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### Essay:

## Hitler and Humor: Coming to Terms with the Past Through Parody

**Giuliana Sorce**

**Abstract:** Recent developments in German television programming represent Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime through comedic entertainment. While these programs do not poke fun at the Holocaust itself, they are utilizing the image of Hitler for parodistic purposes. Similar to existing foreign media depicting Hitler as a foolish ruler with farcical mannerisms, newer programs such as the comedy show *Switch Reloaded* and the movie *Hotel Lux* show a clumsy and gullible Hitler. This essay argues that these recent representations of Hitler are contributing to the ongoing cultural conversation of the Holocaust, while also encouraging new ways in how Germans can culturally cope with their recent past. Drawing on parody and cultural trauma research, this essay offers evidence from German national media reviews and newspaper articles.

**Keywords:** Hitler, parody, humor, cultural trauma

Germans still face the cultural and socio-political repercussions of the Holocaust, even today. As one of the most tragic genocides in European history, the media coverage of this event is characterized by serious accounts that reflect its dark reality. Germans discuss the Holocaust with ongoing sincere intensity and other nationalities often think of Germans with direct association to the Nazi regime and its leader, Adolf Hitler. In the past 90 years, numerous media texts have been generated that focus on Hitler and the Nazis, ranging from comics and documentaries/docudramas, to fiction and parodies.

Of interest to this paper is the genre of parody as it continues to stand in curious paradox to a chain of tragic events that have significantly shaped World history. While Holocaust themes and Hitler parodies have long appeared on film and later television, these productions originate primarily in foreign countries. The United States, Japan, and Great Britain are examples of countries that have appropriated this historical event to create comedic entertainment for their viewers for decades (Gilman, 2000). In fact, many consider Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* as

the formal beginning of anti-fascist comedy (Cole, 2001) and—simultaneously—as one of the most risqué productions because of its proximity to the actual time frame of the Nazi regime.

Later movies such as Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be* (1942) or Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (1968) have enjoyed great popularity across the globe, although it seems like film industries outside of Germany seemed to have had an easier time producing anti-Nazi parodies. While there have been some efforts from European filmmakers in the 1970s to acquaint local audiences with comedic elements of Hitler and the Nazis – consider films such as *Jakob the Liar* (1975)—the genre was not well received. Recently; however, the German media landscape has been changing.

For the past decade, television producers have been dealing with Germany's recent past in a rather progressive manner—more and more parodies make it to the screen that aim to look at Hitler in a more lighthearted way. Germans have greeted these parodies with mixed emotions—some believe it is time to let the stern past rest, while others find any comedic accounts of the Nazi regime grotesque and unethical (Landler, 2007). Either way, Hitler parodies in Germany are creating controversy and stimulating public discourse.

Comedians such as Helge Schneider, Michael Mittermeier, Michael Kessler, and Michael “Bully” Herbig are finding growing support in the German entertainment industry and have been starring in, producing, and marketing their Hitler parodies since the mid-1990s. By engaging in Hitler parodies and promoting self-deprecating skits, these comedians may reduce the stern views on Hitler and Nazism. While early attempts were rather unsuccessful, these parodies seem to be gaining traction in the German media landscape and simultaneously, growing on the German audience.

There has been a sizeable shift in attitude from Dani Levy's Hitler parody *Mein Führer* (1995) to recent parodies: Twenty years ago, Levy's parody was received very negatively “with German critics and commentators proclaiming the film naïve, bizarre, vulgar and—most damning of all—not funny“ (Landler, 2007). On the other hand, recent parodies, such as the ongoing skit “Obersalzberg” in *Switch Reloaded*, a late night comedy show, have received positive comments from various newspapers; e.g., Mader (2012) openly acknowledges that “it is okay to laugh about Hitler”. This curious development in German media begs the following questions: How can parody become a means of dealing with the cultural trauma of the Holocaust? And how are these parodies contributing to the ongoing conversations about Hitler and the Nazi regime?

The following seeks to unveil the meaning behind these parodies by looking at the use of humor as a means of coping with cultural trauma. Upon a review of the existing literature on Hitler media, I will discuss two contemporary Hitler parodies

(the 2008 movie *Hotel Lux* and the ongoing comedy skit “Obersalzberg”), and analyze their cultural implications through the media coverage they have stimulated.

## Parody and Cultural Trauma

Parodies have been utilized within the comedy genre for decades and see increasing popularity in dealing with controversial topics. Defined as an art form that “imitates the style of someone or something else in an amusing way” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, n.d.), the term literally means “besides the song” (Hariman, 2008, p. 249). From Miguel Cervantes’ epic novel *Don Quixote* (1605) to the Three Stooges’ *You Natzy Spy!* (1934), parody continues as a key genre in the entertainment industry. As a generic description of the traits of movie parodies, Gehring (1999) identifies two important aspects of a good parody: firstly, to create a distorted imitation of something real and secondly, to be funny.

Whether made for the big screen or printed as a comic strip in the newspaper, Hariman (2008) points to the vitality of political comedy within an “engaged” public culture. He notes that parody, in particular, is a way of creating, expressing, and sustaining public discourse. With respect to political satire, Gehring (1999) explains that parody is a means of expressing “creative criticism” (p. 4). In her critical analysis, Bandeira de Melo (2012) illustrates how cinema in general, can function as a mirror for society, as it inhibits the ability to both illustrate the present reality and encouraging a digestion of the past. As for Germany, the question remains how the local entertainment industry is using Hitler and Nazi themes as a means of expressing this “creative criticism.” However, the use of parody as a means of expressing a cultural trauma such as the Holocaust, has not been receiving too much positive commentary.

Cole (2001) provides a historic recap of the first Hitler parody – Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940)–and notes that Chaplin was criticized for mocking a tragedy and causing a misrepresentation of serious political matters. Blau (2005) echoes this critique and comments on the crudity of black humor with regard to Holocaust and Hitler themes in her home country of Israel. She explains that in the Israeli society, it is considered the highest taboo to mock the Shoah. However, both Blau (2005) and Gilman (2004) agree that humor can be a weapon – both for coping, and for never forgetting. Similar to Cole (2001) and Blau (2005), Gilman (2004) asks the question whether we can understand the Holocaust through laughter.

In his seminal work on humorous treatments of the Shoah, Gilman (2000) explains the existence of Holocaust “etiquette”—a sort of agreed-upon code—to treat a traumatic event such as the Holocaust with respect in order to “acknowledge [its] sacredness” (p. 282). While most moviemakers have subscribed

to this etiquette and released accounts of the Holocaust that reflect its sincerity, both Blau (2005) and Gilman (2000) agree that some productions inadvertently encourage laughter. Not much scholarship has addressed the Hitler parody genre in particular, but some reviews can be useful to contextualize this entertainment paradox.

Reimer (2009) explains that “laughing at adversity is a traditional remedy to dealing with pain” (para. 2) and according to Kaplan (2002), “humor offers an alternative to memorialize the Holocaust in the post-war era” (p. 324). Kaplan further notes that humor can liberate viewers of Hitler parodies from the horrifying reality of the dictator’s regime. Similarly, Gilman (2000) notes that laughing at the Hitler regime can provide a means of exhibiting control over the situation, where previously, there was none. Looking at the cultural trauma Germans have derived from the Hitler regime is crucial to understanding the motifs behind these parodies.

Hirsch (2004) explains that Germans associate the Holocaust with “somewhat of a loss of national identity”, a dialectical tension that was reason enough for German filmmakers to refrain from any comedic treatment of this traumatic event for a long period of time (p. 143). Much of the media contents that have been produced around the Holocaust are sentimental dramas or tragic accounts of the Nazi regime. Consider the French film *Au révoir les enfants* (1987), the drama *Europa, Europa* (1990), or Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) – all of these dramatic movies attempt to paint the reality of the Holocaust for an audience whose majority has not lived through this cultural trauma.

According to Hirsch (2004), this type of entertainment is referred to as “posttraumatic cinema;” a cinema that represents “traumatic historical events [and] tries to embody and reproduce the trauma for the spectator through its form of narration” (p. xi). Posttraumatic cinema then allows a viewer to experience temporally distant events, such as the Holocaust. However, typically this type of cinema would exhibit greater latency than other movie genres to allow its audience to receive these kinds of traumatic themes after having some time to digest them. Subsequently, posttraumatic cinema can come in many shapes and forms—including parody.

While parodies are traditionally not perceived as a very respected way of dealing with socially sensitive material, they can indeed provide another fragmented insight into a traumatic event. Therefore, parody can be used as a means of understanding and coping with a culturally traumatic event. By allowing an audience to relive a cultural trauma through humor, parodies can offer an alternative view and thus, offer alternative perceptions.

Humor as a form of coping mechanism is not a novel form of trauma management per se. In fact, many authors have commented on the potency of humor with

regard to a variety of issues (Garrick, 2006; Gilman, 2004; Hariman, 2008). At the core of the recent Hitler parody success in Germany, lays the art of travesty Hitler himself. In their experiment of perceptions and cognitive response to the movie *Mein Führer*, Bauman, Hofmann, and Bluhm (2008) were interested in the general appropriateness of a parodied Hitler. A key assumption in their study was that a comedic treatment of Hitler becomes possible because the movie treats him as a *private person*, thus making his parodied self less “taboo.” Their findings concluded that the humanization of Hitler is successful in increasing empathy and affect towards the deceased dictator. Likability is another central factor in the success of the Hitler parodies, as a goofy and gullible Hitler who tries to be vicious may elicit a less dangerous perception than the “real” person.

Reimer (2009) describes that Hitler’s “screen persona” as foolish, a depiction that aids in his transformation into a “non-threat” (para. 12). Many international Hitler parodies impersonate also Germany’s ex-dictator as a bullying goon to justify scenes in which he is giving orders to his *Sturmabteilung*. Recently, Gilbert (2013) analyzed the “*Downfall* parodies” that overtook YouTube in 2007, which dubbed a scene of Hitler in the bunker with ridiculous subtitles. Gilbert found that these became popular because of the “imitation, exaggeration, and incongruity” they produced, turning Hitler into an “unapologetic buffoon” (p. 417). A similar trend can be observed in non-filmic treatments of Hitler; e.g., in literature. Lubitsch (2004) writes that “Hitler-as-comedic” is what sells.

Consider also Hitler’s homosexualization. Much of Mel Brook’s success of mocking Hitler in his iconic parody *The Producers* (1968) derives from his treatment of the powerful dictator as a gay man (Moshin, 2006). Other parodies play up Hitler’s mannerisms as extremely feminine, thus underscoring an alleged homosexualization. These farcical portrayals neutralize Hitler’s menacing identity and allow viewers to feel “superior to the Nazi leader” (Reimer, 2009, para. 13).

### **A Tale of Two Parodies: *Hotel Lux* and “Obersalzberg”**

In order to study the use of parody on Hitler, Nazi, and Holocaust media, two texts serve as the basis for this analysis – the feature-length movie *Hotel Lux* (2010) and a representative segment from the recurring skit “Obersalzberg,” which continues as a successful part of the German *Saturday Night Live*-format, *Switch Reloaded*.

#### ***Hotel Lux***

Produced in 2010, *Hotel Lux* is the fruition of an idea that developed over fifteen years ago. Originally thought of by German theater icon and director Helmut Dietl, Leander Haußman took on the task of writing the screenplay in 2009. Upon being interviewed by a Berlin newspaper on what he really thought of the controversial themes of the movie, Haußmann answered: “Even though I typically don’t write

screenplays, there was something about the central topic that intrigued me. Eventually, I was thinking that we could turn this into a picaresque parody to extract the absurdities of the drama” (Tschiedert, 2011). *Hotel Lux* premiered in 2011 and won numerous awards in Germany and at European film festivals.

**Synopsis.** In 1933, Hans Zeisig (Michael ‘Bully’ Herbig) and Siggie Meyer (Jürgen Vogel) are successful comedians in the cabaret theater *Variété Valenti* in Berlin. They play the lead roles in the most successful comedic production that year, Zeisig as Joseph Stalin and Meyer as Adolf Hitler. Five years later, in 1938, Meyer, who is an active member of the Communist party, was sent to a concentration camp in Oranienburg, and upon offending his audience of Nazi officers, Zeisig has to flee Berlin. His destination is Hollywood but unfortunately, the fake U.S. passports are out and so he ends up in Moscow, at the famous “Hotel Lux”. This hotel is home to many German Communists who are hiding from the Nazi troops. Zeisig’s fake passport involves him in a comedic mix-up with Jan Hansen, the original owner of the passport, who used to be Hitler’s prime astrologist. Thus Zeisig, now “Hansen,” is assigned to work closely with the real Joseph Stalin to predict the future of the Soviet Union. In the end, the mix-up is resolved and both Zeisig and Meyer successfully escape Moscow and the Soviets.

### “Obersalzberg”

*Switch Reloaded* is a weekly comedy show airing on Pro7, Germany’s second largest private network. With an average weekly viewership of 2 million, *Switch Reloaded* is a successful staple in late-night entertainment. As a comparable format to the U.S.A.’s *Saturday Night Live*, *Switch Reloaded* mocks popular German TV series and targets famous individuals. “Obersalzberg,” the Hitler skit, premiered in 2008 and immediately gained much popularity within the regular viewership. A riff on the German version of *The Office* (known as “Stromberg”), the skit received its name from the Nazi headquarter and Hitler’s preferred residence in the very southeast of Germany. The *Switch Reloaded* makers selected Michael Kessler, a popular German comedian and master of travesty, as the lead actor to portray Hitler. “Obersalzberg” parodies Hitler’s day-to-day operations in the office, positioning him as a ruthless yet gullible boss. One skit in particular comes to mind as an exemplary model of “Obersalzberg” – *Hitler’s Birthday*.

**Synopsis.** Hitler (Kessler) brags about his upcoming birthday (“Führerntag”) and encourages his followers and employees to mark this commemoration with a big swastika in their calendars. Upon consulting with his secretary, he realizes that his birthday is not marked in her calendar and plans to fire her for this offense. What he does not know; however, is that the entire office has planned a surprise party for him. When Hitler enters the room to fire his secretary, everybody sings a traditional German birthday song: “Wie schön, dass du geboren bist” (How wonderful that you were born). As a gift to their Führer, his employees had ordered an old SS colleague to steal a copy of Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* from a

French movie theater. Believing the movie was sold out everywhere, Hitler is very happy about the thoughtful gift and thanks them multiple times.

### **The Paradox of Humor and Cultural Trauma**

*Hotel Lux* and “Obersalzberg” are recent examples of Hitler parodies that have enjoyed some positive receptions from the German audience, despite the fact that both productions are making use of slapstick humor that depict Hitler in a rather blatant manner. In the case of “Obersalzberg”, Hitler’s comedic priming is successful because of Kessler’s impeccable impersonation of Hitler (see Esralew & Goldthwaite Young’s study on mental models, 2012). While a humorous depiction of the Nazi regime borders on bad taste, the comical nature of Hitler’s exaggerated nonverbals is hard to deny—both Herbig in *Hotel Lux* and Kessler in “Obersalzberg” do an excellent job of travestyng Hitler’s iconic gestures, facial expressions, and vocalic elements.

Similarly, Hitler’s Nazi soldiers are depicted as chaotic drones following a loony leader, and while exhibiting fictional characteristics, Hitler’s followers are made to look as gullible as he is. Hitler’s portrayal in these kinds of parodies may also work as a mediator for the negative emotions that stir up when confronted with issues of the Nazi regime or the Holocaust. Even though these comedic programs would never mock or trivialize the actual horrors of the Holocaust, many other images that are attached to Hitler suffer from an overwhelming negative connotation.

A humorous Hitler may provide relief for those who are willing to come at the ex-dictator from a different angle. As noted by Baumert, Hofman, and Bluhm (2008), humor may be a “more positive way to cope with the atrocities of National Socialism” (p. 45). Hitler parodies such as *Hotel Lux* and “Obersalzberg” serve not only to keep Hitler and the Holocaust in the conversation, but they may also provide a means for coping with Germany’s recent past. The dark chapter called Holocaust will never be forgotten, yet Germans will have to find ways to deal with the cultural and socio-political legacies of the totalitarian Nazi regime. While still generating much controversy based on their acceptability, the aforementioned Hitler parodies may provide Germans with an art form that encourages a grappling with the Holocaust narrative from a popular culture perspective. Next to the actors, credit must also be given to the medium transmitting these parodies.

“Obersalzberg” airs on Pro7, the central channel of the ProSiebenSat.1 Group, a television conglomerate that generated EUR 747.1 million in the first three quarters of 2015 alone (ProSieben.de, 2015). Especially among the young demographic (ages 14-30), Pro7 is a popular station with a wide variety of programs. *Switch Reloaded* airs on Pro7 and thus exists within the larger context of the popular brand of this media conglomerate – shows airing on Pro7 have the popular connotation of being relevant and “trendy” to watch. On their corporate

website, Pro7 states: “Television is more important than ever – because it achieves something that no other medium can: [it] brings people together [so] we use this *power of television* to shape the future” (Prosiebensat1.com). Similarly, *Hotel Lux* is using the power of an expensive big screen production to sell its plotline to the German audience. Bandeira de Melo (2012) explains that the medium bears a technological force with great symbolic power, thus illustrating the social meanings of the television and movie industry.

Further, Bandeira de Melo (2012) discusses movies as an integrating system within the larger cultural industry, allowing for both the expression of new cultural narratives while creating a cultural space for national discourse. While the theme choices for both programs juxtapose a prominent public opinion on the Holocaust, both Herbig and Kessler promote the social acceptability of mocking Hitler. In a 2011 interview, Kessler speaks on his first experience with portraying a Nazi:

Armin Rhode [a German actor] approached me in 91 or 92 and said, “they’re doing this movie, in Dortmund, you’d have to play a Nazi. What do you say?” and I was like, “Yeah, Nazi sounds good.” I mean, what actor would not want to play a Nazi once? Back then it was strange to put on the SS uniform [but] somehow that whole Hitler thing became my thing” (Fliegel, 2011).

Kessler’s experience illustrates these comedic treatments of Hitler took time and a sense of bravery by the actor. Hitler and the Holocaust still stand as symbols of shame for the German population and are difficult to grapple with. Kessler travesties Hitler, a depiction that lends itself well to comedy. In a way, laughing at Hitler can trivialize him and render him helpless and harmless to the audience.

Similarly, Herbig talks about his experience with Hitler jokes in regards to the opening of *Hotel Lux* in 2011. While he admits that it felt “crappy” to be in the Hitler and Stalin costume, he explains that he does believe it is appropriate to mock the cruelties of the Third Reich and Stalin’s social cleansing:

I believe that for a younger generation, this can be somewhat of a way to cope with the past. When we put on the first Hitler sketch in 1996 [...] it was this huge deal. But we did it because the beauty of humor is that you can use it to mock anybody (Kulturnews.de, 2011).

In this statement, Herbig is getting at the essence of these Hitler parodies. He believes that this comedy genre fuels the ongoing conversation about the Holocaust while simultaneously providing Germans with a means of grappling with the horrors of the Nazi regime in a progressive way.

Because of the controversial nature of these productions, both Herbig and Kessler have had to justify their approaches in inquiries within various contexts and at various occasions, including interviews, talk shows, awards shows, and movie premieres. Through their unconventional portrayals of Hitler, both Herbig and Kessler become mediators for the larger message. Herbig openly stated in 2011: “Hey, it’s okay to laugh at this”, meaning that Hitler and humor *can* go together



(Kulturnews.de). A crucial point to note here is that these comedians, despite their progressive views on acceptability of their parodies, make a point to distance themselves from the actual horrors of the Holocaust—images such as those of concentration camps, gas chambers, or dying individuals are never part of these parodies. Nonetheless, viewer testimonies yield that Hitler parodies continue to be received with mixed emotions.

After its opening weekend, *Hotel Lux* commentaries were featured in nearly every seminal German newspaper. Buss (2011) comments that Haußmann's movie is "trying to be different"; yet fails to deliver a more tasteful mockery of Hitler (Spiegel Online). Similarly, Cammann (2011) states that the movie is trying to mask real events with slapstick humor and thus, appears surreal and unbelievable (Die Zeit Online). Kuhn (2011) from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* goes as far as arguing that *Hotel Lux* is delivering the viewers "world history through the lens of a toilet seat".

Whether these critiques are harsh or not, Schmoelz (2011) explains that the parodies leave German viewers "completely torn" between appall and laughter (Focus Online). Other forums such as news blogs and lay commentaries further illustrate the viewer dilemma programs such as *Hotel Lux* and "Obersalzberg" are causing. Many viewers have expressed that the idea of making Hitler funny seems unethical, some even recount feeling guilty for finding enjoyment in watching these programs. When looking at comment threads on the *Switch Reloaded* and official *Hotel Lux YouTube* channel, many of these cautious commentators are greeted with laughter from their peers. Responses range from: "Dude, chill out, it's Bully Herbig", to "I think it's okay to laugh at this, after all, Hitler's been dead for ages" (youtube.com).

These inconsistent responses to parodistic Holocaust programming illustrate the controversy a funny Hitler stirs up in German viewers. As previously noted by Anderson and Kincaid (2013), these types of programming create paradoxical sentiments, as viewers derive pleasure from watching funny content while being disturbed by the source of their comedic pleasure. Germans struggle with the necessary emotional distance to mock a man that destroyed so many lives; yet, parodies such as *Hotel Lux* and "Obersalzberg" are keeping Hitler in the conversation. While dabbling the line of social acceptability, Herbig and Kessler have encouraged their German viewers to keep thinking about Hitler, his Nazis, and the Holocaust.

### **Concluding Thoughts on the Power of Humor**

What we can learn from the controversy surrounding Hitler parodies and thus derive from this essay is that humor has power. Scholars have long investigated the effects of sarcasm and parody on political issues; e.g., on information processing,

policy engagement, and issue knowledge (Lamarre, 2013). Especially in quantitative social science, scholars have acknowledged that humor is a “complex psychological-emotional phenomenon,” which hinges on a myriad of variables that interact (Machovec, 2012). In a recent piece on late-night political satire, Matthes and Rauchfleisch (2013) found that the air time of comedic entertainment impacts audience reception and Silter, Kale, and Yuan (2014) found that humor can help traumatized individuals bond through the positive experience of laughter.

Humor remains highly contextual, polysemic, and its effect cannot be generalized—humor elicits different reactions in each individual. Humor cannot and will not be the solution to the cultural guilt Germans continue to bear and neither will it be a way to cope with cultural trauma for everyone. Needless to say, any comedic treatment of Hitler, the Nazi regime, or the Holocaust is to be used with caution. Both international and local German productions have been focusing on mocking the dictator and his fellow politicians by primarily playing on Hitler’s humorous nonverbal characteristics. The artifacts chosen for this analysis—the movie *Hotel Lux* as well as the skits of “Obersalzberg”—are successfully distancing themselves from the atrocities of the Holocaust and derive their comedic value solely by travesty Hitler himself.

Hitler has been used as comedic entertainment internationally and the effects of this genre remains to be studied in nuance. Recently, Steir-Livny (2015) found that Hitler parodies help to keep the importance of the Holocaust in young Israeli’s consciousness and identity. As for the German context, perhaps the fact that these controversial media have stirred up so much public debate remains the most important achievement of *Hotel Lux* and “Obersalzberg”. As noted by Zelizer (1995), the move from personal to collective memory marks an important moment to study, particularly for scholars who wish to investigate the ways in which collective memory is negotiated through cultural media. Herbig and Kessler’s parodies may provide a means for Germans to carry on their journey of coping with their cultural trauma in a way that engages them through positive emotions of laughter and amusement. While continuing to toy with the norms of appropriateness and good taste, these parodies serve as artifacts that keep the memories of Hitler alive. Whether one personally believes that a comedic treatment of the Nazi regime is appropriate—or funny—is not of concern. Rather, this review sought to contextualize our conceptual understanding of the juxtaposition between Hitler and humor.

Studies are now needed that will investigate this phenomenon further. From a quantitative perspective, scholarship may wish to examine how audiences react to a funny Hitler, both from the cultural insider-perspective and outside. Theories on transportation, narrative engagement, and meaningful media may present as useful in studying this phenomenon. Qualitatively, individual interviews and focus groups with German viewers may provide nuanced insights into the sentiments the parodies are generating. In-depth audience analyses are necessary in order to

examine attitudes towards the parodies, as well as the attitudes towards Hitler as generated through the parodies. Ethnographies of the act of viewing such programming (either individually, or in groups) may provide insights into the ways individuals experience Hitler parodies in a native cultural context.

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**Giuliana Sorce** (B.A. Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz, M.S. Purdue University) is a Ph.D. candidate in the College of Communications at The Pennsylvania State University. Sorce specializes in international communication, critical/cultural studies, and gender & sexuality. The author would like to thank Dr. Steven Carr and Dr. Matthew McAllister for their helpful comments. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 109th Annual Convention of the Eastern Communication Association in Philadelphia, PA (USA).

Email: [gus176@psu.edu](mailto:gus176@psu.edu)