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Sex-Crazed and Bloodthirsty: The Misrepresentation of Female Nazis in American Popular Culture

Catherine L. Jones

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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SEX-CRAZED AND BLOODTHIRSTY: THE MISREPRESENTATION OF FEMALE
NAZIS IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

by

Catherine L. Jones

A Thesis Submitted in
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ABSTRACT

SEX-CRAZED AND BLOODTHIRSTY: THE MISREPRESENTATION OF FEMALE NAZIS IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

by

Catherine L. Jones

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2014
Under the Supervision of Professor Joe Austin

This thesis examines the Nazisploitation trope of the Ilsa-type within its political, social, and cultural context. A product of the 1950s men's adventure magazines, the Ilsa-type continues to be a familiar and popular character within American pop culture.

Popularized through the 1970s torture porn, *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, the character has since influenced mainstream film, fashion, and various other popular culture outlets. This thesis discusses why such an ahistorical figure has seized hold of public imagination, how she has developed in the decades since her first appearance, and why she matters. A work of feminist historical scholarship, this thesis aims to explain one of the more puzzling Nazisploitation archetypes.

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The color is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death.

Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism."

Chapter 1 – Introduction & Historiography

Introduction

Nearly 40 years ago Susan Sontag’s pivotal essay, “Fascinating Fascism,” appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, providing a call for research on the relationship between American commodity culture, sexuality, and fascist aesthetics. Though Sontag may not have been the first to recognize or comment on this relationship, her essay is the single most influential work in shaping the discussion as we know it today. Conducted in something of a piecemeal fashion, the resulting research tends to take two forms. It either takes the form of theoretical pieces, much like Sontag’s, that comment on the Nazisploitation trend without offering further analysis, or it takes the form of highly specialized pieces that focus on one aspect of this trend, providing an intensive analysis of that specific topic. Rarely does the research attempt to synthesize any one example within its broader cultural, political, or social context. Rarely does it take the long view and trace the emergence of a Nazisploitation trope over an extended period of time and across several disciplines. Until this type of research takes place, the fascination with, and sexualization of, Nazi aesthetics will only continue. The research of the past 4 decades proves beyond a doubt that this fascination *does* exist; now we must answer the more difficult question of *why* it exists.

By tracing the existence of one particular Nazisploitation trope – referred to here as the Ilsa-type – from her emergence to her dissemination throughout various aspects of popular culture, this thesis is a work of cultural history as well as a work of feminist historical scholarship. It attempts to weave pop culture history and traditional history together, creating a more comprehensive understanding of why Nazisploitation exists,

how it emerged, what lends it staying power, and how that power can be uprooted. While my analysis of the Ilsa-type does not pretend to speak for all aspects of Nazisploitation, it does offer a beginning. By syncing pop culture analysis, political history, and literature on Holocaust studies, this thesis takes a new approach to understanding Nazisploitation.

One might argue that studying this topic is unnecessary, that popular culture has no place in the realm of serious WWII and Holocaust scholarship. I argue otherwise. In fact, I argue that it is perhaps the most important discipline in terms of identifying how young people are exposed to this history and what type of information they internalize and remember as truth.¹ As we move further away from the living memory of WWII and the Holocaust, young people tend to learn more about that era from popular culture than the classroom.² This is problematic for a number of reasons, not least of all because the regular misrepresentation of Nazis conflates the Nazi character with sexual pleasure, replacing the true horror and brutality of the Nazi regime with pleasurable associations. This leads us, as consumers of popular culture, to actively and eagerly consume these ahistorical stereotypes and effectively perpetuate the Nazi myth. This pleasure-seeking process separates the Nazis from their historic crimes, and in the process grants them some degree of innocence.³ In some way, then, by supporting the reproduction of this Nazi myth, the American public grants their actions a degree of tacit approval.

But this is not news. Scholars argue against such misrepresentations as an assault to our memory of the Holocaust and warn of the potential danger of promoting this trend. Yet it continues, if not thrives, and we find ourselves regularly consuming and

¹ Clair M. Hall, "Where Does Evil Sit in the Classroom? Problematizing Teaching About Hitler, Nasty Nazis, and the Holocaust," in *Monsters in the Mirror*, ed. Sara Buttsworth and Maartje Abbenhuis (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010).

² Hall, "Where Does Evil Sit in the Classroom?"

³ Hall, "Where Does Evil Sit in the Classroom?"

applauding media that glorifies the Nazis rather than demonizing them. The embrace of the stereotype and the rejection of actual discourse led to a point where, as Jean-Pierre Geuens aptly notes, “the Nazis are presented almost as they themselves would like to have been seen at the time: cool, perfect, efficient, an irresistible force operating in a world whose history is preordained.”⁴

Inroads are being made, however, and there are scholars who recognize the importance of this research. There are scholars who have taken Sontag’s call seriously and attempt to contextualize Nazisploitation within the realm of Holocaust studies. Their work provides a starting point. These highly specialized studies are necessary to begin identifying the different ways this fascination manifests itself, but it is not enough. Work must be done to contextualize Nazisploitation within the social and political culture in which it emerges, not only within the realm of Holocaust history. Failure to synthesize these two approaches means we never see the whole picture. This study attempts to do so by tracing the history of the Ilsa-type from her first appearance in the 1950s men’s magazines to contemporary films and fashions, and by synthesizing this history with the social, cultural, and political context in which she emerged.

Historiography

First, a broader discussion of Nazisploitation scholarship is necessary to make sense of why this particular topic matters. The majority of the work discussed in the following historiography indicates that Nazi aesthetics are highly gendered and sexually charged, especially within American popular culture. This argument is often framed only in the male context, however, ignoring the existence of a female Nazi stereotype that is

⁴ Jean-Pierre Guenes, “Pornography and the Holocaust: The Last Transgression,” *Film Criticism* 20, no. 1-2 (Fall 1995-Winter 1996): 119.

even more static, repugnant, and (paradoxically) sexually enticing than her male counterpart. She exists in every area of pop culture, yet has largely been ignored. Or, if not ignored, analysis of her character remains at a very surface level. The following thesis brings her to the forefront in an effort to highlight her problematic existence and begin the process of dismantling her allure. The historiography below provides the context and framework for doing so.

In 1975, *The New York Review of Books* published Susan Sontag's groundbreaking essay, "Fascinating Fascism."⁵ Sontag's theories on the eroticization of fascism laid the foundation for much of the work that came afterwards. Her contribution to exposing and defining the relationship between Nazi aesthetics and sexual attraction cannot be overemphasized; however several of her key arguments have since become outdated. Nearly all Nazisploitation scholars point to Sontag's explanation of the SS uniform's allure as the foundation of their own arguments, though few discuss how portrayals of that uniform have since changed and been made more palatable for the mainstream. Additionally, these styles are much more prevalent in hetero and mainstream crowds now than they were when "Fascinating Fascism" was published. S/M and Nazi aesthetics are no longer the extreme taboo they once were, they have made the mainstream jump. Finally, Sontag theorizes that this phenomenon is perhaps a backlash to the, "oppressive freedom of choice in sex (possibly, in other matters),"⁶ which I believe is a problematic statement. I will discuss these shortcomings in the chapters that follow, though they warrant mention here.

⁵ Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1975/feb/06/fascinating-fascism/>

⁶ Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," 18.

Over 20 years after Sontag's essay, Jeffrey Schnapp published his 1996 article by the same name, "Fascinating Fascism," in an attempt to expand on her thesis. He successfully points out some of Sontag's failings: "too simple equations between cultural and sexual dissidence, between fascism and sadomasochism, between 'camp' and the fascist aestheticization of politics; its reductive analysis of contemporary mass culture; [and] its tendency even to fall prey to fascism's self-mystifications."⁷ Schnapp does, in fact, make a convincing argument that these shortcomings need to be dealt with and that we need to pick the conversation up where Sontag left off, yet he fails to do so himself.

Perhaps without Schnapp's essay though, and several other attempts to elaborate on Sontag's thesis in the 1990s, Paul Betts and James Page would not have been prompted to publish their own articles. Betts' 2002 article, "The New Fascination with Fascism: The Case of Nazi Modernism," takes particular issue with Sontag's argument that fascist aesthetics are mainly exciting because they are, "forbidden to ordinary people."⁸ Instead, he claims that the, "1970s subculture fascination with fascism...has now seized mainstream public culture."⁹ He goes on to discuss how the Holocaust attracts an increasing amount of attention from historians and the general public each year. He theorizes that, "the Nazi era and the Holocaust are no longer restricted to either German or Jewish history, and have been refashioned for wider cultural consumption."¹⁰ If we are to accept Betts' argument, then it seems that we cannot write this growing fascination off as something that is politically or socially impotent, but need to approach it with a critical

⁷ Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "Fascinating Fascism," *Journal of Contemporary History: Special Issue: The Aesthetics of Fascism* 31, no.2, (April 1996): 236.

⁸ Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," 17.

⁹ Paul Betts, "The New Fascination with Fascism: The Case of Nazi Modernism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 4 (October 2002): 542.

¹⁰ Betts, "The New Fascination with Fascism," 544.

eye. Exactly how this new interpretation of our fascination with fascism fits into current political, social, and cultural life, however, is left as an open question.

In his 2002 article, “Deconstructing the Enduring Appeal of the Third Reich,” Page argues much of the same. But unlike Betts and Schnapp, he attempts to explain how to weaken the allure of fascist aesthetics. He explains that the fascination with fascism and Nazism, which is now no longer relegated to our subculture but has become a mainstream problem, stems from the fact that we, as a society, only promote the appealing aspects of Nazism.¹¹ We effectively distance Nazis from the violent and horrific reality of the regime. Our mainstream movies and the mainstream discourse on Nazism and the Holocaust are constructed in a way that is meant to appeal to mass audiences, whether that means filling movie theatres or selling books. To do this, Nazism has to appear appealing in some capacity.

Page comes to the conclusion that to stop this, historians must not, “deny the contemporary appeal of the Third Reich to the modern imagination, but rather [deconstruct] this, showing what was behind the rhetoric and propaganda that surrounded Nazism, and [point] out that the regime functioned through immense cruelty and suffering.”¹² If, rather than continuing to promote a fantasy depiction of the Third Reich, the reality of Nazism is reintroduced into the mainstream discussion, it will begin to lose its appeal. I would take this a step further and argue that we must also confront the fact that there are very real economic benefits in perpetuating this myth. Indeed, the American public’s fascination with fascism has made many people quite wealthy. There is money to

¹¹ James Page, “Deconstructing the Enduring Appeal of the Third Reich,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29, no. 2 (2008): 191.

¹² Page, “Deconstructing the Enduring Appeal of the Third Reich,” 194.

be made in Holocaust productions, it has become a business, and without honestly confronting that, we simply perpetuate the cycle.

Now, nearly 40 years after Sontag's essay first appeared, scholars are finally engaging with these more difficult issues. 2010 saw the publication of *Monsters in the Mirror: Representations of Nazism in Post-War Popular Culture*, and 2012 gave us *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*. These two compilations provide in depth analysis of how this twisted portrayal of Nazis in popular culture has become an industry standard. I discuss essays from each compilation below as they relate to specific areas of research below, but the importance of these two works commands special notice. Taken as a whole, they appear as the first published works that attempt to draw on all aspects of mass media to create a fuller picture of the pervasiveness of this Nazi image. These essays, and the other works discussed below, show that the most useful responses to Sontag have developed along five main lines – literature analysis, sexual theory, the study of pornography, mainstream film analysis, and fashion studies. While a number of the works discussed do take up the themes of gender and sexuality, one major problem remains – the development of the female Nazi character trope as distinct from the overall Nazi stereotype has yet to receive significant attention.

Literature

It is prudent to mention here that the Ilsa-type discussed throughout actually predates the 1975 torture porn, *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, for which she is named.¹³ In fact, she was created in the men's magazines of the 1950s and 1960s. These sensationalistic

¹³ Though the term "torture porn" predates the men's magazines and the 1970s film discussed, *Ilsa* is a clear prototype of the genre, justifying the use of the word.

and hyper-masculine publications created many of the stereotypical plot lines that were later adopted in the 1970s concentration camp porns. Furthermore, they established the visual template for the female Nazi character, which was then brought to life in Dyanne Thorne's portrayal of Ilsa. From this point on, nearly every female Nazi in American popular culture followed this prototype – both in physical attributes and in storyline. I refer to her here as the Ilsa-type out of convenience and because Ilsa is the most widely known, and celebrated, example of this character. Few scholarly studies of these 1950s-1970s American men's magazines exist, however, and fewer still discuss the female Nazi trope in anything more than a passing fashion.

Literary analysis of Nazisploitation is not as prevalent as some other areas of research, perhaps because it is not as immediately apparent or as easily visualized, but it is equally as important. Laura Frost provides what could be considered the most important analysis since Sontag in her 2002 book, *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism*. Frost conducts analysis on a series of literary works, but it is really her blatant critique of the traditional feminist approach to fascist aesthetics that is most interesting. She argues that a traditional feminist analysis relies too heavily on the outdated methodologies of Freudian psychoanalysis, which conflates fascism with the patriarchy.¹⁴ This is problematic as it detaches sex from desire, provides a very limited view of sexuality, and indicates that anything less than complete resistance to the patriarchy is a feminist failure.¹⁵ Frost contends that, framed in this way, the feminist

¹⁴ Laura Frost, *Sex Drive: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002): 121.

¹⁵ Frost, *Sex Drives*, 152.

ideology makes the same mistakes as those it critiques – it is too clean, too reductive, and too abstract.¹⁶

Frost’s argument, however, is outdated even at the time it was made. Having already recognized these failings, the vast majority of feminists scholars no longer rely heavily on psychoanalysis. Additionally, while I agree in part with her argument that sexual fantasy rarely equates to political ideology,¹⁷ I believe the two are not entirely separate either. Sexual fantasy can tell us about politics *because* it defines the forbidden. Thus, as she embodies all things taboo, analyzing the ever-popular, never-evolving character of Ilsa with this in mind can, in fact, provide an insight into the fears or anxieties of the culture that fantasizes over her.

In terms of the development of the female Nazi character, S. Lillian Kremer points out in her essay, “Sexual Abuse in Holocaust Literature,” that it is, “male writing, especially fiction by men who have no Holocaust experience, [that] tends to treat sexual abuse more fully, more graphically, and, on occasion, more titillating.”¹⁸ While Kremer focuses on stories of Jewish women being violated by men, this observation holds true to the Nazisploitation realm, particularly in relation to the Ilsa-type. Ilsa was created by and for men, and was much more violent than her male Nazi counterparts. That men – presumably American men – promote the image of hyper sexualized and sadistic female Nazis for American audiences surely has something to tell us.

One unique way to view this tension is through the medium of comic books and graphic novels. Aside from Art Spiegelman’s, *Maus* and several other historical graphic

¹⁶ Frost, *Sex Drives*, 152.

¹⁷ Frost, *Sex Drives*, 10.

¹⁸ S. Lillian Kremer, “Sexual Abuse in Holocaust Literature,” in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010): 193.

novels, comic books and graphic novels have largely been left out of the academic conversation on any topic. For this exact reason, comics are a rich and unique source of insight on cultural trends. In their essays, scholars like Marc Hieronimus and Craig This discuss the male Nazi type and its various changes over time.¹⁹ Most interesting in terms of this historiography, though, is that until the past two decades or so, comic books and graphic novels were largely created and read solely by men. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the Ilsa-type appears so blatantly in this medium, as writers and artists did not have to temper the character to appeal to a female audience.

Rare are the gendered discussions of female WWII comic book characters like the one written by Ruth McClelland-Nugent in her essay, “Wonder Woman against the Nazis: Gendering Villainy in DC Comics.” Yet even here, despite the promise to explore the gendering of villainy, McClelland-Nugent’s discussion is somewhat typical. In fact, she gives Wonder Woman’s first recurrent nemesis²⁰ – Baroness Von Gunther – little analysis. (Coincidentally, the Baroness fits the standards of the Ilsa-type.) Instead, McClelland-Nugent discusses Wonder Woman and the various villains she fights in the usual, slated gender terms, mentioning primarily male perpetrators. The general lack of scholarship on female Nazis in comics is disappointing and further work in this field could add a tremendous amount to our understanding of how we, as an American society, relate to the Holocaust and Nazism.

Sexual Theory

¹⁹ Marc Hieronimus, “Hitler is Fun: Sixty Years of Nazism in Humorous Comics,” in *Monsters in the Mirror*, ed. Sara Buttsworth and Maartje Abbenhuis (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010); Craig This, “*Captain America Lives Again* and so do the Nazis: Nazisploitation in Comic after 9/11,” in *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, eds. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt, and Elizabeth Bridges (New York: Continuum, 2012).

²⁰ Daffodil, “Top 10 Wonder Woman Villains: Baroness von Gunther,” *ComicVine*, May 5, 2011, accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.comicvine.com/profile/daffodil/blog/top-10-wonder-woman-villains/68667/>

In terms of sexual theory, Dagmar Herzog and Elizabeth Heineman both take up the task of deconstructing the socially constructed, and to some extent socially acceptable, sexual attraction to Nazism. In the essays, “Hubris and Hypocrisy, Incitement and Disavowel: Sexuality and German Fascism,” and, “Sexuality, Memory, Morality,” Herzog deconstructs the myth that the Third Reich was a sexually repressive organization.²¹ She argues that if we continue to focus only on the repressive side of the Third Reich, “we simply [will not] understand why Nazism was attractive to so many people.”²² She contends that sexualizing Nazism is simply a way for us to avoid having a deeper, meaningful discussion of sexuality and politics during the Third Reich.²³ I would add that it provides the same escape from having a deeper, meaningful discussion of current sexuality and politics.

Perhaps most important for this historiography is Heineman’s assertion in her 2002 essay, “Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?” that scholarship on the sexuality of female perpetrators needs to be expanded. She argues that, “our fleeting images of them focus disproportionately on a handful of women who linked brutality with flamboyant sexuality,” and that, “such cases have been recounted rather than analyzed, and attempts to analyze them have employed hopelessly crude psychological frameworks.”²⁴ Heineman recognizes the problematic nature of this call to action, fully acknowledging that discussing the sexuality of female Nazi perpetrators may come off as offensive, insensitive, and controversial. However she argues that until scholarship

²¹ Dagmar Herzog, “Hubris and Hypocrisy, Incitement and Disavowel: Sexuality and German Fascism,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no.1-2 (January-April: 2002); Dagmar Herzog, “Sexuality, Memory, Morality,” *History and Memory* 17, no.1-2 (Spring-Summer: 2005).

²² Herzog, “Hubris and Hypocrisy,” 4.

²³ Herzog, “Hubris and Hypocrisy,” 4.

²⁴ Elizabeth Heineman, “Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no.1-2 (January-April 2002): 63.

honestly confronts female sexuality in concentration camps, the picture of life in those camps will remain largely incomplete and will only reinforce the stereotypical image of a sexual cruel and violent female Nazi.

Heineman offers a peripheral discussion on the complications of discussing human sexuality in a way that does not appear pornographic in her 2005 essay, "Gender, Sexuality, and Coming to Terms with the Nazi Past." Here she introduces the concept of "*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: how to distinguish between *representation of sexual pleasure* under Nazism from *pleasure in representing sex* under Nazism."²⁵ It is most certainly this complex question of *how* to discuss sexuality and the Holocaust that has staved most scholars off, as many are afraid that even hinting that victims and perpetrators were sexual beings will be met with tremendous backlash from both the academic and public realms, and those fears may very well be valid. However, by not discussing sexuality, historians are doing a great disservice the field of Holocaust studies, particularly when it comes to understanding what role the Holocaust plays in contemporary society. The Holocaust is not relegated to the world of the past, but it lives and breathes to some extent in our current society. A substantial part of its persistent omnipresence is linked to sexuality and this must be confronted in order to comprehend how Americans understand the Holocaust.

Pornography

What exactly does it mean that the Holocaust continues to be represented in increasingly sexualized terms in our current mainstream culture? One of the easiest ways to examine what these sexualized representations of victims and perpetrators say is to

²⁵ Elizabeth Heineman, "Gender, Sexuality, and Coming to Terms with the Nazi Past," *Central European History* 38, no.1 (2005): 63.

study the cultural implications of Holocaust themed pornography. Of the few scholars who discuss sexuality and the Holocaust, even fewer include pornography in the conversation. Some discuss pornography in theoretical terms – that is they discuss the problematic nature of displaying graphic images or objects for fear that they will belittle, dehumanize and objectify the victim’s experience – but few explicitly discuss the existence of pornographic films that use the Holocaust as a backdrop.

In her 2003 article, “Empathy, Pornography, and Suffering,” Carolyn Dean claims that, through an oversaturation of graphic images of concentration camps and Nazi violence, we run the risk of effectively distancing ourselves from the tragedy of the Holocaust. She argues that through effective marketing of the Holocaust, we reduce human beings to little more than commodities and take pleasure in continuously revisiting their victimization.²⁶ She defines this as, “empathy fatigue,” and points to it as a tool used by both lowbrow and highbrow institutions.²⁷ She contends that this promotes, “expectancy, excitement, voyeurism,” all of which, “violate the dignity of memory by decontextualizing the historical event, by appropriating it for our own pleasure...[and] by [transforming] the subjects of our interest into objects of our now corrupted pleasures.”²⁸

Dean uses the term pornography where perhaps she should use obscenity. She discusses images that are offensive and appalling, but not necessarily sexualized. However, the concept that, through empathy fatigue, these images could generate some

²⁶ Carolyn Dean, “Empathy, Pornography, and Suffering,” *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no.1 (2003): 91.

²⁷ Dean, “Empathy, Pornography, and Suffering,” 92.

²⁸ Dean, “Empathy, Pornography, and Suffering,” 102.

sort of visceral excitement²⁹ and a desire for more (let alone the profit they generate) seems to justify the use of the word. Regardless, Dean stops short of discussing Holocaust pornography – pornographic films made in post-war society that use the Holocaust as a backdrop and provide the vilest example of this commodification of victimhood.

The majority of what does exist on this topic studies the campy 1970s film, *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, though there are a few who extend this conversation to other, lesser known films. *Nazisploitation!* contains an excellent essay by Michael Fuchs which, along with Lynn Rapaport's essay in *Monsters in the Mirror*, attempts to dissect the significance of Holocaust pornography in terms of how it has seeped into mainstream culture and perpetuates the faulty stereotype of hypersexual female Nazis.

In, "Of Blitzkrieg and Hardcore BDSM: Revisiting Nazi Nazisploitation Camps," Fuchs highlights the significance of the SS uniform and role playing in BDSM films. Like other sexual theorists, his argument is grounded in the understanding that BDSM relies heavily on knowing one's place, or one's script, in order to achieve sexual gratification.³⁰ Reminiscent of Sontag, he states that there are few better symbols of the dominator and the dominated than the SS uniform, providing participants and viewers with an immediate understanding of who yields the power in any given scenario.³¹ These films have the paradoxical effect of removing the scenario from historical context while simultaneously inviting the viewer to reformat their understanding of the Holocaust in

²⁹ Dean, "Empathy, Pornography, and Suffering," 92.

³⁰ Amit Pinchevski and Roy Brand, "Holocaust Perversions: The Stalags Pulp Fiction and the Eichmann Trial," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24 (2007): 400.

³¹ Michael Fuchs, "Of Blitzkrieg and Hardcore BDSM: Revisiting Nazi Nazisploitation Camps," in *Nazisploitation*, ed. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt and Elizabeth Bridges, (New York: Continuum, 2012): 286.

terms of sexual pleasure. This is detrimental as it not only promotes a falsified representation of life in the concentration camps or within the SS, but it allows the viewer to think, no matter how briefly, that the Holocaust may not have been a horrible tragedy, but could even have been pleasurable. Aside from this, Fuchs points out that concentration camp porn tends to break a number of BDSM constructs – such as the fluidity of dom/sub positions and the lack of a climax or “happy ending” – making them even more unusual within the genre.³²

Lynn Rapaport’s essay, “Holocaust Pornography: Profaning the Sacred in *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*,” helps determine what these incongruities mean by demanding that we look more closely at how these Holocaust porns represent female perpetrators. Her essay argues that the sexy Nazi character type reveals a great deal about how American society understands the Holocaust.³³ Employing a gender studies framework, she leads to some sinister conclusions about the significance of sexualized Nazi females in American pop culture. Using *Ilsa* as the archetype, she compares representations of female Nazis in various films to prove that *Ilsa* has become more than just *a* female Nazi representation, but is now *the* female Nazi representation. She is blond-haired, blue-eyed, ruthless, cold-hearted and cruel. Her SS uniform has been tailored to emphasize her sexuality and she has a truly insatiable sexual appetite, often deriving sexual pleasure from the pain of others. Based solely on these details, this describes nearly any female Nazi portrayed in Hollywood in the past 40 years. Rapaport asks what it is about the *Ilsa* character that is at once so appealing and so frightening. She explains that this sexy Nazi type is so alluring because she appears more evil than her male counterparts. That is, the act of torture is

³² Fuchs, “Of Blitzkrieg and Hardcore BDSM,” 282-284.

³³ Lynn Rapaport, “Holocaust Pornography: Profaning the Sacred in *Ilsa, She-wolf of the SS*,” in *Monsters in the Mirror*, ed. Sara Buttsworth and Maartje Abbenhuis (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010): 106.

not, by itself, enough to attract people to Nazism, but the fact that Ilsa finds sexual pleasure in torture somehow makes her more enticing.³⁴

Rapaport misses the mark in several significant ways, however. The first is in her reading of Ilsa as a feminist. If we interpret feminism as the advocacy of political, social, and economic equality between the sexes, then we see that while Ilsa may be a product of male anxiety *in reaction to* feminism, she is no feminist. While it becomes increasingly difficult to make this claim the further removed subsequent Ilsa iterations become from the film, at this stage it can be made with confidence. Furthermore, Rapaport poses the question that, “by portraying Nazi atrocities as eroticized encounters between men and women, and Ilsa as the female monster-villain, does the film hold women responsible for Nazi evil?”³⁵ This is a reductive argument and far too serious a claim to make based off of one pornographic film. Furthermore, it makes the mistake of thinking *Ilsa* can tell us anything about the reality of WWII, concentration camps, and the Holocaust, rather than viewing the film as a sounding board for the political, cultural, and social anxieties of the time period in which it was created.

Lastly, and Rapaport is not alone in making this argument, she states that, “While most films portraying the Holocaust white-wash its horrors, *She-Wolf* blatantly exposes them.”³⁶ This claim is used in the analysis of a number of concentration camp porns and must be taken with a grain of salt. True, the film does not shy away from violence, but it only focuses on violence in order to sexualize, and thereby trivialize, it. By sexualizing the brutality of the Holocaust, these films make it enjoyable, palatable even. This then allows the viewer to forgive the Nazis of their crimes, and invites them to participate – be

³⁴ Rapaport, “Holocaust Pornography,” 114.

³⁵ Rapaport, “Holocaust Pornography,” 117.

³⁶ Rapaport, “Holocaust Pornography,” 118.

it in the role of victim or perpetrator – free of guilt. BDSM is about role play and the reconstruction of power roles, even if only temporarily,³⁷ and there was nothing temporary intended in the Holocaust. Sterilizing the violence, as mainstream films often do, is not beneficial either, but trying to justify its sexualization by saying it exposes the true nature of the violence is preposterous. To be sure, the persistent fascination and sexualization of Nazi aesthetics certainly indicates that there is a sexual component that needs to be addressed – this is undoubtedly part of their lasting intrigue. It is a complicated discussion that draws on sexuality, sadistic violence, and the abuse of power; one that must be held carefully. The argument that *Ilsa* does this topic justice only validates the standard opening disclaimers that claim the films have nothing to do with sexual gratification and everything to do with keeping an accurate historical record.

Mainstream Film

Had these stereotypical representations appeared only in pornography, they would be easy enough to overlook or ignore. But they have infiltrated and influenced mainstream culture in significant ways. The link between pornographic and mainstream films has been made explicit by three scholars in particular – Jean-Pierre Geuens, Michael Richardson and Alicia Kozma. In his 1995 essay, “Pornography and the Holocaust: The Last Transgression,”³⁸ Geuens argues that in these pornographic films, “the fullness of the historical facts shrinks into a few iconic scenes that are repeated in film after film.”³⁹ Geuens argues that when the *Ilsa*-type appears over and over, in film

³⁷ Pinchevski and Brand, “Holocaust Perversions,” 400; Fuchs, “Of Blitzkriege and Hardcore BDSM,” 285.

³⁸ It should be noted here that Geuens discusses pornography in the theoretical sense, it is not until the early 2000s that a more explicit discussion becomes more acceptable. Therefore, though the title of his essay implies a discussion of Holocaust pornography, it fits more appropriately with the discussion on mainstream films.

³⁹ Geuens, “Pornography and the Holocaust,” 119.

after film, we hide behind the stereotypical imaginings of the Holocaust rather than engage with the past in a meaningful way.⁴⁰ Providing the other side to Herzog's argument that we will never fully understand the appeal of the Third Reich if we focus only on its repressive aspects, Geuens argues that we cannot overcome the draw to Nazism if we only focus on the appealing aspects of it and ignore the rest.

Richardson and Kozma make the connection between *Ilsa, She-wolf of the SS* and recent Hollywood productions more explicitly. In their essays, it is possible to see how the role-playing and aesthetic cues present in pornographic films are muted and made palatable to a mainstream American audience. In, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," Richardson discusses how Kate Winslet's character in the 2008 film, *The Reader*, readily fits this stereotype and echoes the BDSM tropes, despite the film's attempt to paint a more intellectual, complex female Nazi character.⁴¹ Everything from Hannah's dress to her romanticized sexual advances on the leading male, who happens to be significantly younger than her (cue the associations with perverse sexuality), falls into line with our expectation of female Nazis.

In his scathing review of the movie in *Slate*, Ron Rosenbaum explains that key plot points were changed for the movie to free the main character of guilt and make her more empathetic. Despite the director's claim that he did not want to make a redemptive Holocaust film, by placing an added emphasis on the affair that is exactly what happens. Instead of playing to the viewer's emotions to create empathy, playing to the viewer's sexuality causes them to empathize in a different way. This makes it possible for viewers

⁴⁰ Geuens, "Pornography and the Holocaust," 119.

⁴¹ Michael Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," in *Nazisploitation*, ed. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt and Elizabeth Bridges, (New York: Continuum, 2012): 48.

to enjoy the affair while it lasts, despite her status as a Nazi. They find gratification, then, in both her sexual encounters – because she is a woman – and in her inevitable demise – because she is a Nazi.

Kozma discusses a more direct parallel in, “Ilsa and Elsa: Nazisploitation, Mainstream Film and Cinematic Transference.” In this essay, Kozma compares Ilsa to the character Elsa in the 1989 film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Not only do the two have similar names, but they look strikingly similar; though Elsa’s physical attributes and wardrobe are toned down to cater to more mainstream expectations, they still echo Ilsa in astounding detail. Elsa also, of course, parallels Ilsa’s sexual deviance, sleeping with both Indiana Jones and his father during the film. However, at the end, Elsa appears to feel a real sense of regret for deceiving the Joneses, and “is portrayed as a much more sympathetic figure, something more akin to the ‘hooker with a heart of gold’ stereotype; someone who appears to be bad or acts badly, but who is truly a good person,”⁴² thus making Nazism palatable and attractive to the mainstream American audience. These types of portrayals tell us, on some subconscious level that if Elsa can embody the physical attractiveness and the sexual audacity of Ilsa without the truly heartless cruelty or sadism, then perhaps Nazism is not so bad. Most importantly, as Elsa becomes a character type in her own right, it is not even necessary at this point to know who Ilsa is or to be able to identify Elsa’s roots. The Elsa-type is essentially replacing the Ilsa-type in popular mentality, which is all the more dangerous.

Finally, As Richardson aptly puts it, “on a certain level we have to understand these associations as having very little to do with Hitler and the Nazis and very much to

⁴² Alicia Kozma, “Ilsa and Elsa: Nazisploitation, Mainstream Film and Cinematic Transference,” in *Nazisploitation*, ed. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt and Elizabeth Bridges, (New York: Continuum, 2012): 63.

do with ideological intentions.”⁴³ Therefore, what these scholars argue is that since the Ilsa- and Elsa-types are clearly not based in reality, they must tell us something about our own society. In some way, they are projections of our own understanding of the Holocaust and Nazism. The Nazi type in general is disturbing enough, but when considering female Nazis in movies it becomes even more so. Male Nazis characters are at least given a bit of variety in their character, whereas female Nazis are always portrayed in strictly sexually sadistic terms. If we believe, then, that these films do not reflect the Third Reich but our contemporary American society, what are we saying about women in our society?

Fashion Industry

A final facet of popular culture representations of female Nazis discussed in this historiography is the multi-billion dollar fashion industry. Like comic books and graphic novels, fashion history is a long neglected discipline of serious historical inquiry. Irene Guenther, Eugenia Paulicelli, and Valerie Steele, however, have produced extraordinary book-length studies within the discipline. They simultaneously legitimize the field as a serious aspect of historical study and give current Nazi-chic styles the historical, social, and cultural context necessary in order to properly discuss them.

Paulicelli’s book, *Fashion Under Fascism: Beyond the Black Shirt*, deals explicitly with the fashion industry in fascist Italy. While her study is not entirely relevant in terms of this discussion on sexualized representations of female Nazis in American popular culture, she makes several theoretical points that are crucial in understanding the legitimacy of fashion as a serious area of historical research. She argues that, “as a system of projecting images and identities, fashion achieves two aims:

⁴³ Richardson, “Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis,” 41.

first, it provides a visible narration of a given epoch; and second, it illustrates the contradictions of class and gender conflicts.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, it provides the ability to, “identify the social and class agendas that go towards the shaping of political environments at both the individual and collective levels.”⁴⁵

Paulicelli also points out that fashion studies can be particularly useful in women’s studies and gender studies, as the fashion industry is based on selling the idealized version of the body – essentially, a commodification of the human body lies at the very core of the industry. In this light, it could greatly change our understanding of female Nazis by giving women the unique point of view that Paulicelli calls the “third eye,” which grants a, “supplementary and sophisticated ability, shorn of moralism and paternalism, to gain awareness of one’s own subjectivity, agency and sexuality and to look at oneself with a gaze that lies half way between the internal and the external.”⁴⁶ Perhaps this perspective would allow for a better understanding of these sexualized representations of the female Nazi body, leading to a more accurate dissection of what the trend truly says about politics and culture.

Guenther’s book, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich*, shares much of this theory, but focuses instead on fashion under Nazism. In this work, Geunther explores the contradictory ideologies of the fashion industry in Nazi Germany. She discusses how Nazi propaganda promoted the dirndl-clad farm maiden as the ideal woman, while Nazi high-society was obsessed with the latest international fashions.⁴⁷ She exposes the hypocrisy of a fashion industry that promoted natural beauty and

⁴⁴Eugenia Paulicelli, *Fashion Under Fascism: Beyond the Black Shirt* (New York: Berg, 2004): 148

⁴⁵Paulicelli, *Fashion Under Fascism*, 148.

⁴⁶ Paulicelli, *Fashion Under Fascism*, 149.

⁴⁷ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich*, (New York: Berg, 2004): 265.

feminine elegance while the SS simultaneously sent millions of women to camps, “stripped of their clothing and identities, shaved, covered in formless and threadbare uniforms, beaten, starved, and murdered.”⁴⁸ Guenther’s work deals mostly with the German fashion industry during the 1940s, but her work is crucial in providing the basis of comparison to today’s international fashion industry.

Valerie Steele is perhaps the most well-known and accomplished fashion historian working today. While she does not have an entire study dedicated to Nazi aesthetics, various elements of her work on fetish, Goth, and erotic fashion contribute greatly to the topic. Steele’s work is particularly significant for the way it shows the myriad influences that contribute to a single aesthetic style, be they political, social, or cultural. She is fashion history’s preeminent scholar, making an incredibly complex topic accessible and greatly influencing the field. She does not shy away from the psychology and sexuality of fashion, often giving precedent to the objects themselves and the words of those who ascribe to the style she is studying. Steele uses the clothing itself as a primary text in a way that few others are doing.

In terms of the Nazi aesthetic, Steele does not deal with this particular style at great length. However, her discussion on the significance of fabric, texture, and color greatly inform our understanding of the style’s appeal. She also explains the significance of the uniform within several subcultures which can be elaborated on to encompass the SS uniform and its influence on mainstream styles. Steele’s work is discussed at greater length in chapter 4, though her significance to the field cannot be emphasized enough and demands attention here.

⁴⁸ Guenther, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich*, 270.

Guenther, Paulicelli, and Steele's works are groundbreaking in that they pave the way for more scholarship in this area, making it possible to contextualize the trends of today's fashion industry. Having legitimized fashion history as a discipline and provided a new framework for analyzing fashion, their work makes it possible for scholars to conduct international, comparative studies of fashion history.

Scholars still have not fully answered Sontag's call to deconstruct the fascination with fascism, but the studies discussed here have certainly made a start. True comprehension of the phenomenon involves a synthesis of all of these sub-topics, and more, and may not be possible within a single work. The tremendous reach and influence of the Nazi aesthetic across genres and disciplines is staggering. However, without attempting to understand where it stems from and what makes it appealing, we ignore a discussion that could reveal a great deal about contemporary politics and culture. Without the efforts made by these scholars, the Nazi myth is simply perpetuated and we run the risk of allowing that myth to replace a more historically accurate and responsible understanding of WWII, the Nazis, concentration camps, and the Holocaust.

Chapter 2 – The Creation of the Ilsa-Type

Though many of her trademark looks and characteristics solidified in the 1970s with the soft-core torture porn, *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, the Ilsa-type predates this film by nearly two decades. Pulp detective novels and the men's magazines of the 1950s and 1960s featured many story lines and characters that form the foundation of the Ilsa-type. These texts also establish some standards of the exploitation genre – such as the false, yet persistent, claim of historicity – which make the transition from text to film a logical progression. While present in these texts, it is not until her appearance on film that the Ilsa-type begins to have more widespread influence. In this move from print to film, Ilsa becomes a cult icon and ushers in a more far-reaching wave of stereotypical representations of German women. As explained below, these representations of German women actually served as conduits for the expression of anti-feminist sentiment directed towards American women of the period. Even a surface-level analysis of these texts and films shows us that the Ilsa-type's historical value lies not in her historical accuracy – as no such accuracy exists – but in our understanding of her existence as a projection of male anxieties over changing social norms.

Men's Magazines – Content and Context

Few works of scholarship exist on the men's magazines of the 1950s and 1960s. They are not serious works of literature, their stories and illustrations are often uncredited, their contents are more pulp than anything else, and though they almost always claimed to report “true” stories this is hardly the case. Yet they warrant our attention nonetheless. Typical of the trash genre, they existed in mass quantities and their content followed predictable and repetitious patterns. Their content did not require

advanced reading skills, indicating a lower level of education among their readership. They had a specific target audience of working class, heterosexual, white men, and readily catered to it.⁴⁹ For these reasons, they offer valuable insight on that culture. Analyzing them as a collective work of fiction, it is possible to tease out consistent themes, characters, and story arcs, giving us a glimpse of their creators' and readers' desires and fears.⁵⁰

These magazines enjoyed their greatest success from the 1950s through the early 1970s.⁵¹ They often included features to help the modern man navigate the post-war world, such as dating tips, salacious exposés, and how-to sections,⁵² which revolved around a concept of rough or hard masculinity. As Mark Walker explains, rough or hard masculinity, “is characterized by heavy drinking, physical competitiveness, homosociality, and an opposition to and rejection of the genteel culture of supervisors and the middle class.”⁵³ Along with this emphasis on rough masculinity was the pervasive emphasis on sex, in both stories and images. Some of the most popular of these storylines combined sensational war adventures with outlandish sexual escapades. These hyper-masculine stories frequently use WWII as a backdrop and featured a Hemingwayesque hero who suffers stoically and inevitably triumphs. In part due to the cookie-cutter narrative of these stories, the hero provides an ideal empty shell for the reader to inhabit, a character which allows them to vicariously experience the

⁴⁹ Adam Parfrey, “From Pulp to Posterity: The Origins of Men’s Adventure Magazines,” *It’s a Man’s World: Men’s Adventure Magazines, the Postwar Pulps* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2003): 7; David M. Earle, *All Man! Hemingway, 1950s Men’s Magazines, and the Masculine Persona*. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2009): 6-7.

⁵⁰ Parfrey, “From Pulp to Posterity,” 7.

⁵¹ Parfrey, “From Pulp to Posterity,” 7.

⁵² Parfrey, “From Pulp to Posterity,” 5.

⁵³ Mark Walker, “‘Manliness is the Backbone of Our Nature’: Masculinity and Class Identity Among Nineteenth-Century Railroad Workers in West Oakland, California,” *SCA Proceedings* 25 (2011): 2.

protagonist's pain and pleasure. The general lack of deviation in narrative arc allows the details of the storylines to grow increasingly absurd, yet remain inhabitable to the male readership.

Perhaps the defining component of the men's magazines is that they provide a space dedicated to the construction, definition, and negotiation of 1950s-1970s era American rough masculinity.⁵⁴ Predictably, one way this masculinity took form was through the manipulation of the stories' female characters. This masculinity often used the mother-whore paradigm to define women and explain relationships. More often than not, women appear in these stories as damsels in distress – usually extreme distress, including torture and sexual abuse – and are invariably saved by the man in question.⁵⁵ In an essay on his father Norman's career as arguably the most prolific men's magazine illustrator, David Saunders estimates that about 75% of the magazines that portrayed sexualized violence did so with the woman being victimized by a male aggressor, only to be saved by the story's male hero.⁵⁶ His masculinity is often further validated when the woman, overcome with gratitude, uses sex to express her appreciation.

It is the remaining 25% of the magazines that are relevant to this thesis, however. This portion features the other female type to appear in these magazines – the she-devil – and this is where we find the origins of the Ilsa-type. Often in this selection of magazines, the mother figure is absent and readers are left only with the whore, typically a tremendously vicious whore. This character type is typically more fearsome than her

⁵⁴ Bethan Benwell, "Introduction: Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines," in *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*, ed. Bethan Benwell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd/The Sociological Review, 2003) 8.

⁵⁵ Adam Parfrey, "The Sadistic Burlesque," *It's a Man's World: Men's Adventure Magazines, the Postwar Pulps* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2003): 178.

⁵⁶ David Saunders, "Norman Saunders and the Evolution of Men's Magazine Illustration," *It's a Man's World: Men's Adventure Magazines, the Postwar Pulps*, (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2003) 177.

male counterparts, more sexually sadistic, and often considered “exotic” in some way.⁵⁷ After enacting her various tortures, sexual and otherwise, on her male captives, she is inevitably overpowered, usually raped and tortured, and then murdered.⁵⁸

When directly questioned about their stereotypical depictions of minorities and women, some of the most prolific writers, illustrators, and editors of men’s magazines give predictable responses. They write it off as tongue-in-cheek sarcasm, an exercise in irony, or a running joke that, if it fails to make you laugh, signals your own insecurities and frigidity.⁵⁹ As Belinda Wheaton explains in her study of men’s lifestyle and sport magazines, these responses indicate a mentality within the industry that, “men or women who take the sexism too seriously have missed the point of the joke.”⁶⁰

But these are cheap defenses and hardly stand up to further scrutiny. These magazines offer no realistic depictions of women and provide no alternatives to counter the mother-whore dichotomy, nullifying the argument that it is simply a tongue-in-cheek joke. A joke is no longer a joke when it entirely purges itself of reality. For his study of men’s magazines, Adam Parfrey interviews Bruce Jay Friedman, a major men’s magazine editor, who writes the offensive nature of these images off because, “That was the way things were... We didn’t think twice about it.”⁶¹ Yet these magazines hardly reflect reality. The prevalent racism and sexism were certainly, “the way things were,” but one would be hard pressed to find a living example of the hero of these stories, let alone any islands full of ravenous Nazi women just waiting for an American GI to

⁵⁷ Concluded from an analysis of the magazine covers compiled in Adam Parfrey’s *It’s a Man’s World: Men’s Adventure Magazines, the Postwar Pulps*.

⁵⁸ Richardson, “Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis,” 45.

⁵⁹ Parfrey, “From Pulp to Posterity,” 7; Belinda Wheaton, “Lifestyle Sport Magazines and the Discourses of Sporting Masculinity,” *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines*, ed. Bethan Benwell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing/The Sociological Review, 2003) 212.

⁶⁰ Wheaton, “Lifestyle Sport Magazines,” 212.

⁶¹ Parfrey, “From Pulp to Posterity,” 7.

torture. Indeed, as David M. Earle writes in his study of the genre's fascination with Ernest Hemingway, "if we were to judge the 1950s simply by the covers of these magazines, then men were attacked by wild animals...imprisoned by amazons and sadistic female SS guards, and spent all their leisure time either on safaris and deep-sea fishing or seducing semi-nude coeds."⁶²

Some more contemplative explanations put the magazines in their historical context in a more useful way. Their period of immense popularity began several years after the end of WWII, making it possible to argue that their hyper-masculine storylines are an expression of the frustrated male ego, disappointed in the lack of frontline action it saw during the war.⁶³ Roughly 75% of returning servicemen never saw combat and therefore never had the chance to participate in this "Good War."⁶⁴ As David Saunders explains, upon returning home these men were, "doomed to a life of wondering about their manhood in the face of battle. That huge audience wanted to read about heroic battles to vicariously satisfy their frustrated and unfulfilled expectations."⁶⁵

Likewise, if we understand the magazines' most successful years as being sandwiched between two unpopular wars – the Korean War and the Vietnam War⁶⁶ – this argument gains some ground. The magazines functioned primarily as a form of escapism – allowing men to feel good about their participation in unpopular wars by reminiscing about the "good old days" of WWII. This explains why Nazis far outnumber Korean or Vietnamese as popular magazine villains during these years, even though it was less relevant to contemporary military conflicts. The stories and illustrations return to a war

⁶² Earle, *All Man!*, 5.

⁶³ Saunders, "Norman Saunders," 44.

⁶⁴ Saunders, "Norman Saunders," 44.

⁶⁵ Saunders, "Norman Saunders," 44.

⁶⁶ Parfrey, "From Pulp to Posterity," 10.

where America's agenda was clear cut, where good and evil were black and white.⁶⁷ In a time where many men were supposed to feel a deep sense of patriotism push them towards active service, it was easier to conjure up or reaffirm those feelings of patriotism and pride using images from the "Good War," rather than images from these two "Bad Wars."

Additionally, returning WWII servicemen were faced with a "crisis of masculinity."⁶⁸ Those who saw action dealt with war trauma, and all soldiers came home to an increasingly suburbanized and consumerist-driven society.⁶⁹ They saw the old, working class lifestyle giving way to one based in the sterile, corporate economy.⁷⁰ These things led them, or at least their egos, to believe that the world was becoming a more feminized place with no space for the type of male camaraderie and aggression so central to rough masculinity.⁷¹ And, as Cold War paranoia set in, it also became a more dangerous place – one in dire need of the type of masculinity found in the pages of the men's magazines.⁷² It is worth mentioning here, however, that this crisis of masculinity was not universal. Not all men were concerned with defending their masculine identity, but these magazines provide valuable insight on those who were.

Thus, in feeding off of this crisis of masculinity – indeed, in profiting from it – men's magazines simply perpetuated the cycle by building up, if not inventing, the perceived threats to rough masculinity. The more readers bought into these ideas, the more money the magazines made to reproduce the same messages, thereby creating and

⁶⁷ Parfrey, "From Pulp to Posterity," 10.

⁶⁸ Earle, *All Man!*, 6.

⁶⁹ Earle, *All Man!*, 6.

⁷⁰ Earle, *All Man!*, 6.

⁷¹ Earle, *All Man!*, 9.

⁷² Earle, *All Man!*, 7.

sustaining their own market.⁷³ It comes as no great shock, then, that when the political and social tumult of the 1960s moved closer to its boiling point these magazines became even more absurd and offensive. Faced with Civil Rights, intense anti-war sentiment, and the burgeoning of second-wave feminism, the magazines – and their readers – retreated deeper into the hyper-masculine fantasy world they had created for themselves.

But that still does not explain the hyper-sexualized aspect of the magazines. David Saunders posits that the increasing emphasis on the stories' sexual elements was a natural evolution of the genre.⁷⁴ He argues that satisfying frustrated sexual appetites was a logical progression from satisfying frustrated egos.⁷⁵ As evidenced by the a basic survey of magazine covers,⁷⁶ the constant association of sex and violence indicates that by the early 1960s the two increasingly went hand-in-hand, until satisfying frustrated sexual appetites was simply a routine part of satisfying the ego. Though it makes sense that Nazis would reappear at this point to counter the “Bad Wars,” it does not explain why the magazines begin to show such tremendous violence against women with such regularity. Perhaps it is related to the masculinity crisis, the growing social upheaval, or the burgeoning of 2nd wave feminism. It is certainly a disturbing trend, but it is one that I can only comment on here and not fully explain.

The Origins of the Ilsa-Type

As the United States became more deeply entrenched in Vietnam and watched as the Eichmann trial unfolded in Israel on the global stage, the country's internal turmoil was becoming more demanding with each passing day. The crisis of masculinity

⁷³ Earle, *All Man!*, 7.

⁷⁴ Saunders, “Norman Saunders,” 44.

⁷⁵ Saunders, “Norman Saunders,” 44.

⁷⁶ The covers examined can be found in: Parfrey, *It's a Man's World*.

extended well beyond its origin point of the 1950s as second wave feminism, among other forms of activism, was just beginning. The decade opened with the creation of the world's first birth control pill,⁷⁷ which opened the conversation on women's reproductive rights, women's role within the family, and women's rights (and ability) to enjoy sex. In 1961, President Kennedy established the President's Commission on the Status of Women, headed by Eleanor Roosevelt, which had unexpected ramifications. Aside from encouraging many states to create their own women's commissions, it helped document the discrimination women faced in political, legal, and social issues, setting the stage for the more radical feminism to come.⁷⁸ In 1963, the same year Eleanor Roosevelt delivered the Commission's findings, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and the "problem with no name" became household terms almost overnight.⁷⁹

While these things certainly made women's rights both within and outside the home a more common topic of conversation, it was not until the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964 that women were given a substantial legal foothold with which to make demands for equal treatment and pay in the workforce. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act led to the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and barred workplace discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, and sex.⁸⁰ Though this was primarily geared towards ending racial discrimination it was a landmark first step towards ending sex-based discrimination as well. And, for many white men, it felt like an encroachment on their territory, further contributing to the masculinity crisis.

⁷⁷ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 290.

⁷⁸ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 60.

⁷⁹ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 116.

⁸⁰ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 117.

Perhaps most relevant to this thesis, though, are some of the iconic lifestyle changes of the 1960s. Paired with the controversy of the birth control pill and *The Feminine Mystique*, and serving as a follow up to the Kinsey Reports, Masters and Johnson's 1966 publication, *Human Sexual Response*,⁸¹ pushed the boundaries on sexual norms and how to discuss sexuality in the open. The prevalence of communes and emphasis on free love during the Summer of Love the following year further scrutinized traditional gender roles, socially acceptable sexual habits, and family structures.⁸² Coupled with this sexual revolution was the Stonewall Riot/Rebellion of 1969, which sparked the modern Gay Liberation Movement.⁸³ Perhaps the most controversial, though, was the 1973 decision of *Roe v. Wade*. This issue was as divisive within feminist groups as it was on a larger level, and it brought the discussion of women's reproductive rights into nearly every household. At this time the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment had seemed, at long last, a certainty. Yet it stalled, once again, falling short of ratification requirements, and finally dying in the 1980s. Thus the promising rise of 2nd wave feminism petered out towards the late 1970s, likely due to the backlash against 60s counterculture and second wave feminism, a growing polarity in politics and the conservative revival, and the controversy surrounding *Roe v. Wade*.

Unsurprisingly, the political and social advances women made during the 1960s and early 1970s spurred some intense anti-feminist, if not anti-woman, rhetoric.⁸⁴ Men's

⁸¹ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 292.

⁸² This is another issue that cause divisions among the counterculture. While women benefitted from the sexual revolution in some significant ways, many feminists also opposed it. Some saw this as evidence of the misogyny within the New Left. As Isserman and Kazin phrase it, "the male libido, when unrestrained by custom or law, often led to rape, unwanted pregnancy, and/or abandonment...for women, it [the sexual revolution] confirmed the link between sex and subordination." Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 145.

⁸³ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 263.

⁸⁴ It's important to note that this rhetoric did not come solely from men, but anti-feminist sentiment was promoted by women like Phyllis Schlafly and other ultra-conservative women as well.

magazines, though not on the same scale as significant social and political figures, contributed to this rhetoric. Indeed, the prevalence of violently sexualized images of women in men's magazines prompted David M. Earle to claim that they made up the bulk of accessible and visual propaganda for what Susan Faludi deemed the, "undeclared war against American women."⁸⁵ Given this context, it is unsurprising that we should find the beginnings of the Ilsa-type in these magazines. In fact, there is perhaps no better example of the function of these magazines than the one we find in the Ilsa-type. Satisfying the frustrated sexual appetite and the frustrated ego at once, the Ilsa-type perfectly embodies the bizarre tension between sex and violence set forth in these magazines. Doing so in the coded visual language of WWII, her character type also serves as a prime, albeit libidinous, example of the larger cultural fascination with the "Good War," a fascination that arguably began with the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1962.

As in the majority of men's magazines, with the presentation of the Ilsa-type there is always some claim of historical accuracy. Certainly, violent and sadistic women existed within the Nazi party – as they do everywhere – but they were by no means the rule. Several recent studies focus on a selection of these women in an effort to form a more comprehensive picture of life in the Third Reich and to dismantle the notion that atrocity is somehow gendered, all with varying degrees of success and credibility.⁸⁶ However, it was without these studies that the Ilsa-type became a type. Men's magazine writers claim to ground their hyper-sexual, sadistic villains in the true stories of Ilse Koch or Irma Grese, among others, but they rely on myth more so than facts. Their work thus

⁸⁵ Earle, *All Man!*, 85.

⁸⁶ See Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1988); Wendy A. Sarti, *Women and Nazis: Perpetrators of Genocide and Other Crimes During Hitler's Regime, 1933-1945* (Palo Alto: Academica Press, LLC, 2011); Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

perpetuates the myth until the myth effectively becomes the reality, replacing an accurate image of German women living during WWII with ravenous droves of Ilsa-types. The same holds true for the storylines they write.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, the claim validates the writers and illustrators' right to tell the story and the readers' right to enjoy it. It is unlikely that many men took these stories at face value and believed that hordes of female Nazi sex-robots really existed, but again, no alternate views were ever given to counter this image, testifying to its popularity.

Regardless of the truth, then, they tell us what readers wanted to believe and how they wanted to view these women. Much like the bunk claim that the degrading depictions of women is fine because it is really just a "joke," this is another bunk claim that finding gratification – sexual and otherwise – in something as horrific as the Holocaust is fine because the story is "true."

In the early years of her existence, the Ilsa-type's physical appearance was still slightly malleable. Though always statuesque, strikingly beautiful, intimidating, and scantily clad, there were female Nazi villains who were brunettes and redheads, as well as blonds.⁸⁸ Though a minor detail, it is particularly interesting when we take into account that the real Ilse Koch – the woman who these writers and illustrators (and later film directors) claim to use as a model⁸⁹ – was in fact a redhead.⁹⁰ Overall, the hair color is

⁸⁷ An interesting comparison here is to the way Nazi Germany's own propaganda depicted the ideal German woman. This propaganda focused on motherhood and duty, often using a fresh-faced country girl in traditional garb as the picture of this ideal woman. Needless to say, this depiction was a far cry from reality as well, particularly among women in the upper echelons of German society. Though beyond the scope of this thesis, a comparison of the two types would serve as interesting material for further study.

⁸⁸ Variation displayed in several covers collected here. Adam Parfrey, *It's A Man's World*, 189.

⁸⁹ Michael D. Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, eds. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt, and Elizabeth Bridges (New York: Continuum, 2012) 38; Alicia Kozma, "Ilsa and Elsa: Nazisploitation, Mainstream Film and Cinematic Transference," *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, eds. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt, and Elizabeth Bridges (New

insignificant and the blond stereotype quickly becomes the standard for all Nazis and all German women. What this example illustrates, though, is that the Ilsa-type is a creation, altered to suit preferences and tastes, rather than an accurate model of a real human being. This holds true for her physical appearance as well as for her narrative arc and behavioral attributes.

Though there was slight variation in her initial appearance, the Ilsa-type's story line and characteristics are nearly always the same. A hyper-sexual sadist, she never fails to find new, excruciating means of punishment for her male victims. She alternates between gratifying herself sexually and torturing her captive. These actions are equally stimulating for the reader, who is participating vicariously through the male hero's character. The reader is able to enjoy the graphic sexual content while mentally storing the segments on torture to justify their/the hero's eventual revenge. Inevitably, she displays some weakness that the GI exploits, leading him to ultimately take his revenge and escape. Her plot rarely deviates and her demise is guaranteed.

What is most interesting about this, though, is how Nazism and the swastika come to symbolize something entirely different when attached to a woman, in the form of the Ilsa-type, rather than a man.⁹¹ When the hero and the villain are both male, the expected roles are straight forward and uncomplicated (at least for heterosexual readers). There are variations on the male Nazi character – mad scientists, Hitler fanboy, impotent megalomaniacs – but the conflict grows less exciting after repetition. When the villain is

York: Continuum, 2012) 71 n.14; Lynn Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography: Profaning the Sacred in *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*," *Monsters in the Mirror: Representations of Nazism in Post-War Popular Culture*, eds. Sara Buttsworth and Maartje Abbenhuis (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010) 105, 113-115.

⁹⁰ "Life Sentence for 'Red Witch' of Buchenwald," *Lewiston Evening Journal*, January 15, 1951, accessed December 15, 2013,

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=OkUpAAAAIABJ&sjid=I2cFAAAAIAAJ&pg=4894%2C1088893>

⁹¹ Parfrey, "The Sadistic Burlesque," *It's a Man's World: Men's Adventure Magazines, the Postwar Pulp* (Los Angeles: Ferrel House, 2003) 178.

a female Nazi, however, things get more interesting. Still standardized and repetitious, this gender swap adds an element of sexual charge that is otherwise lacking and allows the reader to play both sides. Through their enjoyment of the sexual encounters they play the role of the villain by literally sleeping with the enemy. In this way, they can enjoy the best of both worlds without jeopardizing their morals or sense of patriotism. More alarming, the rise of female Nazi villains seems to coincide with the readers' desire to see more egregious violence against women in the pages of the magazines. In other words, as the 60s wore on, men's magazine readers grew more hostile towards women as the ultimate goal of the magazine was to find pleasure in the torture and destruction of women, validated by the fact that they were wearing swastikas.⁹²

In their study of a similar phenomenon, Amit Pinchevski and Roy Brand argue that when the villain is a female, Nazi iconography comes to stand as a symbol of suppressed manhood rather than an emblem of the Third Reich.⁹³ Though Pinchevski and Brand examine the pulpy *Stalags* that appeared in Israel during the Eichmann trial, their hypotheses extend to the American men's magazines. Indeed, they note that the *Stalags* were inspired by American men's magazines and monthlies, employing many of the same narrative arcs and visual devices.⁹⁴ Like American men's magazines, the *Stalags* were also a space where sexuality and power were defined, constructed, and negotiated,⁹⁵ serving as a mirror for contemporary political and social turmoil.⁹⁶

Pinchevski and Brand make a significant observation for both the *Stalags* and the American men's magazines when they point out that by, "the early 1960s, [the hero's]

⁹² Parfrey, "The Sadistic Burlesque," 177-178.

⁹³ Pinchevski and Brand, "Holocaust Perversions," 391.

⁹⁴ Pinchevski and Brand, "Holocaust Perversions," 391.

⁹⁵ Pinchevski and Brand, "Holocaust Perversions," 387.

⁹⁶ Pinchevski and Brand, "Holocaust Perversions," 387, 402-403.

place was being taken by a new male, a torturer rather than a savior, who typically wore Third Reich regalia and swastikas galore.”⁹⁷ With the decreasing number of heroes present in these stories, the female characters were never intended to be saved. Thus the male readers, by default, relate to the other dominant male in the text – the torturer. Indeed for those struggling to protect their concept of the rough masculine ideal, “‘Torture Magazines’ were predominantly about male dominance.”⁹⁸ In this way, the texts and their illustrations work to create a thematic and visual alliance between the reader and the male Nazi characters in their effort to bring the female characters into submission.

Indeed, even a brief look at the American men’s magazine illustrations shows particularly vicious depictions of women tortured under the sign of Nazism. While the majority show women tortured, raped, and murdered at the hands of the Nazis, they also include female Nazis who meet the same brutality – all of whom, notably, look like an unrealistic embodiment of female beauty, regardless of the torture they are subjected to and regardless, even, of whether or not they are still alive. Extending Pinchevski and Brand’s idea that “Nazi iconography symbolized a suppressed manhood ridding itself from women whose power lies in their ability to seduce,”⁹⁹ it is hard not to read these stories and images as an expression of male aggression towards women. The male reader delights not only in the sexual encounters they experience, but in the torture, rape, and

⁹⁷ Pinchevski and Brand, “Holocaust Perversions,” 391.

⁹⁸ Pinchevski and Brand, “Holocaust Perversions,” 391.

⁹⁹ Pinchevski and Brand, “Holocaust Perversions,” 391.

death of the female characters, regardless of whether it happens by the Nazis hands or their own via the male protagonist.¹⁰⁰

Using the iconography of a known enemy, the creators of these stories and images clearly define a second, possibly more dangerous, enemy than Nazis – women. Though this conclusion can be drawn by aggregating the countless images of women being tortured and murdered in a highly stylized and sexualized fashion, the Ilsa-type is perhaps the clearest example of this trend. Not only is she a beautiful woman with an irresistible sexual allure, but she reverses the standard power dynamics and inflicts unspeakable torture on other women and men in the name of the Nazi party. The violence and Nazi affiliation allow the reader to fully embrace the opportunity to suppress this woman.

Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS - Translating the Stereotype

The popularity of men's magazines began to fade in the early 1970s, but the hyper-masculine and hyper-sexualized narratives did not fade with them. Given the heritage of the Ilsa-type as detailed above, the film adaptation of this character is logical and unsurprising. For those already familiar with the tropes of men's magazines, these visual cues were easily understood. Nazisploitation films present the same sensational and salacious stories, only in a new format. In fact, the Ilsa-type may even have been better suited to film than print. Film is, by nature, more immediately visual than print, allowing for more instantaneous interpretations of the characters and the Nazi iconography that surrounds them.

¹⁰⁰ Extending Michael D. Richardson's theory of visual alliance between the viewer and the Nazi perpetrator here. Found in "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, eds. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt, and Elizabeth Bridges (New York: Continuum, 2012) 41, 45.

With this transition to film, a paradoxical shift in the Nazisploitation genre occurred in terms of the Ilsa-type's appeal. By focusing solely on the most extreme and unsavory storylines, concentration camp torture porns carved out a niche audience, a shadow of the growing mainstream and academic fascination with WWII and the Holocaust. Yet at the same time a parallel, counterintuitive, shift occurred as the appearance of Ilsa on screen broadened her appeal to a new demographic – women. The film was undoubtedly marketed towards men, but it also served as many women's first real introduction to the character-type. Though the film itself embodied the same hyper-masculine, sexist stereotypes as the men's magazines before it, it was the first step in the process of reappropriating this decidedly anti-feminist character and transforming her into a symbol – albeit a controversial symbol – of female strength.

The 1975 film, *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, closely follows the men's magazine format. Like the magazines, the film combines sex with extreme violence and death. Nudity and phallic props are central components in every torture scene. Many of the scenes even mirror men's magazine illustrations in surprising detail. Sexual encounters are either immediately preceded or followed by a graphic torture scene or a display of death. Yet, aside from the final scene when Ilsa is bound to her bedposts and gagged, the sex scenes are actually somewhat mild. Even the rape scene is glossed over – it is grim, but mostly implied. There is no “rough” sex, nothing overly graphic. These scenes consist primarily of moaning, heavy breathing, and ambiguous shots of body parts – more explicit depictions of sex appear in PG-13 movies. Unlike more hardcore pornography,

there are no visible male genitalia and no visible penetration.¹⁰¹ The torture, on the other hand, is direct and graphic. As many have noted, *Ilsa* is less porn than it is horror film.

Ilsa uses components of BDSM, yet does not fully adhere to its rules. The associations are obvious: the use of phallic props (primarily whips and electrified dildos), the connection between physical pain and sexual gratification, the reliance on a predetermined power hierarchy, and the Nazi uniform. As it has become so heavily laden with sexual undertones and power implications, the uniform itself can be interpreted as a phallic symbol. It clearly indicates who controls any given scenario; likewise, nudity indicates a lack of power.¹⁰² Thus, in true BDSM the uniform would never come off, we would never see a nude Ilsa, only nude victims. However the designated roles of dom/sub are oddly fluid in this film. Ilsa plays the role of both dom and sub, which is highly unusual, while her victims actively resist the submissive role.¹⁰³ So, we are left with a BDSM pornography that is not really pornography nor is it a true BDSM experience.

Reminiscent of the men's magazines, *Ilsa* opens with a disclaimer, as would become a standard for the Nazisploitation film genre, explaining that, "the film you are about to see is based upon documented fact," condensed for purposes of narrative and to reveal the true horrors of the Nazi regime in the hope that, "these heinous crimes will never occur again."¹⁰⁴ Like the magazines, this is an effort to fend off criticism with claims of authenticity, though this claim bears little weight. While scientists did conduct horrific experiments on concentration camp inmates, they were not done with the aim of proving that women were stronger than men (and therefore would make better soldiers),

¹⁰¹ Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography," 109.

¹⁰² Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 171.

¹⁰³ Fuchs, "Of Blitzkriege and Hardcore BDSM," 284.

¹⁰⁴ Opening disclaimer in *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, directed by Don Edmunds (1975; Aeteas Filmproduktions, 2000), DVD.

let alone the fact that, “no women were allowed to become members, let alone officers, of the strictly patriarchal SS.”¹⁰⁵ Thus Ilsa would never have been in the position to conduct these experiments in the first place.

The opening scene is one of the film’s surprisingly few sex scenes, introducing the viewer, as Alicia Kozma frames it, to Ilsa first as a woman – a sexual being – rather than a Nazi.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, Dyanne Thorne, the actress playing Ilsa, was a Playboy bunny¹⁰⁷ and was presumably familiar to her male audience primarily as a woman and sexual being rather than an actress. Thorne’s presence alone perfectly symbolizes the transition from pornography magazine to pornography film.

When Ilsa makes her first appearance on screen in full Nazi garb, she mirrors the character-type created in the magazines. She is statuesque, strikingly beautiful, intimidating, and blond; her tailored, black SS uniform barely contains her ample breasts; she wears a red Nazi arm band, sharply filed red nails, and brandishes various phallic props. Likewise, her sexually sadistic nature becomes immediately apparent when she castrates her lover from the opening scene after he fails to satisfy her. Making the anti-feminist undertones explicit, Ilsa explains early in the film that her reason for torturing her female inmates is to prove women’s physical and psychological superiority to men, which would make them better soldiers.¹⁰⁸

For men who were struggling with their identity in the face of changing social norms and the inability to prove their masculinity in war (as experience in Vietnam was

¹⁰⁵ Fuchs, “Of Blitzkriege and Hardcore BDSM,” 281.

¹⁰⁶ Alicia Kozma, “Ilsa and Elsa: Nazisploitation, Mainstream Film and Cinematic Transference,” in *Nazisploitation*, ed. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt and Elizabeth Bridges, (New York: Continuum, 2012): 60.

¹⁰⁷ Marcus Stiglegger, “Cinema Beyond Good and Evil? Nazi Exploitation in the Cinema of the 1970s and its Heritage,” in *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, eds. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt, and Elizabeth Bridges (New York: Continuum, 2012): 25.

¹⁰⁸ *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*.

tainted by its unpopularity) Ilsa stands as an antagonistic symbol of this masculinity crisis. Though she poses a direct challenge to rough masculinity, it would be a mistake to read Ilsa as a feminist in this film. First and foremost, what Ilsa advocates is not feminism. She wants to prove that women are superior to men, not that they are equal. Second, Ilsa is actually quite submissive to the men in the film. A mere 30 minutes into the film Ilsa exhibits submissive behavior towards both her commanding General and a German-born American GI inmate named Wolfe.

If anything, the film directs us to the conclusion that while Ilsa, like her predecessors, may symbolize feminism as defined by her creators' fear of feminism, ultimately her character's purpose is to prove women's inferiority. While much of Lynn Rapaport's analysis of the film is quite useful, her reading of Ilsa as a feminist misses the mark. Rapaport claims that Ilsa is a feminist despite her conformity, "to the male fantasy of a blond, blue-eyed bombshell, with larger-than-life breasts and an insatiable sexual appetite."¹⁰⁹ Yet there is little in Ilsa's character to indicate that she is meant to subvert her role as a sex object rather than conform to it. Furthermore, Rapaport argues that the film contains, "the complete opposite of male-dominated sexual intercourse,"¹¹⁰ which, I argue, is a misreading. While the premise of the film is certainly the opposite of the traditional male-dominated fantasy – that leaving a woman unsatisfied leads to castration, here as both a literal and symbolic loss of manhood – it is quickly overturned. Men quickly gain the upper hand in this film. By the film's end, Ilsa is strategically and sexually dominated by men who, throughout the course of the film, clearly derived some sexual pleasure from their relationship.

¹⁰⁹ Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography," 108.

¹¹⁰ Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography," 109.

A closer look at Ilsa's interactions with other characters helps dismantle the preferred reading of Ilsa as a dominating character. There are three specific characters who challenge Ilsa's dom role – Anna, the General, and Wolfe. Anna, a female inmate, is her primary victim throughout the film. From the outset, Anna is defiant and unflinching. She undergoes extreme torture, yet never submits to Ilsa's will. However, in a story driven by the male ego, Anna cannot be the hero and dies without exacting any revenge. Her death is also fitting in this film because Anna was the proof Ilsa needed to show her superiors that women are more tolerant to pain, and therefore stronger, than men.¹¹¹ Anna's survival, regardless of whether or not she submitted to Ilsa, would have verified that claim.

While Anna actively resists her submissive role, thus weakening Ilsa's overall authority, Ilsa willingly relinquishes some degree of power to two men in the film – the General and Wolfe. Through a phone call from the General a mere 13 minutes into the film, Ilsa's submission is evident. Her demeanor changes dramatically and she adopts a soft-spoken tone, readily complying with whatever he says. Even without the General's physical presence on screen it is evident that Ilsa understands her place within the male hierarchy of the SS, an organization in which she never would have had any real power to begin with. During his visit, in the only sexual scenario between the two, he praises her as a "some blond goddess,"¹¹² and orders her to remove certain components of her uniform (notably not the boots or jacket) before urinating on his chest. The viewer does not see any nudity or urination in this scene, but the implication is unmistakable. What these scenes do, aside from indicate the General's uniform fetish and "deviant" sexual

¹¹¹ *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS.*

¹¹² *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS.*

proclivities, is make it clear that Ilsa is never in control. Like the men who fail to satisfy her, her submission to the General's orders in these scenes lead the viewer to the conclusion that she cannot control male sexuality and can only do as she is instructed.¹¹³

The General, who could also be a conduit for sexual enjoyment but in all likelihood is probably just an iteration of the "Nazi pervert" stereotype, also inspires a male alliance with the viewer, if only temporarily. After the prisoners rebel and kill Ilsa's assistants, several tanks steamroll the camp's gates unexpectedly. They open fire, killing all prisoners except for Wolfe and a female prisoner, who escaped moments earlier. A Nazi soldier makes his way to Ilsa's room and kills her before calling the General to tell him that the camp, including Ilsa, has been destroyed in compliance with his orders. With this, as Rapaport explains, "the rivalry between male and female power [ends],"¹¹⁴ and the viewer is temporarily allied with the Nazi General in bringing about Ilsa's defeat. In the logic of the film, the only thing more dangerous than a Nazi is a Nazi woman – this is apparently something that men, both Americans and Nazis, can agree on. In Ilsa's death, then, we see the same trend resurfacing from the men's magazines – a visual and thematic alliance between the male viewer and the male Nazi villain made possible through Nazi iconography. This alliance, originally formed in a suburbanized, commodified, 1950s America,¹¹⁵ was likely made accessible for a male audience in 1975 due to their own anxieties regarding the upheaval of social norms and gender roles.¹¹⁶

Aside from her relationship with the General, within 30 minutes into the film, Ilsa is entirely submissive to one of her inmates – the German-born, American GI Wolfe.

¹¹³ Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography," 117.

¹¹⁴ Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography," 117.

¹¹⁵ Earle, *All Man!*, 6-7.

¹¹⁶ Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body," 51.

Once again we find a narrative arc that is familiar to the men's magazine audience. Wolfe allows viewers to enjoy Ilsa's sexuality, literally sleeping with the enemy, while simultaneously feeling a sense of superiority for their knowledge of the pending prisoner rebellion, knowing full well that this rebellion will result in her death. Thus, Wolfe perfectly embodies the satisfaction of both sexual desires and moral obligations. The viewer feels no guilt in Ilsa's defeat because: a) she's a Nazi, and b) she literally and symbolically castrates men.

As an empty shell for the viewer to inhabit, Wolfe provides a conduit for the "everyman."¹¹⁷ The dialog reveals that he has average-sized genitalia, which is odd for porn (even stranger for the fact that they are never seen),¹¹⁸ yet his complete control over his erection is reminiscent of the, "ever-present, long-lasting erection"¹¹⁹ of more traditional pornography. He plays the role of the underdog and is otherwise reminiscent of the lone wolf of the men's magazines. Most significantly, he lets the male viewer live vicariously through his escapades with Ilsa and participate in her downfall, leaving them sexually and morally satisfied.

Initially, Ilsa expects Wolfe's sexual performance to be inadequate. Thus, when he satisfies her, she is immediately cowed into the submissive role. If we read Ilsa, in the context of the film, as a symbol for feminism, then the message is clear: all these aggressive women really need is to get laid and it takes a real American man to get the job done. Submitting to the feminist will reduce masculinity, as symbolized with the inadequate sexual performances and castrations of previous male inmates, which leads to a fate worse than death. Indeed, Mario, a castrated inmate who is integral to the eventual

¹¹⁷ Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography," 109.

¹¹⁸ Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography," 109.

¹¹⁹ Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography," 109.

prisoners' rebellion, refuses to leave the camp with Wolfe when the opportunity presents itself because, "What life is there for a half man outside this wire?"¹²⁰ Wolfe accepts this explanation without question, as the viewer is expected to, because it makes sense within the logic of the film. Moments later Mario is killed. Thus, in his character we see the redeemed male. Though he temporarily lost his masculine identity by submitting to Ilsa (and failing to satisfy her), he rectifies this failure through his participation in the rebellion. In the end he makes the honorable choice in choosing death over submission.

Likewise, Wolfe and Rosette – a female inmate who is soft-spoken and feminine, completely unlike Ilsa and Anna – are the only two prisoners to survive. Rosette's character is so poorly developed that she barely constitutes the requisite "mother" character to counter Ilsa's (and perhaps even Anna's) identity as the "whore." Yet she is the only woman left standing and thus cannot be completely discounted. The film, then, ends on a redemptive note – the strong-willed female has been defeated and Wolfe and Rosette are free to rebuild their lives, presumably building a traditional family centered on love.¹²¹

Ilsa's Transition to Pro-Female Figure

Given the history of the Ilsa character type in men's magazines and the film analysis above, it seems unlikely that the Ilsa-type would become a symbol that women actually embraced. Yet, this is exactly what happened. Dyanne Thorne's portrayal of Ilsa in the 1975 film, *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, was the first real introduction many women had to the character type. While the film's anti-feminist narrative was no doubt off-putting, the aesthetics of the Ilsa character were not so easily dismissed. The following chapters

¹²⁰ *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*.

¹²¹ Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body," 50.

of this thesis explore how mainstream American pop culture adopted the Ilsa-type and popularized her with a female audience. As the decidedly anti-feminist Ilsa-type finds new life in unexpected corners of our society as she is reappropriated as a symbol of female strength, it is difficult not to appreciate the irony of this transition.

Chapter 3 – Ilsa from Cult to Academy

Perhaps as to be expected, after *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*' debut, the Ilsa-type was adopted by mainstream film productions and became the standard for portrayals of German women on screen. Beginning in the 1980s, variations of the Ilsa-type began to appear in mainstream Hollywood productions, typically as a villain and a taboo love interest. Though not as graphic as the *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* film, these movies carried several crucial aesthetic and thematic components over to the mainstream.

The Ilsa-type in action films eventually develops a self-aware, satirical component yet fails to do so in more serious, critically-acclaimed Holocaust films. This leads to her problematic existence as both an industry joke and a substitute for any realistic depiction of German women living under the Third Reich in mainstream media. The aesthetic and thematic components of the character are typically the same across genres; it is simply their expression that determines whether the character is to be considered a ridiculous lowbrow satire or a daring and award-winning highbrow portrayal. The divergence of the Ilsa-type in this sense is a reflection of the same trend on a broader level. Be it WWII, Nazi Germany, Hitler, or the Holocaust, a general trend towards Nazisploitation in mainstream media is apparent. Using Ilsa to examine the process by which it happens is a valuable exercise that has, until now, gone undone.

Holocaust Genre vs. Nazisploitation

Coinciding with the 1962 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel, an intense and persistent fascination with exploring and explaining the Holocaust – and reliving America's supposed moral triumphs of WWII – took hold of American academia and

mainstream popular culture.¹²² There are many theories as to what exactly drives this fascination. Tim Cole argues that the endless exploration and mythologizing of WWII is, “an attempt to extract meaning from this troubling past,”¹²³ and is so appealing to American audiences because, “it is sufficiently ‘foreign’ and distant over both time and space to be relatively unthreatening.”¹²⁴ Cole argues that, “our fascination with the Holocaust is really a cover for our own tragedies and atrocities,”¹²⁵ such as slavery, the atomic bomb, and Vietnam. It is possible to extend Cole’s argument to our most recent conflicts in Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan as well. Others argue that it stems from, “the desire to preserve the image of World War II as the war of a ‘greatest generation’ of American heroes,”¹²⁶ or an, “aesthetic *frisson* (a moment of intense excitement, a shudder, an emotional thrill),”¹²⁷ that contributes to both our effort to explain the atrocities of the Third Reich and our “potentially dangerous remythologization and reactivation of Nazism.”¹²⁸

However, there is another motive that is more worrying than any of these. This is the realization that WWII and, more specifically, the Holocaust have become commodities. There is a definite profit to be made in the perpetual reexamination of this war. Indeed, Cole claims that, “there is little doubt that at the end of the twentieth century

¹²² Maartje Abbenhuis and Sara Buttsworth, “Introduction: The Mundanity of Evil: Everyday Nazism in Post-War Popular Culture,” in *Monsters in the Mirror*, ed. Sara Buttsworth and Maartje Abbenhuis (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010): xxviii; Richardson, “Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis,” 44.

¹²³ Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 172.

¹²⁴ Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 14.

¹²⁵ Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 14.

¹²⁶ Daniel H. Magilow, “Introduction: Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture,” in *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, eds. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt, and Elizabeth Bridges (New York: Continuum, 2012): 9.

¹²⁷ Richardson, “Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis,” 44.

¹²⁸ Richardson, “Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis,” 44.

the ‘Holocaust’ is being made in America.” This process results in the trivialization of atrocities¹²⁹ and often provides some sort of redemptive tone.¹³⁰

This packaging of WWII and the Holocaust is what gave birth to the Nazi stereotypes with which we are now so familiar. As Eva Kingsepp explains, “as a commercial product, Nazi Germany sells. And it sells better when it is packaged in simple binaries than in complex ideas, with primacy given to images over words, surface over content.”¹³¹ Thus we are left with the platform on which the Ilsa-type was developed in the men’s magazines and carried into the Nazisploitation film industry – a genre that relies heavily on highly charged Nazi iconography to bolster its reductive and propagandistic narratives. Indeed, it is this structure that led the creators of *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* to resurrect Ilsa after her death in the first film for a series of loosely related sequels. The hyper-sexual and sadistic Nazi was simply too lucrative a figure to remain dead or even remotely within her proper historical context.¹³²

As discussed in this chapter, it is not only the sensational Nazisploitation genre that is willing to manipulate the female Nazi character for financial gain. The same holds true for more serious films, those awarded the highest critical accolades. While there are a number of complex Holocaust films that warrant in-depth analysis, I focus primarily on the more obviously exploitative films of the genre, closing with a brief look at two Oscar winning films. I will attempt to prove that the gap between Nazisploitation films and academy award winners is not as wide as we may initially think. The goal of this chapter is to illustrate that, “where Nazisploitation was once taboo, today its motifs and narrative

¹²⁹ Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 15.

¹³⁰ Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 172.

¹³¹ Eva Kingsepp, “Hitler as Our Devil?: Nazi Germany in Mainstream Media,” in *Monsters in the Mirror*, ed. Sara Buttsworth and Maartje Abbenhuis (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010): 47.

¹³² Rapaport, “Holocaust Pornography,” 118.

conceits have permeated big budget studio productions and mainstream popular culture as well,”¹³³ and have done so in such a seamless manner that the viewer may no longer be aware of how similar the two actually are.

This exercise calls into question, “the claim that certain representations of violence and sex are ‘appropriate’ while others are ‘exploitative’ kitsch.”¹³⁴ Certainly this distinction exists, as it should if we are to ever fully understand the nature of sex and violence in WWII, but this chapter aims to expose how current depictions of “appropriate” sex and violence are hardly appropriate, particularly in regards to the Ilsa-type. If nothing else, this exercise will show that high-brow and low-brow films that feature Nazis are two sides of the same coin. Nazisploitation, as Jeffrey Sconce’s discussion of the trash aesthetic and paracinema indicates, “serves as a reminder that all forms of poetics and aesthetic criticism are ultimately linked to issues of taste; and taste, in turn, is a social construct with profoundly political implications.”¹³⁵ That is, even the most celebrated and despised of these films exist on the same spectrum and need the other for self-definition, and all have something to tell us about the political, social, and cultural climate from which they emerge.

Thankfully, a number of scholars have already outlined a process for conducting this type of film analysis. As Marcus Stiglegger details, Nazisploitation and mainstream films share the same underlying structure: “the arrival of the concentration camp prisoners and the selection on the platform; the roll call on the open areas between the barracks; the actions in the brothel camps; the disastrous punishments and tortures (it is

¹³³ Magilow, “Introduction: Nazisploitation!,” 6.

¹³⁴ Magilow, “Introduction: Nazisploitation!,” 9.

¹³⁵ Jeffrey Sconce, “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” *Screen* 36 (1995): 392.

here that some critics observe the sadomasochistic appeal); executions; medical experiments; massacre.”¹³⁶ All of these elements occur in *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* and the majority appear in the two Oscar-winning films I discuss. The other films I examine rely more on the logic of Nazisploitation and the central assumptions that, “all Germans are Nazis, all Nazis are members of the SS, and all members of the SS are war criminals, medical experimenters and sexual sadists.”¹³⁷ Paired with the reliance on iconography and visual cues, the characters are predictable and two-dimensional. This lack of complexity and depth is what makes the Nazi stereotype so easily transmittable to other genres and removes the popular culture Nazi from its historical context.¹³⁸

Ilsa in Action

Based on the history of the character-type in men’s adventure magazines, it is unsurprising that variations of the Ilsa-type would become so popular in the hyper-masculine world of action films. Indeed, finding complex female characters in this genre is a rarity. Instead, the female characters tend to be an expression of the same stereotypical dichotomies found in the men’s magazines of the 1950s. Women in early action films were either damsels or vixens; demure or dominating (in a feminine way); overtly sexy or mousey (but still sexy); romantic interest or shrew. Also like their predecessors, there is typically a persistent sexual current underlying all interactions between the female characters and the male protagonist (and, by extension, the male viewer). Perhaps it goes without saying, but the female characters are almost always depicted in a submissive role to the male protagonist as well. In short, they exist to

¹³⁶ Stiglegger, “Cinema Beyond Good and Evil?,” 32.

¹³⁷ Magilow, “Introduction: Nazisploitation!,” 2.

¹³⁸ Kingsepp, “Hitler as Our Devil?,” 33.

accentuate the male protagonist's masculinity and that of the film's presumably male audience.

In the second half of the 21st century, these stereotypes began to change slightly and several scholars have identified a series of female archetypes that exist in action films. While Dominique Mainon and James Ursini date the origins of their modern Amazon woman back to *Judith of Bethulia* (1914) and *Metropolis* (1927),¹³⁹ Rikke Schubart dates the birth of her five female archetypes – the dominatrix, the rape-avenger, the mother, the daughter, and the Amazon – to the 1960s.¹⁴⁰ (As a curious side note, Schubart names Pam Grier as the action genre's first female hero,¹⁴¹ one who got her start in women-in-prison films.¹⁴² Grier earned a reputation as the “Queen of Blaxploitation,” before getting frozen out of Hollywood for demanding more complex roles.¹⁴³) The Ilsa-type, though, satisfies the criterion for both Mainon and Ursini's Amazon woman and Schubart's dominatrix type. Her, “mission is to please the male masochist by acting out his most taboo fantasies. She is not a female hero in any ordinary sense, yet she is a strong, active, and aggressive protagonist, who has become mythical in Western culture.”¹⁴⁴

Mainon and Ursini argue that violent women in film typically have a backstory that makes their violence sympathetic and human, provoking compassion from the viewer, two of the most common being rape revenge and childhood tragedy. Yet the viewer is given no such information in relation to Ilsa. Her experiments on women are

¹³⁹ Dominique Mainon and James Ursini, *The Modern Amazons: Warrior Women On-Screen* (Canada: Limelight Editions, 2006): Timeline 387.

¹⁴⁰ Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2007): 23.

¹⁴¹ Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes*, 6.

¹⁴² Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes*, 6.

¹⁴³ Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes*, 41.

¹⁴⁴ Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes*, 65.

done in the name of science and her castration of men seems to be purely sadistic. In this way, the Ilsa-type and her progeny differ from the majority of female action figures because we, “are never given an acceptable motive for her sadistic behavior. We are not aware of anything that has been done to her that would allow her the excuse of seeking revenge, which is so often the key factor in excusing brutal feminine violence in films.”¹⁴⁵ For this reason, Ilsa, in all her iterations, is harshly punished by the end of each film, resulting in her death more often than not.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the first wildly popular action film to translate the Ilsa-type for mainstream audiences was released on the dawn of 3rd wave feminism, shortly before Rush Limbaugh introduced the term, “feminazi,” to right-wing anti-feminist rhetoric.¹⁴⁶ Having served as an adequate symbol for anti-feminist fears in previous decades, that the Ilsa-type should enter mainstream media at this time is no great shock. Thus, it is with the 1989 production *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* that audiences were introduced to Alison Doody’s portrayal of Elsa – the brilliant, scheming, and sexually conniving female Nazi who would play opposite Harrison Ford and Sean Connery.

Aside from the obvious similarity in name, Elsa echoes many of Ilsa’s aesthetics, made more palatable and appropriate for a PG-13 film. The similarities extend further, as Alicia Kozma explains: Both characters are dedicated to knowledge and achievement, both are involved in unconventional sexual practices (Elsa sleeps with both Indiana and

¹⁴⁵ Mainon and Ursini, *The Modern Amazons*, 345.

¹⁴⁶ This may be no more than a coincidence, but it is one that highlights the confluence of Nazi deviance with the deviance of strong-willed women, be they feminists or not. While the Ilsa-type’s deviance results in an uncontrollable sexuality, the term “feminazi” often connotes an asexuality or homosexuality. Thus, the two are not interchangeable, but the deviant implication pertains to both. The relationship between the two would be a topic for further inquiry.

his father to achieve her own ends), both are responsible for some wrong-doing against the protagonist – where Ilsa tortures, Elsa double-crosses – and both, inevitably, are killed when they show vulnerability to the male protagonist.¹⁴⁷

Yet Elsa shows some last minute remorse, whereas Ilsa does not. Though this distinction may seem minor, Kozma argues that it dramatically alters our interpretation of the character. Her last ditch effort to help Indiana Jones leaves the viewer to believe that Elsa, perhaps, is not all that bad. She is more akin to the “hooker with a heart of gold” than that of a truly fiendish character,¹⁴⁸ one who has been led astray but for whom hope is not entirely lost. No such redeeming characteristic can be found in Ilsa’s character.

But why is *The Last Crusade* willing, as Kozma posits, to translate Ilsa into a more, “sympathetic Nazi, one whose affiliation with the party and actions in its name are forgiven, or at the very least redeemed, through a demonstrated lack of ideological fervor for the Reich.”¹⁴⁹ I argue that the two most obvious answers are sex and profit – the production companies provide audiences with a dangerous and edgy character over whom they can lust with no residual confusion or guilt, thereby securing a greater profit from the film. Regardless, “looking at Elsa through the prism of Ilsa reveals how the trope of the Nazi victimizer has been translated into an ahistorical context devoid of the reality of the atrocities portrayed by Ilsa and her cohort in the films of the 1970s.”¹⁵⁰

As part of another major action franchise of the same era, *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995) gives us Sam Phillip’s portrayal of Katya. Katya’s role in the film is small but she is clearly inspired by Ilsa, both in aesthetics and personality. She is blond,

¹⁴⁷ Kozma, “Ilsa and Elsa,” 64.

¹⁴⁸ Kozma, “Ilsa and Elsa,” 63.

¹⁴⁹ Kozma, “Ilsa and Elsa,” 64.

¹⁵⁰ Kozma, “Ilsa and Elsa,” 64.

attractive, and moves seductively, although she is more androgynous than most Ilsa incarnations. She is a skilled fighter, ruthless and unflinching, and submits only to the authority of Simon Gruber, a German terrorist. Though Katya's appearance and allegiance to Gruber indicate that she is German, her name is Russian in heritage. This incongruity can be viewed as an example of the way Hollywood uses the Nazi character type to identify the "enemy" based on contemporary conflicts. The Ilsa-type is, by this point, readily accessible to viewers. In the context of the film, using an Ilsa-type iteration leads viewers to identify the character as a sexual, sadistic, and violent villain, while attaching a Russian name to her melds the Ilsa legacy with post-Cold War anxieties.

If this seems like a stretch, consider the fact that the *Ilsa* series did the exact same thing. After seeing the unexpected profit generated by *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, the film's production company resurrected Ilsa and made three sequels, each taking place in a different time and place. In 1976 Ilsa was the *Harem Keeper of the Oil Sheiks* in the Middle East; in 1977 she was both *The Wicked Warden* of the South American jungle, and the *Tigress of Siberia* in the Soviet gulags.¹⁵¹ Clearly, Ilsa is not confined by place or time, let alone historical context. Instead, these sequels lead us to believe that she is actually just used as a placeholder for any number of contemporary military, social, and cultural anxieties. Thanks to the reductive nature of her character and the reliance on coded aesthetics, she is easily transferrable to other, even more ahistorical contexts.

In this way, it is possible to read Ilsa as more than just a female Nazi archetype, but as a female villain archetype. The fluidity with which her iterations change nationalities and move through time indicates that Ilsa's staying power stems from her status as a villainous woman first, and as a Nazi second. While, initially, her Nazism

¹⁵¹ Kingsepp, "Hitler as Our Devil?," 118.

provides a platform for her abhorrent behavior, it becomes less central to her characterization in later iterations of the Ilsa-type. That is, Nazism is still a significant detail and often weighs heavily in their aesthetics, but their entire character does not revolve around it. The wickedness, the sadism, and the sexuality, however, seem to consistently permeate the Ilsa-type's character development.

Ilsa as Satire

In the early 2000s the Ilsa-type became a mainstream expression of the Nazisploitation genre's satirical edge. As trash cinema began carving out a larger niche in the mainstream,¹⁵² the Ilsa-type's presence – indeed, the Nazi presence in general – seems expected. In some ways, this could be viewed as a repetition of what happened with men's adventure magazines. The content, originally grounded in hyper-masculine action adventures, gradually becomes more graphic, more sexual, and more absurd. Thus, many satirical Nazisploitation films borrow heavily from the action genre. “Admittedly,” the editors of *Nazisploitation!* explain, “Nazisploitation's early-twenty-first-century cinematic comeback often smirks ironically or condescendingly at its twentieth century antecedents.”¹⁵³

The 2000s saw a revival of the superhero in film, often with a grittier and darker storyline than in the past. Like comic books themselves, which frequently use Nazis as stand-ins for, “America's ideological opponents at [any] specific historical moment,”¹⁵⁴ these films regularly featured Nazis. Indeed, many of the most beloved superheroes *need* Nazis to define themselves – Captain America, Wonder Woman, and more recently Hellboy, simply cannot function successfully without Nazis in the storyline. Because of

¹⁵² Sconce, “Trashing the Academy,” 373.

¹⁵³ Magilow, “Introduction: Nazisploitation!,” 6.

¹⁵⁴ Magilow, “Introduction: Nazisploitation!,” 15.

this dependency, several comics and comic-based films in the early 20th century featured female Nazis who bear a striking resemblance to Ilsa.

But Nazis in comics, regardless of the platform, are nothing new. Satirical Nazisploitation feature films, however, are another story. 2009 saw the release of Quentin Tarantino's wildly popular and controversial *Inglorious Basterds*. Known for his stylized violence and gore, Tarantino's film offers an alternative telling of WWII. The film's two plots – the story of an all Jewish troop of American soldiers who hunt Nazis and that of a Jewish theatre owner seeking to avenge her family's murder – converge, and in the process remind viewers of, “the historical atrocities of the Nazi regime and the visceral pleasure in its destruction at the hands of its victims.”¹⁵⁵ It shares many characteristics of traditional Nazisploitation films, yet refuses to disassociate the Nazis with their cruelty. In that sense, it is both typical and atypical of the genre.

Although *Inglorious Basterds* warrants acknowledgment for this, it is a clip from an earlier Tarantino film that is most relevant to this thesis. Before screening *Grindhouse* (2007) in theatres, Tarantino ran a series of fake movie trailers. One of these was *Werewolf Women of the SS*, directed by Rob Zombie. Though only 5 minutes in length, *Werewolf Women of the SS* offers a succinct look at how self-aware the Nazisploitation genre has become, particularly in terms of Ilsa's legacy. The trailer appeared alongside four other spoof exploitation trailers, two of which have since been made into feature length films. It combines many elements of the campy slasher style with the typical structure of a Nazisploitation film. It shows glimpses of several of the standard Holocaust film elements mentioned above – arrival at the camp, experimentation, torture – and combines historical footage with fake footage, complete with an opening disclaimer of

¹⁵⁵ Kozma, “Ilsa and Elsa,” 69.

historicity. The characters in the trailer are all fanatic and violent, the plot is extreme (the very fate of Germany is on the line), and the nudity is abundant.

The influence of *Ilsa* is obvious throughout the trailer. The film's supposed plot revolves around conducting experiments on prisoners and soldiers to create an unstoppable German army. When the mad scientists fail to make progress with these experiments, the "she-devils" are called in – two leggy, sultry blonds dressed in tall black boots, lingerie, and SS hats. The she-devils' torturous methods somehow lead to the creation of an army of werewolves. How exactly it does so is a mystery, but perhaps that is the point. In this trailer, *Zombie* distills the entire Nazisploitation genre – from characters, to plots, to aesthetics – into a five minute clip that is meant to be enjoyable regardless of logic, depth, complexity, or historical accuracy. Indeed, his dramatic and sensational style suggests that it is meant to be enjoyable *despite* lacking these things. With this, he is able to underscore just how formulaic Hollywood productions are when it comes to portrayals of Nazis, and just how easily reliance on this formula can lead to increasingly absurd and illogical films that offer no real substance.

Where *Zombie* took only five minutes to accomplish this goal, Timo Vuorensola drags the process out in his 2012 film *Iron Sky*. Based on the premise that a fleet of Nazis escaped to the moon during WWII and have been plotting their revenge ever since, *Iron Sky* uses its female Protagonist, Renate, to poke fun at the *Ilsa*-type. Renate certainly has the *Ilsa* prerequisites – she is blond and beautiful, an intelligent scientist, and has an obvious love for the Third (and "Fourth") Reich – but she eventually assists in the downfall of her Nazi companions.

In the film's 93 minutes, Vuorensola explores nearly every Nazi stereotype and scenario that exists, even including internet memes such as the *Downfall* parodies. The result is mixed. At times the subversion of our expectations is humorous – such as Renate's first encounter with Washington, a black American astronaut. In this scene, he is strapped to a medical examination table when she slinks in, but, with the stage set perfectly for a torture scene, the two simply talk before she advises him to, “play a Nazi,” and slinks back out. At other times, however, the film feels like a bad, old joke. Either way, *Iron Sky* assumes its viewers are familiar with the stereotypes it employs, and requires that familiarity for it to obtain any measure of success.

Most interesting and relevant for this thesis, though, is *Iron Sky*'s introduction of two secondary female characters – an American fashion designer and Madame President of the United States – both of whom are seduced by the Nazi aesthetics and rhetoric. The designer uses them to revamp the look of the president's campaign team to help sell its message, while the president is taken by the fanatic politics Renate spouts upon their first meeting. Renate's praise of the Fourth Reich and the coming of a new world order are apparently as alluring as her updated Nazi Chic attire. It is possible to read the attraction these characters feel to Renate's aesthetics as a criticism of the way that female audience members have contributed to the commodification of the Ilsa-type. Viewed in this way, the designer and Madame President can be interpreted as a reflection of how female American consumers have become enthralled with the Ilsa-type's more mainstream iterations and Nazi Chic styles, deliberately removing her from her Nazi context so that she can be enjoyed, envied, and emulated guilt-free.

If read this way, *Iron Sky*, unlike so many other Nazisploitation films, shows us that men are not solely responsible for the successful perpetuation of the Ilsa-type's myth. While the blame certainly does not lie solely with women, after leaving the realm of the men's magazine and torture porn they did play a definite part in furthering this phenomenon and turning her into a popular commercial good. In this sense, the entire film is self-aware, openly joking with the stereotypes and refusing to follow the pre-established story arcs, while also offering a bit of political satire in its treatment of the commodification and political employment of Nazi aesthetics and fascist rhetoric.

Ilsa at the Oscars

While it would be nice to think that the Ilsa-type's intrigue was fading as writers and directors recognize the character's absurdity, the action genre and satirical threads are only a part of her recent developments. The other direction in which the character went is that of the dramatic and critically-acclaimed film. While there is extensive literature on many of these films, I would like to call attention to two in particular. *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *The Reader* (2008) both feature leading female roles who, upon first viewing, seem to be more complex and realistic than they are. Upon conducting a character analysis it becomes apparent that they share the same roots as the Ilsa variations discussed above. Even in these dramas it is clear that German women, particularly German women with ties to Nazism (which, by Hollywood standards, seems to be all German women), are coded with the same sadism and overwhelming sexuality as the Nazi women of the earlier men's magazines, the 1970s pornography, and the later action films.

Sophie's Choice was released in 1982, four years after the 1978 mini-series *Holocaust*, which also featured Meryl Streep and served as many mainstream Americans' first foray into the cultural fascination with the Holocaust. Originally a 1979 novel, the book and film are both early products of the beginning of a culture-wide obsession with exploring, explaining, and rectifying the atrocities of the Holocaust. *Sophie's Choice* far predates the action genre's Nazi-babes and the satirical Ilsa-types of the 2000s, yet *Sophie* is a prime example of the early, falsely-redemptive Ilsa iteration. The entire film – from the voiceover to the lighting to the music – is romanticized and portrayed almost as a coming-of-age story, complete with emotional and sexual awakenings.

Viewers are first introduced to Sophie amidst an impassioned fight with Nathan, her lover, during which she is dressed only in a nightgown. As with Ilsa, we are first introduced to Sophie's femininity, her vulnerability, and her sexuality via this initial wardrobe selection. Viewers are meant to understand that she is in an unhealthy and potentially abusive relationship, thus immediately sympathizing with Sophie. We quickly learn that she is Polish, assuaging any unease on the viewer's behalf of forming such a quick emotional alliance with a character who – given her thick accent and blond hair – could very well be a German (and thereby a Nazi). An early focus on her forearm tattoo indicates that this sweet, soft-spoken woman was in the concentration camps, deepening the viewer's sympathy. Shortly thereafter, Nathan identifies her for the audience as a "shiksa," complicating any initial assumptions as to why she was sent to the camps.

When Stingo, the protagonist, questions Sophie about her family, she tells him that they were killed by the Nazis, and that her father was a, "civilized man living in an

uncivilized world, they were the first to die.”¹⁵⁶ It is not until an hour into the movie that we learn that her father was a Nazi sympathizer and vehement anti-Semite who was killed because he was an academic. Immediately after this revelation, Stingo confronts Sophie and the viewer is taken into a flashback wherein it is revealed that Sophie came to hate her father when she realized his anti-Semitism, was disowned by her family and husband, and took a lover who was involved in the resistance, though she was too scared to get involved herself. Eventually she was arrested and brought to the camp – though still looking like a glamorous and desirable movie star in the cattle car – where one of her children is sent to the camp and the other is immediately “exterminated.”¹⁵⁷

After this revelation, the director’s focus on Sophie as a sexual, vulnerable, and feminine being only intensifies, presumably to maintain viewer sympathy. Indeed, throughout the film nearly every instance of violence or death is quickly preceded or followed by an instance of overt or implied sexuality, just as it is in *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*. As the story’s violence intensifies through a series of flashbacks, so does the emphasis on sex. The pattern culminates after the film’s central revelation – that she made the choice between which of her children would be killed and that it was not a decision made by the guards – immediately after which she initiates sex with Stingo.

The slow and deliberate way in which she undresses and moves closer to Stingo allows the viewer plenty of time to watch her disrobe and, in the process, forget the tragedy of the previous scene, remembering instead her sexual allure. However, it is the voiceover in this scene that underscores the tie to the Ilsa-type. As the two draw closer, Stingo narrates: “I was 22 and a virgin and was clasping in my arms at last the goddess of

¹⁵⁶ *Sophie’s Choice*, directed by Alan J. Pakula (1982; Incorporated Television Company, 1998), DVD.

¹⁵⁷ *Sophie’s Choice*.

my unending fantasies. My lust was inexhaustible. Sophie's lust was both a plunge into carnal oblivion, and a flight from memory and grief."¹⁵⁸ When Stingo wakes the next morning, he finds a note from Sophie that explains that she is going back to Nathan, signed, "You are a great lover, Stingo. Sophie."¹⁵⁹ The scene's emphasis on lust, the detail of Stingo losing his virginity, and the realization that Sophie is loving-it-and-leaving-it lead us to the conclusion that while Sophie may be a sympathetic character in some capacity, her primary purpose is that of a sexual fantasy.

When Stingo arrives back at the boarding house in a state of post-coital bliss, he learns that Nathan and Sophie have committed joint suicide. He finds them holding each other in bed, once again combining the last image of Sophie with death and intimacy. Analyzed through the Ilsa-type prism, having fulfilled her role as a sexual being, revealed her ties to Nazism, and revealed her complicity (albeit a sympathetic complicity) in the death of her child, suicide in the arms of her abusive lover is the only option for Sophie. Yet, the closing voiceover ends on a redemptive note, as Stingo states, "This is not judgment day, only morning. Morning, excellent and fair."¹⁶⁰ This closing statement encourages the viewer to feel uplifted by this ending and satisfied with Sophie's fate. Thus, despite an early attempt to provide a complex Holocaust narrative and despite the praise it received, it is quite possible to read *Sophie's Choice* as a mainstream iteration of the Ilsa-type narrative. She is an intelligent woman with an obvious sexual allure, one who has ties to the Nazi past, and one whose fate is linked to her inability to fulfill the "mother" criterion of the mother-whore paradigm.

¹⁵⁸ *Sophie's Choice*.

¹⁵⁹ *Sophie's Choice*.

¹⁶⁰ *Sophie's Choice*.

Released nearly 25 years later, *The Reader* (2008) uses many of the same techniques to create sympathy for Kate Winslet's character, Hanna. *The Reader* also began as a novel, published in 1995, and like *Sophie's Choice* it uses sexuality to make its female lead with ties to the Nazi party more enticing. Kate Winslet's character appears visually similar to Meryl Strepp's, and both conform to a commercialized version of the Ilsa-type. As Michael D. Richardson explains, *The Reader*'s, "primary concern is a mediation on the nature of guilt and responsibility,"¹⁶¹ which is interesting as it is being negotiated through the skill of literacy. Indeed, the narrator's defense of Hanna's innocence hinges on the fact that she is illiterate. Both Sophie and Hannah's innocence or guilt hinges thematically, to differing extents, on their illiteracy. Likewise, their redemption and eventual deaths also begin with the moment they become literate.

Both characters become literate at some point – that is, they become aware of their complicity in the atrocities of the Third Reich – and this literacy leads to their death. Sophie served as her father's speech transcriber, aiding in the dissemination of his anti-Semitism and his support of the Final Solution. She becomes literate when she pauses her transcription to actually absorb his words and realize their intent. This literacy causes her to make several mistakes in her father's speech which begins the long chain of events that led to her eventual suicide.

Hanna's literacy is more literal and coincides with her trial for war crimes. Though it is less clear in the film than it is in the book, Hanna's literacy training, "was combined with an effort to educate herself about the true horrors of the Nazi regime by using accounts of the Holocaust as some of her reading materials."¹⁶² In the film, though,

¹⁶¹ Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," 39.

¹⁶² Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," 48.

she simply learns to read and the content of her reading is of little significance or symbolic value. With this newfound literacy, Hanna recognizes her own complicity and it leads her to commit suicide in her jail cell. Indeed, read in this way, for each film to make moral sense, the protagonist's literacy must lead to death. Though formulaic, the plot of each film described in this way alone could be understood as a genuine reflection on guilt, responsibility, and complicity. However, both films use the protagonist's sexuality as a method of making her more empathetic to audiences, and in the process subvert the honest effort of exploring these bigger questions.

As Ron Rosenbaum's scathing review of *The Reader* succinctly puts it, "all the techniques of Hollywood are used to evoke empathy for an unrepentant mass murderer of Jews."¹⁶³ Rosenbaum explains how a critical scene in the book was omitted from the film because it made Hannah's guilt too obvious:

*You had to be deaf, dumb, and blind, not merely illiterate, to miss what Kate Winslet's character seems to have missed (while serving as a guard at Auschwitz!). As I learned from the director at the screening of The Reader, the scene [one in which Hannah listens to 300 people burn alive in the church she's guarding] was omitted because it might have 'unbalanced' our view of Hanna, given too much weight to the mass murder she committed, as opposed to her lack of reading skills. Made it much more difficult to develop empathy for her, although it's never explained why it's important that we should.*¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Ron Rosenbaum, "Don't Give an Oscar to *The Reader*: We Don't Need Another 'Redemptive' Holocaust Movie," *Slate*, last modified February 9, 2009, accessed September 18, 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_spectator/2009/02/dont_give_an_oscar_to_the_reader.html

¹⁶⁴ Rosenbaum, "Don't Give an Oscar to *The Reader*."

Instead, the film focuses on Winslet's body and her seductive persona, leading Rosenbaum to expose its, "false redemptiveness," likening it to what, "some critics have called 'Nazi Porn.'"¹⁶⁵

In comparing *The Reader* to *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, it seems that Rosenbaum's argument is not far off. Michael D. Richardson has performed just such reading, and found that both the character and her narrative arc are surprisingly similar. As Richardson explains, throughout the film, "Hanna's status as a Nazi seductress can be seen in her appearance and demeanor, particularly when she is shown in her 1950s-era tram conductor uniforms,"¹⁶⁶ and her sexuality is obviously predatory. She pursues the young protagonist (echoing Sophie this time, in taking his virginity), who acquiesces both willingly and unwillingly.¹⁶⁷ This is particularly significant because, as Daniel H. Magilow aptly notes, "at the same time as mass media demonize female high school teachers for pedophilic liaisons with teenage boys, the official website for Oprah's Book Club still praised and normalized these elements of [*The Reader*] by describing it as a 'love story of stunning power.'"¹⁶⁸ And finally, "by the films' respective ends, both protagonists are dead, neither having expressed remorse, or much remorse, for their crimes."¹⁶⁹ So in *Hanna*, we have a beautiful blond Nazi woman with a history of complicity in horrific violence, what could be read as perverse sexual inclinations, and a near lack of remorse. Though *Hanna* is not deliberately torturing inmates or castrating men, it is hard not to see the similarities in characterization and narrative arc.

¹⁶⁵ Rosenbaum, "Don't Give an Oscar to *The Reader*."

¹⁶⁶ Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," 48.

¹⁶⁷ Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," 49.

¹⁶⁸ Magilow, "Introduction: Nazisploitation!," 6.

¹⁶⁹ Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," 38.

Like Ilsa and Sophie, Hanna's death is crucial to the film's success. Understood through the Ilsa-type's prism, Hanna cannot be acquitted or found innocent, she cannot be sentenced to a life in prison; she must die. Having served her purpose in aiding the protagonist's sexual awakening and having had her Nazi past exposed, the only thing left for her to do is to die. Like the female Nazis of the men's magazines, like *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, like *Sophie's Choice* and nearly every other mainstream female Nazi, Hanna exists to satisfy the viewer's sexual and moral ego. Having enjoyed the forbidden sexual thrill and allure of the Nazi character, the viewer is able to take comfort in her inevitable death. In this way, the viewer can fully participate and engage in the character's sexuality, "only to be able to renounce it from a higher moral standpoint later on, allowing the viewer to vicariously both indulge in, then disavow the desire."¹⁷⁰

For Ilsa, the realization that she is a Nazi is no shock – it is the very premise of the film. But for Sophie and Hanna, the revelation of their Nazi ties are strategically timed well into their respective films. Hardly coincidental, this allows the viewer to feign surprise at the big reveal, aiding in their initial pleasure in her sexuality and their eventual pleasure in her demise. Again, had these films approached the question of guilt, complicity, and responsibility in a more transparent manner, they could be more valuable cinematic works. But the emphasis on the main female characters' sexuality, and her purpose as a sexual conduit for the male protagonist's (and viewer's) enjoyment, belittles and subverts this reading.

As it stands, Sophie and Hanna can be read as mainstream iterations the Ilsa-type, existing within works that attempt to engage in a deeper discussion. Proving how effective this method is, both Streep and Winslet won an Oscar for their performance. If

¹⁷⁰ Richardson, "Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis," 49.

this indicates anything, it is that viewers respond to guilt-free forays into the dark, dangerous, and sexy world of the mythologized Nazi. Like the disclaimer at the beginning of Nazisploitation films, the redemptive ending to these award winning films serves more to alleviate the viewer's guilt at watching and enjoying the film than anything else. Certainly, the films do broach difficult and complex topics and offer some valuable criticism, but the standardized and sexualized characterization of their protagonists is difficult, once recognized, to look past.

Lastly, touching once again on Tim Cole's argument that the Holocaust has become a commodified industry within the United States, Rosenbaum's criticism of *The Reader* was discouraged by those who reminded him of, "how important it is to 'the industry' that films like this succeed in the hard times we were going through."¹⁷¹ With this in mind, the distinction between Ilsa and Hanna lessens even further. Just as producers of the *Ilsa* franchise were willing to exploit the Ilsa character for profit in the 70s – another "hard time" for the film industry – so are the producers of mainstream Hollywood films, even those that receive the highest critical praise.

In response to Rosenbaum's confusion as to *why* the viewer needs to empathize with Hanna, then, we see that the same holds true for *The Reader* as for all of the films discussed in this chapter. Empathy, even a superficial empathy based on sexual desire, aids in the viewer's ability and willingness to enjoy the characters without any threat to their own perceived morality. As expressed above, this tactic is critical to the commercial success of these films, and movies are made to sell. It seems that for films, like the men's magazines discussed in the previous chapter and the Nazi Chic trends discussed in the

¹⁷¹ Rosenbaum, "Don't Give an Oscar to *The Reader*."

following chapter, no topic is off limits for sexual exploitation when there is a profit to be made.

As discussed in the following chapter, the aesthetics of the Ilsa-type are equally as important as the narrative. Blending elements of fetish and Military Chic, these films contributed to the development of Nazi Chic aesthetic within the fashion industry. While it may seem insignificant, I argue otherwise. Fashion plays an important role in how we construct our identities and how we wish to be perceived by those around us, and it is wrought with complicated power dynamics and gender negotiations. So what does it mean when women (and men) eagerly embrace Nazi Chic styles? These styles may have been popularized by various subcultures and countercultures, but mainstream films undoubtedly played a role in introducing the look to many women. While Hollywood contributed to the glamorization of Nazi aesthetics through the female characters discussed in this section, the fashion industry allows everyday women to participate in the process. Chapter 4 looks at how the fashion industry participates in the sexualization of Nazism.

Chapter 4 – Nazi Chic, Ilsa on the Runways

Coinciding with the release and cult-embrace of *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*, Nazi Chic styles emerged within several youth-based subcultures and on major fashion runways. Though its influence is certainly clear, this trend is not solely attributable to the *Ilsa* film. The particular Nazi Chic aesthetic is only part, albeit an important part, of several larger trends – Military Chic, fetish-inspired fashion, and the commercialization of punk and Goth. Indeed, discussing fashion proves a difficult task because each of these styles, though distinct, overlap in significant ways. All negotiate issues of power and sexuality, challenge gender norms, and could be viewed as an expression of what became commonly referred to as “power-dressing” by the 1980s.¹⁷²

Given its convergence with these other styles, the Nazi Chic trend is not altogether surprising. Fetish and military inspired styles have a prominent history in the fashion cycle and subculture fashion is almost invariably adopted by the mainstream in an effort to remain edgy, fresh, and connected to youth culture. The specific reasoning behind the initial incorporation of Nazi iconography into these various larger trends is discussed at length in this chapter.

When the Ilsa-type’s aesthetic value is translated for the runways several important shifts develop. First, women become active consumers of the Ilsa-type. She goes from a concept created for and by men to a concept created for and by men and women alike. In this shift, the Ilsa-type becomes open for negotiation. She becomes a concept on which the feminist identity is negotiated in earnest, rather than an expression of fear in reaction to feminism. Second, it extends the troubling phenomenon of “playing the Nazi.” By glamorizing their aesthetics, it works to distance American consumers from

¹⁷² Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 184.

the actual historical atrocities of the Third Reich on a much larger scale than the men's magazines or torture porns could have done. In this way, the fashion industry is somewhat similar to BDSM in that it allows for this type of role play. It uses visual signals and phallic props, now in the form of fabrics, silhouettes, and accessories, to cue power dynamics. This carries with it an omnipresent connection to sexuality – a connection that can be as subtle or blatant as the designer chooses to make it. Third, though the Ilsa-type's look remains largely homogenized in post-*Ilsa* film, Nazi Chic does not necessarily follow this trend. There are similarities in the clothing produced, but the models do not necessarily bear a striking resemblance to Dyanne Thorne. Ilsa created the character type that would come to reinforce the sexually deviant Nazi myth of Hollywood whereas fashion translates that myth and makes it a commodity that the average American woman can actively consume.

Regardless of where Nazi Chic appears, the uniform is the obvious starting point for this style because of its aesthetic coding. The uniform's very purpose is to define "us" and "them," and thereby establish good and evil. However, successful designers not only reproduce the styles of previous generations, but repurpose them. Rather than send an exact uniform replica down the runway, they present uniform-*inspired* looks. Whether this means the use of specific colors and accessories or the recreation of a 40s-era silhouette, major designers were, and continue to be, fixated on WWII-era aesthetics. As Chapter 2 discussed in detail, Ilsa is a clear product of anti-feminist anxiety. The easiest, most effective way of labeling her as a threat was to give her a German accent and put her in a Nazi uniform. Her deviant sexuality and sadistic nature were then more easily understood and justified – certainly only a Nazi could fathom this type of torture, let

alone derive sexual pleasure from it. It is possible, then, to interpret female Nazi Chic styles as another cultural reaction to the contemporary changes in gender norms, albeit a complicated one.

Studying the cultural and social implications of the fashion industry is a difficult task. Indeed, as the primary texts of a historical inquiry become more complex, the reading of those texts becomes increasingly difficult and requires a certain degree of speculation. To do this topic justice requires more expertise than I possess and so this chapter is not intended to function as a comprehensive study of the phenomenon, but as an indication of where the discussion would benefit from further scholarship.

Sontag vs. Steele and a Defense of Fashion Studies

Before launching into an analysis of specific trends or objects, it is important to consider *how* to study fashion history. Susan Sontag and Valerie Steele offer two valuable, albeit markedly different, approaches in discussing Nazi Chic styles in particular. Both Sontag and Steele speak to the grand scale attraction that the American consumer feels towards particular aesthetic styles – Sontag speaks directly to fascist aesthetics, Steele to fetishism which sometimes collides with fascist aesthetics. Both point to human sexuality as the basis of our attraction to aesthetics that are otherwise considered symbols of suppression and oppression, if not outright violence and genocide. Both point towards a cultivation of “taste” in sexuality as the beginning of this process, a shift that occurred sometime in the 18th century.¹⁷³ During this “transitional period...traditional sexual attitudes and behaviors began to evolve toward the modern pattern. There was an increasing preoccupation with explicit eroticism, as associations

¹⁷³ Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1975/feb/06/fascinating-fascism/?pagination=false>; Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 22.

were drawn between free thought and sexual ‘libertinage.’”¹⁷⁴ This means, as Steele posits, that, “gradually people stopped thinking in terms of sexual acts and began thinking of sexual identities.”¹⁷⁵

Sontag argues that fetish, speaking on S/M in particular, is, “perhaps only a logical extension of an affluent society’s tendency to turn every part of people’s lives into a taste, a choice.”¹⁷⁶ That is, people turn to a sexual practice that openly negotiates issues of oppression and power due to the overwhelming “oppression of choice”¹⁷⁷ in American consumer society. She continues, “up until now, sex has mostly been an activity (something to do, without thinking about it). But once sex becomes defined as a taste, it is perhaps already on its way to becoming a self-conscious form of theater, which is what sadomasochism...is all about.”¹⁷⁸ Thus, according to Sontag, fetish develops as a natural extension of consumer society, as a, “response to an oppressive freedom of choice in sex (and possibly, in other matters), to an unbearable degree of individuality.”¹⁷⁹ Steele treats fetish as less of a perversion than does Sontag, but generally the two seem to agree that through an affluent consumer society, preferences and tastes were cultivated in a way that had not been possible before, eventually leading to the development of fetish.

Where Sontag provides a general, ideological argument, however, Steele approaches the phenomenon more pragmatically. Sontag published “Fascinating Fascism” the same year that *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* was released and a year after Vivienne Westwood opened her infamous London-based boutique, SEX, which was a

¹⁷⁴ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 22.

¹⁷⁵ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 22.

¹⁷⁶ Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” 18.

¹⁷⁷ Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” 18.

¹⁷⁸ Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” 18.

¹⁷⁹ Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” 18.

pioneer in Nazi Chic style.¹⁸⁰ Sontag is widely considered one of the first to make the connection between fascist aesthetics and fetishism, but her largest failing, perhaps, is that she consistently describes the two as something distinct from “normal” people.¹⁸¹ Sontag too consistently attributes these aesthetics to “far-out sex,” something that is “all the more exciting because it is forbidden to ordinary people.”¹⁸² What she fails to see is that fetish fashion and the practices of a true fetishist are two very different things. Even by the time Sontag wrote “Fascinating Fascism,” fetish fashion was being divorced from the actual practices that gave it its allure and sexual taboo. Leather, piercings, tattoos, and kinky shoes, among other things, were already coming to signify something other than “sexual perversion” in the mainstream fashion industry. Perhaps in hindsight, Sontag would see just how common elements of S/M and fetish are in even the most “nice” and “civilized”¹⁸³ wardrobes.

Writing nearly 20 years later, Steele asks, “But what if the ‘straights’ and ‘perverts’ begin to dress alike?”¹⁸⁴ Steele recognized that by the mid-1990s fetish, or at least elements of fetish, were mainstream enough to be incorporated into the standard ebb and flow of fashion trends, and that these trends were not necessarily connected to the designers’ or consumers’ sexual tastes. Steele recognized that, “‘kinky’ fashion is frequently interpreted simply as ‘sexy’ fashion.”¹⁸⁵ To a lesser extent, the same thing happened to Nazi Chic styles. What’s more, Steele argues that this widespread, mainstream acceptance of kinky styles began in the 1960s, boomed in the 1970s,¹⁸⁶ and

¹⁸⁰ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 37.

¹⁸¹ Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” 17.

¹⁸² Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” 17.

¹⁸³ Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” 18.

¹⁸⁴ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 31.

¹⁸⁵ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 42.

¹⁸⁶ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 34.

subsequently became another fashion trope. Runway designers who drew inspiration from sub or counterculture styles, such as punk and Goth, placed those designs in mainstream fashion and beauty publications (as well as stores) and from there the cycle began. Punk, and Goth to a lesser extent, were both quickly commodified and accepted by mainstream audiences anyways, the fetish elements and fetishized Nazi stylings simply came with the package.

The other main distinction between Sontag and Steele is in where they place the source of power of these fascist and fetish aesthetics. Arguing from a cultural historian's standpoint, Sontag explains that, "uniforms are not the same as photographs of uniforms. Photographs of uniforms are erotic material, and particularly photographs of SS uniforms."¹⁸⁷ Thus, according to Sontag, the power of fascist aesthetics, indeed their sexual allure, lies in their representation rather than in the tangible objects themselves. These representations provide powerful visual cues and are heavily loaded with cultural associations, making their actual presence irrelevant. That is, the mere suggestion of the SS uniform is enough. It is the image, rather than the object itself, that is fetishized.

Steele, on the other hand, approaches the issue as a fashion historian, thus automatically awarding the objects themselves a greater significance. Indeed, in the study of fetishized items of clothing, this distinction cannot be stressed enough. While representations of fetishized objects (such as a kinky shoe catalog) are certainly significant, the tangibility and specificity of the object itself takes precedence. The clothing's fabric, color, and detail are central to the fetishist's desire, and therefore warrant real attention. Steele argues that so much attention has been paid to the abstract

¹⁸⁷ Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," 15.

concept of fetish desire that a study of the actual fetishized objects has gone undone.¹⁸⁸ Steele, then, places the central source of power within the objects themselves, not in their representation. In this way, the items of clothing become phallic symbols that the consumer actively wants to *consume*, not simply admire.¹⁸⁹ Thus the power stems from the object itself.

In order to make sense of how mainstream fashion relates and appeals to mainstream audiences, perhaps it is wise to draw from both Sontag and Steele. Certainly the intricacies of the clothing that consumers wish to buy are significant. The distinction between a black skirt, for example, and a black *leather* skirt is significant, as is the method of securing the skirt – zipper, lace up, buttons, buckle, hook-and-eye, or a tube skirt with no need for fasteners. The same can be said of any article of clothing or accessory – shoes, dresses, gloves, hats, etc. The details of each carry their own meanings, particularly when combined with other items of clothing, and must be understood as such. Consumers translate these meanings and, through their purchases, either accept or reject them. Thus, the visceral response to clothing is quite real and cannot be discounted. Yet, the representation of the object is of equal importance. How it is photographed or filmed, how it is displayed and reproduced, how the viewer is expected to first encounter and interpret the image – these are all significant factors to consider.

The fashion industry is well aware of this. Clothing is meant to be coveted, if not fetishized, from afar as a symbolic object, yet it is also meant to be actively consumed. The consumer is meant to interact with the object first in a distant manner – seeing it in print, on screen, on the runway – decode its message, and learn to crave it. They are then

¹⁸⁸ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 6.

¹⁸⁹ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 16-17.

expected to purchase the physical object and wear the item of clothing, essentially participating in the fetishizing of the material. Leaning on Karl Marx here, this is simply the consequence, if not the goal, of a commodity culture and it applies to all consumer goods, not just fashion.¹⁹⁰

Fetish

The history of fetish fashion significantly predates Nazi Chic trends. Just how far back it dates, though, is up for debate. With evidence supporting both, some argue that fetishism, “has existed for thousands of years in many cultures,” while others believe, “that fetishism developed only in modern Western society.”¹⁹¹ Regardless, by the 19th century fetish was common enough and the concept of sado-masochism was just being defined, linking the two as they are now.¹⁹² By the late 19th century, specific items of clothing and practices – such as the corset and tight-lacing¹⁹³ – were already targeted for their fetishistic qualities, and by the early 20th century fetish catalogs and shops appeared in major cities.¹⁹⁴ By the turn of the millennium, fetish was no longer considered strictly taboo and appeared in major fashion magazines and stores with surprising regularity.

Steele dates the appearance of fetish on major runways to the 1960s. It was incorporated into contemporary styles in a mostly playful manner¹⁹⁵ and could even be viewed as an expression of the sexual liberation movement’s, “reassessment of sexual deviations.”¹⁹⁶ Since then, fetish, or at least its visual cues, has become more deeply integrated within broader popular culture. It is interesting and perhaps unsurprising to

¹⁹⁰ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 5.

¹⁹¹ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 21.

¹⁹² Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 5.

¹⁹³ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 58.

¹⁹⁴ As evidenced by *London Life* in London. Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 51.

¹⁹⁵ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 33.

¹⁹⁶ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 33.

note, however, that mainstream fetish is heavily focused on selling the consumer woman a fetishized female image, regardless of the fact that it is widely believed that men make up the majority of fetishists.¹⁹⁷ In a way, then, the fashion industry actively tries to cultivate and normalize a fetish in women. Yet it is important to reemphasize the distinction – the industry shifts the desire away from a sexual fetish and towards a commodity fetish.

As Steel explains, one way the industry sells fetish to women is through its attachment to powerful women in popular culture. She cites *The Avengers*' Emma Peel in her leather catsuit as an early example¹⁹⁸ and we could certainly trace the phenomenon all the way to Rihanna's 2011 song and video, *S&M*, or any number of Lady Gaga's outfits and kinky shoes. In this way, we see the complicated nature by which fetish can be associated with feminism, and even the recent rise of "raunch feminism."¹⁹⁹ On the one hand, many women embrace the fetish-styled pop culture icons as symbols of power, those in control of their sexuality. On the other, it serves as symbolic visual evidence for the argument that feminists – or at least strong-willed women – are, by nature, deviant. For many it signals that a woman's sexuality, and her willingness to exploit it, is inextricably bound to her power and cultural value; she can only rise as far as her sexual allure will allow. Yet, for others, dressing in fetish is a method of reclaiming control over their sexuality and refusing to let others exploit it. There is no definitive answer as to whether popularized fetish is beneficial or detrimental to women, it is entirely

¹⁹⁷ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 12. Fetish is also quite popular among gay men, and while that is certainly related, it is beyond the scope of this paper and beyond the scope of my abilities.

¹⁹⁸ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 34.

¹⁹⁹ Andi Zeisler, "'Do-Me' Feminism and the Rise of Raunch," *Alternet*, October 16, 2008, accessed January 10, 2014, http://www.alternet.org/story/103035/%22do-me%22_feminism_and_the_rise_of_raunch; "So, What's Behind This New Anti-Feminist Trend? Let's Discuss," *I'm a Bad Cat: Politics, Fashion...and Feline Fury*, December 3, 2012, accessed September 12, 2013, <http://imabadcat.com/so-whats-behind-this-new-anti-feminist-trend-lets-discuss/>

circumstantial. In that sense, fetish is both constricting and liberating, which is exactly the point. There is no black and white when it comes to sexuality and the same holds true for fetish.

It is possible to view a latex catsuit, a masculinized 1980's women's suit coat, and the androgynous look as elements of the same trend – power-dressing.²⁰⁰ By dressing in any of these styles, women experiment with the gendered and sexually symbolic language of fashion. They use it to push the boundaries of gender norms, though some styles admittedly push harder than others. Fetish is simply one expression – albeit a complex, persistent, and controversial one – of the way designers and consumers play with gender norms and power roles. If fetish developed in the 1800s²⁰¹ out of the construction of individualized sexuality, it makes it an apt tool for commenting on the ever-shifting nature of that sexuality and its connection to social status and social power.

Though it is common enough within fetish, it is important to note that not all fetish incorporates Nazi iconography. Rather than engage debates surrounding the morality or perversion of this particular fetish trend, it is more constructive to try to understand what the uniform signifies within Nazi fetish. Steele notes that, with S/M, clothing in general denotes a degree of power, and nudity a lack thereof.²⁰² The uniform, then, inherently places the wearer in a position of power. Additionally, it allows the wearer to be completely, “subsumed by his (or her) role,” and thus enjoy a privileged membership, a pre-established power structure, and the encouraged use of violence.²⁰³ Steele also notes that the uniform itself is littered with phallic props, from the boots to the

²⁰⁰ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 23, 184.

²⁰¹ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 22.

²⁰² Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 171.

²⁰³ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 180.

weapons.²⁰⁴ The eroticism, then, stems from the presence of these phallic symbols, the tension between dominant and submissive hierarchical roles, and the anticipation of pain and pleasure.

But this is true of all fetishized military uniforms, so there must be something unique about the SS uniform in particular. It is not enough that, “it symbolizes belonging to an elite and embodies dominance and attraction.”²⁰⁵ As Sontag reasons, it is because the SS not only provides the clearest historic example of a military’s belief in, “the right to have total power over others and to treat them as absolutely inferior,” but that they did it in style. “The SS was designed,” she argues, “as an elite military community that would be not only supremely violent but also supremely beautiful,”²⁰⁶ and their uniform was designed accordingly. While it is unfair to say that fetishists who use Nazi iconography are Nazi sympathizers or somehow approving of the atrocities they committed, it certainly complicates the narrative when those very atrocities are what give the uniform its eroticized allure.

With a long history of American propaganda directed at making Nazis seem sexual deviant, and thereby morally inferior, it is all together unsurprising that mainstream Nazi Chic style incorporates elements of fetish. Nazism was coded with sexual deviance from the outset – indeed, the US government actively supported this stereotype as a method of othering the enemy²⁰⁷ – and the use of Nazi iconography in men’s magazines and pornography only furthered this association. By the late 1970s,

²⁰⁴ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 180.

²⁰⁵ Stiglegger, “Cinema Beyond Good and Evil?,” 30.

²⁰⁶ Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” 15.

²⁰⁷ Frost, *Sex Drives*, 6-7, 155; Richardson, “Sexual Deviance and the Naked Body in Cinematic Representations of Nazis,” 41.

Nazi Chic was heavily influenced by fetish styles, and both were being appropriated by mainstream and subculture fashion alike.²⁰⁸

Military Chic

Just as Nazi Chic draws from fetish to inform its aesthetic foundation, another broader trend from which it emerges is Military Chic. It is difficult to find a definite beginning of the general Military Chic trend, but the style only seems to increase in popularity. This is attributable to a number of factors. Among others, there is the persistent nostalgia for the “Good War” and the change in gender norms that gave consumers more room to experiment with their personal style. The embrace of Military Chic likely stems from the same nostalgic sentiment that inspired the embrace of WWII iconography on a larger cultural scale – frustration with the changing political, social, and cultural climate, frustration with the US’ military engagements, and a desire to return to the “Good War,” where good and evil were easily recognizable. As with men’s magazines and films, fashion not only resurrected the constructs of WWII-era good and evil, but contributed to their specifically aesthetic coding and applied them to contemporary issues.

The uniform forms the basis of Military Chic, inspiring designs based on its color, texture, silhouette, accessories, and adornments. Military Chic’s general influence can be seen in structured army green, beige, and navy pants and jackets; in the recent bomber jacket and aviator fads; in the embrace of combat boots, dog tags, and military patches or badges; or even in the resurgence of Rosie the Riveter-styled bandanas, full red lips, and retro hairstyles such as victory rolls. The uniform’s very purpose in war is to separate

²⁰⁸ There is an important distinction to be made here. Though S/M styles were not always related to Nazi-chic, if there was an SS inspired look, it undoubtedly carried signatures of S/M style as well. That is – not all fetish fashion is fascist, but all fascist fashion is fetish.

soldiers from civilians, and to further divide soldiers into camps of “us” and “them,” good guys and bad guys, heroes and villains, saints and sinners. Further distinctions, such as rank, are typically ignored within Military Chic; focusing on this level of detail would cross the boundary from fashion to costuming. While Military Chic designers are clearly taken with the glamorized and romanticized image of WWII-era America, American uniforms were decidedly civilian in their appearance, and therefore lacking a certain degree of appeal. Wearing American military-inspired garb is more nostalgic than anything else and it is unsurprising that this trend would reemerge during yet another series of unpopular wars in the early 2000s, a time when many Americans desired to return to the old myth, so central to our national identity, of the “Good War.”

What warrants our attention, though, is that not only American styles were repurposed, but Nazi styles as well. In fact, Nazi styles are perhaps more popular than American. This is partially because the SS uniform was better tailored than the American’s civilian-styled uniform, and the black color of the SS uniform is more appealing, flattering, and symbolically loaded than the muted green, navy, and khaki of its American counterpart. Indeed, the color black holds a particularly significant place in the fashion world, as is evident by the timeless appeal of the little black dress, the personal affinity many designers have for the color,²⁰⁹ and the cliché expression “...is the new black.” Perhaps it is suiting, then, that Nazi Chic takes such a strong, yet subtle, hold. The SS uniform was designed with the very intent that it be stylish, intimidating, and attractive. Clearly it was successful in that regard. Combined with the sexual undertones (or, in some cases, the overt sexuality), the SS uniform is, in some ways, as

²⁰⁹ Michael Korls, Karl Lagerfield, and Vera Wang are only a few of the many designers who regularly dress from head to toe in black. In a way, this very deliberate choice in wardrobe can be viewed as a self-mandated uniform, which is interesting within the context of this discussion.

classic as the little black dress – at the very least it holds the same degree of fascination. It proves a continual source of inspiration, controversy, and revenue. As unsavory as it may be, perhaps Nazi Chic has become a staple of the fashion trend cycle in its own right – a classic go-to look. Many trends are loaded with political and cultural implications, but few others boast such staying power.

Nazi Chic tends to be sexier than general Military Chic. That's not to say that Military Chic completely abandons sex appeal – it still caters to the female form and alters the male uniform to flatter the female body. Often the feminized version of the male uniform, or elements of the uniform, are combined with ultra-feminine aspects of WWII-era dress to make them more attractive to women. Nazi Chic, however, revolves around the sex appeal. When one dons Nazi Chic attire they are no longer playing the role of the dutiful civilian, but that of the subversive other. When one crosses that line, the demure “retro” sexuality disappears. That is, the tasteful, respectful, even dutiful sexuality espoused by the broader Military Chic style is replaced with a more forceful, potentially dangerous, yet exhilarating sexuality. The sexual allure of the SS uniform was built into it and verified by the US' own WWII propaganda, the post-WWII Holocaust themed pornography, and the subsequent convergence of deviance, fetish fashion, and the Nazi uniform.

While the Ilsa-type cannot be directly attributed for the creation of the broader Military Chic trend, we see the same trend of commercializing the hyper-sexualized female Nazi within the Nazi Chic fashion realm. The convergence of Nazi Chic and fetishism actually makes the Nazi-cum-dominatrix look easier for consumers to buy into.

As “kinky” regularly translates to “sexy” in mainstream fashion,²¹⁰ and as the fetishized Nazi replaces any real concept of a Nazi, the lines between fetish fashion and Nazi Chic become increasingly blurred. In making the style more palatable, some of the identifiable Nazi insignia is removed (the swastika and arm band being dead giveaways) but the color and silhouette remain. It is even possible that consumers would find themselves attracted to Nazi Chic styles without even realizing that they are Nazi Chic.

However, the roots exist and contribute to the continued fascination with and sexualization of Nazi aesthetics. Perhaps the similarity of Nazi Chic to Military Chic contributes to this more than we know. It is certainly a method of associating oneself with the “enemy,” so to speak, much like the visual alliance created between the men’s magazines male readers and the male Nazi characters. At the very least, it makes it possible for a consumer to outwardly decry the appropriation of the Nazi aesthetic, while inwardly admiring the cut of the Nazi-inspired pant or shoe or blouse. It makes it possible for a consumer to simultaneously condemn the historic Nazis while applauding the image of the Nazi myth.

Nazi Chic Off the Runway – Punk and Goth

As is perhaps obvious, fashion is not always dictated from on high and disseminated to the creatively-impaired masses. Often, particularly when it comes to subcultures, countercultures, and youth culture, the flow of inspiration is reversed. Functioning as an integral part of the punk and Goth aesthetic, fetishized Nazi styles caught the attention of several significant designers who popularized the look. Both punk and Goth incorporated elements of the Nazi uniform in establishing the respective “look”

²¹⁰ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 42.

of their subculture and both, to different extents, were quickly exploited for their mainstream commercialized potential.

As Steele writes, “the punk ‘style in revolt’ was deliberately ‘revolting style’ that incorporated into fashion various offensive or threatening objects like dog collars and chains that were designed to horrify straight observers.”²¹¹ (Note: Steele uses the term “straight” as a synonym for “normal” and not as an indication of sexual orientation) Likewise, many punk women manipulated fashion for their own means as well, scoffing at traditional gender and sexual norms.²¹² They used objects associated with traditional femininity and sexuality in ways meant to shock and repulse, turning the female body into something both sexual and grotesque. Whether this meant a bare chest, a shaved head, or ripped fishnets, the aesthetic impact was immediate and the intent was to offend.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to ignore the use of Nazi iconography when discussing punk fashion. Though certainly abhorrent, the use of swastikas and other Nazi iconography in punk clothing was less about creating an affiliation to the Third Reich than it was about shocking “normal” society. Punks were drawn to Nazi iconography more for its nihilism, its self-indulgence, and its image of a Germany with no future – a catastrophically doomed nation – than anything else.²¹³ This is not to deny the existence of the skinhead faction that certainly did, and continue to, use Nazi iconography as expression of white supremacy. But the majority of punks used this imagery in a way that was detached from any affiliation with the actual Nazi party. Its value and shock factor lay in the fact that it could be a tool for deception; it could mean

²¹¹ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 37.

²¹² Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 37.

²¹³ Michael Bibby, “Atrocity Exhibitions: Joy Division, Factory Records, and Goth,” in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, ed. Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 250.

whatever was projected onto it.²¹⁴ It seems, then, that, “punks displayed swastikas, Gestapo death’s heads, and jackboots together with an ensemble of signs as an aggressive attack against established cultural norms,”²¹⁵ rather than in an attempt to resuscitate Hitler’s Third Reich.

While much of the punk aesthetic revolved around a certain do-it-yourself style, Vivienne Westwood served as a sort of go-between for the punk subculture and the fashion mainstream. Westwood opened her boutique, SEX (later renamed Seditious),²¹⁶ in 1974 and stocked the shelves with bondage and S/M gear alongside clothing that prominently featured swastikas and Nazi Chic items.²¹⁷ Westwood’s London-based shop was a go-to for many influential punk bands, serving as a unique meeting ground for subculture and mainstream fashion. SEX is also significant because many of Westwood’s styles went on to create the British punk aesthetic that was then embraced by the American punk subculture – swastikas and all. But as Westwood said of those visiting her store for the fetish styles, “half [of her clients were] young people who wanted cloths that were ‘about breaking taboos’ and making ‘a statement about how BAD you are,’”²¹⁸ rather than actual fetishists. The same statement likely holds true for those buying Nazi Chic clothing.

Goth and its aesthetic are both generally considered off-shoots of the punk subculture, though Goth uses fetish fashion and Nazi regalia somewhat differently than its progenitor. Some fashion scholars have observed that Goth fashion has always toyed with traditionally gendered fashion, often using fetish fashion to favor an androgynous

²¹⁴ Bibby, “Atrocity Exhibitions,” 250-251.

²¹⁵ Bibby, “Atrocity Exhibitions,” 250.

²¹⁶ Gavin Baddeley, *Goth: Vamps and Dandies* (London: Plexus Publishing Limited, 2010): 58.

²¹⁷ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 37.

²¹⁸ Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, 37.

body or invite males to embrace their femininity. Unlike punks, who used sexuality and fetish fashion to shock and offend, Goths tend to use it as, “a celebration of sexuality,” though often a subversive type of sexuality.²¹⁹

In recent years, however, this seems to be changing. There is now a reemphasis, on the female Goth body which is, “considered as voluptuous (in corsets) and powerful (in dominatrix gear) [marking] a reconfiguration of gender attitudes within the Goth subculture in which Goth’s dark femininity manifests itself as more explicitly sexual.”²²⁰ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock hypothesizes that this, “convergence of Goth and fetish cultures suggests that the Goth subculture is engaged with the dominant culture in a complex negotiation, in which Goth is attempting to retain its rebellious edge by adapting its practices to stay one step ahead of dominant trends.”²²¹ However, given that fetish fashion is already widely accepted in the mainstream, this tactic may prove that Goth is already more mainstream than it wishes to believe.

Steele points to a fascination between life and death as the central tension of Goth style. She cites Walter Benjamin’s observation that, through covering the living body with a dead one (in the form of furs and leathers), the essence of fashion is fetishism. That is, the essence of fashion is the tension between life and death, made sensual by the living human body.²²² Given this observation, that others have identified that the use of Nazi iconography and the fixation on historical atrocities (the Holocaust in particular) are central to Goth style and music, is unsurprising.²²³ Where punks used Nazi iconography

²¹⁹ Baddeley, *Goth: Vamps and Dandies*, 58.

²²⁰ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Gothic Fetishism,” in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, ed. Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 392.

²²¹ Weinstock, “Gothic Fetishism,” 378.

²²² Jessica Burstein, “Material Distinctions: A Conversation with Valerie Steele,” in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, ed. Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 267.

²²³ Bibby, “Atrocity Exhibitions,” 247.

for shock value, often detached from its historic value, Goths used it precisely because of its original historic value – that historic intent (and the resulting genocide) is what gives it power. For Goths, Nazi iconography, “signified that all life is atrocity, the concentration camp is the paradigm of existence, and history compels us to failure, demise, and apocalypse.”²²⁴ Yet this fascination tends to incorporate sexuality with surprising regularity for having such a morbid focal point.

Regardless of any attempt to disassociate Nazi iconography with the actual historical atrocities of the Third Reich, the association is there. It can be said that swastikas, death heads and iron crosses are used for shock and shock alone, but that – like the argument that sexism in men’s magazines is simply a joke – is an insufficient explanation. Both punk and Goth are associated with a certain degree of “whiteness.” As Michael Bibby explains, “although the whiteness most often associated with Goth subculture has been read as the pallor of the corpse, it might also be seen as obviating racial whiteness.”²²⁵ Bibby cites the obsession with Nazi regalia and the Holocaust, the possibility that Goth (and, by extension punk) was an anxious reaction against minority-influenced music like reggae, and the overwhelming whiteness of the subculture’s performers and consumers to support this claim.

It is possible to interpret Nazi Chic styles as a reflection of the rebellious subcultures blossoming in England and the United States, detached of any historic admiration for the Third Reich, but that reading would ignore the very obvious historic associations. The embrace of punk and Goth styles helped bring Nazi Chic to the mainstream. In some way, then, Nazi Chic could be read as a second-degree

²²⁴ Bibby, “Atrocity Exhibitions,” 250.

²²⁵ Bibby, “Atrocity Exhibitions,” 252.

appropriation. Designers appropriated a look from punks and Goths, who themselves appropriated the look from Nazi uniforms. Read in this way, the reason for appropriation differs as well. Rather than linking punk and Goth to Nazism, they used Nazi iconography as a symbol of rebellion, as a symbol that they were not part of the mainstream. Ironically, as happens with nearly all countercultural movements, this edgy, “Fuck You” sentiment quickly dissipates when those very symbols become mainstream.

While *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* cannot take credit for the creation of Nazi Chic, placing the two on the same continuum can only benefit our understanding of how the Ilsa-type came to be such a widely accepted character type. The embrace of Nazi Chic aided not only in the dissemination of the Ilsa stereotype, but widened her appeal to men and women alike. Through women’s eager embrace of these styles, both in subcultures and in the mainstream, the Ilsa-type was arguably transformed from a symbol of male anxiety in reaction against feminism, to a symbol of the empowered and domineering woman. Though not an uncommon phenomenon, this appropriation of decidedly anti-feminist symbol certainly complicates any black and white interpretation of her persistent existence.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

While this examination of the Ilsa-type's creation and dissemination throughout various areas of American popular culture does not, by itself, fully answer Sontag's original call to research the relationship between fascist aesthetics, American commodity culture, and sexuality, it does provide a starting point. It was the intent of this study to provide a model for similar research, using the Ilsa-type as an example of how this can be done in the future. In order to do so, we need to expand our idea of what constitutes a historical "text" and look to under-studied areas of popular culture for inspiration. We need to expand the scope of our research and look across disciplines and genres to fully ascertain the reach and influence of Nazi aesthetics. And, finally, we need to stop reading these texts as though they can tell us about the reality of life under the Third Reich or in the concentration camps and recognize them as products of their own time. Indeed, doing so will require that we treat these texts not as isolated artifacts, but as creations that can tell us a great deal about the political, social, and cultural climate from which they emerged.

A noted complication with the above research is the changing nature of feminism. Though feminism still advocates the political, social, and economic equality of the sexes, the way the word is being interpreted and internalized has evolved tremendously. It has come to mean a great many things and is as much of a public debate as it is an internal one. Thus, as the texts move further away from the fairly straightforward men's magazine depictions of women, they grow more complicated. As this happens, the feminist connotations grow more complicated as well, making them more difficult to read. Thus we are left with layers upon layers of meaning and interpretations that becoming

increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to untangle. That is, with every appropriation of the Ilsa-type, her aesthetics are given new meaning that co-exist, and sometimes challenge, the old meaning.

Yet conducting this type of research is crucial if we are to ever comprehend what lies beneath this fascination with fascist aesthetics. More importantly, it will teach us where people are learning about WWII, the Holocaust, the Nazis, and concentration camps, and what type of information they internalize as truth. This will become increasingly significant as the living memory of the era fades and popular culture begins to replace historical fact with Hollywood myth. What's more, by accepting that these character types and narrative arcs have little to tell us about historical realities, it allows us to make sense of them as commentary on contemporary issues. In this way, they serve as valuable tools for holding discussions about current political, social, and cultural events and trends.

The analysis provided in the preceding chapters does not provide the *only* reading for the narratives and images at hand, particularly as the texts themselves grow more complicated. What it does, however, is question each story's preferred reading. It is not intended as an all-encompassing and conclusive study, but one that provides a new way of reading these texts and opens the door for further discussion. Academic and public discourse only stand to benefit from this type of discussion as it forces us to reconsider what these texts are telling us and why. While further research on female perpetrators is the most logical extension of this study, its framework can also be extended to related areas of scholarship.

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