

## War of Images or Images of War? Visualizing History in Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*

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*The Kindly Ones* (2006), a French novel written by the American author Jonathan Littell, explores the Holocaust from a perpetrator's point of view. Replete with detailed historical analysis and intertextual references, the novel's narrative strategies are in fact highly visual. From the perpetrator's gaze to the archive of perpetrator images that circulate in the text, the novel's visual objects are sites where violence is waged and imagined. Rather than depicting only the Holocaust and WWII, however, *The Kindly Ones* creates an alternative archive of images that brings this past into contact with Algeria, Vietnam, and 9/11. The novel not only offers images of war, it represents a "war of images" that evinces post-9/11 anxieties about the power of images to produce, and not simply represent, violence. By visualizing previously imperceptible relations, this quintessential historical novel offers a model for historicizing the present, not the past.

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*The Kindly Ones* (2006), a French novel written by the American author Jonathan Littell, has enjoyed remarkable critical and commercial success for a nearly 1,000-page tome about an incestuous, matricidal Nazi lawyer. Max Aue, the highly unreliable narrator, relates the novel in the guise of a macabre memoir. Through a series of picaresque misadventures and coincidences, he finds himself at nearly every landmark site in the European theatre of war, including the Babi Yar massacre, the siege of Stalingrad, occupied France, Auschwitz and the death marches, the Soviet invasion of Berlin, and Hitler's bunker during the final days, where he bites the Führer's nose in a fit of hysterical pique.

Feted in France, *The Kindly Ones* nevertheless drew fire from critics for narrating the Holocaust from a perpetrator's point of view. In Germany and the United States, where it did not sell well, critics largely judged it to be in poor taste—even going so far as to call it "kitsch" and "pornography" (Radisch qtd. in Theweleit 22). Whatever accusations of tawdriness have plagued *The Kindly Ones*, the novel is clearly informed by the work of respected Holocaust and WWII historians, including Christopher Browning, Daniel Goldhagen, and Raul Hilberg. Philosophical debates about the nature of evil and the particularity of the Holocaust, such as those found in Hannah Arendt and David Rousset, pervade the text. The book's intertexts extend to a French literary canon that includes Flaubert, Baudelaire, Bataille, and Blanchot, as well as classical myths that frame Aue's memory practices and matricide. Consequently, much of the scholarship on the novel has discussed the ethical implications of narrating a historical novel

from a perpetrator's viewpoint (Hutton; Razinsky "Not The Witness"), its intertextuality and postmodern aesthetics (Suleiman; Razinsky "History, Excess, and Testimony"), its bilingual narrative (Kippur), and its relation to—and creation of—literary history (Michaels).

By focusing on the novel's intertextuality and language, however, its relations to visual culture and visibility—what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls "the intersection of power with visual representation" (4)—have been overlooked. From the perpetrator's gaze to the archive of perpetrator images that circulate in the text, the novel not only offers images of war, it represents a war of images. Real and imagined images circulate within and beyond the narrative, creating an alternative archive that brings together the Holocaust and WWII, colonialism and imperialism, and contemporary events such as 9/11. The novel's images of war are sites where historical violence is waged and imagined—not simply objects that reflect violence. Like Mieke Bal's self-reflexive "theoretical objects" (104) or W.J.T. Mitchell's "metapictures" that represent the act of representation (*Picture Theory* 9), the novel's images of war theorize the relation between violence, power, and visual representation. They evince anxieties about the power of images to *produce*, not simply represent, violence.

Pictures' agency—their apparent "power to influence human beings"—has always provoked fear, even though the way people conceive of the power of images has changed over time (Mitchell *What Do Pictures Want?* 7). But the feeling that images are "living organisms," capable of symbolic as well as social change intensifies at certain historical moments (11). For Mitchell, 9/11 and the destruction of the World Trade Center is the moment that not only inaugurates the war on terror but also the "war of images" (*Cloning Terror* 3). The attacks on the buildings, which represented no military or strategic importance, were calculated to provoke terror *through* the images of the burning towers; they were "a symbolic event, the deliberate destruction of an iconic object designed as the production of a spectacular image calculated to traumatize a whole society" (12-13). The power of the *image* of this event was to realize the imaginary, turning the metaphorical war on terror into an actual ground war (167). The images of 9/11 seemed to inaugurate a new historical consciousness, one in which images seem to take on the ability to produce actual violence.

*The Kindly Ones* is a consummately historical novel that represents the “conventional” theatre of war in Europe (as opposed to the “unconventional” methods of terrorism). But it frequently exhibits anxieties about the possibility that images can produce violence—that they can *terrorize* us. The novel’s treatment of visual images and visibility thus evokes fears about the contemporary globalization of genocide and terror. Although the novel does not include any actual pictures, relations of visibility and perception—what makes things visible—are central to how the text represents memory and history. Indeed, the clash between the past depicted in the novel and its contemporary context is a central part of this war of images. This article will explore three main aspects of visual culture in the text: visual objects and the relation between their aesthetics and the social worlds they construct; modes of perception and the way visual objects are produced, consumed, and circulated; and the study of the visual as a mode of attention or interpretation (Stewart). In my analysis, the anamorphic image, the visual archive, and the dialectical image stage the confrontation between past and present. Ultimately, I argue, the novel’s visibility reflects on the war of images that sparked and sustained the war on the terror. *The Kindly Ones*’ images of war confront us with the responsibility of recognizing our blindness to the violence of images that constitute the period when it was written and published, rather than the historical context of its plot and story. By visualizing previously imperceptible historical relations, the novel historicizes the present, not the past.

### **The Archival “I”**

The novel’s narrator, Max Aue, inhabits a series of double and border positions that, as Debarati Sanyal argues, creates a “sustained tension ... between the beguiling intimacy of Aue’s voice ... and his status as an object of the reader’s critical reflection” (49). He is a twin born in the border region of Alsace to a French mother and a German father, a homosexual who has committed incest with his sister, the presumed father of identical twins from this incestuous relationship, and a jurist who summarily executes innocents. Aue is a meticulous chronicler and archivist who also exists in a radical sexual fantasy world.

His contradictory nature embodies the tension between history (objective) and memory (subjective). Claude Lanzmann, the exacting director of *Shoah*, for instance, praised *The Kindly Ones*' historical accuracy, but disparaged Littell's apparent failure to provide a critical distance from his narrator—for endowing “his SS hero without memory, with History as memory” (14).<sup>1</sup> One of the common criticisms leveled at Littell (and a criticism that often confuses Littell *with* his narrator) charges him with insufficiently distancing himself from Aue or condemning his actions. What critics and readers are most disturbed about, according to Walter Benn Michaels, “is not exactly that Aue is insufficiently repentant but that Littell is insufficiently critical of Aue” (922). In short, Littell is guilty of not creating a space of reflection that enables readers to take an adequate distance from Aue's moral failings.

In *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek's condemns liberal humanitarian discourses that urge immediate responses to violence and catastrophe. In injunctions to “save a child,” Žižek argues, “there is a fundamental anti-theoretical edge ... There is no time to reflect: we have to *act now*” (6). Anxieties about the Aue's proximity to the reader echo this “anti-theoretical” urgency; this is an insistence we *know* now, too, that the work of interpreting Aue's actions, feelings, and thoughts is already done for us so we are no longer in danger of identifying with his disturbing intentions. But Aue's visual nature, which seems to embody the immediacy of violence and our inability to reflect on it, plays a large part in the disquiet he elicits from the reader.

Initially, Aue “sees” himself as a transparent spectator, disingenuously declaring, “I observe and I do nothing, that's my favorite position” (Littell 237). As he moves from observer to perpetrator, however, he comes to acknowledge that the perpetrator's gaze not only perceives but also produces violence: “I consider that watching engages my responsibility as much as doing” (445). The reader's perspective shifts with him, even as his highly self-conscious commentary seems to leave no space for readers to form their own critique. Indeed, Aue embodies the entire process of visual perception, triangulating subject, object, and interpretation: “I was always observing myself: it was as if a camera was fixed above me, and I was simultaneously this camera, the man that it filmed, and the man who studied the film” (106). By inhabiting all of these positions, Aue seems to pre-empt any kind of critical distance. The novel's images

and modes of perception, which include but are not limited to Aue's first-person narration, provide a theoretical reflection on anxieties that images harbor violence. But, I will argue, the novel also *reproduces* such anxieties by endowing images with the agency to produce violence.

### **The Anamorphic Image**

In a 2006 interview with *Le Monde*, Littell suggests that the novel's origins lie in an image of the Soviet partisan Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, which he encountered in 1989 (**Figure 1**):

She had been hung by the Nazis. The Soviets found her body later, half gnawed by wolves. Stalin subsequently made her into an icon. What is extraordinary about this image is that we perceive how beautiful this woman was. That really got my mind working [*Cela m'a beaucoup travaillé*], and at the same time it was intolerable.

(Blumenfeld)

German forces captured the eighteen-year-old in November 1941 near Moscow. Tortured and forced to walk barefoot through the snow, she was hung on 29 November. The body was displayed until New Year's Eve, when Nazi soldiers mutilated her body, cut off her left breast, and then buried her. The photographer Sergei Strunnikov took the photo of her exhumed body, which was published in *Pravda*, the Communist Party daily, accompanying an article by the Soviet journalist Petr Lidov. The almost eroticized image of the naked girl provoked intense reactions in readers. Alongside Lidov's hagiographic narrative, the image canonized Kosmodemyanskaya, turning her into a martyr (Harris 74-75).

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Figure 1. Sergei Strunnikov. *Photograph of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya*. 1941. Russian State Archive of Political History, Moscow.

Depending on the context in which her persona was deployed, Kosmodemyanskaya has represented a Soviet war martyr, a female saint, or an object of beauty or sexuality (Harris). Littell's comments certainly reflect these different readings. The photograph originally comes from the Russian State Archive of Political History and memorials of Kosmodemyanskaya played a central part of the country's post-war myth building. But Littell also refers to Kosmodemyanskaya as "an icon," evoking the Russian cult of saints as much as the valorization of Soviet war heroes. The highly stylized nature of this culture of veneration manifests at the aesthetic level, in the image's (and Kosmodemyanskaya's) "beauty."

However, the photograph of Kosmodemyanskaya—the "icon"—also suggests the photo's iconic nature is a key component in producing these competing historical interpretations, opening up an avenue of theoretical enquiry into the possibilities of representing historical violence. Littell, for instance, is particularly concerned with the aesthetic *possibilities* the image offers. The woman's beauty disturbs him, but her beauty is also productive ("That really got my mind working"). It is the photograph's aesthetic "productivity"—the way it seems able to not only communicate but to reproduce the violence of her death—that so disturbs Littell.

At the same time, the image condenses the different viewpoints of the people complicit in producing, representing, circulating, and consuming this image of violence, from the Nazi perpetrator to the Soviet propagandist to the Franco-American author. The photograph's highly mediated form—its ability to register both the historical presence and the present absence of its subject—produces a series of overlapping viewpoints that envision the image in the novel. Littell's comments that "we perceive how beautiful this woman was" also suggest the viewer is complicit in interpreting the image as an aesthetic object. While not aligning the viewer's perspective to the perpetrator, the image's captivating aesthetics already seem to both reproduce and call attention to one's blindness towards its violence.

The image's striking composition and latent eroticism are at odds with its gruesome subject matter. In **Image 1**, Kosmodemyanskaya's body stretches across the frame against the white background of snow. She is half-clothed, and her left breast does indeed seem to have been cut off. A diagonal line

structures the viewer's eye, which travels from the rope in the upper left-hand corner along her body to the lower right-hand corner. This conventional perspective appears skewed, however. The line is interrupted by her elongated, half-twisted neck and cocked head. Viewers must twist and turn their heads to try and get a handle on the photograph's perspective, producing a sense of anamorphosis.

Anamorphosis is a visual device dating from the early Renaissance that requires the viewer to observe an image from a particular vantage point or through a mirror in order to view a hidden symbol distorted in the image—a trick made famous by Hans Holbein's anamorphic *memento mori* skull in *The Ambassadors* (**Figure 2**). It emerged nearly simultaneously to linear perspective as a way of challenging the scientific order of such representational systems (Collins 73). Much later, it was popular with avant-garde artists such as Salvador Dalí, who also used it to challenge rationality and visualize the unconscious. The ability to grasp the anamorphic image depends on the viewer being positioned at an extreme oblique angle to the work's surface, while closing one eye to correct "binocular vision." By locating the visual interpretation of the work in the viewer's body, anamorphosis presumes a radically subjective, rather than objective, point of view (73). For the avant-garde, as for Holbein, then, anamorphosis is inherently concerned with the formation of subjectivity and the representational processes that actively construct the subject. Anamorphosis visualizes the formation of subjectivity in relation to the object by requiring a specific location of proximity and distance, and employing visual technologies (mirrors and such) that represent the subject to oneself.

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Figure 2. Hans Holbein. *The Ambassadors*. 1533. National Gallery, London.

Jacques Lacan, who famously discussed *The Ambassadors* in his Seminars, recognized the relationship between the subject and object in anamorphosis. Furthermore, he used anamorphosis to visualize the function of the gaze itself (89). Anamorphosis produces a web of gazes that both ensnares and depicts the viewer within the representational processes of the picture (92). Just as photography has been seen as a technology that represents the act of seeing, anamorphosis exposes the mechanics of

vision, but in a manner that decenters the normal subject/object viewing position (Collins 74). Crucially for Lacan, artists use anamorphosis to make something meaningful emerge when they have lost their aesthetic or historical bearings. Anamorphosis helps the subject make sense of the past by connecting it to one's present sense of self. Its "philosophical meditation throws the subject towards the transforming historical action, and ... orders the configured modes of active self-consciousness through its metamorphoses in history" (81). In contrast to a metaphysical sense of self, anamorphosis enables the individual to grasp the construction of his/her subjectivity in relation to the historical forces anamorphosis represents in the painting. In other words, anamorphosis represents the elusive forces of representation itself: "what we seek in the illusion is something in which the illusion as such in some way transcends itself, destroys itself, by demonstrating that it is only there as a signifier" (136). By allowing previously imperceptible relations to cohere into a readable image (135), anamorphosis models theoretical inquiry through artistic practice (136). A similar process is at work in the way different interpretations of the Kosmodemyanskaya image emerge within particular ideological or historical contexts, but also how the image *produces* these different interpretations.

The viewer's attempt to recompose Kosmodemyanskaya's body—to place it back into proper perspective, both visual and historical—seems to lie at the heart of Littell's own theoretical project: an attempt to make visible the power structures that construct systems of representation. He does this not only by focalizing the narrative through the first-person perspective of a perpetrator, but also by turning the reader into a viewer. The novel's visuality thus places the reader *qua* viewer at one remove from the narrative while the anamorphic perspective constructs the viewer's subjectivity through the perpetrator's viewing location. The troubling process of identification that operates through anamorphosis dramatizes the swing between the distance needed for critical reflection and the reader's uncomfortable proximity to Aue.

The suggestion that the viewer is implicated in producing the perpetrator's gaze occurs in a passage that imagines Kosmodemyanskaya's death. In the scene, Aue witnesses the partisan being led to

scaffold. German soldiers then file past her, each of them kissing her using greater and lesser degrees of violence. When it comes to Aue's turn (he is the last), his is confronted with her look:

She looked at me, a clear and luminous gaze, washed of everything, and I saw that she, she understood everything, knew everything, and in front of this pure knowledge I burst into flames. My clothes crackled, the skin of my belly cleaved open, the fat sizzled, the fire roared in my eye sockets and my mouth and purged the inside of my skull. The kiss was so intense that she had to turn her head ... For days afterwards I reflected on this strange scene; but my reflection rose up in front of me like a *mirror*, and never returned anything to me but my own *image*, inverted certainly, but true. The girl's body was also a mirror for me. (171, my italics)

The ways of seeing in the scene vacillate between constructing Aue as a subject, the agent of the gaze, and an object, a collection of bodily pieces. In the confrontation with the woman's anamorphic gaze, he visualizes the breakdown of his self, his body fracturing into pieces until he is left merely as the scattered remains of his former self. But then in the void left behind by Aue's former self, swept away by the wind, the perpetrator's subjectivity is constructed. In a representation of Lacan's mirror stage, a recursive process yokes "reflection" to "mirror," projecting back to Aue an image of himself as the result of his actions, "inverted of course, but true." His confrontation with his own gaze projects the inescapable image of himself as a perpetrator. In imagining the representational processes of the Kosmodemyanskaya image—in constructing his sense of self through it—his "first" crime as a self-conscious perpetrator (Aue has, of course, already committed many crimes at this point) is to turn the picture taken by a Soviet photographer into a perpetrator image.

Indeed, the episode in which this passage appears is when Aue directly acknowledges his role as a perpetrator: "I must have been like them," the men "perfectly unmoved by their executioner's work" (170). The woman's mutilated body resurges on street corners, confronting him at every turn as the sign

of his culpability: “she lay in the snow covering the Trade Unions Park, her neck broken, her lips swollen, a bare breast gnawed by dogs. Her rough hair formed a crest of Medusa around her head and she seemed to me fabulously beautiful, inhabiting death like an idol” (171). Like the viewer who twists and turns to place the anamorphic image into perspective, these visual hallucinations throw Aue into “a labyrinth of vain speculations” that, like his confrontation with himself in a speculum, “made me lose my footing.”

Even more importantly, however, the lost footing of anamorphosis here harnesses the *viewer's* gaze to construct Aue's perpetrator subjectivity. Placing the image back into its proper perspective gives form to the viewer's subjectivity. If the Kosmodemyanskaya image in the novel represents the processes of becoming a perpetrator, its anamorphosis implicates the viewer. *We* seem to construct Kosmodemyanskaya as a beautiful aesthetic object; *we* seem to lose our footing within the vertiginous forms of identification. One can see why *The Kindly Ones* makes for such uncomfortable reading. Littell does not prevent his readers from taking an adequate distance from Aue's too *little* space for critical reflection. Rather, he is guilty of using the our critical reflection to produce a space in which this violence can take place. By using anamorphosis as a form of theorization, the image threatens the possibility that our gaze produces violence.

If we think back to Lacan, anamorphosis provides a mode of theoretical reflection when the artist has lost their aesthetic or historical footing. The image makes the viewer complicit in constructing Kosmodemyanskaya as an aesthetic object, thereby bringing the interpretation of history back to the present by ordering the historical perspective around the viewer. As our eyes follow the curved line of Kosmodemyanskaya's body—the mirror of Aue's—our gaze is brought back to the present blind spots in front of our eyes produced by the glare of our reflection. While we clearly do not become perpetrators by reading *The Kindly Ones*, the way this image operates evokes real anxieties about the ability of images to produce or make us complicit in their violence. The anamorphic image here becomes a snapshot of our ignorance of violence in the present. As I shall shortly come to, this historical disorientation anticipates the novel's globalized terrain of Holocaust memory.

## The Visual Archive

By contrast to the way the subjective gaze of anamorphosis anchors historical interpretation in the present, archival practices seem predicated on constructing objective historical narratives. But this historical objectivity is a veneer; in his analysis of what he terms postmodern art's "archival impulse," Hal Foster explores the way archival practices such as collecting, recording, assembling, and typologizing allow artists to "connect what cannot be connected" (Hirschhorn qtd. in Foster 10)—to bring together motley histories and spaces in order to illuminate contemporary concerns. Whereas the anamorphic image breaks down the narrator's subjectivity, making explicit the interpretive process that constructs the perpetrator in the novel, the visual nature of the extradiegetic historical archive Littell draws on resurfaces in the story with the creation of a visual archive of perpetrator images. Aue creates a photo album that self-consciously recreates the act of recording and archiving Holocaust imagery—the same sort of imagery Littell draws on to communicate the affective shock of coming into contact with one's reflection in the mirror as a perpetrator. The photo album provides a recursive frame that draws the reader's attention to the circulation of these images within a visual economy.

This is particularly evident in the way the novel multiplies the perpetrator gaze. In one scene, Aue, the perpetrator himself, watches SS soldiers taking photographs of SS soldiers about to execute four hundred Jews in a public spectacle. They take clear pleasure in it—"the men were laughing, joking; many were photographing the scene" (93), he says. In the same manner that the soldiers sexually assault Kosmodemyanskaya, Aue recounts how soldiers such as these "*visibly* took pleasure in [*jouissaient de*] the act itself (97-98, my italics). Paralleling Littell's incorporation of the Kosmodemyanskaya image into the narrative, perpetrator photographs circulate in a visual economy of desire: they are traded like baseball cards, used as poker chips, sent home to families, and even tacked next to soldiers' bunks like pin-up posters (88). The photographs are not merely records of the event; their value *motivates* violence.

Although photographing the *Aktion* is prohibited, the Nazi hierarchy realizes the value in collecting these records. Aue is tasked with assembling and collating this material produced by the

soldiers, including photos, films, posters, and signs, with the aim to “archive” the images (98). Just as Aue is transfixed by the spectacle of Kosmodemyanskaya, these images, many of which are highly accomplished, captivate him: “I couldn’t take my eyes away, I was stunned [*médusé*]” (99). The portable archive also has an aesthetic dimension: Aue commissions an officer, an amateur photographer who took color photos of the Babi Yar massacre, to print copies of “his best pictures.” These are displayed alongside black and white images of the *Aktion* “on handsome paper,” with calligraphy titles, all of it bound by one of the *Arbeitjuden*, the Jewish slave laborers who worked in the camps in “a piece of black leather taken from the confiscated goods” and stamped with the insignia of Aue’s *Sonderkommando*, “Sk 4a” (130-31). The album is seen by Heinrich Himmler, eventually winning Aue a promotion, and it follows Aue throughout the narrative, surfacing at key moments.

One of these moments takes place during a dinner part at Adolf Eichmann’s home, when Eichmann notes the similarity of Aue’s archive to the infamous *Stroop Report*, a *Bildbericht*, or report in pictures, of the Warsaw Uprising and the destruction of the ghetto by German forces (523). *The Kindly One*’s fictional album is clearly informed by the *Stroop Report*. Much like the Kosmodemyanskaya image, the report’s aesthetic quality celebrate the ghetto’s destruction. Inscribed with the title “Warsaw’s Jewish Quarter No Longer Exists!” the *Stroop Report* contains one of the most iconic images of the Holocaust archive. “Removed from the ghetto by force” shows a young boy surrounded by other Jews, hands raised, standing at the front of a line of Jews being expelled from a building, where they await deportation (**Figure 3**).

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Figure 3. Unknown. *Removed from the Ghetto By Force*. 1943. From *The Stroop Report* intended for Heinrich Himmler.

But the report’s origins in a perpetrator archive have gradually been lost in the global circulation of Holocaust imagery. In her discussion of the *Stroop Report*, Marianne Hirsch questions how the image of the boy in “Removed from the ghetto”—a perpetrator image that commemorates the humiliation of Jews—has come memorialize Holocaust victims in educational material provided by Yad Vashem and

“postmemorial” art. In the image, the camera embodies the gun: the boy is placed in the crossfire of the camera and the soldier in the upper-right-hand field. The photographer’s perpetrator identity constitutes a way of seeing that composes the image and thus shapes our interpretation of the image’s iconography (Hirsch 133-34). The image of the boy, then, has the potential to reinforce the violence of the original context (130). In *The Kindly Ones*, however, Aue’s album visualizes the deadly mechanics that bring perpetrator images into being. Unlike the images of the *Stroop Report*, however, which have become disconnected from their original context, Aue’s album provides a material index of perpetrator memory and knowledge. The album’s journey up to the highest levels of Nazi command constructs the visual—and thus power—relations of history. Paradoxically, the “unreality” of this archive provides an index of perpetrator memory that ironically undercuts perpetrator claims of ignorance, exposing what Mitchell calls the “operational reality” (*Cloning Terror* xviii) of images’ ability to produce terror and violence.

Aue’s album visualizes the construction of images of war originally intended for the visual pleasure of perpetrators. In doing so, the novel exposes the asymmetrical relations of visibility and violence that underpin the contemporary global circulation, reception, and consumption of Holocaust images. As in the scene where Aue witnesses SS soldiers taking photos of SS soldiers shooting Jews, the novel’s perpetrator images provide a recursive framework that exposes the way the camera naturalizes the perpetrator’s gaze, demonstrating how perpetrator images “are taken by perpetrators for their own consumption” (Hirsch 136). But its peripatetic journey through the novel—much like Aue’s own—also gradually distances it from its original source in the bloody ravine of Babi Yar, mirroring the way the *Stroop Report* was stripped of its context.

Like the Kosmodemyanskaya image, the novel’s album of perpetrator images provide a site where the perpetrator, the photographer, and the viewer all look at the victims (Hirsch 134), thus collapsing the retrospective distance of spectatorship. Aue’s archive *restores* the perpetrator’s perspective to history, demonstrating how the perpetrator’s gaze continues to contaminate our historical vision. The images stage the confrontation between the past depicted in the photograph and present-day ways of seeing, exposing the historical myopia that allows us to unwittingly use perpetrator images to

commemorate victims—victims who sometimes died in the glare of the camera.

### **The Dialectical Image**

The anamorphosis and archival methods involved in imagining Kosmodemyanskaya and the *Stroop Report* produce theoretical objects that reflect on contemporary anxieties about the ability of images to not only imagine but also produce violence. The third type of image I will explore, the dialectical image, also disrupts historical interpretation by exposing the violence of history in the present. For Walter Benjamin, the dialectical image is not an image per se—“the place where one encounters them is language” (*Arcades* 462)—but rather a mode of reading or historical interpretation. Nevertheless, the dialectical image has a visual form that materializes what Maurizia Boscagli calls the “mental act of historical memory” (147), and it anticipates Benjamin’s thinking on film and photography (Hanssen 66). Benjamin was opposed to linear conceptions of history, or what he called “historical naturalism,” which presented history as a narrative of progress (*Arcades* 461). The immediacy of the dialectical image’s “flash” (likened to lightning or the camera’s bulb) momentarily arrests the continuity of time (463) and disrupts linear, teleological narratives (think of the millenarism implicit in the concept of the Thousand-Year Reich, for instance). Similar to montage, which allows seemingly unconnected times and spaces to interact, the dialectical image produces a form of “imagistic” or fragmented writing whose form criticizes historicism as the eternal return of the past (Ferris 16). By impressing the past onto the present, the dialectical image “brings the past into a critical state” (Benjamin *Arcades* 471). The appearance of the dialectical image in *The Kindly Ones* shatters its historical narrative, allowing the novel to historicize the present.

The final passage I will analyze, from the novel’s first chapter, “Toccata,” explores the constellation of history to dizzying effect, cracking open the Holocaust archive to allow other spaces of terror and violence to flood in. Narrated in Aue’s present, there are several clues pointing to when he is writing his account. We know he was born in 1913, and he still works as the head of the lace factory in

France where he washed up after the war, making it unlikely he is writing in 2006, the year the novel was actually published. Aue refers to Raul Hilberg's book *The Destruction of the European Jews*, which was published in 1961, but only became widespread during the 1980s. (Incidentally, Hilberg was the only scholar interviewed by Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah*, one of *The Kindly One's* key "inter-images.") Based on these clues, Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests Aue could be writing any time between the 1960s and 1980s (4). But there are further indicators that map out the novel's political terrain of memory, which I will come to shortly.

In an early passage in the chapter, Aue meticulously itemizes the number of German, Soviet, and Jewish deaths during WWII. This comparison provides an ironic commentary on the way "the television hammers us with numbers, impressive numbers, when you line up the zeros," although "who among you have ever stopped to really think about these numbers? ... this famous six million, or twenty million" (20). Parodying the earnest concern of charity fundraisers, Aue breaks down the deaths by year, month, day, hour, minute, and second. He calculates "a dead German every 40.8 seconds, a dead Jew every 24 seconds, and a dead Bolshevik (Soviet Jews included) every 6.12 seconds" (22). Aue nevertheless implicitly understands that this "good meditation exercise" risks alienating his French reader. So he widens the frontiers of his analysis to incorporate a more familiar episode of historical trauma, enjoining his readers, "if you are French," to "consider your little Algerian adventure, which so traumatized your fellow citizens." He places the number of French dead at around 25,000, or "the equivalent" of "approximately seven days of dead Jews." But he does not count "Algerian deaths: since you never speak about them, in books or TV shows, they must not count for much" (23). In a moment that mirrors his lost footing in front of the Kosmodemyanskaya image and the recursive effect of watching SS soldiers photographing SS soldiers shooting Jews, Aue acknowledges the vertiginous effect of these histories collapsing into each, inviting readers to continue such calculations on their own, "until the ground gives way beneath your feet."

Aue quickly decamps from this brief Algerian interlude, but this moment has the shock of an explosive force that collapses the steady historical ground on which the reader seems to be standing. In

the flash of the dialectical image, the past resurges to bring the present into a critical state. Like the Kosmodemyanskaya image, the dialectical image here acts as a theoretical object. Instead of organizing history into a linear timeline, the novel's narrative resists periodization, turning history into a horizon of the present—Aue's near present. The Algerian War ended in 1962, and Aue's discussion of Algeria in the past tense ("which so traumatized"), as well as a final count of the dead and the allusion to books and television shows that have neglected to address it, suggest at least several years have passed since the conflict ended—a period in which the necessary historical reflection has not taken place. Aue's narration, then, produces another diegetic timeline that frames his subsequent narration of the Holocaust.

The resurgence of French colonial terror in a narrative about the Holocaust is not baseless. French police and army officers who collaborated with Nazi Germany under Vichy to develop a security apparatus and deport Jews, such as the now notorious Maurice Papon, were transferred to Algeria after the war to quell the growing insurrection through "extraordinary measures" like torture and detention. Such officers were then called back to France when the Algerian conflict spilled into the metropolis, where they again acted with impunity against Algerians living in the Hexagon (House and MacMaster). *The Kindly Ones'* overlapping timelines dramatize the circulation of terror and genocidal violence across these transnational spaces.

The force of the dialectical image disrupts linear history, then, producing violent aftershocks that resonate not only in Aue's present but also beyond the book's covers. The English translation (originally intended for an American audience, supervised by Littell, and translated by Charlotte Mandell) makes a striking alteration that suggests yet another *mis-en-abyme* timeframe. It asks the reader to imagine, "If you are an American ... your little Vietnam adventure, which so traumatized your fellow citizens" (Littell and Mandell 16). In this flash, the dialectical image introduces America's failed neo-imperial war alongside France's concurrent failed colonial war in Algeria. But the aftershock is not over. Shaken by the tremors of the dialectical image, the English translation creates a further embedded timeframe, because Vietnam (or "Indochina") was also a *French* adventure that immediately preceded Algeria. In translating Algeria into Vietnam, the American edition also tacitly translates Vietnam back into Indochina. The

transnational archive that circulates across the spaces Aue visits in the text is also *translational*, assembling the places he imagines through translation, dissemination, and reception.

This cascade of “translational” spaces is apt: just as the security apparatus developed under Vichy was exported to Algeria, the counter-insurgency strategy developed by France in Indochina, including torture methods, detention camps, and the infamous *parachutistes* regiments, were transferred to Algeria when France ceded the Indochinese conflict to America in order to concentrate on protecting the racial hegemony of their settler presence in Algeria (House and MacMaster 2). Sharing the French government’s apocalyptic vision of the spread of global communism and “third world” revolutionary war, America modeled its own tactics against guerilla war in Vietnam on France’s methods (MacMaster 5).<sup>ii</sup> In this spectrum of imperial and neo-imperial spaces, atrocities pile up—“wreckage on top of wreckage” (Benjamin *Illuminations* 249)—like the relentless succession of the contemporary 24/7-news cycle.

But the approximation of the Holocaust with France’s colonial enterprise in Algeria (and Indochina and Vietnam) is also deeply problematic. The open ground of globalized memory risks swallowing the reader in a violent earthquake that flattens and relativizes history. France’s colonial adventures evoke Aue’s “colonization” of Holocaust memory, as well as the way dominant memory traditions can “colonize” or subsume others, such as anxieties about the “Americanization” of the Holocaust (Rothberg 221). As Debarati Sanyal argues, “our only access to this traumatic history is a testimony whose archive is colonized by a perpetrator-accomplice’s memory and voiced from within the roar of extermination” (54). Sanyal also situates Aue’s colonization of memory within Hitler’s plans for imperial expansion and colonial settlement in Eastern Europe to free up *Lebensraum* through the extermination of “lesser” races (60).<sup>iii</sup> Paralleling the troubling triangulation of Indochina, Algeria, and Vietnam, Aue cites “American policy” towards native peoples as the “precursor and model of our own, the creation of a living space [*espace vital*] by murder and forced displacement” (543). Like the perpetrator archive that structures the novel’s historical gaze, the English translation has ethical consequences that stretch beyond the exterminatory politics of the Holocaust. The translation into Vietnam problematically performs a kind of imperial creep in which American culture has come to claim

the Holocaust as its own, as well as repeating the erasure of Indochina and Algeria from French and global memory in a “cultural genocide.”

By inadvertently pointing to its own process of translation, however, the American edition opens the novel’s timeframe beyond Aue’s diegetic past and present to implicitly historicize the present.<sup>iv</sup> In a 2008 interview with *Haaretz* in Berlin, Littell, who grew up during Vietnam, declared:

I am from a generation that was very marked by Vietnam. I was a very small boy but it was in the living room every goddamned day—much more than the Holocaust or Israel or anything else. We saw it on TV every day for my entire childhood. My childhood terror was that I would be drafted and sent to Vietnam and made to kill women and children who hadn’t done anything to me. As a child there was always the possibility of being a potential perpetrator. (Uni)

Littell situates his Holocaust novel within a global terrain of memory that is contemporary with the one Aue establishes when he invokes Algeria. Whereas *The Kindly Ones* uses the imagistic force of the dialectical image to bring together different spaces, here it is the decidedly more prosaic television that maps out the Holocaust in relation to Vietnam, Israel, and America. In heightening the atrocity, the television broadcasts the horrors of faraway Vietnam into the heart of the child’s home, suggesting that the child—the symbol of innocence *par excellence*—has the potential to become a perpetrator. These images harbor the possibility of violence as much as representing it. Like the potentialities of the Kosmodemyanskaya image, which amplify the reader’s anxieties about reproducing the violent gaze of the perpetrator, televisual ways of seeing collapse two temporalities framing past and present selves, child and perpetrator.

Littell’s discussion of the mediatization of Vietnam—the first “televised” war—parallels the transmission of the 1961 Eichmann trial, which marked a watershed in shaping a narrative of the Holocaust as a unique event perpetrated against the Jewish people (Hartouni 17). A highly publicized

media event, it also entailed a specific regime of looking in which Eichmann was forced to confront the stark image of his crimes (106). Born in 1967, Littell could not, of course, have watched Eichmann on television, but his evocation of Israel, where Eichmann was tried, hints at the historical potency of both visual events. Littell's childhood anxiety of becoming a perpetrator seems largely beyond the ken of a five-year-old child. It appears more as the product of the kind of historical, measured reflection that prevents the unthinking "banality" of evil Hannah Arendt attributed to Eichmann—the very same failure Littell *enfant* seems determined to defy.

Littell's comments provide a final extradiegetic timeframe that brackets the diegetic timelines of the Holocaust, Indochina, Vietnam, and Algeria, and suggest a further ironic reading. Namely: Littell is not Aue but rather Aue's *son*. His childhood fears about becoming a perpetrator are recast as absolving the child for the crimes of the father. I am not implying, of course, that Littell actually conceived of Aue in this way. But Littell's (adult) self-awareness and desire to take responsibility for a child's potential crimes reflect the intergenerational conflict that affected the generations of those born after WWII and Vietnam, providing a model for the novel's multiple embedded, indeed intergenerational, timelines.

The book's circumnavigation across transnational—and translational—spaces is not only tied to what the dialectical image exposes, but also by what we *do not* see or have deliberately ignored. Littell's desire to identify and take responsibility for the historical blind spots of previous generations by evoking Vietnam silences other events of which there are few images. Both Indochina and Algeria were seen as "hidden" wars. Journalists and writers were censored, and the events were largely absent from the Hexagon's television screens. (France only reclassified Algeria as a war and not a security operation in 1999, making the notion of a "war correspondent" moot.) Controlling images of Indochina and Algeria controlled public knowledge, while the power of images to shape public dissent about Vietnam in the United States certainly suggests their political agency. The translation of Algeria into Vietnam (and tacitly into Indochina) performs this blindness at the level of narrative form, transforming these ties of racialized violence into a war of images that renders France's colonial wars once again invisible.

Translating Algeria into Vietnam accomplishes a further aim, however. The novel's roundabout journey across a vast war of images of colonial and genocidal terror, from the Holocaust to Algeria to Vietnam (and even, perhaps, to Israel), ultimately brings the historical frame of reference back to the contemporary context in which it was written and published. Rerouting the interpretation of history in the novel ultimately allows the novel to historicize the present. For Algeria provided a military and a visual paradigm for both the American conflict in Vietnam *and* the invasion of Iraq following 9/11. In 2003, the Pentagon screened *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) to a military and civilian audience. Its putative aims were to provoke discussion about France's counter-insurgency methods against guerilla warfare—including widespread torture—and to serve as a cautionary tale about winning tactically and losing strategically; or: “how to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas ... Sound familiar?” (Kaufman). This literal “screen memory” about the way political terror produces terrorism as a return of the colonial repressed helped realize the Bush administration's war on terror. And like the Eichmann trial and Vietnam, the televisual spectacle of 9/11 was a turning point in not only the visual representation of war but the war of representations. The “shock and awe” campaign of the Iraq War had disturbing resonances with the images of the towers, designed to terrify and tyrannize a country—a war waged in and through images. In the war of images, war was the goal not the solution. *The Kindly Ones* has the extraordinary ability to visualize the transnational and translational connections that underpin the continuity of violence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But in doing so, it also concedes to the same anxieties about the power of images to produce violence that help replicate terror.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> All translations from French texts, including *The Kindly Ones*, are my own, except when discussing the novel's official English translation.

<sup>ii</sup> In 1961, French government provided specialist instructors to train American army units deploying to Vietnam. The CIA's Operation Phoenix in Vietnam, modeled on the “Battle of Algiers,” was heavily influenced by the Algerian commander Colonel Roger Trinquier's *Modern Warfare*, which is still used by the American army today (MacMaster 8).

<sup>iii</sup> See Razinsky “We Are All The Same” for a further discussion of the novel's equivalences between genocidal and colonial programs.

<sup>iv</sup> I say “inadvertent” because although Mandell and Littell would have been acutely aware of the difference, very few American readers would be able to read the text in the original and thus make the comparison.

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