This chapter argues for a complex consideration of queer iconographies across Holocaust perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and resisters. Looking at the construction of same-sex sexual conduct in Holocaust memoirs, this article proposes sexual manifestations as an important issue in power relations between women during the Holocaust. I argue that, while invocations of queer femininity initially assisted in drawing attention to the extreme perversity of Nazism, post-1980s lesbian-feminist films draw on the lesbian to rewrite women into victims and resisters.

‘she had favourites, always one of the young ones who was weak and delicate, and she […] took care of them and fed them better, and in the evenings she had them brought to her.’

Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*

Since the opening of the concentration camps, images of queer femininity have played an important role in Holocaust representation, serving to both highlight the supreme perversity of Nazi crimes and construct agencies of innocence, i.e. sites of non-pollution by the Nazi menace. Where Schlink’s portrayal of Hanna alludes to the real-life overseer Irma Grese with her exceptional beauty, meticulous cruelty and sexual proclivity for women, Max Färberböck’s film *Aimée & Jaguar* draws on the figure of the lesbian to absolve the German private sphere from its implication in Nazism.

As part of a larger project on strategies of sexualisation and queer representation in visual culture on the Holocaust, this article on lesbian visuality and the Holocaust argues for a complex consideration of queer iconographies during the period of National Socialism. By stressing the gendered and sexualised dimensions of persecution and annihilation, the chapter proposes that same-sex sexual manifestations during the Holocaust go beyond the clear-cut constellations of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. Moving from the early post-war discourse on the gendered and moral perversity of perpetrators and their accessories, the destabilisation of moral certainties in post-1960s art house cinema are explored. From there the argument will turn to a new filmic discourse which emerged in the 1980s and forms the centrepiece of this article. Coming to full fruition in Färberböck’s
work, this body of lesbian-feminist films draws on the modes of queer representation from the 1960s, only to perform a double normalisation: to domesticate the lesbian against the notion of perversion and make all women during the Holocaust into victims. In doing so, this chapter contributes to our still sketchy understanding of same-sex sexual manifestations during the Holocaust and theorise their discursive reconfiguration in post-1945 popular culture.

Pornographic troping of the female body, doubled in lesbian encounters, highlights the general problem of sexualised images of the Holocaust, which manifest Adorno’s observations on the problematic aspects of Holocaust art. As Adorno argued in his 1962 essay ‘Engagement’, the artistic representation of suffering provides pleasure in the act of aesthetic appreciation, thus further denigrating the victims of the Holocaust. Consequently, many critics have looked askance at the possibility of making art from the Holocaust. Sexual imagery, through its potential of evoking pleasure, ranged among the highly problematic narrative strands, and critics thus tended to condemn sexualised images of Nazism and the Holocaust as inappropriate. Alvin Rosenfeld, for example, insists that general depravation dulled sexual desires in camp inmates and that therefore ‘one of the characteristics of Holocaust writings at their most authentic is that they are peculiarly and predominantly sexless’.

Yet Rosenfeld’s assertion is only partially true since a number of survivor memoirs, particularly by Jewish women and child survivors, feature graphic descriptions of sexuality. These include the public display of hetero- and homosexual acts, the witnessing of prostitution and experiences of sexual assault by other internees of both sexes. Such reports indicate how sexual acts under the constant threat of annihilation cannot be viewed in terms of intimacy and autonomous self-expression. This is not to say that sexual desire ceased to exist; on the contrary, some reports indicate, it continued to play an important role in the camps. However, sexual expressions became so entangled in the need for physical preservation among less privileged groups of inmates that sexual acts were difficult to separate from sexual violence and broader forms of power within the camps. While this dynamic in no way characterises homosexual encounters alone, many survivor memoirs attribute to female and male homosexuals a particularly exploitative nature. One case in point is the overseer Irma Grese, whose surpassing beauty, sadistic brutality and apparent sexual