



## YEAR 9 FEATURE ARTICLE PROJECT

**During a study of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel, *Maus*, students of 9 English ABX were asked to write a feature article exploring barriers that get in the way of representing the extreme experiences of others, such as those of Holocaust survivors.**

Here are two noteworthy examples of their work. These students have dealt sensitively with a difficult topic of discussion, demonstrating skilful control of the feature article form.

### **REPRESENTING THE UNREPRESENTABLE**

**The Holocaust changed the world forever, but that change may not have been spurred by a true understanding of the horrific experiences for those involved. So, do you think the Holocaust should be represented, even if it may be misrepresented?**

Irene remembered the night she was told to leave it all. Her mother packed their only suitcase with the essentials: food, warm clothing, bedding. The delegation forced her father to hand over the rest of his money and rounded them up at the town hall. Prisoners, uniforms and barracks passed outside the train window. It seems like a work camp they were headed towards.

Can testimonies and art serve as proof of the 'reality' of the Holocaust? An argument from literary scholar Lawrence L. Langar goes against universalising the Holocaust. He claims those who 'universalise' reduce the meaning of the Holocaust to vague metaphors about humanity in Jewish history. The fear is that this historical event will come to be remembered as a general tragedy to all humankind. This leads to most of us having only a vague idea of the Holocaust as a historical

event with horrific suffering, but without any specific details – without the sense that it was a specific tragedy that happened to a distinctive people.

On the other hand, the popularity of depicting the Holocaust in contemporary culture has taken the attention of millions of people. Through movies like *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus* (1980), have the survivors of the Holocaust been given the justice they deserve? Were these texts successful in representing an ineffable and sublime experience like the Holocaust? Is that the right question? It could be that drawing attention to the subject was the only relevant measure of their success.

Arguably, interest in the Holocaust has risen due to its sanitised, popular image in the public imagination. People are only ready to engage with the Holocaust when it has been 'softened' for consumption. The 1960s saw the start of people's familiarity with the widely-known *Diary of Anne Frank*, and in present times, the movie *The Zookeeper's Wife* has also garnered much attention.

Yet, representing experiences on film is a wholly different problem when attempting to portray sublime horror. In the words of Diego Vertov, "The movie camera was invented to penetrate deeper into the visible world..." How can a movie like *Schindler's List* accurately represent the horror of the Holocaust when the artistic appeal of the image demands an ultimate uplift?

This goes back to the argument of whether the medium of art and testimonies can represent the sublime horror of the Holocaust. How do you represent the ineffable? The Holocaust, like any historical event, is presented through a summary of accounts and through different mediums like photos, diaries and visual art.

These accounts can only show the audience one part of "the reality", one part of the whole horrific event. This also means that some representations are seen as subjective instead of historically "correct". Even turning to the historical documentary genre, virtually all of such films rely heavily on archival footage. Given the unreliability of archival footage, due to its need for subjective framing and interpretation, the problems of Holocaust representation persists through any medium. Ultimately, the representation of the Holocaust will always be a problem for the author/historian, due to the scale and horror of the event.

Irene thought that if she could work at a camp, then it wouldn't be that dreadful. She was immediately reassured. Although stories of mass shootings of Jews from Poland reached her young ears, the organised system she saw brought comfort. An organised system of genocide. We could never see this happening again, but do the past attempts of representation help at least illuminate the experience?

Beatriz G

## **THE DECEPTIVE SENSE OF AN ENDING**

**Is it ethical to portray the Holocaust through fiction? Maybe it is educational or maybe it is reprehensible, but narratives spun from this moment in history are nothing if not controversial.**

As I read the book's final words and felt the thin edge of the final piece of paper crease against my index finger, I sighed in discontent and mentally recounted the events of the tragedy. A tale of somebody's mournful, horrific experience that occurred a mere seventy-five years ago.

Except that it didn't. Every memory, scene and heart-breaking remembrance was fictional, told by a person who could never truly feel nor depict what those who lived and died then had endured.

But I couldn't decide. Was it wrong – selfish, even – to profit off of the lies crafted from someone else's horrible truth, forever unknown and unnamed to the world?

For many survivors of the Holocaust, this is the case. Stories within movies, books and the like, aimed at grasping the attention of simple citizens searching for a brief distraction from the world and making money, are just that. Selfish profit made through the entertainment industry, depicting the horrors of the past and tearing the attention away from the raw inhumanities actually performed on each individual. Main characters whom we are involuntarily yet subconsciously, now willingly, rooting for in a story that does not nearly represent the truth... To many survivors and historians, there is no candid, ethical way to display the Holocaust for the purpose of entertaining, when the business side of things sits lurking around the next corner.

However, the flip-side to this debate is that portraying the Holocaust in today's pop culture and story-telling mediums can provide basic education on the matter which often leads to further research and exposure to the real happenings. To provide a famously controversial example, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne follows the story of a young German boy named Bruno who befriends a Polish Jew from inside Auschwitz.

The book, as it is written from the perspective from a child, numbs the bleak facts of the Holocaust and therefore censors its extremities. Many have argued that it is insensitive and damages people's perceptions of the Holocaust. Despite this, the book is used in classrooms to introduce the concept of Nazi Germany to a younger audience whose minds grasp the concealed portrayal much more easily than what they would a stark demonstration of historical fact, therefore enabling a slow shift into greater accuracy as they mature.

I read this book as a young tween and was quite taken aback by the emotional conflict and realisations of the true meaning of the censors in the book, as I had been exposed briefly to the topic before and had a basic understanding of the Holocaust. This prompted me to research further and educate myself, showing the good that depicting the Holocaust in entertainment can do.

Nevertheless, this is merely my personal experience. I have observed those of my peers who have read and watched depictions of the Holocaust, and many of them did not take it as seriously as the general consensus has it that it should be taken. This returns us to the downside of light-touched portrayals of the Holocaust, adding to wider misconceptions of the heavy truth and slowly altering the incomprehensible experience into an almost humorous and action-filled story of power, of pure heroes defeating dark villains whom we could never become.

I sit now with John Boyne's tale in hand and various tabs of stories and movies about the Holocaust open on my laptop, aware that every word I am reading comes from not a place of raw understanding, but another attempt at explaining the unexplainable and unravelling the knots and twists of the sublime. And yet, the question still stands. Is this ethical, or is it a harmful cell created by the spread of a plague of misinformation, forever tainting the pure sublimity and truth that once was?

Mia Z.