

The Construction of Holocaust Memory by Means of Graphic Humor in Sergio Langer's book *Judíos*

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore nine frames from *Judíos (Jews)*, a book written by Argentinian graphic humorist Sergio Langer, first published in 2015. The corpus exploration was conducted considering how the image and the word (two systems that shape the dual language of comics) interact and complement each other to materialize meanings. As part of the methodological procedures, three categories were created to classify the frames: a. Jewish stereotypes, b. Everyday situations in concentration camps, c. Holocaust cultural products. Langer manages to make humor a powerful tool to depict the Shoah in an unconventional way. All in all, it seems undeniable that Sergio Langer's work beats any form of Jewish stereotypes and contributes to the construction of Holocaust memory.

Keywords: graphic humor, Holocaust representation, Holocaust memory, *Judíos*

1. Introduction

Sergio Langer is an Argentinian Jewish graphic humorist, whose style is undoubtedly unorthodox, sarcastic, acid and provoking. He is also an architect, who has been working as a cartoonist for more than thirty years now in different local media. In his work, we get to know different controversial characters who challenge the status quo concerning everyday life.

Judíos is indeed no exception: sarcasm and grotesque humor characterize every single frame. Illustrations offer new viewpoints about Judaism; some panels conspicuously depict situations before, during and after the Holocaust. Furthermore, there is something that makes this book different from any of his creations.

In this book, Langer manages to portray challenging and provocative images and caricatures about Jewish life, compiled in one single text. Some of his panels are autobiographical. He was born to a Jewish family fully acquainted with strong suffering:

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his mother (and his mother's siblings) survived the Holocaust; he grew up feeling like "a victim" and drawing served as some sort of self-defense.² His drawings allow the reader to learn about Jewish life during and after the Holocaust. What is more, they are an invitation to reflect on Jewish identity (focusing on varied Jewish stereotypes), orthodox and secular Judaism, political issues (Israeli affairs in the Middle East), racism and discrimination, to mention some of the topics depicted on the 352 pages of his work.

The aim of this article is to explore nine frames representing Jewish stereotypes, events in concentration camps and Holocaust cultural products to reflect on how Langer's work succeeds in making the reader reflect on this genocide by means of original stylistic resources. He may be claimed to be the only Argentinian graphic humorist who has been fully devoted to maintaining the Shoah memory through his assiduous artwork.

This article is structured as follows: First, some central ideas regarding humor will be tackled: the role of humor, new modes for constructing Holocaust memory and a review of Jewish stereotypes in Nazi Germany. Second, the methodology and corpus selection criteria will be presented. Third, the corpus exploration will be conducted to eventually share findings and discussion. Last, conclusions and references will follow.

2. The Role of Humor

To start with, humor is thought to be closely connected to one's sense of selfhood:

Humor normally should have the function of preserving the sense of self. It is an expression of our uniquely human capacity to experience ourselves as subjects who are not swallowed up in the objective situation. It is the healthy way of feeling a "distance" between one's self and the problem, a way of standing off and looking at one's problem with perspective. (May 1953, 42)

This healthy aspect is also based on the fact that whenever one laughs they are not (fully) dominated by fear or anxiety; consequently, the subject may distinguish himself from the outer objective world. This perspective reminds us of Freud's function of humor as a

² Mattio, Javier. "Me crié con eso de ser víctima." Article published in La Voz, 14/05/2015 retrieved from <https://www.lavoz.com.ar/ciudad-equis/sergio-langer-me-crie-con-eso-de-ser-victima-y-mi-defensa-era-el-dibujo/>

means to release excess energy or tension, and how humor is depicted as the highest defensive function since:

Unlike repression, it scorns to withdraw the content of the imagined idea connected to the distressing affect from conscious attention, and this is how it overcomes the automatism of defense; it brings this about by finding a means of withdrawing energy from the release of unpleasure already mobilized, and by discharging it, of transforming it into pleasure. (Freud [1960] 2003, 239)

Along the same lines, Herzog (2011) shares useful explanations in relation to the abominable humiliations and sufferings at the time of Nazi Germany. He posits that these atrocities were the subject of jokes and, surprisingly, the tellers were the Jews themselves (not unconcerned Germans or perpetrators) who used humor to try to keep emotionally distant from the imminent massacre. The author explains that “astonishingly, a number of these jokes were preserved by people who survived the Holocaust” (Herzog 2011, 167). Even, Herzog adds the use of black humor was not something unusual. For example, Coco Schumann, a German-Jewish jazz musician who survived Auschwitz, recalled that Jews in concentration camps used to tell jokes so as to cheer themselves up. What is more, Jews in Amsterdam may have probably known about the gas chambers, suggested by the following joke which refers to Abraham Asscher and David Cohen, the two heads of the Jewish Council in the occupied Dutch capital, often accused of being collaborators.

Asscher and Cohen are summoned to Nazi headquarters and told that the Jews are to be gassed. Asscher immediately asks, “Are you going to deliver the gas, or do you want us to take care of it?” (Herzog 2011, 172)

Besides the use of humor as a self-defense mechanism (which comprises black humor and self-directed humor), Ziv (1984, 1-80) describes four other categories. The first one is called “aggressive,” which concerns both the achievement of superiority and a suitable response to frustration. The second function relates to the sexual dimension. The third considers the social function. Last, the intellectual one.

When studying the role of humor in ghettos and concentration camps, Ostrower (2014, 7) explains that humor helped Jews maintain their self-respect and dignity besides being a healthy defense mechanism to deal with mortification. In addition, they resorted

to black humor to laugh at their own disgrace; for instance, Jews joked about the possibility of being turned into scented soap and also about the black smoke coming from the chimneys, as we can see in Moshe Oster's talk:

From the ramp you could see the crematorium, black smoke was coming out of the crematorium and we asked, "And what is this?" He said, "Here, fellows, you have an idea what this is, the greatest technique in the world. You see, you enter through these gates and you exit through the chimney." (Ostrower 2014, 10)

The author, who makes use of Ziv's five categories, also provides us with two more which contemplate humor about food and scatological humor. Regarding the first one, Ostrower (2014, 13) asserts that it should be understood as a defense mechanism; "food and recipes were associated with another reality, which the prisoners could only dream about." Concerning the second, she states that as sexual and scatological humor involve the same body parts; the purpose of these two categories may overlap. Apart from that, scatological humor emerges from elements such as "grotesqueness of defecation and urination, contact with feces, the awareness that a private function is being carried out publicly, the observation of these biological function" (Ostrower, 2014, 19). Lastly, scatological humor is also connected to the social function of humor. Prisoners were free to interact in the area of the latrine since the SS hardly ever went there.

To sum up, we count on different functions of humor. However, it seems that all types comprise a social dimension. Humor enhances social interaction; it contributes to group cohesion as it provides the subject with a sense of belonging. On these grounds, we may recall Bergson's depiction of laughter:

Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain. (...) Our laughter is always the laughter of a group. (...) Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification. (Bergson 1913, 5-8)

2.1. New Modes for Constructing Holocaust Memory

The Shoah still today raises the debate about its memory should be built and spread in order to prevent genocides and to combat different forms of racism and xenophobia.

The so-called “Holocaust memory” is regarded as a field of study, whereas the use of the plural “memories” comprises the varied narratives and multiple voices about the genocide. In other words, the different representations of the Holocaust may be considered as cultural products, conceived as memory producers, which contribute to the remembrance of the massacre and the maintenance of its memory.

One strong motive for the Holocaust memory construction was the need to make justice. From a legal standpoint, two crucial events have been thought to be of paramount importance: Nuremberg trials (1945-1946) and Adolf Eichmann’s trial (1961). However, their great significance would not mitigate the suffering and atrocities during the Holocaust.

As time goes by, the collective memory of the Holocaust will continue to evolve, owing to the multiple representations materialized by means of different semiotic modes³ (music, painting, theatre, comics, humor, etc.). Memories which are presumably detached from “the norm” are conceived as controversial.

Considering the above mentioned, the question that arises is the following: What is the norm? Presumably, a highly accepted proscription, part of a “Holocaust etiquette,” in the field of Holocaust studies which “dictates that anything pertaining to the Holocaust must be serious, must be reverential in a manner that acknowledges (and supports) the sacredness of its occasion” (Des Pres 1988, 278).

This answer implies a dichotomy: serious vs. trivial Holocaust memory representations. Alejandro Baer (2006) enlarges on this distinction. Presumably, we may encounter serious narratives, i.e., “cautious” depictions. On the other hand, there are other forms which are less conventional and, as expected, do not adhere to what should be said about the Holocaust. Hence, their disobedient nature makes them “trivial.” Coming back to the original question, the norm embraces moral and ethical issues. Some discourses

³According to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2021, 14-18), in the making of signs, different forms (‘signifiers’) such as color, perspective and line (among others) are used to realize meanings (‘signifieds’). Different representations make sign-makers choose forms to express what they may have in mind; these forms should be the most apt and plausible in a given context to make their messages maximally understandable. What is more, any semiotic mode has to have the capacity to form texts, complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they are produced.

seem to be more acceptable than others, which is indeed based on ideological grounds. The author argues that this classification is obsolete since there is no legitimate genre, language or tone to represent the Holocaust. Knowledge about the genocide should be spread for the sake of remembrance and maintenance of its memory. In this postmodern world, the youngest generations seem to be more open-minded, and hold pluralistic views of truth. So, alternative forms of representations should emerge for the sake of historical memory transmission.

Among alternative semiotic modes, laughter, the comic, cartoons, graphic humor, black humor are undoubtedly part of the list. As Des Pres (1988, 278-281) explains, humorous content and laughter seem to be more powerful and effective to canalize horror, generating some emotional distance and arousing resilience to atrocities and suffering; “laughter is life-reclaiming.”

2.2. A Review of Jewish Stereotypes in Nazi Germany

Within the field of cultural studies, it has commonly been affirmed that stereotypes impose a fixed, general image about a social group, hence portraying some sort of invariant identity. The etymology of the word “stereotype” implies the notion of “fixing” since, historically, it has been associated with the process of printing by means of a solid plate capable of duplicating any typography. Regarding its social use,

stereotyping consists of classifying all new experiences, and especially persons, using symbols learned in the past. These symbols consist of significant cues for classification. Important in this list of cues are race, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and others. Persons and situations are infinitely more complex than these simple cues will admit. (Zaleznik and Moment 1964, 35)

So, how could we relate these two notions? Identities are historically constructed by means of representations depicting the presumed characteristics of a certain community; they emerge from the interrelations between “self, other and the object-world” (Jovchelovitch 2007,76). Moscovici (1973, xiii), asserts that “social representations are systems of values, ideas and practices which enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.” Palese (2013) defines identity as a task for the world

demands from the individual a permanent and controversial change for identity in order to fit in. Simply put, identity is impervious to change, so it cannot be reduced to one unique and static self.

When social representations take the form of static and inert images they are referred to as stereotypes. Stereotypes serve the purpose to show one group's superiority making the other inferior. They are fully unreliable as they arise from an asymmetrical power relation and they typically focus on negative traits and behaviors.

Regarding Jews in Nazi Germany, the Nazis used caricatures as well as other forms of propaganda to depict Jews as monstrous, disfigured, fearsome creatures. The Nazi weekly tabloid *Der Stürmer* was in charge of disseminating these images, which were rooted in former stereotypes dating back to the fifteenth century. These hateful depictions were also spread by different other means, such as posters, newspapers, the radio, films, the art, etc.

Coming back to caricatures, these were highly exploited in the film industry. With respect to this, Baruj Gitlis (2008, pp. 99-114) provides us with a list of common stereotypes.

To start with, the Jew is the archenemy, i.e., the devil that embodies the evils of modernism, some sort of Antichrist. He is also the profaner of the pure race; the one would contaminate future generations by means of his poisonous blood and heritage.

These conceptualizations were materialized through a grotesque image: an aberrant hunched beast having a *disproportionate body* structure, with enormous feet and long hanging arms, with goggly eyes, very thick lips and a hooked prominent nose. This creature could rape an Aryan virgin, who was always represented with long blonde hair and white skin; the golden hair and whiteness of an Aryan woman was a contrast to the dark hair and obscure intention of the Jew. As part of the myriad of stereotypes, Gitlis also mentions the following portrayals: the foreigner, the arch-conspirator, the "Fat Cat" and the Bolshevik.

3. Methodology and Corpus Selection Criteria

A total of nine frames were analyzed considering the dual nature of the language of comics (made up of the word and the image), reflecting upon how these two systems may work in isolation or combine with each other to create narrative compositions. Different categories were created to classify the selected panels: a. Jewish stereotypes, b. Everyday situations in concentration camps, c. Holocaust cultural products.

Regarding the corpus selection criteria, these nine images were selected due to their high potential to illustrate each of the above-mentioned categories.

4. Corpus Exploration

4.1. Jewish Stereotypes



Figure 1: Protruding nose.

Figure 1 (Langer, 2015, 95) shows a conversation between two yellow stars that are mocking each other because of their enormous noses. In English, the exchange reads as follows:

Star A: Pal, you have such a “moishe” face⁴.

Star B answers: Look who’s talking!

The nose as a sign is meant to reinforce the stars’ Jewish condition, which is rather obvious considering their shape (they have six pointed edges). Historically, their color reminds us of the yellow badge Jews were obliged to wear throughout German-occupied Europe. In the Warsaw ghetto, Jews also wore a white armband with a blue star on their left arms. Jewish shops were also marked with the yellow Star of David. The star was

⁴ “Che” is a common interjection used in Argentina to address someone in an informal way. “Moishe” is highly used (especially among Jews) to refer to Jewish people.

meant to segregate Jews and to make them fully identifiable for their eventual deportation to camps.

In this scene the meaning of this sign (the nose) has been re-signified. It does not imply any sort of segregation or humiliation; it reinforces the self through the identification with the other, making this frame a suitable example of the social function of humor.

Figures 2 and 3 (Langer 2015, 123) portrait some sort of humor that challenges the moral values of ultra-Orthodox Judaism as a means of preserving the sense of self. Self-acceptance is self-liberation. And self-liberation defeats oppression, fear or anxiety.



Figure 2. It is God's will.⁵

⁵ "It's God's will." (The translation is mine.)



Figure 3: Lesbian, Hebrew, vegan.⁶

As shown in figure 3, three traits serve as some sort of identification and connote a sense of belonging. These women belong to the LHV movement, which may be interpreted as a parody of the well-known lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movements. To put it in a nutshell, the situations portrayed in both panels confront the religious status-quo.

Last but not least, figure 4 (Langer, 2015, 230) allows the reader to reflect on what a Jew is supposed to be like so as to be recognized as such. “You do not look like a Jew,” the man says. This linguistic expression should be understood by the reader since it is crucial for the interpretation of the message; the image in isolation may give rise to multiple interpretations absolutely farfetched from what is originally intended. What physical traits characterize a Jew? Probably, Langer’s shapeless alien cancels any suitable answer.

⁶ “Lesbian, Hebrew and vegan.” (The translation is mine.)



Figure 4: Not looking as a Jew.⁷

4.2. Everyday situations in concentration camps



⁷ “You do not look like a Jew.” (The translation is mine.)

Figure 5: You've gone mad!⁸



Figure 6: AAAAH!⁹

⁸ “Tell that faggot, Goering, on behalf of I-G. Farben, Siemens, Krupp, Bayer and Daimler Benz to stop killing Jews!” (The translation is mine.)

⁹ “Buchenwald, 1943. In many extermination camps, hundreds of SS officials got mad, committed suicide and threw themselves to the electrified fences to stop killing innocents.” (The translation is mine.)



Figure 7: Free our Jewish brothers!¹⁰

In the three panels, the situations portrayed happen in concentration camps. They display instances of distorted realities. At a glance, they may be regarded as ridiculous (not necessarily funny) since any reader with some knowledge about the Holocaust will immediately recognize that what is being manifested is not what really occurred.

Langer resorts to irony, which allows him to use language to signify the opposite, i.e. the depiction of fictional events or the distortion of (some aspects of) documented historical facts. Figure 5 (Langer, 2015, 21) can make us reflect on the crucial role that forced labor played in the wartime Nazi economy. Jews were brutally exploited as well as Poles, Soviet civilians and other victim groups in concentration camps. This exploitation, together with diseases and starvations, killed prisoners.

Regarding figure 6 (Langer, 2015, 22), in real life prisoners flung themselves onto the electrified fences:

¹⁰ "Amen. Free our Jewish brothers! With this motto Pope XII, leading a retinue of 300 Catholic bishops, visited Dachau on March 12th, 1942. This brave action caused the closure of the concentration camp and the cancellation of the extermination plan in the rest of Europe." (The translation is mine.)

Most of the suicides were committed in the first years of imprisonment, and the method of suicide most commonly used was hanging, although other methods included cutting blood vessels, poisoning, contact with electrified wire, or starvation. It is possible to differentiate two behaviors when committing suicide; impulsive behavior (contact with electrified barbed wire fences) or premeditated suicide (hanging up or through poison). (López-Muñoz and Cuerda-Galindo, 2016, 1)

In panel 7 (Langer, 2015, 24), Pope XII says, “free our Jewish brothers.” However, the Vatican remained silent on many occasions. What is more, Cornwell (2008) shows how Pacelli supported authoritarian regimes (such as Franco’s) and how he believed there was a strong link between Jews and Bolshevism. It is also worth mentioning that Pope XII’s image is indeed controversial, giving rise to opposite interpretations of his “silence.” Marchione (2002, 14) mentions, for example, Miccoli’s view (Church History professor at the University of Trieste) who states that the motivation for the Pope’s silence may be found in the Vatican’s interpretation of the war, in the rapport between German Catholicism and Nazism, in the Vatican’s attitude concerning the dangers of Communism, in the occupation of Rome, as well as in its position on anti-Semitism and the racial laws. Presumably, the Vatican remained impartial for the sake of peace (to play the role of mediator among the parties and to represent a sign of unity among all Christians at the conclusion of the war). What is more, some records would show how the Catholic Church helped many Jews before the outbreak of World War II.

4.3. Holocaust Cultural Products



Figure 8: Lanzmann's Shoah vs. Anna Frank, the musical.

Figure 8 (Langer, 2015, 251) reads as follows:

Star A: Hey, pal! Have you seen Claude Lanzmann's Shoah? That documentary that lasts nine hours?

Star B: It's such a bore... "Anna Frank," the musical, is what I liked best.



Figure 9: Shoá 3 (Langer, 2015, 253)

Both panels clearly affirm that “cautious” representations are not truly effective in the era of entertainment and constant change. Younger generations demand different products. Cultural changes throughout time have (re)created different genres and multimodal languages which are highly consumed by the younger generations. Modern societies demand representations which could adapt to changing times. What is literally shown in

both figures is that, in the twenty-first century, a young adult will not choose Lanzmann's Shoah as the very first option to learn about the Holocaust. Consequently, those apparently "less serious" genres are likely to prevail.

5. Conclusion

Langer does not accept norms; he disregards etiquettes. The analysis has shown that his unique style makes valuable contributions: the possibility of beating stereotypes by the re-signification of certain signs, the demystification of some presumably untouchable truths or depictions which may verge on the ridiculous or introduce counterfactual realities.

Langer's technique functions as a secret passage: we have access to the unsaid (i.e., what is implied) only by questioning what is literally portrayed. An original way to catch the attention of those readers tired of mainstream Shoah representations.

His stylistic resources offer the possibility to find out and reflect on Jewish identities and how they have been subjected to constant change. Moreover, Langer manages to make humor a powerful tool to represent his own beliefs and perceptions of the genocide, which may cause the reader to either laugh at or bluntly reject what is being meant in each case. In whatever case, Langer's provoking work will remind the reader about the Holocaust, keeping its memory alive.

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