"Ketchup Is the Auschwitz of Tomatoes": Humor and the Collective Memory of Traumatic Events

Eyal Zandberg
School of Communication, Netanya Academic College, Netanya 42365, Israel

This study explores the interrelations between humorous texts and the memory of traumatic events through an analysis of skits aired on Israeli television that are related to Holocaust memory. The study presents a typology of these skits indicating an evolutionary development: from the use of humor to criticize Holocaust remembrance to the use of Holocaust memory to create humorous effects. Contextualizing these findings in the fields of media memory and trauma theory, the study argues that this evolutionary development challenges the hegemonic commemorative discourse of the Holocaust: while commemorative discourse plays a distinctive role in performing cultural trauma, the media’s humorous discourse conveys a sacrilegious viewpoint and thus can play a vital role in recuperating from it.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Humor, Holocaust Commemoration, Cultural Trauma, Television Skits.

doi:10.1111/cccr.12072

The title of this article is taken from a popular personal column written by the Israeli writer Uzi Weil and published during the 1990s in the local weekly newspaper Ha’ir (The City). The column presented fictive quotations from invented characters that mocked Israeli culture. The quotation “Ketchup is the Auschwitz of tomatoes” was attributed to the “Chairman of the Tomato Growers’ Association” and was followed by his apology:

First, I did not compare the Holocaust to ketchup. I said ketchup is like the Holocaust … Second, I am a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, so it is inconceivable that I would disrespect the Holocaust. And third, if anyone has the

Corresponding author: Eyal Zandberg; e-mail: zandeyal@netanya.ac.il
right to disrespect the Holocaust it is me, because I am a grandchild of a Holocaust survivor. But I am not comparing. How can one compare? It was horrible, the Holocaust. And besides, what is this attack? What, is this the Gestapo?

Uzi Weil aimed his sarcastic satire at the Israeli establishment, which frequently uses the memory of the Holocaust to interpret current events, but at the same time criticizes others when they make such comparisons. This text encapsulates the dilemmas regarding the use of humor in relation to the collective memory of traumatic events: on the one hand stand those who call for restricted discourse in order to avoid disrespectful representations that might lead to the trivialization of the memorialization of the trauma, and, on the other hand, those who wish to probe the limits of representation (Freidlander, 1992) and are constantly looking for new ways to deal with the familiar subject.

This study explores the interrelations between humorous texts and the memory of traumatic events through the analysis of skits related to Holocaust memory that were aired on Israeli television. My main argument, following the theory of Cultural Trauma (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, Alexander, & Butler Breese, 2011), is that some of these texts can play a vital role in the process of recovering from the collective memory of traumatic events.

For many years, the Holocaust and its commemoration were considered sacrosanct in Israeli culture, and humorous treatment of the subject taboo. In this study, I argue that since the 1990s there has been an evolutionary development of the use of humorous skits on television and in other media in connection with the Holocaust, and I suggest a 4-phase typology of this process, following the first, “taboo,” period. In the second phase, humor was used in order to explore and criticize Holocaust commemoration; in the third, humor about Holocaust memory was used to comment on other social fields; and in the fourth, Holocaust memory itself is being used to create humor. Holocaust memory, once taboo, is now ordinary and acceptable raw material for laughter. I argue that this shift indicates a change in society’s collective memory, one that advocates a “normalization” of the traumatic memory of the Holocaust.

Although this article focuses on the use of humor dealing with Holocaust memory in the Israeli media, it argues that similar trends and changes may be traced in other cultural fields, such as literature and the Internet, and in other commemorative discourses, such as the memorialization of fallen soldiers and the remembrance of terror attacks. The evolution of humorous television texts relating to Holocaust memory is explored here through 3 analytical points of view: the sociological-generational development of Holocaust memory; the medium of popular culture and television; and the genre of humor, as further explained below.

The historical-sociological point of view deals with the development of Holocaust commemoration in Israel from the early years of the State, when the official Zionist view dominated public discourse. Changes in this view began to occur with the
increase in alternative voices following events such as the Eichmann trial (1961) and the Six Day War (1967) (Segev, 1991; Zertal, 2005), and the influence of the survivors’ children, known as the “second generation” (in the 1980s) (Wardi, 1992). This article traces the contemporary dynamics of this point of view by focusing on the role of the Israeli “third and fourth generations” as rising and significant present-day voices.

The second outlook involves the conflict between popular cultural practices and the conventions of Holocaust remembrance. Holocaust representation has been investigated extensively, and since the 1990s there has been a growing interest in researching Holocaust representation in the various genres of popular media. This interest was sparked by a number of works of popular culture that aroused considerable intellectual and public discourse. The television miniseries Holocaust and Art Spiegelman’s comic graphic novel Maus mark the beginning of this trend (Des Pres, 1988). But the leading cultural event responsible for bringing the question of Holocaust representation in popular culture to the forefront was Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film Schindler’s List (Loshitzky, 1997), and a few years later, in 1998, discussion was intensified by Roberto Benigni’s film Life is Beautiful. Following these 2 films, public discourse became much more open to recognizing the central role that popular culture plays in the shaping of collective memory.

The third point of view deals with the problematic relationship between content (the Holocaust) and form (humor). Some critics, mainly in reaction to Benigni’s film (Gilman, 2000; Niv, 2000), have expressed concern and even outrage at the use of the rhetoric of humor to represent the Holocaust. These critics argue that the incongruous, ambivalent, and disruptive characteristics of this genre are inadequate to deal with the Holocaust. Others, however, claim that comic representations are more effective in repudiating horror because, unlike tragedy, they do not accept what has come to pass (Des Pres, 1988). In other words, laughter is a rebellion against the given (Rovner, 2002). This outlook raises ethical as well as esthetic questions, and illustrates the radical changes that are taking place in the collective memory of the Holocaust. This study focuses on the use of humor because it is a subject too often slighted both in media studies and memory studies. Furthermore, its ambivalent and polysomic nature makes it possible for it to be part of mainstream prime-time television and, at the same time, to incorporate subversive texts. This unique positioning makes these texts a good indication of covert trends and changes in society’s collective memory.

Using cultural trauma theory (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, 2002; Eyerman et al., 2011), I suggest that the traditional commemoration plays a distinctive role in performing cultural trauma. It blurs the distinctions between the (traumatic) past events and the current sociopolitical situation, and thus it plays a part in acting out the trauma (LaCapra, 2001). The humorous texts, on the contrary, challenge this discourse: By asserting that Holocaust memory can become just more raw material for comic effect, they play a part in working through the traumatic memories.
Theoretical framework: Collective recollection, Holocaust memory, and television humor

Media, memory, and media memory
Collective memory studies postulate that every community develops its own memories of the past, and that these memories mark its boundaries. As suggested by Halbwachs (1951/1992), collective memory defines the relationships between the individual and society and enables the community to preserve its self-image and transfer it over time. Later research (Olick & Robbins, 1998; Zelizer, 1995) has advanced Halbwachs's work in various ways, theorizing the fundamental features of social memory.

Among the many mnemonic signifiers in modern national societies, the media constitute the most prevalent site of collective recollection (Huyssen, 2000). The rise of mass culture and mass politics have both led to a situation in which the right to narrate the past is no longer reserved for academic and political elites. Nowadays, major historical events gain their public meanings not only through academic and state-sponsored interpretations but also through the media. The intricacies of “media memory” (Kitch, 2005)—the systematic exploration of collective pasts that are narrated by the media, through the use of the media and about the media (Neiger, Meyers, & Zandberg, 2011a) — have been discussed in various ways and in relation to a variety of media, such as daily newspapers (Zelizer, 1992), magazines (Kitch, 2005), television (Edgerton & Rollins, 2001; Shandler, 1999), radio (Meyers & Zandberg, 2002; Neiger, Meyers, & Zandberg, 2011b), and the new media (Hoskins, 2011; Reading, 2011).

In the process of shaping collective memory—an ongoing process that involves political, cultural, and sociological confrontations as different interpretations compete for their place in history (Sturken, 1997)—the media play a distinctive role. On the one hand, they serve as a platform or an arena for the sociocultural struggle; on the other hand, they are also actors in this competition and perceive themselves as the authoritative storytellers of society (Zandberg, 2010).

Thus, 3 processes occurred simultaneously: the rise of the narrative-interpretative approach to historiography, which undermined the authority of historians (White, 1973); the expansion of collective memory research; and the increasing awareness of popular culture as a dominant memory agent. Historian Shapira (1996) has described the resulting situation as a paradox: Although more archives are being opened and more information is in the hands of historians, historians actually have less power to shape the past. Rather, cinema and television have become the authoritative tellers of the past and the shapers of public memory. This situation raises ethical as well as esthetic dilemmas when Holocaust memory is dealt via popular media outlets.

Holocaust memory, popular culture, and humor
One can point to 4 areas of tension between the characteristics of products of popular culture and the conventions of Holocaust representation. First, popular culture is considered as part of the “cultural industry” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972/1994). As such, these representations are by definition circumscribed by the economic
and ideological tenets of the cultural industry, whose primary values are those of entertainment and spectacle. Second, there is a conflict between the concept of the Holocaust as a unique event and the standardized nature of popular cultural production. The mere fact that television shows are always part of a flow of entertainment that is frequently interrupted by commercials necessarily secularizes any representation of sanctified subjects such as the Holocaust (Meyers, Zandberg, & Neiger, 2009). Third, the main virtue of popular culture products is that they do not challenge the consumer. Their inherent superficiality conflicts with the notion that any representation of the Holocaust should command maximum attention and have a long-lasting impact on the viewers. Finally, to be profitable and please consumers, popular products are designed according to standard models that have been proven successful. It can be extremely problematic when popular culture products attempt to fit the telling of the Holocaust story into the usual dramatic conventions. As Loshitzky (1997) puts it in relation to Schindler’s List, the need to focus on one personalized story can blur the scope of the disaster; the need for conventional and active heroes contradicts the complex reality of the Holocaust; and the need for a “happy ending” contradicts the very essence of the Holocaust.

This cultural-historiographic discourse led to the development of several necessary conventions: The Holocaust must be represented in its totality, as a unique event; artistic representations of the Holocaust must be accurate; and the Holocaust should be approached as a solemn, even sacred, event (Des Pres, 1988, p. 217). These conventions challenge the givens of the genre of humor, which is perceived as an anti-authoritarian, rebellious, and ambivalent mode of communication (Lynch, 2002; Mintz, 1999).

The nature of humor tends to blur social boundaries and distinctions, transgressing and subverting every rule. Furthermore, according to philosopher John Morreall, humor has always been associated in Western religion and philosophy with the vices (2010). Morreall points to 3 primary objections to humor in the rationalist tradition: Humor is derived from a sense of superiority and is therefore derisive and hostile to society; humor is aligned with the incongruous and is therefore playful, nonserious, and threatening to rationality; and humor is irresponsible because it encourages disengagement from dealing with the world (Rovner, 2002, p. 7). Des Pres (1988), on the other hand, uses some of these same characteristics to defend humorous representations of the Holocaust. He highlights the liberating virtues and particular efficiency of humor: By putting things at a distance, humor permits a more active response. Des Pres finds comic representations more effective in revolt against terror because humor rejects reality, and is thus able to elicit more responsible-critical reactions to catastrophe.

Questions about the nature of human humor have been asked since ancient days. Over decades and centuries of research, 3 meta theories of the root of humor have evolved (Shifman, 2007, p. 189): the superiority theory, asserting that laughter is generated by feelings of superiority that people have over others; the release theory, suggesting that humor provides relief for mental and physical energy; and the
incongruity theory, claiming that humor derives from an unexpected encounter between 2 incongruent components or fields. The incongruity theory is especially relevant for this study’s analysis because it focuses on the texts themselves (Shifman, 2008), so that it is useful for understanding how television skits work, and because the Holocaust is considered an “event at the limits” (Freidlander, 1992), so that it cannot be compared to any other historical event and raises unique questions in regard to the cultural ways of its commemoration.

The development of Israeli Holocaust commemoration

As mentioned, one of the perspectives for understanding the evolution of humorous texts and Holocaust memory is the sociological-generational development of this discourse. During its early years, Israel’s public Holocaust discourse was dominated by official voices and was utilized as a political and educational tool: The leaders of the young State needed to emphasize the connection between the State of Israel and the Holocaust to justify Zionist ideology. Thus, the official Israeli Remembrance Day is called “Memorial Day for the Holocaust and Heroism.”

Most researchers identify the first turning point in Israeli Holocaust commemoration as the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 in Jerusalem (Ofer, 1996; Pinchevski & Brand, 2007). The nation’s leaders considered the trial as an educational tool. It was the first time that the Israeli public was exposed to the intense, continuous testimonies of Holocaust survivors (Pinchevski & Liebes, 2010) that were dominated not by stories of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising or the heroism of Jewish partisans, but by “ordinary” Jewish victims and survivors of the Holocaust. The blurring of the previous dichotomy between Zionist Israelis and Holocaust victims became evident after the Yom Kippur War (1973), which symbolized the emergence of a new Israeli identity, one more aware of its own vulnerability and more open and empathetic with Holocaust victims and survivors (Zerubavel, 1995). The major shift in Israeli Holocaust commemoration during the 1980s was the growing emphasis on the question of Holocaust representation. This shift was the result of several factors: the aging of the survivors, which focused public attention on the need to preserve their testimonies; an internal critical discourse about the history, historiography, and memory; and, finally, a growing interest in questions of representation, as part of an international trend (Holtzman, 1992).

The Holocaust remains an enduring influence on Israeli society and culture, and for many Israelis it is still a vibrant force in their lives and imaginations, a pivotal event that shapes their Jewish-Israeli identity (Ofer, 2009), but this influence has been altered over the years in 3 significant ways. Holocaust discourse has gradually shifted from consisting of constant discussions of the historical events to increasingly emphasizing Holocaust memory and commemoration. Holocaust memory has also become more privatized (Bresheeth, 1997). Finally, Holocaust discourse has extended beyond the once well-defined borders of official remembrance days and infiltrated everyday Israeli life (Meyers & Zandberg, 2002). Indeed, the Holocaust continues to function as a filter through which Israelis interpret issues such as atrocities and wars around the world, as well as Israel’s foreign policy and domestic issues (Zuckerman, 1993).
Analysis: Television humor and Holocaust memory—An evolutionary typology

In order to find the relevant skits from popular television shows, I looked in the archive of Israel’s most popular newspaper (Yedioth Aharonoth) for public debates in Israel about the conjunction between Holocaust memory, humor, and television. This search led me to over 70 news articles, some of which guided me to relevant television shows and even to specific sketches. The skits themselves were deconstructed, and the characters, language, and issues raised were analyzed. Throughout the study, congruity theory is the basic tool for exploring the source of incongruities in the various texts, for constructing the typology of the humoristic texts and for exposing the views of the writers of these texts in relation to issues of society’s collective memory.

As mentioned above, the use of humor in regard to Holocaust recollection was first apparent in the Israeli media in the 1990s. Until then, Holocaust memory had been considered sacrosanct and held a unique status in Israeli media and culture. This process created preconditions for authorship only for the “right” people who could tell the “right” stories (Zandberg, 2010), and, thus, to the construction of a discourse dominated by a “redemptive narrative” (LaCapra, 2001). One can mark the first attempt to challenge that conception in television in the debate over the broadcasting of the movie Shoa Tova (Good Holocaust), which served as a “foot in the door” for later broadcasts.

The movie, directed by Orna Ben-Dor, is an adaptation of a book by the same name written by Holocaust survivor Gavriel Dagan. The story is about a Holocaust survivor who, on his way to lecture on Holocaust Memorial Day about his experience during the Holocaust, sees a wounded dog and takes it with him. At the end of the evening, a young girl pets the dog and asks: “What should we call her? Maybe Shoa?” And while continuing to caress the dog she says: “Tova. Shoa Tova” (“Good [dog]. Good Holocaust”).

The public television channel (then the only television channel in Israel) refused to broadcast the movie, claiming that Israeli television could not broadcast a movie containing the phrase “good Holocaust.” Only after the intervention of the Supreme Court was the movie finally aired. In the public debate over the issue, the 2 main points of view were articulated that have dominated similar debates ever since. On the one hand is the position of well-known Holocaust survivors, who see themselves as having exclusive authority in shaping collective memory and argue against any trivialization or secularization of the memory of the traumatic event; on the other hand are artists like Dagan (himself a survivor) who insist that their intention is to explore new ways of representing the very familiar issues, in order to avoid clichés.

Using humor to criticize Holocaust collective memory

The most popular examples of the use of humor to criticize Israeli Holocaust memory can be found in skits produced for the satiric television show HaHamishia Hakamarit (“The Chamber Quintet”),1 which criticized the politicization and commercialization of Holocaust memory, as well as the dominance of media memory over the historical
events (Zandberg, 2006). These skits created memorable characters, like the “Israeli
delegates” who in an athletic competition held in Germany ask the German starter to
allow the Israeli runner to begin the race a few meters ahead of the others, arguing
“Haven’t the Jewish people suffered enough?” Another skit created the son of Holo-
caust survivors attempting to become a painter or violinist because, as a postal worker,
he does not fit the media stereotype of the “second generation.” This highly praised
and influential show expressed shrewd criticism of the saturation of Holocaust mem-
ory in Israeli culture and public life.

In all of these skits, it is the incongruity between Holocaust memory and every-
day issues that creates the humor. By highlighting incongruity, the skits both criticize
the (ab)use of Holocaust memory for political or economic goals and suggest that
Holocaust memory is not ordinary but has a unique status in culture. Thus, the show
represents the complex relations between humor, memory, and a critical viewpoint.
On the one hand, the show criticizes the traditional commemoration; on the other
hand, in spite of the use of the rhetoric of criticism and the genre of humor, the show’s
creators actually follow the commemorative conventions indicated by Des Pres.

Another illuminating example can be seen in the program HaRetzua (“The
Leash”), aired on a cable comedy channel, with the format of a fictional talk show
featuring a failing host and caricatured guests. The final episode, the last in the series,
differs from the others. After the host announces that this is the final show, there is
a knock on the door and a group of “Nazi soldiers” enters the studio and informs the
host and his guests that now that they have finally been found they are all going to
be shot. The host is confused and says: “but the war is over, you were beaten and we
are now in Israel. We have our own state and army.” The Nazi officer explains that
these are all illusions and this is a common phenomenon among people who were
in hiding for a long time: “they start to imagine that everything is well and they live
in freedom.” He urges them to look outside and when they go to the window they
realize he is right. The host begs them to let him finish the show, and they do. The
series ends with a clip in which Nazis kill off the show’s entire cast of characters.

It seems as if the writers of the show concretized Israeli sociopolitical discourse
that is saturated with Holocaust memory. In this discourse, there is always a “current
Hitler,” whether Yasser Arafat during the 1980s (Ofer, 1996), Saddam Husain during
the 1990s (Zuckerman, 1993), or Iranian leader Mahmud Ahmadinejad nowadays,
and Israelis are constantly facing the threat of “another genocide.” Such discourse
weaves Holocaust memory into the current Israeli situation, blurring the distinctions
between past and present. Hence, the show criticizes the national discourse that uses
memories of traumatic events to stretch time conceptions and leads society to live
in “past continues” time, in which past events continue in the present (Zandberg,

Using humor and Holocaust memory to criticize other sociocultural fields
The first stage in the use of humor to criticize Holocaust remembrance (the second
phase) involved the search by creators for new ways to relate to a familiar subject,
and the use of humor was directed—mainly as criticism—inward, to the field of Holocaust commemoration itself. The second stage was directed outward: in the third phase, humor and Holocaust discourse were now “convenient” tools for writers with which to look critically at other fields in society and culture. Because the Holocaust is considered in Israeli culture an “event at the limits” of history, it is a useful device: Almost any subject that is integrated with Holocaust memory discourse can create incongruity and thus can lead to humorous effects.

In the television show “Eretz Nehederet” (“A Wonderful Country”), one of the most popular programs in recent years, there have been several skits relating to Holocaust remembrance. One skit presents a couple at a travel agency looking for a vacation destination. One possibility after another is excluded because it has been declared dangerous by the Israeli foreign minister and the National Security Council. Finally, after disqualifying the Sinai desert, Turkey, and the Far East, the travel agent offers the couple the perfect place: “It is in classical Europe, very secure and with no threat of terror attacks.” The skit ends with the couple strolling near the famous gate and fences of Auschwitz, romantic music in the background, admiring the security of the place with its barbed wire and watchtowers and celebrating their anniversary. In this sketch, Holocaust memory discourse and humor are used to criticize the political isolation of Israel and Israelis and the numerous travel warnings issued by the Israeli National Security Council.

A skit from the eighth season of the show integrates comic satire with aspects of reality television shows. The sketch’s main character is a casting director who auditions (real) people who think that they are auditioning for a new reality show. In the first part of the sketch, he asks them to give their qualifications as potential show participants, and most of them reveal their cynicism, cruelty, and ambition. In the second part, the director outlines the show: after declaring that it is “a new format, from Germany, that was very successful all across Europe,” he shows them a model of a concentration camp and ends with “the first prize is six million.” None of the interviewees, still ignorant of the fact that they are participating in a satirical sketch, becomes confused or embarrassed; all of them flatter the casting director about the show’s idea and explain why they should be chosen to take part in it. The skit thus uses Holocaust memory and humor to look critically at the attraction of people to reality shows and the lack of any constraint or judgment in their desire for “fame.” In an interview, the editor of the show expressed his shock that even after they were informed that there was no such show and that they were part of a satire, none of those “interviewed” expressed disapproval or asked to be cut from the sketch.

The humorous effects in the third phase derive from the incongruity between Holocaust memory and everyday cultural fields. But, as in the first phase, the humorous integration of the security of Israelis around the world or reality shows with Holocaust memory through the use of satire again emphasizes the traditional narrative that Holocaust memory is unique and demands different treatment.
Using Holocaust discourse to create humor

The fourth phase in the evolution of the interrelations between humorous skits and Holocaust remembrance represents a fundamental change of direction. While in the first phase, as discussed above, media writers used humor to look at Holocaust memory; in the current phase, they use Holocaust discourse to create humor. Holocaust memory has become (just) another subject, additional “raw material.” This is not simply another evolutionary phase, as I shall show: This shift marks an essentially different way of relating to Holocaust remembrance discourse. Furthermore, the skits from this phase are taken from less regarded shows; they are not critical satire but rather “low-brow” entertainment shows. It is these examples that have the potential for allowing recovery from collective traumatic memories.

One of the sketches from the television show Lo Lifnei Ha’Yeladim (“Not in Front of the Children”) presents a couple on a romantic date in a coffee house. The man asks the woman, Judith, why she is staring at him, and she tells him that he reminds her of someone but she cannot figure out whom. She dismisses his suggestion that she is thinking of Robert Redford (“Girls always told me that”), and changes the subject of the conversation. He accepts her invitation to taste her chocolate mousse, and a bit of it gets smeared above his mouth, like a small mustache. The woman grabs her bag in panic and screams: “Now I know who you remind me of!” In a low-angle camera shot, the man stands still and shouts: “Where are you running? Judith! Judith!”

Another comic Television show, Ha’Haverim Shel Naor (“Naor’s Friends”), focuses on a group of 5 friends in Tel Aviv, all singles in their 20s. In one episode, the new girlfriend of the show’s protagonist, Naor, has been responsible for distancing him from his friends and for changing his lifestyle. In a short clip from the episode, we see how she dominates the hero’s everyday life: She draws him into doing yoga and sports instead of hanging out with his friends, and she redecorates his apartment, transforming it from a macho-bachelor apartment into an old-fashioned, unstylish one. The choice of soundtrack for this clip is most unusual, although the song itself is familiar to nearly all Israeli adults: it is the anthem of the Jewish Partisans who fought the Nazis during World War II, and the main theme of the lyrics is to never lose hope, even in the face of death and terror. The humorous effect of the skit is due to the incongruity between the song and its associations with the ultimate darkest times, and the everyday situation of a new girlfriend. The humor is not used to make a statement, but purely as a means to create laughter.

This phase of using Holocaust memory discourse to create humorous effects is evident not only in prescripted and edited shows but in improvised shows and live broadcasts as well. In one of the shows of Moadon Laila (“Night Club”), for example, in which a panel of comedians hosts a celebrity and discusses various issues, the guest was Israeli radio and television presenter Kobbi Meidan. The panel revealed that as a boy Meidan had played the violin, and they surprised him by bringing out an instrument and asking him to play something. While everyone around him cheered and danced, Meidan naively played a song he remembered from childhood—“Our town is burning,” a lament written in 1938 and rarely performed outside of
commemorative ceremonies for the Holocaust. In the following program, they hosted the actor Rami Hoiberger who, reacting to a news clip picturing a young girl wearing a red coat, shouted: “Hey, it’s the girl from Schindler’s List! Run, little girl! Hide from the Holocaust!”

The episode exemplifies the current stage of the evolutionary development of the use of humor: What began as a self-reflective critical look at Holocaust memory, and later developed into an exploration of other cultural fields, has become raw material.

**Discussion: Television humor and remembrance of traumatic events**

The 4 phases in the evolution presented above, though somewhat overlapping, show a clear direction and continuity, the ways in which one phase opened the door to the next. The first phase was that of silence: Holocaust memory was considered a sacred subject in society’s civic religion, so that it could not be connected with humor. The second phase appeared during the 1990s, when for the first time humorous television texts began to deal with Holocaust memory, and humor was employed in order to critically look at and challenge traditional forms of remembrance. The third phase took the process even further, probing the use of humor and Holocaust memory as a means of criticizing other social and cultural fields. The current, fourth, phase has changed direction: instead of using humor to explore Holocaust memory, Holocaust memory is used to produce humorous effects. The incongruity is not between Holocaust memory and sociocultural phenomena, but between Holocaust memory and the genre of humor itself. From being treated as a sanctified subject, Holocaust memory has been transformed into raw material for creating laughter; it is now perceived as “just another subject,” demanding no unique treatment. In this section, I wish to argue that this change signifies a tendency to “normalize” the traumatic memory of the Holocaust.

I suggest exploring this current-phase shift from 3 analytical perspectives: the sociological, involving developments in Holocaust remembrance; and the medium and the genre, both of which relate to the characteristics of humorous television texts. Sociologically, the current phase is dialectically connected to its predecessors. During the first generation of Holocaust survivors, the discourse was constructed as subordinate to the process of “nation-building,” and was thus shaped mainly by the Establishment. The discourse of the second generation was intense and loud and was very conspicuous in Israeli popular culture. The third generation looked at Holocaust memory differently, expressing a special awareness of the socially constructed nature of the process of shaping collective memory and of their own role in shaping it; this change in perception allowed humor to be used to explore new ways of representation and to criticize traditional ones. Hence, while the second generation broke the silence of the first generation and put Holocaust memory in the forefront of public discourse, the third generation probed the limits of representation by using humor to challenge traditional commemoration. The current phase goes even further and uses Holocaust memory as it would any ordinary subject, like politics or sex that might spark laughter.
The medium of television and the genre of humor are cultural perspectives. The very nature of television (Shandler, 1999) leads to the secularization of the Holocaust, because in order to keep a constant flow of content, television must deal with a range of mundane, everyday topics. This tendency is even more obvious when it comes to humor: its playful, nonserious, irresponsible nature radicalizes the secularization process. Furthermore, the study suggests that, surprisingly, the less culturally appreciated skits signify the radical change, the sketches that did not make a critical statement indicate an option for alternative, less traumatic memory.

Concepts from Trauma Theory are useful in describing the political and cultural implications of this process and the potential for the changes explored in this study. Two competing approaches to the mediation of trauma may be identified: the psychoanalytic and the cultural-sociological (Pinchevski & Liebes, 2010). The first, represented by Dominic LaCapra (1994), claims that groups and individuals “act out” and/or “work through” trauma outside of the therapeutic framework in order to relate it to the cultural domain, mediated by society’s memory agents. Accordingly, trauma is act out when it is repeated, compulsively rehearsed, and the differences between the past, present, and future go unrecognized. Historical traumas may provoke a generation-long acting out in the form of denial and violence. Working through also involves a mode of repetition, but one that offers a measured critical perspective on problems and seeks to control action in a responsible manner, advancing desirable change; it implies the possibility of judgment and is related in mediated ways to action (LaCapra, 1994, pp. 209–210).

The sociocultural approach (Alexander, 2004) argues that trauma on the collective level is different from trauma on the individual level: it is not an immediate, reflexive response to a shattering event, but rather a socially constructed process of representations (Pinchevski & Liebes, 2010, p. 270). As a cultural process, argues Eyerman (2002, p. 1), trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory. This approach suggests that events are not inherently traumatic, but that trauma is a socially mediated attribution: “Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain … Collective actors ‘decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are” (Alexander, 2004, p. 16). In this account, a cultural (or national) trauma must be understood, explained, and made coherent through public reflection and discourse (Eyerman, 2002, p. 2). Here, the media play a decisive role in representing cultural trauma and in recuperating from it, providing the symbolic means for a community to narratively reconnect past and present.

Using these concepts, I suggest seeing the evolution of the use of humor in relation to Holocaust memory as an indication of a subversive trend in Israeli collective memory. Studies focusing on Holocaust memory and Israeli society show time and again the stagnation of the traditional-nationalistic memory (Yair, 2011). Zertal (2005), for example, demonstrates the dominance of Holocaust memory in Israeli political discourse; and Alexander and Dromi (2011) analyze how Israeli society constructs Holocaust memory as an ongoing trauma and how Holocaust
memory is used mainly by right-wing figures, leading to the construction of a nationalist conservative narrative. While these studies focus on the ways by which Holocaust memory “infiltrates” current political discourse and how the two shape each other, other studies focus on the media memory of Holocaust Remembrance Day as part of the national commemorative ritual. The findings are similar: daily newspapers (Zandberg, 2010), television newscasts (Zandberg et al., 2012), and prime-time programs (Meyers et al., 2009; Meyers, Zandberg, & Neiger, 2011) all construct a discourse dominated by the political establishment, one that continues the traditional conventions of conceptualizing Holocaust commemoration as a holy, inviolate subject—what LaCapra (2001) described as a “redemptive narrative.” The dominance of this narrative is highly significant: from a political perspective: the redemptive narrative of the Holocaust indicates that society has yet to begin working through the trauma of the Holocaust. Thus one can say that the national establishment is using the media to intensify collective memory of the trauma for political gains. Some (Zertal, 2005) even see this process as a force preventing Israel from becoming a more civic society.

In conclusion, this study argues that the dominant commemorative mediated discourse, whether as part of the national commemorative ritual or as part of the current political discourse—both shaped by the political establishment—plays a distinctive role in performing cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004), while the humorous skits related to Holocaust memory suggest more varied ways for remembrance and may play a vital role in recuperating from it. Hence, although these skits are marginal in relation to the political or the commemorative discourse, they present a subversive alternative to society’s memory of traumatic events. I have suggested that the current phase of evolution in the interrelations between humorous skits and Holocaust memory is a way of working through collective memories of traumatic events. The trends and changes of Holocaust remembrance discourse until the traumatic memory is considered as just another subject for writers of humor can be seen as an alternative means of remembrance, and of society confronting its memories of a difficult past and healing them.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the editor of Communication, Culture & Critique and the anonymous reviewers for their thorough reading and for their helpful remarks. I also thank Tamar Ashuri, Sherna Kisilevitz, Oren Meyers, Motti Neiger, and Limor Shifman for their comments and support. The article was written during my sabbatical as a research fellow at the Chaim Herzog Institute for Media Politics & Society, Tel Aviv University. I thank Nurit Guttman and the faculty of the Department of Communication for their hospitality and their comments on this research.

Notes

1 The show’s 5 seasons were broadcast intermittently by all Israeli television channels in the years 1993–1997.
“Ketchup Is the Auschwitz of Tomatoes”

E. Zandberg

2 The show was aired for 4 seasons (189 episodes) on Channel Bip during the years 2003–2006.
3 The show has been aired on Channel Two for 10 seasons (130 episodes), since 2003.
4 http://www.mako.co.il/tv-erez-nehederet/season8-articles/Article-85930e9ffe1f21006.htm&ChId=f348e341afe3210&plId=786102762
5 The show was aired for two seasons (23 episodes) during the years 2008–2010.
6 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LP_Za_ltrc&feature=player_embedded
7 The show was aired for 3 seasons (41 episodes) during the years 2006–2010.
8 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnXPyo9FfSQ
9 The show was aired for 4 seasons (66 episodes) during the years 2006–2010.

References


“Ketchup Is the Auschwitz of Tomatoes”  

E. Zandberg


