“FROM HIDDEN TO (OVER-)EXPOSED”:
THE GROTESQUE AND PERFORMING BODIES OF WORLD WAR II NAZI
CONCENTRATION CAMP PRISONERS

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World War II continues to carry considerable “cultural weight” in the United States. Many movies, documentaries, and television mini-series about the Holocaust seem to try to make sense of what can seem like a senseless act. The field of performance studies offers another avenue by which we can examine those events and our responses to them. In this paper, I apply a construct of the grotesque body, based primarily on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, to the prisoners of World War II Nazi concentration camps to examine the social networks at play in current understandings of the Holocaust. In chapter one, I analyze the relationship between prisoners, guards, and prison officials by means of the grotesque body in the official and clandestine cabarets performed by the prisoners. In chapter two, I examine the role of the grotesque body in the photographs taken by Allied soldiers after constructing the premise of viewing photographs as performance. I argue that the prisoners’ bodies are integral in the maintenance of our collective memory. In chapter three, I track contemporary appropriations of one specific photograph of prisoners and the way the performance of reading the image has changed as the appropriations have become more politicized. The bodies of prisoners have gone from hidden to revealed to appropriated.
I dedicate this to my father, who I think about and miss every day and in whom I find strength,

and to my mother for her indispensable sacrifices and support.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: HIDDEN PERFORMANCES – CABARET PERFORMANCES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS AS GROTESQUE</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabaret in the Camps</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabarets as Grotesque</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filth</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excess</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Jew</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official Cabarets</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-official Cabarets</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clandestine Cabarets</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: REVELATORY PERFORMANCES – PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE BODIES OF CONCENTRATION CAMP PRISONERS AS GROTESQUE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Atrocity Photographs</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographs as Performance</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Grotesque Body</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Interval</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Grotesque in Mourning</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER THREE: OVER-EXPOSED PERFORMANCES – CONTEMPORARY
PERFORMANCES OF GROTESQUE BODIES CONTAINED IN PRISONER

PHOTOGRAPHS ........................................................................................................... 72
Photographs as Emblems ......................................................................................... 73
Postmemory .................................................................................................................. 77
Typology of Recontextualization .............................................................................. 79
Text-driven Recontextualizations: The United States Army and libertarian.nl ....... 81
Parallel Recontextualization: Cabaret ........................................................................ 84
Substitutional Recontextualization: Kerryfest ......................................................... 89
Attribution .................................................................................................................... 91
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 92

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................ 97

WORKS CITED .......................................................................................................... 102
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fifteenth century German woodcut by an unknown artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Salome Receiving the Head of John the Baptist</em>, Bernardino Luini, sixteenth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Corpses Lie in One of the Open Railcars of the Dachau Death Train</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Corpses in a Mass Grave in the So-called “American Cemetery” at Mauthausen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Three Emaciated Survivors in a Barracks in the Newly Liberated Buchenwald Concentration Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>An Emaciated Female Jewish Survivor of a Death March Lies in Bed at an American Military Field Hospital in Volary, Czechoslovakia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sick and Emaciated Survivors of the Dachau Concentration Camp are Evacuated on the Back of a Truck to a Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Former Concentration Camp Prisoners Headed to a Hospital for Medical Attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>“Young Singers Spread Racist Hate: Duo Considered the Olsen Twins of the White Nationalist Movement” poster</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

When I began work as the dramaturg for a production of the musical *Cabaret*, I did not have an adequate appreciation for living conditions in World War II Nazi concentration camps. During my research, I learned of, among other things, prisoner cabaret performances in these unimaginable circumstances. I also, of course, encountered pictures of the emaciated bodies of prisoners. I had no words to describe my reaction. Upon reflection, my response captured my interest. My failure to find language to articulate my experience adequately was a by-product of the grotesque moment I had already been studying. I wanted to know how such a profoundly visceral response functions.

This study stems from my interest in the function of the grotesque in performance. In it, I will analyze the concentration camp cabaret performances and the photographic images of the bodies of World War II prisoners from the perspective of the grotesque, as I define it below. In using the grotesque to examine these performances and photographs of prisoners, I will examine how people experience phenomena that make them recoil. The grotesque body functions differently in different performative contexts: the prisoners in concentration camps performed in occluded bodies to create an identity for themselves, the revelation in the images released following the liberation led to the performance of collective memory and mourning, and the overuse, or over-exposure, of the grotesque body in contemporary appropriations of the photographs allows for viewers to perform a myriad of identities determined largely by the re-envisioned contexts. The purpose of my study is to explore ways in which we engage the performance of the grotesque as it occurs in three case studies. Let me briefly chart the background of these case studies.
Background

During World War II, the Nazis hid and denied the existence of the bodies and identities of their prisoners. The prisoners lost their identity during their internment. One way the prisoners re-claimed their bodily identities was through their performances of cabarets. While prison administrators authorized some of these performances, prisoners staged semi-public and clandestine cabarets even while under the constant threat of death. Performances under such extreme circumstances challenge our understanding of typical cabaret performances. Reconciling the gaiety we associate with these performances with the horrors the prisoners surely endured in their daily lives seems almost impossible. In short, we are confronted with the grotesque.

Following the liberation of the concentration camps, photographs of prisoners began circulating through press reports and personal displays. These photos came primarily from three sources: photos taken by Nazi officers during the operation of the camps, photos taken on official press junkets organized by the United States Army following liberation, and photos taken by Allied soldiers immediately after the liberation of the camps. Allied soldiers took the photographs to provide “proof” of the atrocities and thereby to appropriate a source for the construction of public and private memory. These photos document the grotesque abuses of the Nazis against their prisoners.

Recently, individuals have used some of these photographs for reasons other than documentation or memory construction. These images have been tied to political agendas and educational interests. Such political activism and educational needs change the function of the images from referents of past events to objects used to assist in commentary on current events. These uses prompt contradictory readings of the photos. In their appropriation and through contradictions they produce, they function as grotesque.
Definitions

Even while language fails in the instance of experiencing the grotesque, I will nevertheless provide a working definition of “grotesque” based on the work of several theorists. To identify the grotesque, I need to first define the “grotesque body” and “grotesque experience.” When coupled, these two elements create what I call the grotesque. Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin stress the inclusion of discarded and rejected elements of the body in creating the “grotesque body.” The body’s holes, orifices, and rejected parts and fluids make the body grotesque. By underscoring these elements, the body is lowered to grotesqueness. Bakhtin correctly places the emphasis on

the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body. (26)

The grotesque body is one example of an artifact that fits within the framework of the “grotesque.” Other types of artifacts may include images, literature, and fine art objects.

To further define “grotesque,” I now define the “grotesque experience.” The grotesque experience is the alogical interval, as marked by literary theorist Geoffrey Galt Harpham, where language fails between the initial perception of the artifact and the ensuing process of rationalization or interpretation that follows. The grotesque experience is the ambivalent visceral response between a perceptual experience and an immediately incomprehensible intellectual
challenge. The grotesque, then, refers to the aesthetic considerations of the grotesque artifacts and the grotesque experience.

In this study, I attempt to articulate the function of the grotesque body as it relates to the public memory of concentration camp prisoners in World War II. When I use the term “memory,” I do not refer to the individual act of recalling events. Rather, in this context, memory refers to the creation of a collective remembrance to help “heal” a public trauma. The photographs released following World War II performed this task of creating a public memory.

Besides creating this memory, photographs from World War II also function as a source for the construction of “postmemory.” Literary critic Marianne Hirsch, in her essay “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” writes,

> Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as narratives and images with which they grew up, but are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right.

(218-19)

However, children are not the only ones who can experience postmemory: “this form of remembrance need not be restricted to the family, or even to a group that shares an ethnic or national identity marking: through particular forms of identification, adoption, and projection, it can be more broadly available” (220). The culture of the United States continues to include a strong postmemory response to World War II. Postmemory offers a useful tool in examining both the artifacts of representation and the cultural conditions reflected in the representations. Hirsch writes, “Postmemory offers us a model for reading both the striking fact of representation and the particular canonized images themselves” (267).
Allied soldiers also took photographs for purposes of “documentation.” By documentation, I refer to the need of soldiers “to record scenes for history” (Zelizer, “Finding Aids” 701). As media critic Barbie Zelizer writes, “The aim here was clearly to construct a visual template that could help individuals take responsibility for what they saw” (“Finding Aids” 701). The documentation is a collective act for collective purposes. I contrast this use of the photos with contemporary uses of photographs which alter the collective performance of viewing these images.

After their initial release following the liberation of the concentration camps, the photographs taken by Allied soldiers were framed to tell the “war story.” Shortly thereafter, however, the presence of the photographs shifted the “war story” to the “atrocity story” – thereby becoming “atrocity photographs.” The “war story” refers to the collective Allied war effort during World War II, primarily including the military activities. The “atrocity photographs” changed the story from one of the war to one of the victimization and persecution of specific populations, primarily the Jews. The “atrocity story” predates the war and includes the actions of the Nazis in their efforts at genocide. The “atrocity story” therefore no longer told of the war efforts in Europe. Sometimes the photographs are framed in the “liberation story,” which, unlike the atrocity story which predates the war, consists of a shorter timeframe and isolates the efforts of Allied soldiers to free the camps.

**Literature Review**

Much has been written concerning the grotesque. Bakhtin provides a foundational study in *Rabelais and His World*, in which he sets forth an understanding of the grotesque, or material, body. While Bakhtin offers a framework for the grotesque body, I agree with literary scholar
Wolfgang Kayser and theatre scholar Ralf Remshardt when each argues that Bakhtin overstates the potentiality of the grotesque body in that Bakhtin fails to address the body that rejects collective potentiality. Bakhtin writes,

In grotesque realism [...] the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. (18)

The emaciated bodies of the prisoners are grotesque, but not in Bakhtin’s sense of the grotesque body as “deeply positive.” They do not demonstrate the potential to invert social hierarchies because they are “severed from other spheres of life.” Instead, I argue that they illustrate and support the power structure. The Nazis took the prisoners out of the world and, as a result, denied their bodies. In this respect the bodies of concentration camp prisoners do not entirely fall within a Bakhtinian view of the grotesque body.

Bakhtin describes the elements of the grotesque body when he writes, “the grotesque body […] is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world” (26). The abject body, as constructed by Julia Kristeva, parallels the major principles of the grotesque body set forth by Bakhtin. For Kristeva, the abject body is revealed with the “collapse of the border between inside and outside” (53). Both Kristeva and Bakhtin emphasize the rejected parts of the body (urine, feces, nail clippings, etc.). They also emphasize its porosity. Bodies transgress their borders as does the abject and grotesque. The
body is central in both abjection and grotesque. To establish the scatological condition of the Nazi concentration camps, I turn to concentration camp survivor and psychologist Élie Aron Cohen and his description of the pervasiveness of filth and human excrement in the camps.

As I noted above, Kayser and Remshardt construct their conceptualizations of the grotesque somewhat differently than Bakhtin. Kayser and Remshardt both allow for a less idealized grotesque body. Of the grotesque, Kayser writes, “we smile at the deformations but are appalled by the horrible and monstrous elements” (31). Both Kayser’s and Remshardt’s studies include discussions of theatre, yet both rely on texts and make no comment on embodiment.

In his study addressing the grotesque experience, Geoffrey Harpham identifies some of the elements of the grotesque that prompt physical responses. He explains its attraction-repulsion tendency; moreover, he notes that the grotesque experience is the interval when all language fails between witnessing the artifact/experience and rationalizing it (14-18). Harpham sets forth a way through which the grotesque becomes a useful tool for interrogating fictive texts. His notion of grotesque “foregrounds the mysteries of the process of making and un-making meaning, for it represents the scene of transformation to and from the realm of the meaningful” (40).

In this study, I argue that witnessing the grotesque challenges the spectator’s cultural assumptions and thus creates a visceral and ambivalent response. In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes identifies the same ambivalent response to photography. Barthes argues that specific elements in images can create an experience that leaves the viewer unable to articulate an appropriate response. He calls those elements the *punctum*, that which in the image wounds or pierces the viewer (26). His concept of the *punctum* complements my conception and view of the function of the grotesque.
Significant foundational work exists regarding the cabarets in concentration camps. Theatre historian Rebecca Rovit and theatre scholar Alvin Goldfarb offer the most comprehensive scholarship in this area. Concentration camp survivor and performer Curt Daniel provides further insight into the structure of the cabarets. Other sources of information about the nature and structure of the cabarets include the individual journals of prisoners and autobiographies of survivors. While all of these provide necessary documentation, they offer less in terms of a critical perspective.

Much existing scholarship explores the relationship between the photographic images from World War II and public trauma. Cultural critic Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* proves foundational in this area; nearly every scholar writing about World War II photography and images of public trauma references Sontag’s work. Sontag argues that photography creates a falsely objective view of the thing photographed: “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power” (*On Photography* 4).

Barbie Zelizer also provides significant contributions to the study of the iconography of World War II. She addresses issues of memory and post-memory in relation to the images of World War II. She also examines the effects of viewing, in that the photographs shift from representing the past to becoming objects themselves and no longer referencing the public trauma. My construction of the grotesque as an alogical experience which prompts its own rationalization or interpretation fits within her discussion of the functions of photographs. She writes, “For many, seeing at some level constitutes believing. In that regard, photos offer a vehicle by which individuals can see until the shock and trauma associated with disbelieving can be worked through” (“Finding Aids” 699).
Marianne Hirsch and art historian Carol Zemel provide different perspectives from those of Zelizer and Sontag for contemporary appropriations of the atrocity photographs. Hirsch contends that the circulation of the few repeated images provides insight into the images and the forces that circulate them. Zemel argues that the repeated circulation of a few images has turned the atrocity photos into icons or emblems of atrocity.

**Methodology**

I primarily rely on two methodologies in this study, the grotesque and reader response criticism. However, I use two other theoretical considerations in the application of the grotesque to the performance of cabarets and the performance of viewing photographs, areas traditionally left unexamined by scholars of the grotesque, to more appropriately suit its application. First, to examine the cabaret performances, I apply performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz’s principle of “disidentification” to the grotesque. Muñoz offers a framework through which I can view these performances at the contact point where the dominant culture of the Nazis concentration camp meets the distinct culture of the prisoners. I incorporate Zelizer’s theories of remembrance into my definition of the grotesque to study both the grotesque bodies in the photographs of prisoners and the viewing performance of those photographs, both following the photos’ release and in contemporary contexts. I also use reader response criticism to examine reception of the photographs.

I apply a framework built on the each understanding of the grotesque in each of the three case studies. The grotesque includes certain identification “markers.” In these case studies, I focus on issues of debasement, excess, and hybridity or fusion. I identify the grotesque as a means to examine the attraction/repulsion impulses in the reception of the cabaret performances.
and images of the bodies in the photographs. As Harpham writes, “Broadly and basically speaking, we apprehend the grotesque in the presence of an entity – an image, object, experience – simultaneously justifying multiple and mutually exclusive interpretations which commonly stand in relation of high to low, human to subhuman, divine to human, normative to abnormal with the unifying principle sensed” (14). Regarding the cabarets and the bodies as grotesque allows me to view these performances within the circumstances that would appear to deny them. I do so, for as literary critics Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write, “If we can grasp the extremes which encode the body, the social order, psychic form and spatial location, we thereby lay bare a major framework of discourse within which any further ‘redress of balance’ or judicious qualification must take place” (3).

Muñoz’s principle of “disidentification” complements a grotesque analysis for how it helps explicate the cultural performance of these cabarets. Disidentification “transforms a cultural logic from within” (Muñoz 11). By revealing the contradictions embedded in the performances, I hope to offer an alternative to the denial of the bodies in cabarets. The application of disidentification to my definition of grotesque allows me to view these performances as affirmations of the concealed prisoners’ identities by exposing the contradictory social conditions which undergird the performances. Political scientist James C. Scott, in his book *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, provides me with another conceptual lens to further investigate the cultural performance of resistance.

I use Zelizer’s work on remembrance of World War II through photographs to identify the grotesque body as an element in the photographs that facilitates the mourning and reconciliation processes of the collective tragedy. I use theories of photography and the grotesque to construct the photograph as a site of performance where the viewer “plays out” the
collective effort to cope with the evidence and unbelievable nature of the atrocities of World War II. The photograph both essentializes and fragments that which it seeks to represent. As such, it works as a work of fiction in need of interpretation.

Zelizer writes, “Collective memories allow for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about the past, often pushing aside accuracy and authenticity so as to accommodate broader issues of identity formation, power and authority, and political affiliation” (Remembering to Forget 3). The photographs accommodate the different agendas the new users intend. The bodies in the photographs are co-opted into creating a reception of those accommodations.

To examine the performance of viewing the photographs I will use reader response criticism. The photograph serves not as a captured authentic historical moment, but rather as a representation of that moment. Similarly, the photos are not the bodies of the prisoners, but rather representations of the bodies. The process of reading a representation functions as a performance by assisting the viewer to create meaning. Literary scholar Wolfgang Iser compares the experience of actors to that of the viewer when he writes, “For the duration of the performance we are both ourselves and someone else. Staging oneself as someone else is a source of aesthetic pleasure; it is also the means whereby representation is transferred from text to reader” (244). The photographs become the script for the construction of meaning. The reception of the grotesque bodies shifts when the context changes from addressing the photograph’s referent to public trauma, to the furthering of private interests. Viewers can make these grotesque bodies participate in “contradictory meanings” as their reading strategies differ (Fish 467).
Research Questions

In this study, I will apply the grotesque to the cabaret performances and photographic images of concentration camp prisoners. I will explore the clandestine cabarets as grotesque performances of occluded bodies, examine how we received the revelation of the grotesque bodies in the photographs by Allied soldiers, and analyze contemporary reception of the bodies in photographs in contemporary appropriations. In doing so, I shall endeavor to answer the following questions:

- What makes cabaret performances in Nazi concentration camps grotesque?
- What does that fact that prisoners performed cabarets under seemingly unimaginable conditions reveal about the social dynamics in concentration camps?
- How does a grotesque view of the performances explicate those social forces?
- How do we perform the viewing of the atrocity photographs?
- What is the role of the grotesque body in performing the public memory of World War II?
- How has the role of the grotesque body in the atrocity photographs changed as the photographs are placed in new contexts?
- How do the new contexts change our performance of viewing the grotesque body?

I do not presume to offer a comprehensive understanding of grotesque performance; rather, I am initiating a conversation by looking at one of the most grotesque events of the twentieth century – the Holocaust. I write this study fully aware that the selection process for these images naturally represents another example of the re-appropriation of the image (as detailed in chapter three). One additional danger in any study of cabarets in concentration camps
may be to skew the view of life conditions in concentration camps. Every personal account from prisoners spells out explicitly the horrors and nearly intolerable conditions they faced daily. My discussion of the cabaret performances should not minimize those conditions. Cabarets did not make life “good.” It is my hope that, by using the grotesque, that the performances can be understood within the larger contextual frame of the Nazis’ atrocities.

**Tentative Chapter Breakdown**

In chapter one, “Hidden Performances – Cabaret Performances in Nazi Concentration Camps as Grotesque,” I provide a brief description of the performances and use the framework of the grotesque with Muñoz’s work on disidentification and Scott’s conception of “hidden transcripts” to explore the function of these performances. I contend that the critical lenses of the grotesque and disidentification provide a means to examine the elements of the performances and to tease out the nature and conditions of these performances.

In chapter two, “Revelatory Performances – Photographs of the Bodies of Concentration Camp Survivors as Grotesque,” I study the photographs of prisoners released after the war. I provide a close reading of the bodies in these photographs as a viewing performance, utilizing the grotesque, the theories of photography presented by Sontag and Zelizer, and the contemporary performance theories of Julia Kristeva and Peggy Phelan. I provide a reading of the visual rhetoric of the oppressed body under alteration based on reader response theory. The photographs for analysis for this chapter come from public domain photographs in the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website. I conclude that the grotesque body in the image presents a formal element of the photograph which fosters collective recovery, but also prevents a complete recovery from the traumas of World War II.
In the chapter three, “Over-exposed Performances – Contemporary Performances of Grotesque Bodies Contained in Prisoner Photographs,” I focus on the performance of the bodies in one specific photograph recontextualized in contemporary usages. The United State Army, libertarian.nl, Kerryfest, and my work on *Cabaret* all used this one image to different ends. Using Hirsch’s and Zemel’s construction of the atrocity photograph as an icon of atrocity, I look at the ways the new contexts alter the viewing performance. The recontextualizations have moved the performance of viewing from a performance of another’s identity to the performance of no identity. The body of the represented survivor or victim is now a body without a history, a culture, or a specific meaning.

In the conclusion, I find that the grotesque body is a dislocated object, disassociated from spheres of life. Only through performance can we ascribe meaning to the grotesque body and elicit meaning from it. The attraction-repulsion ambivalence inherent in the grotesque allows it to function as a tool for social contestation. The grotesque bodies of the cabaret performances and in the photographs challenged, and continue to challenge, the “facts” of World War II and the Holocaust. Studying the performances necessitates a new understanding of the dynamics in the relationship between different groups of prisoners, guards, and prison officials. The photographs provided, and provide, proof of the unimaginable. As proof, however, the grotesque bodies of the atrocity photographs also “prove” more than the Holocaust. Those who utilize the photographs to make political and personal statements also risk the “re-disappearance” of the bodies. By further dislocating the bodies from the historical moment in which they were created and the social conditions which created them, those appropriating the image of the grotesque body risk removing the bodies from history.
CHAPTER ONE: HIDDEN PERFORMANCES – CABARET PERFORMANCES IN NAZI
CONCENTRATION CAMPS AS GROTESQUE

In this chapter, I apply my construction of the grotesque to examine cabaret performances by prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. By using the grotesque to frame these performances I reveal contradictions within the social structures in the camps that both compelled and denied the performances. As theatre historian Rebecca Rovit writes, “Attempts to understand the phenomenon of performance under duress inevitably reveal factors that may contradict one another in suggesting why and how individual artists engaged in theatrical activity” (460). The forms of these cabarets reveal the contradictions of performance. Prisoners performed in cabarets authorized by the camp commander, in semi-official cabarets permitted by guards but not camp administrators, and in clandestine cabarets. While each form demonstrates similar patterns, each form also demonstrates different dynamics at play in the camp.

Here, I use an analysis of cabaret performances to interrogate the system of extreme conditions in the camps that simultaneously justified and de-legitimized the social structures. I begin this chapter by looking at the form and content of prisoner cabarets. I then employ some elements of the grotesque as a frame to show the cultural ambivalences embedded in these performances. Following that, I demonstrate the way these cultural ambivalences manifested in the different performance types. The degradation and the persistent threat of death functioned simultaneously as forces used by the Nazis to maintain their power and their authority and forces that spurred acts of resistance by the internees.
Cabaret in the Camps

While the types of performances and their official statuses vary from camp to camp, I will use anecdotal accounts from different camps to construct a representative model of the performances. I am not attempting to essentialize camp conditions, but rather to identify specific structures from the anecdotes in order to explore some of the contradictions between the life conditions in the camps and the drive to perform cabarets of song, poetry, and humor. The form of the performances affected their content and their impact on the power relations between different groups of prisoners, guards, and prison administrators.

Official performances were those authorized or commanded by camp officials. These were often attended by prison officials, Nazi officers and guards, and prisoners. Commanders frequently preferred cabarets over other theatrical activities because of the relative ease of production and popularity (Goldfarb 8). Cabarets presented camp commanders with an inexpensive way to improve prisoner and guard morale and quell discontent. Semi-official cabarets were those that were not organized by camp officials, but rather were permitted by Nazi officers or barracks commanders. Despite the lack of attendance by administrators, internees would still not have the freedom to express dissent.

Clandestine cabarets provided prisoners with an avenue for political expression. Daniel refers to the clandestine cabarets of Dachau as “the freest theatre in the Third Reich” (801). The most dangerous cabarets for the prisoners to perform were the clandestine cabarets. Although they were the most dangerous, they were the most common form of theatrical activity within the camp system (Goldfarb 4). According to Daniel, while cabarets were not explicitly forbidden by camp officials, discovery would have “automatically” resulted in the torture or death of internees.
Regardless of the structure of the camp, the discovery of subversive activities resulted in brutal punishment.

The structure and leadership of each camp affected the degree of sanctioning that took place. For example, Westerbork and Theresienstadt, both transit camps, held multiple officially organized cabarets attended by camp officials, SS officers, and prisoners. In Dachau, an extermination camp, official and semi-official cabarets were non-existent (Daniel 801). Nonetheless, each camp performed clandestine cabarets. While official and semi-official cabarets provided prisoners with some relief from their daily lives, clandestine cabarets gave prisoners greater opportunity for the construction and expression of their culture and identity. Daniel describes the circumstances under which prisoners were able to perform clandestine cabarets in Dachau,

The only day in the week when there could be anything in the way of entertainment was Sunday. On this day there was none of the hard work characteristic of the week days, although the morning was spent in cleaning up the camp huts and in roll call. In the afternoon and evening the prisoners were left to themselves. On alternate Sundays the prisoners were permitted to write brief letters home or to read the newspapers (In Dachau, unlike the other camps, it was permitted to read any newspaper printed in Germany). As far as the S.S. guards were concerned, the dead hour for the camp was around 4 P.M. Under ordinary circumstances there would be no S.S. men nearer than the watch-towers surrounding the camp. The prisoners took this opportunity to create their own organized entertainment. (802-803)
While authorized performances largely consisted of traditional cabaret numbers, the content of clandestine cabarets varied. I break the content into two styles: political and non-political. Performers at political cabarets emphasized satire in their scenes and songs. In Buchenwald, the performances consisted of five men moving from hut to hut in the evening during the week (Daniel 805).

Non-political cabarets consisted of professional performers who were more likely to perform the material they performed prior to internment. Daniel also describes the format of the non-political cabarets:

The performances generally took place inside a hut, with some hundreds of prisoners grouped in a circle around the artists. Sentries were posted at the ends of the huts to make certain that there were no S.S. men in the locality. At times there might be three shows running simultaneously in three huts. The ‘Stars’ ran from one hut to another for their turns. (804)

While prisoners at official and semi-official cabarets could not perform scenes openly critical of the Third Reich., they subtly commented on camp conditions in their performances. Daniel writes of a professional cabaret compère who hosted an authorized cabaret in Buchenwald. Daniel describes the patter as follows:

‘You know, times don't really change. I remember that when we had the Kaiser, we always had swine pushing us around. Later when we had the Republic, was it any different? No, we still had swine pushing us around. And what of today?’ He waited for an answer. The air was electric as the prisoners watched the S.S. men out of the corners of their eyes. No
answer. He answered the question himself. ‘Why, today is Monday.’

(Daniel 805)

While not openly calling the Nazi regime “swine,” the compère insinuates how things remain unchanged from one regime of swine to another. In some instances, the subtle mockery in the performances did not “vex” prison officials (Goldfarb 6). Auschwitz-Birkenau survivor Philip Mechanicus describes how the performers muted their political discourse for the sake of safety: “The revue was a mixture of antiquated sketches and mild ridicule of conditions and circumstances prevailing at the camp. Not a single sharp word, not a single harsh word, but a little gentle irony in the passing, avoiding the main issues. A compromise” (146). In Buchenwald, though, prisoners did not enjoy the authorized performances because many SS officials and guards were nearby; therefore, prisoners placed more importance on the secret performances to provide relief (Daniel 803).

While prisoners often filled the performance spaces, they received the performances with ambivalence. Some enjoyed the relief and boost in morale from the authorized performances. Others were bothered by the idea of joy in an environment predicated on the death of the prisoners. Despite attending the performances, some shared the ambivalence of others. Mechanicus describes attending one performance in Auschwitz: “Absolutely packed. Old numbers that had been refurbished, well acted. A great part of the programme consisted of dancing by revue girls with bare legs…Went home with a feeling of disgust” (176). Even many prisoners who disapproved of the performance attended; as Mechanicus adds, “Silently protesting, they give way to the vital demands of life” (159).

Despite the ambivalence, cabarets provided several advantages for the internees. Performers had a chance to practice their craft and all of the benefits it afforded. Cabarets gave
spectators the chance to escape, if not physically, then psychically, even if only temporarily. Attendance afforded prisoners a chance to get out of the barracks and their accompanying filth. The break from the usual drudgeries of life also allowed for a boost in prisoners’ morale through the songs, poems, laughter, and socialization. In unimaginable conditions, the prisoners sang and laughed.

**Cabarets as Grotesque**

The unimaginable contrast between camp conditions and camp cabarets provides an entry point for a discussion of the cabarets as grotesque performances. The unimaginable, or the ambivalent, is a hallmark of the grotesque – or as literary scholar Phillip Thompson calls it, the “unresolved clash of incompatibles” (*The Grotesque*). Certainly, one may find difficulty in comprehending the appropriateness of songs and humor in the horrible conditions of Nazi concentration camps. However, we aren’t the only ones faced with the “unresolved clash of incompatibles”; the prisoners also felt the contradiction. Holocaust survivor Max Garcia writes of this internal dilemma, “Just imagine this song with these guys playing and me singing…In that rotten camp…Singing to the SS…This is an absurd scene…People are dying around you; I mean, they’re being gassed. And then you do this…You’re singing in the middle of hell” (qtd. in Rovit 475-76). Mechanicus describes the performance environment as “an atmosphere of painful melancholy and suffering hangs like a haze” (159).

Even consideration of the motives of the prisoners presents a grotesque clash. Rovit argues that intent does not break into discrete categories, “For each assumed motivation – whether selfish or selfless – the opposite is just as likely to have been present” (Rovit 476-77). Selflessly, prisoners performed to boost morale, to build unity among inmates, to provide an
escape, and to express their cultural identity. Conversely, selfish motives for performing prisoners included the gratification of performance, their own escape, better *kommandos* (prisoner work details), and better housing and food. The world of concentration camps challenged inmates to adapt to a world that left them alienated from the rest of the world.

We, too, are challenged to comprehend this alienation. Kayser writes of the “alienated world” (185), a familiar world revealed as sinister, but we may better understand concentration camps as “an alien world made real.” We read, hear, and see accounts of Nazi atrocities and construct a world that is alien, sinister, and, most importantly, not ours. Yet, when we hear of laughter and singing in such brutal conditions, we realize that the alien world is ours. We can no longer distance ourselves from the events of World War II. The contradiction of singing and laughing in the world of atrocities forces us to confront what we have dismissed, or imagine the unimaginable. The sacred and profane exist in the same place and at the same time. The conflict becomes grotesque because, as Germanic studies scholar Edward Diller writes, “The grotesque leads us into, and forces us to recognize, the paradox – a relationship of ideas to reality, that cannot be comprehended” (334). In addition to this alienation, the grotesque has other defining characteristics.

*Fusion*

An element commonly associated with the grotesque is that of fusion. Fusion, or hybridization, occurs when two oppositional elements are merged in such a way that both elements lose their previous identity without providing an immediate identity for the newly created hybrid. Prior to World War II, cabarets represented a European culture of (relative) freedom and decadence. Cabarets also allowed various social groups to come together in a
celebration of art, life and cultures. Concentration camps represent a culture antithetical to freedom. The Nazis determined nearly every aspect of the prisoners’ lives and any overt resistance meant punishment, including death. By identifying the contact point between the two competing cultures I can clarify the fused dynamics of the concentration camp social structure. As Stallybrass and White write, “Hybridization allows for the possibility of shifting the very terms of the system itself. It forces us to confront the relationship between the oppositional forces” (58, emphasis in original). The grotesque occurs in the failure to make sense of that relationship.

In the face of contradictions, people naturally seek to re-establish order. This need may be innate as “cultures strive for unity and order” (Morson and Emerson 140). Harpham argues that modern logic is built on “the avoidance of contradiction,” so we build hierarchies to avoid contradictions (53). As systems disrupt and we are faced with extreme contradiction, language temporarily arrests. We attempt to restore order when experiencing a disruption in that order. The grotesque works within hierarchical social structures and reveals contradictions therein. The hierarchical social structure provides “a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense-making” (Stallybrass and White 3). The result of this rationalization process is often a hybrid. The significance of fusion or hybridization lies not in the simple mixing of two things, but rather grotesque hybrids fused together two incompatible items. The viewer or spectator is left to rationalize the absurd mixture.

José Esteban Muñoz’ concept of “disidentification” performances, or the process by which artists “reformulate the actual performativity” of their identity, contains similar elements to grotesque fusions in art and literature (x). Disidentification fits within my construct of prisoner cabarets as grotesque performance. Like the grotesque, disidentification works within the system
to expose its contradictions. Each grotesque artifact functions as a challenge to cultural norms of identity, each works within the dominant ideology to reveal contradictions while neither affirming nor rejecting those embedded assumptions, and each creates immediately unrecognizable hybrids. The purpose behind both is to show the contradiction in the dominant cultural formation by activating the spectator. “Disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (Muñoz 31). The concentration camp performers took a cultural performance and recast it in re-conditioned bodies to create disidentification.

Prisoners took the pre-existing cabaret and ethnic cultures into the camps to fashion a hybrid identity. Cabarets occur at the “point of collision” where the subhuman conditions of the camps meet the previous identities of the prisoners, or “the moment of negotiation when hybrid identities arrive at representation” (Muñoz 6). The disidentificatory capacities of the political cabarets seem a clearer expression of culture than performances using standard cabaret texts. However, the non-political cabarets, whether clandestine or authorized, may have had a greater effect on prisoner identity because performers redeployed the traditional cabaret scripts into an environment upon which it invariably commented. The environment of the camps was necessarily a factor in the selection of poems, songs, and skits. Muñoz writes that public performances have a distinct impact on the hybrid identity, “The importance of public and semipublic enactments of this hybrid self cannot be undervalued in relation to the formation of counterpublics that contest the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere” (1).

In the concentration camps, prisoners were forced to create their own identities because the Nazis denied their physical identities as they were sequestered in camps and their social
identities depriving them of their names and giving them numbers. The prisoners created a group identity based on the stars on their clothes, their emaciated bodies, the surrounding filth, and their lives prior to internment that included a festive and freer social system. Neither their pre-camp identity nor the Nazi identity applied to them any longer; they were not allowed the social freedom of the previous cabarets, yet did not consider themselves prisoners. Cohen writes that “there was not the slightest occasion to regard themselves as prisoners. This feeling of being innocent and yet having to suffer all this misery aroused self-pity and weakened the energy that was essential for survival” (144). In response, the prisoners needed a way to counter the demoralization resulting from imprisonment. They took their previous culture, now marginalized, and recast it within the dominant oppressive culture to create a hybrid prisoner identity. The creation of a new identity was not merely a symbolic act because, as Muñoz writes, disidentification is “a survival strategy” (18). Their bodies and culture needed a new identity.

The cabaret performances assisted in this creation of a new identity. Muñoz calls the fiction of performance “a technology of the self” because the “real self” who comes into being through fiction is not the self who produces fiction, but is instead produced by fiction. Binaries begin to falter and fiction becomes real; which is to say that the truth effect of ideological grids is broken down” (20). When fictions turn real we can experience the grotesque. When we witness the real renegotiated, we can see disidentifications

Hybridization occurs as part of the negotiation between the majority and minority culture. The cultures engage in a symbolic dialog. The dialogic negotiation constitutes “a specific way of conceptualizing, understanding, and evaluating the world” (Morson and Emerson 141). Dialogizing occurs when the language of the subordinates meets the language of those in power. The language of the prisoners created a hybrid with the language of the officials in the authorized
performances and yet separate codes are active – one for the officials and one for the prisoners — each expressing a different way of viewing the world. The performers engaged in indirect negotiations with the Nazis and subtle satire against them.

Filth

My analysis of the grotesque relies on the principle of degradation, or the lowering of an other. As the grotesque interrogates hierarchical social structures, degradation challenges the high/low boundary by challenging the fixity of that structure. Stallybrass and White argue that the high/low distinction is fundamental to the construction of all hierarchies; that is, “cultural categories of high and low, social and aesthetic – hierarchies of social order, human body, geographic space, and psychic forms are all interrelated into categories of high and low” (2). By examining lowering through degradation, we can see the attraction-repulsion impulse of the Nazis toward the Jews. Degradation was necessary to justify and actualize their superiority. In the case of concentration camps, degradation took multiple forms, primarily through filth – the excrements of the body. The atrocious conditions of the camps demonstrate the grotesqueness in which the cabarets took place.

Filth connotes decay and collapse. It shows the body falling apart and its insides coming out. The matter expelled from the body lowers all of us. In that way it is universalizing; we are all subject to lowering. However, the extreme status-degradation by the inescapable contaminating presence of filth aggravated the social discrepancy between prisoner and officer. By examining the filthy conditions as degradation, we can also see the ambivalence in the actions of the Nazis toward the Jews.
In this thesis, I use “degradation” and “defilement” interchangeably. Where Bakhtin and other scholars of the grotesque identify degradation, Kristeva uses the term “defilement.” Again, I contend Bakhtin and Kristeva are constructing the terms similarly. Both degradation and defilement occur through exposure to filth, or the matter expelled by the body. The primary difference between Bakhtin’s degradation and Kristeva’s abjection is their treatments of the concepts. For Bakhtin, degradation constitutes a celebration of the low as the low is the center and the high exists on the margins (19). Kristeva, however, constitutes defilement as an element of psychic fear, employed by the speaking subject (the high) to reinforce the separation between high and low, male and female. For Kristeva, filth marginalizes (69). In this paper, my construction of the lowering principle follows Kristeva’s idea of defilement, as seen in the Nazis’ defilement the Jews, from a position of dominance against a position of oppressed. In the case of concentration camps, the Jews are lowered by means of the filth.

Filth pulls its subject, in this case the Jews, further into the margins. Bakhtin’s grotesque body lowers the high by placing it in the margins and bringing it toward the earthly. Kristeva constructs filth as relating to the margins boundary. Both, though, construct filth as a lowering object. The filth that was a part of the daily life of internees threatened the identity of those prisoners. Kristeva writes, “Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpses, etc.) stand for the danger of identity that comes from without; the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life and death” (71). Filth materially and symbolically placed the prisoners on the margins.

In concentration camps, filth takes on specific physical manifestations. More importantly, though, filth moves from the realm of the physical to that of the symbolic. That is, filth is also a symbolic defilement and degradation. Nothing in excrement inherently defiles. Filth is degrading
or defiling because we have constructed it that way. Filth symbolically lowers the other. Filth represents a way to physically manifest the attraction-repulsion of the other by encoding the body of the other.

In considering defilement, we can see the ambivalent relationship of the Nazis toward the Jews. Filth demonstrates the “frailty of the symbolic order” (Kristeva 69). Filth was necessary for the Nazis to ensure and reinforce their social position out of both fear and desire. The prohibitions showed “strong concern” for separation of the one from the other (Kristeva 70). Nazis used filth to preserve their own identity and status, or, as Kristeva writes of filth “as one encoding of the differentiation of the speaking subject as such, a coding of his repulsion in relation to the other in order to autonomize himself” (82, emphasis in original). Thus, the Nazis needed the presence of the low-status Jews in order to preserve and exalt their own high-status identity. Stallybrass and White identify a recurring pattern with the use of degradation and the grotesque, wherein “the ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate the ‘bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependant on that low-Other…but also that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life” (5). The Nazis conflict between their desire for Jews and their fear of them resulted in prohibitions and degradation.

Kristeva constructs defilement as necessarily about sexual difference, the separation of the male and female (82). I contend that defilement also blurs sexual distinction through its construction of something that feminizes the other. For Bakhtin, filth is universal and denies all sexual distinctions. In contrast, Kristeva recognizes the Jew as a feminized other due to that ethnicity’s abjection. The differentiation between pure/impure reinforces sexual difference
whereby impure is equated with female. Through the act exposure to filth, the Nazis degraded the Jews because filth, in part, feminizes.

*Excess*

Although filth always defiles what it touches, the amount of filth brings that defilement to the level of the grotesque. The extreme status degradation aggravated the social discrepancy between prisoner and officer. A critical determinant in the grotesque is the existence of an excess in condition. The grotesqueness lies not only in the filth, but also the excessive aggravation of social positions. Excess provides a quantitative aspect to the grotesque. Importantly, Quantitative evaluations heighten the qualities of the elements in contradiction in order to bring both of those elements to the fore, rather than the conditions remaining inconsequential. Thus, seeing the grotesque arrest language because that fusion, juxtaposition, or degradation reaches a level that defies understanding. Excess exposes the cultural assumptions at play in the grotesque object or event. Anthropologist James C. Scott writes that the excess clarifies distinctions in power relations as “the most severe conditions of powerlessness and dependency would be diagnostic” and “most sharply etched” (x). The degradation demonstrates the degree of powerlessness of the Jews in the camps.

Sanitary conditions for camp prisoners were abysmal, meeting the standard of excess necessary for a grotesque understanding of the camps. The extreme prevalence of filth affected the physically, psychically, and socially. Physically, filth covered their bodies and brought disease. Auschwitz survivor Giselle Perl writes,

> There was one latrine for thirty to thirty-two thousand women and we were permitted to use it only at certain hours of the day. We stood in line
to get into this tiny building, knee-deep in human excrement. As we all suffered from dysentery, we could rarely wait until our turn came, and soiled our ragged clothes, which never came off our bodies, thus adding to the horror of our existence by the terrible smell which surrounded us like a cloud. The latrine consisted of a deep ditch with planks thrown across them at certain intervals. We squatted on those planks like birds perched on a telegraph wire, so close together that we could not help soiling one another. (qtd. in Des Pres 54)

This defilement also had a profound effect on the psychology of the prisoners. Auschwitz survivor Reska Weiss writes about how the defilement dehumanized the prisoners: “Urine and excreta poured down the prisoners’ leg and by nightfall the excrement, which had frozen to our limbs, gave off its stench. We were no longer human beings in the accepted sense. Not even animals, but putrefying corpses moving on two legs” (qtd. in Des Pres 57). This degradation had a significant psychological effect not only on the prisoners, but on the officers as well.

“[Degradation of the prisoners] made it easier for the SS to do their job. It made mass murder less terrible to the murderers, because the victims appeared less and less human. They looked inferior” (Des Pres 61, emphasis in original). Because of this, Donat writes, “It was almost an iron law: those who failed to wash every day soon died” (qtd. in Des Pres 64). Therefore, for the prisoners, resisting defilement became a physical and symbolic means of survival.

For the prisoners to perform cabarets in such a debasing environment defies belief. The scatological conditions in the camps were in excess to the degree necessary for the grotesque. When considered in relation to cabaret performances under these conditions the degradation increases the social discrepancy between Jews and Nazis. Also, excess degradation is necessary
in order to relegate the other to the status of an animal, because labeling someone a non-human allows extermination of that defiled other to be more easily justified. Stallybrass and White argue that grotesque realism is a physical manifestation of social conditions, in that “Grotesque realism uses the material body – flesh conceptualized as corpulent excess – to represent cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world” (8-9). The inverse is equally true. The social and the spiritual materialize in the body. Holocaust scholar Terrence Des Pres writes,

In extremity man is stripped of his expanded spiritual identity. Only concrete forms of existence remain, actual life and actual death, actual pain and actual defilement; and these now constitute the medium of moral and spiritual being. Spirit does not simply vanish when sublimation fails. At the cost of much of its freedom falls back to the ground and origin of meaning – back, that is, to the physical experience of the body. Which is another way of saying that, in extremity, symbols tend to actualize. (69)

The degree to which the Nazis sought control over the Jews reflects their desire-fear ambivalence. In the case of the bodies of concentration camps inmates, the excess also takes place in how it was excessively absented – the body was reduced, but remained a representation of the social hierarchies. Nazis needed the Jews’ emaciated bodies in order to perform their own identity – to perform and to display their “superior” identity. The Nazis degraded the Jews as a demonstration of their self-actualization.

The Jew

A long tradition of the grotesque in art includes religion, specifically Christianity, as a foundation for constructions of the other. Artists juxtaposed other religions against Christianity
in creating the grotesque. Christian appropriation of artifacts and images from those non-Christian cultures created were grotesque fusions in content between plants, animals, and humans, in Classical, medieval, and Renaissance iconography. In instances of Christian appropriation, the grotesque demonstrated a “celebration of Christian triumph” (Farnham 30). The grotesque was not designed to question the dominant religious ideology (in this case Christianity), but rather to elevate the faith and reinforce Christian values in its various audiences. In this way, Christians sought the rejection of the hybrid rather than the rejection of the social order. Artist Ewa Kuryluk argues that early Christian grotesque imagery challenged cultural assumptions by ingraining moral dualisms: “The visual arts translated Christianity’s moral dualisms into the polarity of the ‘right’ and ‘left,’ the ‘up’ and ‘down,’ the ‘male’ and ‘female,’ ‘life’ and ‘death’” (17).

Fig. 1. Fifteenth century German woodcut by an unknown artist

Specifically, Christian grotesque imagery includes images of the Jew represented opposition to the dominant European Christian ideology. Grotesque images in medieval and Renaissance art often show the Jew juxtaposed with an animal. The man-animal fusion is a common theme in the grotesque, because the juxtaposition questions the hierarchy of man over
animal by placing man in an equal or lower position than the animal. Anti-Semitic medieval European prints, woodcuts, and sculptures show the *judensau*, or “Jews’ Pig” – a Jew or Jews suckling at the teats of a much larger sow. Occasionally, the picture of the *judensau* will feature a Jew eating the excrement (Fig. 1).

During the Renaissance, painters often depicted the Jewish princess Salome in grotesque fashion. The paintings, which show Salome holding the severed head of John the Baptist, highlight Salome’s Jewish physical traits. High Renaissance artist Bernardino Luini painted several depictions of Salome, many showing her satisfaction with the decapitation. (Fig. 2) For the purposes of my study, the history of the Jew in grotesque art demonstrates the aspect of the grotesque that does not challenge dominant ideology, but rather reinforces it by delegitimatizing Judaism. The Jew as other manifested itself in the actions of Europeans, not just the arts.

![Salome Receiving the Head of John the Baptist, Bernardino Luini, 16th c.](image-url)

Fig. 2. *Salome Receiving the Head of John the Baptist*, Bernardino Luini, 16th c.
Bakhtin uses Renaissance carnival as a leading example of the leveling possibility of grotesque realism. Carnival provided European populations with an opportunity to “blow off steam” prior to Lent. Importantly, carnival remained, however, a church-sanctioned or church-tolerated event. Bakhtin argues that carnival was a place of inversion, a leveling of the high and a valorization of the low. However, because the leveling took place within the Christian ideology, non-Christian groups, including Jews, were often persecuted during this period of inversion. According to Stallybrass and White, “…during carnival Jews were seen as outside of carnival and were target for violence – the revelers could not displace the church, other than symbolically, and because Lent was the defeat of carnival (the outside), they target another outside” (54-5). The grotesqueness lies in the excessive distancing between high and low: the low is lowered; the high is elevated.

Contemporary assumptions about the Jew in society provide another source for an understanding of the grotesque through which to consider the construction of cabarets in Nazi concentration camps. The cabaret performances allow us to interrogate our “fantasies and deliriums” when we attempt to “globalize, unify, or totalize” (Kristeva 178). Contemporary constructions of the Jew ignore the Jew as artist. Kristeva argues that negative constructions of the Jew do not include the Jew as artist because “The Jew is the prototype of the intellectual, the superintellectual, so to speak…he is incapable of art” (184). Negative constructions of the Jew demonstrate grotesque and abjected social ambivalence toward the other.

“The Jew becomes the feminine exalted to the point of mastery, the inspired master, the ambivalent, the border where exact limits between same and other, subject and other, and even beyond these, between inside and outside, and
disappearing – hence an Object of fear and fascination. Abjection itself. He is abject: dirty, rotten” (Kristeva 185).

Also, the religious basis of much of the grotesque imagery demonstrates the contradictions within a dominant Euro-American Christian ideology. The image of the Jew produces the attraction-repulsion dynamic inherent in the grotesque. Kristeva identifies the Jew as model of abjection because he is “the exemplar of all hatred, of all desire, of all fear of the Symbolic” (180). Jewish abjection overflows a strictly religious formation to infiltrate broader cultural institutions. Kristeva argues that anti-Semitism becomes “the sociological thrill, flush with history, that believers and nonbelievers alike seek in order to experience abjection” because the Jew is both “phantasmatic and ambivalent” (180).

When constructed in this way, the Jew represents the desire-fear impulse at the cornerstone of the grotesque. The conditions of the grotesque show how degradation, fusion, and excess in regards to the Jew encode the way in which we can evaluate the cabarets of concentration camps. The abjection of the Jew allowed the Nazis to establish their own identity. “Only a genuine other consciousness can draw convincing boundaries for us, complete us, fill us in” (Morson and Emerson 75, emphasis in original). An examination of the cabarets reveals the social codes which both compelled and threatened the performances.

**Official Cabarets**

By viewing the cabarets as grotesque manifestations of expansive cultural contradictions I will begin to tease out the oppositional forces in the power dynamics at play in the cabaret performances. Each form of the cabarets – official, semi-official, and clandestine – reveals distinctive patterns in the negotiation of power between officials, guards, and prisoners. Cabarets
seemingly represent both complicity with the Nazi agenda and prisoner resistance against that agenda. By performing in Nazi-organized activities, performers advanced the Nazi agenda by creating discontent among the prisoners and by facilitating the Nazi denial of the Holocaust to the public. However, my analysis highlights more complex dynamics between performers, prisoners, guards, and administrators. For example, prisoners benefited from receiving favors and guards and officials benefited by humiliating the prisoners (Rovit 461).

While the imposition of power may not have been the sole determinant of performance in official cabarets, the overarching authority of the Nazis certainly played a critical role in prisoner compliance. One clear example of that power dynamic took place in Theresienstadt. In 1944, Nazis German forced Jewish actor Kurt Gerron to direct a propaganda film entitled Der Führer Schenkt den Juden eine Stadt (“The Fuhrer Gives the Jews a City”). While Gerron’s compliance may have helped keep other, more clandestine activities from the attention of officials, I argue that the Nazis’ authority and ability to select him was an a priori factor in this instance. Also, his compliance did not significantly put him out of harm’s way. Shortly after completing the project, Gerron was selected for deportation to Auschwitz. The Nazis terminated the gassing program on 2 November 1944, one day after Gerron’s arrival and immediate execution.

In one respect, official cabarets constituted forced labor as officials mandated performances for their own benefit (Goldfarb 5). Goldfarb explains one way in which officials used the performances to deny the atrocities: “The SS exploited these performers for propaganda. The Nazis forced them to present ‘variety shows’ in the camp yard on Saturdays and Sundays; reports of these productions would then appear in the Belgian press to allay fears of still hidden Jews and to counter rumors of German atrocities” (5). They used those performances for propaganda and manipulation.
Each official performance gave greater authority to the Nazis. The performers, by measuring their words and relenting to the wishes of the officials, granted authority to the Nazis. Scott writes, “Every visible, outward use of power – each command, each act of deference... is a symbolic gesture of domination to manifest and reinforce the hierarchical order” (45). By sanctioning the performances, the Nazis attempted to deny the prisoners’ “possibility of autonomous social action” (Scott 45). They reinforced the lower social status of the prisoners, specifically the Jews, with their attendance and the appearance of benevolence. Performances also reaffirmed the Nazis’ power over the prisoners insofar as they required the prisoners to perform in German and moderated their dialogue so as not to offend.

Consideration of the official programs as exclusively submissive, though, fails to account for the subversive character of the performances. By performing traditional cabaret pieces with no overt rhetoric of resistance, prisoners were able to hide other, clandestine performances. Scott writes, “We are in danger of missing much of their significance if we see linguistic deference and gestures of subordination merely as performances extracted by power. The fact is they serve also as a barrier and a veil that the dominant find difficult or impossible to penetrate” (32). The acts preserved what Scott calls a “sequestered site,” where prisoners performed acts of more forceful resistance (32). The official cabarets, thus, appeased both Nazis and prisoners. Nazis used official cabarets to alleviate discontent and resistance; however, the official cabarets also served to alleviate Nazi concerns of resistance. One of the prisoners’ motivations for participating was the secret preservation of other activities of cultural expression and their locations.

One construction of cabaret performances that I would like to establish is viewing them as resistance. Official cabarets, as discussed above, fit within Scott’s construction of a “public
transcript,” defined as a “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (2). Public transcripts are those interactions where the subordinates defer and acquiesce to the authority of the dominant power. Performers in the official cabarets had to mark their words and perform act suitable to Nazi officials. However, within the public transcript of the cabarets, prisoners would also engage in what Scott calls “hidden transcripts,” or “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (4).

One example of the hidden transcript of public performance took place in the Dutch camp of Westerbork. Since Westerbork was a transit camp, very few detainees stayed for any extended time. One exception was cabaret performer Camilla Spira. The success of her performances eventually led to a pronouncement that she was “Aryan” and she was released from custody in 1947 (Jelavich 267). Part of the performances in these sanctioned shows was a glorification of camp life. Some of the performers, like the above compére, were backhandedly supportive. Other performers, like Spira, thanked the officers for their privileges, like outside letters and packages, as either an appeal for extended privileges or a “thanks” to remain in reasonable favor. Such discourse thus becomes “double-voiced” as two separate communications. Such hidden transcripts are “practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (Scott 4-5). Yet beyond the public show, the subtle comments by compéres and the implicit negotiations of Spira also fit within hidden transcripts because they are disguised acts “out of the direct observation” of the Nazi spectators. This dynamic is possible because, as Scott contends, “By the subtle use of codes one can insinuate into a ritual, a pattern of dress, a song, a story, meanings that are accessible to one intended audience and opaque to another audience the actors wish to exclude” (158). In performance, then, under the guise of complicity, the doubled codes demonstrate forms of resistance.
Specifically, for example, performers would sing songs thanking the camp officials for even minor privileges. These songs functioned in two ways. By thanking camp officials, Spira could try to improve the treatment of detainees by camp officials. The songs also served to suggest that further benefits would further improve prisoner attitude and obedience. In this way, through song, Spira engaged in an open negotiation of power, if not a direct negotiation. Mechanicus called the Aryanizing of Spira “a great loss” for the cabarets, but understood her willingness to somewhat disavow her heritage (176).

Hidden transcripts protect subordinates in another way. The performance of hidden transcripts in concentration camps deflected the prisoners’ anger and aggression, which would otherwise have turned into a more direct form of resistance which would have resulted in certain death. Scott writes, “At its most elementary level the hidden transcript represents an acting out in fantasy – and occasionally in secretive practice – of the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination” (37).

The licensed release of cabarets promoted social control was used to preserve the high. The tolerated or semi-official cabarets (those compelled by SS officers or barracks commanders) reinforce the social hierarchy differently. They allowed Nazis with somewhat less authority (lower than the camp administrators) to exert their authority while subverting the higher authority. The third type of cabarets, unauthorized cabarets, most closely realizes Bakhtin’s grotesque realism. They were subversions of social order, a celebration, not of the corpulent, but of the gaunt, all those who were gaunt were equal. In their grotesqueness, they resisted. Stallybrass and White write that the grotesque “functioned as catalyst and site of actual of symbolic struggle” (14, emphasis in original).
The spectators of these performances, then, were resisting Nazi power through improved morale, the affirmation of their culture, and by escaping the horrors of camp life. Performers received different benefits than spectators. Several personal factors motivated performers to participate in cabarets. Rovit writes that prisoners performed for self-preservation, improved economic status, spiritual retreat, and, with the spectators, a temporary distance from the suffering that pervaded camp life (464). Moreover, in situations of forced performances, declining to perform most likely brought severe retribution, possibly even selection for extermination. We should not mitigate the impact of the ubiquitous presence of death.

Performers received the additional benefit of being promineats. “Prominent” was the name given to inmates with special skills, such as doctors, chemists, carpenters, and performers. In camps, the prominesnts clearly held a privileged status. They wrote and performed the songs and poems, whether they were standards from pre-war cabarets or texts in response to the conditions in the camps. The prominesnts also had another advantage. Because the skits, songs, and poems could not be written down, the performances were passed on by oral transmission. The prominesnts chose those who were to perform the numbers next. The internal organization of the prisoners was, I believe, not democratic, but, rather, stratified like the surrounding social structures. While Scott argues that the collective cultural expression of subordinate groups is “relatively democratic” (157), his construction does not fit within the context of concentration camps.

The grotesqueness of the performances also reveals a social structure within the prisoner group. The contradictions in the value of performance demonstrate the “class” differences among the prisoners and fostered the internal negotiations of power. The prominesnts and functionaries, Jewish prisoners who served as low-level camp administrators, received better jobs and were less
often sent to *kommandos* (work details) off-site. Those who worked off-site often worked a twelve-hour work-day of hard labor. Inmates finishing strenuous physical labor would be less likely to perform and attend the cabarets. Their physical needs would take precedent over social needs. The benefits of afforded prominents were often illusory or temporary, though. The benefits given to prominents only temporarily delayed selection (Rovit 462).

Most prisoners, both performers and audiences, recognized that the cabarets lifted morale and offered a brief opportunity to feel relief from their daily conditions. Performance scholar Richard Schechner calls this type of performance “transportation performances.” In transportation performances, “the performers are ‘taken somewhere’ but at the end, often assisted by others, they are ‘coded down’ and reenter ordinary life just about where they went in… The performer goes from the ‘ordinary world’ to the ‘performative world,’ from one time/space reference to another” (Schechner 125-26). For the audience Schechner differentiates between “transportation performances” and “transformation performances”: transportation temporarily changes the audience or moves from one performative space to another and back, whereas transformation permanently alters the spectators (20). Cabaret audiences experience the shows as transportation in that, soon after the performance, they would return to the harsh world of the concentration camp. However, I suggest that this transportation goes from an alienated and alienating world to a seemingly more ordinary world because concentration camps are extraordinary and sinister. Like the performance, the transportation was a temporary reprieve from the harshness of the surrounding atrocities.
Semi-official Cabarets

The semi-official cabarets share most of the characteristics of the official cabarets, especially in terms of content; however, the tolerated performances reveal internal social dynamics within the camp system which the mandated performances do not reveal. As acts of resistance, semi-official cabarets favored prominents disproportionately. One way in which prisoners were able to organize semi-official performances was by bribing the guards. Not all prisoners had the ability or resources to bribe. The prisoners most likely to have the necessary resources were the prominents; thus, prominents had greater access to escape through performance than others. Yet, the act of bribery constitutes a hidden transcript as it undermines the system of domination. The bribery also demonstrates a disconnect between the goals of camp administrators and the guards and officials under them. The act was not merely a symbolic act, but an act that undermined the authority of officials. Rovit writes that prominents also held specific advantages in organizing performances, because “at Westerbork, Terezin, and Auschwitz, permission to perform often depended on one’s prisoner category, work detail, linguistic ability (German was preferred), and contacts” (462).

During semi-official cabarets, performers did not have complete freedom. Prisoners had to measure their words as carefully as during official cabarets. While the semi-official cabarets were acts of resistance, they also, in a small way, benefited the Nazis. The performances gave guards, as well as prisoners, the opportunity to transcend the deplorable conditions.

Clandestine Cabarets

The Nazis’ degradation of the prisoners was a significant factor in the development of the clandestine cabarets. Scott writes that domination creates a “countervailing pressure that cannot
be contained indefinitely” (15). The actions of the Nazis necessitated the response to their actions. As the atrocities and degradation worsened, prisoners gained a stronger impulse for resistance. The force needed for compliance increased the prisoners’ need for clandestine activities as a way to deal with their aggression and anger toward those in power.

As clandestine cabarets gained a semi-formalized structure, as Daniel describes above, they developed their own centripetal and centrifugal forces. Literary theorist Gary Saul Morson and Russian literary scholar Caryl Emerson describe centrifugal forces as disparate and disunified (140). The conditions of daily life (selection, death of performers, filth, and labor, for example) worked against the prisoners’ maintenance of the cabarets. Defilement was not confined to the realm of the symbolic; the degradation also served to prevent the organization of prisoners. Survivor Eugene Weinstock writes, “In Buchenwald…it was a principle to depress the morale of the prisoners to the lowest possible level, thereby preventing the development of fellow-feeling or co-operation among the victims” (qtd. in Des Pres 60). Also, as prisoner resistance built and became more organized, the centripetal forces of the Nazis became centrifugal forces for prisoner resistance. The daily conditions of fatigue, malnutrition, and illness acted as centrifugal forces against resistance. In that construction, the performance became a centripetal force for the maintenance of the order of resistance, the internal social order, and the identity maintained through the performances. Order creates centripetal forces and prominents maintained the centripetal force of the cabarets – they could bribe, perform, and attend performances more easily than other prisoners. I argue that as the centrifugal forces of malnutrition and illness increased, the cabarets acted as greater catalysts for resistance. Moreover, as conditions worsened, the cabarets gained value.
The political cabarets fit easily within a model of resistance, as they expressed their discontent, even outrage, over camp conditions and the Nazi regime. However, the non-political performances constituted also political resistance as renegotiations of the power relations. The non-political cabarets included cabaret standards and re-contextualized them. Those songs then became numbers of cultural heritage and aided in defining the new heritage by shifting the meaning and purpose.

One way in which the performances boosted morale was by manifesting as active resistance and organizing. Goldfarb writes that the purposes were “not only meant to lament the current plight of the internees but to assure camp audiences that previous oppression had been overcome” (6). Performances permitted by camp officials and officers were often performed in German (Rovit 462). Thus, while the official and semi-official performances occurred in the language of domination, the clandestine cabarets allowed prisoners to perform in their native language. Therefore, the clandestine cabarets fit more clearly into Scott’s hidden transcripts than did the official performances. They take place outside of the physical view of officials and contest the public transcript to a greater degree.

Prisoners also resisted Nazi domination through their selection of performances sites. The “social sites” of performance included the barracks, Kanada (the storehouse for prisoner possessions that were seized upon arrival at the camp), the infirmary, and unguarded exterior walls, which were transformed from sites of domination and degradation into sites of resistance (Daniel 804). Even the identification of Sundays as a day for performances resisted Nazi authority. Each action should be viewed as an act of survival, whether collective or individual.
Conclusion

In the camp system, survival was in itself an act of resistance and anything that fostered survival constituted resistance. In an environment designed for extermination, prisoners resisted merely by surviving. The grotesque acts as a centrifugal event – it disrupts order and resists the center. Clandestine cabarets challenged the assumptions reinforced daily in the concentration camp system through their hidden transcripts. In other forms, such as resistance in official and semi-official cabarets, the performance of cabarets infiltrates the center to disrupt order. When seen as a grotesque act, cabarets offer resistance to the dominant ideology through the creation of a disidentified culture and the perpetuation of that culture as resistance.

Prisoners used the concept of the “Realm of Death” to determine many of their actions. Concentration camp survivor Lucie Adelsberger describes the “Realm of Death” –

We counted on death every minute, and life, which may last only another week or only another day, or perhaps even only an hour... And thus life in the face of death became something quite concentrated and condensed, from which everything unessential or superficial glanced off... Death was near and concrete and one had become familiar with him. One struggled against him, but one was no longer afraid of him. (qtd. in Cohen 159)

The cabarets were “essential” because every action for prisoners came down to one determinant – survival. Compliance with officers and guards was a necessary evil that at times helped people survive. Performance, whether official, semi-official, or clandestine, was also resistance.

Each type of performance – official, semi-official, and clandestine – had its own languages, and each performance watched and measured its language. Cabarets also met the spiritual needs of prisoners. A prisoner’s spirituality provided morale and temporary escape.
Cabarets helped inmates in their desire to “cling to tradition” and “preserve cultural identity” (Goldfarb 6). “Creative performance takes place on two levels, connecting the artist both to him- or herself and to the audience. As a result, the spectator or listener has an opportunity to participate on two planes: individually as a response to the created art work, and as a part of a temporary group focused on pleasure, emotion, and even beauty” (Rovit 478). Connections to identity and culture were elements of survival.

The possibility of assisting Nazi efforts meant considerably less because living mattered above all else. Cohen writes, “We camp prisoners had only one yardstick: whatever helped our survival was good, whatever threatened our survival was bad and to be avoided” (112). Any appearance of kowtowing or complicity did not matter as long as the end result of the action was survival. From the perspective of survival, even official cabarets were resistance.

The actions of resistance in camp were not merely “for show.” Scott writes, “it is impossible to separate veiled symbolic resistance to the ideas of domination from the practical struggles to thwart or mitigate exploitation…The hidden transcript is not just a behind-the-scenes griping and grumbling; it is enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems” (188). It would be a mistake to view cabaret performances as empty or strictly symbolic. “The subordinate always lives in two worlds: the world of the master and the offstage world of the subordinates. Both of these worlds have sanctioning power. While subordinates normally can monitor the public transcript performance of other subordinates, the dominant can rarely monitor fully the hidden transcript” (Scott 191). Performance was about survival.

The disidentificatory cabaret performances worked with and against the majority culture; official and semi-official cabarets affirmed Nazi authority and encouraged compliance among prisoners while weakening the desire for other forms of resistance that could result in
punishment. At the same time, they created a greater social energy that reinvigorated the prisoners. Clandestine performances took place in barracks and other sites of dominance in the environment of filth and death.

The performances created a culture that allowed existence to continue. Disidentification fosters “cultural, material, and psychic survival” (Muñoz 161). Disidentification takes the pre-existing identities “towards a reconfiguration that presides in the future” (Muñoz 3). The result was a fluid performance of power and resistance between the camp culture and the culture of the prisoners.
CHAPTER TWO: REVELATORY PERFORMANCES – PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE BODIES OF CONCENTRATION CAMP SURVIVORS AS GROTESQUE

In this chapter, I clarify the role of the grotesque in the viewing of World War II atrocity photographs. The grotesque body constitutes a significant element in these photographs, which compel the spectator to confront the horrors vicariously and experience the atrocities depicted through the act of viewing. First, I discuss the role photography played in the construction of a collective memory of World War II. Next, I frame the viewing of photographs as performance, where the image acts as an incomplete script for the viewer to interpret and perform. Then, I provide a detailed description of the grotesque body and its implications in the photographs. The grotesque object – in this case, the body – triggers a break in the cognitive processing of the photograph – or, in other words, it triggers the grotesque experience. I analyze this gap and describe how it alters the viewer’s performance of viewing the photographs. The grotesque initiates the interval between feeling and thinking and necessitates the resolution of this rupture. I argue that the viewer’s performance through this interpretive gap necessarily triggers the processes whereby the viewer can mourn and process the atrocities represented in the photographs. Finally, I argue that because the images are never complete and the performance potentially shifts with each viewing, the interval triggered by the grotesque to assist in the mourning process is also the element of the viewing performance that prevents a full resolution. The horrors of World War II remain in our collective memory.
The Atrocity Photographs

The atrocity photographs taken by Allied soldiers and subsequent touring members of the press put the first images of the concentration camps in front of the previously unseeing public. A great deal was riding on these photographs as they “needed to report the essentially unbelievable” (“Liberation” 141). The photographs showed to the public the hidden bodies whose existence had been previously denied by the Nazis. The photographs offered validity to the story of the war efforts by the Allied forces. The privileges granted to photography placed it in the unique position of a truth-making medium. As Zelizer writes,

Photographs offered the Journalistic community a tool of documentation with its own authoritative features: photography’s strengths seem to derive from its positioning as a medium of record. The photograph, long assumed to “tell it like it is” acted like a “transcript from reality.” It possessed a certain indexical, denotative, referential force, an aura of verisimilitude, that made it seem as if it captured things as they were in the real world.

(“Liberation” 139)

Insofar as the photographs functioned as proof, the photographs, in many ways, legitimized the Allies’ war effort. They concretized and justified the reasons for going to war. Zelizer writes, “In contrast to the earlier muted word-stories of the camps, the image-making apparatus in all its forms helped to turn collective disbelief into the shock and recognition of horror” (“Liberation” 159). Because of the objectivity to which we ascribe to the photograph and the subjectivity we ascribe to the self, we believe the image over the eye-witness accounts. The image becomes more real than reported direct observation. We even grant greater authority to the photo than to our own eyes in viewing the grotesque so that we may be prompted to exclaim, “I
can’t believe what I saw.” Unlike viewing an event, we can “re-see” the photograph. The photos produce a reality—the concentration camps and prisoners which were doubted or unknown became real (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Corpses Lie in One of the Open Railcars of the Dachau Death Train. Credit: USHMM, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.

However, the images quickly lost their ability to relay the story of the war to the public. “Images became less useful as identifiable markers of specific activities and more as representative indices of general wartime circumstances” (“Liberation” 152). Inconsistent reporting and editing practices in the press drained the photographs of the capacity to reference specific events. In time, the journalists and editors stripped the photographs of their contexts. The images became a generalizing force. Taken collectively, the photos conflated Auschwitz and Dachau, Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen. Yet, paradoxically, the photos retained their force because their formal elements did not change. Zelizer writes, “While many images offered few identifiers of a story’s specific locale, they fit well within more general discourse about the German war machinery. Often they lacked subject name, place, photographer, and photographic
agency” (“Liberation” 151). Nonetheless, the photographic bodies remained emaciated. Without the specifics of the war in the photos, the people still saw the bodies and “knew” the atrocities.

The photographs were also instrumental in the process of collective healing that followed the war. The soldiers who photographed the atrocities held a unique position as witnesses to the war. Zelizer writes, “The liberators who ‘opened’ the concentration camps to the free world became the involuntary holders of what remains as one of the most atrocious and unbelievable memories in recent history and became a group in need of working through the trauma caused by what they saw” (“Finding” 700). Moreover, the photographs offered, and continue to offer, the public a means to ease a troubled collective conscience.

**Photographs as Performance**

Part of the authority we grant to photography is because of our assumption that it can show reality. Despite the authority granted to photography as “real,” the photograph presents the viewer with a paradox. Phelan writes, “Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The ‘excess’ meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that make multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly” (2).

Photographs are not in themselves the “truth.” They don’t show reality; they depict or represent, and yet we cannot separate the aesthetics of photography from its documentary function. Sontag writes, “Even when photographs are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience” (6). The act of photographing changes the subject of the photograph – especially with live human subjects when photographed. People become who they think they are or who they think they should be. Barthes writes, “Now,
once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing.’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it to its caprice” (10-11). The photographic image is then the Platonic copy of a copy. Even when the photograph is not of human subjects, the decision of what to photograph, how to photograph it, and where to photograph it implicates the dynamics of subjectivity into the presumption of objectivity in the image. “Clearly, the very presence of the camera alters its object; it is the camera that defines and requires the moment’s very staginess” (Sayre 53).

As I discussed above, the atrocity photos essentialize what is seen. Photos are universalizing – they cease to “be” of one specific thing but begin to function as generalities. The bodies are no longer indexed to specific events and instead become symbols of the war. The photographs of the atrocities produced the emaciated person in the photo into a generic victim and the grotesque body certified the person as a victim. Sontag refers to these photographs as “ethical reference points” (20). The people in the photographs, whether living or dead, lost their personal identities (Fig. 4). They represented the people in the camps and the people subjected to the atrocities of the Holocaust. The images were not the subjects, but rather a concept tied to the representations of the subjects. The universal character of the photographs, however, did not diminish their ability to act as a source of public memory. Zelizer writes, “In many cases, the images remained so devoid of identifiable detail that it was difficult to anchor them in a given physical or geographic place. Yet the more universal the place they were accorded, the more effective carriers of the collective memory they would be” (“Liberation” 158-59). The essentializing character of the photographs enhanced their grotesqueness. People could begin, paradoxically, to talk about the thing to which they couldn’t put words.
Acting as markers of universality, along side the text’s referentiality, they helped position discourse about Nazism within that broad parameters against which it needed to be judged. More than other tools of documentation, images made the discourse simultaneously comprehensible and beyond comprehension. (“Liberation” 154)

Despite more consistent news editing in the years following the war, the photographs maintained their generic status. Zelizer writes, “Images thus continued to do in memory what had been done at the time of the camps’ liberation – to move the atrocity story from the contingent and particular to the symbolic and abstract” (Remembering 158).

![Fig. 4. Corpses in a mass grave in the so-called "American cemetery" at Mauthausen. Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Instytut Pamieci Narodowej.](image)

The photograph is a fragment of the moment it captures. It is not a complete story. The photograph can only show what is within the frame. As demonstrated in the atrocity photographs
that generalized the war story, photographs possess gaps in the narrative they capture. Barthes argues that we only remember even familiar photos in fragments (65). As incomplete images, photos neither duplicate nor reproduce, but rather represent the subject.

Just as photographs are incomplete, our memories are equally fragmented. Memories have gaps and images have gaps. The image fills gaps in memory and the memories fill in the gaps in the images. Munoz writes, “[Images] foreground the fact that memory is always about a collection of fragments. The constellation of memory is also made through an active spectator who pushed pieces together, like a child with a puzzle” (174). Both the personal narrative and the photographic narrative are incomplete.

Because both images and memories are fragmentary, the viewing of photographs creates interplay between the two. We fold the text of the photos into our narrative at the same time we complete the photograph’s narrative by filling in its gaps. Iser describes this interaction between viewer and text as the “double structure of fictionality” (236). The double structure creates the representation because the image is not of what is shown; it is the product of the doubling of the world we make and the world it references. We unconsciously choose the elements from our personal narrative and combine them with fragments in the image. This construction follows Iser’s notion of “acts of selection.” The acts of selection create “intertextual deformations,” whereby both texts lose rhetorical integrity. The fluid negotiation between text and reader creates an impact on future meanings as existing meanings build upon each other. Iser writes, “The resultant dynamic oscillation between the two ensures that their old meanings now become potential sources for new ones” (237).

The oscillation between the world of the viewer and the world of the photograph creates a fictional world experienced in the image. The act of viewing requires the viewer to engage in this
fictional world. “This self-disclosed fictionality as an act of boundary-crossing causes the recipient’s natural attitude to be doubled by the new attitude demanded of him, and the world of the text is doubled by the world from which it has been bracketed off and whose reverse side is brought to the fore” (Iser 239). Sontag writes, “photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are” (6-7). Because they neither duplicate nor reproduce the subject, they fictitiously represent the subject.

Even if the photographs are actual portrayals, the images contained within them pre-date most contemporary spectators. As such, they stand as representations of a non-existent reality. However, the subjects of the photographs retain their status of “having been there”; thus, we are caught between the essentializing and fragmentary in the photograph. Therein lays another aspect of the fictionality of photography. Truth-making requires absoluteness; therefore, photographs don’t constitute truth. Barthes writes that photographs are “partially true, and therefore totally false” (66). They show a time and a place we do not know. We enter that fictional world if we accept that image as a source of memory. When we accept the truth of the image we act “as if” the world is real. We, then, respond to the fiction.

The fictional nature of photographs then requires an interpretive act on the part of the viewer. Sontag argues, “Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination… Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” (23). Like any text, photographs need to be “read.” It is in the gaps of the image where we impose our interpretation. Remshardt writes, “Indeed, physical eye-movement analysis testifies to the fact that our perceptions are constructed through an integration of discrete samples of the picture and are biased toward the ‘loaded’ parts of the picture in which the most useful
information can be accumulated – we read an image very much like a text” (23-24). The interpretative act highlights how viewing is performance. Iser writes, “In this respect, the required activity of the recipient resembles that of an actor, who in order to perform his role must use his thoughts, his feelings, and even his body as an analogue for representing something that is not” (244). As we impose our feelings and experiences into the reading, we must, at the same time, also give way to the formal elements of the photograph. Iser adds, “we must place our own thoughts and feelings at the disposal of what the representation seeks to make present in us” (244).

The formal elements in the photograph combine to create the text from which we read or interpret. Each photo is a text. Art historian and scholar Henry Sayre identifies a negotiation in the act of viewing between the photographer, the subject and the viewer (262). We see the frame as set by the photographer; we see the formal elements in the subject; and, we project ourselves and our narrative into the picture. Iser notes how the interaction between the viewer and the representation is a “performative activity”:

Representation is therefore both performance and semblance. It conjures an image of the unseeable, but being a semblance, it also denies it the status of a copy of reality. The aesthetic semblance can only take on its form by way of the recipient’s ideational, performative activity, and so representation can only come to full fruition in the recipient’s imagination; it is the recipient’s performance that endows the semblance with its sense of reality. (243)
As we imaginatively rewrite the text of the photograph, we bring a new image into view. The image is a new assumed reality because of the truth-making status we grant photographic representation. Iser writes:

> Representation can only unfold itself in the recipient’s mind, and it is through his active imaginings alone that the intangible can become image. It follows, then, that representation, by bridging difference and thus making the intangible conceivable, is an act of performing and not an act of mimesis, since mimesis presupposes a given reality that is to be portrayed in one way or another. (243)

Reality is not a given; reality is continually being reframed in the negotiation between viewer and image. Photographic representation also fits within this doubling of fictionality in literature.

Despite the need for interpretation, the performance of viewing is not entirely subjective. The codes in the formal elements of the photograph frame or shape our interpretation. The context of the photograph forms one extratextual field that informs our interpretation of the text. Our previous experiences form another extratextual field.

The act of viewing is performative in another respect as well. Each viewing is fleeting and ephemeral. Once the viewing experience ends, the same viewing cannot be reproduced. Each viewing effectively rewrites the text. Each viewing produces a negotiated narrative between the formal elements of the photograph, the context in which the photograph is viewed, and the interpretation of the text by the viewer. The negotiated narrative informs the next viewing. Like other performances, no two viewings are the same and each viewing is lost once it ends.

The performance of viewing bears upon the grotesque because the grotesque works between the various fragments of the photo. The grotesque is a non-thing. It works in the gaps.
Therefore, we must engage in a negotiation with a subject that is not a known thing. Each photograph may invite different readings; however, we choose the readings based on the acts of selection. The grotesque forces contradictory readings. As a formal element of the photograph that informs the performance, the grotesque limits the readings or suspends all readings temporarily. The instability of the performance makes us more susceptible to the fear-desire impulse of the grotesque: “One is vulnerable to disturbing events in the form of photographic images in a way that one is not to the real thing. That vulnerability is part of the distinctive passivity of someone who is a spectator twice over, spectator of events already shaped, first by the participants and second by the image maker” (Sontag 168-69). In the instance of the encounter with the grotesque, our loss of language disrupts the performance.

**The Grotesque Body**

Our encounter with a grotesque object results in the loss of language because it is an alogical experience. As grotesque, the images depersonalize the survivors’ bodies because, according to Zemel, “ravaged physiques diminish signs of individual identity” (210). The subject becomes the body, not the person as “the limits of the self dissolve in infinitude” (Zemel 215). The grotesque body does not fit within the limits of an identifiable social construction of the body (Fig. 5).

Historically, those in a high position have tried to maintain accepted and prevailing constructions of the “ideal” body as a means of reinforcing their high status. They denigrated and dismissed the grotesque body as shameful and obscene, attributed it to the low-Other. For example, cultural practice during the Renaissance dictated that women disguise their pregnancy (Bakhtin 29). Bakhtin writes, “The ever unfinished nature of the body was hidden, kept secret”
(29). In a similar way, the Nazis sequestered the grotesque bodies of the prisoners. They created the grotesque bodies and then hid them and the horrific condition in which they existed. This occlusion of the grotesque body satisfies the need of the powerful to deny the low-Other. The excess of the grotesque body pushes the paradox of our normative expectations of the human body beyond understanding. The resultant, altered view resets our perception of ourselves and all that is sinister in our world. As part of our coping and rationalization process that follows the grotesque experience, we negotiate a new reality.

Fig. 5. Three Emaciated Survivors in a Barracks in the Newly Liberated Buchenwald Concentration Camp. Credit: USHMM, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.

At the heart of the grotesque body in the atrocity photographs lie several binaries; of primary importance are human/inhuman, man/animal, and good/evil. In viewing the images, the Holocaust becomes unimaginable and the depicted bodies lose such form that they cease to appear human. To make sense, we cast ourselves into the bodies barely recognizable as human.
We effectively say, “I am human. Their body is not mine. They are not human.” Yet, we know they are as we are (humans) and so we imagine ourselves as them in viewing the photo. We project our own narrative into the photo, into the grotesque world and ask, “How can someone do that to someone else?” Yet, we are faced with our own complicity and ask, “How can we do this to each other?”

While the bodies of prisoners did not match Bakhtin’s construction of grotesque as corpulent bodily excess, they were grotesque bodies – that is ‘not classical’ – in their emaciation and subjection to filth. The Jews of the concentration camps fit within Stallybrass and White’s definition of outsiders because they are “constructed by the dominant culture in terms of the grotesque body. The ‘grotesque’ here designates the marginal, the low and the outside from the perspective of the classical body situated as high, inside and central by virtue of its very exclusions” (22-3). The Nazis needed the emaciated figures to justify and rationalize their own cultural, physical, geographical, and psychic superiority. The bodies made the moral distinction material. The Nazis were able to materially rationalize their treatment of prisoners because the prisoners now possessed grotesque bodies.

I have argued that the formal elements of the photograph do not change from reading to reading. Here, I contend that the grotesque body is one such element. The grotesque bodies are Barthes’s punctum in the atrocity photos. Barthes describes punctum as the element within a photograph that affects him; it pricks and bruises him (27). The punctum prefigures identification. Barthes writes, “In order to perceive punctum, no analysis would be of any use to me… it suffices that the image be large enough, that I do not have to study it (this would be of no help at all), that, given right there on the page, I should receive it right here between my eyes”
The bruising and pricking are sensations or stimuli that precede identification. Therefore, like the grotesque, we receive the *punctum* viscerally before we receive it intellectually.

The other pertinent aspect of the grotesque body is the desire it instills in us. The attraction lies, in part, on another privilege we grant to photographs: showing the desirous. The photograph takes possession of the subject. The subject thereby becomes something to be coveted and possessed. Sontag argues, “Nobody has ever discovered ugliness through photographs. But many, through photographs, have discovered beauty” (85). In general, this is the motivation for photography, except as documentation (Sontag 85). The status we give the photograph as an arbiter of worthiness gives the image the gleam of desire. Because the photographer has chosen the subject, the subject must be worth possessing. Even the ugly or hideous become beautifully so. The corpses in the atrocity photos are beautiful in their horror. They are beautiful in their emaciation and pain. Sontag writes, “But notwithstanding the declared aims to reveal truth, not beauty, photography still beautifies. Indeed, the most enduring triumph of photography has been its aptitude for discovering beauty in the humble, the inane, the decrepit” (102). Additionally, seeing pain in others elevates ourselves because we are not suffering. There is a lure to the grotesque body that resides in its desire-fear contradiction.

**The Interval**

In photographs of concentration camp survivors, the grotesque body elicits a visceral response in the viewer resulting in a temporary disruption in thought processes. The grotesque severs the emotional from the intellectual. Harpham argues that the grotesque experience is the visceral moment of confusion between recognizable forms or categories (14). The grotesque is unrecognizable and unnamable. The interval is an indeterminate moment. Bakhtin writes that the
two determining traits of the grotesque are relation to time (interval) and ambivalence (liminality) (24). I call this interval the grotesque experience.

As a trigger to the grotesque experience, the grotesque experience is a violent event. We can find a suitable comparison between the violence of the grotesque and the violence experienced in the punctum. On a rhetorical level, bruising and piercing are violent acts. For Barthes, the piercing of the punctum produces in a moment of liminality, “This something has triggered me, has provided a tiny shock, a satori, the passage of the void” (49, emphasis in original). He describes this passage as a moment of “intense immobility” (49). Furthermore, the element of the grotesque, or punctum, which gives way to the gap is its lack of any inherent morality. The grotesque is “free from moral distinction” (Kayser 37). Of the punctum, Barthes writes that it “shows no preference for morality or good taste; the punctum can be ill-bred” (43).

While he constructs punctum as an either/or, I argue that the ambivalence in the punctum initiates the void. It is neither good nor bad until we resolve the contradiction. Additionally, the punctum alters the image; as Barthes puts it, “[The punctum’s] mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph” (Barthes 42). It is this change in meaning that initiates the interval.

During the interval, we must alter our beliefs. We move on, through mourning, when we kill the mental energy tied to the object. As Phelan writes, “The object-cathexis must be aggressively killed off and discarded. This is a part of the mourning process” (Mourning 131). The grotesque experience is an act of aggression. The grotesque provides the means to “kill off” the object we seek to mourn Instead, because the photos are incomplete, we can never fully rationalize the event, the bodies will always wound us and always remind us that the Holocaust happened. The interval will always prevent us from moving on. We have no way of smoothly
traversing the divide. The grotesque experience is always violent. Moreover, the performance of the grotesque always shifts, and each viewing is a new and different performance, so that we re-enact the rupture differently each time. Because it disrupts, the grotesque affirms our inability to “know.” The grotesque body is alienated from the world.

The grotesque allows the photos to carry their force. The *punctum*, as a formal element within the image, does not disappear. As long as the actions of the Nazis appear horrific, the wounding force behind the *punctum* remains. Therefore, we will never fully heal from the wounds of World War II. From personal experience, even after seeing these atrocity photographs hundreds of times, I can attest that, they do not lose their force with repeated viewings. I am, and we are, still wounded by the images of the bodies because in the absence of resolution, we re-enact the trauma.

Our ability to comprehend the grotesque lies, in part, on the process of human perception. Remshardt writes, “The exposure to the grotesque calls the entire conceit of perception into question by breaking down its sensual and intellectual components and manifesting its attendant fragility” (21). The grotesque works in the gap between the eye’s reception of the light rays and the brain’s interpretation of the images. Remshardt writes,

> The constructional flaw in the human perception apparatus may well be the fact that perception is necessarily sequential, that we can only perceive in time, even if the object of perception is static; there is, so to speak, a ‘perception gap’ between our knowledge of the phenomenal presence of an object and our full recognition of its visual qualities (24).

While I am reluctant to call the mechanism of perception “a constructional flaw,” the “perception gap” is what allows the grotesque to work. When viewing a photograph that is not grotesque, we
traverse this moment with coding and decoding the formal elements. Most of the time our “intellectual anticipation” fills the gap based on what we have already perceived (Remshardt 24). Based upon the bits and pieces we have already received, our mind creates a vision of what should be. If we had no “perception gap” and recognized objects upon reception, nothing would be unnamable. However, the grotesque works within this moment and extends it. When searching to name what is seen, we open ourselves to a confusion of what is perceived.

The grotesque defies the intellectual activity of comprehension by aggravating the instability of the liminality between reception and perception. Thus, the grotesque experience is a liminal one. The grotesque disrupts anticipation and cognition because it is inherently irrational and not subject to the systematic use of thought (Kayser 188). The liminal moment is the transition from the visceral experience to cognition. Harpham describes this disruption in terms of the innate attraction-repulsion impulse. He argues that the viewer is drawn in by the familiar; however, the grotesque destroys the familiar (9). The grotesque infiltrates the liminal moment by dislocating the socially-ordered intellectual structures. The experience lasts until the temporarily unnamable is named, whether that other is a hybrid or an extreme deformation. For that moment, intellectual anticipation is stilled. The mind rejects what is seen until it names the “non-thing,” and “non-thing” temporarily ceases to exist.

Harpham describes the other side of the interval as a “mental event” (23). In response to the dislocation of social constructions, the viewer naturally attempts to restore order. This need for order may be instinctual; as Remshardt writes, “the challenge of aggravated disorder would seem not only to elicit severe discomfort but also to engage – even in some remote and rationalized form – the archaic mechanism of self-preservation as well” (21). We are unable to deny the impulse to decode. Instead, we must rationalize the transgression. Stallybrass and White
write, “one can never repress, or sublimate, an *instinct*: one can however repress an already-existing social or class *practice* by an act of censorship and discursive transcendence” (197). We can only reject the transgression or the system impugned by the transgression. The grotesque resolves itself by “generating the interpretive activity that seeks closure” (Harpham 18).

In the face of the grotesque, the resulting intellectualization usually takes one of two responses: laughter or disgust. Remshardt writes, “The unclassifiable must either be laughed at or ruled out of existence” (21). In my understanding of the grotesque, the ambivalence results in either the rejection of the social construction or a rejection of the grotesque object. The laughter, or discomfort, is a self-defense mechanism to the challenge of that order. It comes as a partial destruction of the social construction. The disgust comes as a result of our rejection of the grotesque object. By ruling out the unclassifiable, the person reaffirms the social construction (Fig. 6). The grotesque demands resolution – either the grotesque is rejected or incorporated into the existing structures or the structure is reconstructed to accommodate the grotesque.

Fig. 6. An Emaciated Female Jewish Survivor of a Death March Lies in Bed at an American Military Field Hospital in Volary, Czechoslovakia. Credit: USHMM, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.
While I argue that the grotesque experience is based, in part, on biological processes and human drives, the grotesque moment is most importantly a response to a contradiction in our construction of society. Our perpetual striving for ordering means constructions of the grotesque shift. Each society and cultural group answers for itself “What is grotesque?” Very few people in contemporary Western societies would experience the grotesque in the intermingling of plants, animals, and men found in the frescoes of classical Rome discovered during the Italian Renaissance from which we get the term “grotesque.” (Then termed grottesca, the word described the frescoes because they were found in the sunken halls of the buildings, most notably Nero’s Domus Aurea.) Similarly, the gladiator fights to the death of ancient Rome would find few today who would not see them as extreme acts of grotesqueness. “That the grotesque exists has always been a given. But it is up to the culture to provide the conventions and assumptions that determine its particular form. Culture does this by establishing conditions of order and coherence, especially by specifying which categories are logically or generically incompatible with each other” (Harpham xx). Each culture also employs the grotesque differently to different ends.

**The Grotesque in Mourning**

Zelizer identifies “bearing witness,” or “an act of witnessing that enables people to take responsibility for what they see,” as elemental in the collective recovery following public trauma (“Finding” 698). The agency of the recovery, though, belongs to the soldiers and the press – the ones who took the photos. The photos are not the testimony of survivors, but of the soldiers and
press. The goals may be recovery, but the texts and narratives are framed by the liberators. The photographs objectify the bodies.

While the grotesque elicits the rejection of either the social construct or the grotesque object, mourning can only come from the destruction of the object of mourning. We seek out the grotesque and the horrific in hopes that acceptance of the photos will lessen the countervailing pulls of attraction and repulsion. One reason we are drawn to grotesque images is because we do not want to desire them anymore. If, somehow, we can get the images not to repulse us any more, then we can lose the “perverse” attraction to the disgust. The images will cease to puncture us. If we don’t want to seek them out, we won’t be repulsed. We need to kill the power of the grotesque and mourn the loss. Photographs assist the mourning process through the repeated negotiation between the viewer, the photographer, and the image. Sontag refers to the act of photographing as “a soft murder” (15). The grotesque gives us easier access to the act of aggression required to mourn.

Part of the mourning process is the confusion between “the Real and the Living” (Barthes 79). Because of the authority we grant to photographs as showing the real, the person in the photograph is a living being as it is in the photograph. As we project ourselves into the text of the photograph, we confront the conflict between the living and the dead. In the world of the photo the person is alive as the totalized victim of the Holocaust who is dead. The person is there, yet not there. It is this passing between life and death that aids the mourning process.

As we confront the conflation of the Real and the Living in the interval of the grotesque experience, we are cast into a disaffected – and disaffecting – world. Through the grotesque body we envision the world of Nazi concentration camps. “The grotesque world is – and is not – our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by its results from our awareness that
the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence” (Kayser 37).

Mourning requires that we move from the emotional to the rational. We often talk of mourning as “coming to terms.” The implication, and correctly so, is that the process of recovery is a negotiation – a negotiation between our feelings of loss and our need to restore order. The grotesque object necessitates such a transition. As we respond viscerally to the grotesque body, we are forced to formulate a rational response. The grotesque object forces the process of mourning. The grotesque works by compelling the shift from the emotional response to the grotesque images to the mental processes of believing, bearing witness, and forgetting. However, the grotesque experience destroys the emotional energy of the object, not the object itself. As we accept what happened, as we have borne witness, and as the disbelief fades, the grotesque body remains.

The life/death dichotomy stands as one of the strongest in Western culture. As such, when confronted with death in the face of the living, the grotesque experience can overwhelm us. The duality of high/low lies at the heart of all dichotomies. Life is considered good (high) and death is considered bad (low). Death as low presents us with the desire-fear ambivalence central to the grotesque. However, addressing the life/death binary does not resolve all of the ambivalences we experience in viewing the atrocity photographs.

I contend that mourning the loss of the victims is a discrete act from coming to terms with the atrocities of World War II. Another negotiation takes place in viewing the atrocity photographs. The war story and the atrocity story include more than the dead victims (Fig. 7). We must also confront another deeply ingrained dichotomy – good/evil. Within the grotesque, our acceptance of the disputed bodies as “real” signifiers of the war necessitates that we
rationalize the social order that created them. Unlike mourning, through which we destroy the social energy associated with the object to preserve order, resolving how the atrocities could happen requires that we confront the social energies of the structures that tolerated, allowed, or even encouraged the atrocities. We must trouble the social order, not the object – the grotesque body. We must resolve our own complicity in the atrocities. The grotesque allows for such rationalizations. Zemel argues that our response of “shock, terror, and incredulity – perhaps even pleasure – may be followed by moral outrage at such extremes” (211). When the grotesque destabilizes the narrative, we reconstruct the high in our acceptance of the “truth” presented to us in the existence of the bodies. The performance of the previous viewing “disappears” in the void of the grotesque. As it offers the viewer the unnamable anew, the viewer renames it each time. The repeated act of renaming creates a space whereby we can negotiate between our identified roles as both victim and perpetrator. “The act of seeing and taking responsibility for the horrors
depicted in the images helps the collective move on, its boundaries gradually reinstated” (“Finding” 711). In that instance, the grotesque must lead us to destroy the high and we reject the high in relation to all that we associate with the low (i.e., filth, death, the Jewish other). We must rationalize a social order that would tolerate such unimaginable evil.

Individually, we may react less and less to specific photos, and instead to a source of collective memory and mourning, so that the circulation of the grotesque bodies in the atrocity photographs prevents total de-sensitization. As collective memory, the transition to symbolic status does not alter the shape of the body in the photograph. Zelizer argues that we “might reach a point at which they would no longer work as carriers of that memory” (Remembering 141). I do not disagree in that all memories fade; however, I do not believe that they ever disappear. Additionally, the fading of memories has more to do with the reason the image loses its memorial force than vice versa. It is not the lack of authority of the photographs that diminishes their capacity to carry memories; it is the lack of memory that diminishes the associated tie between the two. The image retains its force after we “work through” or cope with the loss. The image, not the memories, makes the photo grotesque. The memories are the mental event initiated by the grotesque bodies. Other mental events are at play. Multiple performances take places at different times whether we remember, we mourn, or we try to understand. The gaps in the photographs allow for a multitude of performances and the array of performances keeps the grotesque “alive.”

I believe the bodies of the dead and the emaciated survivors are the key to the various cabaret performances discussed above. Photographs with images associated with the Holocaust or the war do not function in the same way. In the photographs, we see soldiers walking; however, that image doesn’t pierce. We also see the camp watch towers without initial
queasiness. Even the iconic gateway at Auschwitz or Dachau which announces the great paradox of the camps – “Arbeit Macht Frei” – may disrupt, but the disruption is the result of the memory, not any formal element within the images. The images display nothing distorted. The critical element for the photograph to function as grotesque is the grotesque body. Because those images are not grotesque, they do not continually destabilize the narrative. Photographs without the grotesque meet our social and cultural expectations. Upon seeing the images we are able to name the subjects and we “know” what they are. It is not that any single element in the photographs stabilizes the narrative; it is that no element disrupts our intellectual anticipation. Without the grotesque, the images confirm our expectations about the world. There is comfort in the confirmation that the non-grotesque images provide. They do not force us to confront our own complicity. Through repeated viewing we have built a stable narrative about what we view in the images. The grotesque or the punctum breaks the general ease of the photographs. In viewing the gate, the guards, or the towers without the body demands some comprehension that precedes the emotive response. Yet, the grotesque body is always grotesque.

**Conclusion**

Our response to the grotesque is motivated by self-preservation. In mentally processing the bodies in the images, we are looking to prolong our life and to preserve our own bodies from the degradation and the deteriorating that we witness in the photos. As we process, we mourn for ourselves. We potentialize our own fate and we imagine our own decomposition. As Phelan writes, “The promise of that constantly deferred final sentence… is what keeps us performing repeated acts of looking” (*Mourning* 42).
Zelizer and Sontag both express concern that the heightened circulation of the atrocity photos drains their force as a source of remembrance and bearing witness. However, Hirsch argues that the photos present a “shield of unchanging traumatic fragments, congealed in a memory with unchanging content” (236). I agree with Hirsch that the element which wounds remains even with multiple and repeated viewings. Although, the hyperbolic effect of viewing the grotesque bodies brings us closer to resolution or rationalizing the events of World War II, but we can never achieve that.
In this chapter, I examine contemporary appropriations of the atrocity photographs. Specifically, I track the circulation of one particular photograph (Fig. 8). Various people or institutions employ this image to different, sometimes resistant, ends. Each new context reframes the possible readings and changes the array of performances available to the viewer. I begin this task by looking at how contemporary appropriations have turned the image of the grotesque body into an icon, or emblem, for atrocity. Using Hirsch’s construction of postmemory, I look at how the reappropriations resist the concerns expressed by Zelizer and others that the images lose their capacity to act as cultural memory. By changing the status of the images to emblems of atrocity, recontextualization prevents the images from becoming static and thereby losing their force. I
continue the chapter by examining Zelizer’s typology of recontextualization. She offers three ways recontextualizations shift the status of the photographs to that of an emblem of atrocity: “through the words that guide us through the images, through parallels in the images, and through a pattern of substitution” (221). I look at specific examples to illustrate each type of reappropriation. The United States Army includes the above image on its website with an extended textual narrative on the military’s role in World War II. I explore this site in order to explicate Zelizer’s first method of recontextualization. Politically motivated website Libertarian.nl also employs this image within a larger text. To examine Zelizer’s second method, that of parallel, I use my dramaturgical work from *Cabaret*. The neo-conservative website Kerryfest uses the image as an example of Zelizer’s third method of substitution from a political position antithetical to libertarian.nl. Each use demonstrates a dynamic different from those I discuss in chapter two. In addition to the viewer, subject, and photographer in the negotiation of meaning, the appropriator produces another position from which to do so. While the context of the photographs has always impacted our reading of the images, we must also factor in the goals of those who utilize them. Each formal element, including context, acts as a delimiter to the narrative. What I offer in this chapter is a reading of this photograph in its new contexts. The purpose is to demonstrate the way in which the contexts change each viewing performance.

**Photographs as Emblems**

Zelizer identifies the three distinct periods of the ways in which people used the atrocity photographs:

- an initial period of high attention persisted until the end of the forties; it
- was followed by a bracketed period of amnesia that lingered from the end
of the forties until the end of the seventies; and that was followed in turn
by a renewed period of intensive memory work that has persisted from the
end of the seventies until the present day. (Remembering 141-42)
The third phase, from the end of the seventies until today, presents us with a shift in the meaning
of the photographs. While not explicitly focusing on the bodies of survivors and the deceased
victims, Zelizer frequently relies on corporeal imagery in her analysis. I think Zelizer’s choice of
images – “the neat rows of bodies, the haunted faces” (Remembering 14) – demonstrates the
importance of the grotesque body in the power of the atrocity photographs. She implicitly ties the
new function of the images to the body – specifically, the grotesque representations of victims
and survivors. This focus reaffirms the importance of the grotesque body as a formal element of
the imagery of World War II.

The above image also demonstrates the fragmentary nature of photographs on a structural
level. The people standing on the back of the truck are cut off from the picture. The photographer
chose to include the image of the two men in the center of the frame. They were deemed worthy
of documenting. For example, the arm with the wristwatch in the upper left corner of the image
allows for several discrete interpretations. Surely, the arm is not of a survivor. It is difficult to
know how the image would change if the people on the truck are soldiers, fellow survivors, or
press members, yet, each gap allows for a variant reading. Because the images are fragmented,
they are more susceptible to appropriation. The gaps present people with the opportunity to
create new meanings. “Precisely because the gaze is ‘not all,’ representation cannot be totalizing.
Representation always shows more than it means: in the supplement one can see ways to
intervene in its meaning” (Phelan 27). The image’s incompleteness makes it susceptible to re-
envisioning because the passage of time affects the stability of meaning. Sontag writes, “A
photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings become unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs)” (71). However, the new contexts give the viewer less input on the performance. The new contexts put limits on the number of available interpretations.

The recontextualizations denote a new form of collective memory. Zelizer calls this phenomenon “the new shape of bearing witness” (“Remembering” 185). Zelizer argues that current ways the photographs are appropriated affect the way we view other contemporary atrocities. Zelizer writes, “With ‘the seen’ taken as a primary ground of knowledge in Western thought, ‘seeing’ has become in many cases a metaphor for perspective. In this sense, the ways in which the Holocaust is visually represented have become a concrete corollary for our sense of how the Holocaust means” (Visual Culture 1-2). New appropriations connect current instances of genocide to the Holocaust. The move goes from the images as references to the war to references to the Holocaust, or “the atrocity,” to references to atrocity and genocide without the specific frame of World War II.

The meaning of the image has shifted from an object of reference to an emblem or icon of atrocity and suffering. The recycling of images also “underscores their metaphoric role” (Hirsch 227). The new status as symbol alters the way in which we remember World War II and confront contemporary instances of genocide. Zelizer argues that he images of the Nazi atrocities blurs the distinction between the then and now: “References to the images of the Nazi camps thus activates a memory bank that allows viewers to visualize contemporary acts of atrocity in conjunction with what they remember from the recycled images of World War II” (Remembering 226). As free floating emblems which are applied to a wide range of issues, the atrocity photographs may lose efficacy as current uses dilute their force, according to Zelizer.
She writes, “In connecting the atrocity photos to events as wide ranging as contemporary barbarism, AIDS, urban poverty, and political suppression we may have forgotten how to navigate the terrain that connects them with real action” (Remembering 13). Zelizer’s argument supposes that, as the images becomes less rooted in the historical events, they lose their efficacy as a reference.

By stripping the photographs of their capacity to reference, Zemel argues that the images serve as several icons: “They are prisoners, perpetrators, and liberators, but most often, they are victims: literally and emblematically, the six million Jews murdered in the Nazi genocide” (204). While Zemel and others may contextualize the survivors as prisoners, it is important to remember that they are not. At the time of the photograph, they were not prisoners. At the time of the photograph, the Allied forces took over the prisons and freed the now ex-prisoners. Today, they aren’t prisoners, either. The emblems in this photograph are the emblems of the (living) survivors and the (living and dead) victims. Zelizer argues that the earlier uses of the photographs fulfilled their goal of allowing the public to bear witness the act of bearing witness by forcing us to address our own responsibility in the Holocaust (“Finding Aids” 697). Zelizer further argues that, as icons, we no longer take responsibility for the atrocities: “Photographs are like tombstones: they create a visual space for the dead that anchors the larger flow of the discourse about the events that motivated their death. Yet tombstones, like cemeteries that house them are significant only insofar as they merit attention from the living. Without memorial ceremonies...tombstones – and the dead that they mark – fade away” (238). Because the recontextualizations no longer act as sites for memorializing, the photographs no longer contribute to the act of bearing witness. This is the fundamental move from reference to icon. The icon takes the meaning of the war within its identification without necessarily bearing
witness. Zemel writes, “Shocking as they were as historical accounts, several of them are also now icons, that is to say, familiar pictures that emblematically compress or condense the data of events” (203). Even if the photographs lose their capacity to assist in bearing witness, they still remain a source of public memory. Zemel writes, “To insist on only the evidentiary status of atrocity pictures obscures the ways in which aesthetic effects deliver historical data, reify fragments of memory, and enable the passage from document to icon” (205). Without memorializing, the icon of the bodies of victims and survivors offers us a way in which we can examine our social institutions.

**Postmemory**

While the images may not illustrate World War II or the efforts to document it, they still are useful tools for examining contemporary culture. Hirsch writes that we need a new approach to the atrocity photographs: “The repeated images of the Holocaust need to be read from within the discourse of trauma, not for what they reveal but for how they reveal it, or fail to do so: thus they can be seen as *figures* for memory and forgetting” (222, emphasis in original). The work of the images as “figures for memory and forgetting” constitutes Hirsch’s concept of postmemory. Postmemory works in a space of recovery without memorializing the war. Hirsch writes, “Through repetition, displacement, and decontextualization, postmemorial viewers attempt to live with, and at the same time to reenvision and redirect, the mortifying gaze of these surviving images” (237). Without memorializing, postmemory relies on the iconic status of the images to function effectively as a source of collective memory. Hirsch writes that postmemory requires “a striking repetition of the same very few images, used over and over again iconically and emblematically to signal this event” (217). The recycling of images allows for postmemory. By
recontextualizing the photographs in a contemporary frame, we can examine those frames relative to atrocity.

Trauma as a frame for the memory of World War II inherently links one generation to the next. Hirsch writes, “The notion of postmemory derives from the recognition of the belated nature of traumatic memory itself. If indeed one of the signs of trauma is its aftereffects, then it is not surprising that it is transmitted across generations” (222). We connect with the values and views of previous generations by making the icons our own. Through representations that are incomplete and totalizing, postmemory allows the mind of the viewer to do what it naturally seeks to do – to fill in the narrative – through the influence of the icon. The viewer continually performs the newly reconstructed narrative under the influence of atrocity. The story is created anew. It re-initiates memory in a contemporary form. The photographs emblemized the grotesque bodies as victims and made the victims real. The hidden bodies became real again because of the representations in the photos. We connect with the images of the past through the icons of the present.

In the above image, the man at the center of the image carries and supports a fellow survivor. By recycling this image, we re-create an atrocity where collective support leads to survival. We establish an icon of mutual support and survival. Simultaneously and conversely, the image of the man on the left side is isolated as his image does not overlap that of any other survivor. He is the most emaciated and he sits alone looking down, an object of pity. Therefore, the two most grotesque figures (the man on the left and the man being carried) cannot support themselves. We establish the grotesque body as an icon of someone in need of saving.

The images stay active in contemporary society as contexts change and the photos’ meanings shift. Photographs as a source of postmemory create a connection to those who bore
witness. Hirsch argues that the “compulsive and traumatic repetition connects the second
generation to the first, producing rather than screening the effect of trauma” (218 emphasis in
original). “Even as the images repeat the trauma of looking, they disable, in themselves, any
restorative attempts. It is only when they are redeployed, in new texts and new contexts, that they
regain a capacity to enable a postmemorial work through” (Hirsch 238). Postmemorial work
relies on recontextualization because “in different contexts the effects of this repetition are
different” (Hirsch 218). Context provides meaning and elicits judgment. “Sometimes only
context enables us to decide between devil and deity” (Kayser 18).

**Typology of Recontextualization**

Above, I identify Zelizer’s three methods which may be used to recontextualize the
atrocity photographs. The first method is a text-driven contextualization. Zelizer writes, “The
words surrounding the image traditionally contextualize new atrocities with the Holocaust, just
as words broaden a depicted act of barbarism in World War II into a larger story of the Nazi
atrocity” (*Remembering* 227). The one who appropriates the images places it within a story, not
the Holocaust, to point to the atrocity of the new context. The atrocity image of the past shows
the atrocity of the present which is presented in words. We only know the “real” story behind the
image by reading the text. The text-driven context also forces the reader to view the image as the
only visual cue in the narrative. The authority of the text depends on the authority we naturally
grant to photography as “proof” of the text’s truth. Conversely, we need the text to “know” what
the image is about. This mutual dependence moves the image into its role as icon. The image of
the World War II atrocities stands in for the text of contemporary atrocities. The Holocaust
images are the only visual representation of today’s atrocities. The image no longer represents a
specific historical event (whether the atrocity, war, or liberation story), but simultaneously a past and a present. It is no longer historical; it is iconic. The image of the Holocaust becomes a grotesque dislocation from history. The events did not take place at the time the photograph was taken, but, rather, they took place in the when and where described by the text. Also, if each word constrains the breadth of possible interpretations, then the text hold greater authority in determining the “script” of our performance of the image. We cast ourselves into current genocide through the black and white image of Nazi concentration camp survivors and victims.

The second form of recontextualizing concerns parallelism. Current appropriators often use atrocity photos as a direct reference to contemporary cases of genocide. Zelizer writes, “Stock images of Nazi atrocities – the neat rows of bodies, the haunted faces behind the barbed wires – are echoed in the photos taken in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Cambodia; Nazi atrocity photos are often run side by side with depictions of more recent horror” (Remembering 14-5). The parallel reinforces the image as atrocity by showing its similarity to today’s genocides. Likewise, the image validates the contemporary genocide as atrocity. The parallel images conflate the Holocaust and current events into one genocide event. Then and now are visually one. Instead of a dislocation, the images combine to create a grotesque hybrid atrocity. Our performance bounces between images. We cast ourselves between then and now (which is actual a new “then” as the current photograph already “has been there”), if not into a timeless atrocity.

The third type – direct substitution – transforms the images of the Holocaust into the images of contemporary atrocities. Substitution depends on both the dislocation of past from present. Zelizer writes, “the photo’s iconic, conventionalized, and simplified nature collapses between the then and the now, with substitutional representation extending the earlier disjuncture between the place of the text and the place of the image beyond the event itself” (Remembering
Like the text-driven contextualization, the images are designed to tell the story of today’s events through an image of the past. The substitution of the grotesque image for a contemporary redirects the visceral response toward the new event. We do not respond to the survivors of the Holocaust, but the survivors of the new referent.

In this chapter, I am not using images that reference current examples of genocide. However, the typology remains applicable. The methods of contextualization cue the effects of the photographs in the same way when the issue is not atrocity.

The examples cited below include the different methods of recontextualizations for purposes other than remembrance. However, in all three methods, we see a double atrocity – the survivors of the Holocaust atrocities are now also victims of the new atrocities. The contexts strip away identity more than the generalizations prompted during the first wave of using the photographs as the atrocity story. No longer do we have “the” atrocity story; we have atrocity. Likewise, no longer do we have “the” victims of the Holocaust; we have victims. Victims are re-victimized by removing them from history. Without a history, they are victims without an identity, or icons.

**Text-driven Recontextualizations: The United States Army and libertarian.nl**

The above photograph appears in the on-line book *American Military History Volume II: The United States Military in a Global Era, 1917-2003* on the United State Army’s website. In Chapter Five, “World War II: The War against Germany and Italy,” it appears in an inset entitled “Liberating the Camps.” The inset appears as part of “The Final Offensive.” The caption under the image reads “Former Concentration Camp Prisoners Headed to a Hospital for Medical Attention.” As an atrocity photo, it is not referencing other contemporary atrocities. However, the
placement of the image fits within Zelizer’s typology as an image guided by text. The photograph assists in current attempts to bear witness in a secondary way. It references bearing witness more than it provides proof of the atrocities. One element in the text next to the image reads that the soldiers “encountered grim evidence of atrocities the Nazi regime had committed” (159). In that sense, the image testifies to the fact that the soldiers witnessed. While it is also proof of the atrocities, the author especially wishes us to see it as evidence encountered by the soldiers.

The U.S. Army’s use of the image constitutes Zelizer’s construction of the surrounding text recontextualizing the photograph. Despite its location in a chapter dedicated to World War II, the image is not about the war anymore. In a way similar to how the earlier photographs moved the story from the war to the Holocaust, the placement of this image moves the reader from the war to the liberation, then back to the war. The image is part of an inset, sectioned off from the rest of the chapter. The liberation is an aside to the war efforts. The story is one of the liberation, not the war. The bodies serve as an icon of heroism and the glory of the military. The grotesque bodies are the pathetic figures of those who needed saving, and they justify the war efforts. Because the military liberated these bodies from certain death, they become icons of those saved and helped by liberators.

Another important aspect of recontextualization goes back to who took the photos. The liberators, not the survivors, took the photographs. The liberators framed the images. The bodies were their “proof” and “objects for memory.” We see the victims and survivors. Even the press photographers took the pictures as victors. This loss of agency on the part of the survivors makes appropriation easier because the soldiers composed the pictures. The subjects never had control over the use of their likenesses. The site demonstrates Zemel’s contention that the photographs
taken by Allied soldiers now function by “sharing their identity – and heroism – as liberators” (207). In her study, Zemel addresses the formal consideration of the photos, primarily composition and views the power of the photos from an aesthetic perspective. She notes how the communicative capacity of the photos lie in the images contained within the frame. Words guide the reader through a liberation story of the victims. The image always had been taken by the soldiers and used by the soldiers, but now the image serves the story of the soldiers, not the survivors.

On the libertarian.nl website, the editor attached the photograph to an article entitled “Zestig jaar na Auschwitz” (“Sixty years after Auschwitz”). The author, Dirk Verhofstadt, argues that, as the survivors of the Holocaust are dying, we need to make renewed efforts, or “take the torch,” to combat anti-Semitism, Nazism, and racism (“Zestig jaar na Auschwitz”). The image appears at the top of the article to the right of the title. The first three sizable paragraphs detail current European examples of negationism and anti-Semitism. Verhofstadt argues that right-wing politicians and extremist Muslims are fostering Holocaust denial and violence against Jews. The article features the image prominently (177% larger than Fig.8). The Verhofstadt article appeared on another website (Liberales.de) prior to its posting on libertarian.nl. The article on Liberales.de does not include the image of the survivors. I take this to imply that the editor of libertarian.nl added the image.

In the last paragraph of his essay, Verhofstadt writes about the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. He writes about the number of deaths at Auschwitz, but does not specifically attribute the deaths to the Nazis. He writes of Nazi sympathizers, but not of the Nazis. The article conflates then and now in the inclusion of the image at the top near the discussion of current examples of anti-Semitism. The bodies are meant to be taken as the
consequence of right-wing politics insofar as it focuses the text on politicians and community leaders. Through this conflation, Verhofstadt implies that we should blame right-wing politics for the deaths. The bodies are the horrors of anti-Semitism.

Fig. 9. “Young Singers Spread Racist Hate: Duo Considered the Olsen Twins of the White Nationalist Movement” – One of Twelve Lobby Display Posters for BGSU Spring 2007 Production of Cabaret.

**Parallel Recontextualization: Cabaret**

Another example of recontextualizing this image comes from my work as dramaturg for the Bowling Green State University’s spring 2007 production of Cabaret. As part of that work, I helped create a lobby display. I created twelve posters for the display, one of which I titled...
“Young Singers Spread Racist Hate: Duo Considered the Olsen Twins of the White Nationalist Movement” (Fig. 9). The poster showed two teenage sisters, Lamb and Lynx Gaede. The top two-thirds of the poster included quotations from the sisters, images of the sisters (one of which showed them in a smiley-face t-shirt modified to reference Adolf Hitler), quotations from their mother, sample lyrics from one of their songs, and the text of the First Amendment. The lower third of the poster referenced the Holocaust. The section on the Holocaust included the image of a swastika, one of a crematory, one of an oven in a crematory, and the image from fig. 8. I placed the image in the lower right corner of the poster. Beside the photograph I included a quotation from Auschwitz survivor Judith Sternberg Newman:

Corpses were strewn all over the road; bodies were hanging from the barbed-wire fence; the sound of shots rang in the air continuously. Blazing flames shot in the sky; a giant cloud of smoke ascended above them. Starving, emaciated human skeletons stumbled toward us, uttering incoherent sounds. They fell down right in front of our eyes, and lay there gasping out their last breath. (qtd. in DesPres 177-8)

Also to the left of the image of the survivors, and above the quotation, I placed the image of the oven. Above the image on the right margin is a quotation from April Gaede, mother of the singers’ mother. The quotation read: “Well, all children pretty much espouse their parents’ attitudes. We’re white nationalists and of course that’s a part of our life and I’m going to share that part of my life with my children.” Above the quotation from April Gaede are lyrics from the song Sisters off of their album Fragment of the Future (as listed on www.bestlyric.com and www.songlyricscollection.com):
We are sisters, UGLY and PROUD. We feel the poo as it comes out. We don't care if it's green or yellow, as long as it smells poopy. We know we can’t compare ourselves with Mary Kate and Ashley in “beauty,” but we got a mean stink and we ain’t afraid of being booed at, ‘cause we’ll scare everyone away with our keed, yeah, that’s our creed.

We racists gotta do someting ‘bout those whites, man. They ruinin’ our lives, and, of course, the blacks are best! Prussian Blue, man. That’s us, we hate and we don’t care, as long as we got our poo, we fine, we sisters. We sisters till the end, till the end (which is in a few days).

Other quotations include an explanation of their name “Prussian Blue” and their political and social goals.

Unlike for the websites of the U.S. Army, Kerryfest, and Libertarian.nl, here I can discuss the specific intent in the choice of images and their arrangement for the poster. While I gathered the images and texts for the poster without assistance, the design of the lobby was a collaborative effort between myself and Bowling Green State University Department of Theatre & Film’s Business Operations Manager, Sara Turner. We designed the poster so that the viewer would read from top to bottom. The image of the survivors was placed oppositionally to the primary image of the sisters with the Hitler smiley-face shirts, which sits in the upper left corner, under the title. The first image the viewers would see should have been that of “normal” healthy blond-haired teen girls in full color. The last image the viewers should have seen was the sickly, dirty, and emaciated concentration camp survivors. We directly contrasted the grotesque bodies of the victims with the healthy, youthful bodies of the young singers. My hope was that the quotation by April Gaede informed the image by suggesting that the ultimate consequence of hate is the
systematic extermination of a people. The image informed the quotation by placing the victims next to a quotation that suggested their parents’ ideology may influence the sisters’ actions.

Further reading of the context reveals some unintended framings of the bodies. Placing the image of the bodies next to the image of the oven and under the quotation suggested that the consequence of hate is not an extermination of a culture, but specifically the destruction of the bodies. Going back to the idea in chapter one to the Nazi’s use of filth to degrade the prisoners, the grotesque bodies perhaps makes it easier for some to rationalize the physical destruction of the low-Other. The physical placement in the lower corner placed the bodies as low-Other, sequestered from the rest of the poster. Further, the placement of the image of the survivors relative to the quotation and the image of the oven could have unintentionally suggested that the natural result of hate is death – that hate is not manifest in two young girls, but rather in the rhetoric of parents guiding their children – that a possible outcome of trans-generational hate is the physical destruction of the grotesque other.

My appropriation fits within Zelizer’s concept of parallel recontextualizations. The success of a parallel contextualization relies on the conflation of past and present. The image of the survivors ran next to images and texts of contemporary forms of hate and racism. The context highlighted the connections between the two, whether those connections were real or imagined. The image of the survivors proved the atrocity of today. The grotesque bodies of the survivors also recontextualize the image of the youthful, healthy sisters as grotesque. The image of the sisters was placed above the image of the survivors, or they were higher than the survivors. The image of the sisters becomes grotesque because they are the new “faces” of the perpetrators. Despite the effort to distance, or even excuse, the sisters from full culpability in the “new” Holocaust, they are oppositional to the survivors. If the survivors are victims, the sisters are
perpetrators. If the survivors are grotesque because their bodies appear debased, the sisters are grotesque because their bodies appear uncorrupted. Yet, the accompanying lyrics on the poster act as a debasement of the sisters. They reveal their bodies as leaky and grotesque. In ways similar to the ways in which the lyrics debased the sisters, the accompanying Cohen quotation further debases the survivors. Because the sisters are implicated in the atrocities of World War II through conflation, as the survivors’ bodies become more debased, the healthy bodies of the sisters make them more grotesque. Their bodies are viewed as high. Yet, the worse the horror into which they are implicated, the more that status as high increases our repulsion. The conflation extends beyond the time of the image and the context to the conflation of one image for the other.

In addition, the university setting legitimized the relationship between the two sets of bodies. The lobby poster functioned as one part of the context of the image. Because the university production extends the context of the image, the image was part of the production. The photograph became an image of the consequences of willful blindness or the consequences of inaction. The implied relationship between sisters and survivors cast the sisters as “what is wrong” and the survivors as the consequences of inaction. Because of the authority granted to photographs as objective and truth-making, the image was further authorized as part of an official university event. In this sense, the bodies of the survivors and the sisters became objects for scholarship.

The context of the university production also changed the framework for the performance of the image. While open to the public, college students formed a significant percentage of the audience. The image of the youthful teen sisters more closely resembles the looks of a majority of the audience members. As such, the students were perhaps more easily able to identify with
the image of the sisters. Consequently, the image of the survivors potentially became more estranged or alien. The images of the survivors became more grotesque. Yet, the greater ease of identification also would have made the sisters more grotesque. The students would perhaps have cast themselves more easily into the role of the “perpetrators” and “what is wrong” than they would the emaciated victims. The desirability of the image of the teens would elicit the fear response because the “perpetrators” were desirable. The lack of the formal elements of the grotesque body – filth, excess, distortion – would have created a fear of the desirable. The image of the survivors would create a complementary internal ambivalence. The grotesque bodies become desired because they are not the bodies of the perpetrators. Yet, because the wounds of the formal grotesque elements persisted, the survivors’ bodies would have elicited the desire of the feared.

**Substitutional Recontextualization: Kerryfest**

Kerryfest is the personal web page of a self-labeled conservative. The majority of the site is dedicated to issues surround the United State’s War on Terror. Currently, the photo is a hyperlink for an article entitled “No Rights for the Wicked.” The article warns against being “far too concerned about the comfort and the rights of our enemies” (Kerryfest). In total there are 28 hyperlinks to different images and newspaper articles. The image of the survivors is attached to the word “recognized” in the following sentence: “When the dire threat posed by the Axis powers was finally recognized, America and her allies joined together to fight the enemy and save the world. This is a summary of events that occurred sixty years ago” (Kerryfest). Each underlined word hyperlinks to a different image or article.
The manner in which the editor of Kerryfest employs the photograph fits within Zelizer’s typology of substitution, or “situational representation,” in that the new context “collapses the distance between then and now extending the earlier disjunction between the place of text and the place of image beyond the event itself” (Remembering 225). The image takes the viewer from a current event back to the Holocaust. The implication is a cultural regression from contemporary manifestations of hate speech to the victims of hate speech. The conflation between then and now operates simultaneously as the dislocation of the image from the time and place of the event represented in the image.

The photograph is embedded in an editorial on the War on Terror. The image of the concentration camp survivors stands in for the narrative of the War on Terror. The image is almost entirely disassociated from the context of World War II. The argument ties the image to World War II; however, the image and the bodies in the image aren’t “about” World War II. They are “about” terrorism. The image is subtext and the subtext of the references to World War II is a call for direct action against terrorists. The aesthetic takes precedent over the reference. By tying the image to “recognized,” the editor provides “proof” of the dangers posed by terrorists. As we cast ourselves into the photograph, we are the ones in need of protection and aware of what can happen should we not protect ourselves. We project ourselves into bodies that we don’t want to be when Zelizer describes: “The emaciated bodies alongside barbed wire, vacant gazes of survivors who stare directly into the camera, and neatly stacked corpses and skulls underscore atrocity in its most contemporary form” (Remembering 222-23). The image of the emaciated survivors relays the threat of terrorists, not the horrors of a past event. The editor wants us to fear becoming the emaciated victims of terrorists. Instead of an image of the victims of terrorism, we see an image of the victims of Nazism. We substitute current threats with past atrocities.
By incorporating the image into their websites, Kerryfest and libertarian.nl demonstrate the relative ethical neutrality of the photographs. The photos need the context in order to perform politically. Sontag writes, “Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one – and can help build a nascent one” (17). The appropriations are examples of how “memory breathes life into the photos rather than the other way around” (Remembering 200). By placing the image next to references to the Holocaust, thereby placing the subject of the photograph in the Holocaust, the editors of Kerryfest and libertarian.nl designate the image as the motivating, or moving, force. Thus, they occlude the compelling face of context, or re-context, in the performance of the photos.

**Attribution**

When looking at the image in various contexts, a striking contradiction stands out. On the libertarian.nl site, the image accompanies an article on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The website editors imply that the image is that of Auschwitz survivors. The U.S. Army includes the image in its accounting of the U.S. military’s liberation of the camps. However, the United States military did not liberate Auschwitz; the Soviet military did. In that the photographed served as an icon, such specifics failed to have significance; it doesn’t matter where those photographs were taken or by whom they were taken.

Similar to the inconsistent attribution of the images in the years immediately following World War II, contemporary appropriations displace the image from the photographer, editor, and location of the photograph. The image’s status as icon has stripped away of the need for attribution. In fact, the decontextualization of the image is necessary for an iconic recontextualization. Icons have no attribution.
Of the images on the Kerryfest, the unnamed editor writes:

Wyolife.com does not claim any ownership of any of the photos used in these productions.

The photos used to create this website were collected from a multitude of publicly accessible websites as cataloged by the Google Image Search Engine. It is not our intention to violate anyone's copyrights.

If any photo or other copyrighted material used in this website is owned by you and you would like to be acknowledged or you would like us to remove the material please let us know. **We would be happy to honor your wishes.** (emphasis in original)

Like each of the other uses, no attribution is listed. Kerryfest provides the only acknowledgement I found which addresses the source of the photograph. The other uses include the image without attribution.

The editor of libertarian.nl includes neither the source of the image nor a caption to contextualize the photograph. I find myself in a similar position with the lack of attribution and caption. The lack of caption gives more potency to the surrounding images and text. The lack of attribution further dislocates the image from its functions as documentation and bearing witness to World War II or the atrocity story. With neither an identifiable history nor an attributable source, the image functions solely as an icon.

**Conclusion**

The recontextualizations of fig. 8 reveal the presence of a fourth “negotiator” in the performance of viewing – the person, persons, or institution appropriating the image. While
contexts have always influenced reading of the photograph, the impact of the context was not as
great as it is today. The context remained relatively stable as the uses of the images were
confined to documentation and remembrance. The contexts encouraged those performances of
reading. As the photograph turned from reference to icon, the contexts open the ways in which
one can incorporate the image into a larger narrative. While the number of ways one utilizes the
photograph has increased, the introduction of the context as a larger negotiating presence limits
the range of interpretations of the photograph. The context contains formal elements that
contribute to the narrative. In the cases of the U.S. Army and libertarian.nl, the accompanying
text directs the viewer toward specific readings. In my work with the poster, I used images and
quotations to frame the image beyond the frame established by the photographer. The editor of
Kerryfest employed the image in such a way as to encourage or suggest a viewing different from
the other contexts. As the turn from reference to icon shows, the subject loses more agency than
in past appropriations. While not rising to the level of ahistoricity, the icon is less historically
specific. That we don’t know which camp the survivors survived testifies to the increasing
irrelevance of the subject. It becomes even more about the formal element of the icon – the
bodies. The bodies in the photos are there, they had once been there, but also they are no longer
there. They are “stuck” in the photograph at the mercy of the image appropriator to
recontextualize the eventual image and the viewer who performs the interpretation of the text.

Based on the examples cited above I would dispute Zelizer’s concern that the images will
deaden our response to contemporary atrocities and will function as a means to remember to
forget about current events. None of the examples cited above directly reference other atrocities.
The images serve as emblems of broader societal issues rather than specific examples of
contemporary instances of genocide. If the images solely stood in for current atrocities, then the
photos might act as a tool for distraction. However, the wider utilization of the image suggests that a more appropriate frame may be Hirsch’s construction of the images as icons. The icon is that of the victim. The bodies in the photos are the victims of racism (*Cabaret*), the victims of politics (libertarian.nl), and the victims for heroism (U.S. Army and Kerryfest).

However, the re-circulation has moved away from the function of documentation and bearing witness. Hirsch writes, “The repetition of the same few images has disturbingly brought with it their radical decontextualization from their original context of production and reception” (217). The move from bearing witness does not mean a move away from collective healing. Hirsch contends that the recontextualizations “make repetition not an instrument of fixity or paralysis or simple retraumatization, as it is often for survivors, but a *mostly* helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past” (218). While genocide in the vein of the Nazi atrocities continues, the World War II photographs still carry an impact. They carry more weight than photographs of contemporary genocide in the public imagination because of the formal elements of production and reception. Zelizer writes, “Gone from these most recent depictions are the number of photos displayed in World War II, the primacy of the photos, and the constant discussion of the photos – in both the press and professional literature” (*Remembering* 224). A trauma-based analysis relies on the ability of the image to “re-wound” the viewer, even if the viewer has never seen the image before. The images of the corpses, skeletons, skulls, and emaciated figures from the concentration camps, through postmemory “re-wound” the spectator. The grotesque “re-wounds” the viewer.

Other elements account for why the World War II atrocity photographs carry more weight. We have had over sixty years to process the images collectively and find the images that best function as icons. *Because* the same images reappear, they contribute to their own added
significance. Under the framework of trauma, we have found the images, and the formal elements contained therein, that most affect us. We seek to “work through” our experience of the war through the few recycled images. A wide variety of images would prevent us from working through the same experience of the war.

The grotesque bodies, though, serve more than as an extreme example to “drive the point home.” Each use depends on the attraction-repulsion impulse to enhance the persuasiveness of the point of view. While some contexts are more overt about perpetuating their perspective, each represents a perspective. The perspective of the person or persons utilizing the image factors into the performance of viewing. The photograph becomes one element of the context, with the accompanying text or images. The body is the icon. Hirsch calls the objects in the photographs the “epitome of dehumanization” (230). As emblems, they are not representations of the subjects, but representations of genocide and victimhood. The body is that of the victim and we know it is the victim because of its grotesqueness. The filthy clothes, the emaciation, and the emptiness in the eyes looking back at us all mark the victim. As an icon, though, the victim has lost all semblance of personal identity. The icon's lack of identity allows us to more easily project ourselves into the body and, thus, into the narrative. Yet, the lack of identity and recontextualizations that facilitate the projection dislocate the body from history. As an icon, the grotesque bodies of the survivors trouble fundamental concepts of history and victimization. We have violently and grotesquely ripped the bodies out of history. The bodies are nameless, and, as icons, they are now without their social, cultural, or historical identity. Those who appropriate the images also revictimize the survivors with each recontextualization. They are victims because they are forever cast into that role as an icon, but also because they have no agency in determining the meaning of their own bodies. We, as appropriators and as viewers, make their
bodies mean what we need them to mean. The bodies are not victims, prisoners, survivors, Jews, living, or dead. The bodies as icons are disassociated and nameless. In other words, they are grotesque.
CONCLUSION: THE GROTESQUE BODY AS A SITE OF SOCIAL CONTESTATION

Through the course of this study, I have employed the grotesque as a tool to analyze seemingly resistant social dynamics by dissecting different social institutions. In each of the case studies, the grotesque body is an object into which the performer or viewer casts herself/himself. The cabaretists of the Nazi extermination camps sang and made jokes in the degraded and abused bodies that were not theirs prior to internment. The emaciated figures in the atrocity photographs provide the bodies into which the viewer projects her/his self. To view these events as interjections or projections has allowed me to examine of the forces that created and perpetuate the bodies. The grotesque cabarets help explicate the multifaceted, and mutually resistant, social dynamics between concentration camp officials and prisoners. The analysis of the performance of viewing the images as grotesque reveals the cultural ambivalences experienced by the second generation witnesses. By accepting these bodies and performances as grotesque, we admit to the existence of cultural constructions that create the attraction-repulsion impulses. By engaging the grotesque body in analysis, we encounter the sources of those impulses and, thereby, we can bring the engaged social constructs and social binaries into relief. As a tool of analysis, the grotesque body clarifies a site of social contestation. Stallybrass and White write, “The grotesque physical body is invoked both defensively and offensively because it is not simply a powerful image but fundamentally constitutive of the categorical sets through which we live and make sense of the world” (23). Performance scholar Rebecca Schneider writes that the interrogation of the binaries can untangle even the most ingrained social constructions:

The terror that accompanies the dissolution of a binary habit of sense-making and sense-fashioning is directly proportionate to the social safety
insured in the maintenance of such apparatus of sense. The rigidity of our social binaries – male/female, white/black, civilized/primitive, art/porn – are sacred to our Western cultural ways of knowing, [even while] theorists have long pointed to the necessity of interrogating such foundational distinction to discover precisely how they bolster the social network as a whole, precisely what they uphold and what they exclude. (13)

Analyzing the grotesque allows for a view of objects or events that appear fixed to be re-viewed as fluid. For example, historian Peter Jelavich writes that the Berlin-style cabaret died in the camps with the prisoners who performed it:

The genre was strained to the limit in concentration camps, and it was there that Berlin cabaret died. It did not perish because it could not cope with the inhuman conditions; it managed to retain a blend of art and entertainment, of humor and seriousness, even in those impossible circumstances. Berlin cabaret died because the Nazis murdered so many of the human beings who sustained it – women and men, writers and composers, actors and musicians, professionals and amateurs, entertainers and audience. (282)

I speculate that Berlin cabaret could not sustain the culture prior to 1933 because the culture of cabaret fundamentally changed in the camps. Cabaret became a tool of survival and identity preservation. Cabaret lost the decadence, frivolity, and licentiousness associated with Berlin cabaret prior to the camps. The absurdity of the grotesque conditions under which prisoners performed denied cabaret’s capacity to remain removed from those grotesque conditions. Berlin cabaret did not die, but it could not go back to the way it was.
I feel obliged to reiterate that the existence of cabarets in the concentration camps did not make life “good” for the prisoners. Yet, the failure of language when rationalizing the existence of the performances points to the need to interrogate the social forces underpinning the performances. Daniel writes, “The amazing abundance of humor, however, must not be misunderstood. There was, and is, nothing funny about life when death can sneak up in a score of painful ways which seem to have no connection with the laws which govern the outside world” (704).

The identities created in concentration camps were hybrids of the dominant Nazi concentration camp culture and the cultures that the prisoners attempted to preserve from before incarceration. The hybrid is a form of resistance. While disidentification, as a hybrid, is not an overt rejection of the dominant ideology, it is resistance. Stallybrass and White write, “To define the grotesque, then, as a process of hybridization is not to neutralize its role as a kind of contestation. Rather it is to acknowledge that the grotesque tends to operate as a critique of a dominant ideology which has already set the terms, designating what is high and low” (43). Yet the high can also question the terms of the hierarchy through the grotesque to re-set those terms. As we can see in the imagery of the Jew in medieval and Renaissance art, by lessening the distinction between Jew and animal, the high disrupts the hierarchy in order to elevate its relative position. The degradation and violence of the Nazi concentration camps created a grotesque body that further facilitated the genocide. I suggest that the grotesque need not work only through the low troubling the high and disputing the high’s status as morally neutral. The view of cabarets in concentration camps as grotesque allows us to investigate the ways in which the means of degradation become the source of resistance. If the grotesque works only as the low troubling the high, then we can easily dismiss the degradation the Nazi imposed upon prisoners as “evil.”
However, if we view the grotesque in terms of the way it troubles of the hierarchy, then we can better see the role the filth and terror had in both the maintenance of power by the Nazis and in the efforts of the prisoners to resist that authority. Also, we then view seemingly incongruous acts as separate elements on a continuum of strategies to survive.

In viewing, we perform our ambivalences toward the war. As authorized by the photograph, the grotesque bodies construct an unbelievable proof of atrocities. The innate fear and desire in the bodies of survivors and victims allow us to play out those same ambivalences toward the war. We cast ourselves into the unnamable to put words to an unimaginable event. The initial release of the atrocity photographs following the liberation of the camps gave the previously-unseeing public the opportunity to name the events. They “found” justification for the war. Contemporary appropriations give the same name to other events. We understand genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia through our repeated viewing of the past. We view modern-day anti-Semitism and contemporary freedoms through the interpretations we take and make through our performance of the images. The photographs are essential to the way we view ourselves. Phelan writes, “Self-identity needs to be continually reproduced and reassured precisely because it fails to secure belief. It fails because it cannot rely on a verifiably continuous history” (Unmarked 4). Through our repeated viewing of the same atrocity icons, we reproduce the ambivalences of our identity in the hopes that the ambiguity will subside. Yet, the bodies in the photographs remain the same. The contexts and other gaps around the images change but the bodies remain.

As a site of ambivalence, the grotesque body challenges some fundamental assumptions of identity and culture. The grotesque body is both material and cultural. The bodies of prisoners and the images of the bodies of survivors represent the disappearance or destruction of the cultural and the material at sites of social contestation. In order to destroy the culture of the
prisoners, the Nazis needed to destroy the bodies. In our need to mourn the victims of World War II, we destroy the psychic energy tied to the victims and turn their bodies into icons. To reconcile the events, we perform the grotesque body to destroy the psychic energy of the social structures tied to the Holocaust. Performance scholar Diana Taylor provides a useful construction of disappeared bodies, like those of concentration camp prisoners, as “the battleground, the geographic terrain” upon which people fight for culture and identity (151). The process of revelation of the atrocity photographs resists continued efforts to make the bodies disappear. At least three times people have tried, or are trying, to make the bodies disappear: when the people were taken from community in the prisons, when they were taken from world during selection for extermination, and when they are taken from history through denial. Additionally, through the act of photography, the bodies are disappearing. As icons, the grotesque bodies of concentration camp survivors and victims no longer exist as individual bodies of a specific time or place, but rather they exist as a device to invoke feelings of fear and desire regarding any number of subjects, from the War on Terror to the United States military to a college production of *Cabaret*. Even in these less malicious ways, the bodies continue to disappear.
REFERENCES


http://davidlavery.net/Grotesque/.


