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Advanced Writing Course

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# Teaching about the Holocaust and the Subject of Objectivity: Psychoanalysis, Trauma, and Counter-Transference in an Advanced Writing Course

Robert Samuels

This work examines various ways teachers can use psychoanalytic concepts to help students approach the subject of objectivity as it relates to social science research writing and other general education courses.<sup>1</sup> By using the psychoanalytic notion of counter-transference, I will explore a new model for scientific objectivity, which moves beyond the traditional stress on neutrality, abstraction, generalization, and impersonality. In this “postmodern” form of scientific discovery, the creation of an “empathic classroom” helps students to explore and utilize their personal unconscious negative reactions to their research material. Moreover, by coming to terms with their own subjective responses to various threatening subjects, students can learn to integrate emotional aspects of selfhood into the research process.

By developing the notion of subjective objectivity, I hope to show how the scientific quest for an “objective” stance often forces students *and* teachers to repress and deny their unconscious fears and doubts related to the subject matter in question. In the case of research in the social sciences, this repression of subjectivity often denies the researcher access to important information essential to the inquiry process. Since the social scientist’s own desires, fears, and values are most often related to the particular object of study, the denial of the researcher’s own feelings only serves to hide subjective reactions, which may unconsciously hinder or possibly help the research process. For example, in my own research on social science explanations of the Holocaust, I have found that my strong emotional responses to this subject matter have helped to block my ability to analyze objectively certain theories and concepts. On the other hand, I have also found that when I analyze my subjective responses, I am often able to use this emotional material to indicate unexplored areas of research.

This effort to incorporate counter-transferential aspects of subjectivity into the writing of social science research has been explored by Alain Giami in his article “Counter-Transference in Social Research: Beyond Georges Devereux.” Giami argues that:

A researcher’s counter-transference can be defined as the sum of unconscious and emotional reactions, including anxiety, affecting his/her relation with the observed subject and situation. These reactions produce distortions in the process of knowledge construction that remain hidden from the researcher. Notions of “inappropriateness” and “resistance”, as defined by Schimek, become central in understanding the cognitive processes affecting the researcher, because they highlight the researcher’s reactions to aspects of reality emerging in fieldwork. Counter-transference points to the researcher’s difficulty in clearly distinguishing material that comes from outside (the subject, the field) and from inside (his/her own emotional reactions). The researcher has to struggle with these emotional reactions and anxieties.

Giami effectively shows here why we need to take into account this notion of counter-transference when we ask students to perform social research. The student, as researcher, is not the object of study; rather, the student researcher is a subject who must sift through various internal and external information.

Drawing on the work of Georges Devereux, Giami posits that social science research always implies a dialectical communication between subjective and objective factors:

The researcher is, in one way or another, the subject and object of the knowledge that he/she elaborates. The specific position he/she occupies in the

field allows at the same time for a specific kind of focus and for specific blind spots. From any one position, there are aspects of the world that one can perceive and aspects that one cannot. Absolute objectivity is, by definition, impossible and one has to find the appropriate focus, the “good distance”, according to one’s research objectives. The position of the researcher in the field defines (1) what he/she can know, (2) what he/she might be able to know, (3) what he/she cannot know and last but not least (4) what he/she actively refuses to know for some social or psychological reason. . . . In some cases, researchers know what they do not know and what they cannot know; in others they do not even take account of what they cannot know.

By getting our students to examine their own blind spots and limitations in relation to a particular subject matter, we can help them to understand the subjective aspects of objectivity as they learn to monitor their counter-transference reactions to their objects of study.

In order to clarify what I mean by counter-transference and the subject of objectivity in the social science writing situation, I will discuss my experiences teaching a class entitled “Social Science Approaches to the Holocaust, Prejudice, and Cultural Assimilation.” Students often had a difficult time discussing and writing about contemporary depictions of the Holocaust and the role of prejudice in popular culture. In fact, until I motivated my students to explore their personal reactions to the class topic, they often resisted reading the class assignments and engaging in substantive class discussions.

The turning point came in this class when I took the risk of openly discussing my reaction to the students’ negative responses to the class readings and assignments.<sup>2</sup> One of the unexpected benefits of revealing my subjective reactions to the students’ resistances was that the students stopped seeing me as a purely “objective” social scientist, and instead, they were able to witness the role played by my own subjectivity in my quest for an objective analysis. Later on, many students said that the class discussion of my “counter-transference” feelings was key to turning the class

around and making students feel safe in expressing their personal feelings and reactions. Once students saw that I was also “human” and that I considered myself a part of their culture, they were more willing to engage in serious research and writing. While I believe that there are many risks to this type of teaching, I feel that the best way to teach about “objectivity” is to analyze the role of subjectivity in all research processes.

In many cases, this need to explore the subjectivity of the objective researcher requires the teacher/researcher to analyze his or her own subjective reactions to the class dynamics. In psychoanalytic terms, the analysis of the teacher’s reactions to the students’ resistances can be called “counter-transference,” since it involves the analyst/teacher/researcher projecting his or her own unconscious fears and desires onto the students and the object of study. For example, in my class, I often reacted to students’ passivity by unconsciously equating them with the passive bystanders in Nazi Germany. Until I openly made this connection to the class, I was unable to deal with their resistances in a more rational and objective fashion. Furthermore, if the only way to approach a state of scientific objectivity is to try to account for and control most subjective factors, the analysis of the unconscious subjectivity of the students *and* the teacher becomes essential. To show this key role that counter-transference can play in a writing class, I will turn to particular experiences I had teaching my Holocaust and popular culture course.

### **LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL, BUT FOR WHOM?: POSTMODERN RESPONSES TO TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST**

I have taught many classes on the Holocaust, and have always found one of the biggest challenges in teaching this subject matter to be that one must anticipate and counter diverse forms of resistance to thinking critically about anxiety-provoking material. Whenever I teach about the Holocaust, I always encounter at least four modes of denial, which I have labeled as 1) idealizing, 2) universalizing, 3) identifying, and 4) assimilating. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we can consider these modes of denial to involve counter-transference reactions to threatening—and at times traumatic—cultural and subjective representations. I

use the term counter-transference here because these resistances to “thinking-through” an issue or event involve the investigator’s (i.e., the student’s) unconscious projection of his or her own conflicts and psychological divisions onto the object of analysis. To clarify this subjective role of counter-transference in the “objective” process of social science writing and teaching, I will begin by examining the ways that my students and writers on the Web responded to the film *Life is Beautiful*.

One of the most interesting aspects of the general response to this film is that some people claim that it was the best film ever made about the Holocaust, while other people argue that the film had nothing to do with this historical trauma. Instead of directly giving my view on this topic, I will interpret other viewers’ reactions as symptomatic of the ways people in postmodern culture respond to the Holocaust and other forms of cultural trauma. In the case of this movie, the most frequent responses that I received in my class were the following:

- 1) It is a comedy, you are not supposed to take it seriously.
- 2) I was very moved by it and it had a profound effect on me.
- 3) It was about a father’s love for his son and it had nothing to do with the war.
- 4) It makes you appreciate the things that you have and how life is really beautiful.
- 5) I didn’t go to analyze it, I just relaxed and escaped.
- 6) People like to see that even in a bad situation you can make fun of things.
- 7) Everyone can relate to the love between a father and a son, so the film made the Holocaust more accessible.
- 8) I don’t know if it had a message, but it was really well-done.
- 9) It’s really about the power of the imagination.
- 10) It helps you to really experience the Holocaust.

Many of these responses center around the idea that this film is a comedy or a fictional form of entertainment, and thus one is not supposed to analyze it or take it too seriously. I categorize these responses as

“universalizing” because they posit that there is no inherent meaning or value to the representation, and thus negate its particular content or value. This is the major mode of resistance to reading that one finds when studying popular culture: Even when a film or television program is dealing with a historical event, people claim that we can learn nothing from it. In fact, many students argue that it is wrong even try to analyze something that is merely there to entertain us. Here we see how our universalizing global entertainment culture may be founded on the nihilistic principle that our common culture is void of any particular meaning or relevance. In other words, what makes universalization possible is that it is based on a shared sense of non-meaning.

In the case of the mass media’s depictions of the Holocaust, this desire to see movies and television shows about historical trauma as pure entertainment can serve the counter-transferential function of blocking any guilt or anxiety that people may feel in relationship to this event. In fact, in his study of jokes, Freud argues that a major aspect of humor and comedy is to present serious issues and desires in a context where they will not be taken seriously by the joke teller and the audience. A comedy like *Life is Beautiful* therefore may turn to “objective” history in order to negate the effect that history may have on us. Of course, one of the problems with this “white-washing” process is that people growing up in our current culture receive a lot of their historical knowledge from these fictional representations. The popular audience therefore tends to turn to historical reconstructions in order to escape history and their connection to the past.

I have labeled this counter-transferential tendency to empty history and culture of critical analysis “universalizing” because it points to the desire to define subjectivity as a universal category void of any content. Thus, what often unites us in contemporary society is a shared popular culture that we claim has no inherent value. As democratic citizens—all equal in front of the law—what we share is often based on a lack of content or identity. Perhaps this is a key to both the positive and negative aspects of our global community and economy. On the one hand, we are all supposed to be free to interpret things how we want, and we are supposed to be treated equally in legal and economic ex-

changes. On the other hand, this equality strips us of our differences and particular identities.<sup>3</sup>

In order to counter this lack of identity in democratic discourse, many people turn to a second type of resistance to critical thinking: identification. We find an instance of this type of resistance when my student claims that: "Every one can relate to the love between a father and a son, so the movie made the Holocaust more accessible." Here we see how people defend against history by concentrating on their own emotional responses to historical representation. In this structure, the subjectivity of the viewer can serve to block any attempt to approach an objective view of culture. Moreover, people's capacity to relate empathetically to certain feelings does not guarantee that they have learned anything about the causes and actualities of the event in question. In fact, this quick form of emotional release often relates to a false sense of dealing with the subject matter at hand.<sup>4</sup> For example, when students state that "It [*Life is Beautiful*] helps you to really experience the Holocaust" or "I was very moved by it and it had a profound effect on me," we must ask what are the real benefits of this type of vicarious experience.

It is important to point out that in all of these identifying responses, the students return to themselves as the source of identity and emotional release.<sup>5</sup> The underlying idea is that it is through the experience of the Other that people gain access to their own true feelings. Here we see the key to the unanalyzed role of counter-transference: when we witness other people's pain, the rush to empathize with their suffering may result in a reactivation of our own unresolved unconscious conflicts and desires. One of the problems with this form of empathy is that it tends to deny the reality and history of the person and events being portrayed in favor of the emotional responses of the viewer. Thus, many of my students argued that the film made them value their own lives more and made them realize that it is always important to stay optimistic.

By refocusing the effect of the film onto the effect that it has on their own selves, these students often end up idealizing both the creator of the film and their own personal values. In this way, a film about historical horror and tragedy can be viewed as a personal story about the greatness of human courage and love. While I do

not deny that these aspects were presented in the movie, I do think that it is very reductive to center one's reaction solely on one's own emotional and personal response. In fact, for many viewers, this film acted as a mirror where they saw their own ideal selves reflected back to them.

This type of idealizing narcissistic reaction often hides the particular experiences of others behind a false wall of universal suffering or celebration. When my students posit that anyone can relate to this story of love and pain, they often imply that the specific historical facts and personal situations are not important. In these acts of universalizing (i.e., the negation of particular experiences), the importance and differences of the Holocaust and other historical events are denied. Furthermore, this process of universalizing is inherent to mass culture, since popular representations must make themselves attractive to a wide range of people and values, and the best way to do this is to deny difference and specificity and try to tell a story to which "anyone" can relate.

In order to appeal to the idealizing tendencies of the universal audience, popular movies often rely on showing off their technical skill and special effects. Yet, by focusing the audience's attention on the aesthetic production of the film, the actual information and the messages that are being communicated are often obscured. Thus, when my student claims that "It's really about the power of imagination," what he/she is saying is that the idealization of the artist is more important than the content of the film. This is not to say that people do not learn from popular culture: on the contrary, they learn a lot. The problem is that people are not always aware of what they are taking in when they watch a film for pure enjoyment or a sense of escape.

In order to teach about the Holocaust and the subject of objectivity in this type of cultural context, one must first actively work against the message that popular culture has no meaning and that art is only for art's sake. To say that a film centered on fascism and life in a concentration camp has no meaning is to deny the value and importance of the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. This mode of postmodern Holocaust denial is neither intentional nor direct, but it still has some of the same effects of more obvious forms of Holocaust denial. For example, this movie was able to

claim the power and prestige of a film about an important historical period without being historical at all.

In fact, the lack of a historical context is often proclaimed by the people who admire the film. One of my students pointed to this “de-contextualizing” aspect of the movie by stating that “It was about a father’s love for his son and it had nothing to do with war.” This denial of the historical specificity of the film relates to the general way that our culture rips events and symbols out of their original contexts and places them in new contexts. In order to stress the fictional and adaptive nature of many cultural representations, I call this mode of resistance “assimilating.” To assimilate a symbol or event is not only to absorb something into a new context but also to play upon recognizable themes and attributes for a generalized audience. Likewise, the person who tries to assimilate is someone who attempts to mimic the dominant characteristics and beliefs of a given culture. In order to take on these borrowed attributes, the assimilator first has to remove these signs and symbols from their original context and re-deploy them in a new context.

In my class on the Holocaust, I used this model of assimilation in order to discuss the dominant modes of representation in our current popular culture and to help my students analyze their own resistances to thinking about cultural and subjective traumatic experiences. Like many other teachers who use popular culture in their classes, I have found that sometimes the best way to deal with very difficult social and emotional issues is to approach them first in a fictional representation and then see how other people have responded to these representations before dealing with the class’s own subjective reactions. In order to perform this distancing move in my class, I had my students read and analyze discussions of popular culture and the Holocaust that were circulated on the World Wide Web.

### THE WORLD WIDE WEB OF HOLOCAUST DENIAL

The first site we examined in my class was the Yahoo! User’s group discussion of *Life is Beautiful*, where we found a wide range of responses to this film that echoed many of the statements my students had previously made themselves.<sup>6</sup> For example, one writer in this group argued that:

I know it was not realistic . . . . The story showed that man is also capable of purity and goodness, even in the face of evil. We do not know if they were in the camp for a week or a year, where the camp was located, or any of the facts . . . [;] we draw our own conclusions. We do know that pure love exists.

This quote starts by referring to the cultural context of the film: it is not a realistic movie, so we should not think about it in a realistic fashion. In fact, its lack of realism and specificity allows the film to take on a universal appeal. In turn, the universality of the unrealistic picture produces an idealization of love, purity, and goodness in the form of the ideal relationship between the father and the son. Finally, this idealizing process results in an empathic celebration of pure love. The movement of this viewer’s logic therefore passes through the four major forms of denial that I have been discussing. Moreover, this combination of assimilating, universality, idealization, and empathic identification moves the focus of the film and history to the emotional experience of the individual viewer. Of course, one of the major problems with this “counter-transferential” approach is that it often leaves history, critical thinking, and the suffering of others by the roadside.

Yet many of my students and the participants in web discussion groups claimed that the film actually provides a deep understanding of history and the Holocaust. These viewers argued that instead of a quick move to universalize the subject matter and forget about the Holocaust, this form of popular culture allows one to combine important knowledge with personal investment. For example, one response claimed: “The way the movie was directed made you feel as if you were in the camps along with the characters.” In this form of empathic identification, we witness a merging between the audience and the sufferers of history through a process of emotionally re-experiencing the pain of others. Here, we see the power of the counter-transferential experience: the audience/therapist becomes over-whelmed with his/her own emotional state and merges with the object of analysis. Moreover, the web writer above posited that one identifies with the “characters” in the camps and not neces-



sarily with the victims of the Holocaust. In other words, one feels that one is really part of the constructed fiction and not necessarily the events of history.

This empathy with fictional characters may still have the negative effect of blocking all levels of critical thinking and analysis. Even though it is a common idea in postmodern culture that to re-experience something is the same thing as actively learning about it, it is clear from these responses, and the responses of my students, that they may have learned very little about the actual events being depicted in this movie and other popular culture productions.

This use of history in order to not learn about history is evident in many of the comments that I collected with my class. For example, one writer in the Yahoo! User's Group declared:

I think that the reason that I responded to the emotional landscapes that the director created in "Life is Beautiful" as opposed to other films in which the holocaust is portrayed with the focus on the violence and the horror/torture which I tend to shut off from and generally become numb to those types of images (sic).

This writer describes the way that violence in film can undermine the ability of someone to react to the content of the movie by flooding the viewer with overwhelming stimuli; however, one has to question what is learned from a picture that denies the true violence of the history that is being depicted.

As one astute writer in this discussion group pointed out, this act of presenting a violent period of history without much violence is similar to the ways that Guido in the movie tries to protect his son from the horrors of the Holocaust. This discussant posited that the viewer is placed in the same position as the young boy who must be shielded from the true horrors of the camp. She also argued that this way of pacifying the audience is "condescending" and "assumes that a parent—first and foremost—has the power to control and present situations in the way they want to for their children. The whole point about such horrors like the Holocaust is that you can't protect you're (sic) children." This writer did engage in an empathic relationship with the film and the sufferers of the Holocaust,

but she was also able to maintain a level of critical distance and see that the parents at the camps could not protect their children. In fact, she did universalize this point by stating that no one can control what his or her children are going to see; however, this universalization occurred after she recognized the different historical contexts.

In response to this writer's critical comments, many people reacted with outrage and dismissal. One strong proponent of the film declared:

YA AIN'T UNDERSTOOD NOTHIN' OF THE MOVIE! This movie is NOT a movie about the holocaust! It wasn't supposed to show exactly what happened in the camps! Schindler's List did that already! This was supposed not to tell your children that the holocaust was bad, but that LIFE is beautiful, and to always enjoy it!

This statement is based on the idea that there can only be one reading of a film and that reading is determined by the intentions of the idealized director. Furthermore, this writer claims that *Schindler's List* already covered the Holocaust, and thus there is really nothing else to add.

Anyone who has ever taught literature knows that this concentration on the "one intention" of the author is very hard to shake. The idealization of the one meaning of the author usually entails a transferential idealization of the person who understands this singular meaning. Many times this type of argument relies on the idea that history is made by great individuals and not by cultures and group actions. This I-dealizing perspective insists that we should never criticize a work of art; rather, we are supposed to celebrate its greatness and our greatness with which it puts us in touch.

One of the problems with this mode of idealization is that it not only mis-reads history, but it also tends to attack anyone with a critical perspective. Thus, one discussant argued: "You missed the whole sense of the film as it was the intention of Benigni and whoever I heard that saw the film has come to appreciate." This viewer believed that there can only be one meaning for the film, it is based on the intentions of both the author and the audience, and anyone with an alternative view is just blowing hot air. Moreover, we see in this response how idealization helps to shield the

subject from an encounter with an anxiety-producing event by denying the value or import of the real event.

### WRITING ABOUT SUBJECTIVE DENIALS

One of the things that I learned from this class, and our analysis of the different defenses generated in the encounter with the subject of the Holocaust, was that all of the attention regarding Holocaust deniers and anti-Semitic hate groups on the Web has helped us to overlook some of the more subtle forms of prejudice and historical revisionism. By analyzing the ways people interpret popular culture representations of this historical trauma, instead of merely focusing on extreme hate groups, I believe we can gain insight into the possibilities and limitations of teaching about the Holocaust to the broader public.

In order to help my students get in touch with and move beyond their own resistances to thinking and writing about the Holocaust, I first had them write about the various types of denial and subjective responses they found in the Yahoo! group discussion and at an Internet site called *epinions.com*.<sup>7</sup> After reading and writing about the Holocaust for several weeks, my students were shocked by the lack of sensitivity and knowledge shown by the general public regarding anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. What bothered my students the most was the complete lack of historical specificity and information that these comments displayed. For example, the following “epinion” replicates many of the subtle historical distortions circulating on the Web:

Then the war starts, and thus, so does the persecution of Jews. He [Benigni] unfortunately, is one of those taken in, along with his son. In the concentration camp, the kid is hidden away in the over-filled dormitory, so that his father can make sure of his safety. Throughout, he must keep his son's spirits up, and lift him out of his boredom and depression. Thus, this film becomes not just a comedic tale, but a serious drama composed of family bonds and keeping your spirit against all odds.

One of the most commendable aspects of this film is that it was not another war story that was depressing, methodic or violent, but a story that

focuses on characters and personalities, irregardless of whether they are placed in a war situation or not.

Though we see Benigni's depiction of the father go through the most difficult of situations, we see him pull through, and fight back without any bitterness but with invention, intelligence, and comedy. In short, this film focuses on the human character, the human will, and a fathers' (sic) love.

“Life is Beautiful” will make you think exactly what life is really all about, and hopefully by the end, you will realize that life is about protecting and nurturing those closest to you, to the end. I loved this movie, and I hope that you will, too.

This analysis of the film stresses the development of the characters and the important need to protect one's family. However, as my students pointed out, wasn't the Holocaust a situation where families were separated and one could do nothing to protect them? Furthermore, how could one develop one's sense of self in a situation that dehumanized people and stripped them of all sense of dignity and control?

Since this movie and the commentator efface all historical realities and conditions from the Holocaust, it becomes easy for one to project one's own values and desires onto the leading characters. In this sense, it is reasonable for the commentator to praise the father's relationship with his son, but one has to wonder why he also lauds the father's lack of bitterness. In a very subtle way, these comments seem to blame the victims of the Holocaust for being bitter and not as inventive as the father in the film. In fact, many people who lack knowledge concerning this time period wonder why the Jews did not resist their murder and imprisonment. Since this film, and others like it, ask the viewer to identify empathetically with the main characters in a universal story of redemption, it is not unreasonable for the viewers to apply the situation of their own lives to the situation of this very different context. *Life is Beautiful* calls for this simplistic counter-transfential mode of identification by de-contextualizing the setting of its own narration.

It is interesting to note that when people on the Internet did present a negative view of this film, they were quickly attacked for not having a sense of humor



or for being a negative person. Thus, just as the film tries to put a happy face on an unhappy situation, film viewers often demand that their fellow viewers stay positive. This idea is evident in the following opinion:

Poor Roberto Benigni. There has been a terrible backlash against this brilliant actor/director. People said they got sick of seeing him bounce around and kiss everybody. I happen to find him refreshing and funny. Sure, maybe he overdoes it for the cameras, but people must be cynical to hate a person for being "too happy." In much the same way, people who don't appreciate *Life Is Beautiful* for the stunning, heartbreaking film that it is must also be horribly cynical or they just haven't seen the film. Maybe they haven't seen it because they think it is wrong to make light of the Holocaust. But if there was ever a film that takes the Holocaust seriously it is this one. I came away from this film with a greater appreciation of the effects of that war than I had with any other movie. Yes, there was laughter, but the audience knows the laughter that Benigni brings to his child is in order to mask the horror. Nobody in their right mind could possibly think this movie was just about the jokes and "Ha, ha, this concentration camp is so fun, let's all laugh." Anybody who thinks that has to be on crack. When I saw Benigni's face go from playful laughter while talking to his son, to terror and worry as he thought about what was really happening, I realized that I was watching one of the greatest films ever made. The message of the film, that it's important to remember that life is beautiful even under the worst of circumstances, is perhaps too positive a message for some people to handle. We're so used to wallowing in our misery that we have forgotten how to find happiness. The critics of this film's humorous aspect would do well to remember not to take themselves so seriously and that humor is often a healing agent.

At one moment this writer claims that the film is not a comedy, and then she goes on to attack people for not being able to take a joke. One possible reason for this contradiction is that she wants to defend this film against her own unconscious awareness that it may not be a good idea to turn the Holocaust into a comedy.

Moreover, her desire to criticize anyone who criticizes the film points to a central aspect of our current culture: We often see that the person who points to a particular social or cultural problem becomes labeled as the problem. Thus, feminists are called sexists for pointing out gender disparities, and critics of racism are called racists for showing how race still functions in America. In the case of the Holocaust, people who criticize a Holocaust film or museum are called anti-Semitic.

Of course, one of the biggest problems with the film and the comment above is the notion that the Holocaust should be used as a situation to prove that life is great. Perhaps as a counter-transferral defense against despair, people want to see goodness and happiness in a place where they did not belong or were not even possible. Or one could argue that people are tired of different ethnic groups complaining about their prior bad treatment, and so the dominant group wants the dominated groups just to be positive and forget the negative things that have happened in the past.<sup>8</sup>

In one of the more astute comments in this web discussion, we see how a person's prior knowledge of the Holocaust affects the way he/she views popular culture representations of this event:

I fear that this movie was critic-proof for several reasons, not the least of which being that writing a bad review of it will most likely be seen as approving of the Holocaust in some fashion. Let me just say right now that I am in no way disparaging the concentration camps or what happened there—I believe it, I am unable to comprehend it, and that's precisely why this movie left such a bad taste in my mouth. It is a dangerous, dangerous thing to make an allegory out of the Holocaust, and yet Benigni thought it would be in some way moving to deemphasize the horrific details of the camps and focus instead on one man's devotion to his son. Make no mistake, this is Holocaust-lite—read Primo Levi's "Survival in Auschwitz" to get an inkling of what it was *\*really\** like. I'll say it again I cannot comprehend the inhumanity of what took place during the war, and no one who wasn't there can either. So why is it OK for Benigni to make a movie that depicts the camps as a place where chil-

dren could survive and piles of bodies were only dimly visible in the mist? The tremendous outpouring of praise that this movie got was a disturbing indication of how much people want to believe these scenes. I think that by serving up Holocaust Lite, Benigni actually made this monstrous, inconceivable thing accessible to the masses, suddenly palatable, like watered-down hot sauce. What most of us were unable to face was presented to us in a neat, digestible package, complete with humor and a “happy” ending to make it go down smoothly. Shouldn’t this be frightening? Shouldn’t we all walk away from a movie about the Holocaust sick and exhausted with grief? Should it be permissible (sic) to combine such elements this way? This is one of the greatest crimes against humanity in the history of the world - genocide does not deserve to be sugar-coated.

This comment begins by arguing that one can be critical of this film and still not be a Holocaust denier. It is clear that this defensive position is derived from the fear that one should not go against popular opinion. Yet this commentator does brave the storm, and we can see how his argument derives in part from his reading of Primo Levi’s autobiographical text. In other words, unlike many of the other discussants, he does not compare this film to other pop culture Holocaust representations; rather he relates *Life is Beautiful* to a novel that is full of real details and historical contexts. I am not arguing here that film is by definition inferior to books, but this commentary does show how a book can provide for both a more accurate description of a historical context and still leave space for the limits of representation.<sup>9</sup>

In response to this person’s criticism of the film, he did indeed receive many negative comments. One of the people who disagreed with him also turned to the field of literature to make her argument:

Guido knew and we knew the horrors of the camp but he was determined that his son would not know them. I’ve read many, many books on the Holocaust and most of the victims tried to believe in the basic goodness of man (Anne Frank is the most quoted example). I don’t feel this was trivial-

ized or made light of. In fact the contrast between what Guido told his son and the truth was painfully obvious to all but Joshua, a four or five year old boy. It is that contrast that shows the horrors. I’m sorry to disagree with you on this so strongly. You have a definite right to your opinion and I hope you will consider my comments. Thanks! I’m sorry to disagree with you so totally, Mr. Alexander, but I couldn’t pass your review and not say something. This comment is in part inspired by *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which I would argue does present a more positive image of human beings than most novelistic depictions of the Holocaust. For I think it would be untrue to say that most novels concerning the Holocaust depict the Christian (?) message of the essential goodness of all human beings.

In another critical response to the discussant’s negative criticism of this film, we find a different usage of literature to defend the movie:

There are many books and movies on the ins and outs of concentration camps and the Holocaust, so we pretty much know how bad the Holocaust was. This was supposed to be a different take on it. And in response to your argument that critics were afraid to say anything negative about it, I refer you to “Jakob the Liar”. Just wanted to tell you, and I also respect your opinion. I like people who break away from the pack. Keep up the good opinions.

Here we are told that everyone knows enough about the Holocaust already, and so we do not need any more films or books on this subject matter. And like the previous writer, this discussant honors the right of everyone to his or her free opinion. In fact, this writer praises the critic for not conforming to the dominant view of this film. Once again, we find in these statements a curious blend of the celebration of individualism, the universal right to free speech, and a desire to stop learning about history.

In many ways, the World Wide Web is founded on these principles of free speech, individualism, and de-contextualized history, and thus it is often hard to find a thoughtful discussion of the Holocaust on the Internet. The Holocaust itself represents a historical situa-

tion where individualism and free speech were most often curtailed or destroyed. The medium of the Web thus is in conflict with the content of the Holocaust, and in this sense, there is almost an inherent inability to discuss the Holocaust and its representations on the Internet and also in film.

I do not want to give the reader the impression that I consider all discussion on the Web to be useless and that it is impossible to represent the Holocaust in film or in discussion groups. In fact, there are many informative sites on the Web. What I do want to argue is that psychoanalysis can offer us language and theory to help us come to terms with our subjective desires to deny the traumatic aspects of our personal and social histories. As teachers and students, we need to be constantly aware of our tendency to universalize, identify, assimilate, and idealize threatening representations and experiences. By taking into account these subjective forces shaping our perceptions, we can more effectively approach the scientific notion of objectivity. In other terms, objectivity does not come from denying subjectivity; rather it is approached by taking subjectivity into account.

I found in my class that in order to get my students to deal with the historical actualities of the Holocaust, it was first necessary to work through their subjective responses and defensive reactions to traumatic stimuli. Ironically, this move was made easier once I openly dealt with my own defensive responses to the students' resistances. By admitting that I was not effective in my handling of some of the students' reactions, I opened a door for students to reveal that they felt I was blaming them for the Holocaust. What we then clarified as a class was the sense that the hopelessness of the people in the Holocaust made all of us feel hopeless, and thus we needed to defend against this overwhelming sense of anxiety by projecting onto each other our own rejected anxiety and primitive feelings of being over-whelmed by some incomprehensible force. We also realized in this class that many of us turn to the realm of popular culture to fulfill a need to project unwanted feelings onto fictional characters in a safe and controlled environment.

This desire for a controlled cultural space is often challenged by teachers who want their students to study anxiety-provoking subject matter. With the re-

cent interest in trauma studies, there is an even greater need for teachers and students to be aware of the unconscious counter-transferences that often circulate unchecked in classrooms. A psychoanalytic pedagogy can help teachers and students to analyze and contain the various defenses and resistances that often block the desire for a more objective and scientific approach to various threatening cultural issues.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I want to thank Lynne Layton and Marcia Ian for their help with this essay.

<sup>2</sup>As Lynne Layton has pointed out to me, this act of self-disclosure is a key topic in many current psychoanalytic discussions of counter-transference. Counter-transference pushes the analyst to move beyond Freud's notion of analytic neutrality in order to disclose the analyst's own unconscious resistances to the patient's discourse.

<sup>3</sup>In *Looking Awry*, Slavoj Žižek argues that this universal form is void of content and represents the Cartesian subject of the unconscious.

<sup>4</sup>I do not want to discount the importance of emotion and empathy in the public responses to popular culture. What I do want to argue is that these affective responses can at times block the critical analysis of culture and so they must be considered to be necessary but not sufficient modes of response.

<sup>5</sup>This glorification of the personal emotional response to the pain of others can be derived from a faulty understanding of psychotherapy. Moreover, this mode of empathy has become a major form of popular entertainment.

<sup>6</sup>This discussion group can be accessed on the web at: <http://post.messages.yahoo.com/bbs?action=1&tid=hv1800019119f0&cid=22198844&prop=movies:&pt=movies&p=movies.yahoo.com/shop%3fd=hv%26id=1800019119%26cf=info>.

<sup>7</sup>This site can be found at: <http://www.epinions.com/mvie-review-2945-39C0EEF-38D1D893-prod4?temp=comments.html>.

<sup>8</sup>In *Daddy's Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture*, Valerie Walkerdine uses psychoanalytic theory and social theory to discuss popular culture in an effective manner.

<sup>9</sup>Many people would argue that the film *Shoah* does successfully bridge this gap between historical knowledge and the failures of representation.

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