prison, and everyone was content."²⁸ However, according to King, networks were not interested in their pitch, finding a night in jail to be a boring premise for a sitcom. A few months later, in an effort to salvage the series, Ruddy came up with the idea of setting it in a German POW camp, and CBS quickly bought into the concept.²⁹ For producers Fein and Ruddy, though, this change in plot meant that *Hogan's Heroes*, as a comedy series about prisoners of war, was going to have to address the preeminent American war of the era: the

²⁸ King, *The Chicago Tribune*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Vietnam War. Robert R. Shandley contextualizes the sitcom in his book *Hogan's Heroes* by writing about how the show fit into the Vietnam War and American society:

Hogan's Heroes faced the challenge of satirizing war during the most uncertain period of the most controversial war in American history. The run of *Hogan's Heroes* corresponds with the crucial period of America's presence in Vietnam, from the escalation of hostilities in 1965 to the beginning of the American military withdrawal from Southeast Asia in the early 1970s. In an era in which attitudes about the military, patriotism, and authority were undergoing a sea change, *Hogan's Heroes'* response to those issues tells us much about the possibilities and limits of prime-time television to engage those changes.³⁰

Indeed, *Hogan's Heroes'* run corresponded with one of the darkest and most uncertain times in American History. Adding to the challenges that Fein and Ruddy faced in their production of the show were the realities of the television industry at the time. As Shandley explains, "to succeed the show had to speak to its moment, but the drive to put television properties into syndication for as long as possible also motivated the producers to avoid cultural references that were likely to feel outdated in a few years."³¹ Certainly, Fein and Ruddy were faced with a difficult challenge in their production of *Hogan's Heroes*, as they had to be sure that the comic material they put on screen would stay relevant years later in syndication, while simultaneously ensuring that the content still commented on the primary event of the day: the Vietnam War. They were able to do this by consistently emphasizing two concepts that alluded to the Vietnam War, at least in the minds of most Americans: draft dodging, and the idea of being shipped off to certain death.³² As Shandley puts it, while it is certainly a stretch to directly equate the Pentagon with World War II German military brass, "*Hogan's Heroes* does draw increasingly frequent parallels between the two military

³⁰ Robert R. Shandley. *Hogan's Heroes*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011) 3.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Shandley, 78.

apparatuses. Whether or not the show's writers intended these parallels (and there is plenty of reason to believe they did), a late 1960s television audience would have been sensitized to notice them."³³ An example of such a strong allusion against the Vietnam War can be found in the episode "Don't Forget to Write" in the second season of *Hogan's Heroes*.

In the episode, Klink is designated for a transfer to the German Eastern front, meaning that he would be forced to face the brutal Russian army and the extreme, frozen conditions of western Russia, a near death sentence for any Nazi soldier. Seeing that they may be losing their incompetent prison camp commander, Hogan and his fellow POWs scheme to save Klink from his transfer east by inspiring him to fail his physical examination. Indeed, this situation brings to mind a condition that was quite common for young Americans throughout the Vietnam War. Just as Klink was handed a near death sentence with his transfer to the Eastern front, young American men were being called to service through the draft nearly constantly throughout the run of *Hogan's Heroes*. And just as Hogan and fellow prisoners advise Klink to fail his physical, young American men were constantly scheming to avoid the draft, and their subsequent deployments to Vietnam. Shandley contextualizes this sentiment within the context of "Don't Forget to Write" by stating that, "Hogan's suggestion of a way to beat the draft reveals the methods as common knowledge,"³⁴ a near certain reference to the widespread draft dodging that was occurring stateside in the late 1960s. In the end, despite his starvation diet and sleep deprivation, Klink is told that only death would keep him from qualifying for service on the Russian front. Again here, *Hogan's Heroes* takes a stab at the American military by referring to the difficulties faced by physically unable

³³ Shandley, 83.

³⁴ Shandley, 83.

soldiers who were still forced into service in the Vietnam War. All in all, *Hogan's Heroes* certainly presented a message much deeper than the slapstick humor of the show would lead on, and served a real purpose in American society during the Vietnam War. Other comedic representations of Nazism from this era, most notably Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, would be no different. They, too, would be influential and would reflect the sensitivities and tensions of the periods in which they were made.

Perhaps Mel Brooks' most notable and most important comedic representation of Nazism was his 1967 film *The Producers*. In my opinion, *The Producers* is best summed up by film reviewer George McKinnon of *The Boston Globe*, who writes "*The Producers*, the new comedy starring blubbery Zero Mostel now at the Paris Cinema, is loud, frantic and tasteless, but it may strike you as very funny if you can accept Hitler as a figure of fun."³⁵ Indeed, in order for the viewer to enjoy *The Producers*, he or she needs to understand the direction from which Mel Brooks comes in his making the film, and he or she must also be prepared to laugh at Hitler. While *Hogan's Heroes* came from the mainstream of American society, airing every Saturday on CBS and catering to all audiences, *The Producers*, as Kirsten Fermaglich writes in her article "Mel Brooks' *The Producers*: Tracing American Jewish Culture Through Comedy, 1967-2007," "skirted the boundaries between the American mainstream and the margins. And it was that liminal status between insider and outsider that *The Producers*' manic energy reflected."³⁶ Indeed, *The Producers* very much toes the line

³⁵ George McKinnon. "The Producers Features Hitler as a Hippie." Rev. of *The Producers*, dir. Mel Brooks. *The Boston Globe* 24 Jul. 1968: 35. Proquest. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

³⁶ Kirsten Fermaglich. "Mel Brooks' *The Producers*: Tracing American Jewish Culture Through Comedy, 1967-2007." *American Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Winter, 2007), pp. 59-87. JSTOR. Web. 15 Feb. 2013.

between the American mainstream and the “Borscht Belt” section of American culture that is distinctly Jewish.

Before I go on in my analysis of *The Producers*, it is necessary to first provide a plot summary for the film, and a bit of background information about Mel Brooks himself. Set in New York in the 1960s, the film centers around struggling producer Max Bialystock (Zero Mostel), who has been hustling old women out of their money in the form of investments in his plays, which all flop, in exchange for sexual favors. When his timid accountant, Leo Bloom (played by Gene Wilder) comes to examine Bialystock’s books, he hatches a plan to make them both rich. By seducing little old ladies into buying shares in a play that will certainly flop, and grossly overselling the shares, the two would be able to pocket the investors’ money when the play folds. After reading seemingly hundreds of scripts, Bialystock and Bloom come across *Springtime for Hitler*, written by a crazy neo-Nazi, Franz Liebkind. After securing the rights for the play from Liebkind, the duo protect their investment by hiring an awful, flamboyantly gay director named Roger de Bris, and a dim witted hippie named L.S.D. to play Hitler himself. Despite all of this, the audience finds L.S.D.’s portrayal of Hitler to be hilarious, and the play finds success as a result of its comedy. Fearing that they will be caught and their plan will be exposed, Bialystock and Bloom attempt to blow up the theater, are caught, and put in prison, where they are seen in the last scene overselling shares for their next musical, *Prisoners of Love*.

As for the film’s writer and director, *The Producers* definitely reflected Mel Brook’s background and upbringing. Born in New York in 1926, Brooks first got his start in comedy by working at “Borscht Belt” Jewish resorts and nightclubs in the Catskill Mountains. In

Norman Mark's article "Up a Notch or Two From Borscht Belt", Brooks describes his own "Borscht Belt" experience, and how it influenced his craft, by saying:

I went to the Catskills for \$8 a week and I started work at this resort by saying 'Mrs. Bloom, if you don't bring that rowboat in, by God you'll never see another one.' I was Mr. Rowboat. Then I put on a derby and heavy alpaca coat and I'd go to the diving board with two heavy suitcases and I'd say, 'Business is bad, I don't want to live,' and I'd jump in the pool, and everyone would laugh. But nobody would help me out. It was a heavy coat and I'd just be able to surface once in a while. Then they let me play drums. The comic got sick, I didn't want to do 'I just flew in from Chicago, folks, and boy, are my arms tired,' so I just did local humor - what was really happening around the Butler Lodge. And I decided that it was very exciting comedy. The human everyday follies, and I've been writing that way ever since, just digging scenes and laying them out.³⁷

Indeed, if its in the Catskills that Brooks developed his comedic style, then it is only fitting that it would also be in the Catskills where he would catch his first big break. While working in the at a Catskill resort, Brooks met Sid Caesar, and the two forged a relationship that would eventually land Brooks a job writing for Caesar's show.³⁸ Ten years later, when the show was still running, Brooks was getting paid \$5,000 a week, a handsome raise from the \$50 a week he got when the show had first debuted.³⁹ Following his work on Caesar's show, Brooks continued to build his comedy career in both acting and writing, but it wasn't until *The Producers* that he wrote and directed his own film.

The Producers certainly reflected Brooks' background, having grown up Jewish in New York, and first discovered his comedic niche while working in the "Borscht Belt". It is because of this Jewish influence that the film received mixed reviews, with some finding its topic disturbing and others its production too slapstick. Fermaglich explains another reason

³⁷ Norman Mark. "Up a Notch or Two From Borscht Belt." Rev. of *The Producers*, dir. Mel Brooks. *The Los Angeles Times* 14 Jul. 1968: Q18. *Proquest*. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

for the mixed reviews, by writing “like may other works in American Jewish culture, *The Producers* was “double-coded,” communicating one message to non-Jewish audiences, while allowing Jewish audiences to interpret characters, scenarios and plots as being Jewish or having distinctive Jewish meaning.”⁴⁰ Perhaps the best example of this humor can be found in other character’s reactions to *Springtime for Hitler* within *The Producers*. After all, as Fermaglich puts it, “unlike most other characters in *The Producers*, Bialystock and Bloom understood the depravity of their play and wanted “Hitler” to flop; Bloom, in particular, was repulsed by the need to work with an escaped Nazi.”⁴¹ Indeed, this trend continues when *Springtime for Hitler* finally opens. Fermaglich describes the opening of the play by explaining that, “it was not Bialystock and Bloom, but the bourgeois audience in the film, who demonstrated a frightening abandonment of moral values as they rushed to embrace the hippie Hitler in *Springtime for Hitler*.”⁴²

Certainly, in the long run, the film favors Bialystock and Bloom over its non-Jewish characters. Although they are con men, they are meant to be sympathetic characters, and the viewer definitely finds him or herself rooting for them to succeed and, literally, for *Hitler* to flop. Importantly as well, Bialystock and Bloom ultimately turn out to be the moral heroes of the film, as they were the only ones that saw the absurdity in a Broadway musical titled *Springtime for Hitler*, while their (assumably primarily non-Jewish) bourgeois audience flocked to the play.⁴³ The films popularity among two main demographics, the youth and the Jews, was also reflected in its box office successes and failures. Fermaglich explain that:

⁴⁰ Fermaglich, 66.

⁴¹ Fermaglich, 66.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Fermaglich, 66.

The movie succeeded in New York - Mel Brooks remembered that it played for nearly a full year at one art house there - but it seems to have been less successful in other cities, like Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., and in non-urban theaters as well. That the film succeeded so well in New York, a city with a disproportionately youthful and Jewish population, suggests that young people and Jews may have been the primary core of its fan base, helping to explain why the movie became a cult film rather than a broad box office draw.⁴⁴

Indeed, it was the older generation, and the Christian establishment, who primarily took issue with *The Producers*, while it was the Jewish community and the 1960s youth, two groups that challenged the conventions of society and occupied the fringes of the mainstream, that flocked to the film and made it the moderate box office success turned cult classic that it was. Norman Mark provides further evidence for *The Producers*' status as a cult classic upon its release, by stating "it is on its way to becoming the newest cult film (quick, already how many people are going around screaming, 'You're fat, fat, fat,' as Gene Wilder does in the film).⁴⁵ Indeed, as *The Producers* became a cult classic, it would quickly come to provide the narrative for a young Jewish voice that emerged in the United States in the 1960s.

This Jewish anti-hero element in *The Producers* definitely reflected the era in which the film was made, and the personal sentiments that Mel Brooks held influenced his creation of the film. Recall from earlier in the chapter that Holocaust and Nazi commentary and imagery, especially comedy, was uncommon following the conclusion of World War II and throughout the 1950s. In *The Producers*, Brooks saw his opportunity to immortalize the Holocaust, and put his own unique stamp on the atrocities that the Nazis committed against the Jewish people. In his article "Up a Notch or Two From Borscht Belt", Norman Mark asks Brooks why he wanted to write a movie about Nazis on Broadway. Brooks' response is

⁴⁴ Fermaglich, 71.

⁴⁵ Mark, *The Los Angeles Times*.

as follows: “I wanted to put down Nazism, but I didn’t want to get on a soapbox. I just used a kind of mental ju-jitsu. I went with the neo-Nazi. By overdoing the super Nazi, I exposed the insanity and ludicrous nature of Nazism.”⁴⁶ But beyond just Mel Brooks’ personal mission to bring down the Nazis, *The Producers* provided a release for American Jews, especially young American Jews who had recently developed a newfound pride in their culture due to Israel’s resounding victory over its hostile Arab neighbors in the Six Day War. As Fermaglich points out, “the strong Jewish sensibility at the heart of *The Producers* appealed to young audiences in the years after the Six Day War, as young Jews vented their anger with Nazism and sought a hip Jewish humor to fit their national newfound Jewish pride.”⁴⁷ Mel Brooks was more than happy to provide this Jewish humor, although some critics failed to see the humor in Hitler that Brooks so passionately laid out in the film.

One such critic who offered a very mixed review of the film was Renata Adler of *The New York Times*. Adler writes in her review “Screen: *The Producers* at Fine Arts”, “*The Producers*, which opened yesterday at Fine Arts Theater, is a violently mixed bag. Some of it is shoddy and gross and cruel; the rest is funny in an entirely unexpected way.”⁴⁸ Adler goes on to explain that, in her mind, *The Producers* alternates between being funny and disturbing (in reference primarily to the scenes where Bialystock is seducing little of ladies), until the audience in the film begins laughing at *Springtime for Hitler*. It is at this point, that in Adler’s mind, the film lost traction and became unfunny. She sums up her opinion of this plot twist by writing “there is nothing like having your make-believe audience catch on to a

⁴⁶ Mark, *The Los Angeles Times*.

⁴⁷ Fermaglich, 68.

⁴⁸ Renata Adler. “Screen: ‘*The Producers*’ at Fine Arts: Brooks’s Black Comedy Stars Zero Mostel.” Rev. of *The Producers*, dir. Mel Brooks. *The New York Times* 19 Mar. 1968: 38. *Proquest*. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

joke - and a joke that absolutely capsizes the plans of your leading characters - to make the real audience really hostile to you”⁴⁹. Adler was not alone in this sentiment, yet other critics offered even harsher reviews of the film. Fermaglich notes other reviews of *The Producers* in her article by writing:

For influential film critics Andrew Sarris and Stanley Kauffmann, however, the notion of Jewish producers working with a Nazi to put on a play was the most disturbing: ‘I simply cannot believe that any Jewish producers would involve themselves in such a project,’ Sarris charged. ‘Springtime for Hitler... doesn’t even rise to the level of tastelessness,’ Kauffmann wrote in *The New Republic*, going on to note that ‘it seems odd that the Nazi is oblivious to the Jewishness of his producers.’⁵⁰

Indeed, the sentiment reflected in Sarris and Kauffmann’s reviews is understandable, given the sensitive nature of the subjects presented in the film. Still, though, it seems that reviewers who took offense to the film missed the point that Brooks was trying to make in the film; in his mind, *The Producers* pointed out the lunacy of Nazism and fascism, and put the Nazis down in a strong, convincing way.

Amidst the “Cold War” era tensions that immediately followed World War II and the fall of the Third Reich, few produced representations of Nazism. Yet, with *Hogan’s Heroes*, which grappled with the Vietnam War and draft dodgers, and *The Producers*, which represented the frustrations of Jews on the outskirts of American society, comedy was reintroduced as a medium in which the Nazis could be represented. On top of that, though, the release of *The Producers* coincided with a surge in Jewish pride within the Jewish American community. Indeed, the release of the *The Producers* came at an extremely opportune time for Jewish Americans, especially young Jewish Americans. Israel was

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Fermaglich, 70.

thriving, having just decisively defeated their neighboring Arab states in the Six Day War, and Jewish pride was high amongst young Jewish Americans. As we will see in the next chapter, these young American Jews would soon grow into adults, and they would carry this Jewish pride with them as they replaced their parents as prominent film and television creators and producers in Hollywood.

Chapter 3: The Holocaust Today: Comedic Representations of Nazism in the Modern Era

In the 1970s, as the Vietnam War finally came to an end and Cold War alliances were firmly set as the conflict continued into its fourth decade, there was a prominent increase in American thought about the Nazis and the Holocaust. As Peter Novick puts it in his book *The Holocaust in American Life*, “since the 1970s, the Holocaust has come to be presented - come to be thought of - as not just a Jewish memory but an American memory.”¹ Indeed, following the revival of Nazi and Holocaust representations that took place throughout the 1960s (see chapter 2), Americans rapidly began taking a greater interest in the Holocaust, and Holocaust representations became increasingly widespread and visible within American society.

It is difficult to identify an exact reason for this explosion of Holocaust imagery in the 1970s. Of course, there are the obvious considerations: that Jews were especially prominent in Hollywood, and the idea that the revitalization of Nazi representations in the 1960s created a self-fulfilling prophecy that ultimately yielded more and more Nazi and Holocaust representations in subsequent decades. While there is certainly some validity to both of these theories, equating the prevalence of Holocaust and Nazi imagery in American society since the 1970s with a disproportionate Jewish presence in Hollywood and a revitalization of the genre that had occurred in the previous decade doesn't fully explain the drastically increased frequency with which this imagery has been shown in recent years. Rather, as Novick puts it, “in large part the movement of the Holocaust from the Jewish to the general American arena

¹ Novick, 207.

resulted from private and spontaneous decisions of Jews who happened to occupy strategic positions in the media.”² Indeed, during the 1970s, much of the older generation of the Hollywood Jewish brass, who had for the most part been either indifferent towards or silent about Jewish concerns during their time in prominent positions, came to be replaced by the next generation of Jews with great influence in Hollywood. This generation, unlike the one before it, deeply felt the concerns of the Jewish community (for a variety of reasons, as discussed in chapter 2), and was decisively more up-front about raising their interests.³

In the 1970s, with the younger generation of Jews now in charge in Hollywood, representations of Nazism and the Holocaust would soon be everywhere, and became an unavoidable part of the media and American life. As Peter Novick puts it, “From the 1970s on, a series of events - sometimes trivial in themselves, but often rich in symbolism - kept the Holocaust on the front pages and on the nightly news.”⁴ One such event that would have a widespread effect on millions of Americans was the groundbreaking television event, NBC’s miniseries *Holocaust: A Story of Two Families*. Novick sums up the importance of *Holocaust* by stating that, “without doubt the most important moment in the entry of the Holocaust into general American consciousness was NBC’s presentation, in April 1978, of the miniseries *Holocaust*.”⁵ The miniseries itself, which spanned over four parts in four nights and yielded nine-and-a-half hours of content, followed ten years in the lives of two fictional families, the Weiss family and the Dorf family. Over the course of the miniseries, the lives of the two families drastically change, as the Weiss family, which begins the series

² Novick, 208.

³ Novick, 208.

⁴ Novick, 226.

⁵ Novick, 209.

as an upper class German-Jewish family living in Berlin in 1935, is deported to Poland and the Warsaw Ghetto. On the other hand, for the Dorf family, the coming of war presents opportunity. At the series' beginning, Erik Dorf is a struggling lawyer in Berlin. At the urging of his wife, Dorf joins the SS, and eventually is put in charge of extermination operations at a Nazi prison camp. Although his job weighs on his conscience at first, over time Dorf becomes accustomed to his role within the SS, and embraces his position in the name of following the orders of his superiors, a common theme in post-war discourse involving former Nazi officials. Ultimately, all but one member of the Weiss family perishes in the Holocaust, and Dorf himself follows the example of many other Nazi officers following the end of the war, committing suicide by taking a cyanide pill.

Let me begin my analysis of *Holocaust* by first offering some staggering numbers related to its viewership. According to *The New York Times*' article "NBC-TV Says *Holocaust* Drew 120 Million", the newspaper states that "on the basis of figures available yesterday, NBC-TV estimated that the four-night, nine-and-a-half-hour telecast of *Holocaust* was seen in part or in full by 120 million people."⁶ Indeed, this staggering number reflected the widespread American viewership that *Holocaust* gathered during its initial run. *The New York Times* offers more perspective on these viewership figures, writing that Tuesday nights' episode of the miniseries, the second to last night of *Holocaust*, "had a 30.3 rating, indicating that almost one-third of the homes with television sets were watching, and a 49 share, meaning that just under half of those homes watching anything were tuned in to NBC."⁷

⁶ "NBC-TV Says *Holocaust* Drew 120 Million." *The New York Times* 21 Apr. 1978: B4. Proquest. Web. 25 Mar. 2014.

⁷ Ibid.

These numbers indicate that *Holocaust* was more than just a miniseries; rather, it was a must watch television event that captivated the American public as a whole. To give some perspective to the magnitude of viewership that *Holocaust* received, I have pulled some viewership numbers from this year's Super Bowl, played on February 3, 2014 between the Seattle Seahawks and the Denver Broncos. According to the sports website *bleacherreport.com*, the game, which ranks fifth all time in viewership for a single television program in the United States and will almost certainly finish 2014 as the most viewed program of the year, saw a 47.6 rating and a 70 share, meaning that 47.6 percent of homes with televisions were watching the game, and that 70 percent of homes watching television at the time were tuned into the game⁸. While *Holocaust's* ratings don't quite match this year's Super Bowl's, the fact that they are competitive shows that *Holocaust* was more than just a television program, and had a vast significance in American culture.

Holocaust: A Story of Two Families had such a strong influence on American culture that it sparked a prominent surge in discussions about the Holocaust among many different cultural groups, and made the Holocaust an essential topic to be discussed in representations of Nazism that followed. In Michael Elkin's article "Jewry Backs NBC *Holocaust*" in *The Jewish Exponent*, a Philadelphia area Jewish newspaper, Elkin explains that "fifteen major national Jewish organizations have produced a program kit to help local Jewish agencies use the TV special to spur programs and projects in formal and informal Jewish educational settings."⁹ Indeed, the American Jewish community strongly mobilized around *Holocaust*,

⁸ Tyler Conway. "Super Bowl TV Ratings 2014: Latest News and Reaction." *Bleacher Report* 3 Feb. 2014. Web. 25 Mar. 2014.

⁹ Michael Elkin. "Jewry Backs NBC *Holocaust*." *The Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, Pa.) 7 Apr. 1978: 5. *Proquest*. Web. 26 Mar. 2014.

but on top of that, the miniseries was so commonly watched within American society that it sparked something of a national Holocaust remembrance movement. With the encouragement of the Jewish community, this movement eventually sparked a transition from the Holocaust as a Jewish narrative, to the Shoah as a story that effects all Americans. As for NBC, the network contributed a great deal of effort and resources to popularizing the series, and making sure that the magnitude of the content was understood by all of its viewers. Elkin remarked that “NBC has developed a discussion guide, distributed through the network’s 217 local affiliates, for schools. The guide [is] also available directly from the network.”¹⁰ Certainly, both NBC and the Jewish community aimed to make sure that *Holocaust* would be viewed and understood by all American demographics. But on top of all this, and perhaps as a result of it, *Holocaust* made it so that future representations of the Nazis, including comedic representations of Nazism, had to feature the Shoah, or risk being identified as stale and unoriginal. Indeed, Mel Brooks’ 1983 remake of *To Be or Not to Be* would epitomize this need for the Shoah to be present for a comedic representation of Nazism to achieve success in America.

Despite his incredibly successful career and reputation as a risk-taking comedic film maker, Mel Brooks’ 1983 remake of Ernst Lubitsch’s 1942 classic *To Be or Not to Be* was, for the most part, very negatively reviewed and considered to be a flop. Gary Arnold of *The Washington Post* reviewed the film in his article “Nazis and Nonsense; *To Be or Not to Be*: Questionable Mel Brooks”:

To Be or Not to Be doesn’t cry out for reenactment, but if you’re rash enough to tamper with the original, it becomes necessary to take a few things into

¹⁰ Ibid.

consideration, like the passage of 40 years and the differences in comedy styles between Jack Benny and Mel Brooks, and revamp accordingly. Oblivious on both scores, Brooks embarks on an unnecessary remake and then fails to tailor the material adequately to a 1980s perspective or his own performing strengths.¹¹

Indeed, Brooks hardly changed the original *To Be or Not to Be* in his remake. And, as Arnold points out, in the 1980s, when the Holocaust was ubiquitous within American society, a reenactment of *To Be or Not to Be* that didn't include the Shoah simply wouldn't please the American audience, which had developed an infatuation with the Holocaust. Rita Kempley also reviews the film in her article "*To Be or Not: A Silly Question*" in *The Washington Post*. Kempley writes about the actual comedy that Brooks employs in the film, saying that, in the form of Colonel Erhardt and Captain Schultz, "tired old Nazi buffoons bring scattered laughter, the sound of an audience trying too hard."¹² Indeed, at this time in American society, most Americans didn't find laughing at the Nazis in the World War II context to be funny. Kempley sums up this sentiment by writing "Twould be better were "*To Be*" not to be."¹³ To truly captivate the minds, hearts, and laughs of the American people, filmmakers would need to represent the Holocaust, the event that American were most interested in.

Similar to *Holocaust* 15 years earlier, when *Schindler's List* was released in 1993, the film would quickly become extremely popular, and would become ubiquitous within the American consciousness. Spielberg's classic, which depicted the heroic actions of Nazi businessman Oskar Schindler, who saved over a thousand Jewish lives from the horrors of Auschwitz, became an instant hit. Indeed, the film would quickly become a definitive

¹¹ Gary Arnold. "Nazis and Nonsense." Rev. of *To Be or Not to Be* (1983), dir. Alan Johnson. *The Washington Post* 16 Dec. 1983: F1. Proquest. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.

¹² Rita Kempley. "*To Be or Not: A Silly Question*." Rev. of *To Be or Not to Be* (1983), dir. Alan Johnson. *The Washington Post* 16 Dec. 1983. Proquest. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.

¹³ Ibid.

American Holocaust classic, and would come to represent the tragedy of the Shoah to many Americans. Peter Novick discusses the phenomenon that surrounded the release of *Schindler's List*, claiming that it:

Benefited not just from the director's mega-reputation but from the fact that it appeared in the same year that the Washington Holocaust Museum opened. As *Holocaust* had swept television's Emmy Awards for 1978, *Schindler's List* did with the Oscars for 1993. And whereas in 1978 Jewish organizations felt obligated to promote the television program, in 1993 public officials from the president on down were so actively promoting Spielberg's film that it was hard to find room on the bandwagon. Free showings for high school students were arranged (during class time) across the country, as a contribution to their moral education, following the example of Oprah Winfrey, who announced on her talk show that "I'm a better person as a result of seeing *Schindler's List*."¹⁴

Certainly, *Schindler's List* was a sensation that swept the United States, and emotionally touched many Americans. Additionally, *Schindler's List* greatly advanced the United States' national fascination with the Holocaust, and created another Holocaust film that the Americans could use to identify with the conflict. Yet, despite its box office successes both domestically and abroad (grossing slightly over 96 million dollars domestically, and slightly over 317 million total),¹⁵ the film was highly criticized by many for being overdramatized. Peter Rainer discusses these critics in his article "Commentary: Why the *Schindler's List* Backlash? Charges that the Holocaust has been 'Spielbergized' may Conceal the Deeper Belief that it Shouldn't be Dramatized at all". Rainer argues that perhaps the source of the backlash to the film, which accompanied its box office and Oscar success, was the result of a deeper belief that the Holocaust should not be represented at all. Rainer speculates that behind criticisms of the film "may lie the deeper conviction that the Holocaust should not be

¹⁴ Novick, 214.

¹⁵ "Schindler's List" *IMDB*. Web. 29 Mar. 2014.

dramatized at all-by anybody; that however one does so is a disservice, an obscenity. This is not a new concept. Jonathan Kirsch, in his pan of *Schindler's List* in *The Jewish Journal*, quotes Theodor Adorno: 'After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.'¹⁶ Indeed, *Schindler's List* attempts to show the horrors of Auschwitz and the concentration camp experience, and provides what appears to be a somewhat realistic interpretation of the tragedy of the Holocaust, but many didn't think that such realistic material was appropriate to be shown on screen at all.

Another argument that some made regarding *Schindler's List* was that the film was too realistic for its own good. Miriam Bratu Hansen advances this argument in her essay "*Schindler's List* is not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory" by commenting that many found "that the film is too 'realistic.' So, by offering us an 'authentic' reconstruction of the events of the Shoah, the film enhances the fallacy of an immediate and unmediated access to the past - by posing as the 'real thing' the film usurps the place of the actual event."¹⁷ Indeed, Hansen offers an example of this by citing what is perhaps the most dramatic scene in *Schindler's List*, when the women in the film step into what they (and the viewer) believe to be a gas chamber at Auschwitz, but as it turns out is only a shower (fig. 1). Hansen writes that "Spielberg transgresses the boundaries of representability most notoriously, critics agree, when he takes the camera across the threshold of what we, and the women in the film 'mistakenly' deported to Auschwitz, believe to be a gas chamber. Thus *Schindler's List*, like the TV miniseries *Holocaust*, ends up both

¹⁶ Rainer, Peter. "Commentary: Why the *Schindler's List* Backlash? Charges that the Holocaust has Been 'Spielbergized' may Conceal the Deeper Belief that it Shouldn't be Dramatized at all." Rev. of *Schindler's List* dir. Steven Spielberg. *The Los Angeles Times* 30 Jan. 1994: 21. Proquest. Web. 29 Mar. 2014.

¹⁷ Miriam Bratu Hansen. "*Schindler's List* is not 'Shoah': The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22. No. 2 (Winter 1996), pp. 292-312. JSTOR. Web. 25 Oct. 2012.



Fig. 1

trivializing and sensationalizing the Shoah.”¹⁸ In a context where the miniseries *Holocaust* demanded that future representations of the Nazis grapple with the Shoah, *Schindler’s List* responded with a starkly realistic (maybe even to a fault) depiction of the Holocaust. The comedians that followed in Spielberg’s footsteps, and aimed to produce comedic representations of Nazism that focussed on the Shoah, would be faced with a great challenge in balancing realism with comedy. Indeed, while Spielberg attempted depict reality in the concentration camps through *Schindler’s List*, the comedians that followed Spielberg in representing the Shoah would take a different approach. Rather than attempting to “show the un-showable,” as Spielberg does in *Schindler’s List*, the comedians that would attempt to represent the Holocaust in the years that followed Spielberg’s film created such unrealistic scenarios that they didn’t have to explain their historical inaccuracies, and lack of realism. Indeed, Roberto Benigni pushed the Holocaust to a comedic set in his *Life is Beautiful*, and Quentin Tarantino deliberately falsified the truth in his *Inglourious Basterds*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Both of them showed that comedic representations of the Holocaust didn't have to follow in *Schindler's List's* mold of strict realism. Rather, instead of attempting to "show the unshowable" in the way that *Schindler's List* does, these comedic representations of Nazism took apart the Holocaust through their comedy, and offered strong commentary on the event despite their lack of realistic representation.

A comedian who earned great fame and fortune from a so called "semi-fictitious" comedic representation of Nazism was Roberto Benigni, who wrote, directed, and starred in the 1997 smash hit Italian film, *Life is Beautiful*. Set in the late 1930s, in *Life is Beautiful*, Benigni plays an Italian Jewish poet and waiter, Guido, who occupies the early parts of the film with his rather entertaining courting of an Italian, non-Jewish schoolteacher, Dora. Eventually, Guido and Dora get married and give birth to a baby boy, Giosue. Although the film hints at the fascist influence in Italy throughout its early parts, Guido and Dora continue to go about their lives as usual, until one day the Germans arrest Guido and Giosue, transferring them to a concentration camp. Heartbroken, Dora also insists to be taken to the camp, even though she is not Jewish. In order to protect his son from realities of their situation, Guido tells Giosue that the two of them are participating in a secret game, where they must earn 1000 points to win a real tank and leave the concentration camp. Indeed, Guido goes to great lengths in order to keep this game going, and to continue to trick his five-year-old son into thinking that they are actually playing a game where they could win a tank.

Still, though, life is difficult in the camp, which according to Sander L. Gilman, author of "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older

Films”, “bears all of the hallmarks of the Auschwitz scene in *Schindler’s List*.”¹⁹ Indeed, one of the most powerful scenes in the film comes when the Nazi guards round up all of the children in the camp to “take a shower”, meaning that they are to be gassed to death. Giosue narrowly escapes this fate by refusing to take a shower; his fellow children in the camp would not be so lucky. After this moment Guido knows that Giosue needs to stay well hidden from the guards, as now no other children remained in the camp. Ultimately, when Guido realizes that time is short and the Nazis will soon discover his son hidden in the camp, he sacrifices his own life by valiantly attempting to free the woman he so dearly loves, Dora. The next morning, the American forces break into the camp, and Giosue emerges from hiding just as a tank pulls around the corner. He is quickly rescued by the American soldiers and taken inside the tank, essentially winning the game that his father had created for him upon their arrival in the camp. Finally, as the tank is leaving the camp in the final scene of the film, Giosue glimpses his mother among the female prisoners being liberated from the concentration camp. The two are reunited, capping off an extremely heartwarming, yet still bittersweet ending to the film.

Life is Beautiful challenges the concept of what is appropriate to laugh at and what can be interpreted as funny, in the sense that with the film *Benigni* attempted to show the Holocaust in a comedic context. It was a groundbreaking film that challenged its viewers to find the humor in the most desperate of human situations, in this case the Holocaust, despite the gravity of the predicaments in which the characters find themselves. Gilman discusses the trailblazing aspects of *Life is Beautiful* by comparing it with two of Mel Brooks’ films

¹⁹ Sander L. Gilman. “Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films”. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Winter, 2000), pp. 279-308. JSTOR. Web. 7 Nov. 2012, 292.

that predated it, *To Be or Not to Be* (1983), and *The Producers* (1967). In reference to Brooks' films, Gilman argues that, "comedy in this context was only possible with the bracketing of the Final Solution. And such bracketing was impossible, at least in America when the Shoah became the stuff of mass culture following the showing of the NBC-TV series *Holocaust: A Story of Two Families*."²⁰ After the airing of *Holocaust*, the Holocaust became the human tragedy that Americans most commonly used in their attempts to comprehend the depth of the evils of the Nazi regime, and the gravity of the struggle that was World War II. Still, though, there is the question of how this "bracketing of the Final Solution" referenced above existed before the airing of *Holocaust*, and the sudden national fascination with the Shoah. Gilman offers a terrific explanation for this:

The comic is possible when imagining the Third Reich and the Nazis as the enemy. It is a means of assuring the viewer that the 'victim' is smarter and more resilient than the aggressor. The victim must be in a position to win or to at least survive the world of the Nazis. Not all film evocations of the Third Reich seem to need to (or want to) evoke the Shoah. Partially this has to do with when the work was made and the meanings attached to the Shoah at the time. But it was possible to write a comedy long after the 1940s about the Third Reich, such as the long-running TV series *Hogan's Heroes* (1965-1971), without evoking the Shoah. Indeed, such representations are possible only if the survival of the 'victims,' here the allied prisoners of war, is never drawn into question. . . . No randomness is permitted and thus the inherent randomness of the Shoah must be eliminated in such representations.²¹

Indeed, now that the Shoah was in play, and the success of representations of Nazism in large part depended on their focus on the Holocaust, there was an opportunity for Benigni to take a risk and make *Life is Beautiful*. While *Schindler's List*, a clear predecessor to *Life is Beautiful*, attempted to portray the realities of the Holocaust as realistically as possible (as evidenced by the shower scene referenced above), *Life is Beautiful* pushed the realistic

²⁰ Gilman, 288.

²¹ Gilman, 286-287.

elements of the Shoah to a set, favoring the fantastic over the realistic, and the comedy over tragedy. Indeed, the collision of comedy and the Holocaust was for the most part very well received, but there were some that seriously opposed the film, and felt that it threatened Holocaust memory everywhere.

Following *Life is Beautiful's* release, the film received copious glowing reviews, and Benigni was the recipient of much praise for not only his acting, which eventually netted him an Oscar win, but also his directing and writing, both of which earned him nominations.

Kent Wolgamott of the *Lincoln Journal Star* lauded these aspects of Benigni's contributions to the film in his review:

As an actor, Benigni is an expressive-faced charmer, with a gift for exaggerated movement and physical comedy reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin. As a writer, he takes a familiar topic and gives it new life through a story that powerfully blends movie fantasy and historical reality. As a director, Benigni seamlessly links the two halves of his story, capturing the period, coaxing a touching, wide-eyed performance out of young (Giorgio) Cantarini (the actor who plays Giosue) and never losing touch with the magic and love that is the movie's heart.²²

Kenneth Turan of *The Los Angeles Times* also offers his praises to the film. Turan gives his explanation for the success of *Life is Beautiful* by stating that "while it's futile to pretend that *Life is Beautiful* completely triumphs - it's simply too tough a concept to sustain - what is surprising about this unlikely film is that it succeeds as well as it does. Its sentiment is inescapable, but genuine poignancy and pathos are also present, and an overarching sincerity is visible too."²³ Still, though, there is the question of what makes *Life is Beautiful* appropriate. More specifically, why is it ok for Benigni to crack jokes while his character is

²² Kent L. Wolgamott. "'Life is Beautiful' A Powerful, Moving Film." Rev. of *Life is Beautiful*, dir. Roberto Benigni. *Lincoln Journal Star* (Lincoln, Neb.) 12 Feb. 1999: 4. Proquest. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.

²³ Kenneth Turan. "Movie Review; The Improbable Success of 'Life is Beautiful.'" Rev. of *Life is Beautiful*, dir. Roberto Benigni. *The Los Angeles Times* 23 Oct. 1998: F1. Proquest. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.

imprisoned in a very real looking concentration camp? Another film critic, Daniel M. Kimmel of Worcester, Massachusetts' *Telegram and Gazette*, offers his answer to this question by stating that, "it would be a mistake to place the burden on *Life is Beautiful* of being the Holocaust movie, a teaching responsibility it neither asks for, nor deserves. However, as a story that acknowledges the horrors and injustice of that period to tell its tale of a parent's ultimate gift to child, it succeeds brilliantly."²⁴ Still, though, there were many critics who failed to see the film this way, and took great issue with the themes that it presented.

Despite *Life is Beautiful's* global popularity and Oscar wins (for Best Foreign Language Film, Best Original Dramatic Score, and Benigni for Best Actor in a Leading Role), some critics found the film to be extremely offensive and completely inappropriate. Gilman recognizes some of these critics in his article, remarking that "During a press conference at the Cannes festival, one French journalist stood up to accuse Benigni of mocking the victims of the Holocaust, declaring that he was 'scandalized' by the picture."²⁵ According to Gilman, another such critic from "*The Guardian* (London) wrote that it is 'a hopelessly inadequate memorial to the vile events of the Holocaust."²⁶ Yet, nobody seems to offer a stronger distaste for *Life is Beautiful* than Kobi Niv, who published a book in 2003 entitled *Life is Beautiful, but Not for Jews: Another View of the Film by Benigni*. In the book's introduction, Niv offers an explanation for his disagreements with the film. He claims

²⁴ Daniel M. Kimmel. "'Life is Beautiful' A Moving Film." Rev. of *Life is Beautiful*, dir. Roberto Benigni. *Telegram & Gazette* (Worcester, Mass.) 17 Feb. 1999: C5. *Proquest*. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.

²⁵ Gilman, 294.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

that the film presents the viewer with a “sham ‘normality’”, rather than accurately portraying what life in the camps was actually like. Niv explains:

And it was exactly this sham ‘normality’ that *Life is Beautiful* chooses to present us with, while avoiding mention of nearly all of the rest. When we are shown a wounded prisoner who gets treated, but we do not get to see anything else - the brutality, the starvation, the beatings, the humiliation, the endless standing to attention day and night, or the daily executions - we are actually shown a softened, sugar-coated, and outright false version of the truth: a concentration camp lite.²⁷

Certainly, *Life is Beautiful* doesn’t portray a truly realistic concentration camp scenario. In fact, Niv is correct to point out that the viewer is shown a softened version of the truth. But, to echo the sentiments expressed by Turan and Kimmel, *Life is Beautiful* succeeds despite its imperfections and deficiencies, in fact it often succeeds because of them. It is in its lack of complete realism, its “sugar-coated” version of the truth, that *Life is Beautiful* manages to turn the Holocaust into a comedic game while still garnering significant positive critical reception. Indeed, by turning the concentration camp experience into a set where Benigni was the star, *Life is Beautiful* does what few comedies have been able to do: produce a depiction of the Holocaust that lacks exact realism, but excels in the conflicting areas of comedy and tragedy. A decade later, in 2009, Quentin Tarantino would revisit the semi fictitious genre of Nazi representation that got its start with *Holocaust* and was taken to a whole new comedic level with *Life is Beautiful* by writing and directing his take on World War II in his film, *Inglourious Basterds*.

Quentin Tarantino’s release of *Inglourious Basterds* in 2009 marked a continuation of the progress within comedic representations of Nazism that *Life is Beautiful* made over a

²⁷ Kobi Niv. *Life is Beautiful, but Not for Jews: Another View of the Film by Benigni*. (Landham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2003) xvii.

decade earlier. Indeed, while *Life is Beautiful* responded to *Schindler's List* by turning the Holocaust into a comedic game and a Hollywood set for Benigni's comic genius, *Inglourious Basterds* deliberately falsified the "true story" of the Shoah that *Schindler's List* aspired to show, and the result was Quentin Tarantino's wonderfully violent re-imagination of history in *Inglourious Basterds*. The film opens in 1941 with Colonel Hans Landa of the SS, known as the "Jew Hunter", interrogating a French dairy farmer about the Jewish family hiding beneath his home. After Landa is finally able to squeeze a confession out of the farmer, he calls in his soldiers and they shoot the family. Yet, moments later Shoshanna, the lone survivor, emerges from the floorboards and flees into the nearby hills, much to the dismay of Landa. The film then jumps forward three years to 1944, just before the Allied Invasion of France. The *Inglourious Basterds*, an eight-man Jewish-American commando unit led by Aldo Raine with the mission of killing Nazis, is causing fits for the Nazi command, all the way up to Adolf Hitler himself, who is represented as terribly-tempered, yelling and screaming at all who come into his presence. After introducing the "Basterds", the plot shifts back to Shoshanna, who has assumed an alias to protect her Jewish identity and has become the proprietress of a cinema in Paris. After Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda for the Third Reich, decides to make a movie about Nazi war hero Fredrick Zoller called *Nation's Pride*, Zoller convinces Goebbels to host the premiere at Shoshanna's theater, as he had developed a romantic interest in her which she does not reciprocate for him. Shoshanna then hatches a plan, along with the help of her black theater employee Marcel, to lock the doors and burn the theater down during the premier by igniting Shoshanna's (highly

flammable) film collection during the premier of *Nation's Pride*, trapping and killing many high ranking Nazi officials.

At the same time, though, the British military hatches a plan called "Operation Kino", in which a German double agent, star actress Bridget von Hammersmark, is to get the Basterds into the premiere under the guise of them being Italian filmmakers, where they can use suicide bombs and machine guns to kill the Nazi elites inside. In the final scene, Landa arrests Raine as he sees through his fake "Italian" (his southern accent is certainly a giveaway) and reveals himself to be a turncoat, who will blow up the theater with explosives that he had placed earlier in exchange for exoneration for future war crimes and "a home on Nantucket Island." Following an exchange in which Shoshanna and Zoller murder each other, it is time for Marcel to carry out he and Shoshanna's plan to burn down the theater. At the same time, the Basterds who still remain in the theater, Donowitz and Ulmer, burst into Hitler's box and gun him down along with Goebbels and several other historical Nazi leaders. Finally, the dynamite stuck to Donowitz and Ulmer's legs and the dynamite that Landa had placed in the theater earlier both go off, and the theater is reduced to rubble. The next day, Landa takes Raine to the American lines and surrenders his gun and sword. Raine, though, refuses to allow Landa to leave to his new American life without a parting gift. He carves a swastika into Landa's forehead, a commonly employed technique for those who survived encounters with the Basterds, so that he is sure that Landa can never blend in to the American populace, and will not be able to hide the unthinkable acts that he had committed while an officer in the SS.

In *Inglourious Basterds*, Quentin Tarantino fulfills not only his idealist alternative history through the massacre of the Third Reich's elites, but he also pays homage to the power of film as a medium through the plot of his film itself. Ben Walters addresses this topic in his article "Debating *Inglourious Basterds*":

Here, nearly everyone works in the movies. Operation Kino relies on Hammersmark, a star, and Hicox, a critic. The Basterds pose as Italian filmmakers. Shoshanna runs a cinema ('we respect directors in our country,' she insists) where she plans to interrupt the premiere of *Nation's Pride*, starring self-described film fan Zoller as himself, with her own film, a prologue to the Nazi audience's death in an inferno caused by flammable nitrate film. Goebbels is referred to as 'the leader of the entire German film industry,' and compared to Mayer and Selznick. Even Hitler, introduced posing for a portrait, seems more star than politician. 'I like that it's the power of the cinema that fights the Nazis,' Tarantino has said. 'But not just as a metaphor, as a literal reality.'²⁸

Indeed, in the fantasy world of *Inglourious Basterds*, Tarantino makes the decisions about how World War II ends, and through his work of semifiction, he uses the power of film to bring down the Nazis. In the process, Tarantino completely shuns the mold of *Schindler's List* type realism within representations of the Nazis and the Holocaust, and instead aims deliberately to falsify the truth, portraying the outcome that he wished had occurred years ago, during World War II. Tarantino addresses this concept himself in an interview with Ryan Gilbey in 2009, published in the book *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews*. Tarantino is quoted as saying, regarding the idea of film bringing down the Third Reich, that "It's a really juicy metaphor, the idea of cinema bringing down the Third Reich. On the other hand, it's not a metaphor at all, it is actually what's happening: 35mm film is bringing down the Third Reich! When I conceived of that ending, it was one of the most exciting inspirations I've

²⁸ Ben Walters. "Debating *Inglourious Basterds*." *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Winter 2009) pp. 19-22. JSTOR. Web. 11 Feb. 2014.

ever had as a writer.”²⁹ Clearly, in his abandonment of strict realism and complete denouncement of historical accuracy, Tarantino is able to achieve his goal by using his craft, film, to retroactively, and quite literally, burn the Third Reich to the ground.

On top of this, though, *Inglourious Basterds* encourages its audiences to laugh at Hitler, but in a different way than its predecessors such as *The Producers*. J. Hoberman addresses this issue in his essay “*Inglourious Basterds*: Tarantino Makes the Nazi Occupation of France Ridiculously Fun.” Hoberman writes that “Shoshanna - who is, of course, also an actor - applies her war paint to become the glamorous ‘face of Jewish vengeance.’”³⁰ Indeed, it was exactly this “vengeful Jew” portrayal that differentiates *Inglourious Basterds* from its predecessors. Hoberman explains this by explaining that “*The Producers* might seem an obvious precursor, but there’s a difference between victim and victor mocking Hitler. European Jews were losers; decimated by the war, their only victory was in individual survival. Where the Brooks scenario involves dancing on the monster’s grave (a contemporary Purim play), the Tarantino scenario is less cathartic than bizarrely triumphalist.” Indeed, while previous representations of Hitler and the Nazis, including *Life is Beautiful*, relied on cathartic emotions and, in some cases, individual survival to convey their messages, *Inglourious Basterds* thrives on a revisionist history in which the Jews were victorious over the Nazis. Imke Meyer comments on this in her essay “Exploding Cinema, Exploding Hollywood: *Inglourious Basterds* and the Limits of Cinema” by explaining that

²⁹ Quentin Tarantino. Interview with Ryan Gilbey. “Days of Glory.” *Sight & Sound* Vol. 9, No. 9 (Sept. 2009). Reprinted in *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews*, ed. Gerald Peary. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013) 179.

³⁰ Hoberman, J. “*Inglourious Basterds*: Tarantino Makes the Nazi Occupation of France Ridiculously Fun.” Rev. of *Inglourious Basterds* dir. Quentin Tarantino. *Phoenix New Times* 20 Aug. 2009. Proquest. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.

“Shoshanna, a Jewish character who, early in the film, escapes the role she was meant to play, namely that of victim, takes charge. She sets fire to her movie theater, thereby destroying the Nazi leadership.”³¹ Shoshanna, war paint and all, posthumously triumphs as her theater burns to the ground, taking with it the several of the most crucial members of the Nazi elite. Tarantino, a true believer in the craft of filmmaking and the power of the medium of film, triumphs with her.

A huge part of this triumph, and the character who undoubtedly “stole the show” in *Inglourious Basterds* is Colonel Hans Landa, brilliantly portrayed by Christoph Waltz, who was awarded with an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his performance. Hoberman writes of Waltz that, “Waltz’s elegant and clever SS man is the movie’s most crowd-pleasing creation - another in the long line of glamorous Hollywood Nazis. Indeed, this smooth operator is Eichmann as fun guy! He’s also a European sissy whose “barbaric” antagonists are a squad of Jewish-American commandos led by wily hillbilly Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt).”³² Certainly, Landa draws connections to Eichmann, and the so called “banality” of evil that many prominent Nazis represented. Tarantino himself explains this best, in his interview with Ryan Gilbey:

Into the movie a little bit, you realize Landa is not a dyed-in-the-wool party member. He’s doing his job. He’s not a rabid Third Reicher. The Nazis aren’t a religion for him; he’s a very practical man. As he says, he’s a great detective. ‘My job is finding people, so naturally I work for the Nazis, finding people. That’s my job.’ The way it was in the Third Reich, whether you were an actor or engineer or whatever, you did whatever you did before the war. For you not to do it for the Nazis was like the equivalent of desertion in battle. Now I’m not saying he’s an innocent in any way,

³¹ Meyer, Imke. “Exploding Cinema, Exploding Hollywood: *Inglourious Basterds* and the Liits of Cinema.” *Quentin Tarantino's Inglourious Basterds: a Manipulation of Metacinema*. Ed. Robert Dassanowsky. (New York: Continuum, 2012) 19.

³² Hoberman, *Phoenix New Times*.

but he's obviously not Goebbels. Patriotism and fidelity to the party are not his strongest objectives. He's disturbingly charismatic. It's not so much that you're rooting for him. You're not. When he shows up behind Shoshanna in the restaurant, you're scared. But he sets himself up as such a great detective that you don't want him to disappoint you. You want him to be as good as you think he is.³³

As Tarantino explains, Landa doesn't necessarily choose to become the "Jew hunter", and become personally responsible for countless innocent Jewish deaths. Rather, due to his expertise as a detective, he fulfills the role as a job, his mandatory service to the Third Reich. Indeed, as the Eichmann trial proved, this was not an unfamiliar condition among Nazis following the war.

Yet, before Tarantino ends the film, he makes sure to twist history one more time, and provide audiences with the gory, satisfying ending that they had hoped for. Recall that Landa, similar to Eichmann before his capture and countless other high ranking Nazis who were never discovered following the war, wished to live out the rest of his life as an innocent, with the horrific acts of his past a distant memory, completely invisible to everyone he may encounter. Ultimately, though, the tough-nosed hillbilly Aldo Raine won't stand for it. Tarantino's final act in his vengeful fantasy comes in the form of Raine carving a swastika in Landa's head and claiming "I think this just might be my masterpiece." Indeed, *Inglourious Basterds* was a masterful work of film, one of Tarantino's best to date. More importantly, though, Tarantino's brilliant filmmaking has redefined what it means to comedically represent the Nazis and the Holocaust, and has raised the question of how future comedic representations of Nazism will adapt to the new standard that Tarantino set with *Inglourious*

³³ Tarantino, Interview by Ryan Gilbey, 181.

Basterds, where imagination dominates the landscape, and no alternative representations of history are off limits.

Conclusion

In 2009, Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* went where no comedic representation of Nazism had gone before, deliberately falsifying history in favor of a gory, Nazi-killing bloodbath which portrayed Jewish characters, particularly Shoshanna and the Basterds, as vengeful aggressors rather than passive victims like their predecessors in *Schindler's List*. Indeed, *Inglourious Basterds* has definitely changed the genre of comedic representations of Nazism, and has raised the question of how comedians will answer to Tarantino's revolutionary film, and what the future will hold for comedic representations of Nazism. Imke Meyer discusses the film, its importance, and its potential impact on future representations in her essay "Exploding Cinema, Exploding Hollywood: *Inglourious Basterds* and the Limits of Cinema". Meyer explains:

Schindler's List purports to tell a true story, but it serves up a fantasy. The difference is that Spielberg's fantasy is of the rather disturbing kind... Not only does it leave the Jews in a position of complete dependence and powerlessness, but in addition, Schindler, the Nazi (normally a signifier of absolute evil), appropriates the position of the actively good man that would normally be embodied by one of the Jews. *Schindler's List* allows us complacently to believe that we are witnessing a re-enactment of history. We believe that we know 'what things were really like,' when in reality we indulge in the escapist fantasy that the Nazis really sometimes turned into good guys. In contrast, Tarantino's film sees a testament to the insight that the historical truth is always already out of reach and that all we can access are representations of history, rather than history itself.¹

Indeed, in *Inglourious Basterds* Tarantino does not attempt to represent history as Spielberg does in *Schindler's List*. Rather, Tarantino chooses his own representation of history, and retells the story of World War II in his mythical, fantastic fashion. Such a radical representation of Nazism certainly raises the question of where the genre is headed from

¹ Meyer, 25.

here. Who can follow *Inglourious Basterds*, which so radically changed the genre of Nazi comedy. Meyer offers her explanation of this problem by writing, “With *Inglourious Basterds*, Quentin Tarantino has made a Hollywood film about Nazis that not only takes this genre to a new lever, but rather - by liberating the Jews from the position of eternal victimhood to which they had seemed to be irrevocably assigned by Hollywood - queers the genre to such an extent that the problematic structures that undergird both it and Hollywood cinema in general are exposed.”² Certainly, it is difficult to speculate what kind of Holocaust and Nazi comedy can follow such a unique film as *Inglourious Basterds*.

One place where, perhaps, the future of comedic representations of Nazism lies is on the internet. Indeed, J. Hoberman suspects that some of Tarantino’s influences in his production of *Inglourious Basterds* itself came from an internet craze that predated the film. Hoberman explains that, “*Basterds*’ coarse, ranting, ridiculously caped Hitler certainly contributes to the war’s vaudevillization, but the notion of Hitler as a screaming infant was more eloquently demonstrated several years ago when a hilarious meme swept the Internet, subtitling a key tantrum from *Downfall*, the 2005 German drama of Hitler in the bunker.”³ Indeed, following the release of *Downfall*, anonymous users on the Internet began to take Bruno Ganz’s emotional, dramatic scene where a frantic Hitler first begins to realize that his Nazis faced eminent defeat, and turn it into ridiculously hilarious memes, where Hitler is complaining about anything “from his lost Xbox to the Super Bowl upset to Obama’s victory.”⁴ Hoberman offers his perspective on the meme craze, and perhaps how it

² Meyer, 30.

³ Hoberman, *The Phoenix New Times*.

⁴ Ibid.

influenced Tarantino, by claiming that “with the evil genius of the 20th century already a joke everywhere outside of Germany - and perhaps even there - Tarantino’s particular genius has been to provide a suitably regressive scenario for the sandbox war that cost 50 million lives.”⁵ Certainly, *Inglourious Basterds* served as a response to the *Downfall* meme craze on the Internet; in Tarantino’s mind, the only way to belittle Hitler in a unique way was to perform the world’s collective fantasy by having vengeful Jews brutally shoot and kill Hitler.

It is tough to say where the next level of Internet representations of Nazism and the Holocaust will take us. In a medium such as the Internet, where people are making homemade texts that speak to the Holocaust in a comedic fashion, there appears to be no limit on what people are willing to say and show when comedically representing the Nazis. Indeed, never before has there been such an open forum for audience pushback, where anonymous users can create Youtube clips that appeal to an diverse audience, and broadcast them instantly to the world. While comedic representations of Nazism began with propaganda films used to bring the Nazis down within the minds of Americans, the genre has greatly changed from the days of Chaplin to today, the days of Tarantino, so to speak. Today, within comedic representations of Nazism, Jews can be the heroes rather than the victims, Hitler can be burned to a crisp inside a French Jew’s movie theater, and anybody with a laptop can offer their stance on comedy and the Nazis through the use of the *Downfall* meme. Only time will tell what the future holds for the genre, and we will have to wait and see how the comedians who follow in Tarantino’s footsteps offer their commentary about the Nazis and the Holocaust.

⁵ Ibid.

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