

***Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Culture and Film*** by Matthew Boswell.

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'One of a new generation of Holocaust scholars'<sup>1</sup>; Matthew Boswell is probing the so-called limits of Holocaust representation by providing an intellectually stimulating and provocative analysis of a largely under-researched topic. This book is concerned with the literary, filming and musical narratives that make use of 'aesthetic shock to induce deeper ethical engagements' with the subject of the Holocaust (p. 6). Through close readings of Sylvia Plath's and S.D. Snodgrass' Holocaust poetry, British (post)punk music, and films such as Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds*, Boswell reveals the presence, and more importantly, the relevance of 'Holocaust impiety'. Inspired by Gillian Rose's critique of 'Holocaust piety' – a mode of artistic engagement which argues for the ineffability of the Holocaust – Boswell echoes Rose that 'to argue for non-representability of the Holocaust is to mystify something we dare not understand, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human'.<sup>2</sup> The author contends that works of Holocaust impiety which run against the ineffability argument are worthy of consideration, if not for their aesthetic value then for their potential to make us realise that 'on some level, we [could have been] *the monsters*' (p. 146).

As one may expect, Holocaust impiety is situated at the opposite end of 'piety'. Unlike the latter, it does not avoid ethical engagement, nor does it hold 'prohibitive tenets' (p. 8). The author defines Holocaust impiety as referring to 'works that reject redemptory interpretations of genocide and the claims of historical ineffability... [they] deliberately engineer a sense of crisis in readers, viewers or listeners by attacking the cognitive and cultural mechanisms that keep our understanding of the Holocaust at a safe distance from our own understanding' (p. 3). Hence, their objective is deliberately transformational, as they rely on the ability to shock the audience into adopting a new point of view.

To a certain degree, Boswell's explanation of this category lacks consistency. This is made apparent when the author argues that Lanzmann, even though a defendant of Holocaust piety, employs an 'impious' interviewing methodology. One also wonders why Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, mentioned alongside the acclaimed *Schindler's List*, is deemed an example of Holocaust piety – given that it has been thoroughly criticized by Elie Wiesel, who viewed it as a crass example of Holocaust desecration and hence, impiety. Yet, we can also learn from Boswell's inconsistency as it raises the question of whether works of art can fall into two opposing categories - 'piety' as well as of 'impiety'. Tackling such issues also draws attention to the inherent ambiguity of the concept of Holocaust impiety.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by scholar Robert Eaglestone, retrieved on <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=419158&sectioncode=26> (accessed on 23.4. 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Rose quoted by Boswell on p. 2.

Certainly this criticism does not detract from Boswell's insightful account of works that span a range of media. In the book's first section, Boswell challenges the claim that Plath identified too easily with the Holocaust victims, arguing that the narrator of *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* builds a tenuous relationship with Jewish victimisation 'by showing lack of knowledge of the historical experiences, traditions and religion of the Jews' (p. 45). The author shows eloquence in his interpretation of W.D. Snodgrass' dramatic monologues of Nazi leaders included in the cycle of poems *The Fuehrer Bunker* (1977), especially when he observes the performative aspect of Snodgrass' poetry produced through the use of 'formal and linguistic experimentation'. This encourages readers to engage with the text in a way which foregrounds their own potential culpability (pp. 63, 91).

With the exception of Jon Stratton's research, the impact of the Holocaust on punk movements has drawn little scholarly interest, which makes this author's engagement with this phenomenon a real contribution. Through his analysis of song lyrics, band biographies and of public performances, Boswell suggests that far from adopting the Nazi swastika and other symbols for their shock value, leading band members of *Sex Pistols* were in fact mocking Nazism, in the same way in which they would be mocking the hypocrisy, complacency and passivity of their parents' generation. His reading of *Joy Division's* album *Closer* points to the transformational role of music, as listeners are drawn by both sound and word into a 'dark internal space of the mind' where they can confront, by means of imagination, not only an atrocious history but also themselves as being a part of it (p. 123). The nihilism which hovered over this band's songs and personal lives surfaces with greater force in the songs of *Manic Street Preachers*. Through their engagement with the monstrosity of history and of humanity, this band has in fact lost the belief in the worth of any kind of human value system.

Boswell is interested in how filmmakers use the camera as an 'active agent [...] that implicates the viewer through association' (p. 135). He observes how the camera positions the viewer as a victim or as a perpetrator, but also how it has the power to inflict violence. The latter is especially apparent in Lanzmann's filming of former SS officer Franz Suchomel, where his purpose was to 'kill him with the camera'. It also appears in *Inglorious Basterds*, where the *enfant terrible* of the Hollywood film wants to believe that 'it's the power of cinema that fights the Nazis' (p. 135). While he recognizes *Shoah* as a valuable 'document of Nazi crimes and the experiences and attitudes that shaped those crimes' (p. 158), Boswell criticizes Lanzmann for his refusal to see any human continuity between Nazi criminals and our lives in the present, making his work a counter-example of Holocaust impiety.

Tim Nelson's *The Grey Zone* is pitted against the repertoire of pious works which propose non-representability of the Holocaust, as his intention is to 'show everything' (p. 164). The book ends with an engaging interpretation of *Inglorious Basterds*. Boswell identifies, with a great deal of mastery, the film's subtle reliance of cinematic references, and its central metaphor of cinema as a weapon which can refashion history (p. 177).

This book is highly recommended for those interested in the most recent developments in the discussion about Holocaust representability. The thesis of Holocaust impiety proposed by Boswell brings an important contribution to the field of Holocaust memory and representation, and situates this author within a new generation of scholars who are unafraid to pose challenging and worthwhile questions.