



Wedderburn, A. (2019) Cartooning the camp: aesthetic interruption and the limits of political possibility. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 47(2), pp. 169-189. (doi: [10.1177/0305829818799884](https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818799884)).

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/210170/>

Deposited on: 19 February 2020

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

CARTOONING THE CAMP: AESTHETIC INTERRUPTION AND THE LIMITS OF POLITICAL POSSIBILITY

PUBLISHED IN MILLENNIUM: JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES 47(2), 2019, 169-189

AVAILABLE AT <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0305829818799884>

ABSTRACT

Over the last thirty years, post-structuralist, feminist and other IR theorists have asked questions of the ways in which discourses on sovereignty seek to foreclose political possibility. To do so, they have advanced a decentralised, contested, incomplete and relational understanding of politics that presupposes some sort of (fragmented) intersubjective agency. There is one site, however, that appears to confound this line of argument insofar as it is commonly understood to exemplify an entirely non-relational, anti-political 'desolation': the concentration camp. Drawing on feminist theory to establish the terms of an aesthetic mode of 'interruption', this paper will identify a compelling challenge to this position in a comic book drawn by Horst Rosenthal, a German-Jewish detainee at Gurs in Vichy France who was later killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Rosenthal's piece will be read as an 'aesthetic interruption' that mounts a powerful critique of the logic underpinning his concentrationary experience, and in so doing demonstrates one way in which (to however painfully limited a degree) the political might be 'brought back in' to discussions about sovereign power.

Keywords: aesthetics, popular culture, visual global politics, sovereignty, comics

INTRODUCTION

For more than thirty years now, sovereignty has been a prominent object of critique among post-structuralist, feminist and other International Relations [IR] theorists.¹ At stake in this body of work is not so much an empirical question about the extent to which the state's importance to international political affairs has been eroded,² but rather an analytical question about the ways in which the boundaries of political possibility are circumscribed and policed.³ This literature is therefore concerned with how sovereignty functions and operates: with how it gains and maintains substance, significance or self-evidence, and with how it thereby comes to delineate and determine the political realm.⁴ In the process, sovereignty is recast as something that *does*, rather than something that *is*: in Rob Walker's words, it is 'an act that works by producing a... state of being, exactly where there is and can be no such thing'.⁵

¹ Examples of this literature might include Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (1984): 225-86; Richard Ashley, 'Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problematique', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 17, no. 2 (1988): 227-262; Richard Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, 'Reading Dissidence/Writing the Discipline: Crisis and the Question of Sovereignty in International Studies', *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1990): 367-416; Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jenny Edkins et al., eds, *Sovereignty and Subjectivity* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Jenny Edkins et al., eds, *Sovereign Lives: Power in Global Politics* (New York & Abingdon: Routledge, 2004); Scott G. Nelson, 'Sovereignty, Ethics, Community', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30, no. 7 (2004): 816-841; V. Spike Peterson, ed., *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1992); Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Cynthia Weber, *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

² This is a question posed and tackled, in varying ways and with varying responses, by scholars working in the fields of international political economy (e.g. Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)); global governance (e.g. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, eds, *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David Held and Anthony McGrew, eds, *Governing Globalization: Power, Authority, and Global Governance* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); liberal cosmopolitanism (what John Ikenberry calls 'Liberal Internationalism 3.0'. G. John Ikenberry, 'Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order', *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 1 (2009): 71-87); and so-called 'New Wars' (e.g. Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999)), among many others.

³ R. B. J. Walker, 'Conclusion: Sovereignties, Exceptions, Worlds', in Edkins et al., *Sovereign Lives*, 241. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 335; Ashley and Walker, 'Reading Dissidence', 387; Didier Bigo & R. B. J. Walker, 'Political Sociology and the Problem of the International', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35, no. 3 (2007): 731; Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Fat, 'Introduction: Life, Power, Resistance', in Edkins et al., *Sovereign Lives*, 1-3.

⁴ Ashley, 'Untying The Sovereign State', 248. Cf. Ashley & Walker, 'Reading Dissidence', 388.

⁵ Walker, 'Conclusion', 242. See Cynthia Weber, 'Performative States', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27, no. 1 (1998): 77-95 for an analysis of sovereignty in which 'does' and 'is' overlap and elide.

This 'state of being' can be understood as an articulation of what Michael Dillon describes as a 'metaphysics of presence':⁶ a logic that looks to resolve difference and division by uniting individuals and communities under a univocal authority that can 'decide for one and all what every disputed happening must mean'.⁷ It is for this reason that sovereignty is understood to be a- or even anti-political: in its endeavour to demarcate and occupy a closed and homogenous space, it seeks to establish and secure a dominion in which the intersubjective relations that constitute 'politics' – contestation, dissent, resistance, deliberation, counter-conduct, play and so on – would be either unviable or unnecessary. For Richard Ashley and Rob Walker, sovereignty can therefore be said to project a 'voice... *beyond politics* and beyond doubt'.⁸

Yet as Walker notes, even if sovereignty 'is', insofar as it exists as an identifiable set of discursive assertions and claims, it also 'can[not] be', because it is necessarily incapable of fulfilling the conditions it sets for itself: it is, in other words, a discourse defined by *hubris*.⁹ To this end, a number of theorists have stressed the decentralised and relational ways in which power operates, the fragmentary and negotiated character of all identity claims, and the consequent impossibility of overcoming, finalising or perfecting the political field.¹⁰ Sovereignty is thus reconfigured as a particular 'grammar of power'¹¹ operating on a broad plane of political contestation defined by a multiplicity of voices and struggles that *in* their very multiplicity offer a challenge to its onto-politics of closure.¹² If sovereign power seeks to produce a space 'beyond politics', then to bring these other voices under consideration

⁶ Michael Dillon, 'The Sovereign and the Stranger', in Edkins et al., *Sovereignty and Subjectivity*, 117.

⁷ Ashley & Walker, 'Reading Dissidence', 381. Cf. Bigo & Walker, 'Political Sociology', 734-735; Derrida, *Writing*, 333; Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security: Towards a Political Philosophy of Continental Thought* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), 171.

⁸ Ashley & Walker, 'Reading Dissidence', 368. Emphasis added.

⁹ Walker, 'Conclusion', 242

¹⁰ Richard Ashley, 'Living on Border Lines: Man, Poststructuralism and War', in *International/Intertextual Relations*, eds James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1989), 259-323; Ashley & Walker, 'Reading Dissidence', 413; Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back in* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (London: Penguin, 2003), 28-29.

¹¹ Edkins & Pin-Fat, 'Introduction', 3.

¹² Cf. David Campbell, 'The Onto-Politics of Critique', *International Relations* 19, no. 1 (2005): 127-134; William E. Connolly, 'Foreword: The Left and Ontopolitics', in *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*, ed. Carsten Strathausen (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2009), ix-xviii.

– to draw attention to the multiplicity sovereign power seeks to suffocate – is to contest these depoliticising effects, and to preserve a sense of political possibility.¹³

This literature can potentially be brought into dialogue with a number of other theoretical discourses within IR. These might include the emphasis within Critical Security Studies on the ontological complicity between security and insecurity, or the broadly (and sometimes explicitly) Foucauldian affirmation of the immanence of resistance within practices of governance – both of which similarly seek to problematise claims to an anti-political wholeness or monophony.¹⁴ In this article, however, I would like to pursue this literature’s decentralised, fragmented, contested, incomplete and relational understanding of politics within a specific historical context of such dire privation that meaningful political activity has, to some, appeared *genuinely* unviable: the concentration camp. Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Fat, for example, identify the concentration camp as an environment in which a ‘sovereign’ violence and coercion operate so overwhelmingly that politics is *entirely* and *absolutely* impossible:

...what examples might [there] be, in practice, of a mode of being where resistance is impossible, and hence where there is no power relation[?] It can be argued, following Agamben, that the concentration camp is such an example... [The camp] is an example of where power relations vanish. What we have in the camps is not a power relation... What we have is... *an impossibility of politics* [emphasis added].¹⁵

Although Edkins and Pin-Fat allow for the possibility of resistance in contemporary refugee or asylum camps, they posit the Nazi camps – which they consider together, in the abstract – as limit zones of

¹³ Cf. Edkins, *Poststructuralism*.

¹⁴ On (in)security see Dillon, *Politics of Security*; Didier Bigo & Emma McCluskey, ‘What is a PARIS Approach to (In)securitization? Political Anthropological Research for International Sociology’, in *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*, ed. Alexandra Gheciu & William C. Wohlforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 116-132. On Foucauldian approaches to resistance, see Michel Foucault, ‘On Method’, in *The Global Resistance Reader*, ed. Louise Amoore (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 86-91; James Brassett, ‘British Comedy, Global Resistance: Russell Brand, Charlie Brooker & Stewart Lee’, *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 1 (2016): 168-191.

¹⁵ Jenny Edkins & Véronique Pin-Fat, ‘Through The Wire: Relations of Power and Relations of Violence’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 1 (2005): 10-12. Cf. Edkins and Pin-Fat, ‘Introduction’.

violence to which the ‘opposite pole can only be passivity’.¹⁶ For Edkins and Pin-Fat, then, the camps of wartime Europe are spaces in which an overwhelming, arbitrary violence holds complete and uncompromising sway, without interruption or disturbance. They are spaces, in other words, in which the broad critical project outlined above breaks down: truly non-relational, non-political spaces in which the supposedly hubristic ambition to govern without excess or remainder appears in fact to have been realised.

How, then, might one identify the possibility or even the practice of politics in such a devastating, extreme environment – if indeed one can? What can ‘politics’ even signify in a context like this, and how can any discernable political engagement with such overwhelming material circumstances be theorised or understood? In this article, I will address these questions with reference to a comic strip drawn by Horst Rosenthal, a German Jew detained at Gurs¹⁷ in Vichy France and later killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau.¹⁸ Although there is a sizeable literature on camps within IR, as well on the global-political significance of comics and other visual and popular-cultural media, these fields of study have not previously been brought to bear on each other.¹⁹ Political theorists, meanwhile, have more

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, quoted in Jenny Edkins & Véronique Pin-Fat, ‘Through the Wire: Relations of Power and Relations of Violence’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 1 (2005): 13.

¹⁷ Gurs, located on the French side of the Pyrenees, was built by the French government in 1939 primarily in order to intern Spanish refugees who had crossed the border after the end of the 1936-1939 Civil War. Even before the German invasion of 1940 the camp was being used to detain fleeing Jews from Germany and elsewhere (including, briefly, Hannah Arendt), a role which expanded after the establishment of Pétain’s client state in the south of the country. By 1942 the camp was functioning as a transit point from which Jews arrested in southern France could be sent to extermination camps in the East, primarily Auschwitz-Birkenau. Almost 4000 non-French Jews (including Rosenthal himself) were killed in this way. Another 1100 or so died within Gurs itself, primarily from illnesses like typhoid and dysentery whose spread was exacerbated both by overcrowding and by the lack of basic resources like food, water, sanitation and so on. Geoffrey P. Megargee, ed., *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), Vol III, 150-153.

¹⁸ Little is known of Rosenthal: he was born in Breslau [now Wrocław, Poland] and held at Gurs between 1940 and August 1942. While detained there, he drew (at least) three short comic strips – *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* [Mickey in the Gurs Camp], *La Journée d’un Hébergé* [A Day in the Life of a Hébergé [Resident]], and *Petit Guide à Travers Le Camp de Gurs* [Little Guide Through the Gurs Camp]. The first two of these were donated to the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris in 1978, though nothing is known of their whereabouts up to that point. The third was given or sold to a Swiss nurse in Gurs, who smuggled it out of the camp before donating it in 1986 to the Skovgaard Museum in Viborg [Denmark]. None of Rosenthal’s three extant comics have ever been made available outside France. Biographical information taken from Joël Kotek & Didier Pasamonik, *Mickey à Gurs: Les carnets de dessins de Horst Rosenthal* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy/ le Mémorial de la Shoah, 2014), 167-169; Pnina Rosenberg, ‘Mickey Mouse in Gurs – humour, irony and criticism in works of art produced in the Gurs internment camp’, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2002): 273-292.

¹⁹ On the camp, see Edkins & Pin-Fat, ‘Through the Wire’; Raffaella Puggioni, ‘Resisting sovereign power: camps in-between exception and dissent’, in *The Politics of Protection: Sites of Insecurity and Political Agency*, ed. Andrew Dobson, Jef Huysmans, & Raia Prokhovnik (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 68-83; Andrew Neal, ‘Foucault in

commonly concerned themselves with how to bear witness *after* the event: with the profound practical, ethical and epistemological challenges associated with the retrospective visualisation or narrativisation of concentrationary atrocity.²⁰ This focus either on the exhausting and exhaustive totality of the power relations at play, or on testimony produced by survivors in retrospect, has inadvertently served to obscure the small but significant body of work produced *in* the camps themselves, most of which remains little- or unknown.²¹

To read Rosenthal's comic strip as expressive in some sense of a political will and agency is the task of this article. What is at stake here, I would like immediately to make clear, is by no means either the profound physical, mental, emotional, political and ethical extremity of camp spaces, or the everlasting silence of a countless multitude of those they have detained. Nevertheless, this strip, and others like it, offer one way of potentially 'bringing the political back in' – in however fragmented or diminished a form – to a constellation of events that is often discussed as though it were beyond the limits of political possibility.²²

The article will proceed in three sections. The first will draw on Primo Levi in order to provide a framework through which to understand the relational terrain of the camp space, before establishing

Guantánamo: Towards an Archaeology of the Exception', *Security Dialogue* 37, no. 1 (2006): 31-46; Jef Huysmans, 'The Jargon of Exception – on Schmitt, Agamben and the Absence of Political Society', *International Political Sociology* 2, no. 2 (2008): 165-183. All of this literature acknowledges (without necessarily following) the work of Giorgio Agamben, especially Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998). On the relationship between visual media and international relations, meanwhile, see – amongst much else – Roland Bleiker, ed., *Visual Global Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2018). On popular culture, see Jutta Weldes, 'Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics: Exploring Intertextual Relations', in *To Seek Out New Worlds: Science Fiction and World Politics*, ed. Jutta Weldes (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 1-30; Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies & Simon Philpott, 'Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture–World Politics Continuum', *Politics* 29, no. 3 (2009): 155-163. On comics, see Lene Hansen, 'Reading comics for the field of International Relations: Theory, method and the Bosnian War', *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 3 (2017): 581-608.

²⁰ The relationship between 'the Holocaust' on the one hand and memory and the writing of history on the other is the subject of Jeremy Black, *The Holocaust: History and Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016). Political theorists and/or philosophers who have engaged with this relationship at monograph length include Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 1999) and Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

²¹ One might say that Adorno's statement regarding the barbarity of writing poetry *after* Auschwitz has achieved fame and notoriety at the expense of poetry written *in* Auschwitz. Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 34; cf. Andrés Nader, ed., *Traumatic Verses: On Poetry in German from the Concentration Camps, 1933-1945* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2007). It is notable, in any case, that very little contemporary documentation of the wartime genocide has anything more than a specialised audience. Anne Frank's diary is probably the sole exception, though Charlotte Salomon's extraordinary *Life? Or Theatre?* has begun – rightfully, if belatedly – to attract serious academic and curatorial attention. Cf. Griselda Pollock, *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

²² Cf. Edkins, *Poststructuralism*.

the concept of an ‘aesthetic interruption’ in order to identify one way in which political possibility might be enacted and exploited in such a context. The second section will introduce *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, a largely unknown comic strip written and drawn by Horst Rosenthal, and offer a reading of it informed by the preceding section’s analysis. Thirdly and finally, the article will conclude by reflecting on the limited nature of the strip’s intervention. While Rosenthal’s comic *can* be seen to represent the pursuit and practice of politics in an environment of unthinkable privation, to understand it in ‘interruptive’ terms is also to recognise the manifold ways in which it is woven into the material context from which it emerged, in relation to which it operated, and by which it and its author were disciplined (and in the latter case, destroyed). Without acknowledging this, it would be possible to conceive of the comic as an independent, vital force – to valorise it as an abstract emblem of human resilience, for example. This would serve to short-circuit the strip’s interruptive qualities by constituting it as expressive of a discrete and self-governing force of will, rather than something inextricably intertwined with the very network of relations into which it seeks to intervene.

DESOLATION, INTERRUPTION AND POLITICAL (IM)POSSIBILITY

For Edkins and Pin-Fat, the Nazi concentration and death camps are non-relational, aporetic spaces defined by an ‘impossibility of politics’. In these terms, they would appear to actualise the hypothetical sovereign space that thinkers like Ashley and Walker take as their object of critique, insofar as they enact the complete suffocation of difference, defiance and dissent by which the sovereign ‘state of being’ is defined.²³ In this capacity, Edkins’ and Pin-Fat’s vision might be said to echo various survivors’ accounts of their concentrationary experience. In the words of Primo Levi, for example:

²³ Edkins & Pin-Fat, ‘Through The Wire’, cf. Ashley & Walker, ‘Reading Dissidence’; Walker, ‘Conclusion’, 242.

The evil and insane SS men, the Kapos, the politicals, the criminals, the prominent, great and small, down to the indifferent slave Häftlinge, all the grades of the mad hierarchy created by the Germans paradoxically fraternized in a uniform internal desolation.²⁴

For Levi, Auschwitz's 'uniform internal desolation' designates an unintelligible swirl in which all distinctions have collapsed into squalor and ruin. The hierarchies nominally underpinning the camp's functioning dissolve, it seems, in the face of a universal human degradation that produces a catastrophic relational void within which all can be considered 'uniform'. If such a space represents an 'impossibility of politics', then, it is precisely because it so comprehensively shatters the intersubjective conduits upon which politics depends in favour of a monophonic violence whose amplification diminishes victim and perpetrator alike.

What is perhaps more contentious about Edkins and Pin-Fat's account, however, is their equation of this non-relational, non-political concentrationary limit zone with Giorgio Agamben's account of the camp as the paradigmatic space of contemporary sovereign power in the first installment of *Homo Sacer*.²⁵ Agamben's work has been much discussed by IR scholars, and a summary of his ideas and arguments in their totality is not necessary here.²⁶ Nevertheless, it should be stressed that whilst Edkins and Pin-Fat are not alone in interpreting his account of the camp in terms of politics' potential eclipse, subsequent literature has challenged these readings.²⁷ William Watkin, for example, argues that for Agamben the camp is the place where 'the political is at its most dangerous but also its most exposed', and argues that this sense of crisis is exactly what makes a new politics not only necessary but possible.²⁸ Agamben himself, meanwhile, has turned in subsequent installments of the *Homo Sacer* series

²⁴ Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man/The Truce* (London: Abacus, 2001), 127-128.

²⁵ Cf. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

²⁶ The clearest summary of Agamben's thought and of its relevance to IR is probably Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Giorgio Agamben', in *Critical Theorists and International Relations*, ed. Jenny Edkins & Nick Vaughan-Williams (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), 19-30.

²⁷ Cf. William E. Connolly, 'The Complexities of Sovereignty', in *On Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, eds Matthew Calarco and Stephen DeCaroli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 23-42; Andreas Kalyvas, 'The Sovereign Weaver: Beyond the Camp', in *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer*, ed. Andrew Norris (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), 107-134; Ernesto Laclau, 'Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?', in Calarco and DeCaroli, *On Agamben*, 11-22.

²⁸ William Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference: A Critical Overview* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 200.

to the question of whether and how politics can proceed from the very state of degradation that his earlier work sought to diagnose, advancing what might be described, with Sergei Prozorov, as a ‘politics of inoperativity’.²⁹

It is therefore the idea of the camp as a non-relational, non-political space, rather than Agamben’s account, that I would like to engage with here. It should be emphasised that I have neither the capacity nor the intention to question or criticize Levi’s description of his own concentrationary experience, and nor do I want entirely to equate Gurs with Auschwitz or any other camp: the homogenisation of the transit, concentration, labour, death, prisoner-of-war and multi-purpose camps that sprung up across Europe during the war is an unfortunate feature of contemporary Holocaust discourse that is reinforced by the tendency to see Auschwitz as a synecdoche for the camp system as a whole. Notwithstanding this important qualification, the ‘uniform internal desolation’ Levi describes is nevertheless of use here insofar as it will illuminate the aesthetic terrain that *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* constructs in order to engage or ‘interrupt’. I turn now to establish the terms of this ‘aesthetic interruption’ that will inform my reading of Rosenthal’s comic strip.

AESTHETIC INTERRUPTION

There is no political position purified of power, and... that impurity is what produces agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes... Those who are deemed “unreal” nevertheless lay hold of the real... and a vital instability is produced by that performative surprise...³⁰

²⁹ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), xiii; Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); Sergei Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 30-59.

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), xxvi.

'Interruption' is a word to which feminists have intermittently turned in order to describe or explain their own practice.³¹ For Judith Butler, to 'interrupt' is to introduce into a particular epistemic, relational or political system an element deemed to be extraneous to it, in so doing destabilising its hold over meaning and order by compelling it to recognise or engage with a body or idea that it has silenced or rendered invisible. *Gender Trouble*, she says, is therefore a book designed to 'interrupt' established discourses on sex and gender by contributing to a more general 'collective struggle' by and on behalf of 'those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins'.³² It is, in short, an attempt to introduce recalcitrant 'others' into otherwise accepted, presumed-universal discourses: the very others, indeed, that those discourses must marginalise or obscure in order to secure their own hegemonic privilege.

Stuart Hall's account of the challenge made by feminism to cultural studies describes how such an interruption might be experienced by those on its receiving end:

For cultural studies (in addition to many other theoretical projects), the intervention of feminism was specific and decisive. It was ruptural ... As a thief in the night, it broke in, interrupted, made an unseemly noise...³³

Hall conceives of the 'interruptive' qualities of feminist thought in a similar way to Butler. For him, too, 'interruption' can be understood in terms of the intrusion of the 'unreal' into the 'real': feminism introduced 'unseemly noise' into cultural studies' settled, comfortable debates and in so doing offered a radical challenge to the relational order by which that very 'noise' was constituted as such.³⁴ Interruption, then, can be said to induce an intersubjective relation where previously there was none – and in doing so, it might also be said to make political transformation possible (though of course never

³¹ Cf Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Marysia Zalewski, 'Distracted reflections on the production, narration, and refusal of feminist knowledge in International Relations', in *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, ed. Brooke Ackerly, Maria Stern & Jacqui True (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 50-51; Marysia Zalewski, 'Do We Understand Each Other Yet? Troubling Feminist Encounters With(in) International Relations', *BJPIR* 9, no. 2 (2007): 309

³² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxviii.

³³ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (Routledge: New York, 1992), 282.

³⁴ Michel Serres has drawn on communication theory in order to develop a theory of relations predicated on an interruptive interaction between 'signal' and 'noise'. Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

inevitable). It is for this reason that Jacques Rancière argues that ‘politics comes about *solely* through interruption’, and that ‘the political community is [therefore] a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local...’.³⁵ The ‘inter-’ of ‘interruption’, in short, opens up a relational ‘between’ that performatively establishes the intersubjective multiplicity choked and denied by the attempt to establish and fix sovereign order.

Within IR, Cynthia Weber has expanded upon this to think about interruption in relation to critical practice: to interrupt, she argues, is ‘to break the uniformity or continuity of *x*’, in so doing ‘methodically pluralising’ a discourse or apparatus presumed to be final, settled or complete.³⁶ To ‘interrupt’, then – to introduce an ‘unseemly noise’ into the discursive channels through which knowledge and truth about international politics are produced and transmitted, and in so doing to ‘forc[e] a conversation’ – is a critically and politically vital act that may be exemplified by feminist critique, but is not necessarily limited to it.³⁷ To identify an interruptive ‘noise’ in the context of a concentration camp, it is therefore necessary to look for instances where detainees sought to position themselves in relation to an apparatus that sought to deny them any sort of positionality at all: instances where those subjects deemed ‘unreal’ nevertheless sought to ‘lay hold of the real’, in Butler’s terms. But what shape could such interruptions possibly take? Towards whom might they be directed? What is there even to ‘lay hold’ *of* in a context of ‘desolation’?

Although there are instances of organised, material resistance within the camp system that might provide an answer to these questions, in this article I have chosen instead to look at a comic strip written and drawn by Horst Rosenthal while detained at Gurs in south-western France in 1942.³⁸ This strip has been selected for three reasons: firstly, that it is directly accessible to the twenty-first century researcher in a way that interruptive events like the Treblinka Uprising – events that can only be studied

³⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 13, 137. Emphasis added.

³⁶ Cynthia Weber, ‘Interruption Ashley’, *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010): 977-979.

³⁷ Weber, ‘Interruption Ashley’, 979.

³⁸ On Gurs and Rosenthal, see footnotes 17 and 18 in this article.

today through the mediations of second-hand historiography – are not.³⁹ Secondly, that although there is a sizeable body of artwork – ranging from graffiti through to large-scale murals and frescoes – that derives from Gurs and indeed the Nazi camp system more widely,⁴⁰ this piece in particular allows for an especially rich interruptive engagement with its author’s concentrationary context, adopting as it does the extended, narrative form of the comic strip.⁴¹ And finally, that it also allows for the identification of an *aesthetic* mode of interruption that not only provides an unusual perspective on political (im)possibility but that is also of potential relevance to the study of visual or popular-cultural global politics more widely.

There is a growing body of work within IR that engages with cartoons and comic books as popular media that can (and do) play an important and active role in international politics.⁴² The idea that one might potentially speak of a comic book as an ‘interruption’, then, is one which builds upon this literature insofar as it acknowledges that aesthetic, visual, and/or popular media are productive both of international politics and of the epistemic frameworks through which it is studied and known.⁴³ Importantly, however, the productive potential of comics and cartoons does not mandate any particular political function or trajectory: they can be disruptive or constitutive, critical or conservative. In the words of Lene Hansen:

³⁹ Cf. Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 282-294.

⁴⁰ Claude Laharie, *Gurs – L’art derrière les barbelés* (Biarritz: Atlantica, 2008). For examples of artwork from within the camp system more generally, see Arturo Benvenuti, ed., *Imprisoned: Drawings from Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016). Secondary reflections on some of this work can be found in Gillian Carr & H. C. Mytum, eds, *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012). Of course, the variable material conditions within the camps, dependent on all sorts of factors ranging from their function to their geographical location in relation to supply and frontlines, played a key role in determining the possibilities available to detainees. Nevertheless, work survives from a wide variety of camps, including those with extermination facilities such as Birkenau.

⁴¹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (London: HarperCollins, 1994); Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).

⁴² E.g. Jason Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013); Klaus Dodds, ‘Steve Bell’s Eye: Cartoons, Geopolitics and the Visualisation of the “War on Terror”’, *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 2 (2007): 157-177; Lene Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image for Security Studies: Visual securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis’, *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 1 (2011): 51-74; Hansen, ‘Reading Comics’; David Shim, ‘Sketching Geopolitics: Comics and the Case of the *Cheonan* Sinking’, *International Political Sociology* 11, no. 4 (2017): 398-417.

⁴³ Cf. David Campbell, ‘Cultural governance and pictorial resistance: reflections on the imaging of war’, *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003), 57-73; Grayson, Davies & Philpott, ‘Pop Goes IR’.

When analysing comics, therefore, one should study how text and images are mobilized such that coherent identities are produced, for example, through representations of human subjects. However, one should also ask where and how such ‘cohesion’ is destabilized through specific characters — visually and textually — that challenge representations of homogeneous collective identity.⁴⁴

Although comics and cartoons do not have to act in an interruptive manner, then, they nevertheless *can* do so, insofar as they possess the capacity to introduce ‘noise’ – dissonant, resistant or transformative ideas, images, narratives, or symbols – into the meaning-making channels of political discourse.⁴⁵ In the case of *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, however, so little is known about the circumstances surrounding the comic’s creation that it is impossible to draw any conclusions regarding how and why it was made, who saw it or to what effect. It is not even known if anyone else within the camp was aware of its existence beyond Rosenthal himself, whilst its journey out of the camp and into the collection of the Hansbacher family – who donated it in 1978 to the archival wing of the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris, where it remains – is similarly obscure.⁴⁶ *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* cannot therefore be read with any confidence as an immediate interruptive intrusion into the environment in which it was drawn. Instead, I would like to argue that it exemplifies an alternative, *aesthetic* mode of interruptive practice.

If to interrupt is to bring the ‘unreal’ to bear on the ‘real’ through the introduction of what Hall describes as ‘unseemly noise’, then an ‘aesthetic interruption’ can be understood as the introduction of ‘noise’ into an aesthetic realm that stands as the avatar of the ‘real’. The representation of a concentration camp within an artistic medium like the comic strip opens up an alternative, parallel camp space where an engagement with the camp’s day-to-day practices (or with the epistemic frameworks that underpin and sustain them) can be pursued with a latitude that would be impossible within the material camp itself. Rosenthal’s comic can therefore be said to stage or enact a decisive, ruptural interruptive encounter *within* the aesthetic space it has itself constructed. It does this by

⁴⁴ Hansen, ‘Reading Comics’, 589.

⁴⁵ Cf. Grayson, Davies & Philpott, ‘Pop Goes IR’. It is this idea that underpins not only the so-called ‘aesthetic turn’ within IR, but also the idea of ‘creative resistance’. Cf. Campbell, ‘Cultural governance’.

⁴⁶ Kotek & Pasamonik, *Mickey à Gurs*, 52-53; Pnina Rosenberg, ‘Mickey Mouse in Gurs – humour, irony and criticism in works of art produced in the Gurs internment camp’, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2002), 275.

introducing into its envisioning of Gurs what Michael Shapiro has termed an ‘aesthetic subject’: an aesthetically-constituted being whose ‘movements and actions’ can function to ‘map and often alter experiential, politically relevant terrains’.⁴⁷ In *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, that subject is none other than Mickey Mouse, whose indecipherable, ‘noisy’ presence radically destabilises the logics sustaining the imagined Gurs through which he wanders.

One reason for *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*’ pursuit of an aesthetic mode of interruption, one imagines, is at least potentially to establish a degree of separation from the camp itself and from the retributive violence likely to befall any open act of dissent. Yet even if aesthetic interruption is of potential use as a clandestine means of resistant practice that can (hypothetically, and only ever relatively) insulate its author from reprisal, it nevertheless remains important to recognise that it also potentially opens up an expansive sweep of narrative and imaginative opportunities that enable a depth of interruptive engagement not necessarily available by other means. In short, by operating in relation to an aesthetic facsimile of the ‘real’ as opposed to the ‘real’ itself, the political possibilities open to Rosenthal – or to the aesthetic subject that serves as his proxy – multiply dramatically. This is an obvious truth that is of particular relevance in a context like a concentration camp where the material possibilities for disruptive, resistant or transformational action were curtailed to an all-but-absolute extent. *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, then, carves open an aesthetic space in which Gurs itself can be explored, opposed and toyed with. It fashions the terrain it then proceeds decisively to ‘lay hold of’ via the interruptive introduction of a dissonant, ungovernable aesthetic subject: a fictional mouse who cannot be understood according to the terms of belonging that ostensibly govern the camp; an enigmatically modern Midas whose very touch makes all that is solid melt into air.⁴⁸ It is in these terms that I turn now to read the comic itself.

⁴⁷ Michael Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), xiv. See also Michael Shapiro, *The Time of the City: Politics, Philosophy and Genre* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010). Kyle Grayson introduces the idea of the aesthetic subject into his analysis of drone warfare and targeted killing. Kyle Grayson, *The Cultural Politics of Targeted Killing: On Drones, Counter-Insurgency and Violence* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 130-169.

⁴⁸ Cf. Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983).

CARTOONING THE CAMP: *MICKEY AU CAMP DE GURS*

The basic plot of *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* is simple – as indeed it has to be, given its length of just fifteen panels. Mickey Mouse, striding happily about France, is arrested. Without papers, he is sent to Gurs, where he is detained. Roaming around the camp, Mickey engages with its various characters, practices and rituals, before in the final panel deciding to depart for greener pastures: ‘And so, because I’m nothing more than a drawing, I rubbed myself out with a stroke of the eraser... and... ta-da...!!! The police can always come and look for me in the land of lib...ty, eq...ity and frat...ity (I’m talking about America!)’ (fig. 5).⁴⁹

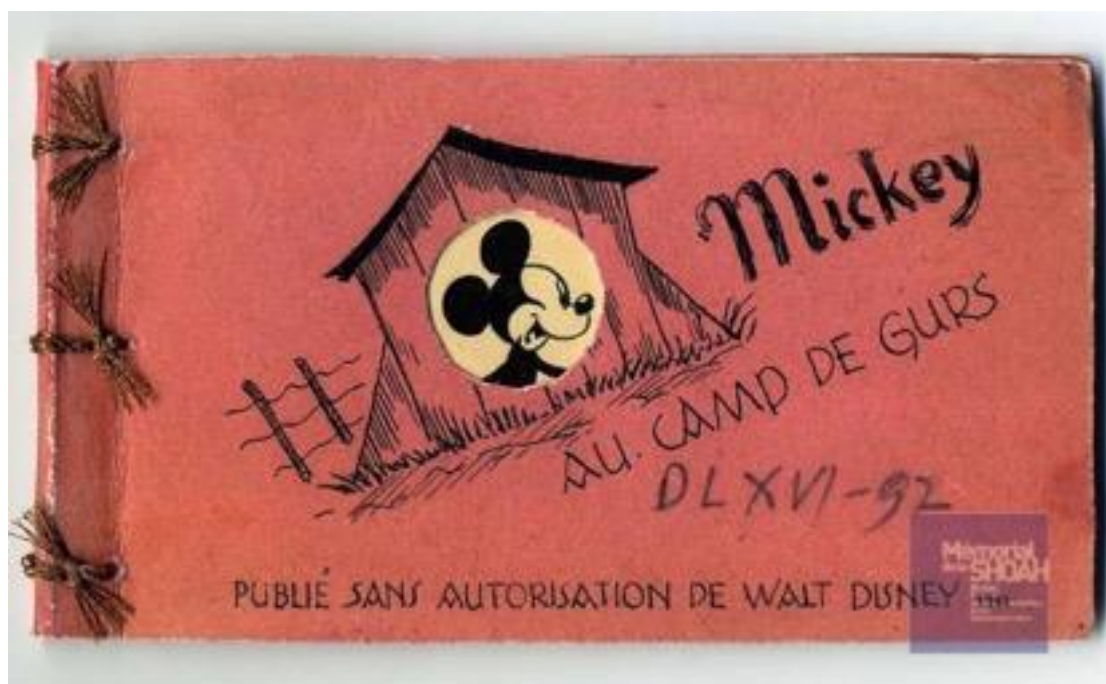


Fig. 1: *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, cover⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ellipses in original. All translations from *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* are my own, working off a facsimile of the original at the Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris. Additional help has been given by Jessica Freeman-Attwood, to whom I owe my thanks. Any remaining infelicities or mistakes are mine. Horst Rosenthal, *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* (1942), DS-O.377, Centre de Juive Contemporaine, Paris.

⁵⁰ ‘*Mickey in Gurs: Published without the permission of Walt Disney*’

The strip, then, presents an encounter – what might be described, with Alenka Zupančič, as an “impossible” joint articulation’ – between an actual place and an imagined, fabulous subject with no material referent at all.⁵¹ The comic strip, it might be argued, is a medium that suits this purpose, given that it not only openly eschews representational realism, but also itself exemplifies a series of ‘joint articulations’ in its combination of image and text, animal and human, spatial frame and temporally indeterminate ‘gutter’.⁵² Rosenthal plays upon some of these juxtapositions in the comic’s fourth panel, where Mickey, having been arrested, encounters Gurs for the first time (fig. 2). Here two different worlds collide: the cartoon on the one hand, and the camp in its actuality on the other; a drawing and a photograph presented in tandem yet still warily distinct. Mickey’s obvious expression of alarm appears to denote an understandable unwillingness to insert himself into the concentrationary sphere. Yet despite his reluctance, the rest of the strip articulates mouse and camp in concert, slurred together despite their apparent incompatibility and obvious incongruity.

⁵¹ “The point is not that of one side undermining the other, or of constituting the ‘truth’ of the other. The truth is their joint articulation, which is never visible in the given reality, yet is constitutive of it”. Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 58-59. Zupančič argues that this ‘impossible joint articulation’ is constitutive of comedy.

⁵² Cf. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*; Shine Choi, ‘Borders’, in *Visual Global Politics*, ed. Roland Bleiker (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2018), 35-41. The introduction of fictional characters into historical events, meanwhile, is a hallmark of comic book fiction. One particularly egregious example is the 1991 *Captain America* comic from Marvel’s counterfactual-historical *What If...?* series in which Captain America, placed at the head of the D-Day invasion, leads the allied forces through western and central Europe at such speed that they are able to liberate Auschwitz ahead of the advancing Soviet forces. ‘What If... Captain America Had Led an Army of Super Soldiers in World War II?’, *What If...?*, 2 no. 8 (1991)

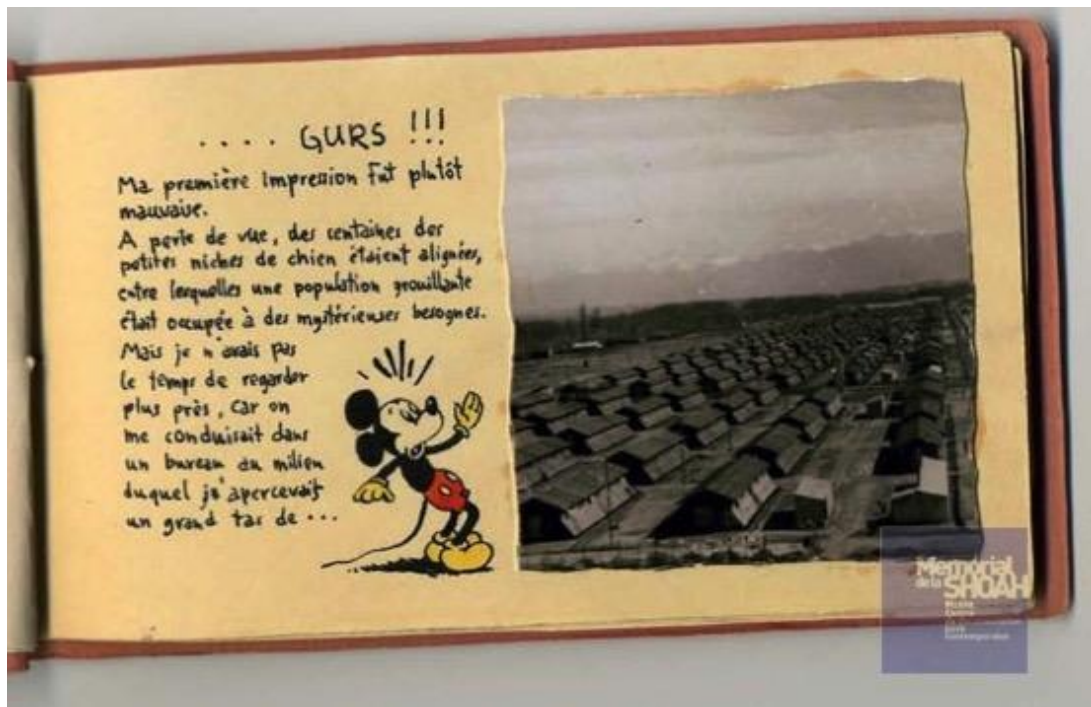


Fig. 2: *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, fourth panel⁵³

The comic therefore constructs an aesthetic space in which an impossible encounter between Gurs and Mickey can be sustained – an encounter whose impossibility is reinforced by the multiple media across which they are introduced. Crucially, however, the tension signified by the formal incoherence of this initial meeting is preserved even after Mickey enters Gurs, insofar as the camp is unable fully to accommodate him within its epistemic and juridico-political co-ordinates. Mickey might be *in* Gurs, but he is never *of* it, and he therefore occupies a completely different subjective position to its human detainees. His alien presence must be unscrambled, understood, or disciplined into some kind of intelligible sense if it is to be brought under effective control, but for all its evident effort in this regard, the camp is incapable of deciphering or decoding him: Mickey is a literally ‘unreal’ figure brought to bear on the representational ‘reality’ of the strip’s concentrationary universe.

It is in these terms that *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* might be read as an aesthetic interruption, insofar as its introduction of an illegible and hence ungovernable aesthetic subject performatively cultivates a

⁵³ ‘...GURS!!! My first impression was pretty bad. As far as it was possible to see, hundreds of little dog kennels in lines, between which a swarm of people busied themselves with mysterious tasks. But I had no time to look any closer, because I was taken into an office, in the middle of which I could see a large pile of... [papers, see fig. 3)]’

‘vital instability’ within an otherwise established system of governance and rule. Although Mickey occupies the same huts as his human contemporaries, takes the same rations as them and so on, he is nevertheless not *like* them, and consequently cannot be made the object of power and/or knowledge by the camp’s officials. This is evident from Mickey’s first interchange within the wire, in which he speaks to a clerk who attempts to identify him and in so doing determine the terms of his detainment (fig. 3).

The dialogue reads:

—Are you a Jew?

—What?

—I asked if you were a Jew!!

Shamefully, I professed my complete ignorance on the subject.

In the accompanying picture, Mickey gazes up at the clerk, wide-eyed and with a question mark in a speech bubble above his head, understanding neither the content nor the context of the question. When Mickey eventually declares that although he was born in America, he is really international, the clerk assumes ‘with a horrible grimace’ that he is identifying as a communist. Mickey, of course, is doing nothing of the sort: he cannot be ascribed any national, cultural, or political identity, and appears almost entirely unaware of what such titles might signify: he is of no race, of no nation, of no political affiliation, of no family.⁵⁴ As such, the attempts of the clerk to ascribe Mickey to one of the categories underpinning the camp’s terms of detainment meet nothing but thin air.

⁵⁴ Mickey tells the clerk that his ‘father’ is Walt Disney, and that he has no mother at all. It should be noted in this context that ‘Jewishness’ is traditionally matrilineal. Whether Rosenthal was aware of Walt Disney’s own (now well-documented) anti-Semitism is a matter of speculation.

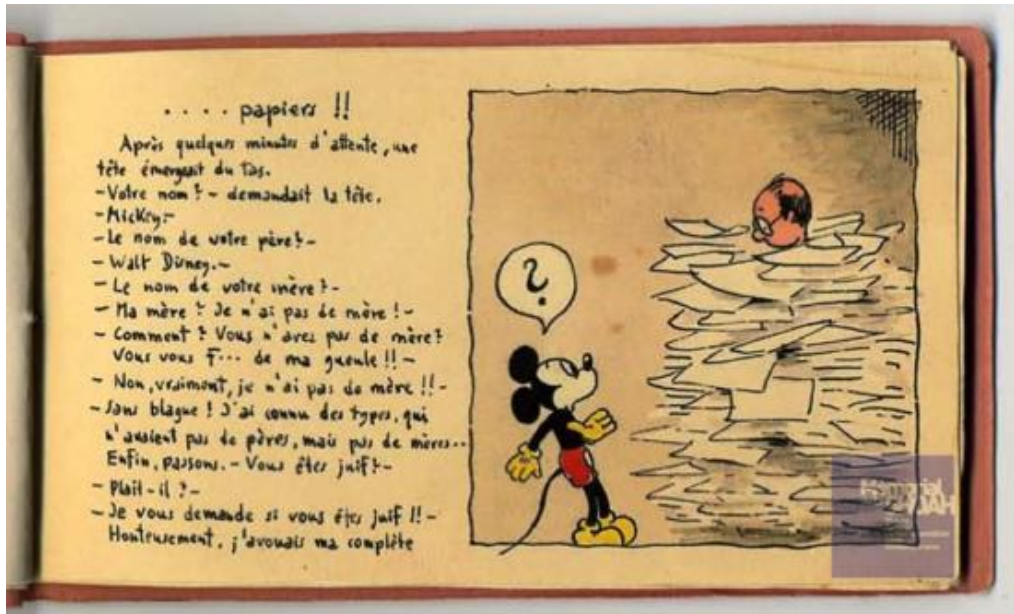


Fig. 3: Mickey Au Camp de Gurs, fifth panel⁵⁵

The childlike naïveté evident in this particular panel is key to Mickey’s aesthetic subjectivity throughout the strip. Understanding nothing of the logic underpinning the camp’s existence and practice, he is baffled by his experiences rather than angered or horrified by them: he is a *tabula rasa*, unable to participate in the camp’s identity games as a result of his complete ignorance of the terms by which they are played. As such, he might be contrasted with Felix Nussbaum’s 1943 *Self-Portrait with Jewish Identity Card* (fig. 4), in which the artist displays his yellow star and identity card prominently to the viewer. These signifiers, of course, worked to govern how Nussbaum was to be recognised, classified and distinguished – as a Jew, as a person whose identity was determined by the papers he carried, and whose movement was consequently constantly checked and curtailed. Yet the picture – as a *self-portrait* – also appears to suggest that this vision has become normalised and internalised. This, it seems, is how Nussbaum now conceives of *himself*.

⁵⁵ [‘I was taken into an office, in the middle of which I could see a large pile of...papers!! After a few minutes’ waiting, a head popped out of the pile. “Your name?” the head asked. “Mickey”. “Father’s name?” “Walt Disney”. “Mother’s name?” “My mother? I don’t have a mother”. “What?! You don’t have a mother? You’re taking the piss!!” “No, really – I don’t have a mother!!” “No kidding! I’ve heard of people who don’t have a father, but no mother... Anyway, we’ll move on. You’re a Jew?” “Pardon?” “I asked if you were a Jew?” Shamefully, I professed my complete [ignorance on the subject]’



Fig. 4: Felix Nussbaum (c. 1943): *Self-Portrait with Jewish Identity Card*⁵⁶

Nussbaum's self-portrait depicts an environment in which a restrictive, arbitrary violence has worked productively to alter the terms by which he sees himself, and in so doing to circumscribe a desolate space in which the relations and interactions that constitute 'normal' social life become impossible to sustain.⁵⁷ In *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, the same processes and practices are in evidence – the obsession with papers, with identity defined in racial or political terms, with constraint and curtailment, checkpoints and barriers. The human detainees Mickey meets consequently exist in a state of desperate degradation, and variously spend their time pimping, fencing or spivving, fussing over a 'garden' consisting of a single weed or cooking up some vile concoction with whatever material is available, edible or otherwise. They do not interact either with each other or with the camp's various officials, who are themselves likewise diminished; lost within mountains of paper (cf. fig. 3) or, in one case, literally faceless. Yet Mickey – uniquely – is able to resist the camp's attempts to drag him onto its

⁵⁶ Oil on canvas, 56 x 49 cm, Felix-Nussbaum-Haus Osnabrück, loan from the Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung. Image © Felix-Nussbaum-Haus Osnabrück. In 1944, Nussbaum painted *Self-Portrait in the Camp*, a companion piece to the above that is now in the collection of the Neue Galerie in New York.

⁵⁷ Nussbaum painted his self-portrait whilst in hiding in Belgium. In 1944 he was discovered by German agents and sent to Auschwitz, where he was killed. His painting thus derives from a time of informal concentration in which he was outside the camp system, but nevertheless tightly enclosed, hidden from view only by the generosity, good will and bravery of his Belgian friends. This constraint is implicit within the backdrop that he gives himself in his portrait: high, blank walls mirrored by a heavy, sinking sky, both rendered in charcoal grey.

plane. If, as Primo Levi argued, ‘the [camp] was a great machine to reduce us to beasts’, then Mickey is the ghost in this machine, unable to be bestialised because he already *is* non-human.⁵⁸ Whilst his physical body can seemingly be confined (although the camp’s ability even in this regard is limited, as his ultimate self-erasure from the strip attests), the camp’s attempts to rationalise his detention through the imposition, designation, or production of a particular subjective identity make no headway whatsoever. Mickey instead plays the part of a blithe *flâneur*; a renegade ethnographer whose mere presence interruptively alters the terms of belonging determining the group he takes as his object of study.⁵⁹

It is here that one might note how Mickey’s interruptive presence within Gurs serves not only to map the desolation of the camp, but also to probe at the practices that sustain it.⁶⁰ Manoeuvring about the camp on his own terms, diverting and deflecting its attempts to govern him, Mickey dissolves the logic underpinning Gurs’ day-to-day practice through his unconscious traversal of the categories it seeks to define, uphold and secure. His wanderings around the camp are therefore ‘interruptive’ by virtue of their performative demonstration of a rogue, ungovernable element that cannot be incorporated into the camp’s *modus operandi*. It therefore comes as no surprise that by the end of the strip, Mickey has come to realise that whatever the camp is, it is not for him: ‘...decidedly, the Pyrenean air did not suit me at all’ (fig. 5). Describing the camp as a corruption of the French revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, he therefore chooses to rub himself out of the comic strip altogether and relocate to the United States, where such values are still to be found (fig. 5).

With this move, Rosenthal reverses the polarities of Mickey’s initial encounter with Gurs, in which the former shrinks away from the latter (fig. 2). Whilst *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* at first appears to depict Mickey’s entry into the material world of the camp, this final panel suggests that the strip might equally be read the other way: perhaps it in fact describes the submission of Gurs to the comic absurdity

⁵⁸ Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 39.

⁵⁹ Critical anthropologists have long recognised that the ethnographer is an active participant in the ethnography she conducts. Paul Atkinson & Martyn Hammersley, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 14-18. Within IR the so-called ‘turn’ towards narrative methods has similarly sought to reflect self-reflexively on the politics of academic knowledge production. Cf. Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Politics of Exile* (London: Routledge, 2013).

of Mickey's own cartoon world. 'Laying hold' of the terrain upon which he has unwillingly been thrust, Mickey therefore demonstrates once and for all its inability to contain him by heading across the Atlantic.

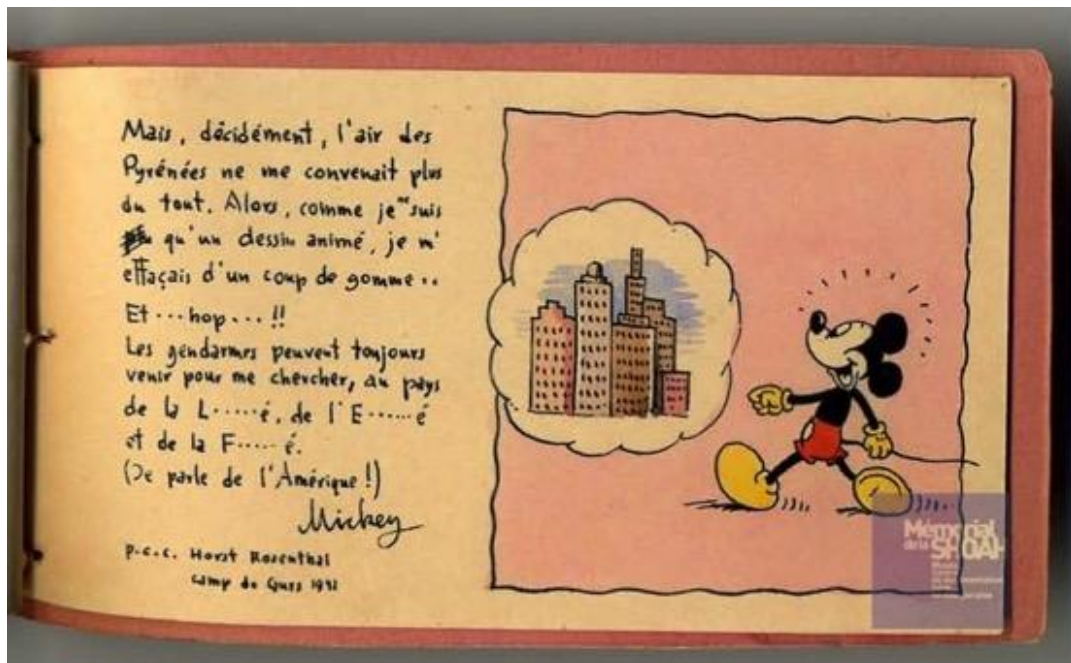


Fig. 5: *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, final panel⁶¹

If Mickey's self-erasure is in some sense an interruptive triumph, however, it is important to remember that it also carries with it an obvious overtone that also looms over *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* more generally. This is of course Rosenthal's own continued legibility within the very space that Mickey interruptively frustrates; his continued detainment within the same wires Mickey simply ghosts through. There is a pathos lying behind the comic's engagement with the camp system in which its author was detained (and by which he was eventually killed) that is of crucial relevance if its interruption is to be understood in political as well as aesthetic terms. Because details regarding both Rosenthal's own life and the conditions of production and dissemination of *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* are next to non-existent, however – making it exceedingly difficult to respond to this problem with any

⁶¹ 'But decidedly, the Pyrenean air did not suit me at all. And so, because I'm nothing more than a drawing, I rubbed myself out with a stroke of the eraser... and... ta-da...!!! The police can always come and look for me in the land of lib...ty, eq...ity and frat...ity (I'm talking about America!) Signed, Mickey (copy certified by Horst Rosenthal, Gurs, 1942)'

confidence – it makes more sense to frame *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* in relation to these pointed absences themselves. Whether and how the comic functioned interruptively within Gurs itself is impossible to know with any certainty – it is, after all, partly for this reason that an appeal to an aesthetic mode of interruption is necessary. Yet the comic might still offer an interruptive challenge to readers today: to the absences and lacunae that inevitably restrict the comprehension of enormity, extremity and everything else besides, and to the assumptions that might commonly be made in discussions of politics and political (im)possibility both within camp spaces and beyond. This article concludes by reflecting on how *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* might function in this way.

CONCLUSION

In August 1942, Horst Rosenthal was sent from Gurs to Drancy, near Paris, and then on to Auschwitz, where he was killed upon arrival.⁶² In this light, it would be grotesque to suggest that *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* represents any sort of means by which its author might have overcome the situation in which he lived and ultimately died, and consequently I do not make this claim: there are obvious and potentially profound limits to the aesthetic mode of interruptive practice that I have advanced in this article. This is not to say that an aesthetic interruption is necessarily politically powerless or incapable, however: a large literature exists both within IR and without concerning the ways in which visual and/or popular-cultural media like comic books might contribute to the (re)definition of the limits of political possibility.⁶³ Yet it is important to acknowledge that any interruptive effects identifiable beyond the aesthetic sphere of the strip are provisional and indeterminate, dependent on the circumstances of production, dissemination and reception that are incumbent on artistic activity as much as any other

⁶² Kotek & Pasamonik, *Mickey à Gurs*, 167-169.

⁶³ Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).

field of practice. These circumstances are unknowable in relation to *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, and establishing the comic's interruptive effects within the material camp space itself is therefore impossible: in this instance, questions of reception must reluctantly be left open.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that despite this, *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* nevertheless remains relevant to contemporary IR. In recent years, it seems that sovereignty has become increasingly entrenched within a number of Western states, feeding (and feeding off) a growing border anxiety that has on occasion (but not always) found material form in camps of one sort or another: in Calais, on Nauru, on Manus, and more recently still in ICE detention centres in the United States.⁶⁴ Underpinning all these sites is a desire for control, a desire whose fulfilment relies on the reduction of the political field to a singularity and the consequent production of what Nick Vaughan-Williams describes as 'the subjects of sovereign power: mute; undifferentiated; and depoliticised'.⁶⁵ In such times, it is more important than ever to keep an ear cocked for the interruptive buzz that belies the *hubris* of this desire, and to remain open to the possibility that such interventions might find aesthetic expression. *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* therefore gestures towards other sites of potential interest to IR scholars: the work of, amongst others, Abbas al Aboudi, an Iraqi artist detained by the Australian Department of Home Affairs on Nauru; Eaten Fish, an Iranian cartoonist formerly detained on Manus island, Papua New Guinea; and Behrouz Boochani, an Kurdish novelist and journalist who remains on Manus.⁶⁶ Like *Mickey au Camp de Gurs*, their work manifests a diminished yet existent political possibility; it both describes and (to a painfully limited degree) defies the desubjectifying and depoliticising effects of sovereign power. It is important not because it offers a way to escape or transcend coercive violence, nor because it represents some residual, ethically vital 'humanity' left in an otherwise inhuman space. Rather, this work's refusal

⁶⁴ Cf. Claudia Aradau, 'Political grammars of mobility, security and subjectivity', *Mobilities* 11, no. 4 (2016): 564-574.

⁶⁵ Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics*, 135. Cf. Lauren B. Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorising Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 87.

⁶⁶ On Abbas al Aboudi, see Ben Winsor, "'I paint to forget': A refugee turns to art on Nauru", *SBS News*, available at <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/i-paint-to-forget-a-refugee-turns-to-art-on-nauru>. Last accessed 01.08.2018. The best initial port of call for Eaten Fish (real name Ali Dorani) is probably the website started by Australian cartoonist First Dog on the Moon in order to campaign for his safe passage from Manus. Available at <https://eatenfish.com/>. Last accessed 01.08.2018. Behrouz Boochani tweets at <https://twitter.com/behrouzboochani>. Last accessed 01.08.2018. See also Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (Sydney: Picador Australia, 2018).

to accept 'desolation', its refusal to be 'mute, undifferentiated, and depoliticised', is important because it testifies to the possibility and indeed the necessity of politics, even in the most chastening of contexts.

It is important because it *is*.