Planet Auschwitz: Holocaust Representation in Science Fiction and Horror Film and Television, by Brian E. Crim

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Brian E. Crim. *Planet Auschwitz: Holocaust Representation in Science Fiction and Horror Film and Television*. Rutgers University Press, 2020. Paperback. 280 pg. $37.50. ISBN 9781978801608. EBook ISBN 9781978801622.

Planet Auschwitz joins the many estimable works on the representation of the Holocaust, and it adds to the discussion about how to approach and partake in the grim repertoire of Holocaust imagery. The volume traces conversations among Holocaust scholars and survivors, particularly those that focus on the representations of the Holocaust, while it produces its own arguments grounded in thorough film and TV analyses. One of the unspoken questions Crim addresses in this work is "Who owns the Holocaust?" i.e. who can represent it?—a question that deserves much more attention than it commonly gets considering the pervasive use of its imagery.

Eli Wiesel acquiesced that media was indeed needed to educate future generations, but warned that the Holocaust was un-representable. Crim is of the opinion that integrating Holocaust imagery into genres of popular culture may be instrumental in engaging those audiences previously intimidated by the historical Holocaust (6), facilitating a useful reflection and discussion among non-witnesses.

Planet Auschwitz establishes early on that Weimar Culture was the fertile ground for Nazi anti-Semitism and that its films (*Metropolis* [1927] and *Nosferatu* [1922], in particular), created a repository of images for future uses. Crim is a historian, and the volume is about history—a particular part of history—and how its representations take on different shapes according to the current context.

The volume consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, notes, a bibliography, and an index. The first four chapters examine horror cinema and television and look at the way Holocaust imagery has been employed in plots that incorporate historical trauma and address injustice and great acts of cruelty. In zombie movies like *The Walking Dead* (2010-), Crim employs Primo Levi's concept of "Muselmann"—a camp prisoner whose humanity was systematically and deliberately rooted out—as a trope of the collapse of civilization and its rules. The Muselmann

and the Holocaust appear as the lingering proof of trauma and violence in Sidney Lumet's 1964 film *The Pawnbroker*, that is set in a society ignorant of and indifferent to the Holocaust—a returning accusation from Crim. HBO's series *The Leftovers* (2014-17) is analyzed as a meditation on survivors' guilt and discloses how historic traumas are mapped on the representation of survivors. Chapter Three, entitled "Nazi Monsters and the Return of History," is a very convincing demonstration of the cross-fertilization between our un-mastered past, modernity's complacency about this past, and our Holocaust-beset popular culture. The FX channel's *American Horror Story* (2011-) series is the example here. Characters lifted out of the Holocaust's own horror stories, based on Josef Mengele, Ilse Koch, or SS officers, intersect with a passive humanity suffering from history amnesia. Many "heroes" are camp survivors or victims of similar atrocities. Nazi vampires are sentient monsters driven to turning the globe into a wasteland.

Obstinately persisting images of Third Reich horrors indicate that evil forces are lurking in the periphery of a seemingly restored world. According to *Planet Auschwitz*, American horror films such as *The Omen* (1976), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *The Shining* (1980) suggest that structural forces and institutions that supported the Third Reich are alive and well through our own complacency, powerlessness, and complicity (125). The end of the horror section presents us with an interesting reading of *The Shining* as Kubrick's "ongoing struggle with the Holocaust" (140).

The final section of the volume, Chapters Five and Six, examines science fiction film and TV narratives, among them *Starship Troopers* (1997), the *Star Wars* franchise (1977-), and *The Man in the High Castle* (Amazon 2015-). These works demonstrate Astrofascism, that is, highly functional societies that have adopted fascist aesthetics and ideology (142). Crim proposes that science-fictional fascism often functions as "the other" (141), thus propping up the actual capitalist status quo, and he asks what consequences the consumption of fictional fascism may have. For example, *Star Wars*'s Empire perpetrates Holocausts as a matter of course, but it looks seductively good doing it.

Crim uses the *Blade Runner* and *Terminator* movies, *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-09) and *Westworld* (2016-) TV series to explore humanity's troubled and mediated relationship with cyborgs. It is perhaps the darkest of all the chapters, because it buttresses what his previous analyses have gradually made clear: humanity and whatever it shapes in its image, cannot, or perhaps even does not want to, escape its enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism, racism, and genocide.

There are few weaknesses in this volume. Not all of Crim's analyses are equally convincing. I am thinking here of the section on *Westworld*. Moreover, there are too many extensive plot lines for this reviewer's liking, and one finds a strangely unkind and out-of-character remark about Rosa Luxemburg on page 177. That apart, *Planet Auschwitz* is a decidedly timely work, appearing at a time when neo-fascist and neo-Nazi discourses are again circulating through Western culture, often, regrettably, unconstrained and with impunity. It tells a cautionary tale when it demonstrates, like other works on the same theme, that many users of Holocaust imagery are seduced by

its spectacularity and monumentalism and prefer to cut the images off from their historical context. In most of the examined texts, Crim is quick to point out that what accompanies the monumentalism of the parades, uniforms, art, etc. is also an undressing of our current culture's lack of compassion, absence of investment and accountability, and an always present racism—which brings us back to whether the Holocaust is representable at all. Crim's insistence that Holocaust images, when embedded in popular culture, can facilitate cognizance of an event that otherwise just becomes a metaphor for horror is clearly laid out in this first-rate volume. His research is up-to-date and meticulous, demonstrating his long familiarity with the complexities and vicissitudes of modern German culture.

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