The Rhetoric of Trauma: Teaching about the Holocaust and Postmodern Affect in an Advanced Composition Course

Robert D. Samuels

Like many other teachers of composition, I believe that students often write better if they are dealing with an engaging subject matter, and if they have developed critical thinking skills. However, I have also found that some of the most important and interesting topics often serve to reduce—and, at times, block—critical analysis. For example, in teaching several writing courses on the topic of "The Holocaust and Popular Culture," I have encountered strong student resistances to analyzing issues concerning historical trauma, especially when these issues are presented through popular culture productions. Students often insist that movies and television programs should be just enjoyed and not analyzed; however, what do we do in a cultural situation where many people get their knowledge of history from the mass media? If we think that history still matters, and students need a historical perspective, then we must teach critical media literacy at the same time that we teach about historical events.

One place to begin the analysis of why people resist thinking about historical and personal traumas is in the recent development of "trauma studies." For instance, Cathy Caruth's important work *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, posits that postmodern theories of subjectivity and representation, which problematize our notions of historical reference, may work to undermine our efforts to take an ethical stance in relation to traumatic experiences (10). However, Caruth affirms that the very nature of trauma replicates many aspects of postmodern culture and theory: "Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrollable repetitive appearance of hallucina-
tions and other intrusive phenomena” (11). In this structure, trauma pushes us to rethink our conceptions of history and reference so that we take into account the radical temporal distinctions between an event and its representation. Moreover, this separation of the referent from the sign of the referent points to a postmodern and deconstructive notion of cultural representation.

From Caruth’s perspective, cultural memory is always already locked into a Freudian model of the return of the repressed (13). In other words, we are constantly forgetting or repressing essential historical moments, only for those moments to return in a veiled and symbolic way. According to this logic of deferral and difference, cultural studies itself can be reinterpreted as a mode of trauma studies, since we are continually trying to make sense of various symbolic representations by tracing them back to some primal unrepresentable event. In many instances, the founding traumatic event in cultural studies is an encounter with racial, sexual, political, or economic oppression. Like a cultural form of psychoanalysis, cultural theorists and teachers try to associate current cultural representations to past traumatic events by discovering the repressed or hidden symbolic links that connect the initial event to the current representation.

What is often missing in these cultural studies’ interpretations of historical traumas is the role played by emotion in the experience and understanding of traumatic violence. In “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion,” Lynn Worsham defines emotion as “the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially and historically constructed and bodily lived, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the social order and its structure of meanings” (216). This theory of emotions helps us to see why it is so difficult for us to engage our students in thinking about traumatic events: for the very structure of emotion entails a confrontation with the social determination of affect, and this encounter with social determinism is itself traumatic by nature. However, as Worsham rightly argues, we cannot ignore the important role that emotion plays in every pedagogical encounter (216).

In the case of studying about the Holocaust, the level of emotional sensitivity is often intense. One reason for this intensity is that students are forced to deal with a situation that fundamentally challenges their strong belief in individual free will. Following Worsham, I would like to posit that this need to defend individualism, even in events that deny any possibility of self-determination, represents one of the strongest effects
of our emotional pedagogy in postmodern American culture, for the media and our education system teach us at an early age to take pride in our exceptional individualism (222). In this context, teachers who tell their students that they are controlled by larger social forces often become the victims of the students' repressed rage and anxiety.

We can explain how students displace their affective states onto their teachers by turning to the field of psychoanalysis. According to the psychoanalytic notion of projective identification, students who encounter their own sense of powerlessness soon project that sense of powerlessness onto the teachers, and thus by making the teachers feel disempowered, the students are able to experience this unwanted emotion through the other in a safe and distant way. In face of their own sense of powerlessness, teachers often retreat from dealing with these highly emotional issues. One form of retreat that Worsham articulates is the use of theory and abstract thinking to separate thought from emotion and thus to contain traumatic reactions in a safe and controlled manner (222). This process of symbolic containment can also be applied to Jameson' notion of the "waning of affect" in postmodern culture. Since we are constantly watching trauma on television and in movies, we have been taught how to replace real emotions with symbolic affects that lose their intensity through distance and fictional representation.

In The Plague of Fantasies, Slavoj Žižek has articulated some of the ways that our cultural representations of trauma allow us the ability to watch other people suffer while we remain sitting in the comfort of our own homes. For example, while discussing the case of the traumatic war in Bosnia, Žižek argues that the West was able for a long time to stay out of the conflict by maintaining the presence of a "neutral gaze" (17). Furthermore, by not taking sides with any of the main parties, the West tried to maintain "the impossible neutral gaze of someone who tries to exempt himself from his concrete historical existence" (18). I believe that this false neutrality represents one of the major forces defining the ways my students react to the Holocaust and other cultural traumas: in this structure, neutrality represents a repression of history and social determination.³

Žižek not only sees this impossible neutral gaze as a mode of social and personal resistance to working through the cultural foundations of trauma, but he also argues in The Metastases of Enjoyment that trauma itself can be defined as the "gaze of the helpless other" (210). In other terms, what we find so threatening in a traumatic scene is the look of someone who knows that he or she can neither understand nor prevent
a senseless act of victimization. Žižek adds that this helpless gaze "makes us all feel guilty" (211).

In response to this guilt caused by our own and the victim's sense of helplessness, Žižek posits that we cultivate a false sense of compassion for the victim (212). According to Žižek, this mode of responding to the other's helplessness allows us to keep a safe distance from the other's trouble (212). In this logic, we like to feel compassion for the other because this makes us feel good about our selves (212). Furthermore, Žižek insists that our fascination with the traumatic victimization of the Other prevents us from acting to change the real conditions of suffering (214). Now, some may say that Žižek is presenting a highly cynical interpretation of the ways people respond to other people's trauma; however, I want to use some of my students' comments and discussions on the Web concerning the Holocaust to see if Žižek's theories are actually accurate. I also want to suggest several pedagogical strategies that will help us to better understand and explore the emotional reactions we have to traumatic events in and out of the writing class.

Confronting Student Resistances
In order to incorporate critical media literacy into courses concerning historical events like the Holocaust, I believe that we need to anticipate and counter diverse forms of resistance to critical thinking, for whenever I teach about the Holocaust and other representations of cultural trauma, I always encounter at least four modes of emotional denial, which I have labeled as: idealizing, universalizing, identifying, and assimilating. I believe that these four forms of denial represent the most common ways that students resist analyzing both popular culture and representations of history. In order to test this theory, I will discuss the way my students and writers on the Web have responded to the film *Life is Beautiful*.

One of the most interesting aspects of the response to this film is that some people claim that it was the best film ever about the Holocaust, while other people argue that the film has nothing to do with this historical trauma. Instead of first giving my view on this topic, I will interpret my students' written reactions as symptomatic of the ways that people in postmodern culture respond to the Holocaust. My goal here is not to mock or stereotype my students; rather, I aim to articulate a method to help students to historicize and denaturalize their own emotional reactions in a safe and controlled space.
In terms of the movie, the most frequent cognitive and emotional responses that I have received in my classes are the following:

(1) It is a comedy; you are not supposed to take it seriously.
(2) I was very moved by it and it had a profound effect on me.
(3) It was about a father’s love for his son and it had nothing to do with the war.
(4) It makes you appreciate the things that you have and how life is really beautiful.
(5) I didn’t go to analyze it; I just relaxed and escaped.
(6) People like to see that even in a bad situation you can make fun of things.
(7) Everyone can relate to the love between a father and a son, so the film made the Holocaust more accessible.
(8) I don’t know if it had a message, but it was really well-done.
(9) It’s really about the power of the imagination.
(10) It helps you to really experience the Holocaust.

Many of these responses center on the idea that this film is a comedy or a fictional form of entertainment, and thus one is not supposed to analyze it or take it too seriously. I categorize these responses as “universalizing” because they posit that there is no inherent meaning or value of the representation, and thus it is open to any and all interpretations. This is the major mode of resistance to reading that one finds when one is studying popular culture. Even when a film or television program is dealing with a historical event, people claim that we can learn nothing from it. In fact, many students argue that it is wrong to even try to analyze something that is merely there to entertain us.

This desire to see movies and television shows about the Holocaust as pure entertainment can serve the function of blocking any guilt or anxiety that people may feel in relationship to this event. In fact, in his study of jokes, Freud argues that a major aspect of humor and comedy is to present serious issues and desires in a context where they will not be taken seriously by the joke teller and the audience. A comedy like Life is Beautiful thus turns to history in order to negate the effect (and affect) that history may have on us. Using Worsham’s theory of the pedagogy of emotion, can we not say that popular culture has trained Americans to not take their own culture seriously. Moreover, this ideology of popular culture having no meaning works to separate our affective responses to television, movies, and music from our cognitive sense of rationality. In
this splitting of affect from cognition, the reception of popular cultural representations of traumatic events allows people the chance to escape history and their connection to the past.

I have labeled this tendency to empty history and culture of critical analysis, "universalizing," because it points to Zizek's definition of the democratic subject as a universal being without any content:

The subject of democracy is not a human person, "man" in all the richness of his needs, interests, and beliefs. The subject of democracy, like the subject of psychoanalysis, is none other than the Cartesian subject in all its abstraction, the empty punctuality we reach after subtracting all its particular contents. (Looking 163)

According to this universalizing logic, as democratic citizens—all equal in front of the law—what we share in common is often based on a lack of content or identity. Perhaps this is a key to both the positive and negative aspects of our global community and economy. On the one hand, we are all supposed to be free to interpret a meaningless popular culture any way that we want and to be treated equally in legal and economic exchanges. On the other hand, this equality strips us of our differences and particular identities. Thus, what often unites us in contemporary society is a shared popular culture that we claim has no inherent value.

In order to counter this lack of identity in democratic discourse, many people turn to a second type of resistance to critical thinking: identification. We find an instance of this type of resistance when my student claimed that: "Everyone can relate to the love between a father and a son, so the movie made the Holocaust more accessible." In this type of response, we see the way that people defend against history by concentrating on their own emotional responses to the historical representation. However, just because people can empathetically relate to certain feelings, this does not mean that they have learned anything about the causes and actualities of the event. This quick form of emotional release often relates to a false sense of dealing with the subject matter at hand. For example, when students state that "It helps you to really experience the Holocaust" and "I was very moved by it and it had a profound effect on me," we must question what are the real benefits of this type of vicarious experience.

It is important to point out that in all of these identifying responses, the students return to their own selves as the source of identity and emotional release. The underlying idea is that it is through the experience...
of the Other that people gain access to their own true feelings. One of the problems with this form of empathy is that it tends to deny the reality and history of the person and events being portrayed in favor of the emotional responses of the viewer. Thus, many of my students argued that the film made them value their own life more and made them realize that it is always important to stay optimistic. In these positive emotional reactions to historical trauma, we can see how a whole pedagogy and rhetoric of emotion has helped to shape the affective responses of individual watchers.

By refocusing the effect of the film onto the effect that it has on their own selves, these students often end up idealizing both the creator of the film and their own personal values. In this way, a film about historical horror and tragedy can be viewed as a personal story about the greatness of human courage and love. While I do not deny that these aspects were presented in the movie, I do think that it is reductive to center one’s reaction solely on one’s own emotional and personal response. In fact, for many viewers, this film acted as a mirror where they saw their own ideal selves reflected back to them.

This type of idealizing narcissistic reaction often hides the particular experiences of others behind a false wall of universal suffering or celebration. When my students posit that anyone can relate to this story of love and pain, they often imply that the specific historical facts and personal situations are not important. In these acts of universalizing, the importance and differences of the Holocaust and other historical traumas are denied. Since mass culture must make itself attractive to a wide range of people and values, the best way to do this is to deny difference and specificity and try to tell a universal story to which “anyone” can relate.

In order to appeal to the idealizing tendencies of the universal audience, popular movies often rely on showing off their technical skill and special effects. By focusing the audience’s attention on the aesthetic production of the film, the actual information and the messages that are being communicated are often obscured. Thus, when my student claims that “It’s really about his power of imagination,” what he/she is saying is that the idealization of the artist is more important than the content of the film. This is not to say that people do not learn from popular culture: on the contrary, they learn a lot. The problem is that people are not always aware of what they are taking in when they watch a film for pure enjoyment or a sense of escape.

In order to teach about the Holocaust in this type of cultural context, I have found that one must first actively work against the message that
popular culture has no meaning and that art is only for art’s sake, for to say that a film that is centered on fascism and life in a concentration camp has no meaning is to deny the value and importance of the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. This mode of postmodern Holocaust denial is neither intentional nor direct, but it still has some of the same effects of traditional modes of historical revisionism. For example, this movie was able to claim the power and prestige of a film about an important historical period without being historical at all.

In fact, the lack of a historical context is often proclaimed by the people who admire the film. One of my students points to this “decontextualizing” aspect of the movie by stating that “It was about a father’s love for his son and it had nothing to do with war.” This denial of the historical specificity of the film relates to the general way that our culture rips events and symbols out of their original contexts and places them in new contexts. I call this mode of resistance “assimilating” in order to stress the fictional and adaptive nature of many cultural representations: To assimilate a symbol or event is not only to absorb something into a new context but also to play upon recognizable themes and attributes for a generalized audience. Likewise, the person who tries to assimilate is someone who attempts to copy and mimic the dominant characteristics and beliefs of a given culture. In order to take on these borrowed attributes, the assimilator has to first remove these signs and symbols from their original context and redeploy them in a new context.8

Studying the Emotional Denials of Cultural Trauma on the Web
To help my students think about the different modes of emotional resistance I have been discussing, I have often found that it is best to start off by examining the ways other people have reacted to historical trauma. This strategy has the advantage of building up a sense of trust and collaboration before one tries to get students to examine their own feelings and reactions. My pedagogical approach follows Lisa Langstraat’s *JAC* article “The Point Is There Is No Point: Miasmic Cynicism and Cultural Studies Composition,” where she argues that we must help our students to historicize and denaturalize their own emotional reactions (294). However, as Langstraat argues, this type of emotional pedagogy is rendered difficult in a postmodern culture where “the experience of genuine emotion seem to be reduced to mere simulacra” (295). In order to combat this sense that “everything is just a movie” and “movies have no meaning,” Langstraat recommends teaching our students how cyni-
cism is itself "a culturally constructed and rhetorically situated affect" (294). In other terms, she recommends analyzing the defenses of the culture before one starts to analyze the content of the culture; yet, we are still caught in the problem of how do you get students to examine the historical and cultural foundations of emotions when they are denying the importance of culture and history? Furthermore, how do you get postmodern subjects to analyze their own nihilism without constantly encountering their own nihilism?

I have found that even though most students cannot take a rhetorical and historical approach to their own emotions, especially their own cynicism, they can locate the social foundations of emotions when they are looking at other people’s reactions to cultural events. Therefore, I base the first part of my course on exploring the “popular” resistances and denials concerning the cultural representations of the Holocaust circulating on the Web. My strategy is to use the Internet as a research tool for students to collect and examine various personal responses to the Holocaust. For example, in the Yahoo User’s group discussion of Life if Beautiful, my students found a wide range of popular responses. One writer in this group argues that:

I know it was not realistic. . . . The story showed that man is also capable of purity and goodness, even in the face of evil. We do not know if they were in the camp for a week or a year, where the camp was located, or any of the facts. . . . We draw our own conclusions. We do know that pure love exists.

This quote starts by assimilating to the cultural context of the film. The writer informs us that it is not a realistic movie, so we should not think about it in a realistic fashion. In fact, its lack of realism and specificity allows the film to take on a universal appeal. In turn, the universality of the unrealistic picture produces an idealization of love, purity, and goodness, in the form of the ideal relationship between the father and the son. Finally, this idealizing process results in an empathic celebration of pure love. The movement of this viewer’s logic therefore passes through the four major forms of denial that I am discussing. Moreover, this combination of assimilating, universality, idealization, and empathic identification moves the focus of the film and history to the emotional experience of the individual viewer. Of course, one of the major problems with this approach is that it often leaves history, critical thinking, and the suffering of others by the roadside.
Yet, many of my students and the participants in the Web discussion groups claim that the film actually provides a deep understanding of history and the Holocaust. These viewers argue that instead of a quick move to universalize the subject matter and forget about the Holocaust, this form of popular culture allows one to combine important knowledge with a personal emotional investment. For example, one response claims: "The way the movie was directed made you feel as if you were in the camps along with the characters." In this form of empathic identification, we witness a merging between the audience and the sufferers of history through a process of emotionally reexperiencing the pain of others. Moreover, this writer posits that one identifies with the "characters" in the camps and not necessarily with the victims of the Holocaust. In other words, one feels that one is really part of the constructed fiction and not the events of history.

This empathy with fictional characters may still have the negative effect of blocking all levels of critical thinking and analysis. Even though it is a common idea in postmodern culture that to reexperience something is the same thing as actively learning about it, it is clear from these responses, and the responses of my students, that they have learned very little about the actual events being depicted in this movie and other popular culture productions. This use of history in order not to learn about history is evident in many of the comments that I have collected. One writer in the Yahoo User's Group declares:

I think that the reason that I responded to the emotional landscapes that the director created in "Life is Beautiful" as opposed to other films in which the holocaust is portrayed with the focus on the violence and the horror/torture which I tend to shut off from and generally become numb to those types of images.

This writer describes the way that violence in film can undermine the ability of someone to react to the content of the movie; however, one has to question what is learned from a picture that denies the true violence of the history that is being depicted.

As one astute writer in this discussion group points out, this act of presenting a violent period of history without much violence is similar to the ways that Guido (the father) in the movie tries to protect his son from the horrors of the Holocaust. This discussant posits that the viewer is placed in the same position as the young boy who must be shielded from the true horrors of the camp. She also argues that this way of pacifying the
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The audience is “condescending” and, “It assumes that a parent—first and foremost—has the power to control and present situations in the way they want to for their children. The whole point about such horrors like the Holocaust is that you can’t protect your children.” This writer does engage in an empathic relationship with the film and the sufferers of the Holocaust, but she is also able to maintain a level of critical distance and see that the parents at the camps could not protect their children. In fact, she does universalize this point by stating that no one can control what one’s children are going to see; however, this universalization occurs after she recognizes the differences of the historical contexts.

In response to this writer’s critical comments, many people reacted with outrage and dismissal. One strong proponent of the film declared:

YA AIN’T UNDERSTOOD NOTHIN’ OF THE MOVIE! This movie is NOT a movie about the holocaust! It wasn’t supposed to show exactly what happened in the camps! Schindler’s List did that already! This was supposed not to tell your children that the holocaust was bad, but that LIFE is beautiful, and to always enjoy it!

This statement is based on the idea that there can only be one reading of a film and that reading is determined by the intentions of the idealized director. Furthermore, this writer claims that Schindler’s List already covered the Holocaust, and thus there is really nothing else to add.

Anyone who has ever taught literature or cultural studies knows that this concentration on the one intention of the author is very hard to shake, for the idealization of the one meaning of the author usually entails an idealization of the person who understand this singular meaning. Many times this type of argument relies on the idea that history is made by great individuals and not by cultures and group actions. This idealizing perspective insists that we should never criticize a work of art; rather, we are supposed to celebrate its greatness and our greatness that it puts us in touch with.

One of the problems with this mode of idealization is that it not only misreads history, but it also tends to attack anyone with a critical perspective. Thus, one discussant argues: “You missed the whole sense of the film as it was the intention of Benigni and whoever I heard that saw the film has come to appreciate.” This viewer believes that there can only be one meaning for the film, and it is based on the intentions of both the
author and the audience, and anyone with an alternative view is just blowing hot air.

**Writing without History on the Web**

I want to stress here that while there has been a lot of analysis regarding Holocaust deniers and anti-Semitic hate groups on the Web, what has often been overlooked is some of the more subtle forms of prejudice and historical revisionism. By analyzing the ways people interpret popular culture representations of this historical trauma, instead of merely focusing on extreme hate groups, we can gain insight into the possibilities and limitations of teaching about the Holocaust and other cultural trauma to the broader public.

In my writing course on the Holocaust, I had my students analyze the above mentioned Web discussions and the debates and commentaries that were distributed on an internet site called epinions.com. After reading and writing about the Holocaust for several weeks, my students were shocked by the lack of sensitivity and knowledge shown by the general public regarding anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. What bothered my students the most was the complete lack of historical specificity and information that these comments displayed. For example, the following “epinion” replicates many of the subtle historical distortions circulating on the Web:

Then the war starts, and thus, so does the persecution of Jews. He unfortunately, is one of those taken in, along with his son. In the concentration camp, the kid is hidden away in the overfilled dormitory, so that his father can make sure of his safety. Throughout, he must keep his son’s spirits up, and lift him out of his boredom and depression. Thus, this film becomes not just a comedic tale, but a serious drama composed of family bonds and keeping your spirit against all odds.

One of the most commendable aspects of this film is that it was not another war story that was depressing, methodic or violent, but a story that focuses on characters and personalities, irregardless of whether they are placed in a war situation or not.

Though we see Benigni’s depiction of the father go through the most difficult of situations, we see him pull through, and fight back without any bitterness but with invention, intelligence, and comedy. In short, this film focuses on the human character, the human will, and a fathers’ love.

“Life is Beautiful” will make you think exactly what life is really all about, and hopefully by the end, you will realize that life is about protecting and nurturing those closest to you, to the end. I loved this movie, and I hope that you will, too.
This analysis of the film stresses the development of the characters and the important need to protect one’s family. However, as my students pointed out, wasn’t the Holocaust a situation where families were separated, and one could do nothing to protect them? Furthermore, how could one develop one’s sense of self in a situation that dehumanized people and stripped them of all sense of dignity and control?

Since this movie and the commentator efface all historical realities and conditions from the Holocaust, it becomes easy to project one’s own values and desires onto the leading characters. In this sense, it is reasonable for the commentator to praise the father’s relationship with his son, but one has to wonder why he also lauds the father’s lack of bitterness. In a very subtle way, these comments seem to blame the victims and survivors of the Holocaust for being bitter and not as inventive as the father in the film. In fact, many people who lack knowledge concerning this time period wonder why the Jews did not resist their murder and imprisonment. Since this film, and others like it, ask the viewer to empathetically identify with the main characters in a universal story of redemption, it is not unreasonable for the viewers to apply the situation of their own lives to the situation of this very different context. *Life is Beautiful* calls for this simplistic mode of identification by decontextualizing the setting of its own narration.

It is interesting to note that when people did present a negative view of this film, they were quickly attacked for not having a sense of humor or for being a negative person. Thus, just as the film tries to put a happy face on an unhappy situation, film viewers often demand that their fellow viewers stay positive. This idea is evident in the following epinion:

Poor Roberto Benigni. There has been a terrible backlash against this brilliant actor/director. People said they got sick of seeing him bounce around and kiss everybody. I happen to find him refreshing and funny. Sure, maybe he overdoes it for the cameras, but people must be cynical to hate a person for being “too happy.” In much the same way, people who don’t appreciate *Life Is Beautiful* for the stunning, heartbreaking film that it is must also be horribly cynical or they just haven’t seen the film. Maybe they haven’t seen it because they think it is wrong to make light of the Holocaust. But if there was ever a film that takes the Holocaust seriously it is this one. I came away from this film with a greater appreciation of the effects of that war than I had with any other movie. Yes, there was laughter, but the audience knows the laughter that Benigni brings to his child is in order to mask the horror. Nobody in their right mind could possibly think
this movie was just about the jokes and “Ha, ha, this concentration camp is so fun, let’s all laugh.” Anybody who thinks that has to be on crack. When I saw Benigni’s face go from playful laughter while talking to his son, to terror and worry as he thought about what was really happening, I realized that I was watching one of the greatest films ever made.

The message of the film, that it’s important to remember that life is beautiful even under the worst of circumstances, is perhaps too positive a message for some people to handle. We’re so used to wallowing in our misery that we have forgotten how to find happiness. The critics of this film’s humorous aspect would do well to remember not to take themselves so seriously and that humor is often a healing agent.

At one moment, this writer claims that the film is not a comedy, and then she goes on to attack people for not being able to take a joke. One reason for this possible contradiction is that she wants to defend this film against her own unconscious awareness that it may not be a good idea to turn the Holocaust into a comedy. Moreover, her desire to criticize anyone who criticizes the film points to a central aspect of our current culture: we often see that the person who points to a particular social or cultural problem becomes labeled as the problem. Thus, feminists are called sexists for pointing out gender disparities, and critics of racism are called racists for showing how race still functions in America. In the case of the Holocaust, people who criticize a Holocaust film or museum are called anti-Semitic.

Of course, one of the biggest problems with the film and the comment above is the notion that the Holocaust should be used as a situation to prove that life is great. Perhaps as a defense against despair, people want to see good and happiness in a place where it does not belong or was not even possible. Or one could argue that people are tired of different ethnic groups complaining about their prior bad treatment, and so the dominant group wants the dominated groups to just be positive and forget the negative things that have happened in the past.

In one of the more astute comments in this Web discussion, we see how a person’s prior knowledge of the Holocaust effects the way he/she views popular culture representations of this event:

I fear that this movie was critic-proof for several reasons, not the least of which being that writing a bad review of it will most likely be seen as approving of the Holocaust in some fashion. Let me just say right now that I am in no way disparaging the concentration camps or what happened there - I believe it, I am unable to comprehend it, and that’s precisely why this movie left such a bad taste in my mouth. It is a dangerous, dangerous thing to make an allegory out of the Holocaust, and yet Benigni thought
it would be in some way moving to de-emphasize the horrific details of the camps and focus instead on one man’s devotion to his son. Make no mistake, this is Holocaust-lite - read Primo Levi’s “Survival in Auschwitz” to get an inkling of what it was *really* like. I’ll say it again: I cannot comprehend the inhumanity of what took place during the war, and no one who wasn’t there can either. So why is it OK for Benigni to make a movie that depicts the camps as a place where children could survive and piles of bodies were only dimly visible in the mist? The tremendous outpouring of praise that this movie got was a disturbing indication of how much people want to believe these scenes. I think that by serving up Holocaust Lite, Benigni actually made this monstrous, inconceivable thing accessible to the masses, suddenly palatable, like watered-down hot sauce. What most of us were unable to face was presented to us in a neat, digestible package, complete with humor and a “happy” ending to make it go down smoothly. Shouldn’t this be frightening? Shouldn’t we all walk away from a movie about the Holocaust sick and exhausted with grief? Should it be permissible to combine such elements this way? This is one of the greatest crimes against humanity in the history of the world: genocide does not deserve to be sugar-coated.

This comment begins by arguing that one can be critical of this film and still not be a Holocaust denier. It is clear that this defensive position is derived from the fear that one should not go against popular opinion. Yet this commentator does brave the storm, and we can see how his argument derives in part from his reading of Primo Levi’s autobiographical text. In other words, unlike many of the other discussants, he does not compare this film to other popular culture Holocaust representations; rather, he relates Life is Beautiful to a novel that is full of real details and historical contexts. I am not arguing here that film is by definition inferior to books, but this commentary does show how a book can provide for both a more accurate description of a historical context and still leave space for the limits of representation.11

In response to this person’s criticism of the film, he did indeed receive many negative comments. One of the people who disagreed with him also turned to the field of literature to make her argument:

Guido knew and we knew the horrors of the camp but he was determined that his son would not know them. I’ve read many, many books on the Holocaust and most of the victims tried to believe in the basic goodness of man (Anne Frank is the most quoted example). I don’t feel this was trivialized or made light of. In fact the contrast between what Guido told
his son and the truth was painfully obvious to all but Joshua, a four or five
year old boy. It is that contrast that shows the horrors. I’m sorry to disagree
with you on this so strongly. You have a definite right to your opinion and
I hope you will consider my comments. Thanks! I’m sorry to disagree with
you so totally, Mr. Alexander, but I couldn’t pass your review and not say
something.

This comment is in part inspired by The Diary of Anne Frank, which I
would argue does present a more positive image of human beings than
most novelistic depictions of the Holocaust, for I think it would be untrue
to say that most novels concerning the Holocaust depict the Christian (?)
message of the essential goodness of all human beings.

In another critical response to the discussant’s negative criticism of
this film, we find a different usage of literature to defend the movie:

There are many books and movies on the ins and outs of concentration
camps and the Holocaust, so we pretty much know how bad the Holocaust
was. This was supposed to be a different take on it. And in response to your
argument that critics were afraid to say anything negative about it, I refer
you to “Jakob the Liar”. Just wanted to tell you, and I also respect your
opinion. I like people who break away from the pack. Keep up the good
opinions.

Here we are told that everyone knows enough about the Holocaust already
and so we do not need anymore films or books on this subject matter. And
like the previous writer, this discussant honors the right of everyone to his
or her free opinion. In fact, this writer praises the critic for not conforming
to the dominant view of this film. Once again we find in these statements
a curious blend of the celebration of individualism, the universal right to
free speech, and a desire to stop learning about history.

In many ways, the World Wide Web is founded on these principles
of free speech, individualism, and decontextualized histories, and thus it
is often hard to find a thoughtful discussion of the Holocaust on the
internet, for the Holocaust itself represents a historical situation where
individualism and free speech were most often curtailed or destroyed.
The medium of the Web thus is in conflict with the content of the
Holocaust, and in this sense, there is almost an inherent inability to
discuss the Holocaust and its representations on the internet and also in
film.

I do not want to give the reader the impression that I consider all
discussion on the Web to be useless and that it is impossible to represent
the Holocaust in film or in discussion groups. In fact, there are many informative sites on the Web. For example, The Museum of Tolerance has a web site that not only offers valuable information about the museum itself but also presents a lot of detailed historical knowledge regarding the Holocaust and other matters. However, what this Web site cannot do is to engage the students in a dialogue over their own emotional responses to this historical trauma.

Pedagogical Implications of Analyzing Popular Resistances
Throughout this essay, I have been arguing that since contemporary students get so much of their knowledge about cultural and historical traumas from popular culture sources, teachers need to address the way students resist analyzing the implications and affects circulating in postmodern popular culture. I have also posited that when students encounter anxiety-provoking course material, they will often project their negative feelings onto their teachers. In order to limit this problem of projective identification, I have recommended an approach that begins with the analysis of other people's reactions to historical traumas and popular culture representations. However, at a certain stage in every class, one still needs to engage students on the level of their own affective responses, and this can represent the most difficult aspect of this type of class.

To help deal with the anxiety and apathy that can be generated from asking students to consider states of extreme helplessness, I think that the teacher has to first establish a safe classroom environment and then ask students to write in a private way about their own personal responses to the class material. Yet, this type of expressivist writing will only help if students are asked to consider their own cognitive and emotional responses as at least partially culturally and historically constructed. In other words, it is important to help students to denaturalize their own emotions and to historicize their affective lives while they get more in touch with their subjective reactions. The goal here is not to colonize their emotions by subjecting them to alienating concepts and theories; rather, the idea is to help students open a dialogue between their affective reactions and their cognitive responses.

By having students write about their own emotional states in a critical way, teachers can help to avoid the pitfalls of universalization, idealization, identification, and assimilation; however, as Worsham posits, this process will only work if the students do not feel that the teacher is being placed in "the traditional patriarchal role as the sign of power and the
agent of empowerment” (235). Students need to feel empowered by their own self-critical writings, and thus they should not be put in a position where the teacher is all knowing and the students feel disempowered. Perhaps, the ultimate goal of this type of course is to open the possibility for a truly dialogical interplay between subjectivity and culture. This process entails having students move beyond their resistances to understanding the subjectivity of others and their own sense of helplessness in postmodern culture.

University of California
Santa Barbara, California

Notes

1. Caruth’s conception of traumatic repetition forces us to ask if Derrida’s stress on deferral and difference constitutes a traumatic foundation for all representations. Since the traumatic encounter is often tied to the impossibility of representing the event and postmodern deconstructive philosophies argue that we can never fully represent the thing, are we now encountering a model of culture based on traumatic reactions?

2. Historians, like Peter Novick, have argued that the American cultural reaction to the Holocaust followed this structure of the return of the repressed: During the 1950s everyone repressed this traumatic event, and then starting in the 1980s, the Holocaust became ripe for a symbolic return in movies, television series, and museums.

3. Lisa Langstraat argues that our culture is dominated by a “miasmic cynicism” that delights in the commodification of culture, fake emotions, lost belief, and inauthentic authenticity (293–98).

4. Could there be any greater source of nihilism in our society than the fact that Americans watch on average thirty-five hours of television a week, but still claim it has no meaning or value other than pure entertainment and escape.

5. In a work in progress, I examine Freud’s theory of jokes and how it relates to the critical analysis of popular culture.

6. I do not want to discount the importance of emotion and empathy in the public responses to popular culture. What I do want to argue is that these affective responses can at times block the critical analysis of culture and so they must be considered to be necessary but not sufficient modes of response.

7. This glorification of the personal emotional response to the pain of others can be derived from a faulty understanding of psychotherapy. Moreover, this mode of empathy has become a major form of popular entertainment.

8. This notion of assimilation can push us to rethink the foundations of the postmodern pastiche, parody, and repetition. As a culture of immigrants, America has always been a society based on the appropriation of other cultures combined
with a deep need for personal conformity. If American culture has been
globalized, this may also mean that immigrant culture has been universalized.

9. This discussion group can be accessed on the web at: http://post.messages.yahoo.com/bbs?action=l&tid=hv1800019119f0&sid=22198844&prop=movies:&pt=movies&p=movies.yahoo.com/shop%3fd=hv%26id=1800019119%26cf=info.

10. This site can be found at: http://www.epinions.com/movie-review-2945-39C0EEF-38D1D893-prod4?temp=comments.html.

11. Many people would argue that the film Shoah does successfully bridge
this gap between historical knowledge and the failures of representation.

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