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„The ‘Third Reich’ memoir in the light of postmodern philosophy: historical representability and the gate-keeper’s task of ‘poetry after Auschwitz’“

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Declaration of Authenticity

I confirm to have conceived and written this paper in English all by myself. Quotation from sources are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors are truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

Christine Schranz

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0 Introduction

When one November 9th, I called my grandmother to ask how she had experienced the November pogrom in 1938 – still unsure how much of a Nazi she had really been, I formulated my question carefully in order to make her talk rather than remain silent –, there was a thoughtful pause. “The pogrom ...,” – she finally said, and I could sense her frown uneasily –, “what year was that again?”

In our days, historical understanding is strained by a number of alarming tendencies. A selective historical memory is bequeathed in the families of culprits and followers, while our schools are still teaching versions of the Austrian “victim myth.” Inside the international ivory tower, there is an ongoing academic controversy among historians, Holocaust authors and literary critics, centering around the question of the “proper” representation and emplotment of National Socialism. In the last decades, a number of controversial literary and historical works have been published, Holocaust representability as such has been called into question, and the reliability of historical memory has been challenged.

The literary work that first brought the unreliability of eyewitness testimonies to greater public attention was Jerzy Kosinski’s 1965 novel *The Painted Bird*. In 1998, this question gained urgency with the scandal caused by the exposure of Benjamin Wilkomirski’s (Bruno Dössekker’s) professed autobiography *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood 1939-1948* (1995) as a work of fiction. In 2000, Norman G. Finkelstein used both these books as evidence in his case against “‘The’ Holocaust industry,” American Jewry and Israeli politics, while in the ivory tower’s narratology departments, scholars of literature continued to contemplate the differences of fact and fiction in search of textually inherent criteria to distinguish one from the other. A few weeks ago, yet another Holocaust autobiography scheduled for publication next month (February 2009) was exposed as a fraud: Herman Rosenblat’s *Angel at the Fence*.

In a parallel debate, suggesting the relativity and meta-narrative nature of all historical writing, Hayden White, F. R. Ankersmit and Keith Jenkins started providing grist to the mill of Holocaust deniers and revisionists in the 1970s. Among those revisionists are the literary scholar and Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson and the self-appointed historian David Irving,

who between 1963 and 2002 published thirty books significantly altering, distorting and denying World War II history. Finally, in 1998, London saw the climax of revisionism in Irving's libel case against Deborah Lipstadt.

This paper attempts to portray narratological and historical controversies about Holocaust writing, identify their links and reveal their political and ideological implications in and outside academics. In the first part, I shall ponder the differentiability of fact and fiction defended by narratologists and questioned by postmodernist historiographers. In the second part, I will focus on Holocaust biographies and autobiographies and illustrate that, as Doron Rabinovici has noted, “[b]eyond the scientific handicraft, there lie the possibilities of [a] literature that does not even pretend to only depict the facts. It is for that reason that [literature] can approximate a truth exceeding all reality without betraying it” (“Wie es war,” my translation).

1 Limits and Possibilities of Narratology

<i>1st premise:</i>	$A \rightarrow B$	
<i>2nd premise:</i>	$B \rightarrow C$	
<i>Inference:</i>	$A \rightarrow C$	<i>(Modus Barbara)</i>

Martin Löschnigg defines three kinds of approaches to the differentiability of factual and fictional narration: logico-linguistic approaches, semantic approaches, and pragmatic approaches (59–69). In adopting this classification to show the limits of either exclusive school and explore the heuristic value of the three categories, I will try to find exceptions rather than examples affirming their professed universality. When applicable, my examples are taken from post-Auschwitz literature in order to illustrate the scope of the problem writers like Robert Faurisson, David Irving, Bruno Dössekker and Norman Finkelstein present us.

1.1 Logico-linguistic Approaches

The logico-linguistic school assumes that fictional and factual texts are distinguishable by means of grammatical structures alone and has been established by Käthe Hamburger's 1957 book *The Logic of Poetry*. Hamburger argues that in fictional texts, the preterite loses its grammatical function. She writes, “In a statement about reality, the preterite implies that the reported event is a past event, or, which means the same, that it is known to be past by an I-

origo (Ich-Origo¹)” (64; my translation). In epic fiction, the real I-origo of a factual text is substituted by fictional I-origines. From this, Hamburger infers, it follows that the preterite loses its grammatical function. The grammatical symptom of this premise is the occurrence of the *epic preterite*, which can only be observed in fictional texts. The phenomenon manifests itself in a concurrence of adverbial time deictics (today, now, tomorrow etc.) and the preterite and, according to Hamburger, does not indicate past tense but the fictional nature of a given text. While the preterite in non-fiction indicates that what is recounted belongs to the past, the epic preterite evokes the impression of being set in a fictional presence (cf. Hamburger 64–67).

Hamburger’s theory has been expanded by Harald Weinrich’s book *Tempus*. Weinrich distinguishes between narrated world (erzählte Welt, i.e. fiction) and reviewed world (besprochene Welt, i.e. non-fiction), and assigns a “tense group” to either world, arguing that not only the preterite, but all tenses carry information concerning their fictional or factual nature. The tense group of the narrated world comprises epic preterite, past perfect and conditional, the tense group of the reviewed world present tense, perfect (preterite) and future.

In the approach taken by Hamburger and Weinrich, things seem almost too easy to be true. Taking a random non-fiction book from my bookshelf, I need not read further than page 10 to come across the first epic preterite. In her autobiography *Still Alive*, which recounts her youth in Vienna, her detention at the concentration camps of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Christianstadt, and her life thereafter, Ruth Klüger writes,

But this English bourgeois [her cousin] had been tortured in Buchenwald as a young boy, when his little relative had perked up her ears under the blanket and not fallen asleep, bent on learning something about his detention [...]. Only that then, I was not allowed to know, because I was too little. And now? *Now I knew* a lot anyway and *could* [konnte] ask straight out, however and whenever I wanted, for those who had forbidden it were gone, scattered, gassed, had died in beds or elsewhere.

(10; my translation, my emphases)

According to Hamburger and Weinrich, the combination of adverbial time deixis (“*now*”) and preterite (“*I knew* [...] and *could* [konnte]”) would not be possible in autobiographical writing, but Klüger’s book is not a fictional text.

Weinrich and Hamburger rightly observe the effect created by the epic preterite; their error in reasoning, however, lies in the assumption that only fictional texts want or should create a fictional presence. Taking the reader to a fictional presence and letting him or her know that he or she is reading about the past are not mutually exclusive. Just like a work of fiction, Klüger’s autobiography wants to make the past come alive for her readers. This effect

¹ Hamburger substitutes the term “I-origo” as an epistemologically connotated synonym for “Aussagesubjekt.” Cf. Hamburger 62.

is more easily created by means of combining the verbs in the preterite with “now,” a deictic adverb of presence, than with a deictic adverbial of temporal ambiguity, such as “that day.” The “now” draws the reader into the story, takes him or her closer to the events, while “that day” would keep him or her at a distance. “He who wants to feel along, think along, needs interpretations of the events. The events alone are not enough,” writes Klüger later on in her book (160; my translation). The epic preterite is one of the elements that enable us to think along and feel with her rather than merely observe the events from a distance.

Hamburger’s and Weinrich’s argument can be depicted in terms of what logic calls the “modus Barbara”:

1 st premise:	The epic preterite is a distinctive feature of fiction.
2 nd premise:	<u>N makes use of the epic preterite.</u>
Inference:	N is a work of fiction.

It seems that the shortcomings of Hamburger’s and Weinrich’s inference do not lie in an error in reasoning – within the closed system of logic, it holds perfectly true –, but in assuming an untenable 1st premise: the epic preterite is *not* a distinctive feature of fiction. Hence, rather than reading Hamburger’s epic preterite and Weinrich’s tense group as evidence of fictionality, we can identify them as narrative strategies used in fiction and non-fiction alike.

As these theories do not prove useful for distinguishing fact from fiction, let me take a look at the approaches taken by Dorrit Cohn and John Searle.

In her 1990 essay “Signposts of Fictionality,” Dorrit Cohn assumes a differentiability of fictional and historical narration (1) in terms of the different reference/story/discourse dynamics (“levels of analysis”) in factual and fictional narrations, (2) in terms of focalization (“narrative situations”), and (3) in terms of the concordance or dissimilitude of author and narrator. Cohn notes the insufficiency of the traditional bi-dimensional story/discourse model when applied to historical narratives. Disregarding the level of reference, she argues, misleads theorists like Hayden White to assume a constitutive indifferenciability of factual and fictional narration². As Cohn points out, historical discourse is a priori different from fictional discourse due to the different nature of its referential constraints. “[T]he former’s [history’s] ties to the level of reference and the latter’s [fiction’s] detachment from this level determine distinct discursive parameters [...]” (Cohn 784).

² In “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” White writes, “Readers of histories and novels can hardly fail to be struck by the similarities. [...] Viewed simply as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another” (*Tropics* 121 f).

Cohn focuses on an essential feature of historical discourse that is also observed by Genette: its “perigraphic apparatus³,” i. e., its footnotes, endnotes etc. Relying on Genette, she identifies focalization as the distinguishing element, but argues that the focalization modes need to be modified in order to apply to historical narratives: a new category combining external focalization and zerofocalization must be introduced. According to Cohn, historical narration “remains stably unfocalized from start to finish” (Cohn 787), and hence cannot be described by zerofocalization, which according to Genette refers to a constant shift of focalization.

However, I would argue that historical narration is in fact far from “remain[ing] stably unfocalized.” Although a typical work of history will remain externally focalized in its dominant narrative framework, it may, drawing on secondary sources such as a historical character’s diaries, also implement the findings derived from them by means of internal focalization. This is facilitated by what Cohn herself identifies as the “perigraphic apparatus.” The fluctuation resulting from the shifts between external and internal focalization, the historian’s “zooming in” on different historical characters, meets Genette’s definition of zerofocalization. Without being aware of it, Cohn herself provides an example that disproves her position and confirms Genette’s. She quotes the “Author’s Note” introducing Barbara Tuchman’s World War I history book *The Guns of August*. In this foreword, Tuchman justifies her style:

Sources for the narrative and for all quoted remarks are given in the Notes at the end of the book. I have tried to avoid spontaneous attribution or the “he must have” style of historical writing [...]. All conditions of weather, thoughts or feelings, and states of mind public or private, in the following pages have documentary support” (Tuchman xx).

As a result, Tuchman’s book contains passages of internal focalization such as “[t]he German ambassador *thought* [...], and *supposed* [...]” and “he [Emperor Wilhelm II] *allowed himself to confess* the wish to Edward” (Tuchman 5; my emphases).

Taken out of context and disregarding the perigraphic apparatus, Tuchman’s style could easily be thought to belong to a fictional text: “the German ambassador *thought* [...], and *supposed* [...]” and “he *allowed himself to confess*” clearly show the narrator’s insight into the character’s mind, i. e., internal focalization, which is facilitated by the author’s access to the historical character’s diaries and personal documents.

Furthermore, Cohn attests a “qualitatively different [reading] experience” (Cohn 799) between fictional and historical narratives, which she sees as a manifestation of Paul

³ Cohn uses the term coined by Carrard to refer to foot- and endnotes, appendices etc., which are more frequently used in historical than fictional discourse.

Hernadi's proposal that "[f]ictional narratives demand, historical narratives preclude, a distinction between the narrator and the implied author" (Hernadi qtd. in Cohn 793). Although Cohn deems the presence (or absence respectively) of a narrator not a textually inherent feature but an extratextual cognitive model applied by the critic, she strongly rejects both Barthes' notion of the death of the author (in fiction as well as nonfiction) and Hamburger's "narratorless model for third-person fiction" (Hamburger 111–141, Cohn 795).

To conclude that the concordance of author and narrator is a decisive trait of nonfiction writing is tempting indeed. Unfortunately, as in most things tempting, there is a catch. The Wilkomirski scandal illustrates this catch in bright colors. In 1995, Suhrkamp's *Jüdischer Verlag* published an autobiographical novel by Binjamin Wilkomirski. In *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood 1939-1948*, the homodiegetic narrator recounts his childhood experiences during the "Third Reich." The book was showered with literary awards⁴, compared to the works of Primo Levi and Anne Frank, and translated into thirteen languages. Wilkomirski himself appeared in public as a contemporary witness and expert on the Shoah. In 1998, however, the journalist Daniel Ganzfried revealed that Wilkomirski was in fact Bruno Dössekker, who was neither Jewish nor had he, as claimed in his book, spent his childhood in the concentration camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz. I will later return to the consequences of Wilkomirski's exposure as an impostor, which the American political scientist Norman Finkelstein exploits in making his case against "'The' Holocaust industry." First let me take a look at *Fragments* in the light of Cohn's insistence on a differentiability of author and narrator underlying the narrative text⁵.

The book shows that in certain texts, there may well be an absence of textually inherent criteria telling us whether the author and the narrator coincide. In order to expose Wilkomirski as a fraud, Ganzfried had to leave the logico-semantic realm and conduct investigations on the author's person and biography. It follows that within the logico-semantic realm, it may indeed come to a "death of the author," albeit not in the Barthes' sense. Barthes disregards the narrator and exclusively focuses on the author-reader relationship, concluding that "the true locus of writing is reading" and "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the author" (Barthes, section 7). In Wilkomirski's case, it is not the birth of the reader which "must be ransomed by the death of the author," but the birth of the narrator. In writing the autobiography of Binjamin Wilkomirski, Dössekker, homodiegetically narrating from

⁴ It won the 1996 *National Jewish Book Award for Autobiography and Memoir* in the US, the *Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize* in Britain and the *Prix Memoire de la Shoah* in France.

⁵ I use the term "text" as defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*: "Strictly, a written text in the usual sense." While "text" in this paper refers to the words on the page *as such*, the term "discourse" is used to refer to the text (i. e., those same "words on the page") *as a product of the author's communicative intention*.

Wilkomirski's point of view, *becomes* Wilkomirski and ceases to be Dössekker. His readership, then, is not "born" from the narration, but constitutes the crucial link in the chain of transforming Dössekker into Wilkomirski. If his readers had not accepted the identity of author and narrator, the two would have remained distinct. The decisive momentum when it comes to answering the question "Who speaks?" happens neither on the level of the author nor on the level of text/story/discourse, but on the level of the reader.

I agree with Barthes in so far as he stresses the importance of the reader, and also admit that certain narratives suggest the "death of the author," although this is not a universal criterion. Either way, by teaching us a lesson on the potential unreliability of the author (not the narrator!), the Wilkomirski scandal also shows the untenability of Barthes' relativization of the author. Referring to an example sentence taken from Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes states: "its source, its voice is not to be located" (Barthes, section 7), a finding he assigns validity across all genres⁶. However, while the reader is the decisive final link in the chain of the author/narrator identity assignation and the text its mediator, the author is its crucial starting point. The way he molds his narrative discourse does not determine, but influence and manipulate the reader's resulting interpretation. Hence it is important to bear in mind that all discursive origin – in Barthes' words, "its source, its voice" – can in fact be located: it is always the author.

Returning to Cohn, her section on voice ("Narrative Situations") deserves further attention. Cohn rejects (as she has to in defense of her own position) Searle's conclusion that "[t]here is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a stretch of discourse as a work of fiction" (Searle 325). Searle argues that all writing "consists in performing [...] 'illocutionary [speech] acts'⁷" (319): while factual narration performs illocutionary acts in agreement with the rules Searle establishes in *Speech Acts*⁸, fictional narration merely "pretends" to perform illocutionary acts. Since the speech acts of fiction are "pretenses," they may violate the rules governing conventional illocutionary acts. That is to say, while a journalist "commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition" (essential rule) and "must be in a position to provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition" (preparatory rules), a writer of fiction waives commitment to these rules (cf. "Logical Status" 322). From that follows what Cohn criticizes in her "Signposts of Fictionality": since "pretended" illocutionary acts may look exactly like ordinary ones, Searle

⁶ Cf. "The Death of the Author," section 6: "Thus literature (it would be better, henceforth, to say *writing*) [...]" (my emphasis), and Cohn 792.

⁷ On the speech act theory, cf. J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: 1969), esp. chapters 3–5.

⁸ The "essential rule," the "preparatory rules," the "sincerity rule" etc., cf. J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: 1969), chapter 3.

points out that there is no innertextual property that allows for a distinction. Cohn argues that Searle's statement is disproved by the very example he provides to illustrate it. Interestingly, a little later she gives the Tuchman example quoted above, unintentionally disproving her own approach and in turn confirming the one she disagrees with.

Searle's example is taken from Iris Murdoch's *The Red and the Green*. The novel begins thus: "Ten more glorious days without horses! So *thought* Second Lieutenant Andrew Chase-White [...]" (qtd. in Searle 322 and Cohn 784; my emphasis). Cohn writes, "What 'serious' discourse ever quoted the thoughts of a person other than the speaker's own?" However, Tuchman's *The Guns of August* is a striking example that serious discourse may not only quote the thoughts of historical characters, but even do so without footnotes in the text proper, provided their authenticity can be documented.

Cohn rightly assumes that fictional narration is characterized by the difference of author and narrator, and factual narration by their sameness. However, matters are not that simple, for, as *Fragments* demonstrates, an unreliable writer may make false pretenses. For the research interest of this paper, it can be concluded that Cohn's findings are tendential rather than universal, for (1) difference and sameness cannot always be decided on the basis of the text alone and (2) the actual relation between author and narrator may be overruled by the relation assumed by the readership.

Searle's "Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" deserves further attention. With reference to *Fragments*, I want to agree with Searle that "[t]here is no *textual* property, syntactic or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction" (Searle 325; my emphasis) in principle, though I do not want to dismiss the observability of semantic and syntactic *tendencies* in factual and fictional narration. However, Searle's reasons for his premise and the conclusions drawn from it prove problematic when we take a look at the context of the premise:

[T]he identifying criterion for whether or not a text is a work of fiction must of necessity lie in the illocutionary intentions of the author. There is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction. What makes it a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes toward it, and that stance is a matter of the complex illocutionary intentions that the author has when he writes or otherwise composes it. (Searle 325)

What Searle means by the author's illocutionary stance is that "whether or not [a work] is fiction is for the author to decide" (Searle 320). This is not only an unorthodox, but a rather odd definition of fact and fiction – isn't it *history's* decision rather than the author's? A work is a work of fiction when the events it recounts never happened, and it is a historical work if

they did. Despite the fact that Dössekker-Wilkomirski's illocutionary stance is that he has written an autobiography, the fact remains that he is Bruno Dössekker and *never had* the experiences he claims to have had.

Taking Searle's line of thought, Dössekker-Wilkomirski's claim to use ordinary (and not "pretended") illocutionary speech acts, that is, his alleged adherence to the illocutionary rules according to Searle, would make *Fragments* a work of non-fiction – which it is not. Its fictionality does not lie in the kind of speech acts the author uses, but in the historico-biographical refutability that takes the author's illocutionary stance ad absurdum.

A little later, Searle draws another misleading conclusion. Principally disagreeing with "a school of literary critics who thought one should not consider the intentions of the author when examining a work of fiction," he nevertheless agrees with them to some extent when he says, "perhaps one should not consider an author's ulterior motives when analyzing his work" (Searle 325).

Yet it seems that an author's "ulterior motives" are precisely what is at stake when it comes to the authenticity of a work like Dössekker's. If his critics had disregarded his "ulterior motives," they might never have found out about Wilkomirski's fictional identity. Thus it can be said that the author's person forms a crucial point in the investigation of factual and fictional narrative discourse. Dismissing the author's "ulterior motives," Searle ultimately contradicts himself, for what are these motives if not the very illocutionary stance his theory is based on?

Another important contributor to the debate on fact and fictionality, Philippe Lejeune, focuses on the distinction of autobiography and fiction. In his seminal work *The Autobiographical Pact*, Lejeune defines the genre as follows: "Retrospective narrative in prose written by a real person about his or her own existence, if he or she emphasizes his or her individual life, [and] in particular the history of his or her personality" (Lejeune 15; my translation). Similar to Cohn, Lejeune identifies the congruence of author and narrator as the distinctive criterion of autobiography. His approach is more subtle than Cohn's in the way it tackles the question of authenticity. Lejeune argues that the identity of author and narrator necessarily demands affirmation, which can be met in a number of ways:

1. implicitly in the author-narrator's "autobiographical pact," which may be contracted by means of (a) the title of the book ("*The Story of my Life*," "*Autobiography*" ...), or (b) the narrator's introductory commitment to the autobiographical nature of his or her book.

2. explicitly “on the level of the name the author-narrator gives him- or herself in the narration, and which is the same as the author’s [name] on the cover” (cf. Lejeune 26 f; my translations).

According to Lejeune, author-narrator identity has to be affirmed by at least one of these means in autobiographic writing.

At first sight, this seems like a sound approach, and a more detailed one than Cohn’s claim for the author/narrator identity. Lejeune’s theory holds true for Ruth Klüger’s autobiography (quoted above) in terms of “explicit identity” (2). Klüger writes how she became “Jewish in defense” at the age of seven, as her belief in Austria started to falter: “Before Hitler, everyone called me Susi; then, I insisted on the other name, which, after all, was mine as well; why did I have it if I must not use it? A Jewish name was what I wanted, befitting the circumstances. No one told me that Susanne is a Biblical name just like Ruth” (Klüger 51; my translation).

However, an example confirming a given theory does not make it universal – does *all* autobiographical writing explicitly or implicitly allude to its genre? Re-reading *The Periodic Table* (the translation by Edith Plackmeyer in the 2004 *Süddeutsche Zeitung* edition) confirms my doubts. There is neither an introduction nor an afterword affirming the concordance of Primo Levi and the narrator, and the title is not suggestive of the book’s autobiographical nature either. The narrator remains nameless throughout the text. This is not to say that there are no textual hints at the author-narrator’s congruency, but Levi’s hints are slightly more subtle and do not conform to Lejeune’s criteria. For example, in the chapter “Vanadium,” the author-narrator, now working as a chemist in the manufacture of lacquer, wonders whether the representative of the company “W.” is the same inspector he had to work for at the Buna works near Auschwitz. In order to find out, he sends him a letter and a copy of his (i. e., Primo Levi’s) book *If this is a Man*.

Although *The Periodic Table* is known to be among Levi’s autobiographical works, I want to add that the author himself did *not* regard it as an autobiography. Not because it is a work of fiction (which it is not, although it contains three fictional stories written by Levi himself), but because Levi saw it as a collection of stories about the chemist’s profession rather than his own life. Since Levi’s life and his work as a chemist are intrinsically tied to each other, we can, I think, say that the book is both an anthology of stories and an autobiographical work.

While *The Periodic Table* would not be autobiographical by Lejeune’s criteria, Dössekker’s book would, matching both implicit (1 b) and explicit criteria (2): although there

is no introduction, there is an afterword claiming the congruency of author and narrator. In addition, the narrator is called “Binjamin” and even “Binjamin Wilkomirski” throughout the text (1 b). When the camp is freed, a woman recognizes the narrator and takes him with her to Sandomierz:

Binjamin,” she screams, “Binjamin, oj Binjamin!”, and she is still running in my direction. Mesmerized, I watch her. What’s wrong with her? She is almost there already.

“Binjamin – you?!”, she screams in utter excitement, and her screaming sounds like a question.

The realization strikes me like a blow: it is me she is calling! Yes, I – I am Binjamin, she’s calling out to me!

Already, I have almost forgotten that I have a name.

(Dössekker-Wilkomirski
102 f; my translation).

A few pages later, the woman consigns him to the care of a rabbi in Kraków: “I’ve got someone for you, the little Wilkomirski, Binjamin Wilkomirski!” (Dössekker-Wilkomirski 106; my translation). The narrator is surprised and proud to have *two* names now.

It becomes clear that, while Cohn’s claim for congruency of author and narrator seems too general, Lejeune’s *Autobiographical Pact* presents an imprecise approach that both excludes certain autobiographies and includes works of fiction.

Another theorist who has dedicated himself to the study of autobiography is Gérard Genette. In “Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative,” he assumes a “different behavior” of factional and fictional narration “towards the story they report.” He assumes such a difference based on “the mere fact of this story’s (supposedly) being in one case ‘truthful’ [...], in the other case fictional [...]” (Genette 756 f). The decisive momentum, Genette concludes within the same paragraph, “is the official status of the text and its reading horizon” (horizon de lecture).

This is a somewhat paradoxical introduction, for it seems to contradict itself. Genette first refers to a textually inherent indicator of difference, manifest in the textual “behavior,” but then, like Searle, bases it on extratextual criteria. While Searle’s approach suggests that it is the author who decides on the status of a text, Genette, in contrast, introduces the criteria of textual status and reading horizon. Extratextual criteria, as will be shown later, cannot change the “behavior” of the text itself but only its reception. The text itself – the words written on the page – do not change with the angle from which the reader looks at them, it is only the reader’s interpretation that changes.

Genette sees the decisive differentiator of fact and fiction in the focalization mode and voice of the narration. For him, Hamburger’s epic preterite does not in itself constitute fiction,

but is symptomatic of interior monologue and free indirect discourse (style indirect libre), which do constitute fiction. Factual texts do not preclude the presence of psychological insights in a character's mind, however, they have to legitimize their assumptions in terms of either references to the source of knowledge (cf. Cohn's perigraphic apparatus) or modalizing. A fictional text, on the other hand, is not constrained by footnotes or bibliographies, nor need the thoughts put into a character's mind be modalized. While it is clear that fiction need not constrain itself on internal focalization, let me return to Tuchman's "Author's Note" quoted earlier, which illustrates the two ways of legitimization open to factual texts. Tuchman assures the reader that evidence for "[a]ll conditions of weather, thoughts or feelings, and states of mind public or private" in *The Guns of August* are documented in the "Notes" at the end of the book. In order to avoid modalization (the "he must have" style of historical writing), she refers us to the annexed perigraphic apparatus: "I have tried to avoid spontaneous attribution or the "he must have" style of historical writing: 'As he watched the coastline of France disappear, Napoleon must have thought back over the long ...'" (Tuchman xx).

A further indicator of fictionality according to Genette is external focalization. External focalization, i. e., utterly objective narration, is fundamentally fictional. Hemingway and Robbe-Grillet are mentioned as examples of external focalization. Zerofocalization, which describes the focalization mode of third-person limited or effaced narration, i. e., a narrator who does not privilege one point of view but shifts the focalization from one scene to the next, is opposed to omniscient narration. Since knowing everyone's thoughts is not possible outside the realm of fiction ("One intuitively with complete certainty only what one has invented oneself" [Genette 762]), omniscient narration constitutes a trait of fiction, while zerofocalization, as has been shown in the section on Cohn, is identified as nonfictional. Genette concludes, "[M]ode is, at least in principle, revelatory of the factual or fictional status of a narrative and, therefore, a point of narratological divergence between the two types" (Genette 763).

As for voice, Genette sees the presence of metadiegetic narration as "a quite plausible indication of fictionality," although, he adds, "its absence is no indication of anything" (Genette 764). Expanding on Lejeune and Searle, Genette, like Cohn, further concludes that factual narration is defined by the strict identity of author and narrator. What makes his approach clearer than Cohn's and less problematic than Lejeune's is that he adds that this holds true only as long as the author takes *responsibility* for the statements of his narration and does not allow autonomies of his narrator(s). Without this restriction, fictional (auto)biographies and historical fiction would both have to be considered factual narrations.

At the same time, Genette does not insist on the authority of the autobiographical pact. He concludes that the relationship between author and narrator is elusive and sometimes ambiguous.

Genette's approach to autobiography proves more useful than Cohn's and Lejeune's, but also raises a new problem when applied to *Fragments*: Dössekker *does* take responsibility for the statements of his narrator or, in Searle's terminology, claims to adhere to the illocutionary speech act rules; he openly pretends to *be* Wilkomirski, and so convincingly that it has been argued that Dössekker himself *believed* to be Wilkomirski⁹. Furthermore, he certainly does allow "autonomies of his narrator." What can be learned from Genette is that, in order to decide on the factual or fictional nature of a text, the discursive universe has to be held up to extratextual reality. Before expanding on this important theorem in the second part of this paper, let me turn from logico-linguistic theories of fact and fiction to semantic and pragmatic ones.

1.2 Semantic Approaches

The semantic scholars such as Gottfried Gabriel and Thomas Pavel suggest that "the fictional discourse is [necessarily] a pseudo-referential one, that is, an "as if"-discourse" (Löschnigg 63; my translation), while factual texts are consistently referential. However, as Löschnigg points out, the discursive elements tend to be neither exclusively fictional in fiction nor exclusively factual in non-fiction.

The Periodic Table provides a good example again. Levi includes three short stories in his factual text ("Lead," "Mercury" and "Hydrogen"). Vice versa, fictional texts more often than not contain references to historical sites, characters and events. For instance, fictional autobiographies such as Kosinski's *Painted Bird* and Wilkomirski's *Fragments* are set in historical Eastern Europe, and Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence* is set in historical Germany. All of them concern the historical "Third Reich." Semantic approaches only hold true for a small number of unambiguously fictional fairy tales, and certain fantasy and science fiction novels. Even these genres more often than not contain at least some references to reality. With Löschnigg, we may dismiss the heuristic value of semantic theories for "non-escapist" genres, and turn to pragmatic approaches.

1.3 Pragmatic Approaches

⁹ Cf., for example, Diekamann, Irene and Julius H. Schoeps. *Das Wilkomirski-Syndrom. Eingebildete Erinnerungen oder von der Sehnsucht, Opfer zu sein*, or and Salecl, Renate. "Why One Would Pretend to be a Victim of the Holocaust."

Pragmatic approaches assume that the differentiability of factual and fictional texts is linked to their “communicative context” (Löschnigg 63). Lejeune and Genette have already highlighted the shortcomings of a definition of fiction and non-fiction that is based on the text alone. Pragmatic approaches take this insight a step further.

Paul John Eakin acknowledges that “fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life” (Eakin 5). Unlike Lejeune and Genette, Eakin does not consider this concept problematic, but embraces it as his point of departure in *Fictions in Autobiography*. Eakin assumes that “[t]he fictive nature of selfhood [...] is [...] a biographical fact” (Eakin 182). That is to say, in living our lives, each of us automatically employs fictionalization techniques. The mere acts of thinking about ourselves and narrating past experiences to others shape our lives into story-form, a form the referential past lacked at the moment of happening. In being faithful to “the reality of remembered experience” (Eakin 167) when thinking or talking about it, we are not necessarily faithful to the past “as such.” According to Eakin, the autobiographer simply goes one step further by putting the remembered past, including the traces of fiction it already shows, into words.

Eakin’s *Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* mark a paradigm shift in autobiographical narratology. If one does not want to argue like David Carr, who holds that “narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence, independently of our contemplating the past as historians” (or autobiographers) (Carr 9) – that is to say, that the past is not given story-form in the process of writing it down, but that the story-form is inherent to the past itself – one can only approve of Eakin. His insight that communicating the past in thinking, speaking or writing necessarily renders it into a different form, which may include, but is not limited to arranging the material in chronological or non-chronological order, smoothing it out, and stressing certain memories and omitting others, does not only apply to autobiography, but to any non-fictional text. In this context, it seems important to stress that “fictionalization” refers to changes in the *form* of the past, not to its truth value. That is to say, a historical fact does not lose its validity when it is written down. Meaning is, as it were, “translated” from the past itself into its textual form. Although this process of translation involves techniques of fictionalization, truth is usually carried over from the past to the text, just as the meaning of a story is not normally lost when we translate it from one language to another. At the same time, it lies in the nature of translation processes that they involve, even require change:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a

translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. ("Task of the Translator" 81)

Walter Benjamin's contemplations of translating Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* can be seen as a metaphor for Eakin's take on writing one's life. The historical or autobiographical text is no more a replica of the life it refers to than Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire is a replica of the French original. However, both "translations" – the historical/autobiographical text and the translation of the *Tableaux Parisiens* – "must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification." It is not their sameness, but this "loving and detailed incorporation" that makes them "recognizable as fragments of a greater language": the language of truth.

There is, however, a school of postmodern philosophers of history who do, as it were, not believe in the translatability of lived experiences into story form. Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit and Keith Jenkins share Eakin's point of departure, but assume that the translation process is at least as likely to fail as it is to succeed. The narratological background having been established, I will now turn to the postmodern historico-philosophical debate about the representation and representability of truth.

2 A Critical Reflection on Postmodern Philosophies of History.

On Tuesday, X ventures along a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds on the road four coins, somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain. On Friday, Z comes across three coins on the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house. [The heresiarch is trying to deduce from this story the reality, that is, the continuity of the nine recovered coins.] It is absurd, he states, to suppose that four of the coins have not existed between Tuesday and Thursday, three between Tuesday and Friday afternoon, and two between Tuesday and Friday morning. It is logical to assume that they have existed, albeit in some secret way, in a manner whose understanding is concealed from men, in every moment, in all three places.

(Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius")

2.1 Narrative "Effectiveness" and the Ethics of Relativism in the Light of Holocaust Denial

For Hayden White, the avant-gardist of metahistory¹⁰, the historical work is “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*” (*Metahistory* 2). The historian’s cognitive interest, which will determine the form the “narrative prose discourse” takes, is based on the historian’s *interpretation* of the past – an interpretation that is but one out of numerous possible interpretations. White bases his theory on the assumptions that (1) facts do not exist in the form of re-narratable stories but “only as a congeries of contiguously related fragments” (*Tropics* 125), while (2) “[t]he historian arranges [these fragments ...] into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end” (*Metahistory* 7). The historian’s proceeding corresponds to the novelist’s: just as a novelist “put[s] together figments of [his] imagination to display an ordered world,” the historian arranges the fragments “to make a whole of a particular [...] kind” (*Metahistory* 7).

The central problem with White for the Holocaust debate is his understanding of the historian’s task and his historical relativism. Studying pre- and post-Revolution historiography¹¹ and French existentialism, White seeks to pinpoint the task of today’s historians. Taking Gottfried Benn (of all people) as a point of departure, he comes to the conclusion that “*the burden of the historian* in our time is to [...] transform historical studies in such a way as to allow the historian to participate positively in the liberation of the present from *the burden of history*” (*Tropics* 40 f). White does not mean, as this statement seems to suggest, that the task of the historian is the annihilation of his own discipline, but pleads for its radical transformation. When he takes up this thought again two decades after “The Burden of History” (1966) in “The Politics of Historical Interpretation” (1982), he amplifies that historical interrogation should not concern itself with the study of history, but with “the study of the study of history” (“Politics” 137).

White’s historical relativism is perhaps best outlined by means of his controversy with Carlo Ginzburg. In his essay “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” White suggests that “perspectives on history” are innocent in themselves and therefore equally valuable in principle. White makes this point because, as he points out, he himself has “been implicitly praising” a perspective on history which “is conventionally

¹⁰ White adopts the term “metahistory” from Northrop Frye, who uses it as a synonym for “speculative philosophy of history.”

¹¹ *Historiography* in this paper adverts to both what White calls “proper history” (Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt etc.) and “philosophy of history” (Marx, Nietzsche, Croce etc.).

associated with the ideologies of fascist regimes” (“Politics” 130). The roots of a perspective and its past political instrumentalization(s) are not to bias our take on them:

[...] we must guard against a sentimentalism that would lead us to write off such a conception of history simply because it has been associated with fascist ideologies. [...] W]hen it comes to the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning rather than another. (“Politics” 130)

However, I would argue that it is impossible to separate the latent authorial intentions from their manifest discourse. When White praises “[the kind of perspective on history ...] conventionally associated with the ideologies of fascist regimes,” he does not only advocate their sublime, apolitical essence, but also the fascist patina intrinsically connected with it.

What does this reveal about White’s own ideological disposition? In fact, it hardly reveals anything. It is merely reflective of his – as I would argue, mistaken – assumption that historical facts do not exist in the form of stories and hence cannot be a priori ideologically charged, and that their meaning solely depends on the historian’s interpretation. In short, it shows his historical relativism; a relativism White “conceive[s] [...] to be the basis of social tolerance, not a license to ‘do as you please’” (White, *Content* 227).

However, as Ginzburg points out in his argument against the “Politics of Historical Interpretation,” the claim that relativism serves as “the basis of social tolerance” is

historically and logically untenable. Historically, because tolerance has been theorized by people who had strong theoretical and moral convictions [...]. Logically, because absolute skepticism would contradict itself if it were not extended also to tolerance as a regulating principle. Moreover, when moral and theoretical differences are not ultimately related to *truth* (my emphasis), there is nothing to *tolerate*. (Ginzburg 93 f)

White does take truth into account, but his historical relativism leads him to define a “true” historical narration as the most effective (i. e., most convincing, most widely accepted) interpretation: “[...] its truth, as a historical interpretation, consists precisely in its effectiveness (in justifying a wide range of [...] political policies [...])” (“Politics” 135). As Ginzburg bitterly notes, “We can conclude that if Faurisson’s¹² narrative were ever to prove effective, it would be regarded by White as true as well” (Ginzburg 93).

However, there is certainly a grain of truth in White’s stressing of the “effectiveness” of historical arguments. A 1998 British court case shows that the “effectiveness” of an argument and an assumed equal validity of historical and revisionist statements are not restricted to the postmodern ivory tower (where Noam Chomsky rushed to the defense of

¹² Robert Faurisson is a French literary scholar and Holocaust denier.

Faurisson's Holocaust denial, writing "Freedom of Expression" on his flags), but can also be observed in British libel law.

In 1997, the self-appointed historian and later Holocaust denier David Irving published the first edition of *Hitler's War*, a book striving to exculpate Adolf Hitler from his responsibility for the "final solution." The second edition of the book (1991) was subject to a number of changes, for Irving had turned to Holocaust denial in the meantime: "In the 1977 edition he accepted [the Holocaust] as an historical truth in all its essentials, systematic mass murder of Jews in purpose built extermination factories, but in the 1991 edition all trace of the Holocaust in this sense has disappeared" (Rampton, *Trial Transcripts*, Day 1, 95). In line with that, Irving said about the 1991 edition, "You won't find the Holocaust mentioned in one line, not even in a footnote. Why should you? If something didn't happen, then you don't even dignify it with a footnote" (qtd. in *Trial Transcripts* 98).

Statements like these led Deborah Lipstadt to refer to Irving as a Holocaust denier in *Denying the Holocaust: the growing assault on truth and memory*, which was published by Penguin Books in 1994. Irving responded by suing Lipstadt and her publisher for libel.

In British libel law, it is *the defense* which has to *prove* that what it is being accused of (having called Irving a Holocaust denier) is grounded in reality, rather than the prosecution having to demonstrate the validity of its accusation (cf. Menasse 64 f). Consequently, in 2008, Lipstadt and Penguin Books were summoned to *prove that the Holocaust had indeed taken place*. It goes without saying that, after three long months, this grotesque court case, at one point of which Irving accidentally called Judge Gray "mein Führer," was won by the defense. Yet, the bottom line is that the trial nevertheless provided Irving with the public attention he may have been seeking above all things. Neal Ascherson writes in the *Observer* that Irving "was also suing before 'the court of world opinion'." Paradoxically, because Irving *lost* the case against Lipstadt, "[...] a minority of people clearly think it was Irving [rather than Lipstadt] who was on trial, being sued for his opinions by Penguin Books. [...] In consequence, there is now a tendency to see the trial outcome as a form of censorship, a clamp on the limits of historical inquiry."

The court, in accordance with British libel law, treated the two parties in a way White would approve of: as if the past were not a given, but subject to debate, Irving and Lipstadt were granted equal points of departure, that is, points of departure from which Lipstadt and Penguin Books had to prove that their historical "interpretation" was, as White might say, more "effective" than Irving's.

The impression could arise that, as White has it, “the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another” are not inscribed in the past as such, but “ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological” (*Metahistory* xii). Certainly, *justice* has “won” the Lipstadt-Irving case. But should Irving, already well known for his revisionism, have been granted the right to sue for libel in the first place? Should Lipstadt have had to *prove that the Holocaust did indeed take place?*

Neal Ascherson closes his article with a remark on the British court: “[...] an English libel court is for justice, not for history.” Justice has won, but history’s victory was less complete, as is reflected in the “tendency to see the trial outcome as a form of censorship, a clamp on the limits of historical inquiry.” Just as a Chomsky was ready to defend Faurisson’s “freedom of expression” in the 1980s, there were now voices defending Irving’s right of “historical inquiry.”

Democratic societies are not and should not be subject to censorship, and they do not and should not impose limits on *serious* historical inquiry indeed. But as, I think, Benjamin Franklin once said about what to publish and what not to publish in a democratic newspaper: “this is not a public stage coach that has to take anyone who buys a ticket.” Freedom of speech does not abolish the difference between historical truth and its distortion, but requires the audience (be it individuals, publishers, courtrooms ...) to think for itself and simply not devote attention to falsehood. Unfortunately, this is something the postmodern “Whiteist” society seems all too eager to forget.

2.2 From White to Ankersmit

Frank Ankersmit takes as his starting point the current “overproduction of historical literature [read: historiography] which is spreading like cancer in all fields” (“Historiography” 138). This abundance of texts *about* the past, he argues, makes it impossible to see *the past as such*: “The reality is the information itself and no longer the reality behind that information” (“Historiography” 140). For radical postmodernists such as White, Jenkins and Ankersmit himself, this understanding of reality probably holds true. But, before immersing myself in Ankersmit’s theory, I would like to anticipate my doubts that the past is experienced in quite that way by the average person, either inside or outside academia.

Ankersmit’s argument is congruent with White’s, although his terminology and main “metahistorical” focus are different. Like Eakin and White, Ankersmit argues that “the historical text consists of (many) individual statements” and “the evidence available to historians would have permitted them to write many more true statements about the past than

we actually find in their texts” (“Reply” 277). With “[t]he reality [being] the information itself and no longer the reality behind that information,” *the replacement of the past* by the text is identified as “the historical text’s ‘disciplinary goal’,” just as metaphors and works of art strive to “replac[e] what [they] represen[t]” (cf. “Historiography” 143 f, “Reply” 280, 291). However, just as Plato finds that objects never live up to the ideas they have been shaped after, representations of the past are always found lacking.

While this argument is logically coherent in its own closed system, it should be noted that Ankersmit’s conclusion (history fails in reaching its “disciplinary goal,” i. e., in replacing what it represents) only holds true if one agrees with his premise that historiography strives to replace the past by representing it. As I have expounded in the chapter on pragmatic approaches, I would argue against this goal and assume with Benjamin a complementary rather than hierarchical relationship between the past (“the original”) and its story-form (its “translation”): “[...] a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel” (“Task of the Translator” 81).

As Robert Anchor points out, this does not mean that the past is replaced by its representation (by its translation into story-form), but that the historical narrative “provides everything needed to tell what actually happened in the past, or at least what we are entitled to actually think happened in the past and what it means, so far as the evidence allows and the generally recognized criteria of objectivity are applied [...]” (Anchor 110).

As for the abundance of historical narratives criticized by Ankersmit, it could be replied that, since the temporal distance between a given historical epoch and the present moment continues to grow, there is nothing to be said against the *number of links* growing simultaneously and bridging the temporal distance. Ankersmit, contrary to this notion, claims that not only has the “referential past” been lost with the dawn of postmodernism, but that it is “epistemologically a useless notion” and therefore has “no role to play in historical debate” (“Reply” 281). Instead of making the truth value (the “referential past”) the central concern of the historical debate, Ankersmit introduces a concept related to White’s effectiveness: the “successful” implementation of the “available historical evidence.” The “successful” implementation of historical evidence leads to the “stylistic superiority” of one narration over another (cf. “Reply” 294).

Treating historiography like literature and judging it according to its “stylistic superiority,” Ankersmit holds that, unlike science and politics, history, “[a]long with poetry,

literature, painting, and the like,” belongs to the sphere of culture (“Historiography” 139). Drawing a clear line between science and politics on the one hand, and “the sphere of culture” on the other, he adds, “politics should not interfere with culture” (“Historiography” 139). But is there one historical period in which politics has *not*, in more or less subtle ways, interfered with culture?

The “sphere of culture” (education, media, literature ...) is one of the most powerful spaces to be infiltrated with ideological doctrines and one that has always been claimed by politics. During the “Third Reich,” the cultural sphere was not only (ethnically and ideologically) “cleansed” by means of censorship, but also actively instrumentalized for indoctrination. The Nazi children’s book *Der Giftpilz* is but one example. For a contemporary case, consider Norman Finkelstein’s instrumentalization of *The Painted Bird* and *Fragments* in his case against the “Holocaust industry,” Israeli politics and American Jewry.

Ankersmit’s *l’art pour l’art* trivialization seems rather quixotic. Art is a strong intellectual means to fight political systems or dominating ideologies, and the gate-keeper of sanity. Many seminal works of art have been political and socio-critical ones (think of Heine, Brecht, Huxley, Orwell, to mention but a few). Voices claiming that politically engaged art may have been important in the past, but is “dead” in our postmodern times, should, as Margarete Rubik has pointed out, remember Britain’s thriving documentary drama scene: Granada TV’s 1990 TV documentation *Who Bombed Birmingham*, which revealed a judicial error in the case of six supposed IRA terrorists and brought about a re-opening of the case and a subsequent acquittal, or Richard Norton-Taylor’s play *The Colour of Justice*, which “raised awareness for institutional racism and is now used in the training of police cadets,” or, more recently yet, Victoria Britain’s and Gillian Slovo’s *Guantanamo* (2004), which “not only changed the life of the detainees, [...] but could also have contributed to the release of several British prisoners [...]” (Rubik, “Documentary Drama,” my translation) prove beyond doubt that politically engaged art is thriving and continues its work in the name of justice.

With these examples in mind, I would like to oppose Ankersmit’s axiom (“politics should not interfere with culture”) with a different proposition: culture *has to* interfere with politics, lest all culture be lost. Following Walter Benjamin’s assessment of the task of the work of art, the aesthetization of history has to be met with the politicization of art (cf. “Das Kunstwerk” 169).

The above examples further point out that culture (literature, art, journalism ...) rather than “not [being] a *mimetic reproduction* of reality but a *replacement* or *substitute* for it,” as Ankersmit holds (“Historiography” 144), obtain a regulatory function in defense of a reality

that is all too often “replaced or substituted” by politics. As Rubik points out for the genre of political drama, “[...] political plays [...] have come to fulfill a therapeutic function of voicing the frustrations of an electorate which has learned to distrust the truth value of official political information, and for enlightenment turns to the dramatist instead” (“Everything you always wanted to know ...” 270).

Drawing a parallel to psychoanalysis, Ankersmit makes the important observation that “the past is also what it is not” (“Historiography” 147). Therefore, we should also pay attention to what is *not* written but deliberately or unconsciously left out. This is characteristic of the postmodernists’ *literary* approach to historiography, since for scholars of literature, juxtaposing what is said to what is not said has long been common practice. Ankersmit’s proposal to pay attention to what is silenced in the historical discourse shows that the instruments of literary criticism may also be fruitful to the philosopher of history.

The link Ankersmit sees between historiography and psychoanalysis can also be observed between literature and psychoanalysis. At the turn of the 20th century, Schnitzler (*Anatol* [1893], *Lieutenant Gustl* [1900], *Die Traumnovelle* [1926]) and Freud (“Der Dichter und das Phantasieren” [1907], “Das Unheimliche” [1919]) drew attention to the propinquity of psychoanalysis and literature. The early 20th century saw a paradigm shift for both psychology and literature and explored the potential of art and science to influence and refine each other. The development of psychoanalysis shows that art and the sciences are indeed neighboring disciplines. However, unlike White and Ankersmit, I fail to see a problem with this vicinity. Why should the neighborly relationship not be a good one, based on each party’s willingness to look beyond the rim of their own tea cup and learn from the other? I shall return to this notion a little later.

Ankersmit’s observation that the past is also what has *not* been written about is an important one, although I do not agree with the conclusion Ankersmit draws from this insight. He deduces that “the essence of the past [i. e., historiography] is not, or does not lie in, the essence of the past [i. e., the historical past]” (“Historiography” 148), and hence essentialist and positivistic approaches to historiography are doomed to failure. Ankersmit, in line with his theory that the disciplinary goal of historiography is to replace what it refers to, equates the (historical) past with what has been written about it. The essence of historiography, however, does undeniably lie in the historical past.

I propose to take Ankersmit’s insight that the past is also what has *not* been written as a starting point for a psychoanalytical approach to given (historical, political) discourses.

Contemporary political drama is doing just that. Shedding light on the latent motives/motifs underlying a manifest narrative, a psychoanalytical approach that pays attention to “what is not said and what is suppressed” (“Historiography” 147) can provide insights to illegitimate ideological biases and help us distinguish between, for example, serious historians and the Faurissons, Irvings and Finkelsteins of this world.

Summing up, Ankersmit like White finds that the historiographic debate is to be a purely narratological and literary one, and defines the “successful” (i. e., convincing, effective) “individuation” of narrative substances as the central yardstick on the historical opinion market, while truth and falsity are not to be criteria at all. However, the insight that “successful” narratives are not necessarily true should not lead to letting go of all notions of truth, but stimulate a critical approach to historical and political discourses in the manner of standards set by political and socio-critical art. The fact that there is a close affinity between art and the sciences does not require an *l’art pour l’art* aestheticization of historiography, but may serve as a starting point to explore new ways in which the two disciplines can complement and refine each other.

2.3 Keith Jenkins: History and Ethics – “Why bother?”

In his manifesto *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*, the “post”-postmodernist Keith Jenkins discriminates between “modernist upper case (metanarrative) and lower case ‘proper’ (professional/academic) histories”¹³ (15). Jenkins argues that the dusk of postmodernism brings about “the end of history” – that is, a point where the study of history *as such*, both in its upper and lower case excrescences, has become obsolete: “[...] it is now clear that ‘in and for itself’ there is nothing definite for us to get out of [the past] other than that which we have put into it” (3).

White and Ankersmit, Jenkin’s heroes of historical relativism, are contrasted to Richard Evans, whom he “want[s] to read [...] ‘symptomatically’; as a representative of an attitude constitutive of contemporary lower case orthodoxy” (92). Evans (who, as I would like to note in passing, was one of the expert witnesses in the Lipstadt/Irving libel case referred to earlier, and provided a minutely researched expert report on Holocaust history and denial that helped justice to win out), is ridiculed as the representative of an orthodox historical practice long outdated. Thus the chapter “On Richard Evans” begins: “We now enter an intellectual

¹³ Unless specified otherwise, I will use the term “history” to refer to both “upper case” and “lower case” historiography in this chapter.

world utterly unlike that of the generous quasi-transcendental, cross-discursive, playful, radical one of Derrida, Baudrillard and Lyotard. Here is a world of the flat-earth variety” (95).

One of the fundamental shortcomings of history in “flat-earth intellectual universes,” he argues, is that it fails to serve as a parameter for “moral decisions.” Jenkins distinguishes between *ethics*, by which he means “ethical systems” established in the past (e. g. the Ten Commandments), and *morality*, which refers to “ungroundable, *aporetic* decisions” (*Why History?* 2). Moral decisions, which Jenkins deems superior, “must be taken *outside* of ethics yet *in* morality in that the singular (moral) choice, if it is to be a real choice, if it is to pass through the *aporia*, can *never* be the application of a previously existing ethical system with claims to omniscience” (20).

But *can* we do without “heteronymous ethics,” and is “autonomous morality” more valuable than “heteronymous ethics” in the first place? Instead of taking a direct stab at this question, I would like to approach it through the back door of contextuality and first assign Jenkins his place in the broader canon of ideas.

In his review of *Why History?*, Robert Anchor suggests that Jenkins writes, among others, in the tradition of Dostoevsky. So it must be this tradition that compels him to reject history for not “serv[ing] morality.”

What exactly *is* morality?, what did it use to be *before* various interpretations were superimposed on it, we may ask, for Jenkins’ post-Kantian interpretation does not seem wholly convincing. The etymology of “morality” reminds us that morality is intrinsically linked to *written* instructions, it is something that is *taught*, and it has to do with *interpretation*:

Anglo-Norman *moralité* moral treatise, symbolism, interpretation and Middle French *moralité* (12th cent. in Old French in sense ‘moral treatise, moral teaching’; 13th cent. in sense ‘moral interpretation which an author or reader takes from a literary work’; late 13th cent. in sense ‘moral character, ethical value’; 1601 in French in sense ‘positive or negative value of a person’s behaviour in relation to moral standards’) (Etymology of “morality, n.” in OED online).

Origins such as “moral treatise,” “interpretation” and “moral teaching” intrinsically link morality to the past: it is *past* experiences that we draw a moral from, it is (hi)stories that we interpret, and it is the historiographic narrative that teaches us morality. The artificial distinction Jenkins draws between morality and ethics is not convincing, for morality is grounded in “ethical value.”

Dostoevsky, in whose tradition Anchor suggests that Jenkins is writing, provides an early example of what happens to “morality” if history is neglected. While Dostoevsky is well-known for his works of fiction, he also wrote non-fiction. One of these pieces concerns

“the Jewish question” and can be found in *The Diary of a Writer*. Dostoevsky’s logic is anti-Semitic (and hence amoral) precisely because he does *not* look at the historical origins of anti-Semitic thought, but only at the present (1879) “evidence”: he argues that anti-Semitism “must have stemmed from something” and hence is “the Jews’ fault” (Dostoevsky qtd. in Dershowitz 232). He does not investigate the roots of anti-Semitic thought on the side of the anti-Semites but simply infers that it “must have stemmed from something” (a “something” he does not care to look at more closely) “the Jews” have done. It becomes clear that *morality is among the first values at stake when history is abandoned*.

Jenkins is well aware of past failings of ethics/morality, but he does not attribute this to historical unawareness but rather to its opposite, from which follows “that [historical] scepticism and relativism are not problems at all, but the *best* solutions we can come up with” (*Why History?* 27). Modern history, explains Jenkins, has been written “as the history of the European nation state, perhaps the most efficient (rational) killing-machine that has ever existed, a killing-machine that includes amongst its manifestations the actuality of the Holocaust – that supreme, *modern* event” (27).

His answer to the obvious accusation that “neo-pragmatism and postmodernism gives us no absolute basis upon which to resist fascists and neo-Nazis” is that “a modernist or any other type of absolutist thinking [rooted in history] won’t do the job either, simply because all absolutes can be claimed by just anybody and thus relativised with ease” (27 f). Jenkins quotes Richard Rorty to support his theory: “No sooner does one draw up a categorical imperative for Christians than somebody draws one for cannibals ... [Accordingly, since] the time of Kant, it has become more and more apparent ... that a really professional philosopher can supply a philosophical foundation for just about anything” (Rorty qtd. in *Why History?* 28).

Jenkins would certainly agree with White that, from a strictly *rational* point of view, fascist narratives are no more “guilty” or “innocent” than, say, democratic ones. While White deduces that therefore, there is no rational “moral wrong” in “implicitly prais[ing] [the kind of perspective on history ...] conventionally associated with the ideologies of fascist regimes” (White, “Politics” 130), Jenkins concludes that the danger lies in ethical systems as such, since they can be constructed by both fascist and democratic raconteurs. “[Y]ou can, if you like,” he writes,

exchange love and justice for fascism (make them equivalent). And it is no good asking which of these really is ‘love and justice’, because it is only and precisely in the intrinsic ascribing of such values to one or the other that ‘it’ has a value in the first place. Things in themselves – liberal democracy or fascism – don’t have value *in* them as if value is some kind of property. No. Things are just things (‘the past’ is just ‘the

past') and we can ascribe value(s) to things (to the past) as we wish. In that sense, the referent doesn't really enter into it 'except rhetorically'; it is symbolic 'all the way down'. (*Why History?* 24)

He holds that "for [a] decision to be a moral decision [...], ethical systems cannot provide the 'moral' answer any more than the moral [aporetic] choice can." The aporetic moral choice, however, is deemed superior because it is based on the individual's "responsibility." There are no lessons to be learned from earlier decisions; history fails to provide a basis for present decisions: "each decision has to be marked and re-marked as a singularity – forever" (21).

Foreseeing the objections raised by his opponents, Jenkins explains that upon the realization that there has never been a rational ethical system, we will also find that past generations have developed "*moral discourses*" all the same, which "means that we didn't need such [ethical] foundations in the first place, and that the unending and unrewarding search for foundations can now be called off" (25). "[T]heorists today [...] do very well [...] without modernist histories," and "if Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Rorty, Ermarth *et al.* can do without a historical consciousness [...], then we all can" (202 f). Accordingly, instead of bothering about the past, we should "begin to live *out* of history and ethics and *in* time and morality in relaxed and [...] emancipatory ways" (28).

Jenkins' utopian vision of a society without collective historical memories is an intriguing thought experiment. However, in human society – in a societies defined by our ability to "bind time" (as Korzybski phrased it) –, living "*out* of history" does not seem feasible, as I will try to show in the next chapter.

2.4 The Merits of Postmodernism: Historical Relativism and the Planet Tlön

Three prestigious promoters of postmodernism having had their say, it now seems fair to give a louder voice to one of its opponents, whose approach may provide an interesting insight to the nature of the postmodern phenomenon.

Robert Anchor suggests that admitting that the positivistic historiography of the 19th century (e. g. Ranke) has long had its heyday does not necessarily imply agreeing with postmodern historical relativism (White, Ankersmit, Jenkins). He advances a critical rationalism in the tradition of Popper, and agrees with Chris Lorenz that "[f]rom the correct insight that no certain knowledge is possible, postmodernism draws the unjustified conclusion that no knowledge at all is possible (instead of the correct conclusion that all knowledge is fallible)" (Lorenz qtd. in Anchor 109). Anchor suggests that we "think of historians as jurors"

who investigate narratives by means of historical evidence. “No judicial system is perfect [...],” he fumes, “[b]ut what are the alternatives? No judicial system at all? What would a society [...] look like without a judicial system? What would it look like without history?” (Anchor 109 f). Anchor ironically remarks that it might look like the planet Tlön in Borges’ short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940). This idea is worth pursuing, for the difference between Tlön and the planet earth can serve as a vivid illustration of the shortcomings of postmodernist historiography.

The narrator in Borges’ story tells us that over the course of two centuries, a secret society of intellectuals (one of whom was George Berkeley) invented the planet Tlön. Originally only pursuing the invention of a country built around the intellectuals’ perceptions of “hermetic studies, philanthropy, and the cabala” (Borges 18), the society found itself challenged by one Ezra Buckley from Memphis, “a freethinker, a fatalist, and an apologist for slavery,” who laughed at “the modesty of the project” and “proposed the invention of a whole planet” in its stead (18). Buckley, an atheist, demanded that the planet have “no truck with the impostor Jesus Christ” (18), and suggested the publication of an encyclopedia detailing the planet’s landscapes, languages, literature and sciences.

Due to a number of coincidences, the narrator gets hold of volume XI of this encyclopedia and shares the Tlönian facts with his readers: Tlönians are “congenitally idealist” in the sense of Berkeley’s subjective idealism. Different languages are spoken on the northern and the southern hemisphere. In connection with the postmodernist world of White, Ankersmit and Jenkins, it is primarily Tlön’s northern hemisphere that is of interest. In its language, there are no nouns, but objects are referred to by “an accumulation of adjectives”: “One does not say moon; one says *airy-clear over dark-round* or *orange-faint-of-sky* [...]” (11). There is no fixed signified and corresponding signifier, but the accumulation of adjectives chosen varies according to the situation. Since language shapes our perception of the world (or vice versa, if you want), the Tlönians perceive the universe in a way that bears a striking resemblance to the postmodernist take on history: a given phenomenon can be described in a number of ways, involving adjectives pertaining to all the senses. A sunrise, for example, cannot only be connected to its colors, but also to the song of a bird or to the chilly morning temperature. Without either finite signifieds or finite signifiers (*fixed* accumulations of adjectives), assuming a connection between a number of events seems illogical:

[The Tlönians] do not perceive of the spatial as everlasting in time. The perception of a cloud of smoke on the horizon and, later, of the countryside on fire and, later, of a half-extinguished cigar which caused the conflagration would be considered an example of the association of ideas.

This monism, or extreme idealism, completely invalidates science. To explain or to judge an event is to identify or unite it with another one. In Tlön, such connexion is a later stage in the mind of the observer, which can in no way affect or illuminate the earlier stage. Each state of mind is irreducible. The mere act of giving it a name, that is of classifying it, implies a falsification of it. (12)

This seems to be a perfect description of the world White, Ankersmit and Jenkins would like to be living in. On Tlön, the past does not consist of a re-narratable story, but of disconnected single events. However, the fact that “the earlier stage” cannot be put into relation with later stages without being falsified does not, as one would imagine, mean that there are no sciences on Tlön:

[...] science exists, in countless number. In philosophy, the same thing happens as happens with the nouns in the northern hemisphere. The fact that any philosophical system is bound in advance to be a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, means that systems abound, unbelievable systems, beautifully constructed or else *sensational in effect*. The metaphysicians of Tlön are *not looking for truth*, nor even for an approximation of it; they are after a kind of amazement. They consider metaphysics *a branch of fantastic literature*. They know that a system is nothing more than the subordination of all aspects of the universe to some of them. Even the phrase “all the aspects” can be rejected, since it presupposes the impossible inclusion of the present moment, and of past moments. (12; my emphases)

The passage reveals two further parallels to postmodern historiography: the “sensational [...] effect” of “systems” corresponds to White’s criterion of effectiveness and Ankersmit’s notion of the “stylistic superiority” of a historical narration that “successfully” implements the available historical evidence. While Ankersmit and White regard historiography as a literary subgenre, metaphysics is treated as “a branch of fantastic literature” on Tlön, and while science and philosophy are “dialectical game[s]” on Tlön, historiography is a dialectical game for the postmodernists – a game in which “criteria of truth and falsity do not apply,” as Ankersmit has it (“Reply” 295), just as Tlön’s metaphysicians [...] “are not looking for truth.”

I deem a planet Tlön not only deeply fascinating, but also *thinkable*. We earthlings, however, will never be Tlönians, for our languages, and what they can and do describe, prevent the coming about of the radical idealism governing Tlön. What the narrator observes for Berkeley’s subjective idealism – it is, as Hume has said, “not only thoroughly unanswerable but thoroughly unconvincing [... in] our world” (Borges 10), while at the same time being thoroughly applicable and thoroughly convincing on Tlön – can also be said about our postmodernists. As a matter of course, their arguments would not be questioned on Tlön. It would not even need any Whites, Ankersmits and Jenkinses on Tlön, for the relativist knowledge would be a priori shared by anyone growing up in a world without fixed signifiers and signifieds.

Unfortunately for postmodernism, the planet earth is nothing like the planet Tlön, and historical relativism entails a number of serious problems. In nuce, two basic facts make for all the differences of the Tlönian and the earthly universe: Tlön has “no truck with the impostor Jesus Christ,” in fact, the Tlönians do not seem to believe in any god whatsoever. Hence they do not need history, for there is no need to remember a creation myth. The planet earth, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in its various creation myths. Hence, the earthly languages have developed in a way allowing the earthly mind to describe the time span from the moment of creation to the present moment as a chain-of-events.

As Wittgenstein has observed, the limits of our language are the limits of our world. “[T]he impostor Jesus Christ” is unthinkable without (1) fixed signifieds and signifiers and (2) perceiving time in terms of chains-of-events. Without such chains, certain theories could not have developed. For example, one religious chain-of-events would never have been regarded as “truer” than another one, one “race” could never have thought itself “fitter” than another one, Dostoevsky would not have written in his diary that anti-Semitism “must have stemmed from something” and hence faulted “the Jews.” Because the consequences of these arguments would not have come about either, postmodernism would not entail the danger of relativizing, for example, revisionist chains-of-events.

More importantly still, there would be no basis for revisionism in the first place. Phenomena of mass hysteria and mass seduction, such as Nazism, would not function on Tlön the way they do in our world, for the masses could never be “*gleichgeschaltet*” as they were in the “Third Reich.” In a world without fixed signifiers and signifieds, there are no proper nouns to be emotionally charged in order to (mis)guide the masses. Furthermore, Mechanistic historical models (if not historical models as such) are particularly unconvincing, for they involve an exceptionally long chain-of-events. The Nazi doctrine would be regarded a tasteless joke by the Tlönians; Marx’ teleological class struggle might be deemed a fantastic piece of art in the dialectic game.

In our world – which does not even remotely resemble Tlön – emotionally charged proper nouns (such as *fanaticism* [e.g. in NS reports] or *mother-country*) have been used to guide the masses in the past. We do, of course, also encounter emotionally charged proper nouns on a day-to-day basis; advertising slogans and political campaigns rely on their force. In order to maintain a critical stance towards emotionally charged nouns and proposed chains-of-events in the present and future, we cannot, since we do not live on Tlön, afford to forget about our history, for the “picture of the past [...] threatens to disappear with each present that does not recognize itself as being meant in it” (Benjamin, “Geschichte” 253; my

translation). – It seems that, for the time being, we should not dismiss Richard Evans’ “intellectual world [...] of the flat-earth variety” (*Why History?* 95) altogether.

Does this mean we are we supposed to “learn from our history,” as is frequently demanded? And if so – what exactly is it we are supposed to learn? Is the lesson of history ever an unambiguous one? I am afraid it is not. Historical points of view are intrinsically linked to political ones, for the historian, just as any other intellectual, philosopher, scientist – just as any other human being, that is – is *never* disinterested.

However, while what we ought to learn from the past is debatable, the past as such is not. We may draw different conclusions, deduce the causal nexus pursuant to our political attitude, and come up with interpretations that are, as Anchor and Lorenz suggest, fallible. But we should keep in mind that while “the truth may be debated, the existence of the half-truth and of the out-and-out lie cannot be denied” (Rabinovici, “Wie es war,” my translation).

Postmodern theories are not irreconcilable with historiography as long as they keep in mind an axiom formulated by Jean-Francois Lyotard, himself a postmodernist: “[n]othing can be said of reality that does not presuppose it” (Lyotard 9). The present is what has been built on the ruins of the past, and the task of the historian is the task of a geologist, archeologist, and architect. Pointing out the meta-level of discourse, the postmodernists do open up new ways of thinking about the present society, but they cannot, no matter how deadly their pen, write away what preceded it.

3 “Poetry after Auschwitz”

“What are you writing” the Rebbe asked. “Stories,” I said. He wanted to know what kind of stories: true stories. “About people you knew?” Yes, about people I might have known. “About things that happened?” Yes, about things that happened or could have happened. “But they did not?” No, not all of them did. In fact, some were invented from almost the beginning to almost the end. The Rebbe leaned forward as if to measure me up and said with more sorrow than anger: “That means you are writing lies!” I did not answer immediately. The scolded child within me had nothing to say in his defense. Yet, I had to justify myself: “Things are not that simple, Rebbe. Some events do take place but are not true; others are – although they never occurred.”

(Elie Wiesel qtd. in Weissman 67 f)

3.1 The Limits of Historiography

I do not think a binary model of history/fact on the one and fiction on the other hand does justice to a topic as complex and controversial as the (mis)representations of Nazism. Rather than getting lost in logico-linguistic, semantic and pragmatic categories of fact and

fiction, we should bear in mind a different angle, which transgresses the two-dimensional model: truth.

It is not only historical works that can be “true,” there are works of fiction that are equally true, and sometimes even more so. As Doron Rabinovici remarks in his essay on the writing of history and literature after and about the Shoah:

The historian and the chronicler are facing the same problem. They can only point out the extent of the atrocity with the murderers’ measure. Account is given of epidemic-hygienical actions, of the technical perfecting of the barbarism. Nondescript stays that this is reflective of the logic of the murderers. Beyond the scientific handicraft, there lie the possibilities of [a] literature that does not even pretend to only depict the facts. It is for that reason that [literature] can approximate a truth exceeding all reality without betraying it. (“Wie es war,” my translation)

An unemotional statement of the plain facts will inevitably apply “the murderers’ measure” in some way. Cold objectivity will, just as the murderers did, see the victims in terms of numbers and (ethnic, racial, religious) categories; it will use the euphemisms of the murderers. At the same time, it may fail to see the people, and fail to represent the unsayable, the unthinkable. Consider an example taken from the chapter “Anti-Semitism and ‘Ordinary Germans’” in Richard Evans’ *Rereading German History* (Evans is arguing against Goldhagen’s claim that “no other country’s antisemitism came close’ to matching German antisemitism in the nineteenth century”):

In the two weeks following the Tsar’s October Manifesto, which made major concessions to the idea of a constitutional monarchy, there were 690 documented pogroms in Russia, with over 3,000 reported murders. In the town of Odessa, 800 Jews were murdered, 5,000 wounded and over 100,000 made homeless. (Evans 154).

Evans’ paragraph, well-documented and objectively (heterodiegetically) formulated, states a historical fact – and not more than that. He has given account of factual truth, yet the question remains what he has actually conveyed about that time. Will his readers, after having thought of this paragraph, see the world any differently than before?

“Plain historiography,” along with its merits as well as shortcomings, can also be transferred into spoken discourse such as the Lipstadt/Irving dispute brought before the English court which I have referred to earlier. Irving argues that the elevator connecting the underground gas chambers in the crematorium II in Auschwitz-Birkenau with the incinerators did not have the necessary capacity for proving the eyewitness accounts of the (that is, of any!) gassings. He is cross-examining Robert-Jan van Pelt, one of the expert witnesses of the defense:

Irving: [...] What do we know about the carrying capacity of that elevator?

van Pelt: There is a document for that. The elevator, this document in March for that, I think it is March 1943, they carried the original one which was installed for 750 kilos.

Irving: 750 kilos.

van Pelt: They immediately asked to increase the carrying capacity of that elevator by providing extra cables to 1500 kilos.

Irving: What do we know about the provision of the motors for those elevators?

van Pelt: [...] I do not have the document. But I do know, because I actually looked it up this morning, that they were adapting that particular -- it was a temporary elevator -- to a weight, to a carrying load of 1500 kilos. So I presume if they do that, that indeed there is a motor which will be able to hoist 1500 kilos.

Irving: This was made by Daemarg, I believe, the company?

van Pelt: Yes.

[...]

Irving: Anyway, carrying a load of 1500 kilos, that would be how many corpses?

van Pelt: An average one 60 kilos. It seems a little high, by that would be -- the theoretical carrying capacity would be, let us say, 20 corpses, so that would be 20, 25 corpses.

(Trial Transcripts, Day 10, 183 f)

Mentioned in the same breath with a company manufacturing elevators and reduced to their weight, the victims are stripped of all humanity – they are abstracted, turned into mere numbers and mathematical equations. Once turned into mere numbers, the inhibition threshold for applying the “murderers’ measure” recedes: on his way home from the courtroom, James Dalrymple, the journalist covering the Irving/Lipstadt case for the *Independent*, took out his calculator to check what Irving had denied: That 500,000 bodies were transported from the gas chambers to the incinerators by a single elevator. He writes in his article:

And on the way home in the train that night, to my shame, I took out a pocket calculator and began to do some sums. Ten minutes for each batch of 25 [corpses], I tapped in. That makes 150 an hour. Which gives 3,600 for each 24-hour period. Which gives 1,314,000 in a year. So that’s fine. It could be done. Thank God, the numbers add up.

This is not to say that van Pelt is not doing his job, that he is not stating historical facts, or that he is not doing so in a way appropriate to the legal environment. Nor is it to blame Dalrymple for taking up the revisionist game, for being tempted to doubt the historical facts (his own doubts become quite clear when he says, “Thank God, the numbers add up”), for showing the readers of the *Independent*, some of whom may be equally doubtful, that Irving is wrong. We can provide historical evidence for van Pelt’s testimony; we can take out our own pocket calculators and confirm Dalrymple’s calculation. Yet we will, just like them, have applied “the measure of the murderers.” We will have talked about the “technical perfecting of the barbarism,” we will have confirmed historical facts. Just like van Pelt and

Dalrymple, we will have produced factual texts in our analyses, and just like them, we will have stripped that time of its humanity, that is, of its atrocities, by turning it into easily digestible bites for our respective audiences. Saying something factual about history or about the texts produced about history, “scientific handicraft” will have moved yet another step away from that time itself – we will, albeit adhering to the facts, have, in Rabinovici’s words, betrayed truth.

Yet it is, of course, facts, and the truth behind and beyond these facts, that the serious historian, author or journalist wants to mediate in his texts. It is art and literature that may provide the means to overcome the dilemma and let him or her articulate the unspeakable. While truth eludes the texts produced by van Pelt and Dalrymple, literature opens a door to the unspeakable beyond the naked facts.

As Franz Fühmann observes in his juxtaposition of scientific and fictional writing, the allegories of art have the power to place the individual experience of an I into the frame of understanding by the other, by *those who have not been there*, while the syllogisms of scientific/testimonial/factual writing fail to communicate individual experience across the borders inflicted on us by our otherness. Fühmann quotes the Book of Job, and relates it to the death of a friend: “Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together! For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea“ (Job 6:2–3, King James). Although grief cannot be literally weighed on a scale, and neither can all the sand of the sea, the allegory captures a truth that eludes a scientific syllogism like “All humans are mortal; Gajus was human; conclusion: Gajus also was mortal; now come off it!” (modus Barbara; cf. Fühmann 193).

3.2 An Eakinian/Benjaminian Approach

Part 1 has shown that in historiography, factual narration can be enriched and rendered more easily accessible by means of narrative strategies traditionally associated with fiction, such as internal focalization in Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*. Literary techniques like the epic preterite are not limited to the fictional register, but also constitute a fundamental component of literary non-fiction (such as Ruth Klüger’s autobiography *Still Alive*). The registers overlap; there is no such thing as a clear boundary between factual and fictional narrative techniques. Fiction tends to include factual elements, and non-fiction may make use of “fictional,” that is, *literary*, narrative techniques respectively. Acknowledging a certain overlaps of fact and fiction can help us to overcome the logico-linguistic and semantic

formalisms and their insistence on the “pureness” of (factual or fictional) genres. Instead of falling into the relativist trap of postmodern philosophy upon the finding that generic pureness is a mere idealization, I want to propose taking a pragmatic approach to art based on Eakin and Benjamin (cf. chapter 2.4).

Benjamin’s “[f]ragments of a vessel” shall serve as a metaphor for the act of translating experiences into story-form, and the referential past into written words: “Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another” (“Task of the Translator” 81). Like fragments of a vessel, the referential past and its story-form “must match one another in the smallest details,” that is, they must be truthful. But they “need not be like one another” – it lies in their very nature that they must be *more* than mere replicas of each other. By means of “lovingly and in detail incorporating the original’s mode of signification” (81), they become “fragments of a greater language”, namely the language of *truth*.

Striving to not only “match the original [the referential past] in the smallest detail,” but also to “be like [it],” positivistic historical discourse such as Evans’ *Rereading German History*, if taken to its extremes, will produce texts such as van Pelt’s positivistic account of the carrying capacity of the Auschwitz elevator or Dalrymple’s article for the *Independent* (cf. chapter 3.1), that is to say, texts that “can only point out the extent of the atrocity with the murderers’ measure” (“Wie es war”).

As Rabinovici observes, art transcends the limited possibilities of positivistic historiography; it can “approximate a truth exceeding all reality without betraying it” (5). Moreover, art opens up a space beyond the postmodern controversy about historical representability, and it has the means to reach an audience that may not be reached by, or not be willing or able to relate to, positivistic historiography: art speaks to everyone.

3.3 Art Spiegelman: Transcending the Limits of Representation

I have referred to the language of art (literature, film, painting ...) as a “language of truth,” that is, a language able to express “a truth exceeding all reality without betraying it” (Rabinovici, “Wie es war”), a language that manages to not only share knowledge, but create empathy by means of communicating individual experience across the borders inflicted on us by our otherness.

Communicating what is lost in the “cold facts” of historiography and science, the empathy created by art does not only develop a force of expression inaccessible to positivistic

historiography, but also fulfills the task of a gate-keeper. While positivistic approaches to history run the risk of exploiting the past in order to justify present politics, of stripping the victims of their humanity, and of applying “the murderers’ measure,” the empathy of art – its ability to not only *tell*, but to *involve*, to invite identification – acts as a counterbalance to the abstraction of “pure” historiography.

Furthermore, while postmodern philosophers of history tend to reduce historiography to mere theory and disapprove of its attempts to express something realistically that cannot be expressed realistically, art sidesteps the postmodern “truth” debate. “[N]ot even pretend[ing] to only depict the facts” (Rabinovici, “Wie es war”), but “lovingly and in detail incorporat[ing] the original’s mode of signification” (Benjamin, “Task of the Translator” 81) instead of mimicking it, art opens up a safe space for the past. This space is not confined to the ivory tower, but invites a broader public to engage in it.

I want to illustrate art’s force of expression by means of a close reading of Art Spiegelman’s anthropomorphic graphic novel *Maus. A Survivor’s Tale*, the biography of Spiegelman’s father Vladek, and at the same time an autobiography of the author himself, and a critical reflection on the representation and representability of the Holocaust.

The first volume, *My Father Bleeds History* (first published as a book in 1986), tells the story of Spiegelman’s parents, Vladek and Anja, from their time in Poland until their imprisonment at Auschwitz. The second volume, *And Here my Troubles Began* (1991), recounts Vladek’s ordeal in the concentration camp until their liberation. Vladek’s experience is juxtaposed with Art’s¹⁴ own experience growing up as a second generation Jew in the US.

I have decided to choose *Maus* rather than a traditional Holocaust (auto)biography for three reasons:

(1) First of all, “[comics] offers range and versatility with all the potential imagery of film and painting plus the intimacy of the written word” (McCloud 212). Refusing to be categorized, that is to say, making use of and reflecting on three artistic genres (writing, drawing/painting, film) simultaneously, the book lends itself to an Eakinian/Benjaminian analysis not only of Holocaust literature, but of Holocaust art as such. Transcending genre boundaries and the border of “popular” and “high” culture, taking a highly experimental approach to a serious topic, causing empathy and shock with simple words and simple pictures that will speak to any reader, and playing with irony and black humor, *Maus* seems

¹⁴ I will refer to the author Art Spiegelman as Spiegelman, and to his avatar as Art.

an ideal juxtaposition to the “thinking inside boxes” popular among both logico-linguistic and semantic narratologists, and postmodern philosophers of history.

It is a rigorously researched autobiography that includes historical material of the narrated past (Vladek’s and Anja’s story), such as family photographs:

Richieu: the second volume is dedicated to Anja’s and Vladek’s first son, who did not survive the Holocaust, and introduced with a picture of him.

Vladek: *Maus I* 100.

Spiegelman and Anja: *Maus II* 134.

The work also reproduces historical documents, such as a map of Auschwitz-Birkenau (*Maus II* 51; back cover of *Maus II*), and a map of Poland indicating the location of Polish concentration camps on the back cover of *Maus I*. Furthermore, the CD-ROM edition of *Maus I* includes excerpts of Spiegelman’s taped interviews with Vladek.

At the same time, *Maus* employs fictionalization techniques, and Art and Spiegelman question Vladek’s eyewitness testimony (the depiction of the orchestra, *Maus II* 54).

In addition, *Maus* reproduces materials from the narrated present (Art’s story), namely *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, an earlier comic by Spiegelman that was published in the underground comics magazine *Short Order Comix* in 1972 (*Maus I* 100–103).

(2) Secondly, *Maus I* is the most self-reflective and self-critical Holocaust (auto)biography I have come across. It confronts the problematic notion of “Holokitsch” (Spiegelman’s term, qtd. in Staub 41) and the phenomenon Norman Finkelstein calls “The Holocaust industry” (cf. chapter 4.5), it is well aware of their problematic implications and deliberately refuses to become a part of it: “I resist becoming the Elie Wiesel of the comic book”, Spiegelman said in a 1992 NPR interview (qtd. in Rothberg 687).

(3) Unlike traditional works, which tend to take the representability of the past for granted, *Maus* keeps questioning it (for example in *Maus II* 45), but simultaneously insists on Art’s personal need to put it to paper: his parents’ past keeps intruding into Art’s present life, and in order to come to terms with it, he has to break the silence.

The critical and self-reflexive approach taken by Spiegelman makes *Maus* a decisively *postmodern* work. As a postmodern artist, Spiegelman acknowledges that “no certain knowledge is possible” (cf. Anchor 109). However, unlike White, Ankersmit and Jenkins, this insight does not lead him to the misconception that *no* knowledge at all is possible, but to the conclusion that truth can only be adequately explored and represented as long as it remains aware of its own relativity, constantly questioning itself and exploring all aspects of its dialectics and inconsistencies.

I shall explore these three and other aspects of the work in greater detail, and point out how Spiegelman came to write graphic novels rather than novels or make films, and what *Maus* can teach us about (auto)biographical art on the one and the culture industry on the other hand.

3.3.1 Between Cinema and the Written Word: “the past is also what it is not.”

An important aspect of graphic novels in general and *Maus* in particular is the proximity to film. The cinematographic element in Art Spiegelman’s work manifests itself in the influence of Ken Jacobs’ non-narrative films, and in a number of cinematographic allusions and devices on both the level of words and the level of images.

Spiegelman’s interest in making comics was sparked by a class with filmmaker Ken Jacobs in New York, who was to become an important influence for him. Ken Jacobs’ experimental approach to film includes what he calls “mining existing film.” Jacobs wants to make his audience aware of what they are *not* seeing when watching a movie at normal speed (24 frames per second). In his *Nervous System* series, for example, Jacobs confronts the viewer with between two and four frames per second, or shows one and the same frame over and over again in order to draw attention to what happens “in between” the frames and make his audience see everything there can be seen in one frame (cf. *Conversation with Ken Jacobs*). The element of the “in between” was to become equally important for Spiegelman’s graphic art.

The phenomenon Jacobs is experimenting with when showing only a few frames per second – the ability of the human mind to “take two separate images and transform them into a single idea” (McCloud 66) – is called closure. When watching a movie at normal speed, our mind performs closure 24 times per second. Comics are equally dependent on closure, albeit in a different sense. In film, closure relies on *time*: at a certain speed, different frames are projected on the same space. In comics, closure relies on *space*: the panels are all there at the same time, but they occupy different spaces. When reading a comic, closure happens in the gutters (the blank space separating two panels).

For Spiegelman, the “space in between” is even more important than for Jacobs. In an interview with Grant Rogers, he explained that *Maus* could not be a movie or an animated cartoon because the meaning of the gutters would be lost (Resonance FM). The importance of the spatial dimension in his comics is irreconcilable with the temporal dimension of film, for showing individual frames on an animated projector, as Jacobs does in the *Nervous System*

series, produces non-narrative cinema. Jacobs cinematographic work can only *show* and draw attention to detail, but it cannot *tell* a story as Spiegelman's *Maus* does. Cinema can only be either narrative or non-narrative. The moment it draws attention to what is not seen in narrative cinema, it ceases to tell a story. Comics, on the other hand, narrate a story in their panels, while the gutters can simultaneously be used to draw attention to what is *not* written/drawn.

Stressing this aspect of his work, Spiegelman visually solves the problem posed by Ankersmit, who claims that the past is hard to adequately mediate because "[it] is also what it is not" ("Historiography" 147). In Spiegelman's work, the gutters can be read as a metaphor for the silence of his mother Anja. In addition to Art's frequent allusions to Anja's absence and inability to tell her side of the story (e.g. "I wish I got *Mom's* story while she was alive. She was more *sensitive* ... It would give the book some balance" [*Maus I* 132]), the gutters are framing the panels throughout *Maus I* and *II*. They are equally important to the mechanics of the comic book medium as the panels themselves, but they are filled with nothing but the blank silence characterizing the space-in-between.

At the same time he attended Jacobs' lectures, Spiegelman was deeply impressed by Kafka, whose stories required a reading as active and engaged as Jacobs' films required an active and engaged viewing. While Jacobs wanted his audience to closely look at a single frame and Kafka's novels asked to be read more than once, Spiegelman decided to make "comics that needed to be re-read": the idea for *Maus* was born (cf. Resonance FM).

Spiegelman had found a way to represent the past that was at the same time accessible to anyone ("It is an important book. People who don't usually read such stories will be interested" [Mala in *Maus I* 133]), but at the same time rejected the easy digestibility sought by mainstream Holocaust ("Holokitsch") works, for Spiegelman's comics "needed to be re-read."

Apart from closure, graphic novels also make use of a different cinematographic device: the voice-over. As Doherty observes, graphic novels "[claim] a dual kinship with the narrative voice of the novel and the narrative voice-over of cinema" (Doherty 80).

The boxed comments rendering Vladek's present narrating voice in combination with a picture of a past scene do for *Maus* what voice-over does for a movie. They show the past and at the same time remind the reader that he or she is not *in* the past, but watching someone's present thoughts *about* the past.

The boxed comments enable Spiegelman to render the voice of Vladek's direct speech in the narrated past differently from his voice-overs and his direct speech in the narrated present. Vladek's speech balloons in the narrated present and his voice-overs reproduce a second-language speaker's English. For example, two panels depicting Vladek working at a prisoner-of-war-camp in *Maus I* combine with the following voice-overs: "It came very many Gestapo and Wehrmacht. We were not at ease. We didn't know what they could do with us," and "I stood always in the second line. I didn't want they should see me much" (*Maus I* 58). In the panels depicting the present (Art talking to Vladek), Vladek's English is also a second language learner's English. After spilling a bottle with pills he has to take, Vladek says, "It's my eye," "Ever since I got into my left eye the hemorrhaging and the glaucoma, it had to be taken out from me. And now I don't see so well" (*Maus I* 39). Art's English, on the other hand, is a native speaker's English, for he has grown up in the US and spoken English all his life.

Unlike in Vladek's voice-overs, the English syntax in Vladek's *speech balloons* in the narrated past is always correct. This is because at that time, Vladek would not have spoken English but his native languages Polish and Yiddish (also cf. Huyssen 78). Writing a traditional biography would have made it difficult for Spiegelman to distinguish between Vladek's past and present voice by means of using English alone without alienating the reader. In the comic book, on the other hand, the voice switching works as smoothly and feels as natural as it would in a movie.

This enables Spiegelman to forego the question of the reliability of memory, which traditional biographers may have to struggle with and which their works are frequently criticized for when they take the reliability of memory for granted. The panels taking us deep into the narrated past (Vladek's story) and making us forget about the narrated present (the conversation between Vladek and Art in the US) are disrupted by Vladek's voice-overs. The syntax reminds us that the Vladek who is narrating/remembering is not the Vladek who is being narrated/remembered. The truth of *Maus* does not lie in a non-verifiable claim that up to the minutest detail, this is exactly what *happened*, but in the verifiable claim that this is exactly what Vladek *remembers*.

Spiegelman takes the cinematographic dimension even further by "visually fram[ing] Vladek's narration] as if it were a movie projected by Vladek himself" (Huyssen 70). When Vladek starts his narration, he is sitting on his exercise bike, the mechanism of which resembles a movie projector, as Huyssen observes (71). In the background of Vladek's bike/movie projector, there is a large poster of the 1921 movie *The Sheik*. This panel is

situated neither in the narrated present (it is unlikely that Vladek has an oversized Valentino poster on the wall of his living room) nor in the narrated past. Instead, it introduces the reader to the way the story is going to be narrated. It is a panel that uses what comic artists call bleeds, that is, an unframed panel standing out among the surrounding framed panels. With bleeds, “time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel, but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space” (McClaud 103).

Not confined by a frame, the panel does not only refer to one moment in the story, but to the entire story. “People always told me I looked just like Rudolph Valentino” (*Maus I* 13), Vladek muses, starting to pedal and set the spinning wheel/the film reel into motion. The next panel is already situated in the small town of Czestochowa, where the young Vladek (who, unlike the aged Vladek, does not wear glasses) is portrayed dancing with a girl. However, the aged Vladek is still present in the voice-over-style boxed comment: “Eventually, I took Lucia to dance ...” Rather than saying “[...] I took Lydia *out* to dance,” as a native speaker of English would, Vladek’s non-native syntax omits the “out.” One panel down, there is no more voice-over, Vladek and Lucia are dancing, and the young Vladek’s syntax is correct, indicating that he is talking in his native Polish or Yiddish now: “I have a small apartment. My parents moved to Sosnowiec” (*Maus I* 13).

It only takes Spiegelman three panels to teach his readership how the story is going to work. The closure performed by the reader’s imagination in the gutters of these three panels reveals the underlying narrative structure of the entire book.

The cinematographic structure is revoked on the last page of *Maus II*. As Huysen remarks, the background to Vladek’s and Anja’s reunification resembles the fade-out iris of silent films (80). The panel comes with Vladek’s last voice-over, playing on fairy tale/Hollywood-style happy endings: “More I don’t need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after” (*Maus II* 136).

However, the book does not end where a movie might end. The following two panels take us out of Vladek’s memories and back to the narrated present, that is, back to Art’s present. Vladek tells Art to turn off his tape recorder, and adds in the next panel: “I’m tired from talking, Richieu, and it’s enough stories for now ...” (*Maus II* 136). In the same panel, the last but one, Art looks at his father and seems somewhat lost. Vladek’s accidentally referring to Art by the name of Richieu, his dead brother, reminds Art that the past has not stopped intruding into his own life, although Vladek has finished telling his story. Richieu, Vladek’s and Anja’s first son, who did not survive the “Third Reich,” will always be with them.

Throughout *Maus I* and *II*, the young Art seems to almost feel haunted by the constant presence of his dead brother in his parents' life. He tells his wife Françoise, “[Richieu] was mainly a large, blurry photograph hanging in my parents’ bedroom. [...] The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble ... it was an ideal kid, and *I* was a pain in the ass. I couldn’t compete” (*Maus II* 15). Richieu, having died at an age where it is still easy for children to fulfill their parents’ expectations, has never stopped being the boy who might have “become a doctor, and married a wealthy Jewish girl” (*Maus II* 15). Spiegelman says that he, on the other hand, “was in rebellion against [his] parents from an early age and had a difficult time coming to terms with them” (qtd. in Staub 40).

The memory of Richieu adds a further level to the motif of “the past [being] also what it is not” (“Historiography” 147): as for Richieu, the past is a life that could have been lived, but was not.

By the end of *Maus II*, Art seems to have made peace at last with the brother he never got to know: Spiegelman dedicates *Maus II* to Richieu and to his own daughter Nadja. The dedication is accompanied by a photo of Richieu. That way, Spiegelman sets an allegorical tombstone not only for his parents, as he does in the bleed that is the very last panel of *Maus II*, but also for his brother Richieu.

3.3.2 Anthropomorphic Characters

The characters in *Maus* are not humans but, depending on their ethnicity, belong to one of eleven groups of animals, many of which play on stereotypes. The Jews are mice, Polish Christians are pigs, the German Nazis are tabby cats, the Roma are gypsy moths (*Maus II* 133), white Americans are white dogs and African Americans black dogs (*Maus II* 98), the French are frogs (*Maus II* 93), the British are fish (*Maus II* 131), the Russians bears, Swedes are reindeer (*Maus II* 125) and Israeli Jews are porcupines (*Maus II* 42). Spiegelman is consistent in his imagery: the children of a German Christian and a German Jew are tabby mice (*Maus II* 131), and Jews pretending to be Polish are depicted as mice hiding their faces behind pig masks (*Maus I* 64, 125).

Reminiscent of works as different as animal cartoons, traditional animal fables, works by Kafka, and Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Spiegelman’s anthropomorphic main characters prepare the reader to bring a specific moral response to the book.

While it is easy to sympathize with the mice we readily associate with characters from *Mickey Mouse* and *Tom and Jerry*, we are quick to recognize the cats – the mice’s natural animals – as the villains of the story. The Polish pigs point to Poland being an agricultural

country, but also to the fact that pork is not kosher. Furthermore, recalling the most prominent pigs in English literature – Orwell’s Stalin parody “Napoleon” and his allies, who revolt against the humans only to end up acting just like them –, Spiegelman satirizes the Poles and conditions the readers to mistrust the pigs. In contrast, the Americans, depicted as lop-eared dogs, evoke the impression of loyalty, fidelity and friendliness. Drawing the Roma as woodboring beetles is a pun on the term gypsy and metaphorically evokes the Nazis’ understanding of Roma as pests. “Frog” is a common term of abuse for the French, referring to the national dish of frogs’ legs and to the French’s alleged cowardice. Similarly, “cold fish” is a colloquial expression for an emotionless person. Representing the British as fish, Spiegelman contrasts the stereotypes of American extroversion and English reserve. The Russian bears are based on the traditional Russian emblem, and the reindeer – typical Nordic animals – are a metonymical illustration of the Swedes. The Israeli porcupines – a caricature of Jewish-Israeli mentality and Israeli foreign politics – are Spiegelman’s most satirical metaphor. Porcupines are prickly, an adjective also used figuratively to describe someone who is easily offended and overly sensitive. The porcupines can be interpreted as an allusion to traditionalist/nationalist Israeli Jews, who bristle at international criticism, including criticism from the more liberal Jewish-American community. Furthermore, a topic is called “prickly” if it is sensitive, contentious or hard to deal with, as is the case for Israeli-Palestinian politics.

The different criteria Spiegelman uses when selecting the animals for the individual nationalities and ethnicities – from literary references and heraldic animals to puns and metonymy – evoke the impression of deliberate randomness and can be read as a comment on the irrationality of the stereotypes we live by. Using them to make his story work, Spiegelman makes us aware our own readiness to unquestioningly accept these stereotypes. At the same time, he attempts to deconstruct them, as becomes clear from the genesis of *Maus*.

Spiegelman’s fascination for anthropomorphic characters and his idea to depict Jews as mice was also triggered by Ken Jacobs’ film class he attended in New York. Jacobs confronted his students with animated racist cartoons from the 1920s and 1930s, and animated Mickey Mouse cartoons. He then asked them to think about the difference between the two, a question that engaged the young artist’s imagination (cf. Resonance FM).

Spiegelman may have associated Jacobs’ class with his own and his father’s personal experience with comics. As Thomas Doherty observes, the young Vladek must have been surrounded by “anti-Semitic broadsheets and editorial cartoons depicting Jews as hook-nosed, beady-eyed *Untermenschen*, creatures whose ferret faces and rodent snouts marked them as

human vermin” (Doherty 74). Spiegelman, on the other hand, remembers “[growing] up with everything from Aesop’s fables to the Donald Duck stories and animated cartoons” (Resonance FM).

Cartoons must have seemed to be an ideal means to mediate between his own and his father’s life. Spiegelman consciously picks up the Nazi stereotype depicting Jews as vermin, and fills the cartoon mouse with new meaning. Spiegelman’s juxtaposition of the Nazi vermin and his own anthropomorphic mice becomes clear from the paragraphs Spiegelman quotes as an introduction to *Maus I* and *II*: “The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human” (Hitler qtd. in *Maus I*), and

“Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!”
(newspaper article, Pomerania, mid-1930s, qtd. in *Maus II*)

Spiegelman himself commented on his deliberate deconstruction of Nazi cartoons: “My anthropomorphized mice carry trace elements of [editorial cartoonist] Fips’s anti-Semitic Jew-as-rat cartoons for *Der Sturmer* [sic!], but being particularized they are invested with personhood; they stand upright and affirm their humanity” (qtd. in Doherty 74), and Huysen observes: “[...] Spiegelman’s mimetic adoption of Nazi imagery [...] succeeds in reversing its implications while simultaneously keeping us aware of the humiliation and degradation of that imagery’s original intention” (Huysen 75).

Spiegelman’s fondness of Kafka (*The Metamorphosis*, “A Little Fable,” “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk” etc.) may also have contributed to his interest in anthropomorphic characters.

In an interview for the *Comics Journal*, Spiegleman himself stresses that he could not have drawn his father’s biography with human characters, because

if one draws this kind of stuff with people, it comes out wrong. [...] [F]irst of all, I’ve never lived through anything like that. [...] I don’t know exactly what a German looks like who was in a specific small town doing a specific thing. [...] I’m bound to do something inauthentic. [...] [I]f I did it with people [...], [i]t would come out as some kind of odd plea for sympathy or “Remember the Six Million,” and that wasn’t my point [...]. (qtd. in Ewert 92 and Huysen 75)

This statement reflects Spiegelman’s refusal to write “Holokitsch” and become “the Elie Wiesel of the comic book” (qtd. in Rothberg 687), and to become part of what Finkelstein calls “The Holocaust industry.” Spiegelman does not ask for sympathy and he does not primarily want to write one more “Remember the Six Millions” book. “I had a focus,” he writes, “for dealing with the issues that were important to me – my parents, my ethnic

background, the ghosts of the dead – and I could sustain the illusion of doing work that was making a difference” (“Saying Goodbye” 44) Not trying to tell a universal story, but taking an unconventional as well as personal approach to family history is what enables him to make the fragments of his parents’ past and his present “recognizable as fragments of a greater language,” as Benjamin has it (“Task of the Translator” 81).

What would Spiegelman’s work have looked like, had he used people instead of animals? An earlier comic by Spiegelman, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* (*Maus I* 100–103), affirms the artist’s intuition that “it comes out wrong” “if one draws this kind of stuff with people.” The human characters in *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* do not evoke immediate empathy; the need to draw their faces in greater detail to distinguish one human avatar from another defeats the universal appeal of Spiegelman’s mouse people. As a whole, the human characters (in combination with the different drawing style) rather turn *Prisoner* into a dark and desperate splatter comic than into a sensitive, subtle, ironic and thought-provoking work like *Maus*.

“To use these ciphers, the cats and mice,” Spiegelman continues to explain his approach, “is actually a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it” (qtd. in Huyssen 75). The ciphers work, that is, *Maus* makes us see “past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it” because of the way our mind processes cartoons: “[...] when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face[,] you see it as the face of *another*. But when you enter the world of the cartoon[,] you see *yourself* (McCloud 36). This is exactly the effect Spiegelman creates: he wants the animal metaphor “to be shed like a snake-skin” (qtd. in Ewert 95). Indeed, as the story progresses, the reader soon overlooks the anthropomorphism and identifies the mice as humans. The universal appeal of cartoons invites reader identification, and their simple drawing style makes the characters less and their message – what they have to say – more vivid (cf. McCloud 37, Ewert 97).

Spiegelman’s ciphers make use of this effect: of all of his anthropomorphic characters, the mice most closely resemble a ☺ – the simplest and most universal representation of a human face we are all familiar with. As McCloud points out, it is not a specific *shape* that prompts our mind to recognize a face in an object or drawing, but any two dots combined with a line that marks the mouth. Our mind may make us see a face in an object as mundane as a socket, or even in the headlights and front spoiler lip of a car. In any case, the more minimalist a ☺ in a comic, the greater the chance that the reader will see him- or herself in it rather than another.

As for the main ethnic groups in *Maus*, the faces of the mice – two dots combined with the smile-shaped chin – are more minimalist than the faces of the cats and the pigs. The Nazi cats, in contrast, are mostly drawn with uniform caps overshadowing their eyes. This simple device – the missing eyes – makes them less human; they appear sly and untrustworthy. The civilian cats (*Maus II* 130) and the cat married to a mouse (*Maus II* 131) do not wear uniform caps and hence look more human and less sly. However, at this point of the story, the reader has learned to associate cats with Nazis, and he or she will automatically approach the civilian cats with initial wariness and distrust. A similar effect is created by the Polish pigs, whose prominent snouts, although they do not evoke the eyeless cats' dangerousness, prevent resemblance to the universal 😊 and hence do not invite reader identification either. In contrast to the Nazi cats, the American dogs always have eyes, no matter if they are wearing uniform caps or not (e. g. *Maus II* 112). Together with the loyalty and faithfulness we unconsciously associate with dogs ("man's best friend"), Spiegelman's dogs, like his mice, immediately win the readers' sympathy. However, as the identification with the mice has already happened long before the reader encounters the first dog, the reader has already identified with the mice, and the dogs – the rescuers in the narrated past as well as the Americans Vladek, Art and Françoise encounter in the narrated present – are bound to remain the friendly other.

It is not only Spiegelman who reflects on the animal metaphor in his interviews and on the author's picture on the blurb of both volumes, his avatar also wonders about his anthropomorphic characters on a meta-level of the story itself.

Maus II begins with Art and his wife Françoise on a summer vacation in Vermont. The first panel shows Art's notebook, where he has tried to draw his wife as an elk or reindeer, a poodle, a frog, a mouse and a rabbit. This panel is larger than Spiegelman's average panels and uses bleeds, introducing the question of a possible representability of the past in general and as an anthropomorphic graphic novel in particular as an underlying sub-theme for the entire second volume.

The first page continues with a conversation between Art and Françoise (both of whom are depicted as mice):

Françoise: What are you doing?

Art: Trying to figure out how to draw you ...

Françoise: Want me to pose?

Art: I mean in my book. What kind of *animal* should I make you?

Françoise: Huh? A *mouse*, of course!

Art: But you're *French*!

Françoise (points at Art's notebook): Well ... how about the bunny rabbit?

Art: Nah. Too sweet and gentle.

Françoise: Hmmph.

Art: I mean the French in general. Let's not forget the centuries of anti-Semitism ... I mean, how about the Dreyfus affair? The Nazi collaborators! The –

Françoise: Okay! But if you're a mouse, I ought to be a mouse too. I *converted*, didn't I? (*Maus II* 11)

Drawing Françoise poses a problem to Art: is she primarily French, or is she primarily Jewish? Or should a convert be a different animal altogether? If she is primarily French, she has to be a frog, for the Frenchman Vladek meets in Dachau is a frog as well (*Maus II* 93). If Françoise is primarily Jewish, she has to be a mouse like him.

Art solves the problem by simply drawing it to the reader's attention. As we get to know Art's and Françoise's marriage better in the course of *Maus II* – it is a partnership based on mutual understanding, a shared sense of humor and, not the least, a certain opposition to Vladek's character –, it becomes clear that drawing Françoise as a mouse fits best indeed: it is her rather than Art who is driving their car, and when it comes to confronting Vladek's racism, she shows the courage of Jerry, the mouse, rather than a "French frog's" stereotypical cowardice. As Françoise herself remarks in the dialogue quoted above, she has to be "a mouse, of course!"

Spiegelman also uses the animal metaphors to introduce more general thoughts on the representability of his parents' past and on the translatability of lived lives into narrated lives. "I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams," he explains to Françoise, "And trying to do it as a *comic strip*! I guess I bit off more than I can chew, maybe I ought to forget the whole thing." He continues talking about his self-doubts until Françoise advises him to "just keep it honest, honey." Art retorts, "See what I mean ... In real life, you'd never have let me talk this long without interrupting" (*Maus II* 16).

Spiegelman acknowledges that "fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life" (Eakin 5). However, rather than inferring that the past cannot be truthfully translated into words and "participat[ing] [...] in the liberation of the present from *the burden of history*" (White, *Tropics* 40 f), Spiegelman embraces this insight like Eakin and Benjamin do, and wittily addresses rather than avoids the problems he encounters in his work.

While *Maus* won Spiegelman a Pulitzer Prize Special Award, it has not been greeted with positive reviews only. The animal metaphors have been criticized by Marianne Hirsch as "duplicating the Nazi's racist refusal of the possibility of assimilation or cultural integration

when [Spiegelman] represents different nationalities as different animal species” (qtd. in Ewert 100 f).

The approach a reader takes to the animal metaphors is certainly important when it comes to assessing the status of *Maus* as a Holocaust memoir. However, I believe that the different animal species represent a concept diametrically opposed to what Hirsch reads into them: they represent the utter arbitrariness of putting people into ethnical/racial/religious/... categories. As Spiegelman has stressed, he wants the animal metaphors to be “shed like a snake-skin” (qtd. in Ewert 95), which is illustrated by the unmasking of the artist and his interlocutors in the chapter “Auschwitz. Time flies.” (*Maus II* 41–47).

The possibility to shed one’s old identity “like a snake-skin” and acquire a new one is also explored on more subtle levels in the visual narrative. One striking example is what Ewert calls Spiegelman’s mouse tail metonymy (cf. Ewert 98 f). The tail is a distinctive marker of Jewishness. For mice with tails, being Jewish constitutes an important part of their identity, while mice without tails are assimilated Jews. The 10-year-old Art depicted in the preface (*Maus I* 5–6) does have a tail. As the introductory conversation with his father suggests (“Friends? Your friends? ... If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week ... then you could see what it is, friends!”), Art is raised in a Jewish household, surrounded by his parents’ Holocaust memories and photographs of dead relatives. He is constantly made aware of his Jewish identity. However, when the adult Art first visits Vladek in order to question him about his past, he is drawn without a tail (e. g. *Maus I* 12). The reader soon learns that Art does not have a good relationship with his father. By now, Art rather sees himself as *an American* than an *American Jew*, and he is married to a French woman who “only converted to make Vladek happy” (*Maus II* 12). However, as Art gets drawn into the story and starts relating to his father’s past again, he is soon represented with a prominent tail (e. g. *Maus I* 45; fig. 1).

The mouse tail illustrates that Jewish identity can indeed be shed and acquired “like a snake-skin.” This fact is also illustrated by Françoise who, having converted, is depicted as a Jewish mouse rather than a French frog. The panels depicting Vladek successfully disguising himself as a Pole with the help of a pig mask (e. g. *Maus I* 64 or 155) further underline the meaninglessness and arbitrariness of ethnical/racial/religious/... categories: it did not matter whether someone “felt” Jewish or lived a religious life – it was the Nazis who decided who was a Jew and who was not.

In the panels depicting Auschwitz, the mice are hardly drawn with tails (*Maus II* 58). Ewert suggests that rather than trying to show that *Jews* were killed at Auschwitz, Spiegelman

consciously “moves towards the universal and away from the particular [visual rendering of his characters]” in order to show that *humans* were killed at Auschwitz. Spiegelman moves beyond categorizations and suggests that the universal wrong, rather than consisting in killing *a certain group* of people, consists in killing *people*, period.

This reading of the animal metaphors seems more appropriate than Hirsch’s reading and is underlined by what Spiegelman himself said in an interview: “One thing that fascinated me, and it was a fascination that I suspect I share with many non-religious Jews, was the fact that the people sent to their slaughter as Jews didn’t necessarily identify themselves as/with Jews; it was up to the Nazis to decide who was a Jew” (qtd. in Ewert 101). It is this arbitrary categorization and the powerlessness of the victims that Spiegelman captures in the animal metaphors that can be “shed like a snake-skin.”

3.3.3 *Maus* vs. “Holokitsch”: “I resist becoming the Elie Wiesel of the comic book.”

The technical irreconcilability of *Maus* and the film medium referred to in the beginning of the Spiegelman chapter is not the only reason Spiegelman has turned down numerous offers for a *Maus* movie or animated cartoon. He did not want Vladek and Art to become “objectified characters in a grander narrative that’s the film” (Resonance FM), which would inevitably happen in a movie. His art should be art “on the other side of the high/low hyphen,” an art that “establish[ed] a new kind of relationship with the reader” (Resonance FM). Comments like these reflect that Spiegelman has never primarily tried to sell, but to accurately tell the story he felt he had to tell, and to tell it in the medium and way that seemed most appropriate to his take on life, art, and communication. Writing beyond the reach of a culture industry producing merchandise articles and blockbuster movies, yet within both popular and high culture, Spiegelman has found a new way of looking at both art and the past that expresses “a truth exceeding all reality without betraying it” (Rabinovici, “Wie es war”).

The notion of “the other side of the high/low hyphen” reflects the bold mingling of “high” and “popular” culture Spiegelman seeks. Refusing to be put into a category, *Maus* invites people of all ages and from all backgrounds to engage with the narrated past. Spiegelman says about his work that it “doesn’t try to simplify the complexities of interpersonal relationships and disastrous history ... and yet it comes across in an easy-to-take tablet” (“Saying Goodbye” 45).

The refusal of simplifications and categorizations is reflected on the level of the visual narrative, where both past and present refuse to be put into boxes and panels. Spiegelman frequently uses bleeds in order to remind the readership that the narrated past is filtered through the narrated present. For example, when Vladek talks in voice-overs (two panels showing the soldiers hiding in the woods with their guns accompanied by boxed comments) about his military training in 1939, he says: “[...] We were given army trainings for a few days and then, by the start of September we were on the frontier [...]” (first 1939 panel; *Maus I* 44), “It was everything quiet until near morning ...” (second 1939 panel; *Maus I* 45). In the frameless panel that follows – a bleed depicting Art talking to Vladek in the narrated present – Art interrupts his father’s voice-over: “Wait a minute, they only trained you for a few *days* before sending you into combat?” (*Maus I* 45, fig. 1). In the panel illustrating Art’s question, he is lying stretched out on the floor of his father’s living room, taking notes. Art’s legs reach far into the previous panel with the soldier and Vladek’s “It was everything quiet”-voice-over. Unlike the panel showing Art’s question, the panel depicting the narrated past is framed and smaller in size. As a consequence, the visual impression is that the second panel – the narrated present – is spatially closer to the reader, an impression that is underscored by Art’s legs protruding into the 1939-panel.

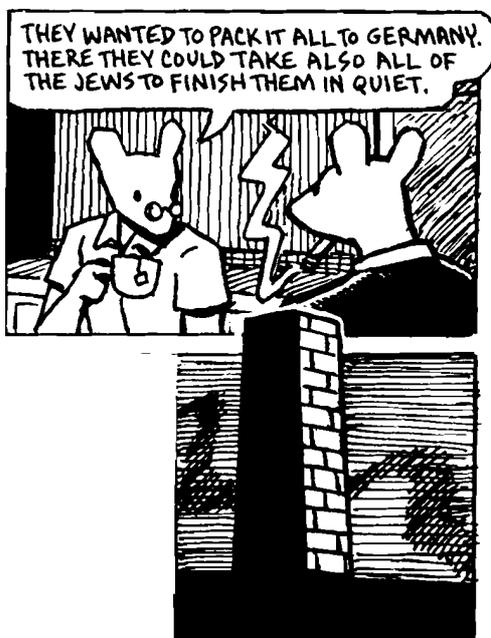
Unlike traditional Holocaust literature such as Elie Wiesel’s *Night* or Primo Levi’s *If this is a Man*, who narrate *only* the past as if stowed away in a memory-box – to be remembered, but also strictly separated from the present –, Art’s present visually touches, reflects on and filters the past, refusing to draw a line between the “then” and the “now.”



Fig. 1. From *Maus I* by Art Spiegelman. Copyright © 1973, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986 by Art Spiegelman. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

It is not only the present that engages in the past, the past also repeatedly intrudes in the present. The drawing of the Auschwitz gate, accompanied by Vladek's voice-over – “And we came here to the concentration camp Auschwitz. And we knew that from here we will not come out anymore [...]” – takes up more than half a page and uses bleeds (*Maus I* 157). Unlike the bleeds depicting the narrated present, for which Spiegelman leaves the background blank, the background of the Auschwitz bleed is shaded, making the missing frame even more prominent. The dreariness of the large image spanned by the “Arbeit macht frei” inscription does not only overshadow the entire scene. The shaded background appears to bleed over the edges of the book into the reader's present (an effect Spiegelman does not create with the blank backgrounds going with the bleeds depicting the narrated present).

The panel that best illustrates how the past intrudes into Art's life is probably Spiegelman's self-portrait on the inner back cover of both books, which is accompanied by a short biography of the author. At the spot where books traditionally feature a photo of their author, Spiegelman has drawn himself as a human wearing a mouse mask, sitting in his study, supporting his head with his hands, and holding the chain-smoker's omnipresent cigarette the reader is familiar with from the story. The self-portrait is the only color panel found in *Maus*. On the level of the present, it depicts Art's pens, pencils, ink, brushes, cigarette pack and ashtray. On the wall behind the avatar, there are a poster of the comics magazine *Raw* that Spiegelman co-founded with his wife, and the cover picture of *Maus I*. However, the level of the past violently disrupts the otherwise peaceful image. Outside the window of Art's study, there is a watch tower manned with a German cat getting ready to shoot, and a high chimney reminiscent of the incinerator's chimney at Auschwitz. This image is framed by the window frame as if by the frame of a panel, locating it at the same time inside and outside the larger panel of the author's portrait. More disturbing yet is the cigarette brand Art is smoking. Looking closely, it is possible to read the brand name “Cremo.” As Rothberg observes,



Vladek refers to the Auschwitz incinerators as a “cremo buildings” in one of his voice-overs: “I came to one of the four cremo buildings. It looked so like a big bakery ...” (*Maus II* 70). Furthermore, the picture on the cigarette pack shows two giant chimneys.

Another intrusion of the past into the present, also connected with a chimney, happens when Vladek, talking about the incinerator in

Maus II in a panel depicting the narrated present, stresses that he is “not telling rumors, but only what really [he] saw” (*Maus II* 69, fig. 2). In the next panel, we are in the narrated past again, in a (framed) panel depicting the brick chimney, accompanied by Vladek’s voice-over: “For this I was an eyewitness” (*Maus II* 69).

Fig. 2. From *Maus II* by Art Spiegelman.
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Although the panel is framed, the chimney sticks out of it as if the past were too large and too heavy to fit in a box. The chimney reaches into the panel located above, which depicts Vladek holding a cup of tea and Art smoking a cigarette in the narrated present. The trail of smoke from Art’s cigarette is located exactly on top of the chimney as if it were smoke from the incinerator. The jagged line of smoke visually separates Art and Vladek, cutting the panel into two halves. However, Vladek’s speech balloon transcends the barrier of smoke. Although Art has no direct experience of the “Third Reich”, Vladek’s narration takes him there, and although Vladek cannot make Art experience the past he has lived through, he can make him see it as he projects his memories on a metaphorical movie screen by means of his narration.

The powerful chimney motif Spiegelman repeatedly picks up illustrates the omnipresence of the past not only in Vladek’s, but also in Art’s life. Art grows up surrounded by attitudes shaped by Auschwitz, a topic revealed to the reader in *Maus I*’s two-page introductory chapter. Under the heading “Rego Park, N.Y. c. 1958,” Spiegelman draws Art as a boy of ten years, sobbingly telling his father that he fell on his skates and that his friends did not wait for him. Vladek replies, “Friends? Your friends? ... If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week ... then you could see what it is, friends!” (*Maus I* 6).

The introductory scene can be read as a metaphor for Art’s need to draw the story. As a young Jew whose parents survived Auschwitz and whose émigré life remained shaped by the past (the mother commits suicide and, as Art admits in respect of his father’s pedantic austerities, even Vladek “in some ways [...] didn’t survive” [*Maus II* 90]), the Jewish people’s and especially his parents’ history become a defining part of Art’s identity as well. He feels held up to Richieu, the brother he never knew, and grows up surrounded by photos of dead relatives. Telling his father’s story provides a means to explore the way Art’s own life has been overshadowed by a past he never directly experienced, to record a survivor’s testimony, but also to subtly criticize the reification and commercialization of memory in the American culture industry at the turn of the 21st century.

Maus refuses to become part of the culture industry traditional autobiographers like Elie Wiesel have actively engaged in with their works and public appearances. Wiesel's approach differs from Spiegelman's not only in the obvious fact that Wiesel is a survivor, while Spiegelman is a survivor's son. They also differ in their motivation for telling their story. For Spiegelman, it is the wish to engage in (his family's) history and a personal need to mediate between the Jewish people's past and his own presence in a meaningful way, while Wiesel, as he says in the preface to the 2006 edition of *Night*, "believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory. [...] Convinced that this period in history would be judged one day, I knew that I must bear witness" (viii).

However, once Wiesel had become a celebrated survivor and writer, and sought-after public speaker, he was facing the accusation of "exploiting" the Holocaust for political and ideological reasons and personal benefits (cf. chapter 3.4.1).

Spiegelman sidesteps these problems by actively defining himself against the culture industry and "resist[ing] [to become] the Elie Wiesel of the comic book." In the same breath Spiegelman says that *Maus* has provided a way to "[deal] with the issues that were important to me – my parents, my ethnic background, the ghosts of the dead" ("Saying Goodbye" 44), and adds: "The scary part to me is that *Maus* may also have given people an easy way to deal with the Holocaust [...], that reading *Maus* now makes it possible for them to feel that they understand it [...]. And since that isn't true for me, it's peculiar if it's true for people reading my book" ("Saying Goodbye" 44). The "Holokitsch" works (Spiegelman's term) Spiegelman rejects tend to try and smooth out the story they tell, portray the survivors as heroes or saints, or allude to a "moral lesson" to be learned from the Holocaust. In short, they do what Spiegelman is afraid of: they "make it possible for [the readership/audience] to feel that they understand [the Holocaust]." While "Holokitsch" submits to the culture industry and tries to give answers, Spiegelman wants to raise questions. This decision gives his work an integrity that is scarcely reached by literature and other works of art deliberately submitting to the culture industry.

The critique of the culture industry becomes most explicit in the second chapter of *Maus II* ("Auschwitz. Time flies."). A depressed Art sits in his study situated on a pile of corpses and critically reflects on the success of *Maus I*, which was published five years earlier (fig. 3):

Between May 16, 1944, and May 24, 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz ...

In September 1986 [...], the first part of *Maus* was published. It was a critical and

commercial success.

At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out. I've gotten four serious offers to turn my book into a T.V. special or a movie. (I don't wanna.)

In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.)

Lately I've been feeling depressed. (*Maus II* 41)

Art's crisis is also reflected in the font he is thinking in. While the entirety of *Maus I* and the first chapter of *Maus II* have been rendered in capital letters only, Art is thinking in upper and lower case from the beginning of the chapter "Auschwitz. Time flies." The puniness of the font mirrors Art's feeling of insignificance, senselessness and shrinking self-confidence on the visual level.

Through the window of Art's study, we can see the watch tower that also features in Spiegelman's author's portrait on the inner back cover of the book. Symbolized by the pile of dead mouse bodies and the watch tower, the past is lurking at the edges of the presence. With *Maus I* having become "a critical and commercial success," it seems as if Art has drawn it back into the present rather than written it off his mind: in contrast to traditional Holocaust memoirs that successfully stow the past away as if in a "memory-box," Spiegelman's text constantly toggles between past and present, (his)story world and metatextual level.



Fig. 3. From *Maus II* by Art Spiegelman. Copyright © 1986, 1989, 1990, 1991 by Art Spiegelman. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

Most notably, Art is depicted as a human wearing a mouse mask. It is this element that has the strongest impact on the reader, who by then has already identified with the *mouse* Art and started overlooking the fact that Spiegelman has not drawn actual humans, but mice. Art's mouse mask reminds Art himself and his readership of the fragility of his metaphor, and of the sensibility of the topic as such. Upon realizing the critical and commercial success *Maus I* has become, Art starts doubting the legitimacy of his work. He realizes, so to speak, that, after all, he is no Elie Wiesel. Although Auschwitz has greatly impacted his life, Art, unlike Wiesel, has never "lived through anything like that" (qtd. in Ewert 92). Hence, Art sees himself wearing only a mask, while the dead bodies his desk is standing on are the bodies of mice, not masked humans. The metaphor suggests that Art wonders if his project is turning into something he never wanted it to be: is he exploiting his family's and his people's past, a past he has not had to live through himself?

In the same picture, someone – a photographer, as the reader assumes – calls out to Art from outside the panel. Only his speech balloon is visible: "Alright Mr. Spiegelman ... We're ready to shoot!" (*Maus II* 41). As Rothberg observes, this sentence adds an uncomfortable ambiguity to the scene: "Among other meanings hovering, like the flies, in this frame, the overlay of positions and temporalities communicates an important fact about anti-Semitism: its effects persist across time and situation; someone is always 'ready to shoot,' even when no Nazis are visible and the media is under your control" (Rothberg 683). Like the watch tower outside Art's window, the utterance suggests the irreverence of the culture industry, which is exposed on the next page.

The press team interviewing Art consists of men wearing cat's, mice's and dog's masks. The American journalist (the dog), stepping onto the pile of corpses, asks, "Tell your viewers what message you want them to get from your book?" (*Maus II* 42). Art answers, "a message? I dunno ..." (*Maus II* 42; my emphasis). In this speech balloon, Art starts his answer ("a message?") with a lower case "a," indicating that his self-doubts have further risen. As Spiegelman points out in the *Comics Journal* interview quoted earlier, it "wasn't his point" to write "some kind of odd plea for sympathy or 'Remember the Six Million'" (qtd. in Huyssen 75).

This also means not accepting the somewhat kitschy patina Wiesel tends to apply to his works and his public appearances (see 4.2). In contrast to Wiesel, Spiegelman, not willing to accept commercialization of his work and his father's memories without a word of protest, consciously defines himself against the culture industry. With *Maus I* having become the prey of the very culture industry he deplors, the only way of taking *Maus II* beyond Holocaust

heritage commercialization Spiegelman sees is to have his avatar directly address the reader, as he does in the beginning of the chapter “Auschwitz. Time flies.” (cf. Rothberg 683), and to critically address his animal metaphor in the second volume.

The merchandising industry is dealt with on page 42, where Art is offered a “licensing deal” to turn the black coat both Spiegelman and his avatar Art are frequently wearing into a fan article: an Israeli (porcupine-masked) business man confronts Art with a poster saying “Maus – you’ve read the book, now buy the vest!” (*Maus II* 42). Making the business man an Israeli, Spiegelman makes an ironic reference to the stereotypical Jewish mammonism and further distances himself from “politically correct Holokitsch,” which tends to paint a black-and-white picture of the world by means of portraying Jewish characters as saints. Questioning (positive as well as negative) stereotypes, Spiegelman draws attention to the utter arbitrariness of thinking inside boxes and invites his readers to see different individuals rather than members of different ethnic/racial/religious/... groups.

An even stronger indicator of the arbitrariness of stereotypes can be observed in the portrayal of Vladek. Rather than smoothing out the story and portraying his father as the survivor-“saint” typically found in “Holokitsch” works, Art tries to “keep it honest,” as Françoise advises him to do in the beginning of *Maus II* (16). Hence, quite unlike the Vladek of the narrated past who recounts his own life and appears as a loving husband and father, the Vladek of the narrated present – the father Art has known since his childhood – appears rather greedy, stubborn and selfish, and even racist. When Françoise is about to stop the car and pick up a (black) hitch-hiker, Vladek shouts, “It’s a *colored* guy, a *shvartser*! Push quick on the gas!” (*Maus II* 98). Françoise gives the hitch-hiker a ride all the same, and Vladek starts complaining in Polish. As soon as the hitch-hiker has gotten off the car, Vladek gives vent to his anger:

Vladek: What *happened* on you, Françoise? You went crazy, or what?! I had the whole time to watch out that this *shvartser* doesn’t steal us the groceries from the back seat!

Françoise: *What?* That’s *outrageous*! How can you, of all people, be such a racist! You talk about blacks the way the Nazis talked about the Jews!

Vladek: [...] I thought really you are more smart than this, Françoise ... It’s not even to *compare*, the *shvartsers* and the Jews!

(*Maus II* 98 f)

By means of including episodes like this in his books, Spiegelman violently undermines the concepts of the stereotypical survivor-saint, of a “moral lesson” to be learned from the Holocaust, and of any “ethically purifying” effects it must have on a survivor. In a conversation with Mala, Vladek’s second wife, Art worries about his portrayal of Vladek’s character:

Art: I used to think the *war* made him that way ...

Mala: Fah! *I* went through the camps ... *All* our friends went through the camps.
Nobody is like him!

Art: [...] It's something that worries me about the book I'm doing about him ... In some ways he's just like the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew.

(*Maus I* 131)

However, the decision to honestly render Vladek's character in the narrated present gives Spiegelman an opportunity to avoid what he is afraid of: "that Maus may [give] people an easy way to deal with the Holocaust [...], that reading Maus [...] makes it possible for them to feel that they understand it [...]" ("Saying Goodbye" 45).

Vladek's character expresses a greater truth that is in line with Spiegelman's take on the past, and that cannot be expressed by smooth "Holokitsch" works. *Maus*' refusal to read "moral lessons" or "ethically purifying" effects into his parents' past is at the same time the refusal to attribute any "sense" to the Holocaust. *Maus* does not comfort its readership, try to make the Holocaust approachable and understandable, or give easy-to-digest answers. In this way, Spiegelman's approach succeeds in what Elie Wiesel's work and mainstream movies like *Schindler's List*¹⁵ fail to do: at the end of *Maus*, a reader may be pondering more unanswered questions than at its beginning. And this, I believe, may be precisely what is needed in order to express "a truth exceeding all reality without betraying it" (Rabinovici, "Wie es war").

However, in the second chapter of *Maus II*, Art feels that his work has already been sucked into the machinery of the culture industry despite his efforts to resist it. In the scene in Art's study, his crisis is represented on the visual level, and in the subsequent conversation with his shrink, it is reflected on the narrative level. As Art is assailed with questions by the journalists – "Tell our viewers what message you want them to get from your book?", "Many young Germans have had it up to *here* with Holocaust stories. [...] Why should *they* feel guilty?", "If your book were about *Israeli* Jews, what kind of animal would you draw?", "Could you tell our audience if drawing *Maus* was cathartic?" – and with the offer for a *Maus* merchandise vest by the business man, Art's avatar is getting smaller in size and younger from panel to panel. By the end of the page, he has turned into a small child. The public attention and the demand to formulate a message Art never had in mind are becoming too

¹⁵ In *A cinema of loneliness*, Kolker observes a number of simplifications and trivializations in *Schindler's List* and attributes them to the fact that "Spielberg wants us to understand the heroism of one German who saved some Jews. At the same time, he wants the viewer to see the huge, disgusting canvas of the slaughter. He cannot only do the latter, because the film would be like a documentary and, without a drama, would not draw a large audience. He cannot make the drama too complex, because that would endanger the emotional bond that Spielberg must build between audience and film. *Depth and ambiguity are not acceptable qualities of popular cultural artifacts*" (321, my emphasis).

much for him. As his self-confidence and security are shrinking, he stops “feel[ing] like a functioning adult” (*Maus II* 43).

After the journalists’ visit, he leaves to see his shrink Pavel, a survivor like his father, and tells him: “[T]hings couldn’t be going better with my ‘career,’ or at home, but mostly I feel like crying. I can’t work. My time is being sucked up by interviews and business propositions I can’t deal with” (43). Art and Pavel talk about Art’s feeling that “[n]o matter what [he] accomplish[es], it doesn’t seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz” (*Maus II* 44) and about the commercialization of survivor memory Art finds himself confronted with. Pavel muses, “[L]ook at how many books have already been written about the Holocaust. What’s the point? People haven’t changed ... [...] [M]aybe it’s better not to have any more stories” (*Maus II* 45).

Pavel is both wary of the culture industry and doubts the possibility to tell accurate stories as such, since “the victims who died can never tell *their* side of the story” (*Maus II* 45). Stories usually end up consciously or unconsciously evoking the impression of a survivor-hero, while in fact, as Pavel stresses, “it wasn’t the *best* people who survived, nor did the best ones die. It was *random!*” (*Maus II* 45). Art agrees, responding with a Samuel Beckett quote: “Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.” After a thoughtfully silent panel, he adds: “On the other hand, he *said* it.” Pavel says, “He was right. Maybe you can include it in your book” (*Maus II* 45).

This dialogue holds the key to the way the story is presented in *Maus II*. Art does want to continue telling Vladek’s past despite the fact that the first volume has become a prey of the culture industry he deplures. Pavel’s advice to include Beckett’s words and the fact that Beckett *said* them all the same, thereby both stressing and undermining his dictum, provides Art with the means to position his book beyond the reach of the culture industry without undermining its success.

Maus II is highly self-reflexive, which makes it as much a book *about writing about the past* as a book *about* the past. Art’s thoughts about what animal to make his wife (*Maus II* 11), the revelation of the animal metaphors as masks (41 ff) and the inclusion of Art’s conversations with the journalists and the business man (42) and Pavel (45) play on the meta-narrative level and keep reminding the reader about Art’s own stance towards writing *Maus*. The portrayal of Vladek’s character affirms Pavel’s testimony that “it wasn’t the *best* people who survived, nor did the best ones die. It was *random!*” (*Maus II* 45).

However, the realization of the randomness of survival and the incompleteness of any representation of the Holocaust does not lead to depression. While in several meta-narrative

scenes, Art's deliberate deconstruction of the animal metaphor has a disturbing and alienating effect (such as the portrayal of the characters as people wearing animals' masks), others play with irony and remind the reader that Art, although at times depressed, is a humorous narrator and does not take himself too seriously. This impression is evoked by Art's sketches of Françoise as an elk, poodle, frog and rabbit, and by his voice-over introducing Pavel's office, portraying Pavel next to one of his dogs: "His place is overrun with stray dogs and cats. Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?" (*Maus II* 43).

The inescapability of the commercialization of survivor memory is not only referred to on the level of the narrated presence, but also in the narrated past. Spiegelman includes a photo of his father in a camp uniform, taken at a souvenir photo shop shortly after the liberation of Auschwitz (*Maus II* 134). The photo indicates that it is not only survivor-writers like Elie Wiesel and second generation writers like Spiegelman, but *all* survivors who have to come to terms with, and either reject or accept, the omnipresence of a culture industry that does not stop short of their experiences. Vladek, having taken the souvenir picture, accepts its terms.

Another visual pun concerning the culture industry is observed by Robert Storr, who notes that the stripes of the bar code on the back cover of *Maus II* are visually connected to the stripes on Vladek's prison uniform: "The text's very 'wrapping' asks the reader to consider its implication in a system of economic entrapment. The self-conscious irony of this parallel between imprisonment and commodity production marks one of the many places where Spiegelman rebels against the terms of his success." (Rothberg 667).

Spiegelman seems to overcome the crisis depicted in the chapter "Auschwitz. Time flies" upon realizing that the economic entrapment of art and culture is ultimately inescapable, a fact that is illustrated in the bar code on the back cover. However, he refuses to resign and accept this entrapment but wittily undermines and criticizes it by constantly drawing it to the reader's attention.

3.3.4 A Postmodern Answer to the Culture Industry

Fredric Jameson defines postmodern works as "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (Jameson x-1). As for *Maus*, it is indeed an "attempt to think the present historically" in an age in which "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed [by philosophers like White], and then

effaced altogether [by radical ahistoricists like Jenkins], leaving us with nothing but texts [as in Ankersmit's theories]" (Jameson 18).

Unlike traditional representations of the Holocaust such as Wiesel's *Night*, which rejects postmodern narrative techniques, Spiegelman acknowledges the problematic nature of traditional historical representations, but finds a way to reconcile this central insight of postmodernism with the concept of faithful historical representation. As "an instance of postmodernism that has not yet eschewed morality" (Blume), as Spiegelman himself once described his work in an interview, *Maus* brings the concept of "a truth exceeding all reality without betraying it" (Rabinovici, "Wie es war") to new life within the framework of postmodern narrative techniques.

Among the most prominent postmodern devices found in *Maus* are the nonlinear story line composed of the overlapping levels of narrated past and narrated present, Spiegelman's playing with genres (the comic book tradition, biography, autobiography, the animal fable, cinema ...) and narrative conventions (drawing attention to the animal metaphors by means of drawing people with masks), Spiegelman's/Art's weariness of personal memory (*Maus II* 54) and the rejection of one objective truth or "message" (*Maus II* 42), Art's direct address of the reader (*Maus II* 41), Spiegelman's mingling of popular and high culture, his self-irony, the meta-narrative reflections on the limits of representation, and the underlying cultural criticism. I shall explore three of the most interesting postmodern traits – (1) Spiegelman's refusal of mimetic representation, (2) his calling into doubt of Vladek's memory, and (3) his allusions to "the past [being] also what it is not" (Ankersmit, "Historiography" 147) – in more detail.

(1) Spiegelman's anthropomorphic characters themselves are an allegorization of historical events, suggesting that they cannot be mimetically (non-allegorically) represented unless one wanted to produce a splatter comic applying "the murderers' measure."

Spiegelman does what Fühmann shows by means of the book of Job: like the allegory – "Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together! For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea" – (Job 6:2–3, King James; Fühmann 193), the allegorical mice and cats capture a truth and evoke an empathy and understanding that elude mimetic representations and scientific syllogisms. Mistrusting mimetic representations but nevertheless insisting on the representability of the past, Spiegelman creates a story-form that is not an exact replica of the referential past, but "lovingly and in detail incorporates [its] mode of signification," turning the past and his representation into "fragments of a greater language" (cf. "Task of the Translator" 81).

As Richter remarks in his “reading journals,” *Maus I* illustrates Benjamin’s dictum that “all great works of literature either create a genre or dissolve it” (“Proust” 335; qtd. in Richter 88; my translation). Benjamin makes this observation about Proust’s *Recherche*, dwelling on the fact that Proust does not describe a lived, but a remembered life. A remembered event, Benjamin muses, is limitless, it is “the key to everything that happened before and everything that happened after it” (“Proust” 336, my translation). The same holds true for *Maus* as well. The past refuses to stay past but continues shaping both Vladek’s and Art’s present lives, constantly disrupting the linear story line on the narrative as well as on the visual level and making *Maus* both a realistic and a postmodern work.

(2) Another postmodern trait is Art’s questioning of Vladek’s memory. Well aware that “fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life” (Eakin 5), that is to say that human memory is selective and not one hundred percent reliable, Spiegelman authenticates Vladek’s story with historical documents and scrupulous research. Among other documents, Spiegelman includes a floor plan of a crematorium (*Maus II* 70), maps of Eastern Europe (back cover of *Maus I*, *Maus II* 84), and various family photos (the dedication of *Maus II* to Richieu is accompanied by a photo; *Maus I* 100, *Maus II* 134).

The fact that he grants historiography more authority than his father’s memory is illustrated in the scene depicting the camp orchestra at Auschwitz (*Maus II* 54, fig. 4), which has also been observed by Ewert. The panel depicting the prisoners on their way to work is accompanied by Vladek’s voice-over: “Each day I marched to work and hoped again I’ll see Mancie ... She could have more news of Anja.” The panel – illustrating what Vladek’s narration makes Art see in his imagination – shows a group of prisoners on the left side of the panel, just about to pass the camp orchestra that had to play every morning when the prisoners left for work and every evening when they returned.

The subsequent panel is located in the narrated presence. Art, referring to the image he is seeing in his mind’s eye, interrupts Vladek’s narration: “I just read about the camp orchestra that played as you marched out the gate ...” “An orchestra?”, Vladek answers in a voice-over taking us back into the narrated past of Art’s imagination, “No. I remember only *marching*, not any orchestras ... From the gate guards took us over to the workshop. How could it be there an orchestra?” This panel is the visual sequel to the earlier marching scene. In the meantime, the prisoners have continued their march from the left to the right side of the panel and now fill its entire frame.

However, a close look reveals that Art still imagines the orchestra Vladek does not remember. In the background, just reaching above the heads of the prisoners, the conductor's head, his baton, the neck of the contrabass and the top of the trumpet are visible. In the panel that follows, Art interrupts Vladek's voice-over again, insisting on the orchestra: "I dunno, but it's very well documented ..." Vladek answers, "No. At the gate I heard only guards shouting" (*Maus II* 54).

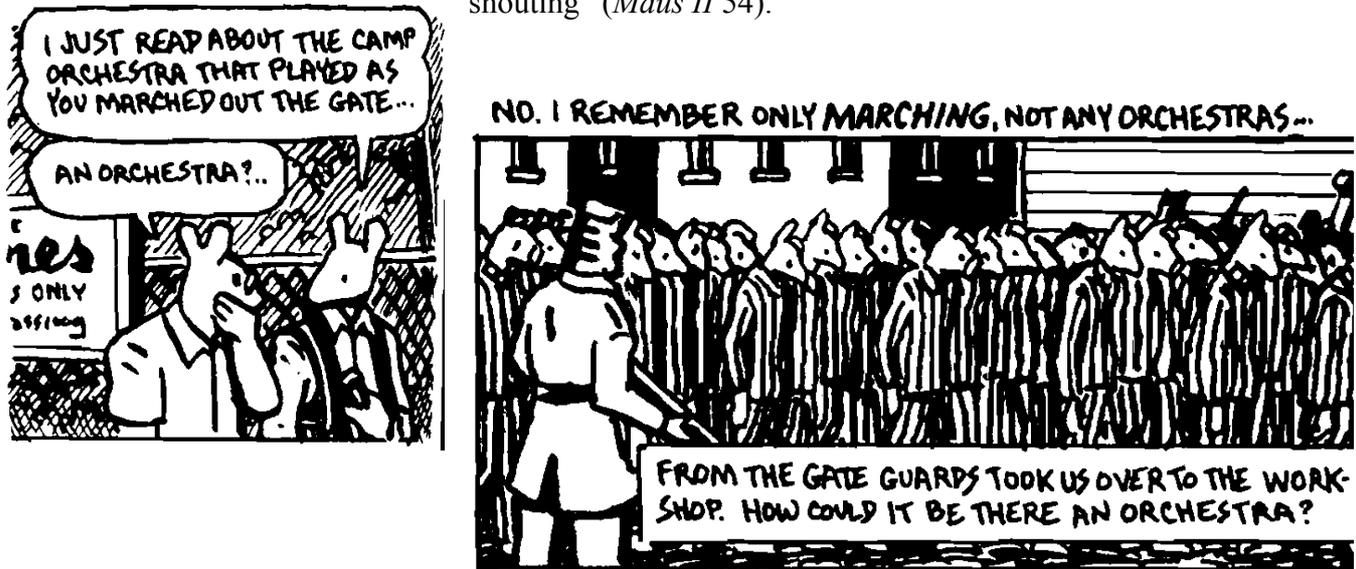


Fig. 4. From *Maus II* by Art Spiegelman. Copyright © 1986, 1989, 1990, 1991 by Art Spiegelman. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

The scene illustrates that the listener will never see exactly the same as the narrator who remembers. While *Maus I* focuses on the question "Who speaks?", metaphorically rendered in Vladek's projecting his memories on the movie-screen of Art's imagination, *Maus II* focuses on the question "Who sees?". It is Art who sees the "film" Vladek's narration is projecting on an imaginary screen, but his imagination is not limited to his father's narration. He adds details he knows must have been there although Vladek leaves them out, and it can be assumed that he vice versa fails to accurately imagine other details from Vladek's memory.

However, unlike Elie Wiesel, who finds himself confronted with the same problem and resigns with the words "Deep down, the witness knew [...] that his testimony would not be received" (Wiesel ix), Spiegelman finds a way to overcome the question of the translatability of the past into words by means of addressing it on a meta-narrative level. The answer he finds to the problem is an Eakinian/Benjaminian one. Embracing "[t]he fictive nature of selfhood [as] a biographical fact" (Eakin 182) with postmodern boldness rather than resigning in contemplation of it, he transcends mere mimetic representation and has Art openly address the conflicting dialectics posed by all "translations" of the past into the present.

(3) Another quasi postmodern trait is Spiegelman's inclusion of what is *not* said about the past into his work. He does not only focus on Vladek's memories, but also on his mother Anja's silence.

Like Ankersmit, who insisted that "the past is also what it is not" ("Historiography" 147), Art, who can only question one of his parents (his mother committed suicide in 1968) feels that he is only telling half of the story. In the course of *Maus I*, he repeatedly asks his father for Anja's diaries. Vladek promises to look for them, but never seems to find them. The narrated past in *Maus I* ends with Vladek and Anja arriving at Auschwitz. Then there is a switch to the narrated present, depicting Art and Vladek talking to each other:

Vladek: ... and when they opened the truck, they pushed men one way, women to the other way ... Anja and I went each in a different direction, and we couldn't know if ever we'll see each other alive again.

Art: This is where Mom's diaries will be *especially* useful. They'll give me some idea of what she went through while you were apart. (*Maus I* 158)

When Art suggests looking for Anja's diaries in the garage, Vladek contritely admits: "No. You'll not find it. Because I *remind* to myself what happened ... These notebooks, and other really nice things of mother ... one time I had a very bad day ... and all of these things I *destroyed*" (*Maus I* 158).

Realizing that his mother's memories will never be regained, Art shouts, "God *damn* you! You – you murderer! How the hell could you do such a thing!!" (*Maus I* 159). Art knows that the story will never be complete without Anja's memories. In his rage, he accuses his father of murdering Anja a second time. As long as her memories were saved in her diaries, both Anja and her past remained, as it were, alive and accessible despite her death. With the destruction of her memories, her death is final; with no one to remember her life, it is as if she had never lived.

A different allusion to the past being what is not said can be found in the panels depicting Art's appointment with his shrink described earlier. Saying that "the victims who died can never tell *their* side of the story, so maybe it's better not to have any more stories" (*Maus II* 45), Pavel suggests that it is not only Art's story which is facing the problem of incompleteness, but any attempt to represent the Holocaust. It is only the survivors – and survival, as Pavel stresses, is utterly random – who will ever be able to tell their story. The paradigmatic victims, the six million who died, must remain silent.

In contrast to "mainstream" American Holocaust productions such as Steven Spielberg's 1993 movie *Schindler's List*, Spiegelman remains aware of this silence that will always foreclose the possibility to tell the entire story. Alluding to the silence throughout his work, Spiegelman refuses to smooth out the story by means of a happy ending or a black-and-

white picture of “good” and “bad” characters, to monumentalize the survivors or to assume a “moral lesson” that can be learned from the past. Spiegelman critically observed about productions like *Schindler’s List* that “there is no business like *Shoah* business” and defines himself against the “Holokitsch” productions and their “fatuous attempts to give it a happy ending” (qtd. in Staub 41)¹⁶.

Spiegelman’s inclusion of Anja’s silence, metaphorically represented in the gutters, reflects the fact that the story can never be complete and brings him full circle with regard to his critique of the culture industry, whose most despicable manifestation for Spiegelman is represented by another Spielberg production: the 1986 animated cartoon *An American Tail*. Set in 1885, *An American Tail* tells the story of a Jewish-Russian mouse family fleeing Russia under Tsar Alexander III and emigrating to the US (which, as rumor has it, is a land without cats). Before the release of *An American Tail*, which Spiegelman saw as “an utter domestication and trivialization” (qtd. in Richter 107) of the Jewish mouse metaphor, he raged:

[Spielberg and Bluth] were going to be swathing the story in all this mindless, fashionable, self-congratulatory patriotic fervor — whereas, if you were being true to the initial metaphor, in depicting the way things actually were in 1940, you would have had to strand my mice people off the coast of Cuba, *drowning*, because it is precisely the case that at that point, the time of their greatest need, mice people were denied entry into the US.... [...] I just read where they’ve now licensed off doll rights for the Mousekawitzes [Spielberg’s Jewish-Russian mice family] to Sears, and McDonald’s is going to get the beverage-cup rights! (qtd. in Richter 107)

An American Tail is indeed a domestication, trivialization and fictionalization of the historical hardships of émigré life in the 1940s. As Spiegelman observes, it was all but easy to emigrate to the US at that time, and the life of Jews in New York tended to be characterized by discrimination, long working hours and financial hardships rather than happy-go-lucky moments, family reunions, happy endings and the liberty and patriotism evoked in *An American Tail*.

The fictionalization of history is also reflected in Spielberg’s sloppy research, which contrasts with Spiegelman’s own scrupulous fact-checking and background research: *The Internet Movie Database* lists four anachronisms, one error in geography and one factual error in *An American Tail*. Spielberg’s romanticization of the hardships of Jewish emigrants in the New York of the 1940s allowed Spielberg to advertise the animated cartoon with a tagline that had nothing in common with historical reality: “[A] magical experience. A musical

¹⁶ For Spiegelman’s explanation why he considers *Schindler’s List* “a failure,” see Blume’s interview “Art Spiegelman: Lips.”

journey. And a story that will live in your heart forever,” and to make his project an even greater commercial success by means of fan goods such as dolls and beverage cups.

4 Problematic Texts

HISTORY, n. An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools.
(Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*)

Spiegelman's anger at the commercialization and trivialization of history is not without reason. That the Jewish people's history may be diluted, re-written and romanticized for a generation of children growing up watching *An American Tail*, and that *Schindler's List* or Wiesel's work may “[make] it possible for [people] to feel that they understand [the Holocaust]” (“Saying Goodbye” 44) is only part of the problem posed by “Holokitsch” works. Fictionalized Hollywood productions of historical events have long become an integral part of the cultural environment most people grow up in. In theory at least, they can be easily juxtaposed with a sound historical education that addresses historical inconsistencies and invites a critical viewing/reading experience rather than passive consumption.

However, there is a more complex dimension to the interest the culture industry has taken in Holocaust works. On the one hand, both Wiesel's memoir *Night* and *Schindler's List* have been accused of lobbying for Israeli and American Middle East politics, and Wiesel has been suspected of writing and speaking in public for the sole reason of promoting Jewish-American interests. On the other hand, the popularity of “Holokitsch” works has led to the emergence of a number of professed Holocaust autobiographies such as Kosinski's *Painted Bird*, Dössekker-Wilkomirski's *Fragments*, and Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence*.

It is not the publication of professed autobiographies as such that poses the problem. Fraud has never been far from the publishing business as long as there is money to make or a reputation to gain, and it would be naive to assume that it stops short of history. The problem, however, lies in the reactions that such publications have triggered. In his popular book *The Holocaust Industry*, Norman Finkelstein does not make a difference between survivors like Wiesel and frauds like Kosinski and Dössekker, and accuses all three of them of exploiting “The Holocaust industry.”

In the next chapters, I shall outline the development of institutionalized memory that set the stage for “Holokitsch” works and literary and historiographical fraud, outline Elie

Wiesel's contribution to the culture industry, and focus on the political and cultural dynamics of institutionalized memory.

4.1 The Foundations of Institutionalized Memory

No matter whether one embraces the popularity of mainstream Holocaust movies and books like Elie Wiesel does, criticizes them like Art Spiegelman, or is repelled by them like Norman Finkelstein, it cannot be denied that in the last decades, Holocaust art has become an integral part of Western, and in particular American, "high" and "popular" culture. However, there is a peculiar quality about this popularity that sets it apart from literature and art dealing with other wars and human catastrophes.

As Novick observes in *The Holocaust in American Life*, "[g]enerally speaking, historical events are mostly talked about shortly after their occurrence, then they gradually move to the margin of the consciousness" (1). He mentions as an example that, in the 1920s and '30s, "novels, films, and collective consciousness were obsessed" with the World War I Battle of Passchendaele, which had taken place in 1917, while by the 1950s and '60s, the topic had disappeared from literary publications and movies, and from collective consciousness (1). The same holds true for the Vietnam War. The public reception of the Holocaust, on the other hand, is inconsistent with this tendency: it was "hardly talked about for the first twenty years or so after World War II; then, from the 1970s on, [it became] ever more central in American public discourse" (Novick 1 f).

As Mintz points out in his study about the shaping of Holocaust memory in popular culture, if we accept that the Holocaust is a "paradigm-shattering tragedy" and that "it is not in the conservative nature of cultures to be easily shattered and reconfigured," it is only natural that "cultures [...] resist admitting the Holocaust [...] because of its subversive quality; and when the Holocaust is finally let in [...], it enters not on its own terms, but within the terms already set out from within the culture's own dynamic" (Mintz 36 f). A detailed account of "the terms set out from within the [American] "culture's own dynamic" is given by Novick, whose observations about the impact of Holocaust memory on American society today can be read as a synecdoche for Western society at large.

However, the paradigm shift in Holocaust memory was caused by a distinctively American political and ideological constellation, and a substantial part of the literary and cinematic Holocaust representations popular throughout the West today, as well as numerous influential subsequent critiques, have their origin in the US. Therefore, I will, like Novick,

focus on American society in order to outline the history of collective Holocaust memory and its cultural impact.

Applying the theories of sociologist Maurice Halwachs, who “explored the ways in which present concerns determine what of the past we remember and how we remember it” (Novick 3), Novick finds a convincing explanation for the temporal paradox of Holocaust consciousness. He distinguishes two factors that have influenced Holocaust reception:

- (1) the construction of (American) identities, and
- (2) the interpretation of political landscapes.

4.4.1 The Construction of (American) Identities

As the traditional American “integration ethos (which focused on what Americans have in common and what unites [them])” was gradually replaced “by a particularist ethos (which stresses what differentiates and divides [Americans])” (Novick 6 f), ethnic groups began defining themselves through what set them apart from other groups rather than through the “Americanness” they all shared. The “integration ethos” had focused American Jewry on assimilation and had taught them to regard themselves as Jewish *Americans* rather than *American Jews*. According to Novick, by the time the “particularist ethos” gained popularity among ethnic groups, the attitudes Jews had towards religion, cultural practices, and Zionism were extremely diverse. Therefore, “[t]he Holocaust, as virtually the only common denominator of American Jewish identity in the late twentieth century, has filled a need for a consensual symbol” (Novick 7).

While the “integration ethos” was replaced by the “particularist ethos,” American culture also saw “a change in the attitude toward victimhood from a status all but universally shunned and despised to one often eagerly embraced. On the individual level, the cultural icon of the strong, silent hero [was] replaced by the vulnerable and verbose antihero. Stoicism [was] replaced as a prime value by sensitivity” (Novick 8).

Resulting from the combination of the particularist factor with the victim factor today, “the assertion of [a] group’s historical victimization – on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation – is always central to the group’s assertion of its distinctive identity” (Novick 8). Making the Holocaust part of Jewish collective identity (no matter whether an individual’s ancestors had been directly affected by this history or not) suggested itself, just as the history of slavery became an integral part of collective black American identity.

The new status of antiheroes and victims-as-heroes was reflected in the popularity of movies and literature centering on such characters. Novels, memoirs and movies about the hardships of social outsiders, minority groups and ethnic groups entered the bestseller lists and became box office hits. But why is it that, while the trend towards the “particularist ethos” and the hypostatizing of victimhood has generally remained constricted to individual ethnic groups, remembering the Holocaust has become an important concern not only for Jews, but for Western, and in particular American, society as a whole¹⁷? Novick provides a demographic answer:

We [American Jews] are not just ‘the people of the book,’ but the people of the Hollywood film [Spielberg] and the television series [Gerald Green’s and Marvin Chomsky’s miniseries *Holocaust*], of the magazine article and the newspaper column, of the comic book [Art Spiegelman] and the academic symposium [Saul Friedländer et al.]. When a high level of concern became widespread in American Jewry, it was, given the important role that Jews play in American media and opinion-making elites, not only natural, but virtually inevitable that it would spread throughout the culture at large.” (12).

It is plausible that demographics have contributed to the nationwide institutionalization of Holocaust memory (although they have certainly not been its sole cause). What makes Novick’s approach more convincing than the one taken by Finkelstein, who chooses a similar starting point I shall explore later, is that Novick’s approach is analytical rather than judgmental and polemic. Without “the important role that Jews play in American media and opinion-making elites,” Novick observes, the second factor could not have impacted the culture of collective memory and historical representation the way it did.

4.4.2 The Interpretation of Political Landscapes

In the 1950s and ‘60s, the Holocaust remained marginalized not only because of the then prominent “integration ethos,” but also because evoking it would have undermined the American interpretation of the Cold War. This interpretation equated Soviet Russia with Nazi Germany, which required “defin[ing] the victims of Nazism in political rather than ethnic terms.” (Novick 87). As Novick observes, “any suggestion that the Nazi murder of European Jewry was a central, let alone defining, feature of that regime would undermine the argument for the essential identity of the two systems” (87).

¹⁷ This is reflected, for example, in the fact that “the Nazi holocaust is just about the only historical reference that resonates in a[n American] university classroom today. Polls show that many more Americans can identify The Holocaust than Pearl Harbor or the atomic bombing of Japan” (Finkelstein 11).

In 1961, the Eichmann trial, followed by the controversial publications of Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy* in 1963, called greater public attention to the Holocaust for the first time. Novick suspects that the "shift in focus to Jewish victims rather than German perpetrators [...] made [the] discussion [of the Holocaust] more palatable in the continuing cold war climate" (144).

However, Novick assumes that the decisive event that focused Jewish American attention on the Holocaust happened only in the 1970s. In 1973, the Yom Kippur War made American Jewry aware of the threat posed to the state of Israel by its neighboring countries and hence reminded them of their European history. Against the backdrop of the emerging "particularist ethos" and the focus on victimhood among ethnic groups, "viewing Israel within a Holocaust framework, was the single greatest catalyst of the new centering of the Holocaust in American Jewish consciousness" (Novick 168). With Israel being an important American ally, an increased Holocaust consciousness was consistent with the general American interpretation of the political landscape in the Middle East. Once Israel had become what Finkelstein calls "one of the world's most formidable military powers" (Finkelstein 3) in response to threats of wars of extermination from Arab States, Israel's security was not in immediate danger anymore. The political landscape in the Middle East and its general American interpretation remained largely the same none the less.

Furthermore, Novick assumes that by the 1980s and '90s, the "institutionalization of [Holocaust] memory" (e.g. in the form of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, the establishment of Holocaust studies as an academic discipline, and its addressing in literature, art and film) had already gained "self-perpetuating momentum to the centering of the Holocaust" (6). Novick suggests that one reason for the Holocaust becoming an important concern not only to American Jews but to Americans as a whole is its political usefulness when interpreting Middle East politics, which continues to reinforce the momentum its representation and discussion have already gained.

One question suggesting itself at this point is whether the "institutionalization" of Holocaust consciousness and its implications are desirable or not. What impact have they had and continue to have historiographically, politically and culturally? Is there someone who profits from them or someone who suffers from them on one of these three levels? I doubt that it is possible to find an objective *political* answer to the question; at any rate, I am incapable of providing it. As Novick rightly observes regarding objectivity, "[i]ndividuals from every point in the political compass can find the lessons they wish in the Holocaust; it has become a

moral and ideological Rorschach test” (12). However, while an objective answer appears hard to find, Norman Finkelstein’s *The Holocaust Industry* lends itself to an illustration of the lack of objectivity in the political debate.

The historiographical and cultural levels, on the other hand, suggest themselves for academic analyses. I have already looked at the *historiographical* aspect in the second chapter. Considering that we live in a world which is very much unlike the planet Tlön, I have come to the conclusion that the “institutionalization” of Holocaust consciousness is serviceable to the task of remaining aware of historical facts and teaching them to future generations.

In chapter 3.3, I have explored the potential of literature/art to transcend the limits of positivistic historical representation. I shall now look at the downsides of the Holocaust’s discovery by the culture industry in order to further explore the *cultural* impact of Holocaust “institutionalization,” and then look at Norman Finkelstein’s abusive re-interpretation of this cultural impact as an example for a polemical rather than academic political answer.

4.2 Elie Wiesel and the Culture Industry

Elie Wiesel has not only accepted, but embraced the terms of the culture industry and the fame it has earned him in return. As Kazin points out, Wiesel, turning himself into “the ‘High Priest’ of a ‘Holocaust cult,’” has “made a successful career out of bearing witness to the extermination of European Jewry” (qtd. in Weissman 42). Like Spielberg *Schindler’s List*, Wiesel’s work has not only made the Holocaust approachable to a mass audience, but also simplified the historical context by means of opposing “ever-guilty Gentiles” to “ever innocent Jews” (Finkelstein 55).

Furthermore, Wiesel has used Holocaust consciousness “for ulterior [political, ethical] motives” (Mintz 40). This makes him what Mintz calls a “constructivist” – someone who believes that “[c]ultures, like individuals, can [...] comprehend historical events only from within a set of their own issues and interests; the very willingness to engage in external events must be motivated by an internal exigency” (4). Wiesel considers the Holocaust “an unprecedented event in human history,” but also subscribes to the constructivist assumption that “it is in the nature of individuals and institutions to perceive even unprecedented events through categories that already exists” (Mintz 39).

Therefore, in order to appeal to the masses, Wiesel frames his memoir *Night* in a way that is likely to appeal to his potential audience. The foreword, written by his mentor, the

Catholic Nobel Laureate François Mauriac, mainstreams the book for a Christian mass audience. “The child who tells us his story here,” writes Mauriac,

is one of God’s chosen. From the time he began to think, he lived only for God, studying the Talmud, eager to be initiated into the Kabbalah, wholly dedicated to the Almighty. Have we ever considered the consequences of a less visible, less striking abomination, yet the worst of all, for those of us who have faith: the death of God in the soul of a child who suddenly faces absolute evil? (xix)

Mauriac anticipates Wiesel’s personal tragedy (“the death of God in the soul of a child”) before Wiesel’s readers have come to learn about it themselves in *Wiesel’s* voice, *Wiesel’s* words and *Wiesel’s* memories. The foreword is suggestive of a certain lust to engage in someone else’s personal catastrophe on the side of the reader. Advertising the tragic “death of God in the soul of a child” to a mass audience as if it were a Hollywood movie, it turns *Night* into “Holokitsch.”

Mauriac’s ultimate paragraph recounts a personal encounter with Wiesel and is concerned with religion again, diametrically opposing Mauriac’s own Christian faith to Wiesel’s and investing the author’s experience with Mauriac’s interpretation:

And I, who believe that God is love, what answer was there to give my young interlocutor whose dark eyes still held the reflection of the angelic sadness that had appeared one day on the face of a hanged child? [...] Did I speak to him of that other Jew, this crucified brother who perhaps resembled him and whose cross conquered the world? Did I explain to him that what had been a stumbling block for *his* faith had become a cornerstone for *mine*? And that the connection between the cross and human suffering remains, in my view, the key to the unfathomable mystery in which the faith of his childhood was lost? (xxi)

Describing the young Wiesel’s eyes as “still [holding] the reflection of the angelic sadness that had appeared one day on the face of a hanged child,” Mauriac alludes to the hanging of a *pipel* (young inmate who is granted privileges in exchange for maintaining a homosexual relationship with a Kapo) in *Night* (Wiesel 64 f). The *pipel*, described by Wiesel as a “sad-eyed angel” (54), is hanged together with two men. While the men immediately die, the boy, who is too light to be strangled by the rope, remains alive for a long time:

And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. [...] Behind me, I heard [a] man asking:
“For God’s sake, where is God?”
And from within me, I heard a voice answer:
“Where He is? This is where — hanging from this gallows . . .” (Wiesel 65)

Speaking of Wiesel’s eyes still “[holding] the reflection [...],” Wiesel connects the hanging of the *pipel* with an image evoked in the opening lines of the original Yiddish manuscript of *Night*, which were not included in the French and English editions that won Wiesel the Nobel Peace Prize:

In the beginning there was faith — which is childish; trust — which is vain; and illusion — which is dangerous.

We believed in God, trusted in man, and lived with the illusion that every one of us has been entrusted with a sacred spark from the Shekhinah's flame; that every one of us carries in his eyes and in his soul a reflection of God's image. (Wiesel x f)

Mauriac connects the three hanged inmates with the crucifixion of Jesus, which is said to also have taken place alongside two other men. For Mauriac, the *pipel* becomes an allegory for Jesus, and his “angelic sadness” makes him the epitome of innocent suffering. The reflection of God's image has been replaced by a reflection of the *pipel*'s image. In *Night*, the moment Wiesel hears the voice within him answer that God is “hanging from this gallows” is the moment he loses his faith. Mauriac, however, draws another parallel to his own (Catholic) faith: “Did I explain to [Elie Wiesel] that what had been a stumbling block for *his* faith had become a cornerstone for *mine*?” (xxi). The cornerstone of Mauriac's faith is the image of the crucified Jesus. Mauriac presumably believes that every Catholic carries “in his soul” a reflection of Jesus' image ever since the death of “that other Jew, this crucified brother who perhaps resembled [Wiesel] and whose cross conquered the world” (xxi). The “stumbling block” of Wiesel's faith – the hanged *pipel* – reminds him of this image. Again, three men are executed, one of whom looks like a “sad-eyed angel,” just like the Jesus of Mauriac's imagination, and again, “the reflection of God's image” is replaced by the reflection of an innocent sufferer. Reading striking parallels to Christian imagery into the scene, Mauriac makes it fit into the schematic grid the majority of the readership is likely to have.

The passage in *Night* that Mauriac refers to is a very powerful one. The *pipel*'s hanging shows the young Wiesel's bitterness and frustration with God. From now on, he will not join in the other inmates' prayers. Allegorical and straightforward at the same time, it is not a passage that needs to be explained to the reader. However, most importantly, it is a passage relating to a specific situation and its impact on a specific person: it describes a moment at Auschwitz, and how the young author-narrator experiences it. *Night* is not one of Wiesel's novels that the anecdote I have used as an opening quote of part 3 refers to. It is not a book “about things that happened or *could have happened*” (qtd. in Weissman 67, my emphasis). It is, as Wiesel stresses, “his ‘deposition,’ the written testimony of a witness who is under oath” (qtd. in Weissman 67). In the scene describing the hanging of the *pipel*, Wiesel is not making an allegorical allusion to Jesus, he is simply bearing witness to what he saw.

However, as Mintz observes, “different interpretive communities¹⁸ will construe the [Holocaust] in different ways” “in order to reinforce different values” (174). Mauriac, assuming the role of a cross-cultural mediator between the Jewish writer and his predominantly Christian audience, renders *Night* accessible through a set of schemas familiar to the anticipated “interpretive community.” This inevitably causes a certain falsification of Wiesel’s original testimony, as has been anticipated by Wiesel: “Deep down, the witness knew [...] that his testimony would not be received. After all, it deals with an event that sprang from the darkest zone of man. Only those who experienced Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know” (Wiesel ix). However, Wiesel chooses a distorted testimony over not being heard at all. As a constructivist, he assumes that the audience “can [...] comprehend historical events only from within the set of their own issues and interests” (Mintz 40). Wiesel accepts these terms, although he knows that they involve a distortion of his testimony.

Mauriac’s last paragraph goes one step further and imposes a conclusion on the hanging of the *pipel* that does not appear in Wiesel’s memoir at all. “We do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear”: Mauriac ponders what he should have told the young Wiesel, “All is grace. If the Almighty is the Almighty, the last word for each of us belongs to Him. That is what I should have said to the Jewish child. But all I could do was embrace him and weep” (Wiesel xxi).

While the scene in *Night* goes hand in hand with the author-narrator’s *loss* of faith, it illustrates God’s mysterious ways for Mauriac and hence *affirms* Mauriac’s faith. Lost for words, however, “all [Mauriac] [can] do is embrace [the Jewish child] and weep.” Having insisted on the difference of their faith and on the different message the scene holds for them, Mauriac does not describe *one human embracing another*, it describes *a Catholic adult embracing a Jewish child*. Mauriac weeps for Wiesel’s lost faith, yet he himself believes to know what Wiesel does not know: “All is grace. If the Almighty is the Almighty, the last word for each of us belongs to Him.” Mauriac does not say this to Wiesel, but he says it to the Christian mass readership. His interpretation provides an “answer” that is potentially comforting in that it proposes a reading of *Night* consistent with the readership’s schemas.

For the same reason, the interpretation detracts from the questions posed by the text itself. For instance, in the last but one chapter, the author-narrator witnesses his father die in the bunk below him. “I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep,” he writes, “But

¹⁸ Mintz borrows the term *interpretive community* from Stanley Fish (*Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*), who has developed it “as a way to mediate between subjectivism and the presumption of objective meaning” in literary theory (cf. Mintz 172, 200).

I was out of tears. And deep inside me [...], I might have found something like: Free at last! . . .” (112). If left to speak for themselves, scenes like this one are potentially disturbing and may rupture or broaden the readership’s schematic horizon. Contextualized with Mauriac’s approach, on the other hand, they may be dismissed as “God’s mysterious ways,” since we may rest assured that, as Mauriac has it, “[a]ll is grace” and “the last word for each of us belongs to Him.” Mauriac does to Wiesel’s book what Spiegelman was afraid would also happen to *Maus*: he “give[s] people an easy way to deal with the Holocaust” and “makes it possible for them to feel that they understand it” (“Saying Goodbye” 45).

Referring to Wiesel as “the Jewish child,” Mauriac further distorts the events. When Wiesel wrote *Night*, he was in his late twenties, hence he had long ceased to be a child. Making him appear younger than he is, Mauriac again betrays Wiesel’s “deposition [...] under oath” (qtd. in Weissman 67). This is just what Wiesel, “[knowing] [...] that his testimony would not be received” (Wiesel ix), has anticipated. Being reduced to “Holokitsch” that insists it is approachable and can be directly related to everyone’s life, just as Mauriac relates it to his life, appears to be the price paid for participating in the culture industry. Participating in the culture industry in turn appears to be the precondition of being allowed a voice as a witness. At the time Wiesel wrote *Night*, he did not necessarily approve of these terms, but saw no way of avoiding them and accepted them in order to live up to his “moral obligation to try and prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory” (Wiesel viii).

However, along with his growing fame and influence, Wiesel came to eventually embrace the terms of his commercial success. Having been advertised as the one “emblematic survivor” and “a living icon of that catastrophe” (Young qtd. in Weissman 47), Wiesel gradually started regarding himself “as the Holocaust personified” (47). Once “his presence as a featured speaker at prominent national and international Holocaust ceremonies ha[d] come to seem mandatory” (Weissman 47), Wiesel used his appearances to promote his own politics of memory: “[u]niqueness of Jewish suffering/uniqueness of the Jews, ever-guilty Gentiles/ever innocent Jews, unconditional defense of Israel/unconditional defense of Jewish interests” (Finkelstein 55).

The fact that “[h]is words are received as if the Holocaust has endowed this single survivor with hallowed wisdom and moral authority” (Weissman 47) makes an open and critical debate about the politics of memory and Holocaust literature difficult. As Finkelstein observes, Wiesel tends to fend off *any* criticism, no matter if legitimate or not, of Jews, Holocaust literature, and Israeli politics with the argument that it is uninformed or anti-

Semitic. Critics disagreeing with him are regarded as “unworthy,” as Wiesel implies in an interview with Harry James Cargas: “Not anyone — and not everyone — has the right [...] to say, ‘I became a Holocaust scholar,’ or ‘Holocaust historian,’ or ‘Holocaust writer.’ It’s not given to everyone. You must be worthy of it. Unfortunately, these days, [...] all kinds of people have entered the field and they desecrate the Temple” (qtd. in Weissman 49).

An approach like this is exactly what Mintz, who otherwise welcomes a free exchange of visions, arguments and positions concerning Holocaust memory, disapproves of: “let no group, not even survivors, claim that only they guard the sanctity of Holocaust memory and only their motives are free from taint. For if the purity of Holocaust memory is cordoned off and protected [...] and if it is *not* admixed with other values and aspirations, then it will wither to the point of becoming little more than a museum artifact” (Mintz 178).

On the one hand, successfully appealing to the broadest possible audience, Wiesel, like Spielberg, has doubtless contributed to the historical education of the masses. The ideological coloring of his appearances and the simplification of the historical context that is a precondition of the constructivist approach do not change this mass educational impact. On the other hand, implying that he holds the key to the sole “Holocaust truth,” and insisting that this truth result in a dogmatic code of conduct towards Jews, Israel and Holocaust literature (an implication Spielberg has never made), Wiesel is anything but an unproblematic mediator of the past. Furthermore, his commercial success has inspired a number of copycats to fabricate their own Holocaust memoirs.

4.3 A History of Literary Fraud and “Holokitsch”

The tradition of professed autobiographies dates back far beyond the Holocaust. It is assumed, for example, that a number of Daniel Defoe’s fictional works were considered factual life stories by his contemporary (17th century) readership (Löschnigg 66). In 1863, the make-believe former slave Archy Moore published *The Slave: or Memoir of Archy Moore*, which was later exposed to be a work of fiction written by the white historian Richard Hildreth. In 1929, actress Joan Lowell wrote *Cradle of the Deep*, a sensationalist memoir about her childhood spent aboard a ship. It turned out that she had grown up in California and never lived at sea. In 1972, Clifford Irving sold a manuscript of the fake *Autobiography of Howard Hughes*, which Irving claimed was written on Hughes’ commission and based on interviews he conducted with the billionaire. More recent frauds not related to historical events include *Sarah* (2000), the “memoir” of the transgender teenage prostitute JT LeRoy. In

fact, the book was written by Laura Albert, who had not had any of the experiences JT LeRoy describes. 2003 saw the publication of *A Million Little Pieces*, the bestselling “memoir” of James Frey, who recalls his fabricated past as a drug addict (cf. Rich).

The first professed Holocaust autobiography shooting to fame was Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*, published in 1965, after Kosinski’s family had emigrated from Poland to the US. The book describes a six-year-old’s flight through rural Eastern Europe, where he encounters physical brutality, sexual violence, exploitation, anti-Semitism and witchcraft rituals. It contains scenes of shattering brutality and mainly focuses on the atrocities the narrator experiences from Polish peasants.

Written in short, simple sentences from the perspective of an observer who can only describe what he encounters, but is too young and ignorant to relate it to its larger historical and social context, the story is as gripping as it is disturbing. The emotional distance and the lack of introspection, reflection and processing of the events appear to be the disturbed boy’s only way to deal with (or, rather, avoid dealing with) what he encounters and evoke the impression of authenticity. A representative example of Kosinski’s plot and style is the death of the outcast “Stupid Ludmila,” who has been beaten by the other village women:

To the accompaniment of raucous laughter and loud encouragements from the others, [one of the women] kneeled between Ludmila’s legs and rammed the entire bottle inside her abused, assaulted slit, while she began to moan and howl like a beast. The other women looked on calmly. Suddenly with all her strength one of them kicked the bottom of the bottle sticking out of Stupid Ludmila’s groin. There was the muffled noise of glass shattering inside. Now all the women began to kick Ludmila; the blood spurted round their boots and calves. When the last woman had finished kicking, Ludmila was dead. (Kosinski 48)

The narrator witnesses the scene, yet there is no introspection at all. Only describing his physical reaction – “I sat, huddled and chilled, on the cemetery wall, not daring to move.” –, the narrator appears to be observing himself from the same “emotionally safe” distance with which he describes the surrounding events.

There are hardly any connecting passages between the chapters, since the narrator never knows exactly where he is, and sometimes does not seem to know how he got there. With seamless transitions from one brutal episode to the next, Kosinski evokes the impression of free association. The narrator seems to follow an urgent need to bear witness to his experiences as uncensored and fragmented as they come to mind. Rather than approaching the past through the adult “author-narrator’s” historical knowledge, the “autobiographer” Kosinski turns back time and once again slips into the mind of the desperate eight-year-old he claims to have been. The abundance of violence and lack of quiet scenes seem only natural;

the reader assumes the traumatized boy only remembers the experiences that frightened him most.

Soon after its publication, *The Painted Bird* became a bestseller and was taught in high school and college classes, it was critically acclaimed by Holocaust writers like Elie Wiesel and Ruth Klüger, translated into numerous languages, voted one of “the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to the present” by the *Time* magazine, and won the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger in France.

Although there were voices calling the book sensational and “a pornography of violence” (Finkelstein 55), its authenticity was not questioned. Since there had been no previous Holocaust fraud, the critics saw no reason to be weary of Nazi era autobiographies. Furthermore, why would a Jewish author who had survived the Holocaust want to *invent* experiences as traumatizing as the death of Ludmila? It simply did not seem likely.

Only in 1982, seventeen years after the publication of Kosinski’s first novel, did *The Village Voice* publish an article claiming that *The Painted Bird* and Kosinski’s seven subsequent novels – if Kosinski had written them himself at all – had originally been written in Polish, without Kosinski acknowledging his English translator. It was also suggested that he might have plagiarized his works or paid a ghost-writer.

Finally, when Poland lifted its ban on *The Painted Bird* twenty-three years after the publication and the book was translated into Polish, the Polish readership were outraged about their depiction in the novel. It turned out that Kosinski, who “had always insisted – at parties, in interviews, in writing – that he was the boy in *The Painted Bird* (which, he said, was not strictly a novel but ‘auto-fiction’)” (Routh), was not the narrator he claimed to be. Polish researchers found proof that Kosinski had never been tormented and exploited by peasants, but that he and his parents had been hidden and protected by Poles throughout the war. Routh writes:

[T]he Jewish Lewinkopf family, to escape the Nazis, moved from Lodz [...] and changed their name to Kosinski, a common Polish one. They lived in the homes of Poles and their true identity was concealed by Poles. They carried on their lives as Catholics. Jerzy was baptized and received Holy Communion; he served as an altar boy. The Lewinkopf/Kosinski family was in fearful hiding, but not in a potato cellar or barn. They even employed a maid.

The article in the *Village Voice*, although the scale and exact nature of Kosinski’s fraud remain disputed until today, put an end to Kosinski’s career as a writer. However, in 1995, *The Painted Bird* became an inspiration for another writer, who faked an autobiography that was remarkably similar in style: Bruno Dössekker’s *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, published under the name Binjamin Wilkomirski.

Like *The Painted Bird*, *Fragments* is told from the perspective of a young boy unable to make sense of his experiences or relate them to their broader historical context. Like in Kosinski's work, one disturbingly violent episode is followed by another. Like Kosinski, Dössekker-Wilkomirski claims to only remember "fragments" of his childhood, which is reflected in the lack of connecting passages between the individual episodes. Dössekker-Wilkomirski's style also resembles Kosinski's in the use of short, simple sentences and the uninvolved prose of a boy resorting to emotional distance for psychological self-protection. Both works evoke the impression of the narrators' urgent need to confront the past by means of bearing witness at last through free association.

Although *Fragments* is set in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek and *The Painted Bird* is set in rural Poland, the plots are strikingly parallel as well. Both books contain a disturbing scene of a body being devoured by rats (Kosinski 53, Dössekker-Wilkomirski 81), both narrators are committed to an orphanage after the war and have trouble adjusting, and both narrators do not realize that their ordeal has ended until much later.

As Finkelstein observes, Kosinski and Wilkomirski have even described their books similarly. "Kosinski represented *The Painted Bird* as 'the slow unfreezing of the mind'; Wilkomirski represents *Fragments* as 'recovered memory'" (Finkelstein 57). Comparing two strikingly similar passages taken from Wiesel's *The Jews of Silence* (1966) and *Fragments*, Finkelstein shows that Dössekker-Wilkomirski borrows ideas not only from Kosinski, but also from Wiesel's writings (cf. Finkelstein 57 f).

Like *The Painted Bird*, Dössekker-Wilkomirski's "autobiography" was critically acclaimed by Holocaust scholars like Elie Wiesel and Ruth Klüger, won literary prizes, and was translated into numerous languages and put on high school and college reading lists.

The latest Holocaust memoir exposed to be a fraud was Herman Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love that Survived*. Rosenblat writes about his experiences as an inmate of the concentration camp of Buchenwald (he was detained at Buchenwald indeed, however, apart from this fact, *Angel* is pure romance fiction). In *Angel at the Fence*, Rosenblat claims that a Jewish girl living in hiding on a nearby farm regularly comes to see him and toss him apples over the fence. Years later, the story goes, the "author-narrator," who has emigrated to the US after the war, meets the same girl on a blind date in New York. Upon discovering their shared past, they decide to get married. In fact, as Rosenblat later admitted, he never met an angel girl at Buchenwald. As scholars have pointed out, even if someone on the other side of the fence had attempted to help an inmate, the layout of the camp would have made it impossible to throw food over the fence without being spotted by the SS.

As early as 1995, long before the publication of *Angel*, Rosenblat and his wife (who acted the role of the *Angel* girl) appeared on “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” where, after telling the same story, Rosenblat “got down on his knees to give his wife a new ring. Ms. Winfrey called it ‘the single greatest love story, in 22 years of doing this show, we’ve ever told on the air’” (Rich and Stelter). Subsequently, the Rosenblats’ love story was included in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* anthology, and Laurie Friedman based her children’s book *Angel Girl* on it.

Rosenblat’s “autobiography” was scheduled for publication in February 2009, but the manuscript of the implausible story was exposed to be a fraud by Jewish studies scholar Kenneth Waltzer, and the publication was cancelled. Producer Harris Salomon, on the other hand, having already secured the movie rights, is thinking of turning the fictionalized manuscript into a movie all the same. As the *New York Times* reports, Salomon holds that “whether the portion about Mr. and Mrs. Rosenblat’s meetings at the concentration camp was strictly true [is] almost irrelevant” (Rich and Stelter).

Salomon’s take on the subject indicates that for those who see culture as a business and history as just another topic that lends itself to financial exploitation, it does not matter whether historical truths are fictionalized and trivialized in publications geared to a mass audience. But is it really “almost irrelevant” whether Rosenblat’s story is “strictly true”?

In his essay about “Shoah romances” (a term that equals Spiegelman’s “Holokitsch”), Doron Rabinovici comments on the recent rise in fictionalized autobiographies and fiction centering around romantic love stories set against the “backdrop” of the concentration camps. “The further the past dates back, the greater the fear that the broad audience could regard it as [...] pale and dull,” Rabinovici concludes, and the more “the darkness of the atrocities is dyed and brightened with sentimentalities” (Rabinovici, “Shoah Romances,” my translation). Rabinovici believes this “tendency to kitschify the past” may indicate that engaging in the past is still experienced as disturbing (hence the attempt to trivialize the atrocities). In the case of Rosenblat, this may indeed be the case, if Rosenblat was honest in his statement issued upon discovery of the fraud: “I wanted to bring happiness to people, to remind them not to hate, but to love and tolerate all people,” the *New York Times* quotes him, “[...] My motivation was to make good in this world. In my dreams, Roma [his wife] will always throw me an apple [...]” (Rich and Berger).

However, I believe Rabinovici’s explanation for the growing body of “Shoah romances” is more likely: “The calculations of the publishers may be even more cynical. Does the Shoah merely serve as the depressingly dramatic backdrop [dramatisch düstere Todeskulisse] for a love that outshines everything? Is it all about selling palatable romances?”

(“Shoah Romances” 4; my translation). It probably is about “selling palatable romances” with a dramatic twist indeed, simply because stories like *Angel at the Fence* are bound to be a commercial success. When I asked Rabinovici what he thought about the cancelled publication of Rosenblat’s book, he said in his opinion, “Rosenblat’s story would be no less of a fraud if it were true,” for couples’ reunions after Auschwitz were mere accidents. Not only did they rarely happen, but in view of the death of six million people, they become utterly meaningless. Therefore, romances like *Angel at the Fence* neither tell us anything significant about the past nor anything relevant for the present. “It’s not necessary to go to Florence”, Rabinovici added cryptically, “and repaint Michael Angelo.” The point to be taken is that the historical events are neither in need of fictionalization nor of an accentuation of unlikely details. They do speak for themselves. “Shoah romances”/“Holokitsch” works trivialize history. To foreground elements of humanity and hope is to rewrite a (hi)story of violence and hopelessness into one of hope and humanity surviving against all odds. Authors like Rosenblat are reading a “heartwarming” message into a historical event that was anything but heartwarming.

The problem posed by “Shoah romances”/“Holokitsch” works goes beyond a simple misrepresentation and trivialization of history. As they are reproduced and written about, and new works continue to be based on them due to their popularity – *Angel at the Fence*, which has already appeared as a short story in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* anthology and as the children’s book *Angel Girl*, and may soon become a movie, is a good example –, their message of hope and love potentially turns into a self-perpetuating motif. As Bathrick observes, “recycled fictions and documentary illustrations of prior visual representations continue to circulate as powerful signifiers that are a part of the collective unconscious archive by which societies have come to know and even remember the Holocaust” (51).

Western societies today tend to subscribe to an individualist philosophy. They hold that economic and personal success (and the lack of them respectively) are the individual’s responsibility, rather than thinking in terms of economic, material and social determinism. Together with the victim-as-hero concept, Western individualism conditions a mass audience to embrace “Shoah romances”/“Holokitsch” rather than less fictionalized representations of the Holocaust. “Shoah romances” perpetuate the message that an individual may heroically survive and succeed, “rise in the world” and find personal happiness even under the most unlikely circumstances. Suggesting that good will win over evil, the *Angel at the Fence* story is, similar to *Schindler’s List*, comforting rather than thought-provoking, for it reassures the mass audience of what it *wants* to believe in.

A less fictionalized representation of the Holocaust, that is, a representation that (1) refuses to make sense of the past or read a “message” into it and (2) “work[s] against the fetishization of representation and its claim for authenticity” (Bathrick 51) is less palatable and potentially discomfoting, but certainly thought-provoking. In the light of the values dominating Western societies today, these attributes make such a work less likely to become “a part of the collective unconscious archive by which societies have come to know and even remember the Holocaust” (Bathrick 51) than a “Shoah romance.” While the audience of “Shoah romances” still know about the historical atrocities, the first image to surface from the “collective unconscious archive” may eventually become the heartwarming scene of a girl throwing an apple over a fence.

However, while “Shoah romances” potentially inscribe self-perpetuating motifs in the “collective unconscious archive,” the reception of *The Painted Bird* and *Fragments* suggests that Holocaust *frauds* are likely to become powerful signifiers on yet another level of Holocaust discourse.

4.4 The Reception of Holocaust Fraud

The Painted Bird and *Fragments* are not the earliest fictional stories being passed off for truth, and *Angel at the Fence* will probably not be the last one. Yet the reactions to their exposure have drawn attention to the problematic nature of Holocaust memoirs and have caused a greater stir than Defoe’s fictional autobiographies or James Frey’s make-believe memoir *A Million Little Pieces*. One could argue that it does not make much of a difference whether Defoe’s novels were read as biographical or fictional works by his contemporary audience, and that media interest in the “scandals” caused by the likes of Laura Albert and James Frey wore off fast.

Since the Holocaust is not only a sensitive subject but also, as Novick has observed, “a moral and ideological Rorschach test,” Holocaust *frauds* tend to cause greater unrest. Ruth Klüger, who in her observations about the fraud does not reveal her own opinion but merely concludes that “kitsch is always possible,” sums up the different responses triggered by Ganzfried’s exposure of *Fragments*:

And now minds part way; there are those who think that the disclosure should best not have happened because it abets the Auschwitz lie¹⁹ [...]; those who [...] think that the memory of the Holocaust must not be contaminated by fraud; those who are simply outraged at having been lied to; those who are ashamed of not having

¹⁹ I.e., the lies spread by Holocaust deniers like David Irving and Robert Faurisson.

condemned earlier what they now perceive to be kitsch; and those who think that the text, if it was good as an autobiography, should also be good as fiction, that is, those who insist on the literary merits of the book [...] independent of the genre [it] purports to be” (Klüger qtd. in Ganzfried 225; my translation and footnote).

The number of Holocaust scholars and literary critics “insist[ing] on the literary merits of the book [...] independent of the genre [it] purports to be,” and believing that “the text, if it was good as an autobiography, should also be good as fiction,” as Klüger has it, is surprisingly high. Both Elie Wiesel and Deborah Lipstadt continued praising *Fragments* after its exposure, and Lipstadt, who is a professor of Jewish and Holocaust Studies at Emory University, kept it on her syllabi. Publisher Arthur Samuelson described *Fragments* as “a pretty cool book” which is “only a fraud if you call it non-fiction. I would then reissue it, in the fiction category. Maybe it’s not true – then [Wilkomirski]’s a better writer!” (qtd. in Finkelstein 60). For Israel Gutman, the director of Jerusalem’s Holocaust museum Yad Vashem, it is “not that important” whether Dössekker-Wilkomirski *physically* had the experiences he recounts in *Fragments*: “Wilkomirski has written a story which he has experienced deeply; that’s for sure. . . . He is not a fake. He is someone who lives this story very deeply in his soul. The pain is authentic” (qtd. in Finkelstein 61).

Why was it that Holocaust scholars and critics continued praising a literary fraud? Samuelson, as a publisher, may have realized that the story would sell well, no matter whether it was fact or fiction: due to its simple sentences, the child’s perspective and the straightforward plot, it is easily accessible to a broad audience. Drawing a clear line between good and evil, containing violent passages and being adorned with a happy ending for the victim-hero, it caters to the taste of the masses. Why Holocaust scholars like Lipstadt and Gutman, and survivors like Wiesel kept praising the book is harder to understand. Did they not want to discredit the positive reviews they themselves had issued while the book was still believed to be autobiographical? Were they afraid that their own critical opinion would provide new grist to the revisionist mill? Did they simply believe that the “message” of *The Painted Bird* and *Fragments* should reach as broad an audience as possible, no matter whether it was embedded in fictional or factual stories?

Whatever is the case, I believe that every literary genre as well as every field of scholarly discourse can tolerate, if not profit from, legitimate criticism. Facing open debate and publicly dissociating themselves from hoaxes, the genre of Holocaust literature, and Holocaust studies as a whole, will gain a credibility they lack as long as hoaxers are defended with flimsy arguments. The scholarly reactions to *Angel at the Fence* indicate that a paradigm shift towards a more open and outspoken academic response may already be in the process of

taking place. Deborah Lipstadt, who a decade earlier continued defending *Fragments* after its exposure, has questioned the veracity of *Angel* the same time as Waltzer did, and has publicly criticized the book for “insult[ing] [...] the survivors,” “giv[ing] ammunition to Holocaust deniers,” and being “inimical to the pursuit of historical truth” (cf. Lipstadt, “Holocaust love story”). Although a conclusive empirical evaluation of this trend will be possible after another decade at the earliest, the academic approach to fraudsters appears to gradually be developing into the critical and open debate desirable for all scholarly discourse.

A different group of critics of the Dössekker-Wilkomirski affair concluded that *Fragments* proves the textual indistinguishability of fictional and historical narration. Günter Jacob, for example, holds that Dössekker-Wilkomirski has made the difference of fiction and testimonial literature (*Zeugnisliteratur*) “invisible to his audience” (qtd. in Küntzel; my translation).

This approach, while aiming to re-establish the innocence of the readership misled by the fabricated autobiography, does not reach new conclusions. *Fragments* and *The Painted Bird* do indeed illustrate that a well-forged autobiography is *textually* indistinguishably from a factual one, and, being supported by the alleged testimonial status of the text and a trusting readership, may be mistaken for history. However, this finding is not as new as Jacob passes it off for in 1998. Logico-linguistic narratologists analyzed the difference of fact and fiction earlier, and have discovered factual and fictional *tendencies* rather than unambiguous indicators. Similarly, postmodernist philosophers pointed out the textual indistinguishability of a skilful fraud and a factual text as early as in the 1970s.

While dwelling on this indistinguishability when criticizing Holocaust fraud is a mere revival of an old discussion, it also dismisses a crucial point. As Matthias Küntzel remarks, what is at stake in the *Fragments* debate is not the suggestive power of literature but the veracity of the author. In an interview Dössekker-Wilkomirski gave after his exposure, he said that it had always been up to the audience to read his book as “literature” (i.e., fiction) or as “a personal document” (qtd. in Küntzel). Küntzel points out that Dössekker’s statement spreads “the cynically relaxed position of the modern revisionists who have learned the lesson of postmodern epistemology” (Lau qtd. in Küntzel). Both literary criticism and narrative theory have extensively engaged in the problem of (un)reliability of the *narrator*, but largely ignored the (un)reliability of the *author*. An unreliable author is an author falsely claiming to adhere to the laws of (non-pretense) illocutionary speech acts, that is, an author passing his fictional narration off as a factual one.

Since biographical veracity is not a question of narrative strategies but of historical verifiability, the reliability or unreliability of an autobiographer is not opaque. As Polish researchers have shown for *The Painted Bird*, Ganzfried and Mächler have shown for *Fragments* and Waltzer has shown for *Angle at the Fence*, it can be verified or falsified straightforwardly. These three examples do not only show that literary fraud has flourished for a long time and is likely to continue its popularity. They also illustrate a gradually increasing “fraud awareness” on the part of publishers, journalists and Holocaust scholars. While *The Painted Bird* was only recognized as a fraud seventeen years after its publication, *Fragments* was exposed three years after its publication, and *Angel at the Fence* even before it appeared in print. It can be concluded that, while the culture industry has certainly furthered the production of literary fraud, this development has not been ignored by scholars and journalists. It is much harder to publish a literary fraud today than it was fifty years ago, because fact-checking has become a matter of course when it comes to unlikely stories. While this does not unwrite the fraud already published and cannot prevent the publication and film adaptation of “Shoah romances” like *Angel* under the label of fiction, it does effectively prevent untruths to be passed off as historically verifiable facts.

“Fraud awareness” is certainly a step in the right direction when it comes to a responsible handling of historical memory. However, it should be noted that fact-checking and an open debate will have little, if any, influence on a different after-effect of the institutionalization of memory: the deliberate re-interpretation and misrepresentation of cultural artifacts and their critical reception in the service of an ideological agenda.

4.5 Norman Finkelstein and “The’ Holocaust Industry”

As opposed to Wiesel’s constructivist position, Norman Finkelstein positions himself on the “exceptionalist” extreme of Mintz’ heuristic scale of Holocaust representation. As an “exceptionalist,” Finkelstein holds that “[w]hen it comes to cultural refractions of the Holocaust [...], the norm is [...] vulgarization, especially in works of popular culture. Most disturbing and most prevalent [...] is the way the Holocaust is traduced by being appropriated to serve purposes — national interests, universalist ethics, personal identity — that are not only unrelated to the Holocaust but often antithetical to its memory” (Mintz 39). Finkelstein only credits a slim body of early historical (Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews*) and artistic (Stanley Kramer’s movie *Judgment at Nuremberg*) works with having

accurately represented the past, and holds that new representations tend to be corrupted by the culture industry, and improperly appropriate the Holocaust for ulterior motives.

Holocaust fraud is one of Finkelstein's main points in his case against "The Holocaust industry." In the course of his argument, Finkelstein illustrates Bathrick's thesis that "recycled fictions [...] continue to circulate as powerful signifiers" (51) long after their initial publication, and that these signifiers may come to mean something bearing little resemblance to the original signifieds.

Finkelstein is not a disinterested scholar, but has a strong ideological agenda, which brings him to do what Hayden White criticizes historians for. Relying mainly on the factual observations Novick makes in *The Holocaust in American Life*, Finkelstein re-arranges Novick's findings "into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end" (White, *Metahistory* 7). Novick does not try to answer the question of *how* the Holocaust should be remembered and represented, but merely illustrates the complex processes that have turned it into the important cultural signifier it is today. He concludes that "[i]n the future, as in the past, changing circumstances will influence the choices we make about remembering the Holocaust. But while circumstances will influence our choices, we ourselves are ultimately responsible for those choices – with all their consequences, intended or unintended" (Novick 281). Finkelstein, on the other hand, does have a definite answer to the question of how the Holocaust should be represented: if possible, it should not be represented at all. He quotes Novick's sociological observations, but deduces his own conclusions and presents them as self-evident. As a result, *The Holocaust Industry* and *The Holocaust in American Life* are two strikingly different books about the same topic. Although Novick's and Finkelstein's conclusions differ, the historical facts they rely on are the same. It is their distinct intentions rather than their distinct source material that results in their diverging conclusions.

The polemic agenda Finkelstein adds to Novick's facts, although it is skillfully interwoven with historical evidence, cannot be upheld upon a close reading. Many of Finkelstein's conclusions can be identified as unsupported opinions rather than self-evident results. Therefore, Finkelstein's mixing of facts and imagination does not prove Ankersmit right, who says that "the evidence available to historians [permits] them to write many more *true* statements about the past than we actually find in their texts" ("Reply" 277, my

emphasis). While Novick's book bears up under academic scrutiny, Finkelstein's work is neither objective nor disinterested, but highly subjective.

Finkelstein's agenda becomes clear from the introductory paragraph of *The Holocaust Industry*:

In the pages that follow, I will argue that 'The Holocaust' is an ideological representation of the Nazi holocaust²⁰. Like most ideologies, it bears a connection, if tenuous, with reality. [...] Its central dogmas sustain significant political and class interests. Indeed, The Holocaust has proven to be an indispensable ideological weapon. Through its deployment, one of the world's most formidable military powers, with a horrendous human rights record, has cast itself a "victim" state, and the most successful ethnic group in the United States has likewise acquired victim status. (Finkelstein 3)

The paragraph shows how Finkelstein invests factual observations with subjective opinion not only in his interpretations of the facts, but also on the semiotic level. In his first sentence, Finkelstein introduces the different signifieds of "'The' Holocaust" (capital T and H) and "the Nazi holocaust" (lower case). The choice of upper and lower case already is a semiotic sign of Finkelstein's ideological bias that may, albeit on an unconscious level, tempt his readers to subscribe to this bias as well. Why does Finkelstein choose to capitalize the term for the "ideological representation of the holocaust" rather than the one for the historical Holocaust? The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests the opposite procedure: in contrast to the general meaning of the noun "holocaust" – "[a] sacrifice wholly consumed by fire; a whole burnt offering" –, the entry for "the mass murder of the Jews by the Nazis in the war of 1939–1945" reads "the Holocaust" (capital H). By means of capitalizing the term for "The Holocaust," Finkelstein attacks the attention received by ideologies based on "the Nazi holocaust".

Finkelstein's ideological disposition is spelt out in the second sentence, suggesting that [ideological] representations of the Holocaust have little to do with historical events. It is implied that they systematically distort "truth" rather than document the past. The last sentence seamlessly ties "'The' Holocaust industry" to Israeli politics. Finkelstein's anti-Zionist disposition becomes clear without him ever using the words "Israel," "Zionism" and "Jewish". Omitting direct reference, he creates the feeling of a formidable military power indeed: if we immediately know what he is talking about although he does not directly refer to it, the impression arises that Israel must in fact be quite a threat. Putting the "victim" in "'victim' state" in inverted commas, Finkelstein ironically suggests the absurdity of "one of the world's most formidable military powers, with a horrendous human rights record" getting

²⁰ Finkelstein uses the capitalized term "The Holocaust" to refer to the "ideological representation" of the historical, or, as he calls it, the "Nazi holocaust."

away as a victim state, a notion of absurdity that subsequently is extended to “the most successful ethnic group in the United States.”

Finkelstein does not say anything that is historically untrue: Israel *is* “one of the most formidable military powers,” and today, Jews are probably “the most successful ethnic group in the United States” (Finkelstein points out that “per capita Jewish income is almost double that of non-Jews; sixteen of the forty wealthiest Americans are Jews; 40 percent of American Nobel Prize winners in science and economics are Jewish, as are 20 percent of professors at major universities; and 40 percent of leading law firms in New York and Washington” [32]). As Novick explains, the “ideological representation of the Nazi holocaust” does in fact sustain certain “political and class interests.”

However, Novick argues that the choices people make when it comes to collective memory tend to be unconscious and frequently arbitrary. Hence, representations of the Holocaust and their implications tend to be related to personal concern with Jewish history and identity rather than class interest or calculations. Novick does not reproach society for the way the Holocaust is remembered, but wants to make his readership realize that when it comes to “the memory [...] of terrible events of human history whose scars do the work of the wound, the role of that wound in group consciousness has to be carefully considered” (281). Finkelstein, on the other hand, concludes that the way the Holocaust is represented is always the result of “political and class interests,” and that the Holocaust is consciously used as an “ideological weapon.” In order to prove his point, Finkelstein skillfully blends facts and polemics, invests his source texts with new meaning, leaves out the facts that detract from his argument, and stresses those that support it.

Finkelstein is an anti-Zionist and a harsh critic of Israeli politics and American-Israeli foreign relations, which are perfectly legitimate *opinions*. However, blending facts and interpretation, he passes opinion off as fact.

This practice makes *The Holocaust Industry* a textbook example of a postmodern history book as White, Ankersmit and Jenkins would define it. Finkelstein’s preconceived opinion determines the “form” (White) his investigation and argumentation take rather than the other way around. Out of the pool of facts, Finkelstein chooses only those that strengthen his point, and he connects them with his own ideology in order to create “a whole of a particular [...] kind” (White, *Metahistory* 7).

Furthermore, throughout the book, Finkelstein’s references are not to the historical Holocaust, but rather to *texts that have previously been written about it*: among others, Novick’s *The Holocaust in American Life*, historical works by Raul Hilberg, Hannah Arendt,

Daniel Goldhagen and Benny Morris, political works published by Noam Chomsky and Finkelstein himself, and literary works like Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* as well as various books by Elie Wiesel. For example, Finkelstein points out that his "initial stimulus for [writing] this book" was not his interest in the historical event itself, but "Peter Novick's seminal study, *The Holocaust in American Life*" (4). Finkelstein himself is the son of survivors, but he stresses that he "[does] not remember the Nazi holocaust ever intruding on [his] childhood." Instead, his "earliest memory [...] of the Nazi holocaust is [his] mother glued in front of the *television* watching the trial of Adolf Eichmann" (5; my emphasis), and his "reading [...] of] John Hersey's *The Wall* and Leon Uris' *Mila 18*, both fictionalized accounts of the Warshow Ghetto" (6; my emphasis).

It is, of course, perfectly legitimate for an author to investigate the representation of historical events in secondary literature. Claiming otherwise would be to dismiss an entire field of sociological and literary research, including my own approach to the topic. Novick and Mintz shed light on the politics of meaning-making and collective memory precisely because they view the historical events against a backdrop of historiographical, literary and cinematic representations.

However, Finkelstein's version of a secondary-literature based investigation poses a number of problems. His research is imbued with ideological biases, leading him to strategically avoid references to the historical Holocaust and misinterpret the secondary literature his arguments are based on.

In *The Holocaust Industry*, what Ankersmit observes for postmodern texts is taken to an extreme: direct references to the past are substituted by references to texts about the past, and the Holocaust is effectively "replaced" by its representations.

This narrative strategy creates the emotional distance essential to Finkelstein's argument that the historical Holocaust is ideologically over-represented and that "American Jewry 'discovering' the Nazi holocaust was worse than its having been forgotten" (6). Never referring to the atrocities as such, Finkelstein diminishes the significance of the historical event. The reference to his parents' past seems to legitimize his doing so. While *The Holocaust Industry* is characterized by a lack of direct references to the historical Holocaust, there are numerous direct references to Israeli politics, to the way Finkelstein believes American and Israeli Jews collectively profit from the ("ideological representation" of "The") Holocaust, to the corruption of America's foreign politics, and to the way Finkelstein believes Jewish claims for compensation money have wronged Germany and Switzerland. For

example, Finkelstein juxtaposes his defense of post-World War II Germany with his indictment of the US:

With little if any external pressure, [Germany] has paid out to date some \$60 billion [of compensation for Jewish victims].

Compare the first American record. Some 4–5 million men, women and children died as a result of the US wars in Indochina. After the American withdrawal, a historian recalls, Vietnam desperately needed aid. “[...] [T]here were an estimated 200,000 prostitutes, 879,000 orphans, 181,000 disabled people, and 1 million widows; all six of the industrial cities in the North had been badly damaged, as were provincial and district towns, and 4,000 out of 5,800 agricultural communes.” Refusing, however, to pay any reparations, President Carter explained that “the destruction was mutual.” [President Clinton’s defense secretary, William Cohen,] declar[ed] that he saw “no need for any apologies, certainly, for the war itself.” (84)

Unlike the Holocaust, whose historical atrocities Finkelstein never refers to or describes in terms of numbers, the damage caused by the Vietnam War is documented in detail and presented as an urgent concern to both writer and reader. When Finkelstein talks about the Nazi Holocaust, he evokes the impression of disproportionate claims of victimhood made by Jews trying to enrich themselves. *Nevertheless*, as Finkelstein stresses, “[t]he German government sought to compensate Jewish victims with three different agreements signed in 1952” (84) and “negotiated at the same time a financial settlement with the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany” (85). The numbers illustrating the Vietnam War, on the other hand, are presented as indisputable facts that have been ignored by the corrupt Carter administration.

The factual information Finkelstein gives on the Vietnam War is certainly correct, but I do not agree with the implied conclusion. Finkelstein undermines what he himself says in the beginning of his book: “To make out *moral* distinctions between ‘our’ [Jewish] suffering and ‘theirs’ is itself a moral travesty. ‘You can’t compare any two miserable people,’ Plato humanely observed, ‘and say that one is happier than the other’” (8). Finkelstein compares the lack of Vietnam War compensations to the supposed abundance of German compensations in order to accuse Jewish help organizations and individuals of corruption: “Many Jews fabricated their pasts to meet this [compensation] eligibility requirement” (82). Trying to “measure” suffering in terms of money is in itself a hopeless endeavor, and Plato is certainly right. Human suffering can only be accurately expressed in an allegorical sense. Similarly, guilt can only be “paid off” allegorically because guilt cannot be undone. Therefore, compensation moneys are nothing but a helpless attempt to allegorically compensate victims for what they have endured. Arguing that Holocaust victims have received more

compensation than they “deserve” is like claiming that Fühmann’s allegory²¹ is “wrong” because grief is only half as heavy as the sand of the sea. Rather than deducing from the juxtaposition of the lack of Vietnam War compensations and the professed abundance of Germany’s compensations that Holocaust victims have received more than enough money and attention, as Finkelstein argues, I suggest deducing that the victims of the Vietnam War have not received the allegorical money and attention they are entitled to.

An example of Finkelstein’s interweaving of factual information and subjective opinion is his definition of “‘The’ Holocaust industry,” and his circular arguments “*explaining what [it is] by representing [it]*” (White, *Metahistory* 2). Finkelstein quotes statistics illustrating that Jews are “the most successful ethnic group in the United States” (3, 32) and Novick’s observations of how the Holocaust has become an important cultural signifier, both of which are indisputable, but *independent* facts. Then he links them together by attributing Jewish success to *nothing but* “‘The’ Holocaust industry”: According to Finkelstein, “[i]nvoking The Holocaust [is] [...] a ploy to delegitimize all criticism of Jews” (37), and “Israel [can] act with impunity because ‘we have the Anti-Defamation League . . . and Yad Vashem and the Holocaust Museum’” (Chomsky qtd. in Finkelstein 78).

For Finkelstein, “The” Holocaust as an “indispensable ideological weapon” and the perpetuation of Jewish victimhood are personified by Elie Wiesel: “Wiesel’s prominence is a function of his ideological utility. Uniqueness of Jewish suffering/uniqueness of the Jews, ever-guilty Gentiles/ever innocent Jews, unconditional defense of Israel/unconditional defense of Jewish interests: Elie Wiesel *is* The Holocaust” (55). In his public appearances, Wiesel has frequently stressed what Finkelstein criticizes about “‘The’ Holocaust industry”:

- “(1) [that] The Holocaust marks a categorically unique historical event;
- (2) [that] The Holocaust marks the climax of an irrational, eternal Gentile hatred of Jews” (42).

Finkelstein observes that Wiesel has lectured that “the Holocaust ‘leads into darkness,’ ‘negates all answers,’ ‘lies outside, if not beyond, history,’ ‘defies both knowledge and description,’ ‘cannot be explained nor visualized’ [...], ‘marks a destruction of history’ and a ‘mutation on a cosmic scale’” (45). Wiesel is also known to have reproached individuals and the media for referring to other events as a “holocaust,” as he did when “the parody of a New York tabloid was headlined: ‘Michael Jackson, 60 Million Others, Die in Nuclear Holocaust’” (Finkelstein 45) and when Shimon Peres called Auschwitz and Hiroshima “‘the two holocausts’ of the twentieth century” (Finkelstein 46). Finkelstein reproaches Wiesel for his

²¹ “Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together! For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea” (Job 6:2–3, King James); cf. Fühmann 193.

dogma of “Holocaust uniqueness,” and for the material wealth he has gained by means of promoting this dogma “for his standard fee of \$25,000 (plus chauffeured limousine)” (45).

That is not to say that Finkelstein attributes the growing concern with Holocaust memory starting in the 1970s to Wiesel alone. He agrees with Novick that changes in the political landscape and changing parameters of identity construction have manifested themselves in an increased awareness of the Jewish past. However, Finkelstein does make Wiesel his scapegoat for introducing “The” Holocaust to the culture industry and “corrupting” its memory by insisting on its uniqueness and categorical irrationality, and thereby turning it into a popular literary and cinematographic motif, a topic of exhibitions and academic conferences, and an “ideological weapon” to promote Jewish and Israeli interests. He reproaches Wiesel for having interfered with the “natural” fluctuation of interest in historical events until “The” Holocaust had become a “powerful signifier in the collective unconscious archive,” and its representation was “not about justice, [... but] a fight for money” and power (Hertzberg qtd. in Finkelstein 87).

As I have argued in chapter 4.2, I agree that Wiesel’s claims and public appearances entail a number of problems. As a constructivist (cf. Mintz 4) with a political, ideological and mass-educational agenda, Wiesel has used his status as the “single survivor with hallowed wisdom and moral authority” (Weissman 47) to lobby for his own political disposition. However, Finkelstein’s claim that Wiesel alone is responsible for the commercialization of the Holocaust seems a rather bold, if not to say absurd, hypothesis. While Elie Wiesel has doubtlessly shaped Holocaust interpretation to a significant extent, Finkelstein credits him with and implicates him for more influence than he is likely to have.

Finkelstein rightly states the obvious – since the culture industry discovered the Holocaust, its representations have *also* (but by no means *exclusively* [cf. Finkelstein 87]) been about money. However, Finkelstein’s allusion to Wiesel’s “standard fee of \$25,000” (45) and the underlying implication that Wiesel is solely concerned with the “fight for money,” but not with “justice” (87), seems hardly fair.

For Finkelstein, this “fight for money” and power encompasses everything from Jewish-American academic and business success, and representations of the Holocaust in popular culture, to the “extortion racket” (Finkelstein 89) claiming compensation money from European countries, and positive American-Israeli political relations.

Criticizing Wiesel’s books and public appearances, and analyzing literary fraud, Finkelstein condemns “the cultural milieu that nurtures this Holocaust literature” and the Jewish organizations and individuals he believes are maintaining this milieu (Finkelstein 55).

His premise is that “much of the literature on Hitler’s Final Solution is worthless as scholarship,” and that “the field of Holocaust studies is replete with nonsense, if not sheer fraud” (55).

Finkelstein conducts a close reading of *The Painted Bird* and *Fragments*, both of which were published after Wiesel’s *Night*. He reviews their reception and focuses on critics like Arthur Samuelson, Carol Brown Janeway, and Israel Gutman – those critics who “think that the text, if it was good as an autobiography, should also be good as fiction” and “insist on the literary merits of the book, which they regard to be independent from the genre the book purports to be” (Klüger qtd. in Ganzfried 225). Rather than giving an overview over the different reactions, Finkelstein evokes the impression that with the exception of few “knowledgeable historians like Raul Hilberg” (60), Jewish academics, historians and pressmen have as a rule defended Holocaust frauds against their better judgment in order to further Jewish interests. “True”, Finkelstein writes, “Wilkomirski fabricated his Holocaust past, but the larger truth is that the Holocaust industry, built on a fraudulent misappropriation of history for ideological purposes, was primed to celebrate the Wilkomirski fabrication. He was a Holocaust ‘survivor’ waiting to be discovered” (61).

Interestingly, Finkelstein also quotes one critical reaction to the Wilkomirski scandal and the culture industry, a reportage Philip Gourevitch wrote for *The New Yorker*. Rather than admitting that Gourevitch shares his own critical stance to a certain degree, Finkelstein uses the reportage as evidence for the perpetuation of the second characteristic trait he attributes to “‘The’ Holocaust industry”: within “‘the’ Holocaust industry,” the Holocaust is represented as “the climax of an irrational, eternal Gentile hatred of Jews” (42) (a politics of representation Finkelstein disagrees with). Even though Gourevitch’s article is highly critical, Finkelstein deduces from it that the author and *The New Yorker* are part of “‘The’ Holocaust industry” themselves: “*The New Yorker* titled its exposé of the Wilkomirski fraud “Stealing the Holocaust”²².” Yesterday Wilkomirski was feted for his tales of Gentile evil; today he is chastised as yet another evil Gentile. It’s always the Gentile’s fault” (Finkelstein 61).

Finkelstein ignores the main points made by Gourevitch, but reads an indictment of “Gentile evilness” into the text. In the article itself, Gourevitch first documents Dössekker-Wilkomirski’s life and the exposure of *Fragments*, and then concludes that the book has a “carefully engineered structure” (Gourevitch 54) constructed to evoke the impression of authenticity, that Dössekker-Wilkomirski’s “groping recitations of his memories” are tailored to an audience that knows “how a ‘rememberer’ looks in a movie” (61), that *Fragments*

²² Finkelstein misquotes the title of Philip Gourevitch’s article in *The New Yorker* (June 14, 1999). The original title is “The Memory Thief.”

contains scenes that are “almost too silly to be called kitsch” (68) and that “[i]f one bothers to read, rather than to ‘experience,’ Wilkomirski’s book, it is difficult to understand how it was ever taken seriously” (67).

Furthermore, Gourevitch’s second major argument is in line with Finkelstein’s criticism of “the cultural milieu that nurtures this Holocaust literature” (Finkelstein 55): Gourevitch believes that Dössekker-Wilkomirski consciously “stole” other people’s memories and pretended that they were his own, but his major concern is more complex: “I am more fearful for and depressed by the culture that received [Wilkomirski] as an apostle of memory than I am for the man himself, whoever he thinks he is” (Gourevitch 68). “[H]ere, in the *Washington Times*”, Gourevitch wonders,

is the writer Arnost Lustig, himself a camp survivor, comparing “Fragments” to the works of Homer, Cervantes, and Shakespeare; and here, in the *Guardian*, is Anne Karpf, a daughter of survivors, proclaiming that Wilkomirski, having written “one of the great works about the Holocaust ... ranks with Primo Levi.” (68)

Gourevitch criticizes Dössekker-Wilkomirski and also mentions that the author was found out to be “neither a Jew nor a Latvian but the Swiss-born son of an unwed Protestant woman” (51). However, this biographical fact is only mentioned in passing. Gourevitch does not dwell on Dössekker-Wilkomirski’s ethnicity long enough to justify Finkelstein’s interpretation of *The New Yorker* depicting him as “yet another evil gentile” (Finkelstein 61). Gourevitch rather makes the point that it alarms him that not only the general public, but also Jewish camp survivors like Lustig and survivors’ children like Karpf have *uncritically* embraced *Fragments*, and that the culture of memory at the end of the 20th century seems to have conditioned literary critics to base their judgment of Holocaust literature not on its actual literary merits, but on its message, plot and motifs without being aware of the affirmative biases that inform their judgments.

Gourevitch’s arguments would have suggested themselves as a reinforcement of Finkelstein’s own opinion. However, reinterpreting the text as a piece of evidence for the representation of “Gentile evil” instead, he uses it to underline the omnipresence of “‘The’ Holocaust industry” and claims the monopoly on elaborated arguments against this aspect of capitalist consumer culture for himself²³, rather than sharing it with a potentially like-minded critic like Gourevitch.

Ankersmit has pointed out that “the evidence available to historians would have permitted them to write many more true statements about the past than we actually find in their texts” (“Reply” 277). The way Finkelstein uses Gourevitch’s article as a building block

²³ Novick is not given much credit for his research either. Finkelstein relies on his findings, but calls him a muckraker (4) and criticizes that Novick’s work is “not a radical [enough] critique” (5).

in his argument seems to illustrate this thesis. However, the accuracy of Ankersmit's dictum hinges on the definition of "true statements." The available evidence certainly permits a writer to base a number of different *interpretations* on it. Interpretations can be convincing or unconvincing – they can be more or less "effective," as White would say – but they cannot be "true" or "untrue" in the strict sense. It is only the "available evidence" itself that is either true or fabricated. The "true" (i.e., concrete, verifiable) available evidence in this case is Gourevitch's article. What Finkelstein has to say about it – that it perpetuates the motif of Gentile evilness – is not supported by additional evidence. The conclusion is neither a "true" nor an "untrue" statement, it is rather Finkelstein's chosen interpretation. Finkelstein could just as well have deduced something different and less far-fetched from the article: he could have used it to challenge his own assumption that almost everything that is being written about the Holocaust either glorifies Jews and Jewish history or condemns Gentile malice.

Any non-fiction book will, as Eakin has pointed out, involve a certain degree of fictionalization. In a work like *The Holocaust Industry*, i.e., a book designed to convince rather than to inform, the amount of subjective conclusions drawn from verifiable facts can be expected to be higher than in a work like *The Holocaust in American Life*, whose author wants to inform about different aspects of a given topic.

When judging the "truth value" of a text, factual evidence and its interpretation have to be disentangled, and the plausibility and conclusiveness of the interpretations should be considered. Finkelstein skillfully interweaves Novick's objective observations and references to other literary and academic texts with his own subjective interpretation. In various instances, such as Gourevitch's article, Finkelstein's interpretations are rather far-fetched and indicate his own ideological bias, which makes him susceptible to only seeing what he wants to see in the texts and cultural phenomena he is investigating.

Finkelstein's ideological bias against "The' Holocaust industry" is reflected in his weakly supported belief in a conspiracy connecting literature, historiography and scholarship, and his belief that it is but a few influential Jewish individuals who pull the strings behind the scenes of "The' Holocaust industry." After his passionate manifesto against literary frauds like Kosinski and Dössekker-Wilkomirski, Finkelstein proceeds to review Holocaust historiography. He discredits the work of Daniel Goldhagen (*Hitler's Willing Executioners*), but defends the academic contributions made by Holocaust denier David Irving. "Although bearing the apparatus of an academic study," Finkelstein writes about Goldhagen, "*Hitler's Willing Executioners* amounts to little more than a compendium of sadistic violence. Small

wonder that Goldhagen vigorously championed Wilkomirski: *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is *Fragments* plus footnotes" (64).

Picking up the loose threads of his earlier critiques of individual "Holocaust exploiters," Finkelstein reveals the larger pattern he wants his readers to see: "Consider, finally, the pattern: Wiesel and Gutman supported Goldhagen; Wiesel supported Kosinski; Gutman and Goldhagen supported Wilkomirski. Connect the players: this is Holocaust literature" (67).

The concluding statement about Holocaust literature is bound to surprise the reader because Finkelstein's earlier remarks about Wiesel, Gutman, Kosinski and Wilkomirski, each case thought through and brought to its own conclusion, do not anticipate a connection between all of them. Finkelstein does not simply want to present his theses, he wants to astonish the reader like a conjurer pulling a rabbit out of his hat. It is narrative twists like this that make his book a riveting page-turner, as opposed to Novick's less entertaining style in *The Holocaust in American Life*. It is likely that the greater popularity of *The Holocaust Industry* does not only rely on its more radical (hence more intriguing) theses, but also on Finkelstein's narrative strategies.

At the same time, Finkelstein's conjurer's style also marks an academic weakness of the book. Just like a conjurer will refuse to explain how the rabbit got into the hat, Finkelstein gives his arguments surprising twists without backing them up with concrete evidence or academic explanations. How exactly are Wiesel, Gutman, Goldhagen, Kosinski and Wilkomirski connected? Have they ever personally met? How have they received each other's publications? Have there been situations where they did not support, but criticize each other? Finkelstein's withholding the answers to these questions makes for a surprising conclusion and an entertaining reading experience, but it also proves his argument speculative and academically weak.

Having made clear his stance on historians like Goldhagen, Finkelstein proceeds to talk about Holocaust denial. He holds that although "Holocaust exploiters" claim that Holocaust denial poses a threat to memory, "there is no evidence that Holocaust deniers exert any more influence in the United States than the flat-earth society does" (68). Finkelstein suggests that Holocaust scholars have a well-calculated reason for spreading unsubstantiated fear of Holocaust denial: "In a society saturated with The Holocaust, how else to justify yet more museums, books, curricula, films and programs than to conjure up the bogey of Holocaust denial?" (68).

Finkelstein's circular argument for this suspicion is that "Deborah Lipstadt's acclaimed book, *Denying the Holocaust*, as well as the results of an ineptly worded American Jewish Committee poll alleging pervasive Holocaust denial, were released just as the Washington Holocaust Museum opened" (68). Finkelstein juxtaposes Lipstadt, who he condemns for "conjur[ing] up the bogey of Holocaust denial," with Holocaust denier David Irving, who Finkelstein thinks has been judged too harshly: "Lipstadt brands David Irving 'one of the most dangerous spokespersons for Holocaust denial' [...]. But Irving [...] has nevertheless, as Gordon Craig points out, made an 'indispensable' contribution to our knowledge of World War II" (71).

As has also been acknowledged by Irving's critics like Richard Evans and Eva Menasse, Irving does indeed have the substantial knowledge about the "Third Reich" he takes pride in. As Evans points out, it is precisely this historical knowledge that makes Irving a denier, because it proves that the "numerous, enormous mistakes" he makes in his historical texts are deliberately calculated, and not the result of ignorance or sloppy research (Evans qtd. in Menasse 93). There certainly is a grain of truth in Irving's *Hitler's War* (if there were none, he could not have passed it off as a non-fiction book), but it is merely used to conceal the degree of Irving's distortion of history. Irving calls himself Hitler's biographer, but in fact, as Eva Menasse points out, he is not a disinterested biographer, but rather an "advocatus diaboli" (Menasse 24) who wants to see Hitler innocent *despite better knowledge*. Irving's motivation is that he himself, as even Finkelstein admits, is "an admirer of Hitler and sympathizer with German national socialism" (Finkelstein 71): Irving knows that Hitler is *guilty* before "the court of world opinion," but he believes that, although the practical implementation had its flaws, national socialism qua national socialism was *right*. Hence, as Menasse points out, "when it comes to evaluations and interpretations, [Irving], the 'Hitler partisan wearing blinkers' [Lipstadt's nickname for Irving], enters his own brown cosmos" (Menasse 27; my translation).

Prima facie, the result is that *Hitler's War* seems to illustrate the postmodern dogma of historical evidence inspiring historians to come up with an endless number of different "interpretations." Irving's "interpretation" – just one in many competing possible "histories" – comes down to the conclusion that the Holocaust never happened. In fact, however, *Hitler's War* does not at all prove that "the evidence available to historians [permits] them to write many more *true* statements about the past than we actually find in their texts" (Ankersmit, "Reply" 277, my emphasis). Held up against "the [available historical] evidence," Irving's works and their reception only show that "he appears to be engaging in

deliberate distortion. Worse, he is a sneak; the uncautioned reader will absorb a version of history exonerating Hitler and minimizing the evil of the Holocaust without knowing it.” (Rosenberg qtd. in Menasse 59).

A critical engagement in “revisionist” literature clearly disproves Finkelstein’s assumption that Irving has made “an ‘indispensable’ contribution to our knowledge of World War II” (Finkelstein 71). Irving’s historical distortions have at best contributed to our knowledge of what World War II was *not* like – which is arguably a dispensable contribution. Distorting and denying the past, Irving’s text sheds light on his revisionist agenda rather than on historical events.

The way Finkelstein implements Irving and Gourevitch in his case against “‘The’ Holocaust industry” may be convincing (or, in White’s words, “effective”) as long as a reader only looks at *The Holocaust Industry* itself, but not at Finkelstein’s source texts. When taking a close look at the textual background Finkelstein’s arguments rely on, it becomes clear that he neither offers new facts nor convincing arguments to the debate about how representations of the Holocaust are affected by the culture industry. The references in *The Holocaust Industry* constitute a treasury of representative texts and critical reflections that have developed within the culture industry over the last fifty years. On the one hand, Finkelstein’s eclectic use of quotations and his academically weak inferences based on them tell us more about the author’s ideological agenda than about the inner mechanisms of the culture industry.

At the same time, Finkelstein’s *Holocaust Industry* itself forms another fragment of the politics of memory the author seeks to reveal. To some extent, Finkelstein does precisely what he criticizes in others: he makes a living writing and lecturing about (“The”) Holocaust, while (somewhat hypocritically, I dare venture) demanding that it be neither written nor lectured about. Borrowing Benjamin’s metaphor once more, I would say that Finkelstein, misrepresenting the implications of various source texts, does not succeed in “translating” his observations about contemporary representations of the Holocaust into “a greater language [of truth]” that explains the politics of representation and memory in a nutshell. He does, however, pull another interesting *original* (rather than a work of secondary literature that investigates “interesting originals”) out of his conjurer’s hat and adds one more primary text to the diverse body of cultural artifacts addressing the Holocaust.

5 Conclusion

An analysis of past representations suggests that the body of fiction and nonfiction, “Shoah romances”/“Holokitsch,” revisionist “historiography” and autobiographical fraud

addressing the Holocaust will continue to grow. As is reflected in the success of works dealing with the past, the institutionalized market for Holocaust memory is far from saturated. As a consequence, the next years can be expected to also see further interpretations of the underlying politics of memory – either positioning themselves in relation to Novick, Finkelstein and Mintz, or reading these earlier interpretations as part of the cultural material to be analyzed. “[P]eople,” as Fredric Jameson remarks, “become aware of the dynamics of some new system, in which they are themselves seized, only later on and gradually” (xix).

The reception of early works, from autobiographies to historiography and from “Holokitsch” to literary fraud, shows that writers, critics, scholars, journalists and historians used to concentrate on the implications of *single* works. With later writers like Spiegelman, journalists like Gourevitch and critics like Novick, Finkelstein and Mintz, the shift from a focus on the publication and reception of *individual works* to a focus on critical interpretations of Holocaust representations *as a genre*, and a growing interest in larger patterns and in the cultural background that brought forth this genre can be observed. Two factors contributing to the growing awareness of “the dynamics of [the] *system* [of Holocaust representation], in which [its critics] are themselves seized,” are

- (1) the paradigm shift from a positivistic (logico-linguistic and semantic) understanding of fact and fiction to a pragmatic one, and
- (2) postmodernism’s taking the positivistic blinkers off traditional historiography.

Acknowledging their own limitations, negating the absolutization of one positivistic truth, questioning mimetic representability, and transcending genre boundaries, postmodern approaches lend themselves to representations of the past in the tradition of Eakin and Benjamin – that is, approaches like the one taken by Art Spiegelman in *Maus* that “approximate a truth exceeding all reality without betraying it” (Rabinovici, “Wie es war”).

However, postmodernist approaches to history will only prove fruitful if “the correct insight that no certain knowledge is possible” is taken to its “correct conclusion that all knowledge is fallible” rather than “the unjustified conclusion that no knowledge at all is possible” (Lorenz qtd. in Anchor 109). As Spiegelman put it, a meaningful postmodern contribution to the study of the past must not “[eschew] morality” (qtd. in Blume). Like any earlier historical period, the postmodern age has seen both “moral” and “immoral” approaches to the past. “Immorality,” as critics like Spiegelman and Rabinovici would define it, includes not only professed autobiographies and revisionist literature, but also “Shoah romances”/“Holokitsch” works.

However, “immoral” works tend to enjoy not only commercial success, but are also subject to “moral” criticism. Furthermore, the growing body of autobiographical fraud has led to an increased sensibility and awareness on the side of scholars, publishers and journalists, who have come to constitute a moral control entity. The increasing effectiveness of this entity is reflected in its fact-checking speed and reaction time regarding literary fraud, as can be observed in the exposure of *Angel at the Fence*, the latest fabricated Holocaust autobiography, before its publication. Producer Harris Salomon’s plans to make an *Angel at the Fence* movie in the “Shoah romance”/“Holokitsch” tradition all the same, on the other hand, consciously takes an approach that “[eschews] morality.” Not unlike *Schindler’s List*, Salomon’s movie is likely to earn him substantial commercial success. At the same time, it can be expected that the movie will, due to the scholarly debate about representations of the Holocaust gradually becoming more open and critical, be counterbalanced by stronger critical reactions and “moral” reproaches on the part of scholars and historians.

The institutionalization of memory has indisputably brought forth a growing body of “Holokitsch” and fictionalized versions of the past in danger of trivializing history. Yet, lacking as these popular cultural artifacts may be in terms of faithful representation, they are bound to reach a much broader audience than academic texts and works of “high” culture. It is only through works appealing to the masses that culture’s all-embracing educational mandate can be met full circle. In the light of revisionist “historiography” spread by Holocaust deniers, it is essential that this mandate be fulfilled: as long as deniers may plead the right for freedom of opinion, the only effective measure to immunize society to revisionism is to educate all its members.

What direction the politics of memory and representation will take in the long run, as there are fewer and fewer living eyewitnesses, is hard to tell. “In the future, as in the past, changing circumstances will influence the choices we make about remembering the Holocaust”, Novick muses at the end of his book, “But while circumstances will influence our choices, we ourselves are ultimately responsible for those choices – with all their consequences, intended and unintended” (Novick 281). How future scholars, writers, publishers, directors, and their respective audiences will define their responsibilities, and if they will choose to meet or ignore them, cannot be predicted. In some respect, the publications by and reception of White, Ankersmit and Jenkins, Finkelstein and Irving, Spiegelman and Wiesel, Spielberg and Rosenblat, Dössekker-Wilkomirski and Kosinski tell us not so much about the past as about their author’s intentions and agendas, the politics of collective memory, and the cultural environment that brought them forth. The same can be

predicted about books and movies that are yet to be written: as there are fewer and fewer new historical insights to be gained, the historical discourse is likely to become less about the past and more of a “moral and ideological Rorschach test” for present societies.

Since the referential past itself can neither be unlived nor rewritten, and new texts are bound to increasingly be variations on old motifs, Samuel Beckett may have been right: “Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness” (qtd. in *Maus II* 45). On the other hand, what would our non-Tlönian society turn into if the morality of its members were not reinforced every once in a while? I suspect that Beckett was both right and wrong. True, words are but stains on silence and nothingness. But we do need these stains. They may be all the meaning there is.

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Appendix A: German abstract

Die Diplomarbeit hinterfragt die Darstellung und Darstellbarkeit historischer Ereignisse in Belletristik, Autobiographie, Film und Geschichtsschreibung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Holocaust.

Der erste Teil konzentriert sich auf erzähltheoretische Ansätze zur Abgrenzung von Fakt und Fiktion. Anhand von Martin Löschniggs Unterscheidung von sprachlogischen, semantischen und pragmatischen Ansätzen werden die Stärken und Schwächen verschiedener erzähltheoretischer Modelle untersucht.

Der zweite Teil setzt sich mit der Problematik postmoderner Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit und Keith Jenkins auseinander.

Danach wird anhand konkreter Beispiele das Potential von Literatur und Film als Vermittler zwischen Gegenwart und Vergangenheit erörtert. Art Spiegelmans *Maus* wird als gelungene Alternative zu konventionellen Holocaust-Biographien gelesen, die die postmoderne Geschichtsskepsis auf graphischer und metatextueller Ebene hinterfragt und überwindet. Den theoretischen Hintergrund des dritten Teils bilden Texte von Walter Benjamin und Paul Eakin.

Im vierten Teil liegt der Schwerpunkt auf institutionalisierter Erinnerung und auf der Rolle des Holocaust in der Konstruktion kollektiver amerikanischer Identitäten. Norman Finkelsteins *The Holocaust Industry* wird als Exempel eines Textes an der Schnittstelle von Sachliteratur und Polemik behandelt. Weiters wird auf den „Ausverkauf“ des Holocaust durch die Kulturindustrie, den Wilkomirski/Dössekker-Skandal, den Gerichtsprozess zwischen Deborah Lipstadt/Penguin Books und David Irving und die „Holokitsch“-Problematik eingegangen.

Die Arbeit will keine Antwort auf die Frage geben, wie die Vergangenheit denn nun darzustellen sei. Vielmehr sollen die Zusammenhänge zwischen Text und Realität, Vergangenheit und Gegenwart aufgezeigt werden. Die Grundlage der Untersuchung bildet meine persönliche Überzeugung, dass unser Wissen um und Denken über Geschichte einen Faktor für die gegenwärtige Entwicklung von Gesellschaft und Gemeinschaft darstellen, der, allen Schwierigkeiten zum Trotz, weder wegdividiert werden kann noch sollte.

Appendix B: curriculum vitae

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 Geburtsdatum und –ort: 13. 11. 1985, Oberwart
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Ausbildung

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 1996–2004 Bundesgymnasium Oberschützen
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 02–03 2010 Volontariat/Sozialarbeit für COMI in Oaxaca, Mexiko
 01 2010 Tutorin für die Wellesley-in-Vienna Winter Session
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