

# The Rhetoric of Shimon Wincelberg's *Resort '76* and the Aesthetics of Atrocity in Drama of the Holocaust

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## Summary

The question of whether or not it is proper to create fictionalised works of art out of traumatic episodes of human history such as the Nazi Holocaust of the 2nd World or the Rwandan genocide of 1994 is one which continues to trouble mankind.

This dilemma was famously posed by Theodor Adorno (1965) and Lawrence Langer (1975) when they questioned the potential dangers and the morality of "re-victimising the victim" (Hove 2015) through the production and propagation of artistic works that depict intense human suffering such as that which is wrought by genocide. Although Langer poses the question; is it possible and ethical to depict human tragedy without trivialising or exploiting the scale of the suffering and; what moral responsibility do artists have in undertaking such a task, he nevertheless suggests the adoption of an 'aesthetics of atrocity' which will enable these art forms to present landscapes of despair in such a way as to coax the reader into a mixture of credulity and complicity even as they also assist humanity to engage and transcend these tragic events in a more positive way.

## Opsomming

Daar word steeds geworstel met die knellende vraag of dit reg is om gefiksionaliseerde kuns te skep uit traumatiese gebeure in die geskiedenis van die mens, byvoorbeeld die Jodeslagting deur die Nazi's in die Tweede Wêreldoorlog of die volksmoord in Rwanda in 1994.

Hierdie dilemma is geopper deur Theodor Adorno (1965) en Lawrence Langer (1975). Die kwessie het veral bekend geword toe Adorno en Langer die potensiele gevare van en moraliteit verbonde aan die "herviktimisering van die slagoffer" (Hove 2015) deur die produksie en propagering van kuns wat intense menslike lyding uitbeeld, bevraagteken het. 'n Voorbeeld van die menslike lyding wat hier ter sprake is, is die lyding wat deur volksmoord meegebring word. Langer vraof dit moontlik en eties is om menslike tragedie uit te beeld sonder om die omvang van lyding te trivialiseer of uit te buit en wat kunstenaars se morele verantwoordelikheid is wanneer so 'n taak aangepak word. Hy stel voor dat 'n "estetika van gruweldade" aanvaar word. So 'n estetika kan dit vir kunsvorme moontlik maak om landskappe van wanhoop op so 'n wyse weer te gee dat lesers dit glo en uiteindelik hul aandagigheid erken, terwyl dit die mensdom ook help om op 'n positiewe wyse met hierdie tragiese gebeure om te gaan en dit te bowe te kom.

In this article I analyse *Resort '76*, a Holocaust play, by Shimon Wincelberg. I use this play as an example of how the conundrum famously raised by Langer and Adorno can be navigated successfully using the rhetoric of the aesthetics of atrocity. In this play, Wincelberg presents a naturalistic setting of hopelessness and despair for the victims of the Nazi Holocaust with the ultimate purpose to build hope. I argue that Wincelberg skilfully achieves the dual feat of mining one of the saddest and most tragic episodes of human history as he also uses his art as a veritable vehicle with which to articulate collective hope and to demonstrate the ultimate triumph of the human spirit over the worst depths of tragedy and despair.

I further argue that Wincelberg adopts the rhetoric of the aesthetics of atrocity in order to disrupt commonly held notions of the Nazi Holocaust as having preyed on essentially helpless and passive victims.

## Introduction

Thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them... Thou shalt consume all the people which the lord thy God shall deliver thee, thine eye shall have no pity upon them (Deuteronomy 7: 2).

Slay the idolators wherever you find them (The Koran 9: 5).

I deliberately begin this article with a pair of epigraphs taken from two world religions with the widest global reach. I use these epigraphs in order to demonstrate the extent to which the scourge of genocide and humanity's proclivity towards the genocidal is something that has been with us from time immemorial. I also use these two epigraphs in order to indicate just how far the tendency to destruction and mass murder is easily hemmed in with humanity's most profound spiritual beliefs. The first one is taken from the Holy Bible while the second is a quotation from Islam's Holy Koran.

A number of historians and critics who have studied genocide identify its long history as one which dates back from antiquity and biblical times right up to the present (Skloot 1982; Jones 2006; Kiernan 2007; May 2010).

As a concept, the world's first working definition of genocide was coined by a Polish-Jewish jurist, Raphael Lemkin (himself a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust), sometime during the 1930s when he referred to it as "the premeditated destruction of national, racial, religious and social —". Lemkin's definition was later to be codified in the United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide in 1948 where it was defined as "an attempt at extermination, whether partial or complete (Quoted in Kiernan 2007: 10) [Emphasis added]:

... acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, racial, ethnical or religious group, as such”.

I find the inclusion of the three terms “attempt”, “partial” and “complete” in the United Nations’ definition particularly useful for my analysis which follows below in that the play I analyse in this article does not necessarily depict the mass murder of German (and other) Jews as one would (rightly or wrongly) be inclined to anticipate in drama that is based on the phenomenon of genocide. As Kiernan (2007) observes, genocide need not be violent. As will be demonstrated in my analysis below, it can also encompass the imposition of social and living conditions that make it difficult to sustain a group’s existence, including the deliberate infliction of physical or mental anguish with the intention to break a people’s spirit.

In order to illustrate my point, I analyse a play from the theatre of the Nazi Holocaust, namely Shimon Wincelberg’s *Resort ’76*. I analyse the rhetoric of Wincelberg’s Holocaust play as an illustrative example of what Lawrence Langer (1975) refers to as the “aesthetics of atrocity” in presenting art forms that have the potential to “re-victimise the victim” through the recreation (whether factual or fictional) of human trauma such as we encounter in the theatre of the Nazi Holocaust during the 2nd World War and the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

### **The Dilemma of Re-victimising the Victim**

While the study of genocide and its accompanying human tragedies across space and time has interested generations since time immemorial; lawyers, historians, artists, sociologists and literary critics have often agonised over the meaning and morality of reproducing human trauma in any form (Schumacher 1998; Jones 2006; Kiernan 2007; May 2010; Samuel 2010; Short 2010; Hove 2014). This moral dilemma has been at its keenest in legal and sociological contexts where victims are often expected to recount or reproduce accounts of their victimisation and their trauma. This dilemma is also felt in the artistic domain (whether documentary or fictitious) when artists and critics reproduce such traumatic historical events. Lawyers, sociologists and literary critics refer collectively to reproductions of trauma as acts of “re-victimising the victim”. The concept of “re-victimising the victim” occurs when instances of trauma are re-enacted, discussed or analysed in ways that glamorise tragic events or are likely to revisit pain on the original victims of that trauma (Hove 2014).

The dilemma surrounding artistic re-enactments of trauma arising from genocide was famously posed by Theodor Adorno (1965) and Lawrence Langer (1975) when they questioned the potential dangers and the morality of producing and propagating works of art that depict intense human suffering

such as that which is wrought by genocide. Although Langer posed the questions; is it possible and ethical to depict human tragedy without trivialising or exploiting the scale of the suffering and; what are the moral responsibilities of the artist when undertaking such a task, he nevertheless suggested the adoption of what he referred to as an “aesthetics of atrocity”. Such a strategy would enable these art forms to present landscapes of despair in ways that would uplift the human spirit through hope rather than despair. Langer proposed his aesthetics of atrocity as a technique that would move the reader to credulity as it simultaneously implicated him/her in the gravity and atrocity of the events so depicted. By so doing, adopting the rhetoric of the aesthetics of atrocity would force humanity to engage and to transcend the artistic treatment of tragic events in human history in a more positive way.

It is significant to note that the extent of the dilemma surrounding the meaning and morality of depicting human tragedy and genocide may vary depending on the art form that is used. This is because literature and fine art are essentially inanimate and passive art forms with which the reader or viewer engages privately unlike film, television and the theatre. There is therefore a significant difference between literature and fine art on the one hand, and film, television and live theatre on the other in the sense that the latter are essentially social art forms (i.e., they involve *methexis* or group sharing) in ways that can accentuate a much greater sense of shock and awe. As live and animate art forms, theatre, film and television can easily approximate lived reality in potentially awe-inspiring ways thereby increasing their capacity to shock the viewer in some very significant ways compared to literature and fine art whose consumption tends to be more private.

Like others before and after him, Robert Skloot (1982) engages the meaning and moral dilemma of using drama and theatre to depict traumatic historical experience. Skloot trains his primary focus on the Nazi Holocaust. He identifies two major questions that are intertwined with that of the basic morality of depicting trauma through art. These are as follows: is it possible for the Holocaust to be dealt with in works of art; and if it is, will the experience be cheapened, trivialised and/or exploited? (Skloot 2008). In this article I equally posit that the dilemma associated with the meaning and morality of depicting traumatic human experience through art is rendered particularly more poignant by the sociality and live nature of drama as an art form. Drama uses live human actors who perform in front of live human beings in ways that can easily whip up latent emotions in some very profound ways. I therefore argue that in light of the above, theatrical depictions of the Nazi Holocaust can be easily worsened by the morbidity of the events depicted, especially in terms of the suffering [death] and squalor on a massive scale such as we find in Wincelberg’s *Resort ’76*.

In a seminal text on the origins of genocide, Jones (2006: xix) compares studies and engagements with genocide as something that approximates “looking into the abyss”. Jones’ comparison not only attests to the horrors and

morbidity of genocide history, art and literature but it also echoes the efficacy and attractiveness of adopting the rhetoric of Langer's aesthetics of atrocity in presenting genocide art as I seek to demonstrate in the analysis which follows below.

### ***Resort '76* and the Aesthetics of Atrocity**

To avoid the obfuscation of the gravity of the issues at hand, Shimon Wincelberg's *Resort '76* dispenses with unnecessary symbolism and stylisation in order to appeal to the conscience of the reader/viewer more directly. The reader is moved to credulity as he/she is simultaneously implicated in the atrocities of the Holocaust by the play's presentation of a snapshot of life inside a factory in which the play's helpless characters find themselves. *Resort '76* follows a simple linear plot structure in the form of Three-Acts. In line with the playwright's conscious desire not to obfuscate the material at hand, the play adopts the style of naturalism, something which allows the playwright to delineate the austerity, sadness, horror and abject situation of Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Also, in line with the notion of presenting a snapshot of life in the ghettos during the Holocaust, the play maintains close fidelity with the three unities of Time, Place and Action where all the events take place within the factory shell within a time-span of no more than half a day. The duration or time of the events is from Sunday afternoon to the next Monday morning, the setting or place of events is inside a small factory located in a Nazi ghetto, and all the action revolves around the various characters' personal rituals, strategies and will to survive even as they are surrounded by the ever-present threat of death and annihilation.

Like most other plays that are based on historical genocides and the Nazi Holocaust, Wincelberg's play does not necessarily depict the mass murders that the reader has come to associate with the event. Rather, the events depicted in this play fall under Article 2 of the United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide of 1948 Sections *a* to *c* which describes physical genocide as not only killing but violence, i.e., "causing serious bodily or mental harm" or "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction" (Quoted in Kiernan 2007: 13).

Wincelberg's play is set inside a factory in a labour camp that is located in a Nazi ghetto in the Polish city of Lodz during the Second World War. The play presents a motley group of Jewish victims of the Nazis who beside living and working in sub-human conditions, are also surrounded by the ever-present threat of violence, death and annihilation at the hands of the Nazis.

The characters in Wincelberg's play constitute a representative spectrum of helpless Jewish citizens from different walks of life all of who are in the prime of their lives even as they face the ever-present threat of death. Their ages

range from Beryl who at thirteen is barely out of childhood to Yablonka and Hauptmann who are in their sixties. It is the ever-present threat of death and violence, which allows the playwright to deploy the rhetoric of the aesthetics of atrocity in order to implicate the reader or the viewer in the crime of genocide as the playwright simultaneously demonstrates the ultimate triumph of the human spirit in times of adversity.

Contrary to the abject poverty and suffering that is depicted here, Wincelberg chooses to give the title *Resort '76* to the play. The contrast between the play's misleading title as a haven of abundance, peace and joy and its actual reality as a place of abject suffering, poverty and death is in sync with the way in which all the characters refuse to give in or to give up, choosing to scheme for survival rather than to succumb to the ever-present threat of death.

Throughout the play, Wincelberg sustains the abject poverty and hopeless situation of his motley group of characters by using images which constantly bring to mind extreme suffering, poverty and deprivation. The reader/viewer is immediately led into the scene by the play's opening stage directions which introduce a bleak setting inside the factory and the labour camp as follows (1982: 43):

[The lights] Fade up on the damaged horizon of an industrial city. Drooping electric wires, gap-toothed housetops and factory chimneys, a sullen, sunless sky.

Sounds: Some sour, derisive strains on a harmonica ... the dying wail of an air-raid siren ... the labored chug of a railroad engine ... a jaunty old Prussian marching song ... slivers of wind knifing through the bones ....

Fade up on a snow-encrusted brick wall chipped and scarred by bullets and shell fragments .... Behind the wall, the upper story of a small, cracked, fire-smudged factory building.

Soon after this graphically bleak description of the play's basic given circumstances in terms of setting (which is repeated in varying degrees throughout the play), there follows the description of Yablonka, one of the play's characters and residents of the factory slum who is (1982: 44):

Dressed somewhat less adequately than a scarecrow .... He walks on his wooden-soled shoes like a man furtively kicking dirt into his open grave.... His skin, where the dye-stains permit, is transparent, as though it enclosed little more than bones and water.

These abject surroundings in terms of setting (as described above) and the cadaverous look of the play's characters (as represented by Yablonka and later on Esther who is described as "a skeletal young woman") all combine to create the impression that hope and life cannot be sustained, last long or triumph in these circumstances of pervasive death and destruction. The enduring images of hopelessness, death and destruction are carried forward

into the description of the interior of *Resort '76*. The factory interior does not have “a touch of color anywhere” apart from “shades of muddy gray”. These images of an austere lifelessness are further sustained with more metaphors suggesting death and a dysfunctional environment of impotence in which the factory interior also houses “the corpse of a bicycle” and flower pots “some of which have begun to yield a sickly gray leaf here and there” (1982: 48).

In the midst of these graphic descriptions of abject surroundings and the ever-present threat of death and annihilation, Wincelberg forces the reader to ask him/herself: can the inhabitants of these ghettos survive and if so for how long? Similarly, what could possibly be the purpose of life under these abject conditions? Having implicated and forced the reader to make these considerations, Wincelberg then employs the rhetoric of the aesthetics of atrocity in order to salvage hope and a will to survive for this motley group of condemned characters. In other words, the playwright uses the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust as depicted in *Resort '76* in order to encourage the reader or viewer to introspect into the depths of suffering that can be inflicted on one set of humans by another on the basis of racial and cultural prejudice. Having done so, Wincelberg then uses the constant scheming to survive and the unbreakable spirit of the play's inhabitants to encourage the reader to introspect into the deepest meaning of life, hope and self-belief.

In order to present the ever-present menace and capricious nature of the Nazi killing machine during the Holocaust, the SS patrols (i.e., the German enforcement officers during the Holocaust and the Second World War) are never made visible on stage. They only lurk menacingly in the background as we find after Beryl (Schnur's child student of Jewish rituals inside the factory building) is captured and threatened with arrest, for which he gives away Schnur's location and personal details. The menace of the SS patrols is further worsened by the constant sound of freight trains going past the factory. Each time a freight train goes past *Resort '76*, there are visible signs of palpable and mortal fear and alarm among the factory inhabitants. This is not least because of the significance of trains during the Holocaust. During the Nazi Holocaust freight trains were not only used to transport Jewish victims to the concentration camps but they were also used as gas chambers in which Jewish victims were gassed and incinerated to their deaths. The morbid circumstances surrounding Wincelberg's characters is further accentuated by the play's deployment of a combination of dark humour and the macabre. These characters work in a factory that is in the business of packing human hair (presumably salvaged from the gas chambers) as it also processes blood-stained clothes of the dead from the death chambers. In the midst of it all, children play in the streets of the ghetto down below kicking around a corpse. Even the death of Krause by suicide towards the end of the play is treated just as callously and without reverence by the inhabitants of the factory shell, with Yablonka making the following statement directed at Blaustain as the two of them transport the corpse of Krause out of the factory: “I tell you, it's a bad

world when you can no longer tell the difference between a funeral and a garbage collection” (1982: 110). It comes as little wonder then that Yablonka has begun to exist in a liminal state in which he is neither sure of his personal identity nor whether he is dead or alive because he is constantly surrounded by these morbid images of death and the macabre. This is exposed during a conversation with Krause when he makes the following statement (1982: 47):

YABLONKA: There’s some uncertainty about my age, because I had a brother who looked just like me, and to this day even I am not sure which one of us was shot during the roundup. It could be I’m the one who’s dead, and my mother didn’t have the heart to tell me. [*His triumphant cackle is cut short by the sound of a train whistle. YABLONKA listens, coiled up with anxiety, until it has faded*].

Having implicated the reader by delineating a pervasive atmosphere of sparse resources, desolate reality, squalor and oppressive destitution, which is self-evident through the stage directions even before the first line of dialogue is uttered in the play, Wincelberg’s rhetoric then places a group of seemingly helpless characters in the midst of these adverse genocidal conditions. Surprisingly however, these characters refuse to have their spirits broken by these conditions.

Damien Short has argued that the dominant understanding of genocide as mass killing is sociologically inadequate as it fails to account for the “importance of culture and social death to the concept of genocide” (2010: 831). Short’s observation gains currency when examined closely with Wincelberg’s characters’ steadfast refusal to have their deeply held cultural traditions and beliefs snuffed out by the Nazis. This comes across through the story of Schnur and his child apprentice Beryl whom he teaches the rituals of Jewish animal slaughter in spite of the perils that will certainly come with being discovered by the SS, which has outlawed all Jewish cultural practices in the ghettos. During the Nazi occupation, the observance of Jewish cultural practices and beliefs was an offence that was punishable by death. In spite of it all, Schnur and his compatriots refuse to allow their spirits to be broken, opting to choose life and their long-held cultural traditions and beliefs rather than oppression. It is also in the midst of these perils that the inhabitants of Resort ’76 choose to be driven by an abiding sense of community, compassion, trust and sacrifice even if it means that this is occasionally interspersed with bouts of dark humour as a coping mechanism such as we see each time Blaustain jokes about death or when Hupert the charlatan constantly passes himself off as an exiled American film director. In the midst of the death and destruction wrought by genocide, Hupert’s false consciousness is hemmed in with the rhetoric of the aesthetics of atrocity in much the same way as all the other characters are driven by an abiding optimism to survive the Holocaust against all odds.



Because the rhetoric of the aesthetics of atrocity has to do with the ability to depict genocidal experience in such a way as to enable the reader or viewer to transcend the experience and create hope out of adversity, the characters in Wincelberg's *Resort '76* are each on a quest that seems to defy the odds which are stacked against each one of them. However, as Skloot (1982) correctly observes, all the characters are caught in a moment or a dilemma when an action must be taken which has ethical implications of enormous proportions. I argue that the enormity of these dilemmas and the consequences of the decisions to be made is augmented by the abject conditions of violence and the ever-present threat of death which surrounds these characters. The engineer Blaustain and his ailing and pregnant wife Esther have to grapple with the decision on whether it is morally right or wrong to give birth to the baby that Esther is carrying in the current circumstances. Whether or not Esther's pregnancy is allowed to run its full term (which it eventually does) becomes testimony to the triumph of life and hope in the throes of genocidal adversity. Parallel to Blaustain and Esther's dilemma is whether or not Blaustain must agree to escape with his sister Anya in order to join the partisans (an underground Jewish resistance movement during the Second World War) and in that process abandon his ailing and pregnant wife Esther. In the end Blaustain chooses to stay with his pregnant wife.

It has been observed that those who perpetrate genocide are often driven by the combination of a desire to restore a utopia that is predicated on arresting the perceived decline of pure origins. In such instances, acts of genocide are justified on the basis of the need to restore cultural purity and racial order. From this perspective, genocide is then viewed as a form of paying homage to cults of antiquity when most human societies lived in splendid isolation, sealed off from racial or cultural contamination (Jones 2006; Kiernan 2007). It is this context that Krause is banished to Resort '76 by the Nazi authorities following accusations that he may have Jewish blood on his mother's side. When Krause is banished to Resort '76 by the Nazi authorities, the rest of the factory inhabitants are forced to make a decision on whether or not to accept him in their midst fearing that he may be a German spy after all. However, even though the factory inhabitants confirm the triumph of the human spirit by choosing to accept Krause in their midst in spite of the dangers that are fraught with taking that decision, Krause himself has so internalised the racial and cultural inferiority of the people in the habitat of his banishment that he sadly chooses to commit suicide rather than to endure. For Schnur and his child apprentice Beryl, a decision has to be taken as to whether it is safe or unsafe to continue to impart Jewish rites to the child apprentice given that this may lead to certain death upon discovery by the Nazi authorities. As in all other instances, Schnur's tenacious belief in the continued propagation of Jewish tradition and culture triumphs over the threat of oppressive tendencies by the Nazis.

The last dilemma that is faced by Wincelberg's characters is a collective one. It has to do with the fate of a recently captured stray cat which they keep inside the factory shell. The cat becomes a central point of disagreement and debate among all the inhabitants as each one of them seems to have an idea about what ought to be done with the cat. For instance, Blaustain is not willing to shoulder the risk of harbouring the cat on behalf of Madame Hershkovitch who found it for fear of being discovered by the Nazi authorities, although he is also aware that the cat could be easily exchanged for a safe job as clerk at the Ration Board. In the midst of the starvation and penury which characterises the factory, the other residents such as Hauptmann would rather have the cat skewered for dinner while Yablonka wants to exchange it for increased bread rations. The cat is finally set free by Blaustain, which act marks the conclusion of the play as Yablonka makes the following valedictory statement (1982: 112):

YABLONKA: Go ... go in peace ... Enjoy the sunshine ... and tell the other animals ... tell them what it was like to be a Jew.

Significantly too, and in line with Wincelberg's adoption of the rhetoric of the aesthetics of atrocity, the play's closing stage directions mark a radical departure from the bleak imagery of death and destruction that has previously characterised the play's entire length and breadth. The play closes on a more positive note of hope and redemption as: "For a long moment, the cat remains on the window sill, *purring happily in the golden morning sun*" [Emphasis added] (1982: 112).

## Conclusion

In this article I have analysed Shimon Wincelberg's *Resort '76* as an illustrative example of a genocide play that is based on the Nazi Holocaust in which the playwright grapples with the need to maintain historical accuracy using the fictional form as he simultaneously deploys the rhetoric of Langer (1975)'s aesthetics of atrocity in order to portray the triumph of the human spirit in times of adversity.

Wincelberg uses the dramatic style of naturalism in order to paint a bleak picture of the intense suffering and hopelessness that was visited upon the victims of the Nazi Holocaust. Having mined this sad and tragic episode of human history as a source for his art, the playwright then presents a group of characters who refuse to succumb to their abject situation in spite of the enormity of the odds which are stacked against them. This is what constitutes the aesthetics of atrocity as articulated by Lawrence Langer in this play. As this analysis has sought to demonstrate in the preceding sections, the aesthetics of atrocity is a strategy of artistic representation, which achieves the effect of implicating the reader in the commission of horrendous acts as it

simultaneously allows both the reader and the characters so depicted to transcend their hopelessness and recuperate a sense of collective hope and survival in the face of adversity. The rhetoric of the aesthetics of atrocity enables the human spirit to triumph against seemingly insurmountable odds of mindless violence, bestiality, death and the ever-present threat of death and annihilation such as we find in Wincelberg's Holocaust play *Resort '76*.

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