

Holocaust Perpetrators in History and Fiction

Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Clark University

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CONFERENCE REPORT

BY MARY JANE REIN

Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities;

Truth isn't. - Mark Twain

Literature, movies, and the visual arts provide license for writers, filmmakers, and artists to explore depictions of Nazi perpetrators in ways that imagine historical “possibilities.” Freed from the requirements of scholarly standards of factual authenticity, verifiability, and historical consistency, fictional discourses are able to find different “truths” about the past. The fall 2022 workshop *Holocaust Perpetrators in History and Fiction* gathered a group of historians, literary, and visual scholars to consider representations of Holocaust perpetrators in fiction and visual arts. The participants were invited to present papers exploring the wide variety of individuals who committed or supported Nazi crimes including face-to-face killers, camp guards, desk perpetrators, men and women, Germans and non-Germans, bystanders, and even privileged camp inmates, and others. Discussion of Hitler was discouraged, as an abundant scholarly literature has developed around his representation.

The tension between demonizing perpetrators as the epitome of evil versus humanizing them has received considerable academic attention. The workshop organizer, THOMAS KÜHNE, Strassler Center Director and Strassler Colin Flug Professor of Holocaust History, urged participants to move beyond this binary to consider whether fictional evil doing is morally universalized or historically contextualized. In response, the presenters sought nuance and complexity in analyzing pieces from a variety of genres. They avoided simplification, sensationalism, and fetishism by considering challenging and sophisticated works that plumb the actions and behaviors of diverse Nazi perpetrators and adherents.

An opening conversation with CHRISTOPHER BROWNING (Chapel Hill, NC) and ERIN MCGLOTHLIN (St. Louis, MO), the former a historian and the latter a literary scholar, explored how historical truth and fiction differ and how they enrich each other. Browning described early literary representations of the Holocaust that developed following trials which brought historical details to public attention. He praised the novel *Götz and Meyer* (2005) by David Albahar, which draws on a single document to imagine how the eponymous protagonists organized the gassing of Serbian Jews in 1942. Browning, who wrote an historical account of these events, appreciated the novel's fictional reconstruction as the perpetrators were never found after the war. On the other hand, McGlothlin credited scholars whose historical research aids in interpreting the social and situational dynamics and habituation of the perpetrators she encounters in literature. Historians' efforts to reconstruct the lives and motivations of particular perpetrators are useful for understanding how to individualize the phenomenon of perpetration in fiction, which generally deals with a single protagonist. Yet, literary representations also present ethical quandaries in so far as they risk humanizing actual victimizers. Together, history and fiction can shed light on why human beings participate, willingly or under coercion, in committing atrocities.

In Panel 1, *Literary Representations: Serious and Comic*, ERIN MCGLOTHLIN affirmed the links between the historical and the fictional as “mutually constitutive and informative.” Nonetheless, given the abundance of non-fictional accounts and documentary evidence, she found historians reluctant to consider post-war and contemporary fiction. McGlothlin described how antimimetic or “unnatural” narration, common to post-modern fiction, tends to estrange the reader while realist or “natural” representation is able to immerse the reader in a simulation of real life. Her comparison of the Martin Amis novels *Time's Arrow* (1991) and *The Zone of Interest* (2014), highlighted the differences between antimimetic and mimetic fiction in representing the Holocaust. Both novels depict the ramp at Auschwitz and take a different approach to representing how Nazi perpetrators make sense of their brutality and culpability.

LAURIKE IN 'T VELD (Rotterdam, NL) presented four graphic novels that suggest nuanced views of perpetration by exploring the moral gray zone. Through research into their family past, the graphic novelists discover varying levels of involvement, entanglement, and complicity. Their family members are not major offenders but ordinary people whose action or inaction

contributes to the murderous regime. The comic medium lends itself to the familial lens as redrawing the characters facilitates a connection that allows an imagined conversation with deceased family members. Drawing on Michael Rothberg's theories about diachronic implication, Veld considered how family members are folded into harms as they grapple with questions of knowing and not knowing. Furthermore, the constructed nature of the comic manifests the effort to interpret history.

In Panel II, *Cinematic Depictions: Lowbrow and Highbrow*, BRIAN CRIM (Lynchburg, VA) presented three case studies from film and television that depict Nazi perpetrators in the post-war period. His examples come from the "Nazisploitation" genre that became popular in the 1960s and 70s. The dramatic capture and televised trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 inspired writers and directors to imagine fantastic scenarios in which Nazis appear in a wide variety of settings. Until then, most Americans knew little about the Holocaust. Sci-fi and horror films and television episodes that imagine the "Nazi next door" reveal collective anxieties about the trauma of the Holocaust, the lack of accountability for prominent Nazis, the possibility of 'Fourth Reich,' and present-day existential threats. These productions also use the Holocaust as a moral paradigm to respond to contemporary issues, such as Civil Rights, the Vietnam War, and American fascism.

In his discussion of feature films, BRAD PRAGER (Columbia, MO) highlighted cinematic narratives that depict monogamous love between Nazis and victims. These narratives conform to Hollywood clichés but also subvert them. After all, the Holocaust tends to problematize plotlines that end with love conquering all. Referencing Marianne Hirsch's work on gender and Holocaust photography, he found that fictional perpetrators both infantilize and idealize their victims. Feature length Holocaust films reproduce the perpetrator gaze, resulting in a tension between the infantilized victim who must also serve as the erotic love interest. Prager presented films that align with narrative conventions that adhere to the logic of forming couples, yet the perpetrator gaze with its psychic muddling of the paternal and the erotic undermines the effort to create believable characters.

In Panel III, *Visual Images: Then and Now*, PAUL JASKOT (Durham, NC) surveyed how German visual culture influenced societal debates over how to interpret the Nazi past. Post-war images raise the idea of historical repression, beginning with the earliest images of Jewish

suffering, which imply rather than overtly depict the perpetrators. The 1962 reconstruction of the Nazi degenerate art show in Munich considered the issue of Nazi continuity in the art world and, more broadly, the question of individual agency. Following the Eichmann Trial and the Frankfurt trial of Auschwitz guards, German society grappled with the extent of German complicity. Gerhard Richter, in particular, addressed the ubiquity of ordinary perpetrators in paintings based upon family photographs. East German artists also contributed to debates about the Nazi past and critiqued the presence of perpetrators in contemporary West German society.

DIANA POPESCU (London, UK) reviewed a range of art forms and movements that depict perpetrator figures or the legacies of their actions, both explicitly and indirectly. She highlighted visual tropes and themes that artists employ to engage with ideas of perpetration from the period of the Third Reich to the present and encompassing different histories of persecution including Bosnia, Cambodia, Darfur, Iraq, and Rwanda. For instance, animal imagery conveys brutality but also distances the perpetrator from ethical accountability while political cartoons may mobilize viewers to act. Faceless figures suggest loss of humanity while ordinary depictions imply the general human capacity for evil. Contemporary artists and exhibitions have interrogated the public fascination with perpetrator imagery. Such a self-reflective approach is also necessary to confronting the art world's complicity with the Nazi party and the legacy of colonialism.

Overall, the participants effectively engaged with Mark Twain's concept of 'possibility,' which was crucial to showing how fictional and artistic representations of perpetrators go beyond, question, ignore, or reproduce historical and judicial depictions rooted in fact-based research. The discussion also acknowledged the development and changes in collective memory, an essential element for shaping the specific products of perpetrator imagery and fiction. In sum, the workshop highlighted the possibility of a fictional turn in perpetrator studies as a way to yield new and complex insights into perpetrator behavior and its memory.

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

KEYNOTE

Holocaust Perpetrators in History and Fiction: A Conversation

Christopher Browning (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Erin McGlothlin (Washington University, St. Louis), and Thomas Kühne (Clark University)

PANEL I - LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS: SERIOUS AND COMIC

Erin McGlothlin, Washington University in St. Louis

Holocaust Perpetrators in Fiction: Between Mimetic and Antimimetic Representational Modes

Laurike in 't Veld, Erasmus University

Holocaust Perpetrators in Comics: Complicity, Implication, and the Family

PANEL II - CINEMATIC DEPICTIONS: LOWBROW AND HIGHBROW

Brian E. Crim, University of Lynchburg College

Nazi Monsters and Astrofascists: Perpetrator Representation in Horror and Science Fiction Film and Television

Brad Prager, University of Missouri

No Ordinary Love: Romances between Perpetrators and Prisoners in Holocaust Feature Films

PANEL III - VISUAL IMAGES: THEN AND NOW

Paul B. Jaskot, Duke University

Cold War Conflict and Generational Critique: Imagining the Nazi Perpetrator in the Visual Arts, 1950-70

Diana Popescu, Birkbeck, University of London, UK

Facing Perpetrators in Contemporary Visual Arts: Patterns, Ethics, and Reception