Silence and the Atrophy of Activism

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Symbols and slogans of oppression represent collective cultural narratives, elements of communication that are vital to the performance of a collective group.[1] Despite differences across eras and locations, individual variations are negated; experiential narratives tether affected populations together.[2] Appropriately and perhaps not surprisingly these communal narratives affect personal ontology.[3] Resultant impacts are vast. As Barbara Hardy notes: "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative."[4] Narrative discourse therefore connects and emblematizes a society or individual, creating experiences through the sharing of narrative themes.[5] One such cultural narrative emerged in 1986 in response to the growing AIDS pandemic. The slogan SILENCE = DEATH, [6] ubiquitous in 1980's activism, was only possible through a sharing of the nrrative and tragic performance of *Nazizeit.*[7]

Widely printed on placards, t-shirts, and a staple at public protests, the slogan combined prevalent performative symbols of 1980s activism: links with historical persecution, the dangers of a shared communal silence, and a stark reminder of a physical if not societal extermination. I posit that not only is the slogan linked to the narrative of *Nazizeit* but that it also finds its physical embodiment in Berlin's 2008 memorial to gay victims of the Holocaust. Both of these artifacts represent counter-monuments, rhetorical artifacts with an aim "not to

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[1] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry, no. 7* (1980): 5.
[2] Amardo Rodriguez, "Redefining our Understanding of Narrative," The Qualitative Report, 7, 1 (March, 2002):
[3] Theodore Sarbin, "The Narrative Quality of Action," *Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 10* (1990): 49.
[4] Quoted in L. O. Mink, "History and fiction as modes of comprehension," *New Literary History, 1*, (1970): 541.
[5] Kenneth Gergen and Mary Gergen "Narrative and the Self as Social Relationship." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology , 21, 1* (1988) 17.
[6] See Fig. 1 in the Appendix.
[7] I contend that the term *Nazizeit* presents for a far more holistic, encapsulating term than "era" or merely "period" as it is a representation of "time." Arguably, the term *Nazi-zeitgeist* or *Nazi-kriegszeit* may show the greater similarity, especially considering the appropriation of some of both terms into the English vernacular, but have selected to incorporate this term as emblematic of both the chronological and cultural as opposed to only militaristic elements of Germany's National Socialism. .

console but provoke … not to be ignored by passerbys but to demand interaction…. Not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back."[8]

These narratives underscore and are affected by sociological and individual worldviews; discourse surrounding them substantiates a sharing of a communal Self and establishes avowal expectations.[9] Similarly, narratives create a bridge between historical experiences and memories, an intersection of thought across social and communicative performances.[10] That is, narratives "are consistent with the political logic of trying to shape the present in light of lessons learned from the past."[11] Therefore, narratives effectively underscore the transmission of social, experiential, and cultural knowledge to an individual, complete with behavioral expectations and auspices of a historical precedent. [12]

The assumption of the SILENCE = DEATH narrative is that cultural collateral continues to be a pervasive result of anti-gay animus. Regardless of era, that animus bound communities together. As Judith Butler concludes in her reaction to Slavoj Žižek: "Those who are oppressed by certain operations of power also come to be invested in that oppression and how, in fact, their very self-definition becomes bound up with the terms by which they are regulated, marginalized, or erased from the sphere of cultural life." [13] The horrors of *Nazizeit* served then as the collective undertone and cultural doppelganger for the responses of the American government present during the initial stages of AIDS. These responses framed the

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[8] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 30.
[9] George A. Hauser, "Narrative, Cultural Memory, and the Appropriation of Historicity," in *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 97.
[10] William H. Sewell, Jr. "Introduction: Narratives and Social Identities," *Social Science History, 16, 3* (Autumn, 1992): 479.
[11] Shaul R. Shenhav, "Political Narratives and Political Reality," *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique, 27, 3* (July, 2006): 246.
[12] Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge," trans. Geoff Bennington, Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature, vol. 10* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
[13]Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (W. W. Norton & Co, Inc., 2000).

fledgling Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) rights organization entitled the American Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP.

Larry Kramer, the group's founder and pugnacious activist, summarized the ethos of ACT UP well: "People were afraid of us! That's what made us. … We were no longer the limp-wristed effeminate person. We were men in jeans and boots. … There was a lot of terror and anger by a younger generation … 1987 to 1991 I think was probably one of the great peak moments in gay history."[14] At its base, ACT UP attempted to create societal change through direct action, albeit one associated with the performance of confrontation and risk. Similarly, the social memory and narrative of gayness under *Nazizeit* was tinged with a constant hue of outside danger, but any response to that political era was grossly different than ACT UP's 19080s America. Direct confrontation by affected group members was impossible; even an iota of ACT UP's public demonstrations and performances would have resulted in almost certain attack if not annihilation. Narratively, however, societal complicity and dehumanization allowed *Nazizeit* to flourish.[15] This response was similarly represented in the silence initially extended toward AIDS.[16] Both artifacts suggest that the most adverse social position is paradoxically one of silence. To remain complacent is, in the case of ACT-UP, to remove the very possibility of progress as silence is equated with an admission of inferiority or at least, as Kramer espouses, weakness. Conversely, to remain silent in case of *Nazizeit* is to not only become isolated but also is to remain mute in the presence of a potential interloper or attacker. In either case, silence kills.

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[14] From http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ett_Rz_eNqA

[15] Daneil Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, (New York: Vintage, 1996).

[16] Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1987).

In the same manner that Kramer's efforts would come to symbolize 1980s radical activism, ACT-UP came to be known by the slogan SILENCE = DEATH. The Encyclopedia of AIDS explains that "[i]n 1987, six gay activists in New York formed the Silence = Death Project and began plastering posters around the city featuring a pink triangle on a black background stating simply 'SILENCE = DEATH.'" [17] Coupling the images of silence in the AIDS pandemic with voluntary complacency to the horrors of the Second World War underscores not only the need for personal involvement but also the disastrous results of civic lethargy. Of particular importance to the slogan is the predominantly displayed pink triangle. Well-recognized as a pervasive symbol of the persecution of gay men under *Nazizeit*, it manifested itself both in the rhetoric of the 1980s and beyond as a stark reminder of the result of governmental persecution and apathy toward personal tragedy. [18] It also reinforced the double binding position of gay men in *Nazizeit* and during the rise of the AIDS pandemic: Not speaking was to invite both a risk to health and the scourge of self-denial, but to disclose was to incur physical persecution.

Historical narratives underscored this reaction. Condoning the oppression of gay men was a direct manifestation of the disciplined masculinity of Germany.[19] Physical attacks against supposed enemies of the Reich were viewed not as barbarism but expected and celebrated examples of emotional or psychological control.[20] Additionally, retribution was legally condoned.[21] Under paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code, anyone committing an

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[17] Raymond Smith, *Encyclopedia of AIDS: A Social, Political, Cultural, And Scientific Record of the HIV Epidemic* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), 708.
[18] Erik Jensen "The pink triangle and political consciousness: Gays, lesbians, and the memory of Nazi persecution", *Journal of the History of Sexuality 11, 1 and 2,* (2002):
[19] Jamie M. Carr, *Queer Times: Christopher Isherwood's Modernity.* (New York: Routledge. 2006).
[20] Timothy L. Schroer, "Civlization, Barbarism, and the Ethos of Self-Control among the Perpetrators," *German Studies Review, 35, 1* (2012): 33.
[21] See Warren Johannson and William Percy "Homosexuals in Nazi Germany," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual, 7* (1990).

act of indecency was punished by imprisonment, the loss of civil rights, or both.[22] Any action could be determined to have sexual, indecent content and were therefore punishable by law; This systematic targeting and ultimate death of between 5,000 to 15,000 gay men followed the imprisonment of over 100,000 under *Nazizeit.*[23] Inviting comparisons between the two time periods, a wave of fear against gay men skyrocketed in the 1980s following the rise of AIDS.[24]; [25] This oppression, sharing animus toward what was assumed to be a subversive perversion, linked an oppressed American group to the homophobic actions of a foreign, historical regime. [26] SILENCE = DEATH therefore engendered a response that could only be possible through a connotative and discursive link to *Nazizeit*.

This response found its way into a variety of venues and works in recent years. Public memorials and performances recognizing the murders of gay men under *Nazizeit* are found in locations throughout the world. Examples include works in Rome, Tel Aviv, San Francisco, as well as several other sites.[27] Created in 2008, the Berlin memorial was a continuation of an earlier plan that featured a commemorative memorial plaque at Nollendorfplatz, Berlin-Schöneberg. Titled *Gedenkort für die im Nazionalsozialismus verfolgten Homosexuellen*, or "Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted under Nazism," it was created by Berlin resident artists Michael Elmgreen, (b. 1961) from Copenhagen, Denmark, and Ingar Dragset (b. 1968) of

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[22] From *Deutschen Strafgesetzbuches§ 175(1) Ein Mann, der mit einem anderen Mann Unzucht treibt oder sich von ihm zur Unzucht mißbrauchen läßt, wird mit Gefängnis bestraft.*

[23] Retrieved from the United States Holocaust Museum, http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/hsx/ on 24 April 2012.

[24] Gregary M. Herek, "Stigma, prejudice, and violence against lesbians and gay men" in *Homosexuality: Research implications for Public Policy* eds. J. Gonsiorek and J. Weinrich (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991):60.

[25] Originally, the disease had been known by the acronym "GRID," gay-related immune deficiency. It also had been given the sobriquet "the gay plague."

[26] See Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October, 43*, (Winter, 1987): 197.

[27] See http://andrejkoymasky.com/mem/holocaust/ho08.html for photographs and descriptions of these and additional memorials.

Trondheim, Norway.[28] Its creation adds to similarly themed works in Germany, including memorials in Cologne (1995) and Frankfurt am Main (1994). The Berlin 2008 memorial is the only one, however, to use video-recorded images. The overwhelming majority of the remainder of similarly dedicated memorials include at least a reference to if not outright incorporation of the pink triangle motif.

The memorial is located on the Tiergarten, near the monument to the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe." It is a concrete, grey rectangular cubicle, measuring 11.8 feet tall and 6.2 feet wide. It evokes similarities with the stark rows and columns of blocks that formulate the nearby memorial. It includes an explanatory plaque that references Paragraph 175, along with some suggestion as to the memorial's connotation: "'A simple kiss could land you in trouble," …. The plaque adds: 'In many parts of the world people are still persecuted because of their sexual identity, homosexual love is a criminal offense and a kiss can spell danger.'" [29] A small window opens on the memorial's side onto a darkened internal space where a looped film is screened. It features a wooded scene with two men who are filmed in profile at approximately half-length. [30] Following a brief physical embrace and consistent glances to survey their surroundings, they kiss.[31] Outside of the slight suggestion of conversation at the onset of the video, the film and its actors remain silent.

The memorial serves to remind audiences of *Nazizeit* while also suggesting the multi-tiered impact of silence. The two men featured in the video are surveying their locale in order to forestall possible arrest. The constant need for surveillance, be it that of a physical or psychological nature, is stressed their performance. Similarly, the consternation of the

[28] See Fig. 2 in the Appendix.
[29] Rex Wockner, "Holocaust Gay Memorial Unveiled in Berlin," *LGBTQ News and Calendar for the Bay Area*: *Bay Times*, 5 June 2008.
[30] See Fig. 3 in the Appendix.
[31] A portion of the video is available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bec7fAS3tgs.

revelation of an inner identity is highlighted. The performative narrative of the memorial accentuates the tension between insider and outsider positions. The link is accentuated through a negotiation of insider versus outsider, viewer or witness versus participant. The damaging effects suggested through Foucault's analysis of subjectivity are all too present.[32] The fear of attack surfaces, as does the need for constant self-monitoring— thus eradicating the possibility of any additional public physical exchange but also implicating and inculcating the viewer as part of the narrative performance. The viewer looks on, partaking in this exchange and powerless or perhaps unwilling to act. In short, the memorial becomes both a participatory mausoleum and closet, a hinterland of trepidation and judgment surrounding an act of simple intimacy.

In both cases, the shared cultural narrative suggests that "silence" may well be a most fitting counter-monument. A portion of this apathy may have become an inherent aspect of the performative cultural narratives of the GLBT community. To return to links between the two communities invites additional reaction from Larry Kramer:, "{T]he gay population of this country continues to be so passive, so apathetic, so shut-the-fuck-up-with-all-your-message-queen-shit. Every treatment for HIV/AIDS exists because gay activists, almost all from ACT UP, fought like tigers to get them. … With what have we followed this great triumph? A return to the never-ending complacency on the part of almost all gay people."[33] In Kramer's estimate, the silence of complacency has become a cultural din, both within and outside of the GLBT population.

[32] See Mark Bevir, "Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency against Autonomy, Political Theory, " 27, 1 (Feb., 1999): 65.
[33] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/larry-kramer/act-up_b_1382314.html

Kramer's reaction undergirds the rhetorical turn of his decades' long involvement with GLBT causes but more importantly suggests a conclusion as to popularized reactions to radicalism, particularly in relation to AIDS. Through the SILENCE = DEATH campaign, societal apathy was equated with outright vitriol. The "Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted under Nazism" similarly suggests that homophobia and anti-gay animas has a longitudinal history, one that is stained with barbarism. Both messages directly confront the viewer by forcing interaction with historical legacies and the shared narrative of a collective silence. Similarly, both artifacts interpolate cultural narratives with civic engagement and political largess, suggesting that commonalities in performative narratives that underscore similar results. Across each situation, and in true counter-monument form, the messages directly confront viewers with a silence that has become emblematic of a neglectful habitus of behavior.[34]

The apathy toward or encouragement of the installation of anti-gay laws and sentiments was only intensified by a societal complicity toward homophobic sentiments. Thus, the shared collective cultural narrative and performance of both works is that silence is both initiator and recipient, a pernicious force that begets an operation of compliance through omission. This codified silence is not merely summarizing the communicative actions of participants but also any placid or apathetic observers. These works wrest responsibility from the affected parties and instead suggest that observers must vocally respond to the rancor of disease, be it of a physical or political nature. Only then can the performance and activism of silence take on an appropriate narrative of a soothing communicative balm.

[34] See Pierre Bordieu "Habitus" in *Habitus: A Sense of Place, Jean Hillier,* ed., Emma Rooksby (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate Pub Co.): 43.

APPENDIX

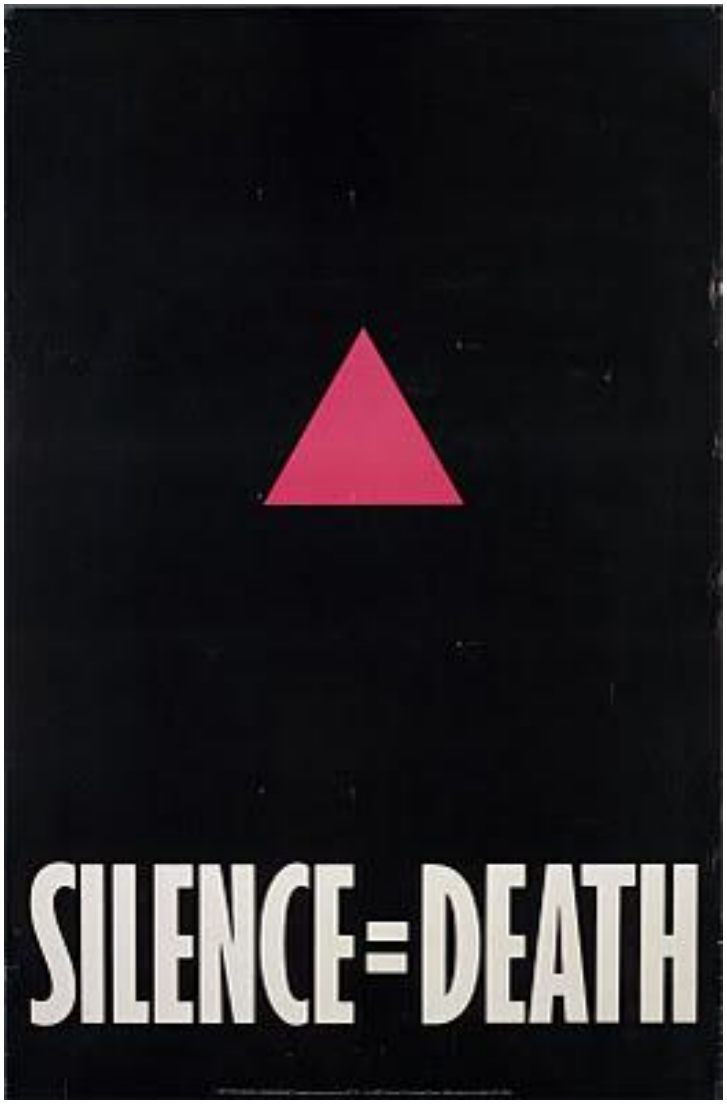

Figure 1: *SILENCE = DEATH*, 1986, Poster, offset lithography, 29 x 24". Courtesy of the New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archive Division.

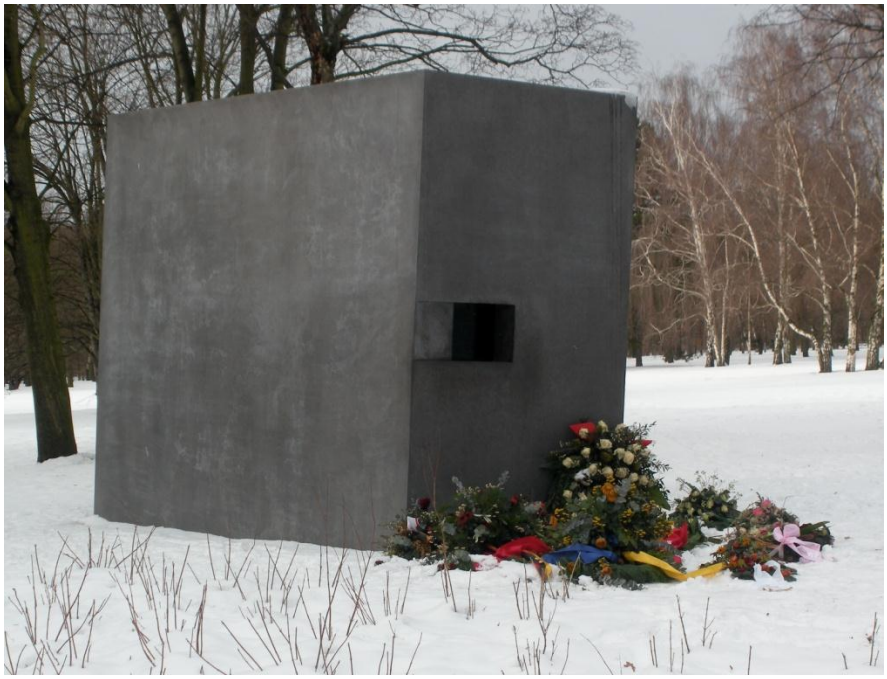

Figure 2: *Monument to the Persecuted Homosexuals*, courtesy of http://besondersweg.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/dscn1037.jpg Retrieved on 24 April 2012.

Figure 3: *gay*[sic] *Memorial Berlin*, detail 2009, courtesy of sidsmeets, http://www.flickr.com/photos/25857257@N08/4581677313/, Retrieved on 24 April 2012.

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