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Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film
ed. by Jenni Adams and Sue Vice (review)

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Book Review

Jenni Adams and Sue Vice, eds., *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film* (Edgware, UK: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013).

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As a number of its contributors note, the very title of this collection (which brings together essays that previously appeared in the journal *Holocaust Studies*) encapsulates some of the difficulties of considering, and indeed producing, narratives that center on those who were responsible for the Holocaust. Representing—depicting—perpetrators contains the possibility of representing—speaking on behalf of or in defense of—their actions. Further, as Robert Eaglestone puts it in his essay, “the very fact of representation creates [the] inescapable possibility of identification” (14). Precisely because of the challenges that broaching the issue of perpetration raises from both an aesthetic and an ethical angle, it is perhaps unsurprising that writers and filmmaker have continued to address this problematic aspect of Holocaust representation, and the essays gathered here consider a range of both recent and historical examples, focusing principally on Anglo-American works or the reception of works in an Anglo-American context, but with some consideration of German engagements with the Nazi past.

Two of the more prominent and controversial recent examples, Jonathan Littell’s novel *Les bienveillants* (2006), published in English as *The Kindly Ones* (2009), and Oliver Hirschbiegel’s film *Der Untergang* (2004), released in Britain and the United States as *Downfall*, both of which have already generated energetic debate among literary and cultural critics and

in the wider media, rightly receive consideration here. Eaglestone sees the often-repugnant “phantasmagorical” (20) aspects of the behavior of Littell’s protagonist, Maximilien Aue, including his expression and apparent acting out of incestuous desires toward his twin sister and scatological motifs that recur through the text as evidencing a “swerve” (15) away from what is ostensibly the subject matter of the novel: Aue’s role in the killing of Jews on the Eastern Front. Aue’s apparent psychopathy militates against the desire, evident elsewhere in the novel, for a detailed engagement with the realities of genocide. Eaglestone identifies such “swerving” in other narratives, including the Swedish novelist Steve Sem-Sandberg’s *De fattiga i Łódź* (2009; *The Emperor of Lies* [2011]), in which the depiction of Chaim Rumkowski as a child abuser provides the novel with a means to condemn him while evading any thorough engagement with the ethical complexities of his position as head of the ghetto. In each case, through a sort of narrative sleight of hand, behavior that can be straightforwardly condemned substitutes for behavior that, in terms of motivation, is morally much more complex.

Jenni Adams sees *The Kindly Ones* differently. Through close reading of some of the more abject moments of the novel, she suggests that such incidents confront the reader with a dissolution of subject boundaries that enacts the difficulties of identification that are characteristic of representations of perpetrators. This reading brings together two related concerns of the collection, which Adams also highlights in the introduction to the volume. If the production of identification between the reader and the protagonist is part of the goal of literature, what happens if this requires the reader to identify with a creation as deeply unpleasant as Aue? And if the possibility of such identification is evaded, does this not run the risk of reifying evil? A further potential difficulty is highlighted by Matthew Boswell in his essay on *Downfall*; Boswell suggests that the film offers too easy a point of identification in the shape of Traudl Junge, Hitler’s secretary, described by Boswell as an “ambiguous perpetrator-victim” (149). This film, to use Eaglestone’s term, seems to swerve away from the genocide, producing a “redemptive reading of history” (158), in which the German people are positioned as victims and “objects of the film’s pity” (152).

Junge’s appearance in interview footage at the start and end of the film reinforces the extent to which this is a (self-)exculpatory narrative;

the film's use of an "ordinary" individual as a focalizer may be designed to provide the viewer with an unchallenging access point to a challenging situation, but this becomes problematic when we are invited to view this "ordinary" individual as representative of the German people in general. Junge appears to know only what she sees, and there are a lot of closed doors (literally and metaphorically) in the bunker. Looking away, then—or, more bluntly, denial—is characteristic of many of the other examples of perpetrator testimony that are examined here: if literature and film have difficulty in keeping the events of the Holocaust squarely in view, this is no less, and perhaps even more, of a problem when the perpetrators themselves speak.

Sue Vice's essay examines two interviews with former members of *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing squads deployed on the Eastern Front after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union) conducted by Claude Lanzmann but excluded from his film *Shoah* (1985). As Vice notes, *Shoah* takes the Polish death camps as its focus, and this interview material would therefore have been difficult to incorporate into its narrative. Vice's analysis of these interviews meticulously exposes the strategies of evasion employed by Lanzmann's interviewees, Heinz Schubert and Karl Kretschmer, strategies complicated by the fact that Lanzmann himself deceived them into talking to him in the first place. The interview with Schubert comes to an abrupt end when Schubert's sons and their friends beat Lanzmann up and throw him out of the house after discovering his hidden recording equipment, actions that left Lanzmann hospitalized for a number of weeks. Schubert was a "desk murderer," present at the killing sites though likely not to have taken an active part in the executions. Vice carefully unpicks the evasive language used by Schubert, and indeed his wife, who makes impromptu interventions into the conversation, to describe his role, noting how Lanzmann countered Schubert's post hoc descriptions with the account given at his trial, an account that is itself peppered with deflections. In Kretschmer's case, a comment in one of the former soldier's letters home from the front that the men can't face eating "Blutwurst," blood sausage, becomes a means by which Lanzmann attempts to bring back into view what Kretschmer continues to try to hide. In a fashion familiar from many of the interviews in *Shoah*, Lanzmann takes a forensic approach to language, relentlessly mining the implications of details,

a procedure that is echoed in Vice's own incisive close reading of these problematic encounters.

Schubert and Kretschmer were both tried for their actions during the war. The former was sentenced to death at Nuremberg but had his sentence commuted to ten years in prison and was in fact released in 1951. The latter was tried in 1968 but the case was dismissed for lack of evidence. Other essays here engage in detail with the perceived shortcomings of judicial treatments of perpetrators and with how the spectacle of the trial itself has been reconsidered by writers, artists, and filmmaker. Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem in 1961 comes into focus in essays by Lyndsey Stonebridge and James Bailey. Stonebridge considers both Eichmann's trial and the Nuremberg Tribunal as examples of "twentieth-century juridical screen culture," supplementing Shoshana Felman's concept of the juridical unconscious with the "juridical imaginary, where the perpetrator is not only tried, but imagined, captured within a mirroring and doubling that Eichmann's famous glass cube materializes so explicitly" (94). Francis Bacon's painting *Study for a Portrait* (1949), in which a screaming or expostulating figure is presented to the viewer framed in such a way as to pre-echo the glass booth within which Eichmann was enclosed in the Jerusalem courtroom, becomes, for Stonebridge, an image that provokes both an uncomfortable sense of "absolute otherness" and "a discomfiting kind of proximity" (96). Attempting to sequester the perpetrators, to render them absolutely other, fails because the glass booth is also a mirror, reflecting us back at ourselves.

Bailey's essay tackles the Eichmann trial from a different angle, focusing on the British novelist Muriel Spark's engagement, or lack of engagement, with the proceedings. Sent to cover the trial for the *Observer* newspaper, Spark failed to produce any material for publication there, instead incorporating elements of what she saw and heard into her novel *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965). Echoing Hannah Arendt's sense that the trial exposed the "banality of evil," Barbara Vaughan, Spark's protagonist in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, feels experience deadened by resort to the language of bureaucracy, comparing the "repetition, boredom, despair" engendered by the trial to the effects produced by the "anti-novelists" (165), practitioners of the *nouveau roman*, in which an urge for extreme objectification and scrupulously detailed description estrange the reader and slow action

down to a virtual stop. Perhaps paradoxically, as Bailey points out, this was in fact something of the direction taken by Spark in her own novels of the later 1960s and 1970s. Rather than indicting the *nouveau romanciers* for indulging in some kind of fascism of representation, Spark's reference to them in the trial sequence of *The Mandelbaum Gate* and her more implicit (and contested) engagement with their aesthetic in her later work imply that this "repetition, boredom, despair" can be resisted only by being confronted head-on, or, indeed, from the inside out.

As well as these new engagements with recent and, one might say, canonical representations of perpetrators in literature and film, this volume also offers glimpses into less familiar territory. In a fascinating case study of the reception of the now-lost television play *The Prisoner*, screened in 1952, James Jordan offers a glimpse of how the Holocaust was understood in Britain in the immediate postwar period, at a time before the term "the Holocaust" was in use. Drawing on the BBC's written archives, Jordan describes material that was broadcast in the period prior to Eichmann's trial, noting some often-surprising, and, even at the time, controversial, offerings: Thames Television's *The World at War* (1973) gave airtime to Albert Speer, as well as the aforementioned Traudl Junge, but it is surprising to discover that as early as 1954 the BBC broadcast a documentary in which former field marshal Albert Kesselring justified "the presence of former SS and SA men in the structure of the new Germany" (187). *The Prisoner* itself, set in Israel, centers on the assassination of an Israeli minister who is revealed to have been a Nazi collaborator in the prewar period before fleeing to Palestine. As Jordan wryly comments, "The suggestion that Israel's Minister of Justice could be a murderer, a rapist, an informer and a Nazi was not the only controversial element in the script" (195), as Israeli soldiers are accused of persecuting Arab refugees in a way that echoes the Nazis' persecution of Jews. In response to vociferous complaints from the *Jewish Chronicle*, the BBC's assistant controller of television rather weakly asserted that the intention had been to present "an exciting adventure story set in Israel" (197). Jordan suggests that the correspondence relating to the play reveals not so much prejudice as naïveté on the part of the BBC, a narrow-minded view of its audience demographic.

Focusing on postwar vengeance sought for actions taken prior to the outbreak of the war, *The Prisoner* is evidently another example of a swerve

away from the depiction of the Holocaust, although putting it this way implies that it is possible to clearly demarcate the boundaries of that event (or, rather, those events). What this collection reveals, then, are not only shifts in how perpetration might be defined but also the concomitant shifts in the temporal boundaries of both events and actions: going on trial and serving time imply that an individual can eventually forego the label of criminal and be reincorporated into civil society, but what this volume evidences is that perpetration casts a shadow as long as victimhood. As is shown by other essays here—including Antony Rowland's consideration of immediate postwar and more recent depictions of female concentration camp guards and Caroline Pearce's analysis of material relating to perpetrators on display at German memorial sites—how we see others and how they see themselves are always tightly knotted up with contingent issues relating not only to the understanding of history but also to often deeply ingrained presumptions about gender, nationality, and space.

The cover image of this volume is a still taken from *Shoah*: the face of Franz Suchomel, a former guard at Treblinka, is blurred at the edges, his head balding, a strip of interference across his eyes giving the impression that he is blindfolded, although on closer inspection, his half-open eyes are just visible in the deeply shadowed sockets. In fact, I did not want to examine this image more closely: while writing this review, I often found myself turning the book face down or glancing away from it. Suchomel looks like an alien in this picture, but, more disturbingly, he looks all too human, too.