

Pop Shoah?

Imaginaries of the Jewish genocide in contemporary Italian culture

Review of: Francesca Recchia Luciani, Claudio Vercelli (eds.), *Pop Shoah? Immaginari del genocidio ebraico*, Genova, Il Melangolo, 2016, 187 p., ISBN: 9788869830143, € 16,00.

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The publication of this thought-provoking collection of essays, *Pop Shoah? Immaginari del genocidio ebraico*, edited by Francesca Recchia Luciani and Claudio Vercelli, brings an original and intentionally provocative perspective to the Italian critical debate over the memory of the Holocaust. The critical trajectory of the volume seeks to present the reader with a first survey of those dynamics of banalization of memory that, within the specific territory of Italian culture, increasingly put at risk an effective ‘comprehension’ of the historical and cultural significance of the genocide. Building on a direction of research opened by Valentia Pisanty with her studies on Holocaust denial, this book then fills a potential void in the discussion concerning the specificity of Italian misrepresentations of the memory of the Shoah.

The contributions collected in the volume cover a wide range of cultural products and practices – from movies to third-generation memories to the so-called *viaggi della memoria* – and outline a detailed exploration of the imaginary surrounding the Jewish genocide in contemporary popular culture. At the same time, *Pop Shoah?* draws attention to the existence of a problematic nexus between the increasing pervasiveness in media and public discourse of the memory of Auschwitz, and the risk that this ‘overexposure’ might result in a semantic emptying of the real historical meaning of the genocide. Rather than consolidating the presence of the Shoah in public discourses, such ‘inflationary effect’ has the side effect of obfuscating its historical ‘substance’ (p. 7).

The thematic diversity of the contributions speaks to the innovative approach adopted by Luciani and Vercelli. *Pop Shoah?* suggests a further critical reflection on a methodological as well as cultural question emblematically alluded to by the very title of the book. Its patent idiosyncrasy, embedded in the formula ‘pop Shoah’, provides a thought-provoking tool to expose the growing ‘*reductio ad spectaculum*’ and the ‘cognitive and semantic drift’ produced by the profusion of images directly or indirectly referring to Nazi genocidal violence in media culture (p. 145). However, the focus of the book is not on an aesthetic and intellectual critique of banalized representations of the genocide. As pointed out by Vercelli, ‘pop Shoah is not a conceptual category, nor a concept relating to aesthetic critique’. It 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' (p. 174). The axes of this exploration are de-contextualization, volatility and a contradictory 'presentification' of the genocide in the public discourse about history.

In this context of memory 'inflation' fueled by an incessant multiplication of uses and abuses of images and narratives relating to the genocide, *Pop Shoah?* embarks on a 'deconstruction of the cultural industry of memory' born out of this memory hyper-saturation (p. 9). Marked by a wide heterogeneity of theoretical angles and methodologies, the studies collected in the volume address some of the most problematic and notable examples of this media overexposure. The essays by Claudio Gaetani, Damiano Garofalo, and Fiorenza Loiacono tackle 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 memory of third-generation Italian Jews (Raffaella Di Castro), and the problematic role that the Shoah acquired in school education (Antonio Brusa).

The argument at the center of *Pop Shoah?* points thus to a disciplinary domain that could be termed "semiology of history": a study of the social and cultural factors that determine the construction of meaning of historical events. The analysis developed by Luciani and Vercelli aims at denouncing the existence of a cultural 'dispositive' where the interpretations of the past and the transmission of its memory occur in complete disconnection from an appreciation of its historical 'truth and veracity' (p. 179). Attempts at dialectic comprehension 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 understanding. It is the 'logic of the simulacrum' carefully analyzed by Jean Baudrillard: 'not a copy of something original', but 'a reconstruction that refers to nothing necessarily objective,' and that, taking the semblance of an 'apparent totality,' validates itself in a tautological manner (*ibidem*). 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, uninterruptedly disseminated in a deterritorialized and ultimately meaningless media memory. The vertiginous multiplication of its representations intrinsically implies a parallel evacuation of its meanings. Devoid of its reality and historicity, reduced to an empty signifier and to a relativized metaphor for 'a total, radical and even metahistorical evil', this simulacrum remains open to only a single modality of knowledge: that of affective identification, equally expressed by the symmetrical extremes of 'sacralization' and negationism, while the contents and meanings on which this identification should be grounded become superfluous (p. 181). This is the critical territory charted by the essays collected in the volume, one which undoubtedly brings a much-welcomed and inspiring contribution to the Italian debate over the memory of the Jewish genocide.

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