

Imagining the Worst: Ladislav Fuks' Contributions to Holocaust Fiction

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### Abstract:

Ladislav Fuks' works are under-recognized in English-speaking academic discourse. He is a valuable contributor not only to the Holocaust Literature genre, but also to film and literature in general. His two English-translated works, *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* and *The Cremator*, as well as the film adaptation of *The Cremator*, examine the role imagination can play in art that addresses atrocity, allowing for a heightened subjective impact on the audience. I critically and comparatively examine Fuks' work to establish his value to literature and Holocaust art. In the first chapter, I frame my argument with questions of art's abilities to represent atrocity and provide relevant background information relating to Fuks' and his experience in wartime Prague. In Chapter Two, I closely read *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*, concentrating specifically on Fuks' use of metaphor, presentation of incredulity, and commentary on the imagination's capabilities in confronting terror. Chapter Three compares *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* to the "Momik" section of David Grossman's *See Under: Love*, focusing on similarities between the title characters. Chapter Four examines Fuks' use of the grotesque in *The Cremator* and its film adaptation. Chapter Five compares Fuks' works to Aharon Appelfeld's novel *Badenheim 1939*, emphasizing each author's reliance on the audience's retrospective prescience, which provides a significant psychological impact and avoids contributing to the over-saturation of Holocaust information on the public. I conclude that Fuks should be more highly regarded and widely recognized both academically and in popular culture, as he exhibits similar features as other, more celebrated Holocaust writers, and his innovative contributions defend the value of literature in representing atrocity.

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## Chapter One Introduction and Historical Background

### Introduction

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1. *The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history.*
2. *Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason—artistic reasons included.*
3. *The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead. (Des Pres 217)*

Among the most prevalent and unresolvable Holocaust-related discourses is the debate over artistic responsibility and ethics in fictively representing atrocity, a subject often introduced with Theodore Adorno's statement that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). While critics seem to take Adorno's quotation out of context, the basis for their concern lies in an interrogation of mimesis and the limits of not only the arts, but also language, memory, and suffering (Des Pres 217). Despite the inherent difficulties and possible critical backlash of almost all attempts to represent the Holocaust and its historical situation, artists continue to creatively explore the unthinkable. This continued production results in the commercial and artistic enterprise Norman Finkelstein termed the "Holocaust Industry" (Finkelstein). While this term certainly has negative implications—assigning blame to individual creators, corporations, historians, and the public for both profiting from atrocity and producing artifacts that misrepresent the historical situation—there is value in many works for both the artist and audience<sup>1</sup>. In the case of the first-generation artists, whether survivors, witnesses, perpetrators,

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<sup>1</sup> This is a great oversimplification of Finkelstein's work, which is much more political and specific to American

or bystanders, their works can convey personal interpretations of experienced events and, ideally, allow the audience a glimpse into a foreign personal, cultural, and historical circumstance.

Holocaust scholars also set other parameters within which fictive artistic representations of the Holocaust should work. Terrence Des Pres explains his understanding of the accepted ethical situation regarding representation as the three specific rules displayed in the chapter's epigraph, emphasizing singularity, accuracy, and solemnity. Lawrence Langer, in *Admitting the Holocaust*, questions whether composed representation can “rival the immediacy of contemporaneous photographs, diaries dug up after the war in the ashes surrounding Auschwitz, or even survivor accounts—unromantic emotions recollected in disquietude?” (174). These questions and commandments explain both the earnestness with which one must approach Holocaust events and the difficult balance one must achieve when taking an “imaginative” rather than testimonial approach.

The task for artists using fiction (as opposed to testimony or memoir) to confront the Holocaust is especially difficult when artists are not themselves Holocaust survivors, because they do not maintain an almost immediately authoritative status. Some concerned critics might suggest that a writer should portray the Holocaust only if they have a direct familial connection—or at the very least, a religious connection—to the events. Other, less conservative critics, have maintained that, for artists without a Holocaust heritage, only originality can justify what is otherwise unjustifiable: turning human suffering into a commodity. For example, Langer questions whether or not the work offers “any fresh insights into the Nazi mind, the victim, the spectator” (*Admitting* 176). Even though these parameters may limit a writer's possibilities, they

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Jewish responses to the Holocaust. I believe, though, that the term “Holocaust Industry” can be used loosely to address the potential degradation of tragic events through flippant or false representations, whatever they may be.

do not preclude artistic excellence, as can be seen in innovative works, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or David Grossman's *See Under: Love*. While general discussion of Holocaust representations' intricacies and values could continue indefinitely, perhaps it is best to begin examining how Czech writer Ladislav Fuks, another innovative novelist, specifically enacts his fictional representation of the Holocaust.

Ladislav Fuks, while known and respected in Europe, is very little known in English-speaking society, which one can gather from the scant amount of English-language scholarship dedicated to his work and the number of his works translated into English (two out of about fifteen book-length works)<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps one reason for Fuks' lack of recognition in English-speaking countries, in addition to general unfamiliarity with the Czech language, is Czechoslovakia's under-recognized status as a significant player in modern European history, including World War II—one of the central subjects throughout his oeuvre. Thus, readers might not have an extensive enough familiarity with the historical and cultural context within which Fuks worked to be confident of their ability to understand the settings of his novels.

Fuks, born in 1923, grew up in Czechoslovakia. In his young adulthood, he experienced second-hand the effects of the 1938 Munich Agreement, which annexed the Czech Sudetenland to Hitler's Germany (Pynsent 90). Months after the Munich Agreement, Slovakia became its own Nazi-supporting state, and the German military began occupying Prague and the remaining Czech territory. In this political transition, the Czech population experienced cultural conflicts regarding Germany, leading to a mixed population of victims, bystanders, and perpetrators

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2 I found only two substantial scholarly English-language investigations of *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*: a chapter in Lawrence Langer's *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, and Rajendra Chitnis' "Remaining on the Threshold: The Cunning of Ladislav Fuks." There is no in-depth scholarship on the novel, *The Cremator*; the film adaptation has the most English-language academic scholarship of any Fuks-related work.

(Demetz 45). While not Jewish himself, Fuks dedicated much of his work to examining empathetically the destruction of Jews in Prague (Mesher 396). Following the war, Czechoslovakia fell under communist rule, but, throughout the 1960s, the country became increasingly liberal socially, politically, and artistically. This liberalization can be seen in the emergence of the Czechoslovakian arts, particularly literature and film, which flourished, with representatives such as Milan Kundera, Arnost Lustig, Milos Forman, and Jiri Menzel. The Prague Spring, a period of heavy liberal reform in 1968, marked the apex of liberalization. The Soviets tightened control on Prague in the summer and stifled the artists through various forms of censorship (Williams 41)<sup>3</sup>.

Historical and cultural circumstances shaped Fuks' work significantly. He published his two works that have been translated into English, *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* and *The Cremator*, in 1963 and 1967, respectively. He adapted the latter of the novels for an influential film directed by Juraj Herz in 1968. The World-War-II era Czech history is important because Fuks' narratives are set in pre-war Prague just before and during Germany's full occupation of Czechoslovakia. The later liberal environment is equally important because both novels were created during this unusually liberal period. Herz actually filmed his adaptation of *The Cremator* during the few months of the Prague Spring, and Fuks' subsequent works receded into relative obscurity presumably because the Soviet restrictions stifled his thematic concerns (Chitnis 47-48).

In both *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* and *The Cremator*, Fuks concentrates on the anxiety, fear, and disorientation victims experienced preceding the concentration camp experience. His writing style incorporates fantastic elements of the grotesque and the absurd as well as an

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3 The preceding history is yet another oversimplification, but I hope it explains just enough of the cultural and political climate to illustrate some important aspects of both the content of the film *The Cremator* and the conditions under which it was made.

historical context in an “attempt to communicate to the reader the disorientating and debilitating confusion of subjective and objective reality experienced by the character” (Chitnis 51). The characters' experiences related through the subjective narrative style then affect the reader to an extent that “neither reader nor character can reliably distinguish between reality, dream, hallucination and invention” (Chitnis 51). Fuks' exploration of the inability of imagination and rationality to comprehend the Holocaust resonates with other canonical Holocaust literature, but the incorporation of the reader's imagination and the specific historical basis for the works provides a potent narrative that emphasizes the complexities of both imaginatively representing atrocity and experiencing atrocity through representation. In this sense, his work exemplifies almost all troubling aspects of Holocaust literature, but does not diminish the urgency and importance of writing about atrocity.

Comparing Fuks' novels to other Holocaust fiction proves his worth within the Holocaust Literature genre. While many works warrant comparison, David Grossman's *See Under: Love* and Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939* provide particularly enlightening analogues, the former as a second-generation narrative focusing on the imagination, and the latter as a pre-concentration camp narrative exposing reader preconceptions. Also, Juraj Herz's film adaptation of *The Cremator* further illustrates Fuks' use of the imagination and contributions to the film medium through his involvement with Herz's cinematic representations of the grotesque. Comparing Fuks' novels to these works will help further establish Fuks' standing within Holocaust literature and emphasize art's capabilities in representing atrocity.

## Historical Background

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Because Fuks' works concentrate on psychological reactions to Holocaust events, it is important to compare his fictional interpretations to actual experiences. An examination of survivor testimonies from Prague, Fuks' native city, helps illustrate a shared anxiety among potential victims of the Socialist Democratic Party's intensifying fervency and influence as the German military prepared to enter Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement. But before discussing the occupation, one should explain the socio-political situation of Jews in Prague.

In the years preceding World War II, there was cultural tension in Prague, not necessarily between Jews and non-Jews, but between German speakers and Czech speakers. This cultural tension originates centuries before. Indeed, Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk* is a strong illustration of the conflict between Czech and German cultures in the World-War-I era that carried over into World War II. The title character must fight for the German-speaking Austria against the Slavic Russians and Serbs. He feels no nationalistic identification with the Empire for which he fights and therefore rebels in various absurd ways throughout the novel (Parrot 121). The linguistic tension continued to linger even after Czechoslovakian independence, nearing World War II. Speaking German in Czechoslovakia represented an effrontery of sorts towards Czech tradition and nationality. As Eva B., a Jewish survivor of Terezin from Prague, explains: the "Czech population was often angry at Jews for going to German schools" (HVT-1)<sup>4</sup>. The two languages and literatures were a significant source of division. Many Jews spoke

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4 All testimonies were viewed at Yale's Fortunoff Archives. The archives began in the early 1980s and now include over four thousand videotaped Holocaust-related testimonies for public viewing. Each cited number, for example HVT-1, refers to the videotape's call number in the archives. My transcriptions remain true to the original statements, although occasional insignificant utterances, such as stutters or place-holding terms, may have been omitted to improve overall clarity. No words or meanings were added or changed during transcription. Also, I have abbreviated surnames in accordance with the archive's own presentation.

German, particularly those of the middle to upper class, as speaking the language identified the user with the enlightened German culture and power structure so well respected in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even though the respect was far from reciprocated. She later divulges, however, that there was no real anti-Semitism from the general Czech population, only this cultural conflict over the apparent alignment with German values. The tension appears repeatedly in testimonial accounts from the Jewish population in Prague before occupation and illustrates a society with conflicts, but perhaps not the conflicts expected by readers with a less informed historical understanding of European cultures, picturing a pervasive European anti-Semitism.

Fuks illustrates the cultural conflict extensively in *The Cremator*, which is set in 1938 and 1939 in the time both immediately preceding German occupation, and during it. After discussing the German threat with a pro-German friend, Reinke, who fought with Kopfrkingl in World War I, the novel's central couple, Karl and Lakme Kopfrkingl, confer about their children's education, the wife saying "the children go to Czech schools, only Czech is spoken at home, just like now..." to which her husband agrees "We've never spoken German here...I also have nothing but Czech books...Our German blood, why, it's but a drop" (39). They are proud of their Czechoslovakian nationality and do not feel the need to support German culture, even with the drop of German blood. But as the husband thinks over the language conflict, he encourages his son, Mili, to study the German language as an acknowledgement of the nation's increasing influence. The father explains that it will help Mili's financial prospects, using Reinke's success as an example:

"He's got a car in front of the house, and you lag behind in German. We speak

Czech here, without doubt, and I don't like Willi's politicking in the least, let alone his contacts with the SDP, but, my dear boy, you ought to know German, at least for yourself. There's nothing else for it. It is a nation of one hundred million people. Jan Bettelheim knows German, I'm sure, and Vojta Prachar attends some lessons." (41)

Through this scene, Fuks acknowledges the significance of the cultural division to everyday Prague life and retroactively supports the Czechoslovakian culture under intensifying German threat. The cultural division is made most explicit through the comments regarding Reinke's success; but Koprkingl has always been subject to being impressed by those he considers more cultured, for before Reinke's sphere of influence, he had been in awe of the cultured Jewish doctor, Bettelheim, living upstairs and was delighted that Mili had befriended his son, Jan.

As Germany approached occupying the Sudetenland and Europe began witnessing and experiencing the gravity of the Nazi Party's position, Czechoslovak citizens could only speculate as to what might happen in their near future. Eva B. describes the initial stages of confronting the German occupation, explaining that "There was an influx of German immigrants, and they kind of brought the fear with them, which, until thirty-nine, Czechs were saying 'not here; it's not going to happen here'" (HVT-1). This particular statement explains not only the introductory sources of anxiety, but also an aspect of incredulity that most concerned parties shared regarding Germany's political and military actions. Another survivor, Ann L., confirms this sentiment of disbelief, assuming that "what was happening in Austria could never happen in [the] Czech [Republic]..." (HVT-1122). Many Czechs assumed that their government would fight against the German threat, but they did not do so after the Munich Agreement, in which major European

nations convinced the Czech government to appease Hitler and avoid conflict. Hitler's actions took many people, not just Europeans, unexpectedly, and incredulous response has become a staple of survivor narratives (Lang 178); but the safety for Prague Jews seemed perhaps more likely than for those in Germany, Austria, and Poland, and the disbelief experienced as Hitler's forces took over would become one of Ladislav Fuks' most thoroughly explored concerns in *Mr Theodore Mundstock*.

Part of this inability to comprehend the German Reich's actions, whether in their initial political and military moves or the implementation of the Final Solution, lies in the relatively slow progression in which some changes occurred. Discussing Jewish rights after German occupation in Prague, Frances E. explains, “The nibbling away of our freedom was very gradual” (HVT-577). The gradualness allows for a little-questioned or opposed transition from a rational, relatively harmonious society, to participants living in what would become, at the very least, a disorienting and fear-injected ethos.

To say that Jews and other victims experienced fear and anxiety is certainly an understatement, as the extent of the catalysts and psychological responses is very difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend, for those involved. Returning to Eva B.'s prior statement, that the fear began when German emigrants brought information pertaining to Germany's state, is intriguing because the notion of oral transmission of speculative information, or perhaps more simply, hearsay, became a significant feature of potential victims' lives under the German Reich's occupation. When information was available, the mystery shrouding most of the claims added to the disorientation and anxiety that was so antithetical to Enlightenment values. Frances E. describes a scenario in which “nobody had any idea what was in store. And we were sort of

living, waiting for day-to-day, what comes next,” and even when supplied with speculative information, “there was no idea about anything like Auschwitz or gas chambers or anything like that. There were just rumors that Jews were being evacuated and moved to different cities in Poland, or ghettos” (HVT-577). This is a common theme among Prague testimonies: even in Terezin, a work camp, “The average person...did not know of extermination” (HVT-681). Victims understood that they would be forced out of their homes and out of Prague, while having no real knowledge of what awaited them in their immediate or extended future; this vague notion of a frightening future created an intense anxiety.

Otto K., a Jewish survivor born and raised in Prague, describes extensively the psychological state of potential victims:

We didn't know. People are afraid of the unknown. And as more and more Jews were transported to ghettos and to concentration camps, east, and as we didn't know what expected us, it was a day-by-day and night-by-night fear. And that fear I would say, which, by the way, was much worse than anything else, worse than starvation, worse than humiliation, that fear accompanied me for the next, well, for the next six years. Sometimes more fear, sometimes less fear. But it was always at the back of our minds, there was that incessant fear—of the unknown...We were aware that we were handled by people who hated us, but we actually, we didn't know how far they would go. (HVT-53)

This description resonates with other testimonies and survivor narratives, including Elie Wiesel's *Night Trilogy*, Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, and Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*. The fear and anxiety-based psychological impact overshadow any physical debilitation or abuse

toward the survivor. This is not to say that the psychological and physical pain are not related—the haunting memories of experienced and witnessed abuse linger in nightmares and in the back of the mind for many survivors—but the physical pain usually recedes, leaving sometimes physical and more often psychological scars (Améry 40). These literary examples mostly focus on the concentration camp experience. The fear, as explained in Otto K's testimony, actually began before transport with the overwhelming lack of knowledge and accompanying security or solace (depending on the expected outcome) regarding one's immediate or extended future. It left the survivor at an existential loss. Thus, the pre-transport experience is a crucial aspect in understanding the extensive psychological impact on potential victims even before the pain experienced in the camps.

Survivor testimonies viewed in conjunction with historical records indicate that Czechoslovakia's specific cultural and social circumstances provide an exceptional distribution and interaction among the commonly examined victim, perpetrator, and bystander roles. In 1939, when the German army began occupation, the Nazi Party began regulating the Czech Jewish population through laws and mandates. Because of this, the non-Jewish population separated more and more from their Jewish neighbors, whether willingly or not. The cultural make-up, which then consisted primarily of Germans, Czechs, and Jews, provided diverse reactions to policy implementation. According to survivor Zenka W., “the Germans of the city were 'heiling' the Hitler, and the Czechs were just staring, crying, upset” (HVT-1343). This testimony obviously establishes Germans as invaders (or at least in support of the invaders) and Czechs aligning themselves the future victims. But not all of the accounts present so disparate a situation. Eva B. explains that the non-Jewish Czech population “never hurt us, but they never

helped. They just stood by and watched.” She also notes that Czechs after the occupation “became very cynical, very self-centered, very opportunistic” (HVT-1). Eva K., another Terezin survivor, acknowledges that on her way to transport the Czech population's reactions were “very mixed...Some of them had tears in their eyes, the Czech population, and some were jeering” (HVT-681). Even while much of the Czech population in Prague did not become enveloped in the ideological Nazi fervor as did their neighbors in the recently split Reich protectorate Slovakia, they also did not directly oppose the German occupation. Many Czechs actually took advantage for financial gain of Jewish displacement from both jobs and homes. The distinction between perpetrator and bystander is not clear, as is the case in many Reich-occupied countries, but, while one may have difficulty arguing for general bystander innocence in Prague, one can at least recognize a significant third-party population of witnesses; they did not actively participate in persecution of Jews, but many also chose not to fight back physically or morally. In Mr. Theodore Mundstock, the Sterns' daughter, Freda, is engaged to an Aryan engineer. When German restrictions begin, he leaves her. He is not directly mean to her and calculatedly justifies his decision to leave her because “marriage wouldn't save her while it would be the ruin of him” (45). He, like many others, acts according to a type of short-range self-interest difficult to argue against.

Throughout the study of Fuks' work, one finds emotions and events that resonate with Prague survivor testimonies. While the remaining chapters will explore Fuks' portrayal of victim and perpetrator psychology, particularly the fear and incredulity aroused in an irrational environment, it is also important to understand that Fuks' works remains moored in the Czechoslovakian experience. A witness or bystander himself, he seems to have recorded the

experience with respect for the victims and concern for depicting the relationship between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.

He specifically explores the complexity of the Prague victim-bystander-perpetrator relationship in *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*, in which the narration reflects the title character's subjective experience. During a particularly stressful event in which he must sweep an overly-trash-ridden street, Mundstock imagines a hidden or disguised Nazi enemy who "seemed to be watching him furtively as if they wanted to see how he was going to set about his job, and it occurred to him that this was a trap that had been set for him....So that...they could accuse him of disobedience, of refusal to obey orders, and even of sabotage" (106). Soon after, he addresses the bystanders watching him attempt his job:

[S]ome of them carefully looked in the other direction as they passed him, others furtively caught his glance, and some looked into his eyes for a moment, with pity or as if they wanted to encourage him; it was sure, though, that not one of the people passing by had any idea what was going on in his mind, what a terrible thing he had to deal with, this man in his worn black coat with the yellow star, pushing his cart along with its broom; they could not guess his very existence was at stake. (106-107)

Mundstock is understandably paranoid and bitter toward those outside of his traumatic experience. However, many bystanders attempt to help him as well. Two young, thuggish men, after mistakenly harassing Mundstock (they believed he was a black market dealer), deliver a package of cheese to him on Christmas Eve (97-98). The subjective point-of-view clouds the reader's understanding of whether the young men actually antagonized Mundstock at all, because

his paranoia affects his comprehension of his own experience—something to consider when examining any testimony. Either way, the young men, soon to be political prisoners, ultimately provide him some human warmth. Similarly, later in the novel, Mundstock attempts to goad the local butcher into punching him in the face. The butcher, Alois Klokocnik, generously gives Mundstock extra meat, to which Mundstock responds with accusations that he not only cheats the customer, but also unfairly blames the meat's quality on Nazi restrictions. Klokocnik, while briefly angered and confused, does not react negatively or violently, rather, “Mr. Mundstock left the shop...with two hundred grams of salami in his pocket and a coupon for another two hundred grams in his purse” (144-145). The butcher is genuinely and exceedingly sympathetic to the victim's circumstances and mental state. One also finds sympathetic neighbors in the Cizeks and Mrs. Civrna, all of whom encourage Mundstock during his psychological tribulations.

The Cremator presents a more direct yet more confused understanding of the victim-perpetrator relationship. In this novel, which follows a bystander's journey to becoming a perpetrator, Fuks provides an early indication of disoriented morality through Karl Kopfrkingl's interpretation of a painting depicting an abduction attempt in which the abductor is thwarted by a third party. After much consideration, “he understood the scene; the abduction which failed...And suddenly he no longer knew who he felt more sorry for—the beautiful pinkfaced girl, her old husband the rescuer, or the aristocratic abductor who was unsuccessful, but it was just a quick flash through his mind” (57). While a more complicated understanding of the three roles is desirable, a basic assumption and celebration of victim innocence and perpetrator guilt is a necessary indicator of a working moral compass in the bystander, something that Kopfrkingl lacks.

Fuks' novels present a divided Prague society that supports the testimonial representation of the psychological, social and cultural circumstances. Confronting the bystander's role in the Holocaust is important for Fuks' fellow Czechoslovakian bystanders examining their complicity in the Holocaust; but this does not mean that the historically and culturally specific circumstances are not useful to an outside audience. These circumstances are quite important because Prague, and Czechoslovakia in general, is not as generally or critically "understood" as Poland, Germany, or Austria during World War II. When readers consider the Holocaust, they think immediately of Auschwitz because of prior media and historical representation—it is the extraordinarily brutal deathcamp and thus deserves the most attention—but it remains important to examine how the Holocaust affected victims outside of concentration camps. Fuks' concentration on the pre-transport experience in Prague provides a fresh narrative, avoiding the possibility of contributing to over-saturation and providing valuable information about what happened in his homeland. So, without further ado, let's see what he saw.

Chapter Two  
Psychological Avoidance, Rationality, and Imagination in Mr. Theodore Mundstock

An Imaginative Avoidance

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*Wherever you look in this household you see fantasy at the helm.  
Truth stands in a corner weeping and since you have brought her  
in with you, know that you will weep for it and weep most terribly,  
and when you leave you will lament in sorrow that you ever came  
in here. These people have lost their reason and believe the exact  
opposite of whatever they are told. (Mr. Theodore Mundstock 40)*

Ladislav Fuks' first novel, *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*, can be boiled down to Lawrence Langer's complicated question: "How shall I enact my survival in a world I know to be unalterably darkened by the shadow of irrational death, before an audience anticipating a performance that will be illuminated by the light of reason and glow of the future?" (Langer *Holocaust* 94). Rather than tackle the entire question at once, it might be more productive to begin with a brief summary of the novel's plot: Theodore Mundstock, an aging Jewish man confronted with the certainty of concentration camp transport, attempts to cope with his circumstances in every conceivable manner. Ultimately, he fails, ironically dying just before the transport.

As *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* is ostensibly a portrait of the title character's psychological interactions with terror, Fuks employs various metaphors to emphasize Mundstock's inability to confront or even comprehend reality: a shadow, a pet bird, and a lamp with Columbus's ship on the shade. Each metaphor represents Mundstock's attempts to orient himself in a world where "all attempts at orientation must fail" (Langer *Holocaust* 94). The shadow and the bird are contrasting embodied representations of psychological reactions to terrifying circumstances. The lamp, more obviously, represents hope for Mr. Mundstock. Throughout the first half of the novel, these three metaphors interact to provide a complicated and bleak realization of the pre-

concentration camp experience.

Columbus's ship is traditionally, in Western culture, a symbol of mobility and possibility. It means that there are exciting places and opportunities elsewhere and that they are for the taking. It also represents empiricism and the West's exploratory triumph (Chitnis 54). All of these aspects specifically describe an idealized America often mythologized or imagined as a land of opportunity and refuge for emigrants. Fuks employs the ship lampshade specifically as a metaphor for hope of escape, a combination of illumination in the fixture with the aforementioned attributes that Columbus represents. The lamp remains a positive, resilient metaphor for Mr. Mundstock throughout the novel, and the hope inspired is one of Mundstock's defining attributes.

Fuks introduces the lampshade almost immediately, as Mr. Mundstock worries about receiving a letter that he surmises is a summons to transport that might send him either to Lodz or Terezin. He stares at the ship until realizing that his friends, the Sterns, sent the letter; it is not a summons. He is relieved, and his shadow moves away as the "pale lamplight [falls] on his face and chest," upon which he notices his pet bird (1). This short scene presents the working relationship between all of the major metaphors in the novel's first half. The transport is the object of immediate fear. When it is no longer necessary for Mundstock to worry about it, at least as an immediate danger, his personified shadow (also a representation of fear) disappears, and the hopeful light and imaginatively exotic bird take precedence. In the split between the fearful and hopeful symbols, the transport and the Columbus lampshade provide opposite potential outcomes—forced migration into a camp environment that suppresses humanity and freedom, and chosen emigration to an open land that specifically celebrates humanity and

freedom.

The most prevalent and perhaps most important of the novel's symbols is Mundstock's shadow, Mon. Fuks gives Mon, although only a shadow, both voice and mobility that function separately from the living source. He acts as a foil for the delusional Mr. Mundstock in his “mocking and often cynical presence, irritably persistent in his attempts to undercut the illusions which Mr. Mundstock invents...that things are bound to get better,” but eventually disappears as Mundstock begins to consider his circumstances more directly (Langer Holocaust 95).

Mon's first appearance in Mr. Mundstock's life occurs on the “first day of German occupation,” March 15, 1939 (Fuks 32). Mundstock remembers his arrival at his string and rope business, where he encountered a confrontational Nazi official who immediately and derisively kicked him out of his former store. He returned home where “something inside him split in two” (75). A shadow emerged that he could call only “Mon.” The loss of livelihood, the accusation that he was something less than human (the officer referred to him as “Jewish swine”), and the prospect of Nazi rule too extensively overwhelmed his understanding of existence, and, presumably as a defense mechanism, Mundstock created another self, not unlike the common perception of the Multiple Personality Disorder victim who creates an alternate personality to deal with psychological pain too severe to confront.

Fuks uses Mon from the novel's beginning to provide an oppositional voice to Mr. Mundstock's mistaken optimism. In the first interaction between the two characters, Mundstock has just read a letter in which his close friend, Mrs. Stern, implores him to visit her family to share news of the war and Jewish fate (2). As he considers visiting the family with falsely positive news, his shadow insistently inquires “why do they ask him round?” when he

consistently refuses to acknowledge “the sad things” (5). Mundstock continues preparing dinner, discussing with his pet bird, Chicky, what he might tell the Sterns, and ignoring his shadow. Fuks then provides the reader with a dialogue exemplifying the man-shadow relationship. Mundstock believes that the Sterns ask him around “Because I know the first transports left for Lodz not long ago, and they're going to be leaving all the time now,” and because “Every one of us can expect the summons any day, only there's no need to be afraid, they say once you get to the concentration camp you get dulled to it and don't even feel the horrors.” Mon replies: “It's because he doesn't tell them that, just because he tells them the exact opposite. Because he'll tell them there aren't any transports going to Lodz and aren't going to be any, that's why they ask him round. Because he'll say it's all imagination, expecting the summons....Because he's a liar and a cheat!” (8). This particular instance of dialogue is significant, for the shadow not only reminds Mundstock that the immediate future is both terrifying and seemingly inescapable, but also that Mundstock has a serious responsibility toward others. This contrast provides a stark commentary on Prague's state in the years immediately preceding the Holocaust and introduces a theme of incredulity and avoidance, or an inability to acknowledge or discuss the situation among potential victims—a theme mirrored historically in the fact that “Few personal narratives among the countless diaries, memoirs, testimonies from the Holocaust fail to assign a central place in their retelling to the element of incredulity: the sense that what in the Holocaust became actual was viewed, even as it unfolded, as impossible—that it simply could not be happening” (Lang 178). Mundstock actually believes the real, looming certainty of the transport, but will not admit it.

Fuks emphasizes Mundstock's mental state through the extent of Mon's presence in the

narrative. In the exchange discussed above, Mon is both present and angrily or excitedly vocal. In instances of an oppression too strong for Mundstock to avoid through displacement, Mon disappears. The first glimpse of this in the novel occurs when Mundstock is in bed, staring “into the darkness as though he wanted to catch sight of him, he desperately wanted to catch sight of Mon, at least his outline, at least the shadow he cast, but it was hopeless and in vain. All around him hung the thick darkness no light could penetrate” (16). His shadow, while it reminds him of his own inconsistencies, comforts him in that it means he is not completely alone to face a disturbing reality; there is nothing to separate him from it, and there is no metaphorical light of hope. Mon keeps Mr. Mundstock in a seemingly “reasonable” state of mind. Later, however, he disappears; this is likely due to Mundstock's excessive guilt after optimistically lying to the Stern family and reconsidering a life which “overstepped the limits of reason and reached regions where there seemed to be nothing in human guise,” and consequently “his poor tormented reason surrendered” (58). Mundstock believes that he has found his true calling as a seer and savior of the Jews, which the shadow attempts to refute. After Mundstock finally stops questioning his new calling, “A wild roundabout began,” in which “The room whirled round Mon at a fantastic pace and the darkness grew redder and sparser as it spun round. A dreadful message forced its way through his head as the whirlpool of his thoughts raged and Mon lamented and cried and groaned” (60). Here, Mundstock nearly abandons displacement as a coping mechanism and accepts the even more delusional Messianic role. From this point, Mon, the embodied voice of truth and reason, has less influence over Mundstock and appears much less in the novel.

That Mon, the representation of insistent truth and moral accountability, takes the form of a shadow is quite significant. A shadow is both colorless and featureless. It is the very basic

representation of a form stripped of all complexities. The absence of any exceptional attributes signifies a bleakness without pretension—an unflinching understanding of the world. But shadows in the Platonic sense also represent a mere signification of the real thing. They are not real in their lack of dimensions and provide only a feeble account of reality. Thus, while providing a less adulterated and more confrontational understanding of the oppressive Jewish experience in Prague, Mon still is not real and is not an apt representation. This brings us back to the idea that the Holocaust experience is unrepresentable in the enormity of terror and painfulness.

Mon is not Mundstock's only invented companion, however. Quite the opposite of Mon's unadorned bleakness, Chicky, Mundstock's pet bird, has fantastically embellished features. On the novel's first page, the pet is described first as a “creature” with “a speckled body, bright red eyes and a yellow beak.” Fuks continues to refer to the bird as a creature and creates a sort of mystery about what kind of bird-like creature Chicky actually is. Chicky functions as a pet should (and also as Mon does) for the solitary Mr. Mundstock in that it gives him “someone” with whom he can converse. At one level, this emphasizes the the loneliness of a person living alone during times in which socialization is restricted through enacted curfews and regulation of formerly unrestricted social environments. But more importantly, the fantastic Chicky creature is an outlet for Mundstock's falsely optimistic delusions. Mon's commentary occurs during one-sided conversations with the bird that are usually justifications for Mundstock's delusional reactions to his circumstances.

After accepting the seer role, Mundstock seems more able to confront both his personal history and the current happenings around him as they are, but he is still unable to deal with them

psychologically (Langer Holocaust 95). In an extended episode of reminiscing, he recalls a failed former relationship that was prematurely ended by the occupation of the Nazi Party. As he remembers the time when he felt himself “split in two,” he momentarily “knew it was the end” (75). He attempts to hang himself, but the rope breaks and he falls on Chicky, who is now described as “a pigeon with ash-gray feathers, brick-red legs and a dark beak” whose “wings were broken and drops of blood had clotted on its breast feathers” (76). Chicky loses all fantastic mystique and becomes merely a dead pigeon. When Mundstock attempts suicide, he reaches a point in which there is no longer any reason to try to understand the pre-Holocaust circumstances as they truly are and also no reason to sugar-coat his understanding. He knows that he, like Chicky, has been reduced to nothing special.

Mr. Mundstock's desperate decision to hang himself marks the end of his attempts to avoid the immediate Nazi threat of transport. The first half of the novel is his transition “from the apex of illusion to the nadir of despair” (Langer Holocaust 101). Fuks uses the contrast between Mon and Chicky not only to illustrate the psychological difficulty experienced by a potential victim in the face of terrifying circumstances, which the victim cannot accept, but also to present a very basic conflict about representing atrocity— attempts to assess the appropriateness of victims' reactions are ultimately unnecessary as there is no way to actually “comprehend” the position in a way that prepares one for what's to come.

The first-discussed metaphors, Columbus's ship and the transport papers, continue into the novel's second half, but Fuks makes an important statement about the weakness of these metaphors when confronted with existential concerns. While much of the novel is about avoidance of frightening possibilities, Mr. Mundstock often briefly recognizes the futility of his

situation. In one of these moments of terrifying lucidity, after Mon accuses him of being a liar and a cheat, Mundstock recognizes the failure of placing hope in mere objects. He tells Chicky,

There are my books in the room behind us, books I've collected over thirty years, a sofa I turned into a bed at night so I can lie there and sleep, and a door, but the door opens here into the hall, and you can't escape from the concentration camp that way. A lamp, with a ship moving over an endless sea, endless because it goes round and round—can I hop on board and sail away, on a lampshade? Or should I start trying to talk to the spirits, like old Haus—is that the way out? The mirror, yes there's a mirror in there too, but all I can see in that is myself. And the window, the light comes in through it as long as it isn't blacked out, the fourth floor window...If I only knew a way out I'd tell everybody, I'd help everybody whether they wear the Star of David or not, they're just as badly off as we are, or just a bit better off because they've got a tiny bit more hope than we have, but I'd help them all. Only I don't know how. I don't know a thing. (9)

This passage is especially significant because it provides a basic summary of Mundstock's quest in the novel: to find a way out. He recognizes that to put hope in objects provides no real resistance to the Nazi regime's plans. It is in the novel's second half that Mundstock truly begins to explore how to find a way out. While he no longer believes in the efficacy of Mon or Chicky, or avoidance as a means of escape, he still believes in the abstract hope that the lampshade represents.

In the novel's second half, Fuks addresses the question "Is there a way...of preparing oneself or others for...the unexpected, for the impossible?" (Lang 179). In answering this, he introduces a number of new attempts by Mundstock to confront the potential concentration camp experience, attempts which fail because of "the inability of the imagination to conjure or anticipate the realities of l'univers concentrationnaire" (Langer Holocaust 106). The section begins with Mundstock's visit to his Rabbi, in which the Rabbi explains to him that Jews "are apt to receive prophetic and messianic visions, but it is essential to distinguish between the true and the false" (82). He identifies Mr. Mundstock's particular failures in the novel's first half and establishes the central conflict of the second half when he admonishes, "Mr. Mundstock thought he could be a seer and a messiah, and take his own life, when he used to be a sensible, practical, logical man with a method of dealing with everything?" (83). He diagnoses Mundstock's messianic delusions as a sickness of the heart caused by the Devil's deceit and reminds Mundstock not to avoid his Jewish responsibility and to accept, instead, his current position, because Jewish "life cannot pass without suffering. Suffering is our vocation. In our suffering we are eternal" (83).

While Fuks only briefly returns to this scene throughout the rest of the novel, it is significant because the Rabbi's guidance gives Mundstock a way out of the despair that drove him to suicide. Mundstock's descent in the first half of the novel left him in an irrational mental state, diminishing his abilities to distinguish between his imagined power and his extreme impotence in his situation. The Rabbi explains to Mr. Mundstock his previous failings and encourages him to embrace his oppressed position. He will no longer avoid his fate in the concentration camp, using Mon and Chicky as psychological barriers between his mental health and the Nazi regime; he will instead learn how to survive through suffering with logic and

practicality.

Fuks illustrates Mundstock's new mentality in a scene in which Mundstock must sweep the area streets, his new regime-assigned job. During a surprisingly trash-heavy day, Mundstock begins to understand:

...something he had only dimly felt so far, something vaguely guessed. He discovered what it was that seemed to be sprouting and budding green in his mind.

The way out of the Jewish history of suffering.

The secret of salvation. (104)

When confronted with the unusual amount of refuse, Mundstock becomes exceedingly anxious because he, in a paranoid state, believes that the new regime is testing his abilities. He thinks that “his very existence [is] at stake,” and if he fails to put all of the trash into his cart at once, the Nazis will punish him (107). With this imagined threat, he discovers a “method” by which he can fit all of the trash in the cart. He concludes that all one must do to survive is to be prepared. The night after this revelation, Mundstock wishes to discuss it with Mon, but “his shadow had disappeared. Only on the lampshade Columbus's ship came sailing towards him...” (113). From this point forward, Mundstock fully immerses himself in a new pursuit of pragmatic preparedness. Mon's relative disappearance represents the full methodological transformation that the Rabbi planted in Mundstock previously. Thus begins Mundstock's almost entirely imaginative approach to survival under the Third Reich.

Mundstock continues to ponder his new approach to confronting pre-transport apprehensions through:

the colossal investigation of every possible situation, the working out of a method of action in each of these situations, down to the last minute detail, including all possible eventualities, and fantastic perseverance in practical training for them all. In the understanding and thorough comprehension of reality, at the same time stripping it of all fantasy, illusion and invention. (116)

Even though Mundstock already lives with minimal rations, dehumanizing work, and constant fear, he imagines his future experiences both during the transport to Terezin and while living there, and attempts to prepare himself for the certain physical and psychological suffering, through simulated or proxy punishment; this includes carrying a stuffed suitcase for extended periods to prepare for the transport, placing an ironing board over his sofa-bed like the camp beds, swinging a poker to simulate working in a quarry, goading the butcher into striking his face as a Nazi officer might, and loading and unloading the bakery ovens as if he were working the crematory ovens.

Toward the novel's end, Mundstock attempts to simulate his own execution at gunpoint. He ties his hands behind his back and briefly contemplates death and the state of European Jewry at the hands of the Nazi Party. He imagines the soldiers' "clicking their heels and snapping their rifle barrels" and forces himself to wait for them to shoot (190). Eventually he imagines it, bites down on a tin frog to emulate the gunshot's sound, and drops to the floor. He realizes that "this death is not enough" and that "There could be another death, a far stranger one" (190). Upon this realization, he turns on the gas because he imagines that "Beasts like the Nazi would find

incredible things to do” to people. He thinks of his deported former love, Ruth Kraus, and bitterly believes that he wasted his life by not marrying her, as he is now only “an unmarried Jewish pig...all alone” (192)<sup>5</sup>. Smiling, he loses consciousness; but “Still it was not over...he realized with surprise a little later” when “He suddenly felt he was being dragged up from the floor” (192). Ironically, two Nazi guards revive him and then physically and verbally abuse him while ransacking his apartment.

This scene presents one of the most explicit indications of the failure of Mr. Mundstock's approach in the novel's second half because of an issue central to Holocaust fiction—that “perhaps for the first time in history...reality exceeds the capacities of...imagination” (Langer Holocaust 106). Sadly, Mundstock's new approach works no better, and is perhaps even worse, than the first approach because his “determination to fight the consequences rather than resist the cause, marks his final unwitting submission to the principle of death that has haunted his world since that day three years before, when the Nazis arrived and 'something inside him split in two” (Langer Holocaust 104). The mere decision, although it would certainly be inappropriate to fault him for it, to accept the inevitability of transport seems at first a reasonable and celebratory transformation from the man who was totally unable to confront his impending fate. Yet, while he confronts the Holocaust in the second half of the novel, it is from a fully delusional perspective. Although Mundstock tries to convince himself that his “logical” preparations ensure his survival through the Holocaust, his imagined training neither prepares him mentally nor physically, for he does not know the totality of what lies ahead. More importantly, in attempting to prepare for the concentration camp experience, “He has already abandoned the living for the

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5 “Eine unverheiratete jüdische Sau...all alone”

condition of nonbeing his persecutors seek to impose on him even before his death; and the supreme irony of his existence is that his attempts to face in advance 'the most terrible thing fate had forced on him' exactly fulfills [sic] the plans of his persecutors, not his own" (Langer Holocaust 115). His sort of living death emphasizes the extent of the psychological damage the Nazi state inflicted upon its victims even before interning them.

A misapplication or misinterpretation of "rationality" and "reason," those pristine products of the Enlightenment, is an oft-employed explanation of the Holocaust's development in historical, philosophical, testimonial, and fictional work<sup>6</sup> (Langer Preempting 66). In fact, the Holocaust specifically seems to be the historical exigence behind a wave of postmodern thinking that rejects rationality as the appropriate lens through which society should view life. In 1944, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno explain that the Enlightenment's project to "overthrow fantasy with knowledge" ultimately "regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape" by not considering its negative implications and foundation in the acceptance of the existence of absolute truths (1-20). More specifically, they posit that anti-Semitism stems from a number of Enlightenment ideas, among which they include the devaluation of individuals and the vitality of stereotypes (137-172). The antagonism toward what they take to be the consequences of the Nazis' misapplication of the trappings of reason is a reaction to the perpetrators' efforts to promote a "proven" superior race and their development of absolute efficiency in their death machinations. German culture was considered to have been enlightened, intellectual, and highly moral, one that incrementally distorted the Enlightenment values they so celebrated (Lang 183).

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6 One of the applicable definitions of "reason" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is as follows: "The power of the mind to think and form valid judgments by a process of logic." Rationality is "the ability to exercise reason." Sometimes, however, people feign rationality by adopting a semblance of logical behavior while simultaneously failing to form judgments that are in fact valid.

Thus, the general German population, among others, was either unable to judge the government's policies as unreasonable or merely accepted the irrationality. Similarly, victims' and bystanders' mistaken trust that they lived in a “reasonable” world eliminated the ability to conceive a reality in which the terror of the Nazi Party, emphasized by their abuse of rationality, could actually exist. As Jean Améry states about camp inmates: “The power structure of the SS state towered up before the prisoner monstrously and indomitably, a reality that could not be escaped and that therefore finally seemed reasonable” (12). Fuks illustrates through Mundstock that this reaction to the overwhelming state apparatus could affect not only those already in the camps, but also those potential victims still living outside.

Accepting or trusting the existence of a stable, rational society for all parties involved—perpetrators, victims, and bystanders—is a central theme in Fuks' work, where “logic and organization were 'fantasies' which both victims and persecutors invented to conceal the even more inconceivable consequences of deportation—humans exterminated by humans” (Langer Holocaust 107). Fuks, through Mr. Mundstock's simulations, interrogates the same psychological components of incredulity that compose the failed metaphors of the first half of the novel. In this instance, however, the incredulity lies in trusting preparation and the discipline that allowed him to finally confront his situation, rather than in avoidance. They are different examples of the mind's inability to comprehend Nazi terror, one through imaginative avoidance, and the other through failed imagination. Mundstock fools himself with a semblance of rationality because his experience did not allow for the possibility of a fully irrational Nazi regime, and this self-deluding irony culminates in Mundstock's advice to the Sterns:

[T]ake all eventualities into account. Take all the facts one by one, step by step,

methodically, and prepare yourself for them all. That's what I'm doing, preparing myself for it all the time. The whole secret, you see, is not to have any illusions.

If you go about with your eyes open there's nothing to be afraid of. (162)

Just as the regime's unquestioning and seemingly logical perspective at first fooled many outside it, Fuks illustrates through Mundstock an instance of a victim falling prey to the same misunderstanding.

Mr. Theodore Mundstock is not only about the title character's pre-transport experience, but also about the people around him. Fuks uses Mundstock's acquaintances throughout the novel to explore even further the various reactions to the threat of Nazi terror. Perhaps the most interesting and absurd episode in the novel involves another elderly man, Moyshe Haus, Mundstock's connection to the Jewish Community Office, who becomes completely detached from a standard conception of reality. According to Haus' companion, a young woman from the Community Office who lost any semblance of "reality" along with Haus, the "real truth" will explain "when you are really awake and when you are only dreaming..." (171). The experience on Earth is but a nightmare; while sleeping, however, one is "really awake" and travels to the Swan constellation where "nobody wants for anything" (155). As Mr. Mundstock tries to sort out these fantastic ideas, he finally persuades the girl to show him into the room Haus currently inhabits. Mundstock sees Haus' body in a tub and exclaims "He's dead!" to which the girl replies, "You are wrong, sir....He is immortal" (173). During the encounter, Mundstock notices "something unnatural in the air" that "he could not find words to express," and a strangely anxious feeling overcomes him (169).

This scene is significant because it provides an example of a completely different

imaginative experience from those explored by Mr. Mundstock. The detachment exhibited through Mr. Haus and his aide illustrates extreme reactions to a concentration camp specter that "breeds fantasies in the potential victims until the lines of demarcation between fantasy and reality vanish in the fruitless search for a meaningful orientation to an incomprehensible experience, one that violates any prior sense of human expectations" (Langer Holocaust 112). This is a profound extension of the irrationality discussed previously regarding Mundstock's simulations of the concentration camp experience, in which the situation's irrationality requires the victim to make sense of it through imaginative flexibility. Haus, in his mystical approach, creates an inverted experience of consciousness that is as disorienting as the concentration camp morality and shows again that victims' attempts to confront reality during the Holocaust ultimately fail (Langer Holocaust 112-114). There is no longer a lasting semblance of rationality, thus, the characters turn to mysticism.

While Mundstock acknowledges the seeming insanity of Haus' reactions, he still does not realize that he is similarly delusional. But reality intrudes again when his closest friends, the Sterns, are transported to Terezin. Mrs. Stern explains in a letter that their son will not leave until the next transport, and Mundstock suddenly cannot avoid the terror: "For the first time in weeks tears of pity, of self-disillusionment, filled his eyes and were ready to spill over on his shocked face--but they did not. Suddenly everything soared within him and he awoke from his grim dream, his dark, nonsensical fantasy..." (199). Fuks establishes a connection here between Haus' fantastic conception of reality and Mundstock's own nonsensical reactions. While Haus seems more vastly detached from a commonly perceived notion of existence, his escape into a dreamworld is just as delusional and maybe even more appropriate in its utter opposition to

reality than Mundstock's belief that preparation and discipline, which he views as rational actions, cannot fail. Even after his devastating realization, Mundstock immediately turns his full attention to teaching the Sterns' son, Simon, the secrets to outlasting the camps. For Mr. Mundstock, rationality remains only as a "fetish rather than a means of insight, an invented enactment of a ritual on an imagined stage that pretends to duplicate the drama of life" (Langer Holocaust 114). As falsely confronting reality has become ritualized, the reader can see that it is as much an escape as the avoidance illustrated in Mon's personification and Chicky's exoticism.

## Chapter Three Generationally Speaking

### Mundstock and Momik

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*Yes, of course, it's an overwrought imagination...people are imagining an awful lot these days. You have to take things as they are and not believe whatever you happen to hear. That is the way to salvation! (Mr. Theodore Mundstock 153)*

Many of the representational issues that Fuks addresses in Mr. Theodore Mundstock, as a first-generation Czech witness, are also significant themes in second-generation Holocaust literature.

Second-generation works are mainly distinguished through the authors' Holocaust heritage.

Many second-generation literary memoirs focus on the struggles of growing up under the care of a Holocaust survivor and exploring feelings of anger or guilt, an inability to connect with the parent, and feelings of otherness regarding the social environments in which they mature. These three conditions interrelate and stem, in a sense, from a child's psychological conflict with the psychological effects of the Holocaust experience (van Alphen 474-475).

Although not the product of a second-generation victim (his parents are not survivors), one of the most significant second-generation related works is David Grossmann's *See Under: Love*, a novel tracing an Israeli writer's attempts to write about the Holocaust<sup>7</sup>. The novel's first section, "Momik," is about the title character's struggle with the Holocaust as a ten-year-old child of survivors in Israel<sup>8</sup>. His parents seem to function within a small survivor community, raising

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7 Grossman was born in Jerusalem in 1954. He writes in Hebrew, and *See Under: Love*, his second novel, was immediately celebrated in Israel for its innovative and affective representation of Holocaust-related struggles (Abramovich 119-121).

8 I only address the first section of *See Under: Love* because the novel's breadth and complexity warrant more

Momik under a sort of omnipresent Holocaust. They (as well as other community members), however, avoid discussing Holocaust events around Momik; this is either so he will not be affected by his Jewish and direct familial heritage, or perhaps more likely, because most of the survivors are incapable of understanding their Holocaust experience enough to make it comprehensible to an outsider. The adults in the community, however, cannot consistently avoid discussing the past around him; this leads Momik, a curious child, to “use imaginary things and hints and hunches and the talking that stops the minute he walks into the room...” in order to form an understanding of the dark event, the Nazi Beast, that so greatly affected all of the adults (23-24). This imaginative exploration toward comprehension and representation of history and terror is Grossman's central psychological quandary in the “Momik” section.

Momik shares several interesting similarities with Mr. Mundstock. Most significantly, and perhaps most obviously, both characters spend their time trying to imagine what the Holocaust is<sup>9</sup>. In this sense, Momik, a representative of the second generation, experiences very similar psychological responses to the mysterious threat so prevalent around him. Like Mundstock after he decides to confront the concentration camp specter, Momik obsessively searches for deeper understanding of the Holocaust in order to fight against it “in various ways he thought up from day to day, because it was clearer than ever now that he must not fail” (65). He trains himself through his imagination, waiting for the day that he must confront the Nazi Beast that he so often overhears being discussed.

A more specific characteristic Momik shares with Mundstock is a trust in his ability to

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extensive discussion than is possible in the current work. Out of all of the sections, the “Momik” chapter most directly relates to Fuks' work, and it provides an interesting age contrast for the main characters.

9 I use *is* here specifically because for Momik, the Holocaust is a living being that still deeply affects the lives of those around him. It is not yet relegated to the past, as it is a fear that the survivors still live with and that Momik must vanquish.

employ logic and reason to understand the Holocaust's dangers, and thus survive. Just as Mundstock believes that he can survive the camps as long as he is aptly prepared, even after suffering enough pain and anxiety to push him to suicide in the novel's first half, so “Momik doesn't know the meaning of the word 'surrender,'... and he understands that a thing may seem mysterious and scary and confused today, but it will clear up by tomorrow, because it's just a question of logic, there's always an explanation, that's how it is in arithmetic, and that's how it is in everything else” (21). In his pursuit of a logical explanation of the Nazi Beast, Momik studies the survivor stories and believes he must “make the most of this opportunity and remember everything, everything, and then run home and write it down in his notebook, and draw pictures too, because some things it's better to draw. So that when they talk about certain places Over There, for instance, he can sketch them in the secret atlas he's preparing” (16). Even later, when he seemingly cannot grasp the Nazi Beast at all, specifically because of its irrationality, he concludes that “he was just going to have to try harder and sleep less” (56). Momik also exhibits other obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Walking home from school, he “makes his way...at a scientific pace...directing his footsteps through the secret passages and short-cuts only he knows, and there are some trees you have to brush against accidentally, because he has this feeling maybe there's somebody inside and you have to show him he hasn't been forgotten”(24). This ritualistic behavior seems to provide some comfort in a situation in which real comprehension is unachievable. Both Momik and Mundstock find a sort of hope and refuge in preparation for the unknowable.

This similarity even goes as far as both characters creating a “game” in order to get through the difficult situation. For Mundstock, one sees this first in the scene with the cart in

which he realizes that discipline can get him past the traps set for him by the Nazi, and later in all of the scenarios Mundstock imagines in order to prepare himself for the concentration camp experience. Momik imagines scenarios in which he fights alongside an invented, comic book-like character, Bill, who “died and came back to life and died and came back to life again and again” (55). Momik sees this aspect of his vision as:

the best part of the game, only it wasn't really a game at all, a game, ha! Momik didn't enjoy it one bit, but he could never dream of stopping it because he has to practice, because there are so many people waiting for him to become a leading world expert...and Momik knows someone's got to be the first to volunteer to enter the frozen kingdom and fight the Beast and rescue all the people and take them away, and you just have to have a plan, that's all. (55-56)

Both characters seem to simultaneously escape and take refuge in the imagination in their confrontations with the Holocaust. Less literally than in Ida Fink's celebrated short story “The Key Game,” playing “games” seems not merely a psychological function, but a survival mechanism when addressing a terror beyond comprehension (Wilczynski 32).

Another interesting shared device between Momik and Mundstock is the invention of an imagined companion to alleviate the psychological isolation and alienation of Jewish victims during the Holocaust. Bill, the character described in the previous paragraph, serves as a brother and fighting partner against the imagined Nazi Beast. They interact in Momik's imagination as an American Western duo, a sheriff and his deputy, and their adventures involve rescuing survivors who have been refused shelter, presumably like those of the SS Exodus, and finding

lost children of the war<sup>10</sup>. While Bill serves a very different function than Mon, who paradoxically seems to ground Mundstock in reality, he arises from the same anxieties.

Grossman describes the emotional exigence of Bill's existence, explaining that "Bill gets killed at least twenty times a day by the bullets and knives of the villains, and in the end he always comes back to life, thanks to Momik who gets really scared when Bill dies, and maybe it's the fear, his very hopelessness, you might say, that brings Bill back to life" (55). Momik's fear and hopelessness when confronting his understanding of the Holocaust stimulate him to imagine a partner who can enhance his confidence or optimistic understanding of the situation.

Bill's function in Momik's imagined adventures, however, is also very important and illustrates another similarity between the second-generation victim and the Holocaust victim. The inability of both Momik and Mundstock to confront the irrationality of the Holocaust at its own level causes them to incorporate the Holocaust into an accepted heroic narrative. Mundstock believes that he will be a savior of sorts, whether for all of the victims, as is the case earlier in the novel, or later only for Simon. Momik's self-proclaimed purpose in the novel is to save his parents and all others whom the Nazi Beast continues to afflict. His understanding of the Holocaust changes throughout the section, but it always reflects his naiveté, as in the fairy-tale version:

there's a curse on Over There. And this is where it starts getting kind of blurry. There's this spell that was put on all the children and grownups and animals, and it made them freeze. The Nazi Beast did it. It roamed the country, freezing everything with its icy breath like the Snow Queen in the story Momik read.

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<sup>10</sup> The SS Exodus was a ship carrying Holocaust survivors to Palestine in 1947. The ship was overtaken by a British military vessel, and survivors were returned to Europe because they lacked necessary legal documents.

Momik lies in the bed imagining....Over There everyone is covered in a very thin layer of glass that keeps them motionless, and you can't touch them, and they're sort of alive but sort of not, and there's only one person in the whole world who can save them and that's Momik. Momik is almost like Dr. Herzl, only different. He made a blue and white flag for Over There, and between the two blue stripes he drew an enormous drumstick tied to the back of a Super Mystère, and below it he wrote the words If so you will, it is no fairy tale, but he knows he doesn't have the least idea yet about what he's supposed to do, and that kind of worries him.

(50)

This passage encapsulates Momik's mindset: he is quite aware that he can only imagine the Holocaust events, but he also feels that the fairy-tale version is real enough metaphorically to thaw those frozen under the curse. He, like Mundstock, genuinely believes that he can be a savior-figure if he can figure out the meaning behind the Nazi Beast. He compares himself to Theodor Herzl, a journalist who, in reaction to anti-Semitism, proposed and campaigned for the formation of a Jewish state in Palestine at the turn of the century; many Zionists celebrate him as a hero (Sicherman). Later, during a period of deep investigation in which the Beast still remains a mystery, Momik questions his ability to figure it out, but acknowledges that “everything depended on him” and “if it ever did decide to show itself, it would show itself to Momik and no one else, because who else but Momik would challenge it like this...” (65). He seems to understand his purpose as though he were selected or fated to finally confront the horrors.

Whereas Mundstock discovers his approach solely in imaginary preparation in reaction to speculative explanations of the concentration camp experience, Momik, being a second-

generation victim, consults history texts to supplement his imagination. He delves into psychological and historical works that explain how the Holocaust could occur because he believes “what he needed in order to fight the Beast was the very thing that most scared it, the thing he'd been avoiding all along, which was to get to know more about the Beast and its crimes” (65). As he immerses himself in Nazi history, he absorbs into himself some of the Nazi Beast's cruelty. He collects wild animals and hides them in cages in the dark cellar so that he can scientifically observe them for signs of the Nazi Beast. The animals become increasingly wild due to their mistreatment, and Momik feels brave in his “war” until ultimately realizing that this is only “bravery out of fear” (58). Even more explicitly than Mundstock, who adopts Nazi-related behaviors in abusing the butcher, Klococnik, Momik momentarily exhibits a mixture of scientific coldness and domineering savagery associated with the Nazi Party.

When Momik finds that even this observation does not help, he brings his grandfather and his grandfather's survivor friends down to the cellar to confront the Beast with “real Jews.” This does not work either. It only produces insanity, something previously seen in survivors throughout the novel: the grandfather's babbling, the father's nightmares, Hannah Zeitrin's sexual deviance and outbursts. Momik ultimately realizes that the Holocaust is too powerful to understand or make sense of in the way that he wishes. It is for the protagonist an experience mirroring the sentiments from his Grandfather's science fiction work, in which to the question “what is it that you saw?” the character could not respond, “though his face bore testimony to the evil which had befallen them all, and horror, perhaps Death, lurked at the window” (10). The lesson that Momik learns is something felt, but not thought, because it exceeds not only verbal but imaginative capabilities.

The similarities between Fuks' and Grossman's Holocaust fictions are quite remarkable, specifically when considering that they differ in such a significant aspect: the temporal relation to the exigence to which the characters respond. This is one of Mr. Theodore Mundstock's most intriguing and innovative aspects. Fuks, a Holocaust witness, addresses the event from a perspective specifically realized after the fact but incorporated into a pre-concentration camp narrative. His work presents similar issues as those in Grossman's novel, but it is embedded within the immediacy of a first-generation narrative. He employs a creative approach similar to that of the younger generations, whose Holocaust-related works “incorporate a reflection on how to write it, a reflection on representation itself” (G. Hartman 9). Mundstock's story, even more than many other first-generation narratives, is an exploration of art's failings in addressing the Holocaust as a metaphor of sorts for a more difficult situation of the limitations of the mind (whether the mind of a victim or the mind of a retroactive thinker) in the shadow of atrocity, whether as a victim or a retroactive thinker.

## Chapter Four

### Opposites Interact: Mr. Mundstock and Mr. Kopfrkingl

#### Narrative Comparison

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*You're making jokes and it's given me the shivers. People shouldn't be joking in here, what with the furnaces and all that. (Cremator 61)*

Fuks, while obviously interested in the psychology of the Holocaust victim, was also quite occupied with perpetrator psychology, which he addresses extensively in his other English-translated novel, *The Cremator*. Fuks published *The Cremator* in 1967, four years after he published *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*. Through the novel, which is particularly illuminating when read in conjunction with *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*, he concentrates on many of the same conflicts from his previous work, but also addresses a perpetrator's response to, and participation in, the impending German occupation of Prague; it is, in a sense, the antithetical representation of life in Prague's pre-Holocaust years.

Fuks' novel is a psychological portrait of an increasingly delusional Prague crematorium manager, Karl Kopfrkingl<sup>11</sup>. As German ideology, along with the threat of the German military, presses upon the Prague citizens, Kopfrkingl becomes obsessed with advancement. Because of this, he latches onto the Nazi ideology under the pretense that Germans are purer, cleaner, and more sober than Jews and other Czechs. This change in his beliefs mostly results from prodding by Reinke, his fighting companion from World War I, as Kopfrkingl on his own is no more than an indulgent romantic. Reinke knows how to manipulate his pleasure-seeking companion into

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<sup>11</sup> In the novel, Karl's last name is actually Kopfkringl. However, in the film it was changed to Kopfrkingl. For the sake of uniformity, I will use the film's spelling.

joining the party—through sexual temptations and opportunities for increased power and wealth. In order to embrace the morality of the Nazi ideology, he begins to view death mystically and confusedly as purification, which justifies his opportunistic betrayal of Jewish friends and coworkers. It later justifies (in his mind) the murder of his wife and the attempted murder of his daughter. Kopfrkingl moves from a sentimental, albeit strange, family man at the novel's beginning to an ideology-fueled monster and rising party member by the end. The narrative is an obvious allegory for both the spreading of Nazi ideology just before World War II and for the ideology's failure as a rational system. As shown through narrative summary, the material is very dark, but it is also quite funny. Fuks addresses the pre-war milieu with a grotesque sensibility and avoids direct representation of the concentration camp experience in favor of a psychological examination of one incipient perpetrator. His work emphasizes “multiple perspectives, the grotesque and the absurd” (Hames 224).

Kopfrkingl mirrors Mundstock's character: the spread of Nazi ideology and power in Prague produces an incredulous psychological reaction that employs the use of the imagination and a reliance on his ability to use method to “make sense” of atrocity. In this case, however, the character rationalizes his opportunism, taking advantage of the prevailing oppression of the Jewish population. In doing so, he uses his imagination to envisage an Eastern philosophy-influenced reality, in which his actions, incinerating corpses, are praised for liberating souls into the ether and away from the degradations of the body and life on earth. The Eastern philosophical influence at first seems appropriated as a defense mechanism for dealing with a daily immersion in death; it is the “development of a psychology of detachment whereby the perpetrator of a violent act separated himself inwardly from its effect upon the victim” (Langer

Admitting 67-68). It is an excuse of sorts to elevate his profession. But later, after conflating the philosophy with Nazi ideology, also as an excuse of sorts, Kopfrkingl envisions a Tibetan monk informing him that he is the Dalai Lama, representative of harmony:

“Kushog. I'm a tulku from the Mindoling monastery. Our Dalai Lama is dead. Tibet, our blessed country, has been searching for his incarnation for years...seventeen, nineteen years. The incarnation of the great man whom Buddha has chosen, in whom he has been reincarnated, and...[Tibet has] found him at last, after so many years of quest and search, after almost twenty years. I've been sent on this long journey to find you and tell you that it's you. The throne in Lhasa is waiting for you, rimpoche...But complete reticence is necessary, it's secret...I shall come here again several times to initiate you. Then we'll leave for the Himalayas, for our paradise, our blessed country....” (171-172)

This italicized language eerily reflects a party member's immediately prior remarks to Kopfrkingl, explaining his potential value to the Nazis who “need to try out gas furnaces....But complete reticence is necessary, it's secret. You are being offered a great honour. You could be put in charge of an expert job” (168-169). Allegorically, Fuks indicts the Nazi Party's irrationality and their attempts to morally account for their actions through an idealistic and mystical rhetoric that suggests that destroying Jews is a humanitarian act (Eaglestone 312). He emphasizes the absurd coexistence of two contradictory moral codes—one of harmony and the other of destruction. More immediately, Kopfrkingl's fantasies are more direct avoidances than Mundstock's imaginings, rendering them less tragic in a sense, but the juxtaposition of pleasant, clean fantasy and vulgar brutality establishes a grotesque tension that allows for stronger

psychological impact on the reader.

Fuks also emphasizes Nazi irrationality in an earlier scene in which Reinke requests that Kopfrkingl disguise himself as a Jewish beggar and eavesdrop on a local Jewish celebration's attendees under the pretense that "It'll be a kind of test of your strength and courage" and "it'll be a way of helping these poor, lost, erring Jews, who oppose the well-being and happiness of our people" (116). Reinke then appeals to Kopfrkingl's morality and ambition, perhaps his most defining trait, positing that "You've always been against violence and war, against exploitation, poverty and suffering. Besides, you are, after all, employing two Jews as agents...two decent, good, orderly people. Why shouldn't you help them? Does the meaning of your life consist of forever regulating the flow of coffins into furnaces?" (116). Reinke then offers Kopfrkingl an SDP membership application. His irrational commingling of deceit, aid, and prosperity resembles the persuasive balance present in Nazi propaganda in which a veil of justifications covers purely emotional appeals for ideological support.

This scene resembles propaganda in a number of other ways as well, particularly in the caricatured appearance of Kopfrkingl's disguise, which reinforces stereotypical notions of a Jewish race. He wears a moldy shirt and moldy pants, grease-paint on his face, a fake bump on his nose, and glasses (115-119). He also hunches and drags his leg, acting impressively enough to warrant Reinke's compliment that he seems "just like Chaplin," a master of beggar caricaturization (122). Later, Kopfrkingl ironically counts the money he amassed in his beggarly role, a financial concern anti-Semites negatively attribute to Jewish greed and devious ambition.

The racist elements presented in *The Cremator* mirror similar stereotypes in Joseph Goebbels' propaganda film project *Der Ewige Jude*, or *The Eternal Jew* (Schofield). This film

evokes racial and cultural prejudices of Jews, offering “a revealing look into the way that the National Socialist media had the power to shape not only what its viewers thought, but to actually distort epistemological attitudes for the benefit of the state” (Hansen 103). Much of the film's footage was shot in Polish ghettos and depicts unhealthy Jews living in squalor. The work is presented, however, as a documentary “describing the history and 'true nature' of the Jewish people” and providing an “objective, even scientific, picture of the Jews” (J. Hartman 332). The filmmakers present the Jews in the ghettos as Jews in their natural state and never acknowledge that the Nazis themselves created the portrayed conditions when they invaded Poland and established ghetto communities (J. Hartman 333). The fallacious narrative illustrates a willingness to feign a rational self-image in order to encourage ideological support.

One purpose of *Der Ewige Jude* is to provide viewers the means to identify disguised assimilated Jews on sight. The filmmakers present a paradoxical reasoning here, in which “Jews are visibly different because they are inherently (i.e., racially) different, and yet, the viewer must be taught to 'see' the true Jewish nature behind the illusion of what he literally sees—that is, to recognize Jewish faces while remaining unfooled by Jewish faces, which can be so deceptively non-Jewish” (Hansen 89). The film caricatures Jewish people in order to emphasize their differences and ultimately presents an image much like *Kopfrkingl* in disguise: beggarly, dirty, big-nosed, and physically inferior. Ironically, the party wants *Kopfrkingl* to disguise himself in order to help the state; this is the same charge used against Jews in *Der Ewige Jude*, and it reflects Horkheimer and Adorno's claim that “In the image of the Jew which the racial nationalists hold up before the world they express their own essence” (137). Ending the episode with another caricature—Reinke in a green Tyrolean hat—Fuks critiques the racial Nazi

prejudice so prevalent in their propaganda by using it against them.

Perhaps this is one reason why, in Mr. Theodore Mundstock, Fuks refers to the film screen as “deceitful”; he has experienced the type of manipulation used in visual propaganda. But he also questions more fundamental problems of representation, as seen through Mon, Chicky, and the Columbus lamp metaphors. Fuks focuses once again on imagination in order to address the creative dilemma of whether art can in fact effectively represent atrocity-related events both meaningfully and ethically. In *The Cremator*, he emphasizes this focus through the inexplicable recurrence of a married couple throughout the novel constantly involved in the same argument: is what they see real or merely a representation? This debate first occurs in a wax museum. The lifelike wax figures presented in violent or repulsive scenarios frighten the wife; the husband repeats, “this is only a waxworks” until one of the figures, an actor representing a wax man, moves. She flees terrified (20-28). The wife is right, in a sense. The waxworks is more than a benign imitation of life, but it is also nothing to fear. This metaphor, while never fully resolved, leads the reader to openly question the representational techniques at hand. The scene also employs the grotesque in the wax-like human figure and its uncanny effect on the audience, something even more aptly represented in the Fuks-penned film version of *The Cremator*, directed by Juraj Herz.

The film adaptation of *The Cremator*, produced only a year after the novel at the height of the Prague Spring, differs from the novel in a few significant aspects. Herz and Fuks omitted from the film adaptation the previously mentioned scene in which Kopfrkingl disguises himself as a Jewish beggar; they probably made this choice because of the close connection Czech viewers might have had with image-based propaganda. Also, because images more immediately

affect audiences than does written language, Fuks' literary depiction allows more psychological space between historical actuality and personal recollection. Herz and Fuks recognize the limitations of cinema and make many significant changes in adapting the novel to the screen.

The novel contains much more specific historical bearings; for example, in the novel *Kopfrkingl* deals with the Nazi Party and refers to events such as the Munich Agreement. Reinke, *Kopfrkingl*'s primary influence, directly explains the Nazis' self-understood exigence, explaining:

“The just settlement of Europe lies in their hands, not in the hands of inferior weaklings. Look at Austria....Her annexation to the Reich constitutes the first step. Hitler is an ingenious politician who rids a nation of one hundred million people of its hardships, poverty, unemployment, secures them a just position in the world...Didn't you see the leaflets published by the SDP? The Sudeten German Party?” (38)

The film takes a more allegorical approach, referring only to “the Party” rather than Nazis and never referring to specific historical figures, dates, or events.

The film also concludes less definitely and more horrifyingly than the novel, which ends with *Kopfrkingl* institutionalized because of his messianic fervor. In the film, Party members lead *Kopfrkingl* to his new position, in which he will implement an economical and systematic crematorium for the Jews. These decisions, while they significantly change the narrative, only intensify the effects of the grotesque in relation to the Holocaust already established in the novel while providing a more subjective impact. This is because the medium, with more sensual

elements, allows for a more disorienting audience experience. An understanding of the director's employment of the grotesque will provide a strong comparative tool for better understanding the complexities of Mr. Theodore Mundstock.

### Establishing the Cinematic Grotesque

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According to one critic, “One of the film’s major achievements is finding a visual equivalent for Fuks’ literary descriptions of a degenerating mind” (Hoyle). Herz and Fuks, in both adapting Fuks' novel and creating a film representation of the pre-Holocaust experience, make many significant choices regarding the most effective and affective methods to achieve a meaningful artistic product. In creating a psychologically-based grotesque horror film, the director uses an expressionistic aesthetic involving cinematic excess and disorientation through manipulation of both audio and visual technical film components. The visual, audio, and editing elements often undercut the narrative, challenging the viewer's expectation, a strategy that gives the film a deeper psychological impact. Herz implicates the viewer's complicity through point-of-view camera shots, and he also uses the viewer's imagination and knowledge of history through backshadowing, which emphasizes the film's purpose: to complicate the viewer's understanding of the Holocaust and provide an artistic exploration that, while unable to provide a positive message, at least acknowledges, rather than ignores, the absolute horror involved. Herz and Fuks provide a document that makes the viewer think deeply about the seemingly unthinkable, and for a Czech audience no more than twenty-five years past a very real Holocaust experience, this means quite a bit.

Perhaps the most critical factor in understanding *The Cremator's* complex psychological

impact is Herz's approach toward a cinematic grotesque. The grotesque is “a term that appears often in literary and art criticism but seldom in film studies” (Naremore 5). This under-use may result from cinema's relative youth as an artistic medium; thus critics have not had time to explore beyond less specific terms such as “dark” or “black” comedy. More likely it is due to the lack of a specific and generally accepted definition of the term “grotesque.”<sup>12</sup> The term's definitions seem to change slightly in each generation, with each medium, and perhaps with each work, but “while the forms of the grotesque have changed over the centuries, the emotional complex that the term denotes has remained fairly constant” (Harpham 461-462). Frances Barasch, in “The Grotesque as a Comic Genre,” explains that “in the best or purest grotesque, conflicting elements of ludicrous-horror occur simultaneously, producing in the reader a confused and uneasy tension between laughter and fear or disgust” (4). The artist creates a work that simultaneously arouses contradictory emotions. Geoffrey Harpham, in “The Grotesque: First Principles,” provides a third element which Barasch only hints at when using the term “ludicrous”: astonishment (463). Astonishment is important because the grotesque's effects result from an estrangement caused by subversion and surprise (Kayser 185). Subversion challenges accepted understandings of reality. As these understandings change over generations, so does the material that can surprise and subvert. Thus, to better understand *The Cremator* as both an exemplar of the grotesque and of Holocaust fiction, one must understand how it subverts.

First, it is necessary to address narrative choices because many of the medium-specific

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12 The grotesque also shares features of surrealism and the absurd, both terms which could be used throughout a discussion of Fuks' work; it is a technique used to reach the goals of the absurd, a subjective experience also achieved through the surreal. However, concentrating on the specific functions of the grotesque allows one to focus on the aspect of an ironic humor relying on audience preconception. It also provides an illustration of Fuks' and Herz's formal contributions to Holocaust art.

components work to either undercut or support the narrative<sup>13</sup>. Herz and Fuks address many grotesque themes in the film. In *The Modern Satiric Grotesque*, John Clark identifies some of the genre's commonly shared narrative devices. One of the most significant of these themes should be apparent from the film's synopsis: an attack on the abuse of rationality (Clark 11-12). The narrative's allegorical dimensions are a condemnation of the rise of the Nazi Party and also of Kopfrkingl's "reasoning" or justifications for his betrayals and familial murders. Pseudo-rationality is also attacked as the viewers see a schedule for cremations on the wall. The calculated brutality is offputting, to say the least. The anti-hero is also a consistent grotesque narrative device (35). By the film's ending, Karl Kopfrkingl has no redeeming qualities. Using a delusional central figure as the hero "generate[s] an additional horror that provides a fresh response to the familiar and mundane qualities of Nazi logic and the collaborationist ethic" (Hames 225). Another oft-employed device is visually representing unsavory and animal aspects of the human body, "reducing man to defecating animal before our eyes"<sup>14</sup> (Clark 116). The camera zooms in on characters eating messy, filled pastries, creating hideous expressions. Kopfrkingl ritually cleans his ears in public and combs a corpse's hair, subsequently using the comb on himself. He has an animal-like sexual desire. He also consistently grabs characters by the back of the neck with his overly-active hands, signifying the animal-like nature established through the film's opening montage at the zoo in which close-up shots cut back and forth between the Kopfrkingls and the zoo animals. While these actions are certainly unpleasant, his demeanor, voice, and appearance are somewhat seductive. The casting choice Herz made for

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13 I could spend much more time on the narrative, but I will instead rush through it in order to allow more room for exploring Herz's role and the audio-visual equivalents of the literary grotesque.

14 While there is no actual defecation portrayed (although urination may be metaphorically implied in the son's death scene), there are still very degrading, bestial actions.

Kopfrkingl, Rudolf Hrusinsky, was known for portraying bumbling, comedic protagonists, such as Švejk in the film adaptation of *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Casting Hrusinsky, who brings the comedic physical traits to the role, as a sinister figure complicates the audience's reception of Kopfrkingl as a standard villain, and manipulating audience preconceptions creates an uneasiness or tension in the film. All of these character and plot-based choices are in accord with the grotesque literary tradition and establish a grotesque narrative to be both complicated and complemented through the purely cinematic elements, such as the camera-work and score.

The film opens with a close-up shot of a spotted leopard quickly pacing back and forth behind cage bars. The movement is blurry, and the viewer is disoriented, as a montage of jump cuts between close-ups of the Kopfrkingl family and the animals continues. Specific body parts are highlighted—the eyes, the ears, the hands—alongside similar animal parts, such as an elephant's eye or a snake's tongue. The images are crisp, in deep-focus, with a high black-and-white color contrast. Karl discusses in a pleasant, almost whispered monotone the history of his marriage, his failure to provide adequately for his family, and his opportunistic business plan to rectify his perceived failure. About halfway through this two-minute monologue, the camera zooms out to reveal that the characters are in a zoo. At the end, Karl says “We are a lovely and blessed family, but I always have the feeling that I do so little for you” as the camera cuts from the reflection of the family in a convex mirror to a perspective-switching fish-eye lens shot of the family. The obvious irony is in the distorted image of the family undercutting the “lovely” and “blessed” descriptors. Similarly, while Karl's words themselves are not menacing, the dark, ambient choral drone in combination with his overly-pleasant delivery makes them ominous. Throughout this scene, Herz uses individual cinematic elements to create a disorienting viewing

experience that is at once aesthetically pleasing and wholly uneasy. He employs these consistently throughout the film.

One of the consistent remarks from the few English-language critics and reviewers who have written about the film is a reference to its “excessive” features. Peter Hames, in *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, explains that “The film's constant overstatement—extreme close-ups; liberal use of the fish-eye lens; the deft use of black comedy; and the insidious relish of Rudolf Hrusinsky's performance—makes *The Cremator* a uniquely disturbing experience” (224). Furthering Hames' explanation of the subjective “disturbing experience,” Adam Schofield adds that Herz's film achieves, through the use of “rapid cutting, extreme close-ups, subjective shots and fish-eye lenses 'to excess'...a frighteningly palpable breed of psychological horror” (Schofield). The cinematographic and editing techniques create a disturbing effect, but the over-use of these elements creates an even stronger psychological response through disorientation (Schofield).

Two of Herz's most excessive “tricks” are the fish-eye lens and distorted sound<sup>15</sup>. Such obvious manipulation might normally be deemed “cheesy” or “kitschy” in a standard horror film<sup>16</sup>. Herz's use of the fish-eye lens is justifiable because the shots “effectively link form to content and are never thrown in aimlessly for the sake of visual interest or flare” (Schofield). They seem to work because Herz uses them very purposefully at the film's beginning, especially in the opening scene, and also because he uses it in conjunction with a wide-angle lens that, while less extreme in its distortion, prepares the viewer to accept the fish-eye lens. As the film

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15 Although I use Herz's name regarding visual techniques, I do so merely for convenience. Stanislav Milota is responsible for the cinematography and Jaromir Janacek, the editing. Their work alongside Herz and other Czech New Wave directors is both innovative and admirable.

16 It seems that a certain amount of kitsch is now a significant identity feature for the horror genre.

progresses and the narrative horror increases, Herz uses the lens more frequently and for longer durations. It seems that the distorted image then has an opportunity to create “palpable horror” because the viewer no longer questions its use. Similarly, Herz introduces a distorted echo effect that seems to occur at the peaks of irrationality. During his wife's funeral, Kopfrkingl increases his passion in a eulogy that becomes a call to sacrifice for the Party. At the apex of his rallying orator, the word “death” is distorted and rapidly echoes through in the funeral parlor. At the end of the eulogy, Party members yell “Heil!” with the same effect. This not only surprises the viewer in its contrast to Kopfrkingl's normally overly-calm voice, but emphasizes the distorted viewpoints of Kopfrkingl and the Party.

Herz uses many other visual techniques to establish a type of disorienting effect reflecting Kopfrkingl's increasingly delusional and alarming psychological state. He uses the close-up extensively and to various effects throughout *The Cremator*. Béla Balázs explains, “Close-ups are the pictures expressing the poetic sensibility of the director. They show the faces of things and those expressions on them which are significant because they are reflected expressions of our own subconscious feeling” (274). This statement, while focusing on the “charm of the close-up,” relates to Herz's film in that it reflects on the viewer's subjective reaction to the shot. In a film with horror aspects, this means that the close-up transmits some of the narrative horrors to the audience psyche, “as it distinguish[es] the film as an external representation of Karl’s psyche” (Schofield).

Close-ups also perform another function for Herz. As mentioned previously, close-ups sometimes signify the human relationship to animals. Furthermore, however, when close-ups focus on body parts, they “are disturbing because they tamper with the continuity of the human

form generally beheld during mundane life. When shown mere parts of the body, viewers are denied the unified whole which they desire. Such fragmented, magnified images thus enhance The Cremator's ability to disorient its viewers" (Schofield). These continuity-disturbing shots are reflected throughout the opening credits in which flat, dismembered body parts pile up on the screen. The human body is disfigured and made foreign to the viewer in its disunity (Schofield). They are also used throughout the film while Kopfrkingl looks at images of nude women, or while the independent camera focuses on a succession of suffering people, whether in the Bosch painting behind Karl during a maniacal pro-fascist monologue or in the passing religious images at the Jewish gathering. The focused stillness of these images invites the viewer to consider the difference between the negative effects of Kopfrkingl's overexposure to death (as a cremator) and the suffering for which he must account.

But much of the close-up effect of the latter examples is constituted by Herz's use of jump cuts in conjunction with the close-ups. One of the most exemplary uses of jump cuts occurs when Karl betrays his Jewish friends and coworkers. In this scene, with each indicted coworker, the camera flashes a quick shot of the character's face. The most obvious way that jump cuts help create a disorienting experience for the viewer is in their time-disrupting aspect. This editing produces a rapid, unintroduced movement through space and time quite different from objective spatial-temporal experience. In this sense, they create a subjective experience, playing "an important role in immersing viewers within Karl's demented consciousness" (Schofield). Herz achieves this through a combination of temporal disruption and assumption of Kopfrkingl's point-of-view through which "viewers become aware of what pictures Karl chooses to focus on" and "are allowed to see what Karl 'sees', or...what he imagines" (Schofield). The voyeuristic

implications diminish the comfortable distance viewers might want from a deranged murderer, something that will be discussed more fully later in the essay.

Another interesting editing technique has the same effect as the jump cut but is actually quite the opposite; it is a kind of false cohesion. In this instance, the camera, usually in a close-up, focuses on a particular object, usually Karl, and eventually zooms out to reveal a scene change. For example, when Karl introduces Dvorak to the crematorium, the final shot zooms in on a flower. When the camera zooms out, Karl is outside on a sunny day with his family in Prague. In a more extreme instance, the camera moves back and forth from the Jewish gathering to the scene of betrayal in the Party meeting. In this scene, “Shots of what Karl actually saw and heard are interwoven with those revealing the lies he feeds to his new fascist comrades” (Schofield). Again, “the result is jarring” and “the close psychological distance created by these falsely continuous transitions emphasizes that the film is a reflection of Karl’s own subjective narrative” (Schofield). Thus, while this editing technique is quite different from the jump cut, it also breaks a comfortable linearity. The false continuity, supported by an unbroken soundtrack and dialogue, often puts opposites in contact. The memorial flower of death becomes the flower of life, and Kopfrkingl appears to interact simultaneously with the Jews and with the Party. Jump cuts disrupt the viewing experience by moving unabashedly out of time, while these transitions disrupt by inappropriately concealing what should be a scene cut.

Many of Herz's cinematic components can be seen as attempts to open the audience up psychologically so that they may subjectively experience the unfamiliar terror of both Kopfrkingl and the narrative in general. The most obvious of these subjectivity enhancements is changing point-of-view. Film's very nature relies on a relationship between audience and image in which

“the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera” (Metz 698). The extreme case of this is when the “framing of the scene corresponds precisely to the angle from which the out-of-frame character looks at the screen,” producing the “character's point of view” (Metz 700). The spectator of *The Cremator* adopts many points of view. Mostly, as mentioned briefly in the discussion of rapid close-ups, which “typically appear to be subjective and selectively illustrate what Karl chooses to gaze at, and at times what he imagines”; they “accentuate Karl’s voyeuristic gaze,” which makes him even more monstrous. But, as viewers identify with Karl when adopting his point of view, they themselves become monstrous. But Herz doesn't limit the point of view to Kopfrkingl; the spectator also sees through a high-ranking party official, each member of Karl's family, and even Dvorak. Just like so many of the other features, the changing perspective disorients viewers, not allowing them to settle in a sustained position. Perspective also has deeper implications; following the allegorical nature of the film, the viewer must “become,” at some level, both perpetrator and victim. Identifying with both parties complicates the traditional understanding of the Holocaust narrative.

One should also discuss camera movement, which has a significant impact on disorienting the spectator as well. When Karl gives Dvorak a tour of the crematorium, he ends in a tight receptacle-filled room. This room is deep inside the crematorium and as the camera circles around Dvorak, while he himself walks around and peers about the room, the claustrophobic element of the space is emphasized. Similarly, when Karl pursues Zina in the crematorium, coffins obstruct all paths of escape. The camera moves quickly and is uncomfortably close to the characters. When it approaches Zina, this means that Karl will surely catch her; when the camera is too close to Karl, it is even more terrifying because Zina, with

whom the viewer identifies, will be caught.

All of these elements, from fish-eye lenses to camera motion, explain much of *The Cremator's* subjective impact upon the audience. There would much less impact, however, if there were not aesthetically sophisticated and pleasing components of the film as well. Peter Hames refers to the film's power deriving from both forced reflection and “its hypnotic effect—its imagery, the monotonous sound of Karl's voice, the attraction of the calling female voice on the soundtrack” (226-227). Similarly, the cinematography is referred to as “simultaneously breathtaking and grotesque” (Schofield). These elements provide a contrast that either undercuts or is undercut by the more distorting elements. They work together to greater effect.

Herz used both deep-focus and wide-angle lenses to different effects (Hoyle). The deep-focus lens provides a fully clear image from foreground to background. The wide-angle lens is somewhere between the deep-focus lens and fish-eye lens, and Herz uses it to magnify the focal point of any given image, in most cases Karl. It emphasizes the perceived distance between objects in the foreground and background and contrasts with the deep-focus shots. When a deep-focus shot abuts a wide-angle shot, the former's clarity is heightened. The deep-focus shot is focused throughout and has a clear resolution, but, along with the high-contrast film stock, does not have any natural softness (Naremore 4). Thus, the deep-focus lens provides a detached visual beauty.

The music works similarly. Herz signifies music's importance to the film in the first post-credit scene, which begins with a band warming up. There are characters named Strauss and Dvorak, and Kopfrkingl seems almost obsessed with playing music in all of the crematorium scenes, including the murders. In its narrative role, music is “the only hint of spirituality during

the 'final journey' in Kopfrkingl's crematorium" (Bird). In fact, when introducing Dvorak to the crematorium, Kopfrkingl cringes slightly when he hears a woman practicing her vocals rather than the expected beautiful classical pieces. The music falls in line with Karl's mystical justifications of death. The film's score, composed of "background music, written by Zdeněk Liška,...is an unforgettable combination of haunting chorals and upbeat tunes that fit the film perfectly because they do not seem to fit at all" (Schofield). Liška 's pieces, both dark and light, concentrate on female vocals, and they seem to create a undertone that works against the action on screen. Karl's pleasant speech becomes eerie in conjunction with Liška 's score. Similarly, very playful and harmonious music undercuts the darkest moments on screen, such as Zina's attempted murder. It is something akin to Kubrick's use of "Singin' in the Rain" or Beethoven alongside violence and rape in *A Clockwork Orange* (Naremore 7). Rather than distorting through individual form, the music complicates the film's pathetic harmony.

It is not simply the excessive employment of cinematographic "tricks" that makes *The Cremator* a troubling and affecting film; it is the combination of the individual components into a complex whole. Combining light and darkness, clarity and distortion, laughter and screams, constitutes a "duality of attraction and repulsion that make this film unique" (Hames 227). Thus, while examination of individual perceptual elements is important, one must examine scenes with integration or synthesis of those elements to better understand their effect.

There is only one significant scene in Herz's film that works in a standard, unified cinematic mode of representation, at least for a bit. Kopfrkingl's Party superiors ask him, as a test of faith to the Party, to invite himself to the upcoming "Jewish celebration" and find out who attends and in what ways they subvert the Party.

The scene opens with a close-up of the Cantor singing prayers. As he sings, Kopfrkingl enters with his Jewish friend, Dr. Bettelheim, and his employee, Mr. Strauss. Other Jews mingle throughout the room at dining tables, and the camera shows a close-up of Karl's eyes assessing the room. Immediately following the shot of his eyes, a close-up establishing Kopfrkingl's gaze focuses on a religious painting. It then moves into a series of rapidly paced extreme close-ups, which reveal images of suffering, mourning, and death. The camera returns to Karl's eyes, as he looks again about the room. More close-ups ensue, revealing first the Cantor and then the attendees in conversation, breaking bread, eating, and drinking. Karl says to Bettelheim, referring to the Cantor, "What a magnificent tremolo." Herz then uses a series of hidden transitions between the Jewish gathering and a Party gathering, established through continued shots of Karl and the continuous presence of the Cantor's voice, until finally the scene fully moves to the Party gathering. When talking to a Party leader, Karl again refers to the singing—this time as "so soft, so heartrending."

Before the transition begins, everything in this particular scene works congruously and humorlessly. The music, which actually is soft and heartrending, supports the flash-cut close-ups of suffering and mourning. The empathy that the religious images and music evokes then transfers onto the Jews at the gathering; this is a kind of foreshadowing that reminds the viewer of the Jewish fate. Kopfrkingl even seems genuinely moved or entranced momentarily; but the scene breaks as soon as Karl speaks: "What a magnificent tremolo." The subsequent obvious lying betrayal and reintroduction of humor into the film undercut the genuineness of the previous scene, a genuineness that the audience's preconceived understanding of the Holocaust magnifies.

An interesting contrasting scene occurs in a wax museum at a carnival. In this scene, the

Kopfrkingls go through the crowded museum as the “curator” explains in rhyme the stories behind the grotesque and disfigured wax bodies. The scene opens with flash-cut close-ups of individuals from the amusingly shocked audience. The camera zooms in on the facial expressions and the bloody wounds of the wax “victims.” A woman in the audience runs in fright, unable to dismiss the represented violence. The music is appropriately carnivalesque throughout. An iron bar and a noose foreshadow future murders (for Mili and Lakme, respectively). A dark-haired woman, seen briefly throughout the film but never explained, fleetingly appears. Another woman in the audience runs in fright, unable to dismiss the represented violence. The crowd goes outside, but Karl stays to see other deformed grotesqueries.

This scene is almost entirely comedic. While the narrative is about serial murderers and the plague, the playful music, rhymed story, and wax composition of the figures make the narrative not only bearable, but also funny; this goes for both the depicted audience and the real audience. But Herz undercuts this humor with unsettling wax figures that are in fact human actors “attempting to move with jerky motions, as if made of wax” (Schofield). Karl's only spoken line is a banal comment on a bathtub, which he does not think is as nice as his own. The foreshadowing reminds the viewer that Kopfrkingl is a murderer. When Herz frustrates the comedic elements, the film becomes much more frightening.

In these two scenes Herz uses the same filmic elements oppositely, but toward a similar goal. The former is completely cohesive and mournful. Kopfrkingl's single remark adds an element of terror because he seems coldly enchanted by the same people that he implicates and, in effect, sentences to death. In the second scene, Herz takes a mostly comedic scene and

complicates it through multiple discordant elements. Together, the scenes create a different kind of terror. Peter Hames' explanation of the film's comedic aspect is that “it is difficult to laugh outright when faced by a huge close-up of Karl or the implications behind the words” (227). The unity and disunity of the filmic elements create an astonished psychological space in which comedy and horror are inseparable; this provides the most uneasy feeling of all.

One might argue that literature is superior to film as an expressive medium because literature relies upon the reader's imagination to create the experience. Herz's film leaves the audience room for imagination as well. The film ends with Kopfrkingl riding away with the Party toward a future in which he is both savior (from the standpoint of his delusional self) and implementor of mass death (from the standpoint of the Party). His daughter escapes death. But the viewer, especially a Czech audience in the 1960s with an experiential and emotional understanding of the Holocaust's historical events, is left to fill in the narrative. This means that Zina, being part-Jewish, most likely dies anyway, unless connections with her Czech boyfriend help her; most likely they will not, as seen in the situation of her analogue, Freda Stern, in Mr. Theodore Mundstock, who is abandoned by her non-Jewish suitor. Also, the allegory is not so fantastic. Karl's dream of an economical, mechanistic crematorium came true. This historical backshadowing really gives the film much more significance and emotional weight, but it also establishes the main tension: this grotesque film is not as bad as the real thing; the allegory is only as fantastic as the history.

There are many conflicting approaches to describing an “appropriate” Holocaust literature. One approach, consistently represented in Lawrence Langer's work, involves an art of destruction. He poses that because the Holocaust is entirely unimaginable and is such a unique

historical experience, artists must find new methods that shatter reality enough to understand the “unreality” or utter irrationality of the events (Langer 2). Leslie Epstein posits that this type of approach encourages an “atmosphere of monstrous fantasy’...commingled with a kind of sacred awe” that actually reinforces the mythical understanding Nazis had of their own culture (Epstein 266). The comic-grotesque quashes any inappropriately mythical understanding of the Third Reich with the inclusion of laughter and a deep satirical cut at Kopfrkingl's own disturbing and mystical reverence for the Party. It also shows the irrationality present in a purportedly rational society. In marrying both the satirical allegory to the disruptive cinematic techniques, Herz uses the grotesque to make the Holocaust simultaneously too conceivable and absolutely unfamiliar. It is a valuable addition to film and Holocaust studies because of this.

Chapter Five  
Retrospective Familiarity and Subjective Response

1939: The Peripheral Experience

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*What is required then in speaking about lessons of the Holocaust is that they should stand at the verge between contingency and necessity, between the concrete and the abstract, between the particular and the general, between the past and the future, even also, as I have suggested, between history and memory (Lang 177-178).*

Herz, in his adaptation of *The Cremator*, employs elements similar to those in Fuks' first novel, even though the works adopt opposite perspectives. The most apparent similarity is Fuks' employment of irony as a technique to encourage an active readership; this is what allows for the most devastating and terrifying moments of each narrative. One final comparison is necessary for a better understanding of this technique and to begin explaining Fuks' contribution to the Holocaust Literature genre.

Irony is a substantial component of the grotesque's execution in that it relies on conjoining contradictory elements. For example, in *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* the author describes Mundstock's epiphanies as he works toward a response to his futile position. Many of these moments manifest metaphorically with the emergence of something "that seemed to be sprouting and budding green in his mind" (104). When his method fails, the irony of the natural, regenerative imagery becomes striking. Blooming nature should signify spring, life, and growth, but here signifies only the creation of a doomed plan leading to imminent death.

This instance of irony runs the course of almost all of Mundstock's decisions, emphasizing the absurdity of his situation. While this particular imagery may not seem as substantial as some of the novel's other ironic instances, its significance becomes more apparent

when compared to another Holocaust fiction, Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939*<sup>17</sup>. In this work the reader is presented a lush natural setting that contradicts the bleakness of humanity in pre-war Austria. Even when the setting moves from spring to fall towards the novel's end, where the “autumn flowers were already filling the air with their pungent scents,” the images remain poetic and starkly contrast the immediate human terror (115).

Appelfeld's novel shares many other previously discussed themes. The author presents pre-war Austria under the spell of a secret “gradually encompassing the people” and “a vague anxiety in the air, born of a new understanding” (37). Unlike the survivors in *See Under: Love*, most of Appelfeld's characters are bourgeois intellectuals; they vacation at the resort town to relax, experience the arts, enjoy fine foods, and converse with fellow vacationers. However, even these intellectuals cannot interpret the signals of what is to come. At the novel's conclusion, Dr. Pappenheim, the resort's impresario, upon seeing the “four filthy freight cars” that will transport them, guesses, “If the coaches are so dirty it must mean that we have not far to go” (147-148). Jean Améry explains that “the intellectual did not so easily acknowledge the unimaginable condition as a given fact as did the nonintellectual” because “practice in questioning the phenomena of everyday reality prevented him from simply adjusting to the realities of the camp” that “stood in all-too-sharp a contrast to everything that he had regarded until then as possible and humanly acceptable” (10). Appelfeld presents intellectuals going through the frustrating process in which a comfortable understanding of life no longer exists:

“Kill me, I don't understand it. Ordinary common sense can't comprehend it.”

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17 Aharon Appelfeld was born in 1932 in Bukovina. He escaped a labor camp, survived in hiding, and moved to Jerusalem in 1946. *Badenheim 1939* was originally published in Hebrew as *Badenheim, 'ir nofesh* in 1979. It was translated into English in 1980 (Sokoloff 17-19).

“In that case, kill your ordinary common sense and maybe you'll begin to understand.” (70)

The employment of conventional thinking, as is the case in all of the works discussed thus far, seems to fail when confronting the Nazi regime.

There are still more similarities between Appelfeld's and Fuks' works. Appelfeld's characters present a spectrum of reactions to the looming events, as Fuks illustrates through the Stern family; some take refuge in drugs, as Mundstock does with his sedatives, and others seem to lose all understanding of reality. Like Fuks, Appelfeld's prose is hallucinatory, and his “writing flows seamlessly, enticingly, until one notices that the logic of this quiet narrative is a logic of hallucination and its quietness mounts into a thick cloud of foreboding” (Howe 195). But a central similarity remains: despite a shared thematic interest in anxiety, defective rationality, and hallucinatory prose, Appelfeld's and Fuks' strongest correlation lies in the historical and temporal relationship the characters have with the Holocaust; hence the foreboding.

Responding to the idea that “one cannot” represent the concentration camp experience, Appelfeld, although a survivor, chooses to set all of his fictions outside of the camps, whether before transport, in hiding, or after liberation (Howe 194). But in *Badenheim*, even though he never refers directly to the Holocaust, he nonetheless represents the evil surrounding the Holocaust. According to David Jacobson, the pre-transport setting allows Appelfeld to concentrate primarily on “the relationship of two groups living an everyday existence to the absurd evil of the Holocaust: the victims, whose prewar everyday lives were invaded by the Holocaust, and the readers of the novel, who live an everyday postwar existence, to whom he

wishes to convey the reality of the Holocaust” (137). The manipulation of the reader's experience with the text and incorporation of absurd elements are significant aspect of Fuks' fiction. Jacobson discusses this technique further when he explains Appelfeld's mission to convince Israelis that victims should not be blamed for passivity:

Appelfeld sought to dispel that misunderstanding by portraying in *Badenheim*, 'irrefresh the process whereby the absurd invaded the everyday life of the victims and elicited a natural human tendency toward optimism that interfered with the victims' full understanding of their fate. He makes clear in his portrayal of the response of the victims that their apparent acceptance of the Holocaust evil was due to the calling forth of the very mechanism of distancing oneself from the absurd that his readers who did not experience the Holocaust tend to call forth. What emerges is a curious parallel between the response of those who first viewed the Holocaust as victims and those who continue to view the Holocaust as observers after the fact. Just as those who lived after the war have devised techniques of perception that shield them from the true reality of the Holocaust, so did those who experienced the war. Such a parallel suggests how inappropriate it is for those who live after the war to judge those who were its victims. (138)

Appelfeld's chief tool here is the intermingling of the absurd with everyday life. The contrast of the reader's known experience and the unknowable evil surrounding the Holocaust experience might be disorienting. But once one, as a non-survivor, realizes that his or her own ability to be consistently rational is limited, and that he or she uses psychological defenses when confronted with a representation of the Holocaust, they begin to better understand the victim's experience.

Fuks uses this very technique in *Mr. Theodore Mundstock and The Cremator*, and it is especially effective because he allows the reader to bring his or her own understanding of Holocaust history to the novel. As Mundstock explores his “conception of the journey to the concentration camp...we measure his conception against our own knowledge of such journeys, although his imagined experience assumes an authenticity that forces both him and the reader to relive its details” (Langer *Holocaust* 106). Mundstock seems deeply pitiful because the reader's perceived Holocaust completely overwhelms the character's preconceptions in a situation where “Horror ousts humor, a horror born less of the events themselves than of the naturalness, not to say naïveté, with which Mr. Mundstock seeks to sort out misconception from 'truth,' and especially, a horror born of his ill-placed confidence that such knowledge will make a difference in his fate” (Langer *Holocaust* 107).

Of particular interest is an expanded explanation of stimulating a subjective response by leaving out or only hinting at the most well-known and mythologized aspects of Holocaust events. Langer refers to the reader's application of subjective history to the fictional work, in this case *Badenheim*, as a situation in which the informed reader is “armed with insight from our own retrospective prescience while simultaneously sharing the failure of foresight and insight in the orbit of the characters” (Admitting 126). This is one of Fuks' most significant narrative choices; in choosing, like Appelfeld, to write a pre-transport novel rather than a concentration camp novel, he allows the unwritten or undescribed to speak more loudly and perhaps more effectively than the written. One way this manifests in Appelfeld's novel is through the manipulation of tainted vocabulary. In a presumably innocuous description of the construction surrounding *Badenheim*, he includes suggestive items such as “fences,” “cement pillars,” and, most

terrifyingly, “barbed wire.” Similarly, the characters repeatedly see posters celebrating Poland, their eventual destination, exhibiting slogans such as “THE AIR IN POLAND IS FRESHER” that present the country as an “idyllic, pastoral place” (30-32). Poland becomes a positive alternative to the unknowing guests restricted environment, although readers know that they are being sent to death camps (Schwarz 253-254). These ominous terms and references signify the novel's allegorical dimensions and are “sufficient to suggest the historical reality of the Holocaust to the readers, yet insignificant enough to avoid causing the readers to distance themselves from the overly familiar images of Holocaust horrors” (Jacobson 142). Because Appelfeld encourages the reader to make the connection between the vague narrative and historical experience, the work has psychological impact beyond more standard mimetic narratives.

One of the most effective examples of this technique in Fuks' work is Mundstock's attempt to assist the baker, Pazourek, in loading and unloading the ovens. In this scene, the reader finds that Mundstock's “inarticulate affinity for ovens,” although merely a poorly calculated effort to prepare for the concentration camp milieu, “floats in the pool of the reader's terror and threatens to drown him with the horror of implication” (Langer Holocaust 110). The association that most readers have with ovens and Holocaust deathcamps—that Jews were burned in them as a supplement to mass executions—is strong enough that the deep irony of Mundstock's interest becomes almost sickening. Also, if the reader knows of the Sonderkommando—the individuals who operated and cleaned the ovens—was comprised of Jewish prisoners, the image of Mundstock operating the ovens does not seem far-fetched.

While *The Cremator's* conclusion has already been discussed in Chapter Four, it deserves

iteration here. One of the most significant aspects in which the film adaptation surpasses the novel is that in the film the audience is encouraged to fill in more openings intellectually. The cinematic approach is more allegorical, and the conclusion provokes an array of reactions that rely on postulating the characters' lives (or deaths) after the credits. Similarly, Mr. Theodore Mundstock ends at the beginning of the journey to the concentration camp as a sort of “anti-Bildungsroman” (Langer Holocaust 123). Mundstock decides finally that his fate and worth rely on his attempt to educate the Stern's son, Simon, in his methods of survival. After arriving at the train station, he notices Simon across the street and walks over to him. His preparations call for him to switch his suitcase between his hands every five paces; because he stops to do this, a military truck runs into him, leaving him with these final thoughts:

My God, what has happened...what were we doing, just practising, we couldn't prepare ourselves for everything, it was all some terrible mistake I made, I must have made an awful mistake...he felt as though a star was falling, a star that was a part of him, down, down, and it flashed through his mind, Heavens, could the boy see, would he understand, oh God, the poor boy...and at that moment he cried out in helpless terror. The cry was torn from him, his last cry: Mon, Mon! (213)

Finally, after all of the preparation, he dies before ever testing his methods. The reader can assume that he would have died in the concentration camp anyway, but the absurdity that even that narrative cannot occur absolutely defies expectation. Fuks ends the novel with an image of Simon, or more specifically an unnoticed “little shadow trembling terrified on the paved street by the dead man...cast by a weeping boy with a star and a little green case, who had run out the moment he heard someone on the other side of the road call his name...” (214). Mundstock's

journey ends ironically with Simon in the same devastated psychological state that he had worked so diligently to avoid. It is unclear, however, if his shadow works independently from his material being. Perhaps showing Simon an absurd death is actually the best preparation for him. It is fairly safe to assume, though, that in 1942 Prague, if Simon survives Terezin, he will most likely be transported to an extermination camp such as Auschwitz, where avoiding death would be miraculous. Mundstock's method certainly would not work. The reader can only begin to understand the conclusion's impact by imagining Simon's future in the concentration camp.

#### Conclusion: Fuks' Contribution

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Robert Doran argues in his essay “Representing the Holocaust in the Postmodern World” that the Holocaust is “the weightiest historical event in the Twentieth Century” (44). While this claim certainly originates in the history's gravity—the facts, figures, deaths, and destruction—a number of other discourses contribute to the Holocaust's existence as “part of our [sic] intellectual and cultural architecture” (Eaglestone 305). Documentary, artistic, philosophical, and mass media representations, whether experienced in academic settings or popular culture, combine to establish the preconceptions that inform readings of other Holocaust texts. Fuks withholds information from the reader throughout his works, whether in the narration's subjectivity or in the narrative events themselves. In *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*, Mundstock's transport occurs directly after Heydrich's assassination attempt, but the narrator explains only that there is a funeral of an SS general, that “they've shot him and everything will fall to pieces,” that martial law will be enacted, and that it is May (177-182). Fuks does not tell the reader that Heydrich was assassinated. He requires that the reader be marginally familiar with the historical events. In this sense, the more one knows about Holocaust discourses, the more impact Fuks' works will

have on the reader. The text exercises preconceptions and elicits active reader imagination in a manner rather different from strict historical accounts, testimonies, or survivor-fictions.

Robert Eaglestone explains, regarding survivor recall that “memory is not motionless, and adapts and evolves as the present changes, as identity changes....Memory is perhaps not a 'picture' but an active system—events are recalled as interactions—and, as a result, they can be distorted, changed, or misremembered” (78). This also applies to collective and public memory. The knowledgeable reader must be familiar with the tendency in Holocaust literature to examine what happened in concentration camps, as these experiences are exceptionally traumatic. In both *The Cremator* and *Mr Theodore Mundstock*, Fuks' refusal to address the actual transport or concentration camp experience, even though they catalyze the narratives and are most likely the exigence for readers initially examining the works, signifies that the reader should question artistic representational limits and the imagination's capability in constructing an affecting mental representation of atrocity. However, in directly addressing the imagination's failures through the characters' delusions, Fuks requires that readers seriously consider their own conceptions of Holocaust events. As Rajendra Chitnis explains, about the imagination's role for characters “the activity of the imagination in Fuks's work is ambiguous, simultaneously offering and blocking access to greater knowledge” (52). It is the same for readers; in forcing the audience to examine their own comprehension (or incomprehension), his ultimate contribution lies in disorientation and disruption. One of Fuks' most significant achievements in his works is this disruption of comprehension. Geoffrey Hartman, discussing media influence on conceptions of the Holocaust, explains the following:

Even as our senses are routinely besieged, the imagination, traditionally defined as

a power that restores a kind of presence to absent things, has its work taken away, and is in danger of imitating media sensationalism....In the midst of an unprecedented realism in fiction and the public media, there is reason to worry about a desensitizing trend, one that keeps raising the threshold at which we begin to respond. (99-100)

Fuks does not raise the response threshold in danger of desensitization; he restores a critical imagination that recognizes not only realism's mimetic limitations, but also its own.

His contributions to the genre move toward an art which must “give up its own absolutist pretensions and accept some grey matter...becom[ing] suspicious of itself, of its aestheticizing drive” and creating a space in which “The reflective and the creative, therefore, often mingle conspicuously” (G. Hartman 53). Perhaps it is best to revisit a scene from *The Cremator* novel: the couple arguing over the reality of the waxworks. The woman's fear that the waxworks are actually “real” seems completely irrational, as does her husband's persistent claims that it is “only waxworks.” They are both right, in a way, and also both wrong. Neither thinks critically enough about the situation. In scenes like these, Fuks complicates reader understanding in a way that stimulates a critical and indefinite interrogation of Holocaust knowledge. This reinforces one of Geoffrey Hartman's approaches to Holocaust education in; he calls for interpretations that “are not sentimental, or burdening in a purely emotional way (for that leads to defenses that again produce forgetfulness) but as tough, as intellectually and morally challenging, as any offering in history, sociology, or literature” (10). Although vague, applying this solution to Holocaust fiction requires that works should, above all, compel the audience to consider the Holocaust deeply.

An indefinite and challenging approach to comprehension of the Holocaust is perhaps the best approach one can provide. Kenneth Seeskin posits some ethical boundaries for Holocaust comprehension in his essay "Coming to Terms with Failure: A Philosophical Dilemma": "if it is intellectually dishonest to ignore the Holocaust, it is equally dishonest to pretend to wisdom" (111). Fuks forces readers to critically acknowledge the Holocaust while also emphasizing their imaginative limitations as outsiders; at the same time, he does not pretend to wisdom. He provides no over-simplified lessons.

This ambiguation is a sort of *modus operandi* followed by other influential Holocaust writers: Jean Améry, Charlotte Delbo, Primo Levi, Art Spiegelman, David Grossman, Aharon Appelfeld, and many others whose "discourses make things less straightforward," displaying a "constant attempt to maintain the inability to come to terms with it, and to trace this through Western culture and thought" (Eaglestone 341). Ladislav Fuks should be as celebrated academically and popularly as these literary figures. Even Appelfeld, whose *Badenheim '39* is perhaps the closest analogue to Fuks' work, published this first novel over fifteen years after Fuks' *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*. Fuks provides an early example of Holocaust fiction that is as innovative as many second-generation and post-Holocaust counterparts and supplies an interpretation of a historically underrepresented Prague. With an abundance of Holocaust literature available, it is understandable that some works often receive less attention than their worth merits, but *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* and both versions of *The Cremator* deserve further examination. One may then find not only his contributions to Holocaust fiction, but also his contributions to literature in general. This is little to ask because, through his work, he proves the value of literature.

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