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European Journal of Cultural Studies 2001; 4; 491

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ecs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/4/4/491

Published by:

SAGE Publications

http://www.sagepublications.com

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF cultural studies

Vol 4(4) 491–501
[1367-5494(200111)4:4; 491–501; 018280]

Consuming history and memory through mass media products

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ABSTRACT The representation of the past through products of the 'culture industry' bears the history of a long debate between detractors and optimists. This controversy becomes especially significant in a time where commercial audiovisual media affect in unprecedented ways the content and the form in which massive audiences relate to the events of the past. Even more so in a so-called postmodern moment in which public confidence in the real is overall in decline. In this context, the debate on the representation of the history and memory of the Holocaust – the paradigmatic example of limitations and imperatives to representational practice – has become a contemporary battlefield regarding the legitimacy and propriety of mass media products. By examining contemporary Holocaust representations that are at the intersection between the world of commercial mass media and the conventional nonfiction culture and documentary tradition (such as high-tech museums and Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation), this article will reflect upon the diverse implications of the mass media–history relation.

KEYWORDS *documentary films, exhibitions, historical films, Jewish Holocaust 1939–45, museums*

It has become common in public discourse to regard contemporary western societies as having reached the end of history and to characterize them as amnesic cultures: societies beset by spectacle and immediacy but lacking any sense of history. A closer look at the presence of history and memory in our culture leads us to reconsider this statement. I would like to argue that an important cultural shift is taking place. This is not necessarily a shift from memory towards amnesia, or from history towards the disappearance of history. It is rather a transformation of media, narratives and institutions through which history and memory are transmitted. We are witnessing the proliferation of new forms shared outside formal historical discourse and traditional institutions of

socialization. These are linked to all sorts of cultural products, embodied in films, books, comics and artefacts and invested with new cultural meaning.

Historical sites are being revivified as theme parks. New cable TV channels are specializing in historical documentaries. Fictional films on historical themes gain enormous public significance and historical and memorial museums are brought back to life with astonishing success. We are living through a moment characterized by an unprecedented presence of history and memory in the cultural sphere. Here visual technologies of representation and narration (first film and later television and computers) are playing a fundamental role. In recent decades, to talk about memory is to talk about audiovisual representations of events. These have transformed historical events by giving them renewed visibility, magnitude and public awareness and they have affected significantly the relationship between culture, history and collective memory.

In this article I will reflect upon the problematic link between history, memory and commodity within a consumer culture. I will explore to what extent the rigid epistemological dichotomies and fixed aesthetic limits of representation that this controversial relationship has raised in the past still apply in an increasingly complex and multidimensional cultural context. Contemporary representations of Holocaust history and memory will be examined to highlight these issues.

Apocalyptics vs optimists

The representation of the past through the 'culture industry', a controversial concept introduced by the Frankfurt School, has a long history of critics and optimists. From the critical perspective, Theodor Adorno was perhaps the most prominent theoretician to equate commodification of culture with cultural forgetting. For most critical theorists the culture industry was taking a real sense of history and making it into spectacle and entertainment. Moreover, Adorno drew structural connections between the mechanisms of the culture industry and the logic of anti-Semitism. He saw a connection between the latter and the features of advertising psychology: mass production, ticket mentality, stereotypes, cliches, etc. Adorno argued that TV dramas or Hollywood films have this affinity with commodity aesthetics, as they are constructed according to the dramaturgy of advertising. Thus, nothing that resembles advertising could be used for enlightenment or teaching. The critics hold that cognitive rational understanding is always incompatible with emotional melodramatic representations of history. In addition, there was the allegation that TV reduces the world to an appearance, blocking all possible critical reflection and response. History and memory recreated in conventionalized fictional and nostalgic forms

would 'colonize the audience's historical imagination instead of stimulating and liberating it' (Kaes, 1990: 118). Other authors (Hartman, 1993; Jameson, 1991) were equally concerned with the impact of TV and film on public memory. These cultural critics were worried that memory was becoming increasingly alienated from personal and active recollection, falling prey to the effects of 'information sickness' in a world turned into a vast accumulation of images, which have lost their referential value. Serious epistemological and political objections have also been raised concerning the potential danger of an extreme form of relativism resulting in the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction in new mass media cultural products.

Umberto Eco vigorously questions these positions in his influential work *Apocalypse Postponed* (1994). Eco claims that underlying this 'apocalyptic' critique is distress driven by some sort of enigmatic 'morbid attraction' to the medium, what Eco calls 'mysterium televisionis'. This has caused prodigious exaggerations, even before the existence of film and TV. Eco's position is shared with several theoreticians who subscribe to a more 'optimistic' perspective, claiming that serials, feature films and mass media in general have made possible the comprehension of historical events more effectively than any previous rational–objective–'historical' account of the past (Zielinski, 1980). An inevitable vulgarization was always preferable to indifference and silence and the culture industry did awaken an interest in people who were previously ignorant of many important historical events. A further argument along these lines is the possibility of enriching the comprehension of historical events through its representation within a multiplicity of popular genres. Another optimistic claim is that the proliferation of historical mass media products has led to a far-reaching understanding of the stakes of historical representation: a recognition that history and its representations are always processes and constructions (Sobchak, 1996).

Representing the Holocaust through mass media

The Holocaust constitutes a paradigmatic example of this controversy between apocalyptics and optimists. Its presence in this commodified, mass-mediated, memorial culture has raised an ardent debate on its (im)possible and appropriate representation. Opposing opinions on hybrid genres and aesthetic appropriation of the Holocaust have brought to the surface complex negotiations over the restrictions and imperatives that dominate the form of Holocaust history and memorialization. The Holocaust has a specific singularity that forms the background to the debate, which is that any failure of historical or aesthetic representation would resonate as not just a 'mistake', but a desecration of the memory of Holocaust victims. This notion came from the generalized idea that certain ways are shockingly inappropriate for depicting this event.[1]

The Holocaust was represented for the first time within a massive commercial cinematic context in 1979 through the NBC television mini-series *Holocaust*. Its airing had a big impact in American and European public opinion and raised, for the first time, the question of the validity of commercial entertainment products in the face of catastrophe and trauma. Critics attacked the series as an example of obscene trivialization of the Holocaust in popular culture. Elie Wiesel, who has an international reputation on bearing witness to the Holocaust, was among the most fervent critics, considering the show 'an insult to those who perished, and those who survived' (Wiesel, 1987; see also Wiesel, 1990). Other series and films were also considered deeply offensive, since the original trauma was often re-enacted and exploited in a way that allegedly trivialized the historical event of the Nazi Final Solution.[2] The publication and world success of Art Spiegelman's comic book *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* raised again the debate on the appropriateness of such a medium to address this topic, since it inserted the *tremendum* of the Holocaust into the context of one of the allegedly most vulgar and commodified vehicles of popular culture. First censored as a superficial and tasteless American product, it was belatedly considered by the audience and some critics to be even more authentic and convincing than those 'factual' projects which aimed to represent the suffering of the Holocaust survivors.

The debate on the limits of Holocaust representation (see Friedlander, 1992), informed by the insistence on an exclusive and true representation of the Holocaust in its uniqueness, enormity and unspeakability, became obsolete in the face of its multiple representations and increasing ubiquitousness during the last decade, when massive audiences derive their historical knowledge from products of mass culture. (The very sparse controversy regarding the 'appropriateness' of Roberto Benigni's tragic-comic Holocaust fable, *Life is Beautiful*, illustrated that absolute limits of representation are ceasing to be a disputed matter.) *Schindler's List*, being a Hollywood-style dramatization of the Jewish genocide, represents the success of history conveyed through (American) popular culture and its progressive disconnection from memory as discussed in academic settings or on the political/institutional level. The historical event had literally 'dissolved as an object of respectably scientific knowledge' (White, 1996: 19), resulting in a blurring between an official 'authorized' and a popular version of history that definitely exploded the boundaries of how the Holocaust could be depicted and interpreted. *Schindler's List* has also shown that the culture industry is capable of preserving (or reintroducing) the events of the Holocaust in the collective memory and historical consciousness of globalized audiences (Loshitzky, 1997). Moreover, the film was very effective in defining the shape and dominant imagery of that memory. *Schindler's List*'s soundtrack for instance is recognized worldwide and used in different

ceremonial occasions. In Spain, for example, it is remarkable that on the Holocaust Day commemoration ceremony in 1995, at a community centre of the Jewish community in Madrid, the closing act of candle lighting was accompanied by this music.

Visual history and high-tech museums

Schindler's List and other films on the Holocaust have also influenced other more conventionally sober or serious representations of the Holocaust, such as the Holocaust museums, and have impelled oral/visual history projects like Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation – the institution established by Steven Spielberg that is dedicated to videotaping testimonies of Holocaust survivors worldwide for historical preservation and educational purposes.[3] Since *Schindler's List* was released in 1993, the same year the US Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in Washington, DC, it contributed significantly to the museum's popularity. In memorials and museums the elements of cinematic perception become real objects, and they satisfy the kind of enthusiasm for history, that 'readiness' for history, that the films provoke. This is a paradoxical consequence of a so-called postmodern 'amnesic' moment which has a counterpart in a new 'museum' culture matched with the fascination with memory and the past (Huyssen, 1993). Hence, any Holocaust memorial and any other memorializing practice are embedded in a complex framework heavily influenced by imagery constructed by the culture industry. The Shoah Foundation is a product of the monumental success of the feature film *Schindler's List*. The movie not only provided part of the financial resources for the extraordinary scope of the project, but also created a worldwide popular fascination with survivors and their stories. As a result it also raised the interest in the numerous volunteering interviewers as well as a far-reaching disposition to give testimony among survivors.[4] It is common to hear among interviewees, as well as among the Foundation's staff, that *Schindler's List*'s impact opened up this awareness and a personal need to contribute to a public Holocaust memory. The film has therefore demonstrated how popular culture and mass media have created new spaces within which it has become possible to associate oneself to the past (Zelizer, 1997). On a methodological level, these are relevant issues in identifying the social, cultural and political contingencies in this visual history project.[5]

The following anecdote illustrates this contemporary ambivalence between history, memory and culture industry in a wider sense. After interviewing me for a Spanish newspaper on the Shoah Foundation's project and the interviews of Holocaust survivors I conducted in Spain, the journalist told me they were not sure where to place the article, whether in the Culture or the Society section.[6] In the event, the article

was published in the Culture section and accompanied with two photographs, one of Steven Spielberg and a still photo from *Schindler's List*.[7] Formerly clear-cut distinctions between popular and recognized history, education and entertainment, fictional construction and historical documentation, are less and less certain. But at the same time a supposedly dangerous blurring of generic borders is still the major critique raised against the Shoah Foundation's work, especially in relation to their educational products (documentaries and CD-ROMs).[8]

The boundaries between museum, memorial and document have also become fluid in the visual media-saturated public sphere in the past decade. Clear examples are the 'Tower of Faces' in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (which is both documentation of and monument to the murdered Jews from the Polish town of Eishyshok) or the multimedia archive of testimonies carried by the Shoah Foundation, which in its enormity (more than 51,000) turns into a vast living memorial of stories. Contemporary practices also go beyond the traditional strong moral and aesthetic pressure to deal with the Holocaust in strictly historical and documentary modes. These were based on the authoritative nature of documentary photography. At the present time there is both a critical stance on visual representation as evidential technology and on the concept of historical fact, which is the object of critical interrogation by contemporary theorists. On one hand, postmodern culture is heavily marked by an unprecedented awareness of representation itself. On the other, it is becoming accepted that historiography is more about 'arranging and telling stories' (White, 1996: 23) and less about delivering objective truth. These two aspects, developed at a theoretical level, accompany the dissolving of memorial practice and historical representation in hybrid genres far from the traditional forms depicting the past. Martin Smith, former director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, commented on the traditional (documentary) museum forms of representation using the following terms:

> The irony is that I don't trust the medium of documentary photography and I don't even trust historical records. They are all coming through the filters of human memory . . . The exhibition will be a mixture of photographs, films, documents and artifacts. I think increasingly with time people will be more and more skeptical about visual imagery and about film. (Quoted in Liss, 1998: 16)

Historiographic practices of Holocaust representation formerly legitimated as 'proper' (factual, descriptive, etc.) in museums are changing in their appearance and structure and moving much closer to the formats of popular mass media culture. The modern history museum favours a multimedia and participatory approach. It proposes simulated environments and an emotional encounter with the events. Current Holocaust museums favour strategies designed to arouse strong emotions

and a literal immersion of the visitor into the past. This could not be reached via traditional modes of presentation, but through a physical experience and technological means (artefacts, recreations, re-enactments and interactive audiovisual material). With its high-tech displays and simulations, the museum enters into a troublesome area that has almost become a 'special effects arena' in the sense Klein (1998) describes. In fact, a booklet on postmodernism did exemplify the confusion between information, education and entertainment in contemporary culture with a reference to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. The museum was cast as 'Holocaust theme park', and the display of Nazi documentary footage of executions as 'historical *snuff movies*' (Appignanesi and Garratt, 1995: 17). According to Linenthal (1995), a major concern regarding the adequacy of representations among the members of the Commission in charge of developing the permanent exhibition of the Holocaust Memorial Museum was the danger of 'Disneyfication', and of becoming another attraction on a tourist itinerary in Washington, DC. However, Museum Director Jeshajahu Weinberg maintained that the museum had to speak the language of 1990 and 2000 and therefore modern audiovisual technology would be indispensable. He defended an 'exercise of visual historiography' (Linenthal, 1995: 152) in a 'hot' museum. At the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, which houses the West Coast's largest Holocaust exhibition, a similar approach is used. The informational brochure describes the centre as a 'high tech, hands-on experiential museum that focuses on two themes through unique interactive exhibits'.[9]

The Shoah Foundation carries an intricate combination of conventional and high-tech formats. The interviews (conventional ways of historical documentation and representation) are digitized, catalogued completely and stored in a supercomputer. The user interface is designed as an interactive information retrieval facility that provides access to the videotaped testimonies, photographs and documents. In the Shoah Foundation's promotional video, Spielberg explains this facility in the following words:

> This is what we could call technically the user's interface, but it is in some way what makes that this technology has, perhaps for the first time, emotion. . . . So we move around this world with faces from yesterday, today and tomorrow. We have the names of all the survivors and with each name we see a photograph and brief summary of who they are . . . When survivors talk, it is almost like a live documentary. Automatically maps, pictures of themselves and documentary footage of the ghettos and forced labor camps in which they were show up, depending on what they are saying, and their words are illustrated by these images. So we are looking at a living document of the experiences of each individual during the Holocaust.

This is all but the 'pure' process that Elie Wiesel defended as a suitable approach to the Holocaust history.[10]

A similar immersion is promoted with the educational CD-ROM *Survivors: Testimonies of the Holocaust*, which features accounts of four survivors from the Foundation's archive. With this CD users virtually navigate through Holocaust history, see different faces and click on a face to hear that person's story. It shows testimonies, maps and timelines, in addition to historical material and archival footage within a heavily computer game-like aesthetic (vanishing and superimposed images, elaborate textures, musical background, etc.). Another distinctive element of this material is the fact that famous actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Winona Rider narrate the documentary parts of the CD-ROM. The three documentary films produced by the Shoah Foundation – *Survivors of the Holocaust* (1996), *The Lost Children of Berlin* (1997), and the Academy Award-winning *The Last Days* (1998) – also rely strongly on the narrative modes and visual strategies of commercial film and TV. All of them weave together survivor testimonies with archival footage, personal photographs and artefacts, which is a well-established documentary film practice. But montage, composition of images and choices of characters emphasize identification, drama and explicitness. In addition they all have a soft musical underscore, a violin melody that echoes the theme of *Schindler's List*, which adds a touch of sentiment that for many critics went beyond the documentary needs and left little space for a viewer's personal work with the film (Langer, 1995; Seesslen, 2000).

There is a difficult problem that emerges when these products are intended to have both the scientific and aesthetic standards of 'History', on one hand, and memorial and educational value, on the other. The latter, as Museum Director Weinberg has identified, in order to be effective, requires modern, compelling elements. Since the present is inevitably the site for all past representation and knowing, the embodiment of history and memory needs to be in accordance with the visual imagery and narrative forms of contemporary culture. This progressive shift towards these forms of Holocaust representation suggests the extinction of the traditional divisions over the depiction of the past: emotional appeal and fictional forms vs detached, sober and conceptual representations. It means the disappearance of the epistemic borders between what constitutes imagined and factual history, invented and real spaces, documentary modes and fictional modes of TV and film.

Some conclusions

The discussed examples of contemporary Holocaust representation – audiovisual histories and high-tech museums – are fully immersed in the hybrid and controversial space of cultural memory; a memory, as Marita

Sturken (1997) has illustrated, formed by the intersection of various cultural arenas (art, popular culture, consumer culture). These products, practices and sites can be understood as representative of contemporary society, where history is the object of unprecedented public attention and where mass media, history and memory do not exist within neatly defined boundaries. The boundaries are blurring and each of these domains is overlapping and influencing the others. But the discussion has to go beyond the debate on truth or falsehood of the depicted history or the adequacy of the means of representation. The question is rather the growing presence of these new products and cultural practices, the resources and technologies that they use and their far-reaching impact on the historical knowledge and memorial imagery of an increasingly globalized public.

In this respect, and regarding the reception – or consumption – of these products, the title of this article does not have the 'apocalyptic' connotation that it might have suggested at first sight. Instead, it stands for a viewer that is increasingly aware of the constructed and context-based nature of all representations and an audience that has the possibility of choosing from a variety of representations in order to build its understanding and knowledge of the events of the past. Thus, the link history–industry has produced much more than 'cheap' popularizations of complex historical processes. The massive presence of media products, the variety of genres, styles and interpretations of the past, might be creating a richer understanding of history and collective memory and a more reflective and self-conscious historical subject.

Notes

This article was presented at the 3rd International Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference, Birmingham, UK, June 2000.

1. This notion has been recurrently emphasized with Adorno's often paraphrased argument about the 'barbarism' of aestheticizing the horror of the event (Adorno, 1981).
2. Judith Miller (1990: 232) has aimed a fervid critique against the 'Americanization' of the Holocaust and warned of its appropriation by mass media culture: 'This vulgarization is a new form of historical titillation . . . And in societies like America's, where the public attention span is measured in seconds and minutes rather than years or decades, where sentimentality replaces insight and empathy, it represents a considerable threat to dignified remembrance . . . Europe's most terrible genocide is transformed into an American version of kitsch.' A critique to American cultural productions on the Holocaust was made more recently by Rosenfeld (1997).
3. Besides this main goal (the archive of audiovisual survivor testimonies, which is the most comprehensive collection of such firsthand accounts ever assembled), the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation produces documentary films and educational CD-ROMs. The author of this article

has conducted several interviews with Spanish Holocaust survivors for the Shoah Foundation's archive.

4. Branko Lustig, Executive Producer of the Foundation said, that '*Schindler's List* was the little stone that caused the avalanche called testimonies of the Shoah' (Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, not-for-profit public service video presentation, 1997).
5. Since the Shoah Foundation pursues a historiographical research objective and employs a precise oral history methodology to conduct its interviews, all probable influences from the media and the film industry need to be explicated and placed under critical analysis.
6. The Society section in Spanish newspapers deals with social concerns whereas the Culture section deals with the arts.
7. *La Razón* (24 Dec. 1998).
8. A particularly critical article in this direction was published by Broder (1999). However, the fact of the Shoah Foundation being an organization established by Hollywood filmmaker Steven Spielberg has given rise to acid exaggerations in the press and academia. A usual misunderstanding is the mixing of a legitimate aesthetic critique of the educational products with a methodological critique regarding the quality of the interviews of the archive, which would need further comparative research.
9. This prospectus has on its first page a quote from the *New York Times* that says: 'This is no ordinary museum . . .'.
10. 'My world is that of words and verbal images, not of lenses and visual images.' Ellie Wiesel, quoted in Linenthal (1995: 126).

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