



Francesca Recchia Luciani
and Claudio Vercelli (eds.),
Pop Shoah?
Immaginari del genocidio ebraico

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by Tommaso Pepe

The publication of this acute and thought-provoking book, *Pop Shoah? Immaginari del genocidio ebraico*, edited by Francesca Recchia Luciani and Claudio Vercelli, brings an original and stimulating perspective to the Italian critical debate on the memory of the Jewish extermination. The contributions collected in the volume cover a significant range of cultural products and practices – from movies to third-generation memories, from literary texts to the so-called *viaggi della memoria* – and outline a detailed exploration of the imaginary surrounding the Jewish genocide in Italy's contemporary popular culture. At the same time, *Pop Shoah?* draws to attention the existence of a problematic nexus between the increasingly omnipervasiveness of the memory of Auschwitz in media and public discourse, and the risk that such “media overexposure” might implicitly result in a semantic emptying of the authentic ethical and historical meanings of the genocide. Recognizing the “inflationary effect” deriving from the growing number of references to the genocide, often scattered among a multiplicity of unrelated contexts, *Pop Shoah?* invites to a critical reflection on the potential side-effects of this excess of media exposure.



Against this background of memory “inflation”, fueled by an incessant multiplication of uses and abuses of images and narratives relating to the genocide, the essays in the volume embark on a “deconstruction of the cultural industry of memory” born as a result of this hyper-saturation (9). Marked by a wide heterogeneity of theoretical approaches and methodologies, *Pop Shoah?* addresses relevant examples of this media overexposure. The essays by Claudio Gaetani, Damiano Garofalo, and Fiorenza Loiacono investigate the propagation of Holocaust-like tropes across the media semiosphere prompted by two prominent master narratives of the genocide, Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* and Anne Frank’s *Diary*, this latter read through the deforming adaptation of George Steven’s movie (1959). Elena Pizzaroli’s contribution proposes a critical reappraisal of the recent growth of Holocaust-related ‘dark tourism’. Looking more specifically at the Italian context, other chapters in the book confront the issue of the banalization of memory and address the *viaggi della memoria* (Bruno Maida), the experience of third-generation Italian Jews (Raffaella Di Castro), and the problematic role that the Shoah acquired in school education (Antonio Brusa).

The thematic diversity of the contributions speaks to the innovative nature of the project undertaken by Luciani and Vercelli. The richness of the interpretive tools set in place by the editors might suggest to further extend this “critical deconstruction” to other significant ‘pop’ transmogrifications of the imaginaries of the Jewish genocide that appeared in Italian culture. On the one hand, for instance, the popular movie by Roberto Benigni, *Life is Beautiful*, (1997) as well as the controversial cinematic transposition of Giorgio Perlasca’s life story directed by Alberto Negri, *Perlasca, un eroe italiano* (2002), have been both criticized for their sugarcoated depiction of the tragedy of the persecution. On the other, in a recent fictional novel Carlo Greppi tried to explore the imprinting that such ‘media memory’ exerts on the mind of young generations, through an immersion into the semiosphere of its ‘pop’ representations, ranging from Tarantino’s *Inglorious Basterds* to mainstream music (Carlo Greppi, *Non restare indietro*, 2016). Looking further backward, uses and abuses of the tragedy of the camps have proved to be widely employed in the cinematic narratives of Liliana Cavani (*The Night Porter*, 1974) and Lina Wertmüller (*Seven Beauties*, 1975).

The reflections gathered in *Pop Shoah?* offer then a valuable starting point to critically assess dynamics and consequences of this increasing spectacularization. The title itself of the volume, with the terminological hybridization suggested by the idiosyncratic formula ‘pop Shoah’, provides an effective tool for exposing the growing “*reductio ad spectaculum*” and the “cognitive and semantic drift” produced by the uncontrollable flow of images relating to the Nazi crimes flooding the media culture (145). However, the goal pursued by the editors of the volume is not to present to the reader another critique of trivializing representations of the genocide. As pointed out by Vercelli, “pop Shoah is not a conceptual category, nor a concept relating to aesthetic critique”: the purpose of this critical operation is rather an attempt to identify “a bundle of social phenomena” relating to the “public fruition of the main historical event” of the last century, an exploration of the “multifarious aspects of reception and



collective use" of meanings, events and representations that refer to the extermination of the European Jewry (174).

The conceptual core of *Pop Shoah?* points thus to a disciplinary domain that one could be tempted to call 'semiology of history': a study of the social and cultural factors that determine the construction of meaning of historical events. The analysis undertaken by Luciani and Vercelli aims thus at exposing the pervading presence of a cultural "dispositive" by which the interpretation of the past and the transmission of its memory occur in complete disconnection from a full appreciation of its historical "truth" (179). Attempts at a real understanding of the historical factuality of the genocide become in this context irrelevant, as long as that past is incessantly and acritically replicated on media screens and affective identification replaces intellectual comprehension.

In light of this critical perspective, the editors point out the risk for the Shoah of becoming – if it has not already become – an empty "simulacrum": a "reconstruction that refers to nothing necessarily objective" (179). A purely symbolic referent destined to be disseminated in a completely decontextualized and ultimately meaningless media landscape. Devoid of its reality and historicity, reduced to be an empty signifier and a metaphor for "a total, radical and even metahistorical evil", this simulacrum remains open to only a single modality of knowledge, that of affective identification.

On the other hand, if the historical meanings on which that identification should be grounded become superfluous, such affective identification is prone to deviate toward the opposing and symmetrical extremes of "sacralization" and negationism (181). This is the critical territory charted by the essays collected in the volume, that undoubtedly brings a much-welcomed and inspiring contribution to the Italian debate over the memory of the Jewish genocide.

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