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The reality of imagining the Holocaust: David Levinthal's Mein Kampf

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It is perhaps unsurprising that a review of a collection of photographs of toys entitled Mein Kampf, the very same title as Hitler's notorious book with its associations with the Holocaust, begins: '[N]o doubt there are those who will take offense' (Hagen 1994). Mein Kampf (1996) is not the first collection of American photographer David Levinthal's work to feature toys as its subject, nor is it the first to represent Nazis. In Hitler Moves East: A Graphic Chronicle 1941-43 (1977) Levinthal collaborated with Garry Trudeau to produce a book recreating the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Hitler Moves East features images of toy soldiers at war and, as Trudeau notes in his preface, the collection raises controversial questions such as: '[C]an war be beautiful?'(Levinthal and Trudeau 1977, p. 8). The images of Nazis in Mein Kampf, however, accompany representations of their non-combatant victims, and of the Holocaust, which raises controversies of its own.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (1989) states:

> No one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz. The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so.

In other words, the reality of the Holocaust can only be known by those who were victims of it. If Auschwitz's truth 'remains hidden', the question arises as to how those who are not survivors can interact with accounts of its reality. James E. Young (2004, pp. 159, 163) observes that 'these events will pass out of the realm of personal experience and into that of the imagination only'. This means that experience of the Holocaust will soon be only 'necessarily vicarious'. Indeed, Wiesel, only a child when he encountered the concentration camp's horrors, is now in his eighties. Nonetheless, the poem prefacing Primo Levi's Holocaust testimony If This is a Man insists we 'meditate that this came about', and that we 'repeat [his words] to [our] children' (1987, p. 17). Moreover, Giorgio Agamben (2002, p32) believes that:

> To say that Auschwitz is "unsayable" or "incomprehensible" is equivalent to euphemein, to adoring in silence [...] Regardless of one's intentions, this contributes to its glory.

Accounts such as Levi and Wiesel's testimonies or Holocaust Exhibitions such as those at the Imperial War Museum London or The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum facilitate compliance with Levi's instructions. Moreover, in their 'saying', they are a means of avoiding glorification through silence. Yet, in spite of the factual, if mediated, nature of these representations of reality, 'necessarily vicarious' experience of the Holocaust is problematic.

Robert Eaglestone (2004, p. 19) explains this in The Holocaust and The Postmodern:

> We who come after the Holocaust and know about it only through representations are frequently and with authority told that it is incomprehensible. However, the representations seem to demand us to do exactly that, to comprehend it, to grasp the experiences, to imagine the suffering, through identifying with those who suffered.

He suggests here that, when confronted with depictions of the Holocaust, we feel a compulsion to imagine and understand something that we also feel we cannot truly grasp.

Not a survivor himself, Levinthal nonetheless appears to 'retell' the concentration camp in Mein Kampf. He first exhibited these pictures in their original form as 20 by 24 inch polaroids at the Janet Borden Gallery, New York, in 1994. These large photographs of Holocaust perpetrators and victims in miniature scenes of horror and pageantry were published as a book two years later.[1]

This article argues that Mein Kampf does not reveal the realities of the Holocaust. However, what it does present is the need to confront the reality that, in spite of others' authoritative assertions of the futility of attempting to comprehend it, we do imagine the Holocaust. Levinthal is not attempting to transform the experience of survivors into knowledge of the Holocaust but instead explores what we do with their-and others'-attempts to make this transformation. James E. Young's articles discussing Mein Kampf recognize that Levinthal (1996, p. 68) is exploring his own 'imagined' relationship to the Holocaust and in doing so 'stimulate[s] the imagination' of the viewer (2002, p. 78). He finds ultimately that Levinthal raises questions he does not answer about 'our own role in the representation of mass murder' (Young 2002, p. 81; in Levinthal 1996, p. 81). Young attends, quite rightly, to the problems implicated in viewing reproductions of victims. This article develops the idea that Levinthal, concerned with the imagination, focuses more specifically on what Mein Kampf conveys about the 'reality' of the action involved in imagining the Holocaust.

[1] Whilst this essay concerns itself with the images as presented in book form, some of the photographs discussed can be found at http://www.davidlevinthal.com/works.html

When discussing the inability of the *Schutzstaffel* (the SS) to name the bodies of Holocaust victims in Remnants of Auschwitz, Agamben (2002, p. 51) explains that:

> We know from witnesses that under no circumstances were they to be called "corpses" or "cadavers," but rather simply Figuren, figures, dolls.

There seems, therefore, to be something apt yet troubling in Levinthal's use of dolls, inanimate figures of humans, to represent the bodies of the Holocaust: both its victims and the Nazis. These dolls, however, are not mere playthings. In his afterword to Mein Kampf, Young counters any possible suggestion of frivolity (in Levinthal 1996, p. 69). He gives Levinthal authority by placing his work within the oeuvre of serious artists who use dolls. He names Laurie Simmons, Cindy Sherman and others. Simmons's work raises questions about domesticity, and Sherman has turned herself into a doll to be dressed and redressed as a way of exploring female identity and powerlessness.[2] By positioning Levinthal with these others, Young suggests he is not, as they are not, merely playing.

Toys, of course, are toyed with. 'To toy with something is to manipulate it, to try it out within sets of contexts' (Stewart 1993, p. 56). Susan Stewart's discussion of toying is not only another way to help us consider Levinthal as portraying the treatment of Holocaust victims but also to allow for a fuller examination of how we imagine the Holocaust. It seems that, through his use of toys to create Holocaust tableaux, Levinthal is suggesting that we manipulate pieces of knowledge we have about the event to try and make our own story in an attempt to understand the Holocaust. As Stewart (1993, pp. 56-

[2] Examples of Simmons' work can be found at http://www.moma.org/ (such as: 'Blonde/Red Dress/Kitchen', from the series Interiorshttp://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=55981) and Sherman's at http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sherman-doll-clothes-t12571

57) points out, a toy is 'a point of beginning for narrative', and 'the desire to animate the toy is the desire not simply to know everything but to experience everything simultaneously'. In employing toys (symbolically, only a beginning, and something we ourselves must want to manipulate to create narrative), Levinthal reminds us that what we consider to be our knowledge of the reality of the Holocaust is in fact partially constructed by our imagination: we take representations of the Holocaust and cannot help but 'animate' them.

In some of Mein Kampf's images these dolls we desire to manipulate are clearly intended to be erotic: many of the naked female toys (whose limbs appear not to be moveable) have been manufactured with arms in a position suggestive of bondage and their legs wide apart. That this can be seen as controversial should be acknowledged. Young has discussed this with Levinthal who responded that, 'it remains true-whether we like it or not-that in many of its popular representations, the Holocaust has been eroticized', giving examples such as D. M. Thomas's novel The White Hotel (in Levinthal 1996, p. 79). Young concludes that Levinthal 'was only showing a Holocaust porno-kitsch already at play in the cultural transformation of these terrible scenes' (in Levinthal 1996, p. 79). This indicates that Levinthal is representing something other than the Holocaust itself and that he is interested in the 'cultural transformation' in the ways it has been imagined.

Thus Mein Kampf is not, in itself, kitsch. In many ways the work invites consideration as such, in particular its use of mass produced toys, but it cannot be said to meet Clement Greenberg's definition of kitsch (1939) that it 'pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money'. Kitsch does not question or interrogate, and that is exactly what Levinthal does here; as already stated, he explores the ways we imagine the Holocaust and the reality is this includes a kitsch element.

The toys Levinthal uses represent human bodies in miniature. Gaston Bachelard (1994, pp. 149, 152) argues that 'imagination in miniature is natural imagination which appears at all ages in the daydreams of born daydreamers', and 'in the presence of an image that dreams, it must be taken as an invitation to continue the daydream that created it'. Accordingly, in using the miniature, Levinthal could be seen to be proposing that we imagine on a manageable scale. Stewart (1993, p. 68) discusses Lilliput (Jonathan Swift's island of miniature people in Gulliver's Travels) and states:

> As is the case with all models, it is absolutely necessary that Lilliput be an island. The miniature world remains perfect and uncontaminated by the grotesque so long as its absolute boundaries are maintained.

However, we see no boundaries to Levinthal's miniature world. They are out of focus and his worlds' grotesqueries have no limit except the edges of each photograph, beyond which each seems to continue. Levinthal thus further suggests the futility of any attempt at complete comprehension, in spite of our imaginings being on a seemingly manageable scale.

Young (in Levinthal 1996) encourages us to consider other aspects of Levinthal's employment of focus. He writes (in Levinthal 1996, p. 76):

> The focal plane takes us into the space between the object and its once-worldly referent [...] where the mind is forced to imagine.

Young's text compels us to consider that Levinthal not only depicts the act of imagining the Holocaust but, through the use of blurring, also requires us to undertake that act.

The manipulation of the reality of the viewers' relation to these miniature scenes further informs our understanding of this imagining. The point of view in which Levinthal's camera places us in relation to

the miniature it captures is unusual. The expected point of view in relation to the miniature can be seen in Bachelard (1994, p. 173) who says that:

> From the top of his tower, a philosopher of domination sees the universe in miniature. [...] And since he is high, he is great.

In viewing Levinthal's images, we observe the miniature from the same level as the camera, making us feel small also; therefore, we are reduced to the height of toys. In this way, Levinthal suggests we cannot have mastery over the Holocaust's narratives.

Furthermore, in looking at the photographs in Mein Kampf, we cannot say we see only from the point of view of victim, or perpetrator, or bystander. What remains is the point of view of the camera; we see these constructions as it sees them. The camera narrates these constructions, but we should remember that a camera is always operated by someone. Thus, the story is not of the Holocaust; it is of someone imagining the Holocaust. Furthermore, the word 'Mein' suggests an individual's story, a first person narrator in the form of 'I'. Thereby, Levinthal positions us to identify with the tableaux's creator, with the act of imagining the Holocaust.

Levinthal states his photographs are 'intentionally ambiguous to draw the viewer in so that you make your own story' (in Young, 2002, p. 78). If viewers make their own story, then they imagine, and his medium itself encourages us to do so. Indeed, as Susan Sontag explains in On Photography (1979, p. 23), photographs are 'invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy'. However, Sontag (2004, p. 23) observes that:

> For the photography of atrocity, people want weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance.

She continues: 'By flying low, artistically speaking, such pictures are thought to be less manipulative' (2004, p.24). In his use of the photographic medium to depict constructed miniature scenes of the Holocaust and thus not 'flying low, artistically', Levinthal can be read as highlighting that all photographs (and films) we encounter of the Holocaust are, to some degree, constructed. Consider, for example, as Agamben does (2002, pp. 50-51), the content of the English film of the Bergen-Belsen camp, shot following its liberation:

> The camera lingers almost by accident on what seem to be living people, a group of prisoners crouched on the ground or wandering on foot like ghosts. It lasts only a few seconds [...]the same cameraman who had until then patiently lingered over naked bodies [...] could not bear the sight of these half-living beings; he immediately began once again to show cadavers.

The cameraman could not bring himself to give the same attention to those persons who were still alive as he did to the dead. His response to what he saw shaped the film he recorded; the film, therefore, is his interpretation of reality from his point of view only and is not the full reality of what was found at the camp.

In contemplating the imagining of Holocaust narratives, one thing Levinthal's photographs examine is the role of images, which are 'a quick way of apprehending something', in this necessarily vicarious process (Sontag 2004, p.19). Some images in particular seem almost like 'quotation', as Sontag puts it (2004, p 19). Hitler saluting, swastika banners, barbed wire: we piece together our own narratives of the Holocaust through those images we remember, and the essays accompanying Mein Kampf encourage us to look for such iconography. Young writes, 'Levinthal has used toys to examine and deconstruct mythological icons of popular culture' (in Levinthal 1996, p. 71). The term icon can be problematic. Cornelia Brink (2000)

tackles difficulties arising from making the photograph analogous to icon with regards to photographs of the liberation of Auschwitz. She quotes Vicky Goldberg: 'The images I think of as icons almost instantly acquired symbolic overtones and larger frames of reference that endowed them with national or even worldwide significance' (Brink 2000, pp. 138 - 139). Accordingly, we take the term icon to refer to images which are symbolically significant in our visualizing, in this case, the Holocaust.

Young adds that 'once icons of the Holocaust enter the popular imagination, they also turn mythic, hard, impenetrable' (in Levinthal 1996, p. 74). Certainly, in photographing metal or plastic toys Levinthal could be said to be reflecting the solidity of these icons (of course, Young must be aware in writing 'hard' he is also suggesting difficulty, strictness, harshness). But we find Young's assertion comes into conflict with Levinthal's images, as the medium through which images become iconic today itself suggests penetration. Walter Benjamin (1973, p. 235) explains that photography, unlike painting penetrates: '[M]agician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web'. Lance Speer (2001) claims Levinthal's use of iconic imagery and our recognition of it 'allows the individual events, whether historically accurate or imagined on the part of the photographer, to come alive, almost attaining the status of a "documentary"'. Although necessarily constructed, a documentary is considered factual. To say that these obviously fictive pieces are like a documentary because imagery allows us to put them in context is comparable to saying any fiction using Nazi iconography is almost documentary. Speer's comments illustrate Brink's (2000, p. 142) warning that 'one recognizes [icons] and thinks that recognizing them implies an understanding of what they

represent'. Levinthal's photographs penetrate the reality of icons' role in imagining the Holocaust, not the actual event of the Holocaust; he reminds us that when we imagine it we often think about its symbols not its reality.

As if to emphasize this point, Mein Kampf's introductory image encourages the viewer to utilize symbols of the Holocaust in order to comprehend it. The front cover image comprises mostly black shadow with blue and white background. The shadow appears to be a tower with a large window suggesting an observation tower; behind it is an extremely blurred fence. What is beyond it is entirely unreadable. In the foreground, there is a clearer fence and, in addition, the profile of head and shoulders of a helmeted or hatted (it is not clear) character. He disappears into the blackness at the bottom of the page. Relating the tower to the title Mein Kampf and its associations, we encounter a recognizable symbol (an icon) of the Holocaust and we infer that this is an image of a concentration camp. Thus, Levinthal suggests experiencing ambiguity is the reality of engaging with the idea of the Holocaust, and he underlines this ambiguity's relation to our reliance on icons.

In spite of the blurring, Levinthal does not disguise that his images are of dolls. The first photographs are scenes from a Nazi pageant (Levinthal 1996, pp. 1-3). By the third photograph, we know we must be looking at photographs of toys. Pillars in the first picture reflect light with a shine not found with granite or stone. Likewise, the bugler's leg in the second photograph shines unrealistically. The third provides certainty; the soldier lacks a human's facial detail and his clothes' reflection of light is unnatural. These must be small toys; these are miniature constructed scenes. Levinthal is not trying to create the illusion that the toys are the concentration camp.

Yet Levinthal's images reflect some of the experiences related in the testimony of Holocaust survivors, Levi and Wiesel. When we read Levi's If This is a Man, we find that it was not only the corpses that were seen to be other-than-human bodies. Levi (1987, p. 22) relates his experience on arrival at Auschwitz:

> With the absurd precision to which we later had to accustom ourselves, the Germans held the roll-call. At the end the officer asked "Wieviel Stück?" The corporal saluted smartly and replied that there were six hundred and fifty "pieces".

The Nazi's consideration of groups of human beings as things, objects, is clearly reflected in Levinthal's images such as one which depicts two soldiers either side of the foreground aiming guns at a group of naked women (Levinthal 1996, p. 36). It is more than simply humans being represented by toys. There is clear differentiation between the white victims' bodies and the dark, shadowy soldiers. This draws attention to the difference between the two, consequently highlighting the indignity in the women's nakedness. Such representation of degradation implies the dehumanization inherent in calling people 'pieces'. In spite of the blurring, we can see identical hairstyles and poses of some of the dolls. These are manufactured, mass produced objects; it seems there is nothing individual about them. The testified treatment of human beings as 'pieces' could not be better reflected than in this way. The connection between the reality described by survivors and Levinthal's images suggests the influence testimony has on our imagining of the Holocaust.

Two photographs from the series most strongly reflect this idea of people being treated as objects (Levinthal 1996, pp. 49, 54). In one of them, skeletons are placed into what appears to be a mass grave; in the other, two men seem to be shoveling through the pile of skeletons whilst a blurred figure in the background stands, possibly watching. In

both pictures, the camera focuses on the toy bodies, skeletons that stand in for the corpses thrown into mass graves at concentration camps. As there are few other instances of the camera focusing on the dolls themselves, most particularly Levinthal portrays here what Agamben tells us about the naming of corpses by the Nazis. It seems that Levinthal wants to demonstrate that the victims of the Holocaust were not treated as humans. These identical skeletons represent the lack of consideration of those victims as individuals. Agamben (2002, p. 73) explains that the philosopher Heidegger used the term 'fabrication of corpses' to describe concentration camps and that:

> For [him] the "fabrication of corpses" implied, just as for Levi, that it is not possible to speak of death in the case of extermination victims, that they did not truly die, but were rather only pieces produced in a process of an assembly line production.[3]

We see this here, but, at the same time, cannot ignore that the Nazis we see are also represented by toys. Levinthal's use of toys in reflecting all aspects of how we imagine the Holocaust further reminds us that these representations of the Holocaust informing our imagining are often also manufactured, unreal.

These images also reveal more about imagining the Holocaust. The toy skeletons which replace the corpses are clearly not the corpses, we know this from photographs from the liberation of concentration camps; they are clearly just representative. We notice too looking through the images that we do not see the victims in the striped uniforms. Levinthal has purposely not created them. It is as if the narrator is making do with what he has been able to find in order to create the tableaux. This gives precision to Levinthal's reflection on imagining the Holocaust: in imagining this horror, he has used only the

[3] An introduction to Heidegger which details the complications of his connections to Nazi politics can be found in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/

toys available to him and so things are missing; likewise, we cannot fully imagine it, for in doing so we can employ only what we believe we know.

There are further reflections of Holocaust testimony in Mein Kampf. The blurring that Wiesel (1982, p. 33) describes in his experience of when their 'senses were blunted' is found in all the photographs. Images that appear to be events occurring within the camps cannot be fully comprehended, as Levinthal does not allow the viewers' eyes to focus clearly. There are images which suggest naked, possibly female, bodies lying with their legs apart, with male clothed figures standing over them (1996, pp. 45, 50). This contrast is suggestive of sexual humiliation or assault; however we cannot determine the precise nature of what we see. Our senses, too, are blunted. Yet the position in which Levinthal places us is also ambiguous: as aforementioned, we are at the same height as the toys and, consequently, imagining as a participant in the scene; yet the nature of the participation imagined cannot be discerned. These images seem to imply the reality that some imagining of the Holocaust could be deemed inappropriate. Of course, this is connected with issues of identification to which we will return.

What Levinthal implies about our necessarily vicarious encounters with the Holocaust is tied to his obfuscation. Not only is much of it out of focus, but there is also no text to clarify what we think we see. Sontag (2004, p.41) voices the truism that '[t]he caption of a photograph is traditionally neutral, informative'. The absence of captions from Mein Kampf implies the impossibility of responding neutrally to the Holocaust in imagining it without clarity.

Two images in particular interrogate the possibility of 'imagining the unimaginable' and we see a final feature of testimony reflected in these photographs: the Muselmann (Levinthal 1996, pp.59,

63). This term was used to describe those who did not survive the Holocaust, those who appeared to be, as Agamben (2002, pp. 45, 55) puts it, 'defined by a loss of all will and consciousness' and 'mark[ing] the threshold between human and inhuman'. There is no focus in either image. The first hints at two men dealing with a pile of bodies indoors; the second appears to be a pile of bodies in a grey room. Placing these photographs in his Holocaust narrative, Levinthal suggests the gas chamber. His use of focus turns the toys into the 'anonymous mass', the 'faceless presences' that Levi (1987, p. 94) describes. What these two photographs depict here is partly what separates Levinthal's images from the testimony they also reflect. These photographs portray that to which survivors cannot testify, for no one survived the gas chamber to tell of its horror, as Levi, quoted by Agamben(2002, p.33), says: 'No one has told the destiny of the common prisoner, since it was not materially possible for him to survive'. Levinthal's blurry depiction of something of which no one can know the reality reminds us that, in imagining the Holocaust, we conjure some images that can only be products of our imagination, not testified reality.

Levinthal's scenes connect visually through blurring. Additionally, images of Nazis, the *Brandenburger Tör* (the Brandenburg Gate, a well-known Berlin landmark), and red backgrounds link images of pageantry; and snow, the barbed wire, the woman in the blue dress connect images of the horror of the camps. These connections invite reading as narrative. The inclusion of the gas chamber images makes it clear that this narrative is not, in spite of the many connections, meant to be read as testimony, as a depiction of reality. Reading Holocaust narrative involves the problem of identification and indeed testimony, due to its narrative nature: something Robert Eaglestone explores. He (2004, p. 8) explains:

> Works of testimony are often consumed in the same way as fiction. This happens principally through the day-to-day process of identification, in which the reader identifies with - becomes or relives in some way-the events of a book

He highlights that 'survivors do not believe they can or should be identified with, even through their testimony' (2004, p. 28). It has already been suggested above that there are some aspects to Levinthal's images that might encourage identification, how the blurring seems to make us see as those who really experienced the Holocaust's horror. Yet, at the same time, Levinthal's manipulation of his camera and the resultant ambiguity of point of view negate this.

What Levinthal in fact suggests in Mein Kampf is that in imagining the Holocaust we cannot identify with the victims, the perpetrators or even the bystanders. We do not see their reality clearly; we do not have all the tools, the experience, to do so. It may seem, he suggests, that identification does take place where the images' blurring reflects testimony, but the fact that his tableaux portray different strands of the Holocaust's story counters this. We imagine only symbols, icons of the Holocaust, but we do imagine it and we do meditate that it came about. As we encounter accounts of its horrors, we construct our own Holocaust narrative. The cover image of the watchtower and possible guard or soldier concludes as well as introduces Mein Kampf. Levinthal's structuring of the narrative in this way suggests that our imagining will be repetitive. Repeating (as Levi requires) the story of the Holocaust as we know it to our children, we should never hope to have full comprehension. Ultimately, Levinthal suggests that our necessarily vicarious experience of the Holocaust can only ever be just that.

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