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**CULTURAL ATROCITY
EXPRESSED IN CONTEMPORARY ART**

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Faculty Mentor: Mark Cory
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Abstract:

Some of the most horrific chapters in human history have involved an ethnic dimension, notably the centuries-long obliteration of traditional Nigerian cultures by European colonizers, the attempted destruction of European Jews in the Holocaust, and the World War II decision to assault the Japanese with atomic bombs. The consequences of the above atrocities are not contained within temporal or cultural barriers, but hold profound and pervasive ramifications within contemporary society in its entirety. More recent conflicts in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Balkans reemphasize the horror and suffering brought about by cultural collisions. One of the most potent reactions to ethnic exploitation, persecution and brutality is the aesthetic response, art as the product of atrocity.

*To demonstrate the powerful implications entailed within the realm of aesthetics, this study explores three contemporary artistic responses to cultural atrocity (Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Hijikata Tatsumi's *Buto*), and focuses on the concept of art as a refutation of (or resistance to) the aesthetic of the oppressor. Each response probes the tenability and function of art as a means of cultural, social, and political resistance in three ethnically and geographically disparate settings, and attempts to illuminate the potent ramifications entailed within today's society.*

This paper serves as an overview and summation of my Honors senior thesis, which considerably extends and expands the ideas presented here. The larger study examines the history of the cultural atrocity in question and the biography of each artist and offers an analysis of the respective artistic pieces. The greater effect of each work is also assessed--for example, whether the art is viewed by elite or popular audiences, serves to facilitate individual understanding, vindicates an entire ethnic group, or pursues a global objective.

The Paper:

“How should art — how *can* art — represent the inexpressibly inhuman suffering of the victims [of cultural

Marlie McGovern and Mark Cory

atrocity] without doing injustice to that suffering?” asks literary critic Lawrence Langer.¹ In evaluating any artistic medium in reference to cultural atrocity, one must first acknowledge the inherent contradiction between the experience to be expressed and the vehicle for its expression. If art can be described as the ultimate articulation of what it means to be human, acts of cultural atrocity, as the antithesis of humanity, would seem to defeat any attempt to elucidate history through art. Yet, paradoxically, art recurrently emerges from atrocity, often offering deep, multi-layered insight into intense, seemingly impenetrable realms of horror. “To create beauty out of nothingness - this is the dark challenge facing human spirits who sought expression if not renewal, by translating the agony of annihilation [be it human, cultural, or aesthetic annihilation] into the painful harmonies - and discords - of an art of atrocity.”²

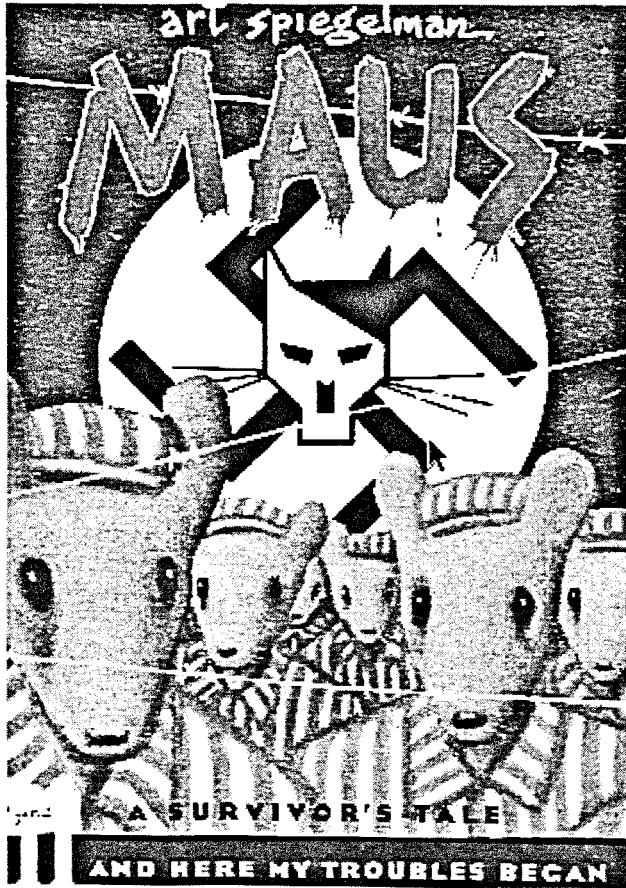


Figure 1. Front cover of Art Spiegelman's 1991 *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon)

Aesthetics, specifically in regard to the art of atrocity, entail potent social, cultural, political, and ethical implications which extend far beyond the limits of any singular artistic creation. Interestingly, art may serve as both a forceful means for cultural repression as well as a successful vehicle for defiance and rebellion against oppressive ideology; this is the dual potential of art explored in this study. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Hijikata Tatsumi's *Buto*, three contemporary artistic responses to cultural atrocity, utilize art to refute and resist the aesthetics of cultural repression.

In each instance, an overpowering, oppressive force (Nazi politics in Germany, Western colonizers in Nigeria, and U. S. military forces in Japan) asserts ethnocentric dominance over the subjugated cultures in question. The political and social ideologies of the dominant cultures are manifested through their particular aesthetic values. The Nazi aesthetic demands perfection in artistic form, just as the Nazi political agenda requires perfection of the Aryan race through annihilation of the Jews. Western aesthetics celebrate high culture (such as written histories, stories, and poetry), and the Western political mind-set entails bringing "civilization" to (or may justify the exploitation of) the "savages" in Nigeria who possess no written words. U. S.

aesthetics center on modernity and progress and reflect the political desire to promote technology and democracy within Japan, despite the sacred Japanese bond between humans and nature. Through their respective artistic statements, Spiegelman, Achebe, and Tatsumi confront and defy the oppressive ideology of cultural atrocity, offering uniquely valuable insight to modern society.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is initially deceptive. What appears at first glance to be an entertaining comic strip is in reality a poignant, multi-layered address to the horrors of the Holocaust. Serving as historical memoir, explanatory biography, and pointed social and political commentary, *Maus* is Spiegelman's challenge to and inversion of Nazi aesthetic and political ideology through comic art. Hitler's 1932 rise to power in Germany brought about long years of unspeakable cultural and political oppression for European Jews. The tenets of National Socialism, aimed directly at reestablishing a sense of German pride and nationalism after the economic and psychological devastation of World War I,



Figure 2. Front cover of Chinua Achebe's 1959 *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.)

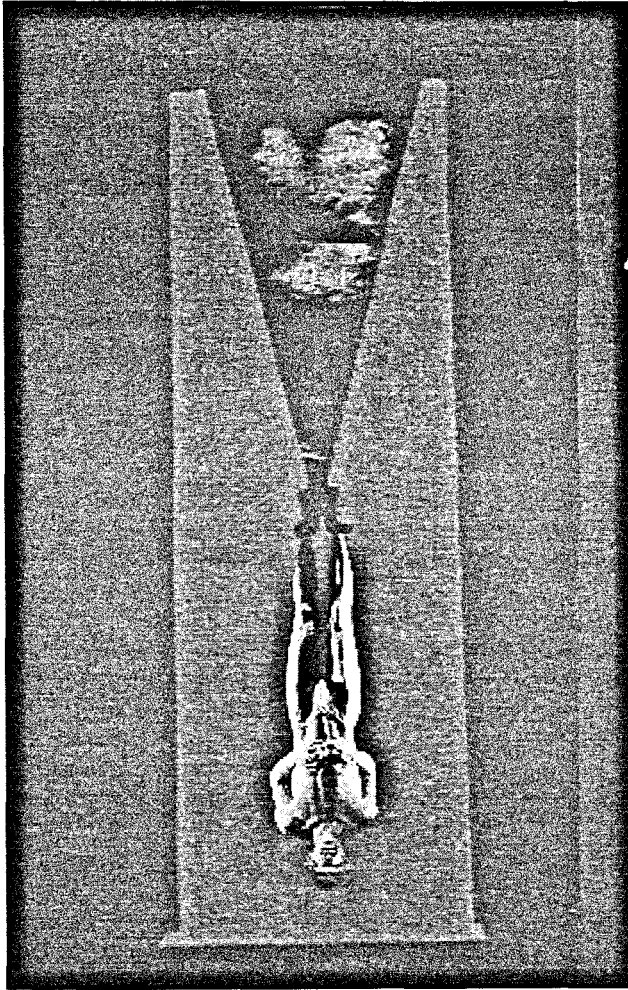


Figure 3. Ushio Amagatso performing Buto. Illustration from J. M. Adolphe 1994 Ballett International, 8:60.

identified the Jewish race as the essential enemy of an ideal Germany. Anti-Semitism pervaded every aspect of life in Germany; art and popular culture were specific vehicles for, and targets of, racial antagonism. In art, as in life's practice, Nazis condemned and exiled the imperfect, the misshapen, and the irregular; aesthetics were state-regulated by the Reichsministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda under Joseph Goebbels.³ Progressing through three stages (1933-1939 defamation and legal discrimination, 1939-1941 restriction and internment, 1941-1945 final solution), German persecution of its Jewish citizens escalated into a state-mandated genocide of unprecedented scale and horror.

The Nazi regime served to divide humanity into various species; Jews were relegated to the status of vermin, unnecessary "pests" to be exterminated. The Nazi representation of the Jewish population was largely confined to editorial cartoons. The anti-Semitic broadsheets and editorial cartoons of the Third Reich depicted Jews as "human vermin," with hideous,

exaggerated rodent characteristics. In reaction against this Nazi symbolism, Spiegelman decided to depict his comic strip characters in animal form (the Jews are mice, the Nazis are cats, the Poles are pigs, the Americans are mongrels, and the French are frogs). Spiegelman states, "*Maus* was made in collaboration with Hitler . . . My anthropomorphosized mice carry trace elements of editorial cartoonist Fip's Jews-as-rats cartoons for *Der Sturmer*, but by being particularized, they are invested with personhood; they stand upright and affirm their humanity."⁴ An encounter with *Maus* leaves one with a deeper comprehension of the Holocaust, and the potent ideology entailed therein, in both historical and contemporary settings.

Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* utilizes aesthetic synthesis to refute inaccurate Western portrayals of Nigerian society through the incorporation of an African cultural practice (elements of oral tradition) within Western literature. The instigation of imperialistic occupation by the capitalist powers in Third World countries, such as the late nineteenth century British colonization of Nigeria, initiated profound and lasting influences on the subjugated cultures. Great Britain imposed foreign systems of government and religion upon the formerly autochthonous regions; consequently, the indigenous aesthetic definition was distorted by altering (and in some instances forbidding) traditional artistic and cultural practices. Among the most prominent changes lies the transition from oral tradition to written language. Audible narratives not only provided entertainment for their respective societies but also served as educational tools in regard to history, genealogy, and religion.⁵ The nineteenth century introduced written language to Africa, forcing previously oral tribes to assimilate alphabetic symbols as an alternate method of communication. Interestingly, the rich, deeply-rooted tradition of orality did not disappear completely; it simply merged with the newly acquired literacy. The modern-day author Chinua Achebe illustrates the partnership between written and oral aesthetics in his fiction, essays, and poetry, and specifically through his novel *Things Fall Apart*.

In *Things Fall Apart*, detailing the story of Nigerian tribesman Okonkwo during the onset of British occupation, Achebe provides an honest, uniquely individual insight into the agricultural, legal, matrimonial, social, and ritualistic aspects of native culture. Achebe's inspiration for the novel came from his desire to dispel the myths and stereotypes about Nigeria constructed by European social scientists. Yet Achebe's fiction is relevant on far more than an anthropological level; his writing transcends the limited boundaries of fiction (largely because of the incorporation of narrative proverbs and other elements of oral tradition) and encompasses the universal themes of ethnographic, social, and political commentary.

Hijikata Tatsumi developed *Buto* dance as a response to the U.S. 1945 atomic bombings and subsequent occupation in Japan. Invoking traditional Japanese spiritual and ritualistic aesthetics in his choreography, Tatsumi's *Buto* serves as a direct refutation

of the prominent and unwanted Western influence pervading Japan from 1945 through 1952. Western occupation in Japan entailed significantly detrimental social, political, and economic ramifications for the Japanese; they were overwhelmed with an inescapable and unwelcome Western presence and ideology within their own country. The pain, loss, and destruction caused by the bombings and occupation were physically and emotionally devastating for at least a generation of Japanese; their lives were forever darkened and fundamentally altered.

Strongly opposed to Western hegemony in Japan, Tatsumi created *Ankoku buto* (the "Dance of Darkness") in 1959, imposing a "particularly Japanese quality"⁶ on physical movement and spirituality. Drawing on the "centuries-old gestures of farmers in their paddy fields, old peasant women, or grotesque prostitutes, and images of his own disabled sister,"⁷ Tatsumi's style was raw, violent, and improvisational.⁸ Through an embrace of the depth and complexity of Japanese cultural history (specifically the elements of theater and religious ritual), Tatsumi's dance served simultaneously to convey the utter grief and suffering of the Japanese people and to contradict the pervasive Western aesthetic influence. Tatsumi's art attested to devastating desolation entailed within cultural atrocity and, in an age of increasing internationalization, serves as a necessary reminder of the horror and suffering which stem from disregard and cultural biases.

The art of Spiegelman, Achebe, and Tatsumi offers testimony to the serious and powerful role of aesthetics within social, cultural, and political arenas. Aesthetics have the potential to delude and confuse (as demonstrated by the Nazis, British colonialists, and the U.S. military) and to bring about destruction; but art also has the potential to elucidate and illuminate history (as seen through the featured artists' works). It is for this reason that art as a reflection of cultural history should be viewed as a viable medium for personal expression, intercultural communication, and global enlightenment.

Endnotes:

¹ Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975) 1.

² Langer 1.

³ Thomas Doherty, "Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust," *American Literature* (1996): 72.

⁴ Doherty 75.

⁵ Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992) 110.

⁶ S.J. Cohen, ed., *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 18.

⁷ J.M. Adolphe, "Pastime of the Gods," *Ballet International* (1994): 61.

⁸ Cohen 17.

Faculty Comments:

Ms. McGovern's mentor, Mark Cory, had this to say about her project:

When I read Marlie's seminar paper for the Honors section of my course last spring on Literary Reflections of the Holocaust, I knew she had both the basis of an

excellent research proposal and the skills necessary to see a project through to its completion. I was not surprised to learn that she was a candidate for Four Year Honors in Cultural Anthropology, and I was delighted when she conceived of a way to tailor a greatly expanded version of her original study as her Honors thesis. I encouraged her to submit a proposal to the SILO/SURF competition in the fall. We remained in contact over the summer, and by August I had confirmation of Marlie's seriousness about the project. She had secured the support of her advisor in Anthropology, had prepared a substantial bibliography, and had come during the first week of class with her draft proposal! The proposal was funded and she has submitted a significant portion of the SILO/SURF project to the undergraduate research conference in Conway this spring. She will continue to work on the elaboration of the SILO study next year as she completes her program, which she is extending to add European Studies as a co-major. Her present abstract summarizes this larger study.

In terms of method, her thesis examines aesthetic responses to atrocity in a variety of cultures: European, Japanese, African. It involves a variety of art forms: literature, graphic arts, dance. Because of this interdisciplinary approach, it was not an easy combination to sell as an honors thesis, even though our ambitious H2P program prepares students to expect exactly this kind of thinking outside normal departmental boxes. Thankfully, her curiosity and determination have been met by generous support in her major department, where she received excellent methodological training in cultural anthropology. For her insights into Japanese dance, she has been prepared both by her own personal training as a dancer and by the formal guidance of our colleague Terry Brustar in the Drama department. My contribution has been to help apply the lessons of Holocaust literature to the very different kinds of cultural atrocity she explores in the case of colonial Africa and occupied Japan.

In terms of significance, Marlie's study is intellectually courageous and bound to be controversial. The validity of an aesthetics of atrocity is not yet universally accepted even in Holocaust studies (although I believe the best scholars embrace the concept). Where it is accepted, the concept tends to be closely guarded, as if any attempt at wider application could somehow undermine the uniqueness of the Holocaust or lessen the suffering of those victims. In the meantime, the kind of cultural exploitation Achebe addresses has received but a fraction of the attention regularly lavished on the much more prominent European catastrophe. And the attempt by a young American to look with fresh eyes at the aftermath of Allied victory over Japan in these terms is both daring and, in my judgment, long overdue. Finally, I would conclude by pointing out how marvelously well Marlie's entire

program, culminating in this research project, responds to the legacy of Senator Fulbright. I take that legacy to be a commitment to the humanities, an awareness of the dangers inherent in an arrogance of power, an appreciation of the benefits of international study, high intellectual standards, and a resolve to pay back in some future service the privileged opportunities conferred by American citizenship. This, I think, accurately describes Marlie, whose modesty would never permit her to recognize herself in this characterization. Nevertheless, her academic record, her intellectual quest to understand how different peoples have responded aesthetically to the Holocaust, to Hiroshima, to Colonialism, her own study abroad on the short term trips her limited financial resources have allowed (London last summer, Germany, Austria, Holland and the Czech Republic this summer), and her increasing interest in some form of public service after graduate study all mark her in my judgment as a student in whom this institution will take great pride.

Mary Jo Schneider, Professor of Anthropology, made the following remarks about Ms. McGovern's work:

Marlie McGovern has undertaken one of the most ambitious and most important honors projects that I have seen from an undergraduate. Marlie is working under Dr. Mark Cory to explore an important anthropological question: how does art serve as a force of resistance for ethnically oppressed groups. To explore this question, Marlie is comparing three examples of contemporary artistic responses in three settings: Nigeria, Germany, and Japan. Western colonizers, Nazi politics, and U.S. military forces dominated these societies during the middle part of this century. Artistic expressions can give us some insight into how those without power deal with their subjugation.

Marlie is a superb student. She is conscientious, dedicated, and extremely hard working and thorough. She has thought and rethought theoretical and substantive issues as she has tried to come to grips with the complexities of a difficult subject. I have seen a number of drafts and abstracts and I am quite impressed with her sophistication in this final version of her work. Marlie's is an exceptional piece of work that reflects credit both on Marlie and her mentor, Mark Cory. I give Marlie and her work my unqualified endorsement.

I have had Marlie in my History of Anthropological Thought class. She wrote reflective, thoughtful essays that were among the very best in the class. Marlie made connections that others overlooked, and her graceful writing style reflected her training and interest in the humanities and literature.

Professor of Dance, **L. Terry Brusstar**, made the following comments:

My interaction with Ms. McGovern has led me to believe that she is one of the brightest and most capable undergraduate Honors Students the program has had to date. Over the past three years I have had Marlie in two honors dance history courses, and I am presently supporting her research endeavors for her Honors Thesis. During this same period I have taught almost two hundred honors students.

During our teacher-student relationship, I have found Marlie to be both creative and scholarly in the work she has produced. She is consistently motivated, disciplined, and well read, and she produces papers, projects and the like which are well beyond my expectations and at a level far beyond that of her peers.

This project is original in concept and affords Marlie a wonderful opportunity to develop an area of expertise to pursue later in graduate study in Anthropology and/or European Studies. Marlie's research probes the function of contemporary art used as a means of cultural, social, and political resistance. Her study is both timely and significant to the "Popular Culture" discipline under the area of research called "Memory and Representation."