Comprising twelve well-written and diverse essays, *Visualizing the Holocaust* has the feel of an intense seminar. Each presentation indicates a mastery of the material and deep thinking about the issues involved, concerning both the Holocaust and the visual media that have sought to represent it. Together, the chapters supply a diversity of perspective and represent a multiplicity of cultures. All that is missing is an interaction between the presenters and other scholars who have thought long and hard about the very same issues, and could challenge and engage the presenters. A book, of course, is not a seminar. Its advantage is that its audience is wider, and it endures for all to consult and learn from.

The editors are to be admired for bringing together a diverse group of scholars. Although all teach at American universities, they hail from a variety of departments and specializations: Jewish studies and German studies; literature and film; architectural studies; and visual studies. Their wide-ranging perspectives and linguistic abilities enhance the work. One must note the irony that in order for German studies to attract students, and for American scholars of German to flourish, they must grapple with the Holocaust—seemingly retooling themselves intellectually from the language and literature that first attracted them to their chosen field.

The topics explored in *Visualizing the Holocaust* will be familiar to anyone who has studied this field. They include works that have achieved canonical status in the field: *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Night*, *Schindler’s List*, Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, the photo of the young boy who hands are raised surrendering in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Eichmann Trial. All of this is to be expected. What is unexpected is the use of lesser-known films, the contrasts they offer with their more famous counterparts, the originality of the thinking, and the depth of the scholarly engagement. After reading this book, I went out and bought no fewer than five films and four new works of history, as well as two of fiction.

Images abound, along with insightful interpretations of them. Daniel H. Magilow writes eloquently on Heinrich Jost’s photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto, taken on September 19, 1941, which were presented at Yad Vashem and seemed to portray the Jews sympathetically and individually—a far cry from the propaganda photographs that have become commonplace in ghetto portrayals. Magilow argues that Jost never intended these photographs to be ‘Nazi propaganda or a subversive record of genocide’ (p 43). The reason he took the photographs, and the reason he kept them, are mysteries that he carried with him to the grave. What was done with the photographs, though, is widely known. The fact that they were first exhibited at Yad Vashem, then compiled in book form by the same institution, lent them an aspect of identification with the victim that was perhaps never intended.
The issue of why images are taken, preserved, and transmitted lingers throughout this volume. I found myself pondering it as I simultaneously read this book and worked with the National Geographic Society on their television documentary, *Masters of Death*, which analyzes the role of the *Einsatzgruppen* in the murder of Eastern European Jews and the Holocaust itself. A centrepiece of the documentary is a minute examination of the famous film taken of the mass murder of the seven thousand Jews of Liepaja, in German-occupied Latvia. The rare and graphic footage was captured by Reinhard Wiener, a German naval sergeant and amateur cinematographer. While travelling, Weiner was warned by a soldier that ‘something awful was happening’ and to ‘go no further.’ Ignoring the soldier, Weiner carried on, and covertly filmed the mobile killing unit and its massacre of Liepaja’s Jews. The film is examined frame by frame, character by character: victims, perpetrators and bystanders, SS personnel and local gendamerie, children on the hillside and even a dog walking through the frame. Left unexamined, though, is why Wiener took the film, and why it survived. We do know that he happened upon the scene accidentally, but the film was not preserved accidentally, nor shared accidentally.

Two marvellous essays by David Brenner and Michael Richardson force us to consider the use of humour in Holocaust portrayals, from pre-Holocaust films like Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, to more recent works such as *Jakob the Liar* and *The Producers*. Richardson focuses on depictions of Hitler, and the narrowness of his topic allows the reader to consider the various ways in which the Hitler figure continues to be used in both comedic and menacing contexts. The joke may be on us. Unfortunately, Richardson does not move much beyond film, and fails to consider the portrayal of Hitler in art—for example, his “apology” in Hebrew, spliced together from clips of his speeches, which was part of the Jewish Museum’s controversial exhibition on *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*. Jaimy Fisher uses Lanzmann’s *Shoah* as a foil with which to examine Peter Forgacs’s *Free Fall into the Holocaust*, and the broader genre of film diaries. *En passant*, Fisher offers sharp insights into the role of diaries themselves, whether in literature or film they:

…offer [the] reader an opportunity for not only strong identification with and affective investment in the position of the diarist but also an identification with his or her emphatically intimate and interior life and above all with the dynamic character of identity itself. (p 242)

When blended with film, this produces a narrative contrary to most feature films, which tend to rely on the transparent. David Brenner’s consideration of the film *Train of Life* is impressive. He considers the struggle of generations: not just witnesses, survivors, and their descendents, but those who are merely witnesses of the witnesses.

Elke Heckner offers a fascinating study of Daniel Libeskind’s self-described architecture of memory, and the struggle so central to his work and his generation’s efforts: how to translate the experience of rupture into productive engagement with Holocaust memory. Unfortunately, she does not consider the impossibility—or near impossibility—of translating Libeskind’s architectural
form into a real museum. In fact, the form that was so successful in a vacuum proved catastrophic for actual museum-building. She also does not examine the redeployment of his Holocaust-related forms in non-Holocaust-related projects.

What emerges from these essays is a fresh look at the canon of Holocaust representation, and therefore a new appreciation for what is seen, and how memory shapes our attempt to salvage something from its ashes.

Michael Berenbaum © 2011
American Jewish University
DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2011.554086