
6.2: Troubling Images

Troubling Images: PETA's "Holocaust on Your Plate" and the Limits of Image Events

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In Spring 2005, Wal-Mart endeavored to expand into Flagstaff, Arizona. It encountered, much to its chagrin, not only citizen opposition, which has proven increasingly common in recent years, but a proposed local ordinance designed to manage development, limiting the number and size of large retail operations. In response, the multinational corporation, through a local political action committee (PAC), Protect Flagstaff's Future, launched a media campaign, seeking to rally public support against unfair government regulation and in support of the planned store. One advertisement attracted particular attention. [The ad](#) featured a photograph of a Nazi book burning atop a strong defense of consumer choice, reading in part:

Should we let government tell us what to read?

. . . Should we allow the local government to limit where we shop?

. . . Choice is a freedom worth keeping.

The advertisement is striking on a number of levels, including Wal-Mart's invocation of freedom of expression, given its history of censoring material and silencing critics, and its equation of democracy and freedom with consumption and choice. Rather than securing public support or generating renewed dialogues about the role of the State, the advertisement prompted an outcry focused on its use of the Nazi past to describe the present. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), an organization committed to combating anti-Semitism and preserving the memory of the Holocaust, was among the most vocal critics of the ad, asserting that it was offensive and inappropriate. In response, both Wal-Mart and Protect Flagstaff's Future issued apologies.

It is easy to dismiss this episode as isolated, ill-conceived, and even insensitive. Such a reading, however, fails to grasp both the significance of metaphors and the increasing importance of visual imagery in contemporary political struggles (see King). Although Wal-Mart's ad campaign might appear to be instructive only for corporate strategists and political operatives, in fact, it illuminates the production and reception of arguments through troubling images, or uneasy, traumatic, and/or transgressive representations meant to frame, ground, or shift the terms of debate, forms of address, and/or modes of understanding in a social field. Put briefly, the preferred reading of the advertisement relies on the conventional association between the Nazi regime, repression, and ultimate evil, and the same associations, namely the singularity of the Nazi era and the final solution, made many individuals and organizations, especially those who claimed ownership over this moment and its tragic outcomes, uneasy, leading to the eventual failure of the ad. The image seeks to cause trouble, invoking a troubled past, but in the end, audiences troubled by accepted understandings resist the preferred reading.

Read in this way, the Wal-Mart ad has important implications for oppositional political movements that employ images to advance their positions. More particularly, this cynical corporate spectacle, intent to secure hegemony and increase profits, encourages deeper reflection on image events, or staged occasions in which oppositional groups claim media attention and generate public discourse around marginalized issues and silenced concerns (Delicath and DeLuca, DeLuca). "Holocaust on Your Plate," a media campaign launched by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in 2003, affords an important opportunity to reflect on the ways in which content and context energize and undermine (subversive) visual and performative politics. Like the failed Wal-Mart ad, "Holocaust on Your Plate" drew upon familiar images and understandings of the Nazi regime but

did so, not to advance capitalism, but to alter public perceptions of animal rights in the context of industrial agriculture. This borrowing of moral power, as the subsequent discussion demonstrates, has important implications for how we understand the contours of cultural politics in the contemporary United States. Moreover, like the multinational giant, but in contrast with many oppositional image events, PETA apologized for its imagery, granting insights into the ends of visual politics. Finally, it was staged both online and in public spaces around the world, fostering discussion of media and message no less than image and event. With this in mind, here, through a close reading of PETA's "Holocaust on Your Plate" campaign, I detail the ways in which ruling articulations of meaning, morality, and power simultaneously give life to and impose limits upon image events.

For me, a pronounced ambivalence has haunted nearly all of PETA's media campaigns, simultaneously delighting and repulsing me. On the one hand, as a vegetarian, I sympathize with the group's ambitions and enjoy the kind of reactions they evoke from a public alienated from the conditions and processes that bring food to their tables. On the other hand, the organization does employ disturbing tactics and tropes, which seem to contradict its commitment to liberation, such as its reliance on scantily clad young models who, like *NYPD Blue* star Charlotte Ross, "would rather show their buns than wear fur" ([Fur is Dead](#)).

In press releases, a traveling installation, and on the World Wide Web, "Holocaust on your Plate" amplified these uncomfortable tensions as it activated traumatic images to draw analogies between the treatment of animals in factory farms and the experience of Jews in Nazi Germany. Most striking were the digital images online. In that series of images, a slideshow cycles through a sequence of visual comparisons: dead human bodies gathered together in a chaotic stack beside a heap of animal carcasses; then a group of emaciated, bare-chested Jews in their death camp barracks alongside a group of chickens at a factory farm. Together, they juxtapose animals and people, suggesting that the routine processing of animals for human consumption, considered acceptable, if not desirable by most in North America, is equivalent to the systematic killing central to the Holocaust. As an image event, "Holocaust on Your Plate" raised difficult questions for me about representation, memory, and critique, highlighting the ambivalence, creativity, and danger associated with a political intervention that invokes the experiences, position, or treatment of marginalized groups to call attention to other inequities, oppressions, and harms rendered unlike and distinct by prevailing ideologies. In what follows, I probe these tensions, arguing that while the metaphors and juxtapositions employed by PETA allow it to speak to broad audiences about pain, power, and praxis, calling for a profound rethinking of everyday life and accepted categories, to recode the use and understanding of animals in contemporary society requires that it take and remake something conventionally understood to belong to others, a process of rearticulation that makes the image event always already contested, ultimately constraining its critical possibilities. Indeed, as my analysis suggests, the visual tropes employed by PETA both offend and inspire; they claim injury and victimization, even as they potentially injure and victimize others; they critique through shock but may have little lasting significance. In short, its visual rhetoric is conflicted and context dependent, scripting great political theater with powerful evocative force while exposing some of the contradictions and limitations of image events in the contemporary United States.

My discussion begins with an overview of the staging of "Holocaust on Your Plate." On this foundation, I unpack the meanings and affects of the image event, in part by attending to public responses. In conclusion, I work through the significance of "Holocaust on Your Plate," outlining its implications for an understanding of the limitations of image events.

Holocaust on Your Plate

"Holocaust on Your Plate" made its debut in Spring 2003. It appeared online and as a traveling exhibit that toured the United States, Canada, and Europe, stopping in more than 50 cities, including Boston, Massachusetts, Ithaca, New York, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Spokane, Washington, and major metropolitan areas in Ireland, Scotland, England, and Germany. (Some of the images from this campaign are [available online](#)).

“Holocaust on Your Plate” sought to convey a simple but challenging message: the treatment of animals in the context of industrial agriculture mirrors the exclusion and extermination of undesirable and dehumanized groups by the Nazi regime. Speaking during the staging of the exhibit in Columbia, South Carolina, Matt Prescott, Youth Outreach Coordinator for PETA, described the goals of the project: “We’re encouraging people to consider what happens to animals before they become food. . . . What we’re comparing is the mindset that allows someone to permit abuse and death” (Seal). In an interview with CNN, he continued, “The very same mindset that made the Holocaust possible—that we can do anything we want to those we decide are ‘different or inferior’—is what allows us to commit atrocities against animals every single day” (Sabia 2).

To communicate its perspective, PETA relied upon visual juxtaposition of photographs, comparing factory farming and concentration camps, supplemented by texts that reinforced its fundamental assertions. The traveling exhibit featured eight 60-square-foot panels, each of which contained two images. For example, one installation, entitled, “Walking Skeletons,” displayed two rows of naked and malnourished prisoners on the left and an emaciated cow in a feedlot on the right; another, dubbed “Baby Butchers,” shows Jewish youth (including Elie Wiesel) behind barbed wire and a group of young pigs in a cage—individual figures in each photograph gaze directly at the viewer; a third panel, named “To Animals, all people are Nazis,” contrasts rows of crude, crowded bunk beds in the camps from which emaciated prisoners peer out with rows of overcrowded chicken coops from a processing plant; and a fourth panel, labeled “Final Indignity,” juxtaposes piles of bodies—human and animal—recently slaughtered and haphazardly stacked into mounds that overwhelm the viewer. The online version (formerly posted at [mass killing](#)) contained the same images, presenting them with more elaborate narrative, supplementary and supporting commentaries from Holocaust survivors and intellectuals, and a charged polemic. For instance, images from the “Walking Skeletons” panel frame quotes—past and present on the Jewish experience of the Holocaust and factory farming. Both the virtual and embodied restaging draw a striking parallel, which many audience members find to be counter-intuitive, if not morally reprehensible: “The viewer,” according to Nathan Snaza, “is to understand that what s/he is looking at is an absolute reality, or rather two absolute realities (the Shoah, the slaughterhouse) and that these realities in a way, *mean the same thing*” (10, emphasis original).

Reaction to “Holocaust on Your Plate” was immediate, intense, and overwhelmingly negative. The ADL described it as “abhorrent,” dismissing its calls for Jewish support as “outrageous, offensive, and taking chutzpah to new heights.” Similarly, Fred S. Zeidman, Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum found it to be “utterly shameless and contemptible.” In letters to newspapers and online blogs, citizens raged against “Holocaust on Your Plate” and its use of the Holocaust to convey its message, calling it offensive, trivializing, hurtful, insane, misguided, dehumanizing, hyperbolic, crass, and unconscionable. Public spaces in which PETA staged it also became the scene of vocal dissent; at Cornell University, one student yelled at the organizers, “Jews are not pigs” (Sabia). While the ethical and political commitments of critics of the exhibit vary, most of them insist on the singularity and incomparability of the Shoah, stressing the importance of never forgetting it. In large measure, individuals and organizations who spoke out against “Holocaust on Your Plate” reiterated the predominant understanding of the Holocaust, nicely summarized by Ariella Azoulay: “at the center of the discourse concerning the Holocaust stands a deviant, unique, rare, and extraordinary event comparable to none other...the uniqueness of the Holocaust will not be allowed to concede ground before the uniqueness of any other event” (61-62). Importantly, then, arguing for the singularity of the Shoah in the face of countless other genocidal projects in the modern era allows critics to dispute the content of the exhibit and the acts of comparison that animate. In a very real sense, such criticisms police the boundaries of common sense, endeavoring to retain control over the authority not only to authenticate the past but also to adjudicate struggles over moral wrongs and claims to social rights.

Obviously, audiences were unsettled by “Holocaust on Your Plate,” disturbed by the imagery, uncomfortable with its assertions about their eating habits, and/or upset over the visual rhetoric that compared the treatment of animals in factories with the exclusion and extermination of people who were deemed deviant and

unviable. But, in part, this was point. As senior writer for PETA Kathy Guillermo noted, “We could have avoided the entire controversy. But we would rather trouble people in the hope that they may consider that there is not a hierarchy of suffering” (1-2).

Media and the Message

PETA combined two representational modes in its staging of “Holocaust on Your Plate,” multiplying the event, its audiences, and its impacts. First, in common with more conventional image events, the animal rights organization has seized upon the possibilities of embodied performance, presenting the exhibit in scores of metropolitan areas in the United States and Europe. Second, at the same time, it capitalized on new electronic media to present a more engaged and engaging text at once more accessible and more likely to create social networks around the issue of animal rights. Live performance and online exhibition both aim for audience interaction and interpretation; however, they speak to citizen-subjects in decidedly different ways. Whereas the former might be best understood as scripted for media dissemination, provocative instances that attract attention and warrant coverage by local and national media gatekeepers, the latter (while it remained active) engaged curious and committed individuals who intentionally sought out the site or accidentally stumbled upon it while browsing the net. The importance of this difference cannot be overlooked. Media gatekeepers frame and filter image events, undoubtedly altering texts and contexts. In contrast, the website democratizes access and interpretation, allowing PETA to communicate its message more directly while affording visitors a fuller opportunity to evaluate claims and make connections. Indeed, freed from the constraints of corporate media, posting “Holocaust on Your Plate” online linked visitors to PETA’s other webpages and animal rights cyberactivism more generally. And finally, although the staging of “Holocaust on Your Plate” in Boston or Spokane or Minneapolis may foster coverage and prompt debate for a few media cycles, largely in local communities, placing it online expands the potential audience numerically and geographically, while permitting ceaseless repetition (until a webpage is disabled).

Rhetorical Force

“Holocaust on Your Plate” pivots around juxtaposition, a rhetorical strategy increasingly fundamental to social movements and visual politics (King). It receives its force and significance from its capacity to link two (seemingly) unlike things: on the one hand, State violence, euthanasia, exclusion, extermination, concentration camps, and fascism; on the other hand, (industrial) agriculture, commodification, cruelty, killing for nutrition, the processing plant, and consumerism. To propose such a metaphorical reading demands that the exhibit hold in tension two particular approaches to the Shoah: an exceptionalist rendering that suggests that the Holocaust is unique and incomparable, possessing a singular, transcendent meaning, and a constructivist rendering that suggests that the meaning of the Holocaust is not fixed but dependent upon cultural context and can be brought into dialogue with other events and experiences (see Mintz, Snaza). Indeed, “Holocaust on Your Plate” is only possible because it simultaneously embraces accepted understandings of the horror, evil, and inhumanity of the Holocaust, refusing to question or complicate what viewers bring with them, *and* it insists that the treatment of animals be understood as comparable to, if not a mirror of, this earlier limit event (Snaza). That is, PETA establishes the Holocaust as a uniquely vile event, depending upon this interpretation for its claims, while also insisting that the plight of animals be understood in terms of this singular transgression.

Taking and remaking the Holocaust in this fashion, PETA endeavors to do five things in “Holocaust on Your Plate.” First, it seeks to make visible practices and precepts typically unseen, making familiar habits (such as eating meat or considering animals outside the moral community) strange, while confusing the seemingly clear boundaries between normal and deviant, accepted and unacceptable, mainstream and extreme. Second, it creates pastiches of pain, through which it is hoped (representations of) suffering will prompt audiences to see the world anew, embrace novel narratives, and transform their everyday practices of consumption. Third, in invoking

the Holocaust, PETA seeks access to an established realm of political morality. Specifically, it wishes to fashion an ethical vocabulary for speaking about animals, injury, and modernity through images of the Holocaust and the manner by which they mirror photographs of contemporary factory farming. Fourth, "Holocaust on Your Plate" does not argue or instruct so much as evoke. It works (to the extent it does) by eliciting sentiments, fostering reaction, and prompting emotive connections between audience and object. Undermining its efforts, however, are accepted understandings of the Holocaust (that anchor a critical backlash) and its refusal to find techniques to problematize them. Fifth, the juxtaposition of the Shoah and the slaughterhouse calls not simply for kinder treatment or self reflection, but it also displays images of injury and abuse to subjectify animals, transforming them from objects open to mistreatment and marginalization to social subjects worthy of inclusion, care, and even rights. Ultimately, PETA recodes Holocaust imagery to reframe animals and the treatment they receive in industrial agriculture, gain access to an audible moral vocabulary through which claims can be advanced and issues made visible, and to compel action.

Borrowing Power

Image events often hinge on cultural borrowing or even poaching. At best, they unfold as flexible and mobile engagements from the margins. Claims of ownership and fixity of meaning, in turn, threaten to subvert, if not undo, image events. "Holocaust on Your Plate" offers a striking example of how each of these forces can compromise visual politics.

Over the past half century, a fairly specific understanding of the Holocaust has crystallized in the United States (Flanzbaum, Mintz, Novick). In many respects, this understanding has a narrow conception of the Nazi regime and its policies of eugenics, euthanasia, and extermination, limiting them to a teleological account of the destruction of European Jewry, while too frequently forgetting about the treatment of other groups, including Roma and Sinti, religious minorities, homosexuals, and the disabled. As a consequence, ownership of and authority over the Holocaust belongs largely to the Jewish community. Although there is great debate among scholars as well as survivors, one of the more vocal constituencies holds that the Holocaust marks a radical break with modernity, and its uniqueness cannot be compared with other genocidal projects, such as those directed at the Armenians in Turkey or the native nations of North America (Rosenbaum). Moreover, a number of individuals and organizations committed to preserving the memory of those who sacrificed so much, while protecting the exceptionalism of the Holocaust from trivialization, have taken it upon themselves to police the use to which it is put in the present. "Holocaust on Your Plate," then, faced two major obstacles when sought to advance animal rights by invoking the Holocaust: (1) the strong connection between the Holocaust and Jews and (2) a committed constituency intent to regulate its significance.

Indeed, I would argue, these forces limited the impact of "Holocaust on Your Plate." Established sentiments refused the connection between the killing of six million Jews under the Nazi regime and the everyday slaughter of animals for food. Yad Vashem, from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, for example, issued a press release shortly after the unveiling of "Holocaust on Your Plate." It read in part:

Yad Vashem is utterly appalled by the tasteless and inappropriate use of the Holocaust no matter how seemingly just the cause.

Yad Vashem emphasizes that the desire to be provocative does not justify degradation of the Holocaust and is deeply offensive to the public at large and to Holocaust survivors in particular. (Yad Vashem Responds)

In a similar vein, the ADL described the image event as "abhorrent." Even individual bloggers protested, claiming, among other things, that "PETA cheapens the Holocaust" (Sabia). At the same time, ownership of the images of themselves became pivotal. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum chastised PETA for its use of photographs owned by the museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Counsel Stuart Bender insisted that the museum had never given its permission, thus their incorporation in "Holocaust on Your Plate," which "improperly and incorrectly implies that the museum, a federal government establishment endorses

PETA's project" (Besser). Significantly, both ethical and material claims on the Holocaust delegitimized "Holocaust on Your Plate," questioning not only the appropriateness of its assertions, but curtailing their thinkability as well.

Oppression Olympics

"Holocaust on Your Plate" also illuminates the shape of cultural politics in the contemporary United States, highlighting the ways in which they undermine the exhibit. This evocative visual intervention on behalf of animal rights, as I have suggested, draws upon the exclusion and extermination of European Jewry to secure voice and visibility, literally trading upon past horrors and dehumanization in hopes of securing rights in the present. In doing so, "Holocaust on Your Plate" mirrors many contemporary image events—such as Greenpeace's campaign against the hunting of baby seals—that foreground abuses suffered, pain endured, and wrongs committed to make tangible its claims for rights, restitution, or otherwise doing the right thing. In contrast with many other counter-hegemonic political movements that have employed visibility, however, PETA's use of the Holocaust pits two oppressed groups against one another: Jews under the Nazi regime as well as survivors and their descendents and animals caught with the factory farm system. In this context, the marginalized, maligned, and maimed compete with one another claims of injury and victimization, a perverse combat takes shape, known colloquially as the Oppression Olympics. In the public arena, ultimately, genocidal projects perpetrated against Jews in the European past trump naturalized practices that feed and please the mass of Americans everyday. Accepted understandings of injustice and inhumanity triumph in large measure because animal rights activists lack the authority to speak of the Holocaust and its horrors *and* to give voice to the voiceless (animals). Worse, in the process of advancing animal rights, and in naming the issues and abuses shaping the lives of animals in factory farming, PETA must render the victims and survivors of Nazi terror in a dehumanizing visual vocabulary that reduces their identities and experiences to injury and abuse; sociality and subjectivity emerge through and are conscribed by suffering (see Butler). Given the prevailing frame of reference, because it reiterates visual tropes of the camps and reiterates the animalization of Jews central to the systematic killing under the Nazi regime, "Holocaust on Your Plate" hurts (Jews) as it endeavors to help (animals), seeking moral and material dignity through images that debase.

No Apologies

From the start, critics of PETA demanded that the animal rights organization withdraw the traveling exhibit and apologize for its inappropriate use of Holocaust imagery. After months of repeated stagings online and in cities around the world, Ingrid Newkirk, President of PETA, issued a formal apology. Newkirk sought in the press release to clarify the circumstances that gave rise to "Holocaust on Your Plate," detailing the prominent role played by Jewish staff members and scholars from its inception. Far from the negative public reception, she claimed, PETA had anticipated pronounced support in the Jewish community. And while PETA understood the campaign was "emotionally charged," it had the best of intentions. Or, as Newkirk phrased it:

We did aim to be provocative. We did not, however, aim simply to provoke. . . . We hope you can understand that although we embarked on the "Holocaust on Your Plate" project with misconceptions about what its impact would be, we always try to act with integrity, with the goal of improving the lives of those who suffer. We hope those we upset will find it in their hearts to work toward the goal of a kinder world for all, regardless of species.

PETA's apology reframes the controversy, reiterating the import of its core mission to secure animal liberation. Consequently, its issuance is neither a sign of contrition (in a conventional sense) nor a moment of closure, but rather a productive occasion in which the central features of "Holocaust on Your Plate" can be restated and put into circulation once more. It becomes another phase in the image event, albeit without any visual content. In contrast with Wal-Mart's ill-fated invocation of Nazi imagery that led to the end of the campaign and its message, as well as the firing of a high-ranking public relations executive at the multinational giant, PETA's apology does

not portend failure or retreat, precisely because oppositional social movements, in contrast with corporate efforts to manufacture consent, hinge on their capacity to foster discomfort, encourage engagement, and elicit discussion. Thus, even as Newkirk apologized, the website was shutdown and the exhibit was retired, “Holocaust on Your Plate” still continued to generate controversy and prompt conversation. Perhaps more importantly, other animal rights groups have in the wake of the controversy embraced Holocaust metaphors as a means to communicate the plight of animals.

Conclusions

“Holocaust on Your Plate” demonstrates the form and function of image events, while exposing the ways in which content and context impose limits upon them. In its virtual and embodied stagings, PETA tested the boundaries of good taste and unsettled the canons of common sense. Through street theater and political pastiche, it was intended to trouble consumers, making their practices and precepts less secure. It used the media to amplify its message, intensifying the effects, if not the resonance, of its guerilla attacks on factory farming as well as the complacency and logic that have naturalized it. Although many observers would cast “Holocaust on your Plate” as a failed venture, undermined by its obscenity, arrogance, and incompleteness, such interpretation misunderstands both this particular intervention and image events more generally. In the context of political struggle waged from the margins in pursuit of rights and recognition, neither the offensive reactions felt by many viewers nor the eventual apology issued by PETA in response should be read as problematic. On the contrary, each of these features lamented by critics made “Holocaust on Your Plate” more visible, exposing otherwise indifferent audiences to one or another version of its message. Indeed, as this case clarifies, image events trouble; however, as they play around with established meanings and institutionalized media, they can also get themselves into trouble, diminishing their significance.

Controversy, even if manufactured in furtherance of sincere ends, in many respects, is what animates social movements that rely upon image events. Controversy brings with it dangers that work to blunt the critical edge of image events like “Holocaust on Your Plate.” Informed by common sense ideas about meat consumption and the horrors of the Holocaust, media coverage overdetermined the content and consequences of PETA’s visual politics, readily focusing on the reaction to the staged events and less on its content. Media saturation and increasingly shortened cycles of coverage further limited what “Holocaust on Your Plate” could say and how it could say it. Put another way, although image events have emerged in response to changing media and sociopolitical conditions, it may well be the very features that make them possible reduce their effectiveness: hype threatens to eclipse analysis as sound bites silence informed debate and caricature counter-hegemonic positions.

Indeed, the absence of depth, distance, and the unifying metanarratives of modernity as well as the evermore sophisticated manufacture of consent and common sense have exhausted critical vocabularies and sensibilities.

While media culture may simultaneously encourage and undermine image events, “Holocaust on Your Plate” unsuccessfully negotiated an entirely distinct set of social conditions. It sought to highlight gross injustice through visual juxtaposition and moral comparison. In doing so, PETA laid claim to the well understood suffering, destruction, and inhumanity associated with the Holocaust. It literally borrowed power from the victims (and survivors) of the Holocaust, trading on the cultural capital and moral authority invested in those unfortunates. At the same time, in taking and failing to satisfactorily remake the meanings associated with the Shoah, “Holocaust on Your Plate” highlights the ways in which ownership of histories, trauma, and representations curtail the critical capacity of oppositional social movements. These constraints are all the more pronounced because the image event pits the concerns of two oppressed groups against one another—efforts to protect the human rights of the Holocaust victims and survivors versus a movement to secure animal rights.

In the end, “Holocaust on Your Plate” reminds us of three fundamental features of image events. First, they use representation and performance to engage and ideally undermine accepted or mainstream readings of culture, history, and power. Second, to be productive they must hold in tension prevailing expectations and

emergent understandings that recode cultural myths and rearticulate ideologies, while remaining intelligible and evocative. And third, the content and context of image events simultaneously enable and undermine them.

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