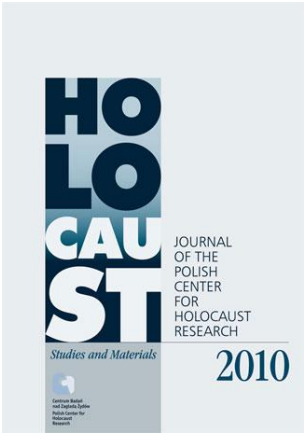


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The Comforting Power of Kitsch. The (Esthetic) Meanders of Holocaust Literature

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The Comforting Power of Kitsch. The (Esthetic) Meanders of Holocaust Literature

The reflections on kitsch in Holocaust literature direct the attention of a literature historian toward an interesting area of issues – an area of complications and entanglements bordering on esthetics and ethics. The very category of kitsch has an interesting genealogy in the history of esthetics. The description and analysis of this phenomenon in 20th century culture is a quite clearly separate, but, as it seems, marginal area of esthetics. The French sociologist Abraham Moles, who was interested in this category, quite precisely described this phenomenon's genesis and spectrum. Since Moles' conclusions have not become obsolete, the most important theses he formulated should be recalled here.[1] According to Moles, "the term kitsch comes from the word *kitschen* from a local dialect in southern Germany, which denotes 'doing something any old way, trashily,'"[2] in a way departing from the norms and standards of perfection or appropriateness. The very character of that explanation shows that kitsch is a term difficult to define, that it is a connotative category, whose sense we determine intuitively, simultaneously agreeing to its status as a semantically undefined, arbitrary and historically changing term.

It is important that Abraham Moles' analyses reveal that 'kitsch' has two dimensions: the esthetic (or rather, as we would say, pragmatic) and the social one. The first one suggests that the essence of kitsch should be seen as a "concession to the receiver's tastes,"[3] as a conformist incorporation into the horizon of (common) expectations, which postulates resignation from the creative quest and element of artistic risk. While in its social dimension kitsch is a "kind of attitude which one enters with respect to things,"[4] it is a "fetishization of objects."[5] This dimension of the functioning of kitsch shows how tightly it is connected with the consumer civilization and axiology prevalent in middle-class society. Precisely the latter observation creates a convenient point for building a platform toward the reflection on the Holocaust's genesis and various forms of Holocaust representations. For it occurs that kitsch

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1 A. Moles, *Psychologie du Kitsch* (Paris, 1977).
2 Ibidem, 13.
3 Ibidem.
4 Ibidem, 34.
5 Ibidem, 20.

– this seemingly marginal esthetic category – corresponds unexpectedly well with the diagnosis of the birth of fascism that has emerged in the philosophy and theory of history. As we recall, Theodor W. Adorno looked for sources of fascism and of the Holocaust's project precisely in the attachment to objects which characterized middle-class society, in the phenomenon of the reification of the human world as well as in the alienation of man and in seeing him in purely economic terms.[6] And kitsch is a specific, ultimate case of objectification, a kind of prefiguration of the middle class's conformity and desire to possess. In his study *Nowoczesność i Zagłada*[7] [Modernity and the Holocaust] Zygmunt Bauman develops this idea by pointing to the continuity between mass production of consumer goods and the insane idea and practice of "fabricating corpses" – the annihilation of millions of people conducted using industrial methods.

I shall not discuss this issue any further, for it is a subject for a separate article. Nevertheless, this surprising convergence of a few threads of 20th century humanistic thought in the issue of "kitsch" seems noteworthy, since it suggests that kitsch not only marks important esthetic/social/historical conflicts, but also functions as a kind of "transmission" which allows for outlining the analogies between various disciplines of science and art.

Ambivalences of Kitsch

Kitsch also seems to be well grounded in the esthetics, history of art and theory of history dealing with the Holocaust. One must admit, however, that it is recalled in surprising, not clearly negative contexts. While in Moles' classic monograph the word "kitsch" evokes undoubtedly pejorative connotations, the contemporary history theoretician Frank Ankersmit makes this category more ambiguous. In his article "Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholia"[8] he writes about the "ambivalence of kitsch." And so on the one hand kitsch is accused of inauthenticity ("kitsch is something 'pretentious,' 'bombastic,' 'affected'"[9]), while on the other hand it seems to be an attribute of all art – for from a certain perspective art is always an imperfect, "cheap" imitation of Plato's ideal. According to Ankersmit, kitsch has a significant value from the perspective of Holocaust art's reception – it makes the receiver react spontaneously and does not allow him to remain indifferent toward the artistic event which he is participating in. "Kitsch" evokes authentic emotions; it is not received with speculation, with a reflective distance. On the contrary, it produces an "emotional" reception thanks to which the ordinary, artistically unrefined

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[6] *Cf.* T. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* in *idem Gesellschaftstheorie und Kulturtheorie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1975).

[7] Z. Bauman, *Modernity and The Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989) (among others the chapters "The Holocaust as the test of modernity," "Moral consequences of the civilizing process").

[8] F.R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, 2001), 186.

[9] Ibidem, 186.

consumers of art also have the chance to participate in commemorative rituals, in the memory of traumatic events from the past. The Children's Memorial in Yad Vashem is one example of kitsch understood in this way – it is an example of positive kitsch. It uses quite petrified and literal symbolism of the color white, mourning candles and photographs, which are all accompanied by a voice reading out the names of thousands of victims. Here is what Ankersmit writes about the memorial:

> This memorial [which Avishai Margalit called "kitsch" in *The New York Review of Books* – A.U.] does not *channel* our already existing feelings and emotions, but, in a way, succeeds in *creating* them. It therefore effects or produces what is the *ingredient* in the kind of remembrance of the past we may associate with the Hall of Remembrance. Or, to put it differently but more interestingly, we *experience* the Children's Memorial and what it commemorates rather than having our experience *organized* by it as it is done by the Hall of Remembrance. The Children's Memorial ends, so to speak, where the Hall of Remembrance begins – and, as I shall argue, precisely this is why for future generations the Children's Memorial is a more appropriate memorial to the Holocaust than the Hall of Remembrance.[10]

While reconstructing the meaning of the word "kitsch" in the reflection on the Holocaust, I need to mention American historian and esthetician Saul Friedländer's famous essay *Reflections on Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*,[11] which has been translated into many languages. It discusses the Holocaust art of the 1980s and 1990s which used the esthetic of "Nazi kitsch" as an artistic strategy. It is an enormously important book; I think it beneficial to devote more space to it, for Friedländer's conclusions in an interesting way throw light on the complexities of the place of kitsch in art about the Holocaust.

The Nazi kitsch as seen by Friedländer is a group of characteristic qualities taken from many styles and symbolic languages. Its most characteristic feature is that the Nazi representations and symbols were set in the "apocalyptic fantasy," which referred to the images of the twilight of the world and of death as total annihilation of everything that lives. In the Nazi esthetic thanatical motifs were accompanied by the longing for harmony and unity with nature, which could be interpreted as an attempt to revive the rustic, primeval values which were so important for the volkist ideology that German fascism drew from. According to Friedländer, it was precisely the tension between the contradictory qualities – Eros and Thanatos, the desire for conciliation/peace and destruction – which evoked powerful emotions among the Nazi movement's fanatic supporters.

Friedländer treats the category of kitsch in two ways: as a feature of the Nazi discourse which simultaneously constitutes a kind of key to its understanding, and, on the other level of analysis, as a creative practice allowing one to find a way out

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[10] Ibidem, 185.

[11] S. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, (New York, 1984).

of the paradigm of the representation which supposes the Holocaust's non-representativeness. There is somehow fundamental kinship between fascism and kitsch. For fascism was a rebellion against modernity, an effect of the crisis that society underwent during the period of its transition from traditional ways of life to the era of industrialization.[12] If Nazism can be called "a revolt in the name of the archaic utopia," then kitsch with its esthetic of simplicity and Arcadian harmony was ideal for expressing the Nazi ideology.

Since, as the American historian claims, the attractiveness of Nazism lay not only in the doctrine it propagated, but at least to the same extent in the power of the emotions it produced, in the images and phantasms it evoked,[13] then the art coping with the heritage of the Holocaust should penetrate the sphere of phantasmatic images used by the Nazi ideology. The artists whose works Friedländer analyzes (Liliana Cavani's movie *Night Porter*, Hans Syberberg's motion picture *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland*, and Michel Tournier's novel *The Ogre*) acted in accordance with this conviction. These works and projects were based on the conviction that they need to use the language of Nazism and its imaginational structures to express and at the same time to unmask the dangerous illusions on which it was based. That is precisely why modern (actually postmodern) art about the Holocaust unmasks and discredits the Nazi esthetics and its beguiling ideology by means of hyperbolization, grotesque sharpening of certain elements constitutive for fascist emblems or for Nazi rhetoric.

In his book Saul Friedländer also undertakes to define the typology and determinants of the esthetics of kitsch in art on the Shoah. This outline reveals the presence of kitsch at various levels of the literary and film work's organization, and it also situates kitsch in various cultural contexts:

1. According to Friedländer, a manifestation of kitsch would be, first and foremost, the aforementioned *juxtaposition*, combination of conflicting elements: the combination of the promise of harmony, which supposes the receiver's emotional engagement, and the fascination with death, atrocity and horror.

2. Thus, typical for the esthetics of kitsch are: the motifs of bucolic landscapes, primeval (Wagner-like) sagas and legends, the topic of "heroes," various esoteric symbols, the aura of mysticism or the references to initiation rituals.

3. According to the American historian, at the level of technique (particularly the novel-writing technique) traces of kitsch can be found in the particularity of description and in the detailed realism in describing mass death (Abraham Moles also writes in his study about the "principle of culmination, the need for mad amassing" of things, attributes, adjectives[14]).

4. According to Friedländer, the presence of erotic-pornographic aspects, the eroticization of power, violence and ruling, are examples of the kitsch esthetics in

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12 Ibidem, 35.

13 Ibidem, 22.

14 A. Moles, op. cit., 63.

Holocaust art. The same thing can be said about the topic of "purification," which seemingly runs counter to it, i.e. the call for purification of or for the destruction of sluggish, corrupt modernity.

5. Finally, kitsch as an esthetic category inevitably leads to the neutralization of the past, to the creation of a softened, bearable image of the Holocaust. Friedländer calls such a strategy the "exorcizing" of the Holocaust, which he defines as placing the Shoah in the context of normal historical events, into "the framework of cognitive conformism and unification."[15]

Escapism and Derision

Friedländer's typology, though highly inspiring and generally useful, often fails when we want to use it to analyze specific literary works about the Holocaust, or rather when we are trying to manage the feeling that we have dealing with kitsch. For one cannot forget that kitsch always functions in the field of the reception of a literary work (either fictional or autobiographical), in the network of the reader's reactions, which have a culturally determined and historical character, which to a large extent depends on the reader's individual impressions. It also enters into interactions with other esthetic categories such as "appropriateness," "conventionality," subversiveness, "good taste," and obscenity (as Claude Lanzmann understood it[16]), which highly complicates the interpretations and the theoretical reflection on kitsch in Holocaust literature.

In my opinion a more useful method here would involve carrying out an exemplificational analysis of selected fictional and autobiographical texts combined with a "pragmatic" attempt to point out the determinants of kitsch. It would allow us to avoid the danger of overinterpretation or of the esthetic theory's violence toward literature. John Boyne's novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* of 2006,[17] which was nominated for the prestigious Irish Book Awards and made into a movie for HBO, calls for such an interpretation. Seemingly, it is not a publication which would manifest kinship with the esthetics of kitsch. On the contrary, it seems to belong to the realm of high literature. The Polish publisher of Boyne's novel (the renowned Wydawnictwo Literackie) would also, it seems, testify to its being an example of ambitious fiction.

The novel is based on a fanciful concept, whose sense the reader should decipher. Perhaps it is precisely the conceptual excess and formal peculiarity which cause the book's gravitation toward kitsch and make it seem so controversial and difficult for the reader to accept.

Boyne's novel is a story of a German boy named Bruno, whose father – an officer – is appointed commandant of a concentration camp in Poland. But the sense of

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[15] S. Friedländer, op. cit., 109.

[16] C. Lanzmann, *The Obscenity of Understanding* in *Trauma. Explorations of Memory*, ed. C. Caruth (Baltimore, 1999).

[17] *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas. A Fable by John Boyne* (London, 2006).

that history remains hidden and shut out thanks to the implementation of a sophisticated literary strategy. It consists in the pervasiveness of a limited narrative structure throughout the novel. It shows the world from the perspective of a small boy, who does not understand the wartime Europe reality and does not know the real purpose of the institution (camp) next to which he lives. Even when Bruno makes friends with Shmuel, the boy behind the wires, when he comes to the "other side" and when he dies in a gas chamber due to a "tragic mistake," even then the horrible truth about the mass annihilation remains beyond the story's horizon (but it is constantly present within the horizon of the reading process, within the reader's scope of competence).

> One afternoon Shmuel had a black eye, and when Bruno asked him about it he just shook his head and said that he didn't want to talk about it. Bruno assumed that there were bullies all over the world, not just in schools in Berlin, and that one of them had done this to Shmuel. He felt an urge to help his friend but he couldn't think of anything he could do to make it better, and he could tell that Shmuel wanted to pretend that it had never happened.
>
> Every day Bruno asked Shmuel whether he would be allowed to crawl underneath the wire so that they could play together on the other side of the fence, but every day Shmuel said no, it wasn't a good idea.
>
> One day Bruno asked why Shmuel and all the other people on that side of the fence wore the same striped pajamas and cloth caps.
>
> "That's what they gave us when we got here," explained Shmuel. 'They took away our other clothes.'
>
> "But don't you ever wake up in the morning and feel like wearing something different? There must be something else in your wardrobe."
>
> Shmuel blinked and opened his mouth to say something but then thought better of it.[18]

Boyne's novel develops tropes that are present, as we remember, in Holocaust literature and art. It talks about the Holocaust from the perspective of a child, and such a narrative and existential perspective established a separate area of Holocaust literature and also contributed to the creation of true masterpieces of children's wartime testimonies. Boyne takes up the topic of children's vision of reality, but simultaneously – bravely and creatively – reverses the scheme known from numerous children's Holocaust autobiographies or fictional works such as Imre Kertesz's *Fatelessness*, Michał Głowiński's *Czarne sezony* [Black Seasons] or Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (actually, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* seems to be the reverse of that beautiful film story about the war treated as "a game") since his novel talks about Auschwitz as seen by a German boy.

It would seem that the author is faithful to the principles of the "esthetics after Auschwitz," and particularly to Adorno's "image ban" due to his consistent avoidance of representing the camp reality and visualizing it in descriptions or in onomastics. Direct or even allegorical description is replaced with a childish, "infantile"

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[18] Ibidem, 150–151.

stylization, where the geographical or administrative names are given equivalents taken from children's vocabulary (in Bruno's language "Führer" becomes "The Fury," while "Auschwitz" becomes "Out-with"). The limited cognitive capability and fragmentariness of the child's knowledge find their equivalent in a language full of euphemisms, ellipses, understatements (the best example of which are the "striped pyjamas" used as an equivalent of the camp outfit in the title). But the analogies to Benigni's film and to Adorno's esthetic are only seeming. It appears that Boyne interprets the principles of writing about the Holocaust very freely, which causes the feeling of disgust and inappropriateness to increase in the course of reading. The novel's seemingly sophisticated construction, which shows the camp reality from the perspective of a small boy's pre-knowledge (expressed in the constantly repeated question "what is on the other side of the fence?") turns into an irritating naivety, escapism and inability to face the horrifying truth about the Holocaust and, in fact, into an unintended parody of the "topos of inexpressiveness," which is so important for understanding the Holocaust literature. The poetics of euphemism leads to the creation of unbearable, inappropriate expressions echoing the tone of unintended derision (e.g. "the community of striped-pyjama wearers").

Boyne's novel, and particularly its aspects which we have associated here with kitsch, shows certain features of Dominick La Capra's "redemptive narrative" – a model of a narrative which, as defined by the American scholar, brings a moral, uplifting message, thus neutralizing the genocide's exceptionality. And such an "uplifting" conclusion is precisely what patronizes the concept on which *The Boy*... is based. Despite the narrator's death the ultimate message of the novel is deeply humanistic and uplifting: for it is a message of brotherhood and human community, which is regarded as stronger and more primeval than the ethnic or ideological divisions. Such a "conciliatory" perspective, however, evokes distrust and objection. The brotherhood of a German boy and Jewish prisoner seems as fundamentally unacceptable as the perspective of the child's "unawareness," which trivializes the lot of the Holocaust victims.

Boyne's novel, due to its exemplariness, provides interesting material which allows for broadening the typology of the characteristics of kitsch suggested by Friedländer. In this context particularly close to kitsch seems the too fantastic and improbable portrayal of the war reality. For it is difficult to imagine a friendship of a German and a Jewish boy in Auschwitz. Totally unrealistic and untrue seems also Bruno's unawareness, lack of orientation regarding the adult heroes' true motives and conditioning. That is why Boyne's novel is read as an unintended parody of or derision at the lot of the Jewish Auschwitz prisoners. What is more, the unrealistic model of Auschwitz's representation alarmingly resembles the strategy of negationists, who deny the deadly function of the death camps, and the arguments/defense mechanisms of the Germans, who supposedly "did not know" about what was going on behind the concentration camps' barbed wired fences.

But the excellent contemporary films by Benigni and Mihaileanu, installations by Zbigniew Libera, Mirosław Bałka and David Levinthal and novels by Jonathan

Foer and Marek Bieńczyk are actually based on a similar concept of risky experimentation with the principle of paradocumentary representation of the Holocaust – they are based on the effect of "decontextualization." Thus, a question arises as to why *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, whose author uses a similar method of elliptic, parabolic talking about history, deserves to be called kitsch? Perhaps because a dangerous perspective shift has taken place here: the perpetrator (in this case a symbolic representative of the "nation of the perpetrators") was cast as the narrator; and perhaps that, coupled with the poetics of euphemism, is what produces such a disturbing and controversial effect? For the perspective shift seems like silencing the victims, like sentencing them to remain silent. The ostentatious telling of the Jewish prisoner's story from the perspective of the German boy quite arrogant in his unawareness produces an extraordinarily "obscene" effect; it seems to be a trick on the verge of cheap provocation.

It seems that we touch upon a highly vital issue here. The interpretation of Boyne's novel suggests that the effect of kitsch is in some vague and difficult to grasp way connected with talking about the Holocaust from the perpetrator's perspective, with manipulation of the ethically significant sense of "[Raul] Hilberg's triad" (perpetrator–victim–bystander). Perhaps this thread opens an interesting area for investigating the essence of kitsch in the literature on the Holocaust.

Kitsch as an Esthetization of Killing

It is difficult not to refer here to, famous also in Poland, Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones*. I am aware of the risk involved in such a choice. According to many critics, *The Kindly Ones* deserved to be called an important literary achievement, almost a masterpiece, thanks to its being situated in the domain of "cultural transgressions" – a tradition especially important in French culture, with its representatives being Georges Bataille, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva (who writes about Céline's novel *Journey to the End of the Night* and his *Bagatelles pour un massacre*). The critics' opinions suggest that Littell's novel is an example of high-standard literature far superior to the commercial or second-rate novels and autobiographies about the Holocaust I have discussed. Hence, it poses all the more of a challenge for the reader and interpreter (who, it must be said, sees *The Kindly Ones* as an exceptionally ingeniously camouflaged example of Holocaust literature kitsch, which uses the style of macabre and freneticism without a deeper esthetic justification).

Contrary to the prevailing opinions which accompanied the book's publication, I think *The Kindly Ones* a text not too sophisticated in respect of the literary technique. The story of Aue, the main protagonist, who presents himself as an intellectualist and art connoisseur, written in the poetics of a monologue (memoir, sometimes inner monologue) is rendered in a surprisingly one-dimensional way – the narration's linguistic shape is monotonous, devoid of the stylistic tone, of the specific modality which marks grand literature. The author's strategy seems obsessively focused on

describing the historical events and their explanations appearing in the German officer's mind. Hence, the narration is directed at imitation, at "faithful" description of the facts and of the reality which constitutes their scenery. But it has nothing to do with the "new realism" strategy (close to Tadeusz Różewicz and Jean Amery) which aimed to develop an innovative, ascetic language, which would be a means of expression devoid of the metaphysical dimension and characterized by decreased figurativeness. Conversely, one might rather get the feeling that the detailed, imitative description is an effect of limited literary skills and unconcern, of unawareness of the axiological sanction involved in specific esthetic choices.

This is not the end. Bearing in mind Saul Friedländer's essay, it is easy to come to the conclusion that precisely *The Kindly Ones* features traces of the typology of the characteristics of literature kitsch suggested by the American historian. It seems that the constant feature of Littell's style is precisely the accumulation, stressed by Friedländer, of various facts, micro-events, trivial thoughts, concerning the mechanism of the Nazi administration's functioning and the German officer's career. The basic literary strategy here consists in the irritating accumulation of observation material, which neither serves any purpose nor supports the novel's construction. Conversely, it absurdly piles up "empty sequences" followed by detailed, particular descriptions of executions. A similar combination of the particularity of description and the piling-up of material can be found in the scenes of the Jews' genocide, massacres, tortures and physical abuse. Perhaps nobody had ever gone so far in the description of the physiological reactions of a tortured or killed person (e.g. during the pogrom in Lvov, the execution in Babi Yar or in Minsk). Hence, the dominating characteristic of Littell's style is a strange kind of hyperrealism, transformed by the author into a sophisticated convention. This literary practice is accompanied by an unchangeable, flat narrative perspective which flattens the described world – the historical events recalled in *The Kindly Ones* lack a "shadow," an ontological aura. They are as if lit by a diffused, homogeneous light controlled by the narrator, who resembles a classic "omniscient narrator." It is not certain whether it is a deliberate measure or the effect of both an inability to control the literary material and unawareness of the importance of the topic the author undertook to pit himself against (for one cannot help the feeling that the poetics used by Littell actually resembles popular adventure novels in its naive realism). Here are a few quotations from the novel to illustrate the opinions presented herein:

> Walking on the bodies of the Jews gave me the same feeling, I fired almost haphazardly, at anything I saw wriggling, then I pulled myself together and tried to pay attention, but in any case I could only finish off the most recent ones, underneath them already lay other wounded, not yet dead, but soon to be. I wasn't the only one to lose my composure, some of the shooters also were shaking and drinking between batches.
>
> Nearby, another group was being brought up: my gaze met that of a beautiful woman, almost naked, but very elegant, calm, her eyes full of an immense sadness. I moved away. When I came back she was still alive, half

> turned onto her back, a bullet had come out beneath her breast and she was gasping, petrified, her pretty lips trembled and seemed to want to form a word, she stared at me with her large surprised incredulous eyes, the eyes of a wounded bird. . . .
>
> I convulsively shot a bullet into her head, which after all came down to the same thing, for her in any case if not for me, since at the thought of this senseless human waste I was filled with immense, boundless rage, I kept shooting at her and her head exploded like a fruit, ...[19]

The author intended the accumulation of the cruel scenes interweaved with Aue's monologues to present the "truth" about the life, intellectual horizons and moral sensitivity of the SS-men from the *Einsatzgruppen* who conducted the executions during the first phase of Operation Reinhardt. The effect, however, seems the reverse of the one intended. The descriptions of the executions seem sophisticated, unnatural, as if the (first-person) narrator himself savored the atrocity and horror. It has little to do, however, with transgressing the limits of conventional morality. Littell's poetics seems more of a cheap replica of the literary transgression tradition; it is difficult not to see the chasm separating *The Kindly Ones* from the great originals: de Sade, Genet or Bataille's novels, both in the technical sense (e.g. the sequences of Aue's dreams, intended as formally sophisticated and which have a seemingly developed metaphorical layer, actually seem literarily mediocre) and in the sense of a certain "ideology" those works carry. De Sade and Genet's transgressions had a subversive potential, they addressed cultural taboos and simultaneously carried a risk of ostracism, of the author's exclusion from the society in which they lived. Against this background Littell's esthetics seems simply a manifestation of conformism, since nowadays it is a very common artistic practice used in various media. *The Kindly Ones* does not break any esthetic-cultural taboo; on the contrary, it is in line with popular culture's dominant trend, whose representatives (e.g. Quentin Tarantino) compete with each other in shocking the audience with sensation, cruelty and startling contrasts. A nonconformist action would rather call for a certain minimalism and self-constraint – for choosing *one* moving scene or short sequence instead of a stream of cruelties, described in detail, pedantically, one would say – in accordance with Friedländer's definition of kitsch.

A little more light on that issue (as to why in my opinion Littell's *The Kindly Ones* deserves to be regarded as Holocaust kitsch) could be thrown by conducting a contrapuntal comparison between the novel and Józef Mackiewicz's short autobiographical story or actually micro-novella *Ponary-Baza* (Ponary-Base) about the Vilna Jews' execution that the narrator witnessed. This story is shocking due to its realism which, however, was used very skillfully and in an empathic and discreet way. Mackiewicz uses a style very similar to that dominating in *The Kindly Ones* – similar yet not the same: he describes injuries, death or actually the physical crushing of the Jewish transport not so much in detail (like Littell) but with reverence and

[19] J. Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, transl. Ch. Mandell (London, 2009), 128–130.

attention, thanks to which his realistic description does not deprive the victims of dignity. The narrator, who does not reveal his reactions openly (he only records the feeling of surprise and physical disgust), simultaneously "looks death bravely in the face." And his heroism and compassion for the victims are expressed in that very look at the Ponary station and in the subsequent description. The pedantic description becomes the equivalent of an empathic look, and the realism which it produces is transformed into a new form of elegiac literature, into a specific lament. In that way the story's hero – a random passer-by, who had no right to appear on the spot of the execution – seized for himself the right to watch and to testify to the massacre which was to remain undescribed.

The comparison of Littell's novel with Mackiewicz's story leads to important conclusions. For it seems that it is the narrator's/hero's role – the position in "Hilberg's triad" from which the Holocaust is described – which introduces crucial differences in the esthetic tone of the works which we are discussing here and in its ethical implications. I could venture to say that it is precisely the account from the perpetrator's perspective which harbors falsity and inauthenticity, which are manifested at various levels. Firstly, as Littell's novel proves, the narration conducted consistently from the perpetrator's perspective becomes a kitsch repetition of Nietzscheanism – a gesture of impertinent contempt for values and rejection of axiology. It also transpires that the book has no informative value; the facts connected with the history of "the final solution of the Jewish question" mentioned by Littell (who, as rumor has it, was aided by a team of researchers) can be revealing and surprising only to the reader who has never taken an interest in Holocaust history. But the strategy chosen by Littell is a fiasco also in a different sense: on the epistemological level. For it turns out that "nothing can be seen" from the perpetrator's perspective. This position marks the blind spot in the Holocaust epistemology. Consequently, the attempt to take this place, to put the narrator in it, inevitably ends in falling into Holocaust kitsch. Moreover, it makes the author himself fall into a cognitive trap. It seems that Littell was seduced by the hero he created. Taking Aue's lofty auto-image for truth, he did not see the intellectual limitation and ordinariness behind the hero's conviction of his own refinement. The esthetics of kitsch caused Littell to present the perpetrators how they would like to see themselves and not how they were in reality.

Sentimental Kitsch, Imitative Kitsch

The issue of the esthetics of kitsch seems much more complicated in the case of autobiographical works about the Holocaust. When we talk about survivors' testimonies (memoirs, diaries, epistolography) we usually suspend the evaluation, at least in the meaning traditional for literature specialists, i.e. understood as a system of qualifying linguistic texts as "successful" or "artistically deficient" by means of situating them on a specially understood axiological scale between masterpiece and graphomania. Holocaust literature is subject to totally different evaluation criteria. Favored here are the following: the categories of "authenticity," "constrained tone,"

"faithfulness to the facts," avoidance of excessively sophisticated formal measures and more or less conscious following of the tradition of "giving testimony" understood as a quasi-documentary description of the historical events in the individual dimension.[20] This characteristic of personal document literature is seen most vividly in the example of the history of the reception of Benjamin Wiłkomirski's book *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*,[21] which was later revealed to be a falsified childhood Holocaust memoir. In this case the autobiographical text (very interesting for formal reasons) was degraded by the readers and sentenced to infamy, because it not only did not follow the principle of referentiality and documental faithfulness to historical facts, but it was even received as an example of usurpation, morally ambiguous appropriation of the "Holocaust survivor's" biography model. The history of the reception of Wiłkomirski/Grossjean's book says a lot about the role which in the evaluation of Holocaust literature is played by the reader, his expectations and his internalized models of storytelling, together with the immanent axiology they carry. It also reveals the area of issues common for kitsch and personal document literature, outlined by the network of mutual dependencies between the sphere of axiology, the notion of truth/authenticity and esthetics.

The category of "kitsch" reveals its problematic nature precisely in the area of personal document literature; it seems that it often touches upon the surface of phenomena which are actually more complicated. If kitsch can call up associations with sentimentalism, mawkishness or mannerism of style, then it must be said that these attributes can be found in many women's Holocaust autobiographies, for instance in Maria Szelestowska's *Lubię żyć*[22] or Halina Birenbaum's *Hope Is the Last to Die: A Coming of Age Under Nazi Terror*.[23] Sentimentalism is actually characteristic of literature practiced by nonprofessional authors who have little literary awareness (but their works become highly desired objects of analysis for researchers of autobiography – to which testify the comments of Philippe Lejeune, the founding father of research on intimism[24] – since such works are the most typical examples of intimism, which is characterized by very strong interiorization of literary genre rules[25]).

Particularly Szelestowska is especially eager to exploit the areas of the Polish language which fit the stereotype of the style of a "girl's album." Such a style is in-

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[20] See among others B. Lang, "The Representation of Evil: Ethical Content as Literary Form," in idem, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago, Ill., 1990); M. Głowiński, "Wielkie zderzenie," *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2002).

[21] See: S. Mächler, *Der Fall Wilkomirski. Über eine Wahrheit einer Biographie* (Zurich, 2000).

[22] M. Szelestowska, *Lubię żyć* (Warsaw, 2000).

[23] H. Birenbaum, *Hope Is the Last to Die: A Coming of Age Under Nazi Terror* (New York, 1996).

[24] Cf. P. Lejeune, *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii* (Cracow, 2001).

[25] Cf. Z. Ziątek, *Wiek dokumentu. Inspiracje dokumentarne w polskiej prozie współczesnej* (Warsaw, 1999).

tensely gender-marked and is characterized by emotional modeling of the language which is full of affectations, exclamations and enumerations. The chapter entitled "Kwiat" (Flower) is the most vivid example of the artistic strategy of the author of *Lubię żyć*. It is entirely devoted to a description of the frozen tulip decorating the wartime (unheated) apartment of the author, who was hiding on the Aryan side of Warsaw, and her husband. It is difficult to think of a more "kitsch" literary concept, an expert on the world literature masterpieces would say. But Szelestowska's autobiographical book is a priceless source for a wartime intimist writing researcher. It is so precisely because it differs from the prevailing model of "documentary writing" due to its spontaneity and authenticity, both in the area of the life philosophy (illustrated by Nechama Tec's concept of female "coping strategies"[26]), and in the area of the ways of describing the world and of the text's literary organization, which in a different article I called a (feminine) "discourse intimization." It manifests itself in the marginalization of "grand history" and stressing individual experience as well as personal and family values.[27]

According to the common but also quite unreflective esthetic classification, Szelestowska's book could be regarded as Holocaust kitsch (it should be stressed here that the author is very intelligent, ironic and courageous). A more insightful interpretation of the book and its (surface) reception would, however, reveal a hidden mechanism of this evaluation. Perhaps this classification marks the feeling of dissonance between Szelestowska's personal style and the model of narration which literature scholars call "the normative [and actually male] model of a Holocaust story,"[28] examples of which are Władysław Szpilman's *The Pianist* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Then "kitsch" would function as a notional fetish describing the literary phenomena reaching beyond the accepted, customary esthetic norms, and revealing the lack of gender and esthetic awareness which would allow for an intellectual analysis of the described phenomena.

It is difficult to resist the impression that the most acute and dangerous form of "kitsch" settled in slightly different areas of personal document literature and close to differently understood forms of evaluation. Two autobiographical books could serve as examples of literary deficiencies understood in this way: Marta Sztokfisz's *Księżniczka deptaku*[29] and Roma Ligocka's *The Girl in the Red Coat*.[30]

The two remembrance accounts are similar especially in their perspective removed in time, which gives them a status of memoirs with a strongly marked narrative frame of the present tense, the time of the story. It does have an influence on the books' shape and general significance – one cannot rid oneself of the suspicion

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[26] N. Tec, *Resilience and Courage. Women, Men and the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2003).

[27] Cf. A. Ubertowska, "Pisałam sercem i krwią'. Poetyka kobiecych świadectw holokaustowych," *Ruch Literacki* 6 (2008).

[28] J. Ringelheim, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable. Women and the Holocaust," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1 (1984): 74–76.

[29] M. Sztokfisz, *Księżniczka deptaku. Opowieść o Edycie Klein* (Warsaw, 2007).

[30] R. Ligocka, *The Girl in the Red Coat* (New York, 2003).

that they are modeled on many famous wartime memoirs and that they (unsuccessfully) imitate the known and already established models of the Holocaust survivors' accounts. While reading those memoirs one is under an increasing impression that the authors who survived the Holocaust did not become "witnesses" according to Primo Levi and Giorgio Agamben's definition, i.e. subjects of a terminal situation. The authors' experience did not transform them, it did not become the reason for a deep metamorphosis, which would make them search for a new language, new genological tradition or esthetic convention, or which would at least impose emotional and stylistic discipline on the authors. While Maria Szelestowska's memoir might be described as "an account of an unruly girl," and this very style was made by the author the strategy of women's resistance to history, the style of *Księżniczka deptaku* is closer to the style of a diary of an egocentric girl focused on her own appearance and attractiveness.

Księżniczka deptaku is a retrospective story of Edyta Klein, which was drawn up and signed by the journalist and writer Marta Sztokfisz. The recommendation on the cover familiarizes the reader with the style and – more broadly – with the author's/heroine's vision of the world. *Księżniczka deptaku* is presented there as an "unbelievable story of a girl miraculously rescued from the Warsaw ghetto, who thanks to her big heart became a lady and entered the world's high life."[31] It is perhaps the perspective of the "world's high life," from which the Warsaw ghetto history is told here, which introduces falsity into Klein's Holocaust memoir. The juxtaposition of the terminal low with the postwar social and material advancement, described in terms of "being raised" to luxury in high society circles becomes highly inappropriate and blurs the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a historical event. Surviving the Holocaust – unlike in the memoirs of Halina Birenbaum, Henryk Grynberg, Janina Bauman, Alina Margolis-Edelman and others – ceases to be a "transformative event" in the individual and historical dimension, and becomes merely a phase or sequence of the "Hollywood" story about the heroine's worldly successes.

> The balls in the Metropolitan Opera in New York were truly wonderful moments. Elegant outfits, champagne, beautiful music, excellent artists. This is how high society was enjoying itself – music lovers in tail coats, club card holders coming for Monday performances, who sat with their guests in the best galleries while their partners occupied the seats near the stage. John Street, one of them, became the founder of the curtain which has been hanging in the Metropolitan Opera ever since.
>
> He never wanted me to be his lover; nevertheless, I felt like a real woman in his company. In a restaurant or during a concert he held my hand, escorted me into the house holding my arm. Even though he was not much older he was a devoted carer for my sons and a partial substitute for my father whom I lost in my childhood.[32] . . .

[31] M. Sztokfisz, op. cit., note on the back of the cover.

[32] Ibidem, 27.

> The life in the ghetto was horrible, but what actually knocked one off one's feet was the unspeakable poverty and hunger. The children were dying in the streets, the people were throwing their relatives' bodies outside their homes, so that they could use their food coupons for a day or two more, so as not to give them back to the Judenrat, because they represented a chance for survival.[33]

The autobiography's composition was organized as a non-chronological patchwork of sequences. The memories from the ghetto are juxtaposed with the fragments of the author's postwar life – a peculiar chronicle of love conquests, acquaintances with millionaires, and the author's professional successes as a model and interior decorator working for the aristocracy and world rulers. The pretentious high life stories impose the style onto the whole autobiography including the parts talking about ghetto life. The drama, the unique tragedy of the ghetto inhabitants as a community which cannot speak out vanishes in that egocentrically oriented narration directed at describing an individual history. The author-witness as defined by Agamben should talk about the Holocaust in the name of all those who died – for only they deserve to be called true witnesses of the Holocaust. This literary imperative is especially significant in women's autobiographies, in which the strategy of depersonalization of narration dominates (it is enough to recall here the panoramic narrative perspective in Seweryna Szmaglewska's *Smoke over Birkenau* or the collective narrator in Charlotte Delbo's or Etta Hillesum's books).[34] The narration in *Księżniczka deptaku* is totally different: it accentuates the heroine's (alleged) uniqueness and her lot's extraordinariness and miraculousness. The narrative focus rarely goes beyond the horizon of the heroine's experiences. The communal world, if at all discussed, is seen only "in relation to" her personal experiences. Thus was created a solipsistic autobiography which is the antithesis of an "autobiography-chronicle." It should be pointed out that the relation between a diary and memoir was reversed here: for usually it is the diary which is more personal, while the memoir allows a panoramic perspective to be created in the description of historical events. In Sztokfisz's book it is the opposite: the passing of time somehow narrows down the perspective, it makes the egocentric vision of the world obliterate the dimension of historicalness and communality.

Roma Ligocka enclosed her memoir into a similar narrative frame, in which the perspective of the story is drawn from a window of a luxurious hotel in Nice. *The Girl in the Red Coat*, half of which talks about the wartime experiences in the Cracow ghetto and on the Aryan side, not accidentally calls up associations with Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. The author herself reveals the source of the motivations which induced her to describe her wartime experiences after such a long time. It was precisely the girl in the characteristic red coat from Spielberg's film (the character

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[33] Ibidem, 35.

[34] Cf. M. Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny. Women Writers and the Holocaust* (New York, 1986).

functions as an allegory of an innocent victim) who set in motion the sequence of analogies to her own biography.[35] This very gesture seems a serious abuse, almost a "marketing trick" aimed, one supposes, at facilitating the promotion of Ligocka's book thanks to the interest taken in the American director's film.

This source simultaneously reveals the book's weakness and invites the following question: since *The Girl in the Red Coat* is an autobiography born from fiction (but partially based on the historical truth), perhaps the suspicion of the book also being fiction is also legitimate? The reactions of the persons Ligocka mentioned in her memoir and particularly the interview given by the author's famous cousin Roman Polański[36] support this suspicion. The director accused the author of departing from the truth and publishing "nonsense" (she writes, for instance, that Polański's father abused him physically, while Polański claims that his father never hit him; the director also accuses Ligocka of holding back the fact that her father was a capo in a concentration camp, for which he was arrested after the war). Polański holds it against the author that she held back the general "weakened truth ontology" of the account of a two- or three-year-old child who, according to the director, could not so accurately remember the events that took place a few dozen years ago.

The Girl in the Red Coat appears to be a peculiar kind of auto-fiction – an example of fictionalizing oneself in an autobiographical account.[37] In the initial fragments of her quasi-memoir Ligocka uses the narrative forms regarded by theoreticians of literature as typical determinants of fiction: dialogues quoted (allegedly) in extenso and omnipresent *perfectum* in the present tense function.[38] The extensive dialogues, which are not a diegetic account or periphrasis, but a mimetic dialogue in reported speech, are seen as improbable and fictional, not always in accord with the author's intensions. Hence, Ligocka uses the "convention of the perfect memory" as understood by Mendilow,[39] while camouflaging its fictional nature. Even in the ethically "neutral" theory of literature such a procedure is classified as a breach of the principle of the autobiographical pact.[40] And in the area of Holocaust literature such behavior of the writer should be regarded as not only unethical but also esthetically deficient and situating Ligocka's book close to Holocaust kitsch.

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The outline presented here shows that the category of kitsch, seemingly connotative and devoid of a clear link to scientific terminology, nevertheless allows us

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35 R. Ligocka, op. cit., the last page of the cover.

36 "Łatwo wyjść, ale jak przeżyć?" A conversation with Roman Polański [G. Lubińska], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 15–16 March 2003, 12–13.

37 Cf. R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska, "Kłopoty z autofikcją. Mimowolne autofikcje Romy Ligockiej," *Ruch Literacki* 6 (2005).

38 J. Jeziorska-Hałady, "Dialog jako wykładnik fikcji," *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2008).

39 Ibidem, 247.

40 Ibidem.

to draw a map of interesting phenomena in the Holocaust literature. Devoid of the capacity to synthesize concepts, it does, however, include various areas in which it marks (fragmentarily to an extent) areas of formal conflicts, esthetic contrasts, falsity in the cognitive process, or, quite the reverse, areas of totally unveiled commerciality and indulgence of not very sophisticated expectations of common readers. Hence, it outlines the spectrum of possible mistakes and imperfections and fills the gap which marks the esthetic which concerns literary representations of the Holocaust, a gap which is the result of a lack of rigorous poetics or evaluation criteria.

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