

Look who's back

ANNA KATHARINA SCHAFFNER

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld

HI HITLER!

How the Nazi past is being normalized in contemporary culture

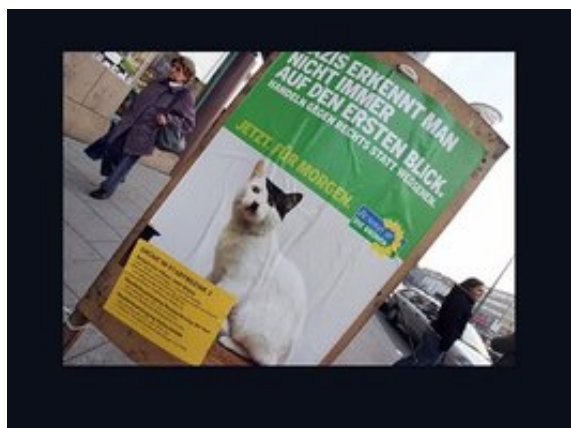
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A campaign poster for Germany's Green Party, 2008:

"One cannot always spot Nazis at first sight"

Photograph: © John MacDougall/AFP/Getty Images

websites dedicated to "kitlers" (cats that look like Hitler), YouTube videos that remix documentary footage to turn Hitler into a dexterous disco dancer, and innumerable parodic appropriations of Bruno Ganz's psychotic rants in Oliver Hirschbiegel's film *Downfall* that are refashioned to criticize a plethora of contemporary cultural discontents ranging from Kim Kardashian, traffic jams and Indian call centres to Rebecca Black's song "Friday". Disparate as they may sound, these phenomena are, according to the American historian Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, all signs of a widespread "normalization" of Nazism in contemporary culture.

In *Hi Hitler!* Rosenfeld argues that since the turn of the millennium there has been a complete change in the ways in which the Nazi past is analysed and represented. This change has permeated all areas of cultural production, and is equally manifest in scholarly historiographical works, political debates, literary fiction and films, and various online trends. Rosenfeld understands this shift as part of a process of historical normalization – a relatively recent concept

We hope you enjoy this piece from the TLS, which is available every Thursday in print and via the [TLS app](#). Also in this week's issue: Oscar Wilde's ventures in a foreign tongue; enlightenment and withdrawal in the life and work of Agnes Martin; Robert Irwin on Salman Rushdie's "odd" foray into magical realism; Jeremy Corbyn and his posse of poets – and much more.

Germany's Nazi past has been subject to some radical reconceptualizations, both historiographical and creative, in recent decades. There have been revisionist historiographies of the Second World War that question the familiar American "good war" and British "finest hour" narratives. Parallels have been drawn between the Holocaust and other genocides, while broader historical forces, such as capitalism, modernity and imperialism, have been cited to explain the rise of Nazism. The suffering of German civilians as a result of the Allied bombing campaign has been documented. Speculative historical and fictional counterfactuals have explored what might have happened if Hitler had never existed or had been assassinated, if the Allies had not intervened following the invasion of Poland, or if the Nazis had won the war.

Alongside new historical interpretations Nazism has also been reappropriated by popular culture. Films that humanize, ridicule, or psychoanalyse Hitler, or that deploy satirical, farcical, or slapstick devices to represent the Third Reich and its main protagonists, have reached a worldwide audience. There are now

deployed by historians to explain how and why perceptions of the past change over time. Normalization entails, above all, an attack on the perceived exceptionality of a given period, by replacing accounts of radical difference with accounts of similarities.

According to Rosenfeld, the normalization of the Nazi past has taken three principal forms: universalization, relativization and aestheticization. Those charged with universalizing the Nazi past challenge narratives of the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust, and emphasize parallels between past and present political situations or leaders, or point to broader underlying psychological, social, or economic tendencies to show that no culture can claim to be fully immune to latent fascist tendencies. Those who are found guilty of relativizing Nazi crimes might in some ways blur the radical difference between perpetrators and victims, or challenge narratives that uphold the rigid boundaries between the forces of good and the forces of evil in the war. Those charged with aestheticizing the Nazi past, finally, use “unconventional” (that is, not strictly realist, factual and moralistic) means of engaging with the topic – above all, humour.

Almost every one of the many historians, writers, directors, and internet users Rosenfeld discusses is ultimately found either to universalize, relativize, or aestheticize the Nazi past, and thus to contribute to its normalization. Among his case studies, which cover mainly Anglo-American and German sources, are: Nicholson Baker's study *Human Smoke* (2008), Patrick Buchanan's *Churchill, Hitler, and the “Unnecessary War”* (2008), Norman Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry* (2000), Donald Bloxham's *The Final Solution: A genocide* (2010) and Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010); Jo Walton's novel *Farthing* (2006), Timur Vermes's *Er ist wieder da* (2013; *Look Who's Back*) and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007); films such as *Max* (directed by Menno Meyjes, 2002), *Downfall* (2004), *Mein Führer* (Dani Levy, 2007) and *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009); as well as various rather silly or, in some cases, plainly offensive recent websites poking fun at Hitler.

There is no doubt that Rosenfeld's study is important and timely, as well as lucid, engaging and readable, and that his case studies are thought-provoking. The implicit and explicit questions he addresses are ultimately of an ethical nature and concern the importance (and potential pitfalls) of the mechanics of cultural memory and historiography; the boundaries between good and bad taste; the fragile line that separates a legitimate search for new ways of representing the Nazi era and disrespect for its victims; and the moral lessons we can learn from the past and in which mode these should be communicated. Rosenfeld is also convincing on the workings of what he describes as the “dialectics of normalization”, that is, the idea that every attempt to normalize the Nazi past generates a fierce backlash from those who wish to defend approaches that, in contrast, emphasize the historical specificities of the period, its uniqueness and exceptionality. Paradoxically, then, Rosenfeld argues, the many recent attempts to normalize Hitler and Nazism more generally have the opposite effect, in that they provide new arguments against which the guardians of the exceptionality hypothesis can position themselves, and thus ensure that the debate about the very status of Holocaust memory remains alive and pertinent.

It is a shame, though, that Rosenfeld's general argument remains so schematic. Although his more detailed readings tend to be both perceptive and nuanced, nuance is precisely what is lacking in his main thesis. Rosenfeld operates with in over-rigorous and ultimately not fully convincing categories, assigning almost all of his case studies to one of two schools: those that are moralistic, and that adhere to the exceptionality argument; and those that are normalizing. Yet anyone who reads Rosenfeld's fine collection of case studies with any care is likely to conclude that many (though certainly not all) of the works he discusses manage in their own particular ways to do both at the same time. In other words, they adopt a position that does not trivialize the memory of the horrors and the crimes of the Third Reich, while at the same time also looking to experiment with modes other than the rigidly realistic, didactic, moralizing, or tragic. Alternatively, they draw attention to the fact that there may well be some viable middle ground between the poles of absolute good and absolute evil in historical analyses of the Allied and Axis powers during the war. Similarly, many of the works Rosenfeld discusses manage both to emphasize the historical specificity of the Nazi era and to analyse features that might be more universal. And so while Rosenfeld acknowledges the fact that the (ultimately positive) process of the dialectics of normalization may take place between works and their critics, he seems reluctant to allow

for the possibility that individual works might be thought about dialectically, that there could be works that fall into the both/and rather than the either/or category. This failure is the one significant point of contention in this otherwise fine and important book.

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