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# Resisting Ilsa: Foucaultian Ethics and the Sexualization of Nazism

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## Resisting Ilsa: Foucaultian Ethics and the Sexualization of Nazism<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper examines the contemporary phenomena of sexualized depictions of Nazism in various forms of media. Drawing on both the work on power and on resistance and perfectionist ethics of Michel Foucault, I argue Nazism has become conflated with deviant sexuality and used as a “floating signifier” in media to represent and further binary good/evil, normal/abnormal narratives. I argue that there are three primary tropes of sexualized representation (“sexy sadistic,” “gender non-conformist,” and “star-crossed”) which each adheres to the same binary logic. Applying Foucault’s theory of biopolitics, particularly that of the “Perverse Implantation” and “the Speaker’s Benefit,” I further argue Nazism has become conflated with deviant sexuality through the constitutive and product influence biopower has on the sexuality of subjects. I conclude this paper by looking to contemporary Jewish voices and, looking to Foucault’s perfectionist ethics, argue that sexualized representations of Nazism are problematic because of their silencing effect on the narratives of the victims and survivors of the Shoah, and that representations of Nazism based on the binary logic of good/evil and normal/abnormal ought to be resisted in favour of depictions based on survivor and witness testimony.

**Keywords:** Foucault; Foucaultian politics; biopower; biopolitics; sovereign power; binary logic; binary narrative; philosophy of sexuality; perfectionist ethics; Foucaultian ethics; Foucaultian resistance; Holocaust media; Shoah media; Holocaust representation; Shoah representation; ethics of representation; ethics of media

In November 2014, rapper and sex symbol Nicki Minaj caused controversy with the depiction of German fascism in her music video “Only.” Though hip hop has never been shy toward harnessing the attention-grabbing power of shock value, the blatant sexualization of Nazism in “Only” is relevantly distinct from the profanity

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typically seen in mainstream rap. A cartoon Minaj appears in a skintight gimp suit, with her record label's logo modified to resemble a swastika plastered on arm bands, banners, flags, and the centre of Minaj's breasts. Animated completely in red and greyscale, featuring rows of soldiers in front of a Nuremberg-style palace, Minaj is accused of emulating *The Triumph of the Will*, and of deliberately releasing the video on the anniversary of the Kristallnacht (McCormack 2014).

Though "Only" was publicly criticized (Foxman 2014; Denham 2014), the trend of representing Nazism as erotic is prevalent in contemporary media, and has been since WWII. Typically, representations of Nazism are highly sexualized, glamorized, and sensationalized, with no regard for or attention to the horrors and suffering conveyed in survivor testimony. Over eleven million people perished in concentration camps; horrendous suffering was the consequence of German fascism. Such atrocity brought forth from evil intention and exploitation of the desperate usually invokes compassion and mourning, yet the conflation of "sexy" and German fascism is so pervasive in Western media it has become mundane, and even considered an actual quality of historical Nazism. Michel Foucault asks:

How is it that Nazism—which was represented by shabby, pathetic puritanical characters, laughably Victorian old maids, or at best, smutty individuals—how has it managed to become . . . in all the pornographic literature throughout the world, the ultimate symbol of eroticism? (Foucault 1989, 97)

Sexy, or at least sexual, has become as essential to depictions of Nazism as swastikas, small square moustaches, and anti-Semitism, and consequently, these symbols and objects have become deeply entangled with eroticism, with one announcing the presence of the other. The erotic presentation of Nazism makes these fictional characters both easily recognizable and consumable; more importantly, I argue, it also functions as a means of establishing and preserving hegemonic narratives. When deviant sexuality becomes understood as the "truth" of Nazism, the testimony of survivors and the stories of those lost are swept away by the claims of uncovering a "greater," "more real" truth of the opposing binaries of good/evil, normal/abnormal, and deviant sexuality/heteronormative romance. Sexualized representations perform the revealing of a greater, more fundamental "truth" than can be found in the narratives of survivors and witnesses. I take up Foucault's question and offer an ethical analysis, drawing on Foucault's later works, for resistance to the understandings of a truth of deviant sexuality of Nazism, and the sexualized representations to which this assumption is foundational. I begin by arguing sexualized depictions of Nazism tend to adhere to the same logic of representation, and produce and shape a collective understanding of the Shoah which conforms to a binary narrative of "good versus evil" through conflation with deviant sexuality. Second, I

apply Foucault's theories of power and sexuality to understand *how* and *why* this conflation has happened, and how Nazism is used as a floating signifier for the evil/abnormal. Finally, I argue these understandings and representations can and should be resisted in favour of media which is grounded in survivor testimony, as opposed to hegemonic narratives, to discuss and preserve the histories of the victims of German fascism. The purpose of this paper is not to prescribe strict rules for representations of Nazism nor to make judgements about the way individuals view and respond to these portrayals, nor do I mean to morally condemn every piece of media I examine in this paper; I believe that it is possible to be critical of aspects of representations without saying the piece itself is problematic. Rather, my purpose is to look critically at how and why Nazism has become sexualized, and to argue that these representations function to disregard or silence witness testimony, and exploit suffering of the victims of the Shoah through guising hegemonic binaries of good/evil, normal/abnormal, and others, through technologies of power. Following Foucault's ethics of engaging critically with power to cultivate one's own freedom, I look at what forces have caused Nazism to become sexualized, and why subjects should be resistant to these representations.

Claims of "truth" in opposition to subjectivity were a major interest of Foucault's throughout his career. Foucault importantly denies there can be a "liberating truth" that frees subjects from power. He rejects the traditional or popular correspondence theory of truth, that there is a singular, "right" truth which reflects something "real" about the world. Foucault is primarily concerned with exploring how and why current political conditions arose. He is curious about how the particular phenomena of our present emerged, understanding these as contingent and stemming from particular historical conditions, rather than universal or necessary. Foucault notes that making these claims of knowledge or existence of a "truth," to sexuality, human nature, morality, and so on, is a mechanism of biopolitics, and often appears to "prove" or "support" preexisting moral or political commitments of the state (Gutting 2013). He is skeptical of a possible universal truth to questions about humanity; Foucault is explicit that he is not seeking a "truth" in his work, nor does he think this is the job of the philosopher. Rather, he critically engages with knowledge and power in order to help his reader reflect on their own situation with power structures and how they may live within them. Inspired by Nietzsche, Foucault argues "truth," in the correspondence theory sense, is a conceptual invention used to connect knowledge to the implication of power technologies (Elden 2017, 32–35). Power and knowledge are then deeply intertwined through the concept of and claims to this "truth." Therefore, the "factual truth" is never entirely clear. This critical attitude towards claims of "truths" and what these claims are doing are integral for our following discussion. How claims of a knowledge or discovery of a

“foundational” or “greater” truth function as a technology of power is essential to our following discussion.

In the *Seinfeld* episode “The Raincoats,” Jerry and his girlfriend are spotted by Newman kissing during a screening of *Schindler’s List*. When Jerry’s confronted, he responds arguing he had not seen his girlfriend in so long the couple could not resist. But perhaps something else got them hot and bothered. In “Fascinating Fascism,” Susan Sontag argues Nazism is marketed and consumed like pornography, as demonstrated in her analysis of a pocket book of Nazi paraphernalia:

*SS Regalia* is [pornographic]. The cover already makes that clear. Across the large black swastika in the Nazi flag is a diagonal stripe which reads “Over 100 Brilliant Four-Colour Photographs” and the price, exactly the way a sticker with the price on it used to be affixed—part teaser, part deference to censorship—dead centre, covering the model’s genitalia, on the covers of pornographic magazine. (Sontag 1975)

This is the standard marketing of Nazism from the 1940s to today. A recent edition of *Mein Kampf*<sup>2</sup> features a black and white portrait of Hitler with “NEW: UNCENSORED EDITION” bannered across the top, “uncensored” bolded in red, and another red banner diagonally covering part of the portrait. The similarities between these books, published forty years apart, are astounding; both sensationalize their material, while claiming to present truthful documentation. Despite appearing radically different on the surface, I argue, the majority of media featuring Nazism obeys the same logic of representation. There is always an assertion of a claim of a “hidden,” “greater” truth to the opposing binaries of the Axis and the Allies, and a further claim that this is revealed in the sexuality of each of the opposing sides.

Nazism is used as an easily accessible and universal symbol of the evil/abnormal to make a greater claim in the overarching Western narrative of good/normal versus evil/abnormal. The binaries of good/evil, normal/abnormal, order/chaos, natural/unnatural, and romantic love/deviant sexuality have become intertwined in popular media featuring National Socialism so that Nazism may be used as an assumed symbol that evil/abnormal is infectious, desirable, and has the potential to become absolutely powerful. In his lecture series *Abnormal*, Foucault argues the binary normal/abnormal as a stable and meaningful “truth” of individuals, is used as a normalizing dispensary technology, while simultaneously producing more “abnormalities.” Sexual deviance is one of these “abnormalities,” and sexuality is thereby presented to have within it the truth of an individual’s “normalcy” or “ab-

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<sup>2</sup> Published by Elite Minds, Inc.

normality.” Deviant sexuality, as indicating the truth of “abnormality,” becomes as much a symbol of “evil” as a nasty cackle or an all-black outfit:

Fascism is everywhere, above all in our heads. . . . The non-analysis of fascism is one of the most important political facts [post-WWII]. . . . It enables fascism to be used as a floating signifier, whose function is essentially that of denunciation. (Foucault 1980a, 139)

It is through lack of examination and attention to testimonies, paired with the spectacles of power that characterize National Socialism, that Nazism becomes a symbolic replacement or indicator of evil/abnormal. When Nazism is used as a floating signifier, real suffering is taken up, distorted, and used as a symbol of a “greater truth” (that the “normal” will triumph over the “abnormal”). The “good/evil” narrative disguises itself in the dress of Nazis and Jews, hushing survivors by claiming the “more real” or “overarching” truth. Nazism is particularly effective as a floating signifier; one cannot question or disagree with the representation of Nazism in these depictions without risking being labelled a “fascist” or “Nazi sympathizer” themselves, despite these extreme erotic fictionalizations having almost nothing in common with the accounts of survivors. For the most part, despite their claims of “truth,” these representations certainly do not concern themselves with reflecting the accounts of survivors.

I argue there are three standard but non-mutually exclusive ways Nazism is conflated with deviant sexuality, each following the same binary logic of representation tied to hegemony. These are: through BDSM imagery, through gender nonconformity, and in opposition to heteronormative romantic love. The “sexy sadistic Nazi” presents the desire to subordinate and inflict pain on others as a universal quality of German fascists, either being “natural” to the subject or inherited once they join the party. These characters exhibit sexual excitement and/or gratification, either explicitly or implicitly, from subordinating, humiliating, torturing, experimenting on, and killing camp prisoners, Ally soldiers, and even other lower-ranking Nazis.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mainstream and “highbrow” films that feature the “sexy sadistic Nazi” include *The Night Porter* (1974), *Sophie’s Choice* (1982), *Schindler’s List* (1993), *Apt Pupil* (1998), *Island at War* (2004), *The Reader* (2008), and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), but nearly all cinematic representation of Nazism feature motifs of the “sexy sadistic” Nazi. And this is not just in film but appears in literature as well, though these fictionalized accounts share their own style as well; *Tours of the Black Clock* (1989), *Eve’s Tattoo* (1992), *The Kommandment’s Mistress* (1993), *Hitler’s Angel* (1997), *Hitler and Geli* (1997), *Hitler’s Niece* (1999), and *The Kindly Ones* (2006) are popular novels which

The “sexy sadistic” Nazi made one of its first appearances in “Stalag fiction,” a genre of pocket books published in Tel Aviv in the early 1960s (Richardson 2012, 45). Despite being Israeli written and produced, Stalag fictions avoid acknowledging Jewish suffering. The stories focus on “Ally versus Axis” characters, with nearly no Jewish characters, and only allusions to the Shoah. Judaism is always external to, if not completely disregarded from, Stalag fiction (Pinchevski and Brand 2007, 390, 398). Adherence to testimony and historical documentation is swapped for the themes and logic of representing evil/abnormal established in men’s adventure magazines of the 1950s (Pinchevski and Brand 2007, 391). Stalags flout accuracy in favour of narratives of hegemonically masculine heroes who conquer and defeat the evil/abnormal, but not before voyeuristic eyes enjoy the humiliation and torture of the female protagonist. The female SS officers of Stalag fiction are abnormal; they are sadistic and promiscuous, rejecting hegemonic femininity. Ally heroes conquer the Nazis, restore women to their subordinate roles, dismantle sexual deviance, and replace it with heteronormative romance. Women are reminded in Stalags both of the dangers of resistance to their subordination and of sexual and gender deviance. Although the works are clearly fictions, the authors of Stalag fiction attempt to make their stories appear as documentation of true events. Stalags were published under American-sounding pseudonyms, credited to nonexistent translators, and written in the form of a diary (Brothers 2011). This attempt to legitimize the alternated narrative, based not on survivor or soldier testimony, but on archetypes and ideals of hegemony, works to further sensationalize the material, and to justify its violence.

Soon after the popularity of Stalag fiction, a whole film genre of “sexy sadistic” Nazis emerged in the West, the most famous being *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*. *Ilsa* depicts the reign and fall of the cruel and curvaceous commander of a POW and experimentation camp. *Ilsa* is very much the typical Nazisploitation film. The genre is defined by lack of plot, graphic scientific experimentation, torture, and violent sexual assaults, with domineering, anti-social, and beautiful Nazi officers/scientists who are defeated, usually by rape and murder. *Ilsa*, like a number of Nazisploitation films, begins with a “historical disclaimer” claiming that the film is based on true events, and even performs the exposing of real horrors (Kozma 2012, 59). But, unlike Stalags, Nazisploitation films utilized real photographic documentation of concentration camps and pulled “inspiration” from famous and mythologized Nazis. The use of the historical disclaimer implies a connection between the Third Reich and fiction depictions of Nazism, intentionally blurring the viewers’ knowledge of what is

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feature sexually deviant Nazis. Fictions of Hitler’s own abnormal sexual tendencies are notably more popular in literature than film. BDSM, gender deviance, and incest are notably prevalent themes.

based in documentation and what is fictional. Nazisploitation films perform bearing witness and testimony, while anchoring their claims in the logic of hegemony. The “based on a true story” tagline makes the films more titillating and removes guilt from the viewer for the voyeuristic morbid pleasure of watching the victims tortured and the female perpetrators defeated through graphic rape and violence. Accuracy of representation to testimony or historical documentations does not matter as long as the Nazis are represented as directly conflicting with the “good” in the established binary; getting who-is-who in the good/evil binary right is what is “truth” in hegemonic logic.

The heyday of Stalag fiction and Nazisploitation is over, but their influence is still seen in contemporary media. Purposeful confusion of fantasy and reality has shaped popular representations, and subsequently cultural understanding, of German fascism. “Lowbrow” media, such as BDSM pornography,<sup>4</sup> fictional erotica,<sup>5</sup> and internet fan fiction,<sup>6</sup> overtly display the influence of Nazisploitation and its hegemonic foundation. Better disguised is its influence in mainstream and “highbrow” depictions. Alicia Kozma argues Nazisploitation produced the subsequent rules for how Nazism is recognized and represented in mainstream film:

Nazisploitation films . . . develop generic tropes and an enduring aesthetic that is critical to the creation of cinematic Nazism. The translation of those images to mainstream film created powerful mythic images that have pushed past the margins of exploitation and made an indelible impact on film as a whole. The iconic images engrained by Nazisploitation films are gendered, bound in the costume of fetish and signaled through violence and a particular fascination with the body. (Kozma 2012, 56)

But this goes even further than Kozma claims. Even mainstream depictions of Nazism establish their narratives through claims to truth based in the oppositional hegemonic logic of the normal/abnormal binary. Kozma compares Ilsa to Dr. Elsa Schneider, the Nazi-sympathizing archaeologist from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Kozma 2012, 62). Both reject hegemonic femininity; they are sexually deviant,

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<sup>4</sup> Mood Pictures’ *Dr. Mengele* (2005), *Gestapo and Gestapo 2* (2006) and Keith J. Cocker’s *Blitzkreig: Return to Stalag 69* (2008) are a few examples.

<sup>5</sup> A quick amazon.com search will bring you to *Bend Over Hitler*, *Forced by the Nazi Soldier*, *Leather Nazis*, and *Suzie’s SS Spanking Story*, to name a few.

<sup>6</sup> Both the fictionalized version of Ameen Goeth from *Schindler’s List* and Col. Franz Landa of *Inglourious Bastards* have dedicated fandom.

professional, unmarried intellectuals who commit violent acts.<sup>7</sup> Ilsa and Elsa both follow the same logic of “abnormality”; for Ilsa this signals her intrinsic evil/abnormality (she only *appears* to be human), while Elsa chooses evil over good. These deviations from feminine norms make them abnormal, and therefore dangerous. For this, each is punished and destroyed by hegemonic masculinity (one begins to ponder the origin of “femi-nazi”). Elsa is humanized by her momentary adherence to the good/normal; she is attracted and sympathetic to Jones, and admits hatred for her Nazi employers, but, ultimately, her commitment to intellectual achievement, coded as abnormality, wins out, and she is inevitably destroyed.

Ilsa and Elsa are both also examples of the second form of representation, the “gender nonconformist” Nazi. Gender deviance in depictions of Nazism is both overt and subtle, and appears across sexes. The “gender nonconformist” Nazi manifests in two primary ways: gender fluidity and feminization. Many representations of Nazism engage with both femininity and masculinity, making them a fluid hybrid of each, consequently neither “male” nor “female,” and therefore, abnormal. Many sexualized representations of Nazism display hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine traits simultaneously, and their appearance and behaviours slide between the extremes of gender expression, while the heroes display a stable hegemonic gender identity corresponding to their biological sex.<sup>8</sup> One of the most vivid depictions of the dual manifestation of hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity is the villainess Bruno from Frank Miller’s graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*. Bruno has an army-style buzz cut and a machine gun; she towers over her male cronies with her height and robust musculature; and she wears nothing but swastikas on her voluptuous breasts and bottom, brown-uniform bottomless chaps, long black gloves, and combat boots. Blending hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity renders Bruno synchronously sexual and repulsive; her exaggerative gendered features turn her into a violent, sexual monster. Her appearance garners multiple jabs throughout the novel, and her gender fluidity appears to be both the manifestation and the basis of her

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<sup>7</sup> Oliver Speck has suggested that the conflation of Nazism with ruthless scientific pursuits depicts intellectualism and academia as suspicious or even sinister; the “mad scientist Nazi” likely finds its basis in the anti-intellectualism it works to enforce (Speck 2012, 202). This is especially true in the case of intellectually driven women.

<sup>8</sup> Examples of these include Lady Gaga’s music video “Alejandro,” Michelle “Bombshell” McGee’s controversial 2005 photoshoot and subsequent BDSM pornography film, Col. Franz Landa from *Inglourious Basterds*, and the films *The Damned*, *Cabaret*, and *The Night Porter*.

evil. The rejection of stable masculinity or femininity acts as an indication of these characters' rejection of hegemony, and therefore reveals their evil/abnormality.

The feminization of Nazism is often used to detract from its power and trivialize both its power and its racist logic and agenda, and it is usually accompanied by sexual humiliation and violence. Adolph Hitler himself is the target of much of this, potentially beginning with the decades-long fascination with his alleged single testicle. The film *Little Nicky* features a sequence of daily life in Hell in which Hitler, dressed as a French maid, is forcibly penetrated with a pineapple. In *Jackboots on Whitehall*, Hitler sings and prances while dressed as Queen Elizabeth I. *The Producers* draws much of its humour from the feminization of German fascism. The eccentric Nazi-in-hiding Franz pens the musical *Springtime for Hitler*, and reveals Hitler's middle name to be Elizabeth, as he was "descended from a long line of English queens" (Stroman 2005). Recently, the popular comedy website collegehumour.com produced the sketch "Ways Hitler Was Like a Teenage Girl," featuring a parody of Hitler at a teenage slumber party, yelling at his mom and reading from his diary, while the narrator cites biographical facts. This feminization changes the intimidating displays of Nazism into ridiculous spectacles: conflation with femininity both destabilizes German fascist power and trivializes it. Comparing Hitler to English Queens, a surprisingly reoccurring motif, insinuates he is dramatic, histrionic, and unfit for and undeserving of leadership. The feminization of Nazism both delegitimizes its power and makes a mockery of its ends. Ladelle McWhorter explains the function of "queering" Hitler in *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*:

Hitler's alleged homosexuality had become a joke in popular media in the United States long before Pearl Harbour, and entry into the war. . . . Available evidence led . . . researchers to conclude that Hitler was effeminate and had homosexual tendencies—which made him queer by 1940s standards; however, none found any evidence of overt homosexual activity. (McWhorter 2009, 239–240)

Unfounded accusations of homosexuality were used to "other" Hitler (and by extension, Nazi racism) from the hegemony of Western culture. This just-so narrative, used to illustrate the "truth" of an intrinsic abnormality of Nazism, subsequently produced feminized representations of German Fascism, while still maintaining a presentation of a "factual" basis. Nazism is subordinated, and Nazis are revealed to be hysterical floozies who only care about indulgence and decorum, through conflation with heteronormative femininity. In representations featuring the "gender non-conforming" Nazi, females are portrayed as hard, militaristic, lustful soldiers, while males are dramatic, superficial, and hysterical. Though each representation functions differently, attributing gender fluidity and femininity to Nazism both functions

as a marker representing a “truth” of an abnormal, and works to subordinate Nazism and gender nonconformity as evil and in opposition to hegemony.

Not all sexy Nazis are desecrated by hegemony. Sometimes, Nazi characters are saved, converted, or redeemed through heteronormative romantic love. Stories of the “star-crossed” Nazi usually feature (typically male) Nazis caught between love for an opposite-sex Ally or Jew, and their loyalty to German fascism and sexual deviance, and, consequently, abnormality.<sup>9</sup> In *Schindler’s List* (Spielberg 1993), Aameon Goeth gains sexual gratification, at least implicitly, from his disturbingly nonchalant humiliation, torture, and murder of camp prisoners. His only humanizing quality is his “love” for his Jewish maid, Helen Hirsch. Notice, in the previous two discussions, Jews are external to, and often disregarded in, the representation. With the “star-crossed” Nazi, they play an important role in the narrative, but always as defined in opposition to, and as needing saving from, Nazism. Goeth and Hirsch’s relationship is depicted as that of an abusive but infatuated husband and reluctant wife; though he treats her horribly his fondness and devotion are genuine. His violence towards her is horrendous, but, in typical hegemonic fashion, his “true love” for her has the potential to redeem him from his abuse. On their first meeting, Goeth instantly falls for Hirsch (“love at first sight”), choosing her over more qualified domestic help with a lightly cloaked insinuation of virginity: “I don’t want someone else’s maid.” Schindler recognizes Goeth’s love, and when Hirsch confesses her fear of Goeth, Schindler explains the special, even miraculous, impact she has on Goeth. Goeth is shown sympathetically when he reaches out to Hirsch; only the beautiful Ashkenazi brings the Nazi to his knees, and offers him redemption, revealing the truth of his potential “normalcy.” *Schindler’s List* and other works with the “star-crossed” Nazi place fascist characters in dualisms of good/evil and normal/abnormal, suggesting the character is torn between sides in the eternal battle of good and evil. Though the “star-crossed” Nazi’s “truth” is not presented as inherently evil/abnormal, it still adheres to the logic of representation which uses Nazism as a floating signifier for evil/abnormal for the purposes of perpetuating a political message about human nature, sexuality, and romantic love.

The previous analysis reveals sexualized depictions of Nazism adhere to specific rules of hegemonic representation; this already established binary formula absorbs the Shoah into a good/evil political mythology which is marketable and consumable. I argue Foucault can tell us why Nazism is particularly effective as a floating

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of the “star-crossed” Nazi are featured in the films *The Sound of Music* (1965), *The Night Porter* (1974), *The Summer of My German Soldier* (1978), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1985), *Aimee & Jaguar* (1999), *Black Book* (2006), *The Reader* (2008), and *Suite Française* (2015), to name a few.

signifier, and how sexuality has become an essential aspect of its life as a floating signifier. This section will look to Foucault's work on sovereign and biopower to examine how the unique power dynamics in the historical Third Reich contribute to contemporary erotic preoccupation with Nazism, and how present forces of regulatory and disciplinary power have worked to sexualize Nazism. I argue it is the first condition which captures erotic attention and produces fascination around Nazism, and the second condition which has given rise to the distinctly sexual connotation Western media has imparted on German fascism.

Michel Foucault was fourteen when the Nazi occupation of France began in 1940. Foucault spent a large part of his youth under the threatening presence of Nazism and the oppressive influence of the regime's ideology (Macey 2004, 15). This period spent under German fascism certainly made an impression on Foucault and influenced his theory of sovereign and biopower.<sup>10</sup> Foucault directly addresses the unusual power dynamics of the Third Reich in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction* and his lecture series *Society Must Be Defended*. In the former, he writes: "Nazism was doubtless the most cunning and the most naive (and the former because of the latter) combination of the fantasies of blood and paroxysms of a disciplinary power" (Foucault 1978, 149). Foucault is referring to the blending of sovereign power and biopower; the distinct and usually, but not necessarily, separate forms of power he theorizes exist in Western societies. I argue that, to understand the erotic appeal of Nazism today, we must look to not only the biopolitical binaries of othering the abnormal at work in our own society, but also the power dynamics of Nazi Germany itself. In *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, and its predecessor *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault claims the dominant forces exercised on populations and individuals have shifted from sovereign power, which demanded obedience to a single authority enforced through spectacles of violence and death, to biopower, which operates through technologies not usually recognized as power on both individuals and populations to produce thoughts, desires, and beliefs to more effectively manage external behaviour. The Third Reich combined these two forms of power and their technologies in ways which Foucault argues are unique to that specific historical and political situation; German fascism was a rare case in which strong elements of both sovereign power and biopower operate in complimentary ways. National Socialism was able to establish racist and oppressive laws and demand compliancy of both behaviour and belief through the simultaneous use of dazzling spectacles of power and through subtle disciplinary and regulatory technologies. Both the sovereign "blood right" to rule and biopower's claim for "the greater good" are blended

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault speaks directly of his encounters with Nazi power while writing about Spain under the Franco dictatorship (Foucault 1994, 775).

to establish the authority of German fascism; those with Aryan blood are given authority not solely because they are the superior race, but also because it is only those of Aryan blood who can continue biological progression and facilitate the flourishing of society and humanity. Foucault explains how these seemingly oppositional forces worked together in Hitler's Germany:

We have, then, in Nazi society something that is really quite extraordinary: this is a society which has generalized biopower in an absolute sense, but which has also generalized the sovereign right to kill. The two mechanisms—the classic, archaic mechanisms that gave the State the right of life and death over its citizens, and the mechanism organized around discipline and regulation, or in other words, the new mechanism of power—coincide exactly. We can therefore say this: The Nazi State makes the field of the life it manages, protects, guarantees, and cultivates in biological terms absolutely coextensive with the sovereign right to kill anyone, meaning not only other people, but also its own people. (Foucault 2003, 260)

Hitler believed in the idea of the “Aryan master race,” that different biological races were in possession of different qualities and potentials shaped by evolutionary pressures; the Aryan race, he believed, was responsible for all of humanity's achievements and the only race capable of further growth (Bendersky 2014, 20). Blood and the common good were rendered inseparable in the Nazi myth that established its claim to power (and thus blending sovereign and biopower); inherited superiority bestowed the right to rule to those with the inborn ability for the evolution of civilization and the continuation of human development. Their right to rule was both inborn and for the greater good. Foucault argues this conflation with biology and social progress, based on Social Darwinism, is basis of the logic and power of German Fascism (Foucault 1989b, 269).

If both biological and cultural evolution are one, the fate of civilization is therefore dependent on the reproductive behaviours of the entire population, most importantly those genetically desirable. Pleasure and desire are then both the Aryan race's defence and its vulnerability; race purity and expansion will continue their evolutionary legacy, while interbreeding and reproductive failure would dismantle present progress and halt further advancement. Sexuality becomes a collective and individual responsibility. Nazism utilized “the characteristic privileges of sovereign power [over] the right to life and death” (Foucault 1978, 135); those who were hostile to the Leviathan, either through the threat posed by their biology or through direct disobedience to the sovereign Führer, were killed (though not always in the spectacular and public sense characteristic of sovereign power). The genocide and execution carried out by the Nazi Party can be understood simultaneously as justi-

fied by the mutually reinforcing protection of the sovereign and as a necessity for the promotion of the “greater good.” Nazi mythology teaches that Aryan blood, and therefore the entirety of human progress, is in danger at the hands (or, more accurately, the genitals) of competing less-evolved genes; Hitler believed that the Jewish people were the greatest threat to the Aryan race because of their racial purity and self-preservation (Bendersky 2014, 21). Keeping the Aryan genome pristine and increasing offspring production could not be enough to ensure the future of the Aryan race. Foucault explains that biopower required National Socialism to kill in the name of life:

Wars . . . were waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations were mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity; massacres have become vital. . . . One had a right to kill those who presented a biological danger to others. (Foucault 1978, 137–138)

The Third Reich maintained its benevolent appearance by declaring that some were too dangerous to live. These were not just those of non-Aryan races; “eugenically undesirable” Aryans, such as those with mental and physical disabilities, homosexuals, and others, were the manifestation of erosion within Aryan blood. There existed both internal and external threats to the population, each with equal means of desecration between their legs. The reproductive bodies of both non-Aryans and “eugenically undesirable” Aryans were presented to the general population as biological weapons of mass destruction, and the Third Reich became preoccupied with the sexual behaviours and desires of its subjects. Sexuality was now understood as a public and political act; what was sexually permissible became a central aspect of population policy, and essential to the actualization of national goals (Timm, 2005, 223). The importance of sexuality to population control transformed it from the inconsequential and uninteresting to a predominant part of the anxious and paranoid collective consciousness.

German fascism endorsed a reproductive preemptive strike that required the cooperation of all eugenically desirable Aryans; the plan was for racially pure Aryan subjects to both out-produce others races and effectively annihilate competing genetics before their numbers could overwhelm or contaminate the Aryan ones. What was before of little interest or consequence to the government now suddenly was a national concern; genitals became property of the regime. Regulatory power was implemented through the study and surveillance of the reproductive lives of the German population. The Nuremberg laws (better known as the “Blood Purity laws”) offered “eugenically desirable” Aryans various incentives for early marriage and high birthrates, and for the barring of Aryan women from the use of birth control and abortion, while creating disincentives, forced sterilization, and even “euthanasia” for

those deemed “eugenically undesirable” (Heineman 2005, 43). Reproduction became “compulsory labour” for “eugenically desirable” Aryans, as the desirable population was “made to live” (Heineman 2005, 43). It is important to note that, contrary to popular belief, the Third Reich was not an entirely sexually repressive society. Historian Dagmar Herzog has argued that fascist Germany was a sexually complex society and that its attractiveness to citizens (and, I argue, part of its contemporary appeal) was partially due to its attitudes towards sexuality and romance:

The deliberate sacralization of human love [was] a crucial aspect of National Socialism’s reconfiguration of notions of mortality and furthering ongoing processes of secularization . . . to read the Nazis’ paeans to the delights of love as simply tactical embellishment of what was actually a narrowly reproduction-oriented agenda would be to miss the ways Nazi advice-givers inserted themselves into the most elemental desires for personal happiness . . . even as the glorification of heterosexual romance provided the context for (and distracting counterpoint to) defences of some of the most grotesque and violent aspects of Nazi politics. (D. Herzog 2005, 15)

Romantic love was understood as a “higher pleasure” than intercourse, and one that races less-evolved than Aryans were not capable of. The “eugenically undesirable,” particularly the Jewish people, were deemed sexually driven and predatory without interest or capacity for romantic love. Jewish men were understood as simultaneously animalistic yet organized in their plan to exploit and corrupt Aryan women, and to spread venereal disease and infection into the Aryan race. Jewish women were believed to be promiscuous and sexually voracious and were said to disguise themselves as racially pure women to prey on Aryan men (Szobar 2005, 147). Promiscuity and sexual desire were deemed suspicious; Aryans were instructed to remain chaste until marriage because of the dangers of non-Aryan sexualities. Traditional romantic and family values were to be defended against from corrupting animalistic sexualities: “aggressive sexuality was coded as Jewish and dangerous” (Swett 2011, 42), and lust was feared and romance glorified. Though the contemporary popular understanding of sexuality in the Third Reich may not be completely historically accurate, general knowledge of the relationship between power and sexuality, and the strength of sexuality in the collective consciousness of Nazi Germany, have contributed to Western erotic fascination with Nazism. McWhorter notes in her discussion of the “queering” of Hitler, Western countries were able to maintain their allegiance to biopolitics and eugenic and hegemonic logic, the same forces at the foundation of Nazi Germany, by “othering” Nazism through declaring a “truth” of abnormality (McWhorter 2009, 244). It becomes clear the ideological basis of Nazi Germany is not far from the “othering” done through the conflation of deviant sexuality with

Nazism. It is this shallow and general historical understanding that has allowed Nazism to work as an especially effective floating signifier for the evil/abnormal, particularly when paired with deviant sexuality.

I have argued that Nazism has become conflated with sexuality through the power dynamics displayed in Nazi culture and paraphernalia through the “othering” done by Western cultures to preserve their own destructive biopolitics. I also see one more component of its sexualization: through the inadvertent eroticism constituted by power relations. Foucault argues labelling acts and attractions as sexually perverse and taxonomizing desires as “sexualities” that are both inherent to and revealing of the true nature of the subject, is “less a principle of inhibition than an inciting and multiplying mechanism” (Foucault 1978, 46). An attraction to Nazism is created first by its presentation as dangerous and powerful, then enforced by the cultural belief that sexualities are inborn and unchanging parts of identity. According to Foucault, the judgement of a sexual desire as shameful, disgusting, and perverted only makes the attraction more powerful and erotic. And what could be more immoral and distasteful than an erotic inclination towards the perpetrators of some of history’s worst crimes? Sexual imaginations are sparked and relationships eroticized when they are outlawed; these seemingly contradictory desires are the unintended residue of biopower’s productive effect on a subject’s desires. Foucault explains that sex acts and attractions are split into a binary, in which everything erotic must be either “permitted or forbidden” (Foucault 1978, 83). Though the intention of exercising this constituting power over subjects is to perpetuate what is permitted and extinguish the forbidden, power works in unexpected and unwanted ways. The relationship between power and sexuality is unpredictable and impossible to control, and attempts to constrain and direct desire usually backfire. Power relations render the sexually forbidden, and therefore evil/abnormal, as accidentally desirable, and the conflation of sexuality and identity make these desires stable and more powerful. The role contemporary representations of Nazism have been given in the good/evil binary has, inadvertently, eroticized it.

Foucault refers to the unintentional production of undesirable sexualities through mechanisms of biopower as “the Perverse Implantation.” We can understand the sexual energy surrounding Nazism in contemporary collective consciousness as the Perverse Implantation on a greater scale than the medicalized version Foucault puts forth in the *History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction*, but as following the same logic. Here, the Perverse Implantation is working at the level of mainly populations, as opposed to just individuals. There are two aspects at work in the sexualization of the fictional Nazism that is used as a floating signifier. First, its conflation with the evil/abnormal renders it dangerous and powerful, and each is very erotic. Foucault explains how its conflation with power reveals the sexual understanding of power: “Power has an erotic charge. . . . Aren’t we witnessing the begin-

nings of a re-eroticization of power, taken to a pathetic, ridiculous extreme by the porn-shops with the Nazi insignia that you can find in the United States?" (Foucault 1989a, 97–98). Nazi imagery has become so closely associated with "sexy" that sex has become conflated with its symbolism and vice versa.

Though perhaps counter-intuitive, all uses of Nazism as a floating signifier, no matter how lewd or offensive, adhere to the same logic of biopower. Even the most vulgar depictions of Nazism are not a form of resistance to power; though deemed an undesirable sexuality, they still play into biopower's effect on sexuality. Foucault explains that what he refers to as the "Speaker's Benefit"—performing resistance and presentation of exploration of sexualized Nazism as liberated from constraints—is itself constituted by power relations:

There may be [a] reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression; something that one might call the speaker's benefit. If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (Foucault 1978, 6)

Those who enjoy Nazisploitation, or other blatantly sexualized media involving Nazis, may feel as though they are being brave or naughty while expressing their "real selves and sexuality." This is, however, a failure to understand that expressions of sexuality are not inherently liberating; if one is buying into biopower and believing that constituted desires are real, inherent parts of the self, and that power is only repressive on sexualities, then they are failing to understand the real relationship between power and sexuality and adhering to the idea that sexuality is a real, stable aspect of the self. This further perpetuates these beliefs and adheres to the logic of biopower. There is nothing inherently "sexy" about Nazism, nor is anyone in possession of a natural disposition of sexual attraction to German fascism. What has rendered Nazism erotic is its presentation in media as the manifestation of the evil/abnormal, the taboo surrounding Nazism and sexuality, and the configuration of Nazism as powerful and even otherworldly. No one is sexually attracted to the "real Nazis"; they instead desire the fantasy created around National Socialism that allows it to function as a floating signifier. It is not an attraction to Nazism per se, but an attraction to the power and abnormality it has come to represent in media, and that exists in collective consciousness.

The second aspect of the Perverse Implantation is the belief that desires are indicative of a subject's "sexuality." Fleeting, meaningless desires constituted

through power relations are transformed into prevalent erotic inclinations that the subject believes are an unchanging aspect of their identity, through categorization, documentation, study, and diagnosis of perversions and sexualities. Subjects are made to believe that “therein resided a truth” (Foucault 1978, 158) of both their natural sexuality, and what this sexuality means about the nature of themselves and of humanity. Nazism’s presence in collective consciousness, paired with sexual media representations where it is used as a floating signifier, has allowed Nazi directed-desire to become an aspect of the identity of those so inclined. This is manifest not as people necessarily identifying with a “Nazi sexuality,” but with conflating Nazism with a dark seductive power to which a subject’s attraction reveals their true nature.

When sexuality becomes “a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected” (Foucault 1978, 157), arbitrary feelings become understood as indicative of a “true self,” and these attractions become more permanent and pervasive. There is nothing inherently sexy about Nazism, and desires directed at German fascism reveal no truth about the subject or a greater human nature; however, these erotic feelings do reveal the ways in which power is acting on subject and the ways in which National Socialism is conveyed in media and in collective consciousness” (Foucault 1978, 45). Whether the sexualization of Nazism in media is an unintended byproduct of biopower or an effective way of perpetuating the dualisms of good/evil (normal/abnormal), it is certainly an example of the productive workings of power relations working in surprising and unexpected ways.

Now that we have a clear Foucaultian picture of how and why Nazism has been sexualized, and an understanding that these representations rely on a hegemonic logic which is damaging to witness and survivor testimony, what are we to do? Throughout his work, Foucault argued that it was harmful and wrong to claim to speak for or on behalf of others, and advocated for an “archeology” of the voices of people whose stories have historically been silenced and swept aside of discussion and study. Much of his work<sup>11</sup> has focused on creating a discourse where those who have been ignored, ridiculed, and marginalized through biopolitics may speak on their own behalf and be listened to seriously. Foucault worked to create a dialogue in which the voices of the unheard could be freely expressed and acknowledged without being glamourized, romanticized, or commodified:

[The masses] know far better than [the intellectual] and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves. But there exists a system of power which

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<sup>11</sup> Specifically, in his discussion of knowledge in *the Archeology of Knowledge*, but this is also applied in his books *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *History of Sexuality Vol. I*

blocks, prohibits, and invalidates this discourse and this knowledge, a power not only found in manifest authority of censorship but one that profoundly and subtly penetrates an entire societal network. . . . The intellectual's role is no longer to place himself "somewhat ahead and to the side" in order to express the stifled truth of the collectivity; rather it is to struggle against forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of "knowledge," "truth," "consciousness," and "discourse." (Foucault 1980b)

The job of the philosopher is to resist pressures to explain the lives and experiences of others, but to show how these voices have been stifled and give room so they may speak freely. The flip side of this, then, is Foucault's rejection of an ethics of hard imperatives decided on by philosophers (Foucault 1988, 49). Such kinds of normative judgements would, after all, undermine the philosopher's role of the critic of power; moral imperatives make, for Foucault, a problematic claim a "truth" of what is right. What Foucault ultimately rejects is the sort of imperative-based ethics of deontology and consequentialism; it is clear, given both his earlier texts and his own activism, he is not a moral subjectivist. But how can there be an ethics without truth?<sup>12</sup> Though he never offered a comprehensive moral theory, Foucault began to develop an "aesthetics of life" rooted in the possibility of a "self-constitution" in his final books (Foucault 1997, 291). This "self-constitution" refers to the subject's own ability to resist and engage with power structures. Johanna Oksala explains:

Foucault sought to develop a way to think about ethics and politics that does not rely on any ahistorical, ontological assumptions about the subject. The subject is neither the starting point nor the foundation of morality, any more than it was of epistemology or history. Throughout his work Foucault warned us against fixed meanings of what a human being is. To be consistent, his ethics cannot be built on any foundational understanding of the ethical subject, but on the contrary, must aim to break essences, constants and human natures. Ethics becomes possible exactly the movement of revealing forms of subjectivity as contingent and questioning constraining essences. (Oksala 2005, 192)

Foucault holds that the subject has, to some extent, a role in producing their sexuality; the subject will be necessarily at least somewhat sexually constituted by the power exercised on them, but the subject does have the ability to resist and disman-

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor (1984) raises this fascinating point in his essay "Foucault on Freedom and Truth."

tle power, though this is difficult. Foucault's final works are concerned with exploring how subjects in alternate cultures understood and expressed sexuality; Foucault reveals how much of understanding and practice of sexuality is culturally shaped. Contemporary power may be inescapable, but in embracing resistance one may become, to some extent, self-constituting.

Timothy O'Leary maintains that *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* has a distinctly moral slant: "*The History of Sexuality*, volume 1 deals with ethics because it deals with the ways we are constituted and constitute ourselves as subjects; and the task of understanding the historical forces which have made us the kinds of individuals that we are is, for Foucault, one of the most important tasks of ethics" (O'Leary 2002, 31). *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* engages directly with Foucault's "aesthetic of life" because it examines how subjects are constituted by power, and therefore, inadvertently, offers the means of resistance to this constitution. Therefore, sexual practices are neither inherently liberating or oppressive, but it is *how* we engage with sexuality that is ethically significant. Pat Califia defends the use of the Nazi fantasy in sexual role-play: "Not everyone who wears a swastika is a Nazi . . . S/M is more a parody of the hidden sexual nature of fascism than it is a worship or acquiesce to it" (Califia 1982, 36). It is true that many people attracted to fascism do not condone Nazism or other racist ideologies. The problem with Califia's claim lies in the "truth" claim. Califia argues that part of the positive and liberating nature of S/M role-play is that the historical oppressor often is the one degraded or in the masochistic role; S/M allows for a reversal of power dynamics through fantasy (35–36). This is clearly an example of the Speaker's Benefit; Califia claims the resistance of Nazi sexual fetishization lies in its "parody" of some sort of sexual or erotic "truth" to fascism. Though seemingly resistant, ascribing a "truth," particularly one corresponding to deviant sexuality, follows straight back to hegemonic logic. Assuming there to be a hidden "truth" to Nazism, and believing and role-playing this, rather than attending to survivor testimony, buys directly into biopolitics.

A notion playing on the logic of the Speaker's Benefit has been used to argue in favour of less explicit representations of Nazism which follow the hegemonic structure. Todd Herzog argues films which "flip the script," such as *Inglourious Basterds*, are constructive because they free cinematic representations of the Shoah from constraints around political correctness and sensitivity. Herzog holds there is a problematic sanctified treatment of Nazism in film which should be upset and resisted through films which play with the course of history (T. Herzog 2012, 282). Herzog is confused that this sort of fictionalized "turning the tables" on Nazism is both something new and a form of resistance to the traditional logic of representation of Nazism in media. *Inglourious Basterds* is merely the most mainstream and critically acclaimed of these "alternate" but "more true" presentations of Nazism. I hold the personal role-playing and cinematic representations that Califia and Herzog

argue in favour of are the opposite of liberating, but rather, through claiming to find “truth” or “liberation” in claims to truth, silence witness testimony. As feminist philosopher Jana Sawicki explains, one should not confuse different manifestations of the same power dynamics with liberation or resistance:

Foucault wants to shift our attention away from a preoccupation with “repression” as a central concept of analyzing the relationship between sex and power . . . Relations of power are dispersed and fragmented throughout the social field . . . if there is no central locus of power, neither is there a central locus of resistance. (Sawicki 1988, 182–187)

This is not to say that presenting a nonsexualized or nonerotized depiction of Nazism is an act of resistance. We cannot say this; presumably, it is possible for there to be representations of Nazism which engage with sexuality without enforcing hegemonic narratives or claiming to tell the “truth” of the Shoah. However, fictions which construct Nazism as a floating signifier adhere to and perpetuate understandings of the evil/abnormal as established by biopower and always compromise the voices of survivors and witnesses, and many of these representations have done so through appeals to sexuality. As Gavriel D. Rosenfeld explains, the more Nazism is an object of entertainment and a prop in fantasies, the less seriously the general population regards the Shoah (Rosenfeld 2015, 339). Though it will be difficult, perhaps not even entirely possible, resistance to attractions to glamourized Nazi imagery is both liberating for the subject and discontinues damaging understandings of German fascism. Giving into every desire is not to act in a sexually liberated way; rather, it is sexually liberating to understand that sources of pleasure are not inherent to identity and so can be cultivated (Foucault 1978, 157).

Sensationalized depictions of Nazism often do not seek to perpetuate the memory of the Shoah or the suffering of its victims, but rather regard it as a fiction that may be used as a setting for its own purposes. To use the history of the Shoah as a means—whether it be to make a comment on human nature or the existence of evil, for sexual gratification, for cathartic fantasy, and so forth—fails to regard the Shoah with respect or dignity. Writer, professor, and survivor Elie Wiesel replied to the sensationalizing of Fascist power and victim suffering, and the disregard for historical accuracy in NBC’s 1978 miniseries *Holocaust*:

Untrue, offensive, cheap; as a TV production, the film is an insult to those who perished and those who survived. . . . If [the series] makes you cry, you will cry for the wrong reasons. . . . The implications are troubling and far reaching. . . . It removes us from the event rather than bringing us closer to it. . . . The Holocaust *must* be remembered. But not as a show. (Wiesel 1978)

Philosopher Martin Buber argued against the death penalty for Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann for reasons which may be applied to fictional portrayals of Nazism. Buber himself was disgusted with the sensationalism of the Eichmann trial and pleaded for life imprisonment instead of capital punishment for Eichmann (Friedman 1983, 356). Buber held this “symbolic justice” was useless and would present some sort of retribution where none was possible (Friedman 1983, 359). The suffering of the Shoah can never be made up for, and Buber was concerned that Eichmann’s death would create a false sense of justice. This is true also of any fictionalized attempt; these pieces should not be presented as if they provide any sort of “symbolic justice” as this diminishes the reality of suffering. Buber was further concerned with what treating Eichmann as a force of evil would mean for collective consciousness (Friedman 1983, 360). Depicting Nazism as a supernatural force of darkness, and suggesting that the death and destruction (either real or depicted) of Nazis may be justice for victims’ suffering, is problematic as it presents itself as retroactively serving justice where none is possible.

Foucault offers us a jarring yet hopeful understanding of ourselves as political and sexual beings. By understanding the ways in which power, knowledge, and claims of truth in sexuality work exploitatively to disregard witness testimony and use the Shoah as a prop for the assertion of hegemony, we can acknowledge the damage exploitive representations of Nazism do to collective understandings of the Shoah and resist the temptation to look past the suffering of many to find a hidden “truth.” Foucault’s aesthetics of life give the means by which we can better listen to narratives of the Shoah, and free these stories from biopolitical usage.

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