

The Sitcoms Have Become Self Aware: A Discussion of the Current American Sitcom

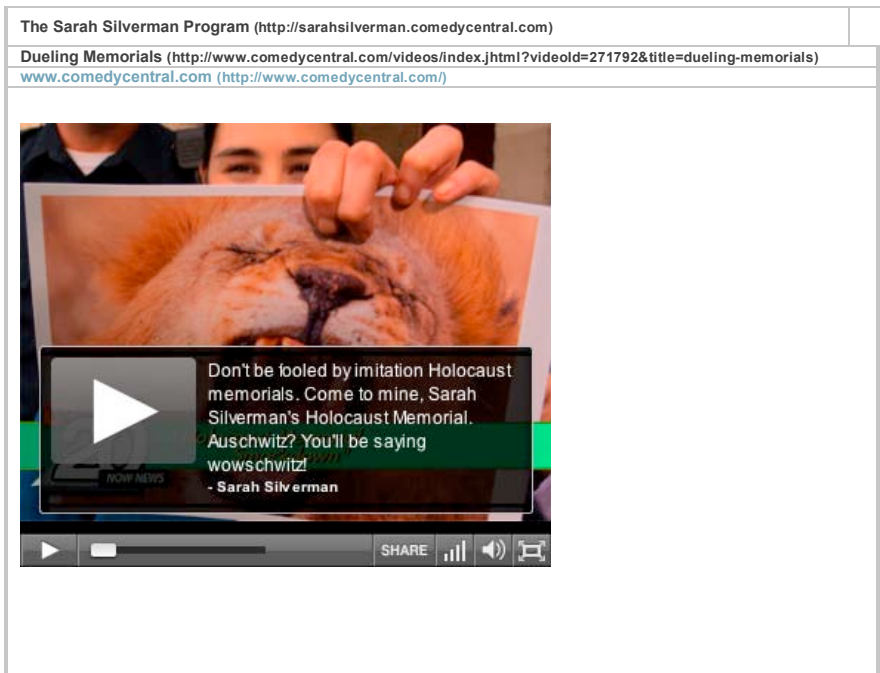
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Can the Holocaust Be a Television Sitcom? Wowschwitz, Comedy Central's The Sarah Silverman Show, and How Taste Still Matters

Please go to <http://stevenalancarr.pbworks.com/flowconference2010?mode=print> to read this position paper, where you can play the clips.

Layered and ironic references to the Holocaust in some American television sitcoms, particularly cringe-coms, are becoming as adept and sophisticated as the strategies some European art films have used to great critical acclaim in depicting the Holocaust. The original call for this Roundtable noted "the current cycle of reflexive sitcoms" deploying a variety of strategies, including reflexivity; mockumentary modes; ironic voice-over narration; self-referentiality; and the confounding of the pro-filmic by blurring the line between fictional and actual characters. The recent and ultimately last 2010 "Wowschwitz" episode of *The Sarah Silverman Program* (<http://sarahblog.comedycentral.com/>) on Comedy Central certainly demonstrates the series' penchant for the absurd and over-the-top treatment of sacred cow subjects. At the same time, though, the episode typifies, arguably in more extreme tonalities, what American television is doing and already has done to depict the Holocaust. Furthermore, these strategies get hailed when they appear in European art films. When sitcoms use them to comment on the Americanization of the Holocaust, they seem to elude serious scholarly attention.

"Wowschwitz" involves Sarah and her real-life sister Laura Silverman competing with one another in a "Holocaust Memorial Smackdown." While Laura's commemoration features a relatively tasteful gold plaque memorializing victims of the Holocaust, Sarah's memorial will be a fun event, with the unveiling of a "Holocaust Erection... a real word for a real thing," a genuine Holocaust survivor (who turns out to be a Nazi), a lion, and a dunk tank with a "sexy Hitler."



While the episode does indeed go further than most, including ones from Silverman's own program, it does what television already has been doing in its treatment of the Holocaust. In using a variety of reflexive strategies, the show's excessive bad taste is merely a pretext to offer a more serious critique of popular media. That critique isn't far off from the one that consistently gets leveled against popular representations of the Holocaust: commercial entertainment tastelessly exploits the Holocaust as it seemingly shows reverence both for the event and for its self-aggrandizing mediated representations capitalizing

on this event. The implicit critique of these shows seems to point out that what popular culture ultimately takes seriously is itself. Any number of cringe-coms have dealt with this pseudo-reverence before, including the 2004 "Survivor" episode from HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, or the "Kate Winslet" episode from the BBC-HBO 2005

season of Extras. The 1994 Seinfeld Raincoats episode already had begun this trend in satirizing Schindler's List (Universal, 1993) ten (10) years earlier.



What is surprising is not that the sitcom has consistently addressed the Holocaust through oblique and sophisticated strategies. As Jeffrey Shandler's While American Watches has shown, television and before that radio have played important, early, yet relatively neglected roles in an American popular understanding of the Holocaust. Self-aware strategies to represent the Holocaust in sitcoms seem more like a logical progression in a long tradition of representation. Rather, what is surprising is that most of the scholarship on mediated representations of the Holocaust performs a lot of hand-wringing over superficial suffering depicted in Holocaust films before coming to the same conclusions that cringe-coms appear to have known at least since Seinfeld. In Sander Gilman's "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films" appearing in Critical Inquiry in 2000, he argues that comedic images in the 1999 film Life Is Beautiful serves as "our guarantee of the happy ending, the rescue of the child" (303). In contrast to films like the East German Jacob the Liar (1975) or the French Train of Life (1998), director Roberto Benigni fails to "self-consciously" use a set of strategies that distance the audience from "the heroic" (303).

By that standard, then, an episode like "Wowschwitz" from the Sarah Silverman Program uses self-conscious distance, not just from the heroic, but also from the artifice of Holocaust memorialization itself.

Like episodes from Curb Your Enthusiasm, Extras, and Seinfeld, "Wowschwitz" uses an excess of tastelessness in its references to the Holocaust to highlight the distance between the Holocaust itself and its highly mediated

representations. Taste thus ultimately marks important boundaries at multiple levels. While taste can mark the European art film from low- and middle-brow depictions of the Holocaust, self-conscious tastelessness is what marks the television sit-com from a mass culture that erodes, desensitizes, and trivializes Holocaust memory. These cringe-coms are more about the tastelessness of what is being done to the Holocaust, than they are about the Holocaust itself. In that respect, "Wowschwitz" has a lot in common with an ongoing scholarly and popular critique alleging an Americanization of the Holocaust, even if the adherents of that critique are unlikely to turn to the cringe-com for insight into the complexity of how popular culture actually depicts the Holocaust.

Original Proposal

This response continues the discussion following *Life Is Beautiful* (1997; Miramax, 1998), particularly with regard to Sander Gilman's "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films" that appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in 2000. The American sitcom's evolving narrative strategies deploying reflexivity, mockumentary modes, ironic voice-over narration, selfreferentiality, and the confounding of the pro-filmic all make this genre uniquely suited to address the Holocaust through laughter. The recent "Wowschwitz" episode in the final season of *The Sarah Silverman Show* on Comedy Central exemplifies the way in which the American situation comedy has historically addressed the Holocaust through humor, how this humor is distinct from the tradition of anti-fascist comedy from which *Life Is Beautiful* belongs, and how through a variety of ironic strategies self-consciously referencing taste and tastelessness, the television situation comedy may be closer to the oblique strategies European art films have used in eliciting "laughter as a means of representing the unrepresentable" (Gilman).

Original Call for The Sitcoms Have Become Self Aware, Flow Conference 2010, Austin TX, 1Oct. 2010

This roundtable will focus on the state of the sitcom in the U.S. How, for instance, do we account for the current cycle of reflexive sitcoms and their use of the moc[k]umentary mode (e.g. *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Modern Family*), narrators (e.g. *How I Met Your Mother*, *Scrubs*), self-reference (e.g. *Community*, *30 Rock*, *Party Down*), or the blurring of “reality” exemplified in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*'s seventh season finale? And how do successful sitcoms engage with sitcom history, format, generic conventions, etc? Respondents are encouraged to draw attention to shifts and/or continuities in the American sitcom. Topics might range from patterns of representation or narrative structure in the sitcom; network or cable programming strategies; performance styles; micro-taxonomies of irony or critical intertextuality.