

The Perpetrator as Punchline: *Hipster Hitler* and the Ambiguity of Controversial Humor

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Abstract: This article examines *Hipster Hitler*, a 2011 webcomic by James Carr and Archana Kumar, where the figure of Adolf Hitler is amalgamated with a generic version of a contemporary hipster, with the apparent purpose of turning both Hitler and hipsters into targets of ridicule. We engage with contemporary scholarship on the representation of Holocaust perpetrators—particularly Adolf Hitler—to examine the implications of a perpetrator of such magnitude becoming so familiar that a few strokes of the pen make him not only immediately recognizable, but also a usable go-to villain whose utilization as a means of generating humorous reactions runs the risk of separating him from his deeds. As the comic appears to emphasize the randomness and shallowness of Hipster Hitler’s horrifying deeds, we ask whether this particular comedic angle can produce valuable engagement with the mechanisms that enabled the relentless and precise work of annihilation orchestrated during Hitler’s regime.

Keywords: Hitler, humor, Holocaust, perpetrator, webcomic

Introduction

For a dead man, Adolf Hitler has shown remarkable resilience. Hitler has endured as a powerful trope, either as a symbol of the crimes of the Third Reich and, by extension, as an archetype of evil, as a benchmark against which crimes perpetrated by Western colonial powers are sometimes measured, or as a lightning rod for the transgressive energies associated with depicting—as horror or as comedy—subjects widely considered taboo. Its potential to prompt reconsiderations of subject positions such as victim, perpetrator, and other related categories, to call into question narratives of empire and resurgence, or to offer transgressive thrills deserves further critical attention. In this article, we are reflecting on *Hipster Hitler*, a once popular webcomic which performs a type of time travel whose logic is patently absurd: Hitler travels from an unnamed present-day English-language cultural space back to 1940s Germany,

The research for this publication was supported by PCE grant 101/2021, “Familiar Perpetrators: On the Intimacy of Evil in Contemporary American Literature and Popular Culture,” offered by UEFISCDI.

Journal of Perpetrator Research 4.2 (2022), 145–172
DOI: 10.21039/jpr.4.2.116 © 2022 by the Authors



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where he wears ironic T-shirts, is overly careful about preservatives, and claims Pac-Man is a vintage strategy game that he can use to obliterate his enemies. The premise for the webcomic, which was later also published in book form in several translations, appears to be poking fun at both Hitler and hipsters in one clean sweep.¹

Mostly black and white, with some grays and rare pops of color, *Hipster Hitler* is aesthetically minimalist, realistically drawn against generally white backgrounds, and does not engage in any formal experimentation, relying primarily on language to deliver the final joke. The main character quotes the most iconic elements of Adolf Hitler's face, such as the moustache and the sleek hair, with a side parting. However, he wears thick-rimmed oversized glasses, skinny jeans, and T-shirts with absurdist puns printed on them (his T-shirts also functioning, in Richard F. Outcault's *Yellow Kid* fashion, as additional word bubbles). Hence, in Carr and Karuna's webcomic, Hitler is merged with the stereotypical figure of a hipster (which we define in the second part of this article) to create 'Hipster Hitler', a character whose biography belongs by-and-large to Adolf Hitler, but whose tastes are those of a generic twenty-first century hipster. His worldview is an absurdist mixture of Nazi ideology and hipster idiosyncrasies; it is based on an impressive inventory of anecdotes and facts from Hitler's past as well as a solid understanding of hipster mannerisms. As a consequence, apart from the evident primary function, which is humorous, *Hipster Hitler* may also fulfill a secondary, informative purpose. Some of the punchlines need working knowledge of Hitler's life, but also war-related information, hipster lingo and tastes; in the absence of such information, research can work to save the punchline. There is also an observable cleavage between reality and fiction in Hipster Hitler's mind, some of it caused by his understanding of himself as more special than everyone around him. This is, again, in keeping with the generic hipster's position as a social category often critiqued and ridiculed for the preoccupation with appearing authentic, 'in the know', with a blasé air of superiority cultivated so that one may appear effortlessly trendy.² Extensive

1 We should underline the fact that our use of the term time travel is metaphorical here: unlike other works which have Hitler literally travel forward into our time via actual time travel machines or unexplained magical processes, in *Hipster Hitler* the mechanics behind Hitler's knowledge of the future and general anachronistic hipsterishness are never revealed.

2 Janna Michael, 'It's really not hip to be a hipster: Negotiating trends and authenticity in the cultural field', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 15.2 (2015), 163-182 (p. 164).

lists about hipster aesthetics (including fashion sense, facial hair, glasses and other items), dining, and specific lingo have been widely circulated in popular culture and are dutifully inventoried in *Hipster Hitler*.³ Even if the hipster is now a figure that has entered the mainstream,⁴ some of the hipster mannerisms have aged poorly. For instance, it appears that items of vocabulary such as ‘deck’ (which means ‘cool’)⁵ may not have transitioned into the mainstream with the rest of hipster culture and some readers might need to look them up. However, the hipster remains a ubiquitous figure, either used neutrally (as in lists of hipster bars provided by websites for tourists) or as a surefire target of ridicule whose recognizability in public consciousness rivals that of Hitler.

In this article, we examine the implications of a perpetrator, more specifically Adolf Hitler, becoming overfamiliar, to such an extent that only a few lines make his portrait immediately recognizable and yet abstract enough to be conflated with another popular target of ridicule (in this case, the hipster) to generate humorous content about both figures. We ask whether the premise for this conflation lies, at least in part, in the idea that Hitler’s acts of perpetration have become so familiar that many no longer identify or read them as such because they have already moved into a realm of inevitability and everydayness. We argue that the result of this amalgamation between Hitler and a hipster produces an ambiguous multi-layered text whose unpacking depends on the amount of labor its readers may be willing to undertake. From this perspective, we inquire whether the shallowness of *Hipster Hitler* (the character) may also serve to mirror our own, as the satisfaction of getting the joke may shift our attention away from considering the systematic destruction of human life that the comic references. Last, but not least, we consider whether this absurdist comedic conflation of a ‘type’ (the hipster) and an individual (Hitler) produces humor that relies on separating the figure of Hitler from its historical context and thus runs the risk of obscuring the audience’s understanding of the specific mechanisms that helped produce his deeds.

3 See Robert Lanham, *The Hipster Handbook* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003) for a comprehensive view of hipster tastes, aesthetics etc.

4 Heike Steinhoff, ‘Hipster Culture: A Definition’, in *Hipster Culture: Transnational and Intersectional Perspectives*, ed. by Heike Steinhoff (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), p. 1.

5 Lanham, p. 6.

Hitler's Place in Recent Debates on Perpetrator Representation

Perpetrators and their crimes are often sensationalized and even turned into figures of fun, fantasy (particularly in those accounts that emphasize the monstrous and mythologically evil figure of the perpetrator),⁶ or adventure (for example, in superhero comics that use the figure of perpetrators of mass violence and genocide, including Hitler, as villains that function as narrative props meant to showcase the heroes' masculinity) in works that both rely on and fuel the public's appetite for extra-ordinary stories. One of the paradoxical effects of this process is the public's enhanced familiarity with these figures, which can often make them appear not only banal, but also intimately close to the public that consumes cultural products about their deeds. This trivialization is often denounced by survivors and victims' families (see the example below with the RedBubble attempt to merchandize Hipster Hitler); however, it remains an important component of perpetrator portraiture in the public space. We thus inquire what happens when the very iconicity of someone like Hitler as a transcultural figure of memory makes him a familiar (even anecdotal) figure whose everydayness draws attention away from his considerable crimes. Still, it is this familiarity—through the representation of perpetrators of various kinds in popular culture—that may both offer and block access to important questions about how evil becomes possible. As Richard Crownshaw points out, it is necessary to consider how the representation of the perpetrator may throw light on 'the processes of perpetration' without completely othering the perpetrator and providing a universalization of the figure of the victim.⁷

The figure of Hitler in particular may cause concerns that the consistent tradition of humor—from dark to slapstick—in which it is embedded, as well as the fact that he is probably the most recognizable dictator and genocide perpetrator in the world, will ultimately reduce the actual historical character to its representations in popular culture. *Hipster Hitler's* representation of the German dictator is fundamentally grounded in Hitler's iconic status, which, by dint of his enduring presence in global popular culture, has transformed him into a figure of

6 See Erin McGlothlin, *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction and Non-Fiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021), p. 11.

7 Richard Crownshaw, 'Perpetrator Fictions and Transcultural Memory', *Parallax*, 17.4 (2011), 75–89 (p. 77).

'arbitrary' meaning,⁸ as Mirjam Gebauer argues, to such an extent that it can be limited to critiquing contemporary media culture through the figure of the hipster, another popular contemporary target of ridicule.⁹ However, *Hipster Hitler* also belongs to a wider recent tradition of reinterpretation where the German dictator is mainly employed to reflect on revivals of Nazi ideology in contemporary culture, in comics such as Grant Morrison's *The New Adventures of Hitler* (1989-1990) and Jason's *I Killed Adolf Hitler* (2017), David Sandberg's short film *Kung Fury* (2015), and Timur Vermes's *Look Who's Back*, initially a novel (the original German title *Er Ist Wieder Da*, 2011) and later also a film adaptation (2015). All these works employ the Hitler figure to interrogate contemporary culture or to elicit transgressive pleasure.

The popularity of the German dictator in contemporary popular culture has generated misgivings, but also more optimistic perspectives on the future of the memorialization of the Nazi regime. In *Imagining Hitler*, Alvin Rosenfeld expresses concern that Hitler's growing presence in popular culture might signal a growing indifference for the horrors of the Holocaust and their moral implications.¹⁰ More recently, Jeffrey Demsky has argued in favor of the potential of certain popular culture products to produce a valuable contribution to cultural memory. An additional contribution made by these diverse creations is, as Gavriel Rosenfeld argues, 'overturning the perceived exceptionality of the Nazi era'.¹¹ Dispelling the 'moralistic aura' around certain events and regarding them as comparable to others from different cultural spaces is a process that is in part produced by the disappearance of those generations that experienced the event directly, and the circulation of Hitler and Nazi-related images on the Internet also 'provides further evidence of the normalization of memory'.¹²

American literature, popular culture, and academic life have recently witnessed a veritable boom in the production of texts about perpetrators, perpetration, and what facilitates them. In this context, perpetrator stories, even when detailed and well-researched, may still fail to provide complete explanations about how crimes of a certain

8 Mirjam Gebauer, 'The Pop-Icon Hitler As a Trope of Critical Reflection on Media Society: The World's Most Recognisable Face', *Academic Quarter / Akademisk Kvarter*, 10 (2015), 233-248 (p. 234).

9 Ibid., p. 241.

10 Alvin Rosenfeld, *Imagining Hitler* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. xviii.

11 Gavriel Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler: How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 7.

12 Ibid., p. 293.

nature and scale—and this is particularly true of genocide—became possible and how human beings engage in such protracted and repeated acts of violence. This arises, in part, from the difficulty of fully solving the riddle of how it is possible for human beings to do often unrepresentable things to other human beings. Alvin Rosenfeld draws attention to the elusiveness of Hitler (the actual historical character) in various representations in popular culture, which do not ‘seem able adequately to present the man or satisfactorily to explain him’.¹³ In the case of perpetrators of genocide of Hitler’s magnitude, the focus is often also on an underlying ‘whydunnit’ investigation, as Robert Eaglestone also argues: ‘many perpetrator testimonies and perpetrator fictions seem to set out to answer this fundamental question of ‘why’, that is, the question of evil, but they swerve and fail to answer the question that they set themselves’.¹⁴ Eaglestone locates this difficulty of providing a complete answer to this question either in ‘genre conventions’, or in the difficulty of assigning complete meaning to, for instance, the evil of the Holocaust, being as it is not ‘profound’ but ‘shallow, fungus-like, routine’.¹⁵ Another difficulty lies in the Nazi regime’s detrimental effect on language and authentic thought by generating clichés, thus producing and hiding behind an ‘inauthenticity’ produced by ‘mendacity, evasion, and pleading’.¹⁶

In this context, in this article we also consider whether the representation of Hitler in contemporary popular culture—and in the webcomic *Hipster Hitler* in particular—may also exacerbate the unexplained/unexplainable and, thus, may propose a logic of randomness as a more satisfying answer to the question of the motivation of Hitler’s actions. Erin McGlothlin explores this process of investigation and obfuscation of the mind of the perpetrator in a selection of works of fiction and non-fiction that ‘filter’, rather than ‘swerve’ (as in Eaglestone’s reading) away from a full explanation or understanding of ‘the interiority of their subjects despite—or perhaps even because of—cultural expectations about the nature and scope of the evil with which such figures are charged’.¹⁷ This article also considers the fact that this lingering enigma—which sometimes

13 Alvin Rosenfeld, p. xx.

14 Robert Eaglestone, *The Broken Voice: Reading Post-Holocaust Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 65.

15 Ibid., p. 66.

16 Ibid., p. 67.

17 McGlothlin, p. 20.

glamorizes perpetrators in certain popular representations or perhaps from certain uncritical ideological perspectives—may contribute to the creation and circulation of a marketable figure of the perpetrator. This very circulation risks distancing perpetrators from their deeds and lending controversial figures from history the shine and shallowness of celebrities who are famous for being famous.

This vacuousness appears to harken back to the shallowness of perpetrators commonly summed up as the ‘banality of evil’, which Hannah Arendt (not uncontroversially)¹⁸ identified as stemming from—in that particular case, Adolf Eichmann’s—‘lack of imagination’, ‘thoughtlessness’, and lack of ‘any diabolical or demonic profundity’.¹⁹ In *The Broken Voice*, Robert Eaglestone emphasizes that shallowness is an important component of Arendt’s understanding of the banality of evil: ‘Evil is powerful not because it is profound, but because it is shallow’.²⁰ Arendt returns to this interpretation in ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture’,²¹ where she once again ponders Eichmann’s ‘thoughtlessness’ as indicative of a remarkable shallowness that was, at least in part, responsible for the staggering scale of perpetration:

Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of ‘the banality of evil’ and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness.²²

This particular view of the perpetrator does not invalidate or bypass Eichmann’s profound attachment to Nazi ideology; Arendt understands Eichmann as banal ‘precisely because he was a fanatical anti-Semite, not despite it’.²³ Arendt’s perspective is useful in the context of our reading of *Hipster Hitler*, as it can help us test the limits of the amalgamation

18 For an illuminating reading of Arendt’s (and others’) take on Eichmann that also explicates the reasoning behind some of the critiques of Arendt’s interpretation, see McGlothlin, pp. 67–131.

19 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 287–288.

20 Eaglestone, p. 38.

21 We came upon this reiteration of Hannah Arendt’s point on Eichmann’s shallowness in Bethania Assy’s presentation ‘Eichmann, the Banality of Evil, and Thinking in Arendt’s Thought’, Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Boston University, 10–15 August 1998, <<https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Cont/ContAssy.htm>> [accessed 30 September 2022].

22 Hannah Arendt, ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture’, *Social Research*, 38.3 (1971), 417–446 (p. 417).

23 Seyla Benhabib qtd. in Eaglestone, p. 36.

with the shallowness of the hipster, a contemporary figure of ridicule which contaminates the figure of Hitler as it emerges from the comic.²⁴

It is perhaps commonplace, particularly when it comes to political contexts that involve autocratic regimes, to idealize humor as a weapon that can always be courageously wielded to slay despots and make room for dissent. However, as Andrew Stott argues, even though humorous representation can be a powerful tool that can be used to subvert despotic political regimes (which famously punish those who poke fun at them), it can also be employed to ridicule the vulnerable, as in racist or sexist forms of humor.²⁵ Stott further reflects on the mixed reception of comedic approaches to the Holocaust in American and European films such as *The Great Dictator* (1940, dir. Charlie Chaplin), *Jakob the Liar* (1974, dir. Frank Beyer), and *Life Is Beautiful* (1997, dir. Roberto Benigni). While he does acknowledge the important role of humor as a reflection upon problematic political situations and moments of crisis in history—like the Holocaust—he proposes that comedy has the ability to demolish, which can be valuable but is, unfortunately, limited when it comes to offering solutions: ‘Perhaps it is true that comedy has nothing to offer politics when the project requires something more than simple derision. Maybe the limited usefulness of comedy in politics is a function of laughter’s association with ridicule.’²⁶ The high expectations one might have of humor when it is employed to criticize dictators and authors of genocide should, perhaps, if we embrace Stott’s tentative postulation, be moderated by the awareness that, while humor can tear things down, it has less quantifiable potential to offer substantial political solutions to the crises it points out. This is important for our reading of *Hipster Hitler* because the comic has connections to the tradition of lampooning Hitler in newspaper cartoons rather than, say, his employment in superhero comics and more recent adaptations.

24 In a 2015 interview with Werner Herzog at the 2015 Biennale, acclaimed film director Joshua Oppenheimer, whose work on the documentaries *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014) helps shed light on the mechanisms that generate perpetration (while giving audiences access to the perspective of the perpetrators), speaks about being able to test Arendt’s interpretation of Eichmann as (he quotes loosely here) ‘guilty of nothing but an acute shallowness’ and deems it ‘true of, somehow, every perpetrator that I’ve met.’ There are, of course, many factors that facilitate perpetration on such a large scale, such as ‘all sorts of despair...hopeless despair, a sort of ecstatic despair,’ ‘an exorbitant selfishness’ and ‘the need to lie to ourselves.’ See Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Look of Silence* [Panel Discussion] [Berlinale, 2015, online video recording, YouTube, 09 February 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qbj70ITgcs&t=1105s>>] [accessed 30 September 2022].

25 Andrew Stott, *Comedy (The New Critical Idiom)* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 98–99.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

At the same time, *Hipster Hitler* occupies a more controversial space in the comedic tradition, that of 'irreverent' or 'impudent' or 'unconventional' portrayals of Holocaust and Nazi representations. Jeffrey Demsky proposes that it is possible to use such texts—particularly in a teaching context—to create 'an irreverent instruction platform, one that supplements traditional literature with more relatable (if fictionalized) accounts'.²⁷ The difficulty lies in managing to differentiate between what Demsky calls 'constructive' and 'destructive memorializing', something that can be achieved, he argues, if scholars are able to mediate among the various versions of history that exist as circulating irreverent narratives and identifying those that contradict historical facts (such as the scale of the Holocaust, for instance) instead of critiquing the flaws in our processes of memorialization.²⁸ Demsky's is an optimistic perspective that considers the shape of contemporary culture and the way information circulates to propose that certain—albeit not all—unconventional popular culture representations have the potential to act against historical amnesia. Stephanie Bird suggests that perhaps we could regard such texts by employing an 'interpretative duality'²⁹ that can help undermine 'the moral anxiety attending representations of violence and suffering',³⁰ particularly in the case of comedy, which has a tradition of being deemed incommensurable with serious matters such as death and destruction. There is value, Bird argues, to the distance generated by comedy, but this distance from difficult subjects does not assuage moral anxieties, partly because of its valuable 'ability to maintain mutually contradictory frames of interpretation'.³¹ Trauma and victimhood, which have 'emerged as ethically privileged states',³² are particularly difficult to address from a comedic standpoint, unless one targets the perpetrator of violence instead of the victim.

In Hitler's case, comedy has been consistently used to demythologize this figure, but the way humor is generated is not unencumbered by its own controversial aspects. These are most often rooted in

27 Jeffrey Demsky, *Nazi and Holocaust Representations in Anglo-American Popular Culture, 1945-2020: Irreverent Remembrance* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p. 6.

28 Ibid., p. 128.

29 Stephanie Bird, *Comedy and Trauma in Austria and Germany after 1945: The Inner Side of Mourning* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2016), p. 2.

30 Ibid., p. 6.

31 Ibid., p. 9.

32 Ibid., p. 14.

considerations about the ownership of the traumatic situation from which the humor stems, the risk of diminishing or drawing attention away from the horror of the perpetrator's deeds, but also the difficulty of identifying the subject of the joke. The ability to produce comedy about a certain situation, particularly one so momentarily destructive as the Holocaust, is often limited by one's background; thus, the right to humor is often granted more readily to survivors or people who have some claim over the trauma caused by the perpetrators. As Uğur Ümit Üngör and Valerie Amandine Verkerke point out, survivors may use humor in order to rehumanize themselves in the wake of dehumanizing ordeals, as well as cope, maintain social cohesion, and criticize the perpetrators.³³ However, when humor migrates outside of the survivor community or when the passage of time has produced fears that the memory of the perpetrator's deeds is fading, it is possible for humorous representation to offend and cause concern that it may encourage the portrayal of the perpetrator as merely a harmless figure of ridicule.³⁴ It is also often difficult to assess whether 'the butt of the joke' is the perpetrator or their victims, as the two categories are painfully connected by a history of violence with recognizable tropes and images that are—in the case of the Holocaust—familiar to many outside of the survivor community. In this context, 'just evoking the machinery of the Holocaust—the camps, the gas chambers, the ovens—is a third rail for many people'.³⁵ This is partly why, in the wake of the emergence of Holocaust-related humor in American popular culture during the 1990s and the recent rise of public expressions of antisemitism in the United States and elsewhere,³⁶ controversy has often emerged and crystallized around either jokes made by authors with little or no affiliation to the Jewish community, comedy that appeared to trivialize the suffering of millions, or humor that appeared to be at the expense of victims even when it seemed to target perpetrators.

33 Uğur Ümit Üngör and Valerie Amandine Verkerke, 'Funny as hell: The functions of humour during and after genocide', *European Journal of Humour Research*, 3.2/3 (2015), 80-101 (p. 83).

34 Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards, 'The Last Laugh?', in *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust*, ed. by David Slucki, Avinoam Patt, and Gabriel N. Finder (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020), pp. 313-333.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 327.

36 David Slucki, Avinoam Patt, and Gabriel N. Finder, 'Introduction: To Tell Jokes After Auschwitz Is Barbaric, Isn't It?', in *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust*, ed. by David Slucki, Avinoam Patt, and Gabriel N. Finder (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020), pp. 1-11.

'We're Fascists, Not Monsters'³⁷: Humor, Hitler, and the Logic of Perpetration

Not only is Hitler quite a mobile figure of memory, but so is the reception of various cultural products that feature him, as they themselves are shifting. *Hipster Hitler* was created as a webcomic in August 2010 by James Carr and Archana Kumar, who are no longer active in the comics community and who did not seem to display any special interest in becoming celebrities themselves. In a February 2011 interview with *Exberliner*, the first magazine that started publishing the comic in print, the creators state their intention of mocking Hitler and parodying the Third Reich, as well as poking fun at hipsters, but never the Holocaust.³⁸ Kumar and Carr, in fact, make sure they specify that they are 'clearly not glorifying or celebrating Hitler, but mocking him'.³⁹ The comic strip was thus born on a whim, as the creators describe it, during a Skype conversation after the two creators, who had been university colleagues, found themselves in different places (Williamsburg and Bangalore, respectively) after graduating:

We were catching up on Skype one day when we started playing around with the site godaddy.com, seeing what URLs were available and more or less typing in the most ridiculous insults to one another that we could. At some point, one of us said 'Ironie Hitler' and playing off this, the other said 'Hipster Hitler.' It had an immediate ring to it, and we had always tossed around the idea of doing a comic together. Thus, Hipster Hitler was born.⁴⁰

The first strip, in fact, consisted solely of Hipster Hitler wearing a T-shirt that said '3 Reichs and You're out.' The webcomic quickly went viral and morphed into a series of memes, YouTube videos, and other offshoots that circulated most intensely approximately ten years ago, as suggested by the dates of YouTube videos and websites such as *Know Your Meme*.⁴¹ *Hipster Hitler* was first published in book form in 2012. The

37 This line from the strip 'Protests', uttered by Hipster Hitler, references (intentionally or not) the debate about the understanding of perpetrators as monsters.

38 James Carr and Archana Kumar, 'HH finds his Heimat', *Exberliner*, 10 February 2011, <<https://www.exberliner.com/berlin/hipster-hitler-finds-his-heimat/>> [accessed 30 September 2022].

39 Ibid., n.p.

40 Ibid., n.p.

41 'Hipster Hitler', *Know Your Meme*, <<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hipster-hitler-2>> [accessed 30 September 2022]. Hipster Hitler memes were followed by many others, some of which seemed to hint at the comic (although there is no ironclad evidence this was the case), such as a 'Disco Hitler'

volume organizes the chronology of the jumbled narrative from the webcomic and provides additional explanations (for instance, every major character is provided with a historically accurate introduction); there is also additional material that covers some of the gaps in Hitler's life that are not covered by the webcomic.⁴² Briefly, some of the T-shirts worn by the protagonist were merchandized. In June 2011, the RedBubble retail website decided to stop selling any merchandise related to the controversial *Hipster Hitler* webcomic, citing the difficulty of making 'sufficiently nuanced decisions' about merchandise selection.⁴³ The action was prompted by a complaint of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, but also by overall media controversy over the products.⁴⁴ The Hipster Hitler T-shirts belong to a long line of merchandise disasters that uncomfortably associated leisure and genocide, such as the quickly withdrawn 'Manifest Destiny' Gap T-shirts or the Zara 'Jewish camp prisoner' shirts, sartorial mishaps that seem to indicate that even well-circulated tropes like the yellow star sown on a prison uniform can, in fact, be effaced as markers of trauma in certain segments of society.

A similarly mobile figure is that of the stereotypical hipster, whose circulation in contemporary popular culture was—at least at the time of *Hipster Hitler*'s emergence—an easy target of parody and other forms of ridicule. The choice to associate these two categories seems to have been motivated by the random observation that Hitler and hipsters (or at least the manner in which they are presented as a homogenous category in the media) share a few superficial resemblances, such as vegetarianism or unusual facial hair. This pairing no longer seems as random (or as superficially justified) upon closer observation, as the employment of the figure of the hipster—as we argue at more length later—proves a surprisingly apt way of gesturing at the shallowness, flippancy, and sense of superiority of the German dictator, who often behaves in the comic as an overgrown child chaperoned by exasperated yet powerless adults. This reading of Hitler is made explicit in strips such as 'Bill', where he is asked to sign a bill, and instead quotes the

meme that featured the text of one of Hipster Hitler's T-shirts, namely 'Wehrmacht Bitches at? There are also many other Hitler-related memes, such as 'Advice Hitler,' 'Bedtime Hitler,' 'Chilling Hitler' or 'Hi Hitler,' which are part of a more general recent drive towards 'overturning the perceived exceptionality of the Nazi era' by normalizing it in various ways and with different effects (see Gavriel Rosenfeld, p. 3).

⁴² It was translated into several languages, including German.

⁴³ Simon Wiesenthal Center, 'Wiesenthal Center Praises Online Retailer for Dropping "Hipster Hitler" Products', 06 June 2011, <<https://www.wiesenthal.com/about/news/wiesenthal-center-praises-5.html>> [accessed 30 September 2022].

⁴⁴ Ibid.



FIGURE 1. Excerpt from 'DIY' by J. Carr and A. Kumar. © 2010 <<http://hipsterhitler.com>>

adage famous among American teenagers who do not wish to perform tasks assigned to them by adults ('It's a free country, man!'), upon which he is reminded that he is, in fact, living in a 'malevolent dictatorship', a logic he exploits by pointing out that he is the leader of the entire evil establishment (his final words, 'Make me!' again shift both his supposed age and cultural background into some imaginary American space occupied by a spoiled teenager).⁴⁵ In 'DIY' (Fig. 1), a strip about Hitler damaging a tank because he decides to use it to distress a T-shirt, one panel features a close-up of a silent Erwin Rommel, who looks distressed as he casts a bitter look of incredulity towards his leader who, once again, has acted like a selfish teenager for whom the higher purpose must always bend to his every whim. This particular panel is one of several that, in spite of the context which is itself fanciful (Hitler on his fixie bike, promising to lend it to Rommel to placate him), gestures at a wider comedic tradition where Hitler's alleged immature conduct is emphasized. In this context, the choice of the hipster seems inspired, as it provides opportunity for the stereotype of the spoiled young adult living in a bubble (the hipster) to cast light on Hitler as a cliché, his conduct often ridiculous, absurd, and at a dangerous distance

⁴⁵ James Carr and Archana Kumar, *Hipster Hitler*, <www.hipsterhitler.com> [accessed 30 September 2022].

from reality, while allowing the Hitler trope to travel to contemporary USA and warn against self-involvement and political apathy.

Hipster Hitler is violent, whimsical, shallow, and prone to irrational decisions (usually dictated by fashion preferences and by his desire to appear authentic, but not as if he were trying too hard). These decisions exasperate his entourage; the main Nazi henchmen present—who all appear to be older than Hitler, mostly because of their more composed demeanor—are Göring, Goebbels, and Himmler, with brief appearances by Rommel and Hess. They are often beside themselves, their hands over their heads or their eyes; this gives the impression that the German side is led by a dictatorial child with little understanding of good and evil but with very strong random preferences that the adults do not condone but have to bow down to. Here, *Hipster Hitler* references the conduct of most dictators whose advisors never contradict them and who end up subjecting entire countries to their whimsical acts of cruelty and destruction. While there is a long tradition of depicting Hitler as a child in the caricature of the 1930s and 1940s,⁴⁶ his henchmen rarely appear in this early stage of Hitler-related satire, perhaps because they had not yet become as familiar to the wide readership that the cartoons targeted. However, when they do appear, they are themselves represented in child-like postures, about to be chastised by Hitler for their failures; in these cartoons, Hitler is depicted as a disappointed and angry father. Other contemporary satirical representations of Hitler's close political collaborators portray them as grotesque, puppet-like figures ready to obey every order (for instance, in a caricature by Soviet cartoonist Boris Yefimov, titled 'The Berlin Gang', Goebbels is portrayed as a capuchin monkey, eagerly and intimately perched on Hitler's shoulder; he is also caricatured as a monkey in other cartoons that underline his inability to fit the ideal of Aryan body image).⁴⁷ In *Hipster Hitler*, the view of the henchmen as adults who tolerate Hitler's behavior and try to correct it bypasses historical evidence and seems to function as a structural element that enhances the arbitrariness and irresponsibility of Hitler's behavior. Thus, it also appears to steer the blame away from the dictator and onto his advisers, a problematic interpretation that may suggest to readers that Hitler was, to a certain extent, irresponsible, hence partly innocent of his crimes. This view of

46 For a substantial archive of cartoons where Hitler is often depicted as a petulant child, see Tony Husband, *Hitler in Cartoons: Lampooning the Evil Madness of a Dictator* (London: Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2016).

47 See Zbyněk Zeman, *Heckling Hitler: Caricatures of the Third Reich* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987).

Hitler as led by emotion rather than rational calculation, as Abraham Ascher argues, was also one of the reasons why he was initially underestimated by contemporary political leaders.⁴⁸ Instead, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that Hitler was aware of how emotion could be used as a political instrument of manipulation.⁴⁹

The narrative structure of the comic strips contains a few common elements: historical events from Hitler's lifetime, linguistic, sartorial, and behavioral quirks associated with hipster culture, and historical anachronisms. These elements frequently work together to emphasize Hitler's shallowness, as they provide an angle that favors an interpretation of the dictator as a flippant leader whose arbitrary decisions are rooted in simplistic logic and a rigid mindset. The historical background is usually made up of either well-documented historical events from Hitler's lifetime or well-circulated but ultimately undemonstrated details about Hitler's life. Both of these categories are filtered through the lens of hipster culture and altered by this proximity to a time and space that is incongruous to their contemporary circumstances. For instance, in a strip innocuously titled 'Beer' (Fig. 2), The Beer Hall Putsch from 1923 is revealed to have actually been caused by Hitler walking into a bar (as the joke might go), ordering a PBR, and being offered instead five German varieties of beer that he despises so violently that, in fact, The Beer Hall Putsch ensues. The fact that, as a stereotypical hipster, he prefers an American brew, is an additional source of humor particularly in the context of Hitler's well-known nationalism and purported pride in German products. American popular culture is further referenced in this strip, as Hitler is wearing a T-shirt with the text 'Death Camp for Cutie' (a disturbing modification of the American band name 'Death Cab for Cutie') printed in large capitals across the front. In every strip there is a similar layering of the sources of humor, and Hitler's body language, but most of all his clothes function as an additional text that can either deliver or help strengthen the punchline. The entirety of Hitler's wardrobe further drives home the point that the dictator is out of place: in 'Beer', he is shown in the first panel walking alongside two companions, one of whom is in full military garb. Hitler's attire gestures vaguely at his military position, but the iron cross on his chest and one stripe on his left arm are both apparently sown on a casually open cardigan.

48 Abraham Ascher, 'Was Hitler a Riddle?', *The Journal of the Historical Society*, 9 (2009), 1-21.

49 See Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, 'Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand', *Journal of Public Affairs*, 9 (2009), 55-76.



FIGURE 2. Excerpt from 'Beer' by J. Carr and A. Kumar. © 2010 <<http://hipsterhitler.com>>

This is merely one of many instances where verifiable (and undisputed) historical events are amended for humorous purposes.⁵⁰

In this version of German history, Hitler's well-known over-the-top gestures and postures are inflected by hipster affectations and occasional slapstick aesthetics. For instance, in 'Olympics' he manages to climb over a fence in spite of being somewhat restrained by his skinny jeans and proceeds to disrupt the 1936 Olympics because he is incensed by German athletes running too fast, thus making the whole nation 'look like try-hards'.⁵¹ In another strip ('Art School'), he is rejected by the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, who instead invite Winston Churchill to take Hitler's place, as the latter throws a tantrum that indicates the episode was a turning-point and may have pushed an already volatile person over the edge.⁵² The comic revisits these and many other moments from Hitler's life and German history: it moves from the Blitzkrieg to Hugo Boss designing the SS uniforms, from Egyptian weightlifter Khadr El-Touni at

50 In the printed version, these events are ordered chronologically, so that the book may read as a more coherent (hipsterized) biography of Hitler's.

51 Carr and Kumar, *Hipster Hitler*.

52 A lot of these comics are reiterations of frequent subjects of debate around Hitler, such as, in this case, what might have happened if he had, in fact, been accepted as an art student.

the 1936 Olympics to the Battle of the Bulge, from Hitler's vegetarianism to the fact that he was on the cover of *Time* Magazine in 1938. *Hipster Hitler* accurately employs many relevant placenames and preserves the fact that Hitler was an antisemite, a dictator, and genocide perpetrator; the character is accurately surrounded by Eva Braun and prominent members of the SS, such as Göring, Rommel, Himmler, Goebbels, and Otto Skorzeny, but also Hitler's dog Blondi. The hipsterization of this version of Hitler's biography skips his entourage only to contaminate the only other two dictators that make brief appearances: Mussolini (who is featured in 'Heil' as a 'Guido', a stereotypical version of working-class male American-Italian that can be quite offensive) and Stalin (or, rather, 'Brosef Stalin', a frat boy with a beer stand and a stereotypical popped up collar). This process (which we call 'hipsterization') humorously singles out the dictators responsible for mass atrocities and surrounded by a grey mass of yea-sayers, but it also runs the risk of transporting them so far out of the realm of their historical context as to separate them from the violence they caused. These and other alterations of historical fact also function as reinterpretations of a history of violence by insisting that they stem from ridiculously superficial reasons (more specifically, the whims of spoiled brats kept in power by a cohort of sycophants). In this manner, we believe, *Hipster Hitler* prioritizes an interpretation of mass violence and involvement in armed conflict as stemming from random and superficial pretexts. While this kind of portrayal of war as the manifestation of an infantile impulse is not new in the tradition of Hitler caricature, it does need to be considered in the wider context of the substantial historical evidence that, while Hitler's own personal bouts of anger might have been lampooned in the contemporary press as the random tantrums of a child, his policies of extermination were anything but random. There is, of course, an element of absurdity to war that writers such as Kurt Vonnegut considered and even famously defined as a 'children's crusade' in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but this applies less problematically to the soldiers who find themselves unwittingly thrown into battle than to dictators who engineer wars. In *Hipster Hitler*, the many references to mass violence, often incorporated in crude puns, can contribute to the memorialization (or at least serve as reminders to the readers) of the relentlessness and scale of the violence perpetrated by the Nazi regime.

A smaller series of strips cover anecdotal unsubstantiated facts about Hitler's life, such as the fact that he may only have had one testicle or that he had syphilis. Here, *Hipster Hitler* once again emerges as superficial and, in fact, incapable of experiencing profound thinking

or emotions even during potentially traumatic moments of his own life. In 'Surgery', he is pictured stoically enduring the pain of a serious pelvic injury followed by the amputation of a testicle that could not be saved only to ask the doctor to remove his second testicle when he finds out he is not the only dictator in world history sporting this particular trend. The strip follows the same pattern of layering references to American popular culture on top of information from the German cultural space: the doctor who informs Hitler that Napoleon also had only one testicle bears a striking resemblance to Hawkeye, the character played by Alan Alda in the American TV series *M*A*S*H*, a reference that may be lost on some (perhaps younger) readers, but whose content gestures at the complicated post-war international situation and the United States' own problematic role in that power dynamic (the action of the sitcom, which started airing at a time when America was still involved in Vietnam, takes place during the Korean War among a group of medics).⁵³ In 'At the Doctor's', which contains the unverified information that Hitler was diagnosed with syphilis, he is sorely disappointed that he was not diagnosed with something fancier and much rarer, such as 'Amyotropic lateral sclerosis', a complaint that is in keeping with his general desire for originality, of hipster provenance.

Most anachronisms are rooted in hipster mannerisms that play havoc with chronology and historical accuracy, thus further contributing to a problematic understanding of Nazi violence as the random work of a fractious child. The sheer volume of hipsterisms demonstrate the authors' extensive knowledge of the culture, but they also limit the scope of the humor to a set of sometimes repeated structures. These are usually centered around Hipster Hitler's passion for fixie bikes, shabby chic, organic products, Helvetica, irony, underground artists, indie films, the avantgarde, sustainable products, deadpan puns, and everything meta, to name but a few. However, the mish-mash of historical ages becomes more evident when Hipster Hitler is engaged in activities that would have been unavailable to him during his lifetime. For instance, in 'Campaign Strategy', he plays Pac-man, a game he pronounces 'soooo vintage' (while Göring specifically draws our attention to the fact that we are not in the future, by shouting 'IT'S NOT FUCKING VINTAGE!'

53 For more on *M*A*S*H*'s social and political criticism, see James H. Wittebols, *Watching M*A*S*H, Watching America. A Social History of the 1972-1983 Television Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998).



FIGURE 3. Excerpt from 'Ironic Invasion' by J. Carr and A. Kumar. © 2010 <<http://hipsterhitler.com>>

IT'S 1940!');⁵⁴ he is aware of Godwin's Law, of the 'Save the Panda' movement, Craigslist, apps, and so on. The sheer accumulation of anachronisms displaces Hitler from the historical context that enabled him to engineer the Holocaust, as a chronological fog sets over the entire comic and obscures the violence beneath the whimsy.

There are, nonetheless, many clear references to genocide and other forms of violence scattered throughout the comic. However, their seriousness is downplayed by the multiple layers of humor that emphasize the superficiality of the main character. Some are incorporated in punchlines usually delivered by Hitler with the help of his T-shirt, which commonly comes into full view in the last panel. Genocide is specifically referenced in the first *Hipster Hitler* strip featured on the comic's website, entitled 'Ironic Invasion' (Fig. 3), where Hitler explains to a confused Goebbels that they should invade Azerbaijan instead of Poland, in order to be more original (since Sweden had invaded the latter in 1626). In a superior blasé tone, Hitler suggests that Goebbels is probably so ignorant that he hasn't even heard of Azerbaijan. His T-shirt bears the inscription 'Eastside Westside Genocide'. This apparent reference to Germany's divided status after the war (also gesturing at New York's own cultural

⁵⁴ Carr and Kumar, *Hipster Hitler*.



FIGURE 4. Excerpt from 'Band' by J. Carr and A. Kumar. © 2010 <<http://hipsterhitler.com>>

differences) usefully links Hitler's actions to their post-war effects (while also fleetingly referencing New York culture and specific social issues). At the same time, the callousness of the message on the T-shirt is also a stark reminder of the offhand manner in which genocide was allowed to continue during Hitler's regime. The humor of the T-shirts is usually employed for this purpose, as the callousness of the puns gestures at the callousness of the violence perpetrated during Hitler's regime.

The only victim alluded to, rather obliquely, is Anne Frank, in a strip where she is irreverently labeled 'that attic chick' (thus relying on the audience's familiarity with her story), and which ultimately zeroes in on Hipster Hitler's superficial interest in appearing original at all costs. In the strip 'Band' (Fig. 4), Hitler finds a satisfactory underground band to play at his Novemberfest, which is 'like Oktoberfest, only more exclusive', and decides to wall them in until their services are needed: 'Too perfect...they are unspoiled ambrosia. If they are allowed out they'll most defs [sic] sell out and lose their edge...We've already been through this once with that attic chick'.⁵⁵ The offhand manner in which Hipster Hitler shouts his orders over his shoulder as he is leaving the room is, again, indicative of the callousness and lack of respect for human life that we know were behind the Holocaust, but the ideology of Nazism is not what motivates Hitler here. Rather, it is his (hipster-inflected) desire to preserve the originality of the band at all costs. That is not to say that *Hipster Hitler* is devoid of overt references to Hitler's ideology (the character's hatred of Jews is mentioned repeatedly), but the suggestion that both Nazism and hipsterism stem from a similar kind of interest in surfaces can help draw attention to the crimes that lay beneath the 'illusion of the normal, of normalcy which the dictatorship

⁵⁵ Carr and Kumar, *Hipster Hitler*.

was able to create'.⁵⁶ However, such references to the Holocaust coated in the cruel whimsy of the hipster also run the risk of diminishing the actual relational pull between Hipster Hitler and Hitler's crimes as the character inches closer to the hipster (in other words, damaging their connection to actual past horrors).⁵⁷

There is another important issue that the comic manages to repeatedly emphasize by employing the conceit of the hipster: the Nazi regime's preoccupation with creating and preserving appearances, which is evident if one contemplates the vast propaganda machine that Hitler famously activated, but also its long-term effects. Hipster Hitler's sincere belief in the fascists' ultimately noble purpose, combined as it is with the hipster's interest in political correctness may not only produce stupefaction, but may also usefully show how Holocaust denial works in, for instance, white nationalist circles. Strips such as 'Military Operations' and 'Triumph' can be valuable in this context, because they point out those situations when Nazi perpetrators and sympathizers may (honestly or dishonestly) wish to portray the regime's policy as one of ultimately good intentions. In 'Military Operations', Hipster Hitler is portrayed worrying that the fascists might come out of the war with a tarnished reputation and urging his henchmen to expand their cultural horizons: 'Be more multicultural. God forbid we should come out of this war looking like racists'.⁵⁸ In a similar logical arc, when Leni Riefenstahl draws Hipster Hitler's attention to the fact that the skull on the SS uniform makes it look like an 'embodiment of pure evil', Hipster Hitler's prompt retort references the doublethink so consistently promoted during Hitler's regime, according to which the victims were evil and the executioners, morally superior: 'Exactly! And since we're the good guys, it's the ultimate irony' ('Triumph').⁵⁹ Such strips also hint at Hitler's commitment to branding and successfully selling a certain image of himself and the Nazi party, as well as attempting to curate his legacy.⁶⁰

56 O'Shaughnessy, p. 61.

57 There is also an obvious reference to gas chambers on Hipster Hitler's 'Zyklonic Youth' T-shirt. Other references to mass killings and violence on his T-shirts usually combine the language and mindframe of Nazi and hipster culture: 'Howdy Pogrom' (as Hitler is wearing a Pilgrim hat), 'Artschule Macht Frei', 'Here's looking at you, Yid', 'Vegetarian', 'Hirohito's Master Rice', 'Aryan vs Predator', 'Aryan microjewelry', 'MIX MASTER RACE', or 'Wehrmacht Bitches at?' All of these references to victims, antisemitism, racism, and pogroms fulfill a similar function of exposing Nazi policies as relentlessly but also casually criminal.

58 Carr and Kumar, *Hipster Hitler*.

59 Ibid.

60 O'Shaughnessy, pp. 55-76.

Throughout the comic, Hipster Hitler remains a violent character, although this may not be his most striking or most memorable characteristic. His violent outbursts are only somewhat tempered by his hipster mannerisms, but their intended outcome remains the same, as in 'Night Before', when he only regrets his intention of decimating the Soviets because Russian dolls are 'so meta'.⁶¹ His hatred of Jews is made to appear innocuous because it is embedded in contexts where he appears more preoccupied with being ironic through pointless wordplay, but he is also often humanized. By humanization we refer to the process through which Hipster Hitler is regarded as a human being, instead of as a mythological monstrous figure, in keeping with Joanne Pettit's understanding of this as a 'process by which the perpetrator figure is shown to be subject to the same range of social, political and psychological forces as those of the reader'.⁶² In the comic, this is achieved through the introduction of a harmless anecdotal detail such as his partiality to juice (as in 'Juice', a strip that relies on the almost-homophones 'Jews' and 'juice' to introduce an ironic T-shirt that seems to proclaim Hitler's love of Jewish people) or by the playful absurdity behind some of his actions (as in 'Poster' – where he claims that he has placed the star of David upside-down to show his antisemitism). Another problem is that Hipster Hitler can be cute. In his bumbling, often incongruous manner, at odds with everything around him, he is, in fact, in this comic, the misunderstood other, ridiculed because of his tastes, language, and dress. There is a certain vulnerability to the character that does not stem from what we know of Hitler as a historical personage, but mostly from his position as a hipster in a fascist world. It is in fact Hitler's position as outside the norm that creates the premise for a revision of the victim-perpetrator binary and even a potential reversal of roles where Hipster Hitler might read as a misunderstood vulnerable victim himself.

Hipster Hitler, like other irreverent representations of Hitler, does not inhabit a void. Instead, it exists alongside many other more historically-minded sources on Hitler on the Internet, as well as alongside countless Hitler memes, but also websites like Stormfront

61 Carr and Kumar, *Hipster Hitler*.

62 Joanne Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 2.

and other alt-right venues.⁶³ As Gavriel Rosenfeld argues, even though it is unclear whether the amount of information about Hitler and the Nazi past ‘actually translates into more active remembrance’, and it is difficult to predict the direction we are headed, on the Internet ‘the new discourse on Nazism is decidedly democratic’.⁶⁴

Conclusions

In *Hipster Hitler*, the figure of the hipster both screens and unveils the figure of the perpetrator, but what it unveils does not—factually speaking—go much beyond the anecdotal.⁶⁵ The shallowness of the perpetrator is, in fact, here, borrowed from hipster culture and it contaminates Hitler’s figure in a revisionist move that at best can gesture at the perpetrator’s actual shallowness, and at worst distances the character so much from the historical figure that the effects of that shallowness may be lost along the way. However, just as Arendt’s view of the shallowness of the perpetrator does not, we argue, dismiss the perpetrator’s profound ideological devotion to Nazi beliefs, neither does the comedic angle that prioritizes the figure of Hitler as a cruel whimsical child detract from the fact that the Holocaust was a systematic and well-planned destruction of entire communities. The comic manages to preserve both angles by recapitulating Hitler’s antisemitic beliefs, his violence, and general callousness about genocide. It is not even original when it does this: Charlie Chaplin had already whimsically bounced the entire globe around in *The Great Dictator* and that perspective of the war as a game and its players as children (a very old trope) did not invalidate the crushingly precise bureaucratic nature of the process that led to so many deaths with such horrifying efficiency.

63 The latter seem unlikely to embrace *Hipster Hitler* because the comic does not produce a flattering depiction of the German dictator, nor does it—as one can find by examining the Third Reich-related archive on the Stormfront forum, for instance—glorify Nazi masculinity, particularly as captured in photographic portraits of various uniformed officers (Hitler included). There is also a Graphics thread on Stormfront, and it consists mainly of reproductions of Nazi posters, various attempts from Stormfront members to create their own white nationalist-inspired artworks, racist cartoons targeting people of color, Jewish people, and immigrants, or cartoons that broadly denounce political correctness, as well as question various historically documented facts about the Holocaust.

64 Gavriel Rosenfeld, p. 339.

65 However, *Hipster Hitler*’s main function, as is often the case with humor—as Andrew Stott argues—is not to educate and construct but to tear down and ridicule. Andrew Stott, *Comedy (The New Critical Idiom)* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 98–99.

The historical events mentioned in the comic belong to the time frame around World War II; it is only the world view of the main character, with its sartorial quirkiness, that belongs to our present. From this perspective, the comic unveils two kinds of time travel: into the past, as the hipster moves backwards, and into the future, as Hitler moves forward to embrace the tastes of the hipster. The problem is that the hipster, as he travels backwards, has limited possibilities for offering a critique of Hitler and his destructive policies. As we see the hipster worrying about appearances, we become aware that Hitler's persona is also employed to critique the vacuity associated with hipster culture. Using a perpetrator of this magnitude for such a mundane and over-performed task (i.e., ridiculing hipsters) suggests a view of Hitler as a usable go-to perpetrator, whose ubiquity in contemporary popular culture has rendered his deeds less visible than his moustache. Thus, the time travel of the comic *Hipster Hitler* draws attention away from the particular historical circumstances of Adolf Hitler's actions and provides them as readily available puzzle pieces for hipster-related puns instead.

We mentioned at the beginning of this article that there is a certain aspect of Hitler's mind that audiences do not gain full access to through such representations. This is partly due to the fact that the association between the figure of the hipster and that of Hitler replaces the question of how it was possible for one human being to unleash such horrors upon others with a focus on the apparent randomness of a toddler throwing a tantrum. *Hipster Hitler* does seem to prioritize a reading of Hitler as a creature of cruel whimsy more than a careful architect of the systematic destruction of millions of lives, supported all the time by collaborators and bystanders. This works well with *Hipster Hitler*'s general shallowness, but it also runs the risk of steering the conversation away from the factors that made it possible for Hitler to put his plans into action.

What certain readers might, in fact, remember of this entire concoction is that, instead of it being a commentary on the actual historical character, dictator, and orchestrator of genocide, *Hipster Hitler* may be something else entirely, a new creation that is most definitely a hipster but not that much of a Hitler. We thus agree with Stefan Hirt's view that the popularity of *Hipster Hitler* and the public's willingness to consume, share, and buy *Hipster Hitler* merchandise stem not from a sort of historical amnesia, but rather from 'the reduction of history to icons, slogans, and banal clichés in an attention and novelty-hungry

Internet culture'.⁶⁶ Hirt also argues that this parodic-ironic mode 'still harbors critical potential', as this article also attempts to show.⁶⁷ But does this particular creation fulfill Alvin Rosenfeld's prophecy that all these decades of poking fun at Hitler in the public space will eventually produce the wider effect of undermining 'any sane vision of culture and ultimately... erase the fingerprints of Hitler from a history of mass murder'?⁶⁸ Or can we argue, more optimistically, with Jeffrey Demsky, that this irreverent portrait of Hitler, 'spurs rather than spurns faithful memorializing'?⁶⁹ Or is it, rather, part of a loose group of works Demsky labels 'irresponsible fictions'—among which he includes certain episodes of *South Park*, *Robot Chicken* and *Family Guy*—that reference the Holocaust in ways that inadvertently diminish its magnitude?⁷⁰

We argue that *Hipster Hitler*—like many other irreverent cultural productions about traumatic moments in world history—occupies an ambiguous space that does not allow it to be boxed into a category definitively labeled responsible or irresponsible, useful or useless, fostering or, rather, risking the erasure of the memory of genocide. This is because at all times it can be and do both. It is a layered text which needs to be thoroughly unpacked in order to contribute to the memorialization of Hitler's role in the Holocaust; this is a type of intellectual labor not all readers might be willing to make. *Hipster Hitler* does present itself as a possible space of reflection upon all of the issues considered in this article, but there is little guarantee that its readers will take the opportunity to pause and reflect. The audience might be prompted to consider and critique it, and perhaps explore those elements of Hitler's biography and/or World War II historical facts that may be more obscure to a wide readership. On the other hand, the audience might be prompted to only quickly gaze upon the first layer, laugh, and move on. In their attempt to understand these elements that make up the layering of *Hipster Hitler*, audience members may thus be encouraged to research both Hitler and hipster culture, but at times it is possible

66 Stefan Hirt, *Adolf Hitler in American Culture: National Identity and the Totalitarian Other* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 571.

67 Ibid., p. 575.

68 Alvin Rosenfeld, p. 105.

69 Jeffrey Demsky, *Nazi and Holocaust Representations in Anglo-American Popular Culture, 1945-2020: Irreverent Remembrance* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p. 5.

70 Jeffrey Scott Demsky, 'We Are a Long Way Past *Maus*: Responsible and Irresponsible Holocaust Representations in Graphic Comics and Sitcom Cartoons', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture*, ed. by Victoria Aarons and Phyllis Lassner (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 529-551 (p. 531).

that the violence perpetrated by Hitler may become secondary to the satisfaction of getting the punchline. From this perspective, hipsterism and Hitlerism work together to unveil the shallowness of our little satisfactions, and particularly so in the online environment, where the memory of the Holocaust is being normalized, and where getting the joke and sharing it provides one with considerable emotional validation—yet does not push towards an ethical engagement with the perpetrator and his crimes, although it might generate it.

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