THE ETHICS OF EMOTION:
THE DIALECTIC OF EMPATHY AND ESTRANGEMENT IN POSTWAR GERMAN LITERATURE AND FILM

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF GERMAN STUDIES
AND THE COMMITTEE ON GRADUATE STUDIES
OF STANFORD UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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MAY 2015
Abstract

Although the question of the role of empathy in our experience of fiction is currently an active one in psychology, most of the relevant research has been conducted on popular literature and film. This dissertation seeks to change that by using cognitive approaches to literature to examine how and why postmodern texts disrupt the reader or viewer’s expected empathic connection with the narrator or protagonist. Drawing on research by both cognitive psychologists and cognitive cultural theorists, I examine first how this disruption is accomplished, through techniques of both narrative and ethical estrangement, such as: narrative unreliability or non-cooperation; mindreading puzzles that can never be solved; moments of intimacy and empathy that are deliberately thwarted; and the presence of the disgusting or the grotesque in the text. Ultimately, I argue that in the wake of the disastrous failure of empathy that was World War II, postmodern writers and directors have sought to render moral judgment and decision-making conscious and deliberate, rather than unconscious and emotion-based. Principle authors and texts include Günter Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel*, W.G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*, and Michael Haneke’s films, *Die Klavierspielerin*, *Das weiße Band*, and *Amour*. This argument has implications for not only the field of cognitive cultural studies, but also for psychology, ethics, and even education.
Acknowledgements

There are a number of people I would like to thank for being part of the journey of the last five years.

I am grateful, first of all, to my committee for helping me shepherd this dissertation along to completion. Amir Eshel never failed to remind me about the importance of history and ethics for my project, and Blakey Vermeule provided valuable insight into the field of cognitive cultural studies, to which I came as a complete novice. Jamil Zaki from Psychology pointed me toward Paul Bloom’s work, which was an invaluable contribution. In addition to dissertation advice, Russell Berman also gave me many opportunities that have shaped and will continue to shape my career. The conclusion of this dissertation would certainly not exist in its current form without his influence.

In addition to the faculty with whom I have worked closely, I was fortunate to write this dissertation as a member of DLCL graduate student committee. I am especially grateful to my fellow “Urban Junglers,” Jenny Strakovsky, Melissa Kagen, Gráinne Watson, and Caroline Egan, for their personal and professional support. I am also very glad to have found Clara Lewis, my writing tutor at the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking. Clara provided invaluable writing advice and a calm voice of reason during this last crazy year.

Last but certainly not least, I want to thank my family and friends who were with me every step of the way through this. I was fortunate to do my PhD within driving distance of my parents and my sister, and that made an enormous difference to me, as did brunches, potlucks, Shabbat dinners, media nights, and hockey evenings with my friends in the area. I could not have done this without you.
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Introduction

Questioning the primacy of empathy at our particular moment — a moment in which the need for more and greater empathy in an increasingly globalized world seems pressing — is a risky one. In a 2014 essay entitled “Against Empathy,” philosopher and psychologist Paul Bloom states that to do so is akin to declaring that one hates kittens. Empathy, traditional wisdom goes, is what allows us to be good people. It is the basis of compassion. It is what allows for neighborly love, agape. If people were educated in how to be more empathic, in how to exercise their imaginations so as to understand more thoroughly what it is like to be someone else, even someone very removed from themselves, the world would be a better place. And fiction, those who wish to defend the humanities as something worthy of study say, is part of that empathic education. Fiction teaches us to be more empathic, and it is therefore a force for good in the world.

It appears that the first half of this statement may, in fact, be generally true. Studies by Raymond Mar and others, which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 1, have shown that those who read fiction do tend to be more empathic than those who do not. But this dissertation will question the leap that is made from the first claim to the second: that this makes fiction a force for good in the world. In fact, this dissertation will question whether empathy itself is, truly, a force for good in the world. The fiction, both written and visual, that I will discuss in the following chapters, indicates something very different. In a wide variety of ways, Grass’s Die Blechtrommel, Sebald’s Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz, and Haneke’s La Pianiste, Das weiße Band, and Amour demonstrate that empathy is, in fact, deeply problematic as a moral lens. They demonstrate that we are better off cultivating an ethic of skepticism rather than an ethic of empathy if we truly want to live ethical lives. And they do so not by inviting empathy, as so much realist fiction does, but rather by disrupting it, both narratively and ethically.

It is no coincidence that the works I will consider all originate with writers and directors from post-1945 Germany. Beginning with the emergence of psychoanalysis
at the end of the 19th century, humanity stared into the abyss of its own mind and realized it had no idea what might be looking back. The development of cognitive neuroscience today has only made us more certain that we do not truly know our own minds. Twentieth century literary movements therefore distinguish themselves from previous centuries through their fascination with the unconscious and the irrational, and through their concern for that which is suppressed, unknowable, or unspeakable. It is the crevasses and chasms of the human mind, the dark, secret places inhabited by sex and violence, fear and disgust, that the art of the twentieth century insisted on making its own. And there was plenty of violence, fear, and disgust to be found in Germany after the Second World War — not to mention, I will argue, the conviction that empathy and emotion had utterly failed as modes of moral decision-making. The literature and film I will consider reflects this failure.

The questions at the heart of this dissertation therefore have to do with the frustration and disruption of empathy in postmodern literature and film — with what I will call a dialectic of empathy and estrangement within these works. I will argue that these works demonstrate the limits of human empathy and attempt to push us to move beyond these limits, a process that is not possible without a great deal of cognitive effort and emotional discomfort. When we read a novel or watch a film, our first impulse is toward empathy; estrangement is, unsurprisingly, alienating and off-putting. And yet both exist to varying degrees within these works. Ultimately, the aesthetic purpose of these works is to inculcate within the reader a strong sense of doubt by drawing attention to the unreliability of narrative — not only of that particular work, but of all narrative. Rather than an ethic of empathy or affect, these works therefore push the reader or viewer toward an ethic of skepticism.

To this end, I am concerned with the cognitive processes that underlie our abilities to perceive the minds of others, a process that is referred to in cognitive science as mindreading. The relationship between mindreading and empathy is a crucial one, and for this reason, it has been a particularly fruitful concept for scholars in the area of cognitive cultural studies, such as Blakey Vermeule, Lisa Zunshine, Murray Smith, and Carl Plantinga, to name only a few. By introducing mindreading into the study of literature, scholars are able to approach such vexing questions as:
Why do humans find fiction — whether visual or written — compelling? Why and how does it move us emotionally, even when we are well aware that the events never happened and the people never existed? How does literature achieve the sort of immersive experience that readers and viewers desire and expect? What makes some fictions more difficult than others?

This dissertation will address, to varying degrees, all of these questions, but this issue of “difficulty” is particularly relevant to the study of postmodern literature. Notably, much of the work that has been done by scholars such as Vermeule and Zunshine has been on eighteenth or nineteenth century texts; however, I argue that when one approaches twentieth century works in this way, the relevant questions change. No longer are we able to ask, “How do we read the minds in this text?” Rather, very often we must ask instead, “Why can’t we read the minds in this text?” The minds of characters in Postmodernist works are often illegible to us. Furthermore, they are often “difficult” in another sense: they actively resist cooperating with their audience. Such texts deny the readers and viewers the sort of “immersive” experience that he or she desires. Ultimately, by disrupting processes of mindreading, these texts also disrupt processes of empathy that are at the core of what readers and viewers expect from their fiction.

This dissertation is, therefore, deeply concerned with the relationship between the text and the reader. I assume a reader who is an active participant in the construction of the narrative, and who has a relationship with both the work’s implied author and with the narrator. These relationships have an enormous impact on the emotional affect of the text for the reader, and I will be continuously concerned with them throughout the dissertation. I would like to note, however, that the reader that I am assuming is more similar to the reader that cognitive science assumes than the one that is often assumed by literary studies. Cognitive science and cognitive psychology assume a reader who is looking for an immersive, empathic experience; these expectations stem largely from our experiences of realist fiction, which are widespread in mainstream media and literature. Most of the work that has been done so far in psychology and neuroscience on the relationship between literature and empathy has been done using “normal” — that is, non-professionally trained — readers and realist
fiction. There are potential pitfalls to this, but in general, I believe it is important for literary scholars to recall that they are not the average reader or viewer of a text. Even though we might constitute a larger-than-average percentage of the readers of non-immersive texts such as the ones I am interested in, we are still not the only readers of these texts. Cultural impact is impossible, I argue, when readership (or viewership) is limited solely to those who are professionally trained in how to read difficult texts. Therefore, we should ask ourselves how other readers — intelligent readers, to be sure, but readers without our professional training — approach such texts. This seems to me to be crucial in expanding the conversation about these texts.

That having been said, I readily admit that my project is not truly a cognitive science project. It is, first and foremost, a literature project, just as I am, first and foremost, a literature scholar. For that reason, the readings that I provide are, in the end, my own readings. I have attempted to imagine how other readers might approach such texts and what sorts of effects the narrative techniques, styles, and content of the novels might have on such readers. But readings of texts are as diverse as the people who read them, and in the end it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions. There will always be readers who say, “But that is not at all how I experience Die Blechtrommel or Austerlitz.” As a scholar, I am interested the points at which friction is created between how readers expect to experience fiction and how these texts prompt us to experience it, and for that reason I will, admittedly, be making some assumptions that might not be accurate for everyone. In the future, a cognitive science or cognitive psychology project related to these texts might be fruitfully undertaken that would explore such questions more empirically. For now, however, I will approach these questions as I have been trained to approach them: through the texts themselves.

In Chapter One: Reading the Postmodern Mind, I establish the relevant theory for my project, examining the cognitive science and psychological research that has been undertaken regarding the concept of empathy and its relationship to fiction. The vast majority of this research, as I have already stated, has been conducted using realist fiction. Therefore, in the second half of this chapter, I take up the question of what happens when this research is applied to non-realist fiction, in this case
postmodern fiction and film. I argue that empathy — that is, the empathic relationship between reader and narrator-protagonist — is disrupted in these works, though that does not mean that it has vanished altogether. Indeed, I argue that both empathy and estrangement are present in a dialectic. Finally, I argue that the disruption of empathy within these works underscores many of the problematic aspects of empathy as a way of making moral decisions, and that the roots of this aesthetic maneuver lie in an understanding of Nazi Germany as a failure of empathy and emotion-based decision-making.

In Chapter Two: Slippery as an Eel: The Rise of Skepticism in Grass’s ‘Die Blechtrommel’, I discuss the quintessential postwar German novel: Günter Grass’s Die Blechtrommel (1959). This novel disrupts empathy at every turn, through both the uncooperative narration offered by the narrator, Oskar Matzerath, and through thematic moments of the grotesque and the disgusting in the text, which are continuously inflicted upon the reader. The emotional dissonance between the reader and Oskar calls into question everything that Oskar says, and reading the text empathically leads only to an impoverished understanding of the text. Therefore, Grass not only disrupts the reader’s empathic, emotional experience of the text, but also begins to replace it with what I am calling an ethic of skepticism — an ethic, he implies, that is necessary to avoid repeating the disaster that was Nazi Germany. Empathy and emotion within Grass’s text are highly suspect, and yet the relationship between them is not static; indeed, there are moments when empathy is strongly invoked, particularly during the Glaube-Hoffnung-Liebe chapter. But these are precisely the same moments in which the problematic aspects of empathy are underscored.

In Chapter Three: . . . sagte Austerlitz: W.G. Sebald’s Mediated Narration and the Ethics of Empathy, I turn my attention to a very different author: W.G. Sebald. Writing thirty years after Grass, Sebald’s concern with regard to the Second World War is quite different from Grass’s. Grass gives very little thought to the victims of fascism; indeed, in 1959, to attempt to imagine the experience of a victim of fascism was not even possible in Germany. With the three intervening decades, however, such an act of imagination became possible — to a certain degree. Direct representation and
the subsequent establishment of empathy between reader and protagonist, however, remains problematic and perhaps even unethical. Sebald circumvents these issues through what I will call “hypermediated narration.” This narration has the effect not only of tempering the emotional experience of the reader, but also of calling attention to the constructedness of all narratives, especially those based on memory; in this narrative maneuver, we may see echoes of the ethic of skepticism that is so strongly present in Grass. At the same time, other aspects of Sebald’s texts, in particular the photographs that he includes, provoke the reader toward mind reading and empathy. The dialectic of empathy and estrangement is therefore re-negotiated in Sebald’s texts in a way that allows for empathy, even while drawing attention to its limitations.

In Chapter Four: Dark Fables, Impossible Puzzles, and Franz Schubert: The Redemption of Empathy in the Films of Michael Haneke, I examine three films by Austrian director Michael Haneke: La Pianiste (2001), Das weiße Band (2009), and Amour (2012). Both narrative and ethical estrangement is present in each of these films, but the relationship between empathy and estrangement is constantly renegotiated. In La Pianiste, there is a re-negotiation of empathy from the novel to the film, with Haneke placing granting his viewer far more access to his version of Erika Kohut than Jelinek does to hers through particular “scenes of empathy” and through the film’s diegetic music, even while reinforcing our inability to really “know” anything about Erika. With Das weiße Band, doubt and skepticism are introduced from the very first moment of the film as an ethical necessity; what was implied in La Pianiste is here clearly articulated. But alongside the skepticism and other estranging elements of the text, there are moments of tenderness that seem to exist solely to provoke empathy on the part of the viewer — even if that empathy can never be rewarded. Finally, in Amour we see the fruits of this renegotiation: a film that uses empathy, rather than estrangement, to shock the viewer.

Recent discoveries in cognitive neuroscience have raised serious and as-yet-unanswerable questions of personal responsibility, agency, justice, empathy, compassion, and, indeed, what it means to be human; in other words, science has begun tackling questions that were previously the province of the humanities. This is actually less of a new development than one might assume; historically psychology
and psychoanalysis have had a close relationship with art. Nobel-prize winning neurobiologist Eric R. Kandel argues in *The Age of Insight* that this relationship may now be reviving, albeit in a different form, due to revolutions in our understanding of the biology and physiology of the human mind. It is therefore not particularly surprising that some literary and film theorists have turned to cognitive science for answers to questions that we could previously only theorize about. But it is not a perfect marriage; indeed, much of the tension that exists between the two fields today stems from the fact that the answers offered up by current cognitive science are not always particularly pleasing to humanists. But that does not mean that the two fields do not have much to say to each other. Kandel argues that although some scholars may be uncomfortable with an approach that “reduces” art to biochemical and neurological processes, in fact “reductionism can expand our vision and give us new insights into the nature and creation of art. These new insights will enable us to perceive unexpected aspects of art that derive from the relationships between biological and psychological phenomena” (xvii). It is my hope that this dissertation will contribute to this dialogue between science and art, in this case literature and film, and that it will access some of the insights Kandel mentions. Although literary studies has been utilizing psychoanalysis for decades now, the influx of cognitive science into the field is much more recent. It is now time, I argue, to consider certain familiar questions, such as those around memory, representation, and emotional affect, in a new light: the light of biology and physiology.
Chapter 1

Reading the Postmodern Mind

In the very first scene of W.G. Sebald’s final novel *Austerlitz* (2001), the reader is startled to turn the page and find a series of four photographs. Each is of a pair of eyes; the top two are of the eyes of nocturnal animals, such as the narrator encounters in the Nocturama of the Antwerp Zoo; the bottom two are of human eyes. The first set of human eyes are those of German artist Jan Peter Tripp (Straus 44), and the last are those of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The narrator provides a clear connection between the eyes of the nocturnal animals and the eyes of the painter and philosopher, writing,

> Von den in dem Nocturama behausten Tieren ist mir sonst nur in Erinnerung geblieben, daß etliche von ihnen auffallend große Augen hatten und jenen unverwandt forschenden Blick, wie man ihn findet bei bestimmten Malern und Philosophen, die vermittels der reinen Anschauung und des reinen Denkens versuchen, das Dunkel zu durchdringen, das uns umgibt.¹ (7)

The narrator thus prompts the reader to linger over the photographs, attempting to see in them the similarities he proposes between the animals and the humans. Where in these photographs of eyes can we locate the ability of the philosopher and the artist to pierce the darkness that surrounds all of us, to bridge the chasm that separates each of us from understanding others or even ourselves?

Our attempt to see in the eyes of Tripp and Wittgenstein the ability ascribed to them by the narrator is partly an exercise in imagination; it is also inevitably an exercise in reading the mind behind the eyes. It is not a coincidence that very similar photographs are used in the “Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test” developed by cognitive psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, in which subjects are asked to look at a

¹ “[A]ll I can remember of the denizens of the Nocturama is that several of them had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to
pair of eyes and decide what emotion lies behind them. This is a test of our ability to read the minds of others and this is precisely what we find ourselves doing when presented with the four sets of eyes at the beginning of *Austerlitz*. That two of the sets of eyes are not human makes very little difference. We may still read surprise in the wide eyes of the bush baby at the top or shrewdness in those of the owl just below, even as we acknowledge that our interpretations probably are not accurate. But it is without a doubt the eyes of Tripp and Wittgenstein that prompt us to pause the longest. There may be some surprise and some shrewdness in both their gazes, but it is possible to read in them amusement and curiosity as well. Most significantly, Tripp and Wittgenstein appear to look back at us from the page, as though attempting to read us in return.

This set of four photographs serves a plethora of functions in the text. I argue, however, that one of its main functions is to prime the reader for the “mindreading” exercise he or she is about to undergo. Wittgenstein’s eyes are particularly enigmatic, and indeed, as Bettina Mosbach points out, it is these eyes that we are meant to superimpose onto Sebald’s, just as the narrator superimposes Wittgenstein’s face onto that of Austerlitz:

> Mehr und mehr dünkt es mich darum jetzt, sobald ich irgendwo auf eine Photographie von Wittgenstein stoße, als blicke mir Austerlitz aus ihr entgegen, oder, wenn ich Austerlitz anschaue, als sehe ich in ihm den unglücklichen, in der Klarheit seiner logischen Überlegungen ebenso wie in der Verwirrung seiner Gefühle eingesperrten Denker, dermaßen auffällig sind die Ähnlichkeiten zwischen den beiden.²

*(Austerlitz 60)*

It is Wittgenstein gazing back at us from the page, but it is also Austerlitz. And it is Austerlitz’s mind, the mind behind the eyes, that the reader must attempt to read

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² “And now, whenever I see a photograph of Wittgenstein somewhere or other, I feel more and more as if Austerlitz were gazing at me out of it, and when I look at Austerlitz it is as if I see in him the disconsolate philosopher, the man locked into the glaring clarity of his logical thinking as inextricably as into his confused emotions, so striking is the likeness between the two of them” *(Austerlitz 39)*
throughout the rest of the novel — an attempt which can only ever be partially
successful.

This example from Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, a novel that I will discuss at length in
my third chapter, is illustrative of some of the quandaries I will be dealing with in this
dissertation. The question of mindreading and empathy is a central one for fiction of
all kinds. In this chapter, I consider much of the research that has been done already in
this area, both by literary and film studies scholars and by psychologists.

Psychologists such as Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley who have worked on the close
relationship between reading fiction and empathy have tended to base their findings on
readers’ “immersive” experiences of texts: “What makes literary fiction unique is how
fiction stories enable us to be ‘transported’ into an imagined world . . . offering a form
of cognitive simulation of the social world with absorbing emotional consequences for
the reader” (“The Function of Fiction” 174). My own work differs from theirs,
however, in its concern for what I will call “non-immersive” texts. Postmodern works,
such as Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, resist readerly immersion. Works such as these force us to
carry out cognitive processes of mindreading consciously, much as the reader must
linger over the photograph of Wittgenstein and consider the question of what is
happening behind the eyes of the great philosopher. It is not obvious, and many of the
minds I will consider in this dissertation are just as opaque as Wittgenstein’s is here. I
will argue that this is a large part of what renders postmodern works notoriously
“difficult” for their readers. But it is in their very difficulty, I will argue, that such
works are valuable, for in forcing conscious mental activity upon us, they also force us
to question our implicit emotional reactions. This questioning, I will show, has
consequences for a reader’s experience of a particular text as well as our impulse
toward moral judgments made through emotion and empathy.
Mindreading and Empathy

The cognitive function known as mindreading is, simply put, knowing – or believing we know – what other people are thinking or feeling. It is the cognitive activity that is at the very core of human social interaction, for without it we would all be bags of flesh to each other, completely opaque. We mindread so easily and automatically that we hardly ever realize we are doing it; it is effortless, even if it is not always accurate. We do it constantly in our day-to-day interactions with people, using facial expressions, body language, and other forms of behavior to postulate about what others are thinking and feeling. We mind read so easily, in fact, that we do it to creatures and things that are not human at all, such as animals (particularly pets) and inanimate objects (such as “misbehaving” electronics). Some scholars, such as Jesse Bering, have argued that this impulse to assign motive to behavior — to read minds — lies also behind the human penchant for reading the “mind” behind “behavior” such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and droughts; in doing so, Bering says, we have created deities the world over.

Mindreading has a plethora of implications for understanding human social interactions and for understanding the basis of human morality. How we treat ourselves, each other, and our environment, as well as the rules we have developed to regulate that treatment, are based on our understanding of other people as being somehow like us – that is, on our ability to represent another individual’s mind. It is also clearly the basis of certain moral emotions, such as compassion and sympathy; these emotions are based on seeing others as souls, rather than simply bodies, and treating them as such. Without the mindreading abilities that humans evolved for a variety of practical reasons, these emotions would be impossible. It is generally agreed, therefore, that mindreading is crucial to understanding how humans relate to other humans. What is not agreed upon, however, is how we do it or even what, exactly, empathy is.

I will begin with the question of how we mindread, which is currently at the center of a vigorous debate in cognitive science. In Simulating Minds, psychologist Alvin Goldman outlines three current theories: theory theory, rationality theory, and
simulation theory (3-4). Of the three theories, the two that have been most important for cognitive cultural studies are theory theory and simulation theory. Fundamental to theory theory is the notion that we possess an innate and usually unconscious “folk psychology.” Simulation theory, in contrast, argues that “mind readers exploit their own mind as a prototype, or model, of the target’s mind” and engage in “mental mimicry” to decide what the target is likely to do (Goldman, “Mindreading by Simulation” 6). Goldman notes that this process is likely to evince a high level of “mindreading error — specifically, egocentric error, reflecting the penetration of the mindreader’s own genuine desires, beliefs, and emotions into the interpersonal tracking process” (“Mindreading by Simulation” 8). In other words, mindreading by simulation forces us to believe that others are perhaps more like us than they truly are; this is a disadvantage in real life, but it may also be a disadvantage when reading fiction in which the minds we are expected to read are very different from our own. Goldman himself comes down on the side of simulation theory, but other cognitive psychologists, such as Simon Baron-Cohen and Alan Leslie, have argued in favor of theory theory, while others, including Raymond Mar, believe that it is likely that we use some combination of the two. It is therefore important to bear in mind that it might not be possible to completely delineate the two theories as starkly as some theorists have.

The question of how, exactly, we might define “empathy” is actually much more difficult than it appears at first glance. In the colloquial usage, “empathy” generally implies a sense of caring, but as Goldman says, discussions of mindreading from the perspective of cognitive science bracket off the “emotive and caring connotation” of the term (Simulating Minds 4). Empathy in the sense that cognitive science uses it has a much broader applicability: it is the ability to understand or imagine the emotional state of another individual. Moral emotions such as sympathy or compassion do not, however, follow inevitably from empathy; one can understand how another person feels and yet have no sympathy for him or her. C. Daniel Batson has actually identified “eight related but distinct phenomena” that might be understood as empathy. These eight phenomena are wide-ranging; Batson argues that this is the case because researchers use the term “empathy” to try and answer two very different
questions: “How can one know what another person is thinking and feeling? What leads one person to respond with sensitivity and care to the suffering of another?” (3) I will not address in detail all eight phenomena here, but I think it is useful to consider the different ways the term “empathy” is used and the reasons that defining it is so difficult. We might think of these eight phenomena as existing on a spectrum, with those that answer solely the first question on one end and those that answer solely the second question on the other. Phenomena that Batson mentions that answer solely the first question include “knowing another person’s internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings” (Batson 4) and “adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed Other” (Batson 5). Neither of these implies any compulsory emotional reaction, although both of them may lead to other, more explicitly emotional phenomena, such as “intuiting or projecting oneself into another situation” (Batson 6) or “imagining how another is thinking and feeling” (Batson 7). It is easy to understand how these cognitive phenomena might eventually lead to those on the end of the spectrum that mostly address Batson’s second question: “feeling distress at witnessing another person’s suffering” (Batson 8) and “feeling for another person who is suffering” (9). I argue that these last two phenomenon might be understood better as sympathy derived from empathy. Both sympathy and empathy are important for my discussion, since together they engender much of the emotional experience of reading or watching a novel or film. However, it is important not to confuse the two. It is possible to understand what someone is thinking or feeling, and even experience physical responses based on watching that person’s face on a screen, without experiencing distress or happiness on their behalf. Viewers of a film, for example, may feel empathy for a character they dislike, but it is less likely that they will feel sympathy for him or her. The reverse statement, however – that is, that it is possible to feel sympathy without empathy – is less plausible. Sympathy and compassion are both heavily predicated upon processes of mindreading and empathy, but they are not inevitable results of those processes. For this reason, while the research I will detail in the following section indicates that reading fiction may increase a reader’s empathy, we should not take that to mean that reading fiction makes us better — that is, more
compassionate — people. Indeed, as I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, psychologist and philosopher Paul Bloom argues that empathy has a significant disadvantages as a way of understanding the world and making moral decisions.

**Mindreading and the Experience of Written Fiction**

Having discussed how we experience empathy, as well as what empathy is, I will now turn to one of the questions at the heart of this dissertation: What do mindreading and empathy have to do with our experience of fiction? Specifically, can these concepts explain why humans the world over are so hungry for fiction in all its forms?

It is possible to examine the question I have just posed from a number of angles. The question of how people experience texts was taken up in the mid-to-late twentieth century by reader response theorists such as Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, and Roland Barthes. Cognitive cultural studies is in many ways the intellectual descendant of reader response theory, in that both fields are concerned with the active participation of the reader in the construction of texts. Indeed, many cognitive cultural theorists, particularly those trained in literary studies such as myself, remain focused on the text, asking such questions as, *How do particular texts engage our mindreading abilities?* Such scholars do so, however, using recent research from the fields of psychology and neuroscience that considers real flesh-and-blood readers and proposes to answer these questions empirically. In the interaction between literary studies and neuropsychology lies both the value and the tension that currently exists between the humanities and the mind sciences; although the underlying questions of both fields are similar, the methods are extraordinarily different — and the results may very well be different, too. For now, I will describe several studies that have been undertaken in this area, particularly by Raymond Mar, before moving on to discuss the approaches taken by more text-centered cognitive cultural theorists, such as Lisa Zunshine and Blakey Vermeule.

Recent studies in cognitive psychology have attempted to measure the impact
that reading fiction may have on our mindreading skills. Mar’s findings indicate that there may, indeed, be a positive correlation between reading more fiction over one’s lifetime and having more finely honed empathic or mindreading skills, though notably, not between reading fiction and being a kinder or more sympathetic person. In a 2009 study of 225 individuals, Mar and his collaborators found that “fiction print-exposure predicts performance on an empathy task” (“Exploring the Link” 420), even after they controlled for the subject’s gender, age, fluency in English, and for certain personality traits, such as openness to new experiences and a “tendency to be transported into a narrative” (412). It therefore seems that psychology may be proving what humanists have long believed: that reading fiction makes us more empathic. In this same vein, Mar argues that fiction is a way of allowing us to “simulate” and “abstract” social experience, allowing readers to “project themselves into the represented events” (“The Function of Fiction” 173). According to Mar, this renders “complex social information” more understandable, a hypothesis that coincides with what certain cognitive cultural theorists, such as Blacey Vermeule, have also argued. In this view, characters become “mental models” that the reader is meant to simulate. This is not a passive process; indeed, because all fictions are “abstractions,” readers are required to participate in their construction.

What is not immediately evident in Mar’s description of “the function of fiction” is the emotional affect of a fictional narrative. Elsewhere, however, Mar has investigated this very question, for the emotions that we experience while reading are undeniably one of the most important aspects of readerly simulation and abstraction. Through having readers engage in self-reporting techniques while reading a text, Mar has identified five different types of emotions that readers typically experience: emotions of sympathy, emotions of identification, emotions of empathy, relived emotions, and remembered emotions. These emotions fall into two categories, Mar notes: emotions “derived from engagements with characters” and emotions that are “rooted in memory” (“Emotion and Narrative Fiction” 826). The former has to do with the reader’s empathic connection with the narrator or protagonist and with her ability to simulate the emotions of the narrator or protagonist. The latter has to do with the reader’s reaction based on her own lived experience; this, I argue, accounts for
much of the variation in readers’ experience of a single text. These memories may be experienced largely unconsciously, but they are crucial to how we experience a text; furthermore, I argue that there are similarities between how we construct narratives and how we reconstruct memories — similarities that will become more clear in Chapter 3, when I discuss W.G. Sebald’s novel Austerlitz — and it is therefore unsurprising that memory appears to play such a strong role in our emotional experience of texts.

Although Mar draws a distinction between these two different types of emotional engagement with texts, it is important not to delineate them too strictly; the five different types of emotions can interact with each other in complex ways, sometimes complementing and bolstering each other, at other times opposing each other. Understanding this helps explain the deeply emotional reactions that we sometimes have toward fiction, even when we know quite well that the events the text describes (and which we simulate) are not real. Patrick Colm Hogan has argued that in general, the fictionality of a work simply does not matter: “One function of emotion for humans, and one important reason for the involvement of the prefrontal cortex in emotion circuits, is to guide our selection of future behaviors” (246). Hogan goes on to note the importance of emotion to the imagination and in our responses to imagined events. Such emotional responses include the fear one feels while vividly imagining, with or without the help of a cinematic image or literary description, a stalking lion or a coiled snake about to strike. Ultimately, Mar, Hogan, and Goldman all agree that the pretend but still genuinely affective emotional effects of fiction are an enormous part of what makes fiction pleasurable, even if they differ slightly in their conceptualization of the emotive states provoked by fiction.

This is quite a different argument from some of those made by certain cognitive cultural theorists who are invested in a stricter definition of mindreading. In Lisa Zunshine’s Why We Read Fiction, for example, Zunshine uses theory theory to discuss unreliable narration and how “metarepresentation” or “source-tagging” (that is, attributing certain thoughts to certain sources) drives certain genres, such as detective fiction. Zunshine argues that although our theory of mind abilities evolved for use in face-to-face interactions, literature – and fiction in general, I would add –
“capitalizes and stimulates” (10) these abilities. Zunshine goes so far as to argue that “the novel, in particular, is implicated with our mind-reading ability to such a degree that I do not think myself in danger of overstating anything when I say that in its currently familiar shape it exists because we are creatures with ToM [theory of mind]” (10). Although Zunshine’s argument is persuasive, one of its major weaknesses is that it conflates “mindreading” with “theory of mind,” making no mention of simulation theory, and neglects the emotional, affective experience of fiction. Surely the reason that generations of readers of Pride and Prejudice have wished for Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy to reconcile their differences and find happiness cannot be entirely reduced to the demands the book makes on our ability to track sources or “metarepresentations.”

Therefore, while I take Zunshine’s argument in favor of the relevance of theory theory seriously, I argue that it tells only part of the story. Admittedly, we do not react to everything in a fictional text the way we would if it were real; both Blakey Vermeule and Gregory Currie note that when we read the mind of another through a work of fiction, we run our mental processes in a “decoupled” (Vermeule) or “off-line” (Currie) mode, so that we do not take the physical actions indicated by our “readings.” Nevertheless, the emotions that result from fiction are, in a neurobiological sense, genuine. Arguments about fiction based heavily on theory theory do not adequately account for our genuinely emotive experiences of fictional texts. Arguments that favor simulation theory, on the other hand, tend to account for these experiences both more easily and more convincingly, but they struggle with the question of why and how that affective experience is produced. For it is certainly true that the emotional experience of the reader or viewer might actually be different from that of the protagonist whose mind we are simulating; in fact, in the texts that I will be analyzing, these emotional experiences are often quite at odds with each other.

Despite these issues, which I will address elsewhere, simulation theory has been taken up by cognitive cultural theorists in interesting and innovative ways. One such argument is put forth by Blakey Vermeule, who explores both theory theory and simulation theory, but ultimately argues that simulation theory is the more promising of the two hypotheses for explaining how and why humans find fiction so compelling. Vermeule states that “simulation theory captures crucial aspects of literary
experience” (41), namely that “narrative can be seen as a vehicle by which people test various scenarios without risking too much” (41), and the way we do this is by empathically “hooking” our minds onto someone else’s – in most cases the protagonist’s. This is similar in many ways to Mar’s argument that the purpose of fiction is “social simulation and abstraction”; from our experiences of fiction, we are able to simulate social contexts and abstract information about them, thus engaging in a relatively risk-free form of social learning. Also like Mar, Vermeule notes the importance of the discovery of mirror neurons in support of simulation theory. Mirror neurons, the presence of which have been confirmed in certain monkeys and which humans are strongly suspected to also possess, fire both when an action is observed and when it is enacted. Therefore, when we watch another person experiencing pain or fear or disgust, our mirror neurons fire, and we experience it as well.

Mirror neurons may therefore very well be the neurological basis for at least some types of simulation. Goldman argues that such neurons are mostly important in what he calls “low level mindreading”; this sort of mindreading primarily functions through a process of emotion mirroring, wherein the perception of others as feeling certain emotions or even experiencing certain sensations, such as pain, leads to an activation of the parts of their own brain responsible for processing such emotions or sensations (“Mindreading by Simulation” 10-14). But according to Goldman, this is not the type of mindreading we typically engage in when we read fiction. Fiction, rather, calls for “high level mindreading,” which Goldman defines as mindreading that targets complex mental states, is subjected to a certain extent to voluntary control, or which is at least partially conscious rather than unconscious (Simulating Minds 147). This sort of mindreading, being voluntary and conscious rather than automatic and unconscious, requires far more effort from us than “low level” mindreading. It often involves targets that the mind reader cannot perceive in the traditional sense; in these cases, which include mindreading scenarios in which the targets are fictional, Goldman argues that the cognitive process engaged is not mirroring, but rather self-projection (“Mindreading by Simulation” 26); according to Goldman, this is the sort of mindreading that fiction - written fiction, at least - engages.
It seems likely, however, that mirror neurons play an even greater role in our comprehension of visual modes of fiction, such as television and film, than they do in our understanding of written fiction. For this reason, I will now turn my attention toward the more visual storytelling medium of film.

**Mindreading and the Experience of Visual Fiction**

Discussing film and literature together is not an uncommon practice, and in many ways it seems intuitive; clearly, novels and films are both narratives, and for our purpose, they are both forms of fiction that contain recognizable, discretely constructed characters. Both forms encourage us to engage in practices of mindreading with these characters, thereby engendering empathy. But there is no denying that the way we experience film and literature is very different. David T. Levin, Alicia M. Hymel, and Lewis Baker argue that the visual nature of film provides us with a context for mindreading that is much closer to how we do it in everyday life (250); logically, one can imagine that film exercises our mindreading abilities more easily than literature does, since many of the facial and body language cues we use to read “real” people are also utilized by actors in films. In written fiction, these must be filled in by the reader, but in film they can be entirely controlled by the actor and director. Films therefore give rise to what Gregory Currie calls “perceptual imagining” (*Image and Mind* 9): imagining based on our sensory experience of what is happening on the movie screen. Novels and other prose fiction, in contrast, give rise to “symbolic imagining” (*Image and Mind* 9): imagining based on description, which is necessarily much vaguer than what we perceive on a movie screen.

These differences in sensory experience have a crucial impact on the film audience’s emotional experience of the text. Perceptual imagining is what allows for the greater importance of mirror neurons, which Carl Plantinga argues are extremely important in our experience of film:

Visual narratives are made possible by the workings of mirror neurons.

One could argue that to watch a movie is to engage in the virtual
rehearsal of movement. Brain processes involving mirror neurons enable us to understand faces and bodies in action and link us to other people’s activities and feelings. [. . .] Building on the intensely social nature of humanity, a great actor uses his or her movements to light up the mirror neurons of others, and thus to affect them powerfully. Psychologists and biologists have discerned over and again that the mirror neurons are activated not merely when actions are seen and heard, but also when moving photographic images and recorded sounds of actions are seen and heard. In part, this accounts for the affective power of the audiovisual media. (‘Affective Power,” 101)

Therefore, if mirror neurons are activated by literature, then how much more are they activated by audiovisual media, which so closely approximates the experience of real-life mindreading? The mindreading we do when reading fiction is undoubtedly related to the mindreading we do with real people. But one might argue that written fiction requires greater adaptation on our part and perhaps, generally speaking, greater cognitive activity, while the audiovisual nature of film makes mindreading much less arduous. Perhaps for this very reason, one could argue that film provokes deep emotion within its audience more regularly and with greater ease than does literature. Indeed, cognitive film critic Noël Carroll argues that emotional provocation is the overriding reason for cinema’s enduring popularity (Engaging the Moving Image, 62). One source of emotional provocation in film, as in literature, is our empathy for a film’s characters.

But what does it mean to empathize with a character in a film? Thus far, I have argued that in literature, this means taking that particular character’s point of view by “hooking” our minds into theirs, to reprise Blakey Vermeule’s metaphor. This makes sense in literature, which is often told from a first or third person perspective. But does the same thing happen when we watch a film? Some critics, such as Noël Carroll and Carl Plantinga, argue that it does not; no matter how emotionally involved the viewer is in the film, he or she remains an observer and can never directly simulate the emotions of the protagonist herself. However, Murray Smith offers a somewhat more nuanced view when enumerating three concepts that will be central to my discussion
of film: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. Although these three concepts are drawn from Smith’s work in film studies, I argue that they also have relevance for cognitive literary studies. For our purposes, the most important of Smith’s concepts are alignment and allegiance; recognition — that is, “the perception of a set of textual elements, in film typically cohering around the image of a body, as an individuated and continuous human agent” (Engaging Characters 82) – is not called greatly into question by any of the texts that I will be considering. Alliance and allegiance, on the other hand, are continually complicated by the postmodern novels and films that I will examine. It is therefore useful to begin with a discussion of both concepts.

Smith describes alignment in the following way: “The term alignment describes the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel” (Engaging Characters 83). Smith goes on to describe a “structure of alignment,” comprised of “two interlocking functions, spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access” (Engaging Characters 83). Attachment refers to the way a narrative limits itself to the actions of a protagonist or protagonists, while subjective access refers to the degree of accessibility we are given to a single character’s subjectivity or inner life. The structure of alignment is what, in literature, would be called “focalization” or, more colloquially, “point of view.” There are a number of visual and filmic techniques available to the filmmaker for aligning the viewer to the character and providing him or her with subjective access to the character’s inner thoughts and feelings. Two of the most important techniques are the point-of-view (POV) shot and the close-up.

Smith argues that the value of the POV shot has generally been exaggerated or at least misused in cognitive film studies. He calls its misuse “the fallacy of POV,” that is “the assumption that POV shots somehow wire us directly into the mind of a character” (“Imagining from the Inside” 418), thereby allowing us to simulate directly the mind of the character, much in the same way that Vermeule argue we “hook” our mind into the mind of a literary protagonist or narrator. But POV shots in film do not function the say way that point-of-view functions in a novel, and a POV shot does not by itself allow subjective access to a character’s mind. Smith does not deny the importance of the POV shot, but argues that it must work in context with other shots,
particularly with reaction shots of the character’s facial expressions and body language. Smith argues that alignment is not achieved merely through knowing what a character is looking at, but through POV shots in combination with “a larger structure of multifaceted alignment” (“Imagining from the Inside” 417) that includes reaction shots, multiple shots edited together in particular ways, and non-diegetic music. Put together, a sequence of shots can create alignment, quite possibly through the activation of mirror neurons. But in order for mirror neurons to activate, we must be able to see the actor’s face, not only what he or she is looking at.

One particular shot that Smith does not mention in his discussion of POV structures, but which I argue is critical to the creation of alignment (and thereby, as we shall see, allegiance) is the close-up. Carl Plantinga calls attention to the importance of the human face in what he calls “scenes of empathy”: “In this kind of scene . . . we see a character’s face, typically in closeup, either for a single shot of long duration or as an element of a point-of-view structure alternating between shots of a character’s face and shots of what she or he sees” (“The Scene of Empathy” 239). Crucial here is the understanding that, like POV shots, close-ups rarely work in isolation, but rather as part of a larger cinematic narrative structure. But Plantinga’s main point is that the duration of a scene of empathy must be too long to be justified solely in terms of conveying information to the viewer; rather, such scenes, and particularly the actors’ faces in such scenes, are actually meant to elicit emotion from the viewer. Close-ups and the POV structures of which they are a part do this through processes of “emotional contagion,” particularly facial feedback and affective mimicry (“The Scene of Empathy” 242). In brief, when a viewer sees a human face in close-up, we are apt to unconsciously mimic the expressions we see on that face, and that mimicry, in turn, causes us to actually catch the emotion from the character (“The Scene of Empathy” 243). This creates empathy within the viewer for the subject of the scene. However, Plantinga is careful to note that the creation of empathy is not automatic when a close-up or even a POV structure is placed before a viewer, and indeed a viewer is more likely to respond with empathic emotion if he or she already likes the character that is the subject of the scene. But certainly close-ups can and do serve as an integral part of structures of alliance and, as I will come to now, allegiance.
The alignment of a viewer with a particular character usually, though not always, leads to allegiance: “Allegiance depends upon the spectator having what she takes to be reliable access to the character’s state of mind, on understanding the context of the character’s actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge” (Engaging Characters 84). Smith notes that allegiance is the closest to what has traditionally been referred to as “character identification,” which has strong implications of both simulation theory and empathy. Smith, however, argues that we are not simulating the character’s mind directly, but rather morally evaluating the character. Smith notes, “Evaluation, in this sense, has both cognitive and affective dimensions . . . On the basis of such evaluation, spectators construct moral structures, in which characters are organized and ranked in a system of preference” (84). A slightly different way to think of allegiance is in terms of goals and problem-solving; Keith Oatley, for example, has argued that “[a] film (or when reading prose fiction or attending a play), we put aside our own goals and plans and insert goals and plans (as indicated by the author) into our own planning processor” (276). These adopted goals are key to our emotional experience of the narrative. Goal-alignment, I argue, occurs only once the viewer has made moral evaluations of a character and decided that the character deserves her allegiance, and therefore not only her empathy but also her sympathy.

These are, therefore, some of the cinematic techniques for establishing allegiance and inducing empathy. Although some are exclusive to film, the overall concepts of alliance and allegiance might be readily applied to written fiction as well. Furthermore, Murray Smith and Noël Carroll’s arguments about the importance of an audience’s moral approval of a character easily apply to both film and literature. Noël Carroll argues that “what bonds us to the protagonists affectively is sympathy, which is emotional attachment secured primarily by moral considerations and, contrariwise, what engenders antipathy toward the villains is their discernible moral failings” (“Movies, the Moral Emotions, and Sympathy” 15). This does not mean, however, that all characters with whom we feel allegiance must be objectively morally “good,” only that the film provokes us into approving of them. If a filmmaker wants to provoke allegiance in his or her viewers for a morally reprehensible character – such
as, for instance, Jonathan Demme does in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) with Hannibal Lector – then traditional structures of alignment may not be enough. Lector’s ability to win over his audience is a complex mix of factors, including but not limited to: his gentlemanly behavior toward Clarice Starling; a stunning performance by an enigmatic, handsome, and charismatic Anthony Hopkins; and a reflexive comparison between Lector and his fellow serial killer, Buffalo Bill, who lacks Lector’s intelligence and wit or Hopkins’s charming and affective countenance. We therefore find ourselves approving of Lector morally in ways that we would not normally, and this paves the way for a strange and unexpected sense of allegiance. Allegiance allows for empathy, and empathy, in turn, allows the viewer to feel emotions that correspond (even if they are not identical to) the protagonist’s. Whether or not we *feel-as* Lector (and most viewers would say that they do not) the same way that we might *feel-as* Clarice Starling, we certainly *feel-for* and perhaps even *feel-with* him.

It is extremely important to note that this process of moral judgment is one that takes place primarily at the unconscious level. Most movie-goers (and, indeed, fiction readers) do not make conscious decisions about who to root for and against. This renders the moral decision-making that humans make regarding fictional narratives not very different from the moral decisions that we make in real life. Cognitive psychologist and moral philosopher Jonathan Haidt has argued that moral decision-making for humans is, generally-speaking, an unconscious, emotional process:

Moral reasoning is usually an ex post facto process used to influence the intuitions (and hence judgments) of other people. In the social intuitionist model, one feels a quick flash of revulsion at the thought of incest and one knows intuitively that something is wrong. Then, when faced with a social demand for a verbal justification, one becomes a lawyer trying to build a case rather than a judge searching for the truth. (814).

Haidt calls this phenomenon “the moral dog wagging the rational tail.” If pressed, movie-goers could probably give reasons for having either sympathy or antipathy toward certain characters, but their moral judgments are not made consciously or rationally, and the reasons they give may not be their real reasons at all. Indeed, this
unconscious and effortless experience of empathic emotion is assumed to be the reason that most people go to the movies (or choose to experience fiction more generally). But moral judgment of fictional characters, particularly in mainstream fiction, tends to be much easier than moral judgment is in real life, with no pesky complications to get in the way; the good guys are clearly good and the bad guys clearly bad most of the time, and if we ended up morally approving of one of the bad guys (as viewers do in Silence of the Lambs), there are usually strong reasons for it. But not all texts render moral judgments easy and not all of them invite this experience of empathic emotion. In fact, this dissertation will focus on texts that actively work to undermine it.

**Verfremdungseffekte: Empathy and the Non-Immersive Text**

It is notable that the vast majority of research on empathy and fiction (whether visual or written) has been done on popular cinema and literature — on texts in which we do, indeed, care about literary or cinematic characters, to borrow Vermeule’s phrasing, and do so with relative ease. This limitation is not difficult to explain: The mode of fiction that has predominated in the Western world, and the mode that most Western readers (and, in the last hundred years, viewers) seem predisposed to enjoy, is one that allows us to easily read the minds of others, be that through mechanisms of simulation or theorizing. Such a mode of fiction is, in other words, one that encourages the easy and automatic establishment of readerly empathy. In *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction*, Lilian R. Furst writes:

“All is true” and its analogues . . . were remarkably successful in their own time in attaining their primary goal: to program readers to perceive the text not as an aesthetic artifact but as a record of the vicissitudes of human existence under the given circumstances of a particular place at a particular time. They encouraged a referential reading of the fiction as a replica or extension of readers’ own experiences. (12)
In other words, in accepting the claim of realist fiction that “all is true,” readers are able to receive the fictional work largely without question. Furthermore, they are able to project their own experience onto that of the characters, which were generally not unlike themselves. Both the belief in the “truth” — the realism — of the narrative and the proximity of the protagonist’s experience to the reader’s own, facilitates an easy establishment of empathy. But not all texts do this, and this dissertation is dedicated to thinking through the impact of the research that has been done on popular or immersive fiction and film for “unpopular” or non-immersive fiction and film. Clearly we experience these texts differently than we do their popular cousins. But how do we experience them differently, and, perhaps more importantly, to what end? Why did writers and filmmakers after 1945 turn to such “difficult” forms?

Mine is not the first attempt to explain the cognitive difference between “easy” and “difficult” texts. Cognitive film theorist David Bordwell uses the term “dedramatization” to describe post-World War II European film that avoids many of the techniques common to immersive films. Hallmarks of the “dedramatized film,” according to Bordwell, include: no non-diegetic music or POV structures, which we have already established are crucial for establishing alignment and therefore allegiance; longer shots of figures in large, open spaces; silence and “dead time,” in which nothing much important or dramatic occurs; a muted acting style; what Bordwell calls “dorsality,” or the turning of the characters’ backs to the camera at particularly intense moments (14). Taken together, the result is films that are generally considered “difficult.” Sometimes, this is because they seem to evoke no emotion in us; they seem flat, affectless, and boring. At other times, it is because the emotions they evoke are unpleasant. Perhaps most aggravating of all is when characters’ goals are left entirely up in the air at the end of a film, and the audience has no way of knowing whether the hopes and aspirations they have adopted as their own have come to pass. All of these techniques are employed to varying degrees in the films of Michael Haneke, which I will discuss in Chapter 4.

In a different vein, Lisa Zunshine accounts for the difficulty of certain texts by arguing that they require us to track our sources of information in ways that do not come naturally to us. For example, novels with unreliable narrators require us to
constantly bracket everything the narrator tells us with, *The narrator claims that* . . ., rather than simply taking the narrator’s information at face value, as we would in other novels. This, I argue, disrupts the establishment of the usual reader-narrator “pact”: that is, the “agreement,” in an admittedly anthropomorphic sense, that both the reader and the narrator will cooperate in the construction of the narrative. I concur with Zunshine insofar as she claims that such texts — which include, but are certainly not limited to, texts with unreliable first person narrators, such as *Lolita* and *Die Blechtrommel* — incur a large cognitive cost; however, I argue that this cognitive cost is not only due to the source monitoring itself, but what it does to our emotional experience of the fictional text. If what makes fiction accessible to us in general is the establishment of empathy and allegiance, then what makes fiction challenging is when those processes are disrupted.

As I have already noted, this disruption is particularly common in 20th century postmodern texts, which very deliberately do not allow the mental states of their characters to be readily read or simulated by their readers or viewers. Mindreading becomes more difficult when the protagonist or narrator whose mind we would generally simulate is very different from ourselves, and it is more difficult still when, through narrative techniques, the mind of the protagonist or narrator is deliberately obscured. Gregor Currie notes the existence of such texts in *Image and Mind*, when he argues that, “Through incompetence and sometimes through design, the characters of fiction resist simulation: their responses to situations, their words, and even their thoughts (in so far as the author lets us know what they are) seem not to be those we would have in their situations” (155). In such cases, Currie notes, the reader must rely more heavily than usual on what he or she knows about the author’s intentions and about the genre of the work; however, I argue that such inferences are not enough. In such cases, I argue, the attempt to read the mind or minds in the text continues, but at the conscious level, a laborious and effortful process. It is these moments of empathic failure in which I am principally interested: moments in which the empathic, emotional experience that we expect from our fiction is disrupted. Although it would seem at first that the disruption of empathy would be an ethically murky narrative move, in fact, I will argue that postmodern writers do this not to decrease empathy,
though that is one effect, but rather to undercut the primacy of emotion in the rendering of moral judgments. In this section, I will discuss further certain distinguishing characteristics of modern and postmodern narratives, particularly the use of Verfremdungseffekte, or estrangement effects. Although I take my terminology here from Brecht, I think it will become clear that what I mean by Verfremdungseffekt must differ slightly from Brecht’s own definition, given our present-day understanding of how readers and viewers experience their texts.

The most basic definition of the Verfremdungseffekt, or estrangement effect, is that the audience is prevented from immersing itself through identification with the characters. Brecht’s epic theater achieves the estrangement of its audience through a variety of theatrical techniques designed to diminish the effects of “first person” emotion in favor of epic or third person emotion. Such techniques include the denial of the fourth wall through the direct address of the audience and the creation of characters that are “flat” or otherwise unbelievable. The purpose of such distancing or estrangement is for the audience to remain aware of the text as fiction and therefore maintain a certain critical distance from its events. For Brecht, the audience’s empathic connection with a protagonist is a bourgeois distraction that prevents us from considering unpleasant truths. As Fredric Jameson says in his text Brecht and Method, the purpose of the estrangement effect is “[to] make something look strange, to make us look at it with new eyes,” which “implies the antecedence of a general familiarity, a kind of perceptual numbness” (39). Verfremdungseffekte render the familiar world strange to us and thereby resist the immersive experience; this stands in opposition to art that mimics the familiar world, allowing us to immerse ourselves comfortably within its fictions.

Brecht called what I have termed immersive fictions “the culinary,” and was well known for his opposition to them; however, as Jameson points out, he was not opposed to them because they were entertaining, but rather because the bourgeoisie consumed them in such a way that allowed for the repression of “real thought,” “unpleasant truths,” and “ideas of action which either promise guilt or ask you to change your life” (37). It was this self-repression to which Brecht objected on ideological grounds, and which led Brecht, early in his career, to strongly oppose the
establishment of readerly (or viewerly) empathy vis-à-vis “identification.” For Brecht, there was no such thing as identification to begin with. He argued for “third person acting,” that is, “the quoting of a character’s expressions of feeling and emotion” (Jameson 53), as a result of the realization that what we think of as the “self” does not exist as such:

... what we call our ‘self’ is itself an object for consciousness, not our consciousness itself: it is a foreign body within an impersonal consciousness, which we try to manipulate in such a way to lend some warmth and personalization to the matter. The simplest models of identification are therefore rendered meaningless by this situation, in which at best, in a Lacanian complexity, two self-objects would entertain a complex and mediated relationship with each other across the gaps of isolated consciousness as such. (53-54)

In light of my discussion of empathy and its cognitive bases, Jameson’s description of identification seems to be fairly accurate; empathy in fiction between the reader and the narrator is indeed “a complex and mediated relationship” that bridges “gaps of isolated consciousness” between two “self-objects” – but that does not mean that it does not exist, nor does it mean that we should join Jameson in dismissing its power.

Indeed, according to Douglas Robinson in Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature, Brecht himself eventually came to a more complicated understanding of the relationship between estrangement and empathy. Later in life, Brecht began “to rethink dialectically his youthful resistance to emotion and even empathy” (211). In contrast to the younger Brecht, for the older Brecht emotion did have a place in the theater; empathy and estrangement, rather than existing in a dichotomy or in pure opposition to each other, instead have a dialectical relationship. As Brecht himself states in his essay on Verfremdungseffekte in Chinese acting: “The alienation [or estrangement] effect intervenes, not in the form of absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the character portrayed. On seeing worry, the spectator may feel a sensation of joy; on seeing anger, one of disgust” (qtd in Robinson 94). In other words, the spectator, far from being immersed in the worry
of the character or in the anger of the character, is guided toward emotions that may be quite at odds with that of the characters.

This dialectic of estrangement and empathy is the form of Verfremdungseffekt in which I am most interested, for there is no denying that reading texts such as Grass’s Blechtrommel or Sebald’s Austerlitz creates an emotional effect in the reader. But the emotional experience of the reader/viewer is very different from, and sometimes at odds with, the emotional experiences of the narrator-protagonists, and this creates a certain emotional dissonance. This dissonance is the result of the dialectical relationship between estrangement and empathy that Brecht identified later in his career. At times these narratives may also cause us to feel shame and extreme discomfort, if we feel that we are implicated in the societal structures being criticized. These emotions are moral ones. But at the same time, the dialectic I have identified renders actual moral judgment much more difficult. This is striking in contrast to popular film and literature, in which the moral judgments we make about characters tend to be clear — far clearer than they ever are in real life — and unconscious. I will now consider the reasons, both historical and moral, that postmodern writers might have wished to complicate the emotional decision-making process.

History’s Emotional Dog and Postmodernism’s Rational Tail

The roots of Postmodernism’s dialectic of estrangement and empathy certainly lie in the modernist movements of the early twentieth century, particularly post-World War I. But it is significant that the decades after 1945 saw a proliferation of these texts. I believe that historian Hayden White may offer some insight on the proliferation of ethically and emotionally difficult literature in the 20th century. In his groundbreaking essay “The Modernist Event,” White argues that in the twentieth century, “[t]he notion of the historical event has undergone radical transformation as a result of the occurrence in our century of events of a scope, scale, and depth unimaginable by earlier historians” (72). White calls such events “modernist events” and argues that they are possible only in the twentieth century. These events have had,
in his view, a profound effect on the type of storytelling in which postmodern authors have engaged. White writes:

Modernist literary practice effectively explodes the notion of those characters who had formerly served as the subjects of stories or at least as representations of possible perspectives on the events of the story; and it resists the temptation to emplot events and the actions of characters so as to produce the meaning-effect derived by demonstrating how one’s end may be contained in one’s beginning.

(74)

For my own purposes, I am interested in understanding how such modernist events “implode” the notion of “character” as the nineteenth century understood it. If that is the case, then what are postmodern “characters” and how are readers to interact with them? By “interact,” I refer to several of the functions I have discussed so far in this essay, including the formation of allegiance, as well as feelings of antipathy or sympathy. In other words, White implies that modernist events have complicated our potential empathic reactions to literary (or, indeed, cinematic) characters. Thus, to White’s argument, I add that the change in our conception of character has been accompanied by a significant change in how we experience postmodern texts emotionally. The empathic connection between reader/viewer and protagonist has become dislocated, and the easy, automatic, pleasurable emotional experience of reading a novel or watching a film has become something far more complicated and difficult.

The reasons for this seem, on the one hand, relatively intuitive, but for myself, they were surprisingly difficult to articulate. In order to do so, I would like to return once more to Jonathan Haidt’s emotional dog and its rational tail: that is, to the idea that human beings are generally inclined to make moral decisions and judgments emotionally and unconsciously, and then, later, reason backward. It is possible for people to change their minds about a moral judgment, but reason triumphs only rarely over emotion; much more often, we learn from Haidt, reason is emotion’s servant, even when we believe otherwise. If this is true, then we must consider how incredibly vulnerable and easily corrupted is our process of moral judgment. Many of Hayden
White’s modernist events have been precipitated by extreme outpourings of emotion. The most infamous example of this is, of course, the rise of National Socialism and the corresponding rise of antisemitism in Germany between 1933 and 1945. The perverse morality of National Socialism was predicated on the Nazis’ ability to create strong emotional affect in their constituents. Although the Nazis provided pseudoscientific data as the basis for their racist policies, this data was, in fact, a classic example of Haidt’s notion of “the rational tail” being wagged by “the emotional dog”; far from being the actual basis for Nazi policies, the Nazis’ pseudoscience of race provided an ostensibly rational basis for moral decisions that had already been made emotionally.

The emotional intensity of the National Socialist movement may be easily seen in the most famous propaganda film of the era, Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (1935). Ostensibly a documentary of the 1934 “Reichsparteitag” in Nuremberg, a convention that celebrated the National Socialist Party and honored Adolf Hitler, the film is in fact generally agreed to be one of the most masterful pieces of political propaganda ever produced despite never explicitly espousing any particular ideological position. Writing about the film, Frank P. Tomasulo argues that, although *Triumph of the Will* was made about the party convention, it does not really articulate any specific political policy or substantive ideology. Instead, preliterate symbolic imagery and vague patriotic appeals are used to address the emotional concerns of the populace. Indeed, Hitler repeatedly stressed that one could not sway the masses with arguments, logic, or knowledge, *only with feelings and beliefs*. (101, emphasis mine)

From the very first shot of the film, this is what Riefenstahl sets out to do: “to appeal to the irrational character structure of its malleable mass audience” (Tomasulo 102). Hitler knew instinctively what it would take cognitive science another sixty years to prove: when it comes to decisions, such as which political party or leader to support, logic has very little to do with it. Admittedly, *Triumph des Willens* appears to have been most effective with those who had already bought what the Nazis were selling, so to speak; others, such as certain international reviewers who viewed the film at the Venice Film Festival in 1935, were much less impressed (Morgan 37). Within
Germany, however, the film encountered an audience that was primed for the emotional experience it offered, and there it was overwhelmingly successful.

*Triumph des Willens* has already been discussed at length by critics, both from film studies and historical perspectives, and I do not wish to retread old ground here. Instead, I will consider a few particular elements of the film in light of my preceding discussion of cognitive film, particularly the concepts of alignment and allegiance. Once we move beyond the intertitles that establish our point in history and remind the German audience of their humiliation in the Treaty of Versailles, the very first shot of the film is a POV shot from Hitler’s own point of view. We see the view from his plane as he descends, with extended shots of the clouds, the majestic buildings of Nuremberg from above, and the shadow of Hitler’s plane as it falls over the city. The vast majority of German citizens would have had no opportunity to experience flight, and so this would have been an extremely impressive sequence in 1935. But not only is it visually impressive, it also draws the viewer into alignment with Hitler himself extremely early in the film, before he has even landed in Nuremberg. Hitler is immediately constructed not as hero but as Messiah, descending from heaven to save the German people (Tomasulo 104).

Despite these early techniques of alignment, the *Führer* himself remains largely out of the viewer’s emotional reach. There is no sense of subjective access to Hitler’s mind, no sense that the viewer might possibly understand what it is like to be him. These early scenes certainly align the viewer with Hitler, and they contribute to a strong sense of being uplifted, thanks to both the heavenly imagery and the music, which is peaceful and serene. But even as the film progresses, there is little chance for the viewer to achieve allegiance with Hitler. Hitler’s face is rarely expressive enough to provoke the sort of automatic responses that are so crucial to the establishment of empathy, and his physical appearance throughout the vast majority of the film “evinces stiff and rigid postures” (Tomasulo 114); when not returning the *Sieg Heil* salute being offered to him by the people, his arms are frequently folded over his chest. In general he appears unmoved by the displays of devotion that are shown to him. But in terms of the film’s agenda, that is to be expected: one does not render
moral judgment upon one’s own Messiah, nor should one ever presume to know what he is thinking.

There is one exception to this trend, and that is Hitler’s final speech in the film, which is far more physical and visceral than any of the others. Even here, Riefenstahl does not indulge in extreme close-ups of the Führer, but the midrange shots of him behind his podium emphasize the increased emotional intensity of this scene. Tomasulo argues that this scene serves as “a fitting conclusion to a motion picture that has emphasized duty, submission, and a rein on one’s emotions”; furthermore, it “allows the audience to experience national catharsis and orgastic release at the climax” (114) of the film. I agree with Tomasulo insofar as this scene provides catharsis to the viewer, as the inaccessible and unemotional Hitler finally breaks, but I disagree that the film in general emphasizes the importance of having a “rein on one’s emotions.” Hitler certainly presents a stoic and unemotional visage, but other “characters” in the film, particularly ordinary Germans, do not. Tomasulo’s mistake is in assuming that Hitler is meant to be the source of the viewer’s emotional experience. If he were a hero in the traditional sense, he would be, but as I have already established, he is not a hero, he is a Messiah, and the viewer’s relationship to him is accordingly very different.

For this reason, it is not Hitler but rather ordinary Germans that are the source of the viewer’s own emotional experience; it is the ordinary Germans with whom the viewer is most closely aligned and with whom he or she feels the most allegiance. This is clear when we return to the opening scene; once Hitler lands in Nuremberg, the POV structures shift away from him and toward the crowd. Close-ups are reserved for shots of ordinary citizens, such as those for whom the film was intended. This is particularly significant in the opening sequence, when Hitler lands and makes his way down a main boulevard of Nuremberg toward the hotel where he is staying. In these scenes, the focus is on the crowd, particularly on its size and the intensity of its emotions. The music swells, and there are multiple close-ups of children’s faces, alight with excitement. Everything in this early sequence works to inspire the viewer to similar emotional heights, through facial feedback, affective mimicry, and emotional contagion. Subsequent sequences are dryer in tone, as the film conveys the content of
the Reichsparteitag speeches, but the viewer is meant to remain buoyed up by this early emotional high and, perhaps more importantly, the film’s underscore.  

*Triumph des Willens* resembles in parts a silent film, with music the only commentary that is offered to the viewer. Writing about the film, Ben Morgan notes that “[t]he effect of the film, both as an event of cultural importance, and as a spectacle that gripped its audience derived in no small measure from the musical framing and the score itself” (41). The film’s music was composed by Herbert Windt, but much of it is a montage of music that German viewers would have already been familiar with. Morgan addresses the opening sequence at some length, noting the musical quotations from a wide variety of sources: Wagner’s *Meistersinger*, his *Ring* cycle, and the *Tannhäuser* overture, as well as German folk music, military marches, and the Horst Wessel Anthem (Morgan 42). One function of this musical montage is historical depth (Morgan 42), but another effect, I argue, is the stirring of the viewer’s emotions vis-à-vis nostalgic impulses. Particularly coming on the heels of such stark reminders of the tragedy of Germany’s recent history, the music awakens within the viewer a longing for the past. Without these associations, it is no wonder that international reviewers found themselves bored by the film. For German viewers, however, Windt’s music serves as a reminder of German history, the glories of days now gone, and, more importantly, the promised glories of days to come. This is especially true when the music is coupled with the shots of statues and buildings in old Nuremberg, decorated with swastikas and the German flag. Whatever wagging of the rational tail that may have followed, the emotional dog lives in this opening sequence.

What I have attempted to show with this reading of *Triumph des Willens* is the intense emotionality that National Socialism deliberately evoked within its followers. Although the Nazis used pseudoscience to explain their racist policies, this “science” should never be understood as the source of those policies, nor of ordinary citizens’ collaboration with them. The science that Nazis used to explain themselves was merely one example of “reasoning backward” from a moral decision that had already been made emotionally, and it is possible to see in *Triumph des Willens* just how adept the Nazis were at stoking the fire of these emotions: the opening intertitles remind the German audience of their suffering and humiliation after World War I; the music and
the images evoke both nostalgia and eleation, reminding them of past glories, and
promising new glories in the days to come; the close-ups of German faces, exclusively
Aryan and alight with joy at the sight of their Führer, provoke similar joy in the
viewer; and finally, the image of Hitler, breaking through his characteristic stoicism to
passionately promise a better future for the German people, allows for cathartic
release. These elements provided the emotional basis that eventually allowed the
Nazis’ racist policies to succeed.

1945 represented a break, a schism, not only in Germany, but throughout the
world. In its wake, writers, artists, and filmmakers struggled to make sense of what it
would mean to produce art, poetry, fiction, beauty, after such an event. One effect of
these struggles, I have already argued, is that literature and film became less inclined
to invite empathy on the part of the viewer. This is not true for all post-1945 literature
and film, of course, but only for the relatively small segment of films and novels that
might be called “postmodern.” But why did these novels and films choose to
complicate processes of empathy and “identification” that underpinned most of the
fiction produced in the 19th century? When one considers the context of this artistic
decision, it seems rather counter-intuitive. It would be both foolish and difficult to
argue with the idea that National Socialism and particularly its racist policies were a
failure of empathy. But would it not therefore seem logical that literature and film
after 1945 should encourage more empathy in its readers and viewers, rather than less?

Not so, it seems. Cognitive science and history have both taught us that there
are limits to human empathy, and those limits severely impact the concrete moral
decisions that we make. Such limits may be expanded, but their expansion happens
only with time, conscious effort, and a certain amount of discomfort. Postmodern texts
notably require all three of these from their audience. The onerous burden that these
texts place on their readers and viewers is not a side effect of their project, but at the
very heart of the project itself. Empathy-based moral decision-making is facile and, as
I have demonstrated through my analysis of Triumph des Willens, it is also highly
subject to emotional manipulation. And this, states psychologist and philosopher Paul
Bloom in his essay “Against Empathy” in The Boston Review and “The Baby in the
Well” in The New Yorker, is only the beginning of empathy’s problems: “Empathy is
biased; we are more prone to feel empathy for attractive people and for those who look like us or share our ethnic or national background. And empathy is narrow; it connects us to particular individuals, real or imagined, but is insensitive to numerical differences and statistical data” (“Against Empathy”). Bloom goes on to argue that,

In light of these features, our public decisions will be fairer and more moral once we put empathy aside. Our policies are improved when we appreciate that a hundred deaths are worse than one, even if we know the name of the one, and when we acknowledge that the life of someone in a faraway country is worth as much as the life a neighbor, even if our emotions pull us in a different direction. (“Against Empathy”)

Bloom’s arguments here are an acknowledgment of the limitations of empathy as a way of making moral decisions; of the way that the emotional dog tends to wag the rational tail, thereby resulting in decisions that are less “fair and moral” than they might be, even if they can be retroactively justified.

This is, in many ways, a difficult argument to make. Bloom himself acknowledges that being “against empathy” is “like announcing you hate kittens” (“Against Empathy”). And indeed, Bloom is not against all empathy; that would be ludicrous and impossible. But he is against thinking of empathy as a panacea for all of humanity’s ills. He is against the idea that if we only expand our capacity for empathy infinitely, we will achieve some longed-for utopia. This is as impossible as eschewing empathy entirely. We need, in other words, different ways of making moral decisions, if not instead of empathy, then certainly in addition to empathy. While emotional plays in a role to some degree in all decisions, there are ways of viewing the world that are not entirely based on empathy and emotion. The works that I consider in this dissertation deliberately provoke their reader or viewer to consider other ways, one of the most prominent of which might be skepticism. Indeed, as I will argue in the following chapters, the postmodern literature and film that I examine promotes an ethic of skepticism, of doubt, of questioning.

The ways in which each work does this varies considerably, but they relate closely to the dialectic of empathy and estrangement that I have already identified.
With each text and author, an examination of the narrative structure will prove critical to the ideas that I intend to develop. All of the texts I am interested in deliberately complicate the relationship between the reader, the narrator (who is often but not always also the protagonist), and the implied author. Some of them do this by problematizing processes of alignment, rendering it difficult for the reader to read the mind of the narrator or to empathize with him. We might think of techniques that disrupt alignment as modes of narrative estrangement. Other techniques allow and encourage alignment but complicate processes of allegiance, by making it impossible for the reader to ever judge the narrator or the protagonist morally. These texts are often deliberately and inherently unreliable, so that even if we feel empathy toward the protagonist or narrator, the “relationship” we have with him is so uncertain that we can never quite be sure where we, as readers, stand. These techniques, which disrupt allegiance, are modes of ethical estrangement. Narrative and ethical estrangement are both present to some degree in all the texts I will discuss; together, they produce severe ambivalence and very often frustration in the reader. The nature of this frustration, however, varies considerably from one text to the next. The uncertainty produced by Günter Grass in Die Blechtrommel, which has to do with Oskar Matzerath's refusal to cooperate with his reader to construct a coherent narrative, is quite different from that produced by the hypermediated narration of W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz.

In this dissertation, I will argue that the disruption of empathy represents the attempt to introduce rationality and, more specifically, skepticism, into moral decision-making. The films and novels that I will consider make rendering moral judgment about the characters that we encounter very difficult, if not impossible. For example, it is nearly impossible to say by the end of Die Blechtrommel whether Oskar Matzerath is a hero or a murderer, a resistance fighter or a fascist. We are never able to comfortably judge him one way or the other — and we are not meant to. We must instead struggle with our own ambivalence and uncertainty; furthermore, our struggle with Oskar becomes, on some level, a struggle with ourselves. These postmodern texts engage our cognitive and moral faculties in ways that popular literature written in the tradition of realism does not. Such texts do not allow us to make emotional judgments
and then reason backward; rather, we must attempt to feel our way, blindly, toward a moral resolution, using both reason and emotions to guide our way. The dialectic of empathy and estrangement that I have described in this first chapter is visible in all the texts I will discuss, but it is not always visible to the same degree. I hope to demonstrate that the texts produced soon after 1945, such as *Die Blechtrommel*, are more inclined toward estrangement, while texts produced toward the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, such as Sebald’s novels and Haneke’s films, show signs of a drift back toward empathy. In a sense, the trajectory of history from 1945 to our present day might therefore be understood as a trajectory toward the reclamation — perhaps even the redemption — of empathy.
Chapter 2

Slippery as an Eel: The Rise of Skepticism in Grass’s Die Blechtrommel

Who is Oskar Matzerath? Is he a magician, a madman, a murderer? From the first page to the last of Günter Grass’s magnum opus Die Blechtrommel, it is almost impossible to say for sure. For all his impressive verbiage, Oskar remains stubbornly elusive. Although he seems to invite us into his mind with effusive enthusiasm, his mind itself is so slippery (not entirely unlike, one is tempted to say, an eel) that we never grasp it, nor are we quite sure we want to. It is a frustrating, at times infuriating, at times completely disgusting text, and yet it is almost inarguably the quintessential postwar German novel. It was published in 1959 into a Germany that had not yet begun the long and arduous process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, whose citizens may or may not have been ready for it. Grass offers a scathing critique of this society, particularly in Book Three, and it is clear that he is entirely uninterested in providing his (presumptively German) reader with a therapy session. Rather, Grass estranges his readers in the most shocking ways his can manage to force them to consider their own culpability in the moral failures of Nazi Germany. At the same time, there are, on occasion, surprising moments of intimacy between Oskar and his reader. These moments, however, serve primarily to problematize empathy and render it subject to skepticism and suspicion.

The principal means by which Grass estranges his reader is through Oskar Matzerath himself. Oskar is what Gregor Currie calls a “controlling narrator,” meaning that he is, fictionally, behind the actual narrative production. Indeed, I would argue that Oskar is the controlling narrator par excellence. Everything the reader is told is at his behest. If something is left out, it is his choice; when something is included, it is his choice. All interpretations are his. All evaluations are his. And with this power, he deliberately and with a great deal of skill sets out to destroy the maxim of realism as discussed by Lilian R. Furst: “All is true.” For Oskar, all is true and nothing is true. As Patrick O’Neill writes, “The problem with Oskar’s story is that it is precisely Oskar’s story, not only the story of Oskar but also and very emphatically the
story by Oskar” (Revisited, 30). This prevents Oskar’s reader from relaxing into the narrative, but rather induces a constant state of suspicion and, indeed, a certain amount of irritation. I argue that these negative emotional states also prevent the reader from forming the empathic connection with Oskar that readers of realist fiction expect to form with an narrator-protagonist; his mind is not fully open to us, for each time we come close to reading it, he aggressively estranges us. And yet, because Oskar is a controlling narrator, there is no other mind we may read. Grass, therefore, asks us to take up the mantle of Oskar’s madness and to consider Oskar’s own alien morality from the inside. Furthermore, even if some part of us recoils from doing so, we cannot help but stare in what Bernard McElroy in his work on the grotesque in Die Blechtrommel calls “fascination-repulsion” — much like Agnes Matzerath in the infamous eel scene, who is nauseated by what she sees and yet never turns fully away. Oskar’s mind cannot be read; he is too strange, too distant, too estranged from us. And yet we are compelled to try. The emotional dissonance that results from this failure is the essence of what I have defined in Brechtian terms as the dialectic between empathy and estrangement.

This dissonance between the reader and Oskar as narrator is created by the very first line of Die Blechtrommel: “Zugegeben: ich bin Insasse einer Heil- und Pflegeanstalt” (9). This line immediately foregrounds Oskar’s unreliability and, in John Reddick’s words, “puts the reader on his guard” (83). He does not seek to hide this unreliability; indeed, he himself calls his stories “hoffentlich genaues Erinnerungsvermögen” (10). Are Oskar’s stories flat-out lies? Exaggerations? Insane ramblings? Memories? If they are memories, how accurate are they? These are the questions that confront Oskar’s reader, for Grass has chosen to “[present] a mad epoch through the eyes of a madman” (McElroy 97). It is the improbability of Oskar’s time, McElroy goes on to say, that allows improbability itself to become “an instrument of the artist” (97). There are limitless possibilities here, but also artistic problems, which Oskar himself lays out for the reader as he asks himself how he might begin:

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3 “Granted: I’m an inmate in a mental institution” (3). All English translations of Die Blechtrommel quotations are taken from the 2011 Breon Mitchell translation.
4 “recollections, which [he hopes] will be accurate” (4).
Man kann eine Geschichte in der Mitte beginnen und vorwärts wie rückwärts kühn ausschreitend Verwirrung anstiften. Man kann sich modern geben, all Zeiten, Entfernungen wegstreichen und hinterher verkünden oder verkünden lassen, man habe endlich und in letzter Stunde das Raum-Zeit-Problem gelöst. Man kann auch ganz zu Anfang behaupten, es sei heutzutage unmöglich einen Roman zu schreiben, dann aber, sozusagen hinter dem eigenen Rücken, einen kräftigen Knüller hinlegen, um schließlich als letztmöglich Romanschreiber dazustehen. Auch habe ich mir sagen lassen, dass es sich gut und bescheiden ausnimmt, wenn man anfangs beteuert: Es gibt keine Romanhelden mehr, weil es keine Individualisten mehr gibt, weil die Individualität verloren gegangen, weil der Mensch einsam, jeder Mensch gleich einsam, ohne Recht auf individuelle Einsamkeit ist und eine namen- und heldenlos einsame Masse bildet. Das mag alles so sein und seine Richtigkeit haben. (11-12)

All that may be true, but Oskar could hardly care less. Here, Oskar situates himself firmly in the tradition of Modernism — and then rejects it. *He* is a hero, Oskar insists, and *he* is an individual, and he is going to start at the beginning — before the beginning, even — and continue until he is done, even if that takes him longer than the five hundred sheets of “unschuldiges Papier” (11) that he has available to him, even if the reader starts to suspect that what he writes on his “unschuldiges Papier” is not quite true. As critics such as Volker Neuhaus have pointed out, it is strange for a narrator-protagonist to lay out a *Romanästhetik* in a book that is, ostensibly, a fiction biography: “In der Regel behaupten die fiktiven Verfasser fiktiver Autobiographien nichts anderes zu schreiben als ihre reale Lebensgeschichte, ‘Roman’ wird sie erst auf

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5 “You can start a story in the middle, then strike out boldly backward and forward to create confusion. You can be modern, delete all reference to time and distance, and then proclaim or let someone else proclaim that at the eleventh hour you’ve finally solved the space-time problem. Or you can start by declaring that novels can no longer be written, and then, behind your own back as it were, produce a mighty blockbuster that establishes you as the last of the great novelists. I’ve also been told it makes a good impression to begin modestly by asserting that novels no longer have heroes because individuals have ceased to exist, that individualism is a thing of the past, that all human beings are lonely, all equally lonely, with no claim to individual loneliness, that they all form some nameless mass devoid of heroes. All that may be true.” (4-5)
der Ebene des Titelsblatts, auf dem der Autor sich nennt, der Biographie wie
Biographie erfunden hat. […] Indem Oskar sich zur Romanästhetik äußert, stiftet er
aber zugleich zusätzliche Verwirrung” (26). This “confusion” Neuhaus identifies
might also be described as skepticism. By exploring the idea of Romanästhetik for
his supposedly factual project, Oskar furthers his project of inculcating skepticism in
the reader — a skepticism, I argue, that is not only an important element in the novel’s
aesthetic project, but also in Grass’s ethical one.

It is possible that this is a project that may only be undertaken by a narrator
who has already accepted his own madness. Oskar himself attributes the accuracy of
his “Erinnerungsvermögen” to his drum, through which he is able to conjure up details
of the past: “Hätte ich nicht meine Trommel, der bei geschicktem und geduldigem
Gebrauch alles einfällt, was an Nebensächlichkeit nötig ist, um die Hauptsache aufs
Papier bringen zu können, und hätte ich nicht die Erlaubnis der Anstalt, drei bis vier
Stunden täglich mein Blech sprechen zu lassen, wäre ich ein armer Mensch ohne
nachweisliche Großeltern” (22). Oskar’s drum, then, is the means through which he
reconstructs the past; it is what allows him to eschew the timelessness and
spacelessness of Modernism in favor of a historical specificity all his own. But the
reconstructed nature of the past, which Oskar emphasizes primarily through the things
he admits his drum has not told him — like the fate of his arsonist grandfather —
demonstrates the relationship between narrativizing the past and memory itself. That
is, the reconstructed memories conjured up by Oskar on his drum demonstrate the
intimate relationship between memory, narration, and fiction; in a sense, every
narrative is a reconstructed one, and therefore unreliable. Thus, through Oskar’s
particular and peculiar brand of unreliability, Grass demonstrates the inherent
unreliability present in all narration.

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6 “Generally, fictional authors of fictional biographies do not claim to be writing anything other than
the real stories of their lives. ‘Novel’ is written on the title page, on which is also the name of the author
who invented the biography as biography. […] By articulating a novel-aesthetic, however, Oskar
creates confusion.” (My translation)

7 “If I didn’t have my drum, which, when handled properly and patiently, recalls all the little details I
need to get the essentials down on paper, and if I didn’t have the institute’s permission to let my drum
speak three or four hours each day, I would be a poor fellow with no known grandparents” (12).
In this chapter, I will trace the threads of both narrative and ethical estrangement present in *Die Blechtrommel*. Oskar as unreliable — or more accurately, uncooperative — narrator is the source of most of the narrative estrangement in the novel, which renders the reader’s relationship with the text tenuous and at times contentious. The ethical estrangement of the text, characterized by a nearly constant emotional dissonance between Oskar and his reader, is induced largely through the text’s grotesque and disgusting elements. There are several scenes throughout the novel that appear to exist for no reason other than provoke a reaction of disgust within the reader; I argue that these scenes exist to estrange the reader viscerally as well as intellectually from the text. And yet, despite everything — despite his lying tendencies, despite his refusal to cooperate in the construction of a coherent and believable narrative, despite his propensity for describing the most vile things in excruciating detail — the reader is not without empathy for Oskar. I will end the chapter by discussing one of the most empathic moments in the text and what it means for the problematizing of empathy as a mode of moral decision-making: the *Kristallnacht* scene at the end of Book One.

**Narrative Estrangement: Oskar the Uncooperative Narrator**

Oskar Matzerath is an unreliable narrator. This statement has been accepted as fact since the publication of *Die Blechtrommel*. Oskar himself admits that he’s in an insane asylum, and there are times when, having related a particular event, he backtracks and underscores his own lies. The result is total confusion on the part of the reader. As Patrick O’Neill has written, “While a central discursive function of most traditional narratives, fictional or otherwise, is thus to assist us in our readerly endeavors to reconstruct the story, *The Tin Drum* gains much of its distinctive fascination precisely from the way in which the discourse hinders us in determining exactly what the story told really is” (*Revisited*, 30). Ultimately, O’Neill goes on to say, “the only thing we can be sure of about Oskar is that he does indeed narrate” (*Revisited*, 35). But the veracity of his narration is never resolved for the reader.
Unreliable narration is not, in and of itself, an unusual literary device, and it is certainly not unique to *Die Blechtrammel*. In *Living to Tell about It*, one of the most thorough and thoughtful recent studies of unreliable narration, James Phelan describes an unreliable narrator in the following way: “A character narrator is ‘unreliable’ when he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing, or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer” (49). There are two terms here that Phelan uses that require some unpacking. The first is “character narrator”; this sort of narrator, also often referred to as a “diagetic” narrator, is a narrator that is also a character in the narrative itself, such as Oskar Matzerath. The second term that requires unpacking is “implied author.” In the landscape of post-Barthesian literary criticism, in which to speak of “the Author” is taboo, the “implied author” is “the implicit image of an author in the text, taken to be standing behind the scenes and to be responsible for its design and for the values and cultural norms it adheres to” (Prince qtd. in Zunshine 80). The implied author Günter Grass is to be confused neither with the real Günter Grass nor with the narrator Oskar Matzerath; indeed, as Phelan’s definition of an unreliable narrator implies, the goals of Grass and the goals of Oskar may be at complete odds with each other. It is this gap between the (sometimes implicit but often explicit) goals of the character narrator and the (usually only implicit) goals of the implied author that produces a work’s unreliability; it is also this gap that produces the estrangement effects in the reader, as the emotional experience of the reader is grounded in the goals of the implied author, rather than the goals of the narrator, even as the narrator’s mind is the only one to which we have access.

Phelan identifies six different types of unreliable narration in which an unreliable narrator may engage: misreporting, misreading, misevaluating, underreporting, underreading, and underregarding (51). Furthermore, these different types of unreliable narration occur upon three “axes of unreliability”: “the axis of characters, facts, and events,” “the axis of knowledge and perception,” and “the axis of ethics and evaluation” (50). Phelan’s framework for thinking about unreliability conceives of unreliability not only in terms of events but also in terms of narrative ethics and evaluation. This is particularly useful when considering Oskar’s particular
brand of unreliability, because the misevaluating or underregarding of the ethical implications of narrative events, both acts of unreliable narration that generally occur along the axis of ethics and evaluation, are a strong component of what estranges the reader and thereby renders the mind of the narrator difficult to read. What Phelan’s framework does not consider, however, is the level of deliberation with which a character narrator such as Oskar might deceive — and estrange — his reader. Gregor Currie does so, albeit rather implicitly, when he differentiates between two types of character narrators: embedded and controlling. An embedded narrator, according to Currie, is one whose telling of the narrative is reported by the text; however, an embedded narrator “is not, fictionally, responsible for the text we read” (Image and Mind 266). In contrast, a controlling narrator produces (in a fictional sense) the text that we read. Both controlling and embedded narrators may be considered unreliable within Phelan’s framework, but it is far more likely that a controlling narrator will engage in the sort of deliberate deception that I identify within Oskar Matzerath’s narration. Although Oskar’s presumed madness is certainly an important element in his unreliability from the first sentence of the text, I argue that not all of Oskar’s unreliability can be traced to this. There is also an element of deliberate deception that serves to widen the already profound chasm between Oskar and his reader. This deliberate deception, and the amount of effort it requires on the part of the reader to read against Oskar’s narration, renders Die Blechtrommel what Currie calls an unreliable work.

Die Blechtrommel as an unreliable work is distinct from (though also related to) Oskar’s status as an unreliable narrator. In Art and Minds, Currie argues that “[u]nreliable works . . . raise important questions about our access to works, and about the ways our presuppositions can mislead us in dealing with them. From the point of view of narrative theory, unreliable narrators are most interesting when they result in unreliable works” (138). Some works, such as Die Blechtrommel are blatant about their unreliability, though it is possible that one type of unreliability — Oskar’s self-proclaimed madness and occasional confessed deception, which put the reader on the alert — may in fact mask other types of unreliability. I argue that Oskar is not unreliable — or not only unreliable — because he accidentally misreads, misregards,
misevaluates, or underreports certain events. He is also unreliable because he deliberately does these things, thereby deceiving his reader, with huge consequences for both the narrative and its reader. Unreliable narrators generally, but uncooperative narrators specifically, I argue, cause a break in communication between author and audience. In such a case, the reader is not able to pick up on the ethics of the text — meaning those of the implied author — by empathically projecting his or her mind onto the character narrator. In such cases, says Phelan, a reader must either supplement the account offered by the unreliable narrator or else, in an even more radical and difficult readerly move, reject it outright (50-51); both supplementation and rejection require considerable cognitive effort on the part of the reader, because they require him or her to construct an alternate and presumably more reliable narrative that compensates and accounts for the narrator’s deception. If we understand Oskar not as well-intentioned but mad, but rather as a deliberate and perhaps pathological liar, then that significantly changes Oskar’s character and his relationship to his reader. An Oskar who is, admittedly, insane, but who does not deliberately deceive his reader (with whom he is engaged in a mutual process of narrative construction and confabulation) does not at least violate the pact of social cooperation established between narrator and reader. An Oskar who deliberately violates this pact, on the other hand, is not only unreliable, but also uncooperative. This creates a contentious relationship between Oskar and his reader, as well as a reading experience that is almost schizophrenic: one must constantly question what is happening in the novel and attempt to account for Oskar’s madness and/or lies.

However, as Patrick O’Neill argues, to attempt to interpret Oskar’s stories reasonably is “to fall spectacularly into the hermeneutic mantrap that is the central characteristic of Die Blechtrommel as a whole, namely, that we take seriously stories that are quite literally entirely impossible to believe” (Acts of Narrative, 111). What makes Die Blechtrommel such an uncomfortable or frustrating reading experience is that “because Oskar calls himself ich and tells us the story of his life, we diligently and even obsessively set about turning Oskar into a human being with all the psychological attributes we feel comfortable in assuming such a human being in such a set of circumstances would very likely possess or be possessed by” (O’Neill, Acts of
O’Neill goes on to argue that this compulsion on the part of the reader to provide psychologically reasonable explanations for Oskar’s stories is due to our desire for a rational explanation; my argument, in contrast, is that we do this because reading Oskar’s mind — the mind of the narrator-protagonist who “calls himself ich” — is something we are compelled to do, both by our experiences with other humans and our experiences with the psychologically realistic fiction with which most Western readers are familiar. We turn Oskar into a human being whose mind may be read and attempt, again and again, to “hook” our minds into his, even when Oskar himself scorns and ironizes our attempts at empathy.

One of the primary techniques by which Oskar undermines his own reliability throughout the course of the novel is by offering multiple versions of the same event, or else returning to a straightforwardly narrated event later and correcting himself, as though compelled by his conscience to do so. The former happens for the first time very early in the text, as Oskar recounts his grandfather’s escape from the authorities and (probable) subsequent death beneath a lumber raft: “Man hat die Leiche meines Großvaters nie gefunden. Ich, der ich fest daran glaube, daß er unter dem Floß seinen Tod schaffte, muß mich, um glaubwürdig zu bleiben, hier dennoch bequemen, all die Version wunderbarer Rettungen wiederzugeben” (35). “Um glaubwürdig zu bleiben” is a highly ironic phrase coming from someone who has already admitted that he is in an insane asylum and who therefore has very little credibility to maintain. Even if he did, the logic behind this statement is difficult to parse: Why would Oskar feel compelled to recount what he clearly labels false versions in order to maintain his credibility with the reader? Far from building his credibility with the reader, by recounting multiple versions of events, Oskar brings his own telling of the events even more into question than it already was. As Neuhaus says, “Wie Oskar von Anfang an das Urvertrauen seiner Leser in ihn zerstört, so verspielt er an solchen Stellen auch jeden vielleicht in der Zwischenheit erworbenen Kredit und vergrößert ihn nicht etwas durch seine ‘Ehrlichkeit’ — warum sollte man dem, der einmal gelogen hat, die

8 “My grandfather’s body was never found,” Oskar tells us. “Though I firmly believe that he met his death beneath the raft, I feel compelled, in order to maintain my credibility, to recount all the versions in which he was miraculously saved” (23).
nächste Version mehr glauben?" (23) Oskar appears to want to shake our faith in him, even as he declares the “false” versions of his grandfather’s story to be “Unsinn und Fischergeschwätz” (36) — especially the last story, about which he claims to give “keinen Pfifferling” (36), even as he tells it in loving detail.

As the text progresses, Oskar’s deceptions grow bolder. In his telling of the deaths of both of his “presumed” fathers, Jan Bronski and Alfred Matzerath, Oskar tells the story one way, and then, in the subsequent chapter, admits that he has lied about it. In the case of Jan’s death, which occurs at the battle of the Polish Post Office, Oskar confesses once the action is over that he “embellished” [übertreiben] his previous account in certain small ways. He embellished, first of all, Jan’s final hand in the grisly game of skat he was playing with Oskar and Kobyella, the dying janitor, which was “kein Grandhand, sondern ein Karo ohne Zwein” (300)\textsuperscript{11}. More significantly, however, he confesses that as they left the mailroom, “stellte sich Oskar schutzsuchend zwischen zwei onkelhafte gutmütig wirkende Heimwehrmänner, imitierte klägliches Weinen und wies auf Jan, seinen Vater, mit anklagenden Gesten, die den Armen zum bösen Mann machten, der ein unschuldiges Kind in die Polnische Post geschleppt hatte, um es auf polnisch unmenschliche Weise als Kugelfang zu benutzen” (300)\textsuperscript{11}. Oskar does this solely for the sake of saving his drum, and save it he does, even as the German soldiers beat his presumptive father. Oskar tells that reader that “an jenem Tag datierte sich meine zweite große Schuld” (301)\textsuperscript{12}, for he says, “Ich kann es mir nie, selbst bei wehleidigster Stimmung nicht verschweigen: meine Trommel, nein, ich selbst, der Trommler Oskar, brachte zuerste meine Mama,

\textsuperscript{9} “Just as Oskar from the beginning destroys the reader’s original trust in him, so does he gamble away in such places any credit he may have accrued in the meantime and does not increase it through his ‘honesty’ - for having been lied to once, why should we believe the next version any more?” (My translation)

\textsuperscript{10} “not a grand but a diamond without two” (229)

\textsuperscript{11} “Oskar, seeking protection, inserted himself between two avuncular and seemingly good-natured members of the Home Guard, put on a show of pathetic weeping, and pointed at Jan, his father, with accusatory gestures, transforming the poor man into a villain who had dragged an innocent child to the Polish Post Office in typically barbaric Polish fashion to use as a human shield” (229)

\textsuperscript{12} “that day marks the assumption of my second great burden of guilt” (229)
dann den Jan Bronski, meinen Onkel und Vater ins Grab” (301). Oskar’s deception here, short-lived though it is, indicates that he has some qualms about allowing the reader to understand the “große Schuld” that he carries. Yet in the end he is compelled to confess to his crime, bringing the reader inside the privileged circle of Oskar’s guilt.

The death of Oskar’s second presumptive father, Matzerath — and Oskar’s assumption of his third great burden of guilt — strongly echoes Jan Bronski’s earlier death. Matzerath dies in the chaos that follows the Russian liberation of Danzig, when he swallows his Nazi party pin out of panic that he will be found out. The pin is open, and the needle sticks in Matzerath’s throat, choking him until he is eventually shot by one of the Russian soldiers. Upon Oskar’s initial description, his role in Matzerath’s death seems minor: he merely hands Matzerath the pin. “Man kann jetzt sagen, dass hätte ich nicht tun sollen,” Oskar tells the reader. “Man kann aber auch sagen: Matzerath hätte nicht zuzugreifen brauchen” (488). Therefore, in this initial scene, Oskar accepts and then immediately rejects his guilt for Matzerath’s death. If he is responsible, then so is Matzerath himself.

We are well into the next chapter (and Matzerath’s funeral) when Oskar finally admits that Matzerath’s death was more than tangentially his fault, confessing to himself, “daß er Matzerath vorsätzlich getötet hatte, weil jener aller Wahrscheinlichkeit nach nicht nur sein mutmaßlicher, sondern sein wirklicher Vater war; auch weil er es satt hatte, sein Leben lang einen Vater mit sich herumschleppen zu müssen” (502). Furthermore, Oskar adds,

So stimmte es auch nicht, daß die Nadel des Parteiabzeichens schon offen war, als ich mir den Bonbon vom Betonfußboden klaubte.

Aufgemacht wurde die Nadel erst in meiner geschlossenen Hand.

Sperrig und stehend gabe ich den klebenden Bonbon an Matzerath ab,

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13 “I can never silence that inner voice, be it ever so plaintive: It was my drum, no, it was I myself, Oskar the drummer, who sent first my poor mama, then Jan Bronski, my uncle and father, to the grave” (230).
14 “Now you might say I shouldn’t have done that. But you might also say that Matzerath didn’t have to reach out for it” (374).
15 “Oskar confessed to himself that he had deliberately killed Matzerath because of the high probability that he was not only his presumptive father, but his real father as well; and because he was fed up with having to haul a father around with him all his life” (385).
damit sie den Orden bei ihm finden konnten, damit er sich die Partei auf die Zunge legte, damit er daran erstickte — an der Partei, an seinem Sohn; denn das mußte ein Ende haben!  

Oskar accepts his guilt, therefore, though he does not seem to feel guilty in the same way he does regarding Bronski’s death. Matzerath’s death was necessary, in the way that every generation’s death is necessary. Still, it is at such moments that Die Blechtrommel is at its most confessional; it is at these moments that we might come close to believing Oskar, even if it is hard to empathize with his patricidal tendencies.

However, when one digs below the narration offered by Oskar, one starts to wonder if Oskar’s confessions are not somewhat disingenuous. By lying to the reader and then confessing to the lie, Oskar seems to believe that he increases his credibility with the reader. But this is, I would like to argue, deliberate disingenuity on Oskar’s part. Although the scene at Matzerath’s funeral contains one confession, it also contains a deception. Oskar originally claims that he throws his drum and his drumsticks in the grave and then, entirely by his own choosing, begins to grow (504). It is not until the next chapter that Oskar reveals what really happened: His “angeblicher” [presumptive] son Kurt throws a rock at the back of Oskar’s head, which causes Oskar to fall into Matzerath’s grave, right behind his drum. Oskar insists that his growth began before then, but as far as the rest of his family is concerned, the growth was caused when Kurt threw the stone. Oskar himself points out that this provides a parallel to his third birthday. Though Oskar insists that he chose to stop growing, the “grownups” claimed that his growth was halted by a tumble down the cellar stairs (509). If Oskar’s intention here is to increase his credibility with his audience by confessing to an earlier lie, than his attempt backfires. Oskar’s admitted deception throws his claims about choosing to grow into a strange light — and, by association, his earlier claims about refusing to grow. Oskar himself simultaneously recognizes and refutes the reader’s growing skepticism, when he says that, “Man mag

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16 “Nor was it true that the Party pin was open when I picked the bonbon up off the concrete floor. The pin was first opened within my closed hand. I passed the sticky bonbon on to Matzerath, pointed and jagged, so they would find the badge on him, so that he would choke on it - on the Party, on me, on his son; for this had to stop!” (385)
in diesen Erklärungen die verständliche Sucht des Menschen erkennen, die da jedem Wunder den Beweis liefern möchte. Oskar muß gestehen, daß auch er jedes Mirakel genaustens untersucht, bevor er es als unglaubwürdige Phantasterei zur Seite schiebt” (509).  

17 “Unglaubwürdige Phantasterei” might be a good way of describing Oskar’s own story, but of course in this case, as in the much earlier scene wherein Oskar purportedly refuses to grow, the reasonable explanation provided is, according to Oskar, patently false. He either does not recognize that he is asking his reader to believe in miracles, or else he does recognize it, in which case this passage is a subtle joke on the reader. The question then becomes how much of Oskar’s deception is self-deception? Is he lying to the reader or is he simply that deluded? It may be impossible to say for sure. But I would like to argue that these cycles of deception and confession attempt to distract from the much deeper deceptions that run throughout the narration of Die Blechtrommel. These deeper deceptions cannot be explained by Oskar’s “burden of guilt”; they are not deceptions that are meant to draw the reader in empathically and render him more comprehensible. They are not the unconscious deceptions of a madman. Rather, they are the deliberate deceptions of a liar — or of a fiction writer.

Two prime examples of moments in which Oskar very probably deceives the reader and does not confess are those in which he seemingly turns the narrative over to someone else. The first of these comes at the end of Book Two, when Oskar turns the narrative over to his keeper, Bruno. Although Oskar claims that he is dictating his narrative to Bruno at this point, it seems in many ways unlikely. Indeed many critics, such as Bernard McElroy and Patrick O’Neill, have argued that it is equally possible, if not more so, that this entire scene is a fabrication by Oskar himself. If Oskar is in fact lying to us here, then that means that he is deliberately tricking us into believing that we are experiencing an outside perspective on Oskar — an objective perspective — when in fact we are experiencing no such thing. We trust Bruno, perhaps, more than we trust Oskar; Bruno, after all, is not an inmate in an insane asylum. By

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17 “One recognizes in these explanations mankind’s reasonable desire to provide a rational basis for every miracle. Oskar has to confess that he too examines miracles from all angles before casting them aside as totally implausible fantasies” (391).
provoking us into trusting Bruno, Oskar temporarily provokes us into trusting him as well, into putting more stock into his reliability than is generally the case.

Ironically, Oskar provokes the reader into trusting Bruno by using Bruno to cast doubt upon Oskar himself, making this the perfect example of how Oskar masks deeper deceptions with surface ones. The circumstances of this change in narrator are that memories of the very painful trip Oskar made from Danzig into the west, during which he grew for the first time since the age of three, have caused Oskar’s fingers to stiffen and swell; therefore, Oskar asks Bruno to write for him. Bruno’s retelling of Oskar’s story includes certain linguistic quirks and narrative asides that disclose his own doubt in the veracity of the stories. For example, he uses such phrases as “mein Patient behauptet,” “behauptet Herr Matzerath,” and “möchte mein Patient sagen” (524-525) to distance himself from the narration. In other places he goes yet further, and more or less calls Oskar a liar: For example, he describes one of the other inhabitants of the boxcar in which Oskar, Maria, and Kurt traveled toward Germany as ein junges Mädchen mit Kopftuch, in welchem Herr Oskar Matzerath ein gewisses Fräulein Luzie Rennwand erkannt haben will. Nach mehreren Anfragen meinerseits gibt mein Patient aber zu, daß jenes Mädchen Regina Raeck hieß, spricht aber weiterhin von einem namenlos dreieckigen Fuchsgesicht, das er doch immer wieder by Name nennt, Luzie ruf; was mir nicht hindert, jenes Mädchen hier als Fräulein Regina einzutragen.18 (522)

In this scene, Oskar lies unsuccessfully to Bruno, who then reports the lie to the reader; but I concur with McElroy, who argues that the true deception of this scene is not in the details that Oskar supplies to Bruno, but rather in the fact that Bruno is not telling the story at all, not even second-hand; Oskar is. If this is true, then Oskar is deliberately deceiving the reader without a subsequent confession.

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18 “a young woman in a scarf, whom Herr Matzerath claimed to have recognized as a certain Fräulein Luzie Rennwand. Upon further questioning on my part, however, my patient admits that the young woman’s name was Regina Raeck, but continues to speak of a nameless triangular fox face he repeatedly refers to by name as Luzie; which does not stop me from entering the young woman’s name here as Fräulein Regina” (402).
Similarly, toward the end of the novel, Oskar appears to turn the narrative over to someone else, in this case, to his friend Vittlar. At the time that Vittlar assumes responsibility for the narrative, he is testifying against Oskar in his murder trial, for he is accused of having murdered the nurse, Sister Dorothea. Even more than Bruno, Vittlar’s narrative voice bears an uncanny resemblance to Oskar’s own, even where he claims to diverge from Oskar’s own account of events, such as when he when he relates how he and Oskar first met: “Bis heute kann ich nicht begreifen, warum der Angesprochene in mir, nur weil ich im Apfelbaum lag, das Symbol einer Schlagen sehen wollte. Auch verdächtigte er die Kochäpfel meiner Mutter, sagte, die seien gewiß paradiesischer Art” (704).\(^\text{19}\) In Oskar’s account, it is Vittlar who brings the apples into their conversation, telling Oskar not to be suspicious, and Oskar who denies that he is. This exchange shifts the center of madness, or at least of unreliability, from Oskar onto Vittlar and back again. Even before this, however, it should be noted that Vittlar is not trustworthy in the same way that Bruno is; Vittlar is, by his own admission, just as much of a liar and a fraud as Oskar himself. He does not turn Oskar out of any sense of justice. Indeed, he does not turn Oskar in at all for over a year, and when he does it is because Oskar tells him to, so that Vittlar will fulfill his lifelong dream of committing some feat great enough to make newspaper headlines. All of what follows — Oskar’s flight into France, his trial and Vittlar’s testimony, even his commitment to an asylum — is but “ein von uns erfundenes Spiel, ein Mittelchen mehr, unsere Langeweile und Einsamkeit zu zerstreuen und ernähren” (704).\(^\text{20}\) But while there is much about Vittlar that is untrustworthy, he does not appear to lie to the reader outright; indeed, his deceptions are quite out in the open, in much the same way that Oskar promptly admits, in the novel’s opening line, that he is a patient in an insane asylum. Furthermore, his testimony — if it is indeed his testimony — calls into question Oskar’s own claim that he is innocent. The reader is left wondering whether Oskar did, indeed, murder Dorothea; that he may have done so

\(^\text{19}\) “I still can’t understand why the accused saw me as the symbol of a snake, simply because I was lying in an apple tree. He was suspicious of my mother’s cooking apples too, and said they must certainly be of the Paradise variety” (541).

\(^\text{20}\) “a game we invented, just one more small way of diverting and nourishing our boredom and loneliness” (541).
does not seem out of the realm of possibility, given Oskar’s instability and his history with the woman in question. This narrative act therefore casts further suspicion onto Oskar and recalls the question with which I began this chapter: Who is Oskar Matzerath? After seven hundred pages, it is still impossible for the reader to say for certain.

In the fifty-five years since the publication of *Die Blechtrommel*, much work has been done to attempt to untangle Oskar’s lies from his truths. This is heavy cognitive work that requires a conscious rejection of Oskar as a reliable narrative; it requires, in fact, that we work at cross-purposes with Oskar, in violation of the traditional narrator-reader pact of social cooperation that we are used to from realist fiction. But we do so because we sense that Oskar himself has already violated this pact and done so deliberately. This ensures that our emotional experience will never — or nearly never — be in step with Oskar’s own. This dissonance is the source of much of the irony in the text, as well as our estrangement. Oskar never tells us what we should feel, and his own feelings are certainly no reliable moral compass. Rather, we are led through *Die Blechtrommel* by what I am calling an ethic of skepticism: by the general rule that nothing is to be believed and everything is to be questioned. This ethic underscores the problematic aspects of empathy, namely that it requires a certain amount of gullibility on the part of the reader, and this gullibility, I will show, is a major sin for implied author Grass. He therefore ensures, through both the narrative estrangement I have discussed in this section and the ethical estrangement I will discuss in the next, that only the most determinedly gullible reader will fall into Oskar’s hermeneutic trap.

**Ethical Estrangement: The Alchemy of the Grotesque and the Disgusting**

In an oft-quoted review of *The Tin Drum* immediately after its publication in 1959, Hans Magnus Enzensberger offered the following insights into the text:

*Die Blechtrommel* kennt keine Tabus. Gewaltätig wirkt dieser Roman, weil er alles berührt, als wäre es antastbar. […] Immer
wieder tritt die Erzählung in jene verbotenen Sphäre ein, wo sich Ekel und Sexualität, Tod und Blasphemie begegnen. Was Grass in dieser Hinsicht einerseits von aller Pornographie trennt, andererseits von dem sogenannten ‘schonungslosen Realismus’ der amerikanischen Schule unterscheidet, was seine brüsken Eingriff legitimiert, ja zu künstlerischen Ruhmestaten macht, das ist die vollkommene Unbefangenheit, mit der er sie vornimmt. Grass jagt nicht wie Henry Miller, hinter dem Tabu her: er bemerkt es einfach nicht. Zu Unrecht wird man ihn der Provokation verdächtigen. Er ist dem Skandal weder aus dem Weg gegangen, noch hat er ihn gesucht; aber gerade dies wird ihn hervorrufen, daß Grass kein schlechtes Gewissen hat, daß für ihn das Schockierende zugleich das Selbservständliche ist. (Enzensberger 9-10)²¹

This passage concisely details much of what is both difficult and yet magnificent about *Die Blechtrommel*. However, I do not quite concur with Enzensberger when he argues that Grass “simply doesn’t notice” taboos; I would argue that Grass recognizes them just fine. It is Oskar who does not notice them, and since it is Oskar’s head we occupy when we read *Die Blechtrommel*, it is Oskar who shocks us by taking that which we believe he should find shocking or disgusting for granted. The reader’s disgust and, moreover, the gap between the reader’s disgust and Oskar’s lack of it, create a profound chasm, one that the reader feels compelled to try and cross. This attempt at empathy, however, is bound to fail, and this empathic failure is, I argue, a fundamental aspect of the text’s ethics. In this section, I will discuss the significance of both the grotesque and the disgusting for this failure and for the dialectic of empathy and estrangement in the text. The grotesque, I will show, asks us to imagine a

²¹ *The Tin Drum* knows no taboos... Again and again the narrative enters the forbidden sphere where disgust and sexuality, death and blasphemy meet. What differentiates Grass in this respect both from any form of pornography, and from the so-called ‘stark realism’ of the American school, what legitimates these blunt forays, indeed elevates them to acts of artistic brilliance, is the total objectivity with which he presents them. Unlike Henry Miller, Grass does not seek out taboos; he simply doesn’t notice them. It would be unfair to accuse him of deliberate provocation. He neither avoids scandal nor invites it; but that is precisely what will give rise to scandal: Grass doesn’t have a guilty conscience, he takes what we find shocking for granted. (Mitchell translation, 2)
world that truly is as we fear our own might be. Disgust, however, does not require any such imaginative effort on our part; disgust and the disgusting are far more “real” to us than the grotesque. Although the grotesque and the disgusting appear at first to have a great deal in common, in the end we must conclude that they serve opposing functions: the grotesque fascinates us, even as we can never quite fathom it, while the disgusting — mundane and fathomable though it is — repels us.

What is therefore worth examining in Die Blechtrommel is where the grotesque and the disgusting meet in the character of Oskar. He is both, at least at certain points in the novel, but what makes him both are not the same qualities. We could imagine an Oskar who is grotesque but not disgusting: He might be a liar, he might be a madman, but he would not seem to delight in relating to the reader things that he knows force us to control our gag reflexes. Such a character might, potentially, be far more charismatic than the Oskar we know; we might it far easier to be drawn in by him, to “hook” our minds into his. Empathizing with an Oskar who is grotesque but not disgusting might not be impossible. Conversely, we can imagine an Oskar who is disgusting but not grotesque, but such a figure lacks the charisma of our own Oskar; he is merely repellant. When the grotesque and the disgusting are brought together, however, something almost alchemical occurs. Together, the grotesque and the disgusting serve in Die Blechtrommel to create a character who is strangely rooted in both fantasy and reality and who both fascinates and repels the reader in equal measure. The push-pull of the grotesque and the disgusting in The Tin Drum forces us to maintain a certain defensive (and critical) distance, even as we continually attempt to bridge that distance.

Grass is hardly alone among postmodern writers in his use of the grotesque in his novels. The relationship between modernity and the grotesque has already been explored at some length by critics. John R. Clark, for example, argues that the modern and postmodern affinity for the grotesque stems both from an increased understanding of the irrationality of our own minds and from contact with Hayden White’s “modernist events.” The world is no longer the rational place the 19th century felt it to be, and we are no longer its rational masters; science may lower the infant mortality rate and explain to us the neurological workings of our brains, but it also is responsible
for the atomic bomb and for countless atrocities that have been committed in its name throughout the last hundred years. For the novelists with whom Clark is concerned, which include Franz Kafka, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, and Gabriel García Márquez in addition to Grass, there is nothing left but to either laugh or weep at our own absurdity and that of our chaotic, entropic world. This postmodern estrangement is markedly different from Brecht’s attempt to unveil the capitalist underpinnings of a corrupt society. According to Clark, for modernist and postmodernist authors, estrangement is less a technique and more a way of being that is predicated on and necessitated by living in the 20th century. For such authors, humanity in the 20th century is distinctly less human than it was in the 19th, and as a result the characters who populate the fiction of these writers are less transparent to us than characters in literature of the 19th century; their humanity is obscured because, for Kafka, for Grass, for Márquez, our own humanity is obscured as well.

It is, therefore, not at all surprising that the grotesque in the 20th century is intimately related to processes of dehumanization. Indeed, the definition of the grotesque offered by a number of scholars, including Bernard McElroy and Shun Liang-Chao, is that it is, above all else, transformational. McElroy describes the grotesque in the following way:

The most pervasive effect of . . . animalism and corporeal degradation in grotesque art is to direct our attention to the undignified, even gross physicality of existence, and to emphasise it by exaggeration, distortion, or unexpected combination. The result may be thought of as an arc ranging from the entirely animal, through the human-animal, to the entirely human. (11)

Therefore, the literal transformation of a human into an animal, such as in Kafka’s “Die Verwandlung,” is clearly, by McElroy’s definition, grotesque. But perhaps more interestingly, McElroy describes the “entirely human” grotesque in two ways: first, “[t]he depiction of humans so deformed as to be astonishingly ugly and suggest an aberration of nature” (11-12); second, “[t]he depiction of humans in some state so bizarre, macabre, or gross that human dignity is obliterated and even identity is threatened” (12). In other words, the process by which something becomes grotesque
is also the process of dehumanization, and this process is hardly limited to literal transformations such as Gregor Samsa’s. Oskar is also, by McElroy’s definition, grotesque, for he is a strange, disturbing amalgamation of man and child, “at once barrenly infantile and sexually potent” (Clark 23).

However, it is not only Oskar’s amalgamated qualities that are the source of the grotesque in Die Blechtrommel. The events of the novel itself, or rather Oskar’s interpretations of them (unreliable and uncooperative though they may be), also contribute significantly to it. Both McElroy and Liang-Chao note that the grotesque is unmistakably uncanny, an effect that Liang-Chao says may be attributed to “the happening of fantastic events in a verisimilar setting,” which leads to “the cognitive confusion of fantasy and reality, the alien and the familiar, the ‘I’ and ‘not I’” (10). Similarly, McElroy argues that the grotesque perverts the relationship between the familiar and the fantastic, when he writes that, “The grotesque transforms the world from what we ‘know’ it to be to what we fear it might be. It distorts or exaggerates the surface of reality in order to tell a qualitative truth about it. The grotesque does not address the rationalist in us or the scientist in us, but the vestigial primitive in us, the child in us, the potential psychotic in us” (5). This displacement of reality and the rendering of the world we know into something monstrous is one aspect of what makes mind reading in “grotesque” texts difficult; the world such texts exposes us to is similar to, but not quite, our own, and the people we encounter there are like those that populate Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland: too strange, too distorted to be fully or easily understood. In such a world, neither the psychologies nor the emotional landscapes of those who live there are likely to be anything like our own.

It is for this reason that Bernard McElroy argues that the source of the grotesque in Die Blechtrommel is Oskar’s madness. He notes that Grass is hardly unique in the pantheon of twentieth century literature for having a madman as his narrator; however, he argues that “[among] this bizarre gallery of deranged narrators . . . Oskar Matzerath is unique and preeminent, not only because of the brilliance of the characterisation, but because of Grass’s ability to use his narrator as a perspective, a way of seeing and presenting a whole epoch of collective madness” (96). It is therefore not Oskar’s personal madness that so elevates Die Blechtrommel in
McElroy’s view, but rather the relationship of that madness to the madness of the era in which Oskar lived that allows “improbability” to become “an instrument of the artist” (97). It is this improbability that allows the narrator Oskar to ask us to believe in certain improbable or even impossible aspects of Die Blechtrommel: Oskar’s ability to choose to stop growing (and, later, to choose to grow again) and his ability to singshatter glass, and the various magical properties of his drum, which range from controlling people to conjuring up history that Oskar has no way of knowing. “[It] is through such incidents,” writes McElroy, “that Grass transforms the historical world of Nazi Germany and the bourgeois postwar era into the grotesque private world of his narrator” (97).

The grotesque in Die Blechtrommel is therefore intimately related to Oskar’s unreliability or uncooperativeness as narrator. The result of Oskar’s narrative madness is that the reader becomes deeply disoriented, as he or she is forced to engage in the sort of analysis I performed earlier in this chapter to untangle the web of Oskar’s truths and lies. But this attempt is doomed to failure:

We can never quite pin down at what point credulity rebels and we see the narrator, and behind him the author, making mad additions and grotesque embellishments. By raising the question of Oskar’s sanity and then refusing to settle it finally, Grass creates a fluidity of perspective, multiplying the possibilities for bizarre incidents by diminishing the differences between sane and insane, subjective and objective, historical and fantastic — a fluidity that proves invaluable in dealing with a period when history was fantastic and behavior insanity in an international scale. (McElroy 99)

It is impossible to entirely untangle the sane from the insane, the historical from the fantastic, the real from the grotesque, the truth from the lies, for they are like the house of cards that Jan Bronski builds during his own episode of madness during the defense of the Polish Post Office: If one card is removed the whole thing crumbles. Die Blechtrommel is essentially Clark’s argument about modernity synthesized into fiction. Indeed, each of the texts that I consider in this dissertation makes this
argument in some way. But what neither Clark nor McElroy addresses is how the grotesque in Die Blechtrommel is paired with the disgusting.

There is certainly a close association between the disgusting and the grotesque, both within Die Blechtrommel and elsewhere. Although that which is disgusting is not always grotesque, the visceral, body-based emotion of disgust nearly always plays a role in our reaction to the grotesque. Furthermore, disgust as an emotion is not limited to the physical realm. On a daily basis, we encounter the language of disgust used to describe those whom we find morally repulsive, and the ethical consequences of such language, which cannot be dismissed as “mere” metaphor, is enormous. William Ian Miller ultimately argues in The Anatomy of Disgust that the transcendence of disgust is about love – or perhaps, as we might think of it here, about the purer state of empathy engendered by love. Where love exists, so must mind reading and empathy; but where love does not exist, empathic reactions in the face of disgust become extremely difficult, if not impossible. Disgust has the distinct tendency to render the minds of those whom it objectifies completely opaque.

As a historical example of this phenomenon, Miller recounts how the emotion of disgust functioned in the exclusion of lepers and Jews in the Middle Ages, noting that lepers “were associated with rotting flesh and cadavers,” while Jews “were associated with excrement and menstrual blood” (155). But the association in these two instances ran in opposite directions: it was the physical disgust that people felt toward lepers that led them to believe that they were also morally disgusting, while it was the belief in Jewish moral depravity that led Christians to believe that the body of the Jew “must then be as disfigured as his soul” (156). Miller’s analysis here strikes at the interdependence between physical and moral disgust. That which we find physically disgusting, we are also apt to find morally disgusting, and vice versa. Furthermore, he alludes to the contaminative nature of disgust: that which is disgusting can contaminate everything around it or associated with it. On this basis, the exclusion of certain groups from communities has been justified; such groups become incontrovertibly, disgustingly Other. Similarly, philosopher and psychologist Paul Bloom writes, “The potential to think of people and their actions as disgusting is intimately related to whether you see someone as a physical body, in which case
disgust is hard to avoid, or as a soul, in which case you can transcend it” (156-157). In other words, Miller and Bloom agree that disgust helps us separate those who are *like us* from those who are not; those who fall within what Paul Bloom calls the moral circle from those who do not; those who are worthy of empathy from those who are not. Disgust makes empathy difficult, if not impossible, and that is why it is such a dramatically successful estrangement technique.

It is, furthermore, an estrangement technique that Grass uses repeatedly throughout *Die Blechtrommel*. Volker Neuhaus has written about disgust in *Die Blechtrommel*: “Die von den ersten Rezensionen an so oft monierten vielen ekelhaften Szenen in der *Blechtrommel* hängen damit zusammen, daß Oskar eine außergewöhnliche Befähigung zum Sich-ekeln mitbringt, an dem er seine Leser offensichtlich gern teilhaben läßt” (46)22. This argument implies that Oskar and his reader are on the same page when it comes to their feelings of disgust; however, I argue that it is precisely the opposite. One manifestation of Oskar’s madness is that he fails to be disgusted by things that the reader finds disgusting (or at the very least he fails to express that disgust). It is Oskar’s failure to be disgusted that creates the chasm between himself and his reader. But to what end? To explore this question, I will examine the most famous disgusting moment in the text: the infamous eel scene.

John Reddick has called this scene “the most penetrating evocation of vileness in the novel” and notes that it has “earned Grass more calumny than anything else” (25). Oskar, Jan, Matzerath, and Agnes go to the shore on Good Friday and encounter there a docker, whom Matzerath dubs “Onkel,” fishing for eels. This scene contains an abundance of disgusting imagery, beginning before Onkel has even revealed his bait, with Oskar’s graphic, matter-of-fact, and by most standards excessively detailed description of the docker spitting. This is a foreshadowing of the disgusting depths to which Oskar intends to drag his reader in this scene, which grows yet more revolting when it is revealed that the docker is fishing with “einen Pferdekopf, einen frischen, wie echten Pferdekopf, den Kopf eines schwarzen Pferdes, eine schwarzmähnigen

22 “The many disgusting scenes that have been criticized from the first reviews onward have to do with the fact that Oskar has an unusual ability to be disgusted, which he obviously shares gladly with his readers.” (My translation)
Rappenkopf also, der gestern noch, vorgestern noch gewiehert haben mochte; den faul war der Kopf nicht, höchstens nach Mottlauwasser; aber danach roch alles auf der Mole” (177)\textsuperscript{23}. But it is not the smell that revolts the reader; rather, it is Oskar’s matter-of-fact descriptions of the “wütend hellgrün kleine Aale” (177)\textsuperscript{24}. And then it grows yet worse: “Und als der Stauer . . . mit beiden Händen hineingriff in den Rachen des Gaules und gleich zwei auf einmal herausholte, die mindestens armdick waren und armlang, da riß es auch meiner Mama das Gebiß auseinander: das ganze Frühstück warf sie, kumpiges Eiweiß und Fäden zielendes Eigelb zwischen Weißbrotklumpen im Milchkaffeegefüß über die Molensteine” (178)\textsuperscript{25}.

At no point in this scene does Oskar comment upon his own disgust; his focus instead is entirely on his mother, and it is indeed Agnes for whom this scene seems to be most significant. Critics have noted repeatedly the association between death and sexuality in this scene, linked through the symbolism of the eels themselves. Volker Neuhaus argues that it is this association which becomes clear to Agnes Matzerath in the scene, and which leads to her suicide by fish in the following chapter. According to Neuhaus, Agnes glimpses in this moment “plötzlich etwas von den furchtbaren Kette von Tod, Leben, Tod und Leben . . . Ihr geht auf, daß der Kreislauf des Sinnlosen, in den sie ihr eigenes Leben hineingebannt sieht, nicht Zufall ist, nicht ihr privates Unglück, sondern Weltgesetz” (67)\textsuperscript{26}. Similarly, John Reddick argues that Agnes senses here “a deadness in existence, and especially her own existence, that is too much for her to bear” (27-28). Moreover, the connection between death and sex here is a disgusting one: the eels, an obviously phallic symbol, have been feasting on the corpses of dead sailors. Agnes is revolted by this to the point of vomiting. If the

\textsuperscript{23} “a horse’s head, a fresh head, a real one, the head of a black horse with a black mane, which only yesterday or the day before may still have been whimpering, for the head was not yet rotten, did not stink, smelled at most of the Mottlau, like everything else on the jetty” (136).

\textsuperscript{24} “small light green eels [that were] were furiously wriggling” (136)

\textsuperscript{25} “And when the docker . . . reached into the horse’s gullet with both hands and pulled out two at once, at least as thick as his arm and just as long, my mama’s jaw dropped: she spewed her whole breakfast, clumps of egg white with yolk trailing threads among lumps of bread in a gush of coffee and milk, onto the stones of the jetty” (137).

\textsuperscript{26} “suddenly something of the fearful chain of death, life, death and life . . . She realizes that the senseless circle, in which she sees her entire life imprisoned, is not random, is not her own private unhappiness, but the law of the world.” (My translation)
reader has empathy in this scene for anyone, it is for Agnes herself, whose nauseated disgust matches our own.

Our narrator-protagonist Oskar, however, is not revolted. Indeed, Oskar seems to revel in the disgusting detail he provides, which he underscores with his characteristic irony. The question here is, as is so often the case with Oskar, the extent to which he does this deliberately. Does Oskar, unmoved and und disgusted himself, not realize the effect that his descriptions have on the reader? Or does Oskar realize very well the effect they have (either because he is himself actually disgusted or because he understands the disgust of others, particularly his mother) and yet proceeds with it anyway, deliberately provoking his reader to revulsion? In contrast to Enzensberger, I argue that Oskar knows precisely what effect he has on the reader. As I have already noted, disgust renders the minds of its objects opaque; in this case, the reader’s disgust at this scene and the dissonance that results from Oskar’s lack of articulated disgust renders mind reading even more difficult than it usually is in *Die Blechtrommel*.

Significantly, this scene leads directly into the chapter in which Oskar loses his beloved mama. Oskar’s feelings about his mother’s death are complex; he seems at first to reject having played any role in it, only to embrace it later as his first burden of guilt. What he does *not* want, it appears, is empathy from his reader. Indeed, I argue that the infamous eel scene disrupts the empathy we might feel for Oskar at the death of his mother, and that Oskar, as the controlling narrator of the text, does this quite deliberately. He estranges us just prior to a moment in which we might feel real empathy for him. Furthermore, this remains a pattern for Oskar over the course of the novel. He doesn’t always use disgust to accomplish it; indeed, with the deaths of his remaining two presumptive parents he uses deception and then revelation to do it: telling us one story and then, in the next chapter, revealing that he has lied and that the “true” story implicates him in Jan and Matzerath’s respective demises. The consequence is that our emotions remain ever out of step with Oskar’s; even as we attempt to hook our minds into his, it slides away from us, as slippery as an eel.

The use of disgust as an emotion to undercut empathy in the face of tragedy or grief continues throughout *Die Blechtrommel*. In Book Three, Oskar takes up gravestone cutting as a profession and begins spending a great deal of time in
graveyards. The chapter “Fortuna North” contains a detailed description of a piecemeal exhumation of a woman:

. . . kam sie hoch in die Frische und lag noch nicht lange unten, seit letztem Herbst erst im Dunkeln und war doch schon forgeschritten, wie ja überall Verbesserungen vorgenommen wurden, und auch die Demontage an Rhein und Ruhr Fortschritte machte, hatte sich jene Frau während des Winters – den ich in der Löwenburg vertändelt hatte – ernsthaft unter der gefrorenen Erdkruste des Braunkohlenreviers mit sich selbst auseinandergesetzt und mußte nun, während wir Beton stampften und den Sockel legten, stückweise zur Umbettung überredet warden. Aber dafür war ja die Zinkkiste da, daß nichts, auch die Kleinste nicht verloren ging . . . (566-567) ²⁷

Death and rotting corpses are probably one of the most easily understood objects of disgust; our sense of disgust was likely developed originally to protect us from rotting food and especially rotting corpses. Few people, when faced with a half-rotted corpse, and particularly with the smell of such a corpse (which, Oskar mentions off-handedly, is not too terrible, it being March), could avoid a sense of revulsion. Furthermore, there is what William Ian Miller in calls the “partibility” of the corpse — not only is it rotten, it is falling apart: “There are few things that are more unnerving and disgust-evoking than our partibility. [. . .] Part of death’s horror is that it too is a severance of body and soul and then, via putrefaction, of the body’s integrity” (Miller 27). We witness this “putrefaction” first-hand in this scene. The reader might be tempted to protect herself from the horror of the corpse’s severability by focusing on the more intellectual elements of Oskar’s description, namely the connection he draws between the “progress” of the corpse’s decomposition in the ground and the economic “progress” made in that part of Germany at the time. But Oskar makes his point about

²⁷ . . . she came up for fresh air, had not been down in the dark that long, just since last fall, yet still she’d made progress, kept pace with improvements underway on all sides; and just as progress had been made dismantling the industrial Rhineland and Ruhr, so too had this woman, in the course of the winter - which I’d frittered away at the Löwenburg - made serious progress, taking herself so gravely to task beneath the frozen crust of the soft-coal district that now, while we poured concrete and set the pedestal, she could be persuaded to move her remains only piecemeal. But that’s what the zinc casket was for, so not even the tiniest piece would be lost . . . (436)
the effects of such progress not despite the disgust he inflicts on his reader but rather through it. To this end, he will not allow his reader to pretend the corpse is anything other than it is. John Reddick has pointed out how many elements of this scene serve to dehumanize the woman entirely, including: its ironic tone; the way in which Oskar’s narration switches back and forth between the exhumation and other unrelated subjects; and Oskar’s repetitious underscoring of the “severability” of the corpse. Furthermore, according to Reddick, the Hamlet-Yorick scene that follows directly on the heels of the exhumation scene “supplies an effective contrast, for Grass’s treatment of the exhumation is quite without that warm solace of emotions that characterises Shakespeare’s famous scene” (37). The empathy that imbues Shakespeare’s scene, in other words, is largely — though perhaps not entirely — missing from Grass’s own.

In counterpoint to this, I argue that the biographical details that Oskar provides about the dead woman, which appear to be gratuitous to his project, are actually crucial to understanding the nuance of the scene and its relationship to disgust and empathy in the text. Though many of these details are speculative in nature, they still forcibly remind the reader that this is a person who is being removed, piecemeal, from the ground: “in die große Stadt, wo immer was los war und neunzehn Kinos gleichzeitig, dahin wollte die Frau heimkehren”28 (567). The reader is hereby prompted to imagine the girl as she once was, in horrific contrast to how she now is. Like so much of Oskar’s narration, these details may or may not be true. But I argue that they serve to emphasize the horror of the exhumation itself. Oskar speculates rather coldly on the girl’s origins and motivations, and his disgust at the exhumation is subdued in comparison to the reader’s own. But the reader’s disgust may in fact be coupled with a pity that Oskar seems to lack: The girl in the ground might have once been the reader’s sister, daughter, or friend; she might stand in for someone the reader lost during the war. But whoever she was, she is now reduced to so much putrefied meat. Oskar’s narration focuses on the dehumanizing effects of war, death, and

28 “the big city was where she wanted to go, where there was always something happening, and nineteen movie houses playing at once” (437)
capitalist progress, but the small details he offers about the woman at hand invite more empathic feelings on the part of the reader.

For John Reddick, this scene reveals a central ambivalence about death in *Die Blechtrommel*. In some cases, he argues, such as this one, “the text avoids almost all mention of the dead person, the attendant group is reduced to insignificant, almost lifeless adjuncts, and it is the sheer reality of burial that is writ large and rendered animate” (38). But in other cases, “there is quite the opposite perspective: the pervasive spirit there is one of compassionate involvement, and implies that individual human lives have their own full value, subjective though that may be, and that their loss is worthy of sorrow” (38). Reddick calls the former point of view the “bird’s eye view” and the latter the “worm’s eye view,” respectively, and they may be seen throughout *Die Blechtrommel* at moments that involve death. In each instance, Reddick claims, the power of the bird’s eye view eventually undermines that of the worm’s eye view.

But these two “views” are not entirely at odds with each other; rather, they are a clear manifestation of the dialectic of empathy and estrangement. The vast majority of the time Oskar takes the “bird’s eye view” that is perceptible in the “Fortuna North” chapter: distant, cold, and dispassionate. Furthermore, he estranges his reader using deception and disgust, until his reader has little choice — or, truly, much desire — to remain at ground level with the worms. But even at these moments, empathy for the reader is not entirely rejected, even if it is continually undermined. There is a dissonance between Oskar’s emotional experience and the reader’s own, and so even while Oskar himself may be among the birds and may not have much to offer in the way of emotion or empathy, those things are not precluded in the reader. Moreover, there are, on very rare occasions, moments in which Oskar and his reader come to a place of temporary emotional accord, where we sense that for once, Oskar has joined us among the worms and feels as we do. One such moment is the Kristallnacht scene, contained in the chapter entitled “Glaube-Hoffnung-Liebe” at the end of Book One. But it is precisely at such moments, I argue, that the problematic aspects of empathy, and the need for an ethic of empathy to be replaced by one of skepticism, become most visible.
Faith, Hope, and Love: The Complicity of Emotion

The “Glaube-Hoffnung-Liebe” chapter that ends Book One is in many ways the thematic and emotional core of Die Blechtrommel. In this passage, the techniques of narrative and ethic estrangement that I analyze in this chapter come together. Oblique remarks about the rise of National Socialism give way to an explicit description of one of Nazism’s earliest triumphs, the desecration and destruction of Jewish homes, synagogues, and shops across the German-speaking world on November 9th, 1938. But even as the description of Nazism becomes more explicit, Oskar’s language, including his characteristic irony, dissolves into fragmented poetry. Parsing the many strands at work in this chapter is difficult, for it accomplishes several things simultaneously that at first glance seem mutually exclusive. It is the most emotional, most empathically inviting passage in the entirety of the novel, but it also underscores, as few other passages do, the fundamental ethical issues that are at stake with empathy as a mode of moral decision-making. Consequently, it raises — almost explicitly — the need for skepticism and doubt as a mode of narration and understanding; indeed, for skepticism as Weltanschauung. Only if we doubt every narrative, only if we treat every story we are fed with the deepest of skepticism, only if we refuse the facile rewards of emotion, might we avoid a repeat of the disaster that was National Socialism.

From the beginning, the reader senses that the dialectic of empathy and estrangement that has been established in the novel through Oskar’s ironic narration, refusal to cooperate with his reader, and insistence on subjecting his reader to the most disgusting elements of his story, is re-negotiated in this chapter. This re-negotiation does not mean, however, that the elements of narrative and ethical estrangement that I have already discussed at length are not present. In fact, the opposite is true: both are present to a strong degree. In terms of narrative estrangement, Oskar’s repetition of the phrase “es war einmal,” the classic opening phrase of a German fairy tale, is particularly striking. The phrase is, on the one hand, distancing: it indicates distance in time but also space, and it also creates narrative distance between Oskar and the story...
he is telling. But this distance, the reader is aware, is illusory: this is not fairy tale set in some faraway place, but one that took place within Oskar’s own lifetime. There may be magic here; if Oskar is to be believed, his drum is at least a little bit magic. But that magic cannot save him. For on November 9th, 1938, there were very few heroes. There were, however, plenty of monsters and plenty of victims.

Characteristically, the only victim with whom Oskar is concerned is the toy merchant, Sigismund Markus. Markus is the supplier of his drums, without which, Oskar claims he cannot live:

Es war einmal ein Spielzeughandler, der hieß Sigismund Markus und verkaufte unter anderem auch weißrot gelackte Blechtrommeln. Oskar, von dem soeben die Rede war, war der Hauptabnehmer dieser Blechtrommeln, weil er von Beruf Blechtrommler war und ohne Blechtrommel nicht leben konnte und wollte. Deshalb eilte er auch von der brennenden Synagoge fort zur Zeughauspassage, denn dort wohnte der Hüter seiner Trommeln; aber er fand ihn in einem Zustand vor, der ihm das Verkaufen von Blechtrommeln fortan oder auf dieser Welt unmöglich machte.²⁹ (242)

Oskar’s concern here appears, at first glance, to be entirely self-interested. He admits that as he leaves Markus’s shop, after having watched the Nazis destroy and desecrate the store, he takes with him “eine heile und zwei weniger beschädigte Trommeln aus dem Trümmern”³⁰ (243) this is a moment of ethical estrangement between the reader and Oskar, as Oskar’s evaluation of the scene appears to be entirely alien to the reader’s own. Why should Oskar care about his drum at a moment like this? But as the chapter unfolds and Oskar’s ironic prose dissolves into poetry, this self-interest begins to seem more like self-preservation.

²⁹ Once upon a time there was a toy merchant named Sigismund Markus, and he sold, among other things, white and red lacquered tin drums. Oskar, mentioned above, was the major customer for these tin drums, for he was a drummer by trade, and could neither live without a drum nor wished to. He hurried away from the burning synagogue to the Arsenal Arcade, for there dwelt the keeper of his drums; but he found him in a state that made it impossible for him to ever sell tin drums again in this world. (185)
³⁰ “one undamaged drum and two slightly damaged ones from the debris” (187);
Oskar’s characteristic irony is clearly present in this passage in the third person narrative and his refusal to state anything outright to his reader. Notably, however, in contrast to other places in the narrative, Oskar does not appear to actually withhold information from his reader in this passage; he expects his reader to draw the right conclusions about why Markus is no longer able to sell drums in this world. But Markus’s death is also the turning point in Oskar’s narration of events in this chapter. As he leaves the shops with his three drums in hand, he encounters the Biblical quotation that is the title of the chapter:


As John Reddick has noted, the imagery of the Gasman “immediately brings to mind the grossest part of National Socialist savagery: the systematic annihilation of the Jews” (20). Reddick goes on to say, however, that the Gasman also “shows that the outcome was disastrous, too, for the conniving, gullible masses, that the effect on them was not just intoxicating but toxic, and that they were left as wrecks by the twelve-year millennium” (20).

\(^{31}\) It was a late November morning. Outside the Stadt-Theater, near the tram stop, stood pious women and shivering, ugly girls handing out religious tracts, collecting money in tin cans, and displaying between two poles a banner with an inscription from First Corinthians, chapter thirteen. ”Faith—Hope—Love”—Oskar read those three little words and played with them like a juggler with bottles: faith healer, hope chest, lovebird, Old Faithful, Hope Diamond, Lovers’ Leap, with love as always, hope to see you again, faithfully yours. An entire gullible nation believed faithfully in Santa Claus. But Santa Claus was really the Gasman. (187)
Indeed, what follows this passage is a meditation on the dangers of not only gullibility in general but of a form of gullibility that involves thinking solely emotionally: of the dangers, in other words, of emotion-based moral reasoning: “Aber nachdem such der Glaube an den Weihnachtsmann als Glaube an den Gasmann herausgestellt hatte, versuchte man es, ohne auf die Reihenfolge des Korintherbriefes zu achten kit der Liebe: ‘Ich liebe dich, liebest du mich wirklich? Ich liebe mich auch’”\(^{32}\) (245). Love and faith here are both rendered complicit in the rise of fascism throughout the German-speaking world and in the violence that Oskar has already described to us. And hope is hardly let off the hook: “Und als dann Schluß war, machten sie schnell einen hoffnungsvollen Anfang daraus; denn hierzulande ist Schluß immer Anfang und Hoffnung in jedem, auch im endgültigsten Schluß. So steht auch geschrieben: Solange der Mensch hofft, wird er immer wieder neu anfangen mit dem hoffnungsvollen Schlußmachen”\(^{33}\) (245) Although this sounds “hopeful,” in the context of the rest of the chapter, it is quite a dark sentiment, for this sense of renewal brings to mind the sentiment of rebirth upon which so much of the appeal of Nazism was founded. This passage, perhaps more than any other, explicitly articulates the ethic of skepticism that is promulgated throughout Die Blechtrommel. Skepticism and doubt are the only possible inoculations against the infection of faith, hope, and love to which human beings are entirely too susceptible. It was entirely too easy, this passage argues, for German citizens to be swept up by the emotional appeal of National Socialism.

Somewhat paradoxically, however, at the very moment that the text’s ethic of skepticism comes to the surface in this scene, the ironic distancing that has characterized Oskar’s narration even to this point begins to dissolve, opening the door to greater empathy from the reader. In the face of such tragedy, even the all-knowing and all-seeing Oskar is as baffled as we mere mortals are:

\(^{32}\) “But once belief in Santa Claus turned out to be faith in the Gasman, they tried love, abandoning the order of things in Corinthians: I love you, they said, oh, I love you. Do you love yourself too? Do you love me, tell me, do you really love me? I love myself too” (188).

\(^{33}\) “And when the end came, they quickly turned it to a hopeful beginning; for in our country an end is always a beginning and there is always hope in any end, even the most definitive of ends. And so it is written: As long as man hopes, again and again he will begin anew with endings full of hope” (188).
Ich aber, ich weiß nicht. Ich weiß zum Beispiel nicht, wer sich heute unter den Bärten der Weihnachtsmänner versteckt, weiß nicht, was Knecht Ruprecht im Sack hat, weiß nicht, wie man die Gashähne zudreht und abdrosselt; denn es strömt schon wieder Advent, oder immer noch, weiß nicht, probeweise, weiß nicht, für wen geprobt wird, weiß nicht, ob ich glauben kann, daß sie hoffentlich liebevoll die Gashähne putzen, damit sie krähen, an welchem Morgen, an welchem Abend, weiß nicht, ob es auf Tageszeiten ankommt; denn die Liebe kennt keine Tageszeiten, und die Hoffnung ist ohne Ende, unter Glaube kennt keine Grenzen, nur das Wissen und das Nichtwissen sind an Zeiten und Grenzen gebunden und enden meistens vorzeitig schon bei den Bärten, Rucksäcken, Knackmandeln, daß ich wiederum sagen muß: ich weiß nicht . . . (245-246)\(^34\)

Poetry is the medium of not-knowing in *Die Blechtrommel*, the evolution of language that has lost its meaning in the face of historical tragedy. It is the language of the worm’s eye view. In these final paragraphs of Book One, the reader falls with Oskar from the position of the birds, high overhead, to find herself among the worms — worms that have no idea why they suffer, only that they do.

Despite the empathic invitation issued by Oskar here for the reader to join him in his *Nichtwissen*, Oskar ends this passage by underscoring his contempt for faith, hope, and love and the need for an ethic of skepticism: “der Mann hieß Saulus und war ein Saulus und erzählte als Saulus den Leuten au Korinth etwas von ungeheurer preiswerten Würsten, die er Glaube, Hoffnung und Liebe nannte, als leicht verdaulich pries, die er heute noch, in immer wechselnder Saulusgestalt an den Mann bringt”\(^35\)

\(^34\) As for me, I just don’t know. I don’t know, for example, who hides behind Santa Claus beards today, don’t know what Ruprecht his helper has in his sack, don’t know how to wring the necks of gas cocks, nor how to choke them off, for Advent is flowing forth again, or flows forth still, and I don’t know if it’s some trial run, don’t know for whom, don’t know if I believe in all good faith that they are polishing those gas cocks, one hopes with love, so they will crow, on what morn or eve I do not know, nor if it matters what hour of day; for Love knows no hour, and Hope knows no end, and Faith knows no boundaries, but knowing and not knowing are bound by time and boundaries, and generally end before their time with beards, and sacks on back, and almonds that crack, and I say again: I just don’t know . . . (188)

\(^35\)“there is no Paul, the man was called Saul, and Saul he remained and wrote as Saul to the people of
Saul was a conman, Oskar declares, and if something is too good to be true, then it probably is. The only possible way to react to these “low-priced sausages” that Saul is peddling is with skepticism. More importantly, however, is the sausage imagery, which recalls an earlier moment in the chapter, when Oskar witnesses the Nazis desecrating Sigismund Markus’s shop: “Einige hatten sich die Hosen heruntergerissen, hatten braune Würste, in denen noch halbverdaute Erbsen zu erkennen waren, auf Segelschiffe, geigende Affen und meine Trommeln gedrückt.”

When Oskar refers to the “amazingly low-priced sausages called Faith, Hope, and Love,” the scatological imagery from the previous scene comes to mind, and there is a reflexive moment of disgust, for which the reader has already been primed: disgust that occurs simultaneously with the words “Glaube-Hoffnung-Liebe” — disgust with the ideas themselves but perhaps also with the people who have bought into them. In the end, it is Oskar who concludes that it is faith, hope, and love who are responsible for the Gasman.

Perhaps more than any other passage in Die Blechtrommel, the “Glaube-Hoffnung-Liebe” chapter invites its reader to empathize with the novel’s narrator. But this invitation is part of the passage’s central paradox: we are invited to empathize with Oskar just as the problems inherent in that empathy are made clear to us. Empathy and emotion are rendered accessible only for Grass to underscore that they are, in fact, unethical in this situation, and not only because Sigismund Markus is a victim of fascism. Rather, it is because empathy and emotion — faith, hope, and love — were themselves responsible for his death at the hands of the Nazis. It is only the ethic of skepticism present throughout the novel but most clearly articulated in the “Glaube-Hoffnung-Liebe” chapter that might prevent such a disaster from ever happening again. By invoking his reader’s empathy here, Grass in fact turns the tables, points the finger back at his reader, and underscores the complicity of our own emotional experience of his text.

Corinth in praise of those amazingly low-priced sausages he called Faith, Hope, and Love, so easy to digest, which, in the ever changing form of Saul, he palms off on mankind to this very day” (190).

36 “I found them at play as I too stepped into the shop through the window. A few had pulled down their trousers, had deposited brown sausages, in which half-digested peas could still be discerned, on sailing ships, fiddling monkeys, and my drums” (185).
Conclusion

Grass’s emphasis on the reader’s own complicity is unsurprising, given that *Die Blechtrommel* was published thirty years before Germany truly dedicated itself to the project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. This project involved a great deal of remembering, a great deal of reconstruction of the past, and a great deal of narrativizing. Throughout the decades-long process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, however, the question of the ethics of empathy in narrating such stories has remained a thorny one. Even today, sixty years after the end of the war and nearly seventy years after Kristallnacht, the question remains: With whom may we as readers empathize? With whom may *writers* empathize? For Grass in 1959, it was clear that it was not ethically possible for a German writer to empathize with the victims of fascism, and he does not try. His emphasis throughout *Die Blechtrommel* is on those who, like his presumptive father Matzerath, had allowed atrocities to occur and perhaps even participated. As such, ethical estrangement is crucial in *Die Blechtrommel*. Grass never allows his reader to assume a position of superiority, for his presumed reader — a German in 1959 — is likely to be just as guilty as any of his characters. Grass’s narrative estrangement, in contrast, demonstrates the need for a new ethic of skepticism that works against the emotion-based decision making responsible for the rise of fascism. Furthermore, it attempts to inculcate such an ethic within the reader.

Thirty years later, the situation was quite different. The next writer I will consider, W.G. Sebald, was of a different generation from Grass; he was of the 1968 generation, which condemned their parents for their participation in National Socialism. Sebald himself spent most of his life abroad in England precisely because of the culture of silence he sensed around these issues. This silence began to break in the 1980s, and — perhaps not coincidentally — this is when Sebald began writing. With three decades separating him from the actual events of the war, Sebald was able to attempt something Grass had not dared: to empathize with the victims of fascism. But Sebald recognized that to do so directly would still be a violation of narrative ethics. As such, he developed techniques of narrative estrangement that allowed him
to explore the experiences of the victims of fascism in more detail than Grass ever could, while at the same time maintaining a necessary distance from that experience for both himself and his reader. For Grass, therefore, the dialectic of empathy and estrangement present in his work is about underscoring his reader’s complicity, undermining empathy and emotion as ways of making moral decisions, and promulgating an ethic of skepticism. For Sebald, in contrast, it is about an ethical approach to the narratives of fascism’s victims.
Chapter 3

. . . sagte Austerlitz: W.G. Sebald’s Mediated Narration and the Ethics of Empathy

Although W.G. Sebald was well known for including images in all of his fictional and semi-fictional work, the photo that graces the cover of his fourth and final novel, *Austerlitz* (2001) is perhaps the most iconic and certainly among the most striking. The sepia-toned image is of a boy dressed as a page. He is clad all in white, aside from his shoes, which are black; he is wearing a cape and holding a plumed hat, and he is standing in a nondescript field, clearly posed for the photograph. The boy stands out clearly against dark grass, but the photo grows blurry at the horizon, as the boy’s blond hair blends into the white of the sky. The boy is looking directly at the camera, and the expression on his face is difficult to parse. He is not smiling, but he also does not appear unhappy; he seems as though he might be about to smile, as if the camera caught him in the second just before it happened. But it is impossible to say for sure. The reader must ask: Is he resentful of being dressed like this and then photographed? Is he excited about the party he is attending in his costume? It is not for us to know for certain.

This photo reappears fairly late within the text, and it is revealed that the photo is of the protagonist, Austerlitz, himself, as a very young boy. The photo was taken when he accompanied his mother Agáta to a ball, she as the Rose Queen, he as her page. Austerlitz is given the picture by his nanny Vera when he finds her in Prague, decades after he was sent to England on a *Kindertransport*. As the cover of the novel, the photo is meant to intrigue readers and prompt us to wonder who the boy in the white costume is. Within the text, however, in the context of the larger narrative, this photo of Austerlitz serves quite a different purpose. Austerlitz relays to the narrator how he stares at the photo once Vera has given it to him:

> Das Bild lag vor mir, sagte Austerlitz, doch wagte ich nicht, es anzufassen. [. . .] An mich selber in dieser Rolle aber erinnerte ich mich nicht, so sehr ich mich an jenem Abend und später auch muhte. Wohl

It is significant that Austerlitz cannot remember the moment in which the photo was taken, no matter how long he spends looking at it. For Austerlitz, this boy is a messenger from the past who asks to be saved from the “bevorstehenden Unglück” that awaited him only six months later, when he was sent to Wales on one of the last Kindertransporte, never to see his mother again. But of course, he cannot be saved; the boy’s unhappiness cannot be averted, not least by his much older self. But perhaps more significant still is the fact that Austerlitz does not understand the boy in the photo as being himself, even after being told by Vera that it is him; his connection to the photo is mediated by time and the vagaries of memory, even while his compassion is stirred by the page boy’s “forschenden Blick.”

Austerlitz’s reaction here to the page boy encapsulates two critical issues: the mediated nature of narration in Sebald’s work and the importance of photographs to its affective impact on the reader. The navigation between text and image renders the dialectic of empathy and estrangement that I have identified particularly malleable within Sebald’s work. The mediated narration that Sebald favors throughout his repertoire disrupts the reader’s instinctive empathic connection with the text, while the photographs of faces and eyes that occasionally interrupt the text to startle the reader issue an invitation to mindread. I will demonstrate, however, that the interplay

37 “The picture lay before me, said Austerlitz, but I dared not touch it. [. . .] Yet hard as I tried both that evening and later, I could not recollect myself in the part. I did recognize the unusual hairline running at a slant over the forehead, but otherwise all memory was extinguished in me by an overwhelming sense of ht long years that had passed. I have studied the photograph many times since . . . And always in doing so I always felt the piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting in the gray light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of him. (180-182. All English translations are by Anthea Bell.)
between the narration and the photographs consistently problematizes this invitation and underscores the ethical dilemmas of mindreading in works that, like Sebald’s, take up the narratives of the victims of fascism. Empathy is, in such cases, not only an inadequate tool, but also an inappropriate or even unethical one, as Sebald’s narration and use of photographs emphasizes at every turn.

In this chapter, I will consider two of Sebald’s novels, *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992) and *Austerlitz* (2001). Although it would be reductive to call either of these novels “Holocaust novels,” critics have paired them since the publication of *Austerlitz* because both novels attempt to navigate the extremely difficult issues of Holocaust representation. The issue of empathy in representations of the Holocaust is a thorny one, and one that critics generally agree that Sebald negotiated more successfully than most writers; indeed, Stuart Taberner notes that Sebald “is almost universally presented in English-language criticism as an author whose literary texts and essays incorporate an ideal solution to the related problems of how to write about the Holocaust and how to ‘write Jewish fates’ as a German without positing an inappropriate identification between the perpetrator nation and its victims” (181). The methods through which Sebald has, in the view of most critics (though notably not of Taberner himself), avoided this problematic identification include forms of mediated and what I will call hypermediated narration. Characters, whether real or imaginary, living or dead, are rarely allowed to speak for themselves, but rather must speak through Sebald’s narrators, with the result that the reader is often three or four steps removed from the person whose story they are experiencing.

This sort of hypermediated narration, while it allows the reader to theorize about and understand the emotions that should result from the events that are being described, often prevents a more spontaneous emotional reaction on the part of the reader. This is particularly true wherever and whenever Sebald dares to narrate the story of a victim of fascism, as he does in both *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*. Sebald therefore uses techniques of narrative estrangement to navigate the ethical stakes of his stories, but there is much less evidence of the sort of ethical estrangement that is found in either Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* or the novels of Thomas Bernhard, which I will discuss briefly below. It is perhaps for this very reason that the particular
dialectic of empathy and estrangement in Sebald’s work is comparatively less jarring to the reader. *Empathy* is hardly a forbidden concept for Sebald, even if he also recognizes the moments in which it is and should be impossible. His work therefore does not thwart empathy at every turn, but rather renders the reader constantly aware of its limitations and inadequacies as a way of understanding the world. As I will show, for empathy to function as a sustainable and appropriate ethical principle in Sebald’s world, there must also, always, be skepticism and doubt.

**Mediated and Hypermediated Narration in *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz***

Even in his earliest novel, *Schwindel. Gefühle* (1990), Sebald clearly resists what Seymour Chatman calls “nonnarrated stories” — that is, stories in which the narrator is invisible, such as in the 19th century realist fiction described by Lilian R. Furst in *All is True*. Rather, Sebald’s work is an example of what Chatman terms “mediated narration”; such narration “presumes a more or less express communication from narrator to audience” (Chatman 139). Sebald’s narrator, however little he may tell us about himself, never lets us forget his presence, even if it is not, strictly speaking, his story in which we are most interested. Furthermore, Ben Hutchinson argues that “one can trace, through the course of [Sebald’s] books, a gradual progression in narrative complexity, a thickening of the filters between the ‘action’ and the reader” (171). In other words, one can see, from *Schwindel* to *Austerlitz*, a dramatic increase in narrative mediation. Speaking about *Die Ausgewanderten* specifically — although I argue that this is equally true of *Austerlitz* — Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchenau notes that the text “incorporates a curious interplay between the narrator’s presence and absence, the stability and instability of narration and the reliability of proof versus the unreliability of narration and memory” (152). Indeed, I would argue that through the texts’ mediated narration, Sebald’s reader becomes aware — to an even greater degree than Grass’s reader — of the interdependent relationship between narration, memory, and fiction, and the reconstructed and therefore unreliable nature of all narration. In this section, I will discuss the impact of
This awareness for the reader’s subsequent emotional experience and the equally important and equally curious interplay between empathy and estrangement.

This “thickening” of narration between action and reader is quite deliberate, and it is recognizable to those readers familiar with Thomas Bernhard’s work. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, Sebald states that he deliberately and consciously borrowed much of his narrative technique from Bernhard:

[Thomas Bernhard] only tells you in his books what he heard from others. So he invented, as it were, a kind of periscopic form of narrative. You’re always sure that what he tells you is related, at one remove, at two removes, at two or three. That appealed to me very much, because this notion of the omniscient narrator who pushes around the flats on the stage of the novel, you know, cranks things up on page three and moves them along on page four and one sees him constantly working behind the scenes, is something that I think one can’t do very easily any longer. (83, emphasis mine)

This “thickening” of narration is visible in many of Bernhard’s major works, most especially Kalkwerk; indeed, this thickening or periscopic narration is even more disruptive to the reader’s experience of the story than Sebald’s most extreme moments in Austerlitz. While “sagte Austerlitz” is perhaps the most frequent phrase in all of Austerlitz, the source tagging in Kalkwerk is often itself reported speech, from which the narrator wishes to distance himself: “soll Konrad gesagt haben” [“Konrad is said to have said”]. Such source tagging not only constantly reminds the reader that we are not privy to Konrad’s mind, but that the information being shared with us may not be accurate at all. The mediated narration of both Bernhard and Sebald’s texts allows the transmission of narrative, but it is undeniable that things are lost in that transmission.

One of those things lost, in both Sebald and Bernhard’s work, is the sort of direct connection between protagonist and reader that realist fiction facilitates and which Sebald consciously resists. Given that many of Sebald’s non-narrating characters are heavily based on people in Sebald’s own past, it is understandable that for Sebald, the omniscient narrator of 19th century literature and its descendants appears not only manipulative but also presumptive. Yet Sebald’s narration does not
completely resist such empathy in the same way that Bernhard’s seems to. Comparing the two authors, James Wood points out, “In Thomas Bernhard’s work, extremity of expression is indistinguishable from the Austrian author’s comic, ranting rage, and his tendency to circle obsessively around madness and suicide. Sebald takes some of Bernhard’s wildness and estranges it” (viii-ix). He accomplishes this act of estrangement through two distinct methods: through the use of “exquisitely courteous syntax” and a diction rendered “mysterious by a process of deliberate antiquarianism” (ix). Although this sometimes renders Sebald more linguistically difficult than Bernhard, it also renders him more emotionally palatable to the reader. His characters are, if nothing else, far easier to like than Bernhard’s. Still, Sebald’s characters’ mental states and motivations are always conveyed two, three, or even four steps removed, and the narrator rarely, if ever, dares to comment upon emotion without significant source tagging (i.e. “sagte Austerlitz,” or, in the German, the form of subjunctive that indicates reported speech).

This mode of narration has distinct consequences for the reader. Mark R. McCulloh argues that “Sebald has made [Bernhard’s ‘periscopic form of narrative’] his own by assuaging the stinging Bernhardian contempt, limiting the diatribes, and heightening the empathy” (133). I would agree with McCulloh in that empathy is heightened in Sebald’s work in comparison to Bernhard’s, but there are certain distinct limitations. Sebald’s narrator is far more present in his works than Bernhard’s narrator generally is, and yet we still know very little about him. Furthermore, although we may empathize with the narrator, his narration is still suspect. Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchenuau points to three particular elements of Sebald’s narration that invite this suspicion: “the use of the subjunctive, the use of translation, and self-critical comments” (147). All three of these “point to a strong presence of the narrator and emphasize the unreliability of narration” (Aliaga-Buchenuau 147). Significantly, it is not the narration of Sebald’s narrator that Aliaga-Buchenuau labels as unreliable, but rather narration in general; Sebald’s mediated form of narration merely underscores this more than most other forms. The presence of the subjunctive has a very specific distancing effect on the reader, and it indicates that not only is the narrator reporting what other people have said, there is also some level of doubt on the part of the
narrator. The moments in which the narration switches to the more immediate and intimate indicative mode are fleeting; before long the reader inevitably runs up against the limitations of Sebald’s narration and is once more reminded that the information is curated, edited, and mediated, if not actually fictionalized.

Sebald’s form of “periscopic” narration invites doubt and skepticism by underscoring for the reader, through the methods elucidated by Aliaga-Buchenuau, the ways in which the story conveyed to us by the narrator might be inaccurate: perhaps the narrator has misremembered the story; perhaps the person who related the story to the narrator never knew the truth or forgot it; perhaps the facts of the story are true, but there is no way to access the emotional truth of the story, nor do we as readers have that right or truly understand the characters’ motivations. “Truth” is, therefore, a rather shaky concept in Sebald’s work, though not quite as dramatically shaky as it is in Die Blechtrommel. Unlike Oskar, Sebald’s narrators do not lie to his reader outright; however, they also do not pretend to omniscience the way that Oscar does, and indeed, they emphasize at every turn the constructed and reconstructed nature of their narratives. Furthmore, that reconstruction must always be incomplete. The narrator and, by proxy, the reader may search for answers, but the key mysteries of the text, like the face of the boy Austerlitz in the photo that graces the cover, remain unresolved and unsolvable.

One such search for truth may be found in Die Ausgewanderten, Sebald’s second novel. Although Sebald’s own history of emigration is only indirectly tied to Germany’s violent twentieth century history, the history of emigration and exile from Germany in the last hundred years is intimately tied to it. Katja Garloff notes that, “Die Ausgewanderten has been hailed as a book that balances the claims of memory against the injunction against Holocaust representation, and the desire to understand the victims with the necessity to avoid a facile identification with them” (“The Emigrant as Witness,” 76). How Sebald manages this balancing act through mediated narration is closely related to how the dialectic of empathy and estrangement develops in his work, and also to why this dialectic is so crucial to understanding him: “When it came to illuminating the saddest spaces of the human spirit, Sebald was an empathetic and articulate scribe, yet just as though are limits imposed on the sensible depiction of
the Holocaust, one should consider whether there are boundaries around the empathy that an author can sensibly display” (Prager 76). Thus, although Sebald’s project, in both Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz, appears to be one of empathy and understanding, he remains aware of the ethical limitations imposed by his position as a German writer, limitations of which his German narrator is equally aware. To fully empathize with the emotional experience of his subjects and to facilitate that empathy for his reader would be in Sebald’s world view, a breach of narrative ethics, a transgression of the limitations Brad Prager describes above.

Sebald lays out his narrative ethics most explicitly in the second story in Die Ausgewanderten, which provides an accounting of the life of Paul Bereyter, a childhood teacher of Sebald who later committed suicide. In an interview with Carole Angier, Sebald said,

*The Emigrants* started from a phone call I got from my mother, telling me that my schoolteacher in Sontofen had committed suicide. This wasn’t very long after Jean Ámery’s suicide, and I had been working on Ámery. A sort of constellation emerged about this business of surviving and about the great time lag between the infliction of injustice and when it finally overwhelms you. (69-70)

This realization forces the narrator — as it forced Sebald — to investigate the circumstances that might have led to Bereyter’s death. He begins with Bereyter’s obituary in the local newspaper:

In einer weiter nicht erlauterten Bemerkung hieß es in dem Nachruf allerdings auch, dass Dritte Reich habe Paul Bereyter an der Ausübung seines Lehrerberufes verhindert. Diese gänzlich unverbundene und unverbindliche Feststellung sowohl als die dramatische Todesart waren die Ursache, weshalb ich mich während der nachfolgenden Jahre in Gedanken immer häufiger mit Paul Bereyter beschäftigte und schließlich versuchte, über die Versammlung meiner eigenen, mir sehr
lieben Erinnerungen an ihn hinaus, hinter seine mir unbekannte
Geschichte zu kommen.¹³⁸ (42)
Although the narrator at first tries to accomplish this mission by imagining what
Paul’s life and death would have been like, in the end he has to admit that “[s]olche
Versuche der Vergegenwärtigung brachten mich jedoch . . . dem Paul nicht näher,
höchstens augenblicksweise, in gewissen Ausserungen des Gefühls, wie sie mir
unzulässig erscheinen und zu deren Vermeidung ich jetzt aufgeschrieben habe, was ich
von Paul Bereyter weiß und im Verlauf meiner Erkundungen über ihn in Erfahrung
bringen konnte” ³⁹ (44-45). These sorts of “unzulässig” or “forbidden” moments of
emotional insight are, of course, precisely what readers expect from realist fiction.
However, Sebald’s narrator does not know what it was like to be Paul Bereyter, and
Sebald does not wish to presume, nor does he want his reader to presume, that they
know what Paul Bereyter felt or thought as a victim of fascism whose trauma during
the Nazi period eventually led to his death, decades later. This underscores Sebald’s
conviction as a writer that our ability to think and feel as others — to empathize — is
an artificial construction, and perhaps even, at times, an immoral one. Writing on this
same passage, Jan Ceuppens notes that “[t]he repetition of the verbs ‘imagine’ and
‘picture’ — in the German original, ‘sehen’ and ‘vorstellen’ — emphasizes what is at
stake: it is as if the narrator seeks to obey a Bildverbot, a prohibition against picturing
or imagining another person all too vividly” (253). Furthermore, Cueppens says, “one
could assume that in the passage quoted, Sebald is formulating a criticism of the kind
of literature that German ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ has favoured for some time, or
indeed of so much of the so-called holocaust literature bordering on kitsch in general”
(253). By this, Cueppens is referring to literature in which empathy is the primary
guiding moral — and, indeed, literary — principle. This passage is therefore an

¹³⁸ “Almost by way of an aside, the obituary added, with no further explanation, that during the Third
Reich Paul Bereyter had been prevented from practising his chosen profession. It was this curiously
unconnected, inconsequentential statement, as much as the violent manner of his death, which led me in
the years that followed to think more and more about Paul Bereyter, until, in the end, I had to get
beyond my own very fond memories of him and discover the story I did not know” (27-28).
³⁹ “[s]uch endeavors did not . . . bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional
moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me. It is in order to avoid this sort of wrongful
trespass that I have written down what I know of Paul Bereyter” (29)
explicit articulation of the ethical dilemma at the heart of Sebald’s work. There is, on the one hand, an all-too-human impulse to attempt to understand Paul Bereyter, and in particular to understand what fascism did to him and why he died. And yet there is also the sense that such an attempt, particularly by a German narrator (and author), is a violation.

But even if empathy is both impossible and unethical, the drive toward understanding in both the narrator and the reader remains undiminished. The narrator therefore turns to an intimate friend of Paul’s, Lucy Landau, to explain aspects of his own memories of Paul that the narrator cannot make sense of, particularly the Unröstlichkeit or “desolation” that seemed to overcome his beloved teacher at certain moments (62). In these sections, Paul’s story is told through Madame Landau; Madame Landau’s words are in turn conveyed by the narrator to the reader. Although this is not quite as mediated as the narration of Austerlitz’s mother’s story will be, it still results in grammatical constructions that force the reader to recognize just how removed he or she is from the story at hand: “So habe er ihr auch, sagte Mme. Landau, in den ersten Tagen ihrer Bekanntschaft bereits mit einer alles in Leichte und Unbedeutende wendenden Ironie berichtet über seinen unlängst erfolgten Versuch, sich das Leben zu nehmen” 40 (66). Here we have not only the “he told her, she said” construction but also indirect speech, as well as syntax that pushes the most important information in the sentence to the very end, delaying the reader’s satisfaction as long as possible. It leaves us with the knowledge that the Unröstlichkeit that the narrator identifies in Paul Bereyter is severe enough to have resulted in at least one prior suicide attempt, but the reason for this attempt remains unclear. Indeed, Paul conceals his true feelings about the suicide attempt from Lucy Landau — and therefore from the narrator and, ultimately, from the reader as well. The narrator, however, has rather specific ideas about what they were, ideas that are generally confirmed by Madame Landau. Paul was never deported or imprisoned, but the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany seems to have been the source of his first bout of depression. Unable to save his Jewish fiancée Helen Hollaender from being deported and forbidden from teaching

40 “Mme Landau said, he had told her, only a few days after they had met, with an irony that made everything seem light and unimportant, of his recent attempt to take his own life” (44)
due to his Jewish ancestry, Paul experiences for the first time “jenes unüberwindliche Gefühl der Niederlage, das ihn später so oft heimsuchen sollte und dem er jetzt nicht mehr auskam”\(^{41}\) (72).

It is significant that Paul’s tragedy is, according to Madame Landau, a specifically German tragedy. Paul’s emigration was short lived; after the war he returned to Germany, an event that Madame Landau calls “eine Aberration” \(^{42}\) (83). He might have done better to stay away, but, Madame Landau relates to the narrator, he could not, because he was “von Grund auf ein Deutscher”\(^{42}\) (84). Indeed, Paul’s complicated relationship with his native country sounds as though it is something that the narrator might have been able to empathize with, but the narrator, who does not share Paul’s one-quarter Jewish ancestry, does not presume to try.

In contrast to Paul Bereyter, Max Aurach, the subject of the fourth, last, and lengthiest story in Die Ausgewanderten, left Germany during the war, never to return. In many ways, Aurach seems to be a precursor to Jacques Austerlitz; at the very least, their stories bear a striking resemblance to each other, even if the characters themselves are quite different. Aurach is an artist, whom the narrator first encounters when he comes to Manchester to study. But it is not for thirty years that the narrator finally learns Aurach’s real story from a magazine article about his work: that Max Aurach (born Friedrich Maximilian Aurach) left Munich in 1939 when he was fifteen to come to England; his parents, who stayed behind, were subsequently deported and killed. Appalled that he had not known this sooner, the narrator seeks his friend out once more, and their subsequent conversation strongly foretells the conversations that the narrator of Austerlitz has with Austerlitz himself. Even Aurach’s ideas about how his experiences have affect his memory and his sense of time foretell Austerlitz’s own thoughts on the subject: “Es gibt weder eine Vergangenheit noch eine Zukunft. Jedenfalls nicht für mich”\(^{43}\) (270). Both characters are unable to imagine their futures because they are also unable to imagine their own pasts. Constructing a narrative of

\(^{41}\) “that insuperable sense of defeat that was so often to beset him in later times and which, finally, he could not shake off” (49)

\(^{42}\) “a German to the marrow” (57)

\(^{43}\) “There is neither a past nor a future. At least, not for me” (181).
their pasts is exactly what Sebald's narrators are able to do for them, even as those constructed pasts remain, in an emotional sense, unimaginable for the author, the narrator, and the reader.

Before the narrator leaves, Aurach gives him a manuscript: his mother’s memoirs, which she wrote between 1939 and 1941. Aurach tells the narrator that he has read them only twice, and only once meticulously. He cannot bring it upon himself to even begin the work of “dem Erinnern, dem Schreiben und dem Lesen” [remembering, writing, and reading] (289) that the memoirs require of him, and so he asks the narrator to do it for him. The remainder of the novel is largely lifted from the memoirs of Aurach’s mother, Luisa Lanzberg, who is allowed to speak for herself in a way that Austerlitz’s mother Agáta never is. But this past, too, is explicitly constructed, both by the narrator and by Luisa herself. In the first few pages of Luisa’s memoirs, the narrator takes care to remind the reader that this is Luisa’s diary by frequently adding “schreibt Luisa” [writes Luisa] or “wie Luisa schreibt” [so Luisa writes]. But gradually the narrator stops reminding the reader, and the narration segues smoothly into a first person account. The memoir is written at first in the present tense, as though it is the child Luisa describing her own distinctly Jewish life in the village of Steinach at the turn of the century. Only once the adult Luisa breaks in for the first time does the narration change into the past tense. “Die Zeit,” Luisa writes, just before this shift in narrative style. “In welcher Zeit ist das alles gewesen? Und wie langsam neigten sich nicht damals die Tage! Und wer war dieses fremde Kind auf dem Heimweg, müde, mit einer winzigen weißblauen Häherfeder in der Hand?”44 (310) What Luisa does not say here, nor anywhere else in the parts of her memoir that the narrator includes in the text, is that she is writing the memoir because she senses that time, which seemed to pass so slowly when she was a child, is about to run out for her.

Here, Sebald’s narrator reproduces not spoken but written narration. This is distinct from both Lucy Landau’s narration of Paul Bereyter’s life and Austerlitz’s narration of his mother’s. There are clear differences between writing and speaking as mediums, and a major one is the reproducibility and reliability of writing in contrast to

44 “Time. What time was all that? How slowly the days passed then! And who was that strange child, walking home, tired, with a tiny blue and white jay’s feather in her hand?” (207)
speaking. Writing remains on the page long after memory has faded; it is much easier to faithfully reproduce what someone has written than it is to faithfully reproduce what someone has said. It is therefore conceivable that a diary like Luisa’s might be reproduced word for word by the narrator, and in fact we are apparently meant to assume that the narrator of Die Ausgewanderten does exactly that. But we are also given to understand that her memoirs are not reproduced in full, as indicated when the narrator notes, in parentheses, at the beginning of a new paragraph, “Denke ich heute, heißt es an einer anderen Stelle in den Aufzeichnungen Luisas, an unsere Steinacher Kindheit zurück” (311, emphasis mine). Both Paul Bereyter and Luisa Lanzberg’s narratives are constructed by those who are left behind to tell their stories; furthermore, telling their story is, Max Aurach says clearly, work: It is work of writing, reading, and remembering. It is work of reconstruction, and it is, almost by its very nature, likely to be imperfect. Ultimately, we have no way of knowing what the narrator might have left out, just as we have no way of knowing how Agáta’s story might have changed in the telling from Vera to Austerlitz to the narrator to the reader, or what role the fallible nature of memory might have played in the reconstructed narratives.

Austerlitz, Sebald’s final work, is the only one of his works that might be considered a true novel, and yet it, too, presents the reader with many of the same difficulties as Sebald’s less novelistic works. These difficulties are due largely to Sebald’s conscious eschewing of many realist narrative conventions even in the most fictional of his texts, though it would be an oversimplification to say that Sebald eschews realism altogether. In fact, realism scholar Lilian R. Furst calls Austerlitz “realism gone wild” (225):

Austerlitz . . . roams all over the place figuratively as well as geographically, overloading readers with an abundance of frequently technical details in sentences pages long (one extends over nine pages), details that pose a tough challenging to readers’ capacity to process, let

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45 “If I think back nowadays to our childhood in Steinach (Luisa’s memoirs continue at another point)” (207, emphasis mine)
alone to accommodate them in the totality by means of interpretation.

(Furst 224-225)

To this list of textual challenges, I would add the “thickening” of narration: the increased distance between reader and narrative subject. Thus, in *Austerlitz*, the relationship between narrator, narrative subject, and reader is rendered yet more complicated than it is in *Die Ausgewanderten*. Narration in *Austerlitz* is not only mediated, but hypermediated. The phrase “sagte Austerlitz” [Austerlitz said] appears three or four times per page in certain parts; this serves to remind the reader, at every turn, of how removed he or she is from Austerlitz’s mind and how artificially the narrative has been constructed. Eventually, such source tags proliferate: it is not only Austerlitz telling the story, but also his mother, Agáta, and his former nanny, Vera.

Strikingly, however, there are moments in *Austerlitz* where that is not true: where the narrator breaks through and invokes strong empathy in the reader, even as he continues to tell us almost nothing about himself. Perhaps the most significant of these is a scene early in the novel, in which the narrator visits the Belgian fortress of Breendonk. This part of the novel is populated by photographs of the real Breendonk fortress, as well as a diagram of it, none of which show any people at all. For the narrator, however, Breendonk takes on a life of its own as “der breite Rücken, so dachte ich mir, eines Ungetüms, das sich hier, wie eine Walfisch aus den Wellen, herausgehoben hatte aus dem flandrischen Boden” (29), and as “eine einzige monolithische Ausgeburt der Häßlichkeit und der blinden Gewalt” (31). Perhaps most emblematic and disturbing is the photo of a hallway, lit only intermittently by inadequate fluorescent bulbs, disappearing into a complete blackness (34).

The reactions that the narrator has to the fortress in general are visceral and unpleasant, but the room that provokes the narrator’s most extreme reaction is the *Folterkammer*, or torture chamber (36). Upon entering the torture chamber, the narrator begins experiencing physical and perceptual distortions; he feels that the “die

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46 “something hunched and misshapen: the broad back of a monster, I thought, risen from this Flemish soil like a whale from the deep” (20)

47 “a monolithic monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence” (21)
Atemluft weniger und das Gewicht über mir größer wird"48 (35-36); then, as he stares at the floor of the chamber he has the sensation that the floor of the torture chamber, already more than a meter below that of the hallway, is continuing to sink. From this “abyss” rises a childhood memory of a butcher shop, and with it further perceptual distortions, illusions, or hallucinations:

Genau kann niemand erklären, was in uns geschieht, wenn die Türe aufgerissen wird, hinter der die Schrecken der Kindheit verborgen sind. Aber ich weiß noch, daß mir damals in der Kasematte von Breendonk ein ekelhafter Schmierseifengeruch in die Nase stieg, daß dieser Geruch sich, an einer irren Stelle in meinem Kopf, mit dem mir immer zuwider gewesen und vom Vater mit Vorliebe gebrauchten Wort ‘Wurzelbürste’ verband, daß ein schwarzes Gestrichel mir vor den Augen zu zittern begann und ich gezwungen war, mit der Stirn mich anzulehnen an die von bläulichen Flecken unterlaufene, griesige und, wie mir vorkam, von kalten Schweißperlen überzogene Wand.49 (37)

This scene, in contrast to the narration in the bulk of the novel, provokes strong empathy; the reader becomes closely aligned with the narrator in this passage through his description of his mental state. It is a scene that requires the reader to imagine intimately the suffering of the narrator and the reasons behind it, and it invites the reader even to experience some of that suffering herself, to the extent that this is possible. This effect is amplified when the narrator recalls later reading Jean Ámery’s description of the torture he underwent in that same room, particularly how he was “an seinen auf den Rücken gefesselten Händen, in die Höhe gezogen hatte, so daß ihm mit einem, wie er sagt, bis zu dieser Stunde des Aufgeschriebens nicht vergessenen

48 “the air was growing thinner and the weight above me heavier” (24-25)
49 No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open. But I do remember that there in the casemate at Breendonk a nauseating smell of soft soap rose to my nostrils, and that this smell, in some strange place in my head, was linked to the bizarre German word for scrubbing brush, Wurzelbürste, which was a favorite of my father’s and which I had always disliked. Black striations began to quiver before my eyes, and I had to rest my forehead against the wall, which was gritty, covered with bluish spots, and seemed to me to be perspiring with cold beads of sweat. (25-26)
Krachen und Splintern die Kugeln aus den Pfannen der Schultergelenke sprangen und er mit ausgerenkten, von hinten in die Höhe gerissenen und über den Kopf verdreht geschlossenen Armen in der Leere hinging.  

Sebald’s narration then quotes Ámery directly, in untranslated French. Thus, although this is a mediated account of torture, from Jean Ámery through the narrator and to the reader, Ámery is allowed to speak for himself. Furthermore, the description is visceral, particularly the vivid description of joint dislocation. As I will show, this vividness is largely missing from the narrator’s retelling of Austerlitz’s story, and it is perhaps present here only because the narrator, still locked in the throes of his own post-traumatic experience, also experiences an unsettling flash of empathy for Ámery, who, as one of fascism’s victims, should be off-limits in this way.

The Breendonk passage aligns the reader early on with the narrator, bringing their minds into close proximity with each other and emphasizing that his is the mind to which we have access. The reader is therefore able to establish an empathic connection with him in a way that is nearly impossible with Austerlitz himself, and even more so with third- and fourth-line narrators, such as Agáta and Vera. But the narrator’s own understanding of his own mind, and therefore our understanding of it, is imperfect; from the very first line of the novel, it is established that the narrator does not always understand why he does what he does: “In der zweiten Hälfte der sechziger Jahre bin ich, teilweise zu Studienzwecken, teilweise aus anderen, mir selber nicht rech erfindlichen Gründen, von England aus wiederholt nach Belgien gefahren.”

This awareness of his inability to know his own mind is something that the narrator has in common with Austerlitz himself, and it is only as the narrative progresses that Austerlitz, the narrator, and the reader come to understand how Austerlitz’s past suffering affects his present. It is only relatively late in his life that Austerlitz's frequent, compulsive visits to Liverpool Station result in a revelation: this is where he

50 “hoisted aloft by his hands, tied behind his back, so that with a crack and a splintering sound which, as he says, he had not yet forgotten when he came to write his account, his arms dislocated from the sockets in his shoulder joints and he was left dangling as they were wrenched up behind him and twisted together above his head” (26)

51 “In the second half of the 1960s I traveled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me” (3)
first met his foster parents when he came to England in the 1940s as a child on a Kindertransport. This realization proves key to him unlocking the secret to his past and current unhappiness, opening a flood of memories long buried in his unconscious, as memories begin surfacing in both dreams and waking moments. From there, Austerlitz becomes aware of — as he had not been before — the cognitive effort his unconscious put into protecting his conscious mind from these realizations: “Ich merkte jetzt, wie wenig Übung ich in der Erinnerung hatte und wie sehr ich, im Gegenteil, immer bemüht gewesen sein mußte, mich an möglichst gar nichts zu erinnern und allem aus dem Weg zu gehen, was sich auf die eine oder andere Weise auf meine mir bekannte Herkunft bezog”52 (201).

The reader follows this process of discovery as well, but not in the same visceral, affective way that she follows the narrator’s grim realization in Breendonk. In contrast to Sebald’s vivid depiction of the narrator’s mental state while teetering on the edge of the Breendonk torture chamber, the narrator’s reporting of Austerlitz’s discoveries, while linguistically beautiful, remain emotionally inaccessible. Perhaps the most direct and striking example of this is the scene wherein Austerlitz describes, via the narrator, how he suddenly recalled meeting his foster parents for the first time:

Den Zustand, in den ich darüber geriet, sagte Austerlitz, weiß ich, wie so vieles, nicht genau zu beschreiben; es war ein Reißen, das ich in mir verspürte, und Scham und Kummer, oder ganz etwas anderes, worüber man nicht reden kann, weil dafür die Worte fehlen, so wie mir die Worte damals gefehlt haben, als die zwei fremden Leute auf mich zutrat, deren Sprache ich nicht verstand.53 (197-198)

This passage’s true emotion, as so much of the emotion present in Austerlitz, lives in the silences; it is “inexpressable,” and the narrator does not venture to aid the reader in

52 “I realized then, he said, how little practice I had in using my memory, and conversely how hard I must have always tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past” (139)

53 As so often, said Austerlitz, I cannot give any precise description of the state of mind this realization induced; I felt something rending within me, and a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it, just as I had no words all those years ago when the two strangers came over to me speaking a language I did not understand. (137)
his or her understanding of Austerlitz’s own emotional state. It is possible, of course, that Austerlitz would not be any more forthcoming if he were speaking to his reader directly, but the mediated quality of the narration means that emotion that is already inexpressable becomes even more inaccessible.

Moreover, this elliptical inexpression of emotion becomes yet more pronounced once Austerlitz begins reporting the story of his childhood nanny, Vera and that of his parents. These scenes become, I argue, hypermediated; we are no longer receiving accounts second-hand from the narrator, nor even third hand from Vera herself, but often fourth-hand from Austerlitz’s own parents. The historical narrative that is at the heart of Austerlitz, that of the Nazi occupation of Prague and the deportation of the city’s Jews to ghettos and concentration camps, is even more heavily mediated than Austerlitz’s own personal narrative. It is not unusual in these chapters for a sentence to contain two source tags, reminding the reader that we are receiving this information third or even fourth hand through phrases such as “wie ich von Vera weiß, sagte Austerlitz” (235). This type of narration mutes and muffles the narrative’s emotional affect, a phenomenon that becomes particularly pronounced in the middle of the novel, during Austerlitz’s accounts of Vera’s memories of the past. The narrator writes, for example, “An meinem dritten Tag in Prag, so erzählte Austerlitz weiter, nachdem er sich etwas gesammelt hatte” (233), without describing the emotions that caused the lack of composure or even what it looked like; similarly, Austerlitz will note that “[n]ach solchen Bemerkungen Veras trat oft ein längeres Stillschweigen ein, als wußten wir beide nicht weiter” (293), while giving the reader very little clue as to the emotional quality of that silence.

In fact, these silences and losses of composure are only ever described retrospectively, never as they occur. For a narrative with startlingly long sentences, Austerlitz is remarkably elliptical, and it forces the reader to fill in those silences and ellipses. In so doing, Sebald resists rendering the grief of the victims easy fodder for

54 “Vera had told me, said Austerlitz” (162)
55 “On my third day in Prague, so Austerlitz continued his story, when he had recovered some degree of composure” (162)
56 “[s]uch remarks of Vera’s were often followed by a long silence, as though neither of us knew what to say” (205)
the reader’s affective experience. One of the most striking examples of this is the scene in which Austerlitz’s father Maximilian describes (via Vera, via Austerlitz, via the narrator) the state of Germany under Hitler. Here, in one of Sebald’s characteristically long, complex sentences, Maximilian describes what it was like to watch Triumph des Willens in Munich when it first came out in 1935. The narration itself stands in stark contrast to the raw emotion evoked by the film, which I analyzed in Chapter 1.

“Nicht nur seien die von Ehrfurcht geschlagenen Zuschauer Zeugen geworden, wie sich das Fluzeug des Führers durch die Wolkengebirge allmählich herabsenkt auf die Erde . . . — nein, man sah auch, so, sagte Vera, berichtete Maximilian, aus der Vogelschau eine im Morgengrauen bis gegen den Horizont reichende Stadt von weißen Zelten, aus denen, so wie ein wenig licht wurde, einzeln, paarweise und in kleinen Gruppen die Deutschen hervorkam und sich in einem schweigsamen, immer enger sich schließenden Zug alle in dieselbe Richtung bewegten, als folgten sie einem höheren Ruf und seien, nach langen Jahren in der Wüste, nun endlich auf dem Weg ins Gelobte Land.57 (243-244)

The effect of the mediated narration is amplified here, as it is elsewhere in Sebald’s work, by the use of the reported speech. Maximilian speaks through Vera, who speaks through Austerlitz, who speaks through the narrator; this is the only way Maximilian might speak now, for his death makes it impossible for him to speak for himself. This scene, like the one I discuss below, invites empathy to a certain degree; it invites us to imagine what it might have been like for Maximilian to watch Triumph des Willens in a cinema full of enraptured Germans. But the narration itself undermines this empathy, muting the passage’s emotion, and underscoring the degree to which truly empathizing

57 Not only did the overawed spectators witness the Führer’s airplane descending slowly to earth through towering mountain ranges of cloud . . . — no, said Vera, Maximilian told us that a bird’s eye view showed a city of white tents extending to the horizon, from which as day broke the Germans emerged singly, in couples, or in small groups, as they all went in the same direction, following, so it seemed, some higher bidding, on their way to the Promised Land at last after long years in the wilderness. (169)
with Maximilian — truly feeling as he felt in that Munich cinema — is a narrative and ethical impossibility.

Another such scene that is even more striking in this regard is the one in which Vera recalls saying good-bye to Agáta; this scene is particularly startling given how emotional one would expect it to be — indeed, how emotional the scene is, to a certain point:

Agáta bat mich bald, sie zu verlassen. Beim Abschied umarmte sie mich
und sagte, dort drüben ist der Stramovka-Park. Würdest du dort
manchmal spaziergehen für mich? Ich hab dieses schöne Gelände so lieb
gehabt. Vielleicht wenn du in das dunkle Wasser der Teiche schaust,
vieleicht siehst du an einem guten Tag mein Gesicht. Ja und dann, sagte
Vera, bin ich nach Hause gegangen.\footnote{Agáta soon asked me to leave her. When we parted she embraced me and said: Stromovka Park is over there, would you walk there for me sometimes? I have loved that beautiful place so much. If you look into the dark water of the pools, perhaps one of these days you will see my face. Well, said Vera, so then I went home” (179).} (257)

As in so much of the novel, the emotion of this passage lives in what is not said: that Agáta does not expect to return, and that, if Vera does see her face “in das dunkle Wasser der Teiche,” it will not be because she is there beside her, in the flesh. It will be instead (the imagery implies) because the pools themselves are linked to the unfathomable, dark places of our own minds, and maybe even to the world beyond this one. The poetry and imagery of this scene draw the reader in, but Agáta’s declaration is followed immediately by, “Ja und dann, sagte Vera, bin ich nach Hause gegangen” [“Well,” said Vera, “and then I went home.”] This transition — sudden and incredibly short for Austerlitz — disrupts the emotion that started to build during Vera’s reporting of Agáta’s final words to her. I argue, however, that as in Vera’s recounting of Maximilian’s description of Triumph des Willens, the disruption does not entirely undermine the emotional effect of the passage. We may not have access to Agáta’s mind, but we have enough access to Vera’s to imagine how this must have affected her at the time. It affected her enough that she still remembers Agáta’s words all these many years later.
These sorts of empathic moments are not unique to Sebald; indeed, I have argued with Grass and I will argue with Haneke that moments of intimacy, of tenderness, of empathy are present in even the most estranging of their works. But each of them also consciously and consistently undermines these moments, albeit in different ways. In the case of Sebald, his ethical issues with realist representation and the invocation of empathy prompts him to prevent direct connection between reader and narrator through mediated narration, thereby forcing the reader to acknowledge that ultimately, it is impossible to understand the minds of others; indeed, under certain circumstances, it is unethical even to try. The narrator and Austerlitz both accept that there is much they cannot understand; they themselves remain skeptical about their own motivations and their own understandings of their own and each other’s minds. However, I argue that it is almost impossible to read in a purely skeptical mode; we as readers are too accustomed to experiencing empathy as we read. Furthermore, Sebald is not entirely discouraging of such our attempts at empathy, even if they inevitably fail. Indeed, while Sebald’s mediated narration deliberately thwarts mindreading and empathy, other aspects of the texts, particularly the photographs that are interspersed throughout the narrative, invite it.

**Reading the Mind Behind the Eyes: The Faces of History**

At the beginning of my first chapter, I described how the reader turns a page very early in *Austerlitz* and is confronted by a series of four photographs. Each is a pair of eyes, two of nocturnal animals such as those in the Nocturama of Antwerp Zoo, and the other two are of human eyes — specifically, they are the eyes of artist Jan Peter Tripp and and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In my first chapter, I argue that these photographs represent a mindreading exercise for the reader, and that the photographs are meant to prompt the reader to pause and linger, attempting to see in them the effects that the narrator describes. Wittgenstein, I mentioned, is particularly significant, for it is over his face that we are meant to superimpose Austerlitz himself, and it is therefore his eyes upon which we are asked to expend the most cognitive
energy. But that effort to read Wittgeinstein’s eyes, like so many mindreading exercises in Sebald’s texts, is an inevitable failure.

In this section, I shall consider a variety of photographs from both *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*; in particular, I am interested in moments like the one I have just described, in which the reader turns the page of the novel and encounters a face or a pair of eyes. This early scene in *Austerlitz* is perhaps the most memorable instance of this, but it is hardly the only one. While critics have expended a great deal of energy discussing the photographs and their place within Sebald’s work, there has been, on the whole, little attention paid to the empathic function of the photographs: that is, to the fact that the photographs invite the reader to partake in a mindreading exercise with people who are, on the whole, already long dead. Furthermore the nature of their deaths often problematize or even preclude the possibility of real empathy on the part of the reader, who cannot understand the suffering that the photographic subject will endure but has not yet endured at the moment in time in which the photograph was taken.

Given that the inclusion of photographs were one of the most striking and unusual features of his texts, Sebald was often asked in interviews about their origin and their meaning. Most of the photos, he claimed, came from “the albums that . . . middle-class people kept in the thirties and forties. And they are from the authentic source. Ninety percent of the images inserted into the text could be said to be authentic, i.e. they are not from other sources used for the purpose of telling the tale” (Wachtel 40-41). In terms of their purpose, Sebald identifies two main ones: verification (that is, verification of the story that Sebald’s narrator is relating to the reader) and the “arresting of time” (Wachtel 41). Photographs, in other words, slow down a reader, causing them to linger, to question, to think; I argue that when a photograph is of a person, particularly a face, a reader is even more likely to slow down, and to attempt not only to connect the photograph with the text, but also to read some deeper meaning within the photograph itself. To return to my first example, it is no great feat of interpretation to connect the four photos of eyes to the text, which explicitly mention the animals in the Nocturama and their resemblance to “certain painters and philosophers.” But the reader then pauses over the photographs of the sets
of human eyes. Perhaps he or she recognizes the eyes; the photograph of Wittgenstein from which the eyes were taken is relatively well known. It is more likely, however, that the reader does not immediately recognize either Tripp or Wittgenstein, and is caught simply by the invitation to mindread, to see within the eyes what Sebald’s narrator has seen.

Sebald alludes to other functions of the photographs in that same interview, when he says, “I have always had at the back of my mind this notion that of course [the dead] aren't really gone, they just hover somewhere at the perimeter of our lives and keep coming in on brief visits. And photographs are for me, as it were, one of the emanations of the dead, especially these older photographs of people no longer with us” (39-40). The “spectral” presence of the dead in photographs is perhaps most palpable when we are looking at photographs of people we, personally, knew, but the fictional narrative in which we find these photographs provides its own context and its own ways of “knowing” — its own forms of intimacy and empathy. For some critics, this is a positive development; J.J. Long for example, writing on family photographs and their relationship to Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” writes that, “[t]he combination of narrative and photography in Die Ausgewanderten can thus be seen as an attempt, at the level of form, to counteract the dispersal, dissipation, and rupture inherent in the historical process. For Sebald . . . it is only through such aesthetic strategies that history can possibly be redeemed” (137).

For other critics, however, such as Taberner, this is highly problematic. Some history, after all, should not be redeemed. In his own piece on photographs in Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz, Taberner writes:

The photographs are thus the visual equivalents of the constant textual allusions to objects that tender a split second’s insight into the quotidian normality destroyed by the Holocaust. These markers are all that remains of people and places catapulted into the horrors of the present, now assembled and redesignated as traces of the prehistory of the Holocaust. This is a designation that they attempt to resist, but which, for us, is indispensable. Because, in the wake of the Holocaust, we cannot grasp them in the integrity of the moment in which they
actually existed in context, as the moment is unrecoverable to us, we can only comprehend them, albeit inadequately, within a teleological reading of history. And teleology, it might be argued, is simply another word for fate. (184)

For Taberner, then, Sebald’s narrative traps the photographic subject like a fly in amber; unlike the fly, though, the subject is not perfectly preserved at that moment in time, but rather imbued with meaning from the “fate” that awaits them, ten, twenty, or thirty years later. This lends the subject’s death an air of inevitability: They did not know it then, but their death has always already awaited them, even at the moment they were photographed, in Theresienstadt or Auschwitz. This teleological view of history is problematic not least for the way in which it strips history of its connection to human agency, rendering it part of natural history — a history over which we have no control. What neither Taberner nor Long acknowledges, however, is the importance of the photographs for the reader’s affective experience of the text: specifically, the extent to which our affective reactions are predicated upon the knowledge we have that the subjects do not. When we turn the page in the fourth and final section of *Die Ausgewanderten* to find Max Aurach’s parents, Luisa and Fritz (326), staring up at us, our reactions cannot preclude our knowledge of how they died.

It is therefore impossible to read these photos in isolation, or to pretend that our emotional reactions to them are not almost inevitably based on the teleological sense of history that Taberner identifies. But I argue that the reader’s emotional reaction is also predicated upon her shock at turning the page and finding a photograph, particularly that of a face or a close-up of an eye, looking back at us. At first glance, the photographs stand in stark contrast to the mediated or even hypermediated narration I discussed in the first part of this chapter. Although the narration itself distances us from its subject or subjects, the photographs provide an invitation to mindread and, moreover, to a more affective form of empathy. This appears to shift the dynamic between empathy and estrangement within the text. Deeper analysis, however, reveals that the presence of photographs does not shift the dynamic so far that unmitigated empathy may ever truly take place. Even while they represent an invitation to empathy, the photographs also represent a caesura in the
text: what Maya Barzilai labels “a disruptive force that relentlessly severs the narrative flow” (217). This disruption, and the sense of the uncanny that accompanies many of the photographs (Barzilai 211), forces the reader to doubt his or her own ability to read the minds behind the eyes of the photographic subjects and to question, in the most extreme cases, whether the face we are attempting to read masks the right mind. The photographs thus serve as an invitation to an empathy that is subsequently thwarted, thereby underscoring the problematic and limited ability of empathy to serve as a way of understanding the figures in the photographs.

The first set of photographs that I will discuss appears in the section of Die Ausgewanderten about Paul Bereyter. Pages 70-71 actually contain three photos in the German edition: a photo of the pupils in one of Paul’s very first classes as a teacher, a photo of his fiancée Helen Hollaender, and a triptych of Paul and Helen together. This section is narrated by Paul’s friend Madame Landau, who provides the narrator and, by extension, the reader, with some guidance toward an interpretation of the photographs. But this must remain her interpretation only, for the photographs allude to a story Madame Landau has no way of knowing fully:

Die um paar ein paar Monate ältere Helen . . . ist für die Paul, einer Mutmaßung, Mme. Landau zufolge, nicht weniger als eine Offenbarung gewesen, dann wenn diese Bilder nicht trügen, sagte sie, dann war die Helen Hollaender freimütig, klug und zudem ein ziemlich tiefes Wasser, in welchem der Paul gerne sich spiegelte.59 (71-72)

The photographs here serve as a proxy for that which cannot be known, which in this case is not only or even primarily factual information, but emotion. Paul and Helen are both dead by the time Madame Landau tells their story to the narrator; the facts may be known — though even they are somewhat questionable — but no one, not even Madame Landau herself, knows the emotional truth of their story without the photographs themselves.

59 “Helen, who was a month or so older . . . came as a veritable revelation to Paul; if these pictures can be trusted, she said, Helen Hollaender was an independent-spirited, clever woman, and furthermore her waters ran deep. And in those waters, Paul liked to see his own reflection.” (48)
Indeed, even with the photographs, that truth is, as Madame Landau herself points out, highly suspect; she is careful to insert the caveat “wenn diese Bilder nicht trügen.” Of course, the photos are suspect not because they outright lie, but because there is no way to interpret them that is not speculative. It is therefore up to the reader to seek out the emotional truth behind Lucy Landau’s narrative in the triptych of the couple at the bottom of the page and in the picture of Helen just above it. The three photos at the bottom are clear demonstrations of Paul and Helen’s happiness, and they evince a sense of carefree whimsy that seems almost cruel when viewed retrospectively, through Stuart Taberner’s teleological lens. But the most interesting photograph by far is the one of Helen seated on a grassy field, looking not at the camera but off to the side. The reader pauses here, searching Helen’s face for the deep waters Lucy Landau spoke of, for her independent spirit, for her cleverness. Though we know little about Helen beyond her brief relationship with Paul and her eventual deportation, the photograph gives us far more than the text would without it. In the end, we cannot say any better than Madame Landau what Helen was thinking or feeling at the moment the photograph was taken. The empathy we might feel for Helen is necessarily tempered by doubt at our own ability to read the mind behind the eyes in her photograph.

This feeling of an emotional mystery that can never be solved is not unique to the photo of Helen Hollaender in Die Ausgewanderten. It may also be seen in two very striking photos in Austerlitz, both of which may be of Austerlitz’s mother, Agáta. The first photo is actually a still from a film about the ghetto of Theresienstadt, where Austerlitz knows his mother was for some time after being deported from Prague; the second is of a photograph of an actress that Austerlitz finds in the Prague theatrical archives. Both photos consist primarily of a face rising out of the dark. Austerlitz describes the face of the woman in the first photo, which is actually a still from a film about the ghetto of Theresienstadt, as “fast ununterschieden von dem schwarzen Schatten, der es umgibt”\(^6\) (354). Austerlitz stares at the women’s face,

\(^6\) “barely emerging from the black shadows around it [the face]” (251)
“gleichermaßen fremde und vertraute” (355), until it begins to match his memories of his mother. But it is impossible for him to say whether it is truly Agáta’s face, or whether the face in the still from the film has become superimposed over his faint and faded memories of his mother, much as Wittgenstein’s face is imposed over both Austerlitz and Sebald’s own. Indeed, Vera tells him that the woman in the film is not Agáta. It is another resident of Theresienstadt, who, though unimportant to Austerlitz’s story, likely met the same end that Agáta did. This begs the question of why, if the woman it shows is not Austerlitz’s mother, Sebald chose to include the photograph at all.

In order to answer this question, I will turn now to the second photograph, which consists of a pale face, beautiful and sad, against a black background (253). Brad Prager, who calls this photograph “one of the work's most haunting ones” (100), compares it to French photographer Christian Boltanski’s Holocaust photographs, *Altar to Lycée Chases*. For this installation, Boltanski re-photographed the faces of students in a class photograph from a Viennese Jewish school, and then subjected the photographs to harsh light, giving the photographs the same sort of “haunting” or “ghostly” effect as the photograph of Agáta. Prager notes that Andrea Liss praises Boltanski’s work for the way it “resists empathy by presenting the dark and alienating physiognomies of the dead” (100). According to Liss, Boltanski’s photographs “refute the strategy of facile identification between the viewer and the memory of the picture” (Liss qtd. in Prager 100); in other words, Liss argues that these sorts of photographs disrupt the empathy that photographs usually inspire in the reader. However, Prager takes issue with Liss’s argument:

Boltanski's photographs, which deliberately avoid the representation of atrocity, horror, and genocide and which work through implication, gestures, and the sense that they mildly unsettle the viewers, can potentially be misunderstood and viewed more as sentimental than provocative. There is no guarantee that such images avoid the issues that accompany the awakening of empathy in viewers or readers. (101)

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61 “both strange and familiar” (251)
Here, I must agree with Prager: there is nothing about the photograph itself that renders empathy impossible, and indeed, the apparent sadness in Agáta’s face may raise in the reader an answering sense of empathic melancholy. Like the photo of Helen Hollaender that I discussed earlier, however, it is impossible to know for sure what Agáta was thinking when the photograph was taken; indeed, it is impossible to know for sure that the photograph is of Agáta at all. In fact, the apparent inauthenticity of the first photo also calls into question the authenticity of the second, even if Vera confirms, “zweifelfrei” [“beyond a shadow of a doubt”] that the second photo is Agáta. I argue that it is this uncertainty, more than anything about the photograph’s composition, that distances the reader from true empathy with the woman in the photograph. If we could know for certain that this was Agáta, Austerlitz’s mother, then we might be more inclined toward the sort of empathy that Taberner and Prager both find problematic; but, although our impulse toward mindreading is reflexive, that sliver of doubt pushes a wedge of estrangement between the reader and the woman in the photo. This uncertainty, Maya Barzilai says, asks us to “realize . . . the limits of our ability to know what took place in the past, especially when that past encloses a traumatic experience” (217). The photo of Agáta thus serves as a microcosmic representation of the ethic of skepticism and doubt that counterbalances our impulse toward empathy throughout Austerlitz, reminding us at every turn that empathy and emotion are not to be trusted.

Conclusion

The progression from the photo of Helen in Die Ausgewanderten to the photo of a woman who might be Agáta in Austerlitz may very well represent a renegotiation in Sebald’s work of the relationship between empathy and estrangement, as well as between narrative and image. There is no reason to doubt that the image in Die Ausgewanderten is truly Helen Hollaender. Although we receive that information second hand from Lucy Landau, the reader is not asked to question its authenticity; Lucy, after all, received the information directly from Paul Bereyter himself. The
uncertainty contained in the photo of Helen is emotional: we know what happened, insofar as that is possible, but we cannot guess at what Helen (or Paul) thought or felt. Notably, this photo of Helen is also an image of everyday life: Helen’s whole body is visible and fully present in a relatively mundane setting. In contrast, the image of Agáta, if it is Agáta, is forcefully ambivalent and also strikingly spectral; her white face comes to us out of the darkness, a true “emanation of the dead.” It is haunting in a way that Helen Hollaender’s photo simply is not, and it disrupts the text in a way that Helen’s photo does not. Moreover, the uncertainty contained in the photo of Agáta is factual: Is it Agáta at all? Like Austerlitz, Vera, and the narrator, the reader cannot ever know for certain. In this way, Austerlitz demands both greater empathy and greater uncertainty from its reader. It primes us for empathy with the eyes at the very beginning of the text, and then aligns us closely with the narrator through the scene at Breendonk. But the hypermediated narration and the uncertainty that surrounds certain key photographs forces distance between the reader and Austerlitz. Though our minds constantly seek to understand his, we are always doomed to fail.

The dialectic of empathy and estrangement present in Sebald’s works is less jarring that that which is present in Grass’s or in the films of Michael Haneke, which I will consider in my next and final chapter. Neither Grass nor Sebald eschews empathy altogether; indeed, empathy plays an enormous role in both their narratives, just as it does in Haneke’s work. But when Sebald estranges his reader, he does so less violently than either Grass or Haneke. There appear to be in Sebald many more moments at which the reader might empathize with the narrator or even with Austerlitz himself. But with many more invitations to empathy come many more opportunities to fail at it. This failure is important, for it is when we fail to empathize that we are forced to seek another form of understanding. Through its mediated and hypermediated narration, through the disruptive use of photographs of faces and eyes, and through the pervasiveness of uncertainty, Sebald’s work, like Grass’s Die Blechtrommel, constructs an ethic of skepticism and doubt. But Grass and Sebald do so to very different purposes. In Die Blechtrommel, skepticism and doubt are a necessary part of the resistance to the emotional elements of German society that allowed fascism to flourish; gullibility is the major sin for Grass, as is visible in the
“Glaube-Hoffnung-Liebe” chapter at the end of Book One. It is empathy’s narrow and biased nature that Grass wishes to undermine. In contrast, for Sebald — writing much later than Grass — skepticism and doubt provide a way of imagining trauma, memory, and the historical past while avoiding the violation of certain narrative ethics. There are things we may not imagine directly. Empathy and emotion are therefore suspect ways of experiencing a narrative when left to their own devices, but they become possible when tempered by skepticism and doubt. For Haneke, I will show, estrangement is a way of underscoring the fascist aspects of empathy in visual media and the viewer’s own complicity in reproducing structures of power. And yet, Haneke’s most recent film *Amour* (2012) reverses this aesthetic entirely and demonstrates the shock value of empathy itself.
Chapter 4

Dark Fables, Impossible Puzzles, and Franz Schubert:

The Redemption of Empathy in the Films of Michael Haneke

The opening titles to Michael Haneke’s 2001 La Pianiste come nearly eight minutes into the film, after a violent and shocking altercation between the protagonist Erika Kohut and her mother has already taken place. The titles themselves are very small white text on a black background. The film cuts repeatedly between the silent titles and pairs of disembodied hands on a piano. Unlike the silence of the titles, these shots contain layers of sound: the piano itself, as Erika’s students play first Chopin, then Schubert’s Winterreise, and over the sound of the piano, Erika’s voice, loudly berating her students for their poor playing. “The music is not purely descriptive,” she declares. “It is not indifferent and drenched in Viennese sentimentality.” Exasperated, she takes over and we see Erika’s hands demonstrating to her student how she wants the Schubert played. From this scene, the film cuts without transition to a shot of Erika on a break, eating a sandwich while staring out the window; only traffic sounds are to be heard here. Finally, with equal abruptness, the film cuts to her standing at a different window, listening as yet another student exasperates her with his inferior abilities, this time applied to one of Beethoven’s sonatas.62

These opening titles provide a clear window into what renders Haneke’s films both powerful and extremely difficult. Nothing occurs as expected: the film begins before the titles, leaving the viewer unanchored and rudderless; noise and silence work together to sow discord, estrangement, and disorientation; and the voice in the background, disembodied like the hands, is harsh and judgmental. Although Erika is berating her students, the audience may also feel berated. If they know Haneke’s work at all, they will not expect something “drenched in Viennese sentimentality.” Indeed, for Haneke, there appears to be no worse sin in filmmaking than that of sentimentality, and he has, on the whole, striven to shrive it from his work, much as Erika attempts to

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62 All musical notations are as described in Die Klavierspielerin: Drehbuch, Gespräche, Essays.
shrive it from her students’ playing. Charles Warren argues that in these opening scenes, particularly when the camera is focused on the set of hands on the piano, “Haneke in effect gives his camera to Erika, suggesting that the film is her projection, that she is its director, or that he is she — try thinking of every shot as Erika’s, her point of view away from herself, or her self-regard — it is possible” (506). This opening sequence collapses Haneke and Erika together in their striving for artistic perfection — a perfection as devoid of sentimentality as humanly possible. This methodical stripping away of sentimentality can make watching Haneke’s films challenging for a viewer whose expectations have been established through mainstream Hollywood cinema, but this challenge is Haneke’s point. The empathy that mainstream film invites is, for Haneke, deeply problematic, and renders the viewer complacent, passive, and complicit in myriad cinematic violences. The forms of estrangement found in Haneke’s films force the viewer into active participation, reflection, and awareness of the ways in which they themselves participate in on-screen violence — in, indeed, structures of power that might be considered fascist. Haneke’s films are therefore consistent in their use of estrangement, for it is an ethical necessity when one is in the position of cinematic voyeur. But that does not mean that the dialectic between empathy and estrangement in Haneke’s texts has remained static over time. Indeed, I will show in this chapter that this dialectic has been constantly renegotiated both within unique films and over the course of Haneke’s larger oeuvre. Moreover, Haneke’s most recent films evince an unexpected turn toward empathy as a mode of storytelling with its own shock-value.

My interest in this chapter is primarily on Haneke’s work since 2001. However, in order to understand the ways in which his work has changed, it is necessary to briefly examine his work from the 1990s. Haneke’s earlier films place great emphasis on estrangement of both the narrative and ethical varieties. In Haneke’s 1992 film Bennys Video, Benny, a young teenager, murders a girl after repeatedly watching a film in which a pig is slaughtered. There is no one in the film with whom the viewer wishes to empathize, and the emotions that the film evokes are violently estranging: disgust, revulsion, horror, contempt, indignation. But in addition to being ethically estranging, Bennys Video is also estranging from a narrative perspective. In a
filmic version of Sebald’s embedded narration, the film contains embedded “gazes”: Haneke’s camera, Benny’s camera, and Benny himself. Bennys Video collapses the gazes of all the observers together and turns the camera lens back on itself. The viewer, then, who cannot or will not look away, is rendered complicit in the fictional violence being perpetrated.

Bennys Video is clearly a polemic against the sort of numbness perpetuated by regular doses of on-screen violence. Haneke elucidated his own position in an essay entitled “Violence and Media,” in which he stated: “The question is not: ‘What am I allowed to show?’ but rather: ‘What chance do I give the viewer to recognize what it is I am showing?’ The question – limited to the topic of violence – is not: ‘How do I show violence?’ but rather: ‘How do I show the viewer his own position vis-à-vis violence and its portrayal.’” Haneke takes this argument to another level in Funny Games (1997), in which an apparently normal bourgeois family is tortured by a pair of sociopaths who show up randomly at the door of their vacation home. Although the embedded gazes of Bennys Video clearly implicate the viewer in the on-screen violence, Funny Games drives the point home even harder. Here, Haneke plays games with its viewer in much the same way that the sociopaths play games with their victims. One of the killers, Paul, frequently breaks the fourth wall to speak directly to the audience, and he also continually invokes narrative conventions of Hollywood films as the reason for his actions, which are otherwise senseless. At one point, when one of the victims appears about to “win,” Paul rewinds the film and prevents it, dashing the audience’s hopes for a “good” outcome. Stephen Holden, reviewing the film for the New York Times, said, “Posing as a morally challenging work of art, the movie is a really a sophisticated act of cinematic sadism. You go to it at your own risk.”

More than twenty years after Bennys Video and fifteen after the original Funny Games, there is still considerable “risk” involved in going to see a Haneke film: risk that one will see things one does not wish to see, or feel things one does not wish to feel; risk that one will be exposed to excessive onscreen violence without resolution or

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63 It was remade for an American audience in 2007.
consolation. Since 2000, however, there has been a significant shift in Haneke’s film making. Whereas Haneke’s earlier work is violently estranging, his work since 2000 demonstrates an empathic evolution, even as he continues to problematize empathy through both ethical and narrative estrangement. In this chapter, I am principally interested in three films he has made since 2001: La Pianiste (2001), Das weiße Band (2009), and Amour (2013).

Cognitive Film Theory Revisited

In Chapter 1, I provided a brief overview of the field of cognitive film theory, with particular attention paid to Murray Smith’s concepts of alignment and allegiance, both of which are crucial for a viewer’s experience of a film. Alignment Murray has defined as “the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel” (Engaging Characters 83); in other words, alignment is the process through which we are able to read a character’s mind and to empathize with them. Allegiance often but not always results from alignment; it is generally the result of positive moral evaluation by the viewer of the character. Once a character is granted our allegiance, we have the tendency to assume her goals as our own and to want her to succeed. Our emotional investment in the film is close intertwined with her success. I will argue in this chapter that Haneke continually disrupts processes of alignment and, where alignment exists, the viewer’s ability to truly grant any single character his allegiance. The means by which he does is are both narrative and ethical, and they have to do with the following three areas: character action, iconography, and music (or, more generally, sound).

Character Action

The importance of character action to moral orientation and the establishment of allegiance may seem obvious, but Murray Smith notes the neglect that has been paid to this crucial aspect of film. This neglect is particularly unfortunate, given that in what Smith calls “classical Hollywood cinema” and I call “immersive texts,” character and character action are conflated and collapsed into each other. For most movie-
goers, in other words, what a character does is entirely congruent with who a character is. Character actions in immersive films tend to be fairly unmistakable in their moral signification, and they require very little conscious effort to interpret on the part of the viewer. Smith, drawing on Noël Carroll, notes that “the behavior of major characters towards minor characters” is a particularly important device, especially when those minor characters are weaker than the major characters, either physically or socially (Engaging Characters 190). A remarkable number of Hollywood films orient their viewers morally in this way, using clear provocations of either sympathy or antipathy to establish their viewers’ allegiances early in the narrative.

However, the films by Haneke that I will examine refuse all such easy establishment of allegiance. Although recognizable characters certainly perform actions within the context of the narrative, the moral significance of these actions for the characters is often ambivalent and requires conscious effort on the part of the viewer to parse; indeed, they may only be able to parse the moral significance of character actions retrospectively. This lack of clarity is especially acute, I argue, in the moments wherein violence erupts onscreen. Indeed, the eruptions of violence — often unseen — that punctuate Haneke’s films serve as a crucial estrangement device, particularly as they often interrupt long periods where almost nothing happens. In all three films, these eruptions serve to startle the viewer; however, perhaps more crucially, they are often sources of bafflement for the viewer, as the character actions that lead to these moments of violence are unclear. Indeed, in some cases, particularly in Das weiße Band, it is somewhat unclear who has committed the violence at all.

Iconography

Iconography, or the physical appearance of the actor, is yet another aspect of film whose importance for the moral orientation of the viewer has been largely ignored. Smith notes that iconography’s impact on a film’s moral structure is “pervasive but only peripherally perceptible” (Engaging Characters 191). The effects of iconography are often culturally embedded and difficult to discuss, but it is no less important in postmodern films than it is in mainstream Hollywood cinema, since the unconscious preferences of an audience severely affect their reaction to particular physical presences on the screen. Physical description in novels, in contrast, does not
have the same effect. A novelist generally paints a character’s physical description in broad strokes, leaving the reader free to imagine any face or body she would like, but there is no such imaginative space given to viewers of most films.

Smith also notes that the actor him- or herself is of great importance, for it is he or she who delivers the performance, that is, the body language and facial expressions. While authors may certainly have fans in a way that is not dissimilar to how filmmakers have fans, and while fictional literary characters may certainly have fans as well (which we might understand as real people who feel an unusually strong sense of allegiance toward them), there is no literary equivalent to an actor: a physical presence that carries over across multiple works that are unrelated apart from that actor him- or herself. Smith notes that “whatever else stars may be, they are . . . embodied clusters of (often conflicting) traits” (193), and these traits are extremely important for how viewers react to a particular character. Indeed, Smith goes on to argue that “[s]tar ‘charisma’ . . . can obviously be used to direct our sympathies. Indeed, this is another technique by which the spectator can be brought to entertain sympathetically actions, characters, and domains of experience that they might otherwise reject” (193-194). Some of Haneke’s actors and actresses, such as Susanne Lothar and Isabelle Huppert, have appeared repeatedly in his work, and indeed appear repeatedly within the three films that I will discuss. Huppert, in particular, is striking in her role as Erika Kohut in *La Pianiste*; I argue that her face, recognizable to most viewers, invites greater empathy than an unknown actress might. This is particularly significant given the lingering close-ups of Erika’s face that occur sporadically throughout *La Pianiste* — close-ups that recall Carl Plantinga’s “scenes of empathy,” which I discussed in Chapter 1. The subtle play of emotions across Huppert’s face and the viewer’s ability to interpret them are crucial to the viewer’s experience of the film. In the end, however, while such shots are a clear invitation to attempt an empathic connection with Erika, the result is at best ambiguous and ambivalent.

**Music and Sound**

Perhaps nearly as crucial as the actor’s physical presence, if rather less obvious to the viewer, is the presence of music in film. Jeff Smith identifies five ways in which film music functions within a film: “Film music 1) provides a sense of continuity, 2)
reinforces formal and narrative unity, 3) communicates elements of setting, 4) underlines the psychological states of characters, and 5) establishes an overall emotional tone or mood” (156). Smith argues that is the last three that are particularly important for understanding the viewer’s emotional experience of the film. He is careful to note that by definition film music does not exist in isolation, and many of the arguments about the provocation of emotion that have been applied to “pure” music simply do not apply to film music, since film is a representational medium and instrumental music is not. The affective responses that a viewer experiences in response to film music, which Smith argues is a combination of physical arousal and cognitive judgment, “are not properly assigned solely to the music, but rather to the combination of film music and narrative, each of which will have its own emotional valence” (156). In fact, Smith argues that the emotional valence of the music and the narrative may change in relation to each other; film music cannot wholly change the emotional tone of a narrative, but it may heighten it.

Jeff Smith is careful in his work to refer to “film music,” and not the “underscore”; he does not specifically talk about the differences between diegetic and non-diegetic music, but the five purposes of film music that he describes are, notably, generally served by non-diegetic music. If we consider Jeff Smith’s theories about film music alongside Murray Smith’s theories of alignment and allegiance, we may conclude that music provides the viewer with greater subjective access, particularly when combined with other structures of alignment, such as a sequence of POV, reaction, and close-up shots. In the case of immersive films, non-diegetic music generally aids us in deciding who is worthy of our allegiance, as certain musical conventions accompany motifs for good characters versus evil ones. In this way, non-diegetic music greatly enhances our ability to read the minds of characters by providing a sort of emotional road map to the film itself: a road map that we are largely unaware of but which is critical nonetheless. The absence of non-diegetic music renders a film much more difficult for the viewer emotionally; with no underscore to guide our emotional experience of the film, we must rely more heavily on conscious processes to make the necessary moral judgments.

Haneke, however, refuses to assist the viewer in this way. His refusal to use
non-diegetic music is well known, and it contributes significantly to the emotional ambiguity of the work; furthermore, the lack of underscore contributes to the feeling of abruptness within his films, as sharp cuts, not softened by music, “jerk” the reader suddenly from one scene to the next. Nevertheless, while non-diegetic music may not be present, diegetic music certainly is. Schubert is a particular favorite of Haneke’s, and his piano sonatas show up in all three films, most notably in La Pianiste, providing continuity not only within the films themselves but also across his oeuvre.

Music is, in fact, crucial to Haneke’s work, even if he refuses to use it to facilitate facile emotional interpretations of what is happening on the screen. But perhaps equally important to Haneke is ambient sound and — perhaps most of important of all — silence. Indeed, Lisa Coulthard has argued that, for Haneke, “silence is not the background against which sound is defined but rather a recurrent acoustic theme” (8). Cuts between music or sound and silence such as I describe in my analysis of the opening of La Pianiste are one of Haneke’s favorite devices, albeit one that he uses sparingly; it is a particularly jarring estrangement device.

As even this brief analysis has shown, Michael Haneke is not a director whose work is easy to like. From an ethical perspective, even those who find his films compelling admit that “[his] body of work is discomfiting, impatient, and sometimes as infuriating as it is infuriated” (Price and Rhodes 2). From a narrative perspective, Haneke’s films all evince many aspects of what cognitive film theorist David Bordwell calls “dedramatization.” Bordwell uses this term to describe post-World War II European film that avoids many of the techniques common to Hollywood films. Hallmarks of the “dedramatized film,” according to Bordwell, include: no non-diegetic music or POV structures; longer shots of figures in large, open spaces; silence and “dead time,” in which nothing much important or dramatic occurs; a muted acting style; what Bordwell calls “dorsality,” or the turning of the characters’ backs to the camera at particularly intense moments (14). Taken together, these techniques result in films that are emotionally non-immersive, and which deliberately frustrate and estrange viewers who are accustomed to more mainstream cinematic techniques. But for filmmakers like Haneke, frustration and estrangement are indeed the point.
My decision to situate Haneke at the very end of my dissertation is closely related to this perceived “difficulty,” which I trace back to his use of both narrative and ethical forms of estrangement. But as I already noted, there has been an evolution in his use of empathy in his texts in the last fifteen years; his films have become, in a sense, more watchable, if not, strictly speaking, enjoyable in the same way that immersive Hollywood film is enjoyable. Haneke’s recent oeuvre opens up questions about empathy’s shifting position within the cultural landscape. If postmodern literature undermines empathy in order to invite an ethic based on skepticism and doubt, rather than emotionality and gullibility, then what does a turn toward empathy even in the work of one of Europe’s most estranging directors mean at this cultural moment? This chapter will therefore bring me to the final question of my dissertation: Is the early twenty-first century seeing a redemption of an ethic of empathy? If so, how have those ethics altered in the last sixty years — if indeed, they have at all?

**La Pianiste: Empathy and Estrangement Renegotiated**

Haneke’s 2001 film *La Pianiste* is an adaptation of Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek’s 1983 Marxist-feminist novel *Die Klavierspielerin*. For Haneke, it was a breakout film. It was his first film in French rather than German, and it also reached a much wider audience than any of his earlier films. It won best actress (for Isabelle Huppert), best actor (for Benoit Magimel), and best film at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001. More surprising than the critical success of the film, however, was its relatively large amount of popular and financial success. This may have been partly due to the marketing of the film as a scandalous French romance, with a poster, for example, that displays Huppert as Erika and Magimel as her student Walter Klemmer, locked in an embrace on the floor of a public restroom. But as Jean Ma points out, “La Pianiste . . . invites such expectations only to betray them, as the film vigorously and mercilessly deconstructs the very conventions of romance, critiquing both the signifiers of heterosexual love in which it traffics and the ideologies of sex and gender upon which its gratifications are founded” (511).
These critiques of heteronormative, capitalist, and indeed fascist power structures are familiar to readers of Jelinek’s novel, which is even more merciless than the film in its Marxist-feminist deconstruction of them. The forces in the life of Jelinek’s Erika have shredded her sense of morality, and although the reader is aligned with her, it is impossible for him to grant her his allegiance. In his film, Haneke has created a more sympathetic portrait of Jelinek’s protagonist Erika Kohut; although Haneke employs techniques of dedramatization — specifically, Isabelle Huppert plays her as very closed-off and self-contained — I argue that the film’s use of lingering close-ups and especially of music renders her more empathic and understandable than Jelinek’s Erika. It is not that Haneke and Huppert’s Erika is necessarily more accessible than Jelinek’s; Jelinek’s Erika is, in fact, extremely accessible, as the reader is often told in no uncertain terms what she is thinking and feeling. But indeed, the bald terms in which the reader is informed about Erika’s inner life preclude true empathic understanding. There is no mind reading challenge in Die Klavierspielerin. With Haneke and Huppert’s Erika, who is far more ambiguous and enigmatic than Jelinek’s, we do want to solve the mind reading puzzle; we want to understand her, even when we find her difficult or unpleasant. For that reason, we as viewers are able to grant her at least partial allegiance.

Both Haneke’s film and Jelinek’s novel relate the story of Erika Kohut, a Viennese piano teacher whose own artistic career has been continually frustrated. She lives with her mother, who is controlling and narcissistic and who views Erika’s artistic ambitions largely in materialistic terms: She wants them to buy an apartment. In both texts, Erika begins a relationship with a student, Walter Klemmer, through which she attempts to act out her sado-masochistic fantasies. This attempt is, in the novel as in the film, a complete disaster. One of the biggest alterations that Haneke makes to Jelinek’s text is the paramount importance of Erika’s relationship with Walter Klemmer; in the novel, as Haneke himself points out in an interview, the “love affair” between Walter and Erika “is more implicated in the mother-daughter relationship. Walter only triggers the catastrophe” (Sharrett 585). For this reason, Haneke says, he attempted to make Walter “more interesting and attractive” in the film, which in general is — in Haneke’s view at least — less “cynical” than Jelinek’s
novel (Sharrett 585). This intention can be seen most clearly in his casting of Benoît Magimel in the role. Magimel’s Walter is classically handsome, youthfully energetic, and generally likable, even if he is shallow in comparison to Huppert’s Erika, whose still waters run deep and dark.

I would argue that what Haneke states in his interview with Christopher Sharrett is true of all three protagonists: Walter, Erika, and Erika’s mother. Although the mother in both texts is controlling and narcissistic, Jelinek’s mother is clearly monstrous, almost a caricature of a controlling mother. Her motto — declared by the narrator — is, “Vertrauen ist gut, Kontrolle ist dennoch angebracht”64 (10). One might interpret the mother as representing fascism itself; certainly she is totalitarian in her control of her daughter. In the novel, nothing is Erika’s that is not also her mother’s, not even her thoughts: “Die Mutter schraubt, immer ohne vorherige Anmeldung, IHREN Deckel ab, fährt selbstbewusst mit der Hand oben hinein, wählt und stöbert. Sie wirft alles durcheinander und legt nichts wieder an seinen angestammten Platz zurück”65 (30). In the film, Erika appears to be more successful in her attempts to establish some independence from her mother, who appears sad, pathetic, and largely ineffective in her attempts to control her daughter. Indeed, in the film Erika’s music career is forbidden territory for her mother, while in the novel, the two of them together “spray acid” [“Säure verspritzen”] at Erika’s students (14). Neither of them wishes for any of Erika’s students to be more successful than she has been. Her mother tells her, “Du selbst hast es nicht geschafft, warum sollen es andere an deiner Stelle und noch aus deinem pianistischen Stall erreichen?”66 (15) In the film, however, Erika refuses to engage in this sort of talk, telling her mother that her musical career and her teaching is not her business. Even in Haneke’s film, however, their relationship is permeated by Freudian dysfunction: although Erika has a room of her

64 “Trust is fine, but control is better [appropriate]” (5).
65 “Mother, without prior notice, unscrews the top of HER head, sticks her hand inside, self-assured, and then grubs and rummages about. Mother messes everything up and puts nothing back where it belongs” (21).
66 “You didn’t make it - why should others reach the top? And from your musical stable to boot?” (9)
own, albeit with no lock on the door, she shares a bedroom and a bed with her mother, and at one point attempts sexual relations with her.

Although the characterizations of both Walter and the mother undergo changes in Haneke’s hands, it is Erika who is most transformed. Jelinek’s novel is not told from Erika’s point of view; her narrator is omniscient and only slightly more sympathetic toward Erika than toward her mother. Erika as she is portrayed in the text is not only neurotic, but also vindictive and mean. In one striking episode early on the in the text, Jelinek’s Erika purposefully harms fellow riders on the trolley car, hiding behind her veneer of cultured politeness in order to get away with it, and then refuses to give directions to a confused old woman:

SIE wendet sich mehrmals nach der vollkommen desorientierten Dame um, bevor SIE einen vertrauten Weg in ein vertrautes Zuhause einschlägt. SIE grinst die Dame dabei an, vergessend, daß SIE in ein paar Minuten unter der heißen Flamme des mütterlichen Schneidbrenners zu einem Häufchen Asche verbrennen wird, weil sie zu spät nach Hause gekommen ist. Dabei wird die ganze Kunst SIE nicht trösten können, obwohl der Kunst vieles nachgesagt wird, vor allem, daß sie eine Trösterin sei. Manchmal schafft sie allerdings das Leid erst herbei.67 (31-32)

This passage makes clear that Erika is cruel to others because it makes her forget her own pain, but knowing that does not make the reader wish to empathize with her by taking on her pain, fury, and vindictiveness. Haneke’s Erika certainly does have moments in which she makes morally reprehensible decisions; of particular note is her decision to place cut glass in the coat pocket of a promising student to whom Walter has paid attention, so that the student will be injured and unable to perform. But this is framed in La Pianiste as a crime of passion, so to speak; she does it out of jealousy.

67 SHE peers back several times at the completely disoriented woman before setting off on the familiar road to her familiar home. SHE smirks at the woman, forgetting that a few minutes from now, SHE will feel the hot flame of her mother’s blowtorch and SHE will be burned to a pile of ashes because SHE is late in getting home. No art can possibly comfort HER then, even though art is credited with many things, especially an ability to offer solace. Sometimes, of course, art creates the suffering in the first place. (23)
While the viewer still condemns the action — after all, Erika’s has deliberately harmed one of her students and for no reason other than the fact that Walter was kind to her — it is more understandable than her behavior toward the old woman in Jelinek’s text.

The passage quoted above from Die Klavierspielerin also clarifies that Erika’s music does not ameliorate her pain; she has very little interest in music as anything other than a means to earn her living. Thus, the classical music that permeates Haneke’s film and adds an element of beauty to what is, admittedly, a rather ugly story is entirely missing in Jelinek’s novel. Charles Warren points out that Haneke’s Erika “is deeply interested in music. She identifies herself through it. [. . .] Music is a presence in the film — like Huppert herself — as it is not in Jelinek’s novel” (506). Haneke’s film certainly has ugly moments, and as the violence of Erika’s relationship with Walter creeps in, the music recedes. But the presence of it from the beginning and its obvious importance to Erika — that is, the fact that Haneke’s Erika does find solace in it — creates a space within the film for an empathic connection between the viewer and Erika that is entirely closed off in Jelinek’s novel. Although music’s role in La Pianiste is not without its ambiguities, it is deeply tied to Erika’s identity and her psychological state, and it is one of the viewer’s main points of emotional access to her. In the terms of cognitive film theory, although both texts align their reader and viewer, respectively, with Erika, it is considerably easier for the audience to grant Haneke’s Erika their allegiance. Her love of music and her relatively morally comprehensible (even when not laudatory) actions render her far more emotionally palatable than Jelinek’s character. And yet, as I will show, the audience’s allegiance is mediated by moments of remarkable ambiguity.

Much has been written about the function of music in La Pianiste, and particularly the importance of Schubert’s Die Winterreise. Lisa Coulthard puts it succinctly: “Repeated and foregrounded, ‘Im Dorf’ (‘In the Village’) holds a central place in the film: Erika is clearly aligned with Schubert's lonely and weary wanderer as the music fleshes out the emotional range and melodramatic crises of the protagonist” (2). In Jeff Smith’s terms, by being present at certain critical points, Schubert — often, but not always, Die Winterreise — provides a sense of continuity,
as well as an overall emotional tone. But it does so in ways that demand far more interpretation from the viewer than a traditional underscore.

In the following section I will discuss two scenes that demonstrate the function of music in the film; in both, music is linked to sexuality, a connection that is hardly new or innovative in film. However, Haneke’s use of music in relation to Erika’s sexuality defies all expectation. In this vein, Jean Ma argues that the music plays a crucial role in the “strategy of cognitive dissonance” (512) perpetrated by the film:

In La Pianiste classical music functions both diegetically in the description of repression and suffering and structurally as a key to comprehending the film’s strategy of disrupting heterosexual romantic norms from within their cultural lexicon. [...] In the conjunction of aesthetics, sexuality, and violence, then, we can begin to discern the distinction between obscenity and pornography, between the critical and the affirmative valences of shock, a distinction that is crucial of a work that endeavors to condemn by showing. (513)

In other words, although the music provides some continuity and psychological access, it does not serve to render empathy for the “heroes” of our film facile. Indeed, the presence of it in certain scenes is meant to deliberately shock the reader, not “affirmatively” but “critically,” as Ma says.

The clearest example of this is also one of the most shocking scenes in the film: Erika, having told her mother that she has a late rehearsal, visits a magazine store in a shopping mall, where, for a fee, a customer is able to watch a pornographic film in a video booth. Although this scene is clearly meant to be morally shocking, what is perhaps most discomfiting is that the music from Erika’s rehearsal — Schubert’s “Piano Trio in E Flat” (Scharrett 588) — continues to play in the background as Erika enters the store, pays for her time in the booth, and then waits with a group of clearly uneasy men for a booth to come free. The strains of the cello clash briefly with the sounds and music from the menu of four pornographic films Erika has to choose from, until the rehearsal music cuts off abruptly. This leaves the viewer with only the sounds from the film that Erika has chosen. The booth is dark, but the camera is focused on Erika in a static close-up shot. The viewer can see her face clearly enough as she
watches the film for a few seconds, and then reaches forward to find a tissue, discarded by one of the booth’s previous occupants, and raises it to her nose to smell, breathing in deeply. It is here that music — this time, Schubert’s *Winterreise* — re-enters the scene. The noises from the film are not quite drowned out by the singer’s voice. Yet, as Andrea Bandhauer says, in contrast to Jelinek’s novel, “in [Haneke’s] cinematography, through the close-up of Huppert's face, both the beauty and the sense of deep sadness of Schubert's song remain intact” (277). The music cannot counteract entirely the obscenity of the film, but it can — and does — change the emotional valence of the scene.

This scene is the first time in the film that anything about the nature of Erika’s sexuality is revealed to the viewer. Previous to this, she seems emotionally repressed and rather sexless, and to discover that this upright and cultured woman visits pornography booths and indulges in smelling used tissues left behind by men is shocking and more than a little disgusting. But for all the scene’s blatant sexuality, it is not meant to titillate. There is very little in Erika’s face to indicate arousal or pleasure; even here, it is hard to say what she is thinking or feeling. But this is unsurprising, given Haneke’s own view on the difference between the obscene and the pornographic. It is his view that “anything that could be termed obscene departs from the bourgeois norm” (Sharrett 587), and in this sense this particular scene is certainly obscene, especially given Erika’s staid bourgeois demeanor in the rest of her life. But pornography, according to Haneke, has to do with the rendering of the unusual into a commodity, something “consumable” (Sharrett 587). In this scene, the film that Erika watches is pornography, but the scene itself is not. The viewer is unable to consume the scene the way that Erika appears to consume the film that she watches; if I extended the metaphor, I might say that the viewer chokes on it. This metaphorical choking is particularly important, given the centrality of empathy for the sexual function of pornography: a very different version of this scene would invite the viewer to empathically take part in Erika’s consumption of the pornographic film. Instead, Haneke deliberately disrupts the empathic connection between the viewer and Erika by way of the invocation of disgust and the extreme impassivity of Huppert’s performance. At the same time, however, the presence of music at the very beginning
and the very end of the scene allows Haneke to retain a certain amount of beauty and genuine emotionality in what would otherwise be a crass and ugly moment.

In comparison, Walter’s audition for Erika’s master class is much less shocking. It is a classic example of what Carl Plantinga calls “a scene of empathy”: that is, a close-up of a single character, too protracted to be explained in terms of plot or the conveyance of information. In fact, both the audition scene and the scene in the video store might be labeled “scenes of empathy,” at least from a structural point of view; both are close-ups that linger too long to feel “natural.” However, neither scene has the effect on the viewer that is expected from such a scene. In the audition scene, Walter plays a series of pieces for Erika and her colleagues: first Schönberg, followed by Rachmaninov, and finally a Schubert sonata. The musical changes happen abruptly, with no fading, and which each new piece we zero in on Erika. Although Walter is playing, she is the focal point of the scene: the camera shows us only her face, against a mundane background of chairs and an uninspiring wall. Erika’s face is all we have to look at, and look at her we do for an unusually long period of time — nearly two minutes. But Erika’s face offers very little to the viewer, and the changes in music, which would generally signal emotional changes of some sort in the character whose face we are watching, are equally baffling, for they lack any sort of continuity. While the close-up invites the reader to read the scene as one whose sole purpose is to invite empathy, Huppert’s performance makes it nearly impossible. Her hands and mouth move minutely; her eyelids flutter; none of it is rendered easily legible to the reader. This “scene of empathy” is therefore becomes its exact opposite: a dedramatized scene. This does not mean that the scene is entirely without emotion; particularly as the music softens during Walter’s Schubert performance, there is the sense that her impassivity hides deep turmoil. Walter has chosen his music carefully in order to woo Erika specifically, but Erika appears not to want to be wooed; indeed, at this point she appears to find Walter’s pursuit of her threatening, and she attempts to reject Walter as a student before being overruled by her colleagues. Or so the viewer might assume; at this point, the viewer is as in the dark as Walter himself about what Erika wants from him.
What Erika does want from Walter eventually becomes clear, and the presence of music in the film lessens as Walter and Erika’s relationship progresses. Moreover, the importance of ambiguity in the film increases considerably. Unlike other works I have discussed in previous chapters, and unlike, for example, Das weiße Band, there is no immediately obvious narrative ambiguity in La Pianiste; the events of the film appear to have “really happened” as they are portrayed. But the meaning of these events is left deliberately ambiguous. This ambiguity is especially visible when the viewer, aligned with Erika and having granted her his tentative allegiance, most wishes to understand her. Although she is an enigmatic character even in the very first scene, she becomes even more so in the second half of the film, when she reveals to Walter that she does not desire the same heteronormative romantic relationship that he does; rather, she desires to fulfill with him a mix of sadistic and masochistic fantasies that she writes down for his perusal. Walter reacts with revulsion to Erika’s instructions, telling her that she is “sick” and in need of “treatment.” She asks him to hit her, and he replies with palpable disgust: “I don’t want to soil my hands. No one would touch your sort, even with gloves on. I swear I loved you. You don’t even know what that is. Right now you repulse me. Fuck it.” Walter’s shock and disgust is both visceral and moral, and it opens up within him a cruel streak that the viewer has not previously glimpsed — a cruelty that appears to mirror, in many ways, Erika’s own thoughts about herself. The viewer, in contrast, while perhaps disgusted or at least unnerved by the scene, cannot be entirely surprised by Erika’s requests, coming as they do after scenes of genital self-mutilation that imply that pain is the only way Erika may be granted sexual release.

After this moment, Walter and Erika’s positions of power are reversed; in their first sexual encounter, which takes place before Walter finds out the nature of Erika’s desires, he pursues her and she is in control, but once her fantasies are revealed to him, it is she who pursues him. In their final encounter, he fulfills to the letter the fantasy that she revealed to him, beating her and finally raping her while her mother remains locked in the next room, shouting impotently for him to stop. This scene, as Jean Ma notes in her analysis of it, “has been the subject of much debate, understood by some [such as Catherine Wheatley] as a fulfillment of Erika’s masochistic desires and by
others as a violation of her desire” (515). Ma states forthrightly that she believes the latter, but she also acknowledges the scene’s ambiguities: “The challenges that the rape scene poses for the understanding of the audience lie in its familiarity: What shocks is not only the sudden intrusion of violence into the realm of intimacy, but also the uncanny echoing of Erika’s fantasies in Walter’s actions” (515). Indeed, Walter quotes exactly from Erika’s letter even as she begs him to stop. Thus, Ma says, the film does not offer its viewer “the comfort of a morally unambiguous perspective from which to condemn the violence she sees” (515). I am less interested here in the question of whether Walter’s rape of Erika is a violation or a fulfilment of her desires than I am in the ambiguity of the scene itself and the eruption of violence into the narrative. The violence, while sudden, is not precisely unexpected; there have been hints of it all along, from Erika’s treatment of her students, to her genital cutting, to her harsh treatment of Walter in their first sexual encounter. But in this final scene, Erika, who has thus far been primarily the perpetrator of violence, is suddenly its victim. Indeed, according to her clearly stated wishes, this is exactly what she wants.

*What does Erika want?* is the question that the viewer, aligned with Erika throughout the film, most wishes to solve; it is the film’s central mind-reading puzzle. It becomes most urgent during the scene in which Walter rapes Erika, for it is unclear, through Huppert’s performance in this scene, whether she truly wanted what she asked for. And if she did want it, does that mean that we, too, as the viewers of the film, must also want it for her? I have argued that *La Pianiste* represents a renegotiation of the dialectic of empathy and estrangement in Jelinek’s novel. In the first half of the film, this negotiation takes place largely through the presence of music, particularly Schubert, and the use of close-ups of Erika. But the violence of the ending represents one last such renegotiation, shifting the balance toward estrangement at the last possible moment. The mind-reading puzzle of *La Pianiste* cannot be solved; it is impossible to know what Erika wants, and therefore impossible to say who is the monster and who the victim in the film. In fact, it would be very like Haneke to imply that everyone — including the viewer himself — is both. While Haneke has renegotiated the dialectic of empathy and estrangement present in Jelinek’s text, and while the fascist power structures present in the novel are less obvious, they are still
present, and Haneke characteristically prompts the reader to consider the role that everyone in the film plays in perpetuating them. Ultimately, therefore, *The Pianiste* is not so unlike Haneke’s earlier work from the mid-1990s: the film still demonstrates to the viewer his own complicity in the violence perpetrated on screen. But the film is all the more powerful for the partial allegiance we grant to Erika and the empathy, however problematic, that we feel for her.

**The seeds of fascism sown early: *Das weiße Band***

*Das weiße Band: Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte* [*The White Ribbon: A German Children’s Story*] (2009) is the only historical film that Haneke has made thus far. It is, as John Orr says, “a radical departure from his previous films” (259): “Where we perhaps always assumed that Haneke was by inclination a colour director he changes format. Where we always thought his films were dark fables about the present or the future, he goes back to the past. Where we had become accustomed to the aggressive reflexivity of his media-conscious narratives in the electronic age, this is practically a pre-motorized world” (259). Despite these immediate differences, the film is still quintessentially Haneke in the way it exposes the dark underbelly of the human condition, and in its concern about the corruption inherent in structures of power and about the complicity of the observer. The simplest reading of *Das weiße Band* is that it is about the seeds of fascism, sown in Prussia at the turn of the century and harvested in Munich and Berlin in 1933. However, Haneke himself has argued that it is not truly meant to be about German history — notably, only the German version of the film contained the subtitle, *Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte* — but about totalitarianism more broadly. To interpret the film as being about specifically German fascism, Haneke says, “would be a misinterpretation” (Haneke, qtd in Grundmann 596), as the film cannot hope to name all the causes of German fascism. In this sense, then, *Das weiße Band* is indeed “a dark fable.” As a dark fable, the film resists facile forms of psychological realism; indeed, there is a sense of surreality throughout the film, aided and abetted by cinematographic choices that prevent the viewer’s full
immersion in the text. Furthermore, like La Pianiste, Das weiße Band provides the viewer with a mind reading puzzle that can never be definitively solved. It is a “whodunnit” with no solution, a mystery without resolution. Doubt and skepticism are therefore an ethical necessity in Das weiße Band.

Haneke says that for him, refusing definitive solutions is a way of giving back to his viewers their own interpretive freedom (Grundmann 605-606). For his viewers, however, this interpretive freedom can feel like a burden. Like all the texts I have analyzed in this dissertation, Haneke’s films are considered “difficult,” for they go out of their way to estrange the viewer from any sense of immersion within the text. Part of this is the lack of definitive resolution, which, as I will discuss, is foregrounded from the very beginning of Das weiße Band; part of it is also Haneke’s cinematographic choices, many of which recall Bordwell’s discussion of dedramatization: the use of black and white film; an acting style that is extremely reserved; characters often shot in wide open spaces; and the use of music and sound to “create an acoustically jarring cinematic experience” (Coulthard 6). Unlike in La Pianiste, there is no one protagonist on which to focus; even the schoolteacher, who provides the voice over, is not really the focus of the action. There are no scenes like the audition scene, in which the camera lingers on a single character for longer than it takes him or her to finish speaking. Das weiße Band, in other words, is a film devoid of Carl Plantinga’s “scenes of empathy.” Despite these clear techniques of estrangement, moments of tenderness that invite empathy on the part of the viewer are more obviously present in Das weiße Band than in any of Haneke’s earlier films; although the fictional town of Eichwald where the film takes place is terrible in many ways, it is not entirely devoid of love or beauty or joy.

Das weiße Band begins with a voice in the darkness: that of a narrator, a much older version of the village school teacher. He tells the viewer: “Ich weiß nicht, ob die Geschichte, die ich Ihnen erzählen will, in allen Details der Wahrheit entspricht. Vieles darin weiß ich nur von Hörensagen und manches weiß ich auch heute nach so
vielen Jahren nicht zu enträtseln, und auf unzählige Fragen gibt es keine Antwort.”

Despite his own uncertainty, he says, he is telling this story in the hope that it may throw “ein erhellendes Licht” on events that occurred later in that country. The narrator does not name these events that may be illuminated. The most immediate historical event of the film is the outbreak of World War I, which happens toward the end of the narrative. But the ominous tone of the narration, and the fact that the narrator seems reluctant to put a name to the events at all, prompts the viewer to suspect that he is in fact talking about the rise of fascism in Germany and the events of World War II, including the Holocaust. He never alludes to any of these events again, even indirectly. But this preliminary voiceover primes the viewer to think of the film in that context from the very first frame, and to connect the events of the film to the events of the 1930s and 1940s in Germany.

Without this initial voiceover, Das weiße Band might be a disturbing film about a creepy and oppressive northern German town. With it, however, the ethical stakes of the film and the mystery at its heart are upped considerably. From 1913 to 1914, a number of strange and ultimately inexplicable events occur in Eichwald: the town doctor is injured in a riding accident when his horse encounters a trip wire; a tenant farmer’s wife falls to her death in the sawmill; the son of the local baron is kidnapped and tormented; the baron’s barn is deliberately torched; and the mentally handicapped son of the local midwife is kidnapped, tortured, and almost blinded. Over the course of the film, it becomes clear that many of the terrible things are being deliberately perpetrated by someone who wishes to punish people whom they deem immoral: the doctor, for example, has been engaged in an abusive, extramarital affair with the midwife; in addition, he has apparently been sexually abusing his daughter for many years. For one or both of these sins, he is punished. But other victims, such as the baron’s son Sigi and the handicapped boy Karli, appear to be innocent of any wrongdoing themselves; they are, instead, punished for the sins of their fathers. These

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68 “I don’t know if the story I’m about to tell you is entirely true. Some of it I know only by hearsay. After so many years, a lot of it is still obscure and many questions remain unanswered. But I think I must tell of the strange events that occurred in our village. They could perhaps clarify something things that happened in this country.”
acts of punishment reveal to the viewer the fundamentally corrupt structures of power at work in the community, embodied by the baron and the pastor. Feudalism and religion emerge in the film as sources of oppression, suffering, and, eventually, fascism itself. The white ribbon of the title is tied around the arm or in the hair of wayward children — specifically, the pastors’ eldest — as a reminder of their purity and innocence. But the trope is ironically subverted by the film as the school teacher — and the viewer with him — strongly suspects that it is these very same children who are behind at least some of the acts of cruelty in the film. The viewer does the math: these children, perhaps twelve or thirteen in the film, would have been in their early thirties in 1933, when Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany. The film therefore traces the origins of fascism back to other power structures that might be considered “proto-fascist.”

The voice over in Das weiße Band is perhaps the most unique element of the film; neither La Pianiste nor Amour has one, and in fact, Roy Grundmann points out, it is much more common to Haneke’s literary adaptations, particularly of modern and postmodern works (594). Grundmann argues:

The use of a narrator in a film based not on a novel but on Haneke’s own original script is in and of itself an important gesture. It not only implies the significance Haneke accords to the aesthetic tension between voice and image . . . but to the implicit tradition of fragmentation, pluralism, and dissent embodied in various ways by modernist and postmodernist literature. (594-595)

Fragmentation, pluralism, and dissent are all messy concepts; they render coherency impossible and viewer satisfaction highly suspect. It is for this reason that Haneke states in his interview with Grundmann that the voiceover exists in the service of alienation (599), another word for what I have called, throughout this dissertation, estrangement. This is somewhat unexpected, as voiceovers are generally used to ground the viewer within the narrative and move the plot along. But that is in fact the exact opposite of how Haneke uses voiceover in Das weiße Band; rather, he uses it to “[signal] that one should distrust the reality of what is shown and claimed” (Haneke, qtd. in Grundmann 600). The narrator and Haneke invite the question of whether we
are receiving the story as it “happened,” or as the narrator believes it to have happened. The readers are left wondering: Are these scenes “truths” in the context of the film? Are there any “truths” at all? What can we believe? The voiceover therefore, rather paradoxically, both establishes the historical stakes of the film by linking its events to those of the 1930s and 1940s, while at the same time undermining this very argument by calling into question its own reliability. Perhaps it was the children who did these terrible things; perhaps it was not. Perhaps we might draw a conclusion about the origins of fascism and totalitarianism from this fable about 1913 Prussia; perhaps we may not.

The use of black and white film also has a paradoxical function in the film. As John Orr has noted, Das weiße Band is the only one of Haneke’s films to appear in black and white. It was not shot that way; rather, it was shot in color and then converted, allowing Haneke to oversaturate his black tones (“Pre-War Trauma,” Stewart 43). This means that the dark scenes of the film are very dark indeed, and that anything white — such as the white ribbon of the title and the many other white ribbons that appear throughout the film — stand out with startling clarity. Haneke himself describes the purpose of the black and white footage as two-fold: it is, first of all, “meant to give spectators easier access to the time period” (Grundmann 600), since any images we have of that era are in black and white. However, Haneke says, it is also true that “the black-and-white always constitutes a certain stylization, which, rather than pretending to be a naturalist image of reality, emphasizes the prototypical character of the story. It is an artifact and is being presented as such” (Grundmann 600). In other words, the use of black and white film emphasizes the film’s artificiality. For all that it makes historical claims, it is not a historical document, and the very nature of its artificiality calls its own authenticity and accuracy into question.

In contrast to La Pianiste, music does not function as the primary point of emotional access in Das weiße Band. Like all of Haneke’s films, there is no underscore; there is, however, diegetic music present periodically throughout the film, though not to the same extent as in La Pianiste. Lisa Coulthard points out the “complicity between music and power” in the film, though she also notes that this “is not total and music itself is not rendered suspect” (6-7). Music is also present as a
soothing or pleasant presence, such as in the scene in which the school teacher woos the Baron’s nanny Eva (Coulthard 7). Indeed, one of the scenes that Coulthard cites as an example of the complicity between music and power also serves this function: although the Baroness does force her son’s tutor to endure “the musical tyranny of Schubert practice” (6), for herself, playing Schubert is pleasurable: “Die Variationen sollten Sie mehr üben. Sonst macht’s keinen Spaß.”69 The Baroness’s exasperation with the tutor, whose musical acumen does not match her own, calls to mind Erika’s exasperation with her students; indeed both women are isolated and lonely, yet stoic in their misery. But unlike Erika, the Baroness eventually succeeds in rescuing herself; she leaves Eichwald and what she calls its “Böswilligkeit, Neid, Stumpfsinn und Brutalität”70 with her children. Thus, for the tutor, who has no choice in whether he plays with the Baroness or not, Schubert is a tyranny; but for the Baroness herself, he is a pleasurable comfort and allows her to reach beyond her isolation in the community. In this way, Schubert is a part of the inner landscape that eventually allows her to escape. This paradox mirrors in many ways one of the central ethical paradoxes of the film: feudalism and religion have given life in Eichdorff meaning and provided its citizens with comfort. But for many of its residents, these societal structures are tyrannical, and the film itself portrays them as the forerunners of fascism. They have also produced the children of Eichwald, who are equally tyrannical in their moral judgment of others.

This type of paradox is also present at the end of the film, when the children’s choir sings Martin Luther’s famous hymn, “Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott.” Much has been made of this hymn in the critical literature surrounding the film. The words of the hymn certainly invoke images of religious war, which are particularly resonant given the outbreak of World War I and the viewer’s knowledge of the war in which all of Germany would soon be embroiled:

69 “Practice the variations or it’s no fun.”
70 “malice, envy, apathy, and brutality.”
Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott, 
ein gute Wehr und Waffen; 
er hilft uns frei aus aller Not, 
die uns jetzt hat betroffen. 
Der alte böse Feind, 
mit Ernst er’s jetzt meint, 
groß Macht und viel List 
sein grausam Rüstung ist, 
auf Erd ist nicht sein gleichen. 71

Martin Blumenthal-Barby argues that “[g]iven the outbreak of the war alluded to by the narrator, it appears safe to say that the notion of the adversary is to be conceived here more broadly, including the political enemy, the enemy of the state. […] A new enemy outside German borders has been found. The internal enemy, who instigated the various crimes, is forgotten; the communal order, as the last shot insinuates, is reinvigorated” (111). This interpretation is in line with Haneke’s own (Haneke, qtd. in Grundmann 604). But the words of the hymn also invoke the idea of a moral enemy that must be vanquished, lest Satan gain the upper hand. It is significant that this hymn is sung by the children whom the teacher believes were behind the crimes, and that the children are, as Lisa Coulthard points out, ironically positioned above the rest of the congregation, in the so-called “moral high ground” (7). The hymn and the film end with a fade-to-black that is typical of Haneke’s oeuvre. But Coulthard notes that it is not that the hymn fades out but rather that “silence fades in” (8). This silence, Coulthard says, is not like the silence of other scenes; “it is not the quiet of the everyday but an overwhelming presence that becomes equated with the dawning of catastrophe and the anticipated death of war” (8). Coulthard argues that the film ends “with a tragic sense of inevitability: the war will rage, lives will be lost and there will be a horrific second war to follow two short decades later. The fading to silence thus does not jar so much as it leaves us with a gradual sense of the image and the music dying off, a fade that undermines the fighting spirit of the song's message” (7).

Coulthard’s reading is predicated upon the same teleological view of history that Stuart Taberner argues against in his reading of Austerlitz, a view of history that

71 A mighty fortress is our God / A bulwark never failing; / Our shelter He, amid the flood / Of mortal ills prevailing. / For still our ancient foe / Doth seek to work us woe; / His craft and pow'r are great, / And, armed with cruel hate, / On earth is not his equal. (Trans. Hedge)
sees all historical events as inevitable, and which collapses human history and natural history together, thereby stripping it of all sense of agency. This, I argue, is not the view of history offered by Das weiße Band. The film does not deny the events that are to come, just as it does not deny the presence of evil in the community. But it also does not view those events or that evil as inevitable. In fact, Das weiße Band stands out in Haneke’s oeuvre for the distinct moments of love, kindness, and joy that exist within the film. There is very little tenderness to be found in Haneke’s earlier films, or even in La Pianiste, but Das weiße Band, despite its ugliness, also has scenes that appear to exist purely to demonstrate that this is not a world devoid of goodness. Although there are no “scenes of empathy” as defined by Plantinga, there are scenes that resist the generally dedramatized style of the film. These scene invite the viewer to feel empathy for the characters and to resist the teleological lens of history — the idea that both world wars and fascism itself was fated for Germany. Among those scenes are those between the doctor’s daughter Anna and her much younger brother Rudi, to whom she is extremely maternal, as well as the scenes of courtship between the schoolteacher and Eva, nanny to the baron’s youngest children. The teacher’s relationship with Eva is one of the few sources of humor in the film, as they are at times quite awkward with each other. If there is anything for the viewer to “root” for in the film, it is the school teacher’s relationship with Eva. Significantly, however, we are not given any information on the resolution to this relationship in the final voice over to the film; we are told that after returning from the war, the school teacher opens a tailor’s shop in the nearby city, but not whether he and Eva ever married.

Scenes between Eva and the schoolteacher are probably the most frequent of these intimate, tender scenes. The most striking of them, however, is the one in which the pastor’s youngest son Gustav comes to him with a bird he has nursed back to health and offers it to his father as a replacement for his own bird that has died. “Weil der Herr Vater traurig ist,”72 the boy says, offering his father the bird’s cage. His father replies, “Danke,” and the boy responds simply, “Bitte, Herr Vater” before turning and leaving. This exchange is ten words in total, and it is governed by the rules

72 “Because Father is sad.”
of extreme politeness and respect that govern all interactions in the pastor’s household. And yet the emotion shines through clearly in the scene: the boy has been moved by empathy to reach out to his father and offer him the bird; the pastor is clearly taken aback by the gesture but also touched by the boy’s kindness. Indeed, in the final frames of the scene, the pastor appears on the verge of tears and wrestles visibly with himself. The scene is very emotionally moving. But over it hangs knowledge of how the pastor’s first bird died, at the hands of the pastor’s eldest daughter Klara, who killed it with a pair of scissors and left it arranged like a crucifix for her father to find. If we follow the logic of progression, Klara killed the bird because her father humiliated her by berating her in front of her confirmation class. This is not an isolated incident; in fact, all of the terrible things that happen in the film appear to have their origins in the moral upbringing the pastor has provided his children, which has taught them that moral failings are to be met with swift and severe physical punishment, rather than forgiveness.

Indeed, none of the relationships I discussed above are left untouched by the evil atmosphere of the town. The shadow that hangs over Anna and Rudi’s relationship has mainly to do with their father’s sexual abuse of Anna, which seems to have begun after his wife died. The shadow that hangs over the school teacher’s relationship with Eva, on the other hand, is more difficult to pin down; indeed, the school teacher himself does not seem to understand it. But Eva, as a young woman in this society, sees it all too well. It is most clearly demonstrated in a scene in which the two of them take a carriage ride together, and the teacher suggests that they have a picnic by the stream. “Das möchte ich nicht,”73 Eva says. She will not tell him why. When he says, “Aber ich will nichts Unstatthaftes von dir. Ich wollte dir nur eine Freude machen mit dem Essen,”74 she replies only, “Bitte.” Eva’s fear in this scene seems to be misplaced. But given the sexual violence that permeates the rest of the film as part of the dysfunctional structures of patriarchy that dictate life in the town, it is also understandable. The kiss that the two of them share at the end of this scene and

73 “I’d rather not.”
74 “I had no improper intentions. I just wanted you to enjoy the picnic.”
their obvious joy in each other do not diminish the viewer’s own awareness of how vulnerable Eva is and how little she may trust even her future husband.

These moments of tenderness often feel disjointed or disruptive in a film that, overall, works toward the viewer’s estrangement through techniques of dedramatization. Narrative techniques such as the paradoxical use of the voiceover, the muted acting style, the use of black and white film, and the disruptive and discordant presence or absence of music work in tandem with the viewer’s horror and disgust at certain characters’ actions — not only the children’s, but also the doctor’s, the pastor’s, and the baron’s. Furthermore, the ending of the film arrives without resolution and without certainty. All of this prevents an immersive cinematic experience for the viewer, and indeed, that is Haneke’s explicit intention. Yet the moments of tenderness that I describe above, in which love, kindness, and joy is shown to exist in Eichwald after all, are crucial to the viewer. These moments are, in many ways, more inexplicable than the children’s acts of cruelty. If the pastor’s household has produced Klara, how has it also produced Gustav? By inviting the viewer’s empathy in the midst of a generally estranging experience, these moments complicate the viewer’s understanding of Eichwald. Without these moments, the viewer might perceive the fate of Eichwald as having been written already; without these moments, the eventual decline of this society into fascism would seem inevitable. But these moments of kindness, joy, and love — small and disjointed though they are — demonstrate that despite the narrator’s hypothesis, there is no inevitability to the fate of the residents of Eichwald — or to the fate of the German nation for which it stands.

I argue, however, that Das weiße Band calls something far more fundamental into question. Viewers, like the children of Eichwald, occupy “the moral high ground.” They sit in judgment on characters; in fact, the cognitive film theory that I discussed in Chapter 1 and which I have revisited in this chapter, argues that that is how we grant characters our “allegiance,” and that granting characters our allegiance is how we are able to enjoy film — and narrative more broadly — at all. Films like Haneke’s that resist allowing us to grant our allegiance to one character or another are more difficult to enjoy. Das weiße Band, however, calls our entire experience of
narrative into question, for is there not something about our own moral judgment, like the children’s, that is itself tyrannical, particularly when conducted from “on high”? Would a more ethical form of moral judgment be from “on the ground,” so to speak, within the story itself? Such a form of ethical judgment would by its very nature necessitate a more empathic mode of experiencing narrative — a mode that Haneke appears to have largely rejected. And yet, the moments of tenderness I have discussed gesture toward the possibility of redeeming empathy as a mode of narration — a gesture that comes to full fruition in Haneke’s next and most recent film, Amour.

Amour: The Shock of Empathy

In an article that appeared in The New Yorker shortly after Haneke’s most recent film, Amour (2012), won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, Hannah Goldfield confesses that she almost did not make it through the film: “It wasn’t that I wasn’t prepared. I knew what the movie was about and, having seen several other of Michael Haneke’s movies and read about his work, was familiar with his sadistic tendencies as a filmmaker.” Goldfield had been prepared by people she knew who’d seen the film for it to be “depressing.” But Goldfield says that films rarely depress her, and so she was utterly unprepared for her own reaction:

Amour depressed me. It depressed me to the point that my chest felt tight, that fat tears streamed down my face as I struggled to keep my shoulders from heaving too noticeably. It depressed me to the point that I seriously contemplated escaping to the bathroom to have it out and collect myself, and considered leaving the theatre altogether.

What follows in Goldfield’s article is a consideration of love and aging, and what one means for the other, inspired by a combination of Haneke’s film and her own grandparents. She writes, “[M]y sadness arose from how close to home Amour hit: this was how much my grandparents had loved each other. The sad fate that Anne and Georges were meeting onscreen was the fate that my grandparents had met.”
Goldfield’s article demonstrates the essential differences between *Amour* and Haneke’s other films. Far from being violently estranging, *Amour* might instead be characterized as violently empathic. But as Asbjorn Gronstad points out in one of the few academic discussions of *Amour* yet published, it is still, without a doubt, a Haneke film in its largely dedramatized style: in its lack of an underscore (though, notably, Schubert is once again present diegetically); in its long stretches of cinematic time in which nothing much happens; and in its visual style, which consists of many long, still shots of the interior of the couple’s Paris apartment (Gronstad 191). There remains as well a typically Haneke interest in ethics, though not in any conventional sense, and two particularly memorable moments of “disruptive violence” (Gronstad 191). But there is very little sign of what Goldfield calls Haneke’s “sadistic tendencies.” Although the film is at times hard to watch, there are few moments that make the reader flinch in the same way that Erika Kohut sniffing the wad of used tissues in the pornography booth or cutting her own genitals does. As Goldfield’s article shows, the difficulty of *Amour* comes from its familiarity. Few people would identify with Erika Kohut, Walter Kammer, or any of Haneke’s large cast of characters from *Das weiße Band* (with the exception, perhaps, of the school teacher and Eva). The moments in which our empathy is invited in both *La Pianiste* and *Das weiße Band* are notable primarily for their scarcity. But *Amour* is different; *Amour* does not set out to alienate its viewer. Although not everyone will have Hannah Goldfield’s reaction, it is crucial to note that the shock value of the film for her came not from its estrangement— which Goldfield had expected, based on Haneke’s other work— but from her own surprising empathic reaction. The primary mode of narration in *Amour* is one of empathy, rather than estrangement, and for those like Goldfield who are familiar with Haneke’s other work, the effect is shocking.

*Amour* tells the story of Anne and Georges, an elderly French couple who share a beautiful Parisian apartment. Their relationship is affectionate and loving after many years of marriage, and they share a love of art and especially of music, as Anne was once a piano teacher. The early scenes of the film give us glimpses into Anne and Georges’ comfortable life together, aligning us with them and provoking our allegiance by showing us how well they treat each other. Theirs is a marriage to which
many couples only aspire. Our alignment with them makes it all the worse for the viewer when when Anne suffers a stroke and her mind and body begin degenerating, putting to an end their comfortable life. After an initial hospitalization and an unsuccessful surgery, Anne forces Georges to promise her that she will not go back to the hospital. The decline of her condition is humiliating for her and for Georges, and the two of them isolate themselves from their friends and even from their daughter, Eva (played by Isabelle Huppert). The ending of the film is inevitable; in fact it is foretold from the opening scene, in which Anne’s body, covered in flowers that cannot disguise the stench of decay, is found when the fire department breaks into the apartment. But it is only later that the film reveals how she died, smothered by Georges months after she asked him to end her suffering.

Although aging has become a somewhat more prominent theme in western literature and film in the last ten or fifteen years, it is rarely handled with as much “unrelenting determination” (Gronstad 186) and honesty as Haneke handles it here. Nor is it often handled in such a way that reminds the viewer — as it reminded Hannah Goldfield — that this is the inevitable ending of the narrative of heterosexual romance and marriage with which western culture has long been obsessed. As Gronstad points out, Amour is not about the question of whether Anne will die; Haneke establishes in the very first scene that she will. Rather, the focus is on “life as it is lived with the awareness of death fast approaching” (Gronstad 188). When Eva asks about her mother’s condition, Georges replies, with a frank honesty that does nothing to cushion the blow for his daughter, “It will go steadily downhill for a while, and then it will be over.”

Haneke is just as uninterested in cushioning the blow for his viewer as Georges is in sparing Eva. Over the course of the film, we watch Anne deteriorate by increments from an elegant older woman into helplessness: She becomes unable to walk, feed herself, clean herself, and finally unable to speak. But she is never unaware of her own condition; that would be a mercy, and one that Haneke does not allow her or his viewer. In this, too, the film is very much of Haneke’s oeuvre: “True to his reputation, Haneke grants us no relief; as viewers we have no choice but to be consumed by this claustrophobic and intensely private world for the duration of the
couple’s ordeal” (Gronstad 190). This sense of claustrophobia, of being trapped, allows for what Gronstad argues is the development a new ethics between Georges and Anne. In this way, Gronstad says, the film demonstrates how the sense of approaching death is, itself, transformational, and it seeks to subject the viewer to this transformation as well through the discomfort that it inflicts (194-195). But this discomfort, I argue, is not the discomfort of estrangement, as is so often the case in Haneke’s films, but rather that of an extreme empathy. We are locked into Anne and Georges’ situation with them; we are too closely aligned to escape. We can only wait and witness as the situation slides inexorably downhill, knowing that at some point, it will be over.

When that moment arrives, it is shocking. Georges sits on the edge of the hospital bed in their bedroom and tells Anne a story from his childhood, about the time he was at summer camp and caught diphtheria. During his telling of the story, Anne, who had been moaning loudly, quiets. He looks at her, and then, with very little warning, he pulls a pillow over her face and smothers her, bending over so that his own face is buried in the pillow, almost as though he is smothering himself as well. She fights and kicks; muffled noises are audible. But she is very weak and quickly goes silent and still. This is no less than she has already asked of him, but Georges had heretofore refused. Indeed, her refusal to drink water only a short time earlier resulted in the film’s only other eruption of violence: He slapped her out of frustration. His decision to smother her seems sudden, if not inexplicable, to the viewer. Why now? And why such a violent form of euthanasia? With all of the medications that Anne is certainly on, there must be a more peaceful way to ease her death. Although she has asked for death many times before, Anne fights him in this scene, and that, in and of itself, is disturbing. But after everything that has come before, even this eruption of violence into the film is not estranging in the sense that violent moments in La Pianiste or Das weiße Band are. This is the culmination of the new ethics of Anne and Georges’ relationship. It is a decision that is both understandable — it would be difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to condemn George for it after having watched his and Anne’s struggles in intimate detail for two hours — and, yet, jarring.
The film does not end with Anne’s death, just as, Haneke makes clear, Anne and Georges’ relationship does not end with it. Indeed, as Gronstad points out, the film is at least as interested in George’s reaction to losing Anne as it is in Anne’s slow decline (190). Accordingly, after Anne’s death, Georges’ grief is shown to us in as much detail as her illness was. For days, Georges remains alone with Anne’s body in their apartment, speaking to no one. This part of the film is nearly silent, with only occasional audible interventions when a phone rings or someone runs water in the sink. What Bordwell calls “dorsality” — the turning of the protagonist’s back to the camera — is particularly noticeable in these scenes. The scene in which Georges smothers Anne is shot in profile, but once the deed is done, Georges turns his face away from the camera and toward the window, looking away from his now deceased wife and from the viewer. Even when we do see his profile, the backlighting means that it is in shadow. In the following scenes, this directorial choice is even more pronounced: Georges’ back is to us when he stands at the sink, snipping the flowers with which he will decorate Anne’s body; his back is to us as well, when he chooses the clothes in which he will lay her out. His profile is partially visible as he seals the door to their bedroom, Anne’s tomb, but it is shot at a distance and his face is often obscured either by his body angle or by a lamp shade. There are no scenes of empathy here, and these scenes are, in one sense, distancing; it is impossible for the viewer to feel what Georges feels, nor does the viewer really have that right. However, despite the distinct presence of dedramatized elements, these scenes are deeply moving. Although we have no right to empathize with Georges in his grief for Anne, we also have no choice but to try. Georges is alone in his grief, and the viewer is left alone with him. Anne’s life is over, but Georges’ is not, and all that is left for the viewer to do is to watch him grapple with what it might mean for him to live without her.

A Haneke film would not be a Haneke film if major questions were not left unanswered, and what happens to Georges after the ending of the film is the biggest one in Amour. In the end, it is only a vision of Anne herself that prompts him to leave. Lying on his bed in the library, he hears the sound of running water in the kitchen: the same sound that heralded the onset of Anne’s illness in the scene wherein she has her initial stroke. He shuffles out of the study and into the kitchen, where he is shocked to
see Anne doing the dishes — not Anne as she was when she died, but Anne as she was at the beginning of the film, healthy and elegant. She says she’s “almost done” and he should put his shoes on. He puts his shoes on in the hallway, and she comes out of the kitchen. She gets ready to leave as well, and he helps her on with her coat. She says, “You’re not taking a coat?” and he returns to get one. Then he follows her out, shutting off the lights. Garrett Stewart notes that if this final scene between Georges and Anne “raises the question ‘Does he die too?’ there is only one answer. Of course he does. Or say: Of course he will” (“Haneke’s End Game,” 21). But it is unclear where Georges goes once he leaves the apartment. This scene is followed by a series of long, still shots of the abandoned apartment — of the remnants of Georges and Anne’s life together. Then their daughter Eva enters. She walks through the apartment, sits in her father’s chair in the library, and stares out the window. Stewart writes, “Eva is last caught seated stock still in a framed recess staring left toward the windows, unseen now, through which she had previously and repeatedly looked away from her father’s pain and anger” (“Haneke’s End Game,” 21). It is hard to say what Eva is feeling in that moment: grief, almost certainly, but perhaps she also feels confusion, anger, and regret. But whatever has happened, it is all over now. The film fades to black.

Although there is much in Amour that a Haneke aficionado might find surprising, upon deeper consideration what is perhaps more surprising are the number of ways in which the film is quintessentially Haneke. The techniques of dedramatization that Haneke has used in all of his films that have elsewhere worked to estrange the viewer and either prevent or disrupt empathy — such as the absence of an underscore, the proliferation of long, still shots, the sudden eruption of violence into the narrative, glaring questions left deliberately unresolved — here result in empathy that shocks the viewer. It is all the more shocking for those who, like Hannah Goldfield, thought they knew what to expect from a Haneke film. But Goldfield’s statement is, in and of itself, telling: estrangement is no longer shocking when it is expected, and seventy years after the end of World War II and the rise of estrangement as a mode of narration, we have come to expect it. Perhaps the ethical value of estrangement comes from its ability to shock, and once that ability is gone, because it
has become an expected feature of our aesthetic landscape, the dialectic must once more be renegotiated. *Amour* represents, I argue, such a renegotiation in Haneke’s own work, just as *La Pianiste* represents a renegotiation of the dialectic in Jelinek’s *Die Klavierspielerin*. With *Amour*, we see empathy redeemed as a mode of narration, and we see that it, too, has the power to shock us. For the empathy that we see in *Amour* is not the facile one of popular culture; it is one that it presents a cognitive and emotional burden for the viewer, demanding as much if not more of us than Haneke’s earlier, highly estranging work.

**Conclusion**

My decision to situate the chapter about Michael Haneke’s work last in my dissertation was not purely about chronology. From the inception of this project, I have thought of Haneke as a microcosm of my broader argument. His films synthesize and distill many of the themes that I have discussed in my other chapters, particularly the relationship between narrative and ethical estrangement; they also demonstrate how the relationship between empathy and estrangement is rarely static, but is rather constantly renegotiated in both individual texts and across a particular writer or director’s oeuvre. Ultimately, for Haneke, this renegotiation has resulted in a surprising return to empathic modes of narration, thus demonstrating that empathy has the power to challenge the viewer or reader in ways similar to the techniques of estrangement I have described. This is a challenge, I argue, that Haneke issues in each of the films discussed in this chapter. Haneke’s work challenges us to empathize with characters we cannot like, in situations where we have little hope of the traditional rewards of cinematic empathy. In this, his work echoes the fundamental challenges of empathy in real life.

For this same reason, Haneke’s work also challenges the primacy of moral judgment in our experience of fiction. Like Grass’s protagonist Oskar Matzerath, judging Haneke’s characters is an exercise in frustration. Erika Kohut does not seem to operate according to any ethical framework with which the viewer might be
familiar; the changes in Anne and Georges’ relationship invite, according to Gronstad, “a new ethics”; and in Das weiße Band, a story in which moral judgment might seem at first to be quite obvious, it is problematized, for it is because of moral judgment that the horrors in the town are perpetrated. In a sense, Haneke’s oeuvre asks us to justify ourselves as viewers. It demands, Who are you to judge? in a way that is more than hypothetical. This is not so different from the ways in which Bennys Video and Funny Games render the viewer complicit in the onscreen violence, but for all its comparative lack of gore, Haneke’s later repertoire actually goes much further in unseating the viewer from his perch above the narrative. His tool for this unseating is, somewhat ironically, empathy. Ultimately, we cannot judge Georges for the act of murder that ends Anne’s suffering; we have been drawn too far inside the story to judge him at all. The renegotiation of the dialectic of empathy and estrangement that occurs within Michael Haneke’s most recent film therefore asks whether a redemption of empathy as a mode of narration might, in fact, be possible, and whether in the right hands, it might not be a more ethical mode of narration after all.
In Conclusion:

Critical Empathy and the Humanities Classroom

Michael Haneke’s most recent film *Amour* (2012) leaves us with the vexing question of the position of empathy in the twenty-first century. I noted at the beginning of this dissertation that it has been given, in many regards, a position of paramount importance; we need more empathy, many people argue. We need to expand our circle of empathy to encompass as much of humanity – and, indeed, the environment and non-human animals with which we share the earth – as possible. There is something seductive and enticing about this argument; certainly many people would like to believe that it is possible to infinitely expand human kindness. And yet research into how we experience empathy calls into question whether it is actually possible to do this via empathy. Empathy, by its very nature, has long been a way of dividing the “us” from the “them” – those who are worthy of kindness from those who are not. Nazi Germany provides only one dramatic example of a moment in which empathy, and the emotion-based decision-making it tends to result in, failed dramatically. Empathy is therefore strongly implicated in fascist structures of power themselves, as my reading of *Triumph des Willens* in Chapter 1 demonstrates. The narrative techniques that Günter Grass, W.G. Sebald, and Michael Haneke develop to negotiate the dialectic of empathy and estrangement I identify in their works might therefore be classified most simply as anti-fascist narrative strategies.

These strategies, I have shown, are many and varied, but there are several that carry across multiple texts and authors: narrative unreliability or non-cooperation, such as in Grass’s *Blechtrommel* and Sebald’s *Austerlitz*; mindreading puzzles that can never be solved, as in Sebald’s *Ausgewanderten* and Haneke’s *La Pianiste*; moments of intimacy and empathy that are deliberately thwarted, such as in Sebald’s *Austerlitz* and Haneke’s *Das weiße Band*; and the presence of the disgusting or the grotesque in the text, as in Grass’s *Blechtrommel* and Haneke’s *La Pianiste*. These techniques refuse us as readers the usual pleasures of the text; they prevent immersion within the text itself, and they force us to question the reliability of all human narrative to the
point that we must adopt, in many cases, an ethic of skepticism. In other words, these texts disrupt our usual empathic approach to fictional narration. But Haneke’s *Amour* disrupts this disruption. It represents an empathic evolution in Haneke’s traditionally estranging work. But it also demonstrates that it is possible for a highly empathic work to avoid falling into certain empathic fallacies. An empathic work, *Amour* demonstrates, need not be pleasurable in a traditional sense; it also need not be facile or, indeed, fascist.

It is therefore perhaps not so much that empathy is being redeemed in our present moment as that our understanding of it has matured. Empathy is not a panacea for all of humanity’s ills, but neither is emotion-based decision-making to blame for all of them. We need both empathy and skepticism in our present moment – both the ability to emotionally invest and to recognize when emotional investment is leading to moral decisions that may only be justified with retrospective mental gymnastics. In Jonathan Haidt’s terms, it is important to recognize when the moral dog is wagging the rational tail. I have come to believe that it is the labeling of a moral position as rational when it is, in reality, an emotional one that is dangerous, rather than the existence of that emotion itself. For in labeling certain positions “rational” and “irrational,” we actually recuse ourselves from having to understand the other side at all. After all, they are being irrational; we, who truly understand the issue and have taken the rational position, cannot be expected to empathize with or understand the position of people who are, clearly, irrational.

Similarly, it is important that we understand the limits of empathy that Paul Bloom has articulated so well, even while acknowledging that cutting ourselves off from it is both impossible and undesirable. I will not go so far as to say that empathy is what makes us human, but it has certainly played an integral role in some of humanity’s greatest achievements – though also, as I showed in Chapter 1, in some of its greatest disasters. I would therefore like to introduce a new concept at this late stage, and call for what I would like to term “critical empathy”: that is, an empathy that is self-reflective and self-critical. Critical empathy understands is skeptical of itself and does not assume that it is necessarily leading to a better world. The type of empathy that one finds in the works I have discussed is precisely this kind of empathy.
Its role is complex and problematized, but it is still very much a force that drives the narrative and – perhaps more importantly – the reader’s experience of that narrative. When it comes to texts like Die Blechtrommel and La Pianiste, that experience may be one of frustration, aggravation, disgust, and annoyance.

My interest in the role that empathy, specifically critical empathy, plays in how we experience such emotionally difficult texts has led me to consider a number of questions outside the immediate scope of this dissertation. One area of interest to me has been the role of empathy and estrangement in texts, especially television shows, in which the protagonist is explicitly designed as a moral antagonist — and yet also explicitly designed to invite a high degree of empathy from the viewer. These types of shows, the most stand-out of which is probably Netflix’s House of Cards, have become increasingly popular. Through techniques such as a direct address of the camera, the protagonist renders himself emotionally and morally legible to the viewer, who adopts the character’s goals and perhaps even his morality as her own for the duration of the show. The question of what these shows are accomplishing from aesthetic, moral, and cognitive angles remains to be fully investigated, as does their appeal in our particular historical and political moment. Is the empathy invoked by these shows truly critical? This is one direction that my research might take in the future, for although this dissertation has focused on postmodern texts, I remain convinced that popular texts are often just as complex and often more important, precisely because of their popularity, than their more aesthetically difficult cousins.

The second question, which I will address in this conclusion, is one that has been central to my own graduate education: humanities pedagogy and the place of the humanities in the public sphere. There has been much talk in recent years of the purpose and value of the humanities; passionate “defenses” of the humanities have been raised, and the dearth of students in humanities classrooms has been lamented. These defenses and lamentations have taken many forms, but empathy, I mentioned in Chapter 1, is often a crucial part of these discussions. The research by Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley, among others, that says that people who read fiction are more empathic has been pointed to by those who would like a scientific basis upon which to ground their claims that reading fiction makes us better people. This involves a
fundamental misunderstanding of what empathy is and is not: it is an understanding of what other people are thinking and feeling; it is not the feeling of being moved to help someone in distress. I noted in my first chapter that Paul Bloom points out that empathy is a narrow, biased emotion; Bloom also points out that it leads to distress on the part of the empathizer, which can actually lead to a lack of action, as the empathizer’s main goal often becomes to diminish her own distress, rather than help the person in need. Empathic feeling is no guarantee of real-world action. I therefore believe that if we are going to use empathy as an argument in favor of the humanities, we should not claim that reading makes us better people. There is simply no evidence that it does.

But that does not mean that empathy does not play an enormous role in the humanities classroom. Both my research and my teaching have convinced me of the importance of students’ emotional experience of a text; we tend to avoid too much discussion of this experience in the classroom, as it veers too close to “appreciation” for our comfort. And yet perhaps we should not dismiss appreciation quite so readily. If we can help students better appreciate a text like Die Blechtrommel, then that is an enormous accomplishment. I therefore would like to argue here for two particular changes in how we approach texts in the humanities: first, a deeper engagement with students’ emotional experiences of texts as a way of teaching them the kind of critical empathy I have outlined here; and second, the slow reading of very difficult texts.

**Feeling Sorry for Gregor Samsa**

In Fall 2014, I co-taught a seminar on philosophical, psychological, and literary approaches to empathy at Hope House, a halfway house for women recovering from drug and alcohol addiction. This presented rather different challenges from the typical Stanford undergraduate classroom. My students at Hope House ranged widely in educational level, from those who had never finished high school to those with Bachelor’s degrees. Most of them had not set foot inside a classroom in many years. Many of them did not believe they were up to the challenge of the course. I knew
when I put Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* on the syllabus that it would be our most difficult text, but I believed our students to be up to the challenge — and they were. For ninety minutes, we had a lively discussion about empathy in the text and the ways in which empathy fails and how that failure contributes to the process of Gregor Samsa’s dehumanization.

At the very end of the discussion, one of my students raised her hand. “I have to ask,” she said. “You said this is one of the most important texts in German literature. But why do you read it? What do you get out of reading a story about a guy who turns into a bug?”

I was a little taken aback by the question, though it was not the first time that one of the students had disrupted the Socratic method to ask my co-instructor and I what we thought about something. There were a number of answers I could have given her: *The Metamorphosis* is a major work of German Expressionism and one of Kafka’s best works; it is also a work about modernity and its effects on individual agency that feels as relevant today as it did when it was published in 1915. But I had the feeling that was not the sort of answer the student was hoping for, and it also was not entirely true; those are very good reasons for reading *The Metamorphosis*, but if I am honest, they are not my reasons.

“I read *The Metamorphosis,*” I finally said, “for the same reasons we read it today: I find the problem of empathy in the text to be interesting. And I feel sorry for Gregor Samsa.”

Around the room, my students nodded. They, too, had felt sorry for Gregor Samsa; indeed, they had had a lot more empathy for Gregor than most Stanford students with whom I have read the text, many of whom have found him too passive and condemned him for being the architect of his own misfortune. But my Hope House students, feeling perhaps that they, like Gregor, had been misused by the people closest to them at times, felt deeply for him.

Literary texts provide us with ways to think about history, philosophy, psychology, and language, but for most readers, their emotional reaction to the text is the basis upon which they will love or hate it. Sometimes our emotional response to a text is pleasant: we find ourselves “transported” or “immersed,” and reading seems
effortless. Other times, however, our emotional response to a text is quite challenging. Students may become frustrated, disgusted, or simply bored. These are the moments in which a teacher is most important; they are also the moments in which a traditional, large-group discussion may fail to produce the intellectual results that both students and teachers hope for. But it is possible, I argue, that those intellectual results do not happen in spite of students’ emotional reactions, but rather because of their reactions. My students at Hope House were able to engage with *The Metamorphosis* because they felt sorry for Gregor Samsa, and because they saw in his situation some shadow of their own. Students’ emotional experience of a text can often be a good place to begin, and can be used to encourage engagement with a text’s thornier passages by asking, “Where in the text were you frustrated or discouraged? Let’s start there.” Particularly with texts that deliberately provoke strong, negative emotions, this can be a fruitful point of departure for students. It can lead into much deeper discussion of intentionality within texts, of what texts can do in the world, and of what texts can do to us as readers. This type of reading, in other words, makes a strong argument for the power of fictional texts and therefore for the humanities.

This type of reading also, however, makes an argument for reading differently in the humanities classroom, where “critical thinking” has long been touted as one of the areas in which the humanities excel. I do not argue with this, though I think STEM fields might take offense at the idea that they do not also practice critical thinking skills. But since the advent of theory in the 1980s, critical thinking in the humanities has become more and more critical, to the point where many students feel that reading has been “ruined” for them by their English classes. What they mean by that, I am increasingly convinced, is that they are no longer able to read with as much empathic enjoyment as they once were. In one striking example of this, in a “How I Think about Literature” address in October 2013, John Hennessy, president of Stanford, mentioned a number of books that he was “tortured” with in high school that he later came to love. Hennessy, a professor of computer science, attributed the change in how he felt about these texts mostly to a maturation of his own mind and an accumulation of experience that allowed him to appreciate novels such as *Moby Dick*. There certainly might be something to that; *Die Blechtrommel* is not a novel for young teenagers, or
perhaps even older teenagers. But this also indicates to me that there needs to be a shift in how we teach literature: reading need not be torturous, and it also need not ignore students’ desire for empathic engagement. Perhaps, then, “critical empathy” should be the flagship offering of the humanities classroom, rather than critical thinking.

What would such a “critical empathy” approach to texts look like? It would, first of all, seek to utilize students’ emotional experiences of texts — especially difficult ones — thereby rendering those texts more meaningful, if not precisely more accessible; after all, the point I have made repeatedly in this dissertation is that many texts are not easily accessible, nor should they be. But the humanities at their best help students find more and greater meaning in texts than they would be able to find on their own, and empathy is a major aspect of that process; it is not one that we can afford to dismiss, particularly, I argue, when it comes to difficult texts. Moreover, reading difficult texts is an intellectual accomplishment on par with the challenges posed in STEM courses, and it is a challenge that requires training to tackle properly. It also requires time. In order to make these very difficult texts meaningful for students and give them the sense of accomplishment they crave, we must move away from the voluminous reading lists that have characterize many humanities syllabi and move toward methods of slow reading that encourage both intellectual and emotional engagement. When students are forced to consume – a word I use deliberately – a text like Die Blechtrommel as quickly as possible, then it is a very small wonder indeed when they do not feel as though they have accomplished much. But reading and understanding a text like Die Blechtrommel, even in translation, is very much an intellectual accomplishment.

I therefore believe we must find ways to teach literature that make use of students’ emotional experiences of texts, especially when that experience is difficult; doing so, I argue, will also render the interpretive challenges posed by these texts more rewarding. Rendering the reading experience both intellectually and emotionally rewarding is crucial, for if we do not do this, very few students will remain who enjoy reading – and I wager that no one ever became a humanist who did not like to read.
Critical Empathy and Technology in the Humanities Classroom

This approach to humanities pedagogy leaves a number of questions open, among them: How do we know how deeply students are engaging with texts? How do we give them that sense of accomplishment? How do we monitor their emotional engagement as they read? Strangely, up to now there has been no reliable way to assess reading in the humanities, even though in many fields it is our primary practice. Rather, we have assessed reading via writing through assignments such as term papers. Writing an argumentative paper is certainly a skill worth developing in its own right, but it does not necessarily help the instructor measure students’ engagement with the reading overall in the course, since good readers are not necessarily the best writers and vice versa.

At this point, however, digital tools are in development for use in the humanities classroom that may allow us to measure students’ engagement more accurately and to encourage them to engage more deeply with texts. For the last two years, I have been privileged to work on a research team developing one such tool. Lacuna Stories is a digital annotation tool designed for use in a humanities classroom, in which students are able to annotate texts, view other students’ annotations, and “sew” their annotations together to track themes across texts. Reading on such a platform is no longer the solitary activity that it has traditionally been. Lacuna Stories transforms reading into a social activity, and it encourages the instructor to employ a learning-centered approach that is focused more fully on the students’ interests and, indeed, their emotional reactions. Furthermore, Lacuna Stories allows students to react to each other’s reactions, and to bring those reactions out of the digital space and into the physical realm of the classroom.

In winter quarter of 2015, as a member of the Lacuna Stories team, I observed Professor Amir Eshel and graduate student Brian Johnsrud’s course “Futurity,” which used the Lacuna Stories platform. One of the texts that students read was Air Raid by Alexander Kluge. Air Raid depicts the destruction of Halberstadt, Germany at the very end of World War II in an American bombing campaign. It is a linguistically, cognitively, and emotionally difficult text that utilizes many of the estrangement
techniques I identified in this dissertation and deliberately avoids the invocation of empathy even for its point of view characters. In the opening scene, Frau Schrader, ticket seller and theater manager of the Capitol Cinema, walks through the streets of Halberstadt, after an afternoon screening of *Heimkehr* is disrupted by a bombing raid. Kluge’s prose is detached, and his cataloguing of Frau Schrader’s reactions is often unbelievable and estranging, as demonstrated in the following passage:

This was probably the most powerful shock that the cinema had ever experienced during the time Frau Schrader was in charge, the effect triggered by even the best films is hardly comparable. For Frau Schrader, a seasoned cinema professional, however, there was no conceivable shock, which could call in question the division of the afternoon into four fixed screenings (or six with matinee and late show).\(^75\) (3)

Kluge’s irony here is more subdued than Grass’s in *Die Blechtrommel*, but the passage itself recalls Oskar Matzerath. The narrator — who is *not* Frau Schrader — describes neutrally the immunity she has developed to shock through years of exposure to narrative violence, but her lack of emotional reaction triggers a counter-reaction in the viewer. This is not unlike the reaction triggered by Oskar’s refusal to be disgusted – or to express disgust – at things his reader finds disgusting. Frau Schrader’s lack of shock, like Oskar’s lack of disgust, creates significant emotional dissonance between the text and the reader.

This emotional dissonance is a crucial aspect of texts like *Air Raid* and *Die Blechtrommel*; I have hypothesized about its significance a number of times throughout this dissertation. However, in the end, the readings I offered about such moments of dissonance were my readings, and the emotional dissonance that I described was my own; my investigations were necessarily based in the text itself. I do not believe that there is necessarily a problem with such an approach, but it is limited in that it assumes a model reader, and there are always readers for whom the readings I offered will not resonate. Tools such as Lacuna Stories have implications for

\(^{75}\) I quote here from the version of *Air Raid* that the students in “Futurity” read, which is the English translation by Martin Chalmers.
humanities education, but also, I believe, for the field of cognitive cultural studies. They render visible the readings and emotional reactions of others more readily. In examining the annotations of students who used Lacuna Stories to read *Air Raid*, it is possible to see the emotional dissonance I described “in action” and to see, qualitatively, their emotional reactions to the text.

As a brief example of what such analysis might look like, I will take as an example students’ annotations of the passage I quoted above, which was one of the more heavily annotated passages in the text. It was annotated publicly by six different students, roughly 50% of the class. Some of these students, as graduate students in the humanities, are what we might call “professionally trained readers”; others, however, as undergraduates in a variety of disciplines, are not. As a whole, students expressed disbelief at Frau Schrader’s emotional reactions, with comments such as:

“So, her indifference is a result of being a ‘seasoned cinema professional’? Unconvincing”

“Is this all to say that Frau Schrader is more moved/impacted by dramatized and fictional scenes depicted in film than by a real-life incident like an explosion..?”

“Wow this seems hard to believe. ‘No conceivable shock’?”

Students’ irritation, disbelief, and emotional dissonance is clearly visible here. Although several of the students noted the irony in the passage, they still attempted to understand and empathize with Frau Schrader and were subsequently thwarted by the text itself. Students could not reconcile Frau Schrader’s reactions with what they imagined their own would be in the same situation. Their annotations render highly visible the disruption of empathy in the text and the subsequent estrangement of its readers. Perhaps most revealing, however, is an annotation slightly further along in the text on the following sentence: “She walked, shattered by now, all the way to the 'Long Cave' where, in the company of the Wilde family, who had fled there during the raid, she chewed a sausage sandwich and they took turns spooning preserved pears from a jar. Frau Schrader felt 'no good for anything any more’” (Kluge 4). Upon this sentence, one of graduate students in the class remarked: “Finally some signs indicating emotional distress.” This student’s relief at some sense of emotional
legibility is clear, despite her relatively high level of training as a reader. Frau Schrader’s lack of emotional distress, like Oskar Matzerath’s lack of disgust, is itself emotionally distressing and estranging. This is true, it seems, even when a reader is able to acknowledge the irony of the text, and therefore understands that the text will not offer them a straightforward exercise in empathy the way a more realistic novel would.

As one might expect, students’ irritation with *Air Raid* bled over into the classroom discussion, where the instructors used students’ emotional reactions to steer them toward thinking about reader expectations in relationship to genre. Although the instructors certainly did not stop at students’ emotional reactions, their access to students’ annotations gave them particular insight into how students felt as they read the text, and they were able to use this information for a conversation that made use of students’ irritation and feelings of estrangement. Indeed, the very first place they began was with this passage, because so many students had expressed such strong feelings about the lack of the emotion in the text itself. The discussion began not where the instructor was interested in starting, but where the students themselves were at in their reading, and it began with an approach that emphasized the importance of critical empathy. Students were asked to catalogue what they felt, where they felt it, and why they were frustrated. With texts such as *Air Raid*, the acknowledgment of frustration and irritation as important reactions in their own right is, I believe, critical to the advancement of students’ understanding of a text, and to their feelings of intellectual accomplishment in reading it, even if they do not come to love it.

It is almost inevitable in a long project like a dissertation, one will be left with things one wishes one had done differently. One of mine is that I wish I had been able to read *Die Blechtrommel* (possibly in translation) with a group of students over the course of a quarter, using Lacuna Stories, to see how these techniques of slow reading and emotional engagement play out in a classroom, and to test students’ reactions against my own hypotheses. Certainly there remains valuable research to be done at the intersection of cognitive science, textual analysis, and pedagogical research that has the potential to transform the humanities classroom into a more student-centered and emotionally engaged place than it currently is. My research over the last three
years has made me aware of the value and limitations of empathy as a mode of ethical reasoning; at the same time, however, it has emphasized to me just how crucial emotions are in moral decision-making of all kinds. In the end, I do not find myself arguing “against empathy” with Paul Bloom, but rather in favor of critical empathy: empathy that is self-aware, self-reflective, and self-skeptical, but which does not discount its own power.
Bibliography


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