

Keywords: Counterfactuals, Hitler, Nazism, Holocaust, Normalization, Jokes, Sontag, Freud

Abstract: In this review essay I explore the dynamics of “normalization” in historical and fictional depictions of the National Socialist past, examining both the “organic” normalization of catastrophic events through the passage of time, and efforts to normalize the Nazi past through aesthetics. Focusing on Gavriel Rosenfeld’s *Hi, Hitler: How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture*, I argue against many dimensions of Rosenfeld’s account of normalization, particularly his claim that aesthetic normalization can undermine our moral judgments regarding the Holocaust. Drawing on Sigmund Freud on jokes, and Susan Sontag on camp aesthetics, I argue that every effort to normalize the Holocaust, especially ones that work through humor and jokes (a major topic of Rosenfeld’s book), actually maintain the Holocaust’s status as a series of historical events resistant to “normalization.” If “normalization” is a process through which extraordinary, or morally charged, historical events lose their moral charge, then aesthetic efforts to normalize the Holocaust actually re-inscribe the special moral status that Rosenfeld believes they erase.

Notes on Camps, or, Counterfactual Führers and the Structure of the Joke

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Works Reviewed:

Gavriel Rosenfeld, *Hi, Hitler: How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015).

“The continuity of history lies not in the permanence of ideal substances but rather in the inheritance of problems.”

– Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*

“Are you fucking kidding me? I have been to the Burn twelve times! Some “tourist” will get my tickets! Do you know how epic this camp is going to be? We’ll blow Space Cowboys off the playa!.... Every Burner will know the name of Hitler!”

– *Downfall* parody YouTube clip, “Hitler Finds Out About [the] Burning Man Ticket Lottery,”

Has Hitler become a “normal” historical figure, and thus somehow inoffensive, seven decades past his suicide on April 30th, 1945? I ask myself this in 2016, as I watch him throw a tantrum in his bunker in Berlin. To be more precise, I’m watching the actor

Bruno Ganz, in the 2004 film *Downfall*, which examines Hitler's last days, the Führer suffering the psychic consequences of military defeat. But I'm not actually watching *Downfall*. I'm watching a parody clip of the film, via the website YouTube. It is called "Hitler Finds Out About [the] Burning Man Ticket Lottery," just one of a wide range of *Downfall* parodies available. For anyone trying to subject this clip to serious interpretation, the local language matters: Burning Man is the annual festival of art, music, and much more, held in Black Rock City, Nevada, and named after a giant wooden statue of a man that is lit on fire at a high point in the festival. It has been the North American counterculture's most famous party for over two decades. Ganz's Hitler is re-imagined as a "Burner," someone who regularly attends Burning Man, whose friendship networks are mediated by "the Burn," and who plans a "Camp," a thematic encampment set up by a group of people. He is thwarted not by the military success of the Allies but by a new ticket lottery system, whose introduction angered many Burners, some of whom complained that it was part of a broader pattern of decline for a festival that was growing more corporate, and less countercultural, each year. Like most jokes about Nazis and the Holocaust, this *Downfall* parody triggers a kind of laughter that is magnified by discomfort and guilt, a feedback-loop between giggles and distress. After all, the pun implied by Hitler going to Burning Man must count as a sick joke. Drawing from Freud's understanding of the joke as "sense in nonsense,"¹ Mary Douglas once observed that sick jokes "pla[y] with a reversal of the values of social life."² If so, then the moral dimensions of our social life depend on our ability to recognize certain jokes, as "sick." Writing about

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious* (The Standard Edition, Volume VIII) (London: Hogarth Press, 1960) 12.

² Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception," *Man*, New Series, Vol. 3, No. 3 (September, 1968), pp. 361-376.

a very different kind of camp, Susan Sontag reflected, “I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it.”³

Walter Benjamin claimed “every document of civilization is a document of barbarism.”⁴ Holocaust jokes, and jokes about Nazis more broadly, remind us to place a heavy stress on this *every*. *Downfall* parodies themselves may seem like a droll micro-genre, their offensiveness of no ultimate interest. Nevertheless, while their aesthetic tone is not “high,” they work with complicated source material that has a place in the story of changing perceptions of the Holocaust, and of the Nazi past. In the eyes of some scholars, the original film *Downfall* was part of a relatively recent trend to “normalize” Hitler and Nazism, a trend linked to the Holocaust’s gradual loss of its status as a paradigm-setting genocide.⁵ Like many other films released after 2000, *Downfall* showed Hitler as an older man, beginning to display physical frailty. Still other films, such as the 2002 *Max*, which starred John Cusack as the Jewish art dealer Max Rothman, represented Hitler in the weakness and uncertainty of his youth. Either way, to show Hitler as an old or as a young man, edges towards humanizing him.

“Normalization” aside, we have never lacked for representations of the Holocaust or the Nazi past that unsettle the most black-and-white ways of telling the story. What some describe as the “revision” of the history of WWII and the Holocaust, began scant years after the liberation of Europe. It would be more accurate to say that those histories have been in constant reinterpretation, a process reinvigorated as new archival materials

³ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Picador, 1990) 276.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed. and Harry Zohn trans. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968) 256.

⁵ See in particular the primary subject of this review essay, Gavriel Rosenfeld’s *Hi, Hitler: How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015).

are found, and as new ideological skirmishes flare up, usually around a provocative new book or essay. The notion that WWII had been a “good” war found early challengers among professional historians, such as Charles Beard, as early as the late 1940s, and A.J.P. Taylor’s 1961 *The Origins of the Second World War* divided blame for the war between the Allies and Hitler.⁶ In a similar key, and more recently, the notion of American moral superiority has found challengers, such as when Niall Ferguson implicitly compared the racial state of Nazi Germany with racial discrimination in the United States during the same period.⁷ Related, and perhaps most consequential, are the uniqueness debates, in which books such as Norman Finkelstein’s *The Holocaust Industry* have loomed large, and in which scholars like A. Dirk Moses have done much to uncover the political and psychological contours of the insistence on the Holocaust’s specialness.⁸

At their most ambitious and expansive, “normalization” arguments link recent humanized, or comical, representations of Hitler, to older historiographical trends that “de-centered” the Holocaust and Nazism within the universe of our moral judgment.

When Hitler goes to Burning Man, one might say, the Holocaust has lost its moral power.

⁶ See Charles A. Beard, *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), and Taylor, A.J.P., *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961).

⁷ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

⁸ Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (New York: Verso Books, 2000). A. Dirk Moses, “Revisiting a Founding Assumption of Genocide Studies,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 6:3 (2011), 289-302., “Genocide and the Terror of History,” *Parallax*, 17:4 (2011), 90-108, and “Anxieties in Holocaust and Genocide Studies,” in Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner, and Todd Presner, eds. *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016) 332-354, as well as “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the Racial Century: Genocide of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, 36:4 (2002), 7-36. And see also Amos Goldberg, Thomas J. Kehoe, A. Dirk Moses, Raz Segal, and Martin Shaw, “Israel Charny’s Attack on the Journal of Genocide Research and its Authors: A Response,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 10: Issue 2, 2016. 3-22.

Humorous or humanizing representations of Hitler, according to a strong version of the “normalization” argument, are the opposite of proper Holocaust education, which stresses the exceptional nature of the Holocaust and makes it an exemplary negative lesson. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, author of the 2015 book *Hi, Hitler*, may have devoted more time and energy to studying the “normalization” of the Holocaust and the Nazi past, as well as counterfactuals about the Holocaust, than any historian working today. *Hi, Hitler* returns to territory Rosenfeld covered in his *The World Hitler Never Made* (2005),⁹ and shows that a moral argument about normalization had always been latent in his earlier efforts to sift through counterfactuals about Nazism. Both works are best read as “casebooks,” their arguments present but strikingly subordinated to an ambitious cataloging of historical works, novels, and films about Nazism, the Holocaust, and WWII.

Rosenfeld’s range is enormous. In *Hi, Hitler* we move from W.G. Sebald’s discussions of firebombing, through the Budapest “House of Terror” Museum, with its presentation of Hungarian suffering under both Nazis and Soviets, through Nicholson Baker’s *Human Smoke* (2008), and up to recent historiographical works that decenter the Holocaust, either by placing it in a long period of nationalist and ethnic conflict in Europe, or by emphasizing not only Jewish suffering, but that of Eastern Europeans both Jewish and non-¹⁰ When relatively recent American cultural products such as Quentin Tarantino’s film *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) or Michael Chabon’s novel *The Yiddish*

⁹ Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ See Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008). On Holocaust and comparative genocide studies, see Samantha Power, “To Suffer by Comparison?” *Daedalus*, 2, Spring 1999, pp. 31-66. See also Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: a Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), and see the review forum on Bloxham’s *The Final Solution: a Genocide* in *The Journal of Genocide Research*: 13:12 (March/June 2011), 107-152, as well as the aforementioned works by Moses.

Policemen's Union (2007) (to name only two Anglophone titles within an international field of play) are added to the list, the result is so multiple an account of the phenomenon of revision that no single analytic framework, from geopolitical change to aesthetic trends to the internal politics of Jewish communal life, could ever suffice.

Indeed, Rosenfeld offers no single analytic framework. Instead, he implies that a single cause drives all manner of “decenterings:” this is the “organic normalization” of the Holocaust through the sheer press of time. The truth of this claim may seem self-evident, as we move further from the Holocaust and have fewer survivors, not to mention WWII participants, in our midst each year. But it also casts “normalization” as a kind of generalized climatic condition that has “settled” over the Holocaust, perhaps like a fog: this is a pleasingly literary image, but it obscures the distinctions between different types of decenterings, and obscures the distinctions between Camp portrayals of Hitler, and the impulse to revisit the Holocaust and WWII via the “what if?” of the counterfactual. It is far from obvious that all these suggest the end of any moral “limit of representation,” as Rosenfeld implies that they do. Such widespread transgression might instead involve a double movement in which we cross lines but re-inscribe them in the same gesture, a point on which I will expand, later in this essay.

Hi, Hitler claims to diagnose a trend in popular culture, but it could easily be understood on different terms, as one historian’s effort to reopen a now decades-old set of West German historiographic debates via a set of new cultural trends, instantiated by novels, films, and yes, YouTube parody clips. This is the famous *Historikerstreit*.¹¹ Those

¹¹ The literature on the *Historikerstreit* is voluminous. A small selection: Rudolf Augstein, et. al., *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the controversy concerning the singularity of the Holocaust* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1993); Geoff Eley, *Nazism, Politics and the Image of the Past: Thoughts on the West German Historikerstreit*

debates, whose participants divided along left- and right-wing political lines, were fought over the possibility or impossibility of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (the “mastery of” or “struggle to overcome” the past). Could the Germans atone for their crimes or for those of their parents’ generation, and, if this were possible, what kind of coming-to-terms, or “mastery,” would it represent? Rosenfeld argues that the ultimate settlement of such issues would result in the “normalization” of Germany’s Nazi past, something arguably made possible by the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany (national division understood, of course as an exceptional or abnormal condition in its own right), and the subsequent confrontation with memories of the National Socialist period. In other words, the conditions for the working-through of the claims of history, and of memory, are, unsurprisingly, always local and political. The status of the Holocaust in German history and memory has everything to do with German national aspirations towards historical normality, in the sense of the possession of a “healthy” past. All German aesthetic “normalizations” of Hitler, or counterfactual accounts of how WWII or the Holocaust might have unfolded differently, have thus been produced against the background of struggles over what normalcy might mean for Germans. The same logic applies in Britain, France and the United States, not to mention Eastern Europe, where WWII and the Holocaust have their own emphatically local values in debates over national history and identity: to “normalize” the history of the War in the UK, would be to work against excesses of national pride over the country’s “finest hour.” Here normalization carries less of a valence of “health” and more one of the management of

1986-1987, *Past and Present*, November 1988, 121: 171–208; Richard Evans, *In Hitler’s Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape the Nazi Past* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); Jürgen Habermas, *Eine Art Schadenabwicklung: kleine politische Schriften VI* (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1987).

internal conflicts over identity: the myth of Britain's "finest hour" has seen periodic revitalizations in the UK, such as at the hands of the Tory government in the 1980s.¹²

Such political debates are often in the background, and sometimes the foreground, of Holocaust counterfactuals or "what if?" questions, a great many of which have been produced over the decades. Some, crafted by historians, have been analytic tools for understanding causal factors contributing to, variously, Hitler's rise to power, the German war effort, or the extermination of European Jewry. Others have served as premises for imaginative "counter-worlds" in fiction or film. Philip K. Dick's *Man in the High Castle* imagines a United States cut in half by a victorious Germany and Japan; Michael Chabon's aforementioned *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* imagines an Alaskan resettlement of European Jewry combining with an early Nazi defeat of the Soviet Union, so that an extermination on the scale of the Holocaust, never takes place. Most poignantly, historians have attended to the question of whether or not Jews might have been saved through the bombing of the train tracks leading to Auschwitz itself.¹³ Such counterfactuals, which probe the moral culpability of the Allies, have been controversial, but few Holocaust counterfactuals drew as much fire, as one that Hannah Arendt included in her 1963 *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt's counterfactual resided in an "if." "If," she wrote "the Jewish people had [...] been unorganized and leaderless [...] the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people." An important source for Arendt's work, Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*, had itself offered counterfactuals of blame, though Hilberg's targets were the U.S. State Department and other agencies, which had failed to rush to the aid of

¹² See Rosenfeld, *Hi, Hitler*, 20.

¹³ See in particular the controversial work by David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1984).

European Jewry. Explicit counterfactuals have not always loomed large in Holocaust historiography, especially when historians have leaned heavily on “structural” or deterministic explanations for the Holocaust. However, any work that stresses Hitler’s personal responsibility, has kept counterfactuals at least tacitly in play, and especially the now-classic “No Hitler, No Holocaust” counterfactual, present in many fantasies about Hitler either having been assassinated, killed before his rise to power or, more benignly, having become a successful painter rather than a dictator.

Hi, Hitler’s most novel contribution is that Rosenfeld pays scholarly attention to something historians may well have considered beneath them. This is the transformation of Hitler into a cartoon character, and the development of what Rosenfeld calls “ironic Hitlerization,” arguably a type of attenuated Holocaust joke, or at least a close comic relative to such jokes. Misleadingly, Rosenfeld terms this latter phenomenon a “law,” but it is more an observation that, especially on the Internet, the figure of Hitler is often used for comic effect, said effect being created by the ironic distance between the historical figure of Hitler, and the apparent topic at hand. Thus a South African egg company’s advertising copy runs, “History’s Produced a Lot of Bad Eggs. Thankfully Ours Are Always Good,” an egg with a Hitler moustache in the foreground. Rosenfeld’s term, “ironic Hitlerization,” is true to one aspect of the Greek term *eironeia*, a rhetorical or dramatic device that alerts the audience to a gap between appearance and actuality: Hitler representing something other than Nazism, as when Hitler goes to Burning Man. But in many cases, irony is accompanied by another kind of humor, an association (punning or otherwise) back to Hitler’s historical deeds. Thus the lines “We’ll blow Space Cowboys off the playa!.... Every Burner will know the name of Hitler,” reminds us of the sick joke latent in the original framing of the YouTube clip. The insinuation is that some

unalterable historical dimension of Hitler's character would assert itself in Black Rock City, perhaps via the forced annexation of other "camps." The other dimension of the *Downfall* parody is, of course, to use Hitler's person to lampoon the culture of "Burners" fixated on their desert festival; in an Angeleno version of the *Downfall* parody, Hitler responds with rage when he learns how he'll be inconvenienced by "Carmageddon," the temporary shutdown of Interstate 405 ("The 405"), one of the important highways running through Los Angeles. The weird implication is that there is something "Hitlerish" about getting extremely angry, that Hitler has become personally symbolic of irrational rage.

Given the intense attention Rosenfeld pays to "ironic Hitlerization," it seems odd that he does not inquire into the relationship between irony, both as aesthetic device and cultural phenomenon, and the "limits of representation" that he suggests are threatened by normalization. For irony to function as irony, after all, there must be some trace of a sense of limits to transgress. Rosenfeld is entirely correct to point to a changed moral climate for discussing the Holocaust, one pushed forward by "organic normalization," year after year, but its dynamics are not limited to the deadening of moral sentiment. Representation has not lost all moral limits; those limits have simply begun to function in new ways. One alternative to the normalization argument, which I can only gesture towards in this essay, builds from material first provided by Sigmund Freud, in his 1905 *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (and, in ways important to my argument, later reworked by Mary Douglas), and by Susan Sontag, in her 1964 "Notes on Camp."

In "Notes on 'Camp,'" Sontag offers reflections on the aesthetic genre of Camp that are strikingly consonant with Rosenfeld's claims about the aesthetic, and "organic," normalization of the Holocaust and of Hitler's person. "Time," she says, "has a great deal

to do with it.” “Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility.”¹⁴ I mentioned Sontag’s ambivalence about Camp at the outset of this essay (“I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it”). While Sontag does not say so explicitly, this offense seems to stem from Camp’s departure from the moral concerns Sontag associates with another aesthetic mode, namely “high” art.¹⁵ As part of the “psychopathology of affluence,”¹⁶ Camp is enabled by safety and security, and it is concerned not with beauty but with the “worked” or elaborated nature of surfaces. Thus it tends towards elaboration and excess, much like Rosenfeld’s Holocaust counterfactuals and alternately humanized or cartoonish representations of Hitler.

Certainly, a film about Nazis such as *Iron Sky* (2012), whose premise is the 1945 creation of a secret National Socialist base on the dark side of the moon, and which features a Nazi spaceship, seems available for a reading as Camp.¹⁷ Sontag claims that Camp is neutral with respect to content, concerned only with style, and *Iron Sky*, like so many films about Nazis, seems to reduce content to style, threat becoming comedy, racism played for laughs.¹⁸ But the value of invoking Sontag’s reading of Camp is not to suggest that it acts as an argument covering the novels, films and yes, South African egg advertisements, that Rosenfeld has so laboriously catalogued. Again, no single analytic frame could encompass all the material in *Hi, Hitler*. Rather, Sontag’s work suggests that

¹⁴ Sontag 285.

¹⁵ Sontag 290. Sontag even offers a suggestive, but unfortunately unelaborated, idea: that the Camp aesthetic, and the modern Jewish experience, have always been opposed to one another, not because Jews dislike Camp, per se, but (as Sontag told the story, in a gross simplification) because Jewish modernity had sought civic emancipation on moral grounds, grounds the Camp sensibility was eager to abandon.

¹⁶ Sontag 289.

¹⁷ One might also see it as an instantiation of the Postmodern, an aesthetic and cultural category Rosenfeld implicates in the “normalization” phenomenon.

¹⁸ Sontag 275.

the humor and pathos of what Rosenfeld terms “ironic” depictions of Hitler and of Nazism, conveyed in jokes or by counterfactuals, relies on a specific structure: there is the acknowledged moral content of the Holocaust, on the one hand, and there is what the work juxtaposes against that content, through an experiment with narrative or historical form. This happens in many ways, sometimes through the aestheticizations of Camp, sometimes through a counterfactual designed to alert us to how the Holocaust, or WWII, or Hitler’s own life, might have developed differently. In most of the examples Rosenfeld covers, moral content is not neutralized, but, rather, underscored, through a compulsive return to the historical materials of the Nazi period, materials that are then reworked. One dimension of the historical counterfactual made clear, by the application of counterfactuals to the case of the Holocaust, is that counterfactuals can reveal the presence of the basically aesthetic distinction between content and form, in a domain where that distinction had previously gone unnoticed: the historical record.¹⁹

In his 1905 *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud had pursued a line of inquiry surprisingly similar, in structure, to the one Sontag would, much later, apply to Camp. He catalogued many types of jokes based on different mechanisms, ranging from condensation, visible in those jokes involving worldplay and punning, to a swerve or displacement of meaning, such as when one Jew (in Freud’s example) asks another if he has taken a bath, and receives the answer, “is there one missing?” Most of the different types Freud catalogued, involve a moment when something is revealed, whether by juxtaposition or by leading the listener through the detour of a story and back to an

¹⁹ As many readers will be aware, this observation follows from Hayden White’s claims made in his 1973 *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). For White, who holds that history already comes to us in narrative, and thus aesthetic, form, the counterfactual would only remind us of that fundamental emplotment.

absurdity that had been lying in plain sight. Freud was careful to point out the ways in which jokes, and dreams, are similar, both relying on displacements, substitutions, and condensations, and both involving the relation between the unconscious, and a set of controls or censors imposed upon it by the conscious mind, and ultimately by the social and cultural surround. At a superficial level, the displacements and recombinations that jokes make possible, can reveal absurdities of all kinds, particularly within social customs, mores, or manners. The “nonsense,” of many jokes, Freud says, “replaces ridicule,” much as it does in dreams.²⁰

But Freud also examined the “mechanism of the pleasurable effect” of jokes, which makes us want to tell or hear them. He found it in a kind of economy of psychic energy, in which the mind is constantly expending some amount of energy in self-censorship. When that censorship is lifted by the joke, as Freud puts it, the “yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychical expenditure that is saved.”²¹ Freud was at pains to show that this would be true, even for jokes that are not (as Douglas might say) “sick,” or contrary to social morality. In the case of many innocent puns, for example, the pleasure from the verbal “short-circuit” “seems to be the greater the more alien the two circles of ideas that are brought together by the same word.”²² Any association or thought that the mind was suppressing, including a morally innocuous but basically irrational relation between meanings, can be pleurably freed through the joke.

²⁰ Freud, 107. There is, as Freud later explains, a crucial difference between jokes and dreams, which bears on the way displacement functions in each: whereas dreams are the fundamental asocial element, present only to the mind of the individual dreamer, jokes are quintessentially social, requiring a teller and a listener. See Freud, 179.

²¹ Freud, 118. At 146, Freud cites Herbert Spencer’s 1860 “The Physiology of Laughter,” which offers an ‘economic’ model to describe the psychic energy that is discharged in laughter.

²² Freud, 120.

If “ironic,” or Campy, representations of Hitler, such as the *Downfall/Burning Man* parody, work as jokes along the economical lines Freud laid out, they might be impossible if the Holocaust had truly and finally been “normalized.”²³ The economy of the joke is made possible by a transgression that no-one living in such a world, could recognize. If we return to Mary Douglas’s understanding of the “sick” joke as one that reverses the values of social life, indeed, inverting the form of reality itself, the deep relationship between jokes and counterfactuals begins to appear. Sick jokes about the Holocaust or Hitler, derive their power from the fact that a perceived moral order has, in fact, been violated already; the joke merely calls attention to this. The counterfactual, too, is an effort to summon the order of things to attention, and in particular to force us to attend to the contingency of events. Thus both jokes and counterfactuals take an existing structure and make new sense of it, often discovering latent potentials both welcome and unwelcome, much as Freud observed that jokes release suppressed libidinal energy. The joy of the joke, Mary Douglas observes in the course of her own reading of Freud, is that suddenly a form of life is there, which wasn’t there the moment before. A man slipping on a banana peel is hilarious because “his stiff body has for two seconds moved with the swiftness of a gazelle, as if a new form of life had been hidden there.”²⁴ Control has been attacked, and successfully overcome. We know that control will return, and paradoxically, the existence of control is the condition of our temporary freedom from it, but in the flush of emotional response, this does not matter.

²³ On Freud’s reckoning, the ironic is proximate to the joke, as a sub-type of the comic, though Freud sees the unconscious mechanisms behind jokes as categorically different than those governing irony. See Freud, 174.

²⁴ Douglas, 364.

But if, Campiness aside, the Holocaust joke or the ironic depiction of Hitler is a challenge to our moral order that may, nevertheless, re-inscribe that order, the Holocaust counterfactual does something more. To repurpose a claim Douglas makes on behalf of jokes, counterfactuals challenge “one accepted pattern,” or in other words, the course of history as we have learned it, “by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden by the first.”²⁵ This “another,” might be the non-incidence of the Holocaust, as presented by Chabon in his fiction, or it might be National Socialism’s terrible expansion, as in Guy Saville’s novel *Afrika Reich* or in Dick’s *Man in the High Castle*, or a different set of actions by the Allies, or by the Pope, leading to a shifted sense for us, the readers of the counterfactual, of the culpability of the players involved. It might also give us readers an enlarged sense of the possibilities contained within those who were lost. Either way, in contrast to the joke’s power to spark a new form of life, or to inspire a sudden, fleeting freedom, the Holocaust counterfactual suggests an abiding preoccupation with the conditions of possibility of both fascism and genocide. Organic normalization may end all this, of course,²⁶ but the “merely” aesthetic kind cannot, for it reproduces the moral law in every new image of catastrophe.

²⁵ Ibid, 365.

²⁶ Freud is entirely cognizant of this, in his book on jokes: “a great number of the jokes in circulation have a certain length of life: their life runs a course made up of a period of flowering and a period of decay and it ends in complete oblivion.” Freud, 123.