

Liat Steir-Livny, *Holocaust Representations in Animated Documentaries: The Contours of Commemoration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), pp. 264.

by Guido Vitiello

Studies of Holocaust representations have long been marked by two general inclinations, or rather by two implicit premises. The first is a prescriptive rather than descriptive conception of literary, film or figurative genres. According to this conception—which recalls ancient and medieval theories of genres—there are appropriate genres and inappropriate genres for dealing with such an extreme subject. Elie Wiesel’s harsh attacks on the Nbc miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) and on William Styron’s novel *Sophie’s Choice* (from which Alan J. Pakula’s film of the same name was made in 1982), as well as Primo Levi’s polite perplexities with respect to the erotic film *Night Porter* (Liliana Cavani, 1974) descend at least in part from this rule: beyond the merits and demerits of the works in question, the error lies in their genre. From the survivors, this propensity to give genres a prescriptive value would later extend to scholars. It has been a little over thirty years since Terrence Des Pres, in a highly influential essay, discussed the ethical and historical permissibility of dedicating a comic book—in this case Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*—to the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> Still in 1997, the debate over Roberto Benigni’s film *Life is beautiful* was conducted largely along these lines: is it legitimate to set a comedy in a concentration camp?

In this respect, much has changed with the latest generation of scholars. Liat Steir-Livny’s book *Holocaust Representations in Animated Documentaries: The Contours of Commemoration* is an excellent demonstration of this shift in perspective. Presenting itself as “the first comprehensive analysis of animated Holocaust documentaries,” (p. x) the book analyzes films produced in the United States, Canada, Australia, Europe and Israel. Rather than focusing on the supposed inherent morality of expressive genres, the author privileges the positive possibilities that a new genre offers. In this respect, animated documentaries “can visualize subject matter that previously eluded live action documentaries, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Terrence Des Pres, “Holocaust *Laughter?*,” in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (London-New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 216-233.

the unfiled past and people's inner worlds of fantasies, dreams, and emotions" (p. x). In other words, this would grant documentary some of the privileges traditionally restricted to works of fiction. The book is structured in three parts. The first, " 'Unimating' the Holocaust," analyzes films about the Nazi period (1933-1945). In most cases these are films devoted to episodes isolated from context and focused on positive aspects such as resistance to Nazism, resilience, humanity and the possibility of redemption. With few exceptions—addressed by the author in part four—these films marginalize atrocities and choose not to represent them, thus risking giving an incomplete picture of the past. The second part, "The Life After," is devoted to the way animated documentary can translate into images the post-traumatic experience of survivors as well as their coping strategies. Finally, the third part, "Secondary Trauma, Postmemory, and Wishful Postmemory," moves away from the direct experience of survivors to focus on their second- and third-generation descendants. Animated documentary, due to its ability to recreate undocumented aspects of both the descendants' outer world (such as their childhood) and their inner world (feelings, imaginations, experiences, fantasies) is particularly well suited to illuminate the transgenerational impact of trauma.

However, as anticipated earlier, there is a second implicit premise in the studies of Holocaust representations, that we might call "Borges' cartographer's trap." In one of his short stories, the Argentine writer tells of an empire in which "the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that coincided with it point for point."<sup>2</sup> Often, in evaluating novels or films about the Holocaust, a claim of the same kind is implicitly made: even if one does not demand of a single work of art that it represent everything—which is obviously impossible—one nonetheless asks it to have an exemplary depiction of this totality, and reproaches it when leaving out something essential: e.g. the industrial and anonymous aspect of the massacres, the responsibilities of one or another historical agent, the vicissitudes of people who cannot be assimilated to the protagonist. This is one of the main criticisms levelled at Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993): why choose, out of all the Germans, the uncommon case of an industrialist rescuing Jews? One might answer: because it is

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<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *A Universal History of Infamy*, trans. Norman Thomas de Giovanni (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 131.

*one single film*, not a 1:1 map of the Holocaust. From the second of these *idola*, Liat Steir-Livny is less immune. The author argues that “Holocaust animated documentaries also have specific shortcomings and have generated a new set of problems relating to Holocaust memory and representation, since the vast majority marginalize the horrors and instead focus on small incidents that reflect bravery, resilience, solidarity, and hope” (p. x). Her analyses demonstrate this brilliantly. However, one might argue, this limitation would only be problematic in a context in which all information about the Holocaust passed through this medium. In a context that already includes a very rich documentary canon, perhaps we could focus on what the animated documentary *adds*, the new possibilities it offers, rather than pointing out its shortcomings with respect to the map of empire. These new possibilities are brought out particularly clearly in the third part of the book, “Secondary Trauma, Postmemory, and Wishful Postmemory.” This is not the place to discuss the heuristic value of such notions as postmemory and secondary trauma, which have come under scrutiny in recent years. But there is no doubt that for the second and especially the third generation—who for obvious reasons are forced to imagine a past they cannot remember—animated documentary offers a broad and nuanced expressive palette. Analyses of the films *2nd World War 3rd Generation* (Elad Eisen, Gil Laron, and Shahar Madmon, 2013), *Noch Am Leben (Still Alive)* (Anita Lester, 2017), *Sketches from München* (Shahaf Ram, 2013), and *Compartments* (Daniella Koffler and Uli Seis, 2017) show how animated documentary allows third-generation creators to explore their inner worlds, and to discover that the stratifications of eighty years of Holocaust visual culture have settled there as well.

*Guido Vitiello, Sapienza University of Rome*

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