

John Boyne's Representation of the Shoah in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*: A Paradigm of Transgression and Linguistic Uncertainties

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Abstract This article argues that transgression provides an illuminating critical category to examine the narrative construction of John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006). Boyne's decision to entrust his testimonial narrative to Bruno, the son of an SS commander, produces a representational uncertainty that is reminiscent of Theodor Adorno's claims on post-Auschwitz aesthetics. Bruno's fictional testimony is marked by a difficulty in conceptualising experience via language, which reveals voids in his cognizance of reality. This epistemic modality, however, is transgressed by the interaction of words and images in the film version of the novel.

Keywords Children's literature. Shoah. Discourse studies. Cognition. Cultural memory.

Summary 1 The Shoah and Children's Literature: A Controversial Debate. – 2 Breaking the Taboo of "Unspeakability": Discursive Uncertainties. – 3 Transgressing the Constraints of Verbal Language.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted	2021-09-21
Accepted	2021-11-16
Published	2022-03-16

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Citation Canani, M. (2021). "John Boyne's Representation of the Shoah in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*: A Paradigm of Transgression and Linguistic Uncertainties". *English Literature*, 8, 199-214.

DOI 10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2021/08/012

199

1 The Shoah and Children's Literature: A Controversial Debate

The search for a paradigm fit to reconcile ethic concerns with aesthetic demands in the representation of the Shoah has been the object of extensive scholarly debate. The best known, and certainly the most frequently quoted statement on the issue is Theodor Adorno's claim, at the end of the essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1949), that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno 2003a, 162). Adorno's sentence has often been assumed to imply an insurmountable loss for words after the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. However, the matter at stake was – and still is – far more complex, and it has not so much to do with whether art *may* or *may not* represent the tragedy of the Shoah. The issue, as Adorno clarified in a later essay, titled "Commitment" (1962), is for the artist to mediate between aesthetics and ethics so as to safeguard collective memory while avoiding the risk of validating the cultural values that perpetrated such atrocities. If "suffering", Adorno states, "demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids",

[t]he so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. The morality that forbids art to forget this for a second slides off into the abyss of its opposite [...]. When even genocide becomes cultural property in committed literature, it becomes easier to continue complying with the culture that gave rise to the murder. (2003b, 252-3)

Aesthetic representations are meant to arouse feelings of pleasure in readers and spectators, even when these feelings are mixed with other responses, fear and sadism included. Thus, when the subject matter is inhuman or barbarous, the risk is to elicit a morbid, voyeuristic effect, and to bring forth a response based on feelings of tolerance and compliance. Implicit in Adorno's concerns are also the constraints of language – verbal and non-verbal alike – in representing the Shoah in such a way as to safeguard the ethical imperative of testimony without commodifying the barbarity of history. This is a crucial point in order to protect collective memory against oblivion, and to institutionalise it, through the commitment of writers and artists, into cultural memory.¹ Still, this tension was often believed

¹ I am referring here to the distinction between 'collective' (or 'communicative') memory and 'cultural' memory as outlined by Maurice Halbwachs and Aby Warburg, and later theorised, among others, by Jan Assmann. Whereas 'collective memory' might be in-

to be inherently irresolvable, and 'committed' art was for a long time viewed as the privileged locus for silence.

In the decades following the end of World War II, an orthodox interpretation of Adorno's writings, coupled with a sense of rigorous deference, led to an intense debate on silence as a respectful response to what was considered to be 'unspeakable'. George Steiner, for example, admitted the impossibility for language, and therefore for literature, to voice the inhuman:

[t]he question of whether the poet should speak or be silent, of whether language is in a condition to accord with his needs, is a real one. [...] Has our civilization, by virtue of the inhumanity it has carried out and condoned – we are accomplices to that which leaves us indifferent – forfeited its claims to that indispensable luxury which we call literature? Not for ever, not everywhere, but simply in this time and place, as a city besieged forfeits its claims to the freedom of the winds and the cool of evening outside its walls. (1986, 53)

Steiner accepted silence with resignation, in the belief that the Shoah was something unspeakable – at least *hic et nunc*, which for him coincided with the post-War period. Indeed, the representation of the Shoah has for a long time been 'muffled' in British culture – suggested, hinted at, or patently evoked, yet never fully voiced – and this is especially the case with children's literature.² A paramount example was the publication of Ian Serraillier's *The Silver Sword* in 1956, which narrates the story of three Jewish children, Ruth, Edek and Bronia, who wander around the streets of the Nazi-besieged Warsaw after their parents have been deported. In 1957, the BBC broadcast a TV series based on the novel, and the production was met with general indignation. As Jane Serraillier Grossfeld recalls in her afterword to the 1993 edition of *The Silver Sword*,

many people wrote to the head of BBC children's television protesting that war was not a suitable subject for children – that it was not right to show them this terrible chapter of human history. (Quoted in Hope 2008, 295-6)

tended, in its simplest form, as the mnemonic heritage shared by a community, 'cultural memory' implies its socio-political, and therefore cultural, institutionalisation through 'symbols' and other 'mnemonic institutions'. These include libraries, archives, and museums, but also cultural productions, such as art and literary works (see Assmann 2010).

² Even though my primary concern here is with British children's literature, the issue is certainly wider. For instance, Patey (2005) focuses on drama to examine the difficulty of British culture in coming to terms with the Shoah; more to the point, Patey connects the reluctance of British drama in voicing the horrors of the Nazi regimen with the indifference to the politics of the Third Reich that characterised Churchill's government.

Chronology, however, poses a serious threat – the substitution of silence with the indifference induced by oblivion. The publication of classics such as Serrailier's *The Silver Sword* and Judith Kerr's *Out of the Hitler Time* trilogy (1971-87) in England,³ and Joseph Joffo's *Un sac de Billes* (1973) in France, has progressively asserted the right for children's literature to speak. Children no longer need to be 'spared' from the horrors of history, and conflicts and genocides may and should be explored in books addressing young audiences because of their educational and testimonial function (see Bosmajian 2002, xi-xxvi; Kokkola 2003). But while the ethic imperative 'to speak' has been safeguarded, aesthetic issues remain cogent, and often have to do with the constraints of verbal discourse.

In his discussion of the Shoah and unspeakability, Trezise introduces a further critical category into the debate, that is, the concept of "transgression".⁴ If the Shoah is a delicate but suitable subject matter for artistic representation, the pursue of ethics in art, Trezise suggests, may be compared with "the feelings inspired by taboo" (2001, 43). From this perspective, artistic and literary representations of the Shoah identify a moral transgression, but they are nonetheless legitimised on moral grounds due to the ethical imperative to keep memory alive. Against the claim of unspeakability, representing the Shoah might be viewed as an act of transgression, a taboo that children's literature ought to break for its pedagogical function and its contribution towards creating an institutionalised form of collective memory.

In this sense, I suggest that transgression provides an illuminating critical category to examine the narrative construction of John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Fable* (2006) and its memorial function.⁵ Although the novel proved to be a commercial success when it was published,⁶ it was also met with mixed critical reception. Detractors especially criticised its historical inaccuracies

³ The trilogy, which may be read as Judith Kerr's fictional autobiography, includes *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (1971), *The Other Way Round* (1975, reissued as *Bombs on Aunt Dainty* in 2002, and *A Small Person Far Away* (1987). On the testimonial function of Kerr's work see Canani 2014.

⁴ Trezise, like several Anglo-American intellectuals, refers to the Nazi exterminations of the Jews as "Holocaust", a term that originally identified a burnt sacrifice offered to a god. Although I have retained Trezise's own words in the quotation, throughout the article I use the word "Shoah", which is the Modern Hebrew equivalent for "disaster" or "catastrophe".

⁵ In the United States, the novel was distributed by Random House with the American spelling, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008).

⁶ The novel sold over a million copies in the United Kingdom alone and topped *The New York Times* bestseller list; besides having been adapted for the cinema in 2008, the book has been translated into over fifty languages. For an overview of the reception of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* see Gray 2014.

as well as the protagonist's innocent gaze, which provides a somewhat sugar-coated version of what actually took place in the concentration camps (cf. Gray 2014). My contention, instead, is that Boyne's novel breaks a double taboo. At a diegetic level, nine-year old Bruno progressively discovers the inhuman reality of Auschwitz insofar as he transgresses parental authority and disobeys the order not to explore what lies beyond the limits of their house. Moreover, the protagonist of Boyne's testimonial narrative is the son of a commander of the *Schutzstaffel* – that is, a representative of the criminals rather than of the victims. Embodied in Bruno's fictional testimony, and related through a third-person narrator, the language of Boyne's novel reveals a difficulty in conceptualising the tragedy of the Shoah that exposes the gap between child and adult addresses. Mediating between silence and the need to speak, the narrative fabric of the novel, it is my point, presents facts without fully *re-presenting* them insofar as it tests and transgresses the boundaries of what can be expressed through language. This epistemic modality, which is key to Boyne's narrative, is ultimately transgressed in the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008),⁷ which may therefore be read as an appropriation, rather than an adaptation, of the novel.

2 Breaking the Taboo of “Unspeakability”: Discursive Uncertainties

Following his father's promotion to Camp Commandant at Auschwitz, nine-year old Bruno leaves Berlin and relocates with his family to the notorious Polish *Konzentrationslager*. Sad about leaving his friends and grandparents, the boy struggles to get accustomed to his new life and spends his days between Herr Liszt's ideologically rife lessons on the glories of “The Fatherland” and minor quarrels with his elder sister, Gretel. The key element of the plot, however, is Bruno's secret friendship with Shmuel, a Polish child that has been deported to Auschwitz with his family, and whom Bruno meets when he disobeys his parents' orders and gets close to the wired fence that separates his house from the concentration camp.

The subtitle of the novel, *A Fable*, clearly hints at Boyne's fictional employment of historical facts, following in the footsteps of a novelistic tradition whose cornerstone is Edgar Hilsenrath's account of the Armenian genocide in the fairytale-like *Das Märchen vom letzten Ge-*

7 *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008). Directed and produced by Mark Herman. BBC Films, Heyday Films, and Miramax Films. UK and USA, 94', colour. Like the novel, the film was released as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* in the United States.

danken (1989).⁸ Leaving aside issues of historical accuracy and unreliability, which have been examined extensively by Gray (2014), transgression provides the only possibility for Bruno not to get bored, but also to escape from the uncertain narrative that surrounds the reason why his family left Berlin. The boy is unable to conceptualise his new life, as his inability to pronounce the name of the place, which he naively calls "Out-With", reveals. This difficulty depends on his young age, but it is also the result of the obscure rhetoric that shapes his mother's explanation. When Elsa informs Bruno that they are going to move because of his father's promotion, the boy finds her "twisting her hands together nervously *as if* there was *something* she didn't want to have to say or *something* she didn't want to have to believe." In an attempt to satisfy Bruno's curiosity and answer his concerns, the woman's only reassurance is that "if *anything* it's going to be an adventure" (Boyne 2007, 1-2, 3; emphasis added).

Boyne replicates a recurring *topos* in the literature of the Shoah, that is, the difficulty that refugee children face in conceptualising their status. However, he represents the son of a German SS-Commander as if he were a deported child or a refugee. In that it blurs the customary, clear-cut distinction between victims and executioners, between Jews and Nazis, this decision is in itself an act of transgression. At the same time, it also enables Boyne to test the limits of verbal language against unspeakability and silence, and this attempt results into a rhetoric style that is grounded in indeterminacy. Bruno's questions are followed by tentative, incomplete answers that can only hint at reality, but inevitably fail to represent it. The repeated use of indefinite pronouns such as "something" and "anything", coupled with the use of the subjunctive ("as if..."), questions received assumptions on the representational function of language, and the idea that one's cognition of the world largely depends on the exposition to linguistic signs.⁹

The narrator's comments and the incomplete answer provided by Bruno's mother are consistent with the woman's claim, later in the novel, that "[w]ar is not a fit subject for conversation" (69). This statement has multiple implications concerning the possibility, but also the limits of verbal language to represent the Shoah in a way that might be suitable for children, and thus to combine ethical concerns with aesthetic demands. Boyne, who declared having been inspired

⁸ Written in the form of a fairy tale, Hilsenrath's novel tells the story of an Anatolian village and, retrospectively, of the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Turks between 1915 and 1916.

⁹ On representational theories of language see Kalmykova 2012.

by Serrailier's *The Silver Sword*,¹⁰ commits an act of transgression in his decision to present young readers with the horrors of the concentration camps, and in so doing he intentionally breaks the taboo of unspeakability. Bruno's experience, however, validates his mother's claim insofar he struggles to conceptualise what is happening beyond the fence that limits his house. The boy's thoughts, like his mother's words, expose the gap that separates his knowledge of reality from his ability to process it and express it through language. The connection between language and its representational function is repeatedly denied; language can only approximate the reality of "Out-With", but cannot completely depict it.

When he looks out of his bedroom window for the first time, Bruno struggles to make out what he perceives in the distance. Even in this case, his reaction is reported through an indefinite pronoun, which confirms his difficulty in understanding what he sees. The boy, the narrator remarks,

put his face to the glass and saw what was out there, and this time when his eyes opened wide and his mouth made the shape of an O, his hands stayed by his sides because *something* made him feel very cold and unsafe. (20; emphasis added)

Significantly, this uncertainty also shapes his sister's response when, prompted by Bruno, she looks at the human silhouettes that the boy assumes to be children playing in a farm. Echoing their mother's uneasiness, Gretel's reaction is expressed by a combination of indefinite pronouns and the subjunctive mood:

something about the way he had said it and *something* about the way he was watching made her feel suddenly nervous. Bruno had never been able to trick her before about *anything* and she was fairly sure that he wasn't tricking her now, but there was something about the way he stood there that made her feel *as if* she wasn't sure she wanted to see these children at all. (28; emphasis added)

Gretel is a teenager, and her gaze is less naïve than Bruno's. The girl is aware of the existence of concentration camps and their role in the so-called "Endlösung der Judenfrage." She has imbibed most of the Nazi rhetoric, as her diligent answers to Herr Liszt's questions, and her crush on Lieutenant Kotler suggest. However, when she is faced

¹⁰ Serrailier's novel, as Boyne wrote in the *Independent*, is "a great children's classic - [it] was my first introduction to the Second World War in fiction, to the horrors of the Nazi era, and the fear that capture could instill in the minds of its young heroes" (Boyne 2012).

with its actual implications she is at a loss for words that might enable her to conceptualise the reality of Auschwitz. When Bruno urges her in his search for answers, the repeated use of modal verbs fulfilling an epistemic function further testifies to Boyne's quest for an aesthetic paradigm fit to represent what remains unsaid – in other words, what the writer finds it hard to express within the boundaries drawn by language. As Gretel tells Bruno, what he sees from the window “*mightn't be the countryside*”, as he wrongly assumed, “[w]hich also means that [“Out-With”] *probably isn't* our holiday home after all” (35; emphasis added). At the same time, this indeterminate rhetoric, coupled with the epistemic function of the modal *must* in the following example, is also indicative of Gretel's own uncertainty. This is the case when the girl tries to explain to Bruno – as well as to herself – what adult readers understand to be a death march:

‘It *must be some sort of rehearsal*’, suggested Gretel, ignoring the fact that *some* of the children, even *some* of the older ones, even the ones as grown up as her, looked *as if* they were crying. (37; emphasis added)

In *Holocaust Representation* (2000), Lang challenged the negative rhetoric that surrounds the debate on possibility for the Shoah to be represented, and denied its foundations on ontological grounds:

[w]e hear [the Shoah] referred to as unspeakable, and we usually hear afterward a fairly detailed description of what is unspeakable, that description intended, of course, to prove that the designation was warranted. (Lang 2000, 18)¹¹

Representation, Lang concludes, is always an act of transgression – a transgression of what is possible, but also of what is imaginable. If one accepts the assumption that artistic representation always implies a selection of what can be *presented* and *re-presented*, these limits are inevitably trespassed by any cultural production, whatever its subject matter (Lang 2000, 55-6). In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, the transgression of the limits traced by possibility and imaginability – what may or may not be represented, and what can or cannot be imagined – creates a rhetoric of indeterminacy that tests, rather than accepting, discursive and linguistic boundaries, a tentative quest that begins by breaking the double taboo of silence and unspeakability.

Replicating the paradigm typical of pagan and Christian narratives staging the quest for knowledge, transgression is the only way for Bruno to trespass the limits to cognizance set by his family. Sig-

¹¹ On this point cf. also Trezise 2001, 41-2.

nificantly, his encounter with Shmuel takes place alongside the barbed-wire that delimits the concentration camp. Bruno's knowledge develops insofar as he approaches the line that he is forbidden to cross, and this progression is mirrored in the narrator's words, which anticipate, through a climactic series of coordinate and relative clauses, the boy's enlightenment:

a small dot appeared in the distance and he narrowed his eyes to try to see what it was. [...] [H]is feet were taking him, step by step, closer and closer to the dot in the distance, which in the meantime had become a speck, and then began to show every sign of turning into a blob. And shortly after that the blob became a figure. And then, as Bruno got even closer, he saw that the thing was neither a dot nor a speck nor a blob nor a figure, but a person.

In fact it was a boy. [...] Bruno slowed down when he saw the dot that became a speck that became a blob that became a figure that became a boy. (104-6)

Bruno's exploration of the area he is interdicted to corresponds to his exploration of what he is forbidden to know. His escape from a narrative in which words cannot fully represent reality coincides with his transgression of parental authority, and his cognitive emancipation is embodied in the way he progressively brings Shmuel into focus. Interestingly, Boyne's compenetration of visual and verbal aspects brings to the fore the need for another form of transgression, that is, the necessity to overcome the representational limits of language for cognizance to occur. As Kalmykova remarks, representational conceptions of language inevitably collide with cognitive voids that indicate the discrepancy between what can be said and what actually is. As much as it is intentional, language is essentially self-referential. As such, it entails blanks in knowledge of the world which need to be filled by integrating action into the experience that is communicated via linguistic signs (Kalmykova 2012, 105-6). This is precisely what Bruno does, and in so doing he transgresses a limit that is both real and metaphorical, physical as well as cognitive.

Bruno's friendship with Shmuel prompts him to question what he knows about Germany's hurt pride, the Jewish question, and the reality of "Out-With". Moreover, the boy's transgression undermines his sister's certainties, which are based on the education she has received, and hence on the Nazis' linguistic construction of the 'Jewish peril' rather than on the knowledge of what exists beyond the fence. For both Gretel and Bruno, the Shoah has only ever existed *in absentia* - that is, as a narrative shaped by a dominant rhetoric, circumscribed and delimited by linguistic boundaries that are ideologically constructed. When Bruno asks his sister if they are Jews - a question that indicates his attempt at defining why he would be different from

Shmuel –, Gretel's answer is peremptory: "'No, Bruno', she said. 'No, we most certainly are not [Jews]. And you shouldn't even say something like that'" (182). Still, the girl must admit to herself her uncertainty, and process the existence of cognitive blanks that the Nazi rhetoric is unable to fill:

"We're..." began Gretel, but then she had to stop to think about it. "We're..." she repeated, but she wasn't quite sure what the answer to this question really was. "Well we're not Jews", she said finally. (182-3)

Like in all mythological transgression narratives, Bruno's disobedience results in his tragic end. In an attempt to search for Shmuel's father, the boy slips into a hole in the fence wearing a uniform provided by his friend – a "striped pyjamas" – and both children meet their fate in what adult readers clearly understand to be a gas chamber. But Bruno's brief experience of Auschwitz is also the chance for the boy to discover the hiatus between what he *heard of* and what *actually is*. His impressions are related by the narrator, who resorts to the epistemic function of the modal *might* to foreground the boy's cognitive gaps: "all the things that [Bruno] thought might be there – weren't" (207). The abrupt juxtaposition of a conditional verb with the simple past "weren't", however, is also an indication of Boyne's belief in the role and the power of the written word. The issue is not whether to remain silent or to speak, but to test the possibilities of language to represent the Shoah and its horrors in such a way as to make it intelligible, and respectful of history and memory, even for the younger audiences.

3 Transgressing the Constraints of Verbal Language

Against the danger of silence, testing the power of words implies coming to terms with the boundaries set by language, and the limits imposed by discourse. Boyne's narrative style often hints at what may not be fully voiced – it isolates and represents fragments and cues whose interpretation is ultimately left with the readers, who are invited to integrate the blanks left by language with their experience of the world. Precisely insofar as it is crafted around a pattern of linguistic uncertainty, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* reveals the gap that separates children from adult readers. "If you start to read this book", the blurb in the back cover states, "you will go on a journey with a nine-year-old boy called Bruno. (Though this isn't a book for nine-year-olds)". This is a well-known issue with children's literature, which always implies a triangulation between adults – the author and the parents who select what children should read – and

children. However, this statement also implies a further act of transgression, the one committed by children who read a novel that explicitly claims it has not been written for them.

As proof of the extent to which transgression and language boundaries are key to Boyne's narrative, it should be pointed out that there is one limit that the novel does not trespass – that is, the representation of death. In *Probing the Limits of Representation* (1992), Saul Friedlander argued that the Shoah is “an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories”. Insofar as it is “an event at the limit”, Friedlander rightly suggested, the threat of banalisation and distortion demands that artist bear in mind that “there are limits to representation *which should not be but can easily be transgressed* (1992, 2-3; emphasis in the original). When Bruno and Shmuel meet their fate, the narrative abruptly comes to a standstill, implicitly suggesting that death remains a taboo not to be broken. It is at this point that Boyne's rhetoric of discursive indeterminacy approaches silence. When Shmuel is worried because his father has been missing for days, adult readers easily infer the reason of his absence, and so they understand the end that awaits the two friends in the dark room they are led to with tens of other prisoners.

The ending of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, however, is unrepresented, except for the concise assertion that “[n]othing more was ever heard of Bruno after that” (Boyne 2007, 214). Death, in other words, is presented only *in absentia*, it is silenced from the narrative. Still, its presence is blatantly audible, confirming Henri Lefebvre's claim that silence is “‘another speech than ordinary saying’ (*un autre Dire que le dire ordinaire*), but it is meaningful speech nevertheless” (Steiner 1986, 53). Following a rhythm that might be compared with an asymptotic line, one may argue that Boyne presents death, but does not represent it. In so doing, this rhetoric strategy reveals the existence of a limit in the English language, the difference between the concepts of *Darstellung* (which means representing, in the sense of ‘putting *there*’ or ‘producing’) and *Vorstellung* (which means representing, in the sense of ‘putting *in front*’) that is central to Arthur Schopenhauer's debate on aesthetics in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818-19). Bruno's death is not *vorgestellt* – that is, it is not presented *before* the eyes of the readers – and yet it is *dargestellt*, it is ‘laid there’ for the readers, at least for the adult ones, to sense and interpret it. Death is the ultimate taboo that Boyne's language is unable to transgress in an attempt to reconcile the testimonial function of literature with the aesthetic limits that representing the Shoah implies. The linguistic indeterminacy onto which the novel is grafted, however, is in turn transgressed by the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.

Released in 2008, the movie was criticised for providing a watered-down depiction of the extermination of the Jews, or, as Linda

Grant wrote in *The Guardian*, a “Disneyfication of the Final Solution” (Grant 2008).¹² This is probably because the film overemphasises Bruno’s point of view, his naivete, and his feelings. Insofar as his household, his relationship with his family, and even the relational dynamics between his parents are given prominence, the film makes Boyne’s ‘original sin’ more visible. Consequently, the boundary between murderers and victims is far more difficult to perceive than in the novel. However, I argue that the movie also transgresses one of the key points of Boyne’s narrative, that is, his attempt at testing the discursive uncertainty that surrounds the discourse of the Shoah.

Precisely because it is the product of verbal language, the representational uncertainty that shapes Bruno’s experience is filled by the interaction of words and images in the film. This is certainly due to the specificities of literature and the cinema, but I would also suggest that the film appropriates, rather than simply adapting, the novel. As Julie Sanders claims, adaptation and appropriation are two distinguished processes. More to the point, appropriation rests not only on a perceivable relationship between the source and the target text, but also on the acclimatisation of the original text so as to fit the culture to which the final product is addressed (cf. Sanders 2006, 26). Sanders specifically refers to texts – literary, visual, or otherwise – that are transposed from a cultural system to another, as the cyclical appropriation of the Shakespearean canon, across time and place, suggests. Still, the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* may be said to appropriate Boyne’s novel in that it transposes it into a new cultural production – in other words, into a movie, with all the aesthetic demands, but also the constraints, that such a medium implies.

When Bruno and Shmuel are caught in the death march that is shown in the final scenes, the director swiftly shifts to Bruno’s father’s office, where the Commander is proudly showing the map of a new crematorium to two soldiers. It is precisely at this moment that Elsa tells him that their child is missing. As Stephanie Rauch rightly observes, the ending of the film provides “a Hollywood-style race against time” that is absent from the book, and alludes to a number of other Holocaust movies, including Oskar’s race to avoid Itzhak Stern’s deportation in *Schindler’s List* (1993)¹³ (Rauch 2021, 83). From

12 Like the novel, the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was met with mixed reception. *The New York Times* criticised the way it “trivialized, glossed over, kitsched up, commercially exploited and hijacked” the Shoah, staging “a tragedy about a Nazi family” (Dargis 2008). A number of critics and scholars, however, have extensively praised its educational function. For an overview of the critical reception of the film see Gray 2014, 113-21 and Rauch 2021, 81-3.

13 *Schindler’s List* (1993). Directed and produced by Steven Spielberg. Amblin Entertainment and Universal Pictures. USA, 195’, colour and b/w.

this perspective, the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* amplifies the original transgression of the novel, giving relevance to the tragedy that falls on the family of the SS-Commander at Auschwitz rather than to the inhuman reality of the concentration camp.

However, the film, like the novel, depicts the Shoah in *absentia*. Even if images compensate for the cognitive voids left by language, what happens beyond the fence delimiting "Out-With" is never clearly made visible. In this sense, the narrative fabric of both the book and the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is also reminiscent of Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (1997).¹⁴ In Benigni's film, when Guido is deported to a concentration camp with his son Giosuè, he persuades the child that they are participating in a competition. In so doing, Guido uses language to construct an alternative reality, even if this manipulation is morally acceptable in that it is meant to protect Giosuè from the tragedy that they are living. The visual and the verbal collide in a story that is presented to viewers, like Boyne's novel is presented to readers, as "a fable".¹⁵

The final scene of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* certainly provides a more dramatic epilogue than the novel in that the interaction of words and images reduces the ambiguities of the original. When the family begins to search for Bruno, the boy, Shmuel and a multitude of other prisoners are led into a dark room and forced to get undressed. The lights fade out among the prisoners' cries, and the scene is only briefly illuminated from above. Hiding behind a gas mask, a soldier opens a window in the ceiling to drop a few mothballs into the room – tablets of Zyklon B, the pesticide infamously used by the Nazis in order to kill Jews by fumigation. A close-up of the crematorium's locked door, followed by a slow, backward tracking shot that shows the loosely hanging, empty uniforms, suggests what is indirectly confirmed a few moments later, when the camera focuses on Bruno's mother to foreground the desperation in her face, and his father finds Bruno's clothes near the fence. The naked bodies of the prisoners, who look like animated corpses in the dark, their cries, and the claustrophobic atmosphere are reminiscent of Dante's *gironi infernali*, and provide a visual representation that leads viewers towards death without indulging in morbid, voyeuristic effects. Thus, despite the differences, a core element of Boyne's novel, and possibly of his commitment as a writer, remains perceivable. Death, the

14 *La vita è bella* (1997). Directed by Roberto Benigni, produced by Elda Ferri and Gianluigi Braschi. Cecchi Gori Group, Melampo Cinematografica. Italy, 124', colour.

15 At the beginning of *La vita è bella*, the voice of Giosuè, who is now an adult, informs the viewers that "[q]uesta è una storia semplice, eppure non è facile raccontarla. Come in una favola c'è dolore, e come in una favola è piena di meraviglia e di felicità" ('[t]his is a simple story, yet it is not easy to tell. It is painful, as fables are, and like a fable it is full of wonder and happiness'; transl. by the Author).

ultimate boundary that may not be transgressed, is still there, as a reminder of the artist's responsibility when aesthetics and ethics need to be reconciled.

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