

## **The Holocaust in American Culture**

Why is it that the Holocaust plays such an important role in US culture? In this seminar we will explore this question and will read and discuss theoretical texts from a number of discursive fields, among them history, cultural and literary studies, and trauma theory. We will furthermore examine representations of the Holocaust in American art (literature, film and the fine arts) over the past 70 years or so. We will trace how American art has dealt with the Shoah from the beginnings in the late 1940s until the most immediate past and how in the process the understanding of the event itself and the parameters of its representation have changed. While strategies of representing the Holocaust have always been a subject of debate, beginning in the 1990s the basic principles of the controversy have shifted significantly. We will discuss how this change can be accounted for and if and how it can be correlated with the process commonly called “The Americanization of the Holocaust.” Considering Benigni’s Oscar-winning film *Life Is Beautiful* (1997) and other more recent – and, as some would think: provocative – works of art we will most prominently deal with the question of the appropriateness of representing the German mass murder in more comical ways. Think about it: Are we allowed to laugh about the Holocaust? Or, as the American scholar Sander Gilman asked in a widely discussed essay: “Can the Shoah be funny?”