

Frederik van Gelder

## Do the Mass Media trivialize the Holocaust? - Reflections on Horkheimer and Adorno's 'culture industry' concept

„Hitler has forced upon the human race, in its state of unfreedom, a new categorical imperative: to organise its thinking and its actions in such a way that Auschwitz does not repeat itself, that nothing comparable can occur in future.“ – T.W. Adorno<sup>1</sup>

„How is one to address oneself, without a persistent feeling of fatuity, even of indecency, to the theme of ultimate inhumanity? Is there anything new to be said regarding the causes and forms of the breakdown of the European order in the 'Thirty Years' War' from 1915 to 1945?“ – George Steiner<sup>2</sup>

„... the surest way to trivialise the Holocaust is to seek to learn lessons from it. ...“ Raimond Gaita<sup>3</sup>

„Once upon a time it happened to my people, and now it happens to all people. And suddenly I said to myself, maybe the whole world, strangely, has turned Jewish. Everybody lives now facing the unknown. We are all, in a way, helpless.“ – Elie Wiesel<sup>4</sup>

„Ihr habt das Leben vor Euch. Nützt es! Nützt es so, daß das Wort 'Nie wieder Auschwitz!' nicht eine Phrase wird, nur an Feiertagen gebraucht, sondern daß es zum Alltag, zum persönlichen Bedürfnis der Menschen, die das Leben aufbauen, wird.“ – Hermann Langbein<sup>5</sup>

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1 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 356.

2 *In Bluebeard's Castle*, p. 29.

3 "Remembering the Holocaust: Absolute Value and the Nature of Evil" in: *Quadrant*, Melbourne, December 1995.

4 Chapter epigraph in Lifton and Markusen: *The genocidal mentality ...* p. 1.

5 „Das 51. Jahr ...“ (Ansprache zur Gedenkveranstaltung zum 50. Jahrestag der Befreiung von Auschwitz-Birkenau im Schauspiel Frankfurt am Main am 29. Januar 1995.) Fritz Bauer Institut – Materialien 15.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Philosophers may be forgiven for their obsession with definitions, even on a topic as sensitive as the current one.

The term culture-industry, with which I shall be concerned in this paper, is an oxymoron, that is, an incongruous conjunction of contradictory terms. What are these contradictory meanings?

By culture is usually understood those functions in a society by means of which one generation transmits its accumulated moral and practical knowledge to those who come after; such a transmission is not possible without that peculiar fusion of mental and emotional horizons, that intersubjectivity of meaning, which we call 'truth'. By industry on the other hand we mean everything to do with the production and sale of commodities for profit.

It is a neologism – the term 'culture industry' – which Horkheimer and Adorno coin to describe what they observe during the war years in the United States, namely the beginnings of that world-wide system of commercialised entertainment, news and 'pop' culture which now spans the globe, meaning that it has become something which now accompanies most human beings on this planet from the cradle to the grave. In the Hollywood products of the thirties and forties, in Mrs. Miniver and the Lone Ranger, in Victor Mature and Mickey Rooney, in the soap operas and sitcoms, they saw the beginnings of an avalanche of kitsch, trivia, sensationalism, pornography and media violence which they regarded both as the product of the capitalist system of production and as a decisive factor in the crisis of the modern world. What does this have to do with the topic of our congress?

The Mass Media's representation of the Holocaust is mythological: it fosters, in the mass public of the industrialised world (which increasingly means the vast majority of the human race now alive) attitudes, orientations, beliefs and convictions with regard to the past which make a rational reflection upon the causes of the European and world catastrophe of this century impossible. Put differently: the mass media make a repetition of the Holocaust in some form – nuclear, ecological, or whatever – likely, and perhaps inevitable; they fulfill, in the contemporary world, a comparable function to that of the propaganda ministry in this country a mere sixty years ago.

I would like to approach this bleak thesis of Horkheimer and Adorno – with its assumption that the European catastrophe of 1914-1945 is based on a social and political dynamic which was by no means halted with the defeat of National Socialism – from the point of view of the title of my paper,

namely the trivialisation, the commercialism which is such a salient feature in the treatment of the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup>

I quote from an exhaustive monograph entitled *Screening the Holocaust – Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*<sup>7</sup>, by Ilan Avisar:

„... Art Buchwald wrote that Hollywood was on its way to featuring Pat Boone as a U-boat commander who refuses to fire on a passenger ship, declaring, 'I'd rather risk getting sunk than torpedo a ship with civilians aboard. Hitler would want it that way.' Or Hollywood producing *Stalag Hilton* with Henry Fonda as the camp commandant and Doris Day as his wife rolling bandages for the Jewish prisoners in the hospital, and when SS sergeant Glenn Ford rushes in with the announcement that the prisoners are escaping, Fonda replies, 'Don't talk to me. I'm in on the July '44 plot to kill Hitler', and Ford says, 'Aren't we all?'" (p. 116)

In his analysis of Visconti's *The Damned* Avisar captures something essential about all mass media treatment of the Holocaust:

„The Damned has contributed to a distinct kind of fascination with the Nazi era, a new cultural trend which sees in Nazism a source for cheap romantic indulgences and aesthetic attractions. Visconti's work, undoubtedly inadvertently, has inspired numerous works which exalt in the perception of a period with uncensored behaviour, and yet a period characterized by a special attention toward aesthetics and quasi-ritual ceremonies. ... In other words, this approach to Nazism offers sensual, or instinctual, stimulations, and then their gratification through the medium of artistic verisimilitude [sic], which also ensures a comfortable distance from the real terror of Nazism because of the inherent playfulness of the discourse of art.

The most conspicuous demonstration of this trend can be found in a branch of pornography, including x-rated movies and dime novels, which makes extensive use of World War II settings and Nazi paraphernalia to play upon the pornographic imagination. The examples range from highbrow works like Lina Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties* and Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* to the cheap sexploitations of the porno industry. These works feature the interactions of Eros and Thanatos, sex and violence, uncensored gratification and brutal oppression, which in the historical case of Nazism were also particularly demonstrated in a special concern with biological reproduction coupled with the creation of factories of death.“ (p. 162/163.)

Since we have just heard a paper with the title „'This Way for the Gas' and 'Maus'“, and since we shall hear a paper entitled „Holocaust Kitsch in

6 The bitter quip which did the rounds some years ago: there is no business like Shoah business, will be familiar to you.

7 Indiana University Press, 1988

Contemporary American Art“ tomorrow by Prof. Jennifer Fink, I think further examples of what it is that we are talking about will not be necessary. In any case, since Saul Friedländer's book *Reflections on Nazism – An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (NY 1984) or Susan Sontag's *Under the Sign of Saturn* (NY 1980), to mention only these, the debate is not so much about the existence of such emotionally primitive ways of dealing with the past, as about their extent, influence, ramifications and causes.

For all that, it would be a mistake to think of Horkheimer and Adorno's concept culture industry as something coined to draw attention to the difference between high and low art, between popular and serious forms of scholarship and historiography. It is not Lina Wertmüller and Steven Spielberg against Peter Weiss and Claude Lanzmann, Art Spiegelman against Raul Hilberg. I quote here from Adorno's posthumously published notes on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

„Indem ein Film überhaupt nur ein individuelles Schicksal gestaltet, wäre es selbst mit dem äußersten kritischen Anstand, unterliegt er bereits der Ideologie. Der Fall, der vorgetragen wird als einer, den zu erzählen noch sich lohnt, wird noch als verzweifelter zur Ausrede für die Welt, die etwas so Erzählenswertes hervorbringt, während ihre Verzweiflung stumm darin sich ausdrückt, daß sich von ihr nichts mehr erzählen läßt, daß sie nur noch erkannt werden kann.“<sup>8</sup>

The trivialisation lies not in bad narratives as opposed to good ones, it lies in the narrative structure itself, with its automatic assumption that what the narrator has to say is meaningful to the audience, that plot, characterisation, moral dilemmas, human choice, dramatic climax, that all these very venerable forms of artistic expression are possible as far as the Holocaust is concerned. George Steiner, in his book *In Bluebeard's Castle* notes:

„Not only is the relevant material vast and intractable; it exercises a subtle, corrupting fascination. Bending too fixedly over hideousness, one feels queerly drawn. In some strange way the horror flatters attention, it gives to one's own limited means a spurious resonance ... I am not sure whether anyone, however scrupulous, who spends time and imaginative resources on these dark places can, or indeed, ought to leave them personally intact. Yet the dark places are at the center. Pass them by and there can be no serious discussion of the human potential.“ 30-31.

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8 T.W. Adorno, „Das Schema der Massenkultur“, *Gesammelte Schriften* 3, p. 303.

A last quote from Avisar, from a section titled „The Discontents of Film Narrative“:

„The Holocaust, ... cannot serve as a proper premise for dramatic conflict. As a subject matter for mimetic epics it also presents serious problems relating to the climax and resolution of the overall narrative. The empirical historical narratives, in their attempt to give a comprehensive view and an epic story to the events of the Nazi era, are led, by the logic of the historical chronicle, to the final phase of the extermination process. In the camps, inmates lived on the basis of day-to-day struggles for their lives, trying to survive starvation, atrocious labor, deadly diseases, or the Nazi selections. Dramatic action in prose fiction or film usually centers on the significant change of a character who gains new recognition and moral stature as a result of a series of events requiring morally important decisions. But in reality the inmates were denied any choice, nor were they able to cultivate sensitive perceptions. According to the Nazi accounts and calculations, the average inmate's existence lasted three months; those who survived the inhuman trials did so, by their own admission, thanks to the undramatic element of sheer luck and/or ruthlessness toward their fellow prisoners.“ (p. 48)

On this then there is agreement amongst critics, educationists, media specialists and historians, namely that the popular effect of the application of the formulas of the entertainment industry upon the Holocaust is – in the main – obscurantist and degrading. The *Dialektik der Aufklärung* – the book, not the process – speaks of a „gierige Aufnahme von Scharlatanerie und Aberglaube“, and that is pretty close to what Avisar calls the „the pitfalls of pornographic fascination with the vistas of horror and atrocities“. (p. 31.)

The antithesis to the mass media's attitude to the Holocaust is that of the survivors. In an analysis of many thousands of testimonies collected at the Yale University Fortunoff Video Archive, Lawrence Langer describes an emotional reaction he calls 'doubling', in which survivors find themselves, with regard to their present-day surroundings, 'detached', only 'partly there', 'absent-minded' and inwardly withdrawn, even from family and friends. Voyagers between the loquacious vulgarity of our contemporary world, and the universe of pain and death etched upon their memories, they find themselves at a loss for words to describe the indescribable.

„I have children', reports one former victim. 'I have my family. But I can't take full satisfaction in the achievements of my children today because part of my present life is my remembrance, my memory of what hap-

pened then, and it casts a shadow over my life today.”<sup>9</sup> One survivor quoted by Langer says:

„You sort of don’t feel at home in this world any more, because this experience – you can live with it, it’s like a constant pain: you never forget, you never get rid of it, but you learn to live with it. And that sets you apart from other people. Not that you can’t enjoy yourself. On the contrary, when I am happy, I’m so happy, because I know how horribly unhappy I can be. I know the whole difference. But there is a certain – it’s like a music in the background. It’s that something is different.“<sup>10</sup>

Survivors live in a dual world – Langer differentiates between an ‘everyday’ memory and a ‘deep’ (traumatic) form of remembrance – trying to relate the mundane here and now to a past which is both present and not communicable with the words and metaphors of ordinary language.

„It is not surprising“, says Langer,

„to hear witnesses in oral testimonies confess that sometimes they do not believe their own stories. Their effort to recapture through memory what, because of the impossibility of its content, has already (for us) fallen outside memory, risks estranging the audience they seek to inform. In the present of their anguished memory, we are asked to share less what is recovered than the process of recall itself, the crossing and recrossing of that perilous threshold until the distinctions between entrance and exit blur and fade.“<sup>11</sup>

Jean Améry in his *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* says something very similar, emphasising that this holds even within the Jewish community:

„Zwar gilt die Katastrophe als existentieller Bezugspunkt für alle Juden, doch geistig nach- und vollziehen können das katastrophale Ereignis nur wir, die Geopferten. Den anderen ... Nur zu, gute Leute, plagt euch ab, wie ihr wollt, ihr redet ja doch nur wie der Blinde von der Farbe.“ (p. 136)

These findings by Lawrence Langer, which are confirmed by current research into the nature of psychic traumatisation, are a kind of belated confirmation of Freud’s discoveries at the beginning of the century, according to which the human ego reacts with specific defence mechanisms of its own

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9 Langer: p. 34, in his book appropriately called *Holocaust Testimonies – the Ruins of Memory*. Yale UP, 1991.

10 Langer, op. cit. p. 35.

11 op. cit. 40

when faced with indescribable suffering.<sup>12</sup> It is no coincidence that Psychoanalytic research into this topic carries titles like „The confrontation with death“, or „Beyond the reach of language“, or Kurt Eissler’s remarkable paper „The murder of how many of one’s children must one be able to bear with fortitude to have a normal constitution?“<sup>13</sup>

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Allow me now to try to place the material which I have presented to you for scrutiny within the perspective of the topic of this congress. Where and at which point could one say that the material on the mass media, or on the psychological reactions of survivors of the Holocaust, has specifically philosophical implications?

I submit that anyone who approaches this material with an open mind has no choice but to ask questions about the way in which the institutions which mould popular opinion – with regard to the catastrophies of this century – operate;<sup>14</sup> institutions which are increasingly centralised, which are increasingly globalised, which are increasingly receptive to the blandishments of commercialism and the dictates of political pressure groups.<sup>15</sup>

At the level of mass psychology there are analogous questions. The historians tell us that during this century something in the order of 50 to 70 million people – men, women and children – have been uprooted, maimed or killed, and that leaves out of account the Third World since 1945. Both world wars, says Eric Hobsbawm, „were episodes of carnage without parallel, leaving behind the technological nightmare images that haunted the nights and days of the next generation: poison gas and aerial bombardment

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12 "Das Ich reißt sich von der unerträglichen Vorstellung los, diese hängt aber mit einem Stück der Realität zusammen, und indem das Ich diese Leistung vollbringt, hat es sich auch von der Realität ganz oder teilweise gelöst." Sigmund Freud (1894): „Die Abwehr-Neuropsychoosen“ in: *Gesammelte Werke* I, London 1952, p. 72.

13 Eddy De Wind: „The confrontation with death“ in: Han Groen-Prakken et. al (eds.) *Traumatisation and War – The Dutch Annual of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 2, 1995. Hans Keilson: „Beyond the reach of language“ in Groen-Prakken. Kurt Eissler: „Die Ermordung von wievielen seiner Kinder muß ein Mensch symptomfrei ertragen können, um eine normale Konstitution zu haben?“ in: *Psyche*, vol. 17, p. 241-291.

14 Wolfgang Benz: „Warding off the Past: is this a Problem only for Historians and Moralists?“ in: Peter Baldwin (ed.) *Reworking the Past – Hitler, The Holocaust, and the Historian’s debates*, Boston, 1990

15 Jürgen Habermas: *Structural Change in the Public Sphere*. Douglas Kellner: *Television and the crisis of democracy*, Oxford. 1990.

after 1918, the mushroom cloud of nuclear destruction after 1945".<sup>16</sup> The survivors of these catastrophes bear mental scars which change their perceptions of themselves, of the past, the future, in fundamental ways not shared by those not directly affected.

In short, even if one regards the terminology of dialectical philosophy as too abstract, too tainted by the praxis of the erstwhile communist countries, too eurocentric or too male-oriented to be of any relevance here – these are the charges, misplaced in my view, usually levelled against it – then one would have to invent synonyms for key concepts such as ‘ideology’, ‘class consciousness’, ‘universal history’, ‘subject/object’, ‘critique of idealism’. The English-speaking world, with its pragmatic, empiricist, natural-science orientation, in trying to understand the forces which threaten the world in which we live, is having to rediscover something the German-Jewish refugee intellectuals grouped around Max Horkheimer in the thirties and forties expressed in the vocabulary of German Idealism and dialectical philosophy. The world in its entirety is ‘negative’, is threatened with war and destruction. We find ourselves in a historical phase in which the resources of the social sciences should be harnessed towards the systematic investigation of the processes of social integration and disintegration within contemporary society. That was the sense of the program of the ‘old’ Institut für Sozialforschung under Horkheimer’s directorship sixty years ago. An analysis of contemporary portrayals of Auschwitz, which is the task we have set ourselves at this congress, seems in this way to force us into a series of questions with regard to the role of the mass media, the mass psychology of victims, of bystanders and of perpetrators, and we do so – or we hope we do – from the point of view of what Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Markusen in their book *The Genocidal Mentality – Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat* have called „Species Consciousness and Species Self“<sup>17</sup>. That is, in their words, „the full consciousness of ourselves as members of the human species, a species now under threat of extinction.“ (p. 258)

Lifton, Günther Anders, Adorno and many others represent an approach to the Holocaust which seeks to break through traditional modes of dealing with the past, a traditionalism which seems to have the built-in tendency to reduce the past either to a positivistic description of factual material or an object of aesthetic enjoyment.

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16 Eric Hobsbawm: *Age of Extremes – The short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, p. 52.

17 N.Y. 1990

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There is another aspect of the ‘Culture-Industry’ debate which I have not yet touched upon, and which has a direct bearing upon what it is that we are trying to do at this congress. Detlev Claussen has dealt with it in a paper called „Die Banalisierung des Bösen – Über Auschwitz, Alltagsreligion und Gesellschaftstheorie“<sup>18</sup>. As the university system changes, as it seeks to fulfill the educational and training needs of industry, commerce, technology and administration, the concept of objectivity and truth itself changes – one of the central themes of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

This change can be traced, indeed, in the title of this congress.

The emphasis on portrayals – i.e. on the subjective side of the large and burgeoning literature on the Holocaust – can be interpreted in quite contrary ways. On the one hand it undoubtedly reflects a conviction widely held in the humanities and the social sciences in recent decades, namely that in the face of the enormity of what happened in the years 1914-1945, the tools of traditional scholarship are themselves faulty, are themselves in need of scrutiny. In the terminology of Continental Philosophy: objective knowledge of our collective past is not possible without a concomitant reflection upon the ‘constitutive’ powers of the (collective) subject doing the knowing.

But this emphasis upon the explicitly subjective aspects of the portrayal of the Holocaust can also be seen as something else, as an expression of a widespread scepticism about the notion of objectivity itself, of a rejection of the western rationalist tradition altogether. The terms modernism, postmodernism, deconstruction, discourse theory and similar – epitomised in the insistence that ‘everything is a text’ – are regarded by many to refer to a ‘method’ in contemporary scholarship which reduces the truth of a statement to the subjective motivations of the utterer.

Where this can lead to is something Deborah Lipstadt, in her recent book *Denying the Holocaust – The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York 1993) traces with disconcerting persuasiveness. She shows that the so-called Holocaust-deniers can turn for succour and support to a relativis-

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18 Reprinted in: Michael Werz (ed.) *Antisemitismus und Gesellschaft – Zur Diskussion um Auschwitz, Kulturindustrie und Gewalt* Frankfurt/M. 1995.

tic and sceptical climate which has grown substantially in the scholarly and academic world in recent decades. Whatever the intellectual antecedents of deconstructionism and similar approaches may be – their origins in the European ‘materialist’ tradition notwithstanding – she shows that they contribute considerably to an attitude of cynical denial. „The deniers are plying their trade“, she says, „at a time when much of history seems to be up for grabs and attacks on the Western rationalist tradition have become commonplace.“ (p. 17.)

She traces this to intellectual currents which became en vogue in the late sixties, when a number of scholars began to argue that texts had no fixed meaning. „It became more difficult to talk about the objective truth of a text, legal concept, or even an event. In academic circles some scholars spoke of relative truths, rejecting the notion that there was one version of the world that was necessarily right while another was wrong.“

While not questioning the intentions of the scholars propounding this approach in specific areas, she warns that the popularity of such ideas in areas far removed from literary criticism

„fostered an atmosphere in which it became harder to say that an idea was beyond the pale of rational thought. At its most radical it contended that there was no bed-rock thing such as experience. Experience was mediated through one’s language. The scholars who supported this deconstructionist approach were neither deniers themselves nor sympathetic to the deniers’s attitudes; most had no trouble identifying Holocaust denial as disingenuous. But because deconstructionism argued that experience was relative and nothing was fixed, it created an atmosphere of permissiveness towards questioning the meaning of historical events and made it hard for its proponents to assert that there was anything ‘off limits’ for this skeptical approach. ... A sentiment had been generated in society – not just on campus – that made it difficult to say: ‘This has nothing to do with ideas. This is bigotry.’“

Lipstadt is convinced that a certain kind of deconstructionist history and Holocaust denial are related:

„These attacks on history and knowledge have the potential to alter dramatically the way established truth is transmitted from generation to generation. Ultimately the climate they create is of no less importance than the specific truth they attack – be it the Holocaust or the assassination of President Kennedy. It is a climate that fosters deconstructionist history at its worst. ...

Holocaust denial is part of this phenomenon. It is not an assault on the history of one particular group. Though denial of the Holocaust may be an attack on the history of the annihilation of the Jews, at its core it poses a threat to all who believe that knowledge and memory are among the keystones of our civilization. Just as the Holocaust was not a tragedy of the Jews but a tragedy of civilization in which

the victims were Jews, so too denial of the Holocaust is not a threat just to Jewish history but a threat to all who believe in the ultimate power of reason.“ (p. 17/18.)

That Lipstadt is not alone in this is borne out by authors such as Christopher Lasch and Russell Jacoby.<sup>19</sup>

How close all this is to the warning expressed in the book title of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* nigh on fifty years ago – how close to the themes dealt by them under the rubric ‘culture industry’ – needs no special emphasis.

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I would like, by way of conclusion, to summarise the main points of this paper in the form of three theses:

- An analysis of the way in which the Holocaust is portrayed in our contemporary culture has no choice but to delve into – and find concepts for – a multiplicity of topics, ranging from aesthetics, the mass media, mass psychology, historiography and related fields. (As indeed the program of this congress demonstrates.) We are forced to do so because we are faced with events of such enormity, complexity and gravity that no other approach seems in the least bit promising.
- In puzzling over the relationship of the objective and subjective aspects of the catastrophies of this century, we are retracing the steps of previous generations. The melancholy science of authors such as Robert Jay Lifton, Günther Anders, or Robert Jungk force us to accept something empirically which the mindset of empiricism and positivism finds impossible to countenance: that our survival on this planet could be in question. At the intellectual level at any rate the dialectical tradition has a terminology for such situations: the discovery of one's own or collective mortality is regarded as a necessary step in the ‘Phenomenology of Mind’. For philosophers trying to probe and understand the legacy of the Holocaust, such wintry solace may not be the worst point of departure.

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19 Christopher Lasch: *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. London 1995. „I think students are also put off by the prevailing mode of cultural criticism, which easily degenerates into a ‘species of cynicism’, as Kimball says, ‘for which nothing is properly understood until it is exposed as corrupt, duplicitous, or hypocritical.’“ (p. 187) Also Russell Jacoby: *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars have misled America*. New York 1994.

- The aestheticisation, the concretism, the subjectivism which is a feature of discussions and portrayals both in the mass media and in academic discussions is not compatible with the rationalist conviction that social and historical crises have causes which can be eradicated in an act of political will.

This is, I think, the antinomy expressed in Adorno's well-known reformulation of the Kantian categorical imperative which none of us can escape: „Hitler has forced upon the human race, in its state of unfreedom, a new categorical imperative: to organise its thinking and its actions in such a way that Auschwitz does not repeat itself, that nothing comparable can occur in future.“

I thank you for your attention.