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Trivialization of the Holocaust? The Elements of Pop Culture in Holocaust Fiction and Film

1

This reflection examines changes in the representation of the Holocaust/Shoah in literature and film over the past few decades. Aleida Assmann has noted that the culture of the Holocaust memory has undergone (what she calls) an "ethical turn" from the figure of a hero or martyr to that of a traumatized victim. Categorizations like survivor, victim, and witness have gained high moral status since the 1990s. This focus has pushed the experience of the victim to the center of consciousness and culture. The Holocaust is recognized as a collective trauma and has been transformed into a global icon in European-American civilization. It represents inhumanity in general, related to values of universal morality, and is perceived as a part of transnational memory.

Some years before Assmann, in 1998, the Israeli historian and scholar Yehuda Bauer declared in his speech to the *Bundestag* in Germany:

> The Holocaust has assumed the role of universal symbol for all evil because it presents the most extreme form of genocide, because it contains elements that are without precedent, because the tragedy was a Jewish one and because the Jews [...] represent one of the sources of modern civilization. (Bauer 2001, 270)

Later he wrote: "In the past two decades or so, an amazing phenomenon has happened. The Holocaust has become a symbol of evil in what is inaccurately known as Western civilization, and the awareness of that symbol seems to be spreading all over the world" (Bauer 2001, 270). He criticized the idea that the Holocaust was "just another genocide." Nevertheless, this universalization of the Holocaust has been evident in many literary works as well as films over the past decades. It has turned out to be one of the key components in the formation of postmodern Western culture. Films from the 1980s such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980, directed by Ruggero Deodato) or *Porno Holocaust* (1981, directed by Joe D'Amato) testify to this process. Neither of these films mentions Jews or their extermination. However, they capitalize on the Holocaust "brand" as a terrible, incommensurable, but also alluring event.

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The term "Americanization" or "Americanizing" of the Holocaust was probably first used in 1983 by Lawrence Langer, the preeminent U.S. scholar of Holocaust literature. Langer's article entitled "Americanization of the Holocaust on Stage and Screen" was published in the collective volume *From Hester Street to Hollywood.* Langer analyzes the enormous impact of two crucial events of the presentation of the Holocaust in the United States: the theater and film adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (premiered on Broadway in 1955, with the film version in 1959) and the 1978 NBC mini-series *Holocaust.* He argues that both alleviate the brutal reality of the Shoah by adapting it to Hollywood's broadly accepted mainstream conventions in America. For instance, in the 1959 film, the feelings that the teenagers Anne Frank and Peter van Pels have for each other are presented in long, sentimental sequences. The last of these scenes comes immediately before the discovery of the hiding place and the arrest of the whole group. However, in her original diary entries, a coolness between Anne and Peter in the final few months is evident. It is significant that the film version of the Anne Frank diary ends with her words, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart." According to Langer, this expression of hope and optimism in extremely difficult circumstances separates the presented narrative from its historical context:

> There is no final solace, no redeeming truth, no hope that so many millions may not have died in vain. They have. But the American vision of the Holocaust, in the works under consideration here, continues to insist that they have not, trying to parley hope, sacrifice, justice, and the future into a victory that will mitigate despair. (Blacher Cohen, 1983)

Langer states that the truth of the Holocaust is about the defeat of hope and the victory of anonymous and mass death. On the other hand, Langer seems to ignore the fact that it is a part of traditional American ethos to emphasize the predominance of goodness, optimism and liberty. The final words of Anne Frank in the film, spoken as if from heaven, express this ethos.

Michael Rothberg also uses this term in the essay "The Americanization of the Holocaust" (1995), later included in his well-known and respected monograph *Traumatic Realism* (2000). Rothberg declares that the Holocaust is being simplified by American popular culture. He lists some parameters of these changes:

> ...the predominance of media and information technologies; the hegemonic position of American media in a global media environment; the "sequencing" of the Shoah in various spheres of the media with other genocides and histories of oppression, as well as with other images and commodities of a postmodern consumer culture. (Rothberg 2000, 201)

Other scholars or survivors have recorded similar changes. In 1998, the Hungarian Holocaust survivor, writer, and *Nobel Prize* winner Imre Kertész wrote that the Holocaust was getting out of hand of the survivors and was becoming a subject of mass media stories, "a cheap commodity".

Polish literary scholars Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska and Magdalena Ruta also write about "Shoah business" and about the universalization of Jewish phenomena in culture, the material world ("Jewish" pubs and cafes for tourists), and politics. Often it is a "virtual Jewish world" instead of the authentic world created by Jews.

According to Alvin Hirsch Rosenfeld, the Holocaust has been transfigured, losing its specificity. This view is close to Yehuda Bauer's above-mentioned statement. He argues that today the culture of the Holocaust is constituted by alternative forms of narrative, art, and film mainly created by television writers, journalists, and filmmakers. National myths and reigning ideologies in each country shape the response to the extermination of Jews in different ways. Unlike Aleida Assmann, Rosenfeld states there is not "anything like a shared memory of the Holocaust, we find a multiplicity of historical memories and often a clash among them." American culture is a dominant shaper of popular images in the West. It dictates the process of imagining and presenting the Holocaust to a great extent for the rest of the world. This is how the Nazi persecution of Jews has been changed from an authentic historical event into just a symbol, or even "entertainment" (2011, 15). Rosenfeld warns of the possible "end of the Holocaust" in the cultural consciousness, and Judy Chicago and Steven Spielberg (see below) can serve as examples for him. *The Holocaust Project* (1985–1993), an artistic installation, made by Chicago in cooperation with her husband, the photographer Donald Woodman, consists of 16 large scale works made of different mediums (tapestry, metal, wood, photography, painting) using the tragic event of the Holocaust as an area where discrimination, injustice, and human atrocities take place (e. g. parallel to the slaughter of Native Americans, the Vietnam War, environmentalism, aggressive patriarchal power of men against women). It was also presented as a book with historical and contemporary photographs and the personal journal of the author (1993). I assume Judy Chicago's project should not be thought of as "entertainment." It provokes emotion because of its use of the topic of the Holocaust as a platform for controversy by utilizing the traditional representation of the Shoah. Moreover, it can bring the Holocaust closer to younger people by comparing it to issues that could be more personally relevant to them.

Sophia Francesca Marshman reflects analogously on Rosenfeld in her study "From the Margins to the Mainstream? Representations of the Holocaust in Popular Culture" (2005). She describes how depictions of the Holocaust have been sliding into the realm of entertainment, following Lawrence Langer and others in call-

ing it the "Americanization of the Holocaust." The phenomenon of the Holocaust has become an object of popular culture and has led to mass Holocaust tourism. As a result, these historical events have been perverted and trivialized. She writes: "The Holocaust has been brought to the attention of millions of people, yet in a softened and distorted guise" (Marshman 2005, 1). She demonstrates this shift with two works, *Sophie's Choice* (novel by William Styron in 1979; film by Alan J. Pakula, 1982) and, similar to Rosenfeld, *Schindler's List.* Marshman attributes this shift to the fact that the Holocaust memory is no longer able to be presented by the witnesses' testimony. Almost all of the witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust have already passed away and the authoritative voices of Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel or Imre Kertész have been marginalized. The popular media tamper with history to make it more accessible to the audience.

However, other scholars have expressed a different opinion. Ernst van Alphen, Professor at Leiden University, published the essay "Playing the Holocaust" in 2001, in which he discussed the role of toy-art works inspired by Nazis atrocities and the Holocaust: David Levinthal's photographs in his *Mein Kampf* (1996), where mass murders, gas chambers or crematoriums are presented by toys and figurines, Ram Katzir's wandering installation *Your Coloring Book* (1996), and Zbigniew Libera's *Lego Concentration Camp* (1996) arousing a lot of controversy. It seems that the devices Levinthal, Katzir, and Libera use are too disrespectful to depict these horrible events. Nevertheless, van Alphen concludes that such a playful presentation of the Shoah does not necessarily lead to its trivialization. It can evoke emotional imagination and lead to engagement with the shocking past. The Polish researcher and writer Leszek Engelking, who refers to van Alphen's original essay, called his own article "Playing the Holocaust and Holocaust Business." He comments on this issue:

> For a generation entering the artistic arena in the 1980s and 1990s, that of grandchildren of the victims and bystanders of the Holocaust, the situation was different. In any case, some of their representations were focused on demonstrative violations of taboos, bordering on profanation. The dolls [...] appear in the works of several artists dealing with the subject of the Holocaust, above all with a Pole Zbigniew Libera (born 1959) – with the creation of the *Lego Concentration Camp.* They are action figures of executioners and victims, prisoners and guards of the German camp, and the whole work is a set of Lego blocks to build a death camp. It is undoubtedly a hugely controversial artifact. (Engelking 2007, 89)

The thesis of this reflection, in part related to van Alphen's and Engelking's arguments, is as follows: it is an indisputable fact there are fewer and fewer eyewitnesses of the extermination of the Jews and of the Holocaust in general. As a consequence, the Holocaust is becoming more and more of a universal theme and more often the subject of fiction. Nevertheless, is this fact alone causing a slide

to entertainment? Is it not also a challenge for new artistic expression or new provocative approaches? Is it not correct to generalize and consider using pop culture Holocaust literature and culture en bloc? Connecting the Holocaust to poetic, literary, and aesthetic devices has often been discussed as taboo, or at least as inadequate, as reflected in the controversy surrounding Art Spiegelman and his graphic novel *Maus* (1980–1991) that eventually won a Pulitzer Prize. I suppose that the patterns of American (and in general Western) mass and popular culture are more heterogeneous and multifaceted than Langer and the other researchers mentioned have assumed. Devices of pop culture can also be used for dismantling sentimental superficiality, as well as black and white characters (see Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds*, 2009).

2

The shortcomings and strengths of pop culture paradigms can be demonstrated by Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993). It was warmly received by audiences (approximately 120 million viewers) and contributed to strengthening the role of the Holocaust in collective memory. The film is a free adaptation of Thomas Keneally's novel *Schindler's Ark* (1982, later *Schindler's List*), which presented an idealized figure of the "good Nazi German" who rescued more than a thousand Jews. While the novel is more authentic, the film distorts some historical facts, for example, Schindler's mission to save his Jews in Auschwitz and Schindler's sentimental farewell to prisoners in Brünnlitz. In contrast, Schindler's antagonist, the brutal commander of the Płaszów camp Amon Göth, becomes the embodiment of ultimate evil. In this way, the film utilizes archetypes as in myths or fairy tales which are already well known from Hollywood storytelling: the struggle of absolute good versus absolute evil, a black and white vision of the world, the character of a moral hero, and the happy ending. The figure of the little girl in a red coat, killed by Nazis, uses a favorite motif of Holocaust literature and film: the death of an innocent child. This scene is shot as a color sequence in the mainly black-and-white film. Therefore, the film is a sophisticated mixture of horror or thriller (liquidation of the ghetto in Kraków, sequences in Auschwitz), noble goodness, and sentimentality (the last scene in the cemetery in Jerusalem). *Schindler's List* emphasizes the basic goodness of human beings, like the aforementioned theater and film adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank.* Nevertheless, it is not possible to agree with Claude Lanzmann's assessment of *Schindler's List* as a "kitschy melodrama," or with Imre Kertész, who did not allow for the possibility of life in a Nazi concentration camp to be accurately portrayed by anyone who had not experienced it first-hand.

Marshman's and Rosenfeld's statements are to some extent inconsistent with Assmann's "ethical turn" in her view of the Holocaust. While Assmann notices the dominance of the experience of a victim, Marshman and Rosenfeld claim that the contemporary Holocaust memory eliminates survivors' voices. However, all of them agree with the idea of the universalization of the Holocaust. Currently, the Holocaust appears in forms and genres that are incompatible with how it was presented in the several first post-war decades. These topics are addressed not only in middle-brow novels and films like *Sophie's Choice* but are also integrated into popular culture in genres like mainstream romance film, musical, operetta, etc. From Polish literature, examples can be mentioned such as Bogdan Rutha's novels *Wyspa psów* (The Island of Dogs, 1971) and *Szczurny palac* (The Rat Palace, 1973) or Jerzy Stegner's romance and crime novel from the Warsaw Ghetto *Żydówka Noemi* (Jewess Noemi, 2010). Slawomir Buryła states that Stegner is betrayed by his inability to write a good literary work, not by the popular genre. All these novels are stereotypical and monotonous. Neither Stegner nor Rutha managed to use the opportunities that these genres offer. This assessment can also be applied to works of the Czech Holocaust survivor and writer Arnošt Lustig, at least to a certain extent. This will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, in contrast to Marshman, it can be argued that this universalization and popularization of the Holocaust is not only focused on the so-called soft versions of life-affirming "escape stories," sentimental stories with beautiful Jewish girls or innocent children, which allow the audience to hide themselves from the harsh realities of the Holocaust. Sometimes, authors and filmmakers utilize elements of thriller, romance, magic realism, fairytale, fantasy, comics or horror to address the young generation and to create original works. The following authors belong to this group: the American novelist Michael Chabon (*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay, 2000*; this work won the Pulitzer Prize), the Czech writer Jáchym Topol (*Chladnou zemí*, 2009; in English *The Devil's Workshop*, 2013) or the Polish novelist Igor Ostachowicz and the Slovak writer Peter Krištúfek whose works are discussed in detail below.

They endeavor to revise classical images and devices of the representation of the Shoah. This integration of pop culture forms is a special literary or cinematic strategy. It can be used as an approach that appeals more to contemporary generations. Moreover, it can also be used as an element of provocation, seeking to be taboo-breaking in style. These works are often connected with innovative narrative techniques, irony, grotesque, or comedy – or in contrast with demonstrative "unpoetic" style. This is the way a "de-" and "re-" constructing of the Holocaust is presented.

Sometimes, these works adapt and modify motifs of Jewish magical tradition and folklore. In this way, Michael Chabon uses the figure of the Golem in *The*

Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay. The Golem, a larger-than-life creature made by a man, was most associated with the sixteenth century Prague rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel. Loew allegedly modeled the Golem from clay and brought him to life to protect the Jews. According to legend, Loew stored the Golem in the attic of the Old New Synagogue in Prague. In Chabon's novel, in 1939, one of the protagonists, the young Jewish artist Josef (Joe) Kavalier, has escaped from Nazi-occupied Prague while also smuggling the Golem out with him. Joe leaves the Golem in the city of Vilnius in Lithuania and then eventually makes his way to Brooklyn, where his aunt Ethel and cousin Sammy live. While the members of Kavalier's family in Europe all become victims of the Holocaust, Joe and Sammy create a modern graphic novel centered on their hero, the Escapist, who fights against the Nazis.

Another creature connected with the Jewish tradition is the dybbuk which originated from the Hasidic folklore. It is the malicious spirit of a dead person who is able to possess living beings and manipulate them. It became known from the Yiddish play written by S. Ansky *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds* (premiered in Warsaw in 1920) and has grown into being a favorite subject of adaptations by writers and film directors. For instance, in Romain Gary's 1967 novel *La Danse de Genghis Cohn* (The Dance of Genghis Cohn), a former concentration camp SS officer, Lieutenant Schatz, is haunted by the dybbuk of the Polish Jew Genghis Cohn, whom he had killed. The Polish author Hanna Krall published the short story "Dybbuk" as a part of her book *Dowody na istnienie* (Proofs of Existence, 1995; in English in *The Woman from Hamburg and Other True Stories*, 2005). The protagonist is an American scientist, Adam S., born after the war. He is probably possessed by the spirit of his stepbrother, who apparently died in the Warsaw Ghetto during the war and who has come to rouse him to awareness of his Jewish roots and family history.

In several works, the Holocaust only appears as a backstory. In the works of younger authors, the Holocaust is often presented as one of several topics, "embedding the Holocaust in a broader narrative."

3

In this section, the work of the Czech writer Arnošt Lustig (1926–2011), who is a good example of changes in the presentation of the Holocaust literature in the few last decades, will be discussed. Lustig survived the Holocaust. When he was 16, he was imprisoned in Terezín, then in Auschwitz for a short time (several days), and later in Buchenwald. Thus for him, the Shoah became the theme of his life's writing. His first works belong to his best: *Noc a naděje* (1958, Night and Hope, translated into English in 1962) and *Démanty noci* (1958, Diamonds in

the Night, translated into English in 1962, with a new translation in 1977). Lustig's characters are not heroic figures, especially in these first short stories. They are often outsiders, children, or old men and women. Despite the bleakness these people must repeatedly undergo, by donning an outer shell just to survive, the majority of them try to maintain their fundamental moral values.

Arnošt Lustig's later books, however, accentuate the more abrasive sides of life in the camps: physical and mental cruelty, violence, homo- and heterosexual prostitution, a lack of solidarity among the prisoners, and so on. He often records the stories of young Jewish girls and women. Their beauty and youth form a moving contrast to the horrors of the Shoah. He first applied this approach in the novellas *Dita Saxová* (1962, translated into English in 1966, a new translation in 1993) and *Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou* (1965, A Prayer for Kateřina Horovitzová, translated into English in 1973), and also in *Nemilovaná*, subtitled *Z deníku sedmnáctileté Perly Sch.* (1979, The Unloved: From the Diary of 17-Year Old Perla S., translated into English in 1985). *Nemilovaná* won the prestigious American National Jewish Book Award in 1986. It is the story of a young Jewish prostitute named Perla in the Terezín ghetto, written as her fictional diary, capturing the period from August to December 1943 with both naïveté and immaturity as well as abrasive matter-of-factness.

> November 16. Twice. Candle and matches. Hairnet. A box of spirit. Three times. Solid alcohol. A quarter of rye bread. Twenty grams of margarine. Thermometer. Tin cup. Liter thermos. (Lustig 1991, 63)

These are rewards for sex.

Perla is a young and beautiful girl, initially submissive in her relations with men. One of her "clients" is a German SS officer who humiliates her by behaving in a superior manner that is condescending to her. This character fulfills the stereotype of the sadistic Nazi. However, Perla's behavior changes towards the end – as does Kateřina Horovitzová's in Lustig's earlier work. When Perla learns she has to leave Terezín with a transport to the East, she kills the Nazi officer by biting through his throat while they are having intercourse.

In general, Perla belongs to the well-known and popular character type of the selfless courtesan or prostitute (e. g. Marguerite Gautier in Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias*, or Sonia Marmeladov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*). In Holocaust literature, Ladislav Mňačko's Marta or Maria Nurowska's Elżbieta can be seen as examples. In *Smrť sa volá Engelchen* (Death Is Called Engelchen, 1959), Marta is a beautiful and mysterious woman with a hidden Jewish identity. She works for the Gestapo as a secretary and sleeps with Nazi officers to gain information that she then passes on to the partisans in Moravia. After the war, Marta is

still traumatized by the events that she experienced and commits suicide. Elżbieta Elsner in *Listy miłości* (Letters of Love, 1991), a sixteen-year-old Jewish girl, comes voluntarily to the Warsaw Ghetto where she becomes a prostitute in a whorehouse to save her father from starving. After escaping from the ghetto, she assumes a new identity. Both of these novels use a mixture of innocence and sexuality while being set among the horrors of the war and Holocaust.

Unloved could be considered to be, in part, original. Instead, Lustig's later novels repeat and replicate his earlier types of characters and devices. Like in the diary *Unloved*, laconic records of sexual partners appear in the first part of the novel *Krásné zelené oči* (2000, Lovely Green Eyes, translated into English in 2001): "Fifteen: Herrmann Hammer, Fritz Blücher, Reinhold Wupperthal, Siegfried Fuchs…"

The main figure is also a youthful Jewish prostitute, the fifteen-year-old Hana Kaudersová, named "Kůstka" (in the English translation "Skinny"), from Prague. After spending some cruel months in Auschwitz, she stays three weeks in a German military field brothel in Poland. Every day, Hanna is forced to serve a dozen soldiers, some of whom are distraught and violent. In this novel, on the one hand, the long dialogues of the characters contain trite ideas; on the other hand, Hana's experiences in Auschwitz and in the brothel are extreme, harsh, and cruel.

> Anything that is not specifically permitted is forbidden. […] The soldier is always right. Kissing is forbidden. Unconditional obedience is demanded. […] With immediate effect, it is forbidden to provide services without a rubber sheath. Most strictly prohibited are: Anal, oral or brutal intercourse. Taking urine or semen into the mouth or anus. Re-using contraceptives. (Lustig 2002, 10–11)

Eroticism, an attractive woman, and teenage sexuality also appear in Lustig's so-called Jewish Trilogy, edited in the years 1992 to 2000 (*Colette, dívka z Antverp*, 1992; *Tanga, dívka z Hamburku*, 1992; *Lea z Leeuwardenu*, 2000). Here, the female figures are in many ways similar. In all these works, the author uses conventional narration: long, dull dialogues, stiff repetitions of motifs, and trivial reflections and remarks by the narrator.

> "Am I?"
> "You are," answered V. F.
> "From flesh and blood?"
> "From flesh and blood." (Lustig 2013, 76–77)

> "Why did God create you and me?" (Lustig 2013, 151)

The narrator comments on these clichés: "These words have ten different meanings," even later, "Any reference to 'purity' has a hundred different meanings." Such dialogues and remarks should provide an impression of considerable depth. However, they are banal. Likewise, in his later novels, Lustig's narrative uses many conventional images. On the first page, he already makes an initial comparison of Colette with birds:

> The wing-span of flying birds was in her eyes. The course of flight from somewhere to somewhere. [...] She resembled a bird whose magnetic needle failed for the whole nine months that she was known to several people in Auschwitz-Birkenau. (Lustig 2013, 5)

Similar images can be found approximately 40 times in the novel: for example, "She felt like a bird caught in a huge cage." This comparison is well-known from prison stories (e. g. from Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead* to Anne Frank) and has reached the point of triviality.

The narrator uses these and analogous rhetorical devices (also images of ashes, chimneys, trains, crematorium ovens) on almost every page. He tries to compensate for these conventional images by using devices of thrillers and erotic novels. For example, in *Colette*, the extermination camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau is described in many scenes, most of which are violent and cruel. The Nazi warden Weissacker, like Amon Göth in *Schindler's List*, kills prisoners for pleasure and rapes female prisoners. His person is the embodiment of the ultimate evil. A pretty 19-year-old Belgian Jewess named Colette is also among his sexual victims. However, she falls in love with a Czech prisoner named Vili Feld. Risking their lives (forbidden love!), Colette and Vili sneak off together and make love. These love scenes provide a strong contrast to Colette's and Vili's harsh life in Auschwitz. Critics have stressed the author's personal experience of Nazi concentration camps as a guarantee of the novel's authenticity and credibility. But in fact, his emphasis on erotic and sexual scenes is quite implausible. Furthermore, as Alvin H. Rosenfeld writes, sexual scenes set in an extermination camp present an improper trivialization and even abuse of tragic events.

> In the camps themselves, as virtually all survivor accounts indicate, the central, most frustrating, and hence most abiding appetite was for food. Other passions were secondary and, it seems, for most were held in abeyance. As a result, one of the characteristics of Holocaust writings at their most authentic is that they are peculiarly and predominantly sexless. (Rosenfeld 1980, 164)

Moreover, the plausibility of the main characters in *Colette* is often questionable. Vili and Colette are "omnipresent" (like the famous Forrest Gump in Robert Ze-

meckis' film) and also "omniscient." Lustig writes that "V. F. knew there was a forgery workshop where Nazis produced English and American money …"

Colette who was known only to "several people in Auschwitz-Birkenau," "knew men from the Sonderkommando who worked in the crematoria, bakers from bakeries, cobblers from shoemaker's workshops, wagon unloaders and employees from the ramp" (Lustig 2013, 65). She even knew about Himmler's secret order to stop the gassing of Jews. By using this information and these statements, the author constructs a kind of encyclopedia of life in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nevertheless, on the one hand, the improbable sexual scenes and the omniscience of the characters misrepresent the harsh reality in the camp. On the other hand, the exaggerated use of highly improbable situations defiles the reality of the Shoah. The result is a loss of authenticity and plausibility of the characters and situations that are presented. At the same time, much of this "encyclopedic data" turns out to be inaccurate when compared with known historical facts.

The film adaptation of the novel, created by director Milan Cieslar in 2013 (allegedly with Lustig's participation; however, Lustig had died in February of 2011), stresses the brutality of some of the scenes and emphasizes eroticism. While the lovers in Auschwitz in the well-known Polish film *Pasażerka* (Passenger, 1963) hold each other's hands, the film version of Colette presents hetero- and homosexual intercourse in Auschwitz in a variety of positions. Some sequences and the last-minute rescue of the two main characters are reminiscent of thriller and Hollywood movies.

In the novella *Colette*, for instance, Lustig's narrative uses many conventional images. The plausibility of his characters is very often lost.

4

The Polish-American historian Jan Tomasz Gross has questioned the Poles' self-image during World War II. He has raised the issue in his books *Neighbors* (Polish edition 2000, in English 2001), *Fear* (in English 2006, in Polish 2008) and *Golden Harvest* (with Irena Grudzinska Gross; Polish 2011, English 2012), which are all based on testimonies and documents. He has described cases of Polish complicity and enrichment through the murder of Jews and has accused the Polish society after 1945 of failing to come to terms with what he considered to be widespread antisemitism. Gross claimed that Polish people killed more Jews than Germans

during the war.[1] His works have aroused numerous controversies and polemics by conservative Polish historians and politicians.

As Przemysław Czapliński states, the publication of these books also became a turning point in Polish literature dedicated to the persecution of Jews and the Holocaust. Currently, in literature, Poles appear as either persecutors, helpers or witnesses. The Poles are not only victims of the Nazi regime, but they also have to deal with their own guilt. The events in Jedwabne in July 1941 where the Polish villagers murdered more than 300 Jews by burning them in a barn has inspired several works either directly or indirectly – Tadeusz Słobodzianek's theater play *Nasza klasa* (2009, Our Class), Władysław Pasinowski's film *Pokłosie* (2012, Aftermath), Krystian Piwowarski's short stories *Więcej gazu, Kameraden!* (2012, More Gas, Comrades!) and Igor Ostachowicz's novel *Noc żywych Żydów* (2012, Night of the Living Jews), which is analyzed below in more detail. The barn in Jedwabne has become a symbol, like the gas chambers in Auschwitz. Marta Tomczok calls these stories "post-Jedwabnie narrations."

Similar statements are also presented in Slovak and Czech Jewish studies and literary works. In the Czech Republic, the memory of the Holocaust had to compete with the memory of Czechs enduring the Nazi occupation. In Slovakia, the new political elites condemned the persecution of the Jews and distanced themselves from the clero-fascist administration of the Slovak Republic during the war (Hiemer et al. 2021, 26). The Slovak Catholic Church and its supporters, however, often defended the wartime leader, the priest Jozef Tiso and his regime. Several Slovak historians and other intellectuals argued against this distortion of history and demonstrated the responsibility of the Slovak clero-fascist administration for persecution and deportations of the Jews. The sharpness of the debates illustrates something about the fragile status of the Jewish cultural tradition that has to be constantly renegotiated and protected. This is what recent literature undertakes through imagination, pop culture, and entertainment elements linking history and the present in a surprising way.

Concerning these problems, another writer to be analyzed closer is the Polish author Igor Ostachowicz (born in Warsaw in 1968). He served as an advisor to the former Polish prime minister Donald Tusk and debuted under the pseudonym Julian Rebes with the novel *Potwór i panna* (2009, Monster and Miss), "the bloody story of a monster in love" with a setting that spans from ancient Rome to contemporary Warsaw. His following novel, *Noc żywych Żydów* (2012, Night of the Living

1 Jan T. Gross, "Eastern Europe's Crisis of Shame," September 13, 2015, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/eastern-europe-refugee-crisis-xenophobia-by-jan-gross-2015-09?barrier=accesspaylog.

Jews), was nominated for the most prestigious Polish literary prize, *Nagroda Literacka Nike*. It contains elements of horror or thriller. The title was probably inspired by the famous horror film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968, directed by George A. Romero), which depicts the fight of a few townspeople against the "living dead" zombies in Pennsylvania, or by the short horror film *Night of the Living Jews* (2008), which depicted an invasion of Jewish zombies attacking a gentile family while hungering for human flesh (a parody on zombie films). In 2014, Marek Kalita adapted Ostachowicz's novel for the theater in a staging at the Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw.

The fictional world of Ostachowicz's novel is set in the twenty-first century, in the present-day Warsaw district of Muranów, where the Warsaw Ghetto was located. The Jews who were killed during the Holocaust and have been forgotten now come back as zombies.

> Only those who are forgotten break out of the floor and crawl out of their basements, those who don't have any family. Nobody will remember them over their grave. People need a little warmth or interest in them after their death, especially after a tragic one. (Ostachowicz 2012, 203)

Forgetting about the Jews contrasts with Aleida Assmann's statement about memorializing the Holocaust as a collective trauma and a common European transnational memory. Although it is an important part of the Jewish tradition to bury deceased relatives and to remember them, Jewish graves have not been tended to after the War, in contrast to those of the murdered Poles.

In the novel *Noc żywych Żydów* Jews emerge from the cellar and flood contemporary Warsaw, trying to integrate into Polish society. The history of Polish Jews returns in the form of zombies, like horror, disgusting and harsh. Polish neo-fascists and skinheads rise against them and a battle between the forces of good and evil takes place in the Arkadia shopping center. Like in *Schindler's List* and other works, archetypes of myths or fairy tales are exploited: the struggle of good versus evil. In contrast with the film *Night of the Living Dead* and other works, the zombies are not aggressive; on the contrary, they are besieged and must defend themselves. These Jewish zombies can speak and feel, and they are presented as victims. They cannot rely on the help of the Polish police or the public too much. Like other authors of his generation, Ostachowicz uses devices of magic realism and fantasy. Miraculous props play an important role in this fight, for example, a silver heart that brings happiness to its owner. The heart belonged to the Jews but was stolen by fascists, and eventually it is returned to the Jews and their allies. The antisemites manage to set the roof of the shopping center on fire, but it

seems they will be defeated, and the Jews will be able to leave and go home to their former houses in Warsaw.

The narrator is the unnamed main character, "a worker with a university diploma" and the son of an antisemitic father. He lives in a modest apartment in Warsaw with his philosemitic girlfriend, whom he calls "Skinny" ("Chuda"). Suddenly he finds himself involved in a big conflict, almost against his will. Eventually, he decides to help the Jews, and he joins them in fighting against the forces of evil. He probably dies during this fight and becomes a zombie too. Nevertheless, the reader cannot be sure, just as it is unclear whether or not the Jews will be saved. Images of "white light" suggest that it is possible the whole story was only a vision caused by amphetamines or other drugs.

Like Lustig in *Colette*, Ostachowicz uses devices of the thriller in the novel. Ostachowicz also exploits popular cultural references, elements of fantasy, comics, and even computer games, horror, and porn films. At the same time, however, the narration mocks these genres and plays with their clichés and stereotypes.

The narrator's language is a specific feature of *Noc żywych Żydów.* It is spoken Polish, on occasion rude, sometimes difficult to understand for those who are not native speakers of Polish. Nevertheless, the style is consistent with the general perspective of the text and with the harsh situations that are depicted. In this novel, as in almost all the books mentioned, there often occur scenes of violence and open depictions of sex, both voluntary and forced, and both hetero- and homosexual. But from time to time, humor and laughter also emerge. As an example, at one point a "living dead" Jewish Polish officer sitting in a cafe wants to light a cigarette. The narrator tells him that smoking is not allowed there, and the officer wonders if it was a remnant of Nazi regulations. In the novel, the news media present sensational headlines like "Living Corpses in the Streets" or "Jewish Corpses Obstruct the Living Poles."

A Polish physician who tried to save his Jewish fiancé during the war is an interesting minor character. After a brutal act of the Nazi Gestapo, he is forced to kill her to save her from further torture. Then he decides to get revenge and murder the Nazis. This type of fierce avenger is not common in the Holocaust literature. It recalls, for example, figures in Jurek Becker's novel *Bronsteins Kinder* (1986, Bronstein's Children; film adaptation by Jerzy Kawalerowicz, 1991) or the famous film by Tarantino *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). According to Marta Tomczok, Ostachowicz's novel is far from any of the usual martyrology and melancholy, both significant for Polish Holocaust literature. The author found in pop culture – like Art Spiegelman in *Maus* and other younger artists – a perfect innovative medium for evoking the past.

The scenes situated in Auschwitz are especially remarkable in the Ostachowicz's novel. They are perhaps only comparable with the "Auschwitz chapter" in

the novel *Sestra* (1994, in English *City, Sister, Silver*, 2000) by Jáchym Topol. Ostachowicz's narrator and his girlfriend "Skinny" find themselves in the transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau in the phantomatic, unreal fictional world of *Noc żywych Żydów.* Their enemies, the protagonists of evil, wait for them on the ramp and welcome them by roaring and beating them. The narrator goes through harsh experiences (*Appell*, *Bunker*), and suffers from hunger. He says:

> …I feel like this is some infernal version of Auschwitz, improved on by the devil, because I don't know how it was in the real one. But it seems to me that [there] is not even a little sparkle of positive human emotion here, not even pity or willingness. And I am among the deceived. (Ostachowicz 2012, 137)

He can see a lot of cages into which naked female and male prisoners are driven. He finds himself in one of the cages with his girlfriend. She is apathetic to him, and he watches her having sex with other men, and he feels like an animal. Eventually, their stay in Auschwitz turns out to be the devil's performance of the forces of evil. They want to seize the silver heart that is said to bring happiness to its owner and thereby force the narrator to surrender to them.

These scenes could have, in fact, been inspired by the chapter "I had a Dream" in Topol's novel *Sestra*, where the characters also find themselves in the Auschwitz camp and this "visit" is presented as something unreal but overwhelmingly impressive. Topol's novel *Sestra* was published in Polish in 2002 (a decade before the publication of *Night of the Living Jews*) in the brilliant translation of the aforementioned Leszek Engelking. Engelking has also analyzed *Sestra* and other works by Topol.

5

The novella *Ema a Smrtihlav* (Emma and the Death's Head Hawkmoth), written by the Slovak author Peter Krištúfek (1973–2018), was published in 2014. Krištúfek worked as a moderator in various radio stations, filmed documentaries as well as feature films, and wrote short stories and novels. In his works, he often presented a controversial view of modern Slovak history using dramatic storylines and fantastic motifs. He died prematurely due to a traffic collision in Central Slovakia.

The beginning and the end of the story are set on the coast of the Black Sea in Bulgaria in 1961. The main character, Šimon, almost 30 years old, is spending his holiday there with his wife, daughter, and son. However, the main storyline returns to the pre-war and war years in Slovakia. Before the war, the then little Šimon lives with his parents and younger brother in Bratislava. His father is a Czech architect

and his mother a Slovakian Jew making fashionable dresses for women. The happy life of the family ends with the breakup of Czechoslovakia, the formation of the Slovak clero-fascist republic, and the outbreak of World War II (1939). Because his father is Czech, he must leave his family behind and move out of the Slovak state and back to the Czech lands. His wife and children are endangered by discrimination for being Jews. In 1942, the transports of the Slovakian Jews begin. Šimon's mother tries to save her family. She flees with her younger son Leo to Central Slovakia, where she has acquaintances. Šimon, a black-haired and more "Jewish" looking boy, is taken to a village near Bratislava where Marika Sándorfiová, a friend of his mother, lives. Šimon spends three years there hiding in her barn. All four members of the family survive and come back together after the war.

The novella is narrated in the third person but completely from Šimon's point of view. During his hiding, Šimon is ten to 13 years old. The whole time he must stay alone in the barn with smelly pigs and goats. Marika "néni" (aunt) only comes to the barn in the early morning and late evening to feed the cattle. Šimon suffers from the cold in the winter, his toes get frostbitten. He is still afraid of being found out; one day, the barn is searched by German soldiers, but they do not discover his hiding place.

Throughout his three years in hiding, Šimon's only distraction is reading colorful magazines, listening to music from nearby houses, and watching a death's head hawkmoth in the barn. Based on the pictures in magazines, adventure books, and fairy tales, Šimon invents his own fantastic story. He imagines a pretty brown-haired woman named Ema lying on the beach near the sea in a yellow swimsuit (this picture is also depicted on the frontispiece of Krištúfek's book). Like in the magazine, she smiles and puts Nivea Creme from a blue tin on herself. Šimon's fear of being discovered is transferred into another figure, a German General wearing the picture of a death's head hawkmoth on his uniform. Šimon calls him General Death's Head Hawkmoth. The General threatens Ema, kidnaps her in a tank, and imprisons her in his house. Šimon manages to free her and they run away together.

The tale imagined by Šimon is similar to many fairy tales and romances based on the archetypical story about "the princess and a dragon." A "damsel in distress" and her saving is also an essential part of Hollywood films, and pop culture in general (see the above-mentioned films *Schindler's List* or *Colette*). Ema embodies beauty, peace, and love, while the General incorporates danger and evil. Šimon's tale is connected with two popular sentimental or even kitschy songs about love and death. They are the Hungarian "Szomorú vasárnap" (Gloomy Sunday) and the German "Lili Marleen." Šimon can hear the first coming from the neighbors while he is in hiding; the second he can only play in his head while he imagines Ema's story. The author quotes both of them in their respective original languages.

He adds the Slovak translations and explanations at the end of his book. He writes that "Lili Marleen" became "a fateful hit of German soldiers fighting in World War II." In fact, it was also popular among American and British units. Marlene Dietrich performed it live for the Allied troops during the war and sang it many times later. Two films of the same name were made, the British *Lilli Marlene* (1950) and the German *Lili Marleen* (1981).

Krištúfek's integration of these sentimental songs into his novella is another example of how he used pop culture elements in his writing. On the other hand, his construction of *Emma and the Death's Head Hawkmoth* is very sophisticated. For instance, the death's head hawkmoth is a moth which Šimon had seen in his father's collection of butterflies. The eagles with spread wings on the uniforms of Slovak fascists also evoke memories of this moth in him. He later watches its hatchings grow and develop in the barn. In a magazine, he sees a picture of the Nazi general who "has the skull and crossbones on his cap." All these experiences are projected onto his image of the German General.

Šimon's daydreams are blended with actual events. Whereas the Germans are searching the barn for hiding places, Šimon imagines how Ema and he would escape from the General and his soldiers. At the moment the German officer says "Nichts!" and leaves the barn, Ema and Šimon are saved and return to the beach.

It is worthy of attention that later in 1961, in the frame story, Šimon's real wife is very similar to his boyish image of Ema:

> The pretty woman lay in a beach chair under a colorful parasol. Ema, he recognized her at once. She was happily stretched, with sunglasses on her face, brown hair braided in a chignon.
> A beachside dressing room made from canvas stood nearby, with red and white stripes. (Krištúfek 2014, 48)

When compared to his adult life in the frame story:

> In the middle of the beach shone a dressing room made from red and white canvas. [...]
> A colourful parasol stood nearby and under it a beach chair.
> The brown haired woman in yellow swimsuit was sunbathing on the chair. (Krištúfek 2014, 50)

Krištúfek depicts an idyllic life before the war, like many Holocaust writers (Josef Škvorecký, Ota Pavel, Piotr Szewc or Marek Bieńczyk). In contrast, the experiences of the main protagonist during the war are very brutal and leave him both physically and mentally traumatized. Šimon suffers from frostbite on his feet and fears water; he has never learned to swim.

According to Polish survivor and researcher Michał Głowiński, documentaries, as well as works of fiction thematizing the Shoah, cannot effectively apply the prin-

ciples of traditional poetics. The events that are evoked in Holocaust literature are unbelievable and horrible, and it is impossible to communicate them as required, for instance, by Aristotle. Igor Ostachowicz, Peter Krištúfek, and other authors respond to Głowiński's statement, with their various approaches to writing. They each disturb the illusionistic imitations and conventional images in the public consciousness connected with the Holocaust. As Darren Sush, one of the "third generation," that of the grandchildren of survivors, expresses:

> Growing up as the grandson of Holocaust survivors, I've heard countless stories about the atrocities that took place during the Holocaust. My mind was bombarded with images and visions that I could not possibly fathom as truth.

This is the reason why the current generation is searching for new narrative treatments, i. e., imaginative and fantastic scenes, metafiction, and the grotesque. They also use stereotypes involving elements of pop culture.

Conclusion

This article examines changes in the presentation of the Holocaust/Shoah throughout the past few decades. First, several theoretical concepts of these changes are analyzed. Yehuda Bauer, Aleida Assmann, and others state that the Holocaust has become a universal symbol of evil in Western culture. Nevertheless, various researchers, mainly American (Lawrence Langer, Michael Rothberg, Alvin Hirsch Rosenfeld, and Sophia Francesca Marshman), warn about the trivialization of the Holocaust using the term "Americanization of the Holocaust." According to them, the Shoah has become a part of popular culture, even "entertainment." They support their judgment by listing globally popular books and films like *Schindler's List*. The extermination of Jews has been glossed over, and the tragic deaths of millions of people have been replaced with happy endings. Not only world-famous books and films but also popular media tamper with the history of the Shoah to make it more convenient for Western audiences.

In spite of that, all these critical views fail to distinguish between the vast variety of works. Middle-brow novels and films (*Sophie's Choice*) or artistic works like *The Holocaust Project* by Judy Chicago should never be identified as "entertainment" or even "kitschy melodramas." Moreover, these critics seem to ignore the fact that it is an important part of traditional American ethos to emphasize the predominance of goodness, optimism, and liberty.

However, other researchers (Ernst van Alphen, Leszek Engelking or Slawomir Buryła) express a different opinion. They believe that the use of elements of pop

culture can be a chance for new artistic expression and new provocative approaches to be developed. For them, this also applies to the topic of the Holocaust. For instance, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1980–1991) aroused many controversies but eventually won the Pulitzer Prize. It is not correct to generalize and consider using pop culture in Holocaust literature and culture *en bloc*.

This article agrees with the second statement. It is true that the Shoah is gradually changing into a universal theme and the subject of fiction. This fact causes many works thematizing the Holocaust to descend into trivialization in their efforts to be popular. Nevertheless, the elements of pop culture, its genres and devices, can also be utilized to create innovative works. It may be a challenge for younger artists who do not want to repeat stable motifs and images connected with the Holocaust.

Therefore, the following sections deal with three writers (one Czech, one Polish, and finally one Slovak) and their works in greater detail. The stories and novels written by the Czech author Arnošt Lustig (1926–2011) are a good example of the integration of pop-culture forms, like thrillers or mass-market romance novels, into Holocaust literature. Unlike his first books from the 1950s, Lustig's later works accentuate the more abrasive sides of life in the camps (violence, brutality, hetero- and homosexual prostitution, as well as a lack of unity among the prisoners). He often recorded the stories of young Jewish girls and women whose beauty and youth form a moving contrast to the horrors of the Shoah. In the novella *Colette* (1992), for instance, Lustig's narrative utilizes many conventional images. The plausibility of his characters is very often lost.

While Lustig uses elements of thriller and romance, other authors also apply elements of thriller or fantasy, comics, and horror as well as pornographic films (the Polish novelist Igor Ostachowicz, born 1968) when writing about the Holocaust. The works of both Lustig and Ostachowicz are full of violence, brutality, and sexual scenes. In contrast to Lustig, however, Ostachowicz's *Noc żywych Żydów* (2012, Night of the Living Jews) is more original and impressive. It also puts forward actual questions concerning the past and the relations between Poles and Jews. The Poles are not only victims of the Nazi regime, but they also have to cope with their own guilt. Ostachowicz's novel belongs to the group of works that discusses the controversial issues of the Poles' past after historian Jan Tomasz Gross questioned the self-image of the Poles during World War II.

The Slovak author Peter Krištúfek (1973–2018) published his novella *Ema a Smrtihlav* (Emma and the Death's Head Hawkmoth) in 2014. It is narrated from the point of view of a Jewish boy, Šimon, in Slovakia during the war. Šimon is forced to spend three years in hiding in a barn. In his imagination, inspired by pictures in color magazines and popular songs, he invents fantastic stories. His trashy

stories about a beautiful young woman called Ema and a German general are blended with actual events.

Krištúfek integrates sentimental German and Hungarian songs as well as pinup pictures from magazines in his narration. The novella *Ema a Smrtihlav*, similar to Ostachowicz's novel and other works of younger writers, disturbs the illusionistic imitations and conventional images in the public consciousness connected with the Holocaust.

Pop culture elements have become a typical feature of literature in last few decades. They extend the creative possibilities for speaking about the Holocaust while raising many problematic questions. Second and third generation artists and writers use a variety of pop culture methods to respond to the increasing forgetfulness of history. These books may sometimes appear trivial, but their poetics can appeal to younger generations for whom the Holocaust represents the distant past.