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## THE PROBLEM OF KITSCH IN THE CONTEXT OF HOLOCAUST FICTION: JONATHAN LITTELL AND BERNHARD SCHLINK

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This paper aims to discuss the problem of kitsch within a broader framework encompassing the issues and limits of representation in the case of fictional works dealing with the Holocaust. In the last decades, the reading public and critics have been confronted with novels whose literary project is both ambitious and controversial: the attempt to shed a more nuanced light on the perpetrator's psyche, to explain and understand its inner workings and motivations. Prominent examples are Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (*Les Bienveillantes*, 2006) and Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (*Der Vorleser*, 1995), which have both been awarded important literary prizes, achieved international acclaim and become best-sellers, translated into more than 20 languages, yet they also sparked significant scandal. The harshest critics (mostly in Germany and Israel, understandably) have issued condemnations on grounds of

kitsch, lack of aesthetic value and moral relativism. In the following, we would like to outline the main points of the debate, drawing both on reception data and on scholarly papers, whilst investigating the various (and often fuzzy) assumptions which seem to be related to the kitsch concept within the context of Holocaust.

### Littel and Schlink: guilty of *kitsch*?

Littell's *The Kindly Ones* has been generally well-received in France and was even awarded two of France's most important literary prizes, the Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française and the Prix Goncourt (2006). The voice of Claude Lanzmann, the filmmaker who directed the Holocaust documentary film *Shoah* (1985), is more of an exception. The vigorous condemnation of the novel in his reviews in the *Journal du dimanche* and the *Nouvel Observateur* seeks to vilify it as a "vénéneuse Fleur du mal", a "venomous Flower of evil" (2006). The German reception in the literary sections of the leading newspapers (*Feuilleton*) has been however mainly negative. An interesting outline and discussion of this reception is offered by Wolfgang Asholt, who comes to the conclusion that the university critics seem to have been the only ones capable of "an objective appreciation of the novel" (2011: 221). The reviews published in the literary sections of the main newspapers seem to have been, on the contrary, marred by emotional reactions due to the difficulties of the German process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past).

The kitsch-condemnation as well as all other critiques are exemplarily concentrated in Iris Radisch's review (2008), the subtitle of which runs as: "Littell's *The Kindly Ones* intends to explain why the perpetrators have killed but ends in repugnant kitsch." From the beginning, Radisch is intent on clearing a misunderstanding. As the emphasis on the perpetrator's voice and not on that of the victims constitutes a burning issue for many critics, she is quick to stress that Littell's narrative choice to offer the reader over 900 pages of first-person narration is not a contentious point as far she is concerned: "The unusual perspective of this ambitious novel is not the issue. It is on the contrary its eminent chance to escape the Landser-kitsch, the docu-thriller and the noble porn into which the book repeatedly threatens to descend" (2008)\*. For Radisch, the main issue is that "the book ... is a disturbing work on the Nazi myth". Moreover, the issue of guilt and responsibility is eschewed, as it is placed under the old Greek conception of "fate". However, the critic feels the need to add an aesthetic condemnation to this ethical judgement and at the end of the review squeezes in a couple of paragraphs about the "style" of the novel which

\* Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German belong to us.

also falls short, assuming “a turgid, primitive sound when Aue indulges in homosexual, incestuous or anal-erotic fantasies” (Radisch 2008). The ending is particularly harsh as it denies any merit or importance whatsoever to Littell’s work, which is scornfully brushed aside as a more or less useless piece of junk: “There remains one last question: Why should we, for heaven’s sake, still read this book by a bad writing, poorly educated idiot, troubled by sexual perversion and committed to an elitist racist ideology and an archaic belief in destiny? I have to admit, *meschersamis français*, that to this issue I have not yet found an answer” (Radisch 2008). No less vehement are the voices condemning Schlink’s *The Reader*. An overview of the reception of the book in German and English-speaking countries is offered by Katharina Hall’s “Text Crimes in the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Case of Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser/The Reader*” (2013), summarizing the two key crimes of which the text stands accused: “[C]rimes against the history and memory of the Holocaust” and “crimes against literature” (2013: 193). If Frederic Raphael’s judgement in *The Times Literary Supplement* holds water, the novel has no place in literature, unless one wants to see literature bereft of all meaning. In a polemical article published in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (2002), Willi Winkler quotes him and two other British writers and literary scholars, Jeremy Adler and Gabriel Josipovici, who have harshly dismissed the book as cultural pornography, to make a case against *The Reader*. Most relevant to our discussion, the scathing review reaches its apex when the novel is ascribed the name *Holo-Kitsch*.

### **The aesthetics of Holocaust-Kitsch**

What are, however, the meaning and implications of the term *kitsch* when used in the context of Holocaust? This proves to be a very difficult undertaking, for kitsch as an aesthetic concept remains very difficult to investigate despite the numerous attempts made in this regard in various disciplines. With the postmodern turn things have become increasingly complicated as clearly dichotomic definitions such as that outlined by the art critic Clement Greenberg (1939), which conceptualizes kitsch in terms of fakeness, imitation (through simplification and stereotyping) of high culture by low, popular forms of art for the sake of profit have gradually become less (if at all) functional. The blurring of frontiers between high and low, and the purposeful embracing of kitsch as a challenging self-conscious device by postmodern artists have made the aesthetic condemnation of a work of art on grounds of kitsch very problematic. The association between Holocaust and kitsch complicates the matter even further. In the last decades many have complained about what has come to be perceived as a true “Holocaust fashion”,

instrumentalizing the Holocaust for literary and cinematic public success. This new phenomenon is accompanied by an increased number of fictionalized approaches belonging to authors of the so-called “post-memory” generation (the generation after the War) and by a vivid interest in the portrayal of the perpetrator (the focus on the witness/victim had previously been the norm). Both novels discussed in this paper fall into this category. The first to draw attention to and attempt to investigate this phenomenon is the eminent Israeli historian Saul Friedländer, whose 1984 essay remains the pivotal work on this topic. While not always rigorous in his approach, Friedländer manages to identify a specific frisson as the common denominator of many works emerging in the late 1960s and the 1970s, which started the trend of a new discourse on fascism (the label proved to be a catchy one as it is still widely used today in Holocaust Literary Studies): the juxtaposition of the themes of death and the kitsch aesthetics rooted in a “certain kind of simplified, degraded, insipid but all the more insinuating romanticism” (1984: 26, 39). The fascination that this kind of (according to Friedländer, dangerous) mixture exerts upon contemporary sensibility is also explained by the connection the historian sees, following Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the director of *Hitler: A Film from Germany*, between kitsch and myth:

Kitsch is a debased form of myth, but nevertheless draws from the mythic substance--a part of its emotional impac--the death of the hero; the eternal march, the twilight of the gods; myth is a footprint, an echo of lost worlds, haunting an imagination invaded by excessive rationality and thus becoming the crystallization point for thrusts of the archaic and of the irrational (1984:49).

Functioning as a “vehicle of coherence”, the myth permits the coagulation of two opposite spheres, the harmony and love for cosiness and order bathed in sentimentality (which characterizes the petit bourgeois taste) and the horror of death, apocalypse and a specific kind of longing thereafter. Even if he does not always clearly differentiate between form and content, Friedländer’s analysis offers equally important, albeit rather sketchy insights into the formal aspects of the new discourse. To the “overload of symbols” and the “baroque setting” coupled with a “mysterious atmosphere of the myth and religiosity enveloping a vision of death announced as a revelation opening up into nothing” (1984: 45) corresponds, on the stylistic level, a certain kind of language:

A first glance reveals that this language is one of accumulation, repetition, and redundancy: a massive use of synonyms, an excess of similar epithets, a play of image sent back, in turn, from one to the other in echoes without end. This is not the linear language of interconnected argument nor of step-by-step demonstration;

this is, under a less immediate but no less systematic and no less effective form, the circular language of invocation, which tirelessly turns on itself and creates a kind of hypnosis by repetition, like a word that is chanted in certain prayers, a dance that persists in the same rhythm unto frenzy, a call of the tom-tom, or quite simply, the heavy music of our parades, the muffled stomping of marching legions (1984:50).

### ***The Kindly Ones* and *The Reader* as examples of Holocaust-kitsch**

Reading *The Kindly Ones* and its critical reviews against this conceptual background provides us with a key to better understanding the issue at stake. What critics have amassed under the kitsch-label could be summarized as follows:

1. the use of numerous Nazi clichés (for example the superior, highly educated and refined intellectual in the Nazi hierarchy);
2. endless and (unnecessarily) repetitive scenes focusing on atrocities, and rooted in a deeply-embedded fascination with goriness, which makes the novel a literary equivalent of the “splatter aesthetics of contemporary action and horror films” (Kuon 2012: 40);
3. pornography and vulgarization of minutiously researched and realistically depicted historical matter with obscene graphic details, as in the famous scene of the engorged penis (which has become the main contentious point of Littell’s depiction of the execution of the two Jewish Judges, Wolf Kieperand and Moshe Kagen in Ukraine, 1941). These aspects also give rise to a certain type of lack of truth, of pretense: as Peter Kuon puts it, quoting Lanzmann, “with reference to people who really existed and events that actually took place, he creates something that seems absolutely authentic” (Kuon 2012: 33) but is not;
4. the combination of the two: gore aesthetic and pornography – which has led the German critics to use the term *Gewaltpornographie* (pornography of violence) and the English speaking critics to bemoan repugnant *death porn* (Bukiet 2009). Subjecting the historical background to fictionalization through this particular lens generates a subtle manipulation of history and it is precisely therein that, for certain critics, lies the threat posed to the public: the reader may become a victim of a certain “fascination with violence” (Manoshek 2008).

Indeed Littell’s book seems to be the perfect example for Friedländer’s new discourse, as, in almost all points, it conforms to the criteria worked out by the historian: it offers a synthesis of kitsch and death, an aestheticized play “on all the facets of horror” (Friedländer 1984: 95) and it puts all “the shoddiest aspects of erotic imagination” (Friedländer, 1984: 39), an expression Friedländer borrows from Foucault, under the sign of Nazism. Moreover, it certainly displays,

thematically and stylistically, that baroque “overload” forged by means of accumulation, repetition, excess and redundancy and it uses myth (in this case, the Greek myth of Orestes) to coagulate the separate lines of the plot, Aue’s personal story and the collective story of war and crime.

However, and this is perhaps the crucial point of Friedländer’s analysis, the aesthetics of the new discourse on fascism originates and it is in fact proper to Nazism itself, to the aesthetics and *Weltanschauung* of the Third Reich (the paper by Jonathan Jones, on the occasion of the first public exhibition of Adolf Hitler’s art collection in Weimar, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1999, is a case in point). At its core lies the never-resolved tension between everyday petty bourgeois sensibility and monstrosity, as Friedländer puts it: “[O]n the one hand, the approachable human being, Mr. Everyman enveloped in kitsch; on the other, that blind force launched into nothingness” (1984: 72). It is exactly the coexistence of these two impossible to reunite facets in Littell’s portrayal of Aue that has bewildered the critics and attracted a lot of negative comments. Peter Kuon for example sees in this failed synthesis a lack of “aesthetic coherence”: “the narrator is thereby further conceived of as a modern ‘Everyman’ who approaches the reader as ‘human brother’ and, finally, as a grotesque, slapstick character... The blending of these narrative perspectives has given form to a contradictory, aesthetically-questionable, but nonetheless (or rather, as its very consequence) successful monstrosity” (Kuon 2012: 44). In the light of Friedländer’s analysis however, this paradox, far from representing an unsuccessful literary ploy, reveals its true significance precisely because it echoes the reality of an impossible conglomerate, the “irreducible anomaly” (1984: 120) of Nazism itself: “In this contradictory series, it is not one thing or another that is decisive by itself; it is their coexistence that gives totality its significance” (1984: 131).

In Bernhard Schlink’s case, the kitsch aspects involved in the controversy about his best-seller novel *The Reader* seem to be of a more conventional type. They mostly concern the (scandalous) couple of adolescent Michael Berg and former SS camp guard Hanna Schmitz, whose erotic rituals revolve around showering, having sex and “consuming” classical literature (Hanna, as it later becomes evident, uses the boy who reads to her from famous works of world literature, to fulfill her hunger for fictions as she is illiterate herself). Aiming to offer serious insights into philosophical, ethical and philosophy of law-related matters, the novel actually gives itself up for easy, immediate consumption, unlike the great literary works belonging to the traditional literary canon to which it alludes, is one of the often-heard reproaches: “The author, by the banality of his vocabulary, the sugar of his eroticism and the blandness of his brevities, asks nothing of us in the way of hard work” (Raphael 2009). Frederic Raphael’s devastating accusations summarize the main aspects of kitsch: easy profit-seeking, pretense and manipulation

of the reader through sentimentalism, while sparing him the effort of an authentic confrontation with the difficulty of great art (as Greenberg writes, “[kitsch] pre-digests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a shortcut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art”, 1939: 44). The novel shows, Raphael argues, how “trash can be dressed as art, or ‘mercy’, admiring it means subscribing to the same virtues of vulgarity and its daimon, smirking fame” (Raphael 2009). Used in this way, though, kitsch remains an “exclusionary and classist” concept, serving to “stigmatize art that does not conform to an aesthetic canon as determined by elite arbiters of taste” (Maltby 2012: 53), and equating ‘serious art’ with ‘difficulty’ is rather controversial. On the contrary, postmodernism has led to “the abandonment or curtailment of elitist claims”, allowing for kitsch to be called art and for art to exploit popular culture (Hoffmann 2005: 51). Beyond the pornographic qualities of the sex scenes, it is the juxtaposition of the love affair with the Holocaust story itself which seems to have also sparked the kitsch attacks, as in the case of Ruth Klüger’s verdict of “cannibalization”: Schlink exploits, according to her, the Holocaust trauma to seduce the public for easy commercial success (Klüger 2000: 51).

### ***The Kindly Ones* and *The Reader* or kitsch as a device of postmodern fiction**

The problems arising for a writer who intends to deal with the psychology of fascist perpetrators are intricate. Taking into account Friedländer’s theory, then the main question would be: how should (could) the author attempt to make the fascist kitsch aesthetics come alive in fiction without endangering the artistic value of her (his) own work and without succumbing to the spell of this frisson (as the “new discourse” seems to have done by mirroring the Nazi imaginary uncritically, according to Friedländer)?

Littell’s solution – and, to our eyes, a successful one – lies in the conscious embracing of this kitsch, pushing it to the extreme. As, for kitsch to be kitsch, it has to remain “on the whole, completely unselfconscious and without any political or critical edge” (Felluga 2011), otherwise it either morphs into *camp* or serves, by its purposeful hyperbolization, as a fictional device of postmodern-like parody or satire. We read therefore kitsch as being an essential part of the novel’s aim of critically interrogating the horrendous past and challenging the reader’s views on evil and human nature. Daniel Mendelsohn is one of the few critics who also argue that “the ‘kitsch’ is in fact integral to the novel’s moralizing projects” (Mendelsohn 2009). Very few critics, again, seem to have approached the novel from a postmodern perspective (especially in Germany where postmodernism is rather frowned upon). Exceptions are Susan Rubin Suleiman’s paper,

“When The Perpetrator Becomes A Reliable Witness Of The Holocaust: On Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*” (2009) and Scott M. Powers's study, “Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*: Evil and the Ethical Limits of the Post-modern Narrative” (2011). This also, undoubtedly, because the novel's meticulous realism seems very far from postmodern fictional games, as Michael Mack notes: “The hyperreality of Littell's novel is of course not that of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism, but it is certainly removed from the playful accounts of fantasy and bricolage that characterize much of postmodern theory” (Mack 2014: 206). Hyper-realism, which assumes the realist conventions and subjects them to parody, is nevertheless one of the modalities of choice for historiographic metafiction, as Linda Hutcheon successfully argued. The postmodern reading allows for a different interpretation of other so-called “flaws” of the novel, not only the kitsch issue. The lack of plausibility becomes a self-referential tool to expose the monstrous anomaly of a historical reality which in itself defies the boundaries of what human beings could have construed as plausible and Aue is not a realist character but a symbol, as Littell has repeatedly stressed. Consider the bitter irony of Kurt Kister's rhetorical question, in one of the few positive reviews the novel received in Germany:

On the other hand, what is this rather German question of plausibility? Was it plausible that SS -Einsatzgruppen, police reservists and members of the Wehrmacht, as well as German soldiers killed tens of thousands of men, women, children in the ravine of Babi Yar in September 1941? Was it plausible that those everyday murderers from the shooting range of Dachau in the spring of 1942 gathered after the job in the same bars where we drank beer thirty years later as high school students? (Kister 2008).

Similarly, the inconsistencies between Aue's position as chronicler and autobiographer become a conscious play between a reliable historical witness and an unreliable narrator, a narrative tool which represents an innovation for Holocaust fiction and is, according to Susan Rubin Suleiman, one of the accomplishments of the novel:

This procedure, which lacks plausibility historically, is extremely effective as fiction. Littell's contemporary readers cannot simply read Aue's narrative as an unmediated account; as I read, I am aware of the author behind the narrator and of the literary choices he is making. Seeing things this way introduces a degree of “derealization” into the narrative, since we are aware of the author's manipulations, the way we might be aware of the camera's movements in a film. But I see this derealization as adding a metanarrative dimension to the novel's realism, marking this novel as a postmodern work rather than a classically realist one (2009: 9).

The same argument about the conscious use of kitsch as a postmodern device can be made for *The Reader*, as in the case of Littell's novel. Similarly (again), few critics and scholars have approached the book from this point of view, perhaps discouraged by the 'easy realism' which is the stylistic mark of the novel. Joseph Metz makes a particularly detailed and carefully-crafted claim: the erotic "compendium of male fantasy clichés and movie scenarios" as well as the "entire tropic inventory of images popularly associated with Nazism, ranging from the uniforms, leather straps, sadomasochism" etc. would not represent an uncritically assumed kitsch aesthetics but "an inventory of positions or stances equivalent to topoi, a series of social scripts to be read from, Vorleser-style", which "raises the question of the extent to which *Der Vorleser* might be read as a type of postmodern discourse" (2004: 301-313). The question may be answered affirmatively, yet there seems to remain an "irresolvable aporia", in Metz's opinion, as a successful mediation between "the very different, finally irreconcilable, imperatives of post-Holocaust and postmodern discourse" might prove impossible (2004: 318).

The crux of the matter lies here in a different aspect of kitsch: the writing off of all that is unsettling, the downplaying of all tragic matter which leads to a particular kind of "whitewashing", as Friedländer puts it, a "rationalization that normalizes, smooths, and neutralizes our vision of the past" (1984: 102). Appealing to the sentimentality of the reader and hiding the true horror of history behind its postmodern mechanisms seeking the relativization of historical truth, the novel has been accused of minimizing the question of guilt and responsibility (for a refutation of these claims, see: Niven 2007). This could be seen as a gesture of exorcism similar to the "complex manoeuvres" executed by the Nazis themselves, as Friedländer argues, in order to "neutralize their own actions" (1984: 102). That the kitsch condemnation is combined with an ethical dimension becomes apparent in Jeremy Adler's already quoted statement about Schlink's *Kulturpornographie*: the novel is cultural pornography because "it pretends to offer new moral insights" but in fact ends up on questionable ethical ground. The accompanying simulation connotation is also part of the canonical kitsch definition, as Baudrillard points out (1998: 111): "To the aesthetics of beauty and originality, kitsch opposes its *aesthetics of simulation*: it everywhere reproduces objects smaller or larger than life; it imitates materials (in plaster, plastic, etc.); it apes forms or combines them discordantly; *it repeats fashion* without having been part of the experience of fashion." Even more explicitly, in Littell's case, Kuon argues that "kitsch as an aesthetic category and falsehood as a moral one are intertwined" (2012: 39).

### Between aesthetics and ethics

It seems therefore appropriate to read the kitsch objections analyzed in this paper as rooted not only in an aesthetic dismissal of the works, but also in a certain ethical uneasiness or downright rejection. Kitsch implies in this sense a preoccupation with a twofold taboo: on an aesthetic level, kitsch represents a taboo against “high” literature or “good, serious art”; on ethical level, it refers to a representational taboo which still lies at the core of all discussion about Holocaust fictionalization (see: Boswell 2014).

The ethical conundrum might in fact be projected onto the aesthetic judgement: a case in point is offered by the reception of Herta Müller’s *The Hunger Angel* (*Schaukelatam*, 2009). The label “kitsch” was attached by some voices to this novel depicting horrendous events in a Soviet concentration camp from the perspective of a Romanian German deported to Ukraine (based on conversations between the author and her friend, the poet and Gulag survivor Oskar Pastior). This work of fiction belonging to a Nobel Prize laureate famous for her difficult metaphoric style is rooted in the poetic prose of German Expressionism, offering an antipode for both Littell’s bemoaned ‘lack of style’ or ‘bad writing’ and Schlink’s ‘easy realism’. And yet Iris Radisch, who is so vehement in her Littell critique quoted in this paper, writes a devastating attack on Müller’s *The Hunger Angel*, based on the same kitsch-argument. In her *Zeit* review entitled “Kitsch or world literature?” (“Kitsch oder Weltliteratur”, 2009), she sets out to demonstrate what the rhetorical question had already revealed: that Müller’s poetic techniques of high metaphorisation, surprising word combinations, repetitions, exaltation (*Überhöhung*) and intensification create a “perfumed”, “tasteless” and “formulaic” text, even if they worked so well in her other books to the point of becoming her globally praised signature style. The issue, Radisch writes, is a lack of cohesion between poetic vocabulary and over-stylization, on one hand, and gulag trauma, on the other. However, one could hardly argue that Müller’s other novels are filled with happy stories: they chronicle traumatic events under the Ceaușescu regime, her experience of oppression and exile. The difference in the case of *The Hunger Angel* seems to be mainly related to the fictionalization taboo, especially when the first-person perspective is used: as Radisch puts it succinctly, “Gulag -novels can’t be penned based on second hand memories” (2009).

What is rejected here is the attempt at poetic innovation in a postmemorial text (broadly understood as a text written by a person who was not a direct witness to the traumatic events). As Agnieszka Izdebska and Danuta Szajnert point out in their analysis of similar Polish novels, such a critique is often aimed at narrators who, taking over the “ethically privileged position, previously occupied by a witness-victim” (2014: 139), display their unconventional language

creativity, thereby producing “fancy and affected kitsch” (2014: 148). The Polish literary scholar and Holocaust survivor Michał Głowiński sheds light on a new aspect of the Holocaust-kitsch problematic:

Since not only works which use schemes and conventions of popular art are kitsch, kitsch is sometimes a composition which ostentatiously expresses the distance from them, the one which represents something what we could call modern mannerism, a composition whose rich and sophisticated artistic outfit is nonfunctional and does not provide the vision of a world which was a true nightmare (Izdebska and Szajnert 2014: 140).

The kitsch-label would in such cases imply self-indulgent mannerism, despite the work’s difficulty and seriousness, corroborated with the representation taboo (for postmemory generation authors at least) – while in Littell and Schlink’s cases the critics fail to accept (and in many cases even to identify) kitsch as a post-modern device, thereby judging the works as unworthy of pertaining to the ‘high’ ranks of ‘serious’ art.

The problem regarding the limits of representation concerns, from the point of view of those who embrace an “ethos of anti-representation” (Elie Wiesel, Levinas, Claude Lanzmann etc.), all fiction, generally speaking all art forms. Lanzmann, among others, sees “an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding”, citing Primo Levi’s account of the Auschwitz guard who told him, “there is no why” (Lanzmann 2011:9). Yet, the case of postmodern fiction as it is made in this paper is a particularly thorny issue even for the moderate voices of those who accept Holocaust representation. While allowing for the controversial position of the perpetrator to become a possible narrative choice, they still demand that certain conditions be fulfilled: respect for historical truth, decent restraint and explicit ethical condemnation of the Nazi ideology etc. The failure of many critical commentators to acknowledge the fact that both von Aue and Michael Berg represent the prototype of the unreliable narrator, characteristic of much of postmodern historical metafiction and their simplistic equation of author and narrator reveals either a surprising blindness regarding the mechanisms of fiction or (as we believe to be the case in most situations), a desire to subject the narrator, in the case of Holocaust fiction, to the same concerns as the historian. As Cynthia Ozick claims, in the case of the Holocaust the “rights of Imagination” should be restrained in the favour of those of history. Otherwise, “in the name of the autonomous rights of fiction, in the name of the sublime rights of the imagination, anomaly sweeps away memory; anomaly displaces history” (1999). In the postmodern historical fictions dealing with the Holocaust, these critics complain, the “reverence” surrounding the Holocaust,

the effort to “hold the Holocaust separate—separate from language, separate from cliché, separate from the always already compromised field of aesthetics, separate from other mass murders” (Hallberg 2009) has come under attack, and the main culprit is postmodernism itself:

This movement is called postmodernism, and in abler hands than Littell’s, it may yet prove itself capable of finding new ways to speak about the unspeakable. And yet it’s worth remembering that its direct forerunner, Friedrich Nietzsche, called not for the abandonment of all values, but their reevaluation. The example of *The Kindly Ones* suggests that that reevaluation becomes more difficult, not less, in the absence of something to rebel against. When nothing is sacred, there can be no sacrilege (Hallberg 2009).

Yet, one feels compelled to insist, far from being specific to the discourse critical of postmodernism, the combination of aesthetic and ethical judgement, as apparent in such claims and central, as we have shown, to the kitsch problematic, has been controversial ever since literature, history and philosophy have established themselves as different ways of dealing with reality. As Steinberg Gould rightly points out in her paper “Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*: Literature, Cruelty, and Narrative (Un)reliability”, arguing against the trend of ethical criticism and aesthetic moralism, “even Plato realizes, in his attack on the poets, that if we read literature as the moralist suggests, there can be no literature” (2014: 4-5). Also surprising, to put it mildly, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after a long tradition of charges brought against literature (Baudelaire, Flaubert and Wilde are just a few famous examples of such trials), is the fear exhibited by many critics regarding the danger posed by such works of fiction: seen as a weak creature, easily prey to demonic ‘seduction’, unaware of fictional traps and unable to assume a critical stance, the reader has to be protected against the ‘fascination of evil’ (or even compassion towards, whichever might be the case) such novels would exude. Petra Rau sees in this “patronizing” attitude a “rather Catholic pronouncement” (2013: 100), yet the case against poets as corruptors of youth, accompanied by the concern for a morally ‘useful’ literature itself goes back to no other than Plato himself. The accessible style and the ‘pre-digestion’ of content, characteristic of kitsch, ensure that the “naïve reader” is rapidly contaminated by the “colossal virus” and “taken hostage” (Kristeva 2007). The two seem to go, from a modernist perspective, hand in hand: only the naïve, uneducated (and thus insensitive to the difficulties exhibited by great art) spectator can be a victim of kitsch, argues Greenberg (1939: 44). Such a presupposition, more or less consciously embraced, seems to explain, in our opinion, in the case of both novels, on one hand the accusations of kitsch, on the other the concern for the moral damage suffered by the reader construed as devoid of “agency, responsibility or judgement” (Rau 2013: 100).

Instead of this rather prescriptive intent to limit literary autonomy (in the case of author and, subsequently, reader), we believe that one should concentrate on the possibilities that such recalcitrant postmodern texts open up for the dialogue between contemporary public and history. Gerhard Hoffmann's investigation of the various techniques of which American post-modern fiction makes use (first employed by the pop artists of the sixties) shows how the aesthetics of kitsch plays an essential part in what can be defined as both a critical gesture and a renewal of imagination. By playing with kitsch and parody, such texts return, in a first step, to 'reality', while exhibiting the fact that that reality/past/history "has become a product of consumption and of the fiction-producing media" – and yet, in a third step, they use "this faked return for the replenishment of subject matter and creative energy" (Hoffmann 2005: 51). Of course, allowing for a similar approach in the case of Holocaust literature means acknowledging, as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière radically states, that "there is no property of the event which prohibits representation, which prohibits art, even in the sense of artifice. Unrepresentability does not exist as a property of the event. There are only choices" (2001:96). If these choices entail a postmodern challenge of taboos and a self-conscious distantiating of reality by means of literary devices such as kitsch, unreliability and satire, they nonetheless reveal, in their own way, the ability of literature to interrogate evil and human nature and distance us from easy certainties and typified patterns of thought. Discussing the metafictional aspect of Schlink's *The Reader*, Daniel Reynolds makes a similar argument:

By inviting its readers to ponder such distinctions as that between fictional construct and factual documentation, or between author and narrator, the novel ultimately argues for fiction's ability to contribute meaningfully to inquiries into the Holocaust (2003:238).

Though retaining a reticent undertone, Matthew Boswell concludes at the end of his investigation of Holocaust literature and taboo (which also touches upon Littell's *The Kindly Ones* and Schlink's *The Reader*): "By continuing to raise such questions and probing these more "existential" types of truth in light of the Holocaust, transgressive works of fiction can at least help to ensure that we do not arrive at the kind of dangerous "final resting place" where the objective truths of mass killing no longer matter" (2014: 195).

Finally, we hold with Michael Mack that there is a therapeutic potential in such fictional encounters with the horror of history: "Literature works against a certain conflation of the other with paranoid hallucination of evil and destruction. It does so by crossing the boundaries

between self and the other by making us experience our shared vulnerability while safely residing at a remove from reality” (2014: 212).

It is perhaps through this shared experience of vulnerability and frailty that we best learn to understand what being human means, and what the ideal that we should strive for should be.

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#### ABSTRACT

##### **The Problem of Kitsch in the Context of Holocaust Fiction: Jonathan Littell and Bernhard Schlink**

This paper aims to discuss the problem of kitsch within a broader framework encompassing the issues and limits of representation in the case of fictional works dealing with concentration camp trauma. Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader* (*Der Vorleser*, 1995) and Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* (*Les Bienveillantes*, 2006) have both achieved international acclaim yet also sparked a huge scandal mainly for their narrative choice of embracing the (controversial) point of view of the perpetrator. Some of the harshest critics in Germany have issued condemnations on grounds of kitsch, lack of aesthetic value and moral relativism; even the term ‘Holo-kitsch’ was coined. Yet the label ‘kitsch’ was attached by some voices even to *The Hunger Angel* (*Schaukelatam*, 2009), a totally different kind of novel depicting horrendous events in a Soviet concentration camp from the perspective of a Romanian German deported to Ukraine. This is a work of fiction belonging to a Nobel prize laureate famous for her difficult metaphoric style, Herta Müller, and rooted in the poetic prose of German Expressionism. We would like to outline the main points of the debate, drawing both on reception data and on scholarly papers, whilst investigating the various

(and often fuzzy) assumptions which seem to be related to the kitsch-concept within the context of Holocaust/Gulag fiction, for example, the extent to which it implies a negative value judgement from an aesthetic perspective and/or an ethically grounded uneasiness about trespassing moral limits of representation.

#### KEYWORDS

Kitsch, Holocaust fiction, ethics, aesthetics, literary representation

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