

The Democratization of the Holocaust in Cyber Space"
By
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“Holocaust on Your Plate,” a campaign launched in 2003 by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), is a controversial example of the exploitation of significant historical images. PETA’s use of concentration camp photographs to mirror the current conditions of factory farms and slaughterhouses has attracted negative attention from the Anti-Defamation League, the Canadian Jewish Congress and many Holocaust survivors, organizations, writers, artists and museums. Since this promotion began, the following statement by Manuel Prutschi, the national director of community relations for the Canadian Jewish Congress has pervaded the debate: “to equate what is truly one of the most monumental crimes in the history of mankind to the abusive treatment of animals is totally unconscionable.”¹ Detractors’ moral and ethical criticism has not challenged PETA’s overall crusade against cruelty to animals but it has targeted their analogous presentation using Holocaust imagery. Prutschi’s sentiments reflect the convictions of many who view the Holocaust as an incomparable circumstance in history for which there are boundaries to its discourse and its imagery. To transgress these boundaries, to jeopardize the integrity of Holocaust remembrance is, in the opinion of many, “unconscionable.”

In displaying side-by-side photographic messages on billboards, in exhibitions (now touring Europe) and on the Internet, PETA’s objective is to heighten public awareness of animal cruelty and to inspire action for its cause. However, the use of these momentous images of human suffering alongside those of chicken coops and slaughtered farm yard animals divisively capitalizes on viewers’ recognition of and response to the atrocious conditions that humans suffered and that are documented within these historical photographs. In its presentation of the ostensibly barbarous conditions during the Holocaust, the exhibition utilizes the public’s response to these well-recognized photographs in order to enhance their analogy that the atrocious conditions imposed on humans by humans during WWII are equal to the treatment of animals by the food industry today. Supporters of PETA’s campaign justify their juxtaposition of these images; yet, the opposition holds that the analogy is grossly over simplified and that the photo ensemble is exemplary of the way in which such usage compromises the integrity of original photos and what they represent. As regards the level of exploitation that these images have reached via several forms of traditional media and new media, this controversial campaign calls attention to the degree to which an image’s integrity can be disseminated in the face of even the most ethical considerations of our time. It forces us to consider our relationship to images that are not only deliberately arranged and placed out of context to voice alternate messages, this controversy asks us to consider what becomes of such images once they enter the digital realm and are unleashed into cyber space.

PETA’s use of Holocaust images alone is not unprecedented. For nearly sixty years, the public has viewed photos of the Holocaust in incongruous associations through a variety of media. Since the end of

World War II, images of Holocaust atrocities have had an important part in what is termed, *bearing witness*.ⁱⁱ As accurate records of an event that affected an entire people and the world, their role is to authenticate personal and historical experiences and provide access to this event for following generations. Under the auspice of bearing witness to the Holocaust, the obligation of survivors, groups, and institutions such as the Jewish Anti-Defamation League and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is to preserve the integrity of Holocaust discourse and its artifacts. Subsequently, Holocaust images hold the position of both memorializing the past and having import for the future. However, media's and institutions' incessant display of the same photographs of Nazi death camps or heaped corpses has made an *impression* that causes the images to be seen as icons of terror and atrocity rather than as specific records of an authentic moment in time. This method of their transference and their use as icons of atrocity to illustrate numerous situations has made it nearly impossible for Holocaust images to function in terms of bearing witness to the actual event. The repetitious use of Holocaust images and their subsequent contextual loss has invaded the realm of organizations and museums like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum whose mission is to try to, "advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy to preserve the memory of those who suffered."ⁱⁱⁱ Such institutions, having acquired thousands of Holocaust photographs over the years, have a crucial role as gatekeepers of the experiences and memories that the photos depict. By controlling access to a vast collection of Holocaust images, there is an attempt to *protect* these photos from various forms of degradation and misappropriation. Nevertheless, these images have been distributed to special interest groups and the public.

An additional dilemma that organizations which try to preserve Holocaust photos face is the threat that new technologies impose: images can no longer be controlled as they once were through printed media. Once on the web, images are random and often rashly interpreted media. As PETA's purchase and subsequent use of several Holocaust images from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum demonstrates, images released into today's electronic landscape are open to new uses and interpretations. PETA's media display on masskilling.com is a key topic for discussion. Their presentation of images which equate animal abuse and confinement to human abuse and confinement have exposed these images to a convergence of media and new variables.

In cyber space, these photos are now communicable—in both senses of the word: they are easily communicated and are transmissible. The public's saturation point for retrieving information has the potential to be reached within minutes. Images, in particular, are regurgitated with the click of a mouse. One would hope that the increased exposure of Holocaust images would increase awareness (as PETA

seeks to do). However, rather than presenting images and the stories behind them, there is once again a repetitious use of the same emblematic images with little contextualization. Holocaust photos are not limited to the sites of organizations who stress remembrance, holocaust museums, survivor's individual sites or pages discussing artists such as Christian Boltansky, Alan Schechner, and Boaz Arad whose works utilize Holocaust images; rather they are plugged into web sites for rock bands, the sale of adult toys or personal web pages dedicated to teenage angst. The iconographic use of such an image on the Internet proliferates associations.

While cyber space itself has the capacity to generate correspondences among a wealth of material that may lead to a broader understanding, it produces impediments to accurate understanding as well. For instance, the search engine's ability to classify information through the use of meta-tags written by a programmer can distance the user from his or her original course. The simple act of conducting a search using the word "holocaust" can generate millions of results leading to both professional and amateur sites. These sites may present survivors' documentation, Neo-Nazi sites, or items for sale on Ebay within a single browser window. An individual searching for Holocaust victims may end up on masskilling.com staring at crammed chicken coops beside crowds of emaciated human beings. Arguably, PETA's use of Holocaust photos decreases their actual historicity while their placement on the web increases the probability that they will be subject to the haphazard interpretations.

PETA's campaign and the reactions to it instigate many ethical questions but it also leads us to question how the nature of original Holocaust images and other historical photographs are seen within digital and transmutable environments: What occurs when existing technologies rearrange the composition or integrity of an image; thus, detracting from its inherent memory or significance? Will re-sampling, CD-ROMs, and cyber space shape the fate of original documentation such as Holocaust photography? In an environment with increased multiplicity of presentation and meaning, is it possible for historical authenticity to be preserved?

NOTES

ⁱ Friscolanti, Michael. *Canadian Jewish Congress in the News*, "Jews outraged by ad linking animal slaughter to Holocaust. PETA campaign 'takes chutzpah to new heights,'" 26 February 2003, <<http://www.cjc.ca/ptemplate.php?Story=170&action=itn>> (30 March 2004).

ⁱⁱ Taking responsibility for the history or for the truth of the event. Bearing witness implies that there is no best way of depicting atrocities; yet, stresses the need to collectively remember the event as accurately as possible.

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's web site, "Mission Statement," <<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/council/mission.php>> (30 March 2004).